



Near, Holly (b. 1949)

by Teresa Theophano

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Holly Near in concert.
Photograph by Mike
Rogers courtesy Holly
Near.

Activist, singer, and songwriter Holly Near has been a tremendous influence in the formation and promotion of the women's music movement. Popular among lesbian-feminists in the 1970s and still changing and growing today, the prolific Near founded alternative record label Redwood Records in 1972 to promote music from feminist and politically conscious artists worldwide. To date she has released twenty albums of her own.

Born to political activist parents in rural Ukiah, California, Near grew up with two sisters in a supportive, liberal family environment. She demonstrated an early proclivity for performance and began singing publicly at the age of eight, going on to act in local talent shows and, later, theater productions.

In her early adulthood she broke into film and television, appearing on such shows as *All in the Family*, *Mod Squad*, and *The Partridge Family*. Her film credits include *Cult of the Damned* (1969), the John Cassavetes film *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), and *Slaughterhouse Five* (1972).

She also appeared on Broadway in the original production of *Hair* (1969) and toured the Pacific with Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, and other performers in an anti-war show called *FTA (Free the Army)* in 1971.

Near's passionate commitment to social change was truly awakened at UCLA, where she enrolled in 1967. This commitment led her to focus her artistic talents primarily on politically-themed music.

Near began writing music and soon formed her label Redwood Records, which was created specifically to release her first album, *Hang in There* (1973). Redwood came into existence because major labels told Near that her lyrics were simply too political. From the start, her folksy songwriting straightforwardly addressed such issues as gay rights, feminism, pacifism, and racism.

Near's pioneering work in helping to create the women's music genre distinguishes her from other political singers. She toured constantly in support of the peace movement and other causes, but she quickly became especially associated with the women's movement and the women's music movement. She performed at the first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1976; and there she outed herself as a lesbian.

One of the consequences of Near's coming out was that Redwood became a lesbian-feminist label. Near's parents had been helping to run Redwood, but they turned it over to Holly and the women who would become her business partners and the company took its place alongside the legendary Olivia Records as one of the most important alternative record labels.

However, Near's lesbian identification veered toward the political rather than the wholly personal, and even then she never felt entirely comfortable with lesbian-feminist separatism. She had had heterosexual relationships in the past, and when she became involved with men again, she was initially met with feelings of distrust by many in the women's music community.

Despite Near's reluctance to label her sexual orientation at all, she worked to regain the trust of the

women's music community by her unflagging commitment to lesbian issues and the ongoing use of lesbian themes in her work. "Except for the purpose of inviting people out of isolation or for the purpose of defense," Near said in a recent interview, "I try to avoid self-definition through group identity."

In her autobiography, Near comments that her idea of lesbianism is not a narrow one defined simply by sexual experience or preference. "My lesbianism is not linked to sexual preference," she writes. "For me, it is part of my world view, part of my passion for women and central in my objection to male domination."

Whatever her views on self-definition, Near's adamantly feminist views, along with her continual promotion of gay and lesbian rights and culture, make her an important and accepted part of the movement.

Although many of her songs use genderless lyrics in an attempt to appeal broadly across all sexual and gender barriers, Near also writes songs that specifically celebrate lesbian love (perhaps most famously, "Simply Love") and lesbianism itself (as in "She").

However, it is no accident that her best known song is the inclusive anthem "Singing for Our Lives," which has the moving refrain "We are Gay and Straight together . . . / We are old and young together . . . / We are a gentle loving people / And we are singing, singing for our lives."

Near's recent albums include a compilation called *Simply Love: The Women's Music Collection*--which features selections from her work over the last 25 years as well as other classic women's music artists such as Alix Dobkin, Meg Christian, and Cris Williamson--and her solo record *Edge* (2000). Both were released on Near's own Calico Tracks music label, established after the demise of Redwood Records in 1993.

In addition to her musical accomplishments, Near is the author of a children's book entitled *The Great Peace March* (1997). Her autobiography was published in 1990.

Near's awards and honors are numerous: she has been recognized by the ACLU, the National Lawyers Guild, and the National Organization for Women, and was chosen as *Ms. Magazine's* 1985 Woman of the Year. Her pioneering work with lesbian and feminist music earned her the 2000 Legends of Women's Music Award.

Near continues to tour extensively and to teach performance and songwriting classes.

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Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).