

Red Wing - Part 2

Bob Altschuler

Part 1 in the October 2009 issue included the history of Red Wing, which was composed in 1907 during the fad for songs with Native American themes. It's been played for over 100 years and recorded by many famous and not so famous western swing, old time and bluegrass bands. The lyrics reflect the often-told story of a broken-hearted lover waiting in vain for her warrior to return.

I did more research about Red Wing's origins and found a lot of interesting tidbits. The music for Red Wing was adapted by Kerry Mills from German composer Robert Schumann's 1848 piano piece "The Happy Farmer, Returning From Work," in his "Album for the Young, Opus 68." He composed this album of 43 easy-to-play piano pieces, each about a minute long, for his three daughters. An interesting note-"The Happy Farmer..." was in the film "The Wizard of Oz" as an orchestral piece in several scenes.

Thurland Chattaway, who wrote the lyrics to Red Wing, was a popular composer in the early 1900s, and wrote several other "Indian" themed songs. In fact, I found over 30 "Indian" themed songs written by various people in the year 1907 alone.

An interesting site with eight versions of Red Wing from the early 1900s is the "Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project" of the University of California at Santa Barbara online at <http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/index.php> . The UCSB Libraries have a digital collection of nearly 8,000 cylinder recordings, which are free to download. You can browse the collection by song title, musical genre, instrument, subject and ethnic/foreign cylinders. There are 25 pre-bluegrass banjo tunes included on the site under the "instrument" category.

The cylinders, pioneered by Thomas Edison, were the original commercially produced recordings in the early 1900s, and had audio recordings engraved (like disc records, which started around the same time) on the outside surface. They were first made of tin foil, then wax and then plastic. The old cylinders can be found at antique shops (I still have some I found in the wall of an old house I was remodeling), and can be played on a mechanical phonograph. There are also 25 pre-bluegrass banjo tunes on the site from early 1900s cylinder recordings.

Now we'll return to the bluegrass versions of the song. Part 1 had a basic version of Red Wing, and here in Part 2 there is an intermediate tab and MP3 with a slowed down version of the tab. The tab is primarily Scruggs style with some melodic measures added for variation.

Part 1 had links to 4 YouTube performances of Red Wing. Here are more, including jazz and piano versions. I think it's useful to see and hear various styles with different instruments playing songs you want to learn.

Chet Atkins plays Red Wing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oXHo4ynHxk> .

You can see and hear 12-year-old Evan and family play it at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TyEu-xUnuQ&feature=related> .

The Vintage Jazzmen play a New Orleans version at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl-lqpxSovQ&feature=related> .

Max Collie Rhythm Aces play Red Wing at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEX5eyilp14&feature=related>

And, check out this hot piano version at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2OFdLk8bFk&feature=related>

See you next issue- happy picking!

Red Wing MP3 <http://BanjoSessions.com/dec09/RedWing.mp3>

About the Author



Bob Altschuler lives in upstate New York and has played bluegrass banjo since 1970. As a banjo instructor, his 25 years of experience includes teaching many students at Banjo Camp North, where he has been the Beginner Bluegrass Track Coordinator since 2003. Bob's training and work as a public school teacher sharpened his teaching abilities, and helped him become a patient and sought after banjo instructor (his day job is now with the NY State Retirement System).

Bob performs with the Dyer Switch band at concerts and festivals across the Northeast, Midwest and South, and recorded "American Airwaves" and "Family Business" CDs with the band. His banjo playing has also been heard on Northeast Public Radio and on television and radio commercials. You can contact Bob at arobanjo@aol.com, or through the Dyer Switch website at www.dyerswitch.com.