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Vol. 44 No. 1

Fall 1999

SING OUT! THE FOLK SONG MAGAZINE



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Boozoo Chavis

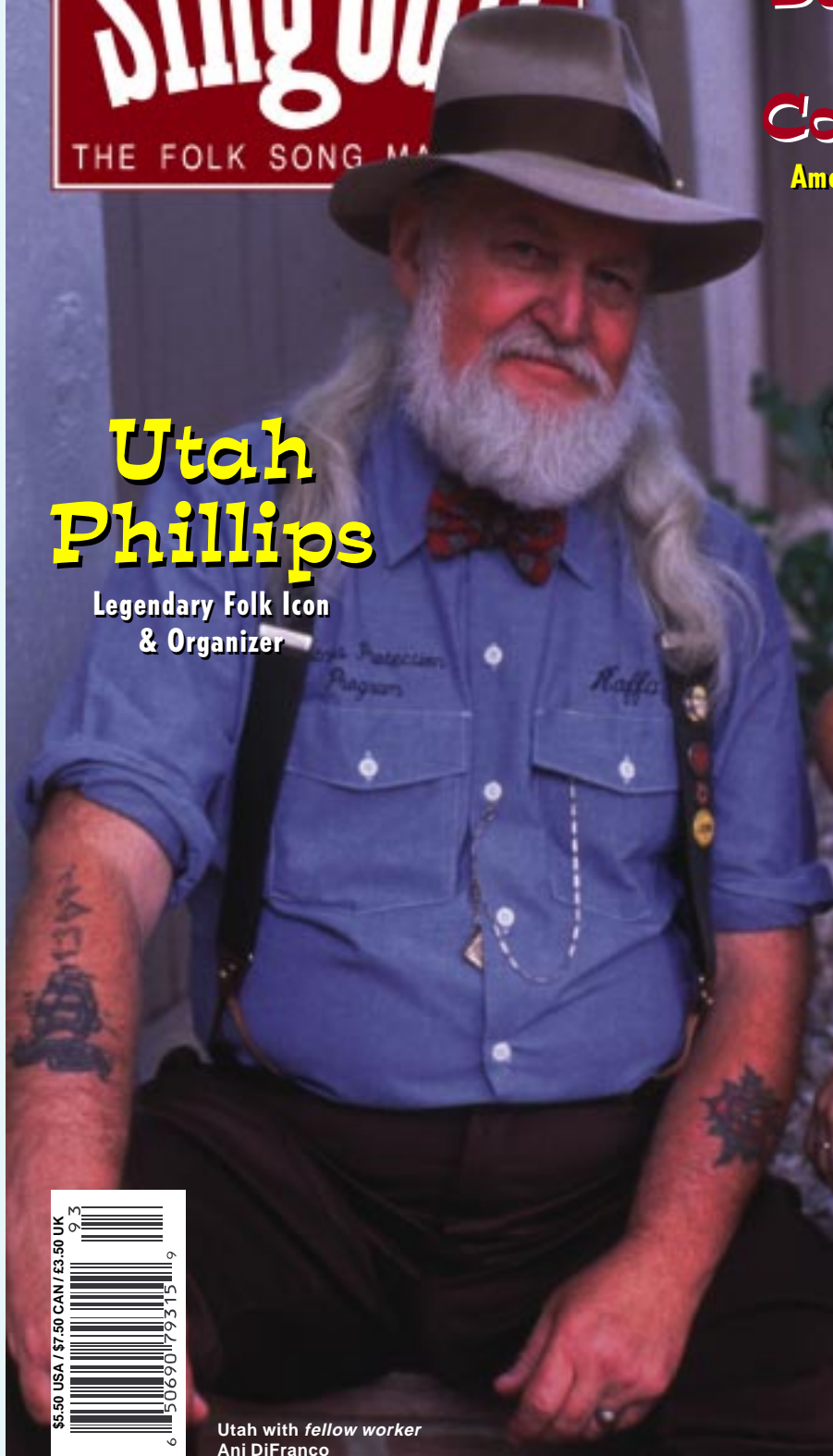
Louisiana Zydeco Pioneer

Cordelia's Dad

American Roots Music Evangelists

Utah Phillips

Legendary Folk Icon
& Organizer



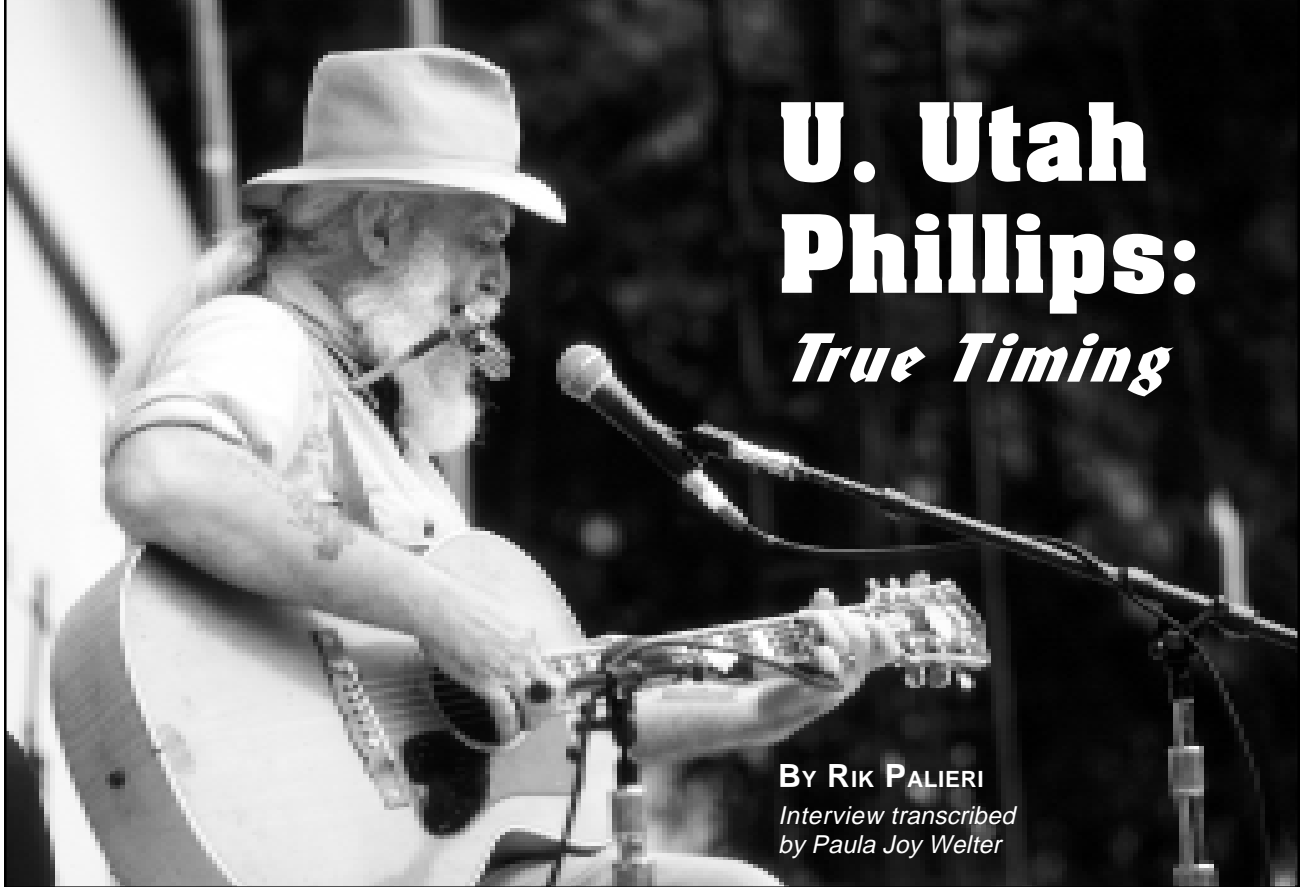
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Utah with fellow worker
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U. Utah Phillips: *True Timing*

BY RIK PALIERI
Interview transcribed
by Paula Joy Welter

Photo by Jack Vartogian ©

Bruce Phillips, a.k.a. U. Utah Phillips, “The Golden Voice Of The Great Southwest,” singer, songwriter, storyteller and Grand Duke of the Britt, Iowa, Hobo Convention, is one of the most durable fixtures in the folk community. With a mix of stories and songs infused with his own anarchist/humanist political road map for living, he follows a road that Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger helped pave years ago ... and he is still hard at work today, sharing songs and ideas that make people think.

Bruce was born into a family of radicals in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1935. As a young boy, he built his own crystal radio set from a kit. Stringing up a wire antenna and threading it through a hole in his bedroom screen, he would hook it to an old apple tree outside his house, and, late at night, he would sneak under the covers with his flashlight and listen to his crystal set through a set of earphones. With his crystal radio, Bruce was able to tune in what was then the early sounds of country music, listening to shows like *The Old Dominion Barn Dance*, from Virginia, *The Louisiana Hayride*, and Nashville’s *Grand Old Opry*. His radio transported him out of his little town in Ohio and exposed him to artists like Hank Snow, Stony Cooper and T. Texas Tyler. He learned how to play the ukulele, inspired by the Hawaiian music that he heard on Arthur Godfrey’s radio show, and was soon imitating his heroes, plucking away on his uke and developing a collection of scratchy 78rpm records.

When his family broke up, he moved to Utah with his mother and stepfather. Frustrated with home life and still in his early teens, he hopped on a freight train and ran away. Rambling around the country, viewing life’s other side from a boxcar door, he discovered a different kind of world than the one he knew at home.

He took on the nickname of U. Utah Phillips, as a homage to one of his favorite country singers, T. Texas Tyler, while working at a camp up in Yellowstone National Park. As Utah recalls, “I was working in the camp kitchen and was always driving the cook crazy talking about Tyler. He heard the name so often he started teasing, me calling me U. Utah Phillips! The name stuck, and I’ve used it ever since.”

Bruce learned how to change his uke chords into guitar chords from road workers out in Wyoming, and it was not long before he began using his new skill to tell his own tales in verse and song. As Utah rode the rails, he found a kinship and inspiration from many of the old hobos he would encounter. With names like Hood River Blackie and Frying Pan Jack, these old ’bos became Utah’s mentors. They taught him their parlance, poems and stories ... and

also how to survive out in the dangerous freight yards.

He continued his family’s tradition of radical politics by joining the IWW, the militant union which spawned working class heroes like Joe Hill, Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The



Photo by Bob Yahn ©

“wobblies,” as they are sometimes called, have a romantic history of initiating strikes, raising hell on picket lines, and organizing workers from every trade and nationality. Their motto of “An injury to one is an injury to all,” fit well with young Utah’s life style and became the inspiration for a life grounded in conviction and principle. He soon found himself combining his political views with his music. His big Guild guitar became cracked and beaten by picket line scabs as he shouted out songs he learned out of the IWW’s *Little Red Songbook*.

Utah served three years in the army in Korea beginning in 1956. He joined because he was broke and wanted to learn a few skills to make a living. As he says, “I wanted to learn a trade, but all they taught me was how to shoot.” Utah became disgusted at the life he was living, and in later years he said, “What I really learned in the army was how to be a pacifist.” After his stint in the Army, he continued his nomadic existence and roamed the country trying to make some sense of his life. “I hopped the trains because I was mad as hell! I hated what I did in the army and I wasn’t sure if I could live in this country anymore, or if I could even live with myself!”

Utah bummed around, working odd jobs for a while, until he stumbled into Salt Lake City. There, he met Ammon Hennacy, a Catholic pacifist and anarchist. Ammon ran a house for transients called The Joe Hill House. Utah recalls, “The Joe Hill House was a place where you could get a square meal, a warm bed, and a little radical education thrown in as a bonus.” As Utah puts it, “Ammon sobered me up and became my new mentor. He taught me about anarchy, got me away from the bottle and gave me the tools to civilize myself.”

Under Hennacy’s tutelage, Utah cleaned up his act and decided to roll up his sleeves and jump into the world of politics. He decided to run for a seat in the Utah state senate, on the “Peace and Freedom” ticket, getting over 6000 votes in the very conservative state. He lost the election, though, and found himself virtually unemployable in the state because of his radical views.

With the election over, and no job on the horizon, he headed off for New York City, planning to sell the songs he had written over the years for a flat fee of \$5000 to finance his next campaign. His plans changed, though, when he visited the Caffé Lena in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. The folk community who gathered regularly at Lena’s heard Utah’s homespun songs and encouraged him to start performing his music professionally. Utah had never thought of making a living with his music, but being exposed to a group of performers who traveled the country while sleeping in old cars appealed to his wanderlust nature and made him reexamine his life. In Saratoga Springs, Utah penned some of his finest songs as he reflected his love for his home out west.

At 35, Utah began “honing his craft” and soon became a full time

songwriter and coffeehouse entertainer. His well-crafted songs and zany sense of humor made him a natural born performer. He soon started carving out his own circuit, often hopping freight trains or thumbing rides to get to his gigs. With his wide brimmed leather cowboy hat, buckskin pants, guitar case under his arm and a leather satchel over his back, Utah was becoming a phenomenon on the folk scene.

Utah never moved away from the small coffeehouses, though. Instead, he “dug in deeper,” building a firm foundation with his fans and the folk community. “I always remember the ones who helped me out on the way up and thought of these coffeehouses as part of my extended family.”

He recorded his first album in 1961 back in Utah. As Utah relates, “My first recording was on a label called Prestige, and that’s about all I ever got out of it, that record really stinks! Whenever I find a copy, I jump up and down and break it. Later, I found some friends up in Vermont who were interested in recording an album of train lore and songs of the railroad, and that’s how I hooked up with Philo.”

At that time, many of the artists lived at the studio, the Philo Barn in the hills of Ferrisburg, Vermont, while recording. Utah purchased a railroad caboose and set up camp right next to the barn on fifty feet of railroad track, causing a stir with the local zoning board. But Utah started singing at local Grange halls and soon found out that his music was the key to smoothing things out. The locals realized that they liked Utah – the man, his music and his outrageous sense of humor. They lobbied the zoning board to rezone Utah’s caboose as a hunting camp as long as it was used only 6 months out of the year.

As Utah’s songs were parceled out to the masses, they were picked up and covered by Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris, John Denver, Flatt & Scruggs and even actress Debbie Reynolds. Utah, himself, has recorded eight albums on various labels and his performances have been included on three collections. Over the last few years, he’s reemerged from a forced semi-retirement due to health concerns. (His heart was damaged from years of hard living.)

The renaissance began with an interesting “collaboration” with Ani DiFranco, where the outspoken contemporary indie-grrl-folker melded tapes of Utah’s monologues and sto-

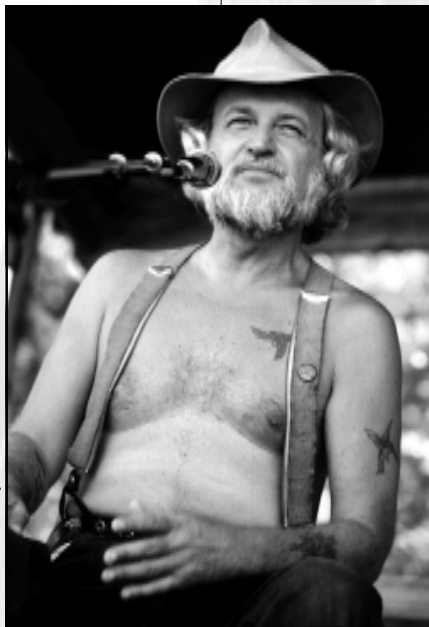


Photo and screen by Robert Corwin ©

(Opposite page top) Utah performs at “Lincoln Center Out-Of-Doors” in New York City in 1990 and (Left) tells a story at a workshop at the 1979 Philadelphia Folk Festival. (Opposite page bottom) Utah won this 1873 silver dollar in a poker game in Idaho back in 1972. He glued it to the headstock of his vintage Guild so that “I wouldn’t lose it ... and so the guitar would always be worth a dollar.”

ries with an industrial, hip-hop beat and introduced his anarchist politics to a whole new generation. It was followed by a collection of songs and poems about Utah's love for hobos called *Loafer's Glory* [Red House #103]. And the past few months have brought the release of *Fellow Workers* [Righteous Babe #15], a second collaboration with DiFranco, as well as another collection of stories and songs on Red House.

These days, Utah lives with his wife Joanna in the old gold mining town of Nevada City, California, still performing some and hosting his own radio show, *Loafers Glory*. Last April, I got the chance to sit down for a talk with Utah for my public access TV series, *A Songwriter's Notebook*. Here's a bunch of what we talked about ...

When did you started riding the rails?

UTAH: I was about 15 when I rode up into Yellowstone to find work in the grading camp. That's where I became the floor show for the Grand Canyon Lodge, the big lodge in Yellowstone. It was a mile around the base ... biggest framed structure in the world. It burned down ... I didn't do it.

I was working as a pearl diver and a sloop jockey in the kitchen. There was a big dining room up there with bay windows that looked down on the three-sided hooch where the garbage cans were kept. One of my jobs was to go down there with a broom or a mop and scare the bears away. The tourists would be up there, looking down and applauding. It was like a floor show. They were throwing me to the bears. They were up there eating and laughing. [sigh] Glad to get out of there.

It's always been my basic understanding that *everybody* knows something that I don't. Maybe somebody I can't stand ... maybe somebody I hate ... maybe some dumb fascists ... but everybody knows something I don't know. And the only way I'm going to find out is to ask. My education began with the self-understanding that I am responsible for my education. Not my parents, not my school, not my teachers ... *I'm* responsible for it. Once you accept that responsibility and just realize you're surrounded by resources, people, books, experiences, you begin that process of self-education that doesn't stop with high school or college.

Armed with the understanding that I was in charge of my education and that the principal tools I would have available to me were curiosity and memory, I always exercised my memory. You know, it's like a muscle: If you exercise it, it stays flexible, just like lifting weights with your arms. This whole process of education – memory, curiosity and method – is all play ... but the concentrated kind of play that you see with a little kid before they can



Photo by Peggy Brisbane ©

Utah entertains some pals with yo yo tricks at the 1993 Wheatland Music Festival in Remus, Mich.

even talk. That's the way I am today.

I was able to apply that to my surroundings. So everybody around me knew things I didn't know. Old people on the road crews, drunks, people who had been country singers in bars who blew their voices out – they knew things. Marvels and wonders, you see.

It was up to me to be the one to ask. And they showed me how to play the guitar. The first time I ever heard Jimmy Rodgers' songs or Gene Autry's, outside the movies, was from those guys. That's when I started making up songs, because, at that time, I was singing ersatz Hawaiian and ukulele music. What they were singing was very close to who they were and what they were doing. It was real. I decided that I couldn't make music that was real for anybody else unless I could make it real for myself.

Did you start by imitating? I know you're a big fan of T. Texas Tyler.

UTAH: Well, nobody can sing like him. I'd practice his recitation, like "Beyond The Sunset." "Should you go first and I remain to walk this road alone" ... oh, well.

And then, of course, my favorite was Hank Snow. Nobody can sing like Hank Snow, and there is not a whole lot of people that would want to. I thought he was a great voice, but listening to him was really what taught me songwriting. It may sound obscure, but Hemingway, giving advice to young writers, would say, "Learn to write the short declarative sentence. Subject, verb, predicate." Well, most folk and country songs are written that way: "I keep a close watch on this heart of mine. I keep my eyes wide open all the time." Snow would use compound sentences going through whole melodic phrases or sometimes a whole verse: "Old Father Time has broke a billion, million hearts walking down the highway of tears," and just – not doggerel, a lesson to see how he'd structurally put a song together. I was familiar with what Emily Dickinson talked about as organic rhythm – a rhythm that's endemic in English, a rhythm dominated by the trochee foot, the falling sign: "ba-ba. ba-ba." Like "going." It follows the beat of the heart.

The beat of our own heart is the first rhythm that we ever know. In that organic rhythm you're using assonant rhymes, you're bouncing vowel sounds together where you're using consonantal sounds, say "consonance" and "assonance." All those things work in Hank Snow's songs if you stop and pay attention to them. And he wasn't thinking about it, which is why it's organic rhythm. It's something that, if you let it alone and leave it in its most basic and simplest form, then it just does.

When you started writing songs, what were they like?

UTAH: They stank. [Laughing] I would write – phew. I’d go down to the Canyon Lodge and sit in the bar, and the Upper Falls of the Yellowstone River was out the window. I would write songs about things that had absolutely nothing to do with my life because I was imitating all the weepers – “Mother, The Queen Of My Heart,” “The Last Letter,” “The Letter Edged In Black,” “Baggage Coach Ahead,” “The Lightning Express.” I learned to love those songs. I learned to love them, and I tried to duplicate them without an experience base to back it up. It’s not to say the people that made up those songs did, but they were around it, and they’d grown up with it, and I hadn’t. So that’s why my songs were terrible.

When did you finally get a song that really felt right?

UTAH: I made up calypso songs that Rosalie Sorrels still remembers. God help us all if she ever sings them. [Laughing] You see, I was imitating, and it was floundering. But I was also learning a lot of music from old guys. When Cousin Ray’s Record Bar threw the 78s out on the table and sold them for a nickel apiece, when the LPs came in, I harvested those. I got Lulabelle and Scottie ... and I got Esco Hankins, who, during World War II, recorded for Roy Acuff. (When Acuff went into the Army, he felt he had to fulfill his contract. He asked Esco Hankins to run the Crazy Tennesseans as Roy Acuff.)

I had the tune and verse models, and I experimented a lot. It was all terrible. Then in Korea, I ran into Larry. Larry was from Santa Rosa, and he showed me an “E” chord. It was a revelation. When we figured out that either you could be playing music in the Officers’ Club, or you’d be walking guard duty, we formed a little band called “The Rice Pad Ramblers” with a guy who played the lap steel guitar. What would you do? [Laughing]

These were guys who were off a true vine, and I learned from them. After Korea, I came back to the States and got on the trains and rode for a while, because I was really upset at what I’d seen and what I’d done. But I began to get serious about making up songs then too. I figured that I had taken in enough and I had thought about it enough that it could begin to come out in a little more cogent form. And I wrote a lot. Then that became my basic mode of communication, was through songs.

You also started using your music to your political philosophy ...

UTAH: The music that the guys on the road crew were using expressed their feelings about the experience of their lives. I simply needed to have more profound experiences under my belt,

Photo by Peggy Brisbane ©



and I needed the fuel of my anger, combined with the inexpressible joy of beautiful sights and strange exotic places: the rice market in Jui Jong Bu, watching the old men throwing sticks in the air, gambling, playing common Korean chess down in the mud with Korean soldiers. All of it was stoking the fires and giving me an experience base. Falling through the world, following my nose with that idea that I’m self-educating. This is all part of my education

I went in the military to learn radar or rockets, but I had no mathematical ability. I sat in radar school in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, writing poetry. I wrote “Thirty Years In The Biggest House, B. Jones, B. Jones,” and I performed it in a service club with some jazz musicians ... beatnik style. It was good. I still have it.

But I was upset seeing the G.I. babies that had been abandoned. I realized that these guys were going to go home and get married and go and sell insurance ... and not even be aware of the fact that their little blond-headed kids were shining shoes ... that the Korean government would take no responsibility for them at all. Again and again, I saw what I came to understand was cultural imperialism, and nobody can give me on racism today. I saw it. And I saw the unlimited license for violence and unlimited excess: sexual excess, excessive booze and drugs, excessive violence. The G.I. compounds attracted the worst element in Korean society, the black-marketing, prostitution, drugs and all that. Most of the G.I.’s never went past that, so they came home with the notion that Korea is whores and thieves.

I would borrow a Japanese bicycle, and go outside the compound into the countryside. It was a beautiful country filled with intelligent people who were very warm and taught me a lot of things. I didn’t even know the language. I saw the collision of these two cultures, watching the one being eroded away by racism that was armed to the teeth.

Then I came home and I wasn’t sure whether I could live in the country that did that sort of thing. That’s when I rode the trains and got back to Salt Lake ... and I got sorted out by Ammon Hennacy when he took me into the Joe Hill House and taught me to cherish my anger ... but to apply it in a little different way.

You’ve said that you “became a pacifist.” What does that mean to you?

UTAH: It means alive, Rik. It means being alive. Because if I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be. Ammon told me I needed to be a pacifist. He said, “You know, you brawl a lot. You need to be a pacifist.” I asked “Why?” And he said, “You’re not any good fighting. You’re the one that keeps getting thrown through the window and I’m tired of repairing the damn thing.”

On stage at Wheatland.

He said pacifism is like booze. Booze will kill an alcoholic, unless he'll sit down with people and put his hand in the air and say, "Hi, my name's Utah. I'm an alcoholic." Twenty years later, sober, you're never going to sit in that circle and say "I'm not an alcoholic anymore." You're going to put up your hand, say, "Hi, my name's Utah. I'm an alcoholic," but it will save your life.

Photo by Bob Yahn ©



At Clearwater's Hudson River Revival in 1987.

Ammon said, "You've got to look at your capacity for violence and acknowledge your capacity for violence in all situations, and deal with it every day in every situation, for the rest of your life, because it's not going to go away, but it will save your life."

You see, that's what I mean. What pacifism means to me is that I stay alive because I know the violence that's in me. I know the anger that I hold. It's just like an alcoholic who stops drinking – but is still an alcoholic. I'm still a violent asshole, but I don't give in to it. Ammon said, "You were born a white man in the mid-20th Century industrial America. You came into the world armed to the teeth with an arsenal of weapons, the weapon of privilege – economic privilege, racial privilege, sexual privilege – and you want to be a pacifist. You just don't give up guns and knives and clubs and angry words. You've got to lay down the weapons of privilege and go into the world completely disarmed." That's damned hard. But if there is one struggle that animates my life on the planet, one of the reasons that I've traveled and gone many, many places and met with many, many people, was to continue to reanimate that struggle, continue to challenge that struggle.

I guess, when you boil it down, a pacifist is somebody you are. It's somebody you are. It's not a tactic, it's not something that you do situationally. It's a way of life. And eventually, it comes from your core. It comes from your inner being rather than coming from the outside.

So you're riding around on the rails. You went back to Utah, you know. You got the idea to run on the Peace and Freedom ticket.

UTAH: I came back to Utah just to make a stand, because if I didn't make a stand somewhere, I was going to fry. I was going to vanish. I realized that I had to make a stand, that I had to make a choice.

I was crossing the Mississippi River – I think it was the East St. Louis yards on the Frisco Road – on a flatcar, and I started to sleep. I had my belt through the davit hole, lying on my stomach so that I wouldn't roll off. It was bitter cold, and I looked down and saw the ice floating in the river below me and wished that I could. I tried to get my hands, which were frozen, into my pocket to pull out my pocket knife and cut the belt so I could roll off and fall into the river to sink

like a stone. But I couldn't get my hands into my pocket because they were frozen. That's pretty close.

When I got to the other side, I said, "I've got to make a stand." I said, "Hey, I'm in charge here. I'm in control here." So I thought, "I'll go

back to Salt Lake, and I'll make my stand there because I know the people, I know the lingo." And that's when I found the Joe Hill House. Thank God, thank Heavens, you know, that the first thing I found was Hennacy and the Joe Hill House. Ammon was involved in the struggle against capital punishment, with the Life For Garcia Committee (Jesse Garcia who was sixteen and on Death Row, and we tried to save his life) and the Committee to Recognize Mainland China, Fair Play for Cuba ... on and on.

Finally, I started the Poor People's Party, and then the faculty at the university, the liberal faculty, wanted to get Peace and Freedom on the ballot in Utah. They asked me if I would merge the Poor People's Party with them, and I said yeah. So there was a convention, and they had to stand for the U.S. Senate. And of course, that's why you're sitting here right now ... When we were done with that campaign, I didn't have a job anymore, and I had to leave Utah to work. When I left Utah, I was an unemployed organizer. It took me about a year to figure out that I had changed trades ... I was now a traveling folk singer and storyteller.

But you were writing all the while?

UTAH: I was writing all the time ... but out of things that were going on around me. I wrote "Jesse's Corrido" for Jesse Garcia out of conversations with his sister. That, to me, is the best kind of songwriting.

I learned about Woody Guthrie in the mid-'60s. He wrote in his essays about being "the people's loud-speaker." He said that people have these ringing phrases to express their passions, and all you do is take what they say and shuffle it around so you get near rhymes on the ends of the lines, and sing it. You sing it back to them. That's one of the reasons why I've always said that nothing happens inside my head unless something happens outside of it first.

That's why I started my publishing company On Strike Music ... on strike against capitalism. It's why I don't license songs to the capitalist music industry, you know – "to coin your very lifeblood into gold" as Joe Hill wrote – because I can't claim ownership. These songs were made up by a lot of people that I happened to be listening to, you know.

I first understood the impact of song in Saratoga Springs. Rosalie Sorrels left Utah before I had. Before she left, I'd come over and sing songs to her that I had made up on the road and brought back to town. She was the one that got me up to Caffé Lena.

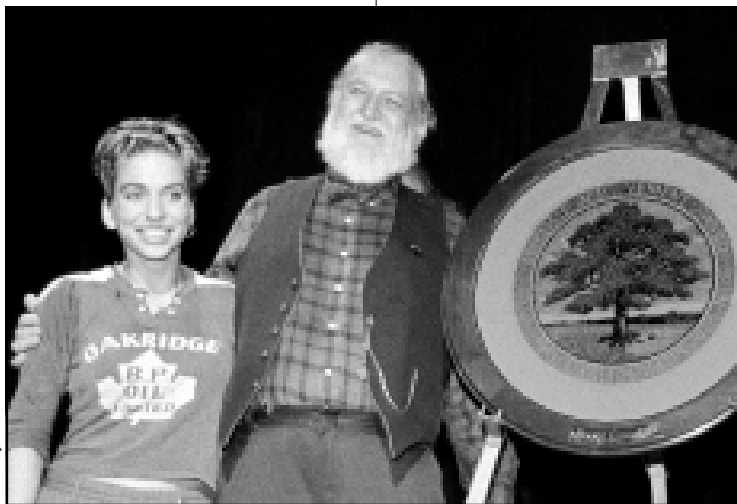
I got in early in the week, and that Saturday I went down to the Caffé. The Albany area's Pickin' & Singin' Gathering club was meeting upstairs. I didn't know that people got together and just sang songs and did camp-outs and sang in song circles. I walked up the stairs to the Caffé, and I heard all these voices singing "Green Rolling Hills Of West Virginia." They had heard it from Rosalie. I stood at the back while about a hundred people sang, and I sang along with them. They all had a big loose-leaf book, and the song leader would change every week. People would pick songs to sing. They took that song in because they liked it ... it meant something to them.

Some years later, I was at the University of Illinois' Institute for Labor & Industrial Relations with folklorist Archie Green. He had a strip-mining symposium going, and as part of that closing concert, he had traditional singers from the South. There was an elderly woman from West Virginia. She sat down, played the guitar, said, "I don't know where this song comes from; just an old song says what I need" and started singing "The Green Rolling Hills Of West Virginia." Archie said that he wanted to introduce me to her. I said, "Archie, let it go, let it alone." The best thing that could happen to a song is for people to find it useful enough and take it into their lives and change it and adapt it to suit their needs. It has to lose its name first. It has to lose the name of the person that made it, you see. But it may be the only *real* tombstone you have. People take that song and then make it their own. If they like it, they're welcome to it. It's not mine. Let them do with it whatever they choose.

You had told me once that you were encouraging the young songwriters to "dig deep into the well of tradition for your song ideas." Do you want to talk about that again?

UTAH: Well, let's set up a structure. When the great folk-music scare, the commercial revival happened, it had its roots from the old Left, from the turn of the century on. You had the young singer-songwriters – Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, Len Chandler, Phil Ochs – at folk festivals with the traditional elders – Roscoe Holcomb, Jim Gar-

Photo by Robert Corwin ©



Ani DiFranco presented Utah with a Lifetime Achievement Award in a ceremony at the North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance's 1997 conference in Toronto, Ont.

land, Almeda Riddle, Frank Proffit and all the rest. The young writers became the inheritors. They adopted those tune and verse models for their own music. Okay. Now, the songs that they were learning from had been around a long time. And today, people are still singing Tom Paxton and Bob Dylan because their tune models are simple ... they're memorable.

The commercial revival faded, then there is about a 15-year hiatus, and then a new wave of singer-songwriters cropped up. But now the elders, the traditional music elders, are dead ... or they've gone home and are forgotten. And the tune and verse models are coming from rock 'n' roll and pop music, you see, and the singer-songwriters are essentially writing "signature" songs. Dar Williams sings Dar Williams' songs, John Gorka sings John Gorka's songs ... and that's it.

Do you want your songs to last? Do you want them to stay in the world? That's what the tradition is good for. It can give you verse and tune models and ideas about how to make songs that people are going to want to take into their lives and take into themselves and use and change and adapt. Take the time to explore the tradition. Our traditional music is our inheritance – it's like our national parks, something we all own together. It's going to perish, it's going to vanish, unless we stay together, unless we mulch it.

We lose old songs all the time. It's probably just as well, but we've got to have new songs being put in at the top. If water goes out at the bottom, you've got to put water into the top of the barrel. But nobody's putting water in at the top of the barrel – so that frightens me. I say pay attention to tradition and sing a couple of those old songs in your sets. Get people to sing along. They'll like it, and it will be good for your show.

Besides feeling this kind of preservation of old songs, you're working with Ani DiFranco and you're stimulating an interest in a whole different way. Now, how do you see that?

UTAH: Well, it depends. That's really how she sees it because she's the one who made all the choices. She gave me only one choice: "yes" or "no." Ani listened to a tape of a concert I did for Phil Shapiro's "Bound For Glory" radio program in Ithaca, New York, and said to herself, "I want my lost-

generation hip-hop audience to hear these stories.” I can quote her letter to me, “Not that there is anything wrong with your performances as they are, but I understand the vertigo a young audience experiences when the music stops and they’re left at the precipice of words and ideas.” Anyone that’s going to say that to me, I’ll work with them. That’s a prodigious great intelligence she has.

Ani is responsible for that record. She took a hundred hours of live concert tapes that I sent to her and I didn’t know what she was going to do with them until they showed up in the mail. But then I started getting mail from her audience, and part of her audience comes to listen when I show up in town to play a folk music concert. She achieved her purpose.

She asked me to come to the next one, called *Fellow Workers*. It’s songs and stories about the Labor Movement. She knows I love singing those songs. The recording includes lessons about direct action – about what a union is for. It’s just what I want to do. Hot dog, it’s what I want to do! She’s created this enormous opportunity for me to speak to people I wouldn’t normally have a chance to speak to.

She absolutely has put the lie to the notion that this is a lost generation, this Generation “X.” That these people are amoral or antisocial. Wrong. They’re intelligent ... creative ... grasping at straws ... looking for something to hang onto in this cockamamie situation of a totally contradictory sock full of puppy-doo we have the audacity to call a “culture.”

I’ve also found out, thanks to Ani and my being exposed to her audience, that they really feel that I lived in a world where things

At the Lincoln Center Out-Of-Doors festival in 1990.

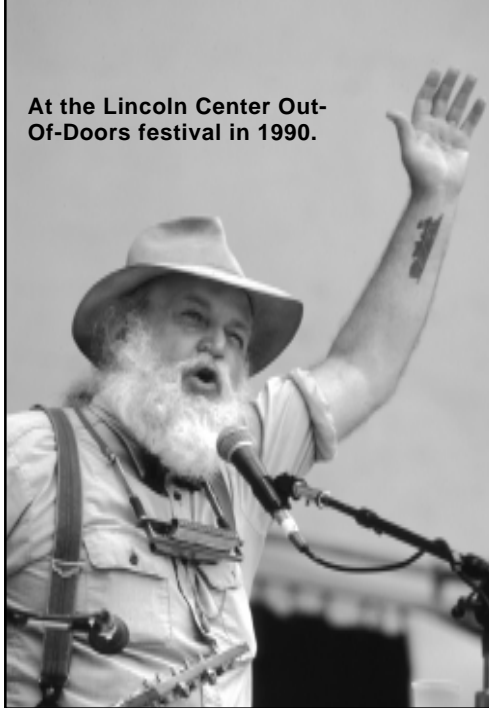


Photo by Jack Varroogian ©

were more durable, more elegant, more sane. They want that, from the second-hand store – you know, the old dresses, the old hats. There is a hole blown in the world, and they want it put back. And I know there’s a hole blown in the world. I can see it, too. So we can agree on that. So I’ll do what I can to put back in that hole what’s missing, and what’s missing is an idea that – again, related to personal responsibility, again, related to self-education – that you can make moral and ethical decisions, but there is a structure for all ethical decisions that doesn’t make the church, or the king, or the president the fountainhead of all honor, the fountainhead of all truth; that you don’t have to have any of the paraphernalia of this culture to make principled decisions and principled choices.

You didn’t leave your old fans behind, either ...

Utah: Let me say that, in no sense, when I work with Ani, do I leave my folk audience behind. And when I sing to *them*, in no way do I leave Ani’s people behind. I refuse to make that generational decision that we are encouraged to make in this culture. I see no division. Those people are going to get old. These people are going to die. And it’s one long stream, one long river. One flows into the other, year after year, song after song. And I’m in it all. I’m not ghettoized, and I won’t ghettoize myself or be put with “these people” or with “those people.”

So what’s in store? What are you looking for, now that you’re up here in Nevada City? You have a happy home with your wife Joanna ...

Utah: And my four cats and my dog ...



Photo by Robert Conwin ©

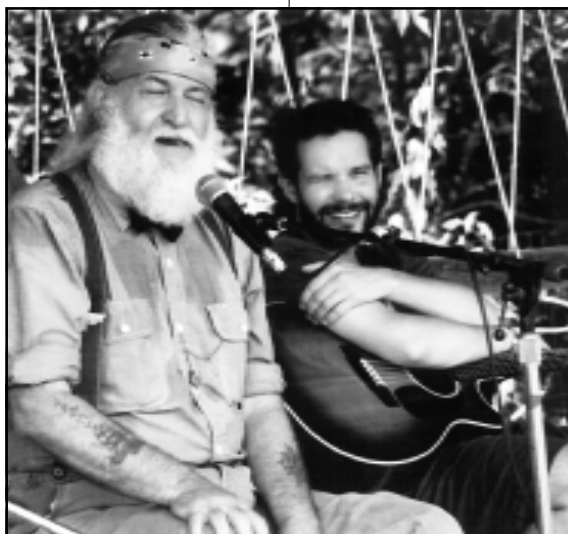


Photo by Bob Yahm ©

... and you have a radio show, “Loafers’ Glory,” that you’re working on, and you’re getting to spend some needed time in your community.

UTAH: Yes. I’m looking forward to convincing the down-

(left) Utah presents the Utah Phillips Lifetime Service to Labor Award to Local 1000 president John O’Connor in February 1999 and (right) shares a workshop stage with John Gorka at the 1990 Philadelphia Folk Festival.

town business community that we need commercial rent control, or this town is going to die. That's as plain as I can put it. So that leads me to get to know people, really. So that means getting to know people really well, meeting in the streets and talking to all the merchants. It's lovely to be in a small town where you're talking to people in the street all the time. People from all walks of life, too, where everybody knows everybody.

I have this congestive heart failure which knocked me off the roads. I've had to go back to a limited performance schedule just to keep our ship afloat, but I've made it very hard for people to hire me. So when I go out, you know, it has a lot of meaning. And I can't go out real often.

I hope that the radio show, *Loafers' Glory: The Hobo Jungle Of The Mind*, will get the kind of underwriting that I need. But then, it's difficult, because I won't take government money because I don't give them any; so I don't deserve it. I need people of similar ilk, you know, people of similar ethical structure, come from the same place, help me out on this.


I would prefer to stay home and just do the radio show and get it out to more and more places. When I am traveling, I do enjoy seeing people I never thought I would see again, when I thought I was really marooned here. I'm feeling healthier because of exercise, good diet, the appropriate medication. Congestive heart failure is not going to go away, so I have to be careful.

I'm looking forward to the second record with Ani, and I'm looking forward to the new storytelling record coming out later this summer from Red House. It's all the tales I've heard, it's all the tales. Most of it is not radio legal. But that's the last – that's all that I want to record.

I have a book of poetry that I have spread out. I know what I want to be in it. I need to put it in manuscript form and give it to somebody who might want to print it. I can't afford to. I want to take the time to sit with my recorder and tell the stories of about 60 songs, and then sing them or put versions there that are sung by other people that I really like. People have been telling me they need a songbook for years. I don't want to sit down and write a song book. Most people I know can't read music anyway. So let's do about a four-CD set and make that a songbook, so I can tell the stories and people can hear the tunes. And then that will be it. When that's done, I'll be done with what I want to put in the world.

Then I feel that the true times begin. I have dreams. I grew up with movies, so my dreams are like movies. They have plots, and subplots, and camera angles, and panning shots, and all that. Occasionally the reel stops. It's as though somebody walked on the stage and said something really loud, and then the movie started up again. That's happened to me three times, the first time when I got sick. And that voice said, "The medicine is not for sale. What's for sale is not the medicine." Oh. So I think about that for the rest of my life. And then the second time the voice came around, it said, "Learn to live beyond symbols but within the means that are provided."

I don't need a symbol for a tree; I'm not a tree. I don't need a symbol for the sun. I don't need a symbol for earth. My feet are on the ground, my head is in the sky. "Learn to live beyond the symbols but within the means that are provided."

The last time, fairly recently, the message was, "Your true times haven't begun yet. This is your story time. Your story times are going to end, and your true times begin." When I get those clean-cut projects done, my story time will end. And then my true time will begin. 

Rik Palieri is a singer, songwriter, storyteller, Polish bagpiper, radio host and oral historian based in Vermont. He is a sometime contributor to these pages. (Check out Rik's own recordings advertised elsewhere in this issue!) Special thanks to Paula Joy Welter, singer-songwriter (check out songs.com/pjw) and a California Certified Shorthand Reporter, for her hard work transcribing this long interview.

DISCOGRAPHY

- Moscow Hold & Other Stories**, 1999, Red House #118
- Fellow Workers** (w/ Ani DiFranco), 1999, Righteous Babe #15
- The Telling Takes Me Home**, 1997, Philo #1210 (CD reissue of Philo #1016 & #1050)
- Loafer's Glory** (w/ Mark Ross), 1997, Red House #103
- The Past Didn't Go Anywhere** (w/ Ani DiFranco), 1996, Righteous Babe #9
- The Long Memory** (w/ Rosalie Sorrells), 1996, Red House #83
- I've Got To Know**, 1991, Alcazar #114
- Legends Of Folk** (w/ Jack Elliott & Spider John Koerner), 1990, Red House #31
- We Have Fed You All For A Thousand Years**, 1984, Philo #1076
- All Used Up: A Scrapbook**, 1975, Philo #1050 (cassette only, or see #1210)
- El Capitan**, 1975, Philo #1016 (cassette only, see #1210)
- Good Though**, 1973, Philo #1004
- Nobody Knows Me**, 1961, Prestige #13040 (o-o-p)



Utah also has a cut each on a couple of compilations: He sings "Joe Hill's Last Will" on **Don't Mourn Organize**, a collection of songs by Joe Hill (1990, Smithsonian Folkways # 40026), and he sings Kate Wolf's "See Here, She Said" on the tribute album to the late singer, **Treasures Left Behind** (1998, Red House #114).

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