

TOTW Ashokan Farewell

Several songs and tunes on banjo evoke a surprise from the listener who assumes the music was not intended for banjo. I'm of the school of thought that allows banjos to play whatever music the player wishes to play. Ashokan Farewell's beauty can be expressed in clawhammer and picking, too.

Ashokan Farewell is often thought to be old-time, but it's fairly contemporary. Jay Ungar wrote it in 1982, playing the fiddle with his wife, Molly Mason, on piano, and using it to end each session of their family-run Ashokan Music and Dance camp in New York. The melody was meant to express the "sense of loss and longing" as the camp sessions finished their course and participants parted.

Ken Burns, who produced The Civil War mini-series in 1990 heard the tune and utilized it twenty-five times in the series for a total of an hour's worth of playing. The music accompanied the reading of a poignant letter by Major Sullivan Ballou and was even played on country radio and also accompanied the United States' entry in Operation Desert Storm. Read more about the [history of Ashokan Farewell in this Wikipedia article](#).

Major Ballou's actual Civil War letter includes these words: "If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, nor that, when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name." Jay Ungar was able to capture in his melody a deep and languishing sentiment. It's said that his composition echoes the style of a Scottish lament.

Original recordings:

[The original Ken Burns Civil War mini-series version](#)

[Jay Ungar and his family band](#)

On Banjo Hangout there are several versions. Here are just a few:

[Ashokan Farewell with lyrics](#) (no banjo)

[3-finger picked Ashokan Farewell by Chris Cooper](#)

[Clawhammered on a cello banjo](#) (my version)

[Bluegrass band with solos](#)

[Adam Hinkel's clawhammered Ashokan Farewell](#)

So why not try it in your own style? Such a beautiful tune!