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THE CONTEMPORARY ROLES OF LABOR SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Music has played a critical role for workers throughout the history of the labor movement. Music gives an opportunity to rebel. It gives an opportunity to argue policy. It gives an opportunity to be heard. Songs written in protest, or in furtherance of a cause, give a sense of historical and political climate of a particular era. This article, “The Contemporary Roles of Labor Songs” draws attention to three especially important periods in the shaping of labor history, the 1930s, 1960s and 1980s, highlighting the representative impact a particular song - “Which Side Are You On?,” “Salt of the Earth,” and “There is Power in a Union” - had in each of these decades.
THE CONTEMPORARY ROLES OF LABOR SONGS

“A singing movement is a winning movement.”
Attributed to, inter alia, Pete Seeger[1] and Utah Phillips[2]

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And

[1] Pete Seeger is one of the world’s great folk singers and political activists. Rolling Stone Magazine called him
“unquestionably the foremost contemporary popularizer of American folk music.” See
www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/pete-seeger/biography. He has been recognized for such classic folk songs as
“Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “Turn, Turn, Turn,” and “We Shall Overcome.” See The Songwriters Hall of
Fame’s entry for Pete Seeger. www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C76. His works have been so renowned
that he has earned “a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, a Harvard Arts Medal, the Kennedy Center Award,
the Presidential Medal of the Arts and even membership in the rock & Roll Hall of Fame.” See

[2] Much less is known about Utah Phillips, a friend of the Catholic Worker, whose most beloved song may well be
his rendition of “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!” See David Kupfer, Utah Phillips, THE PROGRESSIVE, September 2003,
“Utah Phillips is a legend on the folk music circuit, a great storyteller and an unapologetic activist . . .” Phillips
called Pete Seeger who “invented my trade,” one of his heroes. See id. Phillips has said “Because we organized, we
broke the back of the sweatshops in this country; we have child labor laws. Those were not benevolent gifts from
enlightened management. They were fought for, they were bled for, they were died for by working people, by
people like us.” Id. Phillips called “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!,” a Harry McClinton classic which he covered, “the
song that makes him happiest.” Jim Washburn, Do Tell: Utah Phillips Puts his Tales to Music and His Audience’s
Character to the Test, LOS ANGELES TIMES, March 5, 1992; see also Special Merit Picks: Country, BILLBOARD
magazine December 16, 1972.
THE CONTEMPORARY ROLES OF LABOR SONGS

By: Raymond A. Franklin and David L. Gregory

I. St. Augustine Never Heard Me Sing!

St. Augustine said “He who sings prays twice.”[3] Easy for St. Augustine to say---he never heard either of us sing, or, perhaps even worse, attempt to play guitar. One presumes that St. Augustine could sing well, and well enough for a Bishop and Doctor of the Church. We take joy and comfort in this truth

of St. Augustine---song can transform life. Although beyond the scope of this essay, the Psalms and the vast array of poetry express the inexpressible – the faith, the hope and the aspirations of the human.

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The use of protest in various forms of expression dates back thousands of years. In the days of the Babylonian empire, Hebrews who were held in slavery wrote psalms in an effort to voice displeasure with their treatment. Philip Stern, *Psalm 137: The Babylonian Exile: Pieces of the Puzzle*, MIDSTREAM, Volume 53, issue 4, July, 2007 at 33. Some of these psalms have eventually been set to music to enhance their power and message. One of the most famous psalms to come out of this Babylonian era is Psalm 137. “One should remember not only the beginning of Psalm 137, but also the conclusion in which the slave addresses his enslaver…[with] the psychology of the rebelling slave.” Christine Gallant, *Blake’s Anti-Slavery Designs for Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, WORDSWORTH CIRCLE, Volume 39, Issue 3, June 22, 2008. “The misery of the exiles is expressed in Psalm 137 by the implied contrast to the joyous songs of Zion that the tormentors would have them sing…” See Stern at 33. But as the psalm goes on to discuss a vow to remember this treatment, observers have called it extraordinary. “It signals a spiritual triumph over the initial scene of powerlessness, as if declaring that Babylon may capture bodies but not souls.” Alicia Ostriker, *Psalm and Anti-Psalm*, AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, Volume 31, Issue 4, August 31, 2002 at 11.

When conventional language fails, often poetry is the method of communication that presents a message in its most persuasive and powerful form, be it aesthetically or even politically. Alicia Ostriker of *American Poetry Review* has said “The Psalms are the prototype in English of devotional poetry and possibly of lyric poetry in general. Let nobody say that poetry makes nothing happen. Let nobody say that poetry cannot or should not be political.” Alicia Ostriker, *Psalm and Anti-Psalm*, AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, Volume 31, Issue 4, August 31, 2002 at 11. Politics has emerged from poetry for hundreds of years. “Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, all found ways to hail or rage against kinds and governments through their work. Yeats . . . wrote stinging political lines. As did Robert Lowell. As does Seamus Heaney.” Roger Rosenblatt, *Essay: Poetry and Politics*, TIME Magazine, October 13, 1986, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,962534-1,00.html. Poetry and politics have their differences, but they also both create a state of mind. “Paul Valery defined a poem as a ‘kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words. The politician produces the political state or mind by means of words.’” See Rosenblatt, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,962534-1,00.html. Much of today’s political poetry has come alive in modern day song, from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen and others. “In a preview
This is especially true when conventional language, even the most sophisticated rhetoric, exhausts its limits. It is to poetry that we then must, of necessity, turn.

Music has played a critical role for workers throughout the history of the labor movement. Music gives an opportunity to rebel. It gives an opportunity to argue policy. It gives an opportunity to be heard. Songs written in protest, or in furtherance of a cause, give a sense of historical and political climate of a particular era.

This essay will draw attention to three especially important periods in the shaping of labor history, the 1930s, 1960s and 1980s, highlighting the dramatic congruity a particular song had in each of

of [Bruce] Springsteen’s 1996 concert at Atlanta’s Fox Theater, the Atlanta Journal Constitution casually described Springsteen and Bob Seger, another rock musician with blue-collar roots as ‘working class heroes,’ a term that seemed to apply to a particularly successful artist who expressed ‘social concerns,’ confronted the problems of unemployed and ‘dispossessed Americans,’ and considered ‘family problems’ and ‘the need for moral reform.’


While this article focuses on only three songs in relation to the history of labor and workers rights, there are myriad important songs that have stood the test of time and had major impact and influence in the arena of the dignity of laborers. Workers’ rights have been lauded in American classics like “We Shall Overcome” or Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” as well as modern pop songs like Billy Joel’s 1982 ode to steel-workers, “Allentown” and Dolly Parton’s women-in-the-workplace anthem “9 to 5.” This current article is the first part of a larger venture in which Professor Gregory and Mr. Franklin will also work towards addressing and analyzing some of these other songs and their roles in the rights of the worker. The roles of music and the law have periodically been addressed in the scholarly legal arena (see Bernhard Grossfield & Jack A. Hiller, Music and Law, 42 INT’L L. AW., Fall 2008; see also law school seminar course “Law & Music,” Marquette University Law School, taught Fall 2010 by Professor Scott Idleman), but the topic has seldom been explored in-depth from a labor perspective, as this current piece ventures to do.
these decades. This essay is part of a larger premise, tracing the twentieth century American experience with themes of social justice.\[7\]

II. Which Side Are You On?

“Which Side Are You On?” was written in the depths of the Great Depression in 1931. Florence Reece’s keening a capella quickly became the anthem of the Mine Workers Union, and has since been adapted to a host of workers’ rights initiatives.\[8\] The 1930s marked the ever-more-desperate plight of the mine workers throughout the United States, and especially in Appalachia.\[9\] Bitter and violent conflict fostered by unscrupulous anti-union mine owners continued unabated.\[10\]

Reece’s husband, Sam, was one of a group of coal miners striking in Harlan County, Kentucky due to the operators’ failure to recognize their union, the United Mine Workers.\[11\] The deputies of Sheriff John Henry Blair were working with the mine owners in a concentrated strategic corporate campaign to crush the unionization efforts by the mine workers, in especially intimidating and brutal fashion.\[12\] Professional intimidation was pervasive.\[13\]


\[9\]The West Virginia coal mining wars are wonderfully captured by the great film maker, John Sayles, in *Matewan*, Cinecom Entertainment Group and Film Gallery, 1987).

\[10\]See Mike Hudson, *Which Side Are You On?*, THE ROANOKE TIMES, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002


\[12\]“Which Side Are You On?,” Labornotes.org, November 2007; William Serrin, “Labor Song’s Writer, Frail at 83, Shows She is Still a Fighter,” NY TIMES, Section 1, P. 22, March 18, 1984; Joseph Stroud, *Harlan County Hasn’t
As the deputies searched the region for strikers and union leaders, several violent encounters occurred. Sam, one of the union leaders, was a target. He was well aware that he was marked for death, and was thus “lying low.” Company thugs, death squads masquerading as sheriff’s deputies came to the family home, prepared to kill Sam, but they found only Florence and the Reece children.


[13] TIMOTHY LYNCH, STRIKE SONGS OF THE DEPRESSION, University of Mississippi Press, 2001, p. 68 (“By the time the NMU began its organizing in Harlan County, any miner with known union affiliation had been denied work, which severely crippled the NMU’s attempt to build a strong union. Those who were willing to join the NMU were not working, and those who had returned to the mines were not willing to join”).


[15] See id; see also Mike Hudson, “Which Side Are You On?,” The Roanoke Times, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002 (“They were deputies in the employ of the man who held the title of high sheriff, John Henry Blair, but their wages were paid by the company and their job was to root out union men like her husband, Sam, who was organizing the others to fight for decent wages and working conditions.”).


[17] See “Which Side Are You On?,” Labornotes.org, November 2007; William Serrin, _Labor Song’s Writer, Frail at 83, Shows She is Still a Fighter_, NY Times, Section 1, P. 22, March 18, 1984.; see also Mike Hudson, _Which Side Are You On?,_ The Roanoke Times, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002 (“They kept harder and harder a-pushin’ us,” Florence Reece would recall. “. . . I said, ‘There’s nothing in here but a bunch of hungry children.’ But they come in anyway. They hunted, they looked in suitcases, opened up the stove door, they raised up mattresses. It was just like Hitler Germany.”).
Florence, wanting to do something to address this outrage, and to accentuate the pervasive violence against the miners by the employers, wrote “Which Side Are You On?” on the back of a wall calendar.[18]

The song’s lyrics read as follows:

Come all you poor workers
Good news to you I’ll tell
How the good old union
Has come in here to dwell

Chorus:
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

We’re starting our good battle
We know we’re sure to win
Because we’ve got the gun-thugs
A-lookin’ very thin

If you go to Harlan County
There is no neutral there
You’ll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair

Chorus:
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner
He’s now in the air and sun
He’ll be with you fellow workers
Till every battle’s won[19]

[18] See Mike Hudson, Which Side Are You On?, THE ROANOKE TIMES, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002. “She didn’t have any paper, so she tore a page off a wall calendar, and started writing. In that moment of near-despair, she created a song that bristled with outrage and defiance.”

[19] TIMOTHY LYNCH, STRIKE SONGS OF THE DEPRESSION, University of Mississippi Press, 2001 (“The song was written on the back of a calendar since ‘we didn’t have any stationary cause we didn’t get nothing; we was doing good to live.’”)
Reece’s lyrics continue to resound with workers. Myriad interpretations and stories abound as to how she came up with the music to accompany her powerful words.[20] Some have claimed that Reece used “Lay Lily Low,” an old hymn.[21] Others have said that Reece used the tune from “Jack Munro,” a British song.[22] A plausible conclusion is that “Lay Lily Low” and “Jack Munro” contain many of the same elements, and that Reece was influenced by both songs.[23] Even Reece herself has seemed unsure of which song she used as the basis for her labor classic.[24] Various sources have quoted Reece as giving

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[21] Florence Reece, 86; Wrote Songs with Social Message, LOS ANGELES TIMES, August 9, 1986 at B7 (“Borrowing the melody from the hymn ‘Lay the Lily Low,’ Mrs. Reece wrote the union song in the 1930s to describe the plights of mine workers in Harlan County, Kentucky, who were organizing what became a famous strike.”).


[23] See “Which Side Are You On?,” Labornotes.org, November 2007 (“The tune is usually said to be an old Baptist hymn, ‘Lay the Lily Low,’ but the British folklorist, A.L. Lloyd points out its similarity to that of the British ballad, ‘Jack Munro,’ which uses ‘Lay the Lily Low’ as a refrain.”).

[24] TIMOTHY LYNCH, STRIKE SONGS OF THE DEPRESSION, University of Mississippi Press, 2001, p. 141, fn 46 (In [Kathy] Kahn’s Hillbilly Women . . ., Reece said ‘the music to the song is a old hymn. I can’t remember what was the hymn, but I’ve got to look in the songbooks and find out what that was a tune to.’ In the liner notes to They’ll
conflicting information about the song’s origin, including a third song called “I’m Going to Land on That Shore.”[25] Core common influences emerge, reflecting the Scots-Irish folk music so ubiquitous among the Scots Irish population that moved into the Appalachian region consistently from the early years of the Irish diaspora.[26]

The song’s staying power and impact on the labor movement has been incalculable. The Roanoke Times recently stated that “[t]he song spread well beyond Bloody Harlan. It’s been sung at union rallies in mountain hollows, at folk concerts among the urban bohemians, in civil-rights marches along hostile highways, on the green lawn of the U.S. Capitol, in the movies, and in Great Britain, China and other far lands.”[27] “Which Side Are You On?” has been embraced as an integral piece in the folk-music

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_“Which Side Are You On?,”_ she gave the tune as ‘Lay the Lily Low.’ In _American Folksongs of Protest_. . . , the tune is also given as ‘Lay the Lily Low.’”


(“Regarding the hymn as the model for ‘Which Side Are You On?,’ there is some confusion. In [an] interview . . . , Reece related, ‘I’ve heard different people’s ideas on where I got the tune for ‘Which Side Are You On?,’ but I think I got it from a hymn called ‘I’m Going to Land On That Shore.’ The first verse starts out, ‘I’m going to land on that shore and be saved forever more,’ but I don’t remember more, and I’ve looked everywhere.”).

[26] There is a huge literature of Scots Irish culture melding into the Cherokee Native American culture. See, for example, Robert Schenkkan’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning play, _The Kentucky Cycle_ , tracing the Scots Irish and Native American populations over the better part of two hundred years, from the late 18th century and pre-colonial Appalachia to the 1970s and the utter despoliation of the environment by unconcerned rapacious mine owners. See Frank Rich, _Review/Theater; 200 Years of a Nation’s Sorrows, in 9 Chapters_ , NY TIMES, November 15, 1993; see also http://Pulitzer.org/bycat/drama. See THOMAS CAHILL, HOW THE IRISH SAVED CIVILIZATION, Talese/Doubleday, 1995. In the 2008 Presidential primary campaign, U.S. Senator James Webb from Virginia was very identified with the Appalachian Scots Irish of his forebears. See Salena Zito, _Wooing the Scots-Irish_ , PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE REVIEW, March 2, 2008; see also http://www.jameswebb.com/about/about.htm.

lexicon. It has been claimed that “[j]ust as ”We Shall Overcome” made itself the anthem of the
American civil-rights movement, ”Which Side Are You On?” became the most memorable of the rich
procession of protest songs that came out of the Southern Appalachians.”

“Which Side Are You On?” has been recorded by many artists, including a 1941 version which
popularized the song to the general public, by the Pete Seeger-Woody Guthrie group The Almanac
Singers. Popular modern-day artists such as songstress Natalie Merchant and punk-rockers Dropkick

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[28] Mike Hudson, Which Side Are You On?, The ROANOKE TIMES, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002 (“It’s part of our
history now,” says Hazel Dickens, a folk-singing luminary who grew up in Montcalm, W.Va., just over the border
from Tazewell County, Va. “You hear it everywhere.”)

[29] Mike Hudson, Which Side Are You On?, The ROANOKE TIMES, p. Extra 1, September 2, 2002; see TIMOTHY
LYNCH, STRIKE SONGS OF THE DEPRESSION, University of Mississippi Press, 2001, p. 67 (“Fusing a militant battle
cry with a traditional melody, this song would become the anthem of the Harlan County miners. It would also be
used years later during other chapters in their labor struggle, as well as being adopted and adapted by workers in
other industries”).

18, 1984; David O’Reilly, Exceptional Folk a Young Man Finds his Bearings, With Help From a River and a Man
Named Pete Seeger, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER MAGAZINE, p. 16, June 21, 1998; WILLIAM H. YOUNG AND NANCY K.
Singers, a folk trio formed earlier that year by singer Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, formerly a song leader at a radical labor
college in Commonwealth, Arkansas and Millard Lampell, a writer.”)

2003. Kern notes the album’s tracks to include “the chilling union rally “Which Side are You On?”; Merchant also
performed the song at the 85th birthday of priest/activist Daniel Berrigan. (See video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeKYVxzKeU.)
Murphys[32] have also lent their talents to renditions of the song. One of the most notable versions of “Which Side Are You On?” was Arlo Guthrie’s re-imagining of the song. Guthrie, the son of labor rights royalty (father Woody Guthrie),[33] has established himself as a significant folk artist,[34] and infused Florence Reece’s classic song with overtly religious themes.[35]

These are Guthrie’s re-imagining lyrics:

There's trouble all around the world
Well, it looks that way to me
People don't know what to do
They don't know where they should be

But just one question still remains
To which we must respond
Two roads lead from where we are
Which side are you on?

CHORUS:
Which side are you on, boys?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on, boys?
Which side are you on?

Moses crossed the desert
With a band of weary men
For forty years they wandered through
The hot and burning sand

And Moses went and prayed alone
The weary vagabond
And lightning wrote these words in stone
Which side are you on

CHORUS

Jesus stumbling through the streets


[34] See id, http://www.arlo.net/bio.shtml

On the road to Calvary
Nailed high to testify
With other local thieves

And as they hung there dying
One asked what lay beyond
That all depends the master said
Which side are you on?

CHORUS

Some men work for little things
And some men work for more
Some men work for anything
And some don't work at all

And me myself I'm satisfied
To sing for God's own son
And ask you what I ask myself
Which side are you on?[36]

Another complete revision of the Reece version was performed by British rocker Billy Bragg,[37] who performed the song on his 1985 EP *Between the Wars.*[37] As Guthrie’s version did, Bragg rewrote Reece’s lyrics to change the context of Reece’s song while maintaining her vision of standing up for the little guy.[38]

Bragg’s adaptation contains these lyrics:

This government had an idea
And parliament made it law
It seems like it's illegal
To fight for the union anymore

Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on
Which side are you on, boys


[38] See Billy Bragg’s Official Website, http://www.billybragg.co.uk/music/singles.php?singleID=30&songID=77
Which side are you on

We went out to join the picket line
For together we cannot fail
We got stopped by police at the county line
They said, "Go home boys or you're going to jail"

Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on
Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on

It's hard to explain to a crying child
Why her Daddy can't go back
So the family suffer
But it hurts me more
To hear a scab say Sod you Jack

Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on
Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on

I'm bound to follow my conscience
And do whatever I can
But it'll take much more than the union law
To knock the fight out of a working man

Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on
Which side are you on, boys
Which side are you on

III. The Salt of the Earth

On December, 6, 1968, the Rolling Stones released the album “Beggars Banquet.”[40] The album contained several of the band’s biggest hits, including “Sympathy for the Devil” and “Street Fighting

The final track on Beggars Banquet is an often overlooked, but significant and powerful song about the worker, entitled “Salt of the Earth.” “Salt of the Earth” has been referred to as “[lead singer Mick] Jagger and [guitarist Keith] Richards’ vintage paean to the downtrodden and despairing - the "common foot soldiers," black and white alike.”

The lyrics of “Salt of the Earth”:

Let’s drink to the hard working people
Let’s drink to the lowly of birth
Raise your glass to the good and the evil
Let’s drink to the salt of the earth

Say a prayer for the common foot soldier
Spare a thought for his back breaking work
Say a prayer for his wife and his children
Who burn the fires and who still till the earth

And when I search a faceless crowd
A swirling mass of gray and
Black and white
They don’t look real to me
In fact, they look so strange

Raise your glass to the hard working people
Let’s drink to the uncounted heads
Let’s think of the wavering millions
Who need leaders but get gamblers instead

Spare a thought for the stay-at-home voter
His empty eyes gaze at strange beauty shows
And a parade of the gray suited grafters
A choice of cancer or polio

And when I look in the faceless crowd
A swirling mass of grays and
Black and white
They don’t look real to me
Or don’t they look so strange

Let’s drink to the hard working people
Let’s think of the lowly of birth


Spare a thought for the rag taggy people
Let’s drink to the salt of the earth

Let’s drink to the hard working people
Let’s drink to the salt of the earth
Let’s drink to the two thousand million
Let’s think of the humble of birth

The song, referred to as some as “bitingly sarcastic” was provided some awareness of those working folk who did not stand a chance to compete professionally with the dominant holders of power. At the end of the period of Jimmy Hoffa’s Teamsters dominance, worker democracy seemed entirely hopeless. The corruption that permeated some of the unions in the 1960s made it virtually impossible to unilaterally challenge entrenched power. The famous quote by former AFL-CIO President George Meany mirrored “Salt of the Earth’s” sentiment. “The basic goal of labor will not change. It is – as it has always been, and I am sure always will be – to better the standards of life for all


[47] See ROGER CHAPMAN, CULTURE WARS: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ISSUES, VOICES, AND VIEWPOINTS, M.E. Sharpe 2010, p. 312 (“Anti-union forces recognized labor’s vulnerability and stepped up their attacks, arguing that by limiting the power of unions, they were defending the rights of individual workers.”).

who work for wages and to seek decency and justice and dignity for all Americans.”[49] “Salt of the Earth”
“quite directly champion[s] and drink[s] a toast to the working class” and throws a “nod in [the]
direction” of “advocacy for the common man.”[50]

The Rolling Stones rarely perform “Salt of the Earth,”[51] but after the attacks of September 11, 2001 upon New York City, they chose to play it at the Concert for New York City tribute show at
Madison Square Garden.[52] They saw this as the proper song to pay homage to the police and firefighters
who suffered and lost so much during the terrorist attacks. Regarding the group’s motivation to play this
song at this concert, guitarist Keith Richards later said, “Mick [Jagger] and I were wondering what songs
to play,” Richards said. "And Mick said, 'Oh, how perfect would it be for 'Salt of the Earth' and I said, 'I
can't think of a better one, Mick.' It seemed like it was written for the occasion.”[53] Richards said of the
hard-working NYPD and FDNY who lost many of their own in the World Trade Center attacks, “Over

[49] Official Website of the American Labor Student Center, http://labor-studies.org/by-labor-topic/labor-
history/personalities-biographies/george-meany/.

[50] Richie Unterberger, allmusic.com/song/t2770336; “The song has been described as “the Stones look[ing] out on
teeming humanity and see[ing] no reason for hope.” Mike Boehm, Two Gems of ’68 Still Shine After All these Years,

[51] One of the rare occasions where the Stones performed ‘Salt of the Earth’ was in 1989 in Atlantic City with Axl
Rose and Izzy Stradlin of Guns N’Roses. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t64Sn10D0bo; see STEPHEN DAVIS,
WATCH YOU BLEED, Gotham Books, 2008, p. 292; So rarely had the Rolling Stones played the song that when Axl
Rose chose that song to perform with the legendary band, the Stones did not remember how to play the song.

“‘We’d chosen ‘Salt of the Earth’ but they didn’t know it!’ said Stradlin. STEPHEN DAVIS, WATCH YOU BLEED,


my years living in New York I know a lot of those guys. Cops and firemen, they're some of our biggest fans.”[54]

**IV. Power in a Union**

“Salt of the Earth” has inspired other artists who have taken to performing the song as well.[55] The United Kingdom’s Billy Bragg has spent the past twenty-five years making noise as an activist and supporter of workers’ rights and union activity.[56] Bragg grew up on the music of Bob Dylan and The Clash, believing that music could change the world.[57] He became more politically motivated upon the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and her stances on health care, medicine and education.[58] Thatcher is seen by many in the labor movement in Great Britain as the individual who “managed to destroy the power of the trade unions for almost a generation.”[59] Others feel that she righted a labor ship

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which, at the time, featured unions that were too powerful and volatile.\[^{60}\] Those, like Billy Bragg, who deride Thatcher’s methods and results, argue that she weakened unions, took away their legal protection, and severely cut union membership.\[^{61}\]

Bragg’s penchant for political involvement, both in Europe and the United States, led him to the side of the worker, the lower class, and the organization of labor.\[^{62}\] In 1986, Billy Bragg released the album *Talking With the Taxman About Poetry*; the album included one of Bragg’s most popular tracks,

\[^{60}\] See id. (“It is difficult to comprehend today how much power union barons like the then miners’ leader Joe Gormley and transport boss Jack Jones wielded in those days. There were endless strikes afflicting the Post Office, steel industry, the ferries, steelworks and much more.”).


\[^{62}\] See New Labor Forum, *An Overture into the Future: The Music of Social Justice*, December 31, 2001. (One anonymous author stated in the New Labor Forum, “Billy Bragg has long been synonymous with political and class-based music, but what's astonishing is how popular he is today. At the huge Irish Fleahd Festival in New York City, I watched sixty thousand people sing along with Bragg's "There Is Power in a Union." Several months later Bragg performed a special concert in Pittsburgh for the AFL-CIO convention and kicked off his own twenty-five-city tour of the United States and Canada.”); see Neal Thompson, *Bragg Marches to Labor's Tune; Activist: The British Singer Champions American Workers, Thanks to Margaret Thatcher*, BALTIMORE SUN, October 30, 2000, (“His interest in workers' rights and politics had been born of two early 1980s events: a British coal miners' strike and Margaret Thatcher's re-election as prime minister. ‘The miners' strike forced me to define my politics,’ he said.”).
“There is Power in a Union.”[^63] The song has resonated with listeners as a poem representing their voice through one of their heroes; they relate to the song because they feel that Bragg relates to them.[^64]

The lyrics to “There is Power in a Union” are:

There is power in a factory, power in the land
Power in the hands of a worker
But it all amounts to nothing if together we don't stand
There is power in a Union

Now the lessons of the past were all learned with workers' blood
The mistakes of the bosses we must pay for
From the cities and the farmlands to trenches full of mud
War has always been the bosses' way, sir

The Union forever defending our rights
Down with the blackleg, all workers unite
With our brothers and out sisters from many far off lands
There is power in a Union

Now I long for the morning that they realise
Brutality and unjust laws cannot defeat us
But who'll defend the workers who cannot organise
When the bosses send their lackies out to cheat us?

Money speaks for money, the Devil for his own
Who comes to speak for the skin and the bone
What a comfort to the widow, a light to the child
There is power in a Union

The Union forever defending our rights
Down with the blackleg, all workers unite
With our brothers and out sisters from many far off lands
There is power in a Union.[^65]


[^64]: Neal Thompson, *A Working-Class Hero; Bragg’s Activism, Folk Tunes Strike Chord With Labor*, ORLANDO SENTINEL, December 4, 2000, at B6 (“... with songs infused by his... workingman's ideology -- such as "There is Power in a Union" -- Bragg has become a musical hero to the American labor movement.”).

With songs such as “There is Power in a Union,” the union members are not the only ones to recognize Bragg’s impact. Billy Bragg has championed American unions in numerous methods - aiding striking employees, raising money for their causes, and using his skilled pen for journalistic support.\[^{66}\]

“Bragg has performed on picket lines and concert halls all over the world. . . If it’s a listening audience, he’ll talk politics. If it’s a rowdy audience, he’ll play. He feels it’s his job to provoke, especially Americans. . .”\[^{67}\] In 1997, at the AFL-CIO Convention, Bragg performed “There is Power in a Union,” to some of the AFL-CIO’s leaders,\[^{68}\] “many of whom, up till that point, had no idea who Bragg was,” repaid his “honored guest” status at the Convention by “volunteering to perform at an anti-sweatshop rally in New York City’s Herald Square hours before he was scheduled for a club performance.”\[^{69}\] Three years later, John Sweeney, President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), said of Billy Bragg, "Many young people today resent corporate culture, but few understand how to change it. That's why pop-culture figures like Billy Bragg are important to the

\[^{66}\] See Neal Thompson, “Bragg Marches to Labor’s Tune; Activist: The British Singer Champions American Workers, Thanks to Margaret Thatcher,” BALTIMORE SUN, October 30, 2000 (“One day, between concerts in North Carolina, Bragg visited striking coal miners in Virginia and wrote a long story about it for THE GUARDIAN newspaper in London. He has since performed at AFL-CIO conventions and met with union leaders. He hired striking newspaper reporters from Detroit to run his Internet site. During tours, he regularly visits union halls, picket lines and industrial work sites and sometimes takes up collections for various causes at his shows.”


\[^{68}\] On March 18, 2011, Dr. Hugh Blumenfeld, Ph.D. (in the poetics of William Blake) M.D. (and professor at the University of Connecticut Medical School), former poet laureate of the State of Connecticut, performed “There is Power in a Union,” before AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka presented the keynote address at the Theology of Work And the Dignity of Workers Conference, sponsored by the Center for Labor and Employment Law at the St. John’s University School of Law.

union movement. Bragg helps people understand why defining people's freedom to form unions is a way to change society. And it doesn't hurt that he does it eloquently and with a lot of passion.”

V. St. Augustine Never Heard Billy Bragg Sing, Either!

For the uninitiated, Billy Bragg makes Bob Dylan sound like Pavarotti. But, there is a beautiful authenticity and integrity to all of these songs, and especially of the non-singing singers a la Mr. Bragg. In the spring of 1997, at the Randall’s Island, New York City Guinness Fleadh, the second author of this essay saw Billy Bragg live for the first time. On a hot June early afternoon, in front of 27,000+, with an electric guitar and standing solo, Bragg captured the audience’s rapt attention, deriding the Tony Blair government as opportunistic and duplicitous, deriding Blair as “Labor Light,” a classic segue into “There is Power in a Union.” Billy Bragg likewise mesmerized the Madison Square Garden audience at Pete Seeger’s 90th birthday party in May of 2009, as he sang “The Internationale” a capella, sans even a guitar. St. Augustine may well have heard Joan Baez sing. Her beautiful version of “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night,” commemorating the union organizer executed by copper mine owners, performed at

[70] Neal Thompson, A Working-Class Hero; Bragg’s Activism, Folk Tunes Strike Chord With Labor, Orlando Sentinel, December 4, 2000, at B6.).

[71] The two-day concert was held June 14-15, 1997. See Randalls Island Official Website, http://randallsisland.org/timeline/


the Woodstock Festival, might just be the labor song performed before the single largest audience in folk
concert history. [75]

VI. Some Concluding Thoughts

Songs of protest or historical observation provide an intimate glimpse into what was happening at
a particular time. While a memory of witnessing an important event can fade over time, songs like
“Which Side Are You On?,” “Salt of the Earth,” and “There is Power in a Union” keep the memory alive
by evoking the real emotion of someone who lived through something and wanted to comment on it.
Music also sends this message to future generations; once those witnesses are long gone, the songs can
tell the story in a succinct and impassioned way to those who were not there. The first author of this
article did not experience some of the eras that our discussed songs visit, but hearing these songs piqued
his interest and led him to try to learn about what they represent.

Gathering or protesting through song provides a source of unity, as numerous people can
participate in presenting a message at one time. This unity and group-oriented contemplation gives the
message more emphasis and power, as it more loudly demands to be heard. This parallels the very
concept of unionization, where one person expressing discontentment can fall on deaf ears, but a union of
individuals voicing that same displeasure can make a difference.

Plenty of current artists still write to the political climate, or reflect on current events as a way of
connecting with an audience and getting a point across. Whether or not you agree with the message of a

[75] See LAWRENCE JEFFREY EPSTEIN, POLITICAL FOLK MUSIC IN AMERICA FROM ITS ORIGINS TO BOB DYLAN,
McFarland & Co., 2010, p. 30; see also Richard Schickel, Movie Review: Woodstock, LIFE Magazine, April 24,
1970.
Bruce Springsteen or a John Mellencamp, it is fascinating to receive that message through song. One can only wonder what future artists will emerge as a voice for the working class.

We submit that, from the vast array of wonderful labor songs, these three best capture the mood and the ethos of their particular era. Each is razor sharp in its indictment of evil, perhaps ideologically polarizing in the extreme. Thus, these songs may well transcend their era and become part of the four great questions—death, judgment, hell, heaven—“It all depends,” the Master said, “Which Side are You on?” Most important, while reflecting the cold and cruel realities, each song reflects that its writer had a tenacious and stubborn hope for a better tomorrow.

So do we all!

As Saint Augustine said, “He who sings prays twice.”