

Utah Phillips's Last Interview

Fifth Estate Collective

2008

The following is a portion of a transcript of a May 7 interview with Utah Phillips conducted by long-time *Fifth Estate* contributor, Peter Werbe. It aired on his May 11 Detroit radio show in part to provide publicity for a benefit concert for Utah held in Ann Arbor. It is available as a podcast at wrif.com/podcast/nightcall for the show on that date. It follows the first two hours of phone-in talk.

Fifth Estate: Tell us about the IWW songs you sing and the stories you tell; are they outdated

Utah Phillips: I don't sing those songs from the IWW as artifacts. I sing them unhappily because they are just as true today as they were then. I keep singing those songs and telling those stories that say, look What we were able to do when we were organized. That past is the mirror we look into when we look at ourselves today, and say, what the hell are we doing Right now, we're stumbling back into a Dark Age.

FE: Part of the problem today is that people don't see themselves in the traditional category of worker; they're middle-class or service-worker or the like.

UP: The working class is, if you work for wages and you gotta boss, you're in the working class. Doesn't matter if you're a college professor or a ditch digger, and better be proud of it.

FE: You often mention tramps, hobos, and bums, in your songs and stories; what's the difference

UP: A hobo works and wanders, a tramp dreams and wanders, and a bum drinks and wanders.

FE: Tell us about your association with the IWW.

UP: I've been a member of the IWW for over half a century and it's still my proudest association. The philosophy of industrialism—an injury to one, is an injury to all.

FE: How did you get into singing

UP: I was backed into this trade. I didn't choose it. It's a wonderful, fine, honorable great trade, and it gave me an opportunity to explore the country and North America. Town for town, I'd beat the streets and talk to people and visit organizations. It's been a carnival. I'm just so frustrated that I can't be out there any more. Look at me now. I'm laid up. I've got serious, serious heart disease.

FE: Did you set out to be a singer

UP: No, one night at the Joe Hill House in Salt Lake City, I realized I had run out of moves, the cops were on the way. I had an old VW bus, it was driving cold, November rain, and I got in that bus with \$75 and a couple of other misfits and we headed East toward an uncertain future and no prospects. When I got East, I had to be told I was singing folk music; I didn't know what it was.

It took me a couple of years to realize I was a folk singer and not an unemployed organizer. I had the songs with me; I had the songs I made up, the songs I had always sung on the picket line since my mother used to take us out to them. I had a knack for telling stories; it's all one long story like everyone's life. I love telling stories; sometimes they have tunes and we sing them. The only thing I ever learned was to sing songs, tell stories, and leave town the next day.

FE: If someone asked you what is the proudest moment in your life so far, would you have a single answer

UP: The proudest moment in my whole life is marrying the woman who has taken over my life and is taking care of me now, Joanna Robinson. It's like living with an angel. She has the warmest and deepest heart I've ever encountered anywhere. It is such a privilege to have that person so much a part of my life.



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