

Recurring nightmare of justice: The life and music of Joe Hill

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

On Nov. 19, 1915, an innocent man was killed by firing squad. The state of Utah determined that immigrant laborer Joe Hill had murdered two people. What transpired in the court was a mockery of jurisprudence. As his trial wore on, it became obvious that it was not just this individual man being tried. It was the radical



Joe Hill

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the One Big Union known as the Wobblies on trial. And Hill was an outspoken card-carrying member. He was also a multitalented musician, song writer, cartoonist and humorist. During 22 months of incarceration, Joe Hill became famous, an intrepid symbol of struggling workers. In the words of historian William M. Adler, "the IWW and its allies had transformed what had begun as a murder case of strictly local concern, in a remote city of the intermountain American West, into an international cause célèbre."

Founded in 1905, the IWW had an ambitious agenda: organize the unskilled men and women not represented by the elite craft unions of the American Federation of Labor.

The Wobblies used direct action, slowdowns, strikes and the threat of sabotage to get abused workers better pay and working conditions. On streets, IWW soapbox orators urged the dispossessed to fight for the dignity of all who toil. They were despised by the rich and powerful and many did jail time for

their efforts. Mainstream newspapers portrayed them as errant troublemakers and ne'er-do-wells.

Trekking across the country, working where he could, Hill joined up with the IWW in Portland, Oregon. In August, 1913 he arrived in Utah in search of employment. The following January, a Salt Lake City grocer and his son were shot dead in their store. At the time of the murders, a notorious habitual criminal named Frank Z. Wilson was found in the vicinity of the grocery, but the law zeroed in on Hill. He was arrested and charged with homicide.

The same night as the killing, Hill showed up at a physician's home with a bullet wound. He said that he had been shot in a dispute over a woman. However, authorities maintained he was shot by the grocer's son before escaping the store. No heartless criminal, Hill had once been arrested for vagrancy. But he was a known member of a radical union. His affiliation with the IWW was deemed his greatest transgression. A cruel and twisted justice would eliminate this unapologetic voice of the working class.

First published in 1965, "The Letters of Joe Hill" is composed mostly of his letters from jail and a few missives from "before the frame-up." The book concludes with lyrics, poetry and drawings. Hill wrote catchy songs celebrating laboring people and lampooning the owners of capital and their lackeys. Many of his compositions were adapted to familiar religious and popular tunes. Eventually, they made their way into "The Little Red Songbook," which featured songs written by Hill and other minstrels of labor "to fan the flames of discontent."

One of Hill's best known songs is "The Preacher and the Slave" sung to the air of the melodic "Sweet By and By." The original hymn expresses a vision of divine happiness in the afterlife. The IWW subscribed to a more earth-bound dogma expressed succinctly by Mother Jones: "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!" Hill's composition had this chorus:

*You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll have pie in the sky when you die.*

Thus, says Hill with tongue in cheek, don't ponder or confront the injustices of this world ... shut up and get back to your menial lousy work! Present-day Wobbly Alexis Buss writes: "This iconic song, which added the phrase 'Pie in the Sky' to the American vernacular, was written to ridicule anti-labor clergy, in particular the Salvation Army." Hill's ending chorus aimed at those whose comfort is due to the sweat of wage slaves:

*You will eat, bye and bye,
When you've learned how to cook and to fry;
Chop some wood, 'twill do you good,
And you'll eat in the sweet bye and bye.*

Hill's letters from prison reflect his commitment to the IWW and cause of labor. They are a testimony to his intelligence, strength, kindness, patience and humor. On the eve of his execution, he wrote to Bill Hayward: "I die like a true rebel. Don't waste any time mourning — organize!" And he makes this request: "Could you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah."

The story of Joe Hill is encapsulated in this little commemorative volume. It contains late historian Philip Foner's introduction. For this edition, a brief foreword is provided by rocker Tom Morello, of Rage Against the Machine, who says that Hill is his "favorite musician." For a more complete rendering of Hill's story and the IWW, read the fine book "The Man Who Never Died" by William M. Adler.

In Chicago, Joe's funeral would be attended by thousands. In time his ashes would be respectfully scattered in many places. If anyone ever asks you, "Where is Joe Hill buried?" the correct answer is "All over the world."

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