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Remembering Bess Lomax Hawes

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Bess Lomax Hawes, who died Friday at 88, taught thousands of people how to play the guitar. She didn't have a video, or a TV show, or a website, or even an instructional manual. She had a technique.

In the late 1940s, she and her husband Butch were living in the Boston area and sent their three children to a cooperative nursery school organized by graduate students at MIT and Harvard. She frequently brought her guitar to the school to perform for the students. Some of the parents, mostly the mothers, asked her to teach them how to play guitar, banjo and mandolin. Bess agreed to charge them one dollar each for each lesson, which lasted several hours, what she called "a whole evening." She would keep 50 cents for herself to pay for a babysitter and she'd donate the other 50 cents to the nursery school. Word soon spread, and others began to join her classes.

That was how Bess developed her technique for teaching guitar to large groups of people simultaneously, a method for which she became well-known, and which accounts for the fact that over the years, especially after she moved to Los Angeles in 1951, she was able to teach so many people to play guitar. Many of her students, in turn, became guitar teachers, spreading her method - and her enthusiasm for music - which helped catalyze the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s.

Bess figured, she told me in an interview two years ago, that "students learning guitar individually can get intimidated because they can hear their own mistakes. In a group, the students feel bolder about playing, take more risks, enjoy it more, and feel part of something bigger, which sounds better, anyway."

Throughout her life, Bess was always involved in "something bigger," typically spreading appreciation for music, and progressive politics, through her guitar lessons, her participation in the Almanac Singers, her involvement with the post-war Progressive Party, her folklore and anthropology classes at San Fernando Valley State College (now Cal State-Northridge), her [documentary films](#) about folk culture, and her work organizing folklore festivals for the Smithsonian Institute and creating the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts (which she directed from 1977 to 1992).

In 1993, President Bill Clinton awarded Bess the National Medal of the Arts at a reception at the White House. In 1995, the University of North Carolina awarded her an honorary doctorate for her lifetime accomplishments. In 2000, the NEA created the Bess Lomax Hawes Award, which honors people who make major contributions to folk and traditional arts.

The folk music revival that began in the late 1950s, and the recent growing interest in traditional American "roots" music -- reflected in the popularity of such recent films as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *Songcatcher* (2000), the recent re-release of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and the recent celebrations of Pete Seeger in concerts, albums, and documentary film -- owes a great deal to Bess' pioneering efforts.

Born in 1921, Bess' life in music continued a distinguished family tradition. Her father, musicologist [John Lomax](#), worked at several universities in Texas before moving to Washington, D.C., where he became the curator of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. She spent her early years in Texas, learning classical piano and enrolling at the University of Texas at age 15. As a teenager, Bess worked with her father and brother [Alan](#) (who also became a famous musicologist) on their pioneering collection of American folk music, *Our Singing Country* (eventually published in 1941), which was the first of several important song collections produced by the father and son. Bess helped collect and transcribe prison songs, cowboy ballads, and many other songs.

In 1938, she traveled to Europe with her father and his second wife on their honeymoon. She bought a \$15 guitar to keep her occupied during the trip, taught herself to play, and learned songs in several European languages.

After returning from Europe, Bess attended Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia. While at Bryn Mawr, she would occasionally travel to New York and perform with the Almanac Singers. After she graduated from college in 1941, she moved to New York, got a job at the New York Public Library and later with the Office of War Information, preparing radio broadcasts for troops overseas, including music that represented the variety of American culture. She moved into the Almanacs' communal apartment - a highly usual arrangement at the time. She was often the only Almanac with a steady job, which -- along with regular "hootenanny" song parties -- helped pay the rent.

Before there was The Weavers, or Peter, Paul and Mary, there was The Almanac Singers. Formed in 1941, the Almanacs drew on traditional songs, and wrote their own songs, often about current events, to advance the cause of progressive groups, including labor unions. Besides Bess, the Almanacs included Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell, as well as a constantly revolving group of others (including Woody Guthrie) who performed for various left-wing groups. The Almanacs put out several records of topical songs, and flirted with mainstream success, but they were always too ambivalent about

commercialism and compromise to gain a foothold in popular culture. With the Almanacs, Bess recorded the albums *Talking Union* and *Citizen CIO* and sang on the Folkways Records albums *Woody Guthrie Sings Folk Songs* and *Spanish Civil War*. While living in New York she met (and eventually married) Baldwin "Butch" Hawes, an illustrator who occasionally sang with the Almanacs.

Not only did Bess know more folk songs than anyone else, but when the Almanacs needed songs for union rallies and picket lines, to dramatize particular issues, or to plug political candidates, she could write new songs on short notice -- "sometimes on the spot," she recalled. These "new" songs were essentially parodies of old ones, lyrics written for the specific occasion modeled after and set to traditional tunes.

In April 2007, I visited Bess, then 86, in her small room in a group home for seniors in the Woodland Hills area of Los Angeles. She sat in a cushioned chair and had an oxygen tank, with tubes in her nose, to help her breathe. She had no musical instruments in the room because, she explained, she could no longer play because of arthritis in her hands. But she had a CD player and used it frequently. She told me she was better at remembering songs than remembering names, and that was evident during the two-hour interview.

I had come to talk with Bess about the song for which she is most famous - "MTA," typically known as "Charlie and the MTA" -- the ballad about a "man named Charlie" doomed to "ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston" and become "the man who never returned."

Bess recalled the song's history, filling in an important part of its evolution that was missing from previous accounts. The Almanac Singers were invited to perform at a rally for the Transport Workers Union on May 21, 1941 at Madison Square Garden. The group had to come up with songs to stir the crowd and get them singing. They wrote several songs for the occasion, including one called "The Train That Never Returned," which was based on two earlier songs -- "The Ship That Never Returned" (written in 1865) and "The Wreck of the Old 97" (resurrected and popularized in 1924). In the Almanacs' 1941 version, a group of crooked politicians who were trying to crush the transit workers union board a "yellow scab train." The Almanacs distributed the lyrics to the 20,000 people at the rally.

The song was never recorded, and perhaps never again sung in public, but 66 years later, Bess remembered the lyrics and music as though she'd sung them the day before. She removed the tubes from her nose, closed her eyes, looked up, and began singing:

*"Let me tell you the story of some politicians
Who road on a yellow scab train.
On a Monday morning, they left the station
And they never were seen again.
Did they ever return?
No, they never returned..."*

In 1949, Walter O'Brien Jr., a left-wing union organizer who was running for Mayor of Boston on the Progressive Party ticket, asked Bess to write some songs for his long-shot campaign. One of the central planks of O'Brien's platform was a call for rolling back a new subway fare increase by the Massachusetts Transit Authority (MTA). To help her, Bess turned for help to some of the people who came by her house on Sunday nights for informal song swaps, including Jacqueline Steiner.

Bess remembered the song that the Almanacs had sung at Madison Square Garden eight years earlier and suggested reworking it for the O'Brien campaign.

"I knew that it was a good song that groups of people could sing together," Hawes recalled, explaining that in those days she and others would sometimes squeeze together with their instruments on the platform on top of the sound truck and sing at campaign stops.

Steiner wrote most of the "MTA" lyrics, but Bess added what proved to be the song's most memorable verse, the one in which Charlie's wife brings him a sandwich every day, handing it to him through an open window "while the train goes rumbling through." As Steiner explained in an interview several years ago, "Without that verse, the song wouldn't have been so popular." To this day, she said, people can't resist asking why Charlie's wife didn't just hand her husband a nickel, the extra fare needed to get off the train.

The duo ended the song with a verse that made sure Boston voters knew which of the mayoral candidate was on their side: "Vote for Walter A. O'Brien/and fight the fare increase/Get poor Charlie off that MTA!"

The song didn't help O'Brien much, since he finished dead last in the election. But in 1959, the Kingston Trio recorded "MTA." The single made it to #15 on the Billboard chart, and their album that included "MTA," *At Large*, reached #1 on the pop charts and stayed on the charts for 118 weeks.

The song has become a part of American culture, recorded by many other performers, reprinted in myriad songbooks, and sung at countless summer camps. There are now at least fifty versions of the song on YouTube by professional and amateur performers, including versions from Ireland and Denmark. In 1996, the conservative magazine, *National Review*, included "M.T.A." in its tongue-in-cheek list of the 100 "most conservative rock songs" because of its opposition to "a burdensome tax on the population in the form of a subway fare increase." In 2007, the Boston Pops performed "MTA" as part of its annual July 4 concert on the Esplanade. With a different cast of performers, the Kingston Trio continues to tour, and "MTA" is one of their most-requested songs.

Hawes never anticipated that the "MTA" song would outlast O'Brien's campaign. She considered the song a "throwaway" -- one of many topical songs written for a particular political cause at a particular moment in time. She was "totally stunned," she said, when she learned that the song had become a big hit for the Kingston Trio. Hawes found it ironic not only that the song endured, but also that she continued to receive royalty checks - but only because a friend recommended that she and Steiner copyright the song almost a decade after they wrote it.

Bess told me that the ongoing popularity of the "MTA" illustrated a lesson she'd learned from the Bible: "If you cast your bread upon the waters, it shall be returned to you a thousand fold."

The "MTA" song is only a tiny part of Bess' legacy. She devoted only two pages of her wonderful memoir, [Sing It Pretty](#) (University of Illinois Press, 2008), to the song.

Bess dedicated her life to preserving traditional American cultures and spreading the gospel of folk music and folk arts. During the folk music revival, Bess - who played the banjo, piano, guitar and mandolin -- occasionally performed at folk festivals and coffeehouses, but she preferred teaching. "I never felt like a performance singer, by temperament," she said.

Indeed, she became one of the most influential folklore teachers of the past half century - through her courses, workshops, films, books, academic papers, and her work at the Smithsonian and the NEA.

Bess' enthusiasm for folk music was contagious. Steiner, a classically trained musician, found her way to Hawes's Sunday folk-song gatherings in Cambridge through radical political circles. At one get-together, she heard Hawes sing the "Kentucky Moonshine Song." "That converted me," recalled Steiner years later. "I'd been a snob about folk music before that." Forever linked with Bess through their coauthorship of the "MTA" song, Steiner became an accomplished folksinger and continues to perform.

Bess taught popular courses on folklore and ethnomusicology at San Fernando Valley State from 1964 through 1970. During those years she also made four documentary films -- *Georgia Sea Island Singers*, *Buckdancer*, *Pizza Pizza Daddy-O*, and *Say Old Man Can You Play the Fiddle*. With Bessie Jones, she co-authored a book about African-American children's games, *Step It Down*. She served as president of the California Folklore Society and vice president of the American Folklore Society, and spoke frequently at conferences.

In 1975, Bess was lured to Washington, D.C. to help organize the Smithsonian Institution's summer-long Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife in 1976, which brought thousands of artists to participate in the nation's 200th birthday party. When that gig was completed, the NEA asked her to join the agency as director of its Folk Arts Program. During her 15-year stint at NEA, funding for the Folk Arts Program increased from about \$100,000 to over \$4 million, and the staff grew from one to six. She helped create state-based folk arts programs and, by doing so, built a network of folk arts advocates around the country.

At the NEA, Bess started the Heritage Fellowships program to distribute grants to little-known weavers, woodcarvers, songwriters, and other craftspeople and artists whose work might otherwise be ignored. "Each year," Hawes explained at its inception, "we will greet, salute, and honor just a few examples of the dazzling array of artistic traditions we have inherited throughout our nation's fortunate history."

The [program she started](#) has continued and over the years has honored such artists as wood carver George Lopez, Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, Irish-American singer Joe Heaney, North Carolina fiddler Tommy Jarrell, cowboy singer Glenn Ohrlin, Georgia Sea Island song leader Bessie Jones, blues artists Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, shape note singer Hugh McGraw, saddlemaker Duff Severe, ornamental ironworker Philip Simmons of South Carolina, bluegrass founding father Bill Monroe, Appalachian singer Hazel Dickens, Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks, conjunto accordionist and composer Marcisco Martinez, marionettist Miguel "Mike" Manteo, Zydeco accordionist Clifton Chenier, Eskimo maskmaker, dancer and singer Paul Tiulana, French-American fiddler Simon St. Pierre of Maine, Hawaiian quilter Meali'i Kalama, Irish musician Mick Moloney, Laotian weaver Bounxou Chanthraphone from Minnesota, the African American gospel quartet Dixie Hummingbirds, Afro-Cuban drummer Felipe Garcia Villamil from Los Angeles, Puerto Rican hammock weaver Jose Gonzalez, Lindy Hop dancer and choreographer Frankie Manning from New York, and many others.

The NEA's annual Bess Lomax Hawes Award recognizes an individual who has made a significant contribution to the preservation and awareness of cultural heritage. Mike Seeger, the musician and cultural scholar, received this year's award shortly before his death in August. Like Bess, Seeger came from a family of folklorists, and shared Bess' love for folk music, particularly Appalachian tunes.

Bess is survived by her three children -- teacher Corey Denos of Bellingham, Wash., anthropologist Naomi Bishop, and folklorist and musician Nicholas Hawes, both of Portland, Oregon -- and by six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Her husband Butch died in 1971.

Throughout her life, Bess was a political radical who fought for a better future, but who also understood the importance of preserving the many cultural traditions of America's past. During the post-World War 2 Red Scare, Bess was fired from her government job and harassed by FBI agents, but she never succumbed to cynicism or stopped believing that music could be a force for social change and human understanding.

"I have always had the unshakable belief that every single human being has some knowledge of important elements of beauty and substance," Bess wrote at the end of *Sing It Pretty*, "whether everybody else knows them or not."

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