

TOTW Little Bird in the Ash Brook

While scrolling through Facebook's Clawhammer Rules page one day in June, I promptly stopped at Lonesome Ace's invitation to hear a pretty tune to end my week with, as they put it. Indeed, one would want to keep this music on repeat when this group plays Little Bird in the Ash Brook, except that they call it an Ashbank. Some input from Steve Harrison (who along with brother Garry Harrison did the tune collection work in 1977) confirmed that Little Bird in the Ash Brook is the title.

Lonesome Ace's treatment of the tune reminds me of my favorite fiddler, James Bryan – so smooth, so pretty, so relaxing. How often does a Facebook post get over 400 likes?! Seldom.

Thanks to Steve Harrison's comment to provide the oldest source fiddler, Jacob Abbott, I was able to get information from Steve, who was there when the tunes of Jacob Abbott were collected by him and his brother, the legendary Garry Harrison, for the Dear Old Illinois field collection. Here's what Steve says:

"Yes, as learned from Jesse, he called the tune "Little Bird in the Ash Brook." It was my late brother Garry and I who had multiple sit-tos with Jesse. Oh so poignant was the last session at his rural home near Toledo, IL. On that session we had the Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorder on loan from the LOC Folklife Div. After about 1-1.5 hours of a fertile collecting session, we had packed up all the recording equipment, mic stands, etc., and loaded them into the van, and came back in to say our good-byes. And just as we were about to step back out the door and head home, Jesse said: "Yeah, next time you fellers are back down here I'll just play that 'Wild Ponys of the West' for ya." I looked at Garry. He shook his head in agreement -- never even heard that tune title before. Glanced at the van. Nope. We never want to wear out our welcome. So we vowed to be back next weekend and we'd be sure to remind him about that new (aulde) tune. Two days later we got word that Jesse had up and died. He took one with him. And in all of our field collecting, we never encountered anyone else that played a tune by that name.

"...field collecting experiences. 'Treasures,' indeed. And yeah, Lonesome Ace handled Jesse's tune with all due respect and a heapin' helping dollop of musical talent. And as the oral/aural tradition would have it, Lonesome Ace applies their own tempo to the tune, as they feel it and as it should be. I don't recall now the tempo at which Jesse played it, but I can testify that us Crick Delters played it pretty much up to hoedown speed.

"At some point in our field collecting adventure, we came to notice that some "universal" oldtime fiddle tunes (broadly distributed throughout the USA) were played at a slower tempo out east than what our old source fiddlers played them in the Midwest. And mind, the prime sources we were after were those who had learned their fiddling pre-radio, the better to suggest that they learned the tunes, and attendant tempos, from previous generations of fiddlers in their immediate are. We once asked Harvey 'Pappy' Taylor of Effingham, IL about that. Why were we hearing some familiar fiddle tunes at a brisker

pace here in the Midwest than, say, as field collected in Appalachia? Pappy kinda grinned, spit another 'poit' in his chaw tobacco spit can, and said, 'Playing square dances for those raw-boned farmers like we have around here -- they liked it steppy.' Sounded like qualified opinion to us, so we'd work up the tunes pretty much at that same pace."

Chris Coole says that one day Lonesome Ace Stringband may put this on a CD, but at the present they're working hard to make a CD with all original tunes and songs of their own.

Here are the good listening samples I could find, along with my 3-part medley from the three sources I used to learn Little Bird in the Ash Brook:

[Indian Creek Delta Boys](#)

[Lonesome Ace Stringband with Chris Coole on banjo](#)

[Virginia Creepers](#)