Beginning Irish Mandolin

by Michael B. Gregory

As I've indicated previously, the reels and jigs are by far the most prominent tune-types at Irish music sessions. The reels are especially challenging and this may be small part of the reason for their popularity. But I'm sure the main reasons are their lively rhythms and melodies.

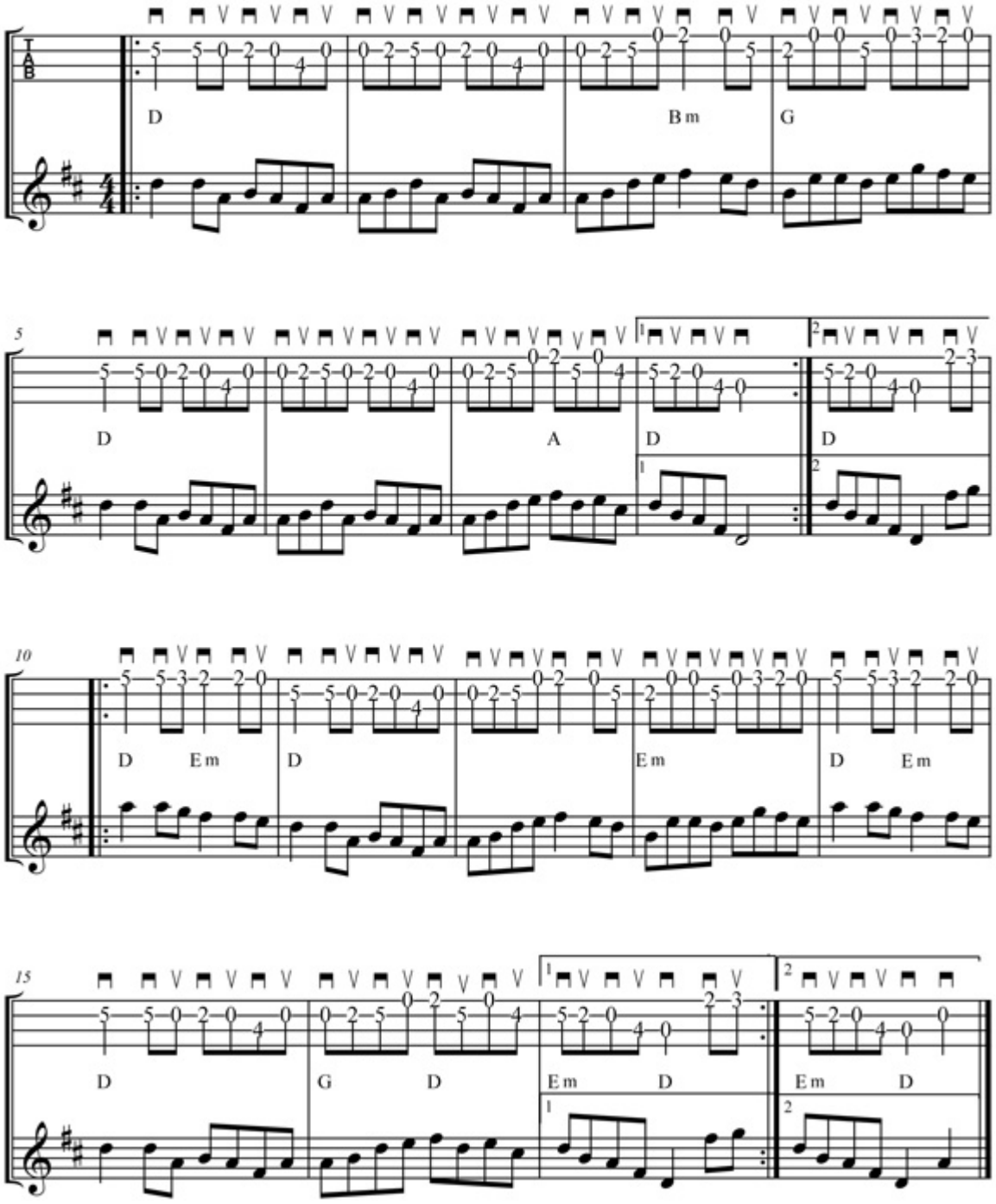
We've already had some experience with jigs so let's sink our teeth into a lovely reel this time. The one I've chosen is titled The Merry Blacksmith but in some circles, especially in the US, it might be known as Paddy on the Railway or Paddy on the Railroad. A very interesting recorded version of this reel appears on the Shanachie cd called "Music of Dreams". On track 10, Noel Hill plays three great reels (solo) before a live & very enthusiastic audience. The middle reel is The Merry Blacksmith and the final one is The Silver Spear, which we'll feature in a future issue. Without question, Hill is a master of his instrument, the anglo-concertina. He captures the very essence of Irish traditional music on this track and his audience approves of it in the most exuberant ways, expressing their emotions out loud, which to the uninitiated may seem to be disruptive. But the opposite is the case: Hill responds to their enthusiasm as the encouragement that it is meant to be. Notice especially, at the transitions between the tunes, how the listeners nearly shout out their recognition. Of course, most of their expressions of emotion arise from the extremely high quality of the music.

This album is a favourite among traditional Irish music fans, containing no fewer than ten outstanding tracks of great tunes played by Hill and his partner for this recording, Tony Mac Mahon (accordion). If you try to play along with these tracks eventually (an excellent idea), be aware that the instruments are tuned a half-step sharp. You can bring them down to standard pitch with The Amazing Slow Downer, an invaluable piece of software that I mentioned in the August-September issue.

Click here to hear blacksmith_slow.mp3.
Click here to hear blacksmith_tempo.mp3.

⊓ = down stroke
V = up stroke

The music and tablature that I'm supplying is not an exact transcription of the Hill recording mentioned above. Rather, it is a very basic version of the tune suitable for beginners. The alternating pickstrokes that I've recommended should help make the tune fairly straightforward. Especially, take a few moments to notice how much repetition there is among the various measures. If you learn phrase-by-phrase, you'll quickly have it memorized. Listen repeatedly to the attached mp3's to get a feeling for the rhythm and melody. Windows users can save these mp3's to their harddrives by right-clicking on them and then selecting "Save Target As...". Mac users click on link and click on right side arrow on the Quicktime player line.

I'm getting a fair number of responses from readers - your questions, comments and suggestions are very much appreciated. I'd be glad to consider requests as well. As always, you can reach me at michael.gregory@und.nodak.edu.

The Merry Blacksmith