



Every now and then I should say that the opinions implied here come from my own delusions and are not necessarily those of the Madison Folk Music Society or its members, their families, their dogs or budgies, though I'm sure it's no surprise to readers of Whither Zither that my musical partner Lou and I support those rallying against the crazy war against Wisconsin families still going on as I write this in mid-March of 2011.

We eagerly accepted an invitation to lead in song the throngs gathered around the capitol to warm us all up in anticipation of the appearance of Jesse Jackson on the chilly evening of the 18th of February. We sang three songs. Two were reworkings of folk songs in the public domain: We Shall Not Be Moved (*We'll keep this rally rolling / We shall not be moved / Although we could be bowling / We shall not be moved...*) And "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean" (*Bring back, bring back, oh bring back Wisconsin to me, to me...*) We finished our rally debut with the amazing song "Solidarity Forever," but without any changes whatsoever.

We have never led so many thousands in song, and we were never so viscerally convinced of the power of singing in concretizing the unity of emotion of such a gathering. I couldn't help thinking of a Yip Harburg quote I've used before: "Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought."

And Solidarity Forever is quite a song. I did not realize until actually rehearsing the verses that its strength comes in part from the difficult flow of the words. The only way to sing the song is to powerfully punch out the words which often don't flow smoothly at all:

*It is we who ploughed the prairies,
Built the cities where they trade
Dug the mines and built the workshops,
Endless miles of railroad laid
Now we stand outcast and starving
'mid the wonders we have made
But the union makes us strong*

In my opinion, this choppy, sputtering

lyric, with all its s's and b's and m's, gives the song a strident quality, perfect for its message. All your speech forming tools -- tongue, lips, etc. -- have to work extra hard (particularly in a chilly wind) to form these sentences. I imagine ventriloquists steer clear of this anthem.

I had never sung the whole song before and didn't know much about it except that the lyrics were written by a man named Ralph Chaplin, so I Googled and found that on the 17th of January 1915, the radical labor organizer and anarchist Lucy Parsons led a hunger march in Chicago; Chaplin wrote "Solidarity Forever" for the march. He set his words to the melody of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" -- lyrics by Julia Ward Howe -- and before that, for the abolitionist song "John Brown's Body" of circa 1850.

Ralph Chaplin was very active in the International Workers of the World (members, including the legendary Utah Phillips, call themselves "Wobblies") and as such, though dedicated to labor rights, he was actually opposed to the idea of "labor unions." The IWW was formed in Chicago in 1905 in actual opposition to the policies of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The IWW's goal was to promote worker solidarity in a revolutionary struggle to overthrow the employing class, which was not an objective of the AFL. The verses of Solidarity Forever take inspiration from the Preamble of the IWW which in part states that, "'Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.'"

Chaplin was a founder of the IWW and was sincere in his beliefs to the extent of spending years in prison, with about 100 other Wobblies, for supposedly interfering with the draft of World War One. While confined, he continued to write. Two of his works -- one a book of his prison poems called "Bars and Shadows," which features an extensive introduction by famed activist Scott Nearing in 1922 when the booklet was published, with Chaplin still in prison -- are available for free download at gutenberg.org.

In an article by Chaplin in 1968 called "Why I Wrote Solidarity Forever," he said, among other even stronger anti-trade-union words, "[among the

Wobblies] there is no one who does not look with a rather jaundiced eye upon the 'success' of Solidarity Forever."

Ralph Chaplin was a complicated, busy, and fiery fellow, and is worth Googling, to put it mildly. To me, as a songwriter, it seemed unfortunate that he was unhappy about how his greatest song came to be used. I wondered if the late great Joe Glazer had anything to say about this aspect of Chaplin's history.

Sure enough, Joe Glazer (1918-2006), famed union songwriter and singer, in his autobiography, "Labor's Troubadour," speaks of hiring Chaplin to speak to a convention of the International Woodworkers of America in Portland, Oregon in 1960. Chaplin, who died the next year, was by then in his seventies, but gave a rousing ten minute address for which he received a standing ovation, followed by Glazer leading the room in singing Solidarity Forever. Ralph later told Joe, "When I wrote that song on my living-room floor in Chicago back in 1915 (?) I never imagined they'd still be singing it forty-five years later." That he sounded proud of the dissemination of his song makes me want to believe that his outlook had broadened and relaxed somewhat. Maybe I'm wrong, but I like to think that by the end of his life he wouldn't have minded our singing his song with the trade and industrial union supporters of Wisconsin. As a matter of fact, the official IWW web site currently proclaims its strong support for the ongoing Wisconsin struggle (URL below).

From **Smithsonian Folkways** (URL below), you can download, for 99 cents, an abbreviated but impassioned version of Solidarity Forever sung by Joe Glazer himself in 1967 on what was originally a private album made for members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and rereleased in 1982 as "Joe Glazer Sings Labor Songs."

Sources:

- **Labor's Troubadour** by Joe Glazer, U. of IL Press, Chicago, 2001
- www.folkways.si.edu/
- www.gutenberg.org/
- unionsong.com/u025.html
- en.wikipedia.org/
- www.iww.org/