

Union Movement Mourns Death of ‘Labor’s Troubadour,’ Joe Glazer

by [Mike Hall](#), Sep 21, 2006



*“I know this song it ain’t never gonna end.”**

The union movement is mourning the death of Joe Glazer, whose musical career began with a \$5 mail-order guitar and included more than 60 years of singing, songwriting and recording songs of solidarity, justice, unions and workers. Glazer, who earned the name “Labor’s Troubadour,” died Sept. 19 in Chevy Chase, Md. He was 88.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney says Glazer’s life was a “a great adventure and a journey for justice.” In recommending Glazer’s autobiography, *Labor’s Troubadour*, Sweeney wrote:

In the years since Joe Glazer got his first mail-order guitar for \$5.95, he’s been singing the music of working people—everywhere from picket lines in the snow to giant union picnics to the White House lawn.

In the book, Glazer described himself as “a musical agitator for all good causes.”

Born in New York City in 1918, Glazer’s father was a member of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union. In his memoir, Glazer wrote:

We didn’t talk much about politics or trade unions. It didn’t seem necessary. It was an act of faith that unions were a good thing for working men and women.

After graduating from Brooklyn College, Glazer took a job as an education specialist with the Textile Workers Union of America in 1944. He and his guitar were dispatched to textile picket lines in the south. There, he began writing labor lyrics, sometimes based on gospel hymns, according to an obituary in *The Washington Post*.

“We are climbing Jacob’s ladder” became “We are building a strong union,” for example. “Jesus is my captain, I shall not be moved” became “The union is behind us, we shall not be moved.”

In his memoir, Mr. Glazer described leading the strikers around a giant Pepperell textile mill singing those songs. They were “basically one-line verses that could be quickly changed” to suit any situation, he said.

“I led nearly a thousand strikers in verse after verse,” he wrote of one strike. “We’re fighting for a contract. We shall not be moved. . . . We’re fighting for our future. . . . We’re fighting for our freedom. . . . We shall not be moved.

“We sang and we sang,” he wrote in his autobiography. “We must have gone on for an hour or more on a picket line that seemed to stretch for miles around the plant. I would sing out each new verse, and the strikers closest to me would pick it up. The new verse would roll like a wave through hundreds of others further down the line. . . .”

In the 1950s, Glazer served as the education director for the United Rubber Workers and continued to perform at rallies and strikes and to record.

During his time at the U.S. Information Agency, according to a biography from the *All Music Guide*, Glazer took his union songs around the world:

The job required that he frequently travel overseas and he seized the opportunity to employ music to transmit the message of the American labor movement to its foreign counterparts.

In 1979, Glazer organized the first Great Labor Arts Exchange, a three-day gathering of musicians and other artists linking art with justice and workers’ rights. The Arts Exchange now is an annual event at the National Labor College. In 1984, Glazer was a founding member of the Labor Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit arts and culture organization that works with the labor movement promoting artistic expression and labor history.

Peter Jones, executive director of the Labor Heritage Foundation, says he first met Glazer when the singer offered Jones, then a 23-year-old Farm Workers union organizer, help to organize a fund-raising concert in the mid-1970s:

Joe had an uncommon ability to reach people of all ages through his music. He preserved the songs of working people, he promoted labor music, and he brought along a whole new generation of union musicians and artists. The world of labor culture will not be the same without him.

In July he played his last concert at a very unlikely venue—the Cosmos Club. The private Washington, D.C., club long has been an exclusive bastion of the richest and most powerful—and until several years ago—white and male movers and shakers in the nation’s capital. But one member with progressive leanings would invite Glazer to perform about once a year.

[Labor Heritage Foundation](#) President Joe Uehlein, who played hundred of gigs with Glazer over 30 years, and who is also the leader of the politically progressive roots-rock band [The U-Liners](#), says Glazer normally would play some of his lighter and more humorous social commentary songs, but this time, weakened by his cancer treatment and knowing it might be his last appearance, he played a special tune.

I helped Joe up on stage and he sat down and said to me, “You know Joe, I wrote a song about the Cosmos Club years ago, but never sang it because I wanted to be respectful. I’m going to sing it tonight.” It was about how the club didn’t let women or African Americans in, about how exclusive it was. He was pretty weak, but once he started playing he did a strong 45 minutes.

He was a giant and in an unconventional way made unbelievable contributions to the labor movement. You could not have a soundtrack to the growth of the American labor movement in the

1950s and 1960s without Joe Glazer music. The beat does go on, and Joe Glazer's beat will continue on forever though the people he touched and influenced.

Glazer is survived by his wife, Mildred, daughters, Emily Glazer and Pattie Glazer, son, Daniel, and four grandchildren. Services have not been finalized and the family asks that those who wish to make a memorial contribution do so to the Labor Heritage Foundation, 815 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Glazer's CD "Joe Glazer Sings Labor Songs II" is available at [The Union Shop Online](#).™ The CD "Joe Glazer Sings Labor Songs" is available through the [Labor Heritage Foundation](#). [The Kennedy Center](#) website has two video clips of Glazer performances, including a 2002 Labor Day concert.

*Hunter/Garcia, Ice Nine Publishing Co. (ASCAP)