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If I Had a Hammer: American Folk Music and the Radical Left

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of History

East Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment

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Masters of Arts in History

by

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ABSTRACT

If I Had a Hammer: American Folk Music and the Radical Left

by

Sarah Caitlin Kerley

Folk music is one of the most popular forms of music today; artists such as Mumford and Sons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops are giving new life to an age-old music. It was not until the 1950s that new popular interest in folk music began. Earlier, folk music was used by leftist organizations as a means to reach the masses. It assumed because of this history that many folk artists are sympathetic to the Left. By looking at the years from 1905-1975 with the end of the Vietnam War, this study hopes to present the notion that even though these artists produced music that promoted leftist ideals, they were not always supportive of the Communist Party and other leftist organizations. Specific artists will be examined, paying close attention to artists who not only produced revolutionary music, but who were also employed by leftist organizations to perform at rallies and meetings.

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I would also like to thank my committee, Dr. Elwood Watson, Dr. Daryl A. Carter and Dr. Dinah Mayo-Bobee for their patience, support and guidance throughout this entire process.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for putting up with me and my constant rambling about the twentieth century and folk music and for always letting me listen to Bob Dylan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

American music can trace its influences back to European and African origins. Music introduced in Appalachia, for example, was introduced from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Cecil Sharp traveled the southern Appalachian Mountains collecting traditional English ballads during World War I. Sharp sparked a new interest in the scholarship of folk music: in 1927 renowned writer Carl Sandburg travelled the nation collecting American folksongs dedicating his book, *The American Songbag*, to “those unknown singers—who made songs—out of love, fun, grief—and to those many other signers—who kept those songs as living things of the heart and mind—out of love, fun, grief.”¹ However, it was during the 1930s when folk music would receive the most attention. Folk music had traditionally shared the same themes and it was typically only scholars that were able to make those connections. The world had survived World War I, but there was something much more destructive lurking around the corner. The Great Depression left a lasting impact on the nation and its people. One of the worst economic downturns began after the stock market crash of October 1929 and lasted a grueling ten years until the start of World War II revived the American economy. The Great Depression offered a common link for many Americans; the Depression affected over 15 million, and folk music began to take new shape along with the nation. Folk songs were being used as a vehicle for political and social activism. Alan Lomax, perhaps one of the most influential characters in American folk music, explained folk music’s appeal as, “first, in our longing for artistic forms that reflect our democratic and equalitarian political beliefs; and second, in our hankering after art that mirrors

¹Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag*, (Harcourt, Brace & Company: NY, 1927), x.

the unique life of this western continent—the life of the frontier, the great West, the big city. We are looking for a people’s culture, a culture of the common man.”²

Twentieth century America has seen a tumultuous century. The nation lived through two World Wars, a Great Depression, survived the stagnant Cold War with Russia, and experienced social unrest and many changes along with the Vietnam War in the sixties. One factor that stayed constant throughout this was folk music. Starting in the early nineteenth hundreds with the Industrial Workers of the World and ending with Bob Dylan in the sixties, folk music offered the Left and other activists a means of reaching the people. What has often been questioned about the Left and folk music was the different ways in which it was enlisted by both the Old Left of the thirties and forties to the New Left of the sixties. Many sociologists have found that folk music was used by the Old Left to evoke the masses. At a time that labor struggles were on the forefront of social issues within America, folk artists understood that their music was easily understood by everyone, no matter race or gender. By the sixties, the face of folk music had changed. It was still being used to evoke to masses, but it was used to confront new issues other than labor strife. Folk gained a popular following and was now being heard on the top 40 countdowns. Bob Dylan became the face of the Civil Rights Movement and other artists were singing of the many struggles that this second wave of “folkies” were experiencing. Although both the Old Left and the New Left used folk music as a propaganda tool, the Old Left referred to this as “agit-prop” music, the way the two employed folk music in very different ways.

Historiography

Popular culture history is a field that more historians are beginning to study. The Pop Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green University, established in 1973, was one of the first

²Allen Lomax, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 86.

of its kind. Forty years later, scholars are still fascinated with pop culture and many other universities across the nation have developed programs focusing on it. Music is one aspect of pop culture that has received a lot of attention from scholars and its effects on people have been debated over the years. Folk music quite often takes a back seat to other genres, especially rock and roll, but the captivation with artists like Bob Dylan is making many reconsider folk music. One major point of interest is the effect that folk music had on the political left, especially what is considered the pro-communist “Old Left” of the 1930s and ‘40s that championed for trade unions and workers’ rights and the “New Left” of the 1960s that shifted focus to civil rights and the anti-war movement. Historiography on the subject is still growing considering the idea of folk music being used by the American Left is often dismissed as obvious. Folk musicians have always been connected with the left due to their involvement in the twentieth century. Folk artists were often known to perform for leftist organizations as in the case of the Almanac Singers and People’s Songs, Inc.

According to folklorist and historian Richard Reuss, the origins of folklore study are deeply engrained in the political aspirations of the “European romantic nationalism movement of the nineteenth century when politically suppressed peoples collected local folk songs and tales in an effort to preserve and restore an ancient cultural heritage that could serve as an ideological prop in the struggle for national independence.”³ During the late 1800s, Marxist co-founder Friedrich Engels first noted the importance of folk song in a letter to socialist contemporary Hermann Schlueter. Various Marxist literature published prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 examined folklore in a historical context with emphasis on labor conditions, class structure, and social position. According to Reuss, Marx felt folklore was “aesthetic in its essence and

³Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 20.

rooted in the primeval world of mankind, and that as society advances, oral traditions like epics, tales, songs, and myths give way to conscious art and mass media.”⁴ During the Bolshevik Revolution, folk music was used across Russia in an agitprop context to stir the sentiments of the working people. The Bolsheviks, however, did not incorporate folk music on a wide level to stir nationalistic feelings, and it would not be until fifteen years after the 1917 revolution that the Soviet Union would “elevate folklore to the pinnacle of ideological respectability.”⁵

Many scholars question the influence of folk music and the different roles that it played, especially during the years 1930-69. Folk music has commonly been associated with the “Left,” beginning in the 1930s. R. Serge Denisoff was one of the first sociologists to publish on the subject with *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (1971) which took a profound look at folk music’s role in the American Left spanning from 1930-60. Although Denisoff relies heavily on editorial material published in journals affiliated with the Communist Party, his work offers an in-depth look at the continued interest of the Left with folk music. Since the publication of Denisoff’s groundbreaking work, academics have begun to look at the roles and uses of folk music. And while this topic is typically studied and written about by sociologists, historians have been inquiring about folk music’s role and are beginning to study the topic more in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Richard Reuss began his major study in the field *American Folksongs and Left-Wing Politics: 1935-56* as a doctoral dissertation for Indiana University in 1971, which was published after his death by his widow, JoAnne, in 2000. A distinguished scholar of the folk music revival of the 1950-60s, Reuss’s interest was sparked by the pre-revival years when artists like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie began to sing with radical voices. Reuss’s work is comprised of

⁴ Reuss, 28.

⁵ Reuss, 32.

personal interviews and researched recordings as well as news clippings. After his death, JoAnne did not wish to rewrite her late husband's work. She instead published his work as it was, but she did include notes on books and various other articles published since 1971, but admits to having made "little attempt to update the study to take account of recent scholarship."⁶ Reuss is able to demonstrate the connection between folk music and the Old Left with the former being used as a medium to reach the masses. During the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Bolsheviks enlisted folk music as a mean to uplift the workers. But Reuss notes that because traditional music is "largely agricultural and ideologically conservative," folk music "had its drawbacks as a propaganda vehicle."⁷

The Popular Front, an organization made up of leftists and centrists led by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) during the 1930s, began to join together with artists to caution against fascism. Pete Seeger is famously known to perform with a guitar that had "this machine kills fascists" written on it. Reuss also notes that by performing southern labor songs, the Popular Front began to rely on rural sounds and styles. Reuss's work tends to focus on the early years and the CPUSA's use of folk music as a vehicle to reach the masses. Thanks to JoAnne's scholarship, there has been new research added without jeopardizing the integrity of her late husband's work. Due to his interviews with Seeger, Lomax, and others involved in the early years of folk, Reuss's work presents a riveting study to a generally new topic. His work falls short, however, in that he does not really attempt to include the songs themselves or an interpretation of the lyrics. It would have been valuable to have Reuss's interpretations of the songs produced during the years studied to better support his argument that folk music was being used by the CPUSA and the Left.

⁶ Reuss, xii.

⁷ Reuss, 30.

Robbie Lieberman's work *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (1989) offers an in depth look at the folk revival and its artists. Lieberman, who is the daughter of an Old Left folk singer, offers an analysis that traces the ways folk music, particularly People's Songs Incorporated, was used by the Communist Party as means to energize the masses.⁸ She notes that the CPUSA enlisted the aid of folk greats like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie and was the dominant party during the years of the Old Left. But "cold-war repression and the Communists' own sectarianism led to the end of the movement's political influence in American life."⁹ But after McCarthyism swept the nation and began censoring many of these same performers, folk music began to take a new form. Now these People's Songs were associated with rebellion and communism, and it was not until the early 1950's that folk music gained popularity with the masses through groups like the Weavers. And since the audiences of folk music were "defying the hegemonic process," the folk revival showed that these artists and their followers were interested in both music and the politics they discussed.¹⁰ Even though the years of the 1950's are not looked at as seriously as the music that predates them or what would follow them, Lieberman notes that the Weavers did make a difference because they brought folk music to the popular masses.

Lieberman does a satisfactory job tracing folk music through the years of 1930-50, what sets her work apart is her ability to demonstrate that during the early years of folk music and its association with the CPUSA, folk music made little to no impact on the discourse of American politics. Many of the People's Songs revolved around labor and race and after many folk artists

⁸ People's Songs, Inc. was an organization founded by Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Lee Hays and others in December 1945 as a means to "create, promote and distribute songs of labor by the American people."

⁹Robbie Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture 1930-50*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xv.

¹⁰ Lieberman, 152.

like Pete Seeger were censored in the 1950's, the '60s ushered in a new era with artists like Bob Dylan. And while these new artists sang about racial segregation, atomic war, and provided more philosophical and emotional songs, "there is still no proof that such reactions were evidence of a change in consciousness or a heightened commitment to political activism."¹¹

Throughout the book, Lieberman presents early folk singers as progressive cultural workers and that their music, early on, was an agent of change. Lieberman provides a descriptive account and is able to point out that the artists of the early folk movement were not so attached to the CPUSA and the communist movement as it was to them. Her work, however, fails to include the entire scope of the information she researched, and she tends to be repetitive throughout. Yet, because she is able to present the importance of studying music and its influence on people and politics, Lieberman's work is being observed by other historians interested in the field.

Inquiring and studying folk music is becoming more and more popular with the continued rise in the fascination with popular culture. But as Lieberman and Reuss discovered, there is much more to folk music than its pleasant auditory factors. Folk music and its artists became the poster children for the Left, both Old and New, who vehemently tried to get their message to the masses. Because of this, folk music is often lumped with political and social protest. And while this may be the case, historians and sociologists are beginning to question whether or not this notion has clouded our view of folk music and if Americans ever really understood what these artists were trying to say. As Denisoff stated, "art, for most people is not a weapon, nor is life a constant political struggle."¹²

The notion that the CPUSA played a central role in the development of folk music during the years 1930-55 and the New Left of the sixties is often dismissed by historians who assume

¹¹Lieberman, 125.

¹²R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left*, (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 4.

that “had a natural affinity for the ‘music of the people.’”¹³ By looking at key figures and groups of the 1930s and ‘40s, it can be argued that Communist ideology shaped some forms of folk music. These individuals were influenced by the radicalism of the era and displayed this in the music that they produced. The Communist Party also enlisted folk musicians to perform at picket lines, rallies and protests. The two were deeply connected and would continue to influence each other throughout the decades.

¹³ Burton Peretti, “Reviewed Work: American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957 by Richard A. Reuss, JoAnne C. Reuss.” *Notes*, Second Series, Vol. 58, No. 2 pp. 364-365. (Music Library Association: WI, Dec., 2001).

CHAPTER 2

“THERE IS POWER IN A UNION:”

FOLK MUSIC DURING THE TWENTYFIRST CENTURY

The end of the nineteenth century had seen a decade plagued by civil war, Reconstruction and an economic depression. The federal government had been weakened in the years after the Civil War, and its success depended on investments from private bankers such as J. P. Morgan. This began the dominance of businesses during an era that Mark Twain dubbed the Gilded Age. The new economy headed by railroad companies was marked with greed and corruption. The California gold rush of the previous decades (1848-1855) spawned the “get-rich-quick” attitude of many of these new industrial businessmen. The Gilded Age transformed the nation into expanding cities and industry that concentrated on steel mills, coal and construction. By the turn of the twentieth century, Americans began moving from the country into burgeoning industrial hubs such as Chicago, Pittsburg and New York. These cities attracted workers by the hundreds from the countryside, and thousands of immigrants came to these new industrial centers in hopes of finding work.¹

Demand grew for cheap unskilled labor to fill the factories, and immigrants and rural workers were eager to fill these positions. The new America brought vast wealth and opportunities but industrial explosion would bring about the exploitation of working class. Industrial wageworkers in the United States grew exponentially, tripling from 5.3 million in 1860 to 17.4 million in 1900.² Many Americans went to work in various factories, mills and mines where they were encouraged to join labor unions. The latter years of the nineteenth

¹ Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. Twain satirized the era from the 1870s-1900 marked by serious social problems masked by gold gilding.

² James Roark et al, *The American Promise*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 508.

century gave birth to Progressivism as a reaction to the excesses of the Gilded Age. Even though the end of the nineteenth century saw the expansion of the railroads and growth of cities, the conditions in the factories, mills and mines were atrocious. But worse, the Gilded Age caused a disparity between “robber barons” like J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie and the working masses.³ The rich were getting richer, and the poor were staying poor. The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 gave hope to average Americans that businesses were under control, but were nothing more than just mere “Band-Aids applied to spurting lacerations.”⁴

Even though wages of average American workers slightly began to improve by 1900, poverty still remained the reality for a large portion of the working class. Due to the large influx of non-English speaking immigrants into the country, supervisory positions were only available for those who could read and write. These skills separated native born Americans from immigrants and caused American workers to established and join labor unions to protect their talents and jobs. Small Appalachian and western towns were being incorporated with the arrival of big businesses like coal that epitomized the growing industrial age. The workers who began to fill these jobs and cities shared “a common language, a certain degree of ethnic similarity, and a tradition of union organization” and these ethnic ties amplified solidarity.⁵

The Western Federation of Miners (WFM) on the surface was like any other American trade union. The WFM, founded in 1893, began as an industrial union, but opened its membership to “all men who worked in and around the mines” in hopes of recruiting all working

³ “Robber baron” is a term that first appeared in the 1870 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* to describe wealthy and powerful 19th century businessmen.

⁴Walter Nugent, *Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

⁵ Melvyn Dubofsky, Joseph Anthony McCartin, *We Shall Be All : A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, (Champaign: Illinois, 2000), 12.

men into the union. The WFM's increased beliefs in solidarity and fraternity led the union to become one of the most militant of its time. The WFM would eventually fall, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) would emerge "hammered out in the fires of that conflict."⁶ The IWW utilized the use of song to convey the union's principle goals.

Early Marxism and Folk Music

The idea as using music as a vehicle to convey messages would be greatly influenced by the presence of Marxism in unions' ideology. Marxist theory believed that capitalism would eventually plunge the world into a state of crisis and class struggle; the role of class struggle dominated American union ideology which was then conveyed through song. Music has played an important role in both Socialism and Communism; Marxists across the board recognized the importance of the propaganda song, and workers' choral groups throughout both Europe and the United States were utilizing propaganda music by the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ Marxist leaders Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx were both acquainted with German folklore ranging from folk tales to folk music, which often drew their influences from labor conditions, class structure, and social position.⁸

Marx was captivated by folksongs and was an avid storyteller of folktales. Engels commented, "These folk books, with their ancient speech, with their misprints and poor engravings, possess for me an exceptional poetic charm. They carry me away from our over-tense time, with its contemporary conditions, 'confusion and delicate interrelationships,' into another world, which is much closer to nature." Marxist literature prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was examined by scholars from an evolutionary perspective with specific

⁶ Dubofsky, 32-3.

⁷ Reuss, 20.

⁸ Reuss, 25.

focus on “concurrent labor conditions, class structure, and social position.” Noted Marxist economist Karl Bucher argued in 1896, that “while in the first stages of their development labor, music and poetry were usually blended, labor was the predominant element, the others being only of secondary importance.”⁹ Class consciousness played a central role in the folklore produced during the era of Marx. Marx’s theory of social change has been “pragmatically and theoretically utilized to deal with and indicate conditions necessary for the formation and continuance of social movements.”¹⁰ Marx believed that folklore was “aesthetic in its essence” and would evolve alongside mankind; epics, tales, songs, and myths would over time surrender to “conscious art and mass media.” Reuss argues that the lack of opposing views to Marx’s idea could suggest that “prior to 1917, Marxist folkloristics remained grounded in the Social Darwinian ethos” and that the idea of enlisting folksongs as propaganda could be seen as “a logical outgrowth of Marxist insistence that all art was a potential weapon in the class struggle.”¹¹

This idea of using folklore as propaganda was adopted by Vladimir Lenin, who believed that “art belonged to the people. Its roots should be deeply implanted in the very thick of the labouring masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will.”¹² Folksongs needed to communicate the party’s ideology to the working class considering that workers made up the majority of Russia’s population. Russia had incurred a mass amount of debt and faced bankruptcy by the fall of 1917 after World War I. Due to the financial problems that plagued the country, many workers and peasants began to

⁹George V. Plekhanov, “Historical Materialism and the Arts,” *Art and Society & Other Papers in Historical Materialism*, (New York: Critics Group, 1936), 9.

¹⁰Denisoff, *Folk Consciousness: People’s Music and American Communism*, 56.

¹¹Reuss, 28.

¹²V. I. Lenin, *On Culture and Cultural Revolution*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 237.

revolt and by October 1917, thousands of peasants led uprisings against landowners. On November 6, the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace at Petrograd and dissolved the Provisional Government that had been instated after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II.

During the Bolshevik Revolution, folk music was used in an agitprop context to stir the sentiments of the working people. Prior to and during the revolution, Russia's population was dominated by agrarian peasant societies and was a land "steeped in tradition." Illiteracy was the norm and education was a privilege, with the urban workers as a continuation of the agrarian generation that had been simply "removed from the farm." It was during this time that the Russian people clung to the songs and tales that had been associated with their culture for decades. Invoking these old tales and songs gave the Bolsheviks a way to connect the revolution and the problems they encountered with earlier revolts against czarist tyranny. Many of the traditional Russian songs and tales were born out of resistance during periods when outside powers controlled much of what would become the Soviet state. These songs encouraged nationalistic sentiments that would eventually lead the Bolsheviks to power.¹³

After the Bolsheviks gained control in the October Revolution of 1917, Russia spiraled into civil war. Fought between the Reds and the Whites, between the Bolsheviks and the White army, the civil war was more than just a series of battles between two sides with opposing views. To the Bolsheviks and many other Russians, the war "showed the true nature of the imperialist stage of capitalist development, when a wide array of rival imperial powers – Britain, France, Japan, and the USA – sank their differences in a determined effort to destroy the first socialist state in the world by rallying to the White cause."¹⁴ After Russia's withdraw from the First World War with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, foreign soldiers began

¹³ Reuss, 30.

¹⁴Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1996), 1.

establishing encampments on Russian soil during the ongoing civil war, attempting to bring down the new Bolshevik government under Lenin. One way of promoting support for the Reds was applying new words to these traditional songs that had been sung during the revolution. One old Siberian partisan song derived from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 was revised to fit the context of the revolution and the civil war:

Comrades, forward/
The Siberian partisan/
Is not afraid of the Japanese cannon/
For the power of the Soviets we will fight/
The power of the workers and the peasants.

Despite the fact that revolutionary songs were being sung and adopted by Bolsheviks across Russia, folklore as a whole “exhibited no striking revolutionary zeal” and was often used to “reinforce old mores, values, and customs that the Bolsheviks were seeking to destroy.”¹⁵ It was these traditions and customs born during tsarist rule that the Bolsheviks felt needed to be destroyed in order to create a new modern state. It was because of this, as Reuss noted, after the revolution, the Bolshevik consolidation of power did not employ folksongs as a major element of their philosophical and cultural framework.

Industrial Workers of the World and the Little Red Songbook

Songbooks linked with agrarian uprising were first introduced in America as early as the 1890s. The songbook *Socialist Songs with Music*, first published by Charles H. Kerr in 1901, was “an attempt at bringing together a collection of Socialist Songs with music for the use of American Socialists.”¹⁶ By the late twentieth century, workers’ choral groups had incorporated folksong and were singing of labor strives across Europe. These songs soon made their way to America, and revolutionary songs were enlisted by the earliest American Marxist group, the

¹⁵ Reuss, 31.

¹⁶Charles H. Kerr, *Socialist Songs with Music*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1901), 7.

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or the Wobblies as they were commonly called, as propaganda music. These groups, whether they be socialist, communist, or anarchist, developed their own “stock of revolutionary lyrics” that were, at times influenced, by Christian socialist thought and often “contained a distinct religious strain both in text and melody.”¹⁷ Like the Marxists, the Wobblies wrote songs about class struggle, but they produced songs that were uniquely their own.

The Wobblies were the most identifiable of these groups that utilized the idea of folk music as a propaganda tool. The IWW emerged in 1905 as a radical labor union with two revolutionary goals: “First, to improve conditions for the working class day by day. Second, to build up an organization that can take possession of the industries and run them for the benefit of the workers when capitalism shall have been overthrown.”¹⁸ Penning many of their own songs, the Wobblies were “grounded firmly in real labor experiences” which was unique prior to 1930. One account from a 1912 IWW strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, mentioned the strike was the first “which sang” and the participants frequently “broke into the universal language of song.”¹⁹ In 1915, pseudonymous “J. E.” published an article in the IWW newspaper *Solidarity* connecting the functions of Wobbly songs with the ballads and broadsides being sang by the common man that had existed centuries before. He went on to suggest that Wobbly songs exposed the “pretensions and frauds of capitalistic society.” “J. E.” concluded that Wobbly songs were not a new literary form, but a “new class expression within the old forms, and the beginning of the new thoughts and new ideals necessary to the beginning of a new society.”²⁰

¹⁷ Reuss, 26. As Reuss notes, the IWW is still active today centered in Chicago, and well-known member and storyteller Bruce “Utah” Phillips still travels the folk circuit. Phillips identifies himself as a Christian anarchist.

¹⁸ Dubofsky, 88.

¹⁹ “The Revolutionary Strike,” *The American Magazine* (May 1912), 4, reprinted in *Solidarity* 3, no. 3, 4.

²⁰ J. E., “The English Novel and I. W. W. Songs,” *Solidarity* (February 13, 1915), 4.

The IWW enlisted “evangelical songs that promised a better life in the hereafter.”²¹ The Wobblies’ publication *Little Red Songbook* (1909), is one of the most famous and widely used sources of radical songs in American history, according to sociologist William Roy. Ten thousand copies of the songbook were handed out within the first month by the Spokane, Washington chapter. The “Songs of the Workers to Fan the Flames of Discontent” featured numerous songs encompassing the many different themes present in folk music. The collection featured songs by Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin and began the collective genre known as “people’s songs.” Before the formation of the IWW, labor unionists “spoke in many tongues” of the different problems that plagued workers across the country. Song became a way to convey the various feelings and concerns that laborers in many different trades were experiencing. In the words of folklorist Archie Green, these “labor-union loyalists and socialists framed their messages in a rainbow of voices.”²² Gathering two dozen songs, the IWW published both new and old songs in a “red-jacketed booklet” that helped spread the words the Wobblies were trying to bring to the forefront of American thought on labor. Many of these songs were written by Wobbly Joe Hill, the IWW’s most recognized member.

Joe Hill

Born in Sweden in 1879, Joel Emmanuel Hägglund learned to play the piano, guitar and violin, his favorite, at an early age. Music was an important aspect of the Hägglund home, and Joel enjoyed playing the violin more than he enjoyed eating. At the age of eight, Joe’s father Olof was injured while working on the railroad and passed away during an operation to stop internal bleeding. After his father’s death, Hägglund entered the workforce along with his

²¹William G. Roy, *Red, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, (2010):72.

²²Archie Green and David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, Salvatore Salerno, et al, *The Big Red Songbook* (Chicago: William H. Kerr Publishing, 2007), 2.

brothers and sisters to keep the family from going hungry. His first job was at a rope factory, and he later went on to become a fireman on a steam-powered crane. In January 1902, fifteen years after his father's unexpected death, Joel's mother passed away after a series of operations due to back problems. Hägglund's siblings decided to sell the family home and venture out on their separate journeys. Four settled in various cities in Sweden, while Joel and his brother Paul decided to depart for America. Leaving in the fall of 1902, the brothers arrived in New York City aboard the Cunard Line's *Saxonia*. At twenty-three years old, Joel worked many different odd jobs around New York City and at some time changed his name to Joseph Hillstorm which was shortened to Joe Hill, possibly to avoid being blacklisted after becoming active in unions. Much of the information pertaining to Hill's arrival and his first years in America is contradictory.

Hill first joined the IWW in Portland in 1908 and later became part of the Spokane, Washington chapter. Work was difficult to find since the West had not fully recovered from the Economic Panic of 1907.²³ It was during this time that Hill and fellow Wobblies began to write parodies of Salvation Army hymns that would be sung during IWW meetings and used as a distraction from the "long-haired preachers" of the Salvation Army that attempted to drown out Wobbly soapboxers. After leaving Spokane, Hill traveled back to Portland and down the California coastline where he finally landed in San Joaquin Valley. Hill worked in agriculture before returning to San Pedro, California where he joined the local IWW chapter in 1910. The IWW was just five years old when Hill joined, and he would later become one of the IWW's most visible members. Living on the docks of the Los Angeles Harbor, Hill lived in a tar paper

²³ The Panic of 1907 occurred when the New York Stock Exchange fell almost 50% from the previous year's peak. During a time of economic recession, many banks and businesses across the United States filed for bankruptcy. See Robert F. Bruner and Sean D. Carr, *The Panic of 1907: Lessons Learned from the Market's Perfect Storm*, (NJ: Wiley and Sons Publishing, 2007).

shack and found it difficult to secure employment. The IWW's rival, the American Federation of Labor, controlled the hiring system on the wharves, making employment for a Wobbly challenging. Hill was one of the main organizers in a IWW-led dock strike and served as the committee secretary. He was arrested in June 1910, charged with vagrancy and was sentenced to thirty days in jail. Released on July 9, Hill decided it was time for a new start and departed for Salt Lake City, Utah, the hometown of two fellow Swedes Hill met while in San Pedro. Hill was told of the work available in Utah, specifically working as a smelter or in the silver mines in Park City, just east of Salt Lake.

During the summer of 1911, Hill ventured across the border to Tijuana, Mexico where he joined local rebels fighting in the Mexican Revolution. It was during this time that Hill probably wrote "Should I Ever Be a Soldier." This song included lyrics like "do your duty for the cause, / for Land and Liberty," referring to the rebels' cry of "Tierra y Libertad." After returning to the United States, *The Industrial Worker* began promoting the fourth edition of its *Little Red Songbook*. This edition of the pocketbook included "The Preacher and the Slave," which would be the book's most popular and most well-known song.

“Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right;
But when asked how ‘bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:

You will eat, by and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.

And the starvation army they play,
And they sing and they clap and they pray.
Till they get all your coin on the drum,
Then they tell you when you are on the bum:

If you fight hard for children and wife—

Try to get something good in this life—
You're a sinner and bad man, they tell,
When you die you will sure go to hell.

Workingmen of all countries unite,
Side by side we for freedom will fight:
When the world and its wealth we have gained,
To the grafters we'll sing the refrain:

You will eat, bye and bye,
When you've learned how to cook and to fry;
Chop some wood, 'twill do you good,
And you'll eat in the sweet bye and bye.”²⁴

Many businesses would enlist the Salvation Army as a tactic to disrupt an IWW meeting whenever it was held. Hopes that the Salvation Army's message of the “sweet bye and bye” would encourage workers to continue their lives and “accept the hell that they faced.”²⁵ The Salvation Army's band was also loud enough to drown out voices in the IWW meetings. To fight against the noise of the loud bands, IWW organizers began to put radical words to familiar tunes. Like many other Wobbly songs, Hill's “The Preacher and the Slave” was sung to the tune of “Sweet Bye and Bye,” a popular Salvation Army hymn. Aimed at parodies of the Salvation Army's “pie in the sky preaching,” other Wobbly songs also changed the words of many popular hymns. “Dump the Bosses Off Your Back” was sang to the tune of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and suggested that “dumping your bosses of your back” would be a more resolute solution than taking the worker's problems “to the Lord in prayer” as the hymn suggests.

While traveling the country before setting in San Pedro, Hill penned many songs and poems that would later become some of his most recognizable work. By 1913, Hill's songs were being sung across the West. The most popular tune was a song written earlier in the year titled “Mr. Block” who was a “common worker, anonymous and disposable to the employing class.”

²⁴ Industrial Workers of the World, *Little Red Songbook*, (Chicago: 1968), 9.

²⁵ Gary Blanchard, *Brief History of Little Red Songbook*, (Createspace Independent Pub, 2014) 14.

Mr. Block did not represent the Wobbly; instead this worker represented everything that went against IWW teachings. Mr. Block was blind to his social position which, according to IWW teachings, was the “metaphorical block upon which capitalism is built.”²⁶ Written to the tune of “It Looks to Me like a Big Time Tonight,” “Mr. Block” became an instant favorite with lyrics like: “tie on a rock to your block and jump in the lake, / kindly do that for Liberty’s sake.”²⁷ Commemorating Ernest Riebe’s cartoon that first appeared in the IWW’s *The Industrial Worker* on November 7, 1912, Hill’s song portrayed the organization’s attitudes towards the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Socialist Party. Wobbly founders felt that the AFL, which presumed to be “the labor movement of this country” did not represent the working class. Wobblies wanted to establish an organization that was open to any person for membership who earned “his livelihood either by his brain or his muscle,” unlike the AFL, which prohibited “the initiation of or conferring the obligation on a colored man; that prohibit the conferring of the obligation on foreigners.”²⁸ The AFL consisted mainly of white male workers, and only a tiny minority of those workers were responsible for obtaining rights for all AFL members. Founding member Eugene Debs commented that:

“If we had met instead in the interest of the American Federation of Labor these papers, these capitalist papers, would have had their columns filled with articles commending the work that is being done here. There is certainly something wrong with that form of unionism which has its chief support in the press that represents capitalism; something wrong in that form of unionism whose leaders are the lieutenants of capitalism; something wrong with that form of unionism that forms an alliance with such a capitalist combination as the Civic Federation, whose sole purpose it is to chloroform the working class while the capitalist class go through their pockets. There are those who believe that this form of unionism can be changed from within. They are very greatly mistaken.”²⁹

²⁶ William M. Adler, *The Man Who Never Died*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 28.

²⁷ Joe Hill, “Mr. Block,” *The Little Red Songbook*, 1968.

²⁸ Minutes of the IWW’s Founding Convention - Part 1, Convention Industrial Workers of the World. First Day. Tuesday, June 27, 1905. Morning Session.

²⁹ Eugene V. Debs, “Speech at the Founding of the IWW,” Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World. Chicago, June 29, 1905.

During the summer of 1913, Hill prepared to leave California for Utah, where the local IWW chapter led strike against the Utah Construction Company. Approximately fifteen hundred “shovel stiffs” lived in tent camps along the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad construction. IWW members from the Local 69 chapter infiltrated the tent camps and began to hold meetings; on June 10 the workers surrendered to Wobbly teachings and demanded both a pay raise and shorter work days. Also among these demands were “decent food and bedding, sanitary bathing and laundry facilities.”³⁰ By the end of the month, the IWW declared victory for the workers, but the Utah establishment had just begun to fight. Instead of deport the Wobblies by the masses as strike breakers in Arizona had done previously, the construction company hired thugs that would attack a peaceable meeting held in downtown Salt Lake City. James F. Morgan, a traveling IWW orator, had been jailed for sixty days for his involvement in the June strikes and was to be featured at the meeting. On the evening of his release, August 12, hundreds of Wobblies packed the streets to celebrate the IWW’s victory and to hear Morgan speak. The meeting kicked off with a song, which was typical of most Wobbly meetings, and Hill’s “Mr. Block” filled the streets. When the song reached its final words, twenty armed men attacked the spectators. Morgan was clubbed by a heavy revolver, and others joined in the assault kicking Morgan until he was unconscious. Soon a riot broke out and Morgan was charged with assault with intent to commit murder and enticing the riot, even though he was bludgeoned before he addressed the crowd. Salt Lake City police chief announced that the IWW would no longer be allowed to hold street meetings, which Local 69 members argued was against their constitutional right to free speech. *The Industrial Worker* published an article describing the riots as “five hundred slaves under the banner of the I.W.W. have revolted against unbearable conditions existing in camps of

³⁰ Adler, 37.

the Utah Construction Company and their subcontractors at Tucker, Utah.”³¹ The Salt Lake City branch sent pleas to fellow IWW members to come join their fight, and Joe Hill was one of many that responded to the call. Hill arrive in Salt Lake City just days after the riot. Just a few months later, there would be a double murder at the local grocery store, and Joe Hill would be the prime suspect.

Since the riots in August, IWW activity in Salt Lake City had calmed down. Joe Hill had been working in neighboring Park City in a mine owned by the Silver King Coalition Mining Company. While working in the mine, Hill became ill resulting in his hospitalization. Hill spent two weeks in the hospital and due to his absence, lost his job. He returned to Salt Lake City and spent the holidays with local Swedish families. At some time shortly before 10 P.M, John G. Morrison and his two sons were closing their family grocery store for the night when they were approached by two men wearing red handkerchiefs covering their faces. The two men, who were both carrying pistols, fired several shots at John and his older son Arling, killing both. Morrison’s youngest son Merlin survived the attack and immediately called the police. Neighbors soon surrounded the Morrison grocery store after hearing the shots that had been fired, and one claimed to have seen two men leaving the store, one appearing wounded. Two more neighbors were able to confirm this, but an ongoing investigation supplied little to no evidence.

Joe Hill could have been a victim of bad circumstances that night. Hill showed up on the doorstep of a local doctor complaining that he had been shot by another man. When the doctor questioned Hill about his wound, Hill claimed he had received the gunshot in an argument over a woman. Hill, however, refused to name either party involved in the argument. The doctor later claimed when speaking to police that Hill was armed with a pistol the night he came to his door.

³¹Gibbs M. Smith, *Joe Hill*, (Layton: Gibbs Smith Publishing, 1969), 118.

The police began investigating Hill, but they were able to find a red handkerchief in his room. However, the pistol that the doctor claimed Hill had that night could not be located. Hill denied being at the grocery that night and to having anything to do with the double murder. Hill did not testify at his trial, but his lawyers noted that there had been four other men treated for a gunshot wound on the night in question. It took the jury only a few hours to deliberate, ultimately ending in Hill's guilt. Hill was sentenced to death by the firing squad, and his execution took place in November 1915.

Before his death, Hill sent a wire to longtime friend Big Bill Haywood. The telegram stated that Hill was sentenced to die, and that he wished to have his body relocated because he did not want to be found dead in Utah. Haywood responded, "Goodbye Joe. You will live long in the hearts of the working class. Your songs will be sung wherever workers toil, urging them to organize."³² The IWW used Hill's execution as fuel to produce more songs. Hill had been viewed as a martyr and what better way to epitomize him than through song. The IWW released a special edition of the *Little Red Songbook* in 1915 dedicated to Joe Hill. Featured in the special edition of the *Songbook*, labor activist Ralph Chaplin's song "Joe Hill" was dedicated to the late Wobbly:

"Singer of manly songs, laughter, and tears;
Singer of Labor's wrongs, joys, hopes, and fears;
Though you were one of us, what could we do?
Joe, there was none of us needed like you."³³

³² Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 130.

³³Ralph Chaplin, "Joe Hill," *The Little Red Songbook: Songs of the Workers to Fan the Flames of Discontent*. (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World,) 6.

CHAPTER 3

“I AIN’T GOT NO HOME:”

FOLK MUSIC AND THE DEPRESSION

Communism entered its so-called “Third Period” by the thirties, which proposed that “the collapse of world capitalism was imminent and that intensification of the class struggle in all areas was necessary to hasten the final overthrow of the bourgeois and the establishment of the rule of the proletariat.”³⁴ This ideology evoked the idea that folk music be used as agitation propaganda (“agit-prop,”) or art as a weapon. As Reuss stated, artists were expected to expel any bourgeois influence in media that reached the workers. The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) gained its largest following during the years of the Great Depression. The CPUSA recruited musicians to produce the agitprop music that party organizers felt would encourage the masses. During the Popular Front, made up of leftists, years of the late 1930s, the CPUSA employed folk musicians like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and other groups to warn against fascism.³⁵ Pete Seeger was even known to perform with a guitar that stated the message “this machine kills fascists.” Party leaders promoted Communism as “Americanism” and they felt folk music was just the vehicle to depict its message.

The Great War raged on for five years leaving Europe in shambles. The United States did not sign the Treaty of Versailles, after a 39 to 55 Senate vote, and did not choose to impose financial penalties on Germany like its European allies. And also unlike their European allies, the United States did not suffer economic disparity. The US led efforts to rebuild Europe in the aftermath of the war, in particular war-torn Germany. World economies, predominantly the

³⁴ Reuss, 40.

³⁵ Peretti, 364.

United States and Great Britain, prospered from 1920-21 due to the scramble to replace goods that had been destroyed during the war. Prices quickly shot down as production began and supplies were easy to access. Eventually, the “bubble burst” and prices, as well as wages, fell.³⁶ The Dawes Plan, introduced in 1924, proposed that the main source of German capital rely heavily on American investment banks. During the “Fat Years” (1922-28), the American economy was at its zenith. The average American spent their time and money purchasing household appliances, especially the new broadcast radio, and automobiles, many of which were purchased on credit. Industrial production rose to over seventy percent and gross national product almost doubled. During this time, unemployment hardly existed and workers were enjoying shorter work weeks.³⁷ Many American industries grew due to the large demand for mass production. Electric power companies increased during these years as well as construction and the automobile industry. But as American business owners began to accumulate vast amounts of wealth, American workers suffered, only seeing a small increase in their wages. The rift began to grow between the rich and the poor, the owners and the workers. This growing disparity and the growing demand for production quickly became too much for the American market to handle.

On October 29, 1929, a day that would become known as Black Tuesday, the stock market crashed, triggering a world-wide depression. The Great Depression would become one of the worst economic disasters in modern industrial history, lasting for over a decade and was the worst economic downturn since 1848.³⁸ The unemployment rate reached twenty five

³⁶ Charles Poor Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

³⁷ Maury Klein, *Rainbow's End : The Crash of 1929*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28.

³⁸ Thomas E. Hall and J. David Ferguson, *The Great Depression: An International Disaster of Perverse Economic Policies*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 4.

percent, over 15 million Americans, by March 1933 and wages dropped almost fifty percent. The recessions suffered during the depression would take three years of economic recovery, from 1938 to 1941, for the employment rate to stabilize. Hooverville's, shantytowns named for the president presiding over the depression, Herbert Hoover, began to spring up across the United States and millions of Americans spent hours standing in soup kitchen lines. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election in 1931 gave Americans new hope of surviving the depression. The introduction of his New Deal in 1933 aimed at repairing financial (banking), agricultural and manufacturing industries and through numerous executive orders, Roosevelt created dozens of new agencies to deal with the country's crippling problems. During the "First Hundred Days" of 1933, Roosevelt initiated fiscal policies, banking and monetary reforms, securities regulations, and the repeal of prohibition. Roosevelt and his administration also created numerous public works projects. These relief projects were intended to provide temporary relief to the millions of Americans suffering from the depression as well as offering jobs to the unemployed. One agency, the Public Works Administration (PWA) hired hundreds of unemployed Americans to help with the construction of numerous dams, bridges, roads, hospitals, and schools. Created on June 16, 1933 as part of the Industrial Recovery Act, the PWA budgeted millions of dollars to be spent on public works projects that would act as a means of "providing employment, stabilizing purchasing power, improving public welfare, and contributing to a revival of American industry." With the task of encouraging economic growth, the PWA funded the construction of over 34,000 public works projects, spending over six million dollars, between July 1933 and March 1939.³⁹

³⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, George Washington University.

President Roosevelt also wanted to stimulate rural and farm growth as well. Programs such as the Resettlement Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, the National Youth Administration, along with various others programs promoted restoration of rural life. The Tennessee Valley Authority was established to modernize rural farms bringing electricity to hundreds who had not experienced the luxury. The Resettlement Administration (RA) was launched to provide relief to California workers and others that had survived the Dust Bowl in the Southwest United States. The New Deal program was issued by Executive Order No. 7027 on April 30, 1935, and was an attempt to alleviate the more than one million farm families that had been affected by the Great Depression. The main goals of the administration were to create and administer programs that involved “resettlement of destitute or low-income families from rural and urban areas,” create connections between rural and suburban areas and administer projects with respect to the environment.⁴⁰ The RA was one of the first government agencies of its kind to endorse folk music as a unifying force in farming communities. Along with creating migrant camps in California and other western states, the RA was also responsible for numerous folk projects. The program addressed the problems of displaced farmers and combated rural poverty through agencies to replenish the battered economy. In 1933, a federal program was enlisted through the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) as a form of direct relief for farmers. Workfare programs, opposed to welfare, were designed to aid small-scale farming and factory industries. Even before the crash of 1929, the agricultural economy was suffering from the “chronic problem” of poverty and many western farmers suffered continuous cycles of drought.⁴¹ Roosevelt’s New Deal would give folklore its largest support from the federal government than ever before. “Down-home” politics sponsored by the New Deal encouraged the collection and

⁴⁰ Resettlement Administration Program : Letter from the Administrator of the Resettlement Administration Transmitting in Response to Senate Resolution no. 295, 1.

⁴¹ Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger: a life in American Music*, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1992), 137.

performance of folk music. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was also fond of folk music: when King George VI visited the United States in 1939, the first lady enlisted Charles Seeger to treat the English monarchs to a traditional hoedown where a Nashville square dance troupe and a traditional hillbilly band introduced the royals to traditional American music.⁴²

Like the IWW during the early years of the twentieth century, leftist political groups, influenced by the Communist Party, began using working class values in folk songs. Due to the discovery that folk songs could be used to spread the revolutionary ideas of the Communist Party, “people’s music” was used as agit-prop, to reinforce these same concepts. These songs promoted social change, and the radical groups the thirties.

Charles Seeger

Born in Mexico City in 1886, Charles Seeger spent most of his childhood travelling back and forth from Mexico to New York City due to his father’s profession. Charlie, as he was known as a child, attended the Staten Island Academy, a private school established in the 1890s, while the family resided in New York and often received private tutoring while the family lived in Mexico. He would go on to attend Harvard University and study music. While at Harvard, Seeger joined the Stylus Club which promoted young artistic minds of the area.⁴³ Even though he enjoyed his time at Harvard, Seeger felt the university fell short in musical training. Seeger had studied ballads under literary great George Lynman Kittredge, but due to poor resources, many music students at Harvard surpassed their teachers. After graduating magna cum laude in 1908, Seeger travelled to Europe to learn more about European native music. Not only was he interested in traditional European music, Seeger felt that this knowledge could help enrich

⁴² Reuss, 17.

⁴³ Pescatello, 34.

American music: “One did not pick up American music where American music was; you had to pick up American music where European music was.”⁴⁴ After arriving in Europe in the autumn of 1908, Seeger began an apprenticeship with Otto Lohse, the conductor of the Cologne Municipal Opera. After experiencing the opera, Seeger travelled throughout Europe and later returned to Cologne in 1910, where he decided that his career as a conductor was over. Seeger left Cologne for Berlin, where he aspired to write an opera of his own. Unfortunately, Seeger would never see the success that he had imagined for himself in Europe, and eventually returned to New York City where he took a job teaching violin at the Institute of Musical Art. In May 1912, Seeger was offered the position of professor of music at the University of California. After arriving in Berkley, Seeger quickly noticed the absence of a real music department. Seeger was not the first to hold his position however; John Frederick Wolle, Seeger’s predecessor, had left no real curriculum upon his departure. In his first years of teaching, Seeger taught the evolution of music as the evolution of a primitive art to a folk art and finally to a fine art. Seeger stressed the importance of “primitive,” popular and folk music but folk was only “a few lectures as a remnant of a dying past.” Under Seeger’s guidance, the University of California would be one of few that would offer musicology and one of the first to concentrate on “contemporary, living music.”⁴⁵

During his professorship at Berkeley, Seeger’s “social consciousness” began to evolve. After being called an “ivory tower idealist” for advocating migrant workers by economist Carleton Parker, Seeger began to travel through California’s hop fields and fruit ranches where numerous migrant workers were employed. Appalled by what he saw, Seeger became more involved in the plight of the workers. He attended university debates regularly and debated

⁴⁴ Pescatello 37.

⁴⁵ Pescatello, 53.

Marxian ideas with fellow colleagues. Seeger marched alongside the IWW through California's San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys during the labor movement. He was also very sympathetic to the Mexican Revolution which had occurred just a few years earlier. When the World War I began, many Americans were opposed to US involvement in the war. While most Americans viewed this as a European problem, Seeger saw it a battle between imperialistic Great Britain and militaristic Germany.⁴⁶ He increased his involvement in the IWW and other radical organizations as his opposition for the war grew. By 1917, his discontent for the war had reached its height after losing his brother Alan on the battlefield. Pressure for US entry grew, causing the US to formally enter the war in April 1917. Americans' opinions of the war changed, and while the majority of Americans supported the war, Seeger was still a strong critic of the Great War.

Seeger would return east to New York City at the end of the war and after battling depression and exhaustion, took a sabbatical to recover. Seeger eventually recuperated and decided with his wife Constance that the family (Seeger and Constance and three boys: Charles, John and Peter) would return to California after touring the South and Southwest with their musical act. The family's plan to return to California did not succeed, and the Seegers returned to New York in 1921 where both Charles and Constance were offered teaching positions at the Institute of Musical Arts, which would become the Julliard School of Music. The strain of work and raising a family would prove to be too much for the couple, and the two eventually divorced in 1932. This would lead Seeger to accept a second teaching job at The New School for Social Research, a very radical institution for its time. The New School was established in 1919 as a means to "seek an unbiased understanding of the existing order, its genesis, growth and present

⁴⁶ Pescatello, 63.

working.”⁴⁷ At the New School, Seeger was able to return to the ideals and opinions he held before and during the WWI while still in California. Much like Seeger, American’s view and opinions changed considerably in the years following the war. After suffering the carnage and heartbreak of the Great War, the United States experienced economic prosperity and a decade of “boomtown mentality” that shifted from rural life to a more cosmopolitan and urban society. The frontier had been overtaken by factories and cities and the new American mentality was that of industrial capitalism. However, everything would soon change in 1929 when “it all came crashing down.”

The New School promoted ideas prevalent in American society and often adapted their curricula accordingly. The newest part of the music curriculum began looking at non-Western forms music. Seeger encouraged a colleague to travel to the Soviet Union in 1929 to gather traditional Russian songs that he would soon begin introducing to his classes. These recordings of “Asiatic music” stimulated the New School students’ minds; they also inspired Seeger to join and establish new societies. Shortly after, he became active with the International Music Society and was able to establish his own society to connect the nation’s musicologists. Through this society, Seeger was able to connect with German-trained, German-American historian Otto Kinkeldy who was serving as chief of the music section of the New York Public Library. The two began discussions of beginning an “American musicology society.”⁴⁸ The Depression had taken a grave toll on Seeger and his awareness of social inequalities became more apparent than ever before. Though his time spent with the IWW and the “social activism of the wartime era,” Seeger’s new views clashed with the elitist attitude he had developed during the 1920s. Seeger’s radical views would soon lead him to trouble with his superior. Walter Damrosch did not want

⁴⁷ “Research School to Open.” *New York Times*, September 30, 1919.

⁴⁸ Pescatello, 95.

Seeger teaching New School students any twentieth century composers, but instead to cling to the classical composers. Seeger would ultimately lose his teaching job, but his work at the New School for Social Research increased. The school became the “hotbed” of new political ideas, and in 1931, Seeger and fellow musicologist Henry Cowell offered the school’s first course on music cultures of the world.

Around this same time, Seeger was becoming actively involved in the Composers’ Music Collective of New York. The collective was a community of professional musicians “seeking to forge a relationship between music, society, politics, and the economy.” Concerned with the plight of the working man and the deepening Depression, Seeger and his peers believed the Collective could be a possible remedy.⁴⁹ With informal ties to the CPUSA, the Collective was a section of the Workers’ Music League (WML), established in New York City in 1931 as an affiliate of the International Music Bureau. Championing the slogan of “Music for the Masses,” the WML “guided the musical aspects of the revolutionary workers movement” and, much like the IWW, published their protest songs into collective booklets released in 1934 and 1935. Members of the WML attempted to link their interests with those of “the unemployed, trade unionists, and other left-leaning artists and writers.”⁵⁰

Seeger was appointed by President Roosevelt to the RA in 1935 due to his “sympathy with the RA’s progressive ideals.”⁵¹ In 1936-37, Charles sent two of his colleagues, Sidney Roberston and Margaret Viliant, to eastern and Midwestern states collecting field recordings for use in government projects to train leaders for new rural settlements. Seeger’s goal would be to eventually place over 300 musicians into resettlement communities throughout the U. S. The

⁴⁹ Pescatello, 109.

⁵⁰ Library of Congress: Workers’ Music League Collection

⁵¹ Pescatello, 136.

music program would be used to “encourage social integration” into communities using “folk idioms, particularly folk song.”⁵² Seeger’s team collected Finnish, Gaelic, American Indian, Swedish, Lithuanian, and Serbish music as well as a number of traditional Appalachian and Ozark songs and dances. The RA would be replaced by The Farm Security Administration on September 1, 1937, as an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The recordings collected by Seeger’s team were given to the Library of Congress, and the 159 recordings still reside there today.

Huddie William “Leadbelly” Ledbetter

Huddie William Ledbetter was born in the Louisiana bayous of the Mississippi Delta close to the Texas border in 1885. His father was a sharecropper who taught the young Huddie how to plow and pick cotton. Huddie attended school in Texas in 1896, the year that the Supreme Court ruled that “segregated schools provide equal education and hence constitutional opportunities for black children” and in the five years he stayed there, learned to read and write.⁵³ He was exposed to music at a very young age: his uncle Terrell taught him to play his first instrument, the “windjammer” (a Cajun accordion), as a child. From there, Huddie learned to play the guitar, mandolin, piano, and harmonica.⁵⁴ By the time he was a teenager, he was a well-known musician in his hometown of Mooringsport. He often headlined “sookey-jumps,” Saturday night country dance parties, and other “breakdowns.” Huddie would travel to Shreveport where he would frequent Fannin Street, the city’s entertainment district. On Fannin Street, he was exposed to new styles of music like “barrel-house piano,” an early form of jazz.

⁵² Pescatello, 139.

⁵³Robert V. Wells, *Life Flows on in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 178.

⁵⁴ Will Schmid, *A Tribute to Woody Guthrie & Leadbelly: Student Text*, (Reston: Music Educators National Conference), 20.

As he got older, Huddie developed a temper and had a few run-ins with the law, and would eventually leave Louisiana for Texas in 1905. After moving to Dallas in 1910, Huddie met Blind Lemon Jefferson, one of the creators of the Blues, who taught Huddie many new songs and playing techniques.⁵⁵ Jefferson was a well-known country blues guitarist and singer and Huddie learned many new songs from his mentor and perfected his guitar technique. In Dallas, Huddie was introduced to the twelve string guitar and mastered playing the slide guitar, often referred to as the bottleneck guitar, with a knife blade.

Huddie's temper would eventually lead him to trouble. In 1917, he was involved in a fight with another man over a woman and was sentenced to spend time in a Texas prison farm. Huddie was sentenced to thirty years to a chain gain, and treatment of African American prisoners was often brutal and harsh. He vowed to survive his term and was given the position of lead man due to his enormous strength. His time in the Sugar Land Prison inspired him to write the song "The Midnight Special" which he would often perform for the prisoners after a hard day's work.

"Yonder comes Miss Rosie. How in the world do you know?
Well, I know her by the apron and the dress she wore.
Umbrella on her shoulder, piece of paper in her hand,
Well, I'm callin' that Captain, "Turn a-loose my man."
Let the Midnight Special shine her light on me.
Oh let the Midnight Special shine her ever-lovin' light on me.

When you gets up in the morning, when that big bell ring.
You go marching to the table, you meet the same old thing.
Knife and fork are on the table, ain't nothing in my pan.
And if you say a thing about it, you have a trouble with the man.

Let the Midnight Special shine her light on me.
Oh let the Midnight Special shine her ever-lovin' light on me.

If you ever go to Houston, boy, you better walk right,

⁵⁵ Wells, 178.

And you better not squabble and you better not fight.
Benson Crocker will arrest you, Jimmy Boone will take you down.
You can bet your bottom dollar that you are Sugar Land bound.

Let the Midnight Special shine her light on me.
Oh let the Midnight Special shine her ever-lovin' light on me.

Well, jumping Little Judy, she was a mighty fine girl.
She brought jumping to this whole round world.
Well, she brought it in the morning just a while before day.
Well, she brought me the news that my wife was dead.
That started me to grieving, whooping, hollering, and crying.
And I began to worry about my very long time.

Let the Midnight Special shine her light on me.
Oh let the Midnight Special shine her ever-lovin' light on me.”⁵⁶

Leadbelly's prison experience had a profound impact on the songs he would perform later in his career as an entertainer. Songs like “Roberta,” “Long Hot Summer Days,” “Shorty George,” and “Make a Longtime Man Feel Bad” were all part of Leadbelly's act at some point or another. This could possibly be because “some of the blues protest songs helped African Americans find a voice to express their anger over racial prejudice and discrimination.”⁵⁷ Leadbelly's talent was noticed by the prison guards who soon began to ask him to play at special occasions. One such event was the visit of the new Texas Governor Pat Neff and his wife. “Pardon Song,” which Leadbelly penned just for the occasion, asked the governor for his pardon. Touched by the song, and in conjunction with his good behavior, Governor Neff pardoned Leadbelly in 1925. After his release, Leadbelly returned home to Louisiana. He quickly returned to his old ways, and after a fight, Leadbelly found himself back in prison. Sentenced to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known to its inhabitants as the Angola Prison Farm, Leadbelly would soon be discovered by folksong collector John Lomax in 1933.

⁵⁶ Huddie “Leadbelly” Leadbetter, “Midnight Special,” *Leadbelly Vol. 5, 1939-1947*, 2005.

⁵⁷ Schmid, 20.

John and his son Alan were travelling the United States, particularly the South, collecting African American prison songs. John took special interest in Leadbelly and helped him work toward getting parole by “hand delivering” a Leadbelly song to Louisiana Governor Allen.⁵⁸ The Lomaxes convinced Leadbelly to tour other Southern prisons to collect songs for the Library of Congress. The trio travelled through Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama and Texas gathering folk songs that would later be compiled into the book *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. The only credit Leadbelly received, however, was “the high honor of seeing his name in print.”⁵⁹ In 1934, Leadbelly travelled to Philadelphia with the Lomaxes to sing for the Modern Language Association where the “gray professors responded with enthusiasm to the recently freed convict.”⁶⁰ By 1935, the trio were in New York where Leadbelly often performed concerts that were arranged by the Lomaxes. Numerous newspapers and radio programs tried to vie interest in the shows by embellishing myths about Leadbelly’s past. He was featured in the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Time Magazine* as a “half sex-mad, knife-toting, black buck from Texas.”⁶¹ The Lomaxes then toured the Northern and New England states, and Leadbelly charged \$100 for each performance.

It was also during his time in New York, from 1935-49, that Leadbelly made numerous recordings with Columbia, Capitol, Victor, Asch, Musicraft, Disc and the Library of Congress. He made many appearances at colleges and universities as well as parties, lofts and political rallies in New York City. He was a “favorite with the liberals” and was often seen at folk

⁵⁸ Schmid, 21.

⁵⁹ Earle V. Bryant, *Richard Wright Byline: Articles from the Daily Worker and New Masses*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015, 241.

⁶⁰ Robert V. Wells, *Life Flows on in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 181.

⁶¹ Bryant, 242.

gatherings alongside Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives and the Almanac Singers.⁶² His time spent in New York City as well as his performances with Guthrie and Pete Seeger helped shaped Leadbelly's philosophy. In the following years, Leadbelly developed a strong political view: he penned "Bourgeoisie Blues" and "Scottsboro Boys" both containing strong messages. Appearing as one of the songs in the Library of Congress's Recordings, "Scottsboro Boys" epitomized the 1931 accusation of nine African American teenagers of raping two white women on a train.

"Go to Alabama and ya better watch out
The landlord'll get ya, gonna jump and shout
Scottsboro Scottsboro Scottsboro boys
Tell it all about

I'm gonna tell all the colored people
Livin' in Harlem swing
Don't ya ever go to Alabama
Just try to sing."⁶³

Leadbelly would become one of the most important singers on the folk circuit of the 1930s and 1940s and, in 1949, would be the first bluesman to perform in Europe. That same year at the age of 61, Leadbelly was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease and died a year later on December 6 in New York City. He was "an innovator of the highest order" developing a structure that would be mirrored in the decades to come by artists like Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie (son of Woody Guthrie) and Bob Dylan. And unlike other African American artists of his time, Leadbelly broke the "race market" and performed for large white audiences before the color barrier was destroyed. Although Leadbelly was a popular performer, he did not attain the wealth he had imagined for himself but his songs would live on through artists like the Weavers, who recorded his song "Goodnight Irene" a year after his death. Leadbelly would be inducted into the Blues

⁶² Schmid, 21.

⁶³Leadbetter, "Scottsboro Boys," *Let It Shine on Me: The Library of Congress Recordings*, Vol. 3, 1940.

Foundation Hall of Fame 1986 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988. “Huddie ‘Leadbelly’ Leadbetter was in many ways like the hungry alligators that patrolled the bayous of his native Louisiana. He roamed his native Southern habitat freely with a surly disposition, never backing down from a fight. Like the gator, Leadbelly was an original who became part of American folklore, despite almost suffering from the electric chair blues.”⁶⁴

Woody Guthrie

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born in Oklahoma on July 14, 1912. Guthrie’s father Charles was a local politician and a working cowboy. He named his second son after the Democratic presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson. Charley was a devout Democrat and did not support the radicalism that was becoming popular on the prairie. Guthrie’s childhood was filled with song; his mother Nora Belle sang to the Guthrie children daily. Her repertoire included old folk songs she had learned as a child and popular tunes of the day. Guthrie attended school in Oklahoma and worked on his high school’s newspaper until he dropped out at age sixteen. His mother died in 1930 from Huntington’s cholera, then a little known disease; he then moved to Pampa, Texas, to stay with relatives. At seventeen, Guthrie learned to play the guitar and harmonica and learned old folk ballads. Roosevelt’s election and his New Deal altered the country drastically, but the plains states were hardly effected. The middle country experienced a severe drought in the early 1930s that would last most of the decade. The drought, coupled with extensive cultivation of the land which stripped the topsoil and uprooted the grass, led to the Dust Bowl. Some of the first dust storms began in South Dakota in 1933 and was followed by a severe storm that carried dust as far as Chicago and Boston.⁶⁵ Guthrie termed the storm “Black Sunday,” a theme he would use in many of his songs. A dust storm in 1935 would inspire

⁶⁴ David Dicaire, *Blues Singers: Biographies of 50 Legendary Artists of the Early 20th Century*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Co. Inc. Publishers, 1999), 151.

⁶⁵ Ronald D. Cohen, *Woody Guthrie: Writing America's Songs*, (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2012), 10.

Guthrie to write his first song, “Dusty Old Dust,” which was fashioned after the old folk tune “Ballad of Billy the Kid.” The drought, along with the Great Depression, left many “Okie” workers jobless and homeless, and so many of them, including Guthrie, relocated to California.

Guthrie left for Los Angeles in 1937 where he was reconnected with his cousin Leon “Jack” Guthrie. He soon began working for the local radio station KFVD that was owned by New Deal Democrat Frank W. Burke. Woody was given his own broadcast; the show began on July 19 and was instantly a favorite of the Okies who had moved to California. The immigrants that made their way to California escaping the Dust Bowl were a prime audience for Guthrie’s show. He wrote his song “Do Re Mi” while working at the radio station. The song criticized the LAPD’s treatment of the incoming immigrants. Many Okies who fled to California were stopped at the border where they were refused entry because they were too poor. The song warns the migrants that if they did not have enough money they would not be allowed in.

“Now the police at the port of entry say
‘You’re number fourteen thousand for today’

Oh, if you ain’t got the do re mi folks you ain’t got the do re mi
Why you better go back to beautiful Texas
Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.”⁶⁶

Guthrie continued to write cowboy ballads with his cousin Jack including “Oklahoma Hills.” He soon met Maxine Crissman, a cowgirl singer who used the stage name Lefty Lou. Guthrie hired her to work with him on KFVD. The two began performing together and before long were offered their own show. The two “took quite a hand in politics” and sang some of their first political songs on the show.⁶⁷ Unfortunately the *Woody and Lefty Lou Show* ended in 1938, but Guthrie’s career had just begun. Guthrie left the *Lefty Lou Show* in June and began writing articles for *Light*, a weekly paper that was owned by Frank Burke, Sr., where he travelled

⁶⁶ Guthrie, Woody, “Do Re Mi,” *Bound for Glory: Songs and Stories of Woody Guthrie*, 1956.

⁶⁷ Cohen, 11.

through Hooverville's and migrant worker camps. American elites and academics began to study rural poverty as it was becoming a widespread problem. John Steinbeck published *Grapes of Wrath* and Carey McWilliams published *Factories in the Field* in 1939. Guthrie was not the first to comment on the plight of the migrant workers, but he was the first to use song to do so. His song "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" used powerful imagery to express his message:

"Was a-farmin' on the shares, and always I was poor;
My crops I lay into the banker's store.
My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

I mined in your mines and I gathered in your corn
I been working, mister, since the day I was born
Now I worry all the time like I never did before
'Cause I ain't got no home in this world anymore."⁶⁸

The most well-known of these was "Oklahoma Hills" which became a national hit. In Los Angeles, Guthrie met struggling actor Will Geer and Ed Robbin who introduced him to the radical politics of the age. Robbin became bureau chief and reporter for *People's World*, the West Coast's publication for the Communist Party. Guthrie began writing a daily column called "Woody Sez" for the local *United Progressive News*, and soon his columns became a weekly feature in *People's World*. Within a year, Guthrie had contributed over 170 articles. His columns were an instant hit and Guthrie even included his own cartoons in his publications. Through his friends Robbin and Geer, Guthrie soon found himself immersed in left-wing politics. Guthrie never formally joined the Communist Party due to their rigid ideology, but he remained sympathetic to their cause. He joined the left-wing group National Maritime Union and People's Songs affiliates in the 1940s because of their various goals and commitments.⁶⁹ Guthrie lost his

⁶⁸ Guthrie, "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore," *Dust Bowl Ballads*, 1964.

⁶⁹ Cohen, 15.

job at KFVD in November 1939 and soon exhausted other opportunities in California. Guthrie and his family returned to Texas completely broke. He received a letter from his old friend Will Geer who told him of his position in the Broadway production *Tobacco Road*. Geer informed Guthrie there may be a position for him too, so he decided to head east to New York City.

Guthrie arrived in New York City in early 1940 where Geer managed to get him some singing jobs at various events including a benefit for Spanish Civil War refugees. Guthrie would be introduced to New York's left-wing circle in March at a "Grapes of Wrath" benefit for the Steinbeck Committee to Aid Farm Workers. At the benefit, Guthrie met Aunt Molly Jackson, Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and Alan Lomax. After hearing him perform at the benefit, Lomax became interested in recording Guthrie for his Library of Congress Folk Song project. Guthrie continued writing his column in *People's World* as well as contributing to New York's *Daily Worker*. He also kept busy performing at local left-wing organizations where he was featured as a "folk expression of anti-war feeling voiced in the songs of the American people."⁷⁰ Woody penned the song "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?" to promote peace during World War II. The song appeared in the April 18, 1940 issue of the *Daily Worker* published in its entirety. Numerous labor song books would be published in the years before and after the war, and many of them contained these same peace songs.

Woody Guthrie's commercial career began sometime in 1940. He recorded his first commercial album *Dust Bowl Ballads* in April of the same year. The 1930s saw the emergence of a new working class that would be a constant theme in Guthrie's work. Guthrie's songs are original work and in whose songs "class oppression comes across not as an element in a theory,

⁷⁰ Cohen, 19.

but as a part of his experience of America.”⁷¹ In Guthrie’s songs, class is almost always characterized with conflict. In his *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Guthrie refers to the constant theme of the poor whose home is always being taken by the rich. In “Dust Can’t Kill Me” the singer is constantly losing his home to someone else, but “That old wind might blow this world down / But it can't blow me down / It can't kill me.”⁷² Guthrie’s songs typically represent some kind of struggle.

It was shortly after Lomax’s Library of Congress recordings that Guthrie would make one of his most well-known career moves. Tired of hearing the same version of “God Bless America” over and over on the radio, Guthrie, inspired by his trip across the country, wrote “This Land Is Your Land.” In the song, Woody protests against class inequalities:

“As I went walking, I saw a sign there,
And on the sign there, It said "no trespassing."
But on the other side, it didn't say nothing!
That side was made for you and me.

In the squares of the city, In the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?”⁷³

Upon meeting Seeger at the “Grapes of Wrath” benefit in early 1940, Guthrie and Pete Seeger struck up an instant friendship. Seeger was already hard at work on his People’s Songs, Inc. project and the Almanac Singers, and he asked Guthrie to join in. With his hard hitting songs and left-wing tendencies, Guthrie was a perfect fit for Seeger’s groups. The Almanac Singers and People’s Songs, Inc. would become very important not only to folk music throughout the 1940s, but also in the folk revival of the 1950s and ‘60s. The American Communist fascination

⁷¹ Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson, *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, (Hanover: University of New England, 1999), 130.

⁷² Guthrie, “Dust Can’t Kill Me,” *Dust Bowl Ballads*, 1940.

⁷³ Guthrie, “This Land Is Your Land,” *The Asch Recordings, Volume 1: This Land Is Your Land*, 1997.

with folk music was certainly not dictated by Moscow, and it had been discovered by the depression era folkies. But it was during this era that American opinion of traditional folk music shifted from negative to positive. Folk music would take an interesting turn after the end of World War II from being associated with leftist organization to the commercial boom that would bring folk music to national attention.

CHAPTER 4

“WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE:”

FOLK MUSIC AND THE POPULAR FRONT

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 had left America devastated. Unemployment and poverty were rampant and shanty towns known as Hooverville’s began popping up all over the country. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and began the conflict that would escalate into World War II, European nations like Great Britain thrived in war time production. But with America claiming neutrality, war time production was not in high demand. Everything changed, however, when the United States entered the war on December 7, 1941 after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Quickly every factory in the United States was working at full production manufacturing war materials. Women began to enter the workforce, filling the factory jobs that had been forfeited by men to serve overseas. Americans full heartedly supported the war, and various propaganda was produced from Hollywood and New York City. The media cooperated with the federal government presenting America as the victors and overall “good guys” of the war.

Attitudes shifted about urban and radical folk groups during the Popular Front era. Made up of leftists and centrists, the Popular Front worked through organization. The third wave of communism had given way to the Popular Front in the United States after the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 which alarmed many Americans and shifted their ideology of the Communist Party. The artists of the Popular Front emphasized racial equality and peace during World War II and the Cold War. The party attracted more non-whites than ever and promoted anti-segregationist laws to promote a unified America. The party attempted to implement the proletarian culture based on American traditions that were epitomized in folk music. Organizations of the Old Left

promoted groups like the Almanac Singers and People's Songs, Inc., to implant the foundations for the socially conscious use of traditional material.⁷⁴

Pete Seeger

Pete Seeger's name has always been synonymous with political activism. It has even been said that, due to his work with so many various social movements, "journalists have paid more attention to his politics than his music."⁷⁵ Seeger has been called "Khrushchev's songbird" by protesters and a saint by his protégé Bob Dylan.⁷⁶ Seeger's interest in music began early in life. His father, Charles Seeger, was a musicologist and his mother Constance was a trained violinist from Julliard. Seeger travelled the country with his parents as the family hosted various concerts. His first interest in folk music came at the age of sixteen after attending the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. After attending boarding schools most of his life, Seeger enrolled at Harvard in 1936, where he studied sociology in hopes of becoming a journalist. As an undergraduate, Seeger joined the tenor banjo society.⁷⁷ Even though music was his passion, he never considered making it his career. One summer while at Harvard, Seeger met several socialists who were joining the fight in the Spanish Civil War; for a short while, Seeger even considered joining them in the fight against fascism. He decided he would be more useful writing about the war instead of fighting on the front lines. Having always been sympathetic to the CPUSA, Seeger joined the Young Communist League (YCL) that same year. He would soon become disgruntled with his teachers who kept telling Seeger he could not

⁷⁴ Reuss, 140.

⁷⁵David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger*, (New York: Villard Books, 2008), xviii.

⁷⁶ Alec Wilkinson, "The Protest Singer: Pete Seeger and American Folk Music," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006.

⁷⁷ Associated Press, "Alumni in the News: Pete Seeger Dies at 94," *Harvard Magazine*, January 14, 2014.

change the world. Poor grades would eventually cause him to lose his scholarships and he left Harvard before taking his exams.

Seeger dropped out of Harvard in 1938, bound for New York City where he hoped to take on a job writing about politics. Seeger was not ready to take on the world of journalism due to his feeling that he had not adequately been trained. He instead took a train to visit his mother in Sarasota, Florida where he spent a month taking art lessons. After leaving Florida, Seeger returned to New York where he travelled across the state supporting himself with his new art skills. Seeger soon realized that he was not a great artist and contemplated on what his next career move would be. As a young man, Seeger was deeply troubled with the direction the world was heading and considered living as a hermit. He returned to these thoughts, wanting to completely detach himself from the hypocrisy and disparity he saw in the world. Seeger had watched his father's involvement with the Communist Party, but was concerned with their rigid ideology.⁷⁸ With the nation still suffering from the depression, and despite President Roosevelt's New Deal, thousands of Americans were still without jobs; and that did not exclude Seeger. He put his journalism aspirations aside and joined Aunt Molly Jackson and Leadbelly performing shows in New England. Seeger was captivated by Aunt Molly and her songs of protest about the hardships that Appalachian coal miners faced. Seeger's involvement with Alan Lomax did not hinder his political activism. He became more active with the YCL during the fall of 1938. Seeger would encourage more radical artists to join the league, and soon dozens of members were crowding into a small New York apartment where they read the *Daily Worker*, but never really delved into heated political discussions. He and other YCL members soon tired of the Communist publication and decided to take their efforts to the people. A small group put

⁷⁸ Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

together a traveling puppet show and went to small communities in upstate New York. When a dairy farmer strike erupted in August, the group found a new cause for their shows and presented an alternative to the “grimness of the picket line.”⁷⁹ They travelled from strike to strike performing their new skit and during intermission, Seeger entertained the audience by singing songs that he had penned himself. But as much as Seeger enjoyed the “Vagabond Puppeteers”, his new venture was not very profitable. Alan Lomax would intervene again, and Seeger took a job in the summer of 1939 assisting Lomax at the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress. Seeger believed that folk music was “the sound of America” and the two would spend years traveling the country collecting rural music sharing their passion for traditional music.⁸⁰

The Almanac Singers and People’s Songs, Inc.

Seeger formed the Almanac Singers with original members Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and John Hawes; Woody Guthrie would join the group a few years later. Seeger was introduced to Lee Hays late in 1940, and the two soon began singing together at “cause” parties and other left-wing functions. Seeger, Hays, Lampell and Hawes spent hours together discussing current events and composing their “own topical songs in folk style.”⁸¹ The Almanacs’ official career began in early February when the group was invited to play at the national meeting of the American Youth Congress (AYC) held in Washington, D. C. AYC leaders requested that the Almanacs perform songs “constructed around the political slogans of the meeting” which included “Don’t Lend or Lease Our Bases” and “Jim Crow Must Go.” After this performance, the Almanacs recognized themselves as agit-prop folk entertainers. Deriving their name from

⁷⁹ *Daily Worker*, Oct 2, 1939.

⁸⁰ Winkler, ix.

⁸¹ Reuss, 149.

the two most common books to be found in working class homes, the Almanac and the Bible (one for this world and one for the next), the group of singers generally performed at labor strikes and rallies. Songs composed by the Almanacs were intended to serve as a commentary and a set of guidelines for political and social values of the American Left. The Almanacs would resurrect the ideology of using folk songs as a vehicle for agit-prop communication from the Old Left present during the twenties and thirties. Lampell noted that the group's formation was the first organized attempt of its kind and that the Almanacs wanted "to give back to the people the songs of the workers."⁸² Almanac shows usually consisted of performances of traditional ballads and labor songs and, at times, songs that had been written by the group. During the first months of the Almanacs existence, they composed "peace" songs that contained strong anticapitalistic messages and asserted that "the Roosevelt administration would drag an unwilling nation into a European war fought mainly for the purposes of redistributing world markets and profits among the capitalist nations."⁸³ Majority of the Almanac songs were set to old folk tunes such as "Billy Boy" but contained new revolutionary lyrics. The group released their debut album *Songs for John Doe* in May 1941, when Europe was again thrown into a world war. Even though the United States remained neutral, the Almanacs produced many anti-war songs on the album championing an anti-interventionist position. "The Strange Death of John Doe" exemplified the Almanacs' position:

"I'll sing you a song and it's not very long,
It's about a young man who never did wrong.
Suddenly, he died one day—the reason why no one could say.
...Only one clue as to why he died—A bayonet sticking in his side!"⁸⁴

⁸² *People's World*, August 8, 1941, 5.

⁸³ Reuss, 150.

⁸⁴ The Almanac Singers, "The Strange Death of John Doe," *Songs for John Doe*, 1941.

Other Almanac Songs took a direct stab at President Roosevelt and his administration. Due to the president's cautiousness when dealing with the war, the Almanacs composed "The Ballad of October 16" commemorating the 1940 initiation of a peacetime draft.⁸⁵ Set to the tune of "Jesse James," the song contained lyrics that openly criticized the president:

"Oh Franklin Roosevelt told the people how he felt.
We damned near believed what he said;
He said, 'I hate war—and so does Eleanor,
But we won't be safe till everybody's dead."⁸⁶

The *John Doe* album caused the Almanacs to become incredibly popular with the communist movement and with the American public. The *Daily Worker* published numerous articles about the group and their performances were demanded by numerous left-wing affiliated groups. Radical presses like the *Daily Worker* praised the album for its revolutionary, and quite often humorous, lyrics and *John Doe's* songs were frequently reprinted. But more importantly, the Almanacs provided an optimistic alternative to the party's hardline ideology. The group performed at New York's annual May Day parade, a communist organized event, and was featured in the WWI antiwar revue *Sign of the Times* where they would "have some mighty pertinent things to say about pretty nearly everything."⁸⁷ World War II transformed on June 22, 1941, when Hitler's Germany invaded the Soviet Union, breaking the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. This shift caused American noninterventionist to change, and the Almanacs could not produce antiwar and anti-Roosevelt songs. They instead shifted their focus to songs that opposed the Nazis and promoted the Allies. The album *Dear Mr. President* (1942) contained songs that encouraged American participation in the war such as "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" and "Dear Mr. President." Written by Guthrie, "Dear Mr. President" hinted at

⁸⁵ Reuss, 151.

⁸⁶The Almanac Singers "The Ballad of October 16." *Talking Union*, 1941.

⁸⁷ "Almanac Singers and Players In Debut May 15," *The Daily Worker*, May 13, 1941.

the fact that the Almanacs had written songs in the past criticizing the president, but “Dear Mr. President” stated that they could put these issues aside for the fight against Hitler:

“Now, Mr. President
We haven't always agreed in the past, I know
But that ain't at all important now
What is important is what we got to do
We got to lick Mr. Hitler, and until we do
Other things can wait.
In other words, first we've got a skunk to skin.”⁸⁸

Seeger, Hays, Lampell and Hawes held “sings” in their New York apartment where they would exchange ideas with other musicians and intellectuals and began composing more revolutionary union songs.⁸⁹ The group formed a collective, with all income being held in the group’s name instead of the individual. This communal living promoted the “Almanac’s Marxist sociopolitical worldview” while supporting the group’s shared musical efforts.⁹⁰ They compiled many of their new revolutionary songs onto their new album *Talking Union* (1941). Songs such as “Get Thee Behind Me, Satan,” and “Talking Union” made the album, and the Almanacs, one of the most popular “cornerstones of progressive working class activity in the United States.” The group received so many requests for their performances that they planned a summer cross-country tour where they intended to play for as many labor and union groups as possible. Both satirical and instructive, “Talking Union” became the union anthem and offered a message that the masses could easily understand and remember. The song described how to start a union by talking to ‘the workers in the shop’ and if the union stays together, “’twont be long” before their demands would be met. But the ending, which was written by Seeger, is the final punchline that people would remember:

⁸⁸The Almanac Singers, “Dear Mr. President,” *Dear Mr. President*, 1942.

⁸⁹ Reuss notes that the “sings” that were held in the Almanacs’ New York loft were predecessors of the hootenanny that would become popularized during the folk revival. Reuss, 153.

⁹⁰ Reuss, 156-9.

“If you don’t let Red Baiting break you up,
If you don’t let stool pigeons break you up,
If you don’t let vigilantes break you up,
And if you don’t let race hatred break you up—
You’ll win. What I mean,
Take it easy—but take it.”⁹¹

Seeger entered the war in July after being drafted where he served in the U. S. Army in the Pacific theatre. He was sent to Saipan in 1944, where he worked in hospitals helping patients recuperate. Seeger learned new songs from the soldiers and entertained them by performing his own. He soon became bored with his military service, and wanted to return to the states to revive his music career. Seeger returned home in 1945, as did thousands of other soldiers, when the war came to an end after the Potsdam Declaration on July 26. Seeger believed that songs could “help this world survive” and that the collective experience could compose songs that would produce social and political change. The war had positive effect on the United States; it brought back economic prosperity to the U. S. due to the demands for full factory production and unemployment had all but disappeared. And now with the war over, communist Russia was the new threat to American prosperity. The Almanacs recorded various sessions for the Office of War Information (OWI), but due to tensions between the USSR and the U. S., the OWI destroyed the recordings and cancelled any future bookings of the group due to their revolutionary lyrics. The Almanacs, however, never considered themselves to be part of the communist movement; they were sympathetic to communist ideology, but they never involved themselves in subversive activities or directly took orders from Communist leaders. And while the group’s political ideology did support the “Stalinist worldview,” the Almanacs continued to

⁹¹ The Almanac Singers, “Talking Union,” *Talking Union*, 1941.

focus on labor and people's songs. Throughout the war, Seeger envisioned a "loosely knit organization where people could get together to exchange and print songs."⁹²

This dream evolved into an organization that Seeger called *People's Songs, Inc.*, with aspirations to "create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American People."⁹³ The collective included numerous left-wing musicians and folk artists who all had hopes of distributing people's music that exemplified the struggles of the working class. With lyrics that supported the president and the war in Europe, folk music began to gain increasing popularity. Folk songs were sung throughout barracks after duty hours and urban Americans were brought into contact with rural soldiers; after the war was over, the average American knew what folk was and sounded like. Radio programs soon began featuring shows that featured folk songs and artists. Seeger recognized this new popularity as a way of promoting folksong and the artists' ideals that composed them. He approached folk singer and songwriter Oscar Brand after a "home-from-the-war" party and asked if he would be interested in helping produce a folksong magazine. The first year of *People's Songs* was a huge success and membership totaled over 1,506 by October 1946. The early years of the collective also signified a "new dynamic force on the progressive music front." By building a broad-based educational system, *People's Songs* artists were able to circulate various articles, pamphlets and songbooks that contained hundreds of old folk, union and freedom songs. The organization also maintained a library of folk songs that supplied sufficient agit-prop material. Seeger imagined building on the singing tradition began by the IWW and the Wobblies. The first issue of *People's Songs Bulletin* would be printed in February 1946 with the purpose to "make and send songs of labor" for the "American

⁹² Reuss, 169-175.

⁹³ *People's Songs, Inc.*, "People's Songs, Inc." *People's Songs Newsletter*, 1, no. 1, (1945).

people through the land.”⁹⁴ *Bulletin* printed a number of folk songs ranging from Guthrie’s “Roll On, Columbia” to the more hard hitting labor songs like “Capitalistic Boss.”

“Red Baiting”

People’s Songs would become one of the leading folk publications in the nation. In order to finance the magazine, Seeger and Brand hosted a series of hootenannies, a term Seeger heard used by the Washington County Commonwealth Federation to describe the gathering of folk musicians for a “jam session” in Seattle in 1941.⁹⁵ Hootenannies began popping up all over the country, especially in colleges and labor union meetings. Membership soon reached over two thousand and while many of the newer members were accepting progressive views, many of the old members remained sympathetic to the Communist Party’s support for the working class. And like Seeger, many of them did not adhere to the rigid ideology of communism but instead clung to idea of using their talents to communicate with the ordinary person. This spirit had not died, as the *Daily Worker* had noted, but instead had been unemployed. Still faced with the disparities of a boom-bust economy created during the post-war years, factory strikes continued and *People’s Songs* artists rallied behind politicians sympathetic to the labor movement. Seeger and several others recorded the album *Songs for Political Action* for the 1946 Congressional elections. Republicans ultimately won over the House and the Senate and fueled anti-communist sentiments in the U. S. Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 which restricted union activities and required union leaders to sign oaths swearing they were not Communists.⁹⁶ Real trouble came when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began to explore subversive activities in the United States. Created in 1938 to investigate fascism, HUAC worked

⁹⁴ *People’s Songs Bulletin*, vol. 1 no. 1, February 1946.

⁹⁵ Oscar Brand, *Ballad Mongers*, (New York: Readers Digest, 1962), 84.

⁹⁶ *Labor Management Relations Act of 1947*, Public Law 80-101, 80th Cong. (June 23, 1947).

with J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI and quickly began to inquire about People's Songs. Anticommunism swept the country and "Red-baiting" attacked the collective and other folk artists, as communist sympathizers. People's Songs would be cited numerous times by HUAC as "as an agency of the great Communist conspiracy," and recognized the collective as "a vital Communist front."⁹⁷ Union leaders were facing the same scrutiny which resulted in the 1949 expulsion of dozens of unions under the membership of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). People's Songs had been employed by the CIO, and after the expulsions, their association with the American labor movement began to vanish. Seeger acknowledged the fact that CIO officials did not want "left-wingers putting out a CIO songbook."⁹⁸

Eventually, most radical unions stopped their contact with People's Songs. Under the circumstances, People's Songs almost collapsed, but the campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948 gave new life to the collective. Americans were becoming dissatisfied with President Truman's approach to foreign policy and again feared a takeover, but this time by the Soviet Union. They wished for a leader who was reminiscent of Roosevelt and found that in Henry Wallace, former secretary of agriculture under the New Deal and vice president during Roosevelt's third term. Wallace's supporters dreamed of a return to the welfare-state liberalism and the strong intellectualism that surrounded the New Deal. Championing the "Century of the Common Man," Wallace and his supporters were successful in establishing the Progressive Party when the Democratic Party splintered. Folk musicians rallied around Wallace and his supporters and began to compose songs for the upcoming election campaign. Cleveland People's Songs director Bryant French composed numerous songs for the campaign and penned the party's anthem

⁹⁷ *Fifth Report of the Senate Fact Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, California Legislature* (Sacramento: Senate Publications, 1949), 281-83, 544.

⁹⁸ Seeger quoted in Reuss, 196.

“Battle Hymn of ’48.” People’s Songs then made it the organization’s main goal to turn the Wallace campaign into a singing campaign and to promote songs as a main means of communication. The collective also hoped to raise mass understanding of the issues that were composed during this period. Ultimately, People’s Songs hoped to establish a permanent singing movement under the guise of the Wallace campaign. The organization was soon being booked at various Wallace rallies across the country and two songbooks were published under the supervision of Alan Lomax by the collective. *Songs for Henry Wallace* contained some two dozen songs that reinforced the Progressive Party. At the Progressive Party’s nominating convention in Philadelphia, Seeger and other left-wing folk artists took the stage performing a collection of songs that had been composed by Wallace supporters. “The Battle Hymn of ’48,” “Great Day, the People Marching,” and “The Same Merry Go-Round” were featured during the show, and the latter became the conventions most popular:

“The donkey is tired and thin,
The elephant thinks he’ll move in.
They yell and they fuss, but they ain’t foolin us,
‘Cause they’re brothers right under the skin.
It’s the same, same merry go-round,
Which one will you ride this year?
The donkey and elephant bob up and down,
It’s the same merry go-round. (toot, toot)⁹⁹

The Progressive Party gained huge popularity through these songs which in turn obtained enormous publicity in the media. The music of the People’s Songs was mentioned daily in the press, to the songsters’ surprise, with admiration and astonishment. Wallace and the Progressive Party represented the Left’s last opportunity at returning to a New Deal nation in the postwar era. Wallace was ultimately defeated and People’s Songs came to an apparent end. Many of the organizations members separated themselves from Wallace because of the stigma attached to the

⁹⁹ Ray Glaser and Bill Wolff, “The Same Merry-Go-Round,” *Presidential Campaign Songs, 1789-1996*, 1999.

Progressive Party's pro-communist views and performed for "safe" audiences. Eventually, all ties with the CIO would disappear, but People's Songs would come to a close by the end of the 1940s after suffering financial defeat.

The Weavers

By the early 1950s, the cold war mentality had given way to the even more vicious form of McCarthyism. Harry Truman was elected president over the Progressive Party's Henry Wallace and Truman campaigned with strong containment policies to stop the spread of communism. In the summer of 1948, over twelve leading members of the CPUSA had been arrested by the federal government under conspiracy charges. Riots erupted in the summer of 1949 in Peekskill, New York when local anti-communist residents broke up a concert featuring African American artist Paul Robeson; nearby Senator McCarthy was giving some of his first anticommunist speeches. Membership in the CPUSA had dwindled since its zenith in early 1947 and its top leaders were in jail awaiting trial. The movement's ties to popular groups were also declining, most likely due to pressures from political foes. Various communist-affiliated unions had been expelled from the CIO and many leaders had rid their organizations of communist sympathizers. Many organizations were reformed under new auspices such as American Youth for Democracy, the Civil Rights Congress and the American Labor Party. This period also saw the "large-scale consolidation and change in the radical folk music milieu."¹⁰⁰ Without People's Song, Inc. and *People's Songs Bulletin*, some members of the folk community left the movement and many others failed to organize songs the way People's Songs had.

Seeger reunited with Lee Hays in November 1948 to form the Weavers with fellow folk singers Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman. Two weeks after Wallace's defeat, Hays returned from Philadelphia where he spoke with Seeger about forming a new group that was modeled

¹⁰⁰Reuss, 223.

after the Almanacs. The first performances of the Weavers were at hootenannies during the early years of People's Songs where folk singers would sing together "as a demonstration of the solidarity of the working class."¹⁰¹ The Weavers' songs resembled that of the Almanacs and Hays and Seeger returned to composing songs like they previously had. The Weavers experienced most of their early success with those sympathetic to the Old Left with their music that had "an explicit or implicit left-wing slant among them."¹⁰² "If I Had a Hammer" (1949) was one of the Weavers' first recordings and drew back to Hays' and Seeger's support of the progressive movement. The song commented on the labor movement using symbols that were easily recognizable to workers.

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning
I'd hammer in the evening, all over this land
I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning
I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land

Well if I had a bell, I would ring it in the morning
And I would ring it in the evening, all over this land
I'd ring out danger, I'd ring out a warning
I'd ring out love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land

Now if I had a song I would sing it in the morning

I would sing it in the evening all over this land
I'd sing out danger I'd sing out a warning
I'd sing out love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land

Well I've got a hammer and I've got a bell
And I've got a song to sing all over this land
It's a hammer of justice, it's a bell of freedom
It's a song about love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land

¹⁰¹ Brand, 106.

¹⁰² Reuss, 234.

All over this land.”¹⁰³

“If I Had a Hammer” also played an important role in the transformation of the Weavers. Seeger had seen through his involvement in the labor movement that union songs never gained much popularity so the Weavers began reviving traditional tunes and popularizing songs that had once been sung by Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly. The Weavers soon were on the top charts and were introducing folk music to millions of Americans. This was not the movement that Seeger had envisioned, but he understood that his group and other folk artists were making Americans aware of their musical past.¹⁰⁴ While rock and roll was becoming popular with the younger generation, folk appealed to those that had been in their twenties and thirties during World War II. In time, the Weavers would see huge commercial success. Due to the introduction of tape recordings, cheap and easy to make records could be produced on a mass scale. This meant that thousands of Americans could purchase artists’ music that many of them were able to produce on their own. The Weavers would skyrocket to fame and would become the first folk group to experience such commercial success. Like People’s Songs, Inc., the Weavers would soon fall under the scrutiny of cold war hysteria.

Political Blacklisting

The summer of 1951 was the height of the Weavers’ career. The group was scheduled to appear at the Ohio State Fair when the local Knights of Columbus and the American League chapters attacked them. The groups cited articles in *Counterattack* accusing the group of being communist sympathizers. The appearance was ultimately cancelled, and the newsletter followed the Weavers to any appearance they had. After the war in Europe was over, the new threat became communism, and anyone who had belonged or supported the movement became the

¹⁰³The Weavers, “If I Had a Hammer,” *Best of the Vanguard Years*, 2001.

¹⁰⁴ Winkler, 63.

enemies. Journalists produced a list citing entertainers who had sponsored or performed for leftist organizations that deemed the entertainers as “unworthy of employment.”¹⁰⁵ Some folk artists shot to fame despite the distrust and criticism received from the federal government like the Weavers. In the new age of the mass media, they appeared on television shows, radio shows and even in motion pictures. HUAC released a listing that contained over 100,000 Americans that had at one time or another belonged to an alleged front organization which was then published in *Counterattack*. The anti-communist publication was founded by American Business Consultants, an organization established by three ex-FBI agents, and was funded by American textile importer, and John Birch Society member Alfred Kohlberg. As early as 1948, any mention in *Counterattack* was enough to cause an artist to lose their job. But many Americans were unaware of the accusations considering *Counterattack's* limited circulation. 1948 also signifies the date when the American Left began to disappear, and when political songs and People's Songs began to vanish.¹⁰⁶

More American business owners were becoming suspicious of their potential employees and believed it was their right to question their political beliefs. On June 22, 1950 American Business Consultants published *Red Channels, The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. The list contained over 150 writers, actors, singers, dancers, producers, and many others involved in the entertainment business that were suspected of any communist affiliation. Many acts were cancelled and most business owners requested that the artist preform an act that showed they were no longer sympathetic to the radical left. The *Red Channels* list remained unknown to the American public until August when the case of Jean Muir hit the headlines. Muir, a very popular and sought after actress, was one of the first names to be included in *Red*

¹⁰⁵ Brand, 123.

¹⁰⁶ See Brand, *Ballad Mongers* (128). Brand cites the different reasons as to why the Old Left began to collapse.

Channels. She was denied the lead role in the Aldrich Family television show after the show's executives received information that Muir was a suspected communist. The show's sponsor General Foods released a statement citing "controversial personalities or the discussion of controversial subjects" for the dismissal of the actress.¹⁰⁷ NBC received numerous phone calls protesting the decision, but General Foods stood behind their choice. It was obvious to many folk artists that their future looked grim because of the *Red Channels* publication, and many business owners adhered to the decision made by General Foods in the case of Muir. The *Red Channels* list grew when former television supervisor Vincent Hartnett released his own *Confidential Handbook* that included many names that were not in the former's list. The Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security added even more names to the list in 1952; many of the names included on this list were popular folk artists. Pete Seeger testified in front of HUAC on August 18, 1955 about his involvement in radical leftist organizations. The committee cited information they had found in issues of the *Daily Worker* since 1945 as the "official organ" of the Communist Party.¹⁰⁸ Seeger claimed that his presence at the leftist meetings did not mean he was a member of the Communist Party.

The Weavers were one of the hardest hit groups because of the blacklist. Because the Weavers had achieved such commercial success, they were under constant scrutiny about their political affiliations. Seeger had been questioned by HUAC and feared that his past involvements would hinder the group. He left the group and was replaced by Erik Darling, whose name did not appear on the blacklist. The group was still prohibited from performing on network television and radio even with the addition of Darling. The Weavers and other folk artists were never able to rid themselves of this "taint" that followed them from being

¹⁰⁷ Brand, 131.

¹⁰⁸ HUAC hearings, August 18, 1955, NYC, NY, 2.

blacklisted. The Weavers were just the openers to the folk revival that began in the 1950s and groups like theirs would carry on the idea of promoting folk music. The four decades of the Old Left had ended with the revival and the new character of folk music. Interest in folk songs that had existed by the young radicals of the Old Left had given way to top charts and sold out shows. Few radical singers went on to popular careers in the decades that followed the Old Left, but the sixties would see the birth of new folk artists like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.

CHAPTER 5

“THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’:”

FOLK MUSIC AND THE NEW LEFT

According to sociologist William G. Roy, the “left-wing movements of the 1930s and 1940s more than any social movements before or since erected an organized infrastructure, a coherent art world to control the production, distribution, and to some extent the consumption of culture.”¹⁰⁹ Folk music began to take a new shape after the first folk revival began in the 1950s and blossomed into “the commercial folk revival of the 1960s.”¹¹⁰ The Almanacs were the first to introduce this new kind of folk group, the urban folk group. The Weavers, the Almanacs successor and formed in 1948 by Pete Seeger, made a commitment to themselves to make “American society more truly democratic” which was “a threat to many in the political and entertainment worlds of cold-war America.”¹¹¹ The Weavers, however, were different from the earlier folk groups in that they were pursuing a commercial career with “a vaguely leftist message in the hope that their music would appeal (and the public’s goodwill) would overcome ideological barriers.”¹¹²

America after the end of World War II experienced an economic prosperity not seen since before the Great Depression. War production had boosted the economy, and the jobs that had been filled by American women during the war were again being filled by men once they returned home. Even though the Allied powers had defeated Hitler and Nazism, the West was

¹⁰⁹ William G. Roy, *Red, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 81.

¹¹⁰ Roy, 126.

¹¹¹Robert S. Koppelman, *“Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!” The Writings of Lee Hays*, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), xix.

¹¹²Burton W. Peretti, Review of *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*, by Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss. *Music Library Association* 58, no. 2 (December 2001): 365.

plagued by another enemy. Soviet Russia had emerged as a threat after the Potsdam agreement had been made ending the war in the Pacific, and many western leaders feared that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin could not be trusted. President Harry Truman offered the Truman Doctrine to Congress as a way to impede Soviet imperialism. The cold war threat heightened in 1947 when Soviet presence in Greece and Turkey caused alarm for Western leaders. President Truman announced his doctrine as a means to contain Soviet influence. The Truman Doctrine established that the United States would supply political, military and economic assistance to any democratic nation under threat from any external or internal authoritarian forces. The policy of containment would be cited time and time again throughout the cold war as a means of stopping the spread of communism. With the constant threat of Soviet invasion, Americans lived in constant fear of a nuclear war. “Duck and cover” drills were practiced in schools and nearly every home in suburbia had a built-in bomb shelter.

After the first revival and the stage set by the Almanacs and the Weavers, many folk artists of the second revival of the 1950s and ‘60s went the commercial route. As cold war fears began to ease, the views of the Old Left began to die and the ideas of the New Left were ushered in. Postwar-conformity and consumerism of the 1950s led to the eventual discontent of the white middle class.¹¹³ Where the Old Left targeted the common man and the working class people, the New Left was full of educators and many others that wanted to see reforms on numerous social issues, like civil rights. The New Left also took a different direction from that of its forerunners and abandoned the earlier use of folk music. Due to various publications like underground newspapers the New Left was more “oriented toward mass popular culture than

¹¹³, Mikikio Tachi, “Commercialism, Counterculture, and the Folk Revival: A Study of *Sing Out Magazine*, 1950-1967.” *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 15 (2004): 190.

movement-based culture.”¹¹⁴ The New Left took a position different from that of their predecessors with folk music. The Old Left enlisted folk music as a vehicle to reach the masses. Where they failed however, was to include the masses. Folk music was “never embraced by their rank-and-file constituents, especially the African Americans they wished to mobilize.”¹¹⁵

During the fifties, the Weavers were being questioned by HUAC and along with others involved in the Leftist movement folk artists were being blacklisted. Many folk artists like Pete Seeger were suspected communists due to their ties with the CPUSA and their overall identification with the Left. After refusing to answer HUAC’s questions, Seeger was indicted for contempt of Congress and was sentenced to a year in prison in March of 1961.¹¹⁶ Like many folk artists in the fifties, Seeger was starting to see the shift from music being used as a vehicle for change offered to the masses to this new commercialism that folk music would see in the sixties. The sixties offered a new role to folk with the “incorporation of the folk song into the mainstream of American popular music in the middle 1960s.”¹¹⁷ The Kingston Trio’s recording of “Tom Dooley” marked a change in folk music. The Appalachian murder ballad sold over four million discs after being recorded in 1958. The British Invasion had taken hold of American popular music, but folksongs were still on the top charts. These songs encouraged young men and women across the country to pick up a guitar and learn these traditional songs.

¹¹⁴ Roy, 219.

¹¹⁵ Roy, 2.

¹¹⁶ It is recorded that Seeger told HUAC, “I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this. I would be very glad to tell you my life if you want to hear of it.” (Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area. Part 7, p. 2449)

¹¹⁷William Ivey. Review of *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left*, by R. Serge Denisoff. *The Journal of American History*, 59, no 2 (September 1972): 471.

The New Left is often synonymous with protest, especially student protest. According to Denisoff, the New Left “is comprised of middle-class students, ‘drop-outs’, intellectuals, militant Negroes, and others, most of whom felt affected by some structural problem of American society.”¹¹⁸ Unlike that of the 1930s and ‘40s, this New Left had little focus on finding solutions and instead protested injustice at the very core of the society. The concerns of the New Left included civil rights and liberties, democracy and peace. The solutions to these various problems could be found in the tactics of folk music, not its ideology. The new threat of the Vietnam War gave many artists something to write and sing about. Many anti-war demonstrations recruited performers like Phil Ochs to communicate their resentments in New Left demonstrations such as “teach-ins.” Ochs’ performance at a Vietnam Day demonstration at the University of California in 1965 exemplifies:

Sure once I was young and impulsive
I wore every conceivable pin
Even went to Socialist meetings
Learned all the old union hymns
Ah, but I’ve grown older and wiser
And that’s why I’m turnin’ you in...¹¹⁹

These “rhetorical songs” illustrated the feelings of the New Left, those of dissatisfaction and alienation from the social structure, and are lacking in the ideology present in the Old Left.

Bob Dylan

Robert Zimmerman was born in Duluth, Minnesota on May 24, 1941. From an early age, Bobby liked all types of music. He loved the artists popular in the forties and fifties like Bing Crosby, Hank Williams, Odetta, a variety of Midwest polka leaders, and more importantly,

¹¹⁸ R. Serge Denisoff, “Folk Music and the American left: a Generational-Ideological Comparison.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 20, no. 4 (December 1969): 433.

¹¹⁹Phil Ochs, “Love Me, I’m A Liberal,” *Phil Ochs in Concert*, 1965.

Aaron Copeland. Copeland had without a doubt “contributed to the blend of music and downtown left-wing politics” that gave birth to the folk revival and would ultimately influence Bob Dylan.¹²⁰ As a teenager, Bobby listened to Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, the Almanac Singers, and the Weavers. After graduating high school in 1959, he moved to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota to study liberal arts. He soon found coffee houses and other places that were known to have live musical performances close to campus, and he submerged himself into the local folk culture there. It was in Minneapolis that Robert Zimmerman would transform himself and emerge as Bob Dylan.

By the fall of 1960, Dylan had become a well-known regular at the coffee houses near campus. Dylan fashioned himself after Woody Guthrie, even copying Guthrie’s rough voice. Dylan idolized Guthrie and the Dust Bowl balladeer quickly became his idol. He yearned to travel to New York City to meet his idol and would make the trip in 1961. He hitchhiked from Minnesota to New York with the hopes of meeting his Guthrie. Guthrie was battling Huntington’s cholera and was placed under permanent care at Greystone Park Hospital in Morris Plains, New Jersey. After arriving in Manhattan, Dylan would frequent Greystone Hospital to visit Guthrie and often sing to him. After becoming one of his regular visitors, Dylan was invited to Guthrie’s friends Bob and Sid Gleason’s home in New Jersey. Guthrie was released on the weekends in the care of the Gleasons, and many of Guthrie’s old friends would board the bus from New York City to make the trip to East Orange to visit and pay their respects to the balladeer. Dylan was exposed to Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, and other folk pioneers. They would often gather and play music and Dylan would be so lucky to “stumble upon the surviving remnants of the original folk revival that had emerged out of the Composers’

¹²⁰Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, (New York: Doubleday Press, 2010), 35.

Collective and the rest of the left-wing music world in New York City at the depths of the Great Depression.”¹²¹ Dylan would write one of his first songs, “Song to Woody” shortly after meeting his idol.

“Hey, Woody Guthrie, but I know that you know
All the things that I’m a-sayin’ an’ a-many times more
I’m a-singin’ you the song, but I can’t sing enough
'Cause there’s not many men that done the things that you’ve done”¹²²

Dylan’s tribute based on Guthrie’s 1941 song “1913 Massacre” pays homage to Guthrie, Leadbelly and other iconic musicians that would have an influence on his music. His time spent with Guthrie and Seeger taught Dylan that song could be used as a force for change. He dreamed of writing his own songs; songs of things that were happening around him and of the people these things were happening to. Dylan earned little attention from record labels in New York and struggled to make money. He regularly slept on the couches and floors of his friends. He settled into life in Greenwich Village where he regularly played Café Wha?, the Gaslight Café and Washington square. Dylan found a way to support his meager lifestyle by playing the harmonica that Café Wha?. Washington Square was a popular gathering spot for musicians of all types. Here, Dylan encountered other folk artists, bluegrass bands and various other types of traditional music. Before long, Dylan was a regular performer of the Gaslight and Café Wha?, usually entertaining the crowd with his rendition of “House of the Rising Sun” and his own “Song to Woody.” Dylan wrote many of his early songs in true Guthrie style; his “talking blues” songs were some of his finest. “Talkin’ Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues” would become the most popular of these telling the story of a boat trip to Bear Mountain that had been oversold due to counterfeit tickets. Dylan released his first album *Bob Dylan* in 1962. The debut record contained two of Dylan’s original compositions “Talkin’ New York” and “Song to Woody.”

¹²¹ Wilentz, 41.

¹²²Bob Dylan, “Song to Woody,” *Bob Dylan, 1962*.

The other eleven tracks are traditional and folk songs. The record sold only 5,000 copies and Dylan became known as “Hammond’s Folly.”¹²³

Recordings for Dylan’s second album began in March 1962, just one short month after the release of the disappointing *Bob Dylan*. Sessions concluded in April 1963 and not many of the talking blues songs that had become known to play showed up on *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*. The nation was deep in the battle for civil rights while Dylan was living and writing in New York. Americans also could not forget the stigma that had followed the red-baiting of the McCarthy era. He wanted to project the feeling of shared oppression and shared identity through his songs, and soon Dylan would be expected to follow in the steps of his hero in singing for social change. *Freewheelin’* featured the songs “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” “Blowin’ in the Wind” derived its melody from the slave song “No More Auction Block” and would become an anthem of the civil rights movement.

“How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, and how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.”¹²⁴

Each verse of the song possibly represented the status of African Americans in the United States. Dylan ends his song with “Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'till he knows / That too many people have died?” The song is also written in true folk style: the imagery of the wind’s indifference to the suffering that was occurring is true folk fatalism.¹²⁵ Dylan’s other ballad “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” was written shortly before President John F. Kennedy’s

¹²³ Donald Brown, *Bob Dylan: American Troubadour*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 10.

¹²⁴ Dylan, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 1963.

¹²⁵ Brown, 15.

announcement of the Soviet Union's missiles located on Cuba which spurred the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dylan seems prophetic in his song; "A Hard Rain" offers a look into the world in its last days and that no one would be able to escape their fate.

"I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it
I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it
I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'
I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'
I saw a white ladder all covered with water
I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken
I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children."¹²⁶

Through these songs, and others present on *Freewheelin'*, Dylan established himself as a voice of a generation. His songs accurately captured the feelings of young people all across the nation. This time, Dylan's poetic album reached *Billboard's* Top 25 list and Bob Dylan became known as the song writer of his day.

The *Freewheelin'* album contained other songs that took on issues of the day. Aside from "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain," Dylan wrote the antiwar song "Masters of War" and "Oxford Town" which was a humorous treatment of the case of James Meredith. Meredith was the first African American student admitted into the University of Mississippi. When Meredith attended his first day of classes, the Mississippi National Guard and federal troops attempted to prevent Meredith from entering the university. During this time, Dylan was being greatly influenced by Pete Seeger who urged him to become involved in political events, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's rally to urge black voters to register in Greenwood, Mississippi. In addition to "Oxford Town," Dylan included "I Shall Be Free," a satirical stab at the Jim Crow South and its segregationist practices. Dylan's songs mirrored the reality of the United States. At a time when the Kennedy administration was beginning to tackle

¹²⁶ Dylan, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, 1963.

poverty and civil rights head-on, “the themes of racist violence and of grinding poverty relate to the ‘very’ times to which the album’s title alludes.”¹²⁷

Dylan made a bold career move in May 1963. He was scheduled to perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show* that month. During rehearsals before the show, Dylan was approached by CBS’s head of television programming who asked Dylan to eliminate “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues” from his set list. CBS executives were worried that the song would be offensive to the society and that CBS could be held liable for Dylan’s words. Instead of altering his performance and being censored, Dylan walked out of the CBS studio. By this time, Dylan had become instrumental in the civil rights movement. He marched on Washington with fellow folkie Joan Baez in August. His third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, associated Dylan even more with political change. Dylan addressed “writers and critics,” “senators and congressmen” and “mothers and fathers” to realize that things were rapidly changing around them.

“The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'.”¹²⁸

Like Dylan’s earlier songs, “The Times They Are A-Changin’” offered a youthful outlook to the problems that plagued the nation. Like *Freewheelin’* Dylan offered an antiwar song in “With God on Our Side.” Dylan offers a short history of the United States’ military engagements ending with the race with the USSR in the Cold War. Cold war mentality made the U. S. involvement in Vietnam more understandable. The song has been praised for its ability to

¹²⁷ Brown, 18.

¹²⁸ Dylan, “The Times They Are A-Changin’” *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, 1964.

convey “a challenging sense of values, even of insight, while maintaining a plainspoken ‘everyman’ pose.”¹²⁹ With the *Freewheelin’* and *The Times They Are A-Changin’* album Dylan had established himself as a spokesperson for a generation that demanded social change.

Dylan would continue to write songs and make albums throughout the sixties. But in 1965 Bob Dylan would shake the folk community to its core. Dylan was scheduled to headline the Newport Folk Festival, a festival established in 1959 to highlight folk, bluegrass, blues, and country artists that year. Dylan had appeared at the festival the previous two years and was met that day in 1965 with cheers for the generation’s prophet. Dylan shocked the crowd when he pulled an electric guitar out on stage going against the very ethos of folk. It came to be known as “the day the Dylan went electric” and marked a turning point in his career. Many folkies accused Dylan of selling out while others believed, like Dylan, that rock and roll “could be a serious form of expression.”¹³⁰ It has been argued that this is the point where Dylan makes the transition from folk to rock, but his songs and imagery would still be used by other folk artists in the second half of the sixties. Peter, Paul and Mary revived “Blowin’ in the Wind” and made it one of the most popular songs of the decade. The same can be said with the Byrd’s rendition of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” another Dylan original.

Phil Ochs

Like Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs became a voice for a generation during turbulent 1960s. He was known for his antiwar and civil rights ballads that made him an unmistakable force of the decade. Phil Ochs was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1940. Ochs’s father, Jacob, a New York-born doctor who received training at the University of Edinburgh, was drafted into World War II and served on the front lines. He participated in the Battle of the Bulge, the wars bloodiest battle,

¹²⁹ Brown, 20.

¹³⁰ Brown, 31.

which left Jacob mentally unstable. He was given an honorable discharge and diagnosed with manic depression upon returning home. Due his father's condition, Jacob's mother was left to be the sole provider for the family. Due to her demanding work schedule, Ochs's mother would often send him and his younger brother to the movies several times a week. Here, Ochs developed an admiration for the men he saw in the movies, particularly John Wayne and World War II soldiers. Ochs also passed the time reading stories that used powerful imagery to tell of strong heroes. Through his readings and movies, Ochs was able to understand how to use such powerful imagery to convey a message, something that would be used throughout his music.

Ochs enrolled in the Staunton Military Academy in Virginia in 1956.¹³¹ While at Staunton, Ochs would develop an interest in country music and some forms of folk. He graduated from the Academy in 1958 and entered into Ohio State University to pursue a degree in journalism. Ochs would be introduced to folk greats such as Lee Hays, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie while at Ohio State and it was during this time that Ochs most likely developed his political stance. He would attend political rallies with his roommate Jim Glover who introduced him to Hays and others. Glover also introduced him to his father, socialist Hugh Glover, who would often engage the boys in political discussions. Ochs took special interest in the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and viewed Che Guevara as one of the heroes from his childhood. While at Ohio State, Ochs wrote for the school newspaper *Lantern*, discussing mostly radical issues. School authorities attempted to censor Ochs for his "leftist sentiments" which caused him to start his own newsletter *Word*.¹³² Ochs and roommate Glover would form a two-man band which they called the Singing Socialists but changed their name to the Sundowners when they began playing local clubs. Glover departed for New York to establish a singing career of

¹³¹ Phil had attended Columbus Academy, but because there was no band, he left the school for Staunton.

¹³²Kathlyn Gay, *American Dissidents: An Encyclopedia of Activists, Subversives, Volume 1*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO LLC, 2012, 448.

his own, Ochs remained in Cleveland playing in area clubs. He booked openings for folk groups the Smothers Brothers and Bob Gibson. Ochs left Ohio State a semester early after losing the position of editor-in-chief due to his radical views. Ochs left Cleveland for New York City where he stayed with his old roommate Glover in Greenwich Village. Ochs would be introduced to folk artists Joan Baez and Tom Paxton and would soon begin writing songs that he deemed “topical songs” instead of protest songs. Writing about the social issues facing the nation during this time, Ochs wrote about the civil rights and peace.

Ochs soon began editing *Broadside Magazine*, a topical songs magazine, in 1963 where he published numerous of his political essays. *Broadside* also offered a place for Ochs to publish his songs. He was invited that same year to play alongside Dylan and Baez at the Newport Folk Festival. Ochs performed his powerful ballad “Power and Glory” and was met with standing ovations. He released his first album *All the News That's Fit to Sing* in 1964. Ochs often referred to himself as a “singing journalist” and his debut album would epitomize this character. The song “Talking Cuban Crisis” and “Talking Vietnam” appeared on the album and are among some of Ochs’ first topical songs. His next album, *I Ain't Marching Anymore* propelled Ochs into his character as one of the generation’s leading folk singers. The album’s leading song became the anthem of the antiwar movement. Ochs had written the song at a time when the United States was becoming more involved in the conflict in Vietnam. Like Dylan’s “With God on Our Side,” Ochs offers a concise history of the United States’ military engagements. Beginning with the War of 1812 and ending with World War II, Ochs questions whether the price of war was worth all the loss of life:

“It's always the old to lead us to the war
It's always the young to fall
Now look at all we've won with the saber and the gun

Tell me is it worth it all.”¹³³

The song was described as “bordering between pacifism and treason, combing the best qualities of both.”¹³⁴ Ochs would continue his involvement in the antiwar movement but never saw quite the same commercial success that Dylan would. Joan Baez’s rendition of Ochs’ “There But For Fortune” was nominated for the Grammy for Best Folk Recording in 1965. Concerned with the escalating war in Vietnam, Ochs dedicated his time and performances to various antiwar protests throughout the country. He organized two “War Is Over” rallies and toured numerous folk festivals singing his protest songs during 1966-67. Ochs became involved in the Young International Party in 1968 and supported Senator Eugene McCarthy as the Democratic presidential nomination. The Young International Party, or the Yippies as they were popularly called, was founded in 1967 by Abbie Hoffman and other radical youths in New York. The Yippies were known for their free speech antiwar platforms, and Ochs seemed to fit right into their mold. He accompanied the Yippies to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago to protest the Vietnam War. The protest turned violent, and soon riots broke out, and the Chicago Eight (Jerry Rubins and other Yippies) were arrested on charges of conspiracy to incite a riot. He would testify in their defense at their trial, but the events that unfolded in Chicago immensely disillusioned Ochs. Other events that occurred in 1968 such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy deeply affected Ochs as well. He produced his sixth, and possibly darkest album, *Rehearsals for Retirement* in 1969 after the traumatic events that unfolded in the previous decade. The album would turn out to be disastrous for Ochs being his lowest selling album.

¹³³ Ochs, “I Ain’t Marching Anymore,” *I Ain’t Marching Anymore*, 1964.

¹³⁴ Gay, 449.

Ochs would continue to be a dominant force in the antiwar movement until the conflict in Vietnam was over in 1975. Ochs planned a final “War Is Over” rally that was held in New York’s Central Park on May 11 where he was joined by folk artists Odetta, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and many others. Ochs closed the show with his song “The War Is Over” finally signifying that the Vietnam War had ended.

“One-legged veterans will greet the dawn
And they’re whistling marches as they mow the lawn
And the gargoyles only sit and grieve
The gypsy fortune teller told me that we’d been deceived
You only are what you believe

I believe the war is over
It’s over, it’s over.”¹³⁵

Ochs moved to Far Rockaway, New York to live with his sister in 1976. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in April of that same year. On April 9, 1976, Phil Ochs ended his own life by hanging himself, ending the career of one of the great poets of the 1960s.¹³⁶

Denisoff notes that the difference between the use of folk music in the Old Left of the 1920s and ‘30s and the New Left of the 1960s came down to that of ideology. According to Denisoff, “a social group denouncing ideology should be individualistic and multi-directed as juxtaposed to an ideologically committed collectivity or movement. This appears to be a key variant between the radical generation of the 1930s and that of the present (1960s).”¹³⁷ In the early stages of the second revival, folk music took an a-political stance. Denisoff defines the revival as “the transfer of folk from an esoteric series of ‘publics’ to that of a mass audience” with folksongs being confined to the isolated subcultures of the Left during the 1930s and

¹³⁵ Ochs “The War Is Over,” *Tape From California*, 1968.

¹³⁶ Gay, 450.

¹³⁷ Denisoff, 429.

'40s.¹³⁸ Once the Civil Rights Movement began, religious hymns such as “We Shall Overcome” were sung in various meetings and demonstrations. It would not be until the rise of Bob Dylan, who introduced the new group of “folkniks,” that protest songs would become popular with the masses. The second revival, centered in the Civil Rights Movement, had little interest in getting their songs on the top charts, but did incorporate African Americans and saw careers like that of Richie Havens flourish. As William G. Roy notes, the effect of music has less to do with the meaning of the lyrics and more to do with the social context in which they are produced which suggests that music is fundamentally social.

The artists of the second revival lacked artistic principles; the young artists of the revival “either modified existing traditional material to fit their needs of self-expression or created their own material in the folk mode.”¹³⁹ What distinguished folk music used by the Old Left and the New Left is the presence of mass media. The introduction of television made it easier for folk artists to convey their messages. Performances and demonstrations were now available for the masses to see, no matter of their location. The “folkniks,” or the voices of the New Left, were products of the media.¹⁴⁰ Songs by Dylan and the Kingston Trio reached the top of the charts alongside artists like Elvis Presley. This new “popular music” was not dismissed by the working class intellectuals like it had been in the '30s. Instead, popular music was embraced across the left since their messages were now being conveyed to the masses through the media. During the 1930s, folk music was used in the notion of “mass singing” in which audience participation was stressed and songs used a “together we stand” ideal of protest and were typically used in a face-to-face context in which the audience could join together with the singers. The 1960s, however,

¹³⁸ Denisoff, 432.

¹³⁹ Peter Krug to R. Serge Denisoff, October 1, 1964 in *Folk Music and the American Left: a Generational-Ideological Comparison*, 1969.

¹⁴⁰ Denisoff, 436.

used the media instead of these face-to-face venues to stir up their audiences. Denisoff describes this as the revivalists “lack of continuity and individualism generally associated with the mass media, which many of them were a part of.”¹⁴¹ The artists of the revival excluded the mass participation and instead wrote songs that, as the Almanac Singers noted, stated the truth as simply as they could.

When asked if protest songs were folk songs Dylan replied, “I guess if they’re a constitutional re-play of mass production.” He also stated that his songs were about people, “they’re about all real people.”¹⁴² Dylan used the melodies of traditional folk songs but made them his own by adding original lyrics that referred to folk traditions and heroes in his work. Oscar Brand defines folk music as having to do with “*now*—how it feels at the moment while the blood is still fresh, while the wind still blows and the calls ring out. No dust ever settles in a folk song.”¹⁴³ And indeed that is what Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs did with the poetic songs that they produced during and after the sixties.

¹⁴¹ Denisoff, 437.

¹⁴² Bob Dylan, given in a press conference in San Francisco, winter 1965 (*Rolling Stone*).

¹⁴³ Brand, iv.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

After the end of World War II, folk artists and the American Left were negatively connected with the Communist Party. But on November 2, 1956, this idea of folk music conveying Communist ideology would change. With the Soviet seizure of Budapest, artists like Pete Seeger no longer connected themselves with the Communist Party. Seeger announced to People's Artists members that the organization was going to disband as Soviet tanks tore through the streets of Budapest. He believed that the ideas promoted by People's Artists since its founding in 1949 could be carried out in new, and better, ways. Even though the era of interest in folksong was over, the revival of the late 1950s would resurface folk music and, to an extent, the radical voices that were present during the years of the Old Left. Artists like the Weavers would go on to have successful popular careers, but they were still able to produce songs that had a radical undertone. Their careers would soon be halted by the Red Scare and McCarthyism when Pete Seeger's and numerous other names were published in *Red Channels* accusing them of being affiliated with the Communist Party.

Seeger and many others would suffer the effects of the blacklist even after their names were cleared, but folk music had already begun to gain popularity with the American people. Songs by the Weavers and Odetta were played on the top 40 countdowns with Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. The tumultuous decade of the 1960s would again give rise to the use of folk music as protest. Labor strife and the plight of the working class was no longer the central theme of folk music. Instead new issues like civil rights and the Vietnam War were the topics featured in folksongs. Bob Dylan would become the voice of the Civil Rights movement due to the many songs that he produced with various political and social influences. The New Left would begin

to splinter by the end of the decade, and with it so did this ideology of the use of folk music. Bob Dylan would withdraw from the public eye after a motorcycle crash in 1966, making few public appearances and not touring again for almost eight years.

Folk music continued to fade from popular culture in the seventies with the American exit from Vietnam and the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement. James Taylor and Cat Stevens wrote songs about relationships and religion and the ever changing political climate. Cat Stevens wrote songs that “held strong humanitarian views; I always stood for the elimination of conflict and wars, and any of those causes that ignite them.”¹⁴⁴ By the eighties, “Reganomics” dominated the American mindset and folk artists. Contemporary folk artists like Michelle Shocked affiliated themselves with grassroots activism with powerful lyrics. These same artists would continue making music into the 1990s, but folk would take a backseat to punk rock and grunge.

Folk music would reemerge in the twenty-first century and not only become a popular form of music again, but some folk artists would enlist the same ideology about folk music as many of their predecessors had. Like many other decades in American history, the 2000s experienced issues of its own. The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 by Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda became a date that, like Franklin Roosevelt said about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “will live in infamy.”¹⁴⁵ The attack would precipitate a nearly thirteen year war in Afghanistan fighting terror and many Americans compared the Afghan War with the Vietnam War. Many music artists began recording memorial songs, including many folk artists. And like the American Folk Life Center did with recordings after World War II, the organization began collecting songs made during and about the attacks.

¹⁴⁴Andrew Dansby, “Cat Stevens Breaks His Silence,” *Rolling Stone*, June 21, 2001.

¹⁴⁵Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Infamy Speech,” December 7, 1941.

Tragedy would continue to strike America in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas. Katrina was one of the most devastating hurricanes in American history killing thousands of people and causing hundreds of billions of dollars in damage. Like the September 11 attacks, numerous musicians began writing songs about Katrina.

The American economy began to slip into a recession in March 2001 causing the loss of over a million jobs. American workers were again faced with the uncertainty of an economic recession. These circumstances had the possibility of causing social unrest, and like the decades of the twentieth century were products of the events that occurred. Like the sixties, civil rights are a hotly debated and discussed issue. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) workers, immigrants, and even the American working class have been struggling for equal rights in the new millennium. Singer-songwriter Holly Near has been active in folk music for years and she has been an activist for peace and equal rights for over thirty years. Her song “I Ain’t Afraid” denounces the use of religion as reasons for discrimination.

“Rise up to your higher power
Free up from fear, it will devour you
Watch out for the ego of the hour
The ones who say they know it
Are the ones who will impose it on you

I ain't afraid of your Yahweh
I ain't afraid of your Allah
I ain't afraid of your Jesus
I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your God.”¹⁴⁶

The nation was also plagued by decades of war in the Middle East and the constant fear of succumbing to another attack like September 11. 2006 proved to be the year for not only folk music, but also for protest songs in general. With the ongoing war in the Middle East, and new

¹⁴⁶Holly Near, “I Ain’t Afraid,” *And Still We Sing: The Outspoken Collection*, 2002.

battle began in Iraq in 2003, Neil Young released his popular, yet controversial, album *Living with War* in 2006. The album is very critical of the George W. Bush administration and the War in Iraq and is very reminiscent of work done by Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs. Songs include "Living with War" and "Let's Impeach the President" which criticizes Bush and his administrations "lying, spying, hijacking," among other offenses.

"Thank God, he's cracking down on steroids
Since he sold his old baseball team
There's lots of people looking at big trouble
But of course our President is clean, thank God."¹⁴⁷

Contemporary folk music continued to gain popularity well in the new decade that began in 2010. While there were still many issues plaguing the nation, folk music began to experience a commercial boom similar to that of the revival of the 1950s. Artists from across the nation have emerged and are writing songs inspired by traditional music. Folk has been infused with bluegrass and this new "alt-country" form of music has given birth to numerous up-and-coming bands. Old Crow Medicine Show was discovered in Boone, North Carolina by bluegrass musicologist Doc Watson in 1998 and had their first performance at a festival that Watson had in honor of his son, Merle Haggard. The group then moved to Nashville, Tennessee where they played at a summer series at the Grand Ol Opry. The group has become one of the most well-known bands in the country. Old Crow has won two Grammy Awards and has been inducted as a member into the Grand Ol Opry. They have written and performed several bluegrass, folk and country songs throughout their nearly twenty-year career. Bob Dylan has had major influence on the band, specifically founding member Ketch Secor. When asked about his major influences Secor stated: "Bob Dylan. More than anything else. More than any book or song or story or play. The work and the recorded work of Bob Dylan. It's the most profound influence on

¹⁴⁷Neil Young, "Let's Impeach the President," *Living With War*, 2006.

me. And then the other people that really influenced me tend to be the same people who influenced Bob Dylan.”¹⁴⁸ One of the band’s biggest hits, “Wagon Wheel,” is Old Crow’s continuation of Dylan’s song “Rock Me Mama” from his *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid* recording. Captivated by the tune, Secor and bandmates decided to finish Dylan’s incomplete work and pursued a shared copyright of the song, which Dylan agreed. Old Crow’s most recent album, *Remedy*, released in 2014, features songs written with Bob Dylan and many ballad style songs.

Durham, North Carolina natives The Carolina Chocolate Drops began their career in 2005 learning old-time tunes from fiddler and songwriter Joe Thompson. The trio would have jam sessions with Thompson, learning songs and most importantly, his fiddling style. The Chocolate Drops released their first studio album *Dona Got a Ramblin’ Mind* in 2006 and made their way to the Billboard Top 40 with the 2010 album *Genuine Negro Jig*. The group aimed at taking traditional music found in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas and highlight African-American musicians who had helped shape American music. The album features traditional songs as well as more recent pieces like Blue Cantrell’s “Hit ‘Em Up Style.” The band draws their inspiration from southern black music of the 1920s and ‘30s including string music, jug bands and early jazz. Fiddler and singer Rhiannon Giddens would go on to work on *The New Basement Tapes* with Mumford and Sons’ Marcus Mumford, My Morning Jacket’s Jim James, Dawes’ Taylor Goldsmith, and Elvis Costello. The collaboration recorded *The New Basement Tapes: Lost on the River* in 2014 based on unfinished songs by Bob Dylan which he recorded for his 1975 album *The Basement Tapes*.

Bob Dylan has continued to have a profound effect on the folk community. He has received several awards and honors ranging from an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for

¹⁴⁸ Cole Premo, “Curiosity Interview: Ketch Secor Of ‘Old Crow Medicine Show,” CBS Minnesota, November 12, 2012.

his song “Things Have Changed” featured in the movie *Wonder Boys* to the Polar Music Prize in 2010. Dylan was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012 where President Obama stated that there was no “bigger giant in the history of American music” than Dylan.¹⁴⁹ His most recent album *Shadows in the Night* (2015) features songs that were originally popularized by Frank Sinatra. Dylan did not cover Sinatra’s songs, however, he wanted to “uncover” them, “lifting them out of the grave and bringing them to the light of day.”¹⁵⁰ It was also announced that in November 2015 some of Dylan’s unfinished work would be released as *The Bootleg Series Vol. 12: The Cutting Edge 1965-1966*. Consenting of material recorded by Dylan between January 1965 and March 1966, *The Bootleg Series* compiled work that Dylan had done for three of his albums *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. Bob Dylan is undoubtedly one of the most influential folk artists and his poetic lyrics are now being studied by academics across the nation. Dylan wrote some of the most popular protest music of the twentieth century, achieving widespread fame and then vanished “into a folk tradition of his own making.”¹⁵¹

Even though folk music was closely tied with the American Left during the twentieth century, the question still remains just how closely were the two connected. It is evident that Communist ideology influenced folk musicians during the years of the Old Left and that the CPUSA often enlisted folk artists to perform at their various functions, but many artists of the time had no real ties to the Communist Party. With the advent of the Red Scare, folk singers and musicians were suspected Communists due to their affiliation with the party and many were blacklisted which greatly affected their careers. After People’s Songs, Inc. disbanded and

¹⁴⁹ Rolling Stone. “Bob Dylan Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.” *Rolling Stone*. May 29, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Andy Greene, “Bob Dylan Will ‘Uncover’ Frank Sinatra Classics on New Album.” *Rolling Stone*. December 9, 2014.

¹⁵¹J. Hoberman, “Like a Complete Unknown: I’m Not There and the Changing Face of Bob Dylan on Film.” *The Village Voice*. November 13, 2007.

denounced any sympathies to the Communist Party, folk music began to take new shape. The revival of the 1950s emerged folk as popular music, and not just associated with the labor movement and even the Communist Party. Artists like the Weavers ushered in enormous commercial success for the folk community and heavily influenced the attitudes of the 1960s. The new battles that the New Left faced of civil rights and the Vietnam War gave artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez new issues to tackle in their songs. Due to the commercial success of the '50s, this new era of protest music was being heard on Top 40 countdowns across the nation. These songs were again reaching the masses, and the Left typically featured these songs at protests and rallies. Folk music is again seeing that commercial boom experienced in the '50s. Instead of tackling social and political issues of the time, contemporary folk musicians are aimed at revitalizing traditional music and demonstrating that folk music is an ever-evolving art.

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