

ROUGH DRAFT

MALVINA REYNOLDS

Singer/Songwriter, age 77
Interviewed by Gloria Frym
January 25, 1978

AT ONE CONCERT YOU GAVE, THE WOMEN REQUESTED THAT ALL THE MEN LEAVE. YOU REFUSED TO PLAY. HOW DO YOU HANDLE SITUATIONS LIKE THAT?

I'm pretty bossy. They do it the way I want it or forget it. I don't believe in excluding anyone from my concerts except the enemy, or the FBI and you can't get them out anyway. I think they're getting smart, they dress up like hippies. I feel that women have have the right to use what they call women space and not have men in on their energy...that's fine. They may feel more comfortable without any men around...I will not perform in that situation. I do not feel that necessity...men do not bug me to that extent. I think they need to be educated. Anyway, those that come to my concerts are already halfway allies.

WERE YOU SINGING FEMINIST SONGS, AT THAT PARTICULAR CONCERT?

Some. I only have a few. I also sing about everything else too. Everything that interests me that I think is important.

(PLAYS "THE JUDGE SAID"--song about judge in Wisconsin who condoned rape)

YOU HAVE A TERFFIC SENSE OF HUMOR EVEN WITH SOMETHING LIKE THIS RAPE SITUATION... I NOTICE YOUR HUMOR IN A LOT OF YOU SONGS...

Well it depends on how you approach something. It's more devastating than just pure anger to be ironic and make the other side look ridiculous.

I FIND MYSELF LAUGHING WITH YOUR LYRICS THEN HAVING TO STOP BECAUSE YOU'RE SPEAKING OF SERIOUS MATTERS...

This works very well with my audiences. They feel we're all together having this joke on the opposition.

YOU APPLAUD YOUR AUDIENCES!

I've always done that. I've become a real genius at involving my audiences. I don't make a big thing of it. I'll show you...

(SHE SINGS, "IF YOU LOVE ME", FROM HER ALBUM MALVINA HELD OVER)

I'll start off by saying, now this is a very short song, so I'm going to sing it two times. When it comes around again, of course you'll know it, so sing it with me. If they don't know all the words, they'll sing what they know. I leave the last line for myself. First thing you know, they're participating.

I have another one I do and I say, this is a true story. It must be true because I read it in the Chronicle.

(SHE SINGS, "THE LITTLE MOUSE")

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU THAT AT AGE 50 YOU DECIDED TO START PERFORMING?

I was a writer, I used to tell stories to the kids in the neighborhood when I was little. The kids would gather round the steps of my house. This was in San Francisco where I was born. Later I always thought of myself as a writer but I was timid and self-deprecating, no confidence.

HOW DO YOU MEAN SELF-DEPRECATING? PERSONALLY, OR WITHIN THE WORK?

Both. I knew I had potential but I didn't have enough confidence in the stuff I wrote, or mostly in my ability to break through to the business world, of magazines and publishers.

WHAT WERE YOU WRITING?

Short stories, poems. I didn't write songs then...

THAT WAS WHEN THERE WERE NO SMALL PRESSES...YOU HAD TO BREAK THROUGH NEW YORK OR NOT AT ALL...

Right. I would try and then I'd get a rejection slip and I was through. This was when I was in my 20's. Then I got my doctorate. It was my theory that I would teach and be able to write also. But I never could get a job because I was on the subliminal blacklist. It was partly my parents being socialists and anti-war. The blacklisting started when I was in high school. In the late 30's, I fell in with the folk song movement. There were hootenannies around Los Angeles where I was living at the time.

THIS WAS THE WOODY GUTHRIE PERIOD?

Yes, and Pete Seeger. It was in the air and I found that it was absolutely right for me. The songs were very realistic and yet understated, and deceptively simple. I was immediately at home in this material. It gave me the vehicle I was looking for.

WAS IT THE POLITICS THAT DREW YOU?

Politics were involved too. Many of the people who were interested in folk music were working class oriented, they weren't interested in going to the opera or the symphony. They had a feeling for this earthy working class material. It was class ~~not~~ oriented. I hung out with that gang and then started to write songs.

HAD YOU PLAYED ANY MUSIC BEFORE?

I had studied music, the violin...we were quite poor but my parents managed to give us lessons. I played by ear on ~~the~~ ~~my~~ ~~cousin's~~ piano, though I never took any lessons.

I was writing songs for quite a while when finally I got to Belafonte's music director, De Cornier (?).

HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Well, I was beginning to be known. This was around Los Angeles.

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I was at the clubs, so that when I had a bunch of songs and wanted to get to somebody, they would know my name. They would go around the circle at these clubs and I would sing my stuff.

YOU WERE NERVOUS ABOUT YOUR WORK WHEN YOU WERE WRITING, BUT SUDDENLY YOU BECAME BOLD?

I was beginning to get more confidence. But there were problems even in the folk song clubs. There was this one guy who became a very famous pop song writer later on, Richard Denger, who would walk out whenever I would get up to sing. He didn't like what I was doing. And there was another man, Bill Oliver, who was a song writer, and I think in this case it was pure jealousy because my stuff was catching on.

Harry Belafonte's publisher took "Turnaround". That was my first big hit. It actually hit the charts and it's been a standard ever since. That gave me an opening to others.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU SOLD YOUR FIRST SONG?

17, I think. Of course, nothing happened. You sign a contract and just turn the song over to the publishing company. They don't buy it, but with them, I even let Belafonte put his name on the song.

HE PUT HIS NAME ON YOUR SONG AND TO THIS DAY EVERYONE THINKS HE WROTE IT?

Yes dear. But I was so excited to have him take my song that it was really important to me. That song has been good to me because it's been such a producer that even the small percentage I get means a lot to me. This is true of many songwriters in my position. There is so much money made in this business that they're willing to take whatever they can get because it's so much better than what they've had. They don't know the bookkeeping and the enormous amount of money that records bring in.

MUSIC IS PART OF THE CORPORATE STRUCTURE...IS THIS TRUE EVEN OF FOLK MUSIC?

Don't say folk music to me, I do not write folk songs. I write popular songs. I'm influenced by folk music.

OK, you DO NOT CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE A FOLK MUSICIAN?

You see folk songs are traditional songs. There's a very sharp line. People who write traditional music scorn me.

BUT THE MELODIES IN YOUR MUSIC ARE VERY FOLK...

That's true of most popular music now, it's been very heavily influenced by folk music. There was a tremendous change in music at the time of the discovery of the folk treasury...it influenced Dylan's treatments and Guthrie's treatments.

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DO YOU FOLLOW THE MUSIC INDUSTRY AND POPULAR TRENDS?

I listen some and I take Variety and Billboard, but I find it hard to listen to, because it's so boring.

AFTER YOU SOLD THE FIRST SONG TO HARRY BELAFONTE, A MAN FROM THE LIMELITERS PICKED UP ON YOUR WORK?

It was Lou Gottlieb, head of a group called the Gateway Singers, and they used a few songs of mine and then the Limelights hit it big. For a while, I had part of a song or a song on almost every album they issued. My husband had heart condition and had to stop working as a carpenter, so we were really dependent upon my income. And we were raising a daughter. And I was being fucked over by the Limelights, also. They would find a folk tune, give it to me to write the lyrics and he would take the publishing ~~xxxxxxx~~ which was half, and he would take the tune, which was half of the other half, and I would have a quarter for writing the lyrics of this tune., that he didn't write. And the worst of it was, he would give me an assignment and I would find out afterwards that he'd also given ~~it~~ it to someone else.

PUT YOU ~~COM~~ IN COMPETITION WITH SOMEONE ELSE...

Which I didn't know at the time.

DO YOU THINK THEY WOULD HAVE DONE THAT TO A MAN?

Well they did it to me because I was particularly timid, but the fellows get fucked over in the same way. Except they're inclined to be more pushy. Here I am at home all the time, not where everything's ~~xx~~ happening.

WHAT OTHER BUSINESS DID YOU HAVE WITH LOU GOTTLIEB?

Some of ~~the~~ ^{my} songs that were recorded by him were picked up by other artists. For instance, one of my kid songs, "Morning Town Ride" became an international hit. It was picked up by the Seekers and half dozen other big time performers. Of course, even after the song left Lou Gottlieb, he was getting all the publisher's royalties. On the other hand, when Joan Baez recorded "What Have They Done to the Rain", she didn't take anything. She had a very different attitude.

HER POLITICS WERE MORE LIKE YOURS?

Right. So I own "What Have They Done to the Rain". I own "Little Boxes," which Pete Seeger made a hit out of. They didn't require anything, they just used the song.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WOMEN-RUN MUSIC STUDIOS AND RECORDING COMPANIES? DO YOU WORK WITH THEM?

Well I have my problems with them but I think it's a great idea.

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Women musicians are beginning to get their share.

WHAT KINDS OF PROBLEMS DO YOU HAVE WITH THEM?

Well, there was Olivia, for instance. We raised the question of their distributing our albums. But they wouldn't distribute my work because I had men in the back-up.

THAT'S WHAT THEY SAID TO HOLLY NEAR, ABOUT A MAN SHE'D BEEN WORKING WITH FOR TWELVE YEARS. SHE SAID, IF I HAVE TO FIND ANOTHER PERSON, IT WILL TAKE ME TWELVE YEARS TO GET TO KNOW THEM!

I was in there fighting a long time before they were born. And they dared ...it makes me indignant. I had men back-up because there were no women. Now that there are women, I have women back me.

IT'S A PROBLEM IN ~~THESE ARE~~ OTHER AREAS AS WELL. ALL THE WOMEN'S PRESSES ARE LESBIAN...ORIENTED. I'VE SENT MANUSCRIPTS TO LESBIAN PRESSES AND GOTTEN REJECTED ON THE CONTENT OF THE POEMS.

Well, it's a new discovery. Lesbians are finding their strength and sometimes can't see the general struggle. I make a point, when I talk about this, to state that I won't exclude people who are victimized for being revolutionaries. My husband, who fought working class battles all his life. Am I going to accept some little lesbian snot who's never fought for anything except this particular thing, which is all right, and it's hard for her to fight for, but she can't lay down laws for me.

YOU'VE HAD A HISTORY OF DEALING WITH THAT KIND OF SNOBBERY OR EXCLUSIVE-NESS, OR BEING ABUSED FINANCIALLY. YOU SAID YOU RUN A VERTICAL BUSINESS. YOU WRITE THE SONGS AND MUSIC, YOU RECORD WITH YOUR OWN COMPANY, YOU DO THE BOOKS, THE DISTRIBUTION... ISN'T THAT TAXING?....

MY assistant Ruth does a lot of the hard work.

YOU OPERATE OUT OF YOUR HOME. WHY DO YOU CHOSE TO DO IT THAT WAY?

I've never had an office outside my house. The experience we've had with other outfits have been so unsatisfactory. There are two songbooks that Ruth and I ~~have~~ put together. We brought the books, to Oak Publications and they paid me something like \$600 for all the work and took the book. And they've been using it forever. I didn't know enough to put a cut off date. They had those two books for years. Then they sold their company to Music Sales Corporation, a big outfit. We had to stand in line behind Elvis Presley and Frampton and everybody to get our books printed. Years went by sometimes without our having reprints. So we said, screw it! We went and put out our own books! They don't own the songs!

ISN'T THAT THE NASTY PART OF THE BUSINESS, THE DISTRIBUTION AND PROMOTION?

Not truly. Everyplace I go ^{to sing} they have my books and records. A book company wouldn't follow up on that so carefully. We do a big mail order business. And there are outlets, like women's places. So

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we don't sell a million, but we sell a thousand.

I did a concert in Sacramento to a packed house. Wonderful audience. I always have a good time with my audience. There were a bunch of kids by the stage, maybe 7 or 8 years old, sitting there kicking up there feet. When the music starts, they listen. I'm singing along, about 5 or 6 songs into the set and I hear a noise. I say, what's the problem. They scream out, "We want you to sing 'Rosie Jane.'" Now, do you know that song? I turn to the audience and I say, you will not believe what these kids are asking for. I have to sing it for you so you'll know...

(SINGS ROSIE JANE) ("Rosie Jane, are you pregnant again, you can hardly take care of the four you had before...")

The audience is screaming by this time. I couldn't sing, I was laughing so hard thinking of those kids over there...

DOES THAT ASTOUND YOU THAT CHILDREN KNOW ABOUT SEX SO EARLY?

No not at all. It's partly that they know there are 'bad' words they like to hear...like 'pregant'. People bring kids to my concerts, thinking here's this nice little old lady gonna sing folk songs. Even my children's songs are cutsey pie. The kids who were recording with me on one of the albums, well, one of the little girls just came out saying, these la-la-las are covering up the words! Eight years old!

DO YOU NOTICE ANY DIFFERENCES IN THE AUDIENCES IN THE LAST 20 YEARS? DO THEY MAKE MORE INTELLIGENT REMARKS THAN THEY MIGHT HAVE 20 YEARS AGO?

I think so. Certainly more sophisticated.

I DON'T WANT TO TAKE FOR GRANTED TOO MUCH OF YOUR EARLY DAYS IN BERKELEY EVEN THOUGH A LOT OF IT IS WELL KNOWN... IN THE INTERVIEW WITH YOUR SISTER ELEANOR LAWRENCE, THE PHOTOGRAPHER, I LEARNED A LOT ABOUT YOUR POLITICS. DO YOU WANT TO CLARIFY YOUR POSITION IN RELATION TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY?

I was a member of the communist party for a long time. I dropped out in the early 40's. I couldn't function in there. I couldn't sing, it was heavy and dull and hard work which I wasn't used to. Then there became these questionable situations, such as the invasion of Czcheckolslavkia and so on.

WHEN YOU DROP AWAY FROM A POLITICAL BODY THAT YOU CLOSELY ALLY YOURSELF WITH, DOESN'T THAT LEAVE YOU SORT OF STRUNG OUT IN NOWHERE BECAUSE THERE ISN'T ANOTHER TO IDENTIFY WITH?

Except that I was being picked up by a lot of other kinds of movements... the women's movement, the labor movement, the ecology movement... then there was the progressive party. So I was always involved in activities. At that time, I was running a mimeograph machine and acting as chairman of meetings and stuff. Now I just have one function. I'm kind of an auxiliary to everything.

YOUR ART COMES FIRST.

That isn't quite true. But I'm an artist for them and for myself. As my role in the revolution.

AND ONE OF THE FEW WHO'S REALLY ABLE TO BRIDGE POLITICS AND ART. IT SEEMS A DIFFICULT PROBLEM. YOU INDICATED EARLIER THAT THE PARTY WAS DULL AND THEY DIDN'T WANT YOU TO SING...

Even now there are problems. Because the American movement is not a singing group.

WHY IS THAT? IT'S NOT A DANCING GROUP EITHER.

I'm not thinking only of the party. I'm thinking in general, the trade union movement...there used to be a lot of singing on picket lines. It's just not done now. There just isn't the group joy. The whole nature of city life does this, keeps us from being what we would be if we lived in tribes or small villages. Or gangs or groups.

It's hard. I wrote a song for Planned Parenthood called "Back Alley Surgery". They love it but they really don't know how to use it. If you just extract a segment of it or Rosie Jane for radio or TV, in a 30-second spot, all you'll be doing is sneering at a pregnant woman, which is not the intention of the song.

I wrote a song about nuclear power called "Power Plant Raggae". I sent cassettes all over the country to all these alliances. I figure that somehow they'll use it...What I can do, if they call me to a meeting or a rally, I sing and they need it and they like it and respond. As to moving it out into their activities...

ONE OF THE ARTICLES I READ ABOUT YOU SAID THAT YOU OFTEN WRITE A SONG ABOUT A PARTICULAR CAUSE OR EVENT OR FOR A GROUP...

Well they ask me and then I ask them what ~~they~~ are you going to do with it. If i'm going to perform it or if they have a specific use for it, I'll do ~~xxxxxxx~~it.

(SINGS POWER PLANT RAGGAE --side 1b)

"Making steam in a nuclear plant is like killing an ant with a bomb, and the bomb costs a million or two."

I sent a copy of this song to Barry Commoner. He liked it very much. I copied his letter and sent it with the cassettes to every alliance I could and some of them sent me more addresses. It's true that there's not a lot of singing done, but to the extent that it's used, I have contributed that to the cause of fighting nuclear power. I pay for the cassettes myself. I have enough leeway in my income that I can do it. This record I made about the judge in Wisconsin, I financed the whole thing. We sell some.

IT SEEMS LIKE YOU RE-CYCLE YOUR EARNINGS RIGHT BACK INTO THE

CAUSE. YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE I'VE MET WHO HASN'T COMPROMISED THEIR VALUES. MOSTLY WHEN PEOPLE BECOME SUCCESSFUL, AS YOU HAVE BEEN FOR A LONG TIME, THEY GIVE UP OR THEY GET SLICK.

The slick is the bad part.

YOU'VE NEVER HAD A DESIRE TO GO HOLLYWOOD?

Never. Buy a big house and a fine car?

YOU COULD HAVE DONE THAT EASILY.

Yes, if I'd directed my work towards commercial ends, selling my songs to other singers. I write good songs. Some of them even by accident become popular! But what does all that mean? If you have to have a fine car and beautiful clothes to feel important...I never needed to flash around. I'm important the way I am. I do something socially valuable that people enjoy. I don't need to eat at the St. Francis to be seen by important people.

PERHAPS THAT'S WHY PETE SEEGER CALLED YOU A MIRACLE!

Perhaps it would be nice if I'd be more conscious of things like that.

WHY HAVE YOU NEVER MOVED YOUR WORK INTO A STUDIO OR AN OFFICE AWAY FROM YOUR HOUSE?

Cause it's so much a part of my life. I identify with it. It's not an eight to five thing. I get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and I have a notion to write a couple of lines or a verse and I can work it out right here at home.

WAS IT EVER AN INTERFERENCE WHEN YOU WERE RAISING YOUR CHILD?

My husband was pretty supportive. He was a carpenter and labor organizer.

HOW WAS THAT WHEN YOU STARTED TO BECOME SUCCESSFUL?

He was remarkable. He'd sit in the audience and they'd scream for me and he'd beam as if he'd done it himself. In a deeper way, it may have hurt him. He was a leader and a speaker and very adventurous. As he got older, he had attacks on his health and then his relationship with the movement had changed, just as mine had. So there may have been some difficulty. I sometime wonder whether I didn't cramp his style with my work. He was in charge of the business when he was alive.

As far as my daughter was concerned, my career kept me from interfering in her life too much. I remember when I was trying to finish my doctorate, she would climb up on my lap when I was typing. She was jealous then. But we are very good friends. She lives upstairs. We go out together. She teaches storytelling.

MUST BE PART OF THE GENETIC HERITAGE...

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YOU TELL STORIES IN YOUR SONGS. WHEN YOU WRITE A SONG, DO YOU WRITE THE LYRICS FIRST?

The lyrics cometo me first but it's my theory that the melody is inherent. There's a melody line to all our speech. If you violate the speech line with the music, you come out wrong.

JUST THE LYRIC ITSELF IS SONG. ORPHEUS WROTE SONGS...

Yes.

YOU WERE WORKING ON A PHd AT CAL. WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN THE 30's?

It was small, much more social. I was ~~really~~ really coasting. School was easy for me. It was kind of a lotus land. ~~xxxxxxx~~ I was separated from the struggle.

ISN'T IT STILL A KIND OF LOTUS LAND. I MEAN, DO YOU THINK YOU COULD DO WHAT YOU DO IN ANY OTHER PLACE? THAT YOU COULD HAVE STARTED AND CONTINUED IN YOUR POLITICAL VEIN ELSEWHERE?

Oh I think so. I could have started in LA or New York.

BUT YOU'VE MADE YOURSELF WELL KNOWN IN A COMMUNITY THAT ACCOMODATES YOUR POLITICAL BELIEFS.

Would you believe, I do less performing in this area than I do elsewhere. That's always been true. People are often afraid of my politics. When they call me, they know what they're getting. When the Unitarian Church calls me, they call me into the pulpit when they want to give their congregation a '~~xxxxx~~schtutz'. They need their ass kicked.

AND HOW DO THE MINISTERS REACT TO YOU?

They love it.

YOU MUST DEAL WITH SOME PRETTY LIBERAL MINISTERS.

Well you see, my stuff isn't all that iconoclastic. I ~~always~~ always do ~~it~~ with humor. And I'm dealing with everyday problems, like pollution. I have a song about brown lung...

WHAT I MEAN IS THAT I THINK YOU STIR PEOPLE'S CONSCIOUSNESS, THE KIND OF CONSCIOUSNESS THAT MANY PEOPLE DON'T HAVE.

People are uneasy about the issues I deal with and to have them presented clearly and with a supportive audience, this changes people's attitudes.

DO PEOPLE ACTIVELY NOT WANT TO HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY? SEND YOU HATE MAIL?

Very seldom. I have a very ingratiating ~~manner~~ manner. My stuff is not hostile, even when people disagree with me, I'm so good natured about it that they don't get up tight. And sometimes, when they

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disagree with me...I sang at Women Against Violence Against Women in Los Angeles. A great turnout, the only song that didn't get a big hand was called, "Song of the Dollies", which is about teenage pregnancy. A kind of friendly song advising girls that it isn't that much fun to have a baby as a teenager. That's the only one that didn't get cheers. During the intermission, I was surrounded by a bunch of loving friendly women telling me why that song was off.

WERE YOU DEFYING MOTHERHOOD IN THEIR EYES?

I think they felt it was condescending or making woman appear as victim. We disagreed but in such a loving friendly way. Hugging me to see their point of view.

I mean, Phyllis Schafly wouldn't come to one of my concerts! She knows who I am.

I SAW HER AT THE 'OTHER' HOUSTON.

But it's not that I just sing for people who agree with me. Whatever, it's seldom hostile. You know my song "We Don't Need the Men"?

(SINGS)

YOU DON'T REALLY FEEL THAT WAY, THOUGH DO YOU? THERE'S HUMOR IN THAT SONG, BUT IT MIGHT BE TAKEN THE WRONG WAY...

But you see, nobody takes it seriously. Oh a little boy about nine years old came up to me after a concert and said, you don't really mean you don't like boys do you.

WHAT'S THE RESPONSE FROM MEN?

Oh they sometimes boo in fun. I wrote that song in 1956. I read an article that said that married women are not as happy as single women. I wanted to tell my contemporary women, who are not married ~~xxxxxxx~~ whose hearts are broken that ~~that isn't~~ the absolute essential, that you can be a happy person without a man. In this kind of joking way.

YOU PERFORMED THAT SONG IN 1956? HOW WAS IT RECEIVED?

Some liked it. It's received about the same now.

HOW DID YOU KNOW? YOU WERE OBVIOUSLY NOT SINGLE IN 1956?

Yeah but I had been. I wasn't married till I was 30. My mother had said to me, Malvina, you've got brains. Anybody can have babies but you have brains. For that reason I pushed marriage aside. I had boyfriends. Then there was the Depression. No job, blacklisted. I couldn't get a teaching job. I suddenly got panic stricken. And I married the wrong guy. That was my first marriage. And when I read this little article in the paper, I thought, that's me and that's all these women who think they're nobody when they don't have a man. I have a cousin who killed herself by overdosing on reducing pills because she was fat and didn't have a boyfriend. But she was thin

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in her coffin.

I was only married the first time for around 3 years. It was no good.

I was blacklisted when I left high school. They didn't give me my diploma because I was a socialist. So I was kicking around, trying to work. I was even blacklisted by the telephone company. I kept getting fired. The FBI was after me. They had nothing else to do, but nag at little girls whose father was a socialist.

After college, I'd go for an interview and ~~they~~ it'd be very nice. Then they'd go back to the placement office for my records, there must have been red tracks all over my files!

YOUR SONGS AREN'T BITTER. YOU WERE PERSECUTED ALL YOUR LIFE.

I realize it's a class war. ~~But~~ I don't blame the capitalists personally, I just think they're a bunch of shitheads. It's not a personal vendetta. The system has to change and the power has to be taken away. I can get pretty angry but I don't lash out at individuals. Though I can get pretty angry at FBI agents who get into the movement, and become your dear friend.

THEY STILL SNIFF AROUND HERE?

Oh yes. When you called up, I think, mmm, she could be from the FBI, this is an easy way to get me to talk about everything. It doesn't interfere with anything. I don't mean it personally. They have billions of dollars and nobody asks what they do with it so they have to spend some of it. So they nag at little people who are no great threat to them.

THEY MUST HAVE A DOSSIER ON YOU YARDS ~~LONG~~ WIDE...

Of course, they send people into the women's movement to deliberately provoke...but you can't stop your work and I can't be suspicious of people. I refuse. If it turns out that they're finks, I may have had some impression on them anyway.

I'm not paranoid...it's part of the class war...I can't think about it that much.

DO YOU FEEL AS ~~XXX~~ IF YOU'RE MORE IN STYLE NOW, YOUR POLITICAL ~~XXXXXXXX~~ PHILOSOPHIES?

It's easier, yes. I can't illustrate anything unless I sing it. Song is so much a part of me.

(SHE SINGS THE CHORUS OF A SONG THAT TALKS ABOUT SEX AND REVOLUTION)

You can do that now without people blinking an eye.

YOU OBVIOUSLY HAD YOUR AUDIENCES THEN, BUT NOW THAT EVERYONE'S HALF HIPPIE...EVERYTHING'S BEEN CO-OPTED...BUT WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT IN YOUR MUSIC HAS MORE SYMPATHIZERS NOW THAN WHEN YOU STARTED OUT...

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My history is long enough that I've been through many ups and downs. . . When the 60's faded out, I didn't think there was no movement left. I've seen ~~ixaxix~~ ups and downs before. This seems like kind of an up now. It could get bad.

IT'S AN UP IN SOME RESPECTS, AND YET THERE'S A WHOLE LOT OF REACTIONARY MOVEMENTS...HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE 60's. YOU SAID IN ONE OF YOUR INTERVIEWS THAT YOU WEREN'T REALLY INTERESTED IN BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP. THAT YOU WERE WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE.

I wasn't very much involved in the 60's because it was such a young movement. It was a student movement and I wasn't on campus. The wind blew the teargas down the street here and I'd go out and watch a little. A lot of it I felt was very upfront. But there was a pre-occupation with publicity that gave the period a look of importance that I don't think it really had. There wasn't as much of a revolution as there seemed to be. There was a lot of trashing and posturing and a lot of real struggle, like in Chicago.

WASN'T IT THE CLOSEST THIS COUNTRY'S COME TO A REVOLUTION IN 200 YEARS? MAYBE NOT AS IT HAPPENS IN OTHER COUNTRIES, WHERE PEOPLE ARE BRUTALIZED EN MASSE.

I wouldn't say it was superficial, just that it was not as heavy as it seemed to be. There was actually struggle going on. It did help to slow down and stop the Vietnam War. And the Black movement had accomplished a good deal, not that much but it made some changes.

WHERE DO YOU THINK IT'S GOING TO GO NEXT?

The ecology movement is becoming very crucial. The whole business of nuclear power is so dangerous, carried on in such a blatant, shameless way. In Europe, the basic cause for resistance is the fight against nuclear power now.

BUT ECOLOGY AND ANTI-NUCLEAR POWER MOVEMENTS AREN'T REALLY MOVEMENTS. THEY DEAL WITH SUCH A BASIC QUESTION OF SURVIVAL...IT'S NOT LIKE ANYBODY CAN'T RELATE TO THOSE ISSUES.

Yet there are those who don't know that.

A BLACK WOMEN WRITER WHO I INTERVIEWED MAINTAINS THAT BLACK MOVEMENTS HAVE GOTTEN CO-OPTED HISTORICALLY BY THE WOMEN. NOW ATTENTION IS DRAWN EVEN FURTHER AWAY FROM CIVIL RIGHTS BY ECOLOGY, NOT THAT ECOLOGY ISN'T JUST, BUT THAT THE LACK OF ATTENTION...THE FACT THAT MOVEMENTS IN THIS COUNTRY HAVE THE LIFE OF A FAD...PEOPLE WILL TAKE SOMETHING UP ON A POPULAR LEVEL THEN DISMISS IT...

My own feeling is that any attack on the system is a plus. Whether it's the black movement or ecology or women.

WHAT WOULD YOU CONSIDER TO BE A MORE JUST SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT?
DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE AN ANARCHIST?

No, on the contrary. My belief is that people are people because they function in groups. What is so destructive now ~~th~~ is that neighborhoods, small tribes, etc. are being destroyed by big systems.

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No, I'm not an anarchist, I'm a socialist. If the means of production and distribution were socially owned, and controlled, a great many of our problems would be solved. I know there are a lot of problems in socialist countries. But in the history of mankind, socialism as a functioning system, is so new, and it is working within a context of surrounding decaying capitalist world, it would be surprising if it functioned well. Certain basic things have happened in China and the Soviet Union, mainly that there is no longer ~~any~~ profit system. The Soviet Union has certainly slipped back into bureaucracy. But there is not the unemployment there. And there are ways for creative people to actually get support. They might be choked off ideologically, but that's the ~~very~~ bad part. But I think, in the long run, that's the way we'll have to go. ~~Ex~~

EVEN AT THE EXPENSE OF ART?

I don't think it has to be at the expense of art. I think that's a big mistake.

THERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS WITHOUT COMPROMISE OF THE ART... VOZNESENSKY, THE RUSSIAN POET. HE HAS MOBILITY. ONE OF THE FEW. HIS CONCERNS ARE UNIVERSAL.

What is absolutely essential is to eliminate private ~~ownership~~ of the means of production and distribution. In my lifetime it's happened. There were no socialist countries when I was a little girl. Socialism was a dream we were working toward. My parents were socialists when ~~xxxxxx~~ I was 2 years old. But in my lifetime there are large areas of this world that are beginning to function as socialist countries. So I say, it looks like progress.

DO YOU THINK THAT THIS COUNTRY IS MOVING IN THAT DIRECTION?

This country will probably be the last one. Cause it's like the head gets through the foot in back and the foot runs the head. This country's had too much prosperity...

TOO MANY INTERRACIAL PROBLEMS. IT SEEMED RELATIVELY EASY IN CUBA BECAUSE OF THE SIZE AND HOMOGENEITY OF THE POPULATION...EVEN THE LAND MASS WAS EASIER TO DEAL WITH...

There is evidence of the system breaking down in this country, even resistance, which is essential. It's even impossible for some people to live because of unemployment. Look at these high rise housing projects, ~~they're~~ it's like trying to put people in jail to live. They're being torn to pieces by the people because there's no social growth...

THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES HAVE NOT CREATED THE ENVIRONMENTS THEY'RE LIVING IN. THOSE PROJECTS ARE LIKE OUT-OF-PLACE CULTURAL ARTIFACTS...

They are set there as a completely mechanical solution to a problem. We need low rise places, neighborhoods...

SORT OF LIKE HOW ESPERANTO FAILED

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No roots in the earth, no overtones, no past.

HAVE YOU EVER FELT COMPETITIVE AS A WOMAN? OBVIOUSLY THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IS ~~AMEX~~ MALE DOMINATED OR HAS BEEN.

I'm not particularly competitive with other women, but with other songwriters, yes. I feel like I have something that's really good that's being shoved into a corner because I can't get through to the people (refers to Billboard and Rolling Stone here). It was years before Wasserman on the Chronicle came to a concert of mine.

DO YOU THINK IT'S YOUR POLITICS?

No. I think it's my age, I'm not a slinky pretty one, I'm not, you know, Linda Rondstadt. Although, when I get in front of an audience, I take 'em over like nothing...they love me. I can't get to an audience, between me and the audience is the manager of the Boarding House and all these people who have a certain image of a woman ~~performer~~ performer. They just shove me in the corner.

SO IT'S SEXUAL AND AGE DISCRIMINATION?

Yes, I think so.

DO YOU FEEL ANH KIND OF ARTISTIC JEALOUSY?

Well, I have this problem. When I'm on a program with somebody else, should I be first or second? First is the opener, the weak one. And yet I hate to push somebody else in that position. It doesn't look good for me to open. I was on a program with a ~~black woman, wonderful singer performer~~ ~~singer performer~~ ~~black woman, wonderful singer performer~~ black woman...the committee decided to make me first. And I said, I don't think so, because her material is all feminist, mine is broad and revolutionary and I think I should be second for that reason. They said, you're right. This wasn't a personal thing, but a question of balancing.

DO YOU EVER HAVE ANY PROBLEMS HUSTLING YOUR WORK?

It's built up so that we get calls enough to fill the program as much as I can stand it.

WHAT ABOUT BEFORE YOU WERE FAMOUS?

If I go to perform at something like a conference, after a whole lot of conference, they're just screaming with delight. People from all over come and want to know how to get me come to their town. If I sing in Houston for the Women's Conference, there are people who'll want to bring me to Moline. In the beginning, we had to send out some matieral, but that's not the way it really happened. It builds, one on the other...

WERE YOU EVER ANXIOUS IN THE BEGINNING?

I had habits of being shy and putting myself down...but I had a strong feeling that I've got something. When the Limelitters would sing my songs at the Hungry I, which was big stuff in those days,

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I would be in the audience and watch this laugh run all over and I'd love it. They'd ask me to stand up and take a bow, once in a while. And all the time they were up there, I thought, if I was up there, I'd do it better. I'm a damned good performer, better than they were.

Recently I sang at the (?) coffee house and my then-boss Lou Gottlieb came backstage and he said, he was obviously impressed because he wouldn't let me sing in the old days, he was giving me advice, which was his way of being impressed. He said, why don't you work out your...

ISN'T THAT PATERNALISTIC...

Oh god, yes. He doesn't grant you your success. He advised me to study up on my pattern more and have it formal so that it was always the same. He had no idea that that was one of the big points of my performance, that the audience could see my brain working, it wasn't all coming out like a phonograph record. I pause and formulate something to say, or like when those kids came up asking for Rosie Jane, that became part of my act. I mean, the audience is right there with me, doin what I'm doin instead of having something laid on them that comes from the icebox.

YOU NEVER HAD A PROMOTER?

No, Lou Gottlieb ~~xxxx~~ would never promote me...he objected to my performing. I'm sure he was envious of me. Now he's no where. ~~xHx~~ They sing in lounges in Las Vegas a few months a year. But their stuff is the same stuff they sang years ago.

WHAT'S THE MOST DIFFICULT THING FOR YOU IN YOUR ART?

Organizing my time to do work. I get up in the morning, I have breakfast, I read the paper, I go out into the garden, I do everything but sit down to the typewriter and work.

I HEAR THIS ALL THE TIME!

There's work piled up always. When I get into it, I don't mind. I have to take myself by the ear and do it. I waste so much time. I'm writing my autobiography. I have a publisher and a contract and I can't ~~do~~ bring myself to do the fucking thing. Partly because they have laid on me the dictum to send in a description, an outline, a this and that instead of sending them the stuff. To write something about something you're going to write is lousy! The thing itself says it~~fix~~. To write something about it, you're moving one step away from the life and quality of it...they want me to say, why is this book different from other books, what kind of an audience, shit!

WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE CALLED?

Well, one title is "It Should Have Started Yesterday". A film that took three years to make has been done about me. It's all old songs. It's darling. But I always get this feeling that the

film should've become yesterday, with what's happenng now...

I sit there and watch the film and I tell my audiences, what a nice lady...I wish I knew her.

MS DID AN ARTICLE ON YOU TOO. ABOUT THREE ~~XXXXXXX~~ YEARS AGO.

Yes, my fame is growing! Variety did a story about me, I'm on national television...If Variety says so, I must be happening.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT WHEN YOU START A CAREER LATER IN LIFE, YOU KEEP ON UNTIL THE END. WHEN YOU MAKE IT IN YOUR 20'S, YOU BURN OUT. YOU HARDLY HEAR OF ANYONE WHO WAS REALLY BIG WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG...THEY RETIRE IN THEIR THIRTIES OR FORTIES. YOU'RE ACTUALLY WORKING FOR A LONGER SPAN OF TIME THAN MOST PERFORMERS...

That's because I'm in touch with what's going on and it keeps me going. You raised the question before about writing for organizations. What happens is that I read something, then bring it to the organization, say with Planned Parenthood, I go and say, you should be using this song...then they say wow, we never thought of that, somebody writing a song ~~aboutxxxxxxx~~ for us. They don't know what to do with it of course, but they're really blown away by it!

WHAT KIND OF PLANS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE FUTURE? I'VE GOT TO ASK YOU A FEW STANDARD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS!

And my standard interview answer is that I'm just gonna keep on doing what I do until I fall down. I like it.

EARLIER YOU SAID YOU MIGHT WAKE UP AT 2 AM AND WRITE A SONG. IT MUST BE DIFFERENT THAT WRITING A POEM, NOT ANTICIPATING THAT YOU'LL BE PERFORMING IT.

I know sometimes that that song I'm going to sing that night is going to get its premiere. When I wrote the "Little Mouse", it was 2 days before I sang at the Great American Music Hall. Everybody in the audience had seen that little item in the front page of the Chronicle. And here was Malvina Reynolds with a song about it. They were screaming! The immediacy! People are always complaining, well, you don't sing that song the way it is in the back. Well, it's grown, it changes, it's organic. You have to have the liberty to change your own songs. ~~xxxxxxx
xxxxxxx
xxxxxxx~~

DOYOU EVER GO BACK AND CHANGE THINGS AFTER A LONG TIME?

Yes. I picked up a song the other day and I thought to myself, that's got damned good lyrics but that tune is nowhere. My music has improved since I wrote it. So I'm gonna put a new tune to it and use it.

I read a letter in Progressive Labor a few years ago from a miner's wife. It almost walked off the page into lyrics.

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I wrote a song about it but I never sang it. Somehow I felt it was hers not mine. That's foolish because I'm her voice. I'm like the instrument through which the music goes to the audience. Actually, she gets part of the royalties. I didn't have to do that, but I felt that she had had her part in making the song. Just lately, people keep asking for it. I feel like I'm not the one. Now there's a coal miner's strike. So now when I sing the song it's very well received.

(sings song without music, side 2b) (Mrs. Clara Sullivan's Letter)
(see songbook, p. 51)

MALVINA, I THINK IF YOU MET THE ANGEL WHO INSPIRED YOU, YOU'D SHARE YOUR ROYALTIES WITH HER...

Well it didn't amount to a lot. Pete recorded this song. She got some royalties and he gave his royalties to her too. He did the tune to this song. Sometimes when I think it's a song that Pete might use, I send the words to him so he'll put the tune on them. (don't quote this...)

WERE YOU WILD IN YOUR YOUTH?

I was very well behaved up to a point. I was politically active. I hung out at the Socialist's School in San Francisco. When I decided to be sexually free, I cut loose. ~~But~~ I wasn't promiscuous, but I went through the abortion thing, the back alley abortion thing and the whole bit. Wild, no, not really. I had boyfriends. I had a good time. I never used any kind of dope. I was just high on life. I was a pretty girl and the boys were after me. When the time came and I got married, I was a one family person.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MONOGAMY?

Well, it's not a thing you believe in, it's whether it's a fact or not is the question.

MAYBE MONOGAMY ISN'T THE ISSUE BUT THE NUCLEAR FAMILY...

I think the nuclear family is a blind alley. Originally it was the clan, the extended family was the basic unit. Some people are deliberately moving in that direction again. But mostly, the fact that the nuclear family is breaking up leaves people with nothing...it's not as if they were left with a replacement.

I THINK OF THE FAMILIES THAT LIVE IN THE LITTLE BOXES LIKE IN YOUR SONG. BUT NOT MANY OF ~~THE~~ MY CONTEMPORARIES REALLY KNOW HOW TO LIVE DIFFERENTLY, EVEN THOUGH WE MIGHT LIVE IN LOWER CLASS DWELLINGS. THE FAMILY IS THE SAME KIND OF SET UP. IT'S CHANGING BUT STILL, ...
~~THE~~

Well I've got a new song about young people going out into the wilderness, but of course, that back to nature thing doesn't work either. It's called "We Can Stop Here."
(breaks into song again, no music)

The song was written about a time when people thought going out into the wilderness would change things...but there is no wilderness.' Everything is fenced in.

THERE'S A LINE IN THE SONG ABOUT HOW IT WAS OK JUST TO BE FRIENDS, BUT WHEN THEY BECAME LOVERS...

I make a parallel with Eden, where ~~ix~~ as long as they weren't lovers... it worked. Oh I don't sing that song in front of a great big audience. It's a very thoughtful song.

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A MORAL PERSON?

Oh yes. A moral is something that develops over a millenium in order to protect the extended family. It's natural. When you feel moral, you're just a red corpuscle in the body politic., and functioning properly. I've done some rotten things in my life and I know it. And that's part of morality, to know what's socially supportive and what's destructive.

HOW DOES THE ARTIST FUNCTION IN THAT CONTEXT? THE ARTIST IS NEVER REALLY EXEMPT, BUT DOESN'T WANT TO SACRIFICE FOR THE INTEREST OF THE GROUP.

and
But individual/artistic values are also inherited. And to inherit something is to take it from a group. It's not an isolated thing. You don't just spring up in the forest with no social environment at all. A lot of people say they write for themselves, but they are themselves a social audience when they're doing it. They are as individuals an accumulation of socialthings.

BUT CAN YOU IMAGINE A COMMUNE OF WRITERS?

No. That's true. When people come to me with their songs, I say, ~~go~~ sing to the public, you belong to an audience, you don't belong to me. I'm fighting myself to relate to a public. A house full of writers or a house full of musicians is nowhere. You make your art for the public, not for other writers or musicians.

DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH OTHER MUSICIANS?

Not as much as I'd like, because of my age and all these things, I never did what young musicians do, ~~whih~~ is hang out in bars or coffee houses or in guitar shops and pick up licks. I can't hang out with young musicians.

I had a great experience with Dave Bromberg, fine musician, crazy man, I love his stuff. We met on an airplane, he was there with his band. He said, I'll back ya, my band will back ya. I was in heaven. We were going to a festival in Toronto and I gave him my music book. When I came to his room with my guitar and my songbooks, his men walked out on me. They were hostile. Maybe they thought I was somebody's grandmother. Dave wasn't hostile. He knows what I do. I told him, I'm not gonna stay here, these guys are walking out on me. Well, he ~~talk~~ took my songbook and started playing and said,

god, you got some weird chords in here. That was wonderful, for him to say that. I told him it would be impossible for him or his band to back me, they'd all be so busy. He said, I'll work it out. Well, we shared the platform for one little piece and then he had to do his show....there were five different stages going at once. So I played my set with a woman who couldn't back me very well. Too bad because there was everybody I admired in the world, John Prine, and I was doing rotten. Well, it was alright. I had said goodbye to the audience and Dave came running up saying they kept me after my show, so I turned and said to the audience, please, come back for just a minute, Dave Bromberg is gonna back me on a song. And he did. He was sweet and he's always been that way.

I've got a record, Steve Goodman and his band backed me on it. He wouldn't take a cent for it. He rounded up some big names.

DO YOU HAVE FRIENDS WHO ARE MUSICIANS?

Not primarily. Rosalie Sorrels and I toured together, though we have very different styles. That's not easy for two musicians to do.

IS IT A PROBLEM FOR YOU TO RELATE TO SUPERSTARS?

Well, you know ~~when~~ you can't be a solid person when everybody thinks that everything that comes out of your mouth is solid gold. It warps you. If you get so far above people, your feet are off the ground, you lose your roots and the source of your inspiration and you're stuck up there. It's not anything you can help in a way, because superstars are cut off from the people by the business people who surround them, who want to touch them to get the gold to come off. The public too gets warped.

SUPERSTARS ARE SURROUNDED BY EITHER SUCKERS OR WORSHIPERS?

Yes. It's sad. Not that I was ever in danger of that!

YOU COULDN'T HAVE KEPT YOUR POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IF YOU WANTED TO PUT YOURSELF IN THAT DANGER!

Also my age was against me. I've been really protected from stardom. I had just a little taste, when I was recording for Columbia, all the people fussing about me, this show and that show.

IMAGINE A STEADY DIET OF THAT, TV AND MAKE-UP, ETC.

Incidentally, I fight make-up, I won't wear it. It puts a mask on your face so you lose your facial expression and you can't smile and your face cracks if you want to make faces!

~~##~~

MALVINA REYNOLDS

Singer, Songwriter

(center)

Pete Seeger called her "some sort of miracle," but she once wrote in her journal that, "if there's something to be said about me, I'd rather say it myself, singing."

~~The hundreds of songs that Malvina Reynolds composed in her thirty year career in music reflect the life of one of the 20th century's greatest women.~~ Born in San Francisco in 1900, she worked in a steel foundry, then in social work, later as a newspaper editor, and also earned a Ph.d in English language and literature from the University of California in 1939. She recorded seven albums and many singles. Her songs were also recorded by Pete Seeger, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte, Diana Ross and many others. She authored numerous songbooks, several for children, and was the subject of the documentary film, "Love it Like a Fool." Malvina ran her own publishing and recording company while she toured regularly around the world, singing her tunes of protest and delighting her audiences with her wry but gentle sense of humor. She lived in Berkeley for 40 years, was married, and had one daughter. Socialist, feminist, environmentalist, activist, performer Malvina Reynolds died on March 17, 1978, two months after this interview was conducted.

MALVINA REYNOLDS

Singer/Songwriter, age 77

} → (center)

~~Interviewed by Gloria Frym
January 25, 1978, Berkeley, California~~

what happened to you that at age 50 you decided to start performing?

I was a writer. Before that, I used to tell stories to the kids in the neighborhood when I was little. They would gather around the steps of my house in San Francisco where I was born. Later I always thought of myself as a writer, but I was timid and self-deprecating.

How do you mean 'self-deprecating'? Personally or within your work?

Both. I knew I had potential but I didn't have enough confidence in the stuff I wrote, or mostly in my ability to break through to the business world of magazines and publishers.

What were you writing?

Stories, poems. I didn't write songs then.

That was when there were no small presses. You had to break through New York or not at all...

Right. I would try and then I'd get a rejection slip and I was through. This was when I was in my twenties. Then I got my doctorate. I thought I could teach and be able to write also. But I never could get a professional job because I was on the subliminal blacklist. It was partly my parents being socialists and anti-war. In the late '30's, I fell in with the folk song movement. There were hootenannies around Los Angeles where I was living at the time.

That was the Woody Guthrie period?

Yes, and Pete Seeger. It was in the air and I found that it was absolutely right for me. The songs were very realistic and yet understated and deceptively simple. I was immediately at home in this material. It gave me the vehicle I was looking for.

Was it the politics that drew you?

Politics were involved too. Many of the people who were interested in folk music were working class oriented. You can bet they weren't interested in going to the opera or the symphony. I hung out with that gang and then started to write songs.

Had you played any music before?

I had studied music...the violin...we were quite poor but my parents managed to give us lessons.

I was writing songs for quite a while when finally I got to Harry Belafonte's music director.

How did that happen?

Well, I was beginning to be known. I hung out at these clubs where they would go around in a circle and I would sing my stuff.

You were nervous about your writing, but suddenly became bold about your songs?

I was beginning to get more confidence. But there were problems even in the folk song clubs. There was this one guy who became a very famous pop song writer later on...he'd walk out whenever I would get up to sing. Harry Belafonte's publisher took "Turn Around." That was my first big one. It actually hit the charts and it's been a standard ever since. That gave me an opening.

How old were you when you sold your first song?

47, I think. Of course, nothing happened. I signed a contract and just turned it over to the publishing company. I even let Belafonte put his name on "Turn Around."

He put his name on your song and to this day everyone thinks he wrote it?

Yes dear. But I was so excited to have him take my song that it was really important to me. That song has been good to me because it's been such a producer. Even the small percentage I get means a lot to me. This is true of many songwriters in my position. They're willing to take whatever they can get because it's so much better than what they've had. They don't know the bookkeeping of the music world and the enormous amount of money that records bring in.

Music is part of the corporate structure...is this true even of folk music?

Don't say folk music to me. I do not write folk songs. I write popular songs. I'm influenced by folk music.

Ok, you do not consider yourself a folk musician?

No. You see, folk songs are traditional songs. There's a very sharp line. People who write traditional music scorn me.

But the melodies in your music are very folk...

That's true of a lot of popular music. There was a tremendous change in music at the time of the discovery of the folk treasury... it's influenced Guthrie and Dylan...

After you sold that song to Belafonte, the Limelitters picked up on your work?

For a while, I had part of a song or a whole song on almost every album they issued. My husband had a heart condition... he stopped working as a carpenter...we were raising a daughter, so we were really dependent on my income. And I was being fucked over by the Limelitters, also. They would find a folk tune, give it to me to write the lyrics...Lou Gottlieb would take the publishing, which was half, and he would take the tune, which was half of the other half, and I would have a quarter for writing the lyrics. And the worst of it was that he would give me an assignment and I would find out afterwards that he'd also given it to someone else...

Do you think they would have done that to a man?

Well, they did it to me because I was particularly timid. But the fellows get fucked over in the same way. Except they're inclined to be more pushy. I mean, here I am at home all the time, not where everything's happening...

What other business did you have with Lou Gottlieb?

Some of my songs that were recorded by him were picked up by other artists. For instance, one of my kid's songs, "Morning Town Ride," became an international hit. It was picked up by the Seekers and a half dozen other big time performers. Of course, even after the song left Lou Gottlieb, he was getting all the publisher's royalties. On the other hand, when Joan Baez recorded "What Have They Done to the Rain," she didn't take anything. She had a very different attitude.

Her politics were more like yours?

Right. So I own "What Have They Done to the Rain." I also own "Little Boxes," which Pete Seeger made a hit out of. He didn't require anything...he just used the song.

Have you ever felt competitive? Obviously the music industry has been male-dominated...

Yes, I have felt competitive with other songwriters. I feel like I have something really good that's been shoved into a corner because I can't get through...it was years before Wasserman on the Chronicle came to a concert of mine.

Do you think it's your politics?

No, I think it's my age. I'm not a slinky pretty one, I'm not, you know, Linda Ronstadt...although, when I get in front of an audience, I take 'em over like nothing...they love me! But between me and the audience is the manager. There are all these people who have a certain image of a woman performer.

What do you think about women-run music studios and

recording companies? Do you work with them?

Well, I have my problems with them but I think they're a great idea. There was Olivia, for instance. We approached them about distributing our albums. But they wouldn't because I had men in the back-up.

That's what they said to Holly Near, about a man she'd been working with for twelve years. And she said if she had to find another musician, it would take her another twelve years to get to know the person!

I was in there fighting a long time before they were born. And they dared...it makes me indignant. I had men backing me up because there were no women. Now that there are women, I have women back me.

At one concert you gave, the women requested that all the men leave. You refused to play. How do you handle situations like that?

I'm pretty bossy. They do it the way I want or forget it. I don't believe in excluding anyone from my concerts except the enemy, or the FBI and you can't get them out anyway. I feel that women have the right to use what they call woman space and not have men in on their energy...that's fine. Some women may feel more comfortable without men around, but I will not perform in that situation. Men do not bug me to that extent. I think they need to be educated. Anyway, those men who come to my concerts are already halfway allies.

Separatism is a problem in other areas of the arts as well. Many of the women's presses are lesbian oriented and will reject manuscripts by women if the content is what they consider male-identified.

Well, lesbians are finding their strength and sometimes can't see the general struggle. I make a point, when I talk about this, to state that I won't exclude people who are victimized for being revolutionaries. For example, I couldn't exclude my husband, who fought working class battles all his life. Am I going to accept some little lesbian snot who's never fought for anything except her own sexual preference...which is all right and it's hard for her to fight, but she can't lay down laws for me.

You've had a history of dealing with all kinds of snobbery and exclusiveness and financial abuse. How do you manage?

My business associate, Ruth Burnstein, and I run Schroder Music Company. Ruth does all the hard work. It's a vertical business. I write the songs and the music, we do the recording, we do the books, and we do the distribution.

You operate out of your home. Why do you choose to do it that way?

Because my work is so much a part of my life. It's not an

right to five thing. If I get up at two o'clock in the morning and have a notion to write a couple of lines, I can work it out right here at home.

Was your work ever an interference with your family?

My husband was remarkably supportive. He was in charge of the business when he was alive. He'd sit in the audience and they'd cream for me and he'd beam as if he'd done it himself.

As far as my daughter was concerned, my career kept me from interfering in her life too much.

You didn't farm out any of the business?

Well, the experience we've had with other outfits has been so unsatisfactory. Ruth and I brought out two songbooks. When we contracted with a small publisher to do the books a while back, they paid me something like \$600. They had those two books for years...I didn't know enough to give them a cut off date. When they sold their company to a big outfit. We had to stand in line behind Elvis Presley and Peter Frampton to get our books printed. Years went by sometimes without our having any reprints. So we said, screw it! We just had to put out our own books.

Isn't that the nasty part of the business, the distribution and promotion?

Not really. Every place I go to sing has my books and records. A book distributing company wouldn't follow up on that so carefully. We do a big mail order business and there are outlets like women's places. So we don't sell a million, but we sell a thousand.

Malvina, you have a terrific sense of humor!

Well, it depends on how you approach things. It's more devastating to give out humor than anger. The irony makes the opposition look ridiculous.

I find myself laughing with your lyrics and then stopping because you're speaking of serious matters...

Yes, it works very well with my audiences. They feel we're all together, having this joke on the opposition.

You applaud your audiences!

I've always done that. And I've become a real genius at involving my audiences. One time I did a concert in Sacramento to a packed house. There were a bunch of kids by the stage, maybe seven or eight years old, sitting there kicking up their feet. When the music started, they stopped kicking and began listening. I'm singing along, about five or six songs into the set and I hear noises. I say, what's the problem. They scream out, we want you to sing "Rosie Jane." Now, do you

now that song? I turn to the audience and I say, you will not believe what these kids are asking for. I have to sing it for you so you'll know...

breaks into the chorus of "Rosie Jane")

Rosie Jane, are you pregnant again?
Rosie Jane, you can hardly take care
of the four you had before.
What in heaven's name were you thinking of!
Rosie Jane, was it love?

© Schroder Music Company

The audience is screaming by this time. I couldn't sing, I was laughing so hard thinking of those kids over there... 1973

Does that astound you that kids know about sex so early?

No, not at all. People bring kids to my concerts thinking, there's this nice little old lady gonna sing folk songs. But even my children's songs aren't cutesy pie. These kids are sophisticated. One of the little girls who was recording with me on one of my albums just came right out and said, all these la-la-las are covering up the words! Eight years old!

You said before that your parents were socialists when you were a child. What were your own political affiliations when you were a young adult?

I was a member of the Communist Party for a long time, but I dropped out in the early 1940's. I couldn't function within the party because I couldn't sing. It was heavy and dull and hard work. Then came many questionable events, such as the invasion of Czechoslovakia and so on.

When you dropped away from a political body that you closely allied yourself with, didn't that leave you sort of strung out?

It might have except that I was always involved in a lot of political activities. I've been right there with the labor movement, the women's movement, the ecology movement...and there was the Progressive Party. At one time, my input consisted of running a mimeograph machine and chairing meetings. Now I must have one function. I'm kind of an auxiliary to every movement I believe in.

Your art comes first?

That isn't quite true. But it's my role in the revolution. I'm not just an artist for myself...

You are one of the few artists who has been able to bridge politics and art. It seems difficult. You said earlier that the party was dull and didn't want you to sing...

Yes, but even now there are problems, because the American

movement is not a singing movement. I'm not thinking only of the Party. I'm thinking of American political movements in general. There used to be a lot of singing on picket lines. It's just not done now. There isn't a group joy. My feeling is that the nature of city life keeps us from singing like we would if we lived in tribes or small villages. Or gangs or groups.

There's very little room for song in politics. I wrote a song for Planned Parenthood called "Back Alley Surgery." They loved it but they really didn't know how to use it. If you just extract a segment of that song or of "Rosie Jane" for radio or TV, in a 30-second spot, all you're doing is sneering at a pregnant women, which is not the intention of either song.

I wrote a song about nuclear power called "Power Plant Reggae." I sent cassettes all over the country to dozens of anti-nuclear power alliances. I figured that somehow they'd use it.

(breaks into singing, "making steam in a nuclear plant is like killing an ant with a bomb...")

I sent a copy of this song to Barry Commoner. He liked it very much, so I copied his letter and sent it along with the cassettes. Even though I say that there's not a lot of singing done in American political movements, I feel I have contributed what I can to fighting the proliferation of nuclear power. I pay for the cassettes myself...I have enough leeway in my income that I can. And with the record I made about the judge in Wisconsin who sanctioned the rape of a high school girl by three boys... well Judge Archie Simonson has been replaced by a woman! I financed that record myself.

It sounds like you re-cycle your earnings right back into the causes you support. You don't compromise your values. Mostly when people become successful, as you have been for a long time, they give up or get slick...

The slick is the bad part.

You never had a desire to go to Hollywood?

Never. Look, if I'd directed my work towards commercial ends, I could have sold many of my songs to other singers. I write good songs. Some of them even become popular by accident! But I just never needed to flash around. I always thought it was more important to do something socially valuable.

Do people actively not want to hear what you have to say?

People are uneasy about the issues I deal with. But I have an ingratiating manner. My stuff isn't hostile. Even when they disagree with me, I'm so good natured about it that they don't get up tight. I sang at the Women Against Violence Against Women conference in Los Angeles. There was a great turnout. The only song that didn't get a big hand was called "Song of the Dollies," which is about teenage pregnancy.

It's a kind of friendly tune advising young girls that it isn't that much fun to have a baby as a teenager. During the intermission, I was surrounded by a bunch of loving, friendly women telling me why that song was off...

Did they think you were knocking motherhood?

I think they felt the song was condescending or making woman appear as victim. We disagreed, but in such a friendly way. There they were hugging me while telling me their point of view. Of course, Phyllis Schafly wouldn't come to one of my concerts! She knows who I am. But it's not that I just sing for people who agree with me. Whatever, I'm seldom hostile. You know my song "We Don't Need the Men"?

(breaks into singing)

We don't need the men,
We don't need the men,
We don't need to have them round
Except for now and then.
They can come to see us
When they have tickets for the symphony,
Otherwise they can stay at home
And play a game of pinocle.
We don't care about them,
We can do without them,
They'll look cute in a bathing suit
On a billboard in Wisconsin.

© Schroder Music Company
1959

I know you don't really feel that way. There's humor in that song, but it could be taken the wrong way...

But you see, nobody takes it seriously. Oh, once a little boy about nine years old came up to me after a concert and said, you don't really mean you don't like boys, do you?

What's the response from men?

Oh, they sometimes boo in fun. I wrote that song in 1956. I read an article that said that married women are not as happy as single women. I wanted to tell the women I knew that they could be perfectly OK without men.

How was the song received in 1956?

Some liked it. It's received about the same now. -

How did you know...you weren't single in 1956...?

Yeah, but I had been. I wasn't married till I was 30. My mother once said to me, Malvina, you've got brains. Anybody can have babies, but you have brains. For that reason I pushed marriage aside. Oh, I had boyfriends. Then there was the

Depression. No job, blacklisted, and I suddenly panicked. And I married the wrong guy. That was my first marriage. When I read that little article in the paper about single women being happier I thought, that's me and that's all these women who think they're nobody when they don't have a man. I had a cousin who killed herself by overdosing on reducing pills because she was fat and didn't have a boyfriend. But she was thin in her coffin. Well, I was only married for three years the first time. It was no good.

When were you first blacklisted?

When I left high school. They didn't give me my diploma because I was a socialist. So I was kicking around, trying to work. I was even blacklisted by the telephone company! I kept getting fired. The FBI was after me. They had nothing else to do but nag at little girls whose fathers were socialists. After college, I'd go for an interview and it'd be very nice. Then they'd go to the placement office for my records. There must have been red tracks all over my files!

You were persecuted all your life but your songs aren't bitter...

I realize it's a class war. I don't blame the capitalists personally. I just think they're a bunch of shitheads. I can get pretty angry but I don't lash out at individuals. Though I can get nasty with FBI agents who get into the movement and become your dear friends.

Do they still sniff around you?

Oh yes. When you called to interview me, I thought, mmmm... she could be from the FBI, what an easy way to get me to talk about everything. Look, I don't mean it personally.

They must have a dossier on you that's yards wide...

Of course. You know they've sent people into the women's movement to deliberately provoke...but you can't stop your work. If it turns out that people are finks, I may have had some impression on them anyway.

Do you feel your political philosophies are more in style now?

It's easier, yes. I can't illustrate anything unless I sing it.

(sings "No Hole In My Head")

Everybody thinks my head's full of nothin,
Wants to put his special stuff in,
Fill the space with candy wrappers,
Keep out sex and revolution.
But there's no hole in my head. Too bad.

© Schroder Music Company
1965

You can do that now without people blinking an eye.

You obviously had your audiences then, but now that everyone's half hippie, your lyrics have more sympathizers than when you started out...

My history is long enough that when the sixties faded out, I never thought that there was no movement left. I've seen ups and downs before. This seems like kind of an up period, though it could get bad.

How do you feel about the sixties? You once said you weren't really interested in bridging the 'generation gap' because you've always been with the young people...

I wasn't very involved in the sixties because it was a student movement and I wasn't on campus. The wind blew the tear gas down my street and I'd go out and watch a little. A lot of the activity was very upfront, I felt. But there was a pre-occupation with publicity that gave the period a look of importance that I don't think it really had. There wasn't as much of a revolution as there seemed to be.

Wasn't it the closest this country has come to a revolution in 200 years? Maybe not as it happens in other countries, where people are brutalized en masse...

Well, I wouldn't say it was superficial, just that it was not as heavy as it seemed to be. There was struggle going on... like in Chicago. It did help to slow down and stop the Vietnam War. And the Black movement had accomplished a good deal.

What would you consider as a more just system of government? Do you see yourself as an anarchist?

No, on the contrary. I believe in people functioning in groups. What is so destructive is that neighborhoods, small tribes, etc. are being destroyed by big systems. No, I'm not an anarchist. I'm a socialist. I know there are a lot of problems in socialist countries. But in the history of western civilization, socialism as a functioning system is so new and it's working within a context of surrounding and decaying capitalist worlds. It would be surprising if it functioned well. The Soviet Union has certainly slipped back into bureaucracy. But at least there's no unemployment there. And there are ways for creative people to actually get support. They might be choked off ideologically and that's the bad part. But I think, in the long run, socialism is the way we'll have to go...

Even at the expense of art?

I don't think it has to be at the expense of art. What is absolutely essential is to eliminate private ownership of the means of production and distribution. In my lifetime, it's happened. There were no socialist countries when I was a little girl. Socialism was a dream we were working toward. But now there are large areas of the world that are beginning to function as socialist countries. So I say, it looks like progress!

There is evidence of the system breaking down in this country, real resistance, which is essential. Look at these high rise housing projects. They're being torn to pieces by the people who live in them because the people feel like they're being put in jail to live. These people have not created the environments they're living in and they resent that. Instinctively, they know the housing projects are a mechanical solution to the problem. We need low rise housing, neighborhoods...

Were you a wild activist in your youth?

I was very well-behaved up to a point, but I was politically active. I hung out at the socialist's school in San Francisco. When I decided to be sexually free, I cut loose. I wasn't promiscuous, but I went through the back alley abortion thing and the whole bit. Wild? No, not really. I had a good time. I never used any kind of dope. I was a pretty girl and the boys were after me. When I got married, I was a one-man woman.

Do you believe in monogamy?

Well, it's not a thing you believe in...the question is whether it's a fact or not.

Maybe monogamy isn't the issue but the nuclear family...

I think the nuclear family is a blind alley. Originally it was the clan, the extended family. And some people are deliberately moving in that direction again. But mostly, as the nuclear family is breaking up, people are left with no replacement.

I think of families that live in the little boxes of your song...but not many of my contemporaries really know how to live differently...

It's changing. I've got a song called "We Can Stop Here," about young people going into the wilderness to live, but of course, that back to nature thing doesn't work either. That's why I feel extended families and neighborhoods are so important.

Do you consider yourself a moral person?

Oh yes. A moral is something that develops over a millenium in order to protect the extended family. It's natural. When you feel moral, you're just a red corpuscle in the body politic and functioning properly. I've done some rotten things in my life and I know it. And that's part of morality, to know what's socially supportive and what's destructive.

How does the artist function in that context? The artist is never exempt from morality and yet can't sacrifice art for the interest of the group...

But individual and artistic values are also inherited. And

inherit something is to take it from a group. You don't just spring up in the forest with no social forebearers. A lot of people say they write for themselves, but they are themselves a social audience, an accumulation of social values.

But can you imagine a commune of writers?

I can't, that's true. But when people come to me with their songs, I say, go sing to the public, you belong to an audience, you don't belong to me. I'm fighting myself to relate to a public. A house full of writers or musicians is where. You make your art for the public, not for other writers or musicians.

Do you associate with other musicians?

As much as I'd like, because of my age. I never did what young musicians do, which is hang out in bars or guitar shops and pick up licks. I'm not exactly in a position to hang out with young musicians anymore.

I had a great experience with Dave Bromberg, a fine musician, a crazy man, I love his stuff. We met on an airplane going to a festival in Toronto. I gave him my songbook. He said, I'll back 'ya, my band will back 'ya. I was in heaven! When I visited him in his hotel room with my guitar, his men walked in on me. They were hostile. Maybe they thought I was somebody's grandmother. But Dave was so kind. He took my songbook and started playing and said, god, you got some hard chords in here. Well, during the festival we shared the stage for one little piece and then he had to do his show. So I played my set with a woman who couldn't back me very well. Which was too bad, because there was everybody I admired in the music world.....John Prine and others... I was doing rotten. I had just said goodbye to my audience when Dave came running up. So I said to the audience, hey, Dave Bromberg is gonna back me on a song. And he did.

Do you have musician friends?

Primarily. Rosalie Sorrels and I toured together, though we have very different styles.

Is it a problem for you to relate to superstars?

Well, you know, you can't be a solid person when everybody thinks that everything that comes out of your mouth is gold. It warps you. If you get too far above people, your feet are off the ground and you lose your roots and the source of your inspiration and you're stuck up there! In a way, superstars can't help it, because they're cut off from the people by businessmen who surround them, who want to touch them to get the gold to come off. Not that I was ever in danger of that!

You couldn't have kept your political commitments if you had wanted to put yourself in that danger!

Well lucky for me that my age was against me. I've really been protected from stardom. I had just a little taste when I was recording for Columbia...all those people fussing about me.

Imagine a steady diet of that, TV and make-up...

I fight make-up. I won't wear it! It puts a mask on you so you lose your facial expressions, you can't smile and you can't make faces!

Even though you didn't want stardom, were you ever anxious in the beginning about making it?

I had the habit of being shy and putting myself down...but I had a strong feeling about having something good. When the Limelickers would sing my songs at the Hungry I, which was big stuff in those days, I would be in the audience. They'd ask me to stand up and take a bow once in a while. And all the time they were singing my songs I thought, if I were up there, I'd do better.

It sounds like you put yourself down because you weren't given the credit you deserved...

Mmmm....recently I sang at a coffee house and my then-boss Lou Gottlieb came backstage. He wouldn't let me sing in the old days. And his way of being impressed was to give me advice. He actually advised me to study up on my patterns more and make them formal...he had no idea that one of the big points of my performance is that the audience can see my brain working on the spot. I pause and formulate something to say, or like when those kids came up asking for "Rosie Jane"...that became part of my act. I mean, my audience is right there with me, doin' what I'm doin' instead of having something laid on them that comes from the icebox.

That measure of spontaneity is the life line between a performer and an audience...

Sometimes I write a song and it gets its premiere that very night. I wrote "The Little Mouse" two days before I sang it at the Great American Music Hall. Everybody in the audience had seen the little item

And here was Malvina Reynolds with a song about it. They were screaming! The immediacy! People are always complaining, well, you don't sing it the way it's in the book. Well, it's grown! It changes. You have to have the liberty of changing your own songs.

Do you ever go back and change your songs a long time after you've written them?

Yes. I picked up a song the other day and thought to myself, that's got damned good lyrics but the tune is nowhere. My music has improved since I wrote it. So I'm gonna put a new tune to it and use it.

I read a letter in Progressive Labor a few years ago from a miner's wife. It almost walked off the page into lyrics. I wrote a song about the letter, but I never sang it. Somehow I felt the song was hers not mine. That's foolish because I was her voice. I'm like the instrument through which the music goes out to the audience. So the miner's wife gets part of the royalties. I felt that she had her part in making the song. Just lately, people have begun to ask for that song, since there's been a coal miner's strike.

(sings "Mrs. Clara Sullivan's Letter")

I'm twenty-six years a miner's wife,
There's nothing harder than a miner's life.
But there's no better man than a mining man,
Couldn't find better in all this land.
The deal they get is a rotten deal,
Mountain greens and gravy meal,
In Perry County.

We live in barns that the rain comes in
While operators live high as sin,
Ride Cadillac cars and drink like a fool
While our kids lack clothes to go to school.
Sheriff Combs he has it fine,
He runs the law and owns a mine
In Perry County.

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Malvina, I think if you met the angel who inspired you, you'd share your royalties with her...

Well, it didn't amount to a lot. Pete Seeger recorded this song. He did the tune to it. And he gave his royalties to Clara Sullivan too.

I've got to ask you a standard interview question.
What kind of plans do you have for the future?

And my standard interview answer is that I'm just gonna keep on doing what I do until I fall down. I like it.

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