

A Place to Be: Margaret MacArthur's Gift to Vermont Traditional Music

by Nora Rodes

Many people primarily credit male collectors such as Francis Child, Cecil Sharp, Phillips Barry, and John and Alan Lomax for the preservation of American folk song. Yet women have always played an essential role in collecting and sustaining traditional music. Between 1920 and 1960, it was the life's work of many New England women, including Fanny Hardy Eckstorm, Mary Winslow Smythe, Helen Hartness Flanders, and Eloise Hubbard Linscott. And for several decades thereafter it was Margaret MacArthur's work as well.

For years, I'd heard Margaret spoken of with deep affection but knew little more than that she was an important musician and collector, and that, like me, she loved ballads. The first CDs I could obtain were not the Child ballads I was expecting, but songs of Vermont, often sung with her family. And the first article I read about her was her granddaughter Robin's, in *Orion Magazine*, in which Robin wrote that Margaret sang because she "wanted a taproot—a means to a vertical sense of place." So when I visited the American Folklife Center (AFC) to listen to the interview from Margaret's performance there in 2005, I was already wondering about her connections between music and place. Why was Margaret so dedicated to preserving and sharing the traditional music of Vermont? And why did she become such a beloved and influential member of a vibrant, extensive community?

In that AFC interview, Margaret speaks at length about her mother's second marriage to a forester, and the many different states she moved through in her transient childhood: Arizona, the Midwest, South Carolina,

Missouri, and California. But she also talks about all the music she heard in her 1930s through 1940s travels, and her five years in the Ozarks, where traditional music was an important component of community. It seemed that music—like her mother's lullabies and her Missouri neighbors' songs—gave her a place to feel loved and safe.

When she eventually returned to her birthplace, Chicago, Margaret married, and in 1948 she and her husband John moved to Vermont for his professorship at Marlboro College. With two young children and very little money, they began to restore what the porcupines and weather had left of a remote and abandoned 1803 farmhouse with views of the Dover Hills. And Margaret began to know her newest home from two songbooks: Edith Sturgis' *Songs from the Hills of Vermont* and Helen Hartness Flanders' *Country Songs of Vermont*. When she learned that Edith's hills were also hers—the Dover Hills—it was "an eye-opener." She sought out more Vermont ballads, tunes, and source singers. Two of her most important relationships were with Fred Atwood (then in his 80's), whose father had sung for Edith Sturgis, and Helen Hartness Flanders, the preeminent New England collector who became her friend and mentor.

In 1962, Moses Asch, then director of Folkways Records, asked Margaret to send him some music; the recordings became *Folksongs of Vermont*—the first of her nine CDs of traditional music. For over four decades, until her death in 2006, Margaret continued to collect, perform, and teach folk music. She frequently performed at folk programs and festivals, often with her own children—Dan, Gary, and Megan—and often original songs of life and events in Vermont as well as traditional ballads. She shared music at informal song circles and other gatherings. As a visiting artist, she taught children songs she learned from their grandparents and how to write songs of their own.

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But Margaret didn't just enthusiastically join and contribute her talents to the folk community. She provided a new place for that community to *be*: the homestead she'd created for herself and her family. Margaret was warm, friendly, joyful, and vibrant—a beacon for the music community around her and those simply traveling through. And as her daughter Megan's accounts of growing up amidst expected and impromptu visitors and the letters sent to Margaret attest, the homestead itself became a vital component in the preservation and organic evolution of Vermont folk music.

Throughout Margaret's childhood, her many experiences of both adapting to and embracing each new place as *home* gave her a unique perspective on what *home* means and why it matters. Many folk collectors have undertaken fieldwork asking: "What songs have traveled here; what songs have *settled into* this place? What can we find here?" Although she loved ancient ballads, Margaret approached her understanding of Vermont asking, more primarily: "What songs have *grown from* this place, what is it as itself, and what *more* will we sing?" To everything she did, Margaret brought an appreciation and enthusiasm for the indigenous, born of all the cultures she'd needed to embrace with presence and immediacy before the next relocation. Margaret fostered others' engagement with identity and community, and in response, friends and neighbors shared not only their own collections and referrals to source singers, but their personal poems and songs as well (sometimes with notes about how Margaret "inspired" them).

Margaret created the home she yearned for by picking up all the things that spoke to her along the way and giving them a place to be: bits of her childhood, things gifted and repaired like her harp, bits from family travels and later her children's. Everything that found its way there was loved. And she created a home for Vermont folk music—old and new—because Margaret herself and her home were inclusive and welcoming. It's what we all long for, my generation at least, I know: belonging. And it's what we can give to each other, and that seems more important than ever to remember today. And it's what we can give to each other. And that seems more important than ever to remember today. Margaret put down deep roots, made her family farmstead an enduring home for generations and filled every life she touched with grace, joy, and music.



Photo courtesy of Megan Littlehales.

In recognition of her research and performance of traditional music, Margaret was honored as a "New England Living Art Treasure" in the 1985 Arts Biennial ceremony at the University of Massachusetts. In 1997, she was invited to perform a concert of Vermont music at the John F. Kennedy Center's celebration of each state's history and culture.

Margaret's collection of songs, poems, books, and recordings is now housed at the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury, and her field recordings are all accessible digitally, with a duplicate of the physical tapes now at the American Folklife Center. The concert she performed for the Library of Congress is available online. Also check out the recent CDSS publication 'On The Banks of Coldbrook' by Tony Barrand, which contains many of the songs collected by Margaret, and a CD by Tony and Keith Murphy of the same name. Available in the CDSS Store.

*At 16, **Nora Rodes** is an aspiring ethnomusicologist, developing a specialization in women folk collectors. Nora received the generous support of the **Vermont Folklife Center's 2019 Flanders Award for Traditional Vermont Music** to come to know Margaret MacArthur. She hopes to continue discovering and giving voice to the traditional music that arises from and sustains community.*