

READERS' COLUMN

The Many Sources of Our Working Class Music

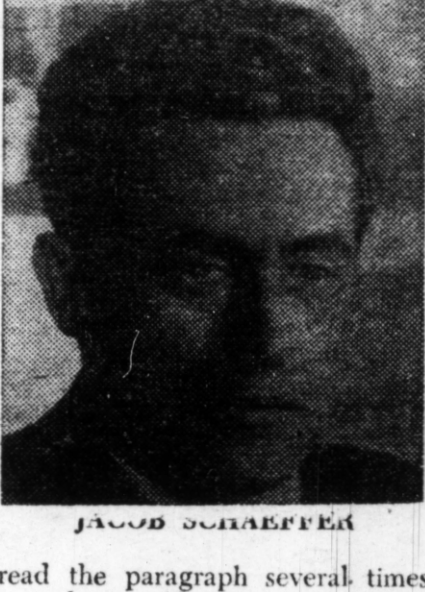
NEW YORK, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

Sectarianism dies hard and it would be a brave soul, indeed, who would conclude that the long struggle necessary to rid our movement and paper of its infantile leftism has been won. One of the most flagrant forms which sectarianism has taken in the past has been our tendency to exaggerate the accomplishments of the left-wing movement and to ascribe the ultimate in achievements to individuals with whose work and sympathy outlook we were in sympathy.

In his column in the Sept. 15 issue of *The Worker*, Mike Gold perpetuates this practice with the statement that the outstanding Jewish composer, Jacob Schaeffer "was driven by his faith to become the father of proletarian music in America."

I found this bland assertion so completely incredible that I re-



JACOB SCHAEFFER

read the paragraph several times to make sure that my eyes did not deceive me. Now, don't get me wrong. I mean to take nothing away from Schaeffer whose contribution to the working class musical tradition in this country is a very important one. Schaeffer's work was primarily among Yiddish speaking workers, however, and in no way can anyone rationally claim the title of "father of proletarian music in America" for him.

The class-conscious, militant singing tradition of America's workers has a rich and varied history. This singing tradition has its roots in the old work songs and songs of social protest of seamen, miners and textile workers who sang their songs throughout the length and breadth of this land long before Schaeffer's contributions were being made. And who can say that the beautifully inspiring work songs, chain gang songs and blues of Negro workers in the South do not constitute an important part of this musical heritage?

Many individuals, too, have left an indelible imprint on American working class music. The songs of Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin, for instance, helped to chart the path for workers' songs which followed. The stirring, bitter ballads of Aunt Molly Jackson, Ella Mae Wiggins, Jim Garland, and others came out of the heart and blood of miners and factory workers in North Carolina and Kentucky. The rich union song tradition carried on so vigorously by the Almanac Singers had little relation to the path of Schaeffer.

Thought must be given too to composers like Marc Blitzstein, whose "Cradle Will Rock" is one of the lasting monuments of labor in the field of music—as well as Earl Robinson, Harold Rome and Woodie Guthrie.

Working class music in America has a glorious heritage and is to be found in many colors and languages. No man can be called its father—for its forbears are many-hued and multi-numbered. Schaeffer is among those who helped to advance this heritage—and no man can ask for higher praise than that he added to the tradition of workers' music.

JACK STYLES.