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Behind the Music: Representation of Labor and Society in American
Work Songs

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Introduction

The need to sing while working and to sing about work itself has been present in the American society from its very beginnings. Sung by generations of settlers, work song through its representation of intertwined relations between work, socio-economic status and cultural identity became a vivid testimony of the American way of life. In a range of its variations this musical form can be traced among different occupational groups shaping the American society through its history – cowboys, farmers, lumberjacks, sailors, slaves, miners, railroaders, textile workers, industrial workers and so on. These groups used work songs for various purposes, such as the coordination of work process, alleviation of pain following hard toil, protest against poor work conditions, or in contrary, the glorification of work.

They were also sung in order to warn about potential dangers and to memorize dead colleagues. Created and sung more or less directly by American working people, work songs are comprised of the voices which have not been taken into the account while documenting and writing mainstream history. Made under no authoritarian notions, they depict common people's realities. Providing different perspectives on daily life and society, work songs can be used as valuable sources of information contributing to the study and interpretation of American history. David K. Dunaway recognizes this potential when he writes that "lyrics of songs inevitably express the world view of their authors and singers. This is particularly true for anonymous works, which often reflect a folk (traditional) or popular (mass) consciousness. Songs make up the unofficial culture of their time, though as documents they are generally ignored by scholars more comfortable with the printed word." (Dunaway 272) He also states that "musical forms have their own identifiable history, which tells us the origins and worldview of those who choose them as means of exhortation" (272), adding that they "reveal community dynamics and history, providing a cultural inventory of a group." (273) Therefore it is not ungrounded to claim that American work songs can be seen as both political and cultural artefacts, reflecting differences between various groups they were sung in and changes taking place in the overall American society through time. In other words, they can be regarded as media providing insight into the neglected parts of the United States' history.

Before going any further, it is important to clarify in which way work songs actually relate to reality. Namely, it is not hard to notice that the majority of these songs are quite

sombre in their tone, mostly focusing on the negative aspects of work. Pointing to the commemorative role and cautionary note of work songs, Norm Cohen discusses this problem in the following words:

Among the songs and ballads of cowboys, miners, lumberjacks, and others, recurring subjects are the potential threats that the workers face: stampedes among cowboys, explosions or cave-ins among miners, logjams among lumberjacks, and so on. It would be wrong to conclude from this that a morbid interest in death and tragedy as such flourished. Some of these ballads and songs have a basis in historical events; their purpose was at least in part to memorialize the dead and injured comrades. But others are completely fictional, suggesting that perhaps the singers and their audiences felt that by verbalizing their fears they would be protecting themselves against the dangers actually happening — or, at least, distributing the fear among the community as a whole. (Cohen xxxvii)

Regardless of whether they represent actual events or the mere sentiment of the time, these songs do possess certain historical value. Moreover, together with other folk song types, work songs are often the only surviving sources for the earliest American societies. Jerome L. Rodnitzky finds them particularly important for studying periods when verbal material was scarce and visual representations almost non-existent, and for “understanding the inarticulate lower classes or regional cultures cut off from central mores.” (Rodnitzky 504) In this manner work songs alone or combined with other available historic sources have the potential to enrich the understanding of history.

While dealing with American work songs it is also important to point to the crucial distinction between their earlier and later use. Namely, in the country’s early stages work songs were mainly sung during the work process itself, coordinating it, depicting its immediate instances and drawing workers’ attention from their hard toils. Due to the drastic change of work conditions in the United States during the second half of the 19th century, this musical form gradually became less attached to the physical instances of work, focusing more on its social and cultural aspects. Namely, technological advancements and massive industrialisation changed the very structure of work. Noise produced by new machinery made it impossible to sing while working. The emergence of private enterprises which were now responsible for the majority of country’s workers created new attitude towards work.

Growing exploitation resulted in massive protests, and together with other means to express their dissatisfaction and requests, workers also used music. In this way work songs also became a tool for socio-political protest. Exactly this protest tone would mark their use during the entire 20th century, when their legacy survives due to two important factors. The first one is their recognition as cultural and historical artefacts by ethnomusicologists, and the second one the revitalisation of the musical form by professional musicians.

The period of work songs' cultural recognition, which coincides with the change in their general use, will act as a starting point for this study. What surviving accounts reveal is the complex pattern of their distribution and use rather than one recognizable genre stream. Early regional varieties sung by cowboys, sailors, lumberjacks, African American slaves, miners and railroaders, together with those composed during labor movement and the ones sung by professional musicians in the 20th century will hopefully show that music can lend insight into a vivid and complex society which expressed itself through it.

Classification of Work Songs

The classification of work songs in this thesis is based on the combination of historical, occupational, regional, racial and thematic determinants. However, since there is no definite way to draw clear lines between those categories, they occasionally overlap. The historical overview of work songs is constructed, as Marek Korczynski proposes, around two key axes: "The first is the nature of the labour process and the aural spaces around it. The second is the nature of music production and consumption." (Korczynski 315) In the pre-industrial period music and work were interconnected – work songs were sung during the process of work and referred to its immediate instances. Regional, occupational and racial determinants played the crucial role in their production and distribution. Work songs of cowboys, sailors and lumberjacks can be identified as separate traditions from this period. Due to their immense impact on American culture and specific origins and uses, African American work songs stand as a distinct category.

Work music of the industrial labor period is less marked by regional and racial determinants, and more by thematic and workplace-contextual factors. Unlike the pre-industrial ones, these songs are more or less datable, and in many cases their authorship can be tracked. Primarily characterised by the notion of protest, these songs mainly focus on working conditions and labor politics, which is quite evident from the examples of miners',

railroaders' and textile workers' songs. The strong impact of the labor movement and unionisation can be recognized through this entire period.

About the relationship of work and music in post-industrial period no definite statements can be made. Due to the fact that one can choose his own music at work, Korczynski states that a worker can be regarded as "an autonomous DJ." (327) Furthermore, in the service sector music at workplaces is primarily being directed towards customers and not workers. This implies that there is no music created by workers or directed exclusively towards them anymore. However, what is possible to track in this period are individual representations of labor within the popular music domain.

Recognition of American Work Songs as Cultural Heritage

Academic interest in the United States' folk songs originates from the Harvard Department of English professor Francis James Child. His monumental work *English and Scottish Ballads*, comprised of 305 songs, was published in ten parts between 1882 and 1898. In spite of its misleading title, the ballads presented in this work belonged to a number of different ethnic groups in the United States. The *Child Ballads*, as they have colloquially been called, have been considered as a milestone of American balladry by later scholars. While Child mostly used contemporary newspapers and cheap print in order to collect ballads, new generations of researchers turned to different methods.

Namely, due to the ongoing changes in American society they felt that it was necessary to "catch" folk songs in their original form while it could still be done. Scott B. Spencer describes their work in the following words: "Often called 'songcatchers,' these brave souls ventured in the areas of the continent known to be insular, inaccessible, and wary of outsiders with the tools of the trade: pen and paper, cylinder recorder, personality, and perseverance. They did so to document ways of life thought to be quickly vanishing with the impact of radio and phonograph, printed page and broadcast media." (Spencer 2)

To put it differently, in the period when scholars started to do field recordings, certain folk songs were already in decline due to the influence of changed social conditions and new forms of entertainment. The majority of informants were of a certain age, residing in rural and secluded areas where the modern impact was not that strong. The fact that a great number of songs, especially work ones, was recorded in prison farms completely isolated from the outer world speaks for itself. Moreover, Leadbelly, one of American folk icons, was discovered in

Angola Prison Farm in Louisiana. Researchers like Dorothy Scarborough, Cecil Sharp, Helen Hartness Flanders, Carl Sandburg, Robert Gordon, and John Lomax, the most outstanding folklorist of the time, in their writings often emphasized the contribution of their work to the study of the United States' history.

In the introduction to his 1927 anthology *The American Songbag* Carl Sandburg specially addresses this quality of folk music material: "It is so intensely and vitally American that some who have seen the book have suggested that it should be collateral material with the study of history and geography in schools, colleges, and universities; the pupils or students might sing their answers at examination time." (viii) He was not the only one to suggest the use of folk song for educational purposes. His colleague Robert Winslow Gordon, as Nancy Groce writes, convinced Carl Engel, the chief of the Library of Congress' Music Division, that grassroots traditions should be represented at the national library. (Groce, par. 2) In 1928 the Archive of American Folk-Song in the Library of Congress' Music Division was established, with Gordon as its director. John Lomax came to the Archive in 1933, giving a stronger boost to its work. In 1936 his son Alan Lomax became the Archive's first federally funded staff member, and during his lifetime he collected a great scope of material, both from anonymous informants and folk legends like Leadbelly, Aunt Molly Jackson, Muddy Waters and Woody Guthrie. While recording music, Alan Lomax also insisted on the documentation of materials' social and cultural background. Ed Kahn notices that in Lomax's volumes "many songs are introduced by a transcription of the informant's thoughts about the material." (Kahn 3)

Lomax's assistant Pete Seeger is yet another important name to mention. Being a performer himself, together with already mentioned Guthrie, he contributed to 20th-century folk revival. Thanks to the broadcast media development, Archive's activities did not remain within the exclusive limits of scholarly work. Namely, Alan Lomax succeeded to popularize folk music through radio broadcasts and live shows. Kahn writes that Lomax particularly emphasized the "importance of sound recordings from cylinders on. He saw the impact on a wide range of workers – from the learned societies to the layman. He felt that these recordings both developed an interest in the real thing in folklore for audiences and brought about the popularization of authentic material." (Kahn 6) Due to this phenomenon, the 1930s act as a key decade for cultural shift regarding American folklore. The interest for it was not anymore confined to the domain of institutionalized scholarly work, but it also appeared among wide audiences. Folk music was not regarded as a historical artefact only, but also as a source of inspiration for the expression of contemporary social problems. Both on scholarly and

performative level folk repertoire remained present in the American culture, including a large number of different work songs varieties.

Pre-Industrial Work Songs

Cowboy songs

If Francis James Child has been praised as the first one to recognize folk songs as American cultural heritage of a great value, than John Lomax can be considered the one to actually give life to the entire process of their collecting and archiving. His 1910 anthology *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* marks the turning point in the reception of American balladry. This thematically homogeneous collection entirely focuses on the life in the far West. Its songs reveal the motifs to go to the frontier, fascination with as well as fear of huge open spaces, and the perils of life in the far West. In short, all aspects of a cowboy occupation. The majority of cowboy songs, like most of work songs in general, have a sombre tone. They were often sung to melodies brought from other parts of America, or even the world. Cowboys, like other occupational groups in the States, came from different social and cultural backgrounds, struggling to get a better life for themselves. When we speak about cowboy work songs, one must notice that due to specific working conditions cowboys did not sing in order to coordinate work process. True, there are indications that they used cattle calls, but none of them have actually been saved. Ted Gioia explains the lack of coordinating work songs among cowboys stating that “Men standing at work will sing. Men sitting at work will sing. Even a walking man is likely to carry a tune. But once a man is moving at rapid pace on a horse or a steam engine, or at a machine, the work song begins to lose its organic connection to physical labor (...)” (Gioia 178) Cowboy songs were therefore sung when the work was already done, memorising and depicting their daily life instances.

One of the most famous pieces included in Lomax’s anthology is *The Buffalo Skinners*. It depicts a man who in the summer of 1873 decides to go westwards after being approached by a recruiter called Crego:

"It's me being out of employment," this to Crego I did say,
"This going out on the buffalo range depends upon the pay.
But if you will pay good wages and transportation too,
I think, sir, I will go with you to the range of the buffalo." (J. Lomax, 158)

Driven by economic reasons, the song's protagonist decides to taste his luck on a buffalo range. However, soon enough he realizes that his summer job is everything but promised:

Our meat it was buffalo hump and iron wedge bread,
And all we had to sleep on was a buffalo robe for a bed;
The fleas and gray-backs worked on us, O boys, it was not slow,
I'll tell you there's no worse hell on earth than the range of the buffalo. (158)

Eventually the protagonist together with the other men in his group kills Crego for not paying them off. The song ends with a strong recommendation to avoid the buffalo range: "tell others not to go/ For God's forsaken the buffalo range and the damned old buffalo." (161)

Occupational fatality, a common motif in a number of American work songs, can also be found in cowboy repertoire. *When the Work's All Done This Fall* depicts one such tragic occurrence. Here a protagonist dies while trying to calm the frightened cattle during a sudden night storm: "His saddle horse did stumble and on him did fall./ The poor boy won't see his mother when the work's all done this fall." (J. Lomax, 54) The motif of return to one's mother present in the song indicates the seasonal character of a cowboy job.

The notion of isolation and loneliness was quite a common motif, but not as prevalent as one might get an impression from Hollywood production. Moreover, a significant number of cowboy songs praise the West. What is the greatest legacy of cowboy songs is their symbolism, the presentation of American virtue and the success of westward movement despite all its pitfalls. *Home on the Range*, although not strictly a work song, is therefore worth mentioning in this context. Nowadays the official song of the state of Kansas, it embodies the fascination with the West – its open spaces, possibilities, and untarnished nature:

Oh, give me a home where the Buffalo roam
Where the Deer and the Antelope play;
Where never is heard a discouraging word,
And the sky is not clouded all day. (J. Lomax, 39)

At the moment when Lomax published his anthology, cowboys were already a disappearing occupational group. With gradual urbanisation coming to the West traditional cowboy life would eventually vanish. Therefore these songs hold even greater importance.

Sailor songs

One of sea shanties' historical and cultural values is that they act as a reminder that the earliest history of America – its discovery and initial development – was closely connected to its water surfaces. The Atlantic Ocean, the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal and the Pacific have been America's key traffic communications. Sailor songs, also known as sea shanties, were another declining work song group at the end of the 19th century. Already in 1882 journalist William Alden in his article "Sailor Songs" notices that traditional sailor song is disappearing due to the increasing steam engine use. Namely, he writes that "The "shanty-man", the chorister of the old packet ship – has left no successors. In the place of a rousing 'pulling song,' we now hear the rattle of the steam-winch; and the modern windlass worked by steam, or the modern steam-pump, gives us the clatter of cogwheels and the hiss of steam in place of the wild choruses of other days. Singing and steam are irreconcilable." (Alden 281) His words indicate several things. Ships were the places full of sound and the term "pulling song" points to the use of music in order to coordinate work. He also points to what would become a common destiny of all music used for that purpose – gradual decline due to technological advancements.

Sea shanties had, just like the majority of other songs used for group work coordination, the so called *call-response* format. Leader used to sing the line and the group hauled during choruses. A good example of the coordinating work song is *Reuben Ranzo*, dating from the first half of the 19th century:

LEADER: Oh Ranzo was no sailor.

CHORUS: Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!

LEADER: He was a Boston tailor.

CHORUS: Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!

LEADER: Shanghaied aboard of a whaler.

CHORUS: Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!

LEADER: They tried to make him a sailor.

CHORUS: Ranzo, boys, Ranzo! (Gioia, 121)

Sailors sang it while raising and lowering sails, and the chorus indicated the right moment to pull. This song was just one of many similar ones spread during the period when the merchant marine was an important economic and social factor in the United States. Gioia states that the large number of African American sailors working in the marine probably influenced the songs which were sung, and therefore it is not surprising that they share some characteristics with African American work songs. (Gioia 123)

Somewhat more depictive lyrics of the next example belong to the song originating from The Back Ball Line, which was the first packet trade line to operate regularly between New York and Liverpool. Founded in 1816, it usually took three weeks for it to reach its destination. Since it was of the utmost importance to meet the average travelling time, sailors had to give their best in order to maintain the necessary speed. Seamanship, remuneration, communication with another continent are notions which can be identified in this song:

In the Black Ball

Line I served my time,

Hurrah for the Black Ball Line!

Once there was a Black Ball ship

That fourteen knots an hour could clip.

.

Just take a trip to Liverpool,

To Liverpool, that Yankee school.

The Yankee sailors you'll see there,

With red-top boots and short-cut hair. (J. Lomax & A. Lomax, 367)

Unlike across the ocean, sailing on inland waterways required somewhat different procedures. For instance, Thomas S.Allen's 1905 song *Low Bridge* refers to the time when boats on Eerie canal were driven by mule power, and passengers on the higher levels had to bow down when they were passing bridges on the way. On the Mississippi it was necessary to check the river depth in order to allow ships to navigate. Moreover, the lyrics of a work song depicting that procedure were an inspiration for probably the most famous pen name in American literature – Mark Twain. As Gioia explains, measuring the depth a leadsmen would utter strong cries: “Mark three!....Mark three!....Quarter less three!....Half-twain!....Quarter

twain!...Quarter twain!...Mark twain!” He also clarifies that the term signalled the depth of twelve feet, the clearance needed to allow the passage of a boat. (Gioia 130) With Samuel Clemens drawing on its symbolical meaning, the phrase from this sailor cry became much more – one of the landmarks of the entire American culture.

Lumberjack songs

Waterways are closely connected to yet another occupational group important for the country’s early development. Namely, woodland areas near waterways had to be cleared with the raise of commerce. Logging camps employed a large number of lumberjacks and followed the general westward migration. They were first placed alongside the Atlantic coast, and then spread to the area of the Great Lakes, gradually reaching the Pacific Northwest. Lumberjack work song examples can be tracked in all areas they worked in, and most of them share one peculiar characteristic – unlike other occupations’ work songs, they were quite jolly in their tone. As Gioia claims, “the general tone of gaiety puts the lumber camp songs almost in a class by themselves in the area of work-related music.” (141) The *Logger’s Boast* taken from Ronald Palmer Gray’s 1925 *Songs and Ballads of the Maine Lumberjacks* supports this claim:

When the white frost gilds the valleys,
The cold congeals the flood;
When many men have naught to do
to earn their families bread;
When the swollen streams are frozen,
and the hills are clad with snow,
O! we’ll range the wild woods over,
and a lumbering will go;
.
When you pass through the dense city,
and pity all you meet,
To hear their teeth chattering
as they hurry down the street;
In the red frost-proof flannel
we’re incased from top to toe,

While we range the wild woods over,
and a lumbering we go! (Gray, 18)

The security of lumberjack occupation, as well as its contrast to city life rush, are in this example regarded as the main contributors to lumberjacks' satisfaction. However, even in joyful repertoire of lumberjack songs certain exceptions can be found. An example from Idaho tells the other side of the story. Fifty thousand lumberjacks, which is also the song's title, are depicted living in unsatisfactory hygienic conditions, working heavily and not being properly paid: "They sweat and swear and strain,/ Get nothin' but a cussin'/ From the pushes and the brains." (Cohen, 2008, 587)

The reasons for such strikingly different representation of the same occupation can be found in different origins of these two songs. Namely, the first one comes from mid-19th century Maine, while the latter one was collected in 1917 Idaho. This spatial and temporal distance also leaves possibility for the change both in working conditions and attitude towards lumberjack occupation. Either way, it proves that American work songs are not a homogeneous thematic body, but rather a representation of various phenomena occurring even among the same occupational group.

African American Work Songs

Slave Songs and Hollers

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (DuBois 167)

These DuBois' words on the one hand point to the tremendous cultural value of African American folk music, and on the other to the lack of its recognition as such in the beginning of the 20th century. He sees it as a uniquely American cultural product through which slavery, an institution based on oppression and exploitation, managed to create pure beauty. Moreover, slave song is regarded as the expression of the entire African American culture – their troubles and pains together with their hopes in a better future.

Although the expression of poor life conditions and never-ending pain is a constant motif in African American slave songs, it managed to go on unnoticed for a long time among whites. Due to African musical patterns which were completely different from the European ones, music sung by slaves seemed unintelligible. As Graham and Shane White notice, to whites used to clear melody and narrative lyrics slave songs sounded like a patchwork of completely different elements out of which no meaning could be drawn. True enough, slave songs actually were combinations of complex rhythmic patterns, with screams, moans and grunts following lyrics made out of various motifs. (G. White & S. White 36) They also state that “the creators of a slave work song draw apparently indiscriminately on biblical texts, lines from secular songs, and contemporary references from everyday life.” (37) One must keep in mind that work song lyrics were prone to change and that the varieties known today are the ones which collectors came across, or even arranged themselves. Furthermore, in the case of African American work songs lyrics are not necessarily thematically linked to their practical use. Spirituals were quite often used as work songs while slavery itself was seen as a hard toil, which gives a whole another level of meaning to this work song group.

In spirituals the idea of escape is a recurrent motif. Writing about them, Sterling Brown notices that their lyrics were never dealing with slaves' own reality. “The makers of the spirituals, looking toward heaven, found their triumphs there. But they did not blink their eyes to the troubles here.”(Brown 47) Later on he adds that spirituals “never tell of joy in the ‘good old days.’ The only joy in the spirituals is in dreams of escape.”(47) For an individual born in slavery “good old days” truly is an unknown concept. Torn apart from their communities, and even families, often the only sense of belonging slaves possessed, if it can be named that at all, was the one to their master, supplemented with the one to the overall slave community. Therefore it is no wonder that slaves used religion for identification. More precisely, they particularly used one aspect of Christianity – the Old Testament. Strongly identifying with the old Israelites, they drew parallels between their situations. As Shane and Graham White notice, oppressive Egypt represented the slave system, and the slaves were in expectation of their own Moses-like figure to lead them across the River Jordan (the Mason–Dixon Line),

into the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, or in the American terms, the North. (116) *Go Down Moses*, one of the most famous spirituals, is an embodiment of slaves' identification with biblical figures. Also used as a coded song for Underground Railway, it sent a strong anti-slavery message:

No more in bondage shall they toil
Let my people go
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go! (*The Official Site of the Negro Spirituals*)

The double meaning recognisable here was omnipresent in African American work songs. It was not only the means used for the expression of dissatisfaction, but also the basis for the slaves' internal communication. On the other side, the inability (or reluctance) of whites to detect it, together with the fact that slaves were constantly singing at work and home, lead to the misleading idea that there was no political and social opposition to slavery among them.

Moreover, as White write, "the real or imagined 'happy' singing of supposedly contented slaves confirmed in slaveholders their belief in the inherent rightness of the system, their sense that, contrary to the fervid cries of abolitionists, this was the way the world was meant to be." (55) Proof that this notion could not be further away from the truth can be found in more explicit work song examples. The double meaning made by using biblical motifs was, after all, not the only manner of expression among slaves. Everyday life motifs also found their way to their music repertoire. Dissatisfaction with slaveholders and their attitude towards slave work is in no way hidden in the following example:

We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn;
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de cruss;
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us de huss;
We peal de meat,
Dey gib us de skin,
And dat's de way
Dey takes us in.

We skim de pot,
Dey gib us the liquor,
And say dat's good enough for nigger. (G. White & S. White, 49)

Harsh treatment, as well as the punishment in the case of not meeting one's daily norm of picked cotton, is quite directly depicted in *Five Fingers in the Boll*. The term "hundud" used in the song refers to the minimum amount of cotton to be picked per day, which equalled ninety pounds.

Way down in the bottom – whah the cotton boll's a rotten
Won't get my hundud all day.
Befo'e I'll be beated – befo'e I'll be cheated
I'll leave five finguh in the boll. (Gioia, 47)

Norm Cohen points to the common use of one particular line in many African American work songs and early blues tunes. "I asked my captain for the time of day/ He said he throwed his watch away." (Cohen, 2005, xxxi) In an almost ironic way it reflects the relation between slave and his supervisor. Namely, while the first one yearns for the end of a day, the second one replies that it is not his concern. In another words, supervisors' authority and slave exploitation is not limited even by natural determinants.

While dealing with African American work songs it is important to mention the so called holler. A short cry, usually sung by a single person, expresses a worker's tiredness and yearning for the end of a day. "Oh, wish tomorrow was Sunday", "Oh, wish I could see my Honey", "Oh, wish every day was Sunday" are some of the common ones. Interestingly enough, scholar Ray B. Browne claims that hollers were present among all occupations where workers had to work alone for a long period of time, such as cowboys and farmers. However, the only examples preserved are the ones given to Lomaxes by Leadbelly. (Browne 73)

Chain Gang Songs

Prison farms were by early folklorists considered as great places for gathering folk music material. Due to their isolation folklorists presumed that folk songs were there

preserved in their authentic forms. In a way, prison farms can be regarded as the legal prolongation of American slave system. Namely, following the abolition southern prisons had introduced “a practice of leasing convicts out to private businesses for work in farming, mining, railroad construction, and other demanding occupations, with little regard paid to their health and safety or even to basic needs for shelter, food and clothing.” (Gioia 207) Isolated from the outer world, or more precisely, from the white world since the majority of convicts were blacks, they had no opportunity to be influenced by contemporary events and media. Moreover, chain gang songs remain one of the most recognizable work song types in the entire American folk repertoire.

Southern chain gang songs are performed with a leader singing the stanzas, while others reply. Rhythm indicates when the hoes have to strike the ground, or when the hammer has to ring. *Rosie*, a number collected in the Mississippi state farm depicts the troubles of its typical prisoner: incarceration, woman waiting at home, hard work and despair:

Ain' but de one thing I done wrong,
Ain' but de one thing I done wrong,
Stayed in Mis'sippi jes' a day too long,
.
Come an' git me an' a-take me home,
Dese lifetime devils, dey won' let me 'lone.
Well, I come in here wid a hundred years,
Tree fall on me, I don' bit mo' keer.
Axes a-walkin', chipses a-talkin',
All day long, honey, all day long.
O Rosie, oho,
O Rosie, oh, Lawd, gal. (J. Lomax & A. Lomax, 68)

Even though the body of African American work songs in its great part comprises slave songs, one must keep in mind that the two are not synonymous. It has already been clarified that chain gangs should not be ascribed to slavery. Furthermore, African American influences can be traced, as Kip Lornell argues, in a number of work song subtypes – sailor songs, railroaders', coal miners' and even some cowboy ones. (172) Moreover, the most famous example of railroaders' song, and possibly American work song in general, *John Henry*, belongs to African American tradition. Howard Odum, the author of *Negro Workaday Songs*,

reminds that the genre of blues, which basically evolved from the earlier African American musical traditions including work songs, contains a vast number of songs referring to work. Moreover, he describes the genre as the “more formal embodiment of the Negro’s workaday sorrow songs.” (Odum 6) However, the complexity and rich history of blues goes well beyond the scope of this thesis.

Industrial Work Songs

Railroaders’ Songs

Railroad is definitely one of the most prominent symbols in American folk culture. Its omnipresence is not surprising due to the immense effect it had on the country’s culture, especially in the second half of the 19th century when the largest growth of American railway system took place. It entered into folk culture both for its being one of the largest workplaces in the U.S. and its role in the country’s incorporation.

Railroad work songs have a twofold origin. Archie Green notices that on the one hand they were created out of the direct workers’ experiences, and on the other by numerous professional musicians which had little or nothing to do with the actual work on the railroad. (Green 2) The same phenomenon occurs among miners’ work songs. Moreover, “the music of the mines,” as Gioia states, “more than almost any other type of labor song, was often composed and disseminated by outsiders – by musicians who had never been down a shaft.” (Gioia 190) The widespread use of this practice among these two occupations can be regarded as a consequence of their socio-cultural impact. After all, the two epitomized the struggles of a typical American worker at the turn of the century.

Railroad nevertheless did not enter into the pantheon of American folk song as a thematic motif only, but it also influenced its sound. As folklorist Archie Green notices, “not only did Americans create songs about the construction of the railroad and about the uses to which it could be put, but instrumentalists improvised train imitations in which the performer himself became the clicking, pulsating juggernaut.” (Green 2)

The song *John Henry*, as it has previously been stated, is probably the most famous American work song. It tells the legend of a man fighting the machine, more precisely, the machine used for the process of drilling while constructing railroad tunnels. Howard Odum describes John Henry as an “ideal of the Negro worker”, and a “noble exponent of sturdy

courage and righteous struggle” (Odum 10). In the era when technological improvements jeopardise the value and efficiency of manual work John Henry proves that human will and determination can still outperform the machine:

John Henry started on de right hand,
De steam drill started on de lef’—
“Before I’d let dis steam drill beat me down,
I’d hammer my fool self to death,
Lawd, Lawd, I’d hammer my fool self to death.”
.
.
.
De man dat invented de steam drill,
Thought he was mighty fine.
John Henry drove his fifteen feet,
An’ de steam drill only made nine,
Lawd, Lawd, an’ de steam drill only made nine. (J. Lomax & A. Lomax, 28)

However, one must wonder if John Henry’s death signifies that the technology is bound to eventually take over in spite of the fact that he wins this particular battle. Nevertheless, *John Henry* acts as an idiom of American folk because his destiny recalls the destinies of numerous anonymous people. The line “a man is just a man”, which appears in a number of its varieties, points to all those who just like this folk hero helped to build the United States with their own hands, many losing their lives trying to do so.

While the John Henry legend cannot be definitely traced, the real life origin of one other folk hero is more than evident. James W. Moody characterises Casey Jones as a railroad engineer known for his habit to run on time, and even more for his tragic and heroic death. On April 30, 1900 Jones was the only casualty of a train crash which occurred due to organisational oversight on the line from Memphis to Canton, MS. (Moody 3) Jones managed to slow down the train as much as possible before clashing with another one stalled on the tracks, saving everyone aboard except himself:

Around the curve and down the dump,
Two locomotives was a bound to jump,
Fireman hollered, “Casey, it’s just ahead,
We might jump and make it but we’ll all be dead.”

Around the curve comes a passenger train,
Casey blows the whistle, tells the fireman, “Ring the bell/*
Fireman jumps and says “Good-by,
Casey Jones, You’re bound to die.” (Sandburg, 367)

The tragic event was first sung by Casey’s friend and co-worker Wallace Saunders to later on enter into vaudeville repertoire.¹ Probably the most famous variety of this song was written by Joe Hill, who introduced a notion of union into it. Moreover, his text acts as a parody of Casey Jones, whose tragic end is seen as a consequence of both his ignoring of co-workers’ call for a strike and poor conditions provided by a railroad company.

Roll on Buddy is an example of a railroad hammer song, used by workers for coordination. With the introduction of banjo and fiddle to its performance, it eventually entered hillbilly and bluegrass repertoire. Its lyrics depict the incongruence between the demanding nature of labor and its remuneration, which is determined by a person acting in the name of a company.

I been a-workin’ ten years on the L. & N. Railroad ;
I can’t make enough money for to pay my board.

I went to the boss, I asked him for my time.
Oh, what do you think he told me, I owed him one dime.

Ah, roll on, buddy, and make up your time;
I’m so weak and hungry I can’t make mine. (Green, 5)

Railroad theme can be recognized in one other vaudeville example. *Oh, I’m a Jolly Irishman Winding on the Train* brings a stereotyped portrait of an Irish worker at the end of the 19th century:

Oh, I’m a jolly Irish lad, an’ O’Shaunessy is me name,

¹Vaudeville is a farce with music. In the United States the term connotes a light entertainment popular from the mid-1890s until the early 1930s that consisted of 10 to 15 individual unrelated acts, featuring magicians, acrobats, comedians, trained animals, jugglers, singers, and dancers. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) James J. Geller writes that *Casey Jones* was first lunched in its vaudeville rendition in 1909 in Los Angeles, few years after vaudevillians T. Lawrence Seibert and Edward Newton heard it while passing through New Orleans and agreed that “the song could easily be re-vamped into a comedy number.” (qtd. in N. Cohen, 1973, 79)

I hired out in section three to go winding on the train.

Oh, they sent me out to number ten, 'twas there my

duties did begin,

But where in the divil they all come in, it nearly

wrecked my brain. (Green, 6)

Green writes that “during post-Civil War decades the Irish laborer was a stock figure on the variety and vaudeville stage. No matter whether he was portrayed as an inept or inebriated hodcarrier, teamster, stevedore, or gandy-dancer, he always managed to get through his workday and was sometimes rewarded by an idyllic return to old Erin's shore.” (Green 6) Although a parodic example, this number points to another phenomenon noticeable in American work songs. Non-standard varieties of English are quite a common feature. Brought from other parts of the world, foreign accents and languages entered folk forms like this one. Moreover, folk forms act as a surviving account of the speech in the past, which is particularly noticeable in African American work songs. Furthermore, a vast number of work songs were actually sung in foreign languages, but due to gradual assimilation and initial lack of scholarly interest, they are nowadays mostly untracked or completely lost.

Coal Miners' Songs

The work songs of mine industry belong to a rich repertoire within the realm of both folk and popular music. Moreover, songs such as Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter* and Merle Travis' *Sixteen Tons* and *Dark as a Dungeon* would probably be the first ones to cross one's mind when thinking about music depicting a typical miner's life. These examples are heavily influenced by traditional coal mining songs. They also point to the fact that there are no clear borders between folk and popular music, which is particularly noticeable among genres which directly evolved from earlier musical traditions, such as blues, country and folk revival music. What primarily distinguishes popular music forms from the folk ones is the “movement from traditional material to commercial product and from regional to national markets,” as it is suggested in *American Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*. (349) This shift does not necessarily affect the thematic aspect of songs. Moreover, by clinging to familiar motifs the sense of authenticity is brought to popular music. In country music, for instance, such motifs are the Wild West, rural spaces, railroads and mines. Acting as cultural archetypes,

they bring the sense of connection with genuinely American images and its past, which often results in the identification of the genre with conservative political values and middle-America.

Poor wages, disconnection from one's family, diseases caused by dust, and most of all, constant dangers and tragedies at work are all common motifs in coal miners' songs. In the number *That Little Lump of Coal* the daily presence of existential uncertainty in a typical miner's life is depicted in the following way:

Oh, he eats a hasty breakfast,
Fills up his carbide flask,
Picks up his lamp and bucket
And he's ready for his task.
Says goodbye to wife and baby,
Stops to kiss them at the door;
He doesn't know if he'll see them
In his life anymore. (Korson, 6)

While doing his fieldwork folklorist George Korson came across George Sizemore, a miner from West Virginia, who wrote songs about his own experiences. (Korson 9) One of them is a first-hand testimony of suffering from miners' occupational disease – silicosis or the so called “miners' asthma.” :

Rock dust has almost killed me,
It's turned me out in the rain;
For dust has settled on my lungs,
And causes me constant pain. (Korson, 9)

In the closing lines of the song Sizemore does not forget to emphasise that he is just one among many miners suffering from the disease. Moreover, it is seen as the inevitable destiny of his co-workers:

I'm thinking of poor drill men,
Away down the mine,
Who from eating dust will end up

With a fate just like mine. (9)

Description of particular events has been a widely spread practice among coal miners' songs. Looking back on tragedies had a twofold purpose: to commemorate the dead and to warn about the hidden dangers of miner's occupation. Those dangers were not always caused by poor work conditions only, but also by conflicts occurring between workers and mine companies, sometimes even resulting in police interventions and human casualties. Two such events were described in Woody Guthrie's songs *1913 Massacre* and *Ludlow Massacre*. In the first one Guthrie goes back to Calumet, referring to it as "the copper country." (Guthrie, "1913 Massacre") On 1913 Christmas Eve the so called "Italian Hall disaster" took place. Namely, during the striking miners' and their families' Christmas party, mine company representatives allegedly shouted "Fire!" even though there was none. Jackson states that the outbreak of stampede down the steep stairway followed, eventually killing 73 people most of whom were children. (Jackson 115) *Ludlow Massacre* describes a somewhat similar event taking place in Colorado in 1914, when 13 people died in the conflict between striking miners and the National Guard. (Jackson 117) The cause of their death was the fire sneakily set by the Guard, which Guthrie describes in the following lines:

That very night your soldiers waited,
Until all us miners were asleep,
You snuck around our little tent town,
Soaked our tents with your kerosene. (Guthrie, "Ludlow Massacre")

Probably the most famous song depicting coal mine worker's exploitation is Merle Travis' *Sixteen Tons*. The song was first published on Travis' 1947 album *Folk Songs of The Hills*, which featured both traditional songs and his own ones mainly focusing on the aspects of railroaders' and miners' lives. Jack Doyle states that Travis based *Sixteen Tons* on the experiences of his father who was a miner in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. (Doyle, par.2)

You load sixteen tons and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
Saint Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go,
I owe my soul to the company store. (Travis, "Sixteen Tons")

The ironic expression at the end of this verse refers to the debt Travis' father owed to the company store. Namely, the older Travis regularly used to, as Doyle writes, "go to a coal company window and draw little brass tokens against his account." (Doyle, par. 2) Since they could be spent in the coal company's store only, one's entire life was basically dependent on it.

Gold Rush

The story of American miners would be incomplete without the experiences of those looking out for gold. When the gold was discovered in California and Alaska, it triggered a large migration of miners to the far West and Northwest. An account of migration to California, which was back then easiest to reach travelling by sea, can also be found in work songs, such as the one called *The Fools of '48*:

When Gold was found in '48, the people said t'was gas,
And some were fools enough to thing the lumps were only brass;
But soon they all were satisfied, and started off to mine,
They brought their ships, came round the Horn, in the fall of '49. (Stone, 7)

Alaskan gold rush started after its purchase from Russia in 1867, reaching its peak after the discovery of gold on the beaches of Nome at the end of the century. Contrary to their initial hopes, a great number of gold seekers left Alaska disappointed. One such testimony is left in the song *The Lament of Old Sour Dough*: "We found there broad beaches of ruby/ And mountains with placers and leads, / But all save the sky was pre-empted/ by salt-water sailors and Swedes." (Dunham, 46) Even though the protagonists of this song reached the right place, they came too late. Their experience points to the crucial role of the factor of luck in Gold Rush.

Songs of the Labor Movement

Even though the notion of protest was a characteristic present in earlier work songs, only in the second half of the 19th century did music itself become the means of political protest and social fight. Massive industrialisation wave spreading all over the country brings one of the biggest social and cultural changes in the United States' history. Work is no longer

within the domain of individual or small enterprises only. The rapid growth of large corporations takes place. Furthermore, American working class was heavily influenced by labor movements in France and England. Gioia suggests that using music to express workers' dissatisfaction and demands was one of the movement's features taken from the European models. (Gioia 232) Namely, Archie Green writes that the chants of William Morris, gathered in pamphlet *Chants for Socialists* originally published in London in 1885, quickly appeared in the United States in Knights of Labor's and other radical organisations' publications. He also adds that the pamphlet called *Socialist Song* was published in Chicago in 1900 by Charles Kerr. (Green, 1991, 93) The potential of music to spread the popularity of the labor movement was therefore recognised early on by its leading organisations. Furthermore, music was used in order to educate workers about the movement's goals and to spread solidarity. In order to achieve the greatest possible circulation of new work songs new lyrics were written to familiar tunes. As Therese M. Volk writes, "their melodies were, in nearly all cases, those of the folk or popular songs of the day or were hymn tunes." (Volk 38) Hymn tunes were particularly popular because they evoked the promise in a better future, a notion which was not that common among earlier work songs.

What is also new in labor movement songs is the strong feeling of class belonging being expressed. Work class and employers are presented as if they had nothing in common, and the existing political system is regarded as the mechanism which keeps that division clear. The use of such agenda in work songs was most prominent in the case of the Industrial Workers of the World, better known as "Wobblies." Founded in Chicago in 1905, they soon recognized the power of songs for the mobilization of their sympathisers. In 1909 they published the collection of 38 songs, the so called *Little Red Songbook*. Its purpose is stated on its cover right below the title – "to fan the flames of discontent." (IWW, cover) One of its outstanding numbers, *There's a Power in the Union*, sung to the melody of a hymn *There's a Power in the Blood* (Volk 40), emphasizes the importance of workers' organizing into unions. Written by Joe Hill, a songwriting icon of the labor movement, and first appearing in 1913 edition, its lyrics are directed to an average American worker:

If you like sluggers to beat off your head,
Then don't organize, all unions despise.
If you want nothing before you are dead,
Shake hands with your boss and look Wise.

There is pow'r there is pow'r in a band of workingmen,
When they stand hand in hand,
That's a pow'r, that's a pow'r
That must rule in every land –
One Industrial Union Grand. (IWW, 22)

What is somewhat evident in the chorus of this song is the international drive of the IWW. Since they were quite radical, their final goal was not to increase wages and working conditions, but to completely abolish the wage system and capitalism in general. In the matter of fact, the organisation's revolutionary rhetoric poses the question whether its songs can also be described as revolutionary and anarchistic. This problem will only deepen during the 20th century with the writing of new work music.

Women and Work Songs

Among the repertoire of protest and labor movement work songs a large collection of those bringing in the notion of working women can be tracked. Most certainly women sang about their occupations as much as men did, however, their work songs in general have not been that well documented. If one recalls that the majority of work songs were collected in places such as prisons, railroads, and mines, all belonging to exclusively male pre-occupations, this does not come as a surprise. Furthermore, since women were mostly confined to domestic environments, it is reasonable to assume that their lyrics were mainly focused on domesticity. Being confined to household surrounding also means that the spreading potential of their work songs was limited compared to the ones made and sung at larger and more dynamic work environments. However, the exceptions to this general rule do exist and they can primarily be found among textile workers. Even though their songs can be traced already from the late 18th and early 19th century, their real boom happened during the labor movement at the turn of the 19th to 20th century. In fact, John Greenway states that “with the single exception of the miners, no organized labor group has produced more songs of social and economic protest than the textile workers.” (121) Due to somewhat earlier modernization of textile industry compared to the other ones, dissatisfaction with employers can be tracked in these songs as early as the first half of the 19th century. *Lowell Factory Girl*, which most probably dates back to the 1830s, “expresses the feeling,” as Greenway writes,

“which predominated in the mills during the early decades of the nineteenth century”
(Greenway 122) :

No more I'll draw these threads
All through the harness' eye;
No more I'll say to my overseer
Oh! dear me, I shall die!
.
Then since they've cut my wages down
To nine shillings per week,
If I cannot better wages make,
Some other place I'll seek. (Greenway, 123)

For its representation of female workers' exploitation and discrimination this number bears an important testimony to the American labor history. Namely, their shifts lasted between eleven and fourteen hours and their wages were smaller than in industries employing men only. Ella May Wiggins, a prominent union leader and songwriter who was killed during the Loray Mill strike in North Carolina in 1929, wrote a song describing the problematics of matching hard factory work with the demands of motherhood: “While we slave for the bosses,/ Our children scream and cry” (Huber, 100). Furthermore, the hard work which parts them from their children is not paid enough to take a proper care of their families:

How it grieves the heart of a mother,
You every one must know,
But we can't buy for our children,
Our wages are too low. (Huber, 100)

Wiggins sees the only way out in the union activism, and calls other fellow workers and mothers to join it – not only for their own sake, but for the sake of their children too. What is indicative in Wiggin's case is her ability to put personal experiences into a song, and in that manner call upon her fellow workers to solidarize with her. Her life made her a hero, and her tragic death the martyr of the working class. Her persona is relevant even nowadays, as Patrick Huber discusses, stating that “industrial workplace issues such as affordable childcare, union representation and chronically low wages continue to plague southern working

mothers.” (Huber 106) Due to a relatively slow change concerning women’s work rights, identification with *Mill Mother’s Lament* therefore still has not ceased.

The Music of Work in the First Half of the 20th Century

During the 20th century work song encounters an ambivalent destiny. While its traditional form dies out due to both changed work conditions and the broadcast media emergence, newly composed music of work mostly leans on the tradition started by labor movement. Furthermore, the notion of work also enters the realm of popular music, sometimes making it particularly hard to draw clear lines between folk and popular music forms. Traditional and mass consciousness constantly merge together. What is truly new is the fact that the 20th century work songs are in most cases created by professional musicians rather than actual workers. Working class is now in a position of a target audience. The music was used as a tool for political enlightenment of the working class, especially in the first half of the century.

Composer’s Collective and Woody Guthrie

Recognition of work song as a valuable American cultural asset by folklorists like Lomax and Sandburg, alongside with union songs which were still very vivid in the first half of the 20th century, inspired new generations of musicians to compose music which would in its character be genuinely American. William G. Roy writes that the first group of professional musicians to take over the task of composing music for the working class exclusively was the Composers Collective founded in 1932. (Roy 90) Notable members of the group were Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell and Charles Seeger. However, due to musical complexity their compositions did not gain wide popularity. Charles Seeger himself explains it in the following words: “There was very little thought in the Collective of people singing our songs. The emphasis was on writing things for them to listen to ... We didn’t have much they could sing themselves, except songs with piano accompaniment, and there were lots of those.” (qtd. in Dunaway, 1980, 163) One of such compositions is the song attacking Henry Ford:

Henry Ford and a hundred thousand men
Bargained up a hill and down again.

Henry got the money and the men did the work. (Dunaway, 163)

Once again, the emphasis is on the discrepancy between the upper and the working class. In spite of their musicality (or because of it), Collective did not manage to truly speak for the working class. What was necessary for the success of any such organisation was the Joe Hill alike figure, who could in simple and understandable terms speak about the problems of a working man. Such figure appeared in the persona of Woody Guthrie. As Gioia notices, Guthrie was “neither a singing worker nor a union organizer,” but he deserves mention “if only for his symbolic role as the musical spokesman for a large proportion of the American working class during the middle decades of the twentieth century.” (Gioia 239) Due to his travels and constant movements, Guthrie managed to get acquainted with all types of American working people and transcribe their experiences into a song. One of Guthrie’s earliest songs refers to the troubles encountered by his fellow “Okies” and other Dust Bowl migrants to California. In the ballad *DoReMi* he warns them about conditions in California, which due to the large influx of people has no more jobs to offer: “Now, the police at the port of entry say,/ “You’re number fourteen thousand for today.” (Guthrie, “DoReMi”) During his time in California, Guthrie gets familiarized with political programs of the Socialist movement and the Communist Party. Even though he never officially joined the latter, its agenda was often used in his songs. His belief in the power of the union is present in a great deal of his music. In *Union Maid*, released on Almanac Singers’ 1941 album, Guthrie emphasizes the importance of solidarity and organizing:

This union maid was wise to the tricks of company spies,
She couldn’t be fooled by a company stool, she’d always organize the guys.
She always got her way when she struck for better pay. (Almanac Singers, “Union Maid”)

A striking feature of Guthrie’s songwriting is the choice of motifs used in songs. Unions, CIO, communism, and biblical stories are intertwined. Author Mark Allan Jackson notices that Guthrie “has overlapped Christianity, unionism, and communism with little real differentiation being made between them. In his estimation, each becomes a force for justice and equality.” (Jackson 218) While listening to Guthrie’s songs rich with Cristian motifs, it is not hard to notice that his vision of Christianity differs from the one proposed by the American rich. While they see the contemporary capitalist system as God’s will, Guthrie

considers them as the ones betraying the principles of religion, which is visible in the song entitled *Jesus Christ*:

When Jesus come to town, all the working folks around
Believed what he did say
But the bankers and the preachers, they nailed Him on the cross,
And they laid Jesus Christ in his grave. (Guthrie, "Jesus Christ")

According to Guthrie, true Christianity does not go hand in hand with large material fortune, especially not with the one gained by the hardships of the poor. The brotherhood of man is therefore regarded not only as the way to fight class differences, but also as a life principle in accordance with religion. Union is seen as the means of accomplishing it. Jackson states that Guthrie's writing of union-oriented songs further intensified after a visit he paid together with Pete Seeger in 1940 to the Highlander Folk School, an institution in Tennessee which enhanced rural union leaders to use songs in order to unite workers. (Jackson 223)

Almanac Singers

At about the same time, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie got together with Lee Hays and Millard Lampell, also folk songwriters, and formed the group known as Almanac Singers. It was Alan Lomax who initially connected them, as he desired a group which would perform folk and topical songs. Their target audience were unions, and most of their performances were held for them and other progressive organisations. Roy writes that the Almanacs did not develop the idea of pursuing mass audiences since they felt that the mass media was controlled by capitalists. (Roy 121) Of course, that does not mean that the Almanacs completely avoided popular media, but they were simply not their primary means of reaching their audience. Roy in this act recognizes the fight against capitalism both through the content and the form of the music. What the group wanted was to "create working-class culture and to facilitate those workers' development of their own culture." (Roy 127)

It is not hard to see that the group had a strong political agenda. By enhancing workers' own culture and using it as a tool for their education and social fight, they wanted them to achieve a greater level of independency from the existing political system. Moreover, their music, just like the one of the labor movements from the turn of the century, emphasized that there is no such thing as supporting both unions and rich capitalists. Their goals were seen as

mutually exclusive. In *Which Side Are You On*, featured on their 1941 album *Talking Union* and written a decade earlier by Florence Reese, these opposing positions are particularly emphasized:

Oh, workers can you stand it?

Oh, tell me how you can

Will you be a lousy scab

Or will you be a man? (Almanac Singers, "Which Side Are You On")

Beside songs directed to working-class population, Almanacs were also notable for their anti-war songs which criticised the president and the U.S.' intervention in WWII. However, it also caused the band's disintegration in 1942/43, for it gained them negative publicity and the status of a national enemy. Interestingly enough, once that he accepted the U.S.' war involvement, Guthrie wrote and performed songs about union forces defeating the Nazis. *All You Fascists* opposes the fascism and praises organised men's unity. Moreover, lines "I'm going into this battle/ And take my union gun/ We'll end this world of slavery" (Guthrie, "All You Fascists") indicate that his vision of fascists was quite similar to his vision of greedy capitalists – each of them subordinating and using people for their own economic prospect.

People's Songs and The Weavers

After WW2, the tradition of left-wing music was continued by People's Songs. Gioia writes that this organisation was established on December 31st, 1945 with the goal of creating politically progressive music, "focusing on workers, labor conditions, civil liberties and peace." (Gioia 241) The project was started by Pete Seeger, and it was active from 1946 to 1949. During this period the organisation, as Roy writes, "by publishing books and magazines, sponsoring events, creating forums for interaction, and linking to other producers and distributors of left-wing music, ... gave folk music a greater presence both in the media and in the movement at large." (Roy 129) He adds that the success of organisation was the result of two things: although it was centred in New York, it had branches all across the country, and it was not as radical as the Almanacs were. (133) Once again, Alan Lomax was the person who connected them all, believing that they could continue the tradition of truly American music.

What eventually destroyed the organisation was its support of Henry Wallace's presidential campaign. It did not only mean the loss of their finances, but also of the unions which were their primary audience. Namely, Roy writes that People's Songs by supporting the campaign also signalled their affiance to intellectual, radical middle class adherents more than to unions, which were in that moment actually retreating from the communistic influence. (146)

After organisation's dissolution, a number of its previous members and associates became targets of McCarthyism, labelling them as communist and anti-American. This poses the question of the degree in which those musicians and their groups were actually influenced by the Communist Party. Even though most of their members were sympathizers and even members of the CPUSA, the party had no real interest in producing music for political purposes. Richard Reuss writes that "although at times the party contributed to, even directly supported, various front organizations of writers, playwrights, musicians, and other cultural artists, it refused to subsidize folk performers or associated organizations." (Reuss 99) In spite of that, belonging or showing sympathies for Communist party was enough to put someone's name on the entertainment industry blacklist and in that manner damage one's career. Ronald D. Cohen states that Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, Aaron Copland and Alan Lomax found themselves singled out. (R. Cohen 293) The effects of blacklisting were strong in all cases, with Lomax leaving the United States and Seeger losing media space and label contracts for his new group, the Weavers. In spite of this, the influence of Seeger's group would only grow.

The Weavers marked the start of a commercial folk boom and opened the space for the protest singers of the 1960s relying on folk tradition, such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary. The group managed to popularize the old work song *Pay Me My Money Down*, while Seeger's *If I Had a Hammer* became a hymn of the generation. With its combination of motifs of work, music and solidarity, it expresses the hope in a better future:

If I had a hammer,
I'd hammer in the morning
I'd hammer in the evening,
All over this land.
.
I'd ring out danger,
I'd ring out a warning
I'd ring out love between my brothers and my sisters,

All over this land.

.

It's the hammer of Justice,

It's the bell of Freedom,

It's the song about Love between my brothers and my sisters,

All over this land. (Seeger, "If I Had a Hammer")

If I Had a Hammer uses the motifs from typical work songs in order to express socio-political protest. This piece of music is not directed towards unions but rather towards the entire American population. Gradual decline in the usage of references to actual work and orientation towards current social problems would lead to the establishment of the 1960s folk movement, whose songs mostly focus on the slowness of the social change.

Work Music in the Post-Industrial Period

Fragmentation and decentralisation of music production and consumption in the post-industrial period makes it difficult to state any definite relations between music and work. Technological advancements have enabled workers to choose their own music at work which led to the complete individualisation of this social segment. What is completely absent is, as Korczynski argues, "the role of music in the ordering of social interaction at work." (328) In terms of a distinct social group workers are not regarded as a target audience anymore. Moreover, in the service sector music at workplaces is primarily being directed towards customers, and not workers. Gioia notices that "the very acts of buying and selling have embraced music with a persistence and vigor that no force – technological, cultural, or political – has been able to eradicate or even diminish. (244) As a result, musical references to the notion of work in this period must primarily be looked for in popular music, which is a sellable commodity itself.

However, an exception to this trend can be found in the songs of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Taking place between 1965 and 1975, the movement, as Neil Foley writes, "brought national attention to one of the nation's least understood and fastest-growing populations." (Foley 148) Namely, throughout the Southwest and California Mexican-American population fought against segregation and discrimination. Protests against unequal educational rights, low wages and poor working conditions, primarily in agricultural business,

were massively staged. Manuel Gonzales states that the key organisation representing Mexican-American workers' perspective was the United Farm Workers led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. Moreover, he considers the organisation's 1965 strike launched in California's San Joaquin Valley as "the most ambitious unionisation attempt to date." (Gonzales 199) Among other means of expression, the Chicano Movement used music in order to state its goals. This music was defined by two constants, as Stevan Azcona argues: the first one being an almost exclusive use of Spanish language lyrics and the second "the Chicano-based broad definition of the protest song, defined along two vectors: a predominance of Mexican song genres and, more importantly, politically explicit lyrics." (Azcona 129) Deliberately using Spanish language and Mexican music genres, the movement aimed to raise Mexican Americans' collective consciousness within the U.S.' political and socio-cultural context. The introduction of politically explicit lyrics to folk music is a feature inherited from the earlier labor organisations, such as the IWW. The adaptation and appropriation of already existing songs was used on a large scale. Interestingly enough, beside traditional Mexican songs, a number of those originating from the American labor movement were also adapted. In this manner the IWW standards *Solidarity Forever* and *We Shall Not Be Moved* became *Solidaridad pa' siempre* and *No nos moverán*, while the Civil Rights Movement's anthem *We Shall Overcome* was translated into *Nosotros venceremos*. (Azcona 95) Even though such translations were not necessarily literal, they mirrored the spirit of their role models' social and political fight.

It has already been mentioned that the motif of work and work song itself in the 20th century finds its way to popular music genres, such as country, pop and rock. Even in its somewhat altered musical form, work song still acts as an expression of the American way of life. This is particularly true for the music of Johnny Cash and Bruce Springsteen. Even though they were not the only ones to sing about work in the second half of the 20th century, the predominance of motifs connected to it in their overall repertoires makes them worth of mention in this context. Each one in his own way gave a new life to the idiom of work song.

According to Armstrong and Greider, Cash mentions jobs in 115 out of 684 songs he recorded. (Armstrong & Greider, 216) His repertoire includes a large number of traditional work songs, such as already mentioned *Casey Jones* and *John Henry*, and a significant number of newly written ones, mostly dealing with the problems of industrial workers. It is also important to notice that prison songs, which are the most dominant ones in his oeuvre, in this case cannot always be identified as work songs too, since they deal with social injustice and prison conditions rather than actual work.

Cash's work songs depict numerous occupations – from cowboys, miners and farmers to food servers, drivers and factory workers. The necessity of occupational change is a recurring motif in his songs, resulting in a changed personal and cultural identification. In a spoken introduction he added to *Detroit City*, a song written by Dill and Tillis, Cash specifies the cause of migration from the South: “Well the cotton land played out every year/ And we went north to the big car factory up north” and adds the notion of “1951 car models” (Cash, “Detroit City”) to make the protagonist more familiar to the audience. Industrial labor is in this example seen as an American present, opposed to agricultural labor dominating in the past.

Speaking of industrial labor in the second half of the 20th century, it is important to point to the songs referring to the automobile industry. In *Wednesday Car*, Cash holds workers' motivation as an important factor for the product's quality, and therefore advises customers to buy cars made on Wednesdays. *One Piece at a Time*, written by Wayne Kemp, problematizes the discrepancy between the value of labor and its commercial product. Namely, it is a story of an automobile industry worker who cannot afford a Cadillac, regarded as an American status symbol, and therefore decides to steal parts over a long span of time in order to make himself one: “I've never considered myself a thief,/ But GM wouldn't miss just one little piece,/ Especially if I strung it out over several years.” (Cash, “One Piece at a Time”) He ends up with the 1949 to 1970 automobile model. What is important to point out when speaking of Johnny Cash is the fact that even though he mostly sung about middle class people, he never used the rhetoric of class solidarity. As Armstrong and Greider put it, he “stayed within the broad boundaries of country.” (227) Understanding that his patriotism and concern for inequality may seem contradictory, he refrained from expressing a clear political stand in his songs and used it as the means of identification with his audience. Primarily regional and occupational framework within the country music, complemented with its tendency to use legends and stories from the past, enabled such apolitical expression of contemporary social concerns. By doing so, even though he based his expression on folk tradition, Cash did not directly rely on the work of Guthrie and Seeger. Their influences can rather be recognised in the repertoire of another popular music hero – Bruce Springsteen.

In Springsteen's music the notion of work is heavily affected by contemporary problems. It is intertwined with social order and growing personal isolationism. Namely, Springsteen's idea of work is hereditary, that is preconceived as belonging to a social class. For instance, in *The River* the protagonist starts off his story by telling that “they bring you up to do like your daddy done” (Springsteen, “The River”), and in *Adam Raised a Cain* he states

that “You’re born into this life paying for the sins of somebody else’s past/ Well Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain.” (Springsteen, “Adam”) Beside the impossibility of upward social movement, one other notion is quite present in his repertoire – the problematics of post-employment.

While work songs mostly used to refer to hardships of work and low wages, now they focus on the lack of work itself. More than anybody else, Bruce Springsteen gave the voice to the generation who had to deal with it. *Johnny 99*, the story of an autoworker who after the loss of his job turns to crime, is partly based on the real life event. Namely, in the early 1980s more than 250,000 autoworkers lost their jobs, and Garman states that the shutdown of the plant in Mahwah, New Jersey, was the one which inspired this song. (84): “Well they closed down the auto plant in Mahwah late that month/ Ralph went out lookin’ for a job but he couldn’t find none.”(Springsteen, “Johnny 99”) Unemployment is seen as the cause of the protagonist’s personality disintegration. Combined with financial problems and state repressive mechanisms, it acts as a prevailing factor of an individual’s destiny, which can be recognized in Johnny’s appeal to the court during his trial:

Now judge I had debts no honest man could pay
The bank was holdin’ my mortgage and they were gonna take my house away
Now I ain’t sayin’ that makes me an innocent man
But it was more ‘n all this that put that gun in my hand. (Springsteen, “Johnny 99”)

In spite of the fact that the song is based on a specific work environment, it represents much more than that. As Garman notices, “it is a representational history of class relation in the United States which illustrates the cost of these relations in human terms.” (Garman 88) By focusing on individual destinies, Springsteen points to the actual consequences of the U.S. government’s policy in the early 1980s, primarily concerning the problems of de-industrialisation and high unemployment rates. As Edward U. Murphy notices, Springsteen by “asking hard questions, offers not answers per se, but human stories that reveal the contradictions between American ideals and American reality.” (Murphy 181) His music is contemporaneous with socio-economic problems which would only later become a topic of history and sociology. In this manner Springsteen bears more resemblance to Guthrie than to his predecessors from the genre of rock. In different time periods both musicians did the same – expressed the United States’ problems in the language of its own people, focusing on the never-ending discrepancy between reality and the promised ideal.

Conclusion

Work song as a product of American folklore is much more than a musical form. It reveals the structure of the society behind it, more precisely the intertwined relations between work, socio-economic status and cultural identity. Being created and based on the actual experiences of American people rather than on political and ideological agendas, work song acts as a rich representation of the American way of life. In all its differences and similarities it points to spatial and temporal determinants of the nation's development from the perspective of common people. Topically grounded on an everyday aspect of life, it brings to surface some often forgotten aspects of history. Work song goes into the domain of both personal and group struggles of economic, social and cultural nature.

With its various purposes – memorising and commemorating events, warning of dangers, coordinating work, protesting, giving hope in a better future and occasionally finding pride in what one does for living – it reveals not only the attitude towards work, but also towards life in general. Even though work songs more often than not focus on work's negative aspects, and therefore might seem overtly subjective and sombre, they still are a trustworthy testimony to the attitude to work of their time. As a folklore form, they offer quite a wide perspective on society. Therefore it is no surprise that folklorists recognised them, together with other folk forms, as truly American cultural products.

Alan Lomax sees the cause of staying power of folklore in its capacity to reject authoritarian notions and to act as a simultaneous expression of individual creativity and community sentiment. (A. Lomax 93) Work songs truly prove themselves in this regard. On the one hand they tell the complex story of the nation's geographical and social incorporation through the perspective of sailors, lumberjacks, cowboys, slaves, miners, railroaders and industrial workers, and on the other they point to the things that went wrong. Social insensitivity and injustice, poor work conditions, low wages, the lack of worker's rights and growing class differences are just some of them. This voice addressing working men's problems continues to be strong even after it declines in the folk use and finds new life within the popular music domain. After all, work song has among other things always been a form of entertainment too – an entertainment whose content bears history in its authentic form. In order to recognise it, one must truly listen. Sometimes there really is something behind the music.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that American work songs can be used as valuable sources of information contributing to the study and interpretation of American labor history. Created from and based on the actual experiences of American working people rather than on political and ideological agendas, work songs can be regarded as media providing insight into the neglected parts of the United States' history. They are both political and cultural artefacts, reflecting differences between various groups they were sung in and changes taking place in the overall American society through time. This quality brought them into the focus of generations of American ethnomusicologists, with John and Alan Lomax being the most prominent ones. Work songs with their various purposes – memorising and commemorating events, warning of dangers, coordinating work, protesting, giving hope in a better future and occasionally finding pride in what one does for living – reveal not only the attitude towards work, but also towards life in general. On the one hand they tell the complex story of the nation's geographical and social incorporation through the perspective of sailors, lumberjacks, cowboys, slaves, miners, railroaders and industrial workers, and on the other they point to the things that went wrong. Social insensitivity, poor work conditions, low wages, the lack of worker's rights and growing class differences are just some of them. In this thesis work songs are classified in categories based on the combination of historical, occupational, regional, racial and thematic determinants. While pre-industrial work songs show a strong connection to the process of work itself, coordinating it and depicting its immediate instances, work songs of industrial period focus more on the attitude towards work and work conditions, often acting as a tool for socio-political protest. A distinct position in American music history is taken by African American work songs, which provide a specific account of slavery – relations between slaves and their masters, yearnings for freedom and cultural identification with biblical figures. During the 20th century work songs gradually shift from the domain of folk to the popular music one. Typical workers' concerns are voiced by professional musicians like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen, who particularly focuses on the problem of post-employment. Although work songs in post-industrial age can be regarded as commercial products themselves, their message remains strong. After all, work songs have always among other things been a form of entertainment too – an entertainment whose content bears history in its authentic form.

Key words: work songs, American folklore, labor history, popular music