

Speech for Vera Hall's induction to the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame

by Gabriel Greenberg 3/3/05

I am here today to speak about Vera Hall. To some of you this may make sense. But to me there is something deeply confusing about it. Start here: by looking at me, you can tell that I am not African-American. From my accent and rapid speech, you know that I can't be from the South. And you'll see from the programs you are holding that my last name is not Christian one. What then, you might wonder, am I doing here? What is a White, Northern, Jewish boy doing here, talking about the life of a Black, Southern, Christian woman who live nearly half a century ago? Believe me, it's a question I've asked myself. For Vera Hall and I exist in worlds that differ not only along the fundamental dimensions of race, region, and religion but also those of sex, class, and time.

Yet in an important way, I think that such an introduction could not be more appropriate for Vera Hall. Her life was one of overcoming boundaries, of bridging territories which were supposed to be unbridgeable, and of forging bonds of friendship among the most unlikely strangers. Again and again it was the vehicle of Hall's song which allowed her and the people who encountered her to transcend these casts. Between the old and the new, the secular and the sacred, the blues and the spiritual, the white and the black, the North and the South Vera Hall's music was chariot that no gate could hold back.

W.E.B. DuBois once wrote that, as a Black man, he had been shut off from the white world by a vast Veil a dark covering which constrained his movement, blocked out knowledge, and stifled his voice. Of course, a veil may obscure in both directions: it can prevent the insider from seeing out, but it also prevents the outsider from seeing in.

The first time I heard Vera Hall's voice, that Veil was lifted, if ever so slightly. At the time, I did not know what I was hearing: it poured out in a smooth, dark stream from the Top-40 station of my car radio. The song was a techno dance track that featured a remarkable recording sample of a woman singing. I was riveted: electrified by the swell of the woman's chilling, mournful tone and delighted at the precision of her phrasing, the surprising shifts of her rhythm. Only later I learned that the woman was Vera Hall, and that the recording had been made over 60 years before.

I was not alone in my fascination: that remix was among the top ten most popular dance singles of 2000. That year, through the warped glass of a pop-song, millions of kids across America and Europe were thrilled by a voice which reached out across a seemingly impossibly distance and spoke with very intimate sadness. Since that time, over five years ago, I have been trying to trace the story behind the voice.

Vera Hall was born near Livingston, Alabama at the turn of the century. She grew up in a supportive family and community, but in difficult and poor rural living conditions. At a young age, Hall became a devout and respected member of the church, and remained so for the rest of her life. But after leaving home, she also fell in with more worldly crowd, for whom blues, craps, and alcohol were the entertainments of choice. The tension between these two spheres that of spirituals and the church, on one hand, and that of blues and the juke-joint, on the other is a theme that recurred throughout her life and infused her music. She drew upon both perspectives to cope with and overcome her life's perennial difficulties. Sadly, she was no stranger to tragedy: she lost both parents, a sister, a husband, a daughter her only child, and two grandchildren all before she herself passed away in 1964 at the age of 58, in Tuscaloosa. Despite her artistic accomplishments, she worked all her life as a cook, washerwoman, and nursemaid.

No one, least of all Vera Hall herself, could have predicted the peculiar turn her life took in the late 1930's when she encountered one Ruby Pickens Tartt, who had just begun her career as a folklorist. Tartt had the intelligence, heart, and ear to recognize Hall's prodigious talent, and introduced Hall to other musicians, music scholars and folklorists, including, notably, John and Alan Lomax. These relationships lead not only to the

precious recordings we have today, but also to a number of unlikely friendships. Alan Lomax and his wife Elizabeth became very close with Hall, and she visited them in New York in 1948. It was likely the only time she left Alabama. The Lomaxes were initially drawn to Hall by her voice, but they were captivated by her personality.

Towards the end of Hall's life, the portrait we have is of a woman who was gracious, gentle, and caring, but also reserved among strangers, and careful of her image. Alan Lomax wrote of Vera Hall that her "manners are so serene and so gentle that she quickly puts one at ease." She was also a survivor. Despite life-long hardship and family tragedy, she ended her life with an optimistic worldview, a deep sense of generosity, and a warm disposition.

Unsurprisingly, Hall's music was in every way part and parcel with her personality. Those qualities which were apparent in her demeanor were the same features which define her recordings. In person, Hall was gentle and soft, but at all times in control; her music, too, is elegant and sweet-toned, but it is always carefully regulated, and masterfully executed.

Hall ranks with ease among the better known folk and country-blues singers of the previous century. Leadbelly, Jelly Roll Morton, Mississippi John Hurt, or Robert Johnson are all comparable talents. Though Hall is dramatically obscure compared to these figures, her artistry is just as great. Her music is unique in the cannon of folk song for its delivery and content. And her songs remain unmatched in their craftsmanship, grace, and emotional power. A careful examination of her songs and her sources reveals a compositional hand at work that goes well beyond the notion of the folk singer merely rehearsing tradition: Vera Hall was in no uncertain terms an artist.

Yet despite the best efforts of folklorists like Ruby Pickens Tartt and scholars of folk music like John and Alan Lomax, Vera Hall and her music faded from public view in the decades following her death. Only recently has the tide begun to change. Public and scholarly interest has begun to take stock of Hall's legacy. In Britain, I am told, a clip from one of her songs is available as a cell phone ring-tone! Perhaps a worthier measure of renewed interest in Vera Hall has been the cascade of emails which I have received in response to my website, which is dedicated to the study of Hall's life and music. These letters, often bursting with emotional enthusiasm, have come from literally all over the world as far as Israel, the Netherlands, Britain, and all over the U.S.A. One woman described how she survived the summer her father passed away in 1970 by listening to old Vera Hall recordings, over and over.

Bringing Vera Hall into the public eye is not just a service to music listeners; it is a service to society. By giving prominence to the likes of Hall, we may change the terrain of American history, and with it our sense of cultural identity, our imagination and ambitions. If we are lucky, we might inspire Vera Halls of the future to reach out across whatever boundary separates currently separate them from us.

Therefore it is my tremendous pleasure to welcome Vera Hall into the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame. This day is a testament not only to Vera Hall but to all of you who have invested your energy so generously in bringing her story to light.

How appropriate that twenty-five years ago, Ruby Pickens Tartt herself was inducted into this very same institution. "Without her," Alan Lomax wrote at the time, "a generation of Black geniuses who have made life in this country so much more livable and beautiful by their wit and by their music would have been lost to us." Now we have the great opportunity of giving one of those very Geniuses a place among the honored.

We have all come to know Vera Hall and her music in different ways. In lullabies, it is a golden buggy to ride into childhood; in spirituals, it is a chariot swinging low to carry us away; in blues, it is a strong drink that manages cloud and clarify all at once. But for all of us, it is, and it must be, a lifter of Veils.