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Appalachian Women Heritage Fellows

by Deborah J. Thompson

The soundtrack of 20th century Appalachia may be heard in the music of eight female NEA Heritage artists honored in the years 1985-2013. The list includes Lily May Ledford (1985), **Ola Belle Reed** (1986), **Etta Baker** (1991), **Hazel Dickens** (2001), **Jean Ritchie** (2002), **Janette Carter** (2005), Mary Jane Queen (2007), and Sheila Kay Adams (2013). Recognizing lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and contributions to our nation's traditional arts heritage, these fellowships are also awarded to allow the artists to spend more time on their art form.

Being born into a musical family or community is a great advantage because it allows one to be immersed in the language and expression of local music. This is especially true for women, who have historically had fewer opportunities than men to learn outside of their own families. Jean Ritchie is perhaps the most represented woman musician from Appalachia on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Her memoir, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, contextualizes the songs that appear on the playlist which accompanies this article. Ritchie's debut recording for Folkways Records was an album of children's songs titled ***Children's Songs and Games from the Southern Mountains***. Through the course of her career, she would appear on fifteen Smithsonian Folkways albums, including seven solo releases, a family recording, and collaborations with other renowned musicians such as **Doc Watson**, **Oscar Brand and David Sear**.

Guitarist **Etta Baker**, from Caldwell County, North Carolina, credits her father, Boone Reid, with being her only teacher and mentor. Her representation on Smithsonian Folkways is mainly as a blues musician, but she has a clear, energetic two-finger style which not only includes genres that might be called Piedmont blues, modern blues, or country blues, but also country or old time. Speaking about her music, she characterized it as "…something my daddy had give me. And I can get to thinking about the sounds he made on the guitar…and I love it more and more, every day, I guess". [1]

[1] Video interview with David Holt. **http://www.ettabakerproject.com/video.html**

Gendered expectations can influence or restrict the types of music allowed or encouraged for both men and women. In some cases, music takes a back seat to raising families and working a "day job". This was the case for Etta Baker, whose music really blossomed after her children grew up, she was widowed, and retired from her job.

Lily May Ledford tells a great story of her mother's insistence on her singing those "old love songs" when she was a child instead of going down the road to play dance music in the rough company of her brother and his friends. This story may be heard on the album *Gems: Lily May Ledford*, which was produced by her granddaughter on the June Appal label. Ledford won a music competition, which got her noticed by songwriter John Lair, who recruited her for his radio program, *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, and created an all-female band, Coon Creek Girls, with Lily May as the leader. Her story illustrates that for many women, being part of a family group or institution such as a radio program creates a zone for social acceptance as a musician and a way to push back on the boundaries imposed by others.

Janette Carter was one of several children of A.P. and Sara Carter, and may be heard on many recordings of **The Carter Family** in the late 1930s and early 1940s available on Smithsonian Folkways, again demonstrating the importance of family groups in women's music. She was an accomplished musician in her own right and has even written original songs. She, along with her brother Joe, developed the Carter Fold performance center and devoted much of her life to keeping the memory and spirit of her family's musical contributions alive. Notably, Janette Carter's NEA award was for her "lifetime supporting and promoting traditional music of the Appalachian region," rather than for her musicianship alone.

Ola Belle Reed was known for her unifying spirit and commitment to social justice, as well as for mentoring young people. In an interview on her album ***My Epitaph***, she defended the music of young people, as well as their right to dress and appear as they wish. Another album, ***All in One Evening***, represents a mix of new and traditional music that was played in the home of Ola Belle and her husband Bud Reed. Her original songs "**High on a Mountain**" and "**I've Endured**" fit right in with traditional tunes and songs, yet extend the expression of her personality.

Being a younger member of a distinguished folk family and community means that it might take some time to be noticed for your own individual accomplishments. Sheila Kay Adams is a ballad singer and storyteller from Sodom Laurel, North Carolina, who is embedded in a family of singers and characters, such as her great aunt Dellie Chandler Norton, or the legendary ballad singer Dillard Chandler, whose rendition of "**The**

Soldier Traveling from the North" can be heard on the Smithsonian Folkways album ***Dark Holler***. Although Adams does not appear on any Smithsonian Folkways recordings, her voice and repertoire ring strong with the tang of the Big Laurel and it is hard to think of anyone who more embodies tradition and yet lives a contemporary life.

There are so many examples of how those honored by the NEA National Heritage Fellowships aren't just repeating and channeling the past, echoing archaic scales and expressions. These women live their music. They have a creative intelligence that reinvigorates and reinterprets their Appalachian cultural heritage in the present, infusing their music and stories with meaning that helps carry their traditions into the future.

Hazel Dickens exemplifies how a person steeped in tradition also has contemporary statements to make. She made a splash in the bluegrass scene beginning in the 1950s, first as a powerful duo with **Alice Gerrard**, then as a solo artist. Her hard-hitting songs gave voice to coal mining families ("**Black Lung**") and asserted the rights of women, including honky-tonk women. She and Ola Belle Reed represent the contributions and importance of Appalachian migrants to northern and eastern cities. By Hazel's own account, she never worried about hitting the right pitch, but focused on the emotionality of the music and meaning of her songs and that came across to her audience. In an interview, she laughed as she said, "Oh, I never hit the right pitch. I go for that feel, I go for the jugular. I can't even think about [the pitch]. When I'm singing, I'm thinking about the real things" (Harrington 2004). They were inspiring to men as well, but Hazel and Alice's enduring legacy is that they inspired generations of women, perhaps the most famous being Naomi Judd, to trust themselves and bring their whole selves to their music.

These honorees have taken very different trajectories in their musical lives, based somewhat on their position in the chronology and topography of the folk revival. Their appearance on or absence from Folkways recordings has less to do with their authenticity, personality, or excellence of their music, and possibly more with where they live(d), their musical compatriots, and whether Moe Asch was made aware of their art. Jean Ritchie, Ola Belle Reed, and Hazel Dickens spent most of their adult life around northeastern cities, where they had greater access to performance venues and opportunities to meet record producers, so perhaps that is why they have more recordings on SF. The workings of gender are so normalized that seemingly small discomforts, like the slender bars on a cage, can work together to create real constraints (Frye 149). For example, male collectors who go out into the field are perhaps less likely to spend time with female sources due to comfort issues on either side of the

microphone. Female musicians may be less likely to put themselves forward (Thompson 2012).

Nevertheless, these women's arts are recognized and documented in a variety of venues and they all have, by definition as NEA National Heritage Fellows, created a legacy of family members, friends, neighbors, fans, and others that are continuing their music. The power of the art and music of these women is that, while they are geniuses of music and creativity in their own right, they are also deeply embedded in their culture and community, giving voice to their people as well. They are not the heroic individualists so celebrated in our culture that bring to light something completely new and unexpected. Instead, they bring forward accessible and relatable elements of life that we sometimes did not even know that we needed to express until we heard their voices.

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