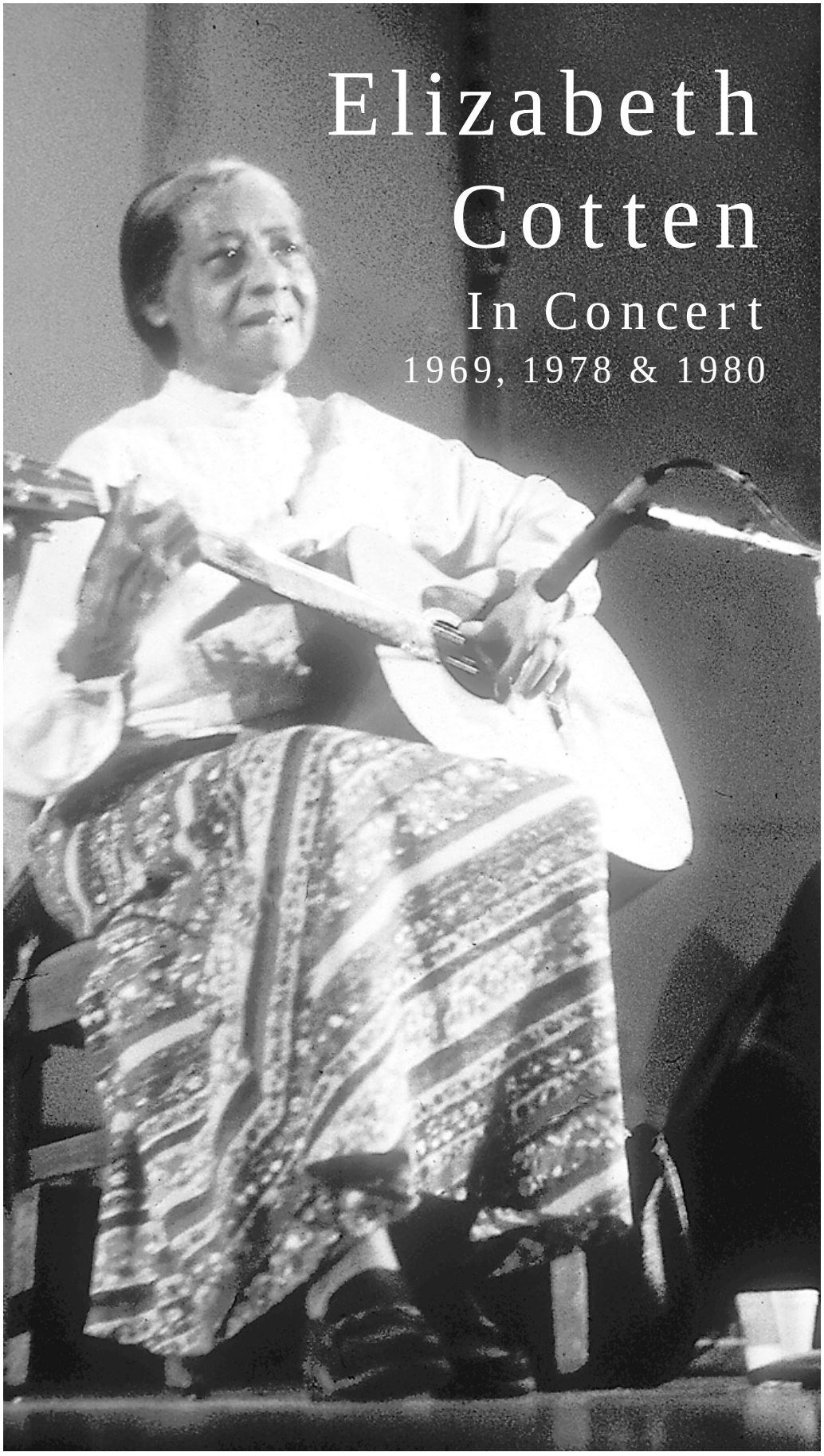
Elizabeth
Cotten
In Concert
1969, 1978 & 1980

Elizabeth Cotten

(1893-1987)

By Mark Humphrey

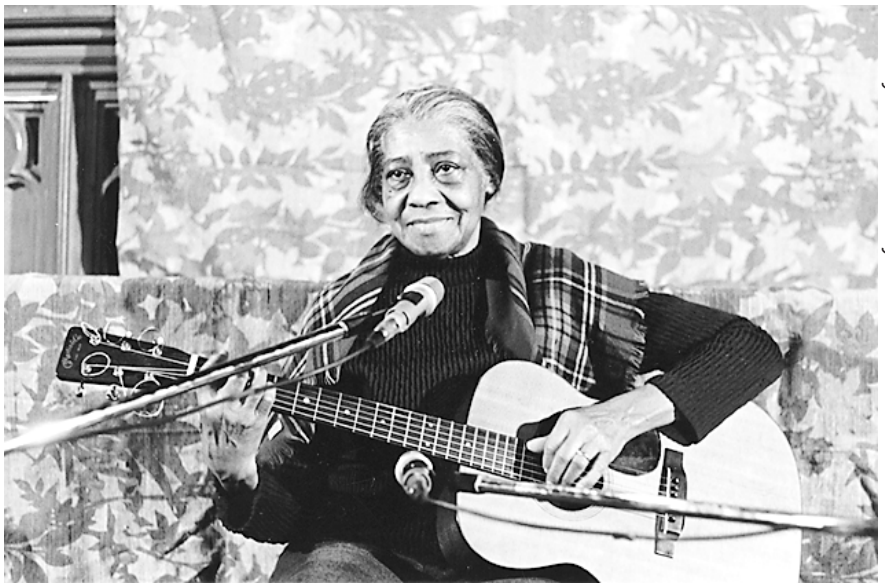

Photo by Anton J. Mikofsky

Nights in Chapel Hill, North Carolina were pretty quiet affairs in 1905, It was, after all, a small town devoid of televisions, stereos, automobiles, or electricity. 'Decent folk' rose at dawn and turned in comparatively early. The noise of a train hurtling through the still darkness (or stuck on the tracks, idling) would surely excite attention. If you were young and imaginative, such disturbances might well trigger some creative response.

"Where I lived the freight train would keep me awake at night," Elizabeth Cotten once recalled. "The track would get stalled and the train would be there sometimes for hours, just making a noise. I started writing a song about what it was doing there." Imagine the insomnia of a young girl kept awake by the hiss of an idling train and the voices of workmen. Unable to sleep and wishing the train forward on its journey (and out of earshot), she begins rolling words over in her mind: "Freight train, freight train, run so fast..." She sits up in bed, reaches out to the corner where her guitar, 'Stella,' is resting, and begins quietly (so as not to disturb the household) playing a tune to her lyrics: "Freight train,

freight train, run so fast...” Only twelve at the time, her thoughts in the darkness turn to death, and she pens her epitaph:

When I die, Lord, bury me deep,
Way down on old Chestnut Street;
Place the stones at my head and feet,
And tell ‘em all that I’m gone to sleep.

Sleep! If she could just get that train to go away, rattling on up the tracks, then maybe she could get some sleep. A half century later, though, Elizabeth Cotten would be grateful for the train-induced insomnia that inspired her to write *Freight Train* when she was only 12. Even the vivid fantasies of her youth then could scarcely envision the song’s future, or Elizabeth’s.

Freight Train will be a century old little more than a decade from now. Its author didn’t quite live to become a centenarian herself, though she did win a Grammy (Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording for *Elizabeth Cotten Live)* when she was 93. Both the song and its author are inexorably linked in the minds of most anyone aware of either, yet this video vividly demonstrates that there was far more to Elizabeth Cotten and her music than *Freight Train*

Her repertoire encompassed three guitar tunings and a variety of songs and instrumentals from different points (ragtime, blues, sacred song, etc.) of the turn-of-the-century musical map. She played banjo too and presiding over the diversity of her repertoire was her unorthodox left-handed playing approach. It worked exquisitely for her, and was indicative of a quietly determined and independent nature: “I taught myself how to play my own style,” she tells Mike Seeger in this video. “Nobody helped me. And I guess when they heard me playing, they were quite surprised.”

Many who know Elizabeth Cotten solely from her signature song will likewise be quite surprised by the range of music she still played with great assurance at 85, her age in the Black Hawk College segment of this

Photo by Irene Young

dvd. Cotten continued to compose well into her seventies, and as Seeger notes after her performance of Wilson Rag, even the staples of her repertoire were subject to revision. (“I swear you play that different every time.”)

It may be that much of what she ‘composed’ in her later life was in fact remembered/recreated from her distant girlhood: *Ontario Blues* has a ragtime strut akin to some of the music of Rev. Gary Davis, her contemporary (born 1896) from South Carolina. There are enough stylistic similarities in their playing to suggest both Cotten and Davis drew from related branches of a pervasive Piedmont guitar style which blossomed in the early 20th century and affected black musicians throughout the Carolinas as well as white ones as far afield as Merle Travis’s stomping grounds in western Kentucky. (Davis would recall learning *Candyman* in 1905, the year Cotten probably wrote *Freight Train.*) And it may be that, over the decades, much of what Cotten learned became so integrally her own that she eventually claimed authorship. Asked in this video about the origin of *Spanish Flang Dang,* she replies: “I didn’t learn it from nowhere. I made it up and played it.” She didn’t, of course, but as the tune’s most senior per-

former, she was closer to its source than the rest of us. Asked the same question about the same tune a few years earlier (in the opening Guitar, Guitar 1969 segment), Cotten replied more accurately: “I heard others play it, but I never play nothing the way I hear it. I change it to my way of playing.”

Her way of learning was admirably unorthodox but absolutely logical, as she demonstrates here, playing *What a Friend We Have in Jesus.* “I put it in my lap so I could see my fingers,” she explains, and assigned her index finger the three bass strings and her thumb the three treble strings. “Then I had to mix the bass,” she says further, and all fingerpickers know that achieving a steady bass independent of a melodic line is a considerable hurdle at first. Was it easier for Cotten, playing the melody with her thumb and bass with her index finger? Probably not, though her method of observing her right hand’s early progress with the instrument in her lap may have contributed in time to the precision of her picking. Demonstrating *Vestapol* to Laura Weber in the opening Guitar, Guitar 1969 segment, Cotten observed: “You can see that you need to learn like that, because that finger (the index) has a lot of work to do.”

Photo by Irene Young

Mike Seeger, Moe Asch & Elizabeth Cotten (Photo by Irene Young)

Cotten may have been ingeniously self-taught, but she wasn't without musical role models. Her maternal uncles all played banjos and fiddles, and of her siblings she recalled: "All five of us played, three brothers and one sister." Cotten would remember songs her mother, Louisa Price Nevils, sang (Mama, Your Son's Done Gone), and her sister would patiently sing to her until Cotten could pick out the same notes on her guitar. She credited her fascination with her brother's banjo as the catalyst for her adamantly left-handed technique: "I had learned a banjo upside down and I couldn't change (the strings) because it belonged to my brother," Cotten explained to Alice Gerard in a 1980 Frets magazine feature. "My brother had a banjo, and when he left home I didn't have nothin' to play, so I just decided I wanted the guitar."

In the early 1900s, the guitar was only beginning to challenge the banjo as the fretted instrument most popular among African-Americans. It may be worth noting that the guitar's rise in popularity seems to have happened concurrent with the early growth of the blues idiom. Cotten's recollections neglected mention of any guitar-playing role model and we don't know how common the instrument was in places like Chapel Hill, North

Carolina in 1900. Cotten's mother may not have even seen a guitar at age ten. The instrument had been heard in America since Colonial days but it was only in the late 19th century that mail order catalogues and mass production conspired to take it out of the hands of the landed gentry and make it both affordable and available to 'the folk.' (Its presence as a 'folk' instrument in the American Southwest, with its close proximity to Mexico is another matter, but the guitar's presence among 'the folk' in places like North Carolina may not predate Cotten's birthdate by more than a decade.)

In 1893, the year of Cotten's birth, the Lyon & Healy company displayed over a thousand instruments (including many guitars) at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. George Washburn Lyon widely advertised his mass-produced instruments ("He is the P.T. Barnum of the musical instrument industry," wrote one admirer), and solidly made Washburn guitars of considerable vintage can still be found today. Providing Lyon & Healy competition a century ago was the Oscar Schmidt Co. of Jersey City, a name now associated with autoharps, which formerly produced (among other instruments) Stella guitars. Huddie Ledbetter is known to have played a Stella 12-string and many bluesmen apparently favored these budget-priced guitars. Remembering Son House and other 'rediscovered' pre-War country bluesmen, Stefan Grossman once remarked: "What these guys really wanted were old Stellas. Today the big-bodied Stellas are hard to find because they sort of disintegrated. They were cheaply made guitars."

Cotten's first guitar was a Stella, and it was the instrument on which she wrote *Freight Train* and with which she forged the basis of her style and everything she would play a half century later to the adulation of folk audiences. Cotten apparently personified 'Stella' as if 'she' were a kid sister. There is a delightful fairy tale quality to her oft-told story, heard in this video, of an eleven year old black girl going from door to door

Photo by Irene Young

seeking employment so that she might earn enough money to buy her 'Stella.' If Cotten sensed any unfairness in her paltry wage of 75¢ a month, she never betrays it. The guitar cost $3.75, which means Cotten performed nearly a half year's worth of domestic chores before she could give her mother sufficient money for the instrument. "After mama bought the guitar," Cotten recalled, "it was to her sorrow, because she didn't get no rest...She'd say, 'Put that thing down and go to bed, babe."'

Asked in this video to perform the first tune she learned on guitar, Cotten plays something akin to *The Bully of the Town,* an extremely popular song of the late 19th century. It was in fact a racist 'coon' song which survived in the folk tradition well into the 20th century (the Memphis Jug Band recorded a version of it in 1927). The era in which Cotten was learning to play was one in which 'coon' songs, ragtime, and cakewalks remained vital elements of America's pop-folk music. If, as she often claimed, Cotten wrote *Freight Train* when she was 12 years old, then she was making music in a world in which Scott Joplin was writing rags; the first jazz recordings were still more than a decade away and the Victrola itself was yet unavailable! She could not read the plentiful sheet music of the era, so everything she learned or created was based on what she heard played by her family and neighbors. And much of what she heard belonged less to the 20th century than to the 19th.

The banjo tunes here are cases in point. There's no use trying to date them, but they belong to an even older strain of African-American music than Cotten's ragtime and blues-flavored pieces. Doc Watson also at one time performed *Georgia Buck,* so the song may have had some currency throughout rural North Carolina. *Rattler* is another song which probably has African-American roots but which became a 'hillbilly' standard. Grandpa Jones's *Old Rattler* was a variant, and his 1947 King recording of it became a national hit.

“Nobody knows who actually wrote *Old Rattler,”* Jones wrote in his autobiography, *Everybody’s Grandpa.* “The idea of a good hunting dog named Rattler goes way back; one of Davy Crockett’s hounds was named Rattler. But after all these years, I’m still not sure where I learned the song about that dog...I vaguely remember hearing somebody from East Tennessee do it...”

Spanish Flang Dang is an example of the chain of influence running in the opposite direction, for the *Spanish Fandango* evidently was a standard of the ‘parlor guitar’ repertoire associated with ladies of the 19th century leisure class. Mississippi John Hurt also played a variant (as *Spanish Fandang*), so the tune and certainly its guitar tuning known as ‘Spanish’ (open G) were widespread among African-American guitarists of the early 20th century. How it entered that tradition is a mystery; did a domestic of the generation prior to Cotten’s learn it from ‘the lady of the house’?

The same question might be asked of *Vestapol,* another tune which gave its name to a guitar tuning (open D). The title is reputedly a corruption of another 19th century parlor guitar piece, *The Siege Of Sebastapol.* Martin Carthy recalls learning most of the tunes from Cotten’s 1958 Folkways debut album, *Negro Folk Songs and Tunes,* and being struck by the presence of a tune called *Vestapol* which he knew in the English tradition as *The Westphalia Waltz.* Evidently some published tunes associated with 19th century ‘parlor guitar’ made their way, via sheet music or sharp ears or both, into the African-American folk tradition. When and how this happened remains one of many unanswered questions about that tradition at the turn-of-the-century.

Another is the route via which ragtime traveled from the piano to the guitar. Or was it from the banjo to the guitar? Both Cotten and Merle Travis (among others) cite the banjo as their first instrument, yet both made music (*Wilson Rag* and *Ontario Blues* are prime examples here from Cotten) that hint at some familiar-

Photo by Anton J. Mikofsky

ity with piano rags. Neither artist ever mentioned piano influences, so the 'missing link' from piano to guitar may be unrecorded performers from the early 1900s. But what of the plectrum style ragtime banjo tradition? As Cotten demonstrates, she did play banjo tunes on guitar *(Judy's Got a Rambling Mind),* but they reflect pre-ragtime folk music. Intriguingly, her *Mama, Where's the Baby,* with its plentiful hammer-ons, is likened by Seeger to 'Scruggs style' banjo. There was a rich vein of fingerstyle banjo throughout North Carolina: on record, we have Charlie Poole from the 1920s and later, Scruggs and his reputed model, Snuffy Jenkins. It seems to have been routine for 'pickers' to have some knowledge of both banjo and guitar: Scruggs himself is a fine guitar player.

The issues raised by Cotten's music take us into the time before Charlie Poole (on record anyway) and before North Carolinians had any opportunity to be influenced by one another's recordings. Cotten enjoyed an intense love affair with music during her early youth: "Music is a funny thing," she told Alice Gerrard. "It's something you love...comes from inside you. Comes out. And you can shut your eyes and go with it and repeat it. I'd pretend I was pickin' up my guitar and keep right up with the tune I was playing and never

hadn't heard it before, wouldn't know what it would be until I had it in my mind to hum it. I can't do it now. That's how I got all of that when I was growin' up."

At age 15, Cotten's music making was set aside for the encroaching responsibilities of adulthood. A Baptist deacon warned her, "You cannot play those worldly songs and belong to the church." Marriage to Frank Cotten and motherhood at age 16, along wit*h the deacon's dire warn*ing, ended Cotten's music making (aside from singing in her church choir) for more than 40 years. It is regrettable that one as talented as she was denied an outlet during what, under different circumstances, could have been her most creative years. However, it was her isolation from music making for such a lengthy period that allowed her archaic style to emerge virtually unchanged when she serendipitously found herself employed in the Seeger household.

Were there other Elizabeth Cottens who weren't so lucky? The discovery in the 1950s of Etta Baker, also from North Carolina, suggests that there were. We will never know anything of these women or their music, and can only regret that field recordings weren't made of them a half century ago when we might have learned more. Given Cotten's discouragement from the 'worldly' pursuit of music and early reluctance, even in a household such as the Seeger's, to reveal her talents, ferreting out similar women would probably have been a daunting task. Anyway, no one would have suspected their existence in the decades before *Freight Train.*

That song took on a life of its own after Peggy Seeger, who gave Elizabeth her 'Libba' nickname, performed it in England during the early days of the English 'skiffle'. Nancy Whisky and Chas McDevitt had hits with it in the UK, and in America *Freight Train* became both a country (recorded by Chet Atkins and Jim & Jesse, among others) and folk (Peter, Paul & Mary) standard in the 1960s. For years it was the song every aspiring fingerpicker learned first: the style's primary components are laid out in *Freight Train* in simple,

sweetly melodic form. Yet for all its apparent universality, *Freight Train* was inseparable from the quietly willful personality of a woman who, in her seventies, could relive her girlhood onstage and enjoy opportunities which getting saved and getting married and being black and being female all denied her when she had turned 15 and away from music in 1908.

Constantly performing at folk festivals and concerts during much of the last twenty-four years of her long life, Cotten was never so much an entertainer as she was a charmer: her performances had the intimacy of family hearthside gatherings with a wise yet spunky elderwoman. As evidenced in this dvd, she was a beguiling storyteller and there was little separating a tune or song from its accompanying tale. Offstage, this dignified and unshowy woman clearly loved the attention her unlikely celebrity brought her.

I once stood among a group of admirers chatting with her for a long time following a performance. She was then in her eighties, and since some of us in our twenties were tiring of standing, we asked her is she wouldn't like a chair. No, she insisted, she was fine. If we would stand so would she. And stand she did till

Photo by Dix Bruce

the last of her interlocutors had gone. I was reminded of this encounter when Lou Curtis told me of Cotten's appearance at the San Diego Folk Festival: "She wouldn't go home," he recalled. Cotten faithfully kept company with the last fan till the festival organizers shooed them away at 2 a.m.

Perhaps late fame, like first love, is the sweetest of all. Elizabeth Cotten savored the attention lavished on her because of one song of perfect childlike simplicity. For those whose interest went beyond the obvious, she offered further treasures from a youth lived when Theodore Roosevelt was President, nights were quiet, and a rumbling freight train was the most exciting sound in the world. "We used to watch the freight train," Cotten once told Mike Seeger. "We knew the fireman and the brakeman...and the conductor, my mother used to launder for him. They'd let us ride in the engine...put us in one of the coaches while they were backing up and changing...that was how I got my first train ride."

DISCOGRAPHY

Negro Folk Songs and Tunes *(Folkways FG 3526)*
Shake Sugaree *(Folkways FT 1003)*
When I'm Gone *(Folkways FS 3537)*
Elizabeth Cotten Live! *(Arhoolie Records)*

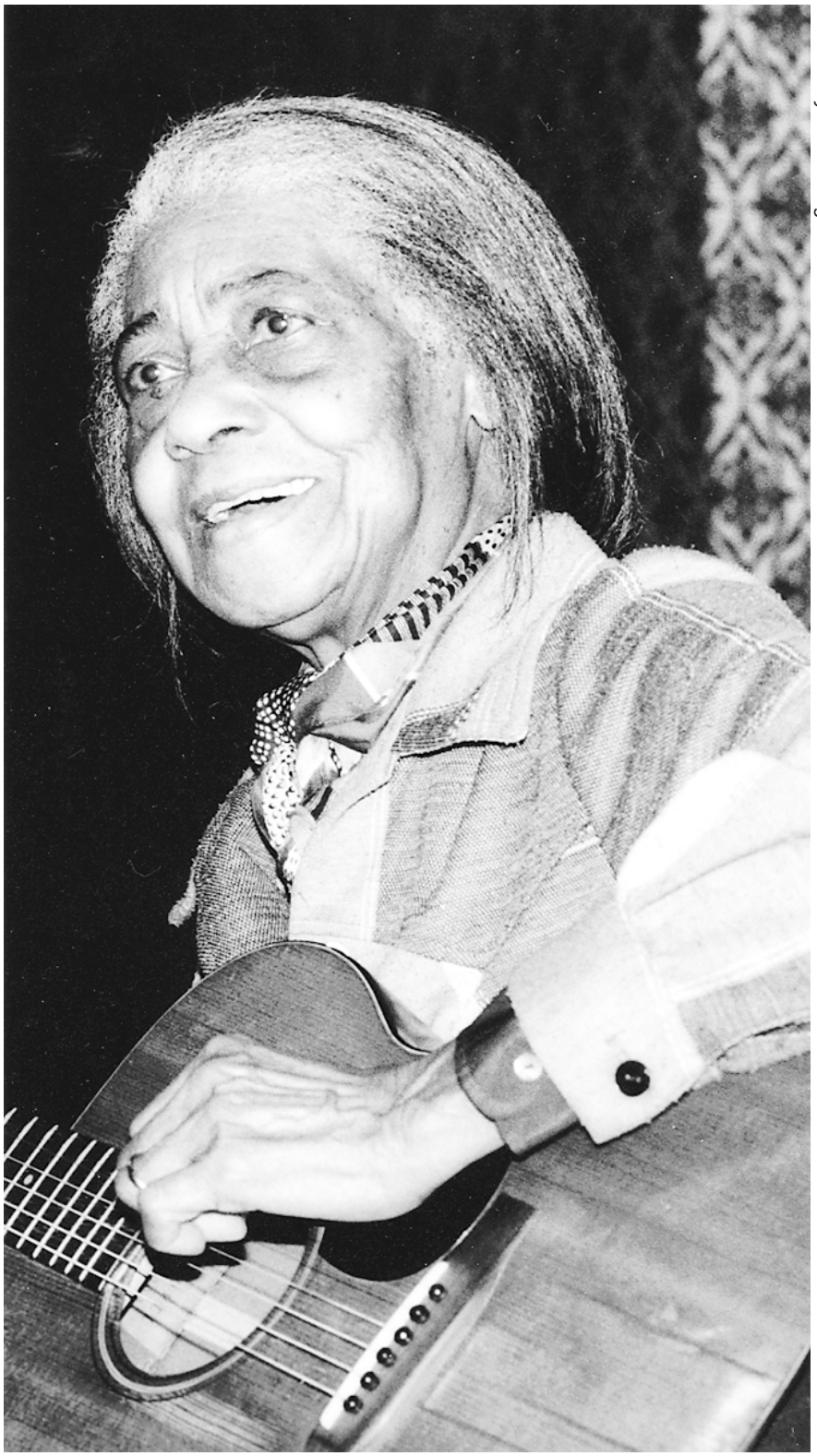

Photo by Irene Young

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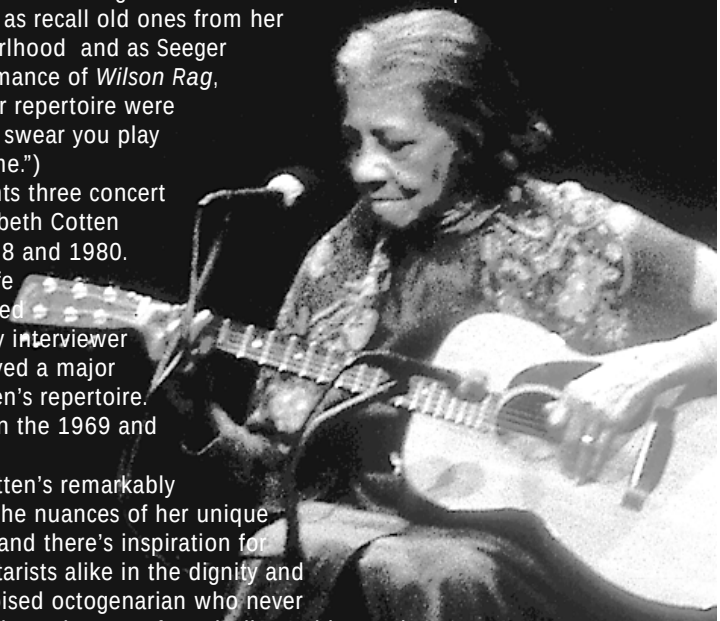
Many who know Elizabeth Cotten solely from her signature song will likewise be quite surprised by the range of music she still played with great assurance in her seventies and eighties. She continued to make up new ones even in her eighties as well as recall old ones from her turn-of- the-century girlhood and as Seeger notes after her performance of *Wilson Rag*, even the staples of her repertoire were subject to revision. ("I swear you play that different every time.")



This DVD presents three concert performances by Elizabeth Cotten recorded in 1969, 1978 and 1980. Recollections of her life and music are prompted in the 1978 concert by interviewer Mike Seeger, who played a major role in recording Cotten's repertoire. Mike is also close by in the 1969 and 1980 performances.

Close-ups of Cotten's remarkably youthful hands show the nuances of her unique 'Cotten picking' style, and there's inspiration for guitarists and non-guitarists alike in the dignity and assurance of a very poised octogenarian who never tired of sharing her balanced sense of musicality and humanity.

From 1969: Freight Train, What a Friend We Have In Jesus, Ruben, Vestapol, Washington Blues, A Jig and Spanish Flang Dang.

From 1978: Freight Train, Wilson Rag, Georgia Buck, Rattler, Spanish Flang Dang, Judy's Got a Rambling Mind, Mama, Your Son's Done Gone, Wreck of the Old 97, Jesus Is Tenderly Calling Today, Vestapol, Buck Dance, Oh, Babe, It Ain't No Lie, Ontario Blues, Mama, Where's the Baby and others.

From 1980: Graduation March, Freight Train, Spanish Flang Dang and Shake Sugaree.

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