

Mother Maybelle, far left, and the Carter Sisters, with June doing the jig in the middle.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUNE CARTER AND JOHNNY CASH FAMILY/THE WINDING STREAM

# Family values

Portland filmmaker Beth Harrington talks about her project documenting June Carter and Johnny Cash, with one memorable appearance from the Man in Black himself

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STAFF WRITER

Portland is such a musical town. It makes sense that the first time I met Beth Harrington, it was at a women's music night at a mutual friend's home. I remember she wanted to play "Dancing Barefoot" by Patti Smith. Immediately, I was smitten.

It wasn't until much later that I would realize Beth Harrington was a filmmaker with a Grammy nomination under her belt for her film, "Welcome to the Club: The Women of Rockabilly."

Harrington works for Oregon Public Broadcasting and has worked in public television contributing to such programs American Experience, NOVA and Frontline. She's been making films for more than 30 years.

In March, Harrington debuted her latest film, "The Winding Stream" at South by Southwest, the annual music festival in Austin, Texas. The film is about The Carter Family and Johnny Cash — their effect on one another as well as the effect they had together on American music. The film features one of the last interviews before Cash's death in 2003. The film currently is being screened worldwide.

Harrington has contributed a solid documentation of The Carter Family legacy. She would love to see a wider distribution of The Carter Family story. She is also currently looking to archive much of the material and footage she has at a University library.

"The Winding Stream" will be shown at the Reel Music Film Festival tomorrow, Saturday, Oct. 11 at the Portland Art Museum's Whitsell Auditorium, 1219 SW Park Avenue.

**S.Z.:** In March, your film, "The Winding Stream," made its premiere at SXSW. Since that time, it has been screened all over the world. The film took you a decade to complete — mostly due to raising the funds for the film.

**B.H.:** I don't have kids of my own, but my nephew is 12 and I started this film before my nephew was born. For all of his life, I have been working on this film. And you know what? It's been about a quarter of my life. It's crazy. I never expected to work on a project for that long.

Once I was entrusted with the material — I had one of the last interviews with Johnny Cash — I thought I can't walk away from this. I have to get it done.

**S.Z.:** One of the last?

**B.H.:** It turned out that Kurt Loder from MTV went to Johnny Cash's house after we were there and interviewed him for the MTV awards. But I'm pretty damn sure that ours was the last interview that he talked about the Carter family and June and their relationship.

Ours was an interview that meant a lot to him. He clearly wanted to talk about June and Maybelle.

**S.Z.:** Johnny Cash is timeless. I loved him, my grandfather loved him. What was it like to interview Johnny Cash?

**B.H.:** For one thing, it came up very suddenly. I had interviewed Rosanne Cash. She had been very helpful to me — not only with this film, but she also narrated "Welcome to the Club." We did a short interview and she said, "You know what you should do next? You have to interview my father."

I was trying to wind up my courage to ask her that and was so relieved, but I asked her if he was up for it? He's just lost June, he's sick, is this a good time? She said, "There isn't going to be a good time. Now is the time. You've got to do it."

When my crew and I arrived in Nashville, we learned that (Johnny Cash) had gone to the hospital that day. Rosanne told us to sit tight and hopefully he'll be out of the hospital in a couple of days. We really couldn't afford to sit around in Nashville, and then just before we were ready to leave, we got the call.

He was totally animated. He obviously wasn't feeling well, but he didn't let that stop him from telling us stories.

The funniest part of the whole interview, was he came into the room in an elevator that came down out of the ceiling. And so the image of Johnny Cash that is forever burnt in my mind is him in this (transparent) phone booth, descending into this room.

It took a long time. It probably took a minute for the thing to come down out of the ceiling so my crew and I — we were all nervous as cats — and we're waving to him and he's waving back.

You will appreciate also that at the end of the interview, he stood up to get back into the elevator to go back upstairs and he said, "I've gotta get back in the Popemobile now." Which of course tickled me to no end. And then as he got in and went back up.

It took another minute for him to go back

up, I thought, "Aw, this is too good. He's ascending into heaven." And so I made the sign of the cross like the pope would make, you know like waving my hand in the air? And the last thing I saw of him was him throwing his head back and slapping his knee and laughing as he disappeared into the ceiling. I made Johnny Cash laugh. Three weeks later he was gone.

**S.Z.:** The film focuses greatly on Maybelle and Sarah Carter and how their music has influenced musicians across the board.

**B.H.:** They both made incredible contributions (to music) that have been lost to some degree in time. In terms of our consciousness. Obviously what they've done still resonates, but I don't think most people could turn and point to them and say, "The Carter sisters influenced me."

Sarah's voice is iconic. She was one of the first people to cultivate that sound: the bluegrass voice that sends chills up your spine.

Maybelle's contribution to guitar playing is really unrecognized.

She helped invent a certain way of playing a guitar that popularized it as more of a lead instrument when it was really just a percussion instrument in those days. Out of necessity, she learned how to fill in those gaps musically with her guitar. That became the "Carter Scratch" that launched the guitar into a whole new place in American music all thanks to this little lady from a small town in Virginia.

**S.Z.:** It seems you have an affinity for history and the natural world. And of course music ...

**B.H.:** The thing about film is that you get to be in all of these different worlds. Every single film is some learning experience in some new arena that you never imagined you would be in.

The reason I'm married to a volcano

scientist is because in 1991 I was given the job of being an associate producer on a NOVA (episode) that was about the eruption of a volcano in the Philippines. Never in a million years did I think I would a) marry a scientist, b) he'd be a volcanologist, c) that he would live in the Pacific Northwest, and d) that I would move there. But here I am. Film takes you to all sorts of places.

**S.Z.:** What is it like to be a woman in the independent film industry?

**B.H.:** Honestly, I felt at the beginning that it was a little bit of a struggle. That was a long time ago. Then it seemed to get easier as I kind of proved my worth as a filmmaker. And lately, I've been looking around and thinking, "Where'd all the girls go?"

I'm 59 years old, and I look around for my peers and I think, "No one else is crazy enough to be doing this? Is that it?" I think it is.

**S.Z.:** You were raised Catholic. You wrote, directed and played the lead character (you) in a film called "The Blinking Madonna" that offered a gentle critique of the Catholic Church in 1996. It screened first at Notre Dame to a room full of priests, nuns and Catholic scholars.

**B.H.:** (laughs) Ha! Yes it was!

**S.Z.:** How was that received?

**B.H.:** Oh my god! It didn't occur to me

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