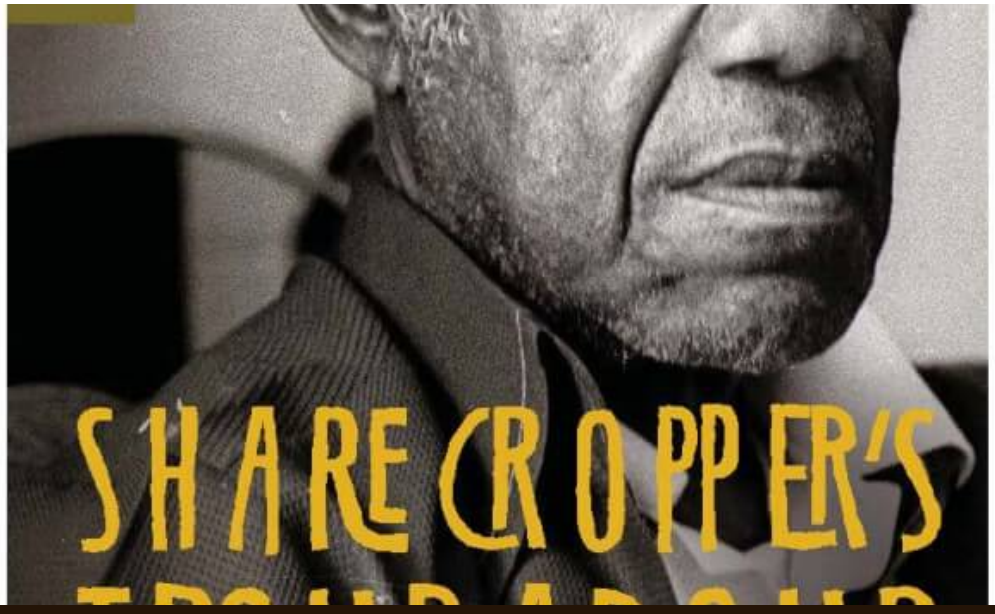


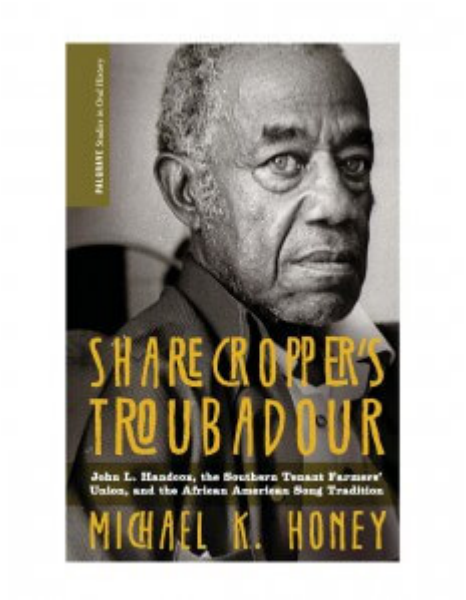
Be Consolated, John Handcox

Posted on April 10, 2014 by Michael Honey

John L Handcox was an African American born in Brinkley, Arkansas, in 1904 at one of the worst times and in one of the worst places to be black in America. His family grew up in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, fifty miles from the site of the Elaine Massacre, where whites murdered scores and perhaps hundreds of African Americans for trying to organize a union in 1919. The grandson of slaves, Handcox took over a small piece of land for his large extended family after a runaway mule threw his father from a buckboard and broke his neck in 1923. John started as a self-sufficient famer but during the 1920s hard times in cotton country and the iron grip of the plantation oligarchy dragged his family into the vortex of dispossession. They lost their land and he ended up as a sharecropper and during the Great Depression as hundreds of thousands like him were evicted from the land to become wage laborers. John joined the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) after it organized in 1934 and became its leading songwriter, poet, and one of its most effective organizers. The threat of a lynch mob drove him out of Arkansas and he eventually joined the Great Migration to the West Coast, only to re-emerge in his eighties as a labor folk musician who carried the spirit of the 1930s labor movement into our own era of hard times and union busting. This poem appeared in The

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Disinherited Speak, Letters from Sharecroppers (New York: Workers Defense League, 1937). Find John's songs, poems, and oral history in Michael K. Honey, Sharecropper's Troubadour: John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the African American Song Tradition (Palgrave MacMillan oral history series, 2013).



Michael Honey,
Sharecropper's Troubadour

Be Consolated

Have you ever woke up in the morning
And your day of toil started wrong?
Nothing in this world would console you
But to start singing the good old union song.

Sometimes you go to the door or window and begin
Wondering and looking across the field,
Thinking of what wealth the farmer has added
While he has to live on such a scanty yield.

Often you go to the shelf and get your Bible,
And sit down and begin to read;
And you find therein where God will punish
The rich man for every unjust deed.

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Be of good cheer; be patient; be faithful,
And help the union to grow strong.
And if at any time you become the least discouraged,
Revive yourself by singing the good old union song.

When thinking of how horrid the past has been,
And know the labor road hasn’t been smooth.
Deep down in your heart you keep singing:
“We shall not, we shall not be moved!”

— John L. Handcox, 1937

Author



- Michael Honey

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