Folk singer and labor organizer John Handcox was born in 1904 in the Arkansas delta of King Cotton amidst segregation and sharecropping, but went on to become one of the most beloved folk singers of the prewar labor movement. This beautifully told oral history gives us Handcox in his own words, recounting a journey that began in the Deep South and went on to shape the labor music tradition.
Descended from African American slaves, Native Americans, and white slaveowners, John Handcox was born in 1904 in the Arkansas delta of King Cotton amidst segregation and sharecropping at one of the hardest times and places to be black in America. Over the first few decades of the twentieth century, he survived attempted lynchings, floods, droughts, and the ravages of the Great Depression to organize black and white farmers alike on behalf of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. He also became one of the most beloved folk singers of the prewar labor movement, composing songs such as “Roll the Union On” and “There Is Mean Things Happening in this Land” that bridged racial divides and kept the spirits of striking workers high.

Though he withdrew from the public eye for nearly 40 years—missing the “folk boom” of the 1960s—he resurfaced decades later, just in time to denounce the policies of the Reagan administration in song, and his work was embraced by new generations of labor activists and folk music devotees.

Michael Honey’s fascinating and beautifully told history gives us John Handcox in his own words, recounting a journey that began in a sharecropper’s shack in the Deep South and went on to shape the labor music tradition, all amid the tangled and troubled history of the United States in the twentieth century.

Sharecropper’s Troubadour is available at 20% discount from Amazon.com

Listen to some of the songs of John Handcox online at: http://faculty.washington.edu/mhoney

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