

“Ola Belle Reed”—Ola Belle Reed (1973)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

Essay by Rahne Alexander (guest post)*



Ola Belle Reed

“Don’t sing my praises after I’m gone,” sings Ola Belle Reed in “My Epitaph,” the penultimate track on her eponymous album; a record now preserved as part of American music history within the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry. Nevertheless, here I am, joining her praise-singing chorus.

Part of what makes “My Epitaph” such a powerful statement is Reed’s outright rejection of maudlin memorialization. “Let me go in peace,” she sings, “I don’t want your marble at my head.” She goes on to remind us that it’s the ways we connect with people in the current world that really matters: “What we do for each other/Let us do it today.” The couplet encapsulates Reed’s ethos; what I see as the key to her legacy.

There are surely as many motives for making music as there are musicians, but I suspect that if there is a common goal for most musicians, it is to be *heard*. Musicians tend to pursue that goal through some combination of recording and performance, and in doing so they tend to reveal their desires. Reed’s decades-long performance career generated but a few recordings; it seems clear where her preferences resided.

In this way, Reed strikes me as something of a kindred spirit as a musician. Recordings have the unique ability to reach audiences across time and space, but the warmth and connection that accompanies live performance is an unparalleled kind of magic. Building bridges, opening dialogue, and establishing community through music--that’s how I prefer to measure success.

Reed lived her life as trailblazer, and the documents of her life suggest a musician who was driven less by ego and more by the purposes her talents could serve. Reed could have readily pursued greater notoriety. After all, she joined the North Carolina Ridge Runners as a singer in 1936, becoming a touring musician at a time when women simply did not do such things,

When economics compelled her family to leave the South, Reed continued to perform, but strategies shifted. She and her family opened a New River Ranch in Maryland, which would showcase national stars like The Carter Family, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, and Flatt and Scruggs for eager local audiences. Bridges were built, communities established.

They also opened a country store--Campbell's Corner--where locals could pick up supplies, and sometimes benefit from Reed's overwhelmingly generous nature. The shop also served as a recording radio studio, where local and touring musicians alike could broadcast performances live over the airwaves. Over the span of 24 years, country stars like Bill Monroe and Grandpa Jones would appear on the Campbell's Corner radio show before ending its broadcast in 1984.

Reed worked steadily throughout her life, but she never been convinced to prioritize recording until 1972, at which point she had been making music for some 40 years. This recording was only achieved thanks to the diligence of Gei Zantzinger that we even have Ola Belle Reed's eponymous album to celebrate.

Recognizing the need to capture a bit of magic, Zantzinger invited Reed and her family band to record at his home studio in Devault, Pennsylvania. Over the course of three days, and with a great deal of encouragement, Zantzinger succeeded in capturing a bit of that magic that we continue to enjoy today.

I can only guess Reed would be unimpressed that I can now summon her to sing "My Epitaph" on demand with the device in my hand, especially at the rates with which artists are currently compensated. But hearing Ola Belle Reed's voice today is, for me, the culmination of a series of minor miracles both circumstantial and technological, and a testament to the power of a musician who truly believes in the mission of her music.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the opinions of the Library of Congress.