

Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labour: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Textile workers in the Southern states formed one of the strongest labour movements in American history in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Strikes in Elizabethton, Tennessee and Gastonia and Marion, North Carolina gathered momentum between 1929 and 1934, with the movement reaching its pinnacle at the Labour Day strike of 1934, when 400 000 textile workers in several states simultaneously walked off the job. Their demands were clear: more humane working conditions and better pay. *In the Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music and Textile Strikes 1929-1934*, Vincent J Roscigno and William F. Danaher suggests that Southern bluegrass music detailed the grievances of textile workers and that the broadcast of that music during the advent of radio acted as a cohesive force for the movement.

The authors tell us that in this era, textile mills of the American South employed entire families, many of them migrants from failing cottage farms, their livelihoods victims of the boll weevil. With the survival of their families foremost in their minds, workers offered their labour to mill managers in exchange for the rental of a house in the mill village and a wage of 20 to 25 cents an hour, one third of that earned by mill workers in the North. Children as young as eight or nine worked in the mills alongside their mothers and fathers. Heat, noise, and cotton dust made twelve-hour days unbearable. The inhalation of fibre, the proximity to hazardous machines, and the ever-increasing demands by management to quicken the pace of production made life on the floor of the textile mill ever dangerous.

When work finished, some mill workers turned to their traditional instruments—banjos, mandolins, fiddles, guitars, and bass fiddles—to entertain themselves and their co-workers. Many other touring musicians came to the mill villages to perform shows for textile workers, the audience always ravenous for good music and good times after long shifts. In the lyrics of many of the songs performed, the brutish world of the textile mill was exposed and detailed.

Roscigno and Danaher assert that the distribution of these songs through fledgling radio broadcasting outfits helped forge class-consciousness among mill workers that spread across county and state lines. Radio during this period was not yet managed by oligarchical ownership structures and control of content was more socially diffuse. As a result, many broadcasters, supportive of the plight of the textile worker, or alternatively, broadcasters merely eager for a mass audience, played popular songs that were key to the labour movement.

Between radio programs of bluegrass music, listeners could not have missed the fireside chats of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt

was offering Americans marginalized by the Depression a New Deal, and he directly addressed Southern mill workers and their labour movement. With the airwaves full of messages assuring them that their grievances were just and their movement popular, textile workers felt increasingly empowered to demand better working conditions.

Management, with the support of local police, eventually crushed the movement. Tangible legislation favouring the textile workers was not forthcoming from the Roosevelt government, nor was protection from the violent state-sponsored repression of the strikes. The movement lost its cohesiveness under these physical, political, and economic pressures; the murder of singer-songwriter Ella May Wiggins by local police perhaps best symbolized the vulnerability of the workers and their certain defeat. By the end of 1934, communities of mill workers were dividing on the issue of unionization.

By employing the archives of the Southern Oral History Program installed at the Southern Folk Life Collection at the University of North Carolina, Roscigno and Danaher add impressive detail to a spectacular history of Southern textile workers conducted by Jacqueline Hall *et al.* entitled, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton World* (1987). Whereas *Like a Family*, a founding work of the archive, provides a broad survey of the cultural landscape of the textile worker including the physical environment of mill work, the negotiation of worker grievances, and the role of leisure in a mill town, Roscigno and Danaher focus exclusively on how the transmission of music through radio and performances affected the rise of class consciousness in the Southern textile industry. Through this far narrower lens, the faces of those mill workers who joyfully played their banjos, mandolins, and fiddles after gruelling hours in textile mills become evermore clear, their inspirational role in the formation of a grassroots search for justice more evident.

The authors tend to ignore the role that ethnicity doubtless played in the formation of the labour movement of Southern textile workers. They demonstrate that migrants from the Appalachian Mountains composed a substantial portion of the work force at the textile mills and that musicians originating from the Appalachians contributed to the music-filled gatherings outside of the mill towns. The technical roots of Appalachian string music, in terms of instrumentation, harmonic resolves, and melodic construction, had crossed generations and the Atlantic Ocean to reach the mountains of Appalachia. Fiddles and mandolins, like jars of good whiskey, had already accompanied Celts through longer and more trying migrations. Ethnic unity, gaining voice in this ancient music, was unifying textile workers as common grievances in the workplace were accumulating among them. Put differently, hillbilly music was nursing both an ethnic and a class-consciousness.

By contrast, ethnically diverse workers at the meatpacking plants of Chicago in a comparable era, could not rely on a common cultural heritage to

unify them in their attempts to resolve workplace grievances. In Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz's analysis of the labour movements of workers of the Swift & Armour meat-packing houses in Chicago, the authors discuss how an ethnically mixed shop floor, composed of Irish, Polish, and African American workers problematised the unification of oppositional culture in the work force.

Roscigno and Danaher's work is an excellent addition to studies on the relationship of music and performance culture to the generation of oppositional culture in historical settings. Eugene Genovese's 1972 landmark *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made* opened the door for professional historians to conduct thorough studies of harmony, rhythm, and lyric and its effect on political movements. But there are still major gaps in the historiography of the role of music in American radical movements that have yet to be filled. For example, studies could be done on the effect of hard rock music during autoworkers' strikes in Detroit or the effect of soul music on Black Power movements in Watts. Hopefully, *The Voice of Southern Labour: Radio, Music and Textile Strikes*, will stimulate growth in this essential field of historical inquiry.

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