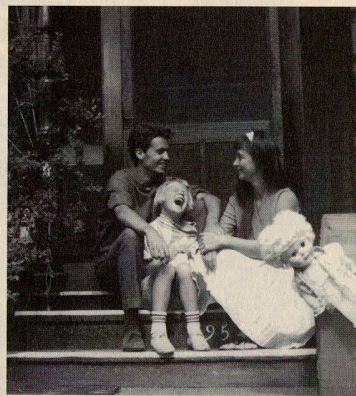


Greenwich Village in the early sixties. There were more people walking around carrying guitars than at any time or place. Long hairs were starting to be called hippies instead of beatniks. It was a very creative scene. There were people with names such as Leo D'Lion, Mary Mary, Big Brown and Barbell Millie. You could rent a crummy apartment from D.D. Stein, the hippies' friend, for \$35 a month. About 1960 Karen Dalton arrived in the Village with her little girl Abby, a big red Gibson twelve-string, a long-neck banjo and an incredible voice. She moved into the heart of the Village. An apartment two floors up above the Bleecker Street Cinema, across the street from what is now the "Bitter End Café". One advantage of that apartment was that no matter how much pot was smoked you could still make it to the movies two floors down. Lots of musicians and artists hung out at that pad and it was there that I first met Karen. I remember Bob Kaufman

the poet, Fred Neil and Dino Valente. Dozens of coffee houses, some as small as your thumb, were jammed into a few blocks between Bleecker Street and 8th Street, and between 6th Avenue on the West and about Broadway on the East. Most of the coffee houses had a handful of folk singers and instrumentalists booked to play a few times a night usually for no guaranty. You'd pass the basket which could bring in fair money, especially on week-ends when it was like Coney Island. Karen might sing at the "Cock and Bull" then go down Bleecker to the "Flamenco Café" then around the corner at MacDougal to the "Café Wha?" across to the "Gaslight" then back to the "Cock and Bull". The Flamenco was later owned by a character named Augustin Demallo who played flamenco guitar and was into martial arts. His act was to play guitar and then break bricks with his hands. The quality of the music was amazing. Bob Dylan, Richie Havens, Jose Feliciano, Tim Hardin



before any-one had heard of them. Karen was the queen of this world. No other female singer came close. The rest sounded like corny school girls. And when she sang half the house was often other singers. Her guitar style was as unique as her singing and sometimes reminded me of a piano. Musicians could have a hard time playing with her because of her very laid back sense of

beat. No one would sing the blues slower or with more feeling. Other singers sounded hectic. To me having her sing was like a drink from a cool mountain stream after walking through the desert. I spent about five years with Karen in a marriage that failed. But there were many good times. I was blessed to sing and play with her and know her magic.

Karen was uncomfortable in recording situations, as are many musicians. However, these recordings were not over-produced and capture her sound quite clearly.

RICHARD TUCKER
BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON, JANUARY 1999



Karen Dalton never played my Folklore Center and neither did Freddie Neil or Tim Hardin. Neither did they play the Newport Folk Festival. And if Karen Dalton played Folk City it was an off night and remains unnoted. History has been turned upside down.

I am a "folkie" of my time and was identified as such by Karen and many others even if they visited my place often and gladly told me about events in their lives. They chose not to play for me and, somehow, unexplainably, I did not ask them to perform for me. I did manage to present the Canadian Joni Mitchell for the first time in the USA – before the folkies got to her. And there was Tim Buckley and Bob Dylan and Emmylou Harris and lots of other singer-songwriters who did their first real performances in my space and then went to other worlds.

I felt that singers got nowhere in coffee houses but singers like Karen saw it differently. Passing the hat after singing was less worse than singing in my "private theater" where artists spilled their blood for a small, select audience. And they remembered! Karen Dalton's name is missing from all the written history of the period, and it is as much her fault as ours.

I listen to this CD for the first time and I am struck by the fact that she was better than most of the "folkies" around, including blues singers, and that she spoke too quietly for our ears to catch her life story wrapped up in pain and the need for companionship. If it then became the thing to sing in ten different genres, you know, one Dylan, one Joni Mitchell, one gospel, one bluegrass, one-sort-of-blues, and hope that one of those styles would create an audience for yourself – well, that was not Karen. All the songs are comments on her own hurt life and her search for some kind of happiness. *Blues on the ceiling* is a great blues song whether it was written by Freddie or changed by Karen. The songs become a litany to the desperation in her life and the constant hope that hopelessness will somehow, tomorrow, be transformed into the hopefulness of a good, continuing relationship. Her pleading for life from the world around her illuminates

the world we all live in and that is what is important in her work. I never was into the druglife but I have felt as alone as Karen even if my way of avoiding the daily tragedy of life was easier than hers. She didn't get out alive.

The slightly uneven surges of emotion are like the will-o'-the-wisp, a luminous, phosphorescent light, springing from the marshes of existence, in this case Greenwich Village. Her artistry consists of correctly depicting the loss of contact with the world that drug abusers suffer from, so that it becomes a universal truth.

ISRAEL G. YOUNG
FOLKLORE CENTER
STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, FEBRUARY 1999

I only met Karen Dalton once, sometime in the autumn of 1980 when I was visiting New York. That night she performed with her then-boyfriend Hunt Middleton (with assistance from Peter Stampfel) at a bar somewhere near her apartment on 33rd Street near 7th Avenue. What struck me was her obvious strength and determination, matched by a pervading sadness as well as a constant need for reassurance, mostly from Middleton (who much to my chagrin sang about 80% of the numbers) and also from virtually anybody, including myself. It was a struggle to convince her that not only had I heard of her but also that I loved her music. Back in London I got news about her from time to time and knew she was ill. She was one of the people I was hoping to see when I decided to move to New York permanently in 1993 and it was with a good deal of sadness that I heard about her death just a few months prior to my arrival.

Peter Stampfel of the Holy Modal Rounders once remarked that Karen made Janis Joplin sound like Betty Boop. Vocally, the closest parallel is Billie Holiday, but the similarity is superficial and does justice to neither woman. Any good singer has to be convincing. You need to feel the emotion of a song and to believe that the singer believes it too. But with Karen it was always more than that. You felt so emotionally involved it was scary. Her voice could be soft and gentle, harrowing and raspy, sometimes pleading and sometimes demanding. Frequently it was all of these things at the same time, which, in itself, is a neat trick. With Karen, though, there was never any trickery. For better or worse she was nakedly honest. She could make you feel that you were her lover, or more disturbingly, that you were eavesdropping on an intimate and extremely private conversation. Either way, listening to Karen's music was rarely a comfortable experience.

She possessed an unerring ability to find unusual songs and rearrange them in a way that made them seem almost as though she *had* written them. Initially she drew heavily from the folk tradition but, unlike most of the city-bred folkies of her time, she was born and raised in rural Oklahoma and grew up with the music. Karen, though, was nothing if not eclectic. Her early repertoire included not only the folk songs of her youth but also blues (country and city) and pre-war vocal jazz. Despite her reputation as a traditional artist, she frequently added contemporary songs to her repertoire. Usually these were obscure, such as Major Wiley's *Right, Wrong or Ready* here. Sometimes, however, she did wildly original adaptations of popular songs, like The Walker Brothers' *The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore*, which, sadly she never recorded. Consequently, it's fair to say that the songs on this album are pretty representative of the diversity of her act during the sixties and were not

imposed upon her by a record company looking for something more commercial than an album full of traditional songs.

In an era when the music world was even more chauvinist than it is now, record companies wanted more of those clear-voiced songbirds like Joan Baez – who, no doubt, was their touchstone for what a female folk singer should sound like. If Karen had written even a few songs, it might have helped, especially by the late sixties, when Joni Mitchell had become the new standard for female performers.

JOHN PLATT
NEW YORK CITY, FEBRUARY 1999

**OOOOOOOH,
THE
WORLD
IS**



**REALLY WEIRD
THESE DAYS,
ISN'T IT?**