

“‘Freight Train,’ and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes”--Elizabeth Cotten (1959)

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Essay by Maya Lerman



Elizabeth Cotten

Elizabeth Cotten’s uniquely American guitar style and songs have woven their way into the tapestry of American folk music. She was unknown in the music world until she was in her 60s, when her playing, singing, and songwriting came to play a major role in the revival of traditional folk music and even made its way into popular music.

Born in 1893, Elizabeth Cotten grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where her father worked in the ore mines and her mother performed domestic housework. One of four children, Cotten early on became fixated on learning and practicing music. She taught herself to play on her brother’s banjo when she was only eight, and not much later to play on his guitar, which he thought he had hidden from her.

Before the age of 12, Cotten found a job doing housework for a family. With the minimal money she earned--no more than one dollar a month--she was able to purchase her first guitar, which she named “Stella.” As a young girl she played her guitar at every opportunity, developing her style as a left-handed player and playing with her siblings around their home. When practicing, she would lay the guitar flat on her lap and teach herself song melodies and rhythms. The distinctive way she learned involved practicing with one string and finger, gradually working her way to a three-finger picking pattern.

As a left-handed player, she played the guitar upside down, using her index or middle finger to play the bass string at the bottom, and her thumb to play the melody. Elizabeth’s guitar and banjo styles reflect late 19th- and early 20th-century African-American instrumental traditions, such as ragtime, blues, old time, parlor music, and gospel, but she integrated these traditions into her own unique and innovative styles of fingerpicking. Her method of playing alternating bass notes in conjunction with single string melodic notes on the treble strings would become known as “Cotten picking” and would later be imitated by countless guitarists to come.

In addition to her guitar and banjo abilities, Cotten composed songs, often when playing music with her brothers. She wrote "Freight Train" at age 11 or 12, inspired by the train that stopped in Carborro, North Carolina, and which she could watch and hear from her home.

As Cotten's religious involvement deepened, she joined the church but was discouraged from playing music by religious leaders who saw secular music as a distraction from serving God. She gradually stopped playing guitar, was married by age 15, and soon after had a baby and focused on her family life for the next 25 years. After moving to Washington, DC, in the 1940s to be near her daughter and grandchildren, Cotten was hired at Lansburgh's Department Store. While working in the section that sold children's dolls, Cotten had a chance encounter that greatly affected her life and musical career. She happened to meet the Seeger family when she returned a lost Peggy Seeger to her sister, Penny Seeger, and mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger. Mrs. Seeger gave Cotten her phone number and offered her a job if she ever decided to stop working at the department store. Cotten soon began cooking and doing housework for the Seeger family, a household full of musicians, including musicologists, composers, and the folklorists Ruth Crawford Seeger and Charles Seeger. In addition to Charles and Ruth, there were the couple's musical children--Mike, Peggy, Penny, and Barbara. Charles' son from a previous marriage was the famous folk singer Pete Seeger.

After a couple of years of Cotten working in this musical home, one day, Peggy Seeger stumbled across Elizabeth playing one of the family's guitars, and was struck by her talent and mastery of the instrument. The floodgates were opened as "Libba" (Penny Seeger's childhood name for Elizabeth, which she adopted) retaught herself guitar, sharing the breadth of her instrumental abilities with the Seeger family, as well as the traditional and original songs from her childhood.

Mike Seeger recorded Elizabeth's songs onto open reel tapes. Those tapes became the album "'Freight Train' and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes." The recordings took place during visits to Libba's Washington, DC, home in 1957 and 1958 where she was helping to raise her grandchildren. The album, released by Folkways Records (now Smithsonian Folkways), would become an incredibly influential album during the 1960s folk revival. The beautiful melody and the simple yet poignant lyrics of "Freight Train" appealed to artists of many different musical backgrounds. "Freight Train" would go on to be recorded by the folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary, by country artist Chet Atkins, the British band Chas McDevitt Skiffle Group, and many others, helping to spread the song's beauty to audiences far beyond the folk community.

Soon after the release of "'Freight Train' and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes," Cotten began playing concerts with Mike Seeger, ultimately performing on prestigious stages at the Newport Folk Festival, the University of Chicago Folk Festival, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and many others. Audiences were captivated by Libba's personal, gentle, and humble demeanor on stage, coupled with her strong guitar playing and mastery of a range of musical styles. Though Cotten's career flourished most during the folk revival, she continued to record and perform until the end of her life. She would go on to record three more albums and received various awards and recognition, including a 1984 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship and a Grammy in 1985.

Cotten died in 1987, but her songs and music live on in the recordings she made as well as in the musicians who continue to learn and perform her music.

Maya Lerman is an archivist at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, where she preserves and provides access to multi-format cultural heritage collections, and undertakes digital preservation activities. Before working at Folklife, Lerman worked in the Recorded Sound Section of the Library of Congress and at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University. Lerman is a folk guitarist, singer, and songwriter.