

Happy Land: Musical Tributes to Laura Ingalls Wilder

The *Little House*® books by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957) are justly famed for their compelling stories of life-building on the frontier of the 1860s-80s. By tracing her own family's history she expressed the trials and triumphs of those who attempted to carve a place for themselves and their families out of the expanse of the American West. The books have rightly become cornerstone classics in American children's literature, read by millions the world over.

Too little noted is the music referenced in the books, some 126 separate songs and tunes. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* alone contains mention of 37 songs; *These Happy Golden Years* is titled after a song; and six of the books close with music-making. Furthermore, the music she employed in the service of her narrative is some of the very finest in the history of American music.

Throughout, the guiding musical spirit is Laura's father, Charles "Pa" Ingalls (1835-1902), who missed few opportunities to sing and play his fiddle. And it's "Pa's fiddle," carefully wrapped, stowed in its fiddle-box, and cushioned by pillows, that accompanies the Ingalls family through all its adventures and comes to symbolize the endurance of the family unit in an often wild and threatening frontier world. Indeed, Wilder wrote to her publisher that "(t)here is one thing that will always remain the same to remind people of little Laura's days on the prairie, and that is Pa's fiddle."

There may be no books in American literature of comparable standing and popularity where America's music is so central to the themes, assumes such a major narrative role, and is found in such rich abundance. If Laura Ingalls Wilder penned what have become the books that best express "The Great American Family," then the music she referred to in those books has become an important part of that mythology too. This recording is an effort to give new voice and sound to music that has lain silent on the page for far too long. For as Wilder herself wrote, "if you want the spirit of these times, you should [hear] these old songs."

This recording is of a selection, carefully chosen, of her "old songs." The producers—Dale Cockrell, a professor of musicology and expert on American music, and Butch Baldassari, master mandolinist and record producer—were challenged to take the old songs of yesterday and make them new and engaging for audiences today.

An old song both starts and ends the recording. There are no recordings of Pa's playing (he died in 1902), but in his stead is the music of fiddler "Jep" Bisbee, who was born only eight years after Pa and, amazingly, just fifty miles

from Ingalls' birthplace. The dramatic opening segue from Bisbee's old-time fiddling to a "modern" version of "The Girl I Left Behind Me" stakes out a central theme of the recording.

Other songs, hymns, and tunes on *Happy Land: Musical Tributes to Laura Ingalls Wilder* are reinterpreted by some of the nation's finest and most respected musicians, always cognizant of their debt to the past but keenly aware of their responsibilities to the present.

- The Girl I Left Behind Me -- Jep Bisbee
- . The Girl I Left Behind Me -- Pat Enright
- . Sweet By and By -- Andrea Zonn
- . The Blue Juniata -- Riders In The Sky
- Oh! Susanna -- Keith Little
- Roll the Old Chariot Along -- The Princely Players
- Highland Mary -- Deborah Packard
- . Arkansas Traveler/Devil's Dream -- Pa's Fiddle Band
- Captain Jinks -- Riders In The Sky
- Oft in the Stilly Night -- Deborah Packard & John Mock
- The Big Sunflower -- Douglas B. Green
- Happy Land -- Peggy Duncan Singers & Pa's Fiddle Band
- Barbara Allen -- Deborah Packard
- Nelly Was a Lady -- Dave Olney
- Uncle Sam's Farm -- Douglas B. Green
- . Promised Land -- Harpeth Valley Sacred Harp Singers
- . On Jordan's Stormy Banks -- Walnut Grove Church
- Bonus Track: The Devil's Dream -- Jep Bisbee

To many readers, what they know about “old American music” is what they learned from Laura Ingalls Wilder: the titles to old songs; the words to songs; how songs and tunes functioned; where they were heard; what they meant. Wilder surely expected them to “hear” much of the music as well as read about it, and relied upon the sound of the music to add feeling and dimension and even theme to the story (as it most surely did for her). She skillfully inscribed a narrative that provides a ready context for wanting to know the music that underscores so much of her story. By having the music recreated and available in attractive and compelling performances, the fondest hope is that upcoming generations will re-voice our musical heritage, giving rise through music to a new regard for “the spirit of [all] these times.”

More information about the program, including media materials for *Happy Land*, is available at www.pasfiddle.com/media.

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