

Elizabeth Mitchell and Friends



The Sounding Joy

Christmas Songs  
in and out of the  
Ruth Crawford Seeger  
Songbook



Smithsonian Folkways



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

ELIZABETH MITCHELL AND FRIENDS

# The Sounding Joy

CHRISTMAS SONGS IN AND OUT OF THE RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER SONGBOOK

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1. Oh, Mary and the Baby, Sweet Lamb 1:32
2. Mary Glad a Baby 3:07
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4. January, February, the Last Month of the Year 3:56
5. Joseph and Mary, the Cherry Tree Carol 4:38
6. Shine Like a Star in the Morning 1:24
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8. Christmas Day in the Morning 2:15
9. Mother's Child (Child of God) 2:24
10. Sing-a-Lamb 1:52
11. Great Big Stars 1:30
12. Baby Born Today 2:33
13. Ain't That a-Rockin' All Night 1:54

14. *Cradle Hymn* 2:37
15. *Bright Morning Stars Are Rising* 3:11
16. *Sing Hallelu* 1:42
17. *The First Noel* 2:39
18. *The Blessings of Mary* 4:01
19. *Oh, Watch the Stars* 2:14
20. *Lo, Glow a Rose E'er Blooming* 1:38
21. *Mary Was the Queen of Galilee* 2:23
22. *Silent Night* 3:18
23. *Singing in the Land* 5:43
24. *Children, Go Where I Send Thee*  
(*Little Pitty Baby: A Cumulative Song*) 6:55

Tracks 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 12, 18, 22, 23, 24: Arr. Elizabeth Mitchell-Daniel Littleton / Last Affair Music, BMI

Track 9: Adpt. Peggy Seeger / Harmony Music, Ltd

Track 17: Arr. Kirsten Jacobson, BMI

Track 20: Arr. Michael Storey Littleton / Last Affair Music, BMI







# The Founding Joy:

## Christmas Songs in and out of the Ruth Crawford Seeger Songbook

ELIZABETH HAS LOANED ME HER 1ST EDITION COPY OF RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER'S *American Folk Songs for Christmas*. It's a well-worn discard from the Glenwood Elementary School library, complete with a quaint manila paper pocket glued to the last page. Due dates are rubber-stamped here, and the last three borrowers' names are written in cursive, in pencil. There's not a bar code to be seen anywhere on the book jacket. Although it was mass-produced, it feels more handmade. With the velocity of change in our "information age," this book with its yellowing pages stitched together with cotton string, its ragged margins, awkward layouts, unsteadily kerned type, and pen and ink illustrations feels like a precious relic of another era. I think about the journey of this little songbook, published 60 years ago, before it was taken out of circulation. How many teachers selected songs from it for Christmas plays and programs? Who were the last "children of the heavenly king" to "sing our Savior's worthy praise" from its pages? I picture those children playing the parts of angels dressed in bed-sheet robes with tin-foil wings, the children of immigrants and native sons. I hear them urging shepherds to "rise up and follow" for "a baby born today" "on the last month of the year," the son of the "Queen of Galilee" has come to "make the crooked straight" and "turn the world to heaven."

But there's hardly a public school in all this multicultural, secular country that would allow such a Christmas pageant today, and I lament the loss. Though I wholly support "inclusion" as a public education policy, I just can't help wondering why we had to throw baby Jesus out with the bath water. We lost all that beautiful, lyrical simplicity when we censured the season. There's no more "shouting from the mountain" or singing "soft like a southern wind in the tree." With only the best of intentions





we've covered our ears, turned our backs, and put ourselves out of the reach of our own history. Isn't that why visionaries like Ruth Crawford Seeger painstakingly documented these songs? Didn't they fear this music would pass into obscurity from lack of use? In her introduction to this very collection she clearly stated her mission: "to give back to the people songs that belong to them."

In 1936 Ruth Crawford Seeger set aside her aspirations of becoming one of the early 20th century's most inventive female modernist composers and turned her attention to the preservation of American folk songs. At the height of the Great Depression, when she joined the WPA Federal Music Project, Ruth keenly felt an urgency to save American folk songs from extinction. Toiling deep in the archives of the Library of Congress alongside the famed father, son, and daughter musicologist team of John Avery Lomax, Alan Lomax, and Bess Lomax Hawes, she sifted through their 10,000 field recordings of native singers and transcribed songs. She helped the Lomaxes produce two sweeping surveys of "people's music," *Our Singing Country* (1941) and *Best Loved American Folk Songs* (1947), creating notated versions for over 300 folk songs (the second anthology with the help of both her husband Charles Seeger and her stepson Pete Seeger). Fluent in both languages of music, formal and primitive, she moved easily from avant-garde elite to New Deal populist and became the bridge between modern urban and rural traditional music. She crossed this great divide for Elizabeth Mitchell, for you and for me, so that we could all be part of her legacy. Our gratitude should overflow for the farsighted keeper of the flame that she was, each time we remember a song she helped save from an unmarked grave.

*American Folk Songs for Christmas* (1953) was Ruth Crawford Seeger's third songbook in a trilogy of inspired generosity: *American Folk Songs for Children* (1948) and *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (1950), in addition to an earlier book of piano arrangements, *Twenty-Two American Folk Tunes* (1937). Tragically, her life was cut short when she died of cancer the very same year this Christmas anthology was published. But Ruth raised her children Mike, Peggy, Penny, and stepson Pete with such a powerful passion for and knowledge of traditional musical forms, few would dispute that the American folk revival started on her

knee. Elizabeth has interpreted these folk carols wonderfully; she sweetens them a bit but still preserves some of their grit. It's possible to hear echoes of work chants and field hollers in the call-and-response songs and low moans and whispers in the spirituals and ballads. These words, taken from the mouths of simple people, of farm hands, shop clerks, and country preachers, are respectfully delivered in spare arrangements. Listen to the close vocal harmonies, the guitar, banjo, fiddle, drum, and flute. These songs resonate in a deep part of us, calling out from the hinterlands of our American soul. See what they conjure? See the plains and the hilltops, remote towns, school yards, dance halls, and village churches? See the people gathering to share warmth and food? Watch, they celebrate the birth of a humble child laid in an oxen stall with nothing but a portentous star and the promise of salvation to his name. Hear them sing good wishes to young mother Mary, who cradles their infant God in her arms. The animals speak, the angels sing, the star glows, and peace reigns. It's a lovely scene, kept safe for the ages in this music.

*The Sounding Joy* is a homecoming, a community gathering on common ground where everyone is welcome. That's the spirit in which it was conceived and recorded. Elizabeth has such an open heart, and she uses music to draw everyone into the circle. The Hudson River Valley, where she makes her home, has a strong community of musicians. She can count among her neighbors some of the best folk musicians in the country, and they've made beautiful contributions to this collection of songs: the extended Ungar family (Jay, Molly, Lyn, Ruth, and Mike), John Sebastian, Amy Helm, Simi Stone, Happy Traum, Larry Campbell, Teresa Williams, Gail Ann Dorsey, and many others. And I know what a thrill it was for Elizabeth when Ruth Crawford Seeger's daughter Peggy accepted her invitation to sing two of the carols. In a way, the circle is now even more complete. So, learn these songs and make them your own, grab your kids, sabotage your Internet connection, throw your coat and mittens on, make yourselves a parade of revelers, bang wooden spoons on skillets and dance around your neighbor's house, bring some light to these darkest days of the year—know that you belong to this music, and this music belongs to you!

— NATALIE MERCHANT, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, APRIL 2013





## Some thoughts about Ruth, Mary, the Baby, and the Holy Quaternity

RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER'S SONGBOOKS ARE THE WORKS OF A TRULY GIFTED AND UNIQUE experimental composer who dedicated herself tirelessly to the preservation, transmission, and continuity of American cultural memory and literacy. Her work is both interdisciplinary in nature and, for lack of a better word, postmodern in its implications. Crawford Seeger managed to subvert, collapse, or gently blur the lines between many oppositional terms that produce our frameworks for understanding and speaking about art—"high" and "low," "classical" and "folk," "sacred" and "secular," the realm of the academic and the quotidian, the public and the domestic. She distilled immense amounts of information into perfectly rendered melodic gestures and counter melodies, with an incredible sense of economy, precision, and deep musicality. Although she did not invent the songbook, her appropriation, or "rebooting," of this established cultural and literary medium may amount to nothing less than a new 20th-century multimedia art form, one that integrates oral history, folk art, cultural anthropology, radical pedagogy, and the advances and methods of modern composition. The more you look at her little songbooks, the more they start to look like something much bigger than you thought they were.

Crawford Seeger arranged the gorgeous and singular settings of old folk songs in her songbooks not for the concert hall but for the living room, for families to sing and play together. She wrote for communities of interpreters and kindred spirits. Crawford Seeger knew the roads and the back roads to our shared cultural inheritance very well, and she gave us a map. *American Folk Songs for Christmas* is part guide, part companion, and part diving board on the shore of an ocean of unknown depths. She took responsibility for this project so that we, and generations to come, could have the tools to bring this music to life and carry it forward in our own lives. A great artist is someone who transcends

the limitations of genre, time, and place by imagining and articulating new paradigms of expressive possibility in the world. That is what Ruth Crawford Seeger did.

The religious content of these songs is focused primarily on Christian apocryphal birth narratives about Mary and the baby Jesus. The story is viewed through the lens of many different regional American traditions and styles—Appalachian, southern, northern, and the songs of black and white churches, for example. Each song focuses on similar events from a different point of view, but the songs have a strong continuity and sympathy with one another. There are songs here about shepherds looking to the stars in the sky and taking a leap of faith into the mystery and possible redemption of leading a spiritual life. There are unusual and deeply moving songs about domestic life—Mary rocking the cradle all night long, Mary and Joseph fighting and working it out. Although these songs are not strictly based on canonical sources, they are sacred songs, and even though traditional details about religious figures abound, often we see Mary in a very relatable, down-to-earth, even mundane light. In other songs she is clearly portrayed as the mother of God in a human form, the virgin Mother, the “sacred feminine” element of the “Holy Quaternity” if she were added to the patriarchal model’s enumeration of God as the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. There are songs here that invoke the transcendent with a kind of magical realism—angels watching over and singing, ships appearing on the horizon carrying the parents of God and ushering in a time of rejoicing and music, cherry trees that bend down low in offering and supplication to Mary as Jesus speaks from inside her womb.

But this overtly Christian material is set side by side with songs about the solstice, and, for me, this makes the songbook a strange kind of alchemical document. Christian tradition successfully appropriated the solstice in a harmonious, syncretic way, at least in its liturgical settings. The return of the light and the flower that blooms in winter are powerful symbols of the meaning and the potency of the solstice, representing the moment when darkness begins to cede its domain within our natural, phenomenal experience of the world to the gradual lengthening of days and the promise of spring. The



birth of Jesus fits beautifully, and some would say conveniently, into this time of year when people of many faiths and belief systems have always honored, or at the very least noticed, our ancient contract with the stars and the elements. I love that Crawford Seeger's collection includes secular songs and songs about the stars. The American Christmas tradition she is trying to preserve is not a "narrow way" or a materialistic one but an inclusive, creative tradition of people sharing music, celebrating together, telling each other stories.

My father, Michael Storey Littleton, was a musician and a teacher, and I remember hearing him talk once about the rare and elusive moments when people find themselves to be in a state of deep agreement with one another. I never forgot his gentle reminder to cultivate a sense of genuine respect for the challenge, difficulty, and importance of finding common ground, and the prospect of friendship that transcends differences. I count it as a testament to the reach of these songs and Ruth Crawford Seeger's visionary work that so many people of so many cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds came together so happily to collaborate with us on this project. It was a kind of all-ages ecumenical summit at our house—we had family, friends, grandparents, young children, Christians, Jews, atheists, Buddhists, yoga practitioners, skeptics, flat out non-believers, and a whole lot of what is in-between, plunging in with no hesitation and a lot of love to help us do this.

So maybe *The Sounding Joy* is not a "Christmas album," after all. Well, not exactly anyway. It is a Ruth Crawford Seeger Christmas album. Maybe this collection of songs is also about Ruth Crawford Seeger's idea of what America was, is, and might yet become. These sacred and secular songs from the American folk music tradition "have been hidden away, hard to find, or crowded out by the more easily available published collections around us." Ruth learned these songs from old shape note songbooks, musicians, and field recordings made all over the country during and before the Great Depression on magnetic tape and wire. We learned most of them from her and recorded them in our home. She tells

us in her introduction that these songs “exist because there was need for them,” and if I didn’t fully understand that when we began this project, I think I do now. People do have a need for music that helps them to connect to and better understand the deep wells of their own history and those of their friends and neighbors. Traditional and devotional music from around the world is a very direct path to those wells. Ruth Crawford Seeger’s vision speaks to all these things, without much fuss. If we are looking closely at her methods and her outcomes, her work can show us that technology is a great and useful tool, but it is not the only thing we need to survive. She was quite prescient in presenting antidotes to some of the issues we face in the age of media culture. She presents art and culture as both responsibility and birthright, not as a means for the mass consumption and manufacturing of products and spectacular, personality-driven media. The only “bottom line” for Ruth Crawford Seeger is that the art of music is something that can happen whenever people come together in a room to play and sing together, and that room can be anywhere, and anyone who is inspired to learn it and to participate is welcome and of equal importance.

Art can invoke the transcendent and the desire that everyone feels to be free and happy, and it can also speak about loss and struggle, often with a clarity we cannot find in our own words. Art holds up a mirror to life, and wields some powerful ancient magic, somehow managing to bring us all closer to a feeling of true universality, even as it delves so deeply into the particularities and subtleties of individual expression and experience. Through it we can sometimes begin to see ourselves with greater insight and remember what is most precious to us. So this music is offered to everyone in the spirit of friendship, and with reverence and respect for the possibility of friendship. Thanks to Ruth Crawford Seeger and her remarkable children for gathering, playing, and carrying these songs through time and space, and finally, for placing them in our hands.

—DANIEL LITTLETON, WOODSTOCK, 2013

## A Note from Elizabeth Mitchell

GREETINGS FROM THE HEART OF SPRING. AS BRIGHT YELLOW FORSYTHIA BURST FORTH from every roadside, spring peepers sing their songs from every pond, and the earth becomes tender and sweet again, I have been immersed in completing this Christmas album, singing songs of dark nights, guiding stars, and a humble birth in a stable. This record began under different circumstances, however, almost four years ago. In the cold, grey light of November, I found myself facing surgery the week of Thanksgiving. I asked myself, after this surgery and recovery, what would I really like to do? The answer was that I wanted to make a Christmas record. We started recording that year and have worked on it sporadically since then.

We began by recording our own interpretations of classic, well-known holiday songs that I loved. I listened to our recordings of them and shrugged my shoulders, unmoved. It was clear to me that I was going to have to dig deeper. I did, and my digging led me to dive into the work of Ruth Crawford Seeger in a more serious way than ever before, her Christmas songbook becoming my guide. The recordings that her children made from the songbook provided significant inspiration for me as well—first on the 1966 Folkways release *American Folk Songs for Christmas*, where Ruth's daughters Peggy, Barbara, and Penny played a selection of the songs accompanied by children from the South Boston Music School, and then a larger collection of the same name released by Rounder in 1989 featuring Mike, Peggy, and Penny accompanied by their own children.

I was drawn to the distillation of the Christmas story that emerges in the songbook, in particular the songs about Mary and the baby. To find traditional, devotional music that celebrates of the birth of a child, the experience of the mother, and the response of the community to that event was incredibly

inspiring to me and gave me an opportunity to sing about something very close to my heart—a mother's love for her child.

Through her song choices, Ruth Crawford Seeger shined a light on a distinctly American Christmas tradition that might be unrecognizable to us today; in her own words:

These songs grew out of and were used in the old-time American Christmas, a Christmas not of Santa Claus and tinsel trees but of homespun worship and festivity.... They have been chosen for their excellence as songs but even more for the genuineness with which they express the Christmas attitudes and values of the people who sang them and the communities of which they were part. Some have come down, singer to singer, for generations; others are local, homegrown. Some are from oral (folk) tradition; others are of mixed oral and written origin. Some are gentle, rich in poetic fantasy; others are of austere strength. Some are free, improvisational; others are more set in text and tune. Many are of the nature of folk carols. They are direct expressions from everyday people.

I included a handful of songs that I grew up singing in church, a couple of hidden treasures that I found along the way, and a family heirloom that came in the form of a choral arrangement of "Lo, How a Rose" written by my father-in-law, the late Michael Storey Littleton. And here it is, *The Sounding Joy*.

Here in Woodstock, nestled between the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River Valley, we have found a vibrant and generous community of musicians. You will hear my extraordinary neighbors on this album (as mentioned by one of them, Natalie Merchant, in her essay), as well as some welcome honorary Woodstock residents, including Peggy Seeger, Dan Zanes, Suzan-Lori Parks, Joan Osborne, Byron Isaacs, Ken Ejinkonye, and Aoife O'Donovan, and our extended family including my brother-and sister-in-law, Michael Littleton and Anna Padgett, and my niece Penny Littleton. I could go on



and on about all of these musicians, but if I started, it would be another year before this album would be released, so I will let you find out about them for yourselves.

The infectious joy inherent in these songs was a real point of access for this diverse group of musicians—some who come from many generations steeped in traditional music, some who are skilled improvisers, self-taught or classically trained, some who are children, and one who is the daughter of the arranger herself! One of the challenges in our process was moving between the fresh ideas and input of this ragtag community that was gathering around the goal of bringing these traditional songs to life in new ways, and the desire to make a more formal gesture towards honoring the songs themselves as Ruth Crawford Seeger heard them. From the more simple arrangements—patty cake and call-and-response with children—to the elaborate—a string trio accompanied by a New Orleans beat—we tried to catch some of the immediacy, simplicity, and energy that Ruth found in the songs:

They are fresh, rhythmically buoyant: singing them, it is easy to remember that clapping, foot tapping and religious dancing have been their frequent accompaniment. They are simple and without pretense. They exist because there was a need for them. A considerable number—the response songs, particularly—stem from vigorous traditions of group spontaneity in singing, work and worship.

This album has already seen four Christmases come and go. My daughter Storey was eight years old when we began, and now she is days away from turning twelve; you can hear the years of tremendous growth in her voice. Each year new people have come into our lives, and some of their hands and voices have found their way into this music. Our widely drawn family circle has grown, and we remain grateful for the collaborations and friendships that have emerged through the process of making this album. Now it is time to share this record with you. However you and your loved ones celebrate the last month of the year, I hope it is filled with the sounds of joy. — ELIZABETH MITCHELL, WOODSTOCK, MAY 2013

# Song Notes

## 1. *Oh, Mary and the Baby, Sweet Lamb*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals and hand slaps; Ken Ejinkonye, vocals and hand slaps; Daniel Littleton, kalimba, Orff xylophone, and percussion; Kirsten Jacobson, flute

One of my favorite things to do with friends and family is make music with whatever we happen to have around. Sometimes you don't have instruments handy, but you can use anything to make sounds. You can make rhythms with your hands, your fingers, your knees, and your feet. I love the music of Bessie Jones; her recordings featuring hand-clapping, stomping, and call-and-response singing sound like there is a good time being had by all. I tried to bring some of that inspiration into our version of this song.

## 2. *Mary Had a Baby*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals; Sophia Reynolds, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar and piano

Daniel's guitar arrangement was inspired by Ruth Crawford Seeger's use of dissonance in the songbook—at first you might not notice it, but she always finds a way to incorporate those “close” intervals.

## 3. *Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals and guitar; Michael Merenda, banjo; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion

With this song I sang the melody right from the songbook, Daniel improvised on the guitar, and we came up with this arrangement. We invited Mike Merenda to play some banjo and Clem Waldmann to play drums, and we wound up with a sparse, bluesy, West African feeling in the song.



## 4. *January, February*

### (THE LAST MONTH OF THE YEAR)

Amy Helm, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Ruthy Ungar, vocals and fiddle; Daniel Littleton, vocals and guitar; Chris Wood, vocals and bass; Simi Stone, vocals; Marco Benevento, piano; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion

Daniel and I play in a band called the Silver Hollers with our friends Amy Helm, Chris Wood, and Ruthy Ungar, who join us here. We have been friends and neighbors for many years and get together and play when we are all home at the same time, which does not happen often enough.

## 5. *Joseph and Mary*

### (THE CHERRY TREE CAROL)

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Natalie Merchant, vocals; Daniel Littleton, piano and harmonium; Nancy Chusid, bass recorder; Jean Cook, violin

There is no mention of this story in the Bible, but variants of it have been around for centuries in oral tradition. The original source of the narrative is quite old; it specifies palm trees, and the fruit in the text is dates. In England, cherry trees are central, but there are apparently versions in different countries using fruit trees that are culturally specific or significant.

## 6. *Shine Like a Star in the Morning*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Simi Stone, vocals; Jay Ungar, fiddle; Abby Newton, cello; Emily Schaad, viola; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion

This is one of several adaptations we recorded for this album of Ruth's arrangement for a string trio. Many years ago, Daniel heard me playing her arrangement of "Mister Rabbit" on the piano, and he was inspired to do some simple orchestrating. Most of her arrangements have two or three parts, and we started to experiment with different, sometimes unusual, combinations of instruments on the songs.

## 7. *Joy to the World*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals; Jay Ungar, banjo and viola; Molly Mason, dulcimer; Daniel Littleton, guitar and piano; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion

Christmas Eve service at the Congregational church I attended as a child was one of my favorite opportunities to practice harmony singing. I would follow along in the hymnal and sing. When we recorded this song, I didn't feel right singing the melody, because I have always sung the harmony! So I asked my daughter Storey to join me.



## 8. *Christmas Day in the Morning*

Peggy Seeger, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals, harmonium, and bells; Ruthy Ungar, vocals and fiddle; Kirsten Jacobson, flute; Byron Isaacs, upright bass; Clem Waldmann, percussion

One of the more well-known songs from the songbook, this is the first song we recorded with the amazing Peggy Seeger. Ruth's arrangement is sparse and deceptively simple. The harmony to the main melody has one close interval that really

sets it apart from the accompaniment most people have heard, and we gave this harmony line to the fiddle and flute to play in unison.

## 9. *Mother's Child*

Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Ruthy Ungar, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar

This is an original adaptation of the song "Child of God" by Peggy Seeger. "Child of God" is part of the Christmas songbook, and Peggy recorded

an exquisite version featuring the original piano arrangement on her family's 1989 release. Daniel had adapted the arrangement for guitar, and we asked Peggy if she would like to record it. She told us how she had adapted the lyrics as well, but had never recorded them. Peggy came up with a beautiful guitar accompaniment on the spot, while Daniel played Ruth's bass line on the guitar. We cannot put into words what an honor it was to have Peggy in our home, singing these songs with us.

## **10. *Sing-a-Lamb***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals; Ken Ejinkonye, vocals; Dan Zanes, vocals and harmonica; Suzan-Lori Parks, vocals, harmonica, and washboard; Daniel Littleton, vocals and harmonica; Amy Helm, vocals; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion

We had the wonderful opportunity to play concerts last year with our old friend Dan Zanes and the brilliant Suzan-Lori Parks, and we were thrilled when they accepted our invitation to come to our house to collaborate with us on "Sing-a-Lamb," featuring our very first harmonica trio!

## **11. *Great Big Stars***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals; Ruthy Ungar, vocals; Jay Ungar, fiddle; Abby Newton, cello; Emily Schaad, viola; Clem Waldmann, percussion

Another of Ruth Crawford Seeger's arrangements adapted for strings, on this one we added percussion to give it the feel of a Moondog arrangement. Our friends Jay Ungar, Abby Newton, and Emily Schaad brought it to life so beautifully. Jay and Abby were close friends of Ruth's youngest daughter, Penny Seeger.

## **12. *Baby Born Today***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and harmonium; Daniel Littleton, vocals and guitar; Ruthy Ungar, vocals and fiddle; Amy Helm, vocals; Chris Wood, vocals and bass; Larry Campbell, mandolin; Clem Waldmann, drums

This song is a "shout"—a traditional part of the all-night Watch Night services held on Christmas Eve at churches in the South. In Ruth's own words: "Song and sermon and prayer flow back and forth with little break from one to the other. Leader and group are joint worshipers and makers of song. A short phrase of music and a brief refrain fill long spaces of night, with each minute detail of the Christmas story lined out—new lines improvised, old lines remembered." The Silver Hollers

join us again here, along with the great Larry Campbell on mandolin.

### ***13. Ain't That a-Rockin' All Night***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Kirsten Jacobson, piano and flute; Jay Ungar, violin; Emily Schaad, viola; Abby Newton, cello

This is one of our favorite Ruth Crawford Seeger arrangements, maybe Daniel's favorite of all, the most haunting song in all of her songbooks.

### ***14. Cradle Hymn***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Amy Helm, vocals; Teresa Williams, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar and piano; Byron Isaacs, guitar

Amy and Teresa knew this melody from the hymn "Ten Thousand Charms." Daniel arranged it for guitar. We worked it out around our kitchen table, and then we walked down the hall and recorded it.

### ***15. Bright Morning Stars Are Rising***

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals, guitar, and harmonium; Kirsten Jacobson, piano; Ruthy Ungar, fiddle; Byron Isaacs, upright bass

This song might be the first "traditional" song I ever learned, back in 1991 when Daniel and I first started dating, and we would spend Saturday



nights over at his sister Cecilia's place in Cambridge singing Appalachian songs with her and her husband. Daniel remembered this one from a record he had called *Music of the Ozarks* when he was a child. Many years ago when we had first moved to Woodstock, Happy Traum taught us Ruth Crawford Seeger's version, and we performed it together at one of the solstice concerts that Happy hosts every year. When I learned this new melody, it was a revelation.

## 16. Sing Hallelu

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals;  
Elizabeth Jerez-Clarke, harp

Daniel thought the chords in this arrangement would sound beautiful on the harp. I have always loved the harp arrangements that Zeena Parkins did for Bjork, and I think that Ruth Crawford Seeger's arrangements would sound right at home in such a modern, experimental music context.

## 17. The First Noel

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Amy Helm, vocals; Kirsten Jacobson, piano and flute; Clem Waldmann, drums;  
Molly Mason, bass

Kirsten Jacobson, a longtime collaborator and dear friend, wrote this lovely piano arrangement

inspired by Ruth Crawford Seeger. It was Kirsten, a wonderful pianist and flautist, who helped me with this project in its earliest stages. We pored over the songbook and made recordings of many of the songs in their most basic form. Working with her was like opening up the door to what would, years later, take the form of this album. And what can I say about Amy Helm? She is simply one of my favorite singers, ever.

## 18. The Blessings of Mary

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar, harmonium, and piano; Larry Campbell, banjo; Teresa Williams, vocals; Ruthy Ungar, vocals; Amy Helm, vocals; Kirsten Jacobson, flute; Byron Issacs, upright bass

I first heard this song on the album *The McGarrigle Christmas Hour*. Seeing their family holiday concerts has been such a huge inspiration to me, both in general and in relation to this project. In many respects the extended McGarrigle family embodied much of what I see as the spirit of Ruth Crawford Seeger's vision of family music during these family concerts. Their work was inclusive, they had staggering reach as musicians, but they were never too precious about it, always aware of the need for tradition to meet with the dynamism and flexibility of the concerns of the present. What a gift and legacy they have given to us.

## 19. Oh, Watch the Stars

Aoife O'Donovan, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals and piano; Jay Ungar, fiddle; Abby Newton, cello; Emily Schaad, viola; Kirsten Jacobson, flute and piano

This is the first song that drew me into the songbook. I would sit at the piano and play this small song over and over. I have very basic skills as a pianist, and I did feel that Ruth had written these arrangements for someone like me. The arrangement was so simple but elegant and timeless. Our friend Aoife O'Donovan is an extraordinary singer, and I knew this one would be a perfect fit with her voice.

## 20. Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals; Michael Littleton, vocals; Anna Padgett, vocals; Amy Helm, vocals

My father-in-law, Michael Storey Littleton, was a wonderful musician, a great improviser on the piano who loved the music of Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington. He was also an accomplished organist and minister of music at a local Congregational church. He loved the music of Bach and Buxtehude, and on a few rare occasions he transcribed some of his own arrangements. This arrangement of "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"

is a window into how he heard and approached harmony. His daughter Cecilia introduced her younger brothers Daniel and Michael to three-part harmony by teaching them this arrangement when they were just children. He loved suspensions and close intervals, and this song about a rose that blooms in winter feels just right for this album. It was the last song we recorded for *The Sounding Joy*.

## 21. Mary Was the Queen of Galilee

Gail Ann Dorsey, vocals; Joan Osborne, vocals; Amy Helm, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and harmonium; Daniel Littleton, vocals and piano

While I was doing some research for this album I came across a recording of this song by the Boys Choir of Harlem. The song haunted me, so much so that even when this album was considered "finished," I knew I still had to record it. I got to know Gail Ann Dorsey and Joan Osborne at benefits we played fighting fracking in New York State this past year, and I am so grateful to them for lending their powerful voices to this recording.

## 22. *Silent Night*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Storey Littleton, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar, piano, and harmonium; Mike Merenda, banjo

Josef Mohr, a priest in a small Alpine village in Austria, wrote the lyrics to this song as a poem in 1816. His friend, church organist Franz Gruber, set it to music two years later. They performed it together on Christmas Eve in 1818, as it was composed for two voices and guitar, with Josef Mohr providing guitar accompaniment.

## 23. *Singing in the Land*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Natalie Merchant, vocals; Happy Traum, vocals and guitar; John Sebastian, vocals and harmonica; Daniel Littleton, vocals and guitar; Ruthy Ungar, vocals and fiddle; Michael Merenda, vocals and banjo; Lyn Hardy, vocals

When we moved to the Catskills, Happy and Artie Traum welcomed us into the community as they have welcomed so many musicians before us. That first winter, they invited us to perform with them at their yearly solstice concert in Woodstock, and it was there that we met the great John Sebastian as well. These folks are an incredible resource and inspiration to all musicians who live here, and of course their influence extends far beyond the Hudson River Valley. We are the luckiest people

in the world to have such a deep musical community, whose generosity is on full display here. In this song we were led by the fearless and mellifluous Natalie Merchant through a hymn that tells us some good news about a baby that sits at the doorway to heaven.

## 24. *Children, Go Where I Send Thee*

(LITTLE BITTY BABY: A CUMULATIVE SONG)

Daniel Littleton, guitar and piano; Warren Defever, guitar and bass; Clem Waldmann, drums and percussion; Ruthy Ungar, fiddle; Anna Padgett, Michael and Penny Littleton, vocals. Individual lines sung by Elizabeth; Elizabeth and Daniel; Storey; Dan Zanes; Amy Helm; Ruthy Ungar; Ken Ejinkonye; Suzan-Lori Parks; Gail Ann Dorsey; Simi Stone; Aoife O'Donovan; Natalie Merchant

I learned this song in elementary school when we would go “caroling in the wings”—our school had unique architecture, in which each grade had its own wing, and the wings joined together in the center. Our brilliant music teacher, Mrs. Reed, taught each grade different Christmas, Hanukkah, and holiday songs, and we would carol for each other. It was my favorite day of the year. When we first conceived of this album, this was going to be the first song. By the time we were finished, it was clear that this was the last song, the party at the end of our journey.





*from left: Simi Stone, Larry Campbell, Teresa Williams, John Sebastian, Mike Merenda, baby Opal,  
Amy Helm, Ruthy Ungar, Byron Isaacs, Daniel Littleton, Happy Traum,  
Justin Guip, Elizabeth Mitchell*

Recorded between 2009 and 2013 at On-Me Sound,  
Woodstock, NY

Produced by Elizabeth Mitchell and Daniel Littleton

Except tracks 1, 2, 5, 15, and 24 produced by Elizabeth  
Mitchell, Daniel Littleton, and Warren Defever; engineered  
by Justin Guip, Chris Edwards, Warren Defever, Elijah  
Walker, Daniel Goodwin, Scott Petito, and Guthrie Lord

Mixed by Justin Guip and Elijah Walker

Additional recording at The Clubhouse, Rhinebeck, NY,  
and Dreamland Recording, West Hurley, NY; engineered by  
Adam Armstrong, Paul Antonell, and Bella Blasco

Mastered by Pete Reiniger

Cover artwork by Brian Selznick

Photography by Jana Leon

Annotated by Natalie Merchant, Daniel Littleton, and  
Elizabeth Mitchell

Natalie Merchant appears courtesy of Nonesuch Records

Executive producers: Daniel E. Sheehy and D. A. Sonneborn

Production manager: Mary Monseur

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden

Art direction, design, and layout by Sonya Cohen Cramer

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of marketing and sales; Betty Derbyshire, director of financial operations;  
Laura Dion, sales and marketing; Toby Dodds, technology director; Claudia  
Foronda, customer service; Henri Goodson, financial assistant; Will Griffin,  
marketing and sales; Meredith Holmgren, web production and education;  
David Horgan, online marketing; Joan Hua, production assistant; Helen  
Lindsay, customer service; Keisha Martin, manufacturing coordinator; Jeff  
Place, archivist; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, sales and  
marketing; Stephanie Smith, archivist; Jonathan Wright, fulfillment.

This album would never have been possible without  
the encouragement, support, patience, and guidance of  
Sonya Cohen Cramer and Mary Monseur.

## About Brian Selznick

Brian Selznick is the author and illustrator of many books  
for children including the Caldecott Award-winning *The  
Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which was made into the movie  
*Hugo* directed by Martin Scorsese. He lives in Brooklyn and  
San Diego.

## About Smithsonian Folkways

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*Dedicated to our childhood music teachers  
Ethel Reed, Lorraine Brooks, and Lois  
Haley Blackstone.*



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings





- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Oh, Mary and the Baby, Sweet Lamb          | 13. Ain't That a-Rockin' All Night  |
| 2. Mary Had a Baby                            | 14. Cradle Hymn                     |
| 3. Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow              | 15. Bright Morning Stars Are Rising |
| 4. January, February (LAST MONTH OF THE YEAR) | 16. Sing Hallelu                    |
| 5. Joseph and Mary (THE CHERRY TREE CAROL)    | 17. The First Noel                  |
| 6. Shine Like a Star in the Morning           | 18. The Blessings of Mary           |
| 7. Joy to the World                           | 19. Oh, Watch the Stars             |
| 8. Christmas Day in the Morning               | 20. Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming    |
| 9. Mother's Child (CHILD OF GOD)              | 21. Mary Was the Queen of Galilee   |
| 10. Sing-a-Lamb                               | 22. Silent Night                    |
| 11. Great Big Stars                           | 23. Singing in the Land             |
| 12. Baby Born Today                           | 24. Children, Go Where I Send Thee  |

*The Sounding Joy* is a spirited collection of folk carols drawn from Ruth Crawford Seeger's 1953 songbook *American Folk Songs for Christmas*. Featuring Elizabeth Mitchell and a luminary list of her musical family, friends, and neighbors, this album celebrates the spirit of community and homespun traditions that existed in times before the commercialization of Christmas. Natalie Merchant, Aoife O'Donovan, Amy Helm, John Sebastian, Dan Zanes, Happy Traum, and many others including special guest Peggy Seeger all add their voices to pay tribute to a collection revered in the canon of American music. 70 minutes, 32-page booklet with photos.

