

IOW Bluegrass and Old Time Music

The IOW has always had musicians and singers playing music from America. The IOW has strong links with America and almost everybody at sometime has listened to American music. This article tells my story but contains a useful number of references for any group playing this type of music.

Banjodave A background to my Old Time and Bluegrass Playing

The article was written for the FBMA

Hi, it is banjodave here. This may help both singers and players who are starting out on “the long and rocky road” of bluegrass and old time. Some people have asked if I could give some background into how I got into playing bluegrass and old time music.

The very beginning

My mother used to sing to me many songs and I sang along with her. Many of them were American folk songs. I learnt to hum, tap my foot to the tunes and sing the chorus, sadly she never taught me harmony. American folk songs were also popular in the school music lessons. Singing and playing your old favourite songs suitable for children is a great way to start. I give a list of a few below to listen to.

No 1 set

Aunt Rhody, Buffalo Girls, Cindy, My Grandfather’s Clock, On Top of old Smoky, Big Rock Candy Mountain, Jimmie Crack Corn, Skip to My Lou...many more can be found in the wonderful resource “World’s favorite Hootenanny sing along songs”, Ashley Publications Inc. I think it is still in print.

Early Years

At a very early age I visited the library where we could take home records. My choice was almost always American music. I listened to the complete series of Pete Seeger, The Carter family, Lead Belly, Lonnie Donegan.... These songs gave me a feel for the music. I started to play a toy ukulele and later a terrible guitar that gave me massive blisters! An ancient banjo I had was almost impossible to play but with Pete Seeger’s book I mastered the basics. Again I give you a list of some of the songs I heard and for you to listen to.

No 2 Set

Careless Love, This land is your land, Darling Corey, Cripple Creek, Old Joe Clark, Cumberland Mountain Bear Chase, Come all ye fair and tender maidens, Wabash Cannonball, I’m thinking tonight of my blue eyes, Hello Stranger, Keep on the Sunnyside. A fun book at the time was “How to play the 5 string Banjo” by Pete Seeger. It is still in print.

Teenage Years

Pop, blues and girls then took over, I was playing bass guitar and harmonica. I then started to play the melodeon (diatonic accordeon), concertina and guitar in bands for folk singing and dancing. The banjo faded into the distance for a sometime. The music I played was contemporary and traditional folk. The singers included Bob

Dylan, Tom Paxton, Byrds, Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez, Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, John Denver, Cat Stevens, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Donovan, James Taylor and Leonard Cohen..... I again list some below you may like to listen to.

No 3 Set

Blowing in the wind, Times they are a changing, It's a lesson too late for the learning, Wild flying dove, I can't help but wonder where I'm bound, Leaving on a jet plane, Moon Shadow, Suzanne, Take me home country roads, Homeward Bound, April Come she will, Early Morning Rain. She moves through the fair, Gaudete, All around my hat, One misty moisty morning, Come ye o'er Frae France.....

Canada

Gradually over the years I collected together songs and tunes from what we now describe as Old Time. I went to work in Canada for a year and joined the local folk club. They played a wide mix of music including American String Band. It was a time when I learnt many songs and tunes. This became very large, several hundred. Reawakened was my interest in groups such as the New Lost City Ramblers, The Weavers, The Kingston Trio, the music of John Lomax and his son Alan Lomax, Charlie Poole, Gid Tanner, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives and the singing of Shirley Collins. Here is a taste of the songs.

No 4 Set Old Time Songs

Angeline the Baker, Arkansas Traveller, Banjo Pickin Girl, Banks of the Ohio, Barlow Knife, Because I'm Jealous, Boil them Cabbage Down, Buffalo Girls, Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow, California Blues, Cannonball Blues, Cindy, Cluck Old Hen, Cotton Eyed Joe, Crowdad, Cumberland Gap, Dance All Night, Dear Companion, Deep Ellem Blues, Dixie, Dixie Darling, Down by the Riverside, Down on Penny's Farm, Down to the River to Pray, East Virginia Blues, Five Hundred Miles, Frankie and Johnny, Free Little Bird, Georgia Railroad, Going to the West, Golden Slippers, Goodbye Miss Lisa, Goodbye Old Booze, Goodnight Irene, Hand me down my Walking Cane, Hard Times, Hello Stranger, I'm thinking tonight of my blue eyes, If the river was Whiskey, In the Jailhouse Now, Jaybird, Johnson Boys, June Apple, Keep my Skillet Good and Greasy, Li'l Liza Jane, Little Maggie, Long Lost Lover Blue, Man of Constant Sorrow, Meet me by the Moonlight, Midnight Special, Milwaukee Blues, More Pretty Girls than One, My Dixie Darling, My Home's across the Blue Ridge Mts, Nine Hundred Miles, Oh Suzanna, Old Dan Tucker, On top of Old Smokey, Peach Pickin Time in Georgia, Pick a Bale of Cotton, Polly Wolly Doodle, Ragged but Right, Rain and Snow, Raise a Ruckus Tonight, Railroad Bill, Red River Valley, Red Wing, Reuben's Train, Sail Away Ladies, Sally Ann, Sally Goodin, Shortnin' Bread, So Long it's been good to know you, Sourwood Mountain, Sugar Hill, Sweet Sunny South, Swing Low, This Land is Your Land, Times are Getting Hard, Tom Dooley, Train Whistle Blues, Turkey in the Straw, Uncloudy Day, Walk Right In, Waterbound, Way down the Old Plank Road, Wildwood Flower, Woke up this morning, Yankee Doodle

Bluegrass and Country

Bluegrass was placed in the same category as early country when I was young. Early country and bluegrass singers were people like Hank Williams, Jimmie Rodgers, Uncle Dave Macon, Fiddlin John Carson, Grandpa Jones, Kentucky Colonels, Light Crust Doughboys, Louvin Brothers, McGee Sam & Kirk, Bill Monroe, Jimmy Martin,

Earnest Tubb, Jim Reeves, Ann Murray, Willie Nelson, Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers, Ricky Skaggs, Stanley Brothers, Stoneman Family, Merle Travis, The Whites, Johnny Horton, Roy Acuff, Chet Atkins, Blue Sky Boys, Johnny Cash, Delmore Brothers, Dillards, Flatt & Scruggs, Jim & Jesse, Loretta Lynn, Maddox Brothers and Rose, Osborne Brothers...

Two useful books are "The Encyclopedia of Country & Western Music" by Rick Marschall, produced for WHSmith and "Bluegrass" by Richrad D Smith, pub by a cappella books.

I enclose a list of some songs largely from this first generation bluegrass era 1945 - 1960. Many we had to change into what I call easier keys for instance B was dropped to G. I was then able to sing them and capo if necessary.

No 5 Set:

Ain't Gonna Work Tomorrow, All the Good Times, Angel Band, Banks of the Ohio, Been All Around this World, Blue Moon of Kentucky, Blue Night, Blue Ridge Mountain Home, Bury Me Beneath the Weeping Willow, Can't You hear me Calling, Come All Ye Fair and Tender Maidens, Cripple Creek, Dark Hollow, Dim Lights, Don't Let Your Deal Go Down, Don't this road look rough and rocky, Driving Nails in my Coffin, Fireball Mail, Foggy Mountain Top, Footprints in the Snow, Fox on the Run, Freight Train, Going down that Road Feeling Bad, Grandfather's Clock, Highway of Regret, How Mountain Girls Can Love, I am a pilgrim, I saw the Light, I wonder how the Old Folks are at Home, I wonder where you are tonight, I'll fly away, I'll stay around, If I lose, In the gravel yard, In the Pines, Jesse James, Keep on the Sunny Side, Last Old Shovel, Little Cabin Home on the Hill, Little Georgia Rose, Live and Let Live, Long Journey Home, Love of the Mountains, Love please come home, Make me Pallet on Your Floor, Midnight Moonlight, Mountain Dew, My Walking Shoes, New River Train, Nine Pound Hammer, Old Home Place, Old Joe Clark, Pick a Bale of Cotton, Rank Stranger to Me, Rocky Top, Roll in my Sweet Baby's Arms, Roving Gambler, Salty Dog, Shady Grove, Sitting on Top of the World, Sunny Side of the Mountain, Tennessee Waltz, This Train, Tom Dooley, Truck Driving Man, Used to Be, Wabash Cannonball, Wagon Wheel, Way Down Town, Wayfaring Stranger, When the Saints, When you go Walking after Midnight, White Dove, White Freight Liner, Will the Circle be Unbroken, Working on a Building, Worried Man Blues, You are my Sunshine

Playing Tunes

Show piece tunes such as the Foggy Mountain Breakdown and Earl's Breakdown seemed almost impossible for an amateur like me to play. We had a wonderful local player who always did the concert pieces including using Scruggs Pegs. I stuck mainly to the basic tunes. I left the solos and clever improvisation to other people! Here is a list of tunes we play. We often put 2 or 3 tunes together and sneak in the odd modern tune.

No 6 Set:

- 1 Gaspé Reel D / Chinese Breakdown D
- 2 Buffalo Girls D / Over the Waterfall D / Angeline the Baker D
- 3 Eliza Jane D / Sally Ann D
- 4 Forked Deer D / Buck Mountain D
- 5 Arkansas Traveller D / Jaybird D
- 6 Soldiers Joy D / St Anne's Reel D
- 7 Music for a Found Harmonium D

- 8 Tamlin Dm /
- 9 Rock the Cradle Joe D / Westfork Girls D
- 10 Hop Up Ladies D / Liberty D
- 11 Seneca G / Crooked Stove Pipe G
- 12 Waterbound G / Shove that Pig's Foot a Little Further in the Fire G
- 13 The Girl I left Behind me G / Flop Eared Mule G/D
- 14 Golden Slippers G / Whistling Rufus G
- 15 Old Joe Clark G / Goodbye Old Booze G
- 16 Fly around my pretty little miss G/ Nail that Catfish to a Tree G / Big Sciota G
- 17 Shady Grove Am / Cluck Old Hen Am / Frosty Morning Am
- 18 Shortnin' Bread D, G & A
- 19 Green Valley Waltz G / Greenfields of America G
- 20 Home Sweet Home C / Texas Gales C
- 21 Margaret's Waltz G / Peeler Creek Waltz G
- 22 Sandy River Belle G / Coloured Aristocracy G
- 23 The Gale Am
- 24 Elzic's Farewell Am
- 25 Mouth of the Tobique G
- 26 Clinch Mountain Am / Accordeon Crimes G
- 27 Down Yonder G
- 28 Under the Double Eagle C
- 29 East Tennesse Blues C
- 30 Dubuque G / Dixie Hoedown G
- 31 Old Dan Tucker A / Jawbone A
- 32 Red Haired Boy A
- 33 Cherokee Shuffle A / Gold Rush A
- 34 Sally Goodin A / Salt Creek A

Jug Band

As the years rolled by I played in a variety of bands. I have played Irish Music, Scottish Music, French Canadian, Shanties, European, English dance tunes, American tunes, Jug Band, Cajun and pop again; the music goes on.

I enclose lists of songs that are suitable for banjo, mandolin, guitar etc. We will start with Jug Band and Skiffle songs. Jug Band music was popular in the 1930's with groups such as the Memphis Sheiks. Skiffle was popular in England in the 1950's. The Beatles started out as a skiffle group. As the name suggests, the groups used a jug to blow and anything else to make a sound such as a battered guitar or banjo. The most well known skiffle player was Lonnie Donegan. There was a revival in the 1960's /70s centred around groups such as Jim Kweskin Jug Band, Even Dozen Jug Band (John Sebastian later Loovin Spoonful), Robert Crumb and his Cheap Suit Seranaders

No 7 set

Alabama Jubilee, Beedle Um Bum, Blues in the Bottle, Boodle am Shake, Crazy Words, Diddie Wa Diddie, France Blues, Glory of Love, Goodtime Charlie, I'm Satisfied with my Girl, I don't love nobody, It's All Worn Out, Jug Band Music, Keep on Trucking Mama, Stealing, Who's Sorry Now

Helpful Hints

If I am listening to a live performance I get so caught up in the act that it can be difficult to pick up hints how to play the song. You Tube is very useful and I use the cog symbol to slow the music down to 75% (slow jam speed). The pitch remains the same. I have found if you do not have a cog option you are using a different browser. A wonderful invention!

Over the years I have collected various books to aid my playing. You do need to be careful because often the music or tab is not the same as the music played. Careful study of the actual tune alongside any music is necessary.

Here is a list of some:

The Penguin Book of American Folk Songs by Alan Lomax; Rambling Blues - The life and songs of Charlie Poole by Kinnney Rorrer; How to play bluegrass guitar by Jerry Silverman; Old Time String Band Book by John Cohen and Mike Seeger; The Fiddler's Fake Book by David Brody; Bluegrass Complete by Creative Concepts; The Real Bluegrass Book, C Instruments by Matt Flinner; Bluegrass Picker's Tune Book by Richard Matteson Jr; Bluegrass Fakebook by Bert Casey and others.

I am not a copy player but I do like to keep the essential tune which is the essence of old time and bluegrass in my singing. The main way to absorb it all is to play with other people!

The final spasm

In the last few years I have returned again to Old Time and Bluegrass. I ran a club called the Midnight Special where we played a mix of Bluegrass, Old Time, Rockabilly, Jug Band and Cajun.

It seems that it is a wonderful time to start learning Bluegrass and Old Time. We have so many CDs, tuition books, DVDs, the Internet, You Tube and now festivals that include tuition. It can, however, just seem overwhelming with the amount of information. The main thing is that you must have a real passion for the music.

I go back to singing and playing the songs that I did as a child. I can still hear Buffalo Girls being sung!

I do not perform much now - the old memory is fading but I do take slow jams. Here people can pick up the songs at a slower speed. Later they can change the key if they want, speed it up and put their own stamp on it.

I have never ventured as far as Newgrass, Rockgrass, Acidgrass, Jazzgrass, Garagegrass, Cowgrass..... but who knows one day!

Hi it is banjodave. Still here after all these years..

PS Here are other lists for slow jams we play.

Tricky Tunes Slow Jam Notes

Big Mon by Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys 1958, Big Mon (Bill Monroe) was tall and big with huge hands. There is sometimes a third part added to the tune. Justin Moses playing Big Mon on guitar.

Billy in the Lowground Trad Scottish/Irish. Roots possibly are William (Billy) of Orange / Yankee soldiers were called Billy. Fiddlin "Red" Herron 1940s

Black Mountain Rag 1930s parts taken from other tunes, Lost Child. Version by Doc & Merle Watson 1972

Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine It has many other names. Irish/Scottish/English origins.

Cattle in the Cane (Cattle in the Corn) Irish tune in major and minor keys. Recorded 1920s.

Cherokee Shuffle Transformed from Lonesome Indian/Lost Indian by Tommy Jackson 1930s.

Coloured Aristocracy c1900s Cakewalk tune. Recorded from old time fiddler Sandford Rich by Mike Seeger's father in 1936.

Crazy Creek The tune leans towards the crazy side. By Tommy Jackson 1957. Played AAB or AABA.

Dixie Hoedown Version collected from Bob Douglas 1900-1995. Jim & Jesse (Vassar Clements on twin violin) 1959. A Hoedown is type of dance, barn dance.

East Tennessee Blues Traditional country rag first recorded in 1926 by Charlie Bowman and the Hillbillies. It has various names such as "Hey Mr Muskrat"! Doc Watson, Bill Monroe recorded versions.

Elzic's Farewell Traditional Irish tune, an old bagpipe tune. 1838 manuscript. Civil War where Elzic did not return. Played by fiddler French Carpenter 1899 - 1965.

Fire on the Mountain 1841 manuscript Dublin Ireland. Recorded 1929 by Red Headed Fiddlers. Has some words. Highwoods String Band version.

Forked Deer (has many other names) 1839 tune collection. Charlie Bowman recorded in 1928. Forked Deer River in Tennessee. Tommy Jackson also recorded it.

Gold Rush by Byrone Berlin & Bill Monroe 1967. California (1848-1855) Klondike, Yukon (1896-1899). Played not too fast but with a lilt which brings out the tune. Vic Jordan version.

Hanged Man's Reel (Hangman's Reel) Irish / Canadian, derived from the Quebecois tune "Reel du Pendu" According to this legend, a fiddler was about to be hung. While waiting for his execution he could see workers constructing the gallows outside his jailhouse cell. Just then the prisoner noticed an old fiddle hanging on the jailhouse wall. He called the jailer over and claimed to be the best fiddler in those parts.

After a heated argument, they made a wager. If the condemned man would get up on the gallows before his execution and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the best fiddler, he would be set free. Otherwise, he would get the noose. The jailer gave the prisoner the fiddle to practice on and left him alone in his cell.

Unbeknownst to the jailer, the condemned man had never even touched a fiddle in his life, but he decided this was his best chance at freedom. You can bet he practised that

night. When morning came, the prisoner was escorted to the gallows where he expertly played the tune now known as “Hangman’s Reel.” Unfortunately, history forgot to record if he was set free or instead received the “suspended sentence” he so richly deserved. Nevertheless, it makes a damn good story!

Jaw Bone (Old Jawbone) Carter Brothers 1928. Has some words. Trad. Ozark tune. Bones are used for rhythmic accompaniment.

Jerusalem Ridge by Bill Monroe and (Kenny Baker?) 1970. The Monroe family lived in a cabin on the family farm called Jerusalem Ridge which is in Kentucky. It had been in the family since 1801. Bill called Jerusalem Ridge above their home “the most beautiful place in the world”.

Midnight on the Water (Waltz) Luke Thomasson. Recorded by his son Benny Thomasson 1966

Roanoke by Bill Monroe recorded 1954. Roanoke Island, North Carolina. There was a colony there in 1585 but it disappeared.

Salt Creek (Salt River) Trad. Salt River is in Arizona.

Stoney Fork (Stony Fork) Old Time tune. Green Mountain Boys 1952 Bell County, Kentucky etc

Texas Gales (Texas Gals) Old time fiddle tune. Norman Blake picks it.

Under the Double Eagle 1902 march written by Austrian Josef Wagner. Double eagle of the Habsburgs. Found its way into old time repertoire. Bill Boyd’s Cowboy Ramblers 1935, Red Fox Chasers 1928, Charlie Poole 1929. Popular guitar piece.

Wheel Hoss by Bill Monroe tune 1955. Hoss - horse. The wheel horse is the animal closest to the wagon. Can be played with twin parts.

Tune for the weekend is:

Salt Spring 1990’s. by John Reischman who also wrote Itzbin Reel. John Reischman and the Jaybirds. Salt Spring is an island off Vancouver.

Popular Tunes played at the sessions.

Big Sciota

Bill Cheatham

Cherokee Shuffle

Clinch Mountain Back Step

Coloured Aristocracy

Dixie Hoedown

Down Yonder

Gold Rush

Jawbone

Jaybird

Liberty

Midnight on the Water

Ragtime Annie AABCC

Red Haired Boy

Red Wing

Salt Creek

Salt Spring

Shove that Pigs foot a little further in the fire

Seneca Square Dance
Soldiers Joy
Tennessee Waltz
Texas Gales
Whiskey Before Breakfast

Others to try:

Grumbling Old Man Cackling Old Women, New Camptown Races Bb, Nail that Cat
Fish to a Tree, Jerusalem Ridge, Done Gone Bb, Temperance Reel, Roanoke, Wheel
Hoss, Cattle in the Cane,
Road to Columbus, Big Sandy River, Mouth of the Tobique, Cuckoo's Nest, Leather
Britches, Old Dangerfield, Denver Belle, Rebecca, Big Mon, Squirrel Hunters,
Ashland Breakdown, Hangman's Reel, Opera Reel.