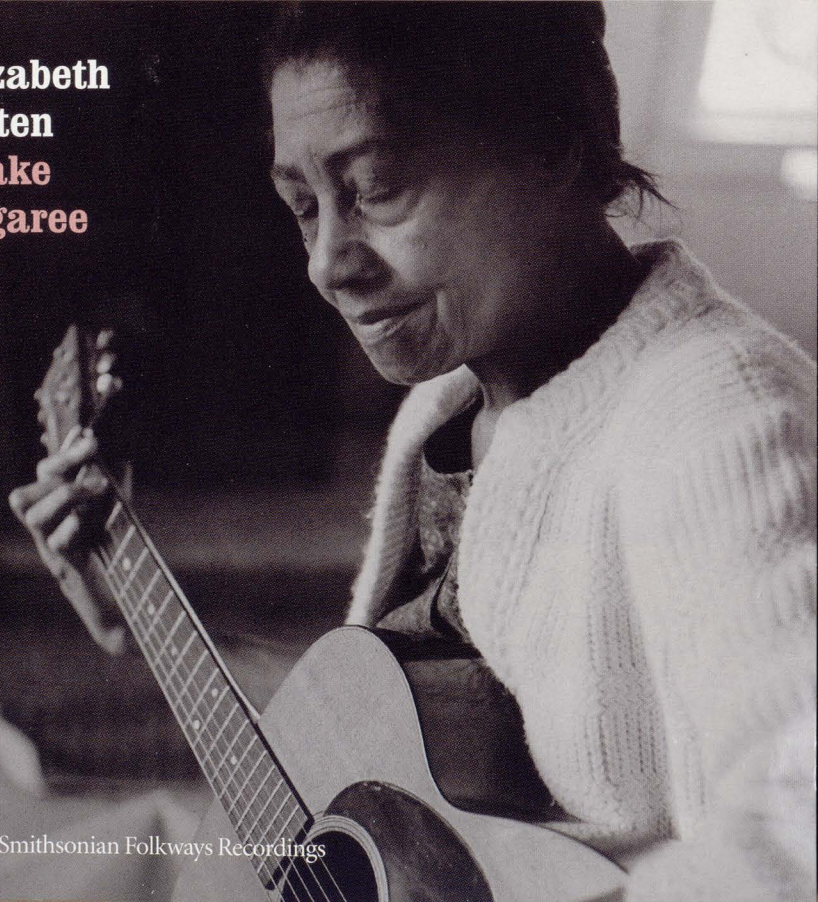




Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

SFW CD 40147 © © 2004 SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS

**Elizabeth
Cotten
Shake
Sugaree**



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Elizabeth Cotten 20 Shake Sugaree

1. SHAKE SUGAREE 5:03
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
2. TAKE ME BACK TO BALTIMORE * 1:59
3. WASHINGTON BLUES 3:38
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
4. I'M GOING AWAY 3:25
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
5. FOX CHASE 3:42
(Elizabeth Cotten)
6. ONTARIO BLUES 3:45
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
7. FARE YOU WELL, MY DARLING * 2:03
8. UNTITLED / GEORGIE BUCK * 3:01
9. MAMA, NOBODY'S HERE BUT THE BABY * :53

10. MAMA, NOBODY'S HERE BUT THE BABY 1:37
11. LOOK AND LIVE, MY BROTHER 1:52
12. JESUS LIFTED ME 2:09
13. JESUS IS TENDERLY CALLING 1:39
14. BUCK DANCE 1:52
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
15. RUBEN 2:14
16. OH, MISS LULIE GAL 1:31
17. CAN'T GET A LETTER FROM DOWN THE ROAD * 1:45
18. SHOOT THAT BUFFALO 1:40
19. BOATMAN DANCE 1:48
20. HALLELUJAH, IT IS DONE * 1:34
21. HOLY GHOST, UNCHAIN MY NAME * 1:25
22. LITTLE BROWN JUG * 2:23
23. DELIA * 2:12
24. BALL THE JACK 2:35
(Elizabeth Cotten/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
25. TILL WE MEET AGAIN 2:04
26. WHEN THE TRAIN COMES ALONG* 2:45

* DENOTES PREVIOUSLY UNRELEASED TRACKS



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The introductory notes to this album have been contributed by John Ullman, who with his wife, Irene Namkung, managed Elizabeth Cotten's performing career from 1974 to 1987. This essay will give you an idea of her life as a touring musician, which began at an age well after most people have retired.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

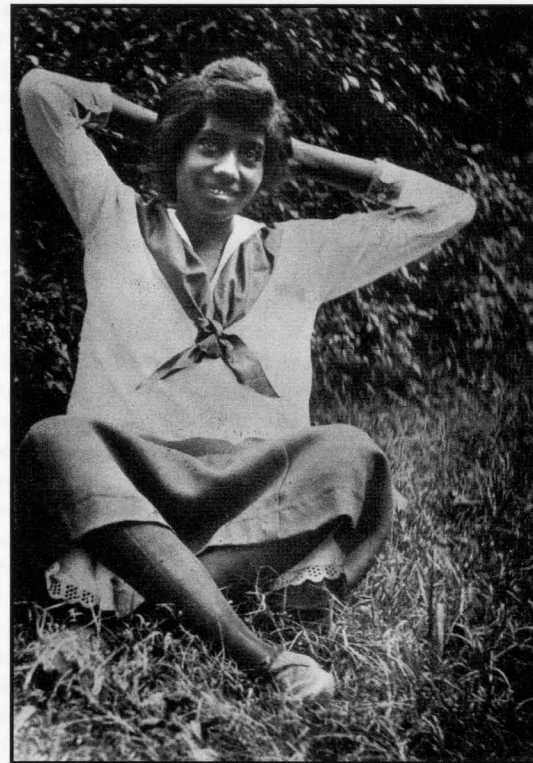
by John Ullman

Elizabeth Cotten (January 5, 1895–June 29, 1987): A Biography

Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten is best known for her song “Freight Train,” which she composed as a child of about eleven growing up in a rural African-American community near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. If “Freight Train” was Libba’s greatest hit, “Shake Sugaree” is her quintessential folksong. It is simple, yet has layers of meaning that engage adults as well as children. Its refrain begs participation, and it was woven into the everyday fabric of Libba’s life. She sang it to her grandchildren to generate enthusiasm for going to bed. Once they were in bed, she would sit down with her guitar and encourage each of them to make up their own verses, and then all of them would join in on the chorus.

4. While there may not have been folksongs associated with Libba’s parents’ professions (her father, George Nevilles, was a dynamite setter, and her mother, Louise, was a midwife), music permeated Libba’s childhood, at the turn of the 20th century. Certainly music was an integral part of work in the fields and worship in the churches. Libba took her music from all the sources around her, including the popular turn-of-the-century brass bands and the tunes of itinerant musicians as they strolled by her front porch. Libba had the rare gift of being able to draw her music from the tradition, personalize it, and yet maintain its universality.

There was plenty of music around the Nevilles’ home. Libba’s brother played the banjo, and Libba was captivated by it. Although forbidden to do so, she often took it out when her brother was away. He never would have known, but on more than one occasion, she managed to break a string. When he came back and picked up the banjo, the broken string would make a “ting-a-ling” sound as it



bounced off the banjo's drumhead. Her brother would just shake his head and say, "Oh, oh, she's done it again!" But he never raised his voice to her, and that was all the encouragement she needed.

When Libba discovered the guitar, she knew she had to have one. She did housework for 75 cents a month to save up the \$3.75 required to purchase a Stella guitar from a local dry-goods store. But even before she owned her Stella, she was developing her deceptively simple finger-picking technique. Eventually, guitar playing characterized by simple figures played on the bass strings in counterpoint to a melody played on the treble strings became widely known as "Cotten style." Being left-handed, and not being at liberty to restring the instruments she borrowed to learn on, Libba taught herself to play with the guitar upside down and backward: she fretted the strings with her right hand and picked with her left, the reverse of the usual method. This meant that the bass strings were picked by her fingers while the treble (melody strings) were picked with her thumb which accounts for the unique clarity of her bass strings and the mellow sound of her treble. And it is why, even though she has been widely imitated, almost no one can accurately recreate her sound.

Elizabeth Cotten's indomitable spirit was evident at an early age. One story she was fond of telling was how she got her name. When she was born, everyone just called her Little Sis. Finally, on her first day of school, the teacher asked her what her first name was. She said she thought for a second and then said, "Elizabeth," because she liked the name so well. Then she would say with justifiable pride, "So you see, I named myself!"

Libba married Frank Cotten when she was 15, not a particularly early age in that era, and had one child, Lily. As Libba became immersed in family life, she spent more time at church, where she was counseled to give up her "worldly" guitar music. The Cottens lived variously in Chapel Hill, Washington, D.C., and New

York City, where Frank found work in the automotive trades. In 1940, when Frank and Elizabeth divorced, she went to live with Lily and her family. Libba found work where she could. She helped raise her grandchildren, Mary, Johnine, Jane, John, and Larry, and, eventually many of their children, her great-grandchildren.

Elizabeth Cotten's talent may have languished in obscurity her whole life but for an amazing chance encounter. By the end of World War II, Libba was working in a Washington, D.C., department store as a temporary Christmastime clerk. One day, she noticed Ruth Crawford Seeger entering the store with two of her daughters. She recalls thinking that Mrs. Seeger looked just like the kind of person she would like to work for. Later, one of the Seeger girls, Peggy, got lost, and Libba reunited her with her mother. Mrs. Seeger gave Libba a card, and suggested she call if she needed work. A month later, Libba began to work in the Seeger home.

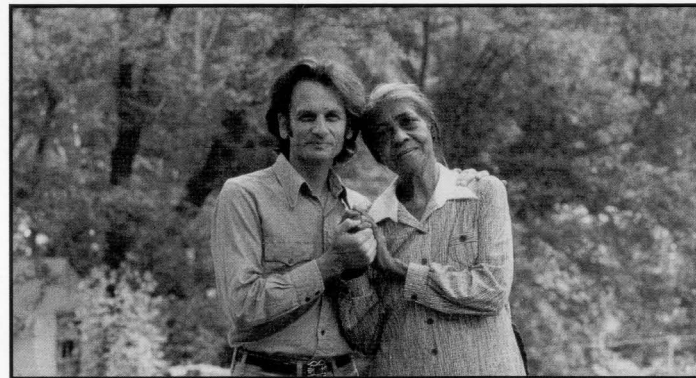
The Seeger home was an amazing place for Libba to have landed entirely by accident. Ruth Crawford Seeger was a noted composer and music teacher, who published the definitive anthology *American Folksongs for Children*. Her husband, Charles, pioneered the field of ethnomusicology and was a leading expert on American folk-music. Charles' son Pete dropped in occasionally when he was not recording or touring with the Weavers. A few years passed before Peggy discovered Libba playing the family gut-stringed guitar. Libba apologized for playing the guitar without asking to use it, but Peggy was astonished by what she heard. Eventually the Seegers came to know Libba's instrumental virtuosity and the wealth of her repertoire.

Thanks to Mike Seeger's early recordings of Libba and the efforts of the Smithsonian Institution's Ralph Rinzler, she found herself occasionally giving small concerts in the homes of congressmen and senators, including John F. Kennedy and James Abourezk. After a concert in his home, Senator Abourezk gave Libba his

card and told her to give him a call if she ever needed to. The card came in handy sometime later, when Larry Ellis, Libba's grandson, was touring with his gospel band in the South. Their van broke down in a small Alabama town. According to Larry, things started to turn ugly because a white member of the group violated some of the local mores. Larry's nephew, Johnny, got to a phone and called Libba, saying that it looked like there might be violence. Libba got his number and location and called the number on the card. It turned out to be Senator Abourezk's personal line and he answered. A few minutes later, a state patrol car pulled up to the service station. The officer said something to the owner, the repairs were finished, and the patrolman escorted Larry and the band safely on their way.

A few years before Libba's first album came out, in 1958, Peggy Seeger moved to London. She included "Freight Train" in the repertoire of American folksongs she performed to appreciative British audiences. Peggy recalls teaching it to skiffle bandleader Charles McDevitt in the fall of 1956. McDevitt and his partner, Nancy Whiskey, popularized the song in England. This appears to be the source for the first U.S. release of "Freight Train," in 1957, by country star Rusty Draper. Regrettably, they neglected to give Libba credit for authorship, publishing it under their own name. Pete Seeger had to mobilize professional help and go to court to get Libba a share of the "Freight Train" royalties.

It's likely that the general public first heard "Freight Train" from one of the many artists who covered it in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But thousands of young folk-musicians playing in college dorms and beatnik coffeehouses across the country learned it directly from Libba's first album, *Elizabeth Cotten Negro Folk Songs and Tunes* (Folkways 1957, now reissued as *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs*, Folkways 1989). Meticulously recorded by Mike Seeger, this was one of the few authentic folk-music albums available by the early 1960s, and certainly one of



Elizabeth Cotten with Mike Seeger, mid 1970s

the most influential. In addition to "Freight Train," the album provided accessible examples of some of the idiosyncratic "open" tunings used in American folk guitar. *Shake Sugaree* (Folkways, 1967), *When I'm Gone* (Folkways, 1979, also recorded by Mike Seeger), and this album constitute a virtually complete record of the Elizabeth Cotten repertoire.

As Libba's music became a staple of the folk revival of the 1960s, Libba began to tour throughout North America. Mike Seeger arranged many festival engagements and tours for her through the mid 1970s. In fact, they both did their first public performances at Swarthmore College in January, 1960. Her career generated much media attention and many awards. The city of Syracuse, New York, where she spent the last years of her life, honored her in 1983 by naming a small park

in her honor, the Elizabeth Cotten Grove. In 1984, she received both a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship and a Grammy award for the Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording. An equally important honor was her inclusion in *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*, by Brian Lanker, an enduring bestseller, which put her in the company of Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, and Oprah Winfrey.

The story of Libba's Grammy is, in part, a testament to the incredibly positive effect her personality and art had on people. After hearing a number of her performances and spending some time with her, a savvy young attorney and amateur guitarist, John Overton, decided he wanted to produce an Elizabeth Cotten album. He didn't let little things like the fact he had never recorded anyone before or the very small chance of monetary profit stop him. He felt that it was important to have a document of Libba's live performances and stories to complement the three excellent studio recordings of her music on Folkways. So he put together a truckful of recording gear, followed Libba around to a number of concerts over a few years, put the *Elizabeth Cotten Live* album together, and persuaded Chris Strachwitz to publish it on his Arhoolie label. And Overton didn't stop there: he made sure copies of *Elizabeth Cotten Live* got into the hands of key Recording Academy members. When Libba won, she flew out to Los Angeles to attend the award ceremony and personally received her Grammy.

Elizabeth Cotten continued to perform right up to the end of her life. Her last concert was one that folk legend Odetta put together for her in New York City in the spring of 1987. Libba's recordings, concert tours, media acclaim, and major awards are a testament to her genius. But the true measure of her legacy is the tens of thousands of guitarists who have included her songs as a favorite part of their repertoires.

In 1976, Libba found herself at Charles Seeger's 90th birthday party. Being

not much younger than Professor Seeger himself, Libba turned to him and quipped, "You know, God must have forgotten about us." But those of us who had the privilege of knowing her must feel it was surely quite the opposite.

Recollections of Elizabeth Cotten's Life on the Road

In Washington, D.C., in November 1974, I ran into Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten at a meeting that Ralph Nader had put together to draw public attention to the dangers of nuclear power. A number of celebrities were there, including Robert Redford and Margaret Mead. Mike Seeger and Hazel Dickens had been asked to provide some music. Mike had been recording Libba all day; and for her, the event was just a stop on the way home. I was attending the meeting in my capacity as staff scientist for the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG).

As I sat savoring the rare treat of Mike and Hazel's music, I suddenly I felt my arm taken in a very firm grip. A little startled, I turned to my left and found 81-year-old Elizabeth Cotten staring straight into my eyes. "When are you going to bring me out West again?" she asked. All I could stammer was, "Uh, February, Libba, how about February?" "Fine!" she said, and relaxed her grip on my arm.

When February rolled around, I found myself meeting Libba's flight on a cold, damp, Oregon evening. As I walked into the Portland airport, "Freight Train" was playing on the Muzak. I had assembled a half-dozen dates in Oregon, Washington, and Utah. For an opening act, I had lined up myself and my wife and partner, Irene Namkung. We might generously have been called competent amateurs.

That little tour launched a three-decade career for Irene and me as agents and artist managers. And for Libba, who had previously done only a smattering of



Mariposa Folk Festival, 1974

coffeehouse and festival dates each year, along with occasional tours with Mike Seeger, it marked the beginning of a regular touring career that took her to major fine-arts venues across North America and brought her a panoply of honors and international recognition.

Libba was pleased with the tour. She went home with about \$3,000, more than enough to purchase the new refrigerator she had been hoping for.

I must admit that it appeared rather naïve to predicate a new business on an 82-year-old client. The thought did cross my mind, but it was overwhelmed by my certainty that Libba had so much to offer the public that practical considerations should be put aside. True, in the first few years, if I sensed a presenter was hesitating to book Libba, I would point out that she was in her 80s and they shouldn't wait until next year. This technique eventually wore thin. One time I called Dave Siglin, proprietor of the Ark in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and before I could say anything, he asked if I had saved him a date on the Tenth Annual Elizabeth Cotten Farewell Tour.

The venues that were available to Libba in the mid-1970s were mostly folk festivals, folk clubs, coffeehouses, and folk societies. Libba did most of them: the Philadelphia, San Diego, UCLA, Vancouver, and Northwest Folklife festivals; clubs including the Ark, McCabe's, the Iron Horse, the Old Town School, Gerde's Folk City, and the Fly By Night Club; and the Seattle, Corvallis, and Tucson folklore societies.

At that time, the university and community fine-arts market was just beginning to consider booking folk artists in their season series. Libba's artistry, charm, and historical importance made her perfect for them. They were good for her too, because they could pay higher fees than the folk venues, had larger halls, and did better publicity. The trick was getting them to see her in performance. The way we did this was to arrange showcases for her at the fine-arts booking conferences. These were trade shows where arts presenters came to meet with managers and agents to

book their next season. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts helped make it possible for Libba to attend these meetings. The showcases were not typical performing situations. They were much shorter than normal concert sets, usually ten to twenty minutes. There was often not a lot of time to sound-check, and presenters often moved in and out of the hall during artists' performances. Libba adjusted brilliantly to these conditions.

The showcase we were most concerned about was at her first National Association of Campus Activities meeting in 1980. The conditions of their showcases were the most stringent we encountered: they were exactly twenty minutes long; if an artist went one second over, they pulled the plug on the lights and sound. We didn't want Libba to suffer that indignity, so we tried to develop a set that took about seventeen minutes. The five-minute warning came, then the two-minute and one-minute warnings. Unfazed, Libba continued to play. She wrapped up her showcase, to considerable applause, at exactly 19 minutes and 53 seconds.

14.

Libba was perfectly capable of touring on her own and often did. More often, however, she toured with other artists. These included Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard; Libba's granddaughter, Johnine; and most notably, Mike Seeger. Mike, of course, discovered Libba's musical talent when she worked in his home when he was a child. Mike recorded her and was the first to bring her to the attention of the folk community. They cared for each other a great deal, and this made their concerts together quite magical.

Mike knew Libba's music better than anyone else, and sometimes this paid interesting dividends on the road. One night in the winter of 1973, when Libba was at a small club in Park City, Utah, she began to sing a song she called "Willie." It told how a young man killed his best friend in a jealous rage over a girlfriend. Mike, who had heard only a portion of the song before, grabbed his recorder and got as much



15.

From left to right: Yank Rachel, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Elizabeth Cotten, Doc Reese, Sleepy John Estes, at Newport in 1964

as he could on tape. Later, Libba allowed as to how she had finally heard that all the principals, whom Libba had known personally, were dead, so she felt it was all right to sing the song. The original incident probably happened around 1907.

Although school engagements typically paid about 10 percent of Libba's usual concert fee, she was dedicated to performing for schoolchildren. She did scores of school shows every year. Sometimes these were arranged by the folks who

presented her major concerts; other times, she agreed to do schools for a week or more as part of programs organized by school districts or state arts agencies.

Libba was delighted to perform for children, and they were charmed by her. They hung on every note, identified with the stories of her childhood, and sang along on “Freight Train” and “Shake Sugaree.” Her young audiences were fascinated that someone her age could be a recording artist. Still, the school shows were not without their moments. After a performance in a suburban Oregon school, one mother complained about the inclusion of religious songs in Libba’s repertoire. Another time, a guileless nine-year-old raised his hand during the question-and-answer period: he asked, “Why aren’t you dead yet?” Libba smiled and said, “I guess the Lord’s just not ready for me.”

Libba’s educational workshops were mostly about music. Occasionally she would be asked to talk about life in rural North Carolina at the turn of the 20th century. On one occasion, Poki Namkung, Irene’s sister and an intern at UC Medical School in San Francisco, asked Libba to talk to a group of her colleagues about what medical practices were like when she was a child. At first, Libba wasn’t sure what she had to offer the doctors, but when she started talking, two hours went by quickly. Libba began with her mother’s experiences as a midwife, and wound up talking about a variety of herbal remedies, including the use of turpentine to effect abortions.

By the mid 1980s, walking long distances was a little difficult for Libba, so we made sure there was always a wheelchair waiting for her at the airport. At first, Libba resisted being wheeled around like an invalid, but she eventually acquiesced to the wisdom of it. One time, she arrived at our home in Portland, Oregon, with Mike Seeger after a long transcontinental flight. After Libba got settled, Mike took me aside and told me that she had noticed people staring at them as he wheeled her down the concourse in the St. Louis airport. “Mike,” she said, “Do you know why

all those people are looking at us? They’re thinking, “Why is that young white man pushing that old Negro lady? She should be pushing him!”

One of her favorite jokes surfaced after a gig in New York City. As her cab was passing the large cemetery on the way to La Guardia, she asked the cabbie, “Do you know how many people are dead in that cemetery?” “No, ma’am, I don’t,” he said. Libba responded, “All of them!”

In the early 1980s, Libba, who was in her late 80s, gave a series of performances in Bellingham, Washington. One show was for a senior citizens’ program at Fairhaven College. It was a pleasant noontime concert, and I think Libba enjoyed the idea of playing for retired folks who were considered elderly, even though she had a good twenty years on most of them. As she was leaving, she remarked to her host, “You know, this is a nice place. I’d like to come here when I get old.”

So many times over the years, I have mentioned Elizabeth Cotten only to be met with a blank stare. Then I say, “You know, the woman who wrote “Freight Train,”” and there is usually instant recognition and a big smile. Libba is inextricably linked to her most famous song. In the 1960s, “Freight Train” was the song that separated the serious folk guitarists from the dilettantes. It was an anthem of the folk movement—one of those songs that form a common ground for musicians, whether they are old friends or just meeting for the first time.

A number of Libba’s songs were recorded by major artists. The Grateful Dead did several renditions of “Oh, Babe, It Ain’t No Lie.” Bob Dylan did that and “Shake Sugaree.” “Freight Train” was recorded by so many artists—to name a few, Pete, Peggy, and Mike Seeger; Taj Mahal; and Peter, Paul, and Mary—that Libba probably didn’t know all of them herself. However, one time Nancy Covey, who managed the McCabe’s concert series in Santa Monica, was taking Libba to a flight at the Los Angeles airport. On the way to the gate, they ran into Peter Yarrow. Before

Nancy could say “Peter, Paul, and Mary,” Libba said, “Oh, yes, you’re the nice young man who played my song. And I’m so glad you did!”

People came to hear Libba because of “Freight Train.” At one concert at Oregon State University in Corvallis, the audience prevailed on her to sing “Freight Train” three times. She was pleased to oblige.

If “Freight Train” got people in the door, Libba then kept them glued to their seats with her folk wisdom, her ability to evoke what life was like at the turn of the 20th century, and her music. Sometimes her mastery of the guitar was the last thing folks noticed. One time, NBC newsman Jim Compton attended three of her concerts in the space of a week; at the last one, he remarked, “She’s really a great guitar player, isn’t she?”

One person who clearly appreciated Libba’s extraordinary musicianship was Taj Mahal. Taj is one of the most talented, intelligent, tasteful, and imaginative artists who came out of the ’60s folk revival. He not only recorded “Freight Train” and “Shake Sugaree,” he invited Libba to be a special guest on a number of concerts in the mid-80s, including a festival in Switzerland. The Swiss festival marked the first time that Libba had gone outside the United States except to Canada, so she needed to get a passport. She needed her birth certificate to get the passport, but her birth records had been lost in a courthouse fire. So we were faced with the task of proving Elizabeth Cotten was a U.S. citizen. The State Department managed to find mention of Libba in both the 1898 and 1902 census records. Problem solved.

Libba’s performing style was so natural that many people underestimated her genius for showmanship. In fact, she crafted her live performances as carefully as she crafted her songs. She understood that people wanted to hear both her music and her stories. She wanted to maintain a connection with her audience, so she always asked for the houselights to be up slightly so she could make eye contact with the

people in at least the first few rows.

Libba’s first show with Taj was in a small theater in Salt Lake City, promoted by the owners of a local nightclub. The sound check went well, and the promoters understood Libba’s wish to have the houselights up slightly. But when Libba took her seat on stage, the house was completely dark. She asked that the lights be brought up. Nothing happened. She asked again, and still no houselights. Backstage, Taj’s jaw dropped. “What’s she doing?” he asked. “Getting her own way,” I thought to myself. A minute or two later, the promoters figured out how to get the houselights up and Libba began to play.

With Libba, getting the show to start was usually easier than getting it to end. She felt a great responsibility to give her audiences all they came for, so she was quite willing to extend her nominal fifty-minute set to seventy minutes with encores. She often said she was willing to play everything people wanted to hear because she didn’t know when she would get back that way again. For their part, the audiences never wanted those enchanted evenings to end. When I went along with Libba on the road, we developed a bit of business for the end of her shows. After her second encore, I would come out on stage, take her guitar, and offer to help her off stage. Libba would look directly out at the audience and say, “He wants me to go. Do you want me to go?” The audience would respond with a resounding “NO!” And Libba was off to her third and maybe fourth encores.

We always tried to schedule a few engagements for Libba when she came through Portland. That gave us time to visit, and gave Libba a little respite from her string of one-nighters, along with a chance for a little home cooking. She really enjoyed turkey, so we always tried to roast one for her when she visited. If time allowed, she would reciprocate by making her chicken and dumplings for us—real comfort food. One morning, after a big turkey dinner, I walked into the kitchen to

find that she had just prepared an enormous turkey sandwich. She was about to take the first bite when she saw me. She paused, sandwich poised between the plate and her mouth, and said, “You know, some old people don’t have an appetite. But, me, I have an appetite. You know why? Because I don’t give up!” 🍷

ELIZABETH COTTEN’S MUSIC

by Mike Seeger

Elizabeth Cotten’s instrumental music is built on a firm foundation of late 19th- and early 20th-century African-American banjo and guitar picking, with some influence of that period’s parlor guitar style. Her songs originally came from a span that ranges back into the mid 19th-century African-American songster and frolic traditions (both unaccompanied and banjo accompanied), blues, and church singing to the very early 20th century with its urban ragtime and popular songs current when she was first playing.

On her first recording (now Smithsonian Folkways 40009), the focus was on her traditional songs, and some of the older songs are here as well. But after she started playing concerts, in 1960, she became inspired to play a lot more and put together the six new songs here. The instrumentals tend to be intricate “parlor ragtime” compositions, with subtle variations from beginning to end.

Ms. Cotten played a standard-strung banjo and guitar left-handed, and since she was entirely self-taught, she adapted traditional styles, creating her unique solid, rhythmic, and graceful sound. Unless otherwise noted, the guitar is tuned EADGBE, but one-half to one tone low. The banjo was tuned approximately gDGBD. On these recordings, Ms. Cotten primarily used a Martin D-18. 🍷

SONG NOTES

based on interviews with Elizabeth Cotten

1. Shake Sugaree 🍷 Vocal, Brenda Evans (her great grandchild, age 12, one of the contributing authors of the song); guitar accompaniment, Elizabeth Cotten

Elizabeth Cotten had the melody for this song by the early 1960s and played it for her four great-grandchildren. About a year before this recording session, as she was putting them to bed, the oldest, Johnny Evans, made the first verse to this song. Brenda, Johnny’s sister, and their cousins contributed verses over the following weeks, and according to Brenda, Elizabeth gave it the chorus and said this about the song: “Now that ‘Shake Sugaree,’ that’s more my four great-grandchildren’s song. They made the verses, and I played the music. The first verse, my oldest great-grandson, he made that himself, and from that each child would say a word and add to it. To tell the truth, I don’t know what got it started, . . . but it must have been something said or something done. That’s practically how all my songs I pick up. There’s somebody’ll say something or something done, and then . . . something will come into your mind.” John Evans emailed this recollection in 2003:

“As I remember it, Libba had the tune for Shakesugaree, and she used to play it for the kids. It was a catchy tune, and we started to add words to the tune. I did the first verse, Brenda the second, Sue and Wendy (Peanut) the other verses. We each had a part in writing the words. I don’t recall that any of us contributed any more than the others. However, Brenda was the singer in the group and wasn’t at all bashful about singing it in front of people.

We would stay up late into the night with Granny playing and coaxing us to make up verses for Shakesugaree. We were so proud to hear the finished song and to have our work recorded, man, it was simply grand. The great thing is that Granny

always gave us credit for the song—she didn't have to do that—all of us were willing lyricists, glad to stay up later than usual and very happy to have Granny's smile of approval.

The best recollection that I have is that the song was written in the year preceding the recording.”

2. Take Me Back to Baltimore ♪ Libba learned this from her brother and others when she was quite young, around Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It was a song, with words.

3. Washington Blues ♪ Elizabeth Cotten composed this song in January 1965, just before these recording sessions. Strictly speaking, this is more a “parlor ragtime” piece than a blues. The word *blues* has evolved to being used as part of a name for almost any piece of music.

4. I'm Going Away ♪ Elizabeth remembered this as an old tune which she changed slightly in 1963 and added some lyrics. In the middle of the piece, she changes her picking style from two-finger (finger and thumb) to thumb and two or three fingers.

5. Fox Chase ♪ The origins for this piece came from guitar players around Ms. Cotten's home community. Each section is a little different, using a different picking pattern (“roll”), separated by a brief bridge. Each represents some of the different hounds in the chase. Toward the climax of the chase, the bass strings suggest the baying of several hounds; and the first string, the drone of the lead hound. This is an unusual piece in its use of minor chords and varying pace.

6. Ontario Blues ♪ Libba composed this song in January 1965, and Johnny Evans named it after the Ontario Place, a small Washington, D.C., coffeehouse and performance venue frequented by Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, John Jackson, and many others, including this writer.

7. Fare You Well, My Darling ♪ Libba learned this song from her mother, which takes the origins of the song back well into the 19th century. Guitar is in G tuning (DGDGBD, from sixth to first), tuned down about a half-step to F-sharp. The first four strings are tuned like the standard banjo G tuning, and she uses a banjolike picking pattern. The song is a relative of the well-known “My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

8. Untitled / Georgie Buck ♪ When I would turn on the recording machine at these sessions, I wasn't always sure what was going to be played. Sometimes Libba would begin before I started the recording machine, and a late start on my part would catch most of what turned out to be the best “take.”

Banjo-tune medleys are not the norm among traditional players. These tunes, like the previous one, use a banjolike picking pattern. I don't recall having heard the first tune anywhere else, but the second was her most often played banjo tune. The guitar is tuned and played as in the previous song. I wish I'd asked Libba to comment on the second “Georgie Buck” verse.

9 & 10. Mama, Nobody's Here But the Baby ♪ Libba learned this song from her brothers. It is played here both as a song and a fast instrumental.

11. Look and Live, My Brother ♪ This is an old church song.

12. Jesus Lifted Me 🎶 An old church song, with vocals by Brenda Evans and guitar by Elizabeth Cotten.

13. Jesus Is Tenderly Calling 🎶 This is an old church song, one of Libba's few pieces in 3/4 time. The guitar is tuned to G tuning (DGDGBD), but tuned down one whole tone to F.

14. Buck Dance 🎶 Libba had known the first part of this tune for a long time, but added the second part shortly before this recording session. The break where she taps her finger on the guitar top, was formerly for the dancer, presumably doing the buck dance. Libba varied the length of the break during a performance. She was a good dancer, and kept up with many of the steps popular in the early 20th century.

15. Ruben 🎶 This is a unique version of the very well-known banjo song of the same name. This is the only time I ever heard Libba sing and play it in this manner with these two parts. Guitar is in D tuning (DADF#AD), tuned down one half-tone.

16. Oh, Miss Lulie Gal 🎶 Libba learned this from her brother as a banjo song before she started playing guitar.

17. Can't Get a Letter From Down the Road 🎶 Libba learned this song from her brother, Claude, as a guitar tune.

18. Shoot That Buffalo 🎶 Libba learned this song from a man who visited their home about 1910. He was about 50 years old and played it on banjo; when he got to his favorite place in the tune, where he'd flip the second string (on the fourth note of the scale, during the word "that," before "buffalo" in the chorus), he'd say "talk it baby." And Elizabeth recalled, "you'd never thought he'd change (play the second

part of) the tune." Ms. Cotten put the words to the tune.

19. Boatman Dance 🎶 This is an old banjo song that Libba learned from her brother, Claude.

20. Hallelujah, It Is Done 🎶 This is an old church song.

21. Holy Ghost, Unchain My Name 🎶 Libba recalled, "When I was in my teens, I got religion on that song. . . . I was baptized, and where I was baptized was something like a creek. The pastor would have someone to kind of dam it up. . . . so the water would get deep at a certain place. Well, that's where I was baptized, . . . and after I was baptized, I joined the church."

22. Little Brown Jug 🎶 Libba remembered having heard this piece all her life.

23. Delia 🎶 Libba occasionally sang words to this song:

Oh my Delia, I long to steal you;

Oh my Delia, I love you so.

This recording was made by Toshi and Dan Seeger at their home near Beacon, New York, in February 1965.

24. Ball the Jack 🎶 First composed in 1964, this song evolved.

25. Till We Meet Again 🎶 This is a well-known church song. The guitar is tuned to G tuning: DGDGBD, one half tone low, in F-sharp.

26. When the Train Comes Along 🎶 This is an old church song and one of the few pieces she played in the key of F, a difficult one on the guitar.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

Recordings were made using a Nagra monaural recorder and one Electrovoice 654 omnidirectional microphone at Alexander Hall, Princeton, New Jersey, in February 1965, and at the Roosevelt, New Jersey, Elementary School, in January, 1966.

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Elizabeth Cotten 🍷 Shake Sugaree

1. SHAKE SUGAREE 5:03
2. TAKE ME BACK TO BALTIMORE * 1:59
3. WASHINGTON BLUES 3:38
4. I'M GOING AWAY 3:25
5. FOX CHASE 3:42
6. ONTARIO BLUES 3:45
7. FARE YOU WELL, MY DARLING * 2:03
8. UNTITLED / GEORGIE BUCK * 3:01
9. MAMA, NOBODY'S HERE BUT THE BABY * :53
10. MAMA, NOBODY'S HERE BUT THE BABY 1:37
11. LOOK AND LIVE, MY BROTHER 1:52
12. JESUS LIFTED ME 2:09
13. JESUS IS TENDERLY CALLING 1:39
14. BUCK DANCE 1:52
15. RUBEN 2:14
16. OH, MISS LULIE GAL 1:31
17. CAN'T GET A LETTER FROM DOWN THE ROAD * 1:45
18. SHOOT THAT BUFFALO 1:40
19. BOATMAN DANCE 1:48
20. HALLELUJAH, IT IS DONE * 1:34
21. HOLY GHOST, UNCHAIN MY NAME * 1:25
22. LITTLE BROWN JUG * 2:23
23. DELIA * 2:12
24. BALL THE JACK 2:35
25. TILL WE MEET AGAIN 2:04
26. WHEN THE TRAIN COMES ALONG * 2:45

* DENOTES PREVIOUSLY UNRELEASED TRACKS

RECORDED, EDITED &
PRODUCED BY MIKE SEEGER

Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten (1895–1987) wrote her well-known song "Freight Train" at about age 11 and sang it nearly 80 years. Through her songwriting, her quietly commanding personality, and her unique left-handed guitar and banjo styles, she has inspired and influenced generations of younger artists. Cotten was declared a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984, and was recognized by the Smithsonian Institution as a "living treasure." She received a Grammy Award in 1985 when she was 90. These essential 1965–66 recordings include ten previously unreleased tracks. 🍷

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