



SONYA COHEN CRAMER

you've been a friend to me

RECORDINGS WITH ELIZABETH MITCHELL & DANIEL LITTLETON,
LAST FOREVER, AND THE SEEGER FAMILY



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1. OH, BLUE (2:07)

© 1992 Rounder Records, under license from Craft Recordings, a Division of Concord Music Group, Inc.

2. A SQUIRREL IS A PRETTY THING (1:39)

(Arr. by Ruth Crawford Seeger) © 1992 Rounder Records, under license from Craft Recordings, a Division of Concord Music Group, Inc.

3. WHEN I WAS MOST BEAUTIFUL (2:54)

(Original words in Japanese by Noriko Ibaragi – Music by Pete Seeger/Melody Trails, Inc., BMI)

© 2008 Applesseed Recordings. From the CD Pete Seeger At 89 courtesy of Applesseed Recordings.

4. HIDE AND SEEK (3:24)

(Dick Connette/Spirit One Music Crescendo o/b/o Two Fourteen Music, BMI)

© 1997 StorySound Records. Courtesy of StorySound Records.

5. IN THE PINES (2:36)

(Arr. by Dick Connette/Spirit One Music Crescendo o/b/o Two Fourteen Music, BMI)

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6. LOUIS COLLINS/SPIKE DRIVER BLUES (3:49)

(Arr. by John Hurt/Wynwood Music Co. Inc., BMI – The Adage Group, LLC o/b/o Mississippi John Hurt Music, Inc., BMI) © 2000 StorySound Records. Courtesy of StorySound Records.

7. ALL FOR YOU (5:47)

(Dick Connette/Spirit One Music Crescendo o/b/o Two Fourteen Music, BMI)

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8. YOU'VE BEEN A FRIEND TO ME (3:26)

(William S. Hays) © 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

9. BLACK JACK DAVEY (5:28)

© 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

10. NO PLACE TO FALL (3:12)

(Townes Van Zandt/Ruminating Music o/b/o JTVZ Music, ASCAP – Ruminating Music o/b/o Katie Bell Music, ASCAP – Ruminating Music o/b/o Will Van Zandt Publishing, ASCAP)

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11. OH THE WIND AND RAIN (3:37)

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12. THE BLACKSMITH (3:17)

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13. SINGING MY TROUBLES AWAY (2:59)

(Alton Delmore – Rabon Delmore/Vidor Publications, Inc., BMI)

© 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

14. LOWLANDS (5:04)

© 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

15. THE BLACKEST CROW (2:15)

© 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

BONUS TRACKS

16. SIDEWALK WILDFLOWER (4:48)

(Wesleyan Women's Singer/Songwriter Collective, 1986)

(Sonya Cohen Cramer/Sonya Cohen Cramer Music, BMI) © 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

17. A LIFE THAT'S GOOD (home recording, 2015) (3:10)

(Ashley Monroe – Sarah Siskind/Reynsong Publishing Corp. o/b/o Ayden Publishing, BMI – Reynsong Publishing Corp., BMI – Round Hill Works, BMI – Sony/ATV Tree Publishing, BMI)

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Produced by Reid Cramer, Dick Connette, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Daniel Littleton

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roots and wings

REID CRAMER

This is a collection of recordings featuring the singing of Sonya Cohen Cramer (1965–2015). With a clarity of voice and an appreciation for the depth and breadth of folk music, Sonya made fresh sounds out of the oldest songs of the American musical canon.

Raised in a family with deep musical and artistic roots, Sonya was the daughter of John Cohen, a photographer, filmmaker, and founding member of the folk revival string band The New Lost City Ramblers, and Penny Seeger—a potter, occasional singer, and sister of folk musicians Mike, Peggy, and Pete Seeger. Sonya’s grandparents were the seminal musicologist Charles Seeger and the modernist composer and folk music specialist Ruth Crawford Seeger. Through her own singing, Sonya uniquely carried on her family’s multigenerational celebration and elevation of folk songs and traditional music.

Just a week after Sonya was born, her parents took her to the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, where she was introduced to extended family, including her godparents Toshi Seeger and Moe Asch, the founder of Folkways Records. As her father snapped photos in a backstage tent, she was cradled by the old-time musicians Roscoe Holcomb and Eck Robertson. Her Uncle Pete dedicated one of the festival’s evening performances to her and asked everyone to “sing with the idea that they are singing to a new member of the human race.” After playing a recording of newborn Sonya gurgling, and calling it “universal folk music,” he said, “This little baby is wondering what kind of a world it’s coming into. You and I got to help think about it too.” Later that night, Dylan went electric.

Sonya grew up in an old farmhouse at Tompkins Corners in Putnam Valley, NY, which her parents filled with creative projects, crafts, and music. With a steady stream of visits by musicians and performers—and an ample collection of Folkways



above: Newborn Sonya backstage at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, with Roscoe Holcomb and Eck Robertson (photo by John Cohen)

top right: Moe Asch and Toshi Seeger (photo by John Cohen)

bottom right: Mother Penny, Toshi, Charles, and Pete Seeger (photo by John Cohen)

**“This little baby is wondering
what kind of a world it’s
coming into. You and I got
to help think about it too.”**

— Pete Seeger



records to play in the house—Sonya was exposed to a wide range of musical styles. She was often taken along to shows at the Towne Crier Café, then located in nearby Beekman, NY, where she and her younger brother Rufus sometimes ended the evening curled up on a comfortable pile of coats. The Great Hudson River Revival—the annual music and environmental advocacy festival started by her family—was a highlight of every summer, as were Hudson River sails on the sloop *Clearwater*. Encouraged to cast a wide net with her ears and eyes, Sonya found inspiration in many singers, songs, and artistic traditions.

Throughout her life, Sonya sang, performed, and recorded a range of original, folk, and world music—including Balkan singing, Carnatic music of South India, and Anglo-American traditional songs and ballads. As her own style unfolded, Sonya delighted in the process of singing, appreciating its intimacy, nuance, and the many ways that it brings people together. Through listening and singing, she was herself a participant in the folk process. Like her family, she cared about where old tunes and stories came from, and she valued the contributions of the music-makers and the keepers of culture. She was also moved by the innovative performers who build on these traditions in their own ways, and she internalized the insight that traditional songs don't have definitive versions, but they inspire and endure when sung anew by the next generation.

Mostly Sonya sang informally at home, relying on her own tattered songbook of collected lyrics that were meaningful to her. She enjoyed singing for herself, but she also worked diligently on her vocal technique. She practiced throughout the house, accompanying herself variously on piano, guitar, dulcimer, or shruti box. Performing for an audience was a special occasion and offered the chance to make an emotional connection. And when she sang to record, her homespun yet carefully crafted approach reflected an ease of enjoyment and a precision of folk virtuosity that could make songs feel simultaneously accessible and special.

The songs and ballads included on this record reflect the full arc of Sonya's musical life. The first two selections are from a family project that recorded the songs of her grandmother's influential songbooks—*American Folk Songs for Christmas* and *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (Rounder Records, 1989/1992). Although Ruth Crawford Seeger passed away well before Sonya was born, these innovative transcriptions of field recordings were foundational elements of the Seeger family's musical legacy. It was a special experience for Sonya to be able to sing and record them with her extended family of cousins, aunts, uncles, brother Rufus and her mother Penny. On the next track, Sonya is accompanied by her Uncle Pete on guitar, performing the haunting anti-war song "When I Was Most Beautiful," a translation of a Japanese



poem that Pete originally set to music in 1969. This recording originally appeared on the Grammy-winning *Pete Seeger at 89* (Appleseed Recordings, 2008). Sonya and Pete also performed the song together at the Library of Congress in 2007.

Sonya was the long-time vocalist for a musical project called Last Forever, which presented the songs and arrangements of composer Dick Connette. Using a musical vocabulary of American folk music and performing as an ensemble, with Sonya's singular voice accompanied by strings, harmonium, percussion, and occasionally horns and woodwinds, Last Forever created new songs out of the old. Last Forever released a self-titled album for Nonesuch Records, which *New York Times* music critic Stephen Holden called one of the top ten albums of the year for 1997, writing that Sonya's "plain, twangy voice embodies the spirit of Mr. Connette's austere, beautifully constructed rural ballads. A haunting evocation of American prairie life in an era before television." Two tracks from that release, "Hide and Seek" and "In the Pines," are included here. Two more tracks come from the 2000 Nonesuch release, *Trainfare Home*: the original tune "All for You," as well as the composition "Louis Collins/Spike Driver Blues," which commemorates the spirit and style of



Singing for friends on her 50th (photo by Sam Kittner)

Mississippi John Hurt. Later albums by Last Forever, *No Place Like Home* (2013) and *Acres of Diamonds* (2015), appeared on StorySound Records.

Sonya's lifelong affinity for singing traditional ballads inspired a recording session with her friends Elizabeth Mitchell and Daniel Littleton. In October 2014, they came down from their home in Woodstock, NY, to visit Sonya in Takoma Park, MD, and arranged for recording time at Charlie Pilzer's nearby sound studio. Sonya particularly enjoyed crafting her own treatment for some classic old-time ballads, like "Black Jack Davey," "Oh the Wind and Rain," and "Lowlands," and offering up new interpretations of several 20th-century gems. The title track of this album, "You've Been a Friend to Me," was originally published as sheet music in 1858 and made widely known through a 1936 recording by the Carter Family. In the last year of Sonya's life, the song became a personal anthem as she navigated the challenges of cancer. She sang it to a large group of friends assembled to celebrate her 50th birthday. She passed away a few months later.

*Oh I'll never forget you, wherever I roam, wherever you may be,
If ever I have had a friend, you've been that friend to me.*



Beyond the musical collaborations that appear on this release, Sonya sang with Ethel Raim, Gary Lucas, Jeb Loy Nichols, and Suzzy and Maggie Roche, among others. Her musical collaborator Dick Connette observed that Sonya was “truly a singer’s singer. She was admired by many of her contemporaries, including Jeff Buckley, Loudon Wainwright III, Geoff Muldaur, Joe Boyd, Meredith Monk, and Kate and Anna McGarrigle. As far as it can be captured in her various recordings, the beautiful and sweet spirit of her song lives on.”

Alongside her singing, Sonya ably raised two children with her husband Reid (that’s me) and became an influential graphic designer. She produced some of her most notable work in collaboration with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the label founded by her godfather Moe Asch’s Folkways Records and associated with the music of her father and her Seeger uncles and aunt. Tying together her interests in music and art, she designed 64 record packages of folk and world music for Smithsonian Folkways, including Grammy-nominated releases by Elizabeth Mitchell and *The Music of Central Asia* series. Sonya served as art director for *The Sounding Joy: Christmas Songs In and Out of the Ruth Crawford Seeger Songbook* (2013), a project that helped more people discover her grandmother’s legacy through the ethereal performances of Elizabeth Mitchell and Friends.

As the songs of this album reveal, Sonya could create beautiful and moving music with her voice. She shared her family’s respect for the artistry and power of traditional music and their belief that the participatory nature of singing and music-making could be a catalyst for cultural understanding—and even social change. Sonya’s collaborative and folk-infused approach to music were shaped by the roots of her family tree, but the radiating sound of her voice was distinctly her own.

Sonya didn’t give much thought to her role at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, but she thoughtfully responded when asked to offer a statement to commemorate the 50th anniversary of that festival.

I was only a few days old when my parents jumped into their VW bug and drove directly from the New York City hospital where I was born to Newport, Rhode Island, for the festival. Evidently, my Uncle Pete looked at my little baby self and thought he would dedicate that evening's concert to me, because I represented the future. I guess I did back then. A few days ago, I turned 50, and the future has shifted, and the time in between has become the past.

But there's always a future, and that's what babies make us imagine and feel hopeful for. In 1965 Pete asked everyone at the Newport festival to think about how to make a better future for that tiny newborn child that was me, and for all the babies of the new generation. He asked performers and audiences alike to share his hopeful vision of a future that was safer, cleaner, more sustainable, more fair, and more just. He asked them to work together and seek changes for the better.

Today there are still babies being born and hopes being hoped. We haven't changed that much. We've made a lot of progress, and there have been many, many changes for the better; thanks in no small part to the very people who were right there 50 years ago. But there's still so much to do.

Pete knew that people can do great things when they work together. It's like harmony, or a chorus, both of which he loved his audiences to sing. Every small part adds up, step by step.

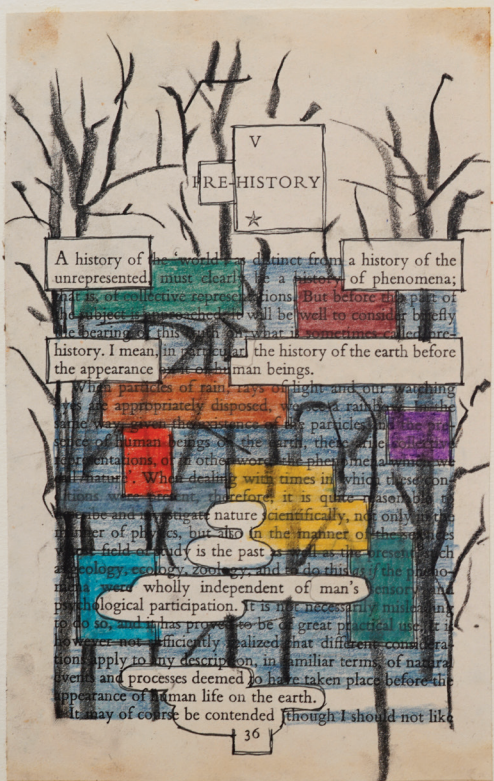
Pete also never stopped loving children and working on their behalf and believing in their future. His last recording was called Tomorrow's Children, made with a class of 4th and 5th graders at his local elementary school in Beacon, NY.

As I look at my own kids today, I have ardent hopes for their future. I encourage them to play their part in making that future, so it becomes safer, cleaner, sustainable, fair, and more just. We all can contribute to that hopeful vision of the future, just as Pete imagined when he shared my first song in Newport 50 years ago.

Peace be with every one of you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sonya". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

July 18, 2015



V

PRE-HISTORY

☆

A history of the world is distinct from a history of the unrepresented, must clearly be a history of phenomena; that is, of collective representations. But before this part of the subject is approached, we will best well to consider briefly the bearing of this upon what is sometimes called pre-history. I mean, in particular, the history of the earth before the appearance of human beings.

When particles of rain, rays of light, and our watching eyes are appropriately disposed, we see a rainbow. In the same way, given the existence of the particles and the presence of human beings on the earth, there arise collective representations, or, in other words, the phenomena which we call nature. When dealing with times in which these conditions were absent, therefore, it is quite reasonable to describe and investigate nature scientifically, not only in the manner of physics, but also in the manner of the sciences of the field of study is the past as well as the present, such as geology, ecology, zoology, and so do this history of the phenomena were wholly independent of man's sensory and psychological participation. It is not necessarily misleading to do so, and it has proved to be of great practical use; it is however not sufficiently realized that different considerations apply to any description, in familiar terms, of natural events and processes deemed to have taken place before the appearance of human life on the earth.

It may of course be contended though I should not like

Pre-history

the task) that some animals enjoy representations sufficiently coherent to set up a phenomenal whole, which could be called 'a world' or 'nature'. But this does not really assist much. For, although animals appeared on earth before man, it is certainly not *their* world or nature which geology, for instance, describes; and even so there remains the whole vast panorama of pre-history which is assumed to have preceded the emergence on this planet of sentient life of any description.

Yet by combining geology, biology and geology and omitting physics and physiology, such descriptions are continually offered to us and form, I suppose, a recognized part of the education of most children to-day. It can do no harm to recall occasionally that the prehistoric evolution of the earth, as it is described for example in the early chapters of H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*, was not merely never seen. It never occurred. Something no doubt occurred, and what is really being propounded by such popular writers, and, as far as I am aware, by the text-books on which they rely, is this: That at that time the unrepresented was behaving in such a way that, if human beings with the collective representations characteristic of the last few centuries of western civilization had been there, the things described would also have been there.

● This is not quite the same thing. It needs, I should have thought, to be considered in connection with another fact, namely, that when attention is expressly directed to the history of the unrepresented (as in calculations of the age of the earth based on radio activity), it is invariably assumed that the behaviour of the unrepresented has remained fundamentally unchanged. Moreover (and this is, to my mind, more important), for those hypothetical human beings with collective representations characteristic of the last few centuries of western civilization we might choose to substitute other human beings—those, for instance, who lived one or two or three or more thousand years ago. We should then have to write a different pre-history altogether.

sonya cohen and last forever

DICK CONNETTE



In 1974 I moved to downtown NYC to try and become a new music composer. But sometime in the mid-80s, I'd had enough of the avant-garde, and started researching, then working with, then writing songs and music based on traditional American folk. It got to be 1991 and I needed a singer. I tried advertising in the *Village Voice*. That didn't work. So I started asking around. A friend of a friend was married to a woman who knew John Cohen. John was a New Lost City Rambler—maybe he knew somebody. I tracked John down and told him what I was up to and what I was looking for, and he said he thought his daughter would be right for the job. I had a hard time taking that seriously—I mean, c'mon, his daughter?! I told him to hold on, slow down, I'd send him a cassette of my music—maybe once he'd had a listen, other singers would come to mind. He called back a week later and said that now he'd heard the music, he was sure his daughter was right for the job. What I didn't know was that Sonya was right there in Putnam Valley, visiting her pop (as she called him), listening in on his side of the conversation, and hopping up and down and pointing to herself. Anyway, I gave up and gave in and set up a meeting with Sonya, who was living in Brooklyn.

We got together in my West Village apartment. She played me a couple tracks that she'd sung on from Seeger family folk song collections. She played me a recording she'd made in college of one of her own songs. It sounded strong and I told her that if she sang with me, I'd also be open to having her contribute as a composer. She said she wasn't interested in that. In fact, she said what she really wanted to do was sing backup. I told her she was out of luck because I needed a lead. To give her some idea of my favorite kind of folk, without telling her what it was, I played her an obscure field recording from the Georgia Sea Islands. Her response was "Janie Hunter—I *love* Janie Hunter!" At the time, I didn't really know what all to make

of that—but it left an impression. We wrapped it up, and I gave her some of my songs to work on. About a week later, she came back and we ran them through. You know what? She was right for the job. I proposed that we start rehearsing and try to line up some gigs. That was fine with her. I thought, she doesn't know what she's getting herself into.

A few months later we had our debut at The Club at La MaMa. La MaMa had been an East Village experimental outpost for decades—it was a classy gig, in a downtown sort of way. And it turned out great, one of those special shows that work in ways that aren't expected and can't be planned for. The Club was packed, and the audience was with us all the way. They wouldn't let us leave until we'd exhausted our repertoire. Sonya's mother came to the show and told me she'd never heard her daughter sing so much. But here's the thing, and it was astounding: Sonya's stage presence was remarkably unstagey. She gave off the illusion (or was it?) of unstudied naturalness. She was matter-of-fact, yet somehow warm, confiding, intimate. It didn't matter where the songs came from—me, the Carter Family, or, yes, Janie Hunter—they lived in her and came to life through her. I had thought she didn't know what she was getting into. Turned out it was me.

The group that played The Club at La MaMa was called Last Forever. And while that project was rooted in American traditional music, I was a composer, not some kind of folkie. What I was interested in was finding new ways of framing and expressing those vernacular materials that I found so peculiarly and particularly moving. The instrumentation was purposefully contrarian-idiosyncratic. To evoke classic folk sounds of plucked and bowed strings and wheezing reeds, I replaced guitar, banjo, and mandolin with spinet (a sort of a harpsichord) and hammer dulcimer. A harmonium stood in for harmonica and accordion. A violin was the sole compromise fiddle crossover. The music itself was all written out—no running changes, no head arrangements. Even the vocals had every note specified—pitch,

rhythm, and phrasing all precisely determined.

Sonya came at it and to it from a very different, even opposite, angle. She grew up with this kind of music—it was in her blood. American folk-style singing and playing was the family business. She had also studied Bulgarian and South Indian Carnatic vocal techniques, both of which informed her singular, personal approach to song interpretation. When Sonya joined the group, a lot of material had already been developed, and, as the vocal parts were all strictly set, she took what she called a plug'n'play approach. But that changed. I came to rely upon Sonya to come up with her own take on whatever I handed her. Over the years I kept discovering new strengths in her expressive singing that expansively informed the music that Last Forever could make. But it was more than just music. She had a spirit and an attitude, a mind and a heart, that I found most compelling, and I started writing lyrics based on my sense of who Sonya was and what she would want to put out in the world.

With Sonya, Last Forever got off to a great start, and over the next year or so we rehearsed and performed regularly and began recording. Then one day she came in and told me she'd be moving to Austin with Reid, who would be pursuing graduate studies at the University of Texas. I wasn't at all ready for that and even began to cry a little. The next time we met, she brought me a collage she had crafted, with images that resonated with and reflected upon the music we were making together. The collage was a kind of pledge, and she promised that even though she was moving away, she was still committed to working together. We couldn't really perform much anymore, but whenever she could get to New York, we kept up the recording. We were fortunate enough to get signed by Nonesuch, and our first album came out in 1997. Sonya was now public, and people took notice. Loudon Wainwright III became a fan. So did Kate McGarrigle and Geoff Muldaur. Suzzy and Maggie Roche liked her so much they brought her in on their *Zero Church*

project—she finally got to be a backup singer! And, perhaps best of all, we shared a bill at St. Ann's in Brooklyn with Jeff Buckley, who immediately fixed on Sonya and was way into what she was up to.

We made a second album, which came out in 2000, and worked up a bunch more material for a 2002 show at Merkin Hall in NYC, featuring a string quartet and a five-piece rhythm section. Sonya was absolutely glowing. We didn't know it at the time, but that was our last show—somehow *Last Forever* got put on hold. A couple years before, Sonya had ideas about our future. She said our first album was a strong statement, and our second album built on those strengths, but our third album would be luminous. We never did make that third album, not really, although I did finally pull together a CD out of all our last studio sessions. Later it occurred to me that what turned out to be truly luminous was the life Sonya made in Takoma Park with Reid and her two children, Dio and Gabel. The last time I saw her we sat together in a public park in New York, and from her laptop she played me some songs she was recording with Liz and Daniel. I kept asking for more, and she kept playing them until she ran out. It was like our first show at La MaMa, only I was the audience, and it was me that couldn't get enough. Well, I didn't get enough. In some ways Sonya was my dearest friend and closest companion, and I know that I'll never be able to make music quite like that ever again.

New York City
April 2023



Photo shoot in the studio with Last Forever (photo by Patti Perret)





Maine coast watercolor



the stars and the elements

ELIZABETH MITCHELL LITTLETON

When I first met Sonya at the offices of Smithsonian Folkways, I didn't know anything about her family legacy or her own profound musical gifts. She just appeared as a radiant and beautiful woman, who I knew had two young children at home but came in person to talk about the art and design for my first album with the label. As she did at so many meetings that followed, Sonya breezed into the room with her warm smile, crystal-clear eyes, golden locks, bags of almonds and dried fruit, and her head and portfolio full of brilliant ideas. I sat down at a table with Sonya and the Folkways production manager, Mary Monseur, and my life changed forever.

It wasn't until after we began working together on *You Are My Little Bird* that I realized it was her singing on the Seeger Family recordings that I cherished, and then I heard the revelation that was her voice on the Last Forever songs. Once I heard Sonya sing, I had a hard time accepting the fact that I was releasing an album of music for Folkways that Sonya was designing, and not the other way around! So, this release means a lot to me, as an act of correction, of logic and reason prevailing, and as a way for Sonya's glorious and exquisite voice to be shared, especially within the context of the Smithsonian Folkways story.

Yet on the day we first met in 2006, Sonya greeted me at the doorway of what felt like an enchanted portal and was my guide for the next nine years. During this time, we collaborated on six records, including an album that was released three years after Sonya's passing.

I can't speak for the other artists who worked with her, but for me, Sonya was much more than a designer. She was a co-conspirator, confidante, anchor, and a particularly reassuring compass. If Sonya thought I was going the right direction, then I felt confidence in following that path. If I doubted myself, felt unworthy or out of my league, Sonya was right there in my ear telling me to keep going. She kept

(photo by Elizabeth Mitchell Littleton)

her eyes on the prize and helped me to center my purpose, which became a shared endeavor we both cared deeply about. Our work together was to create beautiful collections of music for children, and to continue the legacy that her family had helped to create. We sought to make sure that in the age of earbuds and iPods, families would still be encouraged to feel the tangible, timeless global connection that singing a folk song can bring.

Sonya encouraged me to explore the work of her grandmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, a modernist composer who authored several songbooks of folk music for children. I think we were both inspired by Ruth's ability to entwine her life as a mother with her life as an artist, to breathe artistic inspiration into our daily practice of parenting, and to speak to the experience of being a parent through our art.

There was a time in our working relationship that Sonya and I were so in sync that she chose my album title, suggesting the name "Little Seed" for my Woody Guthrie tribute album at the beginning of one of our meetings, and then showing me several mockups that she had already prepared for what the cover could look like, each one more perfect than the next. And then for the record we made exploring the Ruth Crawford Seeger Christmas songbook, Sonya suggested the title "When the Stars and the Elements Shall Tremble with Glee"—a lyric from the song "Cherry Tree Carol." I resisted this idea, probably thinking the marketing department would have my head. Instead, we settled on the title *The Sounding Joy*. It became a joyous project, filled with beautiful songs performed by a collective of friends and musical partners, but when I think of this album now, her title is the one in my mind.

I am so grateful that we gathered on that October weekend in 2014 and sang the songs that you hear within this collection. I had always wanted to sing with Sonya, and the stars finally aligned to make it happen. I continue to draw inspiration from those days and from our years of friendship and collaboration. As I

brought these tracks to what feels like completion—adding fiddles and percussion and more to the very spare recordings we made together that day—Sonya was right there in my ears and heart, engaged in the process and guiding me along. It is an honor to be a small part of Sonya's story and to share these recordings with all of you now. The stars and the elements are surely trembling with glee.

Woodstock, NY
April 2023



Judd Foundation, NYC, 2015
(photo by Dio Cramer)

recording ballads

DANIEL LITTLETON



There was no artifice in Sonya's songs, ever. There was no distance between her and her music that was not mapped or beautifully expressed by the notes she alone could sing and the intention she brought to everything she did in her creative work. Her voice was a singular and rare thing, it carried such grace and depth within it. She knew songs old as rivers and was still listening for new ones. Sonya had profound knowledge of oral tradition, of the preciousness of songs being carried and passed on across generations and cultures. And she was rebellious, too, not bound by traditionalism (in any doctrinaire way) with regard to her own approach to life, art, and music. When Sonya found out that we were friends and collaborators with the great Michael Hurley, she told me that the *Have Moicy* album by the Holy Modal Rounders was her punk rock when she was a kid. I wish we had done one of those tunes, "Slurf Song," "Sweet Lucy," or "Griselda." It would have been fantastic! But the more serious point I am making is simply that Sonya's gift went beyond borders and found connection, harmony, and continuity within the depths of her own unorthodox journey.

When the idea of collaborating on this project came along, Sonya was quite ill, and she did not have the lung capacity to sing in the way she once had, but you would never know this from listening to these recordings. We simply played quietly around her dining room table, in her living room, and then at Charlie Pilzer's Takoma Park studio, and this sublime sound arose effortlessly into the air. We made some choices that were based on a shared love of the old English ballads, a reverence for her grandmother's extraordinary work, and an interest in the foundational drones that are the basis of Indian classical music and Celtic music, too.

In songs like "Lowlands" and especially in her unique interpretation of "Black Jack Davey," we explored the sense of timelessness that the bellows of a bagpipe

or a tamboura drone can conjure, and Sonya was right at home in such a wide-open sound world. All of us loved the Carter Family's classic rendering of "Black Jack Davey" and marveled at the driving, charming, up-tempo feel and almost cheerful harmonies juxtaposed with such a sad and sorrowful tale of love, passion, and betrayal. We decided to build the song around harmonium and fiddle, which required us to play the song at a slow tempo. Sonya's deeply emotional and riveting vocal is original. Her phrasing is unusual, patient, and skillfully rubato. Her understanding of the stakes of the song, its tragic choices and desperate hopes, brings such poignancy to the narrative, and through some feat of magic, she creates an incredible sense of suspense in the telling of the tale.

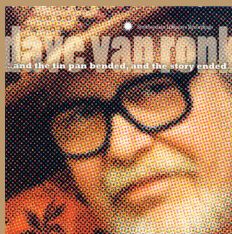
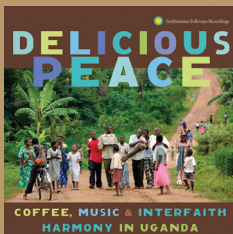
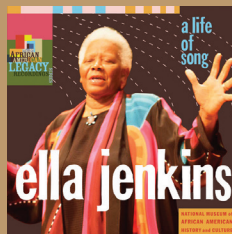
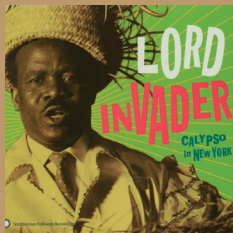
Sonya knew so much about traditional music from around the world, and so she knew many versions and variations of the songs we were considering. We talked about the many different versions of "The Blacksmith," and settled on some inspiration from Shirley Collins that was similar to a version Sonya remembered and was fond of. Again, in "The Blacksmith" Sonya navigates the strange rhythmic world of the old songs, where a deceptively simple phrase suddenly drops (or adds) a beat, and unless you know and trust in these subtle twists and turns in the music, it is easy to lose your way and get thrown off the trail. Of course the granddaughter of the great Ruth Crawford Seeger, the daughter of John Cohen and Penny Seeger, the niece of Pete, Mike, and Peggy Seeger, the wife of Reid, and the mother of Dio and Gabel would "know her song well before (she'd) starts singing." But her style and interpretive gift were all her own. Her tapestries were woven from a place where Appalachian music, South Indian classical music, and Celtic ballads all resonated with each other in a seamless and authentic way, and to hear her sing anywhere and at any time was profoundly moving. Writers, protectors, and players of songs knew, respected, and embraced Sonya because she was one of them. She did not make us, or anyone, feel intimidated by what she came from or what well she drew her water

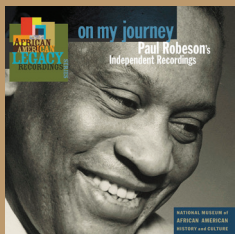
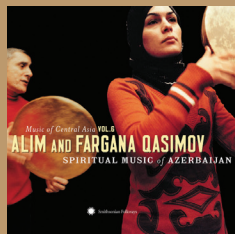
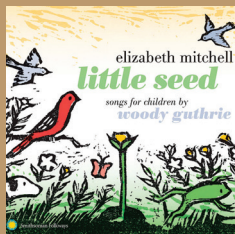
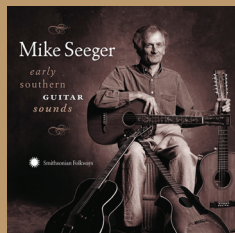
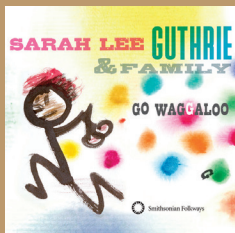
from. She just shared what she knew, and everyone around her received the benefit and the blessing of her knowledge and her gifts as a musician.

Playing and finding these songs together was a powerful, life-altering, and life-affirming experience for us. This music arose in the context of gathering with dear friends—kindred spirits—who recognized in each other a “place to fall,” as Townes Van Zandt once wrote. If you are reading this or listening to this wonderful album right now, wherever you are, our hope is that you will feel something like what I am clumsily trying to describe. The music of Sonya Cohen Cramer is impactful and nourishing, like the best conversations are, and it is a delight and a privilege to invite you to immerse yourself in her work and to share it with your loved ones. The songs we chose grew out of a shared love of songwriting, storytelling, and the unique power of music to speak to (and from) the otherwise ineffable depths of life and experience, the joy and the hardship of life, love, impermanence, family, friendship, and community. Sonya sang and lived from within those depths, and now at last these songs, the last ones she recorded, are offered to the world.

Woodstock, NY
April 2023

next spread: Selection
of Smithsonian Folkways
records designed by Sonya





track notes



I. OH, BLUE

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Penny Seeger Cohen, vocals
Recorded in 1991. From *Animal Folksongs for Children and Other People*. Mike, Peggy, Barbara & Penny Seeger with their children. Rounder Records 8023/24 1992

Sung here as a mother-daughter duet, this song about the passing of a beloved canine companion is believed to have originated in the Mississippi Valley in the late 19th century. Sonya's grandmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, wrote about the song and shared a musical transcription in her *American Folk Songs for Children* songbook (1948). A 1928 version of the song, "Old Dog Blue," by Jim Jackson was included in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, compiled by Harry Smith, and originally released by Folkways in 1952.

Sonya collage

2. A SQUIRREL IS A PRETTY THING

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Peggy Seeger, piano
Recorded in 1991. From *Animal Folksongs for Children and Other People*. Mike, Peggy, Barbara & Penny Seeger with their children. Rounder Records 8023/24 1992

Ruth Crawford Seeger included this song in her *Animal Folk Songs for Children* songbook (1950), citing the 1925 book *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs* by Dorothy Scarborough as a source. Aunt Peggy is playing the piano accompaniment written by her mother, who thought deeply about the challenge of capturing the essence of folk songs with musical notation. Ruth's biographer Judith Tick observed that her arrangements frequently flouted classical symmetry, and that this arrangement "enhances a somewhat limited tune by making a virtue of the bare bones of the melody and keeping it open-ended through the lack of final chord and the single resonating pitch" (*Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*, Oxford University Press, 2000). This is how Sonya sang it.

3. WHEN I WAS MOST BEAUTIFUL

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Pete Seeger; guitar
Recorded in 2007. From the CD *Pete Seeger at 89*, courtesy of Appleseed Recordings

In his book of songs and stories, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* (Sing Out Publications, 1993), Pete writes, “Touring Japan in 1967 I met a young professor, Yuzuru Katagiri, publishing a literary magazine in English (!). I’m a magazinaholic; I subscribed. Shortly after, I read this poem. I got permission to record it back then for Columbia Records. Don’t be scared off because it looks like a long song: it’s got four short verses, each slightly different from the other.” Pete believed in participatory singalongs, even for a complex song with an anti-war message such as this one, but he especially loved Sonya’s delicate solo vocals here. They performed the song together at the Library of Congress in 2007. This recording originally appeared on the Grammy-winning *Pete Seeger at 89* (Appleseed Recordings, 2008).

4. HIDE AND SEEK

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Dick Connette, spinet, piano, banjo; Carolyn Dutton, violin; Bill Ruyle, hammer dulcimer; harmonium, piano, snare drum, bass drum, tambourine; Erik Friedlander, cello; Abby Newton, cello, backing vocals
Recorded in 1997

As the vocalist for the chamber folk ensemble Last Forever, Sonya gave voice to Dick Connette’s compositions, which were animated by American folk traditions. This recording from the group’s first record plays with the unexpected wisdom and poignancy of nursery rhymes and children’s games, gospel, and prison work songs.

5. IN THE PINES

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Dick Connette, spinet; Carolyn Dutton, violin; Bill Ruyle, harmonium; Erik Friedlander, cello; James O'Connor, trumpet
Recorded in 1997

Drawing primary inspiration from the 1927 recording by the rural southern duo of Darby & Tarlton, but also drawing upon other recorded sources, Connette has rendered an original song from a folk fragment. Growing up Sonya heard Lead Belly's version of "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?" and then the spirited grunge version by Nirvana, but her plaintive vocals give the song its chilling edge.

6. LOUIS COLLINS/SPIKE DRIVER

BLUES

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Dick Connette, spinet; Jeff Berman, lap dulcimer; Marshall Coid, violin; Steve Elson, piccolo; Kevin Kuhn, 6- and 12-string acoustic guitars, mandolin
Recorded in 2000

This is a medley of two songs by the guitarist and singer Mississippi John Hurt, who was known for his gentle, confiding vocals and the delicate precision of his finger-picking technique, with its counterposed alternating bass and syncopated melody lines. He was born in 1894 and made his first commercial recordings in 1928. That was it for 35 years. He was eventually tracked down and convinced by Dick Spottswood and others to resume public performances. Sonya's father John Cohen collaborated with Ralph Rinzler and the Friends of Old Time Music to bring Hurt to New York City in 1963 for one of his first concerts up north, and he went on to become a prominent figure in the folk revival until his death in 1967. Through the wonders of production, this track features Sonya singing in multi-part harmony with herself.



7. ALL FOR YOU

Sonya Cohen, vocals; Dick Connette, spinet, harmonium; Marshall Coid, violin; Erik Friedlander, cello; Kevin Kuhn, 12-string electric guitar, 6-string acoustic guitar; Bill Ruyle, hammer dulcimer
Recorded in 2000

Originally released on Last Forever's *Trainfare Home* record, this song opens and closes with a traditional lullaby, whose melody provides a countertheme to the verse, chorus, and bridge. Dick offers a hat tip to Roger McGuinn and the groundbreaking electric transformations of the Byrds. Another hat tip goes to Dio, Sonya's daughter, whose birth inspired the song.

8. YOU'VE BEEN A FRIEND TO ME

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals, guitar; Daniel Littleton, acoustic guitar, vocals; Bill Vanaver, autoharp
Recorded in 2014

Long associated with Uncle Dave Macon and the Carter Family and their recordings in the 1920s and 1930s, this song was originally written in 1858 by William S. Hays. It is now a folk tune in the public domain. The song provided a theme for Sonya's recording session with Elizabeth Mitchell and Daniel Littleton.



Poem prayer flags made for friends and neighbors
(photo by Stephen Kern)

9. BLACK JACK DAVEY

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Daniel Littleton, harmonium; Elizabeth Mitchell, harmony vocals; Ruthy Ungar, harmony vocals; Tania Elizabeth, fiddle; Molly Mason, bass
Recorded in 2014

This traditional song tells the story of a lady who runs off with a gypsy. It likely began as a Scottish border ballad, dating to at least the early 18th century, and has spread widely throughout the English-speaking world. Scores of versions have been sung, variously called “Gypsy Davey,” “Gypsy Rover,” and the “Wraggle-Taggle Gypsies,” among other titles. Sonya listened to many singers’ takes on this ballad, and particularly appreciated the versions of Sandy Denny and her Uncle Mike Seeger.

10. NO PLACE TO FALL

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Daniel Littleton, acoustic guitar, vocals; Tania Elizabeth, fiddle; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Ruthy Ungar, vocals
Recorded in 2014

The brilliant and moving lyrics of Townes Van Zandt’s ballads are destined to be sung for years to come. Sonya was exposed to Townes’ songwriting while living in Austin, TX, where the many bright lights of the music community there expanded her horizons.

11. OH THE WIND AND RAIN

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, acoustic guitar, vocals; Tania Elizabeth, fiddle; Molly Mason, bass; Lee Falco, drums

Recorded in 2014

A tale of sibling rivalry, this is one of the most widely known traditional murder ballads. It was collected on both sides of the Atlantic by folklorist Francis J. Child (Child 10) and Cecil Sharp in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Versions have been variously titled as “Dreadful Wind and Rain,” “The Two Sisters,” “The Cruel Sister,” “The Bonny Swans,” and “The Bonnie Bows of London,” among others. Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl recorded a version by Christina MacAllister of Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1962. Sonya knew and enjoyed many versions of this song. She had a special affinity for the one recorded by Jody Stecher.

12. THE BLACKSMITH

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar, harmonium; Elizabeth Mitchell, harmonium; Jay Ungar, fiddle
Recorded in 2014

This traditional English folk song, also known as “A Blacksmith Courted Me,” is a lament. Field recordings of various versions were collected in the south of England, including one sung by the Traveller Phoebe Smith, whose 1958 recording informed a later version by the singer and folklorist Shirley Collins. Other versions have been sung by Maddy Prior and Andy Irvine on records by Steeleye Span and Planxty, which Sonya grew up hearing.

13. SINGING MY TROUBLES AWAY

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar; Marco Benevento, piano; Lee Falco, drums; Molly Mason, bass
Recorded in 2014

This song was written and recorded by the Delmore Brothers, Alton and Rabon, in 1937. They were stars of the Grand Ole Opry and performed extensively with Arthur Smith as the Arthur Smith Trio throughout the 1930s. Sonya and Liz offer a delightful sisters' version of this tune.

14. LOWLANDS

Sonya Cohen Cramer, lead vocals; Daniel Littleton, acoustic and electric guitar; piano, vocals; Elizabeth Mitchell, harmonium, vocals; Tania Elizabeth, fiddle; Jacob Silver, bass; Storey Littleton, Rachael Yamagata, Will Bryant, Amy Helm, Simi Stone, Philip Marshall, harmony vocals
Recorded in 2014

This old song has been sung as a sea shanty and an evocative ballad that tells of a lost lover who returns in a dream. The lowlands refrain is echoed in the ballads “The Golden Vanity” and “The Lowlands of Holland.” Anne Briggs, whose unaccompanied singing style Sonya appreciated, sang “Lowlands” on a Topic Records release from 1964, *The Hazards of Love*.

15. THE BLACKEST CROW

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar
Recorded in 2014

This ballad is also known as “My Dearest Dear,” “The Lover’s Lament,” and “The Time Draws Near,” and it spread throughout the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains after the Civil War. The lyrics appeared in Carl Sandburg’s *The American Songbook* (1927), and many modern versions came from the teaching of old-time fiddler Tommy Jarrell of Mt. Airy, NC, who was a family favorite.

BONUS TRACKS

16. SIDEWALK WILDFLOWER (WESLEYAN WOMEN’S SINGER/ SONGWRITER COLLECTIVE)

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals and guitar; Jennifer Alexander, backing vocals
Recorded in 1986

This original song is one of the very first Sonya ever recorded. It was inspired by her friend and singing partner, Jennifer Alexander, who provides the backing vocals. Sonya performed the song in coffeehouse style with the Wesleyan Women’s Singer/Songwriter Collective. The collective produced a cassette tape, called SPIN, which was distributed and cherished by a wide circle of friends and classmates.

17. A LIFE THAT'S GOOD (HOME RECORDING)

Sonya Cohen Cramer, vocals and guitar
Recorded in 2015

Sonya first heard this song on the television show *Nashville*, and she enjoyed tuning in to hear the T Bone Burnett–produced songs from its first season. These lyrics resonated for her, and she would work on this song throughout the house, accompanying herself on her mother's Martin guitar. Made at home, this solo recording was her last.

SONYA COHEN DISCOGRAPHY

Seeger Family

American Folk Songs for Christmas - Mike, Peggy, and Penny Seeger, and members of their families (Rounder Records, 1989)
Animal Folk Songs for Children (and other people!) - Mike, Peggy, Barbara, and Penny Seeger with their children: Neill, Calum, and Kitty MacColl; Sonya and Rufus Cohen; and Kim Seeger (Rounder Records, 1992)

Last Forever

Last Forever (Nonesuch, 1997)
Trainfare Home (Nonesuch, 2000)
No Place Like Home (StorySound, 2013)
Acres of Diamonds (StorySound, 2015)



PUTNAM VALLEY, 1963 FOR SONJA, JUST AS IT LOOKED WHEN YOU ARRIVED - LUV. POP.

John Cohen '85

credits

Produced by Reid Cramer; Dick Connette, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Daniel Littleton

Album and track notes by Reid Cramer

Essays by Elizabeth Mitchell Littleton,

Dick Connette, and Daniel Littleton

Tracks recorded by: Track 1, Mike Seeger; Track

2, Robert “Smiggy” Smith; Track 3, Jonathan

Dickau and David Bernz; Tracks 4, 5, 6, 7, Scott

Lehrer; Tracks 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, Charlie

Pilizer; Tonal Park, with additional recording

by Brandon Morrison, Guthrie Lord, and Pete

Hanlon, mixed by Brandon Morrison; Track

16, Wesleyan Women’s Singer/Songwriter

Collective; Track 17 recorded at home, Sonya

Cohen Cramer

Mastered by Oscar Zambrano at Zampol

Productions, NYC

Front cover photo by Reid Cramer; John Cohen’s

photos courtesy of John Cohen Trust; Sonya’s

artwork courtesy of the Cramer Family

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manager; Brian Zimmerman, mail order man-

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left: Lead Belly collage
by Sonya

back cover: Going down the
road with family in St. John, US
Virgin Islands, 1973 (photo by
John Cohen)



SMITHSONIAN
**FOLK
WAYS**
RECORDINGS

 Smithsonian



SONYA COHEN CRAMER

you've been a friend to me

Sonya Cohen Cramer (1965–2015) was raised in a family committed to revitalizing the oldest songs of the American musical canon. Like her father John Cohen of The New Lost City Ramblers, Sonya shared a belief in the transformative qualities of folk songs and traditional ballads. *You've Been a Friend to Me* is the first collection featuring Sonya's singing, and it reveals the full arc of her musical life through collaborations with her aunt Peggy Seeger, uncle Pete Seeger, Elizabeth Mitchell, Daniel Littleton, and the folk-fusion group Last Forever. While shaped by the roots of her family tree, the radiating and clear sound of Sonya's voice is distinctly her own.

1. OH, BLUE 2:07
2. A SQUIRREL IS A PRETTY THING 1:39
3. WHEN I WAS MOST BEAUTIFUL 2:54
4. HIDE AND SEEK 3:24
5. IN THE PINES 2:36
6. LOUIS COLLINS / SPIKE DRIVER BLUES 3:49
7. ALL FOR YOU 5:47
8. YOU'VE BEEN A FRIEND TO ME 3:26
9. BLACK JACK DAVEY 5:28
10. NO PLACE TO FALL 3:12
11. OH THE WIND AND RAIN 3:37
12. THE BLACKSMITH 3:17
13. SINGING MY TROUBLES AWAY 2:59
14. LOWLANDS 5:04
15. THE BLACKEST CROW 2:15
- BONUS TRACKS
16. SIDEWALK WILDFLOWER 4:48
17. A LIFE THAT'S GOOD 3:10

Produced by Reid Cramer, Dick Connette, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Daniel Littleton



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