

Bluegrass pioneer

Alice Gerrard, whose albums with Hazel Dickens in the '60s and '70s paved the way for women in the genre, will play Pickathon in Happy Valley

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Alice Gerrard, born in Seattle, raised in California and now settled in North Carolina, is an American banjoist, guitar player and singer with a career that has spanned five decades. From the mid-1960s to the mid-'70s, Gerrard co-released four influential albums with the legendary Hazel Dickens.

Gerrard and Dickens paved the way for generations of musicians who traveled a musical path behind them, including the likes of Emmylou Harris. Together, the duo later became known as "pioneering women" in bluegrass when the Smithsonian Folkways released a compilation album in 1996. Gerrard is undeniably a part of bluegrass royalty.

The daughter of trained classical musicians, Gerrard didn't grow up with bluegrass or folk music. Her earliest musical memories are of singing along with family members and friends around the living room piano. She was first exposed to that "high lonesome sound" while attending Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She quickly let the piano gather dust while she picked up a banjo and guitar and began to immerse herself in the rural, Appalachian music scene that was thriving in Washington, D.C., where she relocated after college.

Gerrard and Dickens put out those four albums, and then, seemingly just as suddenly as history was born, their professional partnerships ended in the mid-'70s. Both women went on to do amazing things on their own.

For Gerrard's part, in 1987, she founded the Old-Time Music Group, a nonprofit organization that oversees publication of The Old-Time Herald, which celebrates the love of old-time music. Gerrard served as editor-in-chief of The Old-Time Herald from 1987 until 2003.

Last year, at 80 years old, Gerrard released her fourth solo album, "Follow the Music," which was nominated for a Grammy for best folk album of the year.

Gerrard will perform at the 17th annual Pickathon music festival at Pendarvis Farm in Happy Valley. Pickathon runs from July 31 to Aug. 2. Gerrard will perform Aug. 1 on the Meadow Stage.

Sue Zalokar: *You put so much of your energy into The Old-Time Herald ...*

Alice Gerrard: It still exists and largely due to Sarah Bryan. She's the editor and does an amazing job.

I got the concept for the magazine in 1986 because I was living in Washington, D.C., and was friends with Pete Kuykendall (co-editor of Bluegrass Unlimited). So I was kind of in on the beginning of that. I felt like if there was a magazine like that for old-time

music, it might help to kind of bring the community together more. I know it did for bluegrass. It really created a forum for bluegrass music.

I was living in Galax, Va., at the time. I didn't really know anything (about putting something like this together). I barely knew how to use an electric typewriter. I didn't have a computer. Nobody had a computer around there. I knew people to talk to, and they were all very supportive. I had a few friends (who) chipped in \$1,000 or \$2,000, and within about six months of the idea, we had the first issue up and running by August of '87.

And I did that. It was wax strips on paper and typing it in and dragging it up to the printer and then proofing it. It changed so much over the course of the years that I did it.

S.Z.: *How does it feel to be a pioneer?*

A.G.: I don't really think about it that much, to tell you the truth. I feel like we became more aware of that in retrospect as time went on rather than feeling like we were pioneering at the time.

S.Z.: *What was your connection to music as a young girl and woman?*

A.G.: Both my parents were musicians and had a lot of friends who were musicians. They would come over, and there was always music. Whenever people got together at the house, there was always music, which is kind of what happens with the kind of music I play, too.

I grew up with a sense of music as something that you do yourself and have fun doing it with other people. That was what I took away from my (familial) music experience more than learning to play music. (My parents) were both classical musicians. They tried to get me to take piano lessons, and I did for a while, but I never really took to becoming a classical pianist.

S.Z.: *You attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. That was a hugely influential time in your life. Can you talk about that?*

A.G.: It was. More of what I found was the folk revival, so a lot of people were playing guitars and banjos. Mostly it was folk music.

At the same time, I met other people who were paying more attention to traditional music, the more authentic side of traditional music and going back to the sources. That kind of steered me onto that path that was more traditional and less folksy.

S.Z.: *And yet you were nominated this year*

for a Grammy for Best Folk Album of the Year.

A.G.: Yeah. That was fun.

S.Z.: *I think I question the judges' final decision ...*

A.G.: That's very sweet. I won't comment on that. It's such an arbitrary thing; it's subjective. People don't know who I am ... they've never even heard of me. But, as we say, it was an honor to be nominated, and I had a good time out there, just kind of observing the scene.

S.Z.: *Bluegrass, country, old-time, blues, gospel, folk, Americana ... roots music. How do you classify your music?*

A.G.: That's really a difficult question. They do have all these designations. There is probably a little of all of those things in my music, I would say.

These designations are false in some ways. I think maybe they began as a way to divide up recordings in a music store. Folk really means music of the people, but it has taken on another connotation.

I like the designation "roots" music, but you think of one thing when you think of that. And when you think of Americana, you think more of singer-songwriter. You think of bluegrass; that's very specific, but then they have "new" grass and classic bluegrass. ... I listened to all of that stuff.

I think of that Harry Smith "Anthology of American Folk Music." It came out in the '50s. That was very influential on me and a lot of other people. We listened to that thing. ... It had everything on there — well, no rock 'n' roll. But all of that (listening) comes to play; it becomes a part of you, and that's what comes out when you make your own music.

People who have listened a lot to source music, that comes out in their music, too.

S.Z.: *Source music?*

A.G.: You can hear someone playing a song, but you find out that the person who wrote it is actually Almeda Riddle out in Arkansas. And so you go back and look into Almeda Riddle's version and see what that's like.

That was kind of the premise of the Newport Folk Festival when it got started, because to have this mix of more contemporary artists mixed in with traditional artists. So they brought Bob Dylan, but they also had Clarence Ashley. They had Joan Baez, but they also had Doc Boggs or Almeda Riddle, and so people who came primarily because they knew the

names of the stars were also exposed to the older forms and were sometimes very turned on by them. It really created this appreciation of the roots of the music.

I think it makes a difference. For me, anyway, it makes a difference to have that old stuff kind of in my rearview mirror.

S.Z.: *You have influenced generations of women, musicians and activists. Who influences you?*

A.G.: I really like to listen to the older stuff. That's where my heart is.

It's inspiring to me to go to listen to people live. I like to see what they do on the stage and how they sound. Some of it's pretty great, some of it bad. I like to get ideas from others — the way they present a song. The same way as when you are around other songwriters. It's inspiring. You may not write the way they do or even necessarily like some of the stuff they've written, but it can be inspiring.

S.Z.: *You've said you and Hazel (Dickens) were a kind of odd couple, and yet the two of you in duet made history and changed the way the world saw women, specifically female musicians. In what ways were two women who blended musically so beautifully so different?*

A.G.: I was raised in what you'd call a middle class, educated to some extent, family. My mother was college educated. My father was not, but he was very self-educated. He was quite a bit older than my mother. He grew up in Wigan in

England, which is a coal mining area, and his family was in that industry. He was one of 13 kids. He ran away from home when he was 12 or 13 and came to the United States. In some ways, his family was more akin to the way Hazel grew up.

My mother was from a farming family who emigrated out to Washington state from New York. Her mother was a first-generation immigrant, and they grew up on a farm in Washington. But somehow or other, she went to college.

We had achieved middle-classdom. We had a house. We lived in a city. My dad had a job; my mother stayed home. I went to school.

Hazel grew up in a big family of poor people. Her family were coal miners and preachers, and they lived kind of a hardscrabble life, mostly in West Virginia. They came during the second world war, to Baltimore, to get work. A lot of them came to the city to try to have a better life, and it wasn't.

We grew up differently. I grew up comfortably, and she grew up poor. And culturally, I was exposed to more. I went to Antioch College. My mother had remarried after my dad died; she

remarried a professor at UC Berkeley. And then we moved into Oakland, and I was exposed to all kinds of stuff. She joined the Unitarian Church, and she became sort of "radical, left-wing" and so I got exposed to all this stuff that Hazel did not. She lived a very different life.

In Baltimore, she (Hazel) met people. And one of those people was Mike Seeger (American folklorist, Gerrard's second husband, and half-brother to Pete Seeger), who happened to meet Hazel's brother. Her brother found out Mike played music and invited him over for dinner. Mike eventually introduced me to Hazel.

I was in the position of listening and learning for a very long time. We were spending so much time together and playing music. She was clearly a powerful influence on me.

S.Z.: *Harmonizing with Hazel must have been amazing. At a time when women and poor people were being exploited in so many ways, you and Hazel were taking action to bring attention to these issues among others. Did you all know then that it was something exceptional?*

A.G.: No. Well, speaking for myself, and I think I can safely say that Hazel didn't really think of it in those terms either. It was just that there we were and we were surrounded by people who were very supportive.

She was now in Baltimore, now not confined to her crazy family or her friends or the old bluegrass world where you were just a chick singer who maybe got to play the bass and sing one Kitty Wells' song. She now had this group of friends who were me and Mike and others who let her see ... I don't know how to put this: Hazel was a really good observer of people. I remember going into a restaurant with her and she would just sit there, and those little black eyes, they'd be darting around and looking at everybody. She really took stock of people. Having access to this different world for her was kind of life-changing. Her friend Alete was a social worker. I think Hazel would credit Alete for getting her out of what could have been a bad, kind of dead-end situation.

We didn't really think of it in those terms (exceptional). We loved this music; we were hanging out with lots of people who love this music who were listening to old-time and bluegrass and country in Washington and Baltimore. We'd get together on weekends, and we'd have a party. We'd play music. We were always playing music. And I was always learning.

I felt very much in the student role. I was younger than Hazel, and I looked to her as a mentor in a lot of ways. She was the one with the experience. She had street smarts, and she was a great singer — a great intuitive singer. She never had a lesson in her life. None of us had, really. We all learned this stuff from other people who played it and sang it.

There was a huge mix of country people and city people who were having this cultural exchange. They were very different, but they were getting to know one another a bit. There was something in Hazel that sort of allowed her to be receptive to this — and I was receptive to her. I didn't grow up Southern, and I didn't know much about poverty in Appalachia.

There was something in each of us that was receptive to the other. Music was kind of the connecting factor for all of us. From that we came to be friends. The biggest thing that happened to both of us; a friend of ours, Anne Romaine, along with Bernice Reagon ("Sweet Honey in the Rock"), started a tour in the South.

Anne was a civil rights activist from North Carolina who was living in Atlanta, doing a lot of civil rights upheaval (work). She got to be friends with Bernice. And they came with this idea to start a music tour that would take traditional musicians around the South. This had not been done, I mean consciously, as a way of exposing the South to its own music.

There were two prongs: exposing Southerners to their own music; the other was that when they see somebody like Roscoe Holcomb talk about and play his music and his experience, it would speak to the struggles of working-class people in the South.

They wanted to have integrated, black and white musicians. Maybe five, six at a time. They would go around to universities and colleges, communities in the South, and put on programs. Anne asked Hazel and me to be a part of this, and that was such an amazing thing. It is what exposed me to a lot of stuff I had not been exposed to before, in the rural South. We'd go into the mountains and witness firsthand what strip mining was doing. And we'd talk to people.

People were organizing and having community events, trying to address water issues and poverty issues. That was in the Mountain South. And then we'd go to the Deep South. We traveled in a van. It was always integrated, and we'd bounce around in a van together and then play these shows and talk about our songs.

It was an amazing time. It gave me a deeper understanding of these issues, but it gave Hazel permission to write about these issues in her own songs.

It was a real life-changing experience for both of us. We did that for a number of years. They came up with a name for it, eventually. It ended up as a nonprofit. It was the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Inc. (laughter). This is all part of the Southern Folklife Collection at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. People can go there and learn all about it.

S.Z.: *What a relevant idea. We could use a traveling cultural exchange in our country today. I tried to find an answer to this for myself, but I couldn't. Why did you and Hazel parts ways professionally?*

A.G.: It was a combination of things, but I think in some ways, both of us needed to do something else. We'd been doing it for a really long time.

It was a little rough in the beginning. I think if you talk to the folks at Rounder

Records, they would say I should have waited awhile because we were just kind of hitting our stride, which is probably true, but I wasn't thinking in those terms.

For a while, it was a little tricky. Over time, those sore spots healed.

We played together a bunch, and we remained friends. She would come over for Thanksgiving. My family all lives up around there, and they've all known Alice since they were kids. She and I would go out to dinner together around Christmas. And she went on to do amazing things on her own.

S.Z.: *Your voice is suited to the minor key. I saw a YouTube video of you singing "Bear Me Away," and you have a group of people kind of humming behind you. I got chills when you started singing. How does music move you?*

A.G.: I love that song. I got that idea from Jean Ritchie

(folk singer and dulcimer player) from her song "Long Lonesome Way." She recorded it with this kind of droning sound in the background. I wanted to find out more about it, so I called her up and she told me that when they used to have church meetings with dinner on the grounds, they'd have singing afterwards. Sometimes, three or four men would stand on the periphery of the group and hold a drone note. I had never heard of this. It fascinated me.

I recorded this song "Bear Me Away" for the latest album. Rayna Gellert (American fiddler and singer) was playing at an event put on by Folklife. She asked me to play with her on a couple of tunes, and she wanted to pay me. I said, "No, don't pay me. Come to the studio and play a drone note on your viola." So that was her playing the drone note.

She droned several tracks. It wasn't the exact note the whole time. It's like real life, like ... an orchestra tuning up. That sound.

S.Z.: *How has the music industry changed?*

A.G.: To some extent, when I think of bluegrass music, I think everything has gotten much more technical. Sometimes people play notes that don't need to be there just because they can play the notes. Technology has come and people have become more technical. Everything is "perfect." There is no pitch because they can adjust your pitch. What gets lost is the soul of the music.

You don't have to have a note in every space; often the spaces speak louder than the notes.



PHOTO BY IRENE YOUNG