

Notes for *Bill Cheatem* (week two Desert Bluegrass Fiddle Tunes) Matt McConeghy 2/2012

Bill Cheatem may not be as old as *Soldier's Joy*, but it is a widespread tune which probably originated in the late 1800s, spreading around the USA during the early 1900s. It is often connected with the memory of the great 'cowboy' fiddler Alexander "Eck" Robertson (1887-1975) *

Robertson was raised in Texas in a musical family. He started playing fiddle as a small child, then starting about age 16 for many years he traveled across the South playing at every chance. In 1922 he went to New York to record several tunes for the Victor Talking Machine Company including *Arkansaw Traveler*, *Turkey in the Straw*, *Sally Gooden*, *Ragtime Annie*, *Sally Johnson*, *Billy in the Low Ground* and *Done Gone*. A version of *Cheatum* was recorded at this time but was never issued. These recordings are considered by many to represent the first country music records ever produced. In 1929 when recording technology had greatly improved Robertson recorded more tunes including what he called the "Brilliancy" medley, consisting of *Wake Up*, *Susan*. *Billy Wilson* and *Bill Cheatem* played at a hasty 130- 135 bpm. Many imitations have followed, even including a flashy 140 bpm version of the medley done in 1973 by the rock group Fairport Convention with virtuoso British fiddler Dave Swarbrick, (see You Tube.)

You can google "How to play Bill Cheatham on a Bluegrass Fiddle" for a good teaching video.

A Bluegrass guitar video of the tune is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-ITzTmG17E> with fast and slow versions that detail the finger positions.

Another good version, less advanced, is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDJKyeBw7Fk>

A guitar tab is at http://www.raccoonbend.com/flatpick/tablatute/tab_main.html

A mandolin tab with standard notation is at <http://archive.mandolinsessions.com/aug05/wendy.html>

Of course, each of these versions is different. There is no 'right' way to play the tune.

Cross-tuning When Eck Robertson recorded this tune he used a trick that is common to many Southern fiddlers, Since nearly the whole tune is played on the A and E strings it doesn't seem that the G and D strings are contributing much. In the first part of the tune, just three A notes are played on the G string as a low harmony and on the D string just some harmony E notes and the F and G toward the end of the first part. The second part of the tune has no melody notes played on the G or D strings. OK, so we can carefully retune those two lower strings up a step so that instead of G and D they are tuned to A and E. This "cross-tuning" to AEAE means that instead of having to finger the A note on the lowest string, we can just play an open string, and instead of having to finger the E repeatedly on the D string we can play the open string and easily create a partial A chord. The retuned strings resonate with all those other E and A notes to enrich the sound and as a variation we can use the low AE strings to play the same patterns that we play on the high AE strings.

AEAE is sometimes called "sawmill" tuning and is often used for the tunes *Cluck Old Hen*, *Falls of Richmond*, *Sail Away Ladies*, *Sandy Boys* and other A tunes; AEAC#, is called "calico" and is commonly used for *Lost Child*, *Lost Indian*, *Obama's March*, *Piney Woods*, *Rye Whiskey*; ADAE can be used for *Angelina Baker*, *Liza jane*, *Coleman's march*, *Forked Deer*, *Texas Quickstep* and many D tunes; DDAD was used by Benny Thomasson for *Midnight on the Water*; other cross-tunings are EDAE, GDAD, GDGD, etc.

*See <http://www.oldtimemusic.com/FHOF Eck.html> for a fascinating account of Eck's life.

Bill Cheatem – Eck Robertson, recorded 10/11/1929

The image shows a musical score for the fiddle tune 'Bill Cheatem'. It consists of five staves of music in the key of A major (indicated by three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The first staff begins with a double bar line and a repeat sign, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. A section marker 'A' is placed above the first measure. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. A section marker 'B' is placed above the first measure of the second staff. The third staff features a first ending bracket labeled '1' and a second ending bracket labeled '2'. The fourth and fifth staves continue the melody, with the fifth staff ending with a double bar line and repeat sign.

(transcription from Milliner - Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes)

The key of A major uses the notes A B C# D E F# G# A.

The 1-4-5 chords are A, D and E. The 1-3-5 notes that make up the A chord are A C# E.

There are plenty of signals to let us know that this tune is in the key of A: The first measure of this tune starts with an A note on the lowest string, then a partial A chord of E and C# . The tune ends on an A note in both part A and part B. The second part of the tune starts with a run up A C# E A. Well over half the notes in the tune are either A C# or E.

If we are used to playing in G or D, then we have to remind ourselves to play the G# note rather than G. It's a good idea to practice a few scales to get warmed up before working on this tune.