

# **This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land:** Folk Music, Communism, and the Red Scare as a Part of the American Landscape

by Christine A. Spivey

*Where three communists meet, the fourth one ought to be a guitar player.*  
--Woody Guthrie <1>

*I make my living as a banjo picker, sort of damning in some people's opinion.*  
--Pete Seeger <2>

On the evening of March 3, 1940, a young idealistic banjoist first came into contact with a wandering Okie from Okemah. The setting for this encounter between Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, the two forces behind the folk music revival of the 30s and 40s, was a "Grapes of Wrath" benefit for California migrant workers.<3> The backdrop was Greenwich Village, a hot-bed of leftist politics that since the mid thirties had nurtured the fusion of traditional American folk music and radical ideology. In the years following this initial encounter, the two musicians came to need each other "as a flame needs oxygen." <4> The union of Seeger and Guthrie produced a music that was a "citybilly blend of politics, country music and ballads." <5> These two radically different characters, Pete known for his Puritanical morality and Woody infamous for his love of alcohol and women, spearheaded the "All-American Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival," <6> a movement that championed unionism and the common worker, and provoked the rage of conservatives in politics and the community at large.

In *The McCarthy Era in Perspective: Nightmare in Red*, Richard Fried writes that "America has a fabled radical tradition, but its anti-radical tradition runs at least as deep, and conflict has persisted." <7> The folk singers of the 1930s and 40s saw themselves as a continuation of a radical tradition that existed from the American Revolution, to the abolitionism of the nineteenth century, and the labor movements of the twentieth. As Cold War ideology swept over America in the late forties, many politicians agreed. They viewed this continuation of radicalism with hysterical mistrust, attacking the leftist views of both Seeger and Guthrie. In the climate of Cold War America, leftist folk musicians, particularly Seeger, faced an attack on their civil liberties, their rights of free speech and association, and, at least once, an attack on their lives.

Guthrie and Seeger both sang in the tradition of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a radical labor group of the early twentieth century. The "Wobblies" had a membership that was both enthusiastic and musical. <8> Guthrie and Seeger's labor songs, most of which were written when the two performed with the Almanac singers, possessed the same revolutionary spirit as the songs of the I.W.W.'s Joe Hill. This radical labor movement of the twentieth century was a part of a more general radical tradition that, at least in Seeger's point of view, defined American history. Seeger consciously viewed himself as a continuation of this tradition. He saw his ancestors who fought in the

War for American Independence as radicals: "These ancestors of mine were all subversive in the eyes of the established government of the British colonies. If they had lost the War of Independence, they might have each and severally been hung." <9> The song "Wasn't That a Time," performed by Seeger's group the Weavers, reflects the musician's idea of American radicalism:

Our fathers bled at Valley Forge  
The snow was red with blood  
Their faith was warm, at Valley Forge  
Their faith was brotherhood.

Wasn't that a time  
Wasn't that a time, a time to try the soul of man  
Wasn't that a terrible time . . .

And the brave men died at Gettysburg  
And lie in soldier's graves  
But they stemmed the slavery tide  
And there faith was saved. <10>

Although Seeger perceived America as a nation built on the radical tradition, the country has always possessed a strong anti-radical movement. The anti-radicalism of mainstream society originated in the "profound cultural aversion" to the communal ideal. The United States is bourgeois in origin, founded in "the cult of individual, private property, and capitalism." <11> Thus radicalism, in its Marxian sense, always garnered the suspicion of the mainstream. To many politicians, Seeger and Guthrie were more than just liberal--they were communists. A certain degree of truth underlay their fears. The Communist Party U.S.A. enjoyed a modicum of success in the thirties and early forties due in part to the Depression and Roosevelt's New Deal. For some Americans, the 1929 stock market crash and subsequent Depression "signaled the final collapse of capitalism that Marx had predicted." <12> Although the C.P.U.S.A., which stressed ideological purity, initially scorned New Dealers and other progressives, it joined fronts in 1935 with other left-wing groups in opposition to the growing fascist threat. During this period of cooperation, known as the Popular Front Era (1935-39), membership in the C.P. grew to six figures, and those with ties to the party numbered close to a million. <13>

Any socially conscious artist during the Depression years had contact with the Party. To these artists, the Party's cultural fronts provided a social context within a worldwide movement. <14> The origins of what conservatives called the "left-wing folk-song conspiracy" were in the Popular Front Era. <15> In 1937 Seeger, then a sophomore at Harvard and a budding musician, joined the Young Communist League (Y.C.L.). <16> A year before Guthrie had "joined hands" with the C.P. <17> No evidence beyond such a vague allusion proves that Guthrie was indeed a Party member. Throughout his life, Guthrie answered questions of affiliation elliptically. Often he offset the inquisition with humor, once declaring, "I ain't necessarily a communist. But I've been in the red all my life." <18>

Guthrie's politics were indeed more "Steinbeckian" than "Marxian," for they involved a sentimentalization of the working class rather than hard-core Party doctrine. <19> To Woody the poor man or woman was always a hard-working, God-fearing individual, suffering at the hands of the system rather than from personal defect. Guthrie maintained, "Poor folks ... are ten times more honest than the upper crust people, and I like them fifty times more, because they're Real People, Real Honest to Goodness People." <20> Most artists in the late 30s shared this romanticized view of the Poor, for the Popular Front Era and the New Deal marked an "unprecedented glorification" of the common worker. <21>

Among these artists was John Steinbeck whose 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicled the wanderings of a family from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. In 1933 severe drought turned the farmlands of Oklahoma into dusty, infertile wastelands. Many of the displaced farm families migrated west to California in search of work in the fruit or gas industries. Guthrie, whose travels brought him to California in the late thirties, saw first hand:

the false front decay and rot of California's fascistic oil and gas deals, the ptomaine poison and brass knuckles in the jails and prison, the dumped oranges and peaches and grapes and cherries rotting and running down into little streams of creosote poisoned juices ... [and] the hundreds of thousands of stranded, broke, hungry, idle, miserable people that lined the highways all out through the leaves and underbrush. <22>

These were Guthrie's people. He had known them in Oklahoma and had seen their abject poverty in California. In Steinbeck, Guthrie saw a man who "felt in his heart and knew in his head that us Okies was a lookin' for 'A Living WITH Labor.'" <23> A viewing of the movie *Grapes of Wrath* moved Guthrie to compose. His song "Tom Joad" focuses on the sense of dislocation that overwhelms the Joad family in Steinbeck's work:

Tom Joad walked down to the neighbor's farm,  
Found his family.  
They took Preacher Casey and loaded in a car  
And his mother said: "We've got to git away."  
His mother said: "We've got to git away."

Now the twelve of the Joads made a mighty heavy load,  
But Grandpa Joad did cry.  
He picked up a handful of land in his hand,  
Said: "I'm stayin' with the farm till I die.  
Yes, I'm stayin' with my farm till I die." <24>

To conservatives, such identification with the poor smacked of communism. Politicians assaulted Steinbeck's novel for its pro-communist tinge, and leveled similar attacks on the New Deal's Federal Arts Project. <25> Roosevelt's New Deal encouraged and often enlisted artists who wanted to expose Americans to American realities, however harsh. <26> Photojournalists like Dorothea Lange, employed by the Farm Security Administration, gave many their first visual images of the migrant workers and their

impoverished condition in California. In 1941 Guthrie became one of the New Deal artists. The Bonneville Power Administration (B.P.A.), created in 1937 as part of the U.S. Department of the Interior, hired the musician to compose a series of songs praising the Coulee Dam building project along the Columbia river.

To Guthrie the B.P.A. and the Grand Coulee Dam were tributes to "an experiment in American socialism." <27> Because they were a part of massive public works projects, Guthrie and others saw them as "a revolutionary slap at the private enterprise system." <28> The songs of Guthrie's Columbia River Collection reflect his optimism that the dam would bring an increased standard of living to the people of whom Steinbeck wrote and Lange photographed. One of Guthrie's most famous songs, "Pastures of Plenty," presents a utopian vision originating in public irrigation and electricity:

I think of the dust and the days that are gone,  
And the day that's to come on a farm of our own;  
One turn of the wheel and the waters will flow  
'Cross the green growing field, down the hot thirsty row.

Look down in the canyon and there you will see  
The Grand Coulee shower her blessings on me;  
The lights for the city for factory, and mill,  
Green Pastures of Plenty from dry barren hills. <29>

In addition to providing electricity and irrigation to those living in the Columbia river valley, the dam employed a number of people in need of work. Guthrie sings of the common worker helped out by the public works project:

O come along down the river with me,  
All along down her rock canyon you see  
the men that are building your Grand Coulee Dam.  
Bill Jones, Pete Smith, Yan Stewart, Lee Hays,  
Ole Olson, Sam Wilson, Matt Jennings, Ed Wheeler,  
Old Uncle John Turner and all, Old Uncle John Turner and all. <30>

Shortly after Guthrie completed The Columbia River Collection, he traveled back to New York City and began singing with Pete Seeger's Almanac Singers. Formed in December of 1940, the Almanac Singers was a loose group of musicians dedicated to unionism under the auspices of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.). In 1935 some members of the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) formed the C.I.O. to meet the needs of industrial workers neglected by the A.F.L.'s craft unions. The C.I.O. split from the A.F.L. in 1938 over the issue of industrial organization. Both Seeger and Guthrie saw the C.I.O. as the champion of the common worker. Riding the wave of union success, Seeger, Guthrie, and the rest of the Almanacs became "the songleaders of American labor." <31>

The Almanac Singers performed at union meetings and picket lines with the hope of galvanizing union action through their songs. They sought to bring energy and a heightened consciousness to the labor movement. Guthrie explained the purpose of the Almanacs, "Our idea is to bring songs and fun and serious entertainment into the union hall so as to make it a better, livelier, peppier, and a lot more sensible place to come to than a pool hall, gambling game, or horse racing board." <32>

Their songs focused on organization and mobilization, consistently employing the word "We" to stress the unity of all workers:

We shall not, we shall not be moved  
We shall not, we shall not be moved  
Just like a tree that's standing by the water  
We shall not be moved. <33>

We're going to roll, we're going to roll,  
We're going to roll the union on,  
We're going to roll, we're going to roll,  
We're going to roll the union on. <34>

The repetitive nature of the lines and the constant refrain made the songs conducive to group singing. Thus, they were designed for the picket line or mass demonstration. <35> Often sung to the tune of songs that were part of the American fabric, these organizing songs boosted morale and evoked "the glory of . . . solution, the potential beauty of a world remade." <36> The song "Solidarity Forever," sung to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" became an anthem for the labor movement, praising the power of organization:

When the union's inspiration, through the workers' blood shall run,  
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun,  
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one  
But the union makes us strong.

Chorus: Solidarity forever,  
Solidarity forever,  
Solidarity forever,  
For the union makes us strong.

It is we who plowed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,  
Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid,  
Now we stand, outcast and starving, mid the wonders we have made  
But the union makes us strong.

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,  
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn,

We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn  
That the union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,  
Greater than the might of atoms, magnified a thousandfold,  
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old  
For the union makes us strong. <37>

Songs such as "Solidarity Forever" were "great rallying songs, imbued with positive political power, the power to totalize protest into decisive revolutionary action." <38>

While the Almanacs enjoyed popularity in some C.I.O. arenas, many C.I.O. officials treated them with disdain, viewing them as "cheerleaders" rather than "consciousness raisers." <39> As World War II progressed, the Almanacs found themselves in an atmosphere of growing hostility. The Smith Act of 1940 outlawed any group that threatened to overthrow the U.S. government. In 1942 the F.B.I. following the directive of J. Edgar Hoover began to watch "the Almanac gang" for signs of such a conspiracy. <40> During this time most unions honored a "no-strike" pledge, and radicals, even radical singers, within the C.I.O. were viewed with suspicion. Since the advent of the C.I.O., Communist radicals played an important role in organization. Party members controlled such C.I.O. unions as the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. They were known and increasingly feared throughout the C.I.O. as "effective and militant unionists" who remained powerful by "[delivering] what the rank and file wanted." <41> The Almanacs had always been a part of the communist faction within the C.I.O., and in 1941 Seeger left the Y.C.L. to become a member of the C.P. <42>

As the C.I.O. grew increasingly conservative, an anti-communist mindset overtook many union leaders. Even in 1939, 40 percent of C.I.O. members favored "drastic measures" against communists. <43> In the period following World War II, anti-Communism became the dominant ideology of the C.I.O. At the 1946 convention, C.I.O. President Philip Murray proposed a resolution banning communists "meddling" in C.I.O. affairs. <44> The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 further restricted communists within the C.I.O. by forcing all union officers to sign an oath swearing they were not communists. <45> By 1949 communists were on the run. In between 1949 and 1950, the C.I.O. ousted eleven communist-run unions from the organization. <46>

This conservative trend within the C.I.O. eventually shattered the alliance between left-wing folk music and the labor movement. The Almanac Singers disbanded in the summer of 1943 due in part to Seeger's draft notice. At the end of 1943, Guthrie enlisted in the Merchant Marines. Until the end of the war, those in the folk movement saw the leaders of the revival overseas fighting fascists. 1942 did not, however, signal the end of folk music's connection with the C.I.O. In 1946, Seeger and Guthrie joined other musicians to form People's Songs, Inc. (P.S.I.). P.S.I. was a cooperative composed of singers and songwriters that succeeded the Almanac Singers as the center of the folk song movement. <47> Guthrie gave the purpose for P.S.I., "The reason for People's Songs is to shoot your union the kind of a song or songs when you want it and fast. To help you to make a

songbook, a program, a throwaway songsheet, a whole evening." <48> Although P.S.I. began with optimism, it grew increasingly alienated from the mainstream of the labor movement due to the growing anti-communism of the C.I.O. P.S.I. was "born too late." The unions in post-war America had abandoned radical tactics preferring contract bargaining. Gathering songs that galvanized a picket line became obsolete. <49> Although P.S.I. rapidly lost strength, it did, however, garner the attention of the F.B.I. which sent an informer to the 1947 convention. From the convention, the F.B.I. determined that P.S.I. had limited power. By this time, the P.S.I. influenced "red intellectuals" rather than the working class. <50> P.S.I. did have its moments of glory after 1947. In 1948 the organization threw its weight behind the Progressive presidential candidate Harry Wallace. Songs like "Wallace Man" by Guthrie praised the candidate:

I like the way your face lights up,  
I like your cornfield smile  
Franklin D. had that same light  
There, sparkline in his eyes  
I don't like Hoover's lemony puss,  
Nor Truman's bitter bark smile,  
I'm betting my vote on the cornfield grin  
Of this Henry Wallace Man. <51>

In the end, Wallace lost the 1948 election, and P.S.I. went bankrupt the following year.

The anti-communism within the C.I.O. that P.S.I. confronted was endemic to America in the late 1940s. President Truman's administration proved to be a continuation of America's anti-radical tradition. During his first term in office, Truman resisted Soviet expansion by building military bases at strategic locations and formulating the Truman Doctrine which sent aid to countries resisting Soviet rule. His Marshall Plan stabilized the economies of Western Europe and checked any Soviet prospecting in these war-torn countries. <52> In order to whip up support for his anti-Soviet foreign policy, Truman and his advisors needed to plant a certain hysteria within the general public. From this need came the "domestic arm of the cold war . . . a calculated campaign to wash America's brain." <53> This propaganda campaign saw immediate results. As late as 1945, 39 percent of Americans saw the U.S.S.R. as "peaceloving." By 1947 only 12 percent agreed with this label. Conversely, the percentage of the American population that described the Soviet Union as "aggressive" rose from 38 to 66 percent. <54>

By 1949 anti-communism was deeply ingrained into the American consciousness. Two events occurring in this year ignited a public hysteria that became known as the second Red Scare. In 1949 Mao Tse Tung's communist forces defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army. Americans perceived the threat of Red China looming in the East. Later in the year on September 23, 1949, Truman announced to the American public that Russia exploded its first atomic bomb. Only two weeks before the "first full-scale riot of America's cold war" occurred in Peekskill, New York. <55> In the middle of the violence was Pete Seeger.

The occasion for the riot was a Paul Robeson concert scheduled for September 4, 1949, at the Lakeland Picnic Grounds near Peekskill. On the day of the concert, veterans from the American Legions gathered for a demonstration protesting Robeson's pro-Communist politics. The demonstrators turned into vigilantes who forcibly prevented the performance. The following weekend Robeson returned to give the promised concert. Demonstrators again turned violent, throwing stones at the cars of concert-goers. Seeger, scheduled to perform at the concert, was driving one of the cars that invited the rioter's stones. He had his children in tow, because he sensed that something might happen and wanted them to bear witness. <56> Although no one in Seeger's car was seriously hurt, the mob caused over 100 injuries. One person was stabbed, and eight were badly beaten. <57>

Media reaction to the Peekskill riots reflected the degree to which anti-communism characterized public opinion. On September 12 Newsweek reported that Peekskill was "a smashing propaganda triumph" for communists. <58> The fact that the press viewed violence against peaceful concert-goers in terms of a propaganda war demonstrates the mainstream internalization of communist conspiracy theories. An editorial appearing in Life on September 26 went so far as to maintain that Peekskill was orchestrated by communists in order to garner public sympathy. It outlined the "Peekskill formula" used by reds to bait patriotic Americans:

First, find a community where Jews or Negroes have settled in considerable numbers. Then do everything possible to stimulate the resentments which are always latent when a community's racial pattern is changing. Finally, at a carefully chosen moment, fire hatred and touch off riot with some spectacular provocation. <59>

The results of this formula aided the communists. According to the editorial, "Officialdom and the press, denouncing the folly and brutality of those who have been goaded to riot, unavoidably fall in with the Communist design." <60>

Although fear of reds rode high in 1949, some individuals and publications recognized the dark underside of patriotic fervor. In its September 10 issue, *Nation* called the riots of Peekskill "disgraceful" attempts "to bear down ideas with a club." Unlike most of America, it recognized Robeson's First Amendment rights. Robeson was a man "whose warped political views have nothing to do with his right to speak, much less his right to sing." More importantly, the editorial in *Nation* named the public opinion of the day: "far beneath this level of official culpability lies the sinister layer of hate and hysteria which converted an anti-Communist demonstration into a witch's holiday." <61> Such enlightened positions did not go unnoticed by the American public. In Bartlesville, Oklahoma, a librarian was fired for subscribing to *Nation*. <62>

1949 saw a change in the character of the folk-song movement. By this time, the bulk of Guthrie's performing years was behind him, and the debilitating Huntington's chorea waged its slow assault on his mind and body. <63> P.S.I. was bankrupt, and Seeger had formed a new group called The Weavers. The Red Scare forces the leftist politics of the movement underground. The Weavers offered commercial pop songs with no blatant

political content, but at the same time developed a "symbolic, encoded music," usually accessible to only a few live audiences in leftist circles. <64> Songs like "If I Had a Hammer" spoke only of general ideals, but at the same time retained the utopian vision of the Left:

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 a danger,  
I'd hammer out a warning,  
I'd hammer out a love between  
All of my brothers  
All over this land.

If I had a bell . . .

If I had a song . . .

Now I have a hammer  
And I have a bell  
And I have a song to sing  
All over this land.  
It's the hammer of justice,  
It's the bell of freedom,  
And a song about love between  
All of my brothers  
All over this land. <65>

To anti-Communist these generalized and sterilized lyrics remained subversive, because as Seeger reflected, "In 1949 only 'Commies' used words like 'peace' and 'freedom.' " <66> The Weavers meant for these ideals to engender hope. As a member of the group Ronnie Gilbert stated, the Weavers "sang songs of hope at the strange time at the end of World War II when already the world was preparing for cold war. We still had that feeling that if we could sing loud enough, and strong enough, and hopefully enough, it would make a difference." <67>

In 1950 Seeger left the Communist Party in an act of self-preservation. By this time, the Red Scare and the outbreak of the Korean War caused the Party to slip into isolation. It lost its membership and ties to the union, and a paramilitary spirit enveloped those remaining. <68> The conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury further inflamed America's red hysteria. In June of 1950, Red Channels: Communist Influence on Radio and Television fingered Seeger as a Party member. <69> Red Channels was the work of the publishers of Counterattack, a newsletter begun in 1947 that disclosed communism in the entertainment fields.

In the first few years of the fifties, the Weavers were enjoying mainstream success. They introduced the traditional folk songs of Guthrie into commercial music. Songs like "Woody's Rag and 900 Miles" brought Guthrie's style to a mass audience. <70> While the Weavers enjoyed their commercial success, they became "the first musicians in American history formally investigated for sedition." <71> The McCarran Committee which received its power from the Internal Security Act of 1950 (McCarran Act) probed into the Weaver's alleged violation of U.S. Code, Title 18, sections 2383-85: Rebellion, Insurrection, Advocating the Overthrow of the Government, and Seditious Conspiracy. <72> In February of 1952 shortly after the committee's investigation, Harvey Matusow, a former P.S.I member turned F.B.I. informant, testified before the House Committee for Un-American Activities (H.U.A.C.) that three of the Weavers were Communists. Though never brought before the committee as a group, the Weavers fell victim in the same year to the blacklist, an effective tool that kept subversive artists off radio and television.

The H.U.A.C. retained an interest in Pete Seeger in the years following Harvey Matusow's testimony. Formed in 1938 to investigate subversives, the H.U.A.C.'s pet project was ridding the entertainment industry of its red tinge. The H.U.A.C. had the power to impose jail terms on the accused, although the sentence was never for the charge on the subpoena. Usually the accused faced imprisonment for perjury or "Contempt of Congress." <73> In 1955 the H.U.A.C. called on Seeger to give formal testimony regarding his ties to the Communist Party. Seeger found himself at the horns of a dilemma. He could either plead the Fifth and emerge from the hearing relatively unscathed, or he could attack the legitimacy of the H.U.A.C. by claiming that it violated his First Amendment rights. In 1947 the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters accused of Party involvement, employed the latter tactic. The H.U.A.C. slapped them with contempt of court and jail terms. <74>

Although Seeger did not explicitly evoke the First Amendment, he did abandon the Fifth tactic and attacked the committee as un-American. When directed by the H.U.A.C. to answer a question, Seeger responded:

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. <75>

When asked by the H.U.A.C. if he had been a member of the Communist Party, Seeger answered, "I must give the same answer as before." <76> Through the barrage of questions, Seeger retained his position. He would answer no questions he deemed immoral for an American to ask. Occasionally, the repeated pressing of the committee prompted passionate and humorous responses:

I decline to discuss, under compulsion, where I have sung, and who has sung my songs, that I have helped to write as well as to sing them, and who else has sung with me, and the people I have known. I love my country very dearly and I greatly resent this implication that because some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I

have known, and some of my opinions, whether they are religious or philosophical, or I might be a vegetarian, make me less of an American. <77>

Seeger responded to other questions with the terseness of a persecuted martyr. At one moment in the trial, the committee's chief counsel Frank Tavenner handed Seeger a photograph taken in 1952 that showed the musician dressed in military uniform and carrying a placard reading "Censored." He asked Seeger, "Will you examine it please and state whether or not that is a photograph of you?" Seeger examined the picture and shot back, "It is like Jesus Christ when asked by Pontius Pilate, 'Are you king of the Jews.' " This response clearly grated on the chairman of the committee, Francis Walter (Pennsylvania). He scolded like a cross school teacher, "Stop that."

While Seeger refused to answer questions of affiliation, he offered numerous times to discuss his songs with the H.U.A.C. When asked if he had sung "Wasn't That a Time" in a leftist arena, Seeger responded, "I can sing it, and I don't know how well I can do it without my banjo. <79> Later in the trial, Seeger explained:

I have never refused to sing for anybody because I disagreed with their political opinion, and I am proud of the fact that my songs seem to cut across and find perhaps a unifying thing, basic humanity, and that is why I would love to be able to tell you about these songs. <80>

Seeger offered this proposal, because he viewed his music as self-explanatory, able to stand on its own and appeal to all humanity free of its context. Seeger's voice was his music. If the H.U.A.C. wanted to investigate him, it would only find answers in the language of the folk song. The H.U.A.C. was displeased with Seeger's approach — it found him in contempt of Congress. Seeger did not, however, serve any jail time for contempt. In 1962, he won a reversal of his conviction. <81>

In his refusal to discuss his politics outside of his songs, Seeger alluded to one of the most important ideas of the folk song movement: the message cannot be separated from the medium. To most of the singers, the medium was the message. <82> Guthrie maintained that folk songs are "political by definition." <83> A folk song passes through generations orally. Each new generation changes some of the words and makes the song its own. Songs that become "public possessions" are symbolic of socialism, and in direct opposition of capitalism. <84>

Guthrie's most famous song "This Land Is Your Land" has become a part of the American community. Originally written in 1940, Guthrie intended the song to reclaim America for the common worker. It describes the native beauty of the land, but at the same time exposes the problems of a capitalist society:

This land is your land, This land is my land,  
from California to the New York island;  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,  
I saw above me that endless skyway:  
I saw below me that golden valley:  
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps  
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;  
And all around me a voice was sounding:  
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,  
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,  
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:  
This land was made for you and me.

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

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,  
By the relief office I seen my people;  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking  
Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me,  
As I go walking that freedom highway;  
Nobody living can ever make me turn back,  
this land was made for you and me. <85>

The politically explicit verses of the song are in sharp contrast to the utopian vision that awes Guthrie's traveler. The omission of two verses from the popular version of the song demonstrates how the folk song has been passed down through the Cold War generations. Generations change the song to fit their worldview. In the Cold War worldview, socialism necessarily gives way to nationalistic pride. For this reason, the song has entered mainstream America as a manifestation of the latter.

The legacy of Guthrie and Seeger became apparent in the counter-culture of the 60s. The Weavers, who brought Guthrie and the rest of the radical 30s and early 40s to mainstream America, touched off the second wave of the "All-American Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival" with their 1955 concert at Carnegie Hall. <86> Even without this distinction, the concert was extraordinary, because it occurred during the Weaver's blacklisted days. In Carnegie Hall was Don McLean and Arlo Guthrie, Woody's son. <87> Together with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, these musicians who operated under the influence of the two old folk singers Woody and Pete reached a generation of young people who defined American radicalism in the 1960s and early 70s.

## Notes

- 1 Guthrie, Woody. *Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait* (New York, 1990), 89.
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