

Joe Weed
PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

The Fading Traces of “Faded Love”

A few years ago, I was preparing to play a gig with Monte Mills, who leads a traditional country band in central California. Monte loves old classic country music, and especially tunes that feature the fiddle. He wanted me to help train a new young fiddler who was playing with the band, so I thought I would listen to Johnny Gimble’s “Faded Love” and show that to her. I dug out my old Johnny Gimble CD “Still Fiddlin’ Around” (MCA Records, MCAD-42021).

I looked on the back of the CD tray and couldn’t find “Faded Love.” But I remembered hearing the tune on that record, and liking Gimble’s playing on it. Curious, I glanced more closely at the tune listings and decided to give “Nellie Gray” a try. Gimble’s electrified 5-string fiddle began what sounded to me just like “Faded Love,” until the B section, when the band went to the dominant chord and the melody changed. The arrangement had a familiar ring to it, though; the tune started in D, where it lays nicely on the fiddle, and after the first A and B parts, the band played D, D#, and E chords, setting up a modulation to the key of A. That was what I remembered hearing on Bob Wills’ original recording of “Faded Love” — a fiddle intro in D, followed by the same D, D#, E changes to lead into the key of A for the vocalist.

[Play Gimble’s “Nelly Gray” AB]

I was struck by how much the fiddle work in “Nelly Gray” reminded me “Faded Love”: the modulations, the same fiddle ornaments, and the same tempo and feel. I wondered if this were Johnny’s way of getting “Faded Love” onto his album without having to pay the mechanical royalties. But then I realized he might be telling us something about “Faded Love” and “Nelly Gray,” and about his own long career as one of the premier fiddlers in country music.

Joe Weed
PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

Several years later, I asked Johnny about “Nelly Gray.”

“That’s one of the first tunes I ever played on fiddle,” he told me. “My brother Bill taught it to me. “We played it all the time — it was really popular at dances.”

“The first time Bob Wills played “Faded Love” for me, I thought he was playing “Darling Nelly Grey,” Johnny told me in another interview last October. I asked him if he still remembered the “Faded Love” recording session, feeling that he probably would. Gimble’s memory has proven remarkably accurate regarding names, places, and dates from over 60 years ago.

“I sure do. It was 1950, in California. Bob played fiddle on it and Keith (Coleman) and I played background. We played the modulation for the vocal, you know. Rusty McDonald sang the melody...”

Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys recorded “Faded Love” for MGM at Radio Recorders in Hollywood, California on April 27, 1950. Perhaps honoring the man who taught him to fiddle, Wills copyrighted the tune in both his own name and that of his father, John Tompkins Wills. Or was there maybe something deeper in the shared copyright?

Given that “Nelly Gray” was still quite popular when Bob Wills was born, 49 years after it was first published (by Oliver Ditson, in 1856), it’s quite likely that he learned the piece from his father so that they could play it at the many dances around Lakeview and Turkey, TX, where the family lived and worked on a small farm after 1921. Wills’ father (“Uncle John,” as he was known to the family), his grandfathers and uncles were all legendary fiddlers, and fiddles provided the bulk of the entertainment in rural west Texas in the early 20th century.

Joe Weed
PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

As I began looking into the roots of “Faded Love,” I thought I might be seeing a process that has happened many times in vernacular music. In fact, it is an important part of the dynamism and generational identity that propels vernacular music. It seemed to me that Bob Wills had taken a tune he and his family had played for years, and which many people knew and frequently requested, and had updated it and added lyrics and given it a new name. (His brother Billie Jack Wills is credited as the lyricist.)

I decided to try and track “Nelly Gray” from the original Ditson sheet music publication in 1856 and see if I could find published music and recorded examples to show its widespread popularity. This would also show the originality in Wills’ work, I thought — his making a new piece out of the popular old folk song, which had continued to be part of American life through the Civil War and on through the settling of the West.

Through the helpful contributions of a couple of Texas musicians, I learned a few things that surprised and delighted me. And they showed me that Wills wasn’t alone in creating “Faded Love” from the echoes of the crumbling sheet music and broadsides of “Nelly Gray.”

Looking further, I discovered that I may not have been seeing in Benjamin Hanby’s “Darling Nelly Gray” the actual beginning of the tune’s changing and adapting over time. When he composed “Darling Nelly Gray,” Hanby may very well have been doing something much like what the Wills family did. Hanby died young, and although he did contribute another piece to the American songbook (“Up On The Housetop,” published by George F Root in Chicago, 1864), the rest of his legacy is small and short, and I hadn’t seen any study connecting “Nelly” to previous musical sources. Hanby may, however, have been standing on the shoulders of another writer whose song “Maggie May” was already in wide circulation, certainly

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PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

in Great Britain and the eastern seaboard of the United States — in fact, anywhere that sailors might go and sing for recreation or to let off steam after a long time at sea. The questions of how and when “Maggie May” might have reached Hanby I will leave to another study. But the coincidence of words and melody in the chorus is just too close to ignore:

Here’s Hanby’s “Darling Nelly Gray”

“Oh, my poor Nelly Gray, they have taken you away...

...For you’ve gone from the old Kentucky shore”

(“Darling Nelly Gray,” Chorus from Oliver Ditson 1856 sheet music)

**[Play Bradley Kincaid Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs
BlueBonnet BL107]**

and here’s “Maggie May”

“Oh, it’s Maggie, Maggie May, they have taken you away...

Now you’ll never cruise ‘round Liverpool any more”

**[Play “Maggie May,” Chorus from Foc’sle Songs and Shanties,
Folkways Records FA 2429 (Sung by Paul Clayton and the Foc’sle Singers;
Recorded and with Notes by Kenneth S. Goldstein)]**

The story that the Hanby family told about Benjamin’s song sounds quite plausible, and is largely backed up by physical evidence. The following account comes from two places: (1), an unattributed brochure once offered at the Hanby house, which is now managed by the Westerville Historical Society with help from the Ohio Historical Society; and (2) a biography of Hanby written by his son B.O. Hanby. I obtained a scanned version of the biography in October, 2013, from Jim Allen, manager of Hanby House.

Joe Weed
PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

Benjamin Hanby's father William Hanby, in addition to holding other offices, was a minister and a bishop for the Church of the United Brethren in Christ in Westerville, Ohio, about 13 miles north of Columbus. Before living in Westerville, the family had lived in Rushville, about 50 miles to the south. In both towns, William Hanby operated in his home a station on the underground railroad. Apparently, in 1842, when Benjamin was eight or nine years old, an escaped slave named Joseph Selby reached Rushville on his underground trip to Canada, where he hoped to earn enough money to buy the freedom of his mate. Selby, perhaps suffering from ill health after the long and perilous journey, died before he could leave Rushville, and was buried in the local cemetery.

[show gravestone, cemetery]

[Show pics of Benjamin Hanby]

By 1856, when he was 23, Benjamin was attending Otterbein College in Westerville. The family says that Hanby's tune, which commemorates the life and misfortunes of Selby and his mate, was first performed in the **family parlor** at one of their many musical gatherings. Hanby dedicated it to his music teacher, Cornelia Walker. Ms Walker suggested that he send it in to a publisher, and Hanby sent the manuscript to the Oliver Ditson company in Boston. He didn't hear back from Ditson, and assumed that the tune hadn't been accepted for publication. But eventually, his sister Anna heard the tune sung at a reception. Ditson had indeed published it and had even registered the copyright in the company's name. The tune soon became quite popular, and Ditson made big money from sheet music sales. Hanby contacted Ditson and asked for the customary composer's royalties. Ditson, the story goes, wrote back that Hanby got the fame and they got the money, and that was the way things worked. Hanby then obtained the services of an attorney who negotiated a one-time payment by Ditson of \$100 and kept half.

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joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

Supposedly Ditson also sent Hanby twelve free copies of the music, thus completing Hanby's compensation for writing "Darling Nelly Gray."

The story about the attorney and the settlement may be apocryphal. The people I spoke with at the Hanby House have never seen the letter, and it's not among any of Hanby's retrievable papers at the site. The story does appear, however, in B.O. Hanby's biography of his father.

To make the connection between Hanby's "Darling Nelly Gray" and Bob Wills' "Faded Love," I wanted to pursue two avenues. First, I wanted to see how popular "Nelly Gray" had become. Was it likely that poor rural farmer/rancher/musicians who moved around 1913 from Kosse, Texas to remote west Texas would know the tune? Was it likely that they would find an audience for it? I also wanted to find out what the Wills family said about the tune, so I planned to visit with Charles Townsend, who wrote "San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills" (©1976, the University of Illinois Press).

Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, just 21 years after Ditson first published "Darling Nelly Gray." Once the commercial development and widespread distribution of phonograph records changed forever the way Americans would hear and learn music, "Darling Nelly Gray" showed up again and again as a favorite of both recording artists and the public. I've compiled here a short, incomplete list of commercial recordings of "Darling Nelly Gray" that were released between the advent of commercial recording and Bob Wills' 1950 recording of "Faded Love:"

[Show recordings here; photos/scans of disks, labels]

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And here are a number of sheet music examples:

[Show list of sheet music scans]

In fact, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote in “Little House in the Big Woods (“Christmas”) that Pa Ingalls fiddled “Darling Nelly Gray” to help Laura fall asleep on a Christmas eve. So the song was clearly out there, much loved and frequently distributed via written, oral, and recorded means. I felt it was pretty clear that “Darling Nelly Gray” would be a likely candidate for a fiddle band to play at Saturday night dances in rural Texas.

But what about the Wills family? What did they say about “Faded Love?” “Uncle John,” Bob Wills’ father, died in 1952. Bob always credited his father as having helped him write the tune, and according to Charles Townsend, he had the royalty payments for “Faded Love” sent directly to his mother until she died. The story that Bob told and that Townsend relates in his book is that Uncle John took an old fiddle tune, changed it, and worked with Bob to turn it into “Faded Love.” I believe that the old fiddle tune they were referring to was “Darling Nellie Gray.”

But when I interviewed Charles Townsend at his home on October 2, 2013, the now-retired professor and author of “San Antonio Rose” told me, just as we finished the interview, that “I don’t agree that ‘Faded Love’ was a take-off on ‘My Darling Nelly Gray’ (sic).” I’m sure there may be some similarity but I never could see it. But as the author of this book, I wanted to make that clear.”

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PO Box 554
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Townsend's book is a valuable trove of information about Wills, his musicians, his family, and his career. But it's not a completely objective scholarly study. Today, perhaps even more than when he wrote Wills' biography, Townsend feels a strong personal debt to and deep admiration for Bob Wills. Wills clearly did what many of our greatest and most successful vernacular musicians have done (including AP Carter, Bill Monroe, Woody Guthrie, and more). I believe that Townsend was simply trying to protect Wills' reputation and stress his honesty, and felt that if he acknowledged that Wills' writing of "Faded Love" was a re-working of an existing song rather than an original undertaking, it would somehow diminish Wills' stature as a national icon.

Even in his book, Townsend struggles with this contradiction: Was Wills writing original music, or was he working up something new from folk roots? Without naming "Nelly Gray," Townsend refers several times to the Wills' (John and Bob, father and son) working from an old fiddle tune that John knew in order to come up with "Faded Love."

But what about those helpful Texas musicians I mentioned earlier who led me to believe that the Wills family might not have been the only ones to help construct "Faded Love" from the pieces of "Darling Nelly Gray?"

Jazz mandolinist Paul Glasse, in Austin, told me that Louise Rowe, who lives in Euless, Texas, between Dallas and Fort Worth, had performed with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and was the only woman to both sing and play with Wills and the Playboys. She might have some good Bob Wills stories, so I went to talk with Louise. I met her at the Texan Kitchen, a restaurant and bar in Euless, where at 81 she still plays bass and sings western swing favorites on Friday nights with a live band.

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PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

“My brothers had a band called “The Seven Rowe Brothers,” Louise told me. They had a theme song they played every night to open and close their show. They called it “Polk County Two-Step,” and they played it at every show since the 1930’s. It was the melody to “Faded Love.”

She played me a CD which had a transcription of the original 78 recording of “Polk County Two-Step” (Talent 732), and my jaw dropped. The melody of the tune’s A part was unmistakably a string band version of “Darling Nelly Gray.” But then another surprise hit me: the B part showed me what Bob Wills did to put together his melody for “Faded Love.” The B part is just another A part, but with the first line raised an octave. According to Louise Rowe, The Seven Rowe Brothers had been playing “Faded Love” for nearly twenty years before Bob Wills wrote it.

[Play “Polk County Two-Step (Talent 732B)]

I haven’t yet been able to find a complete and reliable discography with dates, matrix numbers, release numbers, etc., for “Talent Records # 732 B, the Seven Rowe Brothers’ “Polk County Two-Step,” but Talent Records releases with numbers immediately before and after #732 were released in 1949, according to HillbillyResearcher.com (accessed May 11, 2014).

The 78 discography 78discography.com/startalent.htm places the record company in Dallas between April of 1949 and March of 1950, and claims that most of the Talent/Star Talent recording activity “seems to have taken place in 1949, although I haven’t been able to pinpoint any exact dates.”

Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys recorded “Faded Love” for MGM at Radio Recorders in Hollywood, California on April 27, 1950. If I can find independent and reliable documentation of the Seven Rowe Brothers Band having performed

Joe Weed
PO Box 554
Los Gatos, CA 95031-0554
joeweet.com joe@joeweet.com

or recorded their “Polk County Two-Step” before Bob Wills’ April, 1950 “Faded Love” session, then we’ll have two independent paths leading to a similar B part.

Fiddler Johnny Gimble, who was on Wills “Faded Love” session, may even have told me how the high melody that opens the B part was written. Johnny related to me in Waco in March of 2013: “Rusty McDonald sang the verses; Rusty was a great singer; and the trio... Billy Bowman had been singing the high 3rd on some songs, and Bob says, “Billy did that on the this song, on the chorus: (Gimble sings: “I miss you darlin’ more and more...”)

[play Wills’ “Faded Love”]

Johnny Gimble also told me that he’d heard the Seven Rowe Brothers — “Yeah, I heard ‘em some in Dallas.” However, he didn’t remember hearing them play their theme song.

So what about that B part, that Wills plays as essentially just another A part with an octave transposition of the first line?

“Darling Nelly Gray” drops to the dominant chord to begin its B part.

[Play Nelly Gray (Mac Wiseman, Dot Records 16107) - or MAC-W 108-2 Mac Wisemans Shares precious memories with Brother Oswald]

I’ve heard versions of “Maggie May” in which the B part is sung over the dominant chord;

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[Play Maggie May, Foc'sle Singers & Paul Clayton]

and others where it's done up a fourth, over the sub-dominant;

[Play Maggie May, The Vipers Skiffle Group]

And even one by the Beatles, with the B part over the sub-dominant;:

[Play Maggie Mae, The Beatles (Let It Be, Apple Records, 8 May 1970)]

In both the Seven Rowe Brothers' version ("Polk County Two-Step") and Bob Wills' "Faded Love," the musicians completely sidestep the harmony issue and remain on the tonic, essentially singing a transposition of the A part.

So the "Faded Love" we know today comes from a dizzying number of places and times. It was created partly in the recording studio, partly in rehearsal session, partly in the Wills' family homes in Kosse and Turkey, TX, partly in the home of Benjamin Hanby in Ohio, partly by an unknown tunesmith in Great Britain, and partly by dance hall fiddlers and bands in Texas, including the Seven Rowe Brothers. All these musicians were responding to the music they'd heard all around them, responding to the needs and wants of the dancers who employed and inspired them. They were embellishing, personalizing and owning music they considered to be part of their folk heritage. They may or may not have known of Benjamin Hanby, whose song "Darling Nelly Gray" was published during the lifetimes of both of Bob Wills' grandfathers. And Benjamin Hanby may not have known or cared who wrote "Maggie May." It's the music that matters, and which answers a need in both the composer and the audience.

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Let's listen again to "Faded Love."

Reading copy

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