

Quaker Girl is a tune title, as well as a CD title. When you listen to Tony Ellis' original tunes you hear good old-time music. You might not know by listening to this slow and easy tune that he's also a rapid-fire 3-finger picker, was tutored by Don Reno, among others, as a teen, and worked for Bill Monroe as one of his Bluegrass Boys at the age of 20. Tony received backstage tutoring from Earl Scruggs as well at the Grand Old Opry and learned from him the importance of putting melody in the music, as well as using syncopation.

Originally from North Carolina, after two years traveling with Monroe from 1960 - 1962, Tony Ellis stopped playing professionally and began college, family life, and a career in earnest. He continued to play banjo and fiddle in Nashville. Moving to Circleville, Ohio for his job found him isolated from the musical life he'd known, so he began playing by himself at the kitchen table over coffee, as he said, using double C tuning to compose many of his tunes, as well as single C, F, and modal G. He tenderly remembered his grandmother's frailed and 2-finger picked banjo. Writing new melodies that sounded old was his goal, remembering that he had promised himself not to copy Monroe's sound if he continued and formed his own band. He says the music he wrote spoke to his soul.

Stephen Wade was instrumental in producing some of Tony's CDs once he became aware of the beautiful tunes. Through Stephen's last track on his new CD Across the Amerikee (Cherry Blossom Waltz) I became aware of Tony.

His band is called Tony Ellis and the Musicians of Braeburn, named after a farm in Scotland. It includes his wife, Louise Adkins, and son, Bill (William, named for Bill Monroe). These days Tony doesn't perform much, but likes to fiddle around with fiddles in the shop at his home. He's a great fiddle player, too, by the way, which you'll see if you watch the LOC video, linked below. He confesses sneaking his sister's violin into the barn as an 8 year-old to figure out how to play!

Legendary banjo player Steve Martin interviewed Tony in the [Banjo Newsletter, July 2011 interview](#). He related how upon hearing the Tony's tune The Wild Fox, Steve was inspired to noodle around in double C tuning and eventually wrote the well-known tune The Crow. Steve asked Tony about Quaker Girl:

**BNL:** Well anyway, I immediately wrote my tune The Crow, just fooling around in double C. And so my new banjo career was off and running. But I'm thinking of songs like Quaker Girl that has such a beautiful melody. It's the kind of song you can sit around and play all day.

**TE:** Well, it's a simple melody, but it's sort of a pretty little melody.

**BNL:** Right, and it has an unusual twist in it. It goes to the minor chord. And you played that on a fretless, and you down-tuned, right?

**TE:** Right, it's tuned down low, with nylon strings. And I played 2-finger style, it sounds almost like frailing. That was a technique that Don Reno showed me, the 2-finger style that sounds a little like frailing."

This [hour-long Library of Congress video](#) lets you see and hear Tony and his family band. You can also hear a [solo performance](#) of a TOTW back in October, 2008—Cherry Blossom Waltz. The Ohio Arts Council documented his life story here: [Interview with Richard Baker](#) and at 15:06 he plays Quaker Girl 2-finger style, apologetically saying it's "simple, don't expect much," but that it's warm-sounding and has a distinguishing minor note.

Tony's son, Bill, said, "His touch on the banjo is very different from other banjo players, it's orchestral in a way....My dad thinks of the banjo as a little orchestra....Play every note like it's the last note you're going to play. Put feeling in it." At the end of the day his dad is a composer. Here's an [interview with Tony's son](#). Tony says he liked parlor music of the 1800's—beautiful, classical music. His grandmother played beautiful lullabies. And in [this interview](#) with Tony by Marc Fields he was in rehearsal with Earl Scruggs, Steve Martin, and Pete Wernick for "The Great American Banjo: A Conversation with Music."

**"Marc Fields:** What images or feelings does the banjo evoke in you? When you hear a banjo...

**TE:** Probably the first image that comes to mind when I think of the banjo early on was my grandmother playing for me at bedtime. Instead of getting a bedtime story, I'd say "Granny, get the banjo" and she'd play a pretty little piece on the banjo for me to have to go to sleep with. So I have very wonderful, early memories of the banjo. Then of course Earl Scruggs. Don Reno. These wonderful banjo players that I was so lucky to have in my life, one time or another. So all these things come to mind, all these people."

Tony has definitely played with some of the best and IS one of the best. At age 78 he's not performing so much, but still likes jamming and working on fiddles and playing them. I'm grateful he was accessible to ask questions and friendly as well.

My tab is for clawhammer, but you can find Tony's 2-finger tab in his book [The Banjo Music of Tony Ellis](#). Here is a nice slow example of it from Tobias: [2-finger picking of Quaker Girl](#). Listen to an old-timey banjo (sounds like a fretless) played by BHO member vrteach: [Quaker Girl played by Erich Schroeder](#).

I've taken to learning several tunes by Tony Ellis and haven't stopped yet. You can hear them on my website and find tabs under a separate heading for him, too: <https://www.mybanjoworld.com/tony-ellis-tunes>.