

Title: “A Link in a Chain:” An Audiopic Analysis of Pete Seeger, 1955 – 1962

Abstract: The twentieth century folk singer Pete Seeger used song to fight for social, cultural, and political change throughout the U.S. and abroad in the post-war era, participating through topical music in a number of social movements throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including civil rights, nuclear non-proliferation, and peace in Vietnam. The marriage in Seeger’s vocation between music and activism has led a number of scholars who study Seeger and his role in the broader New Folk Revival (Richard Reuss, Robbie Lieberman, Robert Cantwell, David King Dunaway, Allan Winkler) to interpret Seeger historically through a chiefly political lens, teasing out his radical upbringing and many lifelong radical friends and affiliates, his brief Communist Party-USA membership, and his political perspectives on social change to argue for Seeger as a performer of left-leaning politics through folk song. This study seeks to complicate the existing narrative by examining Seeger’s life at a particularly politically charged time – his seven year legal battle (1955 – 1962) with the House Un-American Activities Committee as it attempted to jail him for alleged subversive behavior – to deemphasize politics as the main motivating factor for Seeger’s social work and awareness. Drawing from cultural theory, it borrows from Ethnic and American Studies scholar Josh Kun and loosely from Michel Foucault to argue that Seeger was interested in breaking down social, cultural, racial, political, and international barriers during the tense Cold War surveillance state of the 1950s to forge a common sense of unafraid, human collectivity, or “brotherhood,” among his audience listeners. Seeger accomplished this through channeling “audiotopias,” or the production of heterotopic imagined spaces through his music in which the experiences of folk writers and Seeger’s audience members were exchanged to create a common empathy and understanding of one another. During these years Seeger most often played for children and young adults, an audience that later agitated for the breakdown of the era’s politically hostile and homogenizing forces, and some of whom grew up to be folksingers in Seeger’s vein themselves (they were new “links in a chain” of a growing spirit of musical and cultural activism, as Seeger described them). Having absorbed a musical world without racial, classist, political, and other barriers, they wanted to make these experiences into reality. Despite his political influence, Seeger’s efforts to create cultural understanding through musical audiotopias were his key contribution to social justice activism in mid-century America.

I. Introduction: Seeger the Musical “Link in a Chain”

On April 10, 1964, the *New York Times* featured an article entitled, “Muscovites Hail U.S. Folk Singer: Audience Sings with Seeger as He Opens Russian Tour.”¹ The article proceeded to report the concert’s overwhelming success, taking note of Pete Seeger’s popularity with his audience: “Police barriers were up outside the hall to control a milling crowd that included dozens of persons asking for extra tickets. Inside, many were allowed to sit in the aisles.”² It’s true that Seeger was a hit that night. Lanky and unassuming, yet with a characteristic discipline and grace about him, he “walked onto the bare stage” wearing his usual

¹ “Muscovites Hail U.S. Folk Singer,” 1960s, “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

² Ibid.

“sweater and slacks,” and “holding his two instruments [undoubtedly a guitar and his long-neck, five-string banjo], began his program in low-key fashion.”³ Given the standing-room-only crowd Seeger attracted, one might wonder what all of the hubbub was about. Why would a Russian audience gather from far and wide to hear an American banjo picker croon a few “low-key” songs he picked up from the “hillbilly” or Negro country of Appalachia or the Deep South, places that must have seemed a million miles away or more in the Cold War world?⁴ Sure, the audience might have known that politically they had a friend in Seeger – more or less, anyway. Despite his unreliable meeting attendance in the forties, his frustration with the rigidity of Communist Party ideology, and his own admission that his philosophies were seldom “clearly articulated” or “[written] down,” Seeger was raised on a steady diet of leftist collectivism and internationalism that made the Soviet ideal, if not the reality, attractive to him.⁵ But even so, if the Russians wanted a sympathetic American, there were better options to choose from than Seeger.

The article continues: at first the audience seemed a little “nonplussed” over the unpretentious folk singer,

But the Russians soon understood what Mr. Seeger was trying to do and quickly joined lustily in the choruses . . . He urged the audience on in Russian, referring to a piece of paper for key phrases such as ‘louder’ and ‘altogether now.’ At one point he had the audience divided into bass, tenor, and soprano groups, which he compared to a layer cake with himself as the ‘icing on top.’ After the final encore, about 100 youngsters crowded around the stage and clapped for nearly 10 minutes until Mr. Seeger came out to take still another bow.⁶

The concert, which had opened with Seeger softly singing and strumming his banjo, had climaxed by its end with all of the Soviet Union’s Tchaikovsky Hall resounding in song.⁷ The

³ “Muscovites Hail U.S. Folk Singer,” 1960s, “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

⁴ Toshi Seeger. “Pete Seeger.” *Sing Out!* March 1965, 85.

⁵ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

⁶ “Muscovites Hail U.S. Folk Singer,” 1960s, “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

⁷ Ibid.

uniqueness of Seeger's concert style was not to sing alone all the way through, but gradually to make his audience so comfortable (and delighted) that they dropped the reluctance otherwise natural among strangers and together sang along with him. He would coax, cajole, and encourage his onlookers until he could get "a tune out of them," which was Seeger's way of saying that he'd managed to split an audience of thousands into an enormous four-part choir that found themselves belting songs almost "whether they wanted to or not" as Bob Dylan described it.⁸

For all of Seeger's apparent modesty and simplicity, he is a man of depth and intelligence who knows the power behind song, and who used his life to harness it into a world of social and cultural contact for his listeners. What exactly was Seeger singing that night in Moscow? The *Times* reports "a diversified program" including the Israeli tune "Tzena, Tzena," "an American Indian canoe song," "Pilgrim ballads," and "modern songs of protest such as 'We Shall Overcome.'"⁹ When Seeger looked at the world, he didn't see the boundaries that seem otherwise integral to human existence. He broke down the rigid interpersonal barriers separating his audience members from one another, and he broke down their cultural barriers as well. On a spring evening in Moscow, with his meager appearance and instrumentation, Seeger came upon his listeners like a gentle wind that gradually grew stronger, and as his music built he introduced songs from all walks of society and "all over this land," whether that land was the United States, Israel, "the Slavic countries," Western Europe, Africa, Central and South America, or

⁸ Pete Seeger, "Why Audience Participation?" *Sing Out!* Spring 1956, 32. PBS American Masters, Pete Seeger: The Power of Song, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

⁹ "Muscovites Hail U.S. Folk Singer," 1960s, "Pete Seeger Vertical File," Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

elsewhere.¹⁰ He used music to create connections, and in so doing, he moved people. He brought them closer to himself, closer to each other, and closer to the peoples everywhere that surround them. And in a way, this was Seeger's magic, the magic that so energized the Russian crowd that flocked to him and that so roared in applause when it was all over. Seeger once referred to himself as a "link in a chain."¹¹ With himself as its medium, he allowed music to narrow divides and draw his audience together.

II. Historiographical Considerations

Although Seeger's way with music is well known, exactly how he channeled it so effectively is not entirely clear to the growing number of scholars that study his life and work. In the last several decades a number of books have been released that examine both Seeger and folk music in the United States more generally. In the early days of the literature's development, it was inspired in large measure by the "New Folk Revival" of 1959 – 1964, a time when the whole country (and particularly its youth) became infatuated with Joan Baez's "aching soprano," Peter, Paul, and Mary's mystical blending of voices, the raw purity of a Judy Collins song interpretation, Bob Dylan's poetic lyrics, the whimsical tunes of the Kingston Trio, and many others like them.¹² But though they provided the initial inspiration, a more serious look at folk music reveals a life-span that extends beyond its brief blossoming in the early sixties. Although, by nature, folk song contains a musical repertoire of melodies whose original composers are unknown, giving them a dateless but ambiguously "old" quality, for the consideration of this

¹⁰ Lewis Allan, "All Over This Land," *Sing Out!* August 1950, 8 – 9. PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

¹¹ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

¹² See *Sing Out!* issues from Oct. – Nov. 1961 – Nov. 1964 for more on the artists and events of the New Folk Revival.

study folk music is only examined according to its long twentieth century revival, beginning in roughly 1927.¹³

The first scholar to produce a systematic study of modern folk music was Indiana University's Dick Reuss, whose dissertation *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927 – 1957* was first submitted for review in 1971.¹⁴ Due to the radical dissent across college campuses and a protest spirit that was then still very much alive, Reuss' thesis was repeatedly denied publication although it became something of an "underground classic" frequently cited among scholars.¹⁵ Later, from Reuss' untimely death in 1986, *American Folk Music* remained unpublished until his wife revised and successfully submitted it for publication in 2000, some thirty years after its original writing.¹⁶ In it Reuss explores the tense development of a folk song community within and around the American Communist movement from the late 1920s through the 1940s.¹⁷ He discusses the original appeal of song as a form of artistic "agit-prop" (agitation propaganda) and describes the proliferation of left-wing musical circles, from the "Composers Collectives" in the universities (of which Pete Seeger's father, Charles, was a part) to workers' choruses that emerged in unions.¹⁸ He discusses the early careers of both white and African-American folk singers, including Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly, Burl Ives, Josh White, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger.¹⁹ Reuss points out a conflict of understanding that divided the Communist Party from many of these union-oriented, radical singers, creating a missed

¹³ A precise examination of American "folk" music, in view of its early origins, the criteria that defines an "authentic" from an "inauthentic" folk song, the differences between "traditional" and "pop" or contemporary folk song, will not be considered here. Richard Reuss carefully handles definitional debates about the meaning and uses of "folk" when applied to music in the first chapter of *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, pp. 15 – 23. Richard Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*.

¹⁴ Richard Reuss with Joanne Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927 - 1957* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2000), x.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁷ Richard Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 139.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29, 50, 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

opportunity for both. The Party lacked the flexibility to abandon its love of polish, purity, and order, coming to shun the likes of the vulgar Guthrie or Lead Belly, and later had but a limited stake in their popular appeal.²⁰ Without the CP's funding, several of the folk singers' enterprises (like the musical group The Almanac Singers or the journal *People's Songs*) collapsed.²¹ Reuss' text lays out a great deal of groundwork in understanding the early years of folk music's resurgence and its origins within American radicalism.

A colleague and friend of Reuss, David King Dunaway, shared a similar interest in folk music and radical politics.²² Through the 1970s Dunaway's research covered Pete Seeger, who previously had not been extensively studied. This is in part because Seeger resisted the development of a scholarly look at his life, although eventually Seeger let down his reservations and allowed Dunaway access to a host of unpublished sources in his home. In addition, together with several friends, colleagues, and family members, Seeger made available to Dunaway hundreds of hours of time in order to conduct a series of interviews.²³ The result was Dunaway's 1982 biography of Seeger entitled *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger*.²⁴ In it Dunaway explored Seeger's radical politics and commitment to social action as he expressed them musically, and did so through the lens of Seeger's private life and its complicated relationship with his public persona. Dunaway tried to explain, for example, the irony of Seeger's evolution as an artist of workers' songs though he himself came from a background of New England privilege.²⁵ This leads into narratives about Seeger's radical father

²⁰ Richard Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²² *Ibid.*, xiv – xv.

²³ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger*. 2nd ed. (New York: Villard, 2008), xii – xiii.

²⁴ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? Pete Seeger*. 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

²⁵ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?* 2nd ed., 16 – 19.

David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

and his Leninism-heavy grade school education.²⁶ Dunaway included a wide breadth of information about Seeger's public life as well, including his days with the Almanac Singers and the Weavers, his battle with HUAC, and his relationship with the civil rights movement, Vietnam protests, and related events throughout the 1960s.²⁷ It also covers the beginnings of his later life, including his campaign to clean up New York's Hudson River.²⁸ In 2008 Dunaway published a revised second edition, and it remains the definitive available biography of Seeger.

Following Dunaway's biography, in 1989 scholar of the left, Robbie Lieberman, wrote a cultural history of the U.S. radical movement in "*My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930 – 1950.*"²⁹ She points out the uses of folk songs during the Popular Front, arguing for their unique ability to unify, provide historical memory, and suggest hope for a more just (in terms of racial and class equality) future.³⁰ Her narrative follows the standard line of radical history, in which a thriving labor movement in the 1930s is complimented by its growing number of folk songs, merges with the rest of America's anti-fascist sentiments during the Second World War, and slumps in the 1950s from McCarthyite red-baiting.³¹ Although Lieberman's work is heavy on folk music, her basic point is a political one about the condition of the left in the early Cold War.

In 1996 and 2000, two scholars emerged with books that have since become authorities on folk music in America. In 1996, Robert Cantwell wrote *When We Were Good: The Folk*

²⁶ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?* 2nd ed., 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103, 165, 215, 293, 319.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁹ Robbie Lieberman, "*My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930 – 1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1989).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14, 81, 114.

³¹ Robbie Lieberman, "*My Song is My Weapon*," 50, 68, 122.

There is a great deal of scholarship on the American left available to compliment considerations of the folk music communities that grew up around it. For starters, see Morris Isserman's *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1982) and *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1987). See also Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

Revival and in 2000, a Russian Indiana University scholar, Ronald Cohen, wrote *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940 – 1970*.³² Cantwell's book is a comprehensive history of the long twentieth century revival, from the movement's early labor and Jim Crow days to its commercial 1960s successes.³³ His chapter "He Shall Overcome: Pete Seeger" provides a short history of Seeger's life and career.³⁴ Cantwell describes Seeger's concerts in great detail, paying particular attention to his stage presence. When performing, "all of him is there," says Cantwell, "the elegantly disciplined and vigorous awkwardness . . . the refinement politely disguised, the delicacy waived, the theme of social injustice sounded with beseeching gestures from within a private sorrow. Revealing himself, he makes us."³⁵ Cohen's *Rainbow Quest* concentrates on the early sixties' New Folk Revival, providing earlier 1930s and 1940s history inasmuch as it feeds his interest in later events. His social, cultural, and political history places folk music as operating at the heart of sixties' revolutions, including civil rights, the peace movement, and the New Left.³⁶ He provides many of the ins and outs of folk music's development in this decade, from the Greenwich Village scene and the early days of Bob Dylan and other young "folkies" to the annual tradition of the Newport Folk Festival and the role of folk music producers, including the managerial staff at Columbia Records and *Sing Out!* magazine.³⁷ Each of these sources is among the most reliable for thoroughly researched histories on both the long folk revival and its newer 1960s counterpart.

³² Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1996).

Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940 – 1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2002).

³³ Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 185, 250, 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 242 – 243.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁶ Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 86, 91, 196, 204, 133, 14 – 17, 40, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36, 105, 140, 186.

In recent years, in addition to Dunaway's, two short biographies on Pete Seeger have been published, Alec Wilkinson's *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (2009) and *To Everything there is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (2009). Wilkinson designed his biography, which spans about 150 pages, to provide a look almost exclusively at Seeger's private life.³⁸ The book abandons the fascination of many scholars with Seeger's public achievements and details instead his boyhood, his log cabin life in New York's Hudson Valley, his World War II service, and other like narratives.³⁹ He does not ignore Seeger's public life altogether; inevitably some of his battle with the House Un-American Activities Committee is mentioned, as well as the broad significance of his topical singing and radical affiliations, but these are not the core of the book's emphasis. Winkler's biography takes the opposite approach, looking almost entirely at Seeger's public life as he makes the argument for Pete Seeger (as opposed to Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, Joan Baez, or Bob Dylan) comprising the heart of the 1950s and 1960s folk song revival.⁴⁰ While parts of these biographies are useful in their own right (especially Wilkinson's in-depth look at the private Seeger), it seems that a reading of Dunaway could provide the bulk of the information covered in both, save a few scattered nuances and moments of added subtlety. A review of the existing literature reveals that Seeger, and the folk revival in which he played a tremendous role, has been analyzed from a largely social and political perspective. The emphasis leans toward Seeger's personality, his relationship with the left, and his public campaign for social change.

III. Seeger and the Making Music's Influence: An Audiotopic Analysis

Scholars widely acknowledge that what is missing from the conversation on Pete Seeger

³⁸ Alec Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 38, 41, 55.

⁴⁰ Allan Winkler, *"To Everything There is a Season:" Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), xi.

to date is a close examination of his music.⁴¹ Seeger's life as a composer and writer of lyrics has not yet been closely explored, and some scholars find that the solution to this is a study of Seeger from the perspective of ethnomusicology.⁴² It is true that a better understanding of Seeger requires an analysis of his music, but the way in which scholars propose to do this suffers from a degree of myopia. They assume that Seeger's musical life is most importantly about his personal musicianship; they want to know about the music's maker. But if Seeger's life – wrapped up in radical social change as it was – points to anything, it's the impact of song on its *hearers*.

In 2005, scholar of Ethnic and American Studies, Josh Kun, published a book entitled *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* addressing the power of sound when combined with a listener.⁴³ Kun believes that for the listener, music is a way of building one's "own world, creating an alternate set of cultural spaces that, through the private act of listening, [can deliver an individual] to different places and different times and allow [one] to try out different versions of [him or herself]." ⁴⁴ Kun finds that when music enters a person, through the "bones and tissues" of the listener's body, an act of hybridization takes place, in which music, which comes from elsewhere – indeed, which may be circulated around the entire world – enters that person's being and powerfully stimulates the imagination until the listener finds him or herself transported (metaphorically) to a place beyond the here and now.⁴⁵ What follows is a point of contact between the listener's understanding of his or her own self-identity and the context in which the song is situated. "All musical listening," Kun argues, "is a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meanings, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore,

⁴¹ Ted Olson. Review of *To Everything There is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, by Allan Winkler. *Journal of American Music* 29, no. 1 (2011).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

⁴⁴ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 22 – 23.

menaced through its own interrogation.”⁴⁶ The moment of contact that music facilitates creates an *audiotopia*, a term Kun invented that distantly originates from the word “utopia,” but is more closely related to Michel Foucault’s “heterotopia,” in which a world is created that does not consist of one uniform, ideal place, but of a combined multiplicity of places and spaces, “a single real place of several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible.”⁴⁷ When a listener hears music, the social, cultural, and geographical boundaries known in reality are morphed into a world in which they can all exist together harmoniously. This is “the world,” as Seeger might say, “that music lives in.”⁴⁸

Musical audiotopias do not stop at causing listeners to re-envision themselves as different people at different times and in different places. Kun believes that they foster “differential consciousness,” or the sense that if music’s world can be so strongly imagined according to a whole new set of social rules, then perhaps this can be true of the real world as well.⁴⁹ “Music insists on the possibility of difference,” he says, and consequently, it is particularly well-suited to challenging the existing social order.⁵⁰ Kun notes that in 1937, African-American poet Jean Toomer wrote that “music . . . though able to transport you into a different world, cannot keep you in that different world.” But in response, Kun adds that “we always slide back into this world, but, each time, we slide back forever changed.”⁵¹ Music gives its hearers the imaginative ability to see the world differently, a vision that may be so clear that it suddenly seems possible to change the actual one they in which they live.

⁴⁶ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Throughout *Audiotopia*'s introductory remarks, Kun discusses Pete Seeger at great length. He finds that Seeger's songs have produced audiotopias like few others. His protest spirit, songs in different dialects of different languages from places all across the globe, and signature five-string banjo that harkens back to slavery's days in the Deep South, brings his listeners both into differential consciousness and invites them to "slide back into this world" ready to change it.⁵² But after the introduction, Kun proceeds to analyze music's audiotopic power as it influences race relations in the United States, covering the music of American Jews, Latinos, and African-Americans.⁵³ The purpose of this study is to build on Kun's thesis of musical audiotopias, analyzing the relationship Pete Seeger had with his listeners, and venturing to suggest this as a chief reason for his enduring influence on society. While ethno-musicological work remains to be done, this is an attempt to build a bridge between Seeger's life as a social and political commentary and his unique contribution as a musician in the mid-twentieth century. Its confines span from roughly 1955 to 1962, analyzing the relationship that Seeger had with his audiences during McCarthy era America, a phase of Seeger's life in which he was most persecuted, and yet as a result, most influential as a performer.⁵⁴

IV. Seeger's Audiotopias of Difference in a Cold War Culture

The summer of 1955 threw a curve ball that blindsided Pete Seeger. Although in fairness it wasn't entirely unexpected, Seeger was nevertheless momentarily stunned when a black FBI

⁵² Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 48, 86, 113, 143, 184.

⁵⁴ This study is intended to build one other bridge besides a connection between the nature of Seeger's music and his work for social change. It also builds a disciplinary bridge, marrying historical thinking with theoretical and interpretative close reading analysis, work that is commonly done in literary criticism and, more broadly, in the many socio-cultural projects taken up in the field of American Studies. The boundaries between these fields are already porous (American Studies relies heavily on history as one of its many disciplinary sources), but this project hopes to further traverse their boundaries by combining close readings of texts – in this case, audio texts through "readings" of Seeger's songs – with historical work that narrates from traditional archival materials (e.g. documentary evidence).

vehicle lumbered up the driveway of his wooded Beacon home to hand him a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁵⁵ For a few years now Seeger's circle of friends and fellow artists had been harassed for holding "subversive" views against the United States.⁵⁶ There's no question that Seeger and many of his associates were identified as radicals, and at various points in their lives most were members of the American Communist Party.⁵⁷ But their stories are too complicated and idiosyncratic to lump them together as robotic pro-Soviet ideologues. Seeger describes his radicalism not in materialist or ideological but in idealist terms, wishing that modern society would become more like "the American Indians," who in a romanticized past had "no rich and no poor" among them, and who "shared" food and supplies with each other "because they had to."⁵⁸ But as fears of Sovietism sunk into the American public, government agencies clamped down on radical circles. "We were not prepared for the Cold War," Seeger commented some sixty years later, and when the red scare reached a height, few artists on the left survived it without blacklisting, jail time, or at the very least, a Congressional trial that probed their past and present for indications of their political affiliations.⁵⁹ And that summer, the McCarthyite storm which had long loomed on the horizon at last swept Seeger up in it.

When HUAC's investigation began in 1955 (which from trial delays lasted a full seven years, until 1962), for a time it seemed that it would have but a minimal effect on Seeger. In an interview he described it as a "nuisance" operating in the background of his life, but not a

⁵⁵ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 2nd ed. 198.

⁵⁶ "The Un-American Subpoenas," *Sing Out!* March 1952, 2.

"The Un-Americans Retreat," *Sing Out!* April 1952, 2.

"Pete Seeger's Statement to the Court," *Sing Out!*, Summer 1961, 10.

⁵⁷ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

⁵⁸ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 8, Library of Congress.

⁵⁹ PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

dilemma that was consistently at the forefront of his priorities or his worries.⁶⁰ *Sing Out!* magazine regularly poked fun at the HUAC investigations, and while it never undermined the true seriousness of the ordeal, it couldn't help but to describe the Committee as "bent on making our country a sorry spectacle in the eyes of the world" and publishing songs like "Talking Un-American Blues" (modeled after the labor song "Talking Union Blues") with lyrics containing more than a hint of mockery: "If you want to go to Washington here's what to do / You've got to talk for peace – and sing it, too . . . Before you know it you're on your way – Fare paid! Ride in style. First class."⁶¹ But as the decade progressed, Seeger's HUAC ordeal worsened until it took a debilitating toll on his career. Seeger had an increasingly difficult time finding venues for his concert performances.⁶² The FBI imposed a television blacklist that would last until 1967, and fewer and fewer stages around the country were willing to allow him to perform.⁶³ Working hard to maintain Seeger's livelihood, his managers at Smithsonian Folkways Records sent out personal invitations to music libraries to buy Seeger's music with subtle pleas hidden below their professional prose: "Of course," Folkways wrote, "we would appreciate any exposure you could give the material."⁶⁴ But when rejected, individuals like Ed Kahn, a folklorist who refused to annotate one of Seeger's new albums, indicated to Folkways that "unfortunately, [he] doesn't feel he can accommodate us" given that "much of Pete's work is now of a political nature."⁶⁵ From ceaseless FBI hounding and a blacklist whose grip grew tighter and tighter, by the later fifties Seeger's audience shrunk to elementary and high school students, colleges and

⁶⁰ David Dunaway Collection, Box 2, Fol. 15, Library of Congress.

⁶¹ "Talking Un-American Blues," *Sing Out!* April 1952, 10.

⁶² The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Publicity Related with Ed Badeaux, 1958 – 1960, Box 33, Folder 9, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?* 2nd ed., xxvi, 169, 178, 188, 192.

⁶⁴ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Publicity Related with Ed Badeaux, 1958 – 1960, Box 33, Folder 9, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

universities, and occasional “community concerts,” though even these, too were heavily protested.⁶⁶ When Seeger tried to perform in his home town of Beacon, for example, the local Knights of Columbus Chapter held a meeting for all “veterans, fraternal, religious, and civic groups” to be made aware of Seeger’s “anti-American” and “leftist affiliations.”⁶⁷ And yet, it seems that America found its destiny on the road it took to avoid it.

When the FBI barred Seeger from performing for a broad audience, there is little doubt that it struck a major blow to his livelihood. As Seeger awaited trial, endured ceaseless government prodding and probing, and found work wherever he could, his wife, Toshi, struggled to feed and maintain the Seeger household on a greatly diminished income.⁶⁸ But what effect did living on beans and picking up odd jobs performing for schools and colleges night and day have on Seeger? “I thrived on it,” says he.⁶⁹ The blacklist exposed Seeger to the very demographic it was most designed to protect: the nation’s very young and its adolescents.⁷⁰ A number of sources testify to the hundreds of concerts Seeger performed from the mid-to late 1950s to these two groups. In 1959, he performed for such places as Great Neck High School and the Tappan Zee Playhouse in New York, as well as a host of universities, including Duke, Berkeley, Stanford, Ohio Wesleyan, Syracuse, and the University of North Carolina.⁷¹ Interacting with his young audiences, though in a way that wasn’t readily apparent, Seeger changed the social and cultural trajectory of a generation.

⁶⁶ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Misc. Business Materials, Harold Levanthal, 1959 – 1961, Box 1, Folder 11, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Misc. Performance Related Correspondence, 1954 – 1962, Box 1, Folder 13, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 2nd. ed., 222.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

⁷¹ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Managerial with Paul Endicott, 1958 – 1960, Box 33, Folder 8, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

History remembers the fifties as an era of striking homogeneity in American society. World War II veterans were moving their families into white picket fenced suburban homes, the sprawling middle class pushed the poor into a margin of invisibility (indexed at only three percent of the overall population), African-Americans were quietly denied mortgages in predominately white neighborhoods (when they were not working industrial jobs in de facto segregated areas of northern cities), and fear frosted over America's international relations.⁷² The USSR had the bomb. China, saturated in orientalist stereotypes to begin with (the nation was fascinated, in a way driven more from cultural strangeness than religious re-awakening, with Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism, for example) had now gone militantly red with Soviet encouragement.⁷³ Cuba, too, was reddened after Castro's revolution, a reality rendered more disturbing by its close proximity to the United States.⁷⁴ This was true also of Korea and Vietnam, countries the United States would take extensive military action to win back to the West – with varying degrees of success.⁷⁵ The era, traumatized by the rages of war in the preceding decade, and facing some truth to current threats, constructed interpersonal as well as wider social and cultural boundaries along the lines of class, race, gender, and nation. Of course, one should be careful not to overstate the uniformity of the fifties or the willingness of the American people to wall themselves off from one another. To an extent, this is proved otherwise in the country's enormous self-awareness of this tendency, made evident in popular books of the day, including *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.⁷⁶ But be this as it

⁷² H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 69 – 99.

⁷³ Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011).

⁷⁴ H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 69 – 99.

⁷⁵ H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 69 – 99.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

may, there is definite substance behind an interpretation of the era which recognizes that difference, in all of its unpredictable and uncontrollable forms, was suppressed.

Homogeneity may have been the country's cultural way of life, but this reality was run amuck when Seeger's music encountered his new audiences. Although a superficial understanding might reveal a modest artist with even more modest listeners (kindergartners and college freshmen), his songs launched powerful audiotopias that cracked through the walls of America's narrow self-identity. A regular contributor to *Sing Out!*, in 1956 Seeger wrote a column pushing for audience participation during concerts. "For just as the apex of a pyramid can only be as high as the base is broad," he observed, "so we cannot have great professionals unless we have also many audience participants."⁷⁷ When Seeger sang, Toshi wrote that he had a "habit of singing harmony to his own songs, when the crowd is warmed up."⁷⁸ Seeger's concerts were a great blending of himself with his audience. Vocally, he sought to harmonize with it, refusing to place himself at the center of the music's attention. A proponent of "democratic seating," he asked whenever possible to have his stage arranged such that his audience could surround him "in semi-circular fashion."⁷⁹ He felt that this brought him closer to his audiences, providing a more intimate and casual setting than the traditional stage that segmented the artist from the general seating area.⁸⁰ The earliest published recording of his college concerts to date, Seeger's 1960 visit to Bowdoin College in Maine captures a great deal of what his concert experience was like in this period.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Pete Seeger, "Why Audience Participation?" *Sing Out!* Spring 1956, 32.

⁷⁸ Toshi Seeger. "Pete Seeger." *Sing Out!* March 1965, 85.

⁷⁹ Pete Seeger, "A Few Random Notes," *Sing Out!* Winter 1957, 34.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960*, Pete Seeger, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings compact disc, 2011.

Having “something of the university about him,” as Ronald Cohen describes, with his tall and elegantly controlled presence, Seeger “rolled [up his] shirtsleeves” and on the stage got to work.⁸² He opened with his “Goofing-Off Suite,” a piece he claims to have written doing just that – goofing off one day at his home.⁸³ A song without lyrics, Seeger’s fingers raced around the strings of his banjo, and soon he complimented the fast-paced tune whistling notes that rose higher and higher until all at once they dropped, producing a song that “has a number of changes of mood in it,” as Seeger explained in *Sing Out!*⁸⁴ This was not without an express purpose. “After all,” Seeger wrote, “barriers are being broken down all over the world, between races, nations, and peoples. We might as well break down a few musical barriers and show that there is nothing heretical in liking several different kinds of music at the same time.”⁸⁵ Seeger’s opening song offered his audience a melody with fluctuations in sound that created similar fluctuations in mood, one whose crests and troughs challenged musical sameness, and with it, emotional sameness and even social sameness. As he finished his Suite, Seeger invited the audience to sing along with him: “Tonight . . . all I can honestly do is simply sing through some of my favorite songs, and hope that somewhere along the line I hit some that you know and you can help me out on the chorus. There’s as many different kinds of folk music in America as there are folks, and no one person can sing them all.”⁸⁶ Just moments into his concert, Seeger “insisted,” as Kun writes, “on the possibility of difference,” difference within his music, difference among his audience members, and difference within American society.⁸⁷

⁸² Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 257.

⁸³ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

⁸⁴ “Record Review: Pete Seeger, Goofing-Off Suite,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1956, 29.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

⁸⁷ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 18.

As the concert continued and Seeger and his audience warmed up to one another, the music became louder, more intense, more penetrating, more culturally diverse, and more capable still of generating difference, difference that moves its hearers into audiotopic spaces allowing them to see themselves and their reality with new eyes. Into the microphone Seeger's voice piercingly droned "He Lies in the American Land," a song written by a Slavic coal-miner and immigrant to Pennsylvania about the death of a friend and fellow migrant.⁸⁸ Strumming his banjo like the quivers of a mandolin, Seeger sang, "Ahhhhh, my God, what is this land of America / so many people traveling there / I will go too, for I am still young / God the Lord will grant me good luck there." A mining accident kills the man just before the arrival of his wife, who upon emigrating to join him learns of his death: "Ah, but when she arrived in this strange land . . . only his grave, his blood, his blood did she find / over it bitterly she cried."⁸⁹ The haunting tune propels the reality of poverty, cultural maladjustment, and tragedy into the forefront of its listener's mind.

Seeger continues. After a few workers' and Irish songs ("Hieland Laddie" "Old Joe Clark," and "Oh, Riley," to name a few), he tunes and strums his guitar, introducing his 1958 composition "The Bells of Rhymney."⁹⁰ According to *Sing Out!* the song is about "the bells in all the little mining and fishing towns in South Wales."⁹¹ In the 1980s, Seeger fan and fellow musician John Denver described it as "specifically about the mining villages in Wales and the church in those villages and how the bells and the steeples in each of these churches has a different color, a different character to it."⁹² The bells in the song personify the attitudes and personalities of an imagined group of Welsh miners in conversation with one another about the

⁸⁸ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "The Bells of Rhymney," *Sing Out!* Summer 1958, 4 – 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹² "John Denver – Bells of Rhymney," <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHZgIIYSgiA>>.

social and economic injustice of their lot as poor workers. As Seeger strums his twelve-string guitar, he begins to sing in a tone that is both mildly inquisitive and yet apathetically dejected: “‘Oh what will you give me?’ Say the sad bells of Rhymney. / ‘Is there hope for the future?’ Cry the brown bells of Merthyr. / ‘Who made the mine owner?’ Say the black bells of Rhondda. / ‘And who made the miner?’ Cry the grim bells of Blaina.”⁹³ The song, which starts out steeped in a quiet defeatism, moves the listener to an audiotopia that vividly projects the image of early twentieth century Wales. One can nearly feel the cold, the mud, and the dampened spirit of the place, set as it is during “the Hungry Thirties.”⁹⁴ As Seeger continues to play, without warning the strumming of his guitar intensifies, and to it Seeger adds the pounding of his foot, “‘Throw the vandals in court!’ Say the bells of Newport,” he cries. “‘All would be well if, if, if, if,’ cry the green bells of Cardiff. / ‘Why so worried sisters, why?’ Say the silver bells of Wye. / ‘And what will you give me?’ Say the sad bells of Rhymney.”⁹⁵ The song climaxes with a short interlude in which Seeger pounds the strings of his guitar in such a way as to conjure the ringing of Welsh bells. It is hard to listen to this song without becoming somehow invested in it. The strumming of the guitar, which moves from despondency to an intensity that can be classified as either angry or desperately hopeful, together with the lyrics exuding a similar vibe, moves the listener into a space where the cultural strangeness of Wales and even the fact that this era in Welsh history is now past seems irrelevant; what matters is the suffering of the “bells,” or the Welsh poor that one can envision through their ringing. The song invites an international twist to a theme common in many of Seeger’s songs: the trope of the impoverished, common man

⁹³ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

⁹⁴ “The Bells of Rhymney,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1958, 4.

Seeger took the lyrics to “The Bells of Rhymney” from a book by Dylan Thomas, *So Early One Morning*. They were first written by Idris Davies, a Welsh poet. Seeger composed the song’s music.

⁹⁵ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

exploited by a greedy boss.⁹⁶ In this instance, the boss is the mine owner underpaying his workers, who rail against him through their villages' bells.

As the concert reached a height, Seeger played songs from several other "corners of the world," his audience joining in with him.⁹⁷ Replacing what might otherwise be the flamenco guitar with his banjo and vigorously stamping his foot, Seeger belted "Vive La Quince Brigada," a song about the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, with his audience chiming in on the chorus, "rumba la rumba la rumba la!"⁹⁸ Singing in Spanish, Seeger heightens the audiotopic experience. The boundaries between relatively placid mid-twentieth century America and an anti-fascist military brigade in 1930s Spain narrow as the audience cheers on the Fifth Brigade's success in battle. Seeger then lowers the pitch with "Suliram," an "Indonesian lullaby."⁹⁹ Before attempting the Indonesian lyrics, Seeger admits that he knows he "can't do it exactly right," but finds that when "you learn another language, it's a little like discovering the soul of another people."¹⁰⁰ Seeger has thought about the uses and implications of singing in "dialects" more systematically than what his brief song introduction may indicate. To Seeger, attempting to perform in a language other than one's own was not a light issue, given the recent past, he wrote in 1957, of "blackface comedians," as well as "'Irish,' 'German,' 'Jewish,' 'Mexican,' 'Italian,' 'Chinese,' and other nauseous stereotypes" reproduced through the performing arts.¹⁰¹ This raises an important point about music's ability to challenge sameness: a great deal of it can be used to reproduce, rather than counter, cultural homogeneity and hierarchy.¹⁰² This was certainly true of Jim Crow minstrelsy shows and like performances. The key to ensuring that

⁹⁶ Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 158.

⁹⁷ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Pete Seeger, Untitled for "Johnny Appleseed, Jr." column, Summer 1957, 32 – 33.

¹⁰² Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 34 – 35.

music facilitates a point of true cultural encounter instead of merely embodying stereotypes is to “apologize for amateurish pronunciations” and “to keep in mind that everybody, including you and me,” Seeger writes, “must be themselves.”¹⁰³ Seeger believes that an overly eager attempt to articulate lyrics in a non-native language will render the song as showy, shallow, and insensitive as an explicit desire to stereotype. So with his imperfect pronunciation acknowledged, Seeger transported his audience to a soothing space within Indonesia, as on his banjo he strummed a quiet lullaby. In order to get them there, Seeger used a technique that appears in many of his concerts. Before singing, he suggested, “maybe some of you know [this song],” inviting the audience to sing along with him if they did.¹⁰⁴ It’s doubtful that anyone in Seeger’s audience had heard the obscure tune before, yet by offering the possibility of familiarity, the cultural strangeness of the song was lessened, and sure enough, it was not long before the audience was doing its best to hum “Suliram” right along with Seeger.¹⁰⁵

Fluctuating the pace a few more times, before the concert’s end Seeger sang “Wimoweh,” projecting a high falsetto across the auditorium as the audience repeated the bass, tenor, and soprano parts of “wimoweh,” the song’s merry refrain.¹⁰⁶ For all of its apparent lightness, “Wimoweh” creates a point of contact between the audience and South Africa’s apartheid struggle for which the original version was written.¹⁰⁷ “Wimoweh’s” style is only distantly reminiscent of its originator, the South African Solomon Linda’s 1930s recording in Zulu, “Mbube.” But it is striking that as America was facing its own civil rights movement – something which gathered great momentum just a few years hence – Seeger was singing a song

¹⁰³ Pete Seeger, Untitled for “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.” column, Summer 1957, 32 – 33.

¹⁰⁴ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: General Business Correspondence, Box 33, Folder 18, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

from a country with parallel racial struggles. There in Maine, in 1960, with his lily-white, well groomed, college-educated audience, Seeger came upon his listeners with cries of Africa's struggle for equality during the turmoils of decolonization, a struggle with which Americans were more intimately acquainted than one might care admit. Few sources could make this clearer than a telegram Seeger received from the NAACP around 1959 defending his right to perform at New York's Beacon High School. "You have done more to bolster the concept of brotherhood and human dignity for all than most other people," the message read.¹⁰⁸ Seeger sang only the harmony to the following song, "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," allowing his audience to do most of the vocal work while being melodically carried away with "Michael" beyond the here and now into a divine realm with the old spiritual, and concluded with "Tzena, Tzena," and a final labor song, "Worried Man Blues."¹⁰⁹ After being greeted with a wave of applause, before exiting the stage Seeger remarked, "believe me, friends, it's for me to thank you. [The] average musician isn't half as lucky as I am to have a fine chorus singing along with him. And the only thing that can make me any happier is to know that a lot of you are taking these songs and spreading them around the world wherever you go."¹¹⁰

In a college auditorium in Maine, Seeger moved his audience through audiotopias that surfaced the realities of racial and class injustice, while musically blurring the boundaries of American nationhood. He invited them into Slavic, Welsh, Spanish, African, and Israeli spaces, allowing his listeners walk around for a brief while as the downtrodden within and around these places. It is quite naturally impossible to gauge the exact effect the music had on the student listeners that day, moving through them as it did and drawing them into "the world that music

¹⁰⁸ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Correspondence: Misc. Performance Related Correspondence, Box 33, Folder 8, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

¹⁰⁹ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

lives in,” the world in which the “soul of another people” is made apparent and near.¹¹¹ In the same vein, it is harder still to know the effect that Seeger’s performances had on his elementary school age audience, “the young faces” who watched him from, say, the Tappan Zee Playhouse.¹¹² But the immediate impact of a musical audiotopia is one too personal for an outside observer to index. The effects of it, however, become obvious in other ways. A few years earlier, for example, in 1957, Seeger remarked in an article simply entitled “A Few Random Notes” that he was “glad to report the partial success of [his] campaign to lead the younger generation astray.”¹¹³ He proceeded to describe the new tendency among a few of his college-age fans to spend their summers learning about folk music from hobbing around the country (reminiscent to Seeger, undoubtedly, of his own youth) instead of “assiduously earning loot to get through the coming year.”¹¹⁴ Tellingly, the title of column for which he wrote this in *Sing Out!* is entitled “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.”¹¹⁵ When he started it in 1955, Seeger’s first article described the man-turned-myth Johnny Appleseed, who in the eighteenth century “hit upon the scheme of starting an apple nursery to supply farmers with their first orchards” through peaceful (“he never carried a gun”) and self-sacrificial travels planting seeds around the country.¹¹⁶ In like manner, Seeger dedicated the column to “Johnny Appleseed, Jr. – the thousands of boys and girls who today are using their guitars and their songs to plant the seeds of a better tomorrow in the homes across our land.”¹¹⁷ Although he didn’t admit it at the time, the passage contains hints that Seeger saw not only his fans, but himself as a “Johnny Appleseed.” “Some say,” Seeger wrote, that Johnny Appleseed may have been a student “at Harvard” - Seeger’s own would-be

¹¹¹ Jeff Place, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert*.

¹¹² PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

¹¹³ Pete Seeger, “A Few Random Notes,” *Sing Out!* Winter 1957, 34.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Pete Seeger, Untitled for “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.” column, Winter 1955, 30.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

alma mater before dropping out in 1940.¹¹⁸ But in later years, Seeger would make his identification with the good-natured seed planter clearer.

In 1961, Seeger wrote an additional article for the column entitled “The Theory of Cultural Guerilla Tactics.”¹¹⁹ In it he described the various approaches of civilians in Europe to combating the onslaught of Nazism during the Second World War.¹²⁰ Some “foolhardy young ones,” he wrote, decided to throw hand-grenades at the Nazis, making a show of their valor but getting killed in the process. Other, “more cautious citizens took the opposite stand,” “[holing] up somewhere” and hiding from danger, though they, too, were eventually killed, because sooner or later their enemies found and executed them.¹²¹ Those who effectively fought Nazi oppression, Seeger wrote, kept “mobility. It took coolness and self-control. They picked their own battles, and always selected limited engagements which they would win.”¹²² Seeger continued: “It may seem a far-fetched comparison, but for many years I figured I pursued a theory of cultural guerilla tactics.”¹²³ From the blacklist, Seeger acknowledged that he could not appear on radio or television, and that no university would consider hiring him as a teacher of music. But like a guerilla warrior in the night, he sang to audiences of students, and by the mid-1960s, it became clear that this sector of society, like few others, “refused to knuckle under to the witch hunters.”¹²⁴ The youth played a substantial role throughout the sixties in combating what Seeger called “the pleasure of war, racism, and profit” as they formed folk bands and sang at civil rights and peace protests.¹²⁵ Even the young ones, like the child Mary Travers whom Seeger gave guitar lessons, grew up questioning the seemingly stable and fixed America they

¹¹⁸ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

¹¹⁹ Pete Seeger, “The Theory of Cultural Guerilla Tactics,” *Sing Out!* October – November 1961, 60.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Scott Isler, “Plain Folk Pete,” 1970s, “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” Fol. 4, Library of Congress.

inherited by their young adulthood.¹²⁶ By investing in his young audiences, which, thanks to HUAC, Seeger had a more direct connection with than he otherwise might have, he presented them with audiotopias in which reality was transformed. In the “Bells of Rhymney” or “Wimoweh” the rules of American society’s game no longer applied. The affluent society vanished, whiteness was overpowered with color, and America as a nation encountered the songs and “soul” of many other nations, all within the safe confines of a song’s imagined reality.¹²⁷ And when Seeger’s listeners, who in a moment envisioned an alternative existence, one in which injustice was not hidden through homogeneity and fixity but placed out in the open, were able to consider the need for change in their actual world, in time, they not only considered change, but pursued it.

As Seeger caught up his audiences in musical audiotopias from around the world, his work in student venues was punctuated with distractions from continued HUAC investigations. Seeger’s legal troubles climaxed in 1961 when he was summoned before the Committee to discuss his political affiliations.¹²⁸ Beginning with his first hearing in 1955, Seeger refused to discuss his politics before HUAC, claiming his right on First Amendment grounds to keep his opinions to himself without government interrogation.¹²⁹ But in the spring of 1961, Judge Murphy, presiding over the House investigation, sentenced Seeger for “contempt of Congress” for each question that during his trial he refused to answer.¹³⁰ Since in total Seeger did not answer ten questions, he was given ten years’ prison time – one year for each question that he

¹²⁶ *Sing Out!* magazine issues from 1961 – 1964 presents Seeger’s effect on the youth in its fullness with articles about the advent of younger folk bands.

¹²⁷ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 3.

¹²⁸ “Should Pete Seeger Go to Jail?” Brochure from “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

¹²⁹ U.S. Court of Appeals, *United States v. Peter Seeger*, “Defendant-Appellant’s Brief,” Pete Seeger Vertical File, 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

¹³⁰ “Should Pete Seeger Go to Jail?” Brochure from “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

resisted answering.¹³¹ Upon sentencing, the judge permitted Seeger to say a few words. “For twenty years,” Seeger stated, “I have been singing the folksongs of America and other lands to people everywhere. I am proud that I never refused to sing to any group of people because I might disagree with some of the ideas of . . . the people listening to me. I have sung for rich and poor, for Americans of every possible political and religious persuasion, of every race, color, and creed.”¹³² Then Seeger wanted to know if he might be able to sing a song for the Committee, “Wasn’t That a Time,” a song about which HUAC had specifically asked Seeger given what the investigators were its radical implications.¹³³ The judge refused (“‘You may not,’ said the judge in a loud, firm tone,” so the *The Sun* reported).¹³⁴ “Well, perhaps you will hear it some other time,” Seeger responded.¹³⁵ Had Murphy allowed Seeger to sing the tune, one can only wonder what effect it might have had. Seeger’s fingers would have galloped around his five-string (which he brought to trial with him) as he quickly sang the lyrics, lyrics he said were “apropos to the case:” “And now again the madmen come / And should our vic’try fail? / There is no vic’try in a land / Where free man go to jail. / Isn’t this a time! / A time to try the soul of man / Isn’t this a terrible time?”¹³⁶ A song with deeply American rather than radical implications, the song pointed out the ways in which HUAC challenged American freedom, rather like the country’s past struggles, including the Civil War and the Second World War, when brave Americans fought against the “chains” of slavery and fascism.¹³⁷ The audiotopia of this song releases America’s history of fighting for freedom from chronological boundaries,

¹³¹ “Should Pete Seeger Go to Jail?” Brochure from “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

¹³² “Pete Seeger’s Statement to the Court,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1961, 10.

U.S. Court of Appeals, *United States v. Peter Seeger*, “Defendant-Appellant’s Brief,” “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

¹³³ “Pete Seeger’s Statement to the Court,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1961, 10.

¹³⁴ The Moses and Frances Asch Collection: HUAC Related Correspondence and Clippings, 1957 – 1968, Box 34, Fol. 17, Smithsonian Ralph Rinzler Archives.

¹³⁵ “Pete Seeger’s Statement to the Court,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1961, 10.

¹³⁶ Vanguard, *The Weavers Greatest Hits*, compact disc.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

rendering it one, continuous, hopeful struggle that's locked into an eternal present of fighters – like Seeger – who will not give into suppression. But history cannot long entertain what may have been, but rather what was, and Seeger was denied his performance that day. Seeger was immediately imprisoned, but released on bail a few hours later.¹³⁸ After, he appealed the court's decision, awaiting a final trial that would determine whether he, “a free man,” would “go to jail.”¹³⁹

Some scholars believe that what drove Seeger to be the fighter that he was – the musical defender of freedom and heterogeneity – was his New England upbringing.¹⁴⁰ Though Seeger was raised mostly in upstate New York, he was educated in Connecticut, and it seems as though his whole life through he carried the “New England guilt” of the old Puritans on his shoulders.¹⁴¹ This is something that Seeger himself has recognized. Speaking to the judge just after his imprisonment sentence, Seeger said that “some of my ancestors were religious dissenters who came to America over 300 years ago. Others were the abolitionists of New England in the 1840's and 50's. I believe that in choosing my present course I do no dishonor to them.”¹⁴² As a young man, Seeger discovered a Quaker hymn that would in many ways capture his spirit. The old spiritual “How Can I Keep from Singing?” opens with “My life flows on in endless song / Above earth's lamentation / I hear the real, though far off hymn / That hails a new creation. / . . . Through all the tumult and the strife / I hear its music ringing / It sounds an echo in my soul / How can I keep from singing?”¹⁴³ It turns out that Seeger couldn't keep from singing, offering tunes wherever he went that made plausible a “new creation,” and while it seems that his legal

¹³⁸ “Should Pete Seeger Go to Jail?” Brochure from “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” 1960s, Fol. 3, Library of Congress.

¹³⁹ Vanguard, *The Weavers Greatest Hits*, compact disc.

¹⁴⁰ David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² “Pete Seeger's Statement to the Court,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1961, 10.

¹⁴³ “How Can I Keep from Singing?” *Sing Out!* Spring 1957, 14 – 15. David Dunaway Collection, Box 1, Fol. 7, Library of Congress.

problems should have closed down his entire audiotopic enterprise, Seeger pushed through, rather gaily in fact, and continued to sing for audiences.

Months after Seeger's first HUAC trial, in 1955, he gathered with his former singing quartet, the Weavers, in Carnegie Hall for a "reunion concert."¹⁴⁴ Having been blacklisted for the last three years, the folk group's members – Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes, Fred Hellerman, and Ronnie Gilbert – parted ways after becoming a stunning national success in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁴⁵ But on Christmas Eve of '55 the group made a re-appearance, greeted by an audience of 3,000 who as Ronnie Gilbert describes, "defied the blacklist," with "at least another thousand [trying] unsuccessfully to obtain tickets."¹⁴⁶ That evening the Weavers played many of their old hits, from "Tzena, Tzena" to some of Lead Belly's songs which they popularized for him (as white singers, they had the agency to introduce songs to a broader national platform than could the African-American artist on his own), including "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" and "Goodnight Irene."¹⁴⁷ *Sing Out!* reported that the Weavers "rocked Carnegie Hall," and noted that it was "a tribute to both the artists and the audience that the political as well as the musical significance of the concert was implicitly understood."¹⁴⁸ "At the height of the Cold War" *Sing Out!* describes, the Weavers were able to still move an audience around the world and through many walks of American society with their labor and Negro songs, as well as international folk singing.¹⁴⁹ The Weavers' popularity that night testifies to the willingness of Americans to have their reality challenged. Menacing the seemingly predictable landscape of early Cold War American culture as they did, the Weavers' success depicts the culture's homogeneity as more

¹⁴⁴ Irwin Silber, "Carnegie Hall Rocks as the Weavers Return," *Sing Out!* Winter 1956, 31 – 33.

¹⁴⁵ Irwin Silber, "The Weavers – New 'Find' of the Hit Parade," *Sing Out!* February 1951, 6.

¹⁴⁶ PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

Irwin Silber, "Carnegie Hall Rocks as the Weavers Return," *Sing Out!* Winter 1956, 31 – 33.

¹⁴⁷ Irwin Silber, "Carnegie Hall Rocks as the Weavers Return," *Sing Out!* Winter 1956, 31 – 33.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

untenable than its surface appearance indicates. Audiotoopias of differential consciousness did not pulsate through their audiences unwillingly, but people enjoyed “trying on new versions of them [themselves]” within them.¹⁵⁰ When a hearer of music listens carefully to a song’s rhythm and its lyrics, that person’s imagination permits him or her to live in the song for its duration. Sometimes, the listener sees him or herself reflected in the song, however distant the music’s literal context may be from that person’s actual existence. So for example, when listening to “Goodnight, Irene,” it’s possible for a person to vividly conceive of his or her own identity as merging with the character in the song who from “gambling” and “staying out at night” has parted with his wife, presumably “Irene.”¹⁵¹ Josh Kun calls this “intersubjective listening,” the act of comparing oneself with a song’s identity to the extent that a listener absorbs his or her own identity in it.¹⁵² Listening to “Goonight, Irene,” then, might cause audience members to momentarily empathize with struggles known to the African-American poor as they listen to what was first Huddie Ledbetter’s tune. Even in the frostiest days of the Cold War, people came from far and wide to be thrust into various new worlds and experiences with the Weavers, blacklist or no blacklist.

Through what was intended for harm Seeger turned to good, enjoying great success as he slipped through HUAC’s seemingly tight grip around him. According to the *Detroit Free Press* in the 1950s, there was nothing to “compare with Seeger’s way with an audience.”¹⁵³ Titling its article “Folk Singer Boasts Revival Tent Fervor,” the *Press* noted that “there is something of the camp-meeting atmosphere about Seeger’s manner.”¹⁵⁴ The article’s author was enthralled with

¹⁵⁰ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 2.

¹⁵¹ Irwin Silber, “Carnegie Hall Rocks as the Weavers Return,” *Sing Out!* Winter 1956, 31 – 33.

¹⁵² Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 91.

¹⁵³ “There’s Nothing to Compare Pete Seeger with an Audience” Advertisement, 1950s, Pete Seeger Vertical File, Fol. 2, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the excitement he witnessed at a Seeger concert, one in which it seemed the whole world gathered together as Seeger and his bright-eyed audience “[lined] out hymns together,” as Seeger puts it, with him singing a song lyric and the audience repeating it.¹⁵⁵ Together they sang the Zulu “Wimoweh,” “meaning ‘the lion is sleeping’” so loudly as “to have awakened even the most slumberous animal,” used an Irish whistle to accompany “She Moved Through the Fair,” and watched as Seeger introduced other African songs that “showed Aboriginal African improvisatory genius.”¹⁵⁶ For some time, moments like this comprised the routine pattern of Seeger’s life. A “banjo picker with a scratchy voice” would sing to a “maximum capacity auditorium,” often filled with young people, and would send them through a series of audiotopic adventures as together they intersected the many races, classes, and nations of the world, without fear, without violence, and without “subversion,” as HUAC worried, but with musical experiences which gave way to identification from one audience to a great many places and spaces around the world. In 1962, without much of an explanation, the House Un-American Activities Committee acquitted Seeger.¹⁵⁷ In the blink of eye, his legal battle which had continued for so long was over.¹⁵⁸ But what HUAC did not know is that the damage, as it were, was already done. In a seven year period, Seeger had touched the lives’ of thousands of audience members, members who slid into culturally heterogeneous audiotopias and came back out “forever changed.”¹⁵⁹ The cultural guerilla warrior, or even the Johnny Appleseed that he was, Seeger showed the younger generation his understanding of America: his music came from

¹⁵⁵ “There’s Nothing to Compare Pete Seeger with an Audience” Advertisement, 1950s, “Pete Seeger Vertical File,” Fol. 2, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ “Seeger Conviction Reversed,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1962, back page cover.

¹⁵⁸ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 259.

¹⁵⁹ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 13.

“America,” as he so often said, “and other lands.”¹⁶⁰ It was not a bounded, divided nation, but one in which through music people got into one another’s souls. And when they emerged, they had more than a slight desire to stay in the “world that music lives in.”¹⁶¹ So in the sixties, they protested for civil rights, for peace, for the disintegration of boundaries everywhere, aided no doubt, by Seeger’s influence.

V. “I Look Upon Myself as a Planter of Seeds:” Pete Seeger’s Music as Social Change

“I look upon myself as a planter of seeds,” said Pete Seeger in 2007. “Some of them, some of them like in the Bible says land upon stones but they don’t sprout. Some land on the pathway and get stomped on. But some land upon good ground and grow and multiply a thousand fold.”¹⁶² Scholars have long recognized Seeger’s essential role as a mover and shaker for social change in the twentieth century. A radical since his youth, Seeger was raised with a keen awareness of oppression – whether it came through race or class inequality, rigid national boundaries that regarded the world as something to fear, or some combination of all three. Through his music Seeger tried to change this, but during the early Cold War his understanding of the world was anything but accepted, and he was hounded and blacklisted in a campaign to silence his voice. But this, it seems, only sealed his destiny. Seeger was closely and directly exposed to young, impressionable audiences who absorbed his music and who were somehow changed by it. But how were they changed? In many ways, this remains a question to be answered. So far, scholars have tried to dissect Seeger’s influence on America through a political lens, uncovering his appeal to the young American left, or have tried to glean useful

¹⁶⁰ Lewis Allan, “All Over This Land,” *Sing Out!* August 1950, 8 – 9.
 “Pete Seeger’s Statement to the Court,” *Sing Out!* Summer 1961, 10.
 Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 3.

¹⁶² PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007,
 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

information from his protest spirit as it developed from his upbringing and private life. But in the vein of Josh Kun, this study has ventured to look at Seeger's music to suggest that it did not merely work *for* social change, whether it did so socially or politically, or work *with* social change, as a kind of accompaniment to grander events around it, but rather it argues that the music itself *was* social change. When Seeger sang, he unleashed audiotopias on his listeners, musical spaces where the boundaries between human beings narrowed; spaces where history and geography as it operates in the actual world were rendered irrelevant; spaces where the imagination could not only conceive of alternative realities, but could envision improved realities in the here and now as well as in "the world that music lives in." Seeger's music, which was distinct for its themes of poverty, African-American culture, and global-internationalism, were particularly suited to creating audiotopic spaces where oppression was made real and an improved world – one without poverty or racial and cultural hierarchies, became real as well. Exposures to audiotopias menaced the assumption that things in the seemingly homogeneous society of 1950s America were acceptable and, even if they weren't, were unable to be changed. Seeger's music "[frustrated] fixity," making his listeners aware of their identities while merging those identities with others.¹⁶³ And as a result, he played a tremendous role in changing the cultural landscape of America – adding depth and color to it, or, helping Americans to be less afraid to embrace the depth and color that was already there. And Seeger's music lives on. With the same energy and spirit with which he "thrived" under the blacklist and guided mid-century America into a struggle for racial, cultural, and socio-economic equality, he continues to strive forward.¹⁶⁴ Still full of spirit, today Seeger sings for children and his community, and in the fall of 2011 he led young protesters in a march during New York City's "Occupy Wall Street"

¹⁶³ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 182.

movement. Seeger and music have not given up hope, hope for music's ability to change the world as it looks ahead toward a new and better future. Seeger once said it best:

Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life as much as talking, physical exercise, and religion? Our distant ancestors, wherever they were in this world, sang while pounding grain, paddling canoes, or walking long journeys. Can we begin to make our lives once more all about peace, finding the right songs and singing them over and over as a way to start? And when one person taps out a beat while another leads into the melody, or when three people discover a harmony they never knew existed, or a crowd joins in on a chorus as though to raise the ceiling a few feet higher, then they also know, there is hope for the world.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ PBS American Masters, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czk2hj4VISg>>.

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