Snake River Reel

Here’s a catchy and unique dance tune – Snake River Reel, with the contemporary composition date of 1985. Composer, musician, dance caller, and potter Peter Lippincott recently wrote: “I just came up with it noodling around one day, oh so long ago. String bands in St. Louis where I lived took it to Galax and other fiddle venues and it caught on. Who knew? I named it after the Snake River, but other than sounding like a cool name there is no added significance. I also wrote an influential contra dance by the same name at about the same time. Doubling down on a good name I guess.”

Peter is the humble recipient of the Arkansas Living Treasure Series Award for practicing and educating others about the traditional craft of pottery. Take a look at and listen to [Peter's pottery shop and his entertaining song](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UW353xWIj8s).

Since Peter, who now lives in Fayettesville, Arkansas, was then living in St. Louis, Missouri, the tune, in my mind, became loosely associated with the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery expedition. Before hearing directly from him via email my imagination soared as to the historic connotation embedded in the title.

In the Lewis and Clark story the Snake River is one of the two rivers (the other being the Clearwater) where lived the Nez Perce North American Indians. The river had bountiful salmon, a seemingly welcoming meal after the Corps had nearly starved crossing the Great Divide. As the tribe made plans to massacre the explorers, an old squaw intervened to rescue them. She had once been kidnapped and escaped, and recalled the kindness of white people from Canada who helped her. The explorers were then treated as friends. Oddly, they refused to eat the salmon, which initially made them sick, preferring instead to eat horse and dog meat as they continued their expedition to the Pacific Ocean. The swift water of the Snake River brought the men and Sacajawea down to the Columbia River and on to the Pacific Ocean. (Find out more here: [Wikipedia Snake River information](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_River).) So that’s what I think of when I hear the tune…

On The Session site Snake River Reel is described as an old time reel “that changes mode whilst keeping the same tonal centre.” It begins in D-Major, then switches to D-Mixolydian in the second part. Notation and video links are included in the [Snake River Reel discussion on The Session](https://thesession.org/tunes/12995). I first learned it from Dan Levenson’s tab in Buzzard Banjo, Clawhammer Style. It’s rare when a tab is my first source of a tune, but it played so nicely and sounded so unique I couldn’t help but like it. I suggest you get it for the tab and CD and twenty-four other great tunes.

You can seek several versions to hear on BHO. Enjoy watching these on-line samples of Snake River Reel, including some lessons:

[Lukas Poole teaches Snake River Reel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFmtLa6dXQI)

[Bolin Creek Stringband](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbT1pX4-l9w%20https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/snake-river-reel/1408131879?i=1408132181)

[The Kolodners, father and son](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbrcwtENWxA)

[Ryan Spearman clawhammer lesson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fqn_HGcJ_U)

[Ed Britt and Don Borchelt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POrGgWrRTUY)

[Pat Lyons](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lkiHZXLNh4)

[Zepp](https://www.mandolincafe.com/forum/group.php?discussionid=2906&do=discuss) and several mandolinists

[Zepp playing slowly](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0_w_hQuQGU)

[Amy Coburn and Tim Rowell](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMMDBi45OPg)

[Jim Adams](https://soundcloud.com/jim-adams-baltimore/snake-river-reel-1)

[musical notation](https://www.thursdaycontra.com/~spuds/tunes/reels/SnakeRiver.pdf)

My MP3 was recorded on a small scale fretless Gourdeous gourd banjo in 2012. The new video is a medley of two tunes, Snake River Reel and Over the Waterfall, related in their mixolydian mode, as well as in some vague association I have to the Lewis and Clark expedition. I link them when thinking of portaging their equipment and supplies around the Great Falls of the Missouri River and their subsequent and triumphant trip down the Snake River, headed to their Pacific Ocean destination. If you haven’t watched Ken Burns’ film *Lewis and Clark, The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* you’re missing a good one.

Sometimes old-time melodies are not exactly old, but they’re sure good tunes. Hope you enjoy and share Snake River Reel, too.



Peter Lippincott