



The Weill Project and Will Kaufman's Woody Guthrie sing out.

“A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over.” —Joe Hill

As this year's annual [LaborFest](#) ^[1] draws to an end, and the organized labor movement is facing an uncertain future as exemplified by the recent Republican victory in Wisconsin regarding collective bargaining, and the disappointing conclusion to the Mott's strike of 2010, it does the socialist spirit good to soothe the savage breast with music created with an ulterior motive. Political convictions as entertainment have had their misses, but it's the hits we remember more, whether “learned by heart,” or not.

Though probably best known for the unrepentantly dark murder ballad “Mack the Knife,” Bertolt Brecht collaborator Kurt Weill was a staunch socialist firmly on the side of the underdog. The two pioneered theatrical works about and for the working class, and critical of “business as usual,” in life as well as in theatre. Under the direction of Allan Crossman and Harriet Page-March, the Weill Project [2], explored a set of seafaring songs from familiar Brecht/Weill musicals like “The Threepenny Opera” to more obscure tunes such as “Youkali: Tango Habanera,” which made an orchestral appearance in a mostly forgotten Weill side-project called “Marie Galante.”

“Marie,” sung in French by soprano Sibel Demirmen, was one of the evening’s most striking offerings. Another was mezzo-soprano Meghan Dibble’s rendition of “Pirate Jenny,” a song which exemplifies the divide between the working classes and their careless capitalist oppressors. Two other vocalists, Harriet March Page and Justin March rounded out the vocal mix, ably accompanied by Martha Cooper on piano and John Bilotta on accordion. Presented as part of Stage Werx Theatre’s <www.stagewerx.org> new music series, Underground Sound, the Weill Project set the bar high for shows to come, and is an ensemble to watch out for.

A staunch socialist closer to home, one Woody Guthrie, came to life in the hands of Will Kaufman [3] whose solo performance “Woody Guthrie: Hard Times and Hard Travellin’” (as well as his book, Woody Guthrie: American Radical) followed the dusty road of Guthrie’s political awakening through music.

A mean finger-picker, Kaufman played not just Guthrie tunes such as “I Ain’t Got No Home” and “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You” as he described Woody’s visits to the migrant camps and the extra-legal liberties taken by the LAPD and a slew of union-busting vigilantes, but also songs that inspired him towards reaction. Songs like Joe Hill’s “The Preacher and the Slave,” Agnes Cunningham’s “How Can You Keep Movin’ (Unless You Migrate Too),” and Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” -- a song that galled Guthrie so much he wrote an angry counterpoint “God Blessed America,” which became his best known song, sans the political verses, as “This Land is Your Land.”

Kaufman, an American living in England, was inspired to tackle Woody Guthrie as a subject back in 2006 during a time when “George Bush and Dick Cheney were speaking for America,” in an attempt to connect with and portray an all-American voice closer to his own point of view. I can’t speak to whether or not he’s got the British convinced, but in San Francisco, his sentiments were welcome.

The Performant Nicole Gluckstern

Source URL: http://www.sfbg.com/pixel_vision/2011/07/28/performant-serfs

Links:

[1] <http://www.laborfest.net>

[2] <http://www.goathall.org>

[3] <http://www.myspace.com/willkaufman>



