I'm only a broken down mucker
My life in the mines I have spent.
I've been fooled and played for a sucker;
My back's all broken and bent.
The drifting machine was my fiddle;
The stopper my big bass drum,
The pick and the shovel my clappers,
My spirits, the demon rum.

I scoffed at the man in the office,
Called him belittlin' names.
But I realize now that I'm older
I used my back where he used his brains.
The drifting machine done for my hearing,
The mine gasses dimmed my sight.
I know my last days are nearing,
But I'll rally for one last fight.

I'm only a broken down mucker—
My life in the mines I have spent,
I've been fooled and played for a sucker,
My back's all broken and bent.
I know my last days are nearing,
I know it only too well—
I'll be working and sweating and swearing
With a pick and shovel in Hell.
Fragments of the song “I’m Only a Broken-down Mucker” turned up in a number of widely separated places in British Columbia. What most informants remembered most readily were the first lines including,

“I’ve been fooled and played for a sucker.”

The feeling of betrayal in this line makes the song much more than a complaint and presents a contradiction to the general tone of bravado. In the song, an all-but burnt-out laborer looks back on his life and concludes that he was duped, used, and somehow robbed of his human dignity. Who or what was responsible for this, he cannot say, but he hints at the existence of an unjust society.

It is well known that there is a strong tendency for children to find occupations in the same social class as their fathers. In the case of unskilled laborers, this pattern is most evident for they have benefited the least from the educational system, with its inherent service to middle-class notions of upward mobility and “free choice” in the selection of the occupation. The conflict between the values of their working class community and the school is often resolved by working-class children either by rejection of their language patterns together with the tastes and attitudes they share with their parents and neighbors, or by rejection of the school and all it stands for. To reject the school with its demeaning attitude towards him as a person (and as a member of his class), the working class child must build or affirm a set of values which saves his self-respect. For the male, often these values emphasize and exaggerate masculine stereotypes of independence and virility: the song, with its celebration of youth, its zest for physical labor, its whoring, fighting and drinking could well be a catalog of these traits. Crucial, too, in this list is the “belittlin” of the office clerk—the man who chose the values of the school rather than those of his community.

The singer’s portrayal of himself as a “broken-down mucker” with damage to his eyes, ears and back conveys his realization that he can no longer fill the laborer’s role. It seems to him now, as he reflects on his life, that he took the wrong path, that of “brawn” rather than “brain.” But as we have seen, any other choice was, for all but a few, impossible. As is commonly the case, our mucker does not even ask how or why he ended up as he did. He has been so conditioned to individualistic and competitive views of the larger society that he accepts as his lot, however jocularly, an eternity in Hell with his pick and shovel—sweating, swearing and defying to the last a world that has so abused him. That he should consider this his reward after a lifetime of useful work is a sad reflection on a society which values people so little.

Phil Thomas