



“Where Did You Come From, Where Did You Go?” The Split Personality of Cotton-Eyed Joe” (Part I) *

by Howard Marshall

In a section on couple dances in my forthcoming book on the history of fiddling in Missouri, the Cotton-Eyed Joe dance and tune became a focus of interest. The following essay is offered to readers for discussion. Readers are encouraged to contact me by email at MarshallH@Missouri.Edu with corrections and ideas for improvement.

Relatively few people have seen dancers perform a schottische or varsouvienne, even if they remain favorites at old-time country dances. Today, no couple step dance is better known than the Cotton-Eyed Joe – a dance that owes its popularity to mass media, television, Nashville stars, and Hollywood movies. In its modern western swing dance version, it is rather like “Orange Blossom Special” to hardcore old-time fiddlers: the dance and the tune may be connected to genuine traditions, but it is a modern phenomenon fired by popular imagination and fashions of the moment.

The Tune.

The tune, “Cotton-Eyed Joe,” has existed in two different personas. One is a nineteenth-century song, tune, and routine that emerged from African American traditions and from blackface minstrelsy. That version has all but vanished. The other version – our topic here, is the twentieth-century western swing number connected to a special couple dance. The pre-Civil War lyrics trace back to racist words from the minstrel stage and most of those words have been discarded by most musicians. Charles Wolfe summarized our understanding of this tune’s history by

stating that, “Surviving today primarily as a western swing fiddle tune, the song has deep roots in black traditional lore.”¹ Robert Winans’ research in the ex-slave narratives of the 1930s suggests that “Cotton-Eyed Joe” was among the most frequently named fiddle tunes ex-slaves recalled.

In the 1940s, “Cotton Eyed Joe” was put through Bob Wills’ western swing machine and a very fine dance tune emerged. Wills’ 1947 commercial recording of “Cotton Eyed Joe” has the melody and words that continue to be performed by country bands and swing bands. Bill Malone notes that Wills version “emphasized both lyrics and breakdown instrumentation.”² The Wills version is often used for country music nightclub “line dancing” and as music for contemporary clogging ensembles as well as fitness and aerobics classes.³ The tune is commonly fiddled at Missouri dances.

As recorded in 1947 by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (in the key of G), only the first section of the tune was used, and the stanzas contain only twelve bars, rather than the thirty-two bars as required for the tune to fit the pattern expected of a “fiddle tune” and square dance tune. The fiddle breaks (by Bob Wills and Louis Tierney) are also twelve bars (played twice), and repeats the same twelve bars that Duncan sang.⁴ Such timing would give old-time square dancers fits, but the difference in time matters little to line dancers in country dance halls. The words Tommy Duncan sang are:

¹ Charles K. Wolfe (ed.), Thomas W. Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes (1922, reprint, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 27. Robert Winans’ research in the ex-slave narratives of the 1930s suggests that “Cotton-Eyed Joe” was among the most frequently named fiddle tunes they recalled; Winans, “Black Instrumental Music Traditions in the Ex-Slave Narratives,” Black Music Research Journal (10:1, spring 1990), 51-51 (“Turkey in the Straw” was by far the most-mentioned fiddle tune).

² Bill Malone in Country Music USA (op. cit.), 180; among collections with the tune are John and Alan Lomax (eds.), American Ballads and Folk Songs (New York, Macmillan, 1934), 262-263, in a section of minstrel songs and described as “a square dance song or breakdown;” Wolfe, Thomas W. Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes (op. cit.), 27-28; Newman Ivey White, American Negro Folk-Songs (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1928), 359 (“an authentic slavery time some”); also see Dorothy Scarborough, On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs (1925, Harvard University Press; reprint, 1963 Folklore Associates).

³ Among many websites on line dancing, one lists these benefits: “Line dancing is good exercise. Speeds up the heart rate. Great for cardiovascular strength. Lower impact than aerobics. Helps in weight loss by using unwanted calories.” www.bootscooters.com, accessed February 20, 2010.

⁴ John Stewart, personal communication, March 3, 2010.

Don't you remember, don't you know,
Daddy worked a man they called Cotton-eyed Joe,
Daddy worked a man the called Cotton-eyed Joe.
Had not a-been for Cotton-eyed Joe,
I'd a-been married a long time ago,
I'd a-been married a long time ago.

Down in the cotton patch down below,
Everybody's singing "the cotton-eyed joe,"
Everybody's singing "the cotton-eyed joe,"
Had not a-been for Cotton-eyed Joe,
I'd a-been married a long time ago,
I'd a-been married a long time ago.

I know a gal lives down below,
I used to go to see her, but I don't no more,
I used to go to see her, but I don't no more.
Had not a-been for Cotton-eyed Joe,
I'd a-been married a long time ago,
I'd a-been married a long time ago.

Tune my fiddle and rosin my bow,
Gonna play music wherever I go,
Gonna play a tune called Cotton-eyed Joe.
Had not a-been for Cotton-eyed Joe,
I'd a-been married a long time ago,
I'd a-been married a long time ago.⁵

⁵ Recorded in 1947 for the Tiffany Company in San Francisco (producer of transcriptions for nationwide syndicated radio broadcast), with vocal by Tommy Duncan and fiddle by Louis Tierney; reissued on Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys: The Tiffany Transcriptions Vol. 2 (Los Angeles, Rhino Records CD R271470, 1987); released by Columbia Records (Columbia 37212).

What “cotton eyed” means is shrouded in the mists of time. Various theories circulate. The prevailing wisdom holds that a cotton-eyed person is an African American with blue eyes, or any person with exceptionally bright blue eyes. It may refer to any person with exceptionally prominent whites of the eyes,⁶ or the term may refer to the look of a person’s eyes who has consumed too much alcohol, or a “cotton-eyed” person may have an eye disease.

Interestingly, the original Bob Wills song does not include the best-known verse, with its existential subtext and mesmerizing mood -- “Where did you come from, where did you go, where did you come from Cotton-Eyed Joe?” The earliest recording of this verse may be on an early string band record in 1927 by Pope’s Arkansas Mountaineers.⁷

* This essay is part of a forthcoming book on the history of fiddling in Missouri. Please contact the author with corrections and ideas for improvement at MarshallH@Missouri.Edu

{See the transcription of Bob Wills’ 1947 solo on Cotton Eyed Joe elsewhere in this issue. - the editor}

about the author

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⁶ John Steinbeck included a “cotton-eyed piano player” in a scene in his novel, East of Eden (1962, New York, Penguin Books, 2002), 226.

⁷ As suggested in Andrew Kuntz, “The Fiddler’s Companion,” Internet site www.ceolas.org (accessed March 5, 2010); Pope’s string band was from northeastern Arkansas; the 78 rpm record was reissued on County Records LP 520, Echoes of the Ozaks, Vol. 1.