

Si Kahn's Notes on the Songs

- 1. Back When Times Were Hard (Si Kahn):** When they learn I've been a civil rights, union, and community organizer for almost 60 years, people sometimes say, "You must have been in almost constant danger." In fact, I almost never was, certainly not to the extent that union organizers in the first half of the last century were. This song honors them.
- 2. Solidarity Day (George Mann and Si Kahn):** I wrote this song for and first performed it at the Solidarity Day march on September 19, 1981, when over 250,000 union members and their supporters filled the streets of Washington, DC. The march was called by the U.S. labor movement to protest then President Ronald Reagan's firing of 12,500 air traffic controllers, who were striking to demand wage increases, safer working conditions, a 32-hour week, and an end to long shift patterns
- 3. Jail Can't Hold My Body Down (Vivian Nesbitt and John Dillon):** I wrote this song, based on a true incident, for my musical *Mother Jones in Heaven*, which Vivian and John have been touring nationally since before the Covid pandemic. It's a good example of why "Mother," who was thrown in jail with some regularity, was called "The most dangerous woman in America" by a West Virginia prosecutor.
- 4. Gone Gonna Rise Again (Michael Johnathon and Odetta):** How do we know this song is not about my paternal grandfather, Gabriel Kahn? Here's a hint: My Zayde would never have had ham in his smokehouse. Some pastrami maybe, a *bissel* whitefish. But ham? Not in a million years, according to the Jewish calendar.
- 5. We're the Ones (Billy Bragg):** These days, CEOs make hundreds and even thousands of times what that corporation's rank-and-file workers earn. But who are the ones who do the truly hard work, often for wages that aren't even enough to support a family, who endure hardships and hazards, who can be fired at will? Everyday workers are the ones. That's why this album is subtitled "A Tribute to Hardworking People Everywhere."
- 6. Were You There (George Mann):** This is what Lee Hayes of the great singing group The Weavers termed a "zipper song." Even as the song is being sung, the song leader calls out, "What else are you proud of," and then "zips" the answer into the next verse.
- 7. Long Way to Harlan (Laurie Lewis and Si Kahn):** My songwriting is deeply rooted in what I think of as "The Tradition." I try to pay tribute to and honor the tradition by incorporating elements of it in my original songs: a few words here, a few notes there. Here I'm drawing on an old song written in the 1920s, later made popular by Merle Travis, that goes "It's a long way to Harlan/It's a long way to Hazard/Just to get a little brew, boys/Just to get a little brew/Roll on, buddy/Don't you roll so slow/How can I roll, roll, roll/When the wheels won't go."
- 8. Lawrence Jones (Kathy Mattea):** In the early 1970s, I worked with the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) on the Brookside Strike in "Bloody Harlan" County, Kentucky. Lawrence Jones was a 23-year-old coal miner, shot to death on the picket line by a company security guard. To learn more, watch Barbara Koppel's Oscar-winning film *Harlan County U.S.A.*

9. Aragon Mill (Peggy Seeger): While I was working with the UMWA on the Brookside Strike in Eastern Kentucky, I was living in the North Georgia Mountains. That made me the closest union organizer to the town of Aragon, where the company had suddenly closed the mill, throwing 700 people out of work. So the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) asked me to go there to see if anything could be done. Sitting on his front porch, one of the workers, who had complained for years about the noise from the mill, told me, “Now that they’ve shut the mill down, it’s so quiet I can’t sleep.”

10. Standing at the End of the Line (Si): Fear hung like a dark cloud over so many of the coal camps and mill towns where I spent time as a union organizer. Workers wanted higher wages, better benefits, and safer, healthier working conditions. But they were afraid that if they joined the union, they’d lose their jobs – and, in “company towns” where the companies owned the houses, their homes as well.

11. The Old Labor Hall (Joe Jencks): The Socialist Party Labor Hall in Barre, Vermont, known today as “The Old Labor Hall,” was built in 1900 by immigrant Italian granite workers. Many of the most famous activists and organizers of the time spoke there, including Mother Jones. An organizing campaign led by my friend Chet Briggs, the first person ever to record me singing my own songs, saved it from the wrecking ball, and got it designated a National Historic Landmark. After Chet died, I added a new verse to remember and honor him.

12. Spinning Mills of Home (Magpie): Generations of Southerners have found themselves between a rock and a hard place. The good union jobs are in the North, so that’s where they go. But even Appalachian neighborhoods like Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati are a far cry from home and kin, from the warm, welcoming culture they grew up in. So back and forth they go.

13. Truck Driving Woman (Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer): The driver of that big Kenworth semi blasting their horn as they pass you in the lefthand lane may not be tall, but she’s tough as nails.

14. In the Family (Si Kahn): So many of the songs I’ve written were inspired by the good-hearted, hard-working people I met in organizing campaigns from Arkansas to Alaska. They’ve given beauty to my life, meaning to my work. They are truly the salt of the earth.

15. They All Sang Bread & Roses (George Mann): I first learned about the power of music to inspire and sustain people who are organizing for justice in 1965, when I worked in Arkansas with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, during the Southern Civil Rights Movement. Like the Movement itself, so many of these songs will still be there long after we’re gone.

16. Go to Work on Monday (John McCutcheon): The card room is the dustiest part of a cotton mill, and that’s where my friend Louis Harrell spent his working life. When it was cut short by brown lung disease, I was asked to be one of his pallbearers. After Louis was gone, I tried to honor him by taking some of the many things he said to me over the years, and stitching them together into this song.

17. We’re Not Leaving (Si Kahn): This song was commissioned by the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) for a 15-minute film they made to build international support for union copper miners on strike in Arizona. See also *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike*, the first ever book by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Barbara Kingsolver.

Click below to watch the film:

<https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/mhross/id/99699/>

18. The Power of the Union (George Mann): Billy Bragg, labor martyr Joe Hill, and I all have written songs with this title. Billy's song includes what I believe are two of the most powerful lines in folk music: "Money speaks for money/The devil for his own/Who comes to speak for/ The skin and the bone." That's exactly what all the artists on this album are trying their best to do.

19. Hold Our Ground Forever (Tom Chapin and The Chapin Sisters): I love writing songs with Tom Chapin (at last count 20 of them), not just a great artist, but one of the friendliest, most decent people you'll ever meet. Not only is this one of the best songs we came up with, Tom recorded it with his daughters Abigail and Lily, who perform and record as The Chapin Sisters. To quote an old saying, I guess "The family that plays together, really does stay together."

20. You Are the "U" in Union (Si Kahn): I can't remember where or in which organizing campaign I saw the fading poster, but there it was, edges curling up, thumbtacked to the wall, in some comparably fading union hall: **You Are the "U" in Union.** What else could I do, except write this song?

21. People Like You (George Mann): In the mid-1970s, I spent three weeks as part of a team training union leaders from all over the U.S., who had come to Washington, D.C. to lobby Congress for stronger health and safety provisions. Their employers had punished them for their outspokenness by deliberately sending them to work in unsafe conditions, where they'd all been seriously injured. Yet every one said they would do it again. This is for them, and for everyone who has the courage to speak out, even at great personal risk. Hopefully, this song is for you.