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## Henrietta Yurchenco, Pioneer Folklorist, Dies at 91

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Henrietta Yurchenco, whose quest to save living music from the past took her from the mountains of Guatemala and southern Mexico to a New York City radio station to the Jewish community of Morocco, died Monday in Manhattan. She was 91.

The cause was lung failure, her son, Peter, said.

Like a linguist nailing down a dying language, Ms. Yurchenco, an ethnomusicologist, recorded music from long ago that faced an unclear tomorrow. In an interview, [Pete Seeger](#) said she “went to places people didn’t believe she would be able to find.”

Among her thousands of recordings are ritual songs from North, South and Central American Indians, including peyote chants, and music celebrating everything from love to agriculture, found from Eastern Europe to the Caribbean to Appalachia to Spain.

Oscar Brand, the folk singer and radio personality, citing her work with Native Americans, said, “She went out of her way to discover the soft spots, the shining things you couldn’t see in the mists back in the mountains.”

Ms. Yurchenco was also a radio producer, announcer and interviewer. Beginning in the 30s, she broadcast only folk music, both traditional and modern, at a time when few knew it.

[Woody Guthrie](#) called her in 1939 or 1940 and asked if he could be on her live show. [Bob Dylan](#), a little tongue-tied, did one of his early radio interviews with her in 1962. In an interview with NPR in 1999, she said she scoured union halls and immigrant groups to find genuine music.

Ethnomusicologists study music in varying ethnic contexts. Ms. Yurchenco began by tracking down 14 all-but-unknown Mexican and Guatemalan tribes, reaching them with little but a mule and 300 pounds of recording equipment. She eventually recorded 2,000 of their songs for the [Library of Congress](#).

Later, she studied the music of the Sephardim, Jews who had been thrown out of Spain in the 15th century. She arrived in Morocco just as many Sephardim were preparing to move to the new state of Israel, and she seized a last chance to capture their ancient songs in the original context.

Ms. Yurchenco was intrigued by women’s roles in creating music and of the sexual politics involved in making it. Mr. Seeger said women may be the best music collectors, partly because many have the patience to appreciate a grandmother singing a 400-year-old ballad to a baby.

Ms. Yurchenco wrote several books, including a biography of Woody Guthrie. At least one book is still to be published: a study of the music of Morocco’s Sephardic women. She long taught at City College, lectured widely and fought fiercely for her leftist ideals.

Starting in 2005 and continuing almost until her death, Ms. Yurchenco invited like-minded friends to her apartment to sing songs against the Iraq war, often the same ones used against the Vietnam War. Some of their singing was broadcast on Internet radio.

Henrietta Weiss was born in New Haven on March 22, 1916. She told *The Villager*, a neighborhood newspaper in

Manhattan, that her father was “a dreamer who started out in business and failed miserably.” She was a promising pianist who attended the Yale School of Music.

At Yale, she met Boris Yurchenco, an Argentine-born painter, at a meeting of the John Reed Club, named for the American writer who chronicled the Bolshevik Revolution. They were married in 1936, the year she was first arrested in a protest; she was demonstrating against a brass band from Mussolini’s Italy.

In 1939, her musical interests led her to WNYC, the public radio station then owned by New York City. She made friends with people like [Burl Ives](#), the folk singer and [Alan Lomax](#), a legendary music collector.

In 1941, she followed her husband on a trip to Mexico. An engineer from WNYC came along to record music, and she took over when he left. With financial support from groups like the American Philosophical Society, she repeatedly visited the area to record animal sacrifices, healing ceremonies and much else. Scorpions, both yellow and green, were a persistent problem.

Ms. Yurchenco and her husband divorced in 1955. In addition to her son, Peter, of Skillman, N.J., she is survived by two grandchildren.

Legend has it that Mr. Seeger and the Almanac Singers, an earlier name for the Weavers, wrote the song “Kisses Sweeter Than Wine” in Ms. Yurchenco’s relatively quiet bathroom during a noisy party in her apartment. Mr. Seeger said that was not quite true, though he recalled her famous parties.

Mr. Seeger explained that Leadbelly, the great folk and blues artist, was in Ms. Yurchenco’s bathroom with the singer Sam Kennedy, who perched on the obvious as he sang “Drimmin Down,” a lament about a dead cow. (Leadbelly later livened up the beat and used the tune for his own cow song, “If It Wasn’t for Dicky.”)

Mr. Seeger liked the melody and added lyrics about wine.

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