

TOTW Beautiful Doll, 5/1/26

Morgan Sexton is a name commonly heard in the old-time music world, but until I heard a tune called Beautiful Doll, I didn't pay much attention to him. He's known for his 2-finger picking, a style which I haven't explored in depth. The modal melody of this tune captivates me, in my ears epitomizing mountain music. Here's a clip with the tune and Sexton's comments: [A Great Beautiful Doll](#). In the video he describes a fiddling friend named Boyd Watts (?) who played it on his porch at night. A neighbor, who called Boyd a "Baptist preacher", said it was the prettiest tune he'd ever heard.

Morgan (1911-1992) came from eastern Kentucky, as did many great banjo players. His whole family played banjo (you've probably heard of his nephew, Lee Sexton). He learned at the feet of sister Hattie, who taught him songs, but died young at 18 years old from tuberculosis, as told [here](#), along with several autobiographical tales of a hard life. If you watch, you'll hear how from a lard bucket stolen from his mother, Morgan made his first banjo. He worked at several jobs beginning at 13 years old, six years after his father died. The first job was in a sawmill and later mostly in mining, and Morgan wasn't "discovered", as is true for many, until he was in his later years -- 77 years old (check out this [video](#) at a festival). He then earned musical recognition for both singing and his unique 2-finger style.

Good biographies about Morgan Sexton are found in these [June Appal Recordings liner notes](#) and at the site for [the National Endowment for the Arts](#). He had won the honor of being the 1991 NEA National Heritage Fellow! Stephen Wade--a musical legend himself who I personally feel should win this award one day--actually was present when Morgan received the National Endowment Fellowship and distinctly remembers the occasion. "When he sang and played, the banjo's notes so rich in tone, and really, overtones, he summoned another time, another culture ... the music was at once archaic and ineffable."

In this video of [Frank Lee](#) the tune is played in sawmill tuning, but by watching Sexton's fingers, he's apparently in open G tuning, as he often frets the second string on the first fret, rather than tune it up a half step. A popular clawhammer version by [Nora Brown](#) may be in modal tuning, too. And here is our own [Andy Taylor](#) playing Beautiful Doll in his serene, lovely style. I arranged it in open G and combined 2-finger style with clawhammer into one video.