



Introducing The Beers Family

With psaltery, old-time fiddle, limberjacks, mountain dulcimer, fiddlesticks and fourteen wonderful songs

An American Folk Tradition

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Columbia Masterworks MS 6705

Library of Congress catalog card number R64-1577 applies to this record.

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1965 Columbia Masterworks

Produced by John McClure

Cover photo: Don Hunstein



In this hectic era of streamlined balladry, of slick folk combos and supercharged showmanship, it comes as a distinctly refreshing change of pace to encounter the spontaneous, unaffected minstrelsy of Evelyn, Martha, and Robert (“Fiddler”) Beers. Hailing from an obscure Montana gold-mining “ghost” town called New Year, the Beers take uncommon joy in passing on to modern audiences the songs, the stories, the instrumental whimsy, the whole treasury of folklore which they themselves inherited from the vital oral traditions of family music-making in America.

Unquestionably, the Beers owe their greatest debt of gratitude to Robert’s maternal grandfather, George Sullivan. Sullivan, Irish-born and American-bred, was the champion old-time fiddler of North Freedom, Wisconsin, and a fellow, so his daughter says, who could play and sing the whole night through without ever repeating the same tune. Bob spent every moment he could with his grandfather,

including several summer vacations as an 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old boy. “We hunted and fished together,” Bob recalls, “and I suspect that I listened to every song or story that he knew at least a hundred times. Every Saturday night, his friends and relatives gathered in the parlor, where I listened for hours to old-time fiddling, songs, and stories. I can remember being sent to bed early, but there was a hole in the ceiling above the stove that allowed heat to enter my bedroom. So I would lie there watching and listening to the music below for hours, until I fell asleep. I soaked up the tunes, songs, and stories willingly and on occasion stood in front of the stove and was taught to ‘jig,’ Irish fashion, or to sing and recite a story. The musical sounds that came from that room put an indelible mark on my memory...” To this day, a significant proportion of the songs in the Beers family repertoire can be traced back to George Sullivan’s musical evenings; at least six of the tunes in this album were culled from this mine of childhood recollections.

Evelyne Beers, who married Robert in 1943, has such a lovely, sensitive voice, such tasteful musicianship, that it is difficult to believe that she has had no formal training whatever. “Singing in my family,” says Evelyne, “as in my husband’s, is a tradition. I sing by ear; I sing as my mother sang, and her mother before her. As a child I made no distinction whether a song was folk, classical, or popular. If I heard a melody that thrilled me, I sang it.” This is precisely the path followed by the Beers’ teenage daughter Martha when she joins her parents for concert appearances. She too sings with simplicity born of her natural love for music and does not labor for an “authentic sound” or any of the other stylistic bugaboos which so often insinuate themselves between a perform and his songs.

Complementing the Beers’ unique approach to balladry are the beguiling sounds of the instruments they use to accompany themselves. There is the unique sound of Bob’s fiddle, ranging from a modal wail to a saucy cackle, and the gentle strumming of Martha’s mountain dulcimer. Their bag of old American tricks includes unusual fiddle tunings and a percussive pastime known as “beating the straws” (that is, making drum-like sounds by rhythmically tapping the violin or dulcimer strings with a spear of hard buffalo grass). In two numbers here, you will also hear Evelyne manipulating the “Limberjacks” jointed wooden puppets dating back to Colonial times, whose dancing feet pound out an infectious rhythm.

And, most impressive of all, there is the shimmering, almost ethereal music of the psaltery. One of the most ancient of instruments (says the Book of Samuel: “And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries...”), the psaltery in its original form fell into disuse when, with the addition of a keyboard, it became the first primitive harpsichord. Today, its silvery tone, the purity of its intonation

are all but unknown in America; the method of plucking its delicate strands is virtually a forgotten art. The sensitive artistry of both Robert Beers and his daughter Martha in playing this fascinating instrument would be in itself good and sufficient reason for acclaiming their debut recital for Columbia Records. There are, of course, many other others, primary among them the fact that an evening with the remarkable Beers family will give you a whale of a good time.

MOLLY BAN

This name is either the origin or derivation of the familiar Polly Vaughn. It is heard here in an exciting reel, known to Bob's grandfather as a "buck and wing." Bob plays fiddle (in F) with the primitive "Tennessee bow," a loose affair with a high arch, which makes it possible to play all four strings at once in the Baroque style of Bach's day. Evelyne "beats the straws" on another fiddle tuned to harmonize and later dances the "Limberjacks." Martha plays psaltery in a "hammered dulcimer" fashion.

DUMBARTON'S DRUMS in a venerable Scots ballad which apparently has never before been collected from oral tradition in America. A wistful, yearning romance, it is sung here as a duet by Evelyne and Martha, with Bob accompanying on the psaltery throughout, blending with Martha's guitar.

DEV'LISH MARY is one of several damsels in American folklore whose shrewish ways drive the men to songful complaints of the "I Wish I Were Single Again" variety. This setting, once more traceable to the singing of George Sullivan, finds Martha playing the Appalachian mountain dulcimer, Evelyne "beating the straws" on the same instrument, Bob fiddling, and all three Beers joining voices.

LULLABY TO MARTHA is just that—a tender cradle song which Robert composed, both words and music. Evelyne sings, while a grown-up Martha accompanies on the guitar and Robert plays the psaltery.

THE CONNAUGHTMAN'S RAMBLES is another well-known fiddle tune played by Bob's grandfather. One of the residual advantages of Martha's having joined the family ensemble is that she can play the psaltery to Bob's fiddle, thus making possible the sort of instrumental duets he remembers hearing as

a boy. In this instance, Evelyne is also heard playing the “fiddlesticks,” an early American custom where the player whacks away alternately at the body and fingerboard of the fiddle with long, flexible sticks. In one of Bob’s many unusual but traditional fiddle tunings, the strings sound C, F, B-flat, E.

THE WATER IS WIDE, sometimes called “O Waly, Waly,” is an exquisite lament of lost love. British in origin, it was collected by Cecil Sharp in America in at least five variants, and phrases of it pop up in many other English and American songs. Evelyne sings, with Robert providing the limpid psaltery accompaniment.

A STARRY NIGHT TO RAMBLE is a love song plain and simple, fragments of which were sung to Robert by a 97-year-old man who claimed to have known it as a child. Struck by its lyrical warmth, Robert expanded the verses and reworked the tune into its present form (duplicating, incidentally, the manner in which John Jacob Niles collected fragments of an unnamed song and converted them into his superb carol “I Wonder as I Wander”).

THE OLD WOMAN WENT TO THE WELL is another of George Sullivan’s fiddle tunes, rather restrained in mood but with a joyous lilt nonetheless. Robert fiddles while Martha psalters.

THE GREEN GRASS OF SHILOH marks the debut of the songwriting team of Beers and Beethoven. Evelyne describes its genesis: “We were driving through Tennessee on a lovely spring day, near the Shiloh battlefield, and Bob started humming a tune from the Pastoral Symphony. With no idea of debasing Beethoven, words popped into our minds as if it were meant to be that way. By the time we reached the outskirts of New York City, we were in love with our spontaneous creation.” Robert, Evelyne, and Martha recreate the scene here, with psaltery accompaniment.

John Jacob Niles says that he collected **THE LASS FROM THE LOW COUNTRIE** in Cherokee County, North Carolina, but it seems most likely that this poignant ballad was actually “collected” from his fertile imagination. Either way, it is a perfect gem of minstrelsy, and Evelyne sings it most beautifully indeed.

SPEED THE PLOW is an Irish tune which George Sullivan brought with him from the Auld Sod; it has, though, been thoroughly naturalized by now. As Robert fiddles away, Martha “beats the straws” on another violin, and Evelyne operates the dancing dolls called “Limberjacks.”

THE PALACE GRAND, also known as “Lady Mary,” was taught to Evelyne many years ago by May Kennedy McCord of Springfield, Missouri. “We particularly want to give her credit,” say Robert and Evelyne, “as we feel it a matter of considerable importance to recognize the older people who have preserved such fine music.” Evelyne and Martha sing in duo, with Robert accompanying on psaltery and Martha on guitar.

The long, tragic ballad of **MATTIE GROVES** was learned directly from John Jacob Niles, and Evelyne infuses it with glowing intensity and compassion. The oft-told tale of extracurricular romance and its doleful repercussions is unusually potent in this ballad setting because of the depth of characterization that lies between its story lines.

—ROBERT SHERMAN

The selections—public domain except where noted—are followed by their timings.

SIDE I

MOLLY BAN	1:30
DUMBARTON'S DRUMS —Robert H. Beers (BMI)	5:05
THE BRAVE VOLUNTEER —Robert H. Beers (BMI)	2:50
DEV'LISH MARY	2:10
LULLABY TO MARTHA —Robert H. Beers (BMI)	3:50
THE CONNAUGHTMAN'S RAMBLES	1:45
THE WATER IS WIDE	2:45
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	20:13

SIDE II

A STARRY NIGHT TO RAMBLE (Kisses and Love) —Robert H. Beers (BMI)	2:00
THE OLD WOMAN WENT TO THE WELL —Robert H. Beers (BMI)	1:40
THE GREEN GRASS OF SHILOH —Evelyne C. Beers & Robert H. Beers (BMI)	2:10
THE LASS FROM THE LOW COUNTRIE —G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP)	2:50
SPEED THE PLOW	2:10
THE PALACE GRAND	3:20
MATTIE GROVES	9:10
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	23:40