

“I Just Want to Sing Your Name”: Woody Guthrie’s Struggles with *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*

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Oh Sacco, Vanzetti

Hey Sacco, Vanzetti

Hey Nicola Sacco, Bart Vanzetti

I just want to sing your name.

These simple lyrics may have flowed from Woody Guthrie’s pen, but the larger task of writing a cycle of songs about Sacco and Vanzetti proved to be a mighty struggle for America’s premier balladeer. Woody Guthrie had a legendary knack for knocking off songs in seemingly effortless fashion. He wrote “This Land Is Your Land” one night in a seedy hotel near Times Square. Another night’s work with a borrowed typewriter and a jug of wine produced the seventeen verses of “Tom Joad.” And by now Guthrie had written his classic *Dust Bowl Ballads* and *Columbia River Collection*. However, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, what he called “my most important project,” proved to be a very stiff challenge. All he wanted to do was to sing the names of two Italian anarchists unjustly executed for armed robbery and murder two decades earlier. Why was Guthrie having such a hard time of it? So much so that he threw up his arms in despair and complained in a letter to record producers Moses Asch and Marian Distler (November 4, 1946), “I refuse to write these songs while I’m drunk, and it looks like I’ll be drunk for a long time.”¹

Woody Guthrie eventually sobered up and wrote the songs that sing the names of Sacco and Vanzetti. The results were mixed at best, and the eleven songs of *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* remain among Guthrie’s least known major works. The album has had its champions, but like much of the extensive literature inspired by this infamous *cause célèbre*, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* generally has been dismissed by the critics and forgotten by the public. Wayne Hampton calls these ballads “great monuments to two of the American Left’s most notorious martyrs” but later dismisses the work as “merely a few weak, unenthusiastic, and unconvincing songs with which to remember the martyrs” (1986, 124). Biographer Joe Klein argues that despite Guthrie’s ability to identify with Sacco and Vanzetti, “the songs wouldn’t come . . . at least, no really memorable songs came” (1980, 314). In great measure, critics and biographers have discounted the

collection as inferior work and relegated this episode to little more than a footnote in Guthrie's life and work.

Examined more closely, the story of Guthrie's struggles with his Sacco and Vanzetti project can offer further insight into his beliefs and his song-writing and provide a contextual frame for re-evaluating what he called "the most important dozen songs I've ever worked on" (November 4, 1946). Allowing for some hyperbole, Guthrie's characterization of the project as more important than his *Dust Bowl* and *Columbia River* songs underscores the cultural significance of the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the enduring passion that it excited. The quote also speaks to the fact that Guthrie's struggles with the story stemmed not only from personal difficulties during this period but also from the challenge of dealing with the protean nature of the Sacco and Vanzetti case in the hostile atmosphere of post-World War II America. Furthermore, the songs of *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*, whatever their aesthetic qualities, remain important and relevant today as we struggle to deal with our post-9/11 times. Written and recorded during the chilly beginnings of the Cold War and the second Red Scare, and dealing with an episode from the first Red Scare, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* touches on a number of issues that challenge us today, particularly the political fears and hatreds that threaten to suppress civil liberties, scapegoat immigrants, and corrupt our judicial system in the name of collective national security.

The Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti had been dead nearly twenty years, when, in 1945, Moses Asch offered Woody Guthrie several hundred dollars to "provide a document in song on the famed Sacco-Vanzetti Case" (Asch 1960, 1). Sacco the shoe worker and Vanzetti the fish peddler were convicted of a deadly armed robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1920. Seven years later, after Governor Alvin Fuller rejected a clemency plea, the two men were executed. By then Leftists of all stripes had made the case an international *cause célèbre* on the order of the Dreyfus affair. Guilt or innocence aside, the Left was convinced that these poor Italian immigrants had been martyred by a judicial system corrupted by xenophobic hate and fear of radical foreigners. Nearly twenty years later, the case still pained many Leftists, including Moses Asch, who was encouraging Guthrie to write historical ballads about America's radical past (Klein 1980, 313). Asch's own views (1960, 1) were most influenced by Upton Sinclair's two-volume historical novel about the case, *Boston*; Ben Shahn's series of paintings, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*; and his brother Nathan Asch's novel, *Pay Day*,

the story of a disaffected young clerk set on the day of the Sacco and Vanzetti executions.

Woody Guthrie knew the gist of the story, sympathized with the cause, and, always needing money, he jumped on the assignment. It was perhaps surprising that Guthrie, like so many others, hadn't already written about Sacco and Vanzetti. In a sense, his song "I Just Want to Sing Your Name" expressed the collective voice and vision of dozens of creative artists who had sung Sacco and Vanzetti's mourning since their deaths on August 23, 1927. Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Dos Passos, and other poets contributed to two verse anthologies, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Anthology of Verse* (1927) and *American Arraigned* (1928). Dos Passos and Upton Sinclair took up the subject in prose fiction, while Maxwell Anderson and James Thurber brought Sacco and Vanzetti to the stage. Now it was Woody Guthrie's turn.

Guthrie embarked on the project with enthusiasm and passion. Having looked at some materials provided by Asch, he concluded, "There is plenty here for a good album, on 4½ minute plastics, at that. Hurts me to try to pack it all into one ballad, but guess we can do it. I just hate to see all the other angles left unsung. There is a ballad about Sacco, one about Vanzetti, one about the scene of the holdup and killing, one about the arrest and foney trial, one about all of the screwy witnesses and, one about a general shot of the whole thing, the whole story" (January, 2, 1946). Writing in his notebook in March 1946, Guthrie tries to imagine Sacco and Vanzetti arriving in America from Italy, walking around the big Eastern cities, and realizing that the streets weren't paved with gold: "You saw faces against walls, an eye gone, an ear missing, no teeth, open boils, sores of the syph and you heard that there was no known cure. There was no cure known. And the words whirled and spun around in your head, no cure, no cure known. No cure for the people. No cure for the streets" (2, 8).

Woody Guthrie clearly found a sympathetic subject in Sacco and Vanzetti. The two workers were believed to be followers of Luigi Galleani, an anarchist leader who espoused violence as vital to overthrowing the capitalist ruling classes. However, neither man had been tied to any of the bombings that rocked the United States in the postwar years leading up to the Palmer raids of 1919-21. Guthrie was at the very least a fellow traveler among the Communists, but essentially didn't ascribe to any "isms," with the exception of unionism, both in its labor and social forms. Despite their differences, the three men were all outsiders, and as such sided with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, the very groups that the Communists championed. The American songwriter and the two Italian workers were kindred souls, utopians with an unshakeable belief in the brotherhood of man, what Guthrie often called "the one big union."

Having imagined Sacco and Vanzetti arriving in the New World, only to find privations, inequities, corruption, and disillusionment, Guthrie makes striking connections between himself, his fellow Dust Bowl refugees, and the two Italian immigrants. "You are Italian and I am from Oklahoma, but I have left out from Oklahoma to do some bigger jobs, just like you left your native house and home back in Italy," Guthrie writes in his notebook. "I saw the same vision that you did and all of us dust bowl families saw your same vision. It is the one big union we all saw. It shines just as bright over your Italy as over the prairies and the flatlands of my dust bowl" (March 1946, 2-3). Guthrie's genius was to use the concept of refugee to form a symbolic alliance between Dust Bowl migrants from America's southern Plains and immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, people such as Sacco and Vanzetti (La Chapelle 2007, 66). In that way, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* recasts the two anarchists as simple workingmen, union men, men no different from American farmers forced from their land, two men who were executed not so much for their radical politics as for their efforts on behalf of oppressed labor. In letters to Asch and Distler, Guthrie referred to the Sacco and Vanzetti case as the "murder frame up" and called his project the "frame-up" songs (January 2, 1946; November 4, 1946).

For Guthrie, Sacco and Vanzetti stood shoulder to shoulder with American "outlaws" Jesse James, John Hardy, and Pretty Boy Floyd, all worth celebrating in song for fighting unjust laws and demanding that the promise of America be fulfilled. Guthrie's American outlaw-heroes required him to doctor some of the facts and add a veneer of social consciousness. That was not necessary with Sacco and Vanzetti, who were driven by a deep and passionate sense of class consciousness, as is evident in their statements and letters. Guthrie also would have seen parallels between Sacco and Vanzetti and the greatest "outlaw" of all, Jesus Christ. The same forces that "framed up a Carpenter that same way, back over in Jerusalem," as Guthrie put it, were behind the "frame-up" of a shoemaker and fish peddler in Massachusetts two centuries later (quoted in Cray 2004, 153). So, the literary Left's canonization of Sacco and Vanzetti into Christ-like figures would have resonated with Guthrie.

Woody Guthrie had already shown he could write to order with his *Columbia River Collection*. Commissioned by the Bonneville Power Administration just a few years earlier, in 1941, that project had the clear, positive purpose of capturing the "thoughts and ideals" behind the Bonneville and Grand Coulee dams. Stephen Kahn, head of the administration's information division, wanted Guthrie to get a vivid sense of the project and assigned a

chauffeur to give the songwriter a week-long tour of the Columbia River valley. Here was material Guthrie could quickly and concretely embrace: the glorious land he loved so much, a sense of optimism and progress, government as a force for good (unlike the system that condemned Sacco and Vanzetti), and the feel of history in the making. Consequently, in three weeks Guthrie composed twenty-six songs, seventeen of which were collected on the *Columbia River Collection*, one of his best known albums with some of his best loved songs: "Pastures of Plenty," "Roll on Columbia," "The Grand Coulee Dam," "Hard Travelin'," and "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done."

The situation was quite different with the Sacco and Vanzetti project. In his charge to Guthrie, Asch said he wanted "documentation, what actually happened, not the bullshit in the papers" (Cray 2004, 299). Asch sent Guthrie three pamphlets to which the songwriter refers in a letter (January 2, 1946). They are: Vanzetti's letter seeking clemency from Governor Alvin Fuller ["(which will make a good ballad) (covers whole story and will be sung in his own words)"]; a publication of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, most likely John Dos Passos' *Facing the Chair: Story of the Americanization of Two Foreignborn Workmen* (1927); and *Labor's Martyrs* (1937) by Vito Marcantonio, a Labor Party politician/activist. Still, it is unclear what Asch hoped to accomplish with the Sacco and Vanzetti project, other than simply adding to the story's voluminous cultural record (and, it might be assumed, to sell some records).

Woody Guthrie called himself "a Prophet singer" and saw song as a weapon in the class struggle, "a channel through which the people can vent their anger, frustration, and discontent." He also stressed the folk song's "ability to evoke community and solidarity, to bring back the past and to capture nostalgia, and to cure the soul and generate hope" (Hampton 1986, 97-9). Keeping alive the story of Sacco and Vanzetti might release anger, frustration, and discontent. It might evoke solidarity. But how do you turn one of the Left's most depressing chapters into a source of hope and a cure for the soul? What could be restorative about two Italian immigrants turned into corpses by a corrupt and racist justice system?

Guthrie himself needed a cure for the soul and a source of hope, given the state of his personal life and the tenor of the times. The itinerant songwriter was now settled in his Coney Island home, where he doted on his daughter Cathy and wrote wonderful children's songs, but he was having marital difficulties and was cut off from the support network he had enjoyed during his earlier projects. In early 1947, right around the time Guthrie was recording the album, four-year-old Cathy was killed in an electrical fire. And there were signs that Guthrie was beginning to feel

the effects of the Huntington's chorea that would eventually destroy him. Consequently, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* "has a lonely feel to it," according to daughter Nora Guthrie (2008), director of the Woody Guthrie Archives. "He was like this spirit hovering around this story." She believes that the patterns of her father's songwriting now were being dictated by his incipient Huntington's, resulting in an album that is somewhat erratic, in and out of focus, charged with the occasional shot of lightning, but ultimately an unfulfilled, unfinished work.

Guthrie also couldn't have been too happy with postwar America or felt too secure about his position there. As a merchant mariner during the war, he saw the conflict as a crusade against Fascism and racial injustice, but postwar America turned out nothing like the egalitarian society he envisioned. Jim Crow was alive and well, and now spawning vicious race riots. The rich continued to exploit the poor, and labor, fighting to preserve high-wage wartime jobs in the face of a soaring cost of living, erupted into a series of strikes. Similar to the time of Sacco and Vanzetti and the first Red Scare, the powerful sought to stifle dissent and branded as subversives the reformers and activists that sought to dissent. World War II had slipped almost seamlessly into the Cold War and the second Red Scare. "During this era, the United States demonized current and former members of the Communist Party and their 'fellow travelers,' and a host of political opportunists fed—and fed upon—the image of the Communist as insidious, malignant, and dangerous to American values," legal scholar Geoffrey R. Stone writes. "It was a period marked by the bare-knuckled exploitation of anticommunism. Fearful of domestic subversion and nuclear annihilation, Americans turned against one another in what would prove to be one of the most repressive periods in American history" (2004, 312). The atmosphere was one of suspicion and mistrust, and Guthrie certainly was not above suspicion. He had already been named as a Communist in a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing in 1941. Testimony had him seducing the troops at Fort Dix in New Jersey, when he was actually in California (Klein 1980, 339).

By 1946, powerful organizations were calling for crackdowns on subversive Communist elements not only in the federal government but also in other public spheres, including the arts. Over the next couple of years, hundreds of writers, directors, and actors were blacklisted, including Guthrie's close friends and comrades, actor Will Geer and singer/songwriter Pete Seeger. However, Guthrie was not about to disavow his Communist sympathies, writing in a letter to his Aunt Laura and cousin Amalee: "The big rich landlords, gambling lords, rulers and owners are cussing the Communists loud and long these days. The Communists always have been

the hardest fighters for the trade unions, good wages, short hours, nursery schools, cleaner workshops and the equal rights of every person of color. Communists have the only answer for the whole mess. . . . So you can call me a Communist from here on. I've been working with them since 1936 in this same way" (quoted in Klein 1980, 340). And Guthrie was doing just that with the Sacco and Vanzetti project, taking up a cause that had been a darling of the American Communist Party in the 1920s. Although Sacco and Vanzetti were not Communists, the two Italian anarchists represented much that was reviled and repressed in post-World War II America. At the same time, the energetic "old Left" of the 1920s and Popular Front period was dwindling, and labor itself was shifting to the right (Lingeman 2007, 210). "Even in the area of culture, where political radicals had been the innovators during the Popular Front days of the 1930s, the Left seemed to be slipping. . . . if not wholly irrelevant" (Klein 1980, 319). We can only speculate whether Guthrie's Sacco and Vanzetti project would have been more successful during the thirties, when the cultural Left was in the forefront, than during the retreat of the postwar years. The fact remains that this album was produced in a hostile atmosphere, which might in part explain Moses Asch's failure to release it until 1960.

Guthrie himself blew hot and cold about the project throughout 1946. In a March notebook entry, he makes a vow to Sacco and Vanzetti: ". . . I have read the pamphlets about you and my mind is not a blank. I will prove this to you by filling this book with your story, the case, and your frame up. . . . I am going to write your history all over again, because the history of you two men is the pure and perfect reflection of the battle of the whole movement of labor" (1, 2). Later, in a tender moment, Woody penned a lullaby in his notebook, presumably to Nicola Sacco's wife Rosa:

Go to sleep
 Go to sleep
 Sleepy sleepy
 Little baby
 Rosa Rosa
 Rosey Rose
 I just want to
 Sing your name. (15)

However, Guthrie's thoughts were already wandering to other projects: working on an "album of labor martyrs" (with one or several songs about Sacco and Vanzetti); revisiting the Dust Bowl years to improve upon his *Dust Bowl Ballads*; or even undertaking a "racial album" (January 2, 1946).

By the end of the year, Guthrie's writer's block was such that Asch sent him to the Boston area to get a first-hand look at the sites associated with the case (Place 1999, 65). Guthrie had been to Boston two years earlier, during the presidential election. Members of the old Left, with backing from the Communist Party of America, had organized a "Roosevelt Bandwagon," with Will Geer as master of ceremonies and Guthrie among the cast. The Republican press made much of the fact that this was a barely concealed Communist effort. The tour opened in earnest in Boston, where during the first-night performance the audience pelted the stage with stink bombs (Klein 1980, 281, 283).

Little is known about Guthrie's 1946 field trip except what can be gleaned from letters and notebooks, which show him hard at work. A notebook entry indicates that he left Boston by train on October 31, carrying three typed songs, all dated October 30: "I Just Want to Sing Your Name," "Suasso's Lane," and "We Welcome to Heaven." The notebook also has two compositions related to Sacco and Vanzetti but not included on the album. An untitled composition recounts the executions of the two Italians, predicts that a "million million workers/will work for brighter days," and assures the two martyrs that the workers "will speak your name and pray." The second ballad, titled "The Fishermen," begins with Plymouth's fishermen grieving over the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti and ends with the fishermen's eyes burning with "brighter fires" than sparked by a "jail's electric wires." Guthrie tells the fishermen: "The best way you can fight this battle/Is teach your comrade how to smile/This is the spark to win this world/And not the spark of a copper wire" (October 31, 1946a, 10-11; October 31, 1946b, 12-14).

Yet, four days after leaving Boston, Guthrie wanted to postpone the project. "To delay the most important dozen songs I have ever worked on is more of a pain to me than it could ever be to you," he wrote in a rambling letter to Asch and Distler (November 4, 1946). "But, I feel like the trip up to Boston and its outskirts was just a little bit hurried and hasty. I did not go to all of the spots and places so plainly mentioned in the pamphlets and books because travel is so slow, so hard, from one point to the other – and when we get a dependable car of our own to get from one scene to the other, then I will say farewell to busses, trolleys, trains and street cars that get you nowhere, and will drive my own car from spot to spot as it ought to be." Conceding that the project had "had plenty of time to be developed," he still complained: "I just feel rushed, and I don't want this album about Sacco & Vanzetti to feel rushed, to smell rushed, to taste rushed, nor to sound like something rushed." Arguing that he couldn't write the songs until he had "set my foot on every spot related to the Sacco & Vanzetti

story and case," Guthrie added: "I wont let this be one of those hit or miss affairs. I just cant. I wouldnt for no kind of money." He closed by saying, "I'm drunk as hell today Been that way for several days Hope you are the same." Below his signature, over a rough sketch of a man drinking, Guthrie scrawled, "I refuse to write these songs while I'm drunk and it looks like I'll be drunk for a long time."

Perhaps this was Guthrie's way of procrastinating, but an entry in his notebook following the Boston trip indicates that he honestly felt there was more research to do. Included in a list of reminders related to Sacco and Vanzetti, he wrote: "Find out about Sacco's wife and children. Where they live, work, and so forth. (Did they go back to Italy?)" (18).

Two months later Guthrie was in a sunnier mood and drawing a rather different picture of the Boston trip. In a January 20, 1947, letter to the Communist newspaper, *The Worker*, he spoke of having "visited most of the spots around Boston, Brockton, South Braintree, and Plymouth, connected with the homes, and works, of these two men, and also the scenes of the crime up and down Pearl Street in South Braintree in front of the Morrill Shoe mills there." Sending along a copy of "Ballad for Sacco and Vanzetti" (what became "You Souls of Boston"), Guthrie told the editors he had "several songs started, a couple or three long poems, and several drawings," and suggested that the magazine use several of his illustrations to complement the lyrics.

Finally, around the time of this letter, Asch had his way and Guthrie made the Sacco and Vanzetti recordings. Some of the original lyric sheets show that Guthrie was still writing just days before the recording session. "Listening to them suggests that some of the songs were so fresh that Woody was reading them from a lyric sheet as he sang," archivist Jeff Place wrote in the liner notes for the 1996 reissue (5). Despite the rushed recording job, it would be thirteen years before Asch's Folkways Records collected eleven of the songs and released *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* in 1960.

Guthrie biographers Joe Klein and Ed Cray argue that *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* suffers from a ponderous self-righteousness that had infected Guthrie's songwriting. Cray writes: "The more intense the Cold War, the more Guthrie's lyrics became polemics. Poetry gave way to political speeches in verse. . . . The spare voice and wry comment were gone, replaced by a tone of preachy rectitude. Guthrie was no longer writing about people, *his* people, but about great issues of the day" (Klein 1980, 314; Cray 2004, 299-300). However, one man's polemics are another man's passion, and Guthrie could be said to have made Sacco and Vanzetti *his* people, while

also turning them into spokesmen for the oppressed workers of the world. Part of the problem is that Guthrie felt so strongly about the material that he tried to do and say too much with the song cycle. He wanted to do for Sacco and Vanzetti what Walt Whitman tried to do with the United States, to put it all in verse, but the songwriter didn't have the luxury of Whitman's long lines and long poetic form. Writing to Asch and Distler (January 2, 1946), Guthrie lamented that he had more to say than was possible with the three or four minutes available on the 78-rpm master disks.

Given these limitations, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* is successful in providing an economical but detailed history of a protracted case with countless subplots. Guthrie's eleven songs cover an array of details, elements, and themes: the historical context of World War I peace negotiations, international economics, American prosperity, and labor activism; profiles of Sacco and Vanzetti and sketches of Judge Webster Thayer, prosecutors, and witnesses; various accounts of the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti on the Main Street trolley; a minute examination of the case and trial; and the story of the execution and its aftermath. In songs that deal with the trial, it is almost as if Guthrie is attempting to retry the case, recapitulating all the defense arguments, exculpatory evidence, and legal injustices that demanded acquittal of Sacco and Vanzetti. Guthrie packs it all in: the prosecution's machinations and weak circumstantial case, the conflicting ballistics testimony, the potential jury tampering, the flip-flopping state witnesses, the sound alibi witnesses, and the confession to the crime by a member of the Morelli gang. The result is an uneven album that is repetitive, doesn't always effectively meld lyric and music, and offers only a few songs that might have broad appeal. But if *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* is an unfulfilled musical project, the album's interest and strength derive from it being a radical poetic document that mixes polemic and passion in sometimes very artful ways. Devoting an entire album to a national disgrace, and doing so during the beginnings of the second Red Scare, when men such as Sacco and Vanzetti were anathema, made this project "even more bold and remarkable" (Comeau 1997, 33).

For the 1996 reissue of *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*, Smithsonian/Folkways altered the order of the songs to better present them to listeners unfamiliar with the case (Seeger, 4). This rearrangement underscores the coherence of this early concept album. The songs start with the broad background, proceed through the trial and execution, and end with Sacco and Vanzetti's ascension into heaven. Pete Seeger's musical setting of Sacco's letter to his son serves as a coda. (All quoted lyrics are from the liner notes of this 1996 reissue.)

The first song, "The Flood and the Storm," serves as a sort of overture that sets the postwar scene, asserts Sacco and Vanzetti's critical roles in labor's revolutionary struggle, and underscores the importance of the story and its two protagonists in American political and social history.

The world shook harder on the night they died
Than 'twas shaken by that Great World's War;
More millions did march for Sacco and Vanzetti
Than did march for the great War Lords.

Guthrie clearly places the story within the larger context of the Red Scare and fears of a worldwide workers' revolution, concluding with the rather biblical lines:

Hindenburg, Wilson, Harding, Hoover, Coolidge
Never heard this many voices sing.
The zig-zag lightnings, the rumbles of the thunder,
The singing of the clouds blowing by,
The flood and the storm for Sacco and Vanzetti
Caused the rich man to pull his hair and cry.

Despite their critical role in this drama, Sacco and Vanzetti are simply two good men who "preached to the workers."

The second song, "Two Good Men," continues that theme with its memorable chorus:

Two good men a long time gone
Two good men a long time gone
(Two good men a long time gone, oh, gone)
Sacco, Vanzetti, a long time gone,
Left me here to sing this song.

The portraits of Sacco and Vanzetti are the conventional ones: Sacco, the expert shoe cutter and family man; Vanzetti, the fish peddler and studious dreamer. These two good men come to America, organize workers, get branded "anarchist bastards" by Judge Thayer, and are electrocuted. The song ends with a call to arms urging everyone to work like Sacco and Vanzetti and fight on the union's side for workers' rights. One way to do that is found in the song's concluding line: "Jump in with me, and sing this song."

That last line of "Two Good Men" provides a nice segue to "I Just Want to Sing Your Name." This simple song has the sound and feel of one of Guthrie's children's songs and concludes with the affirmative lines that carry an echo of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Oh oh oh, ho ho ho
Yes yes yes yes yes yes
Yes yes yes yes yes yes
Well, I just want to sing you name.

Guthrie deftly sings the names of Sacco and Vanzetti and calls for a radical response to their execution in the fourteen stanzas of "Red Wine." He begins:

Oh, pour me a drink of Italian red wine,
Let me taste it and call back to mind
Once more in my thoughts, once more to my soul
This story as great, if not greater, than all.

The first few stanzas narrate the arrest and detail the charges, both formal and implied: that the men carried guns, were radicals, had dodged the draft during World War I, and acted with a "consciousness of guilt" when arrested. To the charge of draft evasion, Sacco and Vanzetti respond, "The rich man's war we could not fight,/So we crossed the border to keep out of sight." Fortified with drink, Guthrie covers the trial and executions, before concluding with one of his strongest calls for the use of violence, which at the time could have been construed as seditious. "I thought those crowds would pull down the town,/I was hoping they'd do it and change things around." It is telling that this most radical of the Sacco and Vanzetti songs was one of Guthrie's favorite compositions, according to his son, Arlo Guthrie, whose rendition of "Red Wine" concludes Peter Miller's 2007 documentary film *Sacco and Vanzetti* (Briley 2009, 118).

The next song, "Suasso's Lane," gives voice to Bartolomeo Vanzetti and four of the alibi witnesses who claimed to have seen him peddling fish in a north Plymouth alley the day of the robbery and killing. The song concludes with Vanzetti making an appeal that could have come directly from Guthrie himself:

I tell you working people
Fight hard for higher wages,
Fight to kill black market prices;
This is why you take my life.
I tell you working people
Fight hard for cleaner houses,
Fight hard for wife and children;
That's why you took my life.

Sacco and Vanzetti "both have died,/ And drifted out with the Boston tide" in "You Souls of Boston," but Guthrie still is not finished with the

case. This fourteen-stanza ballad retells the story with additional alibi testimony, exculpatory ballistics evidence, and the confession to the crime of Celestino Madeiros, the imprisoned Morelli gang member. But for the corrupt Judge Thayer, "Sacco and Vanzetti are union men,/ And that verdict, guilty, must come in." The penultimate stanza describes Boston as "a dark old town," with people crying and marching, on the night when "the switch went down." In the final stanza, Sacco and Vanzetti are no longer drifting out with the tide but instead are providing inspiration for the continuing struggle: "Where the people's army marches now to fight,/ Sacco and Vanzetti will give us light."

Guthrie shines the light of satire in "Old Judge Thayer." Using animals to represent and critique humans, he creates a courtroom animal farm that recapitulates the themes of the previous songs, with various and sundry critters discussing the merits of the case. When a big-eyed Owl claims that Sacco's cap was found at the crime scene, the big black Crow responds, "They tried that cap on Sacco here,/ And it fell down around both his ears." When Sacco and Vanzetti are executed, the animals gather again and conclude:

Oh see what fear and greed can do,
See how it killed these sons so true?
Us varmints has got to get together too,
Before Judge Thayer kills me and you.

Only in "Vanzetti's Rock" do we get a composition that seems to have benefited directly from Guthrie's trip to the Boston area. Seeing slick tourists visiting Plymouth Rock, blind to Vanzetti's story, Guthrie dreams of union workers flocking to the site, now renamed Vanzetti's Rock. He promises Vanzetti:

Those talks for the workers, Vanzetti,
I'll chisel them down on the rock;
I'll tell every worker to fight like you fought,
Like the Pilgrims that docked on this rock.

Guthrie talks of casting Vanzetti's fish cart "in metals so fine," which, although well meaning, most likely would not strike a chord with the austere Vanzetti. However, there is more resonance in the parallels between the Italian immigrants and the Pilgrims. Beyond alluding to their shared search for freedom, Guthrie here continues the work of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, which in its pamphlet, "Are They Doomed?" had depicted the two men as quintessential Americans, "modern pilgrims from Southern Europe" who came to find good work and fair wages (Trasciatti 2005, 36).

Fulfilling the promise made in “Vanzetti’s Rock,” Guthrie chisels the fish peddler’s words in stone and scatters them on his waters in “Vanzetti’s Letter,” a long, dense song based on Vanzetti’s request for clemency. Vanzetti proclaims: “We do not ask you for a pardon, for a pardon would admit of our guilt;/Since we are both innocent workers, we have no guilt to admit.” Vanzetti details the injustices of the case and asks:

Oh, how could our jury see clearly, when the lawyers and judges, and cops
Called us low-type Italians, said we looked just like regular Wops;
Draft dodgers, gun packers, anarchists, these vulgar-sounding names
Blew dust in the eyes of the jurors, the crowd in the courtroom, the same.

Speaking of the workers’ struggle for freedom, Vanzetti concludes, “Till workers get rid of their robbers, well it’s worse, sir, to live than to die.”

With Governor Alvin Fuller having denied clemency, “Root Hog and Die” conveys the urgency to reach Boston before sundown to stand vigil as Sacco and Vanzetti walk that corridor to death. Getting there is a matter of life and death, as the song title indicates. The original Southern phrase, “root hog or die,” refers to farmers that cut feed costs by turning out their hogs to forage for themselves in the woods. Guthrie’s song implies that Sacco and Vanzetti had to die because they wouldn’t put their fellow workers out to root hog and die. Two lines neatly sum up the tragic case: “Sacco and Vanzetti told the workers, ‘Organize.’/So Judge Webster Thayer says they must die.”

Guthrie’s final contribution to *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* is “We Welcome to Heaven,” a wry, sad song about the “funny old world” that could condemn Sacco and Vanzetti to death. This is a no-win world, where everyone – both the workers and the rich – are caught between a rock and a hard place, condemned for who they are and what they do, but condemned, also, if they are and do the opposite.

If you wear rags on earth, you’re a hobo,
If you wear satin, they call you a thief,
If you save money, they call you a miser,
If you spend money, you are on relief.

It is not surprising then that this funny old world and funny old country would electrocute Sacco and Vanzetti.

The liner notes to the 1996 reissue of *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* aptly include a postscript to the song lyrics. This is Woody Guthrie’s long letter to Judge Webster Thayer, believed to have been written in 1947. The fact that Thayer had been dead some fourteen years clearly did little to soften Guthrie’s animus, for here his emotional involvement in the case

is expressed in all its Guthrie glory. "I would like to paint you a picture with strokes of electricity, to make you see, Judge Thayer, the wrong thing that you done," he begins, adding later: "You did not believe in the mental ability of the ordinary working man and woman to stand together and to meet together, to speak their problems over in a free land together."

Guthrie is at his best when he gets personal. "I had rather be dead than to be a man of your cut and caliber," he tells Thayer, later launching into a riff whose wit and wordplay might have been set to music and included in *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*.

If I was to let my words fly at you like I really feel I ought to, I would chase you up one universe and down the next, up one glacial age and down the next, up one history book and down the other, over several icebergs and out through several jungles. I would rail you and scale you, jail you and bail you, I would mail you and nail you and assail you and frail you. I would run you ragged and crosseyed, cockeyed and whopperjawed. I would not let one drop of your blood rest easy nor one cell of your brain miss my trimming. (20-23)

Clearly, the evidence is that Woody Guthrie was emotionally invested in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti. So, too, his daughter Nora Guthrie, who named her childhood dog, Sacco. "I love this project the more I talk about it," she said (2008). "It's not a great album but there's something loving in it. It's Woody's love song to Sacco and Vanzetti." Nora Guthrie said that under better circumstances the album could have been a more focused and unified operetta, starting with the invocation of the names of the two martyrs, proceeding through the events of the case, and ending with the epilogue of Sacco's letter to his son.

However, it can be argued that to some extent, the album accomplishes that and more. In covering the case of Sacco and Vanzetti in such exhaustive fashion, Guthrie tapped into a number of red-button issues that continue to dominate our public discourse. Guthrie no doubt would be shocked and dismayed by the current state of organized labor, but he would also see much that had not improved in contemporary American society. Just as in the time of Sacco and Vanzetti, we continue to debate the status of the immigrant in America, welcoming him to come work, then questioning his right to be here, and even building a fence on our southern border to keep him out. Where once men like Sacco and Vanzetti were branded anarchist bastards and "low-type Italians," today we argue about the efficacy and ethics of racial profiling in the wars on crime and terrorism. In the wake of September 11, just as in the wake of World War I and World War II, we have seen national security sometimes trumping

civil liberties and dissent condemned as being disloyal. So, the case of Sacco and Vanzetti and Woody Guthrie's depiction of it continue to speak to us. Given the nature of Guthrie's "most important project," the tenor of the times during which it was undertaken, and the personal battles the songwriter was fighting, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* is yet another testament to Woody Guthrie's genius. Its flaws aside, the album is a sprawling, often poignant and powerful, "document in song" about a chapter of American history, with parallels to our own period, which is a sobering reminder that America sometimes has not lived up to its professed ideals.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. This essay retains all spelling and punctuation as found in the original documents.

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