

The protest song that's taken America by storm hits too many false notes

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Rich Men North of Richmond represents the poor but lets the wealthy off the hook

There is mean things happening in this land

Oh the rich man boasts and brags

While the poor man goes in rags

There is mean things happening in this land

So runs the opening verse of John Handcox's classic 1930s song *There is Mean Things Happening In This Land*. Handcox was a tenant farmer and union organiser in Arkansas during the Great Depression. His family, like thousands of others, had been made destitute, crushed between the droughts that afflicted the dust bowl and the ruthlessness of east coast bankers and of the old plantation owners, the white oligarchy that had retained its power in the south after the civil war.

I don't know if Oliver Anthony knows of Handcox. A jobbing country singer from Virginia, Anthony's video of his song [Rich Men North of Richmond](#) has gone viral over the past week, clocking up more than 20m views on YouTube, rising to the top of the streaming charts and becoming an anthem for conservatives from [Marjorie Taylor Green](#), the reactionary Republican congresswoman from Georgia, to the rightwing political commentator [Matt Walsh](#), all viewing Anthony as a righteous figure, whose "rawness" and "authenticity" speak to real Americans.

In some ways, *Rich Men North of Richmond* echoes the themes of Handcox's song, giving voice to a sense of a world divided into rich and poor, and of ordinary people as menaced by those in power. It also shows the degree to which the working-class tradition that [Handcox helped forge](#) has decayed, politically and culturally.

Handcox was not simply a singer or songwriter. He was first and foremost a union activist, and it was out of his activism that his music flowed. He stood in a long line of working-class troubadours. From *The Ballad of Joe Hill* to *This Land Is Your Land*, much of what is now called the Great American Songbook emerged from grassroot struggles, songs created to organise, inspire and console. Some names in that tradition are well known - Paul Robeson or Woody Guthrie. Others, such as Ella May Wiggins, a millworker murdered by a militia during the notorious Loray Mill strike in 1929, and Sarah Ogan Gunning, a nurse and midwife from the mining country in Kentucky, are largely lost to the collective memory.

All helped create a movement in which music became a central strand in the struggle for justice and betterment. It was a tradition that, long before the civil rights movement, was committed to

interracial solidarity. Not only were African Americans, such as Robeson and Handcox, an inextricable part of the working-class folk scene, but there was much cross-fertilisation across blues, gospel and folk.

Handcox was an organiser for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), helping stage a major strike of cotton pickers demanding better pay in 1935. The strike was met with ferocious violence from planters, militias and the Ku Klux Klan. The union was crushed, and Handcox, blacklisted and threatened by lynch mobs, was forced to flee, joining the thousands who had formed a great exodus out of the dust bowl, the raw horrors of which were captured in Dorothea Lange's photographs and in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

"The song expresses individualised resentment - not towards bosses or the capitalist class - but a nebulous political elite"

Handcox would have understood Anthony's lament in *Rich Men North of Richmond* about the precariousness of working-class life. But where he was committed to collective action and unionisation, *Rich Men North of Richmond* expresses individualised resentment. It is a resentment not towards bosses or the capitalist class, as in the old songs but, as has become fashionable today, towards a nebulous political elite, defined as much by its cultural alienness as by its economic power.

A boss who is culturally familiar seems less threatening than a member of the cosmopolitan elite. Anthony even gives a nod towards conspiracy theories about paedophiles ("I wish politicians would look out for miners / And not just minors on an island somewhere"). It is a resentment, too, not just towards the elite but also the undeserving poor, towards benefit recipients and welfare scroungers: "Lord, we got folks in the street, ain't got nothin' to eat / And the obese milkin' welfare". For Anthony, "if you're 5-foot-3 and you're 300 pounds / Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds". Only for some is the precariousness of life to be condemned.

All this has turned the song into a conservative hymn, "the protest song of our generation", as [Walsh has described it](#). Most of those who laud *Rich Men North of Richmond* as being, in Greene's words, "the anthem of the [forgotten Americans](#)", have also long campaigned to deny those forgotten Americans their dues. They oppose unionisation and Medicare and abortion rights, view tax cuts for the rich as more important than support for the poor, and despise welfare payments as "[money stolen](#)". A century ago, they would have condemned Handcox and Wiggins, Robeson and Guthrie, as treacherous "reds", cheered on the strike-breaking militias, and probably joined them, too.

It is a common theme on the right that when people take collective action to defend their interests, they are the wrong kind of workers. It is only when workers lament without resisting that their voice is deemed "authentic". Yet, the decline of radical struggles, the neutering of labour movement organisations and the abandonment of working-class issues by many sections of the left has allowed the most grotesque of reactionaries to shamelessly pose as friends of the downtrodden.

"I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day / Overtime hours for bullshit pay." Anthony's plaint rings down the decades. But as long as disaffection is shaped by a politics that abases working-class hopes, and is directed as much against the undeserving poor or the culturally different as against employers and politicians who seek to crush unions and impose austerity, rich men, whether north and south of Richmond, will remain in power.

"The way they're treated is a sin, / So I'm gonna get organised", Sarah Ogan Gunning sang in her 1937 recording *I'm Goin' to Organize, Baby Mine*. It is an attitude, and a defiance, as necessary today as it was almost a century ago.

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