

# Alice Gerrard: Yesterday and Today

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by Susan Marquez

*Feature photo by Irene Young*

Haunting. Stark. Hard-edged. As a singer, Alice Gerrard developed a style all her own and mastered the rhythm guitar, banjo, and fiddle as a musician. Her songwriting skills are solid as well. A tireless advocate of traditional music, Alice Gerrard is a legendary talent.

Born in 1934 in Seattle, Washington, Alice grew up in a family of six children. "I sang with my mother and four sisters, but it was classically oriented," she says. "My father also loved to sing, and a lot of my parents' friends were musical." So, Alice grew up in a household where parties included music and singing after dinner. "We did it informally, for fun."

By the time she was in middle school, Alice's family had moved to California. Throughout high school, she enjoyed listening to 78 rpm records.

"I listened to 'Where My Heart Goes My Goose Goes' by Frankie Lane and 'Come On to My House' by Rosemary Clooney. I was drawn to the more exotic-sounding, boogie-woogie and harpsichord music." While she was encouraged to take piano lessons, Alice says she hated them. "I had a good grounding in music and a good ear, but to this day, I wish I had taken piano lessons more seriously."

In 1953 Alice set off for Antioch College in Ohio. "There was a budding folk revival of sorts at the time," she recalls. "I

listened to a lot of guitar music and folk songs. I learned to play by ear, from listening to records over and over.”

She often listened to Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*, published by Folkways Records in 1952. “My boyfriend at the time, Jeremy Foster, had a copy of the album. It had Cajun music, Blues, and all kinds of interesting music. I knew when I heard it that it was the kind of music I wanted to do. It was very influential to a lot of people, including me.”

Jeremy’s old high school friend, Mike Seeger, was significantly influenced by his parents, who leaned toward folk music and music from other cultures.

*“Mike had field recordings of folk musicians. When I heard them, folk music and old-time music were starting to take hold in a big way. Bluegrass was an outgrowth of all that came before it. There was just a lot to drink in, and we were all like sponges.”*

<https://youtu.be/nQwsG9xHgBY>

Jeremy and Alice quit school. “Jeremy spent so much time on his music that he decided to drop out rather than flunk out in case he wanted to return to college someday. I felt that scholastically speaking, I was wasting my time in school. At that point, I had no idea what I wanted to major in.” The couple married, and Jeremy returned to school in 1959, attending Oberlin College. “We were both into bluegrass music, and we talked Antioch College into having a bluegrass concert for the students. The Osborne Brothers lived nearby, and they agreed to play. For us, it was so great, but the students didn’t know what to make of it.” As the Osborne Brothers got to know their audience, they began playing songs like “Pretty Polly,” and everyone was on their feet by the concert’s end. “We brought the Stanley Brothers I the next year,” Alice says.

Alice and Jeremy settled in the Washington, D.C. area. “Jeremy

was from northern Virginia, and we had a lot of friends there – a vibrant group of young people who loved bluegrass music. That area became a real center of bluegrass and old-time music,” recalls Alice. “There were places to play all over, and people loved to go hear live music.” Alice says she and Jeremy also visited people in their homes, which provided a burgeoning, rich environment for the music. “Folklore societies brought people to the area, and it provided second careers for some of those artists, who were playing for the new middle class.”

Through Mike Seeger, Alice met Hazel Dickens. “She was already playing a lot, although she worked full time,” Alice says. “On weekends, we drove together to country music parks to listen to music. I was friends with Hazel for a long time. We had music parties, and at one party, musician Peter Segal, who was friends with David Grisman, showed up.” Segal went to the D.C. area to see a concert. It was an outdoor concert, and due to bad weather, it was canceled. He ended up going to a music part where he heard Hazel and me sing. Peter suggested we try to record, and that resulted in two Folkways albums, which, by the way, will soon be remastered and re-issued as LPs. I just heard the MP3, and it sounds great!”

Jeremy met an untimely death due to a car accident, leaving Alice with four children. Alice eventually married Mike Seeger.

Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard played together for many years. “She was the mentor, and I was the mentee,” laughs Alice. “She strongly influenced me. We were never a full-time professional band. She had a full-time job, and I had four kids to raise, so we couldn’t do big tours. We usually did a couple of small tours each year.”

Alice became interested in doing other music-related things, including founding and editing *The Old-Time Herald*, a labor of love for Alice for 25 years.



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While she appreciates the recognition, she never strives for accolades. "I think more about the music. If I can please myself, I'm happy."

While her children weren't into music, some of her nine grandchildren are. "I have to say, being a grandmother is so much more fun. I have taken some of my grandkids to music camps where I'm teaching, and they love it." Hopefully, they will carry the music of Alice Gerrard to future generations.

<https://youtu.be/kK5x02wyNwk>

See Hazel Dickens Feature

See Laurie Lewis Feature