

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

RONNIE GILBERT

Interviewed by

KATE WEIGAND

March 10, 2004
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Ronnie Gilbert (b. 1926) grew up in and around New York City in a leftwing household. She is best known for her role the singing group The Weavers, which worked to popularize folk music in the U.S. from 1948 until it was blacklisted in 1952. In the 1960s and 1970s Gilbert worked as actor and a psychotherapist in New York, California, and Canada. In the 1980s she revitalized her singing career by touring on the women's music circuit, independently and with artists such as Holly Near. She defines herself as a writer/teacher/activist who is particularly committed to the issues of feminism and global peace.

Interviewer

Kate Weigand (b. 1965) has a Ph.D. in women's history and U.S. history from Ohio State University. She is author of *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Abstract

In this oral history Ronnie Gilbert describes her childhood in a leftwing Jewish family in New York City. The interview focuses on her musical education, her childhood experiences at large union rallies and at the progressive Camp Wo-Chi-Ca in upstate New York, her participation in the folk music revival and The Weavers, her personal experience of the anti-communist blacklist, and her feminist awakening and participation in women's music. Gilbert's story documents the personal side of the 1950s blacklist and the connections between the radical political movements of 1930s-50s and the women's movement.

Restrictions

Ronnie Gilbert retains copyright to this interview.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Three 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kate Weigand. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Ronnie Gilbert.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Gilbert, Ronnie. Interview by Kate Weigand. Video recording, March 10, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Ronnie Gilbert, interview by Kate Weigand, video recording, March 10, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted MARCH 10, 2004, with:

RONNIE GILBERT
Ca mbridge, Massachusetts

by: KATE WEIGAND

WEIGAND: This is Kate Weigand interviewing Ronnie Gilbert in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on March 10, 2004. I prepared this long list of things that I might want to talk to you about. Mostly, it proceeds fairly chronologically. I'd like to start out talking just about your family background and your childhood and then to move ahead from there, if that's OK with you. Can we start out talking a little bit about your parents and their backgrounds? I know that they were both immigrants — is that right?

GILBERT: Yes.

WEIGAND: Can you talk about where they came from and how they came to the U.S. and what they did for a living? What sort of political messages you learned from them?

GILBERT: Sure. Well, starting with the older of the couple, my father: my understanding is that he came here with his family when he was probably about five years old. They came from a little tiny village, what they call a shtetl, in the Ukraine. I knew my grandparents for a while. When my father was a little boy they lived in Brooklyn, in Greenpoint. I knew my grandparents when they lived in Greenpoint. I'm not being articulate about this. Let's go back and clear all this stuff up, OK?

My father, Charles Gilbert, was from the Ukraine. His work was in the needle trades, as was my mother's. He did various things but when I knew him, when I was a little girl and knew his work, he was a cap cutter. Those were the days when men wore caps. There weren't machines. He worked by hand. I remember watching him cut thick layers of fabric by hand with a knife and I'd watch his thumb. He'd have his thumb out here and he'd cut around that. That's a very hard thing to do. I mean, I don't know if you've ever tried to do that with the scissors. It's hard. Anyway, that was my dad.

He did various things when he didn't have work as a cap cutter, because of the Depression and all that. He tried to run a gas station. I don't remember that, but that's what I've been told. He tried to run a produce store. We moved from place to place, you know. First it was

Brooklyn and then it was Minneola, Long Island, and various places like that.

My mom was a dressmaker. She came to America when she was 16, and that means that she spent her youth, her childhood, in Warsaw, where she was born, Warsaw, Poland. My mother lost her parents by the time she was 12 years old, her father first, then her mother. Both of them died in the various epidemics that went through and, somehow or other, she escaped with her life, although she didn't escape the illness. And she was apprenticed to a dressmaker, a private dressmaker, which means that as a little girl she carried things, she cleaned, she did all that stuff and she learned a little bit of sewing.

Now, by the time she got to America — she was brought to America by some half-brothers who had already come here — she went to work in the factories and learned how to sew on a sewing machine, a power machine, as she called it. She was what they called an operator. They called them operators, the sewing machine girls, women. She worked at that all during my childhood. She was a sewing machine operator and earned a living that way.

Now, my father was totally apolitical. I remember he used to read the paper faithfully every day, the stock market page (laughs) which doesn't mean to say he had a lot of stocks in the stock market, but he followed it very carefully. My mom told me that in Europe, when she was still a young girl, an older sister was a member of the union, or the Jewish *Bund*, I don't remember which, and that sister got her into the labor movement, which was, at that time, a cultural movement as well as a political one. She sang in the chorus, she remembered going to plays. There was poetry, there was all this kind of stuff, so she came to this country with those two things: with a union consciousness and a cultural consciousness, and she pursued both of them all her life. And that's where I got it. I got it from my mom.

WEIGAND: So can you talk a little bit about what it was like being a child in Brooklyn, living in the family that you lived in? And about the role that music played in your family? Why don't you do that first?

GILBERT: OK. The role that music played in my family was interesting. My father evidently loved singing, loved songs. He'd be very tickled when I would learn songs, and I did that quite a lot, quite easily. My dad used to sing the songs from the old Jewish musicals — maybe not Jewish, but old Second Avenue musicals. He liked to sing songs, like (singing): “Yes, we have no bananas. We have no bananas today.” He had kind a repertoire of those songs which, when he was feeling good, he would kind of burst out.

My mother, on the other hand, had aspirations to what she felt was higher culture. She loved the operettas, Rudolph Friml and that sort of thing. And she tried to learn to play the piano. She had some sheet music in the piano bench — I'm trying to remember some of the songs,

some of the music that she had there — but she also liked the popular music, so she had popular sheet music.

I had piano lessons when I was a little girl. That's really amazing, remarkable, because my parents were poor, you know. They were the working poor while they were working, and it was the Depression. I was born in 1926, and by the time I was old enough to be sitting at the piano keyboard, it was deep Depression, but they somehow managed to find whatever it was. We had dancing school and we had piano lessons and so on. I know now, looking back on it and knowing something about it, that teachers used to teach for a quarter a lesson. They'd get what they could, and that was the extent of it. So I learned how to read music and I would sit there and pick out the tunes on the piano and as we go along, I'll probably remember some of those. So there was music.

WEIGAND: Music must have been really important to them if they found a way to get you these lessons despite —

GILBERT: If I had to guess, I would say that it was my mother who pushed it. I think my father thought these things came naturally. I don't think he made a big deal of it. My father didn't have much say. My mother was the one who really was the — I think it must have been my mother who said, "We'll have a piano, we'll have lessons, we'll have music and dancing." You know, that was my mother. And I did, I had those things when I was a child. I used to have a picture of myself in front of a group of — as a little girl, maybe five, in the strangest little costume. It was pink, of course. My mother told me it was pink, because the picture was black and white. I had little short satin pants and a beret that was on the side of my head like this, and I was leading this group of little children in some kind of routine. The picture said, "The Harry Rinus Dancing School." (laughter) It was some place in Brooklyn, who knows. So, yeah, from quite an early age, music was really in my life, various kinds of music.

WEIGAND: And you started performing at a pretty young age, is that right? On the radio?

GILBERT: You know, when I was in school, one thing that the New York City school system had was music. There was a music class, and every child learned the solfege system and we had music. We moved from place to place to find cheaper rent and bigger apartments, so I went to a lot of different grade schools, but I remember that every one of the had a music class. At least that's my memory. When I was older and was in, I guess, high school, maybe even before, I always sang in the chorus. So there was always music. There was music in my family and there was music, and I know I gravitated toward wherever there was music. That was my thing in childhood — theater, too. I was crazy about plays. And I loved the movies. I remember some of the early movies that made an

impression on me and they were always musicals. I'd go to see a movie and I'd come out knowing the songs. My father got a big kick out of that.

WEIGAND: Do you remember any of them? Not the songs, but –

GILBERT: (singing) “In my song, in my song of love, the moon above makes the music. The words are in my heart. My lips may be afraid to serenade you tonight but the words are in my heart.” Songs get screwed in there and they're hard to get out. That's from a Busby Berkeley movie, or something like that.

WEIGAND: I remember reading somewhere — now I can't remember where — that when you were really young you wanted to be a movie star or a singer in these kinds of musicals. And that all changed later on?

GILBERT: Well, that was my understanding about singers, at first. These movies gave me my first ideas of what singers should be like. When I was a little older, it was band singer. That's what I aspired to, you know. It was a dream that lots and lots of — thousands — of little girls had. If you saw the ballet, then you wished you were a ballet dancer. But I didn't happen to see the ballet, but I saw movies, you know? And that's what made an impression.

Then my mother, who was an avid unionist, took me to a rally. I can't remember exactly, it must have been a strike rally. It must have been something like that. She was a member of the ILGWU — the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union — and an activist. And she was a Communist. She was a member of the Communist Party. She joined the Communist Party sometime in the 1930s, in the early 1930s, so she was very active and she took me to a union meeting. It was outdoors and it was in the garment district of New York, which at that time was between Seventh Avenue and Broadway, below, 42nd Street, or even below that, in the 30s. There was this rally, and there were a lot of people, and I was sort of dragged to this thing, not wanting to go. I listened to interminable speeches, some of them in Yiddish, because the garment workers at that time were really predominantly Jewish — unlike today, when they're Asians and Latinos and so on.

So I was standing there, kind of mad at my mom for making me come, bored to death, when this man comes in front of the microphone, a big, huge black man, and starts to speak to the crowd in a very deep voice, and then proceeds to sing. It was incredible. I'd never heard sounds like that; never heard a vocal sound like that. And the man had such a bearing, such a magnificent bearing. It was Paul Robeson. That was my first indoctrination to music, to singing that was apparently about something. It was Paul Robeson, and he remained my hero. He had a lot to do with my life as a young person.

13:40

WEIGAND: So that was sort of a transformative moment for you?

GILBERT: It was a transformative moment. It just kind of clicked. Something clicked open. You know, I can't really remember when my mother introduced me to anything like a union song, but we did have that in the family. It's interesting how the songs of the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, mingled with the cultural background of the Jews from Europe, Jews like my mother, from industrial Europe. It was incredible. I can remember my mother on the picket line, singing, what would it have been? (singing) "Hold the fort for we are coming. Union men be strong." Union *men*, not union women. "Union men be strong." And so there was that. And then there was Robeson. So something clicked at that time, and Robeson said, I remember him saying, "Your people and mine are forever connected by our slave heritage." Well, that got me thinking, what was that about? So, there it was. That was the beginning of my life as a singer and a — I wouldn't call myself an activist, but a singer, a singer with social conscience, let's say.

WEIGAND: A cultural activist of sorts.

GILBERT: Cultural activist, yes.

WEIGAND: Tell me about this girl gang you were talking about before we started the tape. Who were these women, girls, you hung out with?

17:43

GILBERT: Well, we were more than girls by that time, we were young women, and we connected. The woman that I said I was going to see today, her name was Jackie Gibson in those days. She was a member of a group in Washington, D.C. called The Priority Ramblers. That was my first introduction to singing folk songs, to folk music. I was 16. I went to Washington, D.C. to work in a government agency during the Second World War, and I met her, I met them. It was this group of people who would rehearse in the basement of the house that I was living in. I was living in somebody's rooming house, a friend of my mother's. And in the basement — the couple that lived in the basement were musicians. One of them was Fred Katz and I think he was a cellist in the National Symphony Orchestra, and his wife played French horn.

Anyway, their house was where the Priority Ramblers — real live city folksingers — would rehearse. I would go down and listen to them sing, and this woman in the group, Jackie Gibson at the time — now Jackie Alper — pulled me into that group. I don't know how she knew that I could sing. Maybe I was singing along with them. I have no idea. But I began to sing with them and I became part of that group. That was my first introduction to folk music, at least to singing folk music. She played guitar, not great guitar, but adequate for the very simple kinds of songs we sang, sort of in the country mode. They knew songs by somebody named Woody Guthrie. They knew somebody by the name of

Alan Lomax. They knew somebody by the name of Pete Seeger. So those names came in to my life fairly early, though I didn't know them for a couple of years.

WEIGAND: It's so interesting, too, that it was there, and not in New York, where you connected with these people.

GILBERT: No, Washington, D.C. Well, you know, Washington, D.C., that was the place where people came towards at the end of the World War II. People would come through. Jackie and friends of hers had this huge apartment, this big old apartment in an old ramshackle Victorian. They always had room for people from out of town to sleep and so on. I went to sleep there one night and woke up with Woody Guthrie next to me in the bed. I don't know how he got there but I jumped out. I remember jumping. I put my hand out there and there was this curly something there. Yeah, childhood dreams — so, yeah.

WEIGAND: So, changing gears a little bit, I wanted to ask what it meant in your family, and in your childhood circles, to be a girl, or to be a woman. I'm wondering what messages you got early on about what it meant to be female as opposed to male, and what that was going to mean for you in your life.

20:45

GILBERT: Yeah, that is the question, isn't it? Well, I grew up with a sense of women being very strong. The fact of the matter was my mother was a strong and powerful force. That was certainly my earliest sense of womanhood — somebody who was strong, who could get angry easily, who could be loving, who was very loving and very affectionate, but could turn like that. Somebody who was not easy to please. My mother was not pushover. Moreover, she was a working person. All women I know now are working people but, at the time, she was a woman who worked in a factory besides taking care of a home, and then came home and did the work of the home.

And my father was a hardworking man, too, and when he was running his own place he worked unbelievable hours. So when he came home, he'd go to sleep on the couch. My mother did the work. My mother ran the family, it seemed to me. So that seemed quite natural to me, that women were competent, that women were strong, powerful, that they were reliable. You expected things of women.

Interestingly enough, as I grew older — I had no indoctrination about marriage, and my modeling for marriage was none too good. My family — my parents separated when I was about 11 years old, and for a few years before that they were not very happy. So, that was another piece of it — that a woman could live on her own. She didn't require a man there. Now whether I ever thought about that in those terms I doubt, but that's what I saw.

And unlike many of the women that I know today — well, actually younger women tell me that they dreamt of being brides. That never entered my mind, being a bride. It looked like something a little foreign to me. And there was never a word from my mother about “when you get married,” except if she was mad at me, and she’d say, “When you have children, you’ll understand.” It was that kind of indoctrination (laughs). But there was never pressure about that. So, yeah, I would say, I saw women as strong, as having strong opinions, as being able to deal with difficult times and difficult situations. That’s what I expected of women. Having gotten that kind of indoctrination, that’s what I expected of myself.

WEIGAND: So you didn’t — that stereotypical female thing really didn’t affect you?

GILBERT: Oddly enough, the only stereotypical female thing had to do with singing. You know, I envied and dreamt of being the girl singer in front of a band. That seemed so romantic to me. That seemed so full of some kind of, I don’t know what. To be wearing a pretty dress and all of that, that was the stereotype. If I had a stereotype for being a woman, that was it.

WEIGAND: That’s interesting.

GILBERT: Yeah, it was that. But of course, everything I did moved me further and further away from that, beginning with folk music in Washington, D.C., and then, very shortly after that — oh, you started asking me about the girl gang.

WEIGAND: Oh, yeah.

GILBERT: Well, Jackie was first, and then I don’t remember exactly how the other two came into it, but there was Dorothy Gottlieb, who was in France during a lot of the time that we knew each other. There was another woman, Greta Brody, and Jackie and I, kind of hung together. But I’m leaping ahead. I was 18 or 19 by then. Dorothy worked with a women’s organization in Paris, and she used to send back these letters with tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny script and tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny — on onion skin paper, you know — long, long, long, long, long, all about the complicated political situation in Europe. I don’t remember what I thought of that except that it was incomprehensible to me, always going on, and I’d think, Why did she write about that?

But the three of us hung out, and one of the things that we — those three, Jackie, Greta, and myself, and then Dottie when she came, finally — and what I remember about us is that one of the things that we adored was Lady Day — Billie Holliday. Greta had a collection of Billie Holliday records and we go and moon over those records. We just loved them.

I had another friend who wasn't part of that, a girlfriend from high school, and she had a Victrola. We didn't have a player at my house. We didn't have a collection of records, other than a few opera records. But my friend Beatie Wise had, and her cousin had, so I used to spend some time over there with the big bands and band music, and we'd dance and have a great old time. All of my early connections, emotional connections, were with women, always. Men came later.

WEIGAND: I wanted to ask — I should get back to that later, but I read somewhere that you went to Camp Wo-Chi-Ca? 28:30

GILBERT: Wo-Chi-Ca. Workers Children's Camp. That's right.

WEIGAND: And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, and what it was like, and what it did for you?

GILBERT: Well, there's a book out about Wo-Chi-Ca, and I wrote the introduction to the book.

WEIGAND: Wow.

GILBERT: That was the summer camp that was connected with the left organization that my mother was a part of. When we separated from my father we moved from the very non-Jewish neighborhood, one that was a combination of WASP and Catholic, where I lived until age 11, to Brighton Beach, which was then 99 percent Jewish. My mother suddenly left her assimilationist philosophy and moved into a recognition of her Jewishness. And she wanted that for me, but it was a little late. Now why did I get into that? What was it you asked?

WEIGAND: About Wo-Chi-Ca.

GILBERT: Right, Wo-Chi-Ca. And the organization that she became very involved was something called the International Workers' Order, the IWO. That organization was largely cultural. It consisted of different groups with different ethnic backgrounds. Ours, in Brighton Beach, specialized in theater and there was a school to teach children Yiddish, which I went to for a while, until I wouldn't go any longer. It had a summer camp that belonged to all of the branches. That IWO camp was Wo-Chi-Ca. When I first went there, I went there as a camper, and it was great. It was a wonderful camp. I'd been to several different summer camps. That was another thing. My mother always managed to get us to — one way or another — away for a couple of weeks in the summer. Very necessary for city kids, you know? Their parents were working in factories. But this camp was something very different. It wasn't fancy. It was very rudimentary. There were the specialist counselors, like the nature counselor — wonderful guy, I remember him very well — and there

was music. There was a chorus, and there was a drama specialist and I was in the drama thing.

And being that kind of camp, coming from that kind of philosophy, the way the camp was run, the children were indoctrinated. We were indoctrinated in very socially conscious ideas. The camp made a great effort to have a very diverse community, and they did that with scholarships and so forth. The staff was very diverse. So it seemed like the norm to me, even though you went back to a world that was quite different. Ours was mostly Jewish at that point.

But camp left the deepest impression of having contact, of having intimate, important contact with people of other races. There was a Finnish couple that didn't speak very much English at the camp. Paul Robeson's son went to that camp. I didn't even know it at the time but Paul Robeson came up to visit once and the chorus was singing the "Ballad for Americans," which at that time he had recorded, and it was very important during the war. (singing) "In '76, the sky was red, thunder rumbled overhead. Bad King George couldn't sleep in his bed and on that stormy morn, old Uncle Sam was born. Some birthday." Well, Robeson had just recorded that and we in the camp chorus were singing it for him. He came in during rehearsal, and the barn door opened and there he stood, this huge big man, and then he started singing with us. (singing) "Old Sam put on a three-cornered hat and in a Richmond church he sat." You know, you screw in those things when you're young and you never forget them. And that was Paul Robeson.

So that was Camp Wo-Chi-Ca. Later summers I was a camper again. I went there every year until the year I was a counselor, when I was 18. When I was a junior counselor, they had the junior counselor group — I don't remember exactly when. Our project was — they needed another platform tent for the junior counselors, for us, so we built it. That was Wo-Chi-Ca.

WEIGAND: So you just sort of learned to do all these different things. It sounds like it trained you in this whole cultural activism thing.

GILBERT: That's exactly what it was, cultural activism.

WEIGAND: And you met Fred Hellerman there?

GILBERT: Fred, yes. When I was a counselor, Fred was also a counselor there. And he was just teaching himself, learning to play guitar. I had, by then, a little repertoire of folk things, mostly — the things I'd learned with the Priority Ramblers. And there were a couple of recordings of folk songs. I always forget this man's name, big guy, he became an actor: (singing) "Jimmy crack corn and I don't care. Jimmy crack corn and I don't care." It'll come back. Richard Dyer-Bennett. Those two recordings were big — not big-selling records, but they were important. So Freddie and I started to sing together at that camp.

WEIGAND: So, so tell me how the Weavers come together. I mean, you know Fred Hellerman, and you've gotten into folk music in D.C., and you've heard about Pete Seeger. How did you finally pull that group together?

36:00

GILBERT: Well, when that summer was finished, the summer of when I was 18 and Freddie and I were counselors at that camp, the war was pretty much over and people were coming back from their overseas stints. Pete [Seeger], certainly, was coming back. They'd come back to New York — at least whoever lived in New York did. Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes had a background in a group called the Almanac Singers that predated the Weavers, and that group was a kind of catch all group. Woody Guthrie sang with it, the Lomaxes sang with it, as did a number of other people. It was very, very far left, much further left than anything the Weavers ever did. They wanted to put another group together. That's what I know from having been told it, or having read it recently. But my experience of it was that Pete wanted to put a chorus together, and so I was part of that chorus and Fred was part of that chorus. We were, both of us, involved in a lot of activity that was carried on in New York after the summer. A group called Folksay — Fred was in that. We were around that seething folk thing that was happening at the time, largely around Pete and Lee.

So my recollection is this chorus — and there were a number of people in it that, for some reason, didn't stay in it. Fred and Pete and I did, and I can recall hearing the sound of our voices, through all this other noise, just coming together like that. We were putting on hootenannies, what they called hootenannies — concerts of folk music. This was all part of a process that was going on around organizing the folk world — it wasn't actually a world, but just a bunch of people who liked folk music — for social action, union meetings and so on. Pete and Lee were very much into that. Lee had a background in it and he was part of a religious family. His father was a minister and he had all those gospel songs and he would turn them into union songs. And so there was that. I'm a little confused now. I really don't know where I'm going with this story. Maybe you can help me.

WIEGAND: Well, I was just asking you how they all came together, and People's Songs was part of this, too?

GILBERT: That's right. They organized People's Songs. People's Songs became the center of all this going on. People's Songs supported and got these produced, these concerts called hootenannies. The very first one that I remember, Pete and Lee and Fred and I came together came to sing a song that was a Bach chorale with new words by another singer, Tom Glaser, who later became very famous for children's music. But Tom wrote a very nice — (singing) "Because all men are brothers, wherever men shall be." Notice it was men, always men. "One union shall unite

us forever proud and free.” That was how it began. So four of us sang that and we sang it in harmony and it was very good. We sounded very, very good — very surprised. And that sort of started us, started the group going. There were other songs that we sang. That’s the one I remember most. Maybe because of my choral background, that was the one that was most interesting, in a way.

We went on from there. We tried to stay together. Wherever there was a union thing where they wanted, or could be talked into having singers, we went there, and tried to stay together. We managed to do it. We managed to stay together somehow. It was hard to get any money. The unions were fine. That’s what Pete’s dream was, to make the unions singing unions. Well, you know, the Industrial Workers of the World was pretty much a singing union and I think that’s sort of where his dream was based. But the unions had other agendas, you know? They were happy to have the entertainment, but not too much. But they had no money and it was hard to get even transportation, even.

WEIGAND: So you were pretty young, then. You were what, 18 or 19?

GILBERT: Nineteen.

WEIGAND: As this happened and as you got into this group, were you thinking at that point that you wanted to be a professional singer or —

GILBERT: Not at all. No, by that time, I was pretty convinced that that was not going to happen, you know? It was a dream but it wasn’t — life did not take me in that direction. It gave me a lot of music, and I took advantage of what music I could find, but I recognized it as a dream and not one that was likely to come true.

It was a big surprise when the Weavers became famous. None of us had any thought that that was going to happen. Actually, the first job that we took at the Village Vanguard in 1949 was supposed to be a ten-day or two weeks’ job. It was to cover the Christmas–New Year’s season at the Village. I don’t know what possessed Max Gordon to hire us. I really don’t. This place was noted for interesting acts, but they were mostly jazz or theater people or something like that. Anyway, he knew — Pete may have worked down there at one time, I don’t know. But anyway, he hired us and we stayed for six months.

And while we stayed there, people were offering us all kinds of things. One man came down who was an executive, who was the house composer, let’s say, for Decca Records. He fell in love with the group. His name was Gordon Jenkins, and he came night after night when he was in New York, and took us to see the executive person at Decca Records who said to us, “Yes, you’re very good but you have to decide if you want to be good or commercial.” We thanked him very much and we left. But Gordon was insistent, and he got us a contract there and we recorded these non-commercial songs, like “Goodnight, Irene” and

“Tzena Tzena” on the back of it. They went for commercial hits instantly. So that was a big surprise, altogether a big surprise.

WEIGAND: So you had a day job before that, or were you supporting yourself –

GILBERT: Oh, yeah, I had lots of day jobs. I worked in an office. I worked in offices as a typist. I tried to do sales, but wasn't very good at it. I wasn't very good at anything. The truth of the matter is, I did not have an abiding interest in typewriters or selling or any of that stuff.

WEIGAND: So it worked out alright.

GILBERT: What?

WEIGAND: So it worked out well for you when the group did make it big.

GILBERT: Oh, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, to be working at something that I loved to do and getting paid for it? It was unbelievable. I mean, most women had no such opportunity. My friend Jackie worked as a — she was a very good secretary office worker and she actually got me a job, a part-time job, in the place she was working at the time, the March of Dimes. And the great thing about that was that the people who worked there, the office workers, got to take turns going to the theater. You know, they used to raise money by sending their workers into shows with a can, and the other audience members would put money in the can. We'd try to raise money that way, and you got to see shows. So, I got to see a number of very, very special Broadway shows doing that. But that was office work. That's what I did, mostly.

WEIGAND: A good thing to escape from.

GILBERT: A very good thing to escape from

WEIGAND: Yeah, I've done a fair bit of it myself.

GILBERT: Oh, have you?

WEIGAND: Ugh.

GILBERT: Well, you know, at one point, I thought, or somebody suggested maybe I should study stenography. The idea was you could work yourself up, if you could be a stenographer, you know, and then you wouldn't have to be a clerk-typist. Maybe you'd be somebody's secretary. It wasn't an appealing idea to me, but it was a way of getting further. So I started taking stenography. Well, I just — it was so — I just couldn't do it. It was so far beyond what I could be interested in. I just wasn't very good at it. You know, in truth, I think I was quite lazy. I was that way about

music, too. I had a guitar, I was studying the guitar, but I never could stay long enough with it to really develop any fluency with it. So I think I was just lazy.

WEIGAND: And singing just came more naturally to you?

GILBERT: Yeah.

WEIGAND: You must have had voice training at some point?

GILBERT: No.

WEIGAND: No?

GILBERT: No, my voice, my voice training came secondhand. The year that my mother and father split up, that summer, my mother sent me to some family we had in Springfield, Missouri, to spend the summer there while she got things arranged. It was the family of one of the half brothers who brought her to America, and they had three daughters. One of them was my age. The youngest one was my age, and then there was one two or three years older, and then the eldest.

The one in the middle was a voice student, and she used to vocalize at home. She had music that she used to sing from and I was enthralled. She had what I thought, and I think probably was, a beautiful voice. I was so, so taken with her singing that I used to hang out, hang around when she was practicing. And then when she was out of the house, I would go to the piano and pick out the tunes she was singing. They were out of a book that I think is still published, with a lot of art songs in it. I learned those songs and imitated the sound of her voice. She sang in French, or mostly in French. That was my vocal training. Her teacher should have been paid double (laughs).

I was offered vocal lessons by a teacher from a music school. I was maybe about 15 then and I didn't take them up on it because there was no privacy at that time, and no place to practice, and it was embarrassing to me, so I didn't take it up.

WEIGAND: I guess it worked out OK anyway.

GILBERT: Seems to have worked out.

WEIGAND: You were at the Peekskill Concert where Paul Robeson sang and there was a big riot? Can you talk a little bit about that?

49:10

GILBERT: There were actually two concerts. The first one that was called was wrecked by local thugs before it ever started. We called them thugs, although they considered themselves patriots. The second concert was organized in response to that, and I was at that concert, actually

expecting maybe to sing at it. Fred and I were working that summer at our summer jobs at one of those hotels, summer hotels, not too far away, maybe half an hour or 45 minutes away. Pete was going to be on this program with Robeson and two pianists and somebody else, I don't remember everybody. So we went, thinking that maybe we'd get a chance to sing with Pete. The concert was in a beautiful spot, a kind of natural amphitheater.

Robeson sang. It was a short concert and, when he was finished, somebody came to the microphone and said, "Well, get to your cars and go and leave as quickly as possible." I think that was true, but I might be wrong. Well, we'd come in a car, but the car was nowhere to be seen, and it was bedlam in the parking area. People were jumping on buses and somebody said, "Get on any bus. Just get on any bus." That's what we did. We jumped on a bus, barely got into a bus and, very crowded, and went off. And when we got past the parking area onto this narrow, narrow road, for some reason we didn't know, we were being forced into this little tiny rutted road through the trees. We bumped along for a while and then we were stopped by a uniformed state trooper, at least I thought he was a state trooper. I looked out the window and there was this guy standing with a pile of rocks, very neatly stacked, a pyramid of rocks. As I'm watching him he picks up this rock and hurls it at the bus. He had a big grin on his face and his leg up like a baseball pitcher. It smashed the windows. People were screaming and somebody got cut, and we were being held up by this cop, standing in front of the bus with his hand up like that. And the guy winds up again, does exactly the same thing, and then the cop moves along and moves us along, and says, "Slow." It was a joke, because it was that way all along the road.

For some reason, nobody got severely hurt in our bus, but people were badly, badly hurt and nearly killed. It was watching fascism in action. That's what it was, yep.

WEIGAND: Yikes. Well it's no wonder. People always refer to that event as this sort of landmark event in the –

GILBERT: It was a landmark.

WEIGAND: Yeah, it sounds awful. Let me look at the time here. There's a little more time on this tape. I'm trying to think if I have a question I can ask you that's not going to be too lengthy, or if I should just change the tape now. Maybe I should do that.

GILBERT: Sure. Do what feels safe.

END DVD 1

DVD 2

GILBERT: Camp Wo-Chi-Ca? What was so different about Camp Wo-Chi-Ca? I remember being in other camps. The height of the season was the Black & Gold War, you know, that sort of thing. There was a lot of saluting the flag and that, you know, the things, the summer camp things, coming together to salute the flag. I remember there was always a war thing of some kind going on at every summer camp I went to, except Wo-Chi-Ca. Not only wasn't there a war thing, but campfires, I remember campfires. There was a wonderful drama teacher there, one guy who — well, we did a version of *Tom Joad*.

WEIGAND: Steinbeck ?

GILBERT: Steinbeck, and played parts. I played Ma Joad. I remember a campfire where somebody — may have been the campers or may have been the counselor himself — read from *Johnny Got His Gun*. It's a tremendous antiwar play. It was that kind of thing that went on. You spent a summer having a lot of fun and learning something, and learning something was fun. If you went to Wo-Chi-Ca, you came to expect that, that thinking and politics was something fun. It was good to do that, and that holds for life. It really does.

I guess that's why I feel, how I feel about the polemics. OK, sometimes there's room for polemics, but the way — if you don't feel emotionally about something — if you do, then you can put it in a song, you can put it in a poem, you can put it in a play, put it in music, you know. Because I know there are people who wrote music, straight music, antiwar music, you know. Or you can be a writer. You can write it. But the stage is a wonderful place to teach from. You may not know you are teaching, but it is a place to teach from.

I once wanted to be a therapist, later in my life, and I got upset about what was going on in those days with therapy and therapists and so forth, and cults. I said that to one of my teachers and said, "You know, it really — it distresses me so much I don't even want to be part of it." And he said, "But it's such a great place to teach from." And I guess he was right, but it was not my place. My place was the stage.

WEIGAND: You were saying that thing to me on the phone last week about how you weren't really in organizations, but that politics, for you, was about emotion. It sounds like that's one of the things you took away from Camp Wo-Chi-Ca, and just from your childhood exposure to that sort of left culture stuff.

GILBERT: And I should tell you, you know, that — I told you a little bit about my mom coming from Europe with this amazing, I think, amazing life already lived. My mom, she survived World War II on the streets of Warsaw. When her father was taken into the hospital — and of course it

was, in those days, it was a Catholic hospital — she had to come to bring her father some food, kosher food, so that he could eat, and she was told by the, as she described it, the woman in the black dress with the great wings, “Oh, your father died last night.” Then she turned her back and walked away. Then, a year later, she was in bed with her mother while her mother died of typhus or something like that. She saw her mother taken away. She never saw her again, you know. That kind of thing, to survive that sort of life — we don’t know anything about that kind of life today. You think, How did they survive? How did those women survive? How did my mother survive? And she did, and made a life, and it was a life full of the things she believed in. She was tough, my mom, really tough, and not an angel by any means.

But we always think about — these days, when I hear people talking about the ’50s, you know, when women didn’t work, they stayed home with the house—what women were these? Somebody they saw on television, what was given out on television programs of the nice little housewife? Thousands of women worked. Thousands and thousands and thousands of women worked, took care of their homes and so on. I don’t know where all that comes from. Television, that’s where that comes from. I mean, most of the women that I know, the younger women, a lot of them were younger women, when they speak of their parents as if they were characters in a television play. That wasn’t true of my mother or her generation. It has to do with class. It’s about class, you know, that thing of class which is astonishing.

WEIGAND: Which is so much not talked about.

GILBERT: Yeah, and so much not a part — that this class does not become part of that class and never the twain shall meet, in terms of what they talk about. And I know that’s going on today. I know that’s going on with people — what do we know about people who don’t have homes, families who don’t have homes –

WEIGAND: Right. Very little.

GILBERT: – women who don’t have homes, you know? And it’s not part of our life. It’s not part of our class. It’s somebody — they’re somebody else, they are something else. Even when we feel, you know, concerned about –

WEIGAND: Yeah, they’re the people who really get left out of all of this understanding, I guess.

GILBERT: So that’s kind of — that sort of power that women have. Mother Jones said, “Women don’t understand their own power.” You know, she was against the movement for women to vote. She wanted [activists] to be working for all women, not just the women who wanted to vote. Too

bad, I thought she was wrong, but anyway (laughs) — but I could certainly understand where she was coming from. What more –

WEIGAND: Well, sort of building on that, maybe, I wanted to ask you about the gender dynamics of the Weavers.

8:30

GILBERT: The what?

WEIGAND: The gender dynamics of the group?

GILBERT: Gender dynamics?

WEIGAND: Yes. There were these three men and you (laughter). What was that like? How did it all play out?

GILBERT: Well, in a way, I got my wish. I was the girl in the band, and I hated it. I hated that every time we got a review, they would talk about me as the chick. They would always talk about what I wore. They never talked what the men wore. They always talked about what I wore. So it was very, very split, you know. In a way, I got to be the girl from the band. But by that time, I was way past that kind of thinking and yet it was — it was pleasant.

The men were — I didn't realize it at the time but I realize it now. It took me to get through women's liberation, to get a picture of what was going on. It seemed like I had an equal voice, theoretically. In some ways, practically, I did. Often it was by just being stubborn, by having my say. In general, I deferred to Pete and to Lee. First of all, they were older. They had far more experience and far more, to say the least — I was a Johnny — a Junie-come-lately to folk music, in any case, and so I deferred to them. But what I think was happening was that there was a male competition going on, and in a male competition, women don't matter. Especially if you're not aware of it, right? (laughter) You sort of go along with it.

When I look back on it now, I see it that way. I see that a lot of my feeling of not being a part of it, not being paid attention to, of not being given an equal place was not about that. It was about — if I demanded an equal place, if I demanded my way, I got it. But I don't like to do that, you know? It was who I was and I didn't really want to be that. But that loving and very fierce competition was going on all the time between Lee and Pete, although they never would've admitted it. Pete, certainly today, wouldn't, I don't think. Maybe he would. I don't think he thinks that way. And Freddie, who was the younger guy trying to make his way with those two powerhouses, you know? So the dynamic was very interesting but, unfortunately, I didn't recognize it at the time.

WEIGAND: Yeah, it sounds like you had some level of frustration, or –

GILBERT: A lot of frustration, yeah, a lot of frustration. It came out in a kind of diffuse, sort of, anger. I was [angry] at people. I was angry at Fred a lot, because Fred and I are about the same age. I objected to a certain kind of smugness about the decisions they made. I did not take well to that and do not take well to that, especially from a man. But my life doesn't have a lot of men in it and hasn't for a while, except that recently we've been called back into that group, for one reason or another. We recently had the experience of singing together again. Of course, Lee's gone, but Pete and Fred and I and a couple of other people were on a concert that Arlo Guthrie put together to honor the man who was our producer, Harold Leventhal, recently at Carnegie Hall. And that was fascinating. That coming together again was fascinating. Of course, we were all old people, and how that went down — I was surprised to see how uncertain and nervous Fred was about the whole thing. Of course, they had instruments, and they had to deal with their instruments, which I never did, so it was easier for me to take hold, which I did. I took hold of that concert, because somebody had to. It's so interesting to look back on that stuff and see what you know from the vantage point of having gone through a lot of change.

WIEGAND: Yeah. On the phone last week, I was telling you about how I'd read that there was this occasional critique of the Weavers for male chauvinism. And what I read was that — what did it say? it said that people said that the group catered to "Tin Pan Alley female stereotypes" to win an audience. I'm not sure who said it, probably some cultural writer in the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses* or something.

GILBERT: Really?

WEIGAND: Yeah.

GILBERT: Oh, how — you mean, from the — that's an old thing?

WEIGAND: A quote from the 1950s, yes.

GILBERT: How interesting.

WEIGAND: Yeah, and the other thing I read about was that, you know, Pete Seeger wrote the "Hammer Song" and that last line was, "I'd hammer out love between all of my brothers" —

GILBERT: Yeah, originally that's what it was.

WEIGAND: It was some Communist Party functionary, I think, who said, "Oh, you know, that's not gonna work. It has to say 'hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters.'" And I was going to ask you what you thought about all of that at the time.

GILBERT: Well, at the time, well, let me see. Why don't you ask me what I think about all those songs that we did with all those men in them.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

GILBERT: You know, one of the most important songs in the Weaver's repertoire was a song called "Wasn't that a Time?" which Lee Hayes wrote with a very close friend of his, Walter Lowenfels, who was a Communist poet, a poet and a Communist. It's a wonderful song, and there came a point where I couldn't sing it any more. I mean, it was very appropriate to sing it and I just couldn't anymore because it went (singing): "Wasn't that a time, a time to try the soul of man, wasn't that a terrible time?" And it starts out, "Our fathers bled at Valley Forge," so that was what we had at the time. That what we had were the clichés about humanity and the clichés about — which always were masculine. Whenever it was that kind of statement, it was masculine, and all of the songs were like that.

And the "Hammer Song," when the "Hammer Song" became famous — actually I think it was through Peter, Paul and Mary that it became famous. I don't know if it was a Communist Party functionary who said that, but Peter, Paul and Mary recorded it as "love between my brothers and my sisters." Lee Hayes said, "It doesn't scan." And of course, it doesn't. "Love between all of my brothers" is much better, poetically speaking. But that — by that time, there was a change in popular progressive thinking. My goodness, there was. What was it he said? Oh, yeah, he said, it should be "love between all of my siblings." That was Lee.

So, yeah, what did I think about it? I thought both of those things. One, it doesn't scan very well, and two, I'm really glad that they're thinking about this. They being the next generation, you know. And a few years later, I couldn't even sing "Wasn't that a Time?" We were celebrating the publishing of a wonderful biography of Lee Hayes, at the Vanguard, of all places, and Pete started to play it and I sat down.

WEIGAND: This was in the 1980s?

GILBERT: When was it published? Well, early, late — yeah, the early '80s.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh, interesting. So it sounds like — I mean, it's interesting. You had this frustration and, you know, not conscious awareness of —

GILBERT: Being frustrated without the awareness, really, that's what it was about.

WEIGAND: Right, yeah, and then it really took the women's movement to kind of —

GILBERT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You know, I came to the women's movement largely through poems, through poetry. I was on my way up to Canada, where I had moved to British Columbia, and I wasn't a singer then. I was really going up there as a therapist, during a time of my life when I left performing. I don't know how I came to it. I read a book of poetry criticism, a book I pulled out of a stack in a bookshop, and it had reference to bits and pieces in reference to several women — Adrienne Rich, Alta — I don't know if you know that name, Alta.

WEIGAND: I do, yeah.

GILBERT: She was an early women's movement activist who wrote about the lives of women, about her life, and it was, you know — I just clicked, just like Holly Near's music clicked for me. Her song "Hiking Boot Mama" — do you remember that one?

WEIGAND: I don't know if I know that one.

GILBERT: (singing) "Started out fine, I was from — da, da." She's talking about traveling with her little girl and she meets up with this guy and he's — he complains because the kid's making too much — it's a great song. And it just, it clicked for me at that time. Like everybody else, I'd been reading the paper about (pause in recording) Where were we?

WEIGAND: You were talking about having read the poetry.

GILBERT: So, getting my mind wrapped around being a woman. What did that mean, being a woman. What did that mean in the world? What did it mean? What did my life mean as a woman? Not as a Weaver, not as a — but as a woman. Well, you know, you open that gate, it's a flood. It began through the poems. I began to read Adrienne Rich. I began to read Alta. Alta was tough. It was great. I read Robin Morgan, *The Lady and the Beasts*. Do you know that book?

20:20

WEIGAND: I don't know it.

GILBERT: My copy was so broken up, you know, I'd bind it up over and over again. I felt like it opened a world to me, historically, contemporaneously, you know, and for the future. That's where everything changed. And I went up to Canada having begun to pay attention to being a woman and not having a focus for it. Sadly, when I went to British Columbia and got settled into the area that I was going to live in, a group of women came to me and said, "We'd like you to run a women's group."

Well, I didn't have a clue what a women's consciousness-raising group was. I'd heard about them, you know. We did try. Interestingly enough we tried in this tiny, tiny little town, hardly a town, in the

Kootenay Mountains. We let it be known that we were going to have such a group, and every woman in town, practically, came to it, not just women who were in the women's core. There were a couple of lesbian women up there. It seemed like everybody was waiting for that.

WEIGAND: When was this, chronologically, in the '70s?

GILBERT: Late '70s.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh, and did they ask you because you were a therapist at that time?

GILBERT: Yeah, and if I had been really good at that — well, it was a very important moment. I did the best I could but I didn't know what to be in that group. Should I be — was I the center of the group? Was I the focus of the group? It didn't seem right, you know? It seemed like — that didn't quite seem like it. So I didn't really know how to either take hold of it or let it go. And it sort of let itself go in time, but I think it was an important moment, then. A combination of different things that were coming into my life and consciousness made it a big moment.

WEIGAND: I really want to talk about your involvement in the women's movement but, since that comes later, I don't know if it makes sense to and talk about that now or if I should pull you back and kind of finish up the earlier stuff. Yes, let's talk about the earlier stuff, and then we can get back to feminism later on, because that's really important. Can you talk a little bit about how commercial success, or if commercial success changed the Weavers? I mean, I can see that it might, so, I wonder how that worked.

GILBERT: Commercial success was the hardest on Pete Seeger. That wasn't the way he saw his life and didn't want it to be, at the time. And Lee Hays loved it. I mean, for the first time in his life, he had money, he had — when the Weavers first got together he was very close to starvation. He had no money to buy groceries. He was living off what we could contribute, a small amount, dollars, something like that, a week, to him. So for him, it was like he'd died and gone to heaven. He took a lot of advantage of it. Lee had big appetites of all kinds.

Pete did his best to stay proletarian. You know, he came from an intellectual, high-class background. But though he accepted the intellectual part of it, he hated the high-class aspect. He played the part of the farmer or the proletarian all his life and still does. He's been faithful to that ideal and that idea which, in fact, came from his father, who idolized — not idolized, but lionized the working class.

Myself, I loved it. I just thought it was just a lot of fun. I loved wearing pretty dresses and I wore pretty dresses all through that time. I loved the excitement of going to a new place and seeing if they liked us and they always did. And, you know, we had a wonderful repertoire.

We were singing all kinds of things. We never sang outwardly political songs, but in those days we sang songs of peace and community, world music and so on. That was pretty radical, you know, in the days of the cold war. But it was a different world. It was a very interesting, different world. Would I espouse that world for various kinds of things? Espouse it, no. But it was interesting to see it, you know.

WEIGAND: Well, you were so young.

GILBERT: I was very young. And I think Fred kind of liked it. I know he did. But for the group, it was hard on the group. It was hard for our group dynamic. We were used to — we had spent six months incubating our repertoire at the Village Vanguard. New songs — somebody, often Pete, would introduce a new song. We'd rehearse it back in the kitchen of the Village Vanguard and, by the time we'd done that a couple of times, we had a new song in the repertoire, and it was natural to us — that flow of things. Here we'd made records, and our recordings were selling by the millions and we were expected to perform them.

So the work itself became, not exactly routine — I still loved it, I still loved doing it, but it eliminated a lot of the actual process that was so important to us and that we loved. Getting to know the other people in the world we were traveling in, other people who were part of that world and more naturally a part of it, the other performers, for instance, was interesting and odd, but did not feed us in the way that we had been feeding ourselves in earlier times. That world we wanted to travel in — unionism, you know, progressive politics, antiwar stuff — that's what fed us, and we were not traveling in that world.

So it was hard on the group, and eventually we got blacklisted. We had exactly two years of that living-high-on-the-hog life, and then we were blacklisted and it was over. That was finished, and we didn't get back again for two years. We were blacklisted, we were out of work, and we stayed out of work. I left New York altogether and went to California, had a baby, and so on. I lived the life that I thought I wanted then, which was very much a '50s housewife life. I had absolutely no talent for it. But I had my baby. That was a great thing. I went back to school and I took some music classes in a nearby college, you know. I kept myself busy that way.

But when the Weavers got back together again, the big surprise was the Carnegie Hall Concert of 1955. Harold Leventhal put it together because he felt we did have an audience. He tried to get Town Hall but Town Hall wouldn't book us because they were afraid of the picket lines and the violence which was there, very much so. So Harold got Carnegie Hall instead. And there was this huge turnout of people, hundreds and hundreds of people turned away. That put us back together again for a time. We did another concert the following spring and it put us together again for a bit of time. But by that time, Pete had had enough of it, and he did not want to go back to it. He had also been

indicted for contempt of Congress for taking the First Amendment instead of taking the Fifth. So he was kind of hemmed in, too. But I think he just — he didn't want to do it anymore. We were offered a commercial — I think it was a cigarette commercial? I think so. And he was totally opposed to that. That might have been the basis for his decision to leave the group. So we had the use of him for a few years.

WEIGAND: Right. So, there was a worry of selling out, at least on his part?

GILBERT: Oh, I don't think it was about that. By then, you know, it was clear that our music was not being played on the air. Nobody would play our records. I mean, that was it. Actually, when we came back, after the blacklist, we were doing what we really wanted to do in the first place, which is play for colleges and small concerts, wherever the producer wasn't scared to death to take us on, you know? By then we were actually accomplishing what we had to set out to do. When we first started and tried to stay together and tried to get work Pete wrote to about 50 colleges along the East Coast to see if we could get booked, and nobody was interested. And it wasn't just that they weren't interested in us, there wasn't any folk music going on. So when we came back again we were actually able to play those kinds of concerts. We were raising folk music consciousness along the colleges and the whole folk think came, the folk revival happened.

Of course the folk revival happened because the record companies realized they could make a lot of money on folk songs. But there it was. People were taking out their grandpa's banjos and guitars or grandmother's autoharps or whatever and were playing. They were making their own music.

WEIGAND: It's interesting, too, because by 1955 and '56, you really were, you know, practicing a form a resistance. You were resisting McCarthyism in a sense by getting together and performing in public and drawing an audience.

GILBERT: Yeah, it was a form of resistance, because there were plenty of threats about picket lines and stink bombs. There was even a stink bomb in one place. Yeah. And the people who produced those concerts were also, wherever we went, you know, practicing a form of resistance and so were the audiences, OK. And that was a great thing, that circuit of feeling that was going on, isolated though it was in a lot of ways.

WEIGAND: It must have really helped to keep all those people going.

GILBERT: So they tell us.

WEIGAND: Can we talk a little bit about the whole blacklist thing? I'd love to hear your thoughts on it, on how it felt. I just kind of wanted to hear what

33:42

you had to say about how it felt. Were you surprised when it happened? Or had you been waiting for it?

GILBERT:

Uh, we were not surprised. How could we have been surprised? People were all — it was clear from 1947, which is before the Weavers actually started working together as a group, that this was going to be bad and was going from bad to worse. There were people in Hollywood were accused, people had gone to jail already. Anticommunism had swept the country with these loyalty oaths and everybody got on the get-the-commies bandwagon. It was clear that we were living on borrowed time. But we didn't behave that way. We just went about our business, although we didn't record anything that was controversial. If we were recording we weren't going to record a song from the Spanish Civil War, that's for sure. We might have done it in a concert in the Village Vanguard, but we weren't going to record it.

So, it was no surprise, but that doesn't mean that there was no shock. It was shocking to have this come down on us in the ways that it did, beginning with the radio people, with the networks and so on. We had to sign loyalty oaths. The radio networks, the record companies were making money on this stuff and they weren't eager to give us up. But nobody was going to take any chances, because it had gotten out that you could get in big trouble.

What was surprising was how rapidly this happened. It was almost overnight. We were on the charts, every record we made was on the charts. We were being billed as this very important group in an industry where very important groups are very important. Being stars in those days, being the kind of stars we were, is not like today. I mean, very clearly not like today. The superstars, the super money that's put out and the super money that's earned by a very few — we were nowhere near that kind of thing. But to sell two million records was a big deal in those days. Today, it's nothing, really, hardly anything.

But the blacklisting was so rapid. Suddenly there weren't even club dates. We used to have all the club dates we wanted, but now it was very hard to get them. The club owners who wanted us, who showed any interest in us at all, were immediately threatened by the local Veterans of the Foreign Wars, and by other local, super-patriotic groups, with picketing. They'd get their licenses taken away and so, very quickly, it went from up there (gesturing toward the ceiling) to down there (gesturing toward the floor). We were out of it.

And there were harder moments too. We were in Chicago, maybe at the Palmer House, which at that time was a big venue for big acts, and we used to get together in each other's rooms to rehearse. Some employee of the hotel told us to be sure to leave the door open because if we closed the door the vice squad would come up and have reason to have us arrested and put away. That was astonishing, that sort of thing. But that's what was — that was the mentality, that was the thing that was going on.

We were followed down the street by process servers when we were on the way to a club performance someplace in Ohio. Two guys were following us down the street. We were chatting away on the way to the club from the hotel. I knew these two guys are following us down the street and I turned around and looked straight at them. They stopped, we stopped, and one of them said, “Well do you want your subpoena here or on the floor?” They meant, if we didn’t take it there, they’d serve us in the nightclub. So we took it then and there.

We’d also have to deal with drunks sitting at the tables in the front of clubs saying, Sing “The Star Spangled Banner” — you know, that kind of thing. When we were filming *Wasn’t That a Time* Pete reminded me that once, when that happened, I said sweetly, “Yes, let’s do it when we’re sober, when we’re not drunk.” I don’t remember saying it, but he says I did.

WEIGAND: The experience must have been scary, too?

GILBERT: It was scary, yeah. It was scary. It was more distressing than scary. People were definitely hurt, injured, deliberately injured. Why I wasn’t afraid of that, I don’t know, maybe because I was in denial about it. But it was very distressing and I remember very much that I really didn’t want to be part of this, that I wanted to be out of it. It just wasn’t fun anymore. This wasn’t the kind of fun I’d been having. And the feeling that came up in me at the time, which was, Oh, I want to have a baby. I want to live in a house. I want to live quietly. I want to go away. I can do this. We can do this. We can go away. We’ll go to California. And it came from trying to get away from this.

WEIGAND: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you, whether or not your turn toward marriage and family had a relationship to your experience of McCarthyism.

40:45

GILBERT: Oh, sure. I dreamed of having babies early on. When we first got married I expected that I would do that. That was the one expectation I had as a woman, that I was going to have a baby. But the urgency to do it came certainly on the heels of the red-baiting experience. And in fact, we did. We went off on a trip through Mexico. We drove — we had a new car that had been bought on the profits of “Goodnight Irene,” and we drove it through Mexico, down the east coast, all around, came up the west to California where we’d decided we’d live. It was wonderful. And by the time we got to California, I was pregnant. We moved into that house, the very house I’d dreamed about. It was over on the Valley side of the Los Angeles area. But, as I said, I had very little talent for being a homemaker.

WEIGAND: So, what was that all like? Were you conscious of the fact that you had very little talent and that you weren’t —

GILBERT: Too conscious. I had stacks of magazines, women's magazines, stacks of them in the garage, loads of them. I couldn't even get rid of them because there might be something in there I'd missed that would help me along. I spent a lot of time driving to and from the music library at UCLA. I was in the car a lot driving with my kid, driving, driving, driving. That's the Los Angeles lifestyle. And I listened to music, listened to records and took music classes. I took music theory classes, which I'd never had, and I put music back in my life, but in a different way. And it was good. I liked it.

But I was definitely cut off. I had practically no contact with the Weavers. The first contact I had was a letter from Harold Leventhal saying, "We want to do a concert. Come back to New York." And that was a year — my daughter was then a year old. I said, "No way. Why would I do that? And why do you think there'd be an audience for it?" But the audience was there, and the following year when I got the second letter about it, I came and did that.

WEIGAND: So what did it feel like, once you did get back into it?

GILBERT: Now, talk about a surprise. That was amazing. It was amazing. That was coming out on the stage to almost 3000 people, acting out their hunger for what we had done. That began to impress me. I realized what we had meant to people, what we had been doing. Until then, it had seemed like the Weavers had been about fun and games, you know? Well, that's not really exactly right, but I think that concert was the first time I really had the sense of really being in a community, the sense that people were concerned. It's odd, because I grew up in that kind of context, and that's what took me to the music in the first place. So I think that the little period of time when we were stars was interesting in that it took away that sense of being in a community, of being really part of a meaningful community. And the concert at Carnegie Hall brought it back.

WEIGAND: How about motherhood? You'd had these fantasies about being a mother and having a baby and then you did it. I wonder what that was like for you, particularly in that context of the '50s, when it was defined as *the* thing that women were supposed to do.

GILBERT: As a mom, I saw myself doing what women were supposed to be doing. And I have to say that it was a really — looking at it now, I realize that it was a very isolating experience. I had a friend who had children and there were children across the street and so on, but again, it wasn't a community. It wasn't. We weren't fed by a sense of being in a group, in a community. There were friends, there were sleepovers, there was this and that, and that was all fine, but we were all in our own worlds. There wasn't a playground, for instance, where I lived. There was no playground experience. Well, that was all right with me because I hated

the playground when I was a little girl, you know. How could I not hate it? We moved from one place to another, one place to another. I never had a friend from school. I never had friends to play with, you know, and so every new playground was a new experience with a new jungle. So I didn't know that it was important. I didn't know that it was really important to my daughter to have that experience.

But I thought I was doing what I wanted to do and I loved having a baby. I loved watching her develop. I loved that. I still do. I love watching children. I get glommed onto kids like you get glommed onto television, you know? It's something like that. Watching what are they gonna do with this or what are they gonna do with that? You know, or, this has happened, let's see how she handles that — that sort of thing. And that part was terrific, and I happened to have a wonderful little girl who was very responsive and loving. She'd throw her arms around anybody who was nice and everybody was.

But for me personally, there was not a lot of growth from it. I look at it now and I see families becoming families by choosing to be families, and making sure — I don't know what you're doing with your family, but it's certainly not like the '50s. I don't know for sure, but I think it would be kind of hard to be that isolated today.

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah.

GILBERT: And now I've got a grandchild.

WEIGAND: Right. It was certainly unusual in that era to have just one child. Was that a conscious decision?

GILBERT: Well, my husband and I broke up. I wanted four. It was foolish but I wanted four. But we broke up before there was another one. I still depended upon men. That's the way it was. I did and I didn't. The fact that I left him means that I didn't depend on him and when I left him, I was perfectly sure that I could make a life and make a life for my daughter by myself, and that's what I did.

WEIGAND: You came back to New York?

GILBERT: I came back to New York. It's interesting to look at it now. By that time, when I came back to New York, I was already working again, so I had a housekeeper. That's how I spent my earnings was on a live-in housekeeper. And uh, Lisa went to a good school. I think it was a good school. She made her own little community.

WEIGAND: So, your experiment with June Cleaver lifestyle in the 1950s was very brief, then? (laughter)

GILBERT: It was about seven years. It started in 1953. It was six years, really. It finished in 1959.

WEIGAND: Right along with the decade itself.

GILBERT: Yeah, yeah.

WEIGAND: So you came back to New York and you were doing singing and acting both?

GILBERT: Uh-huh. I got involved in a theater company in New York called the Open Theater.

WEIGAND: Yeah, that's next on my list here. I wanted to ask you about that because I ran across some references to it but I don't really know what it was all about.

GILBERT: Open Theater was an innovational kind of workshop, really, for actors, spearheaded by a man by the name of Joseph Chaikin, a theater director now quite famous, but at the time, not really. It was off-off-off-off-Broadway. It wasn't a producing company. It was a workshop of people looking for what was intrinsic and essential about the stage, about theater, as opposed to television and movies. What was there about being in an audience with live people? What was it for the actor? What was that about? And so, under the influence of — I wouldn't say under the direction, because at that time they weren't acting as directors, but there were other people besides Joe. There was a guy by the name of Peter Feldman who was very effective. He eventually went to Canada and taught up there.

One of the things we did was devise exercises — Joe was terrific at this, devising exercises to — they're hard to explain — but it was to get at certain questions. Basically, the question was, Why theater? What's it about? What's there about being in an audience? If you remember, the 1960s was a time that a lot of theater, or alternative theater companies, were trying to break down that space, for better or worse, between the audience and the actors. And Joe's source of inspiration and idea had started with the Living Theater. He was a member of the Living Theater, a very way-out theater company. They eventually went to Europe and spent many years in Europe, but Joe didn't go with them. He stayed in New York and began this group.

Like I said, the Open Theater, it never was a producing company. But a play that was developed in the work of the Open Theater was produced in an off-off-Broadway theater, and I was cast in it. And amazingly, and to everyone's surprise, it was an overnight sensation. The night we started it, opening night, they had already posted the closing notice on the bulletin board, because it was expected that that would happen. And the next morning, I think it was Clive Barnes wrote

a rave review about the play and we were an overnight success, much like the Weavers in the old days. So there we were. I was in this play and, by then, the Weavers had decided we'd had enough. Somebody — Freddie, I think — had had enough.

When I first came back to New York I had started out trying to do a solo career with music and worked with very good musicians trying to do some kind of eclectic musical thing, but I didn't really like it. I didn't like working alone. I just didn't feel whatever it was that fed us before. Instead I got very into the theater, into this theater particularly, and once I was in this play, it sort of turned my life into that direction and from then on, I pursued that for several years. I went with this play to London. We played it in London, then went back into it in New York. So I was with that play for a couple of years, and then I went to Europe to be part of an experimental group that Peter Brook was putting together, an international theater company, group, to make certain explorations and we went to Paris and did that. That's where I was. I was doing theater. I eventually got cast in some regular scripted plays and I did that.

I went into a play that went to Broadway, and was with that play for almost a year and then we were going to tour it, and the tour fell through, and then I was out of work. And by then, my daughter was about 16 years old and I didn't see a future as an entertainer, as a singer, as an actor, and I didn't know where I was going. Where I ended up going was into therapy. And from there, got into another form of therapy and then became a therapist. I went back to school, got a master's in clinical psychology, whatever that was for, I do not know, but I wasn't a clinical psychologist at all. I was sort of a psychotherapist.

WEIGAND: Well, this might be a good place to stop, for the moment at least.

END DVD 2

DVD 3

WEIGAND: So, when the last tape finished up, you were talking about how your daughter was 16, your show was over, and you decided you were going to change things, and you went off to California, right? And you decided to go to school and be a therapist. Why therapy?

GILBERT: (laughter) Why therapy? Well, in my life, I'd been through therapy a few times, serious times. This was a transitional time for me. As a woman it was a transitional time. My daughter was just on the verge of womanhood and I had had a life mostly in performing, as an actor, as a singer. Certainly both of those had a kind of powerful force to them, you know, that was not just work. Both the Weavers and the Open Theater were powerful forces in my life, in my world. And all of a sudden, there wasn't anything.

I did not like the experience of playing on Broadway and that was supposed to be the apex, you know? But I hated that experience, didn't like it at all, and I don't think I was particularly good in it. I was alright, I was competent, but that was about it. But I didn't like the scene. It was not like the theater I had done, which was exploratory and engaging and exciting. This was not, and the social world around it was not interesting or engaging. And all of a sudden, there was no work. It was past the casting season and all of that, and I was without work, and I didn't really know where I was going.

We went out to the West Coast, to Northern California this time. My daughter had taught herself to be a real weaver. She was very much into hand crafts. A friend of ours was a professional weaver on the West Coast, in San Francisco, so we arranged to go to visit her for a period of time and stay at her house. She was going to go to Mexico and she said we could stay there. And so that's what took us to Northern California. We were trying to find that world for my daughter; she was trying to find it for herself. And while we were there, we connected with some other people who had a house in Mill Valley, and they asked us if we wanted to housesit for them. So we got connected in some ways with Northern California and liked it.

Lisa, my daughter, actually began to move off into her own life while we were there. I had no idea what I was going to do, and I felt myself falling into a state of real depression. Then she went to stay with her father, and she did some other things, and I went into an eclipse and, because of that, I went back into therapy. But I didn't want to go to the conventional therapy that I had been in, and I read a book about primal therapy. This was the first book on primal therapy that was out and I thought, Well, this sounds like it would be worth taking a chance on, so I got myself into that primal therapy.

From there I moved into being a therapist. I went to the place where this therapy was based, in Los Angeles, and then I went up back up to Northern California with two of the therapists who were breaking off to

start their own place. That's how I got to Berkeley. I went to work for them, and I continued to do my therapy there, and went to work and became one of the facilitators in that program. Then I thought I ought to know something about psychology if I'm going to do this, so I got into a program at Lone Mountain College which was, at the time, a women's college. Wait, no it wasn't. They had men there. Maybe it was in the graduate school they had men. But I got into the graduate psychology program. Don't ask me why. I did not have an undergraduate degree, but the people there and the guy who was the head of theater department said my experience in theater would count. Interestingly enough, the music department man did not count my music experience. But I got into that program and I studied and I got my master's in clinical psychology. By that time, I was working in another place. I continued to do my form of primal therapy, which was different from the conventional, so-called conventional primal therapy. That's what I did for the next several years.

WEIGAND: So, where in here do you start to think of yourself as a feminist? You talked a little bit earlier about reading that poetry –

GILBERT: Just after this, when I went up to Canada with my therapy background and my plan to be a therapist. It was when I left this group. I began to be affected by it while I was there. There were two things: Holly Near's recording and Dory Previn's song. She'd just been divorced by Andre Previn. She did a recording and I remember her song about screaming — “screaming on the bridge,” you know, driving her car, screaming on the bridge, and boy, that hit me. And then Holly Near did a recording and dedicated it to me. I had never heard of Holly Near. One usually asks permission of somebody when they're going to do that. Holly Near never asked me for permission. Later, when I asked her, “How come you never asked me?” She said, “Well, the truth is, I didn't know you were alive.” So — I know, I put that on my web site because I thought it was mildly amusing.

It was on one of those trips to Canada when I decided I was going to live in Canada. How that happened was that some people came down to do primal therapy and they found me and they were from that area, a little area in the Kootenays, and they came down looking for primal therapy. They found me and they said, We've only got five months to do this because we have to get back to our planting. We only have so much time to plant our gardens, you know. And I thought, These people have a life. They're really interesting. And they were interesting. They lived in what seemed like an amazing place and I went up there one summer to work with them and did work with them and when I came back, I thought, OK, I'd like to live up there. So I went through the whole business of becoming a landed immigrant and all that, and went up there as a therapist to work with them.

It was on one of those trips between California and Canada — by that time I'd gotten to know Holly and she said, "When you go, since you're going that way," she said, "as you are driving up." I actually wasn't going "that way." But she said, "There's the Northwestern Women's Music Festival happening in Portland. Why don't you stop and see it?" And I thought, Well, that's interesting. I will do that on my way up, out of my way.

So I went out of my way and went to this festival and I was knocked out. It was a two-day festival and I could only stay for one day. That was as much input as I could take, and I heard, well, I heard a middle-aged woman talk in a poetry session — she spoke her poem that was clearly about her clitoris, and it was beautiful. And I'd never seen or heard anything like that. And there was a dance company there that knocked me out. It was the Wallflower Order. And I'd never seen dance like that. Women, this women's company, the power of this women's company — the beauty and the power of this company just knocked me out. And watching women playing and singing, playing guitar, real good guitar, you know. In all the years with the Weavers, I'd never seen women — I mean, there were women musicians, but I had certainly never seen them.

So there was a lot to think about on that trip, and that was the trip I started thinking — it must have been in that bookshop, that Portland bookshop, that I picked up this bunch of pamphlets and this book on poetry. I wish I could remember the title and the name of the woman, the author of this book. I think she's quite well known, but I can't. Anyway, that's where I just began to get focused on feminism.

WEIGAND: It just sort of all came together?

GILBERT: It all came together. One of the things that was very — one of the reasons I was quite unhappy with the guys that I came up with to Berkeley, when I first came into working in primal therapy, was one of them was such a macho guy, you know. He was always standing with his hands somewhere near his fly, you know, in his pockets, you know, one of those, dressed in some kind of western outfit. And he had no conception about, you know, working with women, but he had no conception of women's feelings or problems or special needs or anything like that. I thought, What the hell is he doing as a therapist, you know? I told him so. I said, "You've gotta get — you'd better take Feminism 101. You need it." He did not like that at all. And what the hell did I know about Feminism 101 anyway, at that point. But I just knew that there was something wrong with what was happening.

WEIGAND: Did you seek Holly out or did she seek you out after her album came out dedicated to you?

GILBERT: She sought me out.

WEIGAND: So she found out you were alive.

GILBERT: She found out I was alive, and I remember our first meeting. At the time, I was living in a house not far from where I live now. I told her about how her record was astonishing to me. I just — I was so moved. First I was kind of teed off about it and then I put it on and I was just in tears the whole time, and figured out this has been going on while I haven't been looking, you know. This consciousness, this woman consciousness has been happening and was happening in music, you know. Of course, I loved her because she was like the coming together of all the things I loved in music, from folk music to Broadway to — you know, she had that kind of delivery and voice and she could handle pretty much anything. It was like she had the social consciousness in a new contemporary way that the Weavers had. And then, of course, I learned that she'd grown up with the Weavers.

So, that's how — actually it was my daughter who told me about this recording. I don't know where she heard it, but in a telephone conversation she said, "Mom, did you ever hear of someone by the name of Holly Near?" I said, "No, I don't think so." She says, "Well, she's got a record out and it's dedicated to you." That's how I heard about it.

WEIGAND: Wow, that's amazing, really.

GILBERT: And I think Holly was doing a — she was there, she was in Berkeley because she was going to be doing a television show, not a major one, maybe it was KQED or one of those. Her mother came and she had invited a few people to be in the audience, and I was one of those people. I remember that she was singing a song — one of her songs was set up in a rocking chair. It was about the old woman in the rocking chair, and I told her afterwards that I did not think that was cool. I told her it was ageist and patronizing and she was shocked. So, somewhere along the line, I was developing a feminist consciousness, not exactly against my will. It was certainly not against my will, but in spite of myself.

WEIGAND: Were you aware of the women's movement when it first sort of emerged publicly? You must have been in New York still, at that time.

15:30

GILBERT: When feminism first emerged?

WEIGAND: Yes.

GILBERT: Yes. Like everybody else, I read about women burning their bras, you know, and I thought, Nuts to that. And I remember being at some kind of seminar or lecture or some major public thing around women, and a

group of black women, African American women marched in yelling, Pussy power, pussy power, pussy power. Wow. I think — I didn't know what I thought.

WEIGAND: So this was before it came together for you?

GILBERT: That was on the way to coming together for me. I had a lot of questions. There was a lot to think about, to process in there. There were a lot of things I liked, didn't like, and then questioning myself, Why don't you like this, and all of that, and from a woman's perspective, which of course I hadn't done in my whole life, at least not consciously.

WEIGAND: Yes, that was one of the things I liked in the documentary about the Weavers, where you say you've been thinking about things from a woman's perspective and you wanted to sing some songs from the woman's perspective. The boys didn't look like they got that exactly.

GILBERT: They didn't. Freddie, I think to this day, very much dislikes Holly Near's music, words, lyrics, whatever. At the time, in the 1980s when I introduced her songs to the audience, he was furious. Now, you've got to remember, these guys considered themselves — and I thought so, too — the vanguard. Their theories were very good, but they were as human as anybody else and their indoctrination was as bad as any others. Pete rose above it. Lee, maybe if he'd lived longer, he would have, I'm not sure. Freddie didn't. As far as I know, he didn't. In fact, recently, when we did a tribute to Harold Leventhal with Arlo Guthrie, I introduced another song, a more contemporary song of Holly's, and Freddie was totally opposed to it, hated it. But fortunately, some of the others loved it, so we got to do it. And I have to say, for Freddie, like any of the Weavers, once we decided to do something — once the group, whatever the group happened to be, decided to do something, we always went with it. We did the best we could with it. There were a lot of things the Weavers sang in the early days that I didn't like and that didn't particularly appeal to me, but that was part of the group process. I think one of our great strengths is that we could individually transcend our individual problems something and artistically give it everything we had. I'm leaving it.

WEIGAND: You mentioned in *Radical Harmonies* that it was amazing to discover people you didn't even know existed making women's music, and you say also later on, I think, that women's music was a transformative experience for you. So, I wondered if you'd talk a little more about that discovery and what it was like for you, and about the kind of specific ways that you feel it transformed you?

GILBERT: OK. When I'm talking about it now, all in a row like this, it's just amazing to me how many moments in my life have been transforming

moments. Yes, how many lives do you have, anyway? There was a film made of that 1980s concert called *Wasn't That A Time?*

WEIGAND: Nineteen eighty or '81?

GILBERT: Nineteen eighty or '81. 1980. In it, several artists of the younger generation, the next generation, Arlo Guthrie and so on, said nice things about us. One of them was Holly Near. There was a scene where she was interviewed. It was shot in the loft where I was living at the time and I was there. The two of us were there and during that interview, for about two minutes, if that much, we began to sing her song "Hay Una Mujer," about the disappeared women in Chile. The filmmaker, Jim Brown, was very smart and he left that camera running. It was a high point in the film, and people began to call her record company, Redwood Records, to find out if we were singing together, and when and where are so on. That kind of jump started us into a musical partnership. I had no intention of going back into music. I had no plans for it. But what happened was that Holly and her company began to think that maybe it would be good — a nice idea for us to tour together, two generations, women, and all that. And we started doing that.

Somebody compared our histories as two generations of women folksingers. At the time Holly was touring and I later joined her on her tour. I was amazed! So many things happened. I was amazed. A lot of the Redwood people traveled with us. So I was traveling, essentially, with a bunch of lesbians. I didn't necessarily know they were lesbians and it didn't make any difference to me. I knew that was a mostly lesbian group, and we had community housing. That's something I had never experienced before, where you were put up by the people in the places where you were traveling. With the Weavers we always stayed in hotels. Everywhere we went, there was kind of, well, community. Every place we stopped, there was some sense of — there's something very, very profound going on here, of women caring for women, women taking care of women.

For example, community housing can be hard because people generally expect that you're going to be social with them and when you're on the road, the last thing you in the world you want is to do that. You need your private time. But on Holly's tours, people would give us their place — our place to stay — and then they'd clear out. There was none of that expectation in this situation. Everybody knew what to do.

And I remember one place I went into, it was just an old, old apartment building. There was hardly anything in it. You walked in the door and there was this one room and a kitchen. There was a bed in the middle of the room and there were prints on the wall and a flowered print on the bed, and an orange crate for an end table. There was no closet. There was a curtain across the corner of the room. But everything was done with such meticulous care. And on the bed, in the middle of the bed, was a plate with three pieces of fruit on it. And to me

that was just symbolic of what I was seeing, what I was experiencing there, of the love and appreciation, and the self-teaching.

In all my travels with the Weavers I never saw a woman do anything besides getting coffee or being a secretary or something. And here were women doing these other jobs: running the electrical, doing the lights. Women were doing all this. It was miraculous. I didn't realize at the time that they were teaching themselves. That's what they were doing. I think Redwood or one of the companies had put out a manual and people were teaching themselves how to do it. People would call and say, I want Holly and somebody to come to our town. They'd say, OK, you want them, you have to produce them. Well, how do I do that? Well, here's how you do it. Here's the book. So that was, just in concrete terms, an appreciation of the fact that women could and would and were doing this and I felt very proud to be part of it.

So the music, yeah, the music, you bet. But the doing of all these other things — seeing a woman climb a 20-foot ladder to work on lights. Sound, the sound, you know, I'd be yelling a woman's name, Hey, Mary, instead of Max, you know. It was thrilling, it was thrilling.

WEIGAND: So when you made the decision to go back into music, was it an easy one? 28:00

GILBERT: It was kind of out of my hands, you know. Well, it wasn't out of my hands. That's the thing that women do. I didn't do it, it just happened to me, and I'm constantly doing that. Actually, Holly and I toured and it was quite a remarkable tour. I think one of the most astonishing things to me was when we hit New York and we did two concerts at Lincoln Center, packed. Why we didn't go on? Well, Holly had other fish to fry. So I went out on my own, as a single, and I had very mixed feelings about that. Sometimes it was fine, sometimes it wasn't. It wasn't very well supported by the record company and all that, so it was hard.

I began to do some more theater. Holly's sister, Timothy Near, was the artistic director of the San Jose Repertory Theater in San Jose, California, and she hired me for a couple of years to do a part in her version of *A Christmas Carol*. We did that at the Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. So I was back in the world of performing, singing, and all of that.

WEIGAND: How does your own coming out fit into all of this?

GILBERT: Coming out as a lesbian?

WEIGAND: Yes.

GILBERT: Well, oddly enough, when we did that 1980 concert and I introduced Holly's song, my oldest, dearest, best friend said to me, "Are you coming out?" and I remember the stupid thing I said to her. "I didn't

come out as a heterosexual. Why should I come out as a lesbian?" I hadn't been out. I hadn't been out and I wasn't at that point yet. I hadn't yet met my love. But it was shortly after. What can I say about that? I didn't care what I was thought about. That's fine. They think I'm a lesbian? Good. It was like being on the team, you know, in a way. It didn't matter to me. It mattered, but in a very positive way. I was really glad to be associated with these women.

First of all, just what I just told you. I thought they were wonderful, and they were. Just being, becoming part of that world — that was a community I had never experienced. I mean, the Weavers never (unclear). We really didn't. You know, we were a community, in a way, sort of — not forced, but we were a community of people under attack, which makes a kind of community. But I had a very private life. I did not really — I always had a private life. It was not part of that at all, you know. And this was different, this was different. This was like finding where you belonged, finding where I belonged.

WEIGAND: So it wasn't fraught with distress?

GILBERT: The coming out? No, no, no. I think my mother, like a lot of people, thought that Holly and I were having an affair, which we could have. I mean, we were clearly in love with each other. That was very true. You could see that when we were together. There was kind of electricity between us then. As it happens, we didn't have an affair. I met my love during one of these trips. She became part of the traveling group and we fell in love almost twenty years ago. But my mother, who thought I with Holly, said to me one day, "So, is it like a marriage?" and I said, "Well, yeah, it's like a marriage although I'm not married to her."

WEIGAND: Right. Not now.

GILBERT: She was so puzzled. She just couldn't figure it out. But I don't think my mother would've been shocked. I think it would've been all right with her.

WEIGAND: And how about some of these other people from your past, like Pete Seeger, Fred Hellerman? Did they have a response?

GILBERT: If they did, they didn't tell me. I think it was a little hard for Pete. He's not a person that's clued into personal things. I think he kind of avoids them as much as possible. He's clued into music and actions and cleaning up the river and this sort of thing, but personal things, I think, really kind of scare him. I didn't see that much of them once we'd stopped working together in the early days in the '50s and the '60s. I kind of went on with my life in my own way. When it became clear to them that Donna and I were partners in that way, they never let me

know what they thought, so I don't know. And what's more, I didn't care (laughter).

WEIGAND: What do you think of the current women's music scene? I know it's a really different thing from the days when you were involved.

34:54

GILBERT: I have not been in very much with the current women's music scene. I can't say very much about that. What I'm seeing is that the whole gender idea has turned upside down, inside out, in five different ways sideways. It's incredible, amusing, and very interesting to me, what current generations are making of the idea of gender. I can't keep up with it.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I can't either.

GILBERT: I cut out something from the newspaper the other day and I'm carrying it with me but I haven't had a chance to look at it. What is metro — what's that mean? Metro —

WEIGAND: Metrosexual?

GILBERT: Metrosexual, transsexual, all of this stuff? I mean, there is something going on that's really very exciting to look at, to think about. Why are we so fiercely gendered the way we are, when the fact is, the biological fact is, is that there's very little difference, you know? I mean, early on, long before I became a lesbian, I thought, we're — primarily, most of us are bisexual and would be if we weren't socialized otherwise. But, hey, this younger generation, they're crazy enough to do something about it.

WEIGAND: That's true. Oh, I know what else I wanted to ask you about, HARP, when you and Holly Near and Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger toured. I wondered how that group came together and I was especially interested in — I'm from Ohio myself, and so I remember when you sang with them at the Ohio State Fair, and that was a big deal, because you'd been banned from the fair in the 1950s. So I wanted to know, too, what that felt like, to be up there on the stage at the fairgrounds in Columbus?

GILBERT: Fabulous. It felt fabulous. HARP? Well, Holly, Arlo, Ronnie, and Pete. HARP. You know, I don't really know how we happened to get together. All I know is we got together. I'm sure that it was Holly's record company or something like that; some idea that put us together. And I don't know why Arlo and Pete agreed to it. I mean, they did it — they did it for this tour because they already were a kind of duo. They did a yearly concert at Carnegie Hall. But it was an astonishing experience and the most astonishing moment in it was when we went to Ohio and performed at the Ohio State Fair, at the invitation of the governor at the time.

WEIGAND: Dick Celeste?

GILBERT: Yes, Richard Celeste. Because in the Weaver days, when we got blacklisted, that was one of the big moments. We had contracted to do the Ohio State Fair and we flew there to do it and got off the plane and were met by a bunch of reporters because the fair had decided not to show us and they broke the contract. So Celeste made sure that we did perform at the fair. And it was quite an experience. We stayed in the governor's mansion. We met his family, had dinner with them. And they were in the front row and the whole family was there. The state troopers (laughs) were there. It was all a very different scene from the '50s. That was very exciting.

And HARP is the tour on which I met my love. It was funny. Holly was having trouble with her back and she was walking with a cane during that whole rehearsal period and, and Donna was in some way connected with the company, with Redwood. She and her family were in insurance, and I think there was a connection there. She'd watched the rehearsal process in New York, and she said, "I gotta see how this works out." So she bought a ticket to get on the plane with us, and Holly and I were sitting next to each other and Donna said to Holly on the way in, "I have an aisle seat. Would you like to have that aisle seat?" and Holly said yes. So Donna sat next to me, and one of us, I think it might have been me or her, was reading Alice Walker's *In My Mother's Garden*. We spent the whole trip looking into each other's eyes, talking about being mothers. Now, you see, she was 19 years younger than me, but we shared that experience of both being mothers. And that's where we fell in love, on that trip. So that, for me, was HARP, more than anything.

WEIGAND: Moving towards the present, I'm interested about what you're doing now. You say in the bio that you sent me that you are now not so much a musician but a writer-teacher-lecturer-activist. So I wondered if you could talk about what that involves. What are you doing now and what kind of audiences are you talking to and what's your objective?

40:40

GILBERT: I wrote a play about Mother Jones, you know, and the process of that took me a lot of years. It took a long time to really write it, get it together, and finally to produce it and to perform it. And during that time, I discovered that I really loved to write. So, at some point, because I had been writing, and because I was encouraged to do so by various people, I started writing a memoir. And I wanted to take some classes and I took some workshops and all, and I began to write material for an autobiography, and discovered very quickly that I am not somebody who's going to sit there, disciplined, and write every day the way you really have to do that if you're a writer. And it's also a very lonely job to be writing an autobiography. But the research was wonderful, and I

loved it. Whenever I had something that I wasn't sure of, I had a computer, and I had the internet, which I'd never had in the past, you know? So, I wasn't performing, I was teaching. I teach singing. Mostly, I teach how to sing a song, how to look at a song, how to sing it. It's not so much vocal study, although a little of that. I was thinking about what I wanted to do, and that was one of the things I wanted to do.

There came a point, not so long ago, about a year ago — a little over a year ago — when everybody was in such despair. I was in despair. Everybody was in such despair over what was happening in this country and the world, the Gulf War and all that kind of thing, and, you know, I wanted to write something about what it's like to live through really bad times. I didn't want to boast, but just to say that this is not the first time terrible things have happened, and — questioning myself — what does it take? People are always asking me, How come you're not in total despair? Well, sometimes I am, but how to get out of it?

So it began with being asked to write, and being asked to appear on a memorial concert, not in Canada, but at the Peace Arch between the United States and Canada, on the fiftieth anniversary of Paul Robeson. So it all goes back to the beginning, back to Paul Robeson. It was the fiftieth anniversary of when Paul Robeson's passport was revoked, and so on. There was this big beautiful concert sponsored by various unions, and the guy who's producing the concert was also a producer of the Vancouver Folk Festival, and I had worked with them a number of times. He called me and said, "But you must be — you're old enough to have known Robeson." I said, "Well, in a way — I didn't really know him," I said, "but he was important in my life." He said, "Well, we're doing this memorial. Would you be willing to come and talk, to come and tell us about it?" And I wrote something for it, and that started it. It was good. It really felt good. Danny Glover was there, and Leon Bibb, who had been a singer an actor.

And then a few months later, he called me and he said, "Will you do that same piece, do it at the Vancouver Story Telling Festival?" I said, "Well, I'm not a story teller." I mean, I read it from a script. He said, "It doesn't matter and you can do the same thing." So, sure, I did it and the section I was in was called Women in Labor. So I redid some of this piece to fit into that thing and in doing so, I realized what I needed to do and that is to write myself something that I could perform, that I could speak to an audience about. So that's what I've been doing.

The piece that I'm working with now, the presentation that I do, begins with Robeson, which was the beginning for me, and talks about this, just what I've been talking about to you. I do this in an hour, and then have a half-hour Q and A afterwards. And the audience that I'm finding is usually — I've gotten peace groups, I've gotten Jewish community centers, and so on. It's usually small audiences, sometimes larger. I'm going to do Boston College now. I did it a few months ago as a kind of concert presentation at Cambridge. So that's what I'm doing. I don't need to do a lot of it. It happens a lot this month, in March, for

some reason. I've got four dates to do. That's where I am. I'm writing. I am writing my memoir, and I'm performing it in that way, and I love it when there are young people in the audience, and there are, you know, there are! And they say, I didn't know about that. What was that about, McCarthy? What was that about? So I'm in a position to be able to say what that was about. It feels good.

WEIGAND: That's great. I mean, it's another way of being a political activist.

GILBERT: And telling about moving, finding myself in the women's world and the music world and so on.

WEIGAND: You said you founded Women in Black. I know something about that group.

GILBERT: You do?

WEIGAND: Yeah, you know, I interviewed somebody else who has been involved. And Northampton has Women in Black.

GILBERT: I'll bet.

WEIGAND: So, maybe I won't ask you too much about that. Have there been any ramifications from your piece in the *Progressive* about the investigation of Women in Black by the FBI?

GILBERT: Oh, because of that letter that I wrote?

WEIGAND: Yeah.

GILBERT: Yeah, well, no. That was a peculiar thing that happened because of *Modern Times*, you know. I wrote that piece. I wrote a piece about a woman, another Women in Black group, really on the other side of the water in San Francisco, being harassed by the FBI. The whole point of writing it was to say, "Are we going back to McCarthyism? Is this what's happening now?" And I wrote it because the Supreme Court justice, what's her name? It's escaping me right now –

WEIGAND: O'Connor or Ginsberg?

GILBERT: No, no, no. Oh, well, whatever. I read in the newspaper that she said, "We may have to curtail some of our civil liberties," and I was incensed. What civil liberties? And that's when I wrote this piece which was meant as an op-ed piece in the local newspaper, and that's what happens when you put something on the internet. You know, somebody got a hold of it –

WEIGAND: Yeah, it's everywhere.

GILBERT: – and sent it out, and I was getting stuff from Amsterdam, from all over the world about it. So it got spread out and then *Progressive* magazine bought it for their issue on this — about how we're starting over again, how we're having another McCarthy era. Is that the way we're going to catch — the way we're going to stop anything that's happening? So, I have not had any repercussions on that, but I know that there are FBI people, there are infiltrators. So what, you know, you've got to go about your business and do it.

And Women in Black is an extraordinary group. I came to it because I needed to find something I could do as a Jew, which I'd never done before. I mean, the Weavers started our stardom with an Israeli song, "Tzena, Tzena, Ttzena," and how I got from that to Women in Black is what I'm writing about now. I needed to find some place where I could put my passion for peace and for saying that we never, ever, ever will do anything but make the world worse, whatever war we're in. And I was very moved by Women in Black because I remembered in the 1970s, when Argentina was taken over by military dictatorship and people were disappeared, dropped from helicopters to their deaths, and the disappeared women. This actually started in Chile, and they went to Argentina, and how everything was under military rule and under guns, and these women walked out into the plaza, silently, dressed in black, with their the names of their children and the pictures of their children and said, Where are they? Where are they? Where are they? And that silence was heard throughout the world. And I thought, That's power. That's women's power. So that's how I got into Women in Black.

WEIGAND: We're getting close to the end here. I guess what's left here are some kind of vague questions about your reflections in general, and I guess – (laughter)

GILBERT: I don't know. I think about Granny D. She's the one I think about and I've read some of her stuff. In fact, I put it into my presentation, telling us that it's so easy for people in power, raw power, she calls it, to pass their own laws, to set up their own agencies and all of that. She says, "I've seen it" — and she's old enough to be my mother — "I've seen this several times in my lifetime," she said, "and we must not despair, because of what we have." And she calls on people to elect somebody that's electable, because we must, you know. So I end my piece with her words, and I echo them, and my answer is, It's all a challenge. It's all a challenge. Face it with what creativity you've got. And there is. Because I mean, look at Move On. Look what Move On has done. It's a different world. It wasn't the world I grew up in. The internet is astonishing, and look how people are using it. So I think there's hope. I do whatever I can do to support that idea.

WEIGAND: That's what you're doing, I guess, is reminding people that they can be powerful.

GILBERT: Especially women.

WEIGAND: Is there anything I haven't asked you about that — (laughter) now that I've raked you over the coals for three hours?

GILBERT: No, I don't know. If I think of anything, I'll call you up.

WEIGAND: OK. But there's nothing glaring that you want to stick in here at the end?

GILBERT: I don't know. I'll probably think of something, you know, tonight, or tomorrow. I can't think right now.

WEIGAND: OK.

END DVD 3

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kate Weigand, August 2005.

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