

Before you can use a work song in a work situation, you have to get to know it for yourself. As with any traditional song, you have to "sing it in," as Heather Wood would say, before you can teach it to others. Your brain may have memorized the words and the melody, but the brain is nowhere for a work song to live. Because when you've been harvesting all morning and find yourself out in the field at 3 pm, dog-tired and starving for lunch but still trying to transplant a round of seedlings before the afternoon rainstorm blows in, your brain isn't much good for anything. Since the moments when work songs are the most important are the moments when the your head and your muscles have started to shut down, a work song must reside in some place deeper within your self if it is going to be of any use. You have to make a home for the work song in your gut.

In Pine Mountain, Georgia I would often walk out into a neighboring cornfield and sing before work began. And most nights I made a point of singing a couple songs outside my trailer to put myself to sleep. I would sing very slowly during these moments, sometimes holding out particular notes for a long time, allowing those notes to resonate throughout my body, especially in my belly and my jawbone. I've found that even highly rhythmic songs, such as *Berta Berta*, take on a rich, and even captivatingly lonesome character when they are sung with a slower, more spontaneous rhythm. I leave enough time between lines to hear my voice echoing off the forest at the edge of the field. By slowing the songs down, I've found myself spending ten to twenty minutes running through a work song by myself, settling into a meditative state as I go along. By singing in solitude, free to make mistakes and improvise, we can take traditional songs we've learned from recordings and make them our own.

Most of the songs I sing I have learned while I've been sitting indoors, with my ears pressed up against a computer speaker. The same, I believe, is true for many of today's traditional singers. Most of us haven't grown up with these songs. We have no faces, no scenes, no smells or memories to connect them to. But it is the singer's own experiences with a particular song, rather than the melody and lyrics alone, which really bring a song to life and make others want to join in. For this reason it is all the more important that we spend time with our songs: take walks and measure our steps with them, stop and sing them at sunrise, or while you're coming back home from the field, or while you're doing the dishes, or staring into the wood stove in the evening. Get to where they mean something to you. Share them with one or two people at a time and see how they respond, how the rhythm wants to change as they join in.

Eventually the song will start letting you know that it wants to be sung. Listen to that impulse and follow it, if it means getting out of bed in the middle of the night and stepping out into the cold to sing, or even if it means bursting into song on a sidewalk as strangers walk by. If you obey these impulses, you'll find that you are changing your self to fit the song more than you are changing the song to fit your self. The song is actually pushing you outside of your comfort zone. But eventually you'll start to feel at home with it. Grounded, focused. And when the week has been too long, the days too wet, too cold, when you're feeling lonely or discouraged, the song will come welling up from your gut and bring peace to your mind. After singing through it you might even be able to laugh at your troubles.

The sense of peace you feel with the song will come through in your singing, and your fellow workers will draw from it as they join in. Just remember that before you can use a song as a tool for creating balance within the work crew, you must be singing it from a place of balance. And more importantly, for a song to bring joy to your fellow workers, you must be singing it from a place of joy. So find a song that demands something from you. One that tells you to stop right where you're at and to give some of your self to it, to make some time for it in your day and to make some room for it in your gut.

And then offer it more. Keep singing and see what it gives back to you.