

Work Songs

By Nicholas Wolterstorff | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

My topic in this brief essay is work songs, that is, songs sung as accompaniment to work rather than songs about work. My main thesis is that such songs are a gratuitous and creative excess in which the song enhances the work and the work enhances the song.

The manual labor that work songs accompany can be performed without the songs: spinners can spin and rowers can row without singing. Sometimes the singing establishes a rhythm that is essential for coordinated activity; but there are other ways to establish a rhythm for the work than by singing. From the standpoint of getting the work done, the singing is unnecessary. It's an excess. Except for those cases in which some overseer orders the workers to sing, it's a gratuitous excess.

Just as the work can be done without the singing, so too the singing can be done without the work; that happens when work songs are performed in concert. With respect to the work, the singing is an excess; with respect to the singing, the work is an excess.

The situation is not entirely symmetrical, however. The work is already there; the singing is not. Singing is introduced to accompany the work; seldom is work introduced to accompany the singing. In the term *work songs*, the word *work* is the modifier and the word *songs* is the substantive. Our terminology would better reflect the reality of things if we spoke of *sung work*.

I said of the singing that it accompanies the work; I might also have said of the work that it accompanies the singing. In each case, however, the word *accompany* is misleading. It suggests mere simultaneity. The singing and the working do, of course, occur simultaneously; but their relation goes beyond that. It's integral. When workers sing while working, they create an entity of a different genre. There is now neither ordinary work nor ordinary singing but sung work, an entity of a new genre in which the singing and the working *coinhere* — to borrow a term from theology of the Trinity. In his fine book *Work Songs*, the music historian Ted Gioia remarks, "The work of the poorest laborer is still a process of creating and of making something where before there was nothing."^[1] Singing while working is a manifestation of human creativity; the gratuitous excess represented by sung work is a creative excess.

In situations of labor under duress, this creative excess is the manifestation of a spirit that refuses to be crushed, refuses to be reduced to a mere hoer of cotton or splitter of rocks. By singing, the workers manifest an indomitable sense of their ineradicable dignity. One can see why overseers in prisons sometimes refused to allow the laborers to sing.^[2] They wanted to crush the spirit of the prisoners, but the singing was an indication that they had not succeeded. *Prison Songs* is a recording made by Alan Lomax in 1947-48 of songs sung by prisoners in the Parchman Farm prison in Mississippi.^[3] In 1996 a researcher played it for a group of ex-prisoners living in the South Bronx and asked them what they thought. One said, "You're trying to save your sanity.... You'd lose your spirit if you didn't sing." Another said, the songs are a manifestation of the

will of the human spirit. That will is something within me. It says that I have something that I can do to get myself out of this, too, or get through this day, or cope with tomorrow, and

not just lay back and hope that someone else will come to my rescue. So I think these songs have a great value, a great lesson: the will of the human spirit — the will to survive and go on, no matter what, and in spite of everything.[\[4\]](#)

If the singing and the labor are to coincide, the singing has to fit the work. Thus it is that

the work song follows musical rules of its own, far distant from the cultural and formal considerations that hold sway in virtually all other types of performance art. Indeed, in almost every regard the work song defies our conception of an “artistic performance.” Its pace can be repetitive and predictable; often it strives to achieve effects that, in other settings, would be dismissed as merely monotonous.... The rhythms are typically slower than most other types of traditional songs, sometimes positively sluggish.[\[5\]](#)

The demands of physical labor typically require a measured approach — what one might call the “work song law of conservation of energy.” Pacing is critical, and the song leader is responsible for seeing that the workers do not exhaust themselves in their efforts but rather can continue to the end of day.[\[6\]](#)

Not only must the tempo of the song fit the tempo of the work, but the rhythm of the song must fit the rhythm of the work. In case the work has no inherent rhythm, the rhythm of the song has to be a rhythm that can be imposed on the work. For some types of work it was important, or even indispensable, that the actions of the individual workers be synchronized; in those cases, the singing had to have a rhythm that could serve that function. Track 2 on *Prison Songs*, “No More, My Lord,” and track 13, “Early in the Mornin’,” are fascinating examples of this. Both are sung to the action of chopping wood; in both cases, not only does the rhythm of the singing establish a rhythm for the swinging of the axes, but the ringing percussive sound of the axe-blows is an integral element of the music. “Many compelling recordings of work songs would be deprived of their vitality if the sound of the tools were taken away.”[\[7\]](#)

If the song is to fit the work, the expressive character of the song must also fit the nature of the work and fit the mood typical of those who perform the work. Writing about the music of African tribes, the ethnomusicologist Rose Brandel observes that these peoples do “not deliberately project the ‘work music’ upon the scene in the manner of modern factory psychologists. Rather, the music seems to be an expressive outgrowth of the labor itself.”[\[8\]](#)

Those who sang while working obviously found their new creation, sung work, to be more gratifying than the same work done without singing; that’s why they sang. What was it about this new entity that they found more gratifying? When Lomax asked Bama, an inmate in the Parchman Farm, why he and his fellows sang, Bama said, singing makes the work “go so better.”[\[9\]](#) Singing changed the work for the better; singing enhanced the work. The same thing can be said about the effect of the work on the singing. The work changes the singing for the better, enhances it. About sea shanties Gioia says:

Cut off from the activities that gave it meaning, the shanty has become just another song. This transition can only be lamented, for the work-a-day circumstances that gave birth to the shanty also imparted the rough-and-ready beauty that made them so inspirational and

this charm all but disappears when the music is brought inside the concert hall or recording studio.[\[10\]](#)

Let's set off to the side the enhancement of the singing effected by its combination with the work and reflect on the enhancement of the work effected by its combination with the singing. What was it about sung work that made the work "go so better"? We have already noted one of the ways in which the singing made the work go better: the rhythm of the singing coordinated the activity of the individual laborers. And often the singing energized the workers. In Gioia's words, the songs "impart vitality and energy to an undertaking."[\[11\]](#) When accompanied by singing, tasks "have a stronger and more insistent force of momentum behind them."[\[12\]](#) In addition to enhancing the work, the singing enhanced the workers' experience of the work. It reinforced their sense of being engaged in a common project: they were in it together. The creative excess of the singing blurred the distinction between work and play by introducing a dimension of play into the work. In these ways, singing enhanced the experience of the work whether or not the work was pleasant.

It was especially when the work was unpleasant, however, that singing was important. Much of the work that human beings have performed while singing is tedious, and the singing alleviates the tedium. I quoted three words from what Bama said to Lomax when Lomax asked him why he and his fellows sang while working. Here is more of what Bama said:

When you singin', you forgit, you see, and the time just pass on 'way; but if you just get your mind devoted on one something, it look like it will be hard for you to make it, see, make a day. The day be longer, look like. So to keep his mind from being devoted on just one thing, why he'll practically take up singin', see.[\[13\]](#)

What was it about sung work that made it more gratifying? My answer thus far has taken its cue from the comment made by Bama that singing makes the work "go so better." Singing enhances the work and the workers' experience by coordinating the activity of the workers, energizing them, and taking their mind off the work. These are functional considerations, beneficial effects of the singing on the work. Gioia doubts that such functional considerations exhaust the matter, and I think he is right. His guess and mine is that the workers often found their expression of creativity intrinsically good and not just instrumentally good. They sang for the sheer joy of creating sung work. Sung work was an end in itself for them, just as absorbed attention to a work of art may be an end in itself for others.

It would be impossible to describe everything about sung work that would have made the workers want to do it for the joy of it. But one thing that would have made it joyful was the solidarity that they would have experienced. They would have experienced the solidarity of jointly expressing the sentiments in the words of the songs. They would also have experienced the solidarity inherent in group singing: each singer adjusts his singing to the singing of his fellows.

Gioia describes well an important additional aspect of the "meaning" of work songs:

[The work song] is a musical "genre" that is much more than a genre because it emerges as a transformational tool. Even more striking, this source of transcendence was reserved as a special support for those on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder — the most

oppressed laborer and even the slave or prisoner. When all else was taken away, it remained inalienable. Members of the leisure class, representatives of the ruling powers, were all but excluded from tapping into its power. The nature of this social role — so strange and amorphous, yet so tightly defined — adds to the rich complexity of this body of music.[\[14\]](#)

The enhancement of work by singing is just one example of what is perhaps the most common of all the many ways in which the arts enter into our lives: the arts enhance our activities and enhance our experience. Consider hymns. Work songs are close to disappearing from the modern world; hymns are not.

Worshippers can praise God in spoken prose; sometimes they do. With respect to the action of praising God, singing is an excess. The excess does not merely coexist with the praising, however. The singing and the praising join together to create an entity of a new genre: sung praise. In this new entity, the singing and the praising coinhere. This new entity enhances the praise. Praise is work, of a sort; sung praise is sung work.

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FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) Ted Gioia, *Work Songs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 257

[\[2\]](#) See Gioia, p. 207.

[\[3\]](#) The full title of the CD is *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947-48. Volume One: Murderous Home*. The CD is available as Rounder CD 1714.

[\[4\]](#) These comments are to be found in the booklet accompanying the CD.

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid.*, 60-61.

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, 154.

[\[7\]](#) *Ibid.*, 155.

[8] Quoted in Gioia, p. 56.

[9] The comment is to be found in the booklet accompanying the CD *Prison Songs*.

[10] Ibid., 136.

[11] Ibid., 178.

[12] Ibid., 178.

[13] From the booklet accompanying the CD *Prison Songs*.

[14] Ibid., 260.



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Recommended Citation: Wolterstorff, Nicholas (2014) "Work Songs," *The Yale ISM Review*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 8.

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