

TUNE OF THE WEEK – 7/3/15

LIZA JANE

At a recent music camp Bruce Molsky said that one needs to *listen* to at least as much music as one *plays* music. This TOTW offers you an immense opportunity for such listening.

I've heard that Liza Jane, also known as Eliza Jane, short for Elizabeth Jane, was a likeable, pretty, fictitious character, sung about since antebellum America, perhaps even acting on stage in minstrel shows and placed into parts with Jim Crow, the likable, satiric fellow first portrayed by a very popular, blackened performer named Thomas Rice. Lyrics tells us that Liza Jane's activities included blowing a horn, climbing persimmon trees, mixing sugar cane molasses, marrying, or refusing to marry, or being stolen for marriage, and riding and dying on a train.

If you want to learn more of the facts about Liza Jane, dating back to 1871, check out this [article on the history of L'il Liza Jane](#) and also read these endearing quotes from a 101 year-old slave, including the Liza Jane lyrics she remembers from before the Civil War: [Narrative from Mississippi former slave Lucy Thurston](#). Please share other sources of related history you discover.

Rather than on lyrics, I wish to focus on the variety of melodies for Liza Jane. I can imagine being in a jam where this song is announced by the song leader as the next one, only for you to find it's different than what you anticipated. A jam at music camp last month had one of those Liza Janes I couldn't catch the first time through. Later I figured it out and next time maybe I'll be savvy.

Liza Jane has at least *nine distinct melodies*. Listening allowed me to see that the majority of them fall within three basic melody groups (shown in red) which I'll call Liza Jane, Big Liza Jane, and Little Liza Jane.

#1

I'm calling the basic melody *Liza Jane*, though you'll see it goes by other titles. Learning and tabbing it was my introduction into this complex topic. My TOTW was conceived when a Hangout member expressed interest in having tab for Bob Thornburg's fine version, learned from Dwight Diller and seen here on video with Bob's unique grain measure banjo: [Bob Thornburg's Liza Jane](#).

A week later, coincidentally as part of an "extra credit homework assignment," I discovered this version with a different title in a 1920's recording by [Al Hopkins and the Hillbillies, 1926, Mountaineer's Love Song](#).

I began looking for other related Liza Janes and found this synchopated fiddle version in [Clyde Davenport's Liza Jane](#). Next I found [North Carolina fiddler Marion Reece](#), #1183 on the Slippery Hill website.

Then at music camp in June Ernie Noyes, teaching assistant in Grass Valley, California delightfully sung the chorus “Whopty Liza, pretty little girl, Whopty Liza Jane” and thence I discovered [Bradley Kincaid's Liza Up in the Simmon Tree](#) (from “The Story that the Crow Told Me, Early American Children’s Songs, Vol. 1”, from the 1920’s and 30’s).

The following examples have no lyrics: [JP Fraley's Little Liza Jane](#) and [Todd Phillip's Liza Jane](#). Two nice MP3s on Banjo Hangout are by bluemule 77 (Brian) -- [BHO Liza Jane \(Fraley's\)](#) – and by hayesdt (Dan) -- [BHO Liza Jane by hayesdt](#).

The melody is a bit more melancholy when [Pete Seeger plays Liza Jane on a children's album](#). Art Rosenbaum has a new [Old-Time Banjo Book](#) with forty-seven tunings. He uses Dan Gellert’s version, based on Pete’s, to teach this Liza Jane in f#BEAD tuning.

You can watch [Cathy Moore's lesson "getting drive"](#) as she plays Liza Jane.

Though there are variations in titles, phrasing, notes, chords, and order of chorus and verse, all of the above are certainly one family of Liza Janes.

#2

The second melody family is **Big Liza Jane**. The oldest recording I could find is played by two great old-time musicians: [Franklin George's Big Liza Jane](#) and [Kyle Creed's Liza Jane at 16:00](#) (the video includes a full-length 40 minute CD called “Liberty”). I hear Kyle Creed influence in [Riley Baugus' Big Liza's Christmas Holiday](#). Dan Levenson and Bob Carlin recently published a book called [Kyle Creed: Clawhammer Banjo Master](#). Big Liza Jane is the first tune and Little Liza Jane is also covered. I hope to have this resource soon. You can read more about Big Liza Jane in Banjo Judy’s 2010 post: [TOTW for Big Liza Jane](#). One highlight is this video: [Adam Hurt playing Big Liza Jane](#). The Big Liza Jane melody is found twice on the Slippery Hill website, though simply called Liza Jane -- #849 [Romie Aiken](#) and #850 [Troy Kimble](#).

#3

Third, listen to versions of **Little Liza Jane**, remembered by the children of slaves. Sam Chatmon says his father sang it in the fields, as he describes here: [Alan Lomax's 1978 recording of Sam Chapmon's Little Liza Jane](#). Sam was a successful musician with the Mississippi Shieks. The following sample is [Alan Lomax' recording of Bessie Jones singing Steal Miss Liza, Steal Liza Jane](#). Here are other historic, enjoyable renditions of Little Liza Jane: [Earl Fuller's Famous Jazz Band 1917, Li'l Liza Jane](#) and [Stringbean on the Grand Old Opry in the mid 1950's](#). And here’s the modern jazz sound many have come to associate with the song: [Wynton Marsalis' jazz band, 2012](#).

#4,5,6,7,8,9

I really thought I'd stop with three Liza Janes, but others cry out to be included. Yesterday I found one more Little Liza Jane on the same Kyle Creed Liberty album (linked above at #2), but different from any other. You can hear it beginning at 10:24. I'll call it #4. Liza Jane #5 is *Goodbye Liza Jane*, with a ragtime sound, as heard in [Charlie Poole's Goodbye Liza Jane](#) and [Henry Reed's Liza Reed](#). Try these samples: [Highwoods String Band Goodbye Miss Liza Jane](#) and [Down Trodden Band Goodbye Miss Liza Jane](#). Here's #6 at the Grand Old Opry, countrified: [Vince Gill's Little Liza Jane](#). Listen to #7 if you like rock and roll (and can bear the photos): [David Bowie's Liza Jane](#).

You'll hear a pure old-timey sound in #8 which may go back to minstrel times according to Jeff Titon in his [Kentucky Fiddle Tunes](#) book: [Isham Monday's Old Liza Jane](#), with a part B resembling Going Down to Cairo.

A final #9 is the familiar melody Going Down to Cairo, and was popularized by [Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys with the McKinney Sisters](#). The best bluegrass version I've learned came from Bill Evans, my music camp bluegrass teacher for three years. It resembles [Ted Lundy's Goodbye Liza Jane on Rounder Banjo](#) (go to track 23). That banjo rolls, doesn't it! Stephen Wade includes on his "Dancing in the Parlor" CD: [Liza Jane in a medley](#). Beginning with Johnny Booker, next comes Liza Jane with banjo and penny whistle. Stephen states that Liza Jane "surfaced on the minstrel stage." And here's BHO's Lew Hendrix: [Banjovi's Going Down to Cairo](#).

Banjo Hangout members have posted lots more good versions, too. Please include yours in this discussion so we can enjoy it and also share other favorite recordings out there. Our own Eric Schlange offered the tune in the [Bluegrass TOTW Liza Jane \(3/15/15\)](#) and included several other videos.

There are many people who fed me ideas and links, so thanks to the oldwoodchuck (Tony Spadaro), vrteach (Erich), Brooklynbanjoboy (Lew Stern), bd (Ben), Stephen Wade, Lew H, Tom Berghan, banjospinner (Tim Twiss), and Ernie Noyes. Though Bob Carlin responded to my query, he couldn't add anything about poor little ol' Liza's appearance in the minstrel circuit. And of course thanks to my husband, Kit, who found the typos and expressed amusement at my many discoveries.

With many Lizas to record, I'm tempted to steal the oldwoodchuck's idea by calling them *The Liza Jane Chronicles*. Taking time to sort them out makes it lucky I now have summer vacation, and better yet, that I'm newly retired. See my MP3 details to know which of the Liza Jane settings you're hearing. The PDF file contains eight tabs. The first three are in double C tuning and match one MP3. The last five tabs are in open G tuning and match the second MP3.

A happy 4th of July to all -- our music is as American as apple pie. So are songs like Liza Jane.

AND A POSTSCRIPT: After posting this on [Banjo Hangout](#) members added more versions. It was one of the most fun discussion threads I've experienced on a TOTW.