

JOE HILL, THE WORKING CLASS STRUGGLE, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM A Module for AMS 169: work through this on your own.

“Joe Hill” is the story of how the labor activist/singer/songwriter Joe Hill (1875-1915) immigrated to America in 1902, searched for work, became a union activist, and eventually joined the newly formed I.W.W., a labor union open to all workers and dedicated to ultimately abolishing the wage system. He was arrested on suspicion of murder in Utah, and some on the left argued there was insufficient evidence and he was framed. The trial took on national prominence as it came to symbolize the struggle of the working man. He didn't put up much of a self-defense, though many advocated on his behalf, including Helen Keller and ultimately Woodrow Wilson. Nevertheless, the Governor of Utah refused to grant him a pardon and he was killed by a firing squad on November 19, 1915.

Joe then became a martyr to the cause of the working class struggle for social justice, and he became a larger-than-life symbol of the movement in America.

To trace his impact across the 20th century, listen to Phil Ochs' “Joe Hill” as sung by Billy Bragg, posted at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdSbKSQYXgo>

then give a listen to the great Paul Robeson's rendition of “Joe Hill” (lyrics Alfred Hayes 1930, music Earl Robinson 1936) at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Kxq9uFDdes&feature=related>

Joan Baez passed the torch on to a new generation at the Woodstock gathering August 15, 1969. The outtake from the award-winning documentary of that significant cultural event is posted here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX7M9psH0rM>

(turn up the sound a bit on this one—and if you're interested, she followed immediately with a beautiful a capella version of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, another significant American folk song, a spiritual conveying a yearning for a promised better life)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bxf2X4zP5k>

Do some brief biographical review to know something of these singers and the history of this labor organization:

Phil Ochs (1940-1976) folksinger and songwriter

Billy Bragg (1957-) English folk/punk/protest singer

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) actor, writer, activist, athlete, singer, scholar, lawyer

Joan Baez (1941-) singer, songwriter, activist

I.W.W.-Wobblies Industrial Workers of the World radical union, founded 1905, Chicago

Brief bio on Joe Hill from AFL-CIO:

<http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/hill.cfm>

There is a useful summary of the growth of the Joe Hill myth found at the Joe Hill Project. Visit that site, review it, and be able to distinguish between the man and the myth:

<http://www.joehill.org/themyth.htm>

Finally, this PBS-related Joe Hill website also suggests ways to reflect on using music as protest and the timeliness of labor protests in the 21st century:

<http://www.kued.org/productions/joehill/index.html>