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A High and Lonesome Sound

By **Mary Battiata** June 24, 2001

Listen: Hazel Dickens is singing to herself. She's singing as she stands on tiptoe at the hall closet, her long, birdy fingers pulling at boxes and bags on the back shelves. It's a tune from an old church book, a song her grandmother used to love. Her voice winds and whines through the room, high and thin, oddly insistent, elemental, like something very old freed from deep in the ground.

There are voices and there are voices, you see. Some voices just talk. Others make music. And then there are voices that work on the ear like a wolf howl, and leave the listener alert as a dog in the moonlight, neck hairs ruffled, straining to hear the message encoded in the song. Hazel Dickens has one of those.

She doesn't look much like a wolf. Standing in the living room of this small apartment, she mainly looks as if she could be blown sideways by a gust from the kitchen window. But appearances are often deceiving. Sometimes the voice of the wolf comes in the coat of a lamb.

She is slender, small-boned but not small, and looks younger than her sixtysomething years. She has a fine feather of a mouth that will crease suddenly to reveal a wild, snaggle-toothed smile, and dark, button-bright eyes that burn in a face of snowy pallor, like the eyes of a snowman, and then fade into a gaze of wintry consideration. All of this exotic intelligence hangs on high, wide cheekbones that suggest something Creek or Cherokee. The bugle beads on her worn Indian-cotton shirt glint in the weak light of the living room's lone window.

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She has offered to show a few things. Simple things, really -- some faded quilts, a photo album, an old hymnal. Just a few old memories, as one of her best-known songs puts it. It is a warm, weekday afternoon, bland and dozy. Two fat mugs of tea rest hospitably on an end table nearby. Easy.

But as Dickens's songs have always made clear, excavations like this are rarely casual, and that only gets truer as the years go by. As this one commences, one cannot escape the feeling that a clumsy word could shatter the afternoon in an instant, all trust and goodwill vanishing in a rush of startled feathers.

Now beginning her sixth decade of songwriting, the West Virginia-bred Dickens is increasingly spoken of as a living legend of American music, a national treasure right up there alongside the likes of Ralph Stanley and Bob Dylan, Ray Charles and Bill Monroe -- a wraithlike icon of mountain song. In the fall, she will receive a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, for her work as the keeper of her mountain music tradition and, ultimately, its reinventor.

This laurel will find her much unchanged, living modestly and rather reclusively in a prewar apartment off Wisconsin Avenue above Georgetown, up where the French antiques and \$11 panini-foie-gras-with-extra-virgin-olive-oil-truffled-arugula give way to Blockbuster and Pizza Hut and the Grog and Tankard's ancient, beery dinge. Despite half a dozen critically acclaimed records, she refuses to have a booking agent and makes records on her own schedule, which amounts to when she's good and ready. She performs in the same way, accepting a handful of appearances a year. If Dolly Parton is the self-described fairy godmother of American country music, Dickens might be its Black Madonna, fierce and uncompromising.

She's occupied these two small rooms for almost 30 years now, but their contents could be carted away in a medium-size U-Haul. In this space she is less a bird in a nest than a bird on a wire. There is a small cloth wall hanging depicting the labor activist Mother Jones, a larger framed color photo of country music star George Jones. There are two wooden chairs, one with a tie-on seat cushion; a cinnamon-colored corduroy couch covered with a rust-red sheet; a large aspidistra plant; a television; a Door Store-type bookcase; a small CD tower; an end table that does double duty as a dining room table. There are college dorm rooms with more stuff.

It is the home of a refugee, really, a pilgrim who began her journey into the wider world back in the 1950s, during one of this country's major internal dislocations -- the exodus of some 2 million people from the Appalachian Mountains to the industrial North. She moved to Baltimore, and eventually on to Washington, and she slowly made a name for herself as a singer of barb-tipped, soul-stirring songs about struggle and death in the coal fields of Kentucky and West Virginia, and songs about the paradoxical pain of leaving such hardship behind.

Now, in the summer of 2001, living on her own and wondering, with some melancholy, if she has seen the last turn of the wheel of her life, she is mining a new landscape. Two-thirds of the way through a new album she says will most likely be her last, she is exploring the second half of life in songs about old age and loneliness, confusion and regret. Songs about what comes after love and marriage, divorce and children or no children at all. Songs, in other words, about the waning moon, rather than the waxing one that preoccupies most pop music.

She pulls a stack of CDs down from the shelf. Something from a band called Freakwater, and another from the Bad Livers. These outfits are part of the wave of post-punk, irony-prone, largely suburban-bred musicians who make the music known as "alternative country." These bands, and their fans, revere the so-called hard country of singers like George Jones, Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard. And to her surprise and gratification, they also like Hazel Dickens.

She puts on a CD, settles on the couch and cracks open the photo album. It's a time machine in which she is the only constant, a time traveler who has journeyed across decades that now seem as distant as the lost city of Atlantis: the West Virginia coal fields, circa 1940; the hillbilly ghettos of postwar Baltimore, the fervent folk revival scene of Washington, with its backdrop of ascendant liberal social programs and politics -- the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, feminism, ecology and the murderous struggle to reform a corrupt United Mine Workers union. Turn the page. There are her elderly parents, in faded dress clothes, staring at the camera near the sharecropper's shack that was their last home in West Virginia. Turn the page again and there is Hazel, standing with Vice President Walter Mondale on the Naval Observatory lawn.

The last item out of the closet is a small, bound composition book, the black-and-white speckled kind that they sell at the drugstore. It contains decades' worth of songs, dating all the way back to when she was just starting out and too shy to show the songs to anyone, as well as her award winners, songs like "Just a Few Old Memories," recorded by Dolly, and "Mama's Hand," which the Lynn Morris Band took to an International Bluegrass Association Song of the Year award in 1996.

And here is a new one, titled "Arlindy."

"I just made the name up," she says. The song started as the story of a woman waiting by her window for a "caddish lover's" return. But as it incubated, it became a portrait of an old woman in the early stages of dementia. She wanders the halls of her empty house dressed in party clothes she's found in a closet. She believes she is supposed to be waiting for someone, but she can't remember exactly whom. She does not recognize the faces in the family photos on the wall, but as she paces, she can hear the footsteps of her children echoing in the halls.

"Your songs are always so sad," a radio interviewer exclaimed to her not long ago. Lost love and sickness and death -- "they just seem to pour out of you. Why?"

She paused -- a bit affronted, she said later, by the implication that there must be something wrong with someone who can't be more cheerful.

"Well, that's country music for you," she'd answered, tartly. Her songs, she said, came out of what she has lived and what she knows.

It's been said that Hazel Dickens writes songs about two kinds of pain: the kind you can fix, like economic injustice, and the kind you can't, like heartbreak and death. This puts her at odds, perhaps, with the prevailing cultural conviction that it is within our power to keep all things bright and beautiful if we only try hard enough. Pain shall be banished and those who think on the bright side shall inherit the earth.

But Hazel Dickens travels from a different time, when not everything worked out. When, in fact, most things didn't, and that was how it was, and the grace was in keeping on anyway.

That was country music when she was coming up. And Hazel Dickens was country when country wasn't cool.

'Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People'

"Oh, we got the real hard-core out tonight," she cries happily as she threads her way through the crowd. It's showtime at the Patriot Center, on the edge of Fairfax City. Outside, George Jones's gleaming bus is idling, its expandable sides bugged out so it looks like the Cigar that Swallowed a Refrigerator. Inside, the second show of Jones's "Cold Hard Truth" tour is getting underway.

Earlier in the day, she'd worried that not enough of what she called the "down-home" crowd would be out tonight -- the alt-country audience tends to be less blue-collar than country music's traditional fans.

But these people have come in from way beyond the Beltway, and they're so down-home they're practically yodeling. There are SUV cowboys with straw hats and belt buckles the size of headlights. Women wear big, bright hair and dresses sprayed with rhinestones. Big families, old folks hand in hand, gawky teenagers all mill along the indoor midway that circles the arena.

Hazel floats through this sea of excitement looking quietly ecstatic, a country girl at the county fair. You can see the 16-year-old who arrived in Baltimore back in the early '50s, skinny and shy and looking for work. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I was cute!" she says. "Eyes that were just jumping out of my head. I was looking at everything, like a kid at Christmas, you know."

The George Jones people are selling T-shirts that say "I Saw No-Show Jones," a reference to "the Possum's" habit of calling in sick for his own concerts. Hazel buys a CD and is openly disappointed to learn that only T-shirts come with a free autographed photo.

In the line for the restroom, one fan suddenly announces: "You know the song I want him to do? 'I took the head off Jim Beam and it looked like Elvis.' " That's a Jones hit from 1989 titled "Yabba Dabba Do -- the King Is Gone and So Are You." At the mention of it, hoots of recognition and approval ripple up and down the line.

Hazel laughs, too.

Her high standing among bluegrass purists notwithstanding, Hazel Dickens has been a devoted fan of hard country singers like George and Johnny and Merle for as long as they've been singing. She has lived in cities for most of her life by now, but down-home is still exactly where she's from.

She calls her music Southern mountain music, a grab bag that includes everything she heard growing up in Montcalm, W.Va. It has most often been recorded in sprightly bluegrass arrangements, but it actually embraces many musical traditions: honky-tonk heartbreakers, old English murder ballads, bluegrass breakdowns, back-porch string music and hymns.

Her arrival on the national bluegrass stage 30 years ago with then singing partner Alice Gerrard is now regarded as a thunderbolt for traditional music. Bluegrass -- string band music in overdrive, as it has been described -- was male-dominated and, at 20-plus years of age, beginning to calcify: "You played it with these instruments, with these harmonies and these songs about mother, home and Jesus, and that's all there was," says bluegrass bandleader and commentator Ron Thomason. "At that time, we counted on Ralph Stanley or Bill Monroe or Jimmy Martin to make those big goose bumps open up on our necks and let the cold air flow in . . . And now here were these women who could do it better!"

Monroe, on the lookout at the time for anything that could boost bluegrass's fortunes in the age of rock-and-roll, became a Dickens booster and fan, as did others.

"She is one of the absolutely finest and authentic singers we have -- people who talk about real mountain singing, Hazel does it," says Charles Wolfe, the music historian and author of *Classic Country*. "Her singing has not only that 'high lonesome sound,' but you can hear the pain and anguish and the anger in it. It is absolutely heartfelt and sincere. I don't think she's capable of singing a song she doesn't believe in. She's certainly one of the last great unaccompanied ballad singers."

Bill Malone, the dean of country music historians, calls Dickens's music more country than bluegrass; Hazel says she's always straddled the fence. In fact, as they say at places like Shepherd College in Shepherdstown, W.Va., which recently awarded her her first honorary degree, she is *sui generis*.

"Hazel's not bluegrass, she's older than bluegrass," agrees Nashville writer Bill Woermann. "Her style dates back much before bluegrass -- she's out there in a zone of her own."

Dickens's great innovation, says Malone, was to take the highly traditional music she inherited and commandeer it for a whole new set of concerns. "She was writing country songs about women's concerns long before anyone else in Nashville was doing it," but she also has remained true to the mountain music tradition in which feeling and passion are more important than singing it pretty or on pitch.

Take the murder ballad, for example, with its archetype of the fallen woman, an early and perennial theme in mountain and country music. "These are cautionary tales, where some woman is always going off with the wrong guy and ending up in pieces or at the bottom of a river," says Robert Gipe, a Kentucky-based historian of Appalachian culture.

The theme gets some updating in the Stanley Brothers' classic "She's More to Be Pitied," which tells of a woman who "needs to be loved not despised / too much beer and wine, too many good times / the lure of the honky-tonk have wrecked her young life," and whose plea for tolerance also carries a whiff of sanctimony.

Hazel's variation on the theme is "Don't Put Her Down, You Helped Put Her There." It tells the story from the other side, a perspective she acquired during the years spent performing, and observing the scene, in the bars of Baltimore. The song is about

a woman who is shunned by the bar's male patrons, most of whom have had sex with her. "Hazel turns it around and put the blame right back on the men, or on the system," Gipe says.

Others female performers covered the same ground -- Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn, for instance -- but they weren't as early, or as overtly political. Those who preceded Dickens, such as rough-hewn protest singers like Aunt Sarah Ogun Gunning and Florence Reece (author of the labor anthem "Which Side Are You On?"), were perhaps more defiant, but not as poetic.

"She doesn't do anything that whines or is sappy," says Thomason. "She's not the typical modern singer-songwriter who tells you all about how they feel -- she never does that. She writes about incidents. And when she sings it, she's gonna mean it."

In the song "Lost Patterns," a man sits at a kitchen table staring at the worn-out pattern of the linoleum floor, thinking about the drinking and hard times that have driven his wife away. The faded linoleum becomes a stand-in for all the lost patterns in his life.

In "Little Lenaldo," a migrant worker's child works all day in the fields beside his father, old before his time, "his dreams lay dying, they just died on the vine."

Her coal-mining songs -- "Black Lung," "Clay County Miner" and "The Mannington Mine Disaster" -- found fame and acclaim in films like the 1976 documentary "Harlan County, U.S.A." and "Matewan," John Sayles's feature film about the bloody struggle to unionize in the coal fields of 1920s West Virginia.

How a sheltered and shy girl with barely a high school education came to blaze such a trail is testament to circumstance and character. "She's representative of Appalachian refugees in the way Babe Ruth or Hank Aaron are representative of ballplayers," says Gipe. "She's typical in that she's been through the same experiences, but she's just so talented, and such a great singer, with such an integrated sense of what it all means, that she's able to think about things that were never in the tradition of that music in ways that sound traditional."

So, up in nosebleed Section 103 of the Patriot Center, deep into the ballad portion of George Jones's set, with Jones singing about "living and dying with the choices I've made," and several men and women around her dabbing their eyes, Hazel nods. Hard choices from a poor man's table. That's a subject she knows something about.

'West Virginia, My Home'

Hazel Jane Dickens was born the eighth of 11 children in central Appalachia, about 350 miles and a galaxy away from Washington. Montcalm, W.Va., was a place where "if you didn't work, you didn't eat," she says, where they had fistfights for fun, but "you also knew they'd die for you." Her brothers went to work underground each morning wondering if they'd live to see daylight again, and came home each night "with clothes so black you couldn't tell the cloth they were made from."

Her father, Hillary Dickens, known as H.N., trucked timber to the mines for a living. On weekends, he preached fiery sermons at the local Primitive Baptist church, in a building that he helped build. The Primitive Baptists are noted for their strictness -- no alcohol, no dancing, no musical instrument playing, in or out of church. In place of worldly pleasures, the congregants have the

otherworldly pleasures of a free-form and physical style of worship in which congregants might stand and sway, wave their arms or prostrate themselves across church pews as the feeling takes them.

H.N. was domineering and quick-tempered. "He cried at the drop of a hat," she says, but could hurl an open razor across the room if he cut himself shaving. Until he got religion in his mid-twenties, he rode a horse, carried a gun, made moonshine and played the banjo. He had a poetical way of talking. "I hope I've strewn flowers in your path," he would say to his flock.

He also was a fierce disciplinarian, meting out punishment the way it had been handed to him by his own father. Transgressions were met with strappings or the ominous command: "Go cut yourself a switch." The physical effects of the whippings were sometimes severe enough to linger for days. The emotional effects lasted longer. Dickens was well into adulthood, she says, before she learned to control her own temper. The years of stifling her own thoughts and feelings in order to avoid antagonizing her father had left her a kind of cripple, with no skills for the give and take of normal social life.

"I was years trying to figure out just how to get along with people," she says. "I didn't know how to control my temper, 'cause my father, he never had. I never knew how to talk things out. I would just sort of keep everything in, and of course that didn't work. I had big feelings, but no place to put them."

Her mother, Sarah Aldora Dickens, was worn out early by a high-maintenance husband and the dawn-to-dusk demands of raising 11 children in rural poverty. In a culture that cloistered its women, she rarely ventured out of the house. Hazel describes her as a soft-spoken saint who loved to hear a woman sing and "never had the taking-care-of that she needed."

Big Coal's arrival in Appalachia in the early 1900s had delivered the local people from the rigors of subsistence farming in the mountains, but it was a devil's bargain. Mining work was brutal and dangerous. Men worked on their hands and knees in coal seams that often were no higher than three or four feet. Above ground, they lived in coal-company housing and bought food at company stores that siphoned off what little money they had. Death could be as quick as a tunnel collapse or as slow as black lung disease, but either way early death was an occupational hazard.

Hazel Dickens's oldest brother would die of black lung (without even enough money to bury himself), as would two brothers-in-law. Her anger and grief over their fates were the source of her song "Black Lung," which speaks of the disease's icy cold hands, "As you reach for my body and torture my soul / Cold as that water-hole down in that dark cave / Where I spent my life's blood / digging my own grave."

Throughout the 1930s, '40s and early '50s, the coal-based economy of central Appalachia boomed and busted, but mostly busted. By the 1950s, the region was still mired in the Great Depression, and demand for coal continued to drop, and with it the family's fortunes. H.N. lost his new truck, and then his old one. The family's only household appliance, a prized Maytag washer went, too -- no small blow in a household of 13 people. The Dickenses moved from a small house they'd hoped to buy and into an even smaller one, Hazel's parents eventually landing in a sharecropper's shack.

Hazel and a neighbor girl had fantasized about going to college someday, but the reality was that there often was not enough money for schoolbooks and shoes, and food was often scarce.

The gut-thudding and surreal desperation of this can be heard in Dickens's recording of Harlan Howard's bleakly comic "Busted." The song's narrator -- out of work, with a pile of unpaid bills, a wife and children to feed, and the sheriff at his door -- calls on his brother-in-law to ask for a loan, only to have the brother-in-law yowl out a tale of greater woe: "I was just thinkin' of callin' on you, I'm busted."

In this world, the do-it-yourself comforts of music -- as entertainment, intellectual inquiry and spiritual solace -- loomed large. Music was all around -- in church, on the back porch, at barn dances and on the radio. Only men were allowed to sing solo in church services, but Hazel's father often pushed her forward at church suppers and asked her to perform. It was always the same song: "Man of Constant Sorrow." (Those command performances, friends say, may account for her evident discomfort onstage to this day.)

Her father had given up his banjo for God, but he allowed his children to play, and the entire family listened every Saturday night to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio.

So this evening at the Patriot Center, when George Jones delivers a broadly comic rendition of "I'll Give You Something to Drink About," wagging his hips and playing both the angry wife and the drunken husband, Hazel gets the joke. This is classical country music stagecraft, a mix of song and vaudeville that stretches back through the Opry of the 1920s, '30s and '40s, all the way back to country music's roots in the minstrel and medicine shows of the Reconstruction era.

As a child listening to the Opry, she was drawn to the big emotions she could hear in the voices of country stars like Hank Williams and Roy Acuff. She memorized melodies, scribbled down lyrics. "I knew every song coming and going," she says. By the time she came to write songs of her own, a template for them had already been burned in her brain.

So when Jones sings "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes," a lament about the passing of country music's greats, she knows the answer. "Nobody," she says stoutly. "The country music stars of before came from behind the plow; they knew what they were writing about. Today, the new people singing, they have to conjure it up in their minds."

'By the Sweat of My Brow'

Tonight, it's Hazel's turn, on a plain, black-floored stage in Harlan County, Ky. She's the headliner for a concert to open a traveling Smithsonian exhibition on modern mountain women.

This particular mountain woman is home again and also not. The hills outside the windows at Southeast Community College are still dusted with evergreens, and they're still taking coal out of the ground not far away, but many of the details have changed since the 1950s, or even the 1970s.

Welfare benefits have come, as part of the War on Poverty, and are about to go, courtesy of welfare reform. Except for a spike this year, coal prices have been falling steadily for the past 18. Most U.S. coal mining has moved west to Wyoming's Powder River Basin. Technology has drastically changed what remains. An extreme form of strip mining called "mountaintop removal" shears the tops off mountains to get at the coal underneath. Huge underground coal borers called long-wall machines scour the coal seams, collapsing the earth behind them and cracking streambeds and house foundations up above. With the new machines,

only one miner is needed to do the work 100 used to do.

Harlan County has lost almost 10 percent of its population in the past 10 years, and unemployment among those who remain hovers between 30 and 40 percent, according to a study done by the University of Kentucky's Appalachia Center. New industries like telemarketing centers and computer technology have been introduced in hopes of breaking the local dependence on coal, but they have failed to flourish. Mountain culture is being tested in the latest round of hard times, according to Kentucky sociologists, as a new wave of return migrants and people without mining jobs survive by means of a complex informal economy of barter, trading and herb gathering and growing (everything from ginseng to marijuana, the new moonshine). There are satellite TV dishes in front of the trailers and cabins in the hollows. The public radio station in the next county has popular traditional mountain music and bluegrass shows, but many local people listen to the same thing everyone else does: variations of rock-and-roll or Nashville country pop.

So what does someone like Hazel Dickens have to tell a place like Harlan County, in the age of dot-coms, welfare reform and NAFTA?

Plenty, as it turns out. She takes the stage in a red skirt, black boots and upswept curls. She is the Shaker-plain bookend to George Jones's country baroque, but she is no revivalist tricked out in Dust Bowl duds.

She fumbles with her guitar and spends a moment hunting for a lost capo, but then rips into a set that is remarkable for its energy and fire, particularly as she has traveled 10 hours in a cramped van over bad roads to deliver it. Though the set is not particularly political, she carries a palpable moral authority because of who she is -- where she's come from and what she's done with it. The impression she makes onstage is of a superior, self-motivating instrument with a compass that always points to true north. And in her scrappy, I-did-it-my-way career choices and her commitment to social justice, there is both example and echo of mountain culture, with its hallmark values of self-reliance and responsibility toward one's neighbors.

"Pick it up!" she commands the band just a few seconds into the opening song. She leads aggressively, and changes the order of the songs on the set list at will, improvising, reading the crowd. The musicians of the Lynn Morris Band, friends who are backing her up at this show, lean into this gale force and stay on course, looking exhilarated and occasionally incredulous at the challenge.

Her voice leaps and changes, like fire. It is a bleat, then a bark, a cry, a call, a whisper. She thinks in pictures when she's singing. She enters the world of the song and, like an actor, she keeps a part of herself, maybe 10 percent, detached, freeing her feelings, but controlling them too, so that she stays on the edge -- moved, but not crossing into tears. That would be amateurish and self-defeating, she believes. It would dilute the song's impact by turning the audience's attention away from the song and onto her. It's the people in the audience who get teary-eyed at her shows, and tonight is no exception.

Although she does not introduce them as such, her songs amount to an aural autobiography. There is "Mama's Hand," about a barely grown child waving goodbye to a mother left standing at the cabin door. There's "Just a Few Old Memories," about a powerful homesickness that recurs years after the leaving, slipping through a door "though

I thought I had closed it / so tightly before." In "West Virginia, My Home," the narrator travels home in her mind, "in the dead of

the night / in the still and the quiet / I slip away, like a bird in flight / back to those hills, the place that I call home."

And there is the "Working Girl Blues," a song she wrote on the back of an inventory slip while working a day job, and which can be heard as an anthem of arrival in Baltimore, where she learned to hold a job, draw a wage and came of age musically and otherwise.

Like many of the Appalachian emigres, she arrived alone, and bunked on the living room couches of relatives while she hunted for factory work.

"Just holding down jobs was a tremendous effort; nobody could have been less socialized than I was," she says. "Back home, they never let us out very much. The only people you saw were the people in church or your neighbors. I had no idea how to talk to co-workers or the boss."

She attended an AFL-CIO meeting and was amazed to see people sticking up for themselves. "I'd never seen that before. I was used to letting things slide, to not make anyone mad." (The first time she cut her hand at Continental Can, she ran bleeding all over the floor, searching for a boss to ask permission to turn her machine off and get first aid. Hazel, the foreman told her, next time you can turn the machine off without asking.)

It was culture shock in more ways than one. Baltimore was full of white Southern working people, who settled in neighborhoods that came to be known as hillbilly ghettos. Down South, the term "hillbilly" had been an affectionate term of self-

description. Up North, it was less friendly. One of Dickens's first memories of the city is walking up to the corner store on a hot day, and asking the boy behind the counter for some "pop." He returned with a soft drink, slapped it down on the counter and brayed, "Here's Pop! Now where's Maw?"

Baltimore in the 1950s was a music scene of great energy, where hillbillies who played bluegrass and suburban kids in the grips of the folk revival met and cross-

pollinated, creatively and otherwise. Bluegrass and folk ensembles rose and fell, and scuffled for gigs. "None of us was very good," Dickens recalls. "Everyone was learning and experimenting."

She met Mike Seeger, the half-brother of folk musician Pete Seeger. He was working as an orderly at the Baltimore sanitarium where one of her older brothers was a TB patient, and wangled an invitation home. "I guess we were the first hillbilly family he met in Baltimore," Dickens says. "Maybe the first ever."

Seeger was eager to hear their songs and play their music. He pushed them to form a little bluegrass band and persuaded Hazel to show him the songs she'd begun writing.

"She brought out song sheets at a very early point, and she had a whole mixture of them that made it clear this was a serious person," says Seeger. "She wasn't just drinking beer and playing songs. She was more literary, and more thoughtful, and she had good taste in songs."

Seeger's interest and approval meant "a lot," Dickens recalls. "We needed to be validated that this old stuff we were hanging on to was really worth something. We knew it; we felt it, but there was always this thing in the back of our minds, this fear that people would make fun of us.

"To have someone from outside say it was good -- well, it makes you stop and think."

Then as now, music was the great equalizer in this meshing of two different worlds. "There were differences," says Dickens. "I think that each of us thought the other was a little strange -- different. Their responses to things were never the typical good ol' boy response to things. But we tried like hell to make it work, and it did. We all wound up liking each other."

The newly minted bluegrass band -- "I think we called ourselves the West Virginia Ramblers or some stupid name like that," Hazel remembers -- practiced often and played out when they could. Hazel sang country covers off the jukebox. She bought a used upright bass for \$200 and persuaded friends to teach her to play, and then hired herself out as a freelance bassist and harmony singer.

"It was an exciting time," says Hazel. "We'd work all week and then try to figure out where the music was on weekends." They'd make big batches of fried chicken and drive north, up Route 1, for outdoor bluegrass shows at places like the New River Ranch in Rising Sun.

Music was a passion but not yet a career. That began to change in the early 1960s, when Hazel met fellow scenester Alice Gerrard, a California-raised Antioch College dropout and budding folk musician who wanted, she says, "to learn to sing like Hazel." Alice played guitar and sang melody; Hazel played bass and sang harmony. Hazel and Alice, as they called themselves, played living rooms and then parties and, in 1963, ventured down to southwest Virginia to sign up for a slot at the venerable Galax fiddlers' convention. They made a demo tape and won a \$75 recording contract from Folkways Records, the independent label of New York musicologist Moe Asch.

One summer (it was 1968 or '69, they can't remember), they hitched a ride with a member of Bill Monroe's band out to Bean Blossom, Ind., and changed bluegrass history.

Bean Blossom was the premier bluegrass event of the year, hosted by the Father of Bluegrass himself. They wangled a set on a side stage, and started out with a few people listening, but soon drew a crowd, many of them from a younger generation of musicians who remember the event as life-changing.

Two women playing and singing bluegrass music with the same passion and energy as the men. They played as if they were entitled to, and their material -- songs carefully culled from Library of Congress tapes and the vintage 78 collections of traditional music deejays like Washingtonian Dick Spottswood -- also drew attention and praise.

"After that, it was a little hard to go back to singing 'Salty Dog Blues' with the same conviction," remembers bluegrass veteran Dudley Connell, a member of the D.C.-based Seldom Scene who was getting his start in music at the time.

By now, she had begun writing songs in earnest. She'd started years earlier, copying lyrics from the jukebox and the radio. She

moved on to writing country songs -- they all turned out "sad as sad can be."

"It was a struggle at first to see if I could get four verses and a chorus," she says. "I didn't know I could do it. I was surprised as anyone else. It didn't take me any time at all. I just kept laying these feelings out. They just kept welling up inside of me."

Sometimes the songs were harsh, and she'd think, "I have to write something nice or no one will sing this." But she continued writing, the harsh ones and the sad ones, too. "I try to write from my gut, from the way I see it, and from what I have experienced and seen other people go through. That's the way it has to be; otherwise I'll wind up with something I'm not going to like, something I might not even understand."

It was a catharsis, a release of everything she'd been soaking up all those years -- her mother's pain, the hard times, the honky-tonks.

As she wrote, she felt herself becoming who she was, as opposed to who others wanted her to be. "It took me a long time to evolve as an entity other than my family," she says. "The way we grew up -- women didn't break off and go out on their own the way they do today. You had to adhere to the elders' wishes."

Two more events spurred on her songwriting. In 1970, her first and only marriage, to a young Baltimore cabdriver, aspiring social worker and local music fan, ended in divorce. Dickens moved to Washington, found work managing a Mexican imports shop in Georgetown. In the silence of a new apartment, the first space she'd ever had completely to herself, the songs "poured out," she says.

The second change was happier. Around this same time the duo of Hazel and Alice was invited to join the Southern Grassroots Revival Tour, a twice-a-year musical roadshow with ties to the civil rights movement's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The tour was eclectic, and above all integrated. African American blues musicians from the Mississippi Delta shared the stage with white fiddle players from east Tennessee. The tour's stated mission was to make sure that the same Southern music that was drawing crowds at elite Northern venues like the Newport Folk Festival could be heard by the working people of the South.

At each stop, the musicians were encouraged to perform political material -- "anything about struggle," recalls Gerrard. "Racial, women's, labor . . ."

Although Dickens the emerging artist was offended by the idea -- "I hated the idea of people announcing they were going to write political songs; I was a real purist about the music" -- she nonetheless began writing them to meet the tour's demands. She was startled to realize that the assignment worked as a forge for her emerging political consciousness.

"I thought about the things that had been bothering me," she said. One of those things was the 1968 disaster at the Consolidated Coal mine in Farmington, W.Va. Seventy-eight miners died in a series of underground explosions that resulted in the sealing of the mines without retrieval of the bodies. (Public outrage over the events helped speed passage of the federal Coal Mine and Safety Act the next year.) Hazel's song "The Mannington Mine Disaster," named after the neighboring town where many of the miners lived, warns miners' children not to follow their daddies to the Mannington mines.

A few years later she was asked to contribute songs for the soundtrack of "Harlan County, U.S.A." When the film was released in 1976 (it eventually won an Academy Award), she played at several of the most important openings, further boosting her confidence and her artistic profile. She appeared at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the Mall and traveled at her own expense to sing and play for free at rallies to support striking coal miners, where she was treated as a conquering hero.

The appearances back in coal country were significant, says Dickens's film biographer, Mimi Pickering. They were her first trips back home in her new identity, an artist taking on the forces that had shaped and ravaged her childhood.

During this same period, Hazel and Alice found themselves adopted as icons by ardent and sometimes militant young feminists. They played folk music halls in places like Boston and were amazed and somewhat unnerved to find these usually staid venues packed with screaming fans who knew the words to all of their songs. They did not count themselves as feminists at the time, and were not even sure what the word meant.

But they were flattered and grateful for the support (to this day Dickens's hard-core fans refer to themselves as "Hazelnuts"), and through it all they were fiercely protective of their music, insisting on complete artistic control in recording and performing, even after they moved from Folkways to the independent label Rounder Records. They behaved as if they had a fundamental and inalienable right to self-expression, and looked with bland amazement, amusement or ire at anyone who suggested otherwise.

All of this convinced Rounder cofounder Ken Irwin that the pair had the potential to reach a mainstream audience. The idea, Irwin says, was to market them as the female counterparts to the so-called country music outlaws of the '70s, like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. But before that could be ventured, and before the release of their second recording on Rounder, Alice withdrew from the duo with little explanation. The album was released, but they didn't tour to help sell it.

That artistic crisis provoked a larger one for Hazel. Music had saved her life, she believes. "I would have been a lost soul without music -- I probably still would be lost. Probably would have wound up in a mental hospital." But by 1980, music also seemed to be running her into the ground. The years of trying to play music and work a full-time job, of bus rides to Pennsylvania for rehearsal with Alice and to Baltimore to care for her ailing parents, of struggling to find time to perform, make records and write, had worn her thin. Shortly after her parents died within months of each other in the early 1980s, Dickens collapsed, and was hospitalized for several weeks with a stomach disorder that was never diagnosed.

When she recovered, she decided it was time to choose. Encouraged by the progress of her music career, she decided to try to live off music alone. She quit her day job, cut up her credit cards and let go forever the idea of buying herself a house. (She did buy her little apartment when it went co-op.) She would charge more for her performances, and hire the best band she could, but only as needed. She paid off her debts and said her pledge of allegiance to her music: "I pay cash for everything. And if I can't afford to go somewhere, I just don't go."

'It's Hard to Tell the Singer From the Song'

"God, I had no taste," Dickens sighs, shaking her head. She's back home now, seated on the couch, the photo album open on her lap, examining the picture of herself with the vice president on the lawn of the Naval Observatory. In the photo, she's wearing a bright green jersey pantsuit with a drawstring neckline and flared legs. "My hillbilly hippie look," she jokes. Actually, she looks

good in a '70s, covered-up, "Mod Squad" kind of way. Her dark hair is cut in a short shag, like Jane Fonda's in "Klute," except Jane's probably cost \$100 back then and Hazel cut hers herself.

These days she tends to a uniform of denim slacks, bright sweat shirts and bandanas that she wears when she's got her hair up in pin curls. A splurge involves a trip to a suburban mall with a friend who has a car (she doesn't drive) to pick up a set of coral flowered bedsheets on sale at T.J. Maxx to make a new curtain for the kitchen alcove. "Brighten up the place a bit," she says.

She knows the place could use a coat of paint, too. She thinks sometimes that she should move, but she stays because the neighbors in this small building all keep an eye out for one another, just like back home.

It's late on another weekday afternoon, and after a lot of talking she's curled up on the couch like a cat and trying to remember the dates and specifics of how it was. The couch is the only piece of upholstered furniture in the room, and she reclines on it like Cleopatra on her barge, sailing down the Nile of her life.

"I take after my old-maid aunts," she says, dryly, at one point, letting the idea hang in the air while she studies it.

It's quiet in here. Living alone in the years after her divorce, the silence was her boon companion and an aid to songwriting. Sometimes nowadays, it can feel less friendly. She breaks it up with television -- Oprah -- crossword puzzles, reading poetry and writing songs, sometimes all at once.

"Solitude doesn't come easy," she allows. "It can be lonely, if you let it. But it doesn't have to be." Sometimes when it gets to her, she gives herself a shake and a talking to. "I'll tell myself, 'It's up to you. You're in the driver's seat here.' "

She is in frequent contact with her relatives back home, her sisters, who call and delicately ask sometimes about the status of a longtime relationship that ended a while ago. "They say, 'Do you think you'll ever get back together? We worry about you up there without a husband.' "

"I tell them, 'Well I worry about you down there with husbands,' " she says. "We laugh about it now."

She never met the love of her life, and "I probably wouldn't have known what to do with him if I had," she says. She never had children. "I like kids, but with some of the stuff I went through growing up, I didn't want to take the chance of being a bad mother."

She pauses, thinks some more.

"I take after some of my old-maid aunts," she repeats. Actually, that would put her in ample company. According to mining historian Priscilla Long's book, *Where the Sun Never Shines*, it was not uncommon for daughters of the Appalachian coal fields to look at their mothers' difficult lives and decide to sit out marriage and motherhood.

And anyway, she needs the quiet to write. She can't sit at a desk at a designated hour and order the songs to come. They come when they come, she says. It's always been that way. But the coming is more obvious now. More like a physical sensation, a birth

of sorts, she says. Many times she has been forced to get up out of the bath, dry her hands and grab a pencil to write down an insistent phrase. Sometimes the songs come with a melody attached. Sometimes she will have to spend months or even years getting one right. She knows a song has legs when she catches herself singing it while she cleans the apartment. But that's just the start of it, she says. She has to live with a song "a long time" before she can let it out into the world.

She has "Arlindy" to finish, and another new one, "America's Poor," inspired by the experience of one of her nieces, a middle-aged woman in North Carolina whose textile mill employers persuaded her to train a crowd of younger workers, then abruptly moved the younger workers and the factory to Mexico, leaving her behind.

There isn't a lot of dithering in the songs, and not a lot of debate about the pros and cons of free trade versus protectionism, NAFTA, and the global economy versus union scale and job protection.

"You don't go to Hazel for information," says Thomason, a longtime friend and admirer. "You go to Hazel for passion, for character, for taking a stand. It takes someone like her to bull ahead, with just kind of one eye in the middle of her head."

Her own view of this is uncompromising, but not unnuanced. "It's very hard for a rich person to really understand what it's like to scrape and beg and count the pennies for your next meal," she says. "And it's not easy for working people to come home tired and wore out after a long day, and involve themselves in another person's problems."

The young have the time for that. And so does she. She'll keep at it. She brightens at the thought of it. It's like her grandmother's hymn, the one she was singing, whose narrator talks of the joy that comes from being in the light, whether one's religion, one's art, one's passion. In that light, the hymn says, "December is as pleasant as May."

She is not religious. She never was baptized in her father's church. She's not especially sentimental, either. People always ask her if she'll be buried back home. Nope. She'll go into the ground up here, as her parents did. People ought to be buried where they spend their last days.

She thinks now about whom to leave her things to. One of her nieces might like the old quilt. The cloth is so fragile she's afraid to use it. So she bought a new quilt the other day, and was amazed by it. "Such tiny little stitches," she exclaims, probably made in China or India, "maybe by a child's hand."

As she speaks, the apartment gets crowded with the ghosts of small children hunched under large quilting frames.

"I'd like to find out more about that," she says.

Mary Battiata is a Magazine staff writer. She will be fielding questions and comments about this article at 1 p.m. Monday on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

To hear Hazel Dickens's song "Don't Put Her Down, You Helped Put Her There," go to <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/photo/style/Hazel/template.htm>.

 **0 Comments**