When pianist Wayne Horvitz was coming up in Manhattan’s “downtown” jazz scene in the 1970s, one of the buzz-words of the day was “genre-hopping.” While uptown jazz neo-traditionalists argued fiercely that jazz was a specific genre with swing and blues at its core, downtowners countered that, in a post-modern world, the whole notion of committing to specific boundaries for “jazz,” “rock,” “classical,” “folk,” whatever—was hopelessly archaic. New York Times critic John Rockwell, an early champion of the downtown scene, officially sanctioned this notion in a book called All American Music, noting the new merger of popular music with the avant-garde.

Since then, “genre-hopping” has devolved into a music publicist cliché, but it’s still true that crossing musical boundaries—and the corollary, that no one genre is more valuable than another—has implications related not just to esthetics, but to politics. To put it in plainer terms, if you argue that Hank Williams’s “Lovesick Blues” is as valuable, important, true, and beautiful as Elliott Carter’s Fourth String Quartet, you will soon find yourself in an argument about not just music, but about class. “Art music,” you may be instructed, is for the intellectual pleasure of an educated elite; “popular music,” for the mating rituals of the masses.

It’s no surprise that this question arises so often in America, a country founded on the principles—however unrealized—that all people are created equal and that there should be no classes. So how do you write serious music for a classless society? Duke Ellington took one approach; George Gershwin, another. But how appropriate that Horvitz, a defiant cross-bredreer of genres, should pick a man like the labor martyr Joe Hill to deal with this question in a major piece. For Hill was not only a pianist and popular songwriter himself, he dedicated his life—in fact, died for—those very principles of fairness, equality, and classlessness embedded in such esthetic arguments about music.

When you consider Horvitz’s musical background, family influences, and his present home, Seattle, where some of Joe Hill’s story (and a lot of radical labor history) took place, it’s not so surprising that he would pick such a project.

Joe Hill premiered in Seattle, on October 30, 2004, at Meany Theatre on the campus of the University of Washington, as part of the Earshot Jazz Festival, which commissioned the piece. (It was performed a second time at the Flynn Theatre in Burlington, Vermont, on March 5, 2005.) In an interview before the Seattle premiere, sitting in his basement studio in Seattle’s Mt. Baker neighborhood, surrounded by keyboards, a computer, banks of wires, manuscripts, a Steinway grand, and piles of books and CDs, Horvitz explained, “When I was fourteen or fifteen years old, I was playing those Bartók pieces, the Mikrokosmos. Along with Otis Spann, those were the things that made my heartstrings twang.”

Bela Bartók and Otis Spann: An ethnomusicologist who collected Hungarian folk music and re-composed it into some of the most gorgeous, yet also dissonant, polytonal music of the modern era, and a blues pianist whose rippling, jazz-like sophistication supported one of the greatest of all bluesmen. With influences like that, is it any wonder Joe Hill is a “high art,” long-form piece that includes song-form “folk music” and “jazz.”

Horvitz went on to explain Joe Hill’s genesis:
“I was having lunch with Bill [Frisell] and we started talking about Copland and Ives and how much we like these pieces that use American music and then transform them.” The problem, though, said Horvitz, was that the European vocal style of those pieces didn’t feel quite right for their American emotional content. “Then I said, ‘You know, I’m thinking about doing something larger, with voices that don’t have that quality,’ and [Bill] immediately said, ‘Well, you mean someone like Robin.’”
Robin Holcomb, who sings the female parts in the piece, is Horvitz’s wife, whom he met while they were students at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She has forged a strong reputation of her own, with poetic, minimalist transformations of Americana-based material. Horvitz and Holcomb moved to Seattle in 1989.

Both Horvitz and Joe Hill librettist Paul Magid have labor backgrounds, though from opposite sides of the fence. Horvitz’s father was a mediator for management and the composer even recalls Harry Bridges, the famous San Francisco leader of the longshoremen’s union, coming over to the house. Magid’s grandfather was a Seattle longshoreman and a card-carrying IWW member.

“I’ve always had that interest in outlaw ballads and murder ballads, too,” said Horvitz in a more recent interview, “so I think the idea appealed to me that here was this guy who, even in a more industrial time, after 1900, was packing a gun in the West.”


None of the above. Perhaps the best way to think about it is as a radio play that tells the story of a man’s life in words, instrumental music, and songs. Like a song cycle, Joe Hill incorporates much previously written material (nearly all of it re-harmonized). There are songs by Hill himself, such as “The Rebel Girl” and “There is Power in the Union,” from the IWW’s “Little Red Songbook,” but also by others, including the folk poem “The Lumberjack’s Prayer,” Mississippi John Hurt’s “Spike Driver’s Blues,” and an old English street cry, “Chairs to Mend.” It also employs the spoken word, including Joe Hill’s famous “Last Will and Testament,” plus words used as narration and dramatic dialogue. But “song cycles” don’t usually include ravishingly beautiful stretches of chamber music, much less a completely open line in the score for an improvising guitarist—in this case, the most influential one of our time, Bill Frisell. Because of this oddly structured Rubik’s cube of jazz, folk, classical, and popular music, Magid and Horvitz chose a double pun for the title, referencing the dramatic word, “act,” as well as the labor rhetoric, “action”: Hence: “16 Actions for Orchestra, Voices, and Soloist.”

At the Seattle premiere, the singers delivered their parts standing up, as in a cantata, not as actors in dramatic motion. There was basic stage lighting and at least one dramatic effect, when the narrator Rinde Eckert (on this recording), entered down the main aisle of the theater, declaiming in an operatic voice, like an IWW speaker on a soapbox, “Brothers and sisters, have you had enough of wage slavery?” But it was basically a recital—for chamber strings, 3 woodwinds, 3 brass, piano, percussion, guitar, and three singers (two male, one female).

Magid, best known as one of the founding members of the Flying Karamazov Brothers but also an on old college friend of Horvitz, structured the narrative around the last hour of Joe Hill’s life—in a Utah prison—when he was visited by his fellow labor leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, using flashbacks and the songs themselves to fill in the story, mood, and period feel. In addition to his work as a performer and playwright, Magid is also something of a religious scholar. It was he who chose the line, repeated so often throughout the work that it becomes one of its main themes—“A worker is worthy of his food.” As it happens, this is not something Joe Hill ever said, but a rephrasing of the words of another martyr—Jesus Christ himself, as reported by Matthew: “For the workman is worthy of his meat.” (Matthew 10:9–10).

The choice of this line introduces multiple ironies, some of which also relate to genre. Many of Joe Hill’s songs—and songs by others in the famous “Little Red Songbook” of the Industrial Workers of the World—were written to tunes popularized by the Salvation Army. One explanation for this is that the authorities often used Salvation Army bands to drown out the “Wobblies,” as the IWW proponents were called, when they got up on their “free speech” soap boxes to organize workers. Joe Hill’s sarcastic contempt for
organized religion—Hill called it the “Starvation Army”—as a patsy for capitalism was best expressed in his most famous line, “There’s no pie in the sky when you die.” The line comes from “The Preacher and the Slave,” a parody of a popular hymn of Hill’s day, “In the Sweet By and By.”

There is a delicious musical irony here, but also a political one, in that Magid has appropriated a quote from the enemy (the church), as a socialist motto. But at an even deeper level, the line cuts to the heart of the contradictions inherent in Hill’s—and the IWW’s—life and death. For what Jesus was saying, via Matthew, was that disciples should not have to carry money because the truly righteous would provide for them. This kind of idealism verges on the religious itself and the IWW was, indeed, a kind of secular religion.

Founded in Chicago in 1905, the IWW began as a radical, pan-unionist, sometimes violent movement for social justice, more anarchist than Marxist, whose adherents believed there should be “One Big Union” of all workers, not trade unions of specific crafts. If it finally prevailed, there would no more need for social hierarchy and class distinctions between bosses and laborers would disappear. For obvious reasons, the Wobblies were viewed as a distinct threat by industrialists, labeled “reds” and “agitators.” A vivid picture of how they operated and were persecuted by thugs and private police forces can be found in John Dos Passos’s trilogy, U.S.A. By the 1920s, as organized labor unions ascended, the IWW was essentially crushed, but it still exists today. (I had the distinct privilege of singing songs from the “Little Red Songbook” at the last meeting of the Berkeley, California, branch of the IWW in the early seventies.)

Hill became involved with the IWW in 1910, while working on the San Pedro, California, docks. No definitive biography exists of Hill (though Horvitz reports that the scholar William Adler, in Denver, is currently writing one), but a “biographical novel,” by Wallace Stegner, originally titled The Preacher and the Slave, is a popular source. The famous 1936 song by the late Earl Robinson (also a Seattleite), “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” has also served to popularize Hill’s legend. What we know for sure is that Hill was born Joel Emmanuel Hägglund on October 7, 1879, in Gävle, Sweden, the child of working-class parents, and emigrated to the United States in 1902. Working as a machinist, migrant laborer, longshoreman, and logger, at some point, possibly because of an altercation with the law, he changed his name to Joe Hill.

It was in San Pedro that he began to write songs for the IWW. Though Hill was not a leader of the movement, like the more well-known Big Bill Haywood or Eugene Debs, by the time he arrived in Utah in 1914 to work at the Silver King Mine, near Salt Lake City, his notoriety had grown, through his songs. On January 10 of that year, Hill was accused of murdering a grocer and his son. Hill was treated for a gunshot wound the night of the robbery. Based on that and other circumstantial evidence, he was convicted. Supporters insist to this day that he was framed because of his labor activities, but despite the intervention of officials that went all the way up to President Woodrow Wilson, Hill was executed by firing squad on November 19, 1915.

Hill maintained to the end that he was shot in an argument over a woman (not by the grocer’s son) and that revealing her identity would besmirch her honor. Stegner speculates in his novel that Hill actually was guilty and thought dying as a martyr would do more for the IWW than anything he could do by staying alive. (Not surprisingly, Stegner was excoriated by the left for this view.)

For Horvitz, the question of Hill’s guilt is not the central one and Horvitz most definitely does not view Joe Hill as political propaganda. It offers a nuanced picture of the man.
“I don’t like most art that wears its politics on its sleeve,” said Horvitz, who has often told interviewers he neither cares for the song “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” nor Joan Baez’s version of it at Woodstock. “I want people to listen to the music. I wrote this because I wanted the chance to write for voice and for orchestra. And my hope is that people will go away thinking it is beautiful.”

Considering that Joe Hill was an activist, organizer, and rabble-rouser, Horvitz’s piece is strikingly elegiac and autumnal in tone, more requiem and lament than celebration or call to “action.” This is appropriate to its theme of martyrdom, though there are also many exhilarating, jaunty, and humorous sections. Besides the aforementioned Bartók and Spann, its other major influences are what has come to be called “Americana”—to be more specific, Appalachian music’s nasal vocals, affection for open fifths, ambiguity between major and minor thirds and—here’s a surprise—the jazzy Broadway writing of Leonard Bernstein, particularly his penchant for rapid time signature changes.

“I listened to West Side Story every day for a whole year when I was eight years old,” Horvitz confessed. “My parents finally had to forbid me from listening to it.”

In the quavering singing of Holcomb, southern drawl of Danny Barnes (a banjo-plucking pal and sometime band mate of Frisell’s), and declamatory command of Eckert Horvitz found the right mix of authentic American voices he was seeking, to go along with Bernstein’s jazz.

The piece opens with a gorgeous descending theme in E-flat minor for lone trumpet that resolves to a Picardy third, a theme repeated lushly by the strings in Action 2 and recapitulated by the trumpet in Action 14. Shortly after the first statement of the theme, the strings answer, like a sigh, with another rising and falling pentatonic figure, and Frisell improvises a lovely solo, using the blues scale, yet another sort of pentatonic. Quickly, then, Horvitz has established his harmonic territory, a blending of the blues scale of jazz and the tonal ambiguity of Appalachian music. Two minutes into the piece, however, a dark, dense chord announces that this is a tragedy, not just a pretty homage. The piece moves through several keys, but often—as with those Bartók pieces Horvitz cites as an early influence—two at the same time. One of the most haunting is the closing section of Action 16, when Holcomb sings Hill’s “Last Will and Testament” at a glacially slow tempo over a piano arpeggio simultaneously in the keys of G and G flat.

It takes a little longer to set up the dramatic situation. In Action 1, narrator Eckert—a veteran of the experimental musical theater of composer Paul Dresher—gives his “soapbox” speech, landing on a jarring tritone on the last syllable of “enough!” and Barnes sings Hill’s song “Power in the Union” in a flat, nasal style, interrupted by bright Bernstein-ish interjections from the strings. Action 2 establishes the setting in the Salt Lake City jail, with Flynn making her visit during Joe’s last hour and introduces the other theme repeated throughout the piece, “What is fair?” In Action 3, the comparison to Christ is made explicit, as the narrator notes Jesus was “another 33-year-old murdered by the state.” Horvitz also widens the gender horizon of Hill’s working man, by having Holcomb sing the eighteenth-century “Chairs to Mend,” the heart-breaking street cry of a woman. Feminism is brought back into the picture in Action 14, this time with a wink at early-twentieth-century sexism, with Hill’s own jaunty melody and lyric, “The Rebel Girl.” A lovely touch here is the Bernstein-like dissonances punctuating the rousing choruses.

Horvitz let Hill’s period melody stand for “The Rebel Girl,” and the wheezy pump organ played by Holcomb for the “The Preacher and the Slave” lends a calliope-like, early-twentieth-century church feel as well, even with the disturbing brass harmonies that go along with it.
But for the martyr’s famous anti-war song, “Don’t Take My Papa Away From Me,” sung in Action 13 by Holcomb, Horvitz writes what is surely the most beautiful take-away melody of the piece, and whose polytonalism has nothing to do with evoking the period.

Blues man Mississippi John Hurt’s variation on the early nineteenth-century folk song “John Henry,” “Spike Driver’s Blues” (Action 7), which pits man against machine, also gets a new treatment, set to a vibraphone figure in 12/8 time, with a churning woodwind undercurrent. Hurt’s lyric, “This is the hammer that killed John Henry but it won’t kill me” is decidedly more rebellious than the mythic original.

“Penny’s Farm,” in Action 11, is a traditional protest song about the unfair labor practices of farm owners, but today’s listeners will recognize it as the source for Bob Dylan’s more generalized complaint, “Maggie’s Farm.”

But it is “The Lumberjack’s Prayer,” a sarcastic parody of the Lord’s Prayer written by Matt Huhta (known as “T-Bone Slim”) that, as Bob Dylan himself might say, “brings it all back home.”

“I pray dear Lord for Jesus’ sake/Give us this day a T-Bone steak,” it begins, dramatizing Marxist doctrine into the down-to-earth language of the working man, the very theme evoked from Matthew at the start.

Frisell’s twanging, languorous electric guitar—always sympathetic and understated—lights up many interludes of “Joe Hill,” but the electronic distortions he introduces in Actions 15 and 16, as the martyr marches inexorably toward his execution are especially effective.

Joe Hill died for a humble ideal, and while there is irony that he was motivated by a secular vision as orthodox as the religion he abhorred, it is also true that he died for a Whitmanic, communitarian vision of America that has always stood side by side with Emerson’s self-made, self-reliant man. It is precisely this arena—where opposites meet, converse, or coincide—whether they be key signatures, ideologies, or genres—that is Horvitz’s specialty. How appropriate then, this “genre-be-damned” composer has chosen to tell Hill’s story in music that is both complex and direct, ironic and sentimental, dissonant and gorgeous, popular and artful, and that relishes a well-wrought song as much as long-form development.

But as Whitman himself wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Such is the real stuff of Americana.

—Paul de Barros

Paul de Barros is the jazz columnist for the Seattle Times, adjunct music professor at Seattle University, a regular contributor to Down Beat magazine, and founder of the Seattle jazz support organization Earshot Jazz. A 2003–04 fellow in the National Arts Journalism Program, de Barros received the Governor’s Writer’s Award in 1993 for his history of the early Seattle jazz scene, Jackson Street After Hours (Sasquatch, Seattle).
Composer’s note

I was first inspired to create a new work based on the life of Joe Hill by simply staring at the cover of a book. There are few pictures of Hill, but one of them graces the cover of Wallace Stegner’s *Joe Hill*, originally entitled *The Preacher and the Slave*. I did not use Stegner’s novel as a source, but I was inspired by his approach to Hill’s life as a work of fiction, and to come to terms with the fact that most of the “history” of Hill has in fact been a work of fiction. He was an American outlaw, yet another roadblock in what Wendell Berry calls, “the unsettling of America.” A myth as epic as a Jesse James or a John Henry, but for a new, industrialized century.

Early on in my research I learned that the local law would often bring in the Salvation Army band to drown out the Wobblies as they proselytized in the local town square. Nobody’s fool, they quickly appropriated the band for their own uses, putting their words to the tunes of the hymns being played. This early form of re-mixing intrigued me, and Paul and I were struck by how easily the Wobblies had replaced the religious faith they so despised with a new faith equally fervent, and often to the same tune!! It was Paul who worked in Jesus’ own words, “A worker is worthy of his food” and also Paul who created the fundamental structure based on Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s brief visit to Joe in prison shortly before his execution. I am grateful to him for providing the spark for the music I was inspired to write, and also for providing the foundation for what was a grand and sometimes reckless experiment.

Of politics and music I am often wary. I will not speak to that in this brief essay but for those who are interested please go to [http://waynehorvitz.com/speech/joe_hill_essay.html](http://waynehorvitz.com/speech/joe_hill_essay.html).

The last time I saw my brother Philip was the weekend of the second performance of Joe Hill in Burlington, Vermont, at the Flynn Center. Besides missing him every day of my life, Phil was instrumental in helping me create this piece in ways both personal and pragmatic. This recording is dedicated to his memory.

—Wayne Horvitz

**Wayne Horvitz** is a composer, pianist, and electronic musician who has performed extensively throughout Europe, Asia, Australia, and North America. He is the leader of Sweeter Than the Day, Zony Mash, The Four Plus One ensemble, the Gravitas Quartet, and co-founder of the New York Composers Orchestra. He has performed and collaborated with Bill Frisell, Butch Morris, John Zorn, Robin Holcomb, Fred Frith, Julian Priester, Philip Wilson, Michael Shrieve, and Carla Bley, among others. He has been commissioned by the NEA, Meet the Composer, Kronos String Quartet, Seattle Chamber Players, The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, BAM and others. He appears on more than a hundred CDs and more than thirty CDs as a leader. Collaborations with choreographers include work with Paul Taylor with White Oak Dance Project, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, and Crispin Spaeth. Film work includes music and sound design for three PBS specials and Gus Van Sant’s *Psycho*. He is the year 2001 recipient of the Artist Trust Fellowship, 2002 recipient of a Multi-Arts Production Fund, and 2006 recipient of grants from 4Culture and the Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture.

**Paul Magid** is a founding member and head writer for the internationally known performing troupe The Flying Karamazov Brothers. The group has worked in film, television, and theater. They have performed on Broadway and London’s West End and toured extensively throughout the U.S., Europe, and the world. Magid has written more than a dozen shows for The Flying Karamazov Brothers. These include *Do the Impossible* in 1994, *Sharps, Flats and Accidentals* in 1996, *L’Univers*, a collaboration with MIT’s Media Lab (2000), and *Life: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2004). His plays include *The Three Moscowteers,*
L’Histoire du Soldat, Le Petomane, The Brothers Karamazov, Room Service, A Comedy of Eras, and The Jews of Chelm, California. He has also written for television and the movies and has garnered numerous awards. He is a recent recipient of a Rockefeller Grant and a Jewish National Cultural Foundation Award for playwriting and is a member of WGA.

Danny Barnes was born in Central Texas. He wrote the music for the Sugar Hill recording group Bad Livers. Barnes composed the score for the Twentieth Century Fox film The Newton Boys. He has toured and recorded with Bill Frisell, Tim O’Brien, Robert Earl Keen, Ronnie Lane, Chuck Leavell, and many others. His newest CD is called Barnyard Electronics. Danny lives in the Northwest with his wife and two dogs. He calls his own music folktronics.

Internationally renowned Rinde Eckert is celebrated for a remarkably flexible and inventive singing voice combined with an electrical physical presence. His staged musical theater productions and collaborations have been performed throughout the United States and Europe. Current repertory includes the critically acclaimed solo productions An Idiot Divine and Romeo Sierra Tango, the Obie-Award winning opera And God Created Great Whales, and Highway Ulysses with American Repertory Theatre.

In a career spanning more than twenty-five years and more than 200 recordings, including twenty-five albums of his own, guitarist, composer, and bandleader Bill Frisell has established himself as a visionary presence in American music. He has collaborated with a wide range of artists, filmmakers, and legendary musicians. But it is his work as a leader that has garnered increasing attention and accolades. Frisell’s work over the past decades has forged a truly original approach to a wide range of musical influences and expression. His catalog, including twenty recordings for Nonesuch, has been cited by Downbeat as “the best recorded output of the decade.”

Robin Holcomb has performed extensively in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia as a solo artist and the leader of various ensembles. Recent performances include appearances at Queen Elizabeth Hall (London), Carnegie Hall, the Verona Jazz Festival, the San Francisco Jazz Festival, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Festival of Perth, DuMaurier Jazz Festivals, and Arts at St. Ann’s. Ms. Holcomb is a founder and co-director of the New York Composers Orchestra, an ensemble for which she is also a conductor, pianist, and principal composer. Her own compositions and vocal and instrumental work can be found on four albums on the Nonesuch label: Robin Holcomb, Rockabye, Little Three, and The Big Time and most recently, Solos (Songlines) and John Brown’s Body (Tzadik). Recent works include the staged song cycle with film O, Say a Sunset, based on the life of Rachel Carson (DTW, Walker Arts Center, etc.) and The Utopia Project, in development at Mass MoCA.

Christian Knapp has conducted and performed in festivals and concerts throughout the world. A prizewinner in the Third International Prokofiev Conducting Competition, he has conducted the New World Symphony, St. Petersburg Philharmonic, Western Australia Symphony Orchestra, St. Petersburg State Opera and Ballet, Charleston Symphony Orchestra, and the Volgograd Orchestra, among many others. Mr. Knapp received a bachelor’s degree in piano performance from the New England Conservatory of Music and a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Tufts University. He earned a post-graduate diploma in conducting from the St. Petersburg State Conservatory, where he studied with Ilya Musin and Leonid Korchmar. He also has worked extensively with John Carewe and Michael Tilson Thomas. He currently serves as Assistant Conductor of the Seattle Symphony.
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Performers: Danny Barnes, a worker, Joe Hill; Robin Holcomb, a woman, a worker, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; Rinde Eckert, narrator, a prison guard; Bill Frisell, soloist; Members of the Seattle Symphony and the Seattle Music Guild; Mikhail Shmidt, concertmaster; Giorgio Magnanensi, conductor

All music by Wayne Horvitz Other Room Music (ASCAP) except Rebel Girl composed by Joe Hill and arranged by Wayne Horvitz; Spike Driver Blues by Mississippi John Hurt (published by Wynwood Music Company, Inc.) with additional music by Wayne Horvitz; Jerusalem, Jerusalem (music by Charles H. Purday); In the Sweet By and By (music by Joseph Webster); Chairs to Mend (traditional) arranged by Wayne Horvitz and Robin Holcomb.

All text by Paul Magid except There is Power in the Union, The Preacher and the Slave, Joe Hill’s Last Will, Don’t Take My Papa Away From Me and Rebel Girl (words by Joe Hill); Chairs to Mend and Down on Penny’s Farm (traditional); Spike Driver’s Blues (words by Mississippi John Hurt); Lumberjack’s Prayer (words by Matt Valentine Huhta (a/k/a T-Bone Slim); In the Sweet By and By (words by Sanford F. Bennett); and Jerusalem, Jerusalem (words by Karolina W. Sandell-Berg). (Plus a few words from Jesus.)

Editorial assistance and revisions, Rinde Eckert.

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1. Action 1: Power in the Union 6:16
2. Action 2: One Day—One Hour 7:05
3. Action 3: Worthy of his Food 7:41
4. Action 4: Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1:38
5. Action 5: It’s a Lie 5:31
7. Action 7: Spike Driver's Blues 7:17
8. Action 8: The Land as a Stranger 3:48
10. Action 10: To Have This Hour 2:15
11. Action 11: Hard Time in the Country 4:08
15. Action 15: How to Die 5:52

TT: 77:41

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