



Some Notes about "Missouri Waltz" by a Missouri Fiddler

by Dr. Howard Marshall

"Missouri Waltz" is a tune with a checkered and clouded history, whose actual origins continue to be debated. The song has been attributed to several different black jazz piano players in Missouri railroad towns of the early twentieth century. I grew up in Moberly in the 1950s, where it was broadly understood in our community that "Missouri Waltz" was composed by African-American jazz piano player Dab Hannah of Moberly and St. Louis. I have always preferred the Dab Hannah authorship ascription, since his former wife, Elma Williams Smith, was my childhood nurse. I well remember seeing Dab Hannah perform on an upright piano on a flatbed truck in a community parade on Reed Street in downtown

Moberly in the 1950s.

Most people today, with the benefit of research by Dave Para and Cathy Barton of Boonville, Missouri, Joe Weed of Los Gatos, California, and others, accept the song's composer to be the white jazz pianist from New Franklin, Missouri, Edgar Lee "Jelly" Settles. Settles, it is now believed, was given the melody around 1914 by the DiArmo Sisters, a vaudeville music act on the same circuit as Settles.

The song was published in 1915 by big band leader John Valentine Eppel of Fort Dodge, Iowa, under the title, "Hush-a-Bye, Ma Baby; Missouri Waltz." It was published in Chicago by the F.J.A. Forster music company.

John Valentine Eppel is said to have heard the tune played by Jelly Settles in a Missouri honky-tonk under Settles's title, "Graveyard Waltz." Eppel wrote down the music and had it copyrighted in 1914 with an arrangement by Frederick Knight Logan of Oskaloosa, Iowa. The Chicago publisher, F.J.A. Forster, hired Tin Pan Alley singer and composer James Royce Shannon to write the controversial lyrics. Eppel's dance band then performed the song widely and with great success. It is believed that Frederick Knight Logan printed the first version in 1912 in Iowa; some say that Logan had been given the melody in Iowa by African-American dance instructor Henry Clay Cooper.

According to Joe Weed of Los Gatos, California (July 2006), it is also possible that John Valentine Eppel first heard the melody being played by Jelly Settles in the bar of the Merchant's Hotel in Moberly. The Merchant's Hotel, within walking distance of the Wabash Railroad depot at the foot of Reed Street, was an important venue on the traveling musicians' circuit for piano players like Settles as well as for orchestra leaders like Eppel. Eppel seems to have been performing with his five-piece dance band ("orchestra" in the musicians' language of the time) in the upstairs ballroom at the Merchant's Hotel (a place where I attended numerous dances in the 1950s and 1960s) on the same date that Settles was playing piano in the hotel's bar downstairs.

As far as I know, none of the piano players who played the tune, nor its assumed composer (Jelly Settles), received any recognition from the publisher or from Eppel. It is now clear that Eppel did not compose the tune, but copied it from the playing of another musician, most likely a Missourian.

[The Des Moines Register](#) "Famous Iowans" website (July 2006) reports that Frederick Knight Logan ("America's Waltz King") had heard the song played by John Valentine Eppel and that Eppel had learned the tune "from a black man in Missouri." This appears to confirm the assumption that Iowans no longer claim the song as a composition by John Valentine Eppel.

Harry S Truman, U.S. President in the 1940s, was begged to play this tune on the piano at every opportunity. The song was played by Democratic Party pep bands non-stop during the campaign season of

1948, when Truman was elected President. Under pressure from the press corps, Truman played the tune and posed at the piano with visiting dignitaries, such as in a memorable White House photograph with Jack Benny holding his Stradivarius violin (in the collections of the State Historical Society of Missouri). Mr. Truman strongly disliked "Missouri Waltz," and his musician daughter, Margaret, refused to sing it. As time went by, Mr. Truman became quite blunt about his disapproval of the song, as recalled in Merle Miller's 1973 biography, Plain Speaking. (New York, Berkely, 386-387).

As proposed by Missouri House of Representatives member Floyd Snyder of Independence, and under protest by other members who complained about its racist lyrics, "Missouri Waltz" was adopted by the legislature (House Bill No. 2) as the Missouri State Song in 1949, fortunately with some of Shannon's lyrics removed. One can see why the lyrics needed to be edited when the song became the State Song:

Hush-a-bye, ma baby, slumber-time is coming soon
Rest yo' head upon ma breast while Mammy hums a tune
The sandman is callin' where shadows are fallin',
While the soft breezes sigh as in days long gone by.
'Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody,
When I was a Pick-a-ninny on ma Mammy's knee
The darkies were hummin,' Their banjos were strummin'
So sweet and low Strum, strum, strum, strum, strum,
Seems I hear those banjos playin' once again,
Hum, hum, hum, hum, hum, That same old plaintive strain.
Hear that mournful melody, It just haunts you the whole day long,
And you wander in dreams back to Dixie, it seems,
When you hear that old time song.
Hush-a-bye, ma baby, go to sleep on Mammy's knee,
Journey back to Dixieland in dreams again with me;
It seems like yo' Mammy was there once again,
And the darkies were strummin' that same old refrain.
'Way down in Missouri where I learned this lullaby,
When the stars were blinkin' and the moon was climbin' high,
And I hear Mammy Cloe, as in days long ago singin' hush-a-bye.

As performed today at public events and intercollegiate games by the University's Marching Mizzou band, "Mammy" becomes "Mommy," "Pick-a-ninny on ma Mammy's knee" becomes "little child on my mommy's knee," and "the darkies were strummin' that same old refrain" becomes "old folks strummin' that same old refrain." This somewhat crude revision of the lyrics is thinly disguised, and reflects the version as sung by radio and record stars Bing Crosby and Eddy Arnold in the 1950s, and many people continue to dislike the song.

There have been many commercial recordings since the 1940s of "Missouri Waltz" (as an instrumental piece and song) by many different musicians in a variety of styles, from radio crooners and bands like Crosby, Perry Como, and the Glen Miller Orchestra and Guy Lombardo, to country stars Arnold, Gene Autry Johnny Cash, to the University of Missouri marching band. Several editions of the sheet music are available. In its form, the tune appears to be what could be called a "country rag waltz."

Few Missouri old-time fiddlers have recorded the song. It has only been marginally important in repertoires here, except as an oft-requested song by audiences in public performances. State champion Kelly Jones of Stover has often uses "Missouri Waltz" as his waltz in fiddle contests. For the old-time fiddling enthusiast, at least two recordings by Missouri fiddlers can be recommended, in different fiddle styles: Pete McMahan, *50 Old-Time Fiddle Gems* (Seattle, Voyager, 2005, a reissue of McMahan's four 1970s private label LP records), and Billy Lee *Up Jumped the Devil* (Seattle, Voyager, 2003).

I would be grateful for any comments, suggestions, and corrections on this brief overview of "Missouri Waltz."

About the Author

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