



## Retirement Songs

Amazing the way appropriate songs come to you all by themselves to punctuate whatever it is you're going through at the moment. I have mentioned that my music partner Lou and I have retired from national touring. Though we're still playing around Wisconsin, still writing songs, and still conducting a reduced business, existing retirement songs are popping into my mind.

Spurred on to Google, I didn't find many songs specifically about retiring. There are plenty of songs about growing old, like the Beatles' **When I'm 64**, **Silver Threads Among the Gold** from the 1800s, Sinatra crooning Weill and Anderson's **September Song**, Pete Seeger's **My Get Up And Go Has Got Up And Went**, Faith Petric singing Peter Krug's **Geritol Gypsy**, and so on. And in searching for songs about working, there are zillions of those, and many of them about quitting or wanting to quit (David Allan Coe's **Take This Job and Shove It**) or how hard and thankless is the job (1800s trad. **Cotton Mill Girls**), or even about how vital and important the job is as in **The Work Of The Weavers** (trad.):

*If it weren't for the weavers, what would you do? • You wouldn't have the clothes that's made of wool • You wouldn't have a coat of the black or the blue • If it weren't for the work of the weavers*

But one or two genuine retirement songs did pop into my mind right away, the first one being a 1966 song called **Writer In The Sun** by Donovan. Donovan was having contract hassles which prevented him from releasing his music in the UK when he wrote this. He was twenty years old, a bit young to be worried about forced retirement (©1966 Donovan Leitch):

*I bathe in the sun of the morning • Lemon circles swim in the tea • Fishing for time with a wishing line • And throwing it back in the sea.*

*And here I sit the retired writer in the sun • The retired writer in the sun, and I'm blue • The retired writer in the sun...*

Another song that bubbled up was one I

learned when I was about 16 or so, called **Lay Down My Old Guitar**, written by Alton Delmore of the Delmore Brothers (©1933 Alton Delmore). The chorus goes:

*Gonna lay down my old guitar • Gonna lay down my old guitar • I wish I could tie it by my side • And take it along with me*

The great Labor Songwriter Joe Glazer wrote the pro-union song **Too Old to Work** (©1950 Joe Glazer):

*You work in the factory all of your life • Try to provide for your kids and your wife • When you're too old to produce any more • They hand you your hat and they show you the door*

One of Utah Phillips' songs on the subject is the beautiful **Goodnight Loving Trail** (©1972 On Strike Music). This trail was the westernmost cattle trail going from El Paso to Denver, established by a Mr. Goodnight and a Mr. Loving. According to Utah, "The fellow that honchoed that kitchen, the bull-cook, well, they used to call him the 'old woman' down in the southwest... they were hard-bitten old cowhands who got too busted up inside, too infirm, to be able to sit a horse properly... and got sat out on the chuck-gang... In addition to cooking, they did doctoring and cleaning up and all sorts of minor tasks":

*With your snake oil and herbs and your liniments, too • You can do anything that a doctor can do • Except find a cure for your own god damned stew*

*On the Goodnight Trail, on the Loving Trail • Our Old Woman's lonesome tonight • Your French harp blows like the low bawling calf • It's a wonder the wind don't tear off your skin • Get in there and blow out the light.*

There are songs about forced retirement due to technology, like **John Henry** (Trad.), and **Peg and Awl** (Trad., from the 1800s.) The peg and the awl were a shoemaker's tools:

*They invented a new machine, peg and awl • They invented a new machine, peg and awl. • They invented a new machine, prettiest thing I ever seen • Throw away my peg, my peg, my peg and awl*

*Pegs a hundred pair to my one, peg and awl • Pegs a hundred pair to my one,*

*peg and awl • Pegs a hundred pair to my one, peggin' shoes was never fun • Throw away my peg, my peg, my peg and awl*

When my mother was a child, she taught herself piano by playing hymns. One that caught my ear at a very young age was **Work For The Night Is Coming**, lyrics written in Canada in 1854 by Anna Louisa Walker when she was 18 years old. Like Donovan, a bit early to think about retiring, but this is definitely a retirement-prep song:

*Work, for the night is coming • Work through the morning hours • Work while the dew is sparkling • Work 'mid springing flowers*

*Work when the day grows brighter • Work in the glowing sun • Work, for the night is coming • When man's work is done.*

But my current favorite end-of-working-life song is one by the Stanley Brothers, called **He Went To Sleep; The Hogs Ate Him**:

*He watched us work from where he set • He watched so hard he'd work up a sweat • At this my pa was hard to beat • He couldn't work, he got too fat • He supervised from where he sat • Then pa'd get tired and go to sleep.*

*Oh! he went to sleep and the hogs eat 'im • Hogs eat 'im, Hogs eat 'im • He went to sleep and the hogs eat 'im • Now pa's gone forever • Forever, • Forever • Now pa's gone forever.*

## INCIDENTALLY

Incidentally, speaking of endings, as I apologetically explained to MadFolk president Darlene Buhler last year, Whither Zither's last episode will be the September 2017 column, making it exactly a twenty year run of this nonsense. There have been requests by certain masochists for a collection of these in book form, and that may come to pass, because this has been more fun than I ever imagined it might be. My deep thanks to past prez Mike Tuten, current prez Darlene Buhler, The Madison Folk Music Society, and all you dear darling and long suffering readers for your contributions and support. Now, stay tuned for three more episodes.

--WZ, June 2017