Mp3 Ellen And John Wright - I Shook Hands With Eleanor Roosevelt

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Traditional folk; old-time music with banjo and guitar with charming male/female vocals 12 MP3 Songs FOLK: Traditional Folk, COUNTRY: Bluegrass Details: Ellen and John Wright are faculty members at Northwestern University who play and sing old time music--or "timeless music," as they prefer to call it. He is the author of "Traveling the High Way Home: Ralph Stanley and the World of Traditional Bluegrass Music"; she is working on an as-told-to biography of Roni Stoneman, "First Lady of Banjo" and 20-year star of "Hee-Haw." "We sing songs we've known so long we can't remember not knowing them," the Wrights say. "In part it was our families, in part it was our schools, in part it was America that taught us these songs." Though they have never attempted a scientific survey of the question, it appears that this lifetime acquaintance with their material is shared by most of their audience-and of course this is just what the Wrights are aiming at when they put their shows together. A bit of background: John Wright became involved with banjo-playing and singing while an undergraduate at Swarthmore College during the great folk boom. He was the lead singer for an old-time band called the Crum Creek Valley Boys Girl, which actually recorded a self-produced LP-a rarity in those days (a copy is archived at the college). He put aside the banjo while pursuing his academic career, and when he took it up again years later he was delighted to discover that there were all sorts of music publications that hadn't existed back when he first started playing. He was particularly taken with one of these, Hub and Nancy Nitchie's "Banjo NewsLetter," for which he soon became a regular contributor, writing a monthly column on the music of Ralph Stanley called "Clinch Mountain Banjo." Interviews for this column eventually became the heart of his book on Ralph Stanley, a book which won him the International Bluegrass Music Association's Print Media Personality of the Year award in 1994. At the same time he became involved with songwriting and

recording, working with such Stanley sidemen as Junior Blankenship, James Price, and the late Curly Ray Cline. (Click "John Wright" in the "Try This" box on the left.) A year or two after the publication of "Traveling the High Way Home," Ellen Wright suddenly said to her husband, "I want to learn to play the guitar." He tells the story as follows: "I dug up an old student guitar our daughter had left behind when she went off to college and blew the dust off it. I literally had to tie a knot in one of the strings to get it working. I can't play the guitar, but I understood that the chords out of D are the easiest ones to start with. We looked up those chords in our daughter's instruction book. Ellen then took that guitar up to her study and worked on it, night after night. When she came down a month later she was a guitar player. The rest was just details." Ellen regards this as rather an exaggeration, but the fact remains that when they made a demo tape a year or so later, bluegrass professional Charlie Sizemore reacted to it by saying, "She knows everything you can't teach," and the well known musician and instructional expert Murphy Henry said, "Those bass notes are right where they ought to be." The Wrights started performing together a year or so after Ellen began the guitar. They have appeared from Cape Cod to Kansas; perhaps their most memorable appearance was in New York City a couple of weeks after 9/11, the full story of which is told on their website (see "Links," upper left). A few months before that New York show a friend of theirs invited them to meet Roni Stoneman, who was staying in the Chicago area at the time. Roni was looking for someone to help her write her life story, and the original notion was that as the author of the Stanley book John would be the one to do this. But as soon as the Wrights met Roni it became clear that Ellen was the one to take on this job, and this book, along with the just-released CD "I Shook Hands With Eleanor Roosevelt," have been the big family musical projects over the past year or more. The Songs "Little Liza Jane," despite its antique sound, is the most recent song on the CD (except for our original compositions). It seems to have been written ca. 1916 for a Broadway musical. In those days musicals still featured at least one minstrel-style song, usually having nothing whatever to do with the plot. In Dublin there is a statue that purports to be of the original Molly Malone, and people will tell stories about her life there in the seventeenth century. It's all fiction. "Molly Malone" is a faux Irish song written in the late nineteenth century for the British music hall by a performer who was born in Scotland. "I Shook Hands With Eleanor Roosevelt" describes actual encounters J.W. had with various celebrities over the years. He writes: "In high school I won a contest for writing an essay about the U.N. The winners went to New York City and received certificates from Mrs. Roosevelt. A few years earlier my mother took my

brothers and me to see a matinee of 'South Pacific.' When we arrived we found that the show was closing that night. I never really met Adlai Stevenson, but I saw him in person at a rally; my claiming to know that he would lose is a bit of ex post facto poetic license. Newton Minow, JFK's FCC Chairman who was famous for calling television a 'vast wasteland,' is a trustee of Northwestern University. My dean introduced me to him at a reception, adding that I was chairman of the Classics Department; he said, 'He looks awfully young to be chairman of a department.' The proper riposte occurred to me weeks later; I should have said, 'He looks awfully young to be Newton Minow," which was true." The rest of the encounters listed in the song were similar to these. "Long Long Ago" is the oldest song on the CD. Written in England ca. 1835, it soon became an international hit, not only in the British Empire and the United States, but on the continent of Europe as well. The Wrights had a very moving experience with the song when they played it at an assisted-living center for holocaust survivors in Chicago; because of their background they knew none of the "well known" American songs, but when the Wrights played "Long Long Ago" one woman cried out, "I know that! We used to sing it in German when I was a little girl in Czechoslovakia!" "Oh Susanna" is probably the best known American song in the world. Once the Wrights were in Istanbul where they stopped in at a music store which specialized in selling the saz, the Turkish national instrument (which resembles a long-necked mandolin). Just as there would be in an American guitar store, there were two or three musicians loafing around there, trying out instruments. They knew no English and the Wrights knew no Turkish, but as soon as the word "banjo" entered the fractured conversation one of the Turks started playing "Oh Susanna" on the saz. Almost as soon as the late nineteenth-century song "Bright Mohawk Valley" appeared musicians nationwide simplified the tune and substituted the name of a local river valley for the Mohawk. The Red River is the most widely used today, but others can be found. Ellen Wright's mother remembers her elder sisters' beaux singing "Darling Nelly Gray" around the piano when she was a small girl in New York City. The Beatrice-and-Benedick-style courting song "Reuben And Rachel" has picked up many stray verses over the years; the Wrights have added one of their own to this version. Around 1870 the Chicago songwriter Henry Clay Work went on a trip to England. While in a hotel in Yorkshire he was shown a clock which he was told had stopped running the very moment its owner died. He came home and used this story to write the perennially popular "Grandfather's Clock." The origin of "Buffalo Gals" is obscure, but it appears to have been written by an Irish immigrant who performed as a minstrel under the incredible stage name of

"Cool White." The Wrights recently saw a t-shirt emblazoned with the message "Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight and dance by the light of the moon"--clearly meant to be taken as a statement of female empowerment. The memorable "Whispering Hope" is often considered to be a hymn these days. As for "Keep On Singing," here is the story that J.W. tells about its origin: Several years ago--it was 1998, maybe, give or take a year, my wife Ellen and I went to a bluegrass festival in Marshall, Michigan. Marshall is a very pretty little town in the south-central part of the state, more or less directly above the spot where, to the south, Indiana and Ohio meet. Though the lineup was good, it was a small festival as far as attendance was concerned--unfortunately so; I believe this turned out to be the last year it was held. But the low attendance made it particularly easy for me to go up to the record tables, as is my custom, to pay my respects to Ralph Stanley. I remember kidding him a bit about the liner notes on a new album which called Bill Monroe, Flatt Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers the "Holy Trinity" of bluegrass music. Then I told him that my wife had taken up the guitar and was doing very well with it, but that I couldn't get her to sing. Obviously delighted at the opportunity to pontificate to the college professor, Ralph replied, in a low, portentous voice, "That will come with time." Some time later--I think it was the fall of 2002--we saw Ralph again, this time at a club in Chicago called Schuba's. The "O Brother Where Art Thou" phenomenon had hit bluegrass and old-time music in the meantime, and Schuba's was packed with young urban people, many of whom (it was clear from conversations I overheard) had never seen Ralph Stanley in person before. As a consequence the record tables were very crowded, and it was pretty difficult to get close enough to Ralph to say hello. But eventually I managed it. I reminded him of our conversation in Michigan and told him he was right, Ellen had started to sing. And I added that pretty much all I knew about helping her with the very challenging business of learning to sing in public I had learned from what I had seen and heard about the way he handled his own young singers. Now I know what Benjamin Disraeli said when someone asked him how he handled Queen Victoria so well, that everyone likes flattery and when you're dealing with royalty you lay it on with a trowel. But I meant what I said to Ralph. I really meant it. And it seems to have stuck in his mind, because when we were saying goodbye to the band after the second set, Ralph called out to Ellen, "Keep on singing!" Naturally enough it was a phrase that haunted me for days afterward, and I soon realized I was going to have to make a song out of it. The way that came about was the nearest thing I've had to a visit from the Muses in my brief songwriting career. I was walking home from the office: STEP step STEP step STEP step, etc., and I

started hearing the chorus of the song, either from outside somewhere or in the back of my head, take your pick: KEEP on singing dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum KEEP on singing dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum KEEP on singing dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum Keep on SINGING dum de dum de de, de dum de dum de dum All that was left was to fill in the blanks. If I owe the title and hook of the song to Ralph Stanley, I owe a lot of the story to Charlie Sizemore, whether he knows it or not. There's no great secret here: it involves things he told me in the interview I did with him that was published in Bluegrass Unlimited and subsequently in my book about Ralph. "You're so terribly indebted to somebody like that. I swear I remember getting off the stage back then and I'd say, 'Ralph, I can't sing.' But Ralph would never say, 'Look at Roy Lee Centers, how good he could sing.' He never did give me any of that stuff. He'd always say, 'Yeah, you're doing fine. You'll make it. You just need a little time.'" Even the little girl's grandfather came in a way from Charlie, who's often told me of the close and highly prized relationship he had with his grandfather. (My father's father died before I was born, and my mother's father lived too far away for me to ever have a relationship like that with him.) The religion in the song I suppose is mountain Calvinism. It just sort of worked out that way, and it said exactly what I wanted to say about the infinite worth of every human individual, not only for singing but for everything else.