

ELIZABETH COTTEN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958–1983</i>	<i>Folk</i>	<i>Freight Train (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Elizabeth Cotten*

Years: *1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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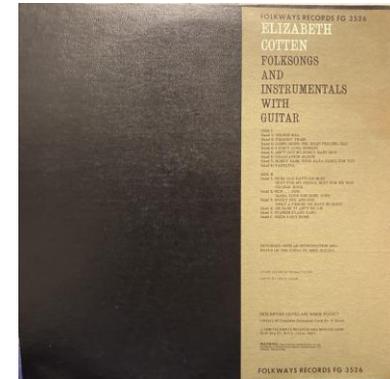
FOLKSONGS AND INSTRUMENTALS WITH GUITAR

Album released:

1958

V A L U E
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More info:



Tracks: 1) Wilson Rag; 2) **Freight Train**; 3) Going Down The Road Feeling Bad; 4) I Don't Love Nobody; 5) Ain't Got No Honey Baby Now; 6) Graduation March; 7) Honey Babe Your Papa Cares For You; 8) Vastopol; 9) Here Old Rattler Here / Sent For My Fiddle Sent For My Bow / George Buck; 10) Run.....Run / Mama Your Son Done Gone; 11) Sweet Bye And Bye / What A Friend We Have In Jesus; 12) Oh Babe It Ain't No Lie; 13) Spanish Flang Dang; 14) When I Get Home.

REVIEW

Considering that my little writing project is mostly concerned with artists who began their careers no earlier than the rock'n'roll explosion of the mid-Fifties (or, at least, no earlier than the post-WWII period, achieving notoriety by the mid-Fifties), Elizabeth Cotten might seem like an odd inclusion — almost like a ghost of a long gone by era, since, after all, she had mastered her guitar playing skills and put together her repertoire as early as the 1900s, before marrying Frank Cotten and abandoning music altogether in order to focus on her family.



Naturally, we have no way of knowing what she sounded like at the time (I guess George and Louisa Nevill, Libba's parents, did not exactly have a habit of storing wax cylinders around the house), which is why, when her dormant talents were rediscovered and re-encouraged by the Seeger family more than 40 years later, she would technically emerge as a «Fifties artist». For the short sessions that made up the bulk of her first and best known album release on Folkways Records, rather humbly but long-windedly titled **Folksongs And Instrumentals With Guitar**, she allegedly had to re-activate all of her skills, neglected since 1910; but since she did it on her own, without any coaching from the younger generation, the result

does sound fairly close to what our expectations of a friendly blues busker from before World War I might look like; the record fits in quite nicely on the same shelf with the dusty recordings of Blind Blake, Lonnie Johnson, and other early blues guitarists with a light, cheerful ragtime flavor (as opposed to the Delta-flavored guitar of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton, and their ilk).

Like so many other recordings by the older generation of bluesmen and blueswomen released on Folkways in the 1950s, Cotten's tunes fell on the fertile soil of young American aficionados of the folk and blues tradition — through the Seegers' mediation, she was undoubtedly heard all over Greenwich Village, and her playing style would undoubtedly influence young folk musicians all the way up to Bob Dylan, directly or indirectly. That said, she never achieved genuine stardom at the time, not even on the level of such «blues dinosaurs» as Skip James or Mississippi John Hurt; in fact, the legend of Elizabeth Cotten took a long time to ripen, with her winning a Grammy in 1984 (when she was already more than 90 years old!), and with **Folksongs** slowly gaining in status until, sometime in the 2010s, it began to be hailed across various Web resources as somewhat of a lost masterpiece.

Much of this has to do with trends, of course. In the era of all-pervasive hunger for social justice, Elizabeth Cotten is quite obviously a near-ideal figure to revive and dust off — she was a woman, she was African-American, she transcended the stage of patriarchal domestic oppression to fulfill her dream, and she even was left-handed with a consequently unique playing style, symbolizing individuality and freedom. All these circumstances are the perfect feeding trough for miriads of same-sounding generic media cheers from people who are much more interested in their salaries than in actually listening to the music — which is not to say that the hype around **Folksongs** may not, even coincidentally, be fully deserved; it is only to say that the album, first and foremost, has to be evaluated in the overall musical context of its age (and by «its age» I mean, of course, the pre-WWII years of acoustic blues, not the Fifties) rather than from the romantic perspective of an oppressed genius singer-songwriter, which Elizabeth Cotten never was, and would have probably been horrified herself to ever be mislabeled as.

The key track on the album is, of course, 'Freight Train' — a song that Cotten claims to have written herself sometime in between 1906 and her marriage. The degree of veracity of that claim is impossible to establish, considering that folk songs are never composed «from scratch», and we even have no idea if Elizabeth played the same chords and sang the same words on the 1957 recording that she did in her teenage years. We do know that the song was «imported» by the Seegers to the UK at least a year or two before Cotten got to record it herself; the first commercial recording was by Scottish skiffle

artist Chas McDevitt, from where it bounced back into the US and was further developed by the likes of Peter, Paul and Mary. Naturally, Cotten's 1957 recording is the earliest «authentic» performance, and since it provides the blueprint for at least half of the other tracks on **Folksongs**, we might as well concentrate on it rather than dissipate our attention around the rest of the material.

The first thing to get out of the way is that Cotten is no singer; her voice is naturally weak, she has very limited range and is rarely able to bring a line to conclusion without flubbing some notes or cracking at the end. How much of this was due to her age (she was, after all, over 60 when the recording was made) and how much to her natural deficiencies, we shall once again never know, but on the whole, it is a good thing that more than half of the tracks are completely without vocals, and the other half only feature a few verses or so, with the main emphasis on the playing. Something could certainly be said about the natural granny charm of Elizabeth's humming, but even so, it seems to me as if whenever she sings, she does that strictly for *herself*, just to help her better get in the mood — in the same vein as Glenn Gould's annoying, but inescapable murmuring of the melody. It might be best to simply think of the album as **Instrumental Folksongs With Open Mouth**, though, admittedly, songs like 'Freight Train' work better if you are conscious of their lyrics ("When I am dead and in my grave / No more good times here I crave" — for reasons that we can all see through, those lines never made it into any of the early cover versions).

As far as the guitar playing is concerned, I am in no way qualified to make a musicological judgement on how exactly does Elizabeth's technique (she was playing a regular guitar left-handed without swapping the lower and higher strings) affect the emotional resonance of the melodies — but I do hear a confident, complex, and well-practiced style of picking, probably the closest equivalent to which can be heard on the early recordings of Mississippi John Hurt from the 1920s, collected on the **Avalon Blues** compilation (an absolute must not just for people interested in the history of acoustic blues, but for everybody looking for beautiful and soulful music from the pre-WWII era). The one chord change on 'Freight Train' that makes all the difference is the one you hear exactly ten seconds into the song — apparently, it is the contrast between the C chord of the first two bars and the E7 of the third one that is responsible for the jumps between chirpy exuberance and deep pensive sorrow and, consequently, all the magic appeal of the song, and *that* may be the single most important thing not only to differentiate between Cotten and John Hurt, but also to understand why this kind of playing might have resonated more with young boomers at the time, who were looking to this music for enlightenment and spiritual guidance rather than for lightweight entertainment.

The problem, as I already said, is that about half of the other tunes on the album sound very similar to 'Freight Train', while not being nearly as impressive — for instance, the well-known 'Going Down The Road Feeling Bad', a particular favorite of the Grateful Dead and countless other roots-rock artists, is just as pleasant as 'Train' but adds nothing to what we already know about the lady's picking style or contemplative mood. Most of the lyrics and instrumental variations on the record are formally interchangeable — you could, for instance, hum the words to 'Freight Train' while playing the instrumental pattern on 'Vastopol' and get more or less the same results. Perhaps worst of all is the fact that everything is played to more or less the same ragtime mid-tempo, allowing almost no mood shifts whatsoever and often blurring the lines between individual tunes... provided those existed in the first place.

There are some curious exceptions to the rule, like 'Graduation March', for which Cotten does indeed slip into a march-like tempo, playing as anthemically as possible for one woman with a guitar — but even on that one, she (jokingly, perhaps) cannot resist slipping into her usual ragtime mode in the transitions between verses (think of this as the musical equivalent of the one mischievous renegade who keeps breaking formation and ruining the solemnity of the event). For the 'Here Old Rattler Here' medley, she briefly switches to the banjo, which she can play as speedily as is usually required, but in a rather monotonous fashion. Most impressively, for 'Run, Run / Mama Your Son Done Gone' she switches the roles of the higher and lower strings, rhythmically strumming the higher notes while playing a fast and almost raunchy lead melody on the bass strings — I sure wish she'd show *that* technique a bit more frequently, as this would have made a hell of an impact on the overall feel of the record. Also, 'Spanish Flangdang' (is "flangdang" a folksy distortion of "fandango"?) is certainly different in its tentative incorporation of Mexican elements, but it hardly goes anywhere farther than pleasant porch-side strumming on a warm summer evening.

Which, of course, might exactly be the kind of vibe one could want from the album: in stark contrast with «official» reviews of the album concentrating on its monumental symbolism, regular reception from common folks that I have seen more often focuses on how charmingly «next-door-neighborly» it sounds — just a little bit of nice playing and lulling humming from a good old grandmother, very positive-vibey and stuff. This is quite true, except that if you treat it strictly this way, **Folksongs** does not exactly stand out from a large number of similar acoustic blues albums. The actual truth probably lies somewhere in between, as usual. Parading Elizabeth Cotten around as some sort of inspirational symbol is ridiculous, but it would be equally wrong to deny the presence of an individual style in these recordings — whose existence, at the very least, plugs yet another gap in our hole-ridden knowledge of the genesis and functioning of the early tradition of popular music which would later morph into its patented and commercialized forms.

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Elizabeth Cotten*

Album: *Folksongs And Instrumentals With Guitar (1958)*

George Starostin's Reviews

Give the album a chance — just do not forget that it is but a (recently popularized) sample of a massive tradition which, in its *most* authentic forms, should be experienced with all sorts of ragtime blues recordings from the early 1920s. Of course, those would be all crackly and hissy, and few of them have that beautiful ‘Freight Train’ chord change, but something tells me that anybody who picks up an Elizabeth Cotten recording does so first and foremost in a quest for knowledge; and if one’s quest for knowledge somehow finds itself hindered by the audio quality of an old recording, it is pretty much failed automatically, isn’t it?..

