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“God Bless the Grass”: The Environmental Songs of Malvina Reynolds

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Abstract

The American folk singer and activist Malvina Reynolds (1900-1978) was truly instrumental in spreading awareness of environmental and ecological issues through her songs. Reynolds only began composing in her forties and performing in her fifties, but soon made a name for herself, starting in the early 1960s, with her topical protest songs touching on a range of issues, most notably the environment. Her compositions have been covered and popularized by folk and pop giants such as Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte and many others. This paper will focus on her most well-known ecological songs: God Bless the Grass, What Have They Done to the Rain, Little Boxes, etc. With her white hair and granny glasses, Reynolds did not at all fit the image of the beatnik folk singer of the 1950s or the hippie movement which followed. She did, however, pioneer the embracing of environmental protection as an important theme in folk music and popular culture in general.

Keywords: Folk music, environmental issues, ecology, protest singer, activism

Malvina Reynolds (1900-1978) was a victim of persecution and prejudice from a young age which, along her family's history of activism, undoubtedly formed her character as a crusader for social justice and environmental protection. She was banned from receiving her high school diploma because of her family's anti-war sentiments during World War One. Her family was attacked by the Klu Klux Klan because of their radical leftist politics and being Jewish. Unable to find teaching work, she was forced to take manual labour jobs for a number of years despite holding a doctorate from UC Berkeley. She lived most of her adult life in Northern California in the Bay Area near San Francisco, and many of her songs make reference to this

geographical locale. It was only in her forties that she began to write songs, influenced by Pete Seeger, among others. Although his musical disciple of sorts, Pete Seeger quickly recognized the genius of the generation-older Reynolds and frequently covered her songs and praised her gift for songwriting. He summarizes his admiration for her as follows in a documentary on her life and work *Love It Like a Fool*:

Malvina was one of the first songwriters who really started pulling things together. She showed that whether your concern is for the ecology of the world or problems of high prices or problems of sexism or racism, that they're all of different size and one big problem and that we're either going to solve or it's going to solve us. (Wengraf)

Reynolds was the first to acknowledge the limitations of her own voice and guitar playing, but nevertheless persevered with her chosen vocation and mission. Many of her songs display affinities with what we would now refer to as spoken word. D. Kelsen writing, about her connection with Long Beach California, discusses, among other things, how she triumphed as an artist despite her lack of classic musical gifts and skills.

By her own admission, Reynolds never had a great singing voice. ... But despite that limitation and her late start, Reynolds found a following after leaving Long Beach by expressing complex truths with poetic simplicity. In 1960, at age 59, she recorded her first album with Folkways Records, *Another County Heard From*, which included "Sing Along" (Kelsen).

The above-mentioned song "Sing Along" from her first record does not deal with ecological themes, but does provide insight into Reynolds' own journey as an artist and a singer. The first stanza describes her own nervous, tentative beginnings as a songwriter and performer.

I get butterflies in my stomach whenever I start to sing,
And when I'm at a microphone I shake like anything,
But if you'll sing along with me I'll holler right out loud,
'Cause I'm awf'ly nervous lonesome, but I'm swell when I'm a crowd
(Reynolds, 1964).

In line with the performance philosophy of her mentor and friend, Pete Seeger, she emphasizes the communal experience and

how singing as a group can provide not only support and courage, but also a feeling of community. The chorus reinforces this message.

Sing along, Sing along,
And just sing 'la la la la la' if you don't know the song,
You'll quickly learn the music, you'll find yourself a word,
'Cause when we sing together we'll be heard (Reynolds, 1964).

The remainder of the song discusses political activism and the notion that there is strength in numbers. This community of like-minded performers and audience members provided Reynolds with a much needed support system and encouraged her to continue in her musical career.

Her second album, *Malvina Reynolds Speaks the Truth*, from 1967, contains a number of her most popular and prescient ecological songs. The following song, "God Bless the Grass" has rightfully become an unofficial anthem for the environmental/ecology movement. It was covered most famously by Pete Seeger.

God bless the grass that grows thru the crack.
They roll the concrete over it to try and keep it back.
The concrete gets tired of what it has to do,
It breaks and it buckles and the grass grows thru,
And God bless the grass.

God bless the truth that fights toward the sun,
They roll the lies over it and think that it is done.
It moves through the ground and reaches for the air,
And after a while it is growing everywhere,
And God bless the grass (Reynolds, 1967).

Reynolds' references to God are certainly not of the traditional Christian bent or of the Jewish persuasion. She was brought up an atheist and later in life occasionally attended and performed her songs at the local Unitarian church in her home town of Berkeley.

God bless the grass that grows through cement.
It's green and it's tender and it's easily bent.
But after a while it lifts up its head,
For the grass is living and the stone is dead,
And God bless the grass.

God bless the grass that's gentle and low,
Its roots they are deep and its will is to grow.

And God bless the truth, the friend of the poor,
And the wild grass growing at the poor man's door,
And God bless the grass (Reynolds, 1967).

The divine being made reference to in the song has much more affinity with Mother Nature or pantheist beliefs than traditional, organized religion. I would assume, however, that Reynolds would have little time or patience with metaphysical musings and would prefer to focus on practical activism. This 'grounded' religious perspective is expressed clearly in her song "This World" included on her record *Malvina* from 1972, but written years earlier.

I'd rather go to the corner store
Than sing hosannah on that golden shore,
I'd rather live on Parker Street
Than fly around where the angels meet (Reynolds, 1964).

The Parker Street mentioned in the song was the street she lived on for most of her adult life in Berkeley.

Even before widespread discussion of acid rain in the 1970s and nuclear fallout, Reynolds drew attention, in the song "What Have They Done to the Rain", to the poisoning of that most essential of natural phenomenon.

Just a little rain falling all around,
The grass lifts its head to the heavenly sound,
Just a little rain, just a little rain,
What have they done to the rain?

Just a little boy standing in the rain,
The gentle rain that falls for years.
And the grass is gone,
The boy disappears,
And rain keeps falling like helpless tears,
And what have they done to the rain? (Reynolds, 1964).

Reynolds did not merely write this song to be recorded and occasionally performed, but made use of it as a marching song during protests against nuclear testing organized by Women for Peace and Women Strike for Peace (WSP). The song has been covered by a number of artists including Joan Baez, who referred to it eloquently as "the gentlest protest song I know. It doesn't protest gently, but it sounds gentle (quoted in Smolko, 58).

Just a little breeze out of the sky,
The leaves pat their hands as the breeze blows by,
Just a little breeze with some smoke in its eye,
What have they done to the rain?

Just a little boy standing in the rain,
The gentle rain that falls for years.
And the grass is gone,
The boy disappears,
And rain keeps falling like helpless tears,
And what have they done to the rain? (Reynolds, 1964).

Tim and Joanna Smolko point out the distinct approach of the song in their volume *Atomic Tunes*: “The song addresses the long-term effects of fallout from continuous bomb tests ... rather than a world-ending nuclear war, the subject of practically all other antibomb songs” (Smolko, 59).

The last song deserving of mention from the 1967 album is *Little Boxes*, which was inspired by ‘cookie cutter’ housing development in Daly City, a suburb of San Francisco. Covered once again by Seeger, among others, the song became an anthem of the counter-culture movement in the 1960s with its critique of the rat race, consumerism and conformity. It reached the public ear once again when it was used as the theme song of the recent hit series *Weeds* about a single mother selling marijuana to provide for her family.

Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There’s a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they’re all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.... (Reynolds, 1964).

Reynolds apparently coined the term ‘ticky tacky’ to refer to cheap, faceless building material used both on the exterior and interior of mass-produced homes. The most worrisome commentary, however, is concerned with how the people living in these soulless homes are equally void of personality.

And they all play on the golf course
And drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children

And the children go to school,
And the children go to summer camp
And then to the university,
Where they are put in boxes
And they come out all the same. (Reynolds, 1964).

Josh Rutner points out the achievement of the song as follows: "It's a great song with a punch in its message that architectural mundanity and social mundanity go hand in hand: It's not just the little houses that are made of ticky-tacky, but also the people who went to universities and came out all the same" (Rutner). It is very apparent why this song struck a chord with the hippy, counter-culture, generation of the 1960s.

The song, "From Way Up Here", from her fourth record entitled merely Malvina Reynolds, released in 1971, seems to be viewing the world from space, which is quite frequently an occasion for a celebration of scientific hubris and nationalism.

From way up here, the earth looks very small
It's just a little ball of rock and sea and sand
No bigger than my hand.
From way up here, the earth looks very small,
They shouldn't fight at all down there,
Upon that little sphere.... (Reynolds, 1964).

Here, in contrast, we have a gentle reprimand concerning the insanity and inanity of humanity, which the viewing from space provides a new perspective on. Distance allows humanity to gain objectivity.

From way up here, the earth looks very small,
It's just a little ball,
So small, so beautiful and clear.
Their time is short, a life is just a day,
Must be a better way
To use the time that runs
Among the distant suns. (Reynolds, 1964).

"The Little Mouse" from the record Mama Lion from 1980, based on a true story of an accident in Buenos Aires involving the short-circuiting of computers caused by a mouse, provides a witty commentary on the fragility of technology.

Hooray for the little mouse
That mucked up the clearing house,
And threw the Stock Exchange in a spin
And made the bankers cry.

So much for the electronic brains,
That run the world of banks and aeroplanes,
And if one little mouse can set them all awry,
Why not you and I? (Reynolds, 1984).

This seemingly innocuous song points out the fragility of our military-industrial complex and how it can be so easily destroyed or temporarily sabotaged; one need only think back to the Covid epidemic. It is also a call for activism and a reminder that even the smallest of us can make a difference.

Reynolds spent most of her adult life in the Bay area, near San Francisco, but in contrast to most cultural treatments of this landscape, Reynolds draws attention to the disastrous ecological situation involving garbage, sewage, pollution, etc. The song “Seventy Miles” was not included on her recordings, but was part of her songbook *The Muse of Parker Street* from 1967.

Seventy miles of wind and spray,
Seventy miles of water,
Seventy miles of open bay,
It’s a garbage dump.

What’s that stinky creek out there,
Down behind the slum’s back stair,
Sludgy puddle, sad and gray?
Why man, that’s San Francisco Bay! (Reynolds, 1967).

Her words of frustration and warning have, by and large, mostly been sadly ignored.

Many more of her songs touch on ecological and environmental issues, but these should provide a representative sample of her concerns and songwriting approaches to the theme. In contrast to her image as an innocuous, little old lady, Reynolds could stand up for herself and did so throughout her life. She put it as follows:

I don’t mind crossing swords with people when I disagree with them,
and I’m not your nice old grandma. However, I always make it clear
that the reason I have this sharp cutting edge is because I do care for

people. I care about children, and I think the world is ripping them off, taking away their natural environment and much more than that—the natural progression of their tradition—and leaving them stripped, uneasy, uncomfortable, and in deep trouble, and it's because of that that I'm so sharp. (Harvard Square Library)

Larry Polansky pays tribute to not only her musical peers, but also acknowledges the great influence she had on singer-songwriters, dealing with topic issues such as the environment, up until the present. There is one important quality, however, that places Malvina's work alongside that of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Holly Near, and many of the other giants of the genre. This is the willingness, and maybe even the need to take on any issue, no matter how large, and handle it with stride, wit, artistry, and natural grace. Like Guthrie, she reserved a special place for the most universal social problems, and treated them with an extraordinary poetic care (Polansky).

Despite her almost frumpy appearance and rather mundane voice and playing skills, Reynolds helped launch the environmental/ecological movement of the late twentieth century. One of the songs which struck a particular chord with the flower-power generation was "No Hole in my Head" which refers to "sex and revolution", among other things. Recorded in 1971, it was performed for enthusiastic live audiences of young people who could easily have been her grandchildren.

I have lived since early childhood
Figuring out what's going on, I,
I know what hurts, I know what's easy,
When to stand and when to run,
And there's no hole in my head.
Too bad. (Reynolds, 1967).

Malvina Reynolds songs are not, by any means, only limited to ecological themes, but those touching upon these environmental concerns undoubtedly rank among her finest accomplishments and continue to be covered and performed up until the present day.

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