

Old Times & Hard Times Hedy West

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Old Times & Hard Times

Ballads and
Songs from the
Appalachians

HEDY WEST



Hedy West is among the best women singers of the American folksong revival. That “among” is a pretence of objectivity: my private view is that she’s by far the best of the lot. She comes from North Georgia and her family were, for generations back, poor hill farmers of the sort called “hillbillies” or “red-necks”, who raised what living they could on little holdings clinging to the mountain-sides where, so they say, the valleys are so narrow that the moonlight has to be wheeled out in a barrow each morning and the sunlight wheeled in, and the land so stony that the cats run, zip zip zip, seventeen miles down to the railway junction, the only place where they can find any soil, and the pigs are so lean, they have to stand up twice to cast a shadow. Silly jokes, of the sort they make about the conditions and ways of hill folk who are often treated as clowns when they aren’t being put on a pedestal as “noble Elizabethan survivals” or “our contemporary ancestors”. Hedy West will have nothing to do with these clownish or mock-primitive stereotypes; she’s not the kind of singer who acts the “country cousin” and wears a cotton bonnet and makes a pinched nasal caricature of her “down home” vocal style just to charm city audiences. She’s a well-educated girl, a graduate of Columbia University, as proud of her fine training in symphonic music as of her family heritage of traditional songs. She’s of that happy band who are entirely at home in either world, the world of fine arts or that of folk arts. Such people are few. As often with hill folk, Hedy West has an intense feeling for the family circle, and it’s a source of pleasure to her that many of her songs are from the repertory of her family, mostly being passed on from her great-grandmother Talitha Mulkey, who accumulated a store of ballads and lyrics in the course of an unsettled childhood shifting from North Carolina to Tennessee to South Carolina to Georgia. The Mulkeys were among the Scotch-Irish who migrated from Ulster in the eighteenth century and settled in the mountains and intermarried with English, Irish, German immigrants

and sometimes with local Cherokee Indians. Hedy says: “A strong spirit of co-operation was at the heart of these mountain communities where hard labour was a necessity. As late as my parents’ childhood, regional music was a vital tradition inside family groups, in local social gatherings, and as accompaniment to co-operative work.” Perhaps in the past the Georgia hill folk had a repertory similar to that which Cecil Sharp reported from a bit further north in the Appalachians, where nearly every item he came across was an old English song or ballad (though there are some who say that this didn’t represent the kind of songs the singers had readiest in their mouths, but rather the kind they believed Sharp preferred to hear them sing). Whatever the case, the repertory of Georgia “rednecks”, and the singing style too, underwent a certain change as the life of the hill folk altered. During the early decades of the twentieth century, great numbers of mountain farmers left their stony holdings to seek work in the cotton mills of the Piedmont, the lower country. Hedy West’s family went there too, and so the musical style that Hedy was brought up with is not the “high-lonesome” manner of some mountain singers but the part-country, part-small town manner characteristic of Southern communities moving from a rural to an industrial mode of life. The most recent pieces in her family tradition are a number of coal-mining songs passed on from her father, the poet Don West, who learned them when he was a relief worker and union organiser among hill-miners in the 1930s. Of this most engaging and varied tradition of the upland Georgia poor whites, Hedy West is a superb exponent, no tricks, no impersonations, no deception; all artistry and conviction.

A. L. LLOYD.

THE WIFE WRAPT IN WETHER'S SKIN

This is one of the ballads handed down in the West family from great-grandmother Talitha Prudence Sparks Mulkey. It sounds like a simple narrative of a farmer who reforms his slatternly young wife by "tanning her hide" - in this case, wrapping her in a sheepskin and then beating her. In fact there may be more in it than meets the ear. Instead of the "dandoo, clish-to-ma-clingo" refrain common in the American South, many English versions have a refrain enumerating a number of herbs, rosemary, thyme, etc. In ancient times, herbs were regarded as protection against demons, and it may well be that in the original sets of this song the wife may have been possessed by evil spirits that had to be exorcised by the use of herbs and ritual flagellation. It's a hypothesis.

FAIR ROSAMUND

This isn't a West family song, but comes from Massachusetts and is quoted in Eloise Hubbard Linscott's Folk Songs of Old New England. It's a rare song. It seems to have turned up only once in the USA and is known in England only from old broadsides. It concerns "Rosamund the I fayre daughter of Walter Lord Clifford, concubine to Henry II (poisoned by Queen Eleanor as some thought) who dyed at Woodstock, AD 1177, where King Henry had made for her a house of wonderful working" Thomas Deloney, the Elizabethan balladeer, had a long ballad about the same lady, but he didn't mention the curious incest motive that is so strong in the present version. Hedy West says: "through repeated singing I have altered the last phrase of the melody."

BARBARA ALLEN

This favourite ballad, with its story that seems singularly passive when one considers what blood-boltered narratives most folk ballads are, is enormously widespread in the upland South of the United States, and in one state alone - Virginia - ninety-two different versions were collected. It probably owes its impressive survival to the fact that it was so often reprinted during the nineteenth century on broadsides and in cheap songbooks. Hedy West says "I have rarely collected folk songs from any singer who didn't know some variant of this ballad. The basic text is from Uncle Gus Mulkey. I've made textual and melodic additions from other sources."

OLD JOE CLARK

Before the railways, automobiles and mail order houses brought the town to the country, before television, radio and gramophone brought "instant music" into the home, the play-party was a natural solution to the problem of self-made social amusement, in communities where religious feelings were so strong that dances were generally proscribed but dancing-games permitted to the young. A favourite dance-game song was Old Joe Clark with its melody based on the minstrel show tune of Lucy Long, and its text made up of floating verses borrowed from sundry other play-party songs such as Ida Red, Shady Grove, Cindy, Liza Jane, Bile Dem Cabbage Down, Sally Ann and others. Of the verses of Old Joe Clark, one Indiana farmer said: "there's thousands of 'em. Every one has his own version." Scholars set the number more modestly at 144. Old Joe Clark is one of the songs Uncle Gus Mulkey used to play on the fiddle when his fingers were still nimble. Kim Mulkey had disapproved and pretended not to know of his son's fiddle playing till he began to hear Gus play religious tunes. Kim Mulkey's fundamentalist religion placed native song and the instruments they were played on as being in league with the devil.

THE COAL MINER'S CHILD

The song comes from the coalfields of the Cumberland Plateau of east Kentucky. The mountaineers there had been farmers before the coal deposits were discovered. Beginning around 1912 the population began a conversion from agriculture to mining. The miners saw prosperous times from 1914 till 1927 when the coal market collapsed. Apart from a temporary boom during World War II the industry has remained depressed. The once-handsome land is laid waste and never restored; the once-independent mountaineer is often demoralised through bad conditions and forced dependence on the coal industry, where trade union activities have been made dangerous by the fact that the companies commanded private police forces and controlled the local and state law officers. The Coal Miner's Child is an east Kentucky re-working of a popular sentimental song, The Orphan Child. It evolved during the Depression days of misery and starvation for miners.

GAMBLING MAN

"My father learned the Gambling Man from Etta (pronounced 'Etter') Mulkey, a Gilmer County neighbour from an unrelated family. She was the daughter of a local 'blockader' (a person who made illegal liquor from maize). Perhaps it was because Etta's face had been badly disfigured from a burn that she never married. Whenever my grandmother was giving birth, Etta would come and take care of the kids and the household for a couple of weeks. This kind of work was her established function in the community. The kids liked her because she was easygoing (so much so that the meals she prepared had bugs cooked with the vegetables) and because she knew many songs and sang them in a beautiful voice."

BROTHER EPHUS

Probably had its origin in a minstrel show song. Many songs traditional in the South were introduced there by travelling "entertainments", medicine, magic and minstrel shows, which included musicians and singers in their programmes. "I sing here a part of the version of Brother Ephus that I learned from Grandma, who sometimes accompanies her singing with banjo played in a double-thumbing style."

POLLY

"I've been told there were three rambling musicians who regularly came through Gilmer County. One was Lum Ledbetter who sang and played on 'Ledbetter's canes', an instrument made by strapping two bamboo-like cane-flutes together. Another was Gus Wilson who played guitar and sang. The third was Jim Sparks who sang unaccompanied in a good tenor voice. He was my great-grand-mother's younger brother. Like his parents he was a rambler, and considered irresponsible because he could never stay put. He followed his father in being a saddle- and boot-maker with a handlebar moustache. As recorded here, Polly is the fragment Grandma remembers of a song Jim Sparks sang." It is a British song, now rare in England. It was known in Dorset as Noble Lord Hawkins and in Northumberland as Sir Arthur and Charming Molly. During the eighteenth century it seems to have been a favourite 'broadside and chapbook piece under the title of Moll Boy's Courtship. Scotland had its version too.

THE DAVISON-WILDER BLUES

“Davison and Wilder are two small coal-mining towns in Tennessee. In 1930 Local 446 of the then weak United Mineworkers’ Union was located at Wilder. The company there forcibly opposed the union and kept the town under strict surveillance of their private police. When a miner accepted work, he had to sign a ‘Yellow Dog Contract’ binding him not to join a labour union or agitate against the company. A mass meeting of pickets was held, addressed by the labour leader Norman Thomas. At the meeting a local miner, Ed Davis, and my father Don West (one of six Divinity students who came to Wilder to distribute food and clothing among the unemployed miners) sang together The Davison-Wilder Blues, which my father thinks was written by several miners including Ed Davis.”

LAMENT FOR BARNEY GRAHAM

This elegy was written by teen-age Della Mae Graham for her father, who was president of the United Mineworkers’ Union local in Wilder. One Sunday morning Barney Graham was walking along the dirt road that was Wilder’s main street, and as he passed the company store, two gun thugs shot and killed him. The community was so tightly controlled by the mine owners that no local preacher dared preach at the funeral of the dead union man; instead the oration was preached by divinity students from Nashville. “The tune I sing here is from John Greenway’s American Folk Songs of Protest which doesn’t explain its source. When Daddy knew Della Mae Graham, she recited this poem and had written no tune.”

THE RICH IRISH LADY

“This is another song Uncle Gus and Grandma learned from their mother, about whom Uncle Gus says: ‘She sung a right smart, all these here old time songs; ‘I don’t remember how many I’ve heard her sing. He (her husband, Kim Mulkey) didn’t sing none of the songs like that. Most of the singing he done he’d do in church. He sung these old midnight songs (religious songs).’” The ballad is related to Child No. 295 The Brown Girl, but the situation is reversed, for there the man first scorns the girl but later his feelings change and he calls the girl to him, but she mocks him and says she’ll dance on his grave. In England The Rich Irish Lady is best known in a seamen’s version called Sally and Billy or The Sailor From Dover.

SHUT UP IN THE MINES AT COAL CREEK

In the autumn of 1935, Hedy West’s father, with two other union organisers, was arrested and taken to Pineville jail, Kentucky. “While Daddy was in jail he shared a cell with Norman Gilford, an ex-miner jailed on a murder charge. He bitterly hated the coal operators and though he lived as an outlaw he refused, out of strict principle, to accept employment as a company gunman. Mr. Gilford knew and sang songs while he was in jail. Shut Up in the Mines at Coal Creek is one that he wrote down and Daddy saved. Across the top of the manuscript is written ‘217 miners perished in Coal Creek explosion.’” The ballad concerns the explosion in the Fraterville Mine at Coal Creek (now Lake City), Tennessee, in 1902. It simulates the form, of the farewell notes which some of the men trapped in the mine wrote to their families while awaiting death.

THE WIFE OF USHER'S WELL

“This is basically the version that Nancy Perdue of Fairfax, Virginia, learned from her mother-in-law Eva Samples (born in 1906 near Carrollton, Georgia). I’ve combined this variant with a similar one from my Grandmother. It was a popular ballad in the Gilmer County community, and it was part of Etta Mulkey’s repertoire.” Altogether this ancient and mysterious song has persisted far better in America than in the land of its origin, whether England or Scotland. The last version of it found in the British Isles was noted down in 1883 from an elderly fisherman at Bridgworth, Shropshire, but in the United States it has turned up repeatedly, especially in the South and Mid-West.

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The photograph on the front of the sleeve
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