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Peace Is the World Smiling. Music for Little People.

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At the rally outside the San Francisco City Hall following the murder of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk on November 27, 1978, those gathered to mourn and to protest the violence and homophobia sang: "We are a gentle, angry people/ And we are singing, singing for our lives." To my ear and my heart, that song sets the standard against which all other songs of peace may be measured. It rouses and confronts violence as forcibly as any protest song, eliciting full-throated assertion of anger and grief, but it enacts a solidarity of non-violent singing rather than violent resistance to injustice and prejudice. In additional verses, the singers avow solidarity with "justice-seeking people," "anti-nuclear people," "anti-racist people," "anti-sexist people," "young & old together," "gay & lesbian people," "gay & straight together," and "a land of many colors."[1] <p> I like the idea of this CD of peace songs and like what the songs attempt, but, as samplers often do, <cite>Peace Is the World Smiling</cite> lacks an emotional core, a drive and development that reaches beyond the sum of its parts. I wish there were room here, as there used to be on jackets of 33rpm albums, for some narrative explaining the mission of the Music for Little People organization and the origin of the several songs sung by children avowing such sentiments as "Peace is a quiet countryside," "Peace is a world smiling," and "Peace is a furry Easter bunny." I want to know more about the collaboration between children and their adult teachers that produced songs such as "Hug the Earth" ("I love her, she loves me/ I hug the earth, the earth hugs me/ She's our friend. . .") or the didactic "Make Peace" ("Every unkind word so you say, comes right back to you/ Sharing spreads the smiles around,/ That's the Golden Rule"). The best piece to come from this collaboration of children and adults is the Mr. Rogers-like "Kids' Peace Song" with the bouncy chorus: "People come in different sizes/ Color, shapes, and names/ Though we're different on the outside/ Inside I think we're the same." I can imagine the children in an alternative kindergarten around the block from me singing this and taking it to heart. Many of the Music for Little People cuts on this CD address peace at home and peace as a condition of everyday quiet life and respect.[2] <p> Other songs offer a more pungent political-economic analysis: Taj Mahal explains in song the weight of poverty and its way of demeaning those who suffer from it, reminding us in the chorus that "Everybody is somebody, nobody is nobody. . . ." Several of the most affecting narratives on the CD don't make it to the notes. Babatunde Olatunji introduces "Aiye Mire" with a brief tale of an African boy swept up in the British preparations for World War II; he resists and becomes a CO (Conscientious Objector) and asks "Aiye Mire baba? Is this my war father? . . . mother? . . . my friend? . . . my mother? . . . Please don't frighten us to death even before the war." Olatunji ends the cut by connecting that boy's story to our own fear today of the nuclear threat to world peace. Pete Seeger's "If I Had A Hammer" is prefaced by a little voice explaining that maybe a hero is not just "a guy who shoots guys dressed in black, maybe he can be a person who carries a guitar and sings" about living together peacefully. This cut is especially rousing as Seeger shouts out the familiar lyrics to an enthusiastic audience which sings back in unison: "If I had a song/ I'd sing it in the morning/ . . . I'd sing out love between/ my brothers and my sisters/ All over this land." <p> There are several nice instances on this CD where a voice not included in the album notes supplies a bit of narrative that works as a kind of mortar between the separate chunks of set songs, such as the voice of Olatunji setting up the "Aiye Mire" song and the voice of the little girl casting Seeger as a "hero who carries a guitar and sings for peace." Especially moving is a tale told by an old woman and introducing, obliquely, Holly Near's "Voices." The woman tells us a tale of a settler family who decided to trust in God, did not keep guns or weapons, and left their latch string out even though the Indians surrounded their cabin. The Indians saw and respected this act of trust and reciprocated, leaving a white feather over the door to signal to other Indians that "this is the home of a man of peace, do not harm him." "Like this family" she concludes, "let us try to make the power of peace . . . real in our homes and our world." Her sim-

ple, earnest tale speaks equally to children and adults, as did Olatunji's earlier. Holly Near follows with her sung appeal to "Listen to the voices of the old women,". . . "of the Indian Nations," and "of the young children." To me, the Olatunji story and song, the Seeger (too brief) cut, and the old woman's tale capped by Near's song make this CD a keeper. <p> I feel less sure evaluating the softer and sweeter children's chorus pieces, which bracket the core performances by Olatunji, Seeger, Taj Mahal, and Near. My ear and heart resonate more to the earlier and grittier peace and protest songs I learned in the 1950s, songs like the traditional "Johnny I Hardly Knew You" (Irish), "I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier" (1914), and "The Peat-Bog Soldiers" (1933). I am less moved by the softer songs sung by children and to children here. Another ear, perhaps one more used to singing to and with children today, might weigh these cuts and detect and appreciate qualities I overlook, and find that these pieces contribute importantly to promoting peace through story and song, the aim of the Music For Little People group that released this CD. Each teacher and family will judge for themselves. <p> [1]. <cite>Rise Up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook</cite>, eds. Peter Blood & Annie Patterson (Bethlehem, Penn.: The Sing Out Corporation, 1992), p. 218. <p> [2]. Five of the fifteen cuts are copyrighted by Music For Little People. Others are drawn from albums by Taj Mahal, Folkway Records, Redwood Records, Moose School Music, Peacemakers Foundation, and Flying Fish Records. <p>

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