

CDSS Sings—Jean Ritchie and the Cool of the Day

by Dan Schatz

*Now is the cool of the day
Now is the cool of the day
O This Earth is a garden, the garden of My lord
And He walks in His garden in the cool of the day.*

There was never a time when Jean's Ritchie's voice wasn't part of my life.

Growing up as I did in a community centered around folk music, she was a constant influence. Dulcimers, autoharps, banjos, guitars and voices rang with songs like "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore," "Blue Diamond Mines," and "My Dear Companion"—not to mention older ballads and play party songs—"Loving Hannah," "The Cuckoo" and "Jubilee." Best of all was Jean's own singing—gentle, unassuming and beautiful, with that clear, high voice that took you right to the hollers of Perry County, Kentucky.

I was in my thirties before I got to know Jean personally—she and her husband George Pickow hosted a folk music picnic at their home in Manhasset, NY. We all sat down and sang together, and you've never heard the Long Island suburbs as quiet as it got in that yard when Jean sat down with her dulcimer and started playing "Pretty Saro." That was the day I learned about Jean's graciousness, generosity and humor. This is a woman whose music had given voice to the beauties and tragedies of Appalachian life and culture, who had influenced millions, who had played the Royal Albert Hall and Carnegie Hall, whose singing had helped shape American music, who could rock a baby to sleep in one breath and dress down the strip miners in the next—and here she was, opening her home to all of us without a second thought. In typical form, she found a kind word for everyone who sang that day.

We made music from afternoon to evening, and as shade began to spread over the yard, Jean sat in her garden and sang:

*My Lord, He said unto me,
Do you like My garden so fair?
You may live in this garden if you keep the grasses green
And I'll return in the cool of the day."*

I'd heard the song dozens of times, but I don't know that I'd ever really listened before. That was the moment when its full impact hit me—the beauty and imagery of Jean's words, echoing the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, but also Jean's very contemporary message of responsibility and covenant with earth, the divine and one another.

*You may live in this garden if you keep the waters clean.
You may live in this garden if you will feed My lambs.
You may live in this garden if you keep the people free.*

I got to know Jean and her family after that picnic, and she donated a song to an album I coproduced honoring her friend Utah Phillips. When she received her copy she wrote me a note, thanking me and expressing the hope that someday, someone might do something like that for her. A few months later, Jean suffered a stroke, and I began to wonder whether it might be time to make that CD. After George died Jean, now retired back to Kentucky, mentioned to another friend, Mick Lane, that she worried her old music friends might forget her, and we decided the time had come.



photograph by George Pickow

Jean Ritchie

Mick, our friend Charlie Pilzer and I started gathering artists to record what became the CD *Dear Jean: Artists Celebrate Jean Ritchie*. Jean was living quietly and comfortably in Kentucky, but now she knew she wasn't forgotten. Recording her songs, every single artist gave back to Jean some of the love and support that she had given to all of us for so many years. It was as if, recognizing that Jean now walked in the cool of her own day, the music community she helped to create had come back to her garden to return some of the love, beauty and wisdom she put into the world.

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Now is the Cool of the Day

by Jean Ritchie

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The musical score is written in 2/4 time and consists of five staves of music. The first staff is the beginning of the verse, with chords Am, Em, A, Em, and A above it. The lyrics are: "verse My Lord He said un-to me. Do you like my gar-den so fair? You may". The second staff continues the verse with chords Em, A, E7, and A above it. The lyrics are: "live in this gar-den if you keep the grass-es green. And I'll re-turn in the cool of the day.". The third staff is the start of the chorus, with chords Am, Am, E, Am, G, and Am above it. The lyrics are: "chorus Now is the cool of the day. Now is the cool of the day.". The fourth staff continues the chorus with chords Am, G, Am, and Am above it. The lyrics are: "O this earth is a gar-den, the gar-den of my Lord. And He walks in his". The fifth staff concludes the chorus with chords C and Am above it. The lyrics are: "gar-den in the cool of the day.".

Then my Lord He said unto me,
Do you like my garden so pure?
You may live in this garden, if you keep the waters clean,
And I'll return in the cool of the day.
Chorus

Then my Lord He said unto me,
Do you like my pastures of green?
You may live in this garden, if you will feed my lambs,
And I'll return in the cool of the day.
Chorus

Then my Lord He said unto me,
Do you like my garden so free?
You may live in this garden, if you keep the people free,
And I'll return in the cool of the day.
Chorus

Tune typeset by Peter Barnes

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Jean died this past June, surrounded by family who sang by her bedside. Her last performance came at a concert in Kentucky just one year ago, when Susie Glaze, John McCutcheon and Kathy Mattea came to sing for Jean one more time at the Union Church in Berea. Jean spent the entire evening singing along from her front row seat. At the end of the evening, Jean turned around in her wheelchair and directed us all in “The Peace Round.” Then, with Jean’s family gathered around her, the room stilled and then echoed with the beauty of the Ritchie family goodnight song, “Twilight A-Stealing.” Thinking on it now, it was a fitting close to a life of love and music.

*Twilight a-stealing over the sea
Shadows are falling dark on the lea
Borne on the night wind, voices of yore
Come from the far off shore.*

Thinking on it now, it was a fitting close to a life of love and music.

These things are important—honoring friendship, listening to elders, reclaiming our heritage, protecting the land. Music is important, and afternoons spent enjoying good company. Life deserves to be celebrated, and Jean Ritchie taught generations to celebrate life.

Dan Schatz is a Grammy® nominated folksinger, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer. His most recent album, The Promise of the Sowing, was released on Folk-Legacy Records in August 2015.

WEB EXTRA: <https://soundcloud.com/dan-schatz/now-is-the-cool-of-the-day>.



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More recent developments might not be directly traceable to conversations held that weekend, but they were surely inspired by the energy and enthusiasm it engendered. Carol Barry’s Advanced ECD series has encouraged callers and dancers alike to challenge themselves anew. Eager dancers prompted Noel Osborn to launch a couples’ dance series this fall with a series of progressive lessons in Scandinavian dance (schottische and hambo). Last August, I started an Irish set dancing series in Stillwater which draws dancers and musicians from around the state. Tulsa organizers are targeting recruitment at their contra dance, having taken advantage of the organizers’ workshop at the Tour stop in Lawrence to build strategies based on other communities’ successes.

If I could point to one thing that has enhanced our state’s dance communities more than any other, it would be travel. Almost all of the callers, dancers, musicians and other volunteers who are involved in organizing our events travel regularly to dance weekends and workshops throughout the South and Midwest, and some go much farther afield—including abroad. We all bring new knowledge and ideas back with us, enriching Scissortail. Nowhere was this proactive approach to travel more visible than in Lawrence last autumn—Oklahomans were in workshops organized for callers, organizers and musicians, and participated as dancers in English country dancing, morris dancing, contra, waltz and more.

If you’d like to include Oklahoma in your travel plans, consider joining us this spring for the Flamingo Fling, with Great Bear Trio and caller Mary Wesley. More information about Scissortail can be found at <http://www.scissortail.org/> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/scissortail/>.

Louise Siddons is a dance caller and organizer in Stillwater, OK—and elsewhere—and Vice President of Scissortail Traditional Dance. She’s particularly interested in youth recruitment, to which end she is running a workshop for the Next Generation of English country dance leaders at CDSS’s English Dance Week at Pinewoods this summer. In her spare time, she’s a professor of art history at Oklahoma State University. She is grateful to Noel Osborn and Carol Barry for information about the early history of Scissortail.

photo by Marcelle Lipke