

THE NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS with
COUSIN EMMY



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MUSIC LP

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with
COUSIN EMMY



The New Lost City Ramblers met Cousin Emmy in person for the first time at Disneyland, California, in 1961. She was performing at Country & Western Night there along with Roger Miller (as of then, undiscovered) and other West Coast country singers. We only knew her music from a Decca album of 1947, which had been edited by Alan Lomax; and many of her songs from that album had become an accepted part of the folk song revival — although none of us knew much about Emmy. Our images were created from her clear country singing and good banjo frailing on songs such as BOWLING GREEN, JOHNNY BOOKER, SINGLE GIRL, and FREE LITTLE BIRD. The impression given from the album was of a real rural country girl bows in hair, surrounded by scenes of quilting bees and square dancers — under a title such as Kentucky Mountain Ballads. Cousin Emmy, at Disneyland that night, was dressed in a white sequined dress, with a necklace that sparkled to the back row, high heels, and blonde hair piled on in the latest of fashion. Her delivery was like Sophie Tucker from the country, and she was introduced as the "first hillbilly star to own a Cadillac." Her music was as we knew it, but instead of coming from a farm kitchen it was coming from a spangled jukebox.

According to her songbook, Cousin Emmy was born in 1903, in a log cabin, 18 miles from any railroad, in Barren County, Kentucky. Her name was Cynthia May Carver. Her childhood was in the best "big-family-struggling-for-existence" tradition. She was always a show-off, as she remembers. When her ma would leave her in the tobacco patch and tell her to do one row, she'd sing and dance and slap her legs and entertain the other seven kids, to get them to do her work.

After getting a few dollars saved up, she went 135 miles to Louisville to radio station WHAS, but couldn't get anybody to listen to her; so she went on back home and prayed some more and kept right on entertaining at bean hullings and pie suppers and quilting parties, and finally landed a spot on WHAS. It was hard to sell a program commercially, in those days. She made her living by making personal appearances. Some days she'd drive

five hundred miles and then get back just in time to make the early-morning 5:15 program. All this time she was still praying that she would get a sponsor. After five years she went to Chicago. God answered her prayers. She was sold commercially for Consolidated Drugs, and she was sent to radio station KMOX in St. Louis. After the first year at KMOX, Cousin Emmy was chosen top act in box office, fan mail, and commercial. She was chosen by the City Art Museum of St. Louis as the most perfect singer of mountain ballads.

Although she was famous throughout the South and Midwest, Cousin Emmy only recorded one 78-rpm single, RUBY, for Decca, and the album *Kentucky Mountain Ballads*. Yet her work and her reputation continue to be felt. We often meet country musicians who remember Cousin Emmy and Her Kinfolk over early-morning radio and early-morning breakfasts. She has always been most generous in crediting the musicians who work with her, and has given a start in the business to young musicians. Grandpa Jones tells how he was inspired to first play the five-string banjo while working at WWVA with Cousin Emmy.

Emmy appeared in a few Hollywood movies like *Swing in the Saddle* and *Under Western Sky*, and has been living in the Los Angeles area for years, raising her adopted children and entertaining at local country music clubs. The making of this album for Folkways is the product of five years of arranging and convincing Cousin Emmy to record again, to make her music available to today's young people. During these past years she has worked with The New Lost City Ramblers at the Ash Grove in L.A., appeared at the Newport Folk Festival, and toured Europe. All of her old recordings have been out of print for many years (a few were available in Britain until recently). More than half the material on this album is previously unrecorded. It only touches the surface of her seemingly endless collection of old-time songs. As she puts it, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Cousin Emmy, in performance, is the seeming contradiction of backwoods songs and uptown delivery. The unique thing about Cousin Emmy is that she has retained the old-time content, while adapting her presentation to whatever style seems salable at a given time. Her means of selling is no longer effective in today's market; but, paradoxically, by virtue of its ineffectiveness, it takes on an element of charm and vitality that seems unique among present-day styles. To a generation of folk song youngsters raised on The Kingston Trio, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, there is a fresh impact emanating from this 65-year-old blonde — in tight-fitting, ankle-length, split-to-the-knee, evening dress — picking a five-string banjo; yanking harmonicas out of her bosom; blowing up rubber gloves and playing YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE through the squeak of escaping air; and then dashing into the audience to sell her songbooks. An anomaly of today's folk song categories, Emmy is, nonetheless, classified with the traditional and ethnic singers. Her kind of vigor has kept a tradition alive — and out of the hands of the purists.

Beyond her background in rural Kentucky and her career on the radio, Cousin Emmy has maintained an illogical belief in her life on the stage. Like the most dedicated artist, she comes to life in front of the audience. She may be tired or feeling low offstage, but the electric potential of the stage is her resurrection and expression. When she tells the audience over and over again, "I love you all from the bottom of my cotton-picking heart," there is no hypocrisy about it. It is how she reaffirms her love of life which for her is onstage.

Side I

Band 1 — OLD TIM BROOKS 1:21
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

This is Emmy's version of a widespread song of an actual horse race which took place in Louisville, Ky., in 1878. On record one can hear other variants — TEN BROOKS AND MOLLY by Bill Monroe, also by the Stanley Bros. RUN MOLLIE RUN by Henry Thomas, TIMBROOK BLUES by Jim Byrd, and OLD TIM BROOKS by The Carver Boys (her cousins). Related versions and floating verses are heard in OLD STEWBALL, SKEWBALL, OLD KIMBALL, and AIN'T THAT SKIPPIN' & FLYING by the Allen Bros.

Band 2 — A HOME IN OLD KENTUCKY 1:23
Words and Music by Cousin Emmy

This is a comic song on the virtues of Kentucky. Ed Kahn reports a similar text from an old book of poems from Kentucky. No other references are available.

Band 3 — I'M GOING 'CROSS THE SEA 2:17
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

This banjo song links Emmy stylistically to the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Although this song is virtually unknown on record or in folk song texts, it is closely related to mountain banjo tunes like SHOUT LULU and HOOK AND LINE. The banjo is tuned here in GCGBD, but Emmy keeps the second string fretted to C throughout.

Band 4 — PRETTY LITTLE MISS OUT IN THE GARDEN 3:12
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

Although this is still one of the most popular ballads alive in tradition today, it has seldom been recorded commercially. The theme of the returning sailor or soldier, in disguise, to the faithful maiden is found also in JOHN REILLY. Bill Monroe's recent version of this story takes place in cowboy country. The Stanley Bros.' recording of this song borrows its text from Cousin Emmy (via the NLCR).

Band 5 — LITTLE JOE 3:01
Southern Publishing Co. (ASCAP)

This sentimental song fits in with a whole school of American songs of self-pity which flourished before the turn of the century, and continue in the old-time and folk repertoire. It is reported in Randolph's Ozark collection and has been recorded commercially.

Band 6 — RUBY, ARE YOU MAD AT YOUR MAN? 1:46
Words and Music by Cousin Emmy

Cousin Emmy's original contribution to the traditional song RUBEN is RUBY, ARE YOU MAD AT YOUR MAN? RUBEN is one of the most popular banjo and fiddle songs throughout the South, although it is seldom reported in the folk song collections. RUBEN can be found in many variations on records: as OLD RUBEN by Wade Mainer, as RIDING ON THAT TRAIN 45 by J. E. Mainer, as TRAIN 45 by the Stanley Bros., as 900 MILES by Woody Guthrie, as 500 MILES by Hedy West, etc. The Osborn Bros.' bluegrass version, RUBY, ARE YOU MAD?, lists Emmy as author of the song. Cousin Emmy puts the banjo into D, tuning F#DF#AD, which is the traditional tuning associated with this song.

Band 7 — DANCE ALL NIGHT WITH A BOTTLE IN YOUR HAND 1:37
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

A popular dance tune is given the full treatment as Emmy fiddles it and shouts out square dance calls. In live performances she also dances along at the same time.

Band 8 — LOST JOHN 3:12
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

This wild and lonesome mouth-harp tune has always been a favorite among folk performers. It is seldom mentioned in the folk song collections, but lives on in the tradition of performance and style, rather than as tune and text. The harp imitates the excitement of the dogs chasing a fox or an escaped prisoner. Emmy's text here covers both. Cousin Emmy plays the mouth harp.

Side II

Band 1 — BOWLING GREEN 1:46
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

A Cousin Emmy original, based on an old fiddle tune from central Kentucky (according to D.K. Wilgus).

Band 2 — CAT'S GOT THE MEASLES 1:22
Arr.: Cousin Emmy

This is a peculiar type of blues tune, found on a few old records of both white and Negro sources as yet undocumented in folk song collections. (See NLCR *Remembrance of Things to Come*, for another version). Tracy Schwarz plays the fiddle.

Band 3 — MOTHER'S GRAVE 2:58
A touching, sentimental song by Cousin Emmy.

Band 4 — CHILLY SCENES OF WINTER 2:05
Words and Music by Cousin Emmy

Another rarely heard song, unencountered in the folk song literature, but recorded a few times commercially — by the Carter Family as IF ONE WON'T ANOTHER WILL, and on an unidentified early hillbilly record, with dobro-style guitar, DREAD SCENES OF WINTER. Texas Gladden, from Virginia, sings it on Asch Records as DARK SCENES OF WINTER. Mike Seeger plays the auto harp.

Band 5 — GRAVEYARD 1:37
Words and Music by Cousin Emmy

In this tune by Cousin Emmy, the banjo is tuned to F#DEAD. This unusual sound is the mountain music equivalent of the blues. In structure, this tune is reminiscent of TRAIN 45.

Band 6 — JOHNNY BOOKER 1:29
Words and Music by Cousin Emmy

This song is probably based on an old minstrel-show tune. The last verse is also found in OLD DAN TUCKER. There are sea chanteys on both sides of the Atlantic called JOHNNY BOOKER, and one old hillbilly record by Jerry Jordan carries some of the same verses with a different melody. Nonsense songs of this type have always been favorites of young children.

Band 7 — SCAT TOM KITTY PUSS 1:14
By permission of John Lair

Cousin Emmy learned this song from John Lair of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, a country radio jamboree which has been going in Kentucky for many years. The song is an interesting mixture of the melodies of FROG WENT A-COURTING and THE CRAWDAD SONG. The chorus, "Bow and balance to me," SISTERS, an ancient tale, perhaps of Scandinavian origin. When is also found in versions of Child Ballad 10 as THE TWO Cousin Emmy performed this at the recording studio, she was dancing and making faces for some little kids who were listening in the engineer's booth.

Band 8 — SHORTENING BREAD 1:00
Emmy plays this familiar square dance tune on the mouth harp.

BANJO NOTES. Cousin Emmy keeps her Vega Whyte Ladie banjo tuned down at least three half tones — from C to A. The A notation was used as banjo standard many years ago. Drop-thumb frailing is her basic technique, but she does use two-finger thumb lead on GRAVEYARD, a three-finger "roll" for LITTLE JOE and CHILLY SCENES, and some very simple chording for PRETTY LITTLE MISS.

Annotated by John Cohen.

Edited by Mike Seeger and Peter Bartok.

Produced by The New Lost City Ramblers for Folkways Records. Recorded April 24, 1967, at Sound House in El Monte, California. Cousin Emmy, banjo; Tracy Schwarz, bass; George Winston, bass; Mike Seeger, mandolin; John Cohen, guitar.

The cover of this album is from a painting of Cousin Emmy done with a matchstick, from an early songbook photo of her. Cover photograph courtesy of John Cohen.

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