

LOST AND FOUND: THE STORIES OF MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT AND ELIZABETH COTTEN

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The American Folk Music Revival of the 1950s and 1960s was of great importance for a number of reasons. Not only did it launch the careers of folk legends such as the Kingston Trio, Peter Paul & Mary, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan, just to name a few, but it also involved the discovery or rediscovery of many forgotten or neglected musicians who were born fifty to sixty years earlier and who had first made recordings in the late 1920s with the onset of interest in so-called ‘hillbilly’ and ‘race’ records. Many of these artists, white and black (the Carter Family, Jimmy Rodgers, Charley Patton, etc.), were of course already providing new paths to even older music.

With the onset of the Great Depression at the beginning of the 1930s, many musicians fell off the grid, again both black and white, but especially the former. This paper will look at two African-American country blues musicians, both born in 1893, Mississippi John Hurt and Elizabeth Cotten. While Hurt was rediscovered in 1963 at the age of 70, Cotten was only discovered for the first time in the late 1950s and consequently enjoyed considerable fame and recognition up until the end of her life. Hurt’s story is much more typical.

John Hurt was born into a sharecropper family (which meant poor whites and especially blacks who worked as farmers, but did not own the land) in 1893 in Mississippi, one of the poorest and still poorest states, in the Deep South. His parents had actually been of the generation which had been liberated from slavery. He spent almost his entire life, also as a sharecropper, in the small town of Avalon in a shack of a home. A self-taught musician, he made his first recordings in 1928 for Okeh records (a pioneering recording company who recorded legends such as Mamie Smith and Louis Armstrong, among others) in Memphis, Tennessee and New York City. He was given his nickname “Mississippi” at this time in order to help with marketing, but did not meet with any

commercial success. Assuming his professional career was a closed book, he continued to work as a farmer and raise a family, while occasionally performing at local dances and get-togethers for extra cash. Unbeknownst to him, however, his music lived on, with two of his early recordings (“Frankie” and “Spike Driver Blues”) included on the seminal collection *Anthology of American Folk Music* compiled by Harry Smith and released in 1952. Afterwards, Hurt’s music influenced and inspired several generations of mostly white musicians in connection with the already-mentioned Folk Revival. Highly reminiscent of the fascinating story *Searching for Sugar Man* about the musician Sixto Rodriguez who made several records at the turn of the 1970s and only realized in the late 1990s that he was a musical legend in South Africa, Hurt was completely unaware of his continued fame and did not, of course, receive any financial compensation for his music. Most of the musicians and fans who admired his work assumed he was long dead. Philip R. Ratcliffe in his excellent biography of Hurt describes the state of affairs in 1962, immediately prior to his rediscovery:

“John did not own a guitar but would still play whenever he got an opportunity... As the year drew to a close he could not possibly have conceived of the upheaval that was about to unfold early in the new year.” (Ratcliffe 2011: 119)

There are several slightly confusing accounts concerning his ‘rediscovery’. Apparently, the musicologist Dick Spottswood, in the year 1963, was led to look at an atlas upon listening to Hurt’s song “Avalon Blues”. To his great surprise, he realized it was actually a place in rural Mississippi and encouraged the amateur musicians and folk fans Tom Hoskins and Mike Stewart to investigate. Accounts of this expedition differ, perhaps due to the drug-addled brain of Hoskins. They apparently arrived at the town and asked at the only gas station if they had heard of John Hurt. They were nonchalantly given directions to his home. They arrived at the house and were met by Hurt’s wife; several hours later Hurt himself arrived and acknowledged his identity. After asking him to play something on the guitar, they realized just whom they had found. Soon after, Hurt — at the age of 70 — found himself surrounded by passionate admirers and flooded with offers for recordings and performances.

For the next three years, up until his death in 1966, Hurt recorded not only his older songs, but a great deal of new material. He became an extremely popular performer at leading folk festivals, most famously at the legendary Newport Festival. Pete Seeger, in Ratcliffe's biography, eloquently describes Hurt's performance:

"When John walked onstage he announced, 'So I'm back with y'all once again. And the reason why I say that [is that] in '28 and '29, I recorded for the Okeh Company. And I haven't had the chance of being back to New York until tonight. And I feel kind of like I'm at home.' He followed by playing 'My Creole Belle'." (Ratcliffe 2011: 159)

As was the case with almost all of his songs, the words were not all his, but he certainly placed his distinct stamp on them. "My Creole Belle" was adapted from an earlier song "Creole Belles" from 1901 by Bodewalt Lampe and George Sidney (Ratcliffe 2011: 22). "Louis Collins" is one of a number of murder ballads ("Frankie" and "Stagolee") in his repertoire. Elijah Wald in his excellent 'Songobiography' discusses the sources of the song having been an actual murder in Hurt's home state in 1897 (Wald 2016). Hurt's song downplays the titillating gore and violence and instead focuses on the reaction of the distraught mother to the death of her son.

Mrs. Collins weeped, Mrs. Collins moaned
To see her son Louis leave his home
Angels laid him away

Kind friends, oh, ain't it hard?
To see poor Louis in a new graveyard
Angels laid him away

Hurt manages in this seemingly simple song to humanize and universalize this obscure historical figure and his community.

Hurt's popularity and charm was not only due to his remarkable fingerstyle guitar playing, but was connected with his soulful, soothing voice accompanied by the almost saintly, modest aura which surrounded him. Pete Seeger's amazing television program

Rainbow Quest in episode 36 from 1966, not long before Hurt's death, provides arguably the finest footage of Hurt, not only performing, but also discussing his life and work. Of particular interest is how he can seamlessly move from a spiritual, gospel song like "You Gotta Walk That Lonesome Valley" to the blatant sexual imagery of a tune like "Candy Man Blues".

Well, all you ladies gather 'round
That good sweet candy man's in town
It's the candy man
It's the candy man

He likes a stick of candy just nine inch long
He sells it fast a' hog can chew his corn

Wald in another of his 'Songobiographies' discusses the seeming contradiction between Hurt's saintly demeanor and his often 'raunchy' lyrics and does not actually reach any definite conclusion, other than this being quite normal at the time (Wald 2018). The musician Jerry Ricks, quoted in Ratcliffe (2011: 173), describes his own first-hand impressions regarding Hurt's distinct charm:

"John was very comfortable with who he was; He wasn't a professional musician and he didn't quit anything to do this. He had no baggage and no frustrations and he didn't want anything."

Hurt's music not only spawned a number of disciples, but encouraged an interest in the source material which he drew from. After his death, Hurt's influence only increased. Musicians not only covered many of his songs, but also wrote tunes making reference to his personage and art, the most interesting being, in my opinion, Tom Paxton's song "Did You Hear John Hurt". The song captures eloquently the admiration and awe felt by a younger generation of listeners for this elderly musician.

Did you hear John Hurt play the Creole Belle?
The Spanish Fandango that he loved so well?
And did you love John Hurt, did you shake his hand?
Did you hear him sing his Candy Man?

Other disciples include the rock band The Lovin' Spoonful, led by John Sebastian, who took their name from a line in Hurt's song "Coffee Blues". John Hurt also performed on the same bill and made the acquaintance of the subject of the second half of this paper, Elizabeth Cotten.

Elizabeth (Libba) Cotten was born in the state of North Carolina in 1893. She left school at the age of nine and began to work as a servant/domestic worker. Like Hurt, she was self-taught, having picked up both the guitar and banjo as a young child, but playing it upside down because she was left-handed. She consequently played the bass lines with her fingers and the melody with her thumb, a technique which later became known as 'Cotten picking', this being a pun not only on her name but the back-breaking work of many slaves in the South. She even began composing her own songs in her early teens, most notably "Freight Train". The seemingly simple song has a timeless air to it, certainly remarkable for a girl her age, with its longing for escape, and philosophical acceptance of inevitable death.

Freight train, freight train, run so fast
Freight train, freight train, run so fast
Please don't tell what train I'm on
They won't know what route I'm going

When I am dead and in my grave
No more good times here I crave
Place the stones at my head and feet
And tell 'em all that I've gone to sleep

When I die, Lord, bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut Street
So I can hear old Number Nine
As she come rollin' by

Mike Seeger in the liner notes to one of her first recordings provides some backstory for the song:

“When Elizabeth Cotten and her brothers were playing music together each would have songs that they called their own, and this was the one that she made up and sang as hers. It was one of the few she ever composed herself and was largely inspired by the train running near her home.” (Seeger, Mike 1989)

At a young age, Cotten abandoned her musical pursuits and dedicated herself to working and raising a family. Her consequent discovery is even more remarkable than Hurt’s story. In 1948, with Cotten at the age of 55, she was working in a department store in Washington D.C. One day, the legendary Seeger family went shopping there, specifically Charles Seeger’s second wife Ruth and their children: Mike, Peggy, Barbara, and Penny. Apparently, one of the girls wandered off and was found by Elizabeth Cotten. Upon returning the child to her family, the grateful Ruth Seeger offered Cotten a job in their household, which was eventually accepted. She eventually became a fixture in this musical family with musical instruments located all over the house. One day, the children caught Cotten playing one of the guitars and immediately asked her to put down her broom and teach them some of her songs, especially “Freight Train”. Peggy Seeger’s account, recorded in her autobiography, is as follows:

“The family guitar was hung on a wall in the kitchen. I came in after school one day and found Libba playing it left-handed, index finger swinging away doing the job of the thumb, her thumb relegated to fignerdom. We heard ‘Freight Train’ for the first time. Mike and I learned to play it left-handed. Libba became a major centre of attention.” (Seeger, Peggy 2017: chapter 5)

Mike Seeger, arguably the most musically talented of the Seegers, became her champion and manager of sorts, organizing her first recordings and often sharing the bill with her in concerts. Seeger was passionate about conserving the traditions and voices of American folk music, scorning the trendy Folk Revival style of bands like the Kingston Trio. His own band the New Lost City Ramblers embodied this ‘puristic’ approach, laying the foundations for the more recent sub-genres of alt-country, Americana, and American Roots music. Cotten became the embodiment of the

kind of voice he felt needed to be preserved and celebrated. Peggy Seeger pays tribute to her brother Mike in her autobiography:

“... it was Mike who bought Libba a guitar of her own, recorded her and got her on stage. It was Mike who toured with her, opened for her and handled her professionally, for in her later days once she got on stage she couldn't be gotten off. Mike became her guardian angel and stayed so till she died in 1987.” (Seeger, Peggy 2017: chapter 5)

Cotten's music and story can also be seen on Pete Seeger's *Rainbow Quest* in episode three from 1965 where she not only discusses the story behind her most well-known song “Freight Train”, but also acknowledges how she had been discouraged from pursuing what she refers to as ‘ragtime songs’ when she became a member of her local church (Seeger, Pete 1965). This condemnation of ‘secular’ music and the pressure placed on black (and white) musicians and singers to abandon ungodly secular music was unfortunately not uncommon. Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the issue at length in his recent book *The Black Church* and argues forcibly that the two traditions (religious and secular) are actually “symbolic of the nature of African American culture itself: Janus-faced; flip sides of a musical form; joined together and inseparable” (Gates 2021:198).

Like Hurt, Cotten seemed rather bemused, but very much pleased, with her better-late-than-never, achieved fame. Her recordings and concerts were met with great enthusiasm and inspired a new generation of musicians – women in particular. One of my favorite contemporary American musicians, Rhiannon Giddens, who initially came to fame with her string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops, is not only from Cotten's home state, but has also championed her music and legacy. I am especially fond of her recording of Cotten's song “Shake Sugaree”, which recounts an impoverished person forced to gradually sell off all of their earthly possessions.

Have a little secret
I ain't gonna tell
I'm going to heaven in a brown pea shell

Oh, lordy me
Didn't I shake sugaree?
Everything I got is done and pawned
Everything I got is done and pawned
...
Got a little secret
I ain't gonna tell
I'm goin' to heaven and I ain't goin' ...

Despite the tragic story being recounted, the song conveys both humour and peaceful resignation to fate. The last quoted line above ends mid-sentence and thereby contributes to the complex ambiguity of the song. Brenda Evans, Cotten's great-granddaughter, who sang on the original recording, recalls the circumstances around the genesis of the song:

"Every night she would play to us and one of those evenings she liked the little tune she was playing and granny said to us, 'Well, kids, can you all think of some words to go to this song?' So all of us just started piping in, and that's how 'Shake Sugaree' came about." (McCabe 2022)

Mike Seeger eloquently summarised her specific aura in the liner notes for *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes* from 1958:

"She was warm, solid in her identity and belief, and always dignified. She was a creative songster and musician, a smooth, subtle instrumentalist, and possessed a very special grace which she communicated so well to her friends and public audience." (Seeger, Mike 1989)

One last fun fact is that the first version of the Beatles, The Quarrymen, was a 'skiffle band', heavily influenced by American country and folk music, and used to regularly include "Freight Train" in their repertoire in the late 1950s.

Harry Smith's *Anthology* was of particular importance in the case of John Hurt, along with certain enthusiasts who kept his music alive over the years. Hurt never stopped playing music during his 'lost' years and seemingly did not experience any pressure to

strictly adhere to either the secular or spiritual camps when it came to his repertoire. Elizabeth Cotten faced both similar and different obstacles. In her case, her musical journey was further complicated by her gender, her class in society and the disapproval of secular music within the Black church. Daphne A. Brooks, quoted in Allyson McCabe's piece for NPR, points out that Cotten's fate was sadly not an exception and that "generations of Black women musicians were denied the spotlight, and the world was denied their art" (McCabe 2022). She continues, however, to point out that Cotten's brilliance is also a product of these particular complicated circumstances: "it's a specific manifestation of her own North Carolina Jim Crow-era Black girl desires, hopes, dreams, and struggles." (McCabe 2022) The stories of these remarkable musicians and their fates lead one to ponder on how easily they could have been lost to us and how many other lost voices are still out there, waiting to be discovered or rediscovered.

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Summary

This paper explores the unfortunately frequent manner in which African-American musicians fell off the grid after being initially recorded in the late 1920s or were never discovered at all, only to be 'rediscovered' in the late 1950s and early 1960s in connection with the Folk Revival. These two folk and blues musicians, Mississippi John Hurt and Elizabeth Cotten, only received much deserved recognition in their sixties and seventies after having worked their whole lives doing manual labour jobs; better late than never. These elderly black musicians, versed in the older traditions of country blues, consequently provided routes for a whole new generation of mostly white musicians and listeners.

Key words: Folk Revival; Country blues; African-Americans; Elizabeth Cotten; Mississippi John Hurt