“Wildwood Flower”—The Carter Family (1928)
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Essay by Carlene Carter (guest post)*

“Wildwood Flower”

“When I first started playing guitar, the first song I learned was ‘Wildwood Flower’.”
People always tell me this and they wonder if the same is true for me. I actually learned
“Gloria” by the band Them before anything else, but “Wildwood Flower” was definitely
an early one. I had the best teacher too: Grandma. The rest of the world knows her as
“Mother” Maybelle Carter of the Carter Family.

Grandma was a rockstar. You’ll know it if you ever see a picture of her with her Ray-
Bans on playing that damn autoharp. She was the absolute epitome of the “Wildwood
Flower.” The song fit her.

I would ask her, “Grandma—if the song is a hundred years old, how did you write it?”
She’d say, “A.P. would come home with scraps of paper of a song that he’d sing a little
bit of, and then me and Sara would re-work it, I’d make up a guitar thing to make it a
little better, while A.P. would pace around,” and that’s it. As simple as that.

Grandma taught me the song when I was really small. I did not have the dexterity I have
now. She taught me to flat pick it instead of finger pick it because the finger picks would
not stay on my fingers. I can now play it both ways, but I prefer flat pick style because
that’s how I first learned it.

Grandma’s guitar playing improved greatly over the years. She took her innovation and
turned it into an absolute, definable style. The “Carter Scratch” that she invented was a
way of playing a rhythm and a melody at the same time, to sound like two players. It
created a whole legacy for other musicians to build upon—people like Earl Scruggs (the
only guy Grandma thought could do “Wildwood Flower” as good as her), Marty Stuart,
Chet Atkins and Vince Gill. If you listen closely, you realize the nuances of how
intricate it is. If you do the “Wildwood Flower” exactly right, it’s hard. You have to
restrain on certain things. It’s like this tee-kee-tee-kee thing she had.

She stopped playing guitar when her arthritis got bad, but she could still tear it the hell
up. When Grandma was in her sixties, she escalated to a place guitar-wise where she
never dreamed she’d be. She went from these tiny, little melodies on the low strings in the ‘20s and ‘30s to really getting good. She had the drive to want to be a better musician. Every time I play it I think, “If I just do it half as good as Grandma, I’m still rockin’.”

It is such a glorious song and it has changed lyrically over the decades. After A.P. and Sara Carter did it with Grandma, the girls Helen, Anita, and my mom, June, started doing it with Grandma. Then the young girls became young women, and they’d put their two cents in. I know I changed things that I probably shouldn’t have, but they fit with how I’m doing it now.

The first time I played the Grand Ole Opry was sometime in the ‘70s when it was still at the Ryman Auditorium. I played the “Wildwood Flower” with Rodney Crowell and Bee Spears from Willie Nelson’s band. I was so brave because I know I didn’t play it right. I can’t imagine what it must have sounded like, but I did it because I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

“Wildwood Rose” was a rite of passage for everyone in my family who wanted to play guitar. If you can’t play that, then you don’t count. It’s also a rite of passage for so many other musicians in every genre of music. Jerry Garcia cited Grandma as one of his biggest influences.

I once had an evening or two with Keith Richards and we spent the whole time trying to pick the “Wildwood Flower” together. I showed him how I did it. I was like, “Oh my God—I’m playing ‘Wildwood Flower’ with Keith Richards.” It was all the proof anyone would need to know how much of a rockstar Grandma was. Maybelle Carter should be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Grandma was cool. She was the Wildwood Flower.

*Carlene Carter is a renowned country music singer-songwriter who has recorded 12 albums. She is the daughter of June Carter Cash and the granddaughter of Mother Maybelle Carter.*