

The Making of Si Kahn and George Mann's Album "Labor Day"

Fifty years ago, shortly after Labor Day 1974, Si Kahn and a small group of then young musicians gathered in a local DJ's living room in the old mountain mining town of Wise, Virginia. Two days later, buoyed by friendship and a four-track reel-to-reel tape recorder, they sent the now classic folk album *New Wood* off to the pressing plant.

The impact was immediate and profound. "Si Kahn is the first artist since Woody Guthrie," Ariel Swartly wrote in the *Boston Phoenix*, "to swoop down on a body of traditional material, transform it utterly and send it home with a shine on." From legenday music critic Robert Christgau in *The Village Voice*: "Subtlety, originality and sheer conceptual elegance." And from Studs Terkel, "Si Kahn fuses life with song."

Today, Si is the only artist in the history of Folk Music International to have received both their specially created Triple Crown Award (#1 Artist, #1 CD, #1 Song) and their Spirit of Folk Award.

"Labor Day" came about as Si was trying to decide what kind of album to release to mark both his 80th birthday and the 50th anniversary of *New Wood*. "I finally decided," Si says, "that it should reflect not only my 50 years as a performing and recording musician, but my 60 years as a civil rights, union, and community organizer."

That fit perfectly with what Si's friend George Mann, a fellow member of American Federation of Musicians Local 1000, was thinking. "I wanted to produce an album to honor Si and his songs on his 80th birthday," George says, "that would also give the labor movement a new collection of songs about workers, unions and the struggle for a better world.'

That was music to Si's ears.

According to George, "There were two guiding principles: getting a bunch of Si's previously unreleased songs and recordings out there, and including selections from some of the many great artists who have recorded Si's songs over the years. More than 100 artists have recorded them. It wasn't easy whittling it down to 21 songs."

But whittle they did. On Si Kahn and George Mann's album **LABOR DAY**, Peggy Seeger, John McCutcheon, Kathy Mattea, Cathy Fink & Marcy Marxer, Billy Bragg, Michael Johnathon, Odetta, Laurie Lewis, Joe Jencks, Magpie, and Tom Chapin with the Chapin Sisters perform not only some of the great numbers from **NEW WOOD** (Aragon Mill, Gone Gonna Rise Again, Lawrence Jones, Truck Driving Woman), but songs from Si's vast catalog that have never before been released, not even by Si himself. Si and George contribute nine songs to the album, seven that are previously unreleased.

LABOR DAY is indeed, as in its subtitle, "A Tribute to Hardworking People Everywhere." But as Si Kahn turns 80, it is also a tribute to Si's lifetime work as a passionate fighter for justice, and as an artist whose songs will continue to be sung so long as working people organize and work to build unions and better conditions for all workers.