



Texas Jailhouse Music

Caroline Gnagy

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Inside the Texas State Prison is a surprising story of ingenuity, optimism and musical creativity. During the mid-twentieth century, inmates at the Huntsville unit and neighboring Goree State Farm for Women captured hearts all over Texas during weekly radio broadcasts and live stage performances. WBAP's Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls took listeners inside the penitentiary to hear not only the prisoners' songs but also the stories of those who sang them. Captivating and charismatic, banjo player Reable Childs received thousands of fan letters with the Goree All-Girl String Band during World War II. Hattie Ellis, a young black inmate with a voice that rivaled Billie Holiday's, was immortalized by notable folklorist John Avery Lomax. Cowboys, songsters and champion fiddlers all played a part in one of the most unique prison histories in the nation. Caroline Gnagy presents the decades-long story of the Texas convict bands, informed by prison records, radio show transcripts and the words and music of the inmates themselves.

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