



# Carrier honored for 30 years of celebrating labor music



Jimmy Kelly

**F**or Jimmy Kelly, carrying the mail was much more than a job—it was a springboard to a life filled with music, advocacy and celebration of the labor movement, even through retirement. The Santa Clara, CA Branch 1427 member founded an annual labor music festival 30 years ago to bring music with a message to countless workers, activists and music lovers, including his own singing and guitar performances.

This June, the Labor Heritage Foundation, a non-profit organization that preserves and promotes labor history, will recognize Kelly's work with a lifetime achievement award.

Growing up in blue-collar Pittsburgh, Kelly became a union man at an early age. "We learned labor terms in fourth-grade classes," he said. His grandfather,

father and two brothers were union members. When he took a job with the U.S. Postal Service in California in 1981, Kelly quickly took an active role in his branch—Santa Cruz Branch 269, which later merged with Branch 1427—eventually serving as president before retiring after 27 years of carrying mail.

The union movement has a rich tradition of expressing its passions, and inspiring workers, through song. Kelly had always enjoyed music with a political angle, whether listening to it or singing and playing guitar. He admired labor troubadours such as Pete Seeger, and the purpose of Seeger's music—to inspire activists. Singers like Seeger often performed at picket lines and protests to keep spirits up and educate workers.

"You've got to keep them fighting," Kelly said, "and keep them believing in what they are doing."

When Kelly read a story in 1985 in *The Postal Record* about the Great Labor Song Exchange—a music festival that has been held each year since 1979 in Silver Spring, MD, that has featured Seeger and other leading labor artists—he knew he had to be part of it.

After attending the Great Labor Song Exchange the next year, where he joined in the performances, he said to himself, "I want to do this back home." Kelly founded the Western Workers Labor Heritage Festival to bring labor-oriented music, art, film, dance and







stories together on the West Coast. Held every year on the weekend of Martin Luther King Day in celebration of King's legacy, the festival celebrated its 30th year this January.

"It's been a pretty amazing story," Kelly said. True to its activist roots, the festival goes beyond art and inspiration. "The finale is that we raise money for workers in need," Kelly said. "They may be on strike, or it may be for food banks."

The Great Labor Song Exchange that Kelly discovered in 1985 is now the Great Labor Arts Exchange, a three-day festival of music, art and activism sponsored by the Labor Heritage Foundation. At this year's event, the Foundation will recognize Kelly with its Joe Hill Award, which honors "leaders and artists who have contributed to the successful integration of arts and culture in the labor movement."

The award is named for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) activist who was executed in 1915 in Utah for a robbery, despite flimsy evidence. Hill was likely targeted for his work organizing strikes and protests for the IWW, whose members are commonly known as the "Wobblies." On the eve of his death, Hill told the leader of the Wobblies, "Don't waste any time in mourning—organize."

"I once heard Jimmy say, 'I'm just a letter carrier who sings,'" Labor Heritage Foundation Executive Director Elise Bryant said. "And he is, but he's also a union activist and a cultural worker. Whether it's on a picket line, on stage or hosting a film festival, when Jimmy performs, he proudly wears his NALC colors. If Jimmy is there, then you'll know the letter carriers are in the house."

With this award, Kelly follows in the footsteps of top artists and activists who have received it each year since

1989, including Seeger; farm worker activist Cesar Chavez; folk singer, activist and storyteller Utah Phillips; and sharecropper-rights activist and singer John Handcox.

Handcox holds a special place in Kelly's memory. Born in Arkansas in 1904, the African-American performer and activist used song to educate and rally desperately poor tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South during the Great Depression to improve their lot, as an organizer for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Fellow protest singers, including Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Joe Glazer, used his songs, such as "Roll the Union On," in their repertoire. Handcox never backed down, even when the Ku Klux Klan came within a hair's breadth of lynching him.

At his first visit to the Great Labor Song Exchange in 1986, Kelly shared a room with Handcox. Kelly was awed by what Handcox had achieved despite the odds. "Here is a black man who came close to being hanged by the Ku Klux Klan because he was a union man—and he was my roommate."

The next year, Kelly and Handcox played "Roll the Union On" together on stage at the inaugural Western Workers Labor Heritage Festival.

If you want to see Kelly perform and you can't make it to a festival, look for a picket line or protest. Kelly often plays to rally workers and activists. His recent appearances have included rallies at Staples stores, sponsored by the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), to protest the company's use of non-postal workers to provide postal services, and at protests against plans by USPS to sell the historic Berkeley, CA, post office.

"I try to get other people to sing along and get excited, and support

workers," he said. Kelly's songbook includes some mail-related tunes, including Guthrie's "Mail Myself to You" and Tom Paxton's "The Mail Must Go Through."

"I think working people and their unions need to remember their history, heritage and culture," Kelly said. "We need to get this message to a new generation. It's about more than music—it's about standing up for one another. When we all of us get together, we win."

This year's Great Labor Arts Exchange, where Kelly will receive the award, will be held June 23-25 at a location to be announced. For more information, go to [laborheritage.org](http://laborheritage.org). The Western Workers Labor Heritage Festival is held each year on the Martin Luther King holiday weekend at the Machinist's Hall in Burlingame, CA. **PR**



The 1985 Postal Record article that piqued Kelly's interest.