

# **COME FOR TO SING**

**Folk Music in Chicago and the Midwest**

**Vol.8 No.3 Summer 1982**

**\$1.50**



**Hazel Dickens: Working Music**

# COME FOR TO SING Vol.8 No.3 Summer 1982

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Editor: Emily Friedman

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And the spring chickens who got this little one to market were: The Ark (long may it float!), George Armstrong, Gerry Armstrong, Thom Bishop, Sandy Byer, Phil Cooper, Mike Curry, Hazel Dickens, Jack Donahue, Pat Dragisic, Don Drake, Josh Dunson, Slim Dusty, the Fox Valley Folklore Society, Emily Friedman, Barry Haine, Peter Hawkins, John Henderson, Priscilla Herdman, Jim Jones, Henry Lawson, A.L. Lloyd, L. Lubin, Trevor Lucas, Charlie Maguire, Mariposa in the Schools, Rich Markow, Bob Menna, Margaret Nelson, Betty Nudelman, Caroline Perry, Philo Records, John Roberts, Norman Rodger, Steve Romanoski, Mary Salzer, Erika Frank Schaub, David, Linda, and Anya Siglin, Judy Tetzlaff, Art Thieme, Steve Tomashefsky, Juel Ulven, the Weavers, and Martyn Wyndham-Read.

## Dedicated to...

Our long-suffering friend and transcriptionist John Roberts, who was faced with transcribing and copying eleven songs--and took a tumble while Morris dancing and ended up in an arm cast. He somehow managed to get the work done, only a few days after the cast was removed. What more could we ask of him?

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## Notes & Such

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We are glad to grant reprint permission for most of the articles we publish; however, we would appreciate your writing to us first and asking--you never know when we may have made a mistake in an article!

Cover photo of Hazel Dickens by Emily Friedman

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## Thought for this issue:

Sumer is icumen in,  
 Lhude sing cuccu!  
 Groweth sed, and bloweth med,  
 And springth the wude nu--  
 Sing cuccu!

--Anonymous verse from around 1250 A.D., said to be the oldest English-language "modern" folk song

# Hazel Dickens: Working People's Singer

American mountain life and struggles are a major source of subject matter for folk songs old and new, and there are few songwriters who have captured the essence of the people of the Eastern mountains as well as Hazel Dickens, the West Virginia singer and songwriter now based in Washington, D.C. Her startlingly keen voice, passionate lyrics, and dedication to progressive causes have made her one of the foremost American topical musicians, despite her relatively rare concert appearances.

Hazel was a featured artist at the 1982 University of Chicago Folk Festival, and during that weekend, on January 30, 1982, she talked with CFTS editor Emily Friedman about her upbringing, belief, work, and professional history as a solo artist, half of the duo of Hazel and Alice (Gerrard), and member of the Strange Creek Singers (Hazel, Alice, Mike Seeger, Lamar Grier, and Tracy Schwartz). Excerpts of that conversation are presented here.

Hazel has appeared on numerous albums, including *Hazel and Alice* (Rounder 0027), *Won't You Come and Sing for Me?* (Folkways 31034), *Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard* (Rounder 0054), and the anthology *Come All You Coal Miners* (Rounder 4005). She was also a key singer and writer for the sound track of the film "Harlan County, U.S.A." Her first solo album, *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (Rounder 0126), was released last year. Following the interview, we have printed "Lost Patterns," a song from that fine recording.



EF: Was there a musical tradition within your family?

HD: My father was an old-time banjo picker and a very great singer. He could have made a living in the music field, had he wanted to; but he chose religion instead and became a preacher. He virtually never played music after getting religion. He did sing gospel songs. Before that, he had sung folk songs and played breakdowns and such on the banjo. That was in Carroll County, Virginia; my mother was from Floyd County, Virginia. The families had both been in that part of the country for quite a long time.

I came from a very large family; there were 11 children. I came from a rather poor background. A lot of my relatives were miners; all my bro-

thers worked in the mines. My father didn't go in the deep mines himself, but he had a truck in which he hauled timber for the mines, to hold the roofs up.

My father was a staunch Democrat; he would rather have died than vote Republican. We thus grew up with something of an awareness of what working-class people have to go through --what they're faced with.

EF: Did the family sing songs that reflected union or class consciousness?

HD: If they liked a particular song, they would never actually sit down and discuss why they were singing it. But in retrospect, I find that a lot of those songs did have good lyrics and did have something to say. I'm sort of proud that the family had good taste in songs.

Most of the stuff that we were exposed to was very traditional, or from the Grand Old Opry on Saturday night, or from people in the area who played and sang. We really didn't have a lot of exposure to the outside world.

EF: Where did you grow up?

HD: In Mercer County, West Virginia. I was born in Montcalm, but we moved around a lot because my dad had to, in order to make a living.

EF: When did you start making music on your own?



Photo by Emily Friedman

HD: It wasn't until I was grown, even though I had sung all my life, although not professionally --with friends, or around the house. I sang some in church, as well, a *cappella* --they didn't allow instruments in the church. I love that style of singing.

EF: I take it you didn't learn to play an instrument at home?

HD: The guys --my brothers --learned to play. It wasn't actually all that frowned-on in my family, because my aunt played.

EF: And your father.

HD: And his very favorite sister was an old-time banjo picker and singer. I never heard her, myself, but he was very proud of her. And one of my sisters wanted to learn guitar, and he let her take a few lessons from a neighbor, a mountain woman who knew how to pick guitar.

EF: What instruments did your brothers take up?

HD: Banjo, a little guitar, the mandolin. The problem was in being able to afford to buy an instrument; most of the time we couldn't afford to buy one.

EF: How old were you when you decided you wanted to get more involved in music?

HD: I suppose it was more a case of having the opportunity, rather than starting to want to do it. I had always liked music, and would like to have played it more. But I was grown and had moved up north to Baltimore to find work before I started working in music.

In the beginning, survival was foremost in my mind --getting a job and trying to support myself. I did get factory jobs, but they didn't pay very much, and by the time you paid your board for the week and bought your lunch for the week, you were lucky if you had enough left over to afford a movie. This was in the early 1950s. I finally did save enough money to afford a used one, so that was one dream realized there. But at that point, I still didn't have anything further in mind than entertaining my own self. There still was no thought of doing it as a profession. That came years later, when I began to meet people in the city who were also interested in music. In the beginning, we were



Photo by Emily Friedman

just purely into the music, not politics. It was just such a joy to actually be able to do it, and to find all these people who were so enthusiastic about it! It went along for quite a few years like that, just playing for friends, maybe getting just small jobs with friends in little local bars that probably never had music before.

EF: Who were you working with at that time?

HD: Mike Seeger. I met him not too long after I got to Baltimore. He was working in a hospital there. My brother was in that hospital for tuberculosis, and he also played music. He met Mike at the hospital. So then Mike asked my brother where his family was; Mike wanted to come down and meet the rest of us, and he did, and it was the beginning of a long friendship.

In the beginning, we were playing with a band; there was a lead singer, and Mike was one of the sidepeople and did some singing. He played fiddle for that group, I believe. I played bass. It was a five-piece bluegrass band. I sang tenor, and Mike would sometimes sing third part.

After that, Mike joined the New Lost City Ramblers, and it was years later, after Alice Gerrard and I had already been singing together for a long time, that we decided to form the Strange Creek Singers. It was

an every-now-and-then group, which we didn't take too seriously.

EF: Concerning Hazel and Alice--when did the two of you start performing together?

HD: It was back about 1962, I guess. Again, it was not something we thought of doing professionally; it was just that we got together at a party at her house, and we liked the sound of it. I think the first thing we did outside of a living room was the festival in Galax, Virginia, which at that time was pretty small. We went down to enter their talent contest. We did Carter Family songs with autoharp and guitar. Bluegrass and Carter Family.

EF: Were you using the strange harmonies then?

HD: Not really. On some of the Carter Family stuff, we did switch parts. But most of the stuff that was more stylistic got worked out later on, because invariably we would choose songs that you couldn't sing regular bluegrass tenor on. It's hard for two women to sing together and do that, unless one of them has a real low voice; and our ranges were not that different.

EF: The difference between the sound on *Won't You Come and Sing for Me?* and *Hazel and Alice* is striking, not only in terms of material but in terms of the sound of the harmonies.

HD: When we made the first record (on Folkways), it was the height of the bluegrass craze, and everything we sang, we sang as fast as we could sing it. Then, later on, we started doing a little bit more exploring, going back through old tapes and records, and we found out that there were all kinds of songs that didn't have to be done at breakneck speed. We also got to know more about what our tastes, or likes and dislikes, were, and became more selective. The more you perform, the more you do something on even a semi-professional level, the more you're forced into that position, to consider things more.

EF: That was a long-lived partnership.

HD: At least 10 years. We haven't sung together for at least 5 years now. It was something we had done together for a long time, and with something like that, you either take it beyond what you've already done, or it becomes tiresome after a while.

EF: The first song of yours that I ever heard was "Mannington Mine Disaster" (on *Come All You Coal Miners*). I don't know where that comes in the chronology of your writing. Did you start out writing topical material like that?

HD: I think I did. I think the first real topical song, the first "country protest" song, was "Black Lung." And I think it's one of my best songs. It was written from a real gut level. Up to that point --and maybe that's why it hadn't been so successful --I was probably not writing on a gut level. I was perhaps afraid to put that out there. I would look at other people's writing and say that mine wasn't as good as they could have done.

EF: Were you influenced by any other people who have worked in this kind of vein? Billy Edd Wheeler, Sara Ogan Gunning, Nimrod Workman, any of them?

HD: No. I was familiar with Sara Ogan Gunning's work. I really didn't know that much about Billy Edd. What I knew from him weren't his good songs; it was his commercial country stuff. I didn't take him too seriously. Later, he came up with "Coal Tattoo" and all these great songs. That's the way the system is; if you don't write a top-40 song, it won't get played, and people don't get to hear you. He was probably writing that stuff all along, but he couldn't get any exposure for it. It's the same with me; there's lots of people who have heard "Don't Put Her Down" and some of my more popular songs, who have

(Continued on next page)

never heard "Mannington Mine" or "Black Lung" or "The Yablonski Murder."

EF: But "Don't Put Her Down" is a pretty high-consciousness song...

HD: It is, but it got exposure through New Riders of the Purple Sage, who recorded it and spread it around, quite a bit.

EF: When did you begin to get involved more actively in political work?

HD: That didn't really occur while I was working with Alice and Mike, but more when I would go off on my own to sing as a solo. And that didn't come about because I had nerve enough to go off on my own, but because I had written some coal-mining songs, and some of the mining activist groups picked up on that. And they would have functions and rallies and poor people's gatherings like the one at Horse Creek, Kentucky, when they asked me to come down and sing "Black Lung," and the rally got on the Walter Cronkite show. There were probably 800 poor and disabled miners there who were trying to get their black-lung benefits. It was around 1970 or 1971.

Also, Anne Romaine organized a Southern folk festival tour, on which you were encouraged to do political-type songs. That was a real good outlet for me; it gave me support. It was all pretty timely, because I was

writing my best songs then, and to have that support at that time was really great. I'm basically a real shy person.

EF: But you're a great songwriter.

HD: I don't always feel that way.

EF: But you're one of the most noted songwriters in the country! Not among women songwriters; among all songwriters. Come to think of it, that's one thing about you. There are many women songwriters who confine their work to women's issues exclusively, but you have written songs about a wide range of issues dealing with oppression and solidarity.

HD: Well, you know, I can't separate it like some people do. I realize that women have had a hard time, and I think they probably always will. I think most oppressed people are always going to have a hard time --nobody's going to clear the path for us. It's going to be a fight. So I can't see that much separation among all of us. We all have the same battle.

I think it's going to be very hard for all working-class people, because I don't think Reagan knows where they're coming from at all. Nor does he care. You can't give him an inch; if we do, he's going to take a mile. It's too bad, because people have already fought and worked so hard to gain so little.

You can't just win one thing today and think that it's going to be all right tomorrow. You win today, and you will have to win it, or something else, all over again tomorrow.

EF: What role do you see music playing in this effort? Does it still have an organizing role, as it did when the Almanac Singers were active in the 1930s and 1940s?

HD: It's still real important. That was a different time; there are so many more threats now than there were then. But I think a lot of people are starting to listen to the lyrics, the content, of the songs more than they used to. I really think it's a sign for all of us, a good sign. I've talked to a lot of songwriters who used to just write anything, but who now spend time to produce one good song with good lyrics.

EF: You are a representative of an endangered culture in this country, the Eastern mountain way of life. Do you have any hope that it will survive as a cultural whole?

HD: In some areas, there's a chance it will survive. I think a lot of it has been kept alive by outside people who respected it and encouraged people to hold on to their traditions. So, in that sense, there's been a lot more support in the last few years, largely from outside people; it might have a better chance now than it did before. ■

## Lost Patterns by Hazel Dickens

Hazel Dickens writes of this song, "When I wrote it, I was thinking about how hard it was, and continues to be, for low-income working-class people to survive. I was born into a family of poor working people, and everyone we knew was in the same boat. It gave me a close look at--and feel for--what it's like to spend one's entire life trying to stretch a paycheck far enough to cover no more than basic needs, never being able to get ahead, no matter how hard one tries. The constant worry and strain of day-to-day living this way take a really destructive toll on relationships." Hazel recorded the song on *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (Rounder 0126).

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Transcription by John Roberts

THE WORN OUT LI-NOLEUM HAS LOST ITS PATTERN ON THE KITCHEN  
FLOOR AND THE WOMAN THAT USED TO SCRUB IT'S TURNED A-ROUND  
WALKED RIGHT OUT THE DOOR THE OILCLOTH ON THE TABLE SHE'D

WIPED SO MANY TIMES IT'S ALMOST GONE AND THE ELBOWS LEANING,  
 ON IT HELD THE HEAD OF A MAN THAT DRANK A-LONE WELL IT'S  
 HARD LUCK HARD TIMES AND TOO MANY RAINY DAYS  
 HARD WORKING PEOPLE WHO JUST GET BY FROM PAY TO  
 PAY WELL IT TAKES ITS TOLL UP-ON US WE SOMETIMES DRIVE A-  
 WAY THE ONES WHO CARE FROM ALL THE WEARING AND THE  
 TEARING THE CARING JUST WALKS RIGHT OUT THE DOOR

The worn-out linoleum has lost its pattern  
 On the kitchen floor,  
 And the woman who used to scrub it's  
 Turned around and walked right out the door.  
 The oilcloth on the table,  
 She'd wiped so many times it's almost gone,  
 And the elbows leaning on it  
 Held the head of the man that drank alone.

Every now and then his empty can  
 Would shatter the silence of the room  
 As it landed on her pretty face,  
 Still smiling from the broken picture frame.  
 For lately, since she left him,  
 He just sets at the kitchen table, drinking beer,  
 Staring at that worn linoleum,  
 Trying to trace the lost patterns around his tears.

Chorus:  
 Well, it's hard luck, hard times,  
 And too many rainy days.  
 Hard-working people who  
 Just get by from pay to pay.  
 Well, it takes its toll upon us;  
 We sometimes drive away the ones who care.  
 From all the wearing and the tearing,  
 The caring just walks right out the door.

