

Utah Phillips' album of IWW Songs

“We Have Fed You All a Thousand Years: Utah Phillips sings the songs and tells the stories of the Industrial Workers of the World” (Vancouver Folk Festival Recordings, ATR 103).

This record is dedicated “To the fighting unionists of British Columbia.” Recorded live in Vancouver, Victoria and Courtenay, B.C., it’s an obvious labour of love and commitment -a collection of classic songs taken from the legendary “Little Red Song Book” of the I.W.W., and songs of the same era which share their spirit. Most of the songs will not be unfamiliar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with folk music over the years. Nevertheless, they’re worth having “under one roof,” especially sung by an advocate of their cause who just happens to be a superb folksinger, storyteller and all-round entertainer.

“Solidarity Forever,” “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!”, “The Preacher and the Slave” (better known as “Pie in the Sky”), “Joe Hill” - all the classics are here, and some less well known outside unionist circles. The songwriters include, among others, Woody Guthrie, Earl Robinson, Haywire Mac McClintock and, of course, Joe Hill. (One of the Joe Hill songs on the record is “Where the Fraser River Flows,” best known to us from Phil Thomas’ “Songs of the Pacific Northwest.” This is the only specifically Canadian content among the songs - but union songs are at home throughout the English-speaking world, and Canada has had no small part in building the tradition.)

Realistically, a live recording of a solo singer, sometimes unaccompanied, sometimes with unpretentious guitar, sometimes with audience choruses, sometimes reciting poetry, is not going to test the limits of your stereo. But that’s not what this record is for. Rather, it sets out to capture the milieu in which the music lives -and pretty well succeeds. A high level of audience noise and backchat conveys the feeling of the crowded union hall.

I was struck once again by the strength of these old union songs, even (especially!) those which depend on humour to make their point. Utah says it in one of his monologues on the record: there’s a world of difference between “How many

seas must a white dove sail?” and “Dump the bosses off your back!” The old Wobblies were out to make converts and raise the spirits of the converted, and mediocre songs weren’t going to do the job!

The songs are strung together by Utah Phillips’ intimitable ramblings - although he’s obviously strongly committed to the cause whereof he sings, his light touch and raconteurial skills keep him safely away from preachiness. A format which, in less capable hands, would have a strong potential for boredom comes off surprisingly well - nobody ever accused Utah Phillips of being boring!

The liner notes consist of a 12-page, foot-square booklet; as well as containing the lyrics of the songs, it’s liberally sprinkled with I.W.W. photos and memorabilia, and lots of chat “excerpted from Utah Phillips’ live performances” (not necessarily those on the record) - an anecdotal history rather than a historical one, and quite in keeping with the spirit of the record. By contrast, the cover, while well-designed, is rather dry and forbidding, with its cumbersome title and a long, earnest article by I.W.W. historian Fred Thompson. Don’t be scared off! This record is worth owning.

If the album isn’t available from your local folk record store (or if you don’t *have* a local folk record store), information can be obtained from: Vancouver Folk Music Festival, 3271 Main Street, Vancouver, B.C., V5V 3M6.

John Leeder

