

# The Cat Came Back

## (Background & Discussion)

Word has it that this song dates from the American Civil War (1860s). It was first published in 1893 by Harry S. Miller (so, he gets the credit) under the title of "The Cat Came Back: A Comic Negro Absurdity" (or more likely, given the times, as "The Cat Came Back: A Nigger Absurdity"). It has also been entitled "And The Cat Came Back", "The Cat That Couldn't [*or Wouldn't*] Stay Away" or just "The Cat".

It has been covered by countless artists through the decades and each has put their own spin on the words. Through all the variations of the song, however, it still tells the story of an unwanted cat and its many lives as it returns over & over to its reluctant owner. The lyrics run the gamut from kid-tickling macabre to "safe for toddlers" Bowdlerized. It is a great song to teach kids how to compose verses and the Wikipedia article on this tune has a terrific discussion on other musical concepts that can be taught to children via this song. You can also trace the evolution of American sociology & technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through its lyrics. The first published lyrics are the usual stereotypical minstrel show fare. By the 1920s & 1930s, verses about steamships and cars have been added and even a verse extolling Route 66 appears. In the 1960s, verses about rockets & A-Bombs have appeared and the song has gone from grown-up minstrel song to classic children's song.

The tune & chords also vary greatly from version to version. Even those with the same chord progression can have quite different melodies sung by the performers. In addition, there is an instrumental bluegrass version of the song that seems to have a different melody & chord structure altogether. However a rough timeline can be drawn on the evolution of the chords:

**1800s-1940s** - people tended to play the classic, original version of the chords. Cover versions were usually done by cowboy singers like Tex Morton & Doc Carson or traditional roots musicians like Fiddlin' John Carson, D & Cisco Houston. The bluegrass instrumental version was covered by no less than the inimitable Norman Blake, among others.

**1950s-1960s** - Sonny James makes the first Rockabilly version of this a hit. His version has a rising bass line, however. Rolf Harris (with Sonny James' chords) & Chad Morgan (with classic chords) picked up the song and made them novelty hits in Australia. The New Christy Minstrels recorded their rather unique version & it became a folk hit.

**1970s-on** - At some point, someone took the Sonny James bass line, sent it down instead of up & put the song in the minor "Stray Cat Strut" key that has become the modern chord version. It became the iconic children's song most of us first learned and was covered by children's artists like Rolf The Dawg (from "The Muppet Show"), Fred Penner, Sharon, Lois & Bram (who have an interesting Big Band take on the tune), The Macabre Minstrels & many, many more. It has also been covered by modern bands like Trout Fishing In America.

**Present Day** - with easy access to CDs, downloads & YouTube, you will see covers of every version of the song and then some. Have fun adding your own versions to this legacy!

I first learned the modern version made popular by both Fred Penner's cover and the 1988 animated short "The Cat Came Back" by Cordell Barker (See it if you can!). Then, I recently heard the older, traditional version at an open mike in Acton, MA. My research in finding this original version to post opened the Pandora's Box to all this "Cat Came Back" madness that ensues below.

As with "Preaching Blues (Up Jumped The Devil)" by Robert Johnson, it is easiest to transcribe several versions of the lyrics to this song and several versions of the chords and let you, the songster, pick & choose what you will. Enjoy!