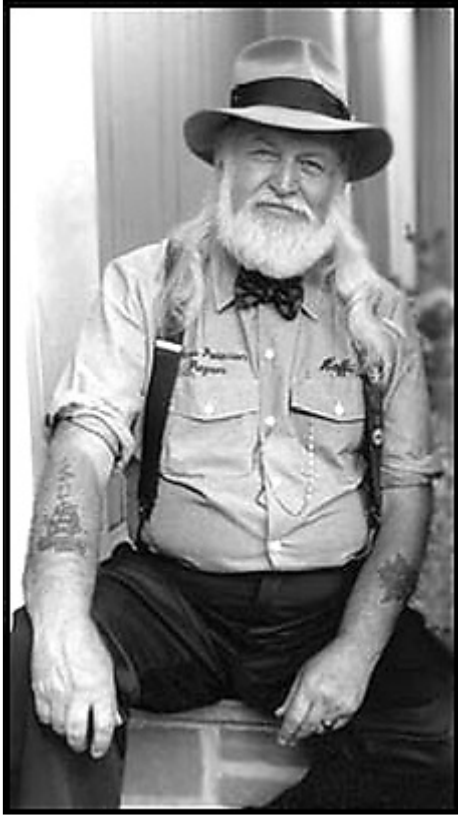


## U. Utah Phillips, 73; Folk Singer Championed the Working Class



U. Utah Phillips had been a soldier, a railroader, a state archivist, a union organizer and founder of a shelter. (Photo By Steven Stone - Photo By Steven Stone)

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U. Utah Phillips, 73, a Grammy-nominated folk singer, rabble-rouser and anarchist whose wild white beard recalled his years as a tramp, died of heart disease May 23 at his home in Nevada City, Calif.

Mr. Phillips, over four decades on the road, combined storytelling with song, describing the plight of the working class, the power of labor unions and the necessity of direct action. He dubbed himself the "Golden Voice of the Great Southwest," but, like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, his

words, more than his baritone voice, carried authority. He had been a soldier, a railroader, a state archivist, a union organizer, founder of a homeless shelter and homeless himself.

He recorded the oft-overlooked value of rubber pockets, a necessity when stealing soup. His tall tale "Gaffing" was a rich illustration of populist scams. He honored the likes of Hood River Blackie and Fry Pan Jack and never hesitated to leaven his history lessons about the Ford Strike of 1932, the Spokane Free Speech Fight of 1910 and the Canine Corps of World War II with such hysterical stories as "Suspender" and "Blackie and the Duck."

His fans have posted dozens of videos of him or his songs online, and a new generation discovered him in the mid-1990s, when folk musician and entrepreneur Ani DiFranco edited about 100 hours of homemade tapes of his performances and blended them with electronic hip-hop, creating an album called "The Past Didn't Go Anywhere" (1996), and released it on her Righteous Babe label.

In 1999, he collaborated with DiFranco on the live album "Fellow Workers," which was nominated for a 2000 Grammy in the contemporary folk album category.

"He was a real storyteller in his performances. He was just a catalogue of people's history in the United States," DiFranco said this week in an interview. "He was so engaging on many, many levels."

Mr. Phillips was a card-carrying member of the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), a radical union that called for all working people to unite. He ran unsuccessfully for president in 1976 as an anarchist, but he never voted -- except in 2004, when President Bush's policies so enraged him. Emmylou Harris, Waylon Jennings, Joan Baez, Tom Waits and Arlo Guthrie sing Utah Phillips songs, but he refused to let Johnny Cash record his standards, his eldest son told the Sacramento Bee newspaper, because he didn't trust the music industry.

The Boston Globe called him "the kind of guy you'd want to sit next to on a long plane ride. Here's a rascal with a clutch of good songs that'll entertain you, educate you, and probably even get you fired up over the current state of politics."

He was born Bruce Phillips on May 15, 1935, in Cleveland to two labor organizers. His family moved in 1947 to Utah, where Mr. Phillips learned to play the ukulele from an instruction manual and took to the roads and rails of the West as a teenager. He adopted the name U. Utah Phillips in emulation of country vocalist T. Texas Tyler.

"I worked with lots of old drunks only fit to shovel gravel, but they all knew songs, and they showed me how to play them," he said.

Broke and out of work, he joined the Army in 1956 and was sent to Korea for three years. "I wanted to learn a trade, but all they taught me was how to shoot," he said in a Sing Out magazine interview. "What I really learned in the army was how to be a pacifist."

After his discharge, he began to drink heavily and ride the rails. He drew a distinction between what he did and the ways of hobos and bums, quoting the 19th-century physician to the poor, Ben Reitman.

"A hobo works and wanders, a tramp dreams and wanders, and a bum drinks and wanders," Mr. Phillips told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in 2006. "That's about right. I tramped. When I was on the freight trains, I wasn't looking for work. I was looking to go from place to place without paying any money."

He ended up at Salt Lake City's Joe Hill House, a shelter for tramps and itinerant workers run by a member of the Catholic Worker movement. He took a job at the Utah state archives, but his 1968 race for a U.S. Senate seat as the nominee of the Peace & Freedom Party cost him the job. He thought he was blacklisted.

"All I had was an old VW bus, my guitar, \$75, and a head full of songs, old- and new-made," he wrote two weeks ago in a message to his local radio station, KVMR-FM. "Fortunately . . . I landed at Caffe Lena in Saratoga Springs, New York. That seemed to be ground zero for folk music at the time. . . . It took me a solid two years to realize I was no longer an unemployed organizer, but a traveling folk singer and storyteller."

In 1973, folk fans discovered his spoken-word recording, "Moose Turd Pie," about the food he served to laborers on a railroad gang. The bluegrass duo Flatt & Scruggs recorded his train song "Starlight on the Rails," and Baez became the first of many to record the dark romantic ballad "Rock Salt and Nails," a song that became something of a folk and country standard.

Mr. Phillips settled in Nevada City, where he helped start the Peace and Justice Center and the Hospitality House, a local homeless shelter. After recording the spoken-word song "The Talking NPR Blues" in 2000, he launched a 100-episode syndicated radio show, "Loafer's Glory," and appeared periodically in the Washington area, where he urged audience members to sing along on tunes such as "Dump the Bosses."

Survivors include his wife, Joanna Robinson of Nevada City; three children, Duncan Phillips of Salt Lake City, Brendan Phillips of Olympia, Wash., and Morigan Belle of Washington; two stepsons, Nicholas Tomb of Monterey, Calif., and Ian Durfee of Davis, Calif.; three brothers; a sister; and a grandchild.