

OLD-TIME TUNE OF THE WEEK – 3-19-13

DEVIL ATE THE GROUNDHOG

The Tune of the Week from Kentucky fiddler Owen “Snake” Chapman (1919 – 2003) is *The Devil Eat the Groundhog*. I learned of it through Jim Reed on Banjo Hangout. When Jim Reed posted a video of Paul David Smith (1933 – 2011) performing this tune Jim was honoring an old friend, who passed away the following day. Paul had learned it from his old friend, Snake, who learned it from his dad, Doc Chapman, long before. Jim asked Don Borchelt to play it on banjo, and Don delivered it to us the next day. Many of us on BHO tried to figure out what the title meant. Here’s how Mark Wilson, song collector extraordinaire, quoted Snake in his liner notes for the CD “Up in Chapman’s Hollow:”

From Doc Chapman, Owen tells this story: “There was a man that had caught a groundhog and had it dressed out. And his dog had come in and seen it laying on the table and, when he turned his back around, the dog had ate it. So he said,

*God almighty d____d dog...
The devil’s eat the groundhog.*

So that’s the story to the tune--the man was cussing his dog.”

[As a side note, any dog would be tempted to eat meat that was lying unguarded, so I don’t fault the dog in this case. The hunter should have been angry at himself, not the dog, who should have been restrained. The hunter’s song fits the old quote, “Well, you can’t blame yourself.” We don’t know what kind of hound dog is the subject of the tune, but we know that hounds are an important part of our heritage. Many still raise and hunt with hounds and at least you can say that this dog must have hunted well to have successfully run and cornered a groundhog}.

If you care to know more about groundhogs, here’s a link to some information, such as that the groundhog is the largest member of the squirrel family: [Groundhog information](#). This link will lead you to a tasty recipe to prepare it: [Woodchuck recipe](#).

I think it’s interesting to know more about the lives of the Kentucky pickers who have brought us this good music. Jim Reed is a living link on Banjo Hangout to the old time pickers, many of whom are gone. Jim says that Snake and Paul mentored him at his home where musicians would gather. So, if I may segue, here’s a link on Paul Robert’s website to the interview with Jim: [Paul Robert's interview of Jim Reed](#) and here’s a direct quote from it:

“Paul: Can you remember any musical experiences as a child that helped you as you were learning to play?”

Jim: I know one thing for sure. Paul David Smith and Owen ‘Snake’ Chapman had more to do with my playing than anyone. It was all fiddle tunes and their great playing and noting. I want to let you know Paul David Smith passed away yesterday, the loss of a great friend. I will be going to the funeral home to pay him my last respects. I’m really sad over this and told my wife just a little while ago that I put Jim McCown and Paul David’s videos on Banjo Hangout yesterday. Why I did that, I really don’t know. I had no idea he would be gone today. I’ve thought of this all evening, why I did this without knowledge of Paul’s death. I guess God has his ways of things like this to happen. Paul loved music as much as anyone I know. He won second place on the fiddle at Clifftop just this year. His teaching came from Owen “Snake” Chapman. Paul followed Snake wherever he went to play. I’ve listened to them all night long. Not once did they play the same song twice.

At the time I was about 12 years they started coming to my dad’s house to pick with my dad and my brothers. Of course, I wasn’t really that good, but they heard some sounds that I was playing that fit into their fiddling. They’d mostly played with clawhammer players and hadn’t been around too many 3-finger style pickers. So you can say they took me under their wings and started telling me, ‘we will play this slow, and when we nod our head, you take a break.’ From there, I started playing fiddle tunes on the banjo. They taught me to be smooth and play notes you don’t hardly hear on a banjo. I think that it may be that some of my playing is just because of their experience and patience.”



Jim Reed, Pike Co., KY

More interesting facts about Snake Chapman:

- His father, Doc Chapman, was born in 1850.
- He believes his family is related to Johnny “Appleseed” Chapman.
- His grandfather did fencing work with Abe Lincoln.
- How he got his nickname in Snake’s own words: “There was an old Italian fellow that worked on the headwall here that took up with my dad. He stayed down at Williamson and would ride up to work around here on a pony he called “Blacksnake.” I’d be a-playing under the big old family table and he’d sneak a cookie or some candy to me every time he come...And he named me “Blacksnake” after his pony and I took my nickname from then on: “Snake.”

Here are some links to the tune:

[Video of Paul David Smith](#)

[Snake on fiddle and Paul on banjo](#)

[BHO member frfiddle](#)

[Tyler May playing Devil Ate the Groundhog](#)

[My clawhammer banjo version](#)

Here a link to information about Snake: [Owen "Snake" Chapman bio and CD reviews.](#)

And here's one tab with 3-finger picking: [Don Borchelt's tab page](#) and another tab with good, simple clawhammer: [Devil Ate the Groundhog tab](#). My tab is found under my [TABS link](#).

Don Borchelt's wonderful 3-finger picking of the tune has helped me the most to learn it. I've been able to do a clawhammer version of *The Devil Eat the Groundhog* as I kept in mind that I wanted to be able to go up the neck like Don, as well as a down-the-neck B part. Hope you enjoy this tune and give it a try, too.