

CONCERT

POWER and GLORY Folk Songs of the Presidency

This concert, held in conjunction with *The American Presidency:*

A Glorious Burden exhibition at the National Museum of American History, Behring Center, on Friday, June 29, at the New York Main Stage, features Oscar Brand with John Foley, Josh White Jr., Joe Glazer, and Magpie.

Politics and music have been natural partners for more than 200 years in this country. Some early campaign songs paired new lyrics with familiar tunes ("Adams and Liberty" or "Jefferson and Liberty") to provide voters with substantive messages. Others, especially in the 20th century, adopted popular songs as campaign jingles, associating candidates with a sunny optimism but without any particular agenda (FDR's use of "Happy Days are Here Again," or Clinton's of "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow"). Sometimes words are altered slightly to fit a particular candidate (as Eubie Blake did for Truman in 1948, adapting his 1921 hit, "I'm Just Wild About Harry"). The writing or adapting of songs has declined in recent decades as candidates rely more heavily on mass media and Madison Avenue to convey their messages. Before radio, television, and a more literate electorate, political songs were a primary medium, easily learned and repeated. The messages were not altogether different, though: glorify or condemn the candidates and their views, enlighten, encourage, or frighten the voter into going to the polls.

Another rich vein for political repertoire is found in songs of praise, protest, or commentary from the world of traditional music. Momentous events — assassinations, for example — have inspired many songs, including "The Ballad of Charles Guiteau," about the murderer of James A. Garfield, or Phil Ochs's "Ballad of Medgar Evers," about the fallen Civil Rights leader. Singer-songwriters like Woody Guthrie and Phil Ochs, belying the image of protesters with a guitar, could idolize their heroes in song (Guthrie's "This World Was Lucky" for FDR, Ochs's "That Was the President" for JFK). But they also wrote anthems like "This Land Is Your Land" and "Power and Glory" that were at the same time strongly affirmative and pointedly critical of the country. These latter songs don't mention presidents or other politicians by name, but they encompass the great American paradox, the country's poverty and injustices amid its many riches and blessings. Similarly, songs like Josh White's "One Meatball" and "Strange Fruit" help to focus fear and anger in ways that, in time, sparked political action and change.

As labor organizer Joe Hill said, "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over." Whether it's in aid of a candidate seeking the nation's highest elected office, bringing national attention to the country's ills, or keeping alive the memory of history's heroes and villains, the songs endure to help us remember.

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