

Let's Sing Like the Wobblies!

Singing together helps make a revolution

David Rovics

2025

a review of

The Popular Wobbly: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim, T-Bone Slim, Edited by Owen Clayton and Iain McIntyre, Foreword by David R. Roediger. University of Minnesota Press, 2025

There's a new book out which should be of interest to all fans of poignant and witty anecdotes, whether or not they're interested in history or in union organizing, and whether or not they've ever experienced police brutality, prison, or poverty. But for those who appreciate the written word, who have an interest in history or in union organizing, and especially for those among us who have ever gone to bed hungry and broke, this book will provide you with sustenance of all kinds.

It's the story of T-Bone Slim, born Matti Valentin Huhta (1880–1942), a Finnish-American writer, humorist, poet, songwriter, hobo, and labor radical active with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

The Popular Wobbly, edited by scholars Owen Clayton and Iain McIntyre, brings to our attention the writing of T-Bone, the most widely-read contributor in the 1920s and 1930s to the publications of the IWW, known affectionately as the Wobblies. There's an introduction and footnotes that do an excellent job of making sense of the many fairly obscure references that most of us who weren't hopping freight trains during the early 20th century wouldn't otherwise get.

Particularly at the beginning of T-Bone Slim's time as the most prolific contributor to the IWW's newspapers, the anti-immigrant hysteria being whipped up by the Congress and in the corporate press was at a particular height. Replace the word Italian with Mexican and it will all seem very much like it does now, over a century after the passage of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and other similar racist and exclusionary federal legislation.

Here's T-Bone, writing in 1923:

"Last year 40,000 Italians came to this country; 53,000 went back. Fifteen thousand Americans, in the same period, had the temerity to commit suicide and dodge all this prosperity..."

From this quote alone, it's easy to see how much this Finnish-American hobo's humor was so widely appreciated when he was writing. Pretty much every sentence shines with this kind of bleak brilliance. It's equally easy to see why his writing is not widely read today, since most people lack the historical knowledge to easily and readily make sense of a lot of it, helpful footnotes notwithstanding.

T-Bone Slim could be said to be a perfect representation of one of the most famous quotes of the most famous Wobbly, his fellow Scandinavian radical, the martyred Joe Hill, when he commented that a pamphlet is read once and then thrown away, but a song lasts forever. The book's title comes from a very funny song T-Bone wrote which was meant to be sung to the tune of another song that was well-known at the time.

"I'm as mild-mannered man as can be

"Ain't done nobody harm that I can see

“Still on me they put a ban, they threw me in the can

“They went wild, simply wild, over me”

This was my introduction to T- Bone Slim four decades ago, and many other folk singers who got their introduction to history from people like Pete Seeger and Utah Phillips can say the same thing.

Without making any undue efforts to reach for contemporary relevance, it strikes me that T-Bone’s writings, mostly little vignettes about life as an itinerant worker, have a lot in common with the short-form videos so many people watch today.

It’s easy to imagine people reading the IWW’s *Industrial Worker* newspaper in the 1920s and being as entertained as someone might be with a short YouTube video today. And, it’s equally easy to imagine people in the 1920s being as mystified by a contemporary Tiktok as many people today might be mystified by the humor of the bygone era. This is only because of the lack of context people on either end would have with the other time period, not because the basic phenomenon of laughing together at the state of affairs we find ourselves in has changed dramatically.

Another song from 1923, which any service industry worker struggling to pay for rent and health care today should relate to immediately:

“We are the horse that is to be pastured. All our lives we have worked for ‘living wages, and no more.’ Now we can start to earn dying wages.”

There is something so much larger, though, than Slim as an individual writer which this book speaks to in so many ways as it focuses on the role of writing, and culture generally, in building, sustaining, and educating a social movement.

It’s hard to imagine in the U.S. or many other parts of the world today a union or radical organization employing the work of a writer like T-Bone Slim so consistently putting out publications that are so full of such humorous anecdotes, cartoons, songs, and artwork, like IWW publications were back in his era.

Most current publications feature mainly serious articles, with little or no poetry or creative writing. Similarly, protests today are full of angry speeches, entirely lacking any music or other artistic elements, or any humor. It’s hard to imagine a contemporary radical group singing songs together, perhaps these days even out of fear of appropriating someone else’s culture.

Once upon a time, though, working class culture was widely embraced, and promulgated by working class institutions and networks of all kinds, such as the IWW. The deep embrace of using writing, art, music and other forms of culture as tools for organizing, educating, and building the union is one of the things the IWW was most known for back in T-Bone’s day. This may be a big part of the reason why the union had such a tremendous impact on the world, pioneering so many tactics and promoting so many ideas which have remained relevant ever since.

So many of the other social movements that followed the IWW in the 20th century which had a profound impact on society were also the ones that produced the most artistic expression, from the Depression-era movements of the 1930s to the profoundly influential Civil Rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, the global justice movement of the beginning of this century, among others.

I have been a musician and writer very intentionally following in the footsteps of people like T-Bone Slim and Joe Hill for the past forty years or so in the US as well as performing in a couple dozen other countries. There’s absolutely no question, from my experience, that the organizations, networks, and social movements that have any chance of succeeding are the ones which deeply embrace culture, and intentionally use it to build, to sustain, educate, and foster a powerful sense of belonging, community, and mutual understanding. Equally, there is no question that the movements that ignore or shun culture fade away and die quickly.

Today, you will find more live music at a rally for a politician like Trump than you will at a protest against war or mass deportations. This, in itself, should terrify everyone with a knowledge of history, or any understanding of human psychology.

Bring back the spirit of T-Bone Slim!

David Rovics is a singer/songwriter and anarchist based in Portland, Oregon. David tours regularly in North America, Europe, and Australia, playing at protests, festivals, squatted social centers and folk clubs. He has recorded dozens of albums and has millions of his songs streamed every year. His writing and podcasting can be found on Substack and other platforms. davidrovics.com

fifth Estate

David Rovics
Let's Sing Like the Wobblies!
Singing together helps make a revolution
2025

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/417-winter-2025/lets-sing-like-the-wobblies>
Fifth Estate #417, Winter 2025

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net