

The Arts

Fire in the Rain...Singer in the Storm: A Review

Fire in the Rain...Singer in the Storm: An Autobiography, by Holly Near with Derk Richardson, William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, 1990.

Reviewed by Lee Russell

Holly Near is one of my personal heroes, and it would be almost impossible for me to write a negative review of this book. I admire her courage, strength, and outspokenness; her tireless efforts on behalf of the causes she believes in; her central role in the creation and growth of women's music; her ability to make a career in alternative music work on her own terms; her high energy concert performances; her talent as a song writer; and her great big voice. Most of all, I admire her commitment to this work over the long haul. She has worked for twenty years now and shows no signs of stopping.

I was excited to learn that she was writing an autobiography; I wanted to know more about what makes this amazing woman tick. Like the artist herself, the book delivers.

Fire in the Rain...Singer in the Storm tells the story of Holly Near's remarkable life and career, including her early work with Jane Fonda, touring to protest the war in Vietnam, and the genesis and growth of her company, Redwood Records, which over the years went from a family business run by her parents from their dining room table to a rather contentious feminist collective, and finally to the stable partnership it remains today. She also talks about her involvement in the early stages of women's music; of a 1975 California tour with Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, and Margie Adams, she says "We walked onstage. The place exploded. I thought for a moment, 'My God, we are the Beatles of the women's movement!'"

Although Holly considered herself straight, she fell in love with Meg Christian and came out publicly as a lesbian at the first Michigan Women's Festival in 1976. She has worked with a wide variety of people, including Ronnie Gilbert of the Weavers; Inti-Illimani, the exiled Chilean folk-singing group; and Susan Freundlich, her longtime sign-language interpreter. All of these people are in the book. The book also chronicles her growing politicization, her commitment to coalition work, and her ever-expanding work for peace and justice, with special emphasis on Latin America.

She estimates that over the course of her career, she has raised almost \$10 million for the causes in which she believes.

There are many other lesser-known stories as well. The collaboration between Redwood Records and Sweet Honey in the Rock was painful and forced the members of Redwood to confront their internalized racism. Holly's relationship with Olivia Records was also difficult. Holly considered Olivia to be like in-laws, with all of the tension that implies.

Fire in the Rain describes the internal conflicts of this complex woman whose lesbianism does not seem to come easily to her (although she insists on calling herself a lesbian, it is clear that emotionally and sexually, she is bisexual), who struggled with political correctness in the 1970's, and whose punishing schedule and ceaseless touring caused a series of serious health problems that led eventually to a complete collapse in late 1984. Holly spent most of 1985 slowly healing herself. She is unsparingly honest in her self-examination throughout the book, but never more than when talking about her breakdown and recovery.

Holly Near comes across as a large-spirited and generous woman, writing with great affection about the people she loves: her family, her many friends, her partners at Redwood. We see someone who is fully engaged in her life, intensely involved in the world around her, passionate about people and causes,

and refusing to fit herself into someone else's narrow box.

Fire in the Rain is not without its faults. Holly Near's great talent is as singer, songwriter, and performer. She is not particularly gifted as a writer, and many parts of her story do not come alive. Much of the treatment of her life is analytical and philosophical. She talks about events and feelings, but we cannot feel them through her.

This is especially true in the sections on her relationships. The description of her relationship with Meg Christian, potentially one of the most interesting sections of the book, is limited by her desire to protect their privacy. As a result, the texture of the relationship comes through dimly, and the reasons it began, grew, faded, and ended are never entirely clear. Her second lesbian partnership was with the singer Nancy Vogl; since their relationship broke up, she has had no long-term partners, although

(continued on next page)


THE [KINGS OF ROCK - APPELLA]

NYLONS

another all points production

**FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 7
AT 8PM
FLYNN
THEATRE**

"impeccable
singing...
spellbinding..."



Times

ALL SEATS RESERVED • \$ 21.50 • \$ 18.50 • \$ 12.50
CALL 86 - FLYNN OR STOP BY:
THE FLYNN THEATRE BOX OFFICE, BURLINGTON
THE UVM CAMPUS TICKET STORE, BURLINGTON
BUCH SPIELER RECORDS, MONTPELIER