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Our Roots Run Deep: Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten Puts Carrboro on National Map with Songs About Childhood



Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten taught herself how to play guitar at the young age of eight, unaware that her unique picking style would be recognizable over a century later. Cotten was born in 1893 on Lloyd Street near the train tracks, in what is now Carrboro. Those train tracks helped inspire one of Cotton’s legendary songs called “Freight Train,” which she wrote at age 11.

Throughout Cotton’s life she never strayed too far from music, but it wasn’t until her golden years when she recorded her first album: “Negro Folksongs and Tunes.” The album was released in 1958 on the Folkways label, which the Smithsonian Institution later acquired. World renowned singer-songwriter Bob Dylan even covered some of Cotton’s most famous songs. Shortly before her death, Cotton was awarded a Grammy for Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording in 1985. Elizabeth “Libba” Cotton’s music continues to influence lives today. This Black History Month the town of Carrboro would like to acknowledge the achievements and life of Ms. Cotton.

