

THE FEATHERED MAIDEN & OTHER BALLADS

SIF 1006 INNISFREE/GREEN LINNET STEREO

THE FEATHERED MAIDEN

Bill Shute & Lisa Null

& OTHER BALLADS



Chorus: John Roberts, Tony Barrand, Caroline Paton/Additional Dulcimer: Sandy Paton

Music has always surrounded me. I come from a mad, musical family, hard to picture unless you have one yourself. My grandmother (who once published a song called "Thy Duty Do and Silent Be") played eight-handed piano the way other women play four-handed bridge. My oldest brother is an avant-garde composer, and my mother sings in Grand Central Station when provoked by the Christmas carols on its public address system. My father was a Whiffenpoof who played Rachmaninov and sang Carter Family songs. Even my husband left me to become a concert violinist. When gathered together, we are a wordy and argumentative lot. Music is the best way we know to get beyond all that and simply enjoy ourselves.

Sooner or later, I found out about ballads. They became the songs I shared with myself alone. No one knew or cared that I learned them as a child, for I sang them in private. They cheered me during nocturnal bathtub depressions. I hummed them under my breath on buses and, later, belted them out in the beloved insularity of my car. My two sons were reared on them until they crept from their cribs to muzzle me in desperation.

One day, I got divorced. The women's movement raged thick about me, and I felt compelled to search for whatever self existed in me apart from my roles of wife, mother, and civic matron. I found one, all right, and I got in touch with it most easily by singing. No longer a closet-folkie, I began to sing loudly and publicly. I stumbled upon the Great American Folk Revival and sang drinking songs, gospel songs and sea songs with a whole sub-culture of people who use and are used by their music as I am. My greatest pleasure remains exquisitely selfish: I love digging up musty old ballads and singing them till the dust falls off. If I do it right, others may be able to immerse themselves in the reserves of truth and magic that make these songs important to me.

I met Bill Shute about four years ago, and we began to play music together. Late night jam sessions turned into joint appearances and, about a year ago, into a serious professional commitment. Our insights are now so fully merged that performing without Bill is like singing with half my voice. This record has been a private indulgence on our part. Please understand, and enjoy it for the sake of the music we love.

Lisa Null, January, 1977

I was raised on the pop music of the day. My earliest musical memories are of Gene Autry's "Rudolph, the Red-nosed Reindeer" and Vaughn Monroe's "Racing with the Moon." Later on in the Fifties, I discovered the Everlys, Elvis, and the Fleetwoods. I still value them all. In October of 1960, I started studying guitar with a fine musician, Nick Giancotti.

Under the spell of Kerouac and other writers, I wanted to live the "jazz life." After a year or so, I found there was a world known as "folk music," with songs of many concerns: not only of love, but of hate, joy, work, birth, death and heroes. I was hooked. First there was Pete Seeger, then Dylan, Bill Monroe, and the New Lost City Ramblers. In high school, together with Jens Lund, Tom Hagymasi and Paul Guernsey (mandolin, fiddle and banjo respectively) I formed a bluegrass/old-timey band called the Blue Eagle Boys, which lasted until three of us left for college.

In 1964 I joined a rock band which came to be known as The Fifth Estate. Between 1964 and 1968 we recorded dozens of singles on four labels, and one album. During the summer of 1967 we toured the country, on our own and attached to the Gene Pitney tour, playing in fifty cities or more.

Since that time, I have played with many people in many settings—rock, jazz, folk, commercials, and pit bands. I have always returned to traditional folk music.

I have never considered myself a soloist or "lead guitarist," but rather an accompanist. There is no greater thrill than creating music around a melody with words well-sung.

Bill Shute, January, 1977

All material traditional unless otherwise indicated.

Side A

Suzie Cleland This version of Lady Maisry (Child #65) was brought back from Scotland by Dave and Carol Pressberg, two Bostonians with an endless store of good traditional songs. It dates from a time when a woman's right to marry the man of her choice was a life-and-death matter of self-assertion. How different from today, when so many women feel that their identities are smothered by their marriages.

Tuning: EADGCE (C major, Hexatonic) This Scottish melody demanded a lilting but supportive guitar. I used the open C to obtain a drone effect, and played with a flatpick.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill, Lisa; Chorus: John Roberts, Tony Barrand, Caroline Paton. (4:33)

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Notes on the songs: Lisa Null, Notes on the music: Bill Shute
Produced & recorded by Sandy Paton, Sharon, Conn., Executive Producer: Pat Sky
Photography: Suzanne Szasz, Rock of Gibraltar: Wendy Newton
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Sweet William's Ghost I found this ballad (Child #77) in Kenneth Peacock's "Songs of the Newfoundland Outports" (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada). A ghostly lover appears, suffering the torments of Hell. Apparently, he has died before marrying his betrothed sweetheart and is being punished for an inadvertent breach of promise. She releases him of his vows, and his spirit departs to rest in peace. The song is of Scandinavian origin, but it took on its present form in Scotland and northern England before crossing over to the new world.

Tuning: DGDGBD (A major, Capo 2) This marks my attempt as a frustrated hammer dulcimer player to achieve the same results with a guitar. It is played with a dulcimer hammer.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill, Lisa. (4:45)

Loving Henry This short version of Young Hunting (Child #68) travelled from the Ozarks to East Texas and was collected by William Owens from the singing of his grandmother's family. It is included in his "Texas Folk Songs," a publication of the Texas Folklore Society, and distributed by the University Press, Dallas, 1950. American variants of Child ballads are often considered to be anemic fragments of their great, dark, terrible ancestors. But the best, like this one, distill and compress their power. There is more malice per ounce here than in any other song I know.

Tuning: DGDGBD (G minor, Hexatonic) I worked on this Texan ballad, too, with another instrument in mind. Using an extended banjo tuning and some characteristic rolls, I tried for a "banjoistic" feel, appropriate to an Americanized British ballad. It is played with three finger picking.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill. (2:12)

Lord Ullin's Daughter This song was given to me by David Barron, a former member of the New York Pine-woods Folk Music Club, who specializes in obscure folk masterpieces. I later found that it had been collected by Jean Thomas in Rowan County, Kentucky. It appears without comment in her book "The Singin' Gatherin'" (New York: Silver Burdett Co., 1939). The text, by Thomas Campbell, has been used as a recitation in old Scottish school books, as well as in the famous "McGuffey's Fifth Reader." It reached America through nineteenth century songsters, but this is the only version I know of that has been taken from oral tradition. A theme of freedom versus authority is tempered here, as it often is in the later ballads, by the father's remorse as he watches his daughter drown in the arms of her lover.

Unaccompanied vocal: Lisa. (5:41)

Lucy Wan This ballad (Child #51) is a composite version published in "The Penguin Book of English Folk-songs" (edited by R. Vaughan Williams and A.L. Lloyd and first printed in 1959). It is more common in America than in the British Isles, having been collected in New England, the Appalachians, and even in Florida. The text is closely related to that of Edward (Child #13) and deals with incest.

Tuning: Regular (B major) I gave this stark, formulaic ballad a ritualistic accompaniment—droning, repetitive, and propulsively driving. Using non-standard chord formations (B and E without their thirds, B with a suspended ninth, and F 7 with a suspended fourth), I tried to achieve a spare quality. I play rhythmically, in imitation of bluegrass banjo rolls, and the results are similar to some of the Byrds' early efforts. This song, played with a flat pick, is emotionally one of my favorites.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill. (3:17)

Gentle Harry L. Null © 1977 Yellow Ear Publishing (ASCAP) Peter Bellamy, the English singer, set a lot of songwriters sizzling on his last American tour. He simply asked why, if we found folksong meaningful enough to sing, we drew so little from its substance when writing our own songs. "Gentle Harry" is an effort to do exactly that. Like other contemporary songs, it is personal and deals more with motivation than action. On the other hand, writing in a ballad-dialogue style gave me enough emotional distance to write from my own experience without self-pity. I see "Gentle Harry" as a sort of psychological exploration of those feelings that the characters in "Loving Henry" might have undergone.

Tuning: DGDGBD (A major, Hexatonic, Capo 2) This is a straightforward mixolydian guitar setting, played fingerstyle. Sandy's dulcimer contributes some beautiful melodic obligatos over Lisa's, and emphasizes the changing nature of the harmonic structure. The 7th scale tone shifts from G to G#.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill; Dulcimers: Sandy Paton, Lisa. (4:16)

Side B

Come Sweet Jane One day, I walked into a listening booth at the Library of Congress, expecting to hear a tape of Texas Gladden. Instead, the reel contained an interview with Woody Guthrie, something that sounded like a world congress of oompah bands, and this ballad, sung by Rebecca Jones of Ebenezer Church, North Carolina. I got caught in the Washington, D.C. rush hour that afternoon and memorized the song while creating a few traffic jams of my own. This is an incomplete condensation of Adieu, Sweet Lovely Jane, in which the hero leaves South Carolina, works the Australian gold fields, and returns to marry his sweetheart. The Ritchie Family and Max Hunter sing similar versions.

Tuning: DADGAD (D minor, Hexatonic) This lovely Appalachian ballad again suggested an old-timey banjo quality, which I tried to capture on the guitar. I borrowed the tuning from Archie Fisher, although it is often used by American banjo players. It is played with a flatpick.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill; Dulcimer: Lisa. (3:16)

The Border Widow's Lament This Scots song is a self-sufficient fragment of The Famous Flower of Servingmen (Child #106.) It was collected in Oklahoma by Ethel and Chauncey O. Moore, and is published in their "Ballads and Folksongs of the Southwest" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964). A great woman's song, this ballad deals with a widow's ability to find personal strength in the midst of crisis. She renounces any future romance in the last stanza. Some might interpret this as foolish self-denial, but I see in it a willingness to stand on her own two feet. As I sing, American images roll across my mind's eye. After all, an Oklahoma frontier wife and a Scots border widow are, in many ways, sisters of circumstance.

Tuning: DADGAD (D major, Hexatonic) This tuning emphasizes the tonic-fifth drone sound of a dulcimer, and allows me to imagine myself a piper for a few, all too brief moments.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill, Lisa. (4:05)

Franklin and His Ship's Crew I learned this song from Helen Creighton's "Maritime Folksongs" (Toronto: Ryerson Press). The words are familiar, though the tune is rare. In 1845, Sir John Franklin took an expedition of one hundred fifty men to find a north-west passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. He died of unknown causes, and his dwindling crew vanished as they attempted to reach civilization without him. Lady Jane Franklin, his widow, was dissatisfied with the British government's cursory attempts to find her husband's expedition. She organized a search mission of her own, which was financed by general subscription as well as by her own funds. She became a public heroine who symbolized steadfast and enterprising married love.

Unaccompanied vocal: Lisa. (4:40)

Lakes of the Ponchartrain I learned this song from collector Gale Huntington of Martha's Vineyard. He learned it from Welcome Tilton, a whaler and coaster, who was his wife's grandfather. Welcome Tilton probably brought this short version of a fairly widespread American broadside back from one of the bayou ports. I wish my singing here were as slinky as Gale's.

Tuning: Regular (E minor) This is an interesting tune. The first section is in E harmonic minor (with a D#,) and the second part is in the relative major key of G (with a D natural.) The Latin rhythms contain a hint of a tango, which I attempted to bring out. A torrid number, this one, it is played with a flatpick.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill, Lisa. (2:25)

Rocky Banks of the Buffalo I heard this song in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, sung by Glenn Walker Johnson, who lives by a waterfall and sings for his own pleasure. He says he learned it from one Pratt Remel of Little Rock, Arkansas. This is an up-beat variant of Babylon (Child #14,) with a feminist twist, American Indian images, and a vitality as modern as the story is old.

Tuning: Regular (A major, Hexatonic) Jimmy Driftwood should sing this song. I have used almost a Johnny Cash style back-up, but with bluegrass overtones. I wish I could play the first solo on mouth-bow. I play with a flatpick.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill, Lisa. (5:53)

The Feathered Maiden or Nilaus Erlandsen Words: traditional. Tune: Lisa Null I found these words in "Danish Ballads and Folk Songs" (edited by Erik Dal, translated by Henry Meyer, and published by the American Scandinavian Foundation. New York: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1967). They first appear in Svaning's Manuscript I, dated about 1580, and are regarded as classic in Danish ballad literature. I have condensed the ballad and set it to a tune not unlike "The Seeds of Love." I love the Grimm's Fairy Tale quality of this magical song. Although tales of metamorphosis are familiar to our Anglo-Celtic culture, I have never heard a ballad of ours with quite this flavor.

Tuning: EAEGAE (B major) I have used here a driving, banjo-dulcimer style of accompaniment in an unusual guitar tuning. This allows for some unusual effects, such as the tone cluster at the end of line two in each verse. I play with a flatpick.

Vocal: Lisa; Guitar: Bill; Dulcimer: Lisa; Chorus: John Roberts, Tony Barrand, Caroline Paton. (6:33)

