

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## The Black Joke

“The Black Joke” was a widely popular street song in England in the beginning of the 18th century, and, despite rather carnal origins rooted in an era with a relatively high tolerance for such things, the melody has since been redeemed by association with a variety of dance traditions. It is still heard as a vehicle for morris dances, English and Scottish country dances, American contra dances and even an Irish set-dance, although it is sometimes rendered in a squared-off, truncated fashion, from its original, irregular form (there are two “extra” measures in each part). As with other older pieces, whether the song or tune appeared first is unknown, for it crops up in ballad operas, early country dance collections and broadside ballad sheets at about the same time. English dance collections that contain the tune are Walsh’s *Third Collection of Lancashire Jiggs, Hornpipes, Joaks, etc.*, c. 1730, Walsh’s *Compleat Country Dancing Master* of 1731, Johnson’s *Wright’s Compleat Collection of Celebrated Country Dances* (London, c. 1742) and Thompson’s *200 Country Dances Volume II* (1765). “The Black Joke” was heard on the London stage in, to name but two productions, “Coffey’s Beggar’s Wedding” (1729, under the title “Coal Black Joke”) and Henry Carey’s burlesque stage piece “Chrononhotonthologos” (1734). Carey (1687-1743) is today best known for his song “Sally in Our Alley,” deservedly esteemed through several centuries, but his use of “Black Joke” was not so universally admired. In fact, one contemporary critic called it “that lowbrow little tune that has been used as an interval tune for years,” referring to the music for dances performed in the entr’acte interval at the playhouses.

A variety of songs were set to “The Black Joke,” many printed and circulated on broadside ballad sheets, but all of them were bawdy. Variants quickly appeared, cashing in on the success of the songs. Sometimes the title was amended to fit regional sensibilities, as when it was called “Black Jock” in Scotland, and “Black Jack” in Northumbria. Other variants of the genre were ‘joke’ tunes in a veritable rainbow of colors; white jokes, brown jokes, yellow jokes, etc. appear in several publications of the time. In Ireland, the not-always-reliable Grattan Flood (1906) reported that Madame Violante set off a furor in Dublin’s Smock-Alley Theatre in December, 1729, when Cummins (a famous dancing master) danced the “White Joke,” a set off to the then-popular “Black Joke.”

That it was extremely vulgar and bawdy probably in no small way contributed to its continued popularity into the 19th century in the British Isles and throughout its colonies, including America [where audiences heard the melody as the tune for air thirteen in Andrew Barten’s ballad opera “The Disappointment” (New York, 1767)]. With the advent of Victorian sensibilities, the tune’s popularity diminished for a time, but “The Black Joke” survived in a number of traditions and guises. In the Shetland Islands it was known as “But the House and Ben the House,” with the first lines remembered as:

*But your house and ben your house  
This house is like a bridal house.*

Shetland fiddler John Irvine played it as a middle tune between two reels for the ceremony of the “bedding of the bride” around the turn of the last century, in which the women of the community escorted the bride to her bed. Peter Cooke, in his book *Fiddle Music of the Shetland Isles* (1986) says: “The use of the ‘Black Joke’ in this context is intriguing...in earlier days the whole song might have been known and, unless the fiddler was having his own private joke by playing this piece, possibly even sung by the bride’s attendants.” He points out that such bawdry serves a purpose and is fairly common in many parts of the world. It can ward off the “evil eye” and defend the happiness of the moment, and such humor helps to release anxiety on the part of the young couple. “Finally...the explicit detail could have served also as a piece of last-minute sex education — an example of how music is sometimes used in a situation that allows one to sing what might be too embarrassing to say.”

“The Black Joke” also survived in good health in English morris dance tradition. The Lichfield morris dance The Barefooted Quaker is performed to it, and versions are found in the Cotswold villages of Adderbury, Acstot-under-Wychwood, Bledington, Bucknell, Ilmington and Staton Harcourt. Some morris versions of the tune are known by the interesting title variant “Old Black Joe,” a curious confusion of title with an American popular song. One such from Badby, Northhamptonshire, lacks the distinctive two-measure ending to both parts that is typical of most “Black Joke” versions. Accordion master John Kirkpatrick (1976) is of the opinion that the Badby dance “flows more perfectly than any in the Cotswold Morris. No jumps, no jerky backwards movements, no need to fiddle the feet to get them right. An absolute joy.”

Scots poet Robert Burns (who was no stranger to ribaldry) penned to the melody, in September, 1784, the words “My girl she’s airy, she’s buxom and gay.” The parody was one of his earliest bawdy songs, although little seen today because of its explicitness. The Scots were quite taken with the melody as a vehicle for demonstrating innumerable variation sets. “The

## Black Joak

*Walsh — Lancashire Jiggs,  
Hornpipes, Joaks, etc. (c. 1730)*

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the fiddle tune "Black Joak". The music is written in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a 6/8 time signature. It contains a single melodic line with a repeat sign at the end. The second staff also features a treble clef and 6/8 time, showing a variation of the melody with a repeat sign. The third staff continues with another variation of the melody, also ending with a repeat sign.

Black Joke” appears in the *McFarlane Manuscript* (1740) in a long variation set (eighteen strains) by Charles McLean, in Bremner’s *Scots Tunes* (1759) in thirty strains, the *Gillespie Manuscript* (1768), the *Sharpe Manuscript* (c. 1790) with eighteen strains, and a flute manuscript of c. 1770; all have basically the same variations, though in different order.

In Ireland as well, “The Black Joke” was widely known, although it survived in collected tradition under another name, “The Sprig of Shillelagh” (referring to a sprig of oak — the name derived from a famous oak forest near Shillelagh, County Wicklow; see *O’Neill’s 1001 Gems*). The set-dance “Humors of Bandon” is said to be a distanced version of

“Black Joke,” and there are similarities in the first parts of the tunes. Irish immigrants brought both tune and ribald tradition to America, and a New York City fire company, Volunteer Engine Company No. Thirty-three, was popularly known as the Black Joke in the mid-19th century.

[More information on “The Black Joke,” as well as thousands of other tunes, can be found at Andrew Kuntz’s on-line tune encyclopedia, “The Fiddler’s Companion” (<http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc>). Andrew is also the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987). Currently, he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.]

## Black Jock

Aird, Vol. II (1782)

## Black Jock

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