

Strip Mining Big Rock Candy Mountain

A Tuneful Utopia

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2005

“The Big Rock Candy Mountain” has to be one of the greatest anti-work anthems in American popular music. One-time Wobbly busker and radio-show hillbilly Harry McClintock of Knoxville, Tennessee connived to claim authorship of the song in the mid-1920s (as he also did with another one of the IWW’s greatest hits, “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum”), but the song has existed in one form or another since the nineteenth-century. Hal Rammel, in his ambitious and imaginative study *Nowhere in America: The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Other Comic Utopias* (1990), goes further and traces the song’s genealogy back to old European folk practices like the carnival and mummers’ plays. The song is a scruffy paean to the most potent weapon of the weak: the utopian imagination that can supersede the grim miseries of oppression, exploitation and want.

In the decades between the Gilded Age ascendancy of monopoly capitalism and the awful carnage of the First World War, the work force in the US was battered by waves of convulsive social change. The overt and unapologetic corporate sponsorship of the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, as well as the frenzied aftershocks of the economic panic of 1907, led to conditions that cruelly disrupted the lives of working people, the poor, and new immigrants.

Wages plummeted as the unemployment rate peaked at more than 35%, forcing many to crisscross the US to find jobs doing seasonal crop harvesting, sawing timber, and building roads. Others sought communities with more generous relief services, or were simply roaming to find a means of escape from capitalism’s latest indignities and predations.

To avoid the high costs of transportation, many itinerant laborers and unemployed wanderers (up to half a million people, by some counts) traveled the land by sneaking aboard freight trains. En route, these travelers sometimes gathered in hidden groves around small campfires in the woods outside of town near a main junction of a railroad line.

It was there that they could cook food, pass the jug, catch up on sleep, swap news, hide from the police, and wait for the next train to hop. It was also here in these hobo jungles that “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” was performed and applauded, as the tune obviously spoke to some of the wildest desires of between-jobs bindle stiff and tramps.

Set to a rather chipper Appalachian-Ozark folk tune, the humorous imagery of the song’s lyrics spells out the fantastic aspirations of those dispossessed people living on society’s hard, lean, and hazardous margins. The mood is undisciplined: to hell with another day of exhausting day labor in some orchard or hay field! To hell with another day of hunger, panhandling and police beatings—I’m out of here! Like the late-medieval peasant visions of the world turned upside down or the most grandiose bling-bling rap boasting of today, the Big Rock Candy Mountain describes a paradise where an economically oppressed social group lives free from the ugly realities of existence and where the hierarchies of authority are overthrown and dismantled. This is a new world where the mechanisms of material scarcity upon which capitalist profit-making derives its power are made obsolete by limitless amounts of pleasant weather, easy abundance, and restful relaxation.

As a result of the stock market crash of 1929 and the blizzards, floods, droughts and dust storms of the early 1930s, many more people in the US found themselves as down and out as the migrant workers were in the previous decades. During the Great Depression, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” became a popular song, moving from the boxcars and jungle campfires to unemployment lines, skid rows, soup kitchens, and flophouses.

As before, the song summed up the sadness and desperation of intense poverty and social dislocation, but inverted it as a crazy hope built on a snarling laugh of defiance and rebellious thoughts. In 2000, the song’s place in Depression-era popular culture was recalled in the Coen brothers’ film, “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” a clever, confusing remix of Homer’s *The Odyssey* centered around the on-the-road adventures of three chain-gang escapees in rural Mississippi in 1937. The popular motion-picture soundtrack, in fact, features a Harry McClintock recording of the song.

An appalling incarnation of “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” appeared in a television commercial that ran for a few weeks starting in mid-February as we were planning for the “Wobblies and Work” issue of *Fifth Estate*. The advertisement—called “Fantasy Ranch” by the production team responsible for it—was for a new sandwich that was being built on the assembly lines of a giant fast-food corporation whose mascot is a crown-wearing monarch. The ad presented a sunny, rustic faux farm out West where slaughterhouse scraps heavily hang from the boughs of trees within reach for easy plucking. Populating this lardy Land of Oz are high-kicking uniformed professional sports cheerleaders, men’s magazine centerfold models, and other scantily-clad, biologically-augmented objects of heterosexual male desire, all of whom cheerfully toil in porno-aesthetic slow-mo in plantation fields of french fries.

Music for their rump-shaking lap-dance moves is provided by a guitar-strumming African-American man dressed in a rhinestone-spangled velour cowboy costume (in real life, a washed-up singer for one of the more insipid mainstream pop-rock bands of the mid-1990s). The commercial has been triumphantly described by the ad agency’s executive producer as “an ideal dreamscape” for the targeted demographic of 18 to 34 year-old men, and it was awarded the distinction of being the “Best Spot of the Month” by the leading industry trade publication, *Adweek*.

Now, on the grand scale of the capitalist order’s ferocious crimes against humanity, the pathetic co-option of a great utopian (anti-) worksong is a minor infraction—the environmental, labor, health, and animal treatment crimes committed every day by the scorched-earth policies of these fast-food multinationals alone are brutalities of a far greater magnitude.

Furthermore, it’s really no news when an artifact of an oppositional subculture has been monstrously assimilated and sold back as a product readymade for consumption. But I seem, “Fantasy Ranch” as a very literal example of the strenuous efforts made to commodify our fantasy lives. Not satisfied with controlling raw material, labor, and the means of production and distribution, capitalists also want access to our private thoughts.

The goal is to sell us something we neither want or need by convincing us to conform our most intimate day-dreams of refusal, rebellion and escape to more easily manipulated units of commercial exchange. “Fantasy Ranch” is not just stealing the music and the ideas of “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” but it is also trying to derail its anti-work ethos of pleasure and plenty and the revolutionary energy of the upside-down world it presents. In so doing, the critical perspectives that are at the core of utopian thought are eclipsed by a presentation of a corporate-sanctioned utopia of its own.

But let’s not leave the last word to a fast-food manufacturer. After all, at the end of the day, the rebellious nose-thumbing of “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” will continue to be too unruly to tame.

Instead, I’d rather think about a story that a friend told me about hearing the song performed live about a year ago at Detroit’s annual Dally in the Alley street fair by the Demolition Doll Rods, a favorite local blues-infected garage-punk band. Gussied up in gritty, ambisexual sleaze-wear, the trio ripped and howled through their own down-’n’-dirty reading of “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” (from their 2004 release *On*), apparently to the shared boogie-woogie delight of old, faded hippies and young pierced post-punks.

According to my friend, that night, the Doll Rods invoked the hobo utopia with a carnival home brew of power, fun, sloppy soul, and liberating hedonism that nailed the essence of the song.

“They hung the jerk that invented work”

BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN
(traditional; attributed to H. McClintock)

One evening as the sun went down and the jungle fire was burnin'
Down the track came a hobo hiking and he said "Boys, I'm not turning,"
I'm headin' for a land that's far away, beside the crystal fountains
So come with me we'll go and see the Big Rock Candy Mountain."

In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, there's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes and you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars are all empty and the sun shines every day
On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees
Where the lemonade springs, where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain

In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, all the cops have wooden legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft boiled eggs
The farmer's trees are full of fruit and the barns are full of hay
Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow
Where the rain don't fall and the wind don't blow
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain

In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, you never change your socks
And the little streams of alcohol come a-trickling down the rocks
The brakemen have to tip their hats and the railroad bulls are blind
There's a lake of stew and of whiskey too
You can paddle all around 'em in a big canoe
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain

In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the jails are made of tin
And you can walk right out again as soon as you are in
There ain't no short-handled shovels, no axes, saws or picks
I'm a-goin to stay where you sleep all day
Where they hung the jerk that invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain

So I'll see you all this comin' Fall in the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

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Fifth Estate #370, Fall 2005

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