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# "A Song Workers Everywhere Sing:" Zilphia Horton and the Creation of Labor's Musical Canon

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“A Song Workers Everywhere Sing:” Zilphia Horton  
and the Creation of Labor’s Musical Canon

“A Song Workers Everywhere Sing:” Zilphia Horton  
and the Creation of Labor’s Musical Canon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History

by

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University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Music in Music Performance and German, 2012

May 2014  
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

Zilphia Horton, a college educated, middle class white woman from the rural American south, created the canon of music that would become central to the black freedom struggle in postwar America. Horton's work in the post-New Deal labor movement established the methods of incorporating protest music in movements of social justice that prevailed for the rest of the century. The work songs and hymns that she collected, arranged, notated, and published while music director at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, TN—including “We Shall Overcome,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “We Shall Not Be Moved”—motivated generations of activists as they transformed the nation. This paper addresses Horton's methods of collecting, teaching, and applying music as a powerful medium of social change - to motivate, to express shared emotions, problems, and goals, and to unify a diverse and divided movement. She developed the musical canon of labor, assured its transmission into civil rights, and created one of the most important and lasting musical legacies of the twentieth century.

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My parents taught me the necessity of a deep, sacrificial love for the poor, the oppressed, and the hurting. Their example makes people like Zilphia Horton more than academic subjects. Rather, like my parents, they are people who make inconceivable sacrifices for those that they love.

## Dedication

For Dena Williams, who would have been great friends with Zilphia Horton

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## Introduction

Zilphia Horton, a college-educated, middle class white woman from the rural south, spent her life helping workers harness the power of collective song. During the 21 years she spent as the music director of Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, Horton worked with hundreds of workers, white and black, who traveled there from throughout the South. A collector of culture, a teacher, and a performer, Horton shaped the music of the unions in the classroom and on the picket lines. With her help, grassroots activists learned the songs of their brethren and wrote their own, a powerful means of expression for a working class stifled by their lack of economic power. The work songs and hymns she collected, arranged, notated, and published gave voice to the injustices and oppression experienced by ordinary people. She passionately believed that music could unify the diverse and divided labor movement and bring about real social change.<sup>1</sup>

Horton enrolled at the Highlander Folk School in 1935. Founded only three years earlier, Highlander served as an interracial training school for rural and industrial leaders. Within just a few months, Horton was appointed the school's music director. Her work centered on labor's cultural development, particularly in music, and she built on the traditional folk repertoire of hymns, spirituals, and folk tunes. Horton collected music during her extensive travels to help unions, and she also invited workers to share their music with her, either in person or by mail. In turn, Horton incorporated workers' music into her classes, when leading songs at union meetings or strikes, and in the songbooks she compiled and edited. Horton encouraged workers to further develop their use of music in their personal struggles. Thus the song of one group or region became the song of an entire movement. Horton created labor's musical canon through her

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<sup>1</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmers' Union School, 1952, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, box 6, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.



collection and transmission of workers' songs. Her songbooks, filled with such well-known favorites as "We Will Overcome," "Solidarity," and "We Shall Not be Moved," became one of the most important legacies to come out of the twentieth-century labor movement.

Horton's philosophy illuminates the role music plays in social justice movements. As Horton developed her methods for collecting and using music, music became more than a means to express and preserve popular culture. Instead, Horton began talking about and actually applying music as a powerful medium of social change - to motivate, to express shared emotions, problems, and goals, and to unify a diverse and divided movement. Her influence over the creation, transmission, and use of music in the labor movement shows how music was a tool of social justice throughout the twentieth century. Music was not something activists simply did; rather music was a vital component of effecting real social change.



Zilphia Horton with her guitar, no date.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Zilphia Horton with her guitar, no date. Courtesy of Thorsten Horton.

When Horton dedicated her extensive musical training to the problems of southern workers, she was joining what Michael Denning calls the “Cultural Front.” Denning disagrees with those historians, such as Glenda Gilmore, who argue that the Communists were the driving force behind the Popular Front. Instead, Denning identifies the Popular Front as a broad, grass-roots, alliance between mass-production, immigrant, blue-collar workers, and the new class of “mass culture mental workers.” Denning’s Popular Front transformed society through literature, popular music and film, theater, and political theory.<sup>3</sup> Horton certainly fits this description; her work in music and drama for southern working people was a crucial outlet of expression as well as a tool that helped bring about real change.

Denning centers the majority of the Cultural Front’s musical output in composers and performers as Duke Ellington, Billy Holiday, Aaron Copland, and George Gershwin. Denning mentions Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie as “earnest bands of urban radicals... writing protest songs under the guise of ‘folk’ music.”<sup>4</sup> He mentions Horton and Highlander, saying she “attempted to fuse southern vernacular culture with the avant-garde workers theater of the Northeast.” He sums up her greatest (and apparently only) musical accomplishment in a single sentence. “It was she who learned the great anthem ‘We Shall Overcome’... and spread it through the movement.”<sup>5</sup> She does not appear in Denning’s chapter on music and musical theater. Denning’s idea of “people’s songs” is Duke Ellington’s *Jump for Joy*; he says that “folk music was not the center of the ‘music front.’”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 284.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 284.

But Horton's extensive work in labor music was rooted in traditional hymns, spirituals, and folk songs, a far cry from the "jazz and swing [that was] the dominant popular music of the young workers who built the CIO," according to Denning.<sup>7</sup> On the labor front, music was an everyday occurrence, an integral part of organizing, striking, and struggling for a better life. The musical canon Horton created encompassed all of the forces at play in the Popular Front – political ideologies, evangelical Christianity, black and white musical traditions. Horton's work directly challenges Denning's definition of the Cultural Front. She was not like Pete Seeger, the son of a Harvard musicologist who transplanted protest songs to the south. She was born in Arkansas and based in Tennessee, a college-educated, formerly trained musician. Furthermore, she was one of the southern radicals who brought the black and white working classes together, a challenge to Glenda Gilmore's notion that the Communists were responsible for this early foray into civil rights.<sup>8</sup> Horton's work roots much of Denning's Cultural Front in evangelical Christianity.

Perhaps most importantly, Horton created labor's musical canon. We do not have a thorough analysis of labor music's contribution to both the cultural production of the 1930s through the 1950s and to the labor movement. Labor music is customarily viewed as either a small and unimportant aspect of strikes and union meetings or a mere precursor to civil rights music. The sociologist William G. Roy, in *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, limits his analysis of music use to the communist-led Old Left and the civil rights movement. He argues that the Old Left used music in order to mobilize and teach the working class without actually involving them in its creation, which he contrasts to

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 328.

<sup>8</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*, (New York: Norton, 2008).

the interactive music making process of the civil rights movement. Perhaps communists employed music in the hierarchical, top-down way Roy describes, but Zilphia Horton certainly did not. Horton's lifelong work of incorporating workers in the creation and use of their own musical culture starkly repudiates this claim.<sup>9</sup>

While Horton certainly is responsible for the transmission of "We Shall Overcome" from labor into the civil rights movement, her contribution to labor and music as a means of social justice is much more than that. Though her story is largely one of labor, the years before her unexpected death in 1956 were dedicated to the struggle for racial equality. Viewing labor music back through the lens of the civil rights movement reduces labor music to a mere precursor. Horton's work demonstrates how extensively music was used in the labor movement as a powerful instrument of social change and was important in its own right. Yet she also helped make music synonymous with the struggle for social justice and demonstrated that music could effect radical social change. Her work not only explicitly links labor and civil rights, it explains how labor music was propelled into the civil rights era. Her musical canon would become central to the black freedom struggle in postwar America. The cultural foundation of civil rights is rooted in the musical culture she helped create.

This study of Zilphia Horton's life and work reclaims her importance in the labor narrative and revises scholarship dedicated almost exclusively to men. Books such as Anthony Dunbar's *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets*, James J. Lorence's *A Hard Journey: The Life of Don West*, Erik Gellman and Jared Rolls's *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America*, about Claude Williams and Owen Whitfield, and Robert Martin's *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South*,

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<sup>9</sup> William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music and Race in the United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

focus on key *male* members of the labor movement. Though women are mentioned, they are not important. Horton customarily receives half of a page. Anthony Dunbar, in *Against the Grain*, summarizes Horton's musical contribution to labor in only five lines, writing simply that she "contributed to the labor movement as a drama teacher and a collector of songs."<sup>10</sup> In *The Gospel of the Working Class* for example, Roll and Gellman sum up music's contribution to labor: "[Claude] Williams, [Lee] Hays, and the students adapted the hymn "I Will Overcome," giving it a message about the saving power of the union. This song would go on to become the classic civil rights song "We Shall Overcome."<sup>11</sup> Zilphia Horton claims a few lines elsewhere in the work, but her own integral role in the transmission of "We Shall Overcome" is not even included.

Zilphia Horton flouts almost every expectation of what a labor activist should be, and she forces a recentering of the Cultural Front. She does not fit into the easy categories – Denning's "avant garde" "Cultural Front," Dunbar's group of activists driven by their faith, or Gilmore's communist-driven radicalism. Rather, she is a fusion of these, a representative of the rural south, the cultured city, and the educated middle class. She gave voice to the oppression felt by workers throughout the nation, black and white. She developed the musical canon of labor, assured its transmission into civil rights, and created one of the most important and lasting musical legacies of the twentieth century.

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<sup>10</sup> Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Erik Gellman and Jared Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 76.

## Radicalization

“What incidents could have influenced me to be even half tolerant of labor in a state where politics, churches, newspapers were so reactionary and bitterly opposed to labor?” Zilphia Horton asked herself this question in an essay entitled, “How I Became Interested in Labor.” Not only did she transcend the “reactionary and bitter” opposition to labor in 1920s Arkansas, she transcended her class, her race, and her upbringing, defying expectations to join a radical movement. Horton’s interest in labor came from a unique kind of access augmented by a questioning mind. As a young adult, Horton spent a crucial time with the radical Cumberland Presbyterian preacher Claude Williams in Paris, Arkansas. Before this, Horton looked upon the working class as only an outsider and a child could. These early experiences shaped her consciousness about a group of people whose experience was far different than her own.<sup>12</sup>

Zilphia Mae Horton, née Johnson, was born on April 14, 1910 in Spadra, Arkansas, a coal mining boom town in the Arkansas valley. Horton’s family moved nineteen times between her birth and high school. Her family eventually settled in Paris, Arkansas where her father owned a small interest in a coal mine. During her early years, Horton moved with her family to Idaho twice and to several towns in Arkansas. At the time she began school, her family was living in the small community of Hay’s Chapel. For a year, she walked a mile and a half to reach the country school. Her parents then decided to send Horton to live with her grandmother in Clarksville, where Horton could attend public school and study music with her grandmother. Horton lived with her grandmother for six years with only a brief interim at home when her

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<sup>12</sup> Zilphia Horton, “How I Became Interested in Unions,” nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 16, Folder 3, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

family moved to Clarksville, AR.<sup>13</sup> When she was 13, her family moved to Paris, where Horton joined them and stayed until she graduated from high school.

Horton was an inquisitive child surrounded by strong, outspoken women. Her mother, Ora Howard Johnson, had four sisters, and they with their mother were a strong presence in Horton's life. Horton herself had two sisters, and the "Johnson sisters" were a veritable force. Horton's father was a seemingly quiet yet stalwart man, overwhelmed perhaps by the sheer number of women in his life.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, though, he taught Horton to be a "doubter." As a child, Horton often challenged what people said, demanding to know of a person's truth, "How do you know it's true and can you prove it?"<sup>15</sup>

Horton related a memory that encapsulates the influence her father had on this way of thinking. When she was six years old, a traveling company came to her town. She was generally only allowed to go to a show once a week, and then only on the weekend. She went to see the show once, and then the next night asked her father if she could see it again. After a long hesitation, he asked her, "Why do you ask that?" She replied, "All the other little girls go." Her father's reply had a profound impact on Horton. He said, "Remember this – no matter if every single person in this town goes to the show, if that's your reason, then you have no reason. You'll never amount to anything if you do things because other people do them." He evidently repeated this to her frequently. Horton said that this experience meant she "no longer accepted as the 'gospel truth' what people said." He taught her to always have reason behind her own actions and to demand the reasoning behind others'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Zilphia Horton, "Autobiography," nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 12, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>14</sup> Thorsten and Charis Horton, interview by author, Madison, WI, July 27, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Zilphia Horton, "How I became Interested in Unions."

<sup>16</sup> Zilphia Horton, "How I Became Interested in Unions."

This exchange with her father shaped the way Horton viewed the world. Before she ever had a “union experience,” she learned to treat any new experience with a challenging and open mind. Evidently the unions’ reasoning was convincing. While at Highlander, Horton told a man at a Farmers Union Convention in Denver that she sang for labor because she believed in the people who had made up the songs, in what the songs stood for, and in the people to whom she sang them.<sup>17</sup> Horton’s work over her lifetime was characterized by deep commitment.

When Horton was very young, her family moved twice to Idaho for a year each time, about fifteen miles south of the Canadian border.<sup>18</sup> Her father was an ore prospector, regaling his family nightly with stories of the Finns, Swedes, Italians, and Poles with whom he worked. Horton was fascinated by these stories, seeing these rough miners as romantic representatives of a world she had never known. She was especially struck by the story of a Swede and by her father’s reaction to her questions about him. After supper one evening, her father began that evening’s story; with a straight back, puffed out cheeks, and fist banging on the table, he shouted in his imitation of the Swede’s accent, “Man is yoost an animalk. All he wants is something to fill his belly and nothing in his head. When will the workers preach the brother-hood of man?” At this point, he burst out laughing. Horton asked who this man was. Her father replied that he was an I.W.W. [Industrial Workers of the World], to which Horton asked what an I.W.W. was. “The smile vanished from his face and he looked straight at me as though I were treading on forbidden ground. Then he said very seriously, ‘They are people who are never satisfied with anything.’”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

<sup>18</sup> Zilphia Horton, “Autobiography.”

<sup>19</sup> Zilphia Horton, “How I became Interested in Unions.”



Though for two years Horton's father prospected in Idaho, he did not support labor agitation. Horton knew to never ask about the I.W.W. again. Yet instead of distrusting foreign laborers unsatisfied with their lot, she thought of the Swede as a "warm and colorful person," one who "might represent something unknown" to her, either as a foreigner or as a radical. Because the Swede interested her beyond just his identity as an I.W.W., she thought she would "like to know another I.W.W." Even from a young age, Horton saw the humanity of people, refusing to reduce them to a political stance. Her father may have assumed the Swede had joined the I.W.W. because everyone else had, a stance he had warned Horton against. For him, the Swede was defined by being an I.W.W. But Horton reversed this meaning. Instead of defining the Swede, the Swede defined the I.W.W.: "An I.W.W. was a lovable Swede who talked about the brotherhood of man." Horton saw more in the Swede than just a union, and that made the I.W.W. something worth investigating further.<sup>20</sup>

Horton's family eventually returned to Arkansas, where her father became a coal mine operator. . In her own town, Horton experienced labor struggles firsthand for the first time as she witnessed a strike and the reactions of the bosses. A large group of Mexicans, the first she had ever seen, arrived in her town by train. Someone told her that they had arrived to work in the mines, because the men in the town had "decided they didn't want to work." The men who normally occupied the tents surrounding the slag heap had disappeared. Instead she saw Mexicans coming out of the tents wearing pit clothes. She climbed the tippie, a structure used to load the coal into railroad cars, as she often did, but she was immediately yelled at to come down. She descended "knowing there was something mysterious about the tippie." She later saw a man with a machine gun at the top.

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<sup>20</sup> Zilphia Horton, "How I became Interested in Unions."

Horton seemed quite comfortable in the mines, using the equipment as a playground and chatting with the employees. The day the Mexicans started work, she overheard the top boss cursing about the Mexicans' poor work and complaining that some had never even worked in a mine. Horton "innocently" – and probably with a touch of guile - asked him why they had bothered to bring the men here, if they were so bad. Horton ended the story by merely saying, "[the bosses] looked at me in amazement and I was told to go back to the truck and wait."<sup>21</sup>

Horton commented that her way of thinking had been shaped when "inexperienced Mexicans took the place of regular workers whom I liked." She did not take issue with the fact that the replacements were Mexican. Rather, Horton was puzzled that men she had known and liked had so easily and casually been replaced by less experienced mine workers. Even as a child Horton seems to have sided with the workers over the mine bosses.

One night, Horton was told that there was trouble at the mines. Late that evening, after the lights had been turned off, Horton could hear her father pacing in the house. At one point, she heard a car drive up toward the house. She climbed out of bed and quietly moved to where she could see into her father's room. He was standing at the window with his pistol in his hand. The car kept going, and she watched her father sit in his chair.

This watchful patrol was repeated night after night. One afternoon, as the sun was setting, a car drove up and parked in the pine thicket close to Horton's house. Her father was asleep in his chair. She recognized the men in the car, two miners whom she liked and would smile and chat with her when she was at the mine. Horton was not afraid, but she knew, intuitively, that the men had come for her father. With a wise perception that indicated her maturity, she thought that if she merely approached these men as if they had come for a congenial visit, the whole episode

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<sup>21</sup> Zilphia Horton, "How I became Interested in Unions."

would be smoothed over. She ran out to the miners' car. They did not smile, and they avoided her eyes. Ignoring these slights, Horton simply said, "Hello," to which she received a response of "Howdy." After a pause, she asked if they wanted to see someone. "A dead silence" followed, until finally one of the men said, "No, I guess we don't want to see anybody," and the car drove away down the hill.

Horton had little else to say about this incident. She did not say what she thought those men had come to do or say to her father. She seemed to refuse to take sides, neither condemning the men for their mysterious mission against her father nor her father for whatever he had done to provoke them. Horton simply wrote that this experience and others like it "kept me from being blind to the meaning of unions when I finally had a chance to learn about them." Though their intentions were unclear, the miners never seemed to be a threat to the curious and perceptive Horton. She demonstrated a capability to observe a possibly explosive situation and, instead of hiding or ignoring it, putting herself in the middle of the storm.<sup>22</sup>

These childhood experiences taught Horton to challenge what others presented as truth and to approach workers with friendliness and affection. By the time she was a young adult, Horton refused to accept the anti-labor agenda of her state and her class. Instead, she encountered the labor movement with interest and an open mind.

Horton graduated from high school in Paris. She had studied music and piano with her grandmother since the age of seven; from that age she said, these subjects were her "chief interest."<sup>23</sup> She pursued a study of music at the College of the Ozarks in nearby Clarksville, only 25 miles northeast of her home.<sup>24</sup> She studied piano and voice, taking part in artistic groups such

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<sup>22</sup> Zilphia Horton, "How I became Interested in Unions."

<sup>23</sup> Zilphia Horton, "Autobiography."

<sup>24</sup> The College of the Ozarks is now named the University of the Ozarks.

as the orchestra, Glee Club and The Muses, a club “which purposes to seek true culture.”<sup>25</sup> She also played in local theatre and for the Lions and Rotary Clubs. Horton seems to have surrounded herself with music; she competed successfully in talent competitions and was voted most talented girl by her class.



The College of the Ozarks Orchestra.  
Zilphia Horton sits at the piano.<sup>26</sup>

After graduating in 1931, Horton taught school in Paris for a few years. During this time she met Claude Williams, the controversial and dynamic preacher of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Paris. Williams angered members of his own congregation and those of other churches in the town, both because of his controversial teachings and his progressive methods of evangelism. Williams used recreation as a way to attract people to church, and he bought a highly criticized pool table and provided cards and games. He also organized a weekly Sunday baseball game, an idea that caused his opponents to “demand the arrest of anyone who tried to play baseball on the Lord’s day.” He preached against racism both to meetings of poor African American cotton farmers and to his regular white Paris congregation. According to the historians Erik Gellman and Jared Roll, Claude and his wife taught “equality between the sexes

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<sup>25</sup> Thorsten and Charis Horton, interview by author.  
College of the Ozarks yearbook, 1931.

<sup>26</sup> Zilphia Horton at piano, no date. Courtesy of Thorsten Horton.

and championed the new 1920s idea of ‘companionate marriage,’ a view that marriage should be based on democratic family organization and emphasize the emotional and sexual needs of both husband and wife.’<sup>27</sup>

Like many young people in Paris, Horton was drawn to Williams. Besides his stirring rhetoric and progressive views, Horton was undoubtedly interested in Williams’s music, a blend of original material, folk songs, and hymns. Fellow labor activist Lee Hays called Williams “The Singing Preacher” because of the importance of music to his work. Hays claimed that “many of the Almanac union songs and certainly the spirit of all of them derived largely from Claude’s work in this field.” Hays was referring to the Almanac Singers, his folk music group active in the early 1940s. Horton was “one of Claude’s pupils,” and she helped him in his church while teaching in Paris.

In Williams, Horton was introduced to new, radical ideas that helped her make sense of the experiences she had had as a child. Horton had no doubt experienced hymns and folk songs throughout her childhood and seen their application as an expression of shared struggle and common goals. Williams took these works out of their sacred settings and incorporated them into his work as a labor activist. The foundation of Horton’s lifelong work, both a radical activism and a deep appreciation of music as a powerful tool in that activism, can be found in her work with Williams.<sup>28</sup>

Horton’s changing views and increased involvement with Williams did not sit well with her parents, especially with her father. At Williams’s encouragement, Horton applied to study at the Highlander Folk School in February, 1935. The tension in the Johnson family seems to have

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<sup>27</sup> Gellman and Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, 41-43.

<sup>28</sup> I am planning on visiting the Claude Williams Papers, housed at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI, this fall. Hopefully that research trip will shed additional light on the time she spent with Williams.

come to a head in late January of 1935, possibly because Horton was considering going to Highlander or perhaps because of Williams' clear influence on her. Regardless, there was a break between Horton and her family, one alluded to by others in letters to Horton. Howard Kester wrote Horton that he was "distressed to learn of the recent developments in connection with your father's attitude toward you."<sup>29</sup> After hearing of her problems from Williams, Willard Uphaus, a well-known pacifist preacher, wrote expressing his regret for the "difficult problems you are facing because of your active interest in building a new world." He applauded her plan to get "special training to organize and lead working people."<sup>30</sup> Another friend of Williams's, R.B. Tefferteller, wrote to say Williams "had received the fatal news...that there had been a definite break in [her] family relations." Tefferteller recommended she contact Highlander and try to spend some time there, in order to "delve below the realm of the superficial in human relations and find the strong bonds of mass strength that are so evident among the working masses."<sup>31</sup> Kester also encouraged Horton to attend Highlander "as soon as it can be arranged" because she would find in the place "a pleasant, genial group with which to work" where she could study the "basic ground-work in the fundamentals of economics, labor history et cetera."<sup>32</sup>

Though the exact nature of her family rift is unclear because she never wrote explicitly about it, Horton made a sacrifice for her beliefs, indicating that her radicalization was deep and real. Kester commended Horton for the "courageous...stand" she took and expressed certainty

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<sup>29</sup> Howard Kester to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 24, 1935, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>30</sup> Willard Uphaus to Zilphia Horton, Jan 26, 1935, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>31</sup> R.B. Tefferteller to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 23, 1935, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Kester to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 24, 1935.

At some point, Horton made up with her parents, although when is unclear. In 1947 Horton took her son Thorsten to visit her parents in Paris. See "Family" vs. 2 by Myles Horton.

she would never regret her decision. Evidently for a time she was at a loss for where to go or live. “Please be assured that your friends are working to find a happy situation for you and that you will be happily located in a very short while,” Kester wrote.<sup>33</sup> The situation he had in mind was Highlander. If she was already considering going to Highlander, the letters she received must have encouraged her impulse.

Horton submitted her application to Highlander on February 12, 1935 and apparently moved there shortly after. She may have intended Highlander to be a stepping stone to another labor school such as Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York. Tufferteller urged her to consider Highlander instead, as “it might prove rather difficult for you to get in at Brookwood within the next few months, for they have a tremendous number of applicants for admission.”<sup>34</sup> Kester wrote her that Highlander “will prepare you in a splendid way for Brookwood or some other more advanced labor school.” Not only would she learn the basics of labor at Highlander, continued Kester, she “would also be able to make a genuine contribution to the school [herself].”<sup>35</sup>

Kester could have had little idea how right he was. Horton’s musical training fit perfectly into the cultural needs of the school. Highlander already had a small drama program, which Horton helped expand during her time there. She began an extensive project to collect labor music and folk tunes, which developed into collaborations with unions to publish songbooks. She became well known throughout the labor movement for her song leading and collecting, and she spoke to labor groups about the role of music in the movement.

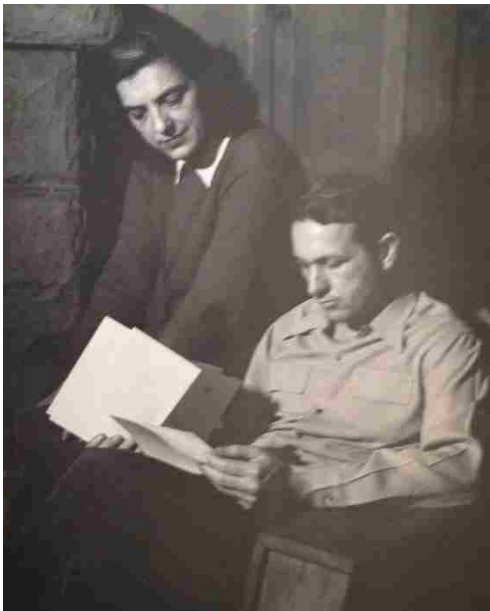
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<sup>33</sup> Howard Kester to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 24, 1935.

<sup>34</sup> R.B. Tefferteller to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 23, 1935

<sup>35</sup> Howard Kester to Zilphia Horton, Jan. 24, 1935.

However, it was not merely Horton's contribution to Highlander that kept her there beyond the spring term. Upon arriving, Zilphia met Myles Horton, and the two quickly fell in love. Myles had founded Highlander with Don West and the Methodist minister James Dombrowski in 1932, modeling it after the residential folk schools he had visited in Denmark. Myles was strongly influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, with whom he had studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York.<sup>36</sup> Highlander began as a training school for economically disadvantaged local residents, although it quickly became a hub of labor, civil rights, and socialist education.



Zilphia and Myles Horton.<sup>37</sup>

According to Myles, although many people thought he and Zilphia had fallen in love at first sight, they did not. Myles wrote in an essay titled "Family," as "Zilphia had been at Highlander almost a week before we fell in love." Myles and Zilphia were quickly aware of their love for each other, but the idea of marriage required a great deal of thought and conversation.

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<sup>36</sup> John Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School 1932-1962*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Zilphia and Myles Horton, no date. Courtesy of Thorsten Horton.



Myles's trade was "education," while Zilphia's was "music." The two activists worried that, though they were both interested in "radical social change," neither would give up his or her distinctive approach to the problem. Though they worried whether theirs "could be a marriage of equals," they decided to try it out as long as it "was mutually workable." This arrangement would last as long as they did not have children; that decision, they decided, would "require a different and possible permanent commitment."<sup>38</sup>

Myles and Zilphia clearly had progressive views of marriage, perhaps influenced by the "companionate marriage" preached by Claude and Joyce Williams during Zilphia's time in Paris. They did not view a childless marriage as a "permanent commitment;" instead they made a commitment to "try to make it work" with the understanding they could separate if the marriage proved untenable. Myles and Zilphia knew they "would never make it unless [they] worked out a way to pursue [their] own independent courses." Although they would have liked to have been together all of the time, they were often separated by their work. Only seven months after their wedding, Zilphia travelled to New York City to study theater at the New Theater School for several months. Myles travelled a great deal as the director of Highlander, and Zilphia eventually returned to Clarksville and the College of the Ozarks to take graduate studies in music. They augmented this time apart by exchanging almost daily letters.

By the early 1940s, Myles and Zilphia were both able to concentrate on Highlander and the school's programs. This stability led to the question of children. Given their ages (Myles was 30 at the time and Zilphia 25), they felt that, if they were to have children, they should not wait too long. However, Myles wrote that "we agreed that children should not be used by adults to work out their own problems and that we would have to be prepared to make a different kind of

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<sup>38</sup> Myles Horton, "Family," nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 1, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

commitment to our marriage.” After giving this a great deal of thought, Myles and Zilphia decided “we were sure enough of ourselves and our relationships” that they would have children.<sup>39</sup> Their son Thorsten was born February 22, 1943 and their daughter Charis March 24, 1945.

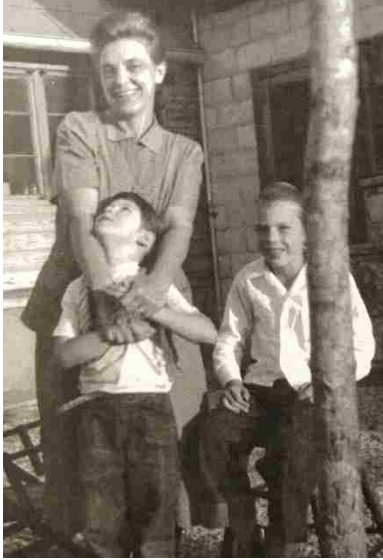
Myles and Zilphia’s attitudes toward child rearing were as progressive as those toward their marriage. Again hearkening back to Williams’s views of marriage as a “democratic family organization,” Myles and Zilphia worked to “share all...responsibilities equally including take care of the children.” The duties that only Zilphia could perform would be balanced by Myles “doing as much of the housework, etc.” as he could.<sup>40</sup> Myles said their relationship with Thorsten and Charis had been, from the beginning, “as adults with their own interested related to children as adults, not pretending or playing like we were children or had interests limited to the interests of children.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Myles Horton, “Family.”

<sup>40</sup> Myles Horton, “Family.”

<sup>41</sup> Myles Horton, “Family” vs. 2, nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 1, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.



Zilphia Horton with daughter Charis, left, and son Thorsten, right.<sup>42</sup>

The children grew up in a unique environment, witnessing as they did the many people and ideas that traveled in and out of Highlander. Their parents shielded them from the outside world; once Thorsten entered school he was shocked by the other children’s “talk of niggers.” Myles explained to Thorsten, “the background of the people in the community and why it was necessary for him not to think of them as bad, hopeless children.” He realized then how sheltered the children were in this way. Myles recounted another episode when the family visited the Sears Roebuck store in Chattanooga. The children were extremely disappointed to find that the water fountain labeled “colored” did not actually have colored water. They demanded of the black elevator operator, who “had a high status position” in their minds, why Sears used this false advertisement.<sup>43</sup>

As the children grew older, Myles said, “[Thorsten and Charis] knew we had to work and they were beginning to learn why we felt what we do was important.” The uniqueness of Myles

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<sup>42</sup> Zilphia Horton with her children, 1951. Courtesy of Thorsten Horton.

<sup>43</sup> Myles Horton, “Family” vs. 2.

and Zilphia's family arrangement meant she was still able to pursue her labor work and continue traveling, not a small feat for a woman in the 1940s. Horton had been propelled to Highlander by a series of childhood events and relationships with activists and radicals. Her own radicalization was absolute; she wove her personal life into her work, a lifelong dedication to the music of working people.

## Creating Cultural Roots: Zilphia's Methods

### Music

As Highlander's music director, Horton was dedicated to using music in the labor movement, one of the few labor activists to do so. Folk singer and fellow activist Lee Hays described her as "one of the few musicians who remain to work steadily in Southern labor struggles;" she combined her skills as a college educated, classically trained musician with her deep appreciation for old spirituals, hymns, and folk tunes in order to push music into the center of the movement.<sup>44</sup> Using oral memory, her connections with labor movements across the nation, and her natural penchant for song leading, Horton turned regional spirituals and traditional songs into national sensations.

Horton made Highlander "an educational institution where folk singing was actually part of the curriculum."<sup>45</sup> She believed music could unite the labor movement and give workers a meaningful outlet for their frustrations and beliefs. Yet her work was not just limited to the school or even to music; Horton often left Highlander to work on other drama and dance projects. But the music of the workers remained at the center of her work.

Horton's first few years at Highlander involved a great deal of time away from the school, assisting unions in the south and teaching at other schools. She returned to Clarksville, Arkansas to take graduate classes in music, and she spent several months in New York City studying theater. At the same time, she collected folk music. From 1935 to 1939, Horton travelled to the Ozarks, the Great Smokies, and the Cumberland mountains to collect songs from southern industrial workers, probably in conjunction with her travel for the school. These songs addressed their working conditions and everyday lives, and she edited a small collection of the

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<sup>44</sup> Lee Hays, "The Singing Preacher," nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 16, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>45</sup> Glyn Thomas, "Hear the Musing Ringing," *New South* 23, no. 3 (1968): 37.

works.<sup>46</sup> This work was ethnographic in nature rather than a technique of labor activism. This concern with folk music went beyond the classical musical training of her childhood and college studies.

In 1939, Horton wanted to expand her collection project. Since she had already collected songs from rural mountain areas, she wished to collect in southern industrial cities and towns, to see how folk music was transformed into labor songs by people who migrated to urban areas. She applied to the Rosenwald Fund, set up by Sears Roebuck magnate Julius Rosenwald that mainly funded education endeavors, for “assistance in collecting and interpreting folk songs, particularly the new labor songs.”<sup>47</sup> In her funding proposal, Horton explained the main purpose of her study: “to show that there is a definite carry-over or influence of the old folk songs on the songs spontaneously sung by southern workers today.” After only four years at Highlander, Horton had made an important connection between work songs and the songs of the past. She hoped to publish her findings in a “simple human-interest story” and print song books. She planned to consult “recognized folk music authorities” such as Alan Lomax, Annabel Morris Buchanan, and members of the Southern Folklore Society.

Her plan reflected the ethnographic methods common at the time – traveling to locations to record or transcribe the music its inhabitants would sing. Alan Lomax, the best known song collector, sought “self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting

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<sup>46</sup> Zilphia Horton, “Statement of Plan of Work,” nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Raper to Zilphia Horton, Oct 11, 1939, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI. The Rosenwald Fund, commissioned by Sears, Roebuck, and Company magnate Julius Rosenwald, sought to equalize opportunities among Americans, funding education and health resources for African Americans in the south, among other things.

influences of popular culture.”<sup>48</sup> Lomax wanted to preserve the songs he thought would soon be forgotten. Horton also intended to preserve traditional songs and she acknowledged the “value of recording the songs.”<sup>49</sup> She disagreed, however, with Lomax’s intent to collect the songs himself, as this allowed the collector, not the musician, to define “American folk music” apart from the community that sang and played it. Alan Lomax’s “personal vision” of American folk music corrupted his work. The canon of folk music he produced is an image of Alan Lomax as much as it is of American folklore.<sup>50</sup>

Horton’s approach deviated markedly from Lomax’s. Instead of choosing what was important, Horton invited people to bring or send her their music. This shifted the power away from the collector and gave it to the one sharing. Alan Lomax was interested in creating an audience for the music he found, so that this music could become popular.<sup>51</sup> Horton was also interested in sharing the music she found, but she intended to preserve music’s power to express common struggles and goals across lines of region, trade, and ethnicity. Horton chose accordingly and adapted as needed. She thought it important to teach her students at Highlander how to take music from other areas and make it their own.

Even as Horton expanded her project as a folk music collector in 1939, she renewed her commitment to perform and teach music in the labor movement. Eventually her plans to record and interpret industrial work songs fell to the wayside, replaced by an effort to collect and teach music for its use in the labor movement. Horton’s labor work was influenced by her years as a

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<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Filene, “‘Our Singing Country:’ John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past,” *American Quarterly*, 43 no. 4 (1991): 605.

<sup>49</sup> Zilphia Horton, “Statement of Plan of Work.”

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Filene, “‘Our Singing Country.’”

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Filene, “‘Our Singing Country.’”

folklorist, but she flouted the traditional methods of Lomax and other collectors. The contrast between them requires further study which I hope to complete in the dissertation.

Horton collected music in two ways: through editing songbooks and through her music classes at Highlander. She published an annual Highlander songbook but she also edited songbooks for large union organizations. In 1938, R.R. Lawrence, the southern director of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee asked Horton to compile and edit a songbook. *Labor Songs* was published in 1939. Through *Labor Songs* Horton expanded her influence over labor music beyond Highlander. She wrote, “Union groups are realizing the need for songs in their meetings and on picket lines to enliven them and bring them more solidly together.”<sup>52</sup> She intended to collect the songs people were using and publish them, “so that all Locals may benefit from them.”<sup>53</sup>

This project was one of her first to use a methodology quite different from folklorists’. Horton used her connections within the labor movement to ask people to send her songs Horton still decided what to include in the songbook but intended to give workers a part in the making of their musical canon. Horton treated this songbook project not only as a tool to be used in the movement but as a way to incorporate movement members across the country in the creation of musical culture.

To create *Labor Songs*, Horton wrote to several newspapers and union organizations, explaining her need for workers’ contributions, and asking them to advertise her request for songs among their members. The popular weekly newspaper, *Labor* published a short article,

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<sup>52</sup> “Book of Union Songs to Be Issued for Southern Workers,” Oct 20, 1938, *The Industrial Leader*, Winston-Salem, N.C., reel 26, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>53</sup> Zilphia Horton to Recording Secretaries of T.W.O.C. Locals and A.F.H.W. and T.W.O.C. Organizers, Nov 8, 1938, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.



titled “Wanted, Songs” read, “[Zilphia Horton] is anxious to compile a workers’ song book, and would like workers to send her any song they may have written, or know about, or would like to have included.”<sup>54</sup> The *Labor Advocate* quoted Horton: “there are comparatively few Southern workers’ songs available with familiar tunes and content...we are endeavoring to meet this need by publishing a song book by and for southern workers.”<sup>55</sup> The *Federal Record* wrote, “In the belief that singing picket lines hold firmer than silent ones,” the songbook will include “the traditional labor songs that have come out of the labor movement...plus songs written and sung more recently under the stimulus of the CIO upsurge.”

Horton also wrote to unions: the Steel Worker’s Organizing Committee in Pittsburgh, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the regional CIO offices in Birmingham and San Diego, Industrial Union Councils in Seattle, Washington, Saint Paul, Minnesota, Martinsburg, Virginia, and Houston, Texas, to name a few. The unions assured Horton they had read her letter aloud in their meetings. Though she apparently told the *Labor Advocate* this was to be a “southern” songbook, she did not limit her collecting to the south. By including groups from different regions, Horton ensured that her songbook would be national in scope and reach.

Horton published songs that union members were using, including original compositions. She intended “to use only familiar tunes for the lyrics which must be sympathetic to the worker in his problems, union organizations, et cetera.” Each set of original song lyrics would be printed with the name of a popular hymn or folk song. She was assuming the singer would be able to sing the new words to the tune he or she had memorized. This method of reusing tunes with new words was a common practice in hymnody and folk songs. The “familiar tunes” were folk

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<sup>54</sup> “Wanted, Songs,” *Labor*, (Washington D.C.) November 18, 1938.

<sup>55</sup> “Publish Workers’ Songbook,” Oct 20, 1938, *Labor Advocate*, Nashville, TN., reel 26, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

melodies, spirituals, and hymns, songs that would be immediately recognizable to practically every reader. By using only work songs set to familiar melodies, Horton could print the words without needing to print the notated music, an expense, she thought, that would make “the price prohibitive to workers.”<sup>56</sup>

Excluding music notation served a practical and economic purpose, but it also ensured that workers across the country could share in a common musical canon. Lyrics alone would not be as alienating to the many workers who could not read music, and contributors could send lyrics without the hassle of writing or printing musical notation. The songs were those workers already knew and loved, with the new labor words building upon the original religious or folk versions. Because Horton relied on well-known songs as the base for the new labor words, workers could immediately use the songs without having to learn new music or even knowing how to read music.<sup>57</sup>

Horton’s work allowed diverse workers to see their shared problems and aims in spite of regional, trade and ethnic differences. In a letter to a potential contributor, she expressed her desire for simplicity and relevancy: “Lyrics about unions, war, fascism, and cooperatives are very desirable so long as they are in simple language and are ‘singable.’”<sup>58</sup> To another inquirer she wrote, “The content of the songs must be sympathetic toward workers in their struggles to organize for a better life, in their every-day problems.”<sup>59</sup> Songs might come from different regions or trades, but the struggle and oppression they expressed were national issues.

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<sup>56</sup> Zilphia Horton to Bertha Mae Chapman, Jan.1, 1938, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>57</sup> “Drama Workshop Report,” Summer 1939, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Zilphia Horton to Bertha Mae Chapman.

<sup>59</sup> Zilphia Horton to A.R. Westcott, Jan. 2, 1939, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Workers and sympathizers across the nation enthusiastically shared their songs with her. A song writer from Vermont, whose “heart is with the workers,” wrote for more information after seeing the newspaper advertisement.<sup>60</sup> A worker from Utah, who had “worked on the labor front twelve years,” mailed Horton his composition “Onward Union Workers” set to the tune of the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.”<sup>61</sup> Another sent four “song poems” and expressed her willingness to send more. She wrote, “You will understand my sentiments judged by the material that I am sending. Nothing I can do for you is too much trouble.”<sup>62</sup> An activist in New York wanted Horton to include a song that had been used at the Automotive Engineers Convention in 1905.<sup>63</sup>

*Labor Songs* was published in Atlanta in 1939. Its 61 songs were diverse in origin but unified in aim; the songs were divided into categories, including “Union Hymns,” “Songs for the Picket Line,” and “Marching Songs.” Some were based on folk songs, such as “Little Brown Jug,” “Dixie,” “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” and “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.” Others used the tunes of hymns – “Stand Up for Jesus” became “Rise Up, Ye Workers; “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder” turned into “The Company Union National Anthem,” and “Power in the Blood” replaced the power of the blood of the lamb with “power in a band of working men.” Spirituals like “No More Mourning,” “I Shall Not be Moved,” and “Somebody Knockin’ at Your Door” were printed with only a few words changed. There was even a song based on “Heigh Ho” from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, we’ll make

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<sup>60</sup> Bertha Mae Chapman to Zilphia Horton, Nov 1938, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Carson to Zilphia Horton, Nov. 4, 1938, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Zilphia Horton, nd, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>63</sup> Josephine Blake to Zilphia Horton, Nov. 25, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

our union grow; For sweatshop hell we'll toll death knell..."). The book sold for 25 cents a copy, the same cost as 5 pounds of sugar or a dozen eggs. Unions could buy lots of 50 or more for 12.5 cents each.<sup>64</sup> Horton hoped to make the book as accessible as possible.

*Labor Songs* was not a Monteagle, Tennessee songbook or a southern songbook, but a book created by diverse contributors united in a common cause. According to *Labor*, Horton's "workers' song book" tried "to put over a unique idea" as workers were not often asked to contribute music to a national songbook.<sup>65</sup> Horton wrote in the introduction, "Most of the songs in this collection were written by people who work in the mines, mills, factories, and on the farms." Horton invited ordinary people to participate in a national movement. Newspapers like *Labor* kept workers throughout the country informed of national events, but Horton told individuals that their individual voices were important and offered them an unusual platform to be heard. Horton hoped *Labor Songs* would encourage "workers to write and sing their own songs" and that the low cost would make the book more accessible to workers.<sup>66</sup> "A singing army is a winning army," wrote CIO Chairman John L. Lewis in his introduction to *Labor Songs*, "and a singing labor movement cannot be defeated."

Horton's music classes at Highlander also invited people to share and create their own music. Highlander students learned to create plays and songs that reflected the issues they faced. When they arrived, Horton asked them to teach her songs they knew. She would then teach these songs to other students and help the group adapt the words to fit their situation. With Horton's guidance, students developed new verses that fit the tune. Students might change the words of a song already adapted for labor or they might create new labor words to a well-known folk tune

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<sup>64</sup> *Labor Songs*, ed. Zilphia Horton, (Atlanta, GA: Textile Workers Union of America, 1939).

<sup>65</sup> "Wanted, Songs," *Labor*.

<sup>66</sup> *Labor Songs*.

or hymn. For instance, Highlander students adapted the spiritual “A Great Day” into a work song that expressed their exasperation with a state politician. Horton collected her students’ songs in the songbooks she compiled and she taught them at meetings and strikes, transmitting them far beyond the school.

At a meeting of the Montana Farmers’ Union, Horton led the audience in “A Great Day” from the union members’ song books. “A Great Day” was a popular shout tune in the south, a type of old spiritual that consisted of a call and response and a driving rhythm. The words printed in the members’ songbooks were those written by Horton’s students at Highlander. She explained how the spiritual was turned into a union song, saying, “Some tobacco workers were at the Highlander Folk School and we were singing it, and we always encourage them to make up songs. This is one of those tobacco workers’ tunes that she sang to us, and the students sat around and made up this song.”<sup>67</sup> A worker taught her original to the other students, and the students developed new lines to the song.

The original shout song “A Great Day” centers around the line “God’s going to build up Zion’s walls.” The students changed the chorus to be applicable to any union (“Oh great day, great day the union’s marching! Great day! We’re going to build our union strong.”), but adapted the verses to an issue relevant to them at the time. The students had been discussing the importance of voting and their own responsibility as citizens to ensure people could make it to the polls. Their new lyrics attacked Kenneth McKellar, a Tennessee senator backed by the Memphis political machine boss Ed Crump and expressed hope for a day when McKellar would be gone. This message of hope was carried over from the original spiritual; the residue of religious meaning can be heard even through the song’s permutations.

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<sup>67</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmer’s Union, 1952, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 6, Folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Horton acknowledged that, at the time of the Montana meeting, McKellar was an outdated subject, but she encouraged them to sing the call-and-response song with her anyway, since it is “a good kind of a song you can change very easily to fit your particular local and your particular group.”<sup>68</sup> Her students’ version of “A Great Day” was shared with other unions through its printing in a labor songbook, but Horton encouraged union members to adapt the lyrics again once the words became outdated. When a group takes a song and changes the words, Zilphia said, “that’s when the song becomes yours...that’s what we should be doing.”<sup>69</sup> Thus several people became a part of the song’s history. The song could be used in places as disparate as Tennessee and Montana, the words changed to fit specific issues, but the universal hope for a different kind of great day continually spread. This is a wonderful example of how Horton’s method actually worked, but these paragraphs needs some refining.

Horton helped her students write their own musical material, and she hoped music would become an even bigger part of their union activities than it already was. In one Highlander term, the students asked if she would teach a class on song leading. Horton felt their interest was based “on a growing realization of the need for singing in group meetings and consequently the need for leaders.”<sup>70</sup> The class was not required, but about ten students managed to fit it in between their other classes. The school had group singing after dinner every night, and the students were able to practice by leading for a few minutes. Lee Hays recalled how he learned to lead singing at Highlander: “When Zilphia got up and said, ‘Brother Hays will now lead us in singing,’ I damn near went through the floor. There was no backing out; I had to take the plunge; I had to

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<sup>68</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmer’s Union.

<sup>69</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmer’s Union

<sup>70</sup> “As dramatics and music...” nd, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society, 50.

get up and sing, and I've been singing ever since."<sup>71</sup> By teaching (or forcing, in Lee Hays's case) students to be song leaders, Horton helped them become the teachers and transmitters of music.

In *Labor Songs* and in her classes, Horton invited workers to contribute their favorite songs and their creativity. Horton began work on a songbook for the National CIO in 1946, and she expanded her earlier methods of inclusion to broaden what the songbook could achieve. Instead of just learning the songs sung by their comrades, Horton wanted workers to share in the actual events that led to a song's use or creation. Horton now asked contributors to also send a brief history of their song to print with the lyrics in the songbook. She asked them to include "when it was written, the circumstances which gave rise to its being written, and a human interest or dramatic incident connected with the song such as a specific union meeting or strike situation." Horton believed a background would "make the song much more appreciated and [would] give the reader some knowledge of the historical struggles of the labor movement in connection with the song."<sup>72</sup>

In addition to writing to individuals and organization asking for their latest songs, Horton tracked down the composers of many of the "old favorites" – "Solidarity," "Joe Hill," "You Gotta Go Down," and "A Dollar Ain'a Dollar" – to ask for permission to use the songs and to learn about their backgrounds.<sup>73</sup> These favorites were standards in Horton's repertoire. She wrote of "Solidarity," "I have taught Solidarity to hundreds of workers and never knew until last year who

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<sup>71</sup> Lee Hays, *People's Songs* (Jan, 1947), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Zilphia Horton to several recipients, nd, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>73</sup> Zilphia Horton to George Guernsey, Oct 25, 1946, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

wrote it.”<sup>74</sup> These songs appeared in every songbook and used at every labor gathering. Horton sought to reclaim their meaning by finding the original composers.

Woody Guthrie, for instance, wrote Horton that she could use his song “So Long It’s been Good to Know You,” which he wrote “to tell...how the worst dust storm in our history hit the panhandle plains of Texas...it tells you how a two hundred thousand of us got dusted out, tracted out, patrolled out, and starved out of our homes.”<sup>75</sup> After many attempts to find Ralph Chapman, Horton finally found the composer of “Solidarity Forever,” who wrote to tell her of its composition during the Kanawha County, West Virginia coal mine strike in 1911 and 1912.<sup>76</sup> When workers sang from this songbook, they not only understood their common struggle between regions, but would also learn about a shared history that could be expressed through the medium of music.

Horton used music to bridge divisions in the labor movement – those made by region, ethnicity, or trade. Though this project was for an industrial union organization, she felt that the songbook could also show industrial workers what they had in common with farm workers. She wrote to Gladys Talbot Edwards, the Educational Director for the National Farmer’s Union, to explain why she felt it was important to include farmers’ songs in her book, saying, “We are always pointing out to industrial workers that all workers have a common purpose...having these songs included would further aid the promotion of this idea.”<sup>77</sup> Additionally, she wrote to Harold Hildreth, composer of the song “Men of the Soil,” “We at the school feel the great importance of

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<sup>74</sup> Zilphia Horton to Ralph Chaplin, Oct. 21, 1946, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>75</sup> Woody Guthrie to Zilphia Horton, nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>76</sup> Ralph Chaplin to Zilphia Horton, Oct. 26, 1946, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>77</sup> Zilphia Horton to Gladys Talbot Edwards, Oct. 28, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.



getting the farmer and the industrial worker together – to make them realize they have a common purpose instead of fighting each other... To include farmers songs... would be to further the idea of cooperation.”<sup>78</sup> Horton wanted the unifying power of music to reach beyond the confines of the CIO to help all workers, regardless of trade, realize they were all in the same fight.

Horton spent many years collecting labor songs, but she also worked to secure their transmission across the movement. Her students at Highlander and elsewhere had a hand in the creation of labor’s musical canon, but Horton ensured the songs would spread and be used. Her students at Highlander returned to their unions and taught the songs they had learned, and the songbooks expanded her influence far beyond the school. Horton also spread the songs through her work outside of Highlander. Horton left the school to work in the unions or at strikes, incorporating songs as she taught and organized. These events allowed her to share music with those workers who never made it to Highlander.

In July 1936, just over a year after arriving at Highlander, Horton and a few other school staff “went down...for the picket line” where they “picketed for about three hours on the hard pavement.” Horton’s song leading “pepped them up considerably,” and the strike leader said he would pay the group’s expenses if they would come again the next day.”<sup>79</sup> She helped a group of clothing workers near Chattanooga by making leaflets, teaching songs, and planning recreations.<sup>80</sup> In 1936 Horton spent several weeks assisting with the Tennessee Valley Authority in Knoxville. There she taught improvisational drama and, by invitation, organized a Women’s

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<sup>78</sup> Zilphia Horton to Harold Hildreth, Nov. 6, 1946, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>79</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, July 23, 1936, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>80</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech to Montana Farmer’s Union.

Auxiliary, Junior Union, and Dramatics Group at the Alcoa aluminum smelting plant nearby.<sup>81</sup>

Two weeks later, her Junior Union had reached 75 members, and they began assisting her in the strike. She wrote to Myles, “yesterday afternoon they came down and picketed and I taught them Union songs.”<sup>82</sup> In a letter to Myles, Horton described her day helping with the Knoxville strike, an example of what was probably a typical strike experience for her, writing:

Up at 5:15 this morning and out to the picket line – leading the group in singing for about 30 min. – standing on my feet all morning talking to strikers until 12:30 – getting chilled from the sudden change in temperature, dashing downstairs for something to eat and a change into warmer clothes – going back out for a meeting and leading songs for forty five minutes until speakers arrived, and then talking over the strike over a glass of tomato juice – all this has made rather a strenuous day for Zilphia.<sup>83</sup>

Horton often wrote Myles with updates on strikes and organizing efforts. She clearly contributed more to these events than just her musical talents, as she had gained organizing skills and a deep understanding of unions and labor struggles while at Highlander. But her song leading and her ability to teach music and other creative arts put her in great demand. Horton taught a six-week course for the Shirt Workers Union in LaFollette, Tennessee, a local branch of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.<sup>84</sup> Lousie sp? McClaron, director of the Southern Summer School for Workers in Asheville, North Carolina, invited Horton to teach for the six-week term, offering expenses and one hundred dollars as an enticement. The School, which existed for female workers and was staffed by female teachers, encouraged women to

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<sup>81</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, Sept 23, 1936, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>82</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, Oct 9, 1936, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>83</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, 1936, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>84</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, May 12, 1937, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

realize and act upon the power they had as a collective unit – a fitting arrangement for an activist like Horton.<sup>85</sup>

All of Horton’s work in labor music – her classes, work in the unions and on the picket lines, *Labor Songs*, and the CIO songbook – created labor’s musical canon. The songs she published and taught were the people’s songs, those used in union meetings and strikes. By encouraging her students or audience to develop their fellow workers’ music into something that was their own, Horton ensured people would want to continue singing these songs. She was both student and teacher, the link between movement members of different trades, regions, and ethnicities who all came to Highlander or wrote her letters. She not only collected the music people loved but shared it with the rest of the movement. Horton utilized work songs in classes, at union meetings and strikes, and in songbooks, encouraging participants to adapt words as needed but ensuring the songs transmitted across the movement with the original music and core message largely intact.

## Drama

As music director of Highlander, Horton created a musical canon for the labor movement. But she used dramatics to educate and empower workers. Labor dramatics were becoming increasingly popular in labor schools, and Horton helped implement a strong drama program at Highlander. Horton applied the principles of “agitprop” theatre, a proletarian drama named after and based on agitation and propaganda that came out of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Early agitprop, according to the historian Malcolm Goldstein, was “a blend of chanted dialogue and mass-movement in which the actors, performing in unison, symbolized the

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<sup>85</sup> Miriam Bonner Camp, Interview with Mary Frederickson, April 15, 1976, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

working-class solidarity essential for the overthrow of the bosses.”<sup>86</sup> Short and easy to comprehend, agitprop plays reflected the “radical efforts to dramatize the struggles of the working class” during the Great Depression and addressed themes of social reform, liberty, rebellion, social injustice, anti-fascism, and anti-war.<sup>87</sup>

In November 1935, Horton traveled to New York City for four months to study “the innovative developments in the use of dramatics, both in the ‘legitimate’ theatre and the left-wing or Agit, Prop Theatre” at the New Theater School.<sup>88</sup> She may have learned of the New Theater School through friends such as Mark, who worked at the school and was supposed to have secured a scholarship for her. Upon arriving, she realized he had forgotten, but he thought it could be arranged if Highlander would send a letter saying they needed a trained student in dramatics and that she was interested and talented. She asked Myles to send a letter by return mail, but said to him, “You will have to close your eyes and cross your fingers when you write in the clause about my talent but ‘wes guys gotta stick together.’”<sup>89</sup> She apparently secured a scholarship, although she worked as a maid to supplement living expenses. While at the New Theater School, she studied play analysis, stage technique, stage make-up, acting, history of the theatre as a social factor, playwriting, and directing, and she returned to Highlander equipped to head its drama program.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 32.

<sup>87</sup> Richard J. Altenbaugh, “Proletarian Drama: An Education Tool of the American Labor College Movement,” *Theatre Journal* 34, no. 2 (1982): 197.

<sup>88</sup> Myles Horton, “Family,” nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 1, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, Nov. 4, 1935, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

<sup>90</sup> Zilphia Horton to Myles Horton, nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 15, Folder 14, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI.

Horton had several goals for her drama students. She wanted students to learn how to write labor plays so that, as new situations arose in their home unions, they could produce plays that fit their needs. In the process of writing their plays while at school, the students became the actors and learned to be creative with the minimal funding they had for costumes, props, and sets. But all of Highlander's curriculum had a single goal: "to give the students something of practical nature that they can take back to their home organizations and put into use."<sup>91</sup> Horton taught her students to be directors; then they could truly apply what they learned at home and pass it on to their comrades.

Horton first stressed to her students that "the course probably won't be like anything you've ever seen or done in drama." Horton taught improvisation; "there will be no plays to memorize," she told them. "Today is the only day I'll be doing any talking like this. You'll be doing the talking," she told them on the first day."<sup>92</sup> She first encouraged students to pinpoint problems or situations they experienced at home – "the little incidents or problems such as the ones you mentioned in Myles' class." The students then improvised skits based on their own labor experiences for inspiration. "Just imagine you're in a strike situation," she told them, "You know what it's like. Now what people would you have, to show it's a strike?" The students gave each other constructive criticism, and as the improvisations improved, timidity gave way to enthusiastic involvement.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> "An Experiment in Drama at the Highlander Folk School," Fall Term 1940, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society

<sup>92</sup> Zilphia Horton, "Dramatics," 1939, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>93</sup> Zilphia Horton, "I teach the drama course..." nd, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Horton then charged each student “to consider himself a director working with his home organization,” meaning he or she assumed Horton’s role as leader and director.<sup>94</sup> The student director was expected to have prepared his problem or theme, time, action, scene, and characters. The following is one student director’s outline:

- A. Problem: Maintaining a strong picket line at all times.
- B. Audience: Hosiery Local 107 while on strike.
- C. Characters: One picket captain, one main picket, two cops, three strike breakers, four men and four girl pickets.
- D. Time: Right after time for the regular morning shift to go into the mill.
- E. Place: In front of the mill which had been struck.
- F. “Curtain”: Pickets are marching up and down in front of the mill. They make remarks about unfriendly cops who are standing on the sidelines. Single strikebreaker walks up but cannot get through picket line. He leaves. The main picket comes up to the picket captain and asks off to get a coca-cola since things are quiet. Says he will be back in a few minutes and leaves. Pickets keep asking off on different excuses and leaving picket line until only one picket captain is left. After all pickets have left except captain, two strike breakers walk up and push their way by the captain. As they go through, the main picket comes back from his coca-cola and asks how they got through. The captain points to the deserted picket line and says, ‘That’s how come!’<sup>95</sup>

The actual lines would be improvised from an outline. The director selected his cast, and the group would enter another room to discuss briefly the dramatic plan, or “Curtain.” After this meeting, they would return to the classroom and perform the play, never having rehearsed it.<sup>96</sup>

After the performance, students offered criticism, and the play was performed again if the class agreed that it could be improved. Eventually, the directors would not tell the class the problem the play represented before the performance, in order to see if the problem was evident from the play itself. The plays were simple enough to be produced quickly, yet they expressed deeply felt experiences.

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<sup>94</sup> “As dramatics and music...,” 47-48.

<sup>95</sup> “As dramatics and music...” 48-49.

<sup>96</sup> “As dramatics and music...” 48-49.

Horton purposefully limited the dramatic conditions at the school to what they would be in the students' home situations: no stage, no curtain, few lights if any, and no scripts.<sup>97</sup> Horton told her students, "You don't need a theater, or rather, when you put on your show, that's your theater." The students provided guidelines in their published plays for simple settings that were easy to reproduce even without a stage: "if you don't have a curtain the actors simply walk on and off the stage at the beginning of and end of each scene carrying their properties with them."<sup>98</sup> She told a story of striking workers who used the company's big flood lights set up outside the plant to light their show on the picket line. After the boss got mad and took the lights away, the workers used cars headlamps to light the action.<sup>99</sup> The plays could be performed anywhere – indoors or out, with or without a stage – and would include no scenery, costumes, or props that required any money.

Such plays moved easily from Highlander to union meetings and strikes. The students expected their plays "to be used by union performers for union audiences," and they designed the plays to be easily performed by untrained union members.<sup>100</sup> Lee Hays, who wrote and produced plays with Claude Williams for sharecropper and Farmers Union audiences, referred to these dramas as "'zipper' plays, as they were constructed so that amateur casts made up of local union members could easily play the roles of committee men, plantation thugs, and so on."<sup>101</sup> In their preface to their published collection, the students wrote, "We hope that names and, in fact, any details that may bring the play closer to the particular group that performs it, will be changed

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<sup>97</sup> "An Experiment in Drama" 1.

<sup>98</sup> Zilphia Horton, *Five Plays about Labor*, Aug. 1931, Highlander Research and Education Center Records, 1917-2005, Box 56, Folder 18, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison. 2.

<sup>99</sup> "Drama Workshop Report," Summer 1939, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Zilphia Horton, *Five Plays about Labor* 2.

<sup>101</sup> Lee Hays, "The Singing Preacher."

to suit each new situation.” Actors were to be every day workers, not professionals; one set of plays included the instructions, “The scripts should not be taken word-for-word” because “no busy worker could be expected to learn some of the long speeches by heart.”<sup>102</sup> Instead, the students felt “a worker should study and list the points that he wanted to cover in a certain character, then say them in his own words.”<sup>103</sup>

Labor plays sometimes involved music. Horton wrote the play “Lolly Pop Poppa: A Musical Farce,” published with four student written plays in *Five Plays about Labor*. The play had six characters: four female workers, the secretary Miss Sputter-fluff – “dumb and a complete slave to the boss” – and the mill boss Mr. Squeezum. The mill boss gives the girls lolly pops to distract them while he lowers their wages and his foreman speeds up their machines. The play opens with a chorus sung by the four workers: “We are the lolly pop girls, We don’t mind our work and we never shirk. We work long hours, for little that’s ours, but we’re too dumb to want more.” The chorus is followed by a speech which the girls speak in rhythm over musical accompaniment. The speech tells the audience the lesson they are about to learn:

Although the show we’re giving you  
Is funny as can be,  
It has a lot of truth in it  
As you will surely see.  
And when the show is over,  
We think you will agree,  
That the moral of this little play, is  
NEVER TAKE A LOLLY POP  
WHEN WHAT YOU NEED IS BETTER PAY!<sup>104</sup>

These lines were sung and spoken over music Horton composed. Most workers could not read music, and they learned new labor songs either by rote or because they already knew the

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<sup>102</sup> Zilphia Horton, *Five Plays about Labor* 2.

<sup>103</sup> “Report – Labor Drama HFS,” nd, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1.

<sup>104</sup> Zilphia Horton, *Five Plays about Labor*.



well-known tune. Lolly Pop Poppa's brand new material would have been a difficulty, particularly for a union group that did not have a piano or a pianist. However, the students were confident the musicals could be performed as spoken plays; one student who put on "Lolly Pop Poppa" at home reported "that it was a success, even without benefit of music (none of the workers can read notes)." The class decided to include the songs "with the mimeographed script...just on the chance that it might fall into the hands of an exception to the rule."<sup>105</sup>

The songs and musical accompaniment made "Lolly Pop Poppa" a popular play. A group of Highlander students performed a program in Nashville for an Amalgamated Local, and the musical was "the high-point of that program." "Lolly Pop Poppa" also inspired students at Highlander to include songs in other plays; they were so enthusiastic about it they "insisted" on songs in their play, "Dues Blues."<sup>106</sup>

In other cases, productions included workers songs, either in the plays themselves or as part of the program. Lee Hays, in writing on the plays he and Claude Williams would perform for sharecroppers and Farmers Unions, said, "It was in the plays that we first sang 'No More Mourning' and 'Roll the Union On'...Sometimes at meetings way out in the backwoods or in the heart of the dismal cotton country, Claude would sing an old song like 'We Shall not be moved' – prepared to break into the old hymn words if gun thugs should appear" – an added advantage of singing new words to old tunes.<sup>107</sup> When Horton traveled with her students, they would involve the audience by singing labor songs together. For instance, one program for a union local lists the plays "Lolly Pop Poppa" and "Stretch Out" followed by the popular song "We are

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<sup>105</sup> "Drama Workshop Report" 30.

<sup>106</sup> "Drama Workshop Report" 29-30.

<sup>107</sup> Lee Hays, "The Singing Preacher."

Building a Strong Union,” sung to the tune of “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.”<sup>108</sup> In many cases, music and drama were paired together.

To increase the use of labor dramatics, students learned to be directors so that they could effectively stage the plays beyond Highlander. Three students wrote that they had performed “Stretch-out” and “Lolly Pop Poppa” for their local union in Lexington, Kentucky and performed them for strikers in Cincinnati as well. Another student wrote he was directing “Lolly Pop Poppa” in Dalton, no abbrev. One class published the four plays they had written, plus a popular play written by Horton, in the collection *Five Plays about Labor*. The school sold the collections for only twenty-five cents, and “extra copies could of course be available to any union groups that applied to Highlander for material.”<sup>109</sup> “If you want any advice about producing these plays,” the students wrote in the book’s introduction, “apply to the Highlander Folk School. We’ll be very glad to help in any way we can.”<sup>110</sup> Highlander students also went “on tour” and performed for striking workers and at union meetings.<sup>111</sup> These performances inspired the workers; one Highlander student told the story, “Some of the Dalton workers had seen a play that the Highlander students had put on in Chattanooga. They were so enthusiastic over it that they’d come home insisting that Maxton, their education direction, help them do something like it.”<sup>112</sup>

The plays educated a union audience on “important union questions.”<sup>113</sup> The play outline quoted above, for example, taught workers the importance of staying on the picket line continuously. In another session, the class wrote a play “aimed at making all the students

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<sup>108</sup> “PROGRAM Local 362,” nd, reel 24, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>109</sup> “Drama Workshop Report” 5.

<sup>110</sup> Zilphia Horton, *Five Plays about Labor* 2.

<sup>111</sup> “PROGRAM Local 362.”

“Drama Workshop Report” 16.

<sup>112</sup> “Drama Workshop Report” 10.

<sup>113</sup> “Drama Workshop Report,” 9-10.

appreciate the falseness of the division of their sectional interests.”<sup>114</sup> Audiences could easily identify the stock characters and the clear line between the hard working employee and the gluttonous capitalist, but they would also learn an important lesson about their movement.

In a report on their drama class, a Highlander student told of a class performance of “Making Both Ends Meet,” a play they had just written. Three new students, who had only arrived the day before and had not been to a drama class yet, told the performers, “That play taught me something I hadn’t known before; or, anyway, if I’d known them I’d never thought about them that way” as well as “I sure would like to have my local [union chapter] see that show.” As a result, the students felt that “at least one of our avowed purposes: Educating the Union Membership, might have been fulfilled by this first attempt.”<sup>115</sup> Student reports also spoke of labor drama’s ability to increase attendance at union meetings (“They’d always come to see a show”) and teach union members the confidence and skills necessary to speak publicly. In some cases, the plays provided “a way of elucidating the union point of view for the general public.”<sup>116</sup> Workers viewed newspaper reports about unions or strikes as prejudiced, and labor drama allowed to relay their experiences.<sup>117</sup>

Labor drama offered an emotional outlet for workers. Horton had to convince workers to share their experiences and express them in an unfamiliar art form. Workers-turned-students at Highlander were, according to Aimee Horton, “deeply involved in the day-to-day problems of their unions, unaccustomed to putting their feelings into words and inclined to believe, as one

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<sup>114</sup> “Drama Workshop Report,” 3.

<sup>115</sup> “Report – Labor Drama HFS,” 1

<sup>116</sup> “Drama Workshop Report” 9-10.

<sup>117</sup> Zilphia Horton, “Dramatics,” 1.

resident group expressed it, “that art is something ‘high falutin.’”<sup>118</sup> Horton’s students embraced this form of expression; writing and performing their own dramas allowed them to “use their own words, never twice the same, to express themselves.”<sup>119</sup> These plays gave workers a sense of control and they began to see their lives as important sources for artistic material. The 1938 winter term students wrote in their report, “Dramatics and Writing,” “Workers lives have much more drama in them than the average middle class person’s. People who live easy, comfortable, sheltered lives get so they can’t do very much or think very hard or believe in anything very strongly...It is out of the lives of workers, out of strikes, out of picket lines, out of union meetings...that drama and art grow.”<sup>120</sup>

Drama reminded workers that they should be united. Like the music created at Highlander or the songs mailed to Horton, plays were based on workers’ actual problems. By sharing drama with each other, workers were able to identify with their comrades’ experiences and share in their struggles. One student who had left an active strike in Dalton, to attend Highlander told his classmates about the events at his textile union. The students decided to dramatize the story and perform it for the strikers in Dalton. The student said, “I think it will be a fine thing for the workers to see. Maybe some of them have forgotten everything that’s happened during the strike and even if they haven’t, they’ll like to see it all in a play and I think it will give them courage to carry on their fight down there. Because we certainly are having a tough time.”<sup>121</sup> The student felt that, by showing solidarity and giving artistic voice to the problems in

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<sup>118</sup> Aimee Horton, “The Highlander Folk School: A History of the Development of its Major Programs Related to Social Movements in the South, 1932-1961” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1971), 149.

<sup>119</sup> “Drama Workshop Report” 12.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Aimee Horton, “The Highlander Folk School” 149-150.

<sup>121</sup> “Drama Workshop Report” 17.

Dalton, the strikers would be encouraged to keep fighting. Like the musical canon, drama had the power to unify.

## Music and Power

### A Laden Movement Hymn: Power within the Movement

Horton believed music brought people together and kept them united. Work songs provided identity and history; in a movement often divided by space, gender, ideology, and ethnicity, labor songs reminded workers of their shared indignation, hope, and solidarity, an encouragement to press onward. When people gathered together to sing, they participated in something intimate and personal. The music's powerful layers of meaning are built upon its origins, multiple transmissions, and repeated use in moments of tension and social anxiety. Singing is a physical act, yet the music's effect is psychological and even spiritual. Music may have helped pass the long hours on the picket line, but its power was much more complex.

Music is intrinsically powerful. Music in the labor movement has three sources of meaning that give the music significance beyond itself: the lyrics, the memory or history associated with the song, and the music itself. This is possible because of workers' cultural training in music, working class themes, and the labor movement. Ian Cross and Elizabeth Tolbert write that, "Meaning is immanent as a condition of felt response that depends on the qualities of the music as the object of listening and on the cultural capacities of its audiences."<sup>122</sup> In other words, workers derive meaning from the music because they understand the content of the lyrics and they have a social and cultural context in which to place the words. They identify certain themes or ideas with the music itself because they have heard this kind of music before. This contextual meaning gave music two types of power to affect workers: a persuasive power - to persuade, convict, and motivate, and a unifying power. Workers who were struggling to

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<sup>122</sup> Ian Cross and Elizabeth Tolbert, "Music and Meaning" *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008): 7. Accessed online via [http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/OUP\\_Mus\\_Psych\\_Hbook\\_Meaning08.pdf](http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/OUP_Mus_Psych_Hbook_Meaning08.pdf).

unionize or maintain a strike were encouraged by music, as demonstrated by Horton's many trips to lead songs on the picket line.

The shared understanding workers had, the familiarity with the music, and the emotional medium of music made music a powerful method of persuasion. Even workers who were not a part of the labor movement could identify with the songs. They were often familiar with the music itself in its original form as spiritual, folk song, or hymn. "We understand the frustrations you feel," these songs seemed to say, "and we have the tools necessary for you to secure justice." Music could unite a movement that was large, unwieldy, and often at odds with itself. Horton was especially interested in using music to bridge the divisions between laborers. Not only would the words of the music demonstrate what workers had in common, but by expressing it through the personal medium of music, workers connected on an emotional level.

While most members of the labor movement agreed that music was important to their work, few seemed to ever put into words why. They sang because they intuitively knew music had an effect on people. With the methods Horton chose for her work as well as her own words that are preserved, Horton demonstrates that she understood, at least partially, how music worked within the movement. The following analyses of two labor songs, "We Shall Not be Moved" and "Song of the Danville Strikers," demonstrates labor music's multiple layers of meaning. The context of a song's origins and history was one layer; the notes, rhythms, and chords are another. Both of these layers worked together to make music a powerful tool for the movement

Horton believed music was meaningful if the singer had knowledge and profound faith in the themes the music expressed. She compared labor songs to a water lily floating on top of a lake, supported by a long root sinking to the bottom of the water – "what determines how beautiful that water lily is and how strong it is, is what's at the bottom of that pond...the

morality, what people stand for represents the roots and the mud at the bottom of the lake.”<sup>123</sup>

The songs were only as strong as the people singing them. In return, the water lily gives the roots access to sunlight, reciprocating with its own kind of strength. Labor songs were only meaningful because of the passion and beliefs that fueled their use, but they provided their own kind of strength to the singer as well.

With this metaphor, Horton provided an image of the relationship between music and the social themes underpinning workers’ songs. The only songs worth singing, she said, were those “that belong to people, come from people who believe in something.” She gave “We Shall Not be Moved” as an example, as it was “one of the most important songs that workers sing all over the United States.” “We Shall Not be Moved” was originally a spiritual that likely stretched back to the slave era. Horton believed sharecroppers in Arkansas first sang “We Shall Not be Moved” as a labor song. The song’s message and the ease of replacing its words made it a clear choice for workers’ appropriation, and by the 1930s it was well-known anthem of the movement. The singer only needed to change one phrase, used twice in the verse. The rest of the verse and the chorus remained the same. Every songbook printed the song with a different assortment of verses; Figure 1 provides a few examples of union verses.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmer’s Union School, nd, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, box 6, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>124</sup> *Labor Songs*, 32.



## **We Shall Not be Moved**

### Verse 1

We're backed up by the Union, We shall not be moved.  
We're backed up by the Union, We shall not be moved.  
Just like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved.

### Chorus

We shall not be, we shall not be moved  
We shall not be, we shall not be moved  
Just like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved.

2 – We're striking for our freedom, we shall not be moved...

3 – We're fighting for our children...

4 – The government is behind us...

Figure 1: Example taken from *Labor Songs*<sup>125</sup>

The words express the singer's steadfastness and the futility of trying to move him.

Horton said of the song, "it means...our faith will not be taken away. Nobody can shake it."<sup>126</sup>

She once wrote of the song, "perhaps this...more than any other song, has held workers together when opposition was greatest."<sup>127</sup> "We Shall Not be Moved" had been used by "different groups of people" all over the country; its meaning was universal. Yet she thought people took the song, and its meaning, for granted. What does it mean to be unshaken in this fight? By singing it so often, workers reduced its effect on themselves and on others. Horton sought to remind workers why they sang "We Shall Not be Moved," not just by talking about the meaning of the words but by digging into the deeper layer of history and experience.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>125</sup> *Labor Songs*, ed. Zilphia Horton, (Atlanta, GA: Textile Workers Union of America, 1939).

<sup>126</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

<sup>127</sup> Zilphia Horton, "Song Notes," nd, reel 36, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.

<sup>128</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

Horton shared a story of when she had used “We Shall Not be Moved” in her work, hoping to remind her audience what the song meant in “many, many places all over the United States.” Horton recounted how she went to help a group of clothing workers near Chattanooga,. These workers had recently organized and asked for representation, and Horton was to teach them how to expand and sustain their union. Horton, with the group, decided to plan a parade on Washington’s Birthday, an event they saw as fitting since they were fighting for economic freedom. She says:

[The workers] were marching two by two, with the children and the band. They marched past the mill and 400 machine gun bullets were fired into the midst of the group. A woman was shot in the leg on the right and in the ankle on the left, on the left of me. And I looked around and the police were all disappeared...well, in about five minutes, a few of us stood up at the mill gates and sang, “We shall not be moved, just a like a tree that’s planted by the water.” And in ten minutes, [the workers] began to come out again from behind the barns and garages and the little stores that were around in this small town, and they stood there, and they were not moved and sang, and that’s what won their organization.<sup>129</sup>

Here Horton is giving this song a rich history of protest that created meaning beyond just the words. She is stressing that the audience members, and presumably all agitators, need to know these kinds of stories in order to give weight and meaning to their own singings of “We Shall Not be Moved.” “If you don’t know what [the song] means and you sing it, just so many words and a chorus,” she says, “it’s no good.” Her experience at the mill demonstrates what it really means to “not be moved.” Cross and Tolbert support this idea, writing “it appears likely that engagement with music can in fact lead to responses that are identical to those that occur when we encounter situations in the real world that induce emotional responses.”<sup>130</sup> By giving the song a history, she is giving the song another layer of meaning and increasing its power. When the audience members go back to their own unions, they will know that workers all over

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<sup>129</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

<sup>130</sup> Ian Cross and Elizabeth Tolbert, “Music and Meaning” 7.

the country share in their fight. Horton gave the song weight by emphasizing its origins and history.

Horton seemed keenly aware that the songs of the movement belonged to the people who sang them before her. She called “We Shall Not be Moved” a “laden movement hymn,” as if it carried the weight of its own history and that of the movement. Horton was not interested in keeping the songs “pure,” as she encouraged adapting it to various situations. Nor was she interested in the original creator. Yet she was very interested in maintaining the song’s past, believing that its history enhanced its power in the present.

In her work on the CIO songbook and the speech she gave to the Montana Farmer’s Union, Horton expressed her commitment to recovering labor music’s origins to enhance its power. However, these songs often had another kind of past, one that was not explained and probably did not need to be. Workers and labor activists borrowed heavily from hymns, spirituals, and folk songs. Sometimes activists kept these songs so much intact that the change of only one word signified that a hymn was now a labor song. Other times only the melody was recognizable. By taking these well-known songs and appropriating them for their cause, labor activists identified their movement with this other kind of past – a religious one.

By explicitly situating a hymn or spiritual within a divisive movement, activists forced an association between their cause and their faith. Words might be changed to center the song, at least lyrically, on labor, but the original context remained. New tenets of labor and equality were added to songs already rooted in faith. This context, even though usually unacknowledged by activists, is as important as the historical context that Horton insisted activists should know.

When known to the singer, the original context permeates the song’s meaning and adds to its

power. The religious context of a song could reach potential converts or even the “enemy” could be persuaded through the association of these labor ideas with the more familiar tenets of faith.

Consider “We Shall Not be Moved,” a song with well-known religious meaning. Workers changed the words very little, keeping the first verse and the chorus in their entirety, meaning the song was a spiritual with slightly different words. It undoubtedly evoked feelings or memories of religious services or shared faith. Even as workers sing of immovability in the labor struggle, the residual memory of religious perseverance remains.

The original meanings of the song imbue its revised form. In writing on the interplay of music and words, the English and music scholar Gavin Alexander argues,

When a poetic form or a musical structure is reused, its past occupant does not entirely depart...the form offers the bare bones, but it is not just a random frame. The ghost of a previous rhetoric animates the new poem or song. Far from wanting to escape that ghost, the new lyric may wish to make itself a kind of avatar, may wish in part to resurrect the voice of the previous lyric in performing its own utterance.<sup>131</sup>

Hymns and spirituals are not a “random frame.” Rather they provide a specific contextual meaning for songs reworked for labor. In performing a new “utterance” of workforce equality, the new lyric is animated by the religious “ghost” of the old. This is possible because of workers’ cultural training. Cross argues that “within highly specific cultural contexts, for enculturated participants, specific musical signals or behaviours are likely to be construed as bearing quite highly specific meanings.”<sup>132</sup>

The faith shared in hymns creates a powerful context from which labor songs grow. Christianity’s hymn tradition transcended the rising sectarianism of the nineteenth century. Though there are examples of sectarian identity in religious music, the bulk of hymnody was

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<sup>131</sup> Gavin Alexander, “The Elizabethan Lyric as Contrafactum: Robert Sidney’s ‘French Tune’ Identified,” *Music & Letters* 84, no. 3, (2003): 401.

<sup>132</sup> Ian Cross, “Music and Social Being,” *Musicology Australia* 28 (2006): 7, Accessed March 15, 2014, [http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/Mus\\_Aust\\_paper06.pdf](http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/Mus_Aust_paper06.pdf).

surprisingly uniform. Churches borrowed heavily from each other, and denominational divides crumbled in the hymnal. Music helped create a common Protestant identity that cut across doctrinal boundaries. The canon was “overwhelmed by hymns that expressed evangelicalism’s most powerful and characteristic beliefs, practices, and spirituality.” Believers sang of “atonement, invitation, salvation, sanctification, witness, perseverance, death, and heaven” in the same songs yet in different churches.<sup>133</sup> Divided by denomination, believers were unified by music and the ideals expressed there. Such ideals do not disappear when they are replaced by new words; the ghost remains.

Take for example the labor song, “Song of the Danville Strikers and their Children,” which appears in Horton’s song sheets with the instructions, “Tune: Jesus Saves.”<sup>134</sup> Though without a date or author, one can presume that the song refers to the union strike at the cotton mills in Danville, VA in 1930 and 1931. With the help of the United Textile Workers Union, 4,000 mill workers went on strike and demanded the mills recognize and negotiate with their union.<sup>135</sup> “Song of the Danville Strikers” has its own specific history. Horton would undoubtedly argue that, should organizers use the song in other places, they should remember the story of how it was used in Danville, Virginia. Like “We Shall Not be Moved,” “Song of the Danville Strikers” “belongs to people, comes from people who believe in something.” You need to know that, she says, to really use the song effectively.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Stephen Marini, “Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Religion,” *Church History* 71, no. 2 (2002), 275, 302.

<sup>134</sup> “Songs of the Danville Strikers,” Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, box 4, folder 8. Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

<sup>135</sup> Ruth Finney, “Leaders Claim Crisis Passed in Mill Strike,” *Pittsburg Press*, (Pittsburg, PA), December 3, 1930.

<sup>136</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

But what of the song's other, older history? The musical structure chosen for the song, "Jesus Saves," was a popular hymn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has appeared in 403 hymnals since its original publication in 1882 by Priscilla J. Owens.<sup>137</sup> Presumably, "Jesus Saves" would have been known to many of the strikers at the Danville mills. Though the reworked lyrics would have been brand new, once placed with the familiar hymn tune, picketers could have easily learned them.

Yet the significance goes beyond the ease of learning new lyrics to a familiar tune. The new lyrics "resurrect the voice" of the faith system expressed in the old.<sup>138</sup> "Song of the Danville Strikers," in its eight brief lines, makes important assertions about the strikers (Fig. 2). The singer(s) identify the size of the strike – four thousand members strong. They assert that they can be victorious and claim freedom through "solidarity." By banding together, the wrongs against them might be righted in their lifetime. Notably, the singers are not assured of success; they "hope to live to right the wrong." "No more slaves, no more slaves," they sing; they will no longer be slaves under the oppressive hand of the mill owners.

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<sup>137</sup> Priscilla Owens and William J. Kirkpatrick, "We Have Heard the Joyful Sound," 1882, public domain, <http://www.hymnary.org/media/fetch/147357>.

<sup>138</sup> Alexander 401.

“Jesus Saves” by Priscilla J. Owens	“Song of the Danville Strikers and their Children,” author unknown
We have heard the joyful sound: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Spread the tidings all around: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Bear the news to ev’ry land Climb the steeps and cross the waves; Onward! ‘tis our Lord’s command; Jesus saves! Jesus saves!	We’re a band four thousand strong No more slaves! No more slaves! We hope to live to right the wrong No more slaves! No more slaves! We will fight till we are free And we’ve gained our victory By our solidarity No more slaves! No more slaves!

Figure 2: Comparison of the first verse of “Jesus Saves” and “Song of the Danville Strikers and their Children”<sup>139</sup>

Like “Song of the Danville Strikers,” “Jesus Saves” makes a powerful declaration. The singer has heard the joyful gospel, and is encouraging all who hear to share this profound message – “Jesus saves!” In later verses, the singer extols the redemptive power of this message: “Sing it softly through the gloom / When the heart for mercy craves / Sing in triumph o’er the tomb / Jesus saves! Jesus saves!” and “Shout salvation full and free / Highest hills and deepest caves / This our song of victory.” The song articulates a number of the experiences expressed in hymnody – atonement, salvation, witness, and death. In singing it, followers are expressing their belief that the salvation of Jesus Christ holds power over sin and over death, as well as their conviction to share the news.

What ghosts of this message permeate the strikers’ version? The triumph over death seems particularly relevant, as expressed in the single line “we hope to live to right the wrong.” As the strike progressed, the mill workers faced increasing hardship. The New York Times reported that the strikers, in their eleventh week, “formed a visiting committee to see that there is no hoarding of food and to ascertain whether there are any families too proud to ask for

<sup>139</sup> Priscilla Owens and William J. Kirkpatrick, “We Have Heard the Joyful Sound,” 1882, public domain, <http://www.hymnary.org/media/fetch/147357>.

“Songs of the Davnille Strikers,” Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, box 4, folder 8. Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

relief.”<sup>140</sup> On December 25, an interdenominational committee in New York City, formed to “get funds for textile members,” announced that investigators for the committee had found “acute suffering among the strikers’ families.”<sup>141</sup> Four days later, fourteen striking families were forced out of the houses they rented from the mills. Though some left voluntarily, others were “moved out” by the mills’ deputies. During these evictions, the local magistrate signed 27 dispossession writs.<sup>142</sup>

The strikers faced death, given that they were without income in the dead of a Virginia winter. In their musical words of hope - “We hope to live to right the wrong” - they echo their faith’s triumph over death - “Sing in triumph o’er the tomb.” The strikers are fighting to overcome a potential physical death, yet they also sing to overcome a different kind of death. Their hope is for a new life that is different than the old, one where the wrongs have been righted. This new life is one that the social gospel says has been prescribed by God – His kingdom on earth. The Jesus who saves them from a spiritual death will also save them from a physical death; they will no longer be slaves.

The strikers were also aware of their role as representatives of labor in the South. A Pittsburg newspaper reported that, “The knowledge that they are taking part in a labor struggle significant far beyond the Blue Ridge is helping to steady the strikers. They have been told, again and again, that the fate of unionism in the South depends on them.”<sup>143</sup> “Song of the Danville Strikers” is a declaration; the mill workers announce to the world that there will be no more

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<sup>140</sup> Louis Stark, Special to The New York Times, "DANVILLE MILLS TO 'FIGHT TO FINISH'," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec 13, 1930.

<sup>141</sup> "CHURCH GROUP AIDS DANVILLE STRIKERS," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec 25, 1930.

<sup>142</sup> Special to The New York Times, "EVICTION OF STRIKERS STARTS AT DANVILLE," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec 30, 1930.

<sup>143</sup> Finney, “Leaders Claim Crisis Passed in Mill Strike”



slaves in Danville. The song “Jesus Saves” instructs believers to share this message in every part of the earth. The strikers are replacing the message of Christ’s salvation with one of solidarity and protest, yet the calling to share their convictions remains the same.

When picketing in front of the mill gates, the strikers faced intimidation, tear gas, and armed soldiers. Perhaps they chose to sing their song of declaration to the tune of “Jesus Saves” because it was familiar and simple. Yet such a hymn, one so representative of the essential tenets of their faith, could only have bolstered their resolve. Thus two powerful contexts appear: one of Virginia mill workers who placed everything on the line and one of a salvation offered through Jesus. To really understand the song, as Horton instructs, we must consider what lades the “laden movement hymn.” The two contexts are intertwined, woven together by the musical frame they share. The melody connects these two worlds irrevocably; a striker cannot sing in protest without remembering singing in the church pew.

Analysis of the lyrics reveal how the meaning of the old words permeates the new. Yet a singer’s memory of the deeper meaning occurs because the words are sung; if “Song of the Danville Strikers” was recited as a poem, an audience would be unlikely to identify it with “Jesus Saves.” The labor text’s multiple layers of meaning, created by the residual memory of the hymn, the shared experience within the labor movement, and the words themselves, would be nonexistent without the tune. The tune binds the new and old together. The hymn’s repetitive melody combined with the simple chord structure create the base upon which powerful memory is built. The music itself infuses the words with meaning, because “music is expressive, particularly of the emotions.”<sup>144</sup> Ian Cross writes that, “while music elicits emotion it may also signify and convey more apparently specific meanings, and the fact that these meanings are

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<sup>144</sup> Ian Cross and Elizabeth Tolbert, “Music and Meaning” 7.

associable with music is indicative of music's symbolic status that can be regarded as co-extensive with that of language."<sup>145</sup> In other words, the cultural significance elicited by music and music's emotional expression is as important as the lyrics.

"Jesus Saves" is a short hymn of only twelve measures.<sup>146</sup> The hymn has four verses that use the same twelve measures, while "Song of the Danville Strikers" has only one verse. The twelve measures divide into four three-bar phrases. Figure 3 shows the four phrases, the chord progressions, and how the labor words fit over the original hymn verse. Figure 4 is a scored version of "Jesus Saves" as it would appear in a hymnal, with measure numbers and phrase markings added.

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<sup>145</sup> Ian Cross, "Music and Social Being," 6.

<sup>146</sup> When analyzing a song used in a labor context, one must consider the workers' musical knowledge and access. A worker could have accompanied the song with a guitar or other chordal instrument, or the workers might have sung in harmony. Horton was well known for using an accordion, a device that would have allowed her to play the harmonies while leading the singers in the melody. I do not know if the Danville strikers sang or played the harmonies or whether they merely sang the melody. With that said, I will focus on the melodic line, but I will still include the harmonies, as they would have played an important role if used.

1. Phrase number
2. "Jesus Saves" Verse 1
3. "Song of the Danville Strikers"
4. Chord Progression
Phrase 1
We have heard the joy - ful sound: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
We're a band four thou sand strong: No more slaves! No more slaves!
I I (ii <sup>4/2</sup> )I I I V
Phrase 2
Spread the tidings all a - round: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
We hope to live to right the wrong No more slaves! No more slaves!
V <sup>7</sup> I (ii <sup>4/2</sup> )I I V V <sup>7</sup> I
Phrase 3
Bear the news to ev' - ry land, Climb the steeps and cross the waves;
We will fight till we our free, And we've gained our vict - o - ry
IV -- -- I -- -- V
Phrase 4
Onward 'tis our Lord's com - mand; Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
By our sol - i - dar - i - ty, No more slaves! No more slaves!
V I (I <sup>4/2</sup> )IV I IV I V V I

Figure 3: Text comparison and chord progression<sup>147</sup>

<sup>147</sup> Priscilla Owens and William J. Kirkpatrick, "We Have Heard the Joyful Sound," 1882, public domain, <http://www.hymnary.org/media/fetch/147357>.  
 "Songs of the Danville Strikers," Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, box 4, folder 8. Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

## We Have Heard the Joyful Sound

Phrase 1

1. We have heard the joy - ful sound: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 2. Waft it on the rol - ling tide: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 3. Sing a - bove the bat - tle strife: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 4. Give the winds a migh - ty voice. Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!

Phrase 2

5. Spread the ti - dings all a - round: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 6. Tell to sin - ners far and wide: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 7. By His death and end - less life: Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 8. Let the na - tions now re - joice. Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!

Phrase 3

9. Bear the news to ev' - ry land, Climb the steeps and cross the waves;  
 10. Sing, ye is - lands of the sea; E - cho back, ye o - cean caves;  
 11. Sing it soft - ly thro' the gloom, When the heart for mer - cy craves;  
 12. Shout sal - va - tion full and free, High - est hills and deep - est caves;

Phrase 4

13. On - ward! 'tis our Lord's com - mand, Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 14. Earth shall keep her ju - bi - lee; Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 15. Sing in tri - umph o'er the tomb; Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!  
 16. This our song of vic - to - ry; Je - sus saves! Je - sus saves!

Text: Priscilla Owens, 1829-1907  
 Tune: William J. Kirkpatrick, 1838-1921



73 73 77 73  
**JESUS SAVES**  
[www.hymnary.org/text/we\\_have\\_heard\\_the\\_joyful\\_sound](http://www.hymnary.org/text/we_have_heard_the_joyful_sound)

This hymn is in the public domain. You may freely use this score for personal and congregational worship. If you reproduce the score, please credit [Hymnary.org](http://Hymnary.org) as the source.

Figure 4: “Jesus Saves” score<sup>148</sup>

<sup>148</sup> Priscilla Owens and William J. Kirkpatrick, “We Have Heard the Joyful Sound,” 1882, public domain, <http://www.hymnary.org/media/fetch/147357>.

The melody is driven forward by a dotted eighth/sixteenth rhythm that occurs on beat three of every measure, increasing the emphasis on the first downbeat of each measure. This is a rhythm with strong military overtones, and it tightens the sense of the singer's resolve and purpose. The greatest emphasis is placed on the word "saves/slaves." Not only is it the most used word in the song (appearing six times), but it occurs on a downbeat preceded by a dotted eighth/sixteenth rhythm, it is accompanied almost exclusively by either a high pitch (a D5) or the tonic (G), and it is noticeably one of the longer notes in the song – a half note. The emphasis on this word draws the singer or listener's attention to the song's central theme – the salvation offered by Jesus and/or the oppression the singers feel.

The first two phrases of the hymn/labor song make a clear statement, both lyrically and musically. The melody oscillates between scale degrees 1 and 5 (G and D). The fifth scale degree is emphasized in the melody. In each of the first two phrases, the melody moves purposefully upward, landing forcefully on D5. D5 is repeated and then settles back down, eventually reaching the tonic at the end of the second phrase. The first phrase repeatedly pounds the tonic chord in root position, the bass line G creating almost a drone effect below the moving parts until finally falling to a D on the V chord at the end of the phrase. With this introduction of the dominant chord, the second phrase then moves between I and V. The focus on the tonic and dominant, in both melody and harmony, is decidedly unambiguous. This provides support for the singer's declaration; the words are not muddled by a tricky melodic line or abstruse chords.

The penultimate chord of the second phrase is a V<sup>7</sup>. This introduction of scale degree 4 (C) prepares the way for the subdominant chord (IV) that begins the third phrase – finally, a break from I and V. While the song had previously avoided the use of C, it is now the melodic star. The introduction of a new chord and a new melodic pitch combined with the repetition of

C5 over dotted eighth/sixteenth note rhythms accentuates the phrase's lyric, most notably in the labor version: "We will fight 'til we are free." The repetition of one note over the same chord (IV) expresses militancy and resolve.

After the first two measures of the third phrase, the melody defies expectation again. In the first two phrases, the phrases ended with "No more slaves, no more slaves" on the D5 moving down. Instead, the third phrase ends with "And we've gained our victory," on a melody that swells up and then back down, barely reaching D5. Though the beginning of the third phrase is musically confident, "And we've gained our victory" ripples with uncertainty. "Victory" ends on the second scale degree, approached from above. This creates tension; intuitively the singer wants to continue to the tonic, but the melodic line is left hanging, depriving the singer of finality or assurance that his goal will be reached.

The first three measures of phrase 4 begin on a D5. Previously when a subphrase began on D5, the second half of the subphrase would jump down (as in measures 2-4 and 6-8). In this phrase however, the D5 moves down a third to a passing  $I^{4/2}$  (introducing some harmonic interest with an F $\sharp$ ) but then steps back up all the way to E5, the highest pitch in the song. This subphrase breaks the pattern, continuing up rather than dropping down. The result is an exultant declaration, "By our solidarity!" that offsets the uncertainty at the end of "victory" – the union is a comfort the singer can cling to.

The song ends with the same melodic line and words as the ending of the second phrase – "Jesus saves/No more slaves" on a repeated D5 and the same words again on scale degrees 2-3-1. Like the second phrase, the last words are accompanied with a V moving to I. In the second phrase the roots of the chords move from D3 up to G3. However, the roots of the final two chords move from D3 down to G2, giving this reiteration a feeling of finality.

Music provides an important source of meaning for the singers of “Jesus Saves.” Workers layered the meaning of their text with the additional expressive power of music. The lyrics are accentuated by the music: musical moments of tension and release, ambiguity or a lack of it in the harmonic progression, and particular emphases on certain notes supports the words accompanying all of this action. By singing these words, multiple people are able to share in the experience. They are unified in this expression of common struggle and hope. And finally, the melody and harmonic structure tie together new words with the old music, ensuring that the religious context of “Jesus Saves” is felt in “Song of the Danville Strikers.” That a person could sing or hear “Song of the Danville Strikers,” and think, “I’ve sung this song before, in church” gives the song powerful social and religious context that a new tune would not provide.

“A Singing Labor Movement cannot be Defeated:” Power beyond the Movement

Thus far, I have focused primarily on the impact of music on people sympathetic to the labor movement. However, another contingent was often present at singings – those that stood on the other side of the picket line. These outsiders, considered the enemy by some, were the work bosses, the police, the hired thugs, and the scabs. As workers sang to encourage each other to press onward in the fight, they also sang to an entirely different audience. And knowingly or not, this audience, by listening to these familiar tunes with new words, took an active part in the performance. Music still exerted its power, albeit in a different way.

Songs were a powerful tool to persuade the enemy, if not of their guilt than of their humanness and relationship to the singers. Consider Horton’s experience with “We Shall not be Moved” at the mill. About ten minutes after they had been fired upon, “[The workers] began to come out again from behind the barns and garages and the little stores that were around in this

small town, and they stood there, and they were not moved and sang, and that's what won their organization."<sup>149</sup>

As economically vulnerable and relatively powerless people, they had demanded organization, challenged the employer/employee relationship, and crossed a social boundary. As a result, they experienced violence. According to Horton, the song and the courage the workers demonstrated in singing it were powerful enough to curtail the violence (they were not shot at again) and to win them organization. The workers did not retaliate with violence or send a delegation. They stood together and sang.

I contend that music opened a channel of communication between the workers and the outsiders, and that this musical communication created the necessary social space for both contingents to interpret the communication within shared social contexts. Because the outsiders are were part of the same culture as the workers, the music becomes an unintentional form of discourse. Though the outsiders are not actually singing, they take an active role in the music through passive listening. Cross argues that listening to music is "at root, [a] communicative human behavior" and "a key component of musical discourse."<sup>150</sup> Outsiders are affected by the music's emotion and the meanings tied to cultural context, even though they are listening rather than performing.

Thus music is a social interaction, and the unique functions of music give this interaction the space necessary to alleviate tension. A collective musical act, including passive listening, "can be construed as guaranteeing the success of social interaction by creating conditions for the minimization of conflict through its semantic open-ness while simultaneously enabling a joint

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<sup>149</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

<sup>150</sup> Ian Cross, "Listening as Covert Performance," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 134, no. 1 (2009): 1, 9. Accessed March 15, 2014, [http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/Cross\\_JRMA\\_0110.pdf](http://www-personal.mus.cam.ac.uk/~ic108/PDF/Cross_JRMA_0110.pdf).



sense of shared action that is oriented around commonly experienced temporal regularities.”<sup>151</sup>

Music is nonthreatening; it does not force only one interpretation, but creates space for a flexible interpretation that does not undermine the integrity of the collective musical act. Music as a communicative behavior affords “us space to rehearse and to sustain our social flexibility,” and it facilitates intellectual flexibility, the ability to “experience behaviours as simultaneously associated with a range of different meanings.” These two functions of music, Cross says, seem “to be likely preconditions for the emergence of abstract concepts that frame and give meaning to human interaction, such as that of social justice.”<sup>152</sup>

If the workers had chosen to send a delegation to talk through these issues with the bosses, the situation would be quite different. The specificity of language, its “ability to be employed and interpreted as imperative and directive,” constrains the ability of each participant to interpret “others’ roles in the overall interaction.” While music creates space for individual interpretation, language forces the speaker’s interpretation. But music, even when combined with potentially dangerous lyrics, makes “an excellently adapted framework for interaction in situations that are on edge, situations where outcomes are neither clear beforehand nor retrospectively (easily) definable...music is able to act as a medium within which a capacity for flexible social interaction may be rehearsed and perhaps formed.”<sup>153</sup>

In more concrete terms, imagine a union leader shouting through a megaphone the words, “We’re fighting for our union, we shall not be moved! We’re fighting for our union, we shall not be moved!” The words themselves offer the only context for the outsider’s interpretation; the context is hostile, specific, and threatening. But imagine the same words sung, by the group

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<sup>151</sup> Ian Cross, “Music and Social Being,” 8.

<sup>152</sup> Ian Cross, “Music and Social Being,” 8-9.

<sup>153</sup> Ian Cross, “Music and Social Being,” 8.

collectively, to an old and well known tune with specific religious connotations. The context has grown; the outsider now feels the emotional expression of the music and the words' religious overtones. His communication with the singers, through his passive listening, has space for individual, rather than a specific, interpretation. The outsider will probably not change his inclusive language views, but he is able to see the singers as participants in this musical conversation rather than merely as an enemy.

The listener would have felt the residue of a song's original, religious context, especially when the labor song is based on a traditional hymn often used in churches. Songs like, "The Preacher and the Slave" based on the popular hymn "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" and "There is Power" based on "Power in the Blood" are direct challenges to those who share the workers' faith. Their daily reality is far different than the prosperity promised them, and the rewritten words are an indictment of greed and injustice. The comparison of the original words and the labor song in Figures 5 and 6 shows how the workers' words are weighted by the original Christian declaration of faith. "The Preacher and the Slave" references the original song's promise of a home "on that beautiful shore." The singer and the outsider who is listening share in the same faith, yet the promise of prosperity after death is meaningless when the workers are starving. It is also expressing frustration with Christian leaders who tell workers they are not acting as dutiful Christians should when they defy their employers. "There is Power" hearkens back to the universal saving power of Christ's crucifixion. Hill's version challenges the worker to not rely on the promise of heavenly mansions and instead band together to demand what is rightfully theirs on this earth.

<p>“In the Sweet By and By,” by Sanford Fillmore Bennett, 1868.</p> <p>There’s a land that is fairer than day, And by faith we can see it afar; For the Father waits over the way To prepare us a dwelling place there.</p> <p>(Chorus) In the sweet by and by, We shall meet on that beautiful shore; In the sweet by and by, We shall meet on that beautiful shore.</p>	<p>“The Preacher and the Slave,” by Joe Hill, 1939.</p> <p>Long-haired preachers come out every night; Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right. But when asked about something to eat, They will answer in voices so sweet.</p> <p>(Chorus) You will eat bye and bye, In that glorious land above the sky, Work and pray, live on hay; You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.</p>
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Figure 5<sup>154</sup>

<p>“There is Power in the Blood,” by Lewis E. Jones, 1899.</p> <p>Would you be free from the burden of sin? There’s pow’r in the blood, pow’r in the blood; Would you o’er evil a victory win? There’s a wonderful pow’r in the blood.</p> <p>(Chorus) There is pow’r, pow’r, wonder-working pow’r In the blood of the Lamb; There is pow’r, pow’r, wonder-working pow’r In the precious blood of the Lamb.</p>	<p>“There is Power,” by Joe Hill, 1939.</p> <p>Would you have mansions of gold in the sky, And live in a shack, way in the back? Would you have wings up to heaven to fly, And starve here with rags on your back?</p> <p>(Chorus) There is power, power In a band of working men, When they stand hand in hand; There is power, power That must rule in every land, When the workers join their hands.</p>
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Figure 6<sup>155</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Sanford Fillmore Bennett, “In the Sweet By and By,” 1868, public domain. Accessed April 14, 2014 [http://www.hymnary.org/text/theres\\_a\\_land\\_that\\_is\\_fairer\\_than\\_day](http://www.hymnary.org/text/theres_a_land_that_is_fairer_than_day).

Joe Hill, “The Preacher and the Slave,” *Labor Songs*, ed. Zilphia Horton, (Atlanta: Textile Workers Union of America, 1939).

<sup>155</sup> Lewis E. Jones, “There is Power in the Blood,” 1899, public domain. Accessed April 14, 2014 [http://www.hymnary.org/text/would\\_you\\_be\\_free\\_from\\_the\\_burden\\_jones](http://www.hymnary.org/text/would_you_be_free_from_the_burden_jones).

Joe Hill, “There is Power,” *Labor Songs*, ed. Zilphia Horton, (Atlanta: Textile Workers Union of America, 1939).

If Horton's experience at the mill was not the result in every union conflict, there is evidence that music can create the space necessary to alleviate moments of social tension. Bruce Hartford, a member of the SCLC, no abbrev told a story of a civil rights march in Grenada, Mississippi in 1966 that illustrates this point:

Surrounding us would be mobs of 500 or more Klansmen. These weren't your typical spur-of-the-moment pick-up mobs, they had been mobilized by the KKK from all over the state to come to Grenada to do business. Some of the time — not always — we could literally hold them off by the quality of our singing. We could create a psychic wall that most of the time they could not breach, even though they wanted to. ... they couldn't do it, we would hold them off, protect ourselves from their attacks, by the moral, psychological force of our singing. They couldn't break through our barrier of song.<sup>156</sup>

Music expressed a passion, faith, and moral justification that was more palatable to the enemy than words alone. Indeed, music has its own agency that works in relation to the intentions of the performer and the perceptions of the listener, creating the possibility of discourse.

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<sup>156</sup> Bruce Hartford, "The Power of Freedom Songs," 2011, accessed Mar 15, 2014, <http://www.crmvet.org/info/fsongs.htm>.

## We Shall Overcome: The Transmission into Civil Rights

By the 1950s, the labor movement had changed. The Cold War and the fear of communism made schools like Highlander easy targets for conservative attacks. The CIO had severed its ties with Highlander, and labor unions had all but abandoned civil rights in the south. Horton was rarely asked to perform for labor groups anymore. She was bitterly disappointed in the conservative shift in unions, with the exception of groups such as the United Packinghouse Workers and the Farmers Union that were highly integrated. In 1952, Horton told the Montana Farmers Union that unions “have become so reactionary and they’re so complacent that they have lost their ideal, and I don’t care anything about singing for people like that.”<sup>157</sup>

As Highlander’s place in the labor movement slipped, the school eliminated its labor classes and turned to civil rights. Horton found a renewed zeal for the music of activism, spending the short remainder of her life working with interracial groups at Highlander and elsewhere in the South.<sup>158</sup> Her transition into civil rights activism is vital to an understanding of how labor’s musical canon became the music of the civil rights movement. Horton had spent years teaching others how to use music in the movement, and she applied these same principles, as well as the same songs, to her work for the civil rights movement.

Horton’s transformation of labor songs into civil rights music can perhaps best be illustrated by her work with “We Will Overcome.” By the time Horton learned this song in 1946, the song, or some version of it, had been used in the labor movement for over forty years, apparently with little success. But only fourteen years later, in 1960, Guy Carawan was teaching the song, now “We Shall Overcome,” to members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

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<sup>157</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech.

Glyn Thomas, “Hear the Musing Ringing,” 41.

<sup>158</sup> Glyn Thomas, “Hear the Musing Ringing,” 41.

Committee (SNCC), and Pete Seeger was recording it in Carnegie Hall. The song was well on its way to becoming a national phenomenon. Yet it was Horton who turned this little known labor song into one of the most important works to come out of the labor movement and succeed in the civil rights movement.

The exact lineage of “We Will Overcome” is unclear. The melody is likely an adaptation of a spiritual sung in southern black churches known as “I’ll be all right” and the words a variation of C.A. Tindley’s hymn “I’ll Overcome Someday.”<sup>159</sup> The earliest remaining evidence of its use in labor dates to 1909 in the Birmingham coal fields. A worker’s letter references the song, “We Will Overcome Someday,” but it is unclear if this is just an adaptation of Tindley’s hymn or if it combined the words with the spiritual’s tune.<sup>160</sup> Claude Williams said that he, Lee Hays, and some of their students adapted the hymn “I Will Overcome” in 1936, “giving it a message about the saving power of the union.”<sup>161</sup> The song appears in print again in 1945, at a strike of the Tobacco Workers Union against the American Tobacco Company in Charleston, SC. In 1946, two members of that union attended a workshop at Highlander for Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers, and the song came to Horton’s attention.

As she did with any visitor to Highlander, Horton asked the two workers to teach her the songs they sang in their home situation. Guy and Candie Carawan, labor activists who played a vital role in carrying this song into the Civil Rights Movement, doubted that the two white workers actually sang “We Will Overcome” during the strike. Instead the Carawans believed

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<sup>159</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, “We Shall Overcome!” nd, Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 16, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, Madison, WI. E. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 369.

<sup>160</sup> Daniel Letwin, *Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners*, (The University of North Carolina Press: 1998), 246.

<sup>161</sup> Gellman and Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, 76.

they had probably heard it sung by the black strikers, who made up the majority of the picketers and were already familiar with the song from their churches. According to Myles Horton, Zilphia had to ask the two workers several times before they would share “We Will Overcome” with her. Pete Seeger remembered it differently: he said a black woman named Lucille Simmons, one of the strikers in the Tobacco Workers Union, taught it to Horton at Highlander.<sup>162</sup> Regardless, a worker or workers shared the song with Horton. As the Carawans tell it, “Based on [the workers’] rendition of it, she had to imagine what it must have sounded like in black tradition, and on the picket line.”<sup>163</sup> Horton’s long interest in African American music undoubtedly drew her to the song’s free rhythmic movement and graceful melodic lines.<sup>164</sup> She adapted the workers’ version into one she could easily sing and teach to others at union meetings throughout the south, creating the musical base for the version of “We Shall Overcome” we know today.<sup>165</sup>

That Horton did not learn the song until 1946 is telling; surely if it had been sung prevalently in labor before then, she would have heard about it. For once she cajoled the two reluctant workers into sharing “We Will Overcome” with her, Horton was immediately struck by it, and it became a standing favorite in her repertoire. She led or taught the song to several groups of students and workers, and she sang it for “many different nationality groups,” such as French Canadians in Canada.<sup>166</sup> The song appeared in practically every songbook she published after first learning it in 1946.

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<sup>162</sup> Pete Seeger, interview by author, Fayetteville, AR, November 10, 2012.

<sup>163</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, “We Shall Overcome!”

<sup>164</sup> Zilphia Horton, Speech to Montana Farmer’s Union.

<sup>165</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, “We Shall Overcome!”

<sup>166</sup> Anne Braden, “The Southern Freedom Movement in Perspective,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*, 17, no. 3 (1965): 26.

Horton said of “We Will Overcome,” “Its strong emotional appeal and simple dignity never fails to hit people. It sort of stops them cold silent.”<sup>167</sup> She felt it had an inherent power. She used it to end her hour-long speech to the Montana Farmers Union in 1952, saying it was “a song which...all Farmers Union people stand for, which all workers who are striving for the things we’ve been talking about this week stand for.” Perhaps most important to Horton was the use of the word “we” – a representation of the collective strength of the movement. She went on to say, “If we mean what we say, we realize that...it has to be more than our community, it has to be communities everywhere...have our horizons stretched all over the world.”

“We Will Overcome” places the singer or listener within that community. The words never reveal just what the singer wants to overcome; instead the singer or listener instills the song with his or her own meaning. The song makes a simple but profound statement: as a collective group we believe we can accomplish these things, whatever those things might be. Clearly religious meanings are implicit here. Pete Seeger felt that by “never once explicitly stating who or what will be overcome” it was left to the singer or listener to “let their minds speculate.” This means, he wrote, “that the song is ever living and ever growing.”<sup>168</sup> Horton said the song is “so simple, the idea is so sincere, that it doesn’t matter that it comes from tobacco workers. When I sing it for people it becomes their song.” A person could think of overcoming Jim Crow or a particularly harsh sheriff or mill boss. Regardless, that person is sharing in a community of people who feel oppressed yet are empowered to effect real social change.

“We Will Overcome” underwent many changes as a movement song. In 1948 Horton taught the song to Pete Seeger, and he published it in the *People’s Songs* newsletter. The

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<sup>167</sup> FTA-CIO Workers, Highlander Students, “281, We Will Overcome.”

<sup>168</sup> Pete Seeger, “Note to the translators of the song “We Shall Overcome” from English into some other language,” June 10, 1967, reel 35, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (microfilm edition, 1980), Wisconsin State Historical Society.



accompanying article quoted Horton, “It was first sung in Charleston, S.C., and...one of the stanzas of the original hymn was... ‘we will overcome’ ...At school here they naturally added other verses.”<sup>169</sup> She intended the song to be changed, as was her usual custom. Students or activists could easily trade in new verses, as they only needed to come up with five words or syllables to replace the verse. Yet the song was simple enough that an audience or group of strikers could easily pick up any new verses. Because it had no composer or single origin, hundreds of participants in the movement had a hand in its composition, and it was continually being remade. Figure 7 shows the words printed in *People’s Songs*, as well as one example of the song’s further adaptation for the labor movement.

“We Will Overcome” in <i>People’s Songs</i> , 1948	“We Will Overcome” in <i>Amalgamated Songbook</i> , nd
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will overcome, We will overcome, We will overcome someday. Oh, Down in my heart, I do believe, We’ll overcome some day.</li> <li>2. The Lord will see us through...</li> <li>3. We’re on to victory...</li> <li>4. We will overcome...</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will overcome, We will overcome,  We will overcome someday.  Oh down in my heart,  I do believe,  We will overcome some day.</li> <li>2. We will organize...</li> <li>3. We will build a new world...</li> <li>4. The Lord will see us through...</li> </ol>

Figure 7<sup>170</sup>

That the words changed is unsurprising, as Horton constantly encouraged workers to change them to best fit their circumstances. However, the music changed significantly as well.

<sup>169</sup> FTA-CIO Workers, Highlander Students, “281 We Will Overcome,” *People’s Songs*, Vol 3 No 8: Sep 1948, 8.

<sup>170</sup> FTA-CIO Workers, Highlander Students, “281 We Will Overcome,” *People’s Songs*, Vol 3 No 8: Sep 1948, 8.

Seeger said that some people liked to sing the song with a quick tempo and hand clapping. Horton, he said, always sang it slowly. The melody printed in *People's Songs* is similar to the copyrighted 1963 version, published by Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, and Pete Seeger (Zilphia Horton is also listed as a composer, although she had died by then). Figure 8 is the version printed in *People's Songs*. The differences between a recording of Zilphia Horton singing “We Will Overcome” and Seeger’s version are striking. The melody and their rhythms are both altered. “Deep in my heart” replaces “Down in my heart.” Perhaps most noticeable, Horton sings the original “will”. Pete Seeger is usually credited with changing “will to shall,” as it “opened the voice better.”<sup>171</sup>



Figure 8<sup>172</sup>

“We Will Overcome” may have been changed more than any other song to come out of the labor movement. Horton turned the original she learned into a version that was easy to sing and learn, and this tradition probably continued as the song was taught more and more often.

<sup>171</sup> Pete Seeger, interview by author.

<sup>172</sup> FTA-CIO Workers, Highlander Students, “281 We Will Overcome,” *People's Songs*, Vol 3 No 8: Sep 1948, 8.

Horton did not turn the hymn into a labor song; a worker did that. Yet she had a critical role in its growing popularity. She was so moved by the song's simplicity and "sincere" idea, she incorporated it into all of her projects until her death. The song's ultimate international fame can be traced back to her, a labor activist who realized the song's inherent power and potential. It seems likely that, had she never learned the song or not liked it as much when she did, "We Will Overcome" would never have become a civil rights classic. Had she not died by accidental poisoning in 1956, her name would be the one synonymous with "We Shall Overcome" and the civil rights movement. Fortunately, the song was not lost at her death, because she had taught it to Guy Carawan and Pete Seeger. After her death, Guy Carawan continued her civil rights work at Highlander as music director, and he taught the song to civil rights activists throughout the south. Pete Seeger, the folk singer and activist, would eventually make the song internationally famous. Both of these men first learned the song from Horton.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, "We Shall Overcome!"  
Pete Seeger, interview by author.

## Concluding Thoughts

Horton contributed hundreds of songs that were used in the labor movement, each a powerful example of music's role in labor. Further analysis is necessary for a complete understanding of this musical canon. Though I touched briefly on the religious element, much more can be done on the role of evangelical Christianity. The canon is rooted in traditional hymns and spirituals, and the themes found in the songs' original versions permeate the new labor words. This is reflective of the strong religious element in the labor movement, one that deserves more attention. Additionally, time and space restricted my ability to discuss race and its part in this story. I plan to expand my research to incorporate a thorough analysis of the influence of black music traditions on labor music, as well as labor music's contribution to the struggle for racial equality. Not only can the civil rights movement find its musical roots in labor, it can find the beginnings of bringing white and black together there as well.

Zilphia Horton provides a completely new way to look at the labor movement and southern radicalism. Her work with labor music reveals the lasting effects of music on movements of social justice. By incorporating the people's music and teaching them how to use music as a tool, Horton brought motivation, unity, and power to the labor movement. This music offers a window into the thoughts and feelings of workers, as well as the strategies and tools workers used to create social change. The musical canon she created is the words of the oppressed, sung on the battlefield of workers struggling for better lives.

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Zilphia Horton with her children, 1951. Courtesy of Thorsten Horton.

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