Studs Terkel interview with James Baldwin
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Essay by Alan Wieder (guest post)*

Studs Terkel’s intrigue and then actions on the left began in his youth. Through his acting, his longtime radio show, “The Studs Terkel Show,” and his many books, he truly represented working people in the United States and throughout the world. He was involved in various campaigns of struggle and had an affinity for third-party political candidates in the United States. It is hard, however, to nail down Studs’ exact affiliations. He was keen to say that “he never met a petition he didn’t sign.” In addition, when asked whether Studs was a member of the Communist Party, his son Dan offered insight into Studs’ politics. He said, “It’s possible that he could have unwittingly signed something that our friendly crusaders in DC were able to link to the Communist Party. But you know he wouldn’t bother to read the document.”

Studs Terkel was born in New York City in 1912. He spent his early years in New York, but his family moved to Chicago when he was 12. The move was facilitated by a relative of his mother, who set them up as the landlords of the Wells Grand Hotel, a men’s only facility in the Towertown neighborhood in downtown Chicago. Studs credited his father, the neighborhood and the men at the Wells-Grand Hotel and Bughouse Square Park as providing the foundation for his politics. He listened to political speeches on the radio with his father Sam, and in his writings, he repeatedly emphasizes his father’s admiration of Eugene V. Debs.

According to Frank Beck, Towertown was home to a “heady mix of radical politics and cultural non-conformity.” Studs referred to the workingmen at the Wells Grand as “the uncelebrated” and Bughouse Square held a special place in Studs Terkel’s heart. In fact, friends and family buried his ashes, along with his wife Ida’s, in the park in 2009. As a youth, he listened to the speeches of radical labor organizer Lucy Parsons, the wife of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons, and Ben Reitman, the “hobo doctor,” who was Emma Goldman’s comrade and lover, as well as many of the “uncelebrated,” as they roared against the Haymarket Affair, American capitalism, and world imperialism.
Terkel went to law school at the University of Chicago, although he never practiced. He worked for a short time at government jobs but his passion in the thirties was the Chicago Repertory Theater. In 1937, he was deeply affected by the Memorial Day massacre of protesting Republic Steelworkers. Alongside fellow theater members, Studs paid homage to the workers with productions at the workers’ bar and various progressive venues. He worked at the time in the radio division of the federal Writer’s Project in Chicago. For Studs, camaraderie was at the heart of this work. Studs began his work in Chicago radio as the Depression came to an end. He spent a short time in the Army during World War II, but he was engaged in progressive radio programs in both the late thirties and forties.

In 1944, he began a weekly program for the Independent Voters of Illinois. The organization was referred to as a Communist front in Studs’ FBI file. In reality, IVI was a progressive group in Chicago that opposed machine politics and promoted civil rights. The show was aired on WCFL, the radio station of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Studs worked as one of the scriptwriters as well as a presenter. In addition, he hosted a weekly news and commentary show. He produced many shows including ones on Henry A. Wallace and the development of the labor movement in America from the days of indentured servants to the present.

In the late ‘40s, along with his wife, Ida, Studs worked against racism in America. In addition, he supported third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. He introduced and spoke for Wallace at campaign stops in Chicago and other American cities, and he co-produced an NBC special on Wallace and Paul Roberson.

Because of his political penchants, Studs was consistently speaking for progressive groups in Chicago. In 1949, he initiated the Chicago television show, “Studs’ Place.” Set in a neighborhood diner, the waitress wore activist badges and the conversation was political. The show was headed to New York when it was canceled. Studs Terkel was being blacklisted. According to Studs’ FBI file, testimony before HUAC accused him of recruiting for the Communist Party. However, the testimony never brought a subpoena. Typical of Studs, he humorously complained that he should have been called with Zero Mostel, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman.

Unexpectedly, Studs was offered a radio show at WFMT, the home of “The Studs Terkel Show” for the next five decades. While he seldom interviewed politicians, many of the shows addressed issues of American racism and class disparity. He became a close friend of Mahalia Jackson and viewed her as one of his teachers on racism and white privilege. Through the years there were features on social class in Chicago, the fight to save Jane Addams’ Hull House, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, the March on Washington, apartheid in South Africa and much, much more. For example, in 1965, Studs interviewed people in Alabama during the March from Selma to Montgomery.

In 1966, Studs was asked to write an oral history of Chicago. He took a three month leave of absence from WFMT to work on the book, “Division Street America.” Possibly Studs’ greatest book, it recounted the story of the economic and racial divisions in Chicago and the “yet to be United States of America.” In total, Studs Terkel wrote 18 books, including two memoirs. All of Studs’ publications dealt with inequality and injustice, but also hope.
Hit book “The Good War” won the Pulitzer Prize, but it was some of his other books that really spoke to the issues that were most important to Studs throughout his life: “Hard Times” told his story of The Great Depression, “Working” addressed the inequity and harshness of jobs, and “Race” dealt with America’s disease, white supremacy. Finally, he also penned two memoirs 34 years apart, “Talking to Myself” and “Touch and Go.”

Besides “The Studs Terkel Show” and his books, Studs never stopped making appearances with those fighting for social justice. In addition to supporting third party presidential bids--Fred Harris in 1976, Barry Commoner in 1980, and Dennis Kucinich in 2000, Studs was especially active working for the election of Harold Washington, Chicago’s first African-American mayor. Studs received two honors that were especially gratifying. In 1999, he was inducted into the National Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent--he was the only white member. In addition, Studs was also inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame in 2001.

Studs Terkel’s political perspective was crystal clear—corporations and governments oppress the people. Studs lived through the Depression and was blacklisted during the McCarthy era. He did his daily commute to his radio job at WFMT by bus and engaged his fellow passengers in his passion: conversation. Studs taught us that we were not impotent, that we had much to say, and that our voices and our actions, not a savior politician, could change the world. He taught us that we have power if we speak out and that, collectively, we have strength when we wed conversation and action.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*