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SUGGESTED LISTENING

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JOE HILL: UNION ORGANIZING

Some of the most famous songs of struggle in the United States were written during labor conflicts from the mid 19th century up to the present.

Joe Hill (1879-1915) was a songwriter for the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a radical movement in the early 20th century committed to the formation of a worldwide workers' organization: One Big Union. His songs described struggles with strikebreakers ("Casey Jones — The Union Scab"), the plight of the homeless and unemployed ("The Tramp"), the economic base of prostitution ("The White Slave"), and charity organizations that help support an oppressive status quo ("The Preacher and the Slave"). His execution in Utah on November 19, 1915, for murder, a charge his supporters considered a class-oriented conspiracy, raised Joe Hill to powerful symbolic status within the labor movement. Many songs and poems were subsequently written about him, among them, "Joe Hill," "Joe Hill's Ashes," and "Joe Hill Listens to the Praying." Both as a songwriter and as the subject of songs, Joe Hill continues to be an important figure in United States labor history.

In a letter to the editor of the I.W.W. newspaper *Solidarity*, from the Salt Lake County Jail, Joe Hill told why he wrote songs as tools for organizing:

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over; and I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress them up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them, he will succeed in reaching

a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science.

There is one thing that is necessary in order to hold the old members and to get the would-be members interested in the class struggle and that is entertainment. November 29, 1914.

Seventy-five years after his death, the name Joe Hill is not as widely known as his influence is felt. But Joe Hill remains an inspiration and a model for many songwriters and performers who organize through music.

Smithsonian/Folkways Records, in conjunction with the 1990 Festival of American Folklife and the Joe Hill Organizing Committee of Salt Lake City, Utah, has issued an album of songs by and about Joe Hill that illustrates his skill as a songwriter and shows his influence on the international labor movement: *Don't Mourn — Organize! Songs of Labor Songwriter Joe Hill* (SF 40026, available on CD, LP and cassette).

Anthony Seeger is curator of the Folkways Collection and Director of Folkways Records in the Office of Folklife Programs. He was previously employed at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro (1975-1982) and Indiana University (1982-1988). Anthropologist, ethnomusicologist and archivist, Dr. Seeger is the author of three books and many articles on the social organization, cosmology and musical performances of the Suyá Indians of Brazil. He was exposed to musics of struggle from early childhood and has performed them as part of his participation in a number of social processes.