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# Alan Lomax, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, (Notes on the songs by Woody Guthrie, Music transcribed and edited and with an afterword by Pete Seeger)

Christina Panou

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1

On first going through the book *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, one may think this is just a collection of songs referring to the era where people actually had a reason to feel and be hard-hit. This, in itself, might well be a good starting point to delve into a difficult time in American history such as the Depression years and reflect on the impact it had on the individual's daily life and well-being or the lack of it. As the story through music unfolds and this 'journey' takes us through to songs made in the 60s, the pages, introduction and postscripts reveal and clarify why this collection of songs in this specific form embraces the ideas, ideals and feelings of the song writers, composers and performers, as well as of these three very important people in American singing, folkloric tradition, Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger. We get a glimpse of the worries of the working class and how making songs about their troubles was relieving for the people. We are reminded that folk songs are typically considered disconnected from the real, day-to-day problems by the majority of scholars and we learn of Woody's suitability in joining Alan Lomax's attempt to collect these songs and include them in a book. Part of this compilation's charm is to read line by line all the notes before and after the songs and get in the mind of the people who contributed to them and arranged their layout. Actually, a great part of the book's value and beauty lies in these notes.

2

Pete Seeger states that everybody can learn from these songs even if the compilation does not make adequate reference to certain groups of American people who

also fought against poverty and unfair working conditions. Each song is a statement, an expression of the working man's sadness, anger, will to rise against injustice and fight, ultimately his relief and implied or straightforward desire to make his dreams come true. This sometimes hidden idealism and eternal hope is at the heart of his fight, even in its most vindictive form when it becomes "fire" or a "cyclone," in Woody Guthrie's words (xx). Furthermore, Guthrie's use of capitalization of the initial letters of certain words is indicative of his perception of importance and who or what carries it. He capitalizes the "Working Man" but does not do the same when he refers to the "big boys" with their Big Unions (xxi).

3

The common denominator of the songs in this book is how the suffering of the simple man brought out genuine feelings and the will to change their world for the better. And if one's reaction is to dismiss these feelings and this book as not lofty enough, then Woody Guthrie has one suggestion only: "take your pants and go home right now" (xxiii). It feels like his language and tone, his spelling even and what I would call a calculated use of illiteracy is his own defense if not weapon against 'highbrow' readers (xxiii) that he has no time for, a test to make sure those who will read these lyrics and look for these songs will do so with due respect. That is why it is so substantial to read his introduction to this book as well as to each separate song.

- 4 He likens being on the road to a religious experience because it is the road that took the poor man lovingly out of his misery and gave him hope for a better life.

5

The first section of songs "Hard Luck On The Farm" is about life on it and the difficulties the farmers faced, mainly because they were fighters in life but not trouble makers (27) although they were challenged by more than just the land and the conditions of their work. Then comes the second section "You're Dead Broke" about being unfortunate and unemployed and yet having to pay the collectors. The first song is "Collector Man Blues," accompanied by the picture of a black mother and her child in Georgia –one of the Farm Security Administration's pictures taken during the Depression.

6

The conditions depicted in the lyrics of the rest of the songs prepare the reader for the next section, "So You Got To Hit The Road." The striking feature here is the picture of a man with a stern look, standing against the backdrop of cloudy Californian skies (60), representative of all those who took to the road and headed west for a better life. It proves an excellent choice as this part of the book centers on the wandering man and the lonesome road and is introduced by the song '66 Highway Blues' which ends with a 'prophesy'..."I'm gonna start me a hungry man's union..." (63). The road tripper is an adventurer by definition and as such he may find himself in a predicament or, even worse, in prison. It could be robbery due to poverty, it could be gambling or drinking and driving, it might even be framing or being punished for the color of their skin, but jail or the abuse by men of law is something very few road trippers escaped. And this is what the next chapter "And You Land In Jail" deals with although the selection of the last song in it strikes a more hopeful note, "Things About Comin' My Way" (86).

7

Due to all the misadventures and difficulties, it was time for the people to get organized. The section "Some From The Old Wobblies" is about the Industrial Workers of the World who wandered and made speeches and sang songs about injustice. They were

seeking better working conditions and better payment for the worker but, like the farmers who were not troublemakers, the IWW were political without knowing politics or how to compete with the shrewd and experienced politicians. Their course was doomed but their songs spoke to the hearts of the people nonetheless. The songs in this chapter address topics like the preachers' empty promises, the cruelty of society against the hungry and the poor, the wanderer's misfortunes and how heaven will admit those who were faithful to their social fight even though this may not be much of a relief in their current hard life. The IWW may have sprung from farm workers mainly but people suffered terrible conditions elsewhere as well. And that is why the next chapter "Old Time Songs From All Over" is dedicated to all those suffering in mines and cotton mills, factories and fields, falling to disease and dying of silicosis. Once again in his introductory comments Woody Guthrie capitalizes the word "That" (99) to stress the capital's exploitation of the masses and the pain it inflicts on people. Guthrie makes a powerful observation: "An Indian used to scalp his enemies. They say a white man skins his friends" (100).

8

The next chapter titled "Hell Busts Loose In Kentucky" is mainly about strikes and protestations, and starts with a special dedication to Aunt Molly. We learn of her strength and courage, how she helped women give birth and sang to the workers and spoke her mind without fear of anyone. A coal miner's wife and a coal miner's daughter, she is very much like the heroine in country singer Loretta Lynn's song "Coal Miner's Daughter," where the singer recalls times of struggle and poverty but also the warmth of a loving family against the hardships. Special reference is made to Sarah Ogan Gunning, a fighter and singer who, driven by personal experience, added lyrics to traditional tunes to make songs like "I Am A Girl Of Constant Sorrow" (a different version of which was featured in the 2000 film "O Brother Where Art Thou?"), "Win It" or to other existing tunes like "Sailor On The Deep Blue Sea" to make the song "I Hate The Capitalist System." A number of other songs included in this part have been composed by her. This section also includes Jim Garland, Ella May Wiggins, as well as the union song "Which Side Are You On?" by social activist Florence Reece which she wrote in 1931 during the Harlan County strike – also sung by Pete Seeger and known to younger generations through remixes and remakes by numerous artists among which Natalie Merchant's 2003 version.

9

It could be Lomax, Seeger or Guthrie who put the "So You Hollered For A New Deal" group of songs after the ones about strikes and protests. Aiming at the three R's - Relief (of the poor and the unemployed), Recovery (of the economy) and Reform (of the financial system), the New Deal was a number of domestic programs in the US introduced by Franklin Roosevelt. For this reason, the first songs are dedicated to Roosevelt and the hopes people placed upon him, whereas the last one titled "Waitin' On Roosevelt" is all about hopes and wishes never fulfilled... "I'm tired of waitin' on Roosevelt... Stop waitin' on Roosevelt" (p.211).

10

In the following group of songs, "The Oakie Section," Woody introduces a new term and explains why "everybody is an Okie" (p.213). Despite being a term typically used for workers in Oklahoma who had been forced to leave their home during the Depression, it could represent all jobless and homeless people who left poverty-ridden areas in search of a better life. The road is a prevalent notion in this section as it becomes a symbol of

freedom and promise no matter how lonesome it may be. The dust of the road and the dust of the Dustbowl is another key word in this section, as it was a key element in the life of people who had to flee the dust storms and poverty and start anew. This is dramatically illustrated by another FSA photo of a dust storm in Oklahoma (219). All of the songs here are by Woody Guthrie.

11

The next group of songs, “Detroit Sets Down,” is dedicated to the achievements of the Unions in the light of the General Motors strikes in Detroit. Guthrie seizes the opportunity to talk about the “Living Truth” (240), that the world belongs to all humanity, not just its few privileged members. The people constitute the Government and by taking action the workers protect this Government – they do not sabotage it. In the conflict between the “working folks” and the “moneyed folks” the right ones will win (239). This song section ends with a version of “Rock-A-Bye-Baby” that paints the picture of a people doomed to a life of poverty and suffering.

12

In “The Farmers Get Together,” the power of the Unions is spreading rapidly, not only among automobile workers. Black people, farm workers, all those in need join the unions and get organized. The hope of a better future is mirrored in the lyrics of an old spiritual song “No More Mournin” (262-263) and the benefits of standing united are praised in “Ten Little farmer Men” (264). And thus comes the next group of songs “One Big Union,” with the word “union” taking on a more general and religious meaning. There are songs about freedom and fighting alongside the Union, songs about strikers who were denied medical care and others who were killed because they challenged their oppressors, songs about the Soup lines and demonstrations, the fights at the Marion Manufacturing Company in North Carolina and the Picket Lines. Finally the last section, “Mulligan Stew,” is a collection of songs not belonging to a certain thematic category according to Woody Guthrie, although there actually is room for some like “Ludlow Massacre” (332) or “How About You?” (346) to fall under the thematic arrangement of the previous sections. Guthrie makes references to Abraham Lincoln’s statement that the country belongs to everybody, he sees Christ as a social reformer who would probably be imprisoned if he preached his ideas in Guthrie’s time, he praises the use of foul language in this book and elsewhere as an honest and genuine expression that ought to be handed down to the future generations.

13

The content of this book can be overwhelming, size-wise and emotionally-wise; a compilation of two hundred powerful songs that was put together by three musical researchers and performers: Alan Lomax, indefatigable collector of folk songs, Pete Seeger, entertainer and educator, and Woody Guthrie, musician, song-writer and performer. *Hard Hitting Songs For Hard-Hit People* is paying tribute to those who suffered the consequences of a harsh era, those who left their home and felt entitled to claim a better life. But it is also a tribute to those who fell without a fight, victims to discrimination, greed and injustice and as such it is a point of reference that transcends time and space. It offers a wealth of information on the political and social context of the Depression years in America and constitutes an excellent source and tool for the historian or ethnomusicologist. What is more, the book transcends social mere observation and is equally useful and enjoyable for the layman, the simple individual who loves music, loves

American folklore and would appreciate learning more about the working class during the Depression years in the most genuine way possible.

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Christina Panou is a graduate of the English Language and Literature Department (Honor's degree), School of Philosophy, University of Athens. She is also a Fulbright scholar, particularly interested in American music, culture and Native American studies.