

Maria Dunn

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Interviewer Don Bouzek

Q: How did you come into this project about 1919?

MD: You invited me, Don, and ALHI invited me in. Of course we've had a working relationship for 18 or 19 years now. I have never had a subject that you've presented to me that I've not found interesting and worthy of trying to write songs about. I credit you very much with pulling me into this labour history world in a more formal sense. From my own family background and as a budding songwriter in the early '90s, I was learning about my own family history and putting some of that into songs. Some of that was from letters where I could read the voice of my 16-year-old great great great aunt, who had immigrated from Ireland to New York. In a song about my grandfather, I could bring back to mind the conversations I'd had with him and my grandmother. I also drew on fiction in a less formal way. I read Annie Prouix's book called *The Shipping News*, about orphaned children who were sent as part of the British home children scheme. Then you had a fictional voice that was a first person voice. That's kind of what got me writing probably the first labour history song I wrote, the Lingan Strike. Call it the family history of storytelling perhaps, but reading a paragraph account in a labour history book. It was one of Des Morton's - I think he was a coauthor if he wasn't the main author (Morton, D. & Copp, T. (1980). *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour*. Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg.

) - that I picked up in a second hand store in the middle of a tour with Laura Vinson. I had time to read this paragraph about miners from Scotland traveling to Cape Breton in 1882 being brought in to break a strike by mineworkers in Cape Breton. By the time they arrived in Cape Breton, a union organizer who had been on the same boat as them had told them why they were being brought, why they were being offered these jobs in Cape Breton, and what they were coming into. By the time they arrived in Cape Breton, they refused to go to work. That was one of the first songs from a historical source that I tried to turn into a song that got at what it must have felt like to be a worker from Scotland, having made a 3,000 km journey in 1882. That was a huge investment. And to try and put myself in that mindset of what would you be thinking and feeling, and to have made this huge time investment? The idea that you're traveling all this way for work, so you must need it. Yet, at the same time,

having this sense of what is right, and understanding and compassion and solidarity with the workers whose jobs you were being brought in to take. That floored me, in a day when we would read news reports of workers being brought in to replace other workers in the same city, and that idea of this huge investment of time and effort. That's just a little bit of background in kind of thinking where I was at the point where I met you, Don. I think I played at a labour cabaret, I filled in for someone who was sick, and I ended up thinking, oh do I have 20 minutes of labour songs? I realized that I had these songs about my family history - I had the Orphan Hand song, I had the Lingan strike. So it was some of the labour community who heard me at that labour cabaret that I think kind of made the connection between you and I. You pulled me into this wonderful world of video ballads and collecting history from workers firsthand. The privilege to be given that material and to be trusted with trying to turn it into an art form, taking someone else's story, is something that I highly value. I'm not saying this very well, but I see it very much as a privilege to be trusted with those stories. With that trust, comes a responsibility to try and get it right. As you talked earlier about the feedback and trying to make sure that what you have done with someone's history and how you presented it rings true, and that you listen to that feedback and are attentive to changing things. So 2003 was our first Troublemakers show with the video ballad form and the songs. I wrote a bunch of songs in 2001; you invited me to be an artist in residence with the Edmonton & District Labour Council. So that began my formal dive into Alberta labour history. I was fascinated, because I was drawn to all these stories I'd never heard in my Alberta school system upbringing. History had never resonated with me. I didn't even bother doing Social 30 because I didn't think it had any relevance to me. Here 20 years after high school, I'm totally immersed and fascinated by all of this history. I'm probably starting to ramble here. It's a process of putting yourself in someone else's shoes. If I am thinking about what was going on in 1919 - and of course you gave me a huge wealth of background information, some of the most fascinating being the Mathers Commission transcripts, where you actually heard people saying in their own words what was going on for them or what they were seeing in their communities in terms of Jean McWilliam and Mrs. Corse. So I had that first person voice information plus then a whole wealth of

secondary information and wonderful storytellers like Tony Cashman, who could kind of put in nice story form things like the telephone girls and how people phoned them up and asked them all kinds of information - what was the siren for that they'd just heard, or could they phone back in 10 minutes and make sure that they took something out of the oven. Or even that fascinating story about someone putting the phone down and saying, I have to run out, can you just listen for my baby will I run out, and I'll be back right away. The first baby monitors in Alberta were women at the telephone exchange. So of all the stories we talked about in trying to distill down into one song, 1919, and also for the occasion, we want to talk about the harshness of the circumstances. This is the way I approach so many of these songs. People are telling you some of the most important things that have happened in their lives, which may be very difficult struggles, but they've come through. How have they managed to come through that? With their personal resilience but also with solidarity and the help of their community. So I wanted to focus on, being that it was one song that would be talking about 1919, I wanted a celebratory element. This song in a way was different. I've written other song commissions that have summed up 20 or 25 or 40 years or 100 years, and it's always a challenge. I had a little bit more freedom with this one, because we were doing one song in the context of a much larger Troublemakers updated show. I knew I didn't need to cover every character and absolutely everything that was going on in that one song. One of the stories of triumph and great resilience and wonderful solidarity that came out to me was these telephone girls, the women that worked the telephone exchange, and the fact that they were the first ones to stay off the job in Winnipeg. We knew a little bit less about what they did in Alberta. Some were not unionized and some of their labour councils did not vote to go out in sympathy, but some were and we know that some did. In that song, I wanted to celebrate the walking out and the being in solidarity with everyone else who was out on strike, but also that little detail that I loved, which was that they took the fuses when they left. So they couldn't easily be replaced; it took quite a while longer before other people could be brought in to take their place. They shut down the communications in Winnipeg and presumably in Edmonton as well. We didn't seem to have as many voices telling us exactly what was going on with them here in Alberta.

So that was the line that started circling in my head as I was still reading all the history and thinking, okay how do you put this voice into a song? It just kept coming back as, walk out, you telephone girls, take every fuse. From that, then I started to think about, okay what was life like for these mostly young women, and definitely single, because they lost their jobs when they got married. What would their awareness have been and what were the major things going on in their lives? November 1918 the armistice had been signed, World War I was over; soldiers were coming back, who had they lost or missed during the war. I remember another musician and friend, Lizzie Hoyt, telling me once that she remembers reading how so many women, their sweethearts were gone and never came back. What must that have been like, to be a young woman at that time? Also the inflation that was going on, and just before the Armistice, the Spanish Flu had hit Edmonton in October of 2018. It had hit Calgary just before that as well. What must that have been like to see that come through their communities? We know that those women at the telephone exchanges were sometimes giving information to people who were too sick to leave their homes, or getting help out to them. We know that they were an important connecting force in communities in terms of information, so they would've been part of that. I started to try and put the historical elements in the verse, but also always kind of trying to keep in mind what it would've been like to be at the phone exchange, to be patching through a call that came from someone whose name you might know in the community, and you might know that they were getting bad news or that someone in their family was ill, or all of those kinds of things. So some of that feeling or trying to get at what it must've been like to be in that position went into the verses, which also covered the territory I wanted to cover in terms of saying, what were the reasons why people were out on strike in such great numbers in that time period? Having all that background information and having done hours and hours of reading, also for the characters that you created for the AUPE school and for the video ultimately, going back through and choosing segments of the Mathers Commission testimony and thinking about which pieces most emotionally spoke to a 2019 audience. As a songwriter, I'm always looking for that emotional kernel. I'm always looking for not why is it important intellectually or what was going on at that

time - and that's all important to put into a song - but I feel like I haven't done my job if I don't get at why should the listener care about this person. I feel that's my job to get at it, and I guess somehow how do I know if I've gotten at it? I play it for other people and for an audience. This song in particular was trying to hit a celebratory note, but with some of the other songs I've written, the more emotional ballad pieces like We Were Good People or Heart in Hand from the Gainers picket line. . . If someone comes to me afterwards and says that they were in tears at that, then I feel like I have done my job. Not because I'm masochistic in any way, or sorry, sadistic. I am masochistic, I'm a perfectionist 😊. It's not that I want people to experience pain and sorrow when they hear my music, but I feel like if it has moved them emotionally then I've done my job. So ya, it's all about that, it's about trying to imagine yourself in that world. All of the historical research is so important in being able to place myself in that world. I remember emailing Alvin and saying, in terms of what a woman at the exchange would hear, would she hear the voices of working class people in her community? Or was the telephone still an elite thing that only richer people in the community had? I needed him to answer that question so that I could understand more about who the women were connecting with. He said to me, no, people of every class had access to phones by that time. They might not have had one in their actual home, but they would've had access to telephones. I was also fascinated by how the telephone girls seemed to be the google of their day. They had all the information, and people would phone them for advice and to answer questions. This is another song maybe for later, but how we look at how gender imbalance of the whole tech world is now and how misogynist it has been to women with things like Gamer Gate and that sort of thing. To think that the first people that held all the communications together with the new technology in 1919 were young women, and 100 years later they're kind of shut out or definitely not welcome. Hopefully that's changing, but definitely not welcome in the leading edge high tech world. I've probably done more than answer your question.

Q: Talk about your use of voice and getting inside the character, using the first person as a character.

MD: That's come very naturally to me, almost to the point that some people have teased me about it, that every song I've written starts with I but is not actually about me. That comes from a long tradition of listening to and loving folk song. You never have an issue, if you listen to traditional folk song, there'd be a narrative and there'd be a story. It could even be a love story from a woman's point of view, but a man would have absolutely no trouble singing it as his party piece for the folk song evening or whatever. There definitely is that tradition of taking a character and delivering a story in song that is not your own. It's the news of the day that you're delivering, but it seems to be more compelling if you can deliver it from a first person point of view and get inside it emotionally. So I come from that tradition on the Scottish Irish folk end of things, from what I would've been listening to as a child. But also, as I came into getting into folk music in the '80s and having a radio show at CJSR for 13 years where I was exploring and listening to all kinds of folk music and folk traditions and different artists, I was always most interested in the ones that were telling me something about the world. You spoke earlier about something that was educative, firing you up in terms of the potential for something that is artistic but that is also saying something that is meaningful to the people watching or listening. People like Buffy Sainte-Marie, like Dick Gaughan, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Hazel Dickens - people that were singing some very meaningful things from their own community in a way that was compelling and would also teach you something that you didn't know before. I don't know if I've answered your question.

Q: Can you talk more about the tradition of the party piece, of communicating through the sharing of songs?

MD: That's so interesting. I would've been a child when this kind of stuff was going on in my family home, so I probably missed the signals of what someone might be singing to communicate something to someone else. But I do know that everyone had their

party piece and you did not attend a party at my parents' home or the other expats that immigrated with them around the same time from Scotland and England to Ontario, you did not go to a party in any of their houses without expecting to sing. And you'd find a similar dynamic at home, not as much, not with all the families. But a typical story in my family is my younger brother going back home to Scotland to visit with family. They had a family gathering and my uncle Bill, who was a very kind and lovely man but had the driest sense of humour, was making everyone go around the room and, okay what are you going to sing now? He got to my brother Paul, who was still in his mid to late teens at the time, a beautiful singer but maybe not so relaxed or comfortable with this. The story as I remember it being told was that he said, well I'm not sure that I'm ready to sing. What do you mean, you're not here to sing? It was basically like, no you're here to sing. You're not here to enjoy yourself. This is not a party where you enjoy yourself, you're here to sing. So people had their party piece. People who didn't sing or felt shy about their voice maybe came with a story or a poem, and that would be acceptable if you really didn't want to sing. For me, I certainly wasn't aware of it as necessarily being people giving messages to each other. But I would say in an informal sense when a singer feels most free to just sing what's on their mind, which rarely happens now in our culture or in Canada, I would say when you really feel free and you know you've got however many rounds a night that you want to sing, you do kind of go more with just what's in your mind and heart at the time. Although, I will contradict myself here and say, sometimes when you know you have one song to sing - and this is a little bit more from a performer perspective or from a fiddle jam and then you might get one song - you have one song to sing so you're thinking, is there someone in this room that I feel I need to sing this song for? Or has someone requested a song? Someone might request something, or you just feel like this is the right song to sing now. That does come in your mind as a singer, and definitely when you only have one song to sing you agonize over what that song should be, if it feels like a meaningful occasion. If I'm on the steps of the Legislature and it's a rally for some particular purpose, then I've thought about in advance what's the one song I'm going to sing. But even sometimes then, you throw that out the window and there's something else you feel is more important to sing.

. . . That makes me think of, as a young woman, starting to play music and playing in bands. I was very fascinated with traditional songs that had to do with women triumphing over people intending to do harm to them. I and my co-singer Dawn Cross that you saw at the concert last November would choose songs like Lovely Joan, which is a woman riding out one day and is accosted and manages to outwit the fellow that intends her harm. Crafty Maids Policy was another one. We would bring these songs to our band, which involved three other fellows. I was told at one point that, no we couldn't sing a certain song, because it was too feminine. So those songs I would say definitely were me exploring where can I find these stories of women where the women have agency and they triumph? I don't want to sing these sad songs and I'm tired of hearing the bluegrass songs where the fellow kills his woman because she cheated on him. I want to find the songs - and that was before I was writing songs - I want to find the songs where the woman does well and manages to get out of. . . [Maria note: ?"trouble"? I would need to hear the tape to know exactly what I said] If I was still in an academic world, I would love to do a whole thesis on women's messages to each other in terms of all of the songs in every existing folk song tradition around the world that are cautionary tales, and when are they framed as tales of triumph? So those were probably me sending a message to my fellow bandmates about what kinds of themes I thought were important to sing in music.

Q: Talk about the relationship of your lyrics to the verbatim interviews that you work with?

MD: When I sit and listen to Anne Ozipko or Renee Peevey or Vicky Beauchamp or any number of people talk about their story, when get a chill up my spine at something they've said the way they say it, I feel like I'm trying to capture what it is and how they said it and what the emotion is. Again, it's all about trying to get at what sent that chill up my spine. What is the actual emotion that I'm connecting with now as I'm listening to them and whatever they're saying, how powerful and eloquent it is emotionally? It might be someone speaking not in their first language, but however they're expressing it, they are so eloquent in how they're saying it that it is getting



me right here. My job is to take that, and I may not use their exact words, but I will try and get close to it. Again, that comes back to the privilege of being trusted with their stories and finding a way to interpret those but keep all of the emotion and keep as close as I can to how they expressed it. I feel like that gives it more authenticity if I'm able to steal their best lines. Sometimes just in a way that a song evolves, I have to rephrase it somehow, I have to shift things around. A song is however many verses long, you're expanding on it or you're bringing in other elements that complement. Like coming back to the chorus where that important emotional kernel is. With Bill Dolinsky writing *We Were Good People*, I took that verbatim, I stole that line verbatim. I'm sure in *GWG*, *Packingtown*, *Watching the Bacon Go By*, that was Mary Ewasiw rephrasing what he-who-shall-not-be-named said about his own workers. Basically, she stole his best line but used it to express her outrage, her rightful outrage, at how the workers were being dismissed and their concerns being dismissed. To me, I'm handed a line like that and I have a chorus almost right away and the whole spirit of it. It's like, okay we're going to write this song where it's just a sendup of all the ridiculous. . . I am talking and taking the workers' lines about the monotony and the danger and the injury and all of that stuff, but we're going to frame it in this certain way. Again with Renee Peevey, she said, you go out there with your heart in your hand, so "heart in hand" is going to be in the chorus. I probably owe all of these workers songwriting royalties 😊.

Q: Labour is an oral culture. Talk a bit about the connection with the audience around that stuff.

MD: Yes, an oral culture and the wonderful stuff that comes out of that. At the AUPE labour school, yes one of the things that felt like it connected the class and brought the class most alive was having an informal singer-in-the-round, and just having people come and participate. But also what I love about those things is that the first round that you do around a room, and if you do it in the egalitarian way of each one taking a turn, the first time around the room there's people who are, oh no I'm just

hear to listen, or I'll sing along if I know it, that sort of thing. But then as you go around the room and then a person jokes, well the only song I know I'm hanging out with my grandkids, the only song I know is the Wheels on the Bus. Then they sing a little bit of it and people join in. It's so low stakes and lovely, like who doesn't know The Wheels on the Bus? There's that little crack in the ice breaking. Someone's just thrown it out there and we've all had a laugh and it's been great. As you go around the circle, people do a little bit here and there and someone says no and a neighbour says, "oh no, I know you can sing, you're going to sing." Echoes of my uncle Bill - you're not here to enjoy yourself; I know you can sing, you gotta sing. All of that lovely stuff can happen in a group where the spirit of generosity is there. It's not a performance and it's not being recorded, we're just making stuff up. We're starting a song that someone would throw out - well I only know the first verse. But nowadays the phones come out and people can get all the lyrics, and someone doesn't know past the first verse but then their neighbour is feeding the next line to them and starting to sing it to feed it to them. It's a great collective activity. One of the most powerful things that happened at one of the schools, by the time we came the second time around the circle, by this time Bill and Claire, who are two wonderful artists from B.C., they speak Spanish and they had been speaking Spanish with a participant in the school, who originally came from Chile. By the time it came around the second time, he asked if he could borrow my guitar. He said, oh I haven't played the guitar in how ever many years. He said, the songs that I know are in Spanish. But we all encouraged him to sing, and it was absolutely stunning and beautiful. He said to Bill and Claire at the end, and they were so much part of coaxing this out of him and supporting him. It was just so beautiful and afterwards he said, I haven't sung or played a song in 20 years. When that kind of stuff happens, that's the real shit. That's when you just go, what a privilege to be in this space with this generosity of spirit from everybody. We have this vehicle of music with which to do it and this vehicle of labour school that thinks it's important enough to have this. That's the real thing.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

MD: I think you've covered it.

Q: Where does your inspiration come from?

MD: It's partly Don's fault for pulling me into the labour movement 😊. The inspiration, I was brought up in a family that was very religious, Catholic, very involved in their community. Social justice was always a huge part of their faith, of my parents' faith. As a family practising the Catholic faith, social justice was always involved in that. So that coming from my family was the initial inspiration in my life to be aware and involved and interested in what's going on outside of my community or my family in particular. When I was a teenager, the refugee crisis, people fleeing Vietnam was happening in '79/'80. My parents, with some other couples in the parish, formed a committee and a group to sponsor a refugee family from Vietnam. In the end, the parish actually sort of sponsors two families, because the government at that time was matching private sponsorship; I think they may still do some of that. I had the privilege of seeing close up as a teenager what a group of committed people working together can do to alleviate the suffering of some other people from halfway around the world, and how a few people can galvanize the energy of a whole parish community. They put out calls for this - we need some dental care for these families, we need some jobs for these families, we need homes for people to live in. My first experience of important group collective action and solidarity was very much in a religious setting. I think by the time I was a young person going to university and thinking about what you do with your life, that was always going to be a side that at the very least I would participate in, outside of whatever it is I did for a job. I was involved in Amnesty International in my younger years. I went to what at the time was called the Third World Film Festival and was interested as a university student and started exploring that world outside of the Catholic church and realizing how many important things one could be involved in in the world in terms of caring about your fellow humans in your own community and around the world. Music was always a part of my life as well. I loved music and probably got the sense of the important impact

music can have through my years at CJSR and listening to all of those mentors on record. Then those things just kind of melded together I would say in the mid-'90s. I worked for ten years as a research assistant. I did a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and I did the research stream in the sciences. I liked that whole intrinsic process of research, and had the privilege of working for some great people in those ten years, that inspired me with their vision towards the future and what questions need to be answered by research now. I worked for two professors in the Department of Psychology for two years - Jeff and Gay Bisanz. They were wonderful mentors in that field and I could see that they were very passionate about the work that they did in child cognitive development, cognitive developmental psychology. I found the work interesting, but I think I realized at the time that it was not where my passion lay. I think it's really important as a young person, it's a great experience to work for and work with people that you can see have a real strong passion about something. It can sort of help you realize that, yes you value what they do, but it's not where your passion lies. Then you start to think, well where does my passion lie? If I'm going to make the financial sacrifice and the stress sacrifice to go back to university, which at the time I did, I sort of thought I would go on and do at least a Masters. I was interested in neuropsychology, I was interested in cognitive psychology; I generally liked the area I was working in, I liked the people. But I started playing music in my spare time. It was the first 9 to 5 job I had after my university degree. I had gone away traveling and come back, and worked for two years for them. In those two years I got enough money to get my own apartment. I was given a guitar as a Christmas present and I started playing music in all my spare time. I think that is when I realized at least, I might not have admitted it to anyone else or I might not have had any idea how I was going to. . . At that stage I wouldn't even have thought I'd be making a living from music ten years from now or 15 years from now. But I just knew that that's where I wanted to put my time and energy. I didn't know how else the rest would pan out. Eventually, after ten years of research work and spending all my free time and money on music, my life had a change. I sort of thought, you know what, I'm just going to go for it. I was working at the Glenrose Hospital at that time. I remember someone said to me something about your career in research. I remember thinking, no

I have no aspirations for a career in research, as much as I still love the intrinsic process of research. I actually went for a job interview with the Adult Memory Project. They were going to do some projects out of the Glenrose, and I had known that research group from when I was an undergrad. I went for an interview with them, I think it was for a two year contract position as a researcher. My job in the research department at the Glenrose had sort of started to skew much more to the administrative side and much less research, and I wasn't very happy with that balance. So I went and did an interview with them about this adult memory project they were going to do and that they needed a research assistant for. In the course of the interview they said at some point, a question I had not anticipated, which was, where do you see yourself in however many years, or what is it that you want to be doing in however many years? It just came out of me. I remember saying, well I want to play music. I'm thinking, oh that was probably the wrong answer to this question for this research position. It's those moments that catch you unaware where the truth comes out. My thinking was, well I'll do this research job and keep playing in a folk band. I was doing a bit of songwriting at that time, but not a whole lot. Anyway, that's how I ended up doing music full time. I sort of worked my way into it. I left a four-day position at the Glenrose. I was offered by a friend who had just become a professor and had some additional funding for a research coordinator, I was offered a three-day a week job by her that would pay me the same. Thanks to Klein's cutbacks in the '90s, I was actually earning less at the Glenrose, earning 5 percent less than I had when I had started seven years before. By that time I was a bit annoyed. I felt like I had a lot of expertise in that job. My boss had also kept my position out of scope, which I kind of started to resent later on as I realized the position could easily have been part of the Health Sciences Association. I would've still taken a 5 percent cut, but I at least would've got a cost of living increase. All of that stuff that was going on then was also part of a political awakening in terms of the nurses almost went on strike in those years, and just being aware of the situation and all the cutbacks and seeing the spin around how we all need to tighten our belts. But I probably didn't go to my first political rally until the Bill 11 rallies, so in 2000. But the Klein years definitely were an awakening for me, and this very strong feeling that not everyone

had the same girth with which to tighten their belts. Through all of this time, I'm doing a folk radio show on CJSR and I'm hearing Billy Bragg and Pete Seeger and Hazel Dickens and Buffy Sainte-Marie and Dick Gaughan, and I'm learning all this workers' history at the folk clubs. It was likely inevitable that I eventually would be playing this labour cabaret and realizing that I had 20 minutes of songs that would fit the bill, and then that you and I would connect and I would get pulled into the labour movement. I was a member of NASA in that year and a half at my research position at the university, and I was earning as much in three days as I'd been earning at the Glenrose in four. But that was a great stepping stone, it was a transition. The position was only for a year, so I knew that if I was going to be serious about music, that would be my chance at the end of that year, to make the leap. Having had ten years of contacts and knowing how the research world worked, it didn't seem so scary to go full time music. I felt that if I fell flat on my face, I had a whole community of researchers that if I put the word out to them that I was looking for another contract, I could get my way back into that world. Instead, I got pulled into the labour history research world, which has been a wonderful experience for me.

Q: Anything more?

MD: I could probably blab on all day. So thank you, Donna, for that question. Thank you, Collette.

[ END ]