



The Big Red Songbook: 100 Years of Wobbly Songlore

Few workers' associations in the United States exist long enough to celebrate their centennials. Trade unions, fraternal organizations, and neighborhood alliances all fall victim to shifts in ideological or physical environments. Before a labor union reaches its hundredth year, it is likely to have merged with parallel or subordinate groups. Thus, members face their anniversaries with diverse feelings: do we honor old age alone; is it only survival that matters; or, alternately, do we elevate a particular symbolic emblem or special formulation to represent our identity?

From its inception in Chicago in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World chose as its guiding cause revolutionary industrial unionism. To the extent that IWW members concerned themselves consciously with cultural theory, like rival radicals, they

relegated expressive material to an auxiliary role. In short, bedrock economic struggle took priority over secondary artistic forms.

Songs, stories, sayings, skits and related ephemera commented upon class conflict, but did not rise to the level of direct action in mine, mill, forest or factory. Whether rebel viewed work through Darwinian or Marxian eyes, each job site determined the contour of life itself. A song, however categorized, might ease a worker's pain, help in getting through the day, or, even beyond individual needs, assist in transforming society.

As 2005 approached, in recognition of the IWW's centennial, a group of friends discussed the possibility of publishing *The Big Red Songbook*, a comprehensive gathering of songs and poems as they appeared in the various editions of the IWW's "Little Red Songbook." These

individuals did not constitute a formal (or even an ad hoc) editorial committee. We undertook to research and write the various portions of the new edition, forthcoming from the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company. It is my task, here, to present an overview of IWW songlore.

Even before the IWW's formal chartering a hundred years ago, farsighted industrial unionists spoke in many tongues reflecting different nativities and philosophies. Accepting the responsibility of building a then-new workers' movement, labor-union loyalists, anarcho-syndicalists, and socialists framed their messages in a rainbow of voices. Similarly, hard-rock miners, straw cats who harvested wheat, fruit and other crops, lintheads in textile mills, mariners, castaways and wanderers shouted or whispered as their separate skills demanded.

Some IWW writers and orators both in their journalism and

by Archie Green

Flyer for striking
IWW members,
1920s, and Little
Red Songbook.
From PFP
archives.

soapboxing mastered high rhetoric; others favored vernacular style. Readers of the IWW press and street-corner listeners encountered language derived from Shakespeare and Shelley, as well as the saloon and the brothel. Unlike many radicals before and after 1905, the IWW accepted strange accents, surreal deliveries, zany humor, and pungent cartoons as proper in the organization's discourse.

IWW words declaimed or sung in poem and song functioned similarly to those in writing. Industrial-union pioneers did not create a rich body of songlore either by calculated design or by divine inspiration. Rather, founders came to Chicago well acquainted with plural musical genres: classical radical fare (e.g. items in *Socialist Songs with Music*, issued by Charles Kerr, 1901); popular hits of stage and parlor (Stephen Foster to Irving Berlin); evangelical hymns (Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey); traditional occupational folksong (not yet gathered in published anthologies but present in plural craft, regional, and ethnic communities).

In short, to understand the IWW's contagious musical blend, one must hear in the mind's ear rebel unionists who knew "L'Internationale" and "La Marseillaise," as well as home-spun shanties and ballads indigenous to ranch bunkhouse, hobo jungle, or mountain mining

camp. Before and during the IWW's formative years, textile workers literally sang "Hard Times in the Mill"; coal diggers and hard-rock "ten-day stiffers" shared the mournful "Only a Miner"; itinerant toilers along countless miles of railroad tracks spun out pieces such as "Big Rock Candy Mountain"— in straight or bawdy form, compensatory vehicles for rootlessness.

Of the many musical idioms available to IWW members, one form dominated: the polemical. With the appearance of IWW newspapers (*Industrial Worker*, *Spokane*; *Solidarity*, Cleveland), readers submitted new tests usually set to then-popular vaudeville tunes or gospel-hymn standards. Editors varied in their reception to minstrel contributions; they printed some items in their journals and others on pocket-sized cards, reminiscent of earlier broadsides. In 1909, the Spokane IWW branch gathered two dozen numbers, new and old, into a red-jacketed booklet titled *Songs of the Industrial Workers of the World*.

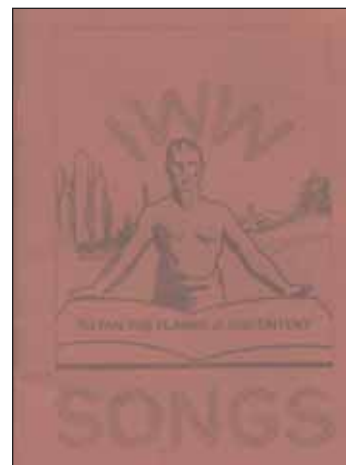
In 1968, Richard Brazier reminisced about his role on the committee which prepared the first songbook. A few of his words reveal the editors' rationale: "...to destroy the old myths that have enslaved us for so long. We will have songs that hold up flaunted wealth and threadbare morality to scorn, songs that lampoon our masters...[Our

songbook] will exalt the spirit of Rebellion."

Subsequent editors in 1910-11 added phrases to the booklet's title such as *Songs of the Workers: On the Road, in the Jungles, and in the Shops; Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*. No one knows who first tagged this gathering the "Little Red Songbook." It proved to be the IWW's most popular publication; it caught on beyond the Union's ranks.

The nickname "Wobbly" began circulating in 1913-1914; it has been joined at the hip to the organization's songbooks. In continuous print from 1909 to the present, these booklets have gone through 37 editions. (Bibliographers still puzzle over the exact number of printings and the sequence of editions.)

Over the years, editors have deleted particular items either for dated content, in response to



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losang samten/continued from p. 26

sand mandala supervisor for Martin Scorsese's film *Kundun*.

He has been recognized with a 2002 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship in honor of his accomplishments as a sand mandala artist, as well as a Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 2004.

Losang makes annual trips to India, where he continues to learn from the Dalai Lama and other spiritual leaders and artists, studies mandala imagery in caves and old temples, and meditates. Because of travel restrictions and his relatives' lack of access to phones and

computers, he cannot communicate with family members who remain in their small village in Tibet. He worries about them and about the future of Tibet and its rich culture. He attempts to better the world through his art and by leading others on meditation retreats, although he left the monkhood in 1994. Mandalas and spirituality are inextricably intertwined. As he explains, "The Buddha himself has been seen as a great artist, as one who has reached into deeper understandings of reality. I retreat and meditate to reach towards better under-

standing, too, and portray my point of view in my art."

This last quotation is from an interview by the author with Losang Samten published in PFA, the newsletter of the Pew Fellowships in the Arts (fall/winter 2004), p. 6.

Losang will be
artist-in-residence
at the
Folk Arts
Cultural Treasures
Charter School
this winter.

wobbly songs/continued from p. 11

change by members in personal taste, or in reaction to external issues. At times, behind-the-scenes debate on difficult pieces has revealed switches in position on large conceptual matters: job action, sabotage, lifestyle, gender, relations with other left-sectarian groups.

Although the IWW discouraged personality cults within its ranks, songwriter Joe Hill achieved legendary status initially among industrial unionists and subsequently in a larger group of CIO members, urban liberals, and unaffiliated radicals. Hill's life as a Swedish emigrant to the United States, his capacity to pen two dozen new Wobbly songs within a five-year span, his trial for murder and death by firing squad in Salt Lake City (1915), and unresolved questions of guilt or innocence combined to elevate him into the workers' pantheon.

The extensive literature on Joe Hill (by writers such as Ralph Chaplin, Joyce Kornbluh, Franklin Rosemont, Gibbs Smith, Barrie Stavis, and Wallace Stegner) leads readers beyond biography to searching questions on the nature of Wobbly lore and its "fit" as a chip in the mosaic of labor's heritage. IWW poets/composers

strove to nurture revolutionary consciousness. Each piece—whether topical, hortatory, elegiac, sardonic, or comic—served to educate, agitate, and emancipate workers. Songs were intended as arrows to penetrate bourgeois (in Wobbly parlance, "scissorbill") mentality, and to anticipate a new social order—the commonwealth of toil.

In everyday practice as Wobblies sang at jungle campfires, in meeting halls, and during free speech rallies, much of their repertoire melted away. Some lyrics proved too taxing to sing; in short, they were unsingable. Others had been set to tunes that lost out in style wars. Still others became irrelevant as the IWW declined. However, a handful entered tradition—a few as folksongs, some as labor-union classics. Not all IWW members have enjoyed sharing material across institutional lines, nor upon hearing treasures performed by rivals: pragmatic craft unionists, reformist allies, left partisans.

Wobblies known for militancy on the job and life-defying bravery on the strike front were powerless to control the trajectory of their songs, or to determine life or death for given

pieces. As their material reached large society, Wobblies responded ambivalently—happy that the Union had gone beyond its ranks; dismayed that strangers might distort the IWW's inherent message.

Three books in particular measure the spread of IWW songlore outside the organization's bounds. In 1909, Paul Brissenden, a California student in Economics, became interested in labor. In 1919, the Columbia University Press published his *The IWW: A Study in American Syndicalism* which included thirteen songs. In 1923, the University of Chicago Press issued Nels Anderson's *The Hobo*, an influential study of homeless men. It held four IWW songs.

Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927) appealed well beyond campus walls with three Wobbly numbers. Sandburg conferred folksong rank for "The Preacher and the Slave." Under varied titles ("Long Haired Preachers," "Pie in the Sky") Joe Hill's parody of the hymn "Sweet Bye and Bye" moved out of labor's sphere to comment upon moral values in the American polity.

Ironically, a song introduced

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outside the IWW orbit yet memorializing Hill achieved more fame than most pieces in the Wobbly canon. "Joe Hill" opens with "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night alive as you and me." It has been sung by Joan Baez, Billy Bragg, Joe Glazer, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger and many others. Alfred Hayes (lyrics) and Earl Robinson (music) offered it initially in 1936 at Camp Unity near New York City. Their gift—forged on a Communist Party Popular Front anvil—has sometimes been erroneously attributed to Hill himself by commentators who allege that he composed it as a salute to fellow workers and a projection of his immortality.

A few words on the troublesome matter of definition may help new readers in their evaluation of Wobbly songs. Most of the items gathered in *The Big Red Songbook* are no longer sung, but remain of interest to historians, sociologists, and a few labor-union partisans. Although the very first booklet held a traditional parody cherished by itinerant workers, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" (irreverently titled "Hellelujah"), the IWW paid no special attention to folklore theory, or the supposed values inherent in folk-song.

In the mid-1930s, some American communists touched by Popular Front ideology embraced folksong. This commitment carried through until the 1970s "folk boom," but it did not hold much appeal to Wobblies. However, the thirty-fourth edition songbook (1973), overturned precedent by including Woody Guthrie's "Union Maid." The thirty-fifth edition (1984), extended the process with Les Rice's "Banks of Marble." These two pieces represent "People's Songs" intrusions in time-tested IWW repertoires.

The subject of "intrusion" has, and continues to be, con-

troversial. During the 1920s and '30s, IWW activists opposed Communist Party policies. However, by the 1970s, with the passing of many old-timers, young Wobblies were less invested in maintaining sectional differences. In this context, "Union Maid" became acceptable to the IWW.

Beyond the merits of enlarging a songbook with "outside" material, labor partisans face a difficult question: pop culture's influence on Wobbly expression (characterized by Franklin Rosemont in his study *Joe Hill*, 2003, as "revolutionary working-class counterculture"). I ask: Should Wobblies have resisted Popular Front formulas and "folksong revival" fare? What are this dilemma's implications for labor unionists in their cultural decisions? How do we navigate between contestational and conciliatory strategies?

Present-day IWW activists divide in assessing their musical heritage. Some assert: "Economic forces outweigh cultural expression; we need only to alter conditions at the point of production; class struggle relegates songlore to a derivative role." Others suggest that IWW songs captured the union's spirit better than its manifestoes, pamphlets, and proceedings. "We should not apologize for our songs; rather let's use them as ambassadors to working people wherever they toil."

Today, Wobbly songs seem suspended between cultural domains. Most are obscure; a few live in tradition. Not one has achieved national popularity associated with Broadway, Nashville, or Hollywood. Nevertheless, labor activists treasure the corpus for internal cheer, oppositional message, and humane promise. Essentially, each Wobbly song that carries into the twenty-first century will affirm the linkage of poetry to cause, as well as music's use in defining individ-

ual and social identity.

My sketch above offers some generalizations about Wobbly songs. Here, I turn to a few of the issues faced by the informal committee of friends responsible for *The Big Red Songbook*.

To identify myself: I have worked first as a shipwright and later as a teacher. Although sharing many Wobbly values, I am not an IWW member. In studies over the years, I have probed for the IWW's place in creating and extending labor-lore. My views reflect trade-union experience and academic folklore training.

Included in *The Big Red Songbook* is the essay "John Neuhaus: Wobbly Folklorist" as I penned it nearly half-century ago. Today, it can be read as a memorial to a friend and fellow worker. Also, it is a road marker on a still incomplete journey. Do we feel obligated to continue John's exact path, or are we free to set off in new directions?

John Neuhaus was passionate in his belief that Wobblies and friends should continue to sing all the numbers in the IWW songbooks (issued before his death in 1958). With the centennial behind us, I do not share John's vision, for I believe that most of the inclusions retain value as cultural or historical artifacts, but not as songs in the repertoires of living singers.

In the chronological and alphabetical check lists in the *Big Red Songbook*, we note all songs to date. However, in our main text, we reprint only those items through the thirty-fourth edition. This decision is arbitrary; it will not satisfy all enthusiasts; it raises the puzzling question: What is a Wobbly song? Is it any piece printed in an IWW songbook, or just those that reflect IWW philosophy? Who decides the contours of Wobbly belief?

Almost all Wobbly songs

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have been recorded by interpreters rather than by traditional singers. This dichotomy has raged in “folksong revival” circles. I shall not repeat the tired arguments here. However, I do stress that very few Wobblies made field recordings in traditional style. Does anyone who desires to understand IWW lore not wonder how the songs were performed when first introduced to copper-camp miners, factory-line workers, or their many peers?

Wobblies faced harrowing regional, linguistic, and social barriers among men and women awaiting organization. To cite an instance: when a new little red songbook appeared in an East Texas piney-woods camp or a Louisiana cypress-mill town, did the workers involved sound alike? It defies reason to suggest that individuals of varied descent (Anglo, African, Mexican) in the IWW-affiliated Brotherhood of Timber Workers approached material in a singular voice. By imagining these diverse woods singers in their particular styles, we arrive at a pluralistic view of IWW lore more challenging than the “folksong-revival” flavored items in the present discography.

For many musical genres, loyal fans have produced LP or CD compilations based on ethnographic and historical research. Such an album of Wobbly songs is long overdue. It might recreate the sounds of a century-old Sousa brass band as well as an early ragtime ensemble. What did Richard Brazier experience when he took in a Spokane vaudeville show? Has any Wobbly commented on his exposure to a barrelhouse piano or a parallel off-color ditty? Fred Thompson has described hearing old Chartist hymns in his native Nova Scotia. Where did other unionists become familiar with camp-meeting hymns and gospel favorites? The challenge is great; the task lies before

present enthusiasts.

I see no contradiction between the act of preparing a retrospective IWW album and continued effort to compose and circulate new material. Bibliographic and discographic tools will provide useful in this task of reconstruction. Readers will observe that *The Big Red Songbook's* two checklists hold only English-language material. Hence, future fans can expand these lists to include IWW songbooks in various tongues. Wobblies printed Swedish songbooks both in the United States and Sweden. However, our present knowledge of other foreign-language editions is incomplete. Similarly, our discography cries for expansion. These gaps in documentation are especially ironic in that Wobblies were far ahead of rival trade unionists in organizing immigrants regardless of race or speech.

In closing this overview, I am also aware of the end of a personal journey. Like other children of immigrants, I attended a Workman's Circle school in the mid-1920s. There we learned labor songs, including IWW classics. Too young to discern the school's politics, I associated these songs with the campaign to save Sacco and Vanzetti from the electric chair. In retrospect, it was a noble cause and a memorable introduction to Wobbly music.

Massachusetts executed the two Italian anarchists on August 23, 1927. I have sung, studied and puzzled over IWW material in all the following decades. Much of what is stated in this preface repeats earlier formulations. Some of my views are commonplace; others, controversial. I have already alluded above to the thorny matter of definition for Wobbly songs; this problem remains unresolved. I am convinced that some of *The Big Red Songbook's* pieces proved difficult, if not impossible, to sing at

the time of their composition. Others caught on with singers; they circulated widely and were altered in the process.

Scholars fall back on two basic beliefs: a song may enter tradition; folksongs show variation over time and place. Before the popular interest in folksong in the 1970s, IWW members paid little attention to academic issues in defining their music.

Some of these problems in status and meaning are illustrated by “The Dehorn,” an irreverent parody set to the tune of “The Red Flag.” It opens:

The dehorn's nose is
deepest red,

The one bright spot in
his empty head,

To get his booze he begs
and steals,

Half naked he goes without
his meals.

This piece never made it into a little red songbook; did the editors consider it sacrilegious? Upon first hearing Joe Murphey sing a bit of “The Dehorn” (Occidental, CA; 1958), I was intrigued as he related it to an IWW technique in social control. Joe had served on dehorn squads in the Northwest lumber region. These informal committees, in the vernacular, “dehorned the dehorn.” To interpret— during a strike, a few tough Wobblies would close or dismantle the saloons and brothels in order to keep workers focused on vital issues. Thus, Joe recalled this song as much more than a humorous ditty, for it represented a disciplined response by the IWW to forces that destroyed workers' seriousness.

With a fragment in mind, I queried John Neuhaus about “The Dehorn.” He had learned it from Louis Gracey, a “shovel stiff,” treasured it, and taught it to me. Subsequently, I included the text in my *Journal of American Folklore* memorial to

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John Neuhaus (reprinted in *The Big Red Songbook*). Songs do not parade straight ahead in unbroken ranks. Rather, they slither about, crawl under hedges, or lie dormant for decades. "The Dehorn" came to life at a time when Wobblies concerned themselves with alcohol as one of the many bourgeois tools designed to weaken a worker's resolve. The song circulated, lodged in a few memories, and seemingly died.

In a sense, "The Dehorn" was reborn after it appeared in the Neuhaus memorial. Joyce Kornbluh doing research for *Rebel Voices* (1964) found that it had been contributed to the *Industrial Worker* (October 11, 1919) by J.B. Perhaps a year later (date unknown), it also appeared in the *California Defense Bulletin* as "The Wino's Nose" by Ed Anderson.

Although I lack information on both J.B. and Ed Anderson, the date 1919 is useful in establishing this song's chronology. The term "dehorn" had been used by cowboys and forest rustlers to describe the act of dehorning young cattle, as well as the cutting off of a branded log's end. The first activity tool away a steer's weapons; the second, assisted in theft. An imaginative Wobbly extended the word "dehorn" to booze which rendered a worker impotent, or robbed him of his spirit.

In the Wobbly lexicon, "dehorn" in various forms became verb and noun, denoting both action and a state of being. It could mean the drink itself, the besotted drunkard, or the effect after drinking. When Prohibition ruled, many persons used denatured or adulterated alcohol. Thus, a canned-heat bum became a hopeless dehorn. James Steven' Northwest woods

novel *Jim Turner* (1948) holds several choice usages for this colloquialism.

"The Dehorn" deserved full exploration as it challenges students of language and literature, history and philosophy. For instance: how did the dehorn morph into a wino (as in Ed Anderson's variant)? The late Fred Thompson, who served time in San Quentin as a class-war prisoner, told me that his IWW mates relished the parody, "The Wino's Nose." I conjecture that Wobblies carried the song South from Washington/Oregon lumber camps to California fields. Itinerants who followed the crops (fruit tramps) after a grape harvest would hang around to buy gallon cans of cheap wine. Today, "wino" is widely used while "dehorn" is esoteric.

However we relate "The Dehorn's" adventures, this excursion into a song's story tells us something of Wobbly creativity. It also points to an unusual portion of our volume. Franklin Rosemont has presented a set of "lost" Wobbly songs and poems— not actually lost but rather not included by former editors in the various little red songbooks. He calls attention to years of unstated (often anonymous) editorial decisions about standards of inclusion and exclusion for selections. IWW stalwarts, not given to authority, were genuinely amused that their songbooks gained such magisterial power regarding text and tune.

Ultimately each *Big Red Songbook* reader will judge the wisdom of our selections and opinions. Songs lost or found, sacred or irreverent, touted or neglected, serious or zany, singable or not, are here. Industrial Workers of the World and their friends have

been singing for a century. May this comprehensive gathering simultaneously celebrate past battles and chart future goals.

*Born in 1917, Archie Green is a union shipwright and carpenter, a pioneering folklorist, and an indefatigable teacher, both in and out of the classroom. He received his Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania— choosing to study at Penn because the head of the Folklore program, MacEdward Leach, supported his interests in labor history and hillbilly music, unconventional subjects for folklore at the time. Archie's many contributions include groundbreaking work on occupational folklore and culture, vernacular music, and in framing up the ground for public sector folklife. This essay is excerpted from his preface to *The Big Red Songbook*, available this winter from The Charles H. Kerr publishing company. (Details are in the advertising section).*