

## Archie Green (1917-2009): An American Always Said to Have Been ‘Called to Labor’

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ABSTRACT: In the spring of 2009 there died Archie Green, the hero of the American working classes, and of all persons ever displaced, as well as of the poor and landless of this world, as of all those who have laboured long to make possible the wealth of others. He was a shipwright, union activist, labour historian, folklorist, academic, and author, a progressive optimist, and the father of the theory and practice of a new way of looking at everyday activity and experience—‘laborlore’. This is a body of knowledge that can make possible occupational involvement, solidarity between ‘classes’ and, in effect, a proud and engaged citizenry, with a cheerful involvement wherever varied bodies of workers come together to perform a task.

### *The Meaning of His Work*

His powerful vision—and his gifts to this world’s countless displaced immigrants—consisted of the central concept, and the belief that the most dramatic transformation of the present is always possible, through science, poetry, song, and personal faith, a view also conveyed by him personally to President Obama at his inauguration. For then Archie recalled specifically that, also in troubled times, during the New Deal, federal agencies in the United States of America had stimulated all manner of ingenuity and creativity, and so reflected the best parts of the country back to itself. He had, so recently, advocated also that there be another, 21st century Federal Writers’ Project to present proudly the workers’ culture and experience in the current stimulus projects.

### *A Little Background*

Archie Green was born Aaron Green on 29 June 1917 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, whither his Ukrainian parents had fled after his father’s involvement in the failed 1905 Russian revolution, the family duly relocating in 1922 to Los Angeles, where Archie continued his father’s involvement in socialist labor politics. In 1939 he earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Berkeley, then duly served, in wartime, in the Civilian Construction Corps as a road builder, and then as a

carpenter in the U.S. Navy. After some 15 years in building trades, during which time he developed an abiding interest in the language, music, and lore of working men and women, in 1958, he returned to academe, holding various like appointments, finally completing a dissertation on case studies of coalmining songs that, as ‘Only a Miner’, he launched the University of Illinois’ series, Music in American Life. Soon after he began his long struggle to confer a national recognition on American folklore and folklife, working unpaid for the Smithsonian’s Folklife Festival, becoming a lobbyist for all its work, and, finally, he brought programmes presenting workers’ traditions to the national folk festivals on Washington’s Mall, with a final success when in 1976 President Ford signed into law the American Folklife Preservation Act, thereby establishing the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

The American Folklife Center was created by the Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to

preserve and present American Folklife through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs and training. [Visit [www.loc.gov/folklife/](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/) ].

#### *Other Career Milestones*

Various other folklore/folklife posts would come his way, while he also produced several significant books, including: *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* (1972); *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes* (1993); *Calf’s Head and Union Tale* (1996); *Torching the Fink Books and Other Heroes* (2001); *Tin Men* (2002); co-editing *Songs About Work* (1993), and also *The Big Red Songbook* (2007). There were various LP albums of ballads and Folksongs that he edited, such as *Green Fields of Illinois*, *Mountain Sacred Songs*, *The Railroad in Folksong*, *The Carolina Tar Heels*, and *Work’s Many Voices*.

#### *And the Style of the Man*

His powers of persuasion were remarkable, as was his ability—one common to all the great folklorists—to enthuse and to make quietly reflective and traditional scholars, already effective teachers, into social activists and the most powerful advocates for the discipline and for the ideals at its core. And it was noted by all that his distaste for institutions had increased over the years, this linked with his passion for ‘inclusiveness’, the better to continually invigorate the nation. Very

appropriately, late last year, the American Folklife Center announced the establishment of a Fellowship in his honour, its holders to

support original field research into the culture and traditions of American workers and/or occupational groups found within the United States...the materials generated during the course of the fellowship [to] become part of the AFC's Archie Green America Works Collection.<sup>1</sup>

The last would, of course, include

the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world.

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*And Our Own Response to This Remarkable American?*

What we may add to the many tributes to Archie over the years is but a recapitulation, but we would stress that he had re-developed the folklore discipline for the later twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. His views were profound, timely, and necessary in the campaign to save humanity from itself. His eminently sane challenge is ours and one for the future of humanity on this planet.



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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, one of the first holders, Robert McCarl of the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs would be selected because of his being much involved with both present occupational groups, as well as ecologically-focused groups, and 'future-oriented occupations, such as preservationists, developers and tribal leaders'.