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Premiere: Derek Piotr – How Can I Keep From Crying

written by [Alex Gallacher](#) 30 March, 2022

In January, we interviewed NYC-based (soon to relocate) musician and folklorist **Derek Piotr** ([read it here](#)) following the release of **Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing**, via the UK-based independent record label **Death Is Not The End**. The album featured archival recordings and some of Derek's own field recordings made on field trips. Of particular note was **Mrs Lena Bare Turbyfill**, a singer who, as he put it, "slipped through the cracks somehow, due perhaps to her reluctance to be in front of a crowd or perhaps to the hard life she endured."

After placing other singers in the spotlight, Derek Piotr is back in the frame with a new solo single, an excellent take on "How Can I Keep from Crying?" taken from his forthcoming album *The Devil Knows How*. He tells us:

“How Can I Keep from Crying?” is one of the first songs I worked on for my new record, The Devil Knows How. My version was loosely based on Frank Proffitt’s “I’m Going Back to North Carolina”, but I asked my longtime partner-in-crime Lance Martin to interpret the melody on acoustic guitar instead of banjo. William Ritter, a fellow folklorist, added some backing vocals spontaneously one night and I had the whole thing mixed very quickly. The emphasis was on keeping the textures more akin to a field recording than a glossy studio document. Seeing as I am, in fact, moving down to North Carolina in early April, releasing this song now could not be more apt. My home’s across the Blue Ridge Mountains!

One of the things I loved about Derek’s folk collecting work was his love for the more unvarnished and “real” – songs sung as part of everyday life rather than delivered as part of a singing profession. I recently purchased a copy of Alan Lomax’s American Patchwork (a double album released on Mississippi Records), which features field recordings from 1978 to 1983, and it’s been on my turntable a lot. It highlighted how field recordings, like the vernacular art I enjoy, can connect on a much deeper level. There’s a magic of some sort at play...the music has a real soul, and it often possesses a far stronger character than that offered by commercial music.

While such recordings may have inspired the direction taken on this new solo album, there’s much more going on here. On *How Can I Keep from Crying?* (out on 1st of April), Derek’s earthy vocals and Lance’s folk-style guitar combine brilliantly; he sounds at home in the song. Throughout, there are some great moments that heighten the intensity of the song. The first is the arrival of William Ritter’s backing vocals, a fine match for Derek’s, and then some gorgeous but subtle pedal steel from Lance towards the end. I’ll be honest, when Derek told me he had a single he wanted to share with Folk Radio, I wasn’t expecting this. I love what he’s done here and I can’t wait to hear the rest of the album, which is out on the 13th of May.

The Devil Knows How (13th of May) is a collection of traditional ballads from western North Carolina, primarily as performed by the Bare family. Many of these recordings originally appeared on the 2021 compilation Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing mentioned above.

During his excavation and curation of the Bare clan’s musical repertoire, Piotr was compelled to perform

several of their key pieces, including “‘Hold up Your Hand, Old Joshua!’ She Cried” and “George Collins”. The

recordings for The Devil Knows How intentionally hew closer to traditional field recordings than studio documents, with engineer Scott Solter (The Mountain Goats, Spoon) and Piotr exploring a wide array of tape textures and fidelities. The record will also feature interviews with the Bare clan as taken in 1939 for the Library of Congress.