

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 3/27/15

INDIAN EAT A WOODPECKER

Chances are you haven't heard this tune very much yet, but perhaps this thread will help promote Indian Eat a Woodpecker. It's one of several tunes about an Indian who feasted on a small game animal and also one whose title and related titles are mostly played by Kentucky fiddlers (e.g. The Indian and the Woodhen, Indian Ate the Woodchuck, Indian Eat the Woodchuck, and Indian Killed a Woodcock). But this TOTW was recorded by a fiddler from Mississippi, so I dug deeper in its story.

When Banjo Hangout member Strokestyle (Christine Breen) posted her band's lively, pleasing version of [Indian Ate a Woodcock](#) I knew it was familiar and found it on a favorite CD -- Bigfoot's "I Have a Bulldog." But the tune title was slightly different: Indian Eat a Woodpecker. After some research I'd have to say that Strokestyle's title is more fitting, as woodcocks are known as gamebirds. They have more of the stout look of a good meal than a taller, scrawnier woodpecker. Another name for a [woodcock](#) is timberdoodle. How's that for a title: Indian Ate a Timberdoodle? (Here's Kenny Baker's cheerful, but different, tune called [Indian Killed a Woodcock](#), which he says he got from his father.) In the Milliner-Koken American Fiddle Tunes book and on Slippery Hill, this week's TOTW is known as Indian Eat a Woodpecker.

The tune as Rhys Jones fiddles is another of his pleasing foot-tappers. Rhys has become one of my favorite fiddlers. His source was the Mississippi fiddler Stephen Benjamin Tucker (b. 1859), who recorded for the Mississippi Music Project in 1939 when he was 80 years old. Nine of these twenty-four recordings were included in a 1954 LP called Great Big Yam Potatoes. A copy of the LP on-line sells for \$200. The record was influential enough to inspire a festival called Great Big Yam Potatoes Old Time Music Gathering in Mississippi, still ongoing in May since 2008. You can check it out on this [website for Great Big Yam Potatoes festival](#).



Stephen B. Tucker, Meridian, 1939.

Through liner notes for the 1939 recording of Great Big Yam Potatoes I discovered Stephen B. Tucker came from Collinsville, MS and learned fiddle as a 9-year old. He used the same fiddle in 1939 for the recordings, bought at age 15 with his own whittled bone apron still on it. As a boy he learned fiddling from his older brother -- a fiddler who had been in the Civil War -- as well as other older fiddlers and neighbors. This could explain how it was that a Mississippi boy learned a tune with a title associated more with Kentucky tunes. Mr. Tucker's recordings are considered valuable in that due to his age when recorded they have a direct link to the Civil War era.

The liner notes of Mississippi fiddle style by Tom Sauber are quite analytical, much as Allan Jabbour analyzed another tune by Tucker (Haste to the Wedding) in a Library of Congress compilation of fiddlers. Sauber wrote Indian Eat the Woodpecker is "played in the key of C. While this tune is familiar sounding, the melody is not a close kin to any published pieces. The coarse part, played primarily up on the bass strings, is similar to 'Tom Wagoner,' as played by K. C. Kartchner of Snowflake, Arizona, but certainly removed from the modern versions of 'Texas Waggoner' [VI 40145] as Eck Robertson recorded that tune. The fine part sounds similar to 'Billy in the Low Ground,' moving to the relative minor [Am] and being almost entirely played on the E string. A nice dance tune, the coarse strain consists of a single melodic phrase played twice. The only change is its ending, first on the dominant [G] and the second time on the tonic [C]. The melody of the fine is also only half the required length and repeats twice to complete the tune. Like many old-time fiddlers, Tucker chooses not to play each part four times to make a dance tune of standard measure; he instead shortens the fine part. The phrase structure thus is AAAABB."

[Bigfoot's Indian Eat the Woodpecker](#) resembles the original recording of [Stephen Tucker's Indian Eat the Woodpecker](#), especially in the A part. The B part differs in that there is the inuendo, as Sauber noted, of a minor chord, not evident in Bigfoot's. As a whole, I actually like Bigfoot's better, but learned both versions. For this MP3 I begin with that version and then include Stephen Tucker's. I'm playing in what is not a usual tuning for me, gCGCE, but have also tabbed it in double C. My recording is found under the [site tab for TUNES OF THE WEEK](#). Tablature is found under [MY TABS](#).

If you do work on it, please share and let more of us enjoy this good tune. I'm also hopeful to continue learning more about other Mississippi fiddlers.