

Interview with Bill Collins, Singer of The Rabble Rousers

Jeff Brigman: Bill, first off let me say thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule and to congratulate you on your album.... which is fantastic by the way.

Bill Collins: Thanks very much, Jeff.

Jeff: So why did you decide to become involved in the Union Labor Movement and why through music?

Bill: When I met my (current) wife Gwen, who's an organizer for Unite Here, saw the good things she was helping to accomplish for working class folks, and realized that these good ideas needed some help on the artistic front. I decided to merge all my previous musical styles to help give the International Labor Union movement some current sounding fight songs and adopt it as my own cause!

Jeff: Did you find the transition from your previous musical styles difficult when you were creating the songs?

Bill: Actually, not so much. My main style of music these days when I'm not playing Union Songs is Irish Folk music, which always had a strong theme of standing up and fighting for your rights. My musical career goes way back and includes Hardcore Punk in the 80's and 90's which also had strong political themes. Between the Punk and the Irish I played a bunch of American-based music like Rockabilly and Country and Rock and Roll and recorded a couple of albums in Nashville. The Old-School Country music is real working peoples' music and talks about ordinary folks' day to day lives. So.... I guess it just came naturally that when I decided to start writing Union songs I would combine the political themes, the struggle, the anger and the down-homeness, (plus some Picket Line chants) to come up with some tunes that might appeal to the average working person.

Jeff: After listening to the album a few times I have to say Ahoy! is my favorite song, which one is yours and why?

Bill: Jeez, Jeff, That's a tough one! Which one of your kids is your favorite child? The closest I can come to answering that is: It depends on my mood at the time. Songs like Ahoy and I Say Union are easy to learn the chorus to on the spot so it easy to teach them to a new crowd. Right away they're singing along and that makes me feel like I'm doing something right. One thing I learned is that people do like to sing along, or better yet, shout along! It allows angry folks to vent a bit, it's a release.

Jeff: I've read about you traveling down to Virginia to lend a hand and that you helped keep their morale up with your music, what was that like?

Bill: I was in the Tidewater area of Virginia as an office volunteer for a Union voter registration drive that my wife Gwen was coordinating for over 2 months before,during and after the presidential election. The doorknockers went out day after day in all kinds of weather. Viruses spread through the group, people went out anyway, sick or not. I just did whatever I could to help lift their spirits. They were a great group of folks I developed a lot of respect for.

Sometimes it would mean buying a birthday cake for someone, giving rides to the hotel or airport, doing janitorial work, processing voter reg cards. Really there was so much to do that it was some weeks before I started playing my songs for people to help them get out the door. People were very happy to have some new tunes to help them on their way, and that made me feel great. Their favorites were: Dirty Tricks, I Say Union, and one I wrote just for them called Don't Knock The Knockers. It felt like I was doing USO shows for the Union. What can I say? I was in the right place at the right time at the point of a very historic moment. Anyway, the Pro-Union candidate won and I like to think my songs had just a tiny hand in that!

Jeff: Do you or The Rabble Rousers have any plans in the future for more Union/Labor related music?

Bill: Yes, definitely! I continue to write songs for the Union/Labor cause. Besides the Virginia tune I mentioned, the newest songs are: Sit Down Strike (for the UEW folks in Chicago that took over their factory) Farr Kitt (the story of a worker who decides enough is enough) Victory Jig (an instrumental for when we win), plus I've always got something simmering on the back burner. We're about to go play shows in Germany with the full band. We'll be talking to a record company and a distributor about a deal and a more extensive European tour. In the US The Rabble Rousers are usually an acoustic duo or trio playing Union and political events. Sometimes it's just me playing solo like I did in VA, or supporting a picket line with some tunes. I'd like to do an acoustic CD, and also bring the full band over for a US tour. Some of our upcoming German gigs will be recorded, so we might have some live tracks or maybe even a live CD coming out!

Jeff: Recently the media's had a field day bashing the UAW because of the economic problems the Big Three Auto makers are facing, what's your thoughts on that?

Bill: Well that's a complicated one. I don't pretend I'm an expert at all. I do know that when someone works for a company all their life, the company should be obligated to look out for that person later on in terms of decent health care and retirement benefits! I also know that the figure that gets used for showing how overpaid US Union auto workers are takes into account that today's workers are helping take care of (rightfully so) benefits for current and future retirees. Anti-Union people argue that the Japanese-based companies don't pay as much in benefits, but conveniently leave out the crucial fact that a company like Toyota, for example, which has been in existence for a much shorter time, has less retirees it must take care of and therefore less overhead. This is no reason to shortchange our employees!

One more issue is that the products the companies are producing are expensive "gas guzzlers" that people can't afford to buy or drive. Why is this? I think management needs to rethink their products and not blame the workers.

Jeff: Another big issue that's been in the media, and is extremely important is the Employee Free Choice Act. How do you feel about it?

Bill: I say let's pass it! The system as it stands right now is overly balanced towards the employers. The EFCA will help "level the playing field" for workers, so to speak.

"Although the law is stacked for them they have to stack the deck again

- they're dealing off the bottom just the same"(A quote from my song Card Count).

Jeff: Thank you once again Bill for the interview, and the awesome music. Any final words for us?

Bill: Thank you for your support. Best of luck, and keep on fighting the good fight!

For more info on my music www.myspace.com/billcollinsguitar or www.myspace.com/therabblersband