

“Wildwood Flower”--The Carter Family (1928)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Jay Orr and Ryan Dooley (guest post)*



The Carter Family

The Carter Family’s 1928 recording of “Wildwood Flower” featured the powerful, clear voice of Sara Carter and the innovative guitar work of Maybelle Carter, Sara’s cousin and sister-in-law. The recording is important because it offers an early example of a woman singing lead on a country song. Sara had auditioned in 1926 for a talent scout from the Brunswick record label, only to be told that women didn’t sing lead on country records. “Wildwood Flower” also offers a vivid example of the guitar style that would come to be known as the “Carter scratch,” originated by Maybelle Carter, and greatly influenced by the many local music makers she heard growing up, among them a Black musician, Lesley Riddle, who would go on to expand the Carter Family’s repertoire.

The Carter women, along with Sara’s husband, A.P. Carter, made their first recordings as the Carter Family in August 1927, in Bristol, on the Tennessee-Virginia border. Ralph Peer, from the Victor Talking Machine Company, came to Bristol, organized the recording session, bought newspaper advertising inviting musicians in the area to record for Victor, posted handbills announcing his visit in search of talent, auditioned the talent, and set up a temporary studio in a warehouse on the Tennessee side of Bristol’s main thoroughfare, State Street, to make the master recordings.

The Carters answered Peer’s call, traveling to Bristol from their homes in mountainous southwestern Virginia, near tiny Maces Spring. They recorded six songs over two days, August 1 and 2, 1927. Victor initially released “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,” the first song they recorded. The record sold well, and the Carters’ musical career took off.

So popular were the Carter Family's first recordings, that, less than a year later, Peer sent word to the Carters that he needed them to come to Victor headquarters in Camden, New Jersey, for additional recording sessions.

They arrived by train on May 8, 1928, and checked into the downtown Camden Hotel. The next day, May 9, the Carters reported to the sprawling Victor compound to record in a cavernous studio that had been used primarily for large-ensemble recordings of movie soundtracks and symphonic works. Pianist Fats Waller had recorded frequently there. Western Electric equipped the studio with wired microphones in 1925, allowing the studio engineers to record smaller groups like the Carters effectively. Among the songs the family cut on the first day was "Keep on the Sunny Side," which would become one of the most popular numbers in their career repertoire.

They returned to the studio the next day, May 10, coincidentally Maybelle's 19th birthday. The sixth of the eight songs they recorded, sung by Sara while Maybelle played guitar, was "Wildwood Flower," a song that had first circulated as a popular parlor tune in the late 19th century. The lyrics appeared first as a poem, titled "I'll Twine Mid the Ringlets," in the April 1860 issue of "New York Weekly," written by contributor Maud Irving. In the poem, Irving tells of a maiden spurned in love and vowing not to show herself affected by the rejection. The poem became a song in the 1870s, when composer Joseph P. Webster (who wrote music for the popular hymn "In the Sweet By-and-By") set it to music.

Ethnomusicologist Richard Spottswood has said that the song was briefly popular and became a part of Southern oral tradition. As "Wildwood Flower" passed down to Maybelle from her mother and to Sara from a neighbor, the song's imagery changed. The "ringlets" of the maiden's hair became "mingles" twined with roses "so red," lilies "so fair," and myrtle "so bright with the emerald dew" instead of *hue*; while the "pale aronatus" of the original has vanished altogether, replaced by "the pale and the leader and eyes look like blue."

Maybelle's guitar propels the song forward. "When I started playing the guitar, I didn't have nobody to play with me, so that's how I developed the style of picking and the rhythm too, you know," she said in 1973. The "Carter Scratch," as her style would come to be called, involves picking the melody line on the bass strings and strumming the rhythm on the higher strings. It derived partly from autoharp and banjo techniques that Maybelle learned from her mother. Maybelle took up the guitar as a teenager and began adapting the songs she later said were "taught to us by my mother, who learned them from her mother before her, who had, in turn, learned them from her parents."

Victor released "Wildwood Flower" eight months after the recording, in January 1929. The song would be reissued on several budget labels in ensuing years, before the Carters re-recorded it in New York in 1935.

The Carter Scratch as heard in Maybelle's "Wildwood Flower" became an example for pickers of every ilk. The song has been recorded by jazz players (John Scofield, Bill Frisell, Charlie Haden), rock guitar heroes (Duane Eddy, Lonnie Mack, the Ventures), country pickers (Chet Atkins, Joe Maphis and Merle Travis, Randy Scruggs, Clarence White, Roy Clark), and acoustic

masters (David Grisman, the Stanley Brothers, Mike Seeger, Earl Scruggs, and Doc Watson, among many others). Folk revivalists embraced it in the 1950s and 1960s, and Maybelle re-recorded the song with her daughters, Helen, June, and Anita Carter, and her son-in-law, Johnny Cash. Gene Watson had a top five country hit in 1979 with a song titled “Pick the Wildwood Flower.”

In 1940, a Library of Congress crew documenting the devastating stories of the Dust Bowl visited a migrant workers’ camp and captured Zelmer Ward singing “Wildwood Flower,” which, she explained, she got from a Carter Family record. Several generations later, Gillian Welch assessed the Carters legacy: “Those were the versions that so many in the next generation learned,” she said. “You really have to look at their take on all of these traditional songs and folk songs as the first sort of blueprint.”

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