

A Personal Testimonial:

Anne Feeney – So Much More Than Just a Labor Troubadour

• *By Mike Stout* •

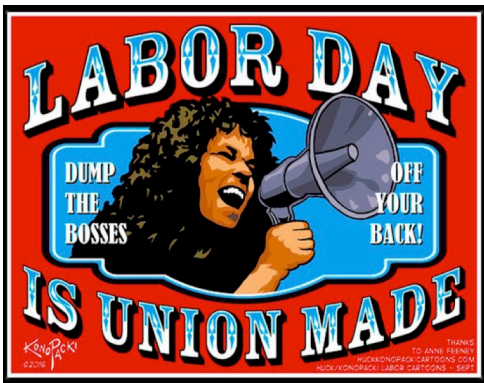
Like so many others, I was heartbroken when hearing about Anne's passing. As a friend and fellow Pittsburgh musician with the same political views, I stayed closely in touch with her health situation of late.

Unfortunately, I was aware of the physical calamities that had beset her for more than a decade. The pain and suffering took a heavy toll on her not just physically, but mentally and emotionally, especially the last few years.



With an ugly pandemic hovering over our heads and the isolation it's wrought, it was reassuring to hear that her two beautiful children were by her bedside, and they got to gaze into each other's eyes a few more times. *We're all brothers and sisters; and there ain't nothing more important than family.*

When cancer first struck Anne back in 2010, she put out a call for financial help. I immediately contacted Liz Berlin of the band Rusted Root and Senator Jim Ferlo. We met at the Tin Front in Homestead and planned a benefit concert for her. Practically the entire Pittsburgh music community responded – union and non-union alike – including stalwarts such as Joe Grushecky, Billy Price, Joe Munroe, Nelson Harrison, the Granati Brothers and, of course, my band, The Human Union, and Liz Berlin's Rusted Root.



We raised more than \$12,000 playing to a packed house at Mr. Small's in Millvale. Feeble, groggy and weak from chemo and the numerous drugs they had her on, Anne performed "Have You Been to Jail for Justice" and "War on the Workers" flawlessly, solo. Her strength in the face of such physical and emotional adversity shone like a spotlight from the heavens.

That beautiful December night Pittsburgh's musical community let the world know what we thought of Anne Feeney and how much we valued the importance of her political and cultural leadership.

To call Anne Feeney a "Labor Troubadour" is a bit of a misnomer; she was a "People's Revolutionary Troubadour." Her causes, musical works and countless benefit performances extended well beyond organized labor and workers causes. She was anti-capitalist to the core! She performed at numerous healthcare, anti-war, environmental, civil rights, women's rights and pro-democracy rallies, picket lines and conventions that spanned this country and several countries in Europe.

Of the majority of her performances, if she wasn't doing outright benefits for some cause, she was the most aggressive "self-employed worker" I ever met, passing the hat and hawking her CDs after a performance, looking audience participants straight in the eye while she patiently held the hat in one hand and her CDs in the other. On top of her high energy performances, she taught us independent working musicians how to stand up for ourselves and our art as workers.



Anne Feeney playing on the back of a pickup truck for striking workers in Decatur, Illinois in 1995 (photo: Dexter Arnold)

When Anne was elected the first female Local Musicians' Union President in 1997, she put her heart and soul into the job, actively recruiting individual musicians and bands, personally showing up night after night at their shows for one-on-one conversations and arm-twisting. She even hired a local union paid organizer, which was unheard of in the musicians' union.

A small cabal of the "old white boys club" at that time in the union resented her feistiness, drive, smoke-filled office and (of course) left-wing politics; on top of all that, she was labeled "an uppity woman"! They drove her out of office after one term. But they could never drive her out of the union.

She joined Local 1000 which was a nation-wide local of independent musicians and bands. Her support for unions and rank and file workers never wavered. Soon after we formed, she brought me and my whole band into Local 60-471 in 1993. Being a friend and knowing my rep as a union activist in the Pittsburgh/Mon Valley area, she gently reminded me that musicians were "workers", too. She woke me up to the musical union world. While some musicians joined and many didn't, they all respected her drive and commitment – and that's why they responded so readily to help her at the December, 2010 benefit Concert.



I moved to Homestead in 1977 to work at the Homestead Steel mill, and in the summer of 1978 Anne called me one day, introduced herself and asked me to come play at a bar called Wobblie Joe's on 27th and Jane Street in the Southside. It was my first live performance in these parts. I performed my recently penned "Unemployment, It Ain't Funny, I Need a Job or I Need Some Money" with Anne jumping on stage and joining in the chorus, waking the house up. I remember thinking at the time, "WTF – Who is this wild woman?"

When I ran for State Rep in 1988, Anne headlined a benefit at the old Bishop Boyle High School in Homestead for my fledgling campaign to help wipe out my campaign debt.

When union conventions came to town and were looking for a rock band, Anne went out of her way to put them in touch with me. As a local union president, she did more than talk the talk, she walked the walk and stood up for her members! She wasn't just a union musician; she was union!

Anywhere in the country I went that she was playing, such as national Medicare for All conferences, SOA Watch rallies in Ft. Benning, Georgia, etc., she always invited me up on stage and handed me her guitar if mine wasn't there.

In October 2007, Anne and I shared the Mother Jones Award from the Pennsylvania Labor History Society. At that event, we duetted on my newly recorded "When the Cotton Mill Women Rose". She had never heard the song, but we didn't have to rehearse; she knew exactly what harmony was needed and where to put it.

Her gutsiness and musical craftsmanship were a powerful combo. When I was recording my "Point of Pittsburgh" CD in 2008 commemorating many of this area's unsung heroes and heroines, I asked Anne if I could record her "Fannie Sellins" song, telling her I even would pay her something.

Her response: "Of course you can, and you don't need to pay me; I ain't in this for the money."

When I had the union employee-owned print shop, for 25 years she loyally brought all her business cards, printing and those of others including the local unions' printing to our shop.



At the School of Americas vigil, 2009

Over a lifetime that spanned nearly 40 years, my shared shows with her are too numerous to mention. Some of the most memorable included union conventions, picket lines, the G20 rally in 2009, performing at several of her single-payer healthcare tour shows in 2009-2010 (where she turned me on to keyboard union player extraordinaire, Laura Daniels) and the battle to save Braddock Hospital, where we both sang in pouring-down rain on a cold November afternoon that film-maker Tony Buba caught on camera.

Once when we were eating dinner together before performing in Harrisburg at a show with Paul Stookey and Si Kahn on the occasion of Woody Guthrie's 100th birthday in November 2011, we were discussing our musical histories, talking about how important music was to progressive movements, etc.

At one point, I asked Anne what she hoped most to accomplish in her music career. Her response was quick, short and to the point, "inspire 'em, rile up as many people as possible."

Her songs, music and memory will live on in the hearts of many. In the world of future generations and years down the road, many of her songs will become Woody Guthrie-ish standards for the working class and poor. Through her music, she will always be with us, riling the oppressed masses to action.

She was much more than a "labor troubadour", she was a warrior for justice, peace and true equality!

Anne Feeney – Presente!

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