

Still Wobbly After All These Years

A mini-memoir

Sid Brown

I was a Wobbly in the late 1950's, through a portion of the tumultuous '60s and into the always seeking-sometimes finding, 'Seventies. Learning and honoring the historic traditions of the IWW and sharing tasks and decision-making with "fellow workers" changed my working life and continues to affect my creative endeavors.

On this 100th anniversary of organizing an anarcho-syndicalist vision into One Big Union, I'm deciding to re-join the IWW and continue Wobblin' into my twilight years, or "The Twilight Zone," whichever state of entropic devolution occurs first.

I joined the IWW for the first time because of the music: those timeless tunes that sung and stung, promising "to fan the flames of discontent." Such a provocative and pragmatic idea! Take common songs, even religious hymns, and rewrite the words in order to inspire, educate and entertain workers. The Wobblies used popular melodies imbued with new, liberatory lyrics to recruit union members and foment revolution.

Maybe Mao's *Red Book* had more devotees, but, *The Little Red Song Book* of IWW songs definitely had more transformative wisdom, wily wit, exciting incitements and parodic popularity. I've lived to see those Wobbly tunes outlast Mao's formulaic fantasies and repressive realities of "cultural revolution" imposed from the top. I believe that those accessible and still mostly topical IWW tunes may be "instrumental" in overthrowing the Nike People's Banana Republic of Sweat Shops Glob-All.

1956: I began playing guitar on my 14th birthday. Back then, before the folk revival of the 'Sixties, the only place to get folk music books was at the local Communist Party bookstore in Detroit, Global Books. I bought my requisite copy of the *People's Songbook* and dropped by there regularly to peruse Sing Out magazine, Marxist classics and Commie literature.

I also bought a copy of *Labor's Untold Story* which devoted a lot of attention to Bill Haywood, the formation of the IWW, its organizing efforts, its use of mass civil disobedience during the free speech fights, and the IWW's revolutionary notions of industrial unionism leading to the creation of a truly democratic syndicalist society. Reading about Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (then a prominent member of the CP-USA) led me to Joe Hill's song about her when she was a Wob, "The Rebel Girl."

I dialed 411 (information in those days) and got the address of the IWW national headquarters. I wrote them and they sent me free copies of the Industrial Worker newspaper and a list of literature. For three bucks I received the "Little Red Songbook" and sheet music for "The Internationale" and "The Rebel Girl" published pre-1920, which I still have. I clutched the IWW Songbook in my blistered, yet-to-be callused, guitar-picking fingers and began to figure out all those three-chord wonders. I didn't do it on my own, for music making works/plays best as a collaborative effort.

1958: Wow! Kids, black and white kids, shut down a segregated swimming pool on the outskirts of Detroit. Throughout the Northern states communities demonstrated their solidarity in support of black students sitting-in at Southern lunch counters. With mass support from Detroit's black community, the downtown Woolworth's store was shutdown. Small victories perhaps, but we demonstrated (literally) that the quiet and apathetic 'Fifties

were over! An embryonic youth culture was emerging, throngs started moving against the war-mongering, racist, corporate controlled state, and songs were sung. All over the world liberation movements erupted.

At the beginning of the 1960's, I was a precocious little putz, what with becoming a fairly adept guitar picker and picketer against segregation and for civil rights. While blue-blood JFK and his Camelotzaluck crew waged bloody terrorist war against revolutionary Cuba and sent military "advisors" to Indochina and elsewhere, we raised some hell in the streets, exuberantly and vociferously, thereby providing new photo-ops for the police Red Squad.

I started attending Friday night forums at Debs Hall, eventually joining the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) because they seemed to connect the dots, moving from protest to power. They had a Plan and I became "hot to Trot." They pooh-pooed anarchism as archaic and incapable of making a revolution, but one of my SWP comrades introduced me to an old friend of his in Chicago, who turned out to be the editor of the Industrial Worker.

My first Wobbly suggested I write to the Libertarian League to get literature about anarchism. Some of the pamphlets I received from them were actually printed in Barcelona by the FAI/CNT. Contrary to the Bolshi vanguard's party line, I learned that anarchist workers and farmers had made a revolution. I realized there was an alternative to Stalinoid stagnationalism: anarcho-socialist surrealism.

I visited the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan before it was mostly cataloged. Its funky garage smell swelled my heart and provoked my mind; boxes and piles overflowing with dreams and schemes for Revolution. This experience merged the little streams of "single-issue" struggles (racism, war, etc.) with the mighty river of radical history. I realized I was a revolutionary and I committed to being a continuator in the process of working class struggles.

For me, this was a truly awe-full, "gee whiz", moment of subversive satori: the collective struggles of the past illuminated a vision of revolutionary changes unfolding momentarily into the future. This was when I first started being a Nowist.

Making music and engaging in radical action was, then and now, change-provoking and life-affirming. When I wonder what seeds of creativity make a culture flower, I see the fertile fomentation of Revolution as a never-ending process, literally "to turn things around." For me, that's what turns bohemianism, that primitive and premature expression of personalized revolt, into a synthesis of constructive critiques of capitalism with collective action that hopefully undermines the commodity system.

We rejected the insipid schmaltz of pop music of the late '50s/early '60s. Most of what was on the radio-daddy-o was not only bland, but blatantly racist: black R & B musicians made the music movin' and groovin' and Pop-white folks eviscerated its soulfulness. Their "covers" got the air play. But late at night on the car radio, we could tune-in "real" R & B broadcasting out of Memphis and the complex hyper-maniac bluegrass syncopating out of Cincinnati. This roots music, redolent of delta grooves and mountain hollers, usually with just three or four chords, demonstrated to us that untrained, unappreciated and mostly poor people could develop musical styles of unimagined and inspired complexity.

This awareness took our folkie strumming to new levels. Perhaps my fellow musicians and I committed crimes of chutzpah: what "right" or credibility did city kids have singing songs of sharecropping or moonshining? But Detroit's auto factories were filled with emigres from the farms and hills of the South.

These workers, who sought decent pay and some dignity through union membership, were the parents of the kids I went to school with. They were sometimes our friends, but always our neighbors, and why shouldn't we honor diversity and add our riffs and licks to the stew brewing in our multicultural melting pot?

There was a world of music in Detroit in those days: I grew up with WJLB playing in the kitchen while my mother cooked knishes and kishkas after a day spent production sewing in a factory. WJLB was a 24/7 "ethnic" station where each night you'd hear the Greek, Arabic, Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish "Hours." Afternoons, we heard Frantic Ernie's R & B show and on Sundays, black gospel music. This omnipresent matrix of diverse scales and rhythms affected the music we began playing.

Several wanna-be-Beatnik coffeehouses opened up in town during the late '50s and we did regular jams, including one mind-blowing and ear-revelating session with jazz saxophonist Yusef Lateef. A bongo-banging poet referred to us as the "Trotsky Trio," though we billed ourselves as "The Motor City String Banned." In dark, dingy and depraved dens such as the Unstabled, we alternated sets with an improv ensemble which included Lily Tomlin.

We few folkies schlepping a fretful array of perhaps 20 guitars, banjos, mandolins, washboards and washtub bass plucked 20-minute blues, bluegrass and Greco-Middle-Eastern improvisational melanges.

Honoring the past's rich folk traditions and creating "newness and nowness" through improvisation was energizing and empowering. In 1965, these musical experiments led to several of us forming The Spike-Drivers, a folk rock/psychedelic band that went on to semi-fame and (mis)fortune.

Despite the group's eventual demise (at the hands of the Showbiz money machine, that we naively colluded with), what is most significant is that we did DIY in a uniquely 'Sixties old school way by producing our own record at Chess Studios in Chicago. What we should have learned from this experience of collectively controlling the creative process, was that the record we produced was better than anything we ever did for Warner Brothers/Reprise after we got our "big break" recording contract.

After the dissolution of The Spike-Drivers, my wife and I moved to Berkeley, where we lived two blocks from People's Park. I wrote the "Karmic Strip" column in the Tribe and made friends with an anarchist who had a print shop in his basement, literally an "underground press." One of my first "Duh Moments" came when I realized that there was no freedom of the press without a printing press.

After moving to Seattle from Berkeley, I hooked up with another anarchist printer, whose press was located in the pre-tourista funk of Pike Street Market. We joined the IWW, making us the second IWW print shop in town. We "revolutionized" the old IWW union bug: instead of two men shaking hands, our version featured a man and woman, reflecting the resurgence of feminist consciousness.

We put the IWW union "bug" on a newsletter that we printed for a hospital workers' organizing drive and also "bugged" many leaflets protesting the Vietnam war. An IWW logo was on all our gig flyers and when we performed, our repertoire included Joe Hill's "The Preacher and the Slave: Pie in the Sky," and a blues-rock version of "The Internationale."

Why have I decided to rejoin the IWW during this 100th anniversary year? For me it's part historical tribute and part a matter of survival for me and others. At 62 years of age, unemployed and partially disabled, I still need to work. Heart, soul and body, I am IWW: I Want Work!

Despite being highly qualified and experienced, ageism (as well as other "isms" and "wasms") is prevalent in the job market. The so-called social service safety net is seriously frayed and I'm afraid. As the situation in the job market worsens for me and other "expendable" folks in the working class, a union that represents all workers is vital.

I respect the fact that the IWW has kept the flame of revolutionary consciousness alive. In many ways. This revolutionary union is as relevant today as it was in the past. In the 1930s, the emerging CIO adopted and adapted the IWW's radical idea of industrial unionism. The CIO grew in members as well as stature due to the sit down strikes where workers seized factories instead of only picketing outside while scabs were brought in to take their jobs. When those hopeful union men and women were taking over the factories, they were singing those good old IWW-inspired songs claiming their power to change the lives of the American working class for the better. These radical actions of the 1930s informed and inspired the Southern student activists in the 1950s, when they sat in at segregated lunch counters.

Worldwide millions of people understand that "the working class and the employing class have nothing in common" as the 1905 Preamble to the IWW proclaimed. If we listen closely, we can hear the songs of the Wobblies cheering us on, while jeering at the bosses.

If rebellion, individual or collective, is a rejection of an oppressive system, then amping up refusal and moving towards revolution is a wholeheartedly constructive endeavor. I envision revolution as "art with heart," a co-creative dynamic, an empowered, imaginative, and empirical rising that struggles against the writhing tide of lockstep dogmatism and its concomitant obeisance unto Leaders.

"One World Indivisible" and "One Big Union Indivisible" work for me. When the workers of the world unite—and they will—it will birth not only peace with justice for all working people, but it will save the planet from the profiteers, plunderers and polluters, and their media prostitutes.

Sid Brown studied classical Indian music with Ali Akbar Khan and performed "ethno-eclectic" music with Good Gaia's. His music can be heard at: goodgaia.com. The "retroll" Spike-Drivers compilation can be heard and ordered at: cdbaby.com/cd/spikedrivers.

Sid Brown (1942–2005)

Sid Brown passed away June 27 in Vancouver, Washington at the age of 62.

Sid grew up in Detroit, the son of a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant family, in a home where the sounds of opera and classical music were always present. Sid had his own musical ideas and became a multi-instrumentalist, mastering six and twelve string guitar, electric guitar, bass, banjo, mandolin, bouzouki, sarode, and oud.

His banjo playing greatly influenced his finger picking style, as did his love of Indian classical and world ethnic music.

He was a pioneer of alternate rhythms, experimental timings, and alternate tunings; most notably open “C1” when other guitarists of the time were locked into standard tuning and signatures. His complex spiral rhythms would flow from his hands during his enthralling abstract, hypnotic improvisations.

Sid was a life-long social and political activist; a proud member of the IWW and Jews for Global Justice. He always cared for the poor and disenfranchised and never compromised his commitment to help bring about a better world in any way he could.

He will be remembered for his musical contributions to groups such as The Spike Drivers, Peace Bread & Land, and Good Gaia. His sense of humor, quick wit, and ability to turn the English language inside-out with his love of puns had no equal. His big kind heart finally broke down. He was a remarkable person, brilliant and quirky. His family and friends will all miss him terribly.

-Malcolm John Brown

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