



U Utah Phillips **"Starlight On The Rails : A Songbook"** AK Press/Daemon Records

This four CD release is a massive undertaking and was mentioned by Utah as long ago as 1999, in the Fall edition of **Sing Out! Magazine**. In an interview with Rik Palieri, his occasional compatriot in The Rose Tattoo, Phillips ruminated *"I want to take the time to sit with my recorder and tell the stories of about 60 songs, and then sing them or put versions there that are sung by other people that I really like. People have been telling me they need a songbook for years. I don't want to sit down and write a songbook. Most people I know can't read music anyway. So let's do about a four-CD set and make that a songbook, so I can tell the stories and people can hear the tunes. And then that will be it. When that's done, I'll be done with what I want to put in the world."* So this may be it folks! In a recording career spanning five decades Phillips only released seven solo albums per se, and another handful in association with other folk musicians. That's hardly prolific compared with some recording artists, so I's suggest grasping this reasonably priced collection while you can.

The numerical details of what Phillips has achieved with **"Starlight On The Rails : A Songbook"** are as follows - Disc 1 contains fourteen songs, Disc 2 seventeen songs, Disc 3 fourteen songs and, finally, Disc 4 sixteen songs. The sixty-one songs are pretty much all Phillips penned originals [+], and prefacing each one is a spoken narrative where Utah offers insight into the creation of, or the background to, the song lyric. As precious as Utah's songs are as snapshots of our times, most taken from the perspective of the humble working-man – either in terms of the task he undertakes to earn a crust, or what some fellow man will do to [unfairly] take that crust away - his spoken narratives are an equal treasure. This is a slice of American history and we are all the richer that Phillips has taken the time to commit his detailed recollections to disc. And you, dear reader, will be a little wiser if you take the time to listen to what this American original has to say in song and narrative. With Utah there's far more chance you'll learn about the sort of folks who man Camp Casey, than some rich, privileged creature who lives nearby in a fortified compound. In Utah's own words *"Ordinary men and women, who do extraordinary things."*

The total running time of the four discs amounts to a massive 281 minutes. In his, to date, seventy years Phillips has been a hobo, blue-collar worker, soldier, active union member, singer, poet, storyteller, songwriter, anarchist/pacifist and humanist.....and more. Phillips performs the songs on Discs 1, 2 and 4, while guests perform them on Disc 3. Those guests include the late Kate Wolf, Kate Brislin & Jody Stecher, Rosalie Sorrels, Toronto based a cappella group Finest Kind, his long-time friend and accompanist Mark "Smokestack" Ross, the seafaring Mainer [Capt.] Kendall Morse, and Kuddie ["The Feather River Kid" and member of The Rose Tattoo].

The songs on **"Starlight On The Rails : A Songbook"** are a mix of studio and live recordings, some already familiar, others previously unreleased. The turning point in Phillips' life, circa 1960, was meeting Ammon Hennacy and the opening song on Disc 4, "Going Away," is a fond remembrance of, tribute in song to, the late Catholic pacifist and anarchist. In fact Hennacy's philosophy and actions are mentioned repeatedly during the spoken interludes on Disc 4. If not for Hennacy, Phillips may never have enjoyed a recording/performing career. Elsewhere, among rich aural pickings, you'll find Utah's "Trooper's Lament" an a cappella performance where he recalls his days in Korea with a helmet and a gun, "Yellow Ribbons" is a remembrance of a subsequent [and unsuccessful] American adventure in a foreign land, there's the luminous light of death dealt by "Enola Gay," "Collie Wilkins" a tale of injustice from the days of the Civil Rights Movement, the harsh reality of the hobo life painted in "Old Buddy, Goodnight" and his reaction to the passing of the once independent and impartial voice of radio in "Talking N.P.R. Blues." Broadening his overview of life and lifestyles, in "Green Rolling Hills Of West Virginia" Utah gives expression to his

love of the land, and “Goodnight Loving Trail” focuses on a cowpunchers life when he’s too old to herd cattle.

Accompanying this four-way fold-out, box set is a twelve-page colour liner booklet, chock full of pictures of Utah’s parents, his early years, and his later days as a performing musician and father.

Note.

[+] – “Wabash Cannonball” is a Public Domain song.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 08/05.