

Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten
in Washington, D.C., 1960



ELIZABETH COTTEN

SHE WAS A PIONEERING
SONGWRITER AND GUITARIST WITH
A DAZZLING REPERTOIRE.

BY GAYLE WALD

Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten (born Elizabeth Nevills in 1893) bought her first guitar with money she saved up as a 12-year-old domestic servant earning \$1 a month in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The instrument, which she called Stella, cost \$3.75, and it gave Cotten, who had been playing her brother’s banjo and guitar, a chance to develop on her own. A left-handed child, she taught herself by laying the guitar across her lap and plucking a single string. Eventually, she developed a technique that entailed playing the guitar upside down, her thumb sounding out the melody while her index and middle fingers plucked the bass notes. For these experiments in playing “wrong,” she received little encouragement. But she persisted because, as she later put it, “I wanted music so bad I could feel it.”

Cotten’s repertoire reflected the rich musical environment that was her birthright. Growing up in an era before radios and phonographs were commonplace, she played popular rags, parlor songs, play songs, blues, and hymns. But she also felt compelled to make songs from the music she heard inside of her head. She would shut her eyes and concentrate, working on the patterns and tones until they satisfied her.

One of these early compositions, “Freight Train,” was inspired by the trains near Cotten’s home. Yet although she was a child when she conceived it, “Freight Train” is not a song of innocence. Its chorus portrayed the train as a vehicle of flight, but its verses spoke of the permanent repose of death, expressing the singer’s wish to be buried where “I can hear old Number Nine / as she comes rolling by.” Sonically, it had an eerie, off-kilter undertow.

Written around 1904, “Freight Train” anticipated by two decades the railroad blues of entertainers like Trixie Smith, Clara Smith, and Ida Cox. In these popular songs, Black female vocalists sang of the train as a source of women’s desolation, as men rode the rails and left them behind. Cotten’s “Freight Train” combined elements of this “male” and “female” symbolism, associating the train with both escape and immobility.

The story of how “Freight Train” became a staple of the U.S. folk music revival – and from there, a key song in the transnational development of 1960s rock & roll – is enmeshed in Cotten’s own experiences as a modern Black woman. Within a few years of composing it, she married a deacon’s son and joined the church, where songs like “Freight Train” were considered anathema. For nearly forty years, she put Stella aside and devoted herself to motherhood, eventually migrating to New York City. After divorcing, she supported herself as a domestic worker, confronting – in addition to her employers’ unreasonable demands and routine condescension – the neglect of the New Deal welfare state, which excluded workers like her from the 1935 Social Security Act.

The story of Cotten’s return to music after a long hiatus is today a part of folk revival lore. After a chance encounter with the composer Ruth Crawford Seeger in 1948, Cotten took a job as a maid in Seeger’s suburban Washington, D.C., home, which the composer shared with her husband, Charles Seeger, the eminent musicologist, and their four children. Working in the household of one of America’s distinguished musical families – where Ruth gave piano lessons, folk music was revered, and everyone



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sang and played – Cotten rediscovered a desire to pick up a guitar again. Some of the songs she heard in the Seeger home were songs she had sung or played as a child.

The Seegers supported and encouraged Cotten, who dazzled them with her unusual technique and extensive repertoire. Yet an incident a few years later revealed just how exploitable Cotten’s knowledge could be, particularly at a time when “folk” music was being mined for commercial gold. Ruth and Charles’ oldest daughter, Peggy Seeger, shared “Freight Train,” which she had learned from Cotten, on a trip to England. Then, the Chas McDevitt Skiffle Group recorded a version, attributing composition credits to their producer. The record became an international hit in 1957, spurring the U.S. industry magazine *Cash Box* to declare McDevitt’s “Freight Train” “a refreshing and unusual item from England that could create a sensation in this country.”

There is little documentation of how Cotten felt to have a song she authored in childhood misattributed to a white man from the U.K. But the success of the McDevitt version of “Freight Train,” and of a subsequent recording by the American country singer Rusty Draper, might have played a part in her decision to allow Ruth and Charles’ son Mike Seeger to record her. The tapes of their 1957–58 sessions, conducted in Cotten’s bedroom, became the basis of *Elizabeth Cotten: Folksongs and Instrumentals With Guitar*, a Folkways album that introduced listeners to her open tuning and unusual pick-

ing technique. (Through the intervention of Mike’s and Peggy’s older half-brother Pete Seeger and others, the copyright infringement case was settled out of court.)

Like a freight train, Cotten’s professional career started out slowly, gathering steam as it chugged along. Initially, through the Seegers’ D.C. connections, she played private recitals for Washington elites, including congressmen and senators; she also accompanied Mike on the college folk circuit and was one of the few female artists to be featured at the University of Chicago’s first annual Folk Festival in 1961. Her career ramped up in the mid-1970s, as she embraced gigs at folk clubs, festivals, coffeehouses, and schools.

Cotten’s compositions, including “Freight Train” and the playful “Shake Sugaree,” and her arrangements of blues such as “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad” and “Oh Babe It Ain’t No Lie,” influenced generations of popular performers, including the Quarrymen (John Lennon’s skiffle band); Peter, Paul and Mary; Bob Dylan; Grateful Dead; and Taj Mahal. The recipient of several late-in-life accolades, she won a Grammy for the album *Elizabeth Cotten Live!* two years before her death in 1987.

Although Cotten is often referred to as a “traditional” musician, her life and art are distinctly modern. In “When I’m Gone,” a teasing blues released in 1979, Cotten sings, “You’re gonna miss the songs I play / You’re gonna miss me every day.” It is a moving self-portrait of Elizabeth Cotten as an American original.

With Yank Rachell, Mississippi John Hurt,
Skip James, Doc Reese, and Sleepy John Estes
(from left), Newport Folk Festival, 1964

