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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—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.

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## Customer Reviews

The Carter Family, Virginia mountain musicians who composed, performed and recorded hundreds of folk songs beginning in 1927, finally get their due in documentary filmmaker Zwonitzer's comprehensive biography. To say that the Carters, who inspired such legends as Chet Atkins, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, had a profound impact on popular American music is an understatement. Zwonitzer follows the Carter family's history from the 1891 birth of A.P. Carter, the musical founder, up through the late 1970s, offering background on the social, economic and technological developments that spawned American folk, country and rock music. The Carter family got its official start when A.P. dragged his wife, Sara, and his pregnant sister-in-law Maybelle to

Bristol, Tenn., to sing for a record company scout. The Carters' performance with A.P. singing bass, Sara and Maybelle singing harmony, and Maybelle on guitar earned them a recording contract and a legendary career that spanned three generations. Family and friends reminisce about the forbidden love affair that broke up the Original Carters; Hank Williams's attempt to shoot June Carter; how June and Maybelle Carter sustained June's husband, Johnny Cash, through his drug addiction; and other colorful episodes from the Carters' lives. Zwonitzer writes with flair, weaving anecdotes into a compelling study that will intrigue historians and music lovers alike. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

With an eye for biographical detail and just the right helping of the vernacular, documentary filmmaker Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, the author of biographies of Elvis Presley and the Beatles, tell the historically important and fascinating story of the Carter family and their music. From the original 1927 recordings of A.P., Sara, and Maybelle Carter, through the 1940s and 1950s tours of "Mother" Maybelle and her daughters, to the marriage of June Carter and Johnny Cash, the history of this family of country musicians and their legacy unfolds through well-written prose. Highlights of the book include a chapter on the importance of the Original Carter Family's broadcasts on the titanic Mexico/U.S. border radio station XERA and the authors' material on the roots of some of the songs found, reworked, and newly composed by A.P. Carter songs that link modern country music to the traditional folk music of the 19th century. This is not, however, a thorough study of the individual songs themselves. Through the many anecdotes and quotations, garnered from interviews with surviving family members and from study of previously published material, the Carters and their associates come across as real people perhaps the book's greatest contribution. Highly recommended for all public libraries and for academic libraries with a focus on American vernacular music. James E. Perone, Mount Union Coll., Alliance, OH Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I had to struggle when it came to awarding "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone" four stars or three. I chose four because if it weren't for Zwonitzer and Hirshberg we would know far less about the Carters. Their contribution to knowledge in this field is signal and I take nothing away from what they accomplished. It would be a truism to repeat what other reviewers have already said ("Love American music? Read this book!"). The writing is brisk and the reader's interest is maintained to the end. So what is the problem? Perhaps because the authors have done half their job so well, the

missing half is glaring. It's usually a compliment to say that the writing left you wishing for more, but here it's excruciating, because Zwonitzer and Hirshberg could have given us more and did not. Because this book helps us to appreciate the Carters, we want to know all you can about them. When you realize that at least some of the gaps could have been filled in by the authors, it's frustrating. What's missing? 1. A timeline. With three main characters and numerous descendants a timeline is indispensable for following the action intelligently. Who was born when and to whom? When were they married and where? How old were they when they died? 2. An epilogue. Half way through the book the focus shifts from the three principals, Alvin Pleasant ("A.P.") Carter, his wife, Sara Dougherty, and her first cousin Maybelle Addington, wife of A.P.'s brother, Ezra J. ("Eck") Carter -- to their children, especially Maybelle's three talented daughters, the famous June Carter Cash and the lesser known Anita and Helen. In the last half of the book their story almost comes to predominate, which is fine, but upon the death of Sara, the book stops, like a locomotive that has fallen off a bridge, and the story of the descendants is abruptly and frustratingly halted. A two page epilogue telling us what happened to Maybelle's three daughters and their children, Sara's children and her second husband Coy, and how fares the Carter Family Museum and their legacy, is the least the authors could have done after building our interest. 3. There are numerous rare photos without dates. They should be dated, even approximately. 4. While it's probably asking too much, a genealogical chart would have been a helpful supplement to the rather dizzying chronicle provided in the text. The book takes a leisurely detour to delve into the minutiae of the life of a quack doctor, John Romulus Brinkley, who sponsored the Carters on his powerful radio station across the Mexican border from Texas. The Brinkley excursion could have been shortened to make room for the preceding missing elements. We're told Sara's age when she died (80), but not Maybelle's age at her death. We're informed at one point that June has \$37,000 in cash in her wallet. Shortly thereafter we see her Country Music icon mother Maybelle, toiling on the night shift as a practical nurse for \$12 an hour! Why? Was it because Maybelle was extremely frugal, or was she nearly broke at this juncture? The authors don't tell us. They never give a hint that there is a breach between Maybelle and Sara but they gloss over the fact that Sara apparently did not attend Maybelle's funeral (p. 392). We also are not told why Sara, who divorced A.P. in her passion for Coy, and took up a new life near Stockton, California, asked to be buried close to A.P. back in Maces Springs, Virginia, against the wishes of her second husband (p. 395). The subtitle of this Carter family biography is: "Their Legacy in American Music." But Zwonitzer and Hirshberg never ruminate on what exactly that legacy consists. They track the waning and eventual permanent waxing of the Carter's influence with admirable narrative skill and solid research. But the authors

never pause to offer the kind of musicological retrospective suggested by the book's subtitle. The reader is left to surmise that Grand Ole Opry + Johnny Cash + Newport Folk Festival + the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band = something or other, admittedly momentous, but the authors shy away from ever saying precisely what that is. They never truly assess the Carter's legacy, leaving it to the reader to glean from all the details just what precisely it was and is. Any competent writer who comes to craft the story of the Carters is going to pen a haunting tale, and from the early music itself with its litany of heartbreak and tragic death, moderated by invocations to "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life," to the artists, this is a compelling and deeply moving story. Maybelle Carter is the family's lay saint, imbued with what the authors term the "forgiving progressivism" of her Primitive Baptist upbringing. A.P. Carter is the song-writing prodigy, afflicted nearly from birth with a tremor in his arm that would be a harbinger of the extent to which his tunes would shake 20th century America with a roots music it had nearly abandoned. He was the architect of the Carter sound and yet another devout Christian imbued with a fundamental decency - his was the first major country group to have the lead vocals sung by a woman, a controversial move made good by the powerful voice of his formidable wife Sara, a strong-willed, proto-feminist. What struck me the most about the Carters was their lack of pride and ego. They were ambitious, certainly, and reveled in hard work, grueling tour schedules and living conditions that would challenge all but the toughest of hardscrabble wannabe recording artists today. Yet they came from an era that predated the cult of celebrity and never bought into it for themselves or other stars. Midway through the book, Zwonitzer and Hirshberg spring a delightful surprise on the reader. All of a sudden, beginning in the 1940s, we find the Carters nose to nose with some of the century's greatest music legends. Hank Williams Sr. is a love sick puppy in the presence of Maybelle's singing daughter Anita, gifted with one of the finest voices in all of popular music. Williams, tormented by his unfaithful wife Audrey, constantly half-drunk or high on pills (he narrowly misses June with a pistol shot during one of his benders), is nursed and mothered by Maybelle and her girls. They treat him just as if he was a farm boy from across the road. Williams is only the first of a parade of superstars who will seek the comfort of their hearth. After Williams died of an overdose, a frightened and tearful singing Adonis by the name of Elvis Presley shared their home, and like Hank, sought the hand of Anita Carter. Maybelle, Eck and her daughters treated Elvis like the lost country boy he was in 1955. There is no sign they were awed by him or sought to hop on what was obviously going to be the gravy train of the decade. When Anita said no to Presley and the Colonel beckoned, it was Johnny Cash's turn to enter their lives and be nursed off the pills and the booze. He was a successful suitor, winning the love of the soon to be twice-divorced June, and from then on he proved as good a friend as any of the Carters could want. Besides June,

Maybelle and her husband Eck were the main recipients of the rewards of the relationship with Cash. Maybelle was really something. She was a good mom and a fine cook who could handle an automobile like a NASCAR racer (for years she was the main driver while the Carters toured the nation), a shrewd and avid card-player, and a faithful wife to her eccentric, bibliophile-husband Eck, a student of Edward Gibbon and Josephus and a lover of Bach and Beethoven. Moreover, the Carters remained open to strangers all of their lives. In fact, some of their closest, lifelong friends were just regular folk they had met in stores or on the street. Throughout their lives they rejected celebrity and snobbery and made themselves available to "ordinary" people with an astonishing degree of access and hospitality. Sarah, after years of separation from A.P. and pining after her estranged lover, the handsome, fun-loving Coy, married him and moved to the far west, where initially the fire of their ardor sufficed to compensate for the distance from her children and the final dissolution of the original Carter Family trio. But as the years passed, Coy, a maintenance man, took to drinking, and the trailer the couple inhabited in straitened circumstances began to stifle. In old age, Sara confided to a friend that marrying Coy had been "the worst mistake of my life." A.P. meanwhile, roamed the hills and railroad tracks of his native mountain Virginia. He never stopped loving Sara, believing she would return to him one day. He ran a grocery store and owned land, but the store was seldom open and he was surely distracted and troubled in mind by the departure of his wife. We are told that the Carters were very private people and left few letters or extended revelations of what they thought about their music or each other. No doubt an enterprising investigative writer will mine more from their story than is found in "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone." The peregrination of the Carters coincided with the 20th century change-of-era time, a headlong rush into modernity that left much of what had made America what it was, from passenger trains to old time music, on the junk heap of history. The Carters, along with others of similar background, were the carriers of ancient voices and tried and true traditions, and while their lives were to some extent warped by the enormous deterioration the country experienced in the 1960s and 70s, in the end they proved themselves worthy of the legacy they were fated to keep alive for posterity.

I am not yet finished with the book, but I am enjoying it immensely. My review may be a little biased as I have had the pleasure of meeting Janette personally at The Carter Fold. We had gotten to the Fold early on a Saturday afternoon and Janette personally greeted us and invited us to visit the museum next door. That evening we watched Janette (and Joe) perform. Joe put on a comedy routine. At that time Gladys was still alive and helped with the show. We went back to the Carter

Fold a year or two later and I swear that Jeanette remembered us! Another reviewer has stated that there are mistakes in this book. There really isn't any excuse for mistaking Johnny Cash for Carl Smith. As for other mistakes, one needs to remember that not everyone keeps diaries and a lot of time has elapsed since the Carters hit the music scene. This is probably the only book I will ever read where I have met those interviewed. That alone makes this book worth reading for me. And the added history of country music that is included adds to its worth. (The part dealing with Chet Atkins is a good example). Another book well worth reading is *Sing A Sad Song, The Life Of Hank Williams*.

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 accordion. 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.

An excellent biography that provided a comprehensive time-line of these unique and talented individuals. Despite the difficulty of working with limited documented source material, the author was able to use what was available supplemented by commentary from extended family members. Excellent musical details as well an introspective view of the personal and emotional side of AP, Sarah and Maybelle. A must read for any musician who plays American roots/folk music as well as for anyone interested in knowing how the music we have come to love today got its start.

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