

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
presents

the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

Archie Green: The Making of a Working-Class Hero

Sean Burns

independent writer, teacher, and musician



TUESDAY, MAY 1, 2012

12:00 NOON - 1:00 PM

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Archie Green: The Making of a Working-Class Hero

Sean Burns

Respected as one of the great public intellectuals of the twentieth century, Archie Green (1917-2009), through his prolific writings and unprecedented public initiatives on behalf of workers' folklife, profoundly contributed to the philosophy and practice of cultural pluralism. For Green, a child of Ukrainian immigrants, pluralism was the life-source of democracy, an essential antidote to authoritarianism of every kind, which, for his generation, most notably took the forms of fascism and Stalinism. Green's passion for pluralism began in his childhood, a time that he spent in the richly diverse working-class neighborhood of Boyle Heights (Los Angeles) in the 1920s and 1930s. This era, astutely dubbed the "Age of the CIO" by Michael Denning, witnessed a profound shift in American conceptions of work and the worker. Compelled by this emergent ethos, Green, with university degree fresh in hand, looked to pursue a career as a shipwright and carpenter in San Francisco. His decades in the trades proved to be as much about developing skills of hand as they were about soaking up the complex multiplicity of cultural practices he witnessed in the shipyards and union halls. By the 1960s, Green parlayed this fascination for what he called "laborlore" into a career as a professional folklorist. Assiduously working into his nineties, Green wrote hundreds of essays and seven books. His laborlore scholarship, beginning with his groundbreaking 1972 study on coal songs *Only A Miner*, challenged assumptions in academic fields as wide-ranging as labor history, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and folklore, provoking all of these disciplines to reconsider their relationship to one another and to Green's primary object of study: the laborer.

Green's activist and intellectual quest was fueled by a generative tension between the political ideologies that animated his life and helped shape his era: New Deal liberalism, anarcho-syndicalism, and pragmatism. This talk explores the relationship between his formative political experiences at home, at school, and at work during the "Age of the CIO"

and his subsequent development of laborlore as a public-oriented interdisciplinary field. Burns will explore laborlore's impact on labor history, folklore, and American cultural studies and place these implications within the context of the larger "cultural turn" of the humanities and social sciences during the last quarter of the 20th century. When Green advocated in the late 1960s for the Festival of American Folklife to include skilled manual laborers displaying their craft on the National Mall, this was an important part of the culture's turn to what came to be known as "history from below." Green knew the profound implications of a basic democratic act: letting working people speak for themselves.

Green is best known for his spirited and unflagging lobbying of Congress in support of the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976 — legislation that paved the way for the creation of the American Folklife Center. In 2000, Green founded the Fund for Labor Culture and History. All of these accomplishments are better understood in light of Burns' research on the intellectual and political formation of Archie Green. This talk will draw from the substantial oral histories that Burns recorded with Green — interviews which provide the foundation for Burns' recently published biography, *Archie Green: The Making of a Working-Class Hero* (University of Illinois Press, 2011).

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

