Foreword

I have a rubric for what it means to be of a given economic class in modern America that I feel is both reasonably true to lived experience and more-or-less factually accurate:

- To be poor is to know that you'll come up short each month.
- To be working class is to worry that you'll come up short each month.
- To be middle class is to expect that unless something out-of-the-ordinary happens by accident or design, you won't come up short each month.
- To be rich is to start each month with the only relevant question "how much more do I want to exit with at its end?"
- To be "super-rich" is to be rich without the need to hold down a job.

I have never personally experienced the two extremes, but I remember well what it was like, as a young kid, tobe a member of a (sometimes tenuously) working class family.

By 2008, I had begun to experience the feeling of "rich." I had "done well by doing good" as part of a small group of people who had offered Microsoft a new path forward on open-source software (OSS)—one that was constructive and collaborative. We'd convinced the decision-makers who mattered it was the smart thing to do.

I had mad respect from some of the most senior and formidable folks at the company, including the general counsel and the deputy general counsel for intellectual property (IP). I was welcome as a speaker at the Berkman Center at Harvard and any number of tech conferences. Luminaries of the OSS community would be more than happy to buy me a drink (if only to give them the opportunity to me how the hell we'd managed it).

And the CEOs of commercial OSS companies wanted to make deals.

The early days of the Great Recession found me at a conference at a fancy hotel in San Francisco. Amidst what still seemed heady days in tech (at least from where I was sitting) individuals and families were being clobbered—needlessly.

Federal help was anemic, and in my increasingly blue-and-wealthy home state (Washington) a Democratic governor chose a path of austerity.

I was pissed.

At the nexus of open source, memories of hard times, present privilege, and being a musician oriented toward folk and the story-telling style of Bruce Springsteen and Leonard Cohen, I responded with what became "*Hard Times Hundred and One: My project to write 101 original Americana songs inspired by photos from the Great Depression.*"

Nearly 200,000 photos commissioned by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, including the work of the late great Dorothea Lange, had been digitized by the Library of Congress and were available online.

As Federal IP, they were in the public domain and free to use.

I scribbled the words to the first song—what became "Cross of Gold"—in pencil on a piece of hotel stationery.

I was by no means certain I would ever complete 101 songs.

In the early days I went through periods of upset and angst: was a good enough musician to do this cause justice? Was I writing and recording at a proper pace?

Today I have more than 90 songs in some stage of production from "an idea" to "the fully recorded track." Barring some grave misfortune, I feel sure I will complete 101 (or more).

Which brings me to this project: writing a book that tells the story of Hard Times Hundred and One.

I have three motivations for doing so.

The first is to "pay it forward."

Some songwriting classes conducted by a folk musician sharing her craft when I was in my twenties really improved my ability to create music. Much more recently, I spoke to a class of middle school students about creating music, and one of their top questions was how "inspiration" worked.

I want to share the dynamics of how a photo, or a few initial lyrics, or a riff can turn into a song for the benefit of others who might want to become songwriters themselves. In some respects, I'd call it "the least I can do" having been graced with a rare set of capabilities (I don't think an 800 verbal on the SATs makes you better than anyone else, but it does mean you're lucky enough to have fair facility with words) and resources to create new music.

The second is to "bear witness." These songs are a mixture of generalized attempts to capture and communicate loss and love, resistance and resilience, the price of pain and the power of solidarity, as well as targeted commentary about people in power choosing to do the doing the right or the wrong thing. I hope to document all that.

As I wrote in "*Ghosts of '29,*" "You can't undo the past's injustice/But you can start to set it right."

The third is to simply "share."

What you gain from the fifteen-year-and-counting Hard Times Hundred and One journey will differ from what I have gained, but everyone should at least have access to what I found to be the most moving bits.

"Man Must Work to Live" follows from some of my earliest and most powerful memories of my late father.

After hearing "*Love in a Time of Want,*" one of my tech colleagues who is from India and also a musician found it to be such a moving testament to caring for the poor that he asked my permission to translate the song into Hindi and record a Hindi version.

Whether created by others or by me myself, I have experienced music as a positive force in my life, something for which I am deeply grateful.

I hope the songs of Hard Times Hundred and One can do that in some small way for others—and I hope this book helps in that regard.