

**"Work is about a search for daily meaning  
as well as daily bread." -Studs Terkel**

# **WORK SONGS**

**a film by Mark Street**



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## **WORK SONGS**

Directed by Mark Street

2019, 68 minutes

In English with French subtitles

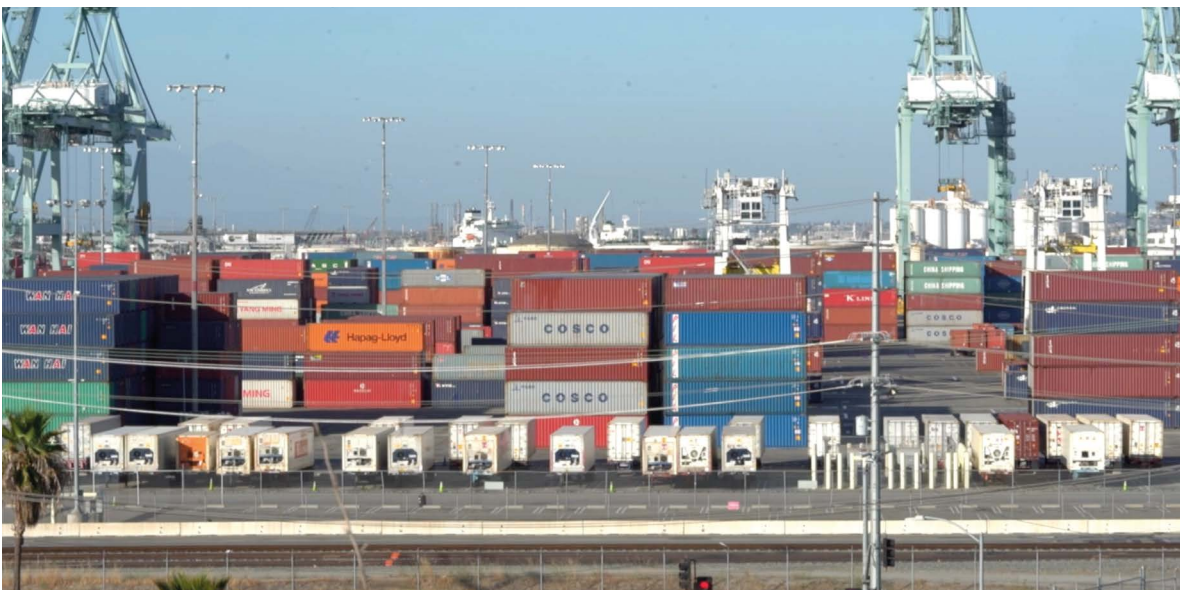
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### **SYNOPSIS**

Inspired by the work of the great Studs Terkel, **WORK SONGS** is a kaleidoscopic portrait of the United States at work. Interviews with cab drivers, longshorewomen, a farmer, a barista and others discuss threats from automation, the gig economy and the decline of unions. Each section reveals a different aspect of our evolving relationship to labor, and allows the viewer to reflect on their own negotiation of economic concerns, satisfaction and a larger social good.

*“Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”*

**– Studs Terkel**



## DIRECTORS BIOGRAPHY

Mark Street graduated from Bard College (B.A, 1986) and the San Francisco Art Institute (M.F.A., 1992). He has shown work in the New York Museum of Modern Art Cineprobe series (1991, 1994), at Anthology Film Archives (1993, 2006, 2009), Millennium (1990,1996), and the San Francisco Cinematheque (1986, 1992, 2009). His work has appeared at the Tribeca (5 times), Sundance, Rotterdam, New York, London, San Francisco, New York Underground, Sarajevo, Viennale, Ourense (Spain), Mill Valley, South by Southwest, and other film festivals.



## CREDITS

Producer & Director.....Mark Street  
Editing.....Mark Street & Sarah Jacobson  
Sound Design.....Quentin Chiappetta at Medianoise  
Additional Camera.....Mark Street & Sarah Jacobson  
Field Producer, California.....Eric Saks  
Distribution Consultant.....Jim Browne at Argot Pictures  
Camera.....Rafael Abreu-Canedo (Pittsburgh)  
Ethan Mass (New York)  
Phoebe Sudrow (California)  
Andy Black (Seattle)

## FEATURING

Ben Dubow	Tiffany May
Charles Crawley	Caye Guillen
Dan Gilman	Sarah Marriage
Claire Ward	Matthew Crawford
Art Almeida	Andreas Stresemann
Roxanne Lawrence	Lisa Winn
Michelle Lawrence	Allen Murray
Maureen Gutierrez	Lienne Harrington
James Browne	Patrick Tierney
Ronold J. Tracy	Keisha Holness
Joe Coleman	Joel Salatin
Corey Streeter	Jen Batters
Cristina Sario	Giancarlo Debellies D'Alessandro



**TRAILER**

[www.worksongstrailer.com](http://www.worksongstrailer.com)

**WEBSITE**

[www.argotpictures-worksongs.com](http://www.argotpictures-worksongs.com)

## DIRECTORS ARTISTIC STATEMENT

My father was born during the Depression and sees work as a value in and of itself; something to stave off the other kind of depression, something that gives life meaning. He retired (begrudgingly) at 86, and had always defined himself through his work. As a kid I saw him escape the emotional vagaries of family life by going 'up to the office for a minute' the way others might sneak off to a bar or a social engagement.

His brother, my Uncle Robert, sold the grocery store he'd owned in Gadsen, Alabama when he was 54. The next week he woke up, made a pot of coffee and went out to the garage to start building some shelves, a home improvement project he'd been planning. Instead, he shot and killed himself. My father has often said that if Uncle Robert had just picked up a tool and started the work that morning he might have saved himself.

My first job in Wisconsin was as a paperboy; I had a morning route-- the papers were dropped off at around 5 AM, I folded and stuffed them into an over sized basket on the front of a black Schwinn bicycle and set off, often in the morning gloom. I was done by 6:30 or so, time enough to have breakfast and get to school by 8 AM. Some 42 years later I still remember which houses subscribed to the Beloit Daily News, which ones wanted theirs delivered to the back door, which had ferocious dogs and which customers had trouble paying up.

The other part of the job was 'collecting.' The newspaper asked us paperboys to collect the monthly cost of the paper and we gave them a large percentage of this cash every month; the remainder was our salary. In retrospect it strikes me as some sort of pure lesson on capitalism; get the lowliest workers to try to gather the money and leave them on the hook if they don't get it. I loved the PIA (paid in advance) customers, it was always sort of scary banging on an adult's door asking for money.

I had paper routes for two years (ages 12-14) and as I recall moved up to nicer neighborhoods; the final one being mostly PIA customers. I also moved to an afternoon route. I remember us afternoon paperboys gathering in our boss' garage to fold our stack of papers together, and being buoyed by the camaraderie and tall tales and the occasional prank. My boss' son and fellow paperboy once handed me a bowl of some sort of delicacy and insisted I take a bite-- "it's like a crouton." As soon as I did he informed me that it was a kernel of dog food. To this day I don't know why I wanted to take a bite of a crouton anyway.

For a summer I did gardening for a wealthy couple who had donated millions of dollars to the college where my father taught. They were a terrifying pair, though I mainly dealt with Mrs. Godfrey, who chain smoked filterless cigarettes and bellowed orders, her rubbery face like a clown's mask. I despised weeding in the hot sun, and could think of nothing other than getting out of there as soon as I arrived. When I see people today gardening for "pleasure" I immediately question their sanity. Mrs. Godfrey was loud, angry, unpredictable; and I now realize drunk all the time (my parents told me she and her husband were terrible alcoholics after she died of old age and he hung himself a week later sometime in the mid 90s.) Once when I did a half hearted job weeding a patch in the hot sun and told her I was done she came careening out of the house, stumbling like a colt, shouting "If you can weed

that garden in under an hour you're a better man than I am Gunga Din!" before pointing out my shoddy work. A few times their long-haired son showed up from out of town in his sports car and I was told to wash his car. He seemed to be impatient with me, his parents, the visit; he was probably waiting for his parents to die so he could inherit their money.

By law I could work in restaurants legally at 15, so things opened up a bit. I worked at a steak house dishwashing, but quit when I got a job at Wendy's, my first franchise. My last night at the steakhouse I took a bag of garbage to the dumpsters out back, pulled a pipe from my pocket got in a few hits of pot in. My manager (who couldn't have been more than 20) came out and caught me red handed. "What the fuck is this? Oh well, it's your last night." Later I grabbed a metal platter without realizing it had just been in the oven and burned my hand. Not sure if it had anything to do with my being slightly stoned, but it didn't look good.

At Wendy's I first encountered something I've been fighting my whole life; a sense of superiority in relation to the work place. I hated the managers with their corporate bromides, enthusiastic chirpings about the food, attempts to improve productivity, the uniforms and most of all the fact that I was the only one who seemed at odds with it all. Everyone else (mostly high school students like myself) seemed like they were taking it seriously, following the corporate protocol (wash grill every 2 hours, change French fry oil after each shift, always upsell the Frosty frozen dessert) and enjoying the thrill of a rush. "We got a school bus in the parking lot" I remember one manager intoning breathlessly while everyone scurried around, bracing for the storm. I just couldn't seem to care; and I was proud of my lack of interest, though I'm less so now.

As I look back, I see an intermittent work ethic in me across all the jobs I've had. I've engaged when I've wanted to, or when it's suited me, or when I found my co-workers interesting characters but as many times disdained the work community around me, felt most comfortable going against the grain. Maybe it's no more or less than privilege; a middle class sense that work has to interest me, or it doesn't matter.

I moved on to another fast food restaurant, this one privately owned. My attitude followed me though, and the manager was particularly disconcerted by my growing hair which I don't think he could tell me to cut for legal reasons, but he eventually did trim my hours, if not my hair. I remember going on a memorable ride one night with some co-workers in somebody's Camaro. We mixed vodka with orange soda from the fountain and I watched the speedometer rise from 80 to 100 up to 110 miles per hour on lonely country roads. At one point I looked back and the cook and waitress were locked in an amorous embrace in the backseat.

As if I needed any more evidence that love can flourish in the workplace I struck up an odd friendship with a Pakistani student at Beloit College who was working part time. He kept inviting me to his dorm room, and one time I went (cluelessly with a six pack of beer though he was Muslim) to play backgammon. At one point he turned to me and said that he had written a poem for me and recited it. I don't remember all of it but I do remember the lines "I love you because for me, you are youth itself". I don't think I'd met anyone either Muslim OR gay before. He was fired for refusing to clean a restroom a month later.

Then the sixteen-year-old Camaro driver announced that his girlfriend was pregnant. We all followed the pregnancy and he brought the kid named "Mark" by a few days after his birth. I guffawed and asked if he'd named his son after me. About a week later he and I were working together late at night and he looked at me seriously "Look, I don't want this to go to your head, but you seem like the kind of guy who might get the hell out of here someday, so I named my kid after you."

The next summer I answered an ad in the back of the paper about telephone soliciting and turned up to a hotel room off I-90 for an interview. I was hired on the spot to go through the phone book and pre sell photographic sittings for an outfit called Olan Mills. Phone soliciting is a terrible, terrible business on every level, but I didn't mind the work at all. We worked out of that same hotel room, 3 high school students and the woman who'd hired me. I don't remember her real name, but her stage, or rather phone name was Vera. As soon as she connected with a customer on the phone her voice slid into a sultry, seductive purr, and she was transformed from a heavy 60-year-old woman who'd spent her life on the road making phone calls into a young temptress. She ordered us gin and tonics from room service and I remember her as being sharp and funny, though she had some admonitions along the way. Once I called up a woman who burst into tears and said that no, she couldn't possibly schedule an appointment, her husband was dying of cancer. I apologized and hung up quickly, only to find Vera staring at me in disbelief. "That, Mark, is when you say 'Oh I'm sorry to hear that, but wouldn't now be the best time to take a family portrait that you'll have for years to come, even after he's gone?'" I don't remember when I exited that job, but I like to think not long after hearing that.

At 17 things opened up again; I was able to work in bars as long as I wasn't serving alcohol. I got a job at a supper club called the Butterfly right near the Illinois border. The place had a beautiful long bar, a nightly lounge singer guy belting out Barry Manilow and Frank Sinatra tunes. I think they catered to a Chicago crowd, which was a couple hours drive away. The two owners seemed connected in ways I couldn't fathom and I now realize were gay lovers. I took out the garbage, fetched ice, maybe stocked the liquor bottles. I remember being intrigued by the sloppy bar banter, watching customers get drunker and drunker, sensing when couples were going to fight-- all the cacophony of an intriguing alcoholic set piece. One night a guy slurred to his drinking buddy a phrase I just can't seem to unhear : "Come on though, have you ever had a bitch throw up when you put the pork in her? I have!"

The requirement was that I wear a white collared shirt and black pants. One evening I selected my Nicaraguan grandfather's guayabera from the closet and headed to work, without thinking anything of it. When I got in one of the owners met me with an icy stare and asked me to come out to the parking lot with him.

"What's with the shirt?"

"It's a white, collared shirt, just like you said"

"Oh, you know what I meant. You can pick up your last check next Tuesday; get the hell out of here."



I refused to apply to college, insisting that real work was what I wanted. I took a job at a truck stop cooking eggs 10 pm to 6 am. The back of the bar stage was right next to the kitchen and it was as if the country band was right there next to the fry station. The set list was always the same; “Elvira”, “Tight Fitting Jeans” “Out on the Bayou” “Put Another Log on the Fire” and on and on. After the bar closed truckers would come in, some canoodling with prostitutes who hung out drinking highballs at the counter. One guy always had the same order; “Two over easy with no snot on them”, another had a bladder problem and his pants were always wet. I remember liking the rush, the rhythm of the restaurant. Instead of chipper bosses fresh from management training classes at Wendy’s headquarters in Columbus, Ohio I was trained by a no nonsense African American woman in her 60s whose cooking ethos I still rely on. Still, one night I just couldn’t bring myself to come in, couldn’t face another all nighter. I never got a phone call, nor detected any visible anger when I went in to pick up my last check the next week. I’m sure no shows happen all the time in the restaurant business.

I ended up living and working on a friend’s family farm turned arts commune where I was forced to confront my resistance to actual work head on. John had been at Beloit College in the late 60s and hired his acid head friends to plow fields only to discover that their ‘commitment to the land’ was more of an abstract thing. An employer himself, he punctured holes in the idea that my previous bosses were stooges, and slacking was some sort of form of resistance. We built a staircase together, out of parts of a former pig pen, painted sheds, organized parties for artists, prepared his barns for wedding rentals. We had a lot of fun together, but John was a pure worker; thrilled to be in the thick of whatever project he’d taken on. He has a reflexive work ethic, untainted by personal considerations. It’s work for work’s sake, and the joy is in completing a task well, toting up accomplishments at the end of the day. I put in solid time on that farm, but I don’t have that Calvinist spirit; or at least it’s not consistent in me.

Somehow, I think sometime in the ‘60s, the cultural left rejected the notion that hard work and resistance were compatible. I’m an inheritor of the poisoned legacy that it’s cool to be a slacker; and I’m ashamed to say a part of me has always considered work avoidance some sort of hip way of sticking it to the man.

Finally I ended up in college, partly because I couldn’t figure out what my relationship to work was, a time honored tradition, for sure. During winter breaks and summers I worked for Buildings and Grounds at Bard College; clearing snow, cutting grass, repairing an occasional dorm room trashed by a student. The town/gown dynamic (which I’d grown up around in Wisconsin) was accentuated during these academic breaks. Each Friday night we bought a keg and shared it with those who worked there throughout the year. Later we went in on grams of cocaine, but somehow these parties just brought out differences between us. One guy who’d worked there for 20 years fell hard for a student who was having a fling with him. He ended up leaving his wife, then later breaking into the student’s apartment in a rage and destroying the taped documentations of the dance pieces she’d been working on throughout her college career.

The summer after Junior year five of us decided to drive to Alaska to work in the canneries, a Steinbeckian rite of passage for college students at the time. We drove across the country,

took the ferry up to Petersburg, Alaska and waited for the fish to come in. And waited and waited. We stayed in tents pitched on wooden platforms out near the town dump. The platforms were rented out by the local police chief who came and collected \$3 a day from each of us. Should the local peace officer have been collecting rent from visitors camping while waiting for work? Probably not, but we were in no position to argue, as we heard bears rifle through the town dump some 200 yards from our tents. We were getting broker and broker, eating meals provided by Bahai congregants in a local park. Finally the fish started coming in. Our first week on the job it was explained that we needed coveralls, boots, goggles and gloves in order to properly stand on the line and cut the innards out of the fish; and those items could be purchased in the company store-- the cost would come out of our first paycheck. Pure lesson in capitalism #2! We were all together and bonding did occur but it was a pretty miserable summer. "Sliming" was the job description, and it was apt. Also we felt more vulnerable to the bears when we came back to the camp stinking of fish.

I moved to San Francisco after graduation and sought out temp positions. One led to a full-time file clerk job at a white shoe law firm on the 25th floor of a downtown building. The hours were 4 to midnight; the idea was I could make films during the day and not be taxed by a job that sapped my energy or my creative mojo, such as it was. I felt it was my duty at that job to do as little as possible, my own little thumb in the eye of corporate America. There was no time clock, so I'd get in at 4 pm, fuck around for a few hours and then take my leave, sometimes at early as 7 pm. It was a bit of a cat and mouse game, as some lawyers worked late; but they weren't looking for me and, as long as they didn't see me actually walking out of the building all was cool. In terms of accountability, I had a system. Each night I'd look at the stack of documents to be filed and choose the very thickest and file those so that the stack would appear diminished considerably in the morning, though at times I'd only filed some 8 or 10 documents out of hundreds. The day clerk hated me with a passion because whatever I left fell to her, but she never said anything and I was able to leave that job before getting fired.

I ended up getting a job at film lab, printing rolls of films in small darkrooms. It was within the general field of filmmaking, not too exciting, but I liked the dark, learning the machinery, training my hands to move quickly by feel along the edges of original film shot by Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Hammer or George Lucas. My co-workers were fun, there was a pool table in the break room, and it was a family owned operation with a big heart. The owner was a colorful Italian American whose father had started the lab and as an amateur photographer had taken iconic photographs of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. He once told me that he had the utmost respect for the pornography producing Mitchell Brothers as businessmen "Those guys pay their bills, it's the lefty documentarians making films about El Salvador who are always trying to get something for nothing."

The film business was drying up, moving over to tape, then the digital realm I wasn't quite trained in, so after graduate school I was out of a job. I ended up taking a job as a bike messenger, first delivering packages up and down the hills of San Francisco, hustling to make it worth my while. Then they put me on a set route; delivering plane tickets for American Express to a few office buildings. Cushy, steady, but not quite as exciting as rushing all over the city. I felt a new contempt from the tattooed lifers as we sipped beer in the dispatch

office on Friday nights; it was as if they thought I was doing less than they were, and of course I was.

In 1997 I got a semester job teaching film at the University of South Florida filling in for a prof who'd had a car accident ("Ambulance chaser!" a friend tweaked me). I moved down there from NYC, rented an unfurnished apartment and ended up walking to the University along a highway because I couldn't afford a car. Not having a car in Florida is like being a half citizen, and once a student of mine pulled over and offered me a ride, horrified that his tuition dollars had hired someone who couldn't even get himself a vehicle. Then came a six year teaching gig in Maryland, and then the job I've had for 15 years now, teaching at a Jesuit University in Manhattan.

Academia has been very close to the perfect job for me and yet one I still don't completely identify with. I love the performative aspect, the students, the ideas, the feedback loop between my own artistic practice what my students are exploring. But some major part of me still considers it a 'day job', something that doesn't define or contain me, though I know of course it does both. Sitting in some protracted faculty meeting about some task force on drafting a mission statement I think "I am not like you people." My superiority complex is hardly conquered.

If teaching is my 'day job', what of filmmaking, the artistic enterprise which doesn't pay the rent but houses my passion? I resist grand pronouncements about the creative process but I do know making films is the thing that consumes, frustrates, excites, saddens, engages, and repulses me the most. These contradictions make it real to me, and I feel no need to separate myself from it; nor do I feel superior to it. It doesn't support me financially; but it does sustain me emotionally in an almost physiological way. I fear it, love it, loathe it, am in awe of it, and I know that I can't ever possibly retire or quit.

For the last few years I've been all over the country asking people on camera about (what else?) their jobs. I've interviewed longshorewomen in San Pedro, Ca, UPS drivers, a crossing guard in Brooklyn, factory workers in North Carolina, a chef in Connecticut, scientists and cab drivers in Pittsburgh among others. It comes out of one my favorite dinner table conversation starters-- 'what's the weirdest job you ever had?' People can talk for hours.