

Folksinger Hazel Dickens dies at 75

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Folksinger Hazel Dickens died April 22 in Washington, D.C. of complications from pneumonia. She was 75. Dickens, whose career began in the midst of the 1960s' folk revival, was a significant figure in old-time, folk and bluegrass music and was highly regarded for her passionate songs about life in the Appalachian coalfields.

Dickens was born June 1, 1935 in the town of Montcalm in Mercer County, West Virginia. She was the eighth of eleven children in a family whose livelihood depended on the coal industry. Dickens' father worked hauling roofing timber to the mines and also preached in a local Primitive Baptist church. Her brothers were all coal miners and a sister found work cleaning the house of a mine supervisor. While most of the family was employed, they lived in poverty and at one point occupied a three-room shack in which the entire family slept in one room.

Dickens developed a love for music and began singing herself at a very early age, admiring the old-time a cappella singing featured in her father's church (in which no musical instruments were allowed). But while the church did not permit instruments, Dickens' father remained a lover of secular country music all his life and Dickens grew up in a home in which the early stars of the Grand Ole Opry could be heard on the radio. Through her father's influence she gained an appreciation of early singers such as Uncle Dave Macon and the Carter Family, but she would also develop a love for more modern country music, including the honky-tonk sounds of Ernest Tubb and George Jones.

When the coal industry underwent a severe depression in the 1950s, mining jobs disappeared and, like so many from the Appalachian coalfields and the Deep South, Dickens moved to the industrial north. In

1954, she settled in Baltimore, Maryland where other family members had already gone looking for work. She was able to find jobs in factories, although she still did not make a great deal of money. As she recalled in a 1982 interview with *Come For To Sing*, a Chicago area magazine dedicated to folk music, "[T]hey didn't pay very much, and by the time you paid your board for the week and bought your lunch for the week, you were lucky if you had enough left over to afford a movie."

The experiences in Montcalm and Baltimore had a profound effect on the future singer-songwriter. As she would tell the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2002, "I've never lost my sympathy for working people. I've always said that if I have a religion, it's the working-class experience and what I feel for working-class people."

In Baltimore, Dickens met and performed with a number of young people involved with the folk revival movement, including Mike Seeger, the half-brother of Pete Seeger and a founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers. Seeger had also come to Baltimore in 1954, having been sent there to perform community service at a tuberculosis sanatorium for having been a conscientious objector during the Korean War. He and Dickens began playing together locally in a five-piece bluegrass band.

However, it wasn't until Dickens began performing in a duo with another area folksinger, Alice Gerrard (who would go on to marry Seeger), that her career in music truly began. Hazel and Alice, as they would often be billed, released their first album *Who's That Knocking?* on Folkways records in 1965 and would continue to record and perform together through the 1970s.

The duo's early work was rooted primarily in the bluegrass genre with its distinct harmonies and instrumental virtuosity (a young David Grisman performs on many of the early songs). Returning to these recordings today, one finds strong renditions of

bluegrass standards including “Long Black Veil,” “Lee Highway Blues” and “John Henry,” as well as lesser known compositions by Bill Monroe and the Carters that were carefully chosen by the singers and are well worth hearing again today.

Over the years, the duo would increasingly move away from up-tempo bluegrass music in favor of performing songs in a more traditional, “old-time” style. Perhaps the best song on any Hazel and Alice album is the stunning “Pretty Bird” from *Hazel and Alice* (1973), sung a cappella in a solo performance by Dickens. Dickens’ voice was never more beautiful or expressive than in this performance. “Fly away little pretty bird,” she sings, “and pretty you’ll always stay.” The final verse is especially moving.

Fly far beyond the dark mountains

To where you’ll be free evermore

Fly away little pretty bird

Where the cold winter winds don’t blow

The real beauty of the song lies in the fact that it is sung from the point of view of someone who is staying behind in those “dark mountains.” In Dickens’ voice one hears both hope for those escaping the conditions there, as well as sorrow for those who will continue to suffer. It’s a deeply affecting performance. Another of Dickens’ more memorable songs, “Mama’s Hand,” would later return to this theme.

As a solo artist, Dickens began to focus more and more on the conditions facing working people in the Appalachian coalfields. She wrote “Black Lung” following the death of her brother Thurman, a miner who had suffered from the debilitating disease brought on by the inhalation of coal dust in the mines. In another haunting a cappella performance she sang:

Down in the poor house on starvation’s plan,

Where pride is a stranger and doomed is a man,

His soul full of coal dust till his body’s decayed,

And everyone but black lung’s done turned him away

In “Aragon Mill,” a Si Kahn composition featured on *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People* (1981), she sang movingly of a town devastated by factory shutdowns. In “The Mannington Mine Disaster” she sang of the 1968 explosion at a Consolidation Coal Company mine in West Virginia that left 78 miners dead. In “Lost Patterns” she sang about the strains of financial hardships on a relationship.

Because many of her songs, including “Don’t Put

Her Down, You Helped Put Her There” and “Coal Mining Woman,” dealt with the hardships of working class women in particular, some commentators have dubbed Dickens a feminist. She apparently disliked this distinction, preferring instead to think of herself as a “humanist.” As she told *Come For To Sing* in the previously cited interview, “[I] can’t separate it like some people do. I realize that women have had a hard time, and I think they probably always will. I think most oppressed people are always going to have a hard time—nobody’s going to clear the path for us. It’s going to be a fight. So I can’t see that much separation among all of us. We all have the same battle.”

In Dickens’ best songs—“Pretty Bird,” “Black Lung” and others—one glimpses something genuine about real life and the burdens borne by working people. They are much more satisfying than the many rallying “fight songs” or “protest songs” she would also perform and, in fact, contained a more moving feeling of protest than could be found in the latter.

While the struggles of coal miners stayed dear to Dickens all her life, she remained vestigially oriented to the trade unions, including the disintegrating United Mine Workers and, even though she would sometimes criticize the union leadership, she never saw or understood the need to make a decisive break with them. She could sing vividly and movingly of striking workers and mine disasters, but she was ultimately unable to draw the essential political lessons from these events.

Hazel Dickens’ best music continues to move listeners. It would be difficult to think of another contemporary country music artist who has placed the experiences of working people so completely at the center of their work. In many ways, Dickens songs about coal miners and their struggles are more immediate and urgent than ever before. 2010 was the deadliest year for the coal mining industry since 1992, with a total of 48 workers killed in the mines.



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