

# Steel Guitar Blag

## Provenance and appropriation in Leon McAuliffe's 'Steel Guitar Rag', 1936

**by Guy Cundell**

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On the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1936 in Chicago, Bob Wills' ensemble stood ready to record the first tune of the day. It was the second day of their second session, a year after their first in Dallas and the entire string band, extended with drums, piano and a three piece horn section, was to be engaged in the tune, an instrumental steel guitar feature entitled 'Steel Guitar Rag'. It had been part of the band's repertoire since its composer, steel guitarist Leon McAuliffe, had joined the group eighteen months earlier.



**Fig 1. The Texas Playboys' line up in 1936/37. Photo courtesy of Kevin Coffey.**

McAuliffe, along with Bob Dunn and Noel Boggs, now stands as a colossus of the steel guitar, whose stylistic innovations on the newly electrified instrument set a standard for steel guitarists throughout country music for years to come. But in 1936 he was just twenty, having taken up the instrument in his early teens. He had left school and began paid performance work at fifteen. He

joined Fort Worth's renowned Light Crust Doughboys in 1933 before being poached by Wills in early 1935.

A sense of anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety may have gripped McAuliffe as his tune had been rejected at the first session by the recording director Art Satherley, but this time, with the band's fortunes ascendant and Wills adamant of its inclusion, the opportunity to wax his composition had arrived. None in the studio could have foreseen the significance of the tune which, riding the growing national popularity of Wills and his band, would be widely revered and become an iconic steel guitar showpiece. It would be essential in any professional's repertoire, yet not beyond the reach of developing players due to its relative simplicity. More broadly, the piece would be influential in cementing a place for the steel guitar within country music for the foreseeable future.

At Wills' instruction, the take began with an unmeasured chordal glissando from the steel guitar followed by a short, spoken introduction from Wills. His words, ending with "Kick it off, Leon. Kick it off" provided the cue for McAuliffe's opening anacrusis which set the tempo of the piece and then the ensemble took off.

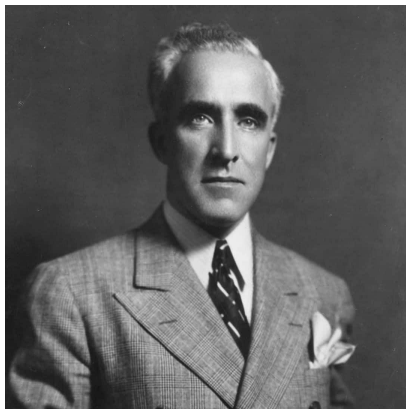
McAuliffe's composition comprised three distinct sixteen bar segments, A, B and C, which began the two and a half minute arrangement. This was followed by a piano solo on the C section, a repeat of the A section by McAuliffe, a saxophone solo again on the C section, ending with a recapitulation of the entire melody.

The horn section's only contribution to the arrangement was to be long isolated triads with syncopated entries that marked the end of the B and C sections throughout the arrangement. The first take proceeded well but was unfortunately marred by a late entry of the horns at the end of the saxophone solo. This seems to have unsettled McAuliffe, as evidenced by a shaky recapitulation that omitted the B section. A second take was required in which the error was corrected and the result was subsequently released.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Discographer Tony Russell advises that take 2 was indeed released on Vocalion 03394, and reissued on Okeh 03394 and two later red Columbia issues. However, take 1 *was* issued, though apparently only on Okeh 03394 (and so possibly by mistake).

McAuliffe's account of the rejection of the tune at the 1935 session in Dallas was that the producer, Satherley, insisted that the record label relied on East Coast steel guitar wizard Roy Smeck to provide any steel guitar feature recordings that they released. While this unlikely justification may have been genuine, it is possible that it was proffered by Satherley as a tactful way to cushion the young McAuliffe from Satherley's assessment of his less than stellar steel guitar performances during the session. If so, and in McAuliffe's defence, his performance could well have been impaired by the primitive Volu-Tone amplification equipment that Wills had recently supplied for him to attach to his acoustic instrument, with any difficulties magnified by the pressure of the recording studio. However, by the 1936 session, McAuliffe was equipped with a superb piece of new technology, a bakelite Rickenbacker B6 steel guitar.



**Fig 2. Art Satherley**

Curiously, the Dallas session of 1935 may not have been the first time that experienced producer Satherley had heard the melody that McAuliffe presented. With many years in the fledgling recording industry, Satherley, an Englishman, had been responsible for marketing records for Paramount and was well acquainted with the company's catalogue. Furthermore, his duties had extended to recording supervision by 1923 when he began conducting sessions for black artists such as Ma Rainey and, later, Blind Lemon Jefferson. A specialist in race recordings and with a reputation for spotting talent, it is likely that he was also familiar with the catalogues of major competitors.

It is possible, therefore, that Satherley was acquainted with at least one of two recordings of an almost identical tune named 'Guitar Rag' made by Sylvester Weaver for a rival company, Okeh in November, 1923 and April, 1927. Weaver, a black Kentuckian, is now recognised for achieving two recording landmarks, as the first guitarist to record an accompaniment for a blues singer and as the first black guitarist to wax a blues instrumental<sup>2</sup>, passing both milestones in late 1923. After an extensive recording career, the span of which is marked by the two versions of 'Guitar Rag', Weaver had passed into obscurity, retiring from performance in 1928. Nevertheless, his influence was acknowledged by prominent black guitarist Lonnie Johnson and his composition 'Guitar Rag' had been recorded by West Virginian Roy Harvey in 1930.



**Fig 3. Sylvester Weaver**

Weaver's 'Guitar Rag', for solo guitar, may have been played 'in Hawaiian style' with the instrument across his lap using a knife or bar to fret the strings but may also have been performed 'bottleneck style' with the guitar held in standard position with a slide on a finger of the left hand. With little resemblance to either the form or rhythmic styling of piano rags of the era, this titular rag employs an open triadic tuning. In the 1923 recording, Weaver generates melody on the top strings of his six string guitar accompanied by alternating bass notes. The form consists of two sixteen bar sections, the first circumscribing a melody which resembles McAuliffe's, while in the second, a simpler melody is deployed

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<sup>2</sup> Weaver's blues instrumental had been preceded in 1922 by Nick Lucas' 'Teasin' the Frets'.

on a more complex chord structure. The three minute recording consists of five repetitions of the form with little variation beyond a gradual increase in tempo.

A product of recently introduced electronic recording technology, the sound quality of Weaver's 1927 recording was considerably improved. The composition had also undergone development. The same intervallic configuration of tuning was employed but now, with the pitch raised to D major, Weaver had made significant modifications. Unlike his earlier effort, the repetition of the first eight bars of the sixteen bar A section was replaced by a new consequent phrase. A second modification was made to the melody of the B section with an attendant subtle alteration of the harmony. Weaver also added a distinct sixteen bar C section which appears after three repetitions of the A and B sections.

Similarities in melody and harmony between the A section of McAuliffe's 'Steel Guitar Rag' and that of 'Guitar Rag' are striking and it is difficult to believe that McAuliffe didn't use Weaver's piece as a model. Furthermore, similarities in harmonic structure and form point to Weaver's 1927 recording as McAuliffe's source.

A juxtaposition of the two melodies is provided in Fig. 3 with Weaver's 1927 melody in D transposed to E for ease of comparison. An examination of the score provides clear evidence of plagiarism that previous commentators have identified aurally. When the similarities were put to him directly, McAuliffe denied having heard Weaver's tune. He was insistent that he wrote the piece at the age of fourteen while taking his first lessons on the steel guitar but his accounts of how he arrived at the melody seem barely credible. He stated that he derived his melody from arpeggios that he played while exploring an E major tuning for the first time. This account is inadequate to the point of seeming glib. While this process may have assisted the formulation of his B and C sections, the repeated major sixth (C#) and minor third (G natural) of the A section are conspicuous anomalies. They both fall beyond the ambit of a major arpeggio and, in open position, stopping of the strings is required to achieve the undulating melody and its distinct blues inflection.

## Steel Guitar Rag/Guitar Rag

transcr. Guy Cundell

**A**

McAuliffe 1936

Weaver 1927  
(transposed)

**B** Antecedent

Consequent

**Fig 4. A comparison of the melodies of Steel Guitar Rag, Vocalion 03394, 1936 and Guitar Rag, Okeh 8480, 1927.**

McAuliffe also suggested that the B section was derived from a Hawaiian hapa haole tune called 'On the Beach at Waikiki', which has a melody of different

phrase structure and melodic contour and employs a contrasting harmonic structure.

While the similarities between the two tunes are inescapable, their differences are extensive. The first conspicuous disparity is that of texture. Weaver's piece is for solo guitar while McAuliffe's is a steel guitar melody with band accompaniment. This characteristic may have given rise to a second point of difference in the form of the intricate and technically demanding melody of McAuliffe's B and C section. It is not possible to perform McAuliffe's melodic line in these sections while maintaining the accompanying bass ostinato that is essential to Weaver's arrangement. It is reasonable to assume that in using the tune to audition for the Light Crust Doughboys, McAuliffe played solo. At some point, when the piece became a regular part of the Wills band repertoire, McAuliffe had the luxury of accompaniment, freeing him from the burden of the bass ostinato and allowing him to employ more dexterity in the development of melody. Thus, the transition to the enhanced and revised melody that he recorded in 1936 is more likely to have been an evolution rather than an event.

McAuliffe's equipment may also have played a role in the formulation of 'Steel Guitar Rag'. Electronic amplification that McAuliffe was first gifted by Wills in 1935 allowed him to perform with volume at the front of a full band. This enhanced accompaniment may have provided him with the impetus to develop his composition further.

In terms of melodic differences, McAuliffe's B section can be seen as a vigorous expansion of Weaver's ideas, while his C section represents an entirely new and intricate melody requiring rapid and precise right-hand picking. Another more subtle but powerful melodic variation is evident in the A section in the modification of the major third of Weaver's repeated motif (G#) to a bluesy G natural, imbuing McAuliffe's opening melody with a distinctive tonal hue. Ironically, almost all subsequent recordings of McAuliffe's piece by innumerable country musicians remove the blues shading by returning Weaver's G# to the motifs.

Condemnation of McAuliffe continues to grow today as Weaver's obscure recordings circulate through reissues on CD and internet videos, providing an ease of comparison that McAuliffe could never have imagined. In view of the

rising chorus of criticism, it seems fair to consider any factors of mitigation that might exist.

Firstly, it is possible that McAuliffe's appropriation was inadvertent. He may have been exposed to Weaver's melody by hearing any of the three recordings of the piece made before 1931 and subconsciously reproduced it as he composed his tune. However, his use of the identical forty eight bar form and harmony of Weaver's 1927 release suggests his awareness of Weaver's tune extended well beyond casual acquaintance.

Secondly, McAuliffe may have considered that Harvey's spoken prelude to his 1930 recording, in which he stated that 'Guitar Rag' was a traditional melody, was an unencumbered invitation to reproduce the tune in his own way. Again, McAuliffe's adherence to Weaver's 1927 version tends to discount this theory as the form and melody of Harvey's version was based on Weaver's 1923 recording.

A third possible view is that McAuliffe considered the alterations that he made to Weaver's tune achieved sufficient differentiation for him to claim it as his own. This may explain why he retained Weaver's title as the root for his. In considering this view it is useful to use the lens of James Young's *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* in which the author defines five modes of cultural appropriation. Rejecting the notion that cultural appropriation should be invariably condemned, Young makes a clear distinction between innovative and non-innovative content appropriation and points to the aesthetic success of innovative popular musicians made possible by appropriation.

Alternatively, McAuliffe's borrowing may have been a shameless act for which he had no remorse. The obscurity of the retired Weaver and his little-known recordings would have made the prospect of discovery seem remote at the time with McAuliffe's choice of title indicating total indifference.

The elephant in the room that persists is the lack of justice for Weaver and his heirs. It is estimated that Weaver may have only garnered \$25 for performance and \$50 for royalties of his first recording. Discographer and historian Tony Russell estimates sales of his second release to be even fewer than the first. In contrast, the enormous commercial success of 'Steel Guitar Rag' has generated income for McAuliffe (1917- 1988) and his estate and will continue to do so for years.



It seems unlikely that McAuliffe's claims of authorship would survive contestation in contemporary litigation as the case of George Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord' demonstrates. The precedent of Harrison's unsuccessful defence of unconscious imitation in the formation of his song's central hook is eclipsed in stringency by the case of Australian band, Men at Work. Their song 'Down Under' was judged to have used a fragment of the melody of a popular children's song presented in a different harmonic context within the accompaniment. The similarity is so opaque that it only came to light twenty years after the record's release as an obscure question in a music game show, with the observation subsequently reported to an oblivious copyright holder. Despite the tenuous connection, a breach of copyright was determined with attendant financial impositions.

However, to take a broader view, the value of McAuliffe's adaptation in furthering the fortunes of the steel guitar is incalculable. Along with helping to cement the instrument within western swing, and consequentially country music as a whole, the lively tune has helped provide a performance pathway for many aspiring young players in a way that Weaver's obscure composition could never have achieved.

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