

Hi Friends,

After the release of *A Complete Unknown*, Bob Dylan performed more often and sold more records than he had for a long time. Another event had driven his popularity a decade earlier—winning the Nobel Prize in Literature for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition. Dylan acknowledged that this tradition was preserved and expanded by the foundational work of Carl Sandburg a hundred years earlier.

This month's letter, "America in Song," chronicles *The American Songbag*, Sandburg's momentous contribution to the world of folk music.

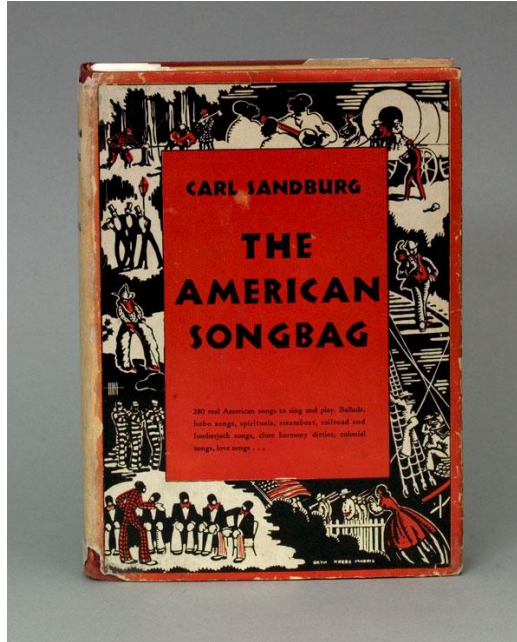
Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

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# ***Letters from a Sandburg Docent***

**John W. Quinley**



*...an All-American affair, marshaling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans.*

## **America in Song**

**July 2025**

Dear Readers,

Sandburg not only sang folk songs, but he also collected and preserved them in his *American Songbag*, published in 1927. The book quickly became a standard in households across America and remained in print continuously for seventy years.

The *American Songbag* contains lyrics and piano accompaniment for two hundred eighty folk songs—a hundred of which had never been published before. It includes meticulous annotations and notes for individual songs, in which Sandburg describes how he acquired the song, where it originated, and how it changed over time. For example, he traces, “Turkey in the Straw,” to early minstrel songs. Sandburg explains that “It has been sung at horses and

mules from a million wagons. It has a thousand verses, if all were gathered.” And for “As I Walked Out in the Streets of Laredo,” he chronicles:

*A cowboy classic known in several tunes from the spaces patrolled by the Northwest Mounted to those where the Texas Rangers keep law and order, more or less. The air is old Irish and many of the lines are almost literally from old broadsides peddled in Dublin these years now gone.*

The book presents the history of America as told in the songs of the common folk. It was a history meant not only for literary anthologies and magazines, but also for the “homes, heads, and hearts of ordinary Americans.”

Sandburg said, “This whole thing is only in its beginning, America knowing its songs,” and he dedicated the *Songbag*

*To those unknown singers—who made songs out of love, fun, grief—and to those many other singers—who kept those songs as living things of the heart and mind—out of love, fun, grief.*

He felt deeply that in the songs of the people there is truth—an expression of the national character at its core.

The book contained many tunes now considered folk song standards, including the “Ballad of the Boll Weevil,” “C.C. Rider,” “The John B. Sails,” “The Weaver,” “Casey Jones,” “Shenandoah (as the Wide Mizzoura),” “Mister Frog Went A-courting,” “The Farmer (Is the Man Who Feeds Them All),” “Hangman,” “Railroad Bill,” “La Cucaracha,” “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” “Midnight Special,” “The House Carpenter,” and “Frankie and Johnny.” These songs inspired such legends as the Weavers, Woody Guthrie, and Burl Ives; and later, the Kingston Trio, Pete Seeger, Leadbelly, and the New Lost City Ramblers. Other twentieth-century folk,

pop, rock, and country music artists who recorded songs from the *Songbag* included the Beach Boys, Johnny Cash, the trio of Peter, Paul, and Mary, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Dan Zanes, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan.

Dylan visited the elderly Sandburg in 1964. He knocked on the famous poet's door and said: "You're Carl Sandburg. I'm Bob Dylan. I'm a poet, too." They visited for about twenty minutes on the front porch, and Dylan handed Sandburg a copy of his newest album, *The Times They Are A-Changin*. One of Dylan's companions on that occasion later noted, "I distinctly felt like there was a passage of honor between the young prince and the old king." Dylan would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition—a tradition, Dylan acknowledged, that was preserved and expanded by the foundational work of Sandburg.

Thanks for reading,

**John Quinley** is the author of *Discovering Carl Sandburg* and is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at [jwquinley@gmail.com](mailto:jwquinley@gmail.com).