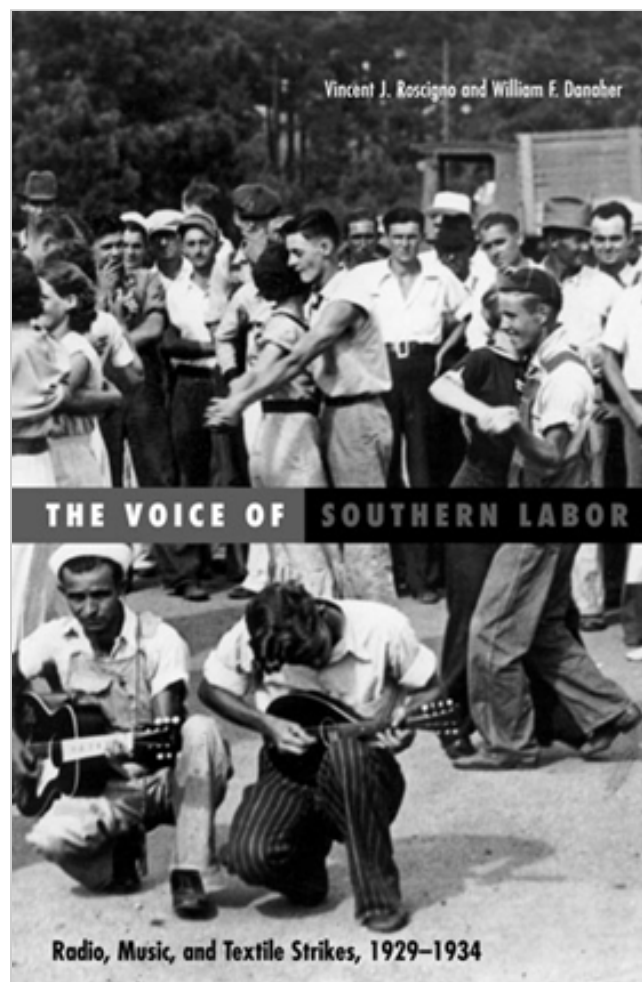


Music for the people: the role of music in the southern textile strikes of 1929–34

The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934. By Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 208 pp., \$22.50 paperback.

The 1920s and 1930s saw a change in the economy of the southeastern United States as people left their farms to join the growing workforce in the new textile mills that were regularly springing up in the region during that time. The mills offered workers steady work and pay—a welcome change to farmers who were in the midst of seeing their crops destroyed by the infamous boll weevil. The promise of the textile mills soon soured, however, under the mill store and the “stretchout” systems devised to improve productivity. *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934*, coauthored by Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, explores the unifying effect the new medium of radio had on textile workers throughout the southeastern United States. From fireside chats with President Roosevelt to “hillbilly” music illustrating the dire conditions in the mills, radio became a crucial adhesive connecting increasingly unhappy workers.

Textile mills were drawn south after chambers of commerce promised a large workforce and very little union activity. Roscigno and Danaher explain that small-town and tenant farmers were recruited by the mills with the assurance of steady pay and good living conditions. Widows with children were also drawn to the mills, to work in the spinning rooms. In addition, children were also added to mill payrolls if they were old enough. Mill villages often had new houses with running water. However, laborers soon found that work in the mills was hot and physically challenging. Overzealous supervisors could mistreat



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workers. Dangerous working conditions and diseases caused by inhaling cotton dust soured the workers on the dream presented by textile recruiters.

Radio stations located themselves near mill villages, in search of an audience. Roscigno and Danaher explain that “Small stations served burgeoning mill towns and rural populations throughout the southern Piedmont, spreading information and leading to a heightened sense of regional if not national community.” The radio stations played music that was familiar to mill workers, largely gospel music and “hillbilly” music that was native to the Appalachian audience. Later, with the help of monies provided by the Federal Music Project, radio stations aired local musicians and sponsored their tours around the area. The expansion of radio stations across the country spread the music of the mill workers to the entire southern United States. Songs about mill life, such as Dave McCarn’s “Cotton Mill Colic” and “Mill Mother’s Lament,” written by Ella Mae Wiggins, provided a unified tune to the mill worker’s experience and became the starting point for a push for collective action.

After a number of smaller strikes erupted starting in 1929, textile workers acted collectively in the General Textile Strike of 1934. Music and radio were employed to spread the word about the strike. Francis Gorman of the United Textile Workers of America spoke on NBC-affiliated radio stations to raise awareness of the strike. Striking textile workers utilized “Flying Squadrons” of cars and trucks to bring the strike to the mills and formed “Dancing Pickets,” blocking the entrances to mills with songsters and dancers to draw attention to the strike. The authors explain that “Music and dancing bolstered strikers’ sense of community and helped them deal with the tedium and fear they felt while on the picket line.” Mill musicians played mill anthems and gospel music for the picketers. Ultimately, the striker’s efforts were met with violence, and the strike was abandoned after 3 weeks. Mill workers returned to their jobs, only to find that many had been blacklisted and were not reemployed.

The United States has a rich tradition of protest music. *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934* sheds light on a segment of this tradition. Southern radio stations were able to organize workers in ways that union organizers could not. In fact, radio stations were able to create a sense of community in many American homes—only to be supplanted by television. As an interesting sidelight, the music referenced in the book is on the Internet and provides a relevant backdrop to the narrative.