

The People's Storyteller

By David Moberg

Studs Terkel is a busy man. On a Sunday afternoon, when I stopped by his house on a pleasant cul-de-sac in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, he had just returned from lunch with writers Barbara Ehrenreich and Tom Geoghegan—having picked up some local Indian newspapers on his way out of the restaurant to get a feel for what's happening in that immigrant community. The week before, he'd been in New York to speak at a centenary reflection on John Steinbeck. He was flying out early Monday morning to New York to pay tribute to poet Gwendolyn Brooks, rushing back to Chicago by Wednesday for the annual Studs Terkel Award ceremony for local journalists, then leaving later in the month for Los Angeles. A few months ago, he had been on tour for his latest book; now he was already working on the next.

His crumpled calendar book was full of other entries, but one day in particular stood out and underscored the significance of that active schedule. On May 16, Terkel turns 90 years old, and his lifelong home city is sponsoring two birthday tributes to the man who is not only one of its most celebrated literary figures, but also a quirky and endearing persona who captures some of the fading romantic spirit of a metropolis that likes to think of itself as a "city of neighborhoods."

"Here's the crazy thing," Terkel reflects, "a guy who was blacklisted is now a half-assed iconic figure. It's funny. It's ironic. I'm not suggesting blacklisting as a career move for young people, but if it weren't for the blacklist, I wouldn't be doing these books, you see."

In the early '50s, Terkel was a pioneer with the small but influential "Chicago school" of television personalities, but he was also a person who "never saw a petition I didn't like." His political commitments narrowed his broadcast options to a local FM radio station. But with the encouragement of publisher Andre Schiffrin, he translated his gift for interviewing from the airwaves to the printed page, producing over the

years a collection of oral histories, including *Working, Hard Times, Race, Division Street*. The Great Divide, "The Good War" (which won the Pulitzer prize) and, most recently, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith* (The New Press).

Covering roughly 75 years of American history, Terkel's books capture the experiences and reflections of a cross-section of Americans—a few famous, most of them little-known, many from poor or working-class backgrounds on some of the great issues of their time, or in some cases, of any time. These assembled personal tales do not constitute a grand, explanatory narrative, but they are a reminder that history is lived through

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