

HALLELUJAH I'M A BUM: REJECTION OF CAPITAL IN HOBO MUSIC AND CULTURE

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Dedicated to my late friend
Sean 'Fintan' "Leyden" O'Sullivan

The figure of the hobo, tramp or bum has often been romanticized (particularly in Czech culture) or even commercialized (Charlie Chaplin's celebrated Tramp). The reality of this lifestyle, however, in the United States, particularly during the Great Depression, was much more grim and problematic. The majority of hobos, at that time, were looking for work and hoping to accumulate enough capital to resume 'normalcy'. Others, either temporarily or permanently, embraced this alternative way of life, even chronicling their lifestyle in literature or music and serving eventually as inspiration for not only the Beatniks, but also the Hippie movement. This paper will look at a selection of hobo songs, from the last decade of the nineteenth and first three decades of the twentieth century, particularly those which celebrate this choice of lifestyle and the rejection of the mainstream establishment.

Although there have been homeless or vagrants from near the very beginnings of European settlement in the New World, most scholars agree that as Kenneth L. Kusmer argues, "Homelessness emerged as a national issue in the 1870s." (Kusmer 2002: 12). This corresponds, of course, with the end of the Civil War and its aftermath and the completion of the transcontinental railroad when the last pike was hammered in at Promontory Point in Utah on 10 May 1869 (Fox 1989: 3), enabling hobos and others to travel vast distances in unprecedented large numbers. This also gave rise to a whole new culture and vernacular, most eloquently captured in Jack London's autobiographical account *The Road*, published in 1907, based on his adventures "on the bum" and "riding the rails" in the 1890s.

There are a number of additional terms used to describe what we would now call the homeless or itinerant workers (vagrant, bum, hobo, tramp, etc.), as well as a number of sub-terms as London describes within hobo culture. The distinction is put succinctly, if not completely fairly, however, by the all-time king of the hobos, Jeff Davis, who used to say, quoted in the autobiographical account of Charles Elmer Fox, “Hoboes will work, tramps won’t, and bums can’t.” (Fox 1989: 3). Fox, a hobo himself, goes on to preface this, however, by stating that: “Some seemed to forget that about 98 percent of hoboes got their start as tramps or bums.” (Fox 1989: 3).

The hobo culture has also not only enriched the English language with a number of terms (punk, gay), but also familiarized the majority, mainstream culture with their nomad sub-culture involving handouts, boxcars and railroad bulls (men responsible, amongst other things, for preventing hobos from travelling illegally). Hobo culture even has its own distinct cuisine, so-called Mulligan stew, this being as Nels Anderson explains, “... a ‘throw-together’ of vegetables and meat. There are certain ideal mixtures of vegetables and meat, but the tramp makes ‘mulligan’ from anything that is at hand.” (Anderson 2020: 123). There are also a number of terms connected with the word bum which are still very much in use today: bum a ride/cigarette, a bum deal, a bum rap, to be bummed/out, bummer, etc.

It is rather ironic, although perhaps understandable, how the tramp has been romanticized in the Czech lands to such an extent, while the gypsy or Romani has been vilified; the opposite held true in the late nineteenth century in the United States. The frequent fear and repugnance felt by the majority of the sedentary population to this new sub-culture is captured in a paper delivered by Francis Wayland, Dean of Yale Law School, in September 1877. He characterized a tramp, mincing no words, as a “... lazy, shiftless, sauntering or swaggering, ill-conditioned, irreclaimable, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage.” (Despantino 2003: 34).

The reality, however, was quite different, at least among ‘card-carrying’ tramps. Their attitude to work, for example, was far from lazy. A Hobo Ethical Code was established as far back as the Hobo

National Convention of 1889, which states in point 4: “Always try to find work, even if temporary, and always seek out jobs nobody wants. By doing so you not only help a business along, but ensure employment should you return to that town again.” (Hobo Ethical Code of 1889).

Consequently, many of the hobo songs, which will be analysed here, do not actually celebrate avoidance of work, but instead reject the mainstream capitalist ‘wage slave’ (a term they were fond of) situation of the day. Many of the hobo songwriters were associated with the labour union the Wobblies, officially known as the Industrial Workers of the World or IWW, and embraced their socialist/anarchist views.

Finally, the actual reality of hobo life could be grim and brutal. Death and accidents, especially connected with hopping freight trains, were frequent with Tim Cresswell providing a number of almost 5000 deaths and injuries per year in the early days (Cresswell 2001: 200). The Welsh poet W. H. Davies (1871-1940) graphically describes the loss of a leg in a failed attempt at jumping a train in Canada in his autobiographical account, *The Autobiography of a Super-tramp* (Davies 1917), roughly contemporary with London’s *The Road*. Rape and sexual molestation of ‘punks’ (young inexperienced tramps) by older ‘wolves’ was not uncommon and violence committed by the police or citizenry against these undesirables was a matter of course. Finally, hobos and tramps were often imprisoned (sometimes by choice during a hard winter) and sentenced to hard labour. Joe Hill, the Wobbly labour activist, occasional hobo and songwriter (*The Tramp, The Preacher and the Slave*, etc.) was even framed for axmurder and executed in 1915.¹

One of the anthems of both hobos and the Wobblies is *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum*, attributed to **Harry McClintock** (1882-1957), among others. Like many Wobbly songs, it is sung to the tune of a well-known hymn, in this case *Revive Us Again* from 1867. The original is extremely pious in its sentiments and orthodox in its theology.

1. This interpretation of the trial is not, of course, universal.

We praise Thee, O God! For the Son of Thy love,
For Jesus Who died, And is now gone above.

Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen.
Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Revive us again.

Hallelujah, I'm a Bum,² in contrast, is highly irreverent, embracing the hobo lifestyle. The song is not, however, espousing shirking work, but instead pointing out the realities faced by itinerant labourers when seeking out gainful employment.

Rejoice and be glad for the Springtime has come
We can throw down our shovels and go on the bum

Hallelujah, I'm a bum, Hallelujah, bum again
Hallelujah, give us a handout to revive us again

The Springtime has come and I'm just out of jail
Without any money, without any bail

chorus

I went to a house and I rapped on the door
And the lady says, "Bum, bum, you've been here before"

chorus

I like Jim Hill, he's a good friend of mine
That is why I am hiking down Jim Hill's main line

chorus

I went to a house and I asked for some bread
And the lady says, "Bum, bum, the baker is dead"

chorus

Why don't you work like other men do
Now, how can I work when there's no work to do

chorus

Why don't you save all the money you earn
If I didn't eat, I'd have money to burn

chorus

2. There are two popular Czech versions of the song: one by Josef Hiršal, called *Alelujá, jsem tulák*, the other by Vilda Dubský entitled *Tak se toulám sem a tam*, they both are almost a word to word translation and great for singing.

I don't like work and work don't like me
And that is the reason I am so hungry

chorus

Utah Phillips (1935-2008), arguably the most prominent of the hobo songwriters building on the legacy of Joe Hill, Harry McClintock, Woody Guthrie and others, includes the following story in the middle of his version of the song.

There I am in Salt Lake City, city of magic, city of light, ensconced upon my front porch in broad daylight, around about noon, my rising time, drinking something of a potable beverage, playing my guitar, long after everybody else in the neighborhood has packed up their lunch box and gone on off to the brick factory to put in their shift.

This enrages my neighbors.

One in particular across the road, a little retired banker fella, been nown to cannonball his rotundity across the road stand there and publicly berate me for my sloth and indolence.

"Why don't you get a job?" he says.

Some of you have heard that, I bet.

Now me, being hip to the Socratic method, fires back a question.

"Why?"

"Why?" he says, taken aback, if you had a job you could make 10 or 12 dollars an hour

I said "why" pursuing the the same tack.

"Hell, if you made 10 or 12 dollars an hour, you could have a savings account and save up some of that money.

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Well, you save up enough of that money young fella and pretty soon you'll never have to work another day in your life.

I said, "Hell, that's what I'm doing right now." (Phillips 2009)

Phillips humorously encapsulates the hobo attitude to both work and capital in general. He also begins his version of the song with the verse:

"Oh why don't you work like other folks do/How can I get a job when you're holding down two?" which expresses succinctly one of the philosophical positions of the hobo culture, namely do not work if it entails taking the work of another person. Utah Phillips eloquently refers to it as "making a living, not making a killing." (Phillips 2009).

3. There is a Czech version of the song written by Miroslav Jaroš (Mirek Skunk Jaroš) as *V Montgomery biji zvony*. The lyrics provide a completely different story from the original version; it is obviously not a translation.

*Hobo's Lullaby*³ was written by **Goebel Reeves** (The Singing Bum) (1899-1859), yet another Wobbler, occasional hobo and professional musician. The song was covered, most famously, by Woody Guthrie as well as by his son Arlo.

Go to sleep you weary hobo
Let the towns drift slowly by
Can't you hear the steel rail humming
That's the hobo's lullaby

Do not think about tomorrow
Let tomorrow come and go
Tonight you're in a nice warm boxcar
Safe from all the wind and snow

I know the police cause you trouble
They cause trouble everywhere
But when you die and go to heaven
You won't find no policemen there

I know your clothes are torn and ragged
And your hair is turning grey
Lift your head and smile at trouble
You'll find happiness (peace and rest) some day

The song's portrayal of the elderly hobo is obviously heart-felt and compassionate, but not sentimentalized, actually having been written by someone who knew the reality first-hand. Almost all accounts about hobos also describe that the lifestyle was very much a young man's game, and not at all suitable for the elderly, women and children.

Arguably the most famous hobo song is *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* by Harry McClintock, recorded in 1928, but apparently written in the 1890s. The song was popularized fairly recently, having been featured in the film *O Brother Where Art Thou* by the Coen Brothers from 2000. McClintock was also a member of the Wobblies and an active labour organizer. The song includes many of the classic hobo themes: hopping trains, harassment by railroad bulls, being attacked by dogs, stealing food, forced labour, imprisonment, etc.

One evening as the sun went down, and the jungle fire was burning,
Down the track came a hobo hiking, and he said, "Boys, I'm not turning
I'm headed for a land that's far away, besides the crystal fountains
So come with me, we'll go and see, the Big Rock Candy Mountains"

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains, there's a land that's fair and bright,
Where the handouts grow on bushes, and you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars all are empty, and the sun shines every day
On the birds and the bees, and the cigarette trees
The lemonade springs, where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains, all the cops have wooden legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth, and the hens lay soft-boiled eggs
The farmers' trees are full of fruit, and the barns are full of hay
Oh I'm bound to go, where there ain't no snow
Where the rain don't fall, and the wind don't blow
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains You never change your socks
And the little streams of alcohol Come trickling down the rocks
The brakemen have to tip their hats And the railroad bulls are blind
There's a lake of stew And of whiskey, too
You can paddle all around 'em In a big canoe
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains, the jails are made of tin
And you can walk right out again, as soon as you are in
There ain't no short-handled shovels, no axes, saws or picks,
I'm goin' to stay, where you sleep all day,
Where they hung the jerk, that invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

I'll see you all this coming fall, in the Big Rock Candy Mountains

Although this is the most well-known, and now more or less established version of the song, there are a number of variations. Todd Depastino, in his Introduction to London's *The Road*, discusses the more disturbing, original, version of the song, which is apparently about an older tramp or wolf's attempt to seduce a young boy or punk into embracing the hobo lifestyle. The song ends with the punk rejecting both his mentor and the hobo scene with the following lines:

I've hiked and hiked till my feet are sore
And I'll be damned if I hike any more
To be buggered sore like a hobo's whore
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

(Depastino 2006: xxvii)

This throws a new light, to say the least, on the romanticized picture of the current version of the song and the hobo lifestyle in general.

There are a great deal of additional interesting songs which could also be discussed: many other Woody Guthrie songs, *Tramp on the Street* by Hank Williams, *The Hobo Song* or *Billy the Bum* by John Prine, *Here Comes Your Man*, Pixies, etc. The ongoing interest in this alternative hobo lifestyle is also in evidence by the success of films such as the critically acclaimed *Into the Wild* or last year's Oscar winning *Nomadland*.

It is a historical irony that the tramping movement in 'capital-less' Czechoslovakia was often perceived as an escape of sorts from the confines of Communism, while tramps in America were often victims of the rigours of capitalism or individuals who chose to reject the strictions of the traditional working world. On the other hand, the Czech tramp 'osada' and the America hobo jungle did have some aspects in common in the end, involving an established set of rules, with guláš as the Czech version of mulligan stew and with a sense of being a sub-culture within a larger unsympathetic culture. Jack London's description of what he calls a true hobo, with his rejection of traditional capital, could also very much apply to the Czech tramp scene: "The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment. He has learned the futility of telic endeavor, and knows the delight of drifting along with the whimsicalities of Chance." (London 2006: 54). The hobo and the associated lifestyle will undoubtedly continue to fascinate and inspire listeners, readers and film-goers on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Summary

This contribution looks at the figure of the hobo, tramp or bum as portrayed in American folk songs. Although the hobo has often been romanticized, the reality of this lifestyle in the United States, particularly during the Great Depression, was much grimmer and more problematic. Most hobos, at that time, were looking for work and hoping to accumulate enough capital to resume “normalcy”. Others, either temporarily or permanently, embraced this alternative way of life, even chronicling their lifestyle in literature or music and serving eventually as inspiration for not only the Beatniks, but also the Hippie movement. This paper also looks at a selection of hobo songs, particularly those which celebrate this choice of lifestyle and the rejection of the mainstream establishment.

Key words: Hobos; American folk music; the Great Depression; the Industrial Workers of the World.