Stacked 'Em Up In Piles

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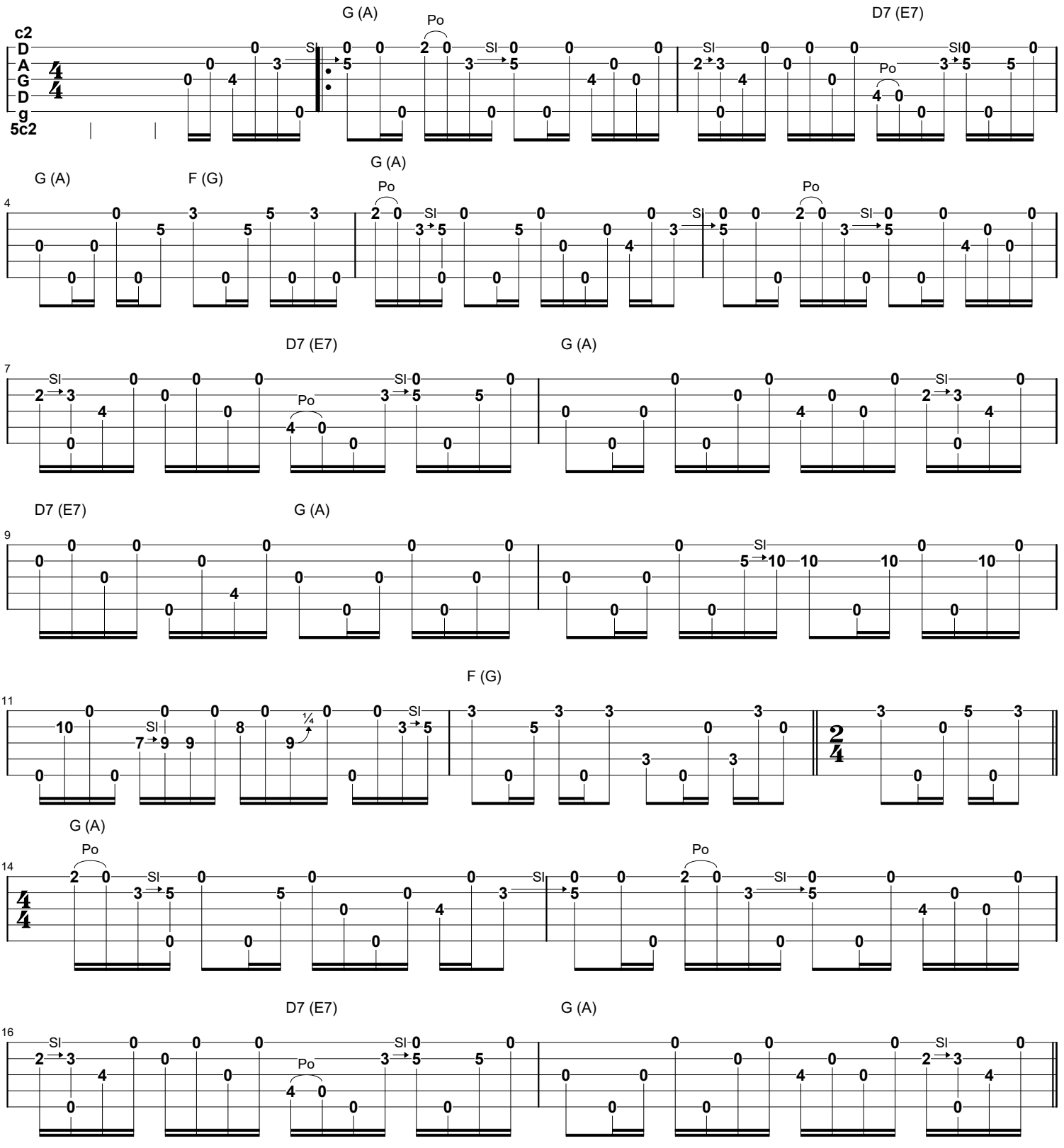

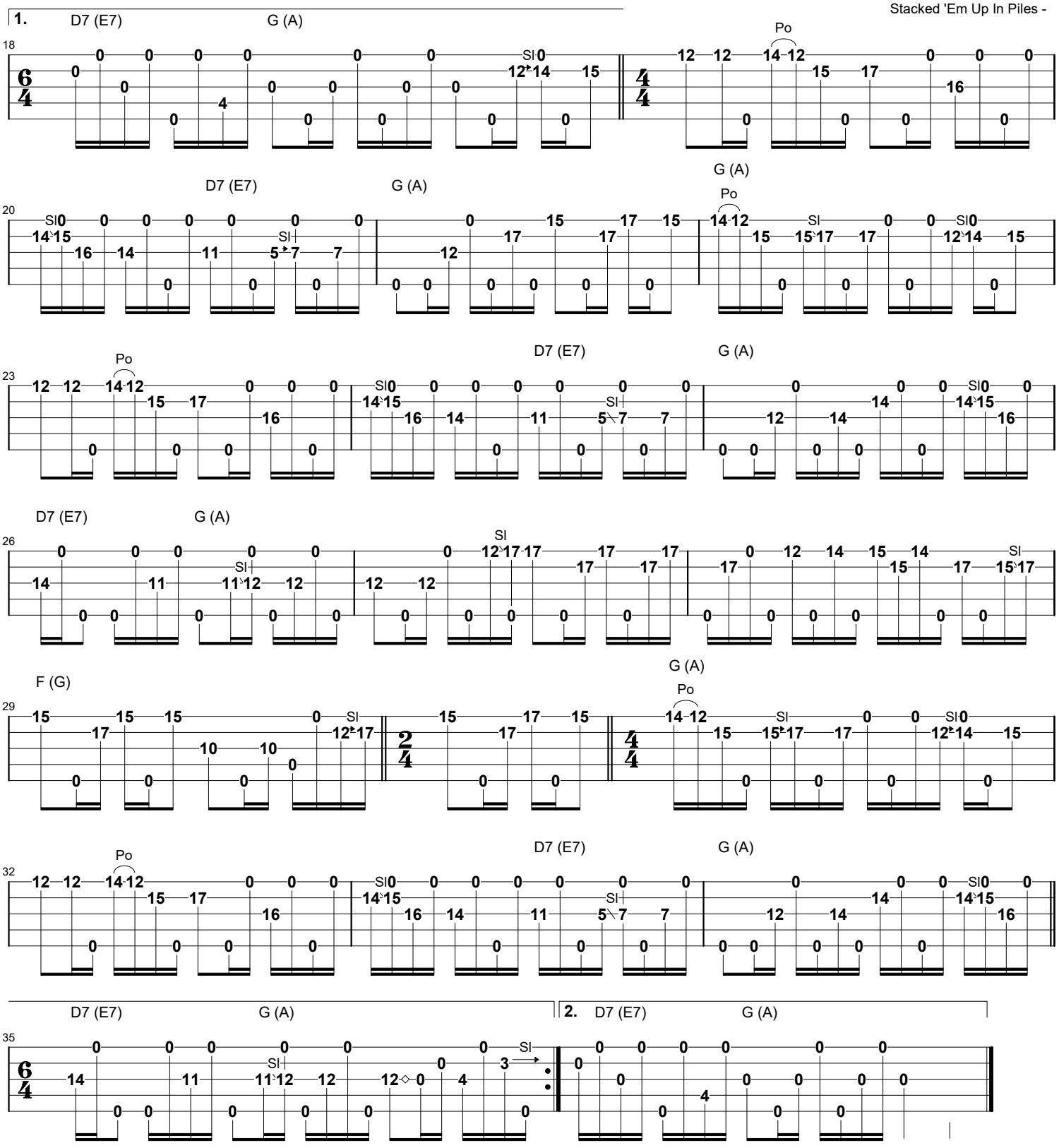

Fiddler Erynn Marshall recorded the great West Virginia fiddler Mevin Wine (1909 - 2003) playing this tune during an interview for her wonderful book Music in the Air Somewhere, the Shifting Borders of West Virginia's Fiddle and Song Tradition. Wine told her that it was the melody of a song that his mother used to sing, but he could only remember a single stanza:

We run ‘em nine miles,
and we stacked ‘em up in piles,
Besides what got drownded in the river.

Wine often made fiddle tunes out of old songs, sometimes ones heard from his family and neighbors, and sometimes from the radio. Marshall notes that there is a song with a very similar lyric in a 1925 collection called Folk Songs of the South, where it is simply called "War Song," and purports to be about a Civil War battle in Bowling Green, although there appears to be no record of a battle in that location. Unfortunately, the book did not include a transcription of the melody.

In her transcription and discussion of the tune, Marshall notes that it has very irregular meter, jumping back and forth between four different time signatures. I would argue that what is actually happening is that while the melody has a beat, it has no actual meter at all, yet another example of the tradition of unaccompanied folk ballad singers going back to ancient times. Instead, it follows the timing of poetry, following the natural rhythm of the lyrics, and the emphasis that the singer chooses in the moment. So the measure lines, both Marshall's and mine, are admittedly arbitrary. Melvin just said it had that "long, modal sound." The timing you will see here, including the rolls that play out what would have been the vocal "dwells," are a mixture of what Wine played on the fiddle, and what Marshall heard and played on her 2008 CD, Meet Me in the Music.