

## **Working Class Heroes**

It was the end of the year 2016 when I had a conversation with an old friend, Eli Smith. Eli is a fine musician and devoted archivist of old-time string band music. He also happens to be the organizer of the Brooklyn Folk Festival where Yvonne and I performed James Connolly's Songs of Freedom in 2016. At first, Eli and I were just "shooting the breeze" about family and friends when we hit upon the subject of commemorations. I happened to mention that 2017 was the 50th anniversary of the publication of "Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People," a songbook first published in 1967 after a thirty-year odyssey through the desk drawers and cupboards of two of its authors, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. I knew the songbook well, having obtained a copy in 1967, when it first came out. Eli wasn't born yet, but he, too, knew all about this book and its striking relevance to present day social and musical developments. We immediately agreed that it would be a worthwhile task to select, from among the book's 195 songs, a representative sample for performance at the Brooklyn Folk Festival 2017.

Yvonne and I had to choose an hour's worth of tunes that we thought would connect with an audience unfamiliar with the book or the historical period on which it was based, that is, 1910-1940, with the bulk of the songs being written in the '30s. The music and the lyrics had to cross the divide of almost a century to speak again to a new generation. So we set to work with more curiosity than conscious plan.

As soon as we began, however, certain patterns emerged. First, these songs were composed by workers, not professional musicians or lyricists. While some were written by Woody

Guthrie, the great majority were by anonymous working people who shared one thing in common: the struggle against suffering and injustice. The songs of Sarah Ogan Gunning are a shining example. They are stunning lyrically and had the curious advantage of being set to music recently popularized by the Cohen Brothers film “Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?” Second, the songs of Sarah’s brother and sister, Jim Garland and Aunt Molly Jackson, were equally powerful, calling attention to the Kentucky coal-country where all three were born and where all three participated in the great struggles against the coal operators. These facts alone exposed the falsehoods that have been foisted on unwitting music-lovers for decades, namely that the working class was a bunch of dumb crackers and that “political” songs were all written by intellectuals in New York. “Real” working class songs were maudlin laments about life’s misfortunes or, alternatively, carefree larks admonishing listeners to “always look on the bright side of life.” Needless to say this is hokum, but more importantly, the evidence proving that it is hokum is truly wonderful music, and fun, to boot.

Shortly thereafter, our song-quest brought us to more such people, Ella Mae Wiggins and John Handcox, to name but two, who were not only workers and organizers themselves but were songwriters of merit, putting their talents to the task of building the worker’s movement. To these we added a few written by the better-known, but equally “authentic,” Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin. These songs were found in “Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People” even though they were from an earlier era and had already been disseminated widely by the Wobblies (IWW). Then, with our repertoire complete, we played the Brooklyn Folk Festival.

That might have been the end of it, but, serendipitously, we were asked to perform at several other festivals, notably, the

James Connolly Festival in Dublin, later in 2017. What followed were more concerts, longer than a festival set, which required that we return to the songbook for more material. Ultimately, we had two hours worth of songs and rich stories accompanying each one. These stories included not only the struggles which had inspired the songs but also those of the people who'd written them. After many performances in the US, Ireland, Germany and Switzerland, it became apparent that diverse audiences shared an intense interest in both the music and the stories. The beauty and emotional power of the songs was immediate and produced the effect of transporting people to the time and place of their origin. But something else touched us as well. Not only were many audience-members deeply moved by the music but they were also curious to know more about the people who created it. Aficionados of "Americana" were especially intrigued. How could it be that they didn't know about this music? Why were these songs not included in the many compilations and collections claiming to be "representative" or "definitive?"

It was early this year, 2018, that we realized the necessity of recording the music, transcribing it for others to sing and sharing, in printed form, the stories we'd been telling from the stage. Since by this time we were no longer strictly confined to songs from "Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People," *and* because that book is still readily available (and should be enjoyed in its own right), we decided to focus on what to us was the most important aspect of the project, namely the people who made these songs and the cause they made them for. These are women and men who gave their lives to emancipate the working class. Many, like Ella Mae Wiggins, were literally murdered by the bosses. Others, like Sara Ogan Gunning, watched their children starve to death and their husbands die of black lung,

only to rise up singing against the system that caused so much misery. This is why we call our project Working Class Heroes.

Unlike mythical figures made in Hollywood or celebrities made by marketing, these were real human beings, ordinary, anonymous, and poor. Their heroism resulted not from their being different than their fellow workers, but from being the same. The same, that is, except in one respect: lowly of birth, they were nonetheless noble of aspiration. They stood up, calling out to their sisters and brothers to join together to fight the bosses, the bankers and the government that were oppressing them. They did so in the face of violent terror and bitter betrayal, their dedication and courage setting an example we can learn from today. Such heroism is immortal, such heroes should be celebrated and their songs can still lift our spirits, if we sing them.