



Pretty  
Saro



# PRETTY SARO

## and other Appalachian Ballads

### Hedy West

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This is a record of family songs. They came to me through my father's family. The family were small farmers in the Georgia uplands at the southern end of the Appalachians. Their culture was typical of their region. Book-learning wasn't prominent, though every family owned at least a Bible. My grandmother was perhaps unusual in that she would sometimes get books through a mail order firm, to read to the children, but her husband didn't approve of her wasting her time from work.

Economically, the hill farmers were in a poor way, and grandfather managed even worse than most. When pack-pedlars and others brought leaflets advertising work in the cotton mills, the wages offered seemed attractive to many upland farmers unused to a money economy. Like some of their neighbours, my grandfather's family became uprooted and they migrated out of the mountains to look for work in the cotton mills of the small towns. The tight community sense was broken. Subsequently the family split up, and some of the offspring developed into characteristic modern Americans, actively involved, for instance in the trade union struggles of the Depression.

Most of the music of the kind of mountain community in which my grandparents lived consisted either of singing, fiddling, or the performance of songs with fiddle. The dulcimer was unknown. Banjo and guitar fairly late on the scene, during the early part of the twentieth century. My great grandfather, a rather rigidly religious man only sang sacred songs, but his wife has a sizeable repertory of ballads and lyrical folk songs which she passed on to the children. The songs on this record come mainly from my grandmother and her brother Gus. Grandma specialised in sober or tragic songs, perhaps conditioned by her hard life, but Gus preferred humorous songs; indeed, he was not likely to sing unless he could extract a bit of fun out of the song.

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Originally, I just picked up the songs in the family, without thinking too much about them. When I arrived in New York, the folk song revival was on, but I found something insulting in the way people looked at the South, and in the way northern youngsters sang songs born in the South. So I took to singing the songs whenever I could, partly to clear up misunderstandings, and partly, I suppose, to compete with the other singers of the folk song revival.

Why should city folk sing and listen to this kind of country song? They don't arise out of their conditions of life, nor reflect directly the kind of world around them. Well, the songs readiest available to modern city folk are pop songs, sentimental, unreal, songs that cheat, that don't honestly describe life. The country songs may not be dealing with the supermarket world, but they do rise out of often deep experience, and they can provide nourishment for a people tired of a diet of artificial things. Modern urbanised people feel estranged from real life. They're offered so much that's unreal, in books, on movies and TV, in the grocery stores. Mind you, some of the folk songs get dressed up, cellophane-wrapped by some show-biz entertainers till they too have become a part of the big delusion. But it seems that many young people are dissatisfied with received values, and are looking for something more firmly based on true life. Perhaps that's why this sort of songs have something to say to them.

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### The House Carpenter

(Child 243)

This is the commonest collected version of *The Demon Lover* (James Harris) in the United States. The oldest known printed version is entitled *A Warning for Married Women* in which the 'heroine' is identified as Mrs. Jane Reynolds, born near Plymouth. The date of the broadside is 1685. A. L. Lloyd says it was almost surely in oral tradition long before that. In the original British forms the returning lover was a ghost who wreaks a terrible revenge on the girl who wouldn't be faithful to his memory. This is one of the first songs Grandma and Gus remember hearing their mother sing.

### Pretty Saro

is apparently a native lyrical piece from the 19th century. Grandma and Daddy always sing it in this slow free style and with this ornamentation. This long phrasing gives singers a chance to use the keen, long carrying tone quality that was considered excellent.

### Old Smokey

is another native American lyrical song or 'lonesome tune'. It's made of elements from other songs: *The Waggoner's Lad*, *Courting Too Slow*, *Loving Nancy*, *The Forsaken Girl*, *The Inconstant Lover*. In a grossly simplified form, *Old Smokey* was sung so often it became a cliché in the beginning of the American folk song revival. I've learned it from Grandma. Gus burlesques it with mock agony and adds his own verse:

Will hug you and kiss you  
And tell you more lies  
Than the fleas on a houn' dog  
Or the stars in the skies.

Then he chants: 'Whacky, whacky, whack!'

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### Blow Ye Gentle Winds

could be a commercial product of full-time or part-time professional musicians in the early country music business. I've only heard it from Grandma, and she doesn't remember where it came from. Perhaps from a phonograph record or from the radio. Since the 1920s phonograph records realised large sales in rural America, and had a strong impact on native music. There's a cartoon of a typical caricature mountaineer, scrawny and barefooted, saying to a folk song collector: 'I learnt that one from my pappy. He had all the records.'

### My Soul's Full of Glory

is one of the religious songs (old midnight songs) my great grandfather Kim Mulkey sang. Because he sang it so often, *My Soul's Full of Glory* was called *Kim's Song*. A. L. Lloyd says: the words are relatively old. William Hauser, the Georgia Methodist preacher and composer heard the hymn as a boy in the 1820s, sung to a tune that is also used for the ballad of *Lamkin*. John McCurry, compiler of *The Social Harp Hymn-book* (1855) prints the hymn to a tune that is close to *The Wearing of the Green*, with a note, 'as sung by William Bowers, Eagle Grove, Georgia'. My family sing the words to yet a third tune; that of *Pretty Saro*.

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### Promised Land

The religious revivals of the late 18th and early 19th century were the scene of extraordinary enthusiasm in the remoter settlements. People would pray and shout for days on end, at the camp-meetings, often being thrown into states of possession. Many of the hymns evolved in this atmosphere were of the simplest kind for congregations to pick up, with a strong rhythm and repetitive words, sometimes with nonsense syllables, said to be dictated by departed spirits (a feature of the Pentecostal Baptist religion is the use of 'spirit language', called 'speaking in tongues'). When she was a child, Grandma was told that the seeming nonsense syllables in *Promised Land* were really words in an American Indian tongue. She therefore calls it *The Indian Song*. If the hymn was serious once, it is taken as mock-religious now. Gus sings it with delight.

### Over There

sounds to me like a minstrel show song. It's another mock-religious song that pleases Gus to sing. His mother, Talitha Sparks, learned it during the part of her childhood she spent in South Carolina.

### Little Matty Groves *Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard* (Child 87)

was quoted in Beaumont and *Fletcher's Knight of the Burning Pestle* written about 1611. Both Grandma and Gus' wife Jane sing a fragment of *Little Matty Groves* that breaks off before Lord Arnold discovers his wife and Matty Groves in bed together. Neither Grandma nor Jane ever knew more of the ballad. An earlier singer has fragmented the song either by censoring or forgetting. This family version is completed with another American text collected by Vance Randolph. I find the ballad intensely tragic because its characters knowingly pursue ruin by insisting on unbending truthfulness.

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### Rake and Rambling Boy

The origin of *Rake and Rambling Boy* is an 18th century British broadside. I heard it from Gus' youngest son Horace, who, like all of his brothers, still lives within three miles of his birthplace in Jaspar, Georgia. Horace learned the song in 1925 from his cousin Coy who sang the song with special affection, because it suited his state of mind just before he ran away from home to become a rambler. I don't know if Coy had heard one of the several country music arrangements of *Rake and Rambling Boy*.

### Joe Bowers

is the story of a gold miner who had nothing but trouble. It is most likely a composed song accepted by the folk. Its authorship has been much disputed. One theory is it was written by Frank Swift, a member of a band of 200 Argonauts from Pike County Missouri in 1849 about another member of the band, Joe Bowers. Another theory is it was written by John Woodward of Johnson's Minstrels in San Francisco in 1849. It has also been credited to Mark Twain, and to a miner called Squibab. Cowboy and pioneer ballads did not generally spread through the rest of the United States. *Joe Bowers*, *The Cowboy's Lament* (see *Lee Tharins' Bar Room* below) and *The Dying Cowboy* are notable exceptions that did become widespread. Grandma and Gus learned *Joe Bowers* from their father who made an exception of the song by singing it despite it not being religious. The tune here is a variant of one used for *The State of Arkansas*.

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### Whistle, Daughter, Whistle

was a mildly bawdy song widespread in England and found by Cecil Sharp in Somerset in various versions. Modified, it was published as a children's song in Britain and America around 1900. Grandma and Gus learned it from their mother but they sing it differently. It's characteristic of Gus to change songs, and of Grandma to leave them as she found them.

### I'm an Old Bachelor

Close by the Mulkeys two old bachelors, Charlie and Mat Forester, lived together all their lives. The Mulkeys often visited with them and stayed overnight. The guests and hosts would tell stories and sing. The Foresters would sing this song. In his low voice Charlie sang the man's part; in his falsetto Mat sang the girl's answers. Gus says, 'They sang it very pathetic'.

### Johnny Sands and My Good Old Man

were first British and then American. *Johnny Sands* was a stage re-make (c.1840) by a singer and comedian John Sinclair from the folk ballad called *The Wife of Kelso*. Both songs here are from the repertory of my great grandmother. Gus has changed the text and the tune of Johnny Sands. I sing Grandma's version.

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### Frankie Silvers

Many murder ballads warning that crime does not pay were written by broadside writers to sound like confessions of murderers. Laws speculates that this ballad may truly have been written by Frankie Silvers when she was in jail awaiting her execution at Morgantown, North Carolina in July 1833 for the murder of her husband Charles. This is one of the songs that Joe Mulkey brought back home from North Carolina. It's a story of gloom sung to a hymn tune called *Devotion*. A. L. Lloyd says that though the tune is credited to the composer Americk Hall, it is in fact a version of a Gaelic tune, *Tearlach Og*. I have shortened the song and sing it in the style I've heard from Grandma.

### Lee Tharin's Bar Room /

#### *The Cowboys Lament*

This was widely sung from New England south to Mississippi, throughout the West and Northwest. Its most popularised version is *The Streets of Laredo*. It is derived from an Anglo-Irish broadside, *The Unfortunate Rake* current around 1790. I've combined the two variants that Grandma sings (*Tam Sherman's Bar Room* and *Joneses' Saloon*) with Horace Mulkey's *Lee Tharin's Bar Room*.

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