

WON'T YOU COME AND SING FOR ME?

Hazel Dickens
and Alice Foster

Chronologically, this is Alice and Hazel's second record; it was recorded in 1967. However they have recorded several times (for Arhoolie and Rounder) since the recordings in this album were made. When Folkways recently decided to release this material I took a look at the notes which I prepared for the album in 1967. Unlike the music, they were rather out of date. At that time I stated that "although performances by the Carters, the Poe Sisters, Molly O'Day, Martha Carson, Kitty Wells, Wilma Lee and Rose Maddox (there are of course many others) have greatly influenced bluegrass repertoire and style, there has not been a strong tradition of female singing in bluegrass. In fact, L. Mayne Smith, in his article, 'An Introduction to Bluegrass' (Journal of American Folklore, 78 (1965), p.245) states as a 'defining trait' of bluegrass that 'Bluegrass bands are made up of from four to seven male musicians...' (emphasis mine.) I went on to suggest that "Perhaps this has been for two reasons: Few women seem to possess the technical skill necessary to play bluegrass instruments properly, and few women can sustain the 'punch' or drive so essential for the successful presentation of bluegrass vocals."

Alice has written me suggesting I might wish to modify my notes in light of current thought on the role of women in our culture. I think her own writing points out the flaws in my reasoning quite concisely:

"Neil -- I feel and I think you would agree in this year, 1973, of growing consciousness, that one reason most women in bluegrass or even country music have tended not to possess the above-mentioned skills is not for lack of inherent ability, but more because they have not been encouraged to develop these skills and qualities; or have felt and been made to feel that the skills were not in keeping with their oft-defined roles as women. Women instrumentalists are few and far between in country and bluegrass music -- Ronnie and Donna Stoneman, Cousin Emmy, Gloria Belle are a few -- although more and more women, especially from the cities, who have become interested in traditional and country music have taken up instruments -- in particular fiddle and banjo. Carol McComb from California has even integrated the pedal steel (into her music)."

Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard (this is her maiden name; the previous Folkways LP used her former married name of Foster) have been in the vanguard of this latter trend with their performances at concerts and folk festivals throughout the U.S. and in Canada. They have participated in "Women's Music" workshops at the National, Philadelphia and Mariposa Folk Festivals. There is no question that they are outstanding bluegrass musicians -- listen to Alice's inventive backup work on the guitar,

and Hazel's solid bass playing -- they provide a splendid rhythmic foundation for the group. Alice is, in addition, an accomplished banjo player; listen to TRAIN ON THE ISLAND. As for their singing, the music in this album speaks for itself. From the delicate feel of WON'T YOU COME AND SING FOR ME to the bluesy harmonies of THE ONE I LOVE IS GONE, they demonstrate their mastery of bluegrass vocal techniques.

Alice and Hazel's first record, Who's That Knocking (Verve-Folkways FV/FVS-9005) included biographical information; I give only a brief sketch here. Alice, who sings the lead (or lower) parts, is from Oakland, California. She came to country and bluegrass music through an interest in folk music acquired at college; in fact, she was banjo picker for one of the first (if not the first) collegiate bluegrass bands, the Green County Stump Jumpers of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Hazel, who sings the high tenor parts, is from West Virginia. Folk music was in integral part of her childhood, and country and bluegrass music were well-liked in her home. Her father, H.N. Dickens, can be heard on Folkways album FA 2315, Old Time Tunes of the South. Alice has written movingly of Hazel's life in "Hazel Dickens: As Country As I Could Sing," (Sing Out, 21:1 (1971), pp. 2-7; reprinted in Mountain Life and Work, Dec., 1972). She is an able song writer, as WON'T YOU COME AND SING FOR ME on this record shows.

They met in Washington D.C./Baltimore -- an area which has been a bluegrass stronghold since the early 1950's, due to the enthusiasm of people such as the late Don Owens, a disc jockey, collector-performer Mike Seeger, and producer-performer-writer Pete (Roberts) Kuykendall. The Washington/Baltimore scene is notable for its mixture of "city" derived and "country" bred musicians and the resulting exchange of repertoire and concepts. By "city" I mean coming to bluegrass from a prior interest in the folk music revival -- Alice's background. By "country" I mean coming to bluegrass from a prior interest in hillbilly (or country-western) music -- Hazel's background. The two terms describe opposite ends of a spectrum, and are meant only to describe the musical orientation or training of a person prior to his interest in bluegrass music.

It is curious, and I think significant, that this music should appeal to people of such divergent backgrounds in our culture. The appeal lies partly in the inherent excitement and beauty created by the music, with its jazz-like instrumental interplay, compelling rhythms (somewhat similar to those of early rock & roll) and the rich modal feeling of the older Anglo-American folk tunes in its harmonies. But there is also a basis for common ground in the words of the songs of Alice &

Hazel. These are songs which are meaningful to "country" people because they express the conflict and tension generated by the move of rural people to the city and urban values to the country. Economic necessity has dictated the abandonment of the familiar scenes and security of the country home (listen to A TINY BROKEN HEART, WON'T YOU COME AND SING FOR ME and A DISTANT LAND TO ROAM); in the new urban context, loneliness and frustration loom large (listen to I JUST GOT WISE, WEARY LONESOME BLUES and THE ONE I LOVE IS GONE). The attempts of "country" people to find ways to ease the tensions of this new and difficult life often have tragic results (listen to MOMMY PLEASE STAY HOME WITH ME). For country singers and audiences, the very act of singing or listening to these songs constitutes a way of coming to terms with the change, of coping with reality. The meaningfulness of such songs to "city" persons lies in their expression of rural values which appeal to people living in an urban environment which is increasingly characterized by pollution and social and physical deterioration. In this sense, Hazel and Alice's songs talk of an alternative way of life and remind young city people that technological change and "progress" do not automatically lead to a better quality of living.

THE SONGS (these are listed in the order in which they appear on the record)

I JUST GOT WISE was written by the late Carter Stanley and recorded by the Stanley Brothers (Carter and Ralph) in 1955 (Mercury 45-70453). Alice sings the lead voice, and is joined on the chorus by Hazel.

MOMMY PLEASE STAY HOME WITH ME was the first recording made by Eddy Arnold ("The Tennessee Plowboy") under his own name, and was the first of many hits which made him the best-selling country singer of the late forties and early fifties. It was recorded in December 1944 (Victor 20-1871; Bluebird 33-0502). Record release data credit the song, which firmly in the homiletic tradition of older country music, to Arnold, Graydon Hall and the well-known gospel songwriter and singer Wallace Fowler. Alice learned this song from Hazel, and has never heard the Arnold record -- a good example of the way in which modern phonograph recordings function like the old printed broadsides, placing popular poetry into oral circulation.

THEY'RE AT REST TOGETHER is a song about what was once a much-feared and wide-spread medical problem, tuberculosis. I suspect it is an old song, dating perhaps from the early years of this century, but perhaps it just has that "sound." It was first recorded, as far as I know, by the Callahan Brothers in April, 1941 (Decca 5952). Hazel learned it during the 40's after she had heard their recording via radio. By 1956 it was firmly entrenched in her repertoire as "TB Blues". It was performed (though to my knowledge never recorded) by the Stanley Brothers, who undoubtedly contributed to its popularity among bluegrass musicians. The Country Gentlemen recorded the song in 1961 (Folkways FA 2410); Harry and Jeanie West recorded it in 1962 (Prestige 13049). Alice and Hazel have put their unique stamp on the song by modifying the yodel at the end of the chorus.

SUGAR TREE STOMP written and recorded by the late Arthur Smith during the 1930's, is fiddled here by Billy Baker. Smith had tremendous influence on contemporary bluegrass fiddling; Billy preserves all the features of Smith's performance and adds a few new twists of his own.

MEMORIES OF MOTHER AND DAD - Every country songwriter worth his salt has written a song about mother; Bill Monroe characteristically transcended the genre with this "true" song, the chorus of which quotes from his parents' headstones. His recording of the song, made in 1952, was issued on Decca records (45-28878 and DL 4780).

TRAIN ON THE ISLAND is a popular fiddle and banjo tune from the Galax region of Virginia. Hazel and Alice learned it from an old "hillbilly" recording by J.P. Nestor (banjo) which featured the fiddling of Norman Edmonds of Hillsville, Virginia. Released circa 1928 (Victor 21070A), the recording can be heard on that fountain of folksong revival repertoire, The Anthology of American Folksong, Folkways FA 2953. A more recent performance of the song, from the same area, by Glen Smith (fiddle), Fields Ward (guitar) and Wade Ward (banjo) can be heard on Bluegrass From The Blue Ridge, Folkways FS 3832. Alice and Hazel's performance combines old-time and bluegrass banjo -- Alice's frilled banjo contrasting neatly with Lamar Grier's bluegrass style banjo. Guitar is provided on this song by Fred Weisz, an alumnus of the famous New York Ramblers, Hazel is the singer.

WON'T YOU COME AND SING FOR ME? was composed by Hazel and is sung here by a quartet consisting of Hazel, tenor; Alice, lead; Dave Grisman, baritone; and Fred Weisz, bass. The instrumental backup follows traditional bluegrass form for religious quartets -- no banjo, fiddle used only in the background, and all the breaks taken by Dave Grisman's mandolin, played here in a style similar to that of Jesse McReynolds.

A TINY BROKEN HEART was written by Charlie and Ira Louvin with E. Hill, and recorded by the Louvin Brothers (Capitol T-769). Like a number of other songs on the album, this is narrated in a style which combines frankness of detail with a sentimental viewpoint -- an approach influenced by nineteenth century broadside balladry and the urban popular music of the late nineteenth century. This is still a popular mode of expression in country music today.

A DISTANT LAND TO ROAM was recorded by the original Carter Family in 1929 (Victor V 40255); it is sung here in a duet by Hazel and Alice, with Mike Seeger playing the Maybelle Carter-style lead guitar. Dave Grisman and Billy Baker echo the antiphonal chorus of the song with a mandolin-fiddle duet break.

JOHN HENRY is one of the most recorded of all American folksongs, and a complete discography would no doubt fill several pages, in small print. Of the many bluegrass recordings of the song, the most significant are those by Bill Monroe (1953: Decca 45-31540, Vocalion VL 3702), the Lilly Brothers (1956: Event 45-E-4272, County 729), the Osborne Brothers (1962: MGM E-4090), and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs (ca. 1961: Columbia CL 1564). For references to the extensive folklore scholarship on this song, see G. Malcolm Laws' Native American Balladry (American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, Volume I, revised, 1964), p. 246. This lively performance features Lamar Grier's banjo.

WEARY LONESOME BLUES was composed and recorded by the Delmore Brothers, Alton and Rabon (Bluebird BB-7300) in the 1930's. It has become somewhat of a country "standard"; it is performed often on the Grand Ole Opry by Brother Oswald of Roy Acuff's Smokey Mountain Boys (Starday SLP-192, 1963). The Delmores were from Alabama, and utilized Negro blues song and

style extensively in their repertoire as this song demonstrates.

THE ONE I LOVE IS GONE was written by Bill Monroe in 1955; he had never performed or published it. Recently, while visiting with Hazel and Alice, he sang it for them. They liked the song, so Bill gave it to them; they published it under Bill's name. They added a tenor part to the piece, and the result is the epitome of the bluegrass sound -- a combination of blues and mountain vocal styles which has come to be known as "the high, lonesome sound." Certainly this performance will take its place among the classics of bluegrass music.

THE MUSICIANS

LAMAR GRIER picked banjo with Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys from September, 1965 to June, 1967; he can be heard on Monroe's Decca album Blue Grass Time, DL 4896. Prior to his stint with Monroe, Lamar worked with a number of bands in the Washington area and recorded with Buzz Busby. In recent years he has played occasionally with local groups in the Washington area and with the Strange Creek Singers Conglomerate, the other members of which are Alice and Hazel, Mike Seeger and Tracy Schwarz.

DAVID GRISMAN, an original member of the New York Ramblers (with whom he won first prize in the 1964 Union Grove Fiddler's Convention band contest), the Even Dozen Jug Band, and veteran of numerous personal appearances and two recording sessions with Red Allen and the Kentuckians (County 704 and 710), has forged a personal mandolin style based on the playing of Bill Monroe, Frank Wakefield and Jesse McReynolds. Shortly after these recordings were made David teamed up with an alumnus of Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, Peter Rowan, to form a rock group, Earth Opera. Since the demise of that group in 1969, he has worked as a studio musician, appearing on the recordings of such groups as the Grateful Dead. Most recently he has changed his name to David Diadem and is producing the Columbia recordings of the Rowan Brothers (Peter Rowan's two younger brothers), on some of which his distinctive mandolin can be heard.

Fiddler BILLY BAKER is from Kentucky, but currently resides in Virginia. Billy played for many years in the Washington/Baltimore area where he recorded extensively for Rebel and Zap Records with the Shady Valley Boys and under his own name. He has also played and recorded with Del McCoury's band. With his forceful, bluesy style, Billy is equally competent with old time tunes and modern bluegrass and country material. He has performed on a number of occasions with the Blue Grass Boys; his cousin Kenny Baker has been Monroe's fiddler since 1967.

BLUEGRASS MUSIC

A few years ago it was possible to speak of bluegrass and even the entire field of country or hillbilly music with reference to a few key articles. Today the proliferation of books, journals and magazines makes it very difficult to refer briefly to the literature on this topic. I can only allude to signposts and hope the interested reader can follow the bibliographical trails. A starting point is Bill C. Malone's Country Music, U.S.A. (Austin, Texas, 1968). The John Edwards

Memorial Foundation, housed at the Folklore and Mythology Center, UCLA, Los Angeles, California 90024, publishes an excellent journal, The JEMF Quarterly, reprints significant articles (including several on bluegrass), and serves as a clearing house for research on Country Music. The Country Music Foundation, 700 Sixteenth Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee 37203, maintains a "Hall of Fame", a Museum, and a Library and Media Center. They also publish a quarterly Journal of Country Music. For those interested in keeping track of the fast-moving world of bluegrass music, there are two monthly magazines, Bluegrass Unlimited (Box 111, Burke, Virginia, 22015) and Mule Skinner News (Rt. 2, Box 304, Elon College, North Carolina, 27244). Both contain lively articles about the history of and current events in bluegrass music (with lots of photographs). They also publish book and record reviews and personal appearance schedules of the better-known bands. Bluegrass Unlimited has had a number of articles on instruments, and publishes a useful listing of bluegrass in clubs throughout North America and Europe.

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