

"TOM LOONE" - THE REAL STORY

In the process of investigating the recording history of Davey Arthur's great reel "Tam Lin", one of our intrepid Zouki Cultural Laboratories researchers came across a little-known tune called "Tom Loone". The composer is a fiddler happily still among us, playing occasionally but devoting most of his time to his West Clare property (which he hopes eventually to convert to a seven-hole golf course, or maybe a wolverine farm).

Here's a transcription of the interview between our researcher and the composer (who wishes, for reasons that may become obvious, to remain anonymous; we'll refer to him as "Jim" [not necessarily his real name]).

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ZCL:

We at the Lab have heard a recording of your tune "Tom Loone", and it's certainly an interesting piece of music.

Jim:

If "interesting" is intended to have a positive connotation, thank you. If however the contrary is true, I take umbrage at your implication and invite you to vacate the premises immediately.

ZCL:

. . . uh . . . I guess it's positive. Let's talk a little about the tune - first of all, let me confirm that it's a reel in the key of E minor.

Jim:

More or less correct. Of course the structure has certain quasi-Aeolian nuances that you might have missed, but we'll agree that "E minor" is as close as bourgeois Western music can come.

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Analysed as a Punjabi raga, of course, that might or might not be true.

ZCL:

When you listen to the tune, you hear a lot of notes that . . . well, quite frankly, the notes sound strange.

Jim:

And well you should, but the word "strange" is perhaps not accurate. The presence of flatted fourths and sharped sixths in upward progressions is intentional. The diminished ninth chords that result are a challenge to some backup players, but that's tough rabbits for them.

ZCL:

When I said "strange", that was a nice way of saying that I thought maybe the fiddler on the recording didn't know where to put his fingers.

Jim (*with a condescending chuckle*):

Au contraire. Mick is classically trained - although capable of functioning smoothly in the West Clare traditional context - and knows EXACTLY where his fingers should be. He has played duets with Anna-Sophie Mutter - the Bach Double Concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic springs immediately to mind - and is also welcome in all of the tourist pubs in Doolin. He's rated as a "five reel" player - not too many others like him around.

ZCL:

What's a "five reel" player?

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Jim:

That means that he gets a free pint from the bar for every five reels he plays. Most locals are rated fifteen or twenty. If you're a musician but not from West Clare, or not related to the barman, have lots of euros ready or bring your own drink. You'll get nothing without paying for it.

ZCL:

What about the flute player that we hear?

Jim:

Unhappily he's an idiot. He plays like he's wearing mittens. Pay no attention to anything he does. If he weren't my brother-in-law, he wouldn't have been anywhere within a mile of the recording device. He just happened to be in my kitchen trying to clear a drain.

ZCL:

Does your brother-in-law play in Doolin?

Jim (*snorts unpleasantly*):

The last time he tried, somebody - I think a German student - emptied a bucket of pig slop on him. Evidently the student kept one or two buckets in his car to use for just such a purpose. My relative got the message, believe me. He's so bad, HE has to buy everybody in the pub a pint after he plays five reels. If he refuses, they hide his flute until he does.

ZCL:

Back to "Tom Loone" - can you give us an idea what you were trying to achieve with this tune?

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Jim:

Certainly. It was composed as a mystical reflection on the sex life of the purple or least bittern, a bird of some local importance in this parish and a few to the south of here. The notes you somewhat comically refer to as "strange" are intended - as I'm sure you'll understand upon further listening - to invoke the bird's mating belch, a sound of nature much loved here in West Clare.

ZCL:

Uh . . . I'm a little confused. If the tune is about a bittern, why did you name it after a loon?

Jim:

Your confusion is understandable. "Tom Loone" - with an "e" - is the name of the owner of the local garage who repairs my car and farm machinery. He asked me to name a tune after him as a kind of advertising gimmick. I agreed - upon offer of a twenty-percent discount on future oil changes - but I drew the line at including his phone number.

ZCL:

Are you familiar with a reel called "Tam Lin"? A lot of people seem to like it.

Jim:

Unfortunately, yes. It's one of my brother-in-law's favorite tunes. We play it at sessions just to keep him quiet, but when we do, most of us are discreetly snickering at its glaring chordal deficiencies. They're obvious to everybody except you-know-who.

ZCL:

Thanks and good luck with your future composing efforts. Are you working on anything now?

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Jim:

As a matter of fact, I have almost completed a jig with recurrent references to tonal uncertainties between the third and fourth scale degrees, as well as a certain mocking allusion to a not-quite-sharped sixth here and there. It's a "cool" tune, as I believe the younger folk would put it.

ZCL:

Sounds . . . uh . . . cool. Do you have a name for it?

Jim:

Its working titles are "Take this Tune and Stick It" or "The Idiot Brother-in-Law". I haven't decided yet.

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