

HER RED BLOOD

Alix Dobkin Speaks about Her Life and Politics

Rain and Thunder had the incredible opportunity to meet with Lesbian feminist pioneer Alix Dobkin in September to discuss the recent publication of her memoir, My Red Blood: A Memoir of Growing up Communist, Coming Onto the Greenwich Village Folk Scene, and Coming Out in the Feminist Movement (Alyson Books, 2009). Our community knows of Alix's remarkable career as a lesbian singer/songwriter and pioneer in women's music. Her commitment to social justice and her involvement in the progressive music scene, however, started much earlier. My Red Blood provides readers with the early chapters of Alix's life that many of us are less familiar with but that are no less important. In fact, there is much to learn and gain from the humorous and sensitive narrative provided from her early life story. The focus on this time period is crucial to understanding Alix's growth and emergence as an artist and activist. For more information on My Red Blood, please visit www.alixdobkin.com or connect by mail at PO Box 761, Woodstock, NY 12498.

Alix Dobkin (AD): Welcome to Woodstock. Wonderful to have you here in our sweet little town.

Rain and Thunder (R&T): Thank you, Alix. We appreciate you taking the time to meet with us to discuss your memoirs and to talk about your life and work as a lesbian activist and pioneer in women's music. We wanted to start by getting a better sense of your process in writing your memoirs. You cover a lot of ground. What was it like to synthesize so much of your life story and to share it with others?

AD: It was a very long process, 17 years worth. I wrote the book because I wanted to share what life was like in the 40's and 50's and 60's, but mostly the 40's because it's a time that's gone forever. Life was very different then. I wanted to document that and I knew I had an unusual story to tell. Of course, everyone has their own story, but I felt mine was important in terms of key moments in American history and world history too. For example, watching Jackie Robinson steal home at Ebbets Field. That was worth writing about. Being a teenager, being 14, when Elvis Presley first got on the scene. And as you read, I'd been listening to Rhythm and Blues, "race music", living in Greenwich Village at the epicenter of a crucial moment in American popular cultural history, so I was right there for that transition in the Midwest. I was also in NYC when feminism exploded in the early 70s. I was at the right place at the right time for a unique and

very rich view of history. That's why I wrote the book.

How I wrote it, I basically wanted to write a book of good stories and I hope that's what I did. You get an image in your mind and it illuminates all kinds of other things. It's like a light and then you remember different things related to that moment. One moment can illuminate a whole scene and a whole era even. So, that's mainly how I worked.

R&T: The title of your memoir captures your early commitment to communism and the Communist Party but it goes beyond that as well. It also references a poem by Dylan Thomas which you excerpt for the epigraph of the book.

AD: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower...drives my red blood." I love that you did such a close reading of it. It's wonderful that somebody really gets all those subtleties.

R&T: Well, it's powerful and it seemed very significant. The hope was to get a better sense of the meaning both as it related to your politics and your internal process.

AD: Well, it's about passion. Red blood. Red-blooded. Red-blooded communist or red blooded American. It took a long time to get the title but I really liked it. When I first signed with Alyson Books, they had a different publisher and she insisted that I change it to "Lavender Jane Speaks" and I said "No, it's not about Lavender Jane." Thank goodness we got a new publisher who agreed with me so we stayed with my title.

R&T: The first part of your book focuses on your childhood. You share many wonderful stories about your parents, including their involvement with the Communist Party during the McCarthy era. Their work in the Party was never openly discussed but you talk about the fear, tension, and repression. In fact, you were able to refer to your FBI dossier...

AD: That was so much fun. I'll show it to you. I'll get it if you want to take a minute. It's right here. I keep it close by. [Alix returns with her FBI file] This is my dossier and all the correspondence to get it.

R&T: Wow. Did it take you awhile to get it?

AD: A few years and it cost me money.

R&T: It's huge.

AD: And this is what it looks like [opens up file and

shows pages].

R&T: You weren't kidding about it being blacked out. Do you have any sense of what they are blacking out?

AD: They're blacking out names of agents and informers and god knows what else. To protect privacy, that's what they quote. Their privacy. So, this is my FBI dossier full of next to nothing. I loved it. I loved using it and I loved showing how they're wrong so often. How they spent two weeks trying to find out where I was playing in Cleveland where every folk person even connected minimally to the folk scene knew. They didn't know. They had no idea.

R&T: You wrote that a large percentage of the membership within the Communist Party was informants and that they were funding your work.

AD: Well, that's what Pop said. The FBI kept the Party alive for years with the dues they paid.

R&T: Can you share what it was like growing up as a Jewish radical during this time?

AD: It was a mixed bag, of course. It was very exciting and terrifying and interesting. My party group in Philadelphia was great. Really smart, active, wonderful people. And we never worried about informers and there weren't any because I can read this [dossier] and know that they had no clue what we were doing. Of course, it might have been all blacked out but they didn't report on any of the meetings or who was in our group. The FBI really didn't make any inroads in our group as far as I know. We did a lot of serious intensive studying and party work and we had a lot of fun too. I loved it, especially after coming back from Kansas City where I was so isolated and miserable.

R&T: In terms of your study group, what were some of the key things that you learned?

AD: Critical thinking, political analysis. Being an outsider and having an outsider's perspective. Mostly political analysis. Things don't surprise me. "Oh, the FBI is watching us." Yeah, your point? That kind of thing. "The US government lies." Yeah? What else is new? Every government always lies. It's a fact of life. So, I feel it put me way ahead of my peers, my non-communist, non-political peers. And I find that's true today. When I speak at colleges and universities, I'll speak to students about anything and I can tell who's been raised in a progressive household by the questions they ask. They're light years ahead of everybody else.

So, my background gave me a huge advantage and I am full of admiration for people I meet who come from fundamentalist, reactionary families, or horrible, abusive families, and they become these amazing, brilliant feminists. How do they do that? It was all given to me, wrapped in a package but other people have had a lot more of a difficult time coming to that understanding so I

really admire that.

R&T: You left the Communist Party when your involvement in the folk music circuit became more serious. You write about your relationships with different singers and performers, everyone from Bob Dylan to Joan Baez and Pete Seeger. Can you talk about who your influences were at that time?

AD: Well, of course, Pete Seeger is probably the main one. I don't know where we'd be in the world without Pete because he raised a generation of kids who had a consciousness. Because he was blacklisted, he found where he could operate in the 50s and 60s and that was schools and camps for kids and as a result thousands and thousands of children got an education from Pete and became the folk movement or became the inspiration for it.

History is so interesting and they make it so boring because it's all about war and conquest and military. That's not the history that's interesting. The interesting history – why we do things, why things are the way they are – that's what's important and that's another wonderful thing that happened while I was writing this book. You make connections.

For example, the *Red Channels* was the blacklisting journal that ex-FBI agents put together in the late 40s and early 50s which listed all of the names they could find in their security index in the FBI. They just published these books with names and these people couldn't get jobs. That was the whole era of exposure. Writing about it in my memoirs, it occurred to me that's when *Confidential Magazine* came out. That's when the *National Inquirer* became national. It was the same concept of exposure and so that started the national tabloid industry. Well, I wouldn't have made that connection. That's a historical connection. And that's what happens when you really look at where you were, what you were doing, what the culture was, what was going on politically, and the background to that. If you can get the deep background, you will see forces that have converged to create this situation.

R&T: It helped then that the folk music scene came out of progressive organizing.

AD: It was all very, very connected. The folk music and the folk musicians of that time were very progressive. Most of us went to Mississippi for Freedom Summer and many of us went to Hazard, KY to support the miners which is when I decided to leave the Party. We went down there and heard these miners and their families and they didn't need some commie punk from NY telling them about the class struggle. They knew exactly about the class struggle. They didn't need us. That was my rationale for quitting the Party which is very hard to do. It was hard because it was a commitment for life and I took that seriously. But I didn't keep it.

R&T: What were the steps that helped you come into your feminist and lesbian consciousness?

AD: I had been married. I had a baby. I had joined a consciousness raising group before Adrian was born and that was it. Feminism gave me permission to come out as a lesbian. It was the politics. It gave me a context. It made it possible. I wouldn't have come out without feminism. I think I would've been happy enough. As I've often said, I'd still be with men if it wasn't for men. And also if it wasn't for women. It was a natural, logical trajectory for me to find feminism after being quite contemptuous of it. So, feminism really opened all the doors for me and really allowed me to be my own person. Of course, I've always been my own person but this gave a political name for it. So, it was quite seamless.

R&T: Was it the CR group or were there other ways that you became more involved in the lesbian and women's movement?

AD: I think it was the CR group that was the real change agent. I was contemptuous not only of lesbians but of women. When I was married, I didn't ever want to hang out with women. They were boring. They just talked about their kids. Of course, when I had a kid, that's all I talked about. And now, with grandmothers, that's all we talk about. But I didn't want to hang out with the women. They didn't do anything interesting. The men had lives. They were in the world. I really had no respect for women so that was something that I had to overcome. And it was the CR group that made the difference because it did just that. The personal is political. It brought everything to the personal level and you could see it right in front of you. This is not just my problem. This is an institution. This is patriarchy. And that's what brought it home. That's what made the Second Wave. Consciousness-raising made the Second Wave of feminism. Feminism made sense of everything. I've been very lucky.

R&T: Did your songwriting also play a part in your growing awareness?

AD: Songwriting had a lot to do with my consciousness because I always used songwriting as an analytical tool. I

would take a subject, decide to write about it, and then examine it from every possible angle and perspective and that was my song. I had to use political analysis. Every word, every sentence, every component had to support the main point of the song. It had to be consistent all the way through. My politics was built from that. So, yes, I used that always. I still do.

R&T: It would be great to hear from you on which contributions to both the women's movement and the lesbian community you are most proud of.

AD: Well, of course, *Lavender Jane*, because it was the very first internationally distributed lesbian album record and it did just what I intended it to do. So, I'm very proud of that.

R&T: What did you intend it to do?

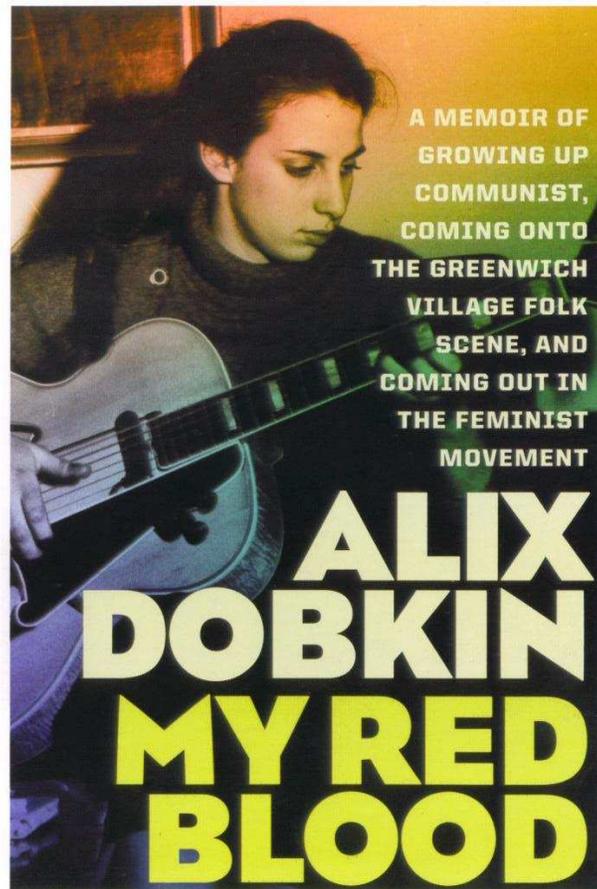
AD: To let women all over the world know they were not alone and it did that. And I guess that's my crowning achievement. Of course, my daughter Adrian. She's not my achievement but she's remarkable. I'm very proud of her and of my grandchildren. I think also helping to create and build the lesbian institutions and women's movement institutions that we have or we had.

R&T: Which ones in particular?

AD: Well, the Michigan festival. I spent 13 years on the long crew working 5 weeks a summer. I'm very proud of that. Even though I left in '94 and haven't been back, I'm very proud of what we refer to as the golden age of the festival. And I'm proud of the influence that I've had on young people, boys and girls alike. The positive influences I've had. I'm proud of the book too. That took a long time and was a lot of work.

R&T: What was the experience of creating and producing *Lavender Jane Loves Women*?

AD: Well, that was an idea whose time had come and was way overdue. My recollection of it was that it just happened. The first fundraising effort I made was on a lesbian cruise around Manhattan and I raised \$3000 just going up to women asking for money. Kay [Gardner] and



I had been performing so women were familiar with my music. They would say “You have to make a record.” We said, “Well, give us the money” so they did. We found Marilyn Ries through my WBAI Pacific Radio connection with Liza [Cowan]. She was an engineer and she had the keys to a four track studio so we went in there and made *Lavender Jane*. It was great. From our backers, we formed a chorus, women who wanted to sing. We recorded it and there we were with this recording. What would we do with it? We found a woman to master it, Mildred. She was great. She mastered the album. We pressed 1000. We copied the cover which we stuck on with rubber cement. I designed the cover. I wrote about the moment of holding that original cover drawing.

R&T: In your music career, what were some of the songs that were your most favorite to write?

AD: “The Woman in Your Life” kinda came to me. I consider it a gift. I don’t remember working much. It was just there. On the other hand, my last song, “Intimacy,” is very complex and I worked for months on it. When I would write a song, that would be all I would think of, day and night. I loved working on “If It Wasn’t for the Women” because I loved “The Work of the Weavers” that I based my song on. They’re all kind of fun at certain points and many were not at other points. But mostly it was stimulating and exciting. I like words. I like to fool with words. I like to take clichés and turn them on their head, give them a little different meaning. One of the things I’m most proud of is a sample of the Beatles I used in “Intimacy.” Remember? “All the lonely people need is intimacy...” The original line is intact but the two last words change the entire meaning.

R&T: How about your favorite songs to perform?

AD: “Lesbian Code”. It’s curious to see which parts audiences get. Different audiences will laugh at different points in my raps or songs. “Amazon ABC” is another. The standards are fun to sing for an audience because you get the response. I learned early on in camp that there’s no entertainment without education. You just don’t bother unless you’re educating. That’s my ethic. I’m lucky to have had it.

R&T: Do you think that the current lesbian community is interested in the politics and focus that women's music characterized?

AD: I think it will always be there. Always that interest. The lesbian community – there are so many and there have always been so many. And people would say well, the women’s movement... which women’s movement are you talking about? Because the lesbian feminist movement that I came into and I’ve been active in is not the same as the NOW women’s movement. There’s overlap, of course, but they’re different movements so I

don’t know about the lesbian community today. My lesbian community nowadays is based on OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. A main reason I joined the Steering Committee was to help recreate the community that we had in the 70s and 80s among the veterans who lived through it with me. So that’s where I meet and hang out with my old contemporaries, many of whom I didn’t know back in the 70s because there were so many of us all over the place. I don’t know what to say about “a lesbian community” now. There are just so many lesbians and so many who don’t identify as lesbians but who are feminists but who choose women or goodness knows. I don’t know how to answer that.

R&T: In terms of the different places you’ve talked or performed, have you seen an interest in the lesbian feminist politics that came out of the 70s?

AD: There’s always that connection and probably always will be but it isn’t the same. It isn’t the same focus. I always like a political analysis and I think my audiences do. They come to hear me because they like it. No, it’s very different now. The generations are so different. The identity politics started getting a bad name as soon as lesbians got an identity. Did you notice that? It’s so interesting. All of a sudden identity politics were out. Don’t want to bother with that. It’s not important.

R&T: Would you say that’s been one of the main challenges?

AD: Sure. We’ve been getting bad press forever. Lies and distortions. And post-modernism. That’s wrecked terrible havoc on lesbian and feminist analysis in my opinion.

R&T: The backlash has attacked and diluted our politics. What would you say are some strategies to respond? How can we revive our focus and work?

AD: I think that attempts to have some kind of communication between generations, cross-generational conversations are very important. And it’s very important to tell our stories. When OLOC in the Hudson Valley organized a cross-generational conversation, we called it OD/YQW – Old Dyke/Young Queer Women conversation. They were mostly Women’s Studies students. About half a dozen showed up and said, “We read and study about the Seventies and it’s interesting but on the page it’s flat, but then you tell your stories and it’s so fascinating!” So that’s what we have to do, besides listen, tell our stories, the real things that happened and how much fun it was because part of the biggest slam that we’ve gotten is that feminists don’t have any sense of humor. Of course, we have a tremendous sense of humor and many of my songs illustrate that.

R&T: It sounds like dialoguing is a big part of bridging

some of those differences.

AD: We don't do the dialogue. We don't have the political intensity that we did. I don't. The world is very different. There are different issues that we all have to deal with and face up to. And to help bring feminism to the fore because there are so many life and death issues for the planet as well as individuals and groups of people. It's just trying to inject feminism wherever possible because the planet is women's business.

R&T: You've talked a little about OLOC. Can you tell us more about the group and how you are involved with them?

AD: I'm on the Steering Committee and have been since 2006. Currently, seven of us meet twice a year for four days of meetings that go non-stop. We operate by consensus, which is not the easiest system but really it's so satisfying when it works and to me it's worth it. The women who are right now on the Steering Committee are wonderful and dedicated. We all have our stuff, but still we work together and we put OLOC first and that's very important. I love working with those women. I look forward to the meetings where we do the work of OLOC and plan our gatherings. We have them every two years. The gatherings are great. 100-150 women come together and you see that these are all leaders. Almost all of these old lesbians have been activists for a long time and are leaders in their communities and it's an amazing group. Lesbians over 60 (and 59 is the 60th year so you can qualify!) and their partners or caregivers are welcome. It's a great event.

We had a gathering this past July in Cleveland and the next one in 2012—we're trying to get to Boston. We don't have an OLOC chapter but there are some excellent women and activists including some anti-racist/anti-classist Lesbians we met at our last gathering. We're getting together to see how we can change OLOC to be more representative and diverse, and Boston could prove to be a big step towards that goal. In addition to the gatherings, we also put out a newsletter, *The Reporter*, four times a year.

R&T: That's wonderful. It's such an amazing group. We so value your visibility and your efforts to put the experiences and struggles of old lesbians at center.

AD: And we use the word "Old". We're not seniors. And we're not older. Everybody is older. We're old. We reject the negatives of ageism, which is one of the missions of OLOC.

R&T: Can you talk about the process of aging and ageism and how OLOC has been a key player in bringing old

lesbians together to address these issues?

AD: It was much easier for me to become 60 because I knew OLOC women and I was looking forward to joining. Kate Rosenblatt was a good friend of mine and she was one of the original members of OLOC who formed it. I thought they were amazing women. So, it's very important for us to have older women to look up to. I mention in my book how I looked up to some of my comrades. They were just maybe two years older, these women, but they really taught me a lot and they were role models.

Every local chapter has a banner that says OLOC - Old Lesbians Organizing for Change - and we all take it out at the pride march and the response is more shock about old than lesbian. "You're not old."

Well, yeah we are. "You don't look old." We're old and this is how we look.

How I feel about it personally, I don't know how I feel about it. I just celebrated my 70th birthday. 70, I can't even imagine. 70 years, but it is. I feel fine. I feel older than I did. People say "I feel exactly the same." I don't feel exactly the same. Of course, in some ways you don't change at all. But yes, I feel different. I feel smarter. I feel wiser. I feel calmer. I feel more confident, but I also feel a bit more fragile and vulnerable, and not quite as immortal as before. I feel more clear about who I am and where I'm going and what I want to do. I have less patience for fools. You know, life is short. I think there's less to lose. Less to defend or to be defensive about anyway. I'm sorry that most of my life is over in a way. There's a tiredness too. But I look forward to many more years. I hope a number of decades. I want to see my grandkids grow up.

R&T: Thank you for sharing so generously your insight. That was the case with your memoirs as well. What are you hoping women will get from reading your memoirs?

AD: I guess the same goal as I had from my first record. To let women know they're not alone. So many women have said "Oh, my god, you could have written my story. We had such parallel experiences. We lived the same lives" but of course we didn't. It was just because I talked about the culture. The popular songs, the movies, what was politically going on. That was really my objective, to have people remember their own lives and to learn history. To make the connections that I made and to start thinking about making those connections themselves. It's a history lesson mainly. At the right time, in the right place, I want you to know this about my life and about the life of this country and the world. That's my objective. I want it to endure.

**Feminism gave me permission
to come out as a lesbian.
It was the politics. It gave me a
context. It made it possible.**

R&T: You've accomplished so much in your life. Your memoirs share your story and history. Now that they are done, what are you hoping to focus on?

AD: Well, selling the book obviously. I'm going to be touring. I went off the road for a couple of years recently and then I went back on last year to promote the book. Almost half of my year was spent on the road but I have nothing planned after December 2010. I've seen a lot of my old friends, met new friends, had great times, and I love it. But really I want to stay home with my family. Right now, my focus is on OLOC and my grandkids and my friends.

I would like at some point in the future to collect my writings, the political columns I wrote for so many years. I'd like to put them in a book. After reading my memoirs, people ask "When's the next volume?" because I end the instant I come out. I could put that together. In my songbook, I've written an awful lot. I wrote a lot about how we did *Lavender Jane*. I wrote about why and how I wrote my songs. It's all there. The liner notes have a huge amount of information on what's happened to me and

what I've done since. My columns for the *Windy City Times* chronicled big political issues stirring the community at the turn of the 21st century. So, it's out there in different places and parts. Maybe at some point I'll put some of it together. But really I did what I wanted to do. I got this memoir out about the 40s, 50s, and 60s. That to me was crucial. I'll just promote the book, hang out with the kids, see my friends, and go to OLOC meetings. Unless someone invites me to appear somewhere.

R&T: Thank you so much for your time.

AD: Thank you for your interest. I love people who are interested in my life, being a Leo and all.

R&T: This has been an amazing experience. You're a life force and the work that you've done and continue to do is something that we admire and feel so much gratitude for.

AD: Well, thank you. I was given an awful lot.

R&T: And you have given an awful lot.