

Tombigbee Waltz, or Gum Tree Canoe

The Tombigbee River is in Mississippi and Alabama.

Early versions of lyrics and melody were attributed to S.S. Steele and A.F. Winnemore (1847)

Traditional American Fiddle
arr. P.K. Clifford

Delicately, lyrically, ♩ = 140

Vln. 

Pno. 

6 

10 

14 

18 Am V Am7 Am9 C D7/A G 1. G 2. G

23 G G7/B C G G#dim

27 Am V Am7 Am9_V C D6

31 G G7/B C G G#dim

35 Am V Am7 Am9 C D7/A G D6 C D7/A G D7/A V

41

G V GM7/B V G6 V G G#dim

45

Am V Am7 Am9 V C G/D D7/A V

49

G V GM7/B V G6 V G7 G#dim V

53

Am V Am7 Am9 C D7/A G D7/A

57

G G7/B C G G#dim

61 Am V Am7 Am9_V C D6

65 G G7/B C G G#dim

69 Am V Am7 Am9 C D7/A G

"Tombigbee Waltz", aka "Gum Tree Canoe", "Tom Big Bee River", Old-Time Waltz in G Major.

Tombigbee Waltz is a 19th century American fiddle tune from the southern states. According to "The Fiddler's Companion" the melody is named for the Tombigbee River which flows from northeastern Mississippi into the Alabama River. The name, Tombigbee, is from the Chotaw Indian word for "box-maker" or "coffin-maker". In the early 19th century the song and lyrics were performed in blackface minstrel shows in which white performers in blackface sang and danced in imitation of black slaves of the American South. But the song is undoubtedly older than its use in minstrel shows.

The oldest reference to a printed version I have been able to find is its publication as "Gum Tree Canoe" in the book "Plantation Melodies" published by Geo P. Reed c. 1847, with the attribution "Words by S.S. Steele, Esq. as sung by A.F. Winnemore and his band of Virginia Serenaders; Arranged for the Piano Forte by A. F. Winnemore", a copy of which can be found in the Detroit public library at <https://digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A208190>

S.S. Steele and A.F. Winnemore (1847) are also credited with words and music in "The Laura Ingalls Wilder Songbook: Favorite Songs from the Little House Books", Eugenia Garson (Editor), 1996. Further, Steele's song version, "Tom Big Bee River," was printed in "Heart Songs – Melodies of Days Gone By", published in 1909 by World Syndica, although the melody is much older.

The dialect employed in the lyrics is typical of old minstrel songs. Over the years there have been dozens of popular versions with lyrical and melodic variations that take it far from its minstrel and pre-minstrel roots. There are even Australian versions, printed in the early 20th century.

You can hear Jay Ungar, Molly Mason and band play the fiddley "Tombigbee Waltz and Simple Gifts" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roqKA-qHnns>); listen to John Hartford sings the first three of the verses below on his album "Gum Tree Canoe" (1984 and 2001) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quZZy73SHvE>); or, enjoy Matthew Sabatella and the Rambling String Band sing a version (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3IlFpZ6as4&feature=youtu.be>).

Tombigbee Waltz (aka Gum Tree Canoe) Lyrics (1847 version):

Chorus:

(2x) Singing row away row, O'er the waters so blue,
Like a feather we'll float, In my Gum Tree Canoe

Verses:

On Tombigbee river so bright I was born,
In a hut made ob husks ob de tall yaller corn,
An dar I fust meet wid my Julia so true
An I row'd her about In my Gum Tree Canoe

All day in de field de soft cotton I hoe,
I tink of my Julia an sing as I go,
Oh I catch her a bird, wid a wing ob true blue,
An at night sail her 'round in my Gum Tree Canoe.

Wid my hands on de banjo and toe on de oar,
I sing to de sound ob the rivers soft roar;
While de stars dey look down at my Julia so true,
An' dance in her eye in my Gum Tree Canoe.

One night the stream bore us so far away
That we couldn't come back, so we thought we'd just stay
Oh, we spied a tall ship with a flag of true blue
And it took us in tow in our Gum Tree Canoe