

## FOAOTMAD ARTICLE – Rabbit Hash and Duck Wootan

Colm Daly has posted a very useful resource of Old Time session tunes and songs in his Facebook group PICKIN' LUNCHTIME (1st Sunday monthly session in Reading UK) with YouTube links for each one, and I've summarised it here on my web link. <https://www.janihoward.org/rabbit-hash-article>

I want to learn more session tunes, so from that list I picked Spencer & Rains playing Rabbit Hash, just to start with.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW0y137wB-Y>



Spencer & Rains [www.spencerandrains.com](http://www.spencerandrains.com)

I like its hypnotic quality and the way it leads you into that almost trance-like group experience that Old Time jams can evoke; you can get into the groove, or some sort of zone; the 'Old-Time Zone'.

My plan was that I could share it with some friends at an Old Time session in Wales, at the White Horse Inn in Llandeilo, set up by John O'Connell. The session went very well and FOAOTMAD members in Wales look forward to future session dates.



### Rabbit Hash

From the Playing of Spencer & Rains August 2016  
Transcribed roughly by Jan Howard

A musical score for the tune 'Rabbit Hash' in 4/4 time, key of D major. The score is written on a single staff in treble clef. It consists of five lines of music. The first line starts with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The second line continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes. The third line features a series of eighth notes and a final flourish. The fourth line includes several 'pizz.' (pizzicato) markings above the notes. The fifth line shows two first and second endings for the piece.

The YouTube link for Rabbit Hash shows Tricia Spencer, Howard Rains, Adam Hurt and others playing Rabbit Hash, with the fiddles in Cross A tuning AEae. The Spencer and Rains video had attributed Rabbit Hash to Duck Wootan of Junction, TX, so I looked on the Traditional Tune Archive for a transcription, but there was nothing there. I learned it by ear from the Spencer and Rains video, and wrote it out in standard notation.

You can also view a larger, clearer, printable version of my transcription of Rabbit Hash here on my web link, along with my attempt at writing down the Spencer and Rains fiddle harmony as well. The harmony part can be played as it is and an octave above (it's a bit more tricky then though).

<https://www.janihoward.org/rabbit-hash-article>



Howard Rains explained to me by email that he had learned most of Duck Wootan's tunes from Duck's grandson Tim Wooten who has been Howard's mentor. I was keen to know some more about Duck Wootan and was able to get in touch with Tim Wooten.



It turns out that the tune Rabbit Hash had been recorded in 1958, played by Thomas Jefferson 'Duck' Wootan near Junction, Texas and his grandson Tim Wooten had passed a copy of the old recording to Bruce Molsky who shared it with other fiddlers and it appeared on the Fiddle Hangout website.

<http://www.fiddlehangout.com/forum/>



It also appears on Larry Warren's Slippery Hill web site, another very useful resource. Duck Wootan was a very prolific player judging from the recordings of him available on Slippery Hill.

<https://www.slippery-hill.com/recording/rabbit-hash>

Duck certainly has a great strong and rhythmic style of playing, especially considering he was well into his 70s when recording this.

Here is Tim Wooten giving some interesting background about his grandfather and the tune: -

"Thomas Jefferson (Duck) Wootan was born in 1882 and died in 1964. Some of my earliest memories are of him playing his fiddle (which I play now). My last name is spelled differently because the US army got my father's name wrong in WWII and it was too much trouble to change it back. My father had the foresight to record a few of Duck's tunes and later gave the recording to me. I'm so glad I gave that recording to Bruce and he shared it. I have been playing those tunes a lot lately and really enjoying them".

"There is no connection between the tune 'Rabbit Hash' and Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. I always thought that the name referred to food. My grandfather (we called him 'Papa Wootan') was a subsistence farmer, and while my father told me they always had enough to eat, I'm sure they weren't too proud to eat jackrabbits when they could catch or shoot them. No one really knows, though, who he got that tune from or why it was named that. That information is probably lost. Papa Wootan got his tunes from other local fiddlers. He played at dances where he and other fiddlers took turns playing. If he heard a tune he liked he would have to remember it the next day and try to play it the best he could. I believe that in those days (say before 1940) there were almost as many versions of each tune as there were fiddlers who played it, because they had no recording devices and most of them played by ear (only a few could read music). Rural fiddlers were also widely

separated geographically in many instances (*I can relate to that – Jan*). I'm sure many tunes and regional variants were lost (or almost lost). Luckily 'Rabbit Hash' is in the second category."

"As to how my grandfather got his nickname; when he was a small child his family raised ducks. They threw bread and other scraps to the ducks and he competed with them to eat the scraps! So they called him 'Duck'."

"Papa Wootan's tunes that we play in AEae, were played by him quite a bit lower. I often play them in GDgd, which is below where he played them but sounds very nice. Try G#D#g##f# for a closer approximation of his tuning. He didn't use any sort of tuner, pitch pipe, tuning fork or other guide. There were no other musical instruments around. He just tuned by ear."

Another factor for recordings of this vintage sounding off-pitch could be that the electricity supply when recording may have been slightly different to when it was played back.

Advantages of Cross A tuning include that it allows you to play some tunes an octave above or below using the same fingering (see Sandy Boys later) and also enables you to use drones; Tim Wooten maintains that "it's very important to keep a drone going at all times! That's one of the great things about a cross tuning - you can stay always on two strings".

As well as using the drone strings to give a grooving pulse with your bowing, the structure of Rabbit Hash also helps give it its mesmerising, groove quality when you're playing it. Many Old Time tunes have 32 bars with 8 bars in the A part which is played twice, and 8 in the B part, also played twice, but Duck's version of Rabbit Hash has 6 parts of 4 bars each, and each part is played twice, making it a 48 bar tune. It might be good to play for a country dance such as 'The Virginia Reel', 'Sir Roger de Coverley', or 'The Bridge of Athlone' here in the UK, maybe? Country dances like these might be referred to as Contra Dances in the US.

A quick look at the Kieran Towers-inspired barnyard analogy for tunes, Horse-Donkey-Horse-Cow etc., suggests that my interpretation of Rabbit Hash would be: -

Rabbit-Fox-Dog, Duck-Fox-Fox-Dog, Donkey-Goat-Fox-Dog, Pig-Dog, Lamb-Goat-Fox-Dog, Squirrel-Goose-Turkey....I can imagine you saying "That's quite enough of that thank you"!

For accompanying players such as bass and guitars, the tune Rabbit Hash may have a number of chord sequences, or maybe just one chord; Tim Wooten recommends they stay on an A major chord throughout the tune, though the pattern could also be something like A-A/A-D/A-D/E-A/ for some of the parts.

Howard Rains refers to the D chord as a four chord (because they sometimes play the tune in G and even F so instead of saying C or Bb they say the fourth chord from the root) and says "I should mention that Tricia and I added the four chord in there for two reasons, 1) Tricia is from the mid-west where the four chord is king (or queen, in Tricia's case) and 2) there was a note in the melody that implied a four chord. When I learned this tune from Tim, we always played it over the one chord, which sounds great! We love it both ways!" Here in the UK we might write the chords as being I, IV, and V instead of One, Four and Five or root, fourth and fifth.

I've struggled with Cross A tuning in the past, but after finding an old fiddle in a shed, I've tuned it to AEae, permanently, and I've discovered a whole load of other tunes to do in Cross A tuning as well, including Big Hoedown, Chinquapin Hunting, Red Prairie Dawn and Sandy Boys.

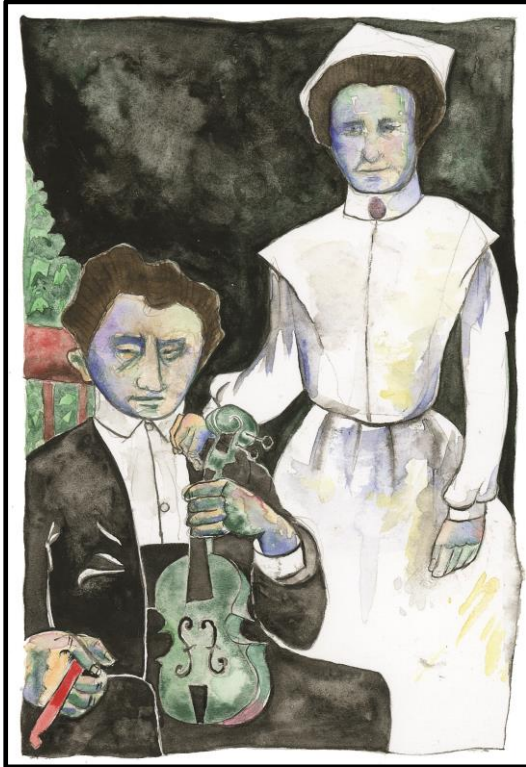


The version of Sandy Boys I'm most impressed with is played by Ben Paley and Tab Hunter [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUokGb\\_FYZA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUokGb_FYZA) which I think he says he got from Bruce Molsky recording that I haven't found yet.

I'll try to transcribe Ben's version of Sandy Boys next, though there are many others out there on YouTube, and there is a useful tutorial version by Chris Carney on Colm Daly's session tune list.

Until then, I can fully recommend Duck Wootan's tunes on Slippery Hill and Spencer and Rains' music, and their artwork.

<http://spencerandrains.com/art/>



Here is Howard's painting of Duck and Lillie Mae Wootan's wedding photograph, and I also really like Howard's painting of Violet Hensley on the Spencer and Rains web site.



So here we go, back into the 'Old-Time Zone', and I hope you'll find yourselves grooving along very often.

Cheers, Jan

