

Work/Death Labor History Tour/Concert

For many Rhode Islanders, Slater Mill Museum in Pawtucket is a destination reserved for elementary school field trips, but a recent nighttime Labor History tour coupled with a concert by musician Work/Death marks an attempt to make the museum more accessible to adults.

“The Japanese have a word, ‘karoshi,’ which translates roughly to something like ‘work/death,’” said musician Scott Weber, who named his band after the term. “It tells the story about how office workers work themselves crazy and eventually commit suicide. That kind of behavior developed because of the industrial revolution. How does this concept of labor affect our lives? That’s what we’re here to talk about.”

Tour guide Joey L. DeFrancesco explains, “Our average tour sort of caters to schoolkids and things like mandatory field trips, so we usually focus on the big names — Samuel Slater, Moses Brown — and the technology,” said tour guide Joey L. DeFrancesco. “In tonight’s tour, labor history is the focus — the people who worked here and how it changed the community. The concert adds another unique element to it.”

DeFrancesco himself worked at a local hotel eight years ago where he claims employees were treated poorly. After getting involved in the local union, the rest was history — literally. He plunged into the local history of the industrial revolution and in addition to becoming Slater Mill’s go-to tour guide, he also does after-school educational programming for Central Falls schools. A part-time musician, he got involved with community arts group AS220, where he met Scott Reber of Work/Death. Together, they came up with the idea to combine this labor history tour with a concert.

DeFrancesco led a full group of about 30 people through the several mill buildings, no doubt the typical tour circuit, but with different emphasis. The people in attendance were exclusively adults — oddly enough, mostly couples both hipster and otherwise, based on the amount of snuggling in the cold. DeFrancesco still mentioned the “big names” and surveyed the water-powered technology and the machinery, but spoke at great length about the community.

“Most people don’t realize that RI was a hub for the slave trade, and for a long time you had 6-year-olds processing slave cotton for pennies a day, working 13-hour days,” he explained. “It was a different kind of slavery.” Rhode Island had more slaves than any other New England states with local heroes like Moses Brown (the founder of Brown University) being prominent leaders who profited from the slave trade.

The people of Rhode Island originally worked artisanal and agricultural trades, going by their own schedule and producing only what they and their families needed, for the most part. DeFrancesco shared a schedule for local shipbuilders, who took breaks at mid-morning and then again at noon, each time partaking in rum and beer. That’s right: rum before noon. People worked on their own time and made their own schedules free of regulation.

Some mills were already processing flax and cotton into threads and fabrics, but the industrial revolution brought in new technologies and a demand for greater numbers of workers. Local townspeople frequently protested working conditions.

"I never realized how much the labor movement really began in Rhode Island," said college student Dan Putnam. "Makes you realize that there's more than meets the eye with these old buildings."

An entire workforce of women trained to manage special machines even staged their own organized protest when their wages dropped. "It was really cool to hear about how it was even the first place where a female labor movement happened, so long before anything like the women's rights movement," said another college student, Tori Spencer.

After the hour-long tour of the museum's buildings, inside and out, the crowd enjoyed brief refreshments before Reber's Work/Death performance of his piece "The Great Textile Strike of 1934."

"There's real interest out there in purely noise-based music," Reber said. In an intro to his performance, Reber talked about the noise of life around us that people so often tune out in favor of headphones. He explained that by capturing and blending sounds we can actually tune in to a new kind of music, one that is everywhere.

Reber grew up in industrial Woonsocket, Pawtucket's neighbor to the north and kindred community with a mirrored history of French Canadians manipulated into working long hours in textile mills powered by the very same river: The Blackstone. It was there that he first learned to listen to how the things around him colored his experience.

"Even noise-based music can related to people in a cathartic way, like tradition or even popular music."

Reber worked as a janitor with the AS220, often cleaning up after concerts and other arts events. He's also hosted a show on Brown Student Community Radio and spent some time volunteering by doing music and art therapy for Generations in Smithfield.

The performance itself was 15 minutes of artfully blended cacophony featuring the sounds of textile machinery at work, grinding and stripping, stretching and wrenching. The sequences were long enough and grating enough to sicken the listener, inducing a kind of horror that must have struck every 6-year-old who had to dive into machinery to retrieve loose threads while narrowly avoiding being crushed. Then, piano chords began to compete against the noise, eventually building into a crescendo that included what sounded like a crackling, raging fire (no doubt a reference to when Pawtucket residents burned a mill to the ground as a labor protest).

It added to the experience that the concert was held on the night of a cold snap. Though unnaturally cold this year, even for New England, the temps chilled and numbed everyone's feet in less than an hour, reinforcing that oddly burning question: How did workers manage for 13 hours a day 200 years ago with no heat in the dead of winter?

Check the Slater Mill Calendar for upcoming events: slatermill.org/calendar/