



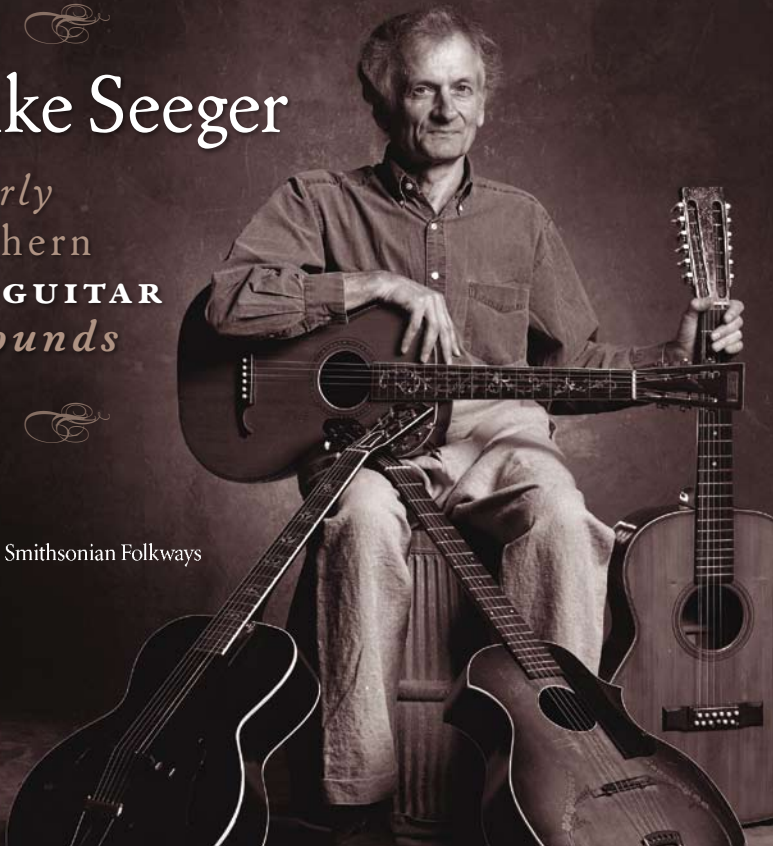
Mike Seeger

early
southern

GUITAR
sounds



Smithsonian Folkways





MIKE SEEGER
early southern **GUITAR sounds**



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|--|---|
| <p>1. WILDWOOD FLOWER 0:52
 (A.P. CARTER / PEER
 INTERNATIONAL / CNP, BMI)</p> <p>2. OLD CHISHOLM TRAIL 1:50</p> <p>3. SPANISH FANDANGO 2:17</p> <p>4. SHAKIN' THE PINES IN THE HOLLER 2:00
 (THEOPOLIS LACEY PHILLIPS)</p> <p>5. WEARY LONESOME BLUES 2:30
 (ROY HARVEY-LEONARD COPELAND)</p> <p>6. WHITE OAK MOUNTAIN 3:12</p> <p>7. I'M CRAZY OVER YOU 2:16</p> <p>8. CAN'T GET A LETTER FROM HOME 2:44</p> <p>9. GUITAR RAG 3:05
 (SYLVESTER WEAVER)</p> | <p>10. SMOKETOWN STRUT 2:54
 (SYLVESTER WEAVER)</p> <p>11. BIG KID'S BARROOM 2:46</p> <p>12. FISHING BLUES 3:23</p> <p>13. AFTER ALL HAS BEEN SAID AND DONE
 2:43 (HUDDIE LEDBETTER)</p> <p>14. JOE LEE'S TUNE 1:56</p> <p>15. CARROLL COUNTY BLUES 2:31
 (WILLIAM T. NARMOUR)</p> <p>16. BIRMINGHAM TICKLE 2:35
 (MIKE SEEGER/WYNWOOD MUSIC
 Co. Inc., BMI)</p> <p>17. WORRIED BLUES 3:45
 (FRANK HUTCHISON)</p> |
|--|---|

18. KENNY WAGNER'S SURRENDER 2:48
 (ANDREW JENKINS)
19. ARIZONA 2:21
 (JACK BRYANT)
20. PEARLY DEW 2:16
21. RISSELTLY ROSSELTLY 1:44
22. JOHNNY DOYLE 4:06
23. BLACK JACK DAVID 2:57
24. JOHN HENRY 3:34
25. BUCKDANCER'S CHOICE 3:19
 (SAM MCGEE)
26. RILEY AND SPENCER 4:24
27. WHEN THIS WORLD COMES TO AN
 END 2:22
28. LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING
 ARM 1:37 (ELISHA HOFFMAN-
 ANTHONY SHOWALTER)

Right: **1936 14-fret steel-body
 National resophonic guitar**
(Track 24)



Early Southern Guitar Sounds

This CD is devoted to the solo guitar styles played by the everyday rural and small-town dwellers of the South during approximately the first half of the 20th century. This was a time of great creativity and diversity of styles as the guitar was being introduced to Southern workers and farmers. The guitar brought new harmonic possibilities to a rich musical culture that had long been based on voice and on melodic instruments such as the fiddle, or the melody and drone of the early rural banjo.

I've decided to limit the styles I represent here to those that were developed in the pre-1930 era, before the first commercial recordings of Southern rural music. Many of these styles were homegrown, and a few persisted into mid-century. My style overlay is my own, perhaps of the 1950s and less rough hewn than the originals. Not included here are the professional "hill-billy" early country music styles that developed after about 1930, or the ensemble styles used in Southern old-time string bands. A few of the styles I've included did become part of commercial tradition: although not initially or intentionally commercial, Maybelle Carter and Jimmie Rodgers were influential stylists, and they later became professional performers.

Most of the repertoire here is drawn from recordings and from my personal recollections of players who learned their music during the first quarter of the 20th century. Early rural Southern players brought several different influences to the guitar: parlor guitar styles, banjo songs and rhythms, song-singing, urban popular music, piano sounds, and the styles of other guitar players. Very early radio and recordings were an occasional influence for some in the country. As there was

not yet any regionally dominant influence, it was a time of great diversity and experimentation.

I play on twenty-five different instruments, a variety of late-19th- and early-20th-century guitars, heavily biased towards Martin guitars. Martin instruments were too costly for most Southern rural players until the mid-20th century, but I like them and they were accessible for this project. One type of guitar missing here is a Dobro-type resonator guitar, which has been popular since its invention in the late 1920s.

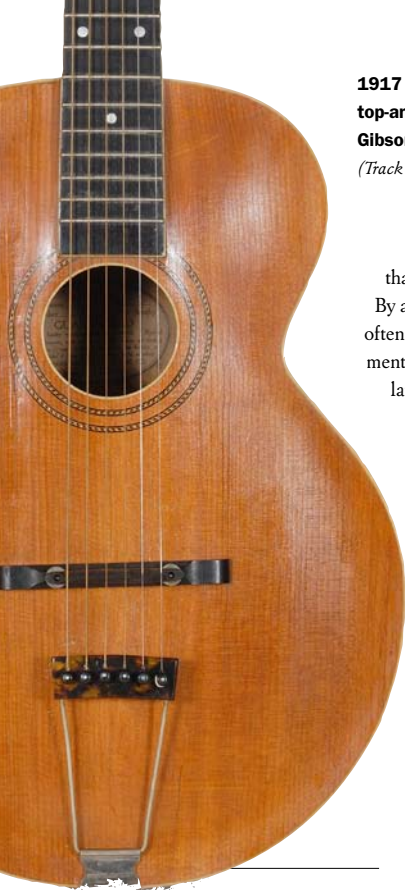
I play in about as many different, representative old-time styles as I can, ranging from mid-19th-century parlor music and some ragtime and slide pieces to Roscoe Holcomb's mid-20th-century Kentucky banjo-like style. In some cases, a style appears a second time in another piece that I learned from a musician acquaintance along my way. I also include one piece that I evolved in the 1960s. I should also mention that I don't feel able to perform most of the African American styles, especially the blues, which have been such an important part of Southern musical life.

But given the limitations of one player, I hope this CD will give listeners a sense of the range and diversity of sounds of the instruments and players of the early 20th century as the guitar was becoming popular in the rural South.

A Brief History of the Guitar and Its Travel South

At guitar-teaching sessions back in the 1960s, many of us were curious about how this instrument came into use amongst Southern workers and rural dwellers. Our guesses were often "I don't know," with some of us wondering whether it came up through New Orleans or Mexico. Although that may be a possibility for the Southwest, for most of the country the guitar came from the makers, importers, and factories in the North and Midwest.

We know quite a bit more now, mostly through published histories of several guitar makers such as Martin, Ashborn, Lyon and Healey, Gibson, Stella, and a few others. Very few of these books touch on the history of the less expensive guitars that the majority, the working-class people, played. How the guitar came into widespread use in the South is a subject not much written about



1917 arch-top-and-back Gibson L-1

(Track 20)

as far as I know, but I'll try to present a story based on known facts with some possibilities. I'll do my best to be clear as to fact and speculation.

The guitar is related to a variety of European string instruments, including the lute, cittern, and *vihuela*, with roots that may go back to the Roman *cithara* or the Arabic *oud*. By about 1800 it had become standardized with six strings, often tuned as it is today. It became a popular parlor instrument in Europe by the late 18th century, and its popularity later spread to cities and towns in the new United States.

Guitars and a few teacher/performers and makers came from Europe, along with working-class immigrants who helped make the instruments and played them.

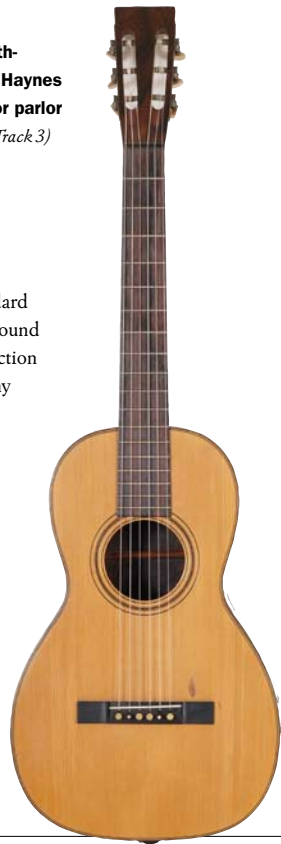
C.F. Martin, who emigrated from Germany in the 1830s, is the best known of these early makers, and his company is still thriving in Pennsylvania. In those early days makers like Martin turned out only a few guitars a year, perhaps twenty or thirty, and they were expensive, costing about as much as an average worker would earn in a month. In the late 1840s an Englishman, James Ashborn, established a small guitar factory in Connecticut, apparently using some of the methods from the then-developing

industrial revolution. For about fifteen years he could turn out as many as 1,000 well-made, practically identical guitars each year, mostly marketed through New York City music stores whose names were stamped inside. They weren't usually as fancy or expensive as the Martins.

An Ashborn or Martin, like many of the imported guitars of the 1840s and 1850s, was small by today's standards, about the size of a Martin style 3. (That's six sizes smaller than today's standard "Dreadnought" guitar.) They were very light, used gut and wound strings (no steel), and had either straight-through wooden friction pegs or geared pegs and the old-style cone-shaped heel. Many had the old fan-shaped bracing under the top. Their tone was warm and well balanced, and they were responsive to finger picking, typically thumb and two or three fingers at that time. They weren't as loud as today's instruments.

Most of these guitars were intended for use in parlor music learned from written manuscripts and teaching manuals. When you see drawings or photographs of guitar players of this period, they're often women, and they're usually in a middle- or upper-class parlor setting, even if they're socializing or partying. Of course, drawing or photographing such scenes would have been most likely a parlor activity. I assume that the parlors were generally in cities or small towns throughout the relatively settled parts of our young country.

Late-19th-century Haynes Excelsior parlor guitar *(Track 3)*



Guitars also turned up occasionally in minstrel shows of the mid-19th century. We know very little about the use of the guitar by everyday working-class or farming people.

The last quarter of the 19th century saw some fundamental changes in America, all of which furthered the democratization of the guitar.

The turmoil following the Civil War was transforming Southern life. Industrialization was beginning, leading to urbanization and giving former rural dwellers money in their pockets. For those who remained on the farm, cash crops established their part of the dollar economy. Traveling salesmen and general stores were becoming active in small towns. Towards the end of the century, railroads and a postal system made possible mail order of almost anything, including guitars.

Emancipation gave African Americans some measure of freedom of movement and livelihood for the first time. It freed black musical creativity. General consciousness of black music and singing could be less subject to white interpretation than in the heyday of the minstrel shows.

Songsmiths had been turning out American songs that would often more appropriately be accompanied by guitar than by banjo. (The Carter Family and other old-time musicians would record a lot of these songs in the 1920s and 1930s.) Community-made music continued to be popular in rural areas, especially throughout the South.

Musical tastes were evolving.

Over the coming decades the guitar would prove itself the most versatile, expressive, portable, affordable, and accessible musical instrument for both amateurs and the most adventurous professional musicians.

The guitar itself had been increasing in size for a while, and its durability was being improved as well. The contemporary heel design replaced the weak “cone” style, which eventually made steel stringing more feasible. Fan bracing of the top was abandoned in favor of the Martin “X” bracing or the “ladder” bracing of most inexpensive guitars. And due to about fifty years of enormous advances in the making of steel wire, inexpensive steel guitar strings became available by the 1890s.

Although guitar makers in small shops continued their work, guitar factories were established, possibly following Ashborn’s success at industrializing American guitar production.

The Ditson Company of Boston was a very influential early leader with the Tilton and Haynes brands. It also helped establish the eventually mammoth Lyon and Healey Music Company in the Chicago area with its Washburn and countless other brands. Later, also in Chicago, Harmony and Regal produced huge numbers of inexpensive instruments. And of course around the turn of the century in the Jersey City and New York City areas the Oscar Schmidt Company built equally huge numbers of mostly inexpensive instruments under a variety of names: the fabled Stella, also Sovereign, some that bore the Galiano name, and others.

Factory production made possible the very inexpensive guitars that were offered by mail order houses and furniture or music stores from about 1890 onward. The advent of the three-dollar guitar put the instrument into the hands of a player for the equivalent of three or four days’ wages rather than the month’s required for a Martin or Haynes. These instruments were made for the most part in large factories, sometimes supplied by small makers of parts in areas near the main factory. They were made simply of cheap, plentiful domestic woods such as birch and oak, and by 1900 or so had steel strings, simple “ladder” bracing, and sometimes rudimentary paint finish either to look like more expensive woods or for decoration. Ladder bracing, inexpensive woods, and especially steel strings also gave the guitar a brasher sound that could compete and mix with a banjo or fiddle; it was no longer a shy, quiet, refined instrument for “well-trained ladies.”

It’s generally thought that many of the factory workers were European immigrants; after all, we were a country of immigrants, especially then. Some were production-line workers, and others were experienced woodworkers and could make some pretty fancy, reasonably priced instruments, marketed by the same manufacturers. We can wonder about who designed these influential mass-produced instruments; we know little about guitar and string manufacturing of this period. At present there’s no reliable estimate of the number of guitars sold by these early factories—they were just doing business—but the numbers, possibly in the hundreds of thousands, dwarfed the small output of pre-1890s makers, and the accessibility of the instrument made possible momentous musical developments.



Galiano,
probably early
20th century
(Tracks 11 and 17)

Evidence of working-class playing of these guitars is sparse during this period. I came across one intriguing, reliable report by writer Lafcadio Hearn describing an African American string band consisting of “a cracked violin, a dismal guitar and a wheezy bass viol” at a lively 1875 waterfront square dance in Cincinnati. (On another occasion the band there consisted of fiddle, banjo, and bass viol.) I think it’s significant that this combination of instruments appeared at an African American dance only a decade after emancipation. Such a band would have likely also played for European American dances. This suggests that the guitar was beginning to enter Southern working-class music by that time, at least in some commercial river towns. It’s hard to imagine, though, how one of those little guitars, almost certainly with gut strings, would fare during a whole night of spirited dance music. A complete set of steel strings for guitars or banjos would have been extremely unlikely then.

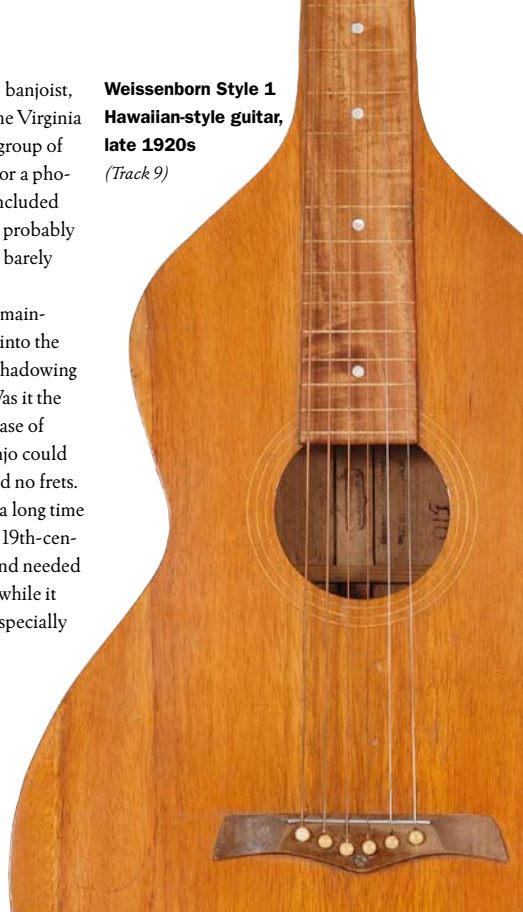
Although we have reports and photos of guitar players in the late 19th century, they can only suggest the musical story. A photo of formally dressed European American mandolin and guitar players in a parlor setting suggests formal written music; a three-piece group (also formally dressed)

of African American musicians—fiddler, banjoist, and guitar player—at an 1895 outing in the Virginia mountains suggests a more rural style. A group of Ohio Civil War-period soldiers, posed for a photograph in a field with instruments that included guitar, violin, banjo, triangle, and bones, probably played minstrel-based music, but we can barely imagine their sound.

We can only wonder why the banjo maintained such popularity from about 1840 into the beginning of the following century, overshadowing the guitar, especially in the rural areas. Was it the brash otherness, the minstrel shows, its ease of playing? Certainly in the country the banjo could be homemade, especially since it required no frets. And it had been around in the South for a long time as an African American instrument. The 19th-century guitar was more expensive, fragile, and needed to be professionally made. Perhaps for a while it was a matter of fashion and preference, especially in the Southern countryside.

The guitar’s journey from a literate parlor instrument to a “by ear,” working-class instrument was slow but gained momentum after 1900, within a continuing story of industrialization and urbanization. The efforts

Weissenborn Style 1
Hawaiian-style guitar,
late 1920s
(Track 9)



to increase loudness led to changes in the instrument. Sizes increased further, some makers experimenting briefly with enormous, unwieldy guitars such as Lyon and Healey's "Monster Guitar," more than six inches larger at the lower bout than today's typical Dreadnought. The same company designed and advertised its "Lakeside Jumbo" with dimensions practically identical to the first Ditson Dreadnaughts (that's the old Martin spelling) built several years later (in 1916) by Martin. Eventually, in the early 1930s, Martin joined in the competition, building the instrument under its own name which after about 1950 became the standard guitar size. The arch-top guitar evolved around 1900, produced mostly by the Gibson Company in Michigan. The resophonic guitars, Dobro and National, were invented in the late 1920s, and they became popular as both Hawaiian-style and regular fretted models. Steel strings became the standard around 1900 for most mass-produced inexpensive guitars, the kind that most old-time music was played on. As guitar sizes increased and steel strings became the norm, picks (which had been around for a while) became more necessary, especially to move the bigger pieces of wood. Southerners enthusiastically embraced many of these developments and the increasing availability of guitars to create new forms of music.

Around the turn of the century within the African American community, the guitar was being adapted to ragtime and jazz in the towns and cities and playing a critical role in the creation of the blues in the deep South. The Hawaiian-style guitar music fad of the mid-1910s spread throughout the country into Southern music and has been a part of it ever since. The guitar was gradually taking the place of both the melody playing of the fiddle and the rhythm accompaniment of the banjo. The electronic microphone, which was developed in the mid-1920s, made successful recording as well as radio broadcast of the guitar possible, and then popular. By the 1930s the fiddle or fiddle-banjo ensemble sound was giving way to guitar or sometimes mandolin melody playing, always with guitar accompaniment. The guitar was becoming people's favorite instrument from home to stage.



Supertone "Bradley Kincaid Houn' Dog" guitar, probably 1930s (Track 4)

Some Personal Observation and Speculation

I've asked many old-time musicians from the upland South when it was that they first encountered a guitar. More often than not the answer has been the late 1920s, sometimes on record or on radio. The musicians they might have heard were the early Southern professional "hillbilly" or "country" musicians such as Riley Puckett or Sam McGee, some of whom, like McGee, learned from both parlor and African American musicians. Banjoist Dock Boggs's first remembrance, from about 1910, was typical: a youngster then, he admired an itinerant black guitarist walking along a railroad track.

European Americans of the early 20th century tended to use the guitar for chord accompaniment of songs or fiddle tunes. Maybelle Carter's use of the guitar as a melodic lead instrument for songs instead of the more usual fiddle was a departure, and was very influential, not only because she was first but because she played with such solid musical grace.

It's interesting to ponder the reasons why the banjo—which came into general popularity from the enslaved African Americans in the South in the mid-19th century, about the same time as the guitar appeared up North from middle-class Europe—became so popular in both cabin and parlor, while the guitar had to wait until after 1900.

Someone will eventually write a people's history of the guitar. There are many written sources that could help in understanding this period: music company catalogues, local histories, newspaper reports, diaries, academic journals, and so forth. Some essays probably exist, but it all needs to be drawn together into a more coherent account than I can present here.

Elizabeth Cotten and John Hurt, African American players from North Carolina and Mississippi, respectively, and many other players talk with affection of their first guitars, acquired just after the turn of the century. Ms. Cotten told me of learning a few pieces from older men about 1905 to 1910, which would put the genesis of some black solo guitar styles well back into the 19th century. Like many, perhaps most, Southern players of this period, both Hurt and Cotten first played ladder-braced, plain wood, mass-produced guitars—theirs were Stellas—that sold for three or four dollars.

The mixing of European and African musics by African Americans over the past 150 years has produced much of what we now know as American music: banjo music, spirituals, jazz, blues, on up to the present. When I listen to the 1920s recordings of black guitarists such as Blind Blake or Lemon Jefferson, their sophistication and depth of feeling suggest many decades of creative development as well as demonstrating their genius. The white styles sound to me younger, some based on parlor playing, some from banjo patterns, and, in many cases, styles picked up from black players.

Based on these kinds of observations, it seems to me that black musicians were early, late-19th-century creators of distinctive vernacular styles of guitar playing, likely built on earlier parlor guitar, banjo, piano music, and vocal musics. It seems likely that most white players adapted the guitar from similar sources as well as from black players, apparently several decades later during the early 20th century.

African American guitarists have played a vital creative role in the development of America's guitar music, especially in the South. So many old-time and recent country Southern musicians and singers have told their stories of learning their first guitar licks from itinerant black guitarists that it makes one wonder: was the black players' role in creating new ways of using the guitar centrally vital to its stylistic development? I believe so. I believe that the most important single element in the creation of American musics has been the interaction between the European and African cultures. The contribution by African Americans to guitar playing has been every bit as significant as the contributions they have made to banjo playing, ragtime, blues, jazz, and so many other forms of American people's music.



When I started this project, I was attracted by the diversity of Southern guitar sounds and had little idea of the history of the guitar in the South. Over the past few years I've talked with some very knowledgeable friends, read a few books, and pondered the subject, and it's been a time of discovery for me. My thanks to: Joe Ayers, Jim Bollman, Todd Cambio, George Gruhn, Philip Gura, Neil Harpe, Chris Henriksen, David Holcomb, Mike Holmes, Catherine Jacobs, Eli Kaufman, Lyle Lofgren, Dan Margolies, Bill Malone, Fred Oster, Scott Odell, Marc Silber, David Stutzman, Paul Wells, Phil and Vivian Williams, and Skip Williams.

This essay, along with the song notes and the CD itself, are a summary of my Southern guitar thoughts as of now. They won't stop here. They're still in motion.

*Mike Seeger
Rockbridge County, VA
March 2007*



above: **Early-20th-century Sovereign** (Track 8)

below: **1932 Selmer** (Track 5)



1. *Wildwood Flower*

If you're going to be a country-style guitar picker, this is one piece you must know, especially if you can play it something like Maybelle Carter on the first recording of the song by the Carter Family in 1928. I play it here as close as I can to the way she did, thumbing the melody on the bass strings and strumming the middle and treble strings with my first finger.

This is a rhythmic style, possibly influenced by the fact that Maybelle Carter, like many early guitar players, played banjo before she played guitar.

Maybelle didn't use picks on their first session in 1927 and used a Stella ladder-braced guitar. I use a circa 1900 Haynes Bay State X-braced guitar with extra light strings played without picks in C, and, following Maybelle even further, I tune the guitar down three frets and capo it on the first fret so that it's in B flat. She tuned the guitar low mainly so that she could play melodies pitched well for Sara's singing yet in her favorite C fingering.

2. *Old Chisholm Trail*

The identity of the singer I learned this from is not clear, but he sang this version of this well-known cowboy song unaccompanied for John Lomax in Texas in the late 1930s. It's very unlikely that there would have been many guitars amongst actual cowboys out on the range in the late 1800s; more likely there would have been a fiddle, banjo, jew's harp, or harmonica.

This style was one of the most common of early song accompaniment styles, and basically came from parlor guitar technique. My dad played this style; he'd played in a guitar and mandolin club in college in the early 20th century. Some others that I've seen and heard playing this style are Clarence Ashley, Bradley Kincaid, Curly Fox, and Eddie Bond.

The thumb picks the bass note in a downward motion on the down beat; on the off beat the first finger plucks upward on the third string simultaneously with the second finger on the second string and the third finger on the first string. Sometimes the fingers play an arpeggio instead of the whole three-string chord.

I play a very small carved-top-and-back pin-bridge 1906 Gibson L-1 guitar in the key of C [photo p. 20].

3. *Spanish Fandango*

One of the earliest printed versions of this parlor guitar piece, which has been played by urban and rural dwellers throughout the country ever since its introduction, is dated 1854. I've heard it played on guitar and banjo, and parts of it appear in later tunes. The original notation indicates the use of this tuning—DGDGBD—and sometimes the use of harmonics. Since it's an open chord tuning, it's good for beginners. In open tunings such as this, many melodies can be simply played and require no chord fingering except choosing the appropriate bass note or possibly barring all the strings for other chords.

I learned this version from Lena Hughes, whose version is very close to Elizabeth Cotten's. (Also see Hughes's "Pearly Dew," track 20.)

I use a late-19th-century very small Haynes Excelsior fan-braced parlor guitar with gut strings [photo p. 7]. Although I play with thumb and two fingers, parlor guitar players

might have originally played it using three fingers and thumb.

4. *Shakin' the Pines in the Holler*

"Shakin' the Pines in the Holler" was played by Theopolis Lacey Phillips on an LP, *Music from the Hills of Caldwell County* (Physical Records PR 12-001). Mr. Phillips was brother-in-law to Etta Baker. It sounded to me like he was playing with thumb and three fingers, and, besides being attracted to the infectious tune, I like the idea of including what sounds like a parlor-guitar-based African American guitar style from the hills of western North Carolina.

I'm playing in C capoed up a couple of frets on an inexpensive small Supertone "Bradley Kincaid Houn' Dog" guitar probably from the 1930s—guitar courtesy of Joe Wilson [photo p. 13].

5. *Weary Lonesome Blues*

"Weary Lonesome Blues" is from a 1929 recording by Roy Harvey and Leonard Copeland of southern West Virginia, recently re-released on County CD 3512. One guitar of this duet was certainly tuned to EBEG#BE,

and the other was most likely standard, capoed, and played in D shape. Their playing is so beautifully integrated that it's hard to tell what each is doing. I've made it into a solo piece using thumb and three fingers with the guitar tuned to DADF#AD.

I visited Mr. Copeland briefly in 1964, and he played several pieces for me in this thumb-and-three-finger style. I think Harvey also played in a similar style, and both were likely influenced by written guitar music of the period. These influences could have come from guitar/mandolin clubs in a small Southern town or city, some of which could have been organized by the Gibson Guitar Company, or possibly by benevolent mill owners. Both Harvey and Copeland were photographed with carved-top, round-hole Gibson guitars.

I use a 1932 ladder-braced, tailpiece Selmer guitar because it has similar tone characteristics to some of those old Gibsons [photo pp. 16–17].

6. *White Oak Mountain*

This song comes from Kentuckian Lily May Ledford, who sings it with banjo on June Appal CD 0078.

I picked up this guitar style and tuning from another Kentuckian, Roscoe Holcomb. It's just one of several styles he plays; this one is close to one of his banjo styles and is appropriate for backing songs that need to be free of regular 2/4 or 3/4 timing, perhaps for

1906 Gibson L-1, arch-top-and-back
(Track 2)



songs that basically need the feeling of being unaccompanied. The melody is played on the second, third, and fourth strings with the fifth and sixth (in unison) and first strings used as drones.

I've not heard anyone else play this style or use this tuning, GGDGBD. I use thumb and finger picks and a much-used 1931 Martin OM 28 tuned down to F#.

7. *I'm Crazy Over You*

This was sung by Daw Henson in October 1937, at Billy's Branch, Clay County, Kentucky, and was recorded by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax.

Some country guitar players, both black and white, used a galloping clawhammer banjo style. I emulate Henson's banjo-like playing here. I couldn't tell for sure what open tuning he was using, but it was in A; it may have been G capoed up. I devised one that sounds similar: CCEGCE, which I capo up one fret to C#. The bass note is very low, and I don't use it.

The song is a variant of the banjo song "Ruben" and is similar to Lemon Jefferson's "Jack O'Diamond Blues."

I use a 1931 Martin 0-17S, a thumb pick, and two fingers, no picks.

8. *Can't Get a Letter from Home*

Some solo old-time players of banjo, guitar, and fiddle—especially those in the eastern Kentucky and West Virginia mountains—like to play the melody of the song to accompany their singing. Kentuckian Emry Arthur's singing and playing on "She Lied" and "Ruben" suggested to me this arrangement of a song from Addie Graham, which she sings without accompaniment on June Appal recording JA 020. Its original title is "Darling Don't You Know That's Wrong?"

This is a good, sparse style for previously unaccompanied songs that don't want to be hampered by rich chords or overbearing rhythm.

I use a small early-20th-century Sovereign ladder-braced guitar, tuned to DADF#AD and played with two fingers and thumb [photo pp. 16–17].

9. *Guitar Rag*

Louisville guitarist and singer Sylvester Weaver recorded two versions of this seminal piece, in 1923 and then in 1927. The 1923 disc was the first recording by an African American country-

blues guitarist. The two versions, both probably composed by Weaver, were quite different, and I combine them here. These recordings were enormously influential. West Virginians Roy Harvey and Jess Johnson recorded the piece in 1930, and a little later Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys converted it into the country-music standard “Steel Guitar Rag.”

Weaver used a standard fretted guitar on these two recordings, probably with a raised nut and without picks. His 1927 recording is available on a variety of labels.

I use a Weissenborn Style 1 Hawaiian-style guitar made of koa wood, probably from the late 1920s [photo p. 11]. The body of the guitar extends into a partially hollow square neck. I lay the guitar flat on my lap and use a Stevens bar, and I pick with thumb and two fingers. The tuning is DADF#AD.

10. *Smoketown Strut*

Louisvillian Sylvester Weaver, the first recorded country-blues guitarist, recorded this at his second session in 1924. He was probably the composer of this piece, which sounds to me like a guitar version of a piano rag. Weaver was a pioneer session guitarist as well, accompanying early

blues singers Sara Martin and Helen Humes.

Though Weaver made his recording on a wooden guitar, on some of his other recordings he plays a six-string banjo guitar, the kind I use here. Banjo guitars were marketed in the early 20th century and were used by both black and white musicians.

I use an 11¾-inch Vega Whyte Ladye banjo, with a fretboard modified to a 23¾-inch string length for better tone [photo p. 24]. I use thumb and two fingers, occasionally three fingers. The guitar is standard-tuned.

11. *Big Kid's Barroom*

This is very similar to a version of this old song that Jimmie Rodgers recorded in 1930, “Those Gambler’s Blues.” His accompanist, a Hawaiian-style musician, played it in a minor key with an entirely different guitar style. Annie Lee Trivette of Fleetwood, North Carolina, sang it (with a style that I can’t entirely emulate) at the 1941 Galax Fiddler’s Convention. I was there but only eight years old and wish I could remember her. She may have used a flat pick, but I use alternating downward thumb and upward first-finger motions. Her style and my emulation, played

fast with occasional accented strokes, allow for free vocal phrasing, especially useful for previously unaccompanied songs.

I play the song in A major on a medium-sized Galiano ladder-braced guitar, most likely made by Oscar Schmidt in the early 20th century [photo p. 10].

12. *Fishing Blues*

Texas songster Henry Thomas (“Ragtime Texas”) recorded this piece in 1928; he must have heard a similar popular song from earlier in the century. I strive to play the quills like he did and also approximate his rough-hewn guitar style at the beginning of this recording and during the vocals. My melody playing is based on John Hurt’s playing of “Stack O’ Lee Blues,” also in D fingering. This is a country ragtime style, usually associated with East Coast players.

I use thumb and two fingers, playing in D capoed to G, and a Kaycraft guitar with arched top and back [photo p. 26].

13. *After All Has Been Said and Done*

This is from the great Louisiana/Texas songster Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), who in addition to possessing a large, varied repertoire was a masterful 12-string guitar player. He concertized all over the United States and in the mid-1940s became acquainted with some members of the Los Angeles movie-making community. At least at one point he was considered for a movie role.

Lyle Lofgren gave me a recording made at a party during a 1948 trip to Minneapolis at which Lead Belly sang this song and gave this introduction:

Now I want to do a cowboy number I made myself—about a cowboy where he left home, and he had a good girl back home, a pretty girl—of course all women is pretty...and so the man he run all over this world trying to find a girl better than he left behind, but every time he went in, not a girl he could find—as the one he left behind. So he rode his horse way out on the mountain...and he was getting worried about this girl back home ‘cause he wasn’t treated just right like he wanted to be. He rode, and he set

**Vega Whyte
Ladye banjo
guitar, early
20th century
(Track 10)**



sideways on his horse like Gene Autry do sometimes... and when he get out there in Universal [the movie studio lot] where they make all them cowboy pictures at—got everything out there, wagons, and horses and everything else—and so they get on them horses, sit sideways, and this boy was singing, he was thinking—I made this song.... It's a 1,2,3 killer.

The 12-string guitar was only occasionally used in Southern music and, judging by early recordings, mostly by African Americans such as Lead Belly or Willie McTell, or Mexican Americans such as Lydia Mendoza.

Here I emulate Lead Belly's thumb- and finger-pick style, playing bass and chord with my thumb, damping the chord strums immediately after they're struck to avoid the sustain of the chords. My first finger comes into motion only on the break.

I use a probably early-20th-century instrument made by Baltimorean Carl Holzhpfel [shown in cover photo, far right]. I bought it in 1957 and sold it in the 1960s to singer Lee Haring, who gave it back to me in the 1990s. It's tuned to B⁷BE'EA'A DDF#F#BB. Note that the sixth pair is tuned two octaves apart, and that the fifth and fourth pairs are one octave apart. Though I play an A seventh chord, just as Lead Belly did, the piece is actually in E due to the low tuning.

14. *Joe Lee's Tune*

I recorded Joe Lee of Norbeck, Maryland, near Washington, DC, playing this tune in 1952. He was about 60 at the time and had played guitar with black fiddler William Adams of Kengar, Maryland, probably in the 1920s. I picked up the tune then, and when I played it in the kitchen while Elizabeth Cotten was cooking one evening, she stopped, washed her hands, asked me if she could see the guitar for a minute—saying, “I think I used a play a piece like that”—and began remembering “Oh Babe, It Ain't No Lie.”

I think this is a typical Piedmont ragtime tune from the early 20th century. Though it starts in G, I think of it in the key of C, and I play it with thumb and two fingers on a 1935 Martin 0-17H with extra light strings that's been converted from the original Hawaiian setup. This is the guitar that I perform with most of the time; it's inexpensive, mellow, and responsive for bare-finger playing like this.

15. *Carroll County Blues*

“Carroll County Blues” is a much-played fiddle tune first recorded by Mississippians Narmour and Smith in 1929, played here in a country ragtime/blues style. I picked up the basics of it about 1957 from Guy Dickens, one of West Virginian Hazel Dickens's older brothers. He sounded more like fellow West Virginian Frank Hutchison than I do. I've also picked up ideas from the original recording.

I use a 1929 Martin 0-42 because it both sounds good and plays easily on the 9th to 12th frets, where much of this tune is played. The guitar is courtesy of Penny Seeger and Rufus Cohen. I play it in E, with no picks.

16. *Birmingham Tickle*

I evolved this in the early 1960s based on Elizabeth Cotten's “Vastopol,” which got its name from a 19th-century parlor guitar piece of a similar name played in this tuning. Disc collector Joe Bussard and I named this tune after I first recorded it for his Fonotone label in 1966, using a pseudonym, Birmingham Bill.

My tune relies on compulsive use of the “hammer-on” technique, fretting a string short-

ly after it's been picked in order to get an extra note of different pitch. I've usually played this piece on this 1930s Kaycraft guitar, a pressed (not carved) arch-top with a tailpiece; it's very responsive and possesses a unique sound. I've had this guitar since 1957 [photo this page].

I use thumb and two fingers, playing typical country ragtime style, and tuned the guitar to DADF#AD.

17. *Worried Blues*

Frank Hutchison of Logan County, West Virginia, my source for this song and arrangement, recorded this for Okeh first in 1926 and again in 1927. It's currently available on County CD 3519, *Old-Time Music of West Virginia*, amongst others.

The date and place of origin of "fretting" the strings with a hand-held metal bar or glass bottle is unclear, but this was a technique widely used by African American musicians by the early 20th century. A couple of such musicians, Bill Hunt and Henry Vaughn, were important local sources for Hutchison's music.

This method of noting the strings with a steel bar, sometimes called "slide guitar," was also popular amongst late-19th- and 20th-century

1930s Kaycraft, pressed arch-top-and-back
(Tracks 12 and 16)



Hawaiian guitar players, who used it to make very different music that eventually spawned the many hillbilly and country music steel guitar styles still popular in the South.

Hutchison's timing is representative of many West Virginia and eastern Kentucky musicians who add or subtract phrases in very individualistic ways. "Riley and Spencer" (track 26) is similar in that respect. Sherman Lawson, a fiddler who recorded with Hutchison in the late 1920s, remarked to me that Hutchison didn't keep time very well. Lawson and Hutchison both had their own concept of time and phrasing, not necessarily the same.

In photographs Hutchison played what looks like a small Martin guitar on his lap. He used a thumb pick and probably one or two finger picks and most likely used a small extension nut device over the regular nut in order to raise the strings up high enough off the fingerboard to play with a metal slide.

I use picks on thumb and two fingers and an extension nut, and I play the guitar on my lap. I use G tuning, GBDGBD, and a medium (approximately 000) size early 1900s A. Galiano ladder-braced guitar probably made by Oscar Schmidt [photo p. 10].

Late 1930s Euphonon Dreadnought *(Track 18)*



18. *Kenny Wagner's Surrender*

Thanks to my friend, Lyle Lofgren, I learned this piece, composed by Andrew Jenkins in 1926, from Ernest Stoneman's 1927 recording. The song is about an actual 1926 event.

I picked up this style from Ernest Stoneman, whom I met and recorded in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His guitar style was like others in the Galax, Virginia/Mt. Airy, North Carolina, area. It is a simple, very effective style and sounds different from others because, while as usual the thumb plays the bass note on the down beat, the first finger strokes only upward on the treble strings on the off beat. Thumb and finger picks are used.

I'm pretty sure that Stoneman played this in F on the original recording, which was very unusual. A B-flat chord is a challenge to most singing guitarists.

I play in G shape but tuned the guitar down so that it's in F. Sometimes Stoneman tuned his guitar to GADGBE.

I play a late 1930s Euphonon Dreadnought [photo p. 27].

19. *Arizona*

This song was composed and sung by Jack Bryant for a 1940 recording made by Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin at the Firebaugh FSA Camp in California. I picked up the song from the recording, which I heard in the mid-1940s.

Flat-picking the guitar was new to rural players in the 1920s, and it really spread in the thirties. Here I emulate the flat-pick style of Jimmie Rodgers, a pioneer guitar player and singing/songwriting star. He had many emulators in the late 1920s and 1930s who used the guitar for chord accompaniment of vocals with occasional bass runs, often not as evenly phrased as in this rendition.

I play a 1929 Martin 000-18 with a medium pick, playing fairly close to the bridge in the key of C.

20. *Pearly Dew*

I learned this tune from Missourian Lena Hughes, who self-produced an LP recording of this and ten other guitar instrumentals in the mid-1960s. When I toured with her in the 1970s, she told me that she'd learned this and several other tunes from fellow workers

while she and her husband Jake followed the harvests, doing farm work in the early to mid-20th century.

This piece sounds to me like it might be based on a 19th-century parlor guitar piece. I don't remember if she used thumb and three fingers or played as I do here with thumb and two fingers. I play the same type of guitar she did, a 1917 arch-top round-hole trapeze-tail-piece Gibson L-1 tuned CGCGCE, one of the rarer tunings [photo p. 6].

21. *Risselty Rosselty*

This song was recorded by H.R. Denoon in Springfield, Missouri, for folk song collector Sidney Robertson (Cowell) in 1939. I remember listening to that recording as a child—Denoon had an Americanized Irish/English-sounding brogue and sang the song unaccompanied. It was a favorite that our family sang often.

This accompaniment style is a parlor-guitar-related style, playing the bass strings with thumb and three treble strings with three fingers. The only difference between this and the style on the "Old Chisholm Trail" is that this is in 6/8

time, a rhythm which pretty much died out in Southern tradition in the mid-20th century.

I play an 1870s Martin 0-26 with gut strings in the key of C but tuned down a half tone to B [photos pp. 31, 34].

22. *Johnny Doyle*

This melody and some of the text are from Buna Hicks in the Beech Mountain region of northwestern North Carolina (Folk Legacy CD22). My wife Alexia Smith and I put that version together with some of the text as sung by Maggie Gant of Austin, Texas, who was recorded by John Lomax. Alexia and I converted this previously unaccompanied ballad into a duet in a way something like the Carter Family may have done with some of the songs they picked up in their collecting and arranging process. Unlike any of the Carter songs, though, the melody ends on the second note of the scale rather than the first causing the song, which is sung in C, to end on a G chord.

This is played in Maybelle Carter's principal thumb and finger style—the one I used on "Wildwood Flower"—but this time I use a thumb pick. I use a 1934 Gibson L-10 tuned



**1934 Gibson
L-10 arch-top-
and-back**

(Tracks 22 and 23)

down three frets, capoed to the third fret, playing in C; and Alexia plays the 0-26 Martin tuned down two frets, playing in D [Gibson photo this page; Martin photos pp. 31, 34].

23. *Black Jack David*

Our family sang this version of this well-known song in the 1940s. My mother learned the song from a recording of the Gant Family of Austin, Texas, who had a rich repertoire of unusual old songs and charming ways of singing them as a family. John and Alan Lomax made the recording in 1934.

The Carter Family recorded a light-hearted version of this song with a similar tune, with their own harmony and this flat-pick guitar style. Maybelle first picked up her flat-pick playing from her brother, then developed her own style, which she used only occasionally. Flat-pick melody playing is essentially an ensemble style and requires accompaniment, unlike all the other pieces on this recording.

I use a flat-pick and a 1934 arch-top f-hole Gibson L-10 similar in design and sound to Maybelle Carter's 1928 L-5 [photo this page]. Some say she chose this guitar because at \$275 it was the one of most extravagantly expensive instruments at the time. That may or may not be so, but I'm sure she wouldn't have used it for the rest of her life if she hadn't discovered



1870s Martin 0-26

(Tracks 21–23 and 28)

that it would help her melody playing on the bass strings to be clear and audible, cutting through the mellow sound of Sara Carter's round-hole guitar.

My wife Alexia Smith joins me with her 1870s-era Martin 0-26 [photos this page and p. 34], similar in tone to the small Martins that Sara Carter used. Like Sara, she plays the bass string with her thumb and strokes downward and occasionally upwards with her first finger without picks.

I've tuned my guitar down three frets, just as Maybelle did, and here I play in F shape, which is actually in the key of D. Alexia plays in D.

24. *John Henry*

This is possibly the best-known traditional American song, significantly about an African American hero sacrificing his life in a competition with a European American machine that was invented to eliminate his job.

This guitar technique is probably of African American origin. I've seen a number of black guitarists hold a small pocket knife between the third and fourth fingers of their left hand to "note" the first string, imitating the voice, leaving the first two fingers free to occasionally note other strings. Others use a glass or metal tube over their third or fourth finger, which is not only easier but also leaves three fingers free for other possibilities.

I use a contemporary “rock slide” on my third finger with a slightly rusty, well-used 1936 14-fret steel-body National resonophonic guitar [photo p. 3]. I raise the first string slightly to make it less likely that the slide hits the neck. I use thumb and two fingers and picks. The guitar is tuned to DADF#AD.

25. *Buckdancer's Choice*

As I was recording Sam McGee for the third time in 1969 and 1970, he played all six parts of this instrumental at various times, though not as one long piece. He remarked that they were all parts of the “Buckdancer’s Choice” that he would play for dancers on- and off-stage. On the 1970s Arhoolie recording I got him to play most of them together at one point, but on his high-spirited 1926 recordings, for instance, he played five of these parts in three different performances. Here I play them all together. His classic 1926 recordings of most parts of this tune are re-released on *Old-time Mountain Guitar* (County CD 3512). His 1970 banjo guitar versions of all of the parts is on his Arhoolie CD 9009. Whether in parts or all together, they are classic, hot, country

ragtime guitar performances. McGee was a pioneer of this style, a great and influential player.

I play my 1920 Martin 0-18 in C and capo up three frets to D#; in 1926 McGee capoed his guitar up to F and played it much faster than I do. Like McGee I use a thumb pick and two finger picks.

26. *Riley and Spencer*

My source for this song is *Fields Ward* (Biograph Records RC-6002A), an LP. Fields Ward, from a legendary Galax-area musical family, learned this piece from a black musician in West Virginia where the two towns of Riley and Spencer were. To me it’s the ultimate alcoholic’s boast/lament. I try to play it like Fields; it’s reminiscent of the sounds of West Virginia’s Frank Hutchison and North Carolina fiddler and guitarist Clarence Green, each of whom had his own irregular, idiosyncratic country blues style.

I play with picks on two fingers and thumb, in A, capoed to B flat, on a 1931 Martin D-1.

27. *When This World Comes to an End*

This song is from Maggie Hammons, from near Marlinton, West Virginia, recorded in 1971 by Alan Jabbour and released on *The Hammons Family* LP (Library of Congress AFS L65-66 and Rounder CD 1504/1505). Maggie Hammons remembered the song from an early-20th-century revival meeting and sang it without accompaniment. My version is much shortened.

This is another guitar technique that is suitable for previously unaccompanied songs, ones that shouldn’t be forced into a rhythmic box. Obviously this gives a very different feeling than the styles on “White Oak Mountain” or “Big Kid’s Barroom.” Occasional, non-rhythmic strumming like this is still sometimes used by bluegrass musicians, mostly for religious songs.

I play a 1935 Martin 00-17 by thumb in D, with guitar tuned down a whole tone.

28. *Leaning on the Everlasting Arm*

This well-known gospel song was composed in the late 19th century by Elisha Hoffman

and Anthony Showalter.

On the first occasion I heard Elizabeth Cotten play the guitar, she played a gospel song in square “church” style, then, without stopping, played the tune once again in her parlor ragtime style. I, too, play this song in those two variations.

Elizabeth Cotten evolved her left-handed style in the early 20th century, her version of the then-contemporary East Coast African American ragtime style. Instead of the usual right-handed “bass-chord” figure, she just alternated playing single bass strings with her first finger, playing the melody with her thumb on the treble strings. One reason I sound different than her is that I’m playing the bass notes with the flesh of my thumb and the melody strings with my fingernail.

I use an 1870s Martin 0-26 [photos pp. 31, 34], and like Ms. Cotten I tune my C chord down to B. Ms. Cotten played a Stella when she was young; then, about 1960, a mid-century Martin D-18; and eventually, from the late 1960s onward, her favorite 00-18 Martin. Thanks to Alexia Smith for use of her guitar, with special thanks to Roger Kasle.

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AUDIO RECORDINGS:

Anthology of American Folk Music, edited by Harry Smith. SFW CD 40080. The best introduction to Southern guitar playing with a great variety of artists, genres, and styles.

Old-time Mountain Guitar 1926–1931. County 3512. The best compilation of European American styles of the South.

The Best of Blind Lemon Jefferson. Yazoo CD. Classic early blues from 1920s Texas.

Carter Family, *Anchored in Love*. Rounder 1064. Their first and some of their most varied recordings. From the Virginia mountains.

Elizabeth Cotten, *Shake Sugaree*. Smithsonian Folkways 40147. Very old and a few new songs with left-handed parlor, banjo-like, and ragtime styles. From Piedmont North Carolina.

John Jackson, *Country Blues and Ditties*. Arhoolie 471. Virginia mountain songster, variety of styles.

Memphis Minnie, *In My Girlish Days*. Blues Forever. Women's blues and guitar duets.

VIDEO RECORDINGS:

There are a few videos of traditional players available, and many guitar-focused pieces appear in compilations. Instructional videos for this kind of music, some by me, are in both the Vestapol and Homespun catalogues. These three are excellent video recordings of the best traditional players:

Legends of Bottleneck Blues Guitar. Vestapol 13002dvd.

Legends of Country Blues Guitar Vol. 1. Vestapol 13003dvd.

Legends of Traditional Fingerstyle Guitar. Vestapol 13004dvd.



**1870s
Martin
0-26**

*(Tracks
21–23
and 28)*

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