

# “Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues”—Odetta (1957)

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Essay by Ian Zack (guest post)\*



*Odetta*

When Odetta and her first manager tried to secure a recording session for her in San Francisco in the fall of 1956, their excitement about her bursting talent quickly turned to dismay. The first studio on their list barred the 25-year-old singer-guitarist because of her race. Under union rules, she learned, Black artists couldn't record there.

Finally locating a “Jim Crow studio”—one manned by Black recording engineers—Odetta laid down the 16 tracks that would comprise her mesmerizing debut LP as a solo performer, “Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues.”

Released in late 1956 [some sources give 1957] by Tradition Records, a fledgling label in New York's Greenwich Village, “Ballads and Blues” hit the small but growing folk music community like a thunderbolt. Who was this young woman singing songs of the Black experience—old spirituals, work songs, rural blues—in an opera-trained contralto? In an era when all respectable Black women were expected to straighten their hair, why was she pictured on the striking red and white album jacket wearing hers in what would come much later to be called an Afro?

The answers to these questions, as it turned out, were all related. Born in deeply segregated Birmingham, Alabama, during the Great Depression, Odetta soon had her first experiences with second-class citizenship—the colored drinking fountains, colored waiting rooms and colored sections of the movie theater that she later described as early slaps at a young girl's dignity. The family followed the Great Migration to Los Angeles, where the racism was more subtle but still imposing for her and her younger sister, Jimmie Lee. “We knew what streets and neighborhoods we couldn't enter, even if there were no signs posted,” Odetta recalled.

The family lived not far from Hollywood, which mass-produced big screen stereotypes of Black people—mammies, Uncle Toms and the like—that helped maintain white supremacy and deepened Odetta's youthful rage. Her mother, like many Black parents at the time, felt the best way to help her children overcome racism was through refinement. Odetta learned perfect diction and studied classical voice, singing German *lieder* and other European art songs, although she knew in her bones that an opera career was out of the question for a Black singer. (Marion Anderson still hadn't broken the color line at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.)

While attending Los Angeles City College part time, Odetta auditioned for a summer stock musical, “Finian's Rainbow,” in 1950 and won a role in the chorus. The following year, the production moved from Los Angeles up to San Francisco, where Odetta discovered folk music

and began to transform her life. Folk songs of the rural South spoke to her anger and shame and spurred her to delve into the real history of African Americans, which wasn't yet being taught in schools. Odetta returned to Los Angeles, borrowed a neighbor's guitar and started singing the songs that touched her soul. Although it was unheard of at the time, she signaled her new-found racial pride by refusing to straighten her hair. For her courageous political statement--which would do much to inspire the self-affirming Afro hairstyle of the Sixties--she endured taunts and teasing from whites and Blacks alike.

She poured her anger about America's racism into her music. It was that intensity, along with her huge, operatic voice--soon to be heard in auditoriums across the nation--that made "Ballads and Blues" so indelible. It includes spirituals like "Buked and Scorned," folk blues like "Easy Rider" and "Jack O' Diamonds" and chain gang songs like "Another Man Done Gone," in which Odetta claps to conjure the sound of a pick axe or overseer's whip. "We were living at a time when I couldn't say I hate me and I hate you and I hate," she remembered. "But I'm frustrated. I'm told that I'm worth nothing. I've been told I'm dumb. Hollywood has told me that. School has told me that.... As I sang those songs, nobody knew where the prisoner began and Odetta stopped and vice versa. So I could get my rocks off being furious."

The centerpiece of the record was the song Odetta called "The Freedom Trilogy," a masterpiece of folk protest. It combines three Black spirituals--"Oh Freedom," "Come and Go with Me" and "I'm on My Way"--that together tell the story of the Black experience in America, from slavery, through emancipation and on to the groundswell for civil rights that, as the record came out, was just beginning to move mountains in the South. Called upon by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, Odetta would sing for President John F. Kennedy on television, for a great sea of protesters at the March on Washington and at countless other demonstrations and rallies that helped raise the conscience of America in the late 1950s and much of the 1960s.

By then, "Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues" and Odetta's magnetic stage act had helped spur a folk revival during which folk songs briefly became synonymous with pop. In northern California, a young Joan Baez cut her teeth on songs from that record before becoming a star. Bob Dylan heard it in a record store in Hibbing, Minnesota, when he was a young man and immediately traded in his electric guitar for an acoustic to become a folk troubadour. "She was a deep singer," he recalled. "I learned every song off that record, right then and there, even borrowing the hammering-on style." Janis Joplin, in Port Arthur, Texas, started out imitating Odetta, as did a teenaged Carly Simon in New York.

Odetta never became as famous as many of those who followed in her footsteps, and after folk music fell out of fashion she spent more than two decades struggling to get by, despite her enormous influence on generations of performers. The release of some blues albums beginning in the late 1990s put Odetta back on the map as a touring act. Shortly after her death in 2008, at the age of 77, a host of artists gathered at Riverside Church in Upper Manhattan to pay tribute to her vast influence. "Odetta gave me the motor, the engine, the vision, about how to use the moment that was cast upon me," Harry Belafonte declared. The singer Maria Muldaur summed up the feeling of many in the building that night: "I heard the voice of Odetta and it changed my life."

*Ian Zack is a journalist and author based in New York. His latest book, "Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest," was published by Beacon Press in 2020.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.