

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 5287

WE WON'T MOVE

SONGS OF THE TENANTS' MOVEMENT

Being a tenant has never been a part of the American Dream. The central promise of America was always the ownership of land, which today usually means homeownership. But now, with almost half of the people in the country renting, the dream has turned to myth, and the struggle of tenants has become a movement.

Thus, the people at the California Housing Research Foundation decided it was time that traditional and contemporary tenants' songs be collected and recorded. (CHRF is the nonprofit partner of CHAIN, California's statewide tenants organization.) Joining with Fuse Music, a group of people committed to supporting progressive music and song, we collected and recorded songs from throughout the country and from throughout the history of the tenants' movement. Primarily through the work of Charles Ipcar, over 200 songs have already been collected. (A songbook by Charlie will be published soon.) Here we offer a representative few.

—Mike Rawson/CHRF, Rob Rosenthal/Fuse Music

Thanks to: Agnes Cunningham, Community Media Productions, Al Heskin, David Keown, Peter McKee, New Song Library, Gene Raskin, Deborah Redmond, Redwood Records/Holy Near, Pete Seeger, Schroder Music/Ruth Burnstein, Jerry Silverman. Special thanks to MOSES ASCH and CHARLES IPCAR. Cover design: Deborah Redmond. Cover Photo: Rachelle Resnick.

SIDE ONE

PENNY'S FARM
(Trad.) (2:12) — Pete Constantini (Seattle Tenants Union) & Rob Rosenthal (Santa Barbara Tenants Union)

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN
(L. Rosselson, 1974) (4:33) — Holly Tannen (Berkeley)

TALKING TENANT BLUES
(Mike Rawson, © 1977, CHAIN) (5:24) — Mike Rawson (Oakland Tenants Union) accompanied by Rob Rosenthal

MOCK BEGGAR HALL
(Trad., circa 1550) (1:40) — Pete Constantini, accompanied by Deb Hunemuller (Seattle)

RENT STRIKE BLUES
(Jimmy Collier, © 1966) (3:40) — Jimmy Collier

NO HOUSE
(Malvina Reynolds, © 1954) (2:37) — Sunny Bea (Los Angeles), accompanied by Rob Rosenthal

YOU CAN'T JUST TAKE OUR HOMES AWAY*
(Adapted from Holly Near's "Mountain Song" by Tony Heriza and Charles Ipcar, 1979, 1981) (2:05) — Karrie Potter (Lansing, MI)

SIDE TWO

THE FAUCETS ARE DRIPPING**
(Malvina Reynolds, © 1960, Schroder Music) (3:50) — Malvina Reynolds, accompanied by Eric Darling

PITY THE DOWNTRODDEN LANDLORD
(Clayton & Wolf, © 1946, Workers Music Ltd.) (2:05) — Pete Constantini

LANDLORD
(Gene Raskin, © 1945) (3:40) — Andrea Harrington (Seattle), accompanied by Rob Rosenthal

BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD*
(words by Langston Hughes, circa 1927 & music by Ray Kamalay, 1981) (3:45) — Ray Kamalay (Lansing, MI)

MOVING DAY
(Sterling & Von Tilzer, 1906) (2:20) — John O'Connor (Seattle) and Deb Hunemuller

WE'RE GONNA STAY
(Mike Rawson, © 1980, Fuse Music) (4:17) — Mike Rawson and Rob Rosenthal

Produced, recorded and engineered by Rob Rosenthal and Mike Rawson at Fuse Music in Seattle and Santa Barbara in 1981 and 1982.

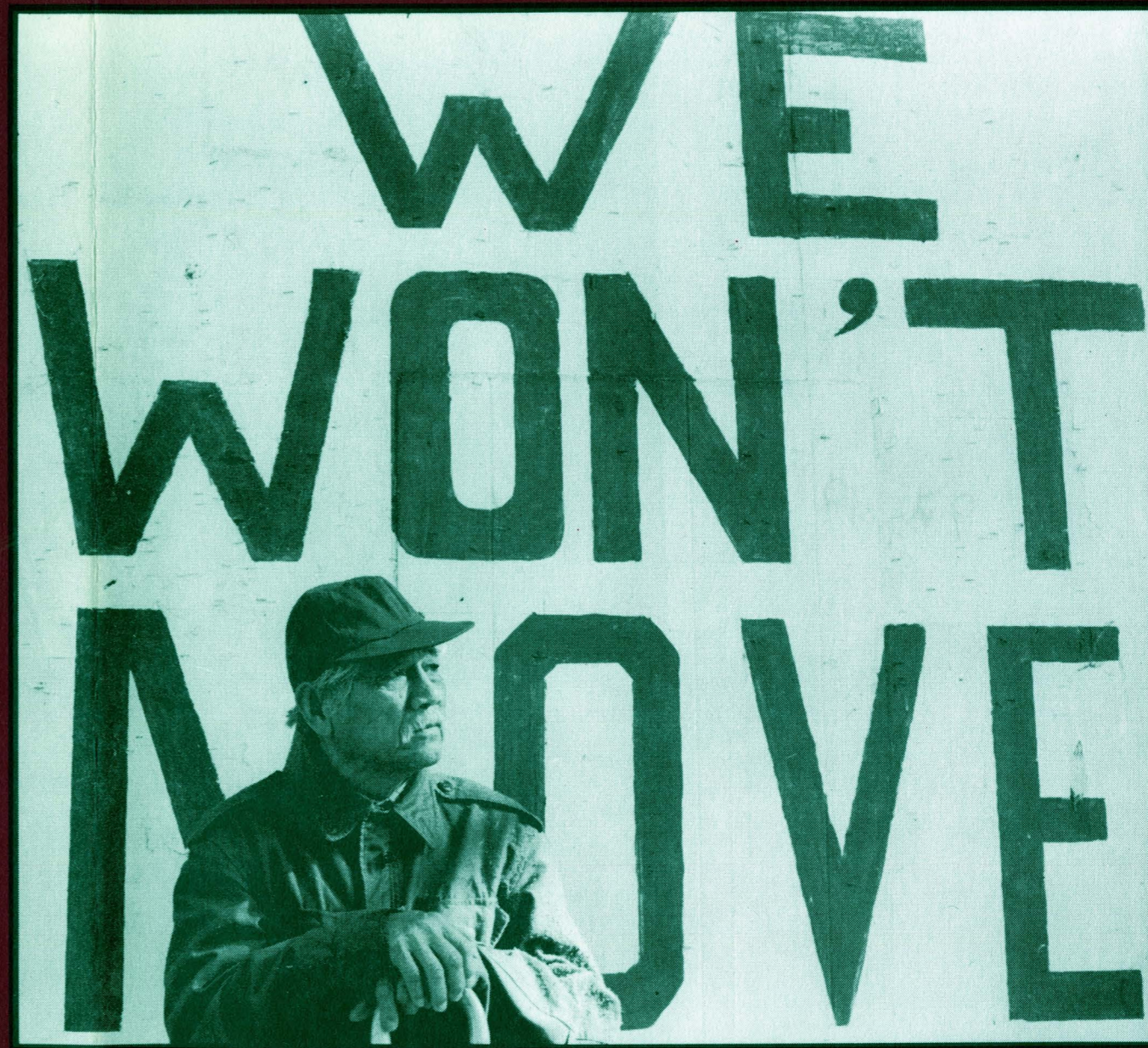
*Produced by Charles Ipcar and recorded and engineered by Gary Reid at DGA Productions, East Lansing, Michigan in 1982.

**Originally released on "Another Country Heard From," Folkways, FN 2524, 1960.

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WE WON'T MOVE—SONGS OF THE TENANTS' MOVEMENT



SONGS OF THE TENANTS' MOVEMENT

WITH MALVINA REYNOLDS, JIMMY COLLIER AND TENANTS FROM THROUGHOUT AMERICA

CHRF & FUSE MUSIC FOLKWAYS FS 5287

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WE WON'T MOVE

SONGS OF THE TENANTS' MOVEMENT

Feudal Beginnings

The tenant-landlord relationship so prevalent in the United States today had its beginnings with the decline of the feudal system of land-holding in 14th Century England. The agrarian economy of feudalism was being gradually displaced by the mercantile economy based upon commerce between growing towns, and political power was becoming concentrated in the Monarchy. Aiding this economic revolution was the Black Death of 1348-9, an epidemic which devastated the population causing a severe scarcity of rural labor. Landowners, already finding it difficult to profit from agriculture, secured the enactment of laws which forbade peasants from leaving the feudal estates to seek work in the towns. The result was the Peasant Rebellion of 1381. Serfs and others bound to the land seized and destroyed the records of their bondage and won from the lords the right to farm and occupy the land in exchange for a reasonable rent. So came to be two new classes: Tenants and landlords.

But the early tenant farmers of England had a difficult time making a living at farming. Not only did they have the agrarian economic decline to contend with, but they were constantly subjected to rent increases by their landlords who were also attempting to surmount the decline. Tenants, unable to pay the rent, were "ejected," as it was then called, by their landlords. While during the earlier prosperous days landowners had provided food and shelter for the destitute and homeless, as economic conditions worsened such aid ceased, the landed being more concerned with looking out for themselves.

This situation is described in "Mock-Beggar Hall," an English "broadside" written somewhere around 1550. In it the speaker recalls earlier days when almshouses had been provided for the homeless by landlords. At the time the broadside is written however, the "young landlords" (of the newly emerging landlord class) are only concerned with collecting and raising rents, while permitting almshouses to become "down fallen." Thus the landlords made a mockery of what had been better, more charitable times.

MOCK-BEGGAR HALL

I read, in ancient days of yore, that men of worthy calling,
Built almshouses and spittles store, which now are all downfalling;
And few men seek them to repair, nor is there one among twenty,
That for good deeds takes any care, while Mock-Beggar Hall stands
empty.

Young landlords when to age they come, their rents they will be
racking;

The tenant must give a golden sum, or else is turned out packing;
Great fines and double rent beside, or else they'll not content be,
It is to maintain their monstrous pride while Mock-Beggar Hall
stands empty.

It may well be that some will muse wherefore, in this relation,
The name of Mock-beggar I do use without an explanation;
To clear which doubt before I end, because they shall all content
be,

To show the meaning I do intend of Mock-Beggar Hall still empty.

Some gentlemen and citizens have, in divers eminent places,
Erected houses, rich and brave, which stood for the owners graces;
Let any poor to such a door come, they expecting plenty,
There they may ask till their throats are soar, for Mock-Beggar
Hall stands empty.

The Digger Movement

The English Civil War (1642-49) changed nothing for the landless. Although two-thirds of the land remained uncultivated due to the agricultural economic decline, it was fenced by landlords and tillage was forbidden. In 1649 a group of "Diggers" came with spades and took a plot of land in Surrey "because our necessity for food and raiment require it." They held out for an entire year before the landlords drove them off. Leo Rosselson's song describes their struggle.

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

In 1649, to Saint George's Hill
A ragged band they called the Diggers came to show the peoples' will
They defied the landlords, they defied the laws,
They were the dispossessed reclaiming what was theirs.

We come in peace, they said, to dig and sow,
We come to work the land in common and to make the wasteground grow
This earth divided, we shall make whole
So it shall be a common treasury for all.

We work, we eat together, we have no swords.
We will not bow to the masters or pay rent to the lords.
We are free (men), though we are poor,
You Diggers all stand up for glory, stand up now.

The sin of property we do disdain,
No man has any right to buy and sell the earth for private gain.
By theft and murder they took the land,
Now everywhere the walls spring up at their command.

They make the laws to chain us well.
The clergy dazzle us with heaven, while they damn us to Hell.
We will not worship the God they serve,
The God of greed who feeds the rich while poor folks starve.

From the men of property the orders came,
They sent the hired men and troopers to wipe out the Digger's claim
Tear down their cottages, destroy their corn
They were dispersed, only the vision lingers on.

You poor take courage, you rich take care,
This earth was made a common treasury for everyone to share.
All things in common, all people one,
We come in peace...the orders came to cut them down. (Repeat)

Colonial Expansion

Although many early settlers came to the "New World" to avoid landlordism, the tenant-landlord system was continued in much the same form in the colonies. Indeed, the greed and racism of the European conquerors of the Native American continents resulted in a reversion to pre-feudal practices in what is now the southern United States— black Africans were captured and brought to North America to work as agricultural slaves.

But after the Revolutionary War tenants, not being landowners, were denied the right to vote and hence the power to permanently change the situation. Except in Pennsylvania, only men who owned property could vote.

The Anti-Rent Movement

In the northern United States, many white tenant farmers, while of course better off than slaves, were subjected to virtual feudal practices. For instance, a lease drawn up by one Alexander Hamilton and utilized by landlords in southeastern New York State provided that tenants were to pay yearly rent of "a dozen bushels of wheat, several fowls, and a day's labor with horse and cart" in addition to paying all taxes and building roads.

In 1839 the tenants of that tract and others throughout the Hudson Valley began calling themselves "Anti-Renters" and resisted the landowners over the next forty years until the feudal "patroon" system, as it was called, was completely eliminated.

Throughout the Anti-Rent Movement, tenants resorted to whatever means worked to prevent being ejected, including violently opposing the expeditions of sheriff's deputies into farm country. They were able to maintain their blatant insurrection in part because of the support of the city dwellers—workers, bosses and bankers alike. All saw the absentee landlords as doing little to help the local economy. Many wry and rousing songs and poems were written for this movement including the one below, penned around 1844 to the popular tune "Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?"

THE LANDLORD'S LAMENT

The Helderberg boys are playing the dickens!
The night of confusion around me now thickens,
Unless the rent business with some of us quickens,
We'll all have to live without rents!

CHORUS: Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Dear, Dear, what can the matter be?
What shall I do with my tenants? How shall I get all my rents?

I used to get rich through the poor toiling tenants,
And I spent all their earnings in pleasures satanic,
But now I confess I'm in a great panic,
Because I can get no more rent!

My tenants once to my office were flocking,
Some without a coat, or a shoe, or a stocking,
But now I declare it is really shocking,
To know I shall get no more rent.

I must give up this business I vow it's no use to me,
It's been a continual source of abuse to me;
The friends of equal rights give no peace to me
Until they get clear of the rent.

Hard Times in the Country

The great plantations of the South, founded on slave labor, crumbled after the Civil War. Unable to run the large estates without free labor, the plantation owners, much like their early English predecessors, sold their land to those who could afford it—mainly entrepreneurs who then rented out small plots to poor blacks and whites. Many of these tenants became known as sharecroppers because they paid their rent in crops. But whether the rent was paid in cash or crops, Southern tenant farmers were barely able to make ends meet. The rents were too high and the plots too small for the tenant families to cultivate a decent living.

Yet, in the face of this, like the Anti-Renters before them, these tenant farmers struggled on with spirit and a sense of humor, expressed here in "Down On Penny's Farm." Known in other versions as "Down on Robert's Farm," this song evolved in the South sometime near the turn of the century. The version included here combines the verses of both.

DOWN ON PENNY'S FARM

Come you ladies and you gentlemen and listen to my song;
I'll sing it to you right but you might think it's wrong;
May make you mad, but I mean no harm:
It's all about the renters on Penny's farm.

CHORUS: It's hard times in the country, Down on Penny's farm.

Now you move out on Penny's farm,
Plant a little crop of 'bacco and a little crop of corn.
He'll come around to plan and plot
Till he gets himself a mortgage on everything you got.

You go to the fields and you work all day,
Till way after dark, but you get no pay.
Promise you meat or a little lard,
It's hell to be a renter on Penny's farm.

Now here's George Penny come into town
With a wagon-load of peaches, not one of them sound.
He's got to have his money or somebody's check;
You pay him for a bushel and you don't get a peck.

Then George Penny's renters they come into town,
With their hands in their pockets and their heads hanging down.
Go in the store and the merchant will say:
"Your mortgage is due and I'm looking for my pay."

Goes down in his pocket with a trembling hand—
"Can't pay you all but I'll pay you what I can."
Then to the telephone the merchant makes a call:
"They'll put you on the chain gang if you don't pay it all."

Yes Mr. George Penny has a big Overland;
He's a little tough luck, he don't give a damn.
He'll run in the mud like a train on the track,
He'll haul you to the mountains but he won't bring you back.

Hard Times Find the City

By the 1830's in New York City and later elsewhere, industrialization had induced the migration of many from the farms to the factories of the northeastern cities. This resulted in the appearance of the first large urban tenement ghettos, as multi-storied apartment houses were constructed to house the influx of workers. Bank supported speculation drove rents up and encouraged landlords to ignore repairs, and the first slums "blossomed." In 1848, the tenants of New York City formed the "Tenants League" which unsuccessfully proposed rent controls and laws against arbitrary eviction. It wasn't until after the Civil War that urban tenants achieved some success when the first building codes were enacted.

Because many of these urban tenants were also factory workers, the plight of tenants and workers were often connected—high rent took from workers' wages what could have been used for other necessities, and low wages meant less money for rent. It was also not uncommon that the owners of industry were the owners of the tenements, having used the profits they made from workers to make even more money by collecting rent from workers. Not content to be labor's boss, they became labor's landlord.

The Single Tax Movement

Consequently, labor and tenant struggles were often combined in local movements. During the Depression of 1873, out-of-work tenant-workers demanded suspension, during the winter months, of the mass evictions that were occurring. In the 1880's the Single Tax Movement exploded in the industrial cities of the east. It was centered around the "single tax" economic plan advanced by Henry George in his book Progress and Poverty. George argued that the imposition of a single tax on landlords equivalent to the rent they charged would end real estate speculation and high rents and simultaneously provide government with adequate funds for redistribution to the poor. The Independent Labor Party of New York and Vicinity was founded on George's ideas and ran him for mayor in 1886— a race he nearly won.

Many songs were inspired by the Single Tax Movement, most being new lyrics written to popular tunes of the time. One of the cleverest was "Mary Had a Little Lot" by Mary C. Hudson. Sung to the tune of the famous nursery rhyme, the song provides a clear and biting critique of landlordism and land speculation.

MARY HAD A LITTLE LOT

Mary had a little lot, the soil was very poor;
But still she kept it all the same, and struggled all the more.
She kept the lot until one day, the people settled down;
And where the wilderness had been, grew up a thriving town.

Then Mary rented out her lot. She would not sell, you know.
And waited patiently about for prices still to grow.
They grew as population came, and Mary raised the rent;
With common food and raiment now, she could not be content.

She built her up a mansion fine; had bric-a-brac galore—
And every time the prices rose, she raised the rent some more.
"What makes the lot keep Mary so?" the starving people cry—
"Why, Mary keeps the lot, you know," the wealthy would reply.

"And so each one of you might be wealthy, refined and wise,
If only you had hogged some land, and held it for the rise."

Evictions

Landlords were quick to make use of their new legal weapons and during hard times mass evictions were common place. Adopting the tactics of the Anti-Renters, tenants took this sitting down— en masse in front of the doors of the tenants who were to be evicted. In the 1890's and early 1900's tenants in the northeastern cities again and again resorted to mass rent strikes and pickets to halt evictions, lower rents and win needed repairs. "Moving Day," a popular song of the early 1900's, describes the speed at which tenants could be evicted. It is an upbeat song about an extremely traumatic occasion, another example of the way that downtrodden people have retained their spirit by confronting hard times with a sense of humor. Playing this role, "Moving Day" has been performed often over the years by tenant songsters and bluegrass groups.

MOVING DAY

Landlord said this morning to me, "Give me your key, this one ain't free.
I can't live on nothin', you see, so pack up your bags and skidoo."
I'm just waitin' till my Bill comes home,
He's my honey from the honey comb,
He said he would never leave me alone, this morning,

CHORUS: Because its moving day, moving day. Rip the carpet up off the floor
Put on your overcoat, get out the door,
Because its moving day, pack up your bags and get away,
And if you can't pay your rent, you better live out in a tent
Because its moving day.

My rent's been due since the middle of May, what can I say?
I'm going away.
Gassed my Ford up, I'm leaving today. I'll get on the road and
I'll go, slow.
Come and get me Mr. Landlord man,
I'll be leavin' just as soon as I can,
I'm going back to Dixieland, this morning.

Hard Times in the City Revisited

During the Depression there was a virtual epidemic of urban evictions. With millions out of work and the wages of those who had a job slashed, countless people could not pay their rent. It was not unusual when entire apartment buildings were cleared of tenants. Paralleling the disintegration of communities in rural areas, whole neighborhoods were torn apart in the cities. For many communities, the imminent threat of wholesale evictions on top of massive unemployment was the last straw. Neighborhood "federations" were formed and many evictions forcibly halted by community members. Jail was a likely consequence of acting alone, especially if black, against the landlords whose money secured the backing of the police and the laws they enforced. Langston Hughes' poem tells of one man's experience in Harlem:

BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD

Landlord, Landlord, my roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you remember I told you about it way last week?
Landlord, Landlord, these steps is broken down.
When you come yourself, it's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you? Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.
What? You gonna get eviction orders? You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty, talk on - till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word if I land my fist on you.
Police! Police! Come and get this man.
He's trying to ruin the government and overturn the land.

Copper's whistle, patrol bell, arrest.
Precinct Station. Iron Cell. Headlines in the press:
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD, TENANT HELD NO BAIL
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.

The situation was tempered somewhat when the Office of Price Administration (OPA), the federal agency established during World War II to control wartime inflation, imposed residential rent controls. But although rent increases may have been curtailed, urban tenants were still faced with living in buildings that had been deteriorating throughout the Depression from lack of maintenance encouraged by government tax policies. Such is the state of affairs described by Gene Raskin's "Landlord," a song often performed by Josh White on his radio programs in the mid 1940's.

LANDLORD

Paint peelin' off the wall, dirt pilin' in the hall.
Ice on the pipes but no steam at all, Landlord! Landlord!
Low down, rottin', good for nothin'....

Gonna raise your rent some day, kick you out if you can't pay,
You and the god-dam O.P.A., Landlord! Landlord!
Low down, rottin', good for nothin'....

He's against Public housing, can't stand the fuss we're rousing,
We'll take care of him later, with a rat exterminator
Pay him a bonus, give him grease, for the right to sign a lease.
You can have dogs but kids must cease! Landlord! Landlord!
Rent collectin', disinfectin', labor baitor, negro hater,
Anti-semite, human termite, Landlord!

Plaster fell on grandma's head, this is what the landlord said,
"Why you kickin'? She ain't dead." Landlord! Landlord!
Lowdown, rotten, good-for-nothin'....
Listen to the faker whine, "Fully Rented" says the sign;
He really thought the war was fine, Landlord! Landlord!
Lowdown, rotten, good-for-nothin'....

He's against slum clearance, government interference,
Just a slimy old reptilian worth a cool eleven million.
Come on, neighbors, let's get wise; we can beat those greedy guys.
All we gotta do is organize, Landlord! Landlord!
Lowdown, rotten good-for-nothin',
Evil speakin', profit seekin', mercenary, reactionary Landlord!

The Dust Bowl Years

In addition to the general economic decline, years of soil erosion and drought resulted in farmland literally blowing away. Tenants had no choice but to move on to other regions, many going to California to become migrant workers. Many families and communities were broken up. Agnes Cunningham collected the "Song of the Evicted Tenant," written by 11 year old Icie Jewell in 1937. It zeroes in on the feelings of these tenants.

SONG OF THE EVICTED TENANT

(to House of the Rising Sun)

Way down in old St. Francis bottom, they call the Devil's Den,
Where many a poor tenant has lost their home
And me, O God, I'm one.

About the 20th of January, when God sent a great big flood,
It run the planters from their beautiful homes,
And now they live in tents.

The planter said to the tenants, "Oh boys how do you like this?"
"Oh boss it ain't a-hurting me,"
The tenants said to him.

"For if you live in a refugee camp or in some tenants' home,
You'd learn not to be a-feared of ice
Or of the burmin' sun.

"Oh boss don't you see where you done wrong when you throwed me out
of my shack,
And I had to build me a tent, out of my old picksack."

Aftermath of the Second World War

With the dissolving of the OPA after World War II, rent increases began again in earnest. Rent hikes were fueled by the shortage of housing precipitated by the influx of returning soldiers, the utter lack of planning for affordable housing by the local and state governments, and the federal government's sluggish implementation of legislation providing for the development of public housing.

"Pity the Downtrodden Landlord," originally from England, became an organizing song for the thousands of tenants in the United States threatened with eviction after federal rent control was lifted.

PITY THE DOWNTRODDEN LANDLORD

Please open you hearts and your purses to a man who is misunderstood.
He gets all the kicks and the curses, tho he wishes you nothing
but good.
He wistfully begs you to show him, you think he's a friend, not a
louse.
So remember the debt that you owe him, the landlord who rents you
his house.

CHORUS: So pity the down-trodden landlord and his back that is burdened
and bent.

Respect his grey hairs, don't ask for repairs,
And don't be behind with the rent.

When thunder clouds gather and darken, you can sleep undisturbed in
your bed;

But the landford must sit up and hearken, and shiver and wonder
and dread;

If you're killed, then you die in a hurry, and you never will know
your bad luck,

But the landlord is shaking with worry— "Has one of my houses
been struck?"

When a landlord resorts to eviction, don't think that he does it
for spite;

He is acting from deepest conviction, and what's right, after all,
is what's right.

But I see that your hearts are all hardened, and I fear I'm
appealing in vain;

Yet I hope my last plea will be pardoned, If I beg on my knees
once again.

Additional hardship was created by the number of landlords who refused to allow children in their buildings as the post-war baby boom took hold.

It is, of course, the children who suffer most from this discrimination, and Malvina Reynolds quite appropriately wrote "No House" from the perspective of a child who is a victim of it.

NO HOUSE

Oh, the cat has a house, and the rat has a house, and the dog and
and the mouse and the flea;

And the snail has a house, and the whale has a house, and they all
have a house but me.

CHORUS: The sign on every window says: "No children wanted here."
When I grow up the sign will say: "Landlords kindly stay away."

Oh, the cow has a house, and the sow has a house, and Truman has
a broad balcony;

There's hangars for planes, roundhouses for trains, garages for
cars, and taverns for bars,

And buildings for stores with seventeen floors, and money enough
for three world wars;

But they couldn't build a house for me.

Oh, the pig has a pen. There's a coop for the hen, and the bird
has a nest in the tree;

The snake has a hole, and so does the mole, but there's no kind of
place for me.

Urban "Removal" Blues

In the 1950's and 60's the federal, state, and local governments embarked on a massive program of urban renewal which, in most areas, failed miserably.

The combination of government sponsored destruction of poor neighborhoods, the failure of the private sector to build affordable housing, and the increasingly intolerable condition of low priced housing generated what were to be the first tenant organizing efforts of the new wave of the Tenant's Movement.

In the poorer neighborhoods of the larger cities, tenants with no place to go began organizing, as had tenants during the Depression and after World War II, and halted evictions and mounted rent strikes to force landlords to perform critical building maintenance. Again, Malvina Reynolds put her finger on the cruelty and absurdity of the situation:

THE FAUCETS ARE DRIPPING

CHORUS: The faucets are dripping in old New York City,
The faucets are dripping and Oh, what a pity!
The reservoir's drying because it's supplying the faucets that drip
in New York.

You can't ask the landlord to put in a washer,
He'd rather you'd move than to put in a washer,
The faucets are dripping, they sound in my ears,
The tap in the bathroom's been running for years.

There's a wild streak of green in the sink in the kitchen,
It comes from the rill trickling out of the plumbing,
The streams from the mountain, the pools from the lea
All run from my faucet and down to the sea.

You can't ask the landlord to put in a washer,
You can't ask the landlord to mend the old stairs,
He takes in the rents, and he lives in Miami,
Where faucets don't drip and there's sun everywhere.

The faucets are drippings, the landlord's content,
With every new tenant he raises the rent,
The buildings can crumble, the tenants can cry,
There's a shortage of housing, you'll live there or die.

They're building some buildings and new Lincoln centers,
It's sure working hell with the low-income renters,
They're jammed into rooms with the rat and the fly,
Where the faucets all drip and the floor's never dry.

Jimmy Collier's "Rent Strike Blues" chronicles the terrible conditions that drove tenants to strike. Jimmy wrote the song for the New City Movement of Chicago in 1966.

RENT STRIKE BLUES

I got the rent strike, I got the rent strike blues,
I got the rent strike, I got the rent strike blues,
Well if the landlord-y don't fix my building
Gonna have to try and move.

Well, I got rats on the ceiling, rats on the floor,
Rats all around, I can't stand it anymore,
Going on a rent strike, got to end these blues.
Well if the landlord don't fix my building,
Gonna have to try and move.

I went next door to see my friend,
Landlord won't fix the building and the roaches let me in,
Going on a rent strike, got to end these blues.
Well, if the landlord don't fix my building,
Gonna have to try and move.

Well, no fire-escape have we got, no money has the landlord spent,
If he don't fix the building, ain't gonna get next month's rent,
Got to go on a rent strike, got to end these blues.
If the landlord don't fix my building,
Gonna have to try and move.

Don't care what you do, don't care what you say,
Everybody black and white 'titled to a decent place to stay,
Going on a rent strike, got to end these blues.
If the landlord-y don't fix my building,
I ain't about, ain't about to move!

The New Tenant Movement

During the late 60's and early 70's inflation, accelerated by the War in Viet Nam and real estate speculation, drove rents and construction costs upward, while wages failed to keep pace. Because of this, an increasing number of tenants could not afford to pay the rents landlords would have to charge to make new buildings as profitable as other investments. Hence, private construction of apartments came to a virtual standstill in the late 1970's as developers turned to building large single family homes and condominiums, and government subsidy programs were insufficient to meet the growing need.

Unlike the sporadic, localized efforts of tenants in the past, however, this crisis spawned a nationwide housing movement that has been extremely effective in combating the economic forces tenants are up against. While the seeds of the housing crisis were sown in the 60's, so were the seeds of this new movement. Building on the efforts of the inner city organizations of the mid 60's, thousands of the people who had questioned and rebelled against the values of society that produced racism and the Viet Nam War turned to their communities and workplaces after the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements wound down.

Beginning with urban communities located near universities in the early 70's, tenant unions were organized in cities and towns throughout the country. Statewide organizations followed and finally the National Tenants Union was established in 1980.

This burgeoning movement has inspired many songs that have been used to rally communities around these issues:

- "Talking Tenant Blues" was originally written and sung for the organizing drives of the Santa Barbara (CA) Rent Control Alliance in 1977. It was recorded and issued on an EP record by CHAIN and subsequently distributed throughout the country.

TALKING TENANT BLUES

Yesterday out on my walk, I heard my landlord makin' a squawk—
"Oh tenant, my costs have risen, and if I don't pay 'em they'll
send me to prison!"

Well violins started playing.... I had to get out my hanky—
tears were rollin' down that poor man's face!

He said, "Mike, this hurts me more than you, but there's really
nothing I can do,
I gonna have to raise your rent— its just a matter of common
sense...

Just a few common cents a day, Mike— a few bucks a week, buddy!
Uh, that'll be another hundred dollars a month."

He had the contract in his paws, and told me about the "No Pet" clause.
I said, "I've got mice as big as cats." He said, "Aw son, we won't charge ya for that!"
I said, "My fridge is leaking on the floor, and they don't make parts for it anymore."
He said, "Oh your the one that's got the antique! That'll be another five aweek."
Nice guy. His mind's an antique....Too bad we can't auction it off and pay some of this rent.

He said that soon he'd make repairs, as my son fell down the broken stairs,
As the child cried on my sleeve, he said, "Keep that kid, you'll have to leave.
This is an adult community, son. Little kids just cause trouble— didn't you know that?" I looke at the stairs and said, "No, I didn't know that."

Well then my face turned red, and I had to say, "Whose buyin' this place, anyway?
Us tenants are buying this place, thats who, Us tenants are buying our homes for you!
And when the price is right, you will sell, For twice what you paid, I heard tell.
You'll sell to one of your landlord friends, and we'll turn around and buy it for him!"
"Now waid a damm minute," said my landlord, "I work very, very hard for my money." Now wait a damm minute," I said, "We work very, very hard for your money too."

We pay water, garbage, juice and gas; Cleaning deposit, first and last.
Why, I had to put down almost a grand, before I could even use the can.
And then the damm thing didn't work anyway— called you up to fix it and got a recording: "Tenants, I'll be gone 'till June. Send your rent to P.O. Box 25254 Palm Springs, California."

Then my landlord broke down and started to weep: "Yes, I make money while I sleep,
And I'm really grateful to you all, If there's anything I can do, just call!
Why, what would I do without you tenants?" Now that's a good question.... Probably wouldn't sleep so much!

So all you tenants listen well, from Newark to the "I" Hotel.
There's alot of work, we gotta do, if we're to own our homes and our lives too.
We've got to put things under control— a little rent control, condo control, speculation control, demolition control— but most of all, most of all OUR control!

- "You Can't Just Take Our Homes Away" is adapted from Holly Near's "Mountain Song," first by Tony Heriza for the slide show "We Will Not Be Moved" (Community Media Productions) and later by Charles Ipcar. It strikes at the heart of the neighborhood decimation wrought by the development decisions of private industry and government which hungrily eye property in formerly "undesirable" communities.

YOU CAN'T JUST TAKE OUR HOMES AWAY

I have lived in this city, as my mother did before me,
And you can't just take my home away, without me fighting,
No, you can't just take my home away.

Well, you make your city plans, try your dammedest to ignore us,
But you can't just take our homes away, without us fighting,
No, you can't just take our homes away.

These old buildings raised our children, and 'tho it's true they need repairing,
You can't just take our homes away....

We have lived in this city, through hard times we've helped each other,
And you can't just take our homes away....

You drive a big Mercedes car, you have a fancy education,
But you can't just take our homes away....

We have lived in this city, ties are deep and they are many,
And you can't just take our homes away.

- "We're Gonna Stay" was written for the 1980 Housing Conference sponsored by CHAIN, California's state-wide organization of housing groups. It reflects on the relation between plant closings and neighborhood disintegration as, once again, the interests of tenants and labor have come together.

WE'RE GONNA STAY

Red brick walls, leaky window panes,
A place to sleep and stay out of the rain.
But its much more than that, more than a roof and a floor—
Its shelter for my family, but a whole lot more,
Its the buts on the corner that gets me to work,
Its the store down the street where I know the clerk,
Its the school yard where my kids can raise their voices—loud,
Its where I start my day and end it proud.

CHORUS: Yes, I think I'm gonna stay this time,
I've paid for this place, why shouldn't I call it mine?
We've paid your taxes and we've bought your wine,
Landlord, this time we're gonna stay.

The place where I live is not my own,
Though I fix it myself and pay the loan,
Though I pay all the taxes and more with my rent,
Someday they'll sell this building, and I won't get a cent.
And thats just the way it is, I'm told, the way its gotta be,
The place I call my home will never belong to me.
The landlord takes the risk I'm told, sure do think thats funny.
What's he got to risk?— Gamblin' with my money.

But now I've got this notice saying we've got to move,
"Pay rent or leave," we've got to choose.
And the same thing is happening all over town,
We're all laid off and the plants shuttin' down.
But, damm it, we don't want to move, and even if we did.
We can't because these landlords refuse to take our kids.
And how can we afford to move— we can't afford to stay.
We have to fight to keep our homes, there's no other way.

So continues the struggle, the struggle for possession of a decent home in a stable community, free from the threat of dispossession. And as it continues, it does so with increasing strength and success— and with song.