



[Piers Cawley](#) · [Reviews](#) · 26 January 2022 · 2 min read

Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing

Piers Cawley takes a listen to "Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing" and finds an intriguing, if slightly frustrating, collection.

There's a [scene in the film *Ghost World*](#) where the anti-heroine, Enid, is listening to a compilation of old 78 blues recordings and *Devil Got My Woman* by Skip James comes up. It clearly hits her right between the eyes, piercing the cynicism that has characterized the character until that point. Chasing moments like that is what keeps me fascinated with source recordings, and Derek Piotr, who put together this compilation of recordings of Lena Bare Turbyfill and her extended family, clearly had one of those moments when he heard a Library of Congress recording of Lena singing 'Bolakins' (a variant of Child 93, 'Lamkin'). This sent Derek hunting for more of her recordings, and indeed meeting up with Lena's descendants, including her daughter. This occasionally frustrating compilation is the result.

Frustrating, because in a few cases we get modern recordings of Lena's daughter, Nicola Pritchard, straining to remember 'Bolakins', but not Lena's recording because that's been collected elsewhere (Google, and the embedded songs [in this article](#), are your friends). I found the words and tune that Lena sang in my copy of [Bronson](#), with a note saying, "The above is only the underlying norm of the tune. It was never so sung, the

phrases being altered perpetually throughout". Having heard the recording, I agree with that description, but what it misses is how brilliantly it was sung and how absolutely right those variations sound.

I would kill for a decent set of sleeve notes, though. Why, for example, do we have Frank Proffitt singing 'Joshua' (really well, it must be added, and with some great, driving clawhammer banjo) as well as Lena's "Hold Up Your Hand Old Joshua" She Cried"? Who are Charlie and Shirley Glenn? Are they related to the Bares in some way? They're certainly excellent singers, and Charlie's a cracking mountain dulcimer player, too.

As I say, a slightly odd collection and clearly a passion project, but I fear I've been spoiled by the quality of [Mustrad Records](#) releases of source singers over the years (if this has whetted your appetite for mountain music, check out the Mustrad [downloads](#), particularly the [Far in the Mountains](#) collections, which come with extensive notes).

These are mere niggles though. The three Bare sisters – Sabra, Lena and Lloyd – were all cracking young singers in 1939 when Herbert Halpern recorded them, and it's great to hear them here.

If you're looking for a proper 'chills' moment, just wait until the last track, a 49-second fragment of Lena Bare Turbyfill and her younger sister Mrs Lloyd Bare Hagie singing 'Cumberland Gap'. They sing together for all of one chorus, and it's heartbreakingly good. And heartbreakingly short.