“He Was an Inspiration to us All”

1. Charles Seeger recorded seven of John Handcox's songs in 1937. They are available from the Office of Folklife at the Library of Congress, as well as in diskette from University of West Virginia Press, *John L. Handcox*.


Introduction. Music, Memory, and History

1. A simple definition of a “folk” song is one that is widely known and sung but for which we don’t know the author. “John Henry” is a good example: sung by people from every walk of life and region, with verses added or subtracted as needed, but with no known author. How do such iconic songs come to be? The top hits of folk songs sort themselves out based on how many folks keep singing them. Some of these are “songs of persuasion” that make it into popular commercial culture. John’s songs, by contrast, have a known author and drew upon the familiar melodies and song structures of the folks he grew up with and the religious musical culture he inherited. He was not a “folk” musician but he so grounded his music in the heavily religious black song tradition that Serge R. Denisoff thought John was a preacher and raised on a plantation (wrong on both scores); Sing A Song of Social Significance. Bowling Green University: Popular Press, 1972, 55; Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971, 35.


3. Songs are especially portable vehicles for building group solidarity and people in all sorts of settings have used them to build social movements. John's music very much falls within the singing traditions of the American labor movement, one reason that labor songsters in the 1980s welcomed him with open arms. “It is our ability to inspire that will make the difference,” as labor activist Joe Uehlein put it. See Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011, 251.
4. Throughout history, nameless people have passed down “oral poetry” through memorization and improvisation. Nameless singers passed down some of most enduring tunes and words to African American music through a similar process. The question about such music, Charles Seeger asked, was not was it “good” music, but what was it “good for”? If it was good for something, it would survive. “And finally the songs which a nation remembers are truly called folk-songs, because so many folks have had a hand (or a throat) in shaping them,” Pete Seeger writes. However, Seeger gave up on the term “folk music” in favor of the simple term, “people’s music.” John Handcox fit that framework as a great innovator of new songs who frequently used old tunes to put them across. Pete Seeger, Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singer’s Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies, ed. Peter Blood. Bethlehem: Sing Out, 1993, 84, 146. See also Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance and social context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.


7. In the days of slavery, southern camp meetings consisted of both blacks and whites. Many whites themselves were “on the social and economic margins of their society and had psychic and emotional needs which, qualitatively, may not have been vastly different from those of black slavers . . . Yes, these whites were musical, and oppressed too,” according to Levine, ibid., 22. William Roy, Reds, Whites and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, documents and analyzes the many ways people have helped to create social movements by turning music from a noun into a verb; 2, 19, and passim. Roy characterizes movement music as a powerful means of people expressing their needs and desires. Such understandings of black song and social movement music provides a welcome contrast to Denisoff’s earlier sociology of narrowing movement music down into different categories, and with people’s music supposedly manipulated instrumentally by Communists. Robbie Lieberman in contrast explains that the “tenacity of movement culture” resulted from Communists and other people in the Labor Left in the 1930s and 1940s whose concerns went far beyond sectarian agendas, and from the power of a people’s music that helped to change American culture as a whole. “My Song is My Weapon”: People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–1950 (1989), quote on 13.


11. Alessandro Portelli points out that even “wrong” versions of events can tell us a great deal and “allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them.” Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, 2. John’s positive account of growing up in the Jim Crow South forces us to not over-generalize about how poorly African Americans survived in the era of Jim Crow; his recall of interracial harmony within the STFU likewise suggests that he perhaps chose 50 years later to dwell on the positive aspects of his experiences. Portelli points out that the most important thing for his work as an oral historian is “always doing my honest best to be true to what I take to be the speaker’s meaning.” I follow this same rule. Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County, An Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 10.

12. See the Preface to *Black Workers Remember* on oral histories. Also see Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007 on how memory and historical research can work together to provide a more complete history of social change movements.

13. Michael Frisch, in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (1990), asks “Who, really, is the author of an oral history, whether this be a single interview or an edited book-length narrative?” xx. John Handcox and I produced the text for this book through back-and-forth dialogues, his sharing of his poetry, music and memory, and a lot of historical digging and writing on my part. I feel confident that it represents the spirit and intent of John, and tells his story and history in an accurate way. It is an attempt to present working-class history from the bottom up.


15. John Handcox gave Donald Lance and Rebecca Schroeder permission to write a book about him, and commented, “If it don’t hep me, mebbe it’ll hep somebody else.” Notes taken by Susan Hollister, of an interview conducted on October 16, 1989, recorded in Columbia, Missouri, tapes and notes in author's possession. He also gave me permission to publish his songs and poems and oral history, although we worked on a basis of trust as well as signed a permission form.
“Freedom After ‘While’”: Life and Labor in the Jim Crow South


3. According to Levine and many others, slaves drew from Christianity the idea of ultimate transcendence, so that sorrow songs “were overshadowed by a triumphant note of affirmation,” Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 39–40. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845), quotes in Chapter 2; W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903), quotes in Chapter 14, “The Sorrow Songs”; and James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, An Interpretation (1972, 1991), 35, 40. For a sampling of these songs and their unique qualities, see R. Nathaniel Dett, ed., Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro, As Sung at Hampton Institute. Hampton, Va: Hampton Institute Press, 1927. He notes that accompaniments to many of these songs “can be carried away only in memory as we have no musical characters to represent them.” Introduction, V.


6. Claude Williams to Harry and Grace Koger (n.d.), Claude Williams Papers, box 14, folder 6, Wayne State University Labor Archives. Thanks to Jarod Roll for bringing this letter to my attention.

7. John Handcox, interview by William Ferris and Michael Honey, January 15, 1990, first quote; second quote, John Handcox, “A Living Legend”; third quote from “This Is Your World”; fourth quote from “(We Have the Rope and the Limb) All We Want Is Him: (Talking about John L. Handcox),” the latter three documents sent by John Handcox in typescript, all in author’s possession.

8. Researcher Jessica Auer has traced John’s ancestors back through US Census record. Vina wa John’s mother; the 1880 Federal Census locates her as three-year-old Viney (her name would later be spelled Vina, Bina, or Vinia ) Nunn living in Randolph County, Alabama, with three siblings, her parents, and her paternal grandparents. Her parents were born in Alabama and Georgia respectively; their parents came from South Carolina; and their parents apparently were born in Africa. John’s father, George, was the son of Ben, John’s grandfather, who was probably born in Mississippi; Ben’s parents, and John’s great-grandparents, named Nathan and Judy (Judia) Hancock, were born in Kentucky and Tennessee. The 1880 census lists the birthplaces of Judy’s parents as Tennessee. US Census Bureau, Population Census of the United States: Woodruff County Arkansas (1870, 1880, 1900); US Census Bureau, Randolph County (1880); and US Census Bureau, St. Francis County (1900).
9. State of Arkansas Certificate of Death, 979 and 0939273, lists John’s father’s name as George Handcox, age 49, date of birth October 16, 1873, in Woodruff, Arkansas; his mother is listed as Lizzett Hill, also of Woodruff, and his father as Ben or Berm (illegible) Handcox, born in Mississippi, n.d. George’s date of death is listed as March 2, 1923, and the cause “accidental runaway team and wagon.” According to Jessica Auer’s research, the 1920 Federal Census lists John’s grandmother as Liznett, at age 63, though her name appears as Lizzeth in 1900. Census records list John’s paternal line as Hancock in 1870, 1880, and 1900; John’s parents’ marriage certificate from 1899 also lists their last name as Hancock. The 1910 and 1920 censuses, however, spell their last name Handcock. The 1930 census records for both Vina and some of her children revert to the spelling Hancock. Census takers interviewed a member of each family and transcribed the oral testimony of their names onto the census record, but the poor penmanship of some census takers makes deciphering the spelling they ascribed difficult. World War I draft cards (1918) for George (John’s father) and George Jr. (John’s brother) list their last names as Hancock but their signatures suggest that they assumed alternate spellings. George’s signature appears as Handcock, while George Jr. clearly signs as Handcox. The names Willis, Eliza, Nathan, George, Ruth, and John appear throughout John’s father’s and his own generation. US Census Bureau, Randolph County (1880); US Census Bureau, Woodruff County (1900); US Census Bureau, Population Census of the United States: Monroe County, Arkansas (1910, 1920, 1930); US Census Bureau, St. Francis County (1930); US Census Bureau, Population Census of the United States: Washington County, Oklahoma (1940); “Arkansas, County Marriages, 1837–1957,” Family Search, Geo Hancock and Bina Nunn, (1899); and “U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918,” FamilySearch, GS Film Number 1530564.

10. US Census Bureau, Woodruff County (1870).


12. Quoted from Handcox, “We Have the Rope and the Limb,” typescript in author’s possession.

13. In 1880, John’s mother and maternal grandparents, the Nunns, lived in Randolph County, Alabama. The family is found in the census again in 1900, living in Wheatley Township in St. Francis County, Arkansas, at which time the family owned their own home and land, and continued to do so until at least 1920. The Nunns had at least ten more children by 1900. Viney was married to George by this time, and living on land in Cotton Plant Township, Woodruff County, not far from Wheatley. By 1910, Vina and George had purchased a plot of land in Monroe County, and George’s brother, Nathan, also moved from Cotton Plant in Woodruff county to Monroe County and secured a plot of land. US Census Bureau, Randolph County (1880); US Census Bureau, Woodruff County (1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940); US Census Bureau, Monroe County (1910, 1920, 1930); US Census Bureau, St. Francis County (1880, 1920, 1930); and “Arkansas, County Marriages, 1837–1957.”
14. Jessica Auer’s research documents that Willis Nunn (John’s maternal grandfather) outlived his wife Eliza. In 1920, a widowed and 76-year-old Willis lived with three of his younger children, Eliza, Elbert, and Ollie, as well as two grandchildren. Sometime after John’s father’s death in 1923, John’s mother Vina and most of her children returned to St. Francis County, Arkansas, where she and her family had first settled after migrating from Alabama. George Jr. was married the same year of his father’s death, and he and his young bride Velma made the move to St. Francis; John’s younger brother Willis married Lucille Polk in 1929 in St. Francis, and also settled near his extended family. In 1930, Vina was renting a household and caring for four of her children, including young Leo, born just a year before his father’s death. Her father, Willis Nunn, lived with his namesake and grandson, Willis Hancock, nearby until his death in 1933. US Census Bureau, *St. Francis County* (1920, 1930); “Arkansas, County Marriages, 1837–1957,” *FamilySearch*, George Hancock and Velma Alexander (1923), GS Film number 2409192; and “Arkansas, County Marriages, 1837–1957,” *FamilySearch*, Willis Handcock and Lucille Polk (1929), GS Film number 2404065.


18. Confederates showed no mercy and took no prisoners, murdering 117 members of the First Kansas Colored, in one of the incidents that occurred during the war. Grif Stockley, *Ruled By Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009, 25, 27, 40, 80.


20. A number of racial massacres occurred when rural blacks tried to form unions or cooperatives. For one example of the grisly white racial violence that gripped the South in this era, see Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009.

22. Quoted in Stockley, *Ruled By Race*, 135. The 1891 election law more than any other measure established one-party rule in Arkansas, ibid., 125.
25. Nearly 12,000 African Americans, most of them in the South, owned all or most of their land in 1900. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet.*, 457, 460–63, passim.
27. Vina’s long life would take her back to St. Francis County, Arkansas after her husband died in 1923, and then to Oklahoma with John, George Jr. and Willis, where she worked as a housekeeper to support herself and her teenaged children still living with her, Martha and Lee (sometimes spelled Leo). Vina would follow John and his wife Ruth to San Diego, California soon after, where she died in 1970. US Census Bureau, *St. Francis County* (1930); US Census Bureau, *Washington County* (1940); and “United States Social Security Death Index,” *FamilySearch*, Vinia Handcox, August 1970.
32. Handcox, interview by Ferris and Honey; and John Handcox, no title (n.d.) and “(We Have the Rope and the Limb),” both in author’s possession; Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, vx.
38. In 1921, Arkansas spent $17.06 for each white child and $5.61 for each black child in school. Stockley, *Ruled By Race*, 98, 151.


42. John Handcox, phone interview by Donald Lance (July 26, 1989), notes in author’s possession.


45. John Handcox to author (ca. 1986), in author’s possession.


47. *From Slavery to Wealth*, written by Bond’s relatives Dan Rudd and Theo. Bond, built Scott Bond up to be a self-made man in the image that white capitalists held of themselves. Bond apparently applied to start a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Bond thought he could recruit 700 to 1,000 NAACP members in the county. Scott Bond to John Shillady (June 4, 1919), NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Part I, 1919–1939, Series G—Branches, Container 12,F, Madison, Arkansas, 1919. Thanks for this document to Jarod Roll, who notes “I’m not sure Bond was as bad as Handcox made out.” Roll, email to author (January 14, 2010).

2 Raggedy, Raggedy Are We: Sharecropping and Survival


4. The family name appears as Handcox on the death certificate of John’s father George in 1923. Family members thought John might have changed the spelling of his last name to Handcox to avoid persecution as a union organizer in the 1930s, but the name change had occurred earlier. Camelia Cook, phone interview by author (August 24, 2009; July 22, 2012).


6. James Ross Jr., “‘I ain’t got no home in this world’: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas” (PhD diss., Auburn University, 2004), 22.


10. Woodruff, *American Congo*, 78–91, quote on 84; Kieran Taylor, "'We Have Just Begun': Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58:3 (1999), 264-284. Taylor points out that whites and blacks had two opposing views of the future: blacks looked toward greater freedom, while most whites wanted to maintain the racial status quo.


13. Ibid.


18. Surprisingly, perhaps, John misremembered the date of his father’s death. He told me his father died in 1921 and in a written account he said 1913. According to the death certificate (previously cited), his father died in 1923.


20. Woodruff, *American Congo*, 72–73. Five men were lynched in Arkansas in 1919, and at least 18 around the Delta, a number of them military veterans.


23. Ibid., 118, 119.


25. Thanks to Jessica Auer for finding these names and birth dates in the 1940 Census.
3 The Planter and the Sharecropper: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union


11.  James D. Ross, Jr., “I ain’t got no home in this world’: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas,” (PhD dissertation, Auburn University, 2004), 23. Per capita income in the South dropped over 50 percent between 1929 and 1932 and one-fourth of the state of Mississippi went up for sale in bankruptcy proceedings. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 354–5, 360.


14.  For the relationship of the Socialists to the sharecroppers and STFU origins, see Dunbar, Against the Grain, 83–86; Green, Grass-Roots Socialism; James D. Ross provides a detailed account of STFU and sharecropper values and politics in “I Ain’t got no home in this world,” Howard Kester, Revolt Among the Sharecroppers. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1936, 54–9; Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 417; Mitchell, Mean Things, 41–59; Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 27–8; and see the chapter on the STFU in Robert F. Martin, Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904–77. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.
15. Jason Manthorne, “The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History* 84 (2010) argues that H. L. Mitchell may have created Isaac Shaw out of a composite of several blacks who helped form the union, but H. L. Mitchell’s *Roll the Union On, A Pictorial History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.* Chicago: C. H. Kerr Pub. Co., 1987 offers a picture of Shaw, 25, and at least three photos identify Shaw in the papers of the STFU. No one will know if this quote is completely accurate, as Mitchell was the only one there who wrote it down.


18. James Ross depicts conflict between Socialist leaders who wanted a cooperative economy and the members of the union, who mostly wanted their own land and freedom to farm in decent conditions, based on a survey the STFU did in 1935. “I Ain’t got no home in this world,” 109–21.


28. Ibid., 131.

29. This account is taken from Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997, 60–61. Kester’s account was originally published in pamphlet form in 1936 and is available in the STFU records, Reel 1.
33. Clay East, quoted in ibid., 134; “it was a church” quote from Myrtle Moskop, in Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 64.
35. Washington’s letter as an example of religious fervor in STFU meetings is recounted in Ross “I Ain’t got no home in this world,” 121–4.
37. Music and preaching always played a role at STFU National Conventions; see notes and programs of conventions in STFU Papers.
42. Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920–1927*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, on McKinney, 184–8. She reports 395 members in Arkansas in 1927–8, past the peak of the Garvey movement, but indicates nearly 30,000 sympathizers in the state, based on petition campaigns in support of Garvey, who was imprisoned and then deported by the US government, 200–1.
44. Ibid., 68. H. L. Mitchell felt that the unwillingness of the Communists in the Alabama Sharecroppers Union to make concessions to the racial system kept them from organizing whites. Dunbar, *Against The Grain*, 39.
46. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 68.
47. Ibid., 66.
48. For examples of how these racial difficulties played out in the urban areas where the CIO organized, see Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*.

53. *Southern Exposure* interviews, 29.


55. *Southern Exposure* interview of J. R. Butler, 29.


60. Ward Rogers to Howard Kester (March 29, 1935), STFU, Reel 1.

61. Minutes of the Meeting of the Special Committee of the STFU Held at Marked Tyree (March 7, 1935), STFU, Reel 1.

62. Robert Reid reported 17 blacks arrested for “vagrancy” and wrote that he decided not to hitchhike into England, Arkansas, from Little Rock for fear he would be kidnapped; three letters from Reid to H. L. Mitchell (March and April, 1935), STFU, Reel 1. Reid was severely beaten in another incident.

63. The power of Norman Thomas to articulate the issues in the sharecropper revolt can be seen in his letters to *The Commercial Appeal* (February 1, 1935), and to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace (April 16, 1935), both in STFU, Reel 1.

64. Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 90–1.


67. Albert Jackson to Comrade Butler (July 4, 1935), STFU, Reel 1.


70. Minutes STFU National Executive Council, Memphis (June 23, 1935, and September 1, 1935), STFU, Reel 1.


74. Ibid., 107; Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 53–4, 59, 71, 72, passim.


77. This and the following paragraph are based on “You May Ask Me,” a written memo by John Handcox, sent to author (n.d.), in author’s files.

78. John Handcox to H. L. Mitchell (February 19, 1936); Mitchell to Hancock (sic), February 26, 1936, asking for reports, STFU reel 1.

79. John Henry to some degree defeated white society on its own terms, based perhaps on a real incident in building the Big Bend tunnel in West Virginia, completed in June 1872, in which over 1,000 blacks “labored in inferno-like conditions,” according to Levine. By the 1960s, more than 50 recorded versions of the song existed and over a hundred songs about John Henry had been copyrighted. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 421. See Scott Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend*. London: Oxford University Press, 2006.


4 There Is Mean Things Happening in This Land: Terror in Arkansas

1. In January 1937 St. Francis County had 4,457 members and 51 locals, almost twice the number of the next biggest area for STFU, Crittenden, which had 2,487 members in 30 locals, according to Alexander Yard, “They don’t regard my Rights at all”: Arkansas Farm Workers, Economic Modernization, and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (1988), 204. Black women played leading roles in the area John Handcox lived. One extraordinary white woman named Myrtle Lawrence came to St. Francis County after being dispossessed of her land, with six children and only two weeks of first-grade education. She was a militant supporter of black–white equality and, like John Handcox, reworked old tunes into union songs. Fannin, Mark. *Labor’s Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race, and Religion in the South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003, 171; and Elizabeth Anne Payne and Louis Boyle, “The Lady Was a Sharecropper: Myrtle Lawrence and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Southern Cultures* 4(2) (1998), 5–27.


and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979, 144. Fearing for their own lives, Goldberger and Smith had driven back to Memphis and set off alarm bells about Kester’s presumed murder.

6. Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 91; H. L. Mitchell to Aaron Gilmartin, March 18, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers [STFU], Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and “Jim Ball Framed Up By Officers,” The Sharecroppers’ Voice (March 1936), 2.

7. Not until 1938 did the federal government crack down and make landlords truly responsible for dividing the subsidies with their tenants. By that time, the damage was already done. Yard, “‘They don’t regard my Rights at all,’” 215–224.

8. Dunbar, Against the Grain; Mitchell, Mean Things, 61–74; and chapter four in Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton.

9. Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 92.


15. Ibid., 106–107.


17. The Miami Valley Socialist League in Ohio and church organizations in various cities collected a ton of food and clothing but “to feed several hundred families who have been evicted . . . is an impossible task,” wrote H. L. Mitchell to Ernest Morgan, February 15. Two young activists from Montana [names indecipherable] applied to the union but it had no positions. Morgan to H. L. Mitchell, February 15; H. L. Mitchell to Morgan, February 18; Morgan to H. L. Mitchell, March 2, 1936, all in STFU, Reel 1. See Auerbach on Mitchell’s salary, “Southern Tenant Farmers,” 122.


20. George Handcox to H. L. Mitchell, February 22, 1936; and H. L. Mitchell to Handcox, March 31, 1936, both in STFU, Reel 1. Mitchell advised the local should put the man on trial and, if found, guilty expel him.


25. Lowell K. Dyson, “The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics,” *Political Science Quarterly* (1973), 235–236; Fannin suggests that the CP line about black “nationhood” at a time when agricultural workers were trying to organize a bi-racial union only made it easier for anti-unionists to split white workers away. That would have been disastrous for the STFU. In fact, few whites belonged to the Alabama Sharecroppers Union. Fannin, *Labor’s Promised Land*, 114, 232–233

26. J.J. Lynn, from Truman, Ark., to H. L. Mitchell, March 11, 1936, said workers were afraid to act and were not strong enough to win; S. G. Brown, the secretary of a local in Sherrill, warned “better not to ask for a strike until we are stronger,” March 9, 1936, STFU Papers.

27. Yard, “‘They don’t regard my Rights at all’,” 202–203.


32. Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 122.

33. Letter to H. L. Mitchell, no name, from Heth, Arkansas, February 20, 1936, STFU, Reel 1.


35. H. L. Mitchell To Officers and Members of All Locals, March 4, 1936; J.J. Lynne to H. L. Mitchell, from Truman, Ark., March 11, 1936; S.J. Brown from Sherrill, Ark., March 9, 1936; and H. L. Mitchell “To be read only to closed meeting,” March 19, 1936, all in STFU, Reel 1.

40. Ibid., 433–439.
41. Ibid., 441–442.
44. STFU Press release, June 2, 1936, STFU, Reel 1; and Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 102–103.
46. Quoted in Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 125.
48. Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 125–127; Baltimore Afro-American (June 20, 1936), 5; and STFU Press release, June 2, 1936, STFU, Reel 1.
49. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 106.
50. Ibid., 109–110.

58. Viola Smith to Mr. Mitchell, June 13, 1936, STFU, Reel 3; Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 104–113; Mitchell, Mean Things, 88–89.

59. The Sharecroppers’ Voice (July 1936), 1–2.


64. See the discussion by Mitchell, Mean Things, 138–143. James D. Ross, Jr., “I ain’t got no home in this world’: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Arkansas,” (PhD dissertation, Auburn University, 2004).


70. In 1948, “Strange Things Are Happening in This Land” appeared in one songbook, n.d., n.p., with no attribution, except as a “Sharecropper Song (Source Unknown).” Sis Cunningham, later of the Almanac Singers, recalled that she heard John sing this song at the STFU national convention in Muskogee in 1937. She and her father later published “Strange Things” with some additional verses they wrote. When the editors of Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People published John’s version, “Mean Things Happening in This Land,” they added in some of the Cunningham’s verses at the end of the song. See Sister Rosetta Tharpe, “There Are Strange Things Happening Every Day,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLFRxfMoOJY. Roseanne Cash commented about her father, who also recorded the song. Thanks to Ron Cohen for details on Sis
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71. Martin Luther King, Jr. often echoed themes of previous sermons or even lifted parts of them wholesale, working like a jazz musician rather than a completely original thinker. He also drew on spirituals, as in the phrase “free at last!” at his March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom speech on August 28, 1963. Bernice Johnson Reagon, If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition (2001), presents a powerful narrative of intergenerational uplift and struggle, with songs as a vital component.


5 Roll the Union On: Interracial Organizing in Missouri

1. The Sharecroppers’ Voice, July, 1936. Brookins to Mitchell, September 7, 1936, Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Papers [STFU] microfilm edition, Reel 3, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Brookins identified Norman Thomas as “my Socialist Brother and Friend” and repeatedly voiced regret at his inability to go back to Arkansas. On May 24, 1937, he made a general appeal to STFU members to fund him so he could go back out into the field, Reel 4. Mitchell wrote back to Brookins on August 20, 1936, STFU, Reel 1, as quoted here.

2. John Handcox, telephone interview by Donald M. Lance (September 30, 1990, and August 1, 1989), notes sent from Donald Lance to author.


6. Various books of “Negro spirituals” included some of these “rolling” songs. The Dr. Isaac Watts hymnal was probably the most utilized in the Deep South. See Isaac Watts's Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1707): A Publishing History and A Bibliography, ed. Selma L. Bishop (1974).

along to liberation; see also, “I’m a-rollin,” in James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), 145. However, none of these songs have the same tune as John Handcox’s “Roll the Union On,” which comes closer to the tune “Polly Wolly Doodle.” Modern gospel choirs sing “Roll the Chariot Along,” but their tunes bear only a partial resemblance to John’s song. John told me he did not think he got his tune from a church song.

8. Tom Glazer writes, “The melody is based on a gospel hymn, ‘Roll the Chariot on,’ and is one of the most popular of all union songs. It was written in 1936 at a labor school in Arkansas; an organizer named John Handcox wrote the first verse, while others were written by Lee Hays, then of the Almanac Singer and later of the Weavers.” Glazer, *Songs of Peace, Freedom, and Protest* (1970), 281. Pete Seeger said he took the word of Lee Hays and gave him credit for originating the song but now credits the song to John Handcox. Seeger speaking at the Labor Song Exchange, Maryland, May 13, 1985, tape in author’s possession.


12. Ibid., 59, 72–73, 81.

13. Ibid., 88.


17. This poem is available as part of John Handcox’s Library of Congress recordings, *John L. Handcox, Songs*, compiled and introduced by Mark Alan Jackson.

18. Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 96–97. The Rust Brothers were New Deal liberals and labor supporters, but their machinery would ultimately wipe out the sharecroppers.


27. “A willing worker” in Handcox to Mr. JR Butler, July 26, 1936, STFU, Reel 1.


30. A Willing Worker to Mr. H. L. Mitchel [sic], June 20, August 4, and August 7, 1936, STFU, Reel 1.


32. Mitchell to Handcox, August 11, 1936, and Handcox to Mitchel [sic], August 17, 1936, STFU, Reel 1. John habitually misspelled Mitchell’s last name, while Mitchell sometimes misspelled John’s last name as well. Unlike his relationship with Claude Williams, John did not know Mitchell well.


34. A Willing Worker to Mr. H. L. Mitchel [sic], June 14, 1936, STFU, Reel 1.

35. To H. L. Mitchell, Dear Comrade, from a Worker, October 13, 1936, STFU, Reel 3.

36. Mitchell to Handcox, October 17, 1936, in Henson, MO, STFU, Reel 3.


38. *The Disinherited Speak*, 16.


40. A Willing Worker to “Dear Comrade” Mitchell, September 18, 1936, from Charleston, STFU, Reel 1.

42. The phrase that unions are “not Santa Clause,” belonged to Claude Williams and got picked up by Whitfield. “Notes to Cotton Workers School of UCAPAWA,” at the Inland Boarmen’s Union Hall in Memphis, August 5 through August 18, 1940, in the Claude Williams Collection, Box 17 folder 28, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. “The Gospel of the Kingdom” and “All Inspired Scripture,” of the People’s Institute of Applied Religion, reproduced in Gellman and Roll, The Gospel of the Working Class, 109.

43. Williams to C. C. Kirkpatrick of Deventer local, October 16, 1936, STFU, Reel 3.

44. Roll, Spirit of Rebellion, 100; Gellman and Roll, The Gospel of the Working Class, 70.


46. Eugene Debs, the key founder and leader of the SP, took the position that the class struggle would resolve racism, but he also took a strong stand against racism, saying “the history of the Negro in the United States is a history of crime without parallel.” William P. Jones, “‘Nothing Special to Offer the Negro’: Revisiting the ‘Debsian View’ of the Negro Question,” International Labor and Working-Class History (Fall 2008), 217.

47. My characterization scarcely does justice to Kester’s varied career as a prophet for change. See Robert F. Martin, Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, especially chapter four, “Race and Radicalism.”

48. Gellman and Roll, The Gospel of the Working Class, 74–76. Mitchell starts his autobiography with a grisly lynching scene in which he witnessed the dead bodies of blacks murdered by whites: “I could never forget these killings, the violence between blacks and whites, the savagery of mob spirit. Certainly these early impressions helped to determine the course my life was to take.” Mitchell, Mean Things, 1–2.

49. Dear Comrades, n.d. but seems to be 1936, from Memphis, Tennessee, STFU, Reel 3. A hand written note says the proposed meeting was “held late 1936 Hillhouse Miss.”


52. “We learned to love the people you white folks hate,” is how one black worker explained his rejection of anti-communism. President Roosevelt asked Owen Whitfield whether he was a communist, defining a communist as someone who
stole someone else’s property. Whitfield joked that if that were the case, whites must be the real communists, since they had stolen the land from the Indians. Gellman and Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, 98


54. “I was a Sharecropper,” Zella Whitfield, attached to a series of documents from Claude Williams titled “The Vicious Circle,” in the Claude Williams Collection, Box 17 folder 28, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.


58. Brookins to the executive council, August 18, 1936, STFU, Reel 1; and Jason Manthorne, “The View from the Cotton,” 36.


62. Gellman and Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, 75–76; “Roll the Union On,” in *The Sharecroppers’ Voice* (January 1937). Serge Denisoff wrote that Handcox was “following in the footsteps of Claude Williams,” probably a complete reversal of the reality in which Handcox spread the songs of his culture to Williams and Hays. *Great Day Coming*, 34. In *Sing a Song of Social Significance*, Denisoff writes that people associated with Commonwealth College, including Alan Lomax, “collected” John’s songs, which is closer to the truth, 55.


64. “Tenant Farmers Convention Asks Land Ownership,” in the *Socialist Call* (January 23, 1937), estimated that 150 people attended the Muscogee convention.


67. Ibid., quotes on 17, 18–19.

68. Ibid., and 45–49.

69. Ibid., 54.


6 Getting Gone to the Promised Land: California

7. Ibid.
11. Stepenoff, Thad Snow, 50, 68.
25. “Color Line Bunk to Dixie Farm Slaves,” *Amsterdam News* (March 6, 1937), 1, for the above two paragraphs.
27. “Plight of Sharecroppers is Told in ‘Sweet Land,’” *Socialist Call* (February 6, 1937), 11.
28. Reese lived in exile at Hill House, Mississippi, while Marie Pierce, an African American, and others lived in exile in Memphis. Kester later said more than 40 families “have been driven from Arkansas and adjoining states because of union activities.” “Croppers Head Near Lynched For Activities,” *Amsterdam News* (December 4, 1937), 10.
31. How the recordings were made is a little uncertain. The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., apparently did not have a recording lab at that time so most recordings were done in the field by Robertson, Margaret Valiant, and other collectors. However, it appears the recordings occurred in Washington, D.C. Archie Green, “A Resettlement Administration Song Sheet,” 81–83, in the records of the Resettlement Administration, Recordings Collection, box 1 of 1, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress, 1939/016. And Charles Seeger and Margaret Valiant, “Journal of a Field Representative,” Introduction by Janelle Warren-Findley, *Ethnomusicology* (May 1980), 169, in the same files.
33. The first edition of People’s Songs after World War II published “Roll the Union On,” as a product of Commonwealth College; it later listed Williams and Hays, in that order, as the song’s authors. Thanks to Ron Cohen for these details. The latter version of the song, n.d., is in author’s collection. Joe Glazer inquired with Mitchell about John’s songs and obtained a listing of them from the Library of Congress. Mitchell to Glazer, October 23, 1959, Archie Green
Collection, Original Deposit 1, Folder 150, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Thanks to Jessica Auer for finding these documents.

34. J. R. Butler to Handcox, April 12, 1937, STFU, Reel 2. Thanks to Jarrod Roll for copies of this and other Handcox correspondence. Gellman and Roll, “Owen Whitfield,” paraphrase of Whitfield, 311 and 304.

35. Handcox to Butler, April 8, 1937, STFU Papers, File 52. Thanks to Jarrod Roll for sending me this manuscript copy.


37. Butler to Handcox, April 12, 1937, STFU Reel 4.

38. The Sharecroppers’ Voice (September, 1937), 1. The Board members were Odis Sweeden, Oklahoma, a Cherokee Indian, James Sager, Texas, Whitfield, Missouri, Walker Martin, Alabama, J. R. Butler, Arkansas, and H. L. Mitchell, Tennessee.

39. The Sharecropper's Voice (September, 1937), 1; “Poem,” editorial page.

40. “The Planter and the Sharecropper,” Southern Farm Leader, New Orleans (July 1936). This newspaper can be found on the microfilm version of The Sharecropper’s Voice.

41. According to Denisoff, labor songsters like Handcox and Jim Garland, once conscious of their role as a spokesperson for their people and their region, took on a new role as “folk entrepreneur.” Denisoff sees the Labor Left as manipulative instrumentalists fitting such people into their Marxist framework. However, the most ardent supporters of southern music, especially labor protest music, such as Pete Seeger primarily appreciated its inherent performative and historic meaning, as well as its political meaning. Denisoff, Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971, quote on 36.

42. “50,000 March in Chicago’s Biggest May Day Parade,” Socialist Call (May 8, 1937), 3. Thanks to Jessica Auer for digging this story out of the records in Davis Library at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.


44. Summaries of telephone interviews with John Handcox by Donald Lance (July 26, and August 9, 1989), in author’s possession. John told me this story as well.

45. Lance telephone interview with Handcox summary (August 1, 1989), in author’s collection.

46. Handcox to Williams, November 30, 1938 and November 3, 1939, both in the Claude Williams Papers, Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit. Thanks to Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll for sending me copies of this correspondence. See Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights, 138–139.
47. Editorial quotes in The Sharecroppers’ Voice, July 1936. The Trotskyist movement entered the SP as a bloc in 1936 and bitter factional fighting in the next two years, destroying the party as a viable entity. Under their leadership, the Socialist Call in 1937 displayed increasingly revolutionary rhetoric but documented less and less action. Repression in the Soviet Union and the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact would also place the CP in an untenable position, as collaboration between the two parties collapsed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds, Encyclopedia of the American Left. New York: Garland Pub., 1990, 720–721, 152–153.

48. On the UCAPAWA convention and the political conflicts on labor’s left, see Dunbar, Against the Grain 156–161.

49. “Oust Sharecroppers From Arkansas Hall, Southern Folk Say Nix After Crowd Comes,” Amsterdam News (March 5, 1938), 5, reproduced by ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

50. Dunbar, Against the Grain, 164–170.

51. See Gellman, Death Blow to Jim Crow.

52. McKinney to J. R. Butler, August 31, 1938, in The Black Worker, vol. 7, Foner and Lewis, eds., 185; McKinney to Wiley Harris, July 29 and August 11, 1938, and to H. L. Mitchell, April 28, 1937, both quoted in Mark Naison, “Black Agrarian Radicalism in the Great Depression: The Threads of a Lost Tradition” Journal of Ethnic Studies (Fall 1973), 59–60. Naison provided one of the earliest and most prescient analyses of the politics of the STFU. White Communists and black union activists protested segregation in the Memphis CIO hall, and left unionists got run out by the CIO’s emerging Cold War leadership for doing so. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers, chapter nine, and 219, 233, 256, 276. H.L. Mitchell to all Locals, September 19, 1938, called for another cotton pickers strike but there is no evidence that it was effective. Reel 9, STFU papers.

53. Williams taught at a Commonwealth College “Cotton Preachers’ Institute” in Little Rock, which held that unionization was the key to progress in the South. “Preachers Back Move To Organize Tenants,” Amsterdam News (September 17, 1938), A3, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Gellman and Roll, The Gospel of the Working Class, 92–93.


55. Cobb and Grubbs, ibid.; “Remove 2 Heads of C.I.O. Union, Rev. Claude Williams Ordered Ousted,” New York City Amsterdam News (October 1, 1938), 12, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.


57. “Breach in Ranks of Tenant Farm Union Widens as Charges Fly,” Amsterdam News (April 29, 1939), 15, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

58. Mitchell was bitter as well, calling Williams a “pathetic figure” who “followed the Communist Party line all the days of his life, because he knew of no other line to
follow.” Mitchell, Mean Things, 174. A photo of a Fellowship of Reconciliation Interracial Student Conference held at Le Moyne College in Memphis in 1932, sadly, shows Kester and Williams side by side, as revolutionary Socialists. The personal relationships between the three men ended abruptly. Martin, Howard Kester, 60.

63.  Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 189. “All his life he fought against the Communist demons in the labor movement and was haunted by them,” believing Harry Bridges and Donald Henderson were “agents for the Soviet Union,” according to Mitchell’s son. Samuel Howard Mitchell, A Leader Among Sharecroppers, Migrants, and Farm Workers: H.L. Mitchell and Friends, n.p., n.p., printed in Canada (2007), 223, 224.
64.  Dunbar, Against the Grain, 180–181; Mitchell, Mean Thing, chapters 14–15, 191–192.
68.  Mitchell, Mean Things, dedication to John Handcox quote on cover page. An appendix in Samuel Mitchell, A Leader Among Sharecroppers, Migrants, and Farm Workers, provides an amazing list of the many places his father went to promote the history of the STFU.
70.  Notes from John Handcox telephone interview by Donald Lance (July 26, 1989), in author’s possession.
71. Handcox interview by Lance (July 26, 1989); and quote, Handcox interview by Lance (August 1, 1989).
72. “C.I.O Brings Negroes Here To Get Instructions for Unionizing Farm Workers; Williams, Ousted From Tenant Union For Red Connections, Leads ‘Classes’ At Illinois Avenue School; Yough Congress Sends Helper,” Commercial Appeal, (August 16, 1940).
73. Claude Williams to Harry and Grace Koger, n.d., Claude Williams Papers, Folder 6, Box 15, recalling the 1940 UCAPAWA school in Memphis. Pete Seeger recalled traveling through Memphis and he probably heard this song at the time or from Claude Williams shortly thereafter. Personal interview (January 19, 1986), Washington, D. C. See, Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights, 138–139.

7 “I’m So Glad to Be Here Again”:
The Return of John Handcox


7. Researcher Jessica Auer located John’s brother George and sister-in-law Velma living close by to John in a 1947 City Directory that listed John’s occupation as “driver” and George’s as “carpenter.” By 1959, she found John’s younger brother Leo, listed as a carpenter, and his wife Cath, at 3960 Florence, and John’s brother Willis and Lucille living on 2884 Clay Street. In 1959 Ruth was listed as a domestic worker at 3140 K. Street, and in 1969 she lived at 3160 K. Street, along with George’s son George, Jr. San Diego City Directories, 1943, 1947, 1959, 1969, listed under “U.S. City Directories, 1821–1989,” database online, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011; and *Polk’s San Diego City Directory* (Los Angeles: R. L Polk and Co. Publishers, 1959).

8. Ibid.


10. Willie Williams, telephone interview by author (September 2, 2010).

11. Profiles of Handcox family members sent by Camelia Cook, in author’s possession.


13. Handcox interview by Donald Lance (July 26, 1989), notes in author’s possession.


found on opening day at Otay Lake,” *San Diego Union* (January 24, 1991), quotes George Handcox, almost surely John’s older brother.


17. The San Diego History Center has a photographic exhibit of Logan Heights from 1939–45, portraits of a proud community taken over many years by Norman Baynard. There are at least two Handcox family photos among the 500 that have been inventoried. They include a number of Nation of Islam photos and a Hancock Advanced Lubrication service station, which could be related to John’s family as well. One photo shows John with his mother and several grand children (91:18476–163), and another shows a large gathering of the Handcox grandchildren with John under a tree in a park on Clay Avenue in 1969 (91:18476–164). See the San Diego History online photographic finding aid. Granddaughter Camelia Cook looked through 500 of the photos, telephone interview by author (July 22, 2012).


20. Jessica Auer located their marriage and divorce records.


22. Camelia Cook, telephone interview by author (July 10, 2009).

23. Ibid.


26. Ibid.

27. Tape recording at the Labor Arts Exchange, May 13, 1985, in author’s possession.

28. The “Reagan Psalms” concluded: “Five thousand years ago, a man named Moses said: ‘Pick up your shovel and mount your camel or ass, and I will lead you to the Promised Land.’ Five thousand years later, a man named Roosevelt said: ‘Lay down your shovel, light up a Camel, and sit on your ass, for this is the Promised Land.’ Now watch Reagan, for he will take your shovel, sell your camel, kick your ass, and tell you: ‘There is no Promised Land.’”

30. Young people loved Handcox and his music, as I witnessed when he sang his songs before a packed auditorium at Elkins College in West Virginia in August of 1985. He sang at a Midwest labor song exchange in Chicago and performed at the Western Worker’s Heritage festival just months before his death. Documents and audio tapes in author’s files.


32. John also recalled to a reporter the “Sundown towns” with signs that said, “nigger, don’t let the sun set on you in this town,” the lynching that his father witnessed in Arkansas, as well as his grand-father telling him that “old marse” had forced his slaves to eat from a horse trough. He remembered walking four miles one way to school, and how his grandmother would zealously spank the children to get them to work long hours in the fields. He recalled the day he went to find United Farm Workers Union leader Caesar Chavez at his Bakersfield office, but he wasn’t there. McLaren, “Labor troubadour.” Rebecca Schroeder interview with John Handcox, October 16, 1989, transcribed by Susan Hollister.


34. Thanks to Robert Ferguson for his prescient interpretation and for his transcript and interview notes of John L. Handcox, interview by Michael Honey and William Ferris (January 15, 1990), William R. Ferris Collection (#20367), Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


38. Melody and arrangement by Michael Honey.


40. Ibid., 119.

41. An example of not forgetting the past is the Southern Tenant Farmers Museum, opened on October 6, 2006, in Tyronza, Arkansas, with an opening event titled “Raggedy, Raggedy Are We,” Highlighted by scholars Orville Vernon Burton,

42. Quip from Honey and Ferris interview; “sharecropper’s son” quote in typescript, n.d., in author’s possession.

43. John’s original rough draft with Sheila Stewart is not the same as the way I have reproduced it here, which is the way John and I sang “Hard to Say Good-Bye” together and the way the song has appeared in labor music circles. John sang it that way, and Pete Seeger transcribed the music the way he heard John sing it. The last verse of John’s original rough draft was left out, however, and in a sense it might be the strongest conclusion to the song.
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John Handcox Songs and Poems

“Raggedy, Raggedy Are We”
“Roll the Union On”
“Join the Union Tonight”
“In My Heart”
“No More Mourning”
“There is Mean Things Happening in This Land”
“The Planter and the Sharecropper”
“Landlord, What in the Heaven is the Matter With You?”
“The Man Frank Weems”
Lyrics by John Handcox, music and arrangement by Michael Honey, in author’s possession:
“Hard to Say Good-Bye”
“Jobless in the USA”
“What A Great World It Could Be”

To hear other songs of John Handcox, go to; http://faculty.washington.edu/mhoney/.

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John Handcox. Interview with Joe Riggs, notes, in author’s possession.


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