

MEL LYMAN ON MUSIC

For me to write about music as something other than me is like a fish trying separate itself from the water. I SWIM in it. I was born into music and to me it is all the same... the various shores being the only definition. There are rivers and streams, lakes and oceans, they all hold water. The first cry that left these lips was the first music this body has ever played. Since then it has been a long process of control and release, dams, irrigation, flood control, navigation. I wish I could be more specific. I will try.

As an emotional young man full of visions of young women, I sought for a way to express it. I yearned to play the piano and sing the blues. Pianos were too big and expensive so I bought a harmonica and blew my fool brains out. I still wanted to sing so I bought a banjo and sang my fool brains out. Now you can say I was playing folk music but really I was just playing my fool brains out. I played and sang anything I could play and sing and folk songs were the easiest. I would have given my left arm to scream and sob through a harmonica like Jimmy Reed was screaming and sobbing through his harmonica but somehow I just couldn't get that sound. One day I strapped a pack of harmonicas to my back, slung my banjo over my shoulder, and set out from Portland, Oregon on a freight train to find all the folk musicians in this country that I admired and find out how come they could do what I couldn't do. That took me several years. Brother Percy Randolph in New Orleans taught me how to play the blues on a mouth harp. He didn't teach me how to FEEL them, I'd been lonely all my life, but he taught me how to make the instrument REFLECT how I felt. J.C. Burris, Sonny Terry's nephew, taught me more in the basement of a tenement house in Harlem. Reverend Gary Davis took me around with him for awhile and told me wonderful stories. Woody Guthrie taught me real songs. I got drunk with Jimmy Reed's wife. Obray Ramsey took me in as his son and for two years I learned what a banjo is capable of. I went everywhere and absorbed music from everyone; I became a musician. Now I'm waiting for all this noise to settle down so I can play some music....

Mel Lyman