

# Press Release for immediate release Saturday May 24, 2008

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## “Folksinger, Storyteller, Railroad Tramp Utah Phillips Dead at 73”

### **Nevada City, California:**

Utah Phillips, a seminal figure in American folk music who performed extensively and tirelessly for audiences on two continents for 38 years, died Friday of congestive heart failure in Nevada City, California a small town in the Sierra Nevada mountains where he lived for the last 21 years with his wife, Joanna Robinson, a freelance editor.

Born Bruce Duncan Phillips on May 15, 1935 in Cleveland, Ohio, he was the son of labor organizers. Whether through this early influence or an early life that was not always tranquil or easy, by his twenties Phillips demonstrated a lifelong concern with the living conditions of working people. He was a proud member of the Industrial Workers of the World, popularly known as “the Wobblies,” an organizational artifact of early twentieth-century labor struggles that has seen renewed interest and growth in membership in the last decade, not in small part due to his efforts to popularize it.

Phillips served as an Army private during the Korean War, an experience he would later refer to as the turning point of his life. Deeply affected by the devastation and human misery he had witnessed, upon his return to the United States he began drifting, riding freight trains around the country. His struggle would be familiar today, when the difficulties of returning combat veterans are more widely understood, but in the

late fifties Phillips was left to work them out for himself. Destitute and drinking, Phillips got off a freight train in Salt Lake City and wound up at the Joe Hill House, a homeless shelter operated by the anarchist Ammon Hennacy, a member of the Catholic Worker movement and associate of Dorothy Day.

Phillips credited Hennacy and other social reformers he referred to as his “elders” with having provided a philosophical framework around which he later constructed songs and stories he intended as a template his audiences could employ to understand their own political and working lives. They were often hilarious, sometimes sad, but never shallow.

“He made me understand that music must be more than cotton candy for the ears,” said John McCutcheon, a nationally-known folksinger and close friend.

In the creation of his performing persona and work, Phillips drew from influences as diverse as Borscht Belt comedian Myron Cohen, folksingers Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and Country stars Hank Williams and T. Texas Tyler.

A stint as an archivist for the State of Utah in the 1960s taught Phillips the discipline of historical research; beneath the simplest and most folksy of his songs was a rigorous attention to detail and a strong and carefully-crafted narrative structure. He was a voracious reader in a surprising variety of fields.

Meanwhile, Phillips was working at Hennacy’s Joe Hill house. In 1968 he ran for a seat in the U.S. Senate on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket. The race was won by a Republican candidate, and Phillips was seen by some Democrats as having split the vote. He subsequently lost his job with the State of Utah, a process he described as “blacklisting.”

Phillips left Utah for Saratoga Springs, New York, where he was welcomed into a lively community of folk performers centered at the Caffé Lena, operated by Lena Spencer.

“It was *the* coffeehouse, *the* place to perform. Everybody went there. She fed everybody,” said John “Che” Greenwood, a fellow performer and friend.

Over the span of the nearly four decades that followed, Phillips worked in what he referred to as “the Trade,” developing an audience of hundreds of thousands and performing in large and small cities throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. His performing partners included Rosalie Sorrels, Kate Wolf, John McCutcheon and Ani DiFranco.

“He was like an alchemist,” said Sorrels, “He took the stories of working people and railroad bums and he built them into work that was influenced by writers like Thomas Wolfe, but then he gave it back, he put it in language so the people whom the songs and stories were about still had them, still owned them. He didn’t believe in stealing culture from the people it was about.”

A single from Phillips’s first record, “Moose Turd Pie,” a rollicking story about working on a railroad track gang, saw extensive airplay in 1973. From then on, Phillips had work on the road. His extensive writing and recording career included two albums with Ani DiFranco which earned a Grammy nomination. Phillips’s songs were performed and recorded by Emmylou Harris, Waylon Jennings, Joan Baez, Tom Waits, Joe Ely and others. He was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Folk Alliance in 1997.

Phillips, something of a perfectionist, claimed that he never lost his stage fright before performances. He didn't want to lose it, he said; it kept him improving.

Phillips began suffering from the effects of chronic heart disease in 2004, and as his illness kept him off the road at times, he started a nationally syndicated folk-music radio show, "Loafer's Glory," produced at KVMR-FM and started a homeless shelter in his rural home county, where down-on-their-luck men and women were sleeping under the manzanita brush at the edge of town. Hospitality House opened in 2005 and continues to house 25 to 30 guests a night. In this way, Phillips returned to the work of his mentor Hennacy in the last four years of his life.

Phillips died at home, in bed, in his sleep, next to his wife. He is survived by his son Duncan and daughter-in-law Bobette of Salt Lake City, son Brendan of Olympia, Washington; daughter Morrigan Belle of Washington, D.C.; stepson Nicholas Tomb of Monterrey, California; stepson and daughter-in-law Ian Durfee and Mary Creasey of Davis, California; brothers David Phillips of Fairfield, California, Ed Phillips of Cleveland, Ohio and Stuart Cohen of Los Angeles; sister Deborah Cohen of Lisbon, Portugal; and a grandchild, Brendan. He was preceded in death by his father Edwin Phillips and mother Kathleen, and his stepfather, Syd Cohen.

The family requests memorial donations to Hospitality House, P.O. Box 3223, Grass Valley, California 95945 (530) 271-7144 [www.hospitalityhouseshelter.org](http://www.hospitalityhouseshelter.org)

Jordan Fisher Smith and Molly Fisk

