

RALLYING CRY: SONGS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The Artists They Motivated

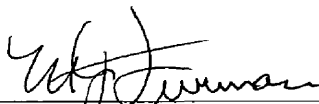
The Movements They Inspired

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Presented to the Liberal Studies Faculty
at the University of Michigan-Flint
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
in
American Culture

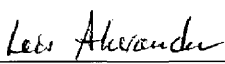
August 26, 2013

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

WHAT MOVEMENTS? WHAT SONGS? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

There is an American musical conversation we have inherited, that grew out of the native and immigrant traditions of our nation, and especially those who immigrated here against their will—the African slaves. While this musical conversation reflects all aspects of American life over the history of our nation, perhaps nowhere has it been more powerful, more iconic and of higher impact than when it was used to voice protest for social and justice issues of our world, our society and the average working American.

This musical conversation happened in a variety of ways. The genesis and evolution of the lyrics and music themselves represent a sharing and passing down of musical ideas, frequently born of old hymns, spirituals and slave songs. Early American music borrowed ideas and phrasing from earlier music. It was commonplace, as you will read repeatedly in this study, for twentieth century American songs to represent a musical conversation between songwriters, living and dead, that reflected shared ideas and gave homage to the works from which they grew.

The musical conversation also occurred between and among those who sang the songs. The conversation had roots in the fields, where slaves used song to send messages to those with whom they were forbidden to commune, and to sustain spirits in the often-unspeakable conditions in which they lived. The conversation often was two ways, with call and response creating a dialogue, which later echoed in the gospel music of black churches that sprouted up in the South. The music was converted to serve the needs of poor blacks indentured in the prison farm system of the post-Civil War South, who used

the music to make the tedious and back-breaking work go by, and to share stories of family, dreams, losses and despair.

In his book, *Talkin' 'Bout A Revolution*, Dick Weissman wrote of the impact of African American music on all later music styles, “Most every genre of music that later developed and influenced the music of the entire world appeared in African American culture during the last half of the nineteenth century. Work songs, hollers, blues, ragtime, and even the building blocks that would lead to jazz all appeared during this time. As the dreams and hopes of the recently freed slaves turned into nightmares of repression, persecution, and prosecution, music became an increasingly important avenue for the transmission of ideas, emotions and dreams” (74).

During the first half of the twentieth century, two sources of music developed separately, and gradually intersected as they influenced both popular and protest music. The music from slave songs and black churches was transformed into songs for agricultural workers rights and, then, civil rights. Another strain of American song, coming out of religious and folk music, was reshaped to become songs in support of the industrial labor movements of the North, Midwest and West.

As means of communication and sharing of music were enhanced, all of these conversations began to merge and influence each other. In the middle of the twentieth century, voices from all movements began to share musical sources during a period of great social change. A more informed society bred concerns about how and why war was being waged, and resulted in a joining of forces across racial divides to make the case for equal civil rights and against institutionalized racism. Another segment of the population, primarily youth, sought social freedoms, and questioned the sexual and cultural mores of

its elders. Others questioned the power structure of American society, and songs were used to raise consciousness about Black Power and Women's Rights.

As Dorian Lynskey points out in his book *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, the variety of protest songs, their style and emotions, and the motivation of the songwriters are enormously diverse: "The songs...tend to stem from concern, anger, doubt, and, in practically every case, sincere emotion. Some are spontaneous outpourings of feeling, others carefully composed tracts; some are crystalline in their clarity, others enthralling in their ambiguity; some are answers; some just necessary questions; some were acts of enormous bravery, others the beneficiaries of enormous luck. There are as many ways to write a protest song as there are to write a love song" (xv).

By the 1970s, "protest" music was endemic to American popular music, particularly folk, blues, rhythm 'n blues, soul and rock 'n' roll. Later, rap, indie and electronica joined a diverse mix of music styles that sometimes included "protest" content. However, after the Woodstock era, the use of protest as a mass rallying force was not prevalent. A few notable voices still engaged deeply with protest content, perhaps none more than Bruce Springsteen, but the commentary was diverse, and frequently individualized, representing the personal reflections of the artist more than an activist's call for change. However, the birth of protest songs throughout history often *was* personal, as the stories of the songs and songwriters in this study will show. Consider what Woody Guthrie wrote next to an asterisk at the bottom of the original manuscript of "This Land Is Your Land," "all you can write is what you see." Many of the authors of protest songs would echo Guthrie's sentiment, repeated later in statements

by Bob Dylan, in which he eschewed the efforts of others to label him as a protest singer or as the voice of his generation.

Whether a personal statement about injustice or human conditions, or designed for shared voices, protests of all kinds are woven into the content produced by today's songwriters. Music is a core manner of sharing ideas or howling to the moon. While it is true that certain artists today are associated more than others with protest content, almost any songwriter may have protest content in his arsenal of songs.

This study explores what are commonly called "protest songs." Groups involved in mass social movements often use protest songs to create a sense of solidarity, or to make a statement at public demonstrations. Such songs are usually simple, with a common refrain. However, the study also will include more complex songs that do not have the simple words and structures of typical protest songs, and were primarily performed by a professional musician or played in recorded form (as opposed to being sung by large groups of the public at mass rallies), but were written and performed with the intention of making a statement and impacting the public's point of view on issues of social and/or political significance.

This paper looks across several key songs and songwriters, and will illuminate interconnections, patterns and insights into how such songs evolved over the course of time, principally the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Illuminated here is a web of artists, beginning in the early twentieth century, who have been strongly influenced by each other and have borrowed from each other's work and ideas. Also included are those who nurtured and supported the development of much of the musical work discussed here.

Three people, one a musician/songwriter, and the other two acting in multiple supportive roles, stand out as individuals whose stories are woven deeply into the fabric of twentieth century protest music. The lives of producer and manager John Hammond, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and songwriter and cultural icon Pete Seeger, could be viewed together as encompassing a great deal of the story of this genre, as their influence and actions played such a major role in shaping its content. While their stories are not celebrated with dedicated chapters in this study, their importance is evident and is demonstrated repeatedly through the many touch points and relationships described in the pages that follow.

As a talent scout, manager and record producer, John Hammond was instrumental in both supporting the careers of many key figures and enabling their music to be shared with a larger public. Alan Lomax, initially in partnership with his father John Lomax, laid the foundation for much of the ethnomusicology work that followed by researching and collecting traditional music, recording in the field, preserving the recordings at the Smithsonian Institution and bringing together musicians who had a profound impact on the lives and works of one another. Dick Weissman sums up Lomax's effect: "Alan Lomax played a unique role in the development of the protest songs. Alan was a sort of godfather and facilitator of the entire American folk song revival. He was a song collector, a record producer, a concert organizer, a radio program producer, an author, and a sort of overall guru of American folk music" (189). Pete Seeger influenced and worked with scores of musicians, and carries the torch for many who are long gone, such as Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly. As a result, at ninety-four he is a living legend and the unquestioned patriarch of all who pursue music for social good.

This study describes how some protest songs have become part of a larger social and cultural fabric, extending far beyond the music field and beyond American protest movements. “This Land Is Your Land” and “We Shall Overcome” have become icons of Americana and American identity, representing the best of the American dream—and the American struggle to sustain that dream—to people across the globe. “Blowin’ in the Wind” has resonated universally as an indictment of man’s inhumanity to man and his inability to avoid war. This study explores songs that helped shape our nation, by influencing America’s view of itself and by furthering democracy through a musical dialogue that continues today.

CHAPTER II. JOE HILL

THE DREAM THAT WAS JOE HILL

Would you have freedom from wage slavery,
Then join in the grand Industrial band;
Would you from mis'ry and hunger be free,
Then come! Do your share, like a man.

Chorus

There is pow'r, there is pow'r
In a band of workingmen,
When they stand hand in hand,
That's a pow'r, that's a pow'r
That must rule in every land—
One Industrial Union Grand.

“There Is Power in a Union” by Joe Hill

(Kornbluh 140)

Who was Joe Hill? He was an enigmatic young Swede who arrived in New York City in 1902 and moved west looking for opportunity and work, a man who talked little about himself, a virulent supporter of the International Workers of the World's (I.W.W.'s) “One Big Union” and a sardonic songster who understood how to touch the hearts and the self-interests of the working stiff—because he was one. Joe Hill was also a man

convicted of murder in Salt Lake City in 1914 and put to death by firing squad in 1915. Whether he was guilty or not we may never know, although recently discovered information supports his innocence, but the bias shown during his trial, false information used to wage a public relations war in the press, and his conviction on largely circumstantial evidence guaranteed that the hero and martyr for which he set the stage was ensured a long and significant run, well beyond his death. This indeed has come to pass.

Certainly, Joe Hill is not a household name in twenty-first century America, and yet his work has lived on as inspiration for unions and radical movements across the globe, and his legend has been a source of inspiration for many artists and for those who participate in equality movements to this day. In fact, through the influence of his work and his bigger-than-life legend, Joe Hill can be called the father of the twentieth century protest song in America and a significant force in motivating movements seeking equality, just treatment and basic necessities for the poor, and opposing war and a power structure designed to favor the wealthy few.

Joe Hill's early life is probably not very germane to making the case of his importance to the development of protest songs, but it does help us to understand his motivations and musical interest and to consider the evidence when trying to figure out which stories and interpretations of him may be true. He was born Joel Hagglund. According to biographer William Adler, "The Haggglunds...named their fourth son Joel—Joel Emanuel. He was born on October 7, 1879. ...In America, he would rechristen himself Joe Hillstrom" (93-94). Later, he shortened this to Joe Hill. His was a working class family with six children in Gavle, Sweden. Philip Foner writes, "His father was a

railroad worker and an amateur organist, but although his son had an opportunity to hear music played in the home, he had no musical training” (9). Another biographer, Gibbs Smith, shares that Joe “composed songs about members of his family, attended concerts at the hall of the workers’ association in Gavle, and in his teens played a piano in a local café” (46). Smith points out that tragedy struck Joe early, with the death of his father from a work injury when Joe was eight years old, leaving the family in even greater poverty than before and forcing Joe and his brothers to find what work they could (46).

According to Smith, Joe worked many different jobs, learned to speak and write English at the YMCA and taught himself to play a variety of instruments over the next several years, during which time he also suffered from skin and joint tuberculosis, for which he had several operations that left him with facial abnormalities and scars. After his mother died in 1902, he and his siblings sold the family home and split the money. With their share, he and his brother Paul decided to pursue new opportunities in America, and set sail together for New York City (46-47). Joe was twenty-two years old. There are limited and sometimes conflicting stories about Joe’s early years in the U.S., although it is clear that he worked occasionally at whatever job he could find, not setting down roots or staying long in any one place. Foner describes Joe’s many endeavors: “He stacked wheat and laid pipe; he played the piano and cleaned spittoons in a Bowery saloon; he dug copper and shipped out; he worked on docks and smelters. And he ‘scribbled.’ He wrote poems, songs, bits of verse, all kinds of things” (9). He was also, like Woody Guthrie after him, a cartoonist whose whimsical political line drawings occasionally appeared in print.

It is unclear whether Joe Hill's reticence to talk about himself was cultural, motivated by modesty, by the desire to create an air of mystery, or was a true belief that the ills he saw around him and the cause of fighting them really was all-important, dwarfing any single man's story. In *Rebel Voices, An I.W.W. Anthology*, Joyce Kornbluh writes, "...when a friend wrote to him in prison asking for some biographical data, Hill scoffingly replied that he was a 'citizen of the world,' and his birthplace was 'the planet, Earth' " (127).

In 1911, Joe Hill came into the spotlight as a songwriter for the I.W.W., the International Workers of the World. He had joined the I.W.W., known commonly as the Wobblies, sometime between 1908 and 1910 (again, there are conflicting stories), but certainly ended up by 1910 in California, where, during the next few years, Kornbluh writes, he "took part in the San Pedro dock workers' strike, the San Diego free speech campaign, and an abortive revolution in Tia Juana, which aimed to make Lower California into a commune" (127). It was in San Pedro that his earliest known, and one of his most famous Wobbly songs, was printed on a card and sold to benefit the I.W.W. strike fund and to help motivate the strikers on the picket lines and those in jail. "Casey Jones, the Union Scab" was "written in 1911 during a strike by shop workers on the Southern Pacific Railroad in San Pedro, California, where engineers and some other skilled workers continued to operate the trains," according to Wayne Hampton in his book *Guerrilla Minstrels* (66).

The lyrics for "Casey Jones," set to the tune of a popular song of the same name, established the tone of Hill's songwriting over the next several years, during which he became the best known and most prolific of the songwriters contributing lyrics to the

I.W.W.'s *Little Red Songbook*. Hill biographer William Adler explains that “Hill’s parody inverts the story of the original ‘Casey Jones,’ a popular vaudeville song written in 1909 that celebrates the ‘brave engineer’ for the Illinois Central...who ‘stuck to his duty both day and night’ but who dies heroically while saving the life of his fireman” (184).

In his version of the song, Hill taunts the strikebreaking engineer Casey and the ramshackle train he is driving (because the regular mechanics are on strike and so not there to keep it in working order). His version of the song has Casey’s train deliberately derailed, because he is a scab, and Casey dies in his fall into the river. He is then recruited by St. Peter to scab on the striking musician angels, and thrown out of heaven by the unionized angels to suffer in hell as his punishment for scabbing (strikebreaking):

Casey Jones got a job in heaven;
Casey Jones was doing mighty fine;
Casey Jones went scabbing on the angels,
Just like he did to workers on the S.P. Line. ...

Casey Jones went to Hell a-flying.
“Casey Jones,” the Devil said, “Oh fine;
Casey Jones, get busy shoveling sulphur—
That’s what you get for scabbing on the S.P. Line” (Adler 185).

In 1965, labor historian Philip Foner wrote, “The song was an immediate success. ... Within a few months it was being sung by workers in many parts of the country, as migratory laborers carried it across the land. ‘Casey Jones’ ... is as widely known today as in the period when it was written” (12).

Another early song written in 1911 was “The Preacher and the Slave,” also known as “Long Haired Preachers.” This was the first of Hill’s songs to appear in the *Little Red Songbook* (the 1911 edition). According to Wayne Hampton, “It was a parody of the hymn ‘In the Sweet Bye and Bye’ and became a popular satire of the Wobblies’ principal adversary in the propaganda battles among California’s unemployed immigrants, hoboes, and migrant laborers, the Salvation Army. The preachers promised only salvation, or ‘pie in the sky,’ while the unemployed and homeless sought food to eat and shelter from the cold. It is considered Hill’s masterpiece ... ” (67):

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

CHORUS:

You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You’ll get pie in the sky when you die” (Adler 182)

In this song, Hill coined the phrase “pie in the sky,” at the time referring to the plenty that was promised in the afterlife to the starving workers. Clearly, he viewed this as a foolish distraction for the hungry, when they should instead be focusing on how to get more food on their actual tables during their time on earth. It is ironic that today’s usage of the phrase “pie in the sky” to describe something very unlikely and out of reach

is commonly employed by people who *believe* in the afterlife, and are unaware that the phrase was originally used to poke fun at the idea of heaven. “The Preacher and the Slave,” was Hill’s most famous work, sung in many languages and countries, and published in 1915 in Upton Sinclair’s collection of social protest literature, *The Cry for Justice*, and in 1927 in Carl Sandburg’s history of American folk music, *American Songbag*. Later, as Wallace Stegner reported in *The New Republic* in 1948, it was “to become the theme song of the breadlines in the hungry thirties” (22).

In their recruiting and organizing work, the Wobblies frequently operated from a soapbox on the street, from which they could reach out to the poor and the homeless. They opposed working conditions and the practices of unscrupulous employment agencies, which worked in collusion with employers to extract fees as payment for short-lived jobs. Many cities made sweeps to shut down the I.W.W. street speeches, including Spokane, Washington and San Diego and Fresno, California. The Wobblies fought back with free speech protests. Labor historian Foner writes, “Through spectacular free speech fights and mass strikes, the I.W.W. soon made a name for itself” (11). In this way, the Wobblies were in the forefront of battles for civil rights, seeking to gain the freedoms promised in the Bill of Rights and envisioned by the nation’s forefathers.

The I.W.W. was different from other unions of its time. Unlike craft unions for skilled workers or the American Federation of Labor, which was viewed as working in cooperation with employers, it sought to engage the masses of unskilled laborers to gain control of the mechanisms of industry. The Wobblies sought to form One Big Union, which would join workers together regardless of the type of industry, the skill or training of the worker, the race, ethnicity, religion or gender, and across national boundaries. The

I.W.W.'s inclusivity reflected a belief in equal rights for women and blacks, among others, that came shortly on the heels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's essays on women's rights and of W.E.B. Du Bois's essays and speeches on the rights of African Americans. Some of the same inequities that propelled these movements and spurred the Progressive Era brought workers' rights into the spotlight and emboldened labor to organize and act.

The I.W.W. had been formed in 1905, about five years before Joe Hill joined, at a convention in Chicago attended by a wide variety of radical groups. There, William "Big Bill" Haywood, secretary-treasurer of the Western Federation of Miners and first President of the I.W.W., declared in his speech that opened the convention, "Fellow Workers: This is the Continental Congress of the Working Class. We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working-class movement in possession of the economic powers, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution without regard to capitalist masters" (Foner 19). The owners of American industry must have read these statements as a declaration of war. They undoubtedly exacerbated the fears of unions among industrialists and fueled their association of the labor movement with communist philosophies viewed by the establishment as seeking to undermine the foundations of American life.

The beginning of the preamble to the I.W.W. constitution reads, "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life" (Smith 3). The series of depressions experienced in America in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the arrival of enormous numbers of new immigrants seeking work, and the increases in automation

were all beginning to reduce the need for unskilled labor, creating a glut in the labor market. Vast numbers of unemployed wandered the country looking for work. Working conditions were often deplorable, hours long, and workers (frequently uneducated and speaking poor English), were taken advantage of by exploitative employers. The I.W.W. proposed radical and direct action, such as sabotage or slow-downs—what the Wobblies called “the conscientious withdrawal of efficiency” (Hampton 74)—as opposed to negotiations, as well as passive resistance through striking, to give the worker the upper hand through control of production.

In this environment, which had apparently knocked Joe Hill around during his first few years in the U.S., his strong anti-capitalist ideas were formed. With his working class background and difficult childhood as a foundation, and with his musical interests and time spent at concerts in the workers’ hall in his Swedish hometown, Hill’s desire to join the fight and use his pen and musical talent as his weapons seems only natural. In several ways, Hill’s values, reflected in his songs and his actions, were in line with some of the ideas of the Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The I.W.W.’s passive resistance was in keeping with Thoreau’s ideas of civil disobedience. Hill’s disdain and distrust of organized religion was mirrored in the Transcendentalist philosophy of finding God within the individual, not without. Hill’s efforts not only to help his fellow man fulfill basic needs but also to rise above those needs to demand a core humanity, symbolized by equality, also was in keeping with Transcendentalist ideals. However, the more violent and destructive aspects of the I.W.W.’s protests departed dramatically from the values of the Transcendentalists.

During the latter part of 1913, Joe ended up in Utah, which Philip Foner writes had been the scene for “bitter labor struggles” including a strike by the Western Federation of Miners as part of their attempts “to organize the mines of Bingham Canyon, acknowledged to be ‘the most repulsive mining camp’ in the United States” (16). Organizing activity was also underway at the Utah Construction Company. While evidence is mixed, it appears that Hill came to Utah to work in the mines. According to Foner, Utah Governor William Spry had become involved in the strikes, assisting the mining company with the deputizing of its hired guns and “vetoing a bill, passed by both houses of the Utah legislature, making a coroner’s investigation of death in the mines obligatory. The miners referred to Spry as ‘the jumping-jack of the copper kings’ ” (16). Spry would later play an important role in denying Joe Hill’s appeals for a new trial.

Even with his air of mystery and his contributions as a lyricist for the I.W.W., Joe Hill might well have been forgotten, save some credits and footnotes in labor history archives, had it not been for the events in Salt Lake City, Utah, of January 10, 1914 and during the year that followed. This was the night Joe Hill was shot, and the same night a grocery store owner and former policeman, John Morrison, and his son Arling, were shot dead in their store. After reading of the grocery store murders in the newspaper, the doctor Joe visited for treatment of his gunshot wound went to the police, three days after the incident. He reported the story of his patient with a gunshot wound and assisted the police in locating Joe so they could arrest him. Joe’s story, told to the doctor on the night of his injury and repeated until his death, was that he was shot in a fight over a woman, that the altercation was as much his fault as the other guy’s, and that he would not reveal the woman’s name because he was protecting her honor.

Joe Hill was tried for the murder of Morrison. The case of the prosecution was, by any measure, circumstantial. Mishandling of evidence, particularly pre-trial interviews, which disappeared and were never found, further complicated efforts to discover the truth. There was only one witness, Morrison's second son, Mervin, fourteen, who was in a back room when the bandits entered the store and only saw the gunmen, who both wore red bandanas over their faces, briefly. Two men had entered Morrison's store, one short and one tall, and had shouted "We've got you now!" and began shooting. Nothing was stolen, and when the shooting ended, Morrison's gun was lying by Mervin's dead brother, with one cartridge missing. His father died later that night without ever regaining consciousness.

No bullet from Morrison's gun was ever found in the store, and there is no clear evidence that it was fired, although testimony to that effect was given at the trial. Joe Hill's wound was from a bullet that had gone straight through his body and out the other side, so had the wound been made in Morrison's store, there should have been a bullet, but none was ever found. There was also no blood in the store, other than that of the two victims. Some bloody spots were found in the street outside, and a trail of blood in some streets nearby, with no evidence of their source. No one could identify Joe Hill with certainty, although both Mervin and two passers by, who saw two men wearing red bandanas on the street nearby, stated at the trial that Joe Hill bore a resemblance to one of the men. Joe Hill claimed that this was a change in testimony from the pre-trial hearings and the identification line-up, at which witnesses were far less sure of any resemblance. These findings were in the lost evidence, and Hill believed the witnesses had been

coached by the prosecution and had thus gained confidence about his resemblance to the shooter.

Hill was a tall, thin man, and had a good friend with whom he was rooming, named Otto Applequist, who was shorter, like the second gunman. Applequist left Salt Lake City that night, and was never seen again (despite many efforts, then and later, to locate him). A red bandana of the type worn by the gunmen was found on Hill's dresser at the time of his arrest. It was a very common type, and the lady of the house at which he was a guest stated that she had lent him the bandana *after* the night of the shooting. The hole through the back of the jacket Hill wore at the doctor's office was four inches lower than the wound. This suggested that his arms were raised at the time he was shot, yet there was no evidence or reason to believe that Morrison's shooter would have been in such a position at the time Arling shot him (if indeed such a shot was ever fired).

Besides the lack of hard evidence, one of the most puzzling parts of the trial was the question of motive. The exclamation, "We've got you now!" by the gunmen, and the fact that nothing was stolen, suggested that the men knew their victim and were seeking some kind of revenge. No proof was ever given that Joe Hill knew Morrison or had any prior contact with him. Years later, based on interviews cited in a 1948 article by Wallace Stegner, there was some suggestion that Applequist might have been the one with a vendetta, based on a wound he had received in a shooting years earlier, but no evidence connected Applequist to the murders, and no proof of his connection to Morrison was provided in the trial (Stegner 24). Shortly after the trial began, Joe Hill tried to fire his defense attorneys, a request denied by the judge, who kept them there as friends of the court to oversee Hill's self-defense. The judge allowed a heated discussion on the subject

to take place in front of the jury. Wayne Hampton reports that Joe Hill “refused to testify in his own behalf, saying he would rather die than reveal the details of his activities on the night of the murders” (81).

If Hill’s story about a fight over a woman was true, no one ever understood why she did not come forward to testify. There *was* a woman who stood by him during the ordeal. Hilda Erickson, a relative of the family with whom Hill was staying in Utah, was reportedly pursued romantically by both Joe Hill and his friend Otto Applequist (who was briefly engaged to Hilda). According to biographer William Adler, she was present in the courtroom during the trial, “stood vigil outside the prison when he was shot and served as one of his six pallbearers. She visited him in the county jail every Sunday for eighteen months,” and after he was transferred to the state penitentiary, “they exchanged weekly letters” (292-293).

In his extensive research for his recent book about Hill, Adler followed a lead that turned up 1949 letters from Hilda Erickson to Aubrey Haan, a university professor who was working on a never completed novel about Hill. Adler quotes a key portion of the primary, six-page, handwritten letter in his book, and reproduces an image of one page of the letter. Discovered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, among Haan’s research papers in his daughter’s attic, the letter tells the story of what Joe Hill shared privately with Erickson the day after the shooting. In it, she tells Haan that Hill reported that Otto Applequist shot him in anger, and that she surmised that Otto left the State in case Hill died and he was sought for his murder. Hilda writes that Joe would “tell me not to say a word because he was innocent of the Morrison case. Therefore the state of Utah could not prove him guilty...” (Adler 298). This supports Joe Hill’s repeated statements that he would not

speak in his own defense because he was innocent, and it was the State's burden to prove him guilty.

Joe Hill was convicted of the murder of John Morrison in June 1914. In early July, he was sentenced to death. An appeal for a new trial was made, based on a failure to establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. It was denied. Then, appeals were made to commute the sentence to life, and these were denied, but Hill was offered freedom if he would reveal—in confidence to his lawyers—the specific circumstances behind his wound. Hill refused, saying: “I do not want my death sentence commuted to life imprisonment and I am not clamoring for a pardon; I do, however, want a new trial—a fair trial. If I can not have a new trial, I am willing to give my blood as a martyr that others may be afforded fair trials” (Hampton 82). Additional efforts to obtain a new trial included appeals from the Swedish minister to the U.S., two requests by President Woodrow Wilson, and mass protests, including a protest by 30,000 people in Minneapolis. Governor Spry, the same governor that the union workers claimed was in the pocket of the copper companies, refused to intervene (Hampton 83).

Whether guilty or not, Joe Hill managed, with statements such as the one above, to build public sentiment on his behalf, and to promote the story that his was a martyrdom resulting from his I.W.W. activity. His actions in the days leading up to his execution seemed tailor-made to secure his place in history, and the subsequent statements and actions of the I.W.W. built Hill's story into a legend that would provide fuel for the cause.

As might be expected of a man whose writings were intended to spur others to action, Hill was extremely optimistic in his outlook. He wrote to his friend Sam Murray

after eleven months in prison, “I am glad that you manage to make both ends meet, in spite of the industrial deal, but there is no use being pessimistic in this glorious land of plenty” (Kornbluh 150). In this way, despite his troubles and despite being of foreign birth, Joe Hill managed to portray the eternal optimism we associate so often with the “American character.”

During interviews with the press on the eve of his execution, “he was reported to have said, ‘What do I expect to accomplish by my situation? Well, it won’t do the I.W.W. any harm and it won’t do the state of Utah any good’” (Hampton 83). He wrote and delivered, through members of his I.W.W. Defense Committee, his Last Will, which read:

My will is easy to decide,
For there is nothing to decide,
My kin don’t need to fuss and moan—
‘Moss does not cling to a rolling stone.’

My body?—Oh!—if I could choose,
I would to ashes it reduce.
And let the merry breezes blow
My dust to where some flowers grow.

Perhaps some fading flower then
Would come to life and bloom again.
This is my last and final will.
Good luck to all of you,

Joe Hill. (Foner 96)

A telegraph sent by Hill to I.W.W. President Bill Haywood that night further sealed his fate as a labor martyr. It read: “Goodbye Bill. I die like a true-blue rebel. Don’t waste time in mourning—organize! It’s a hundred miles from here to Wyoming. Could

you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah" (Hampton 83). Haywood sent a return telegram that some accounts say did not reach Hill before his death. It read: "Goodbye, Joe. You will live long in hearts of the working class. Your songs will be sung wherever workers toil, urging them to organize" (Kornbluh 130).

Joe Hill was executed on November 19, 1915. Varying reports of his exact last words exist, but they all take a similar form. As reported in 1948 in a retrospective article by Wallace Stegner in the *New Republic*, which was responsible for reviving the controversy over Hill's guilt or innocence, the last moments were described as follows: "Like most other 'facts' about Joe Hill's life, his last words are ambiguous. He had so far broken down that when guards came to get him he fought them with a broom handle, and had to be subdued. He talked a streak while they were making the preparations. At the sheriff's word 'Aim,' he shouted, 'Yes, aim! Let her go! Fire!' Those words may be read, and have been, as reckless defiance, as hysteria, or as the effects of a hypodermic" (23).

The I.W.W. set about the task of glorifying and memorializing Joe Hill and of building his legend in the interest of the cause, as Hill seems to have wanted. The cover of the program at his funeral read, "In Memoriam, Joe Hill. We never forget. Murdered by the authorities of the State of Utah, Nov. 19, 1915" (Foner 98). His funeral in Chicago attracted a crowd of 30,000, who sang Hill's songs during the procession. According to Philip Foner, Hill's cremation was observed by I.W.W. representatives, and his "Last Will" was fulfilled, as his ashes were later let fly in the wind in all states of the United States *except* Utah, and in many foreign countries (99).

These types of dramatic flourishes certainly seem to suggest that the Wobblies were well aware of the propaganda potential of Joe Hill's life and death. By the time he was executed, his case had gained national attention. Foner writes, "The *New York Times*, while accepting the Utah authorities' version that Hill was guilty, expressed the concern that his execution might 'make Hillstrom dead more dangerous to social stability than when alive' " and "the *Deseret Evening News* expressed fear that, in time, Hill would be lifted out of his grave 'for glorification' " (103). As William Adler describes it, "...in death Joe Hill entered the pantheon of martyred American folk heroes" (17). The impact of Joe Hill had two major components: the symbol and legend that his life became and the songs that he wrote in an effort to improve the plight of the worker and the unemployed. Both influenced the musicians who came after him.

Joe Hill's songs played a prominent role in making the Wobblies famous for their use of song as a means of protest and as a rallying cry. In his book *Minstrels of the Dawn*, Jerome Rodnitzky writes that Joe Hill "quickly became a legend to many laborers and his songs found a welcome place in the I.W.W.'s 'Little Red Songbook'" (Rodnitzky 5). The committee which published the first songbook believed that the power of song would "exalt the spirit of rebellion" and printed on each songbook's cover its motto: "To Fan the Flames of Discontent" (Rodnitzky 6). Dick Brazier, one of the members of that committee, wrote in the mid-1960s in his manuscript "The Little Red Songbook," "Whilst Joe Hill was not around when the Songbook was first launched, he was, nevertheless, responsible in a large degree for its success and expansion in size by his many contributions of popular songs. In that sense he was foremost amongst those who made the Songbook the success it became" (22).

Biographer Adler quotes historian Joyce Kornbluh as stating that it was Hill, who “more than any other one writer, had made the I.W.W. a singing movement” (3). Adler writes of how the Wobblies sang everywhere they worked and everywhere they protested in this movement that Joe Hill helped to inspire. “The very act of mass singing seemed to embolden and inspire people of varied backgrounds—emigrants from different parts of the world, who spoke different languages, whose skins were of different color—to unite under the I.W.W. flag for the common goal of social and economic justice” (3).

In his book *Guerrilla Minstrels*, Wayne Hampton writes, “Without a doubt, the single greatest contributor to the ‘Little Red Songbook’ was Joe Hill. In the history of the songbook, Hill’s contribution, in quantity as well as quality, is far greater than that of any of the other famous Wobbly songwriters” (69). Hampton goes on to expand his interpretation of the impact of Hill’s songs: “Joe Hill was clearly the most prolific Wobbly songwriter and by far the most important protest songwriter in the history of American labor” (70).

In the liner notes to the 1990 Smithsonian Folkways Recording “Don’t Mourn—Organize!” which features songs by and about Joe Hill, Lori Elaine Taylor, Assistant Archivist, Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, writes: “Joe Hill remains the archetypal example of the worker using music as an organizing tool. The breadth of his influence is hinted by the variety of performers on this album and beyond them to the performers and listeners they continue to influence” (Taylor). Taylor connects Hill’s life and writings to content in the work of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Billy Bragg and Bruce Springsteen.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, an I.W.W. leader and inspiration for Joe Hill's song "Rebel Girl," wrote of Hill's songs in the May 22, 1915 issue of *Solidarity* that Hill "has crystallized the organization's spirit into imperishable forms, songs of the people—folk songs" (Foner 15). It was the genre of the folk song, which typically addresses the concerns of the common man, that would go on to be used to disseminate Hill's value and to embody the protest movements of the decades that followed. Later, beginning with Bob Dylan, the traditional style would morph to include rock 'n roll.

Certainly, folk music was the precedent for Hill's work and the protest song genre itself. In *Minstrels of the Dawn*, Jerome Rodnitzky writes: "From the beginning, Americans sang about politics, wars, heroes, badmen, and misery, but their style was overwhelmingly personal. In contrast to most twentieth-century protest songs, the earlier ballads lacked positive social goals. Perhaps the most subtle songs were the laments of Negro slaves which we loosely categorize as spirituals. Cut off from their natural culture, religion, and community, slaves developed the spiritual as a substitute for all three" (4). In addition to spirituals, James Perone writes that "anti-slavery songs of the mid-nineteenth century" and "folk songs of the late nineteenth century that were adapted" for union strike songs, might be identified as precedents for the protest song tradition in America (6).

Joe Hill's work helped cement the reputation of the Wobblies as a union that used art as a means of furthering its cause. They used pageants, posters, cartoons (some by Joe Hill), street theater and, of course, song. Wayne Hampton writes: "The Wobblies—as propaganda specialists and forerunners in the practice of revolutionary drama, ritual, and festival—were the first of the radical organizations in America to fully exploit the arts for

political purposes” (64). In his 1948 article, Wallace Stegner, making the case that the Joe Hill legend was heavily influenced by propagandists, wrote: “It is no accident that the pictures widely distributed in the labor press are idealized. The process of idealization began when Joseph Hillstrom was still on trial for his life in the winter of 1914, and it has continued to this day.... Apparently Joe Hill is all things to all men, as his pictures show him with a different face each time” (20).

Other artists were certainly inspired by Joe Hill’s story, and by its explosion into legend, which they in turn helped perpetuate. Since his death, Joe Hill’s story has been told in dozens of poems and songs, two plays, nine novels (including Dos Passos’s *1919*), one film and multiple biographies. In many, the complexity and ambiguity of his story is masked by a narrative of a life dedicated to working class struggles and the death of a hero. Many versions of his story accept his innocence and imply, or overtly state, that his execution was the result of his I.W.W. activities.

A good example of such a work is the famous song “Joe Hill” written by poet Alfred Hayes in 1925 and set to music by Earl Robinson in the 1930s. This song, recorded and performed by artists as diverse as Paul Robeson, Joan Baez and Bruce Springsteen, tells of Joe Hill’s death at the hands of the “copper bosses” and hails Hill’s spirit as one that “never dies” and as a symbol of labor everywhere:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
alive as you or me.
Says I “But Joe, you’re ten years dead”
“I never died” said he,
“I never died” said he.

From San Diego up to Maine,
in every mine and mill,
where workers strike and organize,
it's there you find Joe Hill,
it's there you find Joe Hill! (Hayes).

When Joan Baez sang this song at the Woodstock Festival in 1969, she revived the Joe Hill legacy and introduced him to a whole new generation of protesters and idealists.

Others, such as the 1948 article by Wallace Stegner in *The New Republic*, did not buy into the legend: "As for Joe Hill, I think he was probably guilty of the crime the state of Utah executed him for, though I think the state of Utah hardly proved his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.... People like Stewart Holbrook and James Stevens, who have known and written much about the Wobblies, believe that Joe Hill was probably a crook. A Wobbly editor once told Holbrook that every Wob in the know was aware of Hill's character, but that he was blown up into a martyr for the sake of the cause.... It doesn't really matter what he was. A far less authentic martyr than Little, Everest, Ford, Suhr, or a half-dozen others, Joe Hill was easier to blow up to martyrdom because he had the poet's knack of self-dramatization" (24). Biographer William Adler objects to Stegner's references to Hill's character and criminal past: "Stegner seems to have based his verdict largely on the prosecution-friendly trial coverage in the Salt Lake City press, as well as on lurid and demonstrably false reports about Hill's alleged criminal background" (21).

Stegner's article and its conclusion, published thirty-three years after Hill's death, caused an enormous stir within the labor community. Letters were written, *The New*

Republic's offices were picketed, and a defense committee was formed to write a response, which they convinced *The New Republic* to run, and which countered each of Stegner's claims (Friends of Joe Hill Committee). In response to the protests, an editorial in *The Nation* declared, "We found the piece interesting but we doubt whether the legendary figure of Joe Hill can or even should be discredited by the disclosure of the failings of a mere man, Joe Hillstrom, who happened to be turned to legendary use. Such figures are not disposed of so easily. We are not surprised that wobblies, who are legendary themselves, have appeared before *The New Republic*'s door. We shan't be surprised, either, to hear that Joe Hill is among them" ("Joe Hill Legend Cannot Be Easily Killed.").

In her book *Rebel Voices, An I.W.W. Anthology*, Joyce Kornbluh agreed with the magnitude of Joe Hill's impact: "Hill, the man, became a legend compared to Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Johnny Appleseed, and other folk heroes—preserved by novelists, playwrights, poets, and researchers. His story has inspired more writing than any other labor hero.... Wobblies, socialists, communists, A.F.L.-C.I.O. members transcend sectarian differences to sing Joe Hill's songs and share his lore. The man and the martyr have combined into a continuing legend of 'the man who never died' " (131-132).

So Joe Hill was certainly a legend and a symbol for other "rebels" who followed him. He was also a founder of a protest song tradition that was central to change movements throughout the 20th century. His immediate descendant was Woody Guthrie. As Wayne Hampton states in *Guerrilla Minstrels*: "In some sense, there is a direct line of descent from John Lennon back to Bob Dylan to Woody Guthrie and to Joe Hill. ... Lennon listened to and was deeply influenced by the songs of Bob Dylan, Guthrie was

the major formative influence upon the early Dylan, and Guthrie was a product of the union singing movement with which Hill is closely associated. All are heroes in a tradition of protest allied with the popular music culture of America” (7).

In *Guerrilla Minstrels*, Wayne Hampton shares John Steinbeck’s statement (from Steinbeck’s Foreword to *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*) that Woody Guthrie has “the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American Spirit.” Hampton adds: “What Steinbeck refers to as the American spirit is the same thing Elizabeth Gurley Flynn had called the revolutionary spirit, and Woody Guthrie, like Joe Hill before him, was the embodiment of worker solidarity” (Hampton 94). Hampton shares an incident that occurred in 1941, a few months after Woody Guthrie joined Pete Seeger’s Almanac Singers, that directly links Hill to Guthrie through Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: “The significance of the Almanac Singers to the social protest song tradition was underscored that fall by a visit to Almanac House by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The former Wobbly organizer ... Joe Hill’s ‘Rebel Girl’ was there that night officially and ceremoniously to pass on to the Almanacs the Wobbly torch in the form of a briefcase containing Hill’s private papers” (Hampton 115).

Hampton notes that the writings of Guthrie and Seeger were to continue “the spirit that Joe Hill continues to symbolize: the spirit of oneness among all who have suffered from social injustice and economic oppression” (65). These concerns are at the heart of Joe Hill’s work, and Guthrie’s and Seeger’s. They echo those of writers from the Progressive era, such as Rebecca Harding Davis in her novella, *Life in the Iron Mills*, which preceded Joe Hill’s songs by a half-century, and of Hamlin Garland in the short story “Under the Lion’s Paw,” published just twenty years earlier. The reform movements

that grew out of the growth and abuses of the industrial age in America paved the way for the musicians of the 20th century who chose to take up the charge.

One of those was Bob Dylan, a singer who was directly inspired by Woody Guthrie and Joe Hill. Bob Dylan wrote one song as a take-off on the Alfred Hayes-Earl Robinson “Joe Hill” song. In *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*, Mike Marqusee draws the comparison: “As for the ‘faithful ambassadors,’ Dylan tells their saga in ‘I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,’ an adaptation of ‘I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill,’ a popular-front favorite” (249):

I dreamed I saw St. Augustine
Alive as you or me
Tearing through these quarters
In the utmost misery
With a blanket underneath his arm
And a coat of solid gold
Searching for the very souls
Whom already have been sold (Dylan).

Despite finding inspiration in it, Dylan didn’t like the Hayes-Robinson “Joe Hill” song, but his own words suggest an admiration for the man himself: “Protest songs are difficult to write without making them come off as preachy and one-dimensional. You have to show people a side of themselves that they don’t know is there. The song ‘Joe Hill’ doesn’t even come close, but if there ever was someone who could inspire a song, it was him. Joe had the light in his eyes” (Marqusee 250). Dylan, who had always credited Woody Guthrie as a major influence, perceived the link between Hill and himself through

the influence of Hill on Guthrie. Marqusee explains: “Dylan saw Hill as a ‘forerunner of Woody Guthrie,’ and therefore of himself in an earlier incarnation” (250).

In many ways, John Lennon, identified by Wayne Hampton in the direct line of descent from Joe Hill, reflected most of all, in his life and his songs, the values of Hill and the I.W.W., although without the advocacy for violent means the Wobblies promoted. The solidarity of shared values that make war unnecessary, create empathy with the challenges of the working class, and instill a suspicion of the promises of religion—made stronger for Lennon after a soured relationship with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi caused by Lennon’s discovery that he was a fraud—all signal a connection between John Lennon and the songs and legend of Joe Hill.

The Wobblies’ utopian vision of the One Big Union and, as Joyce Kornbluh describes in *Rebel Voices, An I.W.W. Anthology*, its opposition “to war not only on the basis of anticapitalism, but on the grounds of antinationalism and antimilitarism” (316) reads very much like the vision of the world described in John Lennon’s song “Imagine.” The comparison is striking in the description by Wobbly organizer J.P. Thompson: “In the broad sense, there is no such thing as a foreigner. We are all native-born members of this planet and for members of it to be divided into groups or units and taught that each nation is better than others leads to clashes and world war. We ought to have in the place of national patriotism, the idea that one people is better than another, a broader concept—that of international solidarity” (Kornbluh 316).

Like Joe Hill, Lennon took a Wobbly concept and captured it in his lyrics:

Imagine there's no countries,

It isn't hard to do,

Nothing to kill or die for,
No religion too,
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer,
But I'm not the only one,
I hope some day you'll join us,
And the world will live as one.

Imagine no possessions,
I wonder if you can,
No need for greed or hunger,
A brotherhood of man,
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world... (Lennon "Imagine")

Personal identity for John Lennon seems to be bound up with the idea and plight of the working class, an idea he conveys with tremendous empathy and personal pain in "Working Class Hero": "As soon as you're born they make you feel small / By giving you no time instead of it all / Till the pain is so big you feel nothing at all / A working class hero is something to be" (Lennon "Working Class Hero").

Finally, Lennon pays a direct tribute to Joe Hill in his song "I Found Out," in which he uses the phrase "pie in the sky," coined by Hill in "The Preacher and the Slave,"

to comment on the distraction of religion and the need to trust in your own senses, which, as in Hill's lyrics, echoes Emerson and the Transcendentalists:

Old Hare Krishna ain't got nothing on you
Just keep you crazy with nothing to do
Keep you occupied with pie in the sky
There ain't no guru who can see through your eyes
I found out! (Lennon "I Found Out").

Although the impact of Hill extended beyond these artists to others such as Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Billy Bragg and many more, John Lennon seems like a fitting place to end the case for Hill's impact as a symbol and a role model for protest singers. Wayne Hampton sums it up: "Hill and Lennon merge, in spite of the differences of half a century, in the gospel of the utopian One. Both dreamed of all the people sharing all the world, and both were daring practitioners of the art of the mind guerrilla" (66).

CHAPTER III. WOODY GUTHRIE

FROM CALIFORNIA TO THE NEW YORK ISLAND

The Development of Woody Guthrie's Empathy & Activism

California is a garden of Eden,
A paradise to live in or see,
But believe it or not
You won't find it so hot,
If you ain't got the do re mi. (Bell and Guthrie 10)

“Do Re Mi”, Woody Guthrie, 1937

I think real folk stuff scares most of the boys around Washington. A folk song is whats wrong and how to fix it, or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is.... I can sing all day and all night sixty days and sixty nights but of course I aint got enough wind to be in office. (W. Guthrie, Letter to Lomax)

Woody Guthrie, Letter to Alan Lomax from New York,
1940

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, or Woody, as he is commonly called and was known during his lifetime, was born 100 years ago, July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. Fifty-five years later he died of Huntington's chorea, having suffered from the ravaging effects of the disease for almost fifteen years. Although the span of his productive songwriting career was only two decades, his influence on folk and popular music of all kinds was enormous, his iconic stature as a major composer of American protest songs is unquestionable, and his story is complex and fascinating.

Woody was the heir to Joe Hill as both an iconic and inspirational figure in the protest song movement and a prolific writer of union songs employed to recruit and inspire union members. Guthrie paid direct tribute to Joe Hill in the 1940s when he wrote a long first-person poem titled *Joe Hillstrom* that told the story of Hill's trial and execution.

Woody Guthrie lived an extremely full and artistically productive life. This chapter describes the major events in Woody Guthrie's life and illuminates the influences on his songs that addressed cultural change. Also explored are the key areas of protest focused upon in his songs and their power during and after his life. Emphasis is placed on the points of germination and then maturation of his ideas relating to human rights and social justice, and how this evolution was evidenced in his writings and his songs. A particular focal point is the very rich and formative periods of his first two sojourns in California and the first two years spent in New York City, which ultimately became his long-term home.

For the average person who knows the name Woody Guthrie, a jumble of images and facts spring to mind—associations with the dust bowl, hobos and freight trains, with

songs about America (especially “This Land Is Your Land”) and songs about unions and the downtrodden. For some, he was the father to Arlo Guthrie and closely associated with Pete Seeger and populist, leftist politics. It is not a coincidence that the image of Guthrie is such a blur for so many. In a span of less than thirty years, beginning at the age of fourteen, Woody Guthrie lived a fuller, more varied, freewheeling and adventurous life than most people ever experience. He was married three times, had eight children, wrote more than 2,000 songs (and over 3,000, according to some), wrote numerous books and thousands of pages of letters, drew and painted hundreds of works of art, and travelled and performed across the country, claiming to have lived in forty-eight states.

Although his image is one of a hardscrabble fighter for the common man (which he certainly was), Woody Guthrie did not begin his journey in circumstances of poverty. In 1946, reflecting on his work in a letter to his record producer, Moe Asch, he wrote: “I have always said in my songs and ballads that this old world is a fight from the cradle to the grave” (W. Guthrie, Letter to Asch). Woody’s fight did not start as one of hardship of means. His father, Charley Guthrie, was an ambitious man who had worked his way up into real estate and political circles in Okemah, Oklahoma, including holding local elected office. In Woody’s early years, he was able to provide a nice, middle class lifestyle for his family.

Three years before Woody’s birth, in 1909, Charley Guthrie bought the first automobile in Okemah. Although Charley was in the early stages of a youthful ambition that led to over a decade of prosperity, this year also marked the first of many family tragedies involving fire, when the Guthrie’s brand new house burned down. It also coincided with, and perhaps helped trigger, a bout of depression for Woody’s mother,

Nora, that may have been an early sign of her Huntington's disease. According to biographer Joe Klein: "Nora, who'd been there to watch her dream house go up in flames, was terribly depressed. She seemed haunted by the fire, and would talk endlessly about the house for years after" (12). Later, the repeated incidents of tragic fires left many wondering if Nora had a hand in their origination.

Woody grew up surrounded by music. By his own account, in an autobiography he wrote for the 1947 *American Folk Song* songbook, later published in a posthumous compilation of his writings, *Pastures of Plenty* (edited by Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal), he was immersed in music at home and in the home of his maternal grandparents. Nora and her family had a piano and one of the earliest phonographs in town, and Woody's parents both enjoyed singing. As Henrietta Yurchenco explains: "Coming back to town from Grandma Tanner's farm every Sunday, as he neared his house, Woody could hear his parents' voices blending in perfect harmony on hymns, spirituals and soul-saving songs" (18). He described the songs of his mother as sad. From this "so-called civilized music" to the songs of African Americans and Native Americans, to the "screaks of greasy wheeled buggies and wagons," Woody described his surroundings as "the big song I heard all around me" (Marsh and Leventhal 3). Whether intentional or not, this description is strongly reminiscent of sentiments expressed by Walt Whitman in his epic poem, "Song of Myself." The voices and labors of all people and all races would be a recurring theme for Guthrie, as it was for Whitman, particularly in this, Whitman's most famous poem.

Despite comfortable family circumstances, Woody's early life started unraveling in other ways. By the time Woody was six, his mother, Nora, had grown forgetful and

was becoming temperamental (almost definitely from her undiagnosed Huntington's disease, although at the time attributed to nervous strain and mental illness). A year later, his beloved older sister, Clara, died from a fire that cast suspicion among the townspeople about Nora's culpability.

Oil was discovered in the area near Okemah in the early 1920s, turning the community into a boomtown, with the resulting activity and population growth. Woody was exposed to more songs and more types of people and began a broader musical education, as he describes in *Pastures of Plenty*:

Okemah was one of the singingest, square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingest, preachingest, walkingest, talkingest, laughingest, cryingest, shootingest, fist fightingest, bleedingest, gamblingest, gun, club, and razor carryingest of our ranch and farm towns, because it blossomed out into one of our first Oil Boom Towns....I sold newspapers, sang all of the songs I picked up. (Marsh and Leventhal 3)

Woody, viewed by many biographers as repeatedly protecting his mother's legacy by changing facts or the order in which events occurred, attributed his mother's deteriorating condition to the noise and activity of the oil boom: "She commenced to sing the sadder songs in a loster voice, to gaze out our window and to follow her songs out and up and over and away from it all, away over yonder in the minor keys" (Marsh and Leventhal 3). Although the oil boom would last for several years, the land prospecting business became more ruthless, and Charley's fortunes began a long downward spiral, precipitating what Woody called "the time that our singing got the saddest" (Marsh and Leventhal 4). By 1923, partially crippled with arthritis, and having lost miserably in his

first statewide election, Charley was broke. He told his children, “I’m the only man who ever lost a farm a day for thirty days. Nobody ever lost fifty thousand dollars any quicker than me” (Klein 26). Woody was eleven years old.

In 1926, with Nora continuing to deteriorate, Charley sent the two youngest children away to stay with his sister, Maude, in Pampa, Texas. One year later, Charley was seriously burned across his entire trunk in another suspicious fire, and Nora, unable to function, was committed to the State mental hospital. To recuperate, Charley went to stay with Maude in Pampa, and Roy, twenty-one and Woody, fifteen, were left in Okemah to fend for themselves.

Despite efforts by Charley’s friends, Woody was unsettled, hanging with a “gang” of neighborhood boys in an abandoned tin shack and trying his hand at various jobs, from selling scrap metal to polishing spittoons. He also had his first experiences that enlightened him about the plight of workers whose wages disappeared into payments for company-owned housing and supplies from the “company store.” Biographer Ed Cray notes that “He began to wash dishes at the chili palace, paid seventy-five cents a day, and charged twenty-five cents a meal. Like Oklahoma’s tenant farmers, he ended up broke.” In Woody’s words, “I put in one whole cotton season there and still owed the[m] nine dollars.” A later effort to pick cotton fared no better. Again, in Woody’s words, “I owed more for my sacks than I had coming” (11).

Woody stayed with multiple friends of the family for short periods, including the home of the family with whom his brother Roy was living, and settled in to stay for a year in the home of a close friend, Casper Moore. He went back to school for a while,

and also started picking up spare change by playing his harmonica in downtown Okemah—probably his first experience earning money from music.

Woody did some travelling in 1929, going to the Gulf of Mexico to visit friends, and back to Okemah. On his travels, he had his first exposure to hobo camps, listening to the stories and songs of the former boomers and migrant farm workers, learning about music and playing his harmonica. This laid the foundation for a life in which the education of the open road was an immensely formative and important component.

Woody describes the experience: “I hit the road south to Houston, Galveston, the Gulf, and back, doing all kinds of odd jobs, hoeing figs, orchards, picking grapes, hauling wood, helping carpenters and cement men, working with water well drillers. ... I carried my harmonica and played in barbershops, at shine stands, in front of shows, around pool halls, and rattled the bones, done jig dances, sang and played with Negroes, Indians, whites, farmers, town folks, truck drivers, and with every kind of a singer you can think of. I learned all of the tricks of string and music and all of the songs that I could remember and learn by ear” (Marsh and Leventhal 5).

He also saw poverty and disease during his trip to East Texas, which he described as “all caused by no good water, no good houses, no good work....” (Cray 14). At the age of seventeen, he was beginning to observe and understand the conditions of the common man, which would become so central to his life’s work.

Following a request from his father, Woody joined him in Pampa, a town experiencing an oil boom of its own. There, Woody helped his father run the hole-in-the-wall rooming house he was managing, frequented by prostitutes. He also worked for Shorty Harris at his drugstore (and moonshine outlet), where he picked up an old guitar in

the back room and received some lessons in how to play it from his Uncle Jeff. Woody read avidly and broadly at the library during this period, and returned to high school, where he did not succeed as a student or finish a degree, but met Matt Jennings. Matt became his best friend, his musical partner (playing a pawnshop fiddle), and eventually not only a member of Woody's first musical group, "The Corn Cob Trio," but his brother-in-law, when Woody courted and then married Matt's sister, Mary, in 1933.

During the first years of marriage to Mary, living in Pampa, Woody began writing songs and performed music in various groups with both his Uncle Jeff and Jeff's wife Allene, who did magic tricks, and with Matt Jennings and other friends. He tried his hand at mind reading for a fee and also earned money by painting signs, an occupation he would pick up over the next few years whenever he needed to earn a couple of dollars.

In 1935, Woody created a mimeographed songbook titled *Alonzo M. Zilch's Own Collection of Original Songs and Ballads*, which Mark Allan Jackson, in his book *Prophet Singer*, describes as focusing "mainly on western-flavored tales of heartache or joy, farmers and cowboys" (49). Like Joe Hill before him, he set many of his verses to well-known tunes, a technique continued throughout his career. An example from this early collection is a silly song set to the tune of "Home on the Range":

O, leave me alone
Said his darling, his own,
I'm not in the humor to play;
He was amazed when he heard
Her discouraging words—
He decided he'd better not stay. (Yurchenco 64)

In the introduction to *Alonzo M. Zilch's Own Collection*, which he titled "Author's Apology," he acknowledged, in melodramatic and archaic language, the practice of borrowing tunes from others (a common practice among folk song writers): "At times I cannot decide on a tune to use with my words for a song. Woe is me! I am then forced to use some good old, family-style tune that hath already gained a reputation as being liked by the people" (Yurchenco 62).

Although much of his material at this point was silly or romantic, his empathy for those around him was beginning to emerge. According to biographer Jackson, some of Woody's earliest songs "do include moments where his inchoate underclass sympathies flash through" (49-50). Although he treats it with humor, his empathy for the need he sees around him, his desire to do something about it, and his dislike of the wealthy class he blames for the circumstances of poverty, are evident in his verses for one of these early songs, "If I Was Everything on Earth":

If I was President Roosevelt,
I'd make the groceries free—
I'd give away new Stetson hats,
And let the whiskey be.
I'd pass out suits of clothing
At least three times a week—
And shoot the first big oil man
That killed the fishing creek (Yurchenco 64)

It was the depths of the Great Depression, and after the horrific dust storms of 1935, when a combination of drought and unsustainable farming practices created terrible

conditions across the Southwest and the Great Plains, Woody became moody and impatient. He stayed out drinking at night, and went off wandering, disappearing for longer and longer periods of time, visiting friends and relatives in East Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, and coming back to Pampa in between. He hitchhiked and, when so many homeless men filled the roads that it was difficult to get a ride, he travelled by freight train. Woody wrote a song inspired by the Great Dust Storm of April 1935. As Joe Klein observes in his Guthrie biography, the song called “Dusty Old Dust” referenced not only the mindset of masses of Oklahomans, but of Woody himself, and his need to move on:

The melody for the verses was borrowed from Carson Robison’s “Ballad of Billy the Kid,” but Woody composed the chorus himself. ...In the chorus, which eventually would become an American standard, he served notice that he’d had enough of Pampa:

So long, it’s been good to know you
So long, it’s been good to know you
So long, it’s been good to know you
This dusty old dust is a-getting’ my home
And I’ve got to be drifting along (Klein 74).

He travelled in widening circles, including Denver, and then made his first trip to California, where he went to visit his Aunt Laura in Turlock. Mary, at home with their first baby, Gwendolyn Gail, whom they called Teeny, didn’t like his travelling, but hoped Woody would find steady work on his journeys and be able to send money, or send for the family to join him. His drifting mirrored the movements of thousands looking for work: men who had lost their homes, roaming the country alone or with their families, or

whose families had been broken apart by hardship. Their stories moved Woody, and he found receptive audiences among these displaced people. He defined himself by the word Okie, which, because of the huge exodus from Oklahoma, was being used as a slur to describe anyone in the mass of travelling refugees.

Handbills touting jobs in California were distributed widely throughout the dust bowl. Far too many desperate dust bowlers responded to a small number of jobs, and the overabundance of available labor put all the power in the hands of the “buyer.” This reduced to a pittance the wages available to those lucky enough to find some temporary work. As Klein points out, “About 500,000 ‘Okies’ had entered the state since the beginning of the Depression, and there was widespread fear that California was being overrun” (82). Illegal roadblocks set up at the California borders turned away anyone whom police and hired hands interpreted as being a vagrant or unemployable. Similar efforts tried to restrict the large number of hobos travelling by freight trains. According to biographer Elizabeth Partridge, “Men called ‘railroad bulls’ patrolled the train yards with brass knuckles hidden in their fists and billy clubs swinging from their belts, kicking out drifters who tried to ride the rails.... Inside the boxcars and in hobo camps a fierce, loyal camaraderie prevailed” (55).

Although Woody experienced hardship, travelling in the rain, hungry and chased out of warm places to sleep, he was also astounded by the verdant scenery and the fruit trees he found in California. It was likely Woody’s most significant experience to that date of being the unwanted “other.” The tremendous empathy he developed for his fellow travelers undoubtedly made him more receptive to “radical” ideas to which he was becoming exposed during his travels. Among these was his introduction to the Industrial

Workers of the World (I.W.W.), commonly known as the Wobblies. The I.W.W. believed in forming one large, inclusive union of all workers, the “One Big Union,” and advocated shared control by the workers over all industrial production.

Woody met former Wobblies on the freight trains and in the hobo camps. The I.W.W. Preamble, as well as the songs of Joe Hill, Mac McLintock and others, was featured in the I.W.W.’s *Little Red Songbook*. Many of these songs were parodies set to familiar tunes, a form with which Woody was experimenting. According to biographer Joe Klein, “The book was widely circulated in the boxcars and the migrant camps and, somewhere along the way, Woody Guthrie got hold of a copy, which he stuffed in his shirt and carried with him” (84). The Preamble of the *Little Red Songbook* reflects ideas Woody would repeat in various ways through his songs and in his letters, and which still resonate as issues today: that millions in the working class are hungry and in need (echoing the ninety-nine percent of today’s Occupy Movements), while the employers (the one percent) have everything in life, and no peace is possible while these conditions exist. While the “One Big Union” of the I.W.W. was no longer a significant movement in 1936, there was much in the world view, songs and solidarity of the Wobblies that likely appealed to Guthrie’s awakening sensibilities and values.

After his first visit to California in 1936, Woody returned to Pampa, Texas and Mary, who was pregnant with their second child. But he didn’t stay long. Even before Carolyn Sue was born, Woody headed back to California.

Sometime during this period, during and after his first trip to California, Woody wrote some of his earliest protest songs. These songs came out of his experience and observations among the thousands of people migrating in search of work and a new life.

The early songs share the experience of deprivation and foreclosure, the false promise of a plentiful new life in California, and the exclusion of many refugees without sufficient resources. While songs like “Do Re Mi” and “Ain’t Got No Home” observed the problems, Woody’s lyrics did not yet offer specific solutions. He was yet to become intimate with movements to organize labor unions, or with the initiatives of the Popular Front.

There was a large Guthrie extended family in California, in the San Fernando Valley. Woody stayed with his Aunt Laura and spent time with his cousin Jack. Tall and handsome, Jack was a singer and guitarist who dreamed of a career in Hollywood as a cowboy singer. Cowboy singing was all the rage, with singers and groups such as Will Rogers, Gene Autry and the Sons of the Pioneers all enjoying popular followings. With Woody as his sidekick, Jack obtained some performances in cowboy parades, a cowboy vaudeville show, and finally, and most importantly, an unpaid spot on radio station KFVD, useful for publicizing their appearances. Frank Burke owned the radio station, which he used to promote his progressive politics. Burke covered current events, issues and progressive/leftist causes on his own talk show on the station. In the show featuring Jack and Woody, Jack dominated the performances (cowboy music not being Woody’s thing). Their program became popular, and a second show was added.

The genres of music Jack and Woody played on their radio show ranged from cowboy to folk, and Woody projected a down-home, hillbilly persona (almost definitely exaggerated for theatrical impact). On their very first day at KFVD, Woody took a shot at those he deemed culpable for the suffering of working class Americans. In his book,

American Radical, Will Kaufman shares the lyrics of a song written and performed by Woody on the surviving recording of the first air check for KFVD in 1937:

My banker put me down on the Skid Row.

Oh, the banker put me down on the Skid Row.

If you're a-hittin' it hard on the Hollerwood Boulevard.

You might sleep tonight on the Skid Row.

My senator sent me down on the Skid Row.

My senator sent me down on the Skid Row.

I thought he was tops but he's rotten as the crops

And as filthy as the flops on the Skid Row (3)

Jack's closest friends in California were the Crissmans, originally from Missouri. Jack had worked for the father, Roy Crissman, and through him Woody met the family, which included two daughters. One of the two was Maxine, and Woody and Maxine discovered they had well-matched singing voices. They performed together, and Maxine made a guest appearance on the radio show. When Jack decided he needed to go back to construction to make a living for his family, Woody invited Maxine to be his partner on the show. Now in charge, Woody reinvented the show as *The Woody and Lefty Lou Show*, with a special theme song he'd written to introduce each show.

The Woody and Lefty Lou Show was popular with displaced Oklahomans and those from other farming states. Woody and Maxine played familiar songs and stories, adopted a folksy tone, and made the most of Woody's hillbilly language and mannerisms, forming a personal connection with their audience. They were getting an enormous

volume of fan mail, and a third daily show was added in the middle of the day. The late night (11pm) show had a very far range and was heard as far away as Texas, where Mary and family could tune in to catch Woody on the air. Shortly thereafter, Woody sent for Mary and the children.

Woody briefly left KFVD to pursue a failed opportunity with a radio station in Mexico, but returned to the forgiving Frank Burke with a revival of the *Woody and Lefty Lou Show*. However, they no longer had the desirable 11pm slot, which had been given away. Soon after, Maxine decided to leave the show. Woody hit the road for a bit, again visiting refugee camps and was even more stunned by the entrenched poverty, abominable conditions and long-term residencies of many of the families in these camps. He returned to KFVD to do the show solo, but with only one show per day.

The tenure at KFVD was a first period of significant maturation and growth for Woody. He expanded his worldview and began to refine his lyrics. His cultural sensibilities grew, and some of his native ideas were challenged by the diverse audience with whom he now came in contact. For example, his ideas about race and his naïveté about the sensitivity of the subject were soon shaken up. “Nigger” was a commonplace word for Woody. One day he played a harmonica solo, which he introduced to his radio audience by its traditional name, which was “Run, Nigger, Run.” Soon, biographer Ed Cray reports, he received a letter from a listener: “I am a Negro, a young Negro in college and I certainly resented your remark. No person, or person of any intelligence uses that word over the radio today....I don’t know just how many Negroes listened to your program tonight, but I, for one, am letting you know that it was deeply resented” (109). Woody apologized during his show, tearing up the composition in front of the

microphone. He adjusted his language to refer to African Americans as “colored men” (Cray 109).

While not yet engaged with political activism during the majority of his time at KFVD, Woody was writing songs that reflected a strong sense of empathy for the deprivation he had witnessed and the human rights issues facing displaced farmers and workers. He had experienced, or at least observed, much that the hobos and farming families were going through. Now, he not only continued to comment on his observations in his lyrics, writings and illustrations, but also used his radio shows, which he needed to fill with material, to expose his songs to a large audience.

“Do Re Mi” was one of these early songs. In it, Guthrie exposes the realities of the “California is a Garden of Eden” myth and warns those considering the journey to California that they may want to think carefully about their decision. According to Mark Allan Jackson, the tune used for the song is based on “Hang Out Your Front Door Key” (78). While the song recounts the dust bowl migration, the unfriendly reception at the border (referring to the illegal blockade known as the “bum blockade”), and the hardship newcomers experienced in California, the most striking part of the song is the contrast between what California promised (a “garden of Eden” and “a paradise to live in or see”), and the fact that those riches were unavailable to the poor refugee. This great divide, between the haves and the have-nots, was to provide a foundation for much of Woody Guthrie’s work.

Another of the songs Woody produced during this late 1930s period in California was the powerful “Ain’t Got No Home.” This is Woody’s rewrite of an old gospel hymn, “This World Is Not My Home,” made popular by one of his favorite groups and a major

influence on his music, the Carter Family. The Carter's version, entitled "I Can't Feel at Home in This World Any More," relates the traditional sentiment that the answer to the troubles of the earthly life will be found in heaven: "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through/My treasure and my hopes are all beyond the blue" ("This World").

The idea of waiting to get your just rewards in heaven was scoffed by Joe Hill in his most famous song, "The Preacher and the Slave." Woody would have been very familiar with this song, as it was featured in the I.W.W.'s *Little Red Songbook*, which Woody carried with him. The fact that "I Ain't Got No Home" puts new lyrics to the tune of a song about the promise of heaven is certainly no coincidence. Woody was making his own commentary on the very real hardship of the poor, rejecting the resigned suffering of the hymn, and squarely laying blame on those who caused the suffering, rather than perpetuating the idea that the only relief is in heaven, after death.

Woody's song is about a sharecropper who has lost his home through foreclosure. He is destitute, with nothing to show for a lifetime of hard work, and forced to wander the roads, seeking work and bare subsistence. The home that has been lost is more than the literal loss of a house to foreclosure, but also the loss of purpose, security and family: "My wife took down and died/Upon my cabin floor" and "Now I worry all the time/Like I never did before" (Bell and Guthrie 42). While he lays no specific blame for the wife's death, the song points a finger at the forces that made it impossible for the sharecropper to build a decent life. It clearly exposes the dichotomy of the worlds of the worker/farmer/miner and the rich man/banker/mine owner, and decries the guilt of the powerful for the circumstances that have befallen the sharecropper:

Rich man took my home and he drove me from my door

And I ain't got no home in this world anymore...
I was farmin' on the shares
And always I was poor;
My crops I lay
Into the banker's store...
I mined in your mines
And I gathered in your corn;
I been working, mister,
Since the day that I was born...
This wide and wicked world
Is a funny place to be.
The gambling man is rich and the working man is poor
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore (Bell and Guthrie 42).

“Ain't Got No Home” reflects the influence of Woody's Wobbly acquaintances and the tremendous impact of the suffering he had witnessed in his travels. Evident in this song is Woody's growing distaste for the rich man whose wealth has been born out of the working man's toil—the “gambling man” who has the money to invest, and whose wealth results in part from bleeding poor men of their livelihoods. Travelling the roads and the refugee camps in the heart of the Great Depression, Woody had observed, first-hand, enormous suffering and upheaval on a scale that must have been overwhelming. These experiences instilled in Woody a fierce dedication to the less fortunate, with whom he felt a tremendous kinship and a strong sense of the need and opportunity for building a more equitable society in a nation of great wealth. In his biography of Woody Guthrie,

Joe Klein calls “I Ain’t Got No Home” a “clear turning point in Woody’s life” (118). This was the period in which he began turning from the passive observer to a man decrying inaction, rejecting the pacification of the sufferers, and seeking the means to draw attention to the issues and find ways to make change.

Later in his life and after his death, when Woody was recognized for his activism and his commitment to the working class, there was much speculation about his relationship to the ideas of the I.W.W. or to the Communist Party. While Woody clearly felt an affinity to the displaced and the hopeless, he did so primarily out of an outrage for injustice and a personal understanding of what that injustice looked like, not because he embraced a specific ideology. In *Guerrilla Minstrels*, Wayne Hampton supports this interpretation: “There has never been a more eloquent spokesman for the utopian One than Woody Guthrie. Although he often used the language of the Wobblies (employing the characteristic expression ‘One Big Union’), his conception of utopia was a little different. ...He meant specifically the uprooted Okie farmers, reduced to the level of migrant farm laborers after the dust storms and the depression ran them off their farms, and more generally the rural folk community....When asked if he was a communist, he was fond of saying: ‘Some people say I’m a Communist. That ain’t necessarily so, but it is true that I’ve always been in the red’” (95).

This tongue-in-cheek response upon being asked to label himself seems to have been Woody’s rejection of those who would put basic human rights into a box and allow it to be part of an ideological debate. Soon after this time, he would begin to perceive that one part of the solution was banding together to fight for rights through unions—but in these important formative years of the late 1930s, he was focused on exposing the

widespread need and inequities. He avoided political diatribes and worked to deliver a heartfelt and simple message, believing this made a song most effective. Just a couple of years later, in a long letter to friend and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, on September 19, 1940, Woody expounded: “I think one mistake some folks make in trying to write songs that will interest folks is to try to cover too much territory or to make it too much of a sermon. A folk song ought to be pretty well satisfied just to tell the facts and let it go at that” (Guthrie, W. Letter to Lomax).

While it is generally agreed that Woody likely did join the Communist Party several years later in New York (although he does not appear to have been very involved nor active in organizing or running meetings), he was always flippant about the idea of formal political affiliation. In that same September, 1940 letter to Lomax, Woody wrote, “They called me a communist and a wild man and everything you could think of but I dont care what they call me. I aint a member of any earthly organization my trouble is I really ought to go down in the morning and just join everything” (Guthrie, W. Letter to Lomax).

Ed Robbin, the West Coast *People's World* correspondent (a Communist newspaper), had a show three times each week on KFVD. Biographer Klein shares that in January 1939, after Woody had returned to KFVD and was doing the show solo, he heard Robbin interview Tom Mooney, a labor leader who had been convicted of a bombing on “flimsy evidence” and imprisoned for twenty years in San Quentin, but had just been pardoned and freed by the new California Governor, Culbert Olsen (121-22). Woody was impressed by the interview and by Ed Robbin, and wrote a song called “Tom Mooney Is Free,” which he sang on his radio program. After hearing Woody sing the song, Ed

Robbin asked Woody to show him more of his work. According to Klein, Robbin “had never met or heard of a progressive hillbilly before, and was amazed” (122). This was at the outset of 1939, a year that immersed Woody in the widespread activity of the Popular Front, and enabled him to discover a milieu for his work and for the discovery and building of relationships that would help shape the remainder of his active working life.

A couple of years later, Woody wrote the introductions to songs gathered in the book *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, which he helped to organize in collaboration with Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger. Among these was his introduction to “Tom Mooney Is Free”: I wasn’t much interested in high powered politics. Never aim to get a overdose of it if I can help it. But right is right and wrong is wrong. Shooting square is shooting square and framing and cheating is framing and cheating. Railroading a man to jail for 22 years with a crooked court set up and a bunch of lying witnesses is rape of the lowest kind. That’s what they done to Mr. Tom Mooney. That’s why I was glad the day he got out. I run home and hoed out this little song about him and about the Union and sung it a lot of times and lots of people liked it” (Lomax 356).

In *Guerrilla Minstrels*, Wayne Hampton writes that Woody was “class-conscious before he ever heard the term” and viewed the struggle as “a fight between the rich and the ‘pore’” (95). Hampton reports that Ed Robbin, who, after reading more of Woody’s work, introduced him to California political circles, said that Woody didn’t read Marx or Lenin, but “believed that what is important is the struggle of the working people to win back the earth, which is rightfully theirs” (95). Woody’s own experiences of the struggles of these working people, in the Texas and Oklahoma dust bowls and on the road during

the Great Depression, shaped his personal world view much more than the impact of any outside teachings or political movements.

After hearing and reading Woody's work, Ed Robbin invited him to sing "Tom Mooney Is Free" at a rally for Tom Mooney. Not wanting him to be taken by surprise, Robbin informed Woody that it was a Communist party-sponsored event and a "politically left-wing gathering." Woody responded: "Left-wing, right-wing, chicken-wing—it's all the same thing to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em. So if you'll have me, I'll be glad to go" (Hampton 104). Woody's response was comical, but his meaning was clear. What mattered most to him was the opportunity to perform his songs and deliver the messages and stories he wanted to share, the truths he had observed. However, despite his own repeated claims that he gave little weight to politics, his world view and strong sense of the injustices around him prepared Woody for opportunities that awaited him, many of which came through relationships with the Popular Front. Woody was a hit from his first appearance at a Communist gathering and was swept into a busy period of performances for rallies and fundraisers in California, with Robbin coordinating his appearances.

In March 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck was published, generating tremendous interest in the plight of the dust bowl refugees. In the first year, the book sold over 400,000 copies and won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Although the book told a story with which Woody was all too familiar, it affected him strongly, becoming both the subject of a well-known song, named after the book's main character, Tom Joad, and the inspiration for the name of one of his children, Joady. The book also became a story with which Woody would be forever associated, as his

life's story (particularly the somewhat embellished versions that emphasized his hobo and refugee experiences) reflected aspects of the Joad family's journey, and his hillbilly persona and affinity with the "Okies" became not only a defining characteristic, but a point of pride for Woody.

In the introduction to "The Okie Section" of "Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People," Woody wrote: "Almost everybody is a Okie now days. That means you ain't got no home, or don't know how long you're gonna have the one you are in. Sort of means, too, that you're out of a job. Or owe more than you can rake and scrape. Okies has come to include all of the folks that the rich folks has et up. I could sleep might comfortable with just that one name on my tombstone" (Lomax 213).

There is little doubt that Woody played upon his country roots to maximize his listener's sympathies and the niche he saw himself filling. Joe Klein notes: "He had played the rube rather shamelessly on the radio with Lefty Lou, and now that tendency became more pronounced" (124). As Dorian Lynskey notes in his chapter on Guthrie in *33 Revolutions Per Minute*: "He was an extraordinary character who preferred to pass himself off as 'a guitar busker, a joint hopper, tip canary, kittybox man,' because aw-shucks self-effacement only made the myth stronger. He could best reach the common man by *being* the common man, by cloaking his intelligence, artistry, and radicalism in hillbilly vernacular and plain common sense" (14). According to Klein, Ed Robbin believed Woody to be completely uneducated, politically naïve, and from a poor farm family, and was therefore startled when Woody asked to write a column for *People's World*. However, Woody submitted several samples and cartoons, and editor Al Richmond accepted him as an unpaid columnist (Klein 124-25). "Woody Sez" began

publication in the newspaper on May 12, 1939, and ran daily, often with one of Woody's cartoons, until January 1940.

The folksy tone and content of "Woody Sez" enabled Woody to deliver some hard-hitting messages with a heavy dose of humor. The following passage is from a column in which Woody provides a definition of "relief" that would resonate with those active in the Occupy Movement today:

Relief. (noun),: It is 2 people and one of them has accumulated the property of both; and then poses as some sort of a "giver" – when in reality he is only giving back a little at a time, the Life that he took at a single grab or two... They tell me the rich folks is gonna give us a little relief quick as they can find a way to do it without a lower in the standard of a livin–Shux most of us aint never seen no standard yet. ... Anyway, you aint got it an neither have I. But the folks that has got it got it from you an me. An when the highups can invent a way to give you four bits and get back a dollar you will get some relief (*Woody Sez*, 26-27).

With his growing schedule of performances for leftist gatherings, and with a radio audience that shared similar sympathies, Woody began to write more songs with political content. Among these were a number of outlaw songs, in which the outlaw was glorified as a Robin Hood-type character—stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Such was the case with Woody's song "Pretty Boy Floyd," in which the criminal is heralded as an angel in disguise, helping the poor and disenfranchised, and unfairly accused of crimes he did not commit. The song ends by challenging a system Woody believes hunts down one kind of criminal, but not others who work within the system to prey on the poor, such as

Depression-era bankers foreclosing on homes and sending poor families into the streets.

Yes, as through this world I've wandered,
I've seen lots of funny men,
Some will rob you with a six-gun,
And some with a fountain pen.

And as through your life you travel,
Yes, as through your life you roam,
You won't never see an outlaw,
Drive a family from their home (Bell and Guthrie 30).

In July 1939, Ed Robbin made an introduction that would have enormous consequences for the course of Woody's career and life. Robbin introduced him to actor and activist Will Geer, who was looking for a ballad singer to accompany him in a theatrical road show for migrant workers. Woody and Will hit it off and made a good team, with Woody shining in his performances at migrant camps, union rallies and Communist Party events. He formed a lifelong friendship with Will and his wife, Herta. They would prove instrumental in Woody's move to New York the following year, which became his home for the remainder of his life. Meanwhile, though Mary filled the role of a pregnant woman in a documentary film in which Will would star (she was carrying their third child), and socialized with Will and Herta, Woody was getting more distant from Mary, and coming home less frequently.

Woody became enamored of unions as a potent solution to the abuses by oppressive companies, and began to write songs extolling the virtues of union organizing.

According to Mark Allan Jackson, Woody's "first explicit union song" was "Better Go Down and Join the Union" (218). In it, union organizing is the working man's option for competing with the machines of the powerful. The song describes a variety of types of unions, including those of working men, and others that represent the organizations that provide advantages to the powerful (and of which Woody does not approve), including "the bankin' men," and "Landlords."

During that late 1939 period, the Popular Front was shaken by the non-aggression pact signed by Hitler and Stalin, soon followed by the invasion of Poland and the declaration of war by Great Britain and France. As virulent anti-fascists, many Communist Party sympathizers became disillusioned, unable to accept that the Soviet Union had made any type of alliance with Hitler. Woody accepted the Soviet Union's propaganda that its actions were necessary to retain peace in their country. He ruffled many feathers with his pointed defense of Stalin. Among those disturbed by Woody's position was Frank Burke, KFVD owner, who felt betrayed by the Soviet Union's actions. Though chagrined, Burke bore Woody's on-air defense of the Soviet Union for a while, but when Stalin invaded Finland, the two parted ways.

In the midst of this upheaval, Will Geer left for New York to take the lead in the Broadway show, "Tobacco Road." Without his show on KFVD and with Will and Herta gone, Woody's life in California began to fizzle. He brought his family, including newborn Will Rogers Guthrie (born in California while Woody was performing at the site of a labor strike) back to Pampa, Texas, to the shack they'd lived in before. With no work and surrounded by disapproval and gossip about him among the locals, Woody hit the

road again only six weeks after arriving, leaving Mary and the children behind in Texas and heading for New York.

In a difficult trip through blizzards, and gradually selling off everything he'd brought with him, including his guitar, Woody eventually made it to New York in early January 1940. Along the way, every time he stopped someplace, he heard a song on the jukebox called "God Bless America," by Irving Berlin, sung by Kate Smith. The opening verse entreats the listener to "swear allegiance to a land that's free" and to "be grateful for a land so fair" (Berlin).

The self-satisfied air of the song bothered Woody, who felt it romanticized an America where much was terribly wrong. The song made America itself into the hero, the focus of a nationalistic fervor, rather than the people who make up the country. After arriving in New York, and outstaying his welcome with Will and Herta (he left the apartment with Herta's guitar in tow), he lodged at a rundown hotel called Hanover House. There he wrote his response to "God Bless America." Originally titled, "God Blessed America," the song that would become Woody's most famous was his own vision (more balanced than Irving Berlin's) of the beauty and the challenges of America. The original manuscript, reproduced in Elizabeth Partridge's book *This Land Was Made For You and Me*, shows that at some point Woody crossed out the title/refrain and replaced it with "This Land Was Made For You + Me" (85).

The tune for this song was a familiar one, which, like many of Woody's songs (as he freely and repeatedly admitted), had roots in traditional music. According to Joe Klein, the tune was taken from the Carter Family's "Little Darlin', Pal of Mine," which, in turn, had come from an old Baptist hymn, "Oh My Lovin' Brother" (141). The Carter Family's

“When the World’s on Fire” has also been credited as the source. Listening to both Carter Family songs confirms that they are extremely similar to each other, both undoubtedly based on the earlier hymn, and both sharing portions of their melodies with “This Land Is Your Land.”

This song, which became an American standard after Woody’s working career was over, has typically been taught and sung with only the first three verses. In this form, it is perceived as a broad and inclusive song in celebration of America’s diverse geography, its bigness, and its unity. As a result, it is taught by schools and the Boy Scouts, viewed as expressing fervent patriotism, and often sung at conservative political events. Many who sing it would be surprised if they were to read all seven verses.

At its heart, the original six verses are about who really owns America and the principles on which the nation is founded. In this version, the influence of “God Bless America” can be seen in the refrain, as each stanza ends with “God blessed America for me,” rather than the later, “This land was made for you and me.” In the original version, Woody laid claim for himself (and by extension, Everyman) to a stake in the nation. The revised version broadened that claim to make it overtly one shared by all. While this change makes the song more inclusive, perhaps Woody’s intention was more specifically to remind the listener, familiar with the disparities between rich and poor, that the nation was *also* for the common man. That meaning can be understood more clearly if one reads the sentence with an emphasis on the “*and*” (e.g. this land was made for you *and* me).

While “God Bless America” seems to glorify the United States as a monolithic (and monotheistic) state able to do no wrong, Woody’s song celebrates the diversity of

America's countryside, from the point of view of the wandering Everyman and his relationship to a land to which he lays claim:

I roamed and rambled, and followed my footsteps,
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
And all around me, a voice was sounding:

God blessed America for me. (Partridge 85)

Woody's intent not just to glorify America's beauty, but to emphasize each individual's claim to the land, can be understood in his original fourth verse (later his fifth verse when the song was reordered and a seventh verse added):

Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property,
But on the back side it didn't say nothing –

God blessed America for me. (Partridge 85)

In the final version of this song, Woody changed "Private Property" to "No Trespassing" (perhaps a nod to sensibilities about the difference between saying there should be free access and saying there should be no private ownership). More importantly, he replaced the last line with "That side was made for you and me," referring to the side of the "Private Property" sign that had nothing written on it—leaving no doubt about his intended meaning.

Even more significant is the sixth verse (changed slightly in the final version, but without a change in its meaning). This verse acknowledges that there are troubles facing some in America—that all is not sunny and serene, as Irving Berlin's song implies. His allusion to "the shadow of the steeple" seems to indicate that religion hasn't offered the

answers to the problems—that God’s “blessings” have not made hunger and misery disappear from the landscape, nor has the church provided for all the needy. The last line reminds us of the very real possibility that the bounty of America has not “blessed” all men equally:

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the Relief office I saw my people –
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
God blessed America for me. (Partridge 85)

In a later revision, Woody added a seventh verse, which declared his determination to “go walking that freedom highway,” and that no one will ever stop him from this pursuit. It would be many years before “This Land Is Your Land” would become well known, and it was not until after Woody was incapacitated by illness that it became an American icon.

In his book *This Land Is Your Land*, Robert Santelli draws the comparison between Berlin and Guthrie, and describes the distinctly different intentions of their songs. “...the American utopia that Berlin wrote about didn’t exist for all of its citizens. Though an immigrant who knew firsthand poverty and squalor, Berlin chose not to write about it in ‘God Bless America.’ But Guthrie did in ‘God Blessed America.’ He too loved America—or at least the promise of America—and he had faith that it would right itself: but not blind faith. When he wrote ‘God Blessed America,’ Guthrie didn’t whitewash the country imperfections. Rather what he did was tell it like it is, as indicated by his note at the end of the page: ‘All you can write is what you see’” (82).

During his first few months in New York City, Woody spent time with actors and singers who were activists, including some whom he had met through the Geers in Los Angeles (such as Burl Ives), and a group of folk singers with Southern musical roots and experience on the front lines of the labor movement. Biographer Mark Allan Jackson explains that among the latter were Aunt Molly Jackson, Jim Garland, and Sarah Ogan, all of whom “had been active in the fierce and deadly labor struggles in Harlan County, Kentucky, in the late 1920s and early ‘30s” (219). These friends and the songs they shared were an important part of Woody’s labor education, and increased his confidence in the ability of song to help shape and motivate struggles against injustice. Songs by these artists, stories about them and about how the songs were written and used in their labor struggles, would later be included in a manuscript of American folk songs Woody wrote in collaboration with Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger.

Alan Lomax was the son of the famous ethnomusicologist, John Lomax, and had spent much of his young life listening to and collecting folk songs. At the time he met Woody, introduced by Will Geer in mid-February, 1940, at a fundraiser to benefit Spanish refugees, Alan Lomax was twenty-five years old and already the assistant director of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Woody was twenty-seven. Like Will Geer, Alan Lomax was to play a major role in Woody Guthrie’s life and career. In fact, he was instrumental in the careers of many artists, human rights movements and the Folk Revival itself.

Two weeks after being introduced to Lomax, performing at a *Grapes of Wrath* benefit concert to assist refugees and migrant workers, Woody met another person who was to have a significant affect on his life—perhaps the most important colleague in his

career—the young Harvard drop-out Pete Seeger, son of composer and ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger and violinist Constance Seeger (some accounts report both Lomax and Seeger first meeting Guthrie at this benefit concert). Biographer David Dunaway reports that Pete had heard about Guthrie from Will Geer, and was excited to have the chance to meet him. Seeger said, “I just naturally wanted to know more about him. He was a big piece of my education” (Dunaway 1981 edition 63).

With Lomax actively promoting Woody, his next six months were a whirlwind of activity. Lomax invited him to the Library of Congress to record his music, which he did in late March. He appeared on Lomax’s radio program on CBS, and was invited to write his “Woody Sez” column for the *Daily Worker*, another Communist newspaper. Pete Seeger gives an example of Woody’s tongue-in-cheek humor, writing, “Woody used to say he wrote a column for a little paper called the *Sabbath Employee*” (Seeger and Santelli 30). In May, after Lomax introduced his work to RCA Victor, Woody recorded his first commercial album for the label, *Dust Bowl Ballads*. The two-album set included many songs that have become Woody’s classics, including “Do Re Mi,” and “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You.”

Among the songs on *Dust Bowl Ballads* is “Vigilante Man,” one of his simplest and most powerful songs. In the 1930s, many labor disputes had erupted, with violent mobs of “vigilantes” attacking the striking workers, carrying guns and baseball bats. In several instances, these mobs killed and injured rallying or striking workers. Many protesters believed these strong men were not, as claimed, outraged citizens, but instead were the hired hands of the companies who were fighting the union organizing efforts. During the same period, “bulls,” hired enforcers, routinely chased homeless workers and

refugees from railroad cars and buildings. In his song, Woody plaintively asks the question, “What is a Vigilante Man?” He paints the picture of innocents tracked and hounded, and through the repetition of his question, expresses skepticism that these are men of independent action, rather than shadowy figures that are called vigilantes but, perhaps, are really something else

Well, what is a Vigilante Man?

Tell me what is a Vigilante Man?

Has he got a club in his hand?

Is that a Vigilante Man?

Oh, why does a Vigilante Man

Oh, why does a Vigilante Man

Carry that sawed off shotgun in his hand?

Would he shoot his brother and sister down?

Have you seen that Vigilante Man?

Have you seen that Vigilante Man?

I’ve heard his name all over the land (Bell and Guthrie 14).

Woody was engaged by Lomax to work with him and Pete Seeger on a book of folk songs, with Woody writing the introductions to the songs. *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* did not have a publisher, and it did not end up being published until the 1960s, but serves as a record of many of the songs Lomax was collecting and documenting in that period, including many by Guthrie. Woody then hit the road with

Pete Seeger for a trip that included a visit to the Highlander Folk School in North Carolina, renowned for teaching organizing songs to many labor and civil rights activists, and a stop in Oklahoma City, where they stayed with Communist Party organizers Bob and Ina Wood.

At the Woods's home he wrote his song, "Union Maid," in response to Ina chastising Woody and Pete for not writing labor songs about women. According to Joe Klein, the song, which became a labor classic, was Woody's parody of the song "Redwing" (162) which is a song about an Indian girl and the loss of her young brave in battle. The song paints a picture of the intimidation faced by union organizers, who included many brave women: "There once was a union maid who never was afraid/Of the goons and ginks and company finks/And the deputy sheriffs who made the raids." The chorus is a catchy and rousing statement of defiance: "Oh you can't scare me I'm sticking to the union/Sticking to the union, till the day I die" (Bell and Guthrie 18). Klein shares that, for the next decade, this "would be Woody's most popular song, appearing in union songbooks and sung on picket lines all over the country" (162). After leaving Oklahoma City, Woody and Pete headed to Pampa, and after a quick visit to his family, Woody returned to New York, with Pete heading to the west coast.

In New York, Woody appeared on a number of network radio programs in August, appeared regularly on "Back Where I Come From" on CBS, and was then hired by the network in November for "Pipe Smoking Time," sponsored by the Model Tobacco Company, enabling him to send for his family. During this period, Woody was still regularly playing clubs, bars and rallies. He hooked up with Cisco Houston, a former companion he had met in California through Will Geer. Cisco had just arrived in New

York, and Woody invited him to join him to perform in clubs. This began an important life-long friendship and collaboration between the two men.

Amidst comments in the press about his political activity, Woody stopped writing his column for the *Daily Worker*, although whether this was done to protect his place on the radio program or for some other reason is unknown. In any case, within months of starting his “Pipe Smoking Time” program, Woody became frustrated with the sponsor’s efforts to limit his material to what they thought would be acceptable to mainstream audiences. He quit the job, packing up the family and heading west in early 1941. This pattern of obtaining work and income, and then shucking it to hit the road, would be repeated throughout Woody’s life, through his breakup with Mary, his marriage to second wife, dancer Marjorie Mazia with whom he had four children, and his third marriage to Anneke Van Kirk in 1953 (a marriage that took place when he was already in the throes of Huntington’s Chorea, and which would last less than two years, producing one daughter). While in part Woody’s wandering seems to be based on his penchant for freedom, both artistic and personal, it also appears that Woody became agitated by static conditions, especially when things weren’t going his way. Staying in one place was not in his nature.

Back in California, Woody had trouble getting work, and began writing his semi-autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory*. The book was published two years later and became a classic that was made into a movie starring David Carradine. It helped cement the image of Woody Guthrie as the vagabond, singing, hobo cowboy, a down home man of the people. His early radio persona, the language and exaggerated misspellings in his *Woody Sez* columns, and the image created through his *Dust Bowl Ballads* all helped

create what Joe Klein describes as a “mythology,” and a “powerful, romantic image.” The image of Woody, spreading in the early 1940s through left-wing establishments, was of “a dusty little man wandering around the country with a guitar slung over his shoulder, making up songs that helped people to understand themselves and encouraged them to fight back” (Klein 164). While not hugely different from the real Woody Guthrie, the image was nurtured by him. Before anyone had heard of brand marketing, Woody Guthrie understood that success in show business required developing a distinctive “brand.” He was astute enough to realize that being perceived as a kindred spirit would enhance his appeal to the average working person and make him attractive both in progressive circles and to mainstream producers.

The year 1941 brought another opportunity that helped cement Woody Guthrie’s place in folk history. For one month in May, Woody worked for the Bonneville Power Authority, writing songs about the building of the Grand Coulee Dam. The songs he wrote extol the virtues of the dam, the power it would generate, and the beauty of the Columbia River Valley. Among his best and most famous songs from this project is “Pastures of Plenty,” a paean to the wealth of the land, the migrants who produced that wealth and the need to keep it free. According to Joe Klein, the tune comes from an old folk tune titled “Pretty Polly” (195-6). Another Guthrie classic from the project is *Roll On, Columbia*, in which he celebrates the power of the river and the great undertaking of the dam to tame it. He used the tune from “Goodnight Irene” for the song and credited it to its composer, his good friend and colleague, Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter (along with Alan Lomax). The lyrics to “Roll On, Columbia” and some of the other Bonneville songs, again call to mind Walt Whitman, as Guthrie references factories, places, rivers,

and jobs, creating a sweeping image of the American worker, the product of his labors and the places he inhabits. Joe Klein comments on this similarity: “His songs were beginning to sound like Walt Whitman, drunk with details” (195-6).

At the completion of the Bonneville Project, Woody headed back to New York, where he’d been invited by Pete Seeger to join him, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell in a tour of the recently formed Almanac Singers. His family life had been on the rocks for months, including loud fights with Mary, and he left the family in Portland to head east.

He admired the group he was going to join and felt their goals in making music were parallel to his, as evidenced by a letter he had sent to them a few months earlier: “You always had this one advantage over me, that you knew the real music and could ‘write it down and pack it around. You had ought to stay right in the buggy, because you are dealing with the real old honest to god songs of protest against mean treatment, and that’s the highest form of the singing business” (Guthrie, W. Letter to Pete Bowers, Lee Hays, Mill Lampell).

The Almanac Singers were at the center of the newly forming folk music revival. Growing from such influences as Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Sarah Ogan and other artists who had emerged from hardscrabble times and labor struggles of the South and West, along with the recordings, scholarship and activism of such proponents as Alan Lomax, producer John Hammond and others, the folk music revival was beginning to have a following that enabled modest commercial success. The Almanac Singers were among the first to begin to capitalize on these circumstances, although Pete Seeger and Lee Hays’s later group, The Weavers (formed in 1947 and with which Woody occasionally performed), enjoyed much bigger commercial success.

The Almanac Singers had shared values and sought to effect social change. According to author Dick Weissman, “The goal of the Almanac was to make the union movement a singing one” (184). The group created a small community in a shared apartment in New York’s Greenwich Village, which they called Almanac House, and which became a gathering place for folk musicians and leftist activists. Woody was involved early in the Almanac Singers, which over the two-year lifespan of the group had a membership that ebbed and flowed, often increasing to eight or ten people.

In performances, the Almanac’s standard fare included many peace songs, but as Woody moved east to join them for their tour, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, making a neutral position on the war untenable for American Communists and anti-fascists. The Almanacs were left with union songs as the staple of their repertoire, and quickly worked collaboratively to produce a new crop of folk songs they could use in performances. The group went on the road, traveling extensively, and was in great demand among unions. According to Elizabeth Partridge, “They had plenty of interested audiences. There were nearly 2.5 million workers on strike across America” (110). After a cross-country tour, Woody arrived in California. Mary and their children came to join him from Portland, but with Woody detached and planning to continue touring, there were no prospects for a settled family life, and Mary returned home to Pampa, Texas, beginning a separation that would ultimately lead to their divorce.

The Almanacs created a collective community at the Almanac House, a townhouse in New York’s Greenwich Village. Everyone put money into the kitty to pay for the rent and utilities. They threw parties to help pay the rent, which they called “hootenannies,” a name Woody and Pete had heard used to describe a singing party

during their travels. A wide variety of compatriots from both the folk singing and labor communities flowed through Almanac House. As described in Chapter II, among the visitors was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the I.W.W. labor activist who had served as the inspiration for Joe Hill's song "Rebel Girl." According to Guthrie biographer Will Kaufman, she bestowed "a sacred relic upon the group: a briefcase containing Hill's personal papers—in effect, this was 'the Wobbly torch' being passed to them. . ." (72). And that torch was passed along, as the time in the Almanac House was an important period of learning for the young Pete Seeger, who was exposed to various styles and genres by the folk singers visiting the house. According to Seeger biographer David King Dunaway, "The greatest influence was still Woody" (Dunaway 1981 edition 93).

On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and America entered World War II, the Almanac Singers again needed to make a change in their repertoire. Winning the war, and not union battles, was now top of mind for the workers and the nation, and besides, the war effort did a good job of putting labor back to work. Again, the Almanacs, and especially Woody, threw themselves into a frenzied period of composing songs. Anti-fascist, pro-war songs placed them in great demand, but it did not last long. According to Joe Klein, after the *New York Post* printed an article about the group's Communist affiliations in mid-February, their commercial success dried up overnight (219).

Soon after, Woody was invited to perform live for a dance concert entitled *Folksay*, being choreographed by Martha Graham dancer Sophie Maslow for her own troupe. Another young Graham dancer, Marjorie Mazia, was in the piece. She was an admirer of Woody's music and volunteered to work with him on his timing when it

became obvious that his usual freewheeling style would not work for a dance performance. Woody was used to changing rhythms and adding bars, as he desired, which was problematic when providing music for dancers who depended on the music's consistency.

Although both Woody and Marjorie were married to other people, with Mary in Texas, and Marjorie's husband working in Washington, DC, the couple was soon deeply in love. Marjorie became the love of Woody's life and a driving inspiration and help to him. She shared his worldview and encouraged and assisted him in continued work on his autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory*. Later in his life, after his failed marriage to a third wife, it was Marjorie who cared for Woody in his declining years. While Woody continued his productive career for over ten more years, and continued writing songs and books, and producing drawings and paintings, the period through 1942 established the values and goals that inspired his life's work.

Woody had two stints in the military (first with the Merchant Marines in 1943, and then in the Army for seven months in 1945) and wrote a significant body of anti-Hitler and pro-American war effort songs. In 1943, *Bound for Glory* was published, bringing him a great deal more notice. In 1944, Woody completed a large recording project for the Folkways Records label owned by record producer Moe Asch. Known as the Asch recordings, they represent one of the largest bodies of Guthrie's recorded work. He would father five more children (four of them with Marjorie, including American folksinger Arlo Guthrie), write a large body of children's songs (many now classics), and lose Cathy, his first child with Marjorie (eerily, in yet another fire). He served as inspiration and mentor to folksingers Bob Dylan and Ramblin' Jack Elliott (and many,

many others), and finally succumbed to the Huntington's chorea he inherited from his mother, Nora. The book he helped produce with Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger in 1940, *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*, would not be published until 1965, two years before Woody's death, the same year his book, *Born to Win*, was published.

What was at the heart of Woody Guthrie's work and what was his legacy? Was Woody the answer to *Daily Worker* columnist Mike Gold's search for "the proletarian writer-poet who'd become 'Shakespeare in overalls'...a 'Communist Joe Hill'" (Klein 145)? Recounting Alan Lomax's initial impressions of Woody when he first saw him perform, Joe Klein shares that Lomax reported that he knew he was seeing a true original. "He was essentially an unwitting classicist, someone who understood the power and integrity of the traditional forms and sang the old songs in an old-fashioned way... [and] even more miraculously, he was a political radical.... [T]hose were *political* songs he was singing in traditional fashion" (149-50).

This notion of originality, of an authentic, grass roots sensibility about what is right, and wrong and what to do about it, expressed directly and simply through traditional music, is echoed in John Steinbeck's foreword to *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*: "Woody is just Woody. Thousands of people do not know he has any other name. He is just a voice and a guitar. He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people. ... [T]here is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American Spirit" (Lomax 9).

In his essay “Your Land: The Lost Legacy of Woody Guthrie,” David Shumway argues convincingly that while Woody Guthrie’s ideas were indeed radical for his time, they were not radical as much in the political as in the cultural sense. While the Popular Front, the loosely knit left-wing alliance through which Guthrie became involved with political endeavors, included the Communists, it was rooted in the struggles of the American labor union movement. The idea of the union most attracted and motivated Guthrie because his chief concern was with the oppression of the working man. Despite attempts to tie Woody to Communism, Shumway asserts that “Guthrie’s radicalism should be understood as indigenous to America, not something preached by Moscow” (135). This is important because it reaffirms that Woody’s messages and his intentions are tied more to the pursuit of human rights than to any specific political agenda. Indeed, he had a general distrust for the political.

In an essay about Woody Guthrie’s artwork, Ellen Landau discusses the shared simplicity and dominant importance of meaning and message in both his visual art and his subject matter in general: “Folklorists and musicologists are in general agreement that his songs are far more interesting for the stories they tell than as examples of technical virtuosity. Eschewing musical innovation, Woody frequently borrowed well-known folk melodies, endlessly repeating the same refrains” (87).

Woody wrote about the importance of simplicity in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. Encouraging the reader to try his or her hand at writing songs, he advises, “It wouldn’t have to be fancy words. It wouldn’t have to be a fancy tune. The fancier it is the worse it is. The plainer it is the easier it is, and the easier it is, the better it is – and the words don’t even have to be spelt right” (Lomax 19). Remarking on the same subject,

Guthrie again echoes Whitman's "Song of Myself" in celebrating the voice and life of the common man—the Everyman. "I won't say that my guitar playing or singing is anything fancy on a stick. I'd rather sound like the cab drivers cursing at each other, like the longshoreman yelling, like the cowherds whooping and the lone wolf baying—like anything in this big green universe than to sound slick, smooth-tongued, oily-lipped" (Landau 87).

Woody's son Arlo sums up his father's greatest gift as a philosophy typically known as "Carpe Diem," or "Seize the Day." He writes that some people could not understand "the thing he tried to express the most, which was this fabulous, wonderful gift of just being in the moment. Being right there and not worrying about what the future was going to be so much, or what the past had been. But just grasping it, and munching it fully and completely, as if it was the only moment that was every going to be" (Arlo Guthrie 41).

Woody's legacy is multi-faceted, but it is his special ability to integrate ideas about right and wrong into simple folk songs that celebrate a people and country he loved that set him apart from others. There is a directness and a stripped-down expression of the places and situations he had observed that make Woody's songs so powerful, enduring and important. Many songwriters name him as a primary influence, from the aforementioned Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Jack Elliott, to John Lennon, Bruce Springsteen and dozens (probably hundreds) more. His songs have been sung in recent times at Occupy Movement rallies. At the first inaugural celebration for President Barack Obama, the most poignant moment was when Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen sang all of the original lyrics to "This Land Is Your Land."

Woody's ability to live in the moment made him a great observer, and he wanted to share what he had seen. Living and feeling deeply undoubtedly caused Woody Guthrie some trials and made his personal life complicated, but it also formed a deep passion, both for those he loved and for the need to try to change circumstances he thought were unjust. His sensibility connected him to the sounds and stories around him, and he shared them through his prolific songwriting, storytelling and works of art. Perhaps one of his *Woody Sez* columns says it best

Out of all our hard work and low pay, and tired backs, and empty pocketbooks, is goin' to come a tune.

And that song and that tune aint got no end and it aint got no notes wrote down and they aint no piece of paper big enough to put it down on.

Every day you are down and out, and lonesome, and hungry, and tired of workin' for a hoboes handout, theys a new verse added to the song.

Every time you kick a family out of a house, cause they ain't got the rent, and owe lots of debts, why, theys another verse added to this song.

When a soldier shoots a soldier, that's a note to this song. When a cannon blows up 20 men, that's part of the rhythm, and when soldiers march off over the hill and dont march back, that's the drumbeat of this song.

This aint a song you can write down and sell.

This song is everywhere at the same time.

Have you ever heard it?

I have (Guthrie, *Woody Sez* 140-41).

CHAPTER IV. "STRANGE FRUIT"

BITTER CROP:

The Birth and Impact of "Strange Fruit"

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop (Meeropol).

"Strange Fruit" by Abel Meeropol (Lewis Allan)

In the early 1930s, a Jewish high school English teacher named Abel Meeropol (pen name Lewis Allan) saw a photograph of a lynching that had an enormous emotional impact on him. He stated, "Way back in the early Thirties, I saw a photograph of a lynching published in a magazine devoted to the exposure and elimination of racial

injustice. It was a shocking photograph and haunted me for days. As a result, I wrote 'Strange Fruit' ... " (Baker 45).

It is not surprising that the song, immortalized by the April 20, 1939 recording by Billie Holiday, and often incorrectly attributed to her, came from the pen of a man of Meeropol's convictions. An activist in civil and human rights, he believed strongly in the need for federal anti-lynching legislation. "Strange Fruit" has a complex set of origins and influences, and was the most famous work written by Meeropol and the most influential (and only overtly political) song recorded by Billie Holiday. The impact of the song on early civil rights consciousness and activism was significant. This chapter explores the context and possible influences on Meeropol's composition, how the song was introduced to Billie Holiday and became not only a famous recording but also a powerful piece of theatre as performed by her. Also discussed are the repercussions the song had at the time of its recording, in the years that followed, and into the present.

Abel Meeropol was born in Manhattan in 1903 to Jewish Russian parents, and attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, to which he returned as an English teacher after receiving his B.A. from City College of New York and his M.A. in English Literature from Harvard University (Baker 26). He was teaching at DeWitt Clinton when he wrote "Strange Fruit," which, according to Nancy Kovaleff Baker in an article on Meeropol in *American Music*, was first published "as a poem titled 'Bitter Fruit' in a Teachers Union publication, *The New York Teacher*, in January 1937" (Baker 45). This publication, two years before the song was first performed by Billie Holiday, and before Abel Meeropol had met her, proves not only that Billie Holiday did not write the song, as

she later claimed, but also that it was not written specifically for her, as she was also known to report.

Meeropol was a Communist, although he tried to keep this fact quiet throughout his life, and he was active in the Popular Front movement during the 1930s. He wrote under the pen name Lewis Allan (the names of his two children who had died in infancy) because he did not want his political activities to create problems for him in his teaching position at a time when the teachers union was coming under scrutiny for its political activities. He later gained some notice in Communist and progressive circles when he and his wife adopted the two sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg after the Rosenbergs's execution for espionage in 1953.

Abel Meeropol wrote literally thousands of poems and songs, many of which were political in nature, dealing with anti-Semitism, labor union issues, and human and civil rights. It seems clear that he felt his own Jewish heritage and the experience of American Jews with anti-Semitism created a kinship with the plight of American blacks and the racism they experienced. These lyrics overtly expressed the association he felt:

I am a Jew

How may I tell?

The Negro lynched

Reminds me well

I am a Jew (Baker 45).

In the years immediately preceding the writing of "Strange Fruit," the NAACP was working hard to get federal anti-lynching legislation passed. In 1935-36, the New York chapter of the NAACP organized two visual art shows addressing the subject of

lynching, with works by black, Asian and Latino artists (“Strange Fruit”). Lynchings were brutal murders, often including torture, during or after which the victim was hung, with a large and even festive gathering of spectators. David Margolick, in his book about “Strange Fruit,” shares the gruesome statistics of American post-Civil War lynchings: “Between 1889 and 1940, 3,833 people were lynched; ninety percent of them were murdered in the South, and four-fifths of them were black” (35). Although the numbers of lynchings decreased throughout the 1930s—only three lynchings were reported in 1939—the overall climate of racism and the continuing Jim Crow laws in the south made lynching not only a horrific act in itself, but also symbolic of the degradation and inequality suffered by blacks, especially in the Southern United States. An informed progressive activist, Abel Meeropol was well aware of the ingrained state of racism in America. But it was encountering a gruesome postcard of a double lynching that had taken place in 1930 Indiana that motivated him to write “Strange Fruit.”

In her article about Meeropol, Nancy Kovaleff Baker suggests that a black protest song published in *New Masses* in 1931 (the journal to which Meeropol originally submitted “Strange Fruit”) may have added to Meeropol’s inspiration for writing the song. She writes, “A Black protest song titled ‘Sistren an’ Brethren’... has similar imagery and may have suggested to Meeropol the conceit for ‘Strange Fruit’:

Yo’ head ‘tain’ no apple

Fo’ danglin’ from a tree,

Yo’ body no carcass for barbacin’ on a spree.

The song was originally included in a small 1936 book titled *Negro Songs of Protest* (Baker 46).

Meeropol moved in a circle of teacher's union members who sympathized greatly with the Popular Front—Communists, progressives and liberals united to combat fascism. In the documentary film about "Strange Fruit" by Joel Katz, visual artist and fellow teacher Honey Kassoy recalls of Abel, "He wrote words, he wrote music...he was a real fun guy to be with. We weren't unaware of what was going on in the South, even though we lived in the Bronx. We were very aware, and the teacher's union was very aware." In the same film, labor historian, activist and fellow teacher Henry Foner said, "I consider Abel as a pioneer," and expressed his opinion that the fact that an anthem on lynching came from the pen of a Jewish writer "is very significant, and symbolic of the period" (*Strange Fruit*). This was a period when Jews were being systematically targeted in Nazi Germany.

With fascism and anti-Semitism on the rise in Europe, relentlessly harsh economic realities for working class people, and actual or de facto segregation the norm throughout most of the U.S., there was a growing sense of urgency among progressive activists. Abel Meeropol, known among friends for his great humor, was passionate about injustice. "How did one of the funniest men I ever knew, Abel Meeropol, have such a dark consciousness to write a poem like 'Strange Fruit' and then set it to music in such a haunting melody? My father was not only one of the funniest people, he was one of the angriest people," said son Michael Meeropol, interviewed for Katz's documentary (*Strange Fruit*). Michael was the younger of the two Rosenberg children.

After the poem, then titled "Bitter Fruit," was published in 1937, Meeropol himself wrote the music to turn it into a song, although he often relied on others to compose music for his lyrics (including Earl Robinson, the composer of the music for the

famous union song “Joe Hill”). According to author Margolick, “The song was then performed regularly in left-wing circles—by Meeropol’s wife, by progressive friends...by members of the local teachers union, by a black vocalist named Laura Duncan (including once at Madison Square Garden), and by a quartet of black singers at a fund-raiser for the anti-Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. As it happened, the co-producer of that fund-raiser, Robert Gordon, was also directing the first floor show at Café Society, which had opened in December 1938. The featured attraction: Billie Holiday...” (17).

There are conflicting stories about how the song “Strange Fruit” first came to Billie Holiday, her initial reactions and understanding of the song, and who was responsible for the music used in the recording. What is very clear is that Billie Holiday’s version of the story, as reported in her autobiography co-written with William Dufty, is not accurate:

It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest—‘Strange Fruit.’ The germ of the song was in a poem written by Lewis Allen (sic). I first met him at Café Society. When he showed me that poem, I dug it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop. Allen, too, had heard how Pop died and of course was interested in my singing. He suggested that Sonny White, who had been my accompanist, and I turn it into music. So the three of us got together and did the job in about three weeks. I also got a wonderful assist from Danny Mendelsohn, another writer who had done arrangements for me. He helped me with arranging the song and rehearsing it patiently (Holiday 94).

Since there is concrete evidence that the poem was written and published in 1937, before Café Society opened in December 1938, and that the song was first performed by Meeropol's wife, Anne, at a Theatre Arts Committee function, and also performed by others before Billie Holiday ever saw it, we know her version is untrue. It was neither inspired by her story nor were the lyrics or music written by her.

There are various timelines for the writing and performance of the lyrics with music. In her article on Meeropol, Nancy Kovaleff Baker shows the sketch of the musical notation for "Strange Fruit," now in The Meeropol Collection at Boston University. This sketch was written by hand on the back of a program for the Theatre Arts Committee's political cabaret on November 13, 1938 (a month before the opening of Café Society). The program also gives us a glimpse of some of Meeropol's other political work, as a satirical song written by him was performed on the program that evening. "The Chamberlain Crawl" mocks the appeasement policy of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (Baker 46-47). In her article, Baker ponders whether it is coincidental that November 13 was only four days after Kristallnacht, a pivotal event in which Jewish establishments were vandalized and Jews were killed, and which was followed by the arrests, deportations, and mass murders of Jews in Nazi Germany and Austria. Kristallnacht is often considered the first implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution." The possibility that Kristallnacht furthered Meeropol's resolve to put the poem "Strange Fruit" to music resonates when one reflects on the affinity the writer clearly felt between the experiences of blacks and Jews.

Sometime in late 1938 or early 1939 (reports differ), Meeropol brought the song to Café Society to show it to Holiday. Meeropol reported that he had been invited by

Robert Gordon, the aforementioned director of the Café Society floor show, and the club owner, Barney Josephson. However, based on his interview with the former club owner, David Margolick reports, “According to Josephson, Meeropol just showed up there” (42). Meeropol played the song for Holiday. Much has been made of the different interpretations of what happened next, and with good reason.

Holiday stated in her autobiography that she co-wrote the song (although Meeropol successfully sued to have the attribution of authorship revised in the second edition of the autobiography, the inaccuracy reappeared later in the paperback edition). However, Holiday was a notoriously unreliable source of information. The biography included many other untruths and half-truths, ranging from the opening line of the book, stating that her parents got married (which they never did) to claiming her place of birth as Baltimore, although it was actually Philadelphia. In fact, author David Margolick writes that Holiday’s autobiography “offers an account of the song’s origins that may set a new record for the most misinformation per column inch.” He then shares parenthetically that “(Holiday later tried to fob off the blame on Dufty: ‘Shit, man, I ain’t never read that book,’ she said. In fact, because her publisher was skittish about the entire undertaking, it made her read and sign every page of the manuscript” (31-32).

As noted earlier, Holiday claims to have “dug it right off,” and to have understood its significance, relating it to her own anger about her father’s death. According to Holiday, her father, jazz musician Clarence Holiday, was refused treatment for pneumonia at a number of whites-only hospitals in Texas, and by the time he was admitted to the Jim Crow ward at the VA Hospital it was too late, and he died (Holiday 77).

The story shared by Josephson and, to some extent, Meeropol, is quite different. Josephson later stated that Holiday “didn’t know what the hell the song meant....She looked at me...and said ‘What do you want me to do with that, man? and I said ‘It would be wonderful if you’d sing it. If you care to. You don’t have to. And she said ‘You wants me to sing it? I sings it.’ And she sang it” (Margolick 43-44). He went on to say that he was only convinced that she understood the meaning of the lyrics several months later when he saw her cry during a performance.

Meeropol’s statements are less clear and stop short of suggesting Holiday didn’t understand the overall message of the song. He “didn’t think she felt comfortable with the song” and suggested that she might not have sung it “if Barney Josephson and Bob Gordon had not been so impressed by the song.” He stated that Holiday was “not communicative at all” the day he played the song for her, and asked only one question...”what did ‘pastoral’ mean?” (Margolick 43).

In her book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis posits that the white men involved and those who later wrote about the event, including Barney Josephson himself and biographers John Chilton and Donald Clarke, insulted Holiday’s intelligence and treated her in a stereotypical manner: “Her stature as an artist and her ability to comprehend social issues were both disparaged and defined as results of plans conceived by savvy white men. Chilton’s, Clarke’s, and Josephson’s stories capture Holiday in a web of gendered, classed, and raced inferiority and present her as capable of producing great work only under tutelage of her racial superiors” (Davis 187).

The truth, although cloudy, is probably closer to Davis’s interpretation. Certainly, Josephson’s account seems self-aggrandizing and insulting. This song helped put his club

on the map—he used the song itself, as well as Billie Holiday’s name, to advertise the club. Holiday was “referred to in press accounts as ‘the buxom, colored songstress’ or ‘the sepian songstress’” and the song itself was touted “HAVE YOU HEARD? ‘Strange Fruit growing on Southern trees’ sung by Billie Holiday” in an ad in *The New Yorker* in March 1939, reproduced in Margolick’s book (63). In other words, Josephson was quite willing to exploit Holiday’s name and performance, and just as willing to suggest that she was a mere vehicle for his insight and machinations.

Despite her lack of formal education and her heavy drug use, it is inconceivable that Holiday did not understand the meaning of the powerful lyrics. While poetic and metaphorical, the meaning is fairly overt. Although she had never seen a lynching, she would have been heavily exposed to descriptions of lynchings. Given her own extensive negative experiences with Jim Crow while touring the South, and the realities of being an African-American in 1930s United States, she would have had a deep understanding of the realities the song expressed. At the same time, it is not surprising if she had some reluctance to perform the song, which she certainly knew would be controversial, as well as emotionally difficult. She later expressed that it depressed her every time she sang it (Holiday 95).

There is also controversy as to who contributed to the final version of the composition as recorded on April 20, 1939. First, Columbia Records refused to record the song. Holiday succeeded in getting it recorded by Commodore Records, which was a small studio located in Milt Gabler’s record shop on West 52nd Street. Gabler was known for his leftist politics and his support of a progressive group of artists. In his book, *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, Dorian Lynskey sets a context for the date of the recording,

which was “just eleven days after Marian Anderson marked a watershed for Black musicians with her rescheduled Easter concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial” (9).

Meeropol had written the original music performed in the first two years of the song’s existence. To what extent he or others later revised this version is unclear. Two comments shed some light on musical contributions by others. The first is a quote from Milt Gabler in Joel Katz’s documentary film, *Strange Fruit*. Gabler shares that Holiday “came into the store very unhappy” because Columbia Records didn’t want to record “Strange Fruit” because “they didn’t think ‘Strange Fruit’ would be a commercial success.” Gabler says, “We set the date. I used the band that accompanied her at the Café Society where she was performing the song, and the rest was history. It’s so striking and important a song that to set the mood for it, I had the pianist play like an interlude, in fact I put it on the label—Interlude by Sonny White, and Billie comes in and does her stuff” (*Strange Fruit*). This suggests that at the very least the interlude on the recording was written by someone other than Meeropol—by pianist Sonny White.

Another account comes from Arthur Herzog, writer of two famous tunes sung by Holiday and often misattributed solely to her (“Don’t Explain” and “God Bless the Child”). Herzog, interviewed by David Margolick, said it was the arranger, Danny Mendelsohn (also given credit by Holiday), who provided the song’s “ultimate sound. He [Meeropol] wrote something or other alleged to be music and Barney [Josephson] gave it to Danny and Danny rewrote it. Put it into shape. Whether he rewrote it or discarded, I don’t know” (48-49).

Margolick comments that “Holiday bent and twisted and tweaked every song she ever sang and surely played with ‘Strange Fruit’ too” (49). However, such bending of

sung notes in jazz would normally be considered interpretation, not songwriting. Lynskey aptly describes the strength of the artistic choices made by Holiday in her delivery: “Others might have overplayed the irony or punched home the moral judgment too forcefully but she sings it as though her responsibility is simply to document the song’s eerie tableau, to bear witness. ...Her gifts to the song are vulnerability, understatement, and immediacy: the listener is right there, at the base of the tree” (9-10).

A friend of Meeropol, Martin Brin, interviewed by Margolick, also suggests that the music may have been changed from Abel’s original version, although this may have been simply a matter of style and interpretation, as described above, including tempo and emphasis. Brin’s description suggests that the original music may have lacked the languorous quality, subtlety and slowly unveiled horror that is so effective on the Holiday recording: “Martin Brin, who had performed the song among Meeropol’s left-wing friends in the Catskills long before Holiday had ever heard of it, said he went about the task very differently. ‘I was a little disappointed [with Holiday’s version] because it sounded a little like jazz,’ he recalled. ‘We sang it with sort of a zip, with punch.’” (49).

In the end, although he wanted to receive appropriate credit for his work, Meeropol forgave Holiday for her misrepresentations about the origin of “Strange Fruit.” He wrote that “Billie Holiday had a problem with liquor and drugs and like other black artists had in many ways a tragic life and a hard road to travel. I can understand the psychological reasons why the peripheral truths and actual facts surrounding her life were unimportant to her and why she took liberties with them or invented some of them out of whole cloth....I did not hold any enmity toward Billie Holiday for her lapses into fancy

nor would I want the fact that she made untrue statements bruited about now that she is dead” (Margolick 129).

David Margolick calls Café Society “probably the only place in America where ‘Strange Fruit’ could have been sung and savored” (42). What was Café Society and why was it so different and so special? The nightclub in New York’s Greenwich Village was created by Barney Josephson, a former shoe salesman, who, according to Geoffrey Ward in his history of jazz, “hoped—with John Hammond’s help—to demonstrate that New Yorkers would turn out to hear jazz presented ‘with dignity and respect’ before a genuinely integrated audience. He billed it as ‘The Wrong Place for the Right People’—and it was a hit, not only with those who shared his liberal politics but even with some of the society people its slogan was meant to lampoon” (Ward 269).

Café Society attempted to combine the best elements of European cabarets with Harlem jazz clubs, and was frequented by a wide variety of progressive thinkers, from artists and writers to jazz aficionados, to leftist activists. A striking statement was made by the garb and behavior of the club’s doormen. David Margolick describes the environment and the clientele: “At Café Society, the doormen wore rags and ragged white gloves and stood by as the customers opened the door themselves; the bartenders were all veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; blacks and whites fraternized on stage and off” (40). Patrons included, over the course of time, everyone from Nelson Rockefeller, Charlie Chaplin and Errol Flynn, to Lauren Bacall, Lillian Hellman, Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson. Even Eleanor Roosevelt stopped in one time. Among those who performed there were Lena Horne, Teddy Wilson, Sarah Vaughan, Imogene Coca, Carol Channing and Zero Mostel” (41-42).

In her book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis posits, “Before the vast movements of the 1930s and the consequent radicalization of large sectors of the population, the phenomenon of ‘Strange Fruit’ would have been inconceivable. Indeed, New York’s interracial Café Society, where the song first was performed, could not have existed earlier. Barney Josephson, who opened the club at a time when even in Harlem black and white people could not listen to jazz under the same roof, told Holiday that ‘this was to be one club where there was going to be no segregation, no racial prejudice’ (Davis 190).

Thanks to John Hammond’s influence, Billie Holiday was on the first bill at Café Society—“and she stayed for almost nine months, doing three shows a night backed by the trumpeter Frankie Newton’s band” (Ward 269). As noted, this was where Holiday first was introduced to “Strange Fruit” and where she first performed it publicly. First, however, she tried it out at a party in Harlem, arriving in the early morning hours. According to an account collected by Margolick, Holiday announced at the party, “I would like to sing a new song which I have been rehearsing all day; it’s called ‘Strange Fruit.’ I want to see what you all think of it.” A young salesman named Charles Gilmore, who was present, shared that the loud party became silent: “That was all she sang; nobody asked her to sing anything else. There was a finality about the last note. Even the pianist knew. He just got up and walked away. It was an odd thing. Nobody clapped or anything.” He reported that after an interval of silence people started yelling “You did it again, girl!” and “Great song!” (45).

By every account, the first performance at Café Society received a similar reaction. In her autobiography, Holiday noted, “I was scared people would hate it. The

first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake and I had been right being scared. There wasn't even a patter of applause when I finished. Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping" (Holiday 94).

Abel Meeropol attended the first performance at Café Society and was very pleased with Holiday's interpretation of his song. He described the experience in an article in *Broadside* in 1973: "She gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation, which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywhere. ... This was exactly what I wanted the song to do and why I wrote it" (Lynskey 8).

Unfortunately, Abel's satisfaction was soon to dissipate, as Holiday tried to gain credit for the song. First, she began telling audiences the song had been written especially for her, and then allowed it to be recorded without giving Meeropol (Lewis Allan) any credit on the disk. But she was getting attention for her performances of "Strange Fruit," and with Barney Josephson's assistance, was creating a piece of political theatre out of a single, short song.

Geoffrey Ward shares Josephson's recounting of the staging of the performance: "I made her do it as her last number, and no matter how thunderous the applause, she had orders from me not to return for even a bow. I wanted the song to sink in. ... The room was completely blacked out, service stopped—at the bar, everywhere. The waiters were not permitted to take a glass to the table, or even take an order. So everything stopped—and everything was dark except for a little pin spot on her face. That was it. When she sang 'Strange Fruit,' she never moved. Her hands went down. She didn't even touch the mike. With the little light on her face. The tears never interfered with her voice, but the tears would come and knock everybody in that house out" (Ward 270).

Josephson called the song “agitprop,” a left-wing political term combining agitation and propaganda. Clearly, this was also how Meeropol had intended the song to be used, and despite those who stated Holiday didn’t fully understand the song, it also seems to be Billie Holiday’s intention. In her biography, she writes, “It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest—‘Strange Fruit’” (Holiday 94). Madeline Gilford, widow of the comedian who was Café Society’s emcee, recounted that Holiday’s mother objected to her singing the song and asked her why she was doing it. Holiday told her she sang it because it could make things better. “But you’ll be dead,” was her mother’s reply. “Yeah, but I’ll feel it. I’ll know it in my grave” (Margolick 47). This suggests that not only did Holiday intend the song as political action, but understood that singing the number could be challenging or even dangerous for her, and she was prepared to deal with that.

On April 20, 1939, when Billie Holiday and her backup band from Café Society entered the studio to make the first and most famous recording of “Strange Fruit,” she was only twenty-four years old. There were eight musicians on the record, in addition to Holiday: band leader Frankie Newton on trumpet, pianist Sonny White (who had once been engaged briefly to Holiday), alto sax player Tab Smith and bassist Johnny Williams, guitarist Jimmy McLin, tenor players Stan Payne and Kenneth Hollon, and Eddie Dougherty on drums. (Margolick 63). The group recorded several other songs that day, including “Fine and Mellow,” which went on the flip side of “Strange Fruit” and was quite successful in its own right.

In her autobiography, Billie Holiday described this recording of “Strange Fruit” as her biggest-selling record. The 10-inch record was sold for a dollar each, which was

high for the time. Margolick shares information from an interview with Gabler: “Gabler gave Holiday five hundred dollars for the four sides, plus a thousand dollars later. How much she eventually earned for the songs he could not say. ‘We used to give her cash, especially when she was in trouble, right out of the cash register in the store. We never really kept a record of it,’ explained Gabler” (64). Within a short time, the recording reached number sixteen on the Pop Music charts, but was banned on some radio networks (*Strange Fruit*).

Although Columbia Records had declined to record the song, believing it had no commercial value, the musicians in the session believed differently from the start. Bassist John Williams said, “The words were so true; that’s why the fellows thought it was going to be a hit. But we didn’t think it was going to be as big as it was” (Margolick 68).

Although saxophonist Kenneth Hollon claimed the record sold 10,000 copies in its first week, this was almost certainly an exaggeration, as *The New Yorker* published that by 1945, six years after its release, it had sold 50,000 copies (Margolick 68). Writing in 2010 about the impact of “Strange Fruit” in an article in *The Guardian*, Edwin Moore stated, “the record eventually sold over a million copies and became one of the most influential songs of all time” (Moore).

According to the article on Meeropol by Nancy Kovaleff Baker, the Commodore recording was made without Abel Meeropol’s knowledge, and he received no credit on it (52). Margolick notes that Meeropol had not copyrighted “Strange Fruit” because he believed it to have no commercial value, and “learned it had been recorded only when a friend brought him the Commodore 78. After threatening to hire a lawyer, he ultimately got standard royalties: two cents per record, one for the words, another for the music”

(69). While sheet music sales were somewhat disappointing, receipts from the song did add up. “According to Bob Golden of Carlin America, long time publishers of ‘Strange Fruit,’ the Meeropols, father and sons, have collected more than \$300,000 from the song over the past sixty years” (69-70).

In addition to some income and much praise from progressive factions, Margolick explains that Abel Meeropol also got some unwanted attention for his song: “Forced to testify in 1941 before a state probe of Communist ‘subversion’ in New York’s public schools...Meeropol was asked whether the Communist Party had paid him for ‘Strange Fruit’ or if he’d donated whatever he’d earned from it to the Party” (70). He answered no to all questions. According to Meeropol friend and union activist Henry Foner, these accusations were typical at the time. “If you raised your voice against lynching or you raised your voice against discrimination, you were accused of being a Communist” (*Strange Fruit*). Later, in 1950, when folksinger Josh White, who also performed “Strange Fruit” regularly, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), as part of his testimony he read the lyrics of “Strange Fruit” into the Congressional record (*Strange Fruit*). “Why shouldn’t a Negro artist—and for that matter any decent person—raise his voice against lynching?” White asked the committee (Margolick 104).

According to Margolick, the song was to be recorded five times by Holiday after the original Commodore recording. There was a second version for Commodore; a 1945 “Jazz at the Philharmonic” recording, in which, according to a *Down Beat* review, Holiday “breaks into an unashamed sob”; a 1951 recording made at the Boston nightclub,

Storyville; a 1956 studio version; and a London telecast in February 1959 (125). Billie Holiday died within one year of this last recording. She was only forty-four years old.

In many ways, “Strange Fruit,” in both its live performances and its recordings, represented an early salvo in the battle for African-American civil rights that finally erupted full-scale in the 1960s. Dr. C. T. Vivian, a civil rights activist, said, “There are no great movements that do not have music. Even as early as this song was, it was helping to create the music for a movement” (*Strange Fruit*). The aforementioned *Negro Songs of Protest*, compiled by Lawrence Gellert, included twenty-four songs from Southern singers, who shared them only after receiving a promise of anonymity. It was “published by the American Music League, a Popular Front-affiliate of the Communist Party U.S.A. The book featured lyrics of black discontent and rebellion rarely encountered by a white readership” (Garabedian 179). These songs emerged from within a black, Southern folk tradition, and never entered the mainstream. Other traditional songs with religious and folk music roots were adapted for protest purposes by the Labor and Civil Rights Movements, but also did not enter the popular music realm.

The only two songs earlier than or contemporary with “Strange Fruit” to address racial issues head-on within popular music genres were “Black and Blue” by Andy Razaf and Fats Waller, from the 1929 musical *Hot Chocolates*, and Leadbelly’s “Bourgeois Blues” written in 1938. The former was brief, fleeting and unique in its genre, and while the latter had direct lyrics about the discrimination that bluesman Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) had experienced during a visit to Washington, D.C., it lacked both the strong and visceral impact and the widespread acclaim achieved by “Strange Fruit.”

Angela Davis describes “Strange “Fruit” as “a song that was able to awaken from their apolitical slumber vast numbers of people from diverse racial backgrounds” (Davis 182). Davis admits that Holiday was not by any means the first to sing about the infringement of civil rights for African-Americans, but that her performances of “Strange Fruit” played an important role at a pivotal time. “Holiday hardly forged this tradition—indeed, its roots lie in the early days of slavery—but she most decidedly stands as a bridge between the past and the present, with her career as a galvanizing transition between her musical ancestors and descendants” (Davis 197).

Songwriter E.Y. “Yip” Harburg called “Strange Fruit” an “historic document,” and record producer Ahmet Ertegun called the song, “which Holiday first sang sixteen years before Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, ‘a declaration of war...the beginning of the civil rights movement’” (Margolick 17). Of the poem and song, jazz critic Leonard Feather wrote, “This was the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism. It was radical and defiant at a time when blacks and whites alike found it dangerous to make waves, to speak out against a deeply entrenched status quo” (Davis 196). Drummer Max Roach said, “When she recorded it, it was more than revolutionary. ...She became a voice of black people and they loved this woman” (Margolick 21).

Activists of the period saw the song as a potentially powerful tool. In Congress, when Southern senators planned to filibuster in an attempt to bury anti-lynching legislation, the New York Theatre Arts Committee sent each member of the Senate the lyrics of “Strange Fruit.” Despite years of lobbying, no federal anti-lynching legislation was ever passed (*Strange Fruit*).

Not surprisingly, reactions to the song were mixed. Some reviews found fault with the fact that “Strange Fruit” was too different from Holiday’s prior work, and some felt its serious subject matter inappropriate for jazz. A *Down Beat* critic wrote, “Perhaps I expected too much of ‘Strange Fruit,’ the ballyhooed...tune which, via gory wordage and hardly any melody, expounds an anti-lynching campaign. At least I’m sure it’s not for Billie.” John Hammond called it “artistically the worst thing that ever happened” to Holiday (Margolick 78).

At many performances, patrons walked out during the song, and others were vocal in their objections. In her biography, Holiday tells of one instance in the early 1940s in California: “...it only took one cracker in the audience to wreck things. ...I remember the night this white boy stayed around just to bug me. When I started singing it [“Strange Fruit”], he’d start kicking up a storm of noise, rattling glasses, calling me nigger, and cursing nigger singers.” According to Holiday, Bob Hope came into the club and offered to step in to “take care of him” and did so, trading insults with the boy until he left the club (Holiday 105).

In an interview with Margolick, Barney Josephson recounted that even in the sanctuary of Café Society the song wasn’t always welcomed: “Lots of people walked out on the song, party after party, because they said ‘we don’t call this entertainment.’ He told of a woman who followed Billie into the ladies room, “hysterical with tears—“Don’t you sing that song again! Don’t you dare!” she screamed—and ripped Billie’s [dress].” The song had brought back her memories of a lynching she’d seen in the South when she was seven or eight years old (89).

Margolick collected many people's reactions to experiencing the song performed live. Songwriter Irene Wilson shared a story of a white Southern man at Café Society who, when Holiday was on her way out of the club invited her over and said "I want to show you some 'strange fruit,' and drew an obscene picture on a napkin. According to Wilson, Holiday hit him over the head with a chair before the club bouncers intervened and threw the man out of the club (55). Josh White, who also performed the song regularly, explained that he "encountered plenty of hostility." At a performance "in New Castle, Pennsylvania, a man in the audience shouted 'Yeah, that song was written by a nigger lover! And headed menacingly toward the stage'" (Margolick 102).

For her part, Holiday would not sing "Strange Fruit" everywhere. Margolick explains that she was cautious about where she performed the song, and sometimes paid for it when she wasn't: "In New York, apart from 52nd Street, she confined herself to places like Harlem and Union Square...Out of town, she favored black theaters and concert halls and progressive nightclubs, most of them owned by Jews" (84). Holiday rarely performed the song in the South, and reported that when she did, there was trouble. In an interview she said that she was driven out of Mobile, Alabama for trying to sing it (91).

"Strange Fruit" made many people uncomfortable, and this was reflected in limited radio play. According to Margolick, pianist Billy Taylor said, "I don't think it was ever banned officially, I think they just said 'Don't play that.'" (92). A *New York Post* account in November 1939 recounts that station WNEW went back and forth on approving a live broadcast of the song, finally allowing its airing. The song "was also banned on the BBC" (92-93).

Most of the accounts of reactions to the song and its recordings are powerful testaments to its significant and lasting impact. “It is Billie’s pure, un-self-pitying, distilled-emotion approach to the material that haunts our memories,” wrote Gunther Schuller (Margolick 66). Reviewing the recording in October 1939, *New York Post* columnist Samuel Grafton wrote, “This is about a phonograph record which has obsessed me for two days. It is called ‘Strange Fruit,’ and it will, even after the tenth hearing, make you blink and hold onto your chair. Even now, as I think of it, the short hair on the back of my neck tightens and I want to hit somebody. And I think I know who” (Margolick 73).

The accounts of the song’s impact are endless. They frequently include the words “haunting,” “unforgettable,” or “throat-tightening,” or recount how the song moved them to become activists. Margolick shares the remarks of Fred Stone, a newly discharged sailor who saw Holiday perform the song in Chicago in 1946 and said, “When she finished there was no applause, but everyone in the club just stood up with their heads bowed. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life” (117).

The response to “Strange Fruit” by the black populous and the black press was not overly effusive or engaged. Margolick’s survey of contemporary black newspapers found that “references to ‘Strange Fruit’ were rare, muted, strangely off key” and posited that “the song reverberated mostly among the intelligentsia, and the older intelligentsia at that.” He quotes Frank Bolden, of the prominent black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*: “Kids in black colleges were unhappy with the song, they thought these kinds of songs made fun of black people” (94). Yet many black audiences responded strongly to the song. According to Jack Schiffman, the son of the owner of the Apollo Theatre, after

Billie Holiday's first Apollo performance of the song, there was "a moment of oppressively heavy silence...and then a kind of rustling sound I had never heard before. It was the sound of almost two thousand (black) people sighing" (Davis 195).

Ultimately, the impact of "Strange Fruit" was far reaching and long lasting. Angela Davis writes that Billie Holiday "could not have predicted that 'Strange Fruit' would impel people to discover within themselves a previously unawakened calling to political activism, but it did, and it does. She could not have foreseen the catalytic role her song would play in rejuvenating the tradition of protest and resistance in African-American and American traditions of popular music and culture. Nevertheless, Billie Holiday's recording of 'Strange Fruit' persists as one of the most influential and profound examples—and continuing sites—of the intersection of music and social consciousness" (Davis 196).

"Strange Fruit" has received much attention in the years since its introduction. It has been covered by literally dozens of artists as varied as Tori Amos, Terence Blanchard, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Carmen McRae, Nina Simone, Sting, UB40, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Cassandra Wilson. It appeared in the 1947 collection *People's Songbook*, compiled by Pete Seeger and others. In the early 1960s, it remained too controversial for mainstream America. Margolick tells of the story of an appearance on the TV show "Hootenanny" by Josh White, in which White's choice was made clear—if he wanted to appear on the show, he would not be singing "Strange Fruit" (134). Shows, dances and books have used the name "Strange Fruit" when dealing with the subject of lynching. In 1972, the Holiday biopic, *Lady Sings the Blues*, added to the false

information in Holiday's autobiography, fabricating a scene of Holiday witnessing a lynching, and presenting only a portion of the song, leaving out the strongest images.

The song has received its due over time. "In 1978 the Commodore recording from 1939 was voted into the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame, and Lewis Allan received recognition and a certificate as the songwriter" (Baker 54). On December 31, 1999, *Time* magazine named Billie Holiday's 1939 recording of "Strange Fruit" the "Best Song" in its "Best of the Century" article, writing, "In this sad, shadowy song about lynching in the South, history's greatest jazz singer comes to terms with history itself" ("*Best of*").

While "Strange Fruit" is an immensely powerful and important song that delivered an emotional punch and message matched by few songs in the history of music, it is not what we typically think of as a protest song. Yet it certainly was a protest song, and a very effective one. It was not sung by thousands at a mass rally, but created its impact through recordings and in live performances, one horrified listener at a time. In the end, despite its authorship by Abel Meeropol, the song is most associated with Billie Holiday, and perhaps that is fitting, since her magnificent interpretation made a huge contribution to the successful effect of the song. As Dorian Lynskey describes in *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, "'Strange Fruit' ...did not belong to the many but to one troubled woman. It was not a song to be sung lustily with your comrades during a strike but something profoundly lonely and inhospitable. ...For all these reasons, it was something entirely new. Up to this point, protest songs functioned as propaganda, but 'Strange Fruit' proved they could be art" (5). While one might argue that other, earlier songs met that standard, including some by Woody Guthrie, "Strange Fruit" did stand in

a class by itself, as the most evocative, spellbinding and poetic protest song to that point in history, and perhaps to this day.

CHAPTER V. WE SHALL OVERCOME

THE SONG THAT MOVED THE “MOVEMENT”:

The Roots, History, Impact and Legacy of “We Shall Overcome”

We shall overcome

We shall overcome

We shall overcome someday.

Oh, deep in my heart (I know that)

I do believe (ohh)

We shall overcome someday (Seeger, *Where Have* 34).

The anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome,” became well known across the United States in the 1960s. It was sung by protesters in marches facing Southern police brutality, spread across the country by Guy Carawan, the Freedom Singers and Pete Seeger (among hundreds of others), performed by Joan Baez at the March on Washington in 1963, used by LBJ in his famous voting rights speech to Congress, and adopted by the Vietnam War protesters later in the decade.

“We Shall Overcome” is still used by human rights protesters across the globe. This chapter traces the story of where it came from and how it grew to become not only a symbol of the struggle for black equality, but a unifier, a motivator, and an instrument of communication — a vehicle that could change with each singer and each circumstance to convey aspirations for justice and human dignity, and still does so today.

As with many folk songs, “We Shall Overcome” does not have a straightforward provenance. Hardeep Phull describes this in *Story behind the Protest Song*, “Having been adapted and altered from person to person as a traditional folk song across the United States throughout the first half of the 20th century, tracing the origins of ‘We Shall Overcome’ with any kind of absolute authority is very difficult” (1). The song came out of an oral tradition that frequently borrowed from multiple sources, melding aspects of one song with another, and embellished or changed to fit the mood or circumstances of the singer. This evolutionary method of developing and transmitting music is in part responsible for the vibrant, emotional and personal character of blues and gospel music, and as we have observed in the explorations of Joe Hill and Woody Guthrie, is a routine story in the development of many protest songs.

One of the songs from which “We Shall Overcome” is believed to have emerged, and which is often credited as being its progenitor, is “I’ll Overcome Someday,” published in 1901 in Philadelphia by the Reverend Charles Albert Tindley. Leading gospel music expert Horace Clarence Boyer writes that Tindley was a “Methodist minister newly arrived from the South...[Tindley] began composing new songs by setting hymnbook-like verses to the tunes and rhythms of ‘church songs.’ ... ‘I’ll Overcome Someday’...was freely borrowed from the emancipation proclamation spiritual ‘No More Auction Block for Me’” (37). Phull explains that Tindley wrote an original melody for “I’ll Overcome Someday,” but the lyrics were inspired by “the Bible verse Galatians 6:9, which implores believers not to tire in their good deeds for they will eventually reap rewards” (1).

Another song with strong ties to “We Shall Overcome,” the melody of which seems to have strong parallels to the melody of “We Will Overcome,” is a traditional black church song titled “I’ll Be Alright.” This traditional song, which Freedom Singer and music historian Bernice Johnson Reagon calls “the root song that was standard repertoire in many traditional Black Baptist and Methodist churches in the United States” (*Songs* 65), also may have its roots in the 19th century. Phull points out that it is “an old slave spiritual...which itself appeared to be indebted to the melody of a European hymn dated from the late 18th century called ‘O Sanctissima’” (1). Referring to the widely known traditional version of “I’ll Be Alright,” Reagon notes, “Oral testimony indicates wide usage of this version by the turn of the twentieth century” (*Songs* 69).

There is no clarity as to which of these songs came first or exactly how they gradually intersected. Pete Seeger asks about the evolution of the song, “Which song came first? I have friends who have spent a life researching African-American religious songs, and they are convinced that Tindley wrote his more European-style song with its four verses after hearing an older folk ‘spiritual.’ But others are certain that Tindley’s song came first and that perhaps in a spirited prayer service someone improvised ‘I’ll be all right.’ Which is right? I don’t know that field of music well enough to say, except that down through musical history, borrowing has been a two-way street” (*Where Have* 33). What *is* clear is that by the 1930s and 40s, the two songs had been melded into a popular church song titled “I Will Overcome.” This song was not typically sung at the pace and meter with which we are familiar now, but as a more up-tempo number accompanied by clapping and stomping in what is known as “shout.”

It is widely acknowledged that the first recorded use of “I Will Overcome” as a protest song was by the striking Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union in Charleston, South Carolina. Guy Carawan, who was instrumental in spreading the use of the song, wrote, “The striking workers, mainly black women, began to adapt the song to fit their situation. They changed the *I* to *we* and sang, ‘We will win our rights’ and ‘We will organize’ and ‘The Lord will see us through,’” (*Ain’t You Got a Right* 209). The strike, which began in October 1945, ended in April 1946. Reagon reports that one of the union’s founding organizers, Stephen P. Graham, “stated that music was an important part” of the union meetings. “Of all songs used, Graham considered ‘We Will Overcome’ the theme song of the union” (*Songs 73-74*). In the *We Shall Overcome* PBS Documentary, Delphine Brown, one of the tobacco workers in the Charleston strike, said, “When I first heard of the song in my church, they sang it in a gospel, fast, fast music, you know how some of the people today kind of jazz it, on the piano, and people shout...that’s the way we used to sing it, in church” (*We Shall Overcome*).

Among the picketers in Charleston was a woman named Lucille Simmons, whom Phull and many others credit with choosing to adapt the church song for use at the protest, changing the delivery of the song and making the critical choice of changing the “I” to “We.” “As the staff marched in protest, one member of the workforce named Lucille Simmons attempted to rally the spirits of those on the picket lines by singing ‘I Will Overcome’—a song she had heard in church that featured elements of both Tindley’s composition and ‘I’ll Be All Right.’ But rather than deliver it in the gospel style that she usually heard, Simmons used her immense vocal talent to sing it as a slow ballad with no rhythm (sometimes referred to as the ‘long meter style’) as the workers

were carrying placards and would not be able to clap in unison anyway. Most importantly, she reflected the hope and defiance of the group rather than the individual by changing the 'I' in the song to 'We'"(Phull 2). The strike was successful. Reagon reports, "The factory was integrated and so was the union" (*Songs* 75).

In 1932, a liberal thinker and grass roots union activist named Myles Horton had founded an integrated school in Monteagle, Tennessee, to teach adults skills needed for community and labor organizing, and to promote justice and equality. The Highlander Folk School was an extraordinary place, which attracted seekers of justice from throughout the South. As Myles Horton's daughter Aimee shared in her book on the Highlander School, in January 1935, Zilphia Mae Johnson, "a graduate of the College of the Ozarks and a concert pianist with an idealistic concern for working people of the South and their problems," came to the school as a resident, and ended up marrying the school's director, Myles Horton (101). Zilphia expanded the school's integration of music, especially singing, into all of its work. She was a great believer in the power of song, and played an important role in teaching and perpetuating the use of labor songs for community organizing.

According to Hardeep Phull, in 1947 two of the workers who had participated in the Tobacco Workers strike in Charleston were invited to Highlander, and taught Zilphia their version of "We Will Overcome" (2). Guy Carawan describes how the song took off: "It soon became the school's theme song and associated with Zilphia Horton's singing of it. She introduced it to union gatherings all across the South. On one of her trips to New York, Pete Seeger learned it from her and in the next few years he spread it across the North. Pete, Zilphia and others added verses appropriate to labor, peace and integration

sentiments: We will end Jim Crow...We shall live in Peace...We shall organize... The whole wide world around...etc.” (*Songs* 11). In 1947, Pete Seeger published “We Will Overcome” in his folk song bulletin *People’s Songs (Where Have* 32).

The song was sung many different ways and with a wide variety of verses. Seeger explains that Zilphia had a “lovely alto voice, and liked to sing it slowly, with no regular pulse or beat” (Seeger and Reiser 8), which probably reflected the way the tobacco workers from whom she learned it had sung it for her. Seeger shares that he, on the other hand, sang it medium tempo, with a banjo rhythm in back of it (*Where Have* 34). Reagon suggests that Seeger “experimented with changing the rhythm because his voice was not suited to Zilphia Horton’s free-form mountain ballad style” (*Songs* 77). Later, the young Southern protesters would experiment with the tempo further. Seeger is credited with changing the word “Will” to “Shall” because he felt it was a more open sound and an easier vowel to sing well. However, according to Phull, Highlander’s Septima Clark is also said to have preferred using the word “Shall” when she sang the song (3).

According to Reagon, in 1953 California folksinger and sociologist Guy Carawan learned “We Shall Overcome” from Frank Hamilton, who “learned it from Merle Hersfeld, who had in turn learned it from Seeger” (*Songs* 80). This had important implications for the later dissemination of the song, as Zilphia Horton tragically died in 1956, and in 1959, Guy Carawan came to Highlander Folk School as a teacher and song leader, and later became Musical Director.

Bernice Reagon describes another important development during this period: the visit to Highlander Folk School, on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 1957, by the young Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Reverend

Ralph Abernathy, leaders of the nascent Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Accompanying them was Rosa Parks, who, in 1955, had attended a workshop at Highlander just two months prior to refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, which action precipitated the Montgomery Bus Boycott (80). Pete Seeger, who was invited by Myles Horton to lead the singing at this event, played “We Shall Overcome.” Seeger and Reiser noted that Anne Braden, who drove Dr. King to a speaking engagement the next day, recounted that Dr. King commented, “We shall overcome. That song really sticks with you, doesn’t it?” (8). Dr. King and Guy Carawan would both play major roles in the early Civil Rights Movement, and in the establishment of “We Shall Overcome” as the movement’s anthem.

To its growing number of voter registration workshops for Southern black community groups, Highlander Folk School added song-leading and college workshops, led by Musical Director Guy Carawan. The white Californian was in the unusual position of providing musical leadership for the growing black freedom movement. Bernice Reagon, who herself played an important role in early civil rights protests, wrote, “One result of Highlander’s college program was that when the Sit-Ins began in 1960, students from Nashville who had attended workshops there asked Guy Carawan to come and participate in the Sit-Ins. This placed Carawan in the position of being the major songleader figure of the early Movement days” (*Songs* 81).

A group of both Southern and Northern whites that was instrumental in putting singing at the heart of the movement included Horton and Carawan from the South and Seeger from the North, and many others. They were joined by an equally important group of black singers and organizers who recognized and used the power of song in their

organizing work, such as Bernice Johnson Reagon of the “Freedom Singers” from Albany, Georgia and James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette of the “Nashville Quartet.”

Guy Carawan and his wife Candie became close friends, allies and fellow protestors with the leadership of the central organizations of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Seeger, Carawan and the young activists “introduced the song [“We Shall Overcome”] to the founding convention of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) at Raleigh, N.C.” (*Where* 34). Author Josh Dunson wrote, “The most important meeting so far as spreading the songs...was the first South-wide conference in Raleigh, called by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, from April 19 to 21, 1960. Carawan comments that ‘The Raleigh Conference had 200 students there from all over the South involved in the sit-ins singing ‘We Shall Overcome’ for three days. Who was there? John Lewis, Marion Barry, James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette” (Dunson 40). Reagon, who was present, observes that “When ‘We Shall Overcome’ began, everybody stood and joined hands, and from that point on it was the signal song of the movement” (*Let the Church Sing* 117).

According to Pete Seeger, in the early 1960s, his publisher pointed out that if Seeger did not copyright “We Shall Overcome,” someone else would do so and would reap the financial rewards, as well as control the song. Not wanting someone outside the movement to co-opt the song, he put four names on the copyright: his own, Guy Carawan, Frank Hamilton and Zilphia Horton. He explains that no one knew Lucille Simmons’s name at that time (the woman responsible for changing “I” to “We”), and so no African-American was credited on the song, much to Seeger’s regret. The proceeds originally went to support the work of SNCC. Since the disbanding of SNCC, “all

royalties and income from the song go to a non-profit fund, the We Shall Overcome Fund, which annually gives grants to further African-American music in the South” (*Where Have* 34).

Something important was happening, as the strong vocal, and especially choral, traditions of the black churches brought talent, songs and a spiritual connection to the work of the Civil Rights Movement. In an interview, John O’Neal, an early member of SNCC, explained, “This was a singing movement, and there was a lot of music all the time. It was an organizing tool. When people are singing together, they have a way that’s easily accessible of affirming their common cause” (O’Neal).

“We Shall Overcome” inspired the students, but they also needed to make it their own. A SNCC field secretary, Reginald Robinson, commented, “We put more soul in it, a sort of rocking quality, to stir one’s inner feeling” (Reagon, *Songs* 83). Bernice Reagon observes that from the Albany, Georgia campaign, when the influence of black Southern choral singing began to impact “We Shall Overcome,” it “became impregnated with additional slurs and improvised musical punctuations. ‘My Lords,’ ‘I know that’ and intricate ‘ohs’ appeared at the beginning of lines and at musical hesitations and rests between phrases” (*Songs* 85).

During these turbulent, frightening and often violent early years of the Civil Rights Movement, the freedom songs played a particularly critical role in sustaining the resolve of the protesters. “We Shall Overcome” played a special role and took on a symbolic significance among the most popular freedom songs. Witness after witness attests to the power and strength they gained from singing it. The Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, the second Executive Director of Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(SCLC), said, “One cannot describe the vitality and emotion this one song evokes across the Southland. I have heard it sung in great mass meetings with a thousand voices singing as one; I’ve heard a half-dozen sing it softly behind the bars of the Hinds County prison in Mississippi; I’ve heard old women singing it on the way to work in Albany, Georgia; I’ve heard the students singing it as they were being dragged away to jail. It generates power that is indescribable” (Carawan, *Songs* 11).

What was it that made this the Civil Rights Movement’s anthem? Why did “We Shall Overcome” work so well for this movement, and more so than the many other freedom songs used in the marches and protests? For many, it was the strong determination and courage it communicates, along with a firm certainty of eventual victory. Author Serge Denisoff interprets its power this way: “‘We Shall Overcome’...reaffirms the valor of the marchers and the righteousness of the cause in a highly repetitive manner: We are not afraid...We are not alone...The truth will make us free...We’ll walk hand in hand...” (147).

Martin Luther King, Jr. saw the value of song not only as an organizing tool, but as an elemental force, as a legacy from African-American culture and heritage that carried with it tremendous emotional clout and enabled personal and shared expression: “In a sense, songs are the *soul* of the civil rights movement. ...Since slavery, the Negro has sung throughout his struggle in America...songs of faith and inspiration which were sung on the plantations. For the same reasons the slaves sang, Negroes today sing freedom songs, for we, too, are in bondage. We sing out our determination that ‘We shall overcome....together...someday’ (King 348).

King wove the words “we shall overcome” into many of his speeches, often with the same basic messages. As “we shall overcome” was interspersed with messages about the challenges of injustice and inequality, and about the hardships faced by the protesters, they reinforced his resolve and the resolve of those who heard him. The exhortation of the belief that right would prevail and victory would be theirs was a powerful tool that engendered strong belief—in fact, faith—in the listener. King wrote,

...how is it that these students can sing this, they are going down to Mississippi, they are going to face hostile and jeering mobs, and yet they could sing, “We shall overcome.” They may even face physical death, and yet they could sing, “We shall overcome.” Most of them realized that they would be thrown into jail, and yet they could sing, “We shall overcome, we are not afraid.” Then something caused me to see at that moment the real meaning of the movement. That the students had faith in the future. That the movement was based on hope, that this movement had something within it that says somehow even though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice. And I think this should be a challenge to all others who are struggling to transform the dangling discords of our Southland into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. There is something in this student movement which says to us, that we shall overcome (King 52).

“We Shall Overcome” was sung at virtually every civil rights sit-in, rally, and march during the first half of the 1960s, from Selma to Birmingham in Alabama, from Albany, Georgia to Nashville, Tennessee. A *New York Times* article reported that on July 1962, in Sasser, Georgia, “We Shall Overcome” began and concluded a Voting Rights Rally. “Shortly after 10 o’clock, the Negroes rose and joined hands in a circle. Swaying

in rhythm, they again sang, 'We Shall Overcome.' Their voices had a strident note as though they were building up their courage to go out into the night, where the whites waited" (Sitton).

The song was sung defiantly in jail by arrested sit-in protesters. Sometimes, it served as a form of crisis management for those suffering at the hands of their violent opposition. Bernice Reagon writes that her husband, Cordell Reagon, and other Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, May 1961, and sent to the notorious Mississippi work prison, Parchmen Penitentiary. Cordell reported that a guard was beating one of the protesters and, "with blood streaming down his face, he began to sing 'We Shall Overcome.' The guard turned red-faced and walked away" (*Songs* 83).

A turning point in the mood of the movement was obvious at what became known as the Meredith March, in 1962. Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser recount, in *Everybody Sing Freedom*, that Meredith, "the first African American to gain admission to the University of Mississippi, set out on a 'march against fear' across his home state," but he was shot and wounded on the second day. Thousands came out to finish his march to Jackson and to protest his shooting. There was an air of turmoil and many were overheated. One SNCC staff member said, "I'm not for that nonviolence stuff anymore" and another said, "What we need on this march are more blacks, not more northern white phonies!" A radical group called the Black Deacons walked next to the marchers carrying machine guns (215).

In his book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Martin Luther King struggled with how to address the divisions among those seeking change. He wrote about the Meredith March, which was jointly sponsored by CORE, SNCC, and SCLC, on

agreement between Dr. King and Stokely Carmichael. He recounts the tone and mood of some of the marchers: “Once during the afternoon we stopped to sing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ The voices rang out with all the traditional fervor, the glad thunder and gentle strength that had always characterized the singing of this noble song. But when we came to the stanza which speaks of ‘black and white together,’ the voices of a few of the marchers were muted. I asked them later why they refused to sing that verse. The retort was, ‘This is a new day, we don’t sing those words any more. In fact, the whole song should be discarded. Not ‘We Shall Overcome,’ but ‘We Shall Overrun.’” Dr. King wrote that he should not have been surprised: “...in an atmosphere where false promises are daily realities, where deferred dreams are nightly facts, where acts of unpunished violence toward Negroes are a way of life, nonviolence would eventually be seriously questioned... . [D]isappointment produces despair and despair produces bitterness, and...the one thing certain about bitterness is its blindness” (570-71)

A major event in the summer of 1963 was the Newport Folk Festival and Bob Dylan’s first appearance there. The closing number of the festival featured a large group of performers, including Bernice Johnson Reagon and the Freedom Singers, Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Joan Baez, all singing “We Shall Overcome” together and holding hands. In his biography of Pete Seeger, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, David Dunaway reports that Theodore Bikel, one of the festival’s founders, called the singing of “We Shall Overcome” on this occasion “the apogee of the folk movement” (Dunaway 2008 edition 280). Dunaway shares that soon after, Pete Seeger was getting ready to embark on a long-awaited world tour. Before he did, his manager arranged a farewell concert for June 8, 1963, at Carnegie Hall, which was recorded live for Columbia

Records. “The concert, released as ‘We Shall Overcome,’ took place...just as John F. Kennedy was preparing a major civil rights speech” (Dunaway 2008 edition 281).

“We Shall Overcome” achieved more broad national attention at another major event that summer—the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963. This was the large rally at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. presented his “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Hardeep Phull observes, “The official poster...came emblazoned with the words ‘We Shall Overcome,’ and, naturally, it turned out to be the anthem of the day with folksinger Joan Baez leading a recital that was earnestly backed by the thousands in attendance” (4). Bob Dylan was one of the performers on the stage joining Baez in the song.

In the PBS documentary film, “We Shall Overcome,” narrator Harry Belafonte describes the March on Washington as “a television event”—this at a time when television events were not yet commonplace—and the media appeal was enhanced by the presence of celebrities, including James Baldwin and Marlon Brando, who had been recruited by fellow star Harry Belafonte. In the film, Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, speaking of the impact of the freedom songs on the crowd in Washington, said, “When they heard the music, something human was touched that was undeniable” (*We Shall Overcome*).

Following the march, Pete Seeger and his family left on their world tour. Dunaway shares that the nine-month trip would bring them to Samoa, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, India, Kenya, Tanganyika, Ghana and Europe. Seeger sang “We Shall Overcome” at his concerts on the tour. In Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika, without a microphone, he strained to get his audience’s attention. “Then he tried freedom songs,

hoping his voice would hold out. He sang one that caught their attention, and as he wrote in his journal, ‘That does it. I can always tell, to the split second, when that marvelous moment comes—the ‘click’ of singer and listener—when I have really found my audience and it has really found me.’ The song was ‘We Shall Overcome’” (Dunaway 2008 edition 287).

The year 1963 was filled with events to create frustration and impatience with the pace of change. The Birmingham Campaign had led to Martin Luther King’s arrest and violent confrontations in the streets of Birmingham, and Medgar Evers, civil rights activist and a field secretary for the NAACP, was murdered in Mississippi. Then, on September 15, 1963, a bomb in a Birmingham church took the lives of four young girls attending Bible study. Singer Nina Simone, who until then had been relatively inactive in politics, was enraged: “All the truths that I had denied to myself for so long rose up and slapped my face.... I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn’t an intellectual connection.... [I]t came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination” (Lynskey 71). That day Nina Simone wrote her first protest song, “Mississippi Goddam,” which was everything “We Shall Overcome” was not—angry, impatient and uncompromising.

Yes you lied to me all these years

You told me to wash and clean my ears

And talk real fine just like a lady

And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies

You're all gonna die and die like flies

I don't trust you any more

You keep on saying "Go slow!"

"Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble

"do it slow"

Desegregation

"do it slow"

Mass participation

"do it slow"...

You don't have to live next to me

Just give me my equality

Everybody knows about Mississippi

Everybody knows about Alabama

Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam (Simone).

The voices clamoring for freedom and equality got louder and more insistent over the next two years. In 1965 the efforts for change exploded in the voting rights protests in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, known as the Selma to Montgomery Marches, organized by Dr. King, John Lewis, and their colleagues. These marches were marked by tear gas, brutality, and even the murders of three march participants, two of whom were white ("Voting Rights"). Throughout these protests, "We Shall Overcome" and the other

freedom songs helped the activists keep going. Protester Dorothy Cotton summed it up: “‘We Shall Overcome’ was a song that helped us realize our connectedness...a way to instill hope in people who had no hope” (*We Shall Overcome*).

The result of the violence against the protesters, and especially the murders, was tremendous attention from the national media and from President Lyndon Baines Johnson. In July 1964, the Civil Rights Bill had been signed into law by LBJ. Unfortunately, many of the Jim Crow laws remained in effect, including local voter registration rules in many Southern cities that made it very difficult for blacks to register to vote. In Selma, where half of the population was black, only one percent of them were registered to vote (“Voting Rights”).

After the deadly violence in Selma, the President appeared before a Joint Session of Congress on March 15, 1965 to deliver his most famous speech, known as his “We Shall Overcome” speech. He stunned civil rights activists by expressing sentiments about the injustice of segregation and laws that kept blacks from voting, and pledged to push for a Voting Rights Bill, designed to supersede the local laws meant to block people from voting (the bill was passed later that year). Twice in the speech he used the phrase “we shall overcome.”

Both references by LBJ to “we shall overcome” appear toward the middle of the speech. The first use is, “What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome” (Johnson). Just four

paragraphs later, he again uses the phrase: “This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all, all black and white, all North and South, sharecropper and city dweller. These are the enemies: poverty, ignorance, disease. They’re our enemies, not our fellow man, not our neighbor. And these enemies too – poverty, disease, and ignorance: we shall overcome” (Johnson).

In an interview on an Alabama Public Television documentary, Mrs. Jean Jackson, in whose Selma, Alabama home Dr. King watched the speech (he was invited by the President to watch from the gallery, but declined), described the reaction to the speech of Dr. King and his fellow civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young. She said that they were astounded by the content of the speech, because it reflected so much of what they had been saying and for which they had been working, and to hear the person in the highest office of the land give validity to their arguments was overwhelming. When LBJ said, “We shall overcome” during the speech, Mrs. Jackson reported that she looked over at Dr. King, and tears were streaming down his face (“Dr. Martin Luther King’s Reaction”). Not surprisingly, many in the South did not embrace the President’s sentiments. The Selma *Time-Journal* ran an editorial about President Johnson with the headline, “A Modern Mussolini Speaks, ‘We Shall Overcome’” (Adler 384).

Struggles for justice are not new, and certainly African-Americans had been seeking freedom long before the Civil Rights Movement, so it is not surprising that some people found the timeline suggested by the word “someday” in the song’s lyrics too tame, lacking in the urgency they felt. Pete Seeger wrote that Lillian Hellman once scornfully remarked to him “...overcome *someday, someday?*” When he shared the story with

Bernice Reagon, her response was, “If we said ‘next week,’ what would we sing the week after next?” (Seeger, *Where Have* 35).

Frustration with the timeline was not limited to a radical white writer taking exception to tame lyrics. On April 3, 1964, Malcolm X gave his famous “Ballot or the Bullet Speech” in Cleveland, Ohio, expressing impatience with the sentiments in “We Shall Overcome” and the movement it represented. “The political philosophy of black nationalism is being taught in the Christian church...in the NAACP...in SNCC...in Muslim meetings. ...It’s being taught everywhere. Black people are fed up with the dillydallying, pussyfooting, compromising approach that we’ve been using toward getting our freedom. We want freedom now, but we’re not going to get it saying “We Shall Overcome.” We’ve got to fight until we overcome” (Malcolm X 9).

After the passage of the Voting Rights Bill, changes in the South came very slowly, and for some, a half-decade of marching and waiting for “someday” was just too long. The frustration and impatience inflamed their feelings of injustice and made non-violence seem a choice for fools—an appeasement policy that would never force the needed change. At the extremes, these feelings led to the Black Power movement and calls for armed revolt. Gradually, for some, “We Shall Overcome” became a symbol of passivity and ineffectiveness.

Impatience was expressed in the North as well. Black political songwriter Len Chandler wrote a song to help students at Hunter College in New York commemorate John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body” (which is also “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”). One of the stanzas reads:

You conspire to keep us silent in the field and in the slum

You promise us the vote and sing us, “We Shall Overcome,”

But John Brown knew what freedom was and died to win some

That’s why we keep marching on (Seeger and Reiser 216).

Those who shared these attitudes did more than reject non-violence and “We Shall Overcome.” Some also actively worked to create a rift with the white liberals who had worked at their sides. The deep-rooted poverty and inequities in black communities across the U.S. were stark reminders that the systemic change needed went far beyond voting rights and integration. As David Dunaway describes, SNCC was becoming radicalized. “At the end of 1965, a purge of white ‘northern middleclass elements’ began as chairman John Lewis called for a ‘Black-led, Black-dominated’ organization. SNCC canceled plans to extend a Freedom Summer-type program throughout the Deep South; instead, whites were told to organize in their *own* communities. ‘If we are to proceed toward liberation,’ a SNCC position paper read, ‘we must cut ourselves off from the white people’” (Dunaway 2008 edition 299).

Julius Lester, acclaimed author, a friend of Pete Seeger’s, and a former writer for *Sing Out!* magazine, expressed his own disenchantment with the movement in a letter to *Sing Out!* in 1966: “Those northern protest rallies where Freedom Songs were sung...began to look more and more like moral exercises: ‘See, my hands are clean.’ Now it is over: the days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with love. ‘We Shall Overcome’ (and we have overcome our blindness) sounds old, outdated, and can enter the pantheon of the greats along with I.W.W. songs and the union songs. ...They used to sing ‘I Love Everybody’ as they ducked bricks and bottles. Now they sing: *Too much love, Too much love // Nothing kills a nigger like Too*

much love” (Dunaway 2008 edition 302). As Sol Stern reported in an article about the Black Panthers in the *New York Times Magazine* the following year (1967), Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers, speaking to a small rally in San Francisco, proclaimed, “No more ‘praying and boot-licking.’ No more singing of ‘We Shall Overcome.’ The only way you’re going to overcome is to apply righteous power” (Stern).

In the summer of 1968, after Dr. King’s assassination, a disillusioned Southern white liberal journalist named Pat Watters decided to cover the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, D.C., about which she published an article in the *New American Review*, January 1969. A sense of depression and gloom fills her writing—the heart of the movement has changed: “The Solidarity Day march ended in anticlimax, the familiar mournful music of ‘We Shall Overcome’ floating lifeless over the reflecting pool where a Washington Negro slum kid, fully clothed, swam slowly in the muck. ‘We are not afraid’ floated into Resurrection City, arousing what memories there? What derision? Or perhaps no reaction at all, the most chilling characteristic of its somber mood, the blank stare of depression’s rage” (Watters).

By this time, protests against the Vietnam War were growing dramatically, and “We Shall Overcome” was taking a central role in mass anti-war protests and marches. It was sung by millions of peaceful protesters against the war, including huge marches in New York, Washington, D.C. and other major cities in 1967 and 1968. In the minds of some, “We Shall Overcome” remained a symbol of a looming threat from alienated factions. In an ironic twist, given the disillusionment with the song among those who promoted a violent solution, leaders of anti-riot troops training in Georgia used the song as a symbol of the growing unrest. Paul Good reported in the *New York Times Magazine*

that “A recent photograph in the *New York Times* showed anti-riot troops being trained at Ft. Gordon, Ga. ... The photograph depicted a group of ‘enemy’ demonstrators being assaulted by anti-riot troops. Lest there be any confusion in identity, the mock enemies carried a placard. The slogan it bore was not ‘Black Power’ or ‘Up the Vietcong.’ It was the title of a hymn that Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy had sung a thousand times together and that the President of the United States had quoted twice in an address to Congress: ‘We Shall Overcome’” (Good).

Just as many speak of the Vietnam War as the first “television war,” one might think of the protests that featured “We Shall Overcome” as the first “television movements.” Viewers across the nation, obtaining home televisions in larger and larger numbers, watched first civil rights and then anti-war protestors singing in unison. The images conveyed a strong message of belief in the power of non-violence and that mass solidarity could engender change.

However, for those who saw reforms come and go with insufficient change, this manner of taking action, and the non-violence it espoused, became part of the problem. It seemed woven into the mainstream—too much a part of the power structure and completely ineffectual. The mass media’s coverage of the problem was seen as part of the problem itself, tied up part and parcel with the cultural divide between blacks and whites. It reinforced the viewing public’s role of observer and innocent bystander, made political action a spectator sport, and inaction seem acceptable. This was the message of Gil Scott Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” which was issued in 1970. The Civil Rights Movement was becoming complacent and the Black Power Movement was splintering in many different directions, while blacks continued to face poverty and

incarceration in staggeringly disproportionate numbers, and the inequities in education and opportunity continued unchecked. Gil Scott Heron portrayed television, like Marx's view of religion, as the opiate of the masses:

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down
brothers in the instant replay.

There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being
run out of Harlem on a rail with a brand new process.

There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy
Wilkins strolling through Watts in a Red, Black and
Green liberation jumpsuit that he had been saving
For just the right occasion.

Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville
Junction will no longer be so god damned relevant, and
women will not care if Dick finally screwed
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people
will be in the street looking for a brighter day.
The revolution will not be televised.

There will be no highlights on the eleven o'clock
news and no pictures of hairy armed women
liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose.
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb or

Francis Scott Key, nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom

Jones, Johnny Cash or Englebert Humperdink.

The revolution will not be televised (Heron).

In 1965, as African Americans in the U.S. were becoming disillusioned with “We Shall Overcome,” John Harris, a white antiapartheid activist in Johannesburg, was hanged for planting a bomb, and as he walked to the gallows, he sang the famous civil rights song. As a result, “We Shall Overcome” was outlawed in South Africa until apartheid was lifted in 1989 (Phulll 4). In the PBS video documentary *We Shall Overcome*, Pete Seeger indicates that he has taken the song to over thirty countries, that it has become popular in Russia, Thailand, Korea and Beirut, and that it played a central role in fighting apartheid in South Africa and in the Tiananmen Square uprising in China: “I’m just one of a number of singers who took this song around the world... . [M]y guess is newspaper reporters and films took the song around more than anything.... I think there are probably millions of people who can say that this song changed their lives” (*We Shall Overcome*).

In the same PBS documentary, Andrew Young comments on his experience with the global and universal nature of the song: “Almost anywhere I went in the world, people would sing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ I remember the first time I heard the Irish non-violent movement sing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ We sing it in Hebrew, we sing it in Spanish, we sing ‘We Shall Overcome’ in almost every language because it’s a universal ideal that we can overcome injustice” (*We Shall Overcome*). David King Dunaway, too, in his book on Pete Seeger, attests to the widespread and universal appeal of the song. “‘We Shall Overcome,’” he notes, “belongs to the world. Danes and Greenlanders

together sing it by torchlight in independence parades. Hindus in India sing it as a patriotic song; Taiwanese sing it to resist a Chinese takeover” (Dunaway 2008 edition 416).

The legacy of “We Shall Overcome” was acknowledged when the first black President of the United States, Barack Obama, used it in his victory speech on election night 2008. He symbolically linked the conviction and hope of “We Shall Overcome” and the Civil Rights Movement with his own campaign slogan. He spoke of Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106-year old woman who had voted that day in Atlanta, Georgia. This was a woman who just fifty years earlier, might well have had trouble casting a vote in Georgia. After speaking at some length about all she had seen in her 106 years, he said, “She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Yes we can” (Obama 3).

The legacy of “We Shall Overcome” is ultimately that it transcends time and place. It speaks to the tenacity of human beings to take on adversity and make a better life for themselves and others. Joan Baez describes it this way: “I would say that ‘We Shall Overcome’ is symbolically the song that represented the spirit of social change, social action, and I would say that it, out of all the songs, stands uniquely as the song that will always be used in any movement, anywhere, as the song for struggle” (*We Shall Overcome*).

Pete Seeger thinks of the song as bigger than any one conflict or group. Rather, it is all about working together—that with unity, cooperation and determination, we have great powers for change. As he says, “I confess when I sing it I’m thinking of the whole

human race. We're either going to make it together or we're not going to make it at all. And I think we've got a chance.... We, that's the important word--We will overcome" (*We Shall Overcome*).

Perhaps one of the most powerful statements about "We Shall Overcome" is one that doesn't mention the song at all. In 1961, Highlander Folk School was on trial in Tennessee, threatened with the revocation of its charter for trumped up charges motivated by its civil rights work (and Highlander did close, forcing it to reopen later in another location as the Highlander Center). When the judge, agitated, demanded of Myles Horton why he was laughing, Myles replied:

"I was just thinking what a waste this trial is. I know what you're going to do just as well as you do. You're going to convict us on what the state calls evidence, confiscate our property, and put Highlander Folk School out of business. Then you'll all settle back and think you've got the job done. But Judge, you won't have done a thing. You'll only have been wasting the taxpayer's time and money, along with a lot of ours. Highlander isn't just a school. It's an idea, and you can't put an idea out of business by confiscating property. We'll go right on regardless of what's happening in this courtroom, and five years from now Highlander will be doing more good, what you folks call bad, than it ever did before. We've been at it twenty-nine years, Judge, and they haven't licked us yet. You're not going to stop us now" (Bledsoe 3-4).

This statement by Myles Horton, and the idea of which he spoke, is the very essence of "We Shall Overcome," that the power of people working together for the common good shall endure and, ultimately, prevail. It was the idea upon which

Highlander was built, and for which so many worked, and even gave their lives, to empower men and women, blacks and whites, to live full, engaged and decent lives. This is the lasting legacy of “We Shall Overcome,” and the many people who poured their hearts and souls into keeping the idea alive.

CHAPTER VI. SING OUT! MAGAZINE

SING OUT! MAGAZINE, PEOPLE’S SONGS AND THE FOLK REVIVAL

Sing Out! magazine was first published in May 1950, as a magazine to share and engage readers with folk music, but it was much more than a music magazine—it was a cultural magazine that intended to celebrate and defend, through songs, working people and oppressed people of the world. In “The First Issue” the editors melded the sharing of their purpose with the opportunity to take a stand about peace, a timely issue with the Korean War brewing and about to begin in earnest the following month: “What is this ‘Peoples Music?’ In the first place, like all folk music, it has to do with the hopes and fears and lives of common people—of the great majority.... [I]t will grow on the base of folk music...join in common service to the common people and that is what we will call ‘Peoples Music.’ By one thing above all else will we judge it: ‘How well does it serve the common cause of humanity?’ In thinking about this, we have realized that there is a much more basic FIRST ISSUE today. Its name is PEACE.... [O]nly in peace can we enjoy our musical heritage and add to its wealth—only in peace can we move forward to greater freedom and full brotherhood” (“The First Issue” 2).

The audience for *Sing Out!* grew out of the Folk Revival, a music movement dedicated to unearthing, celebrating and paying homage to music of the people, coming out of the everyday experiences and ideas of the “folk,” or common man. Whether newly composed or historical, the music of the Folk Revival used traditional acoustic instruments, and valued authenticity. This musical movement was just reaching a new

generation of idealists interested in learning about all kinds of grass roots music, many of whom wanted to work actively in defense of the people from whom the music had sprung. World War II had ended five years earlier, and the group that organized *Sing Out!*, many of whom were musicians themselves, were troubled by the disparities between rich and poor, the ongoing struggles of workers, Jim Crow laws, and widespread oppression of blacks and other minorities. Their audiences were people passionate about folk music, both older tunes *Sing Out!* sought to expose and preserve and new songs by contemporary writers creating music of and for “the people.”

Sing Out! had a progenitor called *People's Songs*, which was only published for three years, from the winter of 1946 to the spring of 1949 (Silber 8). Pete Seeger, one of the founders of the Folk Revival and the son of an ethnomusicologist, along with a group of other progressive activists (including Seeger's co-writer on “The Hammer Song,” Lee Hays), founded *People's Songs* (and later *Sing Out!*). In an editorial section that accompanied the 1995 reprinting of the first issue of *Sing Out!*, a history of the magazine acknowledged that *People's Songs* “...fueled the advent of an active folk song and topical song movement” (“If I Had a Song...” 20).

The financial challenges of being part of a tiny, though growing, movement, combined with the rise of red baiting, in which those perceived as Communists were systematically attacked and accused, and the propaganda that painted all progressives as Communist sympathizers, led to the death of *People's Songs*. Thus “[a] combination of finances and politics can be blamed for the demise of *People's Songs*. The Cold War was on, and the political climate was changing, with anti-communism and anti-everyone-who-

is-differentism on the rise” (“If I Had a Song...” 20). It was a bold move for the group, after assessing the former magazine, to launch *Sing Out!* just one year later.

In reviewing issues of *Sing Out!* from the 1950s through the 1980s, the most notable change was the *type* of songs and articles that populated the magazine over those years. The amount of tumult and the level of conflict had a big impact on the tone and nature of the magazine’s content. A kind of complacency seemed to settle over the magazine as the activist mood of the 1960s subsided, the nation’s most overt injustices began to be addressed, and folk music itself became more popular and commercially successful.

From its founding in 1950, to the post-Vietnam War era of the mid-1970s through 1980 (and to this day), *Sing Out!* magazine remained dedicated to a progressive worldview that embraced the broad diversity of cultural experiences of the common man. The change that occurred during these years, however, was a shift from being an activist and even organizing voice for a pro-labor, pro-peace, and pro-human rights agenda, to becoming a still progressive, but distinctly more mainstream, promoter of cultural understanding through folk music.

From the first volume in 1950, the activist content, in terms of both songs and articles, was direct and clear. Not only did the editors make a point of promoting the real “FIRST ISSUE,” (peace) as described above, but the Seeger-Hays song that was a call for freedom, justice and peace, “The Hammer Song,” was featured on the cover. It was one of the lyrics in this song that inspired the magazine’s name. “Irwin Silber, in ‘Notes from an Editor’s Diary,’ recalled he borrowed the name *Sing Out!* from the third verse of the ‘The Hammer Song’ written by Lee Hays and Pete Seeger, which incidentally was

printed on the cover of issue number one. It seemed to the publishers an appropriate aim to ‘sing out danger ... sing out a warning ... sing out love between all my brothers (and my sisters) all over this land’ (“If I Had a Song...” 20).

Volume One, number four and number five continued with a strong voice, urging participation, advocating for specific actions, and heavily publishing songs and music that supported an activist agenda. A peace song criticizing the industrialists who make money from war, “I Saw a Man” by Lewis Allan (pen name for Abel Meeropol, writer of “Strange Fruit”), and another song promoting civil rights and peace, “I’ve Been Redeemed,” a rewriting of an earlier gospel song by James Hutchinson, were featured in August 1950.

Meeropol’s “I Saw a Man,” which he wrote just after World War II, exposed the horrors and profit motives of war. Although written as though referring to World War I, he was clearly speaking of the enterprise of war throughout time, and particularly the tremendous loss of life and limb that had just been paid by so many:

I saw a man without a leg
And when I turned to stare,
He said to me: “The other one
Is buried over there!”

I saw a man without an arm,
And when he caught my glance,
He turned and said: “A souvenir
I left behind in France.”

I saw a man without an eye,
He winked his one at me
And said, "I gave the mate of this
To save democracy!"

I saw a man without a heart
His hands were soft and clean,
He said: "I made my little pile
In nineteen-seventeen" (Allan 4).

The activist intention of the editors was evident from the introduction to this song, which they ended with the question, "Have you signed the Peace Petition?"

By the next issue, in September 1950, the Red Scare was gaining momentum, and *Sing Out!* reported that the passport of Paul Robeson, whose performances had recently churned up crowds and been the focus of violent attacks, had been revoked. In 1951, Woody Guthrie wrote a letter to *Sing Out!* to show his solidarity with its positions, and respond to a comment from someone who suggested Guthrie had chosen not to associate with the magazine:

Dear Editor: When some super-reactionary friend of mine looked through several issues of *Sing Out* and failed to find any song of my own making he wrote me and said: "Thank God you're not having anything to do with that bunch."

I've read just about every word of every issue of *Sing Out* and I just want to say right now before any more of you write in to thank me that I could not

agree any more or any plainer nor any stronger with *Sing Out* if I had wrote every single word of it, and every song myself by my own hand. ...

One little issue of *Sing Out* is worth more to this humanly race than any thousand tons of other dreamy, dopey junk dished out from the trees of our forest along every Broadway in this world. I don't know of a magazine big or little that comes within a thousand million miles of *Sing Out* when it comes to doing good around this world (Rosenthal 50).

By 1952, pressing matters escalated and the February 1952 issue reported that two officers of People's Artists, Inc., the publishers of *Sing Out!*, "have been subpoenaed (sic) to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee" ("People's Artists' Leaders Subpenaed" 2). This issue featured highly charged content, including articles titled "Songs for Peace and Freedom in Washington, D.C.," "Paul Robeson Speaks for Equal Rights in the Arts," and powerful lyrics by a young African-American musician, Albert Wood, entitled "Genocide":

Old man lying on a shanty bed,
The walls are cracked and they lean.
Look real close he's not old at all,
but a youth of only sixteen.

Chorus:

It's Genocide, Genocide, Genocide we charge,
Genocide, Genocide, Genocide,
And the criminal's still at large.

Young woman bleeding in a cotton field,
Her head's been broken, her privates revealed,
The rapists laughed and they strolled away,
What a terrible price the black women pay ("Genocide" 3).

In addition to the poverty and human rights violations experienced by large numbers of African-Americans during this period, McCarthyism was wreaking havoc on the artistic and activist communities, the Korean War was underway, and workers and ethnic minorities still suffered economic challenges and indignity. There were many causes to engender anger and to motivate the angered to action.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of continued activism in the pages of *Sing Out!* The struggles for civil rights were joined in the 1960s by growing anti-war sentiments, and these provided much fodder for the activist bent of the magazine. In the 1970 issues, this sensibility still infused the magazine, although it became softer around the edges, with fewer direct calls to action. In the September/October issue of that year, an anti-Vietnam War song was featured entitled "Ballad of the Unknown Soldier," in addition to a column by Pete Seeger, relating his experience at a New Haven rally where he learned the "Black Panther Chant." He shares the radical, inflammatory song in the magazine, which includes the lyrics "Power! Power! Power to the People, Gonna free the twenty-one, Gonna pick up a gun, And we ain't gonna run, Gun totin' power, Liberatin' power" (Seeger 36).

The issue containing the "Black Panther Chant" was the twentieth anniversary issue, and it provided some insights into the magazine's history. In an article sharing "some 20th anniversary thoughts," John Cohen reflected on the magazine's purpose, with

the benefit of hindsight. He expressed that a natural conflict arose as the magazine tried to adjust to changing times and meet the needs of diverse audiences. He noted the magazine's struggle to remain noncommercial in the face of folk music's increasingly mainstream and commercial role in popular music: "These twenty years have been spent in a search for the meaning of folk music in a changing society. The magazine has existed in conflicts of its own choosing, between factions which would see the music as a tool for social action, and those who see it as a source of material for people who play home-made music. It has steered clear of selling songs or marketing products, yet inadvertently it has done its share of image building for commercial figures" (Cohen 20).

Even though the Vietnam War did not end for another five years, the overt anti-war themes and calls to action were becoming more subdued and even, on occasion, were entirely absent from some issues. *Sing Out!* magazine's efforts to build audience, and to fulfill that diverse audience's desire for access to a wide variety of lyrics, music and information about folk songs, artists, techniques, festivals, and more, exhibited itself in the types of songs and articles the editors selected during the first half of the 1970s.

Unlike earlier issues in which sometimes fifty percent or more of the songs spoke to human rights, peace and the plight of the common man, it was now not unusual to find only one or two, as in the September/October 1971 issue illustrates. The song "Body Count" was the only overtly political song in the issue. "Turn to Your Sister," by well-known protest songwriter Malvina Reynolds, was a paean to the strength of sisterhood, but without any controversial content. It celebrated the bond between women at a time when feminism remained a movement, but did not advocate any specific action or lodge a specific protest. The remaining nine songs in the issue included a varied mix of folk

music, including traditional blues songs, country and cowboy songs, and an Irish traditional tune. The articles, as well, contained little of a polemic nature. They focused on biographies of musicians, a “Guitar Teach-in,” an interview with singer-songwriter Paul Siebel, and an article on guitar inlay work.

A 1974 “Teach-in” special edition included eight multicultural and traditional songs, none overtly political, and a large number of teaching articles on everything from Blues Fiddle to Chinese Papercut to Square Dance. Artist profiles and regular features also were included, such as letters from readers, record reviews, news items and festival information.

A regularly featured column written by Pete Seeger also continued. Called “Johnny Appleseed, Jr.,” Seeger’s column was one way the publication retained its core activist mission, because he usually found a way to work in encouragement to stay engaged and contribute to society. But with McCarthyism out of favor, with the Civil Rights Act in place and widespread disapproval of the Vietnam War, the urgency of the causes seemed softened in the magazine’s content, despite the fact that this was still almost a year before the fall of Saigon. Perhaps the reason was that the movement itself was softening and becoming more mainstream and less activist—perhaps there were fewer activist songs being written. Even if that was the case, the resolve of the editors also seems to have changed, evidenced by the fact that the magazine had entirely abandoned direct calls to action.

In reviewing issues from 1975 and 1976, just before and after the end of the Vietnam War, it became obvious that the role of folk music, and by extension *Sing Out!*, had clearly changed. Folk music had merged with popular and commercial music, and

the public had seen it influence both folk rock and rhythm and blues. The magazine's featured music continued to include traditional songs of various genres, ranging from old English and Irish songs to American blues, world music, and an occasional original by a contemporary singer-songwriter. The articles provided practical know-how on playing and singing these songs, information about the cultures from which they arose, and useful information about the folk scene and its publications. *Sing Out!* was a place to network with people of like interests. There was a growing focus on the historical appeal of folk music, rather than the power of the music as a tool for present-day activism.

In 1975, after the end of the Vietnam War, *Sing Out!* commemorated the U.S. Bicentennial with a series of special issues, which focused on songs of Native Americans, blacks, labor, women, Puerto Ricans, English and Celtic traditions, and immigrant and ethnic traditions. The editors implied that this series was an attempt at a rallying cry, to remind readers that there was still much wrong in American society. In the introduction to the series, the editors wrote, "Many of the traditions we celebrate are those that have been expunged from the songbooks and the history books and the contemporary mass media. If there's a theme to this series, it's that of *reclaiming people's history in song*. We wish to deal with the immediacy of history, the concrete reality of tradition and struggle. We wish to celebrate American's revolutionary traditions without illusion, without chauvinism, and without nostalgia. At a time when our peoples are under the most concerted domestic attack since the Great Depression, we want to share music that gives us collective pride, joy, strength, and the courage to resist" ("In the Coming Year" Inside Front Cover).

Unlike the early issues, the magazine did not direct the reader to "Find a rally near you! Sign the petition! Support the Progressive Party! Have the courage to resist!"

Instead, readers were urged to gain insights and devotion to the cause, with the magazine providing tools for their use, but the method, place and time of activism were at their discretion.

The emphasis of a historical perspective was reiterated in 1976, in the introduction to the third publication of the Bicentennial series, which was described as expressing “our feelings about how folk music fits into the history of this country—past, present, and future... . We feel it particularly fitting now to reaffirm our commitment to the ideals on which this magazine was founded” (“Introduction to the 25th Anniversary Issue” Inside Front Cover). This spoke to the much broader perspective the magazine had adopted by this time; its efforts were no longer about immediate action on specific and compelling issues. The history of cultures and songs was shared to inform, not to inflame, to inspire engagement, but not active protest.

That said, there was an implicit understanding, a consistent worldview, which was maintained throughout the history of the publication. Examples of what the later, more mainstream approach looked like included a 1976 article about Victoria Spivey, a blues singer whose music was about the common person’s experience, but had no activist content, and a 1980 article that had a feminist, but not radical feminist, perspective, called “Talking Gender Neutral Blues.”

In the same issue, Bruce Barthol’s satirical song, “I Want to Die for the Shah of Iran” was published:

I want to die for the Shah of Iran

He’s a regular guy, a wonderful man

He did a lot of things for his society

He built a great big army and a secret police. ...

Well, we always honor the biggest thieves

That's why we're glad to have him in the land of the free

Besides he's already paid for our thanks

He put the twenty-five billion in Chase Manhattan Bank (Barthol 15).

From our present day perspective, we understand the extent to which the point of view Barthol expressed in this song represented reality. The United States' longstanding intrusion into domestic affairs in the Arab world in pursuit of oil is well-documented, as are the involvement of its banks in domestic and foreign dealings, not all of them savory. In 1980, although many more people shared these viewpoints than in 1950, these verses represented an anti-establishment and progressive perspective. Yet while Barthol's satire certainly communicated his position, the complaint and the circumstances it describes seemed more academic, more removed from daily life than the immediacy and volatility of the conflicts confronting the editors in the formative days of *Sing Out!*, for there were not coffins arriving home from abroad at that time, nor race riots and mass protests.

Sing Out! has clearly come to terms with its changed role, and sees itself as a place for dialogue and sharing between folk music's long history and its ongoing and vibrant present. This is evident in its current mission statement: "Our mission is to preserve and support the cultural diversity and heritage of all traditional and contemporary folk musics, and to encourage making folk music a part of our everyday lives" (*singout.org*).

The magazine has outlived the ups and downs of various progressive movements, and remains a strong influence on folk musicians and folk music lovers today. Other things have changed—it is glossier and larger than it was in the early years. It started as a monthly publication, became a bi-monthly in the 1970s, and is now a quarterly. The present day *Sing Out!* is much more than a magazine. Its parent organization, Sing Out!, Inc., also produces other publications (song collections, folk music books and directories) and sound recordings, and houses a multi-media resource center and library (“If I Had a Song” 17). It has become an establishment within its musical genre, and it has its own notable history of almost sixty years, which includes being the first to print Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” and a host of other well-known folk tunes, including “Roll on Columbia,” “Michael Row the Boat Ashore,” and “House of the Rising Sun” (“If I Had a Song” 21).

Looking back at the issues of *Sing Out* from the 1950s and reflecting on their context, it seems clear that, given their sympathies, they could not have produced a publication at that time *without* voicing outrage. They could not avoid, and did not wish to do so, asking their readers to take a stand. The founders’ circle of acquaintances and friends were being hauled before a Senate committee because they voiced their support of peace, human rights and justice, and because of fear and hate-mongering; Jim Crow laws prevented black musicians from sharing Southern stages with their white colleagues, eating in the same restaurants, or staying in the same hotel; and just five years after the end of WWII, the U.S. was once again embroiled in a war, and a far less compelling one at that.

While the voices grew calmer and the approach to activism became more philosophical over the years, *Sing Out!* played an important role in helping American music shed some of its post-war complacency and naiveté. It moved through to the other side of a cultural revolution in which it participated actively, and after which it grew up and took a longer view, hand in hand with the generation that had heard its encouragement, and had joined it in the goal of preserving and celebrating the music of the people and the sounds of humanity from both American and global roots.

CHAPTER VII. BOB DYLAN

SONGS OF CONSCIENCE:

The Evolution of Bob Dylan's Poetry and His Influence as a "Protest" Songwriter

One man had much money,
One man had not enough to eat,
One man lived just like a king,
The other man begged on the street.
Long ago, far away;
These things don't happen
No more, nowadays (Dylan "Long Ago").

From "Long Ago, Far Away" by Bob Dylan, 1962

How did a young man from Hibbing, Minnesota become one of the most influential songwriters of the twentieth century, and his songs symbols of the 1960s counterculture movement and rallying cries against social injustice? What is it about those songs that brought this artist renown not only as a musician, but as a poet, leading him to the unprecedented achievement of being awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his songwriting? This chapter will seek to examine the influences on Bob Dylan's world view and his art, the evolution of his songwriting and its place within American poetry, and to show how his work laid the foundation for the inventive, poetic protest songs of key figures who followed his lead, including John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen.

Bob Dylan, born Robert Allan Zimmerman, liked to spin tall tales about himself and shock interviewers. In his early interviews, compiled by Jonathan Cott in his book *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, he claimed that he was Bob Dylan, raised in Gallup, New Mexico, now all alone with no family, a child of the open road who had traveled across the country, and had traveled with a carnival “off an on for six years” (ix). In fact, he had been born in Duluth, Minnesota on May 24, 1961, and had moved to Hibbing, Minnesota at the age of six.

The son of a middle-class Jewish couple, Bob listened to diverse music on the radio and at Crippa’s, the local record store in Hibbing. He had very broad tastes, immersing himself in everything from blues and country ‘n’ western to early rock ‘n’ roll. According to biographers Tim Dowley and Barry Dunnage, “by the age of ten, Bob had taught himself to play the piano, autoharp and harmonica. At twelve, he was working on an old Sears-Roebuck guitar, and using a small wire frame to hold his mouth harp” (16).

He played with several different garage bands during high school and was a big fan of Hank Williams, Buddy Holly and Little Richard. On an early recording made by a high school friend, when asked what the best kind of music is, he answers enthusiastically “Rhythm and blues!” (Hajdu 68). His persona in these high school bands was based on Little Richard and Elvis Presley, and was the first of many changing personas over his career.

During these teenage years, he immersed himself in the first group of major influences that helped shape his art and career. Dowley and Dunnage describe those influences: “...he got hooked on the cult figure of James Dean and by the novels of John

Steinbeck – not least *East of Eden*, the screen version of which had starred Dean. The characters portrayed contrasted sharply with the people of Hibbing, and Bob became fascinated by the Dust Bowl lifestyle and its people’s struggle for survival. He identified with the Dust Bowl refugees, and even began to imitate their appearance and mannerisms” (17).

Bob spent one year at the University of Minnesota, during which time he performed at local coffee houses in the student area known as Dinkytown. Dowley and Dunnage note that here Dylan’s influences expanded. He was exposed to the Beat poets Ginsberg and Kerouac, to the musicians of the Folk Revival, including Pete Seeger, Odetta and The Kingston Trio, and to the great blues artists such as Big Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters (17-18). Most significantly, it was here that he heard the music of Woody Guthrie, whose music must have resonated for the young man who had responded so strongly to Steinbeck’s stories of poor folk and the challenges of the Dust Bowl.

He began to model himself after Woody Guthrie, who became one of his greatest influences. “Guthrie’s autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, became Bob’s Bible,” Dowley writes (18). Author David Hajdu writes: “In Guthrie, Bob found more than a genre of music, a body of work, or a performance style: he found *an image...*” (70). During his time in the Dinkytown coffeehouses, Bob Zimmerman began calling himself Bob Dylan. Hajdu explains that this transformation took external form: “He replaced his motorcycle jacket with a dirty gray tweed sports coat from the Salvation Army and let his hair dangle, uncombed. Bob was a folksinger now” (69).

Dylan left college after freshman year, and in December 1960, he moved to New York City. One of the first things Dylan did was to seek out his hero Woody Guthrie,

whom he met and then visited regularly in the hospital (where Woody was in declining health from Huntington's disease). There he also met many of Woody's friends who were active in the New York folk scene. Reporting on this period, biographer Tim Riley shares a letter Dylan wrote: "'I know Woody,' Dylan wrote home, 'Woody likes me—he tells me to sing for him—he's the greatest holiest godliest one in the world.' ...Dylan exchanged songs with all the New York folkies, including Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Pete Seeger, and young Arlo Guthrie" (18).

Dylan was green but ambitious, and played in Greenwich Village coffeehouses or on street corners, playing material from his favorite artists and those he was meeting and hearing in the Village, as well as his own material that he was writing with increasing frequency. He made a point of meeting everyone who might be helpful to him, and in the summer made an excursion to Boston to play at clubs there. After Dylan returned to New York, Robert Shelton reviewed his September 1961 performance at Folk City in *The New York Times*. He called Dylan "one of the most distinctive stylists to play in a Manhattan cabaret in months" and wrote, "a searing intensity pervades his songs" (Shelton 111). According to Shelton, immediately after the review appeared, Columbia Records producer John Hammond, the legendary discoverer and producer of Billie Holiday, offered Dylan a five-year recording contract. He had seen Dylan backing up Carolyn Hester in the studio recording her first album, was handed the review by Dylan, and signed Dylan without a formal audition (113-115).

Dylan's first album was recorded in November 1961 and released on March 19, 1962. Filled with traditional folk and gospel songs and covers of the work of other songwriters, it had only two originals, both inspired by Woody Guthrie. The first was a

talking blues, called “Talking New York,” in a talking blues form that Woody had used on numerous songs, and the second was “Song To Woody,” a tribute to his hero. Shelton explains that the talking blues “is a very old form, speech delivered against simple guitar background. The narrative tells a wry story in near deadpan. Each verse ends with sardonic asides” (119).

The first album did not sell terribly well, nor did it gain Dylan any significant recognition, although reviews were favorable. It did not contain any “protest” material or songs about social injustice. However, even before it was released, Dylan had begun to write about war and civil rights, and had begun what was to be a four-year period during which he was perceived as a leading songwriter for the counterculture, a title he did not request and which he ultimately rejected. During that period, 1961-1965, Dylan played a major role in changing U.S. songwriting forever.

In February 1962, even before the release of his first album, Bob Dylan was booked by his activist girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, to perform at a Congress of Racial Equality benefit concert. For this event, Dylan wrote his first protest song, “The Death of Emmett Till.” This song, which he boasted to New York Folklore Center director Izzy Young was “the best thing I’ve ever written,” was never released by Dylan and, like much of his early protest writing, was later described by him as “bullshit,” according to Mike Marqusee in *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan’s Art* (48). But the urge to speak out against racist violence—a motivator that inspired numerous other songs throughout his career—was one felt strongly by Dylan, expressed (to varying degrees) quite effectively, and in a visceral and important way that the word “bullshit” does not suitably express.

In fact, the prior year, according to Marqusee, Dylan had “regularly performed a version of Lord Buckley’s satirical rant, ‘Black Cross,’ about an intelligent black man murdered by idiot whites” (49). After “Emmett Till” he wrote “The Ballad of Donald White,” which tells the story of a black man caught inside the penal system and unable to function in the outside world, so he kills a man to go back to prison. The song is in Donald White’s voice, speaking from death row. Like many of his early works, it is a straightforward narrative, told in a personal way, and asking the listener to consider how we define those in society of whom we are afraid, and whom we view as enemies. The first and last stanzas bracket Donald White’s tale of a solitary, dysfunctional, uneducated life that is wasted in jails, never given a chance of succeeding:

My name is Donald White, you see,

I stand before you all.

I was judged by you a murderer

And the hangman's knot must fall.

I will die upon the gallows pole

When the moon is shining clear,

And these are my final words

That you will ever hear.

But there's just one question

Before they kill me dead,

I'm wondering just how much

To you I really said

Concerning all the boys that come
Down a road like me,
Are they enemies or victims
Of your society? (Dylan, "The Ballad of Donald White")

"They killed him because he couldn't find no room in life," Dylan explained. "They killed him and when they did I lost some of my room in my life. When are some people gonna wake up and see that sometimes people aren't really their enemies, but their victims?" (Marqusee 49). Throughout his career, Dylan would continue to empathize with the hopeless and abandoned, the mistreated and the exploited, and to point out the victimization of so many individuals and groups in American society.

From December 1962 through January 1963, Bob Dylan visited London, and there, singing and sharing songs with English folk musicians such as Martin Carthy (later of Fairport Convention) and Ewan McColl, he became immersed in British traditional tunes and lyrics. Dylan would use the melodies he learned there repeatedly. Much like the broadsheet songwriters of Colonial days, and the Wobbly songwriters from the early twentieth century, Dylan would set his songs to existing tunes, including the British traditional tunes he learned in London (such as "Lord Randall," which was the basis for "A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall,") and blues, gospel or slave songs (such as "No More Auction Block," which provided the musical foundation for "Blowin' in the Wind.")

In May 1963, Dylan's second album was released. "Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" included five significant songs that explored war, civil rights and nuclear weapons. The album gained Dylan the label of protest singer, and solidified his growing reputation. The "protest songs" on the album are "Blowin' In The Wind," "Oxford Town," "Masters of

War,” “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” and “A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall.” These songs showed tremendous breadth, ranging from the unembellished questioning about the cost of war in “Blowin’ in the Wind” and the straightforward narrative about James Meredith (the first black man to enter the University of Mississippi) in “Oxford Town,” to the diatribe against the military industrial complex in “Masters of War” and the more complex language and images of nuclear devastation in “A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall.”

“Talkin’ World War III Blues” was, like Dylan’s “Song to Woody,” a traditional talking blues--a folk form perfected by Woody Guthrie and frequently used for tongue-in-cheek commentary about politics and society. In this rendition, Dylan used the form to describe a universal dream created by fears of nuclear holocaust, using humor to explore an oh-so-serious subject:

I was feelin' kinda lonesome and blue,

I needed somebody to talk to.

So I called up the operator of time

Just to hear a voice of some kind.

"When you hear the beep

It will be three o'clock,"

She said that for over an hour

And I hung it up.

Well, the doctor interrupted me just about then,

Sayin, "Hey I've been havin' the same old dreams,

But mine was a little different you see.

I dreamt that the only person left after the war was me.

I didn't see you around" (Dylan "Talking World War II Blues").

"Blowin' In The Wind" was a significant departure from Dylan's earlier protest narratives. Both "Emmett Till" and "Donald White" told a specific story of an individual and his plight; "Blowin' in the Wind" was much more universal and provided an anthem for social justice issues of all kinds for years to come. Biographer Andy Gill describes the significant departure in Dylan's writing that this song represented: "'Blowin' in the Wind' was different: for the first time, Dylan discovered the effectiveness of moving from the particular to the general. ...[A] song as vague and all-encompassing as 'Blowin' In The Wind' could be applied to just about any freedom issue, at any time. It remains the song with which Dylan's name is most inextricably linked, and safeguarded his reputation as civil libertarian through any number of subsequent changes in style and attitude" (23).

The simplicity of Dylan's writing in this song is his brilliance. By weaving together questions about milestones that mark the growth and change of individuals and societies, he challenges the listener to contemplate both the plight of those who suffer and the blinders of those who could do something, if they would break the pattern and act. At the same time, he uses such images as a mountain's very gradual erosion to emphasize the size of the challenge and the enormous effort and patience required to make change:

How many years can a mountain exist

Before it's washed to the sea?

Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist

Before they're allowed to be free?

Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head,

Pretending he just doesn't see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,

The answer is blowin' in the wind (Dylan, "Blowin'")

The unanswered questions that Dylan leaves "blowin'" combined with the impatience implicit in the repeated "how many times" give the song its power. "...[H]e dares the listeners to fill in the gaps," writes Tim Riley in his book, *Hard Rain*. "[H]e means these questions to be larger than any answers" (54-56). The tone, though insistent, is peaceful, calm and relatively congenial. As Mike Marqusee writes, "The song is delicately poised between hope and impatience" (55).

By contrast, "Masters of War" is one of the angriest and most accusatory songs of its type. Long viewed as an anti-war song, it is, in fact, more an indictment of the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower had warned the incoming President John F. Kennedy about just a few years earlier. Specifically, Dylan spews venom at the bureaucrats and profiteers who sit in the safety of their anonymity and send soldiers off to war. At a time when others writing songs about war were keeping their emotions contained and relatively impersonal, Dylan lashed out in one of his earliest attacks at a systemic problem in which an inhumane and broken power structure enables injustice to occur.

Marqusee shares that, once again, Dylan employs a traditional British tune in his composition, in this case "Nottamun Town," Jean Ritchie's Appalachian adaptation of an early English tune (67). The relentless beat and strong accenting of the downbeat reinforce the strength of Dylan's accusations in "Masters of War," and the constant

repetition of the word “you” acts as a verbal finger pointing. This serves to emphasize the guilt of the man hiding behind the desk, the usually invisible, but now exposed, villain. Dylan’s lyrics make clear that the actions of the weapons maker are not only evil, but they are also cowardly:

You that never done nothin'
But build to destroy
You play with my world
Like it's your little toy
You put a gun in my hand
And you hide from my eyes
And you turn and run farther
When the fast bullets fly (Dylan “Masters”).

In the closing stanzas of “Masters of War,” Dylan makes clear that there is no forgiveness, no redemption for the acts of the war monger: “Even Jesus would never/Forgive what you do.” He follows that with a verdict on the cost of what has been enacted: “All the money you made/Will never buy back your soul.” Dylan closes the song with the full force of his anger: “I hope that you die,” and “I’ll stand o’er your grave/’Til I’m sure that you’re dead” (Dylan “Masters”).

“A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” a song about the devastating effects of nuclear holocaust, represents Dylan’s most significant new direction up to this point in his young career. Its series of striking images and lack of the clarity and directness of his earlier narrative work mark it as his most poetic song to-date, requiring the reader/listener to put effort into understanding and interpreting the lyrics. Unlike the much simpler “Blowin’

In *The Wind*” and others on the same album, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” is described by essayist Lawrence Wilde as notable for its “startling experimentation in content and form.” It is “more demanding” stretching “the limits of intelligibility...The condensed images convey a sense of global crisis that has led to the possibility of obliteration by nuclear war” (88).

“A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” along with “Chimes of Freedom,” from one year later, are considered by Lawrence Wilde, in his essay, *The Cry of Humanity: Dylan’s Expressionist Period*, to be “two important precursors” to Dylan’s “‘social expressionist’ body of work,” represented in full fruition by the 1965 song “Desolation Row” (80).

Bearing close similarities to German Expressionism, the distinguishing characteristics of Dylan’s Expressionism are described by Wilde using a definition from Kellner:

“Expressionism sought the most direct expression of intense human feelings through the use of condensed and intense imagery, delivered in order to shock the recipient into a strong emotional reaction. Syntactical compression, symbolic picture-sequences and a fervent declamatory tone were key features” (84).

In *Keys To The Rain*, Oliver Trager, describing “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” writes that it is “[a]s stark a piece of apocalyptic visionary prophesy as anything ever committed to paper, vinyl, magnetic tape...” (233). He describes it as “the first of a cycle of songs that...describes a journey to a symbol-steeped netherworld” (234). It bears the same question and answer format as the British traditional song “Lord Randal” on which it is based, and Trager writes that the reply from Dylan “comes in a surrealistic flood of images” that he compares to “Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ or ‘Kaddish’ ...and evokes images of Picasso’s *Guernica* and Goya’s pacifist sketches, as well as the tortured poetry

of ...Arthur Rimbaud...and Charles Baudelaire” (234). Dylan and Ginsberg were good friends and collaborators for many years, and Dylan had been influenced early on by his readings of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs.

Others have recognized the importance of this song in Dylan’s development as a poet. Andy Gill writes that “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” “established him as the folk-poet of a new generation. Its strings of surreal, apocalyptic imagery were unlike anything that had been sung before, and the song’s rejection of narrative progression in favor of accumulative power lent a chilling depth to its warning” (28). That power, building stanza by stanza, is obvious even in a few isolated lines:

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests,
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans,
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard,
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall (Dylan, “A Hard Rain’s”).

Larry David Smith writes that the song, which he describes as “impressionistic,” “transformed the art of songwriting,” and that “the practice of songwriting changed forever.” Smith concludes that “the extent to which the writer was influenced by symbolist poets is a mystery. At times, he says he was; at others, he denies their influence. In any event, this technique revolutionized the art form, and it would never be the same again” (28-30).

In May 1963, what was to have been Bob Dylan’s first national television appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* became a legendary statement of protest against censorship. In the rehearsal, he performed the song he intended to perform, “Talkin’ John

Birch Paranoid Blues.” Afterwards, made nervous by the controversial lyrics of the song, which made fun of anti-communism, the network executives requested that he play another song. Dylan refused, and walked out of the studio.

Soon after, he made another national statement. At the August 28, 1963 March on Washington—the March for Jobs and Freedom—the demonstrators waiting for the main event were entertained by a group of folksingers. Odetta, Josh White, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paula and Mary sang “Blowin’ In The Wind,” the recording of which (by Peter, Paul and Mary) had reached number two on the pop charts that summer. Then Dylan himself took the stage, performing two original songs, “When the Ship Comes In” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game.”

While the first song was in keeping with the mood of the day and reflected the hopeful message of Dr. King’s “Dream,” the second was a departure from anything else heard that day. Inspired by the murder of civil rights worker Medgar Evers in Mississippi, “Only a Pawn in Their Game” pays homage to Evers, but focuses primarily on the political and economic system that caused Evers’s death. Both the victim and the perpetrator are victims in Dylan’s view:

A South politician preaches to the poor white man,
"You got more than the blacks, don't complain.
You're better than them, you been born with white skin," they explain.
And the Negro's name
Is used it is plain
For the politician's gain (Dylan, “Only A Pawn”).

Dylan made his mark that day, addressing bigger issues and setting himself apart from the other performances. Marqusee explains the distinction: “On a day when everyone else was singing about freedom and deliverance and unity Dylan was outlining a class-based analysis of the persistence of racism—and the central weight of white-skin privilege within the American polity” (9). At the close of the concert, the group of folksingers was joined by the SNCC Freedom Singers and all joined hands to sing the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome.”

By January 1964, when Dylan’s third album, *the Times They Are A-Changin’*, was released, Dylan had attracted enormous attention as a songwriter and musician. The new album, dominated by songs about social justice, solidified his position as the nation’s preeminent protest singer. In addition to the title song, which proclaims in a declaratory and confident voice the coming of change that will turn things upside down (Dylan later decried his naiveté), the album included “Only A Pawn in Their Game” and “When the Ship Comes In,” both sung at the March on Washington. Also on the album were three narrative songs about people without hope or without justice. “Ballad of Hollis Brown” tells the story of a rural South Dakota farmer’s poverty, and the desperation that drives him to take his own and his family members’ lives, seeing no way out and no help at hand. “North Country Blues” tells of a young woman in northern Minnesota, from Dylan’s home turf, whose brother and father are killed in the mines, and after the mines dry up, her miner husband leaves her to raise the children on her own—children who are destined to leave the town where the mine is empty and the work is all gone.

“The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” shares the true story of a poor black woman killed by a rich white man in Baltimore after being struck with his cane when she

was too slow serving him at a bar. Dylan wrote the song after reading that the man was only convicted of manslaughter and was sentenced to a mere six months in prison. Again, as in other similar songs (such as “Only a Pawn in the Game”) he is most interested in addressing the system that has created the social and economic imbalances and the scales of justice that are weighted on one side. The song, Andy Gill writes, uses “a verse pattern based on Brecht’s *The Black Freighter*,” and far less rhyming than his earlier poems. “The rhyme scheme shows how Dylan was maturing technically as a poet: apart from repeating ‘table’ in three consecutive lines of the third verse to evoke the tedium of Hattie Carroll’s servility, the only rhyming lines are the ‘fears’ and ‘tears’ of the chorus” (Gill 50).

Although the album’s title song is certainly its most famous (and one of Dylan’s most popular), the song “With God On Our Side” may be more timeless and prophetic. Dylan relates the litany of conflicts to which America has been a party, from Native American genocide, through major wars, and into the Cold War, in each case stating (sardonically) that our nation can justify its actions because we acted with God on our side. As is frequently the case in Dylan’s lyrics, the repetition of the key phrase at the end of each stanza builds the momentum to create a powerful impact by the end of the song, which he often finishes with a twist of the lyric. “The words fill my head/ And fall to the floor/If God's on our side/ He'll stop the next war” (Dylan, “With God”). The positioning of patriotism, religion and American superiority/supremacy as the justification for aggression certainly is a familiar refrain in twentieth century America.

In the year prior to the release of this third album, Dylan was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with his perceived place in the “movement,” troubled with

the types of expectations it raised and the lack of dimension to its discourse. As Andy Gill explains it, Dylan was identified as “the undisputed king of protest music, though even as he was being crowned, he was experiencing grave misgivings about both that type of song, fame in general and his own position as reluctant leader of a movement” (37).

Dylan’s objections to the label were multi-faceted: fear of the expectations it raised, the obligations it implied and the creative limitations it might create. However, Mike Marqusee points out that he and his work would not be so easily extricated: “... even as he beat a retreat from politics, the political environment continued to shape his songs and his personal vision. As he railed against the movement, his music remained entangled in its fate” (92).

In late 1964, Dylan released his fourth album, appropriately named *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. The album contained only one protest song, “Chimes of Freedom,” the lyrics of which were a more radical departure from his earlier work than even “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” During this time he was also making musical changes, as he increasingly experimented with electric instruments and more of a folk-rock blend in his compositions.

“Chimes of Freedom” is seen as a transitional work for Bob Dylan. According to Mike Marqusee, it is “often described as both his last protest song and the first of those songs comprised of ‘chains of flashing images’ (Dylan’s phrase) that make up the heart of his sixties canon” (93). Although his ability to move from image to image is still somewhat stilted, and his execution of this type of poetry improves in the coming years, it marks Dylan’s move into a new kind of writing. Marqusee notes that Dylan was

reading the French symbolist poets at the time, and that these lyrics are Dylan's attempt at the "disarrangement of the senses," espoused by Rimbaud (93).

Described by Lawrence Wilde as "an unashamed profession of solidarity with the powerless and oppressed" (80), the song mixes sensory experiences with chimes of freedom that are "flashing" through the confluence of bells ringing during a lightning storm. Like a moment captured by a strobe light, images are caught in the illumination from the bolts of lightning (the "flashing" images). The images in the lyrics build upon one another: "the majestic bells of bolts," "the city's melted furnace," "the wild ripping hail," and "the hypnotic splattered mist."

The couple huddled in the doorway, trying to escape the storm, come face to face with the forsaken, as the chimes toll for "the refugees...ev'ry underdog soldier...the rebel...the luckless, the abandoned...the outcast...the guardians and protectors...the deaf an' blind" (Dylan, "Chimes"). After what Andy Gill describes as this account of "a visionary epiphany," a simple dissection of social issues would no longer be the norm for Dylan. Instead, his exploration of social justice issues was "transformed by a razor-sharp satirical surrealism into a parallel universe in which the underlying forces were more subtly revealed" (Gill 58).

Only a few months later, Dylan's fifth album was released in March 1965. Containing no protest songs, *Bringing It All Back Home* was the first of his albums to include electric instrumentation. It also included two important Dylan hits, "Mr. Tambourine Man," and "Subterranean Homesick Blues," the latter full of word play and keystone cop images set against a bopping, electric tune. Andy Gill describes it as "a

three-way cross between Chuck Berry, Jack Kerouac and a Woody Guthrie/Pete Seeger song”(68).

That summer, Dylan’s new sound caused an uproar when he performed at the Newport Folk Festival with an electric band. The reaction of his folk music colleagues was extreme, and he was lambasted in the folk press, treated as a traitor who had sold out. Many critics agree that the song “Positively 4th Street,” written four days after the performance at Newport, is a statement by Dylan about the reaction of many long-time musician colleagues and friends to his own musical evolution. “You got a lotta nerve/To say you got a helping hand to lend/You just want to be on/The side that’s winning....I know the reason/That you talk behind my back/I used to be among the crowd/You’re in with,” he wrote (Dylan, “Positively”). Based on the folk community’s strongly negative reaction to electric instruments being used at Newport, it would seem that Dick Weissman’s assessment that “rock and roll represented a social revolution in its own right” (266) would have rung true for Dylan. Rock and roll was about discarding the norms of the prior generation, but the divide must have seemed even greater to those in the Folk Revival, who had looked for their inspiration to the simplicity of sounds from earlier eras.

In August 1965, at the end of his most fertile period of “protest songs,” Bob Dylan released *Highway 61 Revisited*. A full-fledged superstar at this point, Dylan was busy in the period leading up to the release, touring Britain (a tour made into a documentary by filmmaker Donn Pennebaker), and taking the opportunity to travel with his friend, poet Allen Ginsberg, and to visit with other musicians, including Donovan and The Beatles. Again this album included only one protest song, “Desolation Row,” which

is an enigmatic and expressionistic song full of allusions to all kinds of fictitious, historical and literary figures, including Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliot. It was written during what is known as Dylan's "angry young man" phase, and it is one of two songs (the other being "Ballad of a Thin Man") that Lawrence Wilde describes as coming "closest to giving us a complete expressionist rejection of conservative values....In these songs the underworld of the rebels or freaks is the liberated, sane place to be, and the world of the conservatives is shriveled, hypocritical and in decay." Wilde notes that the other of these two songs, "Ballad of a Thin Man," "may be a reference to T.S. Eliot's 'hollow man', a person of no substance, no integrity" (95).

The period in which this song was written was full of tension and upheaval, with LBJ having ordered ground troops into South Vietnam and the bombing of North Vietnam, and violent reactions to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with embattled attempts to enforce the law. The images in "Desolation Row" reflect this reality. "They're selling postcards of the hanging," refers to an early twentieth century lynching in Minnesota, a photo of which was sold as a postcard, much like the postcard of the Indiana lynching that inspired Abel Meeropol to write "Strange Fruit." It also certainly evokes the racial tensions of the mid-1960s civil rights struggles, as does "the riot squad they're restless" and "everybody's shouting/' Which Side Are You On?" (Dylan, "Desolation"). The images and people that populate the poem seem farcical, purposefully out of place and disjointed, creating a surreal and almost grotesque impression. Author Wayne Hampton describes it as "a frightening maze of hurried, blurred half-images, representing the ugly side of modern life" (181).

Many allusions could undoubtedly be unearthed from a lengthy study of the

poem. The title alone, combined with the presence of a “fortunetelling lady,” is reminiscent of images in Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” another poem at least partially inspired by the desolation of war and the breakdown of normal life and social interchange. Even the words in the titles, “wasteland” and “desolation” are virtually synonymous. Lawrence Wilde identifies allusions to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the lyric “between the windows of the sea/Where lovely mermaids flow,” reflecting the “mermaids singing” and “chambers of the sea” in Eliot’s poem. Wilde describes the literary device used in “Desolation Row” as collage, “jumping from scene to scene through fragmented images over ten verses while managing to sustain coherence.” Writing of the poetic influence of T.S. Eliot in this song and others on the album, Wilde explains, “...Dylan is using Eliot’s technique to subvert the latter’s commitment to the idea of ‘high art’ accessible only to a gifted elite. Dylan not only constructs a masterpiece which commands the attention of millions of listeners, but he comments on the poetic sources of the song in the penultimate verse. Here he has the great exponents of collage technique, Ezra Pound and Eliot, ‘fighting in the captain’s town’ of the *Titanic* as it sails to its doom” (99).

Wilde’s analysis supports the labeling of Dylan as a post-modernist poet, at least from the mid-1960s on. His vision and voice are chaotic and fragmented, and his judgments are full of criticisms for a plethora of American myths. He developed a strong use of imagist language, like H.D., and experimented with rhyme and structure like so many contemporary poets before him. Dylan’s lyrics include an examination of individual challenges and growth, as well as experiences that represent more universal struggles, both of which can be found in the poetry of Adrienne Rich. As demonstrated,

his influences ranged from the Beat poetry of his good friend Allen Ginsberg to the Symbolist poetry of the French poet Rimbaud.

Dylan did not stop writing or producing protest songs in the mid-1960s, although the bulk of his protest material was behind him at that point. Notably, his more recent protest material returned to the narrative story song, sharing the saga of George Jackson's death in San Quentin prison while awaiting trial (released in 1971), and the story of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter (released in 1975), a boxer convicted of a murder, who Dylan believed had been the victim of racial profiling and had not received a fair trial. In the forty-five years since his heyday as an icon of protest songwriting, Dylan has written, produced and performed regularly, traveling on what is called the "Never-Ending Tour." His popularity waned for many years, with periodic resurgences, but took a major positive turn over the last two decades, during which he has produced a number of hits and received many awards and accolades.

Bob Dylan's songwriting has certainly been marked by invention. He was the first to use 20th century protest lyrics as an opportunity for a complex examination of a dysfunctional system with long-standing inequities of power and privilege. He moved the protest song genre from a simpler call for change, peace and unity, to a personal expression of discomfort and disgust, to a challenge to easy answers or simple explanations of guilt, and finally, to a form using high-impact collage-like series of images and expressions to produce emotional responses requiring thought, reflection and dissection.

In 2008, Bob Dylan received a special Pulitzer Prize "for his profound impact on popular music and American culture, marked by lyrical compositions of extraordinary

poetic power” (Pulitzer.org). He was included in *Time Magazine*’s list of “The Most Important People of the Century,” identified as “the 20th century’s most influential folk singer,” and called a “master poet, caustic social critic and intrepid, guiding spirit of the counterculture generation” (Cocks). In 1988, Dylan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which calls him “the uncontested poet laureate of the rock and roll era and the pre-eminent singer/songwriter of modern times” (“Dylan Inducted”). He received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1991, and his name appears on numerous Top 100 lists in *Rolling Stone* magazine. In 1997, President Clinton presented Bob Dylan with a Kennedy Center Honor, and in 2001 he won both a Golden Globe Award and an Academy Award for his song “Things Have Changed.”

Dylan’s influence on other artists is vast. An enormous number of significant musicians have acknowledged their debt to his work and innovation. Early in his career, he met the Beatles, and they became friends. Both John Lennon and Paul McCartney have identified Dylan as an influence on their work. Wayne Hampton expounds on Dylan’s impact on John Lennon: “Other major pop artists, including John Lennon, were profoundly affected by the scruffy little poet with a guitar. Lennon spent hours listening to Dylan’s albums over and over and, inspired by Dylan, would lead the Beatles and the rock community generally in new and more socially concerned directions. Lennon always included Dylan among his major influences” (164-65).

Frank Zappa, at age twenty-four in 1965, recalled his feeling, upon hearing “Like a Rolling Stone,” that “I wanted to quit the music business, because I felt ‘If this wins and it does what it’s supposed to do, I don’t need to do anything else” (Marcus 146). Bruce Springsteen, perhaps the most likely inheritor of Dylan’s poetic mantle, was

heavily influenced by Bob Dylan. Author Larry David Smith explains: “Springsteen’s first two albums’ lyrical content reflect...his ‘ambitious’ writing style and Dylan’s influence. ...[T]he imagery...reminded critics of Dylan’s spontaneous ‘in the spirit’ writings, hence the round of ‘New Dylan’ publicity” (153).

Bob Dylan, who started his career as an acolyte of Woody Guthrie, channeling his spirit, his music and his direct honesty, had the luxury of developing his poetic and musical voice for many more decades than Woody enjoyed. Although Dylan, who has been quite prolific, has written far more songs about human relationships than those with protest or social justice content, he will forever be that bold, complex and direct voice that asked the tough questions, that exposed half-truths, and that called attention to wrongs. As his mentor Guthrie wrote, “All you can write is what you see.” Bob Dylan took Woody’s words to heart.

CHAPTER VIII. WOODSTOCK

PROTEST SONGS AT WOODSTOCK:

The Content and the Legacy

The goal of Woodstock Ventures was to make Woodstock's sole focus on the art of the counterculture and not on its politics. . . . The view of [the organizers] reflects a growing realization within the counterculture that neither violent protest nor politics would bring about the truly revolutionary change the counterculture sought. A complete change of lifestyle was what was needed.

James Perone, from *Woodstock: An Encyclopedia of the Music and Art Fair* (30)

No issue revealed the country's widening chasm more than Vietnam. At the same time that this generation was embracing sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, it was simultaneously learning to endure the shock and trauma of assassinations, race riots, and police brutality. Those were the clouds hovering over Woodstock that had nothing to do with the weather.

Pete Fornatale, from *Back to the Garden: The Story of Woodstock*
(40)

"There have always been a few hold-outs left over from the folk music period," reflected Rolling Stone's Jon Landau in January 1969, "but despite the mass

media's continually mistaken references to rock and roll as 'protest music,' rock musicians have done remarkably little protesting."

From Dorian Lynskey's *33 Revolutions Per Minute* (88)

The three quotes above sum up the strange dichotomy of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, August 15-18, 1969, the largest and most renowned music festival and counterculture gathering of the tumultuous 1960s. The decade the festival helped close, and which it will forever symbolize, was one of social foment, violence against civil rights protesters, assassinations, mounting opposition to the Vietnam War, and a growing assertion of youth independence. Yet the festival and its content ended up being more about a lifestyle and a new world view—a cultural shift—than about music seeking political or civic change.

In some sense, songs and music for change did get a wider audience due to Woodstock and the ensuing album and film. However, as a percentage of the music played at Woodstock, "protest music" of any type was a relatively small portion. Using the most generous definition, including any generally rebellious lyrics or statements of unity, solidarity or a new social norm, by this author's count only eight percent of the songs played at Woodstock might be considered to have some "protest" content.

What is notable about these songs is the story they weave as a group about the voices of that time and the influence of those who came before. They paint the picture of a larger cultural revolution, born out of the folk music revival, the spirit of rock 'n' roll, the desire for more personal freedom, and disillusionment with the social status quo and the growing death toll in Vietnam. Bigger than any one movement, but embracing all of

them, the variety, messages and emotional power of the protest songs at the festival communicated a thirst for a dramatic change--a generation wishing to throw off the precepts of the previous one. The cultural change and related political ideas were of one cloth, communicated as the values of this new generation.

While some of the protest content was overt, written and performed to engage participants and motivate change, other examples were subtler, more poetic, and more introspective—reflections on what seemed like frightening prospects facing the Woodstock Nation. The songs represented the full range of ways that music seeking change can engage: exhortation, faith and hope, satire, rebellion, story, metaphor, simplicity, illustration, and gut-wrenching emotional power. They reflected the influence of earlier writers and composers—anonymous slaves, Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger. As an icon for the role of music in cultural change, Woodstock took on a larger meaning. The festival itself became a statement about freedom from civic and parental authority, solidarity around the ideas of peace in Vietnam, personal freedom, and community responsibility. The festival was not a protest in itself, but was formed from the ideals of a counterculture movement that was based on protest. Of course, everyone does not share this view. Later in this chapter, we will explore the perspectives of a number of key figures and authors on the question of myth versus reality.

Why did this concert, in this location, at this time, take on an iconic status? There were several reasons, and these begin with the producers of the event—four young men: John Roberts and Joel Rosenman, two young investors who, though sympathetic, joined the group to operate the business side of the venture and to make money, and Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld, both engaged in the music industry and the counterculture.

John Roberts was using his recent inheritance to bankroll the event, and Joel Rosenman was an attorney. Both were inexperienced. Michael Lang had produced one other large music event, the Miami Pop Festival (May 1968), and Artie Kornfeld was a music industry executive and the most experienced of the group—as experienced as any of a group of mid-twenties young men could be said to be.

In an excellent demonstration of “learning from experience” and the power of sheer determination, the organizers plowed forward after being forced out of the festival’s first two upstate New York locations due to local fears of the disruptive impact of a large rock festival. They ultimately landed on the farm of Max Yasgur in Bethel, Sullivan County, New York, only a month before the festival was scheduled to take place. The idyllic setting ended up contributing greatly to the way the attendees reacted to the festival’s hardships.

Once they began preparations for the festival at Yasgur’s Farm, unfortunate circumstances, spawned from both inexperience and the enormous crowds, abounded—from the loss of a large portion of the off-duty NYC police security contingent, to fences and ticket booths that were not completed in time. However, as author Chris Smith notes in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History*, interesting and unusual choices also resulted, including bringing in supplemental security from “a well-respected commune from New Mexico called the Hog Farm” (143). The Hog Farm helped establish an alternate reality in the midst of chaos—a communal and care-taking environment in a pastoral setting. Smith explains that “When supplies and workers ran short, the Hog Farm ran a free-food operation and took over the medical system. The few state troopers and

off-duty police officers ...were issued red T-shirts emblazoned with a peace sign, reinforcing the goal of the festival as ‘three days of peace and music’” (143).

The unfinished ticket booths and fences, combined with the early arrival of tens of thousands of young people, caused organizers to declare the event free of charge by the first night. The pastoral setting and the power of a sea of like-minded individuals certainly affected the mood of the temporary encampment, and being free of charge exploded the size of the crowd further and reinforced the need for festival organizers and audience members to work together to ensure survival, peace and harmony. The fact that more than 400,000 young people, with scarcity of food and large quantities of illegal drugs, could gather for three days without a single act of violence was one of the legacies of Woodstock—the embodiment of a communal and brotherly philosophy espoused by the counterculture movement.

However, while these circumstances were very important to the legacy of the event, they alone did not distinguish the Woodstock festival. The diversity, quality and number of musical acts made it the largest and most important gathering of rock ‘n’ roll star power to that date, and to this day one of the most significant gatherings of its kind. Ultimately, it is the lyrical and musical content of some of the performances, combined with the activism of selected performers, and the impressions left by their performances in the minds of festival-goers and film-watchers alike, that generated the protest element of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair and forever associated it with a cultural revolution.

A group of musicians who had grown up within the American Folk Revival Movement, and who had participated actively or written music in support of civil rights and anti-war causes (among others), were featured on Days One and Two of the festival.

These included Richie Havens, Country Joe McDonald (solo and then, on Day Three, with Country Joe & the Fish), Tim Hardin, Arlo Guthrie, and Joan Baez. Each had written and performed protest songs, understood the folk roots of the traditional protest song genre, and had a strong personal commitment to social and political change. Tim Hardin, known better as a songwriter than a performer, included only one overt protest song in his ten-song set. “A Simple Song of Freedom” was an anti-war song that also commented on a distrust of mainstream sources of news and the tendency of those in power to perpetuate wars that their people do not embrace.

Arlo Guthrie, son of legendary folk singer and political activist Woody Guthrie, performed on the first day. While his presence is significant because he was Woody Guthrie’s son (Woody himself was an icon of cultural revolution), his performance was not one of the most memorable or important at the festival. He had a big hit two years earlier with the anti-war and pro-counterculture song “Alice’s Restaurant Massacre,” the audience for which exploded with the release of the “Alice’s Restaurant” film in 1969. However, Arlo’s set at Woodstock had no protest content. It did include two gospel songs, “Amazing Grace” and “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep,” which might be considered a nod to the importance of black spirituals/gospel songs in the Folk Revival, the Civil Rights Movement and the counterculture. Arlo was not expecting to go on stage when he was enlisted to do so, and by his own admission was in a drug-altered state that affected his performance: “Unfortunately, I didn’t know I was supposed to play that day, so I was doing what everybody else was doing, so I had no business actually performing. . . . But, at eighteen, you don’t have a lot of foresight . . .” (Evans 93).

Of the folk singers performing in the first two days, three—Richie Havens, Country Joe McDonald, and Joan Baez—performed memorable and iconic songs that became part of Woodstock lore. Richie Havens was the first musician to take the stage at Woodstock. A native of Brooklyn, New York, and a fixture since the early 1960s on the Greenwich Village folk scene, Havens was just beginning to get national attention when he came to Woodstock. As Mike Evans and Paul Kingsbury write in *Woodstock: Three days that rocked the world*, Havens was originally scheduled to play only four songs, but with many performers stuck in traffic, he was asked to play a longer set to “kill time” and was happy to oblige. (71).

Havens kicked off the set with the powerful anti-Vietnam War song, “The Minstrel from Gault.” The song recounts a soldier’s tales of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which was the decisive battle between the French and the troops of the Viet Minh in the first Indochinese War, and led to the Geneva peace accords and the division of North and South Vietnam (“Battle of Dien Bien Phu”). It then references Moses and the Ten Commandments, admonishing the listener for the willingness to embrace and worship the tenets, but not to listen to (to heed or follow) them:

A man came down from Sinai Mountain, with words of truth for us all.

How we bowed and knelt down,

How we worshipped well.

And when it came to listening,

We listened little, if at all,

If at all. (Havens, “Battle”)

Shortly after the French left Vietnam, the United States became actively engaged in the policy of “containment” of communism that led to the Vietnam War. While most of the young people at Woodstock would not have understood the reference to Dien Bien Phu, this choice of material for the first song performed at the festival was a powerful statement by Havens and a nod to the festival’s aforementioned intention to be “Three Days of Peace and Music.”

Later in his set, Havens sang “Handsome Johnny,” an anti-war song he co-wrote with Louis Gossett Jr., who later gained renown as an actor. A reminder of the relentless cycle of war and conflict, “Handsome Johnny” follows the form of many other protest songs, using repeating lyrics in which only the battlefield (representing a specific war) and weapons change, beginning with Concord, and including Gettysburg, Dunkirk and Korea, before turning to Vietnam, and then morphing to include the war-like conflict of the Civil Rights Movement, which would have been top-of-mind for Havens, an African-American. At the end, the song admonishes the audience for not “listening,” not heeding the gravity of the situation (reiterating a sense of urgency, as in “The Minstrel from Gault,” in which Moses was worshipped, but the Commandments were not heeded). The song asks how close these battles have to come before they are worthy of our attention—and warns that if the alarm is not heeded this time, hydrogen bombs will soon be falling:

Hey, look yonder, tell me what you see

Marching to the fields of Vietnam?

It looks like Handsome Johnny with an M15,

Marching to the Vietnam war, hey marching to the Vietnam war.

Hey, look yonder, tell me what you see
Marching to the fields of Birmingham?
It looks like Handsome Johnny with his hand rolled in a fist,
Marching to the Birmingham war, hey marching to the Birmingham war.

Hey, it's a long hard road, it's a long hard road,
It's a long hard road, before we'll be free.

Hey, what's the use of singing this song, some of you are not even listening.
Tell me what it is we've got to do: wait for our fields to start glistening,
Wait for the bullets to start whistling.

Here comes a hydrogen bomb, here comes a guided missile,
Here comes a hydrogen bomb: I can almost hear its whistle. (Havens, "The
Minstrel")

The most memorable and important song performed by Havens at Woodstock was his last. "Freedom/Motherless Child" was a combination of the powerful repetition of the word freedom, with a portion of the spiritual "Motherless Child" and the insertion of a traditional gospel-style call and response. In it, Havens called out to members of the family, and to the audience, which responded—brother, father, mother and sister. By all accounts, including Havens's own, the song was "largely improvised and highly spontaneous." It was considered "one of the true anthems" to come out of the festival (Evans 71). It became Havens's signature song and helped establish the festival's feeling of unity, harmony and a search for freedom. Perone shares statements by two of the

festival's organizers, Rosenman and Roberts, who "described Havens' 'Freedom' as being a highly symbolic statement that in many respects set the stage for the entire festival" (42).

Although the song's lyrics are quite brief, with no narrative or concrete "protest" content, beyond the very broad implications of the repeated word "freedom," Havens sang it with great power and escalating insistence, and it served as a rallying cry. It was a chilling but potent reminder of the exhausting struggle on the road to freedom. The song's legacy is proof of its effectiveness. Twenty-four years later, a duo of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* addressed the song's lasting importance and its impact:

The enduring image of Richie Havens performing "Freedom" at Woodstock is a potent vision of music's capacity for spirituality. Hunched over and drenched in sweat as he grasped his guitar, Havens danced in rapturous, reflexive motion, completely absorbed by sound and emotion. The performance, captured forever on film, was one of the festival's defining, most unforgettable moments. ... "I never get away from any concert without having to play 'Freedom,'" Havens said (Seigal).

Havens always has had a talent for combining songs to complement or contrast their lyrics (his matching of "Freedom" and "Motherless Child" represented the counterculture's political alienation better than any other song of its day) (Kohlhaase).

Like a number of the performers at Woodstock, Country Joe McDonald was enlisted to perform before he was scheduled to do so, in order to help fill in gaps caused

by performers not yet on site (John Sebastian, of the Lovin' Spoonful, was drafted to go on after this first performance by Country Joe, but wasn't scheduled to perform at the festival at all—he had come only as a participant). It is surprising that, with a film documentary (although not edited in order of appearance) and numerous journalists on-site, there is still some discrepancy as to the order in which the performers appeared. Some accounts and playlists have Country Joe's and John Sebastian's solo sets taking place on the first day, immediately following Richie Havens, and other song lists (also from credible sources) place them as the second and third performers on the second day. In any case, there is no doubt about the impact of Country Joe's first short, five-song solo set (he played again on Day Three with his band, The Fish). Particularly noteworthy was "Fish Cheer/Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die-Rag," which he reprised for the crowd in his Day Three performance.

Country Joe McDonald grew up in California with parents who had both been members of the Communist Party in the 1940s, as a result of which his father lost his job with the telephone company. Joe describes his upbringing: "I was twelve years old when my father lost his job. I grew up with Communist literature in the household, Woody Guthrie music, the *People's World* newspaper. ... Occasionally, we went to a Pete Seeger concert" (Lynskey 90). In 1962, back from three years in the Navy, he participated in desegregation sit-ins and would join with friends in downtown Los Angeles to "play Woody Guthrie songs for the winos and the bums" (Lynskey 90).

Country Joe came to the Woodstock stage as an established activist songwriter. Pete Fornatale explains that "More than any other performer at Woodstock—with the possible exception of Joan Baez—Country Joe's career was about the marriage of music

and politics” (34). McDonald had moved to Berkeley, California in 1965. That September, he released the “Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” which John Orman describes as a “humorous song that ... told of the stupidity, immorality, and uselessness of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam” (155). In September of 1965, the U.S. had been in Vietnam only six months, and support for the war was still quite high, at about sixty percent. The song became a counterculture favorite (and so was already familiar to many in the Woodstock crowd four years later). However, by August 1969, when Country Joe sang the song at Woodstock, Dorian Lynskey notes that things had changed dramatically—“over forty thousand U.S. service personnel had died, public support for the war had halved, Johnson was gone, and America was a very different place” (87).

A song that had been a bold and satirical statement against a popular war in 1965, appreciated by a fringe element, took on a much bigger role in 1969, performed to an enormous crowd of like-minded people, and memorialized and more broadly exposed in the movie documenting that event. The audience at Woodstock was ready to embrace the sentiments of the song and of the “Fish Cheer” that preceded it.

The “Fish Cheer” was an audience participation call-and-response in which Country Joe shouted “Give me an F, Give me a U,” and so on, to spell the word “fuck.” Joe McDonald delivered the “Fish Cheer” just before launching into the song. The crowd roared back the response to each letter and to Country Joe’s commanding and repeated question, “What’s that spell?” While much more common in public usage today, in 1969 this was a forbidden word, and the use of the “Fish Cheer” as a lead-in to the “Fixin’-to-Die Rag” stood as a virulent rebellion that galvanized the audience. This was a mass

statement against the authority of social mores and the primacy of the state, declaring Woodstock Nation independent for a brief time.

John Morris, Woodstock's production coordinator, said, "It was amazing. It's one of the most political moments in a festival that was not political." Country Joe McDonald agreed with Morris's sentiment about the crowd engagement in this moment of rebellion: "It established a mood; a political and social credibility for the Woodstock generation" (Fornatale 38). Blues and rock historian Bob Santelli said, "You couldn't say 'fuck'.... That word was absolutely top to bottom taboo. . . . all rules all laws were left outside the gates. . . . It became an anthem. Not because of the word fuck . . . but it was basically the attitude of the song. . . . Joe's performance there. It was legendary and it was important. It set the stage" (Fornatale 38-39).

Interestingly, given its feel of being different from the more well-known, serious or proselytizing protest songs of the 1960s, the "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" follows in the footsteps of early twentieth century protest songs, such as those by Joe Hill, that were distributed on broad sheets as lyrics set to a well-known tune, which frequently had an upbeat tempo and a popular appeal. While "Fixin'-to-Die" is not based on as well-known a tune (of the time) as was typical of the Wobbly labor protest songs, nor did it follow the melody as precisely (despite the claim, quoted below, that it was "identical"), the "Fixin'-to-Die Rag" was based on a New Orleans jazz standard from the 1920s.

In tracing the song's musical roots, Martha Bayles reports that "It was lost on the revelers at Woodstock that Country Joe and the Fish's antiwar anthem 'I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die" was musically identical to 'Muskrat Ramble,' the New Orleans jazz

standard by Edward ('Kid') Ory" (227). In any case, "Fixin'-to-Die" certainly was different than most other anti-war songs. Pete Fornatale describes the unique approach of the song to its subject matter: "Some were better than others, but they all shared a visceral disgust with the very idea of armed conflict and dying or brutally wounded military personnel. Joe McDonald's song about the issue contained all of those emotions, but presented them in a brilliant, original, incongruous way. . . . Joe placed his 'take no prisoners' stance against the Vietnam War in the framework of a good-timey, music-hall singalong in his 'I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag.' The result is mesmerizing" (42).

The song directly addresses soldiers, their parents, Wall Street, and the nation's generals. Its tongue-in-cheek approach is irreverent and in-your-face—the light, bouncy tone of the song communicating that the war and resulting deaths are being taken lightly by the powers-that-be, and the soldiers treated as disposable. While the song is certainly anti-war, it is in no way anti-soldier. McDonald, a veteran, placed great value on the lives of the soldiers, and it was the trivializing of these lives that inspired the song. The first and last verses, and the refrain, give a taste of the tone and content of the song:

Well, come on all of you, big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again.
He's got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam
So put down your books and pick up a gun,
We're gonna have a whole lotta fun.

And it's one, two, three,

What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.

Come on mothers throughout the land,
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.
Come on fathers, and don't hesitate
To send your sons off before it's too late.
And you can be the first ones in your block
To have your boy come home in a box (McDonald).

While Country Joe sang, the crowd joined in on the refrain, but before the last three stanzas, the singer decided their participation was inadequate. He kept strumming his guitar and said, “Listen people, I don’t know how you ever expect to stop the war, if you can’t sing any better than that. There’s about 300,000 of you fuckers out there, and I want you to start singin’—come on!” (*Woodstock*). The enormous crowd responded, joining in the song and rising to its feet. The volume of hundreds of thousands of voices was almost deafening. The groundswell of solidarity in this scene in the Woodstock documentary film is extraordinary and moving. As Dorian Lynskey observes, “Several other protest songs were performed over the weekend, but none captured the gestalt quite

like 'Fixin'-to-Die.' Preserved and popularized by the following year's hit documentary, it was one of Woodstock's defining moments" (Lynskey 106).

Several years later, McDonald heard from an ex-POW about the impact his song had on the troops in Vietnam. Dorian Lynskey repeats the story that "Hanoi Hannah, the English-speaking North Vietnamese propagandist, used to play the song to residents of the prison nicknamed the Hanoi Hilton, in the belief that it would break their spirits. Instead, he said, 'the prisoners would smile and hum along.' McDonald owns a recording of a GI singing it in Vietnam, two months before he was killed in action. Another soldier explained to the singer how his friend had bled to death in his arms, singing, 'Whoopee, we're all gonna die.' ... 'Those things are just chilling,' McDonald says quietly. 'I never dreamed that would happen. But I like it. They said it provided them with a touchstone to keep them from going insane'" (108).

At age twenty-eight, and with an established ten-year career already under her belt, Joan Baez was the veteran activist, and almost certainly the most politically engaged performer at Woodstock. She had sung (with Bob Dylan) at the 1963 March on Washington, and had marched with civil rights protesters in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March (joanbaez.com). The heavy presence of folk and folk-oriented music on the first day was notable, according to James Perone: "The American folk revival 'set' begun by Arlo Guthrie continued with the performance of one of the most significant figures of the folk/protest song movement, Joan Baez" (45).

Baez was a major and influential figure in both folk music and the political left, credited with mentoring Bob Dylan and aggressively pursuing her political agenda. Evans and Kingsbury comment on her early association with both political songs and the

writings of Bob Dylan, whom she helped bring to prominence: “It was on the second volume of *Joan Baez in Concert*, recorded live in 1963, that she first recorded Dylan material, with ‘Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright’ and the antiwar song ‘With God on Our Side.’ And her first taste of success on the singles charts came with two political songs, ‘We Shall Overcome’ (1963) and her cover of Phil Ochs ‘There But for Fortune’ (1965),” (94).

Baez closed the first day of performance at Woodstock. Before taking the main stage, however, she played a surprise forty-minute set on the free stage that had been established principally to give amateur musicians a place to perform. The set is reported to have included the Dylan song, “I Shall Be Released”—a poignant song about captivity (actual and spiritual) that was particularly apropos given that Baez’s husband, activist David Harris, had recently been imprisoned for draft resistance. This was one of three performances of the song at Woodstock (the others were by Joe Cocker and The Band), and in a sense brought a bit of Bob Dylan into a festival at which he did not perform.

Baez’s appearance on the free stage reflected her self-image as a part of, and not apart from, the larger community at Woodstock. James Perone notes that Baez’s action stood out from the rest of the performers: “Although many of the musicians who performed at Woodstock were deeply entrenched in the counterculture and spoke, wrote, and sang of anticommercialism (sic) and the social idealism of the movement, Baez was the only major star to share her talents at the free stage (Perone 46). Evans and Kingsbury share that Baez actively sought this opportunity to connect directly with the audience: “Baez heard about the stage that had been built outside the festival fence so that those who did not have tickets could be entertained by amateur bands and audience members

performing ‘open mic’ spots. She decided it would be appropriate and in the spirit of the festival to entertain those who could not get close to the main stage, even after the festival had been declared free and the fence was torn down . . . and she was the only major star to do so . . .” (94).

Baez’s set on the main stage consisted of at least five songs, and although additional songs have been noted in some sources (with as many as twelve listed), the additional songs may have been performed in her free stage performance. Of the five songs that were certainly sung on the main stage, four had a place in the history of protest songs and provide a historical reference and celebration of the genre.

“Joe Hill” is a song that portrays the legendary, though factually uncertain, story of the I.W.W. labor songwriter, Joe Hill, and his execution by firing squad in 1915 for a murder for which many union organizers believed he was framed. The song “Joe Hill,” sung by Joan Baez at Woodstock, had become more famous than any of Joe Hill’s own songs, and perpetuated the commonly believed legend of the labor songwriter. Fifteen years after the execution of Joe Hill, Alfred Hayes wrote a poem called “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night.” Six years later, songwriter and activist Earl Robinson set it to music, and it became a popular song in the labor movement.

Baez’s stirring rendition of “Joe Hill” introduced the legend to millions of young people who heard it on the Woodstock album and film for the first time. When questioned about Joe Hill, many of that generation still have only this song as a reference, surmising what they can from the lyrics. The message that Joe Hill was a defender of the rights of workers is strongly imprinted upon those who have heard the song

While “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is understood by most people to be an African-American spiritual about the journey to the afterlife, it had great significance as a freedom song. Many experts believe it was a song about the Underground Railroad and the escape from slavery, and it was revived in service to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. As part of the Folk Revival, Baez included in her repertoire works with historical roots that reflected song as part of the daily life and lifeblood of the people from whom the music emerged. When Joan Baez performed “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” at Woodstock, all the associations with the Underground Railroad and the Civil Rights Movement—the yearning and seeking for freedom—would certainly have been a consideration in her selection and delivery of the song.

Joan Baez invited Jeffery Shurtleff to join her on stage to perform as a duo “Drug Store Truck Driving Man,” written by Roger McGuinn and Gram Parsons of The Byrds. Shurtleff spoke to the crowd, greeting all friends of the draft resistance movement and dedicating the song to Ronald Reagan (which he pronounced as Ray-guns), then Governor of California. The song, inspired by a Tennessee disk jockey that had questioned McGuinn about his draft status on the air, addresses a cultural divide between a flag-waving, racist Southern country music DJ (with some verses slightly altered in the Woodstock performance to allude to Reagan), and a country-rock singer with a sympathy for draft resisters. It was a counterculture song about “us” versus “them,” and the huge crowd amassed at Woodstock was clearly the “us.”

Baez’s set ended with the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome,” which by then had been adopted by the anti-war movement, and was sung by protesters marching for these and other causes. Evans and Kingsbury note this as

a confirmation of the political slant of the event: “With large sections of the crowd joining in—Baez helped confirm the overtly political stance that characterized the counterculture generally, and the Woodstock gathering in particular” (94).

Baez, who saw herself as a bit atypical at Woodstock—older, established, a non-drug user—still felt that the festival reflected her and that she reflected it. “I’d been on the music scene for ten years,” she notes, “and still didn’t take dope or use a backup band. But Woodstock was also me, Joan Baez, the square, six months pregnant, the wife of a draft resister, endlessly proselytizing about the war. I had my place there. I was of the Sixties, and I was already a survivor” (Evans and Kingsbury 95).

Several groups performing at Woodstock were notable because of both their mainstream appeal and the messages of rebellion integrated into their work. Sly & the Family Stone, The Who and The Jefferson Airplane all described desired realities different from the norm in 1969, but quite different from one another as well. They ranged from pleas for peace, brotherhood and activism, to narratives about alienation and a new generation of rebels, to a call for unity, action and cultural revolution. None of these artists were protest singers in the traditional sense, and yet there was a message of change in the songs of all three, and they certainly contributed to the overall impression of Woodstock as a statement about a new cultural norm.

Sly & the Family Stone were a rock, funk and soul ensemble out of California that had gained acclaim the prior year with the release of the hit “Dance to the Music.” The band, which included three Stone family members (two brothers, including band leader, Sly, and a sister), was multi-racial and multi-gender, both highly unusual for rock bands at that time. While numerous bands had a female vocalist or back-up singers, few had

two females who were both instrumentalists and singers. Of the seven band members, two (the drummer and saxophonist) were white, the rest were African-American. The band's makeup reflected its philosophy of peace, love and brotherhood, themes present in many of its compositions.

Of the nine songs Sly & the Family Stone performed at Woodstock, three had messages supporting social change. Two of them, "Love City" and "Everyday People" were paeans to unity and equality. "Love City" was a simple song, expressing a desire for a happy, free and peaceful place filled with brotherhood. "Look into the future, Tell me what you see, Brothers and sisters holding hands, and you sitting next to me, now" (Stone, "Love City"). "Everyday People" was an upbeat and positive song decrying prejudices of all kinds. It coined what became a popular phrase, "Different strokes for different folks," and featured playful lyrics that helped drive home how ludicrous was hate based on external differences:

There is a blue one who can't accept
The green one for living with
A black ones tryin' to be a skinny one
Different strokes for different folks
And so on and so on and scooby dooby dooby (Stone, "Everyday")

The third song for social change performed by Sly & the Family Stone, "Stand," took a more activist approach, urging the listener to stand up for what is right, to shed complacency and find power and strength in conviction. It urged action, but also linked personal success and the achievement of personal goals to taking a position—a stand—for the things in which one believes:

There's a cross for you to bear ☐

Things to go through if you're going anywhere ☐

Stand ☐

For the things you know are right ☐

It's the truth that the truth makes them so uptight ☐

Stand...

Don't you know that you are free ☐

Well at least in your mind if you want to be ☐ ☐

Everybody ☐

Stand, stand, stand (Stone, "Stand")

The set by Sly & the Family Stone was acclaimed as one of the most popular and successful performances at Woodstock. This positive affirmation of right, rather than a protest of what is wrong, in some ways set the tone for the larger cultural shift Woodstock and its three days of peace and music came to represent. It also helped to reinforce the feeling of unity and shared experience among the crowd, by this time (late on the second day) wet and hungry, although mostly still intact and engaged. James Perone describes the feeling the performance generated: "Sly and the Family Stone's set at Woodstock found musicians and audience members feeding off each other to create a performance of great intensity and exuberance" (54).

The Who, a British rock 'n' roll band and one of the all-time great rock bands, did not perform any protest songs or even songs of social conscience at Woodstock. They are included here because they did present a group of songs that spoke to alienation and rebellion. Most of their set was made up of the songs from the album and rock opera

Tommy, which paints a picture of the surreal and horrific adventures of a “deaf, dumb and blind boy,” Tommy, who is a pinball champion and a victim who ultimately is cured and gains a cult-like following.

The song that The Who performed at Woodstock that deserves a brief mention here is “My Generation.” For the 1960s, this song was the equivalent of the Rebel yell—a song to tell the older generation and the squares that the new generation was unafraid, living in the moment and boasting a devil-may-care attitude. Evans and Kingsbury wrote, “The Who created a teen anthem with ‘My Generation’ (1965), which...was as appropriate to the Woodstock audience as it had been to British youth in the mid-1960s” (165). Even though “My Generation” is not meant to protest anything in particular, it is a statement of rebellion that reinforces other Woodstock performances about the pursuit of freedom and the need for independence from the strictures and morays of mainstream society:

People try to put us d-down

(Talkin’ ‘bout my generation)

Just because we g-g-get around

(Talkin’ ‘bout my generation)

Things they do look awful c-c-cold

(Talkin’ ‘bout my generation)

Yeah, I hope I die before I get old

(Talkin’ ‘bout my generation)

My generation

This is my generation, baby (Townshend)

Often associated with San Francisco “flower power” and psychedelic rock music that grew out of the early 1960s Folk Revival and folk-rock genres, Jefferson Airplane was another group whose music was steeped in the language of change and rebellion. They performed in the early morning hours of Sunday, August 17, and their performance did not appear in the original Woodstock film. Bandleader Marty Balin commented, “I don’t think we had a very good set because the sun was rising in our eyes and we had been up all night, naturally, partying” (Evans and Kingsbury 170). Of the nine songs performed by Jefferson Airplane at Woodstock, two of them, “Uncle Sam Blues” and “Volunteers” can be considered to be protest songs.

“Uncle Sam Blues” is a slow-paced anti-war blues song that describes the war as directionless: “I’m gonna do some fightin’, well, no one knows what for... .” And the soldiers are without a clue about why they are fighting: “Well there’s 40,000 guys in the service list doin’ somethin’ somewhere they just don’t understand” (Casady and Kaukonen). It also likens the fighting of a war to institutionalized murder—an outlet for the non-specific frustrations and aggressions of dissatisfied young men:

Said I’m gonna do some fightin’

Of that I can be sure

Well, now I want to kill somebody

Won’t have to break no kind of law (Casady and Kaukonen).

While “Uncle Sam’s Blues” is clearly a condemnation of a pointless war, it is even more a statement about an unsettled society and a feeling of malaise—a nation on the brink of disintegration.

“Volunteers” also communicates a feeling of unrest and delivers the message of a directionless, dissatisfied generation, but is a more pointed call to action. The song invokes a revolution and calls for participation from the youth, the generation with “soul,” the Volunteers of America:

This generation got no destination to hold ☐

Pick up the cry ☐

Hey now it's time for you and me ☐

Got a revolution Got to revolution ☐

Come on now we're marching to the sea ☐

Got a revolution Got to revolution ☐

Who will take it from you ☐

We will and who are we ☐

We are volunteers of America (Balin and Kantner).

Interestingly, given these and other seemingly overt political songs, Paul Kantner, the group’s guitarist, denies that Jefferson Airplane was a political group, saying “If people saw us as political, then that’s their misconception.” Bruce Pollock, reporting Kantner’s remarks in *By the Time We Got to Woodstock*, sees the guitarist as “Taking refuge in the convenient rationalization that he was merely reporting the news, not commenting on it. But in Kantner’s view, ‘Rather than a call to arms, it was a call to attention to what’s going on around you and maybe you have to foment in your own mind something to do about it that’s coherent, rather than responding in the old tried and true ways’” (67). This sentiment echoes those of both Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, that they, as songwriters, reflect the society and circumstances around them, although of the

two, only Bob Dylan echoes Kantner's sentiment, denying that his purpose was to change the circumstances he witnessed. The lyrics decry Kantner's protestations. How can "Pick up the cry," "Got to revolution," and "Who will take it from you, we will," be interpreted as anything but a call to action?

These three rock groups, Sly & the Family Stone, The Who and Jefferson Airplane, all had a part in creating a sense of rebellion and the need for change that colored later perceptions of Woodstock, but theirs were certainly protests of a far different nature than those from folk singers Richie Havens or Joan Baez. Theirs were cries for a new sensibility, a new world view, and a separation from the ways of the prior generation and its social mores.

The super group Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (CSN&Y) was just forming at the time of Woodstock, which they famously reported at the outset of their performance to be only their second time playing together. David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash had just joined forces, having each gained a level of acclaim with their previous bands (The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, and The Hollies, respectively). For part of the Woodstock set, Neil Young performed with them and thereafter became a member of the group.

The group played two sets at Woodstock, first an acoustic set, and then an electric set, performing a total of sixteen numbers. As with the other groups discussed here, they did not feature a great deal of social or political content. Only two songs might be viewed as having protest material, and both were played as encores at the end of the electric set. What distinguishes the performance of CSN&Y is the poetry of the lyrics and the

enormous beauty and power of their four-part harmony vocals, which served the content well.

“Wooden Ships” is a dramatic song about the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, told through the voices of survivors, who, despite being from opposite sides in the conflict that led to the war, seek to communicate and offer to share their food with each other. It is a stark portrayal of the potential cost of nuclear weapons. David Crosby wrote, retrospectively, “Paul Kantner [of Jefferson Airplane], Stephen Stills, and I wrote a song called ‘Wooden Ships,’ the basic idea of which was that we could all just sail away from a broken world into a better, more ideal life that wasn’t based on war or greed. Although we wrote it to describe the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse, it quickly became a metaphor for escaping all of society’s evils. ...The problem...was that most people didn’t have their own ships to sail away in, and no matter how high we were or how far we went, the human problems of the world—war, poverty, disease—would travel with us” (Crosby and Bender 49).

The lyrics of “Wooden Ships” are cryptic, and the story and its meaning must be deciphered by the listener as the song unfolds, making it less direct but of higher impact than a more straightforward diatribe against nuclear weapons. A few phrases in the opening dialogue help the listener begin to unravel the reality of the characters’ situations. One survivor invites a smile from another—a universal language both can understand. Another comments that he “can see from your coat, my friend, you’re from the other side,” and asks, “Who won?” Then one survivor asks the other to share potentially irradiated berries, presumably in an environment with a scarcity of food, and receives a positive response:

Say, can I have some of your purple berries?☐

Yes, I've been eating them for six or seven weeks now, haven't got sick once.☐

Probably keep us both alive (Crosby, Kantner and Stills).

The voices blend in the dream of sailing away from the destruction, sickness and death, on wooden ships, to regain a simple and happy life, “easy the way it’s supposed to be,” to try to survive. But this requires leaving behind the sick and dying: “We are leaving – you don’t need us” (Crosby, Kantner and Stills). The range of imagery and emotions experienced through this song, and the level of empathy it instills, is extraordinary. The protest comes not through chants or satire, but through storytelling, imagery and emotional engagement—through poetry.

This is equally true of the far simpler “Find the Cost of Freedom.” Online lyrics sources show the song with two verses, including an opening verse in which the singer is haunted by battlefields of ancestors who died in battle and expresses fear about how we know when conflict is necessary or right. However, the song was frequently sung by CSN&Y without the first verse and with only two heartbreaking lines repeated: “Find the cost of freedom, buried in the ground; Mother earth will swallow you, lay your body down” (Stills). This stark reminder of the cost of war would have been extraordinarily powerful in the midst of the Vietnam War and among thousands who shared the view that this was a pointless and hopeless conflict.

In August 1969, Jimi Hendrix was already a rock superstar. Having recently disbanded the Jimi Hendrix Experience, his group performed at Woodstock under the name Gypsy Sons & Rainbows. Woodstock producer Michael Lang shares that, as the festival’s headliner, Hendrix insisted on closing the show even though the festival was

running a half-day behind schedule, and this meant he would be performing in the early hours of Monday morning, August 18. Evans and Kingsbury report that “Hendrix did play an incredible set, but by the time he got to the stage there were only about 40,000 people left.” After his opening comments, a voice in the crowd called, “Jimi, are you high?” Hendrix answered, “I am high, thank you. I am high, thank you, baby” (Evans and Kingsbury 216).

Despite his altered state, Hendrix played a two-hour set of sixteen numbers that by every account was amazing. Hendrix was not known as a strongly political songwriter, and his set had only one protest number. In a groundbreaking move, Jimi Hendrix played one of the most powerful protest songs ever performed, without any words. Evans and Kingsbury describe the moment: “The high point of his set...was the sensational, psychedelic rendition of the US national anthem, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ which encapsulated both the musical and political spirit of Woodstock with blues-edged poignancy and other-worldly improvisation as the festival drew to an end” (215).

In addition to making a strong impression on the remaining festival-goers, the performance was prominently featured in the festival documentary, gaining a much broader audience than the small crowd still on-site that Monday morning. The performance literally explodes with the sounds of the war—but instead of the canon fire which Francis Scott Key must have witnessed as he wrote the lyrics to what became the U.S. national anthem, the sounds from Hendrix’s guitar are of bombs and other modern-day weaponry—the soundtrack to the Vietnam War, the first war Americans were able to watch on television as it occurred. In commenting on the significance of this performance, James Perone surmises that “Hendrix’s unaccompanied performance of

'The Star-Spangled Banner' has been cited as one of the most potent messages of the entire counterculture era. ... The performance...seemed to be at once a strong patriotic statement, supporting the ideals of the Constitution of the United States of America, and an equally strong statement against the activities of the U.S. military in Southeast Asia. According to Hendrix biographer David Henderson, famed jazz composer-saxophonist Ornette Coleman called Hendrix's performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' 'a work of genius'" (Perone 59).

Many others single out this performance by Hendrix, from John Orman in *The Politics of Rock Music*, in which he calls it "radically different" and "highly political" (155), to Bruce Pollock in his book, *By the Time We Got to Woodstock*, in which he describes it as "both a belated welcoming blast to the year's festivities and a pentatonic dirge for the generation's walking wounded on the littered battlefield of Yasgur's Farm" (203). Woodstock filmmaker Michael Wadleigh explains the purposeful planning that went into the performance: "...every note, the way he bends it, the feedback, all of it ... his concentration, what he's doing with his mouth, his whole body ... as you know, that's not an improvisation. He told me that he worked on that really hard. He knew he would do it..." (Fornatale 272).

Musically, Hendrix's performance is an incredibly complex musical conversation. He chose a song the tune and lyrics of which are intimately familiar to every American and which is imbued with tremendous meaning and symbolism. This enabled him to exploit the song's intellectual significance, the emotional bonds the audience had to it, and all the dichotomies it seemed to represent during that tumultuous time.

Martha Bayles quotes Hendrix biographer Charles Shaar Murray describing Hendrix's instrumental interpretation of the national anthem at Woodstock (one of numerous and long poetic descriptions of this performance written by Murray). He beautifully captures the roller coaster ride of the performance: "He begins to play the tune—one which every American has heard several thousand times. Or rather, he *tries* to play it, but somehow it gets ambushed along the way. That clear, pure tone—somewhere between a trumpet and a high, pealing bell—is continually invaded by ghostly rogue overtones, the stately unreeling of the melody derailed by the sounds of riot and war, sirens and screams, chaos and alarm.... Time and again, the rich, clean statement of the melody would resurface, a proudly waving flag standing above the *melee*, and time and again ... the feedback and distortion ate into the melody like acid, corroding everything it did not consume" (235).

In *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, author Dorian Lynskey calls Hendrix's "Star-Spangled Banner" "the most eloquent instrumental protest song rock has ever produced." He writes, "Hendrix didn't so much cover the national anthem as napalm it, but the wrenching eloquence of his playing made it into a sonic Rorschach blot, allowing each listener to decide what it represented. He was either putting to the torch the failed experiment of America or evoking the birth pangs of a new, less pernicious brand of patriotism: either the Death Society or the beautiful shipwreck" (106). *Rolling Stone's* Jon Landau made a harsh criticism of traditional protest singers in his assessment of the more powerful statement he felt Hendrix made in his performance without words: "Protest singers in the past were most often ideologues who set pallid verse to semi-

musical melodies. The idea that it is the music that should convey the brunt of their meaning never occurred to them” (Lynskey 107).

Pete Fornatale, in 1969 a disc jockey on a New York City alternative album-oriented rock station, perhaps sums up the breadth and importance of Hendrix’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” best in *Back to the Garden: The Story of Woodstock*:

...depending on your politics—you are hearing one of the most profane or one of the most profound versions of that song that you have ever heard. It is searing; it is soaring; it is stirring; it is majestic; it is mocking; it is shocking; it is appealing; it is appalling; it is calming; it is alarming. It is a brain-twisting, body-contorting, mind-fucking performance with no equal.

It is Jimi Hendrix “playing” the Vietnam War on the strings of his white solid-body electric guitar—with “Taps” thrown in for good measure. In a weekend of “Oh my God!” moments, at a festival of “Can you believe this?” performances, it was then, and it is now, one of the most talked-about moments in Woodstock history, in music history, even in American history” (270).

While Fornatale’s assessment certainly contains a measure of hyperbole, as it is unlikely most historians, even those of the counterculture era, would claim that this performance is one of the most talked-about moments in American history, Fornatale certainly captures the power and wonder of one of Jimi Hendrix’s crowning moments in a too-short life of musical genius. Hendrix died just one year later at the age of twenty-seven.

The most famous Woodstock song was performed by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, but not at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair. Its writer wasn’t even at the event.

Joni Mitchell had just performed with CSN&Y the day prior to their appearance at Woodstock. She was invited to perform at the festival, but fearing that she wouldn't make it back for an appearance on the Dick Cavett Show, record executive David Geffen prevailed upon her to stay in New York when CSN&Y travelled on to the festival. "Joni and I went back to my apartment on Central Park South, and we watched it on television. And she wrote the song 'Woodstock' in my apartment on 59th Street!" said David Geffen. "...Then they [CSN&Y] heard the song, they recorded it, and it became the anthem for Woodstock." (Evans and Kingsbury 230).

Evans and Kingbury report that, according to Graham Nash, Mitchell was able to write "Woodstock" from information shared with her by him and John Sebastian. Joni Mitchell described her choice of this subject: "I had been saying to myself, 'Where are the modern miracles?' Woodstock, for some reason, impressed me as being a modern miracle, like a modern-day fishes-and-loaves story. For a herd of people that large to cooperate so well, it was pretty remarkable and there was tremendous optimism. So I wrote the song 'Woodstock' out of these feelings" (230). Mitchell's "Woodstock" became a major hit for Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

The famous refrain of the song reinforced the idea of the Aquarian Exposition: "We are star dust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." The song about travelers to Woodstock described the power of being part of something larger, "a cog in something turning," and sang of the festival as a place of "song and celebration," where bombers turned into butterflies (Mitchell). This idealized notion of Woodstock was debated between those who believed in the meaning and impact of the festival and those who thought it was manufactured and without significance.

What are the impact and the legacy of Woodstock? The diversity of opinions on this point is enormous. Some think it an important symbol of a new generation's desire to change the world to a more peaceful and gentler place. Others think it a commercial venture that ripped off the counterculture's values and exploited them for financial gain.

Not surprisingly, such a conservative publication as the *National Review* saw no value in what they believed was as an event set in a disaster area: "Woodstock was marked by squalor, dehydration, and overdoses of drugs (and spurious drugs, sold by crooked dealers). The grim scene was glossed over, not just by the teenage baby boomers who attended, but by their elders" (Perone 62). John Street, in his book *Rebel Rock*, writes, "Woodstock's image owed as much to cynical calculation, media attention and the self-aggrandizement of the participants. The organizers seemed deliberately to exploit the romantic idealism that the music suggested" (74).

Some people associated with the era of protest and rebellion shared the view that both producers and the media exaggerated Woodstock's value. Bob Dylan, for example, felt the movement that Woodstock came to symbolize was of little importance. In his thinking, "That Woodstock festival ... was the sum total of all this bullshit ... The flower generation—is that what it was? I wasn't into that at all. I just thought it was a lot of kids out and around wearing flowers in their hair, takin' a lot of acid. I mean, what can you think about that?" (Evans and Kingsbury 232-233).

Pete Townshend of The Who commented, "It was chaos, wasn't it? ... I thought the whole of America had gone mad" (Evans and Kingsbury 165). Neil Young was disgusted with what he viewed as a commercial sell-out—too much attention to the film crew and too little to playing good music: "What effect did Woodstock have on music?"

That's when the market got big enough for the marketers to realize that they should go for it. They could isolate this whole group of people, target them as a consumer group—and they did. They used the music. ... Woodstock was a bullshit gig. A piece of shit. We played fuckin' awful. ... I could see everybody changing their performances for the fucking camera and I thought that was bullshit. ... I wouldn't let them film me, that's why I'm not in the movie" (Evans and Kingsbury 205).

Paul Kantner of the Jefferson Airplane was also somewhat cynical about the meaning and impact, given what followed: "Woodstock was the last great burst of innocence in the face of the oncoming seventies and war and hard drugs and Nixon and disco" (Crosby and Bender 41). Writer and historian Garry Wills, referring to the darkness of the rock scene that resulted in the deaths of Hendrix and Joplin, described it as "the world of the Woodstock con job" (Orman 35).

Yet many have taken a more balanced view of the festival and its legacy, recognizing that there are pieces of truth in dual realities. Wavy Gravy, a key member of the Hog Farm contingent, said, "Let's face it: Woodstock was created for wallets. It was designed to make bucks. And then the universe took over and did a little dance" (Perone 61). Judy Collins, who didn't perform, but did briefly visit the festival, was "horrified" with the conditions at the festival, but recognized that the idea of Woodstock was bigger and more powerful than the reality. Collins said, "Woodstock is a mental attitude. If all the people who say they were at Woodstock were actually there, they wouldn't have fit into the state, let alone the site. But in a way they were all there" (Perone 61).

The media followed the event, and their reports showed a shifting understanding of the nature of its impact and what it represented. In their book *Rock of Ages; The*

Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll, authors Ward, Stokes and Tucker described changing attitudes at the editorial desk of the *New York Times*: “On Monday, the *New York Times* editorial page thundered that Woodstock was ‘an outrageous event’ and asked, ‘What kind of culture is it that can produce so colossal a mess?’ But just one day later, in a stunning reversal, the newspaper of record decided it had been ‘a phenomenon of innocence . . . They came, it seems, to enjoy their own society, to exult in a life style that is its own declaration of independence’” (431).

Contemplating the diverse views on the festival emerging only one week after it ended, *Newsweek* reported, “Woodstock as an event in US social history was surely less cosmic than it looked to beat poet Allen Ginsberg (who called it ‘a major planetary event’) and less revolutionary than it seemed to the Yippies’ Abbie Hoffman (who saw it as ‘the birth of the Woodstock Nation and the death of the American dinosaur’). Yet adult America correctly saw something gently, amiably, and profoundly subversive in it all. . . . Pundit Max Lerner commended it to historians as an event in ‘a cultural, not a political, revolution’ –but a revolution nonetheless . . . a retreat by the young from politics into the sanctuary of their youth and their senses” (Evans and Kingsbury 241). Yet by November, *Newsweek* described the event as one that “may well rank as one of the most politically and sociologically significant of the age” and “the moment when the special culture of the U.S. youth of the ‘60s openly displayed its strength, appeal and power” (Pollock 67).

With tremendous enthusiasm and hyperbole, *Rolling Stone* magazine proclaimed, “No one in this century had ever seen a ‘society’ so free of repression. . . . Woodstock

must always be their model of how good we will all feel after the revolution” (Evans and Kingsbury 243).

Yet many of the declarations about the impact and legacy of Woodstock were more thoughtful, and reflected an appreciation of those things that had gone right with the three-day event. The *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History* observes, “The logistical circumstances improved little over the weekend, but the mood moved beyond one of cooperation into the realm of true community” (146), with people sharing food, helping the injured, and engaging in celebratory communal experiences. In *Stand and Be Counted: Making Music, Making History*, David Crosby and David Bender share Joan Baez’s recollection of Woodstock as “an extraordinary weekend at a certain time in history where the atmosphere was charged with politics and with meaning. People there had a spirit and instead of choosing to act like idiots for three days, even the police decided to act like *human beings* for three days” (41).

In *A Brief History of Rock, Off the Record*, Wayne Robins describes Woodstock as representing “rock’s developing mass culture at its kindest and most life-affirming” (137). Bob Santelli agrees that these positive attributes are what distinguish Woodstock, stating, “Generally speaking, Woodstock was not about politics. It was not about things that were happening outside in the world; the bad things. This was about creating a new world, a new identity, a new nation, this Woodstock nation (Fornatale 39).

The *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History* acknowledges that the significance of Woodstock will be perpetually in question, and sums up its multi-faceted nature: “Entire acres of forest have bravely given their lives to debate whether Woodstock was the end of an era of innocence, the beginning of a generational movement, or just a bunch

of stoned hippies grooving to some really amazing music. It was, of course, all these things, and so much more” (142).

Ultimately, the festival itself was an icon for change, and although its protest content was relatively slight, it was important and powerful, and it was symbolic of a greater ethos that desired justice, peace and greater personal freedom. Music historian James Perrone captures this in his 2005 book, *Woodstock: An Encyclopedia of the Music and Art Fair*: “Whether the Woodstock Music and Art Fair was a validation of the ideals of the hippie lifestyle and rock music or an example of the depths to which American culture had descended depends upon one’s political and social outlook. What cannot be argued, however, is that Woodstock defined an era and became a cultural icon whose influence continues to be felt over thirty years after it took place” (63).

CHAPTER IX. CONCLUSION

COMING FULL CIRCLE

There is an old saying that the more things change, the more they stay the same. While much has changed in the form, content, style and genres of protest music over the past century, the challenges protest music addresses remain a constant. The development of American protest music during the first three-quarters of the 20th century reflected the way the nation changed. The music has highlighted tumultuous dichotomies in our American political and social life. While this study of protest music ends in 1969, it became increasingly evident to this author, as each chapter was added, that the overarching issues that have inspired the music are still hugely problematic, and perhaps always will be. The battles against the same basic injustices and inequities have been fought again and again.

Dorian Lynskey, in the Epilogue to *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, wrote “I began this book intending to write a history of a still vital form of music. I finished it wondering if I had instead composed a eulogy” (Lynskey 535). Lynskey was startled that protest songs hadn’t played a bigger role in the tumult of the Bush years. People did not seem as compelled to express their concerns publicly and certainly not in mass gatherings and in song. Or perhaps it was that such expressions in song rarely reached the mainstream, because they were not created in an age of upheaval and rebellion.

Although this author’s research did not examine in detail the music that followed Woodstock, it is evident that song still plays a role in unifying American voices. The

nation came together in solidarity after 9/11—a cathartic statement of patriotic unity, with a shared enemy. A somewhat sappy musical soundtrack accompanied that brief feeling of unity—every candlelight vigil included “Proud to be an American” by Lee Greenwood. The feeling didn’t last very long.

Then, ten years later, after a giant recession caused by excesses and shady practices in the banking industry that felt like an encore from the times of Joe Hill and Woody Guthrie, the Occupy Movement was born. The old songs, including Guthrie’s, and some new songs, expressed the concerns of a loose-knit, unfocused movement born of anger and resentment, but without clear purpose. This was not a movement with specific goals, like the right to vote, the right to an eight-hour workday, or the demand for the end of a war. The anger and mistrust were more about complex and seemingly immutable systems. Something had gone terribly wrong—the economy was in a tailspin, the auto industry was on the brink of bankruptcy, there was a disturbing and growing gap between the rich and the poor, hunger in a nation of plenty, families thrown out of their homes, and declining schools.

Many in a nation lulled into complacency suddenly realized that they had no idea how to begin to right the ship. Ideological differences and fear created barriers that prevented dialogue and compromise. Today, despite polls showing a majority of the public is dissatisfied with the job Congress is doing, less than 60% of the population votes, and the amount of direct political action has waned. There is a growing distrust of government, and a belief that our legislators are unable, and in many cases unwilling, to affect meaningful change—that political maneuvering has placed them in a semi-permanent state of paralysis.

Have the potential activists been lulled, placated by our generally higher standard of living? Have we been confused by issues that are more complex, foes who are less visible? Corporate entities being granted the same freedoms of political speech as individuals is a threat far less clear than blacks and whites not being allowed to ride the bus side-by-side. African-Americans perceiving that they are frequently stopped by police for “Driving While Black” is a form of repression less clear-cut (and harder to prove) than schools or hospitals that do not admit blacks under any circumstance. An all-volunteer army, a war begun on false claims, and a National Guard that has become an extension of our fighting force, rather than a resource for national emergencies—are these so much less compelling than a universal draft and 58,000 body bags delivered home during the Vietnam War?

Perhaps our energies, and our national attention, have been diffused and exhausted by the variety of new ways to communicate. We can post on social media, write a blog, text a donation for a disaster, all from the comfort of our own home. In the 1960s, when you went to a protest, you felt part of a larger whole—your voice was magnified, and your numbers forced your message to be heard. Lynskey alluded to our complacency and a reduced clarity of goals when he stated, “This process has unfolded alongside a waning of faith in hands-on protest. Placards and sit-ins have given way to charity wristbands and Facebook groups: armchair gestures which appease consciences without inviting risk or struggle. ...Who would be compelled to write, in George Melly’s words, ‘songs for the barricade’ when there are no barricades?” (Lynskey 536-537).

Yet the need for engagement and expression is not gone. Examination of the state of our nation’s poor exposes depressing statistics. While there have certainly been

significant improvements in the basic standard of living for many in our country, and a reduction of inequities over the past one hundred years, there are fundamental challenges to sustaining peace, equality and social justice that appear to be an inexorable part of the human condition. Have we come full circle?

In fact, the percentage of the population living in poverty has dropped since the time of Joe Hill, but not enough. While the definition of poverty has changed with inflation, and the average standard of living has improved with changes in access to food, technological advancements, universal public education and federal welfare programs, the overall picture of institutional and systemic inequities remains grim.

According to William Adler in his book about Joe Hill, *The Man Who Never Died*, a 1904 book by social worker Robert Hunter, titled *Poverty*, extrapolated data from state and federal agencies to estimate “that of the ninety million people the U.S. Bureau of the Census had counted in 1900, ten million lived in poverty. Another researcher looked at wage scales in 1904 and 1905 and determined that ‘at least’ two-thirds of male workers earned less than six hundred dollars annually—the ‘absolute yearly minimum’ one could live on” (7). Examining the conditions ten years later (during a decade rife with numerous recessions and massive unemployment), Adler reports, “A federal study in 1915 found one-third to one-half of the population living at a ‘near-starvation level’ while 2 percent of Americans owned 60 percent of the nation’s wealth” (7). While we can’t extrapolate what portion of that 60 percent was owned by the wealthiest one percent of the U.S. population in 1915, the great concentration of wealth in a small percentage of the populace, and the large number in need, is striking in light of the present day frictions around this topic.

From 2008 to 2011, the U.S. was shaken by a terrible recession, widely reported to be the worst economic decline since the Great Depression. By September 2011, the Occupy Wall Street Movement flared up in response to what was viewed by many as too much power concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few—the “one percent.” On October 10, 2011, attempting to put some meaning behind the Occupy Wall Street protests on behalf of the “ninety-nine percent,” *New York Times* blogger Catherine Rampell wrote, “According to an analysis of Federal Reserve data by the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal research organization, the top 1 percent of Americans by net worth hold about a third of American wealth” (Rampell). Rampell shares that the income disparity, though significant, is lower than the disparity in net wealth, with the top one percent earning about a fifth of the nation’s total income.

The Occupy Movement seems to have been made up of a relatively small number of people (compared with the mass protests of the 1960s), and the protesters were disgruntled for a wide variety of reasons. Insufficiently clear goals may have hampered the motivation of the disenchanting and disenfranchised. However, Occupy succeeded in raising the public’s consciousness and expressing the larger concern (shared by many who did not join the live protests) about the disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the United States. Julie Phelan of ABC News reported on November 9, 2011 the results of a new ABC News/*Washington Post* poll showing that “while 60 percent support policies to address wealth distribution, substantially fewer, 44 percent, identify themselves as supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and just 18 percent strongly so. About as many, 41 percent, say they oppose the movement” (Phelan).

Two months earlier, on September 13, 2011, the *New York Times* had published an article on a new Census Bureau Report announcing that “the number of Americans living below the official poverty line, 46.2 million people, was the highest number in the 52 years the bureau has been publishing figures on it. ... [T]he percentage of Americans living below the poverty line last year, 15.1 percent, was the highest level since 1993. (The poverty line in 2010 for a family of four was \$22,314)” (Tavernise). This was not really all that far from the nineteen percent poverty rate that spurred the War on Poverty in 1964, considering that almost fifty years had passed since then. One of the starkest realities of the new figures was the disparity between people of color and their white counterparts. “Blacks experienced the highest poverty rate, at 27 percent, up from 25 percent in 2009, and Hispanics rose to 26 percent from 25 percent. For whites, 9.9 percent lived in poverty, up from 9.4 percent in 2009” (Tavernise).

There remains plenty of cause for concern and reason for engagement. We take one step forward and then two steps back. From the landmark election, and then reelection, of the nation’s first African American President, accompanied by a seeming soundtrack of iconic protest music and the feeling that we had reached a culminating moment in the Civil Rights Movement, to increasing gaps between rich and poor, and a retrenchment on issues from controlling corporate power to sustaining voting rights, consumer protections and collective bargaining rights, the nation has been on a roller coaster ride, and it is nowhere near over. During the course of this study, it has become clear that many of the problems we face today are really the same as they were a century ago. The consolidation of power in a few hands and the way our system is manipulated by power and wealth is not that different from the time of Rockefeller and Carnegie. The

working man still struggles to make ends meet, the poor African Americans and Hispanics have access to unequal educations and opportunities, and the children of the poor still die on the battlefield.

Other norms have made it harder for the average American to reach conclusions about what path will best lead our nation forward—divisiveness in politics, lack of polite and civil discourse (when there is any discourse at all), fear mongering by both politicians and media personalities, and media “sound bites” that provide no means of understanding complex issues. Newspapers are on their way to extinction. Ironically, while the politicians take immovable positions and the media seek sensational sound bites, some of the strongest voices challenging these behaviors are once again entertainers, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Here is a place where the next generation is learning how to question, how to look for nuances, how to listen carefully and challenge what they hear. Some musical performances are also exposing absurdities and asking tough questions. A growing number of protest songwriters have produced material over the last two decades that include thoughtful explorations of war and abuses of power, Hurricane Katrina and global warming, from Catie Curtis’s “People Look Around,” about the handling of the New Orleans floods, to Dar Williams’s exploration of empire building in the song “Empire.”

In the conclusion to his biography of Joe Hill, William Adler acknowledged that there would be much in today’s world that would displease Joe Hill, that “equal justice remains illusory,” that “the limits of dissent are as narrow as ever,” that “unions continue to be blamed for the country’s economic ills,” and of course, there’s the “concentration of wealth and inequality of income” (Adler 345). However, Adler also points out, “the

seeds of so many struggles for civil and economic rights in full flower today were planted or cultivated by Hill and his fellow Wobblies a century ago. To name but a few of those rights: the right to due process of law; the right to dissent and to freedom of expression and assembly; the right to a living wage; a safe workplace, affordable health care and housing” (Adler 346). He also lists numerous other topics that the Wobblies raised that are still pressing today, including the meaning of patriotism during wartime and immigration reform. The old and many-voiced conversation of which Joe Hill’s music was a part is continuing, and the dialogue, the voices rising in song together, *have* moved that conversation forward.

While many songwriters have continued to address these issues, such as Bruce Springsteen, there are certainly no singing movements or even large groups embracing singular and important musical messages designed to inspire and motivate. The Occupy Movement did succeed in rallying songwriters old and new to join together, however briefly. The Occupy rallies, first on Wall Street, and then around the country and the globe, employed protest music of the past century, including songs by Guthrie and Dylan, and appearances were made at Occupy Wall Street by Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, David Crosby, Jackson Browne, Billy Bragg and others. In addition, new songwriters, such as Dick Gregory’s protégé Wril or libertarian-minded rock band Madison Rising, and organizations like Music for Occupy (musicforoccupy.org), which compiled and sold this new music to further the movement, emerged.

Dorian Lynskey is concerned about the challenges facing anyone who would consider using music to make protest today:

In the 1960s, musicians were invested with such significance that they were expected to provide answers to the world's problems—even to spearhead a revolution. In the late '70s and '80s, expectations were lower, but a new generation of iconic figures—Springsteen, Strummer, Bono, Chuck D—were admitted for their convictions and encouraged to advance certain causes. ... The '60s protest generation were connected, via folk, to the idealism of the '30s; the most politicized punks had some kind of bond with the '60s; the outspoken artists of the '80s and '90s were the children of punk, or of radical soul music. But for a songwriter coming of age now, the idea that music can, and should, engage with politics seems increasingly distant. This is entangled with a broader loss of faith in ideology and a fading belief in what we might call heroes: inspirational individuals with the power to move mountains (Lynskey 536).

Lynskey's point has some validity. Who, seeing the deadlock in Congress, could believe their songs and words can really make a difference? However, the desire to express ills observed remains strong, and although they are fewer, less visible and less cohesive than in past singing movements, voices of protest are still emerging. In part, Lynskey blames both the impatience of audiences and their strong demand that music be entertaining. He fears that the risks are too great and the convictions too weak for today's musicians to take the leap. And yet they do so, and not just the "old guard" like Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger, but newer writers who include in their writings songs of social justice, songs that paint pictures of isolation and despair, and of hope and brotherhood, too—writers such as Tom Morello, former lead guitarist of Rage Against the Machine, or young singer-songwriters such as Aliza Hava.

Today's protest songwriters wear a mantle inherited much more from Bob Dylan than Joe Hill—more from Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young than Pete Seeger. The way “protest” material is woven into the songs and repertoire of many songwriters today is more personal and introspective than the direct rallying cry of a century ago. Songwriters compose lyrics to share their worldview and historical influences. The songs are multi-dimensional, melding elements from the writers' observations and experiences with varied musical ideas and styles. This is a new breed of diverse artistic talents, continuing the musical conversation begun centuries ago. The willingness to break boundaries and make a distinctive musical mark has been an evolutionary process, beginning with Dylan and extending to other musicians who were willing to expose hard questions and explore new ways of doing so. It is the legacy of Woody Guthrie, to write from experience, emotion, and observation.

In many ways, today's songwriters are reflecting a new, more complex way of perceiving the world. We have a huge fractionalization of our sources of information, including about artists and music. Some, like Dick Weissman at the end of his book, *Talkin' About a Revolution*, worry about how protest songs can gain an audience today. He finds it “daunting that a few small corporations own so many radio stations that the idea of a real protest song being widely played on the air is virtually unthinkable. The internet has its possibilities, but it is so fragmented that it may never provide the opportunity for a song to enjoy mass exposure, unless it is sung by an artist that is already well-known” (322).

Yet this same technology is opening up, and delivering, endless possibilities, with new ways of exploring those possibilities every day. The world, its content, its people,

and its music, are at our fingertips. They represent not just information, but new ways of seeing and knowing the world, and of developing relationships and hearing ideas and recommendations from people around the globe. They are leading to a musical sharing and level of exposure unrivaled before now.

While numerous YouTube sensations who were previously unknown have become superstars, Weissman's fears are not completely unfounded. Huge radio conglomerates do limit network radio exposure to playlists of major hits, so new music is rarely heard on broadcast radio, with the exception of small public and college radio stations. And as the clutter of options increases dramatically, it will become ever harder to be "heard" above the cacophony. Creativity and luck will be needed to do so.

Yet new technologies provide a democratization of musical choices that has never before been available. It is as if we exploded in geometric proportion the exciting discoveries teens in the 1960s made as they listened to their favorite album oriented rock DJs on the new stereo FM radio stations. To the sheer volume of music online add the options offered by Spotify, Pandora, and other personalized radio station apps, or by services like Apple's Genius function within iTunes, which will create for the listener a playlist similar to the types of music on his/her computer. As a result, many listeners, particularly among the younger generations, are becoming more open and sophisticated. They are interested in the historical roots of music and can learn about and listen to the music easily. Skilled, creative artists, including many who bend and blend genres, are becoming popular. The future is made promising by this new and far greater exposure to new styles, music, and ideas.

While it seemed that the country was making great progress in the 1960s—that the Woodstock generation was committed to a more open and just society—once the most overt social gains were achieved, as Lynskey noted, the urgency seemed to disappear, and protest content in songs became less common and less virulent. Dick Weissman states in *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, “By the mid-sixties...it became difficult to determine whether protest music itself had become something of a commodity” (Weissman 92).

However, Weissman displays excessive cynicism when he suggests that Dylan moved to folk music because market forces demanded it if he was going to make it in the music business. While Dylan made some comments that suggest this is true, he is notorious for saying things to get a reaction, and we know without doubt that he genuinely admired and emulated Woody Guthrie long before he ever arrived in Greenwich Village and tried to “make it” in folk music. It is true that Dylan went through many incarnations, writing about a wide array of subjects, both personal and universal, experimenting musically, and exploring subjects both directly and obliquely. This was almost certainly his personal musical journey, not his attempt to find a commercial wave he could ride to success. Observing Dylan’s evolution is like watching a mystic on a pilgrimage. Weissman admits that both Dylan’s complex writing and his simpler lyrics can be effective at moving listeners and having an impact on change, although he shies away from claims of direct cause and effect. He writes: “Even though a song cannot create social change, it can certainly be the inspiration that ultimately leads to such changes” (321). This, it seems, is the direction of the 21st century protest song. It is not

the front line weapon of a “We Shall Overcome,” but the thought-provoking questioning of “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

The legacy of Bob Dylan is, perhaps, in his very complexity. He didn’t want to be labeled a protest singer, in part because he really used his music as a lens for seeing and examining the whole of human experience. Dick Weissman quotes Dylan’s former girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, from her memoir on her life with Dylan: “An artist can’t be made to serve a theory” (Weissman 215). This is true for all artists, even those overtly trying to make a political statement with their music. Great artists are not one-dimensional. So as long as there is a diversity of thinking artists, there will be protest music. As long as we have the push and pull inherent in human society, we will have disparities, and there will be people, including songwriters, interested in leveling the playing field.

Dorian Lynskey writes: “To create a successful protest song in the twenty-first century is a daunting challenge, but the alternative, for any musician with strong political convictions, is paralysis and gloom. ... [I]t has never been easy. To take on politics in music is always a leap of faith, a gesture of hope over experience, because there are always a dozen reasons not to. It falls to musicians to continue to make those attempts, whether they succeed or not depends on the rest of us.”

Over the last several decades, there have been notable successes, such as Tracy Chapman, among whose compositions is “Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution,” from which Dick Weissman took the title for his book. That song, amazingly for a work that literally celebrated the idea of an American uprising, became a huge hit in 1988 for Chapman, who has been actively engaged in numerous social causes. Weissman posits that direct action is needed for protest music to be truly effective: “Music seems to be most effective

in the sphere of social change when the musical participants are involved in the political process itself ...in the mining and textile industries, in the civil rights movement, and to some extent in the antiwar movement of the sixties” (Weissman 318). Yet these organized singing movements are unlikely to be repeated. We are in a time when music may act as a stimulus, a motivator, and perhaps occasionally as a way to evoke solidarity, but probably not through the organized mechanisms of the past.

With the enormous exposure to music from all places and times comes a growing respect for the past—for the roots from which popular music has sprung. Who would have predicted that a group such as Old Crow Medicine Show, a modern string band, rooted in Appalachian folk traditions and emulating both Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, would achieve commercial success? The group’s song “I Hear Them All,” is reminiscent of Dylan. It remarks on the voices of the needy and the downtrodden, followed by the chorus, “I hear them all, I hear them all, I hear them all.” The official music video of the song solicited donations for the citizens of New Orleans, where the video was shot. These young musicians mixed the evocation of all kinds of powerful images and connections, lovely Americana music, and an important sense of place in the video, with direct action, and delivered it to 2,038,771 people (and counting) on YouTube (Old Crow).

And who would have predicted that rap and hip hop, despite their fair share of violent and misogynistic lyrics, would also spawn socially conscious artists with deeply poetic lyrics, such as Lupe Fiasco. These musical styles have created a new respect for poetry among the young and have begun to develop more careful listeners. Spoken word combined with music has encouraged many of these listeners to try their hand at writing and may be bringing poetry back into the mainstream. Spoken word as an urban art form

is creating a love of language and an appreciation of crafting and performing poetry among a new generation of urban youth.

During these last few decades of rapid change, and more recent economic turmoil, there are, however, artists of note still in the prime of their careers who have made celebrating the common man and the promotion of human and civil rights powerful and important parts of their repertoire. Among these are troubadours such as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Neil Young, whose contributions to protest music have been touched on in the preceding pages. Bruce Springsteen, who has celebrated the lives and music of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and has written important protest songs, is particularly notable. On his 2006 album, *We Shall Overcome, The Seeger Sessions*, Springsteen celebrated songs made popular by Pete Seeger and his folk music colleagues. His moving rendition of “We Shall Overcome” seems to tell the history of the song through its musical transitions, moving from the Appalachian folk influences of the slide guitar to a gospel chorus that reflects the song’s place in the Civil Rights Movement.

Springsteen’s own lyrics (original material makes up the lion’s share of his recorded body of work) include powerful songs that echo his concerns for human dignity and justice. His “Ghost of Tom Joad” draws parallels between the Great Depression and the late twentieth century. It is a nod both to the protagonist of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and to Woody Guthrie’s song about the same subject, which was titled “Tom Joad.”

Springsteen’s 2012 song “We Are Alive” creates a historical through line from early railroad worker strikes to the Civil Rights Movement to today’s immigrants dying as they try to reach America in a journey across the desert. In it, he seems to voice the

solidarity of the causes across the ages and the strength of the human spirit that endures and will, ultimately, prevail:

Well, we'd put our ears to the cold grave stones □
This is the song they'd sing □
We are alive □
And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark □
Our spirits rise to carry the fire and light the spark □
To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart □ □

A voice cried I was killed in Maryland in 1877 □
When the railroad workers made their stand □
Well, I was killed in 1963 one Sunday morning in Birmingham □
Well, I died last year crossing the southern desert □
My children left behind in San Pablo □
Well, they've left our bodies here to rot □
Oh, please let them know □
We are alive □
Oh, and though we lie alone here in the dark □
Our souls will rise to carry the fire and light the spark □
To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart (Springsteen)

Springsteen's superstardom has given him an important platform on which to share the careful craft and historical appreciation he has gained through study and experience. His work has been an inspiration to a new generation of songwriters.

What has changed over these hundred years is that Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and others *won* songwriters the opportunity to write protest songs as a part of the body of their work, without going in front of a firing squad or being blacklisted. Abel Meeropol and Billie Holiday shook up common sensibilities about what was acceptable to perform in a concert hall or to express in front of mixed race audiences. Lucille Simmons, Guy Carawan, Bernice Johnson Reagon and millions of faceless and nameless singers gave us the sense of hope that “We Shall Overcome,” and that raising our voices in protest really could make change “someday.” Bob Dylan opened the door for songwriters of conscience to be poets and deep thinkers—to make observations without conclusions, and ask hard questions for the world to answer. Woodstock stands as an icon of a cultural revolution that freed society for greater exploration, experimentation, and personal expression.

We live in a time when some of the greatest opportunities to explore creative problem solving and build empathy are available to us through unfettered global communication and sharing of ideas and artistic information, but when many still face enormous difficulties in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness (and health and education). We need our songwriters more than ever—and we need to listen deeply. The musical conversation across place and time will not end as long as humans exist (even if it gets quieter from time to time), because there will always be challenges that are, unfortunately, part of the human condition, and there will always be musicians both moved by them and eager to move others about them. This is why we have come full circle. The journey continues, with no end in sight. What a trip it’s been.

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