



Songcatcher A Review By Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Ellen Rigas Venetis and Richard Miller. Co-Producers are Jennifer M. Roth and Wendy Sax. Directed and written by Maggie Greenwald. Production Design by Ginger Tougas. Cinematography by Enrique Chediak. Original music and musical direction by David Mansfield.

Cinematic length: 112 minutes. A Lionsgate Feature. Presented by Rigas Entertainment in association with the Independent Film Channel. Cinematic release: December 2000. Rated M for sexual scenes and low level violence.

Rating ***** 90%. DVD length: 105 minutes. A CD soundtrack is available.

CAST

Professor Lily Penleric: Janet McTeer, *Tom Bledsoe:* Aidan Quinn, *Delaidis Slocumb:* Emily Rossum, *Elna Penleric:* Jane Adams *Viney Butler:* Pat Carroll, *Fate Honeycutt:* Greg Russell Cook: *Earl Giddens:* David Patrick Kelly, *Harriet Tolliver:* E. Katherine Kerr, *Alice Kincaid:* Stephanie Roth Haberle, *Professor Wallace Aldrich:* Michael Goodwin, *Clementine McFarland:* Rhoda Griffiths, *Ambrose McFarland:* Steve Boles, *Cyrus Whittle:* Steven Sutherland.

Songcatcher tells the story of the start made in the finding of Appalachia's folk music by outsiders. It is very loosely based on the efforts of folklorist and educationist Olive Dame Campbell (1882-1954) and folk song collector Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) but should not be seen as (and does not claim to be) portrayals of either individual. For example Olive Campbell did not go to Appalachia alone and have a romance with a local man. She went to Appalachia with her husband and worked with him, publishing his posthumous collection. She also did not reject working with Cecil Sharp, they published a collection of Appalachian folksongs together.

The story starts in 1907 with Associate Professor of musicology Lily Penleric teaching at college. She has been overlooked for promotion, again. Englishman Cyrus Whittle, who has a formidable reputation in the world of folklore, is chosen instead. As the name suggests, this character is based on Cecil Sharp. When Lily finds that her furtive lover and fellow academic, Professor Walalce Aldrich sides with the establishment against her promotion she leaves for a holiday. This turns out to be with her sister, a schoolteacher in a remote part of North Carolina. For a musicologist this must be one of the world's most fortuitous holidays, for among these isolated people songs brought from the British Isles have been preserved unspoiled as they were repeated and passed on, usually orally, over generations. This process often lasted for hundreds of years.

Lily is very aware that their isolated way of life will not last much longer. Never a slow one to miss an opportunity, she is determined to collect the songs and record the singers before their way of life vanishes. Her collecting arouses suspicion among many of the songs' keepers. The most suspicious of all is Tom Bledsoe. As a veteran of the Spanish American War of 1898, and a former coalminer, he has seen more of the outside world than most of his family and neighbours and he knows how money is made. Cynically he openly says that she is stealing their culture to make money in that outside world. He does not seem to realise it, but he is also changing their music with influences from the outside world due to his wartime contact with hispanic culture. He had brought back from Cuba a guitar, which he plays at events. This was at that time a seemingly outlandish instrument to many Americans, as several of the film's characters makes clear. From early in the eighteenth century (or even earlier) till well into the twentieth the fiddle was a major instrument in American popular music, occupying the place the guitar has since taken and still holds.

A change which emerges not as a development, but a threat to their culture comes from the coal mining company. They are planning to move into the mountains. Ironically the company's big man Ambrose McFarland has an interest in education and his wife loves and collects the folk art from the culture that their mine's expansion will destroy. This threat is personified by Earl Giddens. Originally from that area, like Tom Bledsoe he has lived in the outside world and been changed by the experience. University educated, he is one of the few to initially welcome Lily, but his menace to their way of life, his appearance and speaking manner make him seem creepiness incarnate. As one of the mountain people says "He would steal the nickel off of a dead man's eye." Even so the filmmakers are too subtle to present him as being totally in the mould of the traditional villain. He sincerely believes that his industrialisation will eradicate many of the problems that beset the mountain people. He has a point. The scenery, fresh air, mountain quiet and pure water are wonderful, but they come with poverty, isolation from health, educational and social services and surviving almost literally by back breaking prolonged labor for little reward. At a community sing along he starts the singing of 'Conversation with Death', an ancient song chanted in their style. Here his section of the lyrics announces that the singer is death personified and will be coming amongst them soon. Death he sings is the 'gateway to heaven or hell' and in a sense he offers the audience both. They seem to know that by singing this he is simultaneously affirming that he is authentically one of them and also what he will do to their culture. They show this by continuing the song one by one, but not Bledsoe. He believes that he can keep 'the outlanders' and their influences out. We do not get or need scenes where bulldozers rip through forests and cabins, where farmers become factory workers on land they once owned, the point has been made.

Lily does find a very different ally in Delaidis Slocomb, an orphaned schoolgirl with a formidable repertoire of folksongs. Delaidis also knows where other singers are and this starts Lily off on a collecting quest. To record the singers she must push her gramophone up through the forest's dense undergrowth of the rock and boulder strewn mountain ranges – repeatedly. Some of those slopes look like they are on eighty degree inclines. That gritty determination and her love of their music win over many of the mountain people, but not all, and when danger comes it emerges from an unexpected source.



Lily recording Delaidis. In 1933 a folksong collector visiting North Carolina did get the first version of "I wonder as I wander" from a schoolgirl.



How folk music was often perpetuated, the porch the violin, the voice.

Lily Penleric is not always a likeable person. Her musical obsession makes her oblivious to considering others. She pushes Delaidis beyond exhaustion in both singing and literally up a mountain with Fate Hunnicutt accompanying them. When he pushes the gramophone back to escape further climbing with it he is being only human. She has to be forced to help Vinney with a difficult childbirth, although Vinney has been repeatedly helping her. The mother Alice and her baby just survive. She is cold and even curtly hostile when her sister asks for

understanding about her sexuality and people are sometimes ignored when she has their information, However she does melt a little and becomes part of the community.

Songcatcher was made on a shoestring budget, but for once that does not show. The beautifully filmed scenery near Ashville, North Carolina has an epic feel. The interior settings look right, not like Hollywood sets.. The performers, mostly little knowns or unknowns are all believable, lacking in the pretentious accents, blatantly obvious brutality and stagyness that too often go with depicting southerners. There are several memorable portayals among the cast. Star Janet McTeer does not overwhelm and centre everything on herself. She functions as the central character, but she knows how to fit that role into being one of many concerned with the story, the cast are rounded characters. Aidan Quinn, as the most recognisable cast member, also has the difficult task of being a dominating and energetic character without dominating the lesser known cast members and the film. He does this through succinct, level talk, body language and a wisely understated performance.

The real stars of the film are the setting and the music, performed and sung with a simplicity and a purity that astounds. When the end title cards come up Emmylou Harris gives the best rendition of Barbara Allen this reviewer knows of in nearly fifty years of hearing folk music. All the songs are worthwhile. They include 'Matty Groves' 'Wayfaring Stranger' 'Single Girl' 'Pretty Saro' and 'Fair and Tender Ladies.' Many of the film's singers are not so well known, but are highly professional and add to the feeling of authenticity on the soundtrack.

Lily Penleric is a fictitious character, but there were many women like her, and as saviours to a musical culture that still inspires a hundred years on they deserve to have their story told.

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