

# STRANGE CREEK SINGERS

Mike Seeger • Hazel Dickens • Tracy Schwarz  
Alice Gerrard • Lamar Grier



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2. IN THE PINES
3. SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE
4. POOR OLD DIRT FARMER
5. SALLY ANN
6. I TRULY UNDERSTAND THAT YOU  
LOVE ANOTHER MAN
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**Mike Seeger** – vocals, mandolin, fiddle, banjo, guitar, autoharp, & harmonica;  
**Alice Gerrard** – vocals and guitar; **Tracy Schwarz** – vocals, fiddle, guitar and dobro;  
**Hazel Dickens** – vocals and bass, **Lamar Grier** – banjo.

“When I Can Read My Titles Clear” and “Black Lung” were recorded in the Glen Rock Community Center, Glen Rock, Pa., in 1968 and 1970 respectively. All other titles are studio recordings made in January and February 1969.

Cover Photo by Betsy Siggins

Cover by Wayne Pope, Dix Bruce & Tom Diamant  
Produced by Mike Seeger and Chris Strachwitz

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This album is the fruit from a beautiful tree of friendships going way back into those remote fifties. We were all teenagers then; while our peers were enthralled by the Crew Cuts, Georgia Gibbs and their ilk, we were turning towards alternate American musical styles we were just beginning to discover. I had developed an interest in early music by the time I was ten. At first it was limited to Bix Beiderbecke and Jelly Roll Morton. By the time I was thirteen it had expanded to include Furry Lewis and Lemon Jefferson. But it wasn't until I reached high school that I was exposed

to Uncle Dave Macon and the Carter Family. Not so coincidentally, that was about the time I met Mike and Peggy Seeger. Peggy and I were in high school together. She was an academically gifted senior. I was two years behind her, not so gifted, and so insecure that it took me several weeks to work up a pretext to speak to her. I soon met Mike and became a regular at the Saturday night sings at the Seegers' house in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Mike and I quickly became friends, constantly learning from each other. From him I learned that some of those old hillbilly records I had

been passing up on my junk-store excursions contained music of rare beauty. From me Mike was learning the music on those records and how to perform authentically in those styles himself.

Not long afterwards Peggy went off to Radcliffe and I never saw her much after that. But Mike got me into some memorable Sunday summertime excursions to New River Ranch in northern Maryland and Sunset Park in Pennsylvania. We were overwhelmed by musicians like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the Coopers (Wilma Lee & Stoney), Bill Monroe, Grandpa Jones, Charlie Monroe and the Stanley Brothers. Sunset and the Ranch quickly showed us that our adopted music had survived on something besides scratchy 78s, that it was a living, continuing tradition which had been practically under our noses all our lives.

We soon discovered that we weren't the only city kids alienated from the Crew Cuts and bitten by the country

bug. There was Joan Shagan, a short-haired attractive girl about my age who listened and spoke of this new music with unswerving fidelity and utmost respect. There was Pete Kuykendall; he was the kid with all the Stanley's Rich-R-Tones and a blossoming banjo player as well. There was Jerry Foster who later went to Antioch College armed with a goodly collection of tapes and enthusiasm.

And, of course, there were the people who made this album — all but Hazel — from city backgrounds like ours. Alice Gerrard had come from California to Antioch where she met Jerry who turned her on to bluegrass and old-time music. She was (and remains) a slender beautiful girl whose appearance belies her considerable guitar technique and her strong country contralto. In 1970 Alice married Mike and they moved to the green countryside of southern Pennsylvania, a few miles from another

old friend, Tracy Schwarz. Tracy was born in New York and reared in New England schools. He picked up country fiddling as a teenager and by 1962 was working with Mike in the New Lost City Ramblers. In my freshman year at the University of Maryland, I was responsible for the 7:00 news on the campus station. Not long after I began I was also assigned an MC spot for a bluegrass band whose nightly airings followed the news. The banjo player had particularly impressive talents; his name was Lamar Grier. The band wasn't exactly out of sight. They even had to resort to using me for baritone parts on the trios. I made my debut as a bluegrass performer — at the conclusion of the series I went into retirement where I remain with the exception of occasional bathtub recitals. Lamar went on to better things, including a long tour of duty with the master, Bill Monroe.

Hazel Dickens is the only real coun-

try girl. She was born in Montcalm, West Virginia into a coal mining family. Her father, H. N. Dickens, is a Primitive Baptist preacher and former banjo player. Hazel grew up knowing first-hand the hardships of mining life although she actually entered a mine only once, by stealth; miners consider it bad luck to allow women in the mines. More than any one person it is Hazel who gives this collection its feeling and depth. Her mournful country voice has influenced the singing of the others to a remarkable degree.

Indeed it is the singing which distinguishes this album from any other. Although many city kids have by now become so proficient on their instruments that they can often improve (in a technical capacity, at least) upon the original recorded performances they have learned, their singing always gives them away. Hazel sings country by heritage, Mike, Alice and Tracy by choice (Lamar

doesn't sing at all). But from countless hours of playing, singing and listening over the years — above all listening — they have acquired an easy, natural command over the idioms in which they perform. And the idioms are numerous, as this album will attest. You'll hear Mike on mandolin, fiddle, banjo, guitar, autoharp and harmonica; Tracy on fiddle, guitar and dobro. Hazel, Alice and Lamar stick to their respective bass, guitar and banjo throughout. Singing comes in solos, duets, trios and quartets by just about everybody.

If you share our fondness for old-time country music you probably know at least a few of these songs already. And if you're fortunate enough to have heard some of these folks before, you already know something of their musical inclinations and abilities. Even so you'll agree that these performances are something special—products of people who have been as close personally as they are

professionally. All of these songs are invested with goodly measures of care and a rare combination of discipline and spontaneity. It all adds up to an exceptional musical experience — one you'll enjoy again and again.

## THE SONGS

The songs come from varied sources and comprise a wide spectrum of country music. "When I Can Read My Titles Clear" is from an old Primitive Baptist hymnal in Hazel's possession although Mike learned the tune from a field recording of a Kentucky church congregation used in John Cohen's film, "High Lonesome Sound." Mike lines out each phrase in advance and the rest repeat the phrase in unison. As in most Primitive Baptist music there is no accompaniment. Alice, Tracy, and Mike form a trio for "In the Pines" which achieves a striking emotional effect in the train whistle segment of the chorus. "Sunny



Side of Life" is a country perennial. It was associated for almost twenty years with Bill and Earl Bolick, who, as the Blue Sky Boys, were among the most popular old-time performers of their time. Tracy and Mike sing it, bringing to it more of a bluegrass flavor. Tracy Schwarz fiddles and sings his own "Poor Old Dirt Farmer" which must derive more than somewhat from his years of practical agricultural experience—just how autobiographical it is he refused to say. I really treasure the beautiful fiddle-harmonica duet. "Sally Ann" is a fiddle tune of indeterminate age which has long been popular in southwest Virginia. Ralph Stanley's "Fling Ding" is a reworking of it and has long been the theme for my Washington-area bluegrass hour. Tracy plays fiddle and Mike plays banjo and sings. "I Truly Understand" comes from the singing of one George "Shortbuckle" Roark, preserved on a vintage product of the Victor Talking Ma-

chine Company. I've never heard the original, but Mike has been singing this ever since his first days with the Ramblers. Hazel and Alice provide the harmony. A relatively modern composer, Terry Fell, is responsible for "Old Black Choo Choo," solfeggio and all, as sung by Alice and Mike. Fell also wrote one of the genuine modern country classics, "Truck Drivin' Man." "Today Has Been a Lonesome Day" is from a May 1935 Carter Family record "Sad and Lonesome Day." It is probably their version of their friend Leslie Riddle's "One Kind Favor," which he learned from a Blind Lemon Jefferson recording. "No Never No" was Alice's find. She has put a melody to some words she uncovered in an old heart-song book. Hazel sings it with her, backed more than capably by Mike's mandolin, specially tuned G G D D A A A# D#.

"New River Train" has suffered countless recordings of varying degrees of ex-

cellence. I doubt if it has ever had such a fancy arrangement before, highlighted by the dual banjos of Lamar and Mike. This one took doing a number of times—the numbers never came out right at the end. The Louvin Brothers are responsible for "Get Acquainted Waltz" which they wrote and recorded in the early fifties at the height of their creativity. Hazel and Tracy manage to ignore the silly words as they explore the heart of the beautiful vocal lines. The traditional "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" is sung by the group with Hazel singing lead and Mike and Alice providing guitar breaks. One of the high points of this collection is Hazel Dickens' "Black Lung." It is her

own composition and she performs it with no accompaniment. Several of her brothers have been bituminous miners whose plight the song commemorates. These miners are still some of the most heartlessly exploited workers in our country — people who perform back-breaking and dangerous work under substandard conditions for substandard wages and with inadequate protection against death and disease. Lamar performs his own "Difficult Run Part 2" as if he is unaware of any problems it presents. This banjo tune is named after a stream running through Loudoun County, Va., near Washington, D.C. The twin fiddling is by Mike and Tracy.

*(Richard K. Spottswood—1972)*

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