

Mp3 Laura P. Schulman - Pretty Little Dog



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Old Timey clawhammer banjo picking from 'way back in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. My influences are my teacher, the late Tommy Jarrell, and other old-timers like Wade Ward, Sidna Myer, the Carter Family and other greats. 13 MP3 Songs FOLK: Traditional Folk, WORLD: World Traditions Details: I heard clawhammer banjo for the first time when I was 19 years old. My next-door neighbor had a house guest who "made the banjo ring." I was transfixed. I haunted the junk dealers' shops until I found a terrible mess of a civil war era open-back banjo that had been salvaged from a fire. I badgered a lesson out of the victim I had heard playing, and went "into the woodshed" to learn the little phrase he had given me. That is to say, I did not eat nor sleep until I had learned it, and then went back for more. Now let me explain what clawhammer style banjo playing is. It seems that everybody knows what bluegrass banjo sounds like: fast, driving, loud, twangy.....Earl Scruggs, the dean of early five-string bluegrass-style banjo, made his "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" justifiably famous. Clawhammer banjo is NOT THAT. Clawhammer banjo means you HAMMER the strings with your CLAW. Rather than plucking UP with your right hand, you use the fingernails of your right hand to strike the strings, causing them to ring in a way that is at the same time mellow and full of overtones and harmonics and standing waves and interference. Am I in love with it? Now more than ever, more than thirty years later. I absolutely wore my first mentor out. We were playing in a band together at that time and I was officially playing flute, but I followed him around copping banjo licks to the point that he (I am not kidding) started playing with a handkerchief over his left hand to thwart my intentions of lick larceny. But to no avail, since by then I didn't have to see it to hear it and then lickety-split learn it. Before I knew it, I was out on the street. Well, Harvard Square. I played in doorways in the Square, filled in with the Brattle Street Band (Patty Larkin on guitar), played in all the coffeehouses in Cambridge and Boston, and for dances, parties, and whatever else would pay the

rent. I ended up on several other peoples' records but never really thought of doing any recording myself. 1976 found me hitting the festival trail in the Southern Mountains. Fiddlers' Conventions, as they were called, were held almost every weekend from May to September. Back then, almost every little town had its old-timey fiddlers and banjo pickers that would come out of the woods to sing and play, stay up all night and drink white liquor, tell jokes and "have another tune." You could see the finest flat-foot dancing, looked like their feet were hovering just above the floor, with small, neat movements that exactly played the tune. Sometimes a musician would team up with a dancer and they'd have a duet, just as subtle and elegant as could be. My *modus operandi* was to find someone who played better than I did and follow them around until either I learned all their licks or they caught onto me and kicked me out. I never did get kicked out, but I made a lot of good friends who taught me, sometimes patiently and sometimes not. The great Tommy J. Jarrell (may he rest in peace) was my most important mentor. He is mostly known for his unique, scratchy, sexy style of fiddling; but he was a crackerjack old-timey banjo player, a master of the instrument. I showed up, quite literally, on his doorstep in 1978. I wasn't the first one there, as evidenced by a sign on his door that said something like, "If you're coming here to learn music go away." I guess he was already beleaguered by the waves of young old-time hopefuls, not the least of whom were John Cohen and Mike Seeger of the New Lost City Ramblers. Then there were the rest of us. Tommy didn't have a phone, and I had traveled all the way from Chicago to see him so I was not to be deterred by his sign. Or by his big black dog ("Bolliver (rhymes with "Oliver"), named after that guy Simon, you know, who conquered South Amerikay"). So I knocked and stood on his doorstep until he finally gave up and came to the door. I guess he must have had a soft spot for pretty young girls, because he let me in and first thing asked me if I could cook because his daughter had gone "off" to visit relatives and he had no one to "do" for him. I jumped at that chance. He evicted his grown son from his bedroom so I would have a place to stay. I stayed with Tommy, on and off, throughout that summer, and the next. It was exactly the way I imagined heaven, hanging out with Tommy and whoever came to play with him. Kyle Creed, the famous fretless banjo maker and player, was a frequent visitor. I stuck close by him, even though he was rather prickly and without patience. That paid off, though, because he would say "you don't play it THAT way, girl, THIS is how you play it," and then he would make me note-for-note, nuance-for-nuance reproduce his sound EXACTLY. Wow. Some of them made "white liquor," also known as moonshine. There was a clearly defined protocol for drinking it, though. At Tommy's house, everyone was polite and respectful at

all times. Refined behavior was expected and enforced. No one walked around with a drink in his hand. Rather, each of us had our own half-pint jelly jar, the kind with the lid that just sits on top, doesn't screw on because it is intended that the jelly should have paraffin over it, and the lid just keeps the dust out. So each of us had a jar, and the jar had some liquor in it. Now you had to keep the lid on that jar because the liquor would just evaporate if you didn't, that's how strong it was. But it tasted clean and sweet on the palate. Everybody kept his own jar stashed in the spot of his choosing in any one of the kitchen cupboards. When you wanted to "TAKE a drink," why you just "eased on over" to your cupboard and discreetly took a sip. And a sip was all it took. The first time "the boys" got together to play, I was pretty green. I didn't know, for instance, that the refrain "stay all night and don't go home" is literal. They stayed, played, and drank till morning, had breakfast, and went home. If one of them wore out, he took a nap, then went back "to it." You should know that the youngest of these "boys" was in his mid-seventies. Tommy was eighty-one at that time, and strong as an ox. That liquor got the best of me the first night: I had to go to bed partway through the night even though the boys were still kickin' it up. When I finally dragged myself into the kitchen next morning, my head felt like a well-smashed pumpkin. Tommy had the cure: a "coffee-lace." That is, strong black coffee laced with a "hair of the dog." Then breakfast. His version: slowly render a pound of bacon, remove the solids, and carefully slide some eggs into the grease to poach. Meanwhile, thickly cover some slices of white bread with yellow margarine, lay these in a pie pan, and heat in the oven till the margarine is melted and the bread is soggy. Slide all items onto plate. Heave. After a respectful interval ("Eat that meat, girl. 'Hit's good!") I excused myself and went into the mountains to camp and fast for three days. Renewed, refreshed, and a bit more savvy, I returned to the cradle of my old-time dreams. The last weekend of my summer is unforgettable. Tommy and Kyle and some other "old 'uns" played a dance in some little town on the North Carolina-Virginia border. I was invited to come along, although I would not be playing. The dancers were all old-time men and women in their 60's and 70's. The men wore clean overalls and starched white shirts, the women long calico dresses that skimmed the floor, with long sleeves and high collars. That was the way they dressed back then, respectable yet humble. Everyone wore flat soled black leather shoes. I was invited to "dance in," and I joyfully accepted. The dances were all "traveling couples" big circle dances, with couples making an outer circle dancing with couples in an inner circle, each circle traveling in opposite directions. All the dances were old, and simple, and beautiful. They danced easily, feet barely leaving the floor, the ladies

looking as if they were gliding on wheels. Although I have loved playing for dances and performing solo, my happiest times with the banjo have been just the two of us, all alone. That's when I let it all go, forget that it is I who am playing, and just listen to the drones, the overtones, the mantra of the tune: as Tommy put it, "like the rolling of a wheel." That's when I cease to exist at all, and time is defined by the ebb and flow of the tide of sound. After that last beautiful summer real life intervened, until I found my way back to the mountains of North Carolina in 1998. Somebody called me to let me know that they had released a CD that had a track with me playing on it, and I got to thinking about making one of my own. I got together with my cousin Alan Kaufman, a professional musician, composer, arranger, and teacher who generously volunteered his time to engineer this record. We did our best to try to capture the essence of the old-time open-back clawhammer banjo by recording it in analogue, with the intention of retaining the acoustic properties unique to the banjo, essentially a marriage of a drum with a stringed instrument. We strove to capture the complexities of its ambient sounds, much as you might hear on one of the old 78 rpm records that recorded most of the archives of old-time music. Thus, this CD is not the crisp, clear digital sound of the 21st century, but a little bit funky, just like the music, just like me. The instruments used on this recording are both five-string open-back banjos. One is an A.C. Fairbanks Regent made in 1907. I have her strung with Vega Light strings and a Weatherking head. The other is a Fairbanks and Coles fretless model c.1896, with a calfskin head and gut strings for maximum funk. Thanks for coming along with me. Hope you've enjoyed your trip! Please send your comments to: <mailto:lpsguard-bpg@yahoo.com> 2006 Laura P. Schulman all rights reserved

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