

# THE QUEEN FAMILY

**Appalachian Tradition & Back Porch Music**



OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2006 Heart of Gold International  
Film Festival, Australia



OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2006 Hillbilly Babylon  
Film Festival, Berlin



Produced and Directed by NEAL HUTCHESON  
Executive Producer WALT WOLFRAM

DISTRIBUTED BY PBS HOME VIDEO

[www.queenfamilymovie.com](http://www.queenfamilymovie.com)

## Synopsis

*The Queen Family* represents one of the last pure strains of authentic Appalachian tradition. Sheltered by the forbidding and rugged landscape of Jackson County, North Carolina, their community has retained a keen sense of its own history. Mountain tradition, and the closeness of family and neighbors, are here expressed in exuberant folk music played together with family and neighbors, outdoors on the porch. The songs come in many forms, from many sources. By and large, they are folk songs, telling stories and offering entertainment, instruction or consolation. The music itself is by turns joyful, comical and light-hearted, or dark and moody, a distillation of the soul of the culture.

Family matriarch Mary Jane Queen is ninety-two years old and still strong enough to climb the mountain paths behind her house each day. She has a vivid recollection of the songs and lore learned in childhood days, including an encyclopedic knowledge of wild medicinal herbs. Her youth in the Prince family home looked little different from family life of centuries earlier, based almost entirely around farming, gathering, and bartering. The tales and ballads she learned in those days do indeed date back several centuries, though they have been altered in their passage across the generations.

When Mary Jane married Claude Queen in 1935, they united two of the most gifted musical families in their part of Appalachia. Their eight children grew up in the mountain wilds, with music ever-present in the home. Over time they accumulated their own instruments, and learned to pick and play by ear. In the words of the eldest son, J.R. Queen, “We’ll play for three or four hours with nobody else around, just the family. Maybe a couple of friends’ll come by and want to listen to us. We enjoy doing it. We do a little bit of everything—bluegrass, country and gospel. All of it. I guess mother termed it the best when she said ‘mountain music.’” Mary Jane Queen can still recite hundreds of ballads, and her singing style retains the authentic cadence and delivery of the original Irish sean-nos song form.

*The Queen Family* captures true Appalachian culture and authentic American folk music traditions at their source, in all their unvarnished charm.

## Director's Statement

I met Mary Jane Queen and her family early in the production of a documentary called *Mountain Talk*, a two-week project that turned into two and a half years as I indulged a new-found interest in mountain culture. In visiting the Queens, I was taken by their effortless wit, their music and generous hospitality. Like a songbird, Mary Jane Queen springs in and out of song without prelude. There is an otherworldliness about their home place, a concentration of what I was beginning to perceive throughout the southern mountains. Heading up there from Cullowhee felt like moving from two dimensions into three; it felt somehow more *real* than the place I'd come from, a place characterized by highway construction, fast-food drive-throughs, and cell-phone towers.

There is no reason to deny that the Queens are thoroughly modern, at least in every way they wish to be. There is a satellite dish on the house where Mary Jane and her son Henry live, though it is a house built by Henry's great-grandfather. Henry has a small recording studio in back, a computer, a web site, e-mail. The landscape, however, is ancient. And the songs that the Queen family play are, at least, antique.

Mary Jane Queen and her children are folk musicians in the true sense; mostly playing music at home for their own enjoyment, the songs passed down through their families or learned from their neighbors. Each generation, each performer, makes their own contribution to the songs they sing as they carry the torch to another generation. Certainly the Queens, and American music in general, have been influenced by African-American traditions, by the Carter Family, Flatt and Scruggs, by Doc Watson, and Merle Haggard. Such is a living tradition, interweaving an increasing number of influences as it is carried forward across the generations. The members of the Queen family are de facto tradition bearers, as are all families to some extent. What makes the Queen family so remarkable in the present day is that their traditions date back ages, yet remain vibrant.

A tremendous and gratifying response to the broadcast of *Mountain Talk* indicated a large interest in all things Appalachian and afforded an opportunity to continue the journey. With Walt Wolfram's support for the project, I packed my camera gear and headed back to the Southern Highlands. The Queen family did the rest.

- Neal Hutcheson

## About the Filmmakers

NEAL HUTCHESON (Producer / Director) has produced four documentaries for PBS – *Indian By Birth* (2001), *Mountain Talk* (2004), *Voices of North Carolina* (2005), and *The Queen Family - Appalachian Tradition & Back Porch Music* (2006) – all in collaboration with the renowned linguist Walt Wolfram. Independently, Hutcheson directed the documentary *The Prison Sutras* (1997), and produced numerous short films including *Jornado del Muerto* (1998), *Cry Like A Baby* (2000), and *Vollis Simpson's Whirligigs* (2001). He also produced the feature documentary film, *The Last One*, which previewed in a special exhibition at the Asheville Art Museum in Spring, 2006, and will be featured in the Hillbilly Babylon Film Festival, Sept. 29-Oct. 4, in Berlin. *Obliquities*, a collection of short films, is forthcoming from Sucker Punch Pictures. Hutcheson, in collaboration with Wolfram, is currently engaged in an ambitious feature-length documentary on cultural decay in the rural fishing communities along the North Carolina coast.

Hutcheson received a Regional Artist grant from United Arts in 1997 and again in 2002, and a highly competitive Visual Artist Fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council in 2004.

WALT WOLFRAM (Executive Producer) has pioneered the study of dialect and culture for more than three decades. Wolfram has published more than 20 books and more than 250 articles on American English dialects, and has served on the Advisory Board of the Children's Television Workshop. A prominent concern of Professor Wolfram involves the application of basic research findings to social and educational problems, and the effective dissemination of information on language variation and cultural diversity to the American public. This interest has included work on a number of TV documentaries including the award-winning documentaries *American Tongues* (1986) and *Do you Speak American* (2005), as well as Executive Producer for *The Ocracoke Brogue* (1997), *Indian by Birth: The Lumbee Dialect* (2001), *Mountain Talk* (2004), *Voices of North Carolina* (2005), and *The Queen Family - Appalachian Tradition & Back Porch Music* (2006).

## Filmography

### NEAL HUTCHESON and WALT WOLFRAM

*The Queen Family - Appalachian Tradition & Back Porch Music*. 2006. (PBS)

*Voices of North Carolina*. 2005. (UNC-TV)

*Mountain Talk*. 2004. PBS. (UNC-TV)

*Indian By Birth: The Lumbee Dialect*. 1999. (UNC-TV)

## More About the Filmmakers

- Neal Hutcheson and Walt Wolfram chosen as “Tarheels of the Week” by the Raleigh *News and Observer*: <http://www.newsobserver.com/692/story/396765.html>
- Neal Hutcheson, Walt Wolfram, and Mary Jane Queen interviewed on WUNC’s hour-long NPR show “The State of Things,” 1/23/2006. Archived broadcast available: [http://www.ibiblio.org/wunc\\_archives/sot/index.php?p=544](http://www.ibiblio.org/wunc_archives/sot/index.php?p=544)
- Profile of director Neal Hutcheson in the Raleigh *Independent Weekly*: <http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A20124>

## About the North Carolina Language and Life Project

The North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP) is a part of NC State University Humanities Extension, and is an umbrella organization for regional research, cultural preservation, and the production of educational documentary media for television and classroom.

The goals of the NCLLP are:

- To preserve the rich heritage of language variety in North Carolina as it reflects the different cultural traditions of its residents.
- To gather basic research information about language variety in order to understand the nature of language variation and change.
- To provide information about language differences and language change for public and educational interests.
- To use the material collected in research projects for the improvement of educational programs about language and culture.

## Media Coverage and Reviews

- OFFICIAL SELECTION, 2006 Heart of Gold International Film Festival, Australia
- OFFICIAL SELECTION, 2006 Hillbilly Babylon Film Festival, Berlin
- Featured on WUNC's hour-long NPR radio show "The State of Things," 1/23/2006  
Archived broadcast available:  
[http://www.ibiblio.org/wunc\\_archives/sot/index.php?p=544](http://www.ibiblio.org/wunc_archives/sot/index.php?p=544)
- Press from the January 23<sup>rd</sup> Raleigh, NC premiere of *The Queen Family*:

"Toes tapped and heads bobbed during the half-hour screening of 'The Queen Family,' as members of one of North Carolina's most revered musical families shared their brand of acoustic mountain music, quite literally from their back porch.

"Quail Ridge bookseller Nathan Miller, 27, was so impressed that he took home a DVD after the screening. 'It kinda hit home,' says Miller, who grew up in Wilkesboro. 'Appalachian regional music -- it's very distinct. I think it needs to be remembered.'

...

"The finished product impressed the Queens. 'I think he captured the essence of the music and particularly of mother -- her spirit and what she's about, what she has to offer,' says Kathy Queen Hayes, the sixth of eight children of Mary Jane and Claude Queen."

- Matt Ehlers, *The News and Observer* [Raleigh]  
Sunday, February 5, 2006

## DVD Details



Distributed by PBS Home Video

USA • 2006 • 28 minutes • Color and B & W • Letterbox Format • Closed Captioned

### Special Features:

- The Ballad of Mary Jane Queen
- The Queen Family - Mountain Music
- Outtakes

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- High-resolution press photos available at [www.queenfamilymovie.com](http://www.queenfamilymovie.com)
- Also available from the North Carolina Language and Life Project is the companion CD, *The Queen Family - Back Porch Music*, with 27 tracks of traditional music by the Queen family, recorded on their back porch. See [www.talkingnc.com](http://www.talkingnc.com) for more information.

## Upcoming Live Performance by the Queen Family

On **September 30, 2006**, prior to the national NPS feed of *The Queen Family - Appalachian Tradition & Back Porch Music*, there will be a live musical performance by the Queen family in Cullowhee, at the Mountain Heritage Day festival.

For more information: [www.mountainheritageday.com](http://www.mountainheritageday.com)