

REVIEW

COME HELL OR HIGH WATER

United Steel Workers of America, Local 5457, Buchans, Newfoundland; a Breakwater Recording.

This album records in song and in poem the struggle of the people in the company town of Buchans against the multi-national American Smelting and Refining Company—ASARCO. On March 15, 1973, the hardrock miners went on strike and held out through almost seven months of confrontation until their demands were largely met. During these bitter times a series of militant, pro-union and anti-company songs were composed and served to focus the anger, the frustrations and the pride of the community. These songs were sung to boost the morale of the strikers and their families as they marched through the streets every day to picket the company gates.

Most of the songs were written by Angus Lane, a union man who had achieved a local reputation thanks to his poem "The Christmas of '49" describing an earlier conflict with the company, which he recites on the album. At the beginning of the strike, Angus wrote a new invective, "All because of ASARCO", and set it to the tune of that Newfoundland favorite, "Thank God We're Surrounded by Water" (the words to "ASARCO", sung by Jim Payne to a different tune, are published in CFBII-1). A group of strikers with musical skills made a cassette recording of the song, which was then

blared out from the speaker of a car following the marchers. It was an instant success, and created a pattern for the duration of the dispute as Angus wrote in response to developments and set his lyrics to tunes popular on the island, which could easily be learned and sung by the strikers.

A booklet containing several of Angus' parodies, together with "The Buchans Strike" by locals Hazel and Fronie Flight, and the workers' anthem "Solidarity Forever", was later published, dedicated to the strikers, and prefaced by Mother Jones' mining battle cry: "Pray for the Dead and Fight like Hell for the Living". These are the songs, and the stance, that make up the core of "Come Hell or High Water", in which the booklet of lyrics is included. Side A begins with a brief traditional dance tune, "Cock of the North", played on the button accordion, followed by Angus' "Christmas of '49" poem; and side B

closes with his song "Aftermath"—which was written for the victory banquet—followed by the traditional "Drunken Miners".

How is an outsider to respond to such a record? I find myself groping reluctantly towards such clichés as 'a valuable social document' or 'of great historical interest' to cover up for the fact that the music is for the fact that the music is uninspiring. It's not simply a matter of musicianship: why weren't groups of the miners and their families asked to come and belt out the choruses of these songs and bring them to life? As it is, the musicians perform competently, but the force and the

fire that must have characterised the singing of the strikers themselves are lacking.

The arrangements are all very similar—a curious blend of a strong yet strained lead vocal by Sandy Ivany, accompanied by acoustic guitar, mandolin and accordion (or combinations thereof), with tenor harmonies on some choruses. The words are clear but there is little emphasis or colour in their enunciation. Don Bursey on the accordion is the pick of the musicians, and the jaunty, up-tempo tunes such as “Our Leader, Our President Don Head” (to the tune, “Kelly the Boy from Killarne”) and “Asarco”, more suited to the ‘lift’ and drive of a free reed instrument, are the most successful to my mind.

I feel less happy about the use of a maudlin tune such as “The Green, Green Grass of Home” for the song, “The Victims”. Its echoes, for me, of Tom Jones—even down to the hushed, spoken final verse—squeeze out pre-packaged emotion in a cabaret style rather than evoking the hardships of a miner’s life, in form as well as content. I also feel distinctly unhappy about the song, “Newfoundlanders Forever” with its wretched chorus:

Go, go, foreigners must go
How we do it for sure we don’t care
One guy won’t go far, for he don’t have a car
It’s four wheels up in the air. HA
HA.

I can understand the bitterness of the miners towards their multi-national bosses lording it over the locals, but

such a damn-em-all outburst of xenophobia as the refrain “foreigners must go” coming from militant trade unionists is just not acceptable—especially when the cover of the song booklet displays with pride and sweet irony the seal of the United Steelworkers of *America*!

The sleeve notes by Peter Narvaez of the Folklore Dept. of Memorial University are informative and well written apart from the occasional lapses, such as the references to the strikers “poetical formulation of significant issues”—meaning they wrote songs about what was happening. The lyrics themselves are strong and earnest, but suffer from overuse of the numbingly hackneyed catch-phrases of Unionism. Necessary as these may have been in raising the strikers’ morale, they serve only to blunt the listeners’ response to this record. The use of fresh and natural imagery is no bourgeois affectation—in fact it’s a Newfoundland tradition, as we find for example, in the climax to “The Christmas of ’49” when the mean-spirited mining official gets his desserts:

“Drumsticks and plum pudding
were hurled upon the floor,
Martin got one in the gob when
he came in the door.”

Although this is an important album well worth hearing as an instance of contemporary industrial workers using folksong to voice their grievances and their determination to fight for better conditions, there is a spark of life, an immediacy found in the best music from Newfoundland, that is missing for me in this recording.

Tony Montague