

Robert “Bud” Garrett
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Robert “Bud” Garrett was a man of many talents and for long had been the “main man” in Free Hill, Tennessee, a free black community founded on the Upper Cumberland River in the antebellum South (Garrett). Through his life, Garrett worked at a number of trades, often several simultaneously. These included running a taxi service between Free Hill and Indianapolis (when, following WW II, long time Free Hill residents started seeking employment in nearby cities), delivering ice, driving a school bus, working as a notary public, and working on cars (Peterson and Rankin 1985: 8, 14). No matter the problem, everyone in the community reportedly looked Garrett first.

It was as the proprietor of a café and juke joint and a record store, however, that Garrett developed an eclectic ear, adapting hits from blues, rhythm and blues, and country music to his idiosyncratic musicality—as a singer and self-taught guitar player. Garrett’s interpretive range is definitely narrow compared to the broad net he cast for sources of inspiration. However he became widely popular at festivals during the last years of his life for the way his distinctive amalgam of musical influences spoke of a life in a not very common cultural setting—a rural black community in the South. Garrett’s other claim to fame was as the premier crafter of flint marbles used in the regional game of rolley hole, a croquet-like sport popular in the Upper Cumberland River Valley.

Garrett was born on January 28, 1916, to John Tom Hamilton Garrett and Adeline Hamilton Garrett in Free Hill in Clay County, Tennessee (Peterson 2006). The settlement sits on top of a limestone knob overlooking another antebellum-established free black community in Celina. A detailed socio-anthropological history of the community was published in 1985 in the form of a generous liner note insert for the Tennessee Folklore Society funded oral-history-project-cum-record-album *Free Hill: A Sound Portrait of a Rural Afro-American Community*, on which Garrett was heard performing one of his own compositions, the blues “[I Got a Little Place Way Out in Free Hill.](#)” Garrett’s life sketch and reminiscences were also incorporated in that booklet. That recording, a 12-bar blues preceded by a long talking-blues-style intro, captured the qualities that had made Garrett popular over the last decade, especially on the festival circuit—he was a storyteller who presented entertaining synopses of life in his community.

Although in recent years, a long standing African American presence in Appalachia has been increasingly acknowledged, scholars continue to emphasize that the black Appalachian experience was decidedly different from its counterparts in the Deep South or later in the industrial North. As Richard Blaustein summarizes Peterson and Rankin’s viewpoint, “The climate and terrain of the southern Appalachians did not lend themselves to the development of extensive plantations, and consequently the rigidly stratified class and caste system of the lowland South did not gain a firm foothold.” Yet Garrett’s music and his testimonies make one question the degree of isolation that Blaustein, for example, interprets as he continues, “Slavery and discrimination did exist, however, and black communities like Free Hill sought to maintain a marginal, almost invisible relationship to their white neighbors” (Blaustein: 29).

Surely the banjo and fiddle square dance music that Garrett absorbed as a child seems to have thrived in Appalachia specifically because of the lesser isolation allowed by the smaller size of the black population. Peterson and Rankin also suggest that Garrett picked up the shared square dance music repertoire from dances held for both black and white communities in the region (Peterson and Rankin: 14). While his older family members had played the banjo and fiddle, Garrett came along at a time when guitar was

displacing those instruments and the blues their repertoire all across black America. He did learn his early guitar playing while accompanying older community musicians at square dances (Peterson 2006). Garrett's love for other musics, especially popular country music, grew when he entertained audiences at his café and juke joint in Free Hill and, at some point, ran a small record store in Tompkinsville on the other side of the Tennessee-Kentucky state line (Feintuch and Greene: 8).

Garrett's recordings at the 1984 Celebration of Traditional Music were made later than any of his commercially available ones and find him presenting the whole range of his eclectic repertoire. A sure-fingered guitarist, albeit with a limited arsenal of tricks, Garrett was more of a crowd pleaser as a songster who adapted favorites from many genres to his personable delivery and his favored 12- and 16-bar progressions and melodic contours—a veritable human jukebox survival from an era when the electro-mechanical counterparts had been ubiquitous.

In Garrett's interpretations, the then contemporary country hits such as Merle Haggard's "[Swinging Doors](#)" and Don Williams's "[Love Me Tonight](#)" are shaped to his favorite up-tempo 16-bar swinging country style that he also uses on his own compositions such as "[Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well?](#)," "[Henry Gann](#)," and the sagaciously-titled "[You Can't Tell Which Way the Train Went by Looking at the Track](#)." Most other songs, whether covers such as Ellas McDaniels' (a.k.a. Bo Diddley) "[It Hurts Me Too](#)," Leiber and Stoller's "[Kansas City Here I Come](#)," or Ray Charles's "[What'd I Say?](#)" or originals, are interpreted as 12-bar slow blues.

Garrett's originals have entertaining hook-laden titles and lyrics and it is understandable why he might have considered a professional career as a musician once, recording a single for Excello Records in the 1950s (Peterson 2006). It is also worth noting that Garrett played on an acoustic guitar at Berea's Celebration of Tradition Music while all his commercial recordings have featured him playing on an electric instrument. Garrett's choice seems to have been guided more by expediency of the situation than by the avowed traditionalism of the context, as he exchanged his guitar with someone in attendance that had a better-tuned one.

Bud Garrett had already been on the festival circuit since he was discovered and featured on the Meriweather compilation (cited below) in 1977 and had appeared at the prestigious Knoxville World's Fair in 1982. He continued to perform at important venues after his Berea appearance including the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife in 1985. He passed away on November 24, 1987, while engaging in the other of his two favorite activities—playing marbles (Peterson 2006).

Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:

Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:

- CTM 1984: 17 song performances (one song, "Henry Gann," was performed on two occasions during the festival) contained on 5 Open Reels (01 AC-OR-005-281, 291, 292, 299, 307); all have reference copies on audio cassette.

Commercial Recordings (dubbed to CD):

- *I Kind of Believe it's a Gift* (Meriweather 1001-2): Includes 3 songs by Garrett: "Do Remember Me Baby," and "Way Out in Free Hill."

- *Music of Tennessee: Recorded Live at the 1981 Brandywine Music Festival* (Heritage 042) (Heritage Records 1982) (One song by Garrett: “Can’t Tell Which Way the Train Went”)
- *Free Hill: A Sound Portrait of a Rural Afro-American Community: Traditional Song, Narrative, and Sacred Speech from Tennessee* (TFS 107) (Tennessee Folklore Society, 1985): One song by Garrett: “I got a Place in Free Hill.”

Additional Commercial Discography:

- “*Quit my Drinking*” b/w “*Do Remember*” (Excello, c. mid-1950s)

References:

Blaustein, Richard. 1986. “Review: *Free Hill: A Sound Portrait of a Rural Afro-American Community*.” *Now and Then* 3/1. 29-30.

Feintuch, Burt and Bruce Greene. Liner Notes to *I Kind of Believe it’s a Gift* (meriweather 1001-2). Bowling Green, Kentucky: Bowling Green-Warren County Arts Commission.

Garrett, Robert. 1984. Introduction and Performance. *Celebration of Traditional Music*. Berea.

Peterson, Elizabeth and Tom Rankin. 1985. Liner Notes to *Free Hill: A Sound Portrait of a Rural Afro-American Community: Traditional Song, Narrative, and Sacred Speech from Tennessee* (TFS 107). Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Tennessee Folklore Society.

Peterson, Elizabeth. 2006. “Robert ‘Bud’ Garrett: 1916-1987.” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. <http://www.tennesseencyclopedia.net> Accessed on July 26, 2006.