



Joe's Jottings #4: Jean Ritchie

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

On December 8, 2014, the legendary folksinger/dulcimer player/collector/songwriter Jean Ritchie celebrated her 92nd birthday. Raised in Viper, Kentucky, Jean absorbed the musical traditions of her family and community and has been performing their songs and tunes to wider and wider audiences for most of her life. She received a degree in social work at the University of Kentucky in 1946 (Phi Beta Kappa too!) and arrived that year in New York City to work at the Henry Street Settlement School. She was soon in demand for radio and concert appearances and made a number of recordings, beginning in 1952. Also in that year, she and her husband, George Pickow, traveled to Great Britain and Ireland on a Fulbright grant to record songs and ballads, especially those that paralleled her own repertoire from southeastern Kentucky. She also authored several books on her musical heritage and the Appalachian dulcimer. She wrote poetry and composed a number of songs which evoked her folk roots and concerns of her region (including invasive coal mining practices).

I first learned of Jean through her Elektra LP in 1954. I was struck by the perfect match of the impeccable high fidelity of Jac Holzman's new label with Jean's beautiful crystal clear voice and dulcimer playing. I was smitten! I also learned in my readings that members of her family had been documented by collectors Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles and later by Evelyn Hendrick Wells. I got to meet Jean in 1960 when Ellen Stekert brought her to Indiana University to do a concert. I recall at a gathering I requested her to sing her haunting minor key version of "Fair Ellen," but she exclaimed that she couldn't because it was "too sad!" I didn't mind, since she had so many other beautiful songs to share with us.

When I began employment at the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Song (LC/FOLK) in 1963, I discovered that Jean had been recorded as early as April

1946 by folksong collector Artus Moser at the Renfro Valley Folk Festival in Kentucky, and had been recorded at LC/FOLK in 1951. The Folk Archive also had some field recordings made in 1951 by Jean and George in eastern Kentucky and neighboring Tennessee.

Jean's legacy has now been acknowledged with a 2014 2-CD set entitled *Dear Jean: Artists Celebrate Jean Ritchie* (Compass Records 7 4631 2), lovingly produced by Mick Lane, Charlie Pilzer, and Dan Schatz. Encompassing 37 tracks, the set includes over 100 singers and instrumentalists in various combinations, including Pete Seeger (reading one of Jean's verses), Judy Collins, Janis Ian, John McCutcheon, Kathy Mattea, Tim O'Brien, Robin & Linda Williams, Oscar Brand, Dale Ann Bradley, Eric Weissberg, Peggy Seeger, Robbie O'Connell, Kathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, Sparky and Rhonda Rucker, Debra Cowan and John Roberts, Jean and George's two sons (Jon and Peter), and three of Jean's nieces. The selection of material is fairly evenly balanced between songs from Jean's tradition and her compositions.

Choosing my "favorites" is impossible; they are all beautiful renditions of exceptional songs. I'll name a few which I might designate my "favorites of the moment": "Now Is the Cool of the Day" (Molly Andrews with Tina Chancey on viola de gamba); "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore" (Robin and Linda Williams with John Jennings); "Lord Bateman" (Sally Rogers and Howie Bursen); "Blue Diamond Mines" (Riki Schneyer); "One I Love" (Judy Collins with Eric Weissberg); "Winter Grace" (Debra Cowan and John Roberts); "I've Been a Foreign Lander" (Elwood Donnelly and Aubrey Atwater, with cello and uilleann pipes); and "I've Got a Mother" (Starry Mountain Singers, which includes Suzannah Park [who was featured in the 2012 Portland Revels]). Close behind these are "Young Man Who Wouldn't Raise Corn" (Peggy Seeger); "West Virginia Mine Disaster" (Suzie Glaze); "Go Dig My Grave" ["Butcher/Railroad Boy"] (Dale Ann Bradley, Allison Brown, et al); "Pretty Saro" (Robbie O'Connell et al); and "Jackero" (Archie Fisher). Two other highlights for me were "Who Killed Cock Robin" (Oscar Brand and Jean herself recorded at a 1985 New York City concert), and Jean's "Peace Round." This last one features a recording of Jean recorded at the 1992 Houston Revels with the added voices of 31 folks; truly a masterpiece of audio engineering, thanks to the wizardry of Charlie Pilzer.

This prompts me to place a caveat here. The three producers of Dear Jean are friends of mine. I've had several (and all too infrequent) visits with Mick Lane at his home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dan Schatz grew up in my neighborhood of Maryland; his family were regulars at many folk music events in the area. Charlie Pilzer was a neighbor of mine and, in addition to being a fine musician (you'll find him, as well as Mick and Dan, on these recordings), he is a world-class audio engineer currently with Airshow in Takoma Park, Maryland. Incidentally, when I recently spoke to Charlie on the phone, he was busy mixing a CD of Dan Schatz which, Dan informed me, will include "Doney Gal," which a says he learned from me when he was six years old. I'll certainly look forward to hearing that!.

I recommend Dear Jean without hesitation. Compass Records is located at 916 19th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212 (www.compassrecords.com; 800/757-2277).