

MUSIC FOR THE PEOPLE: THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL  
AND AMERICAN IDENTITY, 1930-1970

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

History

May, 2011

Nashville, Tennessee

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For Mary, Laura, Gertrude, Elizabeth  
And  
Domenica

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have been able to complete this dissertation had not been for the support of many people. Historians David Carlton, Thomas Schwartz, William Caferro, and Yoshikuni Igarashi have helped me to grow academically since my first year of graduate school. From the beginning of my research through the final edits, Katherine Crawford and Sarah Igo have provided constant intellectual and professional support. Gary Gerstle has guided every stage of this project; the time and effort he devoted to reading and editing numerous drafts and his encouragement has made the project what it is today. Through his work and friendship, Ronald Cohen has been an inspiration. The intellectual and emotional help that he provided over dinners, phone calls, and email exchanges have been invaluable. I greatly appreciate Larry Isaac and Holly McCammon for their help with the sociological work in this project. I also thank Jane Anderson, Brenda Hummel, and Heidi Welch for all their help and patience over the years.

I thank the staffs at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the Kentucky Library and Museum, the Archives at the University of Indiana, and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress (particularly Todd Harvey) for their research assistance. I have also had the good fortune of working with and learning from fellow graduate students, namely Kurt Johnson, David Gruber, Claire Goldstene, Lee Crane, LeeAnn Reynolds, Deborah Walden, and Robert Chester. My parents, Robert and Mel Donaldson, and my sister Leah continued to be the amazing support team that they have always been and I cannot thank them enough. Finally, I could not have made it through had it not been for a person I met during my first year of school: my sounding board, editor, drinking buddy, and husband, Josh. He vowed to help me enjoy life and it is because of him that I do.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1965, the musician Pete Seeger published an article in which he articulated why he liked folk music. Seeger was sixteen when he heard folk music for the first time at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1935. As the child of two classically trained musicians and a member of his high school jazz band, Seeger was no stranger to different genres of music; yet the festival, he said, introduced him to something entirely new. It was then that Seeger fell in love with what would become his musical trademark: the five-string banjo. The banjo, however, was not all that drew Seeger's attention; he quickly became enamored with *all* facets of the music that he heard that day—the rhythms, melodies, and, most of all, the song lyrics. Seeger explained:

Compared to the trivialities of the most popular songs, the words of these songs had all the meat of human life in them. They sang of heroes, outlaws, murders, fools. They weren't afraid of being tragic instead of just sentimental. They weren't afraid of being scandalous instead of giggly or cute. Above all, they seemed to be frank, straightforward, honest.

Folk songs, Seeger learned, told a great deal about the people who played and sang them. His subsequent experiences with folk music over the next thirty years led him to conclude that these songs could help Americans “learn about ourselves, and...learn about each other.” As the music of the people, folk music provided a way to understand “where we came from, the trials and tribulations of those who came before us, and the good times and the bad.” Seeger explained that the music also enabled Americans to understand their fellow citizens—the ones with whom they most likely would never interact—by asking, “How many white people have rediscovered their own humanity through the singing of American Negro songs? How many town dwellers have

learned a bit about a rougher outdoor life from songs created by men with calloused hands?”<sup>1</sup> In short, folk music introduced Americans of many walks of life to each other, thus rendering the “imagined” national community more real.

Seeger published this piece shortly after folk music peaked in popular culture. During the early 1960s, in the years between the end of the 1950s rock and roll rebellion and before the British Invasion, the folk had become a mainstream musical fad commonly referred to as the folk music revival. The real revival, however, was much more expansive than merely a “boom” of folk music in popular culture. It was, in fact, a social movement that began in the early 1930s, in the depths of the Depression. The folk music revival brought public folklorists, cultural preservationists, scholars, musicians, political activists, musical entrepreneurs, and folk music fans together in the effort to protect and preserve, as well as promote and popularize, the genre of folk music. While the revival was a national movement, the locus of activity was along the East Coast—in cities and towns, North and South.<sup>2</sup> As with any social movement, the revivalists encompassed different, and sometimes conflicting, views and aims. Despite these differences, the members of the revival shared the belief that, because it came from the American people and thus depicted American experiences, folk music constituted a critical component of the nation’s cultural heritage. Revivalists like Pete Seeger believed that folk music revealed the essence of an American national identity.

Since the movement’s end in the late 1960s, historians, sociologists, and folklorists have amassed a considerable body of work addressing various aspects of the revival. The rise and fall of the revival as a movement has been well documented in historical accounts. Works that

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<sup>1</sup> Pete Seeger, “Why Folk Music?” reprinted in *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival*, David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin, Jr., eds. (New York: Dell Publishing, Inc., 1967), pp. 46, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Folk revivalists were also strong in California, as well as in the Mid-West in cities such as Chicago and Detroit. In this dissertation, however, I focus on the areas where leading revivalists congregated: New York City, Washington, D.C., and an assortment of liberal arts colleges in the North.



combine historical narratives with participant memoirs, along with biographies and autobiographies that focus on individual members, provide personal insight into specific aspects of the movement.<sup>3</sup> Other works have assessed the relationship between the revival and American culture and society from historical and sociological perspectives.<sup>4</sup> While the amount of scholarship that has addressed the folk music revival is too great to list in its entirety, no study to date fully explores the relationship between the revival and concepts of Americanism. Yet, influencing the ways in which Americans understood the values, the culture, and the people of their nation was the crux of the revival.<sup>5</sup> Seeger's argument that folk music enabled listeners to

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald D. Cohen's authoritative history of the revival, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) provides a definitive understanding of the major and minor actors in the movement. Gillian Mitchell also provides a historical overview of the movement in her study, *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945-1980* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Inc., 2007), although she focuses largely on the folk music revival in Canada. Works like Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Music Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), Richard Weissman's *Which Side Were You On: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2005), and Ronald D. Cohen's edited collection of participant reflections, *"Wasn't That a Time!": Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 2005), provide historical assessments that emphasize the authors' and contributors' personal experiences with the revival and its cultural legacy. Additionally, works such as David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin Jr.'s edited collection of articles written by leading revivalists during the height of the movement, *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), enable historians to understand the leading revivalists' views during the final years of the movement. Similarly, biographies such as Peter Goldsmith's *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), David K. Dunaway's *How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981, 2008), and Agnes Cunningham and Gordon Friesen's *Red Dust and Broadwaysides: A Joint Autobiography*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), trace the movement from the perspective of individual revivalists and provide insight into the relationships the revivalists developed with other members of the movement. For an extensive bibliography of scholarship pertaining to various aspects of the revival, see Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk Music: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Benjamin Filene's study *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) traces how the revivalists shaped popular understandings of "authentic" roots music, and sociologists Ron Eyerma's and Andrew Jamison's collaborative effort, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which explores how folk music was used in programs of social and political activism. Sociologist William G. Roy engages in a similar project in his work, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Folklorist Simon Bronner has written extensively on how folklore shaped conceptions of national identity in *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998) and *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002). However, he focuses on academic folklorists, some of who influenced the development of American Studies, who studied literary folklore. In this dissertation, I focus on folk music rather than folklore and on folklorists who worked in the public sector rather than in the academy.

“understand” themselves as Americans reveals his belief that there were distinct traits that the American people held in common, traits that united them as a national community.

In many ways, my understanding of the revival as a social movement and my assessment of its impact on American society borrow from the work of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison in *Music and Social Movements*. Social movements, in their view, are “central moments in the reconstruction of culture” meaning that members of these movements reevaluate societal values and norms, redefining them in the process. Social movements also rely on cultural forms to forward political agendas; movement actors often appropriate cultural traditions to define both themselves and their political aims. Although they emphasize political reform, social movements often alter the larger “values, ideas, and ways of life,” in the process and thus have profound cultural consequences—even beyond what the actors intended. Even after these movements fade from the national political spotlight, Eyerman and Jamison argue, their “cultural effects seep into the social lifeblood” of dominant society. By seeking to understand the ways in which social movements alter culture, Eyerman and Jamison also elevate the role of culture within social movements. In so doing, they challenge scholars’ tendencies to disconnect culture from politics or dismiss culture altogether in the effort to cast social movements in political terms, relegating culture to the role of a structural ‘frame’ that supports the more properly political activity.<sup>6</sup>

Following Eyerman’s and Jamison’s conceptual framework, I argue that the folk revivalists used the cultural form of folk music to articulate the values embedded in American identity. Music was the central medium through which the revivalists spread their message, and their work had profound cultural consequences. They not only shaped popular conceptions of folk music, but they also inspired activists of future generations to use folk music in efforts at

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<sup>6</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, pp. 6-11.

political reform. I differ from these sociologists, however, in my depiction of the agents of the mobilization of folk music as a tool for social reform. Eyerman and Jamison argue that various social movements, including the civil rights, labor, communist, and antiwar movements, used folk music as a vehicle to promote their causes. Their work focuses on the ways in which folk music, as an independent cultural form, was incorporated into various causes. I, on the other hand, interpret the revival as a social movement in itself and view the revivalists as movement actors that fanned out into other movements. In many respects, other social movements incorporated folk music either because the revivalists became directly involved or because the activists drew inspiration from the revivalists' earlier efforts. While the revivalists often participated in other movements, they remained united as members of the revival in their stewardship of their own movement.<sup>7</sup>

It is no coincidence that the revival emerged during the Depression era when the nation suffered from an identity crisis or, in the words of historian Michael Denning, a “crisis of Americanism.”<sup>8</sup> Like many cultural workers of the era, the revivalists sought to solve that crisis by reminding citizens of the qualities that defined their nation. Scholars, however, have neglected to look at the revival as a part of this effort and to determine how it contributed to national identity constructions during the 1930s and subsequent decades. This dissertation brings the revivalists into debates about the nation's character by examining the type of Americanism that they crafted and publicized through the cultural medium of folk music. Since the revival lasted for decades after the end of the Depression, studying this movement reveals how

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<sup>7</sup> Shortly before *Music and Social Movements* Ron Eyerman collaborated with Scott Barretta in the article “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (August 1996), pp. 501-543. Here, they examine the folk revival over the same time span as I do, although they view it as consisting of two distinct “waves,” the first spanning the years of the 1930s-40s and the second in the 1960s, rather than one continuous movement.

<sup>8</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 129.

constructs of nationalism from the 1930s continued to operate in American society for much of the twentieth century. Moreover, because the revivalists brought folk music into debates about the nation's civic and cultural identity, the revival provides particular insight into American cultural politics during the mid-twentieth century.

Numerous participants drifted in and out of the revival over its forty-year span. In order to understand the movement's driving force, I focus on the leading figures as well as members who were active participants for most, if not all, of the revival. These included musicians, festival organizers, record producers, writers, educators, and folklorists who directed their efforts to a public audience. They constructed their definitions of folk music partly on the basis of concepts borrowed from the disciplines of folklore, anthropology, and literature. In general, the leading members were social and political progressives who rooted their concept of Americanism in cultural and political democracy: they celebrated cultural diversity and advocated the inclusion of all citizens in the political process. The revivalists grounded their Americanism in social theories that first appeared in progressive circles during the World War I era, drawing on cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism, which emphasized urban ethnic identities, as well as on regionalism, which highlighted rural identities. The folk music revival emerged at the nexus of intellectual discourses and social movements that sought to define the nation by cultural traditions from the rural hinterlands *and* the cosmopolitan urban centers. Thus, the American identity that the revivalists generated presented an exceptionally diverse picture of the nation—a picture that they worked to sustain over decades marked by war, political turmoil, and cultural factionalism.

In using the folk music revival to understand projects of national identity formation, my work situates itself within a body of scholarship that investigates the various articulations of

American nationalism over the course of the twentieth century. In showing that the revivalists placed civic ideals and cultural pluralism at the core of “true Americanism,” I argue that they, along with other political progressives, initiated a version of nationalism that ran contrary to many contemporary views of American national identity. In arguing such, I contribute to the conversation that Rogers Smith and Gary Gerstle conduct in their respective studies, *Civic Ideals* and *American Crucible*. Smith and Gerstle each contend that the history of American nationalism in the twentieth century has been a continuous contest between two notions of national identity: a democratic, civic nationalism on the one hand and a militaristic, racially exclusive nationalism on the other. The construction of American national identity depended on the interplay between civic nationalism and racial nationalism, two visions that not only defined American values, but determined who counted as American. Smith argues that racial perceptions greatly influenced civic constructs as Americans were routinely divided into first and second-class citizens, with racial, ethnic, and gender restrictions relegating many Americans to the latter class. Gerstle maintains a similar position, arguing that nationalism rooted in civic ideals broadened the category of “American” to previously restricted groups, even as it continued to exclude political dissenters who did not conform to American civic ideals.

Smith’s focus in *Civic Ideals* is on citizenship laws—specifically statutes that determined who belonged to the “American civic community.” He argues that by the eve of World War I, centrist progressives who advocated white supremacy, anti-immigration, and cultural homogeneity opposed “leftist” progressives who advocated pluralistic, inclusive conceptions of American identity. However, Smith also claims that leftist progressives were unable to articulate anything distinctive about American national identity because their pluralism led them to believe

that no one group could speak for the whole nation.<sup>9</sup> I challenge this conclusion by arguing that this leftist-progressive conception of American nationalism, in the hands of revivalists, became a mechanism for insisting that regional and ethnic diversity and the democratic values associated with such diversity, was precisely what made American identity unique.

By collecting, recording, and performing the music of communities ranging from rural towns to urban ethnic enclaves, the revivalists used folk music to illustrate the heterogeneity of the United States. The revivalists argued that these communities were united under the umbrella of the nation and, although culturally distinct, embodied essential civic ideals, such as a commitment to democracy. By examining the revivalists' Americanism during this period, I contest Gary Gerstle's assessment that 1930s ethnic pluralism was restricted to Northern European immigrants. Although this was the case in many aspects of 1930s cultural pluralism, the folk revivalists did seek to collect and popularize African-American, Latino, and Southern and Eastern European-American folk music as well the music of rural white Americans.

In addition to complicating the scholarship on American nationalism, I use the folk music revival to illustrate how early twentieth-century theories of cultural pluralism laid the groundwork for the emergence of multiculturalism in the 1970s. The revivalists recognized the inherent plurality of American society and worked to ensure that national identity reflected this social reality. By bringing the music of folk communities to a national listening audience, they hoped to achieve that end. Yet, they did not just bring the *music* to a mainstream audience; they provided outlets for the musicians of folk communities to present their own traditions directly to the listening public. In this way, the revivalists sought to let the folk speak for themselves.<sup>10</sup> By

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<sup>9</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in United States History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 477.

<sup>10</sup> Despite their best intentions, the revivalists did not operate as completely open channels. As "cultural middlemen," to use Benjamin Filene's phrase, the revivalists often made decisions as to what music and which

“giving voice” to these Americans, many of whom were politically and economically marginalized, I argue that the folk music revivalists provided a bridge from cultural pluralism to early concepts of multiculturalism, specifically those that emerged in multiethnic education programs. In so doing, I explain that the history of multiculturalism is far longer than it has heretofore been depicted as being.

By showing the connections between cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, I do not imply that they were theoretically one and the same. The contexts from which these theories emerged were different: cultural pluralism was a reaction against the anti-immigrant sentiment of 100-percent Americanism of the World War I era, whereas multiculturalism followed on the heels of the racial nationalism and anti-Americanism that characterized the identity politics of the late 1960s. While cultural pluralists sought to secure a place for cultural difference within mainstream American society, many multiculturalists initially rejected any affiliation with the dominant culture and national politics. Furthermore, while both groups encouraged ethnic minorities to sustain their traditions, cultural pluralists emphasized the instrumental value of ethnic traditions—i.e. their benefits both for ethnic groups and the nation at large—while multiculturalists emphasized the intrinsic value of ethnic and racial identities, independently of their national consequences. These differences, however, should not obscure the historical connections between these two movements, which are revealed by an examination of the history of the revival and which have hitherto been largely ignored.

Currently, there are few studies dedicated to the history of multiculturalism in America. This is not to say, however, that historians have avoided the subject. Social and educational theorists documented the emergence of multicultural or “multiethnic” education programs from

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musicians were brought to a listening audience. As with Filene, I also engage questions of cultural representation in the folk music revival throughout this dissertation.

the late 1970s through the 1980s. During the 1990s historians and sociologists such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Higham, and Nathan Glazer began assessing the positive and negative consequences of multicultural theories in American life.<sup>11</sup> In *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, historian David Hollinger provides the most detailed investigation into the emergence of multiculturalism. In this study Hollinger focuses on parallels among multiculturalism and earlier twentieth-century ideas of Americanism that were rooted in cultural democracy (i.e. cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism). Hollinger does not, however, explain *how* the early constructs of pluralist Americanism influenced the later ideas of multiculturalism. By tracing the folk music revival I document the ways in which these early ideas of cultural democracy continued through the mid-century, changed over time, and merged into programs of multiculturalism. By conducting a close examination of revival programs from the 1930s to the late 1960s, this dissertation reveals a more complex history of American multiculturalism, a history that extends back to the early decades of the twentieth century. As such, my explanation of the “long history” of multiculturalism parallels the work of recent historians who have revealed the “long history” of the civil rights movement.

The idea of “giving voice” to racial and ethnic minorities, which became a guiding principle for programs of multiculturalism, permeated the folk music revival and shaped the

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on the history of the movement see John Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and a Critique,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (June 1993), pp. 195-219; Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990); David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); and Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For information on and critiques of the later forms that multiculturalism took, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, see Nathan Glazer, *We are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*, Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, M. Richard Zinman, eds. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991, 1998). For the educational aspects of early multiculturalism, see H. Prentice Baptiste, Jr., *Multicultural Education: A Synopsis* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979); and James A. Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981, 1988).



revivalists' version of Americanism from the beginning of the movement. Embedded in this idea were the moral imperatives to include the traditions of minority communities in the national culture and to ensure that the members of these communities had full access to local and national politics. The latter conviction led many revivalists into left-wing programs that worked to bring politically and economically marginalized Americans into the democratic process. Some scholars have noticed the connection between the folk music revival and left-wing politics, especially during the early years of the movement.<sup>12</sup> Others have documented the revivalists' work in programs of the New Left such as the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement.<sup>13</sup> But no one has followed the revivalists' political activism from the 1930s *through* the rise and fall of the New Left in the 1960s. Many political activists of the "Old" Left continued to participate in the resurgence of activism that marked the years of the "New" Left. While these two generations of leftists differed in many ways, they also shared remarkable similarities, primarily regarding a faith in the promise of American civic ideals. Most importantly, they all worked to reform the political, social, and economic systems to make sure that all Americans would have access to these ideals.

In this dissertation, I look at the Old Left from the perspective of the revivalists in their ranks and what compelled them to join in programs connected to the CPUSA. In the process, I

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<sup>12</sup> Richard and Joanne Reuss detail the political history of Communist and left-wing revivalists, with a strong emphasis on the years of the Popular Front through the early Cold War in *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000); R. Serge Denisoff covers the same period in *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971). Other scholars have focused on individual members and groups of political revivalists. For example, historian Steve Garabedian examines the efforts of the Communist activist and song collector Lawrence Gellert in his article, "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, 'Negro Songs of Protest,' and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Mar. 2005), pp. 179-207. The historian Robbie Lieberman documents the rise and fall of the revival organization People's Songs, which lasted from the end of World War II to the end of the 1940s, in her study *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). Eyerman and Jamison's *Music and Social Movements* also examines the political aspects of the revival from a sociological perspective.

<sup>13</sup> For further information on the revivalists' political activism in the 1960s, see Ronald Cohen's *Rainbow Quest*, Jerome Rodnitzky, *Minstrels of the Dawn: The Folk-Protest Singer as a Cultural Hero* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), and Denisoff's *Great Day Coming*.

argue that many activists on the Left were genuinely motivated by the democratic ideals that permeated the rhetoric of the CPUSA during the Popular Front. In so doing, I challenge the historical assessment that members of the Old Left were mere “Stalinists,” as historians like R. Serge Denisoff and Harvey Klehr depict them.<sup>14</sup> Rather, my work follows in the vein of historians of the Left who argue that many Left-wing and Communist political activists of the 1930s through the 1950s were driven by a faith in the type of democratic Americanism that became the slogan of the CPUSA for the brief duration of the Popular Front (1935-1939). As a result of recent historical scholarship that examines the Left at the grassroots level, we are beginning to learn that the nature of the Old Left was both more complicated and more rooted in the American context than historians had previously thought.<sup>15</sup> By freeing the Old Left from its alleged Stalinist shackles, I shed light on the full impact that the CP had on political activism in the United States during the twentieth century. In so doing, I align myself with the perspectives developed by Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*. Although Denning notes the incorporation of folk music in left-wing programs, he largely ignores the folk *revival* and thus has not fully explained how or why this music came to be used in political activism. By tracing the relationship between the revival and the Left throughout the mid-twentieth century, I fill this void in the larger narrative of the political history of the American Left.

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<sup>14</sup> Denisoff is particularly unsympathetic towards the left-wing revivalists in *Great Day Coming*. Harvey Klehr, on the other hand, does not include the revivalists at all in his study, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), most likely because his work focuses on the history of Party leadership. He does make the argument, like Denisoff, that American Communists were died-in-the-wool Stalinists whose interests lay in following the Party line.

<sup>15</sup> More recent historical scholarship has investigated what motivated the rank-and-file members of the CPUSA. Notable works in this field include Michael Denning’s study of political activists in the arts: *The Cultural Front*, Robin D.G. Kelley’s examination of Communist labor activists in Alabama in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), and Julie Mickenberg’s and David Bonner’s respective studies of left-wing writers and record companies: *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Revolutionizing Children's Records: The Young People's Records and Children's Record Guild Series, 1946-1977* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

The revivalists were able to bring folk music into programs of political and social activism partly because they believed that the genre was itself political. In their view, folk music was a grassroots tradition that expressed the concerns, interests, values, and experiences of the American populace. As such, this music was an intrinsically *democratic* art form because the songs belonged to an ongoing oral tradition in which people across generations adapted them to suit their present interests and circumstances; folk songs had no official version. Based on this view, many revivalists defined folk music by the simple maxim: “folk music is what the people sing.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, simmering below this seemingly simple statement was a cauldron of contentious issues that academic and public folklorists, amateur song collectors, musical enthusiasts and entrepreneurs, educators, and musicians debated throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The obvious question this definition raised was: who are “the people”? By arrogating to themselves the power to determine who qualified as legitimate folk, early revivalists began a process of determining which traditions belonged in the canon of folk music, a process that grew increasingly complex as the movement developed.

The evolution of the folk revivalists’ understanding of folk music operated dialectically: when existing conceptualizations of folk music encountered new political and cultural trends, novel definitions emerged. As sociologist Thomas Rochon explains, “culture” consists of a temporally situated and evolving “stock of ideas that define a set of commonsense beliefs about what is right, what is natural, what works.” As such, the revivalists’ varying definitions of folk music reflected the shifting cultural conditions in which each generation of revivalists operated. Rochon further explains that social movements articulate a particular “discourse,” which is the “linguistic expression of a system of thought” that includes “a shared set of concepts,

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<sup>16</sup> While George Hertzog is often credited with coining this phrase in the *Encyclopedia of Folksong* (1949), it is a definition that has more or less applied to American folk music from the turn of the twentieth century.

vocabulary, terms of reference, evaluations, associations, polarities, and standards of argument connected to some coherent perspective on the world.”<sup>17</sup> The folk revival’s primary discourse centered around music. Some revivalists focused on the music of rural, native-born citizens, especially in underdeveloped regions in the Southeast; others emphasized the folk music that immigrant groups carried with them and sustained in urban ethnic enclaves. Some believed that folk music could only be composed in culturally and socially isolated communities, whereas others included music from any group. Even Pete Seeger recognized that definitions of folk music varied over time, and chose to refrain from delving into the debate altogether by acknowledging that “definitions change.” In this dissertation, I take an approach similar to Seeger’s. Rather than stating my own definition of folk music, or engaging in questions of musical authenticity, I address the various definitions without claiming that some were more “authentic” than others. The importance lies not in establishing a concrete definition of folk music, but rather in understanding *why* the revivalists defined folk music in particular ways, and how those definitions related to the social, political, and cultural contexts from which they emerged.

The revivalists each had their own reasons for appreciating folk music. To some, like Seeger, the music was more “honest”—the opposite of the oft-cited “June-moon-croon” rhyme scheme of Tin Pan Alley pop songs. To later revivalists, beginning with the generation that came of age during the 1950s, the music sounded, in the words of music critic Greil Marcus, “weird”; it was a far cry from the teenage rock-and-roll and adult pop standards that infused their suburban surroundings. For these revivalists, folk music became a “vehicle to carry an ideological message,” according to sociologist William G. Roy, a message that entailed their

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Rochon, *Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 9, 16. For additional information on how social movement members use culture in programs of activism see Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, pp. 4-9.

rejection of popular, mass culture.<sup>18</sup> Among political revivalists, folk music was the genre of choice because it came from the “people,” the downtrodden of society, and thus could be used in people’s struggles for political and economic reform. The music was often simple: easy to sing and easy to play. With just a guitar and a few singers, a political activist could get a crowd of picketers singing and thus raise morale during protests. The relatively simple structure of folk songs also enabled musical activists to insert new lines that addressed contemporary concerns in what became known as “zipper songs.” While I engage with these aspects of the music in order to explain why revivalists enjoyed folk music and why they found it a promising channel for their political and cultural agendas, I do not directly engage with questions of musicality (i.e. determining what musical qualities attracted enthusiasts and musicians to the genre of folk music). This is because I am more concerned with determining what the revivalists did with the music—interpreting the meaning they found inherent in the songs and understanding how they brought the music to the public—than on judging the music’s quality.<sup>19</sup>

This dissertation traces the folk music revival chronologically. I open with a brief chapter that provides a sketch of the intellectual and musical foundation upon which the revivalists built their movement. I use this section to explain the early twentieth century social theories of American nationalism that influenced the revivalists’ version of Americanism and introduce early figures in the field of folk music whose work influenced the revivalists. The second

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<sup>18</sup> Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> In *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, Roy explains the difficulty of assessing the *sound* of music. Roy’s emphasis is on how music operated within the social movements of the Old Left and the civil rights movement. He argues that the meaning of music is context-specific; it changes according to who is listening, who is participating/performing, and where the action is taking place. Roy illustrates this idea through the song “We Shall Overcome,” noting that it “is very different when sung at an organizing meeting in Albany, Georgia, in 1961, played as background music on a documentary about the civil rights movement, sung by Joan Baez on a commercial album, or played in a college class on twentieth-century American history.” All of these contexts alter the meaning of the song, and, in so doing, effect how it sounds to different listeners; for, as Roy explains, “The sounds of the first two and last two examples may be identical, but the meaning is not because the relationship of the performers and the audiences is very different” (14). I would add that this difference in context also changes the way listeners experience the song—although they all may enjoy *listening* to it, the reasons why they do are bound to vary.

chapter, “Crafting the American People,” explains how and why the revival began during the era of the Great Depression. While the early revivalists were immersed in the cultural context of the 1930s, they also drew on other cultural and intellectual foundations. In this chapter I explain the ways in which the revivalists used elements from these foundations and adapted them to suit the cultural, social, and political needs of the movement. I carry the revivalists from the 1930s into the World War II era in the third chapter, “The People’s War.” Here, I employ historian Philip Gleason’s argument that the United States experienced a wartime surge of interest in democratic ideals, but argue that this was in fact a continuation of efforts that promoted cultural and civic democracy that began during the New Deal/Popular Front era.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the leading members of the revival were Leftists—either communists or fellow travelers. These revivalists sustained Popular Front Americanism long after the Front ended as a program, and helped channel this understanding of American identity into the political activism of the New Left. The history of the Old Left is thus crucial to the story of the folk music revival; as such, I dedicate the fourth chapter to examining leftist revivalists during their political heyday between the end of the Popular Front and the beginning of the Cold War. Chapter five, “Keeping the Torch Lit,” follows the revivalists into the Cold War era and explores how they struggled to survive the anticommunist crusades of the McCarthy period. This chapter also addresses the non-political revivalists and determines how they reacted to the cultural and social contexts of the 1950s. Here, I add to the developing historiography that challenges the view that American culture and society was ruled by consensus politics and cultural conformity during the fifties.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Phillip Gleason, “WWII and the Development of American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 36. No. 3 (1984), pp. 343-358. Gleason uses the term “democratic revival” to describe the American social context of the WWII era. He argues that the United States experiences a resurgence of rhetoric that championed democracy as the American way of life during the war years.

<sup>21</sup> Several historians have challenged the historical understanding of the 1950s as an era of overarching conformity. Maurice Isserman argues in *If I Had a Hammer: the Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York:

Specifically, I use revival projects to illustrate that many Americans still believed in the promise of leftist-progressive Americanism and voiced their outrage at the disjuncture between democratic rhetoric and constitutional rights on the one hand, and the political reality of anti-Communism on the other. Through specific musical programs, members of the revival expressed their cultural and political dissent and reaffirmed their faith in cultural and political democracy, all of which served as a precursor to the rise of New Left activism in the 1960s.

The sixth chapter charts the major turning point in the movement: the advent of the folk music fad. In “The Boom” I note the rise of popular interest in folk music during the early sixties and the implications it had on the core revival. I also argue in this chapter that the leftist activism of the 1960s embodied ideals similar to those of the Old Left during the 1930s through the 1960s. Both of these movements were predicated on the belief that American society could still be reformed to achieve democratic goals and that the political process could be altered to include marginalized citizens. During the 1940s, folk music became a valuable cultural medium for young political activists of the Depression generation; and in the 1960s, it was just as important for the activists of the baby boom generation. Therefore, examining how and why political activists of both generations used folk music in their programs helps to draw the connections between these two eras of activism.

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Basic Books, 1987) that political dissenters were active throughout the decade. See George Lipsitz *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Bill Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., 2000), and Jackson Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, Lary May, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) for investigations of cultural dissent in working-class subcultures. Although these historians have shown that American culture in the 1950s was not homogeneous, they still point to the fact that there existed a distinct dominant culture that permitted marginalized subcultures to exist without challenging it. What I seek to understand is how many members of a recently marginalized cultural movement who still sought to alter the national, dominant culture, rather than remain in their subcultural niche, survived in this era.

The folk boom did not last long. By the middle of the 1960s young listeners began to favor new forms of music, particularly “folk rock,” a fusion of folk music and rock and roll. During the height of the boom, the revivalists responded to the popularity of folk music in different ways, which made it difficult to regroup after the era wound down. Many had established different trajectories that separated them from the main movement and had little interest in returning to the revival. Similarly, young political activists of the early New Left divided into smaller, special interest groups rather than remaining as a large-scale political movement. During the late sixties, even political folk revivalists began focusing on specific projects rather than seeking to reform American society as a whole. In “A Bust and a Beginning,” the seventh chapter, I chart the almost simultaneous disintegration of the folk music revival and of the early New Left. Yet, as the political and revival movements collapsed, a new movement designed to generate a culturally and civically democratic American identity was on the rise: multiculturalism. The second half of the chapter explores how the revivalists set the stage for this cultural turn by examining the emergence of multiculturalism during this period, and connecting this development to similar programs that the revivalists created during the late sixties and into the seventies.

Through these chapters, I trace the evolution of the folk music revival over the course of the mid-twentieth century. In addition to explaining its rise and fall as a movement and its relationship to American culture and society, I provide an account of how and why the revivalists sustained their culturally pluralist and politically democratic Americanism over this tumultuous period in American history. The rhetoric and tactics that the revivalists used changed in response to larger political and cultural shifts, but the message remained the same. Although the revival



has long since ended, both the ideas of democratic Americanism and the music of the movement continue to be vital parts of the American cultural identity—past and present.

## CHAPTER I

### TUNING UP

The folk revival began in the 1930s. Many key ideas of this movement, however, were located in the work of folklorists, scholars, and musical enthusiasts stretching back to the late nineteenth century. Therefore to understand the folk music revival and its place in twentieth-century life, it is necessary to begin before the beginning.

Among the early American enthusiasts of folk music was the Harvard English professor James Francis Child, who was then followed by Cecil Sharp, a British ballad collector. Although he was employed as a Shakespeare scholar, Child dedicated much of his personal and professional life to cataloguing Anglo-Saxon ballads that predated the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Despite being an American, Child was consumed with love for Anglo traditions and disregarded any music generated on his native soil. His strict adherence to textual authority also led him to ignore any living musical traditions.<sup>2</sup> Due to Child's limited musical scope, folklorists largely credit Cecil Sharp as the first scholar to identify Anglo folk music traditions in the United States. Sharp believed that British ballads dating back to the Elizabethan era survived in the hollows of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ballads are commonly identified as songs that tell stories through a narrative structure. During his career, Child published two massive collections: *English and Scottish Ballads*, an eight-volume set in 1857 and 1858, and *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* a ten-volume set issued between 1882 and 1898. Child provided annotations to explain the history, adaptations, and subject material of each song. His work was so influential that later song collectors referred to these songs as "Child Ballads."

<sup>2</sup> Child believed that authentic ballads were lost after the printing press debuted in England, which introduced the Anglo peasantry to tawdry, commercial, mass-printed songs in the form of broadsides, mangling true ballads—those that had existed before 1475—in the process. Child made it his life's work to recover ballads before they had been tainted by commercialization, sequestering himself in libraries and hiring research assistants to scour overseas archives for different versions of the "authentic" ballads.

southern Appalachian Mountains, and he sought to collect them before they disappeared.<sup>3</sup> Sharp moved beyond Child by recording songs from living singers. However, he too focused exclusively on Anglo ballads and was drawn to the mountain communities as places that time forgot, where Anglo-Saxon settlers preserved an “authentic” and “pure” British ballad tradition. This view, of course, did not take into account that many of these communities were situated near large towns or middle-class tourist destinations. In his quest to find a connection to the British past, Sharp also conveniently ignored the mountain communities’ racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>4</sup> Although he collected from living informants, Sharp emphasized song lyrics and refrained from documenting, or even commenting on, the music of the songs. His ballad collections, such as *English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, which he jointly published with Olive Dame Campbell in 1917, focused exclusively on the song texts rather than the accompanying tunes. Despite these shortcomings, the coupling of Child’s ballad catalogue with Sharp’s methods of collecting songs inspired other song collectors, amateur and professional. Indeed, the image of a white mountaineer singing a Child ballad became the ideal of authentic folk music in America for many enthusiasts, especially in the South.<sup>5</sup> Sharp can be

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<sup>3</sup> Sharp was not alone in his fascination with and reverence for Appalachian mountain life; during the early twentieth century many novelists, collectors, and reformers turned their attention to the southern highlands. While they all believed that the mountain communities’ geographical isolation protected them from the corruptions of modern life, these music enthusiasts feared that they would not maintain this separation for long. They flocked to the region to identify and record mountain traditions before they were destroyed by the acids of modernity.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, pp. 24-25; David E. Whisnant, *All that is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 105, 112, 119, 124; John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 211-212. While John Williams and David Whisnant comment on Sharp’s racial exclusivity, they cite it as merely an omission because he was focused on collecting Anglo ballads. At worst, they imply that he can be criticized for perpetuating a racial elitism that was prevalent during his time. Filene, however, interprets this racial exclusion as more insidious. He argues that Sharp viewed all effects of modernization as detrimental to mountain life and one of the main problems was “racial denigration.” Where there were modern urban centers, there were African Americans and, to Sharp, these two factors went hand in hand in corrupting the purity of the Anglo-Saxon mountain folk.

<sup>5</sup> The connection between folk music, historical mythologizing, and conservative social values in the South was clearly illustrated in popular fiddle conventions. The most notable of these was the Georgia Old-Time Fiddler’s Convention, which began in 1913 and lasted until the Depression. Convention organizers denied African Americans entrance as both participants and observers. A primary reason organizers excluded blacks from *performing* was

credited with expanding the definition of folk music to include living traditions, but he still upheld the Child frame by defining authentic folk songs as antiquated British ballads that he collected from white, rural, “isolated” communities.<sup>6</sup>

While many championed the music of white mountain communities as the epitome of folk music in America, others worked to broaden the definition of the genre. Scholarly folklorists connected to the American Folklore Society (AFS), a professional organization that emerged in the late nineteenth century, operated concurrently with the Anglo ballad collectors. As folklorists in the European tradition focused on rural communities, the budding AFS folklorists turned their attention to American Indian groups and rushed to record their music, crafts and other cultural artifacts before *these* traditions disappeared, as the folklorists presumed they would. The anthropological folklorists largely followed in the footsteps of Franz Boas, who helped establish the AFS in 1888.<sup>7</sup> Boas and other folklore anthropologists viewed folk communities as “small scale societies” that remained disconnected from mainstream American life, and therefore did not directly influence the national culture. Despite the boundaries that they drew between

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because the convention was designed to evoke a romanticized view of southern mountain culture. Organizers outfitted the stage with a log cabin, picket fence, and live chickens, and described the performers as hailing from the lily-white highlands, despite the fact that many came from towns and cities. Many of the new urban elite viewed the mountaineers as the last bastions of unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock, and because these “contemporary ancestors” were “authentically” white, they were thought to be “authentically” *American*. Fiddle conventions went national in 1926 when Henry Ford, himself deeply nostalgic for a mythical, rural, Anglo-Saxon American past, inaugurated a national fiddle contest that followed the southern model. Gavin Campbell, *Music and the Making of a New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 100-105, 112, 114, 124.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent overview of how the term “folk” evolved in England and Germany (the centers of European folk song-collecting activity) from the eighteenth century through the twentieth century, and what it came to mean in the American context of the late nineteenth century, see Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, pp. 54-60.

<sup>7</sup> Based on his studies of American Indian culture in the Pacific Northwest, his scholarship on black folklore, and his personal experiences living in the multiethnic metropolis of New York City, Boas rejected the racialized “evolutionary” theories that dominated anthropological thought and developed the theory of cultural relativism. Evolutionary theories held that cultures evolved over time and folkways served as building blocks in that process; cultures that continued to practice folk traditions remained in a primitive stage of development and had not advanced to the level of modern societies (i.e. those of the Nordic and Western regions of Europe). Boas’ work challenged this view by stipulating that all cultures maintained validity and that anthropologists should appreciate the plurality of cultures on an equal plane rather than arrange them in a hierarchical order. Simon Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), pp. 131-33.

American Indians and the American national public, these anthropologists opened up the field of folklore to include “non-Western” people.<sup>8</sup>

Boas worked with other folklorists in the AFS to make the study of folklore a social science worthy of scholarly pursuit. However, the Society often lacked funds and public respectability. To counter these shortcomings, AFS leaders encouraged members to organize local chapters in the hopes of garnering more grassroots support. Not surprisingly, these chapters often catered to the local members’ needs instead of following the national organization’s guidelines. For example, the members of local chapters in recently settled states were most interested in using folk culture to establish their local identities.<sup>9</sup> Often, they used their chapters to stage musical performances such as festivals, concerts, and fiddle conventions that showcased the musical traditions that settlers had brought with them and adapted to local conditions. In so doing, these regional AFS chapters opened the canon of folk music to include new traditions that people generated based on their experiences migrating to and settling down in frontier regions. This understanding of folk music effectively challenged both Child’s Anglo focus, and the anthropological emphasis on American Indian cultures—both of which grounded folk traditions in historical epochs and removed them from contemporary, mainstream culture.

A largely academic organization on the national level, local chapters attracted many amateur enthusiasts. Mediating between the two groups were the new public folklorists who joined the ranks of academic folklorists in studying, collecting, and defining folk music during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Not only did the public folklorists help generate wider interest in folk music, but they also used it as a way to understand the way of life for the

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 5, 7. The local AFS chapters operated similarly to local historical societies—they catalogued folk traditions of the region to provide an understanding of the local cultural heritage.

<sup>9</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), p. 131

people who continued these musical traditions. Soon, many of these folklorists began arguing that folk music did not just provide a means for understanding small communities throughout the country, but when taken as a whole, also provided a way to understand the American people as a whole. One of the earliest members of this new cohort was the public folklorist and song collector John Lomax.

In 1947 Lomax opened the memoir of his song collecting adventures with a sweeping assessment of his personal motivations. Lomax recollected: “All my life I have been interested in the songs of the people—the intimate poetic and musical expression of unlettered people, from which group I am directly sprung.” Here, Lomax defined the American folk as the “unlettered” of society—uncorrupted by such modernizing forces as public education and commercial culture. While this definition follows in the same vein as his scholarly predecessors, Lomax set himself apart from figures like Child and Boas by declaring that he himself was from that ilk, describing his family as hailing from “the upper crust of ‘po’ white trash.”<sup>10</sup> Lomax was born in Mississippi in 1867, but his family moved to Texas while he was a child. Lomax turned his love for the music of his adopted state, particularly the songs of cowboys, into a scholarly pursuit when he began a Masters’ degree at Harvard University in 1907.<sup>11</sup>

Lomax’s first major work was *Cowboy Songs* (1911).<sup>12</sup> Although the collection focused entirely on the songs of men working in one occupation, it marked a turning point in the study of American folk music. In *Cowboy Songs*, Lomax parted from the Child precedent by using these

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<sup>10</sup> John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1947, 1971), pp. viii, 1.

<sup>11</sup> While at Harvard, Lomax took a course on American Literature with Professor Barrett Wendell, who encouraged the students to focus on literature from their home regions. Lomax seized this opportunity to show Wendell some of the cowboy songs that he had collected. Wendell grew interested in Lomax’s collection and introduced him to the ballad scholar, George Lyman Kittredge, a former student of Francis Child and Harvard professor. Sharing Wendell’s enthusiasm, Kittredge encouraged Lomax to continue his work and commissioned him to organize a Texas chapter of the AFS to generate more collections of regional folklore. Lomax did organize a chapter of the AFS in 1907 at the University of Texas in Austin, the second regional chapter that the AFS established.

<sup>12</sup> The book’s popularity led to reprints in 1916, 1938, and 1986.

songs as a means to gain insight into a particular way of life in the United States. Lomax also provided musical notations and anecdotes to illustrate the songs' subject matter, which situated them in a specific social and cultural context. In another important respect, however, he continued in the Child/Sharp legacy: he asserted that truly authentic folk music existed only in communities isolated from mainstream society. Cowboys, to Lomax, fit this criterion. Driving cattle herds up and down the rural western states, cowboys were transitory figures disconnected from dominant society, living in their own communities and creating songs that spoke directly to their circumstances. While the overwhelming majority of their countrymen did not share the cowboys' experiences, Lomax categorized their music as American because they created it in response to uniquely American climatic, geographical, and labor conditions.

Besides cowboy music, the other distinctly American folk music in Lomax's estimation came from black communities in the rural South. A popular interest in black folk music had percolated in American society since the mid-nineteenth century. One of the earliest collections of black music was a series of spirituals that missionaries to the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina published after the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Lomax had developed an interest in black folksongs as early as 1904, though he set it aside to concentrate on *Cowboy Songs*.<sup>14</sup> After publishing the latter, Lomax returned to black folk music, asserting that it was the "most natural and distinctive" of all American music. He often lamented scholars' tendency to ignore authentic black folk music, which, without scholarly attention, was in danger of being lost—corrupted by

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<sup>13</sup> Missionaries such as William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison gathered many spirituals from newly freed slaves, jointly publishing them in 1867 as *Slave Songs of the United States*. By the 1890s, black spirituals had become enormously popular among northern audiences. Folklorist Simon Bronner speculates that this was because the white, predominantly Christian audiences easily recognized the songs. Furthermore, the performers from Fisk University and the Hampton Institute of Virginia who brought the songs to northern concert halls knew their audience and often oriented their performances to suit white musical tastes, Bronner, *Following Tradition*, p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> John Lomax biographer, Nolan Porterfield notes that he had originally requested to do his Harvard term paper on African American rather than cowboy songs, but Wendell had rejected the idea, Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 168.

romantic whites who often adulterated the material in their local color literature, or ignored by educated blacks who shunned the music of their ancestors and that of rural black communities. Lomax's interest in black folk music sharply contrasted from most folk song enthusiasts of the era who focused entirely on white traditions. It is even more remarkable that in the early years of the twentieth century he treated black music as part of the *American* musical heritage rather than solely that of an allegedly inferior subculture.

Despite his populist approach and his interest in protecting black folk music traditions, Lomax could not altogether escape the racism of his time and place. In his writings Lomax went beyond merely romanticizing southern black music to exoticizing it as the product of a strange, primitive Other. He often reinforced racial stereotypes by describing African Americans as “childlike” or resorting to physical descriptions that he rarely applied to the white singers he encountered.<sup>15</sup> In his memoir, Lomax even mentioned with perplexity that northern audiences sometimes viewed his presentation of black folk songs with hostility, finding in it racist elements that Lomax either overlooked or dismissed. His ambiguity on racial views is displayed throughout *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. While he peppered his autobiography with racial stereotypes, he also demonstrated a profound respect for black folk traditions, as he revealed in one passage: “All my life I have laughed with my negro friends—never at them. In particular, I do resent ‘takeoffs’ of Negro religious ceremonies and spiritual singing such as I have often

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<sup>15</sup> For example, when Lomax describes his experiences recording the inmates of a female penitentiary in Shreveport with his son Alan, he described one woman as a “young amazon” and that when he and Alan left, “They crowded around us both until the time came for us to go, like eager children starved for the outside world.” *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, p. 121. Though Lomax certainly had academic credentials, D.K. Wilgus classifies Lomax's work as part of the “local-enthusiast tradition.” Collectors in this camp generally aimed this material to a public audience. Local-enthusiast collectors were not as interested in studying and classifying their songs as scholars, and they often romanticized the music, largely by emphasizing the music and the singers' cultural primitivism, D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1959), pp. 157-59.



heard in northern cities.”<sup>16</sup> Although he did believe that African Americans were racially inferior, Lomax did view southern black culture as a legitimate form of folk culture. Furthermore, he argued that black secular musical traditions made significant contributions to the development of an American folk music canon and that recordings of black folk music should be preserved and maintained in the Library of Congress, where he bequeathed all his recordings.<sup>17</sup>

Lomax was not alone in his effort to broaden the definition of American folk music to include the traditions of other native-born Americans, particularly African Americans, during the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1909 the white sociologist Howard Washington Odum completed a doctoral dissertation at Clark University in Mississippi based on African-American secular and religious folk songs that he had collected. Odum first attempted to delineate the psychological and social aspects of black music in his article “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry: As Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes” (1911). While Lomax focused on collecting and preserving black traditions for posterity, Odum used them to understand a marginalized American racial group, believing that folk songs provided insight into African American culture and society because they revealed what blacks “are” instead of “what [they] appear to be.”<sup>18</sup> Like Lomax, Odum recognized that as a white scholar he knew little about African Americans and turned to their musical traditions as a way to cross social and cultural divides. Odum was first and foremost a sociologist and his work in African American folk music, much of which was done in collaboration with his student and eventual colleague, Guy B.

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<sup>16</sup> Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, p. 169. Rather than chastising Lomax for being an unreconstructed racist Porterfield depicts him as a product of his age— itself a very racist time. Though some of his contemporaries were able to transcend the dominant racism of the early twentieth century, Lomax did not. As Porterfield concludes, Lomax “was no less than a product of his time; he was, alas, never more than that either.”

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum’s Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African American Folk Studies* (Athens: UGA Press, 2003), pp. 11-12, 14; Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, pp. 152-53. In another, less charitable, view historian Benjamin Filene asserts “Odum gathered songs less to preserve an American heritage than to discover what made those strange Negroes tick,” Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 31.

Johnson, interpreted folk music through a sociological lens. Odum's and Johnson's second publication, *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), achieved acclaim because it both contained original scholarship on black secular music and provided an analysis of how the songs functioned in society. Through this work, Odum soon came to believe that black folk music should be preserved and studied not only for its own sake but because it could be employed in the effort to improve American race relations.<sup>19</sup>

By opening up the canon to distinctly American groups like southwestern cowboys and former slaves and their descendants, Lomax and Odum broadened the understanding of authentic folk music to include songs generated on American soil that related to American conditions. Lomax hoped that his collection of cowboy songs would encourage others to take up the task and collect other variations of American folk music, including “negro folk songs,” lumberjack, mountaineer, and sea songs.<sup>20</sup> Odum took a more academic path and used folk music to understand American social conditions. While insisting that American folk music was an indigenous creation, both men restricted their focus to specific communities of native-born Americans who were (allegedly) isolated from mass culture. Other folklorists of this era, however, encouraged the collection and preservation of both native *and* naturalized Americans. As early as 1914, for example, folklorist Phillips Barry called for members of the AFS to collect songs “of our fellow-citizens whose power of English is an acquired trait,” in addition to collecting from native-born and American Indian groups. Barry listed German, French, Spanish, Gaelic, Yiddish as “folk” languages, and the “new settlers of our crowded cities” including

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<sup>19</sup> Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey*, pp. 18-19, 42. Anthropologists and folklorists would also adopt a similar interpretation over the course of the next decade and label it “functionalism.”

<sup>20</sup> John Lomax, *Cowboys Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Co., 1911), p. xxvi.

Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Armenians, Magyars, and Syrians as some of the neglected folk groups.<sup>21</sup> Few folklorists of the World War I era cared about the folklore of the foreign masses that filled the country's urban and industrial centers. Barry was thus an anomaly in early twentieth-century folklore circles, but his views were very much in line with a new group of public intellectuals who looked to protect and preserve immigrant cultures, both for the sake of the ethnic communities and for the nation as a whole.

Horace Kallen, a philosopher and co-founder of the New School for Social Research in New York City, was one of many social theorists who grappled with issues of cultural diversity during the era of mass immigration and migration of the early twentieth century. Kallen opposed programs that forced ethnic minorities to assimilate into dominant culture, and celebrated what he called "cultural pluralism." Kallen proposed that the United States adopt a "federation" approach similar to Switzerland's, in which all ethnic groups could participate on equal footing in political and economic life. All citizens would be united through the official language of English, and would have access to the dominant political and economic institutions. At the same time, however, they would be allowed to practice their own cultures. Kallen scorned the popular melting-pot theory as a system of forced homogeneity that stripped away citizens' ethnic heritage, which was the root of their individual identities. Kallen argued that one could change almost every aspect of one's personal identity, but that no one could choose his or her ethnicity. All Americans were hyphenated, even Anglo-Americans, and the time had come for the country to recognize that the national ideals of "individual freedom and liberty" included the right of cultural difference. Kallen's federation idea presented one of the earliest unity-within-diversity views of American society: it characterized the United States as a multicultural society that

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<sup>21</sup> Phillips Barry, "The Collection of Folk-Song," in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. XXVII, No. CIII, (March 1914), p. 77.

should protect the rights, both cultural and political, of the various ethnic groups living within its borders.<sup>22</sup>

Many urban Progressives shared Kallen's views, particularly activists in the settlement-house movement. As part of their effort to assist immigrants living in urban ethnic enclaves, settlement houses often offered classes in ethnic literature, art and music. The houses even opened their doors to ethnic societies to stage community events that would bring immigrants of different backgrounds together. Jane Addams, a leader of the settlement movement, believed that the cultural traditions of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe needed to be preserved—traditions that she referred to as folklore and “primitive art.” Settlement workers staged pageants that included the traditions of ethnic groups living in the area in the hope that the incorporation of these practices into mainstream culture could enrich American life and help the immigrants adjust to their new home.<sup>23</sup> Through these pageants, the settlement house workers aimed to ease immigrants' assimilation into America, while enabling them to retain aspects of their cultural heritages.

Many figures in the field of folk culture operated in the same vein as Kallen and the settlement house workers. Some members of regional chapters of the American Folklore Society even advocated a culturally pluralist position years before Kallen, and even Phillips Barry, began writing on the subject. As early as the 1890s, for example, the Philadelphia branch emphasized the diverse character of the city by instructing its members to collect the traditions of various groups residing there, including “Anglo-American,” “Africo-American,” and “Local Foreign”

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<sup>22</sup> James Henry Powell, “The Concept of Cultural Pluralism in American Thought, 1915-1965,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1971), p. 13; Everett Hemut Akam, *Transnational America: Cultural and Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 3, 57; Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 150-152, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, pp. 40-42, 164-65.

(Italian, German, Chinese, and “Gypsy” communities). The organization’s guidebook instructed members to collect the living traditions in these communities that provided the groups with their distinctive identities—identities that also shaped the city’s overall cultural character.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after Kallen began challenging programs of forced assimilation, Randolph Bourne, another left-Progressive, debuted his own proposal for how America should deal with ethnic diversity. Bourne’s views were foundationally similar to Kallen, although his ultimate vision of American identity diverged from Kallen’s federation. In the essay “Transnational America,” Bourne claimed that assimilation programs were not only detrimental to immigrants, but they also had failed to achieve their intended goal of cultural homogenization. By forcing naturalized citizens to renounce all ethnic ties, Americanizers had actually caused immigrants to cling steadfastly to their old-world identities. As with Kallen, Bourne supported cultural diversity, but whereas Kallen argued that ethnic identities were primarily important to the people of different ethnic groups, Bourne argued that these identities were important for individual citizens and the nation as a whole. Arguing that Anglo conservatism had been the nation’s “chief obstacle to social advance,” Bourne maintained that America needed the flow of new immigrants “to save us from our own stagnation.”<sup>25</sup> The end result would be a cosmopolitan nation that incorporated the best aspects of different global cultures. Bourne’s vision of the ultimate American identity was “a transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with other lands, of many

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<sup>24</sup> Bronner, *Folk Nation*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Randolph Bourne, “Transnational America,” *History of a Literary Radical and other Essays*, Van Wyck Brooks, ed. (New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1920), pp. 267. Bourne cited the example of the American South as what would happen to the country if immigration were to be restricted or forced homogeneity programs were successful. Bourne viewed the undeniably “Anglo” region as a cultural backwater, characterized by “stagnation” due to the absence of cultural “cross-fertilization” that resulted from immigration. Yet, Bourne did not espouse a completely egalitarian view of immigrant communities. Not all who entered the United States were beneficial—some, coming from backward countries (e.g. Southern and Eastern Europe) entered as “raw material to be educated...as a socialized American.” This educational process not only benefited the United States, but if and when these immigrants returned home, they served as intellectual ambassadors, having been introduced to American ideals. They then brought this knowledge to their peoples, which served to elevate their “inferior civilizations” from the ground-up (pp. 271, 277-78, 281, 295).

threads of all sizes and colors,” predicated on a constant interchange with ethnic cultures present in the United States.<sup>26</sup> By arguing such, Bourne moved beyond the limits of cultural pluralism by ignoring group boundaries and promoting voluntary over involuntary affiliations, meaning that individual identities could borrow from various cultural sources in addition to the traditions of one’s ethnic heritage. In Bourne’s system, individuals could indeed change their identities regardless of their lineage. This idea strongly resonated with folk revivalists who later argued that all ethnic, regional, and racial folk music traditions found throughout the nation contributed to an overarching national identity; as such, all citizens, not just those who emerged directly from these groups, could borrow from and partake in these American traditions.

The progressive intellectuals and folklorists generated a vision of Americanism that was grounded in cultural diversity. Yet there were points of division among the approaches: Kallen and Bourne focused largely on urban groups of naturalized citizens, whereas folklorists like Lomax and Odum emphasized rural communities of native-born citizens in their work. To overcome the division between rural and urban cultures, a movement that attempted to bring them together within an overarching American national identity emerged in the 1920s. The regionalist movement, as it became known, connected writers, artists, folklorists, sociologists, urban planners, and scholars who eschewed “mass” culture in favor of folk cultures. While the movement appreciated both urban and rural cultures, many regionalists specifically looked to rural groups in their effort to locate a distinctly American national culture. However, rather than simply advocating rural culture *in toto*, the regionalists, as their name implies, appreciated the

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<sup>26</sup> Largely influenced by the dual citizen concept prevalent in Zionism, Bourne described his hope that America would become more than a stagnant federation of cultures, or a homogeneous “nationality.” He warned that “any movement which attempts to thwart this weaving, or to dye the fabric of any one color, or to disentangle the threads of the strands, is false to this cosmopolitan vision.” Bourne understood ethnic groups as culturally distinct “colonies” and he believed that American identity should be a dual nationalism where citizens belonged to their own cultural colony while simultaneously retaining a shared citizenship with all other Americans through common political, economic and social systems, Bourne, “Transnational America,” p. 297; Akam, *Transnational America*, p. 62.

cultural differences between the different regions in the country, and tried to determine how the traditions of the Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, and West could be woven into a single national fabric. Because they viewed regions as constituent parts of the national whole, the regionalists held a culturally pluralist view of American identity that promoted “heterogeneity over homogeneity,” and that provided a means for “reconstructing the nationalizing, homogenizing urban-industrial complex, redirecting it toward an accommodation with local folkways and local environments,” according to historian Robert Dorman. As the regionalist folklorist Benjamin Botkin noted, regionalism emerged as “an effect of the cultural diversity and change due to the geographical distribution and historical diffusion of culture.”<sup>27</sup> The regionalists’ task was then to ensure that American identity reflected the diverse nature of its citizenry.

Regionalists ardently believed that American national culture needed to be rooted in the nation’s primary folk communities: “pioneer-agrarian-republican communities,” Indian tribes, immigrant folk groups, and African Americans in the rural South.<sup>28</sup> Near the end of the decade, Botkin described the movement as follows:

[T]he New Regionalism has its feet in the ground and its hands in the soil. It is developing a new feeling for locality—not the idle small-town spirit of curiosity, gossip, and boosting but the genuine need of taking root, of finding solidarity and unity in identifying oneself with the community, a need growing out of a world unrest and conflict during and since the War.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), pp. xi-xiii, 83; Benjamin Botkin, “Regionalism and Culture,” in *The Writer in a Changing World*, second edition, Henry Hart, ed. (American Writers’ Congress, NY: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937), p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces*, pp. 9-10, 33, 66. Interestingly, most regionalists were almost entirely unconnected to the folk; many came from old-stock white middle-class families and operated from urban centers or major universities. Dorman notes that regionalism during the twenties was the heyday of interest in Indian culture. This is especially true for those regionalists who came from the Boas school of anthropology and focused on studying Indian societies.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Botkin, “The Folk in Literature: an Introduction to the New Regionalism,” in *Folk-Say* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1929), p. 14.

Botkin concluded his definition of regionalism by referencing World War I because the social transformations wrought by the wartime domestic policies profoundly affected the early regionalists. The increased xenophobia, heightened vigilance, and open suppression of cultural and political dissent that spread throughout America in these years worried regionalists, many of whom were politically progressive. The regionalists strongly advocated cultural heterogeneity and found programs that limited diversity, such as the 1924 Quota Act, which severely curtailed the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and eliminated new immigrants from East and South Asian nations altogether, or groups that stifled political and social dissent, such as the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan, abhorrent. The labeling of political dissenters or ethnic Americans as “un-American” continued with the anti-pluralist 100 percent Americanizers during the postwar years. Regionalists worked to counteract this restrictive, xenophobic nationalism through their literary and artistic works and public programs.<sup>30</sup>

According to the editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, regionalism, “already booming underway in this country,” was ushering in a new concept of nationalism that directly challenged the reactionary nationalism that allegedly patriotic groups like the Klan espoused:

It is scarcely necessary to remind ourselves that there is a need for a dynamic and realistic defining of the concept of Americanism to take it out of any possible shallow connotation of reaction or conservative implication. Classifying people and policies as “American” or “un-American,” is a poor substitute for reality in a day when the nation needs to go on as a nation, set in the American scene. The facts are that the reality of nation is found, first of all, in its geographical situation, and secondly in the peculiar culture, people, and institutions which make America what it is.<sup>31</sup>

As with cultural pluralists of the 1920s, regionalists recognized the importance of group identities that were embedded in local cultures throughout the nation and sought to preserve the

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<sup>30</sup> See Dorman’s *Revolt of the Provinces* for the most extensive study of the movement and the particular programs that regionalists generated.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., “The Boom in Regionalism,” editorial in *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. X, No. 38, p. 606 in Howard Odum and Henry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1938), p. 180.



customs and traditions that these regional communities had generated and sustained over the course of American development. Ultimately, they advocated a unity-within-diversity interpretation of American identity that included rural native-born and ethnic citizens in the American composite.

Although the regionalist movement consisted of members from all areas of the humanities and social sciences, the movement was dominated by literary figures who were particularly interested in folklore. Legends, tall tales, jokes, and other aspects of story telling often became incorporated in regionalist novels, plays, and story collections. Yet, several regionalists also turned their attention to folk music. Perhaps the most notable figure in this area was Carl Sandburg. A writer and poet, Sandburg often traveled the country, a practice he developed as a young man looking for work. Over the course of his travels, Sandburg collected songs from friends, colleagues, and other people he met on lecture tours, publishing them in a large volume entitled *American Songbag* (1927). Sandburg's primary objective in releasing his collection was to get Americans singing—and singing these particular songs, hence his inclusion of piano arrangements to accompany the song lyrics. Sandburg often sang these songs himself, generally breaking out into one or more before he ended a public lecture. Sandburg arranged his collection thematically, dividing the songs under such headings as “Lumberjack,” “Sea Chanties,” “Mountain,” “Cowboy,” and other established categories of folk music. However, he also extended the definitional boundaries by including sections such as “Hobo Songs” and “Prison and Jail Songs” five years before John Lomax began collecting songs from prisoners in southern penitentiaries. He even included a section on urban songs called “Big Brutal City.” Sandburg ignored both the academic stipulation that folk songs only arose in isolated communities, and the notion that those communities were rural. By including urban material in

his definition of folk songs, Sandburg followed Barry's inclusion of city dwellers in his definition of folk communities. Sandburg also included in his collection songs from known musicians, breaking from another folk music convention that folk songs were a community affair and not the creations of individuals. He attributed an overwhelming majority of his songs to individual authors, many of whom had composed the songs recently and related them to relatively current events. Sandburg believed that folk songs were both "as ancient as the medieval European ballads brought to the Appalachian Mountains" and "as modern as skyscrapers, the Volstead Act and the latest oil-well-gusher" and all of them contributed in some way to the making of an identifiable national identity.<sup>32</sup>

If the melodies and verses presented in *American Songbag* were from "diverse regions, from varied human characters and communities...sung differently in different places," as Sandburg wrote in the introduction to the collection, they were all "ditties brought together from all regions of America...It is an all-American affair, marshalling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans."<sup>33</sup> One of the defining features of America for Sandburg was diversity itself. He did not merely state that this collection was indicative of the inherent cultural diversity of American society; he demonstrated this in the songs he included: Mexican songs like "La Cucaracha," cowboy ballads such as "A I Walk Down the Streets of Laredo," mountain fiddle tunes including "Turkey in the Straw," southern blues like "Levee Moan," and songs from the Bahamas such as "John B. Sails." Sandburg's recognition of pluralism as a critical feature of American identity would continue in every succeeding generation of folk revivalists.

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927), p. viii. Sandburg's effort to get American singing through *American Songbag* was not a rogue action. Beginning in the pre-WWI era several collectors were part of the "singing-book strain." These figures, notably Josephine McGill, Lorraine Wyman, John Jacob Niles, and Howard Brockaway, were affiliated with the southern Appalachian settlement schools like Hindman and Pine Mountain and collected songs from the surrounding region. They then published their collections in music books designed for performance. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, pp. 167-69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. vii.

As with the folk music collectors like John Lomax, social scientists like Howard Odum, and public folklorists like Benjamin Botkin, Sandburg believed that folk music provided particular insight into different groups of Americans and that deciphering what musical variations revealed about these communities would provide a deeper understanding of American society as a whole. His diverse collection of “American” folk songs also reflected the theories of cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism because it incorporated ethnic songs from communities of recent immigrants. Sandburg, however, went beyond celebrating cultural diversity and became an advocate for the people. For him, folk music was a way to champion economically, socially, and politically marginalized citizens. Through this music, Americans expressed their disillusionment with their circumstances and their hope for a better life. The fact that he included songs from labor strikes and other protests indicates that Sandburg also believed that folk music could be used as a tool in people’s struggles. This interest largely stemmed from the radical political views that he developed at an early age. Indeed, Sandburg’s belief that the music of the people could be used to help aid movements for social justice became a guiding principle for the first group of folk music revivalists, and for the generations that followed.

In his collections of folk songs, Sandburg added a class dynamic to popular understandings of American folk music. This was the final element of the foundation upon which the early folk music revivalists constructed their own view of Americanism. Sandburg’s working-class Americans joined with the ethnically, racially, and regionally diverse citizens that other scholars, public intellectuals, and folklorists celebrated in their own definitions of the American folk, definitions that the folk revivalists used in constructing their own understanding of American folk music, and an overarching American identity.

## CHAPTER II

### HEARING THE PEOPLE

When the 1930s began, the community of folk music enthusiasts that had started to form during the previous decade had little holding it together other than a common appreciation of folk music. As the thirties progressed, however, these individuals came together to form a tight network that wanted to use folk music to influence mainstream culture and politics in the United States. The country experienced an identity crisis as citizens struggled to adapt to the chain of disasters that followed the stock market crash. Distressing levels of unemployment—and underemployment—challenged the idea that America was the land of opportunity where hard work was the key to success.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the emotional turmoil that the Depression engendered, intellectuals began to examine the underlying values and traits that formed the national character. The time appeared ripe for a program that aimed to define the American identity, past and present, in order to locate a “usable past” that could aid Americans in their struggle to stay afloat, both economically and psychologically.<sup>2</sup> In the effort to do just that, the public folklorists, musicians, and musical entrepreneurs of the revival combined the theories of cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and regionalism to generate an interpretation of nationalism that was predicated on cultural and political democracy. In addition to social theories, these

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<sup>1</sup> Some historians note that the strong strain of individualism in American thought and culture is one of the reasons why citizens did not generate large-scale protests during the Depression. Too many were literally *depressed*, blaming themselves for their economic failure. See William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 129-131. Denning traces how left-wing intellectuals attempted to locate a national heritage, but they were not alone. Other intellectuals tried to use cultural traditions to help Americans during the crisis. These traditions formed, what Van Wyck Brooks termed in 1918, a “usable past,” meaning that, while rooted in the nation’s history, they remained relevant in contemporary society.

budding revivalists also incorporated the politics of the era in their version of Americanism, an interpretation that they forged through folk music.

The revivalists were in good company. The general malaise that settled over the country after 1929 prompted many intellectual, cultural, social, and political leaders to turn to ‘the People’ to find their usable past. In the 1930s, artists and intellectuals who had fled America in the previous decade returned home and attempted to reconnect with American society. One way they aimed to do so was by incorporating images of ordinary Americans in their work.

Throughout the decade scholars conducted oral histories, painters depicted scenes of everyday life, writers dabbled in realist literature, and photographers became preoccupied with photographing average citizens. During the Depression years, many artists and intellectuals defined “the People” as Carl Sandburg did: displaced tenant farmers, southern sharecroppers, unemployed industrial workers, migrants, hoboes, and other groups of marginalized Americans. Historians refer to efforts to catalogue the people’s experiences and cultural traditions as the “documentary impulse,” defined by Warren Susman as “a complex effort to seek and to define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding.” While this effort originated in the twenties, by the thirties it had become a “crusade.”<sup>3</sup> To achieve this goal, many of the leading crusaders began to search for a “usable past”—traditions that had sustained the American people throughout the nation’s history.

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 157. Historian William Stott refers to the widespread effort to collect and document the lives of ordinary Americans during the thirties as the “documentary impulse” of the era. This impulse, according to Stott, stemmed from the “consummate need of the thirties’ imagination to get the texture of reality, of America; to feel it and make it felt.” Furthermore, this effort tied back to intellectuals’ need to define the essence of America, for the documentarians focused on themes that appeared to be “constant” in American life. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 128, 241.

In an era dominated by the iconography of “the People,” public folklorists found a receptive audience for folk music. Some scholars have argued that the populist sentiments that pervaded New Deal rhetoric and policies focused on the white rural ideal.<sup>4</sup> Yet, although liberal politicians, conservative folk preservationists, and even some leftist folk enthusiasts often focused on rural communities of native-born citizens—regarding these people as either the last authentic, racially pure Americans, or as exemplars of a native radical tradition—their conceptions of the folk were not the only ones that circulated during this period. Most Depression-era revivalists recognized the ethnic, racial, and geographic diversity of America, a view that borrowed heavily from the theories of regionalism that became predominant during the 1930s. Michael C. Steiner explains that during the Depression decade regionalism became an “American preoccupation.” Regionalists were primarily interested in locating an authentic national heritage that contained traditions to which Americans could turn in order to reestablish a “stable communal identity” during an era of social, cultural, and economic transformation. This communal identity was crucial because regionalists sought to generate a “sense of place” amid the turmoil and dislocation wrought by the Depression. The search for an authentic American manifested itself in the regionalists’ collection of rural folk culture and study of the relationship between folk groups and the regions in which they lived.<sup>5</sup> The essence of regionalism was

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<sup>4</sup> Some historians, such as Terry Cooney, connect this restrictive ideal of the American citizen to the rise of public, private, and government interest in folk culture. Gary Gerstle also makes this argument, explaining that liberal reformers and intellectuals in the thirties idealized the “folk” as “Americans, past and present, whose freedom from capitalist contamination endowed them with the strength to endure the Depression and to inspire the fight for cultural and political renewal.” The reformers usually defined the folk as “native-born Yankees or white southerners whose families, over the course of generations, had sunk deep roots into the *American* soil.” Terry Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 109; Gary Gerstle, “The Protean Character of American Liberalism,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Oct. 1994), p. 1068.

<sup>5</sup> Michael C. Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Oct. 1983), pp. 432-433; Barbara Allen, “Regional Studies in American Folklore Scholarship,” in *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures*, Barbara Allen and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), pp. 2-3. 6.

therefore an idea of place, both in the literal sense as a geographically defined location, and in a figurative sense as characterized by the people who lived there: in their patterns of daily life, the history of their shared traditions, and in the ways they viewed themselves as belonging to a community that was simultaneously a part of the nation and still culturally distinct.

Among the regionalists that Steiner highlights are left-leaning figures like Benjamin Botkin and Constance Rourke, who sought to fuse “regionalism with the cause of the workers,” and those in the political center, such as David Lilienthal and Arthur Morgan, who were New Deal liberals.<sup>6</sup> During the 1930s, many regionalists adopted more progressive, or even radical, political views as they became active in public programs. While all regionalists believed that cultural products were “inseparable from the natural setting, economy, politics, and folkways of different geographical communities,” according to historian Paul Sporn, the early regionalists focused primarily on geographical differences and did not question social stratification. However, the “progressive” regionalists of the thirties turned their attention specifically to marginalized populations in different regions that had previously been ignored, and expanded their regional definitions to include urban and labor groups.<sup>7</sup> These “progressive” regionalists

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<sup>6</sup> Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” p. 430. Steiner also includes intellectuals associated with the Agrarian Fugitives at Vanderbilt University (the authors of *I’ll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays bemoaning the loss of traditional southern culture in the face of industrialization and other effects of modernity) as the conservative wing of regionalism because they sought to use regionalist tactics to stem the tide of industrialism and regress to a more traditional, agrarian era. Several scholars such as Robert Dorman and Paul Sporn also include the Agrarians in the regionalist movement, but I view their inclusion as historically inaccurate. The Fugitives were involved in a sectional campaign to identify a particularly southern way of life and to return the South to a romanticized past and re-entrench a racial hierarchy. Renowned southern regionalists such as Howard Odum, however, recoiled against this sectionalism because it focused entirely on the South as an entity unto itself and did not seek to incorporate it into the national whole. As Odum argued in *American Regionalism*, the goal of regionalism was to use a “cultural-historical approach to national unity and to translate the older historical sectionalism into a dynamic doctrine of national development” (v). Botkin even attacked the Agrarian mission as antithetical to regionalism not only because it was “reactionary and regressive,” but also because “regional writers do not make the mistake of identifying culture with a way of life; rather, they describe ways of living” (“Regionalism and Culture,” pp. 152, 155). The Fugitives, for their part, also had little to do with the southern regionalists like Odum, who were centered at the University of North Carolina.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers’ Projects in the Midwest* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp. 50-51.

often shared political sympathies with leftist groups involved in the Popular Front, and their racially, geographically, and economically inclusive definition of regional groups largely reflected the views of the American Left of the 1930s. Many folk revivalists participated in this community of regionalists and brought this left-wing regionalism into their own interpretations of both American folk music and an overarching American identity.

By combining cultural pluralism and regionalism the revivalists defined the American people as an inherently culturally diverse citizenry. Some revivalists brought in leftist politics to further support their views and justify their use of folk music in social and political activism. Though not all revivalists shared the same political views—many remained in the political center—they all ultimately believed that the American national identity rested on a foundation of cultural diversity. Yet this diversity did not divide citizens along cultural fault lines because a collective faith in the democratic civic ideal united Americans as a national body politic. Two key revivalists, Benjamin Botkin and Alan Lomax, summarized this view by explaining that the rise of interest in folk music during the thirties resulted from the “deep need for art, literature and music that reflected U.S. democratic and equalitarian political ideals.”<sup>8</sup> By the end of the decade, the revivalists had crafted a notion of nationalism that brought together the appreciation of cultural democracy found in cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism together with an interest in securing political and economic rights for all citizens, rights that the revivalists believed formed the basis of political democracy.

The folk revivalists found the political and cultural atmosphere of the New Deal conducive for both their understanding of Americanism and for their efforts to spread this view through folk music. A fan of folk music, Franklin Roosevelt hosted concerts at the White House

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Lomax and Benjamin Botkin, “Folklore, American,” reprinted from *Ten Eventful Years*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., (1947), p. 359.



and often patronized local festivals when he visited Warm Springs, Georgia. The Roosevelt Administration also supported efforts to collect, preserve, and present folk music to the public, and several of the early revivalists found homes in government agencies and New Deal cultural programs. As many revivalists became enmeshed in the New Deal milieu, some of the leading figures also drew inspiration from another political movement of the era: the Communist Popular Front. Members of Popular Front programs often worked on behalf of disadvantaged Americans—many of whom came from the folk groups that the revivalists championed. The leftist politics of the thirties offered revivalists a political outlet that enabled them to move beyond merely advocating the people’s music to acting as advocates for “the People” by engaging in new programs of political and social activism. The revivalists’ version of Americanism was thus rooted in democratic ideals; it was a conception of nationalism that emphasized pluralism and demanded equal rights for all citizens regardless of cultural, racial, or religious differences.<sup>9</sup> For the young revivalists, the essence of the democratic national heritage—cultural and ideological—could be found within different types of folk music, and they began a movement with the intention of introducing (and sometimes reintroducing) Americans to their national music.

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<sup>9</sup> The revivalists’ concept of national identity fits Gary Gerstle’s description of “democratic” Americanism. Gerstle explains that between WWI and WWII Americans crafted various versions of American nationalism, or “Americanism.” Two articulations of Americanism that Gerstle includes are “nationalist” and “democratic.” The “nationalist” version entailed the exaltation of American heroes, such as the Founding Fathers, and the deeds that they allegedly accomplished. By adopting this dimension, political and cultural dissident groups were able to connect their programs to these national icons. The “democratic” dimension was basically an extension of the “nationalist” component, but here the ideals for which the American heroes fought became the main focus, rather than the figures themselves. Gerstle explains that the “democratic” dimension was particularly useful for cultural articulations of American identity, conceptions of nationalism that include “the pluralist dream that called for the extension of equal rights and equal opportunities for all American citizens irrespective of creed, color, or national origin.” Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 2002), pp. 8-10.

## The Rise of Folk Festivals

The rise of interest in folk music during this era was most notable in the proliferation of musical performance, specifically in festival form. Some folk festivals, especially those in urban areas, maintained the spirit of cultural pluralism that began in the previous decade. In 1932 organizers in St. Paul, Minnesota attempted to inaugurate an annual event that featured over eighteen nationalities. According to the program book of the 1934 “International Folk Festival” in St. Paul, “All nationalities, races, religions, ages and occupations are represented. Men, women, and children of various degrees of education, of every economic and social level, the privileged and the unemployed, descendents of early settlers, [and] the latest arrivals are friends in a common enterprise.” Much like the settlement house pageants of the Progressive Era, mutual understanding and an acceptance of cultural diversity were essential to the national image that these festivals promoted.<sup>10</sup> Occasionally the urban festivals were lengthy events, as was the case in Hartford, Connecticut, where a yearlong festival in 1935-1936 commemorated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Connecticut in 1635. In orchestrating the event, festival planners studied census records to determine which ethnic and racial groups lived in the city. Representatives from each group were then asked to participate in organizing the events, and the different groups were able to perform several times throughout the year. Event planning was left entirely to the participating groups. The festival debuted on August 31, 1935 with a German presentation. Norwegian, Danish, Chinese, “Negro,” Ukrainian, French-Canadian, Armenian, Swedish, Irish, Italian, Hungarian, Russian, and Portuguese groups sponsored programs the rest of the year. James H. Dillon, one of the main festival organizers, noted the festival’s success by

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States: Feasts of Musical Celebration* (Lanham, MD, The Scarecrow Press, INC. 2008), p. 2.

observing that the audience for each event was always diverse and never limited only to the groups who were presenting.<sup>11</sup>

The Hartford festival promoters and other urban folk festival organizers emphasized cultural diversity in their presentations of regional folk traditions. Yet, not all festivals shared this pluralism. Some programs, particularly those in the South, did promote the view that the real folk of America were rural dwellers of Anglo-Saxon descent. During the late 1920s, southern fiddle conventions began to morph into regional folk festivals. In 1928 Bascom Lamar Lunsford, a musician and lawyer, accepted a request to design a folk music program as the entertainment portion of the annual Rhododendron Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. By 1930 the success of Lunsford's program led him to establish it as a separate event named the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. That same year, Jean Bell Thomas debuted her American Folk Song Festival in Ashland, Kentucky. Both these festivals included only self-taught musicians who presented music and dances allegedly handed down through the generations. Lunsford and Thomas focused exclusively on white Appalachian mountain culture, ignoring music that was influenced by other racial and ethnic groups or tainted by mass culture. Another popular festival of the era was the White Top Festival that Annabel Morris Buchanan organized in southwest Virginia with the help of the composer John Powell. The White Top festival, according to the organizers, presented only the "finest" examples of American folk music in order to preserve, in the words of Buchanan, "the best native music, balladry, dances, traditions, and other arts and customs that belong to our [white] race...The White Top activities, if they are to endure, must be wrought slowly, carefully, measure by measure, for a race." This was because White Top was for "the

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<sup>11</sup> John M Hurley, "Hartford's Racial Cultural Program," *Recreation Magazine*, Vol. 28 (Jan. 1936), pp. 501-07, 522.

folk” and, as she proclaimed, “we are the folk.”<sup>12</sup> Despite its racial exclusivity, and narrow view of the “folk,” White Top was a popular event; it even attracted Eleanor Roosevelt as a visitor.<sup>13</sup>

In the midst of southern regional festivals like White Top and The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, a new festival emerged under the direction of Sarah Gertrude Knott. Although she grew up in southwestern Kentucky, among people who maintained similar social and cultural mores as Annabel Buchanan and Bascolm Lamar Lunsford, Knott took her program in a very different direction. With her penchant for theater, Knott became active in the Carolina Playmakers during the 1920s. The Playmakers were a student playwriting and acting troupe at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, under the direction of Frederick Koch. In 1929 Knott left Chapel Hill for St. Louis where she became the executive director of the city’s Dramatic League. During the early years of the Depression Knott began an effort to bring theater to the people, and even received some funding from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for her programs. One of the League’s most successful events was “The Theater of Nations,” a performance that featured new immigrants presenting plays and stories in their own languages. Eventually, it was expanded into a citywide event called a “Festival of Nations.” According to her biographer, Michael Ann Williams, this festival sparked Knott’s interest in developing a national event that would showcase a variety of American regional folk traditions. In 1933, Knott brought together several prominent businessmen from St. Louis to finance the operation, the playwright Paul Green to serve as the festival president, and the former showman

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<sup>12</sup> Annabel Morris Buchanan, “The Function of a Folk Festival,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1937), pp. 32, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Despite this success, however, internal problems forced the White Top Festival to fold in 1939.

M.J. Pickering to act as the business manager for the first National Folk Festival (NFF) production.<sup>14</sup>

Although Knott attended the southern regional festivals, she was not unduly influenced by them. Rather, Knott drew more inspiration from the regional dramatists who began staging theatrical productions based on rural and agrarian folk culture during the 1920s. Frederick Koch was a part of this camp and he often incorporated southern, rural African American folklore that his colleague Howard Odum collected into his plays about North Carolina. This interest in local folklore led Koch, along with many other dramatists, into the regionalist movement during the 1920s. Koch shared a high opinion of regionalism, stating in 1925 that ‘the only way we can be truly national is to be loyally local.’<sup>15</sup> Knott’s association with folk dramatists like Koch had a profound effect on her, and their regionalism greatly influenced the way she staged the National Folk Festival during its formative years.<sup>16</sup> Other members of the loosely connected regionalist movement also made an impact on Sarah Gertrude Knott’s festival planning. Not an academic, Knott often sought out scholars for advice on festival planning. One of her earliest advisors was Arthur Campa, a folklorist who specialized in the Southwest. Other folk regionalists, such as Constance Rourke and Zora Neal Hurston, were involved in the festival from the beginning, and by the end of the thirties even Botkin, a leading folk regionalist, became affiliated with the NFFA.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Ann Williams, *Staging Tradition: John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 16-18.

<sup>15</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 243-47, 251. Glassberg explains that while Koch was racially progressive in his regional plays, he was very much a minority in the South. During the twenties southern regional plays and pageants often turned into celebrations of white supremacy, many even extolling the virtues of the institution of slavery.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Staging Tradition*, 13. Though the folk dramatists were initially important, the influence of the Progressive recreational advocates—those who believed in the power of pageants, holiday celebrations and festivals to teach what it meant to be an American citizen—had a lasting effect on the design of, and purpose behind, the festival for the rest of Knott’s tenure as the president of the National Folk Festival Association. For more information on Knott’s relationship to recreational advocates see chapter 2.

In reflecting on the origins of the Festival, Knott believed that it started at the right time for many reasons. Perhaps the most important reason was the “spirit of nationalism” that marked American culture during the thirties—a *zeitgeist* that included a strong interest in American folk traditions.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the festival’s organization and execution clearly reflect a nationalist vision, but one that was rooted in conceptions of American regionalism as it developed during the Depression decade. Because regionalists focused on the communities that gave regions their cultural characteristics, they often identified regions by the different ethnic groups that resided within them. Folk regionalists in particular tended to concentrate on ethnic and racial groups (e.g. Pennsylvania Germans, southern African Americans, Southwestern Hispanics, and mountain whites) and sought to create an American national identity that incorporated both the ethnic cultures of immigrant communities and the native-born traditions that developed in the rural provinces.<sup>18</sup>

The first festival in 1934 established the precedent of identifying the participants by their home regions in addition to their race or ethnicity. The program commenced with Kiowa Indians from Oklahoma and then moved on to French folksongs, then songs from Vermont, and closed with southern Negro spirituals. The second day featured shape-note singers presented by George Pullen Jackson, a Spanish folk play, more American Indian songs and concluded with Spanish folk songs. The third day opened with a group of sailors from Snug Harbor, Staten Island, singing sea shanties. Cowboy music and ballads opened the fourth day’s program and the final performance of the festival featured a “Negro Chorus of Three Hundred Voices,” which combined different choruses from St. Louis. Knott later explained that she gave the American

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “The National Folk Festival USA: A Flashback to 1934” undated draft, Draw 1, Folder 30, Knott Collection: Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>18</sup> Allen, “Regional Studies in American Folklore Scholarship,” pp. 2-3. 6.

Indians, the “first Americans,” the honor of opening the festival because the program was arranged historically, beginning with the oldest traditions and ending with the most recent.<sup>19</sup>

Though the second festival in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the following year featured many of the same groups, the lineup specifically reflected the festival’s southeastern location by including a group from the Eastern Band of Cherokee in addition to the Kiowa Indians. A group of Pennsylvania Germans also debuted that year, along with anthracite coal mining singers that George Korson, a folklorist who specialized in the folksongs of coal mining communities, introduced. Besides showcasing black spirituals, this festival included a section on “Negro Games,” and a sampling of work songs by a group of boys from the Booker T. Washington CCC camp in Oglethorpe, Georgia. The politically progressive side of the festival was evidenced by Paul Green’s presentation of the play “Fixin’s,” performed by a group of students from the progressive Black Mountain College in eastern North Carolina.<sup>20</sup>

The third National Folk Festival (1936) took place in Dallas, Texas, timed to coincide with the Texas centennial. Again, Knott highlighted the pluralism of American folk culture. Illustrations of various ethnic groups dotted the cover of the souvenir program book and the lineup featured even more examples of ethnic folk music, including another group of German singers and a group from Louisiana performing Acadian songs. Because of the Texas centennial, Knott emphasized cultures distinct to the Southwest region and the early performances particularly favored Hispanic groups. However, Knott faced more challenges to her pluralist vision in Dallas than she had ever previously experienced. A primary problem was that the city’s

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<sup>19</sup> 1934 program; Sarah Gertrude Knott, “The First National Folk Festival—St. Louis, MO, 1934,” Draw 1, Folder 58, Knott Collection: Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY. Each tradition was treated as its own entity. While Knott emphasized a chronological approach, she did not treat these traditions as a progression where older music influenced more recent folk songs. Rather, she presented them as almost static traditions that did not reflect the intermingling of different cultures.

<sup>20</sup> Second Festival Program, 1935 Chattanooga, Draw 1, Folder 59, Knott Collection: Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

strict policy of segregation made it difficult to stage an interracial show. Though Knott did concede somewhat to the racial policies by staging racially segregated preliminary programs, the main performances continued as planned with black and white groups performing on the same stage.<sup>21</sup>

The design of the NFF programs indicates that Knott embraced the culturally pluralist populism of the New Deal era. She particularly desired both to bring art to the people and to include the people in artistic creation. Believing that citizens from politically and economically marginalized folk groups played a role in shaping American culture, Knott concluded that their cultures should be a part of the nation's identity. One way to ensure this democratization of American culture and identity was to incorporate folk traditions into mainstream culture and society. Writing on the eve of the Dallas festival, Knott argued, "Before we ever have a genuine culture in America or a truly creative nation, the interest in creative endeavor must not only touch the lives of the people of higher educational and artistic levels, but it must be so democratic that it will include people of every class."<sup>22</sup> She therefore designed the National Folk Festival to bring people from across the nation (and from across socioeconomic divides) together in an atmosphere of appreciation and exchange. Rather than mere entertainment, Knott emphasized that the music performed at the Festival was the essence of American heritage and that by showcasing these performances the Festival "keeps alive the fine traditional customs associated with the founding of the nation."<sup>23</sup>

Knott held the fourth festival in 1937 in Chicago. Although prior productions had rarely featured the immigrant groups who inspired Knott to organize the festival in the first place, this

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Staging Tradition*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, "Texas Celebrates its Hundredth Birthday," *Recreation*, Vol. 30 (Oct. 1936), p. 374. Knott even included this passage in a draft of the introduction to her unpublished book.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, "General Plan" of the National Folk Festival Association (1939), Draw 1, Folder 28, Knott Collection: Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.



policy began to change when the festival moved to a northern metropolis. The first group of recent immigrants to perform on the festival stage was a troupe of Lithuanian dancers led by Vyts Beliajus, who eventually became an active member of the festival association.<sup>24</sup> Before the opening of the Chicago festival, Knott used an interview on WCFL (the Chicago Federation of Labor radio station) to explain the purpose of the NFFA. Echoing a belief that served as a justification for some New Deal cultural programs such as the Federal Writers Project's American Guide Series, Knott pointed out that Americans had been so busy building up the nation that they never took the time to appreciate the cultural riches scattered throughout the country. When Americans had money to travel, they usually chose to go abroad rather than to explore the varied regions of their own land, the very places that gave America its "warmth and color" as well as its "beauty." Through the festival, Knott endeavored to make the public aware of their country's folk music traditions, which would lead to the development of a "national consciousness" of the American cultural heritage. She also explained that the NFF illustrated the culturally diverse nature of the American people. Yet, rather than including all groups in America, she noted that the National Folk Festival only highlighted those groups who had "integrated more into the American cultural life," i.e. older ethnic groups from Northern Europe rather than recent immigrants.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, though Knott was more inclusive than many of the other regional festival organizers, the exclusion of unassimilated ethnic groups indicates that even her pluralist nationalism had its limits.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Radio Broadcast on WCFL, Chicago, Saturday 4/3/37, p. 3, 5, Draw 1, Folder 61, Knott Collection: Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>26</sup> In many respects, Knott's view on immigrant cultures was similar to Progressive settlement house workers of the early twentieth century. She valued ethnic folk music and dance for enriching American culture as a whole, and she believed that ethnic groups should be allowed to practice their cultural traditions, as long as they adhered to the national civic ideals. Perhaps this is why she valued those groups that had already politically assimilated into the American way of life, yet still maintained a connection to old-world culture, especially folk music.

How exactly did Knott define the American heritage and, through that, American identity? Unlike White Top and The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, Knott presented a multiregional, multiethnic program that contrasted sharply from the others' racial and geographical exclusivity. Even Botkin, who leaned far more to the Left than Knott, recognized the NFF's progressive tendencies. According to Botkin, the Festival was shaped by two main ideas: the sociological view that stressed the importance of diversity in an effort to counteract the forced assimilation programs of the early twentieth century, and the notion in public folklore that folk music itself and the study of folk music encouraged common people to actively participate in American society.<sup>27</sup> These two traits were clearly evident in the National Folk Festival through its presentation of a diverse array of regional, ethnic and racial groups and Knott's desire to incorporate these traditions into the dominant national culture.

### **The New Deal Revivalists**

The New Deal significantly influenced not only the politics of the thirties, but the culture of the decade as well. The Roosevelt Administration accomplished the latter by establishing Federal One, a section of the Works Projects Administration that encouraged the arts and employed American artists, writers, musicians, and actors in such initiatives as the Index of Design, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Theater Project.<sup>28</sup> The New Dealers' populist nationalism led them to promote art that was relevant to the

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<sup>27</sup> Archie Green "The National Folk Festival Association: Commercial Music Graphics #32," *JEMF Quarterly I*, Vol. XI, Part 1, No. 37 (Spring 1975), p 24.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on these projects, especially regarding their emphasis on populism and cultural pluralism see Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Sept. 1975), pp. 316-339; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*; Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers Project*, (Chapel Hill, 2003); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and America Roots Music*; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: a Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of

people, and public folklore suited this populist objective well. Benjamin Botkin described the folklore and folk music research projects of the Works Progress Administration as efforts that demonstrated “the relation between art and life, between work and culture.” Many public folklorists sought to break folklore and folk music from academic confines and weave traditional songs and tales into the fabric of mainstream American life. Botkin defined the mission of New Deal public folklore as the following:

[T]he task, as we see it, is one not simply of collection but also of assimilation. In its belief in the public support of art and art for the public, in research not for research’s sake but for use and enjoyment by the many, the WPA is attempting to assimilate folklore to the local and national life by understanding, in the first place, the relation between the lore and the life out of which it springs.

According to Botkin, this effort was the “greatest educational as well as social experiment of our times.”<sup>29</sup>

Botkin had a long history in the field of public folklore by the time he joined the Writer’s Project. In 1901 he was born into a Jewish family in Boston to parents who were recent immigrants. After teaching English at the University of Oklahoma and at Settlement Houses in New York City, Botkin continued his education in folklore and English under Louise Pound at the University of Nebraska. Relocating to Washington in 1937 under a Julius Rosenwald fellowship to research southern folk and regional literature at the Library of Congress, Botkin remained in the area and became a co-founder and chairman of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts of the WPA, served as the Library of Congress’s Fellow in Folklore in 1941, and became the head of the Archive of Folk Song in 1942. Throughout his career, Botkin was both a scholar and

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Minnesota Press, 1982); Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); and Jane Sherron De Hart, *The Federal Theater: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Botkin, “WPA and Folklore Research: ‘Bread and Song,’” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1939), pp. 10-11.

an unabashed popularizer of folk culture; he assembled popular folklore anthologies, served on the board of the National Folk Festival Foundation, and wrote about popular folk music activities for the *New York State Folklore Quarterly* and other journals. Although he often raised the ire of academically inclined folklorists who disapproved of his disinclination to follow academic standards of analyzing folk music, Botkin saw his work as advancing something greater than just the scholarship of American folklore. As historian Jerrold Hirsch notes, Botkin “offered his folklore studies as contribution to an understanding of American culture, with the hope that they would help that culture realize what he saw as its best possibilities.”<sup>30</sup> While working for the Writers’ Project, Botkin understood his role as conducting “research, not for research’s sake but for use and enjoyment by the many.” To Botkin, folklore and folk music played important roles in the communities that maintained those traditions, and studying these traditions would shed light on the cultural life of the nation as a whole:

In addition to its folkloristic values, its popular interest, and its creative uses, the material collected will have important bearings on the study of American culture in both its historical and functional aspects, including minority groups (ethnic, geographical, and occupational), immigration and internal migration, local history, regional backgrounds and movements, linguistic and dialect phenomena.

The folklorists’ task, therefore, was to understand the relationship between folk groups and national society, and Botkin took his responsibility to be “studying folklore as a living culture and of understanding its meaning and function not only in its immediate setting but in progressive and democratic society as a whole.”<sup>31</sup> In Botkin’s estimation, understanding and incorporating folk traditions into the larger society would not only connect Americans to their

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<sup>30</sup> Jerrold Hirsch, “Folklore in the Making: B.A. Botkin,” *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 100, No. 395 (January-March, 1987), pp. 3-4. During the fifties, the nation’s preeminent folklore scholar, Richard Dorson ruthlessly attacked Botkin for denigrating the study of folklore through his anthologies because he disregarded scholarly methods for collecting folklore material. For this, Dorson publicly scorned Botkin’s work as “fakelore.”

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Botkin, “WPA and Folklore Research,” pp. 10, 13, 14.

cultural heritage but bring the nation closer to achieving the political ideal of a democratic society.

By the 1930s regionalism had come into its own as a movement and Botkin is notable for bringing the theories of regionalism into his work in the WPA. Indeed, many regionalists worked closely with revivalists in the cultural projects of Federal One, which highlighted local artistic expression in literature, theater, and art. These regionalists justified their efforts by relying on the argument that folk culture provided a usable past during a time of social instability because it consisted of traditions that had sustained generations of American through hard times. Seeking to determine how folk traditions could survive in modern America, many regionalists concluded that folk cultural practices were not merely antiquated cultural expressions, but still served a purpose for those who practiced them. Among these New Deal regionalists were the early folk music revivalists, including Botkin, the public folklorist Alan Lomax, and the musicologist Charles Seeger.<sup>32</sup> The figures in this “Washington establishment” used their positions in programs such as the Federal Writers’ Project, the Archive of American Folk Song and the Radio Research Project at the Library of Congress, and the Resettlement Administration to both preserve and popularize folk music, and spread their pluralist understanding of American identity.

In addition to following the tenets of regionalism and theories of cultural pluralism, these folklorists also relied on the anthropological theory of functionalism in their arguments for the utility of folk music. Developed by the British anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R.

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Lomax gives the New Deal a great deal of credit for encouraging the folk music revival, as he explained: “They saw that the country lacked a feeling of unity; they saw that there were conflicts between various kinds of racial, regional and class groups in this country. They hoped that the cultivation of folk music, and the spread of the feeling of cultural unity that lies somehow imbedded in our big and crazy patchwork of folksong, would give Americans this feeling that they all belonged to the same kind of culture.” Alan Lomax, “The Folksong Revival: A Symposium” *New York State Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (June 1963), p. 121.

Radcliffe-Brown, functionalism held that all cultural practices existed because they served important purposes in the communities that maintained them. The theory effectually put an end to nineteenth century ideas of cultural evolution, which held that cultures advanced over time and folk cultures were archaic vestiges from a bygone era.<sup>33</sup> This theory was particularly important to Depression-era folk regionalists because it justified their belief that folk culture provided a means to understand contemporary society as well as historical conditions and events. Among the many public folklorists who relied on regionalism and functionalism as guides for their projects relating to American folk culture, specifically music, was Alan Lomax, the son of John Lomax. During the late thirties, Lomax grew deeply interested in anthropology, enrolling in courses in the field at Columbia University. Lomax believed that, because folk music served a function in folk communities, it granted insight into how different regional communities operated; and he put this theory into practice through song collecting expeditions.

In many ways, Alan Lomax followed a trajectory similar to that of his father. Born in Texas in 1915 and educated at Choate, the elite New England boarding school, Lomax's identity was shaped by both northern and southern influences. Like his father, Alan began his college education at the University of Texas, transferred for one year to Harvard, then returned to the University of Texas and graduated in 1936. Throughout the thirties, Lomax collected songs throughout the United States, as well as in the Caribbean, with the help of other folklorists, including Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and Zora Neal Hurston. By the end of the decade, he had become a premier figure in public folklore and a leading member of the burgeoning revival. Alan became the "Assistant in Charge" of the Archive of American Folksong (AAFS) in 1937, when his father was serving as the Honorary Consultant of the Archive. Established in 1928, the

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<sup>33</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, pp. 137-38; Bronner, *Following Tradition*, p. 151. Bronner explains that Malinowski was especially interested in "learning primitive 'wisdom'" and appreciating different "worldviews."

Archive was originally intended as a repository for “all the poems and melodies that have sprung from our soil or have been transplanted here, and have been handed down, often with manifold changes, from generation to generation as a precious possession of our folk.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, rather than treating the Archive as a mere musical library, the Lomaxes used it, according to Benjamin Filene, “as a way to link their personal musical tastes to a sense of national mission.”<sup>35</sup> Part of that mission entailed using folk music to shape American culture, and, subsequently, American identity.

In 1941, Alan began an intensive investigation of musical practices within black communities in the Mississippi Delta region, working in collaboration with several professors at Fisk University in Nashville. Lomax requested funding from the AAFS to support the expedition by highlighting its sociological, musical, and national significance:

Briefly, the agreed upon study was to explore objectively and exhaustively the musical habits of a single Negro community in the Delta, to find out and describe the function of music in the community, to ascertain the history of music in the community, and to document adequately the cultural and social backgrounds for music in the community. It was felt that this type of study, carried on in a number of types of southern communities would afford: (1) an oral history of Negro music in the South over the past hundred years; (2) describe music in the community objectively, giving all criteria for taste and the relationship of music to the dynamics of social change; and (3) result in a widely varied and completely documented set of basic recorded musical materials.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> From the Library of Congress’s “Report of the Librarian of Congress: for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1928,” pp. 143-44; from the Library of Congress’s “Report of the Librarian of Congress: for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929,” p. 193 in the Richard Reuss Papers, Box 5, Folder: Thesis Folklore and the New Deal, 1928-1985, University Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. During the early 1920s, Carl Engel, the Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress from 1922-34 began a collection of folk songs at the Library, which eventually became the Archive of American Folk Song, with Robert Winslow Gordon as the first acting head. For more information see Peter T. Bartis, “A History of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress: The First Fifty Years: A Dissertation in Folklore and Folklife,” (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982) and Debra Kodish, *Good Friends and Bad enemies: Robert Winslow Gordon and the Study of American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Lomax letter to Archive of American Folk Song (18 Sept. 1941) in *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), p. 242.

While regional folk music provided insight into specific communities, it revealed larger historical processes as well, according to Lomax. Even before his trip to the Delta, he characterized his song collecting efforts as important investigations into distinctly American sociological conditions. When he sought funding from the AAFS to conduct fieldwork around the Great Lakes during the late thirties, Lomax explained that the region was likely a repository for lumberjack songs. He then proclaimed that by focusing on this region, the Archive would be able to “explore the musical potentialities of the many foreign language groups of the area (Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Gaelic, French-Canadian, etc.) and to observe what have been the results of the mixing of these cultures with the Anglo-American matrix.”<sup>37</sup> For Lomax and other folk regionalists of the New Deal era, racial and ethnic pluralism gave the nation its character, and it was incumbent on scholars and public officials to protect these cultural traditions.

Alan Lomax and Benjamin Botkin recognized the importance of imparting their views of regionalism and pluralism to a public audience through folk music in order to spread their culturally democratic interpretation of American identity. As evidenced by the widespread popularity of regional folk festivals, one of the most successful means of reaching this public was through the medium of performance, as they wrote in a joint passage on folklore in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: “Folk, folklorists, and the growing folklore audience met at folk festivals...As cultural expression, it enabled regional and ethnic groups to preserve their own identity and to understand one another better.”<sup>38</sup> In effect, they argued that the popularization of folk culture during the thirties would actually put the appreciation of cultural diversity found in theories of cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural democracy into practice.

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<sup>37</sup> Alan Lomax letter to Harold Spivack (8 June 1938), in Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*, p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Lomax and Benjamin Botkin “Folklore, American,” p. 359.



Lomax clearly recognized the important role that folk festivals played in illustrating and promoting American cultural diversity, because he attempted to stage one to suit that very purpose. In 1939, organizers for the World's Fair that was to be held in New York City sought to incorporate folk traditions into the fair's programs. Envisioning a large-scale folk festival with an international flair to honor the occasion of "bringing the world's nations together" during a troubled time, the organizers commissioned Olin Downes, music critic for the *New York Times*, to plan music and dance activities. Downes strongly encouraged public folklorists such as those in the Folk Festival Council of New York City to be a part of the planning process. Alan Lomax, among others, enthusiastically answered the call to duty.<sup>39</sup> In a letter he wrote to Downes, Lomax described his program, entitled "Yankee Doodle Comes To Town," as follows:

Central Idea: New York City, during her first hundred and fifty years, from 1639 to 1789 exemplifies the growth and the struggle for independence of the whole nation...  
Nationalities: New York City has always been a cosmopolitan town and it will be amusing to portray the arrival of the first Chinaman, the first Negro, and the first Jew.  
Music: For musical material we will utilize Dutch and English folksongs, and shanteys, pirate songs, the popular airs of the revolutionary period, and Indian music.<sup>40</sup>

Lomax's pluralist vision reached beyond New York City to the rest of the country. He proposed to Downes that the folk music exhibit should offer four main pavilions: one a "Negro honky-tonk" and second a "mountain square dance hall," and two more drawn from such "almost endless" possibilities as the New Orleans French Quarter, a Pennsylvania Dutch tavern, a "Haitian house with voodoo dances," a western saloon, "a down-Easter fish house," a "Mexican patio," an "Acadian Fais-do-do hall," a Hawaiian house, and a "Negro church social."<sup>41</sup> Clearly,

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<sup>39</sup> Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Lomax letter to Olin Downes (18 June 1938) in Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

Lomax's vision reflected his conviction that the American nation was grounded in cultural diversity.<sup>42</sup>

Revivalists like Botkin and Lomax had developed their pluralist Americanism before they began working in government agencies like the WPA and the AAFS. Being connected to these institutions, however, enabled them to connect to a larger audience (not to mention that it provided them with a steady paycheck). The fact that progressive revivalists found employment through the federal government also reveals the extent to which the New Deal was receptive to the type of Americanism that the revivalists promoted. Ethnic pluralism and political democracy were central components of New Deal cultural nationalism. For example, in the fall of 1935 FDR provided funds to the Office of Education for radio broadcasts that would commemorate American social and cultural diversity; programs such as *Americans All...Immigrants All* (1938-39) exemplified this effort.<sup>43</sup> These efforts were part of a general trend of government and intellectuals' rejection of xenophobia and racism during the New Deal years and public recognition of the contributions that ethnic and racial minorities made in shaping American life. New Deal officials could symbolically embrace ethnic Americans, Gary Gerstle argues, because by the 1930s there were few concerns over ethnic divisions, racial distinctions or "cultural disunity," a situation resulting from the 1924 National Origins Act, which severely curtailed the number of new immigrants.<sup>44</sup> Throughout the 1930s, however, racist and anti-immigrant attitudes

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<sup>42</sup> Despite his noble attempts and detailed plans, Lomax's festival was never executed in the Fair, though his vision would eventually resurface in a modified form almost three decades later in the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife.

<sup>43</sup> Rachel Davis Dubois was instrumental in starting the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education to teach children about ethnic and cultural diversity. The integrated Service Bureau provided educational materials to schools and in 1938 Dubois worked with the national Office of Education to develop the radio program "Americans All...Immigrants All." This 26 episode series dedicated each show to a different ethnic group. Some titles include: "Negroes in America," "Slavic Contributions to American Life," and "Our Hispanic Heritage" and other shows were dedicated to "Jews," "Italians," "Orientals," "Irish, and "Gemans" in "American Life." See Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 132, 137.

persisted in American society—noticeably in the rise of fascist groups like the German American Bund and the Silver Shirts. Some of the anti-immigrant sentiments stemmed from the economic depression and fears that immigrants were taking jobs away from native-born, or “real,” Americans. Furthermore, public opinion polls conducted over the decade revealed staunch opposition to suggestions of relaxing the quotas established in 1924, indicating that nativism and racism continued to be common features of ‘the People’ decade.<sup>45</sup>

Public officials, along with cultural and social workers tried to counteract this nativist undercurrent by promoting a version of Americanism that celebrated racial, ethnic, and religious pluralism as the essence of the national identity throughout the Depression decade. By the late 1930s they initiated social and educational programs that rejected ideas of racial inferiority and “Nordic supremacy” and “sought to redefine the relationship between immigrants and ‘mainstream’ American culture along civic nationalist lines,” according to historian Jeffrey E. Mirel.<sup>46</sup> Their arguments against programs of forced assimilation and their celebration of the cultural contributions that ethnic and racial minorities made to American culture echoed the work of liberal Progressives. The fact that cultural workers, along with officials in the New Deal including the President, advocated such an Americanism during an era of racial and ethnic tension at home and abroad, made these efforts all the more noteworthy. Overall, the relative calming of post-WWI rabid 100-percent Americanism and the government’s rhetorical acceptance of cultural pluralism sparked a different kind of nationalism during this period. Because the Depression affected almost all Americans, those who attempted to define an

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<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey E. Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism: Americanization Education and European Immigrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 159-64. Mirel notes that anti-immigrant attitudes were not restricted to fringe groups on the radical right. Even the American Federation of Labor and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spewed anti-immigrant rhetoric. Furthermore, while the “fascist fanatic” groups attached themselves to Nazi Germany, Mirel views them, and other groups like the Klan, as extensions of the ideas of ethnic nationalism that anti-immigrant “racial restrictionists” had advocated since the 1920s (p. 162).

<sup>46</sup> Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*, p. 175.

American national identity “encouraged an emphasis upon the...inclusive character of the national experience,” according to historian Alfred Hayworth Jones.<sup>47</sup> Now, the varied examples of the American *experience* became the defining feature of the nation’s identity—an idea that many folk music revivalists had been articulating since the early 1930s.

During a time when debates raged over the meaning of American identity, the revivalists argued that folk music constituted the music of the American people. It was an art form that revealed the democratic essence of Americanism because it came directly from the American people and all performers of folk songs participated in adapting the music and even the lyrics to suit their tastes and needs. The revivalists’ message and their music therefore fit well with the pluralist, democratic populism of the Roosevelt Administration. Yet, the New Dealers were not the only ones who espoused this view, and soon more political figures, particularly those on the Left, adopted a similar interpretation of the national identity and also used folk music to illustrate their version of Americanism.

### **Regionalism, Pluralism, and Race**

As a folksong collector who took his children on song collecting trips, John Lomax clearly influenced his son Alan’s career choice. Yet, the Lomaxes’ shared interest in, and ideas regarding, folk music did not translate into similar social and political views, particularly those regarding race. John Lomax viewed southern black communities, especially those in the Mississippi Delta, as primitive, isolated from dominant culture and therefore pure in their folk musical traditions. Penitentiaries contained an even greater repository of authentic songs, in Lomax’s view, because prisoners were completely removed from mainstream society and mass

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<sup>47</sup> Alfred Haworth Jones, “The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (Dec., 1971) p. 718.

culture. During his major song-collecting trip in 1933, John focused on recording songs in large prisons such as Angola in Louisiana, and at prison farms such as Sugar Land in Texas, Parchman in Mississippi, and several smaller ones in between. He mostly collected field hollers and other work songs—setting up his recording machine sometimes in the field and other times indoors where guards brought prisoners in to sing (sometimes by force). When he reminisced about this trip in *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, Lomax revealed his social and cultural views regarding African Americans. At one point after he and Alan drove a musical informant to a birthday party and John recollected,

As I sat in the car and listened to the steady, monotonous beat of the guitars, accented by handclaps and the shuffle of feet—the excitement growing as time went on, the rhythm deeper and clearer—again I felt carried across to Africa, and I felt as if I were listening to the tom-toms of savage blacks...and I realized that Alan and I were now enjoying a unique experience and a people we really knew very little about.<sup>48</sup>

Like nineteenth-century ethnologists and anthropologists who viewed American Indians as the last authentic primitive culture and feared that their traditions were ebbing away, Lomax thought the same of “primitive” African Americans in the rural South.

Even though Alan Lomax cut his teeth in the world of folksong collecting during this trip, it had little effect on the development of his views regarding race. Unlike his father, Alan Lomax became involved with progressive politics during his stint at Harvard, and continued to develop his progressive political views while working with progressive and left-wing folklorists like Botkin and Charles Seeger during his time in Washington. In many ways, Alan Lomax’s racial views reflected the racial egalitarian aspects of the New Deal era. Throughout the thirties and forties he stressed the importance of black musical traditions for shaping larger folk music styles—an idea that sharply differed from academic concepts of American folk music that

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<sup>48</sup> Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, pp. 117-118.

followed in the James Francis Child tradition. Although John Lomax also viewed African American folk music as an important contribution to the canon of American folk music, he still maintained conservative views regarding racial equality. Alan, on the other hand, “operated with a fiercely egalitarian point of view,” one that “identified itself with outcast and oppressed groups such as the Negro,” according to folklorist Gene Bluestein. Alan believed that black folk music focused on a theme of freedom, a theme that had been an intrinsic part of American identity. Furthermore, black traditions evolved as a hybridization of multiple musical strains, including African and European, that merged on American soil and reflected American conditions. To Alan Lomax, this process of melding and relating to daily life was the essence of the American heritage. Bluestein explains that because of these factors, folk interpreters such as Lomax believed that black folk music epitomized American folk music and it “symbolized...the struggle of all Americans to realize the promise of our democratic traditions.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Lomax articulated his view that American folk music formed a cultural tradition that was pluralist, inclusive, and transcended racial and ethnic prejudices by referencing the song “John Henry” in a *New York Times Magazine* article: “‘A MAN ain’t nothin’ but a man!’ In this sense America has reached out and welcomed the folklore of all the minority groups, racial and national. Jim Crow prejudice has been inoperative in folklore.”<sup>50</sup> While this view was more wishful thinking than reality, it does reveal how Lomax tried to use folk music to realize the egalitarian potential inherent in the American democratic ideal.

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<sup>49</sup> Gene Bluestein, “The Lomaxes’ New Canon of American Folksong,” *The Texas Quarterly*, (Spring 1962), pp. 55, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Lomax, “America Sings the Saga of America” *New York Times Magazine*, (26 Jan. 1947), p. 41. See *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 86-91. This, of course, is an exaggeration and it reflects how many revivalists chose to ignore the conservative, and even prejudiced, side of folk songs and traditional singers. However, this comment does reflect how progressive revivalists like Lomax attempted to use folk traditions to generate a pluralist national culture.

Alan Lomax and fellow Washington folklorists secured a widespread acceptance of African-American folk music as *American* music. In 1938 Alan Lomax rediscovered and recorded the early jazz impresario Jelly Roll Morton, and several folklorists became involved in a massive project in conjunction with the Historical Records Survey to record oral histories of former slaves.<sup>51</sup> Some folklorists explicitly stated their view that American folk music was a combination of different racial traditions. For example, in the music manual for the New Deal Resettlement Administration, Charles Seeger wrote, “The African strain, probably the largest and most powerful of the racial minorities, is thought by many to constitute a separate category.” This, however, was a false distinction, for, as Seeger argued, “It [African-American] folk music has been so modified as to have become part and parcel of the American traditional idiom.” Furthermore, Seeger dismissed the categorization of black music as different from the European-based white folk music: “[A] large proportion of the negro population and of the negro musicians of the United States have as much European as African ancestry. The current vogue of the term ‘negro’ music is, therefore, to be deplored.”<sup>52</sup> If white music did not have a racial label affixed to it, then neither should black music.

Born in 1886, Charles Seeger was a senior member of the New Deal revivalists, and one of the most politically radical. Seeger began his career in music after graduating from Harvard and accepting a position teaching music at the University of California, Berkeley. His move from classical music to folk music resulted from his affiliation with political radicals—particularly the Industrial Workers of the World. An economics professor at Berkeley informed Seeger that he

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<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Botkin served as a director of the slave narrative project of the WPA and John Lomax served as the National Advisor of Folklore and Folkways for the Writers’ Project. Lomax’s tasks included outlining folklore collecting guidelines for American Guidebook Series and for the slave interviews.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Seeger, *Music Manual for the Special Services Division of the Resettlement Administration, 1937*, Box: 8, Folder: Charles Seeger—Music Manual for the Resettlement Administration, 1937-1939, Richard Reuss Papers, University Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

did not know America, that he did not live in America and he took him to see the living and working conditions that migrant farmers endured. It was this experience that both turned him into a socialist and into an advocate of the music of the people he encountered—folk music.<sup>53</sup> After being dismissed from Berkeley for opposing America's entry into WWI, Seeger accepted a position at Julliard and then the New School in New York City. In 1935 he moved into the New Deal and became the "technical advisor to the head of the Special Skills division" of the Resettlement Administration. The job entailed "consoling rural people in their poverty and upheaval" by establishing music programs in the resettled communities. He was also charged with "disseminating the folk music heritage of those in resettlement communities" and tending to their other needs.<sup>54</sup> Seeger ardently believed that folk music was rural by nature, and he interpreted his role as one of teaching urban people to appreciate the folk music of the American provinces. Seeger eloquently summarized the connection between America's rural folk music and national identity in a memorandum he wrote to Nikolai Sokoloff, the director of the WPA's Federal Music Project. The programs of folk music were designed, according to Seeger, "to present a living rural art to urban sections with the idea not only of gaining more respect for it, but even of inculcating a basic conception that there is such a thing as American folk music." Seeger believed, as did many revivalists, that "present in [folk] music is a more truly American cultural reality than any other musical idiom."<sup>55</sup> For all those who were still looking to "find" America, they could locate it in folk music.

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Charles Seeger, tape 1 2/15/75 (Kate and Ralph) CFCH FP 2006-CT-00067, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

<sup>54</sup> Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, pp. 390-91.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Seeger memorandum to Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Subject: Details for the Programming of Folk Music Units, (18 Nov. 1938) in Box 8, Folder: Charles Seeger—WPA Music Project, 1938-1939, Richard Reuss Papers, University Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.



Seeger, Lomax, and Botkin each looked to marginalized groups in their effort to collect American folk music. Geographically isolated, politically disenfranchised, economically disadvantaged, or oppressed ethnic and racial groups were the ‘People’ of America. Although this view appears to be in keeping with the populism of the New Deal, it took on a radical dimension that was associated with another political group: the American Communist Party (CPUSA). The CPUSA during the thirties became the most prominent, or at least the loudest, advocate on behalf of marginalized Americans. The relative political fluidity of the era enabled revivalists to share social views with leftists while remaining involved in New Deal programs. The revivalist-leftist coalitions of the thirties would come back to haunt them during the antiradical campaigns of the early 1950s.

### **The Left Side of the Revival**

The conditions of poverty, economic migration, unemployment, and labor struggles that came to define the Depression years were nothing new to many sectors of the population. However, the depth of economic suffering made these problems visible on a national scale. Furthermore, because these conditions occurred in a capitalist economy, alternative systems like socialism became particularly attractive as a viable solution to the crisis.<sup>56</sup> As artists and intellectuals sought to reconnect to the American people and make their work socially relevant during the economic disaster, many turned to the Left, particularly to the Communist Party. In his memoir of the thirties, Malcolm Cowley explained that Communism appealed to many people because they viewed it as a movement that arose from the ashes of capitalism and united intellectuals with the working class in a common pursuit of justice. Throughout the thirties

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<sup>56</sup> John Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp. 148-49.

writers, artists, musicians, actors, and intellectuals joined in various working-class causes—from the mining strikes in Harlan County, Kentucky, to labor rallies in New York City. Many believed that Communism offered the possibility of both economic and social regeneration because, while every capitalist country suffered the effects of the global Depression, the Communist Soviet Union appeared to be thriving industrially. Artists and intellectuals like Cowley believed that, by joining with the Left, they could transform a nation that exalted rugged individualism into a unified national community.<sup>57</sup> To many communists and communist sympathizers the Left brought political activists together and enabled them to connect to those who were suffering during the national crisis.

Though the American Communist Party (CPUSA) was tied to the Soviet Union on organizational and ideological levels—organizer A.B. Magil noted that many Communists “felt that the Soviet Union had all the answers”<sup>58</sup>—something more inspired CPUSA members than just the beacon in the east. During the late twenties CPUSA leaders started establishing mass organizations to mediate between the Party and the public. Groups such as the Unemployed Councils, the League of the Struggle for Negro Rights, and the United Farmers League were just a few of the organizations that developed between 1929 and 1934. Although these organizations were not necessarily party organs, Party members largely served as the leaders.<sup>59</sup> The groups, as evidenced by their very names, addressed problems endemic in the United States. The fact that they existed, however, was not enough to garner public attention; it took the crisis of the Depression to expose social and economic disparities on a mass scale, which opened the door for

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<sup>57</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the Thirties* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), pp. 22, 33-34, 43; Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 159.

<sup>58</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Harriet and A.B. Magil, pp. 20-21, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>59</sup> Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 104.

Communists to present their programs as solutions. Folk revivalist Bess Lomax Hawes directly attributed her political awakening to the leftist writers, journalists, and other social commentators who revealed the extent of human suffering in the United States:

[T]he experience of this generation was the [D]epression, which we did live through in a period when we were old enough to understand what was happening. And the immense discoveries of the amount of social injustice that was going on in this country that we were faced with first hand. Stories of lynching in the South, stories of the National Guard being called in against unarmed working people who were organizing in factories and in the mines.<sup>60</sup>

Communists not only made these conditions headline news, but they also advocated on behalf of oppressed citizens, which rendered the Party especially attractive to progressive Americans.<sup>61</sup>

By the mid-thirties progressives and liberals had a relatively easy time reconciling with Communists because of a shift in Party policies. American Communists began recognizing in the late 1920s that the revolution was unlikely to come to the United States anytime soon.<sup>62</sup> This doubt became moot during the mid-thirties because the revolutionary emphasis that previously marked the Communist Party subsided as fascism spread across Europe. Now, rather than initiate

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<sup>60</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Bess Lomax Hawes (6 May 1977), p. 6, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>61</sup> Not only did many look to Communism for a remedy for these domestic problems, but international events also rallied leftist recruits. The spread of fascism, and the hard realization that the middle classes—the groups that had formed the foundation of the Progressive movement—were the same ones who supported fascism in Europe caused many to reevaluate capitalism. To left-leaning Americans, the recognition that fascist governments could potentially eradicate leftist dissent in Europe caused them to realize that the spread of fascism must be stopped, and *that* entailed “coming to terms with the Communist Party,” Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, p. 151.

<sup>62</sup> From 1928 until 1935, the Communist Party officials stipulated that all active Communists must work on behalf of initiating a global revolution against capitalism. This era is known as the Third Period. As fascism replaced capitalism as the most immediate threat, the revolutionary emphasis of the Third period began to wane. Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War*, p. 7. Harvey Klehr explains that the fear of a fascist Europe was so strong that the Soviet Union granted European Communists permission to unite with anti-fascist bourgeois groups, a combined effort that was particularly strong in France. This move went far beyond the previous “fronts” that Communists developed in different countries to encourage new recruits and morphed into the “Popular Front” that connected Communists with other vaguely left-of-center organizations in the fight to defeat fascism. In the United States, Communists used the concept of American exceptionalism to explain why they sought to work with New Deal liberals. Because the CPUSA was so small and the Socialist party had fallen on hard times, a united anti-fascist front solely between Communists and Socialists would have been ineffective at changing American conditions. Therefore, the CPUSA had to operate differently than its European counterparts and unite with the dominant political party. The fact that the Roosevelt Administration was also anti-fascist made this collaboration easier (pp. 170, 198).

global revolutions against capitalism, Party leaders directed Communists to work with others to fight the fascist menace. Labeled the Popular Front, the new policy enforced on all Communist parties in the world in 1935, united Communists and other progressive forces in a mutual effort to defeat fascism. Although the Popular Front was a Soviet dictate, it encouraged parties in different nations to turn to their national cultures and connect with their societies rather than operate as isolated, revolutionary forces. This policy change suited American circumstances well, especially since the prospects of a revolution were bleak and the forces of nationalism were strong.<sup>63</sup> Even the historian Harvey Klehr, who largely dismisses American Communists during the thirties as Stalinist stooges, recognizes that many social and political activists responded positively to the Party once Earl Browder, the Party leader, began efforts to Americanize it after adopting a Popular Front platform. Klehr notes the decline of revolutionary sentiment among Communists and their sympathizers by explaining that although many of these recruits wanted a socialist economy, they were more concerned with fighting against fascism abroad and for social and political *reform* at home.<sup>64</sup>

From 1935 to 1939 the Americanization of the CPUSA through the Popular Front was at full throttle. As Browder directed this effort on the macro level, younger Communists, many of whom came to the Party through the unemployed and student movements during the early thirties, led efforts to Americanize the Party on the local level. The Americanization of the Left

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<sup>63</sup> Even Earl Browder, the leader of the CPUSA at this time, had never been fully on board with the prior Third Period's policy of catastrophic revolution and the extent to which he embraced the coalition building of the Popular Front indicated where his interests, and those of his constituency, truly lay. Browder, in fact, was a clear example of the American radical tradition; though he became the leader of the Communist Party, he came from a line of American radicals—his father was an active Populist. Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), p. 8; Richard Reuss interview with Earl Browder (2 Dec. 1968), Folder: Related Research: Dick Reuss Interview Transcriptions, various, 1962-1971, in the Ronald D. Cohen Papers, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>64</sup> Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, p. 217. While communists tried to bury the hatchet with liberals and socialists, many of these figures did not respond in kind. After years of antipathy, many socialists refused to work with Communists during the thirties.

not only prompted Communists to work with liberals, but also enabled progressive social reformers to join forces with Communists. In 1938, the CPUSA referred to its program as a “Democratic” front that united all groups opposed to fascism, including workers, farmers, and middle-class liberals.<sup>65</sup> The Soviet Party under Stalin, however, was inherently *undemocratic*. Therefore, American communists had to work to live up to their new moniker and reach out to all citizens—urban and rural. One way they attempted to do so was by organizing programs specifically addressing the American situation, among which was, in Michael Denning’s words, “proletarian regionalism.” People who became active in this program included Howard Odum, the painter Thomas Hart Benton, and other regionalists who were never card-carrying Party members.<sup>66</sup>

Although Denning gives a nod to radical regionalists as members of the Left of the 1930s, he focuses almost exclusively on urban culture in his study of the cultural and artistic products that members of the Popular Front generated. This emphasis is reasonable, because, as some members of the Front later recollected, it was difficult to get a Party that was strongest in urban areas to connect to the countryside. Norman Cazden, a composer who was affiliated with a progressive children’s camp in the Catskills, Camp Woodland, recognized the difficulties of this reorientation:

I think Earl Browder at the time called for a turn towards rediscovering the American roots because he felt [the] left-wing movement, which was very largely centered in New York City was also very largely centered among recent immigrants rather than grassroots

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<sup>65</sup> Isserman, *Which Side Were You On*, p. 120; Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 133. Although Denning claims that these activists adopted the label “regionalist” to distinguish themselves from metropolitan Communists, it is more likely that they continued to use “regionalist” because of their affiliations with the regionalist movement. However, Denning is most likely correct in his claim that these regionalists used “proletarian” as a means to distinguish themselves from the reactionary Agrarians, whom many outside the movement considered to be regionalists as well.

America. And that while you don't want to discard or negate any of this, you also have to get into the mainstream part of the culture.<sup>67</sup>

Left-leaning revivalists, however, had just the solution for getting into the cultural mainstream: folk music. Revivalists believed that folk music helped them reach out to the wider public through popular culture. It enabled them to target people on the local level, as well, connecting to them via their cultural traditions.

Even before Communists adopted the Americanism of the Popular Front, they recognized the importance of addressing the people through art. In 1928, during the beginning of the radical Third Period, Communists adopted an art-is-a-weapon ideology that became especially popular among American Communists. CPUSA members soon began searching for a proletarian art that would be effective in reaching the people and it was through this search that Communists first became acquainted with folk music. Since folk music came from the people, and not the elite, it was both naturally democratic and most likely infused with class-consciousness, or so many Communists believed. Communists still looked for ways to use art as a tool in their programs even as the Third Period segued into the Popular Front. Activists turned to the artistic theory of socialist realism, which held that artistic products should be socially useful and grounded in real events. In order to qualify as "socially useful," artistic products had to educate and uplift the masses, and artists could only do that if they communicated in media that common people understood. Anything too abstract, esoteric, or incomprehensible was therefore to be rejected.<sup>68</sup>

Folk music fit in well with the CP's change in aesthetic policy, insofar as it was a cultural form that was simple and direct, and it spoke to concerns of "the People." In 1934, shortly before the beginning of the Popular Front, the Communist writer Mike Gold declared in the CP's

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<sup>67</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Norman Cazden, p. 16-17, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>68</sup> Richard and Joanne Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), pp. 59-61.

newspaper *The Daily Worker* that through folk music, Communists could both connect to the people and use the medium to achieve their goals: “Our movement must learn to SING. With song the marching workers find new courage. A song is really a slogan that has been emotionalized and put into a form where it catches the imagination of great masses of people, and sets them on fire.” Even though Gold was not a revivalist, he proceeded to praise singers that had become icons in the movement, such as Ella May Wiggins, a ballad composer who was active in the textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina during the late 1920s; Aunt Molly Jackson, who composed songs in response to the mining strikes in Harlan County, Kentucky; and Joe Hill, a legendary songwriter and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) before World War I, for rallying people to unionize through folk music.<sup>69</sup>

To facilitate the use of music for left-wing causes, musically-oriented activists formed the Composer’s Collective in February, 1932. Folklorist Richard Reuss described the organization as a “left-wing musician’s workshop” that composed and performed revolutionary songs in a modernist style, and established guidelines for others who were interested in writing songs for political action.<sup>70</sup> Charles Seeger, one of the founders of the Collective, later explained that the group developed from the same sense of immediacy that spurred most leftist activities of the era: “Oh, we felt urgency in those days...the economic system, the social system is going to hell over here. Music might be able to do something about it. Let’s see if we can try. We must try. The musician who doesn’t feel he must try is...no good.”<sup>71</sup>

The problem with the Collective, however, was that the music in which the composers were interested was avant-garde and almost entirely disconnected from what the rest of the

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Gold, “Change the World,” *Daily Worker*, (21 Apr. 1934), p. 7, folder: Anthology—Worker’s Chorus Movement ca. 1934-1940, box 5 in the Richard Reuss Papers, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

<sup>70</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Charles Seeger (6 June 1976), p. 25, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

country enjoyed. Some, such as Mike Gold, recognized this disjuncture, opining in the *Daily Worker*, “What song do the masses of America now sing? They sing ‘Old Black Joe’ and the semi-jazz things concocted by Tin Pan Alley. In the South they sing the old ballads. This is the reality; and to leap from that into Schoenberg seems to me a desertion of the masses.”<sup>72</sup> Charles Seeger also came to realize that they needed to reach the American people through their own music. As Seeger recollected, “the whole Socialist and Communist parties were city oriented, slum oriented and addressed to and springing from minorities of the population that didn’t know America...[T]he Communist Party, as I look back, didn’t know the United States. They didn’t know the country.” Seeger believed that, by ignoring the needs and interests of rural Americans, Party leaders and members of the Collective failed to account for a large sector of economically struggling Americans. Since the Collective was not going to the folk, Seeger tried to solve the problem by bringing the folk to the Collective. In 1933 he arranged for Aunt Molly Jackson to sing for the group, a get together that did not turn out well. Members disliked her musicianship and dismissed her songs as antiquated and irrelevant to present concerns.<sup>73</sup>

Although leftists could not get on board with white folk music, they did appreciate black folk traditions, even before the Americanization efforts of the Popular Front.<sup>74</sup> The CPUSA had been, at least rhetorically, one of the strongest advocates for black civil rights dating back to twenties. The Communist ‘Negro question’ policy stemmed from the Party’s interest in marginalized “national minorities.” In the United States, African Americans were the largest and most oppressed minority group. The nation’s highly racist legal and social practices illustrated

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Gold, “Change the World,” p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Charles Seeger, (6 June 1976), p. 32, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>74</sup> For more information on the CP’s antiracist activities in the South through their Birmingham headquarters see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Depression* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1990); and the autobiography of Angelo Herndon, a famed black southern Communist, *Let Me Live* (New York: Random House, 1937).



the double standards of the American “democratic” system. In 1928, the Party answered the “Negro question” by resolving that African Americans were “an oppressed ‘nation within a nation’” who had the right to “self-determination.” Therefore, for the revolution to be successful in America, Communists had to get blacks on board. To increase these chances, the Party organized rural sharecroppers, worked in southern cities, fought for the Scottsboro Nine, campaigned to defend Ethiopia from Italian imperialism, organized the National Negro Congress to register blacks into CIO unions, and launched a massive educational campaign to purge any instances of ‘white chauvinism’ from within the Party itself throughout the thirties.<sup>75</sup>

Some activists particularly sought to enhance the struggle for civil rights through black folk music. Lawrence Gellert, an organizer in the South, was perhaps the most famous contributor to this initiative. Gellert became the first song collector to recognize that southern black secular music contained bitter protests against oppressive conditions. Other collectors like John Lomax and Howard Odum believed that black music could grant sociological insight into the southern black community, but they often turned deaf ears on messages of overt protest in the music. Gellert, on the other hand, focused on these messages. Even though he dedicated much of his time collecting black folk music, Gellert never claimed to be a folklorist. Rather, he believed that black folk songs could be used as a “weapon” in the struggle for political rights and compiled work songs, chain gang songs, field hollers, and blues songs to help in the fight. Blues music was particularly important in Gellert’s view because the lyrics often expressed black rage against racial oppression and “capitalist exploitation.”<sup>76</sup> The Communist press largely agreed and

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<sup>75</sup> Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 76; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 11-19; Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, pp. 327-28, 333-40, 342; Isserman, *Which Side Were You On*, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> Steven Garabedian, “Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, “Negro Songs of Protest,” and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Mar. 2005), pp. 182, 192,

lauded Gellert's efforts. Even when the CPUSA abandoned the push for revolution during the Popular Front years, it still strongly advocated racial justice, and continued using folk music to aid that effort throughout the succeeding decade. By bringing folk music into efforts for political reform, Gellert was one of the earliest members of a political wing of the revival that developed during the following decade.

With the turn to the Popular Front, the Musician's Collective and many activists in the CPUSA changed their tune and soon embraced both black and white folk music in their effort to recruit more activists. Many leftists viewed folk music as a particularly viable tool because it was so malleable. Traditional songs could be reformulated to inspire real and potential comrades, and music was even more accessible than theater or dance because it was easier to perform and allowed for audience participation.<sup>77</sup> The Communists' approach to using folk music as a weapon often reflected the regional cultures and local circumstances where the Party organized. The major regional difference lay between northern, urban, middle-class leftists who used folk music to articulate their hatred of the capitalist system and fight for reform on a national and international scale, and the southern, working-class activists whose radicalism stemmed from personal experiences and who used music to change regional conditions for rural poor whites and

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196-98. Gellert began collecting black music in Tryon, North Carolina, to advance the black freedom struggle. He claimed that because he worked for civil rights through the CPUSA, many blacks felt more comfortable around him and were more willing to reveal their protest songs to him—a situation that did not exist for either Lomax or Odum. Gellert later came under fire for fabricating his collection because he did not record the names of his informants. However, given the racial situation in the South during the thirties, Gellert explained that he refrained from naming his informants because doing so would have been the equivalent of handing them a death sentence.

<sup>77</sup> The I.W.W. proved this theory through their reformulations of traditional hymns into calls for union organizations. One classic example is the song "The Preacher and the Slave," that Joe Hill, one of the more famous I.W.W. lyricists, parodied from the hymn "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."

blacks. Although regional groups equally despised the class system and warned about the “excesses of capitalism,” they arrived at their conclusions from very different experiences.<sup>78</sup>

Long before northern left-wing composers realized that reaching out to the American public through atonal music was not the best approach, southern radicals recognized that the best way to connect to the people was through their own traditions and group experiences. One regional organization that operated on this principle was Commonwealth College in Arkansas. Originally founded by Debsian socialists in the early twenties, Commonwealth was a labor school designed to educate working people. In 1931 Lucien Koch, a Communist sympathizer, became director of the college. Shortly thereafter the last of the socialists left, which allowed him to align the school with Communist causes. Following his self-proclaimed motto that ‘Commonwealth is not an institution, it is a movement,’ Koch instructed students to conduct “fieldwork” that included joining strikes, creating radical groups, and serving as union organizers.<sup>79</sup> After Koch left during the mid-thirties, Claude Williams, a radical Presbyterian minister from Arkansas, took over and continued in the radical vein that Koch established. Williams had been active in efforts to bring unions to the South—he was one of the original members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union—and he recognized the need to approach the people through their own cultural forms in order to achieve any success. Since Williams worked in the Bible Belt, he often approached the people through religion—changing the words of popular biblical stories and well-known hymns to suit contemporary circumstances.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, pp. xii, 21, 40, 57. Though some Communists used folk music to push their agendas, Reuss discounts the *anti-communists*’ charge that their interest in folk music was part of an elaborate conspiracy. Rather, their decision to use folk music was based on “aesthetic” grounds (p. 104).

<sup>79</sup> William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), pp. 15-16, 133-34, 145.

<sup>80</sup> Claude Williams was connected to a coterie of southerners such as Myles and Zilphia Horton, who started the Highlander Folk School, and with Don West, a radical poet, who worked for labor and civil rights in the South beginning in the thirties and also contributed to the founding of Highlander. Williams in particular recognized the

In his history of Commonwealth College, William Cobb argues that in many respects Commonwealth was an abysmal failure—the labor movement that the “Commoners” hoped to spark in the region never came to fruition and the school was shut down in 1940 due to its affiliations with the CP. However, the school was successful at transforming the lives of its members—students and teachers.<sup>81</sup> Lee Hays, an Arkansas native who began directing labor drama at Commonwealth in 1938, combined his love of southern folk music with a zeal for social and political activism. While Hays had developed an interest in socialist politics at an early age, the Depression heightened his political awareness, as it did for many activists:

I think it was what I saw of inequality during the Depression that began to bear down on my conscious and my consciousness. I became aware of the plight of the Dust Bowl refugees and the coal miners first through the work of the great American photographers who went out and photographed the face of America during the 30s, when for the first time America got a good look at itself.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to these experiences, Claude Williams significantly influenced Hays’ political views and activist tactics. Williams taught Hays the tradition of changing words to traditional songs, and introduced him to such union classics as “We Shall Not be Moved,” “Roll the Union On,” “Union Train,” and traditional regional songs that Hays brought with him when he relocated to New York City in 1940. The historian Robert Koppelman claims that “long before Hays ever heard the words ‘Popular Front’...his work with Claude Williams and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union had combined the indigenous culture of his native South with activity aimed at mobilizing the rural poor.”<sup>83</sup>

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need to radicalize religion in order to get the people on board. For this reason, he established the People’s Institute of Applied Religion to educate ministers, with the intention for them to spread the message to their congregations. For more biographical information on Williams see Cedric Belfrage, *A Faith Free to the People* (New York: Dryden Press, 1944).

<sup>81</sup> Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South*, p. 214.

<sup>82</sup> “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*”: *The Writings of Lee Hays*, Robert S. Koppelman, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 56.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 5, 12, 14-15, 18. Throughout the introduction to the book, Koppelman argues that Hays came from a radical tradition indigenous to America. He even argues that the labor movement was the “basic paradigm” for activists like

Hays was not the only one who traveled this path. Another member of the southern radical scene who experienced a political awakening through Commonwealth College was Agnes “Sis” Cunningham. Cunningham grew up in Oklahoma and became involved in political activities during the thirties when she participated in Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union activities, and helped local organizing drives in Oklahoma to get WPA jobs for more people. With her background in music and music education (she had previously worked as a music teacher), Cunningham joined the Red Dust Players, a group of actors in Oklahoma who traveled off the state’s beaten paths to perform plays on contemporary conditions during the mid-thirties. As a more radical “Living Newspaper” of the Federal Theater Project (FTP), the Red Dust Players presented scenarios that the rural farmers would understand, such as bank companies trying to foreclose farms (presented as a love story with the “land” portrayed as a damsel in distress, the “mortgage” as the evil villain trying to steal her away and finally, the “union” as the hero who saves her and the day). They performed at schools, in the open air, and on farmers’ porches in towns the names of which even the traveling FTP troops forgot.<sup>84</sup>

Even more than John Lomax before them, Cunningham and Hays were of the folk. They learned from other southern radicals the importance of reaching people through their own traditions: musical, social, and religious. They carried both this organizing tactic and the folk

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Hays and his fellow folk revivalists, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. By arguing this, Koppelman is trying to rescue Hays and other revivalists from the charges of being “Communist dupes” that anti-communist historians like Harvey Klehr and Ronald Radosh have leveled against them. While it is clear that Hays and others were clearly pushed to the Left by American circumstances, to argue that they were affiliated with leftist organizations is not to say they were Stalinists. They came to the Left via their own experiences and Popular Front organizations that supported the labor movement and civil rights struggles—causes with which they were also aligned.

<sup>84</sup> Agnes “Sis” Cunningham and Gordon Friesen, *Red Dust and Broadside: A Joint Autobiography*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 182-194. The FTP was the theater branch of the WPA Federal One arts programs. Divided up into regional groups, the FTP units operated as traveling theater companies, bringing theatrical productions to people who otherwise would not have the opportunity to experience live performance. The Living Newspapers were the most controversial FTP products—they were sketches based on current events, plays that the FTP members created to inform the audience on current events, many of which were rife with political and social commentary.

songs from their regions with them when they relocated to New York City. Another musician who also brought regional music from the South and Midwest to New York City was Woody Guthrie. Despite the fact that he hailed from a family that shuttled between poverty and middle-class status, Guthrie became the symbol of the itinerant, down-and-out everyman of the Depression era. During the thirties, Guthrie traveled extensively across the South and West, often leaving his young family for large stretches of time, while observing the effects of the Depression. Guthrie is especially known for his songs about the Midwestern exodus to California during the dustbowl. Though Guthrie's folksy accent, dress, and mannerisms were more affected than authentic, to many folk music enthusiasts, especially in the later years of the revival, he epitomized the American rural folk.

Guthrie's folk style was not so effortless as it outwardly appeared; rather, it was a deliberately politicized portrayal of the American folk. Richard Reuss recognizes that the crisis of the Depression and Guthrie's interactions with suffering Americans pushed him to the Left: "It was the radical gospel of the New Deal era that filled his spiritual void and elevated his hillbilly persona to quite another plane of social commentary," which focused on poverty, labor strife, and civil rights.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Guthrie became active in communist circles because he saw Leftist activists as the only ones who truly fought for the downtrodden and marginalized populations in the United States. At the same time, he recognized that affiliations with the Left had negative consequences:

If your work gets labeled [sic] as communist or even communist[ic] or even as radically leaning in the general direction of bolshevism, then, of course, you are black balled, black

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<sup>85</sup> Richard Reuss, "Woody Guthrie and His Folk Tradition," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 83, No. 329 (Jul-Sept. 1970), p. 281. Reuss wrote this as a challenge to folklorists like Ellen Stekert and John Greenway who argued that Communists adopted and corrupted Guthrie for their own ends.

listed, chalked up as a revolutionary bomb thrower, and you invite the whole weight of the capitalist machine to be thrown against you.<sup>86</sup>

Moses Asch, who had a long professional and personal relationship with Guthrie, characterized Guthrie as believing in “international communism,” meaning that “everybody has a share in everything.”<sup>87</sup> Guthrie certainly used folk music as a call to fight for people’s rights.

Throughout the 1940s, Guthrie released albums with songs about various leftist causes with the help of Moses Asch. These included an album that Asch commissioned him to write about the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, a leftist cause celebre, in 1945, and *Struggle: Documentary #1*. This album originally consisted of six songs, including “Pretty Boy Floyd,” a Robin Hood portrayal of the infamous outlaw; “Buffalo Skinners,” about mistreated workers in the nineteenth century; “Ludlow Massacre,” about the killing of union members and their families during the 1913 Colorado Coal Strike; and “1913 Massacre,” about the deaths of seventy-three members of mining families who were on strike in Calumet, Michigan, when someone falsely yelled “fire” during a union Christmas gathering. Guthrie wanted *Struggle* to be one of a series of albums depicting working people’s struggles and spreading the word about injustice.<sup>88</sup> This album summarized Guthrie’s views about his own music and the purpose of folk music in general, which he described in a letter to Asch: “Every folk song that I know tells how to fix something in

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<sup>86</sup> Woody Guthrie letter to Moses Asch (2 Jan. 1946), p. 1, Folder: Asch Project—Woody Guthrie: Letters From Woody to Moe, Box: 3 GS-505, Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

<sup>87</sup> “Long Ways to Travel: Previously Unissued songs By Woody Guthrie” Compiled and Annotated by Guy Logsdon and Jeff Place, p. 22 in Folder: CFCH Woody Guthrie (file 1), in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

<sup>88</sup> Liner notes to Folkways Record Album FA 2485 “Struggle” Woody Guthrie, 1976 FR&SC, p. 2, Folder: 40025: Woody Guthrie in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Asch issued six of the songs in 1946, but he did not release the album in its entirety until 1976.

this world to make it better, tells what is wrong with it, and what we've got to do to fix it better. If the song does not do this, then it is no more of a folk song than I am a movie scout.”<sup>89</sup>

One of the primary people responsible for opening leftists circles to the songs that Guthrie and others were singing was Alan Lomax. As Popular Front activists mobilized to defeat fascism, they began to ideologically “embrace” democracy in an effort to gain more allies. This turn opened the door for leftist sympathizers like Lomax to promote folk music as the ultimate example of both a democratic and proletarian tradition. Reuss summed up Lomax’s position as a belief that American folk music was both radical and natively American, which rendered it “the true “people’s” music of the United States.” As such, it was part of the American democratic heritage, to which Lomax “could identify simultaneously as citizen and political radical.”<sup>90</sup>

While Lomax embodied the ethos of the Popular Front, he remained embedded in the New Deal establishment, working for the Archive of American Folk Song, and then the Office of War Information during the war. Because the Roosevelt Administration supported the rhetoric of democracy that pervaded wartime propaganda campaigns, Lomax had an easy time moving between leftist and liberal circles. Lomax emerged on the political stage in 1948 when he became active in Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party presidential campaign. During the early forties, however, while he supported labor and civil rights, he kept his political views quiet. Many in his revival cohort, including Guthrie, Hays, Cunningham, Pete Seeger and even his sister, Bess Lomax, did not share his political reticence. Instead, they loudly proclaimed their political views and affiliations through music—while Lomax encouraged them mostly from the sidelines.

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<sup>89</sup> Woody Guthrie letter to Moses Asch (2 Jan. 1946), p. 3 in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

<sup>90</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, pp. 104, 116, 122, 128.



Musical revivalists like Guthrie, Cunningham, Hays, Pete Seeger, and even Alan Lomax encouraged activists to use folk music in efforts to generate political and social reform. Their efforts were mostly successful with political activists who already had a proclivity for southern-style folk music or who became active in the revival, rather than for leftists as a whole. Many Communist organizers could not get on board with rural folk music, the kind that these musicians learned from rural singers like Aunt Molly Jackson, and continued to prefer formal music or the more familiar tunes of Tin Pan Ally. While some revivalists continued to focus primarily on rural traditions, others solved this disjuncture by composing music that, while still maintaining the *spirit* of rural folk music, addressed the more urban-oriented activists' tastes.

Earl Robinson, a classically trained musician, was one of the key left-wing revivalists who bridged the world of rural folk music and mainstream pop music. Robinson began his political career in the Composer's Collective in the early 1930s, working alongside Charles Seeger and composers such as Aaron Copland. Working in collaboration with lyricist John Latouche, Robinson composed the epic musical tribute to the common American, *Ballad for Americans* for a *Sing For Your Supper*, a Federal Theater Project program. In 1939, a year after *Ballad* first debuted, Paul Robeson, the famed concert singer and Communist, performed the piece on CBS radio. Robeson's performance received rave reviews and launched the piece into mainstream American music.

*Ballad for Americans* traces the popular history of the United States through iconic moments—the Revolution, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and the Great Depression—from the perspective of the “everybody who is nobody,” the “nobody who's everybody,” and the

“‘etceteras’ and the ‘and so forths’ who do the work.”<sup>91</sup> In addition to celebrating the working-class, Robinson and Latouche define Americans as a multitude of ethnicities and religions, thus couching their Americanism in cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic pluralism. It also reflected the Popular Front’s emphasis on racial equality through the line: “A man in white skin can never be free while his black brother is in slavery.” Besides promoting civil rights, *Ballad for Americans* also embodied Denning’s notion of “proletarian regionalism” by referencing different regions across the United States, deliberately bringing them together into the national whole. Robinson’s radical regionalism came across even stronger in another, though far less popular, cantata called *Lonesome Train* that he co-wrote with Millard Lampell in 1942. *Lonesome Train* depicts a fictional train trip that carried Abraham Lincoln’s casket across the various regions across the country. In addition to depicting geographical diversity that regionalists emphasized, *Lonesome Train* incorporates illustrations of cultural pluralism by describing “Lincoln’s people” as “A Brooklyn blacksmith, a Pittsburgh preacher / A small-town tailor, a back-woods teacher...A Buffalo-hunter telling a story / Out of the Oregon territory” among others. Robinson and Lampell maintained their radical edge by using language that, as Robert Cantwell notes, was reminiscent of the *Communist Manifesto*: “While there are whips and chains and men to use them, there will be no peace!”<sup>92</sup>

Robinson and the other musicians of the revival solidified the relationship between folk music and left-wing causes by the early 1940s—a relationship that would last for the duration of the movement. While southern musicians like Guthrie, Hays, and Cunningham bridged the gap between regional variations of activist culture—bringing southern music into northern

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<sup>91</sup> Earl Robinson and John Latouche, *Ballad for Americans*, record album (New York: Vanguard VRS-9193, 1940, 1976).

<sup>92</sup> Earl Robinson and Millard Lampell, *The Lonesome Train*, record album (New York: Decca DL 9065, 1945); Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 105-106, 109.

causes—Robinson helped lead activists who favored popular music to appreciate the themes of folk music. Robinson also helped alter popular perceptions of folk music, achieving recognition that the category of folk music included both music that came from “the people,” and topical music that was written for “the people,” that was popular in Communist circles. They popularized the idea that folk music was an important tool in the struggles for political, social, and economic change and continued in this effort in the postwar years via a collection of left-wing musicians called People’s Songs. Indeed, various activists from the post WWII era up through the 1960s turned to the type of folk music the New Deal and Popular Front revivalists popularized to promote political and social reform.

### **Conclusion**

The folk music revival emerged during the 1930s as public folklorists, musical entrepreneurs, musicians, and folk music enthusiasts began to coalesce as a definable community. Situated in the cultural milieu and political atmosphere of the Depression, these figures belonged to a network of social and cultural workers who sought to devise ways to help Americans to survive the economic and psychological devastation of the Depression, and to reform the nation in the process. Believing that folk music was an intrinsic part of both contemporary life and the nation’s cultural past, the early revivalists argued that folk music traditions were part of the ‘usable past’ that Depression-era cultural leaders sought to find. The revivalists viewed folk music as a major, if not *the* major, facet of an authentically national culture because it came from American communities—it spoke to the experiences and concerns of all types of Americans.

By adopting aspects of regionalism, cultural pluralism, and cosmopolitanism, and by using experiences to define the nation and its people, early revivalists established that naturalized Americans were as much a part of the nation's "folk" as native-born citizens. In so doing, they rejected the belief that other identities (e.g. racial, ethnic, and religious) barred citizens from participating fully in the national community. Now, people who partook in westward expansion, fought in national wars, labored in regional occupations, and even emigrated from other countries to begin new lives in the United States were *Americans* because they experienced uniquely national events and contributed to the country's development. Furthermore, folk music illustrated the nation's democratic character because, as songs passed down from one generation to another, all singers had a hand in adapting them to suit their own tastes and needs. The revivalists brought their interpretations of the music to the larger public, not only to encourage the rest of the country to appreciate, protect, and revive these musical traditions, but also to accept their version of American identity that was grounded in democracy—a civic ideal that, in their view, was rooted in an acceptance and appreciation of cultural and social difference. While these ideas were vague at first, the revivalists refined them over the course of the decade and, in so doing, established an understanding of folk music and American identity that guided the movement through the next three decades.

In a populist era, when images of, and references to, "the People" abounded, the revivalists turned their attention to the singers of folk songs as much as the music itself and presented socially and economically disadvantaged citizens—native and immigrant—as their examples of the American people. The musicians of the revival also worked to incorporate the struggles of the American people into their music, in much the same way that many writers of the era did in their literature. Like the writers of Depression-era America, the revivalists were

cultural brokers—middlemen between folk culture and the mainstream public. Although they tried to adhere to standards of authenticity, they tailored the music they presented to accommodate the type of Americanism that they believed it represented, weeding out those elements, such as racist comment, that they deemed unsuitable. Whether they were New Deal liberals or Popular Front communists, the revivalists were deeply concerned with larger social and political issues. Folk music was not just a cultural form that needed to be preserved for posterity, but was a means for teaching Americans to appreciate their democratic heritage, and thus to put that idea into practice. Over time, the revivalists would hone their programs and their message to address more specific programs of activism, but it was during the Depression era that they forged connections between folk music, nationalism, and domestic reform—connections that would characterize the revival for the rest of its duration.

While they all participated in forming the folk music revival, the revivalists of the 1930s did not all approach folk music in the same way. Traditionalists like Sarah Gertrude Knott and John Lomax viewed folk music as cultural traditions from a bygone era. Functionalist folklorists like Botkin and Alan Lomax recognized that, though rooted in the past, folk music remained culturally relevant for the communities that maintained the traditions. Left-wing revivalists like Charles Seeger and Lawrence Gellert interpreted folk music as a grass-roots cultural form that came from the people and was written for the people, such that it could be used in “people’s” struggles for social and political rights. Despite the revivalists’ various political views and different opinions regarding the nature of authentic folk music, they all shared an understanding of Americanism that grounded the nation’s identity in cultural pluralism and political democracy. By the end of the decade, these folklorists, musicians, and collectors had turned a general interest in American folk music into a social movement. The folk music revival had officially begun.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PEOPLE'S WAR

The culture of the New Deal and the Popular Front began to wane even before the thirties came to a close. Mounting conservative opposition slashed funding for the arts projects of Federal One, and the Popular Front's grand coalition of anti-fascists ended with the Molotov-Von Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, leaving Communist and left-wing cultural workers in political limbo. The ability to reach the American public became particularly challenging for these cultural workers as the larger political and cultural movements of which they were part began to collapse around them. The end of the movements that grew out of the Depression era did not, however, stymie the revivalists who learned to adjust their message and adapt their work to suit circumstances that developed from a new crisis: the Second World War.

While many leftist revivalists initially opposed America's entry into another international war, the end of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1941 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor a few months later caused even skeptics to rally behind the war effort. The revivalists who had survived the political shifts of the late thirties altered their programs to suit the new political and cultural climate. Still envisioning the nation as a cultural and political democracy, the revivalists were able to employ the new wartime rhetoric, permeated as it was with the language of democratic ideals, cultural pluralism, and tolerance, to further validate their beliefs and programs. Although some of the venues changed, the message that the revivalists promoted, and the music that they used to spread that message, remained the same. In their effort to garner a public audience, revivalists began employing new media such as radio and recording technology, and tailoring their

programs to reach both adult and youth audiences. By adapting to political and social shifts, the revivalists managed to sustain the movement through the wartime years, when they found a receptive audience, and even into the postwar years, despite mounting political opposition.

### **Making America Safe for Democracy**

In 1939, as war spread across Europe, the philosopher, educational theorist, and public intellectual John Dewey called for Americans to turn to their democratic heritage as a source of strength against the threat of European totalitarianism. In his study *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey championed democracy because it was a system in which all could participate; the pragmatic participation inherent in democracy gave the system its egalitarian quality. Dewey noted that all aspects of a democratic society served to secure and enhance its egalitarian character.

Unfortunately, Dewey argued, many political and social figures, “even those who call themselves good democrats,” ignored the importance of cultural products for enhancing democracy, and he hoped that they would change their minds in light of how fascist countries had begun to operate:

[W]orks of art once brought into existence are the most compelling of the means of communication by which emotions are stirred and opinions are formed. The theater, the movie and music hall, even the picture gallery, eloquence, popular parades, common sports and recreative agencies, have all brought under regulation as part of the propaganda agencies by which a dictatorship is kept in power without being regarded by the masses as oppressive.

Dewey recognized that these cultural sources were politically important because they played to citizens’ “emotions and imagination,” which he considered to be “potent in shaping public sentiment and opinion.” One cultural form that Dewey recognized as a particularly strong tool in influencing public opinion was music. “Long before the present crisis came into being,” Dewey noted, “there was a saying that if one could control the songs of a nation, one need not care who

made its laws.”<sup>1</sup> Many revivalists shared this belief; on the eve of America’s entry into WWII they began mobilizing to bring folk music into wartime propaganda efforts.

Near the close of the thirties, writes Benjamin Filene, “the celebration of the marginal... had become the basis for a new style of patriotism celebrating America. The folk became figures, not as failures or malcontents, but as embodiments of America’s strength through diversity.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the populist spirit of the New Deal era that sought a usable past in the traditions of diverse Americans now became a way to unify a nation on the brink of war. Instead of the forced conformity of 100% Americanism during the WWI era, government officials, cultural and social leaders, and propagandists tried to rally the nation together under a banner of diversity. Now, because of this broader shift towards an inclusive nationalism, cultural differences were not only accepted, but *celebrated* as defining American nationality. Propagandists pushed the notion that though Americans practiced different traditions, they all came together in a democratic society, united by the civic ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence and codified in the Constitution. The work that folk revivalists began in the thirties—their inclusion of ethnic, racial, and regional diversity in depictions of the American people—practically became national policy.

During the war years many folk revivalists began arguing that folk music could help Americans survive the new crisis much as these musical traditions possibly helped them through the Depression years. Folk songs were inherently democratic, according to the revivalists, because they were songs that the people created and amended over time in response to their own experiences. As such, this music could be infused into mainstream culture to help the American people sustain their commitment to their democratic national heritage. The revivalists originally promoted this argument during the Depression, but they easily adapted it to rally Americans to

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1939), pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, p. 133.



support a war that was cast in ideological terms. According to the wartime rhetoric, the Allied Powers were engaged in a battle against the totalitarian “Axis of Evil,” a battle in which the very survival of democracy was at stake. This scenario precipitated what historian Philip Gleason labels the “democratic revival,” a moment in which democracy became the catchall signifier of American identity. During the war, cultural, social, and political leaders crafted an ideology of democracy that became the essence of American nationalism. Gleason argues that the democratic ideal provided normative guidelines for American society as a whole. “Democracy” became synonymous with “America.” Even as Americans did not live up to their democratic creed, as evidenced by an entrenched racial discrimination, they nevertheless embraced its principles.<sup>3</sup> Especially once war broke out in Europe, varied religious and civic groups accelerated efforts to combat prejudice, promote diversity, and thus make American democracy more inclusive of marginalized groups. More than simply generating an appreciation of American diversity, the war sparked an ideological renaissance centering on the values to which Americans committed themselves. This “ideological revival” promoted a resurgence of assimilation tendencies, but along civic rather than ethnic/racial lines. Now, cultural leaders pushed an “ideological consensus” that promoted the civic ideals of political democracy, social tolerance, and an appreciation of cultural diversity as quintessentially American characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

Gleason fails to recognize, however, that this surge of interest in democracy and diversity was really an extension of ideas of Americanism that revivalists and other political progressives developed during the Depression era. The major factor that enabled public leaders to segue from

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<sup>3</sup> The Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal argued in his 1944 publication *An America Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* that even the most socially regressive racist still believed in the democratic civic creed and that these ideals made it possible to reform American racial views. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 762-63.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Gleason, “WWII and the Development of American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 36. No. 3, (1984), pp. 344, 352-353.

New Deal democratic populism to pro-diversity propaganda after the United States entered WWII was the political character of the enemy. In her study of the “unifying national ideology” that developed during the mid-twentieth century, an ideology labeled “the American Way,” Wendy Wall explains that several “American opinion molders equated totalitarianism with enforced homogeneity and came to see diversity as a defining feature of democracy.” Wall defines the “American Way” as “the ability of diverse individuals to live together harmoniously.” This type of civic-ideal consensus celebrated cultural and ethnic differences in the United States as a quality that distinguished American-style democracy from totalitarian fascism. Yet, pursuit of an inclusive notion of national identity also resulted from the fear that entrenched cultural differences would eventually lead to violent factionalism—a Balkanization of America. To thwart this, advocates of cultural democracy argued that the nation needed to gather its diverse citizenry under a common umbrella of civic consensus.<sup>5</sup> As long as all United States citizens believed in the same “universally” American ideals of democracy and liberty, then they could practice any cultural traditions they wanted and still be accepted as good citizens.

On the eve of America’s entry into the war, many academics, public intellectuals, civic leaders, and cultural workers joined the effort to inculcate this celebration of diversity in public life. Regionalists in particular shifted their rhetoric from advocating social policy reforms to arguing that regionalism could help unite diverse citizens—and thus save American democracy.

As early as 1938, Howard Odum proclaimed:

The theme of American regionalism is, after all, essentially that of a great American nation, the land and the people, in whose continuity and unity of development, through a fine equilibrium of geographic, cultural, and historical factors, must be found not only the

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 7, 68; Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*, p. 177.

testing grounds of American democracy but, according to many observers, the hope of western civilization.<sup>6</sup>

By adopting a regionalist approach, which involved conveying messages via cultural media specific to local populations, the government could both reach more people and spread messages more effectively. Folk revivalists shared this opinion, and some used the regionalists' logic to justify their own programs. In 1942 Alan Lomax appealed to both regionalism and the celebration of 'the People' that pervaded public rhetoric during the New Deal and WWII years to explain the importance of his folk-music activities: "Since this is a people's war, it is essential that, so far as possible, information about the war should be distributed equally to all groups of people." The "people" with whom he was concerned comprised "a large body of the American public that is not sufficiently literate or sufficiently accustomed to reading to be reached through the press." A large percent of these people also did not have access to national organizations or media: "lumped together" they constituted "the underprivileged, the undereducated, the isolated and certain racial and national minorities, [which] make up what the social scientist, when he is thinking in cultural terms, calls the 'folk.'" Lomax argued that American folk groups had their own forms of cultural expression that they conveyed through folk music, tales, stories, religious services and speech patterns, all of which was "orally transmitted and from being chewed over thoroughly by the group comes to express the group, stylistically as well as ideologically." Therefore, communication officials must channel information through these forms of cultural expression "in order that folk groups may be reached with war information and with the ideals and principles of their people's war."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*, p. 338.

Educating Americans about the war according to this regionalist scheme had larger social implications as well. In 1943, shortly after he joined the Office of War Information, Lomax wrote to William Lewis, in which he recounted how they had discussed certain regional concerns, such as racial tension in the South. Lomax knew southern racism well and he also realized how detrimental it could be for American unity, as he wrote: “We spoke of the urgent necessity of reaching rural Negroes and whites with the facts about the war, not only in order to keep them informed, but also in an attempt to undercut the race issue by raising the more important issues of the war. We agreed that getting to these groups at their own level, in their language and through their own media—local radio programs, rural churches, etc.—was the best way to go about the job...”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the war years, Lomax also sought to use folk music in propaganda campaigns designed to raise morale among different ethnic, racial and regional groups. Lomax asserted that the mission for the Archive of American Folk Song during the war, and his temporary work within it, was to: “1) Preserve our heritage of pioneer democratic oral music while there still is time. 2) Operate in and through minorities and folk communities in the field of morale.” During his trip to the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1942, Lomax came to believe that “a sturdy and aggressive folk-lore program could become crucial for morale work,” a view that resulted from his interactions with public school teachers, musicians, professors at Fisk, and “Negroes and people in the minority field” in general. T.E. Jones, the president of Fisk University, suggested incorporating black folk singers from Nashville into U.S.O. camp programs, as one

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*, p. 368. In the letter, Lomax complained that members of OWI did not believe that it was not their job to reach “those Americans who are isolated by race or nationality or geography or language or lack of education or poverty.” Rather, Lomax believed that “in order to win this war and make a decent peace, *all* the people must be kept well informed.” Furthermore, he argued that neglecting poorer Americans, especially white southerners, would have dangerous consequences, for “[t]hese are the folks who listen to anti-Semitic propaganda, who, if we leave them alone, follow the lead of Negro-baiters, and who are strongly influenced by Fascist rumors.”

way of accomplishing this goal.<sup>9</sup> Another of Lomax's suggestions entailed using materials in the Archive of American Folk Song to generate songbooks for military training camps:

The AAFS can draw upon its large stock of tunes and songs for material for song books for camps. These song books may be designed according to the needs of the regions in which the camps are located, according to the racial and occupational make-up of the camps. I feel, for example that where any large group of second-generation Polish conscripts are located, Polish songs should be sung. The same for Negro, Mexican, Greek, Finnish, etc. conscript groups.<sup>10</sup>

Like other regionalists, Lomax believed that reaching out to first generation and naturalized American soldiers through musical traditions that were prevalent in their local communities would make them feel more welcome in their military units and thus more willing go to war on behalf of the United States. In so doing, Lomax fit into a larger trend of folk revivalists who combined regionalism with cultural pluralism to accomplish the goal of uniting Americans during a time of war.

To Lomax and other progressive revivalists, folk music was particularly helpful in rallying the nation under a banner of democracy because it was a grassroots cultural form. As products of oral tradition, folk songs were always open to revision. This indefinite revisability coupled with its collaborative nature set folk music in marked contrast to the commercial music that Tin Pan Alley concocted and sold to the masses. Many revivalists not only romanticized the allegedly democratic process of folk music, but they also idealized folk communities as microcosmic democratic societies. In *Our Singing Country*, a collection of songs that Alan Lomax co-published with his father in 1941, Lomax wrote:

The American Singer has been concerned with the themes close to his everyday experience, with the emotions of ordinary men and women who are fighting for freedom and for living in a violent new world. His songs have been strongly rooted in his life and

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 318.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

have functioned there as enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence, hunger, and honest comradeship of democracy.<sup>11</sup>

If democratic unity was an important goal for which to strive, then folk music provided a way to achieve that goal, at least in the cultural arena.

To educate the public on the ideological issues embedded in the war and raise civilian morale, Lomax designed radio shows that used folk culture while he worked for the Office of War Information. In one program that he wrote and produced for the BBC, Lomax “toured” the Lower East Side in New York City, narrating to the listeners what and whom he encountered along the way. The people he stopped to “interview” were mostly Italian and Jewish and they explained their views on the war, the war effort, how they contributed to that effort, and how they felt about where they lived. At one point, a Mrs. Cucco explained that “Italians, Jewish, Irish, Negroes—all the same here. My name’s Cucco, your’s Cohen, your’s Fennessy—we’re all alike, 100% Americans.” Later, a young woman named Sylvia, newly married with a baby, reflected on her life and the prospects for her daughter:

I can’t wait for her to grow up, to see what she’s gonna be like. I want her to have better things than I had—not money and clothes and stuff like that—but a feeling of security, of belonging. I’d like to see all the people I know or don’t know with the same things.

After this, Harold, a local, fast-talking lawyer, drove home the point that America’s strength lay in cultural diversity and the promise of democracy:

The different groups that came to America to escape persecution and take part in the growth of a new nation. They became imbued with self-respect. They came to believe in their own dignity. They know they’re free men, and that’s why they make the best fighters in the world...We’ve learned to live together down here, respect each others’ rights and work for the good of the community...After all no bars of race, nationality, class or creed down here...Mark you, today, there’s only one religion. The religion of freedom.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Lomax and John Lomax, *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Lomax BBC radio show script (undated), pp. 14, 17, in Folder: 1/3 Various Radio Scripts, Box 4.01.15, Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Here, Lomax chose one of the most ethnically diverse urban areas to illustrate the harmonious nature of the pluralist American society. American society, however, was hardly ever cohesive, especially during the war—as evidenced by the rise of race riots in urban centers such as Detroit and Los Angeles—but Lomax’s wartime programs were designed to rally support for the war not to provide a realistic view of American life.<sup>13</sup>

By employing the radio to unite Americans during the war, Lomax resorted to a tactic that had been used to generate national unity since the early 1930s. At the beginning of the Depression era, many civic and cultural leaders viewed radio as a “social space” that could bring Americans together during a period of economic and social instability. Anning S. Prall, the first chief commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission, announced in 1936 during a live radio broadcast that the medium had become a public forum that united Americans through common education, entertainment, music and theater and thus served as a powerful determinant of national culture and identity. Public intellectuals, business leaders, and educators largely agreed. Historians Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio maintain that “[t]here was something about radio waves and their...mobility across social boundaries that served as an ideal symbol for national togetherness.” Furthermore, Hilmes argues that the “tens of thousands” of listeners faithfully tuning into a specific program at a designated time generated a communal experience akin to Benedict Anderson’s notion of the national imagined community.<sup>14</sup> Some commentators

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<sup>13</sup> In this program Lomax emphasized the patriotism of immigrant groups. In so doing, he fit well with other civic nationalists who not only celebrated cultural diversity as the source of America’s strength as a nation, but also commended the deep patriotism of naturalized citizens to contradict the anti-immigrant arguments of racialist nationalists. Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, historian Lizabeth Cohen argues, although national radio programming helped erode ethnic identities through mainstream programs, it did augment class identities because a sizable portion of the radio listening audience was comprised of working-class Americans and thus radio stations began catering to their tastes, a situation that helped generate a more national, though class-based, identity for many listeners. On the other hand, Hilmes cites that commercial radio was able to generate a shared sentiment of national unity precisely because it operated on a national, rather than strictly local, scale and this national listening community trumped other economic

during the thirties even claimed that the commercial nature of the national radio system served to protect American diversity and democracy. In 1939 David Sarnoff, the president of the Radio Corporation of America and chairman of NBC, stated that American commercial radio ensured that “the broadcasting network shall serve the many and not cater only to the few, that its efforts shall always be directed to bring the greatest good to the greatest number.” Radio was perhaps the most democratic media service in the United States because, according to Sarnoff,

Education of the masses—as well as of the leaders—is one of the bulwarks of our democracy. Radio is a mass medium. It reaches both the rich and the poor. It reaches the leaders, and the led. It reaches the literate, and those who cannot read. It brings the treasures of education to all alike. In fact, the richest man in the world cannot buy for himself what the poorest man gets free by radio.<sup>15</sup>

Lomax shared this view and tried to use radio to reach the public during his tenure at the AAFS when, in addition to creating his own radio programs, he participated in a major governmental radio initiative.

As the war escalated, the Library of Congress launched the Radio Research Project (RRP). Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in conjunction with the Library, the RRP consisted of a series of popular, educational radio broadcasts designed to thwart the spread of fascism in the United States. By weaving together snippets of local and national cultural material housed in the Library into documentaries, the project leaders aimed “to exhibit to listeners the values inherent in the American tradition and way of life.”<sup>16</sup> Of the many programs that the RRP generated, perhaps the most significant was the Regional Series, which featured episodes that

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or social differences. *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. xi; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 11; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 327-31.

<sup>15</sup> David Sarnoff, *Radio and Education: An Address at the 75<sup>th</sup> Convocation of the University of the State of New York* (31 Oct. 1939), pp. 8, 19 in the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, Box: 45, Folder: 3116 “Lab Pam.”

<sup>16</sup> Alan Gevinson, “‘What Neighbors Say’: The Radio Research project of the Library of Congress,” *Performing Arts Broadcasting*, Library of Congress (Winter, 2002), p. 95.



chronicled the history of particular American towns and regions. Writers for this program based their scripts on information found in the Local History Collection, the Archive of American Folk-Song, and material that writers in the WPA gathered for the American Guide Series. Joseph Liss, the director, described the series as a collection of stories about American communities with the purpose of showing “in dramatic terms how these communities have contributed in the building of America.” Each episode, he explained,

show[s] the people, creating—changing and adjusting themselves to a constantly changing society. We show how community has reflected in history and geography and every-day living, the development of the American Idea. We show how specific industries, land, the way of live [sic] and the culture of the people contribute to democracy...In short, we show, or hope to show, the real significance of big-concept words such as democracy, liberty, and America, by breaking them down into their everyday manifestations in communities and regions throughout the county.<sup>17</sup>

Liss encouraged the writers for the Regional series to “tell a simple story” using plain language and incorporating folklore, and folk music that would help the nation to face the new challenges that the global war posed. Therefore, Liss explained to the series writers that they needed to convey “a feeling of the history, the land, the life, the struggle and the change in the peoples of America.” He further instructed each writer to “tell the story of his own area as the story he earnestly believes to be a part of our growth as a democracy. If this is done we hope finally to have a documented story of the root of America which must sustain us.”<sup>18</sup> To get accurate

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Liss, “Regional Series,” in Part III: Scripts and Other Material of the *Report of the Radio Research Project The Library of Congress*, (Jan. 1941- Feb. 1942), no page number, in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Liss, “General Statement of Plan to Script Writers Working on Regional Documentary Programs,” Folder: untitled, Box: AFC 1941/005 “Radio Research Project Manuscript Collection,” p. 2, in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

depictions of American communities the researchers recorded in both urban and rural areas, collecting the people's songs and stories that they then played to a national listening audience.<sup>19</sup>

Through radio documentaries and other programs, the RRP leaders attempted to introduce Americans to parts of the nation and its population that they most likely would not encounter in person. The RRP reflected the regionalism and pluralism of the era by celebrating cultural diversity and democracy as the essence of the American identity.<sup>20</sup> One of the RRP's leading officials, Alan Lomax, conveyed these ideas by showcasing cultural traditions found in rural and urban folk communities. Lomax believed that American commercial radio had failed "to draw on the rich background of regional speech, music, and history" found within American folk communities. Unfortunately, "metropolitan" culture dominated the airwaves; when popular radio programs attempt to include regional aspects, the resulting "local color" segments were usually based on offensive regional stereotypes. The leaders of the RRP aimed to correct this misrepresentation by featuring the people of American communities speaking—and singing—for themselves. Since live broadcasts were too expensive to produce, the RRP shows often relied on pre-recorded material. Some of this material consisted of recordings taken during a carnival in rural Maryland, at a folk festival at an "Okie camp" for migrant workers in southern California, and in a community in Georgia that was on the verge of being flooded for a TVA rural

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<sup>19</sup> Gevinson, "What Neighbors Say," pp. 95-96. Gevinson credits the RRP for pioneering the modern concept of the documentary because they incorporated interviews with regular people in the field during an era when documentaries were either based on actors reading scripts or silent films over which actors read monologues.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the strongest example of the RRP's emphasis on cultural pluralism is found in the "New Orleans" episode of the Regional Series. Arthur Miller, the scriptwriter for this episode, wanted the broadcast to focus on the historical factors that led the city to develop and maintain its "peculiar characteristics," which include its "multi-national" population and its "cosmopolitan" nature in an overwhelmingly agricultural region. A draft of Miller's final script indeed focuses on the cultural diversity of New Orleans, concluding with: "The Germans live next to the Spanish now and Negroes amongst them all. And in that is the power to build the new history of New Orleans..."(Letter from Arthur Miller to "Joe" (23 Dec. 1940), Folder: New Orleans, Box: 1941/005 "Radio Research Project Manuscript Collection"; Arthur Miller, "New Orleans," fourth draft, (21 Apr. 1941) in the *Regional Prospectus of the Radio Research Project, Library of Congress* (1 July 1942), p. 30 in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

electrification project.<sup>21</sup> By using the techniques of field recording, interviews, and “local sound” for the background music, the RRP helped to generate “a new function for radio: that of letting the people explain themselves and their lives to the entire nation.”<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that the Project leaders did not use their programs to suit their agendas; they did. For example, the narrator at the end of the episode on the “Okie” camp articulated the message that the Project leaders hoped to impart through the camp music festival:

It was good to find people who had music inside them, people who could dance to their own singing, their own hand-clapping, and their own laughter. Their festival, which gave them pride and belief in their own heritage; their camp council meeting expressed their native democratic instincts. Both together they meant one thing—the Okies and Arkies had found a home. With the help of their government they had conquered a new frontier. The roads they took were paved; there were no Indians or wild beasts in their path—but there was hunger, and prejudice, and wrath before them. THERE IS a reason for singing and dancing now.<sup>23</sup>

After Pearl Harbor, Alan Lomax and the rest of the RRP staff emphasized how their work would generate the national unity so crucial for the war effort. In an informational packet entitled “Outline of Proposed Defense Activities for the Radio Research Project,” the anonymous author wrote that the RRP “would acquaint the people of this country with their neighbors who are far away and about whose customs, traditions and problems they know very little, and it would help to bring about real unity as opposed to the talked about unity that now exists. In this program the people of America will show democracy in action rather than democracy dramatized.”<sup>24</sup>

Immediately following Pearl Harbor, Lomax sent telegrams to folklorists in several states

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<sup>21</sup> Project leaders soon realized that they had focused too much on rural communities and sent Arthur Miller to record people in Wilmington, North Carolina, a town that had turned into a wartime industrial center.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Lomax, “Documentary Activities,” in the *Report of the Radio Research Project, The Library of Congress*, (Jan. 1941-Feb. 1942), no page numbers, in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>23</sup> “Okie Festival” Transcript, Folder: “Okie,” Box: 1941/005 “Radio Research Project Manuscript Collection,” in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Though it is unclear who wrote the script for the show, this passage clearly illustrates the belief that American folk communities were microcosms of democracy in action, a view that Lomax and other folk revivalists in the “Washington establishment” maintained.

<sup>24</sup> “Outline of Proposed Defense Activities for the Radio Research Project,” p. 1, Folder: Radio Research Project, General, Box: Radio Research Project: “Hidden History,” and “Americans Talk Back,” in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

requesting “recordings of reactions of four or five average men and women to Japanese aggression” within the next forty-eight hours. For good measure, he specified that they should “get colorful people who speak well.”<sup>25</sup> Soon Lomax had enough material from many groups, including African Americans, Greeks, Poles, Italians, Chinese, and Germans, to broadcast a variety of American reactions to the war.

Other folklorists at the Archive of American Folk Song shared Lomax’s ardent belief that American folk music illustrated democracy and cultural pluralism in action, and that it could be used to bolster the war effort. In an undated informational packet titled “The Archive of American Folk Music in the National Defense Program” the author suggested that the Archive produce radio shows, documentary films, and song books with the purpose of helping “the American people explain for themselves in the democratic language of folklore, the nature of American democracy.” According to the author, folk music is inherently democratic because it is “communally composed” and “communally accepted.” Through this process, the end product becomes the “lingua franca” for the whole group. Of the many programs suggested in the memo, the one that encapsulates the exaltation of pluralism in WWII propaganda was “The Language of Freedom,” described as follows:

The central idea of such a program will be American tolerance of all languages, creeds, and colors. The materials for the program to be drawn from the experience of various minority groups in America. Each program, an exhibit of the story and culture of a national minority group broken by a dramatization of the contribution of some member of this group toward the growth of democracy in the world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Alan Lomax (8 Dec. 1941) in Folder: “Declaration of War,” and Folder: “Declaration of War, 2” Box: AFC 1941/005 “Radio Research Manuscript Collection,” in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>26</sup> “The Archive of American Folksong in the National Defense Program,” undated, Folder: Untitled, Box: Radio Research Project: Misc. Unsorted Materials, in the American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Though the author of this packet is not cited, it is rather clear that Alan Lomax at least contributed to it, if he was not the sole author. This is especially clear because one of the programs it suggests is called “Our Singing Country” which is described as a program that tells the “story of America in terms of its popular and folk music and the lives of the people who made it.”

This program seemed to take the view that America *had* already achieved a democratic and pluralist society and that the citizens could bring this enlightenment to the rest of the world.

By the eve of America's entry into the World War II, the national identity that the revivalists had crafted during the Depression came to suit the kind of propaganda campaigns that characterized this war. Many revivalists were employed in government agencies, and some, like Lomax, used their positions to ensure that folk music was incorporated into actual campaigns. While the message remained the same as it had in the pre-war years, the *tone* that the revivalists used changed. During the 1930s, folk revivalists had used folk music to help Americans withstand the quotidian drudgery of an economic depression. By the 1940s, and especially after the United States entered the war, the revivalists' language became more urgent. Now, folk music was a cultural weapon that could unite Americans, secure citizens' commitment to the democratic way of life, raise morale, and ultimately help defeat the enemy.

### **Festivals Join the Fight**

While the Washington folklorists were in the vanguard of the folk revival, other revivalists supplemented the work of the AAFS, specifically through folk festivals and other types of pageants that featured ethnic and indigenously American musical traditions. Sarah Gertrude Knott's National Folk Festival became the primary public festival that promoted the idea that folk music was instrumental in keeping the spirit of American democracy alive. While it remained a private event, the NFF promoted the same degree of pro-American patriotism as any governmental program during the WWII era.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> While New Deal public folklorists such as Charles Seeger and Alan Lomax never truly accepted Knott, she did manage to stage several successful programs during the festival's Washington stint and garner the support of

In 1937 Knott moved the festival to Washington, D.C., where it would remain until 1942 under the sponsorship of the *Washington Post*. As she did during her time in Dallas, Knott had to navigate the racial codes in Washington D.C., another segregated city. During its stay in D.C., the National Folk Festival was held in Constitution Hall, a venue that the Daughters of the American Revolution owned. The hall became infamous in 1939 when the DAR refused to allow Marion Anderson, a renowned African-American contralto, to perform. However, the NFF continued to feature African Americans on the main stage both prior to and after the Anderson incident. How Knott was able to circumvent the DAR's racial policy is still unclear, but it does serve to illustrate the extent to which Knott adhered to a racially egalitarian conception of the American heritage. The lengths that Knott went to secure an integrated performance are especially noteworthy during an era where other festivals, such as White Top, continued to practice racial exclusion.

By 1940, The National Folk Festival began to adapt to changing political conditions in light of the escalating war. In a letter Knott wrote to Teofilo Borunga, the mayor of the Mexican border city Juarez, asking him to recommend a local mariachi band, she explained: "We are all interested now in the Good Neighbor policy. Surely, there are no more stronger ties that bind Mexico to the United States than the traditional ties of song, music and dance that we have in common."<sup>28</sup> When she sent a similar request to the Commissioner from Nova Scotia, requesting Canadian musicians, Knott further elaborated the NFF's response to the current circumstances: "We feel that there has never been a time in the life of our country or yours, or any other for that matter, when it was so necessary for varied racial groups to understand each other. We know that

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political figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt who served as the honorary chair of the festival's general committee in 1938.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Sarah Gertrude Knott to Teofilo Borunga (14 March 1940), Draw 1, Folder 64 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

the traditional expressions do more than any one thing to bring about that understanding.”<sup>29</sup> Throughout January and February of 1941 Knott sent letters to governors, ambassadors, and cultural officials in Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, the Virgin Islands, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Panama asking them to send representatives for the eighth festival. Practically all the letters stress the need for understanding, tolerance, and unity among the American nations. Knott claimed that more ethnic communities in the U.S. were sending their best musical groups to perform in the festivals because they recognized that “there has never been a time when there was such a need for better understanding, more tolerance, and a stronger national unity.” She hoped to extend this effort and use the NFF to generate an intra-hemispheric appreciation and exchange of folk music that would ultimately aid the Allied effort.<sup>30</sup>

Knott situated the NFF within the context of wartime propaganda in two ways: by including more immigrant groups in the program and by amplifying the festival’s celebration of civic ideals through more references to “democracy” in the publicity for the festival. Knott consistently argued that the Festival contributed to a greater sense of national unity by bringing Americans from various ethnic backgrounds together in mutual appreciation. In an article promoting the 1942 festival, she claimed that the program provided a clear illustration of democracy because, “As old and new Americans meet on common ground, there will be a practical demonstration of the democratic principles upon which our nation has been founded.” The staging of the festival, in Knott’s eyes, provided its own civic lesson:

The United States is one of the very few countries left today where people regardless of race, creed or nationality, can come together in their Nation’s Capitol to present their distinctive folk songs, music, and dances. The importance of encouraging this democratic

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott to A.J. Campbell at the Bureau of Information and Publicity, Halifax, Nova Scotia, (23 March 1940), Draw 1, Folder 64 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott letter to Mrs. Albert Miller (30 Jan. 1941), Draw 1, Folder 68 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

attitude toward racial and national groups within our borders cannot be overestimated in these days of extreme nationalism.

The ideals of democracy and cultural pluralism that the National Folk Festival promoted, Knott claimed, would help protect against the ideological threat that fascism posed.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the war years, the NFF presented an increasingly diverse array of ethnic music. The 1942 festival marked the first time the program featured Jewish performers, and the 1944 festival highlighted Russian, Chinese and Filipino performers. The program noted that the emphasis on these traditions was no coincidence: “Since they are our allies in the world’s struggle, and since we realize that the destiny of our country depends on the destiny of the world, and understanding must play an important part, we are more interested in their cultural expressions.” Yet, the author went beyond championing these groups as allies and commended them for contributing to the development of *American* culture: “We should, however, not be interested just for international reasons, but because these cultures are part of our own culture.”<sup>32</sup>

During this same festival the members of the NFFA became more introspective and started examining the NFF’s current purpose and how it related to festivals of the past. In a draft of the article, “A Glimpse of Folk Festivals in Others Lands Through the Eleventh National Folk Festival,” the anonymous author admitted that the initial festivals were ethnically myopic, focusing only on folk music of American Indians, southern Blacks, and older ethnic groups such as the British, Spanish, French, and Germans, along with work songs of miners, sailors, lumberjacks, and cowboys. While the first programs represented “the attitude of our nation then,” according to the author, “it would not represent the feeling and thinking of our people

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<sup>31</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “Cultures of Many Lands to Be Represented at the National Folk Festival,” W.P. (2 March 1942), Draw 1, Folder 69 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>32</sup> Anon. “Notes on the Recognition of Change,” 11<sup>th</sup> Festival in Philadelphia, p. 1, Draw 1, Folder 71 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.



today.” The outbreak of war precipitated a dramatic shift in national mentality from xenophobic exclusivity to inclusive cultural democracy, and the Festival reflected this change:

This year, at the third wartime festival in Philadelphia, a new America was speaking, one which recognized many of the folk heritages of the forty million and more new Americans who have come to make their homes here within the last sixty years, bringing a new store of vital expressions to add richness and color to the mosaic of our folk pattern.

The author acknowledged that prejudices still existed, but she argued that they were slowly eroding as people from various ethnic and regional backgrounds mingled in the armed forces and had new cultural encounters abroad. These experiences would most certainly break down prejudicial provincialism and create an impetus to make the nation more democratic in reality as much as in rhetoric because, when these people returned to the United States, “[o]ur petty national and racial prejudices in home communities will not be looked upon with favor...When they come home they will not want to think of democracy in generalities but in specific application to their own lives.” Furthermore, the author claimed that not only would returning Americans cease to maintain old prejudices, but also minority Americans, such as American Indians, would no longer stand for second-class citizenship: “[American Indians] will not be satisfied after this [war] to be ‘just Indians’ among neighbors who have been sitting on the sidelines while they faced gunfire.” Those involved in the NFFA helped expedite this process by creating a microcosmic situation in which American democratic and pluralist principles were tried and triumphed: “We are testing one of the greatest experimentations in democracy, proving ourselves and showing others that people can live together in peace and harmony, without forgetting the manifestations of culture which makes each racial and national group

distinctive.”<sup>33</sup> With civic ideals keeping the peace, Americans could concentrate on cultivating cultural diversity through the festival.

The wartime rhetoric of democracy and cultural pluralism was so powerful that it even influenced the recreation industry. Many recreation activists, whose efforts at designing community leisure activities echoed the work of settlement-house workers and playground advocates from the turn of the century, organized local events to generate grassroots support for this type of Americanism. These recreationists often worked with Knott and the other members of the NFFA in designing and promoting programs such as patriotic celebrations and folk music festivals. During WWII, the recreationists’ mouthpiece, the magazine *Recreation*, featured several articles on how community folk festivals could aid in the fight for democracy abroad and at home, an effort that they continued even after the war. For example, the author of the article “Friends Through Recreation,” argued that folk festivals could foster American cultural pluralism, and called for local recreation organizations to sponsor programs that would incorporate folk culture in order to make immigrants appreciate their native cultures and work to preserve their own traditions. The author feared that these unique contributions to American life were being lost as successive generations of immigrants became caught up in “the desperate human mob-need to ‘be like everybody else.’” The best way to bridge the gap between immigrants and native-born citizens and intergenerational divides was to “emphasize the gifts the minority groups have brought with them to build our North American culture.” Advocating a position that reflected the cultural democracy of the WWII era, the author asserted that the ethnic cultures of immigrant communities must be made “an integral part of the whole pattern, not a brilliantly-colored fringe stuck around the edge.” She suggested that mainstream acceptance of

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<sup>33</sup> Anon. “A Glimpse of Folk Festivals in Others Lands Through the Eleventh National Folk Festival,” draft pp. 2, 3, 5, Draw 1, Folder 71 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

cultural pluralism could be accomplished by including ethnic music in local patriotic celebrations of national holidays such as the Fourth of July and Memorial Day. Recognizing the contributions that immigrant cultures made in American life and commemorating the naturalized citizens who fought for the country in these celebrations “can do much to integrate nationality groups into the life of the community, to make them feel at home and proud of the special thing that they have to give to the whole country.”<sup>34</sup> These recreation advocates believed that incorporating ethnic traditions into mainstream culture through folk festivals and patriotic celebrations would not only enhance American culture, but also enable ethnic Americans to develop a sense of pride in their unique cultural forms.

Knott worked closely with recreationists and often publicized the National Folk Festival in *Recreation*. In one article published during the war, she claimed that the Festival helped native-born Americans realize the pluralist nature of American cultural heritage. As with the pluralist recreation advocates, Knott stipulated that the cultures of ethnic minorities should be incorporated into mainstream American culture, rather than remain as isolated subcultures.<sup>35</sup> She also believed that a key way to achieve a cultural democracy was through public performances of folk music. Citing the federal programs that used folk music to help establish international ties, Knott argued that these same programs could help with the domestic situation:

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<sup>34</sup> Anon. “Friends Through Recreation, Parts I and II” in *Recreation*, Vol. 39 (Jan. 1946), pp. 525, 526-7, 581. When citing the immigrants who should be credited for fighting for the United States, the author specifically mentions those from Europe, Asia and Africa.

<sup>35</sup> By emphasizing both inclusion and ethnic assimilation into American life and culture Knott appears to diverge from cultural pluralism and reflect more of a settlement house, or progressive liberal, view of cultural diversity. As with John Dewey and Jane Addams, Knott’s ultimate goal for immigrants was assimilation into American society. Though exponents of Progressive liberalism rejected the forced assimilation of Americanization programs, they believed that there needed to be a wide consensus based on equal participation, meaning that every citizen in a democracy should share similar values (i.e. civic ideals) and have equal access to knowledge, which would effectually result in a national “like mindedness.” Therefore, a democratic society should work to break down barriers between people—cultural, regional, ethnic and racial—in order to come together as a nation united along “common cultural lines.” Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, p. 14.

If a cultural relations program is of value in cementing friendships as the realization of common ideals internationally, it is reasonable to think that a practical, educational activity program applied to our own country, which utilizes in democratic fashion the traditional heritages of all our people, might serve a great purpose in the present and future development of our country.<sup>36</sup>

During a time of international upheaval, the National Folk Festival attempted to serve as an example of the strength of American democracy—cultural and political—in action. When reflecting on the festivals during the beginning of WWII Knott wrote, “We knew that we were living in one of the few nations left where groups, regardless of race, nationality or religious [sic] could come together for a friendly interchange of folk songs, music and dances which openly reflect our racial characteristics and national temperaments without interruption. We were proud to live in that country and we wanted to hold aloft this symbol of our democracy.”<sup>37</sup> To Knott and the rest of the NFFA, the festival was that symbol.

The rhetoric that Knott and other folk festival advocates used during the war years—their celebration of democracy and cultural pluralism—did not differ from that of the 1930s. What did change, however, was the context of the message. These revivalists shifted their focus to accommodate their programs to the context of war. They used folk music to illustrate the inherent plurality of the heterogeneous United States, which contrasted with the forced homogeneity of fascist nations. Through folk music, the revivalists believed that they were educating citizens about their civic and cultural heritage, and they also extended this effort to the citizens-in-training in American schools.

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<sup>36</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “Folklore in Our Day,” p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “Demonstrations of Democracy—World War II Years,” (1944), Draw 1, Folder 71 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

## Singing—and Teaching—Democracy

Folk music revivalists saw great potential in using folk music as a tool to educate children in American democracy, pluralism, and history. These historical interpretations gained prominence during the populist nationalism of the New Deal years and peaked during the pro-diversity propaganda campaigns of World War II. For example, although Sarah Gertrude Knott often received praise for her children's programs at the National Folk Festival, the Parent Teachers Association specifically commended the festival in 1941 for teaching about American ethnic diversity on the eve of American involvement in the war:

In today's confused world the young people especially need to learn something of our heritage. With understanding comes tolerance, and the Folk Festival, by bringing together groups from various sections of the United States with the characteristic folk expressions of each, should be a means of fostering a better understanding which should result in that greater unity for which we in America are striving.<sup>38</sup>

Revivalists specifically argued that folk music instilled a democratic sensibility in American youth that stood in marked contrast to fascist and totalitarian mindsets. During the height of wartime tensions, composer and musicologist Henry Cowell noted that “folk music is of the people, as democracy is government of the people.” Because of the global situation in 1944, Cowell stressed that “it is more urgently necessary than ever before for different democratic peoples to know each other more sympathetically and intimately.” Through folk music—both domestic and international—American students could gain a better understanding of global peoples and thus continue the effort to make the world safe for democracy.<sup>39</sup>

Revivalists and educational experts sometimes joined forces to determine how music could best work in school curricula, particularly for civics classes. In winter 1945 a conference at

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<sup>38</sup> W.P., “Leaders of Parent-Teachers Cites Value of Folk Music,” April 4, 1941, Draw: 1, Folder: 66 in the Sarah Gertrude Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Cowell, “Folk Music in a Democracy,” *Studies in Musical Education, History, and Aesthetics*, Music Teacher's National Association (Pittsburgh, 1944), pp. 172, 174.

Elizabeth Irwin High School sponsored by Camp Woodland, the progressive Catskill Mountain summer camp, gathered notable revivalists such as Pete and Charles Seeger, Alan Lomax, Benjamin Botkin, Harold Thompson (president of the New York Folklore Society) and the Columbia anthropologist George Hertzog to discuss the implications of folklore for education in a democracy. The conference's focus on teaching Americans to appreciate and protect cultural differences was very much in line with a contemporary educational theory that emphasized the importance of cultural differences through a series of programs labeled "intercultural education." Schools involved in "intercultural" or "intergroup" education initiatives incorporated curricula that provided information on different ethnic groups and their historical backgrounds, organized cultural assemblies, and banned books that demeaned ethnic and racial groups. These activities were predicated on the belief that the dissemination of information could successfully challenge negative stereotypes of ethnic and racial communities.<sup>40</sup> Theories of intercultural education first appeared in William Vickery's and Stewart G. Cole's 1943 publication, *Intercultural Education in American Schools*. Guiding this program was the theory of "cultural democracy," which, according to Vickery and Cole, entailed applying mainstream democratic principles to minority groups. They theorized that there existed a set of basic civic ideals (e.g. democracy) to which all Americans ought to adhere, and that national unity should be built upon those ideals. Minority groups should not be forced to accept, or expected to separate themselves from, mainstream culture, but neither should they retain traditional practices that were undemocratic; in all other circumstances the majority should respect their right to practice their own cultural traditions. Furthermore, these minorities would be granted full access to "American life" despite retaining

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<sup>40</sup> James Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Practices and Promises* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1977), p. 8. Intercultural education efforts, however, did not continue past the 1950s, and they largely failed to become ingrained in mainstream education because they occurred in isolated pockets, largely in areas of high diversity such as cities, rather than becoming a part of curricula across the nation.

their unique cultural characteristics. Essentially, “cultural democracy” advocated a type of nationalism that defined America as “a plurality of sub-cultures bound together by a set of common ideals and practices.” Emphasizing a “unity within diversity” view, Vickery and Cole sought to maintain a balance between forced conformity (and hyper-assimilationist programs) and a respect for cultural difference.<sup>41</sup>

While intercultural educational initiatives invigorated cultural pluralism in the 1940s, some social scientists, like Nathan Glazer, would later criticize them for advocating a watered-down version of cultural pluralism—one that promoted tolerance rather than “the maintenance of cultural difference and identity.”<sup>42</sup> This assessment, however, does not apply to the educational initiatives that many revivalists initiated during the wartime and post-war years, programs that not only encouraged tolerance of ethnic and racial cultural differences, but made those differences the root of American national identity.

One of the first major educational initiatives that emerged from the folk music revival was a children’s program that Alan Lomax created during the late 1930s for mainstream American radio. In 1939 Lomax accepted an offer from CBS radio to take over hosting a weekly program of American folk music as a part of the *American School of the Air* series.<sup>43</sup> Lomax’s show was scheduled to run on Tuesday mornings from October through May. Though not a professional educator, Lomax’s show had several stamps of educators’ approval; Columbia’s

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<sup>41</sup> James Henry Powell, “The Concept of Cultural Pluralism in American Thought, 1915-1965,” pp. 159-61, 163, 178. Powell notes that this theory was alternately referred to as “cultural democracy” and “cultural pluralism” during the years 1940-1955. For examples of intercultural curricula see *More than Tolerance: Suggestions to Teachers on Inter-group Education*, Commission on the Defense of Democracy through Education (May 1946); *Democratic Human Relations: Promising Practices in Intergroup and Intercultural Education in the Social Studies*, Hilda Taba and William Van Til, eds. (Washington, D.C.: The National Council for the Social Studies, 1945); and Samuel Everett, *School and Community Meet: the Community Approach to Intercultural Education* (New York: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge, 1948). For a historical assessment of these programs see Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*.

<sup>42</sup> Nathan Glazer, *We are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> From 1938-1939, CBS had aired a music program as part of the ASA called “Music of America” but this show featured popular as well as folk music.

Department of Education, the Music Educator's National Conference, and the National Education Association all affiliated with the program. Much like the progressive organizations that supported education on the radio, Lomax emphasized the concept of applied learning. He prompted students to sing along to the songs that he presented as well as to seek out music for themselves in their homes, schools, and communities; Lomax also encouraged students to attend music festivals, square dances, and other community gatherings that featured local folk music. The show championed folk music as a vital part of contemporary culture and, therefore, as the teacher's manual mandated, "Wherever possible the interest of the class should center on the living oral tradition rather than on things to be found in books."<sup>44</sup> CBS officials estimated that over 120,000 classrooms across the country would tune into the program. Lomax eagerly seized on this opportunity both to popularize folk music and to spread his gospel of the American democratic and pluralist heritage.

The *American School of the Air* provided Lomax with the chance to design a radio program that would not only popularize folk music but also allow him to dictate what qualified as American folk music to a national listening audience. Before Lomax signed on to host the show, the ASA had aired a children's music program, *Music of America*, which featured both folk and popular songs grouped around historical periods. After Lomax took over, the show changed its name to *Folk Music of America* during the 1939-40 season and then to *Wellsprings of Music* the following year, and it categorized folk music in the same way that Lomax and his father, John Lomax, did in their books of collected songs.<sup>45</sup> Prior to WWII, Lomax emphasized work songs, dedicating episodes to such themes as railroad, teamster, lumberjack, forecastle, and

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<sup>44</sup> *Columbia's American School of the Air Teacher's Manual and Classroom Guide*, produced by the Columbia Broadcasting System Department of Education, Sterling Fisher, Director and Leon Levine, Assistant Director (10 Oct. 1939), pp. 16-17, Box: 45, Folder: 3156, Library of Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park.

<sup>45</sup> For the sake of consistency as well as brevity, the show will henceforth only be referred to as *Folk Music of America*.



“Negro work” songs. Occasionally, he designed a particular show around other, non-labor, topics such as children’s games, “nonsense,” square dancing, and love songs. The show centered on performance—Lomax sang on most of the episodes, often with the assistance of different musical guests. The Golden Gate Quartet and Lead Belly performed on the “Negro Work Songs” and “Railroad Songs” episodes; Lomax’s sister Bess accompanied him on love song duets; John M. "Sailor Dad" Hunt sang sea chanties; and Woody Guthrie fittingly contributed to an episode on hobo or “vagabond minstrels” tunes. Most likely because of the show’s focus on work songs, it tended to be a male-dominated program. Apart from Bess Lomax, all of the guests were men who sang about the trials and tribulations of male labor. Even though the show’s themes were very specific—and somewhat narrow—the content was consistently national in scope. To emphasize this focus, during an episode aired on February 20, 1940, the announcer Niles Welch requested that listeners send their favorite folk songs for the last two episodes, which were to be dedicated to listener submissions. Welch implored listeners across the United States to contribute their songs because, as he stated, “We want to have all parts of the country represented.”<sup>46</sup>

Each episode of *Folk Music of America* generally followed the same format. After Welch’s introduction Lomax explained the day’s topic and described the different aspects of the show’s subject. He and the guests then sang songs pertinent to that theme. Lomax described his musical guests not as professionals, but as authentic experts in their fields because they experienced the conditions depicted in the songs. “Sailor Dad” could sing sea chanties because he came from a seafaring family; Lead Belly accurately sang field hollers and chain-gang songs because he had been both an agricultural worker and an inmate. After Lomax and the guests bantered and sang a bit, the show dramatically shifted gears, and professional musicians replaced

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<sup>46</sup> *Folk Music of America* script (20 February 1940), p. 22, Folder 2/3 ASA Scripts 1939-1940,” Box: 04.01.01 3/3 in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

the folk singers. Each episode featured a particular song that Lomax first sang in a folk-style and afterward a professional orchestra performed a transposed version. Different composers took on the task of expressing the song's theme and tune through this orchestral version. After this segment Lomax closed the show by introducing the theme song of the next week's episode so that the children would be familiar with it and thus more apt to sing along themselves. Lomax designed *Folk Music of America* to generate student participation, and he strongly encouraged children to sing along with the music; the ASA also provided a free classroom guidebook to enhance student involvement. Student engagement would help Lomax accomplish his goal, which he described in the introduction of one episode as an effort "to stimulate an appreciation of music as a part of our day to day living. The songs of unknown folk singers and the music of celebrated composers are human reactions to the world around us." He chose the topics and presented them via traditional singers and professional orchestras "to show this connection between music and the basic human needs and ideas from which it springs," an effort that clearly revealed Lomax's desire to use folk music to teach children his views of the culture, society, and national community in which they lived.<sup>47</sup>

Since *Folk Music of America* was a children's show that aired on commercial radio, Lomax did not have many opportunities to express his social and political views. He succeeded, however, in subtly conveying his views on Americanism through the program's themes and music. Before delving into the American tradition that folk music illuminated, Lomax needed to establish that this music was indeed embedded in the American national heritage. This task was not so difficult with songs that had already been established as part of the American folk canon. Cowboy songs, Appalachian ballads, and older work songs like lumberjack and seafaring songs

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<sup>47</sup> *Wellsprings of Music* script (1 Mar. 1941), p. 1, Folder: 1 "ASA scripts 1940-41," Box: 04.01 1/3, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

were largely accepted as “traditional” folk music by the time *Folk Music of America* aired. In this program, however, Lomax also featured new music that people generated from their distinctly American experiences. For example, Lomax presented Woody Guthrie’s topical song “Do Re Mi” as folk music (even though he wrote it to address the contemporary concerns of migrant families moving west) because it expressed a uniquely American situation. Sometimes Lomax made sure to state explicitly that folk music, such as the blues, that some listeners might regard as far from the mainstream, was as “natively American as cornbread, Kansas or Casey Jones.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Lomax best described his belief in the Americanness of folk music in a 1940 article for the Girl Scout magazine, *The American Girl*:

America, with its colorful background—cutting trails across vast, quiet wilderness, breaking new soil, building new cities—is rich in folk music. It has come straight from the hearts of the people, from their loneliness and hunger and cold, from the rhythms of their daily jobs, from their lovemaking and their dancing, and often just from the joy of being alive and strong and healthy.<sup>49</sup>

Folk music in the United States, therefore, was inherently American because it came directly from the American people—both native-born and naturalized citizens.

Once Lomax established that the music he aired was part of an authentic American folk identity—past and present—he then used it to define a particular view of the national culture and heritage. For him, folk songs represented the inherent diversity of American society and one aspect of this diversity was an ethnic pluralism generated by waves of immigration. As Lomax wrote in a letter to folksong collector Joanna Colcord in 1941, he wanted to begin a project recording the songs of ethnic minorities living in New York City because “America should make

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<sup>48</sup> *Folk Music of America* script (9 Apr. 1940), p. 1, Folder: “ASA Scripts 1939-40” 2/3, Box: 04.01.01 3/3, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. This method of connecting types of folk music to objects or themes that were stereotypically “American” was much stronger in Lomax’s other folk radio shows like *Back Where I Came From*, the adult version of *Wellsprings of Music*.

<sup>49</sup> Alan Lomax, “Music in Your Own Backyard,” *The American Girl* (Oct. 1940), pp. 5-7, 46, 49. See *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 47-55.

clear her concern for the cultural riches of the peoples whom she has welcomed into her borders.”<sup>50</sup> Lomax expressed his commitment to crediting immigrants for contributing to the development of America culture, and representing their traditions as a part of American heritage in several *Folk Music of America* episodes. During one program on railroad songs, Lomax presented a romantic view of American pluralism that he illustrated through the construction of the national railroad system. The show began with the songs of Irish immigrant laborers in the North and then proceeded to the songs of African Americans laying down tracks in the South.<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis on cultural diversity as a defining feature of American strength and identity became even more pronounced as WWII escalated. For the episode “The Composer Looks Abroad” during the 1940-1941 season, the manual opened with a cosmopolitan assessment of American culture: “In the three hundred-odd years that a new American culture has been building, foreign influences from all over the world have gone into its make-up. Our folk music is complex, [with] influences from Africa, Spain, France, England, Ireland, [and] Scotland.”<sup>52</sup> Lomax’s script for the January 1, 1941 episode on British Ballads took a more idealized view in light of current events:

America is the land where men from all over the world, speaking different languages, singing different songs, liking different kinds of cooking, have been able to meet and say, “Hello stranger, where are you going? Stop a minute and let’s have a talk. Where are you from? It’s mighty good to know you.” America is the land where all men have been friendly to strangers, because everybody was strangers and they all agreed to talk things over and listen rather than fight first and listen later.

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<sup>50</sup> Cohen, *Alan Lomax: Assistant in Charge*, p. 232. As with his desire to make the Archive of American Folk Song relevant in American society through his radio shows, Lomax also thought that this project could work with foreign language associations and social organizations and the material generated could help create or enhance other cultural programs.

<sup>51</sup> *Wellsprings of Music* script (14 Apr. 1941), p. 2, Folder: 1 “ASA scripts 1940-41,” Box: 04.01 1/3, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>52</sup> “The Composer Looks Abroad,” *Folk Music of America Teacher’s Manual*, p. 36, Folder 3157 “American School of the Air, 1940-42,” Box 45, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park.

Again, he emphasized the pluralism of American folk music by recognizing that “Spanish, French, German, Russian, Armenian, Latvian, [and] Lithuanian” ballads and songs have helped shape the nation’s folk music and, in a further attack against fascism, that “[i]t is not against the law to sing in any language you happen to know here in America.”<sup>53</sup>

Before the war, *Folk Music of America* largely used folk music to illustrate working-class contributions to American culture. As fascism spread across Europe, however, Lomax began to focus less on working-class themes and increasingly preached a dual message of American unity and anti-fascism. The growing popularity of the German Bund and pro-Mussolini Italian groups led public officials to fear the specter of violent division within American society. Therefore, many educational programs emphasized tolerance and diversity as part of a larger effort to sell an idealized view of American democracy.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the teacher’s manual for the first season of *Folk Music of America* situated the show within this educational trend. The author commended the growing appreciation of American folk music as an important part of the American heritage. This in itself was a noteworthy development because, “As one European nation after another has, in recent years, rejected democracy or compromised it, throughout America there has come the realization that our refuge and strength lies in the cultivation of our own democratic tradition”; this tradition is best exemplified “at its musical core—American folk music.”<sup>55</sup>

The anti-fascist commentaries that Lomax and other contributors wove throughout the series reflected the intercultural education programs’ celebration of American social and cultural diversity. Yet, it is also important to recognize that Lomax was also very sympathetic to the

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<sup>53</sup> *Wellsprings of Music* script (1 Jan. 1942), p. 1, Folder: 1 “ASA scripts 1940-41,” Box: 04.01 1/3, in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Gleason, “Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of American Identity,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), pp. 500-503.

<sup>55</sup> *Columbia’s American School of the Air Teacher’s Manual and Classroom Guide*, produced by the Columbia Broadcasting System Department of Education, Sterling Fisher, Director and Leon Levine, Assistant Director, (10 Oct. 1939) p. 16, Folder: 3156, Box: 45, Library of Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park.

programs and ideas behind the Communist Popular Front, and many of the topics that he presented on the program reflected his political sympathies as well. Besides inviting leftists as guests on the show (e.g. Charles Seeger and Woody Guthrie), Lomax's interpretation of American folk music stressed aspects of the Cultural Front platform, such as crediting common people for their contributions to the national cultural heritage. After all, as the manual explains, American folk music was "[c]reated and preserved by the common people, the pioneers, the farmers and the workers [and] these songs reflect the independence of spirit of the people who sing them."<sup>56</sup> Lomax's political and social proclivities revealed themselves most clearly in the case of two of the show's main themes: labor and African-American folk music.

Labor issues were relatively easier to work with during the years of the New Deal and CIO organizing. Though Lomax did not, and probably could not, call attention to specific labor problems during a children's radio program, he did occasionally manage to include comments pertaining to the plight of the American worker. The March 19, 1940 episode, for example, opened with a direct attack on American working conditions, though safely referring to historical ones:

Ever since the beginning of our Folk Music series, we have been singing songs and telling stories about the men who worked hard at dangerous jobs...pioneering men who blazed the trail for American industry. Their lives were harder than almost any worker's today: and they were often very poorly paid...Still others revolted against the laws of society, grabbed a gun and fought back against a hard world.<sup>57</sup>

Two weeks later, the episode "Poor Farming Songs" featured Woody Guthrie singing about the hardships that the American farmer endured during the prior decade. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the episodes dealt with labor is further indicative of Lomax's left-wing political views. During the Popular Front years, leftist artists emphasized working-class

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Folk Music of America* scripts (19 Mar. 1940), p. 1, Folder: 2/3 "ASA Scripts 1939-40," Box: 04.01.01 3/3, in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

themes in film, literature, music and art. The leftists involved in the Front's cultural programs also enabled working-class citizens to become "artists" and generate works that depicted their own lives.<sup>58</sup> Even after the Popular Front ended in 1939, Lomax continued to promote this emphasis. Throughout *Folk Music of America*, he not only highlighted how American labor helped shape larger culture, but his adherence to authenticity also led him to have the people who were part of these laboring traditions sing their own songs rather than feature big-name crooners singing Tin Pan Alley tunes that merely mused about the lives of the common folk.

Racial equality was another guiding principle for the American Left that continued throughout the 1940s. From the outset of his career, Alan Lomax stressed the importance of black musical traditions for shaping larger folk music styles—an idea that sharply differed from prior concepts of American folk music. The folklorist Gene Bluestein argues that Lomax "operated with a fiercely egalitarian point of view," one that "identified itself with outcast and oppressed groups" like African Americans. Lomax believed that black folk music focused on freedom, a theme intrinsic to American identity. Furthermore, the black tradition evolved as a hybridization of multiple musical strains, including African and European, that merged on American soil and therefore reflected American conditions. To Lomax, this process of melding and relating to daily life was the essence of the American folk tradition. Bluestein explains that because of these factors, folk interpreters such as Lomax believed that black folk music not only epitomized American folk music, but also "symbolized...the struggle of all Americans to realize the promise of our democratic traditions."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Lomax later articulated his view that American folk music formed a cultural tradition that was pluralist, inclusive, and transcended racial and ethnic prejudices by referencing the song "John Henry" in a *New York Times*

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xvii.

<sup>59</sup> Gene Bluestein, "The Lomaxes' New Canon of American Folksong," *The Texas Quarterly* (Spring 1962), pp. 55, 58.

*Magazine* article: “‘A MAN ain’t nothin’ but a man!’ In this sense America has reached out and welcomed the folklore of all the minority groups, racial and national. Jim Crow prejudice has been inoperative in folklore.”<sup>60</sup>

Lomax’s views of racial equality, however, were more subdued in *Folk Music of America*. By dedicating shows to specific African American themes such as Spirituals, and black work songs, he did emphasize their importance in shaping American musical traditions. Many of the episodes dedicated to black folk culture, though, tended to romanticize the conditions from which the music developed. Rarely did Lomax comment on the poor living conditions, lack of civil rights, and lynch-law rule that most southern blacks endured. The closest that Lomax came to a direct commentary on American racial injustice, past and present, occurred at the beginning of an episode dedicated to blues music when he explained that “[t]he blues arose as a direct expression of the suffering and sorrow of the Negro people in the South.”<sup>61</sup> The strongest racial, and most controversial, statement that Lomax made with the show, however, was not in the music or the script, but rather in the show’s design. The program featured an integrated cast, a rare situation for the early 1940s. Most importantly, *Folk Music of America* was a show on commercial radio that featured black performers singing and reflecting on their own culture, and not white actors performing in oral blackface—a situation that barely existed anywhere in America at that time. Judith Smith argues that Left progressives recognized the need for black performers on the radio as a crucial part of the fight to gain full citizenship. Indeed, she claims that expanding the definition of American citizenship through folk music was a driving

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<sup>60</sup> Alan Lomax, “America Sings the Saga of America” *New York Times Magazine* (26 Jan. 1947), p. 41. See Cohen, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, pp. 86-91. This, of course, is an exaggeration and it reflects how many revivalists chose to ignore the conservative, and even racist, aspects of many folk songs and traditional singers.

<sup>61</sup> *Folk Music of America* scripts (14 April 1940), p. 2, Folder: “ASA Scripts 1939-40” 2/3, Box: 04.01.01 3/3, in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.



“progressive impulse” for left-wing folklorists like Alan Lomax.<sup>62</sup> Lomax argued that black traditions lay at the heart of American cultural identity because “[w]ithout songs created or inspired by the American Negro, American music would have lost half its soul.” Furthermore, black spirituals, generated by the combined “sorrows of slavery” and religious faith, were one of the nation’s “noblest contributions to world music.”<sup>63</sup> Although he could not state his position on civil rights explicitly on the air, through his presentation of American folk music Lomax did indeed make a powerful statement on the value of black culture and life in shaping the American experience, heritage, and overarching identity.

As much as Lomax believed in social and political equality, his beliefs were only incompletely realized in the pluralist vision of American identity that he presented in *Folk Music of America*. Although he respected the cultural diversity of immigrant folk music, he never actually played songs in other languages and only represented traditions that were sung in English. Some immigrant groups were omitted altogether, particularly Asian ones.<sup>64</sup> Another group that did not fare well in the show was American Indians. Not only did Lomax fail to include their traditions in his musical portrait of America; when he did reference American Indians, he did so in a surprisingly derogatory manner. In a particular episode that focused on cowboys and pioneers in the West, Lomax referred to the Sioux Indians as a “real antagonist”

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<sup>62</sup> Judith Smith, “Radio’s ‘Cultural Front,’ 1938-1948,” in *Radio Reader*, p. 217.

<sup>63</sup> *Columbia’s American School of the Air Teacher’s Manual and Classroom Guide*, produced by the Columbia Broadcasting System Department of Education, Sterling Fisher, Director and Leon Levine, Assistant Director (10 Oct. 1939), p. 25, Folder: 3156, Box: 45, Library of Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park. This argument echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’s assessment of spirituals in “Our Spiritual Strivings,” the first chapter from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

<sup>64</sup> Lomax could have easily at least mentioned Chinese folk music in the episodes that focused on the building of railroads but only referenced the Irish immigrant workers. However, Richard Weiss argues in “Ethnicities and Reform: Minorities and the Ambience of the Depression Years” that much of the American celebration of minorities on the eve of WWII focused on those groups who were being oppressed in Europe (e.g. Jews and Eastern Europeans) rather than those who bore the brunt of American prejudice (e.g. Asians, Indians, and even African Americans). Cultural leaders believed that America had to set itself as the antithesis of fascism and Nazism, hence their acceptance of those whom the fascists persecuted and their belief that democracy stood for tolerance and the acceptance of ethnic diversity (p. 566). Also, the show was designed to encourage student participation, which partially explains why the songs were always presented in English.

who were “[a]-killing poor drivers and burning their trains.” The trains, of course, belonged to the white pioneers, the “unsung heroes,” according to Lomax. He did mention the government’s encouragement of the buffalo slaughter, but failed to reflect on it any more than to muse “when the buffalo vanished, the power of the plains Indians was broken”; the prairie was then open for industrious Americans to “conquer.”<sup>65</sup>

Sometimes listeners noted the shortcomings in the diversity of folk traditions that Lomax presented. In one letter, the correspondence committee of Damascus High School in Maryland informed Lomax that the program introduced the fifty-one students in their seventh grade music class to the vast cultural diversity of American folk music. However, one of the writers asked Lomax about two omissions in the show: first, the role of Spanish and Mexican traditions in shaping the music of the Southwest, and second, the role of American Indians, “the original Americans.”<sup>66</sup> Most letters sent to Lomax, however, praised his *Folk Music of America*. Mrs. E.C. Ottoson of the folk music research department of the Pennsylvania Federation of Music Clubs commended Lomax for bringing folk music to the radio because the club members had “been trying for so many years to bring about an awakening among our musicians and friends of music to the amazing field of folk music lying unrecognized at our doorstep.” A teacher from New Jersey informed Lomax that she used the show in her fifth grade class for music education

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<sup>65</sup> *Wellsprings of Music* script (1 Apr. 1941), pp. 4, 8, Box: 04.01 1/3, Folder: 1 “ASA scripts 1940-41,” in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to Alan Lomax from the Correspondence Committee, Damascus High School, Damascus MD (26 Feb. 1940) p. 2 in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., box: 139/002 1/1 “Alan Lomax CBS Radio Series Collection,” folder: 4 “Correspondence Feb. 1940.” It can be assumed that the censorship of commercial radio restricted Lomax’s ability to expand on the ethnic diversity of America folk traditions. This distinction must be made because although the radio program was somewhat limited, during the same period, Lomax submitted a proposal for a folk festival to be held in conjunction with the 1939 World’s Fair that would feature African-American, Mexican, Acadian, Hawaiian traditions from different regions throughout the country and the influence of Chinese, Jewish, Irish and other ethnic traditions in New York City in particular. See Ronald Cohen *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*.

and to teach the social sciences.<sup>67</sup> This letter must have pleased Lomax because, as he wrote to another teacher in Virginia, “My own interest in this field is in its social background and in the light that it throws on [the] American makeup.”<sup>68</sup> Sometimes listeners wrote about how they were personally affected by the show. A listener from New York City, Peyton F. Anderson, complimented the episode “Negro Work Songs” and remarked, “In them one sees the courage and a rhythmic dignity even in adversity which makes me rather proud of my antecedents [sic].”<sup>69</sup> In addition to individual letters of support, Lomax often received packets of letters from different classes that had listened to the show. Some children wrote about the particular songs they enjoyed or submitted their own songs and games. The 1940-1941 Evaluation of School Broadcasts Research Project of Ohio State University informed Lomax that his show received positive feedback according to the weekly evaluations submitted by teachers who used the American School of the Air series in their classes.

Despite Lomax’s classroom success, his program ended in 1942 after he began working for the Office of War Information. The ASA began airing a new folk music program that differed in many respects from Lomax’s show. Rather than focusing on the music of the American working class, the program *Music of the Americas* concentrated on the folksongs of North, Central, and South America, in addition to United States. This program reflected the larger aims

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from Mrs. E.C. Ottoson to Alan Lomax (5 Feb. 1940); letter Cranford Public Schools, Cranford NJ to Alan Lomax (15 Nov. 1939), Folder: 4 “Correspondence Feb. 1940,” Box: 139/002 1/1 “Alan Lomax CBS Radio Series Collection,” in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Alan Lomax to Mrs. David L. Wing (14 Oct. 1940), Folder: “Correspondence Oct.-Dec. 1940,” Box: 139/002, 1/1 “Alan Lomax CBS Radio Series Collection,” in the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Peyton F. Anderson, M.D., to Alan Lomax (25 Feb. 1940), Folder: “American School of the Air Fan Mail,” Box 139/002, 1/1 “Alan Lomax CBS Radio Series Collection,” Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

of the overall series, which, besides educating about democracy and civic participation, entailed teaching listeners about the “importance of international ties.”<sup>70</sup>

By using folk music to illustrate a distinctly national heritage, Alan Lomax sought to teach children about American cultural diversity in way that transcended a mere tolerance of differences. Lomax’s understanding of nationalism not only recognized social, economic, and cultural difference, but used these distinctions to articulate what made the United States a distinct nation. Despite myriad cultural, economic, and social differences, Lomax had faith that Americans were united through civic ideals and the promise of democracy.

### **Conclusion**

As the nation moved from the Depression and New Deal years into the WWII era, the revival changed along with it. The “hard times” continued, resulting now from war rather than an economic depression. According to the revivalists, folk music served a specific purpose in this new climate. As a people’s music, folk music could be an important cultural tool in a “people’s war.” Once the United States entered the war, the type of democratic Americanism in which the revivalists believed came to define the wartime propaganda campaigns. Therefore, the revivalists easily adapted their Americanism to accommodate the social, cultural, and political contexts of WWII. Now, the revivalists argued that folk music could help secure Americans’ commitment to their democratic national identity during a protracted fight against fascism.

In their effort to use folk music as a tool for wartime propaganda, the revivalists were guilty of both romanticizing America and exaggerating the unity of the American people. In their effort to emphasize this unity, they failed to recognize citizens, such as Japanese-Americans,

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<sup>70</sup> Andrea Lynn Woody, “*American School of the Air: An Experiment in Music Education and Radio Broadcasting*,” M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin (May 2003), p. 73.

who were cast out of the social and political systems, and those, like African Americans, who still suffered second-class citizenship. For many progressives, these grave failures of American democracy were overshadowed by the brutalities of the totalitarian regimes. Yet, for activists who prided themselves on generating a culturally pluralist Americanism even before the war, the failure to acknowledge the full disjuncture between the wartime rhetoric of pluralism and the reality of American racism and prejudice was a significant shortcoming. This indicates that leftist revivalists like Alan Lomax were willing to subordinate their earlier emphasis on economically marginalized Americans to promote the kind of pluralism that suited the government's propaganda campaigns.

Contrary to the rhetoric of the revivalists and other engineers of wartime culture and propaganda, the war did not unite all Americans. However, the war did unite the revivalists. While tensions did exist between some of the revivalists, most redirected their programs to accommodate the war effort.<sup>71</sup> For example, both politically neutral revivalists like Sarah Gertrude Knott and political radicals like Charles Seeger endeavored to use folk music to protect American democracy. The need to stem the tide of fascism outweighed the social and political differences between the revivalists before the war. Following the government's agenda was not difficult for political centrists like Knott, but leftist revivalists had to dull their political edge in order to become fully immersed in the mainstream war effort. However, they did not sustain their political concessions for long. After the Allied victory leftist revivalists resumed the political work that they began before the war. During the war, therefore, the revival experienced

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<sup>71</sup> The revivalists sometimes disagreed on methods of presenting folk music. For instance, Alan Lomax detested Knott's design for the National Folk Festival, especially the way she performed as the emcee. In a letter that he wrote to his father after the 1938 festival, Lomax complained, "Miss Knott played her ordinary dumb but beautiful role, sweeping across the stage in a long white lace dress and pushing folk singers around like a professional checker player," quoted in Cohen, *A History of Folk Festivals in the United States*, p. 19.

a brief period of unanimity; it was a level of unity that the revivalists would not reach again for the duration of the movement.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TRIUMPH AND FAILURE OF THE LEFT

Throughout the years of World War II, the folk music revivalists worked to secure a place for folk music in mainstream American culture. They did so largely by adapting their programs to suit the wartime propaganda campaigns. Having thrown themselves into the war to such an extent, the revivalists needed to learn how to readjust to a time of peace, and learn quickly in order to remain culturally and politically relevant. Just as major industries had to shift production to suit a postwar economy, the revivalists had to change their message for a postwar society in which fascism was no longer the enemy.

Fortunately for the revivalists, two factors enabled them to segue from war to peace. The first was their pre-war efforts to make folk music socially relevant. This was especially true for left-wing revivalists who were involved in the musical group, the Almanacs, which used traditional and topical folk songs to advance left-wing social reforms. During the Popular Front, Communists had turned to folk music, particularly music from the rural South, as a way to connect to larger society because it was a distinctly American cultural tradition. Since many urban activists were either from immigrant families or immigrants themselves, an appreciation of indigenous rural folk music provided a means to effectively become as “American” as old stock citizens.<sup>1</sup> Those Communists who maintained this interest in folk music even after the Popular Front gravitated to a new group called the Almanac Singers. Although the Almanacs consisted of a small assortment of musicians, many progressive revivalists, including public folklorists and

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<sup>1</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, p. 6.

writers, were also affiliated with them. Together, these revivalists established a strong connection between folk music and political activism, especially in the realm of labor activism. It was a connection that many of these revivalists endeavored to strengthen soon after the war ended.

The other factor that helped the revivalists transition to peacetime was the political climate of postwar America. After the war, the United States experienced a surge of left-wing activism, especially in the field of organized labor. Left-wing revivalists formed a strong contingent in political activism. For a brief window in time, these revivalists had reason to believe that they were engendering permanent social and political reform in the United States. The labor movement, a key cause for the revivalists, gained a new sense of militancy after the numerous compromises that workers made during the war; the rise of wildcat strikes signified that a powerful grassroots drive was growing within the rank-and-file. Furthermore, many revivalists began forming close ties with labor unions. The leftist musicians of the revival took full advantage of the labor movement's leftward turn by participating in labor rallies and singing on picket lines—thus bringing folk music into the fight for workers' rights once again. In this environment, the revivalists hoped to achieve their dream of generating a “singing labor movement.”

During this time the left-wing faction of the revival grew in numbers and influence. Through music, these revivalists fought for better housing conditions for low-income citizens, labor reform, civil rights, and international peace. While some of these problems resulted from the postwar circumstances, most of them had deep roots. The revivalists, along with other progressives, had begun a concerted effort to change these conditions in the 1930s, buoyed by the ideals of democratic Americanism embedded in the Popular Front, and they continued their



efforts into the 1940s. While many put their work on hold during the war—several revivalists served in the armed forces or worked in wartime government agencies—the political revivalists resumed their activism almost immediately after peace was declared. With a few exceptions, the left-wing revivalists dominated the movement during these years and profoundly shaped the direction the revival would take in the following decades.<sup>2</sup>

### **Radical Revivalists, Unite!**

Years after Lee Hays left the South, he recalled one of his experiences organizing in the region during the mid-thirties. He was in the backseat of a car with other organizers—a black man and a white woman—driving down a rural Arkansas road at night. Because they were breaking political, racial, and gender codes in a staunchly, and violently, conservative region, everyone was visibly tense. To help calm them down, Hays started singing songs that they all would presumably know: church hymns. Soon, all the people in the car started singing, which did have a calming effect. At one point, Hays remembered saying: “I wish we had as many labor songs as hymns and that folks sang them with the same feeling,” to which a fellow organizer responded, “We will, someday. And who do you think is going to make the new songs?” Hays replied, “Why, I guess we will.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, that is exactly what Hays aimed to do when he came to New York City in 1939. Along with Millard Lampell, a journalist and leftist activist, and Pete Seeger, the youngest son of Charles, who had recently worked with Alan Lomax at the Archive of American Folksong and traveled around the country a bit with Woody Guthrie, he started a

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<sup>2</sup> During the 1940s, folk music also became popular among apolitical musical enthusiasts in cities, particularly in the Northeast. Folk songs appeared in jukeboxes, radio stations featured more programs dedicated to folk music, and progressive educators began employing folk singers as classroom guests. This rise of popular interest has led historians of the revival to characterize this era as the beginning of the “urban” phase of the revival, a qualifier that would continue to describe the folk revival for the duration of the movement. In this chapter, however, I focus on the rise of the political wing of the revival, and trace the rise of popular interest in folk music in the following chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Hays, “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*”, p. 67.

musical group to promote social activism at home and rally support for the fight against fascism abroad. Pete Seeger explained that they decided on the name “The Almanac Singers,” when he came across “almanac” while reading through Woody Guthrie’s notes for his songbook, *Hard Hitting Songs*. Hays suggested that they use “almanac” because in rural homes there were always two books: the Bible and the almanac, and “the bible helps them to the next world and the almanac helps them through this world.”<sup>4</sup> According to Lampell, the Almanac’s “creed” was a simple motto: “Our work is to be performed in the manner which best aids the working class in its struggle to claim its just heritage. We just stick to the old tunes working people have been singing for a long time—sing ‘em easy, sing ‘em straight, no holds barred. We’re working men on the side of the working man and against the big boys.”<sup>5</sup> Over the years Woody Guthrie, Pete and Butch Hawes, Bess Lomax, Agnes Cunningham, Josh White, Arthur Stern, and others joined the Almanacs, trying to bring social and political reform to America, defeat fascism, and generate a singing labor movement.

Lampell’s depiction of the Almanacs as “working men” was definitely an overstatement, for none of them held working-class jobs, but they were sympathetic to the needs of the American working-people. Arthur Stern described the group as a “scruffy lot” who at least tried to *look* like working men by affecting what they perceived as working-class dress, “feeling that to dress well was putting on airs and not part of the working-class decolletage.” Though most of the members came from the middle or even upper classes, as “proletarian romantics” they

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<sup>4</sup> FP 2006-CT-00038 Discussion between Pete Seeger, Ralph and Kate Rinzler, tape 2 (8 Dec. 1991) in the Ralph Rinzler Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

<sup>5</sup> “Interview with Millard Lampell” (30 March 1967) in Folder 110: Related Research: Dick Reuss Interview Transcriptions, Various, 1962-1971, 1.2 Ronald D. Cohen Papers, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

consistently aligned themselves with working-class causes.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, the Almanacs embedded themselves in the Popular Front ethos of the late 1930s. As Denning argues, the Popular Front marked the beginning of “the *laboring* of American culture.” Not only did labor and working-class themes enter into American film, literature, music and art; working-class people became “artists” and generated works depicting their own lives.<sup>7</sup> While the Almanacs were not working people themselves, they did try to sing in working-class dialects; and their subject material—losing houses and farms to foreclosure, joining CIO unions, trying to feed families—were topics to which almost all working-class Americans could relate during the Depression years.

The Almanacs strongly sympathized with causes that Popular Front organizations championed, but, according to Lampell, at the beginning they lacked a clearly defined philosophy. Even though they all espoused “left-oriented feelings,” those sentiments were “pretty vague and formless.” The only original member to have clear political views *and* experience was Lee Hays because of his connection to Commonwealth.<sup>8</sup> Not only did the Almanacs adopt the same causes that Commonwealth supported, they also adopted its living arrangements. Most of the Almanacs at one time or another lived in the communal “Almanac

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<sup>6</sup> “Notes on a Conversation with Arthur Stern, Gordon Friesen, and Sis Cunningham” (28 Dec. 1965), Folder: 105 Related Research: Dick Reuss Interviews with Gordon and Sis Cunningham, 1965-1968, Box 1.2 in the Ronald Cohen Papers, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. While the Almanacs often used male-centric language, they did not discount female figures in folk music. The group included female members and they did compose songs from a female perspective. For example, the song “Union Maid,” while treating women in a more domesticated role, did at least acknowledge women in the labor movement.

<sup>7</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. xvii.

<sup>8</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Millard Lampell, (29 Oct. 1979), p. 5, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Not only did Hays come up North with experience from Commonwealth, he also co-produced a documentary on sharecroppers, filmed on location among communities in Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta with the photojournalist Alan Hacker titled *America’s Disinherited*, from 1936-37. In “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*” Koppelman argues that this film was significant for introducing New York leftists to the plight of the southern sharecropper; it also showed the connection between music and activism for it featured many examples of black and white STFU members singing on picket lines (p. 5).

house” in New York City. The location moved around a few lower Manhattan apartments and members moved in and out, but, generally speaking, the Almanacs lived, worked, ate, and wrote songs communally.<sup>9</sup> Hays explained that the communal songwriting was perhaps the most important aspect of the group. Drawing inspiration from the “Anonymous” literary movement in Paris during the twenties, the Almanacs copyrighted their songs as a group so no one member would receive sole credit (unless a member wrote a song *en toto*). As Hays put it, this way the “[e]mphasis was on the stuff itself” rather than the composer’s reputation.<sup>10</sup>

The Almanacs released their first album, *Songs for John Doe* in early 1941 while the United States, though still neutral, began gearing up for war. The album contained numerous antiwar songs, including “Dear Mr. President” that included the notorious chorus: “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”; and “Plow Under,” that featured such lyrics as: “They said our system wouldn’t work / Until we killed a surplus off / So now they look at us and say / Plow the fourth one under / Plow Under...every fourth American boy.” *Songs for John Doe* revealed the Almanacs’ ideological affiliation with the Soviet Union, and support for the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact the Soviets had with Germany (which ended the Popular Front). However, they quickly changed their tune as soon as the Germans changed theirs.<sup>11</sup> In the album, *Dear Mr. President* (1942), they recanted their earlier

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<sup>9</sup> Hays often cooked for the group and they took turns with other household jobs. The only Almanac to hold a steady job was Bess Lomax who spent her days at the New York Public Library, bringing home a paycheck that was well appreciated.

<sup>10</sup> Hays, “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*”, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon Friesen later commented in an interview with Richard Reuss that, oddly enough, the people who really appreciated *Songs for John Doe* were conservatives because the album was anti-Roosevelt. (Richard Reuss interview with Gordon Friesen and Sis Cunningham, 1965-68, p. 6) Guthrie’s songwriting style was perhaps most evident in early versions of the “The Reuben James,” about the German bombing of the American escort ship that killed 115 sailors. Guthrie originally wanted to include all of the names of the sailors who died, but, because of the incredibly long list, the group decided on the lyrics: “What were their names / Oh tell me what were their names / Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?”

position in the title song, and declared their newfound support for U.S. intervention in such songs as “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave.”

In addition to drawing songwriting inspiration from international events, the Almanacs also focused on using music to reform domestic conditions. The members largely agreed on the causes their music supported, but they occasionally differed on how to get their messages across. Some, like Lampell, advocated an “agit-prop” approach that dealt with larger issues and based lyrics on catchy slogans; others, like Guthrie, disdained slogan-based songs as empty and forgettable and rather sought to write personalized ballads that connected listeners to the songs’ subjects.<sup>12</sup> Despite methodological differences, the Almanacs all agreed that their purpose was to use music in the effort for social, political, and economic change. Besides the fight against fascism, the Almanacs’ priority was helping the labor movement. They operated at a time when the labor movement had reached a peak—buoyed by the success of CIO organizing drives that included many Communist union organizers.<sup>13</sup> By composing songs like “Union Maid,” “Talking Union,” and an ode to the West Coast union organizer, “Song for Harry Bridges,” that they performed at labor rallies, the Almanacs worked to generate a singing labor movement.

The public reaction to The Almanac Singers was mixed. In 1941, *Life* magazine did a feature story on them, and they were invited to audition for a gig at the Rainbow Room in New York City. Yet, in this latter case, the group was treated more like a hillbilly novelty act than a

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<sup>12</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Bess Lomax Hawes (6 May 1977), pp. 30-31, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Gordon Friesen wrote that sometimes Guthrie went overboard with his emphasis on experience, once stipulating that ‘You can’t write a good song about a whorehouse unless you been in one.’ Friesen, “Songs From Our Times from the pages of *Broadside Magazine*,” in *The American Folk Scene*, p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 35. Cohen’s assessment balances between historians like Koppleman who argue that the Almanacs were much more interested in working for the labor movement than supporting Communist activities, and others like Robbie Lieberman who maintain that while the Almanacs did have some success at singing for labor rallies, they had a much bigger influence on the Communist movement than they ever had on organized labor (59).

source of legitimate political protest. The Almanacs did, however, become popular in many leftist circles, mostly in New York City. Bess Lomax Hawes recalled:

I think in other parts of the country, we would have had either a much more limited audience than we had in New York, or we would have had to develop a very different kind of repertoire, quite possibly not as outspokenly left. I think New York was a very special place at that time and when we toured, I think we more or less again sang to the converted.<sup>14</sup>

As they incorporated the leftist ethos prevalent in New York City, they often combined their political views with musical styles from other regions, particularly from the South. Lee Hays attributed their songwriting success to the fact that they drew inspiration from the people they encountered— striking tenant farmers, miners, steel workers, textile workers, and any other group involved in the labor movement. Hays later reflected that they were able to “tap that root of the people’s own culture—to mine out a particular vein. I think the Almanacs came closer to the mother lode than any other group before or since, because they were closer to the people, and from the people drew their wisdom and strength.”<sup>15</sup> To other leftists, that was the quality that gave The Almanacs their unique character, and made them more than simply a leftist agit-prop group. Harriet Magil praised the Almanacs for bringing something different to the movement in New York:

That’s one of the things that was fresh about them. That they didn’t just sit in the movement. They went out there where other people were. And while their point of view was gotten from the movement, their material was gotten from the people out there who had no connection to the movement. Just by listening to their songs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Bess Lomax Hawes (6 May 1977), p. 66. Lomax continued to bring folk music into labor struggles in the Midwest when she and other members of the Almanacs moved to Detroit in 1941-1942.

<sup>15</sup> Hays, “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*”, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> David K. Dunaway Interview with A.B. and Harriet Magil (3 Apr. 1976), p. 18, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

By bringing songs that were from and about other regions in America, the Almanacs helped introduce urban activists to the plight of American workers who were far removed from the union campaigns of the industrialized areas of the North.

Near the same time they formed the Almanacs, musicians Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie participated in an adult program of folk music called *Back Where I Come From*, that Alan Lomax created and hosted for CBS radio in 1940-1941. *Back Where I Come From* encapsulated Lomax's ambitions to present "the seemingly incoherent diversity of American folk song as an expression of its democratic, inter-racial, international character, as a function of its inchoate and turbulent many-sided development."<sup>17</sup> Each episode of the program focused on a theme with different musicians singing and reflecting on that topic. Bringing together then little-known singers like Guthrie and Seeger together with Burl Ives and Josh White, *Back Where I Come From* introduced listeners to musicians who would become major figures in the folk music scene during the 1950s and 1960s.

While Lomax may have intended for the show to represent American diversity, most episodes followed in the same vein as *Folk Music of America* by featuring an all-male cast reflecting on largely masculine activities. The program also largely focused on agrarian life. As Woody Guthrie stated in one episode before breaking out into the Populist anthem, "The Farmer is the Man that Feeds them All": "You got to remember that there's still more corn than concrete in America." At times, the guests acknowledged that they tended to focus on "people from small towns, hilltops, and farm valleys" in discussing such topics as courting, tall-tale telling and other aspects of small town life. Yet, at least one show, on October 21, 1941, included urbanites discussing industrial labor. Lomax repeatedly stressed the American character of the show. On

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Lomax quoted in Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 25.

February 10, 1941, the announcer opened the show by declaring, “Out of the heart of America come the songs and stories sung and told on *Back Where I Come From*. It’s as American as the town hall, the picket fence, the country courthouse and ice cream sodas and prohibition.”<sup>18</sup>

Alan Lomax did not just employ members of the Almanacs on his program, he also served as a “spiritual advisor” to the group. Lomax’s interests in folk music at that time were rooted in rural music, particularly traditions from the South. Many of his song-collecting expeditions focused on the South and Mid-West during this period, and his radio work reflected the rural regions where he traveled. While he tried to lead the Almanacs in a more “countrified” direction that was reminiscent of his radio program, the Almanacs managed to maintain a strong degree of musical eclecticism. While they did incorporate southern folk music that Lomax and Hays advocated, they also borrowed from other traditions, especially protest music that came from nineteenth century British radicals and the American abolitionist movement. During their live performances in clubs, at labor rallies, and on picket lines, they often sang both traditional folk and topical songs, all of which served to advance progressive social and political reforms.<sup>19</sup> By combining traditional and topical, politically conscious and politically neutral songs and bringing them all into the reform efforts, the Almanacs established a precedent that progressive and left-wing revivalists would continue into the 1950s and 1960s.

The Almanacs’ musical eclecticism matched their group dynamic. They were a group that maintained a constellation of members who varied between part-time and full-time

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<sup>18</sup> *Back Where I Come From* episode script (10 Nov. 1940), p. 8; episode script (21 Oct. 1940), p. 2; episode script, (10 Feb. 1941), Folder 2: “CBS Radio Scripts: Back Where I Come From,” Box 04. 01, Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Though the guests on *Back Where I Come From* affirm that the show is authentic in its representation of the American people, Alan Lomax wrote the script for each episode, and therefore his opinions were prevalent throughout the program. However, at the end of each episode, he did request that listeners send in their own songs so the songs at least represented the people who regularly tuned into the program. Lomax often opened the show with, “It’s as American as...” with the comparisons changing weekly.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 28-35.



membership. By 1942, there were no clear leaders and many of the group's early members became involved in side projects. That same year, a group of members, including Bess Lomax and Agnes Cunningham, left New York City for Detroit to be at the locus of labor activism. Soon after, Seeger left for the army, Guthrie joined the merchant marines, and the group eventually disbanded. In the few years that they operated, the Almanacs worked to bring folk music into the labor movement—an effort that most members would resume after the war.

The Almanacs' combination of political activism with folk music inspired many other young revivalists, especially the members of "Folksay," a square-dance group that also began in New York City. Folksay emerged in 1942 as an offshoot of The Victory Dance Committee, an organization of young leftists who supported the war effort. In 1944 the troupe joined forces with the American Youth for Democracy—a more broad-based and popular successor to the Young Communist League. Richard Reuss described Folksay's mission as "the promulgations of the 'people's' democratic heritage through traditional song and coupled with political action."<sup>20</sup> Irwin Silber, a student and strong advocate of Communism, became involved with Folksay shortly after it began. The group, as he described it, consisted of people who had a collective interest in "square dancing, folk music, and things like that, joined in a political framework." It is clear from this description that Folksay members drew inspiration from the Almanac Singers. Many members had attended rallies where the Almanacs performed and followed their path of fusing traditional music with messages of political change. The Almanacs provided an example of how to be politically progressive and yet still connected to American culture, as Silber explained:

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<sup>20</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, p. 184; Robbie Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 60-61.

It was very liberating because—at least for people of my generation who were rejecting the values inherent in commercial music and didn't have that sense of identification with the European traditions, and didn't want to. We wanted something that was America...It wasn't just the Almanacs, it was Woody [Guthrie], Lead Belly, and Pete [Seeger] and so on, pulling it together that made a connection to the music and political values that made a lot of sense to us.<sup>21</sup>

Although, as Silber recognized, there was nothing overtly political about square dancing, the Folksay members believed that they made a political statement just by reviving these traditions: “We were really interested in square dancing. We felt, in that sense, that we were, in reviving the authentic folk music, we were making a political statement.” Folksay members made this statement by crafting a performance style that combined square dancing with traditional and topical songs and themes. With one routine called “Circle Left,” and another routine that followed a script based on Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes*, they clearly tried to build from a distinctly radical American foundation.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly before Folksay formed, the CPUSA experienced sweeping changes. The Popular Front ended as an official policy after the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, but the antifascist ethos that marked the Front resumed after the Soviet Union formed the Grand Alliance with the United States and Britain. In the midst of this, Earl Browder completed the Americanization of the CPUSA by dissolving it as a party and turning it into a political organization called the Communist Political Association (CPA) in 1944. The CPA still followed the Communist precedent of emphasizing the significance of the working class, but it selected such mainstream political figures as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln as leaders to emulate. Unfortunately for

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 5

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pp. 43-44. It is important to note that political groups like Folksay did not corner the market on folk music activities in urban areas like New York City. During the same time that they operated, Margaret Mayo organized another, apolitical square dance group that also became popular among folk music enthusiasts. The staunchly apolitical revivalist, Izzy Young, who became a major figure in the New York City scene of revivalists during the late 1950s and 1960s, credits Mayo's group for getting him started in the revival.

Browder, dissolving the CPUSA as a *Party* went too far for the Soviets' taste, and he served as the CPA's first and last president.

Between the Almanacs, *Back Where I Come From*, and Folksay, left-wing revivalists rooted themselves and their political positions firmly in the American cultural heritage. These revivalists were all sympathizers with the Americanism that the Communist Party espoused during the Popular Front, and they sustained the pro-democracy views and rhetoric even after the Soviet Union halted the official mandate. Not only does this reveal that the communist revivalists maintained a degree of autonomy from the Party, but it also indicates that their political affiliations were predicated on something more than just an interest in following the Party line. Rather, the leftist revivalists were primarily interested in using the musical cultural heritage of the American people to both fight fascism abroad and bring about democratic reform at home.

### **A Time to Gain**

After the war ended, Communists and left-wing progressives experienced a short-lived euphoria; the Allied forces defeated fascism, and a new spirit of labor radicalism coursed through the working class. By the end of 1946 over five million workers in the electrical, steel, coal, auto, oil, railroad, and packinghouse industries had gone on strike. The number of people joining left-wing causes swelled, and Browder's moderate, reformist views no longer suited the increasingly militant milieu. In 1945, Moscow reestablished the CPUSA and placed the hard-line William Z. Foster at the helm.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Isserman, *Which Side Were You On*, pp. 1-2; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 41.

As the revived Party galvanized card-carrying members, the general spirit of activism that characterized the immediate postwar years—spurring wildcat strikes and initiating a new phase of the civil rights movement—rallied leftist sympathizers and fellow travelers. Many revivalists, especially those connected to groups like Folksay, rode this wave of optimism and offered their musical talents to aid the struggles. The founders of the Almanacs and other musical activists spearheaded this drive and formed a new organization with the purpose of bringing music and musicians into social activism. In late 1945, Pete Seeger and Lee Hays convened several of their musical and political associates in Seeger’s apartment. The point of the meeting was to pick up where the Almanacs had left off: to generate music to support the labor, civil rights, and peace movements, and the general drive for social and economic justice. Forming People’s Songs, Inc., the organizers planned to establish a newsletter and expand from their New York City center to the rest of the country; eventually, branches grew in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and on various college campuses.<sup>24</sup> Mario “Boots” Cassetta, a member of the West Coast branch of the organization, described how the members combined a love of folk music with a zeal for activism:

It wasn’t a political organization in that sense of the word. We were not there gathered to formulate programs based on issues and take appropriate action. We were there because each of us somehow were freaks about folk music and its application to whatever a struggle we might think was worthwhile struggling against or for. And the diversity was large...it was a gathering place, a marketplace for ideas.<sup>25</sup>

Cassetta’s view that People’s Songs was not a political organization in a narrow sense is correct. The members were united by a shared interpretation of American democracy as a way to secure justice for all citizens, and they used folk music in efforts to secure that justice—whether it was

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen. *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 42-43; Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, p. xvi.

<sup>25</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Mario Cassetta (26 Sept. 1976), p. 16, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

economic justice for working-class Americans or political justice for disenfranchised citizens. While this interpretation of democracy served as a guiding principle for the group, People's Songs members did not share a common political platform: some were Communist members while others were progressive-liberal holdovers from the New Deal era. While their political affiliations may have differed, however, they shared goals for domestic reform.

Lomax, Lampell, Seeger, and Hays had cited the importance of folk music in efforts for social and political reform during the thirties, and they maintained that the music could still serve that purpose in the aftermath of war. Some commentators lauded People's Songs for bringing folk music back into political activism. In the winter of 1946, Mike Gold declared in the *Daily Worker* that the new organization was bringing "songs of, by and for the people" back into people's struggles, an effort that indicated that the "spirit had not died—it has only been unemployed."<sup>26</sup> Although Gold made this statement shortly after People's Songs formed, his assessment proved correct; the organization soon became the primary outlet for revivalists, and other political activists, who still believed in the democratic ideals that were embedded in Popular Front Americanism.

By carrying the spirit of New Deal/Popular Front era Americanism into the postwar era, People's Songs became a "critical community," to use sociologist Thomas Rochon's phrase, of the revival during the mid-1940s. According to Rochon, movements turn the critical community's ideas into action and work to diffuse their "values" throughout larger society. The progressive revivalists who formed People's Songs as the critical community for the revival during this period included folklorists Charles Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Benjamin Botkin; musicians Woody Guthrie, Betty Sanders, Tom Glazer, and Agnes Cunningham; and lyricists

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<sup>26</sup> Mike Gold quoted in Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 42

and writers Gordon Friesen, Waldemar Hille, and Irwin Silber. Thomas Rochon explains that once a critical community becomes established, it begins to generate its own means of communication.<sup>27</sup> These methods of communication serve to reaffirm the ideological convictions of the group, connect members of the movement, and keep the activists informed on developments within the movement. For People's Songs, the major form of communication was the *People's Songs* bulletin, a magazine through which they promoted their vision of Americanism. As a left-wing group, their Americanism had what historian Michael Denning calls a "radical edge," illustrated by their celebration of traditional icons such as Abraham Lincoln, and more radical, but nonetheless American, figures like John Brown.<sup>28</sup> By adopting these articulations of Americanism, the revivalists of the People's Songs era ensured that the nationalism they promoted was rooted in both an American and *radical* context.

Although the members of People's Songs were interested in folk music, they did not focus exclusively on traditional white and black music from the rural South or ethnic enclaves in urban centers. Instead, they continued to expand the definitional boundaries that the Almanacs had begun to stretch during the early years of the decade. In the first edition of the *People's Songs* bulletin they explained their approach to music by describing the organization's goals:

The people are on the march and must have songs to sing. Now, in 1946, the truth must reassert itself in many singing voices. There are thousands of unions, people's organizations, singers, and choruses who would gladly use more songs. There are many songwriters, amateur and professional, who are writing these songs [and] it is clear that there must be an organization to make and send songs of labor and the American people though the land. To do this job, we have formed PEOPLE'S SONGS, INC. We invite you to join.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rochon, *Culture Moves*, pp. 23, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Anon., *People's Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Feb. 1946), p. 1.

Many of the questions regarding People's Songs' understanding of folk music were answered through their name. The organizers encouraged members to write topical songs and parodies of popular songs, as well as change the words of old folk songs and use traditional songs in new ways to support political activism. In so doing, People's Songs followed the path that the Left had established during the Popular Front years. However, they also broadened the Communist definition of "the people" from that of the working class and its supporters to include almost anyone—even the bourgeoisie, reactionaries, and racists—because they believed that "the people" meant anyone whom they "might hope to reach with [a] broad progressive message," according to historian Robbie Lieberman.<sup>30</sup>

The members of People's Songs devoted much of their efforts to writing topical songs—songs that they spread to other musical social activists through the bulletin. According to the editors of the inaugural issue in February 1946, People's Songs published the bulletin "to create, promote and distribute songs of labor and the American people." The editors encouraged readers to submit any song that would "suit America's varied traditions": traditional songs, new songs with a steady beat, and cantatas were all considered relevant.<sup>31</sup> Despite this open call for any kind of music, folk music enthusiasts and "folk" singers formed the core of People's Songs. Outside commentators also observed that the organization primarily emphasized traditional folk music. The author of a *Christian Science Monitor* editorial from 1947 focused almost entirely on what she perceived as the organization's preoccupation with folk music:

It is interesting to speculate on the possible role of People's Songs groups in their communities. They can certainly do much to circulate the still all-too-neglected folk heritage of poetry and song which, as Archibald MacLeish has said, "tells more about the

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<sup>30</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., *People's Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Feb. 1946), p. 1.

American people than all the miles of their quadruple-lane express highways and all the acres of their billboard-plastered cities.”<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the first several issues of the bulletin, People’s Songs grappled with its musical identity, trying to figure out what music best suited their programs. By the fifth issue, the editors found a common ground: “People’s Songs is interested in folk songs, work songs, and the best in the song traditions. But not to the exclusion of new songs. It works not as a folk-lore society, but as an organization serving the cultural needs of the people—in songs.”<sup>33</sup>

Distinguishing themselves from a folklore society did not mean that the members of People’s Songs rejected older traditions. Rather, they maintained that folk songs, the music of the people, were part of a vibrant, living tradition. In their view, even traditional songs had a political dimension in 1940s America. Benjamin Botkin also shared this understanding of folk music and described the aims of People’s Songs as being based in “the rich and democratic traditions of American folk music.” Furthermore, he declared, “We feel that the whole American Folk tradition is a progressive people’s tradition. For that reason our comments, our new songs, our activities are, in great measure, rooted in the fertile soil of American folk music.”<sup>34</sup> The organization clearly kept the political spirit of American reform that was embodied in the Popular Front alive during the 1940s, a spirit that the editors of the bulletin reaffirmed in each monthly issue.

In each issue, the bulletin requested that readers subscribe to the magazine and join local People’s Songs branches. People’s Songs described the organization as designed “to spread these songs around, to bring to as many people of this country as possible, the true, democratic

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<sup>32</sup> Anon., “People’s Songs,” *Christian Science Monitor*, (4 Mar. 1947), no page number.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., “People’s Songs: Songs of Labor and the American People,” *Peoples Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (Jan. 1947), p. 3

<sup>34</sup> Undated Benjamin Botkin memo to Alan Lomax, p. 4, Box: Benjamin Botkin, Richard Reuss Papers, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.



message that comes with the music—to make these songs which the people created, go to work for the people at last...”<sup>35</sup> People’s Songsters spread these messages by singing for political causes and by printing the songs of the people in the bulletin. Editors particularly encouraged readers to submit parodies of traditional songs because, as they explained, “By taking a familiar folk songs and writing new ‘socially significant’ words for it...you can create a potent weapon.”<sup>36</sup> People’s Songsters hoped to use these musical weapons in social and political reform movements that would secure democratic rights for all Americans. The editors pushed this message by printing certain songs, such as Lewis Allen’s “The House I Live In” (1943), which includes the lines: “The house I live in / The same for black and white. / My country right or wrong / And if it’s wrong to set it right. / A home where all are equal / A house I want to see / Where all will have Four Freedom’s / That’s America to me.”<sup>37</sup>

The writers also couched their political views in traditional—even patriotic—songs. In the Foreward to an edited compilation of songs printed in the bulletin, entitled *A People’s Songs Workbook*, Pete Seeger, Waldemar Hille, and Earl Robinson describe the collection as a representative body of authentic American music: “There are old American ballads here, songs of the Negro people, songs that helped build America, international songs (such as those of the Spanish Loyalists), union songs and more recent topical-political songs. They tell your American history.” The *Workbook* commences with “The Star Spangled Banner,” the tune of which they explain came from an English drinking song, which “merely goes to prove that [the anthem] came from the people and shall forever belong, flag and song both, to the people.” Continuing in that vein, it includes the song “Jefferson and Liberty” to illustrate how music “helped to spread

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<sup>35</sup> “What is People’s Songs?,” Folder: People’s Songs, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>36</sup> Anon., *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Oct. 1946), p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis Allen, “The House I Live In,” *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (Dec. 1946), p. 4. Lewis Allen was the pen name for Abel Meeropol.

the promise of a new democracy during Thomas Jefferson's campaign."<sup>38</sup> Democracy was one ideal for which the members of People's Songs strove, and they presented ways to include marginalized Americans into the democratic national body through specific reform efforts.

The movements that *People's Songs* bulletin supported reflected the ideals of the American Left during the immediate postwar era. Silber explained that at the beginning, People's Songs had a very close relationship with the CIO, when the CIO unions were still on friendly terms with the Left. Members of People's Songs often sang at labor rallies and strikes; the left-wing National Maritime Union was especially fond of bringing People's Songsters onto the picket line.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the organization's emphasis on labor is evident in the very first issue of the bulletin, which opens with the Wobbly anthem, "Solidarity Forever." In their call for song submissions in the following issue, the editors provide a list of topics for which songs are "IMMEDIATELY NEEDED," a list that includes such issues as "the high cost of living, picket lines, [and] labor unity." Lest readers think that this is all they needed, the editors add, "Not to be neglected are [songs about] the people's concern about atomic power, about labor's role in peace, and our concern for suffering minority people's everywhere."<sup>40</sup> In addition to songs, the bulletin also included pro-labor square dance calls for anyone who wanted to hold a socially conscious dance. In the piece "Union Square Dance," calls such as "Break the ring and add two more / Six in the union is better than four," "Red, white, yellow, and brown / United Nations go to town," and the concluding call, "That's all, but before you're through / All make sure to pay

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<sup>38</sup> *A People's Songs Workbook* (People's Songs, Inc. 1947), pp. 1, 5, 6, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>39</sup> David Dunaway Interview with Irwin Silber and Barbara Dane (1977), pp. 17-18, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>40</sup> Anon., "To The Readers," *People's Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (March 1946), pp. 1-2.

your dues,” clearly indicated People’s Songsters’ desire to generate a listening audience that was sympathetic to the American labor movement.<sup>41</sup>

People’s Songs may have been primarily interested in aiding the labor movement, but that was far from their only concern. In calling for songs that reflected the needs of “minority peoples” and printing songs and square dances that encouraged racial egalitarianism, the leaders of People’s Songs used the bulletin to push for an end to racial and ethnic discrimination. Irwin Silber, who succeeded Pete Seeger as the executive director of People’s Songs in 1947, commented that in addition to white, rural folk music, the members of People’s Songs were particularly interested in blues and jazz, something that he attributed to both musical appreciation and the organization’s support for the civil rights movement. This approach echoed the Almanac’s broad understanding of people’s music, and their use of different musical traditions for the purpose of achieving particular social and political reforms. Silber believed that People’s Songs’ emphasis on black traditions, for example, had a clear task in the realm of civil rights. Celebrating jazz and blues enabled People’s Songs to demonstrate “an expression of concern for [the] black democratic struggle; an association of the movement with the culture of black people.” Among the members to whom he attributed this sentiment, Alan Lomax ranked the highest.<sup>42</sup>

From the New Deal folklorists through People’s Songs, most folk revivalists supported civil rights efforts, and they disseminated this message through various media outlets. The Almanacs provided an example of how to employ music in the fight against discrimination, a precedent that People’s Songs closely followed. The Almanacs wrote anti-discrimination songs

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<sup>41</sup> Song #27 “Union Square Dance,” *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Apr. 1946), p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> David Dunaway interview with Barbara Dane and Irwin Silber (1977), p. 24, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Silber credits Lomax for highlighting blues in his radio program *Blues at Midnight*, but Lomax had featured blues musicians on various radio shows dating back to the late thirties when he began his radio career.

like the 1941 song “Jim Crow.” Set to the tune of the traditional song “Groundhog,” “Jim Crow” contained such lyrics as: “This is a Land of Democracy. / Why isn't everybody free? / Why isn't everybody free? / Jim Crow!” Furthermore, notable black musicians including Josh White, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee lent their musical talents to the group. These musicians, and other black folk singers, including Lead Belly, wrote several songs that decried American racism, and they accompanied the other Almanacs into People’s Songs after the war.

In the mid-forties, Woody Guthrie encouraged Moses Asch, an affiliate of Peoples’ Songs, to release an album of songs that Guthrie wrote about contemporary circumstances through his company, Disc. Guthrie hoped that songs such as “Blinding of Isaac Woodward,” “Killing of the Ferguson Brothers,” and “People’s Army” would call attention to the “lynchings, hangings, tarrings, featherings, and blindings” that blacks suffered throughout the country. Furthermore, Guthrie informed Asch that by showing what “is happening right and left all up and down the country...Disc could win the friendship of not only 13 million Negroes, but with many other Nationalities and colors.”<sup>43</sup> Others, while sharing Guthrie’s sentiment, were not as militant and couched their views in more measured language. In 1947, Benjamin Botkin explained that “Negro songs of protest” fit in the long heritage of American freedom songs that spoke to “liberating or being liberated from bondage and oppression.” Botkin explained:

The final lesson of the freedom songs of the Negro is the lesson of all freedom songs in America...our songs of freedom from the American Revolution on down, are a part of our folk bill of Rights, hymning eternal and basic concepts of social justice. They are a part of our folk-say — what the people have to say about themselves, where they come from and where they are going—in their own way and in their own words.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Woody Guthrie Letter to Moses Asch,” (15 Aug. 1946), Folder: Asch Project—Woody Guthrie, Box: 3 in the Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Despite Guthrie’s efforts, this album was never released.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Botkin, “The Folk-Say of Freedom Songs,” *Freedom Train* (21 Oct. 1947), pp. 14, 16 in “Ben Botkin Correspondence,” Series I, Box 1, Archie Green Papers, Southern Folklife Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Sometimes the music that black musicians composed after becoming involved in left-wing circles became controversial. The affiliations black musicians had with leftists provided them with new rhetoric that they incorporated into their songs, a rhetoric that included a vocabulary that was a far cry from their traditional backgrounds. One of the most infamous cases of this is Lead Belly's song "Bourgeois Blues," which he wrote after encountering racial discrimination in Washington D.C. Some scholars of the revival, including R. Serge Denisoff, interpret this song as a case of the political left co-opting a rural southerner and forcing its ideas and vocabulary on him; Lead Belly had experienced far worse treatment in the Deep South, which makes his outrage at segregation in D.C., and his repeated refrain that the racist policies rendered the city a "bourgeois town," rather suspect. However, this interpretation not only patronizes the performer, but also implies an inability on his part to adopt new political positions. It discounts the fact that, perhaps through their encounters with northern Leftists, southern musicians learned a new political vocabulary that encapsulated what they felt and experienced. As folklorist John Greenway argues, incorporating political rhetoric in a folk song "does not lift the singer out of the folk; an awareness of the degradation of one's environment is not culture."<sup>45</sup> The important issue in this case is not whether or not Lead Belly was fully aware of the nuances of Marxist ideology, or if his song was musically "authentic." Rather, it provides an example of how Communist revivalists encouraged folk singers to highlight American racism in their music, and thus to bring folk music into efforts to eradicate racial injustice.

The members of People's Songs followed the Almanac precedent by composing new songs about racial injustice. Occasionally the magazine featured songs that called for a universal brotherhood that denied racial distinction, as with the Calypso singer, Lord Invader's "God Made

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<sup>45</sup> Greenway, *Folk Songs of Protest*, pp. 12, 115.

Us All,” which features the stanza: “We ought to unite with one another / As the scripture say, to love thy neighbor / If you are a Jew or an Italian / A Negro or a subject of Great Britain.”<sup>46</sup> Most of the songs, however, dealt specifically with the American racial situation. Norma and Paul Preston contributed “Mister KKK,” which includes the lyrics: “You can preach about white supremacy / But it’s got no place in a democracy / It’s a dark stain in our history.” In the same issue of the bulletin that featured “Mister KKK,” the editors included a song composed by a southern, black farmer (whose name was omitted for security reasons) commending the Supreme Court’s ruling that desegregated interstate buses, entitled “Hallelujah, I’m A-Travelin.”<sup>47</sup> Many People’s Songsters contributed songs that specifically attacked racist political figures. Leading members Lee Hays and Bob and Adrienne Claiborne protested the notoriously racist and anti-Semitic senator Theodore Bilbo and the racist congressman John Rankin, both from Mississippi. The Claibornes’ “Listen Mr. Bilbo,” summed up the People’s Songs position regarding these political figures with: “You don’t like Negroes / You don’t like Jews / If there’s anyone you do / Like, it sure is news / You don’t like Poles, Italians / Catholics, too / Is it any wonder, Bilbo / That we don’t like you?”<sup>48</sup> Other readers submitted songs that called attention to specific racial incidents. Harold Preece and Celia Kraft contributed “Columbia Town,” about the lynchings of black war veterans. In the introduction they explained that they decided to write it “because they are angry, as good southerners, about the way Negro citizens are treated in the enlightened democracy of the South.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lord Invader (Rupert Grant), “God Made Us All,” *People’s Songs Bulletin*, Vol. 1. No. 6 (July 1946), p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Norma and Paul Preston, “Mister KKK,” and Anon. “Hallelujah, I’m A-Travelin,” *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 8, (Sept. 1946), pp. 5, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Bob and Adrienne Claiborne, “Listen, Mr. Bilbo,” *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1. No. 2 (March 1946), p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Harold Preece and Celia Kraft, “Columbia Town,” *People’s Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (June 1946), p. 7.

In addition to featuring songs that protested racial discrimination, the bulletin kept the People's Songs community apprised of other efforts—both internal and external to the organization—to fight American racism. In the September 1946 issue, the bulletin informed readers of a concert that People's Songs had arranged at Town Hall called “Sing to Kill Jim Crow,” the proceeds of which would be donated to the Civil Rights Congress. The following June, the magazine featured an article, “Singing Uncommercials,” that praised a new ad campaign on the New York City radio station WNEW. According to the writer, “Instead of plugging soap and mouthwash, they are plugging brotherhood—between all mankind. Yes, no matter what the color of your skin or what church you go to.” The station aired a series of four one-minute songs that Hy Zaret and Lou Singer composed as public service messages. The December 1947 issue posted one of these pieces, “Brown Skinned Cow,” that included the lyrics: “You can get good milk from a brown-skinned cow / The color of the skin doesn't matter 'no how / Ho, ho ho, haw, haw, haw / You can learn common sense at the groc'ry store.”<sup>50</sup> Even though Zaret and Singer were Tin Pan Alley songwriters—the scourge of American music, many revivalists believed—their songs became acceptable when they supported the same causes that the progressive revivalists advocated.

The bulletin soon became the primary means for spreading both topical and traditional songs of protest to members across the country. To help more specific, or local, causes, the editors of the bulletin published smaller pamphlets based on the material featured in the magazine. The topics of these pamphlets varied from explaining how to establish a regional People's Songs branch, and how to stage a hootenanny, to how to secure the printing of a publicity release. Some of these pamphlets addressed regional projects, as in the case of

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<sup>50</sup> “Singing Uncommercials,” *People's Songs*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (June 1947), p. 6; “Brown Skinned Cow,” *People's Songs*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (Dec. 1947), p. 3.

“Housing Action Songbook: On To Sacramento,” that the California branch of People’s Songs issued during their participation in the campaign for better housing conditions. Included in this publication are several songs that also appeared in the bulletin, such as the Almanac Singers’, “No Jim Crow,” which the editors explain would help in the effort to “sing out against restrictive covenants,” and “On to Sacramento,” which a songwriter composed specifically for this event.<sup>51</sup>

The author of another pamphlet, “Organize a People’s Songs Branch,” describes the organization’s general aims and beliefs as follows:

We believe that the songs of any people most truly express their life, their struggles, and highest aspirations...And we extend a welcoming hand to anyone, no matter what religion or creed, or race, or nation, who believes with us that songs can bring about a stronger unity between all people, and that songs can thus fight for peace, for a better life for all, and for the brotherhood of man.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, this was a message that the editors of the bulletin reinforced through every song they printed. Irwin Silber recognized this fact as well, observing a year after the organization ended that the bulletin served as an important means for disseminating the music of the people:

From Song No. 1, “Solidarity Forever,” to Song No. 319, “Johnny I Hardly Knew You,” the thirty some odd issues of the *People’s Songs* bulletin distributed songs reflecting the main struggles of the American people and the many cultures which are a part of our culture to thousands of singers, song-writers, composers and performers throughout the country.<sup>53</sup>

Supporting people’s struggles was the driving purpose behind People’s Songs, and the organization’s leaders used the bulletin to spread this message to a listening, singing, and reading audience.

Besides supporting reform efforts ranging from world peace to better housing, singing at union rallies and on picket lines, and organizing hootenannies to support labor and civil rights

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<sup>51</sup> “Housing Action Songbook: On to Sacramento,” *People’s Songs of California* (1947), p. 5, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>52</sup> “Organize a People’s Songs Branch,” p. 1, *American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.*

<sup>53</sup> Irwin Silber, “People’s Songs: Songs of Labor and the American People,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1950), p. 8.



causes, the members of People's Songs became immersed in national politics. In 1947 Henry Wallace announced his candidacy for the presidency, and People's Songs threw almost everything they had into his campaign. Wallace had served as the Secretary of Agriculture and then as Vice President for Roosevelt. As an advocate for peace, for a more conciliatory relationship with the Soviet Union, and for extending civil rights to African Americans, Wallace was certainly an unusual political figure. In a move that only added to his unconventionality, Wallace selected Glen Taylor, a senator from Idaho who was also a cowboy musician, as his running mate on the Progressive Party ticket. Shortly after Wallace announced his candidacy, several People's Songsters began traveling on his campaign tour, including Paul Robeson, Bernie Asbell, and Pete Seeger. Alan Lomax signed up as the musical director for the campaign and various members composed songs about the campaign that People's Songs sold individually and in bound collections, such as *Songs For Wallace*.

In her memoir of her experiences in the folk music revival, Marianne "Jolly" Robinson describes the "Wallace Caravans" that People's Songsters introduced to the Wallace campaign: These caravans were groups of actors and musicians that acted as traveling musical/theater troupes. Working with sympathetic unions and other progressive organizations, the caravans crisscrossed the country, traveling by car to perform shows modeled after the "agit prop" productions of the 1930s. One of Robinson's most memorable trips involved traveling around the steel region of Monongahela Valley in Pennsylvania and into West Virginia. Through dances, skits, and songs, the Wallace Caravans illustrated specific issues of concern to the Progressive Party, which included "jobs and labor unity, racial equality, lower prices, decent housing, health care for all, and peace." The Caravan leaders were centered in New York City, but they collaborated with unions, other labor organizations, and regional branches of the Progressive

Party in many parts of the country. Among the labor groups with which they worked was the International Workers' Order, a radical group primarily composed of recent immigrants.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to leading the Wallace caravans, People's Songs ran the music at the party convention in Philadelphia and organized a mass rally at Yankee Stadium. When People's Songs began to suffer hard times after the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, (which was a blow to both Communists and organized labor), and the growing anti-Communist sentiment, which led to the ouster of Communists and fellow travelers from the labor movement, the Wallace campaign gave them a shot of hope, according to Irwin Silber:

It was a very, very exciting kind of thing and it had enormous significance. It was the beginning of the Cold War[.] Wallace had broken with Truman, around the question of the Cold War, [and] Wallace represented the continuation of the New Deal. Everything was falling apart, the wartime alliance was over. The United Front was breaking down and there was the excitement that gripped our organization... This was a real hope and possibility for the future. Remember, when Henry Wallace first got into the campaign, we were thinking he was going to get ten million votes. We thought that was a realistic possibility. It was a people's movement.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, in the end, Wallace failed miserably. Rising conservatism and anti-Communism, the concessions Truman made to win over voters who would have sided with Wallace, and the fact that Wallace himself was a lousy politician, all help to explain this crushing defeat.<sup>56</sup>

The failure of the Progressive Party at the national level dealt a major blow to the members of People's Songs because they had invested so much time, energy, and money in the campaign. Yet, political failure was not the only source of disillusionment for these revivalists.

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<sup>54</sup> Marianne "Jolly" Robinson, *Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire: The Restless Journey of Marianne "Jolly" Robinson* (Berkeley: Regent Press, 2010), pp. 38-39.

<sup>55</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Irwin Silber and Barbara Dane (26 May 1977), pp. 45-46, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>56</sup> Despite the excitement that surrounded him, Wallace remained aloof and disconnected from even the largest group he courted: the labor movement. Stylistically, he painted himself more as an agrarian populist than an urban workingman. Wallace even followed Alan Lomax's suggestion that he travel around the South with Pete Seeger, on the assumption that Seeger's banjo playing would endear him to rural southerners. However, no matter how much Seeger played, it would not have overshadowed the fact that Wallace ran an interracial campaign to white southerners who staunchly supported racial segregation.

After the war, left-wing revivalists had experienced a surge of optimism, a wave that continued for the next few years. However, in the midst of what seemed to be the era of left-wing progressivism and a new phase of Communist Americanism, conservative opposition steadily grew and then erupted. Now, the political revivalists were suddenly forced to deal with a shift in society that jeopardized both their vision of Americanism and their musical careers.

### **A Time to Lose**

Despite Wallace's personal failures as a presidential candidate, his campaign, at least initially, represented the fruition of the Popular Front dream. Even though the Communist Party had denounced Browder's Americanization efforts by the mid-forties, it did not follow that all of those affiliated with the Left renounced what those efforts stood for—especially for those involved with People's Songs. While it is true that Wallace, a political independent, had ties or at the very least sympathies with the CP, it took more than this connection alone to excite his supporters to the extent that Irwin Silber described. Rather, by seeking to end segregation and other discriminatory practices based on race, and by supporting the labor movement, Wallace stood for downtrodden Americans—the same citizens that leftists had supported since the thirties. In Wallace, the members of People's Songs saw a politician who aimed to include all citizens regardless of race or economic status in the American body politic. By supporting a presidential candidate, People's Songs members did not seek to bring the revolution to America, nor did they think they were going to undermine the American system by placing a “Communist stooge” in power (few believed that Wallace would win, anyway). Rather, they viewed Wallace as a national politician who shared their interests in radical social and economic reform;

stumping with Wallace on his campaign trail enabled them to spread this message across the country.

As the nation took a decidedly conservative turn in 1947 and 1948, People's Songs' affiliation with the Communist Party led to their demise. The CIO began to expunge all left-wing unions from its ranks. Singing for progressive labor unions had been a primary source of income for the organization, and after the labor movement adopted the politics of anticommunism, the number of gigs for People's Songs members declined significantly. The debts the organization accrued led them into financial straits and forced them to close their doors in 1949.<sup>57</sup> The specter of anticommunism, however, was not new. People's Songs' political proclivities riled conservative critics even before the Cold War began to heat up. Attacks from newspaper columnists associated with the far right came as early as 1946. Although these voices were in the minority at this point, it was only the beginning of the influence that conservatives would begin to cut deep into American society and politics. The collaboration of Republicans and conservative southern Democrats rolled back New Deal programs and sentiments, with the Office of Price Administration and the Federal government's support of leftist labor unions as the initial casualties. Meanwhile, the FBI stepped up surveillance of suspected subversives and the House Committee on Un-American Activities initiated investigations of suspected Communist conspirators. As a progressive, left-wing organization, People's Songs was a prime target for the antiradical crusaders.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, William Roy notes that financial problems had plagued People's Songs since their second year in operation. The national office in New York failed to provide adequate publicity for concerts that it sponsored at Town Hall in New York City, which led to poor ticket sales and precipitated a financial downward spiral. They managed to stay afloat with the support of loans that Alan Lomax secured, in addition to their own profits from *The People's Song Book* and additional funds from the West Coast branch in Los Angeles. These problems, coupled with the money lost on the Wallace campaign, directly led to the end of People's Songs (145).

<sup>58</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 46-47, 55-56.

The actual relationship that Peoples Songsters had with the Communist Party, however, was laced with ambiguities. While People's Songs did have affiliations with the CP, with members like Silber acting as conduits between the two, the relationship was rather one-sided. The Party often failed to recognize what People's Songs was doing, or could do, to help the Communist cause in America. Despite Silber's ceaseless efforts to bring the Party and People's Songs closer together, he remembered how "it was usually a constant struggle to get the Party to pay attention." Contrary to anticommunists' arguments that the Party manipulated folk music to indoctrinate the minds of American youth, Silber explained: "All this nonsense about the Party pulling strings and creating folk music images and so forth, it's all bullshit....if anyone did it, I did it, and I was not a master puppeteer."<sup>59</sup> Reuss also argues that People's Songs was disengaged from the theoretical issues of Communism and the politics of the Soviet Union. On the whole, People's Songsters ignored the controversies that "plagued" the CP and were uninvolved in the "theoretical debates on culture in the international communist movement."<sup>60</sup> This situation, however, did not cause left-wing revivalists to discontinue working with the CP in reform efforts such as labor activism, civil rights, and global peace efforts throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Although some sought affiliations with the Communist Party under Foster, the revivalists associated with People's Songs mainly took up Browder's emphasis on reforming America rather than initiating a worldwide Communist revolution. According to other accounts, the relationship between People's Songs and the CP was "symbiotic": the singers found employment by singing for radical organizations, and those organizations used the singers to publicize their causes. "If the singers didn't entirely agree with the causes, they could write the

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<sup>59</sup> David K. Dunaway Interview with Irwin Silber (21 Dec. 1977), p. 2, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>60</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, p. 271.

whole thing off as just another economic opportunity,” according to musician Dick Weissman.<sup>61</sup> In any event, the depth of the relationship that People’s Songs had with the Party became a moot issue as the American public began to turn against anything and anyone that had *any* relationship to the Left.

By the end of the 1940s, Left pessimism had replaced earlier optimism. Rather than bemoan their failures, however, the folk revivalists called for a return to their first principles: reestablishing some understanding of what America stood for, what the national identity entailed, and how to resume the fight for an inclusive, democratic America. For these progressive revivalists, many of whom were affiliated with People’s Songs, the rhetoric of the Popular Front—democracy, unity, and equality—was all they had to go on, and they carried this message through their fights for peace, labor rights, and civil rights during the Cold War years.<sup>62</sup> Most of the songs that members composed stressed the need to fix national problems rather than reflect the changing Party line. Initially, they focused primarily on supporting the labor movement, but their interests expanded as the decade progressed. Pete Seeger explained the shift from exclusively fighting for labor to reforming American society as a whole through music:

In 1946 if somebody asked me, ‘what’s your purpose Pete?’ I said that I’d like to make a singing labor movement, like the Wobblies had. It made sense to me to try to do it...But as the labor movement kicked out the radicals, I settled for ‘let’s get America singing.’ Maybe the basic democratic philosophy in these songs will filter out subliminally to the American people.”<sup>63</sup>

Seeger sustained this view even after People’s Songs ended. Although it may appear that he relinquished his radical beliefs by trying to spread a somewhat vague “democratic message” to a

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<sup>61</sup> Dick Weissman, *Which Side are You On?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Cantwell interview with Roger Abrahams, tape 2 (5 Feb. 1986), SI-FP-1989-0032 in the Robert Cantwell Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> David K. Dunaway Interview with Pete Seeger Transcript (6 Mar. 1977), Folder 09, Box AFC 2000/019, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

wider audience through his music, this effort was actually in keeping with the type of radicalism that brought revivalists like him to the Left in the first place.

Despite its short duration, People's Songs did have a significant impact on the folk music revival. Within the three years that they were active, People's Songs deepened the relationship between folk music and political and social activism. Whether they sang for the labor movement, or to end racial discrimination in America, or to warn about atomic weapons, the members of People's Songs worked to change American life. In addition to jump-starting the careers of many people who would become active in the folk music world in the following decades, the organization also introduced politically inclined people to the utility of folk music. Guy Carawan, a singer from California who became active in the Civil Rights Movement through the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, credits the Almanacs and People's Songs for getting him interested in politically charged folk music. When he first developed an interest in folk music, Carawan had dismissed political songs as musically trite. In time, however, he realized that many good songs came out of politics, channeled through such outlets as the Almanacs and People's Songs. At the end of the fifties, Carawan looked back to those groups as an inspiration and credited them for spreading "the idea that folk songs can and should express the present as well as the past."<sup>64</sup> By publishing songs that addressed different social and political problems in the bulletin, People's Songs used folk songs—parodies of traditional songs and topical pieces—as an aid for political and social protest. In so doing, the *People's Songs* bulletin helped to secure a place for protest songs in a popular conception of folk music, which set the stage for the close relationship that the folk music revival developed with the political activists of the 1960s.

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<sup>64</sup> From the liner notes to FG 3544 "Songs with Guy Carawan," (1958), Folkways Records and Service Corporation, p. 3, in Folder: Carawan, Guy at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

For the first two decades of the movement, the founding folk music revivalists had a relatively easy time crafting and disseminating their version of Americanism among a public audience because the national political, social, and cultural climates were receptive to both their music and their message. The rhetoric of populism and democracy that permeated New Deal and Popular Front politics gave the revivalists political support, and the cultural pluralism of the Roosevelt Administration and WWII propaganda created a receptive atmosphere. The new generation of revivalists that came of age during the late 1940s—the younger members of People’s Songs—did not have the same base. Domestic circumstances had changed to the extent that the channels that previously connected the revivalists to a public audience had closed. Even before the defeat of the Wallace campaign, organized labor’s conservative turn severed the ties that left-wing folksingers had made with most unions; no longer could they perform at large-scale union rallies or rally striking workers on picket lines through song. The termination of these relationships signified the end of the revivalists’ dream of a singing labor movement. The late 1940s thus signaled the beginning of a difficult era for the revivalists. The revivalists continued to promote their culturally and politically democratic version of Americanism, but in the new political climate, their message reached a much smaller audience.

As the 1940s drew to a close, the glow from the successful defeat of fascism had dimmed as America prepared for the (renewed) fight against Communism. Fighting Communism both at home and abroad was nothing new to the United States; the country had sent troops to overthrow the Bolsheviks in 1919 and had attempted to root out suspected Communists (and other radical subversives) in the years following World War I. In 1950, American troops returned again to the battlefield to fight Communism in Korea, while the government resumed efforts to unearth civilian subversives via the senate hearings led by Joseph McCarthy in 1953, as well as the



Congressional hearings against suspected Communists that the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities conducted throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The ideological war against Communism abroad and Communist influences at home made political, and even cultural, dissent dangerous endeavors—a situation that gave the Cold War era during the 1950s its characteristics of political acquiescence and cultural (and social) conformity.

### **Conclusion**

The 1940s encompassed periods of extreme optimism and bitter disillusionment for the folk revivalists. The lingering effects of the pro-democracy campaigns of wartime propaganda, combined with the spirit of radicalism that coursed through American society during the immediate postwar years, spurred the progressive revivalists to return to their prewar political and social activism and use folk music as an aid in programs that pushed political democracy, economic equality, and cultural pluralism. Yet, the optimism that propelled these revivalists—and other like-minded citizens—did not even last to the end of the decade. The labor movement, along with the rest of American society, grew increasingly conservative as the postwar years turned into the Cold War era. The failure of the Wallace campaign to win a fraction of the amount of votes that it had projected destroyed the revivalists' hope for national political reform. The rise of anticommunism in the early Cold War era defeated many of their efforts at social and economic reform as well.

Yet, rather than being a story of failure, the 1940s proved to be a defining phase of the movement. In spite of the setbacks that politically progressive and communist revivalists suffered by the end of the decade, the members of the Almanacs and People's Songs secured a place for folk music within social and political reform efforts. The connection between folk

music and activism became one of the defining features of the revival, and remained such for the rest of the movement. This connection did lead many politically conscious citizens to folk music in later decades, but it also came with several downsides, such as the political backlash that these revivalists suffered during the era of McCarthyism.

While American life during the early Cold War Years is traditionally regarded as an era of consensus and conformity, this interpretation omits sectors of society that refused to submit to the status quo. This was particularly true for many people who participated in the folk music revival, especially the former members of People's Songs. Although these were difficult years for revivalists, the revival continued to move forward, operating sometimes above and sometimes below the national radar. The revivalists, like many progressive Americans, still believed in a politically democratic and culturally pluralist Americanism, and they continued their efforts to bring this view to a public audience. The Cold War political landscape did take a toll on the size of the audience, but it did not dampen many stalwart revivalists' efforts. Through booking agencies, periodicals, and progressive schools, revivalists continued to use folk music to illuminate American civic ideals and challenge policies they viewed as anti-democratic. Through records and performances, they rebelled against cultural conformity by arguing that American culture and heritage was steeped in cultural diversity. The musical programs in which the revivalists participated provided outlets through which they voiced their cultural and political dissent, reaffirmed their faith in democracy, and fought to make civic ideals apply to citizens who were still denied access to the political system. The period immediately following the end of People's Songs marked a time when revivalists largely stepped off the national stage that they had enjoyed during the New Deal and WWII eras. They used this time to both regroup and reassess their motivations and tactics. Rather than kill the folk revival, the challenges of the early

Cold War years enabled the revivalists to refine their messages and their music, and paved the way for their reemergence on the cultural—and political—stage by the end of the 1950s.

## CHAPTER V

### KEEPING THE TORCH LIT

The Cold War took a heavy toll on the revival programs that developed during the World War II years and its immediate aftermath, with several not surviving the political backlash. This is not to say that the revival as a whole ended. Rather, the revivalists adapted to the new circumstances through experimentation and diverging into different interest groups. In so doing, they managed to retain a level of control over the type of music that was brought to the public, and the ways in which the music was disseminated to the listening audience. The sheer fact that they largely kept hold of the reins of the revival, and that they managed to survive the era lent a positive quality to what was otherwise a socially difficult and politically dangerous time.

Shortly after the war, folk music began to enter the realm of popular, commercial culture. By the early fifties, folk music appeared in popular literary anthologies, in school curricula, on college concert stages, and on the radio. One group of revivalists used the growing commercial popularity of folk music to move into the musical mainstream. In the process, they stripped from their music and onstage personalities any references to political platforms or ideologies. At the same time a second group, now organized under the name People's Artists, remained unabashedly radical during a time when even being a reformer meant political censure. The number of politicized revivalists dwindled significantly, as fellow travelers jumped ship and left behind only the committed core. This core, however, remained as politically active as during the Popular Front and WWII eras, if not more so. This, of course, had its consequences, and these

revivalists struggled to keep their programs and music afloat amidst the weight of federal investigations and congressional hearings.

As the radicals continued to use folk music to express *political* dissent, a third group turned to folk music to voice their *personal* dissent from the cultural conformity of mainstream America. These culturally radical revivalists—many of whom were college-aged—grew interested in folk music because it was far removed from what they saw as the banality of 1950s popular culture. These revivalists formed their own sub-community within the movement, and used particular types of folk music, especially old ‘hillbilly’ and ‘race’ recordings from the 1920s and 1930s, to develop their own cultural identity. By the end of the 1950s this wing of the movement began attracting a segment of the baby-boom generation, a trend that grew more pronounced in the 1960s.

The fourth element of the fragmented revival was more a company and an individual than a group. Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Records, produced albums of traditional and contemporary folk music throughout the decade. The premier record company of the revival, Folkways connected many segments of the revival ranging from the political activists to the college enthusiasts. Beyond merely supplying the market with folk music recordings, Asch brought folk music into junior high and high school civics and history classes—an effort that echoed the radio work of Alan Lomax during the 1940s. However, unlike Lomax, Asch operated through his own business, which afforded him greater leeway in projecting the kind of Americanism in which he believed. Through his educational albums, Asch continued to uphold a faith in democracy and cultural pluralism that began during the Popular Front era, and he spread this Americanism to a new generation of school children. Although clearly on the Left, Asch somehow managed to escape McCarthyite censure.

Uniting these disparate groups was a commitment to make folk music a space for envisioning a different kind of America—whether through cultural, political, and educational reform, or by empowering the members of a new generation to develop identities that reflected their place in American life. The fragmentation of the revival, meanwhile, allowed several of these groups to fly under the censors’ radar and thus to keep the revival alive in a difficult political environment. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of the 1950s caused the movement to lose the coherent vision it had maintained in the 1930s and the 1940s. The revivalists of this era continued to share a belief in a pluralist and democratic America, but their means to achieve that end began to vary significantly. The fragmentation of the 1950s prefigured the myriad factions into which the movement disintegrated after the revival climaxed during the folk boom of the 1960s.

### **Negotiating the Cultural and Political Terrain**

The cultural and political climate of the 1950s affected the revival in different ways. Some revivalists, like Sarah Gertrude Knott, managed to maintain political neutrality during the heyday of left-wing activism in the folk music revival.<sup>1</sup> The apolitical nature of the National Folk Festival allowed it to escape the political scrutiny that many other revival programs faced. While Knott managed to circumvent the political difficulties of the era, she was not as successful in navigating the cultural shifts. Throughout the decade Knott continued to promote the Festival as an important representation of the nation’s cultural heritage. Furthermore, she still argued that the Festival served a key role in promoting American cultural diversity and intercultural

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<sup>1</sup> Knott hardly ever spoke of her political persuasions. Though it is clear that she was not a Communist sympathizer, this did not prevent her from including left-wing performers in the festival. In 1942 she invited a group from the labor organizing school, Highlander Folk School, led by Zilphia Horton, to perform. In the 1950s she included Pete Seeger, despite his political investigation, and in the early 1960s she invited Jenny Vincent, another performer who was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, to the NFF stage.

understanding, a message that she crafted during the WWII years and tried to adapt to the changing circumstances of the Cold War era. In 1953, Knott affirmed that if Americans could still gather “to present the folksongs and dances of their choice or inheritance, regardless of race, nationality, or creed, we can rest assured that cultural freedom, now denied many people’s of the world, is still our precious heritage.”<sup>2</sup> Now was not the time for Americans to sit back and bask in their unique freedom; the world was still rife with ethnic, racial, and political tensions that could threaten this security at any moment. Knott explained this fear in the opening to the program book for the 21<sup>st</sup> festival in 1955, writing that the nation, and the world, faced “a highly uncertain future of a highly developed, scientific age” and the need for international peace was still strong. Though the military had the challenge of keeping the peace, Knott argued that “[c]ultural and spiritual activities must be given consideration, for they are forces that must eventually bind nations together in a universal community of peace.” The way to achieve this peace was through mutual understanding, and folk music provided the means to attain this because “[r]ich folk heritages from all parts of the world” had integrated into American culture and these cultural heritages “furnish a golden key with which we may unlock the doors to mutual understanding of many peoples of the world.”<sup>3</sup> The 1955 festival featured Lithuanian, Indian, New Zealand and Yugoslavian music and dance, and a group from Jordan studying at Southern Illinois University presented Middle Eastern songs.

Despite Knott’s efforts, the attendance estimates for the Festival fell as the decade progressed; but this had more to do with the proliferation of new folk music venues than with

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ronald Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “We Hold a Golden Key,” 1955 Festival Program, p. 1, Draw 1, Folder 82 in the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

declining interest in the genre.<sup>4</sup> The rise of smaller festivals signified the growing popularity of folk music in the 1950s. New festivals, organized by younger revivalists, catered to the interests of a growing and increasingly community of folk music fans. By the end of the decade, these types of programs had siphoned the new generation of revivalists from programs like the NFF, which largely resisted incorporating the types of music and musicians that were growing in popularity among folk enthusiasts (e.g. urban folk singers and blues music).

The popularity of folk music grew during the early 1950s. Folklorist Robert Baron traces this interest back to the rise of technology and urbanization, aspects of modernization that generated nostalgia for an “American heritage” located in local history and regional folk culture.<sup>5</sup> Pete Seeger instead attributed the popularization of folk music during these years to the vogue of do-it-yourself activities. Since amateur musicians could easily pick up a guitar or other “folk” instrument and learn the rudiments of many songs, folk music was well suited to the current trend of leisure hobbies. Seeger even wrote and mimeographed his own guide to playing the banjo to encourage people to start singing and playing folk music for themselves. Many individual folk musicians like Josh White and Burl Ives hit the musical big time, as did folk groups like The Weavers.

The Weavers brought together People’s Songs veterans Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, and Ronnie Gilbert. In 1950 they broke into the musical mainstream with their recordings “Tzena, Tzena,” which peaked at number two on the pop charts, and “Goodnight, Irene,” which reached number one, selling over 500,000 records. Despite their growing commercial success, The Weavers maintained connections to the Left by performing at functions

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Baron, “Postwar Public Folklore and the Professionalization of Folklore Studies,” in *Public Folklore*, Robert Baron and Nicholas Spitzer, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p. 310.



and fundraisers for left-wing causes and hiring Harold Leventhal, a musical and political kindred spirit, as their manager.

The ties between the Weavers and the Left became strained as the former gained popularity, however. Pete Kameron, The Weavers' second manager, spurred the group's turn away from the political by curtailing their political engagements and dropping overt political messages from their music. Kameron also solidified The Weavers' place in popular music by securing a record contract with Decca Records. This arrangement included the accompaniment of a professional orchestra—a situation that irked many Weavers fans who favored a more traditional, stripped-down style.<sup>6</sup> The more hard-line political revivalists believed that by recording commercial albums, The Weavers had abandoned their musical and political integrity. They not only altered songs to appease a commercial audience—removing lyrics about the dust bowl from Woody Guthrie's, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh" and a reference to suicide by a morphine overdose from "Goodnight Irene"—but also replaced the "folk" sound of fiddles and guitars with xylophones and "refined" string arrangements. The Weavers themselves, however, liked their new sound. Ronnie Gilbert had always been a fan of pop music and Lee Hays celebrated the fact that they had broken the popular barrier and gotten traditional folk songs on the Hit Parade.<sup>7</sup> By adapting to popular preferences, The Weavers had more success than any other folk music group in bringing traditional music as well as the music of "authentic" folksingers like Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie to mainstream audiences.

The Weavers, moreover, still hoped to bring the music and message that began with People's Songs to a wider audience. Often, the messages embedded in their songs had a political

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 70. Cohen notes that despite the soaring orchestration on the Weavers' recordings, the group stayed true to their roots by only featuring Seeger on banjo and Hellerman in guitar during their live performances.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70; Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, p. 86.

undercurrent, especially in the context of the Cold War. Pete Seeger recollected: “We wanted to see if we [could] get some healthy music out in this very decadent time, to counteract.” Yet, he acknowledged that they were also limited in how far they could go. For instance, they could not sing “The Hammer Song,” a song that he and Lee Hays wrote because,

The words freedom and justice, only Commies talked about things like that. The word peace was also something only Commies talked about. I guess our great thing was simply in our Christmas song where we said ‘peace, frite, pace, pakoi, shalom, the words mean the same, whatever your home.’<sup>8</sup>

Other revivalists also recognized the underlying political message in their music. Myles Horton, a co-founder of Highlander Folk School, praised the Weavers for making this message more mainstream: “I remember very clearly the early days of the Weavers when the people [began] to use singing as a protest thing, politically. They were the first group to catch the imagination of their country.”<sup>9</sup> Anticommunists also took note of the Weavers’ political side. In 1950 the publication *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* listed Pete Seeger as a subversive. Soon, the Weavers lost their sponsorship from Van Camp Beans and suffered a wave of cancellations for concerts and TV appearances. A couple of revivalists, notably Burl Ives and Josh White renounced their political pasts. But the Weavers did not, and were blacklisted as a result.

The political repression of the revivalists peaked in the mid-1950s. In 1955 HUAC subpoenaed Seeger to testify about his activities with the Communist Party; two years later Robert Caliborne, another member of People’s Songs, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, and Earl

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<sup>8</sup> David Dunaway interview with Pete Seeger (6 March 1977), David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, pp. 70. 73, Folder 09, Box I, Series I, AFC 2000/019, The American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Pete Seeger describes the message behind “The Hammer Song” as, “The broad progressive thing, namely, that we have got the tools and we are going to succeed as the basic thing. That’s what it’s saying, isn’t it? This is what a lot of spirituals say. We will overcome I have a hammer” (74).

<sup>9</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Myles Horton (2 May 1980), David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, The American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Robinson, the composer of the enormously popular “Ballad for Americans,” were also called to testify. When asked to name names, all refused to do so. Claibourne, Hays, and Hellerman appealed to the Fifth Amendment to explain their refusals to answer questions; Pete Seeger plead the First Amendment; and when asked why he refused to answer questions, Earl Robinson cited “all the amendments, all the Constitution; every one.”<sup>10</sup> Although the political investigations of the McCarthy era took a toll on the number of political revivalists, it did not dampen these revivalists’ efforts to make the nation live up to its democratic principles.

### **Sharpening the Political Edge**

Anticommunism and the accompanying blacklists did not stop the revivalists who sought to use folk music to bring economically and politically marginalized groups into the national fold. In *American Folksongs of Protest* (1953) the folklorist John Greenway, for example, compiled songs from tenant farmers and sharecroppers, striking textile workers, bituminous coal miners, Populists, Wobblies, and southern African Americans, and he situated them in their historical contexts to illustrate an American radical heritage. Greenway was not the first to publish these songs, but his collection is noteworthy because it directly contested the Cold War ethos of the early 1950s. Greenway stipulated that “folksongs are songs of the folk; [the songs’] qualifications should be seen as nothing more than tests to which full folk possession can be determined,” meaning that folksongs come from a people’s perspective. They can have identifiable authors and still be considered authentic; but they have to represent themes, conditions, beliefs, or values with which the rest of a folk community can identify. The folksong composer’s “function is not that of a consciously creative artist, but that of a spokesman for the

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<sup>10</sup> “Investigation of Communism in the Metropolitan Music School, Inc. and Related Fields—Part 2—‘Testimony of Earl Robinson’” in U.S. Congress HUAC, *Hearings* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 776-793. Some revivalists avoided the political backlash by leaving the country. For example, in 1950 Alan Lomax left on a song-collecting trip around Great Britain and part of Europe that lasted for eight years—just long enough for him to escape the dark years of McCarthyism.

community, an amanuensis for the illiterate, or, to put it more precisely, for the inarticulate.”<sup>11</sup> Although Greenway maintained a broad definition of folk songs, he espoused a narrow understanding of who could be classified as a member of the “folk.” Greenway cited people who engaged in political and economic struggles, such as the unskilled workers of the CIO, as “the only folk we have,” though miners, textile workers, and some agricultural workers could also bear the folk label. Furthermore, contemporary political songwriters such as Woody Guthrie and Aunt Molly Jackson were to be understood as folksingers as well because they spoke for different folk communities; if they were not recognized as such, according to Greenway, “then we have no folk, and we have no living folksong.”<sup>12</sup> By using American folksongs to illustrate a heritage of social, political, and economic dissent, Greenway carried forward the People’s Songs tradition of challenging the political status quo.

Another group that followed this tradition was a booking agency for left-wing musicians called People’s Artists. During the fifties People’s Artists became the premier organization for political folk singers. Paul Robeson, Betty Sanders, Pete Seeger, Irwin Silber, and Bob Wolf figured prominently in its leadership. In 1950, the organization began publishing a magazine called *Sing Out!* after a line from the Pete Seeger/Lee Hays’ song “If I Had a Hammer.” “People’s Artists and *Sing Out!*,” according to Irwin Silber, “started with a more self-conscious theoretical perspective, more consciously left,” than its parent organization, People’s Songs.<sup>13</sup> Their overt leftism limited their appeal but they nevertheless did a great deal to keep folk and politically topical songs alive during a difficult time.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953; reprinted by Octagon Books, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Greenway, *American Folksong of Protest*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Irwin Silber (21 Dec. 1977), p. 2, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, The American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>14</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, pp. 140-44.

*Sing Out!* went through several stages during its career. When the magazine began, its political/musical approach reflected the concerns of the Left during the escalating Cold War: peace, democracy, civil rights, constitutional rights, and fending off anti-Communist attacks. Silber, who edited the magazine for sixteen years, remembered the early years as difficult but exhilarating, as young leftists like himself believed that they were “keeping the torch lit,” that through *Sing Out!* they protected and maintained a tradition that had begun with the IWW balladeers and had carried through the Almanacs and People’s Songs. “We were continuing that tradition of trying to make music that would enhance people’s self empowerment and work on behalf of causes that were in the interests of working people,” Silber explained in 1999.<sup>15</sup> Silber’s emphasis on the working-class reflects his, and the rest of the editorial staff’s, affinity for Communism. Throughout the fifties the editorial staff of *Sing Out!* endeavored to use “the music of the people” to fight for the people—on domestic matters such as political and cultural inclusion for marginalized groups and economic rights for the working-class, and on such international issues as world peace and an end to nuclear armaments.

From the outset of the Cold War, American Communists and left-wing sympathizers opposed America’s entry into a new war, fearing that the escalating tensions would lead to nuclear destruction. In his study of the American Left, historian Maurice Isserman challenges the historical interpretation that the 1950s was an apolitical decade ruled by consensus politics. He claims that activists of the decade actually bridged the activism of the Old Left and the New Left by becoming a source of inspiration for the latter. Isserman argues that one of the main ideological precursors to 1960s radicalism was the type of pacifism that developed during the fifties. Although Isserman does point out that Communists had been against nuclear armaments

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<sup>15</sup> Irwin Silber Lecture at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage,” (1 Feb. 1999), CFCH: CDR #478 in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

since 1945, he goes to great lengths to disconnect the pacifists of the 1950s from the remnants of the Old Left.<sup>16</sup> Yet, pacifism was a strong current among the few remaining members of the Old Left during the fifties, and the left-wing writers and contributors to *Sing Out!* often advocated for peace during the escalation of the Cold War. Songs like “Peace, It’s Wonderful,”<sup>17</sup> and “Song For Peace,” both featured in the first issue of the second volume, are indicative of the antiwar attitude that the Leftists of *Sing Out!* espoused. The editors also printed songs criticizing nuclear weapons and policies, such as Lawrence Gellert’s “Atom Bomb Blues,” Vern Parlow’s “Talking Atomic Blues,” and Leo Cooper’s “Alvin the Adamant Atom,” which includes the lines:

Those atoms all listened as Alvin did grapple / To win them to his side with his  
persuasive ‘atom’s’ apple / And though they were not all one race or one creed / They  
worked out a program on which they all agreed / We will not use our energy for war /  
We’ll stick together side by side / And when the people win their fight to let peace shed  
its light/ When all nations unite, we’ll divide.<sup>18</sup>

Judging from pieces like these, it is difficult to draw a hard and fast distinction between Isserman’s pacifists of the 1950s and antiwar holdovers from the Old Left who found a home in politically-driven revival outlets like *Sing Out!*

In the domestic realm, the contributors and writers of *Sing Out!* believed in the promise of American democracy, and they called for the incorporation of all groups into the democratic process in prose and lyrics. In keeping with a tradition that began with the *People’s Songs* bulletin, *Sing Out!* informed progressive folk enthusiasts about activities that combined music and activism. An article from the December, 1951, issue, “The Unity Chorus—Democracy at

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer...The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 127-28, 147-48. Isserman stipulates that the pacifists reacted against the health hazards of nuclear *testing* to avoid connection to the Communist position of being against nuclear weapons, which would leave them open for attack by the anti-Communist crusaders. This position, however, appears to have been a *tactical* rather than strictly *ideological* difference between the pacifists and the Leftists in respect to ending nuclear development.

<sup>17</sup> “Peace, It’s Wonderful!” was also the slogan of Father Divine, a popular preacher from Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Cooper, “Alvin the Adamant Apple,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (March 1953), pp. 6-7. This song first appeared in a youth variety show from 1947 called “As Young as You Feel.”

Work,” highlights a community chorus, comprised of workers, students, housewives, and other musical amateurs from New York City, that “in its form of organization, its selection of repertoire, and the relationship among its members is democratic to the core.” The author further notes how the “accomplishments of the chorus have proven, once again, that a group democratically run with a sound approach to music for the people can make a lasting contribution to the people’s struggles.” Choruses like this were notable for using music to further progressive causes, and teaching about the importance of democratic rights in song. For these reasons, the magazine hoped to continue to spotlight “people’s choruses” in future issues.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-1950s, when several members of the folk revival community—and a few staff members of *Sing Out!*—faced subpoenas from the House Un-American Activities Committee, the call for local musical groups that sang about democracy became especially urgent. The author of an article about the rise of folk singing in Canada emphasizes this point: “There is a need today, as there has never been before, for the basic sentiments of the American people for peace and in defense of our democratic heritage to be expressed. Singing groups of all kinds can be an extremely important outlet for that expression.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to noting musical activities that epitomized democracy in action, the magazine began running a section that taught readers about the American democratic heritage as found in folksongs called “Heritage—U.S.A.” Debuting in the third volume, each “Heritage—U.S.A” column featured “some song from our American musical tradition, which, in the opinion of our staff, helps us to understand the democratic history of our country.” The staff writers designed the column to exhibit two main themes: the first focused on “the songs of the working people,” under the heading “Who Built America,” and the second, called “Hard-Hitting

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<sup>19</sup> Anon., “The Unity Chorus—Democracy at Work,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Dec. 1951), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., “Lesson from Canada,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Mar. 1954), p. 2

Songs,” featured “songs of struggle from the mighty democratic movements in our country’s history” from such areas as “the Abolitionist Movement, Populist and Socialist songs, union songs, and protest songs of the Negro people and other national minorities.”<sup>21</sup> The series opened with “The Erie Canal,” followed by Joe Hill’s “The Tramp,” Woody Guthrie’s “The Great Dust Storm,” “Just Take a Seat,” (from the 1936 General Motors sit-down strike) and traditional African-American songs like “Go Tell It on the Mountains,” and “Wade in the Water.” Democracy was indeed a frequent theme in “Heritage—U.S.A.” In one issue the topic was the gold rush, which, the author explains, occurred after the “unjust and imperialist” Mexican-American War. While the promise of gold lured poor Americans westward in the hopes of quick riches, the author uses this scenario as a teaching moment for the evolution of democracy: “In this process of movement and dis-location, a new kind of democracy began to grow, a comradeship and kinship born of suffering and search. The following song, which came out some years after 1849, shows memory of the democracy and comradeship of the gold-mining camp.” Songs from specific types of labor were also important in the grassroots development of the American democratic heritage. For instance, cowboy songs, according to the writers of “Heritage—U.S.A.” “provide a most significant page in our democratic folk heritage” because workers composed them to address the unique conditions of labor that they experienced.<sup>22</sup>

Although *Sing Out!*’s contributors were rather vague on how they defined “democracy,” they clearly articulated what living in a democratic society entailed: political and economic rights for all citizens. Over a short period of time, *Sing Out!* amassed a collection of folksongs from reader submissions and from the library of People’s Songs, songs that were applicable “in

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<sup>21</sup> Anon., “Heritage—U.S.A.” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Aug. 1951), p. 2

<sup>22</sup> Anon., “Heritage—U.S.A.” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (Mar. 1952), p. 8.; Anon., “Heritage—U.S.A.” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (Mar. 1953), p. 9. According to *Sing Out!*, record companies have whitewashed over the democratic messages of cowboy songs by promoting sentimental imposters like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.



the people's struggles of today for peace, for equal rights, for rent control—and an inspiration for new works of every kind.”<sup>23</sup> New to the roster of people's struggles that *Sing Out!* promoted through song was equal rights for women. One “Heritage—U.S.A.” section that focused on the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912, featured James Oppenheim's poem “Bread and Roses,” in which he articulated the demands of the striking female workers. The poem and subsequent song primarily focus on labor problems, but *Sing Out!* emphasized its feminist perspective. According to the author of the column, “Bread and Roses” is still “a song for today, for the complete emancipation of women, who still demand ‘Give Us Bread—And Give Us Roses!’”<sup>24</sup> Several issues later, Irwin Silber contributed an article examining the musical subjugation of women. In “Male Supremacy and Folk Song” Silber investigated how male supremacy—an ideology that he claimed has been used to divide workers, lower the standard of living, and “cripple all struggles for peace and for human rights”—had affected American music. Popular music from the 1950s would lead one to conclude that “women are only concerned with some esoteric romance—usually unfulfilled— and that life is one long series of sexual thrill, lonely heartbreak, infidelity, and eternal reminiscence.” Although Silber did concede that male chauvinism appeared in some folksongs, he emphasized that those songs “represent only a small portion of our country's folk heritage which is, by and large, a part of the democratic expression of our proud history of struggle for equal rights.” But, Silber did encourage folksingers to eliminate those rare examples of sexist folksongs from their repertoires because anything that “undermine[s] the emerging role of women and leaders and participants in the battle for human

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<sup>23</sup> Anon., “Songs of Protest, Struggle in the Library of People's Music,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (Mar. 1952), p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., “Heritage—U.S.A.” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Jan. 1952), p. 8. Although it became a rallying cry for union struggles, especially from a female perspective, the song has some controversial elements. Adapted from a poem by James Oppenheim, the song features the line: “As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days/The rising of the women means the rising of the race,” which, coming from the era marked by fears of “race suicide,” imparts a rather strong racial message.

rights and peace have no place today.”<sup>25</sup> Years before the second wave of feminism began, the *Sing Out!* community advocated for women’s rights as a part of the overall struggle to generate a genuinely democratic America.

In a tradition that began in the *People’s Songs* bulletin, *Sing Out!* also featured numerous songs and articles that advocated for civil rights for black Americans. Writers for *Sing Out!* often celebrated black culture by connecting it to the democratic tradition in American life. Each year the magazine celebrated Negro History Week because, as they explained in the third annual issue:

The annual celebration of Negro History Week has helped millions of Americans to know more about the democratic heritage of their country than almost any other commemoration. For a knowledge and understanding of Negro History unmistakably [sic] shows the rich heritage of democratic struggle which belongs to our people today.<sup>26</sup>

*Sing Out!* supported civil rights activism by frequently including songs that decried Jim Crow practices. The magazine also kept readers informed about other activities (plays and concerts) that dramatized the struggle, and commended musicians, especially African American performers, who worked to advance the cause.<sup>27</sup> The second article on “people’s choruses” that *Sing Out!* ran featured an interracial chorus. In this report on a St. Louis group, the author stipulates that a “prerequisite” for people’s choruses should be to “reflect the inter-racial

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<sup>25</sup> Irwin Silber, “‘Male Supremacy’ and Folk Song,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (Mar. 1953), pp. 4-5, 10. Silber also cautions against taking this too far—noting that singers should not exclude all songs pertaining to love and marriage and peace songs that refer to “mankind” and universal “brotherhood.” Interestingly, Lee Hays experiences this sort of treatment from the Left in his and Pete Seeger’s song, “The Hammer Song,” (where *Sing Out!* got its name). Originally the lyrics were: “Sing out love between all of my brothers,” which they changed to “Sing out love between my brothers and my sisters,” to appease left-wing critics who accused them of male chauvinism.

<sup>26</sup> Anon., *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (Feb. 1953), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> In addition to commending musical efforts to end segregation, the writers also criticized efforts that fell short. In the issue for June of 1950, Robert Wolfe reviewed a concert of black composers from Africa, Central America, and the United States that was held at Town Hall in New York City. While he lauds the recognition of black musical compositions, he also had some substantial complaints, as he wrote: “It is unfortunate that only 1,500 people were able to hear this concert, and that the high admission process prevented many—especially working people, Negro and white—from attending. Here, as in every field of human endeavor, the accomplishments of the Negro people have exposed the lie of white chauvinists’ bigoted assertions. Somehow, the people of America should hear this concert.” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1950), p. 9.

character of the people's movement for peace and civil rights." The author then provides a step-by-step guide for establishing an interracial chorus, emphasizing the importance of singing black and white songs, of having black singers sing lead on white songs like English ballads and not just on spirituals, of having blacks and whites serve leadership roles, and of white singers socializing with black singers outside of the chorus.<sup>28</sup> The writers of *Sing Out!* often stressed that groups and demonstrations against racial practices must be interracial. In an article that serves as a how-to guide for people campaigning for the Progressive Party—the “only party in the election which works for genuine equality”—in 1952, the staff at *Sing Out!* recommended forming interracial singing groups because they “can demonstrate physically this unity much more graphically than an all-white group singing songs to end Jim Crow.”<sup>29</sup>

The songs and articles of the early issues of *Sing Out!* consistently decried American racism, particularly practices that excluded African Americans from participating in the dominant culture and society. Even before he called attention to male chauvinism in popular music, Irwin Silber contributed an article on white chauvinism. In “Racism, Chauvinism, Keynote U.S. Music,” Silber explained that racism was prevalent in American culture, especially in music, evidenced by segregated audiences, discrimination against black musicians, and the general “debasement of Negro culture in the United States.” He even attacked the Musicians Union for tacitly encouraging this discrimination through their segregated unions, noting that the black unions were generally smaller and financially weaker.

Throughout the article, Silber noted that these discriminatory practices not only affect the black community, but also extended to ethnic minorities as well, explaining that “One of the greatest crimes of Jim Crow America in the cultural field has been the consistent debasement of

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<sup>28</sup> Anon., “Saint Louis Builds an Inter-Racial Chorus,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Jan. 1952), pp. 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Anon., “Get Ballots with Ballads,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Sept. 1952) p. 5.

the folk cultures of national minorities.” Negative stereotypes of “Jewish, Italian, Mexican, Irish, Slavic, Chinese, and German culture[s]” have been featured in “American ‘popular’ culture for decades.”<sup>30</sup> The staff of *Sing Out!* sought to counteract this cultural discrimination by spreading folk songs that advocated democracy, topical songs that championed rights for minority groups, and ethnic folksongs that naturalized citizens brought into American culture. Several “Heritage—U.S.A.” sections highlighted ethnic traditions. In the September issue of 1952, the column focused on Jewish songs and the cultural contributions of Jewish immigrants and refugees because “[t]he heritage of the Jewish people is one of struggle for freedom. Their songs, many of which have appeared in SING OUT, and like the one presented here, are a vital part of our HERITAGE: U.S.A.” Similarly, the column a few months later focused on Mexican American songs, which, the author explains, “are a much-neglected portion of the democratic cultural heritage of the United States.”<sup>31</sup> *Sing Out!* also printed topical songs that protested discriminatory practices against ethnic citizens. In the 1957 spring issue, the magazine debuted “The Ballad of Sherman Wu.” Set to the tune of “The Streets of Laredo,” the song dramatized an incident at Northwestern University where a fraternity refused to allow a student to pledge because of his Chinese lineage. Yet, rather than focus solely on songs that people composed *for* minority communities, *Sing Out!* emphasized the protest songs that were written within these communities. As Silber wrote in 1957, “Today’s folksongs are being written by southern sharecroppers, both Negro and white; auto, garment and smelter worker; GI’s in every branch of the armed forces; Mexican and Puerto Rican Americans; and many, many more kinds of people

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<sup>30</sup> Irwin Silber, “Racism, Chauvinism, Keynote U.S. Music,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Nov. 1951), pp. 6-7 and Vol. 2, No. 6, (Dec. 1951), p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., “Heritage—U.S.A.,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Sept. 1952), p. 8; Anon., *Sing Out!*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (May, 1953), p. 8.

who feel the need for their own expression.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, they were, and in the following decade, the staff at *Sing Out!* made a point to highlight the songs of a new generation of folk composers.

The revivalists of People’s Artists and *Sing Out!* continued to emphasize a view of American identity that reflected the nation’s ethnic and racial diversity, a view that was intrinsic to the revival from its inception. While maintaining the same views as the initial revivalists, this group took a more militant stance in calling for the protection of ethnic and racial minorities’ cultural rights, and demanding political and economic rights for them as well. For this reason, these revivalists supported programs of social activism, such as a new phase of the civil rights movement—a cause that became central for many revivalists by the early 1960s. These revivalists believed that if underrepresented groups achieved both cultural and political rights, then they would be able to secure their inclusion into the American national community.

As the writers at *Sing Out!* fought for the rights of minority groups during the 1950s, they also had to fight for their own rights. *Sing Out!* recognized the anticommunist pressures in 1951 with an article on the trial of the Communist leader Victor J. Jerome, who was “accused of plotting to overthrow the government of the United States by voicing his views on culture.” This, the author of the piece decried, “is only one step away from total censorship of all cultural expression.”<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter *Sing Out!* reported to its readers that editors Irwin Silber and Betty Sanders were called to testify before HUAC. Rather than bemoan their suffering, Silber and Sanders used this as a rallying cry, urging the readers to “[s]upport the movements and

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<sup>32</sup> Irwin Silber, “They’re Still Writing Folksongs Says SING OUT’s Editor,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1957), p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Anon. “The Witch-Hunt Comes Closer,” *Sing Out!* Vol. 2, No. 6 (Dec. 1951), p. 2.

organizations which are fighting for a free and decent America. Make these songs even more powerful weapons.”<sup>34</sup>

As more members of the folk community were called to testify and forced to defend their political views, affiliations, and musical programs, the tone of *Sing Out!* became more urgent, attacking the hearings as violations of American civil liberties. In the aptly titled article, “The Time of the Lists,” the author declared: “Many citizens and organizations concerned with preserving our democratic rights have dared to defy the McCarthy ‘know-nothings’ and have spoken against the arbitrary ‘listing’ process as being opposed to the principles inherent in our constitution and Bill of Rights.”<sup>35</sup> As with all the causes for which they fought, the writers and contributors defended themselves from the witch-hunts and blacklists by appealing to American democratic principles. The magazine showed readers that these principles were not only sanctified in the Constitution, but were an intrinsic aspect of the nation’s cultural heritage—a position that they defended through songs, articles, and regular columns like “Heritage-U.S.A.” In the opening of the sixth anniversary issue, the editors reaffirmed this mission: “If our songs and articles have helped the American people in any way in their search for peace, in their defense of our democratic liberties, in enriching their lives with the best of our American song tradition, then we think that we have served our country—and our people—well.”<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of American history and cultural heritage that the writers of *Sing Out!* held, it was the House on Un-American Activities, the editors of *Counterattack*, and other anticommunist organizations that were being “un-American.”

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<sup>34</sup> Anon., “The Un-American Subpoenas,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (Mar. 1952), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Anon., “The Time of the Lists,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Jan. 1954), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Editorial, *Sing Out!*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1956), p. 2.

The work of the politically radical folk revivalists of the 1950s challenge the view that a veil of political consensus enveloped the nation during the era of blacklists and anticommunist witch hunts. Although the domestic situation, along with Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin, decimated the ranks of the CPUSA, it did not crush all political activity on the Left. The left revivalists at *Sing Out!* carried on efforts that they initiated during the prior decade. Furthermore, they undertook these efforts in public. As some Communist leaders went underground, the political revivalists continued to publish their thought for anyone who was willing to listen or read. These efforts had consequences: they could destroy careers, lead to imprisonment, or even become physically dangerous.<sup>37</sup>

A revivalist who risked all of these consequences and yet continued to use folk music to enhance political reform and a culturally pluralist and politically democratic Americanism was Pete Seeger. Harold Leventhal recognized that Seeger became a "spokesman" during this era for people who still believed in Progressive reform; folklorist Roger Abrahams credits Seeger for sending college folk music fans down a progressive path. While he may have tamed his overtly political language, Seeger never hid his radical social views. Seeger became the "pied piper" for young fans of folk music and progressive politics in the fifties. They viewed him, according to Abrahams, as a "very clear-headed individual who represented exactly what we felt, politically and spiritually." Through his activism for peace, labor unions, and civil rights, he showed them

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<sup>37</sup> In the summer of 1949 People's Artists organized the infamous outdoor concert featuring Paul Robeson in Peekskill, NY. Violent actions by local citizens prevented the concert from taking place, but People's Artists regrouped and planned a second concert on September 4<sup>th</sup>. This time, the people followed through on their threats. After the concert, local police directed the exiting audience members down a narrow lane lined with local anti-communists shouting epithets and hurling rocks. Several concert attendees were injured in the melee.

“how music could fit into such a life agenda.”<sup>38</sup> Irwin Silber described Seeger during the 1950s almost as an icon of the revival:

[Seeger] came to realize that he stood for something, that he represented something. He had to do something that was much bigger than himself, that was bigger than any individual possibly could be, [and] that he was helping to keep a movement and a spirit alive. [T]he ‘50s...was probably his greatest period because he did what nobody else was able to do. I think plenty of other people did what Pete was doing in the 1960s...But, that decade, he bridged the gap in many ways. His whole concept [was] of the cultural guerilla, of making use of what was available, as much as he could on his own terms.<sup>39</sup>

Myles Horton also noted that Seeger remained popular, especially with young people, despite his political blacklisting in the fifties. Though he was often restricted from performing on large concert stages, he managed to play on college campuses, in progressive schools, and for civic clubs. Horton stated,

Young people would get together and listen to him. He did the best education albums in America. He did this as a job. By the time the blacklist was lifted he was known all over the country. He never stopped playing. Then when he got more recognition and became more open he was known everywhere. He was a real troubadour.<sup>40</sup>

Seeger was especially effective at reaching children at progressive summer camps. Left-wing summer camps such as Camp Kinderland, Unity, Woodland, and Wo-Chi-Ca (Workers Children’s Camp) played a significant role in introducing children to progressive politics and social views as well as folk music; many revivalists, including Irwin Silber and the musician John Cohen, served as counselors during the 1940s and 1950s. During the latter decade, these camps became one of the last remaining sources of employment for blacklisted musicians.

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Cantwell interview with Roger Abrahams, tape one (4 Feb. 1986), SI-FP-1989-CT-0031, Robert Cantwell Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>39</sup> David Dunaway Interview with Irwin Silber (26 May 1977), pp. 2-3, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>40</sup> David K. Dunaway Interview with Myles Horton (2 May 1980), no page number, David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. After Seeger’s citation in *Red Channels* and the subsequent break-up of the Weavers, Seeger could not find work in many mainstream outlets. He survived the period by playing at these progressive institutions, participating in folk festivals, and recording on Folkways Records.



Seeger was often a guest at these camps, particularly at Norman Studer's interracial camp, Woodland.<sup>41</sup> Seeger himself noted how he helped keep the progressive side of folk music alive during the escalation of the Cold War. He believed then, and in retrospect, that the 1950s was a politically frightening time and that fascism was alive in America under the guise of McCarthyism. Seeger likened his role during this era to that of a link in a chain of progressive activism:

I am very fortunate to have been able to be one, [a link] between people like Woody and Leadbelly as well as what I learned from Alan Lomax and my parent [Charles Seeger] and [a lot] of others, Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles Erskine Scotwood, and Mike Gold and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Joe Hill and a whole lot of others. In the Fifties and the Sixties when Leadbelly and Woody weren't around, I really felt that I wanted people to learn the lessons they had taught me.<sup>42</sup>

Seeger continued playing this role even after progressive politics came back into vogue in the following decade.

Seeger and the staff at *Sing Out!* did keep the political "torch lit" during the dark days of McCarthyism. While their audience was but a fraction of the size that it had been during the People's Songs era, those who remained true to the democratic vision embedded in Popular Front Americanism took pride in their sustained efforts to use folk music for political reform. In interviews conducted over the course of the 1970s, Irwin Silber sounds a self-congratulatory note on his, and others', ability to remain politically committed in the face of extreme adversity.<sup>43</sup> It is probable, however, that during the 1970s political revivalists like Silber looked back on the 1950s with nostalgia. In 1957, he viewed his actions during the early years of the decade in a much different light, admitting to folklorist Archie Green that his staunch leftism caused errors

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<sup>41</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, p. 18; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Peter Seeger (25 April 1976) p. 19, The David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, Folder 05, Box 1, Series I, AFC 2000/019, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 104.

in judgment regarding international Communism. Silber also noted that the “one-sided” and “sectarian” views he developed had blocked his ability to critically evaluate Communist positions and policies. Despite the soul-searching left-wing revivalists like Silber had to do by the end of the decade regarding their views on Party politics at home and abroad, they did not question the *domestic* political reforms for which they fought. Throughout the decade they remained committed to their key causes: civil rights, racial and gender equality, and an end to nuclear weapons.

### **The Cultural Rebellion**

Alongside the political radicals, a culturally radical groups of revivalists emerged in the 1950s. These revivalists did not look to folk music as a political tool or as a way to define the nation; rather, they used it to define themselves. In drawing connections between the revivalists of the 1940s and the 1950s, historian Benjamin Filene argues that they all tended to espouse an “anti-establishment” ethos. Whereas many revivalists of the forties were political rebels, members of the new generation of revivalists that emerged during the fifties were cultural rebels.

Despite the outward appearance of conformity in 1950s America, cultural rebellion was gathering strength in pockets. The Beats of the early 1950s formed one of the original, and eventually most famous, countercultural movements of the era. Rejecting middle-class American values, the Beats scorned affluence and consumerism in favor of “voluntary poverty,” avant-garde expressionist art, sexual liberation, drugs, and jazz.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after the Beats emerged in urban neighborhoods like Morningside Heights and Greenwich Village of New York City, the

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<sup>44</sup> Morris Dickstein, “On and Off the Road: The Outsider as a Young Rebel,” in *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, Cornelis A. van Minnen, ed. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), p. 34.

counter-cultural revivalists began to form communities that shared many of the same cultural and physical spaces as the Beats.

These revivalists rejected popular folk music that musicians like the Weavers and Burl Ives sang on the radio, and eschewed the political language and activism of the People's Artists revivalists. With them, the personal became political. Listening to folk music became a way to launch a personal rebellion against mass packaged popular culture that dominated the suburban communities from which many of these revivalists came. As with the "beatnik" counter-culturalists, the young "folkniks" emerged from urban and suburban areas and tended to congregate in bohemian enclaves, and to adopt mannerisms, dress, and lifestyles that challenged the dominant culture. They also frequented the same music clubs, bought records from the same record companies, (companies that produced both jazz and folk music), and are often mentioned side by side with the Beats in memoirs and novels about the counterculture of the 1950s.<sup>45</sup>

One strong connection between the two groups was a mutual interest in African American music. The types of music these groups favored, however, differed widely. The Beats generally enjoyed the more free-form, fast-paced sounds of contemporary bebop, whereas the folk music fans turned to blues and the early commercial "race" records of the 1920s and 1930s and hunted for recordings from this era. Predictably, they moved beyond the recorded sound sought out the musicians in the southern blues tradition including Son House, Skip James, Sleepy John Estes, and Mississippi John Hurt, who would play a major role in the explosion of folk music's popularity during the following decade.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ronald Cohen, "Singing Subversion: Folk Music and the Counterculture," in *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>46</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, pp. 113, 115. Some scholars have argued that the Beats' interest in African American music stemmed from their "romantic primitivism," meaning they idolized black artists for embodying traits that were absent in white culture such as earthiness, "wisdom," and "nobility" that resulted from their history of oppression and marginalization. Essentially, African Americans' outsider status is exactly what made black culture

Common interests led some outside observers to lump the Beats and the folk fans into one counterculture. Yet, as Roger Abrahams has observed, the relationship between them was a “friendly unfriendliness”; while they often frequented the same parties and functions, there were visible differences, and even tensions, between the two. For instance, the folk enthusiasts tended to be more politically aware than the Beats. Abrahams also notes that Beats tended to be more interested in narcotics and other controlled substances than the folk fans.<sup>47</sup> One figure who managed to bridge the gap between these groups was Harry Smith, who organized the *Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952. Issued on Folkways Records, the *Anthology* consisted of six albums of commercially recorded folk music that Smith selected from his enormous personal collection of 78s.<sup>48</sup> Grouping his songs into three vague categories—“Ballads,” “Social Music,” and “Songs”—Smith did not rely on a scholarly system for categorizing the music, nor did he employ the traditional commercial method of labeling white country music as “hillbilly,” and black music as “race.” Rather, he deliberately broke from prior definitional categories by omitting any racial indications and following his own method of organization. Smith openly admitted that he selected the songs for the *Anthology* because they sounded odd, or were interesting versions of significant traditional songs. In this way, Smith believed that the *Anthology* would appeal to “musicologists, or possibly with people who would want to sing them and maybe would improve the version.”<sup>49</sup> Through his unique musical categorization, cryptic

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interesting and authentic—a view with remarkable parallels to those of early folk songs collectors like John Lomax. It would be difficult to attribute this same attitude to the revivalists, however, because their interest in rural music did not focus exclusively on black traditions. In fact, the revivalists often prized recordings of rural white traditions—Anglo-Saxon ballads and “hillbilly” songs—just as much as their “race” counterparts. Rural folk music, therefore, provided the same type of respite from both mainstream music and mainstream society as did urban jazz, see Cohen, “Singing Subversion,” p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Roger Abrahams, tape 1 (4 Feb. 1986), SI-FP-1989-CT-0031 in the Robert Cantwell Interview Collection in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>48</sup> Smith saved these 78 from being destroyed when record companies began clearing out warehouses during WWII.

<sup>49</sup> John Cohen, “A Rare Interview with Harry Smith,” *Sing Out!* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Dec., 1968), pp. 2, 4. Although he originally became interested in American folk music through blues music, Smith began to appreciate Child’s Anglo-

liner notes, and bohemian persona, Smith attached an air of oddity to both himself and his music.<sup>50</sup>

The *Anthology* had a profound effect on the counter-cultural revivalists. The collection provided a “seductive detour” from the “Americanism” of the 1950s, which, according to historian and music critic Greil Marcus, “meant the consumer society, as advertised on TV; it meant vigilance against all enemies of such a society.” The new LP format made these recordings accessible to a larger audience and, though it was sometimes difficult to find in record stores, the *Anthology* became the communal “document” for a “generation of urban youth who began to seek their truer America in its vernacular musics,” according to music critic Jon Pankake.<sup>51</sup> By featuring Delta blues, traditional Cajun music, mountain string-band music, Fa So La shape-note singing, Spirituals, jug band songs, bad man ballads, and many more examples of early American music, the collection introduced listeners to the music of the “old, weird America,” which sounded worlds away from the America of the 1950s.<sup>52</sup>

While attending Swarthmore College in the early 1950s, folk revivalist Ralph Rinzler became one of the early fans of the *Anthology*. Although many of the recordings were only twenty years old at the time, to him they sounded “like something that had come out of another time and place entirely, from another world, they seemed so distant and miraculously

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Saxon ballads after reading Sandburg’s *American Songbag* and then moved to rural, white American music from Alan Lomax’s collection of American folksongs on commercially available records that he released in the mid-forties. Lomax amassed the songs for this collection from the musical archives of Columbia Records and other companies.

<sup>50</sup> From a childhood bout with rickets, Smith was left physically stunted. With his diminutive stature, humped back, and general unkempt appearance, Smith fit the stereotype of a cultural and social oddball. This, coupled with an unconventional family—his mother occasionally declare that she was Anastasia Romonov, and Smith often claimed that his real father was the English Satanist Aleister Crowley—and his bohemian adulthood rendered Smith a true counter-culturalist. See Greil Marcus, “Old Weird America,” in *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, and Annotations Pertaining to the Anthology of American Folk Music* (Washington: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Greil Marcus, “The Old, Weird America” p. 7; Jon Pankake, “The Brotherhood of the Anthology,” p. 26 in *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, and Annotations Pertaining to the Anthology of American Folk Music*.

<sup>52</sup> Greil Marcus coined this descriptive term of the *Anthology* in *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes*.

exotic...The whole thing was wondrous to me, it was thrilling.” The *Anthology* made it possible for people to understand that there was “an enormous range of stuff” out there and that the task at hand entailed finding out exactly how wide was that range.<sup>53</sup> Through the *Anthology*, teenagers like Rinzler learned that there was a whole other world of music that they never knew existed while growing up.<sup>54</sup>

Rinzler was part of the growing coterie of college students who became interested in folk music in the early fifties. Located largely in pockets of progressive liberal arts schools like Swarthmore, Bennington, and Oberlin, the young folk fans began forming a community based on a shared interest in “authentic” folk music, or folk music sung by traditional performers, most of whom came from the rural South. The *Anthology*, and Folkways Records, became a *de facto* meeting ground for many of these students. For example, Stephen Lee Taller, a student from Oberlin, wrote to Moses Asch, the head of Folkways, in 1954 informing him that he had been hosting “Folk Song Festival,” a popular radio show on the college radio station for the past two years, and that he mostly played songs from the *Anthology* and other Folkways records. At Oberlin, he wrote, there were many students interested in folk music and they particularly favored these more obscure recordings rather than the more popular music of mainstream folk music.<sup>55</sup> By developing an interest in folk music, the college revivalists followed the folkniks’ path of using folk music to craft an identity apart from the cultural mainstream. Like the early beatniks and political revivalists, their community was small. Many were introduced to traditional folk music via word of mouth, records produced by companies like Folkways and

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Goldsmith interview with Ralph Rinzler (13 June 1991), PG 043, Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Ralph Rinzler, FP 2006-CT-00032: Ralph Rinzler Interviews: 1956-1958 (2 May 1989), Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Stephen Lee Taller to Moses Asch (19 Feb. 1954), in CFCH Folder 45020, Moses and Francis Asch Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C.

other small labels, radio shows like Oscar Brand's 'Folk Song Festival' on WNYC, and campus folksong clubs.

Roger Abrahams was a year ahead of Rinzler at Swarthmore and also very active in the campus folk music scene. Like Rinzler, Abrahams came from a Jewish family. His parents were German and he grew up in a highly political household that was secular but culturally Jewish. This phenomenon of Jewish teenagers adopting a love of anachronistic, rural American folk music during the fifties was not unusual. Ronald Cohen notes that many children of Jewish immigrants developed an interest in folk music and began playing traditional instruments like banjos, fiddles and guitars because it "connected them to American history and culture, legitimizing their search for belonging, and at the same time serving as an outlet for their alienation from the political status quo."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Abrahams echoes this sentiment, arguing that it was "central, absolutely central" that the music that he and other college students were interested in was inherently American. On the political side, he credits the Almanacs and People's Songs for presenting progressive social views and politics through folk music. As he recollected, "By lining up with Pete [Seeger] and Woody [Guthrie]" the students "self consciously" felt a part of that progressive, American lineage. They attached themselves to a heritage that was not only American but also politically progressive. According to Abrahams, "if you were interested in politics, you were a folk singer"; that was the "presumption at Swarthmore in those days."<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, although the children of Jewish families saw old, rural folk music as a way to connect to America, it also disconnected them from their contemporary, mainstream society.

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<sup>56</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> "Oral History Interview with Ralph Rinzler" transcript (1993) RU009569, folder 9569 I-1, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The music from the *Anthology* and other recordings from the 1920s and 1930s were a far cry from the popular singers of the 1950s like Rosemary Clooney, Perry Como, and Patti Page. The progressive politics that became associated with the music was also absent from much of the national political landscape. It was to this small audience of young, educated folk music enthusiasts that the revivalists' message of Americanism resonated the loudest. These new revivalists were either introduced to folk music through left-wing summer camps or in their progressive colleges. Although they were not the political radicals of *Sing Out!*, they did adopt the message of pluralism and democracy that they learned through the music of Pete Seeger and Folkways Records, and carried this message into the succeeding decades.

### **The Personal, the Educational, and the Political**

While Harry Smith is credited for compiling the *Anthology*, it is quite possible that he would never have completed the task, or even have been able to release the collection, if Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Records, had not been involved. Born into a literary Eastern European Jewish family, Asch was the son of one of the most famous Yiddish authors of the twentieth century, Sholem Asch. In 1914 Moses Asch came to the United States to escape war in Europe. Asch returned to the continent in 1923 to study electronics in Germany, and during this time he began to develop an interest in American folk music. Asch recalled being chided by his European friends that the United States had no folklore of its own and thus no national culture. However, while vacationing in Paris in 1923, he discovered the American folk tradition when he came across John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*. According to Asch, the book "guided me through life because there he [Lomax] said that folklore and folksongs were the real expression of a people's culture." Furthermore, the collection showed that "there was a uniqueness in our [U.S.] culture."



It was not just a ‘melting pot.’” Lomax showed that there was a[n] [authentic] folklore in America.” Asch commended John Lomax for loosening the scholarly grip on folk music, and he credited Harry Smith for doing the same almost forty years later.<sup>58</sup>

Asch often enjoyed explaining that he became dedicated to recording people’s culture rather than following his father’s literary path after meeting Albert Einstein, a friend of Sholem. Asch recollected that Einstein was enthusiastic about his project to record people’s music and this gave him the encouragement—something he rarely received from his own father—to continue. In 1935, Asch began his first record company, Asch Records, though he mainly released prerecorded material. Asch turned his attention to making his own recordings in 1939 and, through his second record company, Disc, he recorded Jewish folk music, jazz, and educational material throughout the forties. After an ill-fated venture with a Nat King Cole record of Christmas songs that missed the holiday season, Asch landed in dire financial straits and was forced to declare bankruptcy. However, with the help of his assistant, Marion Distler, he got back on his feet and formed Folkways Records in 1949.<sup>59</sup> In many ways, Disc Records foreshadowed the musical eclecticism that came to characterize Folkways. From the Disc releases of Lead Belly’s *Negro Folk Songs*, Frank Warner’s *Hudson Valley Songs*, the Palestinian String Quartet’s *Hebrew and Palestinian Folk Tunes*, and an album of Calypso music

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<sup>58</sup> Gene Bluestein, “Profiles: Moses Asch,” California State University, Fresno draft for an article in *American Music*, Fall, 1987, p. 9; Bluestein; Moses Asch interview PG044, in the Peter Goldsmith Collection in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>59</sup> George Hertzog, the first editor of Folkways’ Ethnic Series, a collection of records dedicated to ethnic folk music, gave Asch the name “Folkways,” which he learned from a William Graham Sumner book. Hertzog told him of a German folklorist named Von Hornbostel who had collected German folk music for years but most of the aluminum cylinders on which he recorded the songs were destroyed during WWII and the bombings of the Berlin libraries. Hertzog said that he wanted Asch to pick up where Von Hornbostel left off, to collect ethnic folk music. Bluestein, “Profiles: Moses Asch,” p. 14.

by Lord Invader, Asch's concept of folk music was always inclusive. He carried the idea that American folk music included ethnic traditions into the commercial market.<sup>60</sup>

Moses Asch's social and political views significantly influenced his work in the music industry. Despite Asch's persistent claims that he was not a political activist, he came from a highly political family; one of his closet relatives was an aunt, Basha, who was a Communist revolutionary and served as an educational consultant under Lenin. Besides his lineage, Asch had several childhood experiences that permanently shaped his worldview. When Asch traveled to the United States to reunite with his parents during World War I, he crossed paths with injured soldiers returning from the front. As he told interviewer Tony Schwartz, seeing the mangled bodies was his "first experience of what man does to man" and it left a lasting impression. Upon reaching America, Asch was forced to remain at Ellis Island for a week because his father had misspelled his name and stated his birthday incorrectly on official forms. Again, he recounted to Schwartz that this experience affected him deeply: "And so, the rest of my family went, [and] there I was a kid [alone]. I saw what was happening and I saw these immigrants like myself. They were shut off." In another interview, Asch stated that this experience made him recognize "the need of the people to express themselves some way against this injustice." As Asch recollected, both of these events forever shaped his commitment to helping those who were socially, economically and politically dispossessed to speak out against their conditions.<sup>61</sup>

The Depression years also made a profound impact on Moses Asch's social views and he, like many other political progressives, became acutely interested in the plight of the "common man." According to his son, Michael, Asch was a New Deal Democrat who was connected to a

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<sup>60</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 40. Though Asch ran the company, Distler was officially named the president to avoid legal complications from his recent financial disaster.

<sup>61</sup> Moe Asch Interview with Tony Schwartz, part 2 (undated), CDR-518-1, transcript p. 1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; David K. Dunaway Interview with Moses Asch (8 May 1977), p. 2, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

coterie of political progressives—a network of “democrats, socialists, communists, and anarchists” who believed that they must work to generate a society that would eliminate political, social and economic inequality. This was the ideology that lay behind the founding of Folkways Records: to fight against fascism, racism, and economic exploitation and create a world of “peace, brotherhood, and equality.” Michael Asch maintains that Folkways was his father’s (and Marion Distler’s) response to the times; it was a place where social equality could thrive, “if not in real life, then at least, symbolically.”<sup>62</sup> As with Alan Lomax, Moses Asch’s social views coincided with the ethos of the Popular Front during the late 1930s, and this outlook shaped much of his work in the recording industry.

Asch regarded Folkways not simply as a record company, but as a medium for the higher mission of documenting critical aspects of the people’s culture. This is what led him to enter the educational market during the Disc Records era. According to his biographer, Peter Goldsmith, the mid-1940s marked the beginning of Asch’s two most notable tendencies: recording socially progressive music and attempting to fill holes in the recording market. These two traits worked in tandem. Rather than simply recording music to fit different market niches, Asch consistently recorded music that he believed was culturally or politically significant and marketed them to specific groups. Asch revealed this latter trademark in the way he marketed his early Lead Belly records. Targeting black history teachers, Asch distributed flyers for the recordings claiming that “they are of undoubted educational, cultural, and entertainment value not only to the whole Negro race, but to every American as well.”<sup>63</sup> Disc even had a children’s department with Beatrice Landeck, a music educator and freelance columnist for parenting magazines, serving as

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Asch, “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections,” Keynote address at the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta November 2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> 2007, pp. 5, 9, 11, 15 (copy in author’s possession).

<sup>63</sup> Peter Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), pp. 98-99, 101-102.

its “counselor.” In her articles Landeck often promoted Disc’s children’s records, citing Woody Guthrie’s *Songs to Grow On* and an album of lullabies by Pete Seeger among her favorites.<sup>64</sup>

Asch’s efforts to fill the educational market with folk songs for young people became a focal point with Folkways Records. His decision to record folk music albums specifically designed for educational purposes came at a good time. During the thirties progressive educators began recognizing that folk music was one of the musical genres that was most successful in teaching music appreciation. Initially these educators almost exclusively favored British and other types of European folk music, but by the 1940s this trend began to change. Alan Lomax helped spearhead this effort through his own educational radio show, *Folk Music of America*. By the post war years folksingers had become the “musical medium of choice” in progressive New York City schools such as Little Red School House and Bank Street. Singers such as Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Tom Glazer became especially popular for their down-to-earth styles and ability to connect with children.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, many parents had been fans of these singers and appreciated that they could get albums for their children that featured the artists they enjoyed. The Folkways children’s albums in particular successfully straddled the line between adult and children’s music. In a *New York Times* article, “No ‘Talking Down’: Folkways Records for Young People Are Authentic and Entertaining,” Herbert Mitgang praised the company’s children’s music for being intelligent and ‘infiltrat[ing] the young mind with musical Americana.’ It was music that was truly for the whole family.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bonner, *Revolutionizing Children’s Records: The Young People’s Records and Children’s Record Guild Series, 1946-1977* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2008), pp. 36-38.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, pp. 59-60, 63-4.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Carlin, *Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), p. 140. Throughout his recording career, Pete Seeger often blurred the line between “adult” and children’s” music. In his Folkways album *Folk Songs for Young People* (1959) Seeger included recognizable songs for children like “skip to my Lou,” chart topping Weavers songs like “Goodnight, Irene,” labor songs from his Almanac Days like “The Farmer is the Man,” work songs like “Weave-Room Blues” and “Wood-Chopping Song” and even traditional favorites like “John Henry.”

In 1949 the newly formed Folkways Records released its first educational record called *Who Built America: American History Through Its Folksongs*, performed by Bill Bonyun. Beatrice Landeck's liner notes describe the songs as "the spontaneous expression" of the early immigrants and pioneers "whose experiences are the substance of history." She explains that the album was particularly suitable for young children because "[t]he simple words, without scholarly pretension and full of laughter, reveal the deeper meaning of history as no written record can possibly reveal it." Songs like "Green Mountain Boys," "Erie Canal," "Auction Block," "Jesse James," "Mi Chicara," "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," and the Navajo song "Happiness" do indeed span American history and include both traditional and relatively contemporary folk songs.<sup>67</sup> The album adheres to the concept of cultural democracy by including Hispanic, American Indian, and African American songs and grouping them together under the umbrella of American civic ideals. Landeck summarized the album as follows:

Here are the songs that define our democracy—all the nationalities, races and creeds living together in one peaceful community—striving for similar goals, maintaining through its law and common desires the kind of peace the world is longing for. These are the people who built America and are still building America—they are the bones of our democracy.<sup>68</sup>

In one sweeping statement Landeck set the stage for future Folkways albums that stressed democracy, cultural diversity, and a people's perspective on historical events that characterized the type of progressive view of American history that Folkways Records sold to U.S. schools.

During the mid-1950s Folkways Records began issuing albums of songs dedicated to particular historical periods and events. In 1954 Asch and Distler released *Frontier Ballads* (featuring Pete Seeger) and *The War of 1812* (featuring Wallace House). Asch wrote the liner notes for both albums to provide a historical context for the songs. In these notes, Asch expresses

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<sup>67</sup> "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh" was a Woody Guthrie composition about the miseries of the Dust Bowl.

<sup>68</sup> Beatrice Landeck, liner notes for *Who Built America: American History Through Its Folksongs*, Folkways Records & Service Corp. (1949), p.1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

his belief in cultural diversity and the freedoms inherent—though not always practiced—in American democracy. Referring to the pioneers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as “the freedom seekers, the adventurers, the non-conformists, [and] the naturalists,” Asch describes their westward trek as a search for freedom in the “democratic” frontier.<sup>69</sup> In Asch’s view, the West was a bucolic escape for marginalized Americans: persecuted Mormons, oppressed urban immigrants, and economically displaced tradesmen. Asch focuses on the immigrants who moved westward, and his view that cultural diversity is an American trait is clear when he lists the pioneers as Irish immigrants, Spanish settlers, Yankee migrants, and cowboys. However, he also depicts the injustices American Indians endured through forced removals and the “No Irish Need Apply” phenomenon as examples of the nation failing to practice its democratic proclamations.<sup>70</sup>

As part of his effort to document the American past through recorded sound, Moses Asch released several albums of narrated literature and speeches. In 1958 he produced *The Patriot Plan*, an album of documents for which Charles Edward Smith researched and wrote the liner notes, and Wallace House narrated. In the introductory notes Smith describes the project as follows: “Combining the written and spoken word, this book-and-record project re-creates the dynamic growth of civil and human rights in Colonial America and seeks to bring into perspective the far-reaching changes in democratic concepts that occurred during that period.” Although Asch and Smith anachronistically attribute the rise of human rights to a much earlier epoch, they designed *The Patriot Plan* to trace the rise of American democracy. Through speeches and written material, the album teaches students about the “evolution of Democracy,” beginning with the Mayflower Compact and continuing through the years leading up to the

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<sup>69</sup> Asch even argued that the relationship between Daniel Boone and the American Indians was symbiotic and based on trust and cooperation that was eventually ruined by settlers taking his land and the French and Spanish offers of weapons to reclaim his property; this, of course, led to the armed conflict with the American Indians who fought back to protect themselves.

<sup>70</sup> Liner notes for *Frontier Ballads*, FP5003 (FP 48-5, FP 48-6), Folkways Records and Service Corp. (1954), p. 2.

American Revolution. However, instead of relegating this story to the past, Smith's liner notes clearly state its contemporary relevance: "Whether we are new or old Americans or, more typically, a mixture of the two, the past has the concreteness of home and heritage. Inevitably it holds hope for the future."<sup>71</sup>

Beyond broadly declaring that the album is important for documenting the trajectory of the American democratic character, Smith situates each recording in its historical context and explains how and why it contributed to the development of American democracy. Early documents, such as the Puritan piece "A Body of Liberties," serve either to foreshadow future developments or highlight emblematic individuals who set a democratic course. For the track "Roger Williams: A Letter to the People of Providence (1648)," Smith describes Williams as "one of those individuals, rare in any land, whose tolerance was deep-rooted in a sense of humanity." According to Smith's text, Williams' virtues such as his belief in the separation of church and state, "freedom of conscience," and his advocacy for the humane treatment of American Indians rendered him "one of the greatest of Americans." Other documents are included to show the development of the American conception of rights that was eventually codified in the Constitution. Excerpts of the Maryland Toleration Acts are explained as expressions of religious toleration that foreshadowed aspects of the Bill of Rights. Smith commends Samuel Adams' "Letter of Correspondence from the Town of Boston" for emphasizing a concern for civil rights that was eventually incorporated into the Bill of Rights, and for detailing an early version of checks-and-balances that "contributed to the blueprint for our representative form of government." Yet, Smith attributes the most significant contribution to American democratic thought to James Otis' 1764 statement on the rights of British Colonists,

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<sup>71</sup> *The Patriot Plan* notes written and researched by Charles Edward Smith, Narrated by Wallace House with Kenneth Buckridge, produced by Moses Asch (1958), FR&SC, p. 1, folder: 5710, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

which, Smith explains, “relates to many aspects of our contributions to human rights...it reflects evils of colonialism not altogether eradicated in some areas of the world and...it emphasizes, in a most clear-cut manner, the right of all, regardless of race, to equality.”<sup>72</sup> By weaving together cultural pluralism and civil rights, and citing them as the foundation of American development, Smith and Asch clearly point to the concept of cultural democracy as the crux of American national identity.

Equality and diversity were the essence of American democracy, according to Moses Asch, and these were the foundations of the American heritage that he sought to teach Americans through Folkways Records. The following year, in 1959, he released another album with text again written by Charles Edward Smith as a part of a series of documents and speeches that Asch also called *Heritage, U.S.A.* Smith introduced the album, *The Coming Age of Freedom*, with a succinct statement of the purpose behind the series:

In this series of documents and speeches you will, we hope, arrive at least at a nodding acquaintance with the significant facets of our national life, the continuing maturation of democracy itself, the gradual realization of the principles inhering in the Declaration of Independence, and the consummation of national unity, the coalescence, the fusion of states into a national entity, the coming of age of freedom that finds expression in five words first written by Thomas Paine—“The United States of America.”<sup>73</sup>

Again, this album reverts back to the ideals upon which Asch believed that the United States was founded, and he issued the records to explain how these ideals serve as the cornerstone of the American heritage. They also fit in well with the fascination with national sacred texts like the Declaration of Independence and icons like the Founding Fathers that permeated the educational

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<sup>72</sup> *The Patriot Plan* notes written and researched by Charles Edward Smith, Narrated by Wallace House with Kenneth Buckridge, produced by Moses Asch (1958), FR&SC, pp. 2, 3, 5, 12, folder: 5710, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>73</sup> *The Coming Age of Freedom* text by Charles Edward Smith (This is the “Documents and Speeches” album of the Heritage U.S.A. series) Folkways Records Album No. FH 5006 FH 2191 (1959) Folkways Records and Service Corp., p. 10, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



and cultural context of Cold War America.<sup>74</sup> Yet, there was also a note of subversion. These albums root American political identity in democratic rights for all Americans, even to those who were presently denied these rights. During the WWII era, educators focused on themes of democracy and cultural diversity to contrast the United States with Fascist nations. During the Cold War, “democracy” continued to be a key feature of mainstream educational rhetoric, but educators dropped the emphasis on diversity because they were more concerned with drawing distinctions between United States from Communist-style dictatorship.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, during this period, school curricula became a tool for buttressing the “natural security state and the corporate order it upheld,” according to Julia Mickenberg. This entailed teaching children to not question the political and social status quo, which included segregation and the disenfranchisement of southern blacks.<sup>76</sup> Asch, on the other hand, challenged this trend by continuing to emphasize diversity *and* demand that the civil rights of all Americans be upheld. Although these recordings were not folk music, they served to illustrate Asch’s goal of depicting American identity as one that respected the rights of *all* citizens.

Like Alan Lomax, Moses Asch was not a certified educator, and therefore he employed those who were in the field of education in producing (and selling) these records. In 1955 he produced a pamphlet, “The Recording as a Teaching Tool: A Bulletin for Parents and Teachers” edited by Florence B. Freedman and Esther L. Berg. The booklet contains numerous passages written by teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as by college professors, all

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<sup>74</sup> Julia Mickenberg argues that during the Cold War education, specifically American history, became viewed as a way to instill “strong national loyalties” among American school children. A great emphasis was placed on educating children about the development of national ideals, so that they would in turn learn to protect those ideals. Yet, many of the curricula from this period merely stressed the difference between Americanism and Communism, rather than engaging students to think critically about what citizenship entailed, as many progressive educators had stressed during the 1930s and 1940s (233-34).

<sup>75</sup> Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*, p. 224.

<sup>76</sup> Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left*, p. 234.

stressing the importance of music in education. Several of the educational experts argue that teaching through music allows young children to engage actively with material, and others maintain that music provides a social and cultural view that traditional school texts tend to omit. Richard E. Du Wors and William B. Weist of the department of sociology at Bucknell University praised Tony Schwartz's Folkways record of the sounds of street life in New York City, *New York 19* (1954), because the album "creates an awareness in the student of the multi-cultured nature of city life" and that teachers could use it "to show cultural diffusion, acceptance, and transformation...[and] demonstrate universal values from their local expressions." This belief that music could instill an appreciation of American cultural diversity is the underlying message of the entire pamphlet. Marguerite Cartwright of Hunter College explains in her article "The Use of Records in Intercultural Education" that teachers could effectively teach "unity within diversity" through recorded material, an argument that Angelica W. Cass of the New York State Department of Education further develops in her article "Using Records of Folk Music in Adult Education." Cass asserts that music, especially folk music, helps students to generate informed opinions, understand historic events, and recognize "the international character of our nation." The comprehension of American cultural pluralism that folk music provides could also help students from immigrant backgrounds understand their role in American culture and society, according to Esther Brown of the Colorado State College of Education. Using ethnic folk music in classrooms is especially important for urban schools where, in Brown's view, "foreign students are often made to feel ashamed of their culture, where the pressure to become 'Americanized' as quickly as possible is strong." Folk music combats this tendency and allows students to accept their cultural heritage as a component of American culture, a "self-knowledge

and self respect without which democracy is impossible.”<sup>77</sup> While American intellectuals lamented the increasing homogenization of American culture and society during the era of (alleged) consensus and grey flannel suits, Moses Asch and other folk revivalists used folk music to define an American past and present that was both democratic and diverse.

The emphasis on American cultural diversity was strong throughout Asch’s tenure at Folkways Records, even if most of the records that were not specifically intended for classroom use. One of the aspects of American life that Asch sought to expose was the difficulties that the nation faced in getting citizens to welcome ethnic and racial minorities into the American community. In 1955 Folkways records released a documentary album about Puerto Rican migrants living in New York City. *Nueva York*, the brainchild of Tony Schwartz, contained interviews with migrants, their neighbors, public school teachers, and other New York City residents that he recorded over an eight-year span. Although Schwartz presents a variety of voices in *Nueva York*, he is clearly sympathetic towards the migrants, people whose hardships were similar to his own parents’ immigrant experience. Some of the stories he includes are explanations of why people left for New York and what they encountered after they arrived, the latter of which involved difficulties navigating the city, overcoming language barriers, facing housing discrimination, and suffering from poverty. In 1959 Robert Shelton highlighted this album in the *New York Times*, commending it for publicizing the social and economic issues that accompanied the post-war wave of Puerto Rican migration to New York City.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>*The Recording as a Teaching Tool: A Bulletin for Parents and Teachers*, Esther L. Berg and Florence B. Freedman, eds. Asch: production manager, FR&SC (1955), “Records in Sociology,” Richard E. Du Wors and William B. Weist, p. 5; Marguerite Cartwright, “The Use of Records in Intercultural Education,” p. 5; Angelica W. Cass “Using Records of Folk Music in Adult Education,” p. 5; Esther Brown, “Ethnic Dance in the Integrated Curriculum: Integration,” p. 10, Folder: “Folkways Catalogues,” Box: 3, Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>78</sup> Tony Schwartz, liner notes to *Nueva York: A Tape Documentary of Puerto Rican New Yorkers*, Folkways Records, FD 5559 (1959), Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Robert Shelton, “New York on Tape,” *New York Times* (12. Apr. 1959), pp. SM48, 50. Among the passages Shelton

The educational albums that Asch released during the 1950s share remarkable similarities to the intercultural education initiatives of the 1940s. As part of the pro-cultural pluralism civic nationalism that characterized the WWII era, intercultural education programs celebrated the cultural contributions that ethnic and racial minorities made to American life. While the programs focused primarily on ethnic minorities during the late 1930s, the race riots in Detroit and other urban centers during the war prompted the intercultural educators to design programs that focused on African American contributions as well. The riots also prompted program designers to include commentaries on the disjuncture between American civic ideals and reality via an explanation of the social and political tribulations that African American citizens suffered. By 1955, however, the intercultural education programs had largely ended. Jeffrey Mirel points to a resurgence of ethnic/racial nationalism that culminated in the reaffirmation of the quota system through the McCarran-Walters Act, and the persecution of intercultural educators during the McCarthy era as partial explanations for this end.<sup>79</sup> Yet, despite the decline of interest in the kind of Americanism that intercultural programs advocated, Moses Asch managed to keep the spirit of democratic, pluralist nationalism alive in educational albums that he continued to produce throughout the decade and into the 1960s, skirting the political pressures of the 1950s in the process.

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highlights is a comment by a Puerto Rican woman who recounted how a prospective landlord told her and her husband not to worry about Puerto Ricans coming into the building. Eventually her husband informed him that they were Latin and “sometime to come we will let him know we’re Puerto Ricans so he’ll know not everyone’s the same.”

<sup>79</sup> Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism*, p. 223. Educational theorist James Banks attributed the end of intercultural education initiatives to the fact that there was no guiding philosophy in which the educational reforms were grounded. These initiatives were also funded by “soft” monies (e.g. donations) and when the funds dried up, so did the programs. Furthermore, the programs were implemented in high-risk areas—mostly urban centers—and therefore did not become a way of reforming American education *in toto*. Finally, urban racial problems became more “subtle” during the 1950s, and therefore, many “American educators no longer saw the need for action designed to reduce racial conflict and problems.” James A. Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981, 1988), p. 9.

Ultimately, though he remained politically nonsectarian, Asch can be classified as a progressive revivalist who shared many sympathies with the left-wing members of his cohort. Asch's political views were grounded in a faith in the promise of democracy, and he imbued most of the albums that he released with this view. While it was a view that many Popular Front Communists espoused, to Asch it was just the essence of the American identity, and he did not hesitate to criticize those who tried to impede democracy, even if it meant challenging the nation's political status quo. In 1959 he produced the album, *The Coming Age of Freedom* as a part of the company's *Heritage, USA* series. The liner notes to the album explain the historical contexts for the documents and present a searing indictment of the current political state: [W]ithin a democracy we want...a constant intermingling and recapitulation of forces and beliefs, a situation (never in actual balance) that we maintain only with the utmost tolerance and devotion, not mere lip-service, to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights...A healthy democracy, as Jefferson reminds us, is a turbulence." The notes continue to inform listeners that the producers of this album hope that it will teach American citizens about "the continuing maturation of democracy itself, the gradual realization of the principles inherent in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>80</sup>

Comments like this were enough to get a record producer like Asch into political trouble. During the late 1940s, there was another progressive record company that produced albums of folk music for children. Called Young People's Records (YPR), the company had its own folk music/American history series called "Fact and Folklore." With a format based on Alan Lomax's CBS radio shows, the records arranged the music historically, with topics ranging from Columbus and Daniel Boone to cowboy, sea, logging, and railroad songs. These albums also

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Edward Smith, *The Coming Age of Freedom*, Folkways Records Album No. FH 5006 (1959), p. 1, Center For Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

included Native American songs, and mentioned how white men cheated the American Indians and stole their land. Even though the YPR albums did not contain overt political messages, in 1950 the American Legion accused the company of having Communist sympathies and YPR landed in *Red Channels*. School districts followed suit by banning YPR albums from their libraries.<sup>81</sup>

Folkways, on the other hand, survived the period largely unscathed. Perhaps Folkways managed to fly under the political radar because it was a small enterprise, or perhaps it was because, as Michael Asch claims, Asch could argue that he was simply a businessman trying to succeed in a capitalist society, and “what could be more American than that?”<sup>82</sup> In 1955 the FBI briefly put Asch under surveillance, citing suspicious albums such as *China Reconstructs* and six records of Polish folk music. Yet, the file ultimately concluded in 1956 that Folkways was a “legitimate business enterprise” and that they had “no reason to question the integrity and loyalty of its president, Marion Distler.”<sup>83</sup> Despite his relatively unproblematic experience during the Red Scare, Moses Asch made an obvious jab at the years of fear and political intimidation in his opening dedication to the 1958 album of topical political songs, *Gazette*, performed by Pete Seeger:

I have always believed that it is the duty and privilege of publishers of materials that reach a wide audience to make available to the general public as great a variety of points of view and opinions as possible—without the heavy hand of censorship or the imposition of the publishers’ editorial view. It is with this point of view that Folkways Records and Peter Seeger have collaborated on this new album of contemporary topical and political songs—believing that the complete documentation of American life makes the issuance of such material our public responsibility. To those who believe in the free

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<sup>81</sup> Bonner, *Revolutionizing Children’s Music*, pp. 74-75, 100-103.

<sup>82</sup> Asch, “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections,” p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> *NY 105-14276*, Folder: Asch Project—FBI Files.” Box: 3 “GS-505,” Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

and uncensored expression of not only their own beliefs, but the opinions and ideas of others, I dedicate this album.<sup>84</sup>

By this time, McCarthyism had begun to subside. Still, Asch's outspokenness is impressive.

Regardless of his views, as well as his close relationships with politically controversial figures such as Pete Seeger and Irwin Silber, an avowed Communist, Moe Asch and Folkways Records managed to escape political censure and never suffered school blacklists as had companies like Young People's Records. Indeed, Asch traveled to educational conferences throughout the fifties and sixties to market his educational series. During 1952 and 1953 alone he was invited to participate at the National Catholic Music Educators Conference, the Catholic Library Association meeting, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development conference, the American Association of School Administrators (a Department of the National Educational Association) and the Music Educators National Conference.<sup>85</sup> Occasionally, other record distributors even contacted Folkways, as Mario Piriano of Knight Education Inc. did in 1960, requesting catalogues of "educational" material that they would then distribute through their company.<sup>86</sup> Folkways also received positive feedback on the educational market from educational consultants. During the early 1960s Asch worked with Peggy Brogan, a freelance consultant from Brooklyn College who served as a liaison between Asch and educators at the Brooklyn College of Education who used Folkways, getting feedback on what albums worked best for educational purposes and why.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Gazette: Vol. 1*, Folkways Record Album No. FN 2501 (1958), Folkways Records and Service Corp. p. 1, Folder: 2501: Seeger, *Gazette*, Vol. 1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>85</sup> Unprocessed material, folder of conference invitations in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Mario J. Piriano to Moses Asch (1960), p.1, unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Peggy Brogan to Moses Asch (27 March 1960), unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Near the end of the 1950s, the school children who learned of folk music through Folkways records had come of age and were on the verge of becoming the new rank of college-age folk music enthusiasts. This generation both witnessed and contributed to the folk music boom of the 1960s. By 1958 the folk music revival was poised to become one of the defining cultural phenomena of the 1960s. Asch had played a pivotal role in making this possible.

### **Setting the Stage**

Pete Seeger, like Asch, was an icon of folk music throughout the 1950s. To many folk fans of the decade (and for years afterwards), he embodied folk music itself. Although some people, like Ralph Rinzler, took an instant liking to rural folk music recorded in the twenties and thirties, many others found this music too foreign to easily assimilate. Seeger was able to present this music to young listeners in a manner that appealed to them. The musician Happy Traum gives Seeger full credit for introducing him to folk music: “In my day if Pete didn’t sing a song, it wasn’t a folk song. When I first started in the ‘50s Pete was my yardstick of what songs to sing. My repertoire was based on his records.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, Seeger did not present himself as an authentic folk singer; rather, he aimed to introduce a new generation to folk music. Abrahams commends Seeger for consistently encouraging his fans to go back and listen to the “real thing,” that being traditional singers. To Roger Abrahams, Seeger maintained a notion of authenticity and “never made any pretensions to doing the authentic thing himself.”<sup>89</sup> Despite Seeger’s effort to lead folk music fans to traditional performers, however, by the end of the decade folk music

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<sup>88</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Happy Traum (14 July 1984), p. 7, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, Box 1, Series I, in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>89</sup> “Oral History Interview with Ralph Rinzler” transcript (1993) RU009569, Folder 9569, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



had become a hot commodity, and musical interpreters soon became the vanguard of the popular folk scene.

Although popular interest in folk music had begun earlier in the decade, historians generally trace the beginning of the commercial folk music boom to 1958 when the Kingston Trio hit the airwaves with their rendition of the murder ballad “Tom Dooley.” Neatly dressed in matching clothes, with well-coiffed hair, the Kingston Trio consisted of Bob Shane, Dave Guard, and Nick Reynolds who formed the band in California. The Trio became widely popular soon after releasing their first album.<sup>90</sup> Yet the Trio did not hold onto their musical monopoly for long. Soon groups based on their model mushroomed across the country.

As the popular phase of the folk revival picked up steam, many revival programs began to adapt to the fact that folk music was rising up the billboard charts. The political views in *Sing Out!* began to subside as the magazine became preoccupied with discussing the implications of folk music’s newfound popularity. Pete Seeger initiated this self-examination in 1956 through his regular column, “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.,” noting a bit prematurely that the revival was already in “full force.” In another column a few months later he explained:

The revival of interest in folk music...is simply part and parcel of a gigantic counter-trend in American life. (The main trend is, of course, mass production and mass media.) The Sunday painters, the do-it-yourselfers, the taking up of sports like sailing, skin-diving, skiing, are all evidences of 160 million Americans waiting to do something creative with their time than switch the TV set on and off. And this is, perhaps, one of the very best things that ever happened in our country.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 130-131. Not surprisingly, Guard drew musical inspiration from Pete Seeger and promptly began studying the banjo after seeing Seeger play with the Weavers in 1957.

<sup>91</sup> Pete Seeger, “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 1955), p. 44; Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1956), p. 32. In his inaugural column, Seeger dedicated it to Johnny Appleseed Jr., “to the thousands of boys and girls who are using their guitars and their songs to plant the seeds of a better tomorrow in the homes across out land. They are the lovers of folksongs, and the best of our heritage of the past, and they are creating a people’s culture of tomorrow.” Vol. 4, No. 7 (Fall 1954), p. 30.

*Sing Out!* contributed to the do-it-yourself *zeitgeist* by printing folksongs that readers wrote and submitted to the magazine in a regular feature called “The Folk Process.” Debuting in 1955, this section featured new versions of traditional songs, new verses added to old songs, or new songs set to familiar tunes. The purpose of the section was to show that folk music was a dynamic rather than static art form. This first feature was a song titled “Greenfeather” and set to the tune of Greensleeves about the anti-McCarthy “Green Feather” groups on college campuses. Over the course of the late fifties and early sixties, the column regularly featured songs pertaining to college life, atomic fears, freedom rides, and the sit-in movement—issues that revealed that much of its readership consisted of young, college-age folkies.<sup>92</sup>

As those at *Sing Out!* rejoiced at the increasing number of folk music fans who learned to play instruments and write their own songs that formed the new ranks of folk revivalists, they also grew weary of another feature that was increasingly characterizing the folk boom: commercialism. While many performers realized that in order to get folk music into the mainstream they would have to become “commercial,” and others recognized that by performing on record labels and in major concert venues they had already become “commercial,” still other revivalists strongly distrusted commercial outlets and mainstream media. Most of all, they disdained popular versions of folk songs because most examples were adulterated, or watered down versions of traditional songs.<sup>93</sup> Many political revivalists particularly feared that

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<sup>92</sup> In his historical memoir of the New Left, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Todd Gitlin remarks that fears of nuclear war marked the beginning the 1960s activists’ political awakening. This, coupled with songs about movements that were led by young activists (the sit-in movement) and the songs about college life are all indicators that many *Sing Out!* readers were politically-progressive college students.

<sup>93</sup> In retrospect, one of Seeger’s primary complaints was that the popular revival was a good idea that went astray when good songs became overplayed to such an extent as to obscure their original meanings. For example, Seeger had learned the song “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore,” a black spiritual that white collectors collected in 1867, from Tony Saletan, another musical revivalist. He then taught it to the rest of The Weavers, who introduced it to the larger public by recording the song. The popularity of their recording landed the song in school books and summer camp programs, a process that rendered it “a pale wishy-washy piece of music compared to what it once was.” Unfortunately, this was only one of many similar examples, which caused Seeger to lament, “You can see what was

commercial versions of folk songs would omit references to political or cultural dissent. In 1956, on the eve of the folk boom, *Sing Out!* ran an article about the rise of interest in folk music, evidenced by the newfound popularity of songs like “16 Tons,” “John Henry,” and “This Land is Your Land.” Already suspicious of mainstream music outlets, the writer lauded the growing interest in folk music while still criticizing commercialism: “While the commercial publishers and arrangers frequently distort both music and words of these songs—this development of interest in folk song must be heartily welcomed. Our American music can only be made healthier by it.”<sup>94</sup> As long as the music, and the message behind it, remained in the contemporary versions of traditional songs as well as in the new compositions, then the folk revival would remain on the right track.

Groups like the Kingston Trio were one component of the vast commercialization of folk music. Producers, record labels, concert venue managers and others helped push folk music onto the public scene. As Folkways continued to produce largely esoteric material aimed at folk purists, other companies grew eager to ride the popular folk music wave. Jack Holtzman, the founder of Electra Records, for example, entered the recording business in 1950 and went to New York City specifically to record folk music. Unlike Asch, he focused almost exclusively on English-language music and largely left the ethnic market to his competitor. Seeking to bring “the directness and honesty and poetry, especially of the Anglo-American ballads to a whole new audience,” Holtzman marketed his recordings to college-educated people who read books and frequented art galleries, people much like himself. He and Asch had catered to the same market niche in the early fifties, but near the middle of the decade their paths diverged. By the end of the

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once an honest piece of music become a very commercial, phony piece of music. It makes you sometimes wish you hadn't gotten involved with it.” (David K. Dunaway Interview with Pete Seeger in the David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, Folder 15, Box 1, Series 1 (8 Aug. 1978), (2000/019) in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

<sup>94</sup> Anon., *Sing Out!*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 1956), p. 2.

1950s Holtzman concentrated almost entirely on popular musicians like Josh White (who had lost his folk credibility by becoming unequivocally “commercial”) and even ethnic singers like Theodore Bikel and Cynthia Gooding.<sup>95</sup> Record companies like Electra would largely determine the direction the revival would take during the height of its popularity.

In 1958, in the midst of the escalating popularity of folk music, Alan Lomax returned home from an eight-year song collecting trip around Britain, Italy, and Spain. Although he had dedicated much of his career to getting a public audience for folk music, he was unnerved by the direction folk music was moving as it gained popularity. The year after his return, Lomax published an essay, “The Folkniks and the Songs They Sing” in *Sing Out!*, in which he criticized not only the commercial outlets but also the popular “folk” singers for not taking the time to learn singing styles of the communities from which these songs came, or the music’s “emotional content.” The revival, according to Lomax, began in the thirties “as a cultural movement with overtones of social reform.” Eventually, the “amusement industry” turned the “cultural movement” into the popular “boom.” A negative side effect to this new phase of the revival was that the “city-billy” singers had more access to the entertainment industry and thus were able to quickly generate a devoted following. In order to keep their following “they translate folk music in ways that make it more understandable and acceptable to their market—an urban middleclass group, with a college background,” thus taking folk music away from the tradition bearers.<sup>96</sup> Clearly, the conflicts over the commercialization of folk music ran deep. To the older revivalists, the popularity of folk music threatened to pervert the music they cherished. If this is what it took

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<sup>95</sup> Letter from Jack Holtzman re: Moses Asch (30 Sept. 1991), PG070 in the Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>96</sup> Alan Lomax, “The “Folkniks”—and the Songs They Sing,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer, 1959), p. 30, reprinted in Cohen, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*. Lomax stipulates that he is directing his comments to professional singers, not amateur ones.

to make folk music a part of mainstream American cultural identity, then maybe it was time to rethink the revival.

### Conclusion

While the end of the 1950s is notable for setting the stage for the emergence of the folk boom, the importance of the decade for the revival was just as much in the struggle for survival. For the majority of revivalists, most of whom were political progressives, the decade was one of uncertainty, fear, repression, and betrayal; even the revival had its share of friendly witnesses. In his assessment of the termination and lasting legacy of the culture of the Popular Front, Michael Denning describes all constituents of the Left after 1948—from the hard line Party members to the peripheral fellow travelers—as “repressed and expelled from public culture; it became a beleaguered subculture whose emblems were The Weavers, the Rosenbergs and Paul Robeson,” all of whom fell victim to the Red Scare.<sup>97</sup>

Contrary to this grim picture, not all members of the Left suffered irreparable defeat. Some, like the revivalists connected to *Sing Out!*, Folkways, and progressive schools, continued to push their political agenda despite the risks. Not only did these revivalists sustain the populist and pro-democracy vision of America that had emerged during the Popular Front, but also they did it largely on their own. Much of the Left was gone; so was the broad coalition that had come together under Popular Front progressivism. Now, far more conservative definitions of national identity dominated, highlighting capitalism and “free enterprise” rather than populism.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 464.

<sup>98</sup> Introduction to *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, Lary May, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 5; Jackson Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, p. 42.

In many ways, I follow Denning in arguing that the cultural formation of the Left in the 1930s and 1940s was a powerful current that transcended the Communist Party and progressive political forces from which it emerged. Some fellow travelers managed to retain enough autonomy from the Party to survive the political repression of McCarthyism, albeit with bruises. Moses Asch, and some members of the *Sing Out!* community, are examples of such figures. Even some revivalists who sought affiliations with the CP, people like Silber and Sanders, managed to continue their work throughout the decade. Perhaps it was precisely *because* the Party ignored the revivalists in the late 1940 and 1950s that they were able to remain standing for the duration of the Red Scare.

Denning describes the legacy of the Popular Front during the 1950s, however, as merely a residual cultural awareness, the *spirit* of the movement continuing aesthetically through novels and movies. In arguing such, Denning underestimates the endurance of Popular Front Americanism by depicting it as an inchoate sentiment that informed some artistic products. The Front's emphasis on the 'People' and democratic ideals embedded in the movement did not just make vague appearances in the revivalists' work, but rather provided the guiding principle for many of their cultural programs. The writers, editors, and musicians of People's Artists, *Sing Out!*, and Folkways Records spelled out what needed to be done to achieve lasting political reform, and provided ways to challenge the social and political status quo by bringing music into programs of social activism. Even the products that appeared to lack any political message—such as popular “folk” anthems like “This Land is Your Land” and “The Hammer Song”—proclaimed the very ideals of Popular Front Americanism. The messages that America “was made for you and me” and that one could “sing out love between my brothers (and my sisters) all over this land” were grounded in the populist democratic ideals that emerged during

the Popular Front, ideals that the revivalists continued to rely on to reform the nation throughout the 1950s.

Ultimately, rather than being the nadir of folk music activities, as some historians and folklorists viewed the 1950s, these years bridged the gap between the Old Left generation of folk music enthusiasts and the baby boom generation. During these years political and cultural radicals used music to protest or escape the strictures of the era, and young enthusiasts used it to define themselves and the type of America of which they sought to become a part. It was also during this time that the definition of folk music began to stretch to a breaking point, however. If Lomax was right in his assertion that the new generation of folk music fans did not understand the meaning behind the music, was that meaning lost? Indeed, that question soon became a major source of contention during the folk boom.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BOOM

The late fifties, according to sociologists Ron Eyerman and Scott Baretta, was a rather bleak time for suburban youth culture. Rock and roll, the former outlet for teenage angst, had become co-opted by commercial forces, which effectively rendered the music safe and bland. Jazz, the music of choice for culturally alternative teenagers, grew increasingly avant-garde and “Crow Jim” attitudes (i.e. Jim Crow in reverse) among black musicians rendered jazz a black music scene that restricted whites from gaining access. Without much competition, folk music filled the musical void for much of America’s white, middle-class youth.<sup>1</sup> Groups like the Kingston Trio looked and sounded like the rest of the white middle-class, making them accessible to white teenagers. Yet at the same time they represented something different: they sang songs like “Tom Dooley” that, while being old, were new to the children of suburbia. The Trio differed from their commercial predecessors like the Weavers not only because they lacked a political agenda, but also because they tailored their sound to the youth market. Their stripped down, acoustic sound sharply contrasted with the Weaver’s soaring orchestral arrangements; to teenage fans, this was not their parents’ music. Although many of the songs on their first album were traditional, and songs on subsequent albums addressed traditional themes, the Trio packaged their music in a way that made it easy to digest for the cultural mainstream. The newfound popularity of folk music groups like the Trio led mainstream media outlets to adapt to the times. Even the *New York Times* had a folk music critic, Robert Shelton, who observed that

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (August 1996), p. 522.



by the early sixties folk music had become a definite part of the musical mainstream: “A longer perspective may revise this view, but it appears from a distance of a few months that 1962 was the year when the folk-music revival outlived its period as a fad and became an established staple in the popular-music diet of this country’s listeners.”<sup>2</sup>

Shelton’s observation was correct; by 1962 folk music officially hit the big time. In popular culture, the years between 1960 and 1965 are viewed as the era of *the* folk revival. Although much of the audience during this period were holdovers from the previous decade—the folk music fans who gathered in urban coffee houses, small music clubs, colleges, and parks—they were soon overwhelmed by hordes of young, baby boom enthusiasts. The enormous popularity of folk music during these years would seem to indicate that the revivalists were succeeding in their efforts to make folk music a part of mainstream American culture. In many respects, however, the revivalists were not the vanguard of the folk boom. Rather, commercial outlets and mainstream media largely dictated the type of folk music that was brought to a mass listening audience. Motivated by economic gain rather than political and social idealism, music entrepreneurs, television producers, and some musicians sought to latch onto the folk music craze that they were themselves in the process of creating. In many respects the factions that emerged and the products that flooded the market during the era commonly referred to as “the folk revival” were disconnected from the long-term movement.

As folk music peaked in popularity during the first half of the 1960s, the revival as a whole began experiencing a structural sea change. During this period two generations of revivalists controlled the movement: the first had emerged during the 1930s and the People’s Songs era, and the second consisted of the baby boomers who had come of age. The latter

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Shelton, “Fad to Staple: Disks Reflect ‘Arrival’ of Folk Music as Part of Country’s Popular Arts,” *New York Times* (28 Apr. 1963), p. 144.

divided into two camps marked by their divergent views regarding folk music: musical traditionalists on the one hand, and members and sympathizers of the emerging New Left on the other. While the former helped to complicate the character of the commercial phase of the folk revival, the latter played a critical role in perpetuating the type of Americanism that the older revivalists had carried through the 1950s and adapting it to a new era of political activism, thus forging links between the Old and New Lefts.

In their effort to cope with the rampant commercialization of folk music, the first generation of revivalists operated through the various outlets that they had formed before the boom. *Sing Out!* continued through the early years of the 1960s in much the same vein as it had in the late 1950s, examining the growing popularity of folk music and what it meant for both the revival and American culture as a whole. The members of the *Sing Out!* community did not necessarily condemn the widespread popularity of folk music, but they did try to retain some control over the boom to insure that traditional and topical folk music did not become obsolete. At the same time other revivalists, many of whom contributed to *Sing Out!*, hoped to tap into this fad in order to advance the causes that they had pursued in the past. Many took their interest in preservation a step further by initiating a music festival designed to feature both contemporary popular musicians and traditional players on the same stage. The organizers of the Newport Folk Festival hoped to attract young listeners to come hear their favorite singers from the radio and stay to hear traditional musicians. Similarly, progressive educators used the widespread popularity of folk music as an opportunity to incorporate this music into school curricula. Moses Asch spearheaded this effort, as he had done in the previous decade. The end of McCarthyism enabled him to amplify his progressive views. Through entertainment and education, these revivalists hoped to steer the popular wing of the revival back to its cultural—and social—roots.

At the same time, the apolitical traditionalists of the baby boom generation focused solely on the music itself without any political or social agenda. By jettisoning the message of the revival from folk music, these fans of folk music began to form their own trajectory, independent of the movement from which they had originated. Yet, in the midst of forming their own niche within the world of folk music, they had to contend with the fact that the genre had now become a teenage fad. They responded by shunning any connection to the mainstream aspects of folk music and focusing exclusively on traditional folk music. They worked to literally *revive* this music—either by studying the musical techniques from recordings of the 1920s and 1930s, or by seeking to discover, or rediscover, musicians who were steeped in these musical traditions. Rather than rely on mainstream media outlets and the commercial record industry, these revivalists created their own programs: college folk clubs, festivals, and student-run magazines.

The New Left wing of the new revivalists moved beyond the purely musical realm and initiated new efforts that used folk music to implement social and political reform. These figures were largely responsible for maintaining the core message of the revival, and their leftism shared remarkable parallels to the ideals and activism of the Old Left from the Popular Front era. Both political movements were predicated on the belief that America could still be reformed to achieve democratic goals and become inclusive of marginalized groups. Although the New Left largely emerged from the baby boom generation that had now come of age, many revivalists from the People's Songs era joined their ranks. In addition to maintaining similar ideals, the activists from these two generations shared a belief that folk music promoted a pluralist democratic Americanism that would in turn help generate the kind of political reform that the nation so desperately needed.

## Commercialization and The Revival

In her effort to delineate a theory of music revivals, ethnomusicologist Tamara Livingston explains that the final stage of a revival is marked by the development of a revival industry: non-profit and for-profit ventures including concerts and festivals, magazines, record companies, and music education materials that cater to the revival community. These media outlets not only keep the community informed (ideologically as well as musically) but also help maintain the community of folk music fans as they spread across the country.<sup>3</sup> Of all the revival programs, *Sing Out!* would become the forum for exploring and discussing all aspects of the folk revival community.

In 1961, during the rapidly accelerating folk boom, *Sing Out!* continued to evaluate the positive and negative consequences of the growing popularity of folk music. In his regular column on folk music happenings, “Frets and Frails,” Izzy Young looked at the positive aspects of the commercialization of folk music, noting that the more record companies released folk albums, the more folk music would become a key part of American culture. Folk music would move out of its niche market when “night clubs, radio and TV” started featuring more folk artists. As this happened with more frequency, Young argued, “the important singers will not have to languish and play only in occasional benefit concerts or for a few devoted followers. When the folksinger can make a living, folkmusic [sic] will have arrived.”<sup>4</sup> By 1962 folk music *had* arrived and the question of who held the reins of the revival was anyone’s guess. In the midst of the hype surrounding folk music, the editors of *Sing Out!* stepped back and examined their role in the boom. In an editorial from 1962, Irwin Silber summarized the view of the magazine’s editorial board:

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<sup>3</sup> Tamara E. Livingston, “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter, 1999), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Izzy Young, “Frets and Frails,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Apr.-May 1961), p. 49.

We are, first of all, interested in folk and traditional music: as a living heritage—a link to the past—as an aesthetic experience, and as a vehicle for contemporary expression...One of the functions of SING OUT, we believe, is to make these songs more readily available to the thousands of young people who play guitars and banjos and who are the lifeblood of what has been called “the folksong revival.”

Silber then recognized that *Sing Out!* had expressed many political views, and that the editorial board itself encompassed various musical and political persuasions. The magazine included these different positions because the staff members believed in “the value of a free marketplace of ideas and experiences.”<sup>5</sup> In what appeared to be a gesture to include musical representations from the opposite side of the political spectrum, the magazine printed two songs about the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, “We Belong to the KKK” and “The Klansman’s Friend,” with a preface explaining the various bigoted views that the early Klan espoused. This, however, was the first and last time right-wing songs, and conservative political views in general, were included in the magazine during the 1960s. By appeasing folk fans’ disparate tastes and proclivities, *Sing Out!* attempted to keep one foot firmly in the core of the revival and one foot in the boom.

As the folk boom continued to pick up steam, folk music became—revivalists believed—increasingly compromised in the realm of popular culture. In an editorial on the state of folk music in 1963, Irwin Silber commented that, while there were many positive aspects regarding the popularity of folk music, he was troubled by the over-commercialization of the music and iconography:

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<sup>5</sup> Irwin Silber, editorial, *Sing Out!*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct.-Nov. 1962), p. 3. Despite the rhetoric of open political views and the general decline in political commentary, some readers still complained that the magazine presented a one-sided view of the folk revival community. In her letter to the editor, Mrs. Noel M. Reid from Ann Arbor, Michigan, complimented the magazine but also griped: “Why do all folksingers and followers fall into such a distinct pattern? There are those of us who live a middle-income, outer suburban [sic] life complete with PTA and all of the other mundane responsibilities, who have no axes to grind, no ‘causes’ to sing about; we just sing (or rather howl to ourselves) for the pure pleasure and relaxation it offers; who don’t sing to be a folknik, beatnik, ethnic, or whatever...Anyway, I am sick to death of girls with pony tails smoking pipes and scraggily-headed men with grubby beards...Despite the slight blast at your one-sided point of view, your magazine has still added much interest and pleasure to my life” (*Sing Out!*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Apr.-May 1961), p. 57).

Now, folk music, like the quiz shows before it, has become a device to sell soap, hair tonic, soft drinks, [and] cigarettes. In an age where the sweetest music of all is played on the cash register, folk music has become a commodity, an object of the marketplace, to be judged, weighed and sold by the Lootenanny of 1963.

In the same issue, Bob West from Fairborn, Ohio, echoed Silber's sentiment, exclaiming in his letter to the editor, "What they heck has happened? I was sitting in front of the television when, by God, Oscar Brand started singing. When I started to listen [I realized] it was a DOG FOOD COMMERCIAL!!!"<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the middle of the commercial morass, some revivalists found hope. Benjamin Botkin contributed an article in which he examined the folk boom, ultimately concluding that it was a good thing for American culture:

What is being revived, in other words, or rediscovered, is not so much American folk music as the musical past of America, with the young folkniks running ahead of some of the professors, who got stuck in the ballads, and behind other professors and scholars (Newman I. White, Robert W. Gordon, and Phillips Barry, for example), who were ahead of many of their colleagues in the diversity of their folk song interests. Any revival that can accomplish this kind of rediscovery has earned its name.<sup>7</sup>

The rapidly accelerating popularity of folk music led *Sing Out!* to feature a symposium, "Folk Music and the Top 40," that addressed the relationship between commercialism, popularization, and folk music in the revival in early 1966. Interestingly, the overall tone of the symposium was positive: folklorist Roger Abrahams recounted his initial disgust at hearing a "pop" singer cover a traditional ballad, but then realized "that this sort of popularization of folksongs had been going on for hundreds of years." Bluegrass banjo extraordinaire Earl Scruggs noted that by reaching the top forty, "the general public has become increasingly aware of the value of folksongs." Others, while still praising the widespread interest in folk music, sounded a note of caution: Pete Seeger commented that revivalists "should strive to see that local people are not ashamed of their local traditions and different national and racial groups are not ashamed of their national and

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<sup>6</sup> Irwin Silber, editorial; Bob West letter to the editor, *Sing Out!*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct-Nov. 1963) pp. 3, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Botkin, "The Folk Song Revival: Cult or Culture?," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar. 1965), p. 32.

racial traditions.” Benjamin Botkin continued his call for cultural diversity, noting “if the folk song revival is to survive, it must, as an urban movement, continue to ally itself with the egalitarian ‘urban majority,’ on the side of the dynamic, creative forces of cultural pluralism and equality against the forces of conformity and reaction.”<sup>8</sup> As long as traditional artists continued to be respected, and traditional music did not become too adulterated, then the revivalists could take pride in the success of their efforts to bring folk music to a national listening audience.

Commercial folk music, however, overwhelmingly dominated the boom. One of the symposium themes was the effect that the non-traditional musicians of the boom had on the public image of folk music. All-male groups like the Kingston Trio, the Chad Mitchell Trio, the Limelites, and the Brothers Four were of the more clean-cut variety and often sang traditional songs and material written by other songwriters in addition to their own compositions. Some, like the Chad Mitchell Trio, began singing satirical and even political songs as the decade progressed. Other popular performers included the folk “queens” Joan Baez, Carolyn Hester, Judy Collins, and Odetta, whose musical selections also consisted of traditional and topical songs. Other acts included mixed-gender groups like the Rooftop Singers and Peter, Paul, and Mary, the latter of which became one of the most popular groups of the boom. Groups like Peter, Paul, and Mary along with singers like Baez and Collins became especially notable for bringing the music of other songwriters of the revival (such as Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, and Shel Silverstein) to a wider audience. Many of the albums that these singers and groups recorded landed in the top-40 during the first three years of the 1960s. In the spring of 1960, the Kingston Trio’s *Here We Go Again* was the best selling album. During the same year, the Brothers Four’s debut album reached number two and spent twenty weeks in the top 40. 1962 marked the year

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<sup>8</sup> “Folk Songs and the Top 40,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Feb-Mar. 1966), pp. 12-14.

that satirist Allan Sherman's album *My Son the Folk Singer* was a top-40 album for six weeks, and an illustration of Joan Baez was featured on the cover of *Time*. The following year, fifty radio stations featured a folk music radio show (usually with the word "hootenanny" in the title) and, in August, WCPO in Cincinnati dedicated all airtime to folk music.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the programs that emerged during the early 1960s, none encapsulated the commercialism of the boom quite like *Hootenanny*, a folk music television show on ABC. Aired on Saturday nights beginning in April, 1963, *Hootenanny* featured a variety of revival acts playing popular music and it soon became one of the most popular shows on the station. Richard Lewine and Jack Linkletter, the show's producers, filmed each episode on a different college campus and specifically geared the program to the youth market. Many folk musicians criticized the show, not only because it glorified the faddish aspects of the folk music boom, but also because it blacklisted Pete Seeger and the Weavers from performing. While the producers claimed they did not include him because he was no longer popular among college students, it was obvious that they based their decision on Seeger's political reputation. Since Seeger could not play, many musicians, including Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, and Peter, Paul and Mary, refused to perform as well. Despite his censure, Pete Seeger encouraged these singers to appear on the show in the hope that they would help popularize good folk music to a young audience; even his half-brother Mike Seeger performed with his group The New Lost City Ramblers. The show's success soon led to a vast overuse of the term "hootenanny."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 158, 160, 177, 193, 198, 200.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 196-98, 200, 212. Cohen notes that the word soon appeared on sweatshirts, pinball machines, shoes, paper dolls, bath mitts, candy bars, vacation packages, and Ford dealerships. About fifty radio stations had "hootenanny" shows and the New Jersey Palisades amusement park even hosted a "Miss Hootenanny" competition. The irony of Pete Seeger's exclusion from the show "Hootenanny" is that he was primarily responsible for popularizing the term. A nonsense word like thingamajig, he and Woody Guthrie came across "hootenanny" on their cross-country travels and began calling the musical gatherings that they held as fundraisers for The Almanacs' and later People's Songs' "hootenannies." Long before ABC launched its show, Alan Lomax proposed a program



By staging folk music concerts on college campuses, *Hootenanny* tapped into what had been a common feature of the revival: folk music festivals. Throughout the fifties progressive colleges like Swarthmore and Oberlin hosted folk festivals. Even the schools that did not have full-scale festivals often invited folk music performers for individual concerts. When the Kingston Trio emerged on the music scene in 1958 they first became popular among a college audience. That same year George Wein invited the Kingston Trio to perform at his annual summer jazz festival held in Newport, Rhode Island. Wein, a music promoter, had begun the Newport Jazz Festival in 1954, using the Berkshire Music Festival, otherwise known as “Tanglewood,” as a model.<sup>11</sup> The success of the Kingston Trio in 1958 led Wein to organize a separate Newport Folk Festival on the Tanglewood model the following year.<sup>12</sup> Hiring Albert Grossman, a music manager and owner of the popular Chicago folk music club Gate of Horn, as the festival organizer and commissioning Studs Terkel to serve as the emcee, Wein launched the first Newport Folk Festival on July 11, 1959.<sup>13</sup>

As an annual public event, the Newport Folk Festival appeared more akin to the National Folk Festival (NFF) than the smaller college festivals. The fact that the Newport board included many advocates of jazz and blues music, however, set this festival on a very different path from the NFF, since the latter took years to incorporate blues music and ignored anything that was

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called “Hootenanny on the Air,” a folksong variety show for CBS radio in the late 1940s. Lomax wrote the script and proposed to include Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, the Coleman Brothers Quartet, Cisco Houston, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Hally Wood, Ronnie Gilbert, Pops Foster, Sidney Bechet, and Eddie Smith, with Johnny Faulk as the host. “Hootenanny on the Air” Script, Folder: Various Radio Scripts, Box 04.01.15 (3/3) in the Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the summer Tanglewood presented several classical music concerts performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The series included formal performances and informal public recitals and pre-performance rehearsals, which granted people from all socioeconomic levels access to the music, Cheryl Anne Brauner, *A Study of the Newport Folk Festival and the Newport Foundation*, M.A. Thesis, Department of folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland (October 1983), p 37.

<sup>12</sup> Though the Trio’s popularity was an important factor, Ronald Cohen notes that Wein was inspired to organize a separate folk festival after he heard Odetta, an African American musician from Chicago, perform.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, pp. 46-47.

non-traditional. In the introduction of the program book for the Newport 1959 festival, the organizers set parameters for the music that they believed should be included under the rubric of American folk music. Unlike the NFF and most regional festivals, Newport organizers included both traditional and contemporary performers. Organizers celebrated this musical pluralism, stating in the program that, “The Scholars, the City-bred folksingers, and the ‘authentic’ singers are here to give to you what is probably the very first representative picture of American Folk Music ever held on the concert stage.”<sup>14</sup> Opening with Pete Seeger, the first festival was a two day event that included traditional performers such as Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, John Jacob Niles, the Viennese singer Martha Schlamme, The New Lost City Ramblers, Memphis Slim, Cynthia Gooding, Frank Warner, Odetta, the country singer Jimmy Driftwood, Oscar Brand, Barbara Dane, Jean Ritchie, The Kingston Trio, and more. The program for the festival includes brief biographical sketches of each performer but, as Ralph Rinzler, one of the program writers, noted in retrospect, no distinction was made between traditional and non-traditional musicians.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the NFF planners, the Newport organizers did not bathe their program in talk of patriotism and democracy, although they did note the contributions that the festival performers made to “the cause of American music and our democratic way of life.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, Newport also promoted the democratic Americanism that characterized the revival.

The following year the Newport Folk Festival added a new host of performers, including singers and musicians such as The Brothers Four, Peggy Seeger, Ewan McColl, the flamenco group Sabicas, The Ducorans African Trio, John Lee Hooker, Lester Flatt, Abyssian Baptist

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<sup>14</sup> First Annual Newport Folk Festival Program (1959), p. 2, Ralph Rinzler Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>15</sup> “Rinzler Interviews—Audio Tapes,” FP 2006-CT-0003, Tape 19 (24, 25 Oct. 1989, 1 Nov. 1989), Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> First Annual Newport Folk Festival Program (1959), p. 3, Ralph Rinzler Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Choir, and Cisco Houston, among others. Although the popular phase of the folk revival had yet to peak, Pete Seeger paused to reflect on the movement in the festival program. Dating the beginning of the revival back to the 1930s, Seeger commended public folklorists like Alan Lomax for initiating the movement, and then credited musical groups of the forties and fifties such as The Weavers and the Kingston Trio for augmenting the current surge of interest. Echoing a prior statement that he made in *Sing Out!*, Seeger claimed that “a small army of do-it-yourselfers” spearheaded the surge of interest in folk music and that “one could possibly explain the folk music revival as being simply a part of the whole huge postwar interest in do-it-yourself activities.”<sup>17</sup> The new folk music enthusiast was more interested in creative entertainment outlets, and also believed that folk music would contribute to her worldliness: “The great range of different kinds of folk music indicates that here is a new kind of cosmopolitan citizen: one who can listen to an Israeli hora one minute and the next minute to an unaccompanied English sea chanty, or a gutty deep south blues.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Newport Festival aimed to enhance that appreciation of cultural diversity and was therefore not restricted to traditional music in an effort to uphold standards of authenticity, as were many of the other folk festivals. Rather, it embraced the popularity of folk music, and committed itself to bringing both new and traditional artists, foreign and domestic, to the same stage. Eventually, this pluralism became both the festival’s strength and its weakness.

During Wein’s Jazz Festival of 1960, a skirmish broke out between students and police in downtown Newport, an incident that prompted the city of Newport to ban both festivals. The hiatus for the folk festival lasted for the next three years. In the interim Albert Grossman left the

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<sup>17</sup> Pete Seeger, “The American Folk Song Revival,” *1960 Newport Folk Festival Program*, no page numbers, Ralph Rinzler Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

festival to manage Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary. Pete and Toshi Seeger deftly filled his place. Together with Wein, his wife Joyce, and singer Theodore Bikel, they established the non-profit Newport Folk Festival Foundation (NFFF). Run primarily by musicians, the NFFF marked a sea change in the way that the festival was organized and executed. As Pete Seeger and Ralph Rinzler recollected, the first two Newport programs featured major acts in the popular folk music scene but tended to neglect actual “folks.” Seeger was dismayed that the people from whom he learned traditional music were not included to the extent that he believed they should be, and he, along with Toshi, his sister Peggy Seeger, and British musician Ewen McColl pushed to incorporate even more traditional singers, alternating their performances with those of the urban revivalists. Through this arrangement, they hoped that the festival would connect disparate folk groups within the folk music community. They recognized that Newport still needed to include urban performers in order to attract an audience but decided to pay all musicians, regardless of fame, fifty dollars per diem (in addition to living expenses) to appear at the festival. Any additional profits that the festival garnered would go back to the Foundation to be redistributed among local programs that worked to present local traditional culture. Pete Seeger believed that through this arrangement, the Newport Festival was “in effect, giving wide publicity to something that had been going on for at least twenty years.”<sup>19</sup>

Because of Seeger’s prodding, Newport fell in step with the revival after 1963, for it was now designed to bring traditional music to larger audiences, and to raise social and political awareness through more topical singers as well. By using the star power of performers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul and Mary, the board members hoped that young enthusiasts would be drawn to the festival where they would then be introduced to, and inspired by,

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<sup>19</sup> “Discussion between Pete Seeger, Ralph Rinzler and Kate Rinzler,” tape 2 (8 Dec. 1991), FP 2006-CT-00039, at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. See Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 84.

traditional performers. By combining traditional musicians, popular urban singers, and topical singer-songwriters, the Newport Folk Festival reflected the *zeitgeist* of the folk boom. Its audience numbers rose with the tide of interest in folk music, both traditional and contemporary. The festival included new musical categories that were becoming incorporated under the ever-expanding umbrella of folk music. By 1963 the festival began catering to folk fans' broadening interests and became more interactive, as evidenced by more intimate afternoon sessions, or musical "workshops," dedicated to bluegrass and topical protest songs, as well as to traditional folk music.

As Pete Seeger and the rest of the Newport Folk Festival Foundation continued to bring traditional and topical folk music to a popular audience, another revivalist sustained his efforts to bring folk music to an educational audience. In the midst of recording and distributing albums of various types of folk music, Moses Asch continued to produce albums designed for educational purposes. The early years of the 1960s were particularly conducive to this type of program. With the onset of the folk boom, the educational value of folk music became a *cause celebre* among many core revivalists. Contributors to the *New York Folklore Quarterly* were particularly engaged with this topic during this era. In 1962, John Anthony Scott argued that folklore (and music) should be taught in primary and secondary schools, not as a separate subfield but as an intrinsic part of American history classes. Again, folk music could provide students with a deeper understanding of their own heritage and the cultures of people around the world, thus making them aware of their place in the national and international communities. Through this kind of education students would be exposed "directly to humanity...to living, struggling, thinking and feeling human beings." Because folk music transcended national boundaries, Scott

continued, it could give school children the ability to attain a “whole sense of the unity of our world, the unity of its peoples and even the brotherhood of man.”<sup>20</sup>

In the following issue, Norman Studer echoed Scott’s sentiment that folk culture could connect students on a global scale, but he focused more on folk culture’s educational benefits within the national context. As a student of John Dewey at Columbia, Studer was steeped in Progressive educational theories. He established Camp Woodland during the 1930s and later served as a director of the progressive Greenwich Village grammar school, Little Red Schoolhouse. In his article “The Place of Folklore in Education,” Studer commented that the rise of interest in folklore and folksong over the past fifty years was “one of the most significant and hopeful signs of the times” and that this movement could—and should—make a substantial impact on American education. Arguing that people were displaced and disconnected from each other because of technological advancements and increased (sub)urbanization, he noted that Americans were beginning to express their “dissatisfaction with the spiritual nourishment of the times” and attempting to reestablish ties to their cultural roots, as evidenced by the rise of interest in folk culture. Rather than mere nostalgia, however, the contemporary popularity of folklore and folk music was symptomatic of people’s “need to humanize their modern wilderness frontier of steel and concrete.” Schools, Studer explained, were the best places to foster this reconnection to a folk cultural heritage. Educating through folk culture in primary and secondary schools could enhance these efforts because it would revive regional identities that had been almost obliterated through suburbanization, “urban renewal,” and other modernization attempts that cut Americans from their collective pasts.

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<sup>20</sup> John Anthony Scott, “Folklore and Folksong in Education,” *New York Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. XVII, No. 4 (Winter 1962) pp. 294-295.

Folk culture would also help children of minority groups connect to their cultural heritage and thus allow them to fully participate “in this vast and varied crazy quilt pattern of peoples, called by sociologists a pluralistic society.” Studer noted that some had started working to introduce folk culture into education, such as the organizers of the Downtown Community School, an “intercultural institution” that simultaneously connected children of minority groups to their own traditions and American national heritage. By incorporating this method into primary school curricula Americans could combat the ill effects of forced assimilation and thus “achieve the mutual respect for all our traditions and backgrounds that is the deepest and ultimate goal of the American dream.” Representing a unity-within-diversity position familiar to the revival, Studer emphasized that using the variants of American folk culture to illustrate the diversity of American society would help children to “become the ideal citizens of a country whose official motto is *E Pluribus Unum*.”<sup>21</sup>

Of all the revival programs during the folk boom, Folkways Records was the strongest proponent of using folk music to illustrate American cultural diversity, especially to school children. Much of their material was packaged as school curriculum supplements.<sup>22</sup> In a meeting of the Music Library Association during the mid-1950s, Asch informed the members that librarians were cultural gatekeepers and they could ensure the preservation of quality cultural expressions by purchasing Folkways records. Fortunately, Asch was speaking to a very receptive audience.<sup>23</sup>

In 1960 Asch released albums geared for junior high and high school history and social studies classes. Unlike his earlier educational albums, which had focused on spoken word rather

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Studer, “The Place of Folklore in Education,” *New York Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (Winter 1962), pp. 3-5, 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folkways in Sound...or the Remarkable Enterprises of Mr. Moe Asch,” *High Fidelity Magazine* (June 1960), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Carlin, *Worlds of Sound*, p. 221.

than music, these albums of American history now alternated song tracks with narrated documents. The first album, *American History in Ballad and Song*, prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron, contains songs selected for their “maximum effective use” in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade sections. Each song is followed by “thought questions,” and every section concludes with homework assignments. These albums present a progressive, pluralist, and pro-democratic view of American history. A homework question that follows a song detailing the plight of Irish immigrants, “Shamrock,” states, “What contributions have the different religious, ethnic, and national groups made to America? Can you list several specific examples?” The “Development of Democracy” section opens with an eighteenth century song on suffrage, “Free Elections,” which explains the importance of the vote. A homework question following this piece is even more relevant to both historical and contemporary problems: “Since the vote is so precious, some people would like to prevent fellow Americans from using it. Can you give examples of this?” If the message behind this question was too subtle, students were also instructed, “In a summary paragraph, explain why this is dangerous for everyone.”<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent sections include: the Early Republic, Nineteenth Century Immigration, the Civil War, Industrialization, and the American Farmer. The Industrialization section focuses almost exclusively on the poor working conditions early industrial workers suffered as well as the unionization drives they embraced to uphold their rights. Songs such as “My Children are Seven in Number” teach about the 1933 coal strikes in Davidson and Wilder, Tennessee, and the students are asked to list the miners’ grievances as well as the advantages that mine owners had—and “exploited over”—the workers. The section continues with songs from textile mill strikes, such as “Mill Mother’s Lament” by Ella May Wiggins, a union organizer who was killed

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<sup>24</sup> *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1: Junior High Social Studies*, Album 5801, (1960), prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron, pp. 1, 3, 8, Folder 5801: “American History, Vol. 1,” Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,



during a textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929, and “The Death of Harry Simms,” which is about another union organizer who was killed by company guards during a coal strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1932. Students are again asked to recognize the grievances that the workers had and to determine what the government could do to help them. The “thought question” directs students to explain why workers would want to unionize, and one of the homework assignments asks students to imagine being a union organizer for mill workers and write a speech that would convince them to organize. After this, the American Farmer section centers on the nineteenth century Populist Movement, the injustices of the sharecropping and tenant farming systems, and the Dust Bowl with the songs, “Raggedy,” “Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat,” and “Dust Storm Disaster.” The collection concludes with the section called The World of Man, which features Japanese Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Polish, Hungarian and South African songs. It also includes the song “It’s the Same All Over,” which summarizes the section’s theme, according to the authors, of “Present[ing] the case that all men are basically alike in their hopes, fears, and dreams.”<sup>25</sup>

Volume II of this series was geared for high school social studies classes, specifically for sophomore through senior students. Taking a more thematic, rather than chronological, approach, this set centered on variations of “democracy” with sections dedicated to cultural, political, economic, and international democracy. The first section on cultural democracy delves deeper into investigating the components of American national identity. Again, attention is paid to the influence of immigrant cultures. Students are asked to examine what factors pulled different immigrants to the United States, where various groups settled, what hardships they faced and how these hardships had been eased through governmental legislation. The discussion

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<sup>25</sup> *American History in Ballad and Song: Vol. 2 Senior High School Social Studies*, prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron, (1962), Folkways Records Album No. FH 5802 FraSC, Folder: 5802: “American History, V. 2”pp, 9, 14-15, 16-17, 21, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

of immigration soon turns into an investigation of American xenophobia through Woody Guthrie's "Two Good Men" about the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and the song "Sherman Wu" about discrimination that Chinese students experienced in American colleges. Closing the section on cultural democracy is a popular contemporary Puerto Rican song and a documentary clip of Puerto Rican migrants arriving at Idlewild (Kennedy) Airport in New York. The entire emphasis in this section is on cultural diversity, and students are asked to examine how the United States has dealt with the plurality of ethnic cultures. Although the songs chosen for this section highlight the importance of cultural pluralism, students are asked to ponder for themselves the costs and benefits of living in a heterogeneous society.

The Economic Democracy section continues to investigate American history from the "people's" perspective. To illustrate the issue of laissez-faire capitalism and the public vs. private debate are songs such as Les Rice's "Banks of Marble" about the people taking over the banks through collective action, concluding with: "Then we'd own those banks of marble / With no guard at every door / And we'd share those vaults of silver / That we all have sweated for! (repeat)." The union organizer Aunt Molly Jackson's description of labor conditions and the song "Ludlow Massacre" are included to teach about labor history. Again, students are asked to come up with their own conclusions, but the authors' intentions are clear with such questions as: "In a society of law—such as ours—violence must be punished. But in situations such as the Ludlow Massacre, who is to be punished? What conclusion must be drawn about economic wars?"<sup>26</sup> The theme of the downtrodden continues throughout the next section: Political Democracy. This section opens by claiming that universal suffrage is essential for a democratic government but that throughout American history several groups, such as women, have been

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<sup>26</sup> *American History in Ballad and Song: Vol. 2 Senior High School Social Studies*, pp. 8-10, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

excluded from voting. Students are asked to list other groups who did not have the right to vote and to list any groups who were presently denied this right; the third part of the section features a Martin Luther King, Jr. speech calling for the right to vote for African Americans in the South. The section continues with the hardships that migrant workers have endured and closes with the McCarthy committee's "abuse" of Americans' constitutional rights during the prior decade.<sup>27</sup>

While these recordings presented a left-wing view of American history and identity that is reminiscent of Popular Front Americanism, Folkways Records received numerous letters commending the company specifically for its educational endeavors. In 1960, George G. Dawson, an assistant professor in the social studies department of New York University wrote to Asch about an article that he wrote on the use of folk music as a teaching tool. In the letter he compliments Folkways for their albums and notes how successful they have been in his American history classes. Even students wrote to express their appreciation. In a letter to Marion Distler, a student named Dan Harris states, "I respect it [Folkways] not so much as a record company, for on that score it is among the best, but as an instrument for the promotion of culture and education." Furthermore, he notes the political persuasion of Folkways—or at least those who were fans of the company—by commenting that he was first introduced to their records when his history teacher, "a bit of a leftist," played some albums of social protest music. He writes, "I was tremendously impressed (and one doesn't have to have any particular political leanings to love the records)."<sup>28</sup> Even the writers at *The Little Sandy Review*, a magazine that often lambasted the revivalists who used folk music for political purposes, commended Asch's

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, pp. 13-17.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from George G. Dawson to Folkways (29 March 1960); letter from Dan Harris to Marion Distler (27 Aug. 1960) unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

educational efforts. The reviewer Edmund Gilbertson praised the album *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1*:

I absolutely turn green with envy of today's enlightened junior high social classes when I find that they can study the problems of the American farmer by listening to Woody Guthrie sing "Dust Storm Disaster"; learn about colonial hardship with Peggy Seeger's "When I was Single"; study the causes of industrial fair play legislation by hearing Pete Seeger sing "The Blind Fiddler"; and so on. Ah, progress!<sup>29</sup>

It is clear from these recordings that Left political views profoundly shaped Asch's presentation of American folk music. While he sought to be inclusive as possible, Asch's pluralism never crossed the line into relativism, as he vowed never to record music of groups that oppressed people such as Ku Klux Klan or Nazi songs. On these recordings Asch did sometimes fall into the trap of romanticizing the American folk as well as American history, but he did so in order to promote a more just, inclusive, and egalitarian national community. Asch's respect for civil rights for all Americans and a concept of American identity rooted in cultural pluralism and cultural democracy drove his recording ventures, especially in the realm of education.

Despite Asch's efforts to release educational albums, Newport's attempts to inject folk music into mainstream culture, and *Sing Out!*'s critical examination of the various directions in which the revival was moving, many feared that the message of the revival was becoming increasingly lost in the commercial morass of the folk boom. One of Pete Seeger's primary complaints was that the popular revival was a good idea that often went awry. Revivalists like Seeger were most dismayed that commercial companies and agents who had no interest in what folk music represented, or the context from which it came, had taken the reins in bringing it to the masses. The "folk" music that the commercializers pushed—rearranged and performed by

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<sup>29</sup> Edmund Gilbertson, *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1* review, *The Little Sandy Review*, No. 9, p. 20.

white, middle-class singers—was a far cry from the traditional music that the revivalists championed.

During the height of the commercial boom, a different group of musical enthusiasts did try to define folk music as traditional music. In response to rampant commercialization, these enthusiasts embraced a conservative view of folk music that emphasized rural white and black traditions, largely to the exclusion of political, contemporary, and even ethnic music. Figures like Ralph Rinzler, now a member of the string-band the Greenbrier Boys, believed that they, like Seeger, served as a conduit channeling authentic folk music to the American public. This cohort first emerged in the *Anthology of American Folk Music* generation and was steeped in traditional music. In the liner notes that Rinzler wrote for the Greenbrier Boys' album, he insisted that if listeners liked their music, they should then go back to the real thing. Rinzler then took this stance a step further and left the band to manage the traditional musicians Bill Monroe and Tom (Clarence) Ashley, the latter had appeared in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Rinzler recognized that his turn to managing traditional performers stemmed from his anger at commercial culture for dismissing authentic folk musical traditions that he found both aesthetically pleasing and culturally profound. As with Lomax, Rinzler lamented the commercial music industry's refusal to record people who played the music of their own communities, while people from outside the tradition achieved fame and fortune for singing those very same songs.<sup>30</sup>

Rinzler was not alone in his effort to scrape away the commercialism of the folk boom and stay on course by popularizing traditional folk music and singers. While he turned his attention to managing musicians, others like the New Lost City Ramblers continued to record

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ralph Rinzler, FP 2006-CT-0005 (28 Jan. 1992); Interview with Ralph Rinzler (20 Jan. 1984) SI-FP-1989-CT-0039, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. When Rinzler first met Doc Watson, for example, he played rockabilly music because that was the only way he could make a living. When Rinzler learned that he actually knew a host of traditional rural Appalachian music, he encouraged him to start playing the music from his community and put him on the folk music circuit.

albums of traditional rural music. Focusing primarily on white rural music, and even old Tin Pan Alley songs, the Ramblers—Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley—were music collectors in the Harry Smith vein. They painstakingly studied commercial hillbilly recordings from the 1920s and 1930s and recreated that style as much as they could in their own performances.<sup>31</sup> Working with Rinzler and Izzy Young, John Cohen helped form the Friends of Old Time Music in New York City. They hosted their first concert in New York during the winter of 1961, which featured Roscoe Holcomb, a musician from Kentucky, and more popular “traditional” performers like Jean Ritchie, the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Greenbriar Boys. These musical purists even had a ‘fanzine’ directed at their segment of the revival: *The Little Sandy Review*. Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake, two undergraduates at the University of Minnesota who created the magazine, described themselves and their mission as follows: “We are two people who love folk music very much and want to do all we can to help the good in it grow and the bad in it to perish...if you disagree, fine. More power to you.” These rather cantankerous editors were unrelentingly critical of anything they saw as tainted by commercialism. For example, in response to a letter to the editor that asked if it is wrong to rearrange a song in order to enhance its ability to communicate to a wider audience, the editors wrote:

The idea of ‘arranging a song to communicate to most people’ is a pretty nauseating one to us. This is what the Weavers and the Kingston Trio do. People must come to folk music themselves. You don’t change or dilute the music and make it come to them. The real music is there, open to anyone who is willing to come take it in its purest form. Arrangement is not necessary, and, if done, must remain within the folk idiom (which the Weavers, Kingston Trio, Odetta, etc. do not do.)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Appearing on their album covers dressed in archaic clothing, the Ramblers tried to recreate a 1930s aura in their look and sound. They even adapted the blue eagle, the symbol of the New Deal’s National Recovery Administration, as their logo and declared on one album “I am lost—take me back to 1935.” This reflects the rise of interest in the culture 1930s that characterized a segment of American culture during the 1960s. See Morris Dickstein’s *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009) for more information about the 1930s cultural revival in the 1960s.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake, Introduction, *The Little Sandy Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1; Letter to the editor, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 25.

By only accepting traditional music as folk music, purists like Pankake and Nelson represented a wing of the popular revival that rejected the work of even revival stalwarts like Pete Seeger.

The number of purist sympathizers grew during the early 1960s, although not all of them agreed with Pankake and Nelson and their black and white definition of folk music. Largely situated on college campuses, these enthusiasts tended to form folk music clubs advised by folklorists such as Roger Abrahams and Archie Green. At the University of Texas at Austin, Abrahams organized “Thursday night folk sings,” and Archie Green helped form the Campus Folksong Club at the University of Illinois. In many ways, the college enthusiasts’ interest in traditional folk music seems an example of sociologist Anthony Giddens’ argument that some communities rely on “traditions” in an effort either to create or re-create a “personal and collective identity.”<sup>33</sup> Many college enthusiasts dating back to the early 1950s used traditional folk music to establish their identities. The collective identity that came to define the traditionalist college “folkies” unified them as a cultural group. The networks that they developed with fellow folk music fans provided these students with a community, which was particularly valuable to those who constituted a small minority in their colleges, as was the case for the folkies at Austin.<sup>34</sup>

Initially, the students who became involved in these organizations were cultural outcasts, but soon their efforts to put the traditional back in folk music began to influence larger trends in the revival. In the winter of 1962, students at the University of Chicago hosted a folk festival that featured only traditional performers—a musical event that garnered much praise from older

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<sup>33</sup> Anthony Giddens quoted in *Music and Social Movements*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 162-172.

revivalists and young purists alike.<sup>35</sup> Not only did the purists generate forums like the *Little Sandy Review* to voice their opinions, but they also had record labels like Folkways that catered to their tastes. By the mid-sixties, however, Folkways no longer dominated this field. Other record labels such as Vanguard, Prestige and even Elektra brought folk singers from the twenties and thirties—Mississippi John Hurt, Clarence Ashley, Furry Lewis, Son House, and others—back into the recording studio. Many purist revivalists also worked to bring these musicians on stage and included them in popular music festivals such as the Newport, National, and Berkeley Folk Festivals, in addition to programs that always included traditional musicians like the University of Chicago and the Philadelphia festivals.

The purists responded to the commercialization of the folk boom by cultivating their own community of believers. As other revival programs attempted to broaden their horizons in order to adapt to the cultural changes of the era, the purists maintained conservative definitions of what qualified as authentic folk music, and confined this music to the cultural sphere. By disconnecting folk music from projects of social and political reform, and by disengaging with the Americanism that was intrinsic to the revival, these purists began to sever their ties to the long-term movement. Yet, even this group was not immune to the social and political upheavals that were occurring around them. Soon, they, and the rest of the nation, had to contend with not only the commercialization of folk music, but also with the revivalists' re-politicization of the genre as well.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Cohen explains that the enthusiasm of the University of Chicago Festival prompted Archie Green to return to Illinois to start a folk music club for students.



## The Political Connection

Throughout much of the 1950s, the political wing of the revival struggled to weather the storm of anticommunism. Near the end of the decade, the political and social freeze that had seemed to envelope American politics and society started to thaw, and activism, or at least progressive social and political consciousness, began to reemerge. One of the first signs of this was the growing realization that many citizens' poverty, political disenfranchisement, and social and geographical isolation impeded their ability to access the American dream. Some social scientists began to study African American and Puerto Rican communities that were isolated in urban ghettos. Others turned their attention to the rural poor—many of whom came from the regions where folklorists and enthusiasts had flocked to record music in previous decades. Books like Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) and Harry Caudill's study of poverty in the southern Appalachian Mountains, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (1963), particularly ignited public interest in the plight of the rural poor and influenced policies in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Despite the gross inequalities in American life, most Americans in the fifties and the sixties believed that the nation could still be reformed and that through social and political change previously marginalized groups could become incorporated into the national community. As Gary Gerstle explains, although the Cold War prompted “fear and uncertainty,” it simultaneously made Americans cling steadfast to civic ideals like democracy and liberty.<sup>36</sup> The championing of civic ideals combined with a realization that many Americans faced barriers to these ideals helped the civil rights movement to achieve its initial goals of integration through the *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting

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<sup>36</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 277.

Rights Act (1965). New reform energy also fed Kennedy's New Frontier programs like the Peace Corps, and Johnson's ill-fated War on Poverty, which included the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).

The revivalists were very much in tune to the possibilities of the new liberal era. In 1961 folklorist Gene Bluestein linked the young fans of folk music to the era's *zeitgeist* of hope:

This is still a young movement, composed of students who are filled with the stubborn idealism that permeates the songs of Negro slaves, miners, hoboes, and blues singers. If the Kennedy administration is serious in its proposal to recruit them into a corps which will work to push into new frontiers, they will respond en masse and bring their guitars with them.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, many revivalists did become active in programs for social and political change and often used their voices, guitars, and banjos to advance social causes. Folklorist Alan Jabbour described the revival in the early sixties as a musical movement filled with idealistic fervor: “[W]e in our revival sought out—and created—a music to express simultaneously our quest for cultural roots, our admiration of democratic ideals and values, [and] our solidarity with the culturally neglected.”<sup>38</sup> However, the faith in the promise of American ideals that characterized the early sixties began to change, fomented by a new radicalism that was growing in the wings.

Despite the fact that the liberals who dominated the federal government gradually took notice of domestic problems and attempted to proffer solutions, young activists, much like their predecessor radicals of the thirties and forties, chose more radical alternatives. The baby boom generation of activists turned to the Left because liberals only partially succeeded in helping the underclass; they made these struggles newsworthy, but often failed to implement strong programs that would change the status quo. This half-success made people aware of the disjuncture between promises and reality: liberals promoted “equality” but did little if anything

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<sup>37</sup> Gene Bluestein, “Songs of the Silent Generation,” *New Republic*, Vol. 144 (13 March 1961), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Jabbour, Forward in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, p. xiii.

to make that a reality for people who needed it the most. The emerging activists soon defined their movement in opposition to liberalism. Liberalism, in their view, saw traditional politics and the electoral process as the key way solve domestic problems, whereas the new activists sought to politically transform American society, to “redeem” the nation’s “democratic values,” through direct action. Young activists particularly disdained “managerial liberalism,” which they saw as custodial and maintaining the status quo. If change was to be had, liberals wanted it to be gradual so as not to cause any reaction against it; keeping things in order was key. This, to young activists, was too slow at best and something that stifled any reform at worst. Therefore, they took it upon themselves to be the impetus for change.<sup>39</sup>

The “old” New Left, as historian and former participant Todd Gitlin refers to the movement, “aspired to be the voice, the conscience, and goad of its generation,” and it did serve as a catalyst for the rise of student activism in the late 1960s. During its early years, however, the New Left was a fringe movement, and many members proudly wore their badge of marginality, believing that their support for socially and economically disadvantaged citizens ran contrary to mainstream, middle-class America—a social, political, and economic stratum from which most of the members came.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Year of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), pp. 59-60, 133; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 310. Matusow traces the “rise and fall of the New Left” partly according to its relationship with liberal politics and politicians. At least initially, the early student activists did not necessarily discount liberalism altogether. Rather, they distinguished between “good” liberals, those who believed in the promise of American democracy but were tethered to the Democratic Party, and “bad” liberals, who were the party leaders—the Kennedy Administration and corporate liberals who sought to protect the established corporate order, as well as the social and political status quo (314, 316). See also Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 222-236. For information regarding the political awakening of members of the global Left of the late 1960s who later became key figures in social theory and sociology see *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Many historians of the New Left have a personal connection to the movement—either as former members or at least from living through the 1960s. For perspectives on the movement from the view of historians who were too young to remember the era, see *The New Left Revisited*, John McMillian and Paul Buhle, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 26-27.

Many members of the New Left believed that the movement was *sui generis*, wholly unconnected to the leftist movements that had preceded it. This “self-flattering idea of a virgin birth” allowed the young activists not only to break out of definitional confines that bound members of the Old Left, but also to separate themselves from the politics of anticommunism. However, they were connected, at least ideologically, to many progressive groups that predated the Cold War. For example, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization that became the locus of the New Left, formed as the student branch of the socialist League for Industrial Democracy (LID).<sup>41</sup> The members of SDS, however, eschewed the rhetoric of their parent organization. Michael Harrington, the young spokesman for the Socialist Party, explained that at one point he tried to get Tom Hayden, a leading member of SDS, to join the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL). Hayden agreed on almost every reform issue that Harrington advocated: the importance of “working within the Democratic Party, political realignment, the centrality of the civil rights movement, [and] the centrality of economic demands going beyond breaking down juridical Jim Crow.” He believed in everything but the word “socialism,” because, to him, the term was too bound up in a European context and thus disconnected from the American public; Hayden deliberately “wanted to speak American.” Al Haber, the president of SDS, shared Hayden’s sentiment. In 1961 he wrote that SDS should become an intellectual source for activism, its purpose to provide student activists, many of whom were skittish about “ideologies,” with a framework for action. It was Haber’s hope that SDS would provide “a program which stresses the integrating role that democratic values must play in political

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 110. The League began as a socialist, pro-trade union, and anti-communist organization in 1905. Gradually, however, the SDS members began distancing themselves from the Socialist Party. One of the first schisms that SDS had with LID was allowing a Progressive Youth Organizing Committee (a CP youth group) to sit in at the Port Huron Convention against the socialists’ objections. Harrington complained that the Statement did not denounce the Soviet Union as it should, instead putting a lot of the blame for the Cold War on the US. He also feared that SDS’s criticisms of liberals and trade unions would preclude a united left-liberal coalition, which he viewed as necessary for enacting reform (pp. 112, 120).

formulation.”<sup>42</sup> Essentially, that meant that SDS members would fight to make American political and economic institutions more democratic, to *reform* the system rather than overthrow it. Though their words mark a disjuncture from the ideological Old Left, their desire to open the American political system to all citizens is reminiscent of the goals of many of the folk revivalists who emerged during the Popular Front.<sup>43</sup>

One clear connection between the two generations is that many New Leftists were children of Old Leftists. These “red diaper babies” maintained what sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison refer to as a “habitus of protest” that was embedded in their families, and the communities in which they were raised.<sup>44</sup> Many of the early New Left activists were raised in families that valued political agitation, even during the era of the Red Scare when political protest was a risky endeavor.<sup>45</sup> Folklorist Roger Abrahams explains that he, like many other activists, grew up in a “highly political” German-Jewish family; as a teenager, he, unlike Hayden, did become a member of YPSL. During the early sixties, Abrahams observed that the political activism of the era had seeped into the growing folk community— noting that the crowd that gathered to swap songs on Sunday afternoons in Washington Square Park in New York City was “highly politicized,” meaning that it was highly leftist.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1987), pp. 54, 69.

<sup>43</sup> For additional connections between the Old Left and the New Left see Andrew Hunt’s essay “How New was the New Left?” in *The New Left Revisited*. Hunt systematically debunks “myths” about the newness of the New Left such as that the New Left invented participatory democracy, that it was the first student movement, that it coined the idea of not trusting anyone over 30 (he attributes that idea to John Reed). He also notes that communism was a feature of the New Left as well, noting the influence of young communists such as Angela Davis and old communists like Dorothy Healy, who remained politically influential (p. 143).

<sup>44</sup> Eyerman and Jamison borrow from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus,” which holds that an individual’s identity is formed through personal preferences and learned practices, “patterns or frameworks,” that one acquires through childhood socialization. The “habitus” is therefore a combination of personal taste and community values so that an individual’s identity is based on their own choices as well as the traditions in which they were raised.

<sup>45</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Cantwell Interview with Roger Abrahams, Tape 1 (2 Apr. 1986), SI-FP-1989-CT-0031 in the Robert Cantwell Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Through this observation, Abrahams substantiates another aspect of the “habitus of protest” that Eyerman and Jamison attribute to the American Left. As they explain, protest songs have been used in various movements that spanned generations and thereby “have been important in linking generations and in connecting movement.”<sup>47</sup> Through folk music, the leftist revivalists of the thirties and forties expressed political views via the same mode of cultural expression that many young activists adopted in the early sixties. Gitlin also recognizes that the folk music that political revivalists popularized in the forties not only linked the Old Left activists to the New Left generation, but also connected these young activists to other politically-minded youth who were not raised within political families. Folk music “was the main bridge between red-diaper babydom as a whole and the rest of their generation.” Gitlin recounts that he first learned of political folk music through the father of his “red diaper” girlfriend.<sup>48</sup> The musician Happy Traum followed a similar path that led him, and many others, toward both folk music and leftist politics:

In about 1954 some friends from high school took me to a Pete Seeger concert. It was actually a People’s Artists Hootenanny I think...I do remember the experience was a very amazing one for me. At the same time I was hearing music that was inspired by the left-wing People’s Songs movement that had taken place in New York at that time. I went to the High School of Music and Art in New York and a lot of the kids that went to school there were of left-wing parents. They introduced me to Pete and through that Woody and Josh White and Leadbelly and all those people of the folk music movement of that day. That’s what got me started... It didn’t take me long to drift to Washington Square where I met dozens of other people, some who are still friends of mine, playing music. That’s the typical New York journey into folk music in the mid-‘50s.

Richard Flacks, another leading member of SDS, partly attributes his political awakening to folk music, and he credits folk music for influencing the political development of many in his cohort,

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<sup>47</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 75.

declaring somewhat jokingly that “To understand *The Port Huron Statement*, you have to understand Bob Dylan.”<sup>49</sup>

The sixties activists did not turn to an established political party to help push their goals, nor did they adopt a clear ideological position like dialectical materialism as the solution for all problems. Yet the New Left, much like the Old Left of the People’s Songs generation, continued to believe in the promise of democratic Americanism and civic equality. Although the Popular Front had long since died, Gitlin declares “the idea of it could be sung...folk [music] was the living prayer of a defunct movement, the consolation and penumbra of its children, gingerly holding the place of a Left in American culture.” If the spirit of the Popular Front was carried through to the sixties through folk music, then the “idea” that the folk revival channeled into the new era of activism was the promise of American democracy—a faith in civic ideals that spurred the political revivalists to bring politically and economically marginalized Americans into the national body politic. Many of the activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) tried to become “instruments of the voiceless voices” that would make the plight of the American poor visible on a national scale.<sup>50</sup>

During the boom, folk music magazines, shows, and radio programs proliferated, yet the revival did not provide a literary outlet for its politically-minded members, young and old. With the increased competition, *Sing Out!*, the former political mouthpiece of the revival, had discontinued polemics and focused more on the dynamics of the revival itself. During *Sing Out!*’s political and topical lull, a new magazine made its debut on the folk music scene.

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<sup>49</sup> David K. Dunaway Interview with Happy Traum (14 July 1984), p. 2, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interview with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Richard Flacks, quoted in Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 166. ERAP was an SDS project that formed in 1963. The group focused on techniques of direct action by working within urban communities to teach economically marginalized people how to fight for their own rights. Beginning in 1964, SDS members of the group moved into slums in nine cities and attempted to organize local residents and pressure leaders to respond to the needs of the urban poor.

Intended as a source for spreading topical songs, *Broadside* began in the apartment of former Almanac Singer Agnes “Sis” Cunningham and her husband Gordon Friesen, both of whom were involved in People’s Songs. *Broadside* was actually the brainchild of a few revivalists from the People’s Songs era—songwriter Malvina Reynolds, who initiated the idea, and Pete Seeger who enthusiastically endorsed the plan.<sup>51</sup> Cunningham and Friesen had suffered hard times during the blacklist of the previous decade, but they remained strong in their political radicalism and welcomed the opportunity to revive the mission of printing and distributing socially significant songs that began with the *People’s Songs* bulletin. Cunningham and Friesen printed *Broadside* on a mimeograph machine, giving it a production quality that reflected their limited budget. Despite the magazine’s modesty, many folk revivalists believed in its message, and major figures, including Pete and Toshi Seeger and Moses Asch, lent their financial support.<sup>52</sup>

Friesen and Cunningham printed the first issue of *Broadside* in February of 1962 and continued to issue the magazine every other month. The first issue of *Broadside* opened with an explanation of the magazine’s purpose. Friesen reasoned that because so many songwriters were composing topical songs, “the only way to find out if a song is good is to give it wide circulation and let the singers and listeners decide for themselves.” The opening editorial then continued to shield the magazine from criticisms coming from within the revival regarding the legitimacy of

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<sup>51</sup> Friesen explains that although Reynolds had the idea to start an actual magazine, Pete Seeger realized that the American folk revival was missing the political element that had been so strong during the first two decades of the movement. Seeger noted this absence after a trip to England, where he interacted with highly political musicians who were part of the British folk revival. Upon his return, he got together with a handful of political revivalists who discussed the American state of affairs. Although some political sentiments were trickling into the popular revival through Folkways Records (particularly the set of *Gazette* albums) and the “Folk Process” column of *Sing Out!*, there was no main source for topical songwriters, so the solution was to initiate a group like People’s Songs and this is how they hatched the idea for initiating *Broadside*. Gordon Friesen, “Songs of Out Time from the Pages of *Broadside Magazine*,” pp. 130-132.

<sup>52</sup> For a more detailed description of the beginning of *Broadside*, see Cohen’s *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 179-83, and Agnes Cunningham and Gordon Friesen, *Red Dust and Broadside: A Joint Autobiography*, Ronald Cohen, ed. Cunningham and Friesen managed to keep the magazine in circulation until the mid-1970s and revived it for a bit during the 1980s. I will only focus on the magazine, however, during the years of the revival.



their material: “BROADSIDE may never publish a song that could be called a ‘folk song,’ but let us remember that many of our best folks songs were topical songs in their inception.”<sup>53</sup>

Following the opening editorial are songs by Malvina Reynolds and Agnes “Sis” Cunningham; Bob Dylan also contributed his “Talking John Birch Blues,” to the magazine’s inaugural issue.

When Cunningham and Friesen began *Broadside*, they were on the crest of a wave of interest in topical songs. They believed that the popularity of topical material stemmed from the rising dissatisfaction among American youth about the way the nation was operating. The growing disillusionment over the failure of liberal promises prompted songwriters to generate music that directly addressed social, political, and economic problems. To the writers of these songs, the folk revival to which they belonged was not merely a musical fad, but rather was a large part of the movement culture of the sixties. Moreover, as with People’s Songs, the topical songwriters were still connected to “the people.” Many became active in movements that sought to correct injustices in American life. From walking picket lines, to traveling south for Freedom Summer, to singing during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, singers like Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez appeared to practice what they preached. Cunningham and Friesen sought to spread the songs that helped sustain this activism to a wider audience, mainly to support the causes themselves. They had no illusions that the songs printed in *Broadside* were going to be commercial successes; they just hoped that the material would help boost the morale of those engaged in people’s struggles. Friesen explained, “[W]e began *Broadside* for the purpose of providing an outlet for song writers deeply motivated by local struggles rather than

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<sup>53</sup> Gordon Friesen, Editorial, *Broadside*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Feb. 1962), no page number. Friesen attributes this quote to Gil Turner, who helped get the magazine established and was also responsible for introducing Cunningham and Friesen to several topical songwriters.

aiming at becoming ‘stars.’”<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, Cunningham and Friesen also sought to preserve the new songs as documents of American grassroots activism.

One theme that was prevalent in the early issues of *Broadside* was nuclear war. The magazine featured numerous songs on the topic, including Dylan’s “I Will Not Go Down Under the Ground,” and several articles on the fears and health effects of nuclear testing. Friesen commented on this trend in an editorial in the fifth issue, in which he explained, “If our songwriters reflect the mood of the country, the number one concern of Americans today is the problem of peace and the deadly nuclear arms race. For the theme of peace—and related subjects such as renewed atomic bomb testing and fallout shelters—occurs in the largest percentage of songs being submitted.”<sup>55</sup> In addition to antinuclear songs, the magazine printed songs that preached environmentalism, such as “The Indiana Dunes,” which called for protection of the dunes around Lake Michigan that were in danger of being destroyed to make way for a new steel plant; Julius Lester contributed songs from the civil rights movement in the South and black freedom songs from the North. After 1963 *Broadside* began featuring songs that protested the escalating military presence in Vietnam.

In addition to new songs, *Broadside* kept its reading audience apprised of protest activities. In 1964 Bob Cohen contributed an article, “The Mississippi Caravan of Music,” about a group of folk singers including Barbara Dane, Judy Collins, Peter La Farge, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, and himself who performed at over thirty Mississippi Freedom Centers. As the “cultural arm” of the Mississippi Freedom Project, the caravan, Cohen wrote, “demonstrated the important contribution of Negro music in every aspect of American musical and cultural history. For

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<sup>54</sup> *Red Dust and BroadSides*, pp. 285, 287, 289, 291-92. Friesen also gives credit to Woody Guthrie for being an inspiration for the magazine.

<sup>55</sup> Gordon Friesen, Editorial, *Broadside*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (May 1962), p. 2.

children who have been educated—or rather brainwashed—by the public school system to accept the myth of their own inferiority this was an exhilarating revelation.”<sup>56</sup> Shortly before the rise of black nationalism the political folk revivalists advocated racial pride along with political activism. Some members of the revival, particularly Julius Lester, became strong advocates of black power by the end of the decade.

In many respects, *Broadside* was the political antidote to the commercialism of the boom. Singer, songwriter and frequent *Broadside* contributor Phil Ochs noted the need for the type of music that the magazine published, writing in 1963 that before the era of mass media, folksingers acted as “a traveling newspaper spreading tales through music.” Now, during an era of “forced conformity,” the folksinger of the 1960s served this role again by breaking the silence of media censorship.<sup>57</sup> While the political revivalists, young and old, appreciated the mission that *Broadside* undertook, other revivalists did not. In particular, *Broadside* became a perennial whipping boy in the magazine *Little Sandy Review*. Nelson and Pankake criticized *Broadside*’s political myopia, which led them to print musically weak songs as long as they contained a progressive message. The “protesteer” songwriters featured in *Broadside* composed heavily formulaic songs, according to Nelson and Pankake, to the extent that “in place of talent, we get a sort of reverse-Norman Rockwell Formula for Protest in which the key words are Negro, Bomb, Brotherhood, Shelter, Black and White Together, Capitalist, Politician, Win, Fight, Boss, Worker, Freedom, etc. (Try writing your own *Broadside* song by using this Formula; it shouldn’t take you over five minutes.)”<sup>58</sup> While the editors of the *Little Sandy Review* excoriated the

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<sup>56</sup> Bob Cohen, “Mississippi Caravan of Music,” *Broadside*, No. 51 (Oct. 1964), no page number.

<sup>57</sup> Phil Ochs, “The Need for Topical Music,” *Broadside*, No. 22 (Mar. 1963), no page number.

<sup>58</sup> John Pankake and Paul Nelson, “P-for-Protest,” *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of a Folksong Revival*, David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin Jr., eds. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1967), p. 146.

quality of the songs and songwriters in *Broadside*, many of those songs (and songwriters) soon found their way into another major revival outlet: *Sing Out!*

At the beginning of their thirteenth anniversary issue in 1964, the editors of *Sing Out!* reaffirmed their political commitment and began to include material by the topical songwriters from the *Broadside* group.<sup>59</sup> Although it may not be as obvious as it was in the past, the editors wrote, “We have always been partial to songs of social protest and topical comment—and readers will continue to find this type of material in every issue of SING OUT!”<sup>60</sup> The editorial also calls for readers to submit folksongs that are both traditional and contemporary, addressing the social and political concerns of 1960s America. In 1965, Irwin Silber, most likely a driving force of *Sing Out!*'s return to the political, debuted his column “Fan the Flames,” which became a regular feature during the rest of his tenure at the magazine. In this column Silber strung together political musings, social commentaries, and general complaints about the contemporary state of affairs. Taking his title from the Industrial Workers of the World's *Little Red Songbook* slogan “songs to fan the flames of discontent,” Silber wrote in the first column, “Sometimes it seems as though America's conscience, at best a lonesome waif in this ‘affluent’ society, has found a home in the folk song coffee houses.”<sup>61</sup> In a column a few months later, Silber commented that a new group was taking up the torch that he and other revivalists had carried through People's Songs and People's Artists: “A new generation of young songwriters, talented and with social consciences honed to the cutting edge by the silent frustration of the fifties, began to produce a dizzying crop of songs that did not fear to comment on the social realities of

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<sup>59</sup> The members of this groups were musicians whose songs frequently appeared in *Broadside*, singers like Bob Dylan (during his musically formative years), Len Chandler, Phil Ochs, Mark Spolestra, Pete La Farge, Tom Paxton, Malvina Reynolds, and Janis Ian in particular.

<sup>60</sup> Editorial, “We're 13 Years Old and Now Six Times a Year,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Feb-Mar. 1964), p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Irwin Silber, “Fan the Flames,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar. 1965), p. 47.

the times. This has been one of the healthiest developments in American cultural life of the past decade.”<sup>62</sup>

Topical songwriters of the early 1960s were the heirs to the People’s Songs tradition of composing songs to aid “people’s” causes; in this generation those causes included the civil rights movements, free speech, and protesting the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Other commentators on the revival also noted this turn. *New York Times* writer and critic Robert Shelton cited Phil Ochs as exemplifying this new trend. A topical folk singer, Ochs “has become a sort of musical editorial writer” of his generation. With songs like “Talking Cuban Crisis” and “The Ballad of Billie Sol,” Ochs’s “satire is trenchant and his opinions are controversial.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, they were, and many young folksingers began to follow the path of politically relevant folk music.

*Sing Out!* lauded these efforts and spread the songs of such topical songwriters as Peter La Farge, Tom Paxton, Mark Spoletta, Phil Ochs, and a young Bob Dylan, by printing the songs and explaining their meaning.<sup>64</sup> In 1965 the magazine featured another symposium on “Topical Songs and Folksinging, 1965.” Josh Dunson, also a writer for *Broadside*, explained the trend:

I believe the line, “I’m so mad that I’ve got no place to go,” tells a great deal about the new topical songs and their creators. In these songs, there is anger and disgust with the values of the preceding generation: the political values that have dictated war, the cultural values that have supported segregation, and the social values that have ordered chastity until marriage. The desire to have “a society in which each individual is free and able to express himself as much as his individual capacities will allow” is expressed in song.

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<sup>62</sup> Irwin Silber, “Fan the Flames,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (July 1965), p. 69.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Shelton, “New Folk Singers in ‘Village’ Demonstrate a pair of Trends,” *New York Times* (11 June 1963), p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> For example, the magazine introduced Phil Ochs’s song, “Links in a Chain,” with an explanation that Ochs wrote it in response to seeing white construction workers getting riled over seeing CORE members protesting by lying in front of their trucks. Ironically, they were members of unions that allegedly supported the movement. *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Feb. 1965), pp. 32-33.

Yet, at the same time, in many respects this revival of topical songs differed from the topical songs of the People's Songs era. Dunson noted this disjuncture as well: "You will never find the endorsement of a world system or even of an organization. These songs are written in the first person. Although there is compassion, there are no proposals. This is in contrast to the pretty clear goals of earlier social protest songwriters of the IWW through People's Songs."<sup>65</sup> The topical songwriters of the baby boom did indeed imbue their songs with a strain of individualism, a perspective that was lacking in topical songs from the People's Songs era. However, Dunson's observation leaves out the fact that many of these songwriters did support specific organizations, such as SDS, SNCC, and The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Of all the social and political causes, the civil rights movement was the primary galvanizing force for political activism in the early sixties. Many students in SDS became involved in the voting rights campaigns because they believed that, as Al Haber wrote, "Political rights, ultimately, are the precondition for an equal footing in such areas as employment, housing, education, and welfare protection." During the early 1960s, black and white students in civil rights organizations like SNCC initiated voting registration drives for disenfranchised African Americans in the South, particularly in Mississippi. Yet, it was not simply a matter of getting southern blacks the right to vote. It was the prospect of helping to bring them into a democratic political process that inspired many of the activists to travel down South to assist in the voting rights efforts. The student activists, especially those involved in the voter registration drives, collectively believed in the promise of "participatory democracy." According to Tom

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<sup>65</sup> Josh Dunson, "Symposium: Topical Songs and Folksinging, 1965," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Sept. 1965), p. 17. Older revivalists also noted this lack of a clear program in the topical songs of the sixties. In the same symposium, Moses Asch of Folkways Records criticized this trend: "[M]ost protest songs that have existed and are still meaningful today's world use a militant action, a "for-something" expression as opposed to the "let's-weep, let's-look-into-our-souls, let's-reflect, let's-examine" attitude of the so-called school of contemporary "poets" writing and singing songs of today...Poetry's function is stirring an emotion to change man. But it takes an actual act of man to overcome injustice" (p. 16).

Hayden, the phrase meant “action”; students were now rebelling against the previous decade of apathy and, as Hayden explained, “What’s the opposite of apathy? Active participation. Citizenship. Making history. Voting was not enough. Having a democracy in which you have an apathetic citizenship spoon-fed information by a monolithic media, periodically voting was very weak, a declining form of democracy.” In voter registration drives and freedom schools that SNCC members organized throughout the Deep South, activists taught the people how to become citizens, and this is what inspired their northern counterparts. Although the term “participatory democracy” meant different things to different people and would change significantly over the course of the decade, its emphasis on directing disenfranchised people into the American political system through grassroots efforts was, as journalist James Miller explains, “what was *new* about this left.”<sup>66</sup>

During the early sixties, many folk revivalists—young and old—traveled to the South to join in the grassroots civil rights efforts. Pete Seeger and Theodore Bikel were the first to participate in southern marches, but others soon followed. Odetta, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul and Mary performed in Washington the morning of the 1963 March on Washington;

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<sup>66</sup> Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, pp. 144, 152-53. For information on the theoretical sources of participatory democracy, see Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) and Dimitrios Roussopoulos and C. George Benello, eds. *Participatory Democracy: Prospects for Democratizing Democracy* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005). According to Roussopoulos and Benello, in a participatory democratic system people are directly involved in the process of decision-making regarding decisions that will affect their lives. The system requires that the “decision-making process be continuous and significant, direct rather than through representatives, and organized around issues instead of personalities.” Furthermore, advocates of participatory democracy believe “that in a good society people participate fully, and that a society cannot be good unless that happens. Participation and control must be *one*.” (p. 6) Similarly, Pateman explains that participatory democracy is based on the idea that “individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from each other.” Political representation on the national level is not enough (42). It is clear that these were guiding principles for programs that stressed community mobilization, such as the Mississippi field projects that educated sharecroppers, farmers, and domestic workers with little to no education and no experience in leadership positions—civic or religious—to become leaders in the freedom struggle. According to Mississippi project head Robert Moses, “They were not credentialed people... Yet, through the process, they became leaders.” Collective decision making became the way to ensure that future black leaders remained “responsible to their constituents.” Quoted in Francesca Poletta, “Strategy and Democracy in the New Left,” *New Left Revisited*, pp. 160-161 SDS members applied the methods of participatory democracy that they learned in the South to the North, particularly through ERAP programs.

the SNCC Freedom Singers, Seeger, Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, Marion Anderson and Mahalia Jackson performed at the evening concert. For three days in May 1964 Guy Carawan hosted a “Sing for Freedom” workshop at the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta that brought southern activists Fanny Lou Hamer, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Andrew Young, together with northern topical “folk” singers Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, and Len Chandler. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, Phil Ochs, Peter La Farge, Julius Lester, and Judy Collins performed at schools and community centers as a part of “Project Mississippi,” which focused on reviving local music in Mississippi to aid in the struggle. Bob Cohen, an avid supporter of SNCC and member of the Greenwich Village folk scene, organized a “Caravan of Music” that sent over twenty performers to the state to perform for one week.<sup>67</sup>

Back in the North, journalists Irwin Silber, Robert Shelton and others kept folk fans apprised of the freedom struggle in *Sing Out!* and *The New York Times*, respectively. Folkways also kept listeners informed about the civil rights efforts in the South by releasing albums of music from the movement compiled by Guy Carawan, such as *The Nashville Sit-in Story: Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation (by the Sit-In Participants)* (1960); *WNEW's Story of Selma* (1965), which featured songs that Pete Seeger and Len Chandler collected during the march; and *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi* (1965), a documentary narrated by SNCC leader Robert Moses about the voter registration drives. Asch also released educational albums such as *Songs of the American Negro Slaves*, which included liner notes written by historian John Hope Franklin, and two albums featuring W.E.B. Du Bois commenting on American racial conditions: *Socialism and the American Negro* (1960) and *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Recorded Autobiography, Interview with Moses Asch* (1961). Asch saw the civil rights

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<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, pp. 183-87, 204-8.



movement as history in the making and set out to document it, much as he sought to record other critical aspects of American (and global) life. In so doing, Asch sought to aid in what he believed to be a greater good, which he explained to Carawan in 1959 as giving “dignity and understanding to ALL peoples.” This is what he hoped to do by recording the struggles of black Americans to secure their democratic rights.<sup>68</sup>

Many of the musicians who became directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement were connected to the Newport Folk Festival. These affiliations rendered the festival a staunch advocate in this struggle for democracy. The Newport program of 1963 reflected its intensifying politicization, first by including the Freedom Singers, a group formed of SNCC members that Bernice Johnson organized and Toshi Seeger managed. The politics of Newport became even more overt when SNCC leaders and Joan Baez led a group of over six hundred movement supporters who had been in the audience of the Saturday night concert down the streets of Newport to Truro Park for a rally in support of the impending March on Washington.<sup>69</sup> Even those who did not participate in the impromptu march were provided with a history of the movement in Robert Shelton’s article, “Battle Hymns of the Republic,” which described the role of folk music in the civil rights movement and emphasized the Freedom Singers’ significance. The 1963 festival also provided the iconic picture of Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary linking arms with Bernice Johnson and other Freedom Singers in a rendition of “We Shall Overcome” at the end of the first evening concert.

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<sup>68</sup> Marion Distler letter to Guy Carawan (11 July 1959), Folder: Carawan, Guy (2/3), Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. In the full passage from the letter, Asch criticizes Carawan’s “use of CAPS when you write about the Choctau Indians and Highlander but delegate a small “j” to the Jews and a small “n” for the Negroes. I believe that you must give dignity and understanding to ALL peoples. The small “n” is the Southern approach to minimizing a people.”

<sup>69</sup> Brauner, *A Study of the Newport Folk Festival and the Newport Foundation*, pp. 91-92.

By 1964 musical activists were praised in the festival program. Phil Ochs complimented Guy Carawan in particular for his work in disseminating protest music and gathering socially active musicians for the Freedom Movement in his article, “The Year of the Topical Song.” As Robert Shelton remarked in the *New York Times* after the 1964 festival:

The festival closed in a symbolic finale merging music and social meaning. Odetta led other performers and an audience of 15,000 in two songs of the Negro integration movement. The social commitment of folk music blended with its aesthetic core in a triumphant conclusion. There was a democratizing spirit about this fusion of Negro and white musical forms and about the people who are the conveyor belts of these traditions that was little short of inspiring.

Shelton also quoted a “recording official” commenting that the festival was “almost a utopian dream. All this love, brotherhood and good music seem unreal compared to what is happening in the country today.”<sup>70</sup> With 47,000 admissions paid for the 1963 festival and 15,000 attendees of the first concert of the 1964 festival alone, the Newport Folk Festival was a prime vehicle for illustrating the importance of the civil rights movement in the South to a predominantly white, northern public audience. Through these efforts, the organizers of Newport encouraged the new generation to ensure that the promise of American democracy applied to all Americans, and to mobilize music in the effort to secure this promise.

At the beginning of 1966 *Sing Out!* printed a lengthy article about a conference held at Highlander Folk School that aimed “to encourage and promote grassroots southern Negro culture.” When this conference was held, the civil rights movement was undergoing sweeping changes. Many had begun to question the compatibility of black identity and American identity. In this climate of mounting identity crisis issues, revivalists like Guy Carawan tried to initiate a last-ditch effort to bring the movement back to its cultural roots, and to ensure that folk traditions were permitted to be part of the new black consciousness movement. The conference connected

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Shelton, “Symbolic Finale,” *New York Times* (2 Aug. 1964), p. 89.

white topical singers from the North to black activists from the South. Together they drafted the following statement:

This is an effort to confront ourselves with the problem of our identity in American culture. Negroes have created world-wide musical language in ragtime, jazz, blues, gospel, rock 'n' roll, etc., but they are ashamed to accept the richer root music and folk tradition out of which all this emerged. It will be our attempt through community gatherings and other projects to counteract this feeling of shame and this mis-education and thereby to renew the interest of the Negro community in its own artistic output, to the end that much beautiful music be saved from oblivion, and that the habits which produce it to stay alive, so that more songs will grow in the future.

To accomplish these goals, the attendees—civil rights workers, folklorists, black academics, and field project workers—from across the South agreed to work to alter educational curricula to encourage cultural pride, conduct research on black musical forms, and develop community projects to encourage local people to become involved. The conference members drafted resolutions that combined cultural democracy with the ideas of cultural and racial pride that were burgeoning within the movement: “We intend to encourage the Negro Community to come alive in its own spirit and on its own terms: We stand firmly opposed to those who hold that because the Negroes are winning their Civil Rights that they must be assimilated into the sterile ways of Main Street America. Political and economic progress do not have to mean conformity. A rich and beautiful America should be as culturally varied as possible.” Yet, at the same time, there was a sense of togetherness, a unity-within-diversity view that stood in marked contrast to the separatist position that later came to characterize racial nationalism. Through folk music, according to the attendees, blacks could develop a sense of pride both in their racial distinctiveness and as members of the national community:

In our folk music we will discover a bridge toward a prideful and democratic meeting ground with the white people of the South. The fact is that in Southern Folklore there has never been any Jim Crow line...We look forward to the time when Negro and White Folk

Artists will swap songs in the same platforms and on the same picnics matching their skills and perhaps collaborating to produce songs of unheard of excellence.<sup>71</sup>

For the time being, for this group, racial pride still seemed compatible with national unity.

The early stages of the 1960s civil rights movement brought political folk revivalists together, spanning the generations of revivalists from the People's Songs era to the baby boomers. This, however, was not the only political cause that united the two groups. The escalation of the Vietnam War also prompted the young revivalists of the New Left to mobilize. While most white New Leftists remained committed to the black freedom struggle, the rise of black power in the mid-sixties, and the conflicts in the movement between full-time black activists in the South and the part-time white summer volunteers from the North precipitated organizations such as CORE and SNCC to eject white members. The anti-war movement provided a new opportunity for white activists. While the media tended to focus on the youth element of the anti-war protests, especially since many occurred on college campuses, the anti-war movement was not restricted to the young. As with civil rights, many older leftists were active in the movement and many People's Songs members took up the new banner against what they saw as a new phase of American imperialism.

In 1965, after President Johnson sent ground troops into Vietnam, the American protest movement began to pick up steam. That same year SDS organized a march on Washington to protest the escalation of the war. The march attracted 15,000 marchers, by one conservative estimate, 5,000 more than SDS expected. As Phil Ochs, Judy Collins, and the Freedom Singers sang about peace, the marchers walked in lines of eighty abreast, which, according to James Miller, "clogged the Washington Mall. The vision of participatory democracy crystallized in a

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<sup>71</sup> "Watering the Roots," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Jan. 1966), pp. 61, 63.

new experience, a new sense of power, a new sentiment of solidarity.”<sup>72</sup> Many folk revivalists threw themselves into the anti-war movement as the war progressed. Folkways Records captured the developing movement in *Berkeley Teach-In: Vietnam* (1965), where students and professors gathered to discuss the war and its consequences. This was symbolic for many, not just because it denounced American actions, but also because it marked an end to the pervasive timidity over displaying left politics that dominated the academy during the 1950s.

That same year Irwin Silber and Barbara Dane suggested turning a hootenanny that was planned for Carnegie Hall into a “sing-in for peace” to protest the war. They invited folk singers from around the country to come and sing one song each for the two-night event. Over sixty performers participated and the first night sold out. Even though much of the audience remained apathetic to the war and only attended the event for entertainment purposes, there was a large coterie of anti-war folk revivalists present. After the second performance ended close to four in the morning, many audience members marched three miles to the Village Gate (a music club) to continue the music.<sup>73</sup> Individual revivalists also protested the war in their own ways: Joan Baez followed the historian Staughton Lynd’s lead and refused to pay the percentage of her income tax that she calculated went to the war effort. Songwriters like Phil Ochs wrote numerous anti-war songs such as “I ain’t Marching Anymore” and “The War is Over.” The war inspired Pete Seeger to compose “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” which he sang on *The Smothers Brothers* program in 1968. The song criticized Johnson’s handling of the war through such lyrics as “But every time I read the papers/ That old feeling comes on/ We're waist deep in the Big Muddy/

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<sup>72</sup> Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, p. 231.

<sup>73</sup> Irwin Silber Lecture (1 Feb. 1999), CDR #478, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 245.

And the big fool says to push on.”<sup>74</sup> In 1968 Silber and Dane published *The Vietnam Songbook* that contained topical songs written by contemporary songwriters and traditional songs from Vietnam—North and South.

The combination of civil rights and anti-war protests indicates that the early activists of the New Left and the Old Leftists of the People’s Songs generation united through a mutual faith that the nation could be reformed, and that they could lead the way. They believed in the promise of democracy and constitutional ideals, and that the American political system could work if it became inclusive of, and accessible to, all citizens. Tom Hayden went so far as to suggest in 1965 that SDS should organize a national convention to generate a Constitutional Congress “as a symbolic gesture that would dramatize the political philosophy of the New Left to the rest of the country” and bring underrepresented minorities together to challenge a system that excluded them.<sup>75</sup> Although this proposition seemed radical—and unfeasible—even it was rooted in American political iconography.

During its early years SDS and the New Left in general were motivated by domestic problems: the suppression of civil liberties, intellectual inquiry, and any social activism during the anti-communist crusades, as well as the vast inequities in American society. All in all, the activists believed that “An American radical’s first and overwhelming priority was radical change in America,” according to Gitlin.<sup>76</sup> This the same belief had inspired political revivalists and other activists to join the Popular Front in the 1930s and sustain that effort into the post-war and Cold War years. Many of them continued to believe in the possibility of reforming American into the 1960s, and joined forces with the younger activists of the New Left. In 1968 Pete Seeger

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<sup>74</sup> The first time CBS censored Seeger, but he did return and some speculate that this controversy was one of the reasons why CBS cancelled the show altogether.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, p. 234.

<sup>76</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 121, 123.

reiterated this message to an audience attending a forum at the Ford Hall in Boston. In a talk that was replayed over the radio, Seeger told listeners that “freedom and peace begin in your own home and your own community” and that they should continue to fight for social justice, even if the cause seemed hopeless. Rather than withdraw from society in disgust, they should “figure that the world’s got at least a 50-50 chance, and maybe your little grain of sand as much as mine might help tip the scale and it might be the grain of sand which would mean the human race will keep going.”<sup>77</sup>

Together, the revivalists of the Old and New Lefts promoted a culturally and politically democratic Americanism that had begun to take shape during the 1930s. Unlike liberals, Old Leftists were committed to direct action, particularly in the form of strikes and marches. The days of singing folk songs on picket lines alongside striking workers and union rallies for organized labor may have ended, but the age of civil rights marches in the South was in full swing, and the era of anti-war rallies in the North had just begun. Further connecting these two generations were the ideas of civic education. The educational initiatives that young civil rights activists and SDS members taught in the Freedom Schools in the rural South shared many similarities to the older leftist revivalists’ educational programs in centers like Highlander Folk School.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Highlander served as one of the main conduits between the revivalists of the Old Left and the New Left. In 1932 Don West and Myles Horton established Highlander in Monteagle, Tennessee as a labor college designed to both protect southern mountain culture and improve the lives of local residents through education. West and Horton strongly advocated civil

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<sup>77</sup> “Pete Seeger Sings and Answers Questions at the Ford Hall Forum, Boston, Mass” Folkways Record FH 5702 (BR 502) (1968) transcript, p. 6, in Folder: 5702 Pete Seeger, Boston, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>78</sup> William Roy’s *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, provides a detailed examination of the relationship between music, Old Left activism, and the civil rights movement. Roy also investigates the role that Highlander Folk School played as a bridge between the Old Left and the civil rights movement.

rights for southern blacks, but Highlander initially focused on labor conditions that affected local residents—most of whom were white. By the early 1950s, however, the school had shifted directions and turned from labor organization to facilitating civil rights mobilization in the South.<sup>79</sup> The music director at Highlander, Zilphia Horton, worked to bring folk music into the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and continued this effort in civil rights activism during the 1950s. Horton was responsible for teaching Pete Seeger the song “We Shall Overcome,” which she had learned in 1946 from striking Food and Tobacco workers. Seeger then published the song in the *People’s Songs* bulletin and eventually it filtered into the civil rights movement.<sup>80</sup> Horton passed away in 1956, but her efforts to use Highlander as a way to bring folk music, particularly traditional black folk songs, into civil rights activism was sustained by Guy Carawan and his wife Candie throughout the 1960s.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

During the early 1960s, folk music had become a cultural phenomenon that encompassed numerous groups. At the same time that teenage fans filled the college stadium seats for episodes of *Hootenanny*, other young enthusiasts flatly rejected anything that seemed to lack authenticity—anything that was not traditional. These musical purists attempted to preserve and

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<sup>79</sup> John Edgerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 158-60; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 184.

<sup>80</sup> Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, p. 99. Originally, the lyrics were “we will overcome,” but someone along the way, most likely Pete Seeger, changed it to the better sounding “we shall overcome.”

<sup>81</sup> As a white Californian, Carawan was an outsider to both the South and the black civil rights struggle. Yet he believed in the cause, and, like the members of People’s Songs before him, believed that folk music could serve as a powerful tool in the fight for democracy. In a letter that he wrote to Moses Asch in 1959, Carawan commented, “There is such a great potential here [at Highlander] for developing a program around folk music and to make the integration movement in the south into a singing movement.” The movement was already a “singing” movement, but Carawan wanted “to develop a musical program suiting today’s [sic] needs” and he even used his own talents to support that effort, further noting, “a lot of the singing I’ll be doing in the south I’ll do for free because I believe in it.” Guy Carawan letter to Moses Asch (28 June 1959), Guy Carawan, undated memo, p. 1, Folder: Carawan, Guy (2/3) in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.



promote musical traditions that were in danger of being lost in American culture. Despite the almost innumerable differences between these two groups, the one aspect that united them was their mutual disconnection from the *folk revival*. Neither the apolitical popular fans nor the young traditionalists had any interest in using folk music to promote a democratic Americanism—in other words, they rejected the main tenet of the revival. Essentially, what had begun in the late 1950s as divergent segments of the revival had turned into independent trajectories by the middle of the 1960s.

Throughout the boom years, however, many core revivalists remained committed to promoting a democratic Americanism through folk music, aided by a new generation of movement members. Political revivalists of the People's Songs and baby boom generations once again brought folk music into democratic reform efforts. Even revivalists who did not necessarily partake in the new wave of activism, like progressive educators, tried to teach children about social and cultural difference (and inequality) via different types of folk music. The programs and rhetoric of the revival may have shifted over time, but the message of the movement remained the same. During the first few years of the 1960s, the revivalists, like many activists, still believed that the national cultural, political, and social systems *could* be reformed. Scraping the corruptions of commercialism from folk music, the revivalists tried to reclaim the music of their movement and use it again to publicize what they believed defined their nation.

## CHAPTER VII

### A BUST AND A BEGINNING

The 1960s opened with a marked degree of optimism among those who sought social and political change. The decade closed with an equal amount of disillusionment and anger when those changes failed to be implemented. By the end of the era, the political platform that united the early New Leftists had collapsed; the folk revivalists experienced a similar fate as members increasingly went their separate ways. The internecine fragmentation of both groups, the cultural and political anger that seethed across the country, and the political gains of the “silent majority,” sounded the final death knell for the progressive Americanism that was central to the revival. By the end of the decade, the revival as a movement had ended as well.

Of the many factors that precipitated the end of the movement, the most obvious was the divisions between the revivalists. What had begun as divergent groups during the 1950s turned into factions by the middle of the 1960s, and more revivalists began to openly reject what had been the movement’s driving focus: using folk music to generate a democratic, pluralist Americanism. In the midst of these internal shifts, the revivalists had to contend with the explosion of folk music in pop culture. Now, with a national spotlight fixed on folk music, *what* the revivalists did with the music—whether using it for political reform, or merely expanding what could be classified under the rubric of folk music—became contestable issues on a much larger scale. The political activists of the New Left upheld the People’s Songs mission of using songs for political and social activism, an approach that closely adhered to the democratic Americanism that lay at the core of the movement. At the same time, other figures in the field

tried to sever the ties between folk music and politics. The purists, for example, began to reject the revival's mission of using folk music to promote democratic Americanism even before the folk boom. At the same time, the rise of radical politics and cultural nationalism on the left in the later years of the 1960s caused many older, formerly apolitical revivalists, to turn to the center-right. Clinging to a vision of American unity that was becoming increasingly irrelevant in national life, these revivalists tried to sever the connection between folk music and the realms of political radicalism and countercultural movements. In the midst of this turmoil, still other revivalists tried to alter the movement to appease everyone—the apolitical traditionalists, the conservative revivalists, the leftists, and the popular enthusiasts; yet, it was a lost cause. By the latter half of the decade, these differences in views overwhelmed the movement.

The revival's internecine fighting closely mirrored what was occurring elsewhere in America. Reactions against the freedom struggle after it moved into northern cities, coupled with the movement's own failures, led some civil rights activists to reject integration in favor of cultural separation, a turn that was inspired by the rise of black nationalism. At the same time, the New Left splintered into various subgroups. In general, efforts at reforming the *nation* became almost obsolete as young activists carved out their own identities and eschewed any figurative or literal connection to a national body.

Yet there was a glimmer of hope that came with the emergence of a new movement during the 1970s: multiculturalism. Many of the new multiculturalists were educational theorists who advocated "multiethnic education." Through curricula reform, these figures sought to generate a version of Americanism that bore remarkable similarities to the unity-in-diversity view of national identity that first emerged with cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and regionalism. This wing of multiculturalists sought to base American identity on cultural and

political democracy that recognized the contributions of historically marginalized communities. These educators sought to reform American society along lines similar to those of the folk revivalists, such that I largely focus on the type of multiculturalism that they advocated, rather than the multicultural movement as a whole. Although the new movement was not a direct continuation of early twentieth-century pluralism, these earlier ideas definitely informed the early versions of multiculturalism. During this same period, many former revivalists participated in an annual festival that also aimed to give a voice to the voiceless and encourage ethnic and racial minorities to take pride in their cultural traditions. The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife provides an epilogue to the narrative of the folk music revival. Although the revival as a movement had ended, some of the ideas that motivated core revivalists continued to inform the design and the mission behind the Smithsonian festival.

### **The Turn**

The end of the revival did not come as a great surprise to many involved; the seeds of its destruction were noticeably present, even during its heyday. This was partly evidenced by the changes that the Newport Folk Festival began to undergo after it resumed in 1963. Rural fiddlers, urban songwriters, blues musicians, and American Indian dances all contributed to the new festival's "calliope of folk artists."<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that the Newport programs featured traditional artists during smaller daytime performances and workshops, the organizers often excluded these performers from the large evening concerts. This began to change by the middle of the decade, and the 1966 festival marked a significant turn toward traditional music. This shift took a toll on ticket sales, and the press coverage was not the same as it had been. In order to

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<sup>1</sup> George Wein quoted in Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 84.

maintain a steady revenue stream, Newport continued to feature big names of questionable folk pedigree (such as the Lovin' Spoonful) to attract an audience, and this led to confusion over Newport's focus as a festival. Robert Shelton noted that the festival was heading in too many directions. The Newport committee's desire to cater to various tastes rendered the programs "kaleidoscopic" to the degree that it was difficult to determine what the Festival's focus was anymore.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of the political singer-songwriter of the 1960s was an important trigger of this fragmentation. Despite the commercial nature of performers like The Kingston Trio and even The Weavers, there was little dispute that the songs they covered came from the folk canon. The songs of topical revivalist singer-songwriters, however, were not so easy to classify. Robert Shelton dismissed the debate altogether when he wrote,

The quibbling over definition—whether these are "topical songs" or "contemporary folk songs"—seems a waste of energy. Topical song writers Tom Paxton and Bob Dylan are certainly not being "topical" in "Rambling Boy" or "Hollis Brown" but are writing of universals in a folk vein. Some of the topical songs may endure, may enter oral tradition, and are definitely written in the cadences and language of folk expression, so we'll continue to use the two terms interchangeably.<sup>3</sup>

Irwin Silber, the editor of *Sing Out!*, asserted "As a working definition to discuss the phenomenon of this folksong revival, we have to acknowledge that it is what these young people are singing, and not what we think they should be singing, that constitutes folk music."<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-sixties many of the political songwriters had taken an introspective turn that was producing a new definition of folk music. Already in 1959, John Cohen observed that the new generation of folk singers was no longer emphasizing "social reform or world-wide reform. The effort is focused more on a search for real and human values. We are not looking for

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Shelton, "A Fare-Thee-Well For Newport Sing," *New York Times* (25 July 1965), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Shelton, "Guthrie's Heirs," *New York Times* (14 June 1964), p. X13.

<sup>4</sup> Irwin Silber comments in "The Folksong Revival: A Symposium," *New York State Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (June 1963), p. 111.

someone to lead us. We are looking within ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Cohen’s early observation that young folk enthusiasts “looking within ourselves” would come to describe the direction that many folk musicians followed during the final years of the movement.

Bob Dylan offered the most dramatic symbol of the shift from protest to the personal. Emerging on the folk scene in 1961, Dylan followed in Woody Guthrie’s musical footsteps, and he soon became the songwriting darling of the topical singers. That all changed, however, in the summer of 1965 when Dylan released the rock and roll single “Like a Rolling Stone,” and showed up on the stage of Newport clad in leather pants, backed by some members of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. While many of the revival stalwarts like Pete Seeger and Irwin Silber disliked his stylistic change, they were mostly dismayed at Dylan’s sharp, and sudden, turn away from socially and politically relevant music. Other folk enthusiasts, however, commended Dylan’s new musical and lyrical styles. The debate over introspective folk music in general and Bob Dylan in particular raged over the pages of *Sing Out!* After Dylan’s notorious performance at Newport, contributor Jim Rooney observed that Dylan’s shift marked a clear generational schism within the revival:

The highway he travels is now is unfamiliar to those who bummed around in the thirties during the Depression. He travels by plane[...]. The mountains and valleys he knows are those of the mind[...]. ‘The people’ so loved by Pete Seeger are ‘the mob’ so hated by Dylan. In the face of violence he has chosen to preserve himself alone. No one else. And he defies everyone else to have the courage to be as alone, as unconnected...as he.<sup>6</sup>

Many older revivalists, however, were unable to understand Dylan’s changing perspective. In November of 1964, Irwin Silber printed an “Open Letter to Bob Dylan,” in which he questioned Dylan’s new approach, noting how his “new songs seem to be all inner-directed now,

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<sup>5</sup> John Cohen, “In Defense of Folk Singers,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1959), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Rooney, “Newport,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (Nov. 1965), p. 7.

innerprobing, self-conscious” and that he no longer tried to communicate with the audience.<sup>7</sup>

Paul Nelson, a prominent voice of the young revivalists since his days as cofounder and editor of the *Little Sandy Review*, leveled vehement attacks against Silber in several issues of *Sing Out!* Echoing Rooney’s assessment of the difference between the neo-revivalists like Dylan and the old guard, Nelson responded to Silber’s concerns about Dylan, and the young revivalists in general, with the following:

Time, if nothing else, will vindicate Bob Dylan’s “New Music” from the sad and even pathetic charges of Social Irresponsibility and Artistic Decadence leveled by the current representatives of the Thirties and Forties...Dylan’s unyielding and poetic point of view represents a total commitment to the subjective over the objective, the microcosm over the macrocosm, man rather than Man, problems not Problems...knowing full well that unless the personal is achieved, the universal cannot follow.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, Nelson and many other revivalists had ceased to have any interest in the “universal.” How could folk music be used as a tool to reform the nation when the younger revivalists were increasingly more interested in using music to as a way to find themselves?

By 1966, groups that maintained only a tenuous connection to traditional or political music such as the Lovin’ Spoonful, Simon and Garfunkel, and the Mamas and the Papas, had surpassed such revival mainstays as Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio in “folk” record sales.<sup>9</sup> Many new groups joined up with the topical songwriters’ new introverted approach to form folk-rock. As a hybrid of folk-protest music and rock and roll, folk rock grew louder and more electric as the decade progressed. The growing popularity of this music caused even some traditional musicians to trade in “their acoustic guitars for electronic gear.” Part of folk-rock’s popularity stemmed from the student movement in which students began to see themselves as a distinct group. This self-actualization pushed “proletarian protest” to the side to make way for a

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<sup>7</sup> Irwin Silber, “An Open Letter to Bob Dylan,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (Nov. 1964), pp. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Nelson, “Bob Dylan: Another View,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Feb-Mar. 1966), p. 69 .

<sup>9</sup> Robert Shelton, “Who’s Leading the Folk Pack Now?” *New York Times* (20 Nov. 1966), p. D30.

“youth revolution.”<sup>10</sup> No longer was the music of the revival solely from or for the marginalized “people” of America.

While some critics praised folk-rock as a breath of fresh air, others viewed it as the revival’s death-knell. By the end of the decade even Pete Seeger’s optimism about the widespread political possibilities of folk music had waned because “the youth culture was not interested in organizing, but in freeing itself from organizational restraints.” Many formerly political “folk” singers became preoccupied with exploring the depths of their emotions, and the British Invasion had snatched up much of the youth market. By the late sixties rock music had become so theatrical that folk singers performing with acoustic guitars appeared hopelessly dated to a new generation of teenage listeners.<sup>11</sup>

Another trend that also signified a decline in the revival and the hopes for using folk music to generate political reform was a growing anger among social activists. During the mid-sixties *Sing Out!* continued to showcase social movements that used folk music as a part of the effort to gain political rights, as in the case of the Delano Grape Strike. In his article about the strike, Silber included the song “La Peregrinacion (The Pilgrimage),” which includes the lines: “From Delano I got / To Sacramento / To Sacramento / To fight for my rights.”<sup>12</sup> But in the same issue, the magazine noted the decline of the civil rights movement after its northward turn in David Llorens’ article, “New Birth in the Ghetto,” which detailed the new anti-poverty struggles in northern cities, particularly highlighting the “End the Slums” campaign. The article focused on songwriter and black activist Jimmy Collier and featured his song, “Burn, Baby, Burn,” that contains the lyrics: “I heard people talking about a dream, now, a dream / I couldn’t

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<sup>10</sup> Jerome Rodzinsky, *Minstrels of the Dawn: The Folk-Protest Singer as a Cultural Hero* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), pp. 21, 23, 146.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11, 139.

<sup>12</sup> “La Peregracion,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (Nov. 1966), p. 5.



catch / I really wanted to be somebody and all I had was a match...If I can't enjoy the American dream, won't be water but fire next time."<sup>13</sup> Clearly, Collier's song indicated the rise of anger over the failures of the civil rights movement to engender any lasting changes in many black Americans' daily lives.

"Burn, Baby, Burn" reflected young black Americans' increasing doubt that the nation *could* be reformed. In the wake of the Watts riot and countless beatings and arrests, civil rights volunteers began questioning the plausibility of the "American dream" for which they initially believed they were fighting. The civic ideals that the nation allegedly espoused, and to which they sought access, seemed empty in the face of the unrelenting violence they had suffered in the South and began experiencing in northern cities. Dovetailing with this disillusionment was the growing doubt in the tactical viability of nonviolence. These two circumstances, combined with a growing interest in racial identity, caused many young, black activists to turn to the theories of black nationalism embodied in black power. Historian Peniel E. Joseph describes black power as a "militant new race consciousness that placed black identity as the soul of a new radicalism"; it was a radicalism that was free from white control.<sup>14</sup> Black power emerged from the realization that any cultural change would have to come entirely from within the black community, as historian William Van Deburg explains:

Blacks needed to develop a new appreciation of their past—a rich historical pageant that had been obscured by Hollywood images of cannibalistic savages and shuffling, comic stooges. They needed to write their own histories and create their own myths and legends. Through the process of self-discovery and self-legitimization, the Afro-American people would develop a group consciousness and pride that would serve them well in the struggle for power.

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<sup>13</sup> Jimmy Collier, "Burn, Baby, Burn," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Jul. 1966). Despite the anger in this song, the chorus provides a message of hope with: "Learn baby, learn (repeat) / You need a concern / You've got money to earn / You've got midnight oil to burn baby, burn."

<sup>14</sup> Introduction to *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, Peniel E. Joseph, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

The calls for a new black identity that emerged from this process served as both the “adhesive” and the “guiding force” for the emergence of black power during the late 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of black power had roots in black nationalist movements that began in the late nineteenth century and periodically reemerged in the twentieth century. Though black nationalism took different forms over the years, all the variations were predicated on the basic belief that African Americans would never be fully included in the American “national community” on par with whites. Black nationalists, therefore, did not seek integration, as did civil rights activists, but rather called for the division of black and white races with the ultimate goal to establish a separate, black nation.<sup>16</sup> In the sixties, the adherents of black power borrowed heavily from the black nationalism that the Nation of Islam espoused and Malcolm X preached. By rejecting nonviolence and laying bare the hypocrisies of white America, Malcolm X provided civil rights activists, many of whom were fed up with arrests, beatings, death threats, and murders, with an alternative course of action.<sup>17</sup> Many converts to black power turned to African cultures as a source for their group and personal identities. Adopting African names, dress, natural hairstyles, and other cultural traditions provided them with an identity unconnected to mainstream America.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Van Deburg asserts that black nationalists ultimately believe that in a pluralist society one group will eventually become dominant and force all other groups to assimilate to their standards. They therefore call for groups to maintain their “sociocultural autonomy” by buttressing group values “while holding those promoted by larger society at arm’s length” *New Day in Babylon*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 283, 295-6.

<sup>18</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 308; Gerstle argues that black power was an indigenously American, rather than African, movement. By claiming that black Americans were superior to whites due to their natural temperament and innate culture—i.e. “soul,” which whites lacked—black power was akin to “white racial nationalism” wherein citizens are defined solely according to racial characteristics. Van Deburg, however, disputes the notion that, by articulating a black cultural distinctiveness, black power activists “were engaging in a variant of traditional majoritarian chauvinism.” Rather they used a celebration of black culture—what they knew best, and of which white American knew little—as a foundation for the movement. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, p. 28.

Both *Sing Out!* and *Broadside* closely monitored these changes in the civil rights movement. Julius Lester's "The Angry Children of Malcolm X" encapsulated the anger that many young, black activists felt. Opening his article with the blanket statement: "The world of the black American is different from that of the white American," Lester described how white America had consistently refused to allow black Americans to assimilate into the national mainstream. Initially, the civil rights movement encouraged black Americans to fight to achieve assimilation, but gradually the movement had turned into a "War of Liberation" by the mid-1960s, and Lester credited Malcolm X for inspiring the rise of black militancy. The black male of this era, according to Lester, "has stopped being a Negro and has become a black man in recognition of his real identity. 'Negro' is an American invention which [shut] him off from those of the same color in Africa. He recognizes now that part of himself is in Africa." Not only had this newfound racial awareness given black Americans a distinct identity, but it also allowed them to break free from constantly trying to become full members of the American national body. The era of integration and nonviolence had officially ended: "Now it is over. The days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating billy clubs with Love. We Shall Overcome (and we have overcome our blindness) sounds old, out-dated and can enter the pantheon of the greats along with IWW songs and the union songs."<sup>19</sup> According to Lester's assessment, traditional folk songs had no place in the newfound social and cultural changes that were sweeping the nation.

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<sup>19</sup> Julius Lester, "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (Nov. 1966), pp. 21-25. Lester took an even more violent stance when he submitted his letter resigning from the editorial board of *Broadside*, in which he writes, 'I look forward to the day when I will place a person in my rifle sight, squeeze the trigger, hear the explosion and watch that person fall. And after the shooting has stopped I will continue that act of love that began when I started to hate by helping others to build a country that will exist for its people and not vice-versa.' The letter later appeared in *Sing Out!* "A Letter from Julius Lester," *Broadside* 84 (Sept. 1967).

By the end of the sixties, the black-nationalist style of social and cultural protest had moved beyond black communities and extended into groups of ethnically marginalized Americans, including Hispanics, American Indians, Asian Americans, and even white ethnics like Jews, Italians and Poles.<sup>20</sup> Radical groups like the Chicano Brown Berets on the West Coast and the Puerto Rican Young Lords of the East Coast, the Chinese Red Guard, the American Indian Movement, the Asian American Political Alliance, and even an organization of white Appalachians calling themselves “the Patriots” adopted the rhetoric of black power to buttress their own struggles for cultural pride and social equality. Many of these activists adopted the same demands, style of dress, community programs, and machismo of the quintessential black power organization, the Black Panthers. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Panthers that these groups incorporated in their own movements was a deep sense of pride. Rather than seeing their ethnic and racial lineage as a source of weakness, these young activists generated movements of cultural nationalism in which they viewed ethnic traditions as sources of strength that contrasted with the cultural bankruptcy of white America.<sup>21</sup> Although the government never collapsed during the social and political crisis of the sixties and seventies, the rise of cultural nationalism severely damaged the belief in a unified American identity. Large swaths of the American population, according to Gerstle, “no longer imagined that they belonged to the same national community or shared a common set of ideals.” The era of progressive nationalism that originated during the early years of the twentieth century had officially ended.<sup>22</sup>

While identity politics critically wounded a democratic pluralist version of Americanism during the late 1960s, the movement against the Vietnam War hammered the final nail into its

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<sup>20</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> See Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, “Rainbow Radicalism: The Rise of the Radical Ethnic Nationalism,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, Peniel E. Joseph, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 193-228.

<sup>22</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 345.

coffin. Viewing U.S. involvement in Vietnam as a violation of the ideals for which the country allegedly stood (e.g. anti-colonialism and self-government) many Americans had turned against the war by the middle of the decade. Young, black civil rights activists believed it was just another instance of an imperialist white America trying to subjugate a colored race. Young, white activists also adopted this view and began to sympathize with the Vietcong and other ‘Third World’ revolutionaries. This turn against a national war prompted many to question mainstream national values. Soon, they began moving away from identifying with the American nation and toward identifying with the various ethnic and racial groups that still maintained their own subcultures within the nation.<sup>23</sup> The revival of ethnic identities grew in part out of the anger over the war, which, historian David Hollinger explains, “generated among many younger Americans a deep skepticism about the society into which peoples of all ethno-racial affiliations had been encouraged to assimilate. If the center of the society was so badly flawed, the periphery presented itself as a source of potentially countervailing cultural power.”<sup>24</sup> By leading Americans to question the sanctity of American civic ideals and their place in American society, the war helped open the floodgates of anger and resentment over the conformity of the Cold War era and the forced assimilation to an Anglo suburban lifestyle that many experienced during the post-WWII years.<sup>25</sup>

The revival was not immune to these changes in American society. Many revivalists attempted to accommodate the cultural and political shifts by broadening their musical and political approaches, whereas others steadfastly refused to alter their programs in any way. The Newport Folk Festival and the National Folk Festival respectively illustrate these two reactions.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 312-317.

<sup>24</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 99; Hollinger “Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (May, 1975), p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 329.

Throughout the sixties, Newport diversified its representation of both folk music and political causes. In 1967 the Festival began to feature Luis Valdez's El Teatro Campesino ("Farm Workers' Theater"), the cultural arm of the Farm Workers' Union that staged performances based on the Hispanic experience in America, particularly emphasizing the migrant farmers' struggles. That same year Bread and Puppet Theater, a politically progressive puppet troupe that became famous for the giant puppets they used in anti-war demonstrations, made its debut. In 1968 the Newport Folk Festival Foundation organized musical events for the Poor People's March on Washington. The foundation members had designed these events in much the same way as they designed the more recent festivals: the people would present their own musical traditions. Folklorist Bruce Jackson explained that the organizers hoped to ensure "that the music going on at the March [would] be the music of the people, rather than stars brought in from outside their world...the main source of music [would] come from the marchers themselves."<sup>26</sup> During the festival of that year Joan Baez recounted onstage her experiences being jailed for civil disobedience, Reverend Kirkpatrick sang songs about Resurrection City, and Pete Seeger and the Pennywhistlers commented about the injustices of the war in Vietnam.

Newport's attempts to adapt to the political changes enabled it to remain politically relevant to a degree, particularly among the younger generation of leftist folk fans. The National Folk Festival, however, was situated at the opposite end of the spectrum. Knott blatantly refused to reflect the new politics and incorporate new forms of folk music that emerged over the course of the 1960s. The popularity of her festival floundered as a result. Although she appreciated the rising popularity of folk music during the boom years, Knott was horrified that the media portrayed both folk performers and enthusiasts as members of the counterculture. In 1964 Melvin

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce Jackson quoted in Brauner, *A Study of the Newport Folk Festival and the Newport Foundation*, p. 199.

Hussey, the executive vice president of the NFFA, wrote an irate letter to the editor of a paper in St. Petersburg, Florida (the location of the 1964 Festival) complaining about a cartoon that personified the festival as a “bewhiskered, beslippered beatnick, with vacuous eyes, unshorn hair and eternal guitar, plainly a refugee from a hootenanny.” The National Folk Festival, he explained, presented authentic American traditions “gaily but in dignity” by people who maintained this heritage in their everyday lives, rather than putting “pseudo folk entertainers” like Peter, Paul and Mary and other popular groups on their stage.<sup>27</sup> The National Folk Festival was never able to curry the favor of the young revivalists of the 1960s precisely because the fans of the popular folk revival tended to be more interested in the urban “pseudo folk” groups. Furthermore, Knott altogether dismissed the products of the folk boom. In the introduction of the 1967 festival program Knott wrote, “[I]t is doubtful that the new city-born songs and dances, reflecting a new kind of civilization, will build the kind of foundation necessary to cast their influence on the future. Few have the enduring characteristics that have distinguished earlier folklore.”<sup>28</sup>

The NFFA leaders also faced problems with their continued celebration of American nationalism and unity. At the beginning of the 1960s, Knott had argued that folk music appreciation could help in the fight against Communism as much as it did in the struggle against fascism. She continued to believe that American citizens could be united through mutually shared civic ideals, asserting that the festival enabled Americans to “strengthen our belief in the

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Melvin Hussey (5 Nov. 1964); Letter from Melvin Hussey to Jim Gray of the St. Petersburg Tourist Convention Bureau (9 Nov. 1964) Draw 1, Folder 90, Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, introduction to the 1967 festival program, p. 1, Draw 1, Folder 96, Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY. Despite these harsh criticisms of the commercial aspects of the folk boom, Knott’s own festival was never the bastion of folk purity she believed it to be. After all, in many cases, the NFFA accepted groups that local chambers of commerce recommended for the quality of their performance and for the image that they evoked, and not necessarily for their cultural authenticity.

ideals of our country through the unifying influence of a common culture and beloved by all our people.”<sup>29</sup> Other members of the NFFA sustained this faith throughout the decade. In 1965, for example, Hussey asked President Johnson to endorse the Festival with the words:

Its [the Festival’s] programs demonstrate the strength and beauty of a cultural pattern, woven of many threads, but distinctively American in the completed fabric. These programs eloquently refute the alien doctrines which would divide us, and the spirit of Americanism which they engender makes them worthy of our wholehearted support.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, during a period marked by a growing recognition of the failure of American democracy to include the poor and racial minorities, this kind of justification for the value of the National Folk Festival was grossly out of sync with the younger folk music enthusiasts of the 1960s.

By the end of the decade the NFFA had moved even further to the right. Knott explained in the 1968 program that, “While protests and picket lines grab public attention and paint the United States as a cauldron of discontent, there are thousands who present a totally different picture of this country. They are the conservative, both rural and urban, people who are helping to hold the balance as they have done in older times and in other communities.”<sup>31</sup> These were the kind of Americans, and this was the type of national identity that Knott and the NFFA presented throughout the 1960s. Despite all the challenges to this view, or perhaps because of them, the NFFA persistently proclaimed that Americans appreciated the folk arts that it presented, and that the nation needed the “assurance of national identity and tradition produced by such

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “Folksongs and Dances, U.S.A. The Changing Scene” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (Sept. 1961) p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Melvin Hussey to the White House (21 Feb. 1965), Draw 1, Folder 92, Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Gertrude Knott, “The Past is Prologue,” *1968 National Folk Festival Program*, p. 1, Draw 1, Folder 98, Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.



performance” during the social and cultural factionalism of the 1960s, though fewer and fewer people were listening.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of the sixties, despite the concessions and accommodations that Newport had made, the political factionalism took its toll on this festival as well. On the one hand, the inclusion of political protests served to deepen a rift that had already existed between the political revivalists and conservative musicians from traditional communities. After the 1968 program, Buell Kazee, a Baptist minister and banjo player from rural Kentucky, summarized this political disjuncture: “These people told me before I came here it wouldn’t be like this. I don’t want anything to do with tearing down America. I don’t know why these folks don’t do the honest thing and admit that this is ideology and not just music. If I’d known it was goin’ to be like this I’d of stayed in Kentucky.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the festival was a place for like-minded people to gather in a community, people who largely rejected mass culture, supported civil rights, and were against war.<sup>34</sup> Yet, even the inclusion of leftist views did not appease the more politically radical folk music fans. As audience members sang along to songs about the civil rights and ban-the-bomb movements, knowing and enjoying the music did not necessarily translate into direct action. Bruce Jackson refers to this phenomenon as “necrotizing dysfunction” wherein “a realization of the possibility of action substitutes for the action itself.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the kind of reform efforts that Newport continued to advocate were becoming increasingly irrelevant as both direct action techniques and violence escalated during the late 1960s; to many audience members merely “singing about social and political problems was no

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from William High Jansen of the NFFA to Roger Stevens, Chairman of the Arts Foundation (1969), Draw 1, Folder 99, Knott Collection, Folklife Archives, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony R. Dolan, “Heroes in the Seaweed: Letter from Newport,” *National Review* (8 Oct. 1968), p. 1011.

<sup>34</sup> Brauner, *A Study of the Newport Folk Festival and the Newport Foundation*, pp. 93, 84.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.

longer adequate.” These new activists found that the older organizers did not share their tactical views, and thus they no longer believed that Newport provided the kind of outlet that they needed.<sup>36</sup>

These divisions and rancor within Newport all contributed to the festival’s downward spiral. Riots during the 1969 Jazz Festival prompted the city authorities to place several restrictions on the Folk Festival days before its opening in 1969, creating an atmosphere that was rather repressive for an entertaining music festival. Financial problems forced the Foundation to cancel the 1970 program. New uprisings at the Jazz Festival in 1971 prompted the town to revoke the Folk Festival’s license. The Newport Folk Festival did not recover for well over a decade.<sup>37</sup>

The trials and tribulations of the Newport Festival also played out in the editorial room of *Sing Out!* In July 1967, shortly before *Sing Out!* announced its restructured editorial staff, Irwin Silber, still acting as the magazine’s editor, requested removing “The Folk Song Magazine,” from the masthead. Silber believed that the term “folk music” was too restrictive for both expressing political commentaries and including all types of people’s music.<sup>38</sup> In his remaining days as a member of the *Sing Out!* community, Silber tried to push the magazine in an even more hard line political direction, an effort that was reminiscent of the magazine’s early days. This

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Jackson, “The Folksong Revival,” in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, Neil V. Rosenberg, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Although the Newport Folk Festival and the National Folk Festival began to falter by the end of the decade, this is not to say that all festivals that catered to the folk music audience crumbled. The Philadelphia Folk Festival, which began during Newport’s suspension in the early 1960s, continued to thrive and remained popular throughout the century—blending traditional performers with the new generation of singer-songwriters. Other folk festivals, particularly those on college campuses, adapted with the times as well in order to stay afloat and incorporated more pop and rock groups in their lineup (e.g. The Berkeley Folk Music Festival and the San Francisco State University Folk Festival). See Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, pp. 57-77.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, p. 264. Silber explained that he finally left *Sing Out!* for this reason, and sought to present his political views in more direct and open ways than purely through folk music. He was able to voice his opinions more broadly as a writer for *The Guardian*, a left-wing periodical, and through his own record label, Parendon, that he started with his wife, Barbara Dane.

time, however, the idea of using the magazine as a political soapbox did not sit well with the rest of the board. By April of 1968, Silber was fed up and tendered his resignation to *Sing Out!*, though he hoped to continue contributing articles. Silber was not the only figure from the old guard who had become disillusioned with the magazine, and with the folk music revival as a whole, by the late sixties. During a *Sing Out!* editorial meeting in 1967, Pete Seeger reminisced about the old times, noting how he and Lee Hays had begun the magazine to challenge the forces of commercial music and protect traditional forms. Back then, they had clear enemies: Tin Pan Alley, Nashville, Hollywood, and other purveyors of mass culture, in addition to political and social reactionaries. Now, that had all changed; folk music was big business and those in the revival had turned on each other—the sectarianism among the revivalists was tearing *Sing Out!* and the rest of the movement apart.<sup>39</sup>

The problems at *Sing Out!* had plagued the magazine for years. Many of the disputes reflected the old factionalism within the revival: the debates over the rise of folk rock, the controversies over fusing politics with folk music, and questions over what the term “folk music” even meant. Ed Badeaux, one of the editors of *Sing Out!*, drew the conclusion that this constant infighting was one of many indications that the revival had ended. In his article “The Spectacle Moves On,” Badeaux claimed that of all the things that the revivalists could disagree on, the one thing that they at *Sing Out!* knew for sure was that “folk music is very definitely not ‘what’s happening.’ We may disagree almost to the point of violence as to what exactly has happened. But if we have eyes and ears, if we can interpret record sales charts, then we know this as fact.” The youth of America moved on to new types of music, especially the new type of rock and roll inspired by the British Invasion. Badeaux further described the current state of the folk boom as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 265. The constant sniping back and forth between Silber and Nelson over the change among singer songwriters is only one instance of the growing divisions among revivalists.

“about as serious as the national craze for hula hoops. Period.” Throughout the article, Badeaux echoed Pete Seeger’s disillusionment by describing the early revivalists as “dedicated idealists” who believed that the revival would generate an “American awakening to true musical values” became “victims of their own enthusiasms, blinding themselves to the truths of the American commercial music scene.” Now folk music *was* commercial: “It is amplified. It is stoned. It is completely removed from life.”<sup>40</sup> If anything signaled the end of the revival, this judgment was it.

### **The End**

The old New Left disintegrated at the same time that the folk revival imploded. Interestingly, historian James Miller illustrates the demise of the old New Left by tracing Bob Dylan’s stylistic change, a change that many historians point to when looking for the locus of the folk revival’s decline: “Bob Dylan wasn’t strumming an acoustic guitar and singing broadsides in the artless manner of Woody Guthrie any longer; now, he was shouting over a welter of amplified instruments, plunging headlong into dreamlike poems of betrayed love and apocalypse with the fevered, deranged conviction of a rock-and-roll Rimbaud.” Similarly, the members of SDS and the rest of the New Left had turned away from promoting democracy through education and intellectual inquiry and toward something that “was impatient, raw, hard with anticipation.”<sup>41</sup>

The rise of black power and racial nationalism among many black civil rights activists caused some civil rights activists to advocate cultural separation rather than political integration. Some anti-war protestors turned from peaceful demonstrations to fighting violence with violence. The Weathermen, though never large in number, became the face of the new militant

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<sup>40</sup> Ed Badeaux, “The Spectacle Moves On,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Aug.-Sept. 1967), pp. 10-13.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, p. 254.

antiwar movement. Like the early New Leftists they excoriated liberalism, romanticized revolutionaries from developing countries, and viewed Americans as numbed by affluence and comfort. Despite The Weathermen's marginality, Gitlin notes that many activists believed that the group represented the "cutting edge of change." The student movement turned from one that focused on others to one that focused on itself—where white, middle-class youths revolted "to overcome their own alienation and shape their own lives." Similarly, women who faced discrimination on a societal level and within civil rights groups and student organizations like SDS broke off and revived the Women's Movement. Other groups based on collective identity—Indian, Chicano, Asian, and homosexual—also emerged. By 1969, SDS collapsed under a leadership that rejected leaders, bureaucracies, and discipline. The New Left splintered in many directions, and even those who remained within the main movement shifted their views, as Gitlin surmised: "Little by little, alienation from American life—contempt, even, for the conventions of the flag, home, religion, suburbs, shopping, plain homely Norman Rockwell order—had become a rock-bottom prerequisite for membership in the movement core."<sup>42</sup>

The type of radicalism that the New Left adopted in the late 1960s severed any remaining threads that connected them to the Old Left. Miller explains that the early members followed in a political trajectory that was grounded in the ideal of "civic republicanism," which began with Aristotle and carried through John Dewey. By believing in the power of democracy and civic ideals, the early movement was, he says, the "last great experiment in democratic idealism."<sup>43</sup> It was an experiment that actually took shape during the era of the Popular Front and carried through to the New Left generation. The political folk revivalists of these two generations

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<sup>42</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pp. 184-85, 271, 353, 382, 396-7; Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, p. 265, 311; Rodnitzky, *Minstrels of the Dawn*, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, pp. 16, 254.

believed that American society could be *reformed*; that the ideals embodied in the constitution were solid—they just had to extend to the entire population. They fought to achieve that end by promoting the labor, civil rights, and peace movements. Although Margaret Gelder Franz, an activist in the Old Left, described her cohort as “Revolutionaries,” she further explained: “I am using the term loosely because looking back on the whole thing, none of us were ever revolutionaries—we were all left reformists, not revolutionaries. We thought we were; and everybody else thought we were, but we really weren’t.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, that is a description that aptly applies to the old New Left. Before the social and political fracturing of the late sixties, these activists believed that domestic problems could be solved if all citizens were included in the American body politic. Yet, by the end of the era, this dream dissolved in the face of chaos, disillusionment, and the “Silent Majority’s” success at the polls.

Although the folk music revival had always been segmented, by the mid-sixties the differences grew to such an extent that the revival “lost its semblance of a unified phenomenon.”<sup>45</sup> Divergent definitions of folk music based on commercial products, political messages, and introspective songwriting had stretched the definitional boundaries of folk music to a breaking point. The more successful revivalists entered the pop or rock-and-roll musical mainstream and others moved into mini-revivals of ethnic music such as Gaelic and Klezmer music that became popular in the seventies. While folk music continued to be popular among different political groups, and some revivalist singer-songwriters still used their music as a weapon for social justice, they largely operated as independent agents or as parts of other social movements. Programs that were intrinsic to the revival had to either change with the times or

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<sup>44</sup> David K. Dunaway interview with Margaret Gelder Franz (28 Apr. 1977), p. 9, David K. Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>45</sup> Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival*, p. 136.

face an end themselves. College music organizations like the Illinois Campus Folksong Club, the Newport Folk Festival, and the careers of some singers ended with the movement. Others, like *Sing Out!* and Folkways Records, revamped their programs to change with the political and social tide. In 1971 alone Folkways produced such albums as “Angela Davis Speaks,” “From The Cold Jaws of Prison: By Inmates and Ex-mates, Musicians and Poets from Attica, Rikers and the Tombs,” and “But the Women Rose, Vol.1: Voices of Women in American History.” The previous year Irwin Silber and Barbara Dane had formed Parendon Records, an offshoot of Folkways, specifically to introduce people to the revolutionary movements that were occurring around the world, and to the most “overtly political” music in the United States.<sup>46</sup> Many former revivalists took the academic route during the seventies and enrolled in Ph.D. programs in folklore.<sup>47</sup> Still others followed the path of institutional politics and joined with folklorist Archie Green to push for a federal bill to protect folk culture. Though undergoing several changes, the bill eventually passed in 1976 and established the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress.<sup>48</sup>

The revival had experienced a thinning of its ranks before. Yet, this time was different—first, because now even the stalwart members left the movement; and, second, because the revivalists’ vision of a pluralist democratic Americanism had largely lost its viability in American society. After the mid-1960s, the concept of a national “great community” based on common ideals began to dissolve. From the 1930s through the 1960s, progressive nationalists

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<sup>46</sup> Irwin Silber Lecture (1 Feb. 1999), CDR # 478, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>47</sup> Folklorist Roger Abrahams notes that during much of the sixties academic folklorists and revivalists had little interaction. Some crossed paths with purists, but much of the academic community viewed the revival with contempt, especially during the boom. Indiana University had the most notable program in folklore, led by Richard Dorson who was renowned for disparaging the work of public folklorists like Botkin.

<sup>48</sup> Archie Green, *Torching the Fink Books on Vernacular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 141.

could feasibly promote national unity through a civic nationalism grounded in the “American Idea,” in which culturally and ethnically disparate Americans came together as a national community that respected cultural difference. Yet, this nationalism glossed over real divisions in American life such as socioeconomic disparity and racial marginalization, which tended to go hand in hand. The civil rights movement and the sociological awareness of rural poverty during the early sixties made these inequalities impossible to ignore.

Programs like the Poor People’s Campaign and Resurrection City in 1968 revealed that liberal attempts to address these matters, initiatives like the Civil Rights Act and the War on Poverty, had failed to solve the problems. Growing political frustration coupled with social and cultural factionalism of the 1960s effectively closed the book of the American Idea. Now, cultural pluralists took an anti-nationalist stance, highlighting the “separateness” of ethnic groups, and, according to John Higham, “any claim for centeredness, any affirmation of a unifying national culture, became *ipso facto* oppressive,” even one based on shared civic ideals.<sup>49</sup> Large swaths of the American population “no longer imagined that they belonged to the same national community or that they shared a common set of ideals” The era of democratic nationalism that characterized the revival had officially ended.<sup>50</sup> “Nationalism” and “patriotism” fell in the bailiwick of the growing right-wing movement, a movement that also employed populist rhetoric and iconography but used it to create a conservative national identity that sharply contrasted with the revivalists’ Americanism. Although the prospects for a progressive view of national identity were bleak by the end of the decade, all was not lost for those who tried to maintain their faith in democratic Americanism. A new movement, one that also elevated

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<sup>49</sup> Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism,” pp. 205-206.

<sup>50</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, p. 345.



marginalized communities to insure their representation in the American national body, was growing on the horizon.

### **The Beginning**

In 1950 Alan Lomax gave a speech at the Mid-Century International Folklore Conference in which he called for folklorists to act as advocates for marginalized peoples, many of whom came from the traditional ‘folk’ communities that folklorists treasured so much. By recording their music, folklorists had given minority peoples a voice. Lomax declared, “We have become in this way the champion of the ordinary people of the world, who aren’t backed up by printing presses, radio chains, and B29s.”<sup>51</sup> A decade later, Lomax reiterated this position in the

#### *Hifi/Stereo Review:*

[T]he recording machine can be a voice to the voiceless, for the millions in the world who have no access to the main channels of communication, and whose cultures are being talked to death by all sorts of well-intentioned people—teachers, missionaries, etc.—and who are being shouted into silence by our commercially bought-and-paid-for loudspeakers. It took me a long time to realize that the main point of my activity was to redress the balance a bit, to put sound technology at the disposal of the folk, to bring the channels of communication to all sorts of artists and areas.<sup>52</sup>

This time, Lomax was making these comments when social and political dissent was on the rise, when marginalized American citizens had increasingly begun to fight openly for their rights.

During the late 1960s through early 1970s, progressive activists developed programs that aimed to do exactly what Lomax called for: to give a “voice” to the “voiceless.” In the United States, these activists began a concerted effort to generate an American identity that was rooted in cultural heterogeneity. Labeled “multiculturalism,” this program was highly influenced by the

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<sup>51</sup> Alan Lomax quoted in Baron, “Postwar Public Folklore and the Professionalization of Folklore Studies,” p. 313. Interestingly, Lomax gave this presentation right before he left the country for his eight-year trip to Europe.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Lomax, “Saga of a Folksong Hunter: A Twenty-Year Odyssey with Cylinder Disc, and Tape,” *Hifi/Stereo Review*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (May 1960), p. 38 in *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Ronald D. Cohen, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 173-186.

black nationalist movement of the late 1960s as well as by cultural pluralism. Rejecting forced assimilation and the melting-pot metaphor, multiculturalists returned to celebrating ethnic and racial diversity as the defining feature of American identity. Many early multiculturalists crafted “a new image of a better America, without prejudice and discrimination, in which no cultural theme linked to any racial or ethnic group has priority, and in which American culture is seen as the product of a complex intermingling of themes from every minority ethnic and racial group, and indeed from the whole world,” according to sociologist Nathan Glazer.<sup>53</sup>

The newfound visibility of racial problems in America and the increased attention paid to economic and social problems in urban ghettos sparked an educational reform movement to make education more relevant to minorities, as well as to incorporate ethnic diversity into traditional curricula and the “entire educational environment.” “Multiethnic education,” as it was labeled in the early 1970s, was intended to assuage anger and encourage ethnic pride.

Multiethnic educators comprised a segment of the emerging multicultural movement, one that focused on designing school curricula to teach children about the importance of diversity.<sup>54</sup>

According to these multiculturalists, ethnic and racial identities were a fact of American life. However, the lines separating ethnic and racial groups were permeable, and citizens formed their own identities by adopting elements from a variety of social groups. Multiethnic programs therefore focused on the place of minority citizens within American society, and these educators aimed to inculcate ethnic/racial pride among minority students as well as to provide students with the requisite “skills, attitudes, and knowledge they need to function within their ethnic culture, the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures.”<sup>55</sup> In many ways, these educators fell under the category of “soft” multiculturalism, meaning that, while they

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<sup>53</sup> Nathan Glazer, *We are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 10-11.

<sup>54</sup> Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism,” p. 201.

<sup>55</sup> Banks, *Multiethnic Education: Practices and Promises*, p. 8.

advocated cultural diversity, they still believed that Americans belonged to a unified national body. These multiculturalists maintained that cultural differences were “compatible” with patriotism and that ethnic and racial diversity were actually sources of America’s strength.<sup>56</sup>

Historians generally view multiculturalism as a product of the identity politics of the late 1960s, most likely because the movement followed on the heels of the era of racial nationalism. However, focusing too much on the influence of cultural nationalism obscures several other movements and theories that contributed to the development of multiculturalism. In many respects, multiculturalists borrowed from the social theories of Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen. By maintaining that ethnic diversity gave the United States its cultural identity, and encouraging the protection of the cultures of these groups, multicultural educational theorists incorporated aspects of Kallen’s cultural pluralism into their programs. By focusing on individuals as well as groups, and by regarding identities as malleable, they also included elements of Bourne’s cosmopolitanism. By adopting elements of cosmopolitanism, these educators displayed qualities of “hybrid” multiculturalism, meaning that they believed that identities were fluid and hence advocated “cultural hybridity rather than purity or homogeneity” and believed that people incorporated various group traditions when constructing their own identities.<sup>57</sup> For example, educational theorist H. Prentice Baptist, Jr. took a cosmopolitan approach when he called for multiculturalists to recognize the various group identities that contributed to urban teenagers’ individual identities. He strongly encouraged multiculturalists in

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<sup>56</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 348-49.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Gerstle divides multiculturalists into two general camps: soft and hard. Multiculturalists in the latter camp ranged from extreme anti-nationalists who argued that there was no hope for minorities in America, and hybrid multiculturalists who, much like the early twentieth century cosmopolitanists, encouraged Americans to construct their own identities based on a variety of cultural factors, rather than simply the traditions of a given racial or ethnic group. While the multiethnic educational multiculturalists were a far cry from the anti-nationalists, their combination of soft and hybrid multiculturalism does indicate that the divisions between of hard and soft multiculturalism were more indeterminate.

cities to examine “the culture of poverty,” “the youth culture,” and “the urban culture” in addition to the cultures of ethnic and racial groups.<sup>58</sup>

While multiculturalism emerged from this longer historical trajectory, the movement was not simply a wholesale revival of cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism. As much as early multiculturalists borrowed from these earlier concepts, they also incorporated concepts from contemporary social and cultural movements. Embedded in their recognition of the contributions that ethnic and racial groups made to national life was an understanding that racial *pride* stemmed from racial *power*. Since the late 1960s, Black Power advocates had demanded that schools “recognize the power of ethnic and racial minorities, not just the value of their cultures.”<sup>59</sup> This element of multiculturalism became known as the “new pluralism” and was based on a form of racial pride that emerged out of the context of the civil rights movement. Education theorist James Banks explains that the “black civil rights movement legitimized ethnicity,” and soon “other alienated ethnic groups began to search for their ethnic roots” and sought representation in educational curricula.<sup>60</sup> Black studies directly emerged out of the demand for courses on black history and culture in the late sixties; courses in Chicano and Asian studies soon followed suit. As with early pluralists, multiculturalists tried to instill a sense of pride among children of ethnic and racial minorities in their cultural traditions. However, their messages were imbued with a rhetoric emphasizing that racial cultural traditions provided a source of strength for the people of these groups, a rhetoric that did not, and most likely could not, exist in the mainstream before the surge of racial and ethnic nationalism.

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<sup>58</sup> Baptiste, *Multicultural Education*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>59</sup> Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism, p. 205.

<sup>60</sup> Banks, *Multiethnic Education*, p. 13.

From the beginning of the folk music revival, revivalists had pushed to include regional, racial, and ethnic minority groups in the national body on an equal footing with Anglo-Americans. During the early 1970s, after the collapse of the movement, many former revivalists joined with new public folklorists and multiculturalists to publicize the notion, in the words of folklorist Archie Green, “that traditional artistry and folk wisdom were integral to the American experience.”<sup>61</sup> Many of these figures also borrowed concepts that had been prevalent in the revival. Specifically, they adopted ideas of cultural preservation and the encouragement of ethnic and racial minority groups to take pride in their cultural practices, which they hoped would lead to stronger and more widespread preservation efforts. By advocating these ideas, the members of this cohort of folk music enthusiasts shared many of the same aims as the multiculturalists involved in multiethnic education. The program that provided the nexus between multiculturalism and folk music during this decade was the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife (FAF).

In 1966 S. Dillon Ripley, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, endorsed James Morris’s plan for a folk festival to be held on the National Mall. The Smithsonian had recently attempted to soften its image and make the Institution more accessible to the public. As head of the Division of Performing Arts, Morris believed that a folk festival would bring the Institution closer to the public and he soon tapped the folk performer, manager, and preservationist Ralph Rinzler to help organize it. Rinzler envisioned this festival as a “holistic” enterprise—one that included music, dance, food, and crafts—whose aim would be to celebrate and teach about folk culture. Therefore, the festival would be called a “Folklife” rather than simply a “Folk” festival, as all the music-centric festivals were labeled. Through an educational folklife display, Rinzler

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<sup>61</sup> Archie Green, *Torching the Fink Books and Other Essays*, p. 145.

sought to “establish the fact that folklife was not fun and games, people dressing up and dancing around a maypole.” Instead, he wanted the audience to learn that these traditions served important functions in community life and were not colorful replicas of a distant past, nor the strange practices of quaintly archaic people.<sup>62</sup> One way to impart this educational message was through audience participation. Rinzler structured the festival as a series of simultaneous cultural demonstrations. Rather than placing the participants on a stage, he situated them on the same level as the audience, and stipulated that the ropes separating the two groups would be lowered after the demonstration, thus allowing the audience to mingle with presenters.<sup>63</sup> By collapsing the boundaries that divided presenters from the audience, the FAF organizers worked to enhance the educational experience that participants gained from watching folk traditions. Directly engaging with the tradition bearers enabled audience members to continue learning about the significance of these traditions even after the performances ended.<sup>64</sup>

Rinzler’s views on folk music profoundly shaped the development of the FAF.<sup>65</sup> Even before he began designing the festival, he sought to introduce Americans to folk traditions that

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<sup>62</sup> Marc Pachter, “Oral History Interview with Ralph Rinzler,” transcript (1993), RU-009569, folder 9569: Folk Revival/Smithsonian Festival, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> In the design for his 1939 World’s Fair folk festival, Alan Lomax also envisioned a series of ground-level “open air stages.” He proposed that having performers on the same level as the audience would “bring back into the Fair the ancient feeling of gaiety that our stream-lined commercialism has smothered...” Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge*, p. 81.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Cantwell, “Feasts of Unnaming: Folk Festivals and the Representation of Folklife,” in *Public Folklore*, Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer, eds., (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) p. 273; Interview with Roger Abrahams, with Kate and Ralph Rinzler (28 June 1993), FP 2006-CT-00039, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. This design rendered the Smithsonian Festival akin to the Kutztown Folk Festival. Combining the ethos of community picnics and apple-butter boilings, William Troxell, a newspaperman from Allentown, Pennsylvania organized the first official Kutztown festival in 1933. The Kutztown festival differed remarkably from its contemporaries because it was a participatory event where spectators interacted with the participants and even tried their hands at different activities. Likewise, the Smithsonian festival attracted those people who were interested in learning about and even participating in traditional culture.

<sup>65</sup> The organizers of the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife eventually changed its name to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival; but, because I am concerned with the festival during its early years, I refer to it by its original name.

had persisted in communities despite the fact that they were commercially unpopular. Seeking to understand “music as behavior,” Rinzler was fascinated by how certain musical forms lasted years after a decline in commercial popularity (e.g. hillbilly music from the 1920s) and he wanted to know how this music and these musicians could survive well past their prime. He was amazed that traditional musicians like Clarence Ashley and Doc Boggs were still playing regional music into the 1960s, long after the rise of commercial country and the Grand Ole Opry, and he “had an intense desire to make sure that it stayed around.” This is one of the primary reasons why he began managing these musicians during the years of the folk boom. Rinzler believed that he could function as a mediator between traditional folk music and a “world that was moving away from it,” or that was trying to repackage it to fit commercial expectations of how the music should sound. This desire spoke to Rinzler’s purist sympathies, and it set him apart from many revivalists during the movement. He disdained the way some revivalists had treated the music—using it as a raw material to construct something new, such as compositions and dramatic arrangements like *Ballad for Americans* or other adaptations that musicians such as the Kingston Trio or Richard Dyer Bennett had generated. Instead, Rinzler sought to “scrape” away the adaptations and get to the heart of the music itself.<sup>66</sup> Getting to the heart meant allowing the tradition bearers to present their own music. This understanding placed Rinzler squarely in the company of folk music purists who began to form their own trajectory independent from the revival during the mid-1960s. Rinzler recognized that the notion of a *folklife* festival came from the increasingly prominent “inside-outside” concept. Rinzler and other preservationists such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, a prominent singer from the civil rights movement, believed that the people from inside a cultural tradition should be the ones presenting

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Ralph Rinzler (28 Jan 1992), FP-2006-CT-0005, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

the music, not musical interpreters. By adopting a strictly “inside-outside” position, the FAF was effectively giving voice to folk communities, many of which were marginalized from mainstream culture and society. Having *only* these Americans teach the larger public about their communities was the Festival’s first foray into the cultural politics of the late 1960s.<sup>67</sup>

Through the festival, Rinzler promoted a clear vision of cultural democracy, a view that drew inspiration from Carl Sandburg’s and Woody Guthrie’s populism, Charles Seeger’s leftist politics, and civil rights activism. Richard Kurin, a later director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, argues that Rinzler combined these influences to generate a festival that let tradition bearers present their own traditions, as part of a larger attempt to challenge the commercial dominance of pop culture and democratize American culture as a whole.<sup>68</sup> These notions came at a good time, because the idea of using the Washington Mall “as a pulpit to assert civic participation” grew prominent in the aftermath of the March on Washington in 1963. Cultural advocacy was a driving force behind the Festival, and from the beginning the FAF “navigated between the various axes of art (as entertainment), cultural arts (as advocacy), education (as public service), and knowledge (as scholarship and experience).”<sup>69</sup> Through its presentation of folk culture, the Festival of American Folklife helped to generate a new understanding of Americanism during the social, cultural and political fragmentation of the late 1960s and 1970s, one that both borrowed, and differed, from the democratic Americanism that folk revivalists had promoted.

In all, over 431,000 people attended the first Festival of American Folklife, a turnout that encouraged the Smithsonian “to establish the Festival as an annual Independence Day tribute to

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<sup>67</sup> Roger Abrahams, “Interview with Ralph Rinzler on His Life, Part 1” (24 Jan. 1991), FP-2006-CT-00070, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Kurin, “Pursuing Cultural Democracy,” *Thirty-Fourth Festival Program Book, 2000*, p. 4, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Kurin quoted in Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States*, p. 116.



our folk heritage.” Over the course of four days, fifty-eight traditional craftspeople and thirty-two musical and dance groups participated in the program. The festival featured “Mountain banjo-pickers and ballad singers, Chinese lion fighters, Indian sand painters, basket and rug weavers, New Orleans jazz bands and a Bohemian hammer-dulcimer band from east Texas combined with a host of participants from many rural and urban areas of our country to weave the colorful fabric of American traditional culture.”<sup>70</sup> The festival took on a preservationist tone when several of the featured traditions were described as the survivals of a preindustrial age that managed to persist, even after “the advent of mass media and rapid transportation.”<sup>71</sup> Initially, Rinzler and Morris also envisioned a large academic conference to be held in conjunction with the festival. They sought to bring folklore scholars, government officials and foundation organizers together to discuss the importance of traditional crafts to both the American economy and national heritage. Rinzler also wanted the conference participants to discuss how to publicize the important contributions that folk culture made to the nation’s “total cultural heritage.”<sup>72</sup>

By the following year, the FAF had begun to develop a stronger ideological vision, one that connected the festival both to the changing social climate of the late 1960s and to the rising trend of multiculturalism. Like other “soft” multiculturalists, the FAF organizers maintained a unity-within-diversity view that recognized the ways in which ethnic diversity formed the essence of the nation’s identity. In his opening to the 1968 festival program S. Dillon Ripley noted the importance of presenting a *public* display of folk culture in America. Situating the festival in the context of an increased awareness of cultural and ethnic difference, Ripley acknowledged that the program provided an opportunity to display “some aspects of the cultural

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<sup>70</sup> Anon. Festival Program Book, 1967 from a bound copy of the *Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, 1967-1973*, p. 1, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The attendance figures were provided by the National Parks Service.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 1

<sup>72</sup> Ralph Rinzler quoted in Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festival in the United States*, pp. 116-117.

roots of the people of the United States.” This was because the festival was “a living exhibition of the creativity of the many ethnic groups that make up the culture of the country.”

Unfortunately, schools and other American institutions had done little to study and preserve the variants of folk culture in the United States, and this was precisely why the Festival of American Folklife was a necessary cultural endeavor, something that the organizers “hope[d]...will serve to bring American people more fully in touch with their own creative roots, and that from this acquaintance the way may be pointed towards a richer life for some and a more meaningful understanding of the roots of our society.”<sup>73</sup> Could an appreciation of ethnic traditions provide the much-needed sense of identity, and thus pride, that the multiculturalists argued that ethnic and racial minorities needed to develop? Ripley is vague about the answer, but by recognizing the important cultural contributions that ethnic minorities made to American life as well as recognizing their intrinsic cultural value, the FAF organizers used folklife to encourage Americans to appreciate the various cultural traditions of their own communities and the nation at large.

The FAF also carried forward earlier debates over multiculturalism in the academy. Samuel Stanley, the Anthropology Program Coordinator for the Smithsonian Institution, articulated the festival’s importance both for the study of anthropology and for understanding American identity in his article “Why American Folklife Studies?” Stanley recognized that anthropologists had done admirable work exploring the traditions and history of American Indians, but they tended to ignore the ethnic cultures of immigrant communities, traditions that were “culturally closer to home” for many Americans. Although many of these ethnic traditions had merged into the dominant culture, Stanley pointed out that there were “still numerous

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<sup>73</sup> S. Dillon Ripley, “The Folk Festival Program,” *1968 Program Book*, p. 3, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

enclaves of viable culture groups who have remained on the banks of the river,” such as the Japanese, Chinese, Russian, Norwegian, Polish, and Basque. By looking into these traditions, scholars could attain a better sense of the diverse nature of America, Stanley argued: “Now is the time to seriously tackle the problem of identity of American culture. We must do it by understanding the culture of the ethnic groups which have successfully nourished and been nourished by the mainstream.”<sup>74</sup> Here again, he emphasized the importance of understanding cultural minorities as key components of the multifarious American identity. At the same time, he recognized that there had been a cultural exchange, that minority traditions had also been shaped by other cultural trends and had not remained static, isolated subcultures. By arguing such, Stanley also steered away from the rhetoric of racial or ethnic nationalism of the late sixties.

The second festival in 1968 sustained much of the same focus on traditional music as the debut program. This year also marked the beginning of the festival’s emphasis on a particular state, with Texas as the inaugural feature. In the following year the festival moved northward and highlighted Pennsylvanian traditions. Although annual programs emphasized different states, the organizers maintained their pluralist approach and continued to include various folk traditions found throughout the country.<sup>75</sup> The 1969 program added groups presenting Turkish, Afro-Cuban, and Greek traditions to the roster of festival performances. Indeed, in his summary of the previous year’s festival, S. Dillon Ripley commended the program’s cultural diversity and called for further study of American ethnic and racial minorities:

[T]hese cultures represent a rich diversity which provide[s] this nation with an extraordinary heritage. We are coming to understand that while we as a people commonly

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Stanley, “Why American Folklife Studies,” *1968 Program Book*, p. 12, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>75</sup> In addition to the usual traditional artists, the festival organizers began to broaden their scope with the third festival, even including the unequivocally commercial country music singers from the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.

share a national culture, each American also enjoys the distinctive ways of his family, ethnic groups, region and occupation which comprise his traditional or folk culture and that this more personal culture is of vital importance to the social, moral, and aesthetic fabric of our national life.<sup>76</sup>

Through this statement, Dillon expressed the cosmopolitan bent of the Festival. Recognizing that each American participated in several cultural communities, Dillon argued that these affiliations not only contributed to each citizen's personal development, but also served to color in the patterns of the evolving national identity. Ripley's cosmopolitan approach reflected the view of multiethnic educators who maintained that ethnic diversity "enriches a society by providing all citizens with more opportunities to experience other cultures and thus become more fulfilled as human beings" by having a more well-rounded "total human experience." Similar to the multiethnic educational programs that aimed to "provide students with cultural and ethnic alternatives," the FAF tried to teach Americans that there was a wide array of cultural traditions in the United States of which they could partake.<sup>77</sup>

While the Festival of American Folklife emphasized the centrality of the "insider" in presenting traditional cultures, it also depended heavily on the work of "outsiders." Several of the organizers were academics in the field of folklore, others were musicians themselves, and many participated in both groups. These figures ultimately decided what traditions and which performers would be presented to the public as authentic folk musicians, and thus who would be "given voice."<sup>78</sup> Even though the program emphasized cultural inclusiveness, Rinzler observed that the organizers, as cultural brokers, had to weed out some traditions. Recognizing that not all folk culture was positive—some traditions preserved racial prejudices and other regressive

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<sup>76</sup> S. Dillon Ripley, "Introduction," *1968 Festival Program*, p. 5, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>77</sup> Banks, *Multiethnic Education*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> By 1971 even working-class occupational groups became involved; groups representing butchers, bakers, glass bottle blowers, and iron and bridge workers were featured in a labor program, which showcased the cultural products of "the American working man as a part of organized labor."

practices—led Rinzler to conclude that “[a]ll that is folk cannot and should not be presented at festivals, though it may well be worth studying and understanding in the context of the culture that nourishes it.” Despite the restrictions the organizers placed on the program, Rinzler reaffirmed the underlying message of the festival: to show that “American culture is varied. It’s not a homogeneous or a melting-pot culture at all.”<sup>79</sup> In the 1973 program, the festival began to include sections titled “Working Americans,” “Native American Program,” and “Old Ways in the New World” (a segment entirely devoted to ethnic folklore). The following year demonstrations pertaining to the “African Diaspora,” “Family Folklore” and “Children’s” material were added to the program.

Each year the FAF expanded, including an ever more diverse array of traditions. The largest festival to date was the bicentennial celebration. The 1976 festival was a twelve-week phenomenon that included over 5,000 performers from across the United States and thirty-five other countries. The language of cultural democracy, advocacy, and preservation was at its strongest. Rinzler again used his position in the Smithsonian as an example of how cultural brokers could serve as cultural advocates: “The Smithsonian, as a national cultural institution, is an arbiter of taste and through the Festival acts as the cultural advocate of participants and cultures presented on the Mall. In our nation, where commercially dominated media determine the direction and accelerate the rate of cultural change, this cultural activist role of the national museum is decisive.” By advocating cultural diversity through a festival of myriad folk traditions, Rinzler noted, the FAF helped Americans to “reaffirm our pluralism and cherish our

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<sup>79</sup> Ralph Rinzler, “Introduction,” *1971 Festival Program*, no page number, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

differences while singing each others' songs" during a turbulent time when the future was filled with uncertainty.<sup>80</sup>

In the program book for this festival, Gary Everhardt, the Director of the National Parks Service, contributed an article in which he emphasized a unity-within-diversity view of American identity: "The Festival of American Folklife is an expression of these beliefs that we are different in many ways, but we are still one nation, one people whose individual differences have helped shape a great nation." He continued, "Everywhere you look there will be America—even in the performances of our friends from abroad, whose national traditions have contributed so much to the richness of our own culture." Alan Lomax pushed a particularly strong message of cosmopolitanism and unity in his own contribution. Calling for citizens to practice cultural equality by celebrating the variegated traditions of the American people, Lomax declared: "By giving every culture its equal access to audiences, its equal time on the air, and its equal weight in education, we can come closer to the realization of the principles of Jefferson's declaration."<sup>81</sup> The idea that the music of the folk provided an authentic American identity permeated the festivals during the seventies, and continued to influence subsequent programs through the end of the century. In 1991, Richard Kurin remarked that the Smithsonian Festival was still trying to uphold a mission that originated with the inaugural festival: "An unfinished agenda from 1967 still resonates today...Not all culture is or will be produced in Hollywood, Paris, Nashville, or on Madison Avenue. Local folks, people in families, communities, tribes,

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<sup>80</sup> Ralph Rinzler, "A Festival to Cherish Our Differences," *The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, 1974-1976* (1976 program), p. 7, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>81</sup> Gary Everhardt, "Of Our National Heritage..." p. 3; Alan Lomax, "Of People and Their Culture...And the Pursuit of Happiness..." 4-5, *The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, 1974-1976* (1976 program) p. 7, Ralph Rinzler Papers, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

regions, and occupations continue to make culture.”<sup>82</sup> These “local folks” were the groups that the Smithsonian credited with creating and sustaining an American heritage.

The Smithsonian festival illustrates how some former folk revivalists were able to adjust their understanding of Americanism, a vision of national identity that combined cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and even cultural nationalism, to suit the emerging theories of multiculturalism. The FAF organizers reflected the identity politics of the late 1960s by encouraging racial and ethnic minorities to develop a sense of pride in their cultural traditions. By borrowing concepts of American heritage that came from the revival and combining those with early ideas of multiculturalism, members of the FAF were able to craft a version of American national identity during an era of factionalism and disillusionment. This is an effort that has lasted without interruption for over forty years. Even in the twenty-first century the festival organizers continue to provide a voice for people in America, and the rest of the world.

### **Conclusion**

The revivalists were able to carry their movement through an economic depression, war, political repression, and even an invasion of commercial forces that threatened to commandeer American folk music. They were able to constantly move forward because, despite social and cultural tribulations, the revivalists believed in the movement’s message. The folk revivalists sought to infuse folk music into mainstream culture with the intention of reforming the nation in the process. At the core of the revival was a goal to spread a version of Americanism that was inclusive of all citizens. If Americans understood that democracy and cultural pluralism were the ideals that defined the nation, then they would be more apt to put those ideals into practice by

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Kurin, “The Festival of American Folklife: Building on Tradition,” 1991 program book, bound copy of program books 1989-1991, Ralph Rinzler Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

bringing marginalized citizens into the political process, or so the revivalists believed. Even when the political climate did not particularly favor their version of Americanism, the revivalists continued to push forward, using folk music to change the nation.

While they had withstood hardship and competing visions of Americanism before, however, the revivalists had not previously encountered anything like the turmoil of the late sixties. At the time, ideas of a universal national identity—no matter how inclusive—became irrelevant in many leftist circles. Programs of reform equally fell by the wayside, as activists grew disillusioned with their failed efforts. Many remained politically committed, but now channeled their energy into specific programs rather than broad-based movements to change the nation as a whole. As leftists shed their affiliation with the nation, nationalism became the domain of their political counterparts. A climate such as this left little room for the Americanism of the revival. Adding the movement's struggles was the fact that revivalists also became engaged in other political and cultural projects. Although they remained committed to folk music, they no longer sustained the vision that had guided the movement.

Even before the dust settled from the turbulent end of the 1960s, a new generation of political progressives combined ideas of American pluralism that originated in cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism with aspects of the racial and ethnic nationalism that emerged during the decade. These figures belonged to the first generation of multiculturalists, with many channeling their efforts into educational reform via multiethnic initiatives. In so doing, they created a new space for the emergence of a democratic, pluralist Americanism similar to the kind that the revivalists had articulated. While this movement would change over the remaining decades of the century, during the 1970s a contingent of multiculturalists believed that cultural difference was the essence of American identity. Furthermore, they argued that racial and ethnic pride were not



anathema to national unity, and encouraged members of minority groups to be proud of their traditions and their contributions to the country.

This was the same message that the former revivalists and cultural preservationists channeled into the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. The organizers of this program aimed to preserve folk traditions, not necessarily by going into folk communities armed with recording devices, but rather by getting these communities to protect their own traditions. They would do so, the organizers believed, if members developed a sense of pride in their heritage. A public audience would also learn of the importance of these traditions both for their own sake, and for their contribution to the cultural fabric of American life by learning them firsthand through the festival. In designing a festival with these intentions, the organizers did not seek to revive the revival, but rather to borrow aspects of the movement and channel them into a new program, and perhaps even a new movement.

## CONCLUSION

“Every revival contains within itself the seed not only of its own destruction... but also of new revivals.”- B.A. Botkin

In this dissertation I provide a frame for understanding the folk music revival. The movement was predicated on preserving folk music and infusing it into mainstream American culture. The revivalists believed that folk music, as a music that came from the people, was representative of the different racial, ethnic, and geographical groups that constituted the American public. It was a democratic art because it was part of an oral tradition in which singers could adapt the songs to suit their own purposes. The revivalists’ understanding of this music was also politically motivated, for they included in the canon of American folk music songs that came from, and songs that that were written for, the people. These principles lay at the heart of the folk revival and they guided the movement from its beginning in the 1930s through its end in the late 1960s.

In popular culture, the revival is generally perceived as encompassing the period of the folk boom of the 1950s and 1960s, when folk music became a pop culture phenomenon. Many scholars take a more nuanced approach and date the emergence of the revival in the 1940s when urban listeners first began to take interest in the genre. Yet, even this interpretation uses popularity as the litmus test for determining the chronological parameters of the movement. Defining the revival according to criterion of popularity not only robs it of any theoretical underpinnings or sociopolitical motivations, but also does not provide a way of understanding the revival *as a movement*. According to this assessment, there does not seem to be a way to distinguish the revival from any other musical fad.

The folk music revival, however, was far more than a merely musical phenomenon. Rather, the revivalists actively used music to promote a larger political agenda, which entailed generating an Americanism rooted in democracy and cultural pluralism. To ensure that their interpretation of American identity took root, the revivalists brought folk music into programs of activism that aimed to make the nation live up to its democratic ideals in practice as much as in rhetoric. The revivalists used folk music to secure Americans' commitment to democracy during WWII, to generate a singing labor movement during the 1940s, and to fight for civil rights and combat prejudice in American society from the 1930s through the 1960s. While scholars of this movement overwhelmingly attribute this progressive interpretation of Americanism to those revivalists who were inspired by Popular Front Americanism, this view was not restricted to members of the Left. Even politically centrist revivalists believed in a democratic pluralist Americanism; for instance, Sarah Gertrude Knott infused her National Folk Festival with this nationalism.

What complicates the story of the revival is that it did not remain cohesive for long. Over time different subgroups developed within the movement, subgroups that would eventually contribute to the revival's undoing. After the collapse of People's Songs, arguably at the forefront of the movement during the post-WWII era, the revivalists separated into diffuse programs. Despite the harsh political climate of 1950s America, most revivalists, ranging from those involved in People's Artists and *Sing Out!* to the National Folk Festival and Folkways Records, continued to promote democratic Americanism through folk music. In the midst of these groups, a new offshoot emerged: the cultural radicals of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* generation. These folk enthusiasts, however, used folk music to carve out an identity for themselves than to articulate an interpretation of national identity. During the 1950s, at least,

these figures remained connected to the movement because they were inspired by older revivalists like Pete Seeger and revival programs like Folkways Records. Yet, the advent of this group marked the beginning of a coterie of folk music enthusiasts who would eventually break away from the core of the revival in the following decade.

By the 1960s, many of the college enthusiasts of the previous decade—figures like Ralph Rinzler, Roger Abrahams, Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Izzy Young—joined with a new cohort of musical purists to form a cadre of cultural preservationists who actively sought to disentangle folk music from interpretations of Americanism, programs of political reform, and efforts at popularization. The last part of their mission was particularly relevant after the advent of the folk boom. Even though the enthusiasts of the popular boom were the cultural opposite of the purists, they too largely separated folk music from the articulations of Americanism that the core revivalists had worked to sustain. For many of them, folk music was just another part of the consumer culture of the early 1960s. In one sense, then, the revivalists had succeeded in their efforts to popularize folk music. However, the boom was actually one of the seeds of the revival's destruction. In the midst of these opposing trajectories—the folk music purists' cultural preservation efforts and the commercialization of the folk boom—the core revivalists tried to keep their message alive. Many became immersed in the democratic activism of the civil rights movement and the New Left, bringing folk music to these new programs of democratic political reform.

The one quality that the boom, the Left, and concepts of progressive Americanism shared in this era was instability. Like any fad, the boom lasted as long as the fickle fans of pop music remained interested, and, by the end of the decade, rock and roll had captured the youth market once again. Many folk musicians of the boom turned to rock music, segued into the singer-

songwriter movement of the late 1960s, or found a home in the new genre of adult contemporary music. The New Left and the civil rights movement suffered from their own internal divisions that fractured both movements and instigated the advent of new, specialized forms of activism. Similarly, visions of a unified America collapsed by the end of the decade. In the growing cacophony of escalating violence in the anti-war movement, cultural radicalism and separatism, and the not-so-Silent Majority, the democratic pluralist Americanism of the revival was drowned out. The revival was defunct, not because all interest in folk music had died, but because the vision that had inspired the movement had dissolved, and the people who had led it went their separate ways.

Even though this period marked the end of a sustained era of efforts to generate a democratic American identity, it was not the end of democratic Americanism altogether. Rather, the ideas that comprised this nationalism—democracy, pluralism, cosmopolitanism—continued to inform a new concept of American identity embodied in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism combined ideas of cultural democracy with concepts of cultural pride that came out of the racial nationalism of the late 1960s. An important segment of this movement consisted of educators in the field of multiethnic education who were responsible for bringing this new version of pluralist national identity to a public audience through education reform.

At the same time that multiculturalism emerged, a group of cultural preservationists became involved in the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, which was designed to bring traditional folk music back into the public sphere. Using rhetoric akin to that of the multiculturalists, the festival organizers argued that folk music could help members of ethnic and racial minorities develop pride in their traditions and thus work to preserve their cultural practices. This had been one of the guiding principles of the folk revival, and the many people

who participated in the FAF had been the folk music purists of the 1950s and 1960s. This cohort of preservationists had severed ties with the revival in the midst of the folk boom and charted their own path, which had perhaps enabled them to survive the end of the movement. Even though the FAF began during the waning years of the revival, organizers like Ralph Rinzler insisted that the festival was not a revival program. Despite their disengagement from the movement, these preservationists did borrow concepts that had first emerged in the revival. The FAF organizers argued that the program provided a way for ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic minorities to speak for themselves directly to a public audience. This idea was crucial to the revival, and even though the FAF was not *of* the movement, it carried some of the revivalists' core ideas into a new era.

By understanding what connected the revivalists and what motivated them throughout the movement, historians can gain a deeper understanding of both the revival itself and the role that it played in American cultural politics over the course of the mid-twentieth century. For forty years, the folk music revivalists worked to use folk music in efforts to bring all citizens into the national community in a figurative sense, by ensuring their representation in concepts of American identity, and in a literal sense, by securing their participation in American political, cultural, and economic systems. In their hands, folk music became music for the people.

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