

Ear to the Ground: A Centenary Tribute to Malvina Reynolds

by Anthony Seeger

Folkways Records, founded by Moses Asch in 1948 and acquired by the Smithsonian in 1987, published more songs about current events than any other record label in the world. Even though their ideas might be radical, their songs angry, and their music quite different from the popular music of the day, Asch thought the artists on Folkways should have something to say — and they did, from Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Pete Seeger in the 1940s to Pete LaFarge, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Malvina Reynolds, Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl, and the *Broadside* recordings in the 1960s, to Barry O'Brien, Toshi Reagon, and Larry Long today.

In this Folkways concert a group of artists who first appeared on Folkways Records gather to celebrate one of the great songwriters of the 20th century, Malvina Reynolds, whose first recording appeared on Folkways in 1960. Tom Paxton's songs for the *Broadside Records* series, Bernice Johnson Reagon's first recordings of Freedom Songs, Peggy Seeger's first recordings of Christmas and animal songs with her father and sister, and Rosalie Sorrels's songs from her native Idaho all appeared on Folkways. The performers share not only a history with Folkways, but also an admiration for Malvina's songs and a devotion to many of the causes she held dear. They carry them on into the new century.

Born Malvina Midler in 1900 in San Francisco, of Jewish socialist immigrant parents, Malvina was refused her high school diploma because her parents were opposed to U.S. participation in World War I. In spite of this she later obtained a Ph.D.

from the University of California at Berkeley. But it was the middle of the Depression, and as a Jew, a socialist, and a woman, Malvina never found a teaching position. In 1935 she married William "Bud" Reynolds, a carpenter and labor organizer, and they had one daughter, Nancy. She met Early Robinson, Pete Seeger, and other songwriters in the 1940s and began writing songs herself. She was supportive of many younger songwriters, helped found the underground topical song magazine *Broadside* in 1963, and moved audiences at hundreds of concerts. Malvina brought to her songwriting a keen mind, a socialist, feminist, and environmentalist perspective, a deep sympathy for youth, a sense of humor, and a keen appreciation of the way individual actions and global processes are interrelated. She used these to turn contemporary events into a wonderful array of memorable songs, among them "Little Boxes," "What Have They Done to the Rain," and "We Don't Need the Men." Her songs were admired and sung by performers as diverse as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger, and the performers at this Folkways concert. She died in 1978.

Smithsonian Folkways has just released *Malvina Reynolds, Ear to the Ground* (SFW 40124) and will release a five-CD boxed set, *Best of Broadside: Anthems of the American Underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*, in August. A complete catalog is available at the Marketplace tent, and also on line at <http://www.si.edu/folkways>.

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