

FW George Mann: Keeping The Wobbly Troubadour Tradition Alive

By Greg Giorgio

Traveling musician, songwriter and union activist George Mann is a creative whirlwind. He has written dozens of labor and peace songs, produced a vital series of protest records and toured incessantly playing his latest creations as well as many tunes from the Wobbly canon and beyond. He sang with his mentor, the late Julius Margolin, for many years and now looks at his music and life's work for us on these pages. Don't miss his gigs in the Albany, N.Y. area and in Boston on May 14 and 15. Contact the Upstate N.Y. and Boston IWW branches for details.

Greg Giorgio: How did you get started in music?

George Mann: I have played the guitar since I was eight years old and always wanted to be a folksinger. Before The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix and The Who, there was The Kingston Trio. I remember being stricken, at eight years old, by this woman named Joan Baez who sang a song about a guy named Joe Hill on my sister's album of the Woodstock concert.

GG: How did labor and social justice eventually fit in with your music-making?

GM: I was socially-conscious when younger, but not in a focused way, playing left-wing hippy music and rock and roll in various bands growing up and while going to college. Ultimately, working in the union movement as an organizer led me to the music of people like Utah Phillips, Woody Guthrie, Anne Feeney, Billy Bragg and singers like them who know that a good story and the struggle for justice beats pop music any day of the week. I had always played for activist causes, but singing the labor classics, and 10 years in the New York City Labor Chorus, helped turn my ear more toward folk music. I began writing songs again, eventually recording CDs.

GG: What other kinds of work have you done?

GM: I was a journalist and editor for years and have always had that thread worming through my life as a source of income. Nine years as an organizer, working for the musicians' union and the Communication Workers of America, among others, taught me that I cannot work in the labor movement and play music for it—both vocations demand a full-time commitment. These days, I play music full-time and live a lot cheaper, but I am enjoying life a lot more. I have several “steady” gigs, including working as an accompanist in school plays and playing for veterans and nursing homes on both coasts.

GG: How did your association with the late Julius Margolin get started?

GM: I met Julius when he was 79 years old, and he was just beginning to write songs about labor struggles and opposing the Gingrich-led “Contract with America.” As we became better friends, he recruited me to the New York City Labor Chorus and I eventually convinced him to try recording and making music with me. We had no idea that it would turn into 12 years of fun and struggle against the anti-union and pro-war forces of capital! And I always knew it could end at any moment, but I am grateful for the chance to have been with him during that journey, right on through his final illness and death last summer at 93.

GG: He was an incredible human being. What was the most important lesson you learned from him?

GM: I hope that any person who met or comes to know of Julius takes three things away: his lack of ego, his militant anger at and determination to act against the ruling classes, and his love for the working class and all the peoples of the world. Julius also believed in one very simple concept—if you are going to talk

the talk, you should also have to walk the walk. He served proudly in the Merchant Marine in World War II, survived the blacklist that removed him from the boats in 1949, worked for 30 years in the film industry, and was active in his union [the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, or IATSE] right up until his death. His calendar was filled with solidarity activities and committee meetings until he grew too sick to participate anymore. And when he died, he left such a surge of energy, love and determination among those who knew him. I still draw strength from that, as I continue to miss his presence and face the challenges in my life and the disappointments of everyday struggle.

GG: You have a great amount of creative energy. Talk about some of your solo work and collaborative recordings of the last decade or so.

GM: I recorded three CDs with Julius and I treasure the memory of each one, as I saw Julius develop as a songwriter and I found a production style—and great musicians—to present the music in a way that did justice to our work. Along the way, we were fortunate to create the four CDs in the anti-Bush “Hail to the Thief!” series—finding like-minded folksingers to present our opposition to the Bush regime and its imperial goals. And the documentary film we made about Julius, “A Union Man,” was also a collaborative project, with so many people pitching in to help make this story of Julius's amazing life.

I love the process of writing songs and the magic of recording and producing CDs. And I am finding that the folk world, and the intertwining circles of labor/green/anti-war activism, can provide meaning and support to my life and work. That's a big lesson, not one easily learned, but I'm working on it.

GG: Can you discuss your creative process a little and describe your musical stylings?

GM: Not really, some secrets are best kept in the closet! I wish I could explain the magic of writing songs, but it is something that is very private and mysterious. All I know is that I get better at self-editing as I get older, i.e., only writing/releasing songs that meet my goals/standards.

I think of and “see” music, and new songs especially, as the platform for creating an interesting combination of sounds in the studio, and my studio arrangements tend to be fuller and sometimes even with “rock”/electric guitars and drums backing. But I am always conscious of how that song will sound solo with an acoustic guitar, the way it was written and is usually performed live.

GG: Utah Phillips urged us to “seek out our elders” from the union movement. You have taken that to heart, haven't you?

GM: I think that one reason Utah took to me when we finally met was because he saw I had already learned that lesson, and in bringing Julius out to the world, I was working in the same field that Utah was tilling. But as I told Utah many times, it was his music, his stories and preservation of workers' histories—his example—that led me down that road. I'll never forget what a lightning bolt Utah's work was to me when I first heard about him and began buying his CDs in the mid-1990s: his clarity, his outrage, his sheer skill at singing and telling stories of the workers who fought and died for safe, fair working conditions and the right to a union—this did so much for me at that point in my life.

And so my work with Julius was part of repaying that debt, that collective debt that all of us owe to people like Utah, Faith Petric, Woody Guthrie, Joe Hill and many more of those who came before us and gave us these songs, these stories that resonate 20 years, 40 years, [or even] a century later.

GG: Tell us about your union memberships.

GM: I have been in the American Federation of Musicians for about 20 years. Most of that time, I've been in Local 1000, the non-geographic local chartered for traveling folk musicians. In 2005 I joined the New York City branch of the IWW. While my schedule does not permit me to be active in the branch's work, I believe that the IWW is the union that best reflects my beliefs and I like to spend my money wisely.

GG: What's the latest recording?

GM: After the Bush error ended, Julius and I were wondering what we would do next. When I heard about efforts to help our veterans who struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, specifically the work of The Welcome Home Project [<http://www.thewelcomehomeproject.org>], I decided to create a new compilation CD, “Until You Come Home: Songs for Veterans and Their Kin.” Both Julius and Utah are on it, as well as many other great artists like Tom Paxton, John Gorka, Holly Near and David Rovics.

I am also releasing my new solo CD, “Songs for Jules and Bruce,” in May. This project is very dear to my heart as Julius sings on several songs, Anne Feeney and Mark Ross are among the guests, and many of the songs are about or in tribute to Julius and Utah. My website [<http://www.georgemann.org>] has information on all of our work.

GG: What's next for your musical adventure? Any other projects in the works?

GM: I am taking a vow not to step into a recording studio for a year and to spend that year touring, traveling the country, and writing new songs that show the hope and ability to fight back that exists in us all, if we just seek it out. May brings the May Day concert at the Botto House and concerts for both the Upstate New York James Connolly Branch and the Boston Branch of the IWW. I would love to go play for some of the other IWW Branches and expect to be doing a number of concerts with Veterans for Peace tied into the “Until You Come Home” CD.

GG: How important is our music and our culture for the survival of a working class movement?

GM: What's most important for the survival of a working class and union movement is for people to educate themselves and to find the courage to stand up and fight back. Songs and stories educate people and preserve that long memory that Utah often spoke about, so in that sense music and labor culture are great tools. They help to preserve and present that long memory.

GG: Any last words for our readers?

GM: While there is always a price to pay for activism and challenging authority, direct action is the only thing that gets the goods. This is another lesson impressed into my mind by my elders, but also seen in the struggles I've been in. Power yields nothing without pressure, and you cannot build that pressure without extreme commitment, strength and sacrifice. If you want to win, you have to be ready to offer all.

**A CD Release Concert for “Until You Come Home” and
A Benefit for the Utah Phillips “Long Memory Project”**

George Mann

Friday, May 14 @ 7:00 PM

Altamont Village Hall

**115 Main Street (Rte. 146)
at the Firehouse (Free Parking)**

Suggested Admission \$10, no one turned away for lack of funds!



George Mann is a New York City-based folksinger who sings songs from the last century of labor and social activism, and his own songs are powerful and funny takes on the state of the nation. He also writes songs of hope, healing, struggle and triumph, and for years he recorded and performed with Julius Margolin, who was 93 when he died last August.

His new CD, “Until You Come Home,” features such folk legends as Tom Paxton, Utah Phillips, Holly Near, Magpie, John Gorka and many more artists singing songs about the experiences of war and of returning home. Inspired by the book “Voices of Vets,” George produced this new CD to help welcome home our returning service members and recognize the sacrifices they and their families have made for our country. He is also releasing his new CD, “Songs for Jules and Bruce,” in May.

George and the IWW will present the proceeds from this concert to the “Long Memory Project” in honor of Utah Phillips, singer, storyteller and Wobbly. Beer and wine will be served, feel free to bring snacks. Doors open at 7 PM for reception and the music starts at 7:30 PM.

On the Web:

www.georgemann.org

Online Purchase:

<http://shop.georgeandjulius.com>

**This concert is sponsored by the
James Connolly Upstate Branch of the IWW**

Phone: (518) 861-5627 for more info

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*George Mann will also be performing at 10:00 p.m. on May 1 at Surreal Estate in Brooklyn, N.Y., and at 8:00 p.m. on May 15 in Boston, location TBA.