TRANSCRIPT—ALICE GERRARD

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Interviewee: ALICE GERRARD

Interviewer: Mary Johnson

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Length: 1 cassette; approximately 80 minutes

HALFWAY THROUGH TAPE 1, SIDE A (270)

MJ: Talking about just the community dynamics of playing with a group, I'd kind of like to talk about the folk revival tours, the--

AG: Oh, yeah (laughs)

MJ: --Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project.

AG: Yeah, somebody should write a damn book about this. I swear to god, --

MJ: Absolutely!

AG: --it's pretty amazing. There was somebody who was doing something because I remember doing an interview with her quite a while ago—a long time ago. I don't know what ever became of that. Maybe she just, I don't know. Maybe it's just a book or thesis or what but yeah, somebody should do it.

MJ: There's a lot--a huge file on it in the Folklife Collection with lots of really interesting pieces of correspondence and--(AG murmurs, indicating interest). So I

understand, well, could you tell me a little bit about what your thoughts are of the purpose behind getting that tour organized?

AG: Well, *I* didn't organize it. I mean, it was Anne Romaine and Bernice Reagon were the--and Anne has told me about this and I just can't remember the specific details. But Anne was living in Atlanta at the time. She's from Gastonia, North Carolina and she was living in Atlanta. She was very active--she and her husband Howard Romaine were very active-- in the civil rights movement.

And there was a--and Atlanta was a hub of activity--that's where *The Great Speckled Bird* newspaper was and headquartered. And I believe, I can't remember if Bernice Reagon was living there at the time or if she just had--was coming through or something, but she and Anne were friends and they sat down and talked about the idea of possibly doing something that would speak to people's struggles, in the South, using traditional music as a vehicle and going around the South. Which at that time was a very novel idea because at that point there was you know, there were lots of venues up North, like the Newport Folk Festival, and the Friends of Old Time Music in New York City just--Philadelphia and different places and you know, Southern--traditional Southern musicians--were being presented at concerts and festivals up North but it was like the South--it was still too close to the bone, kind of. I mean, people didn't really appreciate their music that much and you know, the kids who were--the next generation of kids were kind of going through rock and roll and there was-- It just wasn't known or particularly appreciated in its home communities, so much. And, so their thought was to create a tour that would go around and present the music and just kind of by, you know, just by having somebody like Roscoe Holcomb get up there and sing and talk about his life as a coal

miner and the problems he had living in Daisy, Kentucky where strip mines had ruined the water that he had to use in his house and one thing and another and this would, it would speak to people.

And so they started these tours and they got a few people like, I think Pete Seeger might have gone along on one of the early tours for a couple of concerts just to kind of get the ball rolling and I don't remember who the first people –the very first people were but it wasn't too long before they asked Hazel and me, or Anne met us and asked us if we would be on the tours.

And so that was kind of, that was probably nineteen--either the late sixties or early seventies. I swear I'm really bad with those kind of details (MJ laughs) but they probably have something about it down there.

MJ: Okay.

AG: And it—we, Hazel and I you know, we just kind of we were into bluegrass music and we'd been playing a band around D.C. mostly and when Anne asked us to go on the tours, we realized--you know she couldn't afford to hire a whole band so it was just Hazel and me so we had to put together something really quickly that would just be representative of what the two of us would do, you know. I could also play the autoharp so, and Hazel played the bass and she could play guitar a little bit so--you know, we just worked out material that we could do with banjo and guitar, two guitars or autoharp and guitar or some unaccompanied things. And we did this recording which was the first recording we did for Rounder Records of the two of us and it's kind of the classic Alice and Hazel record that people know about--and it was the first one with the little gray picture of us in the middle.

We--you know, neither of us were--we grew up, I'd say that I grew up in sort of a middle-class household which tended to be liberal in its political point of view. My mother certainly was. And, so I, you know, that was kind of in my consciousness at any rate but I didn't consider myself a political person at that point, particularly.

Hazel I don't think was at that time consciously political but you know, she was who she was. She grew up in a large family of poor, you know, they were poor people, grew up in the South and some of her family were coal miners and they moved to Baltimore like so many other people did during the Second World War to get jobs in the factories there and it was a very hard life. And that was *her* experience. But I feel like, you know, at the risk of speaking for her—I don't want to speak for her—but I believe this to be true, that it was the tours that really sort of made us more politically conscious. Because Anne was extremely political and she--we'd go into--we did one tour in the mountain South and another tour in the deep South and everywhere we went--You know, a lot of the stuff that we did was like if somebody was having a strike we would go do a concert in that community. The background was always political. Even if it wasn't overtly political it was political because we were talking about strip mining. We're talking about people whose, like Roscoe Holcomb who could not--If he went away and played music and made money, they would take away his, his, what do you call it? (long pause)

MJ: Contract?

AG: No, they'd take away his, not his pension, but he got welfare. They'd cut into his welfare check because if he made any extra money doing anything and he was barely surviving as it was, you know his back was broken, and disability and it was just, you

know. There were all these people who, you know, and on the tour like there was Roscoe Holcomb, Bessie Jones, Mabel Hillary, Johnny Shines, Ola Belle Reed, Hazel and myself, the Balfa Brothers,--I'm trying to think--Dock Boggs, Elizabeth Cotten. It, yeah, it was just an amazing array of people you know and it would be--Nimrod Workman--and it would be a lot of the same people from--but there'd be usually different ones too, so there was a mixture of the same people and new people on different tours. So you'd be, you know, you'd be rattling around in this van over these little mountain roads (laughs) and it was very hard scrabble. And it was always, you know one of the big things is the tour was totally integrated, you know. And that was a big--that was--it had to be both black and white musicians on every tour, and you know, we were very conscious, you know we were in the South and we'd go into a restaurant and you know, we made sure that we were sitting not with all black musicians at one end of the table, and all--We'd mix it up and it was a very conscious thing that we were into. And, so, and I feel like that was kind of when--and also we started writing songs--that was when we started writing songs was during that time. Well, writing songs and actually performing them.

MJ: Because prior to the tour you were just, you were performing songs that you learned from other musicians?

AG: Yeah, primarily. And it really, you know--our consciousness was definitely getting raised, you know. We were seeing things, or *I* was seeing things for sure and Hazel nothing was very foreign to her because she'd grown up in that hard scrabble. But *I* was seeing a lot of stuff in the South that I had never really seen before.

NEAR END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A (456)

MJ: It's really interesting what you're saying about what was going on within the group 'cause my first question when I learned that the tours were interracial, or started reading more about them, was how the communities received the tours, the communities were—it was a Southern tour, right?

AG: Yeah.

MJ: So what were your experiences in different places?

AG: Generally, they were really good. You know, we played a lot of different places. We played in little community centers, we played at college—in college auditoriums, and I would say--I'm trying to remember. I mean, I think, you know, it's really too bad Anne is still not with us. She could--Because I don't remember any—Oh, I do remember. I think in general experiences were really positive. And we had, you know, I mean, I have a couple of really strong memories of like Reverend Pearly Brown, who was a blind street singer from Americus, Georgia, and he--we went up into Blacky, Kentucky. And we did a little concert at the community center there and then the next day we sat around where the general store was, and we were staying in the—the guy who owned the general store, we were staying in his—We didn't stay in hotels a lot, we stayed mostly with people who put us up. And were staying at the guy's, his name was Cobble, staying at his, in his house. And then we just kind of --we didn't have anywhere to go the next day so we were just kind of hanging around town and we went down to the general store and Reverend Brown was there. And he was just playing music and people were gathered round and you know, I have a picture of Dock Boggs in this little community center with all these young kids kind of sitting around watching him. And we stopped one time –it was Reverend Pearly Brown and a black steel--national steel guitar player--

named Babe Stovall and we stopped at the Union Grove Fiddler's Convention which was at that time it was just before it kind of fell apart because all these motorcycle gangs would come and tear things up and--I'm sure it was a totally racist scene down there but Babe saw that.

You know, I think the thing was, if you started playing music that's all sometimes people need. You know, I remember talking with--and he's a black guy and this is a totally white scene but he was playing his guitar and people loved that. You know? And, so I think that music really does cross a lot of boundaries.

On the other hand, I--we were somewhere. I don't know if it was Savannah, or Charleston. I think it might have been Savannah. But the van had broken down and we were getting it fixed. And we had to lay over there. And so Anne and I, and Anne was this very petite beautiful long blonde hair big blue eyes kind of you know, heavy Southern accent--She and I went looking for a place we could get something to eat. And we walked, saw this—we were just kind of wandering down the street—we saw this it looked like a bar but it was open and we walked in and there's nobody there. The guy behind the counter, we asked him if we could get some sandwiches and he said "sure." So we sat down in a booth to wait for him to make the sandwiches and Johnny Shines, who was a black blues singer who was also on the tour, happened to come past the same place and we saw him and we called and asked him to come in, "Hey Johnny" (whispers).

He walked in and the bar guy—the guy making our sandwiches—came out from behind the bar and he said "You know, I'll make ya'll some sandwiches but he's gonna have to take him out." And Anne--I couldn't believe this. She got up in his face and she says, "Listen"--this little blonde thing—and I'm sure he was totally freaked. And he was

this big (gestures to make a wide frame). She got up and she said "You son of a bitch." She said, "That's against the law and I'll have your—I'll have the FBI on your ass so fast you won't know"—And she was shaking her finger in his face like this (both laughing) and he was you know took, he stumbled back. He went through the door and got a *broom* and came out like this with a broom like he was gonna hit her. He didn't. He wouldn't have I'm sure but it was like, he was, it was very threatening. And at that point Johnny said, "Well come on, let's just go." He didn't want to have a big to-do. So we did, we left. But she did call the FBI and--but they sent the State Bureau, so big deal. And I don't know what they--if they ever did anything about it, but--(laughs). They came over at the motel and talked to us about it. But that was quite, that was, there were occasional things like that but there was never, nothing that I remember while we were doing the shows. And not, I mean every now and then traveling, you know going into a restaurant and stuff, you could kind of feel the looks, you know, but I don't remember anything overt. And--'Course I'm talking as a white person, you know. Maybe some of the black people felt it.

NEAR BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (607)

MJ: From my understanding, you and Hazel chose songs that kind of represented the voice of working class Southerners.

AG: Yeah. We definitely did. Because the point of view of the—that was the point of view of the tour. And so it was entertainment but it was also speaking to, you know, trying to raise the consciousness of whoever was listening to us too. Or, in the case of, if we were, you know, playing for the striking miner's dinner of Harlan County or

whatever, we, you know--They didn't want to hear a love song, they wanted to hear a—'grrr'—a song about what they were going through. And so, that was really part of the whole thing.

MJ: And ya'll started writing music on that tour?

AG: We did.

MJ: What were those songs like?

AG: Well, Hazel had written--I'm trying to remember if this is before she went on the tour or sometime during the tour. She wrote this great song called "Black Lung." 'Cause one of her brothers had died of Black Lung. And she--it was just this incredible song. I'll never forget the first time she sang it. Just kind of, it was, like really knocked me over, it was so beautiful. And, you know, her-- I feel like with her it just kind of brought out something that was in her kind of right close to the surface anyway and it just this tour and Anne's support just kind of gave her permission to go for it.

And so she, you know, we didn't do--and we did songs like the Carter Family's "Coal Miner's Blues." And we did, I don't know, I'm trying to think--let's see--I wrote a song called the "Custom-Made Woman Blues" which we did a lot and so, we were I guess we were kind of gearing some of the things we wrote to the tour. And becoming more conscious of, you know, why are we singing this song about some idiot who murdered his wife (MJ laughs), or what, but then you know then we--you could also look at it a different way which is that those sort of things happened a lot, you know. And that's why there's so many songs about it. It happened a lot, and it shouldn't be happening anymore and you can, you know, so you need to talk about that. So it was just kind of because all these, you know, traditional music comes out of people's lives. It's

not just pulled out of the sky somewhere. It, you know—and a lot of song comes from somebody's experience, generally speaking. I mean, there are the people who sit in the boxes in Nashville and write consciously write, try to craft a song a day. But in general great songs that have been written just come from people's experiences and people's lives. And that's what traditional music is all about.

NEAR END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (672)

MJ: I love music because I feel like it can have so many different meanings, or mean so many different things for different people, and with your kind of, woman—the term I would like to use, and I'm not sure this is cool with you, but the term 'woman – centered,' like some of the music--the songs that you write, "Mary Johnson" for example. When I hear that I'm like, 'hell yeah!' (AG laughs). And I know--I know that a lot of young women identify with, with the music that you write. Would you--How do you see your music fitting into like the feminist movement, for example?

AG: Well (laughs). I have to say, I mean I think--Let me see if I can--I feel like neither Hazel--You know what I said at the concert about being at this, this event. I think it was some kind of event around a strike, here in—might have been Winston-Salem, North Carolina. But I wasn't living here at the time. And we were sort of, we are all staying at the motel. And hanging around the pool. It wasn't the tour. It was before we started going on the tour. I can't remember even why I was there. But I was there. And this woman came back from—and she was all excited, and she was part of the (__?) and she says, "I've just been to this great concert," she says. A lecture, or something, on women's liberation. I said, "Women's liberation, what's that?" You know? And it was

kind of like, and she was trying to explain it to me and all this kind of stuff and I--It didn't really mean a whole lot to me at the time. I mean, I--I think that I didn't have – Hazel had a lot of experiences as a woman playing music in the bluegrass scene that she was in around Baltimore. Because it was totally a man scene back then. I mean there were so few—you could count the women on one hand it was--and, and they weren't respected. They were just kind of like, 'oh, you know.' And she was, you know, she was a chick bass player and they might let her get up and sing one song and you know, while she's playing—and that was her experience until she met people who didn't treat her like this.

And then when we started singing together, you know, it was a whole different story. I never had that experience. I never had--I always felt very supported in what, the music that I wanted to do. And when I was learning how to play, I never sort of felt like it was something I shouldn't do, or 'why are you trying to play the banjo,' you know, 'or the fiddle,' or--You know, I just felt like I was supported. And then I--when I lived in Washington DC which is where I met Hazel, when I met her she lived in Baltimore which is really, you know--I was married at the time, my husband and we had friends who played music and there were a lot of guys and they were all kind of, sort of similarly middle class, you know. At least high school graduates if not college. And I never got that vibe from any of them that I shouldn't be doing--you know, they were very supportive. And so, I had a somewhat different experience from Hazel.

But I still could identify with, I mean I still, I mean I could see what was going on around me. And I knew how women were dealt with and to some extent, you know, that happened in my relationships too. I mean I think that---Because it was just a given, you

know. That basically you were responsible for the kids, and you were responsible for the meals, and I didn't really think too much about it. But as I became more conscious of some of the inequities of this system, it you know, I was more aware. And, at the same time, both Hazel and I, you know, we worked a lot with men, you know, in bands and one thing and another, and there was this one time (laughs) we were hired to play at this--some women's thing in New York. And we got there and it was like, they weren't even letting men in the room. And Hazel, I think she was really shocked, you know, and I think it was a heavy lesbian scene, and she—We just didn't realize it, you know, and we got up there and we did our thing and they were "yeah, yeah," they loved it and but they had, they had people there at the door keeping men from coming in. And I think she, I remember--we were a little upset about this at the time because it was like, what if we had--what if we hired our friend Joe (MJ laughs) to come play banjo with us or something, you know. How would we have dealt with that?

And, you know, but that was early on and I realize now--I think there's, there are places for that, I mean I think that some people just feel more comfortable if there aren't men around. I mean, one of the things I like about having an all-girl band is that there aren't any guys in it and it's really fun (laughs). It's different, you know. And so, and there's something kind of neat about it, you know. You spend a lot of time talking about what you're going to wear on the stage and you know, this kind of stuff. And it's just, they--the guys-- wouldn't understand, you know. But, Tom and Brad, they understand, but (laughs), the next best thing to girls.

So, I think we—we just were kind of naïve, we were pretty naïve, in the early days. And we got more educated as time went on. And I think, you know, I think things

have really progressed, and, I don't know--where were we in this conversation (laughing)? I forget what you asked me.

MJ: Well, the idea of being a woman in a--a woman performer in a--

AG: Yeah

MJ: --a field that's, well especially in that time dominated by male performers and—

AG: Well, and it still is. And it's dominated, although there are so many more women in the field now than there used to be. And I think old time music is more male-dominated in this day and time. Than in some ways I think bluegrass music has come further in that sense. I mean, a lot of women, a lot more women in bluegrass music. Although it's still heavily male. But compared to what it was when Hazel and I started doing it, my god. I mean, there's just no comparison. You have some great women musicians. And you have some in old time music too, but I think it is more male dominated. I mean, women generally play support roles. And you know, I don't really--I can't really say I have a problem with that, I mean I take a lot of pride in being a really good rhythm guitar player. And I—but I also make sure that I have places where I can play fiddle too, and be the lead player.

And so, you just have to, you have to--I think sometimes--and the more women that are doing this, the easier it's gonna be, because it's, you know, there's just a bigger support system out there. Sometimes I think—sometimes I think that women just have to, especially women, you know, in their, like, forties and fifties because they grew up when it wasn't quite so easy to be the lead player, as opposed to Ola Belle Reed who, only the leading role will do (laughs). But I mean, so women are used to being the guitar and the

bass player and the support player. If they want to be something else, sometimes it's harder I think to, I think, to kind of do that battle. With yourself, as well as with whoever else.