

The Labor Heritage Foundation presents the Joe Hill Lifetime Achievement Award each year at the Great Labor Arts Exchange to people who, throughout their lifetime, enriched the working class and the labor movement with their art and their music. This year we are presenting the award to Si Kahn and to Kathleen Farrell. One reason the arts exchange is special is because we – as participants - get to hang out with the Joe Hill award recipients – Si Kahn, a great protest singer and songwriter and Kathleen Farrell, a great people’s artist – a painter, a muralist and a sculptor.

Kathleen tomorrow night the Labor Heritage Foundation will be honored to present you with the Joe Hill Award. Tonight is about Si Kahn.

We are presenting the Joe Hill Award tonight to one of the greatest songwriters of this generation or any generation, Si Kahn. So it is fitting that he receive an award in the name of Joe Hill, the famous IWW songwriter who gave his life for the cause. And because 2019 is Si Kahn’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, all the more reason to celebrate.

Si Kahn grew up in Center County, Pa. which is right on the edge of Pennsylvania’s anthracite coalfields. His mother was an artist; his father was a rabbi. He was raised in the Jewish tradition of living a life of social justice. In fact – social justice and music – are the two callings in Si Kahn’s life.

After graduating from Harvard in 1965 he moved to Arkansas where he became active in the civil rights movement. His experiences in the Deep South – with its racial and economic inequalities – shaped his life and made him who he is today.

In the 1970s in an interview with the United Mineworkers Journal he told a reporter, “I see myself as a singing organizer, not as an organizing singer.”

And he did organize, throughout his whole life. In 1965 he joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Arkansas, he became a Vista volunteer, worked with the United Mineworkers on the Brookside Strike and would go onto to become an area director of the JP Stevens Campaign, remember the JP Stevens boycott?

But wait. Let me pause here for a moment. In 1973, in Harlan County, Kentucky the United Mineworkers were on strike against Duke Power who owned the Brookside mine, a story that was told was told in the documentary “Harlan County USA.” Si worked with the UMWA to organize support for that strike, especially in the Carolinas.

It was during that strike Laurence Jones, a 22 year old union miner was shot dead. Si Kahn, the singing organizer, wrote a song about him and he titled it “Laurence Jones.”

A miner’s life is fragile  
It can shatter just like ice  
But those who bear the struggle

Have always paid the price  
There's blood upon the contract  
Like vinegar in wine  
And there's one man dead  
On the Harlan County line

From the river bridge at Highsplint  
To the Brookside railroad track  
You can feel a long strength building  
That can never be turned back  
The dead go forward with us  
Not one is left behind  
There's one man dead  
On that Harlan County line

If that sounds to you like a ballad from the Southern Mountains, it's because Si has been profoundly influenced by the traditional music of white and black southerners

In 1980 Si Kahn founded Grassroots Leadership, based in North Carolina, an organization he served for the next 30 years. And he is a founding member and lead organizer of the Musicians United to Protect Bristol Bay in Alaska.

And so I guess, Si, we could we could give you this award for being a singing organizer but we are not. We're presenting it you this evening as an organizing singer.

Tonight we praise you for your musical and artistic contributions to the working class and to the labor movement. For your creative songs which tell the stories of unions, of people of color, of immigrants, of everyone struggling for human rights. For your hundreds of compositions such as Aragon Mill, Gone Gonna Rise Again, Mississippi Summer, Crossing the Border, They All Sang Bread and Roses and People Like you. (We really need a complete Si Kahn discography and bibliography to capture his lifetime of work.)

For your many sound recordings such as New Wood, We're Still Here, I Have Seen Freedom, Carry it On, Bristol Bay, Courage and recently It's a Dog's Life with The Looping Brothers. For your playwriting, your innovative musical theater presentations which tell Labor's Untold Story – such as Joe Hill's Last Will, Mother Jones in Heaven, Some Sweet Day and Precious Memories. For the numerous folk and bluegrass music awards you have received, for your concerts, songbooks, and publications promoting people's music, and for spreading the gospel of social justice through music and drama. For all these past years you have Carried it On.!

On behalf of the Labor Heritage Foundation I am honored to present you with the 2019 Joe Hill Award. Congratulations!