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Sharecropper’s Troubadour

John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, and the African American Song Tradition

Michael K. Honey
Be Consolated

Have you ever woke up in the morning
And your day of toil started wrong?
Nothing in this world would console you
But to start singing the good old union song.

Sometimes you go to the door or window and begin
Wondering and looking across the field,
Thinking of what wealth the farmer has added
While he has to live on such a scanty yield.

Often you go to the shelf and get your Bible,
And sit down and begin to read;
And you find therein where God will punish
The rich man for every unjust deed.

Be of good cheer; be patient; be faithful,
And help the union to grow strong.
And if at any time you become the least discouraged,
Revive yourself by singing the good old union song.

When thinking of how horrid the past has been,
And know the labor road hasn't been smooth.
Deep down in your heart you keep singing:
“We shall not, we shall not be moved!”

John Handcox, Union Poet and Singer
In *The Disinherited Speak, Letters from Sharecroppers*
(New York: Workers Defense League, ca. 1937)
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Tacoma, Washington
I was a teenager in college around 1937, when my father Charles Seeger wrote me about John Handcox. A delegation of white and black southern tenant farmers had come to Washington to petition Congress to get them some help in their struggle for justice. My father, a musicologist working as a minor bureaucrat down there in those New Deal days, heard them singing, and immediately asked the lead singer, a man named John Handcox, to come with him to the Library of Congress, where the Archives of Folk Song had some of the early recording equipment available at that time. Scratchy aluminum disks, turning at 78 RPM.¹

On my next vacation home I heard those disks. “There’s Mean Things Happening In This Land,” “Raggedy, Raggedy Are We,” “Roll the Union On,” and a famous old spiritual with some new words:

Ohhhh, Freedom!
Ohhhh, Freedom!
Oh, Freedom over me!
And before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave
Take my place with those who loved and fought before.

Some of the songs were poems, raps of a sort:

The planter lives by the sweat of the sharecropper’s brow.
Just how the sharecropper lives the planter cares not how.

I was bowled over by the songs and poems, and started immediately memorizing some of them and repeating them for friends. The Southern Tenant Farmers
Union eventually got broken up, not only by the powers that be, but by factional disputes between Socialists and Communists within the union.

Three years later, I met Woody Guthrie when he hitchhiked to New York from Los Angeles. (It was February, 1940; he wrote the words “As I was walking that ribbon of highway” while standing there in the cold wind with his thumb stuck out and the cars whipping past him, zoom, zoom, zoom). Energetic young Alan Lomax, then in charge of the Archives of Folk Song, suggested that Woody and I work together to make a songbook out of a pile of disks and paper he handed us. We worked on it in the spring of 1940, and we put a few of John Handcox’s songs in it. I tried to locate John, mailed letters to Arkansas and Oklahoma, got no answer. The book, Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People finally got published in 1967, but again we had no luck locating John. He’d gone to San Diego during World War II, and he stayed there.²

Around ‘72, H. L. Mitchell, who had been head of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, wrote his autobiography. In San Diego many years later, a friend of John’s said to him one day, “John, didn’t you once write a song called ‘Mean Things Happening in This Land’”? “Sure did,” said John. “Well, I seen a book in a bookstore window with that title, written by a man H. L. Mitchell.” “Mitch! Didn’t know he was still alive.”

They got in touch and met at a reunion of old timers from the STFU held in Memphis in 1982. Joe Glazer, who for a long lifetime had been labor’s troubador, was present and few years later I found out about it from him. I got John’s address and phone number at last. John was now about 80 years old.

“Why, yes, I’d be glad to come east if you just send me a plane ticket.” With the help of Ralph Rinzler at the Smithsonian Institution we rustled up the money, and John appeared at the next Labor Heritage gathering in Washington, D. C., in June, 1985.

He was tall and slim and straight, walked with a light step, dark blue eyes, a shock of white hair, and a fringe of white beard. He had a subtle sense of humor. I once introduced him to another person, saying that John had been living in San Diego on his Social Security. John taps me on the shoulder, says with a smile, “Just say ‘existing’ on Social Security.”

In the last ten years of his life, John went to dozens of gatherings east and west, singing his songs, making up new ones. He was an inspiration to us all.

How lucky some of us are who knew him. Now, this wonderful book helps us get to know him better. His story will not be forgotten, now that Michael Honey has got it down on paper. As long as human beings like to sing in the English language, I believe his songs will live on. In that sense, John will never die.
It’s people like John Handcox who will save this human race from the fix we’ve been put in by foolish and shortsighted men.

Here’s to you, John Handcox, people’s poet, people’s songwriter. Children not yet born will carry on your work.

Beacon, New York