



# John Hartford's "Windows" Method

by Chris Coole

When Sam Allison, Mark Kilianski, John Showman, Adrian Gross and I released the album "Adeline" we noted that we had loosely based our playing approach on John Hartford's "Windows"

method of playing old-time stringband backup. It turned out that not many people knew what we were referring to when we mentioned "Windows". I'll try to briefly describe it here, leaning heavily on Hartford's own words. You might like to start by taking a look at the Youtube video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Imjb-j36oQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Imjb-j36oQ)) of us playing Methodist Preacher using the method.

Between 1996 and 2001, Hartford released three albums of old-time fiddle tunes. They were "Wild Hog in the Red Brush" (1996), "The Speed of the Old Long Bow" (1998), and "Hamilton Ironworks" (2001). Although Hartford had been passionate about old-time fiddle since he was young, it hadn't really been reflected in his recorded work much until the 90s. Somewhere around that time, he had become interested (obsessed?) with the West Virginia/Kentucky fiddler Ed Haley. Not only was he learning Haley's tunes, he was working towards getting whatever recordings that existed of Haley available to the public (which, in part, resulted in the release of two double CDs of Haley's fiddling on Rounder Records).

I remember when "Wild Hog in the Red Brush" came out I was very excited. Not only was I a huge fan of John Hartford, but the band was full of some of my favorite musicians – Bob Carlin on banjo, Mike Compton on mandolin, Ronnie McCoury on guitar, and Jerry McCoury on bass. When I started listening to the album I was taken a bit off-guard as it was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. I was used to old-time backup that while driving, was very "consistent" in its support of the fiddle. There would maybe be the odd edgy bass-run on the guitar, but for the most part the band would provide a steady rhythmic bed for the fiddle to play on and there wasn't a lot of tension, rhythmically or tonally, between the band and the fiddle. On "Wild Hog" the band seemed to be endlessly "jamming" behind the fiddle. To my ears (that were used to what I previously described), it never seemed to get settled. It wasn't that the rhythm wasn't locked in, it's just that it was more fluid than I was accustomed to and the texture of it always seemed to be changing.

Although, on the first few listens the music almost seemed chaotic to me, I was very quickly drawn in and won over. There was something about the way the band was playing behind Hartford that made the music come alive in a way that I'd never heard before in an old-time stringband. Good music is always a conversation between the musicians playing it, but that fact seemed to be on "overdrive" on this album. The musicians really seemed to be playing off each other. There was always something to listen to, and something new seemed to be revealed on each listen as you peeled away the layers. It was some of the most engaging



Methodist Preacher video

old-time music I'd ever heard.

When "Speed of the Old Long Bow" came out a couple of years later, the band had changed slightly (Robert Gately on bass, Darren Vincent on guitar), but the magic was still there. If anything, whatever they were doing seemed even more realized. It turns out, what they were doing was something Hartford had conceptualized called playing "Windows". I guess enough people had asked him about that he thought to include a description in the album liner notes. He wrote it out almost like a recipe. Here's some of what he said...

*"It's loosely based on a big band device of changing the texture every eight bars."*

*"For lack of a better name, we call this a 'window' rhythm section. We've tried to find a better name but this one won't go away. I really don't like it cause it sounds too much like computers."*

*"Everybody has a bunch of things they can do on their instruments – you can (1) play rhythm on the downbeat, (2) play rhythm on the offbeat, (3) play a figure, like boogie-woogie, (4) play a figure, like high or low bass runs, (5) play unison lead, (6) play harmony, (7) deaden your strings and play rhythm things, (8) play 4/4 chromatic runs, (9) play straight open chord rhythm, (10) play closed chords, (11) always play just one note like the tonic or (12) you can just lay out."*

*"So every eight bars (a window) you change what you're doing or lay out (less is more). You might have five or six instruments and never more than three playing at the same time. The first window might be just the mandolin, the second window just the banjo, the third, the mandolin doing something different and also adding the guitar. The next window might be everyone and then for contrast, just the fiddle. If it's a tune you haven't heard before you might want to listen for a window or two before you dive in. Or you can play something with anything the first time you hear it even if it's one-note or just something chromatic. An entrance or exit should sound on purpose and not fading in or out and we are trying to make each window real different from the one before."*

*"It's probably a good idea to lay out every third window anyway to keep it from getting too busy."*

“Generally, try and build with one, then two, then three instruments, and then maybe, all of them and then lay out for pacing.”

“The groove is all important and should never be lost.”

It's very interesting to keep this in mind when you listen to the three albums I mention above. It sheds a lot of light on what's going on and why it's happening. There's a lot more to say about these albums – the way Hartford managed to seamlessly weave folklore into the music by vocalizing bits of stories associated with the tunes – his very personalized bowing style and drive on the fiddle – the contribution of Carlin and Compton to the sound (they were the only constants other than Hartford himself), but we'll have to save that for another time. All I can say is that if you can get past the fact that these albums don't sound like any other old-time music you've ever heard, you will be rewarded (and you may have your molecules realigned!).

Although we didn't follow Hartford's recipe to the letter on Adeline, it was definitely the guiding light. We mostly tried to tune into the spirit of freedom and communication that we'd heard on those recordings. Making this album has only deepened my appreciation for Hartford and all the musicians that went along with him to create something truly new, unique, and artful.

Thanks to the Hartford family for giving me permission to re-print John's words in this article and thanks to Bob Carlin for taking the time to talk to me about his time playing with John Hartford.

You should also check out the review of Adeline in the reviews section. □



### Biography

Chris Coole got his first banjo when he was 17 years old after falling in love with the sounds of folk and early country music. Today, Chris is known internationally for his clawhammer banjo style, songwriting, and singing. For the past 10 years, Chris has devoted much of his artistic attention to playing with The Lonesome Ace Stringband. Together they have recorded four albums and toured the world, playing festivals such as Merlefest, Rockygrass, Winnipeg Folk Festival, Mariposa, Wintergrass, and The Vancouver Folk Festival.



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