



# Bluegrass Songs & Licks

A Northwest Tune by Mike Eisler – Tom Moran

This issue's bluegrass column features another original tune from the Northwest. The composer, fiddler/banjoist Mike Eisler, is a founding member of this region's longest-running bluegrass band, the Sawtooth Mountain Boys, an institution around this area for more than 40 years.

Mike began playing fiddle and banjo while in college, immersing himself in the stylings of the "classic" bluegrass musicians from the 1940s and '50s. The *Long Tom* reflects those influences but adds a twist here and there that makes the tune truly his own.

The name of this piece comes from Oregon's Long Tom River, whose headwaters originate in the Coast Range Mountains. It flows through the farming, rural and urban areas of western Oregon before it joins the Willamette River just beyond a town named, appropriately enough, Monroe.

This is a quick, even explosive little tune. It's got much of what I look for in a particular type of bluegrass fiddle tune; a strong melodic line, interesting, unusual chord changes, a sturdy blues

feel, plenty of drive and a quirky hook that is guaranteed to catch your ear.

That hook comes early in the tune. Mike does this in two ways: first, there is the slide from the B-flat to the B in measures two, three, four and six. In itself, this is familiar, as that slide is commonly used throughout bluegrass mandolin playing.

But second, what sets it apart is his placement of these notes. In measure two, it appears on the third beat; in measure three it's found on the second beat; in measure four, you'll see it on beats one and two and finally, in measure six, it returns to the third beat. These come off like little stutter-steps and this stop-start effect is very cool.

In addition, the chord structure is simple but distinctive. I did put a D-chord in the last half of the A-part's seventh measure, but I've heard folks play it without that five chord and it seems to work just fine.

I like the idea that the whole first part of the tune can be played using just the G-chord. It lends it even a more old-timey feel.

What's interesting as well is the key change in the second half of the tune.

The most common way to approach this type of change is to use the five chord (in this case, the D) as the new key. Mike, however, takes it in a different direction by using the C, or four-chord, as his starting point. This is a bit unusual in itself and it immediately grabs your attention.

He then goes one step further and adds only the seventh, or B-flat chord, to the mix. This gives it a bluesy, modal sound and, since there is no five to one (G to C) resolution, a more open feel.

Finally, as a bonus, he changes the melody line in measures 19 and 20 and gives the tune yet another twist. The format is the usual AABB except when playing it the last time through, when the last B-part is followed by AA, bringing it back to the original key. Have fun with it! 🎵

*Tom Moran is a librarian at a Seattle Community College, where he also teaches a class in bluegrass. He has been active as a mandolinist for nearly 30 years in the northwest, performing in a wide variety of groups, including bluegrass, jazz and classical settings. Currently he performs with The Downtown Mt. Boys, a Seattle bluegrass band.*

## The Long Tom

Mike Eisler

G

D

8 **G** **G** **C**

1) 2)

2 5 5 5 5 2 | 2 5 5 5 | 3 3 3 3 3 5 3 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 1 3

12 **B $\flat$**  **C**

1 3 1 3 0 3 | 5 0 0 | 3 3 3 3 3 5 3 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 1 3

16 **B $\flat$**  **C**

1 3 1 3 0 3 | 3 3 3 5 3 | 3 3 3 3 3 5 3 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 3 3

20 **B $\flat$**  **C**

3 6 | 1 5 | 0 3 | 3 7 | 3 7 | 3 5 | 5 5 | 3 3 3 3 3 5 3 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 1 3

24 **B $\flat$**  **C**

1 3 1 3 0 3 | 1 5 | 3 3 3 5 3