



PROJECT MUSE®

## Listening For A Life

Patricia Sawin

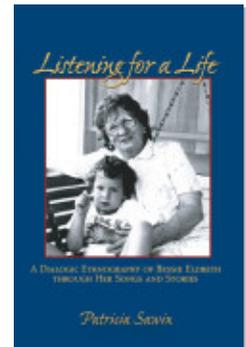
Published by Utah State University Press

Sawin, Patricia.

Listening For A Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories.

Utah State University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9291](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9291).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9291>

Access provided at 8 Apr 2020 08:06 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## PREFACE

This is a book about a woman both remarkable and ordinary. It is simultaneously a book about the process, likewise both ordinary and remarkable, through which one person comes to know another. Bessie Eldreth and I first met in the summer of 1987, when she and her granddaughter, Jean Reid, were performing at the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife on the mall in Washington, D.C. Members of a group from Ashe and Watauga Counties in northwestern North Carolina, they had been invited to represent the distinctive culture and speechways of a portion of the mountain South to some wider American culture of which, the festival setting implied, they were a crucial part yet from which they were somehow separated. Several impressions from that first meeting intrigued me and attracted me to the possibility of working with Eldreth. She was framed for me as a "traditional singer" of some sort, although at that point I did not stop to ask what that might mean. Folklorist Glenn Hinson, who presented her on stage, mentioned that she sang constantly around the house, which hinted at a specifically gendered performance practice. Further, when I introduced myself to Eldreth she responded with a flood of stories about salient personal experiences. The accounts themselves were compelling, and she was clearly a woman who had a story she wanted to share. In the intervening years Eldreth and I have spent many hours talking at her kitchen table and tape-recording her stories and her repertoire of close to two hundred songs. I have gone back again and again not only to Eldreth's house but also to those tapes, trying to grasp what our interactions meant and what she was trying to get across to me.

Increasingly, I realized that I needed to challenge the presuppositions with which I had framed Eldreth and our interactions. She is a remarkable and dedicated singer, but her repertoire and practice link her more to the national, commercial spread of early country music than to the ancient solo ballad tradition in which I had imagined her participating. I had, furthermore, assumed that the significant difference between us was one of culture and that she was valuable for a folklorist to study because of her participation in a distinctive Appalachian culture. However, I became more and more aware that, for Eldreth, the difference between us was an issue of class and specifically of the amount and kind of work we had had to do. I also gradually realized my error in supposing that I could

understand her communications about herself without taking account of my role as the person to whom she was speaking. The dialogic approach that I eventually adopted recognizes that Eldreth, like all of us, talks and sings simultaneously to her immediate audience and to the ghosts of listeners past and future, both of whose understanding and response she anticipates. Once I learned to listen to Eldreth's songs and stories as multivocal communications, I realized that she had been trying to teach me what revisionist historians and folklorists were arguing in these same years—that Appalachia was a rhetorical construct more than a separate region and that the area was as internally class divided as any other part of the country. What makes Eldreth remarkable, then, is not some status as a representative of Appalachian culture (an ascription she both resists and capitalizes upon strategically). Rather she is remarkable for her perseverance and self-sacrifice, the work she did to support her children, her emotional survival despite minimal support from her husband. My goal is not, however, to paint her as flawless. In constructing a respectable self against the odds, Eldreth grasps at the resources available to her, which makes her complicit in reinforcing systems of racial and gender control upon which she relies. Over the years of working with Eldreth, I have grown (one might even say, grown up) as a person and a folklorist, learning above all that our disciplinary commitment to celebrate less-appreciated arts and artists need not blind us to the complexity of our subjects' lives. It has been a challenge and an honor to get to know Bessie Eldreth.

When I first asked Eldreth if I could come to North Carolina to talk with her and record her stories, she replied, "Child, you are as welcome as the water that runs." She has borne my questions with grace and humor, always encouraging me to come visit, and has been very patient waiting for her book. I cannot fully repay her willingness to let me write about her, but every sentence of this book and every hour of the time I have spent working on it is an attempt to show my gratitude.

I have been fortunate in getting to meet all of Eldreth's children and many of her grandchildren, and I appreciate their courtesy and tolerance of my involvement in their mother and grandmother's life. For their friendship and humor I am especially grateful to Roger Eldreth, Carl and Libby Eldreth, Stacey and Drew Eldreth (aged three and five when this study began) and their parents, Bob and Wanda Eldreth, and Lorene Greene and her husband Buster Greene and son Michael Wheatley. Patsy Reese kindly lent the photograph of Eldreth as a child with her siblings and mother. It has been a blessing to worship with the members of the Tabernacle Baptist Church over the years. Thanks especially to Johnny and Helen Moretz and A. C. and Glenna Hollars for the insights our conversations have given me into the changing life of church and community.

Mary Greene made this project possible in innumerable ways. A musician, scholar, and longtime neighbor of Eldreth's, Greene helped persuade me to embark on the work with Eldreth and was unfailingly generous in sharing her

scholarly observations on mountain music and her personal reflections on growing up in the area. She and her husband, Pat Baker, and their daughter Kathleen have kept me sane, challenged my assumptions, given me a place to sleep, fed me familiar food, and become cherished friends. I am grateful, too, to Greene's late mother, Cleo Greene, who found a graceful way to explain me to the community. In Boone while I was doing my initial fieldwork, Elizabeth Stevens and Hattie the golden retriever were wonderful housemates.

At Appalachian State University, Thomas McGowan provided support both practical and psychological for a fledgling scholar. Eric Olsen, former librarian of the Appalachian Collection at ASU, located earlier recordings of Eldreth, Reid, and Cratis Williams that proved extremely valuable. Along with McGowan, Cecilia Conway of ASU and Glenn Hinson, now my colleague at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, have shared impressions from their work with Eldreth and encouraged mine. Conway and videographer Elva Bishop of UNC-TV persuaded me to collaborate on a video of Eldreth that helped me understand her rhetorical flexibility.

For the dissertation with which this project began, I was fortunate in having committee members as supportive as they were demanding. Richard Bauman encouraged me to create my own path, branching off from theoretical roads he laid out. Beverly Stoeltje has been an influential advocate of feminist principles and a forthright and encouraging critic. Michael Herzfeld challenged me to be exact in my thinking. Kenneth Pimple, Laura Marcus, Polly Adema, Hanna Griff, and Mary Beth Stein thought through early stages of the project with me. David Whisnant supplied material and intellectual support essential to the dissertation. The book in important ways reflects my process of fully grasping insights about the construction of "Appalachian culture" that he was prescient in articulating.

I gratefully acknowledge financial support for my fieldwork from the Indiana University Graduate School, the Berea College/Mellon Appalachian Studies Fellowship, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. A summer research award at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, and a junior faculty development grant and a faculty fellowship at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities (IAH) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, provided crucial time to write. I acknowledge the constructive feedback of my fellow fellows at the IAH, especially Jane Thrallkill and Trudier Harris, and the generosity of David E. Pardue, Jr., and Rebecca Pardue, who endowed the fellowship I received. A grant from the University Research Council at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, made it possible to include color photographs.

Carl Lindahl read my entire dissertation and helped me begin the process of rethinking this project for a book. Marcia Gaudet was a beloved mentor and big sister in my transformation from student to faculty member. Connie Herndon and Katherine Roberts have shared their reflections on Appalachia and how to

go about studying a region we all love. Mary Bucholtz and Margaret Brady provided encouragement that helped me believe there would be an audience for my work. Margaret Wiener and Yasmin Saikia read drafts of many chapters in a writing group that made the process of creating this manuscript much more joyful. They, along with Judith Farquhar and Dorothy Holland, offered insightful critiques that enabled me to see my focused project in light of larger trends and arguments. Marisol de la Cadena and Marc David gave me courage and knowledge to rethink the complexities of race. Louise Meintjes and Kathryn Burns engaged me in enlivening conversations that renewed my enthusiasm for the always shape-shifting project of cultural analysis. Leslie Rebecca Bloom has struggled along with me over the years to articulate a coherent feminist ethnographic practice; her intellectual and emotional sisterhood sustains me. Riki Saltzman has been my companion in folklore and my dear friend for more than twenty years; this project would never have come to fruition without her loving encouragement and inspiring example. Cathy Lynn Preston, Michael Preston, and James Lavita were instrumental in my choice of graduate study in folklore and have been fascinating interlocutors ever since. May they be pleased with what they have wrought.

Anita Puckett introduced me to the new Appalachian historiography that crucially reoriented my understanding of Eldreth's life. She, along with Amy Shuman and Elaine Lawless, read the entire manuscript and offered expert and exacting criticisms that have improved the work's precision and grounding. It has been a pleasure to bring out the book with Utah State University Press. I am especially grateful to my editor, John Alley, for his patience, faith in my project, and clarity of vision. Rebecca Marsh's graceful copy editing helped me make the prose flow. Kyle G. Sessions is responsible for the book's interior design, and Barbara Yale-Read for the cover, which approximate Eldreth's vision of a (relatively) "small, red book."

My parents, Marilyn and Lewis Sawin, instilled me with a love of learning and a fascination with the intricacies of artistic speech and have provided immeasurable encouragement as I pursued those issues in fields far from the literature they taught. Their love, inspiration, questions, and occasional impatience have kept me going. Bron Skinner has blessed me with his presence in my life, his music, his joyfulness, and his enlivening mix of pragmatism and spiritual idealism. I thank him for encouraging me to have confidence in myself and to enjoy the creative process.