

Sing a Song of Science

By IVARS PETERSON

*You say the EPA
Has called your business to task
For polluting three communities
With poison gas?
Well, take me to your hearing
'Cause if you can pay
I can convince them that the air
Always was that way*
* * *

*Onward—travel advance in hand
Onward—first class across the land
Onward—I'm a hired brain!**

Singer and lawyer Nancy Abrams drew on her experiences as a consultant in Washington, D.C., and her work at the Office of Technology Assessment when she composed "Have Brain, Will Travel." The "hired brains" of her song were scientific experts who often testified at hearings or appeared on advisory panels. Abrams knew people who could fit any one of the satirical verses in her song.

A few years ago, Abrams sang the song at a science policy banquet sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "The place was just full of these hired brains," she says. "They really, really liked this song. They just laughed and laughed." People at various tables were even guessing about who belonged with each verse. "But nobody ever guessed it applied to themselves!" Abrams remembers.

Abrams began writing satirical songs about science policy in 1978 when she was in Paris. At the time, she was working as a consultant to the Swedish Energy Commission. She had invented a method called scientific mediation, a procedure governments can use to get advice from scientists on technical matters when the scientists disagree, and the commission wanted to try it out on the nuclear waste question. "I was not an expert at all on nuclear waste itself, but only on the procedure for resolving controversial scientific questions," she says. However, she couldn't help learning a great deal about the problems of nuclear waste. Her first song, composed with the help of a newly bought 12-string guitar, was "Carlsbad," about the siting of a test nuclear waste repository in New Mexico.

"Then other songs came real fast," she says, including a song about energy conservation:

*I've heard about gasohol and solarization
But they don't make sense without
conservation
Lots of people are inventing ways
To produce more energy to throw away*
* * *

*Oh, give me a house
Where the windows face south
And a heat pump conditions the air
With good insulation
I get free refrigeration
Con Edison, you better beware!**

Now, Abrams has a wide repertoire and continues to add new songs. She can tailor her program for a variety of audiences. Although Abrams has occasionally performed at coffee houses or nightclubs, she has been most successful at conferences or meetings where the people have something in common. "I've played at several physics conferences," she says. "I have so many songs that I can gear toward scientists of any kind."

Conference sessions also suggest songs. Abrams wrote "Radio Botswana" during a session in Mexico City on Third World energy needs. The room was hot and full of smoke, while Third World delegates argued that the industrialized world owed them all its technology but not its advice on how to use it. They wanted to make their own mistakes. "It was such a pathetic sight," says Abrams:

*Gotta have pollution
Yes, that's the solution
We want our share of cancer and slums
The mark of a great nation
Is industrialization
And whatever comes with it comes.**

Most of Abrams's songs concern science policy because she has spent most of her career embroiled in science issues, and her husband, Joel Primack, is a physicist and a "public interest" scientist at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Some songs, however, are written for fun. "I'm one of those people who can't remember a joke," she says, but "I never forget a song. I remember every song I ever learned in my whole life." Now, to remember a good joke, she writes it into a song.



F. Avery

Nancy Abrams

Humor is only one of the devices she uses in her music. Her words are often prickly, and sometimes the songs are poignant. Her newer pieces are less overtly political and more experimental musically, but the same concerns about political and social issues still permeate the lyrics. "What people do is really going to make a difference in the next few years and they should appreciate that," she says. "We may not have this kind of opportunity if we wait too long."

Two years ago, Abrams produced a recording of several of her songs. She called the album "Hard Listening." She tells this story in the album notes:

One time I succeeded in wangling my way into the inner office of a big record executive. He took a fast look at my guitar.

"What do you do," he asked, "— rock, country or easy listening?"

"Why don't you listen and decide?" said I.

"Look," he deigned to reply right before my audience ended, "what kind of music is it?"

"Hard Listening."

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