Train Song

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After half a century my brother Dave and I often complete each other’s musical sentences. This is perhaps most amusing when we’re playing banjo and fiddle in some festival parking lot, one of us starts a phrase to warm up our fingers in some key, and the other one takes that and runs with it in standard old-time banjo-fiddle-tune form. It’s not that we consciously create a new tune, it just sort of happens. Who knows where those things come from? People hang around to listen, and sometimes other musicians join in. Then afterward, someone always asks “what tune was that?”

For years we would just shrug…but after a while my quirky side took over. Now whenever that happens, I just make up a plausible name. Something in standard fiddle-tune form: “_____ in the ____” like “Chicken in the Corn” or “Weasel in the Outhouse.” If it’s a catchy tune, a safe bet is always a girl’s name...“Katy Douglas” or “Jody Logan”...something like that. Some time back I had twisted a lovely little phrase Dave kicked off into an achingly beautiful melody...at least that’s how I remember it. Someone asked the name of the tune, and I said “Her Father Was a Railroad Man.” I’ve used that name several times, whenever the tune was particularly fetching.

So anyway, about ten years ago I got serious enough about music to record a couple CDs, and I did. The first CD was mostly things we’d been playing for years, and the second one had more new material I’d written. One year on International Talk Like a Pirate Day I wrote a Pirate Hymn, and it turned out kind of achingly haunting in a little Methodist church sort of way. I recorded it on solo mandola, slowly and reverently, in the upstairs studio I had set up in Hood River. I had made the decision to practice until a tune sounded pretty good, and then do the recording in one or two takes. My first attempt had some issues, so I scrubbed that one and started in again. Most of the way through I figured that was the best I’d ever play that particular piece, and warmed up to a heart-wrenching finish. As the last few notes echoed through the studio, a distant train, perhaps a mile away up the Columbia River Gorge, laid on its horn and ruined the take. I shut down the studio and went for a walk, figuring I’d redo the whole thing later. But when I listened to the recording, I knew I wouldn’t be able to play it as well. The distant train is clearly audible on the last few notes, if you listen carefully. I’m not sure anyone else has ever heard it. But if they read this they will.

I’ll go for years without listening to those CDs. Then someone will ask, I’ll burn a few, and then listen carefully to make sure they came out OK. Enough time has passed that I don’t grit my teeth at the flaws any more or think about what I should have done differently. But I always listen for that train whistle, and with time and distance, it has become one of my favorite sounds on that CD. I imagine some dad thinking about his lovely daughter while winding up the Columbia River Gorge in a Burlington Northern or Union Pacific locomotive, smiling, and leaving a fond fingerprint on my CD. Her father was a railroad man.