Mickey Miller Sings American Folk Songs
Accompanied by Bess Hawes

Descriptive Notes are Inside Pocket

Hard and It's Hard
Pretty Polly
Rowena Casket
Abeville Junction

Chinese Breakdown
Sister Girl

Bury Me Beneath the Willow
Ring Them Charming Bells
Lone Green Valley

Poor Unworthy Son or Gambling on the Sabbath Day
Who Killed Cock Robin
Wildwood Flower

Now He's Gone
Brother Six

Smithsonian Folklife Program
The songs in this album represent Mickey Miller's personal repertoire. Like most singers, she has picked her versions up here and there, adding to them sometimes, changing a little here and there, until she isn't really quite sure just what bits are hers and what are not. In addition she has retained the essential folk point of view about her material—that is, since she does not consider herself a professional entertainer, she has retained the right to accept or reject songs according to her own tastes, feelings and ideas. This may perhaps sound smooty; actually, Mickey is one of the most sociable singers I know. She just enjoys making music, and while engaged in this pursuit, incidentally, she has developed an extremely subtle and deceptively simple-sounding guitar style all her own.

This album, then, is a collection of plain and rather old-fashioned songs of the type Mickey and I like. I joined in on these recordings primarily to sing a few duets with her and to add a second instrument for variety. The notes on the songs are our joint project. Since I am a member of the folk-collecting Lomax family and a guitar teacher by trade, I urged the inclusion of a few remarks about background for people interested in folk-song research and also about guitar styling for instrumentalists. Either Mickey or I would be glad to correspond with anyone wishing further information.

Bess Hawes

It seems that most of the songs which we have chosen to do in this album have either death or love or both as subject matter; and it seems that the songs which are most suitable for women to sing are this way. In general, the words alone are depressing and so are some of the tunes. I think that this is what has led to treating these songs as "corn" and, recently, to giving them a rock-and-roll treatment, so that the beat overcomes the material, no matter how dreary. At any rate these themes outlive their treatment no matter what it is; and I hope that at least people can take comfort from the fact that it has all happened before, if not that it will all happen again.

I was born in Washington, D.C. and moved to Los Angeles during the war. A boy friend taught me to play a four string Martin guitar, and pretty soon I thought I was good enough at it to deserve a six-stringer. So I went and bought one and I've been playing the same one ever since. I went back to North Carolina to school for a while and did a little playing and singing there; but most of my songs and guitar style were just picked up from listening or playing with anybody who happened around. On one of Woody Guthrie's trips to L.A., he was playing in a G tuning, and I came home and wanted to play in a chord tuning too. So my husband, Matt, who plays the banjo, took the guitar and tuned it in a kind of G banjo tuning (DADF#AD) which turned out to be in the key of D on the guitar. This is a great tuning for doing square dance picking because you can move around and not have to hold down a chord. This feature makes it possible to adapt frailing and other banjo-sounding styles to the guitar. I always wanted to play the banjo, but when I married I decided that one in the family was enough. Rosewood Casket, Wildwood Flower and Poor Unworthy Son are done in a style which sounds a little like what the Carter Family does. The thumb does the beat and a little melody; and the middle two fingers strum; up down up, or, down up, depending on the rhythm and time. This style does not sound as well on nylon strings; in fact I think that the way I play is really only good on steel strings and has developed from them.

Mickey Miller
HARD AND IT'S HARD

Vocal duet; Mickey Miller, guitar; Bess Hawes, banjo.
Key of D. Mickey's "D" tuning.

This is actually a composite version of this song.
Mickey learned the tune and the first and third verses
from Woody Guthrie; Mickey's last verse is some-
times sung in "Who's Going to Shoe Your Pretty
Little Foot" and her melody has some similarity to
that tune. Although we could have both sung one or
the other tune, we rather liked the effect of the
alternating variations.

In connection with the last verse, look up Robert
Burns! "My Love Is Like a Red Red Rose". This bit
of poetry has been around for a long long time.

There is a house in this old town
That's where my true love lays around
And he takes other women right down on his knee
And he tells them a little tale he won't tell me.

CHORUS:
Well, it's hard and it's hard, ain't it hard
To love one that never did love you.
It's hard and it's hard, ain't it hard, great God
To love one that never will be true.

Don't take to drinking or to gambling
Don't let your sorrows you dismay
Remember there's more than one man in this world
You'll find another one some day.

(CHORUS)

The first time I saw my true love
He was a-walking by my door
And the last time I saw his false-hearted smile
He was dead on his cooling board.

(CHORUS)

I'll love you till the seas run dry,
Rocks dissolve by the sun,
I love you till the day I die
Then you will know I'm done.

(CHORUS)

ASHEVILLE JUNCTION

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of E; standard
tuning.

One of the highways into Asheville from the west goes
through the Swannanoa Tunnel. We haven't found
whether or not any disaster ever occurred there; but
in any event, much of this song is an off-shoot of
the John Henry song, which is usually titled "Mine
Pound Hammer" or "This Old Hammer" — (it "rings
like silver, shines like gold"). Bascom Lamar
Lunsford sings "Swannanoa Tunnel"; his version is
printed in B.A. Botkin's Treasury of Southern Folk
Lore. Lunsford describes it as a work song, sung
during the building of the Swannanoa Tunnel, from
1880 to 1884.

Mickey learned the song from Artus Moser, who was
living at that time in Swannanoa. This rendition
excludes two Jim Crow verses which are perhaps
the reasons why this song has not been more popular.
The two first line tunes, alternating in the verses,
give this song the quality of having a chorus when
it doesn't.

Asheville Junction, Swannanoa Tunnel
All caved in, baby, all caved in.

I'm a-going back to that Swannanoa Tunnel
That's my home, baby, that's my home.

Riley Gardner killed my partner,
Can't kill me, baby, can't kill me.

Four pound hammer killed John Henry,
Can't kill me, baby, can't kill me.

There ain't no hammer in these mountains
Outrings mine, baby, outrings mine.

Asheville Junction, Swannanoa Tunnel
All caved in, baby, all caved in.

ROSEWOOD CASKET

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of A; standard tuning.

Recently we saw a song book dated 1872 and titled
"DeWitt's Forget-Me-Not Songster". On the fly-leaf
its contents were described as
"songs and ballads which our GOOD OLD
GRANDMOTHERS loved to sing at the
fireside and which our DAUGHTERS now
warble in the parlour."

"Rosewood Casket" has undoubtedly been warbled in
many a parlor, but somehow it remains convincing
and sincere in spite of its Victorian vocabulary.

In "North Carolina Folklore, Vol. II", Frank C.
Brown says that the author and history of "Rosewood
Casket" are unknown but that the song has become
a part of the traditional southern repertoire.
Mickey learned it (and, simultaneously, how to play
the guitar) from a friend in Los Angeles in about
1946.

There's a little rosewood casket lying on a marble
stand
And a packet of love letters written by my true
love's hand.

Come and sit beside me, brother, come and sit upon
my bed
Come and lay your head upon my pillow, for my aching
heart falls dead.

Last Sunday I saw him walking with a lady by his side
And I thought I heard him tell her she could never
be his bride.

When I'm dead and in my coffin and my shroud's
around me bound
And my narrow grave is ready in some lonesome
churchyard ground,

Take his letters and his locket, place together o'er
my heart
But the golden ring he gave me from my finger never
part.
PRETTY POLLY

Vocal duet; guitar accompaniment by Mickey Miller. Key of D minor. Guitar tuned in Mickey's D minor tuning: starting from the D tuning, take the third string down 2 1/2 tone to F.

Mickey's accompaniment to the famous old bloody ballad draws extensively from five string banjo technique. Bess's harmony came out of a collecting trip with John A. Lomax Sr. on which she heard two little girls singing a minor version of "Pretty Polly" in close harmony. Although this tune is different, the harmonic feeling is somewhat the same. The second set of "Coon Creek Girls" (Lily May, Rosie and Minnie Leadford) sang some of their old modal ballads in three-part close harmony.

Oh, where is Pretty Polly, Oh yonder she stands,
Rings on the fingers of her lily-white hands. (2)

Oh Polly, Pretty Polly, come go away with me,
Before we get married some pleasure to see. (2)

Oh, he led her over fields and o'er valleys so wide,
At last Pretty Polly, she fell by his side. (2)

Oh Willy, Oh Willy, I'm feared of your ways,
Your mind is to ramble and lead me astray.

Polly, Pretty Polly, you're guessing about right
I dug on your grave two-thirds of last night. (2)

Oh, he threw the dirt over her and turned away to go
No one was there but the wild birds to moan. (2)

Oh, where is Pretty Polly, oh, yonder she stands
Rings on the fingers of her lily-white hands.

JOHNNY BOOKER

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of D. Mickey's "D" tuning.

Mickey learned this from a Decca recording of Cousin Emmy. The secondary instrumental melody is variously known as "Cumberland Gap" and "Doggett Gap". Johnny Booker appears in a sea chantey and a minstrel song, but we don't know if he started out afloat or ashore. This version is a square dance tune.

Hey Johnny Booker, oh my doo, oh my doo,
Hey Johnny Booker, oh my doo. (Repeat)

Johnny Booker came a-riding by
He said your pigs is going to die.
If they do, I'll eat their meat
And send Johnny Booker their head and feet.

Hey Johnny Booker, oh my doo, oh my doo, etc.

EAST VIRGINIA

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of E. Standard tuning. (For guitarists who might enjoy playing this song, the chord progression goes E, D, B7, E.)

"East Virginia" has turned up throughout the south with many different tunes, both minor and major, the most widespread of which probably belongs to the "Greenback Dollar" family. Mickey learned this version from Artus Moser, who has done some collecting for the Library of Congress.

I was born in East Virginia, North Carolina I did go
There I met this fair young lady, her age and name I did not know.
Oh, her hair was dark and curly and her cheeks were ruby red,
Some dark night we'll take a ramble and you'll run away with me.

Papa says I cannot marry, mama says it ne'er can be,
I was born in East Virginia, North Carolina I did go.

There I met this fair young lady and she promised to be my bride,
Oh, her hair was dark and curly and her cheeks were ruby red.

SINGLE GIRL

Vocal duet; guitar accompaniment by Mickey Miller. Key of D. Mickey's "D" tuning.

The first three verses and the tune are by the Carter Family. Mickey added verses four and five, thinking that it was a good song and ought to go on longer, and also that something ought to be said in defense of marriage.

Single girl, oh, single girl
She's going anywhere she please,
Oh, going anywhere she please.
Married girl, oh, married girl,
Got a baby on her knees,
Oh, got a baby on her knees.

Single girl, oh, single girl,
Goes to the store and buys,
Oh, goes to the store and buys.
Married girl, oh, married girl,
She rocks the cradle and cries,
Oh, rocks the cradle and cries.

Single girl, oh, single girl
She's going dressed up so fine,
Oh, going dressed up so fine.
Married girl, oh, married girl,
She wears any kind,
Oh, she wears any kind.

Single girl, oh, single girl
She lays in bed till one,
Oh, lays in bed till one.
Married girl, oh, married girl,
She's up before the sun,
Oh, up before the sun.
Single girl, oh, single girl,
She's looking for a man,
Oh, looking for a man.
Married girl, oh married girl,
She's got her wedding band,
Oh, got her wedding band.

CHINESE BREAKDOWN


Bess learned this tune many years ago from Woody Guthrie. Woody played mandolin in his own characteristic fashion, using lots of double stops and a highly syncopated beat. Instead of the steady tremolo (European style), Woody always used a bouncy, banjo-like rhythm on a single string -- down, down-up, to a one (and) two and count. Together with a lot of "pumping" on the strings with the left hand, this pick style produces a jazzy kind of rhythm much more suitable for square-dancing than the more soulful balalaika style of mandolin playing.

Neither this tune nor "Johnny Booker" nor "Ring Them Charming Bells" really fit in with the theme of this album, but we liked them just the same.

NOW HE'S GONE

Vocal duet; Mickey Miller guitar accompaniment. Key of D. Standard tuning.

Mickey learned this song from her husband, who learned it in New York from Stuart Jamison, a banjo player.

CHORUS:
Now he's gone, let him go; let him sink or let him swim
He don't care for me; I'm sure I don't for him.
Now he's gone across the ocean, himself a better man,
I hope that he finds favor in some far distant land.

Oh, he's pretty and he's small and he dresses awful neat
Isn't it a pity he's so full of his deceit?
Now he's gone across the ocean, himself a better man
I hope he finds favor in some far distant land.

CHORUS

Well, he loved me a little, like the dew upon the corn,
Put it on at evening and took it off at dawn.
Now he's gone across the ocean, himself a better man,
I hope that he finds favor in some far distant land.

CHORUS

WHO KILLED COCK ROBIN

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of C sharp. Mickey used her "D minor" tuning (as previously described). This proved to be too high for comfortable singing, so the entire guitar was tuned down one-half step, thus the song is really being sung in C sharp minor.

Mickey learned this children's song from a teacher in North Carolina. While the text is a nursery rhyme of English origin and probably of considerable antiquity, the melody suggests American Negro influence. Charles Seeger pointed out to us the similarity of this tune to "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child".

Who killed Cock Robin? Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the sparrow, with my little bow and arrow,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who saw him die? Who saw him die?
I, said the fly, with my little teary eye,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who caught his blood? Who caught his blood?
I, said the fish, with my little silver dish,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who dug his grave? Who dug his grave?
I, said the snake, with my little spade and rake,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who made his shrouded? Who made his shrouded?
I, said the beetle, with my little thread and needle,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who lowered him down? Who lowered him down?
I, said the crane, with my little golden chain,
It was I, oh, it was I.

Who preached his sermon? Who preached his sermon?
I, said the crow, just as fast as I could go,
It was I, oh, it was I.

POOR UNWORTHY SON
or
GAMBLING ON THE SABBATH DAY

Vocal duet; guitar accompaniment by Mickey Miller. Key of D. Mickey's D tuning.

Mickey learned this from her husband who learned it from Margot Mayo in New York. However, in the course of time, he forgot the exact tune and this one may not be the original....

A poor unworthy son would dare
To disregard his father's care
And he would not heed a sister dear
Nor listen to a mother's prayer.

Their advice he turned away,
Cards and dice he learned to play.
And now in prison he has to lay
For gambling on the Sabbath Day.

Oh, who can tell a mother's thought
When first to her the news is brought
The sheriff said her son was sought
And into prison must be brought.

His father's sixty years of age
The best of counsel did engage
To see if something could be done
To save their disobedient son.

But nothing could the counsel do
The testimony proved too true,
He had a deadly weapon drew
And pierced his comrade's body through.

The sheriff cut the slender cord,
His soul flew up to meet the Lord.
The doctor said, this wretch is dead,
His spirit from his body fled.
A weeping mother cried aloud
Oh God, do save this gaping crowd
And may none ever have to pay
For gambling on the Sabbath Day.

WILlow FLOWEw

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of A. Standard tuning.

This old pot-boiler with the high-flown lyrics has been garbled beyond recognition by many traditional singers. The principal trouble seems to lie with the first line which apparently originally read, "I will twine with my ringlets of waving black hair". This has on occasion been rendered, "I will bind with my ringlets of raving black hair". Mickey's version seems to represent yet another desperate attempt to make sense out of this old tongue-twister with the wonderful tune.

I will twine with my ringlets of raving black hair
The rose so red and the lily so fair,
The myrtle so green with its emerald hue
And pale armita with eyes of dark blue.

Oh he promised to love me, he promised to love
To cherish me always all others above,
I wake from my dream and my idol is clay
My passion for loving is vanished away.

Oh he taught me to love him, he called me his flower,
A blossom to cheer him through life's weary hour.
But now he has gone and left me alone
The wild flowers to weep and the wild birds to moan.

I will laugh and I'll sing and my heart will be gay
I'll banish this weeping, drive troubles away.
He'll live yet to regret that very dark hour
When he neglected his pale wildwood flower.

RING THEM CHARMING BELLe

Vocal duet; Mickey Miller, guitar; Bess Hawes, banjo.
Key of A. Standard tuning.

Mickey learned this song from a teacher in North Carolina who had done some traveling in the South. He maintained that there was a difference in time in the chorus (probably 2/4). It seems likely that this is a song of Negro origin. The term "free grace" may relate to the idea of individual salvation that was the basis of the "Great Revival" period of the 19th century. At any rate, this song is sung by both Negro and white congregations in the South today. The term "charming bells", incidentally, was likely "chiming bells" originally; we think this way is much prettier.

Mary and Martha just gone alone
Mary and Martha just gone along
Mary and Martha just gone alone
To ring them charming bells.

CHORUS:
Crying, free grace, undying love,
Free grace, undying love,
Free grace, undying love,
To ring them charming bells.

Preacher and the teacher just gone along
Preacher and the teacher just gone along
Preacher and the teacher just gone along
To ring them charming bells.

(Chorus)

Way over Jordan roll,
Way over Jordan roll,
Way over Jordan roll.
To ring them charming bells.

(Chorus)

HANGMAN

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of D. Mickey's D tuning.

This is a version of the widely known Child ballad (#95) "The Young Maid Freed From the Gallows". Mickey is afraid she may have made the tune up while fooling around with her D tuning; at least she can't remember having heard it anywhere. It is interesting to speculate on how many vocal melodies may have developed out of the qualities of various instrumental tunings by just this process.

Hangman, hangman, hold your rope, hold it for a while
I think I see my father coming, riding many a mile
Riding many a mile.

Father have you got the gold, gold to pay my fine,
Or have you come to see me hung from beneath this gallows vine
From beneath this gallows vine.

Daughter, daughter, I've no gold, gold to pay your fine,
And I have come to see you hung from beneath that gallows vine.

Hangman, hangman, hold your rope, hold it for a while
I think I see my mother coming, riding many a mile,
Riding many a mile.

Mother have you got the gold, gold to pay my fine,
Or have you come to see me hung from beneath this gallows vine
From beneath this gallows vine.

Hangman, hangman, hold your rope, hold it for a while
I think I see my true love coming, riding many a mile,
Riding many a mile.

True love, have you got the gold, gold to pay your fine,
Or have you come to see me hung from beneath this gallows vine
From beneath this gallows vine.
LONE GREEN VALLEY

Mickey Miller with guitar. Key of D. Mickey's D tuning.

Woody Guthrie used this lovely old tune in his song "Philadelphia Lawyer". The original song is a widely-known murder ballad, variously titled "The Fair Florella", "The Jealous Lover" and "The Lover of the Lone Green Valley". Mickey learned this version from Jeff Larsen, Missouri fiddler.

Look down that lone green valley where violets bloom and fade
There's where my blue-eyed Ellen lies mouldering in her grave.

She died not broken-hearted, nor by disease she fell
But in a moment parted from the one she loved so well.

Come my love, let us take a ramble down in some valley gay
And there we will set together and appoint our wedding day.

Then to the lonely forest he led his love so dear
He killed her on the mountain and never shed a tear.

Look down that lone green valley where violets bloom and fade
There's where my blue-eyed Ellen lies mouldering in her grave.

BURY ME BENEATH THE WILLOW

Vocal duet: Mickey Miller, guitar; Bess Hawes, mandolin. Key of D. Standard tuning.

This song is another sentimental song which, like "Wildwood Flower", may owe its survival more to the melody than the lyrics. Many years ago, Woody Guthrie, while doing a little wood-shedding on his mandolin, developed the tune now known as "Woody's Rag", and also discovered that it fit, in a kind of crazy counter-point, the tune of "Bury Me Beneath the Willow". In this performance the mandolin slides back and from from one tune to the other.

My heart is sad and I am lonely for the one I really love
Still I hope someday I'll meet him when we reach that land above.

So bury me beneath the willow, 'neath that weeping willow tree
And when he comes he'll find me sleeping, then perhaps he'll think of me.

Tomorrow was to be our wedding, but, oh God, where can he be?
He has gone and found another, he no longer cares for me.

He told me that he really loved me; God, oh God, I thought it true
Until some kindly neighbors told me, he no longer cares for you.