

TOTW 6/3/22, Wolves in the Woods

First, a slight digression and explanation.

Sometimes good things come from not-good things. One example is that old-time jams, festivals, and contests were offered on-line during the pandemic. This was a true innovation which contributed to the needs of musicians to continue earning a living, and facilitated old-time community unity, as well as promoting a fun time for us porch pickers while still learning, performing, and playing with others. One such contest, the Mike Seeger Memorial Old-Time Online Banjo Contest, was organized by Kathy Fink and Adam Hurt, with the first being so successful in 2021 that the second annual contest was offered in 2022.

I told myself that the stress of choosing and recording a piece for competition, and then preparing two more in the doubtful, but always hopeful, event that I'd make the finalists, was something I wouldn't repeat. I would just enjoy watching the second one. But seeing my virtual banjo friends offering their entries inspired me the day of the contest to pay the \$20 entry fee, good for a raffle ticket, too, and whip up a recording to enter. "Whipping up" took more time than expected, but I still entered and proceeded to watch and wait for the results days later, and in the meantime prepare two more songs, just in case they'd be needed....But they weren't. (Consolation – I won a nice raffle prize packet from Pisgah Banjo Co.)

Now to the Tune of the Week. Each entry was wonderful and I was especially drawn to Jim Mullins playing a tune called *Wolves in the Woods*. I commented to Jim at the time it would make a good TOTW, and now here it is. Jim played simply and beautifully, making the finals, finishing 5<sup>th</sup> overall out of some 80 entries. Way to go, Jim! And I set about learning the tune and looking for its source.

One likely player to learn from is Howard Rains, seen here fiddling [Wolves in the Woods](#) with Tricia Spencer in 2013 at the Rocky Mountain Old Time Music Festival. A most beautiful and oh-so-Irish-sounding version was recorded by a trio called Alfi, based in Dublin, Ireland. With Ryan McCauley on banjo and the addition of a whistle and uilleann pipes, it takes me back to my days of enjoying the Celtic music of the Chieftains. You can get Alfi's whole CD on Bandcamp and go to track #2: [Alfi CD Wolves in the Woods](#) (also the CD title). They claim the tune is traditional.

The oldest recorded source points to a Texas fiddler, Thomas Jefferson "Duck" Wootan (1882-1964). The [Traditional Tune Archive](#) has a description and Slippery Hill has a recording, [played by Thomas Jefferson "Duck" Wootan](#) in A modal and recorded in 1958 at Duck's home near Junction, Texas. His grandson is the Austin, Texas fiddler Tim Wooten who plays his grandfather's fiddle with the Duck Creek String Band. [Fiddle Hangout](#) had a thread on the tune in 2010, including this anecdote: Tim taught the tune to Howard Rains, but didn't know where

his grandfather learned it. We read that someone named Betty Bornbrock used to live in Austin and had learned the tune from Tim, but neither knew the title. She had then played the tune for WV fiddler Wilson Douglas and he stated the tune was familiar from his childhood and called it "Wolves in the Wood."

I tabbed the tune based on what I heard on Slippery Hill and from Jim Mullin's contest entry. We used the tuning of fDGCD, sometimes called SRB -- one of the Cumberland Gap tunings -- though Jim tuned his banjo down a step. With its title you get the modal musical feel in the A part of roaming wolves in mysterious, mountainous woods, and then come lonesome howls, as in the B part. There is an unusual 7-measure A part. One would think you'd notice the crookedness, but it plays smoothly and you may think nothing is amiss.

As I've already linked the examples I could find in this discussion, I'm hoping someone will provide more examples and information about this enchanting tune.