

REFLECTIONS AND COMPOSITIONS INSPIRED BY  
THREE PIONEERING GUITAR WOMEN

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## *Abstract*

In the male dominated world of guitar, there have been many, largely unknown, female guitarists who were innovative players and were musical and social pioneers. This thesis brings to light and celebrates the musical achievements of three such women guitarists—Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza and Memphis Minnie—through biographical essays, musical analyses and compositions based around their individual biographies, aesthetics, unique playing styles and techniques. The accompanying compositions are not only influenced by the lives and stories of each artist, but by their varied cultures—Caucasian, Mexican-American and African-American. Besides being an examination of three accomplished women guitarists, this is also a study of the roots and history of American popular music, with an underlying theme of triumph and accomplishment over oppression, transcendence over gender bias and exemplary artistry that has withstood the test of time.

## *Dedication*

*This work is dedicated to the memory of Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza, and  
Memphis Minnie—three inspirational musicians and human beings.*

*May their music and their lives be celebrated for ages to come.*

## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, Paul and Beth Garon, Chris Strachwitz, Nick Nicopoulos, Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg for the amazing biographies they wrote about these three musicians. I found myself returning to your books over and over again throughout the months it took me to finish this work. Thanks so much for taking the time and care to honor these women.

Thanks to my supervisors, Rob Bowman and Louise Wrazen. Rob, your knowledge about American roots and R&B music is so impressive! I can't say how happy I am to have gotten to work with you. Thank you for helping me get into the Graduate Program at York. Thanks also for your time, for the chats, and for correcting my grammar (sorry about that!) To Louise, I'm grateful for your care and patience editing my chapters, and for your guidance on how to put this all together. I also really appreciate the time we spent meeting and discussing women in music. Your input has been invaluable.

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I'm sending a huge acknowledgment to my partner, Peter Karp, for suggesting that I go back to school. On first mention of the idea, I scoffed and resisted. And of course, (and the words were never so true), you were right. I am so happy I followed through in pursuit of this degree, no matter where it leads. My horizons have been expanding since the day we met and I couldn't be more excited about our future together.

Finally to my son, Joseph—an amazing scholar and musician. You keep me reaching higher and I love you with all my heart. And thanks always to my family and friends, for being there with your unconditional love and support. Much love and respect to all.

SF

## *Table of Contents*

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction	1
<b>Chapter One - MAYBELLE CARTER</b>	<b>5</b>
Biography	6
Maybelle Carter's Guitar Style and Musical Influence	12
The Carter Scratch	14
The Hawaiian and Blues Slide Guitar	15
Mexican Guitar Style	18
Summary	20
Composition: "Maybelle's Guitar"	23
"Maybelle's Guitar" - Theme	25
"Maybelle's Guitar" - Form	27
"Maybelle's Guitar" - Methodology	28
<b>Chapter Two - LYDIA MENDOZA</b>	<b>30</b>
Biography	31
Lydia Mendoza's Musical Style and Cultural Heritage	41
Norteña Music	41
Twelve String Guitar Tuning	42
Canções Rancheras	43
Corridos	43
Summary	45
Composition: "Lark of the Border"	47
"Lark of the Border" - Theme	50

“Lark of the Border” - Form	51
“Lark of the Border” - Methodology	53
<b>Chapter Three - MEMPHIS MINNIE</b>	<b>55</b>
Biography	56
Memphis Minnie’s Guitar Style and Musical Evolution	59
The Country Blues	61
The Melrose Sound	63
The Chicago Blues or Urban Blues	64
Summary	68
Composition: “Killer in a Prom Dress”	69
“Killer in a Prom Dress” - Theme	71
“Killer in a Prom Dress” - Form	76
“Killer in a Prom Dress” - Methodology	77
Techniques Used in Recording Accompanying Songs	78
Conclusion	80
Bibliography	83

## *Introduction*

As long as I can remember the guitar was part of the fabric of my being. I was a child of the 1970's, when the radio airwaves were electrified with heavy guitar music; Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, the Beatles etc. It seemed to me like there was a bearded hippie on every corner of every block strumming a guitar and earnestly singing songs of innocence, youth, sex, rebellion and protest. Meanwhile in our house, you couldn't walk across the floor without stepping over my father's beat up acoustic, or one of my three older brothers' electric guitars. I was the youngest of five kids and, though I was a girl, it seemed completely natural and right that I, too, would play.

When I was thirteen I asked my father for a guitar for Christmas. I was living in Edmonton with my mother, and my dad, from whom we were estranged, lived back in Ottawa where I was born and had grown up. I didn't realize it then, but know now that playing the guitar was a way for me to remain close to him and to my roots. I'm sure during those long, dark and frigid Alberta nights as I was getting adjusted to my new home and surroundings, holding onto that guitar brought me comfort and a sense of my own strength and potential.

I studied and practiced for hours a day all through my teens. By the time I was sixteen, I was already doing professional gigs, and by eighteen, I had moved by myself to Vancouver and was fronting my own band. In my twenties I was based out of Austin, Texas, but already spending most of my time on the road. I had a record contract, a booking agent, a manager, a van and a full time touring backup band. I was an ambitious, young musician, and fully immersed in learning my craft.



I was also a bit of an anomaly—a young woman, lead blues guitarist, singer-songwriter. And though I sang and wrote many of my own songs, I've always felt like a I was a guitar player first. What I could say through my instrument was so much more profound than anything I could speak, sing, or write.

The fact that there were fewer female guitarists, especially lead guitarists, than men has always intrigued me. But what intrigued me more, were the women who did play. I always noticed another female player, whether it was someone famous and influential, like Nancy Wilson of Heart, Bonnie Raitt, Lona Boyd, Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, Joan Jett—or more obscure artists like country blues guitarist Rory Block or bassist Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth. Seeing a woman playing the guitar sparked instant curiosity and recognition, and again, that feeling of comfort and strength—strength in numbers.

As the years have progressed, so has the number of female guitarists. From scarcity to abundance—almost any indie band out there performing on the circuit has at least one girl in it, and most are instrumentalists. Today I can't keep track of them all, but in 1990, I knew every one by name.

In 2001, I started working on a book called *Guitar Woman*. For years I conducted interviews with women players, many of whom were the tops in their field. It was inspiring to meet and learn first hand what their lives and careers were like, and I made a lot of new friends during that time. I was eight years into it when, after transcribing dozens of interviews, writing essays, and doing a pile of historical research, I hit a wall, and got completely overwhelmed. There just seemed to be a massive amount of work involved with trying to pay respect to every player and and, to be honest, they were all

unique. It's true these were women players, but if you closed your eyes, would it matter? Most of the women I interviewed didn't care about their gender or how it related to their musicianship. They played, and they just happened to be women. That being said, they, like me, did have a curiosity about other female players' lives, because most of them didn't have many musical role models who were like them.

This brings me to the three artists I have chosen to pay tribute to in this series of compositions and the accompanying essays. Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza and Memphis Minnie are pioneering figures in American music. All were born into humble beginnings in the early 1900's and started their recording careers in the 1920's. Eventually they each became legends in their respective musical genres. They were excellent guitarists and all-around musicians, and went on to influence generations of players, men and women. The fact that they were female is remarkable, because of what they were able to accomplish in an era long before equal rights.

Culturally they represent the three main demographics in Americana music; Maybelle was a white country/bluegrass musician, Lydia Mendoza, a Mexican-American immigrant and icon of Tejano music, and Memphis Minnie, an African American blues musician. What struck me as interesting is the unique way their lives and careers unfolded and how they weathered decades in the music business. Each of their life stories has a very distinctive arc and I can only guess that some of this is because of their respective ethnicities. I will touch on that briefly in my conclusion.

There are three main chapters in this thesis. Each chapter begins with a photo and biography of each artist, followed by a short musical analysis, and a discussion of the composition I wrote in their style. In my musical analyses I chose to focus on the

parts of their styles that resonated with me and that I applied to my own compositions. In this way, the compositions are a mirror of the analyses (and vice versa.) I delve into the theme and form of each composition to shed more light on how I applied each woman's techniques and styles in my songs. Also included is a brief explanation of the methods, instrumentation, and technology used in the accompanying recordings of the three songs.

Even though this thesis is a tribute to three great artists, there is a lot of my own personal reflection in both the analyses and the compositions. Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza, and Memphis Minnie have all had a huge impact on me—personally and musically. Thinking and writing about their lives and music has been an exhilarating and fulfilling process. If this work brings more awareness to their lives and stories, and makes more people listen to their music, I will feel like I have accomplished something very worthwhile. Read on and enjoy!

Sue Foley, Perth, Ontario, 31 March 2015

## Chapter One - MAYBELLE CARTER



## *Biography*

“Mother” Maybelle Carter<sup>1</sup> (May 10, 1909 – October 23, 1978) was an American country musician. She is best known as a member of the historic Carter Family act in the 1920s and 1930s and also as a member of Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters. The original Carter Family—Alvin Pleasant (A.P.) Carter, his wife Sara, and Maybelle—are considered country music's first singing group.<sup>2</sup>

Sara Carter (born Sara Dougherty) was Maybelle's older cousin, and the two grew up close together in a remote area of the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia, known colloquially as “Poor Valley”. The closest city, Bristol, Virginia, lies about twenty miles west of the original Carter homestead. Maybelle (born Maybelle Addington) was the sixth of ten children born to Margaret Elizabeth Kilgore and Hugh Jack Addington, a farmer, rolling mill operator, storekeeper, and moonshiner.<sup>3</sup>

Sarah and Maybelle were both from musical families, and they sang and played the autoharp and the banjo as young girls. Maybelle's mother, Margaret, had an encyclopedic knowledge of old songs and hymns that had been handed down orally for generations, and she taught them to her children to play at local parties and dances. Maybelle showed musical promise early on and, taking after her older brothers, moved from the banjo and autoharp to the guitar at age thirteen. The guitar was just coming into popularity at that time, mostly due to the Sears Roebuck Company, which started distributing the instrument in their mail order catalogue. Around the turn of the twentieth century, traditional music within the Appalachian region consisted mostly of *a cappella* singing and instrumental music played on the fiddle and the

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<sup>1</sup> Photo: Carter Family Archives, Web Page: “Maybelle Carter Rocks,” *SunsetKitty.com*, (Carol Adams webmaster, Accessed April 4 2015) <http://www.sunsetkitty.com/mcr.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Mark Zwonitzer, Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Zwonitzer/Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 67

banjo, but by the 1920's the guitar started to gain in popularity and would eventually become the instrument of choice for musicians and troubadours.<sup>4</sup>

Sara wed A.P. Carter in 1915 when she was just sixteen years old and the young couple started singing and performing together at dances, schoolhouses and even at "singing conventions" around the area.<sup>5</sup> Maybelle was just fifteen when she quit high school to accompany them on their performances, playing guitar and adding her voice in three-part harmony. It wasn't long before she started developing her signature guitar style known as the "Carter Scratch" (discussed below). That, along with A.P.'s bass vocals and fiddle and Sarah's melancholy contralto, created the original sound that locals found so appealing. The chemistry between the three was obvious, and their musical reputation grew throughout the region.

In 1925, during one of their schoolhouse performances, Maybelle was introduced to A.P.'s cousin, Ezra (Eck) Carter, and they started a courtship that eventually led to marriage. Like Sara, Maybelle was just sixteen when she said her vows. The union between Maybelle and Eck solidified the ties between the families as now Maybelle too was a Carter. It seemed completely natural that A.P., Sara and Maybelle would be known as The Carter Family.

The group was recommended to the talent scout, Ralph Peer, who brought recording equipment to Bristol, Tennessee, to discover and record new talent for the RCA Victor Talking Machine Company. Between 25 July and 5 August 1927<sup>6</sup>, the trio cut two records: "Wandering Boy" backed by "Poor Orphan Child" and "The Storms Are on the Ocean" backed by "Single Girl, Married Girl." Not being a fan of "Hillbilly" music, Peer sat on these recordings for months, as he was unsure if the songs would have any impact. Finally, in early 1928, Victor released the

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis R. Davis, "Guitar," *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, (University of Tennessee Press, Published Mar 1 2011, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.encyclopediaofappalachia.com/entry.php?rec=103>

<sup>5</sup> Singing conventions were like music festivals that drew church choirs from all over Southwest Virginia. Zwonitzer / Hirschberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 62

<sup>6</sup> Travis D. Stimeling,, *Country Music Reader*, (Oxford University Press, 2015) 27

records to the public and the Carter's music was an instant hit, selling in the thousands almost overnight.<sup>7</sup>

Their formula for success was a relatively easy one: A.P would find the songs, sometimes writing them himself, or he would travel around the area to track down musical families and clans and learn their local songs and hymns. He would bring the words and music back to the girls to learn, and they would all then follow up with a recording session for Peer. Peer shared equally in the publishing with A.P., Sara, and Maybelle, and over time, they each drew a good income from not only the recording sessions but from the songwriting royalties earned from the record sales. The income from owning part of the publishing from the Carters and many other artists made Ralph Peer a very rich man. It also helped the Carters weather the Great Depression without much hardship.<sup>8</sup>

From 1927 to 1935, the Carter Family recorded some of the best loved songs in country and bluegrass music: "Wildwood Flower," "Keep On The Sunny Side," "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," "My Clinch Mountain Home," "Will The Circle Be Unbroken," and many others that will forever be regarded as some of the purest musical expressions of rural American life.

By the early 1930's Sara and A.P.'s marriage was in trouble. The couple had grown distant in part due to A.P.'s constant traveling and wild temper, but even more so by the fact that Sara had fallen in love with A.P.'s cousin, Coy Bayes. Although there was strain within the group, the three continued to work together professionally even after Sara and A.P.'s divorce in 1936. In 1938, they received an offer of a contract to play live on XERA Radio—one of the biggest radio stations in the U.S. It broadcast from Mexico, across the border from Del Rio, Texas all across the U.S. to Mexico and even as far north as Canada. They performed twice a day for months at a time, making their way into millions of living rooms across North America

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<sup>7</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 104, 117

<sup>8</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 110

and solidifying their place as country music's most loved group. Originally it was only A.P., Maybelle, and Sara who performed on XERA but, by the early 1940's, that changed when Sara decided she wanted to wed her true love, Coy, and move with him to California, thus breaking up the original group.<sup>9</sup> It was then that Maybelle and Eck started working their three daughters—Helen, June, and Anita—into the show, reinventing the Carter Family's image and also its sound.

Though A.P. did play with the new formation of the Carter Family along with Maybelle and the girls, he was a like fifth wheel and the chemistry had changed with Sara's departure. A.P. eventually returned to Poor Valley to be close to his daughters and grandchildren. He was a broken man after losing Sara but losing his beloved music group was almost too much for him. He tried for years to start another musical group but nothing ever solidified. Eventually he opened a convenience store where he held court with any and all Carter Family fans who would wander through town.<sup>10</sup>

Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters went on to work tirelessly, performing for years on XERA, touring non-stop across the U.S. and finally finding their home at the Grand Ole Opry. Their reputation kept growing through the 1940's and the early 1950's, as they based themselves out of Nashville and toured with Chet Atkins, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and many other legendary performers. They managed to hold onto their status as country music's most beloved group due to the simple fact that they had influenced most of these young up and comers and had earned their respect. Though they were still steeped in traditional country music, during the early 1950's the Carter girls performed and recorded popular songs like "Baby, It's Cold Outside," and novelty numbers like, "Mommie's Real Peculiar," Bashful Rascal," and "No Swallowing Place."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 222

<sup>10</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 323

<sup>11</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 289



As the 1950's progressed, the look and sound of country music changed mostly because of the growing popularity and influence of rock and roll. Artists like Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis, who had their roots in country music, appealed to a younger audience fueled by the curiosity "of the flesh."<sup>12</sup> The traditional and innocent songs of Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters were considered "old timey" and, as a result, the offers for the group grew more scarce. Helen, June and Anita had matured into women and had families of their own, which limited their ability and willingness to tour. Maybelle performed at the Grand Ole Opry, filling in slots whenever they needed her and, for extra money, she worked part-time moonlighting as a nurse, sitting with the elderly. During this period it seemed like Maybelle's career was winding down.

In the later part of the 1950's at the cusp of the folk music revival, which peaked between 1958 and 1963, Maybelle and the music of the original Carter Family gained an entirely new audience. This time it was young adults, university students and fans of folk music who embraced their time-honoured sound. In 1961 a young virtuoso guitar player named Earl Scruggs and his "banjo pickin'" partner, Lester Flatt, from the bluegrass group, Flatt and Scruggs, recorded an entire album dedicated to their music called *Songs of The Famous Carter Family* (1961, Columbia – CS 8464). However, it wasn't until 1963 that Maybelle's career started to take off again, this time due to the encouragement from a young group called The New Lost City Ramblers, which featured Mike Seeger, the half-brother of folk icon, Pete Seeger. The New Lost City Ramblers were in awe of Maybelle and her musicianship and they took her out on several tour dates, including shows at the historic Ash Grove in Los Angeles and the Newport Folk Festival. This period marked a turn for Maybelle, for during her entire career, she had been the consummate group musician, always standing in the shadows and pushing others forward. Now it was her turn in the spotlight.

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<sup>12</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 311

Maybelle went on to record several solo albums during the 1960's, including *Wildwood Pickin'*<sup>13</sup>, which was recorded live at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 and *A Living Legend*<sup>14</sup> released on Columbia in 1965. In addition, several original Carter Family compilations were reissued. There was even a reunion album produced with Sara Carter called *The Original Carters, An Historic Reunion*<sup>15</sup> in 1966.

On March 1 1968, June Carter married Johnny Cash after a long professional and personal relationship that blossomed into a romance. Cash had been heavily influenced by the Carters ever since their days on XERA and he had sworn to marry June almost from the day they met. Maybelle became a favourite featured performer on Cash's variety TV show from 1968 to 1971. Sometimes she sang and played her well-known classics like "Wildwood Flower," and at other times she just picked her guitar behind Johnny and her daughters as they sang the traditional country music she had helped invent and make popular. She enjoyed the comic banter between Johnny, June, and the many guests, but she remained the consummate "straight man" — always serious when she played music.

In 1971, Maybelle was approached by the folk-rock group The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band to guest on a bluegrass collaboration album they were producing with many special guests, including Flatt and Scruggs, Doc Watson, and Merle Travis. Like so many other folk and country musicians, "The Dirt Band" considered Maybelle one of their musical heroes and were thrilled and honoured when she agreed to record with them. *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*<sup>16</sup> became a national hit and remains today one of the top-selling bluegrass albums of all time.<sup>17</sup> The band awarded Maybelle a gold record (her first) for her role on *Circle* in 1973.

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<sup>13</sup> Maybelle Carter, *Wildwood Pickin'*, (Vanguard Records, 1997)

<sup>14</sup> Maybelle Carter, *A Living Legend*, (Columbia / SONY, Reissued 2013, Original released 1966)

<sup>15</sup> Sara and Maybelle Carter, *The Original Carters, An Historic Reunion*, (Columbia / SONY, Reissued 1997, Originally released 1966)

<sup>16</sup> The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, *Will The Circle Be Unbroken (30th Anniversary Edition,)* (Capitol, Reissued 2002, Originally released 1972)

<sup>17</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 369

As she aged, Maybelle struggled with arthritis in her hands, which made playing painful, and being the professional that she was, she refused to ever play below her desired level. She finally retired completely from music in 1974 after Eck's death and spent the next few years between homes in Florida and Henderson, Tennessee, visiting with friends and family, riding her bicycle around the neighbourhood and playing bingo almost every night.

Maybelle passed away on October 23, 1978, in her sleep, after suffering a period of deteriorating health. Her death was national news and was covered in almost every major periodical across the U.S. Dozens of musical tributes followed. The Carter Family was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970, and in 2005 posthumously honoured with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.<sup>18</sup>

"Mother" Maybelle Carter will forever be regarded and remembered as the Great Mother of Country Music.

### *Maybelle Carter's Guitar Style and Musical Influence*

Maybelle Carter mastered some of the most widely used and influential acoustic guitar styles in American music. Her playing was steady as a drum and her sense of time was impeccable. Put that together with her warm and round guitar tone, her touch, and her creativity, and you have the very foundation of great musicianship. Her playing cut across musical genres and geographic, ethnic, and social divides.<sup>19</sup> As early as the first Carter Family sessions, she was already playing Hawaiian and the slide guitar favoured by black blues musicians, as well as her own "Mexican style," which was a variation of her Carter Scratch style strumming over a

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<sup>18</sup> "Lifetime Achievement Awards," *Grammy.org*, (The Recording Academy, 2015, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.grammy.org/recording-academy/awards/lifetime-awards>

<sup>19</sup> Zwonitzer/Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 110

polka beat and single note chromatic runs that mimicked the Mexican and Tejano artists she heard while living in Del Rio, Texas and performing on XERA. (see page 15)

Maybelle was always watching for something new, and her ears were always open. Sometimes, after the Carter Family entertainments, Maybelle would hang around the schoolhouse stage.... jamming with the local musicians, picking up new tricks here and there. By the time she started branching out, phonograph records and radio had made it possible for Maybelle to hear about any kind of music she wanted. She took what she could. "Anything to get a little something different." She once said.<sup>20</sup>

She learned the blues and some of her strumming technique from African-American musician Lesley Riddle, who used to travel with A.P. on his song searches. Riddle was a close friend of the Carters, often spending weeks at the home of A.P and Sara. What the Carters got from Riddle was the blues and gospel songs he had learned from musicians like Brownie McGee, Blind Lemon Jefferson, John Henry, and others.<sup>21</sup>

In 1965, Mike Seeger located Riddle in Rochester, New York, where he'd been living since 1942, and brought him out of retirement to perform and record again. "Forty years later when Seeger was recording Lesley, he could see and hear the similarities between Lesley's picking style and that of Maybelle Carter, so he asked him if he ever gave her lessons. Lesley replied, "No, I didn't have to. She would just watch and learn. She was that good."<sup>22</sup>

Maybelle played the same 1928 Gibson L-5 archtop guitar for close to fifty years. That guitar was bought for her by Eck shortly after the Carter Family made their first recordings. During her later years, after the onset of arthritis, she favoured the autoharp, which was easier on the hands. But up until then, for almost every recording Maybelle made, and in every live performance, her 1928 Gibson L-5 always rang through. Maybelle's guitar was called the most important guitar in the history of country music by Nashville guitar collector and owner of Gruhn

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<sup>20</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 185

<sup>21</sup> Kip Lornell, "Leslie Riddle (1905-1980)," *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, (University of Tennessee Press, Published Feb 24 2011, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.encyclopediaofappalachia.com/entry.php?rec=14>

<sup>22</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 184

Guitars, George Gruhn. Gruhn sold the guitar in 2004 to a prominent investor for \$575,000 on behalf of the Carter family. The vintage guitar was then donated to the *Country Music Hall of Fame Museum* in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>23</sup>

## The Carter Scratch

Maybelle Carter's famous guitar style, known as the Carter Scratch, was a combined picking and strumming technique. She would pick the melodies with a thumb pick on the three low strings (E, A, and D) and in the spaces between the melody notes, on the top strings (G, B, and E), she would brush the rest of the chord with her index finger. Most of the melody notes rested within the chord position and could be plucked while she was holding the chord, which made a full sound. This style came directly from the claw hammer banjo technique she learned as a young girl. Traditional claw hammer banjo playing is highly rhythmic and uses elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, and percussion. The technique includes sounding individual melodic notes, strumming harmonic chords as well as producing percussive effects by brushing or thumping the thumb or fingers on the banjo head.<sup>24</sup>

What makes Maybelle's Carter Scratch style significant is that the guitar is being played as both a lead and a rhythm instrument at the same time. The Carter Scratch is the most influential style of country and folk guitar and is the starting point and often also the ending point for any singer or songwriter who accompanies him or herself on the instrument. Excellent examples of the Carter Scratch strumming technique can be found in songs such as "Wildwood Flower".

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<sup>23</sup> Dave Hunter, "Legendary Guitars: Maybelle Carter's 1928 Gibson L-5," *Gibson.com*, (Published Aug 25 2009, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www2.gibson.com/News-Lifestyle/Features/en-us/maybelle-carter-825.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> Miles Krassen, *Clawhammer Banjo*, (Music Sales America; Pap/Com edition, 1974)

Figure 1: Transcription of Maybelle Carter's guitar part in "Wildwood Flower".<sup>25</sup>



### The Hawaiian and Blues Slide Guitar

Maybelle's slide guitar playing was featured in several Carter Family songs such as "Meet Me by the Moonlight" and "Little Darlin' Pal of Mine" (notation see figure 2 following). To play this style, Maybelle would tune her guitar to an open chord —in the case of "Little Darlin' Pal of Mine," an open E chord (EBEG#B) — much like the African American country blues musicians did. She would strum a full chord to the rhythm of the song and use a pocketknife as a slide to pick out the melody on the top strings. This is possible because the open chord makes fretting notes on the neck of the guitar unnecessary so the left hand is relatively free and can slide up and down, using the ringing of open notes and chords to accentuate the melody,

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<sup>25</sup> I copied this transcription from a web site as it reads fairly accurate to me. It definitely shows the Carter Scratch pattern of strumming and the basic melody of "Wildwood Flower."  
Harley Spierenburg, "Wildwood Flower," *Portraits of Harley* (Published 2011, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://users.eastlink.ca/~harleyspi/position.html>

creating a fuller sound. Her melodic single-note melody lines played on the slide would follow or accentuate what Sara sang, which gave the impression of two voices arranged in a call and a response fashion. The open chord strumming was the rhythm that held everything down and created a foundation for the single voice and slide guitar melodies to sit comfortably on top.

The notated example on page 17 shows both the guitar pattern played by Maybelle (bars 1-18), and the vocal harmonies, sung by A.P. and Sara Carter (bars 19-66). The guitar part shows the sliding single-note melody line ascending (bars 1- 2) in the same melodic pattern of the chorus which leads in from bar 18. The slide guitar runs through the melody of the song in slight variations to accentuate and at times counter the vocal parts. The two-part vocal harmonies are mostly sung in perfect fifths but deviate at times to sixths (bar 24-25) and even at times to octaves (bar 19).

Between the slide and rhythm guitar, the two-part harmony vocals, the interchanging parts and call and response all packaged in a simple melody line and chord pattern, “Little Darling Pal of Mine” actually has a lot going on musically. This mixture of simplicity and complexity is typical of most of the Carter Family’s music, and indicative of the genius behind it.

Figure 2: Transcription of the melody lines and guitar chords of “Little Darling Pal of Mine” <sup>26</sup>

**Little Darling Pal Of Mine**

Words and Music by A.P. Carter

**Brightly** ♩=222 Fig.1

The musical score is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a tempo marking of 'Brightly' with a metronome setting of 222. The score is divided into systems with measure numbers 8, 15, 22, 29, 50, 57, and 63. The first system (measures 1-7) is labeled 'Guitar' and 'Fig.1'. The second system (measures 8-14) continues the guitar part. The third system (measures 15-21) is labeled '8 Chorus' and 'Vocals'. The fourth system (measures 22-28) continues the vocal part. The fifth system (measures 29-49) is labeled 'To Coda' and 'w/ Fig. 1'. The sixth system (measures 50-56) continues the guitar part. The seventh system (measures 57-62) continues the guitar part. The eighth system (measures 63-72) is labeled '1. 2.', '3. D.S. al Coda', and 'Coda'. The score ends with a double bar line and the word 'Coda'.

<sup>26</sup> This notation was accessed at musicnotes.com—a reputable source for sheet music. It appears to be a very accurate representation of “Little Darling Pal of Mine” and to be the actual sheet music that would have sold in music stores. Figure 2: A.P. Carter, “Little Darlin’ Pal Of Mine,” (Copyright Peer International Corporation 1939,) *Musicnotes.com*, (Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtdfPE.asp?ppn=MN0049077&ref=google>



## Mexican Guitar Style

In 1961, Maybelle was asked to come into the studio to show bluegrass guitarist, Lester Flatt, how to play her Mexican style by picking on the Carter's classic "You Are My Flower" for the Flatt and Scruggs album *Songs of the Famous Carter Family*. Maybelle had been one of Flatt's favourite all-time guitar influences, but he was struggling to get her style down. They finally had Maybelle play the part herself and just spliced her into the track.<sup>27</sup> With the case of "You Are My Flower," the progression and feel of the song is similar to a polka rhythm that was favoured by many Tejano musicians who played in and around the Texas/Mexican border towns. The polka was brought to the area from the German and European immigrants who settled in Texas around the 1850's. It originated in Eastern Europe around the mid 1800's and became one of the most enduring and popular dance forms of all time.<sup>28</sup>

Although traditional polka rhythm is played in 2/4 time, "You Are My Flower" is played in 4/4, which separates it from the traditional form. No doubt Maybelle got inspired to devise her intricate guitar pattern after hearing the Tejano artists who were featured prominently on XERA Radio while the Carters were living in Del Rio, Texas, during the 1930's. As well as employing a rhythm that is similar to that of a polka, "You Are My Flower" features a I - V - I repetitive progression which is very common in traditional Tejano music. Her intricate lead guitar pattern plays chromatic runs that delicately interweave between the chord changes and vocal lines in an effortless and graceful manner. It's also possible to hear her unmistakable "Carter Scratch" when she brushes the chords and picks out the lead lines in between her strumming pattern.

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<sup>27</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 339

<sup>28</sup> Jason Adrien, "What on Earth is Polka? Geographic origins and history," (Central Washington University, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.cwu.edu/~kuhlkenr/polka.html>

Figure 3: Transcription of the guitar part and melody of “You Are My Flower”.<sup>29</sup>

**YOU ARE MY FLOWER**

Words and Music by A.P. Carter

**Brightly** ♩ = 212

<sup>29</sup> This notation was also accessed at [musicnotes.com](http://musicnotes.com) and seems to be part of the same series of sheet music by the Carter Family. Figure 3: A.P. Carter, “You Are My Flower,” (Copyright Peer International Corporation, 1939,) *Musicnotes.com* (Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtdFPE.asp?ppn=MN0049099&ref=google>

## Summary

To say that Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family were in the right place at the right time is an understatement. They were there when the music business was young and when phonograph records were relatively new. Before anyone had an inkling about songwriting publishing and the money that could be earned, they were already earning it.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, in the early days of radio, they were huge stars, singing and playing their way into millions of homes and hearts and easing their fans through the stress and hardship of the Great Depression.

Their first recording session in 1927 also featured the legendary Yodeling Brakeman, Jimmie Rodgers, who rose to fame around the same time as the Carters. That session is considered by many to be one of the foundational moments in the history of modern country music.<sup>31</sup> The Carters went on to influence and work with many legends in country music and early rock and roll.

It was Maybelle, along with Eck and their daughter June who, after years of patience and compassion, managed to help turn a self-destructive Johnny Cash into a religious man and one of the greatest country musicians ever. Maybelle and the Carter Girls were also the first to recognize the talents of a young guitar picker from Knoxville, Tennessee, named Chet Atkins and give him his start in show business by letting him tour and record with them. Countless guitarists have listed Maybelle Carter among their favourite artists and many, including Doc Watson, Merle Travis, and even the crooner, Perry Como, learned her songs and style first.<sup>32</sup> Maybelle weathered decades in the music business and kept working without ever changing. She played the same songs with the same guitar in the same way through the years, and her

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<sup>30</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 94, 105, 378

<sup>31</sup> Travis D. Stimeling,, *Country Music Reader*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 27

<sup>32</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 110

music always managed to have meaning and relevance. John Cohen, of the New Lost City Ramblers, recalls:

I will never forget standing up there at the Ash Grove in front of some two hundred people and watching Maybelle. The way she used to move her hands in simple little elegant, graceful gestures, making this incredible sound come out of that Gibson. It reminded me of the way my grandmother used to crochet—she used the same skilled, graceful movements, repeated over and over. Everything about Maybelle was unpretentious and matter-of-fact.<sup>33</sup>

According to Mark Zwonitzer and Chales Hirshberg, who co-wrote the Carter Family biography *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music*:

She would remain a gentle, modest woman and a dedicated accompanist —shy of the limelight, quick to push others out front. But she was also, underneath the quiet facade, a woman of remarkable force...Maybelle could work day and night, without expectation and without complaint. And it was Maybelle Carter's drive, her pride, and her prodigious talents that ensured the long sweet sustain of the Carter Family music.<sup>34</sup>

When we examine Maybelle Carter's legacy in life and music it's easy to see that she was a force, no doubt, but an understated one, who felt more at home in her role of bolstering others up and working for the greater good. She was the matriarch who was adopted to mother all of country music's stars, past and present. Her span of influence is still growing with the unwavering and continued interest in the Carter Family's music and her now legendary offspring. "Mother" Maybelle Carter expressed raw creativity mixed with strength and power, all in the spirit of giving. She was humble, musically adventurous, brave, faithful and unchanged by the world of celebrity. She held it all together and made it look easy and natural.

Her career and legacy should remind anyone who plays American music, or studies it, that to be a truly great musician who can have longevity and keep growing creatively, one must

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<sup>33</sup> Quote by John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers, Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 342

<sup>34</sup> Zwonitzer/ Hirshberg, *The Carter Family and Legacy*, 25

always be true to oneself. This takes courage. To have the depth in your sound that will keep developing and getting better with age, it's necessary to "drink from the source." That means going back and studying the great masters like Maybelle.

## Composition: “Maybelle’s Guitar”

### “MAYBELLE’S GUITAR” (lyrics)

It launched a million dreams, it saved a million souls  
In the Midst of the Great Depression,  
It stirred through the old dust bowl  
In the darkest time it was a shining light  
Steady as the Northern Star  
Few things ever shone as bright  
As Maybelle's Guitar

From Texas to Canada, America in every part  
XERA radio, filled their homes and hearts  
The Carters sang of the life of man with true and simple songs  
About a world so beautiful, and a world gone wrong

They sang in times of need, to the forgotten and forlorn  
And her Carter Scratch rang out strong and true  
Through an old Victrola horn  
Where a young boy sat with dreams of being the next great country star  
As he learned to pick out every tune, from Maybelle's Guitar

Chorus:

(Like a Clinch Mountain stream, flowing from the source  
And steady as a freight train, with a slow but mighty force  
No matter how we stray, or how far we roam  
The sound of that guitar brings us all back home)

Williams, Cash and Atkins, they will all attest  
That Mother Maybelle’s knowing gaze would make them bring their best  
When she hit the stage she always raised the bar  
And they all revered the steady strum of Maybelle’s Guitar  
(Chorus)

Now it’s in a museum behind a pane of glass  
and strangers pay a ticket price to peek into the past  
While some wish they could be transported back from where they are  
and feel and hear the sound ring out  
of Maybelle’s Guitar (Chorus)

Figure 4: :”Maybelle’s Guitar” notation and guitar chord progression

## Maybelle's Guitar

The musical notation for "Maybelle's Guitar" is presented as a lead sheet across six staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and rests, along with guitar-specific notations like triplets and repeat signs. Chord progressions are indicated by letters (A, D, E, F#m) placed above the staff lines. The piece is divided into sections: a "Verse" starting at measure 1, a "Chorus" starting at measure 14, and a "To Voice" section at measure 17. The notation concludes with a double bar line at measure 24.

Verse

1. 2. 3. To Guitar

To Voice

Chorus

**\*\*\*All notations of the compositions herein are lead sheets and are meant to be a rough guide, used mostly to follow the chord progressions and basic melody. The essence of roots music is the free form and improvisational style. More detail about the compositions is given in the recordings provided and the synopses of theme and form.\*\*\***

## “Maybelle’s Guitar” - Theme

“Maybelle’s Guitar” tell the story of how Maybelle Carter’s guitar was the driving force behind the Carter Family’s sound, and how that guitar made its way through the Great Depression, through the hey day of classic country music in Nashville TN, and on to influence the next generation of pickers. By the last verse, the instrument finds its final resting place in a museum, under glass. I described her guitar as a “shining light” and “steady as the Northern Star,” emphasizing how it has been a beacon for many country and roots artists long after the Carter’s era passed. These kinds of phrases are put there intentionally to create a mythology about Maybelle’s legendary status as the “Mother of Country Music.”<sup>35</sup>

The underlying theme of “Maybelle’s Guitar” is focused around the history of the Carter Family and the impact they had. Of the three artists profiled in this series of compositions, Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family had by far the most influence on folk, bluegrass, country music and rock and roll. Their music is as relevant today as at anytime in history, as a new and younger group of fans have become aware of the Carters through popular indie-folk bands like Mumford and Sons, Old Crow Medicine Show, the Avett Brothers, and established longtime favorites like Del McCoury and Alison Krauss and Union Station.<sup>36</sup>

The words of the bridge section address how the Carter’s music (and “Maybelle’s Guitar”) flow from the “source” of the American landscape. In this case, these sources are the Clinch Mountain stream, representing the area of Virginia where Maybelle and the Carters are from, and the forceful freight train, which is synonymous with American roots music.<sup>37</sup> The latter is also a great metaphor to describe Maybelle’s steady rhythm guitar playing.

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Wolfe, “The Carter Family,” *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, (Paul Kingsbury, Ed. New York, Oxford University Press, 1998) 84–85.

<sup>36</sup> “Contemporary Country » Contemporary Bluegrass,” *Allmusic.com*, (All Media Network, 2015, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.allmusic.com/style/contemporary-bluegrass-ma0000011818>

<sup>37</sup> Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd Ed. Urbana: (Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 2000) 39–41



The main message behind the theme stresses the importance of remembering artists like Maybelle Carter and the how the Carter Family's music is a constant reminder of eternal human truths like life, death, faith, loss, love and redemption. Those "human truths" along with simple chord structure and melodies are a timeless recipe for what's now called Americana music.<sup>38</sup>

By the last verse, Maybelle Carter's famous Gibson L-5 guitar has turned into a museum piece that sits "behind a pane of glass" (at The Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville TN,) and the visitors that come to see it wish they could "be transported back" (in time) and once again hear the powerful strumming sounds that came from Maybelle and her legendary guitar.

(Figure 5: Maybelle's Guitar displayed at The Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville TN.<sup>39</sup>)



<sup>38</sup> Jed Hilly, "What is Americana," *Americanamusic.org*, (Americana Music, 2015, Accessed April 4 2015) <http://americanamusic.org/what-americana>

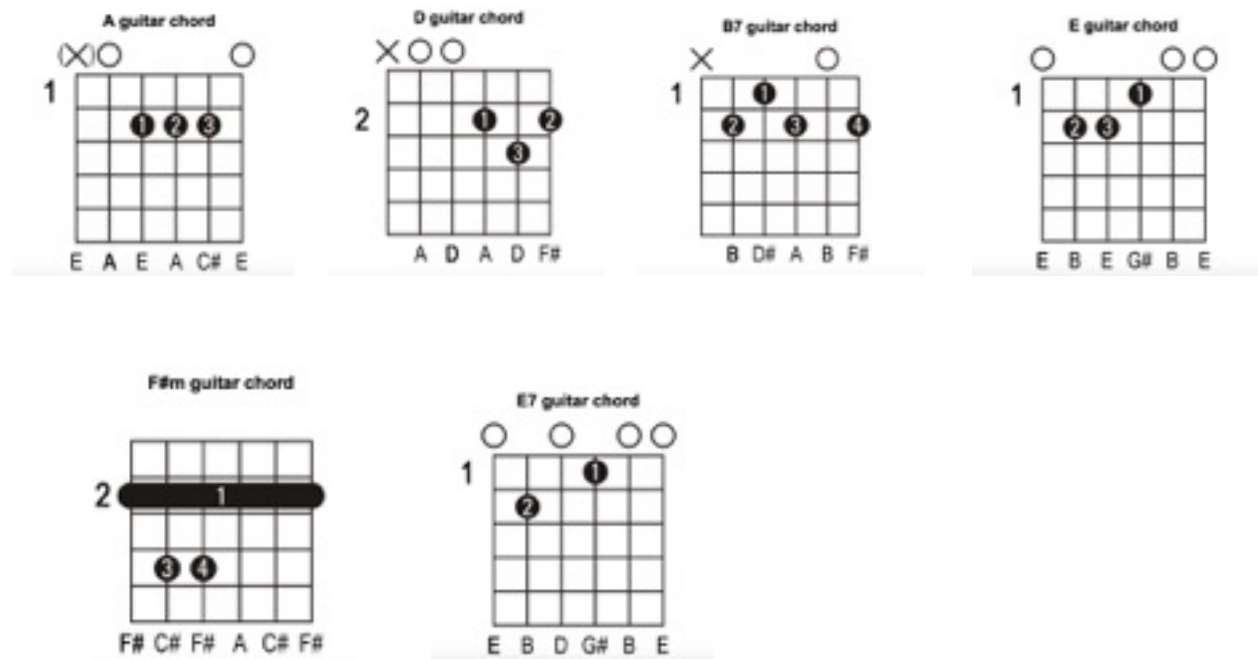
<sup>39</sup> Figure 5: "File:Gibson L-5 (1928), Maybelle Carter, CMHF.jp," *Wikimedia.org*, Photo uploaded by "Cliff 1066," (Published May 17 2007, Accessed April 4 2015) [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gibson\\_L-5\\_%281928%29,\\_Maybelle\\_Carter,\\_CMHF.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gibson_L-5_%281928%29,_Maybelle_Carter,_CMHF.jpg)

## “Maybelle’s Guitar” - Form

“Maybelle’s Guitar” is played in the key of A major. The guitar part mimics Maybelle Carter’s famous “Carter Scratch” with a steady strumming pattern accentuated with a single note melodic line interweaving between the verses. The melodic line played between the verses is a direct copy of the guitar melody of “Wildwood Flower”<sup>40</sup> which is undoubtedly Maybelle’s signature guitar part. This was done intentionally as a tribute to Maybelle to emphasize her influence on country music and her recognizable sound and style.

The main verse is a sixteen-bar form played with a simple chord progression using the chords (A-D-B7-E) played in their first position voicings in the first three frets of the guitar.

Figure 6: First position guitar chord voicings.<sup>41</sup>



<sup>40</sup> Notation displayed in the “Biography” Chapter p.15

<sup>41</sup> Figure 6: Basic Guitar Voicings: Vince Gordon, “Guitar Chords,” *How To Play Guitar*, (Accessed April 4 2015), [http://www.how-to-play-guitar.eu/guitar\\_chords/E7\\_guitar\\_chord.htm](http://www.how-to-play-guitar.eu/guitar_chords/E7_guitar_chord.htm)

The bridge is eight bars in length and rises to the (IV) chord and follows the progression (D-A-E7) repeated by (D-A-E7-A.) On the very last bridge the regular progression is repeated, but instead of landing on the A chord, I hold a suspended F#m chord played on the second fret, for variation before resolving it to the E7 and finally to the A. These simple chord voicings are still used by most folk and country singer-songwriters and beginner guitarists. Though Maybelle was a more advanced player in her overall technique, she used simple chords and voicings as they were a great “jumping off” point for picking melodies between her more complex strumming patterns. She would use a guitar capo when she played in higher keys.

The main melody is delivered in a relatively unemotional and straightforward way to imitate Sara Carter’s style of lead singing. It is also effective to create a sound of starkness and “matter of fact” storytelling that is so prominent in the Carter’s music and in traditional folk music.

The whole song is played allegro at approximately 120 BPM. Even though that is a fast tempo, the feel of the song is that of a medium tempo because of the relaxed vocal delivery between the more rapid guitar strumming pattern. The contrast and tension created between the vocals and guitar seems to slow the song down.

My intention with “Maybelle’s Guitar” is to capture the integrity and feel of Carter Family music and to pay tribute to the legacy of the Carter Family through their story and the direct mimicry of their sound and style.

### “Maybelle’s Guitar” - Methodology

- 1: The use of first position guitar chord voicings.
- 2: Simple chord progression reminiscent of traditional country music.

- 3: A melodic instrumental tag played between verses. In this case, the melody is borrowed from Maybelle's guitar part in "Wildwood Flower."
- 4: An "unemotional" vocal delivery imitating Sara Carter's singing style.
- 5: Carter Scratch style guitar strumming.
- 6: Lyrical content based on the history and influence of Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family.

## Chapter Two - LYDIA MENDOZA



## *Biography*

Lydia Mendoza<sup>1</sup> (May 21, 1916 – December 20, 2007) was a Mexican- American guitarist and singer and a legend of Tejano, conjunto, and traditional Mexican music. She was named "La Alondra de la Frontera" ("The Lark of the Border") when she was still in her teens after her early recordings became hits among the Mexican-American immigrants in her adopted home of Texas. She is one of the early stars in Tejano music and the only Tejano female recording artist who accompanied herself on twelve string guitar.<sup>2</sup>

Lydia's father, Francisco Mendoza Espinosa (aka Pancho Mendoza) married Leonora Zamarripa Reyna in Monterey, Mexico, in the early 1900's during the Mexican Revolution. Leonora was still in her teens, but already a young widow with two children of her own when he married her.<sup>3</sup> For several years, they migrated to and from various towns in Mexico and Texas, seeking safety from the violence in the south and the threat of being enlisted into Pancho Villa's army. At that time, transit between the U.S. and Mexico was less restricted than today, and families often traveled across the border freely. Lydia, the couple's second child, was born in Houston, Texas, on May 21, 1916. The family would eventually grow to seven children — Beatriz, Lydia, Francisca, Maria, Manuel, Andres and Juanita. There was also two half siblings from Leonora's first marriage — Monica and Andres.

Life was hard on Mexican immigrants, and work was scarce. The Nortenos (Northerners), who were inhabitants of Mexico's northern provinces, did almost any kind of job to survive, the most prominent being agricultural fieldwork. There was security and comfort in

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ochs Archive/Getty Images, "Lydia Mendoza: The First Lady Of Tejano," *NPR.org*, (Accessed April 4 2014 ,) <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127033025>

<sup>2</sup> Chris Strachwitz Nick Nicopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza, A Family Autobiography*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1993) vii-viii

<sup>3</sup> Strachwitz / Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 5

numbers, so they lived within their own growing communities and clung to their language and culture.

At the beginning of the 1920's, Pancho Mendoza had a job working for the railroads, which led to the family going back and forth between Monterey, Mexico, and various towns in Texas. For several years, they were constantly on the move. The oldest girls, Beatriz and Lydia, did not attend school, mostly due to the family's constant moving, but also because young Mexican girls were often targets for rape and abuse in America. The family had to stick very close together if they were going to survive. Pancho had a drinking problem and was destructive and abusive to their mother, Leonora, when he was drunk. The family was much happier when they finally moved back to America during the 1920's because Prohibition was still being enforced and Pancho was less likely to go off the rails from booze. After years of being uprooted and on the run, the family finally settled in Texas permanently in 1927.<sup>4</sup>

In Lydia's family music was handed down through the women. Leonora played guitar and sang beautifully. She had learned to play from her mother, Teofila, an educated and cultured woman and a school teacher. Lydia was drawn to Leonora's guitar from a very early age, but she was forbidden to touch it. When she was only four years old, she made a guitar of her own, using a piece of wood, nails and some rubber bands that she got from a friend. At the time in Mexico words to popular Mexican songs were often distributed in bubble gum wrappers. Lydia dutifully collected dozens of them and saved them for years.<sup>5</sup> One day in Monterey she saw a music group setting up outside the convenience store, and after listening to them play for a bit, she ran home to get all the songs in the gum wrappers she had saved. She was able to learn the melodies of the songs this way, committing them to memory after only a single listen. She learned the melody and music to her most popular song, "*Mal Hombre*," (Bad Man or Evil

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<sup>4</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 24

<sup>5</sup> Walter Aaron Clarke, *From Tejano to Tango, Essays on Latin American Popular Music*, (New York: Routledge; 1 ed, 2002) 116

Man), one evening when Pancho took her to a variety show with her sister. As Lydia Mendoza recalls:

We went to the theater to see that particular *variedad* and then, in the course of the show, that pretty girl came out and sang. When they announced “Mal Hombre”, I became very excited.....I got out the gum wrapper. I had it with me. And I just heard the music from that song that one time, but I memorized it... That’s how I learned “Mal Hombre.”<sup>6</sup>

### “Mal hombre”

Era yo una chiquilla todavía  
cuando tú casualmente me encontraste  
y a merced a tus artes de mundano  
de mi honra el perfuma me llevaste.

Luego hiciste conmigo lo que todos  
los que son como tú con las mujeres,  
por lo tanto no extrañes que yo ahora  
en tu cara te diga lo que eres.

### CHORUS:

Mal hombre,  
tan ruin es tu alma que no tiene nombre.  
Eres un canalla. Eres un malvado.  
Eres un mal hombre.

A mi triste destino abandonada  
entable fiero lucha con la vida,  
ella recia y cruel me torturaba  
y más débil al fin caí vencida.

Tú supiste a tiempo mi derrota,  
mi espantoso calvario conociste.

### “Bad Man (or Evil Man)”<sup>7</sup>

I was still a young girl  
when by chance you found me  
and thanks to your worldly charm  
you crushed the flower of my innocence.

Later you treated me like all men  
who are like you, treat women,  
so don’t be surprised that now  
I tell you to your face what you are.

### CHORUS:

Bad man,  
your soul is so wicked it has no name.  
You are a pig. You are evil.  
You are a bad man.

To my sad fate abandoned,  
engaged in a fierce struggle with life,  
suffering the depths of cruelty,  
I was weak and finally defeated.

With time, you learned of my downfall,  
how my life became a road to hell.

<sup>6</sup> Quote: Lydia Mendoza, Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 19

<sup>7</sup> “Cold-Hearted Man (lit. Bad Man),” *Lyrictranslate.com*, (Translator: Esteban 3304, Published Jan 2 2013, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/mal-hombre-cold-hearted-man-lit-bad-man.html>



Te dijeron algunos:

"Ve a salvarle."

Y probando quien eres,

te reíste.

(CHORUS)

Some told you:

"Go save her."

And proving who you are,

you just laughed.

(CHORUS)

Poco tiempo después en el arroyo,

entre sombras mi vida defendía.

Una noche con otra

tú pasaste,

que al mirarme sentí que te decía:

A short time later in the gutter,

I defended my life in the shadowy world.

One night with another woman

you passed by me,

and upon seeing my expression, she said:

"Quién es esa mujer?"

"Tú la conoces?"

"Ya la veres", respondiste,

"una cualquiera".

al oír de tus labios el ultraje

demostrabas también,

lo que tú eras.

(CHORUS)

"Who is that woman?"

"Do you know her?"

"Soon you will see," you replied

"she's a nobody."

At hearing from your lips the abuse,

you were showing again,

what you were.

(CHORUS)

Leonora soon saw how driven and naturally talented Lydia was and started teaching her how to play the guitar and sing. Lydia took to it all with ease and went on to learn other stringed instruments. Pancho became ill in 1927 and could no longer work his job. That left the entire burden of earning money on his wife and children.

From the age of eleven, I began to understand what it was like to struggle in life, what it was to earn each day's bread. Because when my father became ill, he couldn't work anymore....While he was working, we were poor, but we never lacked for the essentials; we never suffered calamities. But when he could no longer work, we really began to notice the things we no longer had. And well, without education, without a way to go work someplace to earn money. We didn't know anything but music.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Quote: Lydia Mendoza, Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 28

Pancho had always delighted in his wife and daughters' musical talents and was fond of bringing them out at parties and gatherings to sing. Leonora played guitar and sang lead, while Maria and Lydia accompanied her on the mandolin and violin. Together they played whenever and wherever they could from the streets of Monterey to the lower Rio Grande Valley.

The Mendoza Family was living in Kingsville, Texas, when Pancho noticed an advertisement in *La Prensa*, a Spanish newspaper in San Antonio. It mentioned that The Okeh Record Company would be recording Spanish-language musicians in San Antonio for two weeks. The whole family packed up everything they had and asked a friend if he could drive them to San Antonio so that they could audition for Okeh. It took them several days to get there, but they made it. They ended up recording twenty sides for Okeh who paid them \$140.00. It was a fortune to them, and they realized that music had the possibility of being profitable. The group needed a name and Pancho insisted they be called *El Cuarteto Carta Blanca*, after his favorite beer, Carta Blanca.<sup>9</sup>

Before they even heard their new recordings they made for Okeh, Pancho signed his family to a labour contract to pick beets in Michigan. They were still unsure whether music would support them completely, and the contract was a sure thing. So, once again, they packed up and followed the migrant worker trail north. The days in the fields were long and hard, and it was work the young family wasn't well suited to do.

The workers were given boxcars to live in with their families, with no furniture, only a stove to cook. Finding no pleasure in this new existence, the Mendozas turned to their music again and played and sang together at the end of the day. It wasn't long before they became popular with the other workers who would gather around and listen to their little "fiestas." One worker told them that they should go to Pontiac, the closest nearby town to play, as there were

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<sup>9</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 32

lots of restaurants and Mexican immigrants there and no live music. They arranged a ride with a local foreman and found a small Mexican restaurant to play in and the silver dollars started flowing. They were learning that they could make a lot more money with their music if they stuck to it, as there were thousands of workers in the area hungry for entertainment. In 1928, before the market crash and the Great Depression, field workers were paid well and had money to spread around. Pancho started feeling better and found a job at the Ford plant in Detroit, so once again they moved. Pancho worked days at the Ford plant and in the evenings the family would play music at local restaurants, family gatherings, and people's houses.<sup>10</sup> Life was prosperous, and things were really looking up. Unfortunately, it was short-lived, as the crash of October 1929 changed everything once again. After the crash, Pancho lost his job at Ford and decided that they should move back to Texas. Beatriz, their oldest daughter, had married Ignacio Montoya, a young Mexican boarder who had been staying with them while they were in Detroit. The young couple had a baby, Charlie. Leonora also had another baby while in Detroit, their youngest son, Andr  s. They now had ten people traveling together and needing to lay down roots. For a while they stayed with various family members in Sugarland, Texas, but there were just too many people, and the house wasn't big enough so they moved to Houston, living in the Mexican ghetto (the barrio) until 1932, and then on to San Antonio, TX.

Lydia started getting more ambitious about her own music and spent all her time studying instruments and teaching her siblings how to play. When they got to San Antonio, they started eking out a living playing for pennies, nickels, and dimes at a popular open market there, El Plaza del Zacate. The Mendozas soon became one of the local favorites, not only because of their talent, but because they were unique as the only group that were all females and also the only family band. Most of the bands that played in the market were men who would play

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<sup>10</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 38

standing up and roam around the audiences looking for patrons. But Leonora and her daughters took another approach. They would choose a good spot where there was foot traffic, set up, and then stay in one place, letting the fans come to them. It was a successful strategy, and before long, music became their main source of income.

Lydia, the most ambitious of the group, was hungry for more musical exploration, so she began performing solo songs in between sets with the family, accompanying herself on acoustic guitar. It was then that Lydia got noticed by a local radio station DJ, Manuel J Cortez, who was hosting a weekly all-Latino radio show called *Voz Latina*. Mr. Cortez was so struck by Lydia's voice and style that he invited her to come and play on the radio and swore he would make her a star. Lydia was excited and wanted to do it, but Leonora was less than enthused as it would mean she would miss a night's work at the Plaza. Finally, Leonora reluctantly agreed. After Lydia made her radio debut, there were so many calls to the station that Cortez again came to the Plaza to ask Leonora's permission for Lydia to return. Leonora only agreed to let Lydia return to the radio station if Lydia was paid. Cortez found a sponsor, Mr. Garcia, who was also fond of Lydia's voice, and the two managed to get clearance from Leonora. "Mr. Garcia gave me three dollars and fifty cents a week. Well with that three-fifty we felt like millionaires. Now at least, we could be sure of paying the rent."<sup>11</sup>

Cortez wanted to make good on his word to make Lydia a star, so after she started getting a lot of attention and fans from her appearances on *Voz Latina*, he swore to get her and her family better shows than playing at the Plaza. He started booking the group in local restaurants and at tent variety shows where they were very popular. The Mendoza's act changed to highlight Lydia's solo performances as the main attraction with the rest of the family opening the show for her and backing her up on a few songs for the finale. Lydia's star was

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<sup>11</sup> Quote: Lydia Mendoza, Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography* 78

rising and she was becoming one of the most sought after singers in Tejano music. It was the stark honesty of her style and the fact that she spoke to working class Mexican-Americans that won her so much acclaim. They started calling her "*La Alondra de la Frontera*" ("The Lark of the Border"). Cortez also arranged for Lydia to compete in local singing contests which garnered her more new fans and opportunities.

By 1934, the Bluebird Record Label was making the rounds in San Antonio looking for Tejano artists that they could "turn into stars."<sup>12</sup> Lydia was right on target and was one of the first performers to get an opportunity to record. In her first recording session, she recorded four sides. One of the songs, "*Mal Hombre*," became an instant hit so Bluebird came back to find Lydia and signed her to an exclusive contract. Lydia signed with the label only if they agreed to record the whole family, which they reluctantly acceded to once they found out she was also being courted by their rival, Decca Records. Ignorant of recording contracts, the Mendozas agreed to forgo the royalties for their recordings and opted only to be paid a flat fee (\$40.00) per record, which in the middle of the Depression was still a huge amount of money. But as the years progressed and their records kept selling, it was clear that they had missed out on thousands of dollars in income because of this oversight.<sup>13</sup>

With the success of her recording career came new offers for live appearances, which got Lydia and her family booked across the Southwestern U.S., as far away as California. Their music was very popular with the Hispanic market, but it did not make an impact on white America, and so they could not play the larger theater market. Their performances were mostly scheduled in smaller theaters, salons, churches, and Hispanic recreation halls. They moved from town to town in two cars, one with Lydia, Leonora and the rest of the kids, which now included Maria, Juanita and her oldest son, Manuel. Pancho, who often suffered weak health

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<sup>12</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 88

<sup>13</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 92

and stayed at home with the younger siblings. The Mendozas presented a variety show that consisted of comedy skits, singing, dancing, and music. Lydia was the featured part of the show, and as usual, she performed her main set solo accompanied by just her guitar. She then played as part of an ensemble with the rest of the group.

The group spent months at a time on the road all across the Southwest until 1941 and the onset of the United States involvement in WWII. When the United States entered the Second World War, the Mendozas and Lydia could not travel because of gasoline rationing. By this time Lydia was married to Juan Alvarado and had three daughters. She spent the war years with her husband and daughters at home in San Antonio. Juan, supported the family as a shoe maker for the Luchesse Boot Company. The rest of the Mendozas did what they could to survive. Juanita and Maria formed a duo group called *Los Hermanas Mendozas* and played local nightclubs in San Antonio; Manuel was drafted and went to fight overseas; and Leonora did odd jobs and managed the careers of Juanita and Maria.

In 1947, after the war, Lydia and her family resumed working and touring together with their variety show. Their group had grown to include their youngest brother, Andrès, who would perform sketches with Manuel and his sisters. They toured like that up until 1952 when Leonora became ill with pleurisy and passed away. Leonora had been the driving force and the glue that kept the troupe together and her death brought the variety show to an end.<sup>14</sup>

Lydia was still receiving many offers for live appearances. She became a great sensation, playing shows across the U.S. and into Mexico and South and Central America where she was a huge star. Some of these shows were in 20,000-seat stadiums.<sup>15</sup> She also recorded for various companies, including Falcon, RCA Victor, Columbia, and DLB. In 1961,

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<sup>14</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 285

<sup>15</sup> Strachwitz/Nicopoulos, *A Family Autobiography*, 277

her first husband Juan died, and in 1964 Lydia married businessman, Fred Martinez, whom she met while on tour in Colorado.

In the mid-1960's Lydia was introduced to the folk music scene and gained a whole new set of fans — young white American college kids. It was the first time her music had been noticed outside of her Tejano and Mexican culture, and her career went through an entirely new period of growth. She finally was recognized and given the attention of a musical icon. She continued to tour various folk festivals across the U.S. and into Canada and recorded for Smithsonian Folkways.

In 1977, Lydia performed at the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter. In 1982, she taught as a guest lecturer at California State University in Fresno and became one of the first recipients of the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Between these prestigious appearances, she continued to play live shows, staying close to her home in Houston TX. In 1987, she had a debilitating stroke that ended her music career.

Even after her stroke, Lydia's legacy continued to grow. In 1991, she was inducted into the Conjunto Hall of Fame in San Antonio, and in 1999, she received the highest honour given to artists in the United States—the National Medal of the Arts—from President Bill Clinton.

Lydia Mendoza passed away peacefully in 2007 at the age of 91.

## *Lydia Mendoza's Musical Style and Cultural Heritage*

### Norteña Music

*Norteña* Music or “*Música Norteña*” is a genre of music now known as Tejano or Tex-Mex music. There are many influences and musical styles that evolved with the migration of the Mexican people from the south to the northern border towns and finally into Texas. These styles include traditional Spanish and Mexican, French-European salon, German folk music, and American popular music. Early Norteña musical forms included the waltz, mazurka, and schottische that had a French European influence and tangos, bolero, ranchera, milonga, corrido and huanpango that were typically Spanish and South American in origin. Until the late 1800's, Norteña music was primarily played on guitars, fiddles, mandolins and bajo sexto along with various wind instruments but towards the end of the nineteenth century, a large German/Czech colonial presence formed in Texas, bringing with it the button accordion and the polka. Both the accordion and the polka took on a major role in Tejano music and modernized the sound. Norteña music that featured the accordion became known as conjunto music (conjunto literally means musical group).<sup>16</sup>

Lydia Mendoza played with many of the early norteña musical legends such as Jose Marante, Lorenzo Caballero, Beto Villa Tony de la Rosa, and Narciso Martinez and she recorded with many different ensembles, including mariachi, accordion conjunto, orchestra tejana and the string band she had with her family. Though Mendoza was an accomplished ensemble player, her most memorable and deeply felt recordings featured her playing solo. The stark honesty and direct delivery of her emotionally expressive voice accompanied only by her twelve-string guitar cannot be matched.

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<sup>16</sup> Manuel Pena, “The Texas-Mexican Conjunto. Migrations in History,” *Smithsonianeducation.org*, (Accessed April 4 2015) <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/bord/tmxmcon.html>



## Twelve String Guitar Tuning

Lydia's approach to her guitar was unique as she tuned it in her own way. Usually a twelve-string guitar is tuned the same way as a regular guitar (from low string to high E-A-D-G-B-E) with the bottom three extra strings tuned up in octaves, and the top three extra strings tuned in unison. Lydia tuned her twelve-string guitar a fourth lower, so it would sound closer to the *bajo sexto*, a popular Mexican instrument often used as a bass. Her low string was a low B instead of E. Her tuning was from low to high (B-E-A-D-F#-B). This is the same guitar tuning used by Leadbelly and Blind Willie McTell.<sup>17</sup> But instead of tuning the third extra string (D) in unison, Lydia tuned it an octave higher. This tuning, which became the foundation of her unique style, created a great bass, booming sound intermixed with a ringing high end. As she explains:

That's why the sound of my twelve-string is very different. It occurred to me to string it up a different way. I imagined it would sound more beautiful. For example, the third string is at a certain pitch. If you combine it with the first string, the first string will sound higher in pitch than the first string in its normal place. You raise its tuning so it will be at the same pitch as the third. It will sound the same, only an octave higher. The end effect is a different sound. And that's how I have tuned my guitar. That's how I have developed my own ideas; to the limits of my own intelligence, see?<sup>18</sup>

She favoured the traditional Spanish and South American forms like the corridos, the Argentinian tangos, the boleros, and the German- influenced polkas. However, her most popular style by far was the *canción ranchera* - an emotionally powerful love song.

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<sup>17</sup> Todd Cambio, "Lydia Mendoza and Her Acosta 12 String," *Fraulini.blogspot.com*, (Published June 27 2014, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://fraulini.blogspot.com/2014/06/lydia-mendoza-and-her-acosta-12-string.html>

<sup>18</sup> Quote by Lydia Mendoza, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzales, *Lydia Mendoza's Life in Music / La Historia de Lydia Mendoza: Norteño Tejano Legacies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, May 17 2001) 79

## Canções Rancheras

*Canción ranchera* (Spanish for "folk song") is a genre of traditional Mexican music that was originally sung by a single performer with a guitar. It dates back to the years of the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century. The term ranchera music became interchangeable with nortena as they both described the music of the northern borderlands,<sup>19</sup> but a traditional canción ranchera is a style all its own and has its roots in the deeply passionate feelings the singer or writer has for love, patriotism or nature.

Ranchera rhythms can be in 2/4 (*ranchera polkeada*), 3/4 (*ranchera valseada*), or 4/4 (*bolero ranchero*) to reflect the rhythms of, respectively, the polka, the waltz, and the bolero. Songs are usually in a major key and consist of an instrumental introduction, verse and refrain, instrumental section repeating the verse, and then another verse and refrain, with a tag ending.

The canción ranchera is by far the most powerfully emotional of all Mexican song types and Mendoza was masterful at this form. Her ranchera repertoire featured themes of familial love such as the love of the mother "*Amor de Madre*," the love of a lost homeland, "*Cuatro Milpas*" (Four Corn Fields), romantic passion, betrayal in love or unrequited love in "*Celosa*" ("Jealous"), and love of old age in "*Cuando Estemos Viejos*" ("When we're Old").<sup>20</sup>

## Corridos

The corrido (Spanish pronunciation: [ko'riðo]) is an historical ballad that came to prominence at the time of the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) and continued in popularity during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921). Prior to formal education and radio, news of the day was often spread through communities by word of mouth or by song. Academic

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<sup>19</sup> Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*, 191

<sup>20</sup> Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*, 194

study of corridos that were written during the Mexican Revolution show that corridos were used as a means to communicate news throughout Mexico and as a response to the propaganda being spread in the newspapers owned by the corrupt government of Porfirio Díaz, who served seven terms as President of Mexico between 1876 and 1911.<sup>21</sup> The best known Revolutionary corrido is "La Cucaracha," a song that was rewritten for decades with added stanzas to celebrate the exploits of Pancho Villa's army and poke fun at his nemesis, Venustiano Carranza.<sup>22</sup> The corrido is still a very popular form in modern Tejano music and has expanded in its themes to include not only stories of historical events and people, but also personal stories of redemption and love.<sup>23</sup>

The musical form of the corrido is almost always the waltz or the adopted Tejano style polka, and they are generally sung in major keys and have melodies with a less than octave range. Musician, scholar and folklorist, Américo Paredes, remarked: "The short range allows the corrido to be sung at the top of the singer's voice, an essential part of the corrido style."<sup>24</sup>

In *La Lírica Narrativa de México*, (The Lyrical Narrative of Mexico), Vicente Mendoza gives six primary formal characteristics or conventions of the corrido. They are: (1) the initial call of the corridista, or balladeer, to the public, sometimes called the formal opening; (2) the stating of the place, time, and name of the protagonist of the ballad; (3) the arguments of the protagonist; (4) the message; (5) the farewell of the protagonist; and (6) the farewell of the corridista. These elements, however, vary in importance from region to region in Mexico and the Southwest, and it is sometimes difficult to find a ballad that employs all of them.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Flores, "The Corrido and the Emergence of Texas-Mexican Social Identity," *Journal of American Folklore*, (Vol. 105, Spring 1992)

<sup>22</sup> Cecil Adams, "What Are the Words to 'La Cucaracha'? The Straight Dope," *Chicago Reader*, July 27 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Dan W. Dickey, "Corridos," *Handbook of Texas Online*, (Uploaded on June 12, 2010, Accessed April 4 2015, Published by the Texas State Historical Association,) <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lhc01>

<sup>24</sup> Dan W. Dickey, "Corridos," *Handbook of Texas Online*, (Uploaded on June 12, 2010, Accessed April 4 2015, Published by the Texas State Historical Association,) <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lhc01>

<sup>25</sup> Quote by: Vicente T. Mendoza, *Lírica Narrativa de México: El Corrido*, Mexico City: (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1964,) <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lhc01>

The corrido is very prominent in Lydia Mendoza's repertoire and she recorded dozens of them. Her interpretation of the corrido not only showcases her masterful gifts of story telling, but it also shows her deep connection to her heritage and community, which is one of the most significant underlying themes in Mendoza's life story. She was known as "one of the great corrido singers" and a "singer of the people" indicating that "folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural myth-makers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable."<sup>26</sup>

There are some songs I haven't sung in many years, which of course I do forget. But as soon as I go over them, they come back to mind. However, I rarely ever forget songs like corridos, for instance, which have many verses. For example I sing corridos like "Joaquin Murrieta", "Luz Arcos", "El Contrabando de El Paso"...I sing many, many corridos.<sup>27</sup>

## Summary

It's impossible to write about Lydia Mendoza's life in music without emphasizing her role in the Tejano (Norteno), Mexican-American culture and community. Her iconic status epitomizes Tejano creativity, culture and triumph over hardship and oppression. Although Lydia seldom composed her own songs, she had a rare musical talent and a depth of expression that was singularly unique. She made every song she sang hers by throwing herself into the music and lyrics like a great actor throws themselves into a role.

I tell you when I sing a song--I've said it over and over...if it's a corrido, I feel what happened in that tragedy. I feel it as if it happened to me....Same thing if I sing a love song...It flows from me! I feel it comes from deep within my soul. Like I told you, I live that song.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands, la frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987) 61

<sup>27</sup> Broyles-Gonzales, *Life In Music*, 49

<sup>28</sup> Quote - Lydia Mendoza, Broyles-Gonzales, *Life In Music*, 47

She never veered from her career path and always stayed true to her roots. She knew that music was her life's calling. She followed this calling with unfettered courage, faith, and strength and managed to thrive in a career that lasted more than sixty years. She lived modestly and kept her love for God, family and community as her main priorities while sharing her music with the world. She had a huge impact on Tejano music and was both decorated and celebrated. With a life that began with many hardships and setbacks, she persevered and achieved incredible success.

## Composition: “Lark of the Border”

### “Lark of the Border” (lyrics)

We came here to escape revolution  
And the threat of Pancho Villa  
In the early 1900's  
We were nothing more than wanderers

I cried the day we left Monterey  
Turned my head and watched my grandma fade away  
In the dusty gold horizon  
We kept riding until sundown

We learned early of the struggles of life  
All the hardship, the worry and the strife  
Papa grew too ill to work  
So mama took us to the streets

San Antonio, the Plaza del Zacate  
That's where I learned to play and sing the hard way  
For a penny or a nickel  
Money falling at our feet

Chorus:  
(I was blessed with the gift of song  
To help the spirit of my people stay strong  
They claimed me for their own  
And named me  
The Lark of the Border)

In '28 our fate was sealed  
Papa sent us north to the fields  
All the children had to work  
so we could stay afloat

If I could sing I knew we'd pull through  
And all our dreams would come true  
We'd have a hacienda  
And money in our coats

(Chorus)

From Texas, and over this land  
Me, my daughters and our little family band  
Clung together through the nights  
We shared blankets on the floor

Though many miles and years have come and gone  
It's faith that kept me pushing on  
Making music is my life  
It's what I was put here for

(Chorus)

When you ask for something from the heart  
God will grant you each and every part  
I firmly believe  
That what you give, you will receive

(Chorus)

Figure 1: “Lark of the Border” notation and guitar chord progression

## Lark of the Border

Verse

B F# F# B

5 F# B B B F#

10 B F# B

14 Guitar 1.2. Guitar End Voice 3. B<sup>7</sup> Chorus E B

19 F# B E

22 B F#<sup>7</sup> B



## “Lark of the Border” - Theme

My song about Lydia Mendoza is a corrido (an historical ballad). The words are in first person, from Lydia Mendoza’s perspective, narrating her life story. I was able to do this with the help of two biographies - *Lydia Mendoza’s Life In Music* <sup>29</sup> and *Lydia Mendoza, A Family Autobiography* <sup>30</sup>. The fact that both books used direct quotes from Mendoza gave me a sense of the feel and flow of her speech and her perspective on her life.

“Lark of the Border” tells how the Mendoza family came to Texas to escape the Mexican Revolution, and about their trials as they wandered around America looking for a better life. It also tells of how Lydia came to be a singer by playing on the streets in San Antonio with her mother and siblings.

The story continues to follow the family up north to Michigan where they worked in the fields planting and picking beets and, then back to Texas where they traveled and performed together as a group. “Lark of the Border” touches on the hardships that Lydia and her family went through but the underlying theme and message is about Lydia Mendoza’s unwavering belief that her “gift of song” had a higher purpose and how she felt that she had a responsibility to share her talents with her community and the world.

One is born with that art of feeling, and that’s what the public and the people value. And that’s what creates great careers— it’s that talent. Not just anyone can do it. It’s a gift you have from God, that’s it. It’s a God-given gift we carry inside. It’s not something you create. You’re born with it, touched by the hand of God.<sup>31</sup>

This is the part of Mendoza’s story that struck me the deepest. After reading about Mendoza’s life, especially through her direct quotes, it’s easy to fall in love with the romanticism

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<sup>29</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*

<sup>30</sup> Chris Strachwitz/Nicolopolus, *A Family Biography*

<sup>31</sup> Quote by Lydia Mendoza, Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*, 48

of her story and be in awe of how she managed to use her formidable talent and wits to climb out of abysmal conditions and make a better life for herself and her family. Lydia Mendoza, was well aware of the power of her gift and she had unwavering faith in staying true to her path of playing and sharing her music. Her strength of character is truly inspiring.

Throughout my long life, music has been a goal I have pursued; nothing could hold me back. Failures, win or lose, I never said “No, I’d better do something else.” No, I persisted with music. And that’s the beauty of it, you see. I hope that all those who want to accomplish something or who have a particular talent will persevere! Don’t hold back; don’t give up!<sup>32</sup>

The words from the first line of the last verse of “Lark of The Border” are taken verbatim from another quote and really sums up Lydia Mendoza’s philosophy about faith and her feeling that she’s been blessed.

So the fact remains if you ask for something from the heart and with faith, with pure faith, your wish will be granted. At least that’s how I feel: when I ask for something...it is granted to me.<sup>33</sup>

### “Lark of the Border” - Form

When I took on the task of trying to write something in the style of Lydia Mendoza, I knew I had to approach it with the same spirit that I have approached playing blues music. That is, learning the basic forms and feel, and paying respectful tribute to the tradition while trying to stay true to who I am. In other words, I knew that I had to try and find authenticity in what could be construed as an “inauthentic” path.

Lydia Mendoza’s sound is so distinct, her singing style so passionate and full of feeling and though she was known as a *Tejano* artist, with some American influence, most of what she

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<sup>32</sup> Quote by Lydia Mendoza - Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*, 52-53

<sup>33</sup> Quote by Lydia Mendoza - Broyles-Gonzalez, *Life In Music*, 71

played and sang had its roots deep in Mexico—and she only ever sang in Spanish, a language I don't speak or understand.

I knew that I couldn't emulate Mendoza's emotional vocal style so I chose instead to use the tools that were more accessible to me starting with her famous soprano. My own vocal range is high alto, so it wouldn't be a stretch to sing in her soprano range. I also decided that it would make sense to play "Lark of the Border" on twelve string guitar, in Lydia's unique guitar tuning (from low to high B-E-A-D-F#-B.) Like Mendoza, I would sing high and play low.

"Lark of the Border" is played in the key of B major, but with Mendoza's guitar tuning the guitar chord voicings are actually played in the key of E major,<sup>34</sup> which allowed me to take advantage of the open strings. That low guitar sound with the open strings ringing out on the twelve string produces a very full sound and is conducive to playing as a solo artist .

I had watched many traditional conjunto bands when I lived in Austin, TX and I was familiar with the bouncy 2/4 polka beat that was favoured among them. I used the polka rhythm as the foundation for my song because it was so familiar to me and I felt a sense of comfort going forward from there. I also used a popular (I-V-I) chord progression over a six bar form with a descending major scale tag after every second verse which also sounded reminiscent of traditional conjunto music. There was no particular song that I was copying or using as a model. I did this all from memory.

After four short verses the progression goes to a chorus section that leads to the (IV) chord. The chords of the chorus are (E-B-E-F#). The message of the words to the chorus along with the move to the (IV) chord breaks up the repetitive nature of the verses and give the song an emotional and harmonic lift.

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<sup>34</sup> Refer to chord charts on p. 5

The rest of the song is musically repetitive—(verse, verse, instrumental tag, chorus) This is intentional because the main focus of “Lark of the Border” is the story of Lydia Mendoza’s life and her philosophy.

Though I know I can never completely catch the essence of many musical styles, particularly those with very distinct cultural leanings (like Mendoza’s emotional Tejano sound or the southern African American blues), I do think it can be a good exercise to embrace and go into musical places of inauthenticity and try and find something to take away that resonates with oneself.

In this instance, I leaned on the more technical aspects of Mendoza’s music and traditional conjunto music rather than trying to emulate Mendoza’s emotional delivery, or attempt to write and sing something in Spanish. That would definitely lead me down an inauthentic path. I think the end result is a fun and somewhat charming tribute to a great and unique artist. It’s not a conjunto song, per se, and it’s not a true corrido. I know my song will never carry the stamp of “authenticity” of either form. It’s just my own take on it. And in the end, it really is about knowing what to keep and what to leave behind.

### “Lark of the Border” - Methodology

- 1: The vocal part to be sung in a high range (high alto or soprano).
- 2: Use a twelve string guitar tuned low to Mendoza’s favoured tuning.
- 3: Making the form a *corrido* and telling the story in first person using direct quotes from Mendoza.
- 4: Use a bouncy polka beat as the base.
- 5: Stock sounding *conjunto* arrangements and chord structure to give the song a traditional feel.

6. The song's theme and message about Mendoza's higher purpose of using her musical gifts to make a better life for herself, her family and her community.

## Chapter Three - MEMPHIS MINNIE



## *Biography*

“Memphis Minnie,<sup>1</sup> born Lizzie Douglas (June 3, 1897 – August 6, 1973), was one of the most influential blues artists ever to record.<sup>2</sup> She recorded over 100 records between the 1920’s-1950’s, some of the best known being “Bumble Bee,” “Nothing in Rambling,” and “Me and My Chauffeur Blues.” Minnie was unique in that she wrote many of her own songs and played lead guitar. She was, to say the least, way ahead of her time.

Minnie was born in Algiers, Louisiana, and raised in Walls Mississippi. She was the eldest of 13 siblings born to Abe and Gertrude Douglas and was nicknamed “Kid” during her childhood. Her first recordings have her listed as “Kid” Douglas.<sup>3</sup>

When she was seven, her family moved to Walls, Mississippi, a town just south of Memphis. The following year she received a guitar for her birthday and became proficient on the instrument by the time she was eleven, when she started playing at local parties.<sup>4</sup> At thirteen, she would run away from home to Memphis to play outdoors on Beale Street, which at the time was the main African American thoroughfare in the south, and the center of blues music and vice.

At the time, women were highly valued—along with whiskey and cocaine—and Beale Street was one of the first places in the country where women could perform in public. In order to survive financially, most of the female performers on Beale Street were also prostitutes, and Minnie was no exception. She received \$12 for her services—an outrageous fee for the time.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Photo courtesy of Del Rey, “Memphis Minnie, Guitar Queen, Hoodoo Lady and Songster,” *MemphisMinnie.com*, (Published by Del Rey, Accessed April 4, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman With Guitar, Memphis Minnie’s Blues*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992) 4

<sup>3</sup> Garon, *Woman With Guitar*, 14

<sup>4</sup> S. Harris, *Blues Who’s Who, 5th Paperback Ed*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989) 161-162

<sup>5</sup> Sonya Shelton, “Minnie, Memphis,” *Contemporary Musicians*, *Encyclopedia.com*, (Published 1999, Accessed April 4 2015,) [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Memphis\\_Minnie.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Memphis_Minnie.aspx)

Minnie's talent and reputation grew quickly, and by 1916, she was traveling across the south performing with the Ringling Brothers Circus.<sup>6</sup>

One of Memphis Minnie's first musical partnerships was with Willie Brown, who is also famous for having played with legendary Delta bluesman Charlie Patton. Brown provided the solid rhythm and bass lines Minnie seemed to require from all her men. They met and started playing together in 1915, when Minnie was just a young woman of eighteen. They worked together in various towns through the south and on ferryboats that catered primarily to white tourists around the Gulf of Mexico out of the town of Bedford, Mississippi.<sup>7</sup> In guitarist Willie Moore's recollection, Minnie was the better guitarist. "She was a guitar king" he said, although Brown was better known.<sup>8</sup>

Minnie was supposedly married three times but there is no real evidence of any marriage certificates.<sup>9</sup> She was said to have married her first husband, Casey Bill Weldon, who played guitar with the Memphis Jug Band, one of the most popular bands on Beale Street, in the early 1920's but there is little proof to substantiate this. Minnie then married "Kansas" Joe McCoy in 1929 and the two began making recordings together. As a duo they recorded dozens of sides for Columbia, including well-known blues songs such as "When the Levee Breaks" and "Bumble Bee." Minnie and Kansas Joe recorded and toured together until the mid-1930's when their union ended. According to biographers, Paul and Beth Garon, it was Kansas Joe's jealousy over Minnie's rise to fame and success that finally broke them up.<sup>10</sup>

After Minnie's breakup with Kansas Joe, she worked primarily in Chicago and her music took on a great period of growth and experimentation. This was mostly due to the production of

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Oliver, "Memphis Minnie," *Oxford Music Online*; (Oxford University Press, Retrieved through Wikipedia.com, Accessed April 4 2015,) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memphis\\_Minnie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memphis_Minnie)

<sup>7</sup> Del. Rey "Guitar Queen," *Acoustic Guitar Magazine*, Issue No. 33, (Hal Leonard, September 1995)

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Calt, Gayle Dean Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues; The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, (Newton, NJ: Rock Chapel Press, 1988)

<sup>9</sup> Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 5

<sup>10</sup> Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 35



talent scout, Lester Melrose, who recorded Minnie in different combos and groups, challenging her to “urbanize” her sound from the country blues she and Kansas Joe were famous for to a more modern style. During this period she recorded for various record labels, including Bluebird, Vocalion and Decca.<sup>11</sup>

By 1939, she had hooked up with guitarist/singer/songwriter Ernest Lawlars, aka “Little Son Joe,” whom she eventually married. Little Son Joe played a steady rhythm backing for Minnie’s guitar and wrote many of their songs. The two enjoyed a successful union for many years, recording dozens of sides including some of Minnie’s most famous songs such as “Me and My Chauffeur Blues,” “Looking the World Over,” and “Black Rat Swing.” They traveled together across the US, often staying for long periods in Memphis, Indianapolis, and Detroit but spending most of their time in Chicago, where the bulk of their work was. They worked together and separately in order to survive. For a time they had a standing engagement at Chicago’s popular 708 Club, playing with Big Bill Broonzy, Sunnyland Slim and Snooky Pryor.<sup>12</sup> Minnie also hosted regular “Blue Monday” parties at Ruby Lee Gatewood’s on Lake Street.<sup>13</sup>

The 1940’s were relatively fruitful for Minnie and Son Joe but work started to decline towards the end of the decade. Younger artists were coming up and major labels were no longer signing blues artists. At the end of the 1940’s jump blues was the popular sound of the day and rock and roll was just around the bend. Minnie’s last sides, recorded in 1949 for the Regal label, have her sounding worn out and tired. She and Son Joe kept playing in Chicago in the early part of the 1950’s but work was declining and both of them were suffering from poor health. Minnie had a heart attack in 1957 and she and Son Joe moved back to Memphis to live with her sister Daisy.<sup>14</sup> Over the next few years Minnie had a series of strokes which left her

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<sup>11</sup> Del Rey, “Guitar Queen”

<sup>12</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, *Notable Black American Women, Book 2.*, (Detroit: Gale Research inc, Edited 1996) 185-188

<sup>13</sup> Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 55

<sup>14</sup> Del Rey, “Guitar Queen”

wheelchair bound. After Son Joe passed away in 1962, Minnie was moved out of Daisy's house into the Jell Nursing Home in Memphis where she lived until her death in 1973.<sup>15</sup> She is buried at the New Hope Baptist Church Cemetery in Walls, DeSoto County, Mississippi. In 1996, a headstone was donated by Bonnie Raitt and a memorial service was held in Minnie's honour.

Minnie influenced many young guitar players and blues musicians whom she mentored and taught including Jimmy Rogers, Homesick James, and Johnny Shines.<sup>16</sup> Her songs have been performed and recorded by hundreds of artists both popular and obscure, ranging from Led Zeppelin, ("When the Levee Breaks" from the album *Led Zeppelin IV*, (1971), Atlantic), to Muddy Waters, Maria Muldaur, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, Clifton Chenier, Koko Taylor, Big Mama Thornton, Phoebe Snow and Bonnie Raitt. Indeed, Memphis Minnie's notoriety kept gaining in momentum long after the end of her recording career and her passing. She remains one of the most well-known blues artists ever and one of the true pioneers of blues guitar.

### *Memphis Minnie's Guitar Style and Musical Evolution*

Memphis Minnie's guitar style can best be described as traditional urban blues or "Chicago Blues" with a strong tendency toward an early country blues sound. She played guitar with a forceful staccato style whether she was playing rhythm or picking out lead lines and runs. There is very little string bending in her playing, except in a subtle way, mostly due to the fact that the acoustic guitars and National Steel guitars which she was famous for playing in her early career didn't allow for bending strings. String bending didn't come into prominence until late in the 1940's and early 1950's. National Steel guitars gained popularity for many country blues artists in the early days of recorded music because the instruments were loud, sturdy, and

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Santelli, *The Big Book of Blues*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) 331

<sup>16</sup> Del Rey, "Guitar Queen"

percussive and could be heard above a crowd. National Steels are made of metal and have resonators in the centre that allow for the sound of the instrument to carry much like a Victrola would, sounding amplified without the need for electricity. They were the perfect guitar that marked the period before amplification when artists needed extra volume to compete with loud bars and parties filled with rowdy patrons.<sup>17</sup>

Minnie played without a guitar pick, using only her fingers to strum out the rhythm and pick out her leads. She was a slight woman, but obviously quite strong physically, as playing finger style on a 1930's National Steel would have required significant strength. Country Blues legend Big Bill Broonzy described her as being as "good as any man playing the guitar."<sup>18</sup> Minnie and Big Bill were close friends throughout their careers and were known to go head to head in guitar battles, many of which Minnie won.<sup>19</sup> She had an interest in not only playing blues music, but also the popular songs of the day, such as "How High the Moon" or "Lady Be Good," which showed she was well rounded and more diverse musically when compared to many of her contemporaries.<sup>20</sup>

The National Steel resonator guitar was manufactured until 1939, but its sales lost momentum after guitars became electrified in 1931. By 1940, the new blues guitar became a regular archtop jazz model, modified with a single-coil pickup.<sup>21</sup> Standard guitars are flat on the top and back but arch tops are arched and have two f-holes (similar to violins) from which the sound resonates. It was this guitar that Minnie became famous for, since every publicity photo from the 1940's onward shows her holding a sunburst archtop electric, also made by National. Adoption of this new style of guitar changed the way blues guitar was played. Any forward-

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<sup>17</sup> Rick Batey, *The American Blues Guitar, An Illustrated History*, (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2003) 75

<sup>18</sup> William Lee Conley (Broonzy), Alan Lomax, "Commentary by Big Bill Broonzy on Memphis Minnie, Lonnie Johnson, and Blind Blake," *Culturalequity.org*, (Association for Cultural Equity, Recorded Mar 2 1947, Website accessed April 4 2015,) <http://research.culturalequity.org/get-audio-detailed-recording.do?recordingId=11965>

<sup>19</sup> Christopher John Farley, "Memphis Minnie and the Cutting Contest," P. Guralnik, R. Santelli, H George-Warren, C.J. Farley, *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*, (New York: Armistad, Edited 2003) 19

<sup>20</sup> Garon, *Woman With Guitar*, 42

<sup>21</sup> Batey, *American Blues Guitar*, .85.

thinking guitar player instinctively knew that this new electrified instrument was the key to playing in larger and noisier bars and nightclubs. Memphis Minnie was one of the first guitarists to use the new technology and plug it in on both her live shows and her recordings.

Starting in 1929, her records lead us through more than twenty-five years of recorded blues and illustrate her life as well, as she moved from the rural southern blues to the urban Chicago sound. Musically, there were three basic phases of her music style: her duet years with Kansas Joe, the “Melrose” band sound of the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, and her later urban blues and electric guitar playing with Little Son Joe. She played using Spanish tuning, also known as open G tuning (DGDGBD), in open D tuning (DADF#AD) and in standard tuning, often using a capo.<sup>22</sup>

## The Country Blues

The country blues, or the folk blues, is a style of early blues music played on acoustic instruments that laid the foundation for other, later, regional blues styles found across the USA.

The country blues is music that relies on the expressive power of the voice with sparse instrumental accompaniment (usually only a guitar or harmonica), differing from the ‘city blues’ in that it has more improvisatory freedom and a less rigidly defined structure.<sup>23</sup> Memphis Minnie’s earliest recordings are pure country blues, but they also point toward the more structured sound of the urban blues. Most of her and Kansas Joe’s songs have a regular twelve-bar format based around the I-IV-V chords.

Unlike many of the other traditional country blues guitarists of the time, Minnie and Kansas Joe did not play slide guitar. “Bumble Bee” is a song written by Minnie that they did on their very first recording session for Columbia in June of 1929. The song became so well known

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<sup>22</sup> Del Rey, “Guitar Queen”

<sup>23</sup> Jessica Keyes, “The Country Blues, Rural Soul Music of the Southern USA,” (Smithsonian Folkways, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.folkways.si.edu/country-blues-rural-soul-southern-usa/music/article/smithsonian>

that Minnie went on to record five different versions of it, even one titled “New Bumble Bee Blues.”<sup>24</sup>

“Bumble Bee” has also become one of the most copied songs in the blues, transforming into “Yellow Bee” by Bertha Lee Patton, “Im a King Bee” by Slim Harpo and the Rolling Stones, and “Queen Bee” by Koko Taylor. There is some thought that Bumble Bee Slim (aka Amos Easton) may have even derived his stage name from Minnie’s song.<sup>25</sup>

The guitar playing on “Bumble Bee” is energized and proficient, the rhythm played in 4/4 with downstrokes on full major chords and the lead, played by Minnie, laying out minor pentatonic runs that accentuate and play call and response with her vocal lines. It’s the raw and sexually themed lyrical content, however, that really makes this song exciting and provocative.

### Bumblebee<sup>26</sup>

Bumble bee, bumble bee, please come back to me  
Bumble bee, bumble bee, please come back to me  
He got the best old stinger, any bumble bee that I ever seen

He stung me this morning, I been looking for him all day long  
He stung me this morning, I been looking for him all day long  
Lord, it got me to the place, hate to see my bumble bee leave home

Bumble bee, bumble bee, don't be gone so long  
Bumble bee, bumble bee, don't be gone so long  
You's my bumble bee and you're needed here at home

I can't stand to hear him buzz, buzz, buzz  
Come in, bumble bee, want you to stop your fuss  
You're my bumble bee and you know your stuff  
Oh, sting me, bumble bee, until I get enough

Bumble bee, bumble bee, don't be gone so long

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<sup>24</sup> Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 103

<sup>25</sup> Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 104

<sup>26</sup> “Bumble Bee,” written by Minnie McCoy and performed by Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe, (Columbia Records, 1929)

Bumble bee, bumble bee, don't be gone so long  
You's my bumble bee and you're needed here at home

I don't mind you going, ain't going to stay so long  
Don't mind you going, don't be gone so long  
You's my bumble bee and you're needed here at home

I can't stand to hear him buzz, buzz, buzz  
Come in, bumble bee, I want you to stop your fuss  
You's my bumble bee and you know your stuff  
Oh, sting me bumble bee, until I get enough

## The Melrose Sound

The Melrose sound was named after the A&R talent scout and record producer Lester Melrose, who recorded dozens of blues artists in Chicago during the 1930's and the 1940's. Melrose's chief contribution was to establish a sound with ensemble playing and a rhythm section, which appealed to the increasingly urbanized black record-buying audience, and prefigured the electric blues and R&B of the late 1940s and the small group sound that became dominant in rock and roll. By using several of his artists in one session, Melrose featured vocals, a guitar, and a piano to create a Chicago blues sound more enlivened and sophisticated than the more subdued country blues.<sup>27</sup>

He worked for several record labels, including Okeh, Columbia and RCA Victor, and he brought artists like Leroy Carr, Champion Jack Dupree, Victoria Spivey, Memphis Minnie, and many others to the world's attention. Until she worked with Melrose, Minnie had only recorded solo or in duets with Kansas Joe. The sound Melrose produced in the studio for her was different and not quite as strident as some of her more stripped down songs and although the recordings are energetic and the songs are strong, it's sometimes more difficult to hear exactly what Minnie is playing on the guitar because there are so many other instruments in the band.

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<sup>27</sup> David P. Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock-And-Roll*, (New York: Pearson, 2008) 6

“Me and My Chauffeur Blues”<sup>28</sup> is an exception as it has such defined guitar parts; the rhythm played by Little Son Joe is a straight 4/4 full chord strumming pattern and the lead guitar part has one of the most recognizable licks in any blues song ever played, mostly because it’s based around the melody lines from another very famous blues song: “Good Morning Little School Girl” by Sonny Boy Williamson I.<sup>29</sup> The melody which Minnie and Lawlars copied almost directly from “Schoolgirl” also sounds rooted in a song called “Back and Side Blues” (1934), by Tennessee bluesman, Son Bonds.<sup>30</sup> The interesting thing about “Chauffeur” is that Minnie and Lawlars wrote a definitive guitar part based on what Sonny Boy Williamson I was playing on his harmonica. This guitar part has gone on to define almost every version of “Schoolgirl” since, including versions by Muddy Waters,<sup>31</sup> Johnny Winter,<sup>32</sup> Ten Years After,<sup>33</sup> and dozens more.

## The Chicago Blues or Urban Blues

Chicago blues is a type of urban blues...Urban blues developed in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of the Great Migration, when black workers moved from the Southern United States into the industrial cities of the Northern United States, such as Chicago.<sup>34</sup>

Chicago Blues transitioned musically away from the south to become a more sophisticated sound. It was music that had a more structured form than the country blues. Most of the African Americans who moved to the northern urban centers in the 1930’s and 1940’s wanted to distance themselves from anything considered “country,” and musicians were no

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<sup>28</sup> “Me and My Chauffeur” performed by Memphis Minnie and Little Son Joe was written by Ernest Lawlars and recorded in Chicago for Columbia Records, May 21 1941

<sup>29</sup> “Good Morning Little School Girl” was one of the first sides cut by Sonny Boy Williamson I. He recorded it for the Bluebird Label, May 5 1937 in Aurora Illinois

<sup>30</sup> Jim O’Neal. “Son Bonds”. *Allmusic*. (Retrieved January 21, 2010, Accessed April 4 2015)

<sup>31</sup> “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” track 4 on *Muddy Waters, Folk Singer*, (Chess, Reissued 1999)

<sup>32</sup> “Schoolgirl” is track 6 on Johnny Winter’s second album, *Johnny Winter*, (Columbia, June 1969)

<sup>33</sup> It appears again as track 4 on *Ssssh, Ten Years After*, (Deram Records, August 1969)

<sup>34</sup> William H. Frey, *The New Great Migration: Black Americans' Return to the South, 1965–2000*, (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2004) 1-3

different. Memphis Minnie was a pioneer of early Chicago blues and one of the few country blues artists who had the vision and artistic depth to make the leap into the new urban sound. Her experiences working and recording with Lester Melrose were the beginning of her evolution. As her time in Chicago progressed, she kept evolving and became one of the first guitarists to plug in and electrify her sound.

Some of the hallmarks of Chicago blues are the walking bass line done over a twelve-bar repetitive pattern and an ascending and descending I-IV-V progression, all tied together with a turnaround. The blues turnaround does exactly as its names says--it turns around the progression to bring it back to the beginning.

The cadence of the blues turnaround moves from the tonic to dominant, to subdominant, and back to the tonic. In a blues in A, the turnaround will consist of the chords E7, D7, A7, E7 (V–IV–I–V). V may be used in the last measure rather than I. Since nearly all blues tunes have more than one chorus (occurrence of the 12-bar progression), the turnaround (last four bars) usually ends on V, which makes us feel like we need to hear I again, thus bringing us around to the top (beginning) of the form again. The root movement of the V–IV–I cadential formula found in the blues turnaround is considered nontraditional from the standpoint of Western harmony. The motion of the V–IV–I cadence has been considered “backward, as, in traditional harmony, the subdominant normally prepares for the dominant which then has a strong tendency to resolve to the tonic. However, an alternative analysis has been proposed in which the IV acts to intensify the seventh of V, which is then resolved to the third of the tonic.<sup>35</sup>

Another common feature of traditional Chicago blues is the walking bass line.

A walking bass is a style of bass playing that creates a feeling of regular quarter note movement, akin to the regular alternation of feet while walking.<sup>36</sup> Walking basslines use a mixture of scale tones, arpeggios, chromatic runs, and passing tones to outline the chord progression of a song or tune, often with a melodic shape that alternately rises and falls in pitch over several bars.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Electric Bass for Guitarists*, (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing, 2003) 34

<sup>36</sup> George J Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) 40

<sup>37</sup> Ed Friedland, *Building Walking Bass Lines*, (Hal Leonard, May 1, 1995) 44



In the example below, the walking blues bassline (in the key of E) follows an arpeggiated pattern with the root moving to the minor third and then to the major third in all the chord changes (E-A-B or I-IV-V). If the instrumentation was expanded to include a bass guitar, it's likely the bass would play its part in quarter notes.

(Figure 2: Example of a walking bass line)<sup>38</sup>

### Walking Bass Blues Guitar



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<sup>38</sup> I found this example of walking bass and the two following blues turnarounds at a guitar instructional web site called [dolphinstreet.com](http://www.dolphinstreet.com). These examples are all very basic and would be great for beginning blues players. The walking bass is also known as a walking shuffle pattern.

Figure 2: "Walking Bass Line," *Dolphinstreet.com* (Accessed April 4 2015,) [http://www.dolphinstreet.com/guitar\\_video\\_lessons/lesson-84.php](http://www.dolphinstreet.com/guitar_video_lessons/lesson-84.php)

Figure 3-4: Examples of blues turnarounds<sup>39</sup>

### Blues Turnaround 1



### Blues Turnaround 2



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<sup>39</sup> Figure 3-4: "Blues Turnaround 1 and 2," *DolphinStreet.com* (Accessed April 4 2015,) [http://www.dolphinstreet.com/guitar\\_video\\_lessons/lesson-84.php](http://www.dolphinstreet.com/guitar_video_lessons/lesson-84.php)

## Summary

Memphis Minnie is one of the most significant players in the history of blues music, and even though her songs have endured through the decades, she is still far from a household name. That being said, she was a true trailblazer in very many respects,. In addition to her guitar work, she was a prolific songwriter, she went head to head with any of her male counterparts and held her own, her career had such longevity and she managed to weather so many musical and creative transitions. All of those things are impressive and it goes without saying that few artists ever make those kinds of contributions in their careers. The most impressive and amazing thing about Memphis Minnie, however, was her spirit and the kind of drive and inner strength she had to have to live such a brave and uncompromising life.

Imagine what life was like for a poor black female child in the Southern US at the turn of the century and what kind of options would have been available to her. In that environment, it's astounding that Memphis Minnie accomplished all that she did. We will never really know what made Minnie run away from home at 13, and what drove her to become such an accomplished musician and push herself so hard for so long. She was known to be a rough woman with a history of streetwalking, chewing tobacco, drinking liquor, and gambling, and of course writing songs and playing a mean guitar. Calling her an anomaly doesn't even begin to describe who she was.

Minnie died in obscurity after spending the last years of her life incapacitated, after suffering a heart attack and several strokes. She would never know the impact her music would have on so many others.

## Composition: “Killer in a Prom Dress”

### “KILLER IN A PROM DRESS” (lyrics)

Sixteen years old, trudging through a winter's storm  
Sixteen years old, trudging through a winter's storm  
Lost inside my blues, lonely as the day I was born

Every weekend afternoon, siftin' through the record bins  
Every weekend afternoon, siftin' through the record bins  
Looking for something new, to shake me from the mood I was in

It was a killer in a prom dress  
Suddenly caught my gaze  
Gold teeth smiling, arch top shining  
Singing “In My Girlish Days”  
And I knew, My search had come to an end  
I was just starting down the road, where she'd already been

People said she was wild, to live the way she did  
They called her a wild child, to live how she did  
But she'd been on the run, since they called her Kid

A killer in a prom dress  
That's how I saw her first  
She played guitar, chewed tobacco, drank and fought and cursed  
Back in the dirty '30's, when life was hard and cruel  
When a woman had no choice, she broke every rule

No one knows her whole story, or the secrets that she kept  
No one knows the whole truth, or the secrets she kept  
The words she wrote, are all we have left

A killer in a prom dress  
With a a dice ring on her hand  
I can sing her words and cop her style  
But I'll never understand  
What was in her heart and how that woman got so brave  
What Minnie saw and did, went with her to her grave

Figure 5: “Killer in a Prom Dress” notation and guitar chord progression

## Killer In a Prom Dress

The musical notation for "Killer In a Prom Dress" is presented in five staves, each with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes a guitar chord progression and a corresponding melody line.

**Staff 1 (Measures 1-5):** Chords: E<sup>7</sup>, A, E, E<sup>7</sup>, A. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes.

**Staff 2 (Measures 6-10):** Chords: A, E, B<sup>7</sup>, A. The melody continues with eighth and quarter notes.

**Staff 3 (Measures 11-14):** Chords: E, B<sup>7</sup> (first ending), B<sup>7</sup> (second ending), E. The melody includes a repeat sign with first and second endings.

**Staff 4 (Measures 15-18):** Chords: A, E, A. The melody features eighth and quarter notes.

**Staff 5 (Measures 19-22):** Chords: E, B<sup>7</sup>, A<sup>7</sup>, E. The melody concludes with eighth and quarter notes.

## “Killer in a Prom Dress” - Theme

“Killer in a Prom Dress” is an interweaving of my personal story of discovering Memphis Minnie with parts of Memphis Minnie’s biography. In the song I’m a girl of sixteen searching for myself in the mythology of the blues.

When I was in my teens, each Saturday afternoon I would venture downtown to the record store in my hometown of Ottawa. It didn’t matter if it was a snowstorm outside or blistering rain, I would just walk or, like my song says, “trudge” out on a quest for inspiration. Like most kids my age, music was my medicine, and it drowned out and soothed the inner angst that was screaming inside me. But while other kids were all listening to whatever was popular and on the radio, I was lost in the blues.

The record store I preferred was called *Record Runner* because they carried more obscure and collectible albums than anyone in town.<sup>40</sup> There was one bin way in the back of the store marked “Blues” in magic marker. It was small and hidden and chances are you wouldn’t even notice it if you weren’t looking specifically for it. Each week, like a magnet, that bin would draw me into its hidden treasures.

Most times I came away with an album by a male blues artist. One week it would be Muddy Waters, the next T-Bone Walker or Buddy Guy. I cherished them all and studied them diligently. But I’ll never forget the moment I pulled Memphis Minnie’s record out of that bin. I just stood there and stared. Time stood still. Minnie was sitting with her sunburst finished archtop guitar on her lap: she was smiling wide through gold teeth and was wearing a die for a ring. Her

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<sup>40</sup> *Record Runner* was the oldest independent record store in Ottawa. It finally closed in 2006 after thirty one years at the same location on Rideau St because of a condominium development in the area.

“Rideau Street condo craze squeezes out veteran businessman,” *The Ottawa Citizen* ( CanWest MediaWorks Publications Inc., Published January 12, 2006, Accessed April 4 2015)  
<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/city/story.html?id=10239070-b947-4925-a194-a1269e153091>

dress was made out of a satiny material with puffy sleeves and to me it looked like a prom dress or something a bridesmaid would wear.

Figure 6: *The album was called “Memphis Minnie, Moaning The Blues.” Sold!*<sup>41</sup>



<sup>41</sup> Figure 6: Image: “Memphis Minnie - Moaning The Blues,” Audio Phile International, (Audiophileusa.com, Accessed April 4 2015,) <http://www.audiophileusa.com/item.cfm?record=55814&c=1&kw=Blues>

From the moment I heard the first words of the first song I was won over. Minnie struck me as being akin to a female Robert Johnson. Her sound was country blues but you could also hear the foundations of where Mississippi blues transformed into the Chicago sound. Her delivery had an immediacy and a power to it. It was the strident way in which the guitars were played, both in the strumming technique and in the single note interplay. Minnie always sang and played at full volume which is most likely because she started her career as a street musician, before there was amplification. Even after she amplified her guitar and sang through a microphone she still approached playing like an acoustic country blues musician who needed to project above the audience. But besides the technical side of things, this “immediacy” I sense from her has more to do with the intention behind her music and her unyielding desire to get her message and story across to the listener. This intention is beyond explanation. It belongs to Minnie and it’s the marker of a masterful blues musician. She put all that emotion, intention and force into every word she sang and in every line she picked out on guitar. Her insightful lyrics and her raw talent made her stand out from most of the male blues artists and she had virtually no rivals who were women. There were a few other female country blues guitarists and singers from the 1930’s and 40’s - Mathey Delaney, Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wiley<sup>42</sup>—but none had the artistry or ambitious creative output of Minnie. She was an anomaly and a completely self-made woman. And she was (and is) my hero.

So much of her early life is shrouded in mystery. There are no interviews or any video footage of Minnie as she flew under the radar and played primarily for black audiences throughout her career. She was already retired from playing by the time of the folk music revival in the early 1960’s so she missed the wave that resuscitated many folk and blues artists’ careers. What we have to put the pieces of her life together are her recordings, one biography<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> John Jeremiah Sullivan, “The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie,” *New York Times Magazine*, (The New York Times Company, April 13 2014)

<sup>43</sup> Garon. *Woman With Guitar*



and spotty stories from a few musicians, most of whom are dead now. It's the words to her songs that we rely on to figure out who Memphis Minnie was.

### "In My Girlish Days"

Late hours at night, trying to play my hand  
Through my window, out stepped a man  
I didn't know no better  
Oh boys, In my girlish days

My mama cried, papa did, too  
Oh, daughter, look what a shame on you  
I didn't know no better  
Oh boys, In my girlish days

I flagged a train, didn't have a dime  
Trying to run away from that home of mine  
I didn't know no better  
Oh boys, In my girlish days

I hit the highway, caught me a truck  
Nineteen and seventeen, when the winter was tough  
I didn't know no better  
Oh boys, In my girlish days

All of my playmates is not surprised,  
I had to travel 'fore I got wise  
I found out better  
And I still got my girlish ways

(words and music: Ernest Lawlars)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Memphis Minnie, "In My Girlish Days," *The Best of Memphis Minnie*, (Blues Forever, 2005)

Minnie's second husband, Ernest Lawlars (aka: Little Son Joe) is credited as writer of "In My Girlish Days." Are we to believe that Minnie took no part in sculpting the words to this song? Is it fact or fiction? It appears to be based on her life as a young girl when she ran away from home, but how are we to know?<sup>45</sup> Minnie has dozens of songs like "In My Girlish Days" that are heartbreakingly revealing and that appear to be biographical. There was so much strength in the commanding way she sang and played guitar but her lyrics reveal an underlying vulnerability and struggle. That is where the title "Killer in a Prom Dress" comes into play. It's the idea that Minnie was so tough, almost lethal, but there was also this feminine side to her that she couldn't help but reveal.

The final message in "Killer in a Prom Dress" explains that though I've always felt a kinship toward Memphis Minnie, and as much as I love her music and story, I know I could never truly understand her. I'll never know what life was like for her or the things she suffered through. Therein lies the struggle for most white blues musicians—though we love this music, and the sound and the romance of it, we should never forget that the blues came from the heartbreak and pain of African American slaves. We pay homage, but we also must realize there is a divide that we can never cross over.

I often wonder what Memphis Minnie would think of a young white woman singing her songs or in this case, writing a song in her style about her life. Would she find it ironic that all the hardship she went through and the beautiful music she created found its way to a Canadian woman's graduate school thesis assignment in 2015!? Would she be disgusted? Or would she be happy that someone remembered her? My guess is probably a bit of both.

We look up to our heroes, but reverence is not our sole motivation. We also stand up on their shoulders and use their message to further our own.

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<sup>45</sup> Garon, *Woman With Guitar*, 50

## “Killer in a Prom Dress” - Form

The music of “Killer in a Prom Dress” is based around a twelve bar blues format with a straight 4/4 beat and a bridge section that changes to a walking bass shuffle. I chose to use some elements of Memphis Minnie’s guitar style mixed with my own to mirror the song’s theme of autobiography/biography. Memphis Minnie was known to almost always play her guitar in open chord tunings (D or G), but for this song I chose standard guitar tuning, which I favour (from lowest to highest strings: E-A-D-G-B-E). I use a few standard blues turnarounds to accent the return to the (I) chord and the beginning of the progression.

“Killer” is played with a single guitar and vocal. During the verses and chorus, I play a straight full chord strumming pattern in 4/4 time, that accentuates the upbeat. In the musical break I open up the guitar and play the walking blues shuffle. This moves the song into a more energetic feel that seems to rush the beat forward. Tension is created when the guitar returns to the original strumming part, when the vocals resume and then the pattern repeats at the next instrumental break. This is a simplistic example of early Chicago blues guitar and is also a prominent style and pattern featured on many of Memphis Minnie’s recordings.

“Killer in a Prom Dress” is in the key of E major which facilitates the ringing of open strings and fills out the sound. The tempo is in the moderato range, at approximately 85 BPM (beats per minute). Basically, it’s an easy, medium tempo blues shuffle feel. Parts of the vocal melody were taken from Memphis Minnie’s song “You Need a Friend.”<sup>46</sup>

I used a shouty and direct vocal delivery devoid of any softness to imitate Minnie’s style. There are no real dips in dynamics or volume levels. It’s a very straight ahead approach to singing. I do try and insert emotion when I sing “Killer in a Prom Dress” but it’s all done at full volume. I kept the instrumentation to a single guitar and vocal to capture the stark simplicity of

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<sup>46</sup> Memphis Minnie, “You Need a Friend,” *Memphis Minnie, Complete Recorded Works Vol 5 1935-1941*, (Document Records, 1991)

Minnie's sound and style. The bare arrangement also leads to hearing the lyrical content and the immediacy of the song's message and theme.

### "Killer in a Prom Dress" - Methodology

- 1: A simple arrangement for a single guitar and vocal.
- 2: A vocal melody that is reminiscent of one of Minnie's actual songs. (In this case, "You Need a Friend".)
- 3: Using the key of E major which allows for a full sound and ringing open strings.
- 4: Lyrical content based around my own personal story, mixed together with parts of Minnie's biography.
- 5: A direct approach to singing and playing, void of dynamics in volume.
- 6: Lead guitar lines in and around the minor pentatonic scale that mimic Minnie's staccato playing style.

## *Techniques Used in Recording Accompanying Songs*

The accompanying recordings were all reproduced at my musical partner, Peter Karp's home studio in Franklin Tennessee, about twenty miles south of Nashville. Each song was done in a single take because I wanted to capture the essence of how each of these artists recorded, before overdubbing and multitrack technology existed. Therefore, I am playing guitar and singing at the same time, live off the floor.

There are two ways in which we did deviate from vintage recording techniques: the first being that we used two microphones instead of one. Therefore we recorded on two tracks. We used two Audio-Technica AT4047/SV studio recording microphones—one for vocal and one for guitar. These microphones were set about six-eight inches from the guitar and vocal so we could capture ambient room sound as well as the instruments. The second way we veered from older recording practices was by using Pro-Tools digital technology and an Apple laptop computer. Obviously, these were not available to Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza or Memphis Minnie, but we have no access to analog technology. It's just too expensive and not practical for us at this time.

For "Maybelle's Guitar" and "Killer in a Prom Dress" I played a Stonebridge acoustic guitar with a single cutaway, Model Number G24CR-C, strung with D'Addario EJ16 Phosphor Bronze, Light (12-53), acoustic guitar strings. For "Lark of the Border" I played an Ibanez Performance Series PF1512 Dreadnought 12-string acoustic guitar strung with D'Addario EJ37 12-String Phosphor Bronze, Medium Top/Heavy Bottom, (12-54), acoustic guitar strings. I used the heaviest gauge 12-string guitar strings I could find to accommodate the low guitar tuning that Lydia Mendoza was famous for.

Originally I tried a lighter gauge string for "Lark of the Border" but there was too much

fret noise and buzzing because of the extra slack. After I changed to heavier guage strings the guitar sounded great and held it's tuning much better.

There are flaws in the recordings, some pitchy singing, and a few deviations from the notations provided, and I realize I could have recorded the guitar tracks and then overdubbed the vocals which would definitely give a more polished end result.

Originally, I had wanted to add harmony vocals on at least two of the songs, but in the end, I chose not to because I wanted to show that live, one take recording is actually very difficult to do. That is yet another reason to honor these artists and all artists who recorded before multi-track technology. We lean so heavily on technology today and we take for granted that we can just "fix things in the mix," including vocal "pitchiness" and all musical blunders. Many of us have forgotten what it is to play a song live.

If I were making a CD with these songs today, I would modernize my approach and clean up my parts using the technology available, but in this instance, it's more important to capture the energy and the spontaneity of being there in the moment.

## *Conclusion*

Shortly after beginning my thesis, I realized what a perfect trilogy there is between Maybelle Carter, Lydia Mendoza and Memphis Minnie. Their lives shared many similarities: all were born within a few years of each other at turn of the 20th century, each being an early recording sensation and having careers that lasted for decades, and each reaching icon status in their respective genres. They also share some glaring differences in the way their lives unfolded and eventually ended.

Maybelle Carter had the most influential and prosperous career and life. She gained more fame than Lydia Mendoza and Memphis Minnie due to the fact that she played country music, which has continued to grow in popularity for the last fifty years. Maybelle experienced great fame and prosperity, and she is widely recognized as the matriarch of country music.

Lydia Mendoza lived out her life and died of natural causes at ninety-one. Though not wealthy, she had a comfortable life and was surrounded and supported by her family and community. She continues to be celebrated in Tejano culture.

Memphis Minnie was a runaway who found herself immersed in prostitution and vice at a young age, and was well known for her drinking, gambling and fighting. She struggled most of her life, living hand to mouth, as a transient, without a home of her own, and eventually died impoverished and alone. Of the three women, Memphis Minnie lived the hardest life. To be a poor, black, female musician in the early 1900's in the deep south was a guarantee that life would be extraordinarily difficult.

This is not to diminish the hardships that Lydia Mendoza or Maybelle Carter suffered through because they were also born into extremely humble beginnings. Lydia Mendoza drew much of her strength from the Tejano and Mexican immigrant community and from her tight knit family. Maybelle also drew from the support of her family and community, and she was able to capitalize on opportunities that were more readily available to white people, such as finding success as a radio and TV celebrity. But it was Memphis Minnie who, as the only real singer-songwriter of the three, publicly expressed her personal hardships through the lyrics of her songs. Her fiery lead guitar and forceful rhythm playing accompanied her tomes of despair, adventure, sexuality and loneliness. Ironically today she is more celebrated by white Americans than by African Americans.

Even though each of these astonishingly gifted and driven women accomplished so much in their careers, the fact remains that they are all still relatively obscure. Maybelle Carter is known mainly for her work with the Carter Family and for being the mother-in-law of Johnny Cash and less so for her extraordinary guitar work and innovation. Memphis Minnie holds her reign as a legendary blues woman but is less known for being one of the pioneers of electric guitar. Likewise, Lydia Mendoza is remembered for her role as a figure in Tejano culture and an amazing singer but little is ever spoken about her accomplishments on guitar and her unique approach to the instrument. It's concerning that guitar aficionados and historians have not embraced either of them for their significant contributions on the instrument.

I learned many things while undertaking this work. Besides studying the lives of these women and reviewing things I may have forgotten about their journeys, I realized



how much of their styles had infiltrated my own, particularly that of Memphis Minnie, whom I've been emulating since my teens. I felt the most comfortable playing in Minnie's style and recording "Killer in a Prom Dress." I found Lydia Mendoza's story very inspiring and touching and I believe a lot of that was due with the fact that both reference books I found on Mendoza were written with her direct quotes. Each book really captures her personality and her feelings about her life and career. With Maybelle Carter I found myself being in awe, not just because of her accomplishments, but because of how she ended up being such a legendary figure in music. Maybelle seems larger than life.

Listeners to the recorded compositions herein may accuse me of musical thievery, notably in the copying of the guitar part from the Carter Family classic, "Wildwood Flower" in "Maybelle's Guitar," for using direct quotes of Lydia Mendoza in "Lark of the Border," and for directly ripping off the melody line from the Memphis Minnie song "You Need a Friend" in "Killer in a Prom Dress." My only intention with these compositions is to honor each artist and hold them in the highest regard. As they say in the music business, "amateurs borrow, professionals steal." Call me a pro.

I can honestly say it was a pleasure to write songs and essays based on the lives of these three icons and it has definitely filled my sails with wind to continue on with my research. Though there may be a paucity of female guitarists from the past to look up to, you couldn't find three more unique and inspiring musicians to be the roots of the family tree of American women guitar players.

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There are many references listed in the footnotes of this thesis but the main portion of my research was done with the help of four biographies:

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Zwonitzer, Mark; Hirshberg, Charles. *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

These four books were the basis from which everything else sprung and the only concise documentation on each artist that's available. I am extremely grateful for the work each author did to make my work easier and it's clear that their books were written and compiled as a labour of love and a desire that each of these remarkably talented women retain their place in the annals of American music history.

Though each artist has a long and varied discography, I studied only a small portion of their recorded work for inspiration to write the songs based on their styles. I wanted to capture some of the essence of their sound without delving into direct mimicry so I didn't feel the need to "over-listen." But to anyone who is not so familiar with these women, I highly recommend spending time listening to almost anything from their discographies. Each era is interesting for different reasons. Where Maybelle Carter is concerned, I would recommend the original Carter Family recordings to get a feel for her commanding guitar work and to experience the unique chemistry between Maybelle, A.P. and Sara Carter. I also found Maybelle's live solo album, *Wildwood Pickin'* that she recorded for Columbia in the mid 1960's interesting because it really showed her confident yet humble personality in the way she converses with the audience, and

her guitar technique is prominently featured as well. For Lydia Mendoza, her early solo recordings, especially her first recorded version of “Mal Hombre” are intriguing. The CD’s listed below show the scope of both her early solo work and her work in different ensembles. For Memphis Minnie, I would suggest a bit of her early and mid-career recordings which show her transition from country blues to urban blues. It’s interesting to compare the difference in sound between Minnie’s work with her first husband, Kansas Joe McCoy, as compared to her recordings with her second spouse, Little Son Joe. It’s also curious to note how Minnie dominates her partners with the sheer force of her personality and raw talent. The CD’s and books listed below in the discography are a place to get familiar with each artist.

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