

# Troubadour from the Shore

With a guitar as her chalk and the stage as her classroom, this coastal crooner shares her passion for New Jersey's history.

**Y**ou'd be grumpy, too, if you had 12 kids, no husband, and no visible means of support. Legend has it that 300 years ago—long before dishwashers and disposable diapers—a woman named Mrs. Leeds used her witching powers to make sure her 13th child would be indestructible and, more importantly, independent. The mother's spell not only gave the infant wings, sharp teeth, and a tail, but, soon after he was born, he flew up the chimney and disappeared. Today, that creature—known as the Jersey Devil—has a hockey team and a hot sauce named for him and was featured on an episode of "The X Files."

So it's no surprise that when Valerie Vaughn (LC'75) set out to write her first song inspired by New Jersey folklore, she chose the Jersey Devil as its subject. Vaughn took a different approach, however, and wrote the song from Mrs. Leeds' perspective. Performing "Mrs. Leeds' 13th Child" at the annual Duck Decoy Show in Tuckerton this past fall, she introduced the song by relating the creature's legendary powers: "It was said that if the Jersey Devil flew over your farm, your cow's milk would turn sour, the wind would howl, and all that wasn't tied down would turn upside down." And with a strum of the guitar, she lifted her voice to sing her tale: "With the feet of a goat and the wings of a bat/He's as ugly as sin, I can sure tell you that."

Vaughn, 45, has spent the last 20 years keeping New Jersey's legends and folklore alive with her original songs. Her repertoire includes a show for kids and more sophisticated programs for teens and adults. Besides her historical songs, she has written—with the encouragement of Rutgers' Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences (IMCS)—several numbers devoted to the Jersey shore, the state's wetlands, and environmental issues. In October 1997, she performed at IMCS's dedication of the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve. She also performs twice a year at marine-science workshops for



K-12 teachers at Rutgers' marine field station in Tuckerton. "Valerie is invaluable to us," says Janice McDonnell, public outreach specialist for IMCS. "She provides a cultural and historical context for our science."

For Vaughn, this year's performance highlights include a fund-raising event with Pete Seeger for the Delaware Bay Schooner Project near Rutgers' Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Port Norris; festivals for the Pinelands, the cranberry, and the blueberry; a gig at the Clammer Jam in Freehold; the Westfield First Night program; and a show at Waterloo Village in Stanhope. And one of her original compositions, "Oh! How Your Garden Grows, New Jersey," was a finalist in a recent competition to designate a state song.

LAND AND SEA: THE NEW JERSEY NETWORK RECENTLY FEATURED VALERIE VAUGHN'S SONGS IN A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THE PINELANDS, WHILE THE MUSICAL EDUCATOR'S TUNE "GOING 2Z SHORE" WAS INSPIRED BY A LICENSE PLATE SHE SAW ON HER WAY TO LONG BEACH ISLAND.



Last year Vaughn was invited to England to perform her songs about the Pinelands and the people and places that haven't always gotten their due in New Jersey history books. One song, "Forgotten Towns," is about iron-ore towns that faded when steel mills came along. Another, "The Son of Charity," is a tribute to James Still (see page 34), the son of escaped slaves who became known as "the black doctor of the Pines" in the 1840s. A third song, "An Alice Paul Tribute," tells the story of the Moorestown activist who helped New Jersey women win the right to vote: "The struggle for suffrage was growing quite old/The flame for the fire grew tired and cold/Til a young Quaker woman stood tranquil and small/Her name was Alice Paul."

Vaughn didn't set out to be a musical educator. She sang in a few bands at Rutgers while working toward a social work degree, but it wasn't until her daughter, Anthea (DC'98), was in nursery school that she overcame her shyness and started performing on her own for preschoolers. By the time Anthea was in high school, her mother had made musical education a career and trips to the library had become part

of the routine. "I research an historical or environmental topic just as if I were writing an article or a scholarly paper, then I reduce the information into a song lyric," explains Vaughn. "The idea is to make learning fun by creatively communicating a story or idea."

The theme for her first compact disk, "Tucker's Island," came to her in 1989 when she came across a magazine article in her dentist's waiting room. "The island was six miles long and called Short Beach in Colonial times," she explains. "A Quaker named Ruben Tucker bought the island in 1765, held meetings there, and raised two sons, Stephen, a loyalist, and Ebenezer, a Revolutionary War hero. Stephen later became a prosperous businessman and named the area Tuckerton. After the Civil War, the island became a popular resort community, complete with two hotels."

Tucker's Island thrived; it was convenient for vacationers from Philadelphia and Burlington County. But new jetties on the larger and fast-developing Long Beach Island altered the tides and, between 1927 and 1932, the sand on Tucker's Island receded, causing a lighthouse and Coast Guard station to vanish.

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