

## CD Review

Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson, compilers, "Songs for Political Action: Folkmusic, Topical Songs, and the American Left, 1926-1953."

(Bear Family, BCD 15720 JL). \$215. Puritan Records, P.O. Box 44, Battle Ground, IN 47920-0044. 765-567-2531 (phone and fax).

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"White niggers go back to Russia!": Stunning and clear, the words emerge from a mish-mash of mob shouts. It doesn't seem possible the crowd really shouted that, but then it comes again, twice: "White niggers go back to Russia! White niggers go back to Russia!"

These sounds, recorded at the time, were put together with Howard Fast's narration about the 1949 events in Westchester County, New York—in which the American Legion mobbed Paul Robeson and his supporters—and the Weavers' "Hold the Line," to produce the haunting "The Peekskill Story, Parts 1 & 2." It is just one of the many hidden treasures that Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson discovered in their research for this CD-set. Originally planned as a four-disc set focusing on the Almanac Singers and their descendants, Cohen and Samuelson soon expanded the set to 10 CDs: 298 recordings. (Even so, they had to exclude a good deal of material.) "Songs for Political Action," moreover, includes a lavishly illustrated coffee-table sized book that not only nicely complements the music, but which stands on its own as piece of scholarly work.

The CDs are arranged chronologically and within that, by artist, recording company, and/or topic. Disc One begins with Carl Sandburg's "The Boll Weevil" and Disc 10 ends with Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" from his last commercial session in 1952. In between are wonderful recordings by virtually unknown singers and groups (Bob Miller, the Union Boys, and The Berries) as well as many rarely-heard recordings by well-known artists (Josh White Sr. and Pete Seeger). Communist Party choruses are well-represented, as are left-wing cabaret songs. Examples of Goodson and Valle's work are present, as are Sir Lancelot's.

A certain portion of this music—exactly how much is debatable—does not stand up over time. Written for quite specific purposes, it is agit-prop pure and simple. The songs that deal with the CIO's Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), the Office of Price Administration during World War II, and virtually all of Disc 9—"Campaign Songs 1944-1949"—fall into this category. Yet we are indebted to Cohen and Samuelson for finding and duplicating even this music. What better way to enter into the spirit—for better or for

worse—of Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign than to listen to "Wallace Button" or "We Can Win with Wallace"? Vern Partlow's songs for the Food and Tobacco Workers' 1946 organizing drive in California offer a similar opportunity for those who want to get an important version of that experience.

The book that accompanies the CDs is simply astounding. More than 200 pages long, it begins with a long introduction and proceeds through a well-written, expertly researched discussion of each disc. The words to the songs appear at the end of each chapter. Superbly reproduced photos liven up the book and are themselves a documentary history. The book is not available separately for purchase, but an audience surely exists for it.

Cohen and Samuelson have not avoided the history of the Communist Party that is so integral to these recordings. First, their text lays out the ways in which CP-led institutions and organizations created an infrastructure for many of the performers. Second, they examine the ways in which the various twists and turns of the Party line affected the music. Finally, when appropriate and on sure ground, Cohen and Samuelson provide the affiliation or non-affiliation of various performers. They are generally clear-eyed about these things.

All this would have been for naught, though, if Cohen and Samuelson had ignored the songs that many would like to forget were recorded. In a move that both counteracts a few tendencies toward romanticization and speaks to their integrity, Cohen and Samuelson include this material. First and foremost are the seven songs on the Almanac's first album "Songs for John Doe." Recorded in the spring of 1941 and reflecting the CP's support for the Stalin-Hitler pact, they are militantly anti-FDR and anti-war. Included is "Plow Under": "Remember when the AAA/Killed a million hogs a day/Instead of hogs its men today/Plow the fourth one under/Plow under every fourth American boy." "Zhankoye," which praised Stalin's policy toward Jews in Russia, also is included, as are the eight songs from Joe Glazer's album, "Ballads for Sectarians."

These recordings, though, also document another side of the CP's history: its commitment to civil rights and racial equality that is evident in illustration after illustration and song after song. It played a central role in creating the milieu in which Josh White Sr. could record and perform songs like those on the albums "Chain Gang" and "Southern Exposure." "Jim Crow Train," "Trouble," and "Goin' Home, Boys" are extraordinarily powerful indictments of the Southern system of racism and, by implication, Northern complicity in it.

These songs are the most emotionally powerful when they draw firm lines in the dust and/or build upon a sense of a beleaguered chosen few bravely fighting the enemy to the end. That is why the "Peekskill Story," so innovatively put together, works so well: What could be uglier than the mob that ram-

paged on those two consecutive weekends? It also explains the many versions and variants of "Hold the Fort."

Yet how often are things that simple? How often are the elect so righteous and the damned so sinful? Are, moreover, the proletarian "hands" of "Song of My Hands" (here in two versions) that are to build a new world so unflawed? so unsullied?

In conclusion: This is an absolutely wonderful collection of music nicely supplemented by the hard-cover book of text, illustrations, and lyrics. Only Germany's renowned Bear Family Recording Company, with years of experience in producing high-quality multi-CD box sets, could have provided the means for Cohen and Samuelson to have pulled this off. Expensive? Yes! Worth it? Absolutely!