

Ain't No Lie

Folk legend Elizabeth Cotten leaves local legacy

by STEVE KOBAK

The Erie Canal Museum is deserted but in one gallery the faint sound of an old woman singing can be heard. She sings a wistful childhood jump-rope elegy about a freight train. It has a click-clack pattering rhythm that evokes an image of a moving railway car. The decorative filling of the higher plucked guitar strings moves the song on down the line.

The sound is coming from an exhibit about Elizabeth Cotten. On the wall hang pictures of Cotten and a short biography. Her music plays from a single speaker.

Cotten was a folk musician from North Carolina who moved to Syracuse in 1978 at the age of 86 and lived here until her death in 1987.

According to Dan Ward, program director of the Folk Arts Program in Syracuse, Cotten was a "time capsule" who contained the key to a past where music was passed down from player to player.

Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten was born in 1892 in Chapel Hill, N.C. At the age of seven, she would steal into her brother's room at night and play his banjo. Cotten, who was left-handed, played the instrument upside down, using her index finger to play the bass parts and her thumb, pointer and middle fingers to fill in the rest of the sound.

She dropped out of school in the fourth grade and worked for 25 cents a week in order to get the money to purchase a guitar. Many of Cotten's best-known songs, such as "Freight Train" and "Oh Babe It Ain't No Lie," were written when she was 12.

Before a radio was a common item, musicians learned music from other players. A musician developed a style that was informed by other styles of playing but had a distinct musical imprint. Cotten developed her finger picking style from her family, a mash-up of styles ranging from Piedmont Blues to ragtime.

"She played the same music that her family and a lot of other people in North Carolina played," said Ward. "When she was learning music there weren't blues singers or country singers. There was just music."

Dana Klipp, a local guitar player who toured with Cotten beginning in 1984, said that performing with her presented challenges.

"It was hard to transpose what she was doing because she was playing a right-handed guitar but left-handed," said Klipp. "I was trying to get as close as I could to the notes she was playing."



File photo

Elizabeth Cotten.

In her teens, Cotten's church persuaded her to stop playing guitar, considering it the devil's music. Forty years later, Cotten was living in Washington, D.C. and working as a nanny for the children of respected musicologists Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger. The Seegers had guitars lying around the house and Cotten picked them up from time to time to see if she could still play. One day, Peggy Seeger, one of the Seeger children, overheard Cotten playing one of her songs and alerted the rest of the family to the treasure in their midst.

Mike Seeger, one of the younger Seegers, began to record Cotten's music in 1957. To hear these sessions is to hear Cotten play like it is 1907. The old-time music style of Cotten's guitar picking paired with the childhood wonder of her lyrics create the odd juxtaposition of a woman physically changed by time whose music remained unaltered.

These sessions yielded two albums of Cotten's music available on the Smithsonian Folkways imprint. Folk musicians around the United States became fans and such luminaries as Taj Mahal and the Grateful Dead reinterpreted Cotten's songs. Fans took to Cotten for the soulful themes in songs like

"Oh, Babe It Ain't No Lie," which was written as a twelve-year-old's plea of innocence in the face of a lie.

"They liked this woman because of her ability to communicate to them something about life," said Ward. "She had a loving philosophy on life."

Millicent Collins, 61, of Syracuse, saw Cotten perform with Mike Seeger in the early '80s. Collins came to the show to snap photographs for a local newspaper called *The Nickel Review*.

"The spirit of God speaks to me about things," said Collins. "He told me that something wonderful was going to happen with those pictures."

That night, Cotten played all of the audience favorites and then started to sing gospel songs. The audience began to leave but Collins stayed behind, captivated by the performance. Collins became an ordained minister soon after the concert.

"I always felt that [Cotten] had something to do with that," said Collins. "I had not before that met someone of her stature willing to publicly acknowledge their faith."

Cotten's last performance was at a tribute to her on February 22, 1987 at City College in Harlem. Dana Klipp and Cotten's granddaughter Johnine Rankin performed with her. She died four months later in Syracuse at the age of 95.

The city of Syracuse has memorialized Cotten. She was posthumously awarded a "Sammy," Syracuse's music award. A portrait of her hangs in City Hall. At the corner of Castle and State Streets, a faded brown wooden sign with gold letters marks Libba Cotten Grove, a "pocket park" dedicated to her in 1983, and rededicated during an August jazz performance.

In 1995, Francis Parks, a fan of Cotten's, formed the Libba Cotten Conservancy, a non-profit organization that honors Cotten and teaches school children about her life and music.

"Not every city gets the chance to celebrate the life of a historic figure," said Parks. "The essence of her life could inform people."

At the Erie Canal Museum, a guitar hangs upside-down, suspended from a metal beam. Visitors are invited to sit on a chair and try to play guitar the way that Cotten did. The chair is unoccupied. Perhaps it always will be. ■

Music has been central to Steve Kobak's life since he discovered Sonic Youth's recordings at age 10. He graduated with an English degree from Central Connecticut State University, where he reviewed music for the school newspaper and interned at the Hartford Courant.