

TOTW, 5/17/24, Peace Behind the Bridge

Tune of the Week has been a big part of my musical life or many years. Another TOTW forum is on Instagram, found by the hashtag #banjototw or by @banjototw. One of my favorite presenters is Tampa (@gardengnomenclature). Her contributions often focus on Black old-time musicians and she has introduced me to new sources, like Frank Patterson and Odell Thompson, who I believe she's distantly related to.

The first tune Tampa offered from Etta Baker is one many of us were familiar with and it was a TOTW here, [Marching Jaybird](#) presented by Aaron Zischekale. My comments back then included that "she wrote about her life in the book [Blue Ridge Music Trails](#). Etta said she learned to play guitar at age 3 watching her father – that's what I'd call a precocious child... She writes of her 'very, very happy life' and says, 'the good Lord blessed me with merry chatter.'"

Three years ago Tampa presented another tune by Etta Baker and I've chosen it today -- Peace Behind the Bridge. Here's [Tampa](#) playing it on gourd banjo.

Peace Behind the Bridge is less familiar and quite different from the well-known Jaybird tune. It's rather simple, but has distinctive rhythm and syncopation and is bluesy. It's said that Etta learned it from her father, who played banjo, fiddle and danced, and that it was a dance tune. The Carolina Chocolate Drops adopted it into their repertoire. You can't help but enjoy this 2011 [performance](#).

A video of an elderly Etta Baker shares her description of music which "helps me out in the problems I have. It pays off good and I have a lot of happiness in it." Music is "just the sound of happiness. It gets on your mind heavier than your ailments do." Enjoy the [video](#) with both an interview and Etta's bluesy guitar playing.

Two good articles with bio information are on the [NC Music Educators Association](#) site and the [Music Maker Relief Foundation](#), founded by Tim Duffy, which was a big help to Etta when she made music a big part of her life.

Here are a couple of paragraphs from the Music Maker Relief Foundation biography page:

"Etta Baker was born in 1913 to a musical family in the North Carolina foothills of Appalachia, a musical and racial crossroad. She claims a mix of Africa-American, white and Native American blood. She grew up in Morganton, where races were not as tightly divided as they were in the cotton and tobacco land down East. 'Where we lived was a white section,...but everybody was one family. I played with my sister Cora and Daddy at big dances for both white and blacks.

"In the early 80's, after her children were grown and her husband passed, Etta decided to make a change. She began to make music her profession, cutting her first album at the age of 78. In 1991, Baker put out her own album, One Dime Blues, on Rounder and she was included in the North Carolina Banjo Collection, a 1998 Rounder release. In 1989 received the North Carolina

Folk Heritage Award from the North Carolina Arts Council. In 1991, she received the National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowship, and, in 2003, the North Carolina Award."

The incredible musician, historian, and storyteller David Holt got together with Etta and recorded in the early 2000's. He wrote this about Peace Behind the River: "One unusual tune that we love, 'Peace Behind the Bridge,' came back to Etta after she'd been playing banjo for a while. She recalled hearing it played by the Crisp family, her neighbors in the John's River community of Caldwell County, who hosted music gatherings when she was growing up. I created the fiddle part and tried to integrate the slides that I heard Etta play on the banjo. The piece has a distinctive rhythm, and Etta liked to recall her father dancing to it. He was known as a fine dancer, whose steps, such as 'sifting sand,' followed the bended notes in the tune." You can hear the resultant audio at the bottom of David's [article](#). The entire CD Etta Baker: Banjo is available on [Bandcamp](#) for the most reasonable cost of \$7 and is a valuable resource.

More listening links:

[Alma Russ, Mountain Talent Youth Contest winner](#)

[Adam Matthew on fiddle](#)

[Andy Taylor](#)

My take on Peace Behind the River is based on Etta's and the Carolina Chocolate Drop's versions.