

MISS MATTIE MAKES MUSIC

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PREFACE

Mattie Baldry is a wonderfully spry, eighty-eight-year-old, Black guitarist in Adairville, Kentucky. Thanks to Dr. Burt Feintuch at Western Kentucky University, I had the privilege of spending some time with her in November of this year. I was able to talk with her about her life and her music.

Mattie Baldry was born outside of Olmstead, Logan County, Kentucky in 1895. She was one of eleven children. Her maiden name was Thomas, but according to Miss Mattie, the family name was originally Red Jacket. It became Thomas after her grandfather, a slave, was sold to a family by that name. Her father was a farmer, and Miss Mattie stated: "We all had to work in the field, both boys and girls."

In 1911, Mattie married Maury Crumbold and out of that union came three children: Aruis, George Merritt, and Annie Mae. The year they married, Mattie and her husband moved about eight miles outside of Adairville to help her father work his newly-purchased farm there. Four years later, Mattie started doing house cleaning work in Adairville. Of her job for the next twenty-seven years, she said that:

House cleaned, all the time . . . that was my regular jog--house cleaning. I canvassed this town. Guess what I was getting an hour? 25¢ And I'd work from 7 [am] to 6 [pm]. I lived eight miles from here [Adairville], west of here . . . I use to walk up here.

About 1937, her husband died and, in 1940, she married Baldry, who died about ten years later. Around 1971, she moved to her present home, off the town square in Adairville.

Miss Mattie's interest in music began at an early age. Her father played a banjo. In fact, the banjo was the first instrument she played.

I started on a banjo. My daddy played a banjo. I started on a banjo. I liked the guitar music best. So I started playing a guitar.

She was unsure how her father learned to play, but believes that "he just picked it up, I guess."

She began playing the guitar at the age of ten. During that time, every week on Thursday night her mother would allow the children to have dances at their home. According to Miss Mattie, her mother preferred for the children to dance at home under her watchful eye than to not know what they were up to elsewhere. Mattie became fascinated by the guitarists and soon talked one into leaving his guitar at her house.

Us girls and boys all use to meet at mother's house and we'd make music and do round. And I'd just look at them and see them playing. They were musicians and I just looked at them so much. I asked one

of them to leave the box [guitar] tuned for me, and let me have the box until they came back next time So he left his guitar over there, and when he come back I could paly one tune. And I just keep on that way until I could play. Nobody didn't show me though.

At the age of twelve, she got her first guitar. Her older sister had wanted one and so did Mattie, but her father would only buy one. Of the two girls, Mattie eventually became the sole owner of the guitar since her sister never learned how to play. She claims th~~a~~ learning to play the guitar was easy. All one has to do is whistle or hum the tune and then pick it out on the guitar. At sixteen, after she had married, Miss Mattie began playing in public.

I used to play for dances, tell you the truth. When I use to play a guitar. I wasn't no rough woman though. I went with my brothers or my husband . . . and I'd play for dances when I wasn't dancing myself.

Apart from the regular dances, she played at slap-hand parties (quadrilles) and sometimes at church. Her first husband played the guitar, too. He was the young man whose guitar she had borrowed first. Together and later with their children, they played each year at the Allensville Picnic in August. One year at

the picnic, they performed with the John Henry Marshall Band and the band asked her to join them as they traveled around the country. She and her husband declined though, choosing to remain in Logan County. As her children grew up, the entire family played together. The two girls both playing guitar and her son playing jug and spoons.

Although she played for many dances, Miss Mattie never played for money. If the dancers or the dance sponsors wanted to give her money, that was fine, but she never asked for a fee.

The type of music that she has played varies, though now she primarily plays the blues. She uses the thumb and forefinger of her right hand for strumming and picking, and chords with either her left hand or a slide. An interesting story about her slide is that about 1910 her father plowed up an old bone-handled pocket knife. He gave it to Mattie and she soaked it for two weeks in coal oil to remove all the rust from it. After it was cleaned up, she found that it made a wonderful slide. She says that in playing the blues all one has to do is play the tune and make up the words as you go along.

One of her favorite songs is "Doozer." It tells the story of a young black man who killed his white father-in-law and was eventually hung for his crime. The real incident occurred in Louisville. She says

that for a long time, she could not play the song there.

At present, Miss Mattie owns two guitars; an electric one that is broken; and a folk-style one that she bought in 1937 for ten dollars. She ceased playing in public in 1940. Two years ago, she had a "stroke in the throat" and her voice is fairly weak now. Yet, she continues to play the guitar.

Although both of her daughters did play the guitar, they do not now. None of her grandchildren learned either.

I tried to learn them. But it just wasn't in them My granddaughter's little little girl, she's fourteen . . . I'm learning her to play. She's pretty easy to learn, too. I put her on a song . . . and she plays pretty good.

Miss Mattie Baldry is a very remarkable woman. At eighty-eight years of age, she walks to the senior citizens' center in Adairville every weekday. She lives alone and contents herself with quilting, watching soap operas on television, and playing her guitar. When asked about how she had been able to teach herself to play the guitar, she answered: "I was just full of music, that's all."

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interviews conducted with Mattie Baldry on
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