

Here is what happened, and *it was a powerful event*, understood and recognized by everyone in bluegrass music who was not overtly involved with the crass Nashville music business scene. Unfortunately, as is still often the case today, most of the Nashville musicians and producers were not really and truly in touch with what was actually going on in the musical lives of the people:

All the thinking banjo players in bluegrass, especially the younger ones, were very sharply attuned (*glued* would be a better word) to Bill Keith after he joined Bill Monroe, and in those days the live performance tapes made at literally almost every Monroe concert circulated like wildfire all over the country. Reel-to-reel tape recorders were in the possession of every dedicated picker, no matter what instrument was being played, and there were a lot of serious younger bluegrass musicians who knew without doubt that Bill Monroe was the source, and that Bill Keith was really up there doing something with the five string. The Bill Monroe 45 rpm singles featuring Keith were avidly collected. All of Bill Keith's work was heavily documented at this time, all the tunes he played, but "Blackberry Blossom" became the anthem, played *constantly*, almost *incessantly*, in every loft, living room, dorm room, and 'parking lot session' throughout the country.

Most banjo players studied and imitated Keith without having heard Arthur Smith or even knowing that Arthur had written the tune - to these musicians, it was a traditional 'fiddle tune' that Bill Keith had chosen to include as one of his extremely artistic banjo statements: one of his musical paradigms (models or patterns). It was largely the same for those who played other instruments than the banjo. Fiddlers, mandolin players, and guitarists began to learn the tune because the banjo players were completely gone over it, but not usually through any knowledge of Arthur, the Delmores, or the old-time country music tradition. And they learned it *from the banjo players*; they learned *the banjo version*.

Because of that circumstance, during the next couple of years "Blackberry Blossom" went through a process of moderately severe formalization, both melodically and chordally. The lanky, 'chicken farm' lead line of Arthur Smith and the hot, minimum chords, often four-to-the-bar guitar backup of the Delmore Brothers were of course not evident - how could they be? Instead the melodic line on all instruments became a series of banjoistic diatonic scale *sequences*, and every chord that was conceivably possible within the tradition was used for the accompaniment. (Bill Monroe might say, "Chords all over the place.") In addition, the harmonic progression for the B part of the tune was changed by the use of a B7 chord. For although he performed it very often while a Blue Grass Boy, Bill Keith did not record "Blackberry Blossom" during his tenure with Bill (March 1963 - December 1963). Bill Monroe's chords were used for the tune during that time; they were much closer to Arthur's original version, i.e., no A chord in the A part, no B7 chord in the B part. And Bill played the melody on the mandolin in a much less melodically sequential manner. Keith's two recording sessions with Bill Monroe were March 20, 1963 and March 27, 1963. There was truly much to be done, including learning Bill Monroe's "Shenandoah Valley Breakdown" (later retitled "Shenandoah Breakdown" on the 45 rpm single) for the March 27 session. "Blackberry Blossom" was worked into the band performances somewhat later, and was quite prominent onstage by September/October 1963. Bill Keith left the band before any further recording sessions were scheduled.

So “Blackberry Blossom” entered the popular bluegrass tradition through the powerful and innovative banjo playing of William Bradford Keith. The ‘standard parking lot version’ is still played in the formalized way, the tune is still considered by many as primarily a banjo number, and most mandolin players play the diatonic melodic sequences and use all the chords possible.

But what you have here as this month’s tune sheet is my current way of playing it, incorporating what Bill Monroe showed me in person on the mandolin more than forty years ago, my long study of Arthur Smith’s music over the years, and the results of a lot of contemplation. I sincerely hope you like it.

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