

Second Annual Friends of the Festival Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert

Saturday, July 6, 5:30 p.m.

Hazel Dickens: A Life's Work

This concert series celebrates the achievements of the founding director of the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies (formerly the Office of Folklife Programs) and of the Festival of American Folklife, Ralph Rinzler, who died in July 1994. According to Richard D. Smith in the August 1994 issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited*, Ralph was "one of the most influential figures in bluegrass, folk and old-time country music history... [I]t is largely due to Rinzler's efforts ... that folk festivals enrich the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans; and that bluegrass and old-time music delight millions more around the world." Before coming to the Smithsonian Ralph had served as fieldworker for the Newport Folk Festival, managed Doc Watson and Bill Monroe, and performed as a member of the Greenbriar Boys. After fifteen years with Folklife Programs, he became the Smithsonian's Assistant Secretary for Public Service. He won a Grammy Award in 1988 as producer of *Folkways: A Vision Shared*; he turned a 1991 Festival program he curated, *Roots of Rhythm and Blues*, into a recording that was nominated for a Grammy in 1992. "Ralph Rinzler made a huge contribution to the continuing struggle to preserve and invigorate America's native musical and artistic cultures," noted David Grisman, one of Ralph's students.

The concerts in the series seek to document the unique voices and home-grown musics that touched and were touched by Ralph's life

work and to commemorate the fruits of thirty years of the Festival's advocacy of these artists and musical forms. Hazel Dickens, the featured artist at this year's concert, was a long-time friend of Ralph's and is a powerful singer, songwriter, and spokesperson for women's and workers' rights whom Ralph held in high esteem.

Hazel Dickens grew up in Mercer County, West Virginia, the eighth of eleven children. Her father was a Primitive Baptist preacher who worked in the coal mines and picked old-time banjo. The whole family enjoyed music, and several brothers and sisters performed. At age sixteen Hazel followed members of her family to work in the factories of Baltimore. There she met young Mike Seeger, who was eager to play bluegrass music with country musicians like Hazel and her brothers. Mike introduced Hazel to the world of the Folk Revival, where she soon met Ralph Rinzler, then a student at Swarthmore College. Hazel remembers: "In a sense Ralph took over where Mike left off. He was one of my biggest fans, inviting me to sing at parties, at political events, and at the Festival of American Folklife. In the early '60s he invited me to play bass with the Greenbriar Boys, opening for Joan Baez. We did



Hazel Dickens and Ralph Rinzler, Deep Gap, NC, ca. 1963.
Photo probably by Joan Shagan

seven major concerts, from Philadelphia to Boston, which was my first exposure to a large stage."* Her career took her to performances at the White House and the Grand Old Opry.

Hazel has been a frequent participant in the Festival. "I always liked to perform there because I felt that I was treated with more dignity and honor than most places that I played.... I think that in the beginning Ralph set that up like that because his feeling was that art was very important and people who give the art were very important."

Hazel recorded for Rounder Records and also for Folkways, and the Smithsonian Folkways reissue of the 1965 and 1973 Folkways releases she made with Alice Gerrard and others is now available as *Pioneering Women of Bluegrass*. "Before [Alice and I made] our first album for Folkways, ... I remember saying, 'Well, we wouldn't do a recording with anybody unless we absolutely would not change the

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way we sing, our repertoire, our arrangements, anything.' We were passionate and possessive about the songs and the music." Not only did Moses Asch enable them to uphold these convictions in his studio, but "the record had historical significance. To my knowledge it was the first time a record had been done with two females singing virtually the male part in bluegrass.... I think it led the way for a lot of women to point to [it] and say, 'They did it. Maybe I could approach a record company, maybe I could do this.'" In fact, Hazel says, "[Alice and I] have women come up all down through the years and talk about the first records that we made and what an impact it had on their lives."

Hazel's original songs reflect her own experience, the lives of people close to her, and a deep concern for the poor and down-trodden. They include songs about home, about the Primitive Baptist church and/or based on hymns, about her parents (a recording of "Mama's Hand" by Lynn Morris, on

the album by the same name, was recently number one nationwide on the bluegrass chart), her sisters and brothers ("Black Lung," written for her older brother who died of cancer), about loneliness, about life, death, and strife in the coal mines, about working-class struggles to make ends meet, and the relationships between men and women ("Don't Put Her Down, You Helped Put Her There" was popularized by New Riders of the Purple Sage and was "one of Ralph's favorite songs that I sang.... Every women's group coming and going sang that song."). Four of her songs were heard in the Academy Award-winning documentary *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976), including "They'll Never Keep Us Down." She also sang in John Sayles's film *Matewan* (1986).

*Quotes are from a February 1996 interview of Hazel by Kate Rinzler.

Discography

Solo Albums

- 1981. *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. Rounder 0126.
- 1983. *By the Sweat of My Brow*. Rounder 0200.
- 1988. *It's Hard to Tell the Singer from the Song*. Rounder 0226.

Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard

- 1965. *Who's That Knocking?* Folkways 31055.
- 1973. *Won't You Come and Sing For Me?* Folkways 31034.
- 1973. *Hazel and Alice*. Rounder 0027.
- 1976. *Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard*. Rounder 0054.
- 1996. *Pioneering Women of Bluegrass*. Smithsonian Folkways 40065. A reissue of the 1965 and 1973 Folkways releases.

Hazel Dickens, Alice Gerrard, Tracy Schwarz, and Lamar Greer

- 1972. *The Strange Creek Singers*. Arhoolie 4004.

A Compilation of Hazel Dickens's Songs

- 1988. *A Few Old Memories*. Rounder 11529.

Concert Program

The performers at this concert represent both the continuity of Appalachian musical traditions and the flourishing of female-led bluegrass bands, spearheaded by the early collaboration between Hazel and Alice Gerrard. In addition to their own repertoire, each performer and group will sing songs from Hazel's unique opus of original works and comment on her influence on their musical lives. Crowning the evening will be performances by Hazel and Alice and members of the Johnson Mountain Boys who often played backup for Hazel over the years.

Participating artists:

- Hazel Dickens
- Alice Gerrard
- Dudley Connell
- Barry Mitterhoff
- Dave McLaughlin
- Elaine Purkey
- The Dry Branch Fire Squad
- Kate Brislin and Jody Stecher
- Ginny Hawker and Kay Justice with Tracy Schwarz
- Laurie Lewis and the Grant Street Band
- The James King Band
- The Lynn Morris Band

The concert is made possible with funds from the Friends of the Festival, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Kate Rinzler, The Recording Industries Music Performance Trust Funds, and the United Mine Workers of America. It was organized by Kate Rinzler, widow of Ralph Rinzler, with assistance throughout from Hazel Dickens. We gratefully acknowledge their support.