“Wildwood Flower”—The Carter Family (1928)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell

Originally it was a “parlor song,” a quiet tune meant for amateur performance in the drawing rooms of Victorian homes, often sung to amuse people’s guests or just themselves. It is usually credited as having its lyrics written by Maud Irving and its music by Joseph Philbrick Webster. (Webster would also compose the Christian standard “In the Sweet By and By.”) It is believed “Wildwood Flower” was written in 1860 and may have drawn its melody—like much early American country music—from an old Scottish or Irish folk song.

Despite having been “written,” most songs of that time only endured due to an oral tradition. It was a generation to generation transmission, relayed ear to ear. This less than exact technique explains how the original lyrics of the song have all but been lost and numerous, perhaps heavily bastardized, synonymous and alternate wordings have since taken their place. For example, for some versions of “Wildwood Flower,” its opening lyric is:

I'll twine 'mid the ringlets of my raven black hair.

The Carter Family version however begins:

Oh, I'll twine with my mingles and waving black hair.

Other mondegreens populate the song and also help to explain how the tune, allegedly, originally titled “I’ll Twine ‘Mid the Ringlets,” has since become known more simply as “Wildwood Flower.”

The version of “Wildwood Flower” that was first recorded by the Carter Family (A.P. and his wife, Sarah, and her cousin Maybelle) had come to them via the oral tradition, having journeyed into the mountains of southwestern Virginia where it then got passed down from one generation to another.

As a Virginia-based singing and playing trio—A.P. on fiddle, Sara on autoharp and Maybelle on guitar—the Carter Family had been performing locally for some years, playing churches and front porches, before they made their first commercial recordings. In 1927, after seeing an ad in the newspaper, the group traveled to Bristol, Tennessee, to be part of Victor Records’s legendary Bristol Sessions.

The Victor Bristol Sessions of ‘27 have since been described as country music’s “Big Bang.” During the two weeks that the sessions took place in an old hat factory rehabbed for the purpose
of recording, such country pioneers and future legends as Jimmie Rogers, Alfred Reed, Eck Dunford, Ernest Stoneman and the Carters all recorded for the first time.

Surprisingly, the Carters’ most famous song, “Wildwood Flower,” was not part of their Bristol repertoire. It would not be permanently set down by them until almost a year later when the trio traveled to Camden, New Jersey, to record 12 additional songs over two days, also for Victor. These songs included, besides “Wildwood,” “Keep on the Sunny Side,” “Anchored in Love” and “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?”

All the songs recorded by the Carters during either of their sessions showcased the group’s tight harmonies and love for traditional mountain tunes. Each also displayed Maybelle Carter’s signature guitar playing style. Hers was a revolutionary method of playing in which the melody was strummed out on the bass strings and the rhythm above on the treble strings. Her style has since been described as “graceful and thumpingly rhythmic, at once” and as “the most unique, innovative method of guitar playing that has come out of the 20s, 30s, 40,…in fact, to date.” Maybelle Carter’s innovation helped propel the guitar from the background into being a lead instrument. Known as the Carter Scratch or Carter Lick, it’s a technique that’s still in use by musicians today.

Upon its release, “Wildwood Flower” by the Carter Family would sell nearly 100,000 copies, an extraordinary achievement for its time. Additionally, due to the popularity of their rendition, it is the Carters’s version of the lyrics—“correct” or not--which have become the most enduring.

Since its initial popularity, “Wildwood Flower” has become a musical standard. Hank Travis, Merle Travis, Jean Ritchie, June Carter Cash, Joan Baez and others have all recorded it or made it part of their stage shows. Natalie Merchant, then part of 10,000 Maniacs, once did a sped up version of it and committed it to video. In 2005, actress Reese Witherspoon, playing the role of June Carter, Maybelle’s daughter, sang it in the film “Walk the Line.” In 2008, Emmylou Harris used it as a departure point for her song “How She Could Sing the Wildwood Flower” which was featured on her album “All I Intended to Be.”

Along with being unquestionably, irrevocably “country” (the Original Carter Family were among the earliest inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame), “Wildwood Flower,” and much of the Carters’s other work, has also been embraced by the modern folk movement. The aforementioned Joan Baez recorded “Wildwood” for her debut album in 1960. In 1967, when Maybelle Carter (or Mother Maybelle, as she was popularly known by that time) appeared at the Newport Folk Festival, her mere entrance resulted in a thunderous, multi-minute standing ovation.

During the course of their career, the Carters would go on to record over 200 traditional songs for a variety of labels. The original trio disbanded in 1944, by which time A.P. and Sara had divorced and Maybelle had begun performing with her daughters June, Anita and Helen. June Carter would go on to marry country superstar Johnny Cash and Cash would often incorporate the Carter Family songbook into his live performances. Often, he would be accompanied by his mother-in-law. The Carter legacy would be further celebrated in 1972 with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s landmark three-LP set “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” which paid tribute to country’s greatest forefathers and foremothers.

Lyrically, “Wildwood” tells a sad and sadly oft-told tale of a woman nursing a broken heart:

How my heart is now wondering no misery can tell
He’s left me no warning, no words of farewell.

Oh, he taught me to love him and called me his flower
That was blooming to cheer him through life's dreary hour

Oh, I long to see him and regret the dark hour
He's gone and neglected this pale wildwood flower.

With its words written by a woman and its allusion to the narrator as a “pale flower,” “Wildwood Flower” has a distinctly feminine feel to it. As it was first recorded with a woman’s voice—Sara Carter’s—its female perspective has been fully retained. Men who wish to perform the song usually do it as just an instrumental with Johnny Cash’s and Mike Ness’s versions, each with a switch in pronouns, being two notable exceptions.

Today, almost one hundred years since its first recording and well over 100 years since it was written, “Wildwood Flower” has remained a beautiful and beloved song, timelessly revived. Acclaimed singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash, has called it, “One of the most important songs in the entire lexicon of American music.” And though new listeners will come to discover it around camp fires or via guitar pulls, or from 10,000 Maniacs or Joan Baez, its definitive version remains the simple, aching, plaintive one set down by A.P., Sara and Maybelle Carter in those Camden studios in May of 1928.