

Banjo Hangout Tune of the Week, 6-5-20, Mulberry Gap

Stephen Wade is my inspiration for learning Mulberry Gap. It's a soothing tune, associated with a banjo player of northern Georgia, someone whose memory is treasured by Stephen.

In the liner notes of Stephen's 1990 CD "Dancing Home" he writes: "This rare tune comes from Chesley Chancey of Cherry Log, Ga., who showed it to me two weeks before he died. There was a peacefulness in his house as he spoke of his times as a moonshiner, of a place in Atlanta where you could get your car repainted overnight, refitted with new license tags, and the bullet holes filled. We talked of music, too. He said, 'A five-string banjer is the only instrument you can entertain a crowd with by yourself....Now people will get bored with a fiddle, but you can take a banjer, you can dance with it, play it, you can sing with it, and you can switch right over into sacred music, and still you're in line.' I danced for him and he smiled. Then he said, 'If you ever play this tune for the people, just say that you learned it from Chesley Chancey.'" Here's a preview of Stephen with Mike Craver on harmonium playing [Mulberry Gap](#). The instrumentation is so lovely I was inspired to add some cello banjo to my recording below.

Art Rosenbaum – musician, author, and now-retired professor from the University of Georgia -- learned of him through the Georgia Folk Society, visited him several times, and offers us this recording of [Chesley's Mulberry Gap](#). Stephen accompanied Art and his wife, Margo, and took to heart Chesley's request to be remembered through this tune. Art included it on page 100 of his tablature book [Old-Time Banjo Book: Forty-Seven Old-Time 5-String Banjo Tunings](#). The tuning is fCFCD, which Art calls Sandy River Belle tuning. It uses Chesley's 2-finger style, index finger leading.

In his book [Folk Visions and Voices: Traditional Music and Song in North Georgia](#) Art also includes more of the conversation while visiting Chesley. Some of it must have been quite light-hearted: "Course I was only drunk one time in my life—got drunk when I was sixteen and stayed drunk till I was thirty."

Chesley was born Aug. 26, 1913 in Ellijay, Gilmer County, Georgia and died on June 28, 1980. His grandfather was a Jewish peddler who came to Tennessee from Germany. Chesley and his brothers were moonshiners in the 1930's. They played in a band together with Joe on guitar, Ralph on bass and Chesley on banjo. Art recorded them in 1979, available to hear in the [Digital Library of Georgia](#).

If you're not familiar with Stephen Wade you can start by listening to two short musical documentaries here: [Old Town School of Folk Music](#). And this nearly hour-long video is a delightful viewing of old-time banjo history written by Stephen in 1987: [Catching the Music](#). Listen to a 7-minute interview about Stephen's CD, [Across the Amerikee](#), with a pretty version of Spanish Fandango, Old Johnny Booker and Arkansas Traveler on a Civil War era fretless minstrel banjo, and the beautifully harmonic Lost Gander. You can read about his entertaining newest CD, [A Storyteller's Story article](#) and hear it on [A Storyteller's Story with interview](#).

While listening to this entertaining CD, I was amazed at the banjo virtuosity, fluidity of speaking, cleverness of stories, and variety and sincerity in the songs. If you're from Chicago, you'll really appreciate the last track. Stephen is a folklorist and musician with a huge legacy and is still going strong with great enthusiasm. He's one of the warmest people you'll ever know. Perhaps one day I'll see him in person...

Speaking of folklore, in researching Mulberry Gap I found a book by David R. Fletcher which purports to share Appalachian folklore through a fictionalized story of a boy spending time with his grandmother in Mulberry Gap, Tennessee (an actual town). For a \$3.99 purchase I then put it on my free Kindle app and read it in a day – an enjoyable read, even including a fiddle and banjo scene, mentioning two tunes we all know. The book is called [Barns are Whispering Down Mulberry Gap](#), but takes place mostly in Tennessee, with a small part in Georgia.

A road exists in Ellijay, Georgia called Mulberry Gap Road and is the present location of a campground with deluxe cabins created for cyclists to stay and enjoy mountain bike rides in this lovely country where the Chancey's lived. See [Mulberry Gap Bike Get-Away](#).

I use the tuning [fDFCD](#), which Anita Kermode puts in the Last Chance category as an F tuning, and actually includes Chesley's Mulberry Gap in her description. It's a slightly different tuning than Art Rosenbaum and Stephen's, who learned the tune directly from him, but only the fourth string differs. My arrangement is clawhammered, rather than in 2-finger style.

I wish there were more recordings of this tune, but I found just Stephen's and the one in Art's instructional DVD. Only two other tunes I recall are so soothingly beautiful, reminding me somehow of Mulberry Gap, and you can find many versions out there – Dead Man's Piece and Calloway, both Hammons family tunes. So let's get more recordings of this special tune out there to commemorate Chelsey Chancey.

The tune has only 14 measures, isn't hard and is a fun and cheerful tune to play. A big thanks to Stephen for providing me guidance and some stepping stones for presenting this meaningful tune in his repertoire. Another thanks goes to Art and Margo, who conversed with me and shared some details of their experiences with Chesley. Give it a try!



Photo by Margo Newmark Rosenbaum