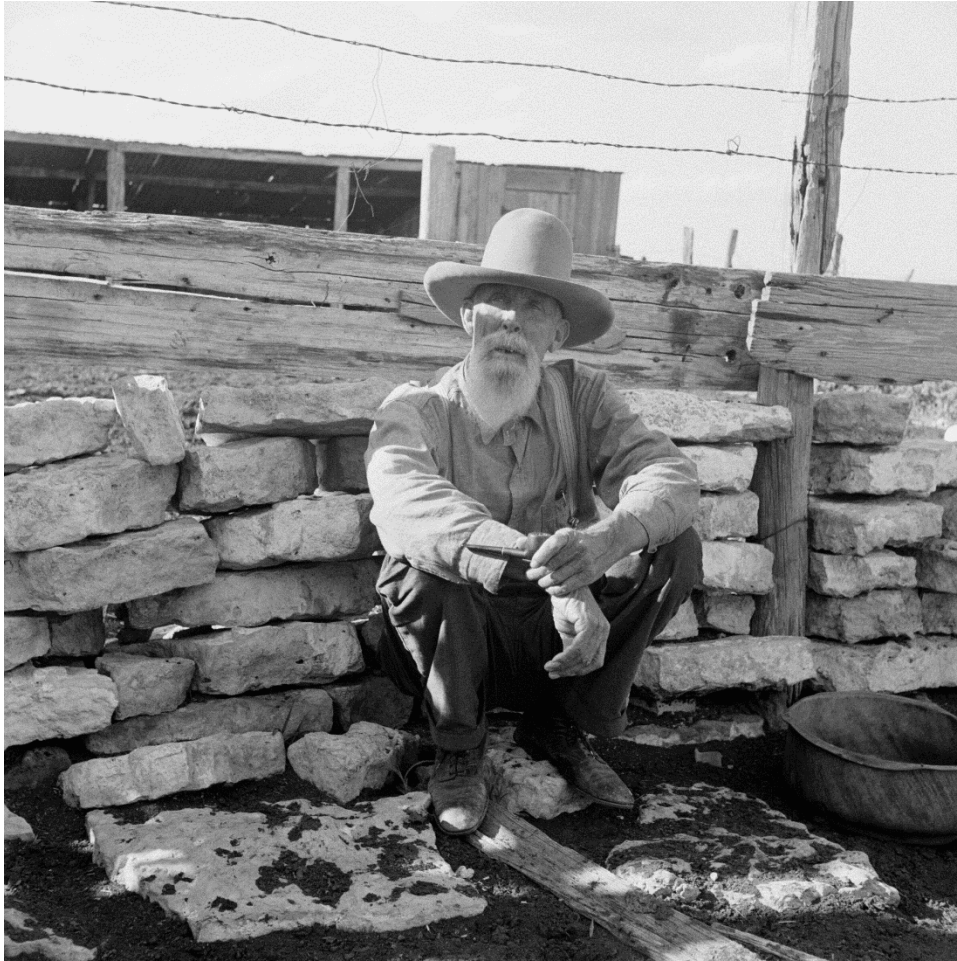


Tractored Out

*Well they tractored us out, with no ceremony / Leaving us on our own, with little to show /
For twenty long years of counting each penny / Just the second part's true, sir, of "easy come,
easy go"*



Native Texas tenant farmer. Near Goodliet, Texas. Aged seventy; seventeen years on the same farm. Is to be "tractored out" at the end of 1938. One son has been tractored out and has been on WPA (Work Projects Administration) for two years. Another son was tractored out in 1937. Has moved to town and remains temporarily off relief by selling his livestock. "What are my boys going to do? It's not a question of what they're going to do. It's a question of what they're going to have to do. They're not any up there in Congress but what are big landowners and they're going to see that the program is in their interest. As long as the government is paying the landowner more to let the land out than they make by renting it, they won't rent it.", Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress), LC-USF34- 018175-E

As a musician I have always aspired to create an album as compelling on its first listen and nuanced on its sixth (or sixteenth, or sixtieth...) as Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* was for me.

I felt certain this would be impossible to achieve—and, given the storied status of that album, I didn't feel at all bad about the prospect of giving it the old college try and falling short.

One of the few times I thought it might be possible to pull it off was while working on this song, "[Tractored Out](#)."

Several things converged visually, sonically, and lyrically. And at least for me, the cumulative effect still holds up after the sixth and sixteenth listens too. Here's how and why this track came about.

The caption is much longer than that of most photos in the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection. It provides a lot more context for thinking through "what would he say?" in a song.

One way I explained to a class of middle school students that I had a chance to talk to about songwriting is that "one weird trick" for writing "more songs" is to put yourself in different positions as a storyteller:

- What do *I* have to say? ("[Mothers and Daughters, Fathers and Sons](#)" was written that way)
- How could their story *be told*? ("[America the Battlefield](#)" was written that way)
- And, finally, what would *they* say? (That's how "Tractored Out" was written).

Our protagonist seems philosophical about things. He's a simple man: he uses aphorisms and folksy phrases like "easy come, easy go," "for better or worse," and "fruits of his labor."

He's not bitter, but he is not living in denial nor inured to pain, either.

I think about three kinds of "motion" in songs. The *music* can take you different places over the course of the song. In "[What Are Working Folks to Do?](#)" the lyrical theme is pretty darn clear pretty quickly, but (I think) on a first listen no one would be able to predict where the music goes.

The *lyrics* can take you different places over the course of the song. The music doesn't change much at in "[Daddy's Old Tin Cup](#)," but (I think) no one on a first listen would be able to predict where the lyrics end up.

"Tractored Out" is a song in which the music remains constant—without even a bridge. But the lyrics are intended to take you to-from-and-back again that sanguine, philosophical perspective he offers.

He's not blind to the fact that his wife is not living the life they and she had hoped. We pull back the curtain on the wound (but with neither self-pity nor acrimony) in the third stanza:

*For better or worse," we vowed our wedding day—
To weather together storms tomorrow might bring
She ain't said one unkind word—and she's no mind to stray—
But that look in her eyes, sir—by god does it sting.*

I don't imagine a couple whose stance is "grin and bear it." But they *will* "bear it."

We reset to our protagonist's philosophical stance in the final stanza: factual, earnest, and modest introspection and reflection:

*What luck I had once has been blown away—
Baked into dust by a merciless sun
What the good lord may give, he might then take away:
I was born to a poor man, I guess I'll leave this world one.*

The final arpeggiated note is intentionally conclusive.