Jean Ruth Ritchie (1922- ) is a traditional musician who spent her formative years in Viper, Kentucky, in a family that considered music fundamental. Here she heard and sang hundreds of songs, most learned orally. While there is no denying Ritchie’s traditional background, to focus on this aspect of her life exclusively is to neglect much of her art. She is not just a folk singer, but also a commercial performer, author, recording artist, composer, and folk music collector.

While much of this project has involved amassing biographical information about Ritchie, it ultimately affords a consideration of broader issues regarding the role of the traditional musician in contemporary society. Ritchie serves as a representative example of one who learned to reconcile ties to her heritage with an interest in achieving a career outside the mountains, of one who learned to place her traditional background into a contemporary context. As such, her activities may also be viewed as a microcosm of the contemporary Appalachian experience.

In addition to illuminating Ritchie’s ties to traditional Appalachian culture, this dissertation explores specific foci of Ritchie’s professional career. Individual chapters consider her role as performer and recording artist, author, and composer. Source material includes Ritchie’s writings and recordings, and personal interviews with her and others. The cutoff point of 1977 has been used as this is the year that one of Ritchie’s recordings, None But One, was reviewed in Rolling Stone magazine, signaling her acceptance into the popular mainstream.

Appendices include a discography, a comprehensive table of contents for all of Ritchie’s published books, and complete transcriptions of interviews.