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Transcript

Malvina and Dorothy

Dorothy Healey Interview of Malvina Reynolds, Folk Singer

Dorothy Healey (DH)

DH: Good morning. This is Dorothy Healy with Marxist

Commentator -- Commentary. I'm really enormously excited

and proud of the guest whom I'm going to be interviewing

this morning. I'm talking about Malvina Reynolds. Malvina

Reynolds, I'm sure a lot of you know, and for those who

don't know, is one of the most popular of the singers

communicating across the generations within the country today. I've known Malvina for, oh, some -- over 40 years. And in a great sense she epitomizes what I have -- you've heard me talk about so often, that I'm constantly stressing, and that is the ability of communication that crosses generation lines. In a great measure she does another thing that I consider of just enormous importance. She helps to *restore* to the country the *collective memory*, which is all too often absent: the knowledge of the tradition of the struggles of *what* happened in past generations, past decades, so that a new generation that takes up that most important struggle of all, the struggle for equality, for justice, the fight against exploitation and oppression, the fight against a system that degrades and brutalizes all human beings. And I'm talking of the capitalist system in this country. That a generation doesn't think it's starting all over again, that there's *nothing* that preceded it, no lessons to be learned, both good and bad. No continuity of a tradition that has been present in this country from our earliest days. And Malvina Reynolds is one of those people who, within her own person and with her artistry, I think, does an important, an overwhelmingly important job in making this a live, real

contribution to a generation searching for answers today.  
Malvina Reynolds, *what* first started you -- what motivated you to dedicate your talents and your life to this greatest struggle of all humanity?

MR: Well, instead of answering your question immediately, I want to go back to something you said a minute ago about crossing generation lines. One of the kicks I get out of performing is to be introduced at a college assembly of people who mostly do not know about me. And I have a feeling that I can almost hear them saying, "Who is this old bag?" And in about ten minutes they are singing along with me and laughing, and they crowd around afterwards. And there is absolutely no *difference* because I am speaking to what they are thinking and what's troubling them and what they're interested in and what amuses them. And there is no generation gap *except* when people ask me to come sing for "old people". I don't know old people. I mean, being old is not important to me, though I know the old people are oppressed. They are an especially, especially oppressed body of people. But I find it hard to identify with them, because so many of them have been forced by the circumstances of our times to give up on life. So I find younger audiences more refreshing for me. I'm spoiled.

All right. Now you were asking --

DH: (laughter) We are going to get a protest right away from all those old people who are always mobilized and organized and marching places. So let's say that you're only talking about those old people who like, well, young people, have given up on life.

MR: That's right. That's right. And very often the people who call me, call me to that group of people who have given up. I know there are a lot of militant older people, including myself. All right. How did I start this whole thing? Well, my parents were Socialists. They joined the Socialist party when I was two years old. And most of our social life was spent around the Socialist movement. My parents were immigrants and had very little connection unfortunately, with their neighbors and other people outside the Movement. So we were -- the Movement was our community. And although I didn't read Marx's Kapital until, you know, I was in my late twenties, my thinking was along socialist lines. And it's always made sense to me. And so it was natural, when I started to write, that I would have a view of *changing* the world. That I would be tuned in on people's oppression, their suffering. My own parents were poor. And I was close to the poor people of

San Francisco. I lived in the immigrant Jewish section of the city when I was a kid. And it's -- it would be cutting off a part of my thinking not to do my creative work in relation to these basic things, aspects of humanity.

DH: You know, one of the reasons why I think it's so important what you're doing, politically important, and I hope people who consider themselves straight political organizers and political activists are listening carefully, is that the understanding of what *moves* human beings is an enormously, incredibly important part of politics. And particularly the question of communication, of how to say and relate to the issues that are present in people's hearts and in their minds, the problems they feel. And it is this particularly that you have managed, in the songs you've composed and the singing you do, to express, and because I think that politics has to represent the totality of the human spirit and not simply the ability to agitate in words. Let me ask, what would you -- what that you have composed would you sing for our audience here now, to start with, that expresses in part some of this question of the comprehension of the pain and the agony that people suffer and of their need to identify in action and motion and struggle around these issues?

MR: Yes. Well, it's hard for me to direct it, or to isolate the particular characteristic. For instance, I have a song called "Little Mouse". It's about an incident, which would seem like a trifling incident. And yet I know it speaks to people's resentment. I hate to generalize this way, because this is exactly what I don't do in the song. People's resentment of the mechanization of society, the computerization of their lives. And so when I wrote the song, "The Little Mouse," I knew that they would respond to it. I'll sing it for you.

DH: Good!

MR: Without a capo. Would you look and see if there's a capo in the case? (guitar plucking) Excuse us for taking a little time with preparations here, but --

DH: This is just fascinating to watch! I must say.

MR: (laughter)

DH: For those of you who tuned in late, I'm interviewing, I think, one of the more important composers and activists of our time, Malvina Reynolds.

(guitar arpeggios)

MR: Thank you. I saw a little item in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, front page. Just, you know, a little four or five lines of news. But they must have had a feeling, the

people on the paper, that there was something special about it. They put it on the front page in heavy type.

(she begins to play her guitar)

MR: (singing) "A little mouse got into the wires at the central clearinghouse in Buenos Aires. One little mouse short-circuited the computers. There's a press dispatch from Reuters. Hooray for the little mouse that fucked up the clearinghouse and set the stock exchange in a spin and made the bankers cry! So much for the electronic brains that run the world of banks and airplanes. And if one little mouse can set them all awry, why not you and I?" (song ends)

Then there was another item in the papers --

DH: I love it! I love it. (laughter)

MR: Then there was another item in the paper about the bank's computers that messed up the accounts, so the farmer's checks all bounced. And his business fell apart, and he nearly broke his heart. So he took the bank to court, and they gave him an award of \$150,000. The bank appealed, and on due consideration, the higher court doubled the compensation.

(singing) "So if a computer does it to you, you can sue or chew the wires, through."

Then I go back to the song again.

(singing and playing guitar)

"The little mouse got into the wires at the clearinghouse in Buenos Aires. One little mouse short-circuited the computers. There's a press dispatch from Reuters. Hooray for the little mouse that fucked up the clearinghouse and set the stock exchange in a spin and made the bankers cry! So much for the electronic brains that run the world of banks and airplanes. And if one little mouse can set them all awry, why not you and I?" (end singing, end guitar)

By the second time around, the audience is singing with me.

DH: (laughter) I wish we got -- that is simply delightful. You know, I first met Malvina when I was in San Pedro in 1935. She -- I was down there -- I had come down to San Pedro after getting out of the Imperial Valley jail as an organizer for the Young Communist League. And it was a *great* year to be around in the harbor. There were enormous struggles taking place. And the longshoremen and the seamen, the cannery workers were being organized, and there was struggle everywhere. And one of the things that intrigues me, Malvina, in all these long years of your activity and your devotion, did you ever feel any sense of contradiction, of conflict, between your artistry, this



enormous capacity to be able to identify the agonies and to write about them and to sing about them, and the pressures just to be out distributing leaflets? And what are you doing? Are you making a worthwhile distribution?

MR: Well, I'll tell you that in Long Beach I was brought up on charges for singing at meetings.

DH: In the Communist Party?

MR: Right.

DH: Really!

MR: Yes.

DH: I've *never* heard of such a thing.

MR: It wasn't a formal thing. But there was one guy down there, a lawyer named [Sibley ?], whom you may remember, who's a fine progressive lawyer. But I think he was either jealous of my singing, or he didn't like it. I'm not sure which. But he made a political issue of it, and it was taken seriously.

DH: Oh, my...

MR: (laughter)

DH: You see -- that's what I mean. And I'm really interested in that because it's not -- it sounds like an old problem. It's not an old problem. It's a *present* problem because there's also the pressures in the movements of today that

when you talk about culture, you're talking about something that's meant for the esoteric, informed group, the elite --

MR: Upper class.

DH: -- and we haven't got time for it. How did you maintain -- how did you have the spiritual political strength to persist in this?

MR: Well, first place, I left the party without hostility. But it just wasn't a place for me. I've never been hostile. I feel that they do excellent work and have done some tremendous, necessary work in the labor movement and so on. But I had to work by myself. I could not work under direction because direction had no concept of what I was doing or of what effect it would have or was having on listeners. So I've been working as a loner, independent. And yet I am a resource for many aspects of the progressive movement.

DH: Absolutely.

MR: They call on me for any number of things. I was called down to San Onofre by my friend Helen King, who is listening here, when they were fighting the extension of the atomic plant. They are fighting the extension of the atomic plant at Santa Onofre. And I was cranky about it. And I have to ride for hours out of Los Angeles, and I was

tired. But when I got there it was great. It was a *great* demonstration. The papers didn't have much to say about it, but it was marvelous. And there was a speaker there, of whom I'd heard. I'd read his writings, never heard him speak. Barry Commoner. And he gave an excellent talk, brief, full of information, on the folly and terrible dangers of atomic power. Well, in Berkeley I was issuing an album for kids. And it's not sugar candy, sanitary songs. They're real songs. The kids who backed us on the record love the songs. They sing them when they don't have to. And they're good songs. I've put all my muscle into them, just my poetic and musical, than I've done into anything else. And the book is very popular. It's almost sold out, the first edition, within one year.

DH: That's the book ***There's Music in the Air*** --

MR: It's a book called ***There's Music in the Air***.

DH: -- ***Songs for the Middle Young***, by Malvina Reynolds. Tell -- sing some of it!

MR: All right. It's pertinent to this whole thing. One of the songs in this book is called "Wheels." (begins to strum guitar) I'll sing it for you because there's a story that comes out of it.

DH: Good.

MR: (singing) "The sun is round, the moon is round. And a wheel was made to roll over the hill and down, down, and satisfy my soul. A wheel was made to roll, roll, stand and made for square. A wheel was made to roll, roll, carry me everywhere. Pad your feet along the street and over the grassy ground. Roll along and rollin' sweet, and that's why the wheel is round. A wheel was made to roll, roll, stand and made for square. A wheel was made to roll, roll, carry me everywhere." (end guitar)

Now there's two more verses to the song. And if you want to hear them, you're going to have to buy my record, which will be out in February. It will be called **Magical Songs** and will be available at your favorite progressive alternative record store.

However, when we recorded this song, we had an excellent back-up, mostly women musicians. And there were two women from New York. And they thought of a great reggae backing for this song. I don't know if you know the reggae rhythm. It's kind of a syncopated, great, off-beat, kind of makes-you-dance rhythm. And they did a beautiful job. And when I got home and went to sleep and thought about it, I said, we cannot use it because, because of the syncopation, it

sounds as though the bicycle has square wheels.

DH: (laughter)

MR: So, we put it aside and made a smoother back-up, and that's the way it's going to be. But here was this 16-track, maybe eight tracks, back-up -- you know, they can take the voice completely out. And here we had this *thing*, and I'm not going to waste it. I'm not that kind. I'm very, very conservation-minded. So now we have this song goes this way. (starts to strum guitar) Now I can't do the reggae beat on here. You'll just have to imagine that. Or else when you get a hold --

DH: Go buy the record!

MR: Yeah. Well, this won't be on this record. This'll be on my next record, which is going to be called ***Purely Political***. That's going to be started in March, I think. (singing) "You can make steam in a boiler or from the light of the sun. But making steam in a nuclear plant is like shooting a fly with a gun. Shooting a fly with a gun, and the gun costs a billion or two. If the gun gets hot and the shooter gets shot, the whole world down the flue.

You can make steam in a boiler so the generator will run. But making steam in a nuclear plant is like killing a flea with a gun. Killing a flea with a gun, and the gun shoots

more ways than one. If the gun gets hot and the shooter gets shot, the whole damn world is done. You can make steam in a boiler or on the gas stove at home. But making power in a nuclear plant is like killing a gnat with a bomb. Killing a gnat with a bomb, and the bomb shoots -- costs a million to shoot. If the bomb gets a crack, you can't send it back. There'll be nobody left to do it.

You can make steam in a boiler or from the light of the sun. But making power in a nuclear plant is like killing a fly with a gun. Killing a fly with a gun, and the gun costs a billion or two. If the gun gets hot and the shooter gets shot, the whole world down the flue." (guitar ends)

OK. So I sent this song to Barry Commoner, because this was his speech. And he wrote me a beautiful letter, saying that I had extended the power of what his statement was by turning it into a song.

DH: Precisely.

MR: So, I made up a bunch of cassettes, 50 cassettes, of this song with our great band reggae back-up. The song's called "Power Plant Reggae." We got a list of all the organizations whose names we could get hold of in these alliances that are fighting nuclear power and sent out a

tape and said, "If it's convenient for you to pay two and a half, which is the cost, OK. If not, forget it. Use it. That's what we care about." We not only got some money back, which is nothing. We got lists of other organizations to send this cassette to. Now if that isn't basic organizational...

DH: Certainly. Exactly. Exactly, Malvina. And that's -- you know, this whole -- I'm sitting here -- I should tell the listener. I'm just sitting here absolutely fascinated. I -- (laughter) I'm having a great deal of trouble to even thinking of continuity in the program because, I mean -- it's the sheer artistry of this political communication. And that's what it is, and I want to emphasize that, that that's what should be the meaning of politics, the ability to stir and to communicate. And it's just enchanting to be here listening to you sing on this. You have -- on this ***There's Music in the Air*** album, ***Songs for the Middle Young***, what have you found in response? Is it already out? Is it available for sale?

MR: The book is out.

DH: The book is out.

MR: But the record will not be printed and out until the end of February.

DH: The end of February.

MR: Yeah.

DH: So that it would be available for people who are doing shopping now for presents to have available --

MR: No -- the book.

DH: The book is, is what I mean.

MR: The book is available, yeah. I'd like to sing you another one now.

DH: Yes. (laughter)

MR: OK? One of the things that's bothering many of us who are active in movement for change is the great weakening of the movement, by people who have become discouraged, frightened, um - have not a solid basis in reality, and have gone off into these Eastern religions or the -- what do you call them? The Jesus --

DH: The Jesus freaks.

MR: Jesus freaks and all that. This extreme reliance on non-realism, on mysticism. I happen to be reading an article about asbestosis, which is brown lung, the -- one of the many, many industrial illnesses that afflict the working class because the owners of the plants don't care about the working people. They want profits. And people are sacrificed. And just at that time, I happened to have



lunch with a young woman who is a leading writer in the feminist movement, a very brilliant young woman, but she had just had her chakra read. She'd had her chakra read. Now I don't know what that means, but I knew it was something I didn't want anything to do with. But it was part of this, you know, way out, unrealistic, going-somewhere-else kind of thing. So we had a strong argument about it. She was very much interested in my point-of-view. And when she went away, I wrote a song, (strums guitar) which I've sent to her, and I've also sung it at every concert.

(singing) "Oh, I love to get into my clean bed with the sheets so fair and white. And when I am in my clean bed, I sleep through most of the night. And my dreams are hardly troubled by the worrying of my mind for the workers who die of the brown lung in the mills of Caroline. Oh, the mystical people, they think they are wise with the smooth on their faces and the stars in their eyes. But the truths of this system are spoken and sung by the workers who bear the brown lung.

Oh, it's Burlington and Stevens and the names we wives know well who advertise the sheets and towels and give us the old soft sell. And they'd rather buy the government

men with promotions here and there than pay out company profits to clean the cotton mill air. Oh, the mystical people, they think they are wise with the smooth on their faces and the stars in their eyes. But the truths of this system are spoken and sung by the workers who bear the brown lung.

Oh, some people talk of the yin and yang and move in a karma daze, as though the influence of the stars could change mill owners' ways. But the people who work in the cotton mills, they know how the world is run. And they need some help of an earthly kind to live their time in the sun.

Oh, the mystical people, they think they are wise with the smooth on their faces and the stars in their eyes. But the truths of this system are spoken and sung by the workers who bear the brown lung.

Oh, the mystics, they wear the blue jeans, but their heads are in the stars. And they do not know how the denim is made or the years of workers' wars. And my place is not in an ivory tower, seeking some power divine. But it's out on the bricks with the union folks at the mills in Caroline.

Oh, the mystical people, they think they are wise with the smooth on their faces and the stars in their eyes. But the

truths of this system are spoken and sung by the workers who bear the brown lung." (song ends, guitar ends)

Well, it's interesting to see the response to this song in the audiences that I sing for. It's a *strengthening* of people there who have been uneasy about this, and they don't know quite how to cope with it. They know it's wrong. They know that it's misleading. And here suddenly, I bring them a statement that seems valid, and they accept it with joy. On the other hand there are people there who do not agree, which means that I am out on the cutting edge.

DH: Exactly.

MR: I am there where something is happening ideologically, and I have put my word in and made the issue clear. And the response is marvelous because there are people who get up and say, "We do not agree!" They get up on the -- you know, in the concert! And they say, "You know, I've had this and this experience." I say, "That's fine for you. It's wrong for me, and it's wrong for a lot of people here." But this is where we're supposed to be clarifying it, you know, by discussing it back and forth.

DH: And there you have the example of two things, it seems to me, Malvina, if I may say so. Because one of the things

that's remarkable about Malvina Reynolds is her *currency*. I mean, the things that happen in this society that people may note out of one corner of their mind or something that have such a really great importance to how -- the *ability* of people to fight back the tricks and the games that are played to distract people from the essential questions of society, into thinking there's some nirvana somewhere that one can float away on and have nothing to do with what's happening. And yet in this song, Malvina has summarized really one of the most important political estimates, political analyses, of the period and has provided an alternative. You know, one of the memories I have of you and your family, those many young decades ago -- I bet you don't even remember it. In Long Beach, where this family was struggling and fighting against all kinds of oppression, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on their front lawn.

MR: Yes, I remember it very well.

DH: Do you remember?

MR: Oh, yes. Yes. Yeah.

DH: What was your feeling when a monstrous thing like that happened?

MR: Yes, I was very much frightened. And we went through a

court case afterwards that taught me a lot about American courts. For instance, our house was invaded by thugs, Klansmen with big clubs in their hands, whittled out of -- many of them -- some of them had chains, some had whips. Some had these clubs that were whittled out of fencepost material. When we came to court, there was evidence of what these guys carried on the table. They looked like twigs! The evidence had been monkeyed with. And there was nothing there -- the only thing there that looked for real was one sap, you know, one blackjack.

DH: The collusion with the police department, in order to...

MR: Right! Yeah, when people in the neighborhood phoned the police, they didn't come. They didn't come. They came, you know, half an hour late. These guys had already loaded us, or about to load us, into cars to take us away. Who knows what? They had lynch ropes in the cars. Yeah, it was a tough one.

DH: But again, see, the moral, if I may, and that is that happened 45 years ago. And yet, Malvina, in the face of this kind of direct vigilante action, didn't get scared and give up her fight. She didn't decide, "Well, there's a comfortable way to live. I mean, I'll protest in a nice way so that I will not be in any danger myself." I think

that's probably what *makes* you so enormously relevant to a new generation of fighters, that you never gave up, this indestructibility.

MR: Well, that isn't entirely true. There were some years when I went to college, and I was isolated from the struggle. College then was not what it is now. I had an academic bent, and I was going to be a writer. And I moved out of the struggle in the period just before the Depression. But I was *jerked* back (laughter) by the Depression, by the fact that as a woman, as a Jew, as a person a little bit older than my graduating class because I had been blacklisted and kept out of college, I couldn't get a job. And economic determinism pushed me back where I belonged, which was in the working class movement. And I was at home there, though I had my difficulties because with this college background and with this *equipment* of expression, I found myself *choked* in the radical movement, by the political documents that I had to distribute. And I hated them, because they weren't written for the American listener. And I knew they were useless, and I hated to do it. And the things that I *wanted* to do and tried to do, there just wasn't any room for there. So there was a period, you know, like five, six, ten years, when I was somewhat

isolated from the movement. But when I came back, I knew where I belonged. And I was comfortable there, in the sense that this was the only thing that made sense. The struggle against the capitalist system was the only thing that made sense to me.

DH: Well, again then, coming back to your artistry, because I -- it's a *revolutionary* artistry. It's an artistry of struggle, of comprehension. Some more examples. Some more illustrations of how you deal with (topical?) questions and communicate.

MR: OK. I was in Madison, Wisconsin in May of this year. And a judge had just made a pronouncement, exonerating three boys who had gang-raped a girl in Madison High School, Madison Central High. And he gave them very light sentences, which was all right. That's not the issue. The issue was the grounds on which he gave the light sentences was that these boys were doing what came natural, that women provoked by their clothing and their manner, they provoked this kind of thing, and that the society was too permissive. This was kind of a *gem* statement of this horrible attitude toward rape, which pervades all over the world, not only here. In Israel, in England, the women are struggling against this also, as well as in this country.

So I wrote a song about it, which was picked up and printed in the big Madison newspaper. They gave it front page of the City Section spread with illustration and lyrics, because the issue was so hot. There was a recall campaign going on in Dale County, where Madison is. And they used my song during the whole campaign. But I knew that this song was a political statement, and it wouldn't do to put it on an album. It had to be out on a single. Now singles are very difficult. First place, they never make money. They're used as advertising for an album. And the second place, a lot of people don't know how to run a single. They've always had albums on their turntable, and they don't know how to handle a single. But I had to put this out as a single. It was like a handbill. And I got some of the best musicians in Chicago to back me at union scale, which means, you know, very small money for them. And Steve Goodman arranged the whole thing, directed it, produced it. Wouldn't take any pay for it. And we got out this *great* statement, this great song. And I say it's great because it *worked*. It's been used in this campaign and picked up all over the country. We issued the album some weeks before the election, recall election. *But* we couldn't get delivery on the album. It was in Los Angeles



in the pressing plant. And the time was passing, and we couldn't get delivery. It looked to me like sabotage. But actually what happened was that that poor old guy Elvis Presley died, and all printing resources and pressing resources were turned to turning out reprints of Elvis Presley. And here my political statement was lying in a warehouse somewhere because they couldn't get the printed covers for it. So I got in touch with Woman Against Violence Against Women. I don't know how they did it, but they got into the plant and found out that the single had been farmed out to a small pressing plant. And they located it, and they got some plain-cover copies. And so we had some copies of the record.

DH: (laughter) Wonderful! Let's hear it.

MR: OK. (strums guitar)

DH: Wonderful.

MR: Now I put this to an old tune that's familiar. Whenever I sing it in concert, I start out by getting everybody in the audience to sing, (singing to tune of "*When Johnny Comes Marching Home*") "Da da da da..." You have to imagine thousands of people singing this! "Da da da... The judge said, 'Screw 'em. Boys, you're only human. They brought it on themselves by being born a woman. Like a mountain's

there to climb and food's there to be eaten, a woman's  
there to rape, to be shoved around and beaten.'

The judge took his position. The judge, he wouldn't budge.  
So we got out this petition, and we're gonna screw the  
judge. Now if you beat a horse or dog or violate a bank,  
Simonson will haul you in and throw you in the clank. But  
violate a woman, you're equal and you're peer.

The judge will slap you on the wrist and lay the blame on  
her. The judge, he wouldn't budge. So we got out this  
petition, and we're gonna screw the judge.

To draw a true conclusion from what Simonson has said,  
woman has to live in fear and cover up her head. She has  
to draw in purda and lock herself in cages, and this kinky  
judge in Madison is from the Middle Ages.

The judge took his position, the judge, he wouldn't budge.  
So we got out this petition, and we damn well dumped the  
judge." (guitar ends)

DH: And that they did!

MR: Right. And they elected a woman judge in his place.

DH: A woman judge. What an incredible story. The combination  
again of communication -- (inaudible crosstalk)

MR: I was flying from Chicago to Denver, and I had the clipping  
with the lyrics in my purse. And next to me were sitting

two typical middle-class people, obviously on vacation and coming back from vacation in their nice clothes. And I thought, I'm just going to try this for fun. So I handed this to the woman sitting next to me. She looked at it and handed it back to me. I said, well, "that's that". But she was going into her purse for her glasses. She got her glasses, and she read the whole thing through. She said, "This is great! This is wonderful! How do you do it? What's happening?" She handed it to her husband. He said, "This is very good. I like this very much!" He handed it to the stewardess. The stewardess read -- I could watch her face lighting up, because everybody knew this story. They'd all read about this judge. She said, "I'm going to show this to the others." And she took it to the other stewardesses. The guy says, "What can I do for you? Can I buy you a drink?" I said, "I don't drink, especially not in airplanes." He says, "Let me buy you a drink." I said, "All right. You can buy me one of those little bottles." They have those cute little bottles of whiskey on the plane. "And I'll bring it to my friends when I land." I was going to Denver to do some singing, a concert there. So the -- he ordered this from the stewardess, and she wouldn't let him pay --

DH: My goodness!

MR: -- because it was for me.

DH: I've never -- that is unprecedented! (laughter)

MR: Right.

DH: What a strange and interesting and kind of illustrative example of the *power* of what that means when you touch the human heart, which is what you do, of course, the heart and the mind. Come on, more! I'm just sitting here so enraptured.

MR: (begins playing guitar) I have a request. (guitar stops) My most recent album, besides the one that's now being pressed, which is called ***Malvina Held Over*** -- and when this was about to go to the printer to get done, I realized that while I had talked about a lot of things about the whales, about pollution of the air, about the women's struggle for freedom, about war, I hadn't made a total statement about the whole damn thing. And I wrote a song, and it turned out to be a document. Forget it! I do not sing documents. I went to sleep, and I woke up in the morning and I had a song. And it wasn't that song at all. (strums guitar) (singing) "They got the world in their pocket, pocket pocket pocket. They got the world in their pocket, and they're up there in control. They got the world in their

pocket. They can shake it, they can rock it. They can kick it for a goal. They got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole.

There's inflation and pollution. Everything's been bought on credit in this rotten institution. And they waste the gentle people because the system has no soul.

They've got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole. They got the world in their pocket, pocket pocket pocket. They got the world in their pocket, and they're up there in control. They got the world in their pocket. They can shake it, they can rock it. They can kick it for a goal. They got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole.

Unemployment is their glory. If a million children starve, why, that's an old familiar story. And there's rage and there's rebellion, and there's grief from pole to pole.

They've got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole.

They got the world in their pocket, pocket pocket pocket. They got the world in their pocket, and they're up there in control. They got the world in their pocket. They can shake it, they can rock it. They can kick it for a goal. They got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got

a hole.

Takes a war to keep them perkin'. And they have to bleed the world to keep their bloody system working. But the system's self-destructing while they play that gangster role. They've got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole.

They got the world in their pocket, pocket pocket pocket.

They got the world in their pocket --" Everybody's singing this now. "...they're in control. They got the world in their pocket, but their pocket's got a hole." (guitar ends)

DH: (laughter) I must say, what absolutely fascinates me is your language, the vernacular, the idiom that you were able to communicate. How did you escape this plague of the shorthand that radicals use that communicates only among other radicals, and that I think obscures thought instead of illuminating thought? How did you overcome it?

MR: Well, that's being a writer.

DH: Well...

MR: That's what being a writer is.

DH: Should be.

MR: Well, I mean, a creative, poetic kind of writer.

DH: Should be.

MR: Should be, yeah. Right.

DH: I envy you. I'm -- somehow or other in *speeches*, one ought to be able to do what you do so eloquently in singing.

MR: Well, I think some people can do it. I think many people can do it in speeches. Yeah, there are good speakers. There are very -- use good vernacular, straight-out speech, and have something to say that's valuable.

DH: Yeah, you mentioned Barry Commoner.

MR: Yes.

DH: I spoke with him at the Celebration ***In These Times*** Chautauqua. And you're right, he does have that talent, too, of taking very complicated questions and making them comprehensible, which is really what you're doing, what you just did with the pocket.

MR: Right. There's another thing, though. There's also the difference between me and some other songwriters. And that is I deal in specifics, very much in specifics. Very seldom do I make general statements. This one, this last one, has quite a few general statements, *but* this is a catchy song. And it's -- it doesn't dwell on any one thing too long, so it moves. But for instance, the "Little Mouse". That's just one little thing that happened. Or "Little Boxes", which is just one aspect of life. But so

many other things come *into* it. And if you have it specific, people can focus on that. They cannot hang in with a lot of generalizations.

DH: But that's true of speaking, too.

MR: That's right.

DH: And writing generally. And I think that is an important political lesson to be learned of communication. Come on, Malvina! Some more while we have time. This is such a rare treat.

MR: OK. (strums guitar) OK. I'll sing you one more of the kids' songs, to show you that, you know, kids' songs can make a statement also and yet not be political documents. Kids like this song. (guitar arpeggios) That sounds as though it's going to be high. I'm getting lazy. I'm used to having an orchestra backing me now, so... (guitar begins again) (singing)

"Don't push me. I'm headed my way. Don't block my highway. Don't push me. Don't shove me.

I'm walking softly. So get off me. Don't push me.

I'm (bound?) around and (unbend?). I need some place, some room to stand. I need my breath. I need my bread. I need some clear sky over my head.

Don't push me. I'm headed my way. Don't block my highway.



Don't push me.

Don't shove me. I'm walking softly. So get off me. Don't push me.

You're born to die, like any other one. You act as though you own the earth and sun. I'm born to die, but 'til that day, I am moving my own way.

Don't push me. I'm headed my way. Don't block my highway.

Don't push me. Don't shove me. I'm walking softly. So get off me. Don't push me. I'm bound around to many walls. You are the walls that close me in. I am too strong for any walls. I'll break right through and live again. Don't push me. I'm headed my way. Don't block my highway. Don't push me. Don't shove me. I'm walking softly. So get off me. Don't push me. (guitar ends)

Don't push." (laughter)

DH: You have been listening to Malvina Reynolds. And we have no more time. My deep thanks, my gratitude, not only for this program, but for being you.

MR: Thank you, Dorothy. I enjoyed it.

**End of Dorothy Healey Interview of Malvina Reynolds, Folk Singer**

NOTES:

For more information about Dorothy Healey, see the book, ***Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party***. Oxford University Press, 1990.

Also check out the Pacifica Radio Archives catalog. Search for "Dorothy Healey". Also search for "Malvina Reynolds".

Malvina Reynolds recordings are available from ***Sister' Choice***, 704 Gilman Street, Berkeley, CA 94710. phone: 510 / 524-5804. [www.sisterschoice.com](http://www.sisterschoice.com).

The book by Malvina Reynolds, referred to in the interview, is ***There's Music in the Air: Songs for the Middle-Young***. Published by Schroder Music Co., Berkeley, CA 1976.

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