

March 2017

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Recommended Citation

Raymond A. Franklin and David L. Gregory (2011) "Labor Songs: The Provocative Product of Psalmists, Prophets, and Poets," *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies*: Vol. 50 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcls/vol50/iss1/12>

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LABOR SONGS: THE PROVOCATIVE PRODUCT OF PSALMISTS, PROPHETS, AND POETS

RAYMOND A. FRANKLIN[†] & DAVID L. GREGORY[‡]

*The words of the prophets are written on subway walls and
tenement halls.*

“The Sounds of Silence,” Simon & Garfunkel¹

*[The Rolling Stones are] the most dangerous rock-and-roll band
in the world.*

Life, Keith Richards and James Fox²

*A singing movement is a winning movement.*³

Attributed to, *inter alia*, Pete Seeger⁴ and Utah Phillips⁵

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¹ SIMON & GARFUNKEL, *The Sounds of Silence*, on SOUNDS OF SILENCE (Columbia, 1966).

² KEITH RICHARDS WITH JAMES FOX, *LIFE* 3 (2010).

³ Ethan Miller, *Making Folk Music a Threat Again!*, RIOTFOLK, <http://www.geo.coop/archives/RiotFolkGEO67.htm> (last visited Feb. 25, 2012).

⁴ Pete Seeger is one of the world's great folk singers and political activists. *Rolling Stone* magazine deemed him “unquestionably the foremost contemporary popularizer of American folk music.” *Pete Seeger*, in THE ROLLING STONE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ROCK & ROLL 868 (Holly George-Warren et al. eds., 3d ed. 2001), available at 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! (To Everything There Is a Season)” and “We Shall Overcome.” See *Pete Seeger Biography*, SONGWRITERS HALL OF FAME, www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C76 (last visited Feb. 25, 2012). His works have been so renowned that

I. ST. AUGUSTINE NEVER HEARD ME SING!

St. Augustine said “[h]e who sings prays twice.”⁶ 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 Psalms⁷ and the vast array of poetry⁸

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.” *Pete Seeger Music*, APLESEED RECORDS, www.peteseegermusic.com (last visited Feb. 25, 2012).

⁵ 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!” “Utah Phillips [was] a legend on the folk music circuit. A great storyteller and an unapologetic activist . . .” David Kupfer, *Utah Phillips*, THE PROGRESSIVE, September 2003, at 35, 35. When asked who some of his heroes were, Phillips indicated Pete Seeger because he “invented [Phillips’s] trade.” *Id.* at 38. Phillips has said that “[b]ecause 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.* at 39. Phillips indicated that “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!” a Harry McClintock classic which he covered, was “the song that ma[de] him happiest.” Jim Washburn, *Do Tell; Utah Phillips Puts His Tales to Music and His Audience’s Character to the Test*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 5, 1992, at 3; see also *Special Merit Picks: Country*, BILLBOARD, Dec. 16, 1972, at 52.

⁶ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶1156 (2d ed. 2003) (internal quotation marks omitted); ANA ARISTA WHITE & JOSEPH D. WHITE, TEACH IT: EARLY CHILDHOOD 75 (2004).

⁷ 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. See Philip Stern, *Psalms 137: The Babylonian Exile: Pieces of the Puzzle*, MIDSTREAM, July/Aug. 2007, at 33, 35. Some of these psalms were eventually set to music to enhance their power and message. One of the most famous psalms from the Babylonian era is Psalm 137. One scholar notes that “[o]ne should remember not only the beginning of Psalm 137, but also the conclusion in which the slave addresses his enslaver . . . [revealing the] psychology . . . of the rebelling slave.” Christine Gallant, *Blake’s Antislavery Designs for Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 39 WORDSWORTH CIRCLE 123, 126 (2008). Psalm 137 expresses “[t]he misery of the exiles . . . by the implied contrast to the joyous songs of Zion that the tormentors would have them sing . . .” Stern, *supra*, at 34. But as the psalm goes on to discuss a vow to remember this treatment, observers have commented that “[i]t signals a spiritual triumph over the initial scene of powerlessness, as if declaring that Babylon may capture bodies but not souls.” Alicia Ostriker, *Psalms and Anti-Psalms: A Personal View*, AM. POETRY REV., July/Aug. 2002, at 11, 12.

⁸ 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

express the inexpressible—the faith, the hope, and the aspirations of the human. 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 the historical and political climate of a particular era.

This Article will draw attention to three⁹ especially important periods in the shaping of labor history—the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s—highlighting the dramatic congruity a

said that “[t]he 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.” Ostriker, *supra*, note 7, at 13. Politics have emerged from poetry for hundreds of years: “Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, all found ways to hail or rage against kings and governments through their work. Yeats . . . wrote stinging political lines. As did Robert Lowell. As does Seamus Heaney.” Roger Rosenblatt, *Poetry and Politics*, TIME, Oct. 13, 1986, at 110. 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 of mind by means of words.” *Id.* Much of today’s political poetry has come alive in modern-day song, from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen and others.

In a preview 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.”

BRYAN K. GARMAN, A RACE OF SINGERS: WHITMAN’S WORKING-CLASS HERO FROM GUTHRIE TO SPRINGSTEEN 253 (2000).

⁹ While this Article focuses on only three songs in relation to the history of labor and workers rights, there are a myriad of important songs that have stood the test of time and have had a 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 project 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 dignity of the worker.

particular song had in each of these decades. This Article is part of a larger project, tracing the twentieth-century American experience with themes of social justice.¹⁰

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.¹¹ The 1930s marked the ever-more-desperate plight of the mine workers throughout the United States, especially in Appalachia.¹² Bitter and violent conflict fostered by unscrupulous anti-union mine owners continued unabated.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Professional intimidation was pervasive.¹⁶

¹⁰ See, e.g., David L. Gregory & Stephen Martir, *The Catholicity of the Middle Class: Reflections on Caritas in Veritate*, 24 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 379 (2010).

¹¹ See William Serrin, *Labor Song’s Writer, Frail at 83, Shows She Is Still a Fighter*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 18, 1984, § 1, at 22; Guy Carawan, *Which Side Are You on?*, LABOR NOTES (Nov. 1, 2007), <http://labornotes.org/2011/10/which-side-are-you>.

¹² The West Virginia coal mining wars are wonderfully captured by the great film maker, John Sayles, in *Matewan*. MATEWAN (Cinecom Entertainment Group 1987).

¹³ See Mike Hudson, *Which Side Are You on?*, ROANOKE TIMES, Sept. 2, 2002, at Extra 1.

¹⁴ See Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also Serrin, *supra* note 11.

¹⁵ See Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also Serrin, *supra* note 11; Joseph Stroud, *Harlan County Hasn’t Been Friendly to Unions*, LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER, July 18, 1993, at A12. (“J.H. Blair was sheriff of Harlan County from 1930–33. According to *Which Side Are You on?*, a book by John Hevener, Blair openly admitted doing everything he could to aid coal companies in their anti-organizing efforts.”).

¹⁶ “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.” TIMOTHY P. LYNCH, *STRIKE SONGS OF THE DEPRESSION* 68 (2001).

As the deputies searched the region for strikers and union leaders, several violent encounters occurred.¹⁷ Sam, one of the union leaders, was a target.¹⁸ He was well aware that he was marked for death, and was thus “lying low.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

¹⁷ See Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also Serrin, *supra* note 11.

¹⁸ See Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also Hudson, *supra* note 13 (“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.”); Serrin, *supra* note 11.

¹⁹ LYNCH, *supra* note 16, at 66.

²⁰ See Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also Hudson, *supra* note 13 (“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.’” (alteration in original)); Serrin, *supra* note 11.

²¹ See LYNCH, *supra* note 16, at 67 (“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.’”); Hudson, *supra* note 13 (“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.”).

(Chorus)

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

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 won²²

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.²³ Some have claimed that Reece used "Lay Lily Low," an old hymn.²⁴ Others have said that Reece used the tune from "Jack Munro," a British song.²⁵ A plausible conclusion is that "Lay Lily Low" and "Jack

²² Florence Reece, *They Say Them Child Brides Don't Last*, in CALLING HOME: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S WRITINGS: AN ANTHOLOGY 62-63 (Janet Zandy ed., 1993); see Carawan, *supra* note 11; see also LYNCH, *supra* note 16, at 67 ("I was asking the miners, she later recalled 'all of them, which side they were on. They had to be on one side or the other; they had to be for themselves or against themselves.' . . . As Reece saw it, one was either for the union or against it; neutrality was not an option.").

²³ Florence Reece, 86; *Wrote Songs with Social Message*, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 9, 1986 at Business 7; Lauren Weiner, *Where Have All the Lefties Gone?*, FIRST THINGS, Jan. 2010, at 29, 31.

²⁴ See Florence Reece, 86; *Wrote Songs with Social Message*, *supra* note 23 ("Borrowing from the melody from the hymn 'Lay the Lily Low,' Mrs. Reece wrote the union song in the 1930s to describe the plight of mine workers in Harlan County, Ky., who were organizing what became a famous strike.").

²⁵ See ALESSANDRO PORTELLI, THEY SAY IN HARLAN COUNTY: AN ORAL HISTORY 407 n.6 (2011) ("The suggestion that the music for 'Which Side Are You On' may come from 'Jack Munro,' via 'Lay the Lilies Low,' comes from A. L. Lloyd, *United Mine Workers Journal*, November 1, 1964."); Weiner, *supra* note 23 ("'Jack Munro' became Florence Reece's 'Which Side Are You On?'").

Munro” contain many of the same elements and that Reece was influenced by both songs.²⁶ Even Reece herself has seemed unsure of which song she used as the basis for her labor classic.²⁷ Various sources have quoted Reece as giving conflicting information about the song’s origin, including a third song called “I’m Going To Land on that Shore.”²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.”³⁰ “Which Side Are You on?”

²⁶ See Carawan, *supra* note 11 (“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.”).

²⁷ See LYNCH, *supra* note 16, at 141 n.46 (“In [Kathy] Kahn[’s] *Hillbilly Women* . . . Reece said ‘The music to the song is an 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 Never Keep Us Down: Women’s Coal Mining Songs* . . . she gave the tune as ‘Lay the Lily Low.’ In Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* . . . the tune is also given as ‘Lay the Lily Low.’ ”).

²⁸ *Id.* (“Regarding the hymn used 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.’ ”).

²⁹ 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 eighteenth-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*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 15, 1993, at C13; see also *Drama*, THE PULITZER PRIZES, <http://Pulitzer.org/bycat/drama> (last visited Feb. 25, 2012). See generally 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, *Opinion, Wooing the Scots-Irish*, PITT. TRIB. REV., Mar. 2, 2008; see also *About Jim Webb*, JAMESWEB.COM <http://www.jameswebb.com/about.htm> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

³⁰ Hudson, *supra* note 13.

has been embraced as an integral piece in the folk-music lexicon.³¹ 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.”³²

“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.³³ Popular modern-day artists such as songstress Natalie Merchant³⁴ and punk-rockers Dropkick Murphys³⁵ 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),³⁶ has established

³¹ *Id.* (“‘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.’”).

³² *Id.*; see LYNCH, *supra* note 16, at 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.”).

³³ WILLIAM H. YOUNG & NANCY K. YOUNG, *MUSIC OF THE WORLD WAR II ERA* 171 (2008) (“[Guthrie] joined the Almanac 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.”); David O’Reilly, *Exceptional Folk a Young Man Finds His Bearings, with Help from a River and a Man Named Pete Seeger*, PHILA. INQUIRER, June 21, 1998, at 16; Serrin, *supra* note 11.

³⁴ Joe Kern, *Review: Natalie Merchant: The House Carpenter’s Daughter*, CMJ NEW MUSIC MONTHLY, Oct. 2003, at 52, available at http://books.google.com.br/books?id=4ikEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA52&dq=%22natalie+merchant%22&hl=pt-br&ei=hFbETNWWPIK78gaAq6TaBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CDoQ6AEwBTgU#v=onepage&q=%22natalie%20merchant%22&f=false (noting 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 Natalie Merchant, *Which Side Are You on?*, YOUTUBE, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeKYVxvzKcU> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

³⁵ See official Dropkick Murphy’s website, Florence Reece, *Which Side Are You On? (Sing Loud, Sing Proud!)*, DROPKICK MURPHYS, <http://www.dropkickmurphys.com/music/albums/sing-loud-sing-proud/#which> (last visited Feb. 15, 2012) (this song appeared on Dropkick Murphys’ 2001 album, *Sing Loud, Sing Proud* which was released by Epitaph Records).

³⁶ See *The Official Oughtabiography of Alro Guthrie*, ARLO.NET, <http://www.arlo.net/bio.shtml> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

himself as a significant folk artist³⁷ and infused Florence Reece's classic song with overtly religious themes.³⁸ 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:

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

³⁷ *See id.*

³⁸ Arlo Guthrie, *Which Side*, ARLO.NET, <http://www.arlo.net/resources/lyrics/which-side.shtml> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

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 on³⁹

Another complete revision of the Reece version was performed by British rocker Billy Bragg, who performed the song on his 1985 EP *Between the Wars*.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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
 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"

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ BILLY BRAGG, *Which Side Are You on*, on *BETWEEN THE WARS* (GO! DISCS 1985); *Between the Wars EP (Single)*, BILLY BRAGG, <http://www.billybragg.co.uk/music/singles.php?singleID=30> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁴¹ *Between the Wars EP (Single)*, *supra* note 40.

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 on⁴²

III. THE SALT OF THE EARTH

On December 6, 1968, the Rolling Stones released the album *Beggars Banquet*.⁴³ The album contained several of the band's biggest hits, including "Sympathy for the Devil" and "Street Fighting Man."⁴⁴ The final track on *Beggars Banquet* is an often overlooked, but significant and powerful song about the worker, entitled "Salt of the Earth."⁴⁵ "Salt of the Earth" has been referred to as "[lead singer Mick] Jagger and [guitarist Keith]

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ See *Beggars Banquet*, THE ROLLING STONES, <http://www.rollingstones.com/album/beggars-banquet> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁴⁴ See *id.*

⁴⁵ See *id.*

Richards' vintage paean to the downtrodden and despairing—the 'common foot soldiers,' black and white alike."⁴⁶ 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

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
 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

⁴⁶ Jonathan Takiff, *Stones Give Boardwalk a Blast from the Past*, PHILA. DAILY NEWS (Dec. 18, 1989), http://articles.philly.com/1989-12-18/entertainment/26156354_1_jagger-and-richards-press-conference-rolling-stones.

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 birth⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ At the end of the period of Jimmy Hoffa’s Teamsters dominance, worker democracy seemed entirely hopeless.⁴⁹ The corruption that permeated some of the unions in the 1960s made it virtually impossible to unilaterally challenge entrenched power.⁵⁰ The famous quote by former AFL-CIO President George Meany⁵¹ 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 who work for wages and to seek decency and justice and dignity for all

⁴⁷ See Rolling Stones, *Salt of the Earth*, METRO LYRICS, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/salt-of-the-earth-lyrics-rolling-stones.html> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁴⁸ Rob Fitzpatrick, *Readers Recommend: Songs About Social Class*, THE GUARDIAN (Mar. 26, 2009), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/mar/27/readers-recommend-social-class>. In the article, Fitzpatrick notes that in 1970, Mick Jagger claimed of those that inspired the song, “I’m saying those people haven’t any power and they never will have[.]” *Id.*

⁴⁹ Andrew B. Dean, Note, *An Offer the Teamsters Couldn’t Refuse: The 1989 Consent Decree Establishing Federal Oversight and Ending Mechanisms*, 100 COLUM. L. REV. 2157, 2171–72 (2000); see FRED ROSE, COALITIONS ACROSS THE CLASS DIVIDE: LESSONS FROM THE LABOR, PEACE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS 98 (2000) (“Business unionism brought benefits during the prosperous 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but at the cost of member disengagement. . . . [M]aterial comfort undermined labor solidarity.”).

⁵⁰ See Gary L. Bailey, *Labor Unions*, in CULTURE WARS: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ISSUES, VIEWPOINTS, AND VOICES 312 (Roger Chapman ed., 2010) (“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.”).

⁵¹ George Meany was President of the combined AFL-CIO from 1955 to 1979. See *George Meany (1894–1980)*, AFL-CIO, <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/meany.cfm> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

Americans.”⁵² “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.”⁵³

The Rolling Stones rarely perform “Salt of the Earth,”⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.’ ”⁵⁶ Richards said of the hard-working N.Y.P.D. and F.D.N.Y. who lost many of their own in the World Trade Center attacks, “ ‘Over my years living in New York I know a lot of those guys. Cops and firemen, they’re some of our biggest fans[.]’ ”⁵⁷

⁵² Irwin Yellowitz, *George Meany*, AM. LABOR STUDIES CTR. (Oct. 18, 2010), <http://labor-studies.org/by-labor-topic/labor-history/personalities-biographies/george-meany/>.

⁵³ Richie Unterberger, *Song Review: Salt of the Earth*, ALLMUSIC, allmusic.com/song/t2770336 (last visited Feb. 26, 2012). The song has been described as “the Stones look[ing] out on teeming humanity and see[ing] no reason for hope.” Mike Boehm, *2 Gems of ‘68 Still Shine After All These Years*, L.A. TIMES, Dec. 12, 1988, pt 6, at 12.

⁵⁴ 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. See *Rolling [sic] Stones & Guns’n’Roses—Salt of the Earth*, YOUTUBE (Apr. 25, 2007), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t64Sn10D0bo>. 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 said they didn’t know it!’ ” said Stradlin. STEPHEN DAVIS, *WATCH YOU BLEED: THE SAGA OF GUNS N’ ROSES* 292 (2008).

⁵⁵ Sarah Rodman, *Jagger, Richards Look Back as Stones Roll into Hub*, BOS. HERALD, Sept. 2, 2002, at News 1.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

IV. POWER IN A UNION

“Salt of the Earth” has inspired other artists who have taken to performing the song as well.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ Bragg grew up on the music of Bob Dylan and The Clash, believing that music could change the world.⁶⁰ He became more politically motivated upon the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and her stances on health care, medicine, and education.⁶¹ 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.”⁶² Others feel that she righted a labor ship which, at the time, featured unions that were too powerful and volatile.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ In 1986, Billy Bragg

⁵⁸ Kelefa Sanneh, *Rock Review; Enjoying the Moment, Patti Smith Celebrates Time’s Passage*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 3, 2004, at B14 (discussing New York City rocker Patti Smith covering the tune at her New Year’s Eve concert at New York’s Bowery Ballroom on December 31, 2003). “Salt of the Earth” was covered by soul singer Bettye LaVette on her 2010 album *Interpretations: The British Songbook*. See PASTE MAGAZINE, http://www.pastemagazine.com/action/paste_station?track_id=3040 (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁵⁹ See Neal Thompson, *A Working-Class Hero; Bragg’s Activism, Folk Tunes Strike Chord with Labor*, ORLANDO SENTINEL, Dec. 4, 2000, at B6.

⁶⁰ Scott Cohen, *Talkin’ Bout a Revolution*, SPIN MAGAZINE, July 1989, at 87, 87–88.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² Paul Wilenius, *Enemies Within: Thatcher and the Unions*, BBC NEWS (Mar. 5, 2004, 1:15 PM), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3067563.stm>.

⁶³ See *id.* (“It is difficult to comprehend today how much power union barons like the then miners’ leader Joe Gormley and transport union boss Jack Jones wielded in those days. There were endless strikes afflicting the Post Office, steel industry, the ferries, steelworks and much more.”).

⁶⁴ See *id.* (“Her economic policies helped weaken the unions. . . . Union membership plummeted from a peak of 12 million in the late 70s to almost half that by the late 80s.”); see also 3 MELTDOWN: MONEY, DEBT AND THE WEALTH OF NATIONS 276 (William Krehm ed., 2008) (“Margaret Thatcher swept to power in 1979 Eventually, unemployment rose, unions lost their leverage and the government enacted legislation that stripped labor unions of their power.”).

⁶⁵ See Joe Uehlein, *An Overture into the Future: The Music of Social Justice*, NEW LABOR FORUM, Fall/Winter 2001, available at <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/>

released the album *Talking With the Taxman About Poetry*; the album included one of Bragg's most popular tracks, "There Is Power in a Union."⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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 can not defeat us
 But who'll defend the workers who cannot organise
 When the bosses send their lackies out to cheat us?

newlaborforum/old/html/9_article25.html (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, Oct. 30, 2000, at 1F ("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.").

⁶⁶ BILLY BRAGG, *There Is Power in a Union, on TALKING WITH THE TAXMAN ABOUT POETRY* (Go! Discs 1986), available at <http://www.billybragg.co.uk/music/album.php?albumID=17&songID=40>.

⁶⁷ Thompson, *supra* note 59. ("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").

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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ “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”⁷⁰ In 1997, at the AFL-CIO Convention, Bragg performed “There is Power in a Union” to some of the AFL-CIO’s leaders,⁷¹ “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

⁶⁸ Billy Bragg, *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry: There Is Power in a Union*, BILLY BRAGG, <http://www.billybragg.co.uk/music/album.php?albumID=17&songID=40> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁶⁹ See Thompson, *supra* note 65 (“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.”).

⁷⁰ Cohen, *supra* note 60, at 88.

⁷¹ On March 18, 2011, Dr. Hugh Blumenfeld, Ph.D. (in the poethics 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,” 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.

anti-sweatshop rally in New York City's Herald Square hours before he was scheduled for a club performance."⁷² Three years later, John Sweeney, President of the 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 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.⁷³

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 Guinness Fleadh on Randall's Island, New York City,⁷⁴ 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 plus people,⁷⁵ standing solo with an electric guitar, 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 ninetieth birthday party in May of 2009⁷⁶ as he sang "The Internationale" a capella, sans even guitar.⁷⁷

⁷² Jo-Ann Mort, *Finding a Voice: The AFL-CIO Communicates*, in NOT YOUR FATHER'S UNION MOVEMENT: INSIDE THE AFL-CIO 43, 51-52 (Jo-Ann Mort ed., 1998).

⁷³ Thompson, *supra* note 65 (internal quotation mark omitted).

⁷⁴ The two-day concert was held June 14 to 15, 1997. See *Timeline: 1992-1999*, RANDALLS ISLAND OFFICIAL WEBSITE, <http://randallsisland.org/timeline/> (last visited Feb. 26, 2012).

⁷⁵ See Jon Pareles, *POP Review: Tales for Head and Heart on Randalls Emerald Isle*, N.Y. TIMES, June 17, 1997, at C11.

⁷⁶ See Andy Greene, *Springsteen, Mellencamp, Morello and More Celebrate Pete Seeger's 90th Birthday With Sing-Alongs*, ROLLING STONE (May 4, 2009, 8:10 AM), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/springsteen-mellencamp-morello-and-more-celebrate-pete-seegers-90th-birthday-with-sing-alongs-20090504>.

⁷⁷ See Simon Vozick-Levinson, *Pete Seeger's All-Star 90th Birthday Concert: Springsteen, Baez, Matthews, and Many More Salute an American Hero*, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY (May 4, 2009, 4:35 PM), <http://music-mix.ew.com/2009/05/04/pete-seeger-90/>.

St. Augustine may well have heard Joan Baez sing. Her beautiful version of "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," performed at the Woodstock Festival, commemorating the union organizer executed by copper mine owners, may be the labor song performed before the single largest audience in folk concert history.⁷⁸

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, 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 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.

⁷⁸ See LAWRENCE J. EPSTEIN, *POLITICAL FOLK MUSIC IN AMERICA FROM ITS ORIGINS TO BOB DYLAN* 30, (2010); see also Richard Schickel, *Movie Review: Woodstock*, LIFE, Apr. 24, 1970, at 12.

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, and heaven—“It all depends,” the Master said, “Which Side are You on?”⁷⁹ Most important, while reflecting the cold and cruel realities, each song reflects a tenacious and stubborn hope for a better tomorrow.

So do we all!

As Saint Augustine said, “He who sings prays twice.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Guthrie, *supra* note 38.

⁸⁰ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, *supra* note 6.