

# Joe Hill

## Book Review

Julie Herrada

2003

a review of

*Joe Hill: The IWW & the Making of a Revolutionary Working-class Counterculture*, by Franklin Rosemont, Charles H. Kerr, Chicago, 2003, 639 pp. \$17.00

“...singing through the hard time for the good times to come...”

—Utah Phillips, IWW storyteller and folk singer

The day I received this book, I also went to see *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony*, a documentary about the protest music of Apartheid South Africa. In the film, freedom fighter Lindiwe Zulu told about the reaction when black activists would lose one of their comrades in the struggle.

They believed that too much mourning dampened the spirit, so after a brief mourning period, they began singing. I was reminded of IWW martyr Joe Hill’s famous words, “Don’t waste any time mourning: organize!”

To round out the experience, the next day I went to see Utah Phillips perform. He sang Joe Hill songs and in fine oral tradition, told IWW stories as if he’d been there. What a treat it was! I was ripe for the experience of reading the book.

Rosemont’s book is compelling, blending the best of labor history and lore with popular culture and contemporary style. He illustrates the extent to which Hill, the Swedish-born IWW who was executed by the State of Utah in 1915 for a murder he did not commit, has become the premier folk hero in our movement, with literally thousands of references to Hill in literature, music, poetry and art.

The “profusely illustrated” book bursts with songs and poetry to fan the flames of discontent as much now as when they were written. It puts what is known about Hill within the broader context the IWW movement and the culture built around it.

This meaty text about one of our favorite Wobbly bards is well indexed and referenced (the bibliography is nearly 30 pages) and provides a valuable guide to further reading and for other researchers. Rosemont not only examines Hill’s own stories, songs, artwork, cartoons, and poetry, but those about Hill as well, and here, the real heart of the book lies. Despite the deficiency of concrete biographical information about Hill, much has been written about him, often using a combination of interviews (not always the most reliable source), newspaper accounts (almost never accurate), and government documents (need I say more?).

Speculation and guesswork about Hill’s personal life, experiences, and thoughts dominate most earlier biographies of Hill; but Rosemont analyzes and explores each fact of Hill’s life and work, however small it may seem, in order to shed more light on the historic rather than the fanciful man.

Rosemont begins with a background of the IWW and conflicting views of its history. He then moves to Hill’s thoughts on internationalism, race, “sky pilots” (preachers), Marxism, the law, and wilderness to his influence among the later day beats, hippies, and surrealists, interspersing the text with reproductions of Hill’s artwork. He effectively employs what is known about Hill’s personality and activities to set forth either the probability or unlikelihood of some of the more obscure information.

Part of what makes the book entertaining is the surprising connections Rosemont finds through his extensive research, from Carl Sandburg to Gary Snyder and Judi Bari. All the familiar and unfamiliar characters he introduces who were moved in some way to express their love for Hill, and the impact he made upon them. Rosemont has done a remarkable job of weaving together and linking the words and memories of many people he's interviewed or corresponded with over the years who knew Hill, or were friends of those who did, as well as thoughtfully utilizing many other sources.

Equally enjoyable, Rosemont debunks the many myths surrounding Hill, perpetuated by self-serving academics and mean-spirited authors, whose research and writings on the IWW have been erroneous more often than not. Rosemont's dissection of these myths is central to the book and a delight to read.

In addition, what emerges is Rosemont's wry sense of humor, and more important, his own passion for IWW history and lore. It's contagious, and it's clear that he had fun writing this book.

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"Hill's story is indissolubly linked to dissent, poetry, protest, the struggle for freedom and a good life for all...[T]here is something special about Hill and his songs, and that those who sing them want to share that 'something' with their listeners. In that sense, every time you hear a Joe Hill song it's a kind of memorial."

—Franklin Rosemont

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