

Mister Gilsaw, if you please!

Over the past few years, I have relished the many opportunities that have come my way for learning and playing old-time music, for both my own enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. Naturally, I was delighted to be approached by the editors [of Old Time News] to share my thoughts on a favourite tune, a little background information, and some insight into my own, possibly misguided, but nonetheless fulfilling learning process.

I find “Gilsaw” great fun to play and have enjoyed positive remarks when I have introduced it into sessions, so it seemed an obvious choice to expand upon here. It’s a wonderful breakdown, which to my ear, stands out thanks to its unusual melody, rhythmic drive and expression through syncopation. It’s played out of D but uses a G chord to good effect at the start of the second bar. It works well in a string band setting, although first time through with your jamming buddies, you can expect a little carnage over that G, so it might be advisable to mention this prior to “sawing-off”!

I’d heard the tune played a few times, most notably at the Morehead Fiddlers’ Convention in Kentucky. Its name eluded me however, until Adam Hurt introduced me to it properly during my most recent trip to the States last summer [2013]. He told me that he acquired the tune from the playing of Lynne “Chirps” Smith (his “Midwestern Harvest” recording, Marimac 9059-CD). Adam went on to explain how it differed stylistically from what was to me at the time, a more familiar Appalachian sound. The phrasing, for example, does not resemble that found in the Round Peak style in any significant way.

After a little encouragement, I decided to contact Chirps (who I had only met briefly at the Clifftop festival) for further enlightenment as to the roots of this piece. Chirps kindly responded to my request and told me he learned the tune from Pete McMahan, a fine fiddler from Columbia, Missouri. He also thought Pete had said his source was another fiddler whose last name was “Gilsaw”; although he wasn’t entirely sure of this.

Armed with this information, I set about some online research and was quickly rewarded with an excellent piece written by Howard Marshall, going into yet more depth about the history and origins of the tune. Needless to say, there isn’t space to reproduce that here, but I would definitely recommend it as it’s a fascinating account of the journey this tune has taken. Howard’s story “Gilsaw: A Fiddler from the Hard Times, and His Tune” can be found at this web address:

<http://fiddlingmissouri.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/gilsaw-fiddler-from-hard-times-and-his.html>

Or, as a shorter link: <http://tinyurl.com/od7zsw2>

In common with other tunes I have successfully learnt, I spent quite a while listening first. Starting out hearing the tune played live, being able to see, as well as hear how it was played is something I found particularly helpful. Listening to recordings, especially whilst driving (as I do a lot of that) also made sense. With perhaps a few exceptions, I don’t really think it’s possible to listen to a tune too much. Without wishing to sound patronising, to really know a tune I believe it has to become second nature; if you’re not able to hum, or at least “hear” that tune in your head, trying to play it is unlikely to yield good results; that’s certainly my experience at least!

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As they say: “it’s difficult to please all the people all of the time”, so I hope you will excuse my omission of any tablature or notation. Instead I have provided a link below to my online “SoundCloud” page, where you can have a listen to how Pete McMahan, Adam Hurt and I interpret this tune. At this juncture, I ought to clarify that I am all for the use of written music, if that helps with recall, or assists you through a tricky section, but I think learning by ear wherever possible is an important skill that is very much in-keeping with the aural tradition that this music is steeped in.

<https://soundcloud.com/russell-hawkes>

You will doubtless notice some differences in the way each of us play the tune. To me, this is one of the wonderful things about old-time music; the way different musicians can put what is ultimately the same piece across in their own unique way. I would not argue how vitally important it is to preserve, and share, the earliest / seminal recordings of our tunes, but I do feel that in order to keep this music alive, for the enjoyment and cultural enrichment of our future generations, the music itself has to have “life”. This can only happen if we are freed from artificial restrictions and allowed to play and develop in our own way. Changing the odd note, simplifying the melody to maintain rhythmic integrity or experimenting with syncopation and variation is all part of this process and allows individual character to be expressed fully.

Technically, Gilsaw is usually played with a straightforward AABB structure totaling 32 bars and is, as you might expect, in 4/4 time. I prefer to use standard fiddle tuning, although it can be played in the commonly used high-bass, or D tuning (ADAE). If you chose to do the later, you will need to avoid sounding the low open A string, so there is not much point unless you happen to be mid-session and don’t want to retune. I’ve found it is sometimes a good strategy to line up tunes of this nature for those “last one in D before we go to G” moments; you then have the advantage of being back in standard ahead of your pals, avoiding the need to compete with them for “loudest tuning award”!

My own bowing for the tune, borrowed in part from Adam, has me starting the tune with a down-bow but starting all subsequent parts, with an up-bow as this just seems to be how the phrases fit best. There is pattern-oriented bowing to be found in this tune, but since there are many different names for these patterns, I would have to first define them before going into detail, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of what I am able to articulate here. I would urge you to listen to the pieces via SoundCloud though, and feel free to leave any comments or questions you may have on the recordings. I hope you enjoy learning or revisiting this tune and I look forward to hearing your own take on it at one of the camps or festivals later in the year!

- Russell Hawkes