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Mill Valley, California

MISS RITA ABRAMS

1943-

An Interview Conducted by

Leonard Anderson

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Miss Rita Abrams

Rita was born in 1943 in Cleveland, Ohio. She went to Simmons College in Boston, transferred to the University of Michigan, and then went back to Boston for graduate work in Special Education at Boston University. She moved to Mill Valley in 1969 to teach kindergarten at the Strawberry Point School.

On Christmas Day, 1969, she sat on a bench in the downtown plaza and composed "Mill Valley." A producer liked the song when she played it for him, recorded it with the Strawberry Point School third grade, and sent it to the Reprise Records division of Warner Brothers. It was rushed into release in March, 1970 and became an instant international hit. Soon after it was made the "official" song of the City of Mill Valley.

Interviewed August 30, 1970 in her home at 96 Miller Avenue, Mill Valley.

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RITA ABRAMS

Leonard Anderson

Today is August 4, 1970. I am interviewing Miss Rita Abrams, who has recently recorded a song by the appropriate name of "Mill Valley." It has taken off on the charts, as they say in the disc jockey business, and is a national hit.

Rita, I want you to give me some information about yourself, about your background, where you grew up, where you went to school, how you got into music.

Rita Abrams

I was born in 1943, 26 years ago, in Cleveland, Ohio. I lived in Cleveland until I was 18 and then moved to Cincinnati and went to college, first at Simmons College in Boston and then I transferred to the University of Michigan. I graduated from Michigan and then went back to Boston and enrolled in Boston University Graduate School in Special Education.

Music was a hobby for all those years, and I did take classical piano for ten years, but I never considered it to be anything more than a hobby.

When I finished graduate school I started teaching in East Boston. I taught there for a year and then decided that I wanted a change of climate and scenery, so I came out to the San Francisco area. I hadn't ever heard of Mill Valley, but I needed a place to teach, since it was two days before school was starting. I took a map and picked out every name on the map and called for vacancies. The name Mill Valley was on the map. I called, and they had one opening, for a kindergarten teacher. The minute I drove into the town, I knew that was where I wanted to be. Luckily I got the job.

I taught in Mill Valley that year and the following

year. Both years I taught kindergarten.

I've always written songs, and I was so inspired by the beauty of Mill Valley itself that on Christmas Day when I was walking through town I decided I wanted to write a song about it. I wrote the song that same day and then taught it to the children at the Strawberry Point Elementary School. Shortly after that I met a producer who liked the song and decided to make a recording of it. That's how it came to be a record.

Mr. Anderson

You said that when you came to Mill Valley you knew this was the place you wanted to be. What about Mill Valley attracted you? Was it the natural setting or the people or the architecture of the buildings or what?

Miss Abrams

At first it was just a general feeling of warmth and congeniality that I felt when I drove into the town. It was a beautiful sunny day, and there were so many trees, and people just seemed to have an air of contentment about them, walking through the town. It was the smallest town I had ever lived in, so that was intriguing to me because it seemed much more personal.

As I talked to people, I discovered there really was a certain feeling of friendliness that Mill Valley seemed to have which was different from other cities I had lived in. Plus the beauty of the town. It's a very pretty place, with the parks and the creeks and the trees, and everything that I ended up writing about in the song. They are all very appealing to me.

Mr. Anderson

Your song, "Mill Valley," and the other side of the record, "Happiest Day of My Life," reflect an obvious talent. How did you get started in music? Did your parents make you take lessons, or did you want to do it on your own?

Miss Abrams

When I was seven years old I got the idea that I wanted to take piano lessons. We went out and bought an old upright piano that had a very clinky sound to it. I somehow stayed with practicing and with lessons, which was different from most children, I guess, who, as they

grow up and have other interests, sort of break away from their music and then regret it later. Somehow I managed to stay with it.

When I reached adolescence and had a lot of unhappy times, I realized I could make myself feel better by writing songs. I wrote my first song when I was 13. Then, just sporadically through the years, I would write more songs, whenever I felt moved to.

Mr. Anderson

In looking over published accounts of your background, I notice reference to a band that you played with in Boston called, I believe, "The Three Faces of Eve." Can you tell us something about that?

Miss Abrams

When I finished graduate school I became involved in this girls' rock band in Boston. It was a group that was started by a student at Harvard Law School and was looking for a pianist. I got the job, and we practiced and practiced, and I became more involved in it. Then I realized that I needed to make a living, and I went into substitute teaching. I soon became so involved with teaching that I would get up at seven every morning and teach for a full day and then go right to practice until 11 o'clock every night. That went on for months and months. Finally when the band broke up I was sort of relieved. I felt very committed to teaching.

Mr. Anderson

Everything seems so fortunate -- your arriving here and teaching at Strawberry Point School and then the song. Everything has just clicked right along.

Miss Abrams

That's exactly the way it happened. That's the way my whole life has been, ever since I came here.

As I said, I had never heard of Mill Valley. I was desperately looking for a place to teach, and I had offers from several places. Mill Valley was just the name of another town. It was only after I drove into the town and saw what it looked like that I knew I wanted to be here. It was really one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me. I could have ended up in Milpitas!

Mr. Anderson

The story behind the song "Mill Valley" is that you went for a walk on Christmas Day 1969 through the downtown area. You sat down on a bench near the bus depot, and you were moved to write this song. What were your feelings at the time, as you can best describe them?

Miss Abrams

I got up early in the morning and walked outside. It was an absolutely beautiful day -- crystal clear and sunny and very quiet outside. I was struck by the difference between that Christmas and previous Christmases I had experienced back East.

I walked along in sort of a haze of contentment and peacefulness. I would meet different people along the way, and they would all smile and talk or say hello. I talked to a little boy on his bicycle, who just drove up and started talking to me as though he'd known me for years, very natural and friendly.

I went to the park and swung on a swing and then walked back along the sidewalk. I was very moved by what a feeling of contentment and peace there was. I keep using the word "peace," because Mill Valley seems like the most peaceful town I've ever lived in.

I sat down on a bench in front of the bus depot, next to a big, friendly dog. I started composing the song in my mind, and it came out variously. I finished it later that night. I wrote it conscious of the fact that I was going to teach it to my children; I wrote it in a very simple style so they could learn it easily. These are the words:

I'm gonna talk about a place that's got a hold on me,
Mill Valley.
A little place where life feels very fine and free,
Mill Valley.
Where people aren't afraid to smile,
And stop and talk with you awhile,
And you can be as friendly as you want to be,
Mill Valley.
Talkin' 'bout Mill Valley, that's my home.

It looks as pretty in the rain as in the sun,
And there's a mountain that belongs to everyone.
And there are creeks that run on endlessly,
And trees as far as you can see,
It makes you feel as if your life has just begun.
Mill Valley.
Talkin' 'bout Mill Valley, California, that's my home.

I know that there may come a time I'll have to leave
Mill Valley.
And every memory will seem like make-believe.
And all the good things that are mine right now
Will call to me and ask me how
I could have left them all behind.
How could I leave Mill Valley?
Talkin' 'bout Mill Valley,
Mill Valley, California, that's my home.

Mr. Anderson

I should add that "Mill Valley" has been adopted by the City Council as the city's official song.

After the music was composed, what was the chain of events that led to its recording? I guess it was first played on KSFO in San Francisco. Since then your life has been rather hectic with interviews and public appearances. What happened between the time the song was first on paper and it's first playing on KSFO?

Miss Abrams

I had taught the song to my kindergarten children. After that I met the producer. When I told him I had written a song for children, he said he was interested in recording children's voices. So I made a tape of the song and played it for him. He liked it. He listened to it about four times, and then he said, "Let's do it." That started the long process of making plans for recording and getting permission from the Mill Valley School District. The administration of the schools was very cooperative and accepting about the whole thing -- even enthusiastic. The superintendent¹ thought it would be a good learning experience, and so did the principal of Strawberry Point School.²

¹Dr. James A. Collins.

²Alfred Gordon.

There was no real opposition or suspicion about the whole thing. People were just very glad their children were getting such an experience.

We got a band in, and for two days we recorded with the children in the kindergarten. It was a great experience, and they were adorable. Then when we heard it on tape we realized the sound wasn't quite professional enough, so it was suggested that we sing it with the third grade class.

The kindergartners got their share of presents and excitement out of the whole thing, so they weren't upset.

The third graders got to go into the studio in San Francisco and record the song against the band track. They learned the whole thing in the space of about two weeks. After the final recording was made, it had to be sent to Reprise Records, with whom the producer had a contract. They had to listen to it and decide whether they wanted to make the record out of the tape. Not only did they like it, but they stood up and clapped when they heard the children singing the first chorus, "Mill Valley." Apparently it was the most refreshing thing that had happened to them in a long time.

A "rush" release was put on the record, and it was officially released on June 10, 1970. Before that, Jack Carney on KSFO had an advance copy sent to him. He called the school, which was very nice of him, and said that in ten minutes he was going to play Miss Abrams' record. The school, of course, went into absolute chaos and pandemonium. Kids and teachers were running all over the place, trying to get to radios. They found all these little staticky radios and huddled around them. We put one radio in the teachers' room, and practically the whole school crammed into the teachers' room, which is strictly off-limits to children at other times. The kids were screaming so loud that you couldn't hear the song, but it was really an exciting experience.

That was a week before school was out, and from then on the school became a television and radio station! Radios were turned on during school hours in all the classrooms to listen to every playing of "Mill Valley."

It was really a delightful experience. It wasn't commercial because it was so much involved with happiness

and with children's joyousness at hearing their own voices and their friends' voices. It was a very exciting and wholesome situation for everybody.

Mr. Anderson

How many records have been sold nationally at this point, and where has it been played?

Miss Abrams

Around 50,000 records have been sold. It has been played all over the world now. One Mill Valley woman called to say that her son in Vietnam had heard it over the Armed Forces Radio. And I've gotten calls from disc jockeys all over. I got one just tonight from Alberta, Canada. Some radio stations are just starting to pick it up and play it.

I've gotten beautiful letters from all over the country, some letters from people who attended school or lived in Mill Valley years ago. Today I got a letter from a boy who is in a reformatory in the midwest. He said he had been listening, and that the song was his only tie with home. He was very moved by it and wanted me to know how happy it made him. There have been a lot of rewarding communications from people.

Mr. Anderson

What kind of reaction have you received from local people in Mill Valley from some of the older residents?

Miss Abrams

Mr. Beedle¹ of the Chamber of Commerce has been absolutely lovely about the whole thing, very excited about it. He said that it "seems to give everybody a big lift," which made me happy to hear.

I think the general reaction, almost unanimously, has been one of pleasure and excitement and pride to hear the people's feelings about the town expressed in the song. A lot of people do feel that it expresses the mood of the town very well.

There are a few who are afraid that it will turn

¹Granville L. Beedle.

Mill Valley into a tourist trap, as other towns have become in recent years, but I feel it's not the kind of a town that can be so easily changed.

Mr. Anderson

What would you say is the essential strength or beauty of Mill Valley? There is an air about Mill Valley, and one purpose of the Oral History Project is to try to capture that. There may be a lot of opinions, but I'd like to hear yours.

Miss Abrams

An example comes to mind. The other day I was standing in line at the bank. A woman, who said she was from Oklahoma, was getting impatient with the length and the slowness of the line. Another woman, who said she had also come from out of town recently, said, "I used to feel that way when I first came to Mill Valley, but now I don't even mind. You just have to get used to that when you come to Mill Valley."

I think this shows that there's a certain leisureliness and restfulness about the place and a lack of tension that's harder and harder to find. To put it more positively as I've said throughout this interview, it's a very peaceful place. It's very warm. People seem sincerely interested in getting to know other people in the town and in sharing the experiences of the town with other people.

This was beautifully illustrated this past Fourth of July when we had the festival which will go down in the annals of Mill Valley history! It was something in which everybody shared. Old people and young people, hip people and straight people, all got together and just enjoyed each other and the feeling of the town. It was a beautiful experience for everybody, because of that sharing.

Mr. Anderson

How has all the attention and publicity that you have received affected your personal life? Do you feel as free as you were before?

Miss Abrams

I'm not as free, in that I don't have the time that I had before, and I feel more responsibilities. I feel responsible to answer letters that people are nice enough to write, and I have to do a lot of talking on the phone

and a lot of organizing the children whenever we have to practice if we want to sing some place.

I went through one period at the beginning of being really overwhelmed by the suddenness of the fame that I was getting, and having people notice me on the street and know who I was. I went through a lot of different stages, and I'm still going through stages about it, because it is a very radical change in one's life to suddenly become any kind of a public personality.

But I think the way in which it happened to me was such a good, healthy way. It was through something that I did, with the help of the children, which was an honest expression of myself and not something that I had to set out to do, or to be untrue to myself. So there's no image that I have to maintain. There's no pressure. I don't have to wear make-up or set my hair when I walk through Mill Valley. I look the way I've always looked, and that's the way people know me. I just feel very much at ease and free to be myself. The nice part is that people are pleased with what it is they hear on the record. It seems to them, and is in fact, an honest expression of myself and of the children.

Mr. Anderson

What kinds of music are you working on now? Are the things that you have in the works now in a similar musical vein to "Mill Valley" -- sort of a light style? Or have you gone into rock or jazz?

Miss Abrams

I think the next record will be one that I wrote a few years ago, which is called "This Time of Life." It's similar in feeling to "Mill Valley," in that it's fairly simple and has a light, easy style to it, not at all sophisticated. It's hard to describe it, except that it's soft and rather melodic. I've adapted it so that it can be sung meaningfully with children, and the words seem to fit.

I really think that the style in which I wrote "Mill Valley," and in which I wrote the song that we may be recording next, is one that is most comfortable for me. For a long time I was a little bit embarrassed about it; I was afraid to have people who were very sophisticated musicians hear it, for fear they would make fun of it.

In fact, I'm sure a lot of them would. But I've sort of accepted that for now that is my style. Some people enjoy it, and I enjoy doing it, so that's what I'm staying with for awhile.

Mr. Anderson

Where would you say that music is at in the United states today, vis-à-vis young people? I'm interested because you are young, and a lot of people might think that you're into rock music, a hippy thing. But it's obvious that you're not. You're recording songs with very young children. Is there a field opening up for this sort of thing? Or do you think music will go the way of the rock vein that's been in effect for the past couple of years?

Miss Abrams

I think from now on there's no one direction that music will take. I don't think there has been, really, for a long time. Rock music and heavy rock has been very popular and may continue, but it's spread out in so many different directions. Right now there is room for every single style that I can think of, from classical to Renaissance to folk to heavy and soft rock -- and now gospel and spiritual. It seems there's a market for every kind of music that can possibly be produced, and I think this is indicative of the great variety that permeates our whole American way of life. Everything is scattering and changing and variegated, and the music is too.

Mr. Anderson

Have you been influenced at all by the old group, The Limelighters? I believe a couple of years ago they recorded a long-play album exclusively with children from Berkeley. Did that record or that group have any effect on your music?

Miss Abrams

There was one song that they did on that album, called "Morning Town Ride," which was written by Malvina Reynolds. Having heard that song, I taught it to my children. That has been one of the favorite songs of any class that I've worked with. That sort of introduced me to Malvina Reynolds, who writes a lot of beautiful songs. In fact, if we ever get around to doing an album, we'll probably record some of her songs.

She's gone in a direction I'd sort of like to follow. She's written some very meaningful and lovely songs that are child-oriented, but they really appeal to people of all ages.

Mr. Anderson

How have the children in the third grade class at Strawberry Point School responded to the attention they have received since "Mill Valley" was released?

Miss Abrams

They, like me, have gone through many different stages. At first they were absolutely ecstatic with excitement. Gradually they've gotten a little bit used to it, and some have even gotten a little blasé about the whole thing, which is very healthy. I would not have wanted them to become star-struck and want to become child stars and go into the profession, in the wrong way.

They've been very happy. They get a big kick out of signing autographs and getting calls from relatives all over the country and seeing their pictures in the paper. It's a really fun experience for them.

They've made some funny comments. One little boy, Greg Beerman, whose quote has appeared through the AP wire service in almost every newspaper in the country, says that he likes what has happened and he doesn't like it. He likes the music and he likes to sing, but he doesn't like it because now, whenever the song comes on, his mother stares at him and he gets embarrassed. His mother stares at him, and his father whistles the song while he's shaving. He says sometimes he's lucky enough to get out of the house before his father starts whistling.

Bryan Friedman has been quoted as saying that he gets called in from baseball games when the song comes on the radio, and he doesn't like that at all.

The children are very colorful, and they have a lot of good things to say about it. But basically they're still the same as they were, I'm very glad to report.

Mr. Anderson

Did you select the kids by quality of voice, or did you just take one class?

Miss Abrams

we just took one class. It happened that they were the best singers in the school. In fact, the teacher

reported that the only boy who sang off-key had moved away two weeks before we made the recording. They were just perfect for it.

The teacher was also very cooperative and very pleased about the whole thing. His name is Bob Pearson.

Mr. Anderson

In your song there's a line that says, "I know that there may come a time I'll have to leave Mill Valley." Where would you go from here?

Miss Abrams

That's a good question! I have no idea.

In the past, every place I've lived, I've always felt the need to move on and live in a different place after a while. After I left home I lived just about two years in any place. I always felt I needed to change and needed to grow, and there was nothing particular that I had to stay for.

Now that I've found Mill Valley I have no desire to leave. The only reason I wrote that in the song is that I know things change, and sometimes it's necessary to move away. But I feel like I've found the place that I would like to make my home. Even if I do leave, I'll always want to come back to it.

Mr. Anderson

Your song has described a Mill Valley that I believe some people in this town would think is perhaps a bit idyllic, and your comments in this interview have more or less gone along with that. Can you see any aspects or life in Mill Valley that you would like to improve?

Miss Abrams

It's really hard to say. It's true, I do have an idyllic picture of the town. I know the song portrays a kind of Utopia. That may be because I haven't really been involved in the politics of the town -- the zoning regulations and some of the problems that are going on here, as in any town where everything is changing.

There are some people who resent other people in the town because they feel they're not responsible citizens and don't look respectable, and so forth. That's one way in which I would like to see the town change a little. I

would like to see people who are made uncomfortable by the presence of other people open up a *little* bit and try to communicate with the other people. In other words, I'd like to see even more of a communal and "together" feeling in the town.

As far as anything more specific than that, it's hard for me to say. I'm not familiar with the underlying structure of a lot of the problems.

Mr. Anderson

Will you tell me what instruments you play?

Miss Abrams

I play piano, electric piano, guitar, autoharp, recorder -- and kazoo, washtub bass and washboard!

Mr. Anderson

What instruments do you play in the recording of "Mill Valley" and the flip side, "Happiest Day of My Life"?

Miss Abrams

I play piano, electric piano and recorder, overdubbed.
There were sixteen tracks, so we recorded one track and overdubbed another, and so on.

Mr. Anderson

Who accompanied you?

Miss Abrams

I was lucky enough to be able to chose two friends of mine who are very good guitarists. One played 12-string guitar and one played 6-string guitar. We had a professional drummer and bass player.

Mr. Anderson

Are you going to making concert appearances in the Bay Area? Are you going to be playing at coffee houses and night clubs?

Miss Abrams

It's very difficult to make concert appearances with children who know only three songs! We can sing them over and over again, and that's about all.

Mr. Anderson

What's the third song?

Miss Abrams

"Match a Penny," which was written by Malvina Reynolds.

I do play and sing with Lyn Elder, who is a Mill Valley instrument-maker. He makes Renaissance instruments -- hurdy-gurdies and psalteries and so on. We do varied combinations of instruments and voice together and with different styles of singing.

Mr. Anderson

I understand that in the coming school year you will not be teaching full-time but will be with the Mill Valley School District on special musical education programs. What role do you feel music should play as a special educational tool in an elementary school?

Miss Abrams

I think the value of music is often greatly underestimated in education and that my best teaching moments have centered around music. At least in the lower grades, music is important to everybody. Younger children, especially, really respond to music. It's very comfortable for them, it's a happy thing for them, and it's a very good group and cooperative experience that teaches them how to work with others to produce a common product, which in this case is the sound of the song.

It really gets down to the simple level of happiness and enjoyment. I know that both of the songs we recorded seem to give a real feeling of enjoyment and happiness to the kids. Not only to the kids who live in Mill Valley; I've had reports from people all over the country that when children hear it they just love it, and they play the records over and over again.

So there's that level of just enjoyment of music, making children happy and giving them a positive group experience. Then, of course, there's the other level, the learning experience, being able to memorize words, learning how to relate pitches to each other, and being able to duplicate sounds that you hear. All these things relate to a lot of different learning areas.

Mr. Anderson

As a school teacher you obviously have been exposed to young children, children in the elementary grades. I've always felt (and I recall from my own childhood) that music and singing and shouting come naturally to young children. Your record seems to bear that out, and the concert on the Fourth of July certainly did. Yet in the past few years we've seen something rather extraordinary happening in this country; young people seem to turn out a lot of very natural physical sorts of enjoyment and start turning on to chemical enjoyment drugs and narcotics and that sort of thing.

What are your thoughts on the changes that young people have gone through in the last couple of years and where they may be headed?

Miss Abrams

The problem of alienation in society is one that you could talk about for days. It seems there are more complex problems now in our society than ever before. Young people are picking up on it and are looking for ways to deal with it or ways to escape from it. They're trying to find themselves, in all the confusion and chaos of modern society. Drugs have been one area in which they've looked for comfort or escape or whatever you can call it.

I think young people are much more sophisticated now and much more self-aware than ever before. Also, since they don't have to struggle so much for just the basic means of survival, the way our parents did, they have more time to be occupied with other things, with deeper things and with more inner thoughts and feelings and awareness. This also leads to a lot of confusion. They're searching inwardly for answers, looking into their own minds, and it's very confusing to them. It's also very confusing to older people who are trying to understand young people, because they grew up in such a different society.

I think music, by the way, bears out that theory. Music has gotten, on the one hand, very confusing and frenzied. The acid rock and the loud, hard-driving stuff ~~ really an expression of the inner confusion and maybe disillusionment that young people feel. On the other hand there are other kinds of music that are happening simultaneously. There's a return to the older style of music in some areas. Folk music, which has been popular for

the last few years, is sort of a return to the basic roots and probably offers something comforting to people who are looking for answers to all the confusion. It's solid, and it's simple.

Country and western music is the same thing. The more complicated the world gets, the more simple is the music that a lot of people are turning to. It's good that people realize they can find some comfort and consolation in music. It's unfortunate when people don't realize this, because music can be a very therapeutic force in people's lives.

Mr. Anderson

As you know, this recording is going into the archives of the Mill Valley Public Library. Maybe 50 years from now, people will be listening to this interview. Is there any one thing that you would like to say to people who are going to be here many years from now?

Miss Abrams

If you're here 50 years from now, I say, "Congratulations! You made it!"

If I may presume to give any kind of advice, it's just always to try as hard as you can to be in touch with your own feelings -- your feelings about yourself and about other people -- and to be honest with yourself and other people. That's the best way to get along in the world.

Mr. Anderson

This has been an interview with Miss Rita Abrams, who is the composer of the song "Mill Valley," the official town song, as designated by the Mill Valley City Council at a recent meeting.

I must say that Miss Abrams is really a delightful person.

Good night.