

“Folk Music, Politics, and the Urge to Sing Out”

David King Dunaway¹

1. Folk Music and a Community of Song

A “romantic mist” has long surrounded the study of folk culture. Many collectors and enthusiasts of folk music have been romantics and, often, patriots. This is because folk music’s common nobility of spirit is rooted in its origins in the peoples of a country and its landscape. The songs are carved from the contours of the land and the primordial experiences of communities.

Folk music has inspired some of our best-loved composers in the West: Liszt, Mussorsky, Bartok, and Ives, among many. And no wonder. It’s inevitable that the faintly heard pipe across the river valley would catch the composer’s ear. And folk music is a river, always flowing, steady and heedless. It has always been the underground stream of American musical culture: the rhythms of daily life, the tune and lyrics of unspoken eloquence. From the river of folk musics has sprung three overlapping American folk music revivals, each with its own direction, personalities, and practice.

Only when we feel ourselves losing the old ways do we begin to think about preserving and reviving them. Thus, the folk music revivals of the twentieth century and their origin in the Romantic belief in human possibility. It is Jean-Jacques Rousseau teaching songs to the schoolboy Emile under a tree. It is Walt Whitman baying at the sea, and the high lonesome twang of a homemade banjo in the distance. Folk music is lighthearted, tragic and bloody, sad and glad, bawdy and blue.

It’s best said in the beginning that there’s no reviving what never died. Folk music is always with us. It is in the tap of the hammer to the music on the radio in the workshop or, in

¹ David Dunaway’s dissertation in American Studies at Berkeley concerned music and politics. Since then, he has taught in Kenya and Colombia as a Fulbright Scholar, and at universities in Denmark, England, across the U.S. He is the author and editor of nine volumes of history, including *How Can I Keep From Singing: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (Villard 2008) and *Singing Out: An Oral History of America’s Folk Music Revivals* (Oxford 2010). He teaches Writing at the University of New Mexico and Broadcasting at San Francisco State University.

older days, to the workers' own signing. It is the rhythmic push of the cabinetmaker's saw, the scan across the checkout station to the beat of songs inside the checker's head.

The United States was founded by such workers and protesters—in particular, religious ones—drawn (or torn) from distant shores. In the baggage of these folk was their music, their instruments sometimes their only possessions. And if they had no instruments, they quickly found them in the New World's sticks and hides: banjos were made from raccoons, pipes carved from bone. And no sooner did they get together and sing the old songs than they started to hybridize them to fit their new circumstances.

In the twentieth century, music researcher were inspired by nineteenth-century Romantics, such as, in Germany, the brothers Grimm, Herder, Haputmann, even Goethe. In sound recordings, the revivals' origins might date from the 1890s, with the first ethnographic recordings of the people of North America's first nations. Preservationists of stories, jokes, or tunes visited libraries; they drove or hiked across damp and dusty byways to find a local storyteller, or that "fiddler in the woods," only to be told: "But you should have seen his uncle—he was *really* good."

Out of these collectors' efforts, a folk music revival movement was born. In the winter of 1940 in Arlington, Virginia, John Lomax's son, Alan, was briefly the roommate of Charles Seeger's son, Peter. Together they would help make folk music respectable and fun, bringing it to millions of folks aching for the sounds of home. But the Lomax-Seeger cultural axis sought something different from what the earlier folk music antiquarians had sought: they wanted to sing their way to action, to build labor unions, to remind people the world over that they were brothers and sisters.

In the following years, a wave of folksingers descended on Greenwich Village. Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and others appeared at the first hootenannies hosted there by the Almanac Singers in 1940. Greenwich Village, where I was born, already had a bohemian reputation dating back to before World War I, but out of those twisting streets—that the old bourgeoisie of Manhattan island passed over when they set up the city's grid—came unionizing songs of the 1930s and 1940s, the Henry Wallace presidential campaign of 1948, and the weavers, who achieved fantastic success with folk-styled songs.

At this point, in the 1950s, the story of American folk music became more entwined with political history. In its domestic incarnation, the Cold War had the FBI and the CIA chasing

folksingers up and down the block. This is the story you'll hear later as Part II: an era that had its rats and its heroes, its songsters and its politicians—the two occasionally meeting at a hootenanny or rally. By the fifties, the only job a musician such as Pete Seeger or Earl Robinson could get was teaching folk music in schools, where a younger generation began to sing the songs.

Today, out of the seeds scattered from Johnny Appleseed's musical bag, a third folk music boomlet exists. The third revival is more technocentric than earlier ones. Video and audio fidelity revives older recordings of the folk masters, and the Internet catapults them out to musicians everywhere. A vast new wave of amateur and professional documentaries, blogs, and other portable public media is emerging.

In this third revival, the grandchildren of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger are making their musical imprint. They are pulling out songbooks or warped records from their parents' folk revival, learning to play an instrument or two, and then performing for their internet friends or the virtual audience in what *Rolling Stone* called in 2007 the "YouTube Folk Revival."

It's friends who get together and sing on Friday nights instead of going out to concerts; maybe it's parents getting together for a pancake breakfast and teaching their kids old songs; maybe it's a bonfire, where revelers sit together and sing a few songs they all know.

That is the lesson of folk music revivals: that *we* are the ones being revived, not the songs, tales, and sayings that the revivalists uncovered and published. It is the oldest discovery: that we all have roots, and they are the source of what makes us each musically distinctive. Sometimes the urge to revive starts in someone's living room, over tea or beer. Sometimes it begins in the library stacks where a musician or scholar has poked his or her head. Sometimes it starts with large-scale American collecting efforts, such as those of the Library of Congress. Eventually, it rises up singing.

2 Music and Politics

Ever since the blasts of Joshua's trumpets, political movements have turned to music in the service of their campaigns and causes. In the centuries since settlers landed in America, music has served as a barometer of political sentiments, whether or not those listening reflected on what it told of their era.

Political sentiment expressed in music has been documented as far back as the Hsia Dynasty—2,000 B.C.—when Chinese emperors sent agents to record the songs of masons building the Great Wall, as a rudimentary opinion poll (Wang 1965). In Europe's Middle Ages, anti-clerical feelings found expression in the songs of wandering goliards. In seventeenth-century England, the egalitarian Diggers composed anthems of class consciousness, and the song 'Lilliburlero' helped topple James II from his throne (Percy 1765).

Traditions of popular dissent, such as the political song, are universal to human society. Each culture generates its own media of social protest. In North America, one of the most widespread forms of dissent has been the song of social protest. Groups as diverse as the Nootka Indians of British Columbia and the Chicanos of the Mexican border have developed distinct musical forms of protest (Dunaway, 1977). For, as John Greenway once wrote, more than half a century ago:

From the earliest periods of American history the oppressed people forming the broad base of the social and economic pyramid have been singing of their discontent. What they have said has not always been pleasant, but has always been worth listening to (Greenway 1953:vii).

In 1734, maverick write-printer John Pete Zenger used political songs so successfully in an electoral campaign that the then-Royal Governor of New York, William Cosby, proclaimed a reward for the detection of the authors of the 'Scandalous Songs or Ballads'; and then burnt the offending broadsides.¹ Ever since, governors and their agents have been chasing balladeers.

During the period covered in this study, 1940-1968, a half-dozen political song movements emerged as the subjects of FBI and CIA interest. The Almanac Singers(1941-44) were a dozen or so young musicians who lived and performed together in the early 1940s to provide musical support to the Communist Party USA and to the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The Almanacs adapted folksongs (by which they meant Southern and Appalachian folksongs) to topical issues and sang them as widely as they could, through their most common audience was among Eastern European immigrants in unions in New York City (Denisoff, 1970; Reuss, 1971; Dunaway, 1981 and 2008).

People's Songs (1945-49) and People Artists (1948-58) set out to spread labor and political protest songs through a national organization of radical songwriters and performers. The association, whose bulletin numbered at its highest 2,000 subscribers, employed a variety or

forms (cabaret, jazz, ethnic, and folk music) for their political music (Lieberman, 1984). These are only a few of the left-oriented movements using song throughout the twentieth century.

From 1954 to 1965, civil rights campaigns in the South made a most effective use of music, beginning with the spirituals adapted by slaves in their protests, songs such as ‘We Are Soldiers in the Army.’ In a second phase, this movement adapted traditional songs—and their melodies—in the same way union organizers had, in the radical labor schools of the 1930s.

Songs of the Nuclear Disarmament movement, sung by a few in the late 1950s, found new life in the 1960s in the rising dissatisfaction with American involvement in Vietnam. Though rarely broadcast, underground anti-war songs such as ‘Feel Like I’m Fixing to Die Rag’ by Country Joe McDonald received wide popularity (Auslander, 1981). In the 1970s, feminists, environmentalists, and advocates of renewable energy sources created grassroots campaigns in music. These movements generated files for the FBI, in programs such as CoInTelPro (Blackstock, 1976).

Scattered Right-wing protest songs also emerged in the 1950s and the 1960s; barbershop quartets advocating the Ku-Klux Klan’s doctrines of racial supremacy, for instance. Largely, these were songs reflecting the backlash to civil-rights and labor organizing campaigns, and satires of social protesters in a country and western vein—such as Merle Haggard’s ‘Okie from Muskogee’ (Triuzzi, 1969). A leader of the Christian Anti-Communist hired a singer in the 1960s to perform compositions such as ‘Be Careful of Communist Lies,’ to the tune of ‘Jimmy Cracked Corn’ (Denisoff, 1970). Such efforts found few audiences.

3 Communists, Folk Music and the FBI

The lack of interest in right-wing protest song did not stop the FBI from pursuing those on the other edge of the political spectrum, as documents later in this essay attest, the Bureau had already begun “bag-jobs,” (breaking and entering citizens’ homes in search of traces of Communism.)

The FBI justified its interest in folk music and folklore by referring to the many right-wing anti-Communist newsletters from the 1950’s, such as *Counter Attack*, which called folk music “an unidentified tool of Communist psychological or cybernetic warfare; which prompted Senator Kenneth Keating (D-NY) to complaining about this group’s musical witch

hunting as “another demonstration of the absurd lengths to which the radical right-wing will go in their quixotic sallies against the Communist Menace.” (Keating, 1963)

In the next line of his Senate speech, Keating paraphrases J. Edgar Hoover, on the danger of the vigilante charges which direct our energies from tackling the real threats posed by international Communism. In response to Keating’s speech, John Real in *The Far-Right American Opinion* summed up the cultural referents of folk music the way the FBI may have seen them:

Along with the handclapping, the guitar strumming, the banjo-picking, the shouting and the howling, comes a very subtle, but highly effective, presentation of standard Communist-Party propaganda. Not since the 1930s have so many young people of the United State been so directly, so cleverly, deceived into a widespread parroting of the Communist line. (Real, in Reuss, 1971)

The FBI investigated U.S. citizens since at least 1919, when it traced “pro-German” statements by William Jennings and William Randolph Hearst. A War Department employee so accused replied in terms parallel to those used by folk musicians called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC): I have no apologies to make [concerning] the kinds of ideals on social organizations I have. They are my own affairs,” (Lowenthal, 1950:39).

Though the FBI was directed to stop such investigations of loyalty in the reforms of 1924, Attorney General Harlow F. Stone’s directives were ignored. In the late ‘30s, citing a presidential directive, FBI spying on those they thought subversive increased dramatically. This culminated in what one scholar called “a full-scale offensive against Party-affiliated groups such as those discussed here. (Buhle, et.al., 1992: 222)

The Communist infiltration into the subversion of American music had been nothing short of phenomenal and in some areas, e.g. folk music, their control is fast approaching the saturation point under the able leadership of Pete Seeger. (Noebel, 1966:9) Through activity probably illegal, the FBI had amassed “more than 25 million files on American citizens. From 1941 to 1975 virtually every civil right group, left-of-center union, and left-wing political organization (approximately 13,500 in total) was mounted by the FBI,” (Fariello, 1995:82). In 1949, at the height of the FBI investigations documented here, when it was sending agents to public singalongs in Greenwich Village, the normally restrained *New York Times* editorial page complained about “the fact that rumors and gossip against people not charged with any offense are maintained,” (quoted in Lowenthal, 1950:463).

Responding to complaints about collecting such innuendos, J. Edgar Hoover justified it by alarming Americans about “this force of traitorous Communists, constantly gnawing away, like termites at the foundations of American society, stand a half million fellow travelers, ready to do the Communists’ bidding,” (Caute, 1978:114). (That month the most popular recording artists in the U.S. were Pete Seeger and the Weavers.)

In the quest to rid America of these “termites,” the FBI abridged privacy given under The Bill of Rights and indulged in chauvinistic and novelistic judgments. And why not? FBI informant Herbert Philbrick, author of the best-selling novel-memoir, *I Led Three Lives*, showed no scruples about breaking into people’s houses, taking their pictures, eavesdropping on private conversations. All is justified because “where Communism is concerned, no one can be trusted,” (Philbrick, 1952:235).

A very different set of tales are told by another FBI man, M. Wesley Swearingen , who described how attacks on civil groups, like People’s Songs, were carried out. Swearingen was a special agent from 1951 assigned to what was known as “political work:”

About five years, shortly after I arrived in Chicago, I started doing illegal break-ins--bag jobs we called them... We found things like membership lists, or what could be construed as membership lists, and correspondence to some of the fugitives who were in the underground. But never any evidence of anything illegal. Well, of course, the Communist Party was considered subversive--but we never found any evidence of any crimes, it was all political...None of us worried about illegality, because most of us were veterans from World War Two. Gee, all you had to do is wave a flag, and we’d stand up and salute and do all kinds of things...We all thought, ‘This is great, we’re defending the country and nobody knows anything about it.’(Farriello, 1995:84-87)

To the effect of their actions on leaders of groups such as those discussed here, such agents turned a blind eye. “They’d end up on the breadline somewhere, and I didn’t give a hoot,” said Peter Szluk, self described hatchet man for the State Department.

Bullied everywhere--we could do that, yessiree boy. Keep in mind that this is a country that believes in freedom, and these sons of bitches were trying to besmirch that...I didn’t think left was a threat to the nation, no way. Because, if I had believed that, I would have killed them, literally. (Fariello, 1995:125)

Finally, J. Edgar Hoover, well known for being the FBI’s Director from 1924 till his death in 1972, created on the inquisitorial culture of his agency, with “a complete run-down on every Congressman, his private life and family.” A later U.S. Attorney General counted 164 files on

leading political figures “outside of the Bureau’s overall filing system,” (Caute, 1978:113). By 1951, the year FBI surveillance of The Weaves peaked, Hoover first decided to devote more resources to fighting “subversives” than to fighting crime: the spread of Communism and the subversive activities of its adherents represent the greatest and most immediate threat,” (Donner, 1980: 99). For Hoover, Communists were simply more dangerous than criminals, “godless, violent, immoral, deceitful, dirty and unpatriotic,” (Donner, 1980:83). Alongside his big-job agents, he zealously supported HUAC’s investigations and those of local “red squads” (police and paramilitaries) in major cities throughout the 1950s. “The closest relation exists between this committee and the FBI,” observed HUAC’s J. Parnell Thomas (Caute, 1980:113). The FBI’s secret investigations and HUAC’s show hearings assured that anyone listed in HUAC’s publications, such as its Guide to Subversive Organizations or Organized Communism in the U.S. received that one-way ticket to the headline. By the time FBI spying of folk music groups and folklorists began to die down in 1956, one out of every three members was an FBI agent (Fariello, 1995:82). Ironically, this was the same year the FBI’s CoInTel Program began, shifting the focus from anti-Communism to anti-Patriotism, individuals such as Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. or groups like the Socialist Workers Party (Blackstock, 1975).

Well, perhaps that’s enough history for today. What remains of the topical-protest movement today?

4 A future for topical song

Are they still written and sung, if rarely broadcast? With bank failures, curtailment of civil liberties in the name of the War on Terror, and military quagmires aplenty, there are no shortages of causes ripe for song. Of course the music, like the struggles, has changed with the times. Antiestablishment songs have evolved from struggle to struggle: fighting union songs in the thirties; “treasonable” antiwar songs as World War II began; songs informally treasonable, which provoked HUAC in the fifties; songs that pushed out boundaries in the sixties and seventies; and those in the name of feminism, environmentalism, and challenging globalization and oppression in the eighties and the relatively prosperous nineties. For much of the twentieth century, topical folk music was the genre for “singing out”; but will this continue in the twenty-first century? Who, if anyone, will be singing out in the future? And what will they be singing?

One answer to these questions is embodied by the punk-rockers of the family band Blackfire: Clayson, Jeneda, and Klee Benally—Diné (Navajo) siblings who grew up on the conflict-ridden reservation in a home without electricity or running water, but with a strong sense of tradition (the trio's father, Jones Benally, is a medicine man, traditional singer, and hoop dancer). Blackfire's work moves between traditional Diné music and rage-rock. Although their distorted guitar riffs would certainly startle the Cecil Sharps and John Lomaxes of old, the chords are basically the same.

Klee Benally, on reconciling musical tradition and the modern world: "I like to say that our music is a result of our desire to find balance within the contractions we faced: colonization, the negative influences that are destroying our environment, our culture, not only for Diné people but for *all* peoples. . . . We came up with the name Blackfire because it was a response to the pollution, the threat of war, nuclear terror, and all of these things that we saw as this force—that was just like what was burning not too far from our place where we were originally from on Black Mesa: coal. Peabody Coal Company is operating this industry that is destroying our mother, the Earth, for profit, for greed; and everything that's burning from that is killing the people and the planet. So for us, our music is for addressing those issues. It's a response to those issues, but it's a way to allow us to release that anger and frustration as a natural reaction, when you see such horrendous things happening in your community, to your own family. So our music is a type of resistance, but it's not all we do."

Pete Seeger, on the People's Music Network: "The music is out there, somewhat; but to me, artists have to have the ability to respond quickly. When the invasion of Iraq occurred, how many wrote songs dealing with that? I look at things that occur now—the Phil Ochs and the Guthries would have a field day today. I think a lot of music has changed: it isn't about music; it's about entertainment."

Holly Near, on the challenges facing socially conscious artists. "I think that the times right now are harder for socially conscious artists, harder even than when I came in. But every generation has to find their way through that."

The Weavers had to find their way through the House Un-American Activities Committee. I had to find my way through sexism and homophobia; and the transition from a music industry that actually was owned by people to one owned by corporations. This next generation, they're going to have to find their way through this extraordinary technology that's at their fingertips. And yet even though every single person can now make a CD in their living room, they have this problem of who's going to listen to it? . . . Where are the opportunities for the next generation to perform live? Well, they're going to have to look around. And if they don't find it, they're going to have to *create* it, just

like we did. . . . Every generation has to lay down the bricks before they step on them. . . . So this next generation will have to articulate what their walls and obstacles are and decide if they want to become bricklayers.”

Protest music may have moved on to other genres, but politics and folk music still intersect. On January 18, 2009, two days before his inauguration, Barack Obama spoke at the Lincoln Memorial, near where Martin Luther King, Jr., had dreamed aloud forty-six years earlier, in the company of folksingers. Sharing that hallowed stage with America’s first black president was eighty-nine-year-old Pete Seeger, singing Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land”—belting out Guthrie’s radical verses, rarely performed, with grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger and Bruce Springsteen.

The urge to voice politics in music is timeless and universal. It comes in waves, wherever and whenever people gather. Whether Chico Buarque singing “ at a time when Brazilian generals tried to jail him; or Pete Seeger, promoting international understanding and peace by getting people together to sing; or today, when Syrians are marching to their deaths singing “Come On Bashar, Leave”—music is power, music is salvation, music is community. Please take your own part. Make your own music. Make your own community. Make it musical!