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Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family & Their Legacy In American Music



Synopsis

The first major biography of the Carter Family, the musical pioneers who almost single-handedly created the sounds and traditions that grew into modern folk, country, and bluegrass music. Meticulously researched and lovingly written, it is a look at a world and a culture that, rather than passing, has continued to exist in the music that is the legacy of the Carters's songs that have shaped and influenced generations of artists who have followed them. Brilliant in insight and execution, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* is also an in-depth study of A.P., Sara, and Maybelle Carter, and their bittersweet story of love and fulfillment, sadness and loss. The result is more than just a biography of a family; it is also a journey into another time, almost another world, and theirs is a story that resonates today and lives on in the timeless music they created.

Book Information

Paperback: 417 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster; 1st edition (February 23, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 074324382X

ISBN-13: 978-0743243827

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.2 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (69 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #556,615 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #255 in Â Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Country #262 in Â Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Country & Folk #276 in Â Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Folk & Traditional

Customer Reviews

There is not a dull page in this 397 page account of The Carter Family. The writers manage to strike a happy medium between a scholarly treatise and a popular biography, something I find very appealing. In addition to being a biography of the Carters, the book also is a history of country music in the first half of the Twentieth Century roughly and a statement on rural Southern sociology of the time as well. The book is full of information that I suspect is told for the first time as well as trivia many of us knew but had forgotten: For example, there was a time when soft drinks were called "dopes" in East Tennessee. I had forgotten that and that my aunt wore Blue Waltz perfume. (There is a funny account of Maybelle's breaking a bottle of this dreadful perfume she was using as a slide

for her guitar in a recording session.) I laughed out loud to learn that Helen Carter, who could learn to play any instrument almost immediately, was having trouble with her first accordian. It took Pee Wee King's telling her she was playing the instrument upside down to get her on the right track. The Original Carter Family was the first group to let the women lead as opposed to being backup singers. The less than admirable Ralph Peer of the recording industry coined the term "hillbilly" for the kind of music Carters and other country Southerners played in the early part of the 20th Century. There is a good account of A. P.'s collecting mountain songs all over the South. That contribution alone would make him a giant in folk/country music. Finally we learn a great deal about both generations of this great family, from A. P., Sarah and Maybelle to "Mama" Maybelle and her daughters. I was pleased to learn, for example, that Maybelle was as good and kind a person as she always seemed to be. (She even sat with sick people for part-time employment at one point in her later life when country music was in an eclipse.) There is a poignant contrast between what apparently was the long and happy marriage of Maybelle and A. P. Carter's brother Eck and A. P. and Sarah's marriage that ended in divorce. Certainly there is nothing more heart wrenching than Sarah's dedicating a song over the radio (apparently in the presence of A. P.) to the man she married after her divorce. The song was "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes." Coy Bays, the intended recipient, heard the song all the way in California and came to Texas for his woman. In the many years that A. P. lived alone thereafter, he never stopped loving Sara. She was preceded in death by him. Both of them are buried, however, only two rows from each other (even though Sara died in California and had been divorced from A. P. for many years) in Mount Vernon Cemetery in Maces Springs, Virginia with identical tombstones. Above their names and dates in beautiful pink marble are perfectly round 78 records and the words "Keep on the Sunny Side." This is a really fine book. Even folks not interested much in this sort of music should find it fascinating. It is the one by which later biographies of the Carters will be judged.

To all but a few of us -- that "few" being those who knew them personally -- A.P., Sara, and Maybelle Carter have always been little more than stoic, unsmiling, unreadable faces on the covers of Carter Family reissues. Mark Zwonitzer, assisted by Charles Hirshberg, manages to put breath and life into these three giants of country and folk music. Though they were ordinary people, they possessed an extraordinary gift, and it took them far from the shadow of their native home in Clinch Mountain, Virginia, and into the ears and hearts of people all over the world -- yet without ever revealing very much of anything about themselves. In a number of ways, this is a sad story. Alvin Pleasant Carter emerges as something of a tragic figure. He is also by far the most interesting

personality of the three, even if not possessed of the stunning musical talents of Sara and Maybelle. The book comes most to life, in my opinion, when A. P., without whom none of us would have heard of the Carter Family, is at its center. As a purely human story, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* -- the title comes from one of the family's most doleful songs -- will keep you reading far into the night. In focusing on the personal aspects, however, it foregoes the sort of deeper musical analysis some of us would like to have seen. It also lacks a discography, which one would have thought essential to a volume of this kind. Even so, this is a welcome, informative book which treats its subjects with an appealing warmth devoid of sentimental gloss.

Zwonitzer's look at the First Family of Country Music, the Carter Family, is long overdue, but very much welcome. Finally the information and stories that fans have been waiting decades for come to life on the book's pages. And what stories they are...I wish I could have been in Bristol when A.P., his wife Sara, and cousin Maybelle Carter made their first recording for Ralph Peer. It had to be one of those timeless moments in music history when someone realized that everything that had come before was about to change. Zwonitzer captures that moment and many others for the reader. The story of how the Carter Family was formed, thrived, soared, and then torn apart is a story that beats the heck out of any soap opera. It's a wonderful story, an inspiring story, and ultimately a heartbreaking story. The style of writing is familiar and comfortable, like an old uncle sitting on the front porch, telling you what it was like when the Carter Family was still around. The best part of the book is the close examination of each of the three principal players in the Carter Family saga: The quiet, never-sitting-still A.P., leaving home for days on end, seeking out new songs for the group while further alienating his already distant wife Sara, the one person he could never forget. Maybelle, who loved performing almost as much as she loved her family. Her style of guitar playing is still studied and imitated by guitarists all over the world. And Sara - perhaps the most tragic figure of all...but I won't tell you the full story. (Otherwise you might not buy the book!)

'Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone' tells these stories so well that when it strays away from the three principal players, I grew less interested. It seemed much attention and far too many pages were devoted to too many minor characters. And so many other parts of the book were severely truncated: Where is all the information about Maybelle and Sara's reunion performances and recordings? How did they feel singing songs they hadn't performed together in over 20 years? What about the origins of some of the songs? In one portion of the book, Zwonitzer tells us that Maybelle gave interviews telling where several of the songs came from, how A.P. put them together, etc., but I wanted to know more. After all, some of these songs have stood the test of time for over 75 years. Although the book contains

some disappointments, I can say the same for it that I do for the recordings: I'm thankful for what we have. It hurt me to read how the music of the Carter Family was almost forgotten by the music industry and the public in the 60's. This music is timeless. If you've never heard a Carter Family disc, buy one. Better yet, buy the 5-disc 1927-1934 set. (It's a steal on !) Then read the book. Sadly, we will probably never see their like again. But they were here for a short time, and what a difference they made and continue to make. The circle remains unbroken...but yes, we do miss them. 397 pages with photos

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