

AN EXCLUSIVE "ON THE TRACKS" INTERVIEW

CAROLYN HESTER

BY LARRY JAFFEE

Carolyn Hester played an important role in the making of Bob Dylan's career, in that it was at the recording of her third album (first for Columbia) Bob caught the attention of the legendary producer John Hammond.

Dylan played harmonica on three tracks of Hester's album, which has been recently released on compact disc for the first time. Sufficiently impressed by Dylan's talent, Hammond promptly awarded the then 20 year old troubadour a record contract.

While Dylan and Hester, a formidable folk talent in her own right, stayed in touch off and on over the past three decades, their friendship was rekindled most recently at the Dylan Tribute Concert in October 1992, where she performed "Boots of Spanish Leather" with Nanci Griffith.

Tell me about your impressions of the Dylan tribute concert.

It was one of the high points of my life, really, and certainly for Dylan. How many people have seen [their] history compacted into a four hour musical history? A 30 year overview where everybody is still healthy enough to be out there playing—I was really thrilled that Columbia did that! It was a really fine time. It was wonderful and Bob did have some people from his folk days. The only thing upsetting would be the Sinead incident. It was a strange situation. I think her civil rights were violated. Sinead's rights. I don't think it was acceptable. That night I thought, "This is going to change the course of her career." That was real sad but you know in another country she might have been thrown in jail for what she did on *Saturday Night Live*."

How did you come to be involved in the tribute concert?

Probably because of my friendship with Bob and with Nanci Griffith. Back in August of '92 we were starting to hear that they were going to do the concert. Around August 16th, I was in Nashville and Nanci called me and said she was going to do her first folk album. She said that she was going to have a lot of her friends from the folk world join her, none of the songs were going to be her own songs, and would I come and sing with her on "Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound." I said I'd just love to! She was going to do "Boots of Spanish Leather" and Bob wanted to put harmonica on it. When I got there, Arlo Guthrie was there. Odetta and all...these people are friends and very good artists, so I figured the album was

going to be very warm. The more I heard about it the better I liked it. In the meantime, Rhino Records brought out a compilation called *Troubadours of the Folk Era*. The August issue of *Stereo Review* [had] a marvelous write up. My [agent] Steve Goldston sent a copy to Dylan's manager and asked, "Please keep Carolyn in mind for the tribute." So that's what happened. They just kept us in mind. And then, when Nanci's people were talking to the Dylan offices they said, "What about Carolyn and Nanci singing together?" And they said, "Perfect." So...we did "Boots of Spanish Leather." I got a nice tape of "Boots" with Bob singing some things they didn't put on the record. The tape I got he said, "Are we going to record this one?" or something like that. I learned the high harmony and met them in New York. Then while we were backstage, Mickey Rayfield (Willie Nelson's harpist), came around and he said, "Look, if you and Nanci need a harp player I'd love to play with you all." I gulped, you know, I thought, "I wonder why he is asking me, why doesn't he just ask Nanci?" I thought he was a little shy so I said, "Lets go over and see Nanci." She said, "I always wanted to play with you Mickey. I think you're just great!" So we added Mickey to the mix. I think we were treated beautifully and we were proud to be part of this historic moment.

Have you kept in touch with Bob over the years?

On and off. I'd see him in different places. There had been a lapse of maybe fifteen years or so since I'd seen him and then about two years ago he called me on the phone and we chatted. I felt that maybe I was going to be seeing him.... It's really difficult because he really moves in the rock world and I have only moved in the folk world. When we got together it was so much fun and like no time had passed. We had a nice visit at Tommy Makem's party. Of course, Nanci Griffith is the other artist who has touched my life. At the party I stood between them and kind of hugged them at the same time and told them how much they meant to me. That was a great moment!

What do you think about your first album on Columbia being reissued on CD?

I just think it's amazing. What are they thinking of? I'm real happy that Columbia is doing that. I don't know how it will compare...certainly the old vinyls are breaking down, to be on CD now will give us a new viewpoint.



Was your first album on Coral produced by Buddy Holly?

It was produced by Norman Petty, who was Buddy Holly's manager.

You did get to meet Buddy Holly, right?

Oh, yes. Buddy and I were very good friends. I'd see him when he'd be coming through for concerts. I'd go down to the Brooklyn Paramount and hang out backstage with The Everlys, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and gosh, it was great! But Buddy and Norman Petty got me the contract with Coral Records. Coral had quite a few women artists.

Several books say it was during the preparation of your third album that Bob and you became friends and he was invited to play harmonica on a few tracks. Is that accurate?

Actually a little before that. Bob and I both got booked at the same time at Club 47 up in Cambridge. We were hanging out there for a couple of days together. I can't remember where Richard [Farina] and I were staying but Bob was staying with Rick Von Schmidt. We all went to the beach. Hanging out all day, Bob asked, "Well, where are you playing next?" (He was just kind of looking around for the contacts. We were all going around creating this thing, making folk clubs out of cocktail lounges. The Singer/Songwriter idea was not the industry it is today, it was just being born, and Bob was at the head of it.) I told him, "The next thing coming up for me in about two months is I'm going to tape an album." My dad had played harmonica on my very first album, which was on Coral Records (1958), and my second album was on Tradition (1960), and this was going to be my third album—the first one on Columbia Records (1962). [Bob] was going to be in New York and I ask him if he wanted to come and hang out on some of the songs. He said, "Well, you know I would, that's great! I didn't know you were going to do an album." I said, "Yeah, when I get to New York, we'll have some kind of rehearsal and we'll get together with John Hammond." He said, "John Hammond?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, that's fine!" We eventually got back down to the city and we did some rehearsing. And he taught me a song, called "Come Back Baby." Of course, a few years later now I regret that I tried to sing the blues.

That is my favorite song on the album—you singing the blues.

How wonderful! But you know what I mean...

Did Bob write "Come Back Baby," or is that a traditional thing?

It was traditional. The thing is I am so willing to go out on a limb to try something new, to take a challenge. I think [folk singers] are really interested in the world of music and they investigate it and they try to bring more of it to their public. Bob realized that and egged me on. He said, "Hey, there is not a blues on here. How about trying out a blues?" So he was really into this recording and I think he played his heart out. I thought he played great on the album.

Dylan biographers suggest that Bob almost stole your thunder at the recording session, that Hammond was distracted by trying to make out what Dylan was all about and even offering him a contract. Did you feel anything?

I tell you what, I am a Bob Dylan fanatic, and if all that was going on and it was at my recording session, great! I absolutely can't get excited by something like that. I made a couple albums at Columbia and they were signing folk singers right and left. I just wanted to bring along more players if I could because I just knew we were pioneers. I didn't know how far it would go but I was real proud I signed up where Pete Seeger was. As far as I am concerned, John Hammond was all business and he was looking for the "Bob Dylans" and so... that was very appropriate. I saw right away that he liked Bob and he was going to talk a contract to Bob. In fact, I brought into the studio the review of Bob Dylan by Robert Shelton (who later wrote this fine book on Bob). Richard and I handed that to John Hammond. I wanted to make sure that Hammond got that. I was in there pushing for Bob so I can't buy into that I got ignored or anything. It's sort of crazy. That's what I wanted!

Maybe you have influenced Bob on more than one level. You were doing a highly dramatic version of "House of the Rising Sun," and I was wondering if Bob heard your version and then put it on his first album?

Well, it could be. That very well could be. But I think that certain songs went through the community. Like Bob Dylan's songs and Tom Paxton's songs, we would use the one we [thought was] best for us.

Do you have a favorite Dylan song?

No there isn't one—there are a half a dozen—and maybe a few other records too.

Judy Collins just released an album of Dylan covers as many other artists have—I read you like Burl Ives—I even have an album of Burl Ives doing Dylan songs....

I never heard that. Fantastic!

But would you ever want to record

an album of just Dylan songs?

I would love to do that. His songs touch me so much that it would be a labor of love. The only one I ever recorded was "Playboys and Playgirls" on *Town Hall*. I added a verse of my own to that.

Did Bob ever say anything about the extra verse?

No, I don't know that he even knows it. We've got some surprises for Bob!

Were you ever considered to be a part of a combo with Peter and Paul? I heard they were looking for a female voice.

They did think of me in that context but I wasn't really that comfortable with the idea. Grossman...was going to form a group and half of it was going to be two men and a girl. One of the things he had in mind was to have Bob Gibson be part of it. I have sung with Peter and Paul separately at events but I never did actually sing with them or try to be part of the trio.

Did you continue to make albums through the '60s and '70s?

I made two albums for Metro-Media in the '70s and one on RCA. That was the first quadraphonic album. RCA was experimenting with that technique. They later abandoned it. I think all the labels abandoned it. Then, for about ten years I didn't do any recording. I had my family. I've got two daughters. I started back recording in the '80s. In 1982 I went back out on tour, my first national tour. Then just began doing what the singer/songwriter and folk people do currently, which is more or less networking and selling your own tapes.

You mentioned Albert Grossman. Was he your manager for awhile?

No, we might have done some business. He is the one who introduced me to John Hammond. What happened was that Hammond was just playing, looking for folksingers and I understand he had been interested in signing Joan Baez. Joan either didn't like him or didn't like Columbia, or something, and she and her manager went over to the Solomon Brothers and Vanguard. At that point, Grossman stepped right in to bring some people from the Village up there so I was the next one....

Speaking of the village, Bob has seemingly gone full circle doing two folk albums back to back.

I know it. That's marvelous, I love his stuff. It's remarkable and I feel like, my gosh, he was singing "Come Back, Baby" to me and he was sounding like I think [his] records sound now. You know what I'm saying? It's interesting. It looks like he grew from one thing into this acoustic performer. But that's not so. Bob managed

himself at certain times. He has not changed and he is not about to change. He's unbelievable.

Were you disappointed at all, initially, when he went electric?

No, I'm afraid I loved it. I definitely did.

I don't think Pete Seeger liked it that much but I shouldn't really speak for him.

Well, that's what you hear. I played the Newport Festival the year after Dylan had the excitement at the Folk Festival when people booed because he went electric. (Of course, he didn't come back to the Newport Festival after that. He got a open invitation to go to a lot of those festivals.) That night in '66 people wanted to have Dylan music and they weren't going to boo me. They loved it! And to think that thing [that] threw Sinead, could have thrown Bob, but it didn't.

I read that you and Judy Collins led a performance boycott when "Hootenanny" banned Pete Seeger. Is that true?

I didn't feel like I was any kind of a political leader at all. I feel like I'm a songwriter at times and a folk singer the rest of the time. Mainly folk when this situation came up. Maybe there were ten shows in the series that Pete Seeger was actually being banned from participating, but he was the *father* of folk music as far as I was concerned. My generation of Judy and Joan and Peter, Paul and Mary—we're all Woody and Pete's children—and that's the way we feel about it. That just wasn't something we could let go. It split folk music and we had to choose sides. I just felt there was no way I could go and do the show.

Wasn't he being banned because of his political beliefs? They were calling him a communist, basically.

Yeah, because he had been called up before the House on anti-American activities and to me that is just unbelievable.

What year was that when that was going on?

Let's see...it must have been '64, maybe.

Was Bob involved in the issue at all?

I don't think so. I feel that Al Grossman, or at least the Grossman camp, decided to keep Bob off of television. They didn't have him appear very often. Someone told me the Dylan people felt, like Baez also, that if you give them all kinds of exposure on TV, which the media wanted, that it kind of took the shine off them doing music concerts. They really did control his appearances like that. So that wasn't an issue Bob [had] to deal with.



Carolyn Hester.

I wanted to ask you about Richard [Farina] he seemed to be quite a storyteller. Was he really friendly with Fidel Castro?

I doubt it. There is an idea that he might have met Ernest Hemingway, too. But there was nobody more charming than Richard. You would like him if you met him now. He was so alive. He was very entertaining. You know, you could go to a dinner party and he kept the show going. I have to admit I fell under his charm. I was married to him for two years and he was married to Mini Baez for six years before he got killed. He is an unforgettable person.

You said two years ago Bob called you on the phone, was it just out of the blue like, "Carolyn, how are you doing?"

The point of the phone call was really.... He said, "What I really want to do is to

thank you for being there at the start." That just floored me because it's been twenty-five years or something! I really felt that I didn't need for him to call or tell me that or anything. For him to do that just showed a remarkable maturity on his part. And I was happy to see it because he is somebody that I believed so much in before he was a big deal. It was amazing for me. It really is his loyalty and kindness that had me on the [tribute] show. There is no doubt about it. Put that in the article somewhere. He is a gentlemen, and people shouldn't forget. ♦

Larry Jaffee authored the Bob Dylan cover story in High Times in February 1993. His writing has also appeared in Rolling Stone, The New York Times, High Fidelity, Spin, Tower Records' Pulse, and Vibe.