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Step by Step - an interview with John McCutcheon

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Abstract

John McCutcheon is a highly talented singer-songwriter who has a strong commitment to the union movement and other progressive causes. A native of Wisconsin, he developed a fascination for the music of Appalachia and the Washington Post once described him as “Virginia’s rustic renaissance man”. He is a multi-instrumentalist and takes particular delight in playing the rare hammer dulcimer. He has made twenty-four albums and has received five grammy nominations. As Sing Out magazine stated in Winter 2000: “When pressed for the perfect example of a modern folk musician, it’s John McCutcheon’s name that comes to mind”.

Keywords

folk songs, labour movement, trade unions, folk singer

Step By Step: An Interview with John McCutcheon

**Interviewers:
Anthony Ashbolt and Maurie Mulheron**

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*Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none
And by union what we will can be accomplished still
Drops of water turn a mill, singly none singly none*

- AA: I am intrigued by the fact that you said tonight that ‘Step by Step’, that great labour song, is your favourite song. Could you tell us why, give us the background to the song, and why it’s your favourite?
- JM: Well, it’s my favourite for a lot of reasons. It’s tied to how I learned it. I learned it from the fellow who really introduced me to unions. Nimrod Workman was his name and he was a great figure, you know, albeit not a well-known figure, in the American labour movement. He was a regular guy who I remember the first time I ever met him he said ‘I am a union man from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet’. He grew up in coal camps, lived in coal camps most of his life and fought hard to change those conditions. He was not an ideologue. He didn’t have a professor that introduced him to Marx. He learned how to believe in

unionism by seeing first hand what it was like to not have a union and to be willing to fight for it. So he's what I call a 'sort of a dirt under the fingernails unionist' and that was my introduction. I mean I grew up in a working class family, and all my neighbours worked in paper mills and they were farmers, part of the national farm organization and different kinds of organisations that taught me from a very early age that people had to really work together to accomplish things. So hearing Nimrod sing that song was important to me because it introduced, in a condensed fashion, so much of what unionism is about. That one person at a time is not going to effect change but many people working together, you know many drops of water turn the mill, many stones can form an arch, singly not one of them can possibly do that. And then it was a song that grew on me as a songwriter. To be able to say everything you need to say in four lines. I tried to write verses for it and they were just pointless.

MM: They can't be improved.

JM: No. They can't be improved. It was like a perfect distillation of the sentiment of the song. So it's the combination of the connection I have to it because of who I learned it from. Secondly, the way it talks about the basic, the most basic things about communities and unions, and thirdly, it's just a perfect song as a piece of craft work.

And, it's easy to teach people, people who have no idea what you are talking about.

AA: Unions used to be much stronger in America than they are today, covering 35% of the workforce in the 1950s. Now they have a membership of around 12%, possibly declining in certain areas, strengthening in others (janitors are organising more than they ever were, for example).

JM: Pink-collar workers and so on.

AA: Yes, but is the general scene depressing?

JM: Well, we have so much in the United States that I don't feel that we can afford the luxury of despair. There are many, many people doing really good things. I mean I am the President of my union local, in the musicians union, which is the American Federation of Musicians Local 1000. It's the union local that covers all the travelling musicians. I mean a lot of the Americans who are travelling in Australia right now are members of my union and so there is a lot of

new hope for people who never had hope before. Whether it be immigrant workers, janitors, travelling musicians, people in the service sector, and then teaching assistants in universities are starting to organise, and I think more and more as people start understanding about privatisation and globalisation they realise that the one force that has traditionally provided a kind of analysis and a criticism of capitalism was the labour movement.

Unfortunately, the American labour movement let itself get co-opted by the red scare. And you had leadership in the AFLCIO who for years just said OK we are going to be anti-Communist, that means anti-Socialist, that means we are going to give up healthcare, we are going to give up this, we are going to let the government take it over where it all used to be one at the bargaining table. The Democratic Party came and said 'we'll take care of all this for you' and it was, you know, we forgot that it was their game. So is it depressing? I prefer to think, and a lot of the people that I work with and take heart in working with, think that this is a really ripe opportunity for change, for new mobilisation, and for a whole new body of workers. There's a television commercial in the United States for instance right now, and I can't even remember what its for, but it said that the average American ... the average French worker gets six weeks of paid vacation time, the average German gets eight weeks of paid vacation time, the average American worker gets two weeks of paid vacation time, what are you going to do with those two weeks? And to me it's like somebody who really knew something incisive made this commercial ... how can an American worker not look at that and say 'What the fuck is going on?'

MM: We're getting ripped off here.

JM: Two weeks, six weeks, eight weeks, I like to think that there was some subversive who made that commercial for American Express, or for ...

AA: Trained in Marxist cultural studies and now works in advertising!

JM: Yes, but who couldn't resist saying "oh and by the way".

MM: Joe McCarthy wouldn't have let that ad go to air.

JM: No.

MM: In fact, there was a time during the blacklist that Pete Seeger's own union were talking about expelling him.

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JM: Yes.

MM: Here was the greatest exponent of unionism and American culture, and at a time of the red scare even his own union was too embarrassed or were fearful of having him as a member. He had to fight to retain his membership.

JM: He was one of the very, very first people to become a member of my local and one of the things I'm going to have on my gravestone is that I was Pete Seeger's union president.

MM: It couldn't get any better, could it?

JM: No.

AA: So do you want to say something generally about, within the American context, about evoking the labour tradition, and how important it is? Is it just a sideline event now, whereas it used to be more central, or is it still so much a part of the general struggle?

JM: Well, the union movement right now is going through some real changes from a cultural standpoint. There are some very central people working in the leadership, and working with the leadership of the AFLCIO, that place great import on culture.

MM: Is that a new development?

JM: It's a totally new development. There is an organisation called the Labour Heritage Foundation, that has been working for 25 years to try to keep labour culture of all sorts, not only music, but we have these giant puppets that are showing up on the streets, and labour theatre groups, and people who are doing posters, and people who are doing cartoons, and it's also expanding. As the labour force diversifies, as you have more Latinos in the labour force, as you have an increasing number of African Americans in the labour force, one of the things that's happening is that you have really diverse kinds of music, you have rap and hip hop labour songs, you have chicano music that is being adapted, as the folk music was, as the bluegrass music was, to a predominantly immigrant southern white culture. They use what ever kind of music they have.

MM: So you are saying not just music, this Labour Heritage is bringing other artists? Puppetry?

JM: It's all kinds of stuff. It's very powerful and it works. I am one of those people who believes that people will go farther

based on what they feel more than on what they believe.

MM: Well, the church taught us that didn't it?

JM: Yes it did. And I have been going around doing these workshops with progressive organisations about understanding the power of culture in organising, and one of the first things I say to them is 'name two speeches from the Civil Rights movement'. And they can't name but one, Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. They can't name a second speech. And then I say, OK, 'lets start naming all the songs we remember from the Civil Rights movement' I stop them after 12. And this is just people walking on the street. We are not talking about musicians or musical historians, these are people who simply grew up knowing these songs, and I said now what does that tell you? It tells you that information and inspiration together is a very powerful thing. And what the churches taught us is that you can get information and inspiration to illiterate people from music and art and culture and it's one of the things that's starting to be used now. Billy Bragg and Steve Earl and Tom Morrell from 'Rage Against the Machine', did a tour right before the election called 'Tell the Truth' tour and the AFLCIO actually put money into sponsoring the tour.

AA: So that tour was different from the Springsteen one?

JM: Oh yes. No, the Springsteen thing was part of what was a 'Change for America'. It was essentially pro-Kerry, anti-Bush stuff. *This* was talking a lot about Labour culture and so on, and the AFLCIO really got on board with it. It was essentially trying to lay a groundwork for progressive organisations, and progressive change in the US because the election devastated financially many progressive organisations because everybody, all the people who normally gave money to progressive organizations were giving money to the Kerry campaign. And I don't think any of us in the progressive movement, especially the labour movement, had any illusions that on November 3rd, no matter who won, we weren't going to have to wake up and start fighting for the kind of country that we wanted. I think that it was very wise to lay a foundation from which we could use that as a springboard, so that we could rally progressive forces. The National Labour Relations Board would have a very different make up under a Kerry Presidency which would have made organising and striking

and labour rights a much easier row to hoe than it is right now with George Bush appointing people to the NLRB. But Kerry was no labourers' dream.

AA: It's funny we haven't heard the story of this alternative progressive culture from the Murdoch press in Australia, isn't it? This brings us to an obvious thing, you even talked on ABC radio this morning about the lack of avenues for music of any sort now on radio and yet you're still optimistic that there is a wellspring of kind of grassroots culture out there?

JM: Oh, there really is out there. And one of the things that's doing it ... there are two things that are doing it, in spite of the fact that the traditional avenues of progressive discussion have been closing, as even public radio, our equivalent of the ABC, and its not even really the equivalent of the ABC, national public radio is getting more geared toward talk radio and less and less culture. In fact there's a new progressive network called 'Air America' in the US with people like Chuck Dee from 'Public Enemy' and Al Franken who is a great comedian and political commentator and it's all talk. And I wrote them a letter recently and I said "what are you guys crazy?", there is so much good progressive culture out there—you don't have to be the left wing clone of Rush Limbaugh and company. I mean give people music. I can't even stand to listen to you guys all day.

MM: But it get's back to your point, you can remember the songs.

JM: Exactly.

MM: So what role does the song play? Someone said recently "no song is going to change someone's mind" but my response was it might nourish the spirits, it might just make you feel connected. Does a speech change your mind? It's not really about that, is it?

JM: No. No. If someone comes up to me and says, 'I heard your song about such and such, and my mind is changed', I am as suspicious of them as someone who says 'I heard Ronald Reagan make a speech and I am all onboard with that'. To make informed decisions in a democracy you need information from all kinds of different sources. You need economists and scientists, you need politicians, you need historians, you need artists, and all these sources are equally important. And to limit your information from

any one of those sources is going to mean that you're not making good decisions. And what culture is able to do is able to appeal to a part of a group of people that is essential to their makeup. It helps them identify who they are. It's not something so much that they own, but that they have the sense of belonging to. I mean, when I go back to my home in Wisconsin, even though I haven't lived there for 35 years, if I hear someone strike up a polka or when I smell a bratwurst cooking, or when the Green Bay Packers come on the television on a Sunday afternoon to play a football game, it's a part of my makeup that's visceral. When I hear certain songs, when I hear stories that I heard my grandfather tell, it's something that goes beyond the experience that I've had, that divide us into ideological or economic or ethnic groups, it's something that is common. And we haven't used that in the labour movement for 30 years, more than that, for almost 50 years, in the US because we let technology drive us and thought that it is more important to have information than it was to tap into that place where people will extend themselves, where people can talk about themselves in ways that allow the development of our own language.

MM: When you look at the McCarthyism in the 50s, the cultural workers were the ones who resisted the most, were the ones most attacked the most. I mean in a sense, going after the writers, the Hollywood 10, and the musicians, and you had the blacklists. It was almost as if the right had realised the importance of the cultural wars and the cultural warriors.

JM: Well, and you still see that now when people are banned from getting stuff sold in Wal-Mart. Or you don't hear it on the radio, or you have to have little stickers on there warning people of the content. Some people used to say music would change the world. I think people change the world but music helps change people in important and essential ways. But what those kinds of efforts—be they the McCarthyism of the 50s, or the McCarthyism of today—tell me is that I am wrong about the effect that music can potentially have on people. Because other people obviously think that it has a lot of effect, enough of effect that they want to ban it. So it makes me take my work much more seriously because maybe it's doing things out there that I am not aware of.

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AA: I try and tell my students at the university what an impact, and I show them a documentary that reflects this, what an impact the song 'We Shall Overcome' had upon the Civil Rights movement, and is still having.

JM: Absolutely, and it was really a study in the power of the pronoun. The song began as an old hymn called 'I'll Be Alright Someday'. And it went through a number of different permutations, but the most import was changing from the singular to the plural of the pronoun.

AA: It was the labour movement which first adopted the "we", wasn't it?

JM: I have had various people say "I was there" when that change happened—"I was at the Highlander School when these students did it." But I have heard from several sources about the composition of the verse 'We Are Not Afraid' ... And it was at a moment when people were very afraid. It was a wonderful example of a song being able to say something, that we wished was true. We knew it was not true and you were afraid but still you had to sing that and it drove ... there were police there, and this young women started singing this, you know its time for another verse, and she sang 'We Are Not Afraid' and of course they were all afraid but they still sang it. And it drove the police crazy. Fear was the tool of the police, far more than the baton or the gun. And to have these people who they were intimidating singing 'We Are Not Afraid', as one, sent a powerful message to their antagonists.

AA: Fear is the tool today.

JM: Absolutely.

AA: Is there a song or do we have to just go to all the songs of you and Pete Seeger and others, do we have a range to pick from? There is no one song, is there, that stands out?

JM: No. It's interesting I went to school, elementary school and high school with a fellow, and he was my lab partner in chemistry classes in school, and his most renowned accomplishment, as far as I was concerned is that he learned to give himself tattoos in chemistry class. And he would do this stuff in school giving himself tattoos and he had really bad handwriting, he was a terrible artist and he didn't understand what he was doing, so he was doing something on his arm to his mum, and he didn't realise that he ran around with 'wow' on his arm for the rest of his

life. But he had tattooed 'love' and 'fear' on his knuckles, and it always intrigued me, and he was the first guy I knew who got a guitar, first guy who grew his hair long, first guy who wore peg leg pants, the first guy who had beetle boots, the first guy who went to prison. And I ran into him a couple of years ago in my home town, and he's still living there, and I was going in a bar and he was going out and I said come on and I'll buy you a beer, and we went inside and we started talking and I said I have been wanting to ask you since we were 16 years old—'love' ... 'fear' ... I expected 'hate'. And he said you know I learned on the streets of this town growing up, hard streets, he said that fear was the opposite of love, hate is the absence of love, but fear is love's opposite. A song I actually considered doing as an encore tonight was that old Youngbloods song 'Get Together'. It's all about the dichotomy of love. "Love is but the song we sing and fear is the way we die."

AA: Someone sang 'Get Together' at the big protest in Sydney prior to the Iraq invasion and I couldn't help thinking we were back in the 60s. But this was even bigger than the 60s in one sense—it was huge, more than 200,000 people.

MM: Biggest demonstration we have ever had, on any issue.

AA: But that is also the disappointment that a lot of us on the left feel now—we got those numbers out and look what happened.

JM: Well, I tell you that it has been the talk in the States a lot about the left and everything—there was incredible mobilisation, you had musicians who I knew who were militantly apolitical, who were getting out there and railing on stage, it was really quite amazing to see. And we lost. And so the question is what good did it do? In terms of the Iraq war I think it ended up, and I am not just turning lemons into lemonade, I think it made the US perpetrate that war in a very different way because it knew, number one it didn't have the support of half its population and how can you possibly ... I mean you know what its like as a union official, you don't have a vote, you don't have a contract vote, unless you have 80% —you just don't do it. So the large opposition made them perpetrate the war in a very different way because it could have been much more ugly. There could have been far more casualties. So there is this leverage to bear, it's not ... these campaigns are not solely determined by one decision, by an election.

There were so many people who worked very, very hard to try to defeat George Bush, but we were blindsided by the evangelicals. We didn't know that for four years that there had been little rallies in churches, every Sunday morning,

So, what we have we going on in every country in this world is an ongoing conversation about what kind of world we're building. And every now and again they put a little box around it and they say ok we're going to have an election, and everybody gets involved talking about it, but in truth it's an ongoing conversation and what's happening in the States now is people are rallying—there's a great bumper sticker going around saying 'Is it four years yet?'. As I was saying tonight, we're growing a whole new world.

AA: Do you think we are going to be defeated?

JM: No. No. No.

AA: I'm back to the pessimism.

JM: What does defeated mean?

AA: The numbers, the compromises, the forces against us just have all the plays and we are going to be left on the sideline.

MM: But Anthony, they often win the big battles, the big elections, every four years but there are hundreds of other struggles that are smaller that are won each and every other day. Sometimes locally, sometimes in the union, sometimes in the local community, and that's important.

JM: It took a long time to abolish slavery. It took a long time to pass child labour laws. It took a long time to defeat apartheid.

MM: And it took a long time to stop the war in Vietnam.

JM: It did.

AA: But so much of what you are talking about has actually been reintroduced to the 21st century. We're not back to child ... well, we virtually are back to child labour in the service industry.

JM: Yes, but one of the things that's a very interesting discussion that is starting in the States is the whole issue of privatisation, which is going wild in the States, and one of the things that is making people stand up and take

notice is the privatisation of prisons. Because even people as vindictive as they can be understand the lunacy of taking someone from Connecticut, a prison in Connecticut and moving them to Georgia, 1000 miles away from their community and their families. And to make incarceration a means of profit. It's the reintroduction of slavery. So the empirical evidence is always going to be on the side of the pessimist. But I think that optimism is the only legitimate operating mode because my attitude is if you are going to get information from above whether it be Fox News or Pacifica, which is the radical network in the US, you are going to be disappointed. You are going to be discouraged. But if you look around at what's percolating up from the grassroots, the organizations that are really paying attention to what's happening in schools, the grassroots organisations who are taking matters of environmental stewardship into their own hands. I mean this is the stuff that doesn't make the news. But it is the stuff that is absolutely happening in the grassroots level, and from an historical broad range these things take a lot of time. And we have such a short attention span in 21st century America, that we want it all now. And change percolates up it doesn't trickle down. Nothing trickles down. We learned that in the 80s.

MM: Your most requested song tonight was 'The Ballad of Joe Hill', that beautiful Earl Robinson song. Do you know the history behind it, that some of Joe Hill's ashes were sent to Australia?

JM: Right, that's right.

MM: He was never going to be found dead in Utah. So the Wobblies sent him throughout to every continent. And it arrived in Sydney. And the police confiscated it and when the Wobblies went to the police to pick up this parcel, that they knew were Joe Hill's ashes, the police sergeant said that they had thrown them in the fire. And destroyed it. And I always liked that story because Joe Hill was so feared they cremated him twice.

JM: This year is the hundredth anniversary of the IWW. Utah Phillips and I are doing a concert together because he is also a member of my union local, and we want to do this concert as a mending of fences between the AFLCIO and the IWW on the anniversary of the hundredth.

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MM: Isn't that wonderful.

JM: Yeah. And hopefully the ALFCIO will sprinkle a little holy water on it.

AA: Does your optimism extend to a faith in the capacities of the younger generation?

JM: The day after the election I was addressing a youth conference in Minneapolis, St Paul. And I really had no idea what I was going to talk to them about, and I got up there, and I realised that they were all abuzz with their own issues, since this was all going on up here, and you had all these high school aged kids who didn't make the connection, really, between their lives and what had just happened in the country. And I thought well on one hand it's kind of naive but on the other hand it's very real. For these kids, because I know this from my own kids, for these kids race is not an issue. They grew up in desegregated schools. They have lots of friends who are all different races and when something happens of a racial nature in the schools the parents get all up in arms and the kids go we obviously don't have the same experience with this that you do. For people my age growing up in the States, I mean race was the issue. The same thing with sexual orientation. I mean, these kids grew up, every single one of them, knowing someone who was gay or lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and it is because of the courage of the people our age who came out. But they knew this. I mean, the two things that won the election for George Bush in the US were abortion and gay rights, gay marriage actually. He parlayed that to rally the evangelicals.

MM: Wedge politics we call it. This was the wedge issue.

JM: Exactly. And I looked out at these kids and I thought, by the time these kids are grown ups gay marriage will be accepted. It's not going to be an issue. They're not going to be able to parlay that kind of fear and division and xenophobia to these kids because the parents have actually done a pretty good job.