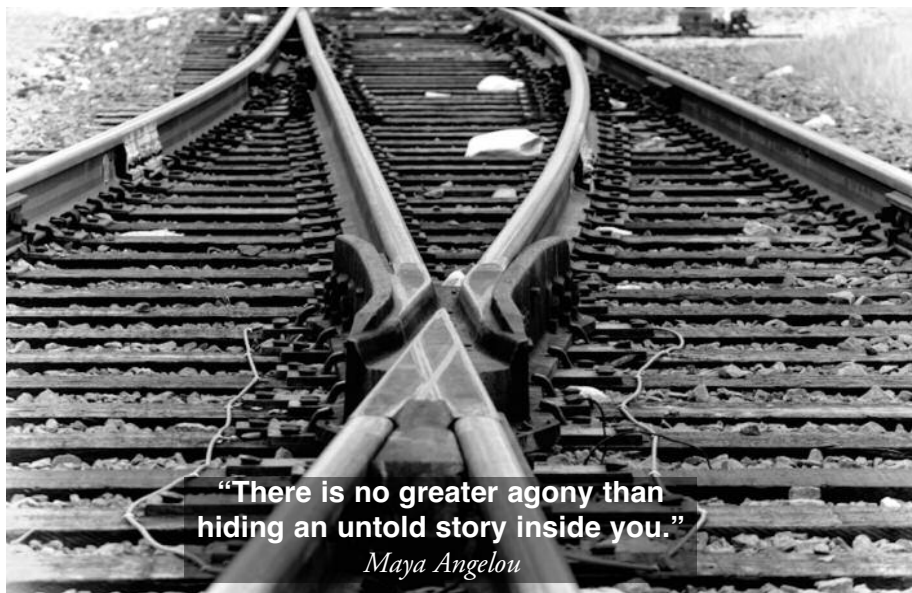


# FREIGHT TRAINS

## Upside Down Guitars & the The Lost Little Girl



**“There is no greater agony than  
hiding an untold story inside you.”**

*Maya Angelou*

It was a warm summer afternoon in Carrboro, North Carolina.

The little house on Lloyd Street was near a railroad track, and the constant rumbling of the massive trains filled the eleven year old girl with visions of leaving that mountain town and seeing the world.

The train passed by her with a rhythm, a motion, a beckoning that called to her. It made her want to jump up, run to the track and hop on that big black monster and ride it as far as it would take her.

But she was only eleven.

And from a poor home. She was the baby of the family and her four older brothers and sisters all had to work, scraping along for every dime and dollar they could muster to keep the family fed, a roof over their heads and a warm bed to sleep in.

Dreams were a luxury that a poor young black girl from a

sleepy Appalachian town could not afford to dwell on because “hopes” are like demons to a little girl with no future.

As most poor families did in 1907, they depended on simple things for entertainment, like music on the front porch. A few years ago her brother showed her some chords on his banjo. She got quite good at it and by the time she was eight she was playing several songs. Music became her comfort, singing became her escape.

And then one day, she heard someone play the guitar. Oh, my how that changed her world. What a beautiful sound. What magic.

So, she went to her parents and begged like only a little girl could beg. But there was no money. Not to be deterred, she had an idea,

*“Mommy what if I go to work with you, would the nice lady give me a nickel?”*

Her mom worked as a house keeper and, sure enough, the lady of the house agreed to let the child work in the home. So she saved her nickels and her dimes and every penny she could find and then one day, one amazing magical day, she was able to buy her precious guitar.

Ahhh, as fate would have it, there was a problem. You see our little child was left handed. And her new guitar was strung for right handed people.

Not to be outdone by this, our eleven year old girl took the problem and literary flipped it upside down. Yes, she decided she would learn to play the guitar upside down. Strung for a right handed player, she simply finger-picked the strings upside down and in reverse. Of course, she taught herself, as nobody quite knew how to teach anybody the guitar upside down.

And so it was on this warm, muggy southern afternoon our little black princess sat on the steps of her front porch, playing the chords on her upside down guitar as that train lumbered by.

Oh, how she wished she and her guitar could hop that train.

But hopes ... they are indeed like demons.

And the train moved on and the clock ticked and the days passed and she started to grow up. Almost. She turned fifteen and found herself married to a young man that she didn't know well and didn't like much. And before you know it our little girl gave birth to a little girl and she and her new husband, Frank, put aside most everything they loved to take care of their little family.

Including that upside down guitar.

And the days turned into months, and then years, and years turned into decades. Her daughter grew up and got married, and so she decided that would be the right time to finally get rid of Frank. They divorced and she sent him on his way.

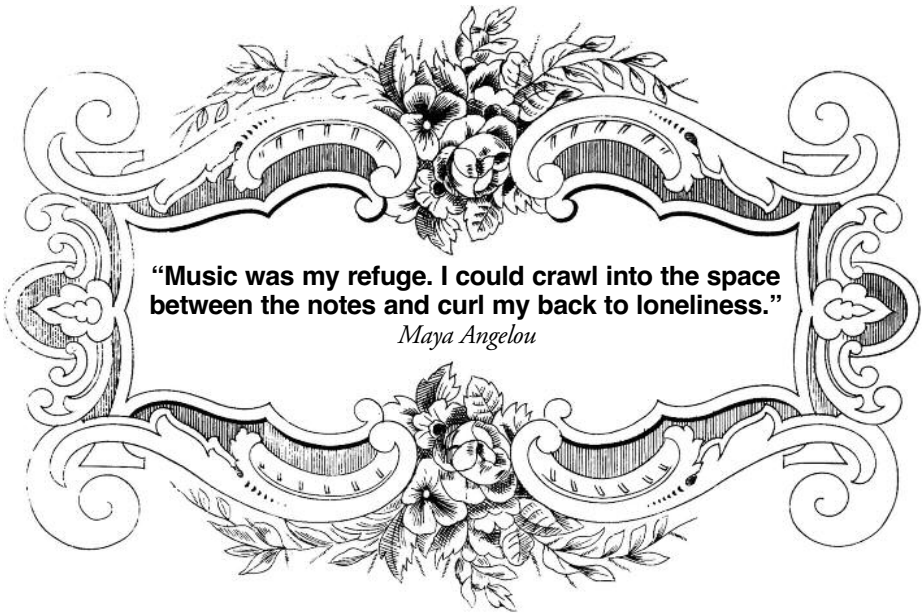
And she never played that old upside down guitar again.

Our little girl was 60 years old now. Her child was grown and gone, and she was alone and living near Washington, DC. She had a hard time finding work, difficult as it was for a black woman in her 60's as the thunderclouds of the civil rights era loomed in 1953.

She managed to find a job in a department store. Not a good job, not a well paying one, but steady. And it was here she thought she would spend what remained of her time ... alone, in a city with few friends, living with the memories of all that she missed out on as a young girl who married too soon.

Including that odd, upside down guitar.

How often she thought of that foolish little guitar.



Until fate beckoned again one unlikely afternoon. There, in an isle, she found a little girl lost, wandering and crying in that big, lonely department store. It was a white girl, six years old.

*"Where is your mamma, child?"* she asked.

*"I don't know!"* the girl cried. So she took the girl by the hand and patiently went up and down the isles of the cavernous department store until they found the distraught mamma.

Well, the mamma was so grateful and overjoyed ... and

impressed with the kind, humble, caring disposition of this black woman in her sixties. As fate yet again would have it, Ruth and her husband Charles just happened to be on a search for a reliable nanny and housekeeper. Would she be interested?

My goodness, yes ... anything would be better than being alone in a big city working in this department store. She accepted the job at Ruth and Charles home to care for the lost little girl, Penny, and her brothers and sisters: Mike, Barbara and Peggy. They had an older brother, Pete, but he no longer lived at home.

And how embarrassing, after all these years, when it was time to move in, she had so few things of her own, so few belongings. It was a simple task and young Mike helped carry her few bags and a long box into the tiny room she would settle in.

One day young Mike finally asked about that long cardboard box under her bed.

*What is this?* he inquired.

It was that little guitar she played as a child. Of all items to keep of her past, she kept the one thing she loved and gave up, so long ago: the upside down guitar that she taught herself to play sitting on the front porch steps of her home near the railroad tracks of that sleepy Appalachian town.

An upside down guitar? Young Mike never heard of such a thing. He was taken by this new musical idea ... and the housekeeper that came with it. His excitement over her guitar surprised her.

You see, young Mike was quite the musician, his father Charles was a curator of folk songs, his mom Ruth was a singer and his sister Peggy was a folk musician and singer. And wait till she meets their older brother, Peter. Wait till he sees this upside down guitar.

Never before had this old black woman been surrounded with so much excitement over something she didn't even do anymore. She wasn't used to the fuss, but she liked it. It felt like, well ...

... family.

Finally, late one night after her work was done, she took a deep breath and pulled the box out from under her bed. She opened it up and stared at it through the lens of her big rimmed glasses, through the gaze of her aging eyes, by the soft light of her bedroom lamp.

Sitting on the side of her bed, she held it gently, almost like a timid friend that might yet run away from her. She strummed it, and to her surprise, young Mike had gotten the old upside down guitar tuned up proper before he put it away,

And for a moment, in the quiet of her room, she was that

eleven year old girl again, sitting on the front porch steps, playing her guitar to the rhythm of that nearby train, wishing she could hop that big black monster and ride it away.

And she remembered the song she wrote that same day as she dreamt of that railroad car. And her old fingers reached for the strings and her old heart reached back in her memory for the words, and she softly sang the melody, lest she dare wake any of the Seeger family up,

*Freight train, freight train, run so fast  
Freight train, freight train, run so fast  
Please don't tell what train I'm on  
They won't know what route I'm going ...*

Suddenly, there is a knocking at the door. Young Mike heard her, please keep singing, he begged. Then his father, Charles came up the stairs. Yes, he said, keep singing.

*When I'm dead and in my grave  
No more good times here I crave  
Place the stones at my head and feet  
And tell them all I've gone to sleep ...*

*"It's just a foolish song, written by a foolish little girl,"* she said.

But the Seeger family wouldn't hear of it. They loved that song and, oh my, look at her fingerpick that upside down guitar. Mike decided to record some of her songs, so after school they would sit in her room and she would sing into a mic, half amused, half flattered that anyone would even care at all.

And then their older brother Pete Seeger came for a visit.

*"Why, she's playing her guitar upside down,"* he said.

And word about the Seeger's housemaid got out into the music community, and everyone wanted to hear the song she wrote as an eleven year child. Before you knew it, other musicians began singing that song about the train, and they started to record the song and put it on their own albums.

Artists like Peter, Paul & Mary, Jerry Garcia, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Doc Watson and Taj Mahal all recorded versions of her song.

And the song become very popular.

Soon, she was asked to perform it herself in person. My goodness, who on earth would want to hear a nearly seventy year old

black woman who could barely play ... and on an upside down guitar, no less?

Well, plenty. She and Mike Seeger started to perform concerts together at colleges. She began doing concerts with Mike's brother Pete Seeger, plus Mississippi John Hurt, John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters. She performed at the Newport Folk Festival, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and Carnegie Hall.

And the money and the royalties started to come in.

And finally, Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten was able to move her daughter and her family close to her again, into a fine home she bought herself and they settled into upstate New York.

She was in her 90's now. She had a heart full of love, a life full of music, and now even a Grammy Award. As she struggled to the stage to accept her prize, all she could say was,

*"I only wish I had my guitar so I could play a song for you."*

... that song she wrote as a wishful eleven year old girl with no place to go in the rumbling shadow of a freight train on her odd, upside down guitar.

*When I die, oh bury me deep  
Down at the end of old Chestnut Street  
So I can hear old Number Nine  
As she comes rolling by*



**Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten and Mike Seeger rehearsing before a concert**