


ODETTA



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1954-2005</i>	<i>Folk</i>	<i>Muleskinner Blues (1956)</i>

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SINGS BALLADS AND BLUES

Album released:
Sept. 2 1956

V A L U E
2 4 3 4 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Santy Anno; 2) If I Had A Ribbon Bow; 3) Muleskinner Blues; 4) Another Man Done Gone; 5) Shame And Scandal; 6) Jack O' Diamonds; 7) Buked And Scorned; 8) Easy Rider; 9) Joshua; 10) Hound Dog; 11) Glory, Glory; 12) Alabama Bound; 13) Been In The Pen; 14) Deep Blue Sea; 15) God's Gonna Cut You Down; 16) Spiritual Trilogy.

REVIEW

Most people in the world — and I do not exclude myself from that number — probably hear this record only after learning that it was (possibly) that one LP which caused a young Bob Dylan to (temporarily) abandon his infatuation with rock'n'roll and switch to acoustic guitar and log cabins instead. This is quite ironic, given the huge popularity of Odetta in the folk-loving circles of the late 1950s and early 1960s — but before you begin citing racism or sexism as a possible reason, let us remember that the absolute majority of folkies from that era ended up sinking without a trace, maybe with the possible exception of Joan Baez, whose tenaciousness and willingness to evolve with the times earned her a more stable place in popular memory than most of her illustrious peers from the era when Greenwich Village ruled over the intellectual world.



That said, **Odetta Sings Blues And Ballads** is both an important and a unique album, if not necessarily a great one. Prior to Odetta, most black female vocalists were either jazz singers, like Ella or Billie; or blues / vaudeville singers, gradually evolving towards R&B; or mighty gospel ladies, like the great Mahalia Jackson. The idea of a black lady playing

acoustic guitar and encompassing all of the folk-Americana tradition, both black *and* white, was, to say the least, vastly underrepresented. Yet here was this imposing young woman from Birmingham, Alabama, who'd actually spent a large part of her childhood training to be an opera singer (in the footsteps of Marian Anderson) and then, after switching to the popular circuit, still ended up choosing a more «academic» than «commercial» singing career. Being this kind of outsider inside the racially open, but still largely white community of Greenwich-based folk singers must have been an odd experience, but also one which gave Odetta a very special edge that set her completely apart from everyone else.

Indeed, the material covered on Odetta's solo debut album (her first LP, a collaborative project with Larry Mohr released in 1954, went largely unnoticed) is quite diverse — folk songs coming from various white sub-traditions are interspersed with deep blues from the Delta, and gospel-influenced working tunes sit next to covers of Jimmie Rodgers. As a guitar player, Odetta is nothing special, besides knowing all the right chords and playing them without any significant mistakes, mainly relying on the guitar as a steady rhythmic support (I think Dylan was actually far more experimental in his playing on the self-titled debut). But as a singer, of course, she is endowed with a powerful and expertly trained voice in which an inborn blues feel is combined with years of practice. She is not a thunderous screamer like Mahalia and not an overwhelming soul siren like Aretha; hers is a more restrained, more pensive approach to the material which puts her more in the Nina Simone category — though, again, with very little, if any, of Simone's intentional provocativeness and theatricality.

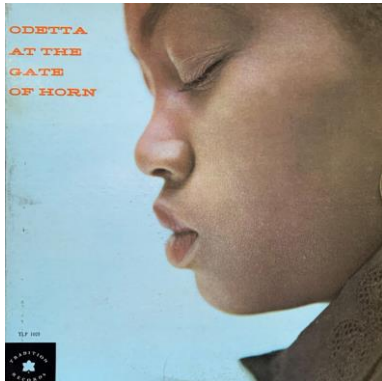
If there is a single flaw to Odetta's approach, it is the exact same one which also applies to all the classic heroes of Greenwich Village, definitely including Joan Baez: all of these old blues and folk tunes are delivered way too seriously, way too «academically», in a manner which transforms them all into sacred symbols and makes you want to stand up and remove your headgear while the album is on. When Jimmie Rodgers, the Singing Brakeman, sang 'Mule Skinner Blues', he did it jokingly and nonchalantly, yodeling and grinning all the way. When Odetta takes over, she sings it as if the future of the world depended on each drawn-out note — without the lyrics, you'd think this was *at least* about Joshua fitting the battle of Jericho and the walls comin' tumblin' on down rather than about how "I like to work / Rolling all the time / I can carve my initials / On any mule's behind". Likewise, compare any of the Leadbelly originals with their interpretations here and it'd be like... well, maybe *just* like what you'd expect an opera-trained singer to do when taking over the legacy of poor old weathered bluesmen from way down South.

The bad news, therefore, is that despite all the diversity of source material — 'If I Had A Ribbon Bow', 'Jack O'Diamonds' and 'Santy Anno', to take a few examples, represent at least three very distinct traditions — Odetta's approach makes them

all into Odetta songs, essentially meaning one deep spiritual prayer stretched over 45 minutes of varying keys and tempos, sometimes a cappella ('Another Man Done Gone', 'Glory Glory'), more often accompanied by guitar, but always conveying one and the same emotion, that of we-shall-overcome. It is a noble emotion and having it displayed before you over a period of, say, 20 minutes would be very healthy, but at 45, it does feel like an overdose.

The good news is that, 20 or 45 minutes, at least in 1956 there was no other album that sounded quite like **Odetta Sings Blues And Ballads**. So it is a bit, or even more than a bit, «academicized», but it is done by just the right person to do this: certainly I shall always take 'Alabama Bound' when it is delivered as a hymn by an actual native person from Birmingham over an 'Alabama Bound' delivered by the likes of Pete Seeger (or Lonnie Donegan from across the other side of the ocean, even if, God bless his soul, the charming old guy did quite an impressive job on that one). Not to mention an actual native person who has depth, volume, power, and manages to stay just one inch away from ruining the material by oversinging it — each single song is perfectly enjoyable and appealing in its own way, it is simply that after a while they really begin to merge together. It would also be quite a chore to try to discuss them all separately (which is why most reviews of this album tend to keep it short and sweet), because any such discussion would immediately lead you into talking about the songs rather than Odetta's personal take on them — because, other than her skilled use of her vocal cords, there is no personal take: she simply prefers the material to speak for itself, and what good would it do to talk about the quality of material known from the recordings of Jimmie Rodgers, Leadbelly, and Blind Lemon Jefferson in a review of Odetta's performance of that material? No good at all. But even so, the album is still a (minor) classic from the golden age of the folk movement era, and there's nothing you can do about that.





AT THE GATE OF HORN

Album released:

Oct. 1957

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) He's Got The Whole World In His Hands; 2) Sail Away Ladies, Sail Away; 3) The Gallows Pole; 4) Lowlands; 5) The Fox; 6) Maybe She Go; 7) The Lass From The Low Countree; 8) Timber; 9) Deep River; 10) Chilly Winds; 11) Greensleeves; 12) Devilish Mary; 13) All The Pretty Little Horses; 14) The Midnight Special; 15) Take This Hammer.

REVIEW

The album title is quite misleading: although Odetta did, in fact, perform in Chicago's famous Gate of Horn folk club, by the time this album was released she was long out of Chicago — in fact, the whole thing was allegedly recorded at Esoteric Studios in New York City, so **Almost Kinda Like At The Gate Of Horn, But No Cigar** would have been a far more appropriate title, but hey, what one wouldn't do to sell an extra few copies to mythology-hungry fans. Besides, **At The Gate Of Horn** certainly has that sort of ring to it, right? Sort of like a mix between *at the Gates of Heaven* and *at Cape Horn*, both only too suitable given how Odetta is both the St. Peter and the Magellan of the American folk movement at the same time.



Sound-wise, the only — though significant — difference between this record and its predecessor is Odetta's addition of Bill Lee on bass guitar: Bill (who is, by the way, the father of Spike Lee and has composed quite a few soundtracks for his son's movies) was a prominent figure around the acoustic folk circuit at the time, and he and Odetta would stick together for at least 5–6 years before parting ways. This sudden appearance of an extra bass guitar was probably intended to give Odetta's performances that extra «bottom», a touch of sonic heaviness, earthy grittiness, doom, gloom, and whatever else rhymes with *-oom*. I am, however, not entirely certain that this was a good choice, because the goddamn bass is so loud sometimes that it totally muffles Odetta's acoustic picking and even upstages her vocals; the result is that there is some slight loss of that precious intimacy which was so important about her first record. (It may not be so coincidental that Dylan would be a bigger fan of the first album, and that, with one or two exceptions, his early acoustic recordings would always be just Bob and his guitar, with nothing else to take the attention away from either).

As for the material, this is precisely the same mix of ye olde British folk, ye-not-so-olde American folk, and occasional samples of blues and spirituals as before. Arguably the only song that genuinely stands out is 'The Fox', largely because it is an old *comic* ballad and it gives Odetta a chance to engage in some lightweight vocal clownery — she does an awesome quack-quack-quack, might I note — to dilute a bit the overall solemn atmosphere. But nobody would probably want to select it as an intentional highlight: instead, that honor must rather go to something like John Jacob Niles' 'The Lass From The Low Countree', if only for the sheer length (four and a half minutes) and the tragic flow of Odetta's "oh sorrow, sing sorrow" vocals. (This is, by the way, one of the few numbers here without the accompanying bass).

In order to write a more detailed review, you have to have a far more serious passion for folk music than your humble servant's, because I probably fail to notice the many nuances that distinguish one of these ballads from any other. I do admire the way she can transform everything, be it a medieval British minstrel song or a modern-era Leadbelly work song, into the exact same «Odetta aria», but, unfortunately, this kind of deprives the tunes from individual personality: when your 'Midnight Special' becomes the same kind of operatic prayer as your 'Greensleeves', you might gain a whole new level of appreciation for the differences between Creedence Clearwater Revival and Fairport Convention. This is by no means to discredit the power, the subtlety, and the overall class of Odetta's delivery — but once you have expressed your admiration for her overall style (which was done in the previous review), you are left with nothing to write about other than the songs themselves, and just how fun is it to write about the lyrics of medieval English ballads in the context of a performance by a mid-20th century folk performer?

Still, just so we can end this on a special note, I *must* state that Odetta's 'Take This Hammer', closing the record, is one of the most vocally powerful renditions of the song I have heard — and that Odetta's heavily snorted "haah"s are easily the most disturbing "haah"s ever, as if she were conveying the idea that all the prisoners working on the chain gang were slowly dying of TB or something. Overall, it would have been nice to hear her do more of these rowdy work songs, as well as gospel material — her voice is just so better suited to anthemic, «burly» songs like these than to romantic or murder ballads. But it's not as if that would help to make the songs more distinctive, and it's not as if she cannot properly handle sentimental material, either, so this is not so much a complaint as an unconstructive criticism for the sake of criticizing.





MY EYES HAVE SEEN

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
3 4 3 3 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) Poor Little Jesus; 2) Bald Headed Woman; 3) Motherless Children; 4) I Knew Where I'm Going; 5) The Foggy Dew; 6) I've Been Driving On Bald Mountain / Water Boy; 7) Ox-Driver Song; 8) Down On Me; 9) Saro Jane; 10) Three Pigs; 11) No More Cane On The Brazos; 12) Jumpin' Judy; 13) Battle Hymn Of The Republic.

REVIEW

As hard as it is to even think about introducing any kinds of change to an established musical formula, particularly a «holy formula» where the slightest tweak may bring on accusations of selling out, losing touch with The Spirit, betraying one's own authenticity, etc. — listening to Odetta's third LP clearly shows signs of such artistic uneasiness; at the very least, there is a desire to use the recording studio as a workbench for doing the old schtick in different ways. Particularly by 1959, when she'd worked her way up to a certain level of recognition and acceptance — and when even the big music business began to realize that there might actually be some future in the neo-folk revival and in social protest (at least, as long as its terms were to be stated «politely» and «accurately»).



Thus it was that for her third album, Odetta had secured a contract with Vanguard Records, one of the leading independent labels of the day — and got to be promoted by none other than Harry Belafonte himself, who not only arranged for her to appear on his TV show, but also supplied a detailed set of liner notes for the LP. Although most of the recordings were still made by Odetta in the sole company of Bill Lee on bass, a few of the tracks totally went out of their way to add a choir, with

choral arrangements by professional conductor, arranger, and producer Milt Okun — who'd already worked with Belafonte before, and would go on to be largely responsible for the sweet sounds of folksies from Peter, Paul & Mary to John Denver... yes, not the best possible reputation, I know, but any producer's angle of corniness is usually a derivative of the artist's readiness to accept that corniness, and on this particular occasion, Odetta was not going to accept any sentimental flack from anybody, so Okun's choral additions work in favor of the songs, not against them.

Actually, the biggest difference of **My Eyes Have Seen** from Odetta's LPs on the Tradition label is not the addition of a choir, but a drastic change in production style. On those earlier albums, the music was always in your face: sit Odetta as close to the microphones as possible and have that acoustic guitar and that powerful, dead-man-rousing vocal boom right out into your living room. Here, the very second that 'Poor Little Jesus' kicks things off, you get the impression that the lady is singing from a cave — suddenly, there's an echoey distance between her and you, one that was not even vaguely hinted at by anything she'd previously done. Some might see this as an unnecessary distraction (and rather route for the kind of version that she performed, for instance, on the [Ed Sullivan show](#)), but artistically, the decision is perfectly sensible — having Odetta adopt this Moses-on-the-Mountain approach to her delivery subtly emphasizes her accumulated status of a «prophet» of the folk movement, and she handles the responsibility well enough.

I do not know of too many renditions of the 'Poor Little Jesus' spiritual prior to Odetta, but I do know that [her version](#) is easily my favorite of everything I did hear; compare it, for instance, with the [Weavers' version](#) from 1951, just to see how Odetta, with her fast tempo, booming voice, and heavy emphasis on the word "*shame*" throughout, turns the song from a «watch our sorrow turn to joy» rumination into a diatribe on the world's senseless cruelty and stupidity. She even dispenses with the last joyful verse altogether; for Odetta's own poor little Jesus, there is no escape from the '*pity and the shame*', not ever — the song's two minutes cut in and cut off as abruptly as possible, as if it were just two minutes of radio interference from a dimension of eternal pain into our own, casually untroubled, universe. It's a masterful gesture which, in such a short while, manages to bring up a state of poignant gospel ecstasy that not even Mahalia Jackson herself could always be capable of, at least not on such short notice. And it sets an excellent tone for the album — which rarely rises to the exact same heights as the opener, but still remains permeated by the same intense Biblical flavor until the very end.

In addition to myself, I know for definite sure of at least one other person who remained impressed with it — not Joan Baez or Bob Dylan or John Denver or even your grandmother, but, believe it or not, the famous record producer Shel Talmy, he of the 'You Really Got Me' and 'My Generation' fame. And you don't even need him to go on record saying it (although he

did): all you have to do is compare the fact that **My Eyes Have Seen You** includes two titles with the word "*bald*" in them ('Bald Headed Woman' and 'I've Been Driving On Bald Mountain') with the fact that those exact two songs with the exact same titles — but credited to Shel Talmy himself!! — would five years later be included on the self-titled debut album by the Kinks. (The Who would also record 'Bald Headed Woman', but not 'Bald Mountain'). Talmy (who, these days, runs an extremely interesting and useful set of mini-memoirs about rock music's golden days on his [FB page](#)) uses the meek apology nowadays that everybody was assuming songwriting credit for traditional material in those days, but I remember quite vividly how, in my own young and innocent days, when «Odetta» was at best a name I came across in a pulpy Bob Dylan biography, I used to form this mental image of Shel Talmy as a pervy little guy with a bald fetish, writing all that stupid material for his artists to make them spread his "Shel 'Bald Is Good' Talmy" religion all over the world... yes, children, misattribution corrupts the correctness of the world's image in your heads, and that's way worse than Shel Talmy buying himself a new jet plane from the royalties off an old folk tune he claimed for his own one day.

Anyway, the connection between Odetta and Shel Talmy is rather accidental — as is her unexpected «influence» on the early Kinks and Who — but it is a little sad that, for instance, as of today, the Wikipedia page for '[Bald Headed Woman](#)' does not even mention the Odetta version, which is arguably the finest of all the ones I have heard. For starters, it is delivered strictly a cappella, with just the same cavernous sound of handclaps setting off the beat for Odetta to follow, reminding us that the tune is essentially a work song, partly nonsensical and partly poignant ("*I don't want no cold iron shackles / 'Round my legs, lord, well a-round my legs*"). Just about every subsequent rendition, with the possible exception of Harry Belafonte's, loses that poignancy by turning the work song into a generic pop-rock tune — neither the Kinks nor the Who, I believe, were truly understanding what they were singing about here; Odetta most certainly *does* understand.

She then does an even more interesting thing with the next number, 'Motherless Children', which begins lyrically like a cover of Blind Willie Johnson's 'Mother's Children Have A Hard Time', then starts sucking in words from all over the place, including 'This Train Is Bound For Glory' and 'Dig My Grave With A Silver Spade', gradually gaining in gospel intensity as the choir solidifies around Odetta and she starts dropping casual hallelujah bombs to the left and right. It's captivating, moving, and at the same time oddly and fiercely post-modernist, a meat grinder of a tune showing that the student is no longer afraid to fiddle around with the classics and is, in fact, trying to find a new angle of perception, for instance, one under which the emotion of despair and the emotion of joy seem to flash with one and the same color — the color of spiritual ecstasy. This is a short performance, just barely over two minutes, which lends itself to any interpretation: it may be about celebrating the coming of the Lord, or it might be about the ground swallowing us all in the Apocalypse. You just

have to tilt your head a little to one side — or another. This train don't carry no literalists, hallelujah.

And this is just the first three songs, though it's not getting much better than the opening. The Irish portion of the record comes next; as the tempo slows down to make way for the romance of 'I Know Where I'm Going', Odetta gets a little too lyrical for me (Judy Collins probably works better for this kind of material), but 'The Foggy Dew' is quite masterful at least in terms of how it starts out — Odetta and Bill Lee really work as a team here, she supplying the fast rhythm trills, rolling over one another like ocean waves or gusts of wind, he providing an overtone-rich earthy foundation which colors your entire living space with black smoke. That the subject of struggle for Irish independence would find its natural place along the subject of struggle for African-American emancipation should hardly be of any wonder; what is *really* unpredictable is the ghostly, ominous beauty of that arrangement, most of which hangs on Bill Lee's shoulders. Remember that, aspiring singer-songwriters: do not underestimate the value of a professional bass player on the team.

On the second side of the LP, highlights include the fast-paced 'Ox-Driver Song', where Odetta's choir does its best to impersonate the ox-drivers (and sometimes the oxen, I guess); the great old pessimist anthem 'Down On Me' (I think that this is probably the version that must have impressed itself on the memory of a young Janis Joplin); and a really groovy, relaxed, chill-out rendition of 'Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos' which must have struck a note with Bob Dylan and through that would later be passed on to The Band. Odetta's rather straight-faced sense of humor shows up on the moralistic tale of 'Three Pigs' (*not* a highlight, but works as a lightweight interlude); and her fight-for-the-right colors are hoisted high up on the closing 'Battle Hymn Of The Republic', which is a bit too much for me to take (I have a real hard time with *any* tune to which you are supposed to stand up and salute) but at least when it is Odetta who sings "*mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*" it's much preferable to, you know... Whitney Houston?

The bottomline is that **My Eyes Have Seen** was as solid a claim for Odetta in 1959 as could be imagined from a folk artist still unwilling to cross that major line separating the interpreter from the creator — but perfectly willing to be as creative with her interpretations as physically possible. The powerhouse vocals; the diversity of the material and the lyrical and melodic liberties taken with it; the subtle atmospheric touches introduced by the production and the addition of vocal choirs — Odetta here was becoming just a wee bit too imposing for the narrow confines of Greenwich Village, entering what was perhaps her most ambitious, if also very brief, period in the music business. *This* was, perhaps, the perfect time for her to try and start writing her own songs, but somehow that particular impulse never came, or perhaps she was suppressing it herself out of fear of taking on *way* too much responsibility. The first Bob Dylan she would never be...

Ironically, even though all these little touches, in my opinion, easily make this not simply the best Odetta album from the 1950s, but also the most *accessible* one — much easier to sit through for a non-committed hardcore folkie — this is usually the point at which even the professional nostalgic music lover's patience for Odetta ends; spurred on by praise from Dylan or from the likes of Joan Baez, people go and try out **Sings Ballads And Blues**, put the «Mission Accomplished» check mark in the box and never return — this is why, for instance, on *RateYourMusic* this LP has something like ten times less ratings than Odetta's debut. This is, in my opinion, a serious misunderstanding for which the critical press should be blamed. While it is true that much, if not most, of the Greenwich Village scene pre-Dylan today constitutes only historical interest, its best representatives were not necessarily just clueless mofos whose inadequate love for American soil had made them deaf and blind to whatever was going on in the world around them — *some* of them at least had their own intuitions and world views and musical sensitivities, and there were curious stories of artistic growth and unpredictable surprises and... whatever, just [listen to the album](#) and hopefully you'll see what I mean.





SINGS THE BALLAD FOR AMERICANS AND OTHER AMERICAN BALLADS

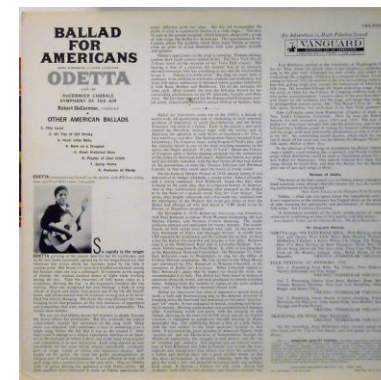
Album released:

July 1960

V A L U E

3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Ballad For Americans; 2) This Land; 3) Old Smoky; 4) Hush Little Baby; 5) Dark As A Dungeon; 6) Great Historical Bum; 7) Payday At Coal Creek; 8) Going Home; 9) **Pastures Of Plenty**.

REVIEW

For some reason, this album has forever remained out of print since its original release on the Vanguard label; while all of Odetta's classic-years catalog got the CD treatment sooner or later, **Ballad For Americans** has for a long, long time only been available as a piece of used vinyl, or, in more recent years, as a crudely ripped digital copy of said vinyl. Apparently, in 2017 somebody finally took proper care of the catalog and remastered the album, so now you can find it on most streaming services in better sound quality — but still not in physical form. Something, I guess, has rubbed somebody in the wrong way about Odetta expanding her horizons and covering the musical legacy of Paul Robeson.

Admittedly, it could be argued that, for all the audacity and desire to move on beyond the acoustic folk formula, Odetta's attempt to put a slightly more modern spin on a pompous musical piece firmly rooted in 1939 does feel a bit... *cheesy*. The original piece, composed by Earl Robinson with a libretto by John Latouche, was basically a «lightweight classical» cantata, combining elements of operetta, spirituals, and showtunes and designed to be sung with typically pre-war dashing pathos, whether by the ground-rattling [bass-baritone of Paul Robeson](#) or, one year later, with the [seductive croon of Bing Crosby](#)



(who adds so much top hat flavor to the composition, I must say, that its very purpose gets lost in the Purr-Pose). But would that same kind of grandstanding patriotic aura really hold up in 1960?

Certainly somebody like Odetta, who had received some training in classical singing (her mother, at one time, really hoped for her to become the next Marian Anderson), would be the perfect candidate to try and answer that question. For this particular recording, she is accompanied by the Symphony Of The Air Orchestra (comprised of musicians from the famous NBC Symphony Orchestra, after it was disbanded in 1954 following Toscanini's retirement), conducted by Robert DeCormier, a good friend of Pete Seeger and one of America's leading experts in combining classical music values with the art of folk singing (and just a little pinch of communism). Predictably, the recording sounds *grand* — almost as grand as the original Paul Robeson version, and definitely more imposing than the Bing Crosby one — and on the whole, Odetta in the role of the "Nobody Who Is Anybody, Anybody Who Is Everybody" is totally convincing, possessing both the gravity and the occasional lightweightness required to properly convey the many shades of the cantata.

The problem is that with this particular arrangement, the 12-minute composition kind of sounds like a medley from *West Side Story*, only with extra pathos on the side. In 1939, if you wanted to make a big statement on the issues of liberty, human rights, equality, and the evolution of the American Dream, there was hardly any alternative to doing it the Paul Robeson way. But by the late 1950s, fashions had changed, and it is probably fair to say that most people did not exactly expect their enlightenment to come from grandstanding, classically-enhanced mega-showtunes; they were much more likely to expect it from in-yer-face folk singers, be it the older school of Woody Guthrie or the slightly younger school of Pete Seeger and his friends at Greenwich Village. Thus, hearing this «mini-musical» wedged right in the middle of Odetta's impressive run of acoustic classics takes some getting used to — at best — or feels like a corny, over-acted, uninspiring melodrama — at worst. In any case, I wouldn't call it a truly «successful modernization».

The bottomline here is that if you are in the mood to hear Paul Robeson at the height of his powers and learn what the fuss was all about, 'Ballad For Americans' is as good a choice as anything. If you want to hear *Odetta* at the height of her powers, though, I would rather recommend the B-side of this LP over the A-side. It's just that some things designed in 1939 are best left in 1939, and continued to be enjoyed in a 1939 frame of mind if you can concoct one for yourself (not that *I* haven't been in a rather 1939 frame of mind ever since February 2022, but that's a slightly different angle of 1939, and not even Paul Robeson can be of much help here). Meanwhile, the old folk ballads and their neo-folk imitations that fill up the LP's second side continued to be all the rage in 1960, and Odetta could still interpret them in her own ways without being held

down by, let's say, certain «gentile conventions» of pre-war musical styles, which, in this particular case, DeCormier's orchestral and choral arrangement has not much helped her to overcome.

She does aim for a little consistency: to keep up with the subject of 'Ballad For Americans', most of the second side also deals with issues of social justice, workers' rights and so on. Interestingly, up to that point Odetta had not yet officially covered even a single Woody Guthrie song; this album includes a whoppin' *three* of them, and while I generally don't think I need yet another cover of 'This Land Is My Land' in my collection, I can't help but feel a little admiration in Odetta's regal delivery — she makes "*this land is my land*" sound as if she were indeed the royal owner of this land through God-given right, and "*this land is your land*" sound as if you were right there, standing on one knee and receiving your personal fiefdom from the monarch. Uh, well, perhaps this is not *quite* the actual meaning of the song, but that's precisely what makes it more interesting, and maybe even a little more unintentionally ironic, than most.

The true highlight of these three Guthrie covers, though, is 'Pastures Of Plenty'. Guthrie usually [sang his own song](#) at a fast, rollickin' tempo, with cheerful harmonica accompaniment and in an uplifting mood — the idea being that, through all the struggle and toil, paradise on Earth shall still be attained, sooner or later, by the oppressed characters of *The Grapes Of Wrath*. "*We'll work in this fight and we'll fight till we win*", that sort of thing. Odetta turns the song 180 degrees — hers is a dark, bleak delivery, with the same ominous guitar-and-deep-bass sound mix she and Bill Lee had going so well on 'Foggy Dew' from the previous album. Most notably, she changes the lyrics: that line about "*fighting till we win*" disappears from her delivery and is replaced by a reprise of "*we come with the dust and we go with the wind*" from the second verse. And then, in the last verse, the line "*My land I'll defend with my life if it be*" is replaced with "*Travel this road until death sets me free*" — feel the difference? (Admittedly, it is a rather poor combination with the final intact line, "*cause pastures of plenty must always be free*": first of all, it's bad form to rhyme the same word with each other, and second, Odetta's reinterpretation is that the song's heroes are *not* in possession of their pastures-of-plenty, and shall hardly ever be — so in this new context the final line makes much less sense than in Woody's original).

Throw in a really impressive guitar-and-bass arrangement of Merle Travis' coal miner anthem 'Dark As A Dungeon', perhaps the most complex and moody take on this chestnut in the entire history of neo-folk; some very stylish picking on 'Payday At Coal Creek', a song that most people would only usually listen to for the lyrics; and a rather haunting version of the old spiritual 'Goin' Home' (which William Arms Fisher had originally adapted from Dvořák's 9th symphony, though not much of Dvořák's original theme remains in this arrangement) — and you really have a *very* strong side of material, a

combination of bleakness, power, and instrumental professionalism unmatched by any other competitor at the Village at the time. Most importantly, the Odetta / Bill Lee combination of instrumental skill and inspiration is just as important here as the vocals are — while it would be a downright lie to say that the Greenwich folkies generally cared little about their playing skills (some did and some did not, as it always happens), Odetta at her best had a real knack for setting the proper mood with her technical proficiency. Just listen to those first fifteen seconds of ‘Pastures Of Plenty’ — there’s just two guitars in there, and the effect is already that of a symphonic sea of sound, penetrating much deeper than the loud and swirling orchestral arrangements on ‘Ballad For Americans’.

Perhaps what I’m really trying to say is that, deep at heart, Odetta is a natural-born *tragic* artist, and both her playing and singing work so much better when conveying bitterness and melancholy than optimism and cheerfulness (cue "*my kind of woman!*" in the voice of the Muppets’ Animal). Even on ‘Ballad’, she’s at her most convincing when singing lines like "*nobody who was anybody believed it, everybody who was somebody doubted it*". This, rather than skin color or anything else, is her biggest difference from, say, Joan Baez — they could sing exactly the same songs, but Joan has a natural gift for «Apollonic beauty» rather than tragedy, while Odetta has this natural gift for carrying the cross to Golgotha. And the contrast between the first and second sides of this record, I think, vindicates this statement better than anything else.





AT CARNEGIE HALL

Album released:

December 1960

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) If I Had A Hammer; 2) I'm Going Back To The Red Clay Country; 3) When I Was A Young Girl; 4) Gallows Pole; 5) God's A-Gonna Cut You Down; 6) John Riley; 7) John Henry; 8) Joshua Fought The Battle Of Jericho; 9) All The Pretty Little Horses; 10) Prettiest Train; 11) Meeting At The Building; 12) No More Auction Block For Me; 13) Hold On; 14) Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child; 15) Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down.

REVIEW

The value of this album is first and foremost symbolic: to have an album recorded **At Carnegie Hall** means an honorable place in the spotlight, in this case signifying progression from the small cafes of Greenwich Village, limited to bohemians and intellectuals, onto a national level of recognition. Although Odetta was far from the first neo-folk artist to have performed and be recorded at the venue (The Weavers had their first live album recorded there as early as 1957), it was still an important achievement both for herself and the entire movement — seriously increasing the role of the folk singer (if not quite yet the «singer-songwriter») in contemporary music culture and all that. How do you get to Carnegie Hall, anyway? Buy yourself a guitar and rent a room in Chelsea around 1960...



Impressively, for this performance, recorded on April 8, 1960, Odetta comes up with an almost completely new setlist; only two of the songs ('Gallows Pole' and 'All The Pretty Little Horses') are reprised from the **Gates Of Horn LP**, and one more ('God's A-Gonna Cut You Down') from her debut album — the rest of the selections had not yet been tried out in the studio.

This is a good thing, because even if comparison of the live and studio versions shows that the live playing and singing are more intense (particularly on 'Gallows Pole'), it feels as if the intensity is largely due to technical reasons — the venue's monumental environment has Odetta trying harder than usual so as to properly reach the audience, rather than «let her hair down» like a rock'n'roll performer would typically behave. On the whole, though, Odetta live is (unsurprisingly) not too different from Odetta in the studio. There is no stage banter, there is virtually no improvisation, and there seem to be no spontaneous or spurious changes to the songs — which is perfectly understandable, since at this point in time all of those «oldies» must have sounded quite fresh and new to the ears of most of the people in the concert hall, and Odetta's point was to get their message across, not to mess around with them.

Joining her for most of the concert is the ever-loyal Bill Lee on bass, and for the last four numbers, a gospel choir from the local Church of the Master. As usual, the songs are a mix of three categories — straightforward gospel numbers; African-American work songs and slave ballads; and a bunch of old English folk ballads carried over from the other side of the Atlantic. As usual, I remain a bit torn about the last category: for all the joys of genre-mixing and a «color-independent» approach to performing, Odetta sounds more at ease singing 'Motherless Child' and 'No More Auction Block' than narrating the woes and troubles of pre-industrial era British fair maidens — the same way Joan Baez sounds significantly more at ease narrating the woes and troubles of pre-industrial era British fair maidens than trying to sound like a cotton field worker. This is not to imply that Odetta's performance of 'John Riley' is worthless, but her big, bulky voice is not a natural choice for this kind of material, which requires more finesse and fragility.

Then again, this is precisely why LPs are more than just collections of individual songs: *extracting* 'John Riley' or 'When I Was A Young Girl' from this record, to treat them as autonomous nuggets within some randomized playlist, is destructive. The album works best as an *album*, whose symbolic significance is in the unity of the folk tradition — showing that British folk, white American folk, and black American folk ultimately share the same roots (well, at least *some* of the same roots), and that folk music need not be perceived as boring or monotonous if you do not painstakingly sub-divide it into a whole lot of separate traditions and styles.

Thus, the record kicks off with a powerful one-two punch as Odetta jackhammers her way through the ubiquitous 'If I Had A Hammer' (at least *hers* feels like it's made out of solid metal, rather than the quaint rose-glass tool of Peter, Paul & Mary) and the non-stop vocal-slaughter of 'I'm Going Back To The Red Clay Country', where the main trick is to stretch out every single vowel until the whole song turns into a barely decipherable, but awesomely irresistible, «mooring and bellowing»

vocalize. Then, whoops, the singer is suddenly all gentrified and her voice takes the elevator to higher ranges on ‘When I Was A Young Girl’, warning Carnegie Hall concert goers about the dangers of excessive ale consumption — don’t do it, kids, or you’ll ruin your falsetto range forever. And soon afterwards, the troubled young maiden reverts to Biblical matron, blasting out a powerful a cappella sermon with ‘God’s A-Gonna Cut You Down’, a great showcase for Odetta’s sense of phrasing, breath control, and loudness dynamics (again, higher, louder, and much more intense than the studio version: you can even hear the audience spontaneously explode in a brief ovation when Odetta jumps out of her «quiet mumble mode» on the last verse to go all ballistic on the final chorus).

This sequencing, even if some of the performances individually work much better than others, ensures that the program never gets bogged down in too much «sameyness» — the worst *and* most common thing that can happen to a guy or a gal with just their acoustic guitar out there — and this good level of variation and excitement is retained through most of the album’s running time. It may look a little amusing to see two songs named ‘John Riley’ and ‘John Henry’ sitting right next to each other on the setlist, but they are naturally two very different Johns — one imported over from Elizabethan England, the other left over from 19th century America — and they naturally get completely different treatments. Like I already said, I’m not overtly pleased with the former, but ‘John Henry’ gets a more monumental vocal tribute from Odetta than any previous recording known to man. She *really* drops the hammer on this one, just the way, one might think, it should have been dropped in the first place: an anthem to a legendary American SuperMan™, adequately vocalized by the contemporary American SuperWoman™.

The last four numbers, for which Odetta engages the assistance of the choir, aim at adding a bit of a mystical vibe to the proceedings. The choir never explodes into jubilation; for most of the time, it stays in the low-key, «mumbling» range, as if weaving a dark, ominous cloud, lapping at the heels of the singer — or perhaps, more accurately, having the singer run right into it, groping her way through the spiritual fog with determination. It’s a very tasteful and genuinely moving use of the choir’s power, simultaneously recreating a really «ol’ time», pre-Emancipation Proclamation feeling, and aimed at letting the audience leave with a clear understanding that the fight is not over yet. If you can stand the slightly antiquated pathos of it all — her ‘Motherless Child’ feels as if it is channelling the attitude of Marian Anderson’s and Paul Robeson’s recordings from the 1930s — you might even experience a little catharsis on the way.

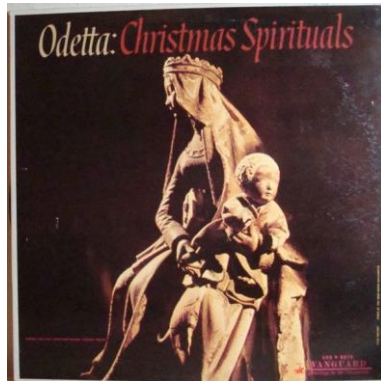
Fortunately for the listeners, Odetta does not end the show with the utmost bleakness of ‘Motherless Child’, but rather on a more uplifting note with ‘Ain’t No Grave Can Hold My Body Down’ — the closest the record does come to a note of gospel

jubilation. Ironically, it also feels like her weakest performance here to me, because it shows the limitations of her upper register — the song absolutely does not require the singer to slip into falsetto unless of her own extra volition, but for some reason, she decides that a contrast between high and low might do good to the overall emotional effect, and, instead of ending the song with power, puts it on its back with a breaking cat-in-heat meow, like a gymnastics champion messing up the final landing after an immaculately performed series of jumps. Oops!

Minor quibbles like this aside, **At Carnegie Hall** is ample proof that Odetta had both the brawn *and* the brain to win over the audience. No video footage exists of the event, of course, and it would be futile to expect an Odetta show to be captured on American camera in the late 1950s or early 1960s; the closest thing to seeing the lady in her prime is a half-hour [recording made for Belgian TV](#) in 1964, with a completely different setlist from **Carnegie Hall** but a similar approach to setlist construction — and a good opportunity to put a face to the music (almost literally so, since the cameraman focuses almost entirely on Odetta's face throughout the show; and a beautifully emotional face it is, although I sure wish she would open her eyes more than once or twice... still not figuring out if it's all a matter of being «carried away» to the world of cotton fields and sweet potatoes, or just a consequence of natural shyness; quite possibly the latter, since Odetta was often reported as being prone to extreme fits of stage fright).

Of course, you don't necessarily *have* to put a face to the music in order to understand that she was the real deal; the voice pretty much speaks for itself, and it's a voice that imbues a liberation song like 'No More Auction Block For Me' with much more sense and «naturalness» (if not necessarily more depth) than, say, Bob Dylan covering it in his early folk days. If only the power, conviction, variety, and professionalism of this approach could be complemented with a proper sense of humor and a faint hint at original songwriting, indicating progression from traditionalism into the future... well, yes, then we'd have Bob Dylan. But there is no way that the existence of Bob Dylan in this world could completely cancel out the roles of the Odettas and the Joan Baezes, either.





CHRISTMAS SPIRITUALS

Album released:

December 1960

V A L U E
2 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Virgin Mary Had One Son; 2) Somebody's Talking About Jesus; 3) Ain't That A-Rocking; 4) Mary Had A Baby; 5) Go Tell It On The Mountain; 6) Beautiful Star; 7) Poor Little Jesus; 8) Shout For Joy; 9) Oh, Jerusalem; 10) Rise Up Shepherd And Follow; 11) If Anybody Asks You; 12) What Month Was Jesus Born In?; 13) Children, Go Where I Send Thee.

REVIEW

While the cheesy tradition of the Christmas album is at least as old as Bing Crosby's **Merry Christmas** from 1942, that of the «alternative Christmas album» is much more difficult to pinpoint. Yet in a way, the roots of the distinction between the likes of ABBA's 'Happy New Year' or Shane MacGowan's 'Christmas Lullaby' could probably be traced, with a little metaphorical skewing, all the way back to the distinction between Christmas carols — recordings of which are already piled up to the sky even before the arrival of LPs — and Christmas spirituals, which feature in far fewer numbers. Odetta's own collection, brought out to the world during the Christmas season of 1960, was definitely not the first one — at the very least, there is Mahalia Jackson's **Sweet Little Jesus Boy** from as early as 1955. But I have a serious hunch that it may have been the first one to be recorded *this way* — in the «alternative Christmas spirit», so to speak.



Because even Mahalia Jackson's [collection of Christmas spirituals](#) is a record that can be easily and carelessly enjoyed over a nice family dinner — as warm, friendly, celebratory background music. Odetta's approach was completely different: not deviating even one bit from her usual standards, she gives you Christmas not as an occasion to have fun and stuff your face, but as an excuse to sit and contemplate on the nature of Christmas as the starting point of liberation from pain, suffering,

and sin — deep-felt jubilation steeped in the sorrows of slavery and oppression. This is quite explicitly stated already in the liner notes, and is made obvious in pretty much every single song on here, one of which ('Poor Little Jesus') is re-recorded in a new version, having already been previously cut for **My Eyes Have Seen**, but carries the exact same sentiment — empathy toward the destitute little boy, "*poor little Jesus, born in a manger, ain't that a pity and a shame?*", something that the 19th century slave in his shack must have felt far more acutely than his owner over at the big plantation house.

Of course, as usual, this is not so much an «authentic recreation» of tradition as its re-imagining in the context of 1960 and its ongoing struggles. For what it's worth, Christmas has traditionally been a time for joy and merriment both for the slave and the slaver, and from that point of view, Mahalia Jackson's jubilation spirit of 1955 might be closer to the truth than Odetta's spirit of deep darkness and bleakness of 1960. This is precisely why «alternative» Christmas albums shall always command only the tiniest proportion of listeners — even those of us who try to keep their eyes open to the world's hurts and issues, let alone our own ones, will be naturally prone to trying to *forget* about them for the holiday season, rather than take the opportunity to wallow in our sorrow even deeper than usual.

From the starting notes of 'Virgin Mary Had One Son', which Odetta and Bill all but turn into a stern chamber sonata for guitar and double bass, song after song gives you a very, very black Christmas. Thus, on the opening number, Odetta plunges into her lowest range for the chorus hookline — "glory be to the newborn king" is delivered in an almost Disney-Evil-Queen vocal tone, spooking away all the kids before they even get a chance to assemble around the fireplace. Minutes later, 'Somebody's Talking About Jesus' is a dialog between Odetta and Lee's highly jazzy bass line that might easily fit on one of the contemporary Charlie Mingus albums, and there's a strong note of *terror* rather than *wonder* in Odetta's voice — the appearance of Jesus is clearly announced as an ominous mystery, the consequences of which are completely unpredictable, particularly to the conscience of a person whose life has been nothing but disappointments, disillusionments, and hopelessness so far.

Later on, starting with the gentle acoustic folk picking of 'Ain't That A-Rockin', Odetta starts weaving in notes of gentle tenderness, which are still typically interwoven with sorrow, and the album settles into a relatively quiet, contemplative mood; it would make little sense to comment individually on the songs, as it would inevitably lead to discussion on the history and nature of specific spirituals rather than on Odetta's actual contributions — which are, emotion-wise, more or less exhausted by the time of the third or fourth song, and begin to loop in a repetitive, but never less-than-pleasant circle. The only thing that does stand out is the final number, a cover of the traditional cumulative ditty 'Children Go Where I Send

Thee' which Odetta approaches far more «seriously» than Nina Simone in her studio cover from the previous year — not only does she whip herself up into furious strumming mode, but she lets the song gallop on for seven exhausting minutes, as if truly possessed by the Holy Ghost, until the endless stream of "*one for the little bitty baby... four for the four that stood at the door...*" turns into a completely mechanical, auto-pilot, trance-like delivery. Probably the closest thing to «having a little bit of Christmas fun» on the entire record. (Also, *bang*, a sudden realization that Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' is quite naturally based on this tune, both melodically and by way of phrasing).

Apart from the predictable issue of emotional monotonousness (which is not *entirely* true — in terms of melodies, tempos, and moods the songs are sufficiently different to not merge into one another), **Christmas Spirituals** still represents the Odetta / Lee duo at their collaborative peak — and an extremely fresh and innovative perspective on the musical embodiment of the Christmas season. Do beware, though, that the album comes in two different versions: much later on, in 1987, Odetta would re-record most of the songs and re-release them under the exact same title. The new album, distinguished by a Black Jesus on the cover, would feature some extra percussion and be sung in a slightly gentler tone, meaning that it is still perfectly listenable but does not quite have the same combination of power and minimalism as featured in the original, so if you are at all interested, be sure to seek out the 1960 version first.

