"What Songs Were Sung"

# **About the Songs**

The Bells of Rhymney. Written by Idris Davies (lyrics), Pete Seeger (music) 1959.

This song is about the struggles of miners in Wales. Born in Rhymney, Idris Davies left school at the age of 14, and worked in the mines until age 21 when he lost a finger a mine accident. Self-educated, became a teacher and poet. Dylan Thomas read Davies' "Bells of Rhymney" and Pete Seeger encountered the poem in a book by Dylan Thomas and followed up by writing music to the poem. Seeger performed it often.

### No Sooner I Go to Bedtime (Eyder Ich Leyg Mich Shlofn)

This is Yiddish song, anonymous, no information available. It was probably written around 1900 in New York City. It's about someone who works very long hours, probably in a sweatshop on the Lower East side. There were no protections for employees. When she's late, her employer docks her a half a day pay.

## Too Old to Work. Words and music by Joe Glazer (1918-2006).

This song was inspired by the decrease in company pensions and lack of security for worker when they get old and no longer can work. Joe remembered Walter Reuther (president of the UAW). It was written in the late 1940s. Joe criticized the automotive employers because they called pensions "creeping socialism." He remembered Reuther telling the story of the mine mules used to pull the coal cars in his native West Virgina. During slack times, the mules were fed and kept healthy so they would be ready to work when the mine started up again. Not so, the coal miners. That's because, as Ruether said, it cost fifty bucks to get another mule, but they could always get another coal miner for nothing.

## Day is Same as Night (Tog Azoy vi Nacht)

A Yiddish song, composer unknown. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here she says "day is same as night" because working hours are so long. She is dreaming about the day her lover will come and take her away from this workaday prison.

## The Dreary Dream. Appalachian, traditional.

This song was collected by J. J. Niles in Kentucky in 1907. It's about a man going to war and dying there, the wife who mourns him. His body was never found. Many songs from England and Appalachia have been written on this theme. I love the use of the word "Dreary," which is variously defined as "dull, bleak, lifeless, depressing. Etymology: Old English – "gory" and "cruel", "gore," "blood" "cruel, horrid, grievous, bloody, blood-stained."

## What Songs Were Sung. Words and music J.J. Niles.

A Christmas song about the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus. After visiting my niece, and meeting my great-nephew Zev and my niece's husband this past year in Portland, Oregon for

the first time, I revised the lyrics to reflect this new child and his parents. J.J. Niles also wrote "I Wonder as I Wander." He collected many Appalachian songs which he arranged for the piano and voice and wrote notes about the situations in which he collected them. These are complied in his "Ballad Book," which is easily obtainable on Amazon.

#### Down by the Salley Gardens. William Butler Yeats (lyrics), Irish folk song.

This is a song a mature person looking back on life and life's mistakes, particularly the mistakes made in love. Herbert Hughes, a collector of Irish folk songs, set William Butler Yeats' 1889 poem to a traditional folk tune in 1909. A Salley is a willow tree. A weir is a low dam built across a river to raise its level.

#### Sitting Here on My Little Bench (Zits Ich Mir Oyfn Benkele)

Words and music by Mark Olf (1905-1987). Mark came to the U.S. from Russia as a teenager with his parents. His early career was as an auto repairman. His wife, Rubia Goldman, was a pianist and music educator. She gave him the space and time to devote himself to music. He recoded 4 albums of Yiddish music for Folkway records and played the guitar and sang professionally. Zits Ich Mir was written in the 1940s. You can hear Mark singing on Folkway recordings on YouTube. He has a beautiful and clear singing voice.

### **They All Sang Bread and Roses**

This song was written in 1989 by Si Kahn, its title referring to "Bread and Roses," that classic worker song which memorialized the 1912 Lawrence Massachusetts textile workers strike. There is a famous line that is from the 1912 song: "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too." I discovered the Si Kahn version when viewing a movie about Berkeley in the 60s, with Ronnie Gilbert singing it. There's a YouTube with Si singing the song. In the last verse of the song, Si touchingly reminds us that there is a thread binding each generation to each other.

The last verse goes like this -- "And though each generation fears that it will be the last, our presence here is witness to the power of the past. And just as we have drawn our strength from those who now are gone, Younger hands will take our work and carry on."

### Oh, In the Morning. Words and music by Arlo Guthrie.

This is a song that I found in an Arlo Guthrie collection of sheet music from 1969 entitled "This is the Arlo Guthrie Book." I was looking for a song called "The Pause of Mr. Claus," which includes a long rap about the FBI and starts with the lyrics "Why do you sit there so strange? Is it because you are beautiful? You must think you are deranged. Why do police guys beat on peace guys?" In the song book, I found this beautiful ballad, which I had never heard before. It could actually be used as a hymn in a service. There is a wonderful 1971 video on YouTube showing Arlo family home movies with Arlo singing the song in the background.

#### A New Year. Words and music by Michael Hunter Ochs.

Michael Ochs is a singer/songwriter/pianist based in Nashville, Tennessee. Aside from country music, he works as a cantor at Congregation Micah in Nashville. There is a YouTube video of

cantors and choirs in Jewish communities around the world singing this song. The song was written for the Jewish New Year 2016, but it's so beautiful, and hopeful (both musically and in its message) that it's much beloved by everyone who hears it at any time of year.