Listening For A Life

Sawin, Patricia

Published by Utah State University Press

Sawin, Patricia.
Listening For A Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9291.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9291

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=201564
“My singing is my life”

Repertoire and Performance

The very first time I spoke with Bessie Eldreth in her home, she made a point of defining herself as a singer: “My singing is my life, it is, my singing is my life.” I had, of course, been introduced to her the previous summer in Washington, D.C., as a singer, so to some extent she may simply have been solidifying our connection by confirming the importance of the practice I had told her I wanted to study. Still, such a claim is not to be taken lightly. I rapidly recognized that the role of songs and singing in her life is indeed remarkable, both the size of a repertoire that she has kept in memory for many decades and the time and energy she has devoted to singing in various contexts. My perception of Eldreth as a singer shades everything I learned about her from the stories analyzed in earlier chapters. She was not only a poor working woman but also an artist with a talent that was valuable to herself and her community and that eventually garnered remarkable attention from people whose interest in her and the music she sings she could not have anticipated. Eldreth eagerly cooperated with me to make tape recordings of her repertoire, close to two hundred songs. I was also able to observe her singing in a variety of settings—around the house, to her grandchildren, in church, and at festivals and educational concerts—as well as to hear her accounts of other memorable performances and occasions for singing. In equating her singing and her life, Eldreth draws attention both to her repertoire of meaningful texts, amassed and carefully maintained over the years, and to her singing, her situated exercise of a special talent that garnered her rare and welcome praise.

Considering Eldreth as a singer confirms impressions of her gathered from her narrative practice and discursive self-positioning, yet also significantly complicates this study in several respects. First, her repertoire, simply as a collection of texts that she has chosen to perpetuate, consists of historically traceable artifacts.
This should theoretically enable us to observe the influx of one kind of external cultural influence, the effects of which seemed apparent in Eldreth’s dual accounts of her childhood. To what extent does she preserve songs learned from “the southern mountain tradition” and to what extent prefer nationally disseminated popular compositions? The process whereby musical items passed readily into and out of the “oral tradition” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, introduces new indeterminacies. Second, her song repertoire (in contrast to a repertoire of personal narratives) consists almost entirely of learned (rather than personally composed) texts that she nevertheless voices. Thus, we have an opportunity to inquire into the dialogic relationship, not only between Eldreth and her audiences, but also between her “own” voice and the voices in the songs that she adopts or resists. These texts, as performed by Eldreth, are potentially heteroglossic in ways her stories avoid. Third, as a singer, Eldreth potentially performs, calling attention to her abilities and the artistry of her effort, in ways she does not when telling a story. Her practice draws us to inquire to what extent performing has been attractive and beneficial to her, especially because of her gender, and to what extent it has proved a liability. Examining these three facets in relation to each other, I argue that Eldreth resists or misunderstands folklorists’ attempts to define her as “Appalachian.” At the same time, she makes use of certain of our definitions and our attention to her both to reinforce her sense of the meanings and importance of her songs and to avail herself of a fulfilling opportunity to perform in ways from which she previously felt restricted because of the defensive gender and class self-construction revealed in her stories.

**Repertoire**

For a song to become part of any singer’s repertoire, it must matter to her in some way. The particular collection of songs that Eldreth has chosen to retain in memory and to voice with regularity reveals many things about her beliefs, values, and sense of self. Nevertheless, in studying a repertoire with an eye to what it means to the singer, one must acknowledge multiple degrees of indeterminacy. There are many potential reasons for a singer to include a particular song in her repertoire, not all of which may be accessible to the singer herself, let alone to those who study her singing (Abrahams in Riddle 1970; Goldstein 1971; E. K. Miller 1981:210; Stekert 1965:167). Furthermore, the words a singer voices when singing a song may correspond more or less closely to her own feelings or thoughts. The study of Eldreth’s rendition of these preformed texts, to an even greater extent than study of the stories she herself has composed, calls attention to heteroglossia, that is, to the interaction, blending, and conflict among the multiple voices of the singer, the overall message of the song, and the individual characters/speakers in the narrative or lyric. One must also consider the potential sources of songs available to a particular singer in order to judge to what
extent she is influenced by tendencies within the ambient repertoire and to what extent she has selectively emphasized or deemphasized particular themes or messages (Abrahams 1970:13).

About the project of recording her repertoire, Eldreth and I seemed to be in accord. We both recognized this as an intelligible and valuable concrete goal. Whenever we took trips in the car she would pass the time with singing, so I learned to turn on the tape recorder, and she responded by starting to plan what to sing for me when we were going somewhere together. On many occasions we also recorded sessions devoted entirely to singing, initially to catch whatever she felt like singing that day, later to allow her to provide songs that I had not taped previously. Eldreth is proud of her memory and her large repertoire: she often paused in our conversations to reflect upon how clearly she remembers events and songs from her childhood. She had herself made tapes of her singing for friends or family members and even for audience members at public performances who asked if she had recordings for sale. She saw our documentation of her repertoire as significant, doubtless in part because of her pride at remembering so many old songs that few other people in her experience now sing, perhaps also in part because that was the most plausible explanation to her of the interest I and other folklorists had shown in her singing. Recording her repertoire and putting the tapes in an archive also proved congruent with her intentions since, as she explained, she feels a moral obligation to make her songs available to other singers.

I like to share my songs with people. I don’t feel like that. I don’t like to be hoggish about nothing. You know what I mean. If somebody likes one of my songs or would like to have a tape or something where I’ve made one, why, I enjoy doing it for ’em. I feel like it . . . a talent that God gives us. Share it with somebody else. Make somebody else happy.

Unless she was ill or upset, Eldreth was always willing to sing for me, and as our collaboration progressed, she became quite eager to be sure that I “got” as many of her songs as possible. Our tapes document almost two hundred songs that she kept in memory.

Repertoire Sources

A repertoire is an unruly entity to try to account for with satisfactory completeness. At this level of generality, attempting to encompass all Eldreth’s songs at once, details of individual compositions are lost to view. However, patterns emerge to suggest the routes via which Eldreth could have been exposed to the items that she elected to learn and preserve. As it happens, the formative period in Eldreth’s life as a singer coincides with the period during which “traditional
Bessie Eldreth with her children: back row, l to r, sons Denver, Bob, Roger, Carl, Fred, and Clyde; front row, Eldreth and daughters Patsy, Virginia, Betty, Grace, and Lorene. (Photograph by Wanda Eldreth.)

The home Eldreth’s sons built for her in 1972 on Castle Ford Road in Watauga County. She saved the money to pay for the land and materials from her own work, without her husband’s assistance. Of the housing her husband had previously provided for the family, Eldreth notes, “We ain’t never lived in nothing but a shack from here to yonder.”
Tabernacle Baptist Church, where Eldreth has worshipped and sung for more than twenty years.
Bessie Eldreth and her granddaughter Jean Reid performing at the 1987 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.

At the Festival of American Folklife Judith Cohn Britt, sign language interpreter, accompanied some of Eldreth's and Reid's performances. Eldreth was taken with the beauty of the signing and subsequently incorporated symbolic hand gestures in some of her performances, notably to accompany the line, "He stabbed her in her heart, and her heart's blood it did flow" in the ballad, "Pretty Polly."
Glenn Hinson presenting Eldreth and Reid on stage at the 1987 Festival of American Folklife.

Eldreth performing with Mary Greene at the 1987 Festival of American Folklife.
Bessie Eldreth singing at the Festival for the Eno, in Durham, North Carolina, July 3, 1988. While audience members may have expected a different appearance for a singer of “traditional ballads,” as she was billed in the program, Eldreth honored the performance opportunity by having her hair styled, buying a new pair of “diamond ear bobs,” and dressing in red chiffon and high heels.

Jean Reid introducing her grandmother during their 1988 performance at the Festival for the Eno. Reid often described learning her songs from Eldreth and praised her grandmother's large repertoire.
Dorothy Holland (left) and Cecilia Conway (back to the camera) interviewing Eldreth at Holland’s home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, before her 1988 Festival for the Eno performance. Excerpts from this conversation, in which Sawin also participated, are analyzed in chapters 3 and 4.

Among the mementos displayed on Eldreth’s living room wall is this collection of photographs of her performances and interactions with folklorists taken during Sawin’s fieldwork in 1988. Pictured (from top left to bottom right): Eldreth with Dorothy Holland and Cecilia Conway in Chapel Hill; Eldreth with Patricia Sawin; Eldreth with her granddaughter Jean Reid, performing at the Festival for the Eno, Durham; Sawin with Eldreth’s son Roger; Reid and Eldreth; audience members at an Elderhostel workshop on Appalachian music taught by Mary Greene at Appalachian State University; Eldreth with other Elderhostel participants; Eldreth with Dean William McCloud of the ASU School of Music after a workshop for music teachers; and Eldreth with McCloud’s mother.
Eldreth in her dining room, showing off part of her collection of china and Depression glass and the furniture made for her by her sons, 1994.

Eldreth's bedroom, decorated in a style she now has time and resources to produce, 2003.
Eldreth has made biscuits and cornbread from scratch as part of her daily routine of woman’s work for more than eighty years. Here, in July 2001, she makes her famous biscuits in a happier moment than that described in the "Biscuit" story.

Practiced hands.
Eldreth displays the awards she has received in recent years for her singing, including these certificates from the North Carolina Folklore Society and the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, among the family photographs and art works on her living room wall.
Notice in the Watagua Democrat inviting people to Eldreth's ninetieth birthday party in 2003. (Announcement written by Betty Cable. Photograph by Wanda Eldreth.)
Sign in front of Tabernacle Baptist Church on the day Eldreth's ninetieth birthday party was held in the church hall.

At Eldreth's ninetieth birthday party a table displayed photographs and scrapbooks and other records of her life, including her certificate for the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award and Sawin's dissertation.
Article about Eldreth in the Watauga Democrat from 1990 (written by Mike Hannah, photographs by Gary Hemsoth), highlighting her involvement in the Festival of American Folklife and other public performances, framed and displayed at her ninetieth birthday party.
Eldreth and Sawin summer 1988.

Bessie Eldreth at age 89 in 2003, showing the view of her beloved mountains from her home.
Eldreth with fellow choir members listening to the Sunday school lesson, April 2004.

The altar at Tabernacle Baptist Church, decorated for Easter 2004.
Eldreth standing in the pulpit at Tabernacle Baptist Church to sing a solo, April 2004.
"mountain music" became an object of concern and argument for two groups of outsiders. During the 1920s and into the 1930s "A and R men" from recording companies (so-called because of their assignment to discover new artists and repertoire) began to seek out mountain musicians and record their music for sale, starting what grew into the commercial, popular, country music industry (Malone 1985). Almost simultaneously, folklorists, settlement school workers, and festival organizers were trying to preserve and encourage forms of mountain music untainted (in their view) by popular sources or commercial embellishments (Becker 1998; Whisnant 1983). Thus, Eldreth was beginning to learn songs, some "traditional" but many relatively recent popular or religious compositions, at just the point that outside interests engaged in debate over the commodification and traditionality of a music perceived (by different interests for different reasons) as both peculiarly regional and fundamentally "American." Eldreth has in recent years gained a reputation as a "traditional Appalachian singer," but her repertoire exemplifies why this is a problematic concept. On the one hand, she actually sings only a handful of songs that are both anonymous and handed down by purely oral channels. On the other hand, her repertoire reveals how materials produced elsewhere became crucial components of the production of a sense of locality (Appadurai 1996), to the extent that it becomes essentially impossible either to determine how Eldreth learned a particular song or to determine what constitutes a "local tradition."

Roughly a quarter of Eldreth’s repertoire at the time we tried to record it all consisted of hymns (56 items), some of which are sung regularly at the church she attends, a few of which she sings as church solos and in other kinds of performances, and most of which she has sung around home or in our song-collecting interviews. In practice, the line between what counts for Eldreth as a sacred and as a secular song is blurry, although there is a stylistic distinction. Among what we might call the not-overtly-religious songs, roughly three quarters (96 of 129 items) were composed by commercial songwriters between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries. Of these popular songs at least half were country music hits in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—some recently composed, some recordings of nineteenth-century songs that had passed into the oral repertoire. Eldreth has also picked up a few popular songs from later decades. She claims eight songs as her “homemades,” not distinguishing in this category between apparent original compositions and instances in which she slightly adapted the words to a recent popular song to reflect her own situation and feelings.

At most a sixth of Eldreth’s repertoire (33 items) would be considered "traditional" by conservative measures, that is, excluding all songs with known authors and relying heavily on stylistic and documentary evidence of long periods of oral transmission. Eldreth sings only one Child ballad, “Barbara Allen” (Child 84), “of all the ballads in the Child collection . . . easily the most widely known and sung, both in the old country and in America” (Belden and Hudson 1952: vol.
2,111). She sings three American ballads traced by Laws (1957) to British broadside antecedents: “Knoxville Girl” (Laws P35), “London City”/“Butcher Boy” (P24), and the murder ballad “Pretty Polly” (P36B). She sings five others that Laws deemed native American ballads (1964): “Banks of the Ohio” (F5), “John Henry” (I1), “The Lawson Family Murder” (F35), “Neoma Wise” (F31), and “Wild Bill Jones” (E10). Four more of Eldreth’s songs fit the criteria set by Belden and Hudson (editors of the 1952 Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore) for “folk lyrics”: “Bonnie Blue Eyes” (FCB vol. 3 #284), “Pretty Polly”/“Wagoner Boy” (FCB vol. 3 #250), “In the Pines” (FCB vol. 3 #283), and “The Storms Are on the Ocean” (FCB vol. 3 #264). There are another twenty songs in her repertoire—including “East Virginia Blues,” “Handsome Molly,” “Little Maggie,” and “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?”—that I have classified as presumably traditional Anglo-American songs, based on a combination of stylistic grounds and testimony from artists who made early commercial recordings that these were songs “we had known our whole lives.”

The group of hymns Eldreth sings shows a similar emphasis on fairly recent popular creations. The only two pre-nineteenth-century hymns she sings are “Amazing Grace” and “Rock of Ages”; the only documented nineteenth-century shape-note hymn is “Poor Wayfaring Stranger,” like “Barbara Allen,” far and away the most often encountered item from that tradition. Eldreth remembers four hymns learned from a great aunt or from her father that have the repetitive wording and marching rhythm that might mark them as songs used for early nineteenth-century camp meeting revivals (see Bruce 1974:95). As noted in the previous chapter, she also knows four African American spirituals, “Mary, Mary, What You Gonna Call That Baby?” “My Lord, What a Morning,” “There’s No Hiding Place Down Here,” and “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” The bulk of her sacred repertoire consists of the kinds of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century gospel hymns written by Fanny Crosby, Ira D. Sankey, Ira Stanphill, Homer Rodeheaver, Albert E. Brumley, and many less prolific writers and kept available in the popular hymnals produced by Stamps-Baxter, R. E. Winsett, J. D. Vaughn, and similar southern religious-music publishing firms.

Eldreth’s repertoire demonstrates perfectly the realization that people in the southern mountains had never been as isolated from American popular culture as the ballad collectors and settlement-school teachers wanted to believe (Whisnant 1983). The stock of songs circulating orally in the first two decades of the twentieth century (that is, even prior to the advent of radio broadcasts) already encompassed much more than the list of English and native ballads favored in folklorists’ collections. An important segment of the repertoire consisted of sentimental parlor ballads, like “The Eastbound Train” and “Little Rosewood Casket,” thirteen of which Eldreth sings. Composed by commercial songwriters in the 1850s through 1890s and circulated as sheet music, these retained their popularity in the mountains after passing out of urban fashion (N. Cohen 1970:10; Malone 1981:3, 1985:10; Wilgus 1965:200). These songs have
been widely collected (or noticed and not collected) by folklorists in the southern mountains and throughout the United States. Laws lists a dozen such songs among often-collected, “ballad-like” pieces that he admits were “sung traditionally” but that he rejected from his list of traditional ballads for one of several reasons, in these instances because they are “melodramatic and sentimental, usually of professional origin” (Laws 1964:277–278). Belden and Hudson, more swayed by evidence of popularity and oral transmission, accorded some of these songs the status of ballad or folksong, including three that Eldreth sings: “Little Rosewood Casket” (composed 1870, FCB vol. 2 #273),7 “Red River Valley” (composed 1896, FCB vol. 3 #260), and “Little Orphan Girl” (FCB vol. 2 #148, in sheet music in the 1850s, author unknown [Ellis 1978:662]). D. K. Wilgus notes that early twentieth-century singers were already regularly labeling as “old-time” songs that had been out of commercial circulation for little more than a decade (1965:198).

Early, “Edison”-type cylinder players and recordings of contemporary popular and classical music were being purchased by mountain families by the time Eldreth was born (1913),8 and record companies began making commercial recordings of southern mountain instrumentalists and singers in 1923. Much of what these artists performed in the early years was their “traditional” music, that is, songs they already knew, mostly ones they thought of as anonymous (Malone 1985:44). Initially, the burgeoning radio and recording industries simply “offered new media for an existing tradition” (Wilgus 1965:197), as entrepreneurs discovered that they could sell mountain music (like other ethnic and regional repertoires) back to the “hitherto untapped market” of people who had listened to the same music being performed by their families and neighbors (Green 1965:208–209), as well as to a growing national audience responding with nostalgia to the “rapid social transformations of the late 1920s” (Whisnant 1983:183).

Commercial “hillbilly” artists thus made substantial amounts of new, but familiar, material available to mountain audiences, some already in oral circulation but not known to everyone, some actually recently composed. A. P. Carter actively collected old songs to add to the Carter Family repertoire and even went on song-hunting trips (Malone and McCulloh 1975:97–98; Malone 1985:67). Jimmie Rodgers drew on a stock of “maverick phrases” common to blues and hobo songs to create his famous “blue yodels” and other pieces that rapidly passed (passed “back”? into a wider oral circulation and have often been collected as traditional pieces in the years since Rodgers recorded them (Greenway 1957:231). Songwriters, themselves well versed in the songs already in oral circulation, created new pieces on the old models, often encouraged by record producers who were eager to find songs that the audience would find congenial but that could be copyrighted for greater profits. To cite a well-documented example from Eldreth’s repertoire, “Floyd Collins”—a ballad about the attempted rescue and death of a man caught in a cave while spelunking in February 1925—
achieved tremendous spread in oral tradition and was accepted as a folksong, not only by Belden and Hudson (1952, FCB vol. 2 #212), but even by the skeptical Laws (1964, G22). The song was actually composed by the Reverend Andrew Jenkins, author of over eight hundred popular and sacred songs, and was commissioned from him by producer Polk Brockman only days after the event (Green 1972:125; Malone 1985:49).

I regularly asked Eldreth when and from whom she had learned her songs and what she knew of their origins, to the extent that it became something of a joke between us. She has strong associations for some songs and no particular memory about others. It is hardly reasonable to suppose that she would recall the source of every one of her songs, almost all learned between thirty and seventy years earlier, let alone that she would make the kinds of distinctions about provenance that scholars have filled in. Still, Eldreth’s pattern of attribution, lack of attribution, and probable misattribution raises interesting questions, usually without providing complete answers.

The source Eldreth mentioned most often was her grandmother Milam:

But, now, that was one of my songs that Grandma Milam taught me. You know, I used to do a whole lot like Jean has done by me. She wouldn’t know that I was listening or whatever. I’d just be around and taking every word in. And I’s a-learning those songs.

Eldreth associates a few songs apiece with her father, mother, a cousin, an uncle, two aunts, and her schoolteacher in Damascus, Virginia. She also attributes several songs apiece to two favorite early country music artists, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Among twenty-four songs in her repertoire that were popularized by the Carter Family, Eldreth specifically said of “Wildwood Flower” and “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?” “that’s one of Maybelle Carter’s songs.” She not only ascribes “T for Texas,” “TB Blues,” “Mississippi River Blues,” and “Peach Picking Time in Georgia” to Rodgers but explained that she had learned to yodel by singing along with some of his records. And of “Blue Christmas,” which she has sung at Christmastime performances, she notes, “That’s Elvis Presley’s song, but I made the third verse.”

Conversely, there are only a handful of songs that Eldreth talks about learning from print or recordings per se. “There’s No Depression in Heaven” (recorded by the Carter Family) Eldreth recalls learning from a music book she bought in a store. Two singular humorous songs, “Snoops the Lawyer” and “Ticklish Reuben,” she knows she learned (apparently when she was only four or five years old, circa 1918) from a relatively wealthy teenaged cousin, Blanche Killens, who owned a cylinder record player earlier than other people in the neighborhood. It is, however, the memory of her cousin’s singing that she emphasizes: “I just learned it by hearing her come off down the mountain singing it. She’d come down to Momma’s and she’d sing that song. She’d start about the time she left
her house.” It seems likely that Eldreth has been prompted to highlight the cylinder record source of these songs because local scholar Mary Greene has done extensive research on the influence of early recordings on mountain singing and often mentions the connection when she has Eldreth perform for Elderhostel programs. At a slightly later date but before she “left home” in 1929, Eldreth’s own family owned a record player, and she reports learning two items directly from that source: a popular jilted-lover song, “Just Another Broken Heart,” and a patriotic, dying-soldier song, “The Red, White, and Blue” (although I suspect the latter actually dates from World War II). “The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake” (recorded by Bill Monroe in the 1950s) Eldreth mentioned learning from an LP she still owns. Interestingly, given her clear memory of Maybelle Carter and Jimmie Rodgers, Eldreth has never mentioned any of the other popular stars of the 1920s through the 1950s—including the Blue Sky Boys, the Stanley Brothers, the Bailes Brothers, Charlie Poole, Vernon Dalhart, Flatt and Scruggs, Grayson and Whitter, the Maddox Brothers and Rose, Gene Autry, Roy Acuff, Asher Sizemore and Little Jimmie, Molly O’Day, Bradley Kincaid, Ernest Tubb, Pop Stoneman, Porter Wagoner, the Louvin Brothers, and Patti Page—whose records or radio performances were likely the sources of many of her songs.

The sources of the hymns in Eldreth’s repertoire present few mysteries, since songs of this type were widely available in hymnals as well as being performed on religious programs on radio and later television. Notable in her repertoire are several that have become bluegrass standards and were thus performed along with secular bluegrass numbers on radio and records. The handful of African American spirituals originally tantalized me as possible evidence of sharing between Eldreth and her few black neighbors, but it seems more likely, as noted in the previous chapter, that Eldreth learned these from recordings by the Carter Family and Marion Anderson. One, “Mary, Mary, What You Gonna Call That Baby?” was also regularly performed by the Mars Hill Singers, and I suspect Eldreth may have picked it up on the one occasion when she and her granddaughter performed on the same program with them at Mars Hill.

The secular songs, however, present a variety of intriguing indeterminacies. The fact that Eldreth remembers learning a song orally from a relative of an earlier generation need not mean that the piece was particularly old or that it had been in oral circulation long (or ever) before her immediate source learned it. She fondly recalls her uncle Sidney Killens singing “Floyd Collins” to her, although since it was composed in 1925, her recollection that he held her on his lap while singing may not be accurate. One of the few songs she says she learned from her mother is “Singing Waterfalls,” written by Hank Williams and recorded by Molly O’Day in 1946. Clearly, childhood need not be the only time for a singer to acquire repertoire, even from family members, especially when several generations live close together through the younger generation’s adulthood. Similarly, we might take the fact that Eldreth learned “Voice from the Tombs” (written in 1918 but popularized by a Blue Sky Boys recording in the 1930s) from
her grandmother as evidence that the song made it into the mountains quickly or as a reminder that Eldreth worked alongside her grandmother, not only as a child, but also as a young adult, as part of extended family reciprocity that enabled everyone to get by during the lean years of the Depression. Furthermore, no one’s memory is perfect. The thematic connection among lawyer songs is so strong in Eldreth’s mind that she now also maintains “My first cousin learnt me that when I was right small” about not only “Snoops the Lawyer” but also “Philadelphia Lawyer,” actually written by Woody Guthrie in 1937 and popularized by the Maddox Brothers and Rose in a 1949 recording.

Indeed, it is even impossible to tell precisely how Eldreth learned songs that are known to have been circulating orally in the mountains when she was a girl. They might have come to her through a chain of oral transmission, but she could equally have learned them (then or later) from record, radio, or sheet music or from a family member who had just learned them from one of the mediated sources. As Cecilia Conway notes, “good musicians tend to be musically receptive to new influences,” and “the foremost community musicians [in the mountain south] were usually the first in their areas to own record-playing devices” (2001:36).12 Several of the traditional songs that Eldreth remembers learning from Grandma Milam were also recorded quite early, for example, “Little Maggie,” (recorded by Grayson and Whitter in the early 1920s), “Pretty Polly”/“Wagoner Boy” (recorded by Bradley Kincaid in the 1920s), and “Sailor on the Deep Blue Sea” (recorded by the Carter Family), so it is just as possible that her grandmother learned them from a recording as that she had had them handed down orally much earlier in her life. There are as many as twenty-five more songs in Eldreth’s repertoire that may well have reached her via phonograph recordings, even though they were (theoretically) available in oral circulation in the region at the time. These include several more Carter Family numbers (“Bury Me beneath the Willow,” “East Virginia Blues,” and “Single Girl/Married Girl”); folk lyrics, such as “In the Pines” (recorded by Dock Walsh in 1926), “Short Life of Trouble” (recorded by Grayson and Whitter in 1928), and “Little Birdie” (recorded by Vernon Dalhart in the 1920s); and several of the nineteenth-century sentimental parlor songs (“Letter Edged in Black” [recorded by Fiddlin’ John Carson and Vernon Dalhart in the 1920s], “My Mother Was a Lady” [recorded by Jimmie Rodgers in 1927], and “Just Break This News to Mother” [recorded by both Riley Puckett and Blind Andy Jenkins in 1925]). It is easy to surmise that Eldreth almost certainly got “Sweet Fern” more or less directly from the Carter Family, since the change from “Birds” in the original title to “Fern” seems to have begun with them (Cohen and Cohen 1973:45). Closer textual comparison of Eldreth’s versions with recorded versions might provide evidence for other specific songs, although over the years she may have modified the wording so that her current versions diverge from her sources.

Perhaps most intriguingly, Eldreth never mentioned learning any of her murdered-girl ballads or her other native American ballads or American ballads from
British broadsides from anyone in particular. She described “Banks of the Ohio” as among those songs that “date back years ago,” reported that she learned “The Knoxville Girl” “before [she] ever left home,” that is, prior to 1929, and indicated that the stories reported in some of the songs were something with which people were familiar when she was a child: “And, you see, my grandparents used to talk about these murder ballads and . . . and where people . . . like boyfriends, they’d maybe want the girl to get married and she refused and they’d kill her before that they’d let her go.” All of these most traditional songs in Eldreth’s repertoire were recorded in the early years of the country music industry—“Banks of the Ohio” by the Callahan Brothers in the 1920s, “Pretty Polly” by B. F. Shelton in the 1920s, “Knoxville Girl” by the Blue Sky Boys in the 1930s, “London City” by Bradley Kincaid in the 1920s, “Handsome Molly” by Grayson and Whitter in 1923, and “Wild Bill Jones” by Ernest Stoneman and Bradley Kincaid—and were thus recirculated and popularized in recorded form. “Naomi Wise,” or, as Eldreth calls it, “Neoma Wise,” a ballad about an 1807 murder in Randolph County, North Carolina, was described by Belden and Hudson as North Carolina’s principle contribution to American folk song (1952: vol. 2, 690; Laws 1964, F31) and has been collected in multiple oral variants that, Eleanor Long-Wilgus concludes, branch off from a text published in 1851 and have been influenced by eighteenth-century British broadsides also in oral circulation (2003). Eldreth, however, except for the unique variation on the murdered woman’s name, sings a text almost identical to a version composed in 1925 by the “hillbilly” songwriter Carson Robison and issued on at least a dozen 78-rpm records, notably by Vernon Dalhart in the late 1920s (Long-Wilgus 2003:19–20).

Eldreth’s vocal style is equally ambiguous, representing a hybrid of elements characteristic of traditional singing technique in the American South and elements typical of a more “cultivated” (bel canto) style. Several qualities mark her as an accomplished singer, irrespective of musical tradition. She stays on pitch without requiring instrumental accompaniment for reference. She is quite aware of the importance of breath control (even teasing people in the church choir who have to take a breath before the end of the phrase). Her light soprano voice is never breathy. She has a substantial dynamic range and is able to sing loudly without apparent effort and softly without losing clarity or focus. She has a strong sense of musical phrase and focuses attention on the shaping of the melodic line.

Eldreth employs two notable stylistic features often noted as characteristic of American vernacular singers who have not been exposed either to formal “art” music training or to the model of popular singers. First, she regularly and gracefully adds small embellishments to the tunes she is singing, including scoops and slides up to a pitch and an especially characteristic three-note slide off of a pitch. She inserts such adornments freely, as it feels right to her, not necessarily at the same point in different verses of the same song. Second, when singing a cappella she tends to conceive of the musical phrase as coterminous with the textual
line, and (though maintaining the meter within phrases) often moves on to the next line without waiting out the metrical fullness of the preceding musical phrase. This tendency becomes especially apparent on the rare recent occasions when folklorists have brought her together with musicians who share items from her repertoire but perform them with guitar or string-band accompaniment. In these instances Eldreth is frequently ready to start singing again while the instrumentalists are finishing out their musical phrase.

In other respects, Eldreth’s singing style contrasts markedly with the “traditional” style of mountain ballad singers. While her sound is not as supported and resonant as that of a formally trained singer, neither is Eldreth’s singing marked by the nasality and roughness identified as characteristically Appalachian. Though not rich, her tone leaves an impression of clarity and openness, probably because she sustains notes through their full value and in particular sustains vowels, keeping them open for the maximum time allowed by the meter (in contrast to ballad singers, who tended to cut off notes at the end of lines and to close on and sing through voiceable consonants like m, n, and l). She sings with considerable vibrato (which she emphasizes further in highly emotive pieces like “He Touched Me”), possibly as a way of approximating a desired resonance which more highly trained singers achieve in other ways. Her focus on musical phrasing similarly contrasts with the tendency of some ballad singers to emphasize the enunciation of individual words rather than the shaping of a musical line. This relatively cultivated quality of Eldreth’s singing is further accentuated by her notable tendency to adopt a much more standard (nonlocal) vocal pronunciation when singing than she does when speaking. As she herself observes, she sings “more proper” than she speaks. Her song texts markedly lack the distinctive local pronunciations (for example, “hit” for “it” in phrase-initial position) and grammatical features (for example, “I was a-singing”) that are an unselfconscious part of her everyday talk. Eldreth expressed great admiration for the wonderfully gravelly, nasal, harsh singing, dissonant harmonies, and marked mountain diction of a gospel group, the “Spiritual Heirs,” that visited her church. But while speaking of their singing approvingly as “spiritual” and “old-fashioned,” she also distinguished their style from her own. She loved that kind of singing but did not think of it as appropriate or even possible for herself. There is a subtle heteroglossia going on here so pervasive that it is easy to miss. Whenever she sings, I would argue, Eldreth enacts herself as a member of a national audience rather than as any kind of isolated mountaineer. The artists she loved and whose songs she incorporated into her repertoire were widely popular. If the music of the Carter Family or of Jimmie Rodgers or of cultivated “hillbillies” like Vernon Dalhart spoke to Eldreth of the South as a place of traditional values in a time of bewildering change, it spoke the same message to beleaguered working-class people all over the county (Malone 1985:42). Ironically, the repertoire that has inclined folklorists to identify Eldreth as a “traditional
Appalachian singer” can as readily be interpreted as evidence of her participation in the mainstream American culture of the day.

I suspect that Eldreth’s sense of how it is most pleasing to sing—with smooth, clear intonation, expressive use of dynamics and tempo changes, and standard diction—is modeled primarily on the more cultivated style of the popular singers she heard on records, radio, and more recently television. At the same time, however, her singing of popular country pieces is also infiltrated by qualities of embellishment and rhythm that she must have learned from singers whose styles were well established before the advent of the commercialized, standardized country sound. Conversely, elements of her polished style could have been passed down orally with the nineteenth-century sentimental songs.

Given the likelihood that Eldreth acquired much of her repertoire from records or radio broadcasts by popular commercial performers, it is intriguing to speculate why she seems not to remember or at least to mention their names or indeed to talk about listening to the radio at all. One possibility is that she may simply have been more interested in the message or feel of the songs she made a point of learning from popular renditions than in the adulation of country music stars that emerged with the recording industry. As Ellen Stekert noted in one of the earliest individual repertoire studies, a singer is more likely to remember the situation in which and the person from whom she learned a particular song if she values it for those associations, less likely if she appreciates the song primarily for itself and its emotional or thematic content (1965:53). Eldreth gives evidence of such thinking with remarks like, “‘Little Maggie’ is just a, you know, not a sacred song, but I like it because she [Grandma Milam] sang it.” One might detect a linkage between her memories and her musical practice. Because she was not merely listening to these songs but memorizing certain ones so she could sing them herself, Eldreth appears to have paid more attention to the content than to the performer or performance.

The other possibility, however, is that Eldreth is responding to a perception that folklorists tend to place greater value on songs learned orally. She is far less a conscious traditionalist than her granddaughter, Jean Reid, who expressed interest in learning only the oldest and most certifiably traditional songs in her grandmother’s repertoire. Nevertheless, it seems possible that Eldreth has been influenced, consciously or not, by the several folklorists who have worked with her in the past and by my consistent interest in direct human sources. In dialogue with me, did she shape her memories to what she sensed I wanted to hear? Did she neglect to attribute songs to recording artists because she understood that folklorists are interested in unattributable songs?

It is also worth noting that Eldreth’s repertoire—in terms of sources, though not of themes—more closely resembles those that men rather than women have been observed to accumulate. In Newfoundland outports, women tended to learn most of their songs from intimates prior to marriage and to continue singing that
repertoire throughout their lives (Kodish 1981), while men tended to learn songs “in their adult years—when they [were] away on boats or in the woods, and around other men, strangers with new and unusual repertoires” and as a result “picked up more current song styles” (Kodish 1981:43; see also Ives 1978:374–395). Anne and Norm Cohen note that a split between domestic (older, less popular) and public (more current) folk music traditions also existed in the southern mountains in the 1920s, which explains why the two groups of collectors active in the area at the time—folklorists (who went into people’s homes) and record company A and R men (who went to social gatherings)—documented such different materials (Cohen and Cohen 1977). In Eldreth’s own Watauga County, the Hicks and Presnell women from Beech Mountain continued to sing a substantial number of the old English ballads along with more recent popular tunes (Burton 1978), while Doc Watson, from Deep Gap, who made his living as a musician, was able to perform only contemporary popular tunes in public until folklorist Ralph Rinzler drew him into the folk revival, which provided a new audience for old songs.

Eldreth, similarly, until late in life, sang her secular repertoire almost exclusively for herself or to entertain children in the home and thus did not feel pressure to conform to anyone’s taste but her own. Because she was a crucial couple of decades younger than those other women, however, and was thus familiarized as a child and very young woman with media that brought new music into the domestic setting, Eldreth, without participating in performance outside her home, had access to the kinds of external influences formerly available only to men. Eldreth’s repertoire thus demonstrates the extent to which commercial recordings, which brought music formerly reserved for social gatherings into the everyday domestic sphere, enabled a rapidly changing public repertoire to be incorporated into domestic singing practice. An interesting effect, noted in other private singers with access over a long period to new popular songs, is the production of a repertoire markedly like Eldreth’s, quirky and old-fashioned, mixing songs that have been remembered by wider audiences with songs that were in vogue only briefly and have long since passed out of public consciousness (Rosenberg 1980:323).

From whatever source she may have learned her songs, Eldreth has held onto them as singers did before the advent of recording, by memorizing them and (as I will detail below) by making her own handwritten copies. Perceptually, then, she is well and accurately aware that she still sings a large number of songs that no one else around her knows.

Meanwhile, however, a number of developments transpired to transform perceptions of Eldreth’s practice and repertoire, notably the folk revival, which recirculated to a new audience a mix of older and newer music then being performed by mountain musicians. The result is a curious partial convergence and partial mismatch between Eldreth’s sense of the interest of her repertoire and the analysis suggested by knowledge of the history of early country music outlined
above. Folklorists’ interest has confirmed Eldreth’s supposition that her repertoires are significant because she knows so many “old” songs. Ironically, however, her very reasonable sense that songs she learned sixty or more years ago are “real old” does not match with folklorists’ tendency to apply that label rather to English or English-influenced ballads from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, of which she sings very few, those possibly learned from recordings. The truly rare items in Eldreth’s repertoire, from a scholarly perspective, however, are short-lived topical and popular pieces that she has preserved as if in amber and that were not previously rediscovered by revivalists. Further, the very indeterminacies in identifying her sources illustrate the hybrid character of the musical repertoire to which people in the mountain South were exposed during the first half of the twentieth century and the fluidity with which certain songs moved among the categories “traditional” and older and newer “popular,” both from an analytical perspective and in singers’ minds.

Repertoire Meaning

Why did Eldreth include in her own personal repertoire certain songs out of the presumably much greater selection to which she was exposed over the years and from which she might have chosen? Given that for most of her life she sang secular songs almost entirely in private, she alone, without needing to consider others’ preferences, chose a particular subset of songs to memorize and perpetuate. Eldreth seems attracted to songs mainly because of the story or feeling expressed by the words. I have only rarely heard her comment on the tunes or express preference for particular pieces on musical grounds. I thus posit that she has chosen songs because the words reflect some aspect of her experience or feelings. This does not mean that she necessarily means every word she sings as an expression of her own thoughts at the moment, of course. And it is possible to trace certain instances where she adopts the words of a song as her own, others where she maintains a separation or even talks back. In general, however, her preference appears to be shaped by what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling,” that is, a form, style, or guiding principle of cultural creation that has a discernable shape but is not formalized or explicitly defined. “We are talking,” Williams explains,

about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. (1977:132)

In a structure of feeling, one’s values, ideology, and sense of self are caught up with and expressed by the formal and thematic qualities of the art works. And as
Gordon notes, it is precisely in such inchoate yet pervasive structures of feeling that hauntings—lingering elements of a constraining past—are transmitted and received (1997:18).

Lonesome Songs

Overall, Eldreth’s songs tell stories that are sad, even tragic, and that envelope singer and listener in melancholy. She sings narrative songs about young women murdered by their lovers, dying children, self-sacrificing mothers, soldiers about to die in battle, men brought down by economic adversity, families torn apart by drink or divorce. Her lyric songs are almost entirely laments, for dead or faithless lovers, dead or aging parents, the impossibility of going home again, the disappearance of religious values and good old-fashioned ways. Eldreth herself often quotes approvingly her daughter-in-law Cathy’s characterization, “You always sing such lonesome songs.” Given the hardships Eldreth has experienced, it seems reasonable that at some level she has chosen or kept songs that could reflect pervasive feelings of regret and abandonment. Still, the mood of the songs could not be more different from Eldreth’s usual warm, cheerful, positive, loving, even ebullient, demeanor. Indeed, her emotional separation from the mood of her songs is suggested by another remark that she also likes to quote, Professor Thomas McGowan’s incredulous question after seeing her perform the murdered-girl ballads, “How can you sing those songs and smile?”

Eldreth has, I believe, amassed a repertoire that takes the songs she learned as a girl and young woman as a model for subsequent inclusions. These included the murdered-girl ballads and nineteenth-century tearjerkers that led Abrahams and Foss to comment on the “remarkable preponderance of songs on the themes of love and death” in the early twentieth-century Anglo-American tradition (1968:92). Thus at an early age she learned a number of songs describing unhappy love—either confused relations between lovers leading to a tragic end, as in “Neoma Wise,” “Little Maggie,” and “Wild Bill Jones,” or the despair of a deserted lover, as in “Wildwood Flower.” New songs from each decade express similar themes: in the 1920s, “Treasures Untold”; in the 1930s, “The Last Letter” and “Philadelphia Lawyer”; in the 1940s, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” “Live and Let Live [Don’t Break My Heart],” “Lonely Mound of Clay,” “Pins and Needles in My Heart,” “Precious Jewel,” “Singing Waterfalls,” and “Tennessee Waltz.” Nineteenth-century mourning songs like “Letter Edged in Black” established the model for a raft of laments for dead or elderly parents—“Silver Haired Daddy,” “Mother’s Not Dead, She’s Only A-Sleeping,” “No, Not a Word from Home Any More,” “White Dove” (“I’ll live my life in sorrow, Now that Momma and Daddy are dead”), and “Wait a Little Longer, Please, Jesus”—or for parents’ losses, “Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight.” Another early-established model came from the late nineteenth-century sentimental songs about dying or self-sacrificing children (“Blind Child’s Prayer,” “Eastbound Train,” “Little Orphan Girl,” “Put My Little Shoes Away”) and dying soldiers (“Just Break This News to Mother”).
To this group Eldreth has added “Drunkard’s Prayer” (from the late 1940s, in which the drunken father runs over his own children and repentantly holds them in his arms as they die), as well as soldier songs from both the first and second world wars (“The Soldier’s Sweetheart” from World War I; “Searching for a Soldier’s Grave,” “Red, White, and Blue,” “The Soldier’s Last Letter,” and “Teardrops Falling in the Snow” from World War II). She has also expanded the category to include adult sufferers: Jimmie Rodgers in “TB Blues,” the young man stuck in jail in “They’re All Going Home But Me,” the farmer reduced to despair, poverty, and homelessness when his wife is seduced by a city slicker in “Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?” and the self-sacrificing mother in “I’m Just Here to Get My Baby out of Jail.” The handful of songs from the 1950s to 1970s that Eldreth has adopted similarly either tell a murder story like the early ballads (for example, “Long Black Veil” and “Springtime in Alaska”) or lament the misery of loss (for example, “Blue Christmas”).

Conversely, Eldreth sings very few songs of happy love, and she picked up neither any of the mine and mill songs, hobo songs, and other protests against the treatment of the working poor that made it into early recordings (T. Patterson 1975:284) nor any songs from other prominent streams in later commercial country music, like honky-tonk songs and songs considering drinking from the drinker’s point of view. Indeed, in terms of affect, if not strict chronology, Eldreth has constructed an “old” repertoire in another sense, selecting subsequent items to match the structure of feeling defined by the earlier pieces she learned. Among the items she spontaneously described as “a real old song” are the traditional ballads “Knoxville Girl,” “Banks of the Ohio,” “Little Maggie,” and “Wild Bill Jones,” the native American lyric “Pretty Polly”/“Wagoner Boy,” and the nineteenth-century parlor songs “Eastbound Train” (1896) and “Sweet Fern” (1876), as well as the 1925 “Dream of the Miner’s Child” (composed, like “Floyd Collins,” by the Reverend Andrew Jenkins), Gene Autry’s 1931 hit “Silver Haired Daddy,” Karl and Harty’s 1934 “I’m Just Here to Get My Baby out of Jail,” the World War II song “Searching for a Soldier’s Grave” (recorded by the Bailes Brothers and the Blue Sky Boys), Gene Sullivan and Wiley Walker’s 1945 “Live and Let Live,” “Singing Waterfalls” (written by Hank Williams and recorded by Molly O’Day in 1946), and Bill Monroe’s 1946 “Blue Moon of Kentucky.”

Eldreth’s repertoire is a perfect example of both the kind of cohesiveness and the retention of early pieces that can occur when “taste and esthetic patterns adopted at an early age remain relatively unchanged during a singer’s life” (Goldstein 1971:64) and is consistent with a pattern observed more widely among “traditional” musicians in the southern mountains whereby “acquisition of new repertory and stylistic techniques was guided by principles of tradition and personal taste” (Conway 2001:36).

The majority of songs in Eldreth’s repertoire are overtly melancholy if not outright tragic. Such sad songs are not entirely sad for Eldreth, however, because she associates them with the childhood that, as we saw in chapter 2, she remembers
as the happiest time of her life. In practice, the structure of feeling that these songs evoke for Eldreth deemphasizes the misery and violence they actually describe in favor of the sense of security and assurance of being loved that pervaded the context in which she first heard the songs that form the basis of and model for her repertoire. In these texts, explicit statements about the superior morality of an earlier generation surface only occasionally, as in “Dust on the Bible” (1945). Nostalgia for an always already disappearing idealized rural past pervades the popular selections, however, from “The Maple on the Hill” (1880), in which the lovers who wooed in a “quiet, country village” will ultimately be buried beneath the tree that was their trysting spot, never suffering spatial dislocation, to “Rank Stranger” (1930s), in which the adult returning to a childhood home finds no one to recognize him.

The hymns in Eldreth’s repertoire, similarly, offer assurance of a reward in heaven\textsuperscript{21} conditioned by a rejection of the (current, degenerate) world, often expressed in terms such as “the world is not my home” or, from one of the hymns most often sung at Eldreth’s church, “I find here no permanent dwelling” (“Mansions over the Hilltop”). A view of Jesus’ life as the maximally valuable time in history establishes a model of looking backward for moral reference. This practice, however, promotes a conflation of an ideal or holy state, one’s own childhood, and an earlier rural life in that heaven is portrayed as a place where the faithful will be reunited with loved ones (“If We Never Meet Again This Side of Heaven,” “That Glad Reunion Day,” “Where Parting Comes No More”) and specifically as a place where the childhood family will be reconstituted (“If You Love Your Mother, Meet Her in the Skies” and “Supper Time” [in which Jesus calling the faithful home to heaven is likened to the long-dead mother calling her son home to supper]).\textsuperscript{22}

The irony in this “sacralization” of childhood, the rural past, and the family is that it was articulated by popular-song and hymn writers well removed from the milieu in which Eldreth actually lived, notably from the poverty and domination by a shiftless husband that she suffered. Many of the songs she sings became so popular in the 1930s and 1940s because economic and geographical dislocation made people nostalgic for supposedly simpler times and made them identify with the yearning feel of the sentimental nineteenth-century tunes, recycled as “traditional,” and the newly written songs based on these models. For Eldreth, these mournful songs serve to recall happy memories of the past and to reinforce the positive sense of herself as moral, resourceful, and hardworking that she associates with those memories. This reminds us further that, whereas it is easy to imagine that the orally transmitted traditional ballads were more properly Eldreth’s cultural property, she experienced all of the songs equally available, equally “her music.” For those who use and cherish a hybrid repertoire, the expressive power of a piece is relevant while its provenance is not (Samuels 1999). Her adherence to this structure of feeling, however, seems to have steered her away from songs that would directly address her economic victimization.
Speaking through Songs

While the repertoire as a conglomerate list of texts suggests the structure of feeling that predominates, examination of a handful of individual songs and Eldreth’s performance of them reveals a wide range of interactions between the singer and her song. When she sings, Eldreth evokes a general set of associations that may or may not be obviously related to the words or the story. Yet any voicing of a pregiven text involves heteroglossia, the coexistence in the utterance of multiple voices that may concur or may contest each other. To what extent, in various instances, is she directly voicing her own feelings and beliefs through the words of the song? If she does not agree with the message or identify with the story, what does the song mean to her when she sings it?

To begin, it is worth noting that Eldreth, because she did not sing publicly—except in church—until late in her life, experienced few of the influences that encourage performers to adopt songs that are effective aesthetic objects but not personally meaningful texts. She has likewise until recently been free of the kinds of pressures that a changing audience may exert on a singer to drop outmoded topical songs or adapt to new aesthetic standards (Goldstein 1971). The one obvious recent influence on her repertoire has come from folklorists and festival audiences, who have probably encouraged Eldreth to sing the murder ballads and her songs from the early cylinder recordings more frequently than she would have otherwise. My tendency is thus to assume that if she sings a song, she means the words. Still, Eldreth’s relatively cultivated diction and vocal style distinguish her singing voice from her speaking voice. Faithfulness to a memorized text, as well as the constraints of a metrical composition, would militate against Eldreth’s adapting song words toward her usual way of speaking. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, Eldreth herself notes that her singing is more “proper” than her speaking, and the consistent difference marks Eldreth the singer as not necessarily identical with Eldreth the speaker, although that distinction may itself be employed for a number of contradictory effects.

At one end of the spectrum are a number of overtly homiletic songs that Eldreth gives every evidence of singing precisely because she does agree with the message and wants to play a part in voicing it. These include “Drunkard’s Prayer,” “Wreck on the Highway” (“I saw whiskey and blood run together, But I didn’t hear nobody pray”), “The Picture from Life’s Other Side” (condemning the lack of compassion that might have prevented desperate suicides), and “Little Orphan Girl” (which denounces the rich man who insists he has “No room, no bread, for the poor”). An especially fascinating and distinctive piece is “Little Girl’s Prayer,” which begins, “Momma says Daddy has brought us to shame. I’m never no more to mention his name” and contains a spoken interlude condemning divorce because it hurts the children. “Satisfied Mind” (“One day it happened, I lost every dime. But I’m richer by far with a satisfied mind”) similarly expresses Eldreth’s own oft-mentioned conviction that she is more blessed than people who are financially better off. Eldreth has also written three religious
pieces, “Someone’s Last Day,” “Someday I’m Going to Heaven,” and “There Are Times When I Am Lonesome,” that capture her feelings at particular moments—in the first instance, for example, on a morning when her youngest daughter called with the news of her mother-in-law’s death. While consistent with other hymns in Eldreth’s repertoire in mixing pathos and hope and in portraying heaven as home, these turn on images that Eldreth probably drew from her own experience, for instance, resorting to prayer during a time when she feels “lonesome” and “blue” or being induced to reflect upon the value of one’s own life by the realization that today is “someone’s last day.”

There is only one set of songs for which I have been able to get Eldreth to articulate exactly why she sings them. I was struck by what seemed the unusual prevalence in her repertoire of songs about dying soldiers. Eldreth explained that remembering and singing these songs was a form of thinking and worrying about a group of people who risk their own lives for the general benefit but whom she thinks most others tend to ignore. Contextual observation also allows me to conclude that Eldreth’s fascination with songs about people’s suffering connects with her strong self-definition as a comforter. She tells various stories about feeling impelled to go help a suffering or grieving person. She constantly monitors her enormous family and often gets so worried about loved ones who are ill or injured that she makes herself sick. When we saw a news story on television about a complete stranger whose children had drowned, she indicated that she would call the man on the telephone if only she knew his number. When I drove her to a viewing at a funeral home in town, I had to stop the car so she could go put her arms around a sobbing girl she had never seen before. It seems possible also that Eldreth may identify with those who suffer (as Bill Ellis argues, with specific reference to the sentimental ballad that Eldreth calls “The Blind Child’s Prayer”), not passively and “gratuitously,” but with a “conspicuous suffering” that is an “act of protest” and a very effective means of manipulating other characters into desired psychological and emotional states (Ellis 1978:667). In performing these songs, Eldreth simultaneously evokes audience sympathy for those who are represented as suffering through no fault of their own—a group with which she would like to be identified—and elevates herself above that group by demonstrating the emotional resources to offer comfort.

Two songs in Eldreth’s repertoire stand out for me because she has made substitutions for words she found unintelligible, evidently to enable her to align her voice more precisely with the song, that is, to mean exactly what she was singing. Gene Autry’s “Silver Haired Daddy of Mine,” in which a child expresses the desire to make up to her father for the stresses that have aged him, is unsurprisingly congruent with Eldreth’s devotion to her own father. Eldreth has, however, transformed the stilted diction of the original, “I’d give all I own, if I could but atone,” into the comfortably colloquial “if I could put a tone,” which she explained as follows:
BE: It now that 'un means that, uh, where his her father had turned so gray, you know, sh— they'd give all they owned if they could put a tone back, now like a differ—, now like his color of hair used to have, put the tone back... in his hair... like he once had.

PS: Like Miss Clairol [laughs].

BE: Yeah, like Mi— [laughs] Now be still! Like Miss Clairol, yeah.

“My Mother Was a Lady,” written by Edward Marks in 1896 and recorded by Jimmie Rodgers in 1927, is notable, first, in that songs that treat the theme of the exposed but virtuous woman were well received by popular audiences in the 1890s but were taken into the repertoires of twentieth-century oral singers far less often than the dying-child songs of that period. Eldreth has not only held onto a song few of her contemporaries thought worth singing but again modifies crucial words to identify herself with the central character. In this song a young woman “has come to this great city to find [her] brother dear,” is working as a waitress, and is harassed by a customer, but stands up for herself and demands decent treatment. In the original, the woman bases her demand for respect on a respectability conferred by class, “My mother was a lady, Like yours, you will allow” (Horstman 1975:355). Eldreth, in contrast, insists that respectability derives from behavior and moral standards, irrespective of class, singing, “My mother was a lady; anything odd she wouldn’t allow.”

Further, of whom might Eldreth have been thinking when she sang that song? For all the years before she ever spoke back to her husband, did she imagine confronting Ed with his mistreatment and lack of appreciation? Did songs like this, which she could sing as often as she liked but which were not, after all, her own words, enable her to express resentment and demand justice in a safely distanced way? While the adaptation of wording in “My Mother Was a Lady” hints at Eldreth’s desire to make the words her own, there are many other songs in her repertoire that it is extremely tempting to interpret as (at least in part) encoded criticisms of her life and lot, but for which I have not even that much concrete evidence. Do the betrayals in the murdered-girl ballads resonate for her as symbolic representations of the way she was mistreated by her husband? Do all the songs mourning lost and hopeless love remind her of the boy she wishes she had married instead of Ed Eldreth? When she vigorously intones the antidivorce diatribe in the middle of “Little Girl’s Prayer” is she “protesting too much,” trying to convince herself that she really was right to stay with her husband, although even some of her daughters now say she should have left him?

Talking Back

Eldreth’s feelings about her husband are, no doubt, extraordinarily complex: a mixture of affection for a man with whom she had eleven children and anger at the ways in which he failed her; longing for a presence to which she had grown accustomed after attending to his needs for forty-seven years and relief at his
absence; possibly some nagging guilt that she might have contributed more to
the marriage; and relief for him that his sufferings are over. The discourses made
available to her, however, both in everyday talk and in song, supply few terms for
these nuances of feeling. They tend to offer black or white, love or anger, joy or
grief. They may even bring the two poles together, as in the murdered-girl ballads
and “Someone’s Last Day,” but they do not elaborate on all the emotional terri-

tory around and between them. Certainly, when Eldreth wants to express feel-
ings about a person who has gone from her life, there is only one rhetoric avail-
able, a discourse—consistent in the deserted-lover and mourned-parents songs—
that voices only misery and longing and wipes away any faults the absent person
may have had. In order to approximate her actual feelings toward her husband,
then, Eldreth twists the words to songs or even sings but talks back to them,
expressing one conventional feeling, countering this false claim with its equally
incomplete opposite, hoping that listeners may perceive that the truth lies some-
where in the unspoken middle.

Whenever Eldreth sang “Those Wedding Bells Will Never Ring for Me,” she
would give me a significant look or emphasize those words in the chorus to
remind me of what she’d told me:

I said I’d never ... as long as I lived ever get married again. [Ed]’s been dead soon
be twelve year. And I’ve not even went with nobody, not one time. As far as
having any use for a man. Now I love ’em all as I and in Christian fellowship.
In Christian fellowship I love ’em all. But as far as ever getting married to one,
no, I’d never do it.

Similarly, she sang “I’m Sitting on Top of the World” most of the way through in
the regular form, from the male point of view, and then changed the last verse to
“And now he’s gone and I don’t worry . . . ,” referring pointedly to frequent insis-
tence that her life had been much easier since her husband’s death. Another time
she sang “Little Birdie,” which includes the line “I’ve a short time to be here and
a long time to be gone,” remarking between the lines that her husband used to
sing it and that it reminded her of him and then stated directly at the end of the
song, “No, really, I’ll just be honest and tell you the dying truth, they been so
many times that I wish he’d a went on and left me and never come back.” This
was a rare instance in which the metaphorical comment in the song emboldened
Eldreth to speak forthrightly about her critical feelings.

Shortly after her husband’s death, Eldreth “made” two songs that suggest how
she works with limited expressive resources. In “Making Believe,” it appears that
Eldreth has adapted a forlorn, deserted-lover song of that title, written by Jimmy
Work in 1954 and recorded by the Louvin Brothers, to describe her feelings after
her husband died. In “Our Home Is So Lonesome Tonight,” she has made small-
er changes to what was probably a lament for a dead father.26 As a result, her
compositions feature lines like “He has gone and left us alone” and “I’ll spend my
lifetime Loving you and wishing you were here." These sentiments puzzled me, given what I had heard from Eldreth about her husband, so I asked her about the songs. Her response suggested both that her actual feelings were more complicated than her previous critical comments about her husband had indicated and that it was not at all easy for her to find words to express those feelings:

PS: I think you did sing that one to me before and it kind of surprised me... that you would write a song saying that you missed Ed when it seems all he ever gave you was pain and trouble.

BE: Well, it was true.

PS: That you missed him?

BE: In a way, in a way, I don’t hardly know how to say it, but now, as the old saying is, it was pain and trouble, heartaches, heartbreaks. Now that is true. But I and then, I was studying today about in there, I was in the bathroom? And I think of him 'bout every day. There’s hardly ever a day that passes that I don’t think of him. And of a night, I very often think of him, and, as Beulah said, I dream of him. But I never have, I don’t hardly know how to say it, I’ve just I’ve never worried much about it... because he caused me a lot of trouble, he really did.

In her explanation, Eldreth shifts back and forth between opposite positions. She misses Ed, but he caused her heartaches and heartbreaks. Not a day goes by without her thinking of him, but she never worried much about his absence. Twice within these few lines she indicates the difficulty she is having expressing herself: “I don’t hardly know how to say it.” A few minutes earlier, when she sang “Making Believe” for me, she engaged in a spontaneous dialogue with herself, one voice singing, one speaking, that clarifies the source of her difficulty.

Making believe that you are around, dear
Making believe that you are still here
I know it is sad, my heart is so glad, dear
To know you’re at rest, with loved ones are blessed

Though I am so lonely [speaks: No, I’m not],
I know not what to do, dear [laugh in her singing voice, then speaks: Yes, I do]
I look out the window and think that you are here
We had our little quarrels [speaks: Big’ins, too]
Like [laughs] everyone else, love, [laughs]
We had our lovely days, like heaven above.

Making believe that you are still with me
The house is so empty it seems like a dream
I know you are gone, to never return, dear
But someday I’ll go, to where my heart yearns, love.
Making believe, I’ll spend my lifetime
Loving you and wishing you were here.
I dream of you; I know it’s not true, dear
I know you are gone; it’s so lonesome here.

Making believe I’ll always love you
Making believe that you are still here.

In singing these songs for me—that is, privately and informally for a woman she knew was sympathetic to her expressions of difficulty with her husband—Eldreth actually articulates out loud both the song she has sung many times and the critical counterdiscourse that must have been running in her head, unvoiced. It would be tempting to suggest that the sung voice was imposed, conventional, not hers, and the spoken rejoinders Eldreth’s real voice, but that would be an oversimplification. Recall that Eldreth calls this adapted popular song one of her “homemades,” suggesting that she has internalized the conventional view and did in part experience her life in those terms. Her dialogic rendition of “Making Believe” demonstrates how she must simultaneously espouse and flatly contradict the forms of expression offered her, blend her voice with the words of a song and separate it out into a contradictory riposte, in order to approximate her actual feelings.

Eldreth’s song repertoire does, then, in many respects express her thoughts, beliefs, and investments of self but not necessarily in obvious or determinate ways. The overall melancholy tone is partly inherited from the dominant themes of available repertoire, partly hints at her own sense of victimization but conversely at her determination to act as a comforter, and partly evokes a structure of feeling according to which sad, old songs recall the idealized times of Eldreth’s childhood and reinforce her sense of her own moral worth. In singing a song, she may be agreeing with the message expressed or questioning it in her mind or some of both. Contextual information suggests her allegiances, but, not surprisingly, she rarely articulates her relationship to a particular discourse, instead infiltrating it or arguing against it, while letting it stand for a part of what she means. Occasional overt commentary or humorous back-talking suggests, however, that subtle heteroglossia may be present whenever she lends her voice to a song, such that she sings her own pain and anger underneath the conventional, respectable surfaces.

**Singing Practice**

My introduction to Eldreth occurred when she was performing at the Festival of American Folklife. Folklorist Glenn Hinson, who had sought her out to come to the festival, presented her on stage, engaging her in conversation, requesting specific songs, and offering a frame within which the audience could understand her
performances as examples of the musical traditions of the Appalachian region. I particularly recall two of Hinson's anecdotes that intrigued me and led me to talk to Eldreth myself. First, he recounted that other people in Ashe and Watauga counties had urged him to seek out “the lady who sings in church.” Second, he related that when he visited Eldreth, she offered to get him a cup of coffee and then sang to herself from the time she left the living room until they resumed their conversation. I was fascinated by the two aspects of Eldreth's practice as a singer thus hinted at—on the one hand, that she was a woman for whom singing was an informal, daily, personal practice; on the other, that her reputation in the local community confirmed her standing as a singer. Only in retrospect did the contradiction between the two images—a private singer with a public reputation—occur to me.

I soon learned that the two contexts—home and church—had offered Eldreth opportunities for distinct singing behaviors and kinds of interaction and had consequently had different meanings for her. At home, her singing was a solitary activity, possibly appreciated by children, sometimes even discouraged by her husband. At church, singing was shared, encouraged, and rewarded as a contribution to the spiritual uplift of the congregation. She had otherwise not sung in public or engaged in recreational singing with people outside her family until (in the 1970s) folklorists at Appalachian State University had become interested in her granddaughter Jean Reid and thence in the grandmother who taught Jean her ballads. Eldreth was probably known to those who recommended her to Hinson because her adult children had invited her to sing solos in the several churches they attended. Music was clearly a central feature of Eldreth's experience and self-definition throughout her life. To understand what she means when she says, “My singing is my life,” we must consider the multiple contexts in which she has sung and the relationship in each between singing, gender, and work. Still, both the story about the public private singer and her initial framing for me by Hinson can serve as emblems of the extent to which Eldreth's singing career and her identity as a “traditional singer” are inextricable from her late, though influential, involvement with several generations of folklorists.

Singing is a daily activity for Eldreth, a regular part of her experience and her way of getting through the day and interacting with other people and also an important component of her self-definition. But what her practice of singing actually involves and what it has meant for her to “be a singer” differ according to the contexts in which she has sung: in and around the house, in church and related situations (like singing religious songs to comfort the sick), and (since the mid-1970s) in various kinds of public performances and demonstrations organized by folklorists, teachers, and musicians. She is also notably active in making written copies of her songs, both as records and as a form of rehearsal. It is equally important to remark that there are other types and contexts of singing in which we might have expected her to participate, although she actually has not—notably small-group singing (as in the gospel quartets common in local
churches) or simply getting together with friends and neighbors to make music for mutual entertainment (although she recalls instances from her childhood and such jams continue to be popular for instrumentalists). The details of her history and practice in each context, and the separations between them, reveal the possibilities and limitations open to Eldreth as a woman with musical talent, revealing how engagement with music both constructs and is constructed by gender identity. Her practice also goes beyond her repertoire in suggesting how she is and is not connected to "traditional mountain music" as it has been defined and celebrated by folklorists. I was able to witness Eldreth singing in instances of all three oral contexts, as well as to observe her involvement with her songbooks. She also frequently talked about singing and memorable times when she had sung, however, so my understanding relies upon her stories about her own singing and analysis of the rhetoric of those stories, as well as upon my observations.

**Home Singing**

Singing around the house and yard, for one's own amusement and as an accompaniment for other activities, is not in itself unusual. Indeed, this kind of non-performative singing for oneself may be one of the most common forms of engagement with music, although more performative practices are likely to be what comes to mind when we consider the role of music in people's lives. The extent of Eldreth's involvement in this informal singing is remarkable, including the frequency with which she sings (according to her own report) and the effort she has put into retaining a circulating repertoire of almost two hundred songs. The stories she tells about her home singing also further reveal that she invested so extensively in this particular music-making practice because it was compatible with her self-definition as a woman, a moral person, and a worker.

Eldreth tells a number of what we might call "origin stories" that explain how she got started singing and how she amassed such a large repertoire. None of these is the single "true" story, of course. Each calls attention to one influence or one facet of her practice, and each can be rhetorically effective for different audiences or to highlight different aspects of Eldreth's identity. Still, conflict between certain stories suggests the dialogic tension inherent in identity construction. It is also ironic that, although family members and friends clearly recognized Eldreth's talent and large repertoire throughout her life, I suspect that she did not have a reason to formulate most of these stories until folklorists started asking her the kinds of questions that the stories implicitly answer, which got her to think consciously about these issues.

The people who now come to talk to Eldreth about her singing, including me, tend, in a humanistic scholarly vein, to ask her about human sources and influences. Eldreth herself challenges the assumption behind such questions, informing interviewers that she sees her musical ability as a divine gift. She thus
explains the frequency with which she sings as the appropriate use called for by that special endowment.

I think, just really, I think that it’s a talent that God give me. I told some of ’em one time, I said, uh, “I’m ’fraid not to use my talent, that I sing. I’m ’fraid that if I was to quit, somebody else’d get it.” And I want to keep mine [laughs].

Still, Eldreth likewise acknowledges human sources and models. She particularly loves to talk about her father and his musicianship, suggesting that her talent is to some extent inherited from him:

My dad always played the banjo and the fiddle. And I told the children not too long ago, I said, “I’d give anything in the world if you children could have heard my daddy play music.” Now, many of a time, I’d set and hear him play. Honest to goodness, young’uns, it just almost seemed like the music talked. It just seemed like he’d play it so plain that it was just like that it would almost say the words.

Interestingly, however, it was in the context of talking about her male forebears who were musicians that Eldreth spontaneously explained why she had never followed them in playing instrumental music, offering a surprisingly blunt analysis of the limitations she faced because of her gender:

He [Grandfather Killens, her father’s father] was a musicianer [a professional musician]. And Dad said that he set on the front porch most of the time and played music. And that’s where Dad picked up his music from, his playing. I’ve often wished that I’d a took up playing some kind of instruments, but I didn’t have time. I had to work too hard.

The claim that she “didn’t have time” is doubtless factually accurate. There were just no moments in a day when she would have felt that she could give priority to playing instrumental music over whatever else needed doing. Yet this is also a symbolic statement. We have seen that leisure time was morally problematic for a poor family like Eldreth’s. Working hard and continually was not only a practical necessity but also a way to justify herself, to prove that she was not lazy and thus that she did not deserve to be poor. In her experience, men could free themselves from the blaming discourse and make time to exercise their musical talents and to enjoy doing it. Eldreth, however, evidently could not construct herself outside that discourse, and she attributes the difference to gender. A poor man could be admired and celebrated for his musical talent even if it involved indulgence in leisure. A woman could not. Notably, once, years later when I took my parents to visit her, Eldreth told my mother that as a teenager she had briefly owned a piano and started to learn to play it but that her mother had sold it, without consulting her, at a time when the family needed money. The claim that the exigencies of women’s work prevented her from playing an instrument is,
however, the story she purveys much more often and, as such, is another means
of critiquing her exploitation by her husband.

Singing, conversely, was a kind of music that could accompany a woman’s
work—housework, cooking, even fieldwork—speeding the labor along and not
interfering with it or requiring breaks. Further, singing could actually serve as a
productive means of accomplishing some of a woman’s necessary tasks, as Eldreth
went on to explain:

I had to work too hard. You see, I raised eleven children. And I babysat for all
the grandchildren. Momma said, “That’s where you got a whole lot of your singing
is babysitting, rocking the cradles.” But I never took up the [instrumental] music.

Singing as an accompaniment to work was, in fact, the example of singing as a
social practice that Eldreth fondly describes being modeled for her as she learned
songs from her grandmother Milam:

I used to go stay with [Grandma Milam] a whole lot when she was able to work and
go, you know. And, uh, she’d be a-churning . . . and she’d always be a-singing. And
I loved her songs. [. . .] She’d be a-working and she’d just sing hard as she could
sing.

For me to witness Eldreth singing while she worked took a specific request and
her cooperation; but one morning she allowed me to leave a tape recorder run-
ing on the kitchen table while she went about her usual morning housework
routine, washing dishes and putting them away, sweeping, going out into the yard
to feed the chickens, and preparing food for the two grandchildren whom she was
keeping that summer.28 During about forty minutes captured on tape, Eldreth
“sang” five songs: “He Touched Me,” “My Mother Was a Lady,” “I’m Just Here to
Get My Baby out of Jail,” “T for Texas,” and “Little Maggie.” In no instance did
she actually sing through all the words to any given song. She usually sang at
least the first couple of lines and, for one song, a full verse and chorus. She then
played around with that song for several more minutes, although she never got
to the end of the text. She often backtrack ed, resang portions that she had
already sung, and alternated between lines sung with words and lines where she
was humming or “do-do-ing” (her term). Once she was through with a given
song and moved on to the next, she did not go back to a previous selection,
although I have noticed that often a particular song seems to be on her mind, as
she sings it repeatedly on a given day or successive days.

On the tape made that morning, Eldreth’s singing is part of a complex sound-
scape, along with the swishing of dishwater, the scuffing of a broom, the distinc-
tive clatters of dishes, pots, and silverware as Eldreth deposited them in the dish
drainer or put them away, her footsteps as she walked around the house and the
squeak and slam of the screen door, the opening and closing of drawers, cup-
boards, and the refrigerator door, the children’s talk and shouting as they played
together or came into the kitchen to ask questions or get Eldreth’s attention,
brief conversational interchanges with me, and the low hum of a male voice from
the documentary film showing on the children’s TV channel. It is interesting to
note that Eldreth is constantly moving as she sings, but moving independently
of the music, not to it. She does not, for example, coordinate her footsteps or the
closing of a drawer to the rhythm of the music. This stream of singing is also
resiliently interruptible, such that necessary interactions with the children she is
taking care of do not disrupt her. For example, at one point the grandchildren
came into the kitchen to ask for something to eat. While singing the first long
verse of “My Mother Was a Lady,” Eldreth finished washing some dishes and
then got out bowls, cereal, raspberries she had picked that morning, and milk.
(The transcription begins as she starts the chorus.)

[sings] My mother was a lady, any odd she wouldn’t allow.
You may have a sister—
[speaks to children] D’ya want these?
[sings] —who needs—
[speaks to children] Come on in here then.
[sings] —protection now.
I’ve come to this great city to find my brother dear.
And you’d not dare insult me, sir, if brother Jack were here.
[speaks] D’you want milk on ‘em?
[backtracks to earlier portion of song]
[sings] She turned [brief pause] hmm her tormentors, her cheeks were blushing red.
Do-do-do [through melody of remainder of line]
[call of several seconds while she waits for children]
[starts a new song]
[sings] I’m not in your town to stay, said the lady old and gray.
[pours cereal into bowls]
[sings] I’m just here to get my baby out of jail.
[speaks to Stacey] No, don’t take it in there. Set it on the coffee table, real easy, don’t
spill it.
[sings] Yes, warden, [brief pause] I’m just here to get my baby out of jail.

Eldreth may be interrupted in her singing, either by someone else’s intrusive
words or by her own need to speak in order to accomplish whatever she is doing
along with the singing, but she usually picks up the song again where she left off;
and she is able to switch from song to speech and back again without loss of focus
or embarrassment. While the kind of observation that taping makes possible
depicts song and speech as a kind of dialogue, Eldreth actually seems to suppress
awareness of any interaction between the song and either talk or environmental sounds, keeping the two tracks running, as it were, in separate parts of her consciousness. The two can happen simultaneously; thus Eldreth could rely on singing to help her get through the amount of work she needed to accomplish, because neither interfered with the other.

Notably, when Eldreth talks about composing songs, she likewise describes the inspiration coming to her while she is working:

I made the words to that song one morning. My daughter called me and told me her mother-in-law had passed away. And she was real upset and I was crying with her. I just went into the kitchen and washing my dishes. And seemed like just as fast as one thought come to my mind, another did, and before I left the kitchen sink I had the words made to that song.

In naming her compositions “homemades” she similarly claims them as appropriate women’s products, like her home-processed cans of homegrown vegetables, her jars of jam made from handpicked wild berries, and her daily pans of scratch biscuits and corn bread. Interestingly, in this song text Eldreth actually describes the emotions behind the song, but the connection with work is elided by conventional language. “Someone’s Last Day” begins simply, “I was standing by my window one bright summer’s day.” Still, in describing her creativity, Eldreth makes it clear that writing a song does not interfere with the work she as a woman must do: she can and, it appears, usually does think of a song while getting “her” dishes washed.

The discourse Eldreth favors thus treats music making as requiring moral justification and characterizes her home singing as justifiable because it helped her to fulfill her duties, her woman’s work: “I always felt happy, regardless what I was doing or how hard I was a-working. I sing with my hard work. Yeah, I did, I’d . . . work and sing. I still do most of the time.” Yet there are at least a couple of other stories that she occasionally tells that reveal this conception as not entirely monologic. One of Eldreth’s explanations for how she was motivated to develop such a large repertoire is connected to her father’s whiskey making:

He’d take that [sprouted corn] up in the field, in a wide, big, open field, you know, and a big old huge chestnut stump. And I’d sit there and beat that corn all day with a little old hammer. [. . .] I was about ten, nine or ten, somewhere along in there. I was just a little old young’un, but that was my job. [. . .] I’d set and sing all day long, just one little old song after another.

Notably, however, almost every time she tells that origin story she also stresses that she had originally been pushed into the admission:

And Jean was the first one started telling that on me. Everywhere I’d go when she’d start talking, and she’ll do it today, wait and see. She’ll say, “Mamaw used to help
bootleg.” She said, “Mamaw doesn’t like to have this told.” So I might as well tell it, ’cause I’m sure she will.

While Eldreth has thus come to trust the audience’s sympathetic reaction and to enjoy making people laugh at the hillbilly, as she learned was possible from her granddaughter, she nevertheless hedges her bets. If her singing is to be associated with what she saw as an immoral as well as illegal activity, she wants to be sure audiences are told she is chary of revealing it.

Eldreth’s insistent description of herself singing alone while she worked also tells us something else by implicit contrast, namely, that she almost never sang with other adults for fun. When I asked her directly, she did recall instances from her childhood of “bean stringings and apple peelings,” where people gathered to complete a common task and sang together to speed the work. She also talked about teaching several of her grandchildren to sing while she babysat for them, and I observed her singing along with Drew and Stacey to teach them a song. From the time she was married, however, secular singing appears to have been almost entirely a solitary activity for Eldreth. It is possible that later in her life there were some parties in her communities at which people sang but that Eldreth did not attend, either because, as a mother with small children, she was too busy to indulge in such leisure activity (compare Kodish 1983:133) or because she was unwilling then, as she emphatically is now, to go to places where people might drink liquor.\footnote{In fact, Eldreth tells stories that suggest that any secular singing that would be heard outside the confines of her home might be morally suspect. She described an elderly neighbor who overheard her and stopped at her open door to comment. His remark, “Anybody who can sing like you sing. . . . You ought to be in church every Sunday,” sounds like a compliment, but Eldreth’s defensive reply, “I was in church every Sunday,” reveals the criticism she believed was implied (see Sawin 2002). Similarly, Jean Reid indicated that her grandfather at least tolerated her grandmother’s frequent singing in the house: “I don’t think he ever minded it. I never heard him tell her to shut up. I guess that’s something he just always got used to.” Apparently, however, shortly before Ed died, when Eldreth owned a tape recorder and tried to make tapes to send to distant family members, he actively tried to obstruct his wife’s home singing: “And I was in here recording some [songs] one time and he come in and he begin to rattle spoons and forks in the dish drainer to drown out the songs.”} In fact, Eldreth tells stories that suggest that any secular singing that would be heard outside the confines of her home might be morally suspect. She described an elderly neighbor who overheard her and stopped at her open door to comment. His remark, “Anybody who can sing like you sing. . . . You ought to be in church every Sunday,” sounds like a compliment, but Eldreth’s defensive reply, “I was in church every Sunday,” reveals the criticism she believed was implied (see Sawin 2002). Similarly, Jean Reid indicated that her grandfather at least tolerated her grandmother’s frequent singing in the house: “I don’t think he ever minded it. I never heard him tell her to shut up. I guess that’s something he just always got used to.” Apparently, however, shortly before Ed died, when Eldreth owned a tape recorder and tried to make tapes to send to distant family members, he actively tried to obstruct his wife’s home singing: “And I was in here recording some [songs] one time and he come in and he begin to rattle spoons and forks in the dish drainer to drown out the songs.”\footnote{It appears that when Eldreth tried to use the home sphere to create a permanent and exportable performance product, her husband felt justified in frustrating her attempts. Eldreth was not operating in a cultural context like that described contemporaneously for Malta, where any woman who sang in public was automatically considered a prostitute (McLeod and Herndon 1975) or even Newfoundland, where men often sang at evening gatherings, but a woman who dared to go out to such events would be considered a neglectful mother (Kodish 1983). Still, similar, if less absolute, discourses guided people’s responses to her singing and her reception of those responses.}
I also suspect, however, that over the course of Eldreth's lifetime there were simply fewer occasions for group singing as the increasing availability of music on records and radio allowed people to be entertained without gathering to create music themselves. Eldreth's repertoire and her practice thus cross with each other in ironic ways. She is arguably old-fashioned in her practice, taking responsibility for learning and singing a large number of songs. In another context she might have been a central member of and valuable resource to a group that sang for sociability. Yet the recordings and broadcasts that supplied so much of her repertoire simultaneously eliminated the occasions in which Eldreth's abilities as a singer of secular songs might have garnered recognition and social support. Similarly her internalization of conservative gender standards both guided her choice of songs to include in her repertoire and stifled any inclination she might have had to take part in whatever participatory music making might still have been available.

Given her lack of opportunities for singing with others and despite her justification of singing as compatible with work, we should not lose sight of the effort Eldreth expended to make time for singing and (as we will discuss in a moment) for writing down song texts. Compared to the daily discourse she reports in her stories or, indeed, to the reportorial style of the English ballads in which emotion is implied by action, the popular songs she favors are explicitly and often dramatically emotional. Songs are always another's words, slightly buffered and deniable. Yet in her constant singing, Eldreth explores adoration and rejection, elation and despair, hope and defiance. Her determination to make these texts an ongoing part of her life experience speaks pragmatically of their value to her as a form of emotional sustenance in an otherwise arid landscape.

**Songbooks**

Another notable and revealing feature of Eldreth's home-singing practice, and one that helps to explain the size of her effective repertoire, is the fact that she has kept a series of handwritten songbooks. In the summer of 1988 Eldreth had at least six songbooks that she consulted, added to, and sang from. There were two large, cloth-and-leather-bound ledger books with numbered pages, two thick (200–250 page) spiral-bound notebooks, one photograph album with acetate-covered pages into which she had inserted sheets of notebook paper with songs written on them (and a few newspaper clippings, as well as photographs), and at least one slim spiral notebook in which she wrote songs prior to several anticipated performances.

The fact that someone we think of as primarily an “oral” singer would employ her literacy skills to manage her repertoire may not now be surprising. Folklorists have discussed a number of women who kept extensive written song collections (see Kodish 1983; Rosenberg 1980; Burton 1978). Still, this is another of the ways in which Eldreth contravenes the kind of image that may come to mind.
when she is described as a “traditional Appalachian singer.” Eldreth’s practice of reading and writing is distinct in both extent and purpose from the massive daily consumption, analysis, and production of text in which most academic readers of these words participate. Because she so frequently spends time writing down song texts, however, Eldreth makes unusually extensive use of literacy skills, compared both to the white, working-class Carolina Piedmont residents documented by Shirley Brice Heath, who use writing mostly for formulaic letters, memory aids like lists, brief notes to substitute for oral communication, and financial records (1983:217–219), and, I suspect, to members of her generation in her community and to many other working-class Americans. Eldreth does not subscribe to any newspapers or magazines and (except for song words) reads only her Bible and a bimonthly series of Sunday school lessons distributed at church. Still, I estimate that, during the time we were working together, Eldreth not infrequently found half an hour or an hour several times a week to go over her songbooks, copy out selections, and write down songs she had been thinking about. Sleepless nights gave her hours at a time for writing:

[M]aybe if sometime when I wake up in the night . . . I’ll think of one [song], I raise up and put my pillows behind my head and set up in the bed and write it down while I think of it, while it’s on my mind. I don’t know how many I’ve wrote like that . . . in the night | of a night . . . when I wasn’t sleeping good, I’d just set and write songs.

Eldreth herself certainly saw her writing down of songs as a frequent and relatively regular activity: “When I’m not real busy with something else I always get my books down.”

In both the Piedmont and the mountains, ethnographers have noted that writing is identified as a form of women’s work and that adult women perform the preponderance of writing tasks (Heath 1983:212–213; Puckett 1992). There is thus some delight in noting that Eldreth, although prevented from singing publicly or communally by certain expectations of women, could at least preserve her songs while doing what women are supposed to do. However, both Heath and Puckett also note that women can rarely take time from other responsibilities to write for purposes that cannot be readily justified to others as “practical” and necessary for the fulfillment of women’s responsibilities, although these may be construed as including the maintenance of family ties through letter writing. Similarly, Eldreth sees her writing as a leisure-time activity: she talks about it as “messing with” her books. As such, it has to wait until she is “not real busy with something else.” She may also be distracted from working on the songbooks for long periods by illness, worry, or a family crisis. From her teenage years Eldreth made a practice of writing down words to favorite songs and keeping them in “kinda like a letter box or something like that, just something that I could put ’em in, maybe a pasteboard box, where I’d hide love letters, too.” None of these
individual sheets survived the floods and fires that have destroyed her homes, however. Eldreth estimates that it was not until around 1970, when she was nearing sixty and her children had left home, that she actually began systematically creating books of her songs and found she was able to maintain this pattern of activity and time allotment. Ironically, the sleepless nights that enabled her to get a good start on her first songbooks were probably occasioned by the stresses of nursing her husband through the last years of his long battle with emphysema.

Various scholars have suggested that women’s songbooks provide opportunities to engage in sociable interaction focused on song texts for those who do not or cannot sing where others can hear them. Kodish, for example, notes that in Newfoundland

Women do not tend to sing publicly in times [house parties], but there is an active tradition of solo display of songs for which women are well known. We have evidence from the 18th century to the present of the women’s tradition of keeping enormous scrapbooks, or ballad books, filled with clippings and handwritten song texts to which they might refer for their own pleasure, to settle arguments, to entertain, or to provide words for other singers. (1983:133)

Eldreth, however, seems to have had few people to share song texts and songbooks with, apart from her granddaughter Jean Reid and folklorists. In one instance that she reported to me, Eldreth took a book along when visiting a neighbor who had been ill and depressed and used it to get the friend singing with her. Conversely, on one occasion Eldreth and I visited Hattie Presnell, a member of the extended Hicks-Profit family of singers and storytellers on Beech Mountain (see Burton 1978). Eldreth scoured Presnell’s songbooks hoping to find texts to songs she only partially remembered. Eldreth herself, however, does not talk about other singers, except Reid, using her as a resource in this way. In the absence of communal singing events, there seems likewise to have been little impetus for others to learn Eldreth’s repertoire and few contexts for pleasantly interacting with other singers to compare versions through the medium of writing or to search for rare texts in each others’ books.

Eldreth’s organization of her songbooks suggests that she modeled them after church hymnals. She evidently wrote down the songs in whatever order they occurred to her and allowed each text to cover as many pages as necessary, but then assigned a sequential number to each song (rather than to each page), as do hymnals of the kind she has used. On the inside covers of each book she made an index (again, using the same position within the book as in many hymnals), although her indices are in numerical rather than alphabetical order. Thus, the index is a direct reflection of the content rather than a finding aid arranged according to another systematic principal, but this arrangement works well for Eldreth to speed her locating of a given text. During our tapings when she thought of a particular song that she wanted to sing, she would often scan down
the index with her finger and then say the number and title out loud while she searched for that page in the book—‘Number one-eighty, ‘Long Black Veil’”—just as the song leader does in church.

The most counterintuitive thing that I had to learn about Eldreth’s songbooks is that, although she uses them in part as reference works, that does not imply all the same attitudes and practices for her as it might for me. At one level Eldreth does regard and employ her books as repositories of information that are proof against memory loss. She refers to the books when she feels called upon to sing a wide selection of songs, either when she makes a tape to send to a friend (“[T]he day before yesterday, I got the tape recorder and one of my songbooks and I fastened myself up in the bathroom and then I sang just as hard as I could”) or when I want to record her singing. At the beginning of the summer during which we worked together, Eldreth would get out her songbooks when I got out the recorder and would flip through them for inspiration. Toward the end of the summer she searched the books in advance of our recording sessions to find songs she had not yet sung for me, often songs that she had not sung at all for some time (“London City”/“Butcher Boy” and the hymns she associated with her father and Aunt Mary Killens were among these). Not uncommonly in our recording sessions she would think of a song or I would request one that she had sung or referred to previously, but she would defer singing it, remarking, “I’ve got that song somewhere in one of my books.” However, if she was singing unself-consciously, she often produced quite full versions of those same songs from memory. When she “sang from the book,” it often seemed that the book served mostly as a convenient list of titles from which she could choose, since after the first few words she rarely needed to look at the text, as indeed is the case for many of the hymns sung in church as well. To the extent that her own songbooks are modeled on hymnals, it should not be surprising that she would similarly regard the book as the container of words and regularly make the text available for reference while she sings but that she would at the same time keep most of the words (as well as the tunes) in memory as well.

Similarly, when I asked about her motivation for making the songbooks, Eldreth explicitly stated that her purpose was song preservation:

PS: What got you started [writing songbooks], anything in particular?
BE: Well, just songs that I wanted to remember and I was afraid if I just let ’em go on and on and I wouldn’t [I might maybe sometime forget ’em. And I wanted to keep ’em and let the children . . . pass ’em on to others that would like to hear ’em and I and for others that would like to sing ’em.

Note, however, that she says she was afraid that she might forget the songs. Although she has at times lent the books to Jean Reid and to me for us to copy out words, her goal was more to keep the song words in her own mind than to make textual records to which others could refer. She has little nostalgic attachment
to her books as artifacts apart from their usefulness to her and no qualms about recopying worn books into new ones and throwing the old ones away:

PS: Of the books you’ve got now do you have any idea of how old is the oldest one? Like these ones it looks like you wrote in 1985. Do you have older ones?
BE: Well, I did have some older ones, but I wrote the songs out of those into these and then I done away with the others.

She protects the books to the extent of sheltering them from the rain and finding substitute paper for a grandchild who wants someplace to scribble, but several books contain amidst the song words tracings of children’s hands and similar evidence that she is willing both to put other precious things in them besides songs and to use them to humor the children she takes care of if need be. Likewise, I have never heard her speak of the books themselves as accomplishments or seen her show them off (as well she might) as evidence of the size of her repertoire.

In this instance as in others, Eldreth seems not to envision the written text as an object with potential functions apart from her immediate use of it. For example, when she makes a song tape, she always slips into the case a sheet of paper on which she has written the titles of the songs in the order in which she sang them, thereby providing some of the information usually included on a record dust jacket. She does not, however, label either the cassette or the box with her name or the date. As with her analogous disinclination to label home-canned vegetables or family photographs, she presumably thinks that the listener’s ability to recognize her voice or to remember receiving the tape from her makes specification of the singer’s identity unnecessary. Even in packaging her voice so that it can be heard when she is not present, Eldreth does not seem to imagine information requirements occasioned by her own absence. As Amy Shuman notes, “the central feature of decontextualization (however unrealizable) is that one writes with an understanding of what it is like to read from another person’s perspective” (1986:115). Eldreth maintains a kind of innocence arguably analogous to that of the adolescents Shuman studied. In her stories, and to an even greater extent with these artifactual records of her verbal performance, she certainly thinks about projecting herself positively but does not stop to consider how the receiver’s situation or state of knowledge might differ from her own.

Eldreth’s relaxed attitude toward her songbooks further suggests her awareness that (even though the books contain texts she does not often sing) with a little effort she could always create another one. Indeed, she is almost constantly in the process of creating another one:

PS: Do you just always have some songbook that you’re writing ones in?
BE: Uh huh.
PS: Do you just keep writing them and keep writing them?
BE: Yeah, just one and then another.
Eldreth described having copied a worn book page by page into a new one, that is, working from one written text to create another. In my observation, however, she was mostly involved in using writing as part of several ongoing processes of working with her songs so as to recycle and revivify her repertoire.

The process she most often spoke about was re-remembering old songs that she had not sung in a long time and bringing them back into her repertoire.

I have laid there [in bed at night] and seems like a song’ll just come to me and I’ll get to thinking about it and studying about it and then I’ll . . . the next thing you know I’ll be as wide awake as I can be regardless of it’s one, two, three, or four o’clock in the morning and I’ll lie there and say it over to myself until I get it. Till . . . and then the next day I’ll go write it in my book.

Old songs, like her own compositions, just “come” to her as a passive receptor, but once they arrive, she can actively fix them in her mind by saying or singing them over silently and can then capture them on paper. She cannot always write down the full texts as soon as she starts to remember them, but she does keep some writing materials by her bedside, “just an envelope or a plain little piece of paper in my Bible,” to jot down the titles. This enables her to get the songs going in her head again the next day and then to sing them and write them down. Once she has taken the time to write out the words and thereby fixed the song even more firmly in mind, she is likely to sing it aloud fairly often at least for a while.

I also observed that Eldreth frequently spent considerable time writing songs in a notebook (usually a new, slim spiral-bound book) just before a planned performance. I initially assumed that she was creating a portable reference work containing the texts of songs she might sing. Eldreth did take these new notebooks to her performances and in one instance when she was particularly nervous even carried the book on stage, but I never saw her consult them after she had created them, either prior to a performance or during one. Even more significantly, I realized that in creating these new books, she never copied a text from an extant text but rather wrote out of her head, taking dictation, as it were, from her mental singing. This, she confirmed, is her practice whenever she writes down a song:

PS: When you’re writing songs down in a book, do you sing through it in your mind or . . . ?
BE: Um hmm.
PS: . . . do you sing it out loud or just . . . ?
BE: No, I just sing it to myself, like I’s singing to myself . . . and write ’em.

In creating performance-specific notebooks, then, the process is more important to Eldreth than the product. Writing out the words while singing the song over
in her head is a significant and often sufficient form of rehearsal. She may supplement the writing with actual singing out loud at another time prior to a performance but does not always feel the need.

The great majority of the songs Eldreth currently sings are ones she learned between fifty and eighty-five years ago. Her repertoire is not simply “stable” (see Goldstein 1971), however, but rather undergoes a constant process of renewal in which writing plays an important role. Eldreth’s practice of literacy is not a motivating factor in deciding which songs will be retained and which jettisoned, but it is an enabling factor, a technical means that allows her to bring remembered songs back into her active repertoire. Throughout her life she probably periodically thought of songs she had not sung for a while and picked them up again. Her attraction to “old” songs (into which category a song she remembers that she used to know automatically fits) provides a constant motivation to recall and reactivate songs that were active in her repertoire previously. The songs Eldreth remembers in this way may be ones she truly has not thought of in years or ones that, when she checks in her songbooks, she will find she wrote down not too long ago. She may keep singing a remembered song or let it lapse again. Even if she stops singing a song spontaneously, she may find the words in one of her books, recall the tune, and sing it once or frequently at a later date. Now that she has the model in mind of acquiring a written text to go along with a remembered tune and partial text, as well as access to academics who are interested in songs, she will occasionally ask one of us to see if we can find the words to a partly remembered song for her. With writing as a mediator, then, Eldreth constantly recycles her repertoire.

Eldreth’s songbooks should be regarded not as inert objects but rather as one of the contexts in or media through which she produces and reproduces her songs. Writing was seen as an unexceptional activity for a woman, and she thus met little resistance in extending it slightly beyond obviously utilitarian purposes, even during her busiest years, and has been able to devote substantial energy to using it to preserve her song repertoire since her responsibilities have lessened.

Writing down a song involves Eldreth in singing it over (text and words) silently in her head. As such, writing not only (and not even primarily) produces a useful artifact. Rather, it is an intrinsically valuable and interesting activity—a form of rehearsal, a means of fixing a text in her mind prior to singing it out loud, and an enjoyable act in its own right. Appropriately, then, writing as process and practice has even more of an influence on Eldreth’s constant revival of old repertoire items than do the reference texts that are its apparent end product. In another sense, however, Eldreth’s songbooks had to be more important as processes than products. Because of a lack of contexts—beyond those she herself manufactured with her grandchildren—in which secular songs might be shared, Eldreth’s songbooks did not provide her the opportunities for sociable interaction documented in other situations where women were otherwise discouraged from sharing their musical knowledge in public.
Singing in Church

The one public context in which Eldreth has been able to share her talents and to participate in music with her neighbors has been the church. She has been a member of the choir at whatever church she attended since childhood. As she notes, “I feel plumb out of place if I’m not if I don’t go to the choir, ’cause I’ve done it just about all my life. So the choir’s where I always sit.” She also regularly sings a solo piece in the course of the service. When singing for herself at home, Eldreth certainly sometimes monitors the quality of her voice production. Prior to her involvement with folklorists, however, church had been the place in which she was encouraged to “perform” as a singer in the terms elaborated by Bauman, that is, to strive for aesthetic excellence as she understands it, to share her efforts with an audience “for the enhancement of their experience,” and to make the result “subject to evaluation for the way it is done” (1977:11). Musical contributions in church seem largely immune to the kind of gender discrimination that might have censured Eldreth’s participation in instrumental music or secular singing outside the home. Singing in churches, her own and others to which she was invited, garnered Eldreth a local reputation before folklorists’ attention gained her recognition in other contexts. This kind of freedom appears to stem, however, from a consensual framing of sacred singing as not exactly performance in all the usual senses.

Since shortly after she built her own house in 1972, Eldreth has been a member of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, just a quarter mile down the road. Most Sundays, between thirty-five and fifty people attend, almost all of whom live or previously lived within a couple of miles. At other times in her life Eldreth’s experience of musical participation in church may have been somewhat different from what I observed. The church of which she was a member in Todd during the 1960s, and which we visited once, is a bit larger and more formal. She also talks about having attended a regular camp meeting around the same time, and Reid recalls going with her grandmother to Pentecostal services where Eldreth and others would “get happy” and sing and dance in an uninhibited expression of the Holy Spirit. Still, Eldreth herself does not differentiate her involvement as a child from participation at Tabernacle, which has been her church home for more than thirty years. Eldreth often remarks, “I love my little church.” She “hates” to miss a service there; and, as I discovered when we came to Durham for her performance at the Festival for the Eno, she does not regard worship at another church as an adequate or appealing substitute.

Singing at Tabernacle Baptist, as at many small Baptist churches in the South, is remarkable for its combination of centrality to worship and its informality (see Titon 1988, chap. 5). During the years that I have known Eldreth and attended church with her, the Sunday morning service has always begun with the choir singing three or four hymns, a section specifically identified as “the song service.” The choir and any members of the congregation who wish to join in also sing
another couple of hymns during the course of worship. Every two to three weeks on average someone will offer a special solo or small group performance as part of the service.33 In months that have five Sundays, the church holds an additional evening service on the fifth Sunday, the centerpiece of which is a musical performance by a visiting group whose participation is arranged through a personal connection with someone in the congregation. (During the summer of 1988, the visitors included a bluegrass gospel group led by the son of a church member and the “Spiritual Heirs,” whose old-fashioned style Eldreth so admired.) The Tabernacle choir is likewise occasionally invited to neighboring churches to provide the special performance for their fifth Sunday, just as Eldreth has been invited by her children to visit and sing solos in their churches.

Although valued, the singing at Tabernacle Baptist is much less formal than the norm for the larger, urban, mainline denomination churches with which I had formerly been familiar. The singers are self-selected and largely untrained and the performances mostly unrehearsed. About fifteen of the forty-five congregation members at Tabernacle regularly sit in the choir, a row of three pews set at right angles to the congregational seating on the left side of the church (as one enters) between the front row of regular pews and the raised dais and lectern for preaching. Several women take turns providing accompaniment on an upright piano. The choir has an identity as a group, and the choir leader is elected along with other church officials like the Sunday school leader and the church secretary, but choir membership is a matter of willingness to serve rather than auditioning or selection. Choir members apparently like to sing more than the rest of the congregation (some of whom do not join in even on congregational hymns) and may be more musical. Vocal tone ranges, however, from sweet to strident, and people take harmony parts sporadically, if and when they are able. Eldreth insists that I sit with her and join in the choir’s singing whenever I visit, and my presence is accommodated without complaint.

The manner of presentation for the hymns sung only by the choir is no different from those that all church members sing. The choir leader chooses the hymns in advance and announces them, rather than, as in some small mountain churches, “let[ting] the congregation choose just before singing [with] each member select[ing] his or her favorites” (Titon 1988:214). Still, hymns occasionally have to be changed on the spur of the moment if one of the pianists cannot manage the original selection, and this is not a source of significant concern. The one “choir rehearsal” I attended involved singing through several hymns (some familiar, some new) just as in a service; there was no attempt to go over difficult passages, no effort to assign or learn harmony parts, no attempt to synchronize timing or tone, indeed, no evident special approach to the music to mark this as rehearsal in conventional terms. The singers are aware of some desirable formal features of appropriate singing—Eldreth talks, as mentioned earlier, about teasing fellow choir members who have to take a breath before the end of the phrase—but there is no organized means for inculcating those practices. In
The provision of vocal music for the church is seen essentially as a voluntary and unpremeditated activity. Participating in the choir involves a mixture of using one's gifts to glorify God and having a good time with the people one likes to sit next to in church.

Eldreth's church welcomes special musical offerings by any member of the congregation who feels moved to provide one. Eldreth is only one of several individuals and groups within her church who periodically contribute to the service. During my visits between 1987 and 1989, for instance, I witnessed five performances by Eldreth, two by a quartet composed of two couples who usually sang in the choir, one by the elderly parents of one of those couples (who were formerly more active in the church than age and illness then allowed them to be), one by a young woman who sang and played the guitar, and a special Mother's Day performance by a man who accompanied himself on the electric bass. Eldreth teaches hymns to her grandchildren and from time to time persuades one of them to stand up at the front of the church and sing, with only a little help from her on the first line. The Sunday school teachers likewise occasionally get the children to prepare and sing a song. When I left Boone in August 1988 after attending church regularly with Eldreth for three months, she convinced me to perform a song with her one Sunday as a fitting goodbye. Singers have complete permission to occupy the raised dais and even the pulpit, otherwise used only by the preacher (and not by either the deacon who gives church announcements or the Sunday school teacher). Performers often had clearly planned their performances in advance, but they usually only told the choir director of their intention when they arrived for the Sunday service. The director never gave any indication that it was a problem to accommodate an individual who wished to offer a special performance or, conversely, to have the choir sing another hymn if no special performance was forthcoming on a given day. Eldreth may sing solos a little more often than others in her church, but she is not markedly unusual in being willing to stand up in front of the congregation and sing alone. Conversely, within the local continuum of semispecialist religious singers—from individuals who might sing a single song as a testimony in their own church on an important occasion, through groups that rehearse fairly often and perform locally half a dozen times a year, up to named groups that become semiprofessional, traveling most weekends and receiving donations to pay for instruments and matching costumes—Eldreth is situated toward the less elaborate end and is somewhat unusual and old-fashioned in singing by herself a cappella, though she is still part of a thriving musical economy.

Her regular practice of offering solos has provided Eldreth with an identity as a singer, in her own mind and for others. Her repeated offering of solos enables her to think of herself as a singer precisely because her past willingness subjects her to others' ongoing expectation that she will make a special contribution to the service. At a lull in the service the choir director (who usually sat in the front row of the choir, immediately in front of Eldreth's usual seat) would regularly
lean back over the pew to enquire, “Do you have anything for us today, Mrs. Eldreth?” If she did not sing a solo for several weeks at a time, other church members would question her, urge her, even extract promises from her to sing, in part because they enjoy hearing her and in part, I suspect, because they know she likes to be asked. One evening Eldreth decided to surprise one of her daughters by going to a midweek service at the church in Todd that she had attended for years, but which she had visited only occasionally since moving to her new house sixteen years previously. The man who had been the choir director at South Fork Church when she was a member of the congregation still held the post. He immediately recognized Eldreth and insisted that we sit in the choir and that she sing several solo pieces, saying, “Oh, good, we can just sing one and then turn it over to Mrs. Eldreth.” Eldreth seemed quite surprised at this invitation, although she was carrying copies of the words to several hymns in her purse; and she had to scramble through the hymnbook and the papers she had brought in order to come up with something to sing. Nevertheless, she was obviously delighted to have been remembered and asked to sing and was more than willing to fulfill the request on the spur of the moment.

In terms of message, style, and mood, solo and small group performers add noticeable variety to the musical fare at Tabernacle. The choir and congregation sing only out of the hymnal that the church owns (Best Loved Songs and Hymns, 1961, R. E. Winsett Music Co., Dayton, TN), the selections in which, mostly composed between the two world wars, are musically and textually homogeneous, generally upbeat and emphasizing expectations of the rewards of heaven. The vocal quartet in the church, by contrast, favored current, pop-gospel songs (like ones often playing on radio or TV when we visited their homes), while the young woman who accompanied herself on guitar presented hymns that sounded recently composed, in a folklike style, in order to appeal to young people. Eldreth expands outward from the church hymnal in several directions, toward the more solemn and the more old-fashioned as well as the more modern, the more high-performance, and even the more secular. For a church revival, Eldreth sang “The Old Crossroad” and “The Pale Horse and His Rider,” notably more somber, textually and musically, than the majority of congregational hymns, emphasizing the inevitability of death and the awful fate of the unsaved, and thus situationally appropriate and well calculated to help a sinner achieve “conviction” of his own sinfulness and need for salvation as the first step toward religious conversion (see Bruce 1974:64–67).

Eldreth’s favorite solo offering during the years I have known her has been “He Touched Me,” composed in 1963 and evidently popularized by its frequent performance by George Beverly Shea on the televised Billy Graham Crusades.34 The piece is an obvious dramatic vehicle for showcasing a solo voice. It has numerous sustained notes, and Eldreth renders it with a richer timbre and much more vibrato in her voice than when singing any other song, producing almost a coloratura effect. While consistent with the common theme in the Southern Baptist hymn
repertoire of a personal relationship with Jesus and conviction of being saved, it is also especially appropriate thematically as an individual testimony:

He touched me, yes, he touched me,
And oh, the joy that floods my soul.
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and he made me whole.

In a very different direction, Eldreth skillfully negotiates the blurry boundary between sacred numbers and songs expressing devotion to family also evident in the bluegrass repertoire. She surprised me but pleased the congregation, for example, with a performance in church of "Silver Haired Daddy of Mine." She explained before she began singing that she was doing the song for an older man in the congregation who had recently been ill and at the request of his daughter. The woman who had asked for the song as well as two others, one with an elderly and one with a recently deceased father, cried while Eldreth was singing and tearfully thanked her for the performance after the service. Although Eldreth was not taking a very big risk with this selection, the instance demonstrates how she can trade upon her established legitimacy to stretch listeners' expectations and how her success in pulling off a tremendously appropriate and appreciated performance then circularly reinforces her legitimacy as a provider of suitable religious experience (Herzfeld 1991).

And contributing to the religious experience of one's fellow church members is precisely the rationale and justification for musical performance. This idea applies more generally within the Christian tradition, of course, but it assumes a particular sense and salience within the egalitarian community of a small Baptist congregation like that at Tabernacle, where each member assumes a certain responsibility for the state of her neighbor's soul. These solo song performances very often are labeled as or lead into a "testimony," an explicit personal statement of some aspect of faith that may both confirm and model others' appropriate experience. Eldreth, for instance, used her singing of "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" to introduce such a profession. The song concludes, "I am just going over Jordan. I am just going over home," which led Eldreth to remark:

I know I'm getting way up in years, but I'll tell you the truth, I'm a happy person . . . and I'm looking forward to going home. I really am. I believe it'd be a happy place . . . when we can all join together. I feel like we've got a . . . real close fellowship here. And I love everyone of 'em . . . from the bottom of my heart. I never pass this church that I don't say prayers for the little church, 'cause I love the church and I love the ones that go to it. But I look forward to going home.

The flip side of this emphasis on content and sincerity is the regularity with which performances are marked—indeed, marked as performances—precisely by
a disclaimer of performance (Bauman 1993a). Like other special performers in these small churches, Eldreth prefaced every offering with a remark like “I know I’m not a singer, but I’m trying to make a joyful noise for the Lord” or “You all just pray for me while I try to do this song.” To those who offer her compliments, Eldreth often responds, “Give God the praise. It’s nothing I did. Give God the praise.” These disclaimers have the effect of helping to set up an interpretive frame in which excellence of form and execution is officially discounted, even though such excellence may be both aimed at and noticed. In concert with the expectation that songs sung in church will be transparent statements of the singer’s beliefs and feelings, the frame within which the singing event is presented thus makes strong claims for the primacy of its semantic content and affective impact. The singers’ skill and the aesthetic and emotional quality of the performance may indeed contribute to the emotional and spiritual effect on listeners, but people should concentrate on the effect and not the means. Thus, to the extent that “performance,” as isolated by Bauman, involves a Jakobsonian “focus on the message for its own sake” and full performance is identified by a dominance of interest in the form and execution of the communicative event over other aspects and effects (Jakobson 1960:356; Bauman 1977:7), Eldreth’s singing in church should be identified as a modified, partial, or hedged kind of performance. It is suggestive that during the service people are likely to respond to a song with “Amen,” signifying agreement with the sentiment or belief expressed. Only afterwards will they compliment the singer on the formal quality of the performance, “That’s the prettiest song I ever heard.”

An important corollary is that an adorable child trying to remember the words or an old man haltingly choking out a hymn he has sung for sixty years may move listeners to contemplation of God’s goodness or of the promised rewards of heaven as effectively, if not more effectively, than an accomplished singer. Formal excellence may contribute to this emotional/religious effect, but it is valued primarily, though not exclusively, for that contribution rather than in itself. Emphasis on form may be a significant consideration, but it should not be the dominant function.

In most instances, then, whatever degree of skill a musician can muster is graciously and gratefully received as an attempt to contribute to the shared religious experience of the congregation. A potential for conflict arises, however, in those instances where the singer’s conduct is perceived as calling too much attention to the performance itself or to the performer and her abilities. The more accomplished the musician or the more evidence she gives of aiming for formal excellence, the more requisite the disclaimer of skill or intention to perform. In fact, any special singing draws attention to the individual and his or her talents. It also takes time. There are no absolute time limits on the service, but people accustomed to going home (or out) for Sunday dinner after church start to get hungry and inattentive if the service goes on too long (as I discovered for myself on hot summer Sundays when my stomach began to growl while
the service seemed to drag on interminably). Extra time spent on special singing also cuts into the time for other contributions. In a church to which Eldreth formerly belonged, she frequently prepared a group of her grandchildren to sing during the service. Some people in that congregation apparently loved it. Others, including the Sunday school teachers, apparently wanted more time spent on religious teaching, perhaps even found the children irritating in frequent doses, and complained behind Eldreth’s back. I found out about this distressing incident, over which Eldreth actually left the church, only because Eldreth sang me a cryptic song that she had written about it, “Jealous in the Bible” (on the model of “Dust on the Bible”). Similarly, since singing is supposed to be an offering to God and a contribution to the religious experience of others in the congregation, it is not acceptable for performance to take the place of or priority over worship. In a small church, absences are noticed and keenly felt. The common greeting, “We missed you last Sunday,” though an honest expression of friendly concern, also requires a justification in answer. Eldreth made a point of explaining to me that she would not sing elsewhere than her own church if it meant missing the service:

They [people at her daughter’s church] have asked me to come sing, but I hate to go leave my church on Sunday. But if it’s any time like of a night or when I’m not in church, then I’ll go along and sing for them.

Similarly, when the festival performance in Durham kept her away from home on a Sunday, she repeatedly mentioned how sorry she was to be missing the service at her church.

An interesting corollary to tension about overemphasizing performance is Eldreth’s insistence that she actually gets more anxious about singing before friends in her little church than in front of a secular audience of hundreds:

I don’t m— | hit don’t bother me. I mean, you know . . . now it seems like it bothers me more . . . to stand up in my church and sing than anywhere. It’s strange, isn’t it? Than anywhere I can go, hit | hit bothers me more. And I | I guess it’s | well, maybe it’s ’cause everybody knows me out there [at the church]. And I | I don’t care to36 stand up and sing before . . . a crowd nor how— | nor how many, ’cause that it seems like that | ain’t nobody that knows me.

In contrast to Reid, who, Eldreth enjoys reminding her and me, used to get sick to her stomach out of nervousness before a big public performance, Eldreth wants to make it clear that she worries more about singing for those members of her congregation, to whom she has a clear religious duty. She also approvingly quotes an alternate explanation that erases the question of performance and performance anxiety completely:
Well, now, I'll tell you, most of the time when I get up in God's house, if you're noticing, I'll tremble. But, uh, I said that to a real old lady one time. I told her, I said, “I don't know why it is when I stand up to and sing or testify,” I said, “I tremble.” She said, “That's the power of God.” She says, “You will tremble under the power of God.” Well, I suppose you would, don't you? You will tremble. You feel like it, don't you?

In contrast to any kind of purely recreational or purely performative singing, then, Eldreth's singing in church counts as a Christian duty and thus as a fully appropriate activity for a woman. It is not quite a form of work, but neither is it a leisure indulgence. Even though Eldreth's husband did not himself attend church, there seems never to have been any question of his preventing her from participating in the service or singing there. As the story of the Cox boy's funeral (analyzed in chapter 4) indicates, however, Eldreth was concerned about the propriety of singing even for an extension of church like a funeral, especially when it might be seen as interfering with her duty to care for her husband or when it involved her being singled out because of her special knowledge. Other women's support, including in that case reframing her singing at the funeral as itself a duty—a bereaved mother's request that could not otherwise be filled—was crucial to allowing her to exercise her talents and enjoy doing so.

Church is the context for singing that matters most to Eldreth. Using a gift that she believes she received from God to return Him praise and to share religious fellowship with her church is a fully satisfying form of performance for her. At the same time, as we have noted, church performance is necessarily hedged so that attention is deflected from the performer and toward the religious message and the spiritual uplift it is meant to inculcate. Singers can receive credit for their artistic abilities without being accused of inappropriately drawing attention to themselves because the church is a setting in which performance is disclaimed and in which sung messages are accepted as semantically and emotionally transparent.

Public Singing

Until she was in her sixties, home and church provided Eldreth with all the scope for singing that she evidently imagined or wished for. She has never given me any indication that she dreamed of performing for broader audiences or that she was dissatisfied with or felt limited by the occasions and contexts for singing available to her. The avidity with which she has since taken to the public performance opportunities offered by folklorists and musicians, however, suggests how congenial she finds the chance to perform without the constraints inherent in her previous contexts. For Eldreth, these new performance contexts represent chances to share her large secular repertoire and to employ her talents for an audience's enjoyment irrespective of religious affect, that is, to treat her singing
as aesthetic production. Ironically, most of the performances she is invited to give are actually framed by those who arrange them as demonstrations of various sorts rather than as pure performance. Eldreth, however, makes her own interpretations. The story of Eldreth’s involvement with folklorists cannot be told in a single voice or from a single point of view. There are ways in which her purposes coincide with those of the people who have arranged her public performances and ways in which she ignores their definitions and frames things in her own terms. Similarly, in some respects Eldreth’s example refutes the comfortable stories folklorists like to tell themselves about their relationships with “the folk” but in other ways confirms our hopes for the benefits of such collaboration.

To begin, as discussed earlier, Eldreth was not “discovered” by me or by any other lone folklorist scouring the mountains for traditional singers in the mode of Cecil Sharp but got involved indirectly through her granddaughter. Reid, who has an exquisite, rich voice and who contemplated trying to make a career for herself in country music, started singing publicly in talent contests in junior high school. One of her music teachers (who may also have been working on a master’s degree at Appalachian State University) took a special interest in her in part because of her beautiful voice and in part because of the older songs she had learned from her grandmother. The teacher took Reid to Raleigh to sing for a convention of music teachers, who were focusing on folk music that year (about 1972 or 1973). There Reid attracted the attention of various scholars of Appalachian culture and music, notably Professor Cratis Williams, one of the earliest and most influential proponents of Appalachian studies and then a dean at ASU, who was excited to find someone of her age singing the old ballads. Over the next several years Reid made more contacts with academics interested in encouraging her singing and received increasing numbers of invitations to sing in public: for the North Carolina Folklore Society, at the Jonesboro Storytelling Festival, at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Folk Festival, for classes at ASU, and on short notice for a group of international scholars being toured around by the United States Information Agency (USIA). She also appeared on television in 1976 for one of a series of “Bicentennial Minutes” about American traditions, although she complains about having been stereotypically posed with a dulcimer, which she does not play, and next to a mountain waterfall, which drowned out her singing. People asked Reid where she had learned her songs and expressed interest in hearing her grandmother sing. Initially, Eldreth accompanied Reid primarily as a chaperone but soon began to sing along with her. Eldreth began singing in these public venues in 1975 or 1976, shortly before her husband died, as Reid explained, “cause I remember Papaw [her grandfather] used to get real jealous . . . about me taking her places,” and went out more often after his death in 1977. In 1979 Reid went off to nursing school in Charlotte and was unavailable for performances for three years. Eldreth began to perform by herself and became the person whom event planners knew about and contacted. Once Reid started working as a nurse in Lenoir and through the 1980s, Eldreth and Reid
again frequently performed together unless Reid could not get time off from work; in the 1990s, after Reid’s sons were born, Eldreth again most often performed alone. Thus, Eldreth’s “career” as a public performer should not be seen as an obvious matter of the most representative “tradition bearer” inevitably rising to attention. Rather the chance temporal coincidence of Reid’s coming into contact with folklorists as a teenager but then being less available to perform, the U.S. bicentennial that focused attention on American traditions, a revitalization of regional festivals thereafter, and Eldreth’s arriving at that period in her life when an older woman could have more flexibility and control over her time resulted in an involvement in public performance that would not have come about under other historical or personal circumstances.

Initially Eldreth was shy on stage, but she got over that fairly quickly, in part out of a determination to sing well. As she pragmatically says, “I used to get real nervous, but it hurts you [as a singer].” By the time I met her in 1987 she appeared comfortable, natural, and unselfconscious in performance. In fact, she usually looked like she was having a wonderful time, laughing and joking with the audience, responding to the presenter with funny quips, and talking quite spontaneously about herself. Audiences responded well to her warmth and unpretentiousness. I have seen people cluster around her after a performance, wanting to talk to her and hug her and get their pictures taken with her. Eldreth loves to talk about how the children crawl into her lap when she sings at schools or how the people in New York just had to get close to her after a performance: “And they’s so many, one didn’t turn me loose till another one’d be a-hugging me and kissing me and really crying on my shoulder.” She has sung for scholars and international visitors, and she and Reid were filmed by actress Stella Stevens for a documentary on “The Southern Heroine,” but she takes it all in stride. Reid articulated what she saw as the benefits of the situation for Eldreth:

I think this has been good for my grandmother, ’cause I think it’s kept her alive and kept her going. It’s kept her spirits up, because my grandmother has always had a hard life and she’s always had to struggle for every little bitty thing that she’s had. [. . .] And I think really when she says that these last years have been the happiest in her life? I really think that’s true, because she can be a center of attention now. And she’s praised and she’s oohed and she’s aahed and she really loves it and she’s never had that before. And she’s never been . . . she’s just never been treated that way before. And I think that’s been really good for her. She has deserved something like this for a long time. She really has.

Similarly, the opportunity to travel, to perform, and to be made the center of attention exemplifies a freedom to order her own life that Eldreth did not enjoy through most of her years—one, as her decision to reject her wealthy suitor reminds us, that she was loath to give up. As she explained just before her performance at the Festival for the Eno:
But now I can, as the saying is, “I feel free.” I feel like I could do what I want to do. And don’t have to wait for somebody to say, “No, you can’t do that.” Now the children’ll say, “Mom, go on and do what you want to do.” And I’m doing what I want to do [i.e., by coming to Durham to perform].

Eldreth’s style and repertoire in these public performances exhibit expectable continuities with those appropriate to the contexts in which she previously sang, but she has also evidently been influenced by the analyses and preferences of those who organized the performances and invited her to sing. Her involvement in these public events has primarily given Eldreth an opportunity to share what was previously her secular home repertoire with wider audiences. The two presenters with whom I have seen Eldreth interact, Mary Greene and Glenn Hinson, were both intent upon educating audiences about the complex history of “Appalachian music.” They consequently encouraged Eldreth to include her favorite religious songs and her own compositions, especially “Someone’s Last Day,” as well as pieces—like “Philadelphia Lawyer,” “Long Black Veil,” and Jimmie Rodgers yodels—that demonstrate both the continuities between “traditional” mountain singing and modern country music and the breadth of an active oral singer’s sources. Because of the “folk” or “old-fashioned” framing of these events, however, Eldreth’s performances tend to emphasize the native American and British broadside–derived portions of her repertoire. “Neoma Wise,” “Knoxville Girl,” “Little Maggie,” and the two versions of “Pretty Polly” show up in her performances with particular frequency, along with the two early recording curiosities, “Ticklish Reuben” and “Snoops the Lawyer.” After years of interacting with folklorists and festival organizers, Eldreth seems to have internalized a sense of the expected repertoire and brings out the native American ballads whether she is specifically directed to do so or not. Relatively conservative scholarly standards of what counts as an authentic American folksong have thus probably given these songs greater prominence in Eldreth’s repertoire than they otherwise would have had. Reid, because of her early and influential contact with folklorists, became interested in singing almost exclusively what she identifies as the oldest and most traditional items from her grandmother’s repertoire, but Eldreth shows no inclination to drop songs the folklorists do not favor.

Given that Eldreth’s main models and main opportunities for singing were solos in church and singing while working, both unaccompanied, she has ordinarily sung everything she knows in a solo, unaccompanied, unharmonized style. When she teaches her grandchildren songs, they all sing the melody in unison. When she began singing publicly with Reid, they sang some songs together on stage; but Cratis Williams discouraged that as a performance practice, evidently on the conservative supposition that the old ballads would have been sung as solos. As a result, Eldreth and Reid developed distinct styles and became used to paying attention only to their own internal sense of rhythm and phrasing. By 1988, Reid commented, “We’re a lot more comfortable singing alone rather than...
together.” However, when they started working with Hinson, a folklorist with a strong interest in contextualized presentation, he encouraged them to sing together again, presumably to model the pedagogical situation and the intergenerational transfer of repertoire, so they then resumed doing one or two songs together in each performance. Thus may changing paradigms of folklore scholarship influence what is presented to external audiences as “folk” material. Furthermore, as noted earlier, participation in festivals has at last afforded Eldreth opportunities for singing sociably with other local and revivalist musicians, although her resolutely singular style does not make her fit comfortably with those more accustomed to group singing.

Eldreth is not merely a passive receptor, however, but actively observes and incorporates novel influences. When performing without a presenter, she now frequently talks about where she comes from or tells one of the stories that explain why she has such a large repertoire, supplying for herself the kind of introduction that a folklorist presenter would usually elicit. Less frequent but attractive models may also be incorporated into her performances. The Festival of American Folklife provides sign language interpreters for many presentations, and Eldreth commented on how beautiful she found the signer’s interpretations of their songs. She usually sits quite still while singing; and the summer after she had been in Washington, she startled presenter Mary Greene, who thought herself familiar with Eldreth’s repertoire and practices, by adding gestures inspired by the signers she had seen to graphic song lines like “He stabbed her in her heart and her heart’s blood it did flow.”

Eldreth is usually invited to sing for folk festivals and musical demonstrations that frame the performer as an example of something. In certain respects she has come to rely upon this presentation, but in others she resists or ignores the framing, effectively insisting upon her own interpretation of what is happening. These occasions are constructed in ways that suggest to Eldreth that the aesthetic quality of her performance takes precedence. Eldreth sits on a raised stage in front of an often sizeable audience. She uses a microphone and is often paid an honorarium. The organizers have gone to considerable trouble and expense to ensure her participation. At the same time, however, the organizers themselves tend to think of the event as (secondarily) a performance that serves (primarily) as a demonstration. The World Music Institute’s series on “The Roots of Country Music” billed her as an example of “the old, unaccompanied ballad style” that immediately predated commercial recording (Allen 1988); Hinson and Greene emphasize the variety of her repertoire and the interpenetration between “traditional” and “popular” song in Appalachia; the 1987 Festival of American Folklife included Eldreth and the other people from Ashe and Watauga counties to exemplify speakers of a distinctive regional dialect; William McCloud, when dean of the School of Music at ASU, included Eldreth and Reid in a workshop for secondary school music teachers to demonstrate that it is possible to be very musical without being able to read music. Those who arrange for Eldreth’s
participation want her to do well, but they involve her because she exemplifies a style, historical moment, or point, not because she is simply or obviously a great singer. Eldreth's purposes are congruent with those of the organizers of such events to the extent that she is proud of and glad to share songs that it is unusual to find in contemporary oral repertoires.

I increasingly realized, however, that Eldreth predominantly sees these situations in a different light than do her presenters. These times on stage provide her with opportunities to shine, to sing as well as she can sing, to perform pure and simple, and thus to satisfy a desire to do her best for an audience and to be recognized for it that neither home nor church singing quite fulfills. She focuses on performing and seems either not to grasp or simply to ignore the efforts to frame her performance as an example of "Appalachian culture." When she and Reid performed at the Jonesboro Storytelling Festival in the late 1970s, they were directed to sit on hay bales on stage while they sang. Reid is quite aware and explicitly critical of attempts to stereotype her as a hillbilly. Eldreth reports the hay bale incident with apparent puzzlement—why would they want us to sit on hay bales?—but she does keep bringing it up. Similarly, when I volunteered to drive her to Durham for the Festival for the Eno, she instructed me to pick her up at the beauty shop, so her hair would be freshly coiffed; and for the performance she wore high-heeled sandals, her best red chiffon dress, and new diamond "ear bobs." Festival audiences may have expected a mountain woman in a granny dress, but for Eldreth performance is an occasion to dress up, not to dress up as something.

When working with a presenter on stage, Eldreth is perfectly happy to answer questions directed to her and, usually, to sing particular songs when asked; but she seems oblivious to the overall demonstration frame. She has actually come to depend upon a presenter's guidance in order to connect well with the audience. The least effective performance I have seen her give came about when Dean McCloud was prevented at the last moment from being there to introduce her performance for the music teachers' convention. The audience was actually expecting Eldreth to sing ballads and even tried to request them, but Eldreth, flustered, kept falling back on hymns. Nevertheless, she tends not to pay much attention to the presenter's argument about, for example, different types of mountain music, for which she is supplying the examples. Instead she responds to her own sense of what she feels like singing at a particular time, thereby dealing presenters some surprises. At the Festival of American Folklife, Hinson gave an extended comment on Eldreth's humorous songs picked up from early records, "Ticklish Reuben" and "Snoops the Lawyer"; but when he asked which of them she wanted to do, she responded, "What Am I Living For?" Hinson then had to accommodate her and explain to the audience what was going on: "OK, that's not a ballad, but go ahead." At an Elderhostel workshop with Greene, an audience member asked Eldreth about her own compositions. She started looking in a notebook for the words to one of her own songs, answering some other questions at the same time, and
then came out with “Voice from the Tombs.” Again, presenter Greene had to offer a quick reframing for the audience: “Now she did switch gears on you. That’s an old hymn.” In order to do her best as a singer, Eldreth evidently feels that she needs to attend (as she does when singing at home) to her own spontaneous sense of what she is ready to sing or what appeals to her at the moment. She usually accommodates presenters’ requests, but her frame of performance, rather than theirs of demonstration, determines her choice of the next song when a conflict arises. I noted a similar tendency on Eldreth’s part to subtly take charge of our interviews and treat them as performances, not mere song-collecting sessions. When she was in good voice and felt like singing, she would gradually squeeze out my questions about the songs, offering only a brief reply before launching into another tune. Conversely, Eldreth always expressed reluctance to have me record her if she was hoarse or otherwise felt that she was not in her best voice. Since I tended, obtusely, to insist, she usually eventually agreed to be recorded, but always with the disclaimer that the resultant tape would be suitable “just to get the words.”

When observing others, Eldreth also has a strong predilection to identify a borderline or laminated (see Goffman 1974:157) activity as a performance rather than a demonstration. Cratis Williams frequently gave a lecture about Appalachian speech, in which he demonstrated the aesthetic capacities of the dialect by telling “The Three Little Pigs.” Since this was a demonstration, however, he usually told about only one or two pigs and then broke off, advising the audience to fill in the rest for themselves. Eldreth performed on the same program once and gives her story of their interaction a different rhetorical spin:

Yeah, I knew Cratis, and I sang . . . I’s singing at Boone once and I took my Momma with me! And it just tickled her so good. He was . . . he’s a-telling us the story of the three little pigs, you know. And, uh, he just told the story of two of ‘em and then when he just told the two and never mentioned the other ‘un, I hollered right . . . right in the whole audience. I said, “Mr. Williams, what happened to the third little pig?” [laughs]. I got the awfallest cheering [laughs]. And he said, “I’ll tell you, Mrs. Eldreth,” he said, “I’ll tell you what happened to the third little pig the next time I tell the story” [laughs]. Oh, it tickled Momma. Momma said, “I’d a never thought you’d a said that!”

Williams was a masterful storyteller; when I saw a tape of this lecture, I, like Eldreth and the audience present along with her, was terribly disappointed when he stopped. Notably, however, in light of her own resistance to the demonstration frame, Eldreth apparently never realized (or completely forgot) that Williams had claimed to be demonstrating, and she thus interpreted his breaking off in midstory as a breach of performance conventions.

While enjoying the opportunity to perform and the rewards of attention and praise for her singing skill, in other respects Eldreth refuses to treat performance
as seriously as one might expect. She explicitly tells people, “I don’t claim to be a perfect singer.” Even considering the local convention of modest disclaimers of ability, Eldreth appears to maintain reasonable expectations of herself. She sings well enough for church, as well as her grandmother did, and she does not need to approximate a recording star to feel confident about appearing on stage. She is similarly casual about rehearsal (in parallel with the model of church choir rehearsals). When she and Reid perform together, Reid insists on a sung practice beforehand. Eldreth is content to think about the songs she plans to sing and possibly to sing them around the house (not necessarily in full voice) and to write them down in a book as a way of going over the words. Having thus prepared, however, she may sing entirely different songs when she gets on stage. If she feels like singing a particular song, she does not worry about whether she has rehearsed it.

Eldreth similarly always agrees to a future performance conditionally, “Good Lord willing,” and tells the organizers to call her back and remind her. She thinks about audience expectations to the extent that she is concerned not to offend anyone. Eldreth mentioned that she really likes “A Little Girl’s Prayer,” but, because it deals with the way children are hurt by divorce, she says, “They’s so many places I won’t sing it for fear there might be a divorced person there and hurt their feelings.” She likewise talks with some distress about singing “The Fair Maiden,” in which the cowboy laments, “Those redskins have murdered my poor darling wife,” and later learning that there had been several Native Americans in the audience. Even for events arranged months in advance, however, she gives precedence to newly arisen obligations to family members over prior agreements to perform. She even told me about “slipping out” of a performance once when she just did not feel like singing, going home without telling anyone and evidencing no concern about the unanticipated gap she thus left in the program.

Ultimately, Eldreth insists upon her own definition of the frame in operation, turning the opportunities offered by folklorists into what she needs them to be, which may or may not be performance for its own sake. The World Music Institute concert on “The Roots of Country Music” was held in a large church in New York City, so Eldreth interpreted it as a religious activity and behaved accordingly: “I was in the church, you see, singing in the church. I felt like it was just like I was singing in my home church.” “I met a lot of people up there that I really loved, just a-seeing ’em and talking to ’em and singing for ’em . . . and testifying, I brought a lot of tears.” Interestingly, this frame “transgression” proved very successful as performance. Hinson reports that the audience loved what she did and loved her. In effect, her sincerity in breaking the performance and demonstration frames to follow her religious impulse actually resulted in a more effective demonstration of the kind of singing she would do at home and thus a more effective performance. Similarly, when a group of international teenagers was brought to Eldreth’s house to hear her sing and, presumably, to see how mountain folks live, Eldreth baked cakes, bought drinks, insisted that the
visitors sing with her, and turned the event into a party of which she was the hostess rather than a study of Appalachia for which she was an exhibit. In talking about her performances, also, Eldreth casts them in terms favorable to her sense of self. Of the school and Elderhostel performances that she especially enjoys, Eldreth remarks, “That’s my pride and joy . . . is to be where young’uns is at or elderly people,” strategically casting herself again as the person with power to do good for others, even though the senior citizens who attend Elderhostels are wealthy, well educated, and now often younger than Eldreth herself. Asked to reflect on all her performing, she is likely to say something like “I guess that’s my life, singing and making others happy. Just something I like to do.”

Eldreth has good reason to represent her performances as a form of service rather than a search for fame. The attention and publicity she has received have occasioned some jealousy and suspicion, particularly among other women her age. The story that stuck in my mind after our first conversation in Washington concerned a visit Eldreth paid to her sister Ruby after returning from her trip to New York a few months earlier. The phone rang and Ruby, looking significantly at her sister, told the caller, “It’s OK. You can come over. She’s not a bit proud.” Eldreth’s trips and awards make appealing human interest stories for the local newspapers. These media thereby effectively brag on her part, inspiring others to use the same medium to put her back in her place:

Momma told me, said | told me about some of my sisters, said that they was going to take that—they had the picture, you know, and I didn’t have it—said they was gonna take that picture and have it put in the Skyland Post. Said that people would see how I looked back when I was trying to take care of the family and everything and the difference it was then to today. And I said, “Momma, honey, it wouldn’t have worried me one bit. I would not have cared,” I said, “because everybody knows just how hard I worked and what I went through with.” I said, “It would’ve been fine if they’d wanted to put it in the Skyland Post. I wouldn’t have cared a bit.”

When word got around that I was writing a book about Eldreth and her singing, I also heard back indirectly that another older woman in the community had complained, “I know those old songs, too.” While in earlier chapters we have seen how older women could eschew competition and offer each other crucial social support, fame beyond the community can evidently revive old jealousies. Thus, Eldreth takes pains to insist that she is not seeking fame and to enlist sympathetic listeners like me as witnesses to the purity of her intentions:

I always felt like that, uh, I guess that’s silly, but I did, I always felt like that . . . I didn’t want people to think that I was . . . trying, you know, trying to show myself. You know what I mean? I mean, like, now, I didn’t want people to, oh, give me credit for all these things that I was a-doing. I just | it was some way | it was just
that I . . . I didn’t want to be bragged on, and all that. I always felt like that, “I’m not that . . . famous and I just | I’m just me.” Now that’s just the way I’ve always felt. I never did try | want somebody to think | look at me as I was . . . special or famous.

When Eldreth talks about her public performances, she never dwells on how well she did or did not sing. Rather she comes back again and again to audience response, to the things people said or did that tell her they were pleased or amused, to the laughter, teasing, compliments, and hugs. Her definition of a good performance, here as in church, is an effective performance, one that evokes the response she hopes for. Public performances enable Eldreth to receive confirmation of her abilities as a singer and entertainer in ways not available to her when singing for herself or a few grandchildren at home or even when offering a solo in church. She controls these public interactions, however, ensuring a positive result and protecting herself by enacting and interpreting them in her own terms. To the extent that she wants to be acknowledged as a skilled musical performer, she rejects framing that treats her as a mere example for someone else’s argument. To the extent that she earnestly desires her music to benefit others (and that she needs to deflect criticism of herself as a fame-seeker), she frames performance as service. In effect, Eldreth mobilizes outsiders (who may think they are doing something quite different, like learning about Appalachian “folk” singing) to affirm her identity as a singer in the community terms that matter most to her.

Conclusions

Consideration of Eldreth’s singing—both practice and repertoire—throws into relief the paradoxes inherent in trying to make sense of her as “an Appalachian woman.” In some respects, the discourses and practices upon which she relies for self-definition are remarkably congruent with conceptions of the region as culturally distinct (rather than historically and economically connected to the rest of the nation); in others, apparent congruence hides ironic divergence; in others still, she actively rejects attempts so to type her. Her repertoire of songs demonstrates the supposedly isolated region’s lack of isolation, illustrating the case that antiromantic empiricists (first in folklore and subsequently in history) have been building for the past thirty years. She learned new songs over a span of six decades, and the songs that seem oldest to her often prove to be popular compositions from the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. At the same time, however, the structure of feeling that directed her repertoire choices, her devotion to the melancholy longing for an ideal agrarian past that to her signals an “old” song, ironically parallels early twentieth-century folklorists’ myopia in searching the mountains for old English ballads and rejecting newer works as contaminations. The very forces of commercialization that in fact provided her
with many of her most precious songs simultaneously deprived her of any opportunity to use her talent for singing and for collecting a repertoire to foster sociable interactions. I seek to destabilize any lingering image of Eldreth as some sort of pristine repository of ancient tradition, even though she in part thinks of herself that way, possibly because of the attention folklorists have paid to her and her repertoire.

As a singer, Eldreth internalized those local discourses that would have made instrumental proficiency or secular performance scandalous for a religious woman and thus confined herself to vocal music and to singing most of her repertoire only for herself. Her large oral repertoire served, however, to help her get through the huge amounts of manual labor in the house and fields that were for her a woman’s lot and became practical adjuncts to her constant duties to soothe and amuse children. Church provided her a context in which to perform, to thus contribute to the essential religious experience of people she cares about, and to be appreciated for her talent. Once her children were grown, opportunities to expand upon her church singing, as in performing for funerals or in neighboring churches, built her a local reputation as a singer. Had she not coincidentally established contact with folklorists, it is hard to tell if she would ever have felt herself limited or have pined for further performance opportunities. Invited to sing publicly, Eldreth enjoys herself fully. She tends, however, to resist attempts to frame her singing as an example of “Appalachian culture,” preferring that it be seen simply as a good performance. She further capitalizes on her interactions with obviously educated and wealthy audiences to gently set herself up as their equal and thus contest the negative stereotyping of mountain folks. At the same time, however, she accedes to local critiques of those who seek fame and judges her performances modestly and joyfully according to how deeply she affects those who hear her sing.