

Etta Baker
By Ajay Kalra
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Etta Baker is a multi-instrumentalist, especially revered for her guitar playing in a style described as Piedmont fingerpicking guitar and often as Piedmont blues guitar. She had an enormous impact on the fledgling urban folk revival movement in North America through her prominent appearance on one of the most influential of early folk music collections, *Instrumental Music of the Southern Appalachians* (Tradition #1007), recorded by folklorist Paul Clayton and released in 1956. This influence was reflected in the styles of many a young urban folk acolyte and was documented in the first anthological instruction book on traditional guitar picking styles, *Fingerpicking Styles for Guitar* (Oak Publications), written by Happy Traum and published in 1965. In that compendium, alongside the works of other major fingerpicking stylists such as Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotten, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Joseph Spence, Mance Lipscomb, Merle Travis, Doc Watson, and Dave Van Ronk, Traum paid homage to Baker's influence on the urban folk revival scene by featuring analysis and transcription of her playing on the 1956 anthology (Sebastian and Traum).

Baker was born in a family with mixed Irish, Cherokee, and African American heritages on March 31, 1913 in Caldwell County, North Carolina, (died 9-23-2006) in a little narrow valley near Sallie Harris Creek where the foothills meet the Blue Ridge. The family was forced to evacuate to Chase City, Virginia, in 1916, in the wake of a flood. This was about the time when Etta, the youngest of nine children of Boone and Mary Sarah Liza Jane Reid, started learning the guitar on her father's lap.

In time she also learned to play the up-picking Piedmont style of banjo as well as violin, instruments that a number of members of her exceptional musical family played. Baker, although a very accomplished banjo player, developed the greatest affinity for the guitar. Although she did not become even a semi-professional touring musician until her late sixties, it was a rare day in her life that Baker did not play the guitar (Signorelli). That intimate relationship with the instrument is prominently evidenced by the surety with which she plays even in her nineties, her thumb alternating on the bass strings with an unerring metronomic accuracy while on the tenor strings her index finger staggers the melody on and off the beats to come up with subtly syncopated variations.

What is most intriguing regarding Baker's style is its significant overlap with the styles of a number of her finger-picking contemporaries and predecessors with whose music she was not familiar. Baker learnt almost all of her music within her family, largely from her father. Her father, Boone Reid, himself a well-respected multi-instrumentalist, might have been among the earliest of fingerpicking guitarists in the Piedmont region. The repertoire that Etta learnt from him, and which still forms the bulk of her most requested tunes, features a preponderance of pre-blues secular music that was performed by both black and white performers across the Piedmont, as well as in many parts of rural America, especially within the South. "Railroad Bill," "Bully of the Town," and "John Henry," three of the songs featured on the aforementioned immensely

influential 1956 record anthology, were all in this category. On that recording, Baker also recorded “One Dime Blues,” an early newly-composed blues learned from the author Alfred Phillips, Baker’s brother-in-law’s brother (Signorelli: 37). Etta Baker was the most prominently featured performer on the Tradition records 1956 compilation and the fifth of her performances on that album, all on the guitar, was the 16-bar tune “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad,” a composition often referred to as a blues. That tune, which shares a number of floating verses with Charlie Patton’s 12-bar “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” provides an interesting link in the process of standardization of the blues out of non-12-bar song forms.

Similarly, other tunes in the repertoire of this oldest living repository of traditional African American guitar music illuminate the spread of the blues in the rural South, much before its storied journey to the Northern cities such as Chicago wherefrom it became an internationally acclaimed music. In her 1996 instruction video for *Homespun Tapes*, Etta reveals the specific histories behind individual pieces in her repertoire and how they entered the community and her playing. For instance, she remembers “[Old Carolina Breakdown](#)” as the first blues tune that her father learned, from a guitarist in a traveling band that visited Chase City, VA (Baker and Martin). That tune, however, shares the 16-bar structure and even the chord progression with “[Going Down the Road Feeling Bad](#),” once again illuminating how blues was understood more loosely in the rural South, at least through the 1910s and 1920s. Yet, the sound of the blue notes was likely striking enough for a mixed-race family in the Appalachians playing a repertoire of traditional music flowing freely across racial lines to label it a distinctive new sound.

Despite the appellation Piedmont Blues, the major part of Baker’s acoustic guitar repertoire continued to feature only subtle shades of the blues, and contrasts significantly with the playing of a number of other celebrated guitarists slotted under that catch-all category for the styles of acoustic guitarists who at any time of their lives had lived or played anywhere around the Piedmont region—especially Blind Willie McTell, [Buddy Moss](#), and Blind Boy Fuller. She did, however, borrow more heavily from the blues for certain other styles and specific songs in her repertoire.

Baker’s slide playing, adapted from her father’s playing with an actual bottleneck, features a much stronger blues sensibility in her liberal use of rattles and buzzes emanating from the metallic prosthesis’s noisy vibrations against the fretboard. Unlike famous later bottleneck players from the Mississippi Delta such as Robert Johnson and Elmore James, however, Baker uses the bottleneck on songs that predate the blues and usually feature a different form than the 12-bar AAB structure typical of the blues after its standardization. Baker’s use of the slide on “[John Henry](#)” and “[Going Down the Road Feeling Bad](#)” is also melodic in the same sense as the fingered part of her repertoire; the slide plays slightly syncopated variations on the vocal melody against an unwavering bass-note pulse maintained by the alternating thumb pattern. In that it represents an adaptation of some elements of the blues—especially tumbrels (rattles, buzzes, whiny sound from the metallic slide) but also, to an extent, note choice—to an older alternating thumb guitar style already present in the Piedmont region before the influx of the blues.

That guitar style itself should be of great significance to scholars interested in regional musics and in the intersections between traditional regional and mass-mediated popular cultures in a period of exceptional flux within American history. In view of Baker's repeated testimony and given her life history, it is not difficult to accept that she learned the basics of her alternating-thumb-bass-plus-fingerpicked-melody-on-top style in the late 1910s and early 1920s entirely from her father in a period before any recordings of rural blues or even rural guitar playing had been released. Obviously, as Baker relates, the blues were entering the Piedmont as early as the 1910s through traveling rural musicians and live bands and not via commercial popular recordings of arranged blues, which, although made from 1914 with white singers and from 1920 with black singers, were initially recorded with urban orchestras and early jazz bands and without any prominent role for the guitar (Baker and Martin; Signorelli: 35-37). The exact sound of those early rural blues musicians in that part of America is not known, however. What is evidenced in Baker's music is an incorporation of some of its elements in a regionally preexisting guitar style.

Baker's guitar style, if understood as one developed by her father Boone Reid in the early years of the twentieth century from a number of influences, bears striking resemblance to the styles of a number of contemporaneous alternating thumb style players from various parts of the Southern terrain, often far removed. The earliest-born of the most influential of these pickers was Ohio County, Kentucky's Arnold Shultz, a black itinerant musician who traveled widely as a young man, working on riverboats on the Green, the Ohio, and the Mississippi. His influence, however, crossed over into the white rural communities of Western and Central Kentucky through a series of white guitarists extending through Kennedy Jones, Mose Rager, Ike Everly and Merle Travis, and then through Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed to legions of fingerpicking guitarists spread across the world. Shultz's learning from or influence on any African American guitarists, however, is not documented (Lightfoot).

Also worth exploring further is the connection between popular musical styles from the second half of the nineteenth century such as parlor music and ragtime. Scholars have tended to emphasize the folk and African American foundations of alternating thumb styles, for instance tracing the predilection for using open tunings to regional banjo traditions. Clearly, however, neither banjo playing nor much of African music has such a rigid adherence to root-fifth or root-chord rhythmic patterns as do alternating-thumb guitar styles. Parlor guitar and ragtime piano, on the other hand, do. While ragtime was an African American synthesis, the steady bass component in it was a European American bequest with the syncopation in the melody being the principal African American element. Not only were ragtime pieces, or more commonly ragtime-influenced tunes with a less elaborate structure, a common part of the repertoire of early alternating-thumb guitarists whether from the Piedmont or the Western Kentucky coalmine region, open-tuning parlor guitar tunes such as "The Siege of Sebastopol" published in 1888 (often retitled "Sebastopol" or "Vastopol") and "Spanish Fandango" continued to appear in their repertoires. The former tune provides the nomenclature for the open D or vastopol tuning and was recorded by Elizabeth Cotten on her debut album,

Freight Train and other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes (Smithsonian Folkways, 1959), while the latter played in the open G tuning, was recorded by Etta Baker on her belated album-length debut, *One Dime Blues: Fingerpicked Blues and Traditional Tunes* (Rounder, 1991).

Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:

- *Celebration of Traditional Music archives (CTM 1983)*: Etta Baker took the stage three times during the festival, performing a total of seventeen numbers, all documented on open reel recordings and reference audio cassettes (AC OR 005-250, 251, 258, 259, and 270).
- Baker performed three tunes at Berea that are not available commercially, “I’m Going Back to Carolina,” “Careless Love,” and the very-out-of-character “Song of the Nightingale” (perhaps an adaptation of the Stravinsky tone poem of that name). In addition, she gave two instrumental renditions of the only number in her repertoire that is an urban electric blues “[On the Other Hand Baby](#).” The other numbers performed include “[Steamboat Bill](#),” “[The One Dime Was All I had](#)” (2 versions), “[Boogie](#)” (2 versions), “[Mint Julep](#),” “[Old Carolina Breakdown](#)” (2 versions), “[Crow Jane](#),” and a slide guitar based rendition of “[John Henry](#).”
- Also of interest is the choice of instrument and amplification, given the avowedly traditional nature of the event. Baker is apparently playing through an electric guitar amplifier but most likely an acoustic guitar with a non-piezo pickup. The overdrive on the amplifier definitely jumps higher on the tunes not featuring her traditional alternating-thumb style, such as the electric blues and boogie-based tunes, yet its warmth and sustain especially on the bass notes are perceptible throughout the performances.
- Commercial Recordings:
 - Dubbed to open reel: Various Artists: *Instrumental Music of the Southern Appalachians* (Tradition, 1956) (BK OR 024-001)
 - On LP: Various Artists: *The Folk Song Tradition* (Tradition) (DW LP 236)
- Radio program recordings: Various Artists: *Southern Songbirds: The Women of Early Country and Old-Time* (AC CT 411-003)

Commercial Discography:

Various Artists:

- *Instrumental Music of the Southern Appalachians* (Tradition, 1956/Empire 2006)

Individual:

- *One Dime Blues: Fingerpicked Blues and Traditional Tunes* (Rounder CD-2112, 1991)
- *Railroad Bill* (Music Maker 91006, 1999)

Etta Baker and Taj Mahal:

- *Etta Baker with Taj Mahal* (Music Maker 50, 2004)

Etta Baker and Cora Phillips:

- *Carolina Breakdown* (Music Maker 56, 2005)

References:

Baker, Etta and Wayne Martin. 1996. *The Fingerpicking Blues of Etta Baker (Homespun DVD-ETT-GT21)*. Woodstock, New York: Homespun Tapes.

Lightfoot, William E. 1990. "A Regional Musical Style: The Legacy of Arnold Shultz." In *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures*, edited by Barbara Allen and Thomas J. Schlereth. 120-137. Lexington: University of Kentucky.

Sebastian, John and Happy Traum. 2004. *The Fingerpicking Blues of Mississippi John Hurt (Homespun DVD-SEB-MJ21)*. Woodstock, New York: Homespun Tapes.

Signorelli, Cathy. "Piedmont Blueswoman Etta Baker: One-Diming it With the Hands of Time." *Sing Out* 41/4: 34-41.