



Work Songs

Ted Gioia

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All societies have relied on music to transform the experience of work. Song accompanied the farmer's labors, calmed the herder's flock, and set in motion the spinner's wheel. Today this tradition continues. Music blares on the shop floor; song accompanies transactions in the retail store; the radio keeps the trucker going on the long-distance haul.

Now Ted Gioia, author of several acclaimed books on the history of jazz, tells the story of work songs from prehistoric times to the present. Vocation by vocation, Gioia focuses attention on the rhythms and melodies that have attended tasks such as the cultivation of crops, the raising and lowering of sails, the swinging of hammers, the felling of trees. In an engaging, conversational writing style, he synthesizes a breathtaking amount of material, not only from songbooks and recordings but also from travel literature, historical accounts, slave narratives, folklore, labor union writings, and more. He draws on all of these to describe how workers in societies around the world have used music to increase efficiency, measure time, relay commands, maintain focus, and alleviate drudgery.

At the same time, Gioia emphasizes how work songs often soar beyond utilitarian functions. The heart-wringing laments of the prison chain gang, the sailor's shanties, the lumberjack's ballads, the field hollers and corn-shucking songs of the American South, the pearl-diving songs of the Persian Gulf, the rich *mbube* a cappella singing of South African miners: Who can listen to these and other songs borne of toil and hard labor without feeling their sweep and power? Ultimately, *Work Songs*, like its companion volume *Healing Songs*, is an impassioned tribute to the extraordinary capacity of music to enter into day-to-day lives, to address humanity's deepest concerns and most heartfelt needs.

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