

## TOTW, Orvetta Waltz, 10/13/23

Sometimes you hear a pretty tune with a familiar name associated with it. So it was when I heard Orvetta Waltz in the repertoire of Missouri fiddler Vesta Johnson (1922- 2021). I knew she was a respected, talented fiddler, but I yet had very little information.

My first introduction to Vesta Johnson was through two tune books I was excited to get – [Ozarks Fiddle Music](#) by Drew Beisswenger and Gordon McCann and [Now That's a Good Tune, Masters of Missouri Fiddling](#) produced and edited by Howard Marshall, Vivian Williams and Phil Williams. The latter book comes with two CDs and it had four tunes played by Vesta Johnson, including Orvetta Waltz. Here she is, playing the tune on the [Field Recorders' Collective](#) site, recorded by BHO member Brendan Doyle. For a thorough video collection of interviews, music, and a description of her life, see the [tribute on the Missouri Folk Arts Program site](#).

In this [Vesta Johnson interview](#), she relates a childhood life that sounds like the proverbial “good old days,” before most people had cars. Social life for the family was the treasured time on Saturday evenings to relax from the rigorous work of farm life at the local house dances.

She was born Vesta Juanita Wilson, was raised in North Missouri (which she pronounced “Missoura”), and began playing fiddle at seven years old with the encouragement of her uncle. Golden Slippers was one of her first tunes. She remembers having no electricity and making toys. The family raised their own food and chores were shared by all, including on school days.

Both parents played fiddle and her father played at the Saturday dances with a guitarist. Vesta admits that women weren't actually supposed to play fiddle, but could play guitar and sing. Recorders were rare and Vesta only remembers Bob Christenson having one. She learned by ear and never read music. When Vesta married, she had no more time to fiddle until her children were in high school. Attending fiddle contests in the 60's and 70's later became a means to socialize and share tunes. She taught fiddle through the Traditional Arts Program out of the University of Missouri in Columbia for 28 years and also taught at Bethel for over 30 years. At the end of this interview, Vesta felt that at one time old-time music had seemed to have died out due to the availability of other activities, as well as the lack of contact the young generation had with musicians, but that after skipping a generation it was coming back.

Recorded in March of 2021, listen now to the smooth fiddle of [Paul Kirk, Jr. playing Orvetta Waltz](#). Paul chose it as his own TOTW #142 (BTW, it's worthwhile to check out more of his videos and his [Patreon page](#)). He also described the life of Vesta Johnson in these extensive notes beneath his YouTube video:

*“In honor of Women's History Month and as a tribute, this week's tune is Orvetta Waltz from the playing of Missouri fiddler Vesta Juanita Wilson Johnson (10 May 1922--05 March 2021). Her father's family had been in Missouri for many generations. Her mother's ancestors, who were originally from Virginia, settled in Missouri after living in Kentucky and Ohio.... Vesta married Stephen Finley Johnson (13 April 1917--10 June 1993) on 01 September 1940, and stopped*

*playing fiddle to raise her family. After that, in the 1960s, she started playing again for dances and socials. In 1974 she and her husband started an organization called the 'Missouri Fiddlers and Country Music Association' to address the growing interest in the music. In time she became a Missouri State Fiddle Champion, a Master Fiddler for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program in Missouri, and a teacher, performer, and recording artist with her grandson Steve Hall who accompanied her on guitar. (source: public documents and Beisswenger and McCann).*

*"Ms. Johnson appeared in an anthology of Missouri fiddle music, 'I'm Old, But I'm Awfully Tough' in the early 1970s, as well as a 1989 anthology, "Now That's a Good Tune." ...*

*"Though I did not have the pleasure of knowing Ms. Johnson, I think this quote gives some idea of the person she was: 'I'd never give you a dime for all the contests there was, but I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for the people I met.'" I agree with you, Paul – that's a classically wonderful statement about Vesta's appreciation for people in her music world.*

There's another tune with the same title published before 1900. It isn't the same tune, though some people hear a relationship. In the [Traditional Tune Archive](#) this story is related: *"A popular and much published waltz by this name [1] was composed by E.B. Spencer and published in Boston by Oliver Ditson Company, Washington Street, in 1879, however, it is a different melody than the "Orvetta Waltz" Missouri fiddler Vesta Johnson plays. (See "[Orvetta Waltz \(2\)](#)" for the Spencer piece and listen to it [here](#).) Missouri fiddler Charlie Walden says Johnson told him she learned the melody as a girl in Chillicothe, Livingston County, Mo., but had no title for it. Later she heard a pianist friend play it from sheet music that had the title "Orvetta Waltz," which is what she called it thereafter."* (The original 1879 sheet music is in the footnote link [1] found in the above quote. It will remain a mystery how Vesta learned a different tune from a person who was playing the older one on piano.)

Though the tune is in G and has an octave and a half range, I found open G tuning was not nearly so easy to play as double C tuned down on a cello banjo, equivalent to playing in G. I can imagine it being played as a fiddle contest waltz tune – it's such a pretty tune -- though we know Vesta preferred jams and people to competition.