

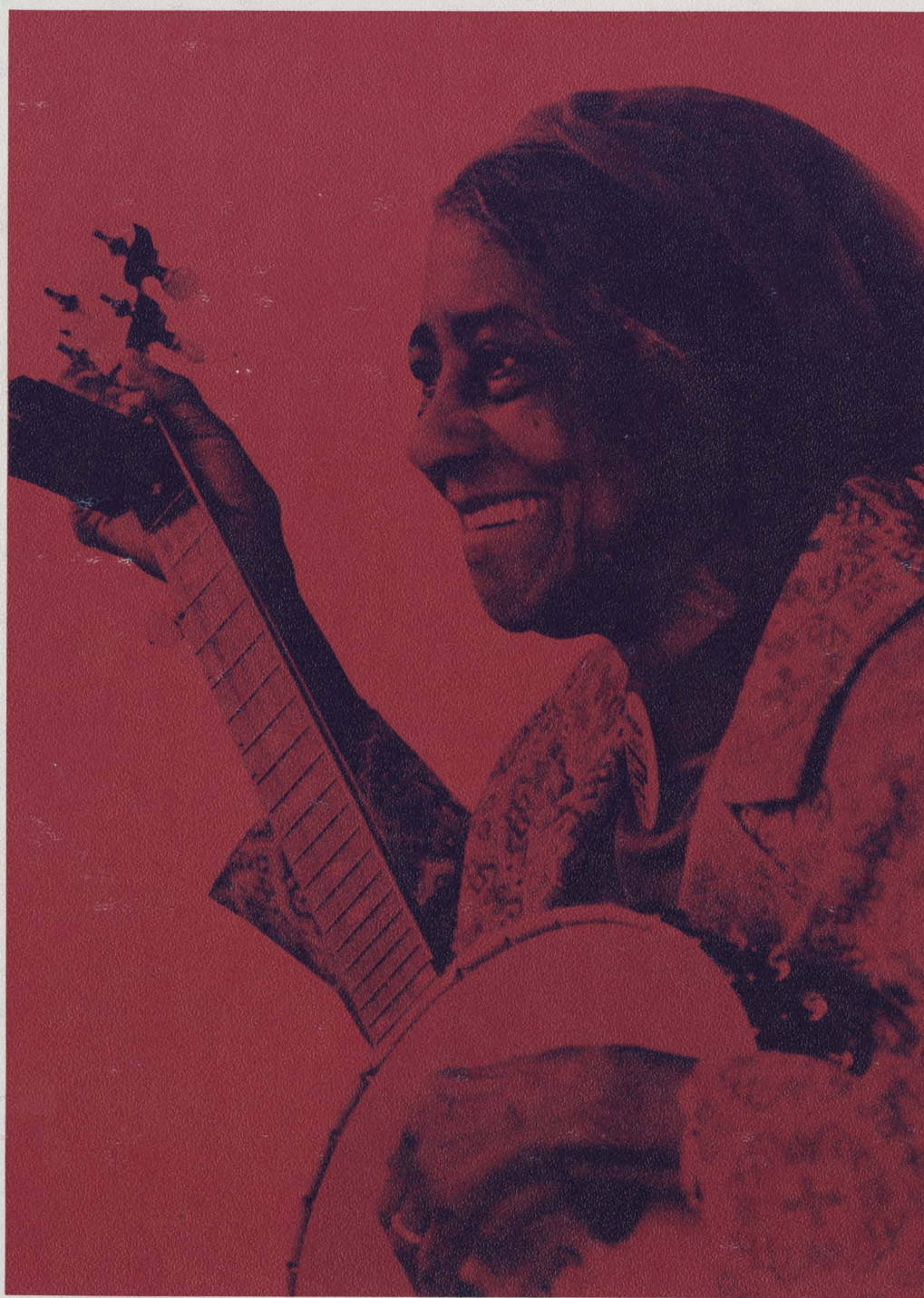
VOLUME THREE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 3537

Elizabeth Cotten: When I'm Gone

RECORDED AND EDITED BY MIKE SEEGER

NOTES COMPILED BY ALICE GERRARD



PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM MYS, MARIPOSA FOLK FESTIVAL 1974

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 3537

SIDE A 21:00

- Band 1. New Year's Eve (Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin) 3:15
- Band 2. Praying Time Will Soon Be Over (Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin) 3:10
- Band 3. Time to Stop Your Idling (Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin) 2:30
- Band 4. Gaslight Blues (Elizabeth Cotten) 4:45
- Band 5. Jenny (Elizabeth Cotten) 2:40
- Band 6. Street Blues (Elizabeth Cotten) 2:10
- Band 7. Home Sweet Home (trad. arr. by Elizabeth Cotten) 2:20

SIDE B 21:45

- Band 1. Freight Train (Elizabeth Cotten) 3:10
- Band 2. Casey Jones (trad. arr. by Elizabeth Cotten) 1:45
- Band 3. Willie (Elizabeth Cotten) 5:05
- Band 4. Boddie's Song (trad. arr. by Elizabeth Cotten) 2:15
- Band 5. Wilson Rag (Elizabeth Cotten) 4:50
- Band 6. When I'm Gone (Elizabeth Cotten) 4:40

All original compositions are published by
Sanga Music.

**ELIZABETH COTTEN VOL. 3
WHEN I'M GONE**

"You're gonna miss the songs I play..you're gonna miss my playin', you're gonna miss my singing, you're gonna miss me walking, you're gonna miss my everyday talk, you're gonna say, 'Well, I wish Elizabeth was here', and you're gonna look and I won't be there.. That's the reason I call it my song. It's everything about me... So you can sing that song if you want to when the ashes to ashes, the dust to dust... It's gonna be a long time off.. We're all gonna rise the Judgment Day. That'd be wonderful wouldn't it? I'd come and gather all my little children in my arms. All of you all. Just gather you up and take you right on back with me. Oh, wouldn't that be sweet. I wished I could."

Extensive interview included inside with song notes.

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632 BROADWAY, N.Y.C., 10012 N.Y., U.S.A.

Elizabeth Cotten: When I'm Gone

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 3537

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ELIZABETH COTTEN Vol. 3

The following is quoted from taped conversations with Elizabeth Cotten, Alice Gerrard and Mike Seeger between Dec. 13, 1977 and Jan. 10, 1979 in Washington, D.C. and Syracuse N.Y., and from an interview between Mike Seeger and Elizabeth Cotten on Jan. 18, 1966 in Roosevelt, N.J.

—Alice Gerrard, June, 1979

Mama called me "Babe," my daddy called me "Shoat." His name was George Nevills. I don't remember him to much... He was a tall man... he wore his hat kind of one side a little bit. He was brown—he was lighter than me, but a beautiful brown, big but rawboney, thin hands and feet. Sometimes I see pictures on television and it reminds me what I think he should look like...

"Shoat!"
"Yes, pa."
"Come here and light your pa's pipe."
"Alright."

Get that old strong tobacco, put that tobacco in there and get a little hot ashes out of the fireplace and put on, or a little coal, lay it on top of it. And I'd smoke it to see was it lit up. And when it'd get to smokin' then I'd give it to him. I can smoke that old strong tobacco, chew it too. I got used to it. Then I'd sit on one leg and Lillie, my sister, on the other, and we'd comb and braid his hair. He had lovely hair. It was kind of long on the top and we'd make little long braids all over his head...

I grew up with liquor and tobacco and snuff and all of that... My daddy was a still maker. He made liquor when mama and him used to live in the country. I used to hear mama say, Lord, she couldn't stop Nevills from doin' that. Said she'd feel uneasy when he'd leave to go to his still to make liquor. And if anybody knocked at the door they'd just scared everybody to death 'cause she just figured that the revenuers had done found him or somethin'. But they never did. He never got locked up on it I don't think. But he made plenty of it. We used to have liquor settin' around in jars, bottles or jugs... When we'd get a bad coddle mama'd pour liquor in a little something, take it to the fireplace and heat it—put a little blaze, the prettiest little blaze on there. Then she would cool that down and give it to us to drink... Liquor was no more than water to us, or milk. And I never did see one of my brothers drunk in my life. But my father, we saw him drunk many times...

My father used to go to the woods and get the rosin out of a pine tree. But before you'd get that rosin, he'd find a tree and cut it on the side that the sun come up on, and it wouldn't be very long before the hot sun would bring the rosin out, and you'd see him get it in a little box. He'd stand there and pick all that rosin off, then he'd take it home and make little pills. That's just the same as taking turpentine... give you one or two pills, wrap you up and give you some hot liquor. That's all the doctorin' people used to do, they didn't know anything about doctors. I guess all mama's five children was born without a doctor.

My daddy must've come from around Chatham County I reckon. I'm just guessing now—but not from Chapel Hill. My father's people was Indians. My mama used to tell me how my daddy's mother was a slave and how she used to get whippings. She told the boss, "Now boss, I'm not gonna take a whippin' this mornin'."

"Come on out here Hannah."

Boss, I'm not comin' out. I'll do what I'm supposed to do, you don't have to tell me boss, I'll do everything I'm supposed to do, and I have not done nothin' to get a beating this morning. And I'm not coming out, I'm not gonna take it."

"Hannah, come on out of there"—mama says she used to mock him.

"Not coming out boss. I just ain't comin' out this morning."

And she went on back to the kitchen and finished her cooking. And I don't think he bothered her no more... How did they feel, whipping somebody hasn't done nothin'? How could you do it? How could you whip a dog if he ain't done nothin'? Yes, and she didn't go out. Granny Hannah did not go out... Her boss was a Nevills or something. That's how they got the name of Nevills I think I heard mama say...

Mama said when the Yankees freed the black folk, my daddy made a big hole and put meat in there... and they got a lot of fodder and made him take the horse and go to the woods and stay in there and just kept feeding the horse so the horse wouldn't whicker. And they made him stay there two or three days. My father taken everything and buried it—you couldn't hide it nowhere 'cause they just'd tear down everything. Mama said they'd just come and rip your house. That door is locked and they want to go in there, they just break it loose and go in, ever who it was comin' around... If they come to your house and you got two or three hams in your smoke house and a whole lot of lard, they'd just take half of that or leave you one little piece. They was getting food for the poor people. And my grandpa, he knew all about that. So he had dug a hole and buried some of the stuff...

After we came to Chapel Hill my daddy worked in a mine... it must've

been a iron mine. It was right off the railroad track that you've heard me talk about so much. He was the dynamite setter... and I remember we was over there with him once. He went down in this well and set the dynamite, and after he'd set them we'd hear him holler up and say, "Alright boys, bring me up. Fire in the hole," he'd say. You ever seen these two handles like drawing water—one man on one side and one on the other... and he'd be in the hole coming up in a tub or something. And they'd bring him up and he wouldn't be up long before you'd hear it say—payow! And they'd wait to hear all them sounds go off. Then my father would go down in there and inspect to see if it was alright, or going to cave in or something. And then you'd hear him say, "It's alright boys, come on down."

And he used to have a little old cap he used to wear, and right on the front of his cap he had a little oil burner the shape of a coffee pot and through the spout you'd pull a little wick through there, and you'd fill the little pot with oil and light this little wick... He worked there until the iron give out, I guess...

My father was a man never wanted a easy job. Looked like he liked very hard work. Didn't, he felt like he wasn't a man or something... he wouldn't take no easy jobs...

I heard him tell a tale once. They used to have chopping blocks or something—they'd see who could cut the most wood or chop the most wood... and they'd always ask "Uncle" George 'cause "Uncle" George was a fast cutting man and... he had a certain kind of ax, and you'd see him sharpen up his ax just before he'd go. I used to hear my mother say that she always felt uneasy when they'd go to these chopping blocks because sometimes the men got a lot of whiskey and they drink and would get drunk and she didn't approve of that too much 'cause she was afraid that they might get to fighting... But anyway, he'd go... and when they split wood you have an iron wedge you put in the split. Alright, then you cut in front of that. When the wedge gets loose you pull it out and put it in another tight place... and he kept telling the man to take the iron wedge out and put it in another place. And finally he taken it out but he didn't know what to do with it. My daddy kept saying, "Stick it back in there in a tight place," and he said the man couldn't understand him and said he just pulled the ax out and let the wood go back on his hand. He did it purposely. And said, "You never heard such praying in your life"—said he bet from then on he'd know what he meant when he said take the iron wedge out and put it in. He said it hurt his hands awful bad... he felt sorry, he said, after, 'cause the ends of them just busted out with blood. But he did that—and laughed about it. But he could beat anybody cutting wood.

Then he used to go to these parties and win a turkey... every time he'd go he'd always bring back a turkey... Everything he'd go to he'd win. He was always the strongest—he was Samson, I guess...

We was all scared of him. I was, anyway. Just as scared of my daddy as I could be. He'd just fust all the time, sittin' around grumblin', you know, talkin'. Like he's the boss...

He broke his leg and when they set it they set it crooked, and he used to cuss that leg... I heard him tell sister, "I'm gonna break this damn leg over and set it right..." He got a piece of metal wagon wheel rim, he bent it and put his foot in it and let it come up to his knee... Tore up one of mama's sheets and wrapped it. My daddy's somethin'. He had a toothache and he couldn't pull it out, and he took a nail, anything that was kind of rough, and put it against the tooth... "God damn you! Guess you won't hurt me no more"—and somethin' came out...

He was a long time a-dyin'... He died in Chapel Hill. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. That's a good hill down there...

I was small and after he passed we would wash for the doctor to pay his doctor bills. There wasn't much money in circulation then, and not much for the colored people anyway... and we washed for that man and they'd have the biggest old nasty wash. We'd just hate to see that wash come in...

My mama was the second child. Louisa Price Nevills. I think there was three girls and ever how many boys that makes ten. About seven ain't it... She lived in Siler City, North Carolina. I don't know whether she was born there or not. My mother's people were not slaves. They were farmers. That's about the only thing at that time for colored people to do. They didn't live close nowhere that they could work for nobody. They just kind of had to sow their grains and reap them. There was no other way to make a living. They had cows, horses, plenty of butter, chickens, eggs, everything that farming people had. She was raised up on plenty to eat but she worked very, very hard for that.

My mother's father was a hard worker; he worked the children very hard—he just about made a boy out of her... He was a man who loved to have plenty of everything... And she had a sister that she didn't like (she

loved her but she didn't like her) because she could stay home with "Muh"—they called their mother "Muh"—and help Muh cook. She never worked a day in her life in the field... her place was at the house with the children and to do the housework and to cook. Not the field. She say she used to wonder "How in the world they take me—I'm a woman too—and work me so hard..."

Mama was a midwife. She delivered a many a little child in Chapel Hill and all through the country...

Mostly white people called her "Aunt Lou." "Aunt Lou, will you come to my house such and such a time? I want my kitchen scrubbed. Would you come and scrub my kitchen for me? Aunt Lou, I declare, your kitchen floors are so pretty, what do you wash 'em with?"

"Miss Jenny, I use a little lye soap on it."

"Well, I wish you'd come over and do up my kitchen for me Aunt Lou."

"Well, I'll come any time you want me to."

"Well Aunt Lou, I'll let you know..." And sure enough, she'd go and clean up their kitchen. And they'd come in there and sit right down at the big old table: "I declare, this is the cleanest table. Aunt Lou what you got to eat? What's in the pot cooking? Aunt Lou, I brought you somethin' today." Mama'd say, "What is it Miss?" so and so... And sometimes it would be a piece of meat or just a little somethin', a pound of butter or somethin'. They loved mama.

Mama was very pleasant. Very nice, obedient. Mama was always kind of humble—just a little bit, you could see it—kind of pulled back act, you know what I mean? She wouldn't go too far too quick. I used to didn't want to see her do too much of that. But she seemed to get along alright... See, she had to do that maybe a little more than I did. I don't know why, 'cause she was not a slave. But after she had to get out and work for herself and work around white people, maybe she picked it up then.

"You do what you're supposed to do, everything's alright." That's what mama used to tell us. "You do what you're supposed to do, don't overdo..." She said, "Children whatever you do, don't never be a liar. Don't tell a lie." Her grandma or somebody used to say, "Don't tell a lie... don't never be a rogue and a liar—don't steal things." Mothers didn't know nothin' to teach their children—that's all they'd know what to teach them... They just worked for them slavery people and did a whole lot of work...

My mother told me—maybe it was just told to her—somewhere down in the south, down in Georgia, there was a man burnin' on a log...

"That man is burning.
Way down in the land of Georgia
That man is burning.
He's burning on a log..."

Where mama got that song I don't know. It sounds like way down in slavery times didn't it? Mama used to sing that song to us and she'd tell us about when the Yankees freed the Negroes. She said she was ten years old. Not too far from where they lived they had a plank thing that goes across the water. And she said it was the old plank road... She said when the Yankees freed the Negroes you could hear the paddle of the horses feet comin' across this bridge—you could hear it for so long, there'd be so many of them you'd listen to 'em a long time... And I think she said that they'd go around to white people's houses and tell the Negroes they was free. And some of 'em would leave and some wouldn't. Some was scared to go and the others would take the people at their word and feel they was free...

I can imagine I see her sometime... doing something, you know, and just singing. All them songs... "Hallelujah T's Done"—that's old, old. Mama'd give out her songs and sing 'em. She'd sing the chorus, then she'd stop and give out the verse, and she'd sing the verse, then she'd sing the chorus... She was a church woman too...

Sometimes when I wake up in the night a song like that comes to me, looks like I can just imagine I see her sometimes. She had a big rockin' chair she rocked in all the time—one for the front porch and one for the house. And after she died, we carried her bed out and her trunk... and that rockin' chair and a straight chair. I put the chair right at the edge of the door and put the rockin' chair kind of in front of the fireplace. I used to pray to ask God to let me wake up and let me see her sitting in one of those chairs at night. Never did see her.

I thought I'd die, yeah. I used to be comin' from work and all at once I know anything I'd be scream'ing and cryin'. I'd see people lookin' out the window and I'd try to be quiet, then when I'd get home and she wasn't there, there was the empty rockin' chair, there was the bed, the chair sitting there. And I'd go in the other room and shut the door and cry as long as I wanted to. And people used to come and ask, "Miss Lillie, what's the matter with Miss Elizabeth?" She'd say, "She's just cryin' 'bout mama." And she'd say, "Poor thing, I know how she feels." I cried satisfaction, then I got up, and I did that, honey, about two months, and I was just goin' away to nothin'. And all at once one day somethin' says to me, "You've got to live—she's

dead." I done all I could for her. Money didn't mean nothing if I had it to spend on her. 'If she needed it to be I'd wait on her, I'd even take her clothes with me to work and wash 'em. I'd buy her food and cook on the job and take to her... I done everything within my power to do and it was just time for her to die. "She wants you to live. She don't want you to grieve and go tingle away to nothin", so snap out of it"—and I did. Just all at once I begin to get better, begin to eat and feel better..."

I used to be at Mrs. Kenfield's hanging clothes... and I'd just get to cryin'. Just busted out. I'd just tear them woods all to pieces out there crying. And she says, "Libba, I'll finish hangin' up the clothes," and put me in the car and take me home—poor Mrs. Kenfield. She'd come tell me what they'd say—her friends. Tell her she's a nigger lover... She put me in the car and take me home, and that would be the place I didn't want to go 'cause mama wasn't there, you know. And I just worried over mama so much.

I remember when I was a child I used to lay in the bad and cry, ask God to let mama live 'til I was big enough to take care of myself. I'd say if I lose my mama what's I gonna do? And I'd just cry right easy. And she did, she lived 'til I was grown and married and had Lillie, and she saw four of her great-grandchildren. She lived that long. But it like to kill me when she died, though. I felt like tellin' her put me in that thing and cover me up with her. I just didn't want to stay without her, you know. But I had to get over that... I just did all I could do, and workin' too...

"I remember, I remember, the house where I was born..." It's somethin' that we used to say in school...

Beans, black-eyed peas, collards, turnip salad, turnips... well, that's what I eat every day when I was growin' up—weren't nothin' else for me to eat. You didn't know nothin' about no market meat...

Turpentine, camphorated oil and mutton tallow, liquor, and mama put up all kinds of wine... She used white mullen... she'd make a plaster with that, put it on a cloth and lay it to your breast or side or whatever hurts... That's what we was raised on...

The first radio I ever heard in my life, I was going to school and the teacher said that this man was coming with this. And he said, "Now I want you all to be nice, don't be noisy," and he brought this great big thing and he set it on top of the table, and this thing had a great big horn... And I remember the teacher telling us, "Now if you don't behave yourself all he's got to do is to turn that horn... something will come out of that horn make you behave yourself." And the records he put on was round, looked like a rolling pin.

When I was a man teacher and then I can remember we had a woman teacher... they didn't want you to talk. They'd have these old long switches. Somethin' would hit your seat like that. She wouldn't hit you, she'd just hit on the seat... I loved school and sister hated school, "I just hate school, Shoat..." I went about as far as the fourth grade... I don't remember never goin' back to study no more. I started making a little money—my 75 cents a month to buy my guitar...

I'll never forget... this man lived about a block from us. And he let the children come when he'd have this music, and dance in his yard. That was long before I bought my guitar. If any of the children could play any kind of horn, or any kind of music, he'd let 'em come in and join the music, and we'd have a nice time. When we'd hear that bugle, ever what it was he'd blow, we begin to worry our parents to let us go, then when she'd say yes—come back here at a certain time—we'd always come back because we wanted to go back the next time. That's where I learned how to dance, waltz, and two-step, do the cakewalk, Frisco... buck dance. And I just danced my little head off... My brothers were there and we'd all dance together, my sister, me, and my brother... In the band they had some kind of horns, the drum, and this big, old guitar—double bass thing... And that was years ago. That old house is torn down now, my old house is torn down and it's all built up in new stuff...

I was always humored so much. That's what you can do to a child. You can humor it so much until that child keeps a mind of a young child. You can humor a child so much that it never feels like nothin' but I'm just a little child, like to be loved and somebody to care for me at all times. All my brothers and my sister—none of them didn't never bother me. Nobody better not hit me. "That's Babe, don't you hit Babe..." When you humor a child so much that child's mind don't ever develop like a child would if he'd have to think for himself or do for himself or kind of protect himself...

I remember when they had a picture show in Chapel Hill. Negroes weren't supposed to go, and after a while they arranged it for the colored people to go but they had to go in the back... You couldn't go in the front part of a store to buy nothin' to eat, and come out the front door. If you're gonna buy something to eat, like a restaurant or something, you have to go in the back door and back out. You couldn't eat it in there...

I was raised up in a church. Go to church every Sunday. You didn't miss... You go to Sunday school and stay the 11 o'clock service and sometimes mama would let us go back at 3 o'clock service. I'm a Baptist, I was baptized in the Baptist church... They'd dam the water of a branch so it would be deep at a certain place and that's where I was baptized. I think I was about 13 or 14 years old. I feel alright—I got my religion. All them songs that you play on the piano, I was raised up goin' to Sunday school singing them. Everybody'd get a book and sit up there and sing the songs. If there was notes there was somebody always there'd always know the notes. And he'd sing it for you and then you follow him—we didn't know no notes. He'd know when to tell you to sing or what. "Now if I'm an alto and you're a soprano, here's the lead. Alright... you sing your part, now you sing your part, you sing yours." Well, if you weren't singing it right, he'd say, "You don't go up on that, you do down," or something—for you to know what you were doing...

All my mother's brothers played music, every one of them—Fiddle and a banjo. There was one fiddle in my family growin' up. I don't know what happened to it, it had a whole lot of twists in it, in the neck, you know... and cut out in here... and I don't remember myself ever trying to pick up a fiddle to play it. The thing I wanted was an organ or piano. My mother wasn't able to get it. I was so full of music if somebody had of just took a little time to find out how full of music I was, give me a few lessons or kind of help me or show me, I'd have been good. I know I would 'cause I know from where I come, from what I learned myself, just me. I think I was so full of it, looked like I could just feel music in myself. And if I go somewhere else and see music—see a piano or organ, I'm just gonna die, I just want to get on it, do something to it, you know. I couldn't play it and mama wasn't able to buy me one, you see. My brother had a banjo and when he left home I didn't have nothin' to play, so I just decided I wanted the guitar.

I wasn't 12 years old and I went to work for this lady, her name was Miss Ada Copeland. She paid me 75 cents a month. I was a lot of help to her... so she said to my mother, "We're going to raise little Sissie's wages." So they gave me a dollar a month. And if you think about it, it sounds like a little money, but in them days for a child it might've been a good price, I don't know. 'Cause my mother was one of the top cooks in Chapel Hill and she didn't make but 5 dollars a month. But anyway, I saved my money and bought me a guitar. Only one place in Chapel Hill at that time you could buy a guitar. That was Mr. Gene Kates. Says, "Aunt Lou, I'll tell you the truth. As long as you and your little girl wants a guitar so bad you can have it for 3 dollars and 75 cents..." And mama had that much money of mine where I'd some worked I don't know how many months for it... And the name of that guitar was Stella. And I liked my guitar so very, very much, and that's when I began to learn how to play a guitar.

I learned the banjo upside down and I couldn't [reverse the strings] because it belonged to my brother. Then when I bought the guitar, so much said about "You better change the strings, you can't play it left-handed," they was changed as much as two or three times. And I could *not* play it. I couldn't tune it, I couldn't do anything with it. So I just sat down and took all the strings off, then I put 'em back on like this and I stopped askin'. I started playing, learning different little tunes on it. Get one little string and then add another little string to it and get a little sound, then start playing.

I had two brothers—they played, and my sister, she chordeed, but nobody had no music—they didn't know nothin' about no [written] music. They just played, like all country poople get together and play songs. I learn yours and you learn mine and just keep on like that. But I didn't even have that much chance when I was learning. Nobody to help me to play... I wanted music so bad I could just feel it. And when I say, "Show me"—"I ain't showin' you nothin'". Turn it over, change the strings." I'd sit there and took all the strings off Stella and strung it up and fixed it myself. The first thing I'd do, I laid the guitar flat in my lap and I worked my left hand 'til I could play the strings backwards and forwards. And then after I got so I could do that, then I started to chord it and get the sound of a song—a song that I know, and if it weren't but one string I'd get that. Then finally, I'd add another string to that... and kept on 'til I could work my fingers pretty good. And that's how I started playing with two fingers. And after I played with two fingers for a while, I started using three... And then I remember I used to play—I'd start with my little finger... I can't do it now. I guess all that was learning me how then. I was just trying to see what I could do.

All the little help I got, mys sister used to sing. We'd sing songs—like if I was singing a song and if I didn't know it right good, whe'd jump in and help

me; "Now Shoat, that don't go like that..." And we'd sing songs, me and sister, sitting by the lamplight singing, playing. I just loved to play. That used to be all I'd do. I'd sit up late at night and play. My mama would say to me, "Sis, put that thing down and go to bed."

"Alright mama, just as soon as I finish—let me finish this," and she'd go back to sleep and I'd sit up thirty minutes or longer than that. Sometime I'd near play all night if she didn't wake up and tell me to go to bed. 'Cause when I learned one little tune, I'd be so proud of that tha I'd want to learn another. Then I'd just keep sitting up trying.

You know the tune and you just learn it. Just keep the tune in your mind and just keep on workin' with it 'til you get something. The way I do, I play it to my own sound, the way I think it sounds. If I'm playing a song and if I don't quite know it, you could finish it off with some kind of sound. I just do it according to my sound... you just get a sound. You just put the sounds together and what sounds alright you just go on with it. And all of them little things you heard me playin', that's the way I got it. I don't know nothing about no notes, I can't read music. You just get a song and know it and just keep fooling around with it 'til you get it to sound like you want it to sound. And whether it's right or wrong I just go on with it if it sounds to suit me. If you're singing a song, whatever you're playing on, there's a little extra something you're doing, the bass or the other hand one, that'll make it a little different. I tried hard to play, I'm telling you. I worked for what I've got, I really did work for it...

There was an old man who lived down at the foot of the hill. He was my husband's uncle or great-uncle... and he used to say, "Cousin Lou, where's that little girl of yours? Come here and tell her to play me a piece on the box... tell her to come here and play Home Sweet Home" (this song that I play—"Spanish," he always called it "Home Sweet Home"). I'd always hear—he didn't have to call me. I don't care where I'd be, I'd always hear when they said play something on the guitar. I was there and had it out.

It was just in me to learn. It's a gift I guess I got. It must be. Something God gave me to live on since I got old... He must've had a handshake in it there somewhere. I'm tellin' you it must be...

Music is a funny thing. It's something you love. I don't know, it just something comes in you, comes from inside of you. Comes out. Just mumble it out. Just come boobles out. And you can shut your eyes and go with it and repeat it. And just sit—pretend I was pickin' up my guitar and keep right up with the tune I was playing and never hadn't heard it before, wouldn't know what it would be until I had it in my mind to hum it. I can't do it now... That's how I got all of that when I was growin' up...

When I was in my teens I got religion on that song "Holy Ghost Unchain My Name"... and I was baptized and where I was baptized was something like a creek... the pastor would have somebody to kind of dam it up so the water would get deep a certain place. And after I was baptized, joined the church. And then the deacons told me, "You cannot live for God and live for the devil. If you're going to play them old worldly songs, them old ragtime things, you can't serve God that way. You've either got to do one or the other." And if any of them people see you or hear tell of you doing something that's not Christian-like they would report it at the church. Well, I got to thinking of it, I got religion, I joined the church for better and... I want to do the right thing... and I just gradually stopped playing. I didn't stop all at once 'cause I couldn't. I love my guitar too good. And then it weren't too long 'til I got married and that helped me to stop because then I started housekeeping...

They said I couldn't make a good member of the church and play those wordly songs... "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad"—that's what I played a whole lot... But I think you can make a sin out of anything, just like drinkin' whiskey. I don't think it's such a terrible sin if a person drinks whiskey and don't get enough to act crazy... they never talk about the Bible 'til they get half drunk, then there's one talkin' to the other one. One knows more about the Bible than the other one... that's when I think it brings in a sin.

They just feel like you're not trying to serve God if you run around and sing those kind of songs but I declare I think about 'em a lot and I don't see where there's so much sin in it. I say them words, they come to you just like a song you make of the gospel. They come from inside of your heart, and do you know why? Because you've been mistreated. It could be your mother, your father, your sister, your sweetheart, your husband, or your dear

friend... You know, if you get hurt you know how you feel heavy? And them words just busts out of you, you got to make a song or talk about it or do something. They got to do something instead of maybe fussin' or quarrelin'... Sometimes you can't talk about it but you can sing it... "Well, what you feelin' bad for?" "The girl I love have turned her back on me..." That song's comin' from the inside... Yes, indeed. All the songs come from your heart. Good ones and bad ones. I reckon the worst songs that ever was come from a person's heart...

The first time I want out with a boy... you would get an invitation to go some place. And at that time I wasn't goin' with boys... They were having a lawn party and they were selling ice cream for the church, and I'd get an invitation... "We're having a lawn party and Mr. so and so will call for you at such and such a time."

And then I remember the first time I walked outside with a boy... and I didn't know what to do... I was ashamed. And finally I got myself together and I walked on out. You'd think we had something or other between us—railroad track or something. I was walking way over here and he was walking way over there. And I'll tell you how silly I was... I do like ice cream and the boys were supposed to buy for the girls. That was the money for the church... so he says, "Wouldn't you like some ice cream?" I say, "Oh, no thank you"... I was ashamed. I wanted it so bad... I was kind of bashful face. But now lately I can talk right smart.

I think the first time Frank asked me to go with him to church—we'd just been playing ball together, just school children. And I went with him to church and that was it. And every time I'd get an invitation, "Mr. Frank Cotten will call..."

I remember before I got married, Frankie and I were sitting down talking about it one night. And I said, "Oh, I can't leave mama." And he said, "Well, would you go if I asked for you?" And I said, "Alright, go ahead." And I heard mama say, "No, Frank. You're both of you too young. Baby's only 15..."

"But Aunt Lou, we love one another."

"No you don't—that's just first love, you don't love one another." So she didn't agree, so we decided we'd go ahead and get married anyhow. And we run away...

That morning when I left home I got a bath. Mama thought I was getting a bath to go to work and I was getting a bath to go get married... And I just left and went out to Carrboro and Frank come and we got on a train and went to Hillsborough... Was a place that would rent rooms to people... her name was Miss Payne. I'll never forget it... And he says to her, "Could we get a room?" And she said, "For who?" and he laughed and said, "For me and my wife." "I can give you both a room," she said, "but that's not our wife." And he laughed and he said, "Miss Payne, we're gonna get married," and she said, "Well sure, it's all right..." And Frank had some cousins lived there somewhere... he got in touch with these cousins and told them that he come to get married and sent them to get the license and put our age up. We were about the same age... So they went and got the license and when the pastor come in it happened to be Reverend Crowell what we all knew was the pastor at [Frank's] church. He looked at Frank, he looked at me, he says, "You're Deacon Cotten's son."

"Yes, sir."

"Is this the lady you're gonna marry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I seen this lady before."

"Yes, 'cause we've been to your church many times."

"Well, either one of you all don't look like you're old enough to get married." So Frank gave him the license. He said, "You all done put your age up?" He said, "Do you know what you're doing?" he asked me. I said, "Yes sir." He says, "When you marry a man it means you're going to live with him 'til death set you apart."

"Yes sir"—I didn't know what I was talking about. And then we got married by Reverend Crowell. [February, 1910]

Then we went home the next day, and mama and his mother and the lady across the street, was standing in the street talking kind of in front of the house I lived in... And you know I was ashamed, I was so ashamed. And all mama said, "Babe, you married?" And I said, "mm hm." She said, "Why did you marry like that? You're my youngest child and I wanted to have a little reception for you."

It like to have killed my mama. She said, "Why did you marry like that?" I said, "I don't know." He said "Get married," I said, "Sure." You think you love one another I reckon...

I'd never left mama, I'd never stayed away from her, and so we stayed at mama's house, then finally we rented the house Miss Mary Durham lived in.

We bought a stove and a little chair, we bought a bed and a dresser—that's all you bought then. If you bought something with a looking glass and a bed to sleep in, you done furnished your bedroom. And his sisters went downtown and they bought me some very pretty curtains and I put them up and child, I was keepin' house.

My own boss. That's what made me feel so proud when I got married—I was my own boss. Nobody to say, "Go in the kitchen and wash the dishes, make up your bed, straighten up that floor, pick up!" Did it if I wanted to and if I didn't I didn't do it. I was a pretty good little housekeeper when I was first married. I was so proud to have it... I was so proud of that place, honey... I married at the age of fifteen, birthed my baby when I was sixteen. And I didn't never have no more...

After I married I don't know how Frank got used to me 'cause I was kind of babyish... "mama's baby, papa's pet, six years old and a baby yet..." Looked like if he'd look at me hard I'd cry...

I was married, my baby was young, and me and mama was working together... in this place for boarders... and mama and I were the cooks there. We had about 50 or 75 students and I was supposed to be the pastry cook and mama cooked the meat. So every morning mama would get up—I was hard to get up, she should have taken a board and boarded me...

"Babe."

"Ma'am." Mama'd get up and start dressing...

"Babe."

"Ma'am."

"Didn't I tell you to get up?"

"Yeah, ma, I'm gettin' up."

"Well, get up then. That's the way you do every morning—you stay here and I get up and go to work..." (see you had to make fires in the stoves then, you didn't have any electric). "I go and do all the rough work, then you strut in and help serve, that's all you do—get up, Babe."

"Mama, I'm gettin' up." Well, when I'd get there sure enough the fire would be made, the coffee would be on and all I'd do's strut in and start fryin' the meat... And then you had to make hot bread for students. My sister took care of Lillie [Elizabeth's daughter]... We were all in the house together, me, my mother, my sister and her. Frank was in New York right at that time. He had a job chauffeuring for white people. I didn't want to stop my job. We finished that season... and that's when he wanted Baby [Lillie] and me to come to New York. Frank sent the carfare...

[At various points Elizabeth and Frank Cotten and their daughter, Lillie, moved back and forth between Washington, D.C., Chapel Hill, N.C., and New York City. Then Frank moved to New York where he had a job as a chauffeur for white people and later operated his own business. At first Elizabeth and Lillie remained in Chapel Hill where Elizabeth was working—cleaning and cooking. Eventually, both she and her daughter moved to New York to be with Frank and to get better wages. Lillie went to school in Yonkers and Elizabeth worked day work—cleaning and cooking, and in a furniture store. They lived in New York until Lillie got married.]

I was there twice, and the last time I was there, that's when I stayed about three years. Lillie grown up there. Frank always had top jobs. He was a chauffeur, good automobile mechanic. And he didn't go to school for that. Just like I play guitar, he took it up himself... that's the way he did his mechanic work. He'd take all them little screws out of the inside of that car and just throw 'em down. Then he'd get up under there and work—he was light too, real fair—and he'd come out with his face all dirty black and his hair, a little piece of it, sticking out from under his cap. He'd of made a good magazine picture... he looked like he enjoyed that... He was the first colored man that operated his own garage shop on South Broadway in New York...

I liked New York pretty good. I worked in a furniture store... worked every day. Baby used to do the cooking for her daddy before I'd get home—washing, ironing. She was smart—iron his socks and all his underwear, something I never could do... [Lillie was in about the 7th grade.]

That wife is supposed to look after that husband. I remember when we were little, we never did eat separate meals. Always we was with my mother and father. Sometimes he was away and she took my father's food, put it in either a pan or plate or something and set it back on the stove. Then what's left, that was for us... My husband never come in and asked for a clean piece [of clothing] and it wasn't ready the whole time I was with him. When I washed them I'd have a drawer. I put all of his clothes in it. When he come to eat he didn't have to set around and wait a half a day before he got his food,

and if he wasn't there when dinner was cooked, me and my baby, we'd just serve our parts and set the other back... Times is changed a whole lot...

He was nice to me—he paid my rent, he'd pay all of my bills... but I just couldn't stand one or two other faults he had... but he was nice to me. I'd say, "Oh well, that's slright, there gonna be a day a-comin', Jesus gonna fix it alright." And he did. "Cause I knew exactly what I was gonna do. My daughter, she was going to school then and I stayed for the sake of my child. When she married then I got my divorce. Life's a funny thing anyway, isn't it? Sometimes you don't know how to figure it out... sometimes I wake up in the night and try to think about different things... I stay awake all night sometimes trying to think about something I want to figure out—is it right or wrong or should I or should I not..."

All my life I've been particular about how a man looks. I want a nice looking man... I could have been married 50 times to an ugly man. I didn't live with that man I married... why should I go get one real ugly then and try to live with that one. I got a chance to marry if I wanted to but I didn't want to... I never look on a white man in that way. I always look on a white man this way: I worked for him. He paid me. I'm his servant. His or hers. I never seen a white man yet that I wanted to be a friend of mine. A sexy friend. But I do look on Negro men. I see some very handsome lookin' men. But I didn't want to marry one. I didn't want another one. I had one husband, I didn't live with him and I didn't feel like tryin' to worry myself up to go and live with another one. Now I'm so old nobody would have me...

[Finally, as children and grandchildren gradually moved to Washington, D.C., Elizabeth settled there, living with Lillie. She worked mainly at day work for white families and helped to raise her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.]

"Elizabeth."

"Yes ma'am."

"Do you like tomahto sandwiches?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm makin' a tomahto sahnwdich for myself. And I'm gonna cut it hahlf in two and I'll leave hahlf for you."

"Thank you ma'am."

I think, mm, hm, I get a good lunch today—I'd be hungry, you know. There's that little half a sandwich layin' on the plate. Nothin' else. I looked around and I didn't see nothin' nowhere... I said shucks, this ain't nothin' for me to eat, me down there washin' and ironin', hadn't had no breakfast. I never get up in time to have breakfast 'cause you'd have to go so far for your work. And if I'd stopped to eat you wouldn't get there til about 9, 10 o'clock. Usually they'd offer you a cup of coffee or... a slice of toast. If you have that you can go a long time on it you know. You can go frm then to lunch anyway... But some of them didn't offer you anything... I'd go there in the rain, go there in the cold, be wet and when I'd get there I'd say, "Ooh, bad rain this mornin', certainly is rainin'." They'd be upstairs eating and I'd say well sure she'll call me after a while and give me a cup of coffee or a slice of toast or bread... Nothin', no nothin'. But I left them curtains for her...

"Elizabeth, do you do curtains?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Elizabeth, now you see these curtains? If I wash them and starch them and dampen 'em down, would you iron them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well now, how long does it take you to iron a curtain?"

"I don't know. I never time myself."

"Well, I know. It's 15 minutes to a curtain."

I didn't say anything. Looked like there was about three windows. She had these ruffled curtains and on the top the curtain was joined... there wasn't no way in the world I could do it... "Yes, ma'am, I'll iron it."

"Well now, I'm going to take 'em down and I'll have 'em all ready for you next week."

"Yes, ma'am." I was thinking—you goin' to fix 'em, you goin' to iron, 'cause I ain't goin' to iron 'em. Won't even offer me a cup of coffee... So she took 'em down and washed 'em and I didn't see her no more. No more...

"Elizabeth. Would you mind wipin' the front door window and cleanin' the front door?" I said "No," and it started to rain and she come back and she said, "Elizabeth, when you get ready to do the door don't take your

water through here—don't bring it through the front," she says, "go around back..." I said, "Alright," but I was thinking I ain't goin' to do that either. I got my bucket and my clothes and my things and went right on up them steps [inside, from the basement]. She just looked at me, she didn't say nothin'. If she was going to say anything I'd of carried the water back downstairs and went on home. Mm, hm. I worked awfully hard there because she liked you to wash her floors and things on your knees. And she had plenty of floors for you to wash... had me crawlin' on my knees savin' her boards in her house—and the house is there yet. She says, "Elizabeth, you put your detergent in this bucket, [and] this is a bucket of clean water..." and I, fool, did exactly what she said. I would wash the floor, wipe it up with that rag, put that in the bucket, then over here I'd take my clean water and wipe and rinse my cloth in that. And I'd do that from her attic all the way downstairs...

... When I got through doing my laundry I was hot and shiny 'cause I was sweating... and I was hurrying. You have to get a certain bus and then you have to wait a long time. Well, I come upstairs and she was going to pay me. When she handed me the money she says, "Well, Elizabeth, I'll see your shinin'—your smilin' face on Tuesday." Well, she was killin' herself laughin' 'cause I could see it. And her son was sitting there and he had a smile on his face. But that didn't bother me. I was shinin' just like she said. She gonna see my shinin' fade... You get all those things said to you. You always have some kind of answer. I'm not afraid to answer, I just try and do it nice, you know. One of these times they're gonna catch me on my hooks. No tellin' what I'll say...

... There was an old woman living in Chapel Hill. She was from up north... she wouldn't hire a black person to save your life. She'd hire my sister 'cause she was lighter than I am... she just didn't like black people...

Now listen, why would the whites feel like that towards the colored people. The colored people haven't done nothing. Why would they bring them in and work 'em and not give 'em privilege and just keep 'em under bondage? For what reason? What was the fault? Is that the way the world was set up to be? At the beginning?

Lillie: "It wasn't set up to be that way. Man took it upon himself to make those moves... You saw the picture *Roots* didn't you? That give you a good idea of the beginning of everything. How the white man took Negroes and worked them, separated their families..."

Where I come up in Chapel Hill I never got all that roughness from white people. 'Course they didn't take me in their lap, they didn't put me in their bed. I wasn't expectin' that, but they would speak nice to me and act like they was alright. And my mother always tell us, "Children, know how far to go with anything... don't go too far with it. Know there's a stoppin' place somewhere and stop before you get to that worst part of it." So we children would always stop to think, "Now they're white and I'm black, is it alright to do so and so?" You could watch a person the way they act, and that makes you uncomfortable. Sometimes the act might not be towards you, but if you're the only one there you watch their actions. I've been in many a place and they ask you to eat, for an instance. And the way they ask and the way they do you say, "No thank you." You might be hungry... It's different with you. You're white. And I'm black. That gives me a different feeling. That makes me kind of watch them where you wouldn't, see? It makes you watch people and know what they say and see if you think they mean it or not, you know? I know I'm black, see, and the old way back times, the way white people treated the Negroes... I heard my mama talk about it... And I think that grew up in the black people by hearin' about it through their parents or maybe their godmothers or their godfathers, whoever raise them. And it makes them have that little drawback kind of feelin' that maybe you wouldn't think about, see? And that makes me sometimes sit—and I say nothin', and they don't know what I'm thinkin'. I'm thinkin' deep... and I'm not sayin' anything. And listenin' to what they say. And you can near about know which way to go—know whether to run or sit...

When I started workin' I was treated pretty nice except for the one that give me the hahlf sandwich... Then I says about people I have worked for—high standing people in the government. They knew things that we didn't know. And they claim they think so much of you but yet they didn't do some of the things for your future gain, like social security and things like that...

[In 1946 or 1947, Elizabeth Cotten was working in Lansburgh's Department store. A woman came into the store to shop accompanied by her little daughter. The child got lost and Elizabeth found her and brought her back to her mother. The woman shopper was composer Ruth Crawford Seeger and she and Elizabeth took an immediate liking to each other. This chance meeting resulted in Elizabeth's employment in the Seeger household in about 1947 or 48, and in the gradual turn her life took as she became motivated to play music again, at first for herself and later on a professional basis. Her musical career expanded as she gradually quit day work in her 70's, and ultimately this career enabled her to become independent and enjoy the flowering of her life.]

That was nice times... Just work, and nobody standin' over you with a stick sayin' "You're gonna do this and then the other," that's right. She told me what she wanted me to do when she hired me. She didn't have to bother to tell me every morning I go in there—"Well, clean this room and that room." I knew what I had to do when I got there... No "Do you think you'll get a chance to rub the silver today," or "That window in such and such a room, would you have time to spray it and wipe it a little?" You know, nothin' like that... Nice place to work...

[At about this time Peggy Seeger was learning how to play the guitar, Ruth Crawford Seeger gave piano lessons as well as worked on her own music, and the shole family often sang on Saturday nights with father Charles or Peggy playing guitar and Mike playing autoharp. Ruth Crawford Seeger was also in the process of compiling a collection of folk songs for children and collected a few songs from Elizabeth Cotten.]

I forgot I could play guitar... there was nobody around played no guitar. Didn't even hear a guitar name called. Then when I went to work for them I heard all that music and just kept a-hearin' all that pretty guitar music, and I said, "I used to could play the guitar," and I decided to play it... and I got [Peggy's] guitar and started playing. I was just playing what I had learned how to play down in Chapel Hill... and the more I could play it the better I could play it. (I don't know how long I was playing her guitar before you all knew about it). When I first started playing it was kind of hard, I couldn't make it sound like I used to but by playing it a little bit every morning, see... Mrs. Seeger would go in there and start her music, I'd do in the other room and start mine... And I'd feel so good after I'd do that...

[In talking with Mike Seeger, as nearly as he can remember, he and Elizabeth Cotten shared a joint concert (the first professional playing job for both) at Swarthmore College in 1959, and she worked as a musician sporadically except for a period in the mid-60's when there was a flurry of activity for traditional and revival musicians. Beginning in the mid-70's when Elizabeth Cotten was in her early eighties, she began working fairly steadily as a musician. She recently bought a house in Syracuse, N.Y., and lives there with her daughter except when she's away on tour as she often is these days. She and Mike often tour together, she tours on her own and has also toured recently with Taj Mahal.]

You don't mind doin' somethin' if it's somethin' you don't mind doin'. Just like playin'. I don't mind pickin'... playin' a few songs, get some money for it. 'Cause I know what I'm doing it for...

Get to travel and get to go places. There ain't no way in the world I'd ever get to go to the places I've been since I've been doing this kind of work. No way, no way. 'Cause I'd never have the money to do that, and I wouldn't know where to go. See, they send me places and tell me where I'm goin'...

Motel, hotel and homes... A motel is so comfortable. You can play there, get undressed and just walk around, get your bath. You do what you want to do, just lay on the bed and study your music if you've got any you want to study, tune the guitar two, three ways, see if you can tune it in a chord that you can sing songs...

I like to be with people... if somebody makes you welcome... and act like you're welcome. Some people don't even act like you're welcome. You know what I mean? They don't say, "Would you like a bath?" They know you got to get a bath... You feel alright when they make you welcome...

I do get mad when I'm sitting around in a home and I want to something. You ain't tired, you haven't done nothin'. "You go sit down, no, no! You go sit down and rest." I say, "Rest—I didn't do one thing!" "Well, you're tired from your trip." And I think they really think I don't know how to do nothin' I reckon... I haven't forgot all the things. I know how to set up a table. I still know how to do that. Put the food on the table. I can't cook like I used to but I can cook a little bit sometimes... I want to help, I want to do things. I could set the table or I could cut up a salad maybe or I could get the plates. Just sit around, and just sit and sit and sit...

I love to feel independent, I do... I feel good. I'm proud of myself. I didn't know I could do all these things that I'm starting and the more I think about it the more I think I can do it... All that money I put in there [her new house] was mine. It was Elizabeth Cotten's money. Save it. I feel like a Jay Gould or Vanderbilt

"makin' me stout,
got to much money that it never runs out.
And when my money was stacked in a pile,
I really do believe it would reach the sky."

I feel good. I feel like I'm goin' to make it; you can make it, you can make it, you can make it. [She bought the house with the money she saved, but now of course, she must live off of her earnings. As all of us in music know, it's an erratic living at best.] The only thing as Mike said last night see, there's two or three months you don't get no money and you have to look between them times when you get your money. You've got to save a little piece. And I'm a good saver. Oh boy, can I save. It's not like work you get paid by the week or the month you know. But when you get it, it's always money. It's money every time. Comes in nice...

A lot of old people my age don't have nowhere to go, ain't got no comfort at all, and wherever they're living they're either cold, probably don't have much food... and I can say thank the Lord I got out of that before I got too old, and now in my older days I am pretty comfortable.

I said to myself this morning—boy, look at the wrinkles there... My fingers has lost so I can't wear my ring all the time... it just slips right off... that's what happens to you when you get near about 85. By the time I'm... getting into 86 I guess I'll get a wrinkle somewhere up in the forehead I reckon...

When a person gets as old as I am I think it's time to think about doin' somethin'. You goin' to make a change sometime. Pretty soon, you know. I don't worry about it. There ain't but one thing I'm worried about... when I did I hate for my body to go in that deep pit and pile all of that dirt upon my body. They say you don't know it but I don't know that. And I'm afraid of worms and I think of worms in there in my body just rootin' 'em out, just workin' all over with worms. And I think about that... I'm just scared of worms. How do you feel about it?

You're supposed to think about you're gonna die one day just like everybody in the world is gonna die, so says the Bible. That's all we got to go by... and it's time you think about "my soul, what's gonna happen to me, there gonna be a hereafter, what way is it gonna be..." As Lillie's uncle used to say, "Yes, sister Elizabeth, I like this world alright... 'cause I ain't never been to the other one. They say it's alright but I like it here alright. There ain't nobody never died to come back and tell us the difference so I want to stay right here." He lived a long time too...

I used to tell my children, I said, "Throw me in the river, just let the water take me away somewhere—just anything," I said, "but don't put me down in that pit..." They're gonna throw you in the ground or either bury you or burn you one when they get through with you. So everybody should stop to think what's the outcome gonna be. That's the biggest thing I worry about. I don't mind dying, I don't mind it one bit, but that pit... six feet in the ground. You in a box and they put another linin' in there, you're in two boxes and then get up and they throw all that dirt on Elizabeth and leave me down there in that cemetery by myself...

So I'm just livin' according to the Bible the best I can, that's all I can do... 'cause you never know when that time's coming. Sometime you go to bed and go to sleep and don't wake up no more... And I had my fortune told once—when I was young I used to like all that kind of stuff... Well, I remember I went to one and this woman told me... and I believed her... "You're a good woman, you're free hearted and you're musical... you're a hard worker and you work hard," she says, "your last days are gonna be your best days, absolutely your best." She says, "In your last days you're just gonna close your eyes and go off. You're not gonna suffer, you're not

gonna linger around, you're just gonna...go to sleep..." That's been a long time ago...

I'm in pretty good health, honey for my age. I'm satisfied. And I feel good and my limbs don't hurt... the only thing is this—I get that sinus every once in a while, but other than that I'm alright. So I don't want to go to sleep like that. I'd rather be sick and I want to call all of you all—"Come here children, I'm going" now." I would like somebody to be around, to tell 'em I'm goin' to die now... I don't know whether I'll get that or not but I sure would like it. I'd like to be where I can call my friends and tell 'em I'm goin' to die. And I'm going now... and just close their eyes and go... Right straight up. I'm gonna fly like a little bird. Whenever it is I'll be satisfied. Goin' just as straight up as I can fly...

I can't remember nothin' now... My mind's not sharp like it used to be. I forget quick... I've thought of songs—most of my songs come to me I'm in bed... and I could remember 'em when I was a little younger, but now when anything comes to me, if you don't mind, I'll turn over and go to sleep and when I get up I don't know anything... I just imagined I picked up my guitar and as I was singin' the song within, I knew exactly the strings I wanted to note. And I could play that song all the way through. Then I'd go to sleep, get up the next morning, everything is gone... I've got several songs I started—never did finish 'em—and this [one] is beautiful—if I could just find a beautiful tune for it it would beat "Freight Train" all to pieces... I got them two, if I do them two I'll be satisfied. That's all I want to do—now I'm going to learn church songs. It won't be all I'm going to sing, but from now on I'm just gonna try to learn church songs—not try to play no more blues. It's 'cause I love church songs...

I like soft music. Nice soft and clear. I just love it. But I play loud now a little bit 'cause sometimes they can't hear you unless you do play loud... and you hear somebody in back, "Can't hear you"—well, you have to do somethin' about it...

I'm tryin' to do what they want to hear. Lord knows I hate to sometimes set up there and tell the same story... If I could just set up there and just play and not have to tell all of that. I feel like I've told it so much everybody would know it and I wouldn't have to keep tellin' it. But I find that there are people that have never heard it and they want to hear it too. So I just have to keep talking about it. It goes along with everything else... So many times I don't want to talk. And sometimes I don't do much talking. And I look at people when the concert's over and I feel like I haven't done my part of what they would like to hear... So each time I just try to do a whole lot of singin' and a whole lot of talking... I try to do it to suit them... That's what keeps me goin' now...

So I try to do it to please them... Looks like I been tellin' it twenty years. They ought to know everything about me—ain't no more about me to know. I done told them everything from childhood up, from eleven years old to 85. Now what can I tell? Nothin'.

Yes sir...

So that's like it is.

That's a little easier than workin', sure enough.

[These days Elizabeth Cotten plays a 000-18 Martin from the late 1940's, although in her earlier recordings she used a variety of other guitars, primarily dreadnought Martins. She uses extra light or silk and steel strings, sometimes tuned down a fret or two. Her guitar is strung up right-handed. She plays left-handed.

She uses three tunings; the standard EADGBE, often tuned two frets low, DADF#AD which she calls Vastopol, and DGDGBD which she calls "Flang Dang" tuning.

In general, her guitar style is a synthesis of turn-of-the-century parlor music, blues, church songs and a little ragtime, and is heavily influenced by the piano. Her choice of material comes from many sources; songs and tunes she heard growing up, songs and tunes that she made up or helped to make up, and of course as she began touring more in the mid-sixties she heard and paid attention to other musicians and many different kinds of music. As long as we've known her she has always been open and receptive to different sounds, ever aware of how she might translate or absorb them into her own musical scheme of things.

Elizabeth Cotten plays in basically five styles; first being the ragtime or two finger style for which she is best known. She plays the 3 bass strings with her

first finger and the three treble melody strings with her thumb, picking one string at a time, alternating between treble and bass (although in her church songs she often plays treble and bass simultaneously). Her unique sound quality comes in part from the reversal of thumb and finger roles. This 2-finger style can be heard on her LP recordings of *Freight Train* on Folkways FG 3526 and on her new LP Folkways FS 3537. The second is her banjo style which she plays sometimes on 5-string banjo and sometimes on guitar. *Rattler* and *Georgia Buck* (Folkways FG 3526) illustrate the style on banjo. On guitar the style is well illustrated by her recording of *Ruben* on Folkways FT 10003. In her use of this style on guitar, she picks melody with her first finger, strums with her second finger, and used the first string as the thumb string. In a third style, she utilizes clusters of notes, playing them with her thumb and 2 or 3 fingers, often in arpeggios. *Buck Dance* or *Washington Blues* gives a good idea of this style (Folkways FT 10003). Fourth, she sometimes plays with a banjo-like roll as in *Fox Chase* (Folkways FT 10003). This roll is similar to the pre-Scruggs style banjo roll. She uses a fifth style for backing up songs which don't lend themselves so much to melody picking, as in *Time To Stop Your Idling*, sung by her granddaughter, Johnine Rankin, on her new Folkways LP FS 3537, and in *Shake Sugaree* on Folkways FT 10003. In this style she picks the bass with her first finger, strums upwards with her other fingers, and sometimes plays the first string with her thumb.

She often mixes these styles within a given song, hardly ever plays her tunes in the same way twice, and is constantly improvising. She consciously works with her tunes, adding to them, changing licks, sometimes making almost new tunes out of them.]

—Mike Seeger & Alice Gerrard

SONG NOTES

SIDE A

1. **New Year's Eve** (Johnine Rankin has written words to this tune by Elizabeth Cotten. Recorded 9 Dec 78 at Elizabeth Cotten's home in Syracuse, N.Y.)

"I was raised up to make a noise, joyful noise, go to church, people come to your house, pray, sing, you ring bells, beat on tubs, anything joyful, lord—toot horns. My father used to load the guns and let us shoot straight up. You bring in New Year's Eve with joy, singing and praying. And letting the old go, see. When I lived in Washington I didn't hear any of that and it made me feel so lonesome. And the guitar was on the bed and I just reached over and set down on the bed and picked up the guitar. And I thought about it so deep looked like, sittin' there with my eyes closed... and I didn't hear anything... just sittin' there with the guitar in my hand. And when I come to myself—I guess I might've went to sleep, I don't know... I was playing a new tune. And here's what I said, 'Lord have mercy what is this tune? I've never heard it before.' I said, 'Oh, it certainly is pretty.' I don't know how long I sat on the bed playing that tune 'cause I didn't want to forget it... and I named it New Year's Eve."

2. **Praying Time Will Soon Be Over** (Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin). Recorded 16 Mar 75 at the home of Mark & Sue Sandson, Arlington, Va. "This is an old tune. I didn't use the words. I heard it a lot when I was growing up."

3. **Time To Stop Your Idling** (Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin). Recorded 17 Nov 74 at the home of Mark & Sue Sandson, Arlington, Va. "It's an old tune. I probably changed it just a little bit. It was religious song, not a wordly song."

4. **Gaslight Blues** (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 23 Jan 70 near Accokeek, Md.

"That's mine—all of it. I was doing a concert and I got tired of playing the same songs. I was there about three nights. I said, 'I'm going to sing my new song that I'm writing and if I make mistakes no one will know the difference because it's the first time in public.' The title is the name of the coffee house where I was playing."

5. **Jenny** (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 19 Jan 69 at the home of Ralph Rinzler, Washington, D.C.

"I wrote a little song for a little girl where my daughter worked, and her name is Jenny. When Lillie worked there she used to tell her about my playing. Anyway, Baby [Lillie] come home to me, she said, 'Mama, Miss ---- said to tell you to write a song for Jenny.' And I just set right down and picked up the guitar and started doing that. And I played it and everybody liked it."

6. **Street Blues** (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 23 Jan 70 near Accokeek, Md.

"Louisa Spottswood used to come down to the house and I played that and she said, 'Oh Elizabeth that was such a pretty song.' It was just a tune I made up—the 'Street Blues'. See, I had the 'Ontario Blues' and I had the 'Gaslight Blues'... and I just had to name it something so I said 'It's the 'Street Blues'. It sounded kind of like people singing in the street... I could have named it 'On a Mountain Top'... anything, you know."

7. **Home Sweet Home** (trad.). Recorded 23 Jan 70 near Accokeek, Md.

"I heard that all of my life... I just knew the song and just started playing it..."

SIDE B

1. **Freight Train** (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 9 Dec 78 at Elizabeth Cotten's home in Syracuse, N.Y.

"Freight Train song started from Chapel Hill, North Carolina at the old homestead of George and Louisa Nevills. And my brother and I used to cut wood and we'd wave to the train... it went on one track and come on another. And in the night we'd hear the freight train and we could lay in the bed and hear it say 'chucka-chucka-chucka-chuck', tryin' to get away. And then we'd go out to Carrboro and play... we were playing there one day, me and my little brother... and Mr. Sporrow... was the ticket agent... and he said, 'You little children want a ride?' We both said 'yes' at the same time. And he put us on and shifted us around... and we got that little ride and I thought I was in heaven... It was the nicest, sweetest ride I ever had in my life. I declare I thought I was sailing up to heaven 'cause I loved trains so very well..."

2. **Casey Jones** (trad., arrangement by Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 23 Jan 70 near Accokeek, Md.

"I just learned the tune from the song people used to sing. [Lillie and her friend, Christine] would pull up all of my mother's onions. They loved the onions and salt. They'd get together and pull up grass and braid the grass for doll hair and be singing, combing it: 'Casey Jones got another baby, Casey Jones da da da...' and they'd be sticky just like onions. And mama says, 'You children better stop goin'' into my garden and pulling up my onions, I'm gonna switch somebody...' But I didn't learn it particularly from them. I heard other people sing it..."

3. **Willie** (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 9 Dec 78 at the home of Elizabeth Cotten in Syracuse, N.Y.

"Willie was a person kind of tease. He found Johnson couldn't take it. And he'd tease him about his girlfriends... just say anything. And Johnson would believe it, and they said he got so mad he jumped on him then, said, 'the next time you come to my father's house I'm goin' to kill you.' Willie didn't believe it because they were good friends. All of us were school children together... and when that happened, honey child... He just shot that boy, he shot him dead... I'll never forget that. His mother brought the news... and by the time she walked from her house to our house, she was draggin' and shakin'. And mama, and I think Miss Mary Durham... got around her and carried her back home... they was all church people together. Willie's father was a jackleg preacher and one of Willie's sisters married some kind of big something in the church and that made them Mr. Uppitty Uppitty, as my mother used to say, a 'high paloot.' John O'Daniel, he was the police... We can talk about him and looks like I can just feel—I can just see Willie where he's standing in front of the yard smoking a cigarette. Mama says, 'Willie, go down to the store and get Aunt Lou some snuff, son.' 'Aunt Lou I'll tell you

what I'll do. I started over here to see Johnson and I ain't goin' to be gone a few minutes. Soon as I come back I'll go to the store for you.' She said, 'alright boy, you'll be sorry you didn't go.' And he didn't ever get back. . . It rained so hard that day it looked like the little frogs come up out of the ground. Thunder and lightning, whooooo! I never heard it so hard in my life—hardest storm. . ."

4. Boddie's Song (trad.).

"It's a church song. Boddie [pronounced Boady—real name, Barbara] is my sister's daughter. I'm not familiar with the words, I just learned the tune from Boddie. She played it all the time. . . and that's how I learned it."

5. Wilson Rag (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 9 Dec 78 at Elizabeth Cotten's home in Syracuse, N.Y.

"Looks like to me that came from Chapel Hill. . . Looks like to me that was a tune they played, but they wouldn't know it was the same tune anymore the way I've changed it around. . ."

6. When I'm Gone (Elizabeth Cotten). Recorded 13 Jan 79 at the home of Mark and Sue Sandson, Arlington, Va.

"The words in this song are all about me. I made 'em up about myself. You gonna miss the songs I play. . . you're gonna miss me when I'm gone. . . Yeah, that's me. I'm talkin' about me, that you're all gonna miss me just like I said—just like the song is saying. You're gonna miss my playin', you're gonna miss my singing, you're gonna miss me walking, you're gonna miss my everyday talk, you're gonna say, 'Well I wish Elizabeth was here,' and you're gonna look and I won't be there. It's me, it's me. That's the reason I call it my song. It's everything about me. Not nobody else. So you can sing that song if you want to when the ashes to ashes, the dust to dust. . . It's gonna be a long time, it's gonna be a long time off. . . We're all gonna rise the Judgment Day. That'd be wonderful, wouldn't it? I'd come and gather all my little children in my arms. All of you all. Just gather you up and take you right on back with me. Oh, wouldn't that be sweet. I wished I could."

PRAYING TIME WILL SOON BE OVER

lyrics © 1979 by Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin. Sanga Music.
Side A, Band 2.

Praying time soon will be over
(rep.)
(rep.)
All over this world.

Chorus:

All over this world
All over this world
All over this world
All over this world.

Blacks and whites you better soon get together

(rep.)

Blacks and whites you better get yourselves together
All over this world.

'Cause my Jesus he's a-coming ain't pickin' no color

(rep.)

(rep.)

All over this world.

And he's comin' from the north, comin' from the south
Comin' from the east, comin' from the west
Comin' on a rainbow, comin' in a cloud
All over this world.

FREIGHT TRAIN

© 1957 by Elizabeth Cotten. Sanga Music
Side B, Band 1.

Chorus:

Freight train, freight train, run so fast
(rep.)
Please don't tell what train I'm on
They won't know what route I've gone.

When I am dead and in my grave
No more good times here I crave
Place the stones at my head and feet
Tell them all that I've gone to sleep.

When I die, Lord, bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut Street
Then I can hear old Number 9
As she comes rolling by.

TIME TO STOP YOUR IDLING

© 1979 by Elizabeth Cotten & Johnine Rankin. Sanga Music
Side A, Band 3.

Chorus:

Time to stop your idling
Get on your knees and pray
Time to stop your idling
Get on your knees and pray,
Get on your knees and pray.

If you don't like your brother
Don't scandalize his name
Put it in your bosom and take it on to God
And tell it all to God.

Used to have some friends
To come along with me
But when I got converted they turned their backs on me
Oh yes, they turned their backs on me.

When I was a sinner
I knew my way so well
But when I came to find out
I was on my way to hell
I was on my way to hell.

WILLIE

© 1979 by Elizabeth Cotten. Sanga Music
Side B, Band 3.

Johnson said to Willie
On one Friday night
Sure you come to my father's house
Sure you take your life.
Ain't it hard, Lord, ain't it hard.

Willie went to his father's house
On one Saturday eve
Johnson shot that poor boy
Fell upon his knees.
Ain't it hard, Lord, ain't it hard.

O Lord oh me, oh Lord, oh my
I shot little Willie Lord, he's bound to die
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

Oh Lord, oh me
Trouble I can see
I shot little Willie, Lord
Police after me,
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

Oh (Lord) Officer O'Daniel
How can it be
All around my bedside
Poor Willie creeps
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

Oh Lord, oh me
Oh Lord, oh my
I shot little Willie, Lord
He's bound to die
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

Went to the country
To get me a drink of gin
When I got back, Lord
Police took me in
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

Rubber tire buggy
Rubber tire hack
Took him to the cemetery
Won't bring him back,
Ain't it hard. . . etc.

WHEN I'M GONE

© 1979 by Elizabeth Cotten. Sanga Music
Side B, Band 6.

You're gonna miss me by my walk
You're gonna miss me by my every day talk
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

You're gonna look and I won't be here
You're gonna wish that I was near
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

Chorus:

Oh, when I'm gone
Oh when I'm gone to come no more
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

You're gonna miss me what I say
You're gonna miss me what I play
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

You're gonna miss me when I shout
You're gonna miss me all about
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

You're gonna miss the songs I play
You're gonna miss me every day
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

One of these mornings bright and fair
Angels coming, gonna sail over there
Friends I know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.