

**ELIZABETH
COTTEN
FREIGHT TRAIN
AND OTHER
NORTH CAROLINA
FOLK SONGS
AND TUNES**



ELIZABETH COTTEN
Freight Train and
Other North Carolina
Folk Songs and Tunes

1. **Wilson Rag** 1:35
2. **Freight Train** 2:42
3. **Going Down the Road Feeling Bad** 2:09
4. **I Don't Love Nobody** 1:10
5. **Ain't Got No Honey Baby Now** :53
6. **Graduation March** 2:29
7. **Honey Babe Your Papa Cares For You** 2:11
8. **Vastopol** 2:08
9. a) **Here Old Rattler Here**
 b) **Sent For My Fiddle Sent For My Bow**
 c) **George Buck** 3:45
10. a) **Run...Run**
 b) **Mama Your Son Done Gone** 2:15
11. a) **Sweet Bye and Bye**
 b) **What A Friend We Have In Jesus** 3:00
12. **Oh Babe It Ain't No Lie** 4:40
13. **Spanish Flang Dang** 2:49
14. **When I Get Home** 2:21

Elizabeth Cotten was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, around January, 1895, one of four children. Her parents had been raised as farmers and before her birth had moved to the city, where her father worked as a laborer, mostly in the ore mines, and her mother was a cook and midwife. At about the age of eight, Elizabeth started playing her older brother's banjo and, a little later, her brother's guitar which he thought he had hidden from her. She would wait for him to leave, pull the guitar from under the bed and set it flat on her lap. At first she developed her picking pattern, with her left hand, then her chording, and finally some of the easier parts of Wilson Rag. Occasionally, a broken string would reveal her playing to her brother, and eventually she went to work and saved enough to buy her own instrument. To learn a new tune she needed only to hear it played or sung once by one of the many musicians around her town. Then she could play it on the guitar or banjo. When she was first learning, she played the guitar at every opportunity pausing only to eat. Both of her brothers and her

sister could also play. Sometimes she would play music with her brothers, one playing bass (on the guitar), the other chording, and Elizabeth leading with the melody. They would also make and play cornstalk fiddles, paper on comb, and other such homemade instruments. They only played around their home, strictly for themselves and their friends.

At about age 12, Elizabeth Cotten followed in her mother's footsteps by doing housework for people in Chapel Hill. She had done this kind of work most of her life. She married when she was fifteen and had one daughter, Lillie. Soon after, she joined the church and for about 25 years gave up her guitar playing except for brief occasions in church. She remained most of this time in Chapel Hill, except for a brief stay in New York City. Since the early 1940s she has lived with her daughter and five grandchildren in Washington, D.C. In the mid-forties she was working in a department store there and returned a lost Peggy Seeger to her mother. They quickly became friends and soon Elizabeth Cotten was working for the Seegers. After a few years, remem-

bering that she used to play, she took the family guitar down off the wall and started playing again, recalling one by one many of the songs and tunes of her childhood and youth. Some of those songs are recorded here.

Mike Seeger, 1958

These recordings were made in late 1957 and early 1958 during about a half dozen visits with Elizabeth at her home in Washington. At the time she was helping raise her great grandchildren who were often in the bedroom as we were recording, being very quiet, just before their bedtime. Often Libba was sitting on the edge of her bed as we recorded.

Sound quality varied, partly as a result of the many sessions, but also because she used several different guitars. On songs A 4, 5 and 6 she used a Goya classical guitar with nylon strings and on "When I Get Home" she used a plywood-top Silvertone "F" hole guitar, which was her only guitar at the time. On all the other songs, as well as I can recall, she used my Martin D-28.

After the release of this album in 1958,

Elizabeth Cotten began getting a few requests for concerts. She and I shared our first concert appearances at a joint performance at Swarthmore College in January, 1960. This interest in her music inspired her to create some new instrumentals and songs, a few of the latter composed by her with her great grandchildren, Brenda, Johnny, Sue, and Wendy. Most of those songs are on her second Folkways album, *Shake Sugaree*. As she played more for audiences she developed a stage persona, took on Penny Seeger's childhood name for her, Libba, and evolved her presentation, which consisted largely of playing her stately music, relating her life's experiences and leading her audiences into singing her songs. Elizabeth Cotten's *Live* album (Arhoolie 1089) gives a good representation of her fully developed concert performance from the early 1980s. At about this same time she remembered a few more of her older songs and learned a few others in her concert travels which are recorded on the Folkways album *When I'm Gone*.

Elizabeth Cotten played a standard guitar or 5-string banjo left-handed (or upside-down) which gave her instrumen-

tal music, especially on the guitar, a unique sound. She played two styles on the banjo and four on the guitar. Her single string guitar picking, the "Freight Train" style picking for which she is best known, is her own adaptation of south-eastern country ragtime picking. When she plays a banjo tune on the guitar she uses a banjo stroke and thumbs the first, or highest pitched string for the drone string. Her music includes church songs, stately blues such as "Freight Train," and many traditional North Carolina songs and banjo tunes.

Libba retired from regular domestic work about 1970. Although she had been moderately active musically in the sixties and seventies, it wasn't until John Ullman of Traditional Arts Services began actively organizing her bookings in the late 1970s that she began touring regularly. By about 1978 she was doing well enough to move to Syracuse, New York, and buy a house. When she was in her late eighties and early nineties she received many honors including the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship Award, a Grammy, and several honors from the city of Syracuse. She was one of

75 influential African-American women to be included in the photo documentary, *I Dream a World* (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1989).

Elizabeth Cotten passed away in Syracuse, New York, June 29, 1987.

Libba Cotten was always a very special person to our family. She reminded me of my New England aunt, also named Elizabeth, both as a person and in the relationship we had. She was warm, solid in her identity and belief, and always dignified. She was a creative songster and musician, a smooth, subtle instrumentalist, and possessed a very special grace which she communicated so well to her friends and public audience. She was my friend and teacher as we travelled and played music together. She will always be warmly remembered by all of us whom she touched.

Mike Seeger, 1989

About the Songs

WILSON RAG

A good example of the country ragtime style, as Elizabeth Cotten calls it, that might be played at cornshucking parties. Portions of this piece are known by other folk guitar pickers, and she herself rarely plays it twice through the same way. The term ragtime generally describes a guitar style with a steady rhythm on the 3 bass strings with a highly syncopated melody on the 3 treble strings.

FREIGHT TRAIN

When Elizabeth Cotten and her brothers were playing music together each would have songs that they called their own, and this was one that she made up and sang as hers. It was one of the few she ever composed herself and was largely inspired by the train running near her home. She sang the song in Washington and it was subsequently popularized by Peggy Seeger, Nancy Whiskey, and Rusty Draper.

"We used to watch the freight train. We knew the fireman and the brakeman...and the conductor, my mother used to launder for him. They'd let us ride in the engine...put us in one of the coaches while they were backing up and changing...that was how I got my first train ride."

"We used to walk the trestle and put our ear to the track and listen for the train to come. My brother, he'd wait for the train to get real close and then he'd hang down from one of the ties and swing back up after the train had passed over him."

Freight train freight train run so fast
Freight train freight train run so fast
Please don't tell what train I'm on
They won't know what route I'm going

When I'm dead and in my grave
No more good times here I crave
Place the stones at my head and feet
And tell them all that I'm gone to sleep

When I die Lord bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut Street

So I can hear old number nine
As she comes rolling by

When I die lord bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut Street
Place the stones at my head and feet
And tell them all that I'm gone to sleep

GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELING BAD

One of the most popular breakdowns of all time played and sung here as a lonesome blues.

Going down the road feeling bad
honey babe Lord
Going down the road feeling bad
honey babe Lord
Going down the road feeling bad
I don't want to be treated this a way

Girl I love done turned her back on me
honey babe Lord
Girl I love done turned her back on me
honey babe Lord
Girl I love done turned her back on me
I don't want to be treated this a way

Thought I heard a whistle blow honey
babe Lord
Thought I heard a whistle blow
Thought I heard a whistle blow
Lord it blowed like it ain't gonna blow
no more

I DON'T LOVE NOBODY

A song and dance tune popular with fiddlers and banjo pickers as well as the old jazz bands, played here in a blues style with the section in the relative minor omitted.

I don't love nobody
Nobody don't love me
All they want is my money
They got no time for me
Think I will live single
Be free all of my life
I don't love nobody
Nobody don't love me

AIN'T GOT NO HONEY BABY NOW

A country blues, the words for which have been forgotten, with an unusual minor chord shift. The picking style is much like the three finger banjo style of western North Carolina.

GRADUATION MARCH

The University of North Carolina is located at Chapel Hill and is that town's main business.

"I remember the time when the students have the commencement. Well the colored people would make just as much to do over it as the mothers and fathers that had sons there to graduate. When they say commencement's next Tuesday or whatever day it would be, not only my parents but other people there, they'd buy their children little new slippers... dresses... hats...going to the commencement. And we'd stay all day long...."

"The people they used to make tables...just take a board and put legs under it, put a white cloth over that and sell food. The biggest thing that used to sell was lemonade from what I can remember. And we'd go down town and

stay all day long just to get to see those students march. They would have a beautiful march. They'd have on their black robes and their caps with the tassels you know, and we'd watch them march in. If there would be room they would let us in but there was never no room. So we used to hang in the windows, I didn't but my brothers did, just to get to see them march in. And then that is when they'd play that band song that I pick on the guitar: that's what they'd march to."

HONEY BABE YOUR PAPA CARES FOR YOU

An old blues tune which Elizabeth Cotten remembers used to have words and to which she has added several more parts.

VASTOPOL

The guitar tuning Sevastopol is known among classical as well as folk guitarists, sometimes as "E tuning" when the guitar is tuned E B E G# B E. It is one of the two most common open chord tunings found on the fretted guitar as well as the old Hawaiian steel guitar.

HERE OLD RATTLER HERE/SENT FOR MY FIDDLE SENT FOR MY SON/GEORGE BUCK

Three dance tunes on the 5-string banjo which she can also play on the guitar when it is tuned to the Vastopol or Flang-dang tunings, though as she says "they just don't sound right until they're on the banjo." Here Rattler and George Buck are well known banjo tunes.

a. HERE OLD RATTLER HERE

Run old Rattler round the barn
Run old Rattler here
Run old Rattler round the barn
Run old Rattler here
Here Rattler here here (4)

b. SENT FOR MY FIDDLE SENT FOR MY SON

Sent for my fiddle sent for my bow
Sent for my black-eyed daisy
She wouldn't come and I wouldn't go
Almost run me crazy
Almost run me crazy

c. GEORGE BUCK

George Buck is dead last words he said
Didn't want no shortening in his bread
Shortening in his bread swimming in his head
Shortening in his bread swimming in his head
Hum

RUN...RUN/MAMA YOUR SON DONE GONE

a. RUN...RUN

A southern fiddle tune with several verses played here in a banjo style on the guitar with a slightly different melody.

b. MAMA YOUR SON DONE GONE

A song Elizabeth Cotten learned as a child from her mother who would sing it often as one of her favorites.

Mama your son done gone
Mama your son done gone
Son done gone been gone so long
Mama your son done gone

SWEET BYE AND BYE/WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

Two old gospel hymns, still sung and played today, picked here first in the straight church style and the second time in the ragtime style.

OH BABE IT AIN'T NO LIE

An unusual blues sung around the Chapel Hill area.

One old women Lord in this town
Keeps a-telling her lies on me
Wish to my soul that old women
would die
Keep a-telling her lies on me

Chorus:

Oh babe it ain't no lie (3)
Know this life I'm living is very high

Been all around this whole round world
Lord I just got back today
Work all the week hon and I give it all
to you
Honey baby what more can I do

(Chorus)

SPANISH FLANG DANG

The Spanish Fan Dango tuning of the guitar, like the Sevastopol turning, is known in turn-of-the-century parlor music. It is also a well-known piece played on the banjo. The guitar is tuned D G D G B D.

WHEN I GET HOME

One of the old revival hymns played and sung in a somber manner as in a small country church 30 or 40 years ago.

I shall have a crown to wear when I get home

I shall lay my burdens down when I get home
Spar the robes of glory I shall sing a story
Of the Lord who brought me when I get home

Chorus:

When I get home when I get home
My sorrow will be over when I get home
When I get home when I get home
My sorrow will be over when I get home

About Smithsonian/Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways,

Cook, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon recordings are all available through:

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