REVIEW ESSAY

The Big Red Song Book

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Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno (eds.), *The Big Red Songbook: 250-plus IWW Songs!* Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 2007.

In *The Big Red Songbook*, Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno have thoughtfully documented twentieth-century Wobbly song in all of its foot-stompin' glory. In 1909, the Spokane branch of the International Workers of the World compiled twenty-four songs into a little red book called *Songs of the Industrial Workers of the World*, with the intention "to destroy the old myths that have enslaved us for so long. We will have songs that hold up flaunted wealth and threadbare morality to scorn, songs that lampoon our masters." *The Big Red Songbook* documents all the songs of revolt from 1909–1973 (including many that were not included in the first go-round), provides extensive bibliographies and references, a discography, and even a glossary for decoding the "vernacular surrealisms" of hobo-slang and radical industrial unionism.

Some trailblazing and extensive documentary histories occasionally steer readers through a historical narrative with an authoritative voice asserting agenda and ownership over previously undocumented treasures, such as the songs and ephemera of the IWW. Thus, alienating methodological strategies of this nature betray the profoundly collaborative work of unearthing silenced voices within history. But, from the get-go, *The Big Red Songbook* sets itself light years apart from such dominant trends in historical writing, and readers can sense the editors' commitment to doing everything in their power to unravel the boss-man tactics of "state-sanctioned" history.

Specifically, *Songbook* challenges Scissorbill-centric historical trends with an engaging dialogue forged through the adroit editorial narrative of Green, Roediger, Rosemont, and Salerno as they reconstruct a forgotten history. Throughout the book, readers are consistently called upon to help with piecing together the topography of a big radical puzzle by sharing pieces of information and contributing distinctive voices to the milieu.

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In trying to unearth an erased legacy of embodied radicalism, how do historians read a radical trajectory as pure Wobbly? As Archie Green wonders, "Who decides the contours of Wobbly belief?" Furthermore, what constitutes evidence amidst an oppositional historiography? Because of the US government raids of the IWW offices in 1918–1919, documentation of the editorial process behind the original songbooks is long gone. Therefore, *The Big Red Songbook* is comprised largely of oral histories and salvaged ephemera.

The folks involved in the production of the *Songbook* skillfully address and analyze the gaps in representation and basic biography, while simultaneously combating the nominal representation that resulted directly from the government raids. Moreover, in understanding that women, African-Americans, and non-English speaking songwriters are few and far between in the original songbooks, the *Songbook* editors fully account for these absences and, most importantly, consistently encourage historians, folklorists, and radical enthusiasts to investigate further: to listen closely for the reverb of the song and keep an eye open for radical voices embodied.

Once readers are immersed in the actual song section of the book, each songwriter—whether fellow worker syndicalists, two-carding hobo-poets, or accordion-touting feminist organizers—is situated within a larger socio-political context with IWW activism at the core. Eugene Barnett, Dick Brazier, Ralph Chaplin, Covington Hall, Joe Hill, and T-Bone Slim believed in the emancipatory power of their songs and were prolific in their contributions to the songbooks over the years. Of course, this is just a small selection of luminaries amidst an extensive list of Wobbly contributors fully represented in the book.

The *Songbook* brings to light many of the women Wobblies who were minimally represented and seeks help, once again, from readers in telling the stories of so many women activists pushed to the sidelines. Mary Marcy, Laura Payne Emerson, Jane Street, Vera Moller, Laura Tanne, and Matilda Robbins "took part in the class war as organizers, strategists, soapboxers, and all-around hell-raisers." Considering each woman's commitment to the IWW, Franklin Rosemont questions, "How then did it happen that so few of the songs published in the songbook between 1909 and 1970 were by women?" Similarly, we find only one song written by an African-American, "A Wobbly Good and True," by Paul Walker. The IWW's open-door policy for women, workers of color, and non-English speaking im/migrant communities apparently opened only so far. For each muffled Wobbly's voice, the *Songbook* serves as a Big Red megaphone. When removed from the vacuum of a selective history of American radicalism, each voice resounds.

Good songs that hit close to home get stuck in your head, and according to Green, "IWW songs captured the union's spirit better than its manifestoes, pamphlets, and proceedings … use them as ambassadors to working people wherever they toil." In cahoots with revolt in song form, the thriving Wobbly cartoon culture added a radicalizing visual element—to both the movement and the book itself. As Salvatore Salerno describes this partnership, "When we add images to songs, or consider the ways songs engendered Wobbly

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visual culture, we again encounter a relationship without parallel in the labor movement."

In addition to the over-arching contributions of the editors, *The Big Red Songbook* is packed with supplementary commentary from songwriters and historians, giving readers the sense that this book was the ultimate blending of radical voices. As I came to the end of this massive tome of laborlore, it was almost jarring to emerge from the radical landscape of hobo-jungles, mountain-mining campfires, ranch bunkhouses, meetings halls, and free-speech, soapboxing rallies that were so marvelously detailed and depicted in the book. Set against an amazing soundtrack, with readers laying down the tracks in their minds, this work is quite the jubilee.

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