

Holly Near is a singer—about that there is no doubt—and yet her remarkable career steered her course to become one of the most articulate and responsive social change artists of our time. The legacy of work she has created, unsurpassed in its depth, breadth, and scope, stretches far beyond the mainstream music business. At the center of social change movements for the last forty years, Holly Near has inspired generations of artists and world citizens to commit their hearts and talents to peace and justice.

Near's career began at age eight when she sang in public for the first time at a talent contest put on by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Her *a cappella* version of “Oh What A Beautiful Morning” from the musical Oklahoma brought the house down and sparked Holly's dream to become a singer/dancer on Broadway.

Throughout high school, Holly sang in all the school productions and, in her senior year, she won the coveted leading role of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*. She also sang with a folk group, the “Freedom Singers,” that “covered” many of The Weavers' arrangements. Living in the small, rural town of Potter Valley in Northern California, Holly was unaware that the original “Freedom Singers” were putting their lives in danger in the South as they sang for the Civil Rights movement. Nor did she know that Bernice Reagon was one of the founders of this group and that many years later, Holly and Bernice would become peers and great friends. Likewise, she could not know that in future years she would tour with Ronnie Gilbert from The Weavers, share many stages with Pete Seeger, and work with Veterans Against the War.

Near's activism began early in her life, hearing her parents, Anne and Russell Near, discuss world events over their morning coffee before heading out to work on their cattle ranch. Holly and her three siblings were included in these discussions and their opinions and questions respected and answered. Her parents were active in their local community: Anne set up a much-needed kindergarten in Potter Valley and Holly's father was elected to the school board and worked to end corporal punishment.

Among her peers and at school, Holly struggled with the types of moral and ethical issues she would confront throughout her life: how to support a friend forbidden to dance because of her religion; debating her stance on racism with a friend newly moved to the area from Mississippi; wondering about the point of desk drills in the event of a nuclear attack. Early in high school Holly joined a group whose goal was to get the military draft board off the campus and another group who fought to change the dress code so that girls could wear pants to school. The first effort failed. The latter taught her the value of long-term struggle. By the time she was a senior, girls were allowed to wear pants on Friday if there was a football game!

After high school, Holly moved to Los Angeles to attend UCLA. She studied musical theater and political science. A few months into her studies, she attended a Nina Simone concert—an electrifying experience that struck a deep chord. Holly remembers being one of the few white people in the audience, a new experience for a girl from rural northern California. When Nina Simone sang Mississippi God Damn, the audience rose to its feet. Ms. Simone's power to infuse the audience with courage did not go unnoticed by 18-year-old Holly Near.

As a freshman, Holly won the role of Sister Sarah Brown in *Guys and Dolls* and, as part of a fellow student's senior project, Holly was invited to play opposite him in a scene from the musical, *110 In The Shade*. She played Lizzie Curry to his Bill Starbuck. A number of talent agents saw the performance and a month later, Holly had an agent. She left UCLA to begin her career. That was 1968. Holly has been working full-time as an artist ever since.

Holly appeared in a few films before landing a role on Broadway in the radical musical *Hair*. One night, just after the Kent State shootings on May 4, 1970, the cast gathered before the show to mourn the dead students. Against all union rules, they agreed to deliver a protest from the stage by pausing the show to make a statement. This was, after all, an anti-war play. Holly remembers that night, "*I didn't even know where Kent State was. I didn't know where Cambodia was. Even with my family's interest in the world, my experience was still very limited. It never occurred to me that within a few years I would travel to Viet Nam as a peace delegate and a guest of the musician's union. I couldn't know that Dean Kahler, one of the badly injured students, would ask me to write an anthem for Kent State, which I would sing at the annual memorial event on May 4, 1974, a song called 'It Could Have Been Me.'*" At the event Holly met civil rights leader, Julian Bond, and singer Judy Collins.

After leaving *Hair*, Holly returned to Hollywood where she did a small but lovely scene with Seymour Cassel in John Cassavettes' film, *Minnie and Moskowitz*. She also performed guest parts on the television shows *All In The Family*, *Room 222*, *The Bold Ones*, and *The Partridge Family*, to name just a few. However, none of the parts she got were singing roles.

Then Holly auditioned for a slot in the Free The Army (FTA) tour. She got the part and within the week, she was on her way to New York with the FTA cast to do a fundraising concert at the Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center—with special guest Nina Simone!

The Free The Army show consisted of a series of skits based on the writings of Viet Nam veterans who were opposing the war and racism from within the military. The cast wrote and performed the skits, which were interspersed with songs and poems. The most visible and well-known participants were Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland; other cast members included the powerful civil rights singer Len Chandler, actor Rita Martinson, poet Pamela Donegan, Yale Zimmerman, comic Paul Mooney and satirical writer, Michael Alaimo. A few weeks after Holly joined the troupe, they headed for the Pacific—Hawaii, The Philippines, Okinawa, and Japan—where they performed outside U.S. military bases on a mobile stage, usually set up by the cast and crew in a field. Thousands of men and women from the military attended as did people from the local communities. Holly remembers this trip as being a "*university of political activism, social change music, and a quick course in the meaning of the military industrial complex. It was on this trip I became a feminist. I came back completely overwhelmed.*"

On her return, Holly did a few more acting jobs. She played Billy Pilgrim's daughter in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, a powerful film directed by George Roy Hill and released in 1972. But mostly, she began to write songs. While on the FTA tour, Holly often felt that she

didn't have the appropriate song to spontaneously pull out to serve the moment. She knew some songs from the labor and civil rights movements but found she wanted to sing about what she was experiencing from a woman's point of view. Fortunately, the two songs Holly was assigned to sing in the FTA Show were feminist anti-war songs by Beverly Grant. These songs, along with all she had learned on the trip, inspired Holly to write.

“Armed” with a new repertoire, Holly began to sing in and around Los Angeles. One venue was the famed Ash Grove where she double-billed with Sonny Terry and Brownie Magee as well as Bill Evans! She sang at The Ice House in Pasadena and the legendary Troubador in West Hollywood; and she sang at a fundraising event with Linda Ronstadt and Bonnie Raitt. Holly was finally getting to be a singer.

She began to make the rounds to music producers and record companies to see if she could get signed. Across the board she was told to change the lyrics to her songs—they weren't “pop” enough for them, that is, they were too political. Undeterred by this rejection, Holly decided to make one record on her own, to document the political songs she had written, and then return to the music business ready to sing the pop music they wanted her to sing. Encouraged by Alex Hassilev of the Limelighters and producer Julie Thompson, Holly, along with her longtime friend and pianist, Jeff Langley, made a record, but to put the record out, she needed a label and a business license. Her parents agreed to help and turned a part of their home in Ukiah, California, into a distribution center, that is to say, the dining room table. So Holly founded Redwood Records in 1972. Without realizing it at the time, Holly created what was probably the first independent, artist-owned record company started by a woman. Redwood Records survived for nearly 20 years and recorded dozens of U.S. and international artists whose work was too political for the mainstream.

What a ride... in the five years since leaving home and all the familiarity of Northern California, Holly had appeared in films, acted on television, performed on Broadway, toured with FTA, and started Redwood Records!

Holly volunteered at the Beverly Hills-based nonprofit organization, “Another Mother For Peace,” and also for the committee to defend Daniel Ellsberg and Tony Russo who had just released the Pentagon Papers. One day, Tom Hayden came into the office where Holly was answering phones and said that Jane Fonda had suggested they talk. Tom and Jane Fonda, along with dozens of activists across the country, were putting together a tour—The Indochina Peace Campaign—focusing on the need for citizens to stop funding the war. He and Jane wanted Holly to help with the cultural arm of the tour and so Holly went on the road with IPC. It was during this time that Holly established an audience who became familiar with her music. Thousands came to hear Jane and Tom, but they went away wondering, “Who is this Holly Near?” Before too long, orders for her record started coming in to her home-based record company, keeping her parents busy. And on the road, Holly would tear out the record store page from each town's Yellow Pages phone book and send them to her folks who, in turn, called the stores and got Holly's record placed. Inspired by the success of the IPC tour, Holly contacted many of the people she had met while traveling and set up a series of small concerts

around the country. She and Jeff Langley took to the road, lugging records with them wherever they went.

During this time, the women's movement was moving into full swing. Men and women who were interested in integrating feminism into their peace and justice work were attending the concerts. After each show, in the lobby, Holly listened to women's stories, which led her to write more women identified songs. Before long, Holly was known, not only to the peace and justice movement but also to the women's movement. She was writing lyrics about women's lives from a global, as well as a personal, perspective. Very few other artists were taking up this challenge; Near sought them out—Wallflower Order Dance Brigade, Kristen Lems, Beverly Grant, Malvina Reynolds, Peggy Seeger. In under a year, Holly met dozens of women who were not only writing feminist and, sometimes, lesbian songs, but they were building a movement. Excluded from the mainstream music business, women were starting record labels, building a distribution network, and working with newly formed women's bookstores to get the music out across the country. Cassettes, carried in back pockets traveled around the world, some in secret to places where it was life threatening for such ideas to be discussed.

In 1975 Holly was invited to join Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, Margie Adam, Lily Tomlin, and the Alice Stone Ladies Society Orchestra to do a fundraiser in LA for the Women's Building. A year later, Meg, Cris, Margie, and Holly did a seven-city tour of California called "Women On Wheels," which was the first major tour of feminist and lesbian artists. Although Holly was not gay, she witnessed firsthand the homophobia that was directed toward these women. Near decided not to say she was straight just for the comfort of it.

On the tour, Holly once again experienced the power of music. While listening to Meg Christian sing *Valentine Song*, Holly fell in love. This was an unexpected turn of events but as was her nature, she faced the music.

Across the country, Holly became closely identified with the lesbian movement and was, perhaps, the first out lesbian to be interviewed in a popular magazine when People magazine ran a story on her work. Holly made a point of saying the word "gay" when she sang at national and international peace gatherings, just to get people used to hearing the word. It was dangerous territory but Near felt she wanted to be OUT about all her beliefs, whether they concerned war or class or race or gender. She did not want to be the keeper of secrets.

Holly came out before it was acceptable in the entertainment industry. Along with her peers, she paved the way for the next generation of out artists. Her gay rights stance caused her to lose some of her audience on the left but Near embraced her new audience and, at the same time, never compromised her global perspective. The ability to link together social justice and human rights issues became the main focus of Holly's work. But it came at a cost to her. Many people who worked for peace didn't want to hear about women's rights or gay rights. Some who worked in the newly born gay rights movement were not sure they agreed with Holly's anti-imperialist perspectives. Years later, Near's relationship with a man caused another loss of audience but ultimately, most came back because Near never abandoned, she just kept moving

forward in her life. There was something about Holly's manner, her humor, her talent that eventually brought together people in spirit if not always in perfect agreement. With her amazingly strong voice she could calm a room, bring focus to a conference, inspire a crowd. She still does.

Holly sang where others would not. She went to war-torn El Salvador to sing at a music festival for peace. She and the other musicians were followed by death squad cars and had to keep strict curfew. In Washington, DC, she joined with Lebanese and Palestinian artists for a concert in support of children in Lebanon. For years, no other non-Arab artist would perform at the event except for Pete Seeger. Holly performed a duet with Simone Shaheen as they turned Near's Appalachian-styled Mountain Song into a cry for peace in the Middle East.

Holly instigated national tours that focused on issues of nuclear disarmament and clean energy, and defended women's studies on college campuses. She did concerts and rallies that supported the United Farm Workers, striking nurses, ending the death penalty, and raising awareness about racism in schools.

Holly was often asked to write songs for particular movements. One such song, *Hay Una Mujer Decaparecida*, became an anthem of solidarity work with Central and Latin America. A women's group in San Francisco had sent Holly a list of the names of women who were missing as a result of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Moved by the desperate fates of the women, Holly wrote the song, whose title means, "*There is a woman missing [in Chile].*" At the beginning of the song she calls out the women's names. It is a haunting piece and often audiences would sing out the names with her. Chilean exiles would come backstage and say that one of the names called was a sister, a mother, an aunt, a sweetheart. Near says, "*I remember hearing that Allende had been killed. I didn't know who Allende was. I didn't even know where Chile was. But before long I found myself hanging out with Chilean exiles, hearing the music of Violeta Parra and Victor Jara. I learned that Victor had been murdered by Pinochet thugs, that artists were targeted. The music always took me where I needed to go. I followed my ignorance. I went where I was afraid.*"

Throughout, Holly remained a consummate artist, appearing many times at Carnegie Hall solo. She also appeared there with the NYC Gay Men's Chorus; with the Chilean ensemble, Inti Illimani; and as part of a multi-artist event to raise money for children with AIDS when she sang with the Boy's Choir of Harlem. Holly loved working in collaboration.

In the late 1970s, Holly and her sisters, Laurel and Timothy, created a show, *The Near Sisters*, which they performed only twice—once at Zellerbach Hall at U.C. Berkeley and at Royce Hall at UCLA. "*People still come up and tell me how much they loved that show. There is something about families performing together that holds a special spark. I think it would be great fun if one day all my family could end up on stage together. Especially now there is the next generation of nieces and nephews who are all singers, dancers, actors, and skateboarders!*"

Also in the late '70s, Near traveled to Japan with Bernice Johnson Reagon to sing at the conference on the A- and H-Bombs. This event marked the beginning of a long working relationship with Dr. Reagon. Holly, along with Amy Horowitz, produced the first concert tour in California for Sweet Honey in the Rock, a group founded by Dr. Reagon and Redwood Records was honored to release one of their early recordings.

In the early 1980s, Holly joined forces with Ronnie Gilbert, the female voice that was part of the legendary group The Weavers (Ronnie, Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes, and Fred Hellerman). *"It was a perfect collaboration for the time."* says Near. *"Generations attended the concert together. People who had been victims of the terrible red-baiting perpetuated by the House of Un-American Activities came with their daughters who were losing their teaching jobs because they were lesbians and with their sons who were blockading trains that carried nuclear weapons. These were the most amazing audiences. We sold out two nights at The Philharmonic Hall in New York City. Everywhere we went the shows were packed with an energy that sizzled."*

Holly collaborated to produce a tour (in 1984) that presented Holly, Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, and Ronnie in a series of concerts. It became known as the H.A.R.P tour (after the initials of their first names). A live recording of the same name was released. That same year, Holly brought Inti Illimani to the U.S. to tour together and record a live album. She also toured in Australia, Nicaragua, and England. *"This was the year that almost killed me. My back had gone out. I was wearing a brace. I was in such pain that it took me 10 minutes to get from sitting to standing position. This was the year that warned me. I was working too hard and trying to do too much."*

In the early '90s, Holly wrote her autobiography, *Fire In The Rain...Singer In The Storm*, which she and her sister, Timothy, turned into a one-person musical of the same name. Holly performed the show in several cities including a run at The Mark Taper Forum in LA and at the off-Broadway Union Street Theater in NYC.

Finally, Holly slowed down. She moved back to Ukiah, California and for the first time in her adult life, had a garden and a line to hang her laundry on to dry. *"I was able to spend time with my mother and help raise my nieces and nephews and a step daughter!"* Near created Calico Tracks Music and used her time at home to reissue her older recordings in historic collections. In a small local studio, owned by Spencer Brewer, Near recorded a tasty collection of standards from the '30s and '40s with John Bucchino on piano. Spencer also introduced her to Alison de Grassi who has been her assistant and production coordinator ever since.

In 2009, Holly was invited to sing at Villa Grimaldi, the infamous prison in Chile that has now been reclaimed by the survivors and the families of the disappeared. The prison has been turned into a Park for Peace. Near says, *"It was so overwhelming to sing to the families and to see the names that were in my song up on the [wall of the disappeared](#). Family members were coming up to me before I sang asking if I would add their loved one's name to the song."*

Now in her sixties, Holly Near tries not to trip over regrets. *"It is humbling to look back and wish that I had known then what I know now, but isn't that how it goes? I am honored to have had the life I have. I was taught by the best. I was held up by community. And I was able to serve as a peace ambassador all around the world for over 40 years."*

Holly's songs continue to be referenced, anthologized, sung, and re-recorded by other artists. Her grace, humor, and integrity has earned her the reputation as one of the most articulate social change artists working today, with a power and maturity that come from decades of love and fear, despair, and inspiration.

In the last few years, Near has released several CDs of new material as well as a mostly *a cappella* recording with the emma's revolution duo (Pat Humphries and Sandy O). Sheet music of her songs are available on her website on request.

Throughout her career, Near has garnered many honors. Notable among them are a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize as one of the "1000 Women for Peace," *Ms. Magazine's* Woman of the Year award, The Legends of Women's Music Award, and a Freedom of Information award from the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

Holly's career is far from over. She continues her work. Some highlights from the past few years include:

- Traveled to Juarez, Mexico with Eve Ensler, Jane Fonda, Sally Fields, Christine Lahti, and noted Mexican performers to protest the uninvestigated killings of hundreds of young women
- Returned to Chile, met with activists, and experienced the devastating earthquake of 2010
- Sang several times at the annual gathering to close down the School of the Americas, a combat training school that teaches torture techniques to military regimes around the world
- Sang at most of the major demonstrations in DC, in particular the March for Women's Lives and the major gatherings to stop the war against Iraq
- In 2008, she organized a "Sing Out The Vote" campaign in Ohio to rally support for then-candidate Obama's close race against John McCain and Sarah Palin.
- Her song, Singing For Our Lives, which she wrote when Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone were assassinated in San Francisco in 1978, was adapted as the official hymn of the Unitarian Universalist Association and was recently performed in an episode of the television series, Six Feet Under
- Holly offers master classes (from college campuses to major corporations) on the art of public presentation for artists, religious leaders, activists, and teachers
- In 2004, she was honored to give The Ware Lecture at the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly

- She participated in a dialogue with Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, and Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon on political song and responsible citizenship at Ohio State University
- Holly's portrait is one of sixteen that hang on the walls of the Harriet Tubman Theater at The Freedom Center in Cincinnati; the other portraits of musicians, singers and entertainers include Paul Robeson, Marion Anderson, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Bono, and Bob Marley.
- Her papers are archived at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe/Harvard and she donated her posters to the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. As one researcher said, "If you follow Holly's career, you follow the social change movements of the seventies through to the present."

What next?

*"I want to work with people I love. Any chance I get to sing with Bernice Reagon, I will do so. I would have loved to sing with Harry Belafonte but I know he has retired. I loved getting to sing with Odetta. I grew up with fantastic women artists and, when I get to work with them, it makes me happy. Adrienne Torf, Barbara Higbie, Linda Tillery, Jackeline Rago, Ferron, Cris Williamson. And then there are the young ones coming up.*

*I would like to find funding to produce a world tour of progressive artists that work outside the mainstream. They are such great artists but because they are not promoted by the mainstream industry, they are lesser known. It is sad that the world does not have the opportunity to hear them. We have a long tradition of social change activism. Music is such a great way to bridge the hostility gap and celebrate together. But the artists are out there doing that work, with or without money. Bless them."*

Near is not a big star. Her photo does not appear on the cover of magazines sold at the grocery store check out stand. She is a quiet storm but her work has left a lasting impression on the American psyche. And, she is still *Singing For Our Lives*.