

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 70 | Number 2 (Spring 2011)

pps. 186-187

Work and Sing: A History of Occupational and Labor Union Songs in the United States

Brian Roberts

University of Northern Iowa

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, Brian. "Work and Sing: A History of Occupational and Labor Union Songs in the
United States." *The Annals of Iowa* 70 (2011), 186-187.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1545>

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Work and Sing: A History of Occupational and Labor Union Songs in the United States, by Ronald D. Cohen. Crockett, CA: Carquinez Press; distributed by the University of Illinois Press, 2010. ix, 190 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Brian Roberts is associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (2000).

There was a moment when common workers were among the most visible of Americans. During that moment university-based folklorists pointed microphones at workers, told them to sing, and workers complied, giving collectors a seemingly endless list of shanties, field hollers, and lumberjack songs. No parade was complete without its marching union locals; some towns even had union choirs. Labor troubadours traveled the land, often singing at colleges, sometimes leading their striking brothers and sisters in sing-alongs of “Solidarity Forever” and “Which Side Are You On.” The moment did not last. In this book, Ronald Cohen focuses on the rise of what he calls a “singing labor movement.” His approach, along with his evidence, suggests why the movement and era passed so quickly.

Cohen’s approach is primarily encyclopedic; the book is not so much a narrative as it is a chronological ordering of songs, performers, and collections. In his first two chapters he attempts to trace the nineteenth-century origins of labor songs. The “history” here is largely a summation of the activities of folklore collectors. Thus the chapters round up the usual subjects: sailor and lumberjack shanties, coal miner ballads, and African American work songs. The only surprise is a section on “cowboy songs.” The topic raises an unanswered question: did cowboys really sing “Get Along Little Dogies” to their bovine charges?

Cohen is more in his comfort zone when writing about twentieth-century folk music and union songs. After a quick run-through of some early examples — particularly the songs of the Industrial Workers of the World — he devotes much of the rest of the book to the period from the New Deal to the decade after World War II. For Cohen this is the golden age of labor song. It was a time of great performers: from Woody Guthrie to Pete Seeger and Joe Glazer. It was a time when pro-labor institutions flourished, from the Highlander Folk School to the Pacific Coast School for Workers. Finally, it was a time when workers and intellectuals shared a common cause, when members of the United Auto Workers and the Iowa Farmers Union worked with folklorists to introduce Americans to songs and images of worker pride and dignity.

Cohen provides a couple of reasons the moment passed. One was a "right-wing backlash." Another reason may be suggested by the book's approach. There are few, if any, blue-collar workers in *Work and Sing*. The book does mention a number of performers. Yet Cohen's main focus is on music collectors. The main historical figure of the book is not Joe Hill or Woody Guthrie but the collector Alan Lomax. Certainly Lomax is important: he made countless field recordings, organized concerts, and even put together several "hootenannies" in which he sang on stage. But while he spoke for common workers he cannot be called one himself. Like other experts, he could be accused of romanticizing his subjects, of celebrating their simplicity to the point of patronizing or even infantilizing them. In 1946 the label Young People's Records began releasing work songs as children's songs, as charmingly simple expressions such as "Erie Canal," "John Henry," and "Get Along Little Dogies." Finally, Cohen's material suggests that by the 1960s romantic visions and a tendency to infantilize worker expressions had changed the context of labor-based folksongs. By 1965, as Pete Seeger would complain, the song "Union Maid" was "far better known on college campuses" than it was "in the average union hall" (147). Cohen's golden moment ended, in other words, when the worker of folk song ceased to be connected to the actual American laborer.

Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories: Our Veterans Remember, compiled by Sarah A. Larsen and Jennifer M. Miller. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010. xix, 357 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendixes, index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Derek N. Buckaloo is associate professor of history at Coe College. His dissertation (Emory University, 2002) was "Fighting the Last War: The 'Vietnam Syndrome' as a Constraint on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1975–1991."

Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories is an oral history in which 40 Vietnam veterans from the Badger State tell their tales of going to, surviving, and coming back from the American War in Vietnam. Rich with photographs and other illustrations and carefully edited into chapters on a variety of subjects, the work shows both the diversity of soldiers' reactions to the Vietnam War and the fundamental reality that wars, right or wrong, are devastating human experiences.

Chapter subjects in the book range from well-known ones, such as the Tet Offensive and Hamburger Hill, to lesser-known parts of the war, such as river naval duty and the "secret war" in Laos. Arranged in a basically chronological fashion and expertly introduced by Jennifer