

Betty Elders

Part 1 – The Betty Elders Story

From an early age, Betty Elders displayed a penchant for the numerous avenues that share that umbrella *"the arts."* When it came to making a choice between her self-confessed penchant for creativity with words, pictures and melodies, and tending to her family, the latter has always come first. Back in 1981, Betty self-released her debut recording, **"After The Curtain."** For the ensuing handful of years, Elders eschewed her pursuit of a full-time career in music, while her two sons traversed their vital, teenage years. Between late 1987 and 1991 Betty lost her parents and brother, and so in latter part of 1991 she decided to put her performing career on hold. It seemed to be a logical step, and the hiatus lasted for nine months. Betty utilized the period to come to terms with her feelings of loss of immediate family, and for that matter of other close acquaintances who had recently passed. It's a testament to her resilience that Betty emerged from this period of enforced hibernation, with a swathe of stunning additions to her already rich catalogue of songs. As a lyricist Betty possesses the skill to reach out and share with her listeners the beauty of the human condition, the joy and pleasure as well as the sadness and pain. In the summer of 1992 I interviewed Betty and she told me *"I do music for human beings about human beings. I offer up myself, my background, my experiences and put it out there for people to consider. I fill it with images. I try to create a place where the listener can go, be with me, and then feel that they've come away with something of use."* Before we look at what Betty has been up to in recent times, let's piece together some fragments of her history and geography. The very roots of Betty Elders.....

Born during mid-December 1949, in Raleigh, North Carolina, Betty Elders was adopted at the age of three months. Her adoptive parents weren't musically inclined, *"Though they had a great appreciation of those who could play an instrument. They exposed me to music from an early age and I adapted to it readily."* Betty was convinced from an early age that her aptitude for music had been programmed genetically, through her natural parents. She would discover years later that they were of Scottish bloodstock. Raised in the town of Greensboro, Betty's foster family lived three blocks from what was known at the time as the Women's College of North Carolina. Between the ages of six and twelve years, Elders attended the initial phase of a twelve long year course, sponsored by the College, which was specifically designed for children who displayed an aptitude for painting, drawing, writing stories or making music. As I said at the outset, what they refer to as *"the arts."*

Let's backtrack a touch to Betty's pre-school days. *"My foster mother was an invalid, so we had this black woman, Lera Chambers, who would come and do housework. I remember that she would sing "Rock Of Ages" as she ironed. One time, I went next door to this elderly lady, Mrs. Walker, and played the melody on her piano. I was only four at the time. From then, till I was fourteen, my parents had me study piano. The thing is, I didn't do as well as I should have. I had little interest or patience in copying what other people had written. I had this impulse to create my own sounds. I wanted to make music that moved people the way I was moved, particularly when I heard music that stirred passion in me."*

At the age of twelve Betty transferred to the public school system and her recall is that the ensuing six years were a period of *"tragedy and trauma."* Having become accustomed to a rich diet of classic as well as modern literature, poetry, music, painting, thought and expression, once enrolled in public high school Betty became the classic underachiever. She had previously been a Grade A student, deemed a child prodigy. For what it was worth, however, Betty barely graduated from high school in 1968. One year later Elders was married. *"I was raised to be somebody's wife. I did what I thought I was supposed to do."* Her husband, a Vietnam veteran, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and found it hard to readjust to civilian life. As a result, it became an uneasy alliance. In 1970 the couple moved to Texas. Betty's first son, Michael, was born in 1971.

In the meantime, Betty's parents had relocated to the Shenandoah Valley in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia where her father worked in the coal mining industry. Betty settled there when her marriage foundered - it was 1973. As a single parent shortly after moving north, Betty began tending bar at The Coffee Pot in Roanoke where Friday night was music night. Though initially reluctant, Betty was eventually persuaded to sing at one of the Friday night sessions. While Betty retains far from fond memories of that debut, she also concluded that performing music in public was an activity to be vigorously pursued. In order to provide for her son, Betty went on to work as a nurse and gained her full

nursing certificate in 1975.

Remarried, Betty gave birth to her second son, Ian, four years to the day after her first child drew breath. I guess some of life's more curious coincidences are better left as unexplained. It's also worth noting that during 1975, Betty began composing songs. *"I guess the struggle for me has been between writing music which I thought I might earn credibility with - well crafted songs versus heartfelt music. The test being to take the skills that I'd learnt as a craftsperson and make music that was effective, yet real. I'm not altogether certain that it works, or that there is a market for it, but that's where I set my sights."*

While employed at the Roanoke bar Betty struck up a friendship with a local fiddle player, Gene Elders. In 1979 the pair started recording and ended up co-producing Elders eight-song debut album. Two years in the making the **"After The Curtain"** sessions took place at Threshold Recording Studio in Roanoke. The album was credited to Betty Nicley, and became the first release on Betty's Whistling Pig label. Considering that one of the local landmarks was Groundhog Mountain, when it came time to fill in those ASCAP forms, Whistling Pig, nickname for groundhog, appeared the most logical name for the embryonic record label and song publishing company.

On Boxing Day 1984, Betty Elders, now married to Gene, returned to Texas and they settled in Austin. A consummate five-string fiddle player, Gene Elders had accepted an offer to join George Strait's Ace in the Hole Band. With Gene on the road for over half the year, in order to add a social dimension to her life, Betty began performing her songs at local "open mikes." The Little Wheel in the Austin suburb of Oak Hills was her first port of call. Gradually, Betty gravitated toward the clubs in *the hub* on Sixth Street, and in particular The Chicago House, where she hosted open mics. and performed for two years, as well as at the Austin Outhouse [a venue where the late and legendary Blaze Foley performed] and Colorado Street Cafe. Betty entered the 1988 New Folk Songwriting Contest at the Kerrville Folk Festival, and in late May that year was selected as a finalist in the competition. As is often the case at Kerrville, while the panel of judges - Sonny Curtis, Buddy Mondlock and Shake Russell - didn't select Elders as one of that year's winners, in subsequent years Betty became a mainstage performer and undertook a number of other roles associated with the festival.

As the eighties drew to a close, Betty began looking for a small studio where she could record some demos of her new songs. Fellow Austin based songwriter Barb Donovan, recommended the now defunct Mid Austin Recording Service [MARS] which was owned and operated by Charlie Hollis. *"He was a gentle heart who offered me the comfort of working under no stress. And he was also very generous."* Between May and September 1989, Betty recorded the nine songs that would appear on the, initially, cassette only release **"Daddy's Coal."** The album was finally issued on CD during 1994, at which juncture a tenth track "Two Hearts Together, Three-Quarter Time" was added. The front cover of the cassette and CD featured a picture of Betty's father stand on top of a hopper car filled with coal, and the liner contained the inscription *"This recording is dedicated to the memory of my brother Charles Hugh Pruett III."*

"Bed Of Roses, Bed Of Thorns" the opening track on **"Daddy's Coal"** was cut by Kathy Mattea during 1990, although that version has yet to be featured on a release by the West Virginia bred vocalist. The previous year, Betty's composition had been awarded premier position in the Billboard Magazine National Songwriting Competition. Subjectively, the lyric deals with the sense of loneliness that can develop when parted from loved ones. Although she undoubtedly draws from personal experience, Elders song lyrics are [also] conceptually universal, thereby allowing the listener to empathise and draw parallels with his/her own personal experiences. Betty's intention with the "A Drifter's Prayer" lyric was to recount her late brother's experiences - he was a Vietnam veteran - through his eyes. Her initial conclusion was 'task accomplished,' although a while later she came to the realisation that her words amounted to a personal narrative that questioned whether life exists beyond this Earthly plane.

Having mentioned that Betty was raised in a North Carolina coal mining community, where her father was employed as a miner, the "Daddy's Coal" lyric could be interpreted as autobiographical. On one level, it appears to be a series of personal insights, memories of times past, present uncertainties and future hopes. The lyric also explores the loss of innocence and loss of faith, and the ordeals that the protagonist endures as a result. Ultimately, the song is a celebration of the human experience within a close-knit family and community. The simplicity of Betty's acoustic guitar work, supported by John Hagen's Manchester, England built cello [circa 1920] and Hal Ketchum's harmony vocal, is topped by the

honest chorus of *"Pleasure springs from simple things and freedom from the truth."* Stylistically "Welcome Home Heart" is reminiscent of that late night smoky sophistication at which Patsy Cline excelled, while the lyric finds the narrator address her recently broken heart, as if it were a 'real person.' Surviving a life strewn with adversity, Elders emerges as a woman who cares deeply - about her family, her country and the future of her planet. The closing track, "The Pilgrim," is a powerful confirmation of the latter contention.

When the results of the 1989 End of Year Polls were revealed, **"Daddy's Coal"** scored heavily with the astute Austin music press. In John Conquest's publication, Music City Texas, the annual Insiders' Poll saw Betty score the awards for 'Best Independent Tape' and 'Song of the Year' (the latter shared equally by "Daddy's Coal" and "A Drifter's Prayer"), and she also topped the Best Female Vocalist and Best Female Songwriter categories. In the Austin Chronicle Music Poll, she gained a Top Ten placing in all the equivalent categories. During 1991, the, then, influential HEAR Music Catalogue added **"Daddy's Coal"** to their already extensive list of recordings by thought provoking contemporary singer/songwriters. Eight years later, HEAR Music became part of the Starbucks group of companies.

When one time lawyer David Rodriguez burst on the Texas music scene in the late eighties, he soon became a regular at The Chicago House, the Peg Miller and Glynda Cox owned venue, sadly now long gone, which was located downtown just north of Austin's 6th Street. When David cut his **"Man Against Beast"** debut album 'live' at the venue on 31st May 1990, and Peg, Glynda and Betty Elders were credited with providing production assistance. This originally cassette-only recording was self-released by Rodriguez later that year, and subsequently upgraded to CD by the now defunct, San Marcos based label Dejadisc. Re-titled **"The True Cross"** it was issued in the latter format during 1992. Having been domiciled in the Netherlands since the mid nineteen-nineties, and pretty much silent on the recording front after the European release of **"Proud Heart"** [1995] – the disc finally saw a U.S. release last year, Rodriguez looks set to make his return as a performing/touring musician with the release of a live album **"A Winter Moon"** on the British based Folkwit label this spring. David is, of course, Carrie Rodriguez's father.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 6/93 [Minor Amendments 11/93] and 02/07.
[2130 words].

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Betty Elders

Part 2 - The Betty Elders Story

*Last week we traced Betty Elders life from her birth in Raleigh, North Carolina through her initial musical performances in Roanoke, Virginia to her settling in Austin, Texas during the mid nineteen-eighties and the recording and release in 1989 of her sophomore album **"Daddy's Coal."***

In Part 1 I alluded to the nine-month long sabbatical that Betty Elders took, commencing in the latter part of 1991. When I interviewed Betty in Austin the following summer, she revealed that during this period of downtime she had composed thirty-six songs. *"Enough for three or four projects. After issuing **"Daddy's Coal"** I had hoped for some attention from independent labels. In the end, nobody handed me a cheque. At one stage, four labels including one here in Texas, were in contact with me. They dangled the carrot, but never came through. I'd rather control the project myself at this point anyway. The difference between **"Daddy's Coal"** and this new batch of stuff is that I let go of all my commercial aspirations. I quit trying to play the game. Trying to deliberately compose commercial material."* Drawn from struggles with mind and soul, my considered conclusion is that during Elders' self-imposed seclusion she fashioned many truly memorable compositions.

By the early summer of 1992 Elders was performing in public once again. In October that year, accompanied by fellow Austinites, Christine Albert, Jimmy LaFave and Walter Hyatt, Betty took part in a Texas Songwriters Showcase at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville. Lucinda Williams **"Sweet Old World"** which was released Stateside toward the end of 1992 by Elektra/Chameleon Records, contained the

Elders/Williams collaboration "He Never Got Enough Love."

"Peaceful Existence" Betty's first recording of the nineteen-nineties was released during the Spring of 1993 by Whistling Pig Records. For me the fulcrum of this collection lay in tracks four and five, but let's look at the album contents prior to "The Quiet" and "Falling Rain." The opening trio of cuts lyrically embrace the festering uncertainties, doubts and problems that occur on the dark side of day-to-day life. They portray events that are prone to result in disruption to, and eventually the destruction of, family life. In "All You Want," a couple sustain a continuing, though uneasy relationship influenced in part by her constant infidelity. A hired hand persistently molests his employer's young daughter in "Crack In The Mirror." Those harrowing occurrences are recalled many years later by the troubled victim. In "The Ballad Of Marley Rose Peyton" a war scarred and confused army veteran, and husband, commits suicide in front of his wife.

An early Stateside review of **"Peaceful Existence"** postulated that Elders should be elevated to major label status forthwith. I guess the writer was attempting to draw a parallel with Iris Dement's, then recent, elevation from being a Rounder/Philo recording artist to inking a Warner Bros. deal. The latter occurred within twelve months of the release of Iris' eponymous debut **"Infamous Angel."** Had such an elevation occurred for Betty Elders it would have been akin to lightning striking twice. Of course the DeMent/Warner's deal wasn't a one-way transfer, and the trade subsequently allowed Rounder to reissue on CD Rosie Flores' 1987 self-titled Warner's solo debut – enhanced by six previously unreleased tracks - as the cleverly titled **"A Honky Tonk Reprise,"** plus the 2CD Guy Clark collection **"Craftsman"** which gathered together three of the tall Texan's late 1970's/early 1980's recordings. I'm digressing.....

OK let's check out **"Peaceful Existence"** cuts four and five. Elders' "The Quiet" focuses on that period that comes after *the storm*. It's a time to seek peace - *"When the quiet came I was standing all alone, With my face against the window, Of a place I call my home."* Once the feeling of tranquillity has descended like a veil upon the survivor, it's time for the release offered by "Falling Rain." The latter eight-line lyric contains a mere forty-nine words. Numerically analysing the lyric further, Elders only employs twenty-six [different] words. In execution the elemental images of wind and rain, plus the mention of flowing rivers and faraway trains, are employed with achingly stunning effect. The result is the amalgamation of simplicity and towering emotion. If you seek interpretation, for this scribe "Falling Rain" represents rebirth. A baptism. A cataclysmic catharsis. On the closing line, as Elders reaches for that top note, you can sense her combating *those demons* all over again. These days, Betty Elders is sustained by the knowledge that their defeat was and is her reward.

At the outset of "Edge Of The Universe" two lovers are sat in a car, and, as the narrator relates *"Well we bared our souls, and we shuffled our feet."* The narrator goes on to conclude that this human emotion is but a microcosm, when compared to all of creation. A personal favourite, given Betty's understated but spot on delivery, the, at times, lyrically sly "Cowboy" depicts the lifestyle of a rowdy Texas redneck and compares it with the patience displayed by his longsuffering spouse. In "Long Bed From Kenya" old friends meet and reminisce about their childhood. The [female?] narrator in "Light In Your Window" recalls an old lover as she passes his home one night, and in the second verse admits *"And your memory runs through me, Like the wind in the fall, Like the rain coming down, Bringing tears I can taste."* The allegory in the title "Winter's Coming" is that of a love affair that now runs cold. Day-to-day life is portrayed via bleak perspectives in the opening cuts of this collection, while optimism surfaces in the songs that come after "Falling Rain." **"Peaceful Existence"** amounts to the reflections of a survivor, rather than the venomous outpourings of a victim. The melody that underpins the penultimate track "Winter's Coming" strays close to that of Nanci Griffith's "It's A Hard Life Wherever You Go," although I make that comment by way of intimating that Elders inhabits similar musical territory to Griffith. One thing is certain in my mind, Elders is easily Griffith's equal in live performance and in the art of marrying words and melody.

"Peaceful Existence" closes with the tranquil "Sometimes (The Night Is Like The Moon Laughing)." Gene Elder's haunting violin solo perfectly fits the moods evoked by his wife's lyrics. For highs, lows and those innumerable emotional levels between, almost a decade and a half since its release repeated prescription of this album is one of the finest medications you can indulge in. A fine line separates a storyline that is believable, from one that becomes obscure or mundane. Betty avoids that pitfall with an uncompromising directness. Production of this acoustic treasure was credited to Betty

Elders, Mitch Watkins and Gene Elders, and it was recorded in Austin between the summer of 1991 and January 1993. Like its immediate predecessor **"Peaceful Existence"** went on to pick up another swathe of local 'End of Year' awards.

A studio version of "Friend Of Mine" was destined to appear on Betty's next album **"Crayons,"** but in 1994 Austin radio station KUT 90.5's **"Live Set - Volume 3"** compilation CD featured a live version of the song. As for covers of her songs Beth and April Steven covered "Bed Of Roses, Bed Of Thorns" on their debut Rounder Records album **"Sisters"** [1996]. Betty leased her next recording to the Chicago based folk music label, Flying Fish Records. Following the late 1992 passing of the label founder, Bruce Kaplan, his widow ran the company for a number of years. She eventually sold the label to the Boston based independent Rounder Records. Produced by Betty and released by Flying Fish during 1995, **"Crayons"** was thirteen-song collection.

During the opening half of the nineteen-nineties Betty appeared as a contributing vocalist on a number of recordings by local artists, including Don McCalister [**"Brand New Ways"** 1993], Sarah Elizabeth Campbell [**"Running With You"** 1994], Eric Taylor [**"Eric Taylor"** 1995] and Christine Albert [**"Underneath The Lone Star"** 1995] – the latter collection included the Albert/Elders co-write "Cool River." Betty also contributed to releases by artists from father afield including Pittsburg based Leslie Smith [**"These Things Wrapped"** 1995], and Arkansas based Crow Johnson [**"Painting Stories Across The Sky"** 1995].

The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines a 'crayon' as.....**crayon** *n. & v.t.* **1. n.** stick or pencil of coloured chalk or other material for drawing. drawing made with this **2. v.t.** draw with crayons, (fig.) sketch. **"Peaceful Existence"** explored many of the fragile aspects of the human condition, and while that remained a presence on the 'almost all new' **"Crayons,"** the recording provided strong evidence of the passing of Elders' previous self-doubts. None of the latter should be interpreted as weaknesses rather they are the towering strengths of Betty Elders, songwriter and humanist. "My Father's Home" is a truly heartrending ode to heredity. Having been adopted at birth, the narrator tells of an, as yet, unfulfilled search for true family identity. The line *"Tis sure my heart would know his voice"* appears in the third verse and also in the final one. Elders' voice wavers and almost breaks on the second occasion. Now that's what I call, honesty. Appropriately titled "Silver Wheels 3," it's a reference to the fact that the song previously appeared on Betty's **"After The Curtain"** and **"Daddy's Coal."** Hence my earlier *"almost all new"* comment. Other standout cuts include the multi-layered conversations contained in "Just to Have You Hum Along [The Futon Song]," the affectionate "Friend Of Mine" and the album closer "In This Place Of My Forgiveness." If you asked me for my summation of this song collection, I'd offer *"Welcome to aural paradise."*

Joan Baez included Betty's "Crack In The Mirror" on her 1997 album **"Gone From Danger."** The same year Betty and Gene Elders and Richard Shindell shared the bill with Baez on her Stateside tour. Apart from appearing on concert stages across the country, Betty sang "Crack In The Mirror" with Joan on the syndicated NPR show **"Mountain Stage,"** and also appeared with Baez at the Newport Folk Festival. Borders Books released a limited edition 2CD version of **"Gone From Danger"** and the second disc included a live rendition of "Long Bed From Kenya" recorded at Newport and featuring the voices of Baez and Elders. Following a successful U.S. tour the Elders and Shindell were retained for Joan's subsequent European sojourn. As Betty relates on her web site what ensued was *"an incredible whirlwind ten-country, two-month, twenty-seven date tour."*

The following year, Norwegian recording artist Roy Lonhoiden, who was performing with the Kulseth Brothers Band at time, covered Betty's "A Drifter's Prayer" and it appeared on their NorskAmerikaner release, **"Almenning."** It marked the beginning of Roy's ongoing relationship with Betty Elders' music. In 2004, now working/recording as a solo act, Lonhoiden cut "Safe Within Your Love," a song Betty has still to include on one of her own recordings, on his critically acclaimed album **"The Lonesome Country."** In addition, Betty Elders wrote the album liner notes and her photograph also featured in the liner. Last year, on **"Sanger Fra Skogen"** [it translates as **"Singer of Songs"**], Roy covered "Farewell" another previously unreleased Betty Elders composition. In the Best Country Music Album category **"Sanger Fra Skogen"** has been nominated for the 2006 Spellemannprisen, the Norwegian equivalent of a Grammy.

Last week in Part 1 of this feature I mentioned that Elders had been a finalist in the 1988 Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Contest. In 1990 Betty made her Kerrville mainstage debut and returned for the 1994, 1998, 2000 and 2001 festivals. Betty and Gene also appeared on a number of occasions at Kerrville's early fall, Wine & Music Festival. During the 1998 festival in addition to her mainstage appearance, Betty served on the faculty of the 26th Annual Kerrville Folk Festival Songwriting School, and along with Texas born songwriting legend Steven Fromholz and Californian Keith Greeninger [a 1997 New Folk winner] she judged that year's New Folk Songwriting Competition. One of that year's half-dozen winners was the late Dave Carter [d. 2002]. During March 1999 Betty accompanied other female festival regulars on a tour to promote the "**Kerrville Women Of Folk, Vol. 2**" compilation. The recording featured a live performance of "Long Bed From Kenya." In early May that year Elders performed at the annual Wildflower Music Festival in Richardson, Texas. The subsequently released Kerrville Festival compilation "**Texas Songwriters**" included Betty's previously unrecorded "Shores Of Ireland."

In 2004 Betty contributed her voice to a couple of duets on "**Still Life At Full Speed**" the fifth release by Austin based pop/country performer Eric Blakely, and the following year Icehouse Music, a small Austin label, released a compilation titled "**Ten In Texas**" which featured Terri Hendrix performing Betty's "Cowboy." Currently posted on Betty's web site are samples of four new songs - "Safe Within Your Love," "Don't Take Your Love Away From Me," "Shirley Falling Down" and "Shores Of Ireland." Drawing on some five decades of writing, last year Betty published a sixty-page book of her 'poems and other words' titled "**Comfort & Trust.**" Subdivided into two sections, as per the collection title, the tome also features the photography of Gene Elders. I deliberately closed Part 1 of this feature by commenting on David Rodriguez's imminent return as a recording artist and touring musician. Similarly, Mary McCaslin recently ended a twelve-year silence with the release, late last year, of "**Better Late Than Never.**" Here in the new millennium is it too much to hope for another stunning Betty Elders song collection?

Finally.....ask Betty who her principle influences as a writer have been, and she'll quote the three R's. **Robert Louis Stevenson** - the Scottish weaver of wondrous tales, **Robert Lee Frost** - the American spinner of down home verse and **Robert Allan Zimmerman** - the restless, rambling kid from Duluth by way of Hibbing, Minnesota. Betty Elders' CD's and her book of poetry mentioned in this feature are available by mail order from **Whistling Pig Music, P.O. Box 935, Dripping Springs, Texas 78620** and can also be ordered on the web at <http://www.bettyelders.com/catalog.htm>

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Kerrville Kronikles 6/93 [Minor Amendments 11/93] and 02/07.
[2335 words].