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Derek Piotr Continues To Excavate North Carolina Mountain Songs

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Folklorist Derek Piotr continues to excavate North Carolina mountain songs, presenting an assortment of archival recordings taking in Child Ballads, bawdy songs, play-party tunes, and old-time family singing – with a further focus on overlooked star Mrs. Lena Bare Turbyfill, of Elk Park, NC.

Diving into the Library of Congress' archives, with a particular interest in the songs of Lena Bare Turbyfill, Piotr's research focused on US interpretations of traditional folk music from the north of the UK (especially Scotland and Northumberland), most notably the Scottish murder ballad 'Lamkin'. His investigation deepened, Piotr read widely around this and other songs and interviewed members of Turbyfill's family, recording their

renditions of these pieces. This stoked his excitement, and he began to formulate his own contemporary takes on this musical tradition.

You continue to work on the North Carolina mountain songs. Your research is becoming a major documentary... tell us more about the making of 'Ever Since We've Known It: More North Carolina Mountain Singing'.

Derek Piotr: 'Ever Since We've Known It' is a companion piece to 'Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing'. Both compilations feature members of the Bare Clan singing traditional songs, ballads, and local folk tunes, with notable focus on Mrs. Lena Bare Turbyfill. Lena recorded dozens of tunes for the Library of Congress in 1939, but only two of these recordings were published in the 20th century. I took it upon myself to work with the entire body of music the family had been documented performing as it is, in my opinion, some of the finest music in the world.

Ever Since We've Known It: More North Carolina Mountain Singing by Various Artists

I'm sure you're full of stories. Would you share your insight on the compilation' tracks?

Probably the nicest one on the 'Last Wisps' compilation is 'Cumberland Gap', sung by Lena Turbyfill and her sister, Lloyd Hagie. I find their close harmonies unearthly...but the one that probably warms my heart most is the rendition of 'Frankie & Johnny' that Nicky Pritchard sang down the phone to me. She made the distinction that, although that song had been in the movies, she had learned it from her family before hearing it via modern media.



Would you like to share some further words about Mrs. Lena Bare Turbyfill...

Lena is sort of my overlooked star; I've been spending a lot of sweat lately making her more visible, including featuring her on [WFMU](#) and [NTS](#). I recently had a photograph of her restored to modern quality; that face could launch a thousand ships! In general I feel she was forgotten to time somehow, and working with the amazing recordings of her warm, virtuosic singing has been a joy. While she was still alive, I also was introduced to Lena's last living daughter, Nicola "Aunt Nicky" Pritchard, who was still living in Elk Park, only about 500 feet away from Lena's old homestead. In July of 2020, I traveled to North Carolina from my home in Connecticut, and Nicky had me over for a visit. Nicky and I had had a few tentative phone calls with poor cell phone service before I came for this visit, and she had gradually begun warming to my interest in the family. But when I stepped through the door of her home and saw her face-to-face, I experienced one of those precious rare instant rapports, in which there are no walls or trepidation. We laughed, we selfies. We held hands while she listened to old recordings with me, and while she herself sang. Nicky was an incredible touchstone to Lena's life and songs, a really amazing fountain of memory.



How would you define "mountain music" apart from its geographical positioning?

Mostly this is a distinction between the Blue Ridge Mountain region of western North Carolina, versus the Piedmont or Coastal Plains. I am not sure I would want to qualify mountain music as having any sort of distinguishing characteristic apart from any other folk music; all music still performed as remembered through oral tradition, to me, holds the same purity. It just so happened that this project focused on families from the Appalachian mountains in North Carolina.



What lies next for you?

I have another compilation, based around the ballad “Lamkin”, in the works, and I am finishing up a new solo record.

Klemen Breznikar