

“Songs are Sneaky Things”: Pete Seeger’s Music as a Force for
Political Change

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“Being generous of spirit is a wonderful way to live.” –Pete Seeger

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“Solidarity Forever”: The Political Roots of Folk Music

“The dissemination of political ideas and the printing of folk songs are not two separate things. They overlap and intertwine and have done so for centuries.”¹

Popular images of protest in the 1960s are often accompanied by song. The 1960s gives America some of its best anti-war songs, songs about racial equality, and songs advocating for widespread changes to America and the way of life in the country. Some of these powerful songs are still used in protest today, and artists of every genre continue the legacy of protest music.

When looking at the protest music of the 1960s, Pete Seeger is a figure that stands out. Seeger was a gifted songwriter and was involved in the major movements of the 1960s, lending his talents and unique performance style to the civil rights and anti-war movements. Seeger’s songs are still sung today, often without people realizing that these incredibly popular, socially conscious songs are his compositions. The influence of Seeger’s music is far-reaching, both musically and politically.

Pete Seeger believed that music could have a part in widespread political and social change, and used his music to begin to implement this change. Following Pete Seeger’s vision for his life, and his beliefs about music and the inherent power of song, this thesis traces his participation in the social movements of the 1960s. Unlike a biography, this thesis places Seeger in the wider historical context and focuses primarily on the social movements, by using Seeger as an entry point. This thesis does not aim to provide a complete picture of Seeger’s life, or even a complete picture of his activism in

¹ Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folk Singer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 218.

the 1960s. Rather, it aims to highlight key moments of Seeger's activism and life as an artist, and relate those to the wider issues of the time. Unlike histories of the 1960s and social movements of the era, this thesis engages with the critically important issue of music as it relates to social movements. While many books and articles about this period mention music, few devote more than a cursory overview to music, and even fewer discuss the idea that music can be a force for change in and of itself. Above all else, this thesis begins with the idea that music is important and powerful, and works to prove that music is valuable as more than just an art form. This thesis will be arguing that music is a political tool and is best utilized as such, a view very similar to the one Seeger held throughout his life.

“The first function of music, especially of folk music, is to produce a feeling of security for the listener by voicing the particular quality of a land and the life of its people.”² So says Alan Lomax, a renowned collector of folk songs. While American folk music can be traced back to the settlement of the country, and even farther back if one includes Native American tribal songs, the collecting of folk songs only begun in the late 1800s.³ Howard Odum, Cowboy Jack Tharp and John Lomax, Alan Lomax's father, spent the late nineteenth and early twentieth century collecting African-American and cowboy songs, respectively.⁴ These early collectors would publish the songs they found either in pamphlets, as Tharp favored, articles in academic journals, as Odum did, or in books, as Lomax did, publishing several books on folk music throughout his life.⁵

² Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), xv.

³ Dick Weissman, *Which Side are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: A&C Black, 2005), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

The folk music of early America that these academics collected centered around the experiences of people's lives. This led to many early songs about love, loss, and personal experiences. However, as Americans left their farms to work in industrial labor, more and more folk songs were written about work and social issues.⁶ This marked the first time that many Americans had to work for a boss, and the work songs of the time reflected that. Other folk songs focused on social issues. The Hutchinson family, a famous early folk group, toured the country in the 1840s, "singing antislavery songs and popularizing the abolitionist cause."⁷ Songwriters in the late 1800s wrote labor songs that used the melodies of popular songs, but changed the words to support presidential candidates, oppose bankers, or fight for the abolition slavery.⁸ There were likely songs written for more conservative causes, but they have been largely omitted from the history of folk music, either due to bias by authors, or because it was the progressive songs that caught the attention of the masses, and thus, it was those songs that stood the test of time.

Pete Seeger's father Charles had an interest in the different types of folk music in America, and pioneered the field of musicology.⁹ In the 1920s, Charles Seeger drove his young family across the country, collecting folk songs and playing the classical music he had been taught in areas of America that had probably never heard a classical violin play.¹⁰ Charles Seeger was not the only person with an increasing interest in folk songs. By the late 1930s, the government had become more interested in folk music, and had hired Alan Lomax to catalogue various folk tunes of America. Lomax worked at the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, transcribing, recording and

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Alec Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

cataloging folk songs.¹¹ Charles Seeger introduced his son, who had a passion for the five-string banjo, to Lomax, who hired Pete Seeger to work at the Archive, and ultimately introduced him to Woody Guthrie.¹² Woody Guthrie, a folk singer from Oklahoma, had spent most of his life migrating and singing songs “that said what everybody in that country was thinking.”¹³ The hard drinking, womanizing Okie and the Puritan New Englander from a good family could not have been more different, but they both shared a love for music, and a fascination with songs that told the truth. Often, these were songs that other folk singers in the 1930s thought were too political, or even obscene, and refused to sing or include in their collections.¹⁴

In the early 1940s, Seeger and Guthrie founded and performed with the Almanac Singers at union benefits and for other progressive causes. The rotating group of folk musicians mostly played pro-union songs, in an effort to motivate people to join unions, and give union members music to rally around. They were playing at a time in American history when unions were at their largest and most influential. More and more factories, including the factories of Henry Ford, were becoming organized under unions, namely the CIO.¹⁵ The 1930s saw a rapid increase in membership in unions, as well as more strikes and the passage of more federal legislation to protect workers.¹⁶

With the rise of unions also came the rise of union music, though this was not a new phenomenon. The International Workers of the World (IWW), or “Wobblies” as they were affectionately known, were the first union that used songs as a part of their

¹¹ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard Books, 1981), 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³ Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: Penguin Group, 1983), 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶ Christopher L. Tomlins, “AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of American History* 65, no. 4 (1979): 1021.

politics, organizing, picketing, and other direct action campaigns.¹⁷ They produced songbooks for members of the union starting in 1909.¹⁸ These small songbooks, colored red to reflect the group's socialist leanings, contained close to fifty songs.¹⁹ The books contain lyrics written by members of the International Workers of the World, or musicians who sympathized with the cause.²⁰ There is no sheet music, or even chord patterns in the books, as almost all of the songs were intended to be parodies of popular tunes. The most famous of these parodies, one that is still remembered today, was "Solidarity Forever."²¹

"Solidarity Forever," like many union songs of the early 1900s, was not written to an original tune. Instead, it borrowed from a popular hymn, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."²² The use of a hymn, or other popular song of the time, made these union songs easier for people to learn and sing. Instead of spending double the time teaching workers new lyrics and a new tune, songwriters could put new and clever lyrics to a tune that all people would know. "Solidarity Forever," like many union songs, was sung to help strengthen the bonds of those in the union, show workers the power that came from starting a union, and build morale on the picket lines during strikes.²³ These were the types of songs the Almanac Singers would perform, and soon, members of the Communist Party began to appreciate the inclusion of music in their activities.

As the Communist Party became more interested in the plight of the "working man," members were exposed to the union and work songs of the common man. Leaders

¹⁷ Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution* (Milwaukee: Blackbeat Books, 2010), 173.

¹⁸ Therese M. Volk, "Little Red Songbooks: Songs for the Labor Force of America," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 49, no. 1 (2001): 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, 178.

²² Volk, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*

of unions, many of whom were Communist, realized that songs could be beneficial to their organizing, and musicians and song leaders soon became a part of every organizational effort and strike.²⁴ Many also knew old IWW songs, and several members created “revolutionary choruses” that people could perform in.²⁵ With the interest the Communist Party had in union songs, it is not surprising that the Almanacs sang at many Communist Party events, and for members of the Communist Party.²⁶ The group broke up at the advent of World War II, but after Seeger returned home from his time in the war, he continued to associate with the Communist Party, enlisting their help to create “a singing labor movement.”²⁷

This activism with the Communist Party would ultimately hurt Seeger’s career, but his commitment to combining politics and song would follow him for the rest of his life. Seeger’s participation in social movements is unique in that he lent his talents to a variety of different movements, and approached all social and political problems with optimism and hope. He used his music to bridge divides between diverse groups of people, and his songs had a power all their own.

The innate power of Seeger’s songs is often left out of literature about him. Much of the literature about Pete Seeger’s life and legacy provides an in-depth look at the man himself, and his specific participation in the social movements of his era. *How Can I Keep From Singing*, by David Dunaway, is the most in-depth study of Pete Seeger, spanning his entire life.²⁸ The book has been updated several times to reflect Seeger’s continuing activism. While Dunaway often discusses how Seeger wrote songs, and what

²⁴ Weissman, *Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution*, 175.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁶ Dunaway, 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁸ Dunaway.

he did with the songs he wrote, he rarely focuses on the larger historical context, or on protest songs as a whole. There are other, shorter biographies of Seeger, namely *The Protest Singer*, by Alec Wilkinson.²⁹ “*To Everything There is a Season*” *Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* by Allan Winkler gives accounts of the major moments in Seeger’s life, but neither book devotes time to analyze the contributions of the songs in depth, and tend to downplay the power of Seeger’s activism.³⁰

Literature about protest music can be divided between works that examine the songs themselves, and works that focus on the historical context of the songs. *Which Side Are You On?* by Dick Weissman talks about the history of protest music, for almost every cause and ideology.³¹ *Story Behind the Protest Song* by Hardeep Phull discusses how protest songs were written, and delve into the business around protest music, how the songs were received, and how songs of certain eras were influenced by past music.³² While works like these are helpful to understand how a protest song is conceived, they do little to argue that the songs themselves are influential.

On the other side, *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music*, a collection of essays edited by Jonathan C. Friedman, examines protest music from around the world and across history to understand the social and political context that produced protest songs.³³ The diverse array of essays show the similar historical contexts that lead to protest music, but once again, the music is treated only as a reaction to outside events, not a catalyst for change in itself. Another book by Dick Weissman, *Talkin’ ‘Bout a*

²⁹ Wilkinson.

³⁰ Allan Winkler, “*To Everything There is a Season*”: *Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Weissman, *Which Side*.

³² Hardeep Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008).

³³ Jonathan C. Friedman, ed., *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Revolution, uses a textual analysis of songbooks to pick out similar themes in anti-war protest songs, feminist protest songs, and civil rights songs.³⁴

One book that gives weight and importance to protest songs, beyond just being reactions to social context is “*When the Spirit Says Sing!*” *The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* by Kerran Sanger.³⁵ Sanger addresses not only how freedom songs were conceived, but also why they were used in protest, and what the effects of those songs were. Sanger details how these songs helped civil rights activists in marches and in jails, how they brought people together under a common message, and how they assisted in the direct action of the civil rights movement. However, even Sanger does not treat these songs as political forces for change in and of themselves.

Research on Pete Seeger does not highlight the political importance of his songs, or take the wider historical context into account. Books about protest music do not present songs as tools that can create change. Of all that has been written about protest songs, it is a quote from Pete Seeger himself that sums up the gap that this thesis aims to fill, that “the right song at the right moment could change history.”³⁶ This thesis will argue that songs are more than just reactions, and that if used properly, can be a tool that can change minds, change laws, and even change history.

A media blacklist early in his career prevented Seeger from playing on commercial radio or television, and forced him to find a new audience at summer camps, elementary schools and colleges. Chapter one will focus on Seeger’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, how that lead to a blacklist, and how Seeger

³⁴ Weissman, *Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution*.

³⁵ Kerran Sanger, “*When the Spirit Says Sing!*” *The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

³⁶ Dunaway, 335.

created a new audience in the wake of that blacklist. The audience of young people Seeger played for grew up hearing his Progressive ideals, and it is no coincidence that they later became the leaders of the social movements of the 1960s.

Seeger himself was active in the civil rights movement. He popularized “We Shall Overcome,” which is arguably the anthem of the civil rights movement. Chapter two will discuss the historical role of music in the civil rights movement, the writing of “We Shall Overcome” and how this song influenced the movement and participants in it. This, and other freedom songs, not only gave confidence and hope to participants in the movement, they touched the lives of those outside the movement as well. Notably, “We Shall Overcome” reached President Johnson, who quoted the song in a speech to Congress, while arguing in favor of the Voting Rights Act.

With the advent of the anti-war movement, protest songs became more commercialized, a detriment to Seeger, who was blacklisted well into the 1960s. Chapter three will focus on the shift in protest music in the 1960s, and how Seeger responded to it. With the increasing dissatisfaction with the war, Seeger began to gain popularity with all Americans, and in 1968, beat the blacklist by performing an anti-war song on network television. A once blacklisted artist, by 1968, Seeger had become an influential protest singer, who attracted national attention during controversies, and had political power. Since then, Seeger has transformed into an icon of American folk music, and undergone a transformation of his reputation.

Songs can unite diverse groups of people more easily than a speech or pamphlet can. They are easy to understand, with easily conveyed messages. There is no education gap that prevents people from participating in music, which leads to people working

under a unified message. Beyond that, the ease and comfort people have when listening to music can make them more open to listening to the meaning of the song, and by extension, the demands of those participating in movements. Finally, when sung in a group, many activists report that songs give them strength where words and speeches did not.

The importance of music cannot be measured empirically. It is impossible to tell how many lives were changed by songs, how music affected decision making, and what real power protest songs had. For people who participated in the social protest movements of the 1960s, music gave them strength and power where words did not. To hear Seeger himself tell it:

“Songs won’t save the planet, but then neither will books or speeches... Songs are sneaky things. They can slip across borders. Proliferate in prisons. Penetrate hard shells...If rulers really knew how important songs can be, they would probably have done something to Woody Guthrie and me and other people long ago.”³⁷

³⁷ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* [1981] (New York: Villard Books, 2008) 427.

“I Love My Country Very Dearly”: The Blacklist and the Underground Folk Movement

“I am proud of the fact that my songs seem to cut across and find perhaps a unifying thing, basic humanity, and that is why I would love to be able to tell you about these songs, because I feel that you would agree with me.”³⁸

Folk music’s political bent in the 1940s ensured that Pete Seeger would find himself a member of many radical causes. Seeger lent his talents to any progressive cause that would benefit from them, provided he believed in the issues. His attachment to radical and Communist causes raised suspicions in the United States Government, and in the early 1950s, Seeger was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. After an inflammatory testimony, Seeger was held in contempt of Congress, and a media blacklist prevented him from playing on commercial radio, television, or in big concert venues. To provide for his family, and maintain his career, Seeger had to find a new audience by utilizing college campuses, elementary schools and summer camps. In traveling and sharing his progressive ideals through song, he contributed to the future activism that would be conducted by young people in the 1960s.

In the late 1940s, Seeger formed a singing group with Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and Ronnie Gilbert. The Weavers, as they called themselves, performed old folk songs in nightclubs, and unlike other quartets that followed a strict, soprano, alto, tenor and bass lineup, the Weavers had unique sound of an alto, a baritone, a bass, and Seeger’s split-tenor.³⁹ The group did not fit with mainstream popular music, and reviewers did not

³⁸ Jim and Mary Capaldi, ed. “House Un-American Activities Committee,” *PeteSeeger.net*, Dec. 1995, Accessed Jan. 11, 2015, <http://www.peteseeger.net/HUAC.htm>.

³⁹ Dunaway, 142.

know how to characterize the group. Newspaper reports at the time called them “brash, rowdy and thoroughly ingratiating” and that there was “not a genuine voice to be found in the lot.”⁴⁰ Opinions like this, and the fact that the Weavers ignored the trends developing in popular music, made the Weavers rise to fame incredibly surprising. The group reached peak popularity with a cover of an Israeli folk tune, “Tzena, Tzena” and another cover of Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter’s “Goodnight Irene.” This meant more money for Seeger and his young family, a wider reach for folk music, and more attention focused on the Weavers. This last point was not always beneficial for the group, especially given the members’ past radical leanings. In 1950, a pamphlet came out with a list of over 150 artists who had “alleged ‘Communist-front’ associations.”⁴¹ Pete Seeger was the only member of the Weavers in the book, but his presence on such a damning list led to canceled bookings for the Weavers, including their potential television series, and to an FBI file being opened on the Weavers in the same year.⁴²

In 1952, a former employee of People’s Songs, a group Seeger used to run, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Henry Matusow told the Committee that all members of the group were Communists, and that he had “sat in Communist meetings with them.”⁴³ The Weavers were not the only people being investigated for their suspected Communist leanings. Throughout the 1950s, hundreds of artists, civil rights activists and other progressives were accused of being Communists. Many were brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and a similar Senate Committee, which questioned witnesses about their Communist past, and asked

⁴⁰ JSH, “Folk Songs Are Sung By Weavers Quartet,” *New York Herald Tribune* (Dec. 22, 1951). 6.

⁴¹ Dunaway, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴³ “3 of the Weavers Called Communists: Former F.B.I. Agent Names Singers in Ohio Inquiry,” *New York Herald Tribune* (Feb. 26, 1952). 6.

them to name other Communists they knew.⁴⁴ The most famous elected official working to weed out Communists was Senator Joseph McCarthy, but “both Democrats and Republicans embraced the domestic anticommunist crusade.”⁴⁵ While the crusade reached all artistic industries, folk music was among the hardest hit, likely due to the genre’s past association with Communist and Progressive causes.

Another thing that made folk singers, and musicians in general, more dangerous than other artists was the ability that musicians had to use their art to present their political beliefs in a way that may be imperceptible to audiences. When asked what made the Weavers music so dangerous, Matusow testified that “they could integrate political songs into their program...they could sing ‘Old Smokey’ and then could follow it up with a Spanish Communist song. They are good entertainers” and would have the ability to make such seamless transitions, and spread their subversive ideals.⁴⁶ The ability of music to cut across political allegiances, while also entertaining, was Seeger’s favorite thing about performing. Seeger had long believed in music’s ability to unite disparate groups, and this was evident in the continued popularity of the Weavers, whose records were enjoyed in large numbers by diverse groups of people. The Weavers music had, for several years, shielded them from attacks and censorship, but with Matusow’s testimony before HUAC in 1952, it looked like the power of their songs had finally been expended.

Following Matusow’s testimony, only Seeger and Lee Hays were called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Like all other artists called to testify before the Senate, or before HUAC, they had two options. They could choose to

⁴⁴ Weissman *Side*, 69.

⁴⁵ Peter Dreier and Jim Vrabel, “Did He Ever Return?: The Forgotten Story of Charlie and the M.T.A.” *American Music*, 28, no. 1 (2010): 16.

⁴⁶ “3 of the Weavers Called Communists.”

cooperate, disclose the Communists they knew, and return to their careers, or they could not cooperate with the government, and be blacklisted for the foreseeable future.

Prominent folk singers, notably Burl Ives, chose to cooperate with the Committee, and entered the 1960s with their career intact.⁴⁷ Folk singers who did not admit guilt, or name names for the Committee, could only stand by as their opportunities to perform vanished and their reputations were destroyed.

The Weavers were already feeling the effects of a blacklist. Throughout the 1950s, many folk singers and groups were informally banned from performing in large concert halls, or receiving radio play for their songs due to their political activities.⁴⁸ These blacklisted performers did not appear on television or major radio stations, and many major music halls would not book them for performances. Some groups and performers were able to withstand this pressure and continue performing, usually in smaller, underground venues, or abroad. The Weavers, however, ultimately could not weather the blacklist, and the group broke up in 1953.⁴⁹ While the government did not perpetuate this blacklist, as the ban was largely informal, there was conversation between Congressional representatives, some of whom sat on HUAC, and people who published materials about entertainers with Communist ties. At one point, the head of Aware Inc., the group that published the pamphlet "Red Channels" that led to questions about Seeger's association with the Communist Party, testified that he knew, and had met with, Congressman Walter, a man who sat on the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Dreier and Vrabel, 17.

⁴⁸ Robert G. Weiner "Atomic Music: Country Conservatism and Folk Discontent," *Studies in Popular Culture*, 19 no. 2 (1996): 222.

⁴⁹ Minna Bromberg and Gary Alan Fine, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces*, 80 no. 4 (2002): 1140.

⁵⁰ "Pete Seeger on being Black Listed in America." (Canada: Canadian Broadcasting Company, 1965), Online clip.

With no group to perform with, and few lucrative bookings on the horizon, Seeger's fortunes only worsened when he had to testify for the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955. Seeger was called before the Committee as an "unfriendly" witness, meaning that he would not be naming names of other Communists, or admitting his own connections to the Communist Party. Seeger had the option to take the Fifth Amendment, refusing to answer any questions that would incriminate him. While taking the Fifth offered an expediency that would allow Seeger to protect his friends, it carried with it the baggage of being guilty, as most people who took the Fifth were perceived as having something to hide.⁵¹ As Seeger said in an interview in 1965, "the Fifth Amendment, in effect, is saying 'you have no right to ask me this question.' But I wanted to say 'you have no right to ask any American citizen this question.'"⁵² By building an defense using the First Amendment, Seeger could argue that the government should not ask questions about his past associations, presence at certain events, and anything he had said previously. This option did give Seeger the moral high ground he was looking for, but also opened him up to the possibility of jail, as the First Amendment does not prevent someone from being held in contempt, or being punished for refusing to answer questions, the way the Fifth Amendment does. Before the hearing, Seeger struggled with these two options, weighing which would be a better choice for him and his family.

On the day of the hearing, Seeger entered in characteristic folk musician fashion. His wife, Toshi, had brought his banjo into the courtroom with her, knowing that Seeger

⁵¹ Dunaway, 165.

⁵² "Pete Seeger on being Black Listed in America."

was more comfortable knowing that his instrument was in the room.⁵³ For the first questions, Seeger was his normal, jovial self, making jokes about how some find his music career “damning,” clearly a jab at the Committee.⁵⁴ This manner was gone as soon as the Committee began to question him on his association with the Communist Party. Rather than take the Fifth Amendment, Seeger simply refused to answer questions on his “political beliefs, or how [he] voted in any election, or any of these private affairs.”⁵⁵ As a result, Seeger would not answer questions about quotes about him that had appeared in the *Daily Worker*, a Communist worker. He would not answer questions about specific performances he had given for Communist audiences, or if he had sang at the request of the Communist Party. When a member of the Committee asked Seeger directly if he was a member of the Communist Party, Seeger stated that he declined to answer such an improper question under compulsion.⁵⁶

At one point, the Committee asked Seeger directly if he was using the Fifth Amendment as a defense. This gave Seeger the opportunity to directly explain his issues with the entire premise of the committee. Seeger responded that he did not want to “discredit or depreciate or depredate the witnesses that have used the Fifth Amendment,” but he felt that the entire line of questioning by the Committee was improper, and that he should not have to use the Fifth Amendment to avoid it.⁵⁷ Instead, Seeger explained his reluctance to answer the Committee’s questions by saying:

⁵³ Dunaway, 174.

⁵⁴ “House Un-American Activities Committee.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

“I decline to discuss, under compulsion, where I have sung, and who has sung my songs, and who else has sung with me, and the people I have known. I love my country very dearly, and I greatly resent this implication that some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I have known, and some of my opinions, whether they are religious or philosophical, or I might be a vegetarian, make me any less of an American.”⁵⁸

Eloquent and powerful as this may have been, it was not a rational accepted by the Committee. After refusing to directly answer questions, even after being ordered to by the chair, Seeger was held in contempt of Congress. This led to years of other trials, until in 1961, a Federal court sentenced him to a year in jail after he was “found guilty on all ten counts” of contempt of Congress.⁵⁹ At his sentencing, Seeger again brought his banjo, and asked to sing a song which he thought was “apropos” of the situation.⁶⁰ The judge, like those running the HUAC hearing, refused Seeger’s request. Luckily for Seeger, not long after he was sentenced, the Court of Appeals ruled that the entire premise of the indictment was illegal, and dismissed the case on the technicality that HUAC’s powers had not been clearly defined.⁶¹ Throughout the process of the hearing, the indictment, the sentencing, and the subsequent removal of the charges, Seeger continued to insist that he had never done “anything subversive to [his] country.”⁶² Seeger served no time in jail, and while he was not morally vindicated, he stood up to the Committee, stuck to his principles, and had come out of the ordeal unscathed.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Philip Benjamin, “Seeger Convicted of US Contempt: Jury Finds Folk Singer is Guilty of all 10 Counts of Defiance in Red Hunt.” *New York Times* (Mar. 30, 1961). 13.

⁶⁰ “Pete Seeger Sentenced to Year in Jail: Judge Tells Singer He Can’t Sing in Court,” *New York Herald Tribune* (Apr. 5, 1961). 3.

⁶¹ Dunaway, 210.

⁶² “Pete Seeger Sentenced to Year in Jail.”

⁶³ In truth, Seeger spent close to six hours behind bars, because the court would not let him out on bail at first. According to Seeger, his daughter said “it’s too bad Dad didn’t go to jail, Alan Lomax could have collected folk songs from him!” (“Pete Seeger on Being Blacklisted in America”).

The same could not be said for his career. The blacklist that had led to the break-up of the Weavers remained in place. Seeger was not welcome on any television program, and it was hard for him to find a record company that would represent him. Beginning in the late 1950s, Seeger did not perform on television, his songs did not receive play on large radio stations, and he was not invited to play in any large concert halls. This was not a blacklist enforced by the government, but Seeger's presence on a radio station or a television program was enough to mobilize people who would demand a cancellation of his appearance. As word traveled about his legal troubles, and left-wing political opinions, owners of radio shows and television stations would refuse to book Seeger. Large concert halls, fearing the backlash that came with booking the unpopular musician, chose less political folk music acts. A less resourceful musician would have seen this as the end of his career, as all major moneymaking options had been closed.

Seeger, however, was no ordinary musician. He could still be hired at colleges, summer camps, and elementary schools, so those were the places he would play. With his participatory style, gift for story-telling, and excitable demeanor, he was a favorite at summer camps and elementary schools. Anti-Communists did not mind when Seeger performed for children, assuming that most of the songs he would sing would be the lighthearted songs children enjoyed.⁶⁴ What people did not anticipate was Seeger's ability to hold an audience, and make the progressive morals for his songs easy for children to understand. *For Kids and Just Plain Folks*, an album released in 1990 that likely mimics Seeger's elementary school set lists, includes a song "If You Miss Me at the Back of the

⁶⁴ Dunaway, 171.

Bus,” which addresses segregation and voting discrimination.⁶⁵ With an easy-to-sing chorus, it is conceivable that Seeger could have roomfuls of children singing about one of America’s most contentious issue. Another song on the album would outright admit the fallibility of adults. With “Be Kind to Your Parents,” Seeger advocated treating parents with understanding “in spite of the foolish things they do.”⁶⁶ Seeger treated the children he performed for with respect, and that, combined with his gregarious stage manner, made him a hit at elementary schools. He gained student’s attention long enough to impart morals. At one performance, he told the children that music “helped solve...troubles. It’s not what *I* sing, but how *you* sing. A good song reminds us what we’re fighting for.”⁶⁷ Seeger then led the children in “If I Had A Hammer,” which argues for justice, freedom, and love, a way to remind students and himself what they were fighting for. Alongside the progressive ideals, the song contained a reference to a hammer, a symbol many conservatives at the time would have immediately associated with the Communist hammer and sickle, further proving, in their minds, Seeger’s Communist associations.

Seeger did more than introduce young children to progressive ideals. He invented the college circuit, playing for any college that would have him.⁶⁸ His college circuit had actually started in 1953, when students at Oberlin asked him to play a concert. Instead of paying him upfront, they passed around a hat, and ended up raising two hundred dollars, a fee many times greater than what Seeger was making playing at small private schools in

⁶⁵ Pete Seeger, “If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus,” *For Kids and Just Plain Folks*, © 1988, Sony Wonder, LK 63424, Compact disc.

⁶⁶ Pete Seeger, “Be Kind to Your Parents,” *For Kids and Just Plain Folks*. © 1988, Sony Wonder, LK 63424, Compact disc.

⁶⁷ Dunaway, 170.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

New York.⁶⁹ Unlike the few other performers who performed at colleges at the time, Seeger “made things as informal” as he could, and prided himself on having the college students he played for join in the songs.⁷⁰ This appearance at Oberlin showed him that there was an untapped audience of college students, many of whom were more liberal than their parents, and many who would be glad to hear him play. Seeger played wherever he could, because like “the average musician” he would sing for “anybody who wants to listen to him.”⁷¹

To promote these appearances, Seeger engaged in what he called “cultural guerilla tactics,” calling radio and television stations in the area and asking if he could perform.⁷² Often, a smaller radio station would remember Seeger from his days with the Weavers, and agree to have him on. Seeger would play a few songs, talk with the young DJ, mention his appearance at the local college that night, and, in his words, “be away before the American Legion could mobilize itself to protest this Communist fellow on the air.”⁷³

One example of Seeger’s repertoire and style of performance at colleges can be found in the recording of the Bowdoin college concert that Seeger played in 1960, a year before he was sentenced for contempt. The performance did exactly what Matusow had warned about the Weavers. The Bowdoin set list artfully mixes old folk tunes, like “The Bells of Rhymney” and “Hieland Laddie,” with more subversive and revolutionary

⁶⁹ Aviva Shen, “Pete Seeger: Where Have All the Protest Songs Gone?” *Smithsonian Magazine* April 2012, Accessed Mar. 3, 2015. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/arts-culture/pete-seeger-where-have-all-the-protest-songs-gone-159453359/>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “Pete Seeger on being Black Listed in America.”

⁷² Dunaway, 159.

⁷³ Ibid.

songs.⁷⁴ And like all Seeger's shows, there is a focus on audience participation and education. For example, while introducing "Hieland Laddie," Seeger mentioned that he had learned the song from an Oberlin College student. When Seeger asked the student where he had learned the song, the student said "a songbook."⁷⁵ However, when Seeger looked up the song, he noticed the student had changed and improved sections, a continuation of the "folk process."⁷⁶ While singing, Seeger urges the audience to join in on the "hey-ho" section of the chorus, and before too long, the audience can be heard singing along to the chorus, and learning about the history of this song.⁷⁷

In between the non-political folk songs that had the audience singing along, Seeger played more radical songs that still proved to be a hit. To introduce one of these songs, Seeger recounts an anecdote where a friend told him people do not have enough arguments in America, so Seeger should "stir up some controversy."⁷⁸ Seeger then sang a song called "What A Friend We Have in Congress," which discusses how much money Congress spent on war, and planes that quickly became obsolete, without passing profits onto those who worked in the factories.⁷⁹ Seeger also sang a song called "Quiz Show" which talked about the illegal activities businesses engage in to make big profits, and how the richest often are able to avoid punishment for their illegal activities.⁸⁰ This song, in particular, with its easy-to-sing chorus of made-up words, had the audience singing by

⁷⁴ Pete Seeger, *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960* © 2012, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD 40184, Compact disc.

⁷⁵ Pete Seeger, "Hieland Laddie," *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960* © 2012, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD 40184, Compact disc.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Pete Seeger, "What A Friend We Have In Congress," *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960* © 2012, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD 40184, Compact disc.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Pete Seeger, "Quiz Show," *Pete Seeger: The Complete Bowdoin College Concert, 1960* © 2012, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD 40184, Compact disc.

the second verse, and many of the jokes in the song received uproarious laughter and applause from students.⁸¹ In an especially subversive moment of the concert, connected directly to Seeger's own legal troubles, "Quiz Show" discusses a Congressional hearing that sounds not unlike one Seeger himself had recently experienced. According to the song, "Congressman Walter can tell you the tale/Of how quizzers get votes and contestants get jail."⁸² Congressman Walter was one of the people questioning Seeger at his HUAC hearing, where Seeger, like the protagonist in the song, received jail time. This line emphasizes his anger with the Federal government and its corruption. At the dawn of the 1960s, a decade with great social and political upheaval, these young college students likely distrusted the government as well, and found Seeger's words and anger to be a welcome departure from the pro-government rhetoric that occupied much of the late 1950s. Seeger's engaging performance style and passion for audience participation, combined with his progressive ideals, made him popular on college campuses. It is no coincidence that these students later became some of the people at the forefront of organizing for the civil rights and anti-war movements.

Children, college students, civil rights workers, and more traditional audiences enjoyed Seeger for similar reasons, which is why he found success with most audiences he performed for. Unlike the performers that Americans were used to, Seeger encouraged, and almost demanded, his audiences sing along with him.⁸³ Throughout his life, he had no difficulty coaxing choruses and harmonies out of audiences large and small, friendly and hostile.⁸⁴ He also did not alter his set list, singing subversive and

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Dunaway, 159.

⁸⁴ Alex Ward, "Seeger, Guthrie: Soft Politics," *The Washington Post* (Mar. 26, 1975). B16.

progressive songs to all ages. Through this, Seeger began to see the second life of his songs. He alone could not use his music to overthrow the natural order and create peace and equality in the world. But he could plant the seeds, and use his music to spur on the young people who would start that process. Seeger was not “inspiring direct political action, he was inspiriting *people*,” a much more long-term solution for an artist who believed he may never perform for large crowds, or on television, again.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Dunaway, 189.

“We Shall Overcome”: Freedom Songs and the Civil Rights Movement

“Songs have accompanied every liberation movement in history. These songs will reaffirm your faith in the future of mankind.”⁸⁶ –Pete Seeger

The civil rights movement is known for its large marches, non-violent resistance techniques, and widespread use of music. Protesters and organizers in the civil rights movement used music during marches, in smaller meetings and in jail, to bolster spirits of participants in the movement and create a sense of unity. “We Shall Overcome,” arguably the most popular and effective song of the civil rights movement, facilitated unity among protestors and gave those in the movement a sense of strength. However, “We Shall Overcome,” and the many other freedom songs of the civil rights movement, also had innate power as political tools and pieces of art.

The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s was a reaction to the Jim Crow laws of the South, and the unequal treatment of black people across the country. The Jim Crow Laws in the South were a system of racial segregation, which prevented black people from voting, serving on juries, and using the same facilities as white people.⁸⁷ Even when black people did not face legal discrimination, they were disadvantaged economically, with non-white families earning around half the median income of white families in America.⁸⁸ This rampant inequality in political, economic and social spheres prompted anger from the black community and led to organized

⁸⁶ Pete Seeger, *Incomplete Folk Singer*, 233.

⁸⁷ Aldon D. Morris, “A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1999): 518.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

movements to challenge the Jim Crow laws and low socioeconomic status faced by black people.

Civil rights activists used the courts, the streets, and the voting booth to affect change. In 1954, the Supreme Court struck down a previous decision that had allowed for the segregation of black and white people. The ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* ensured that public schools would be desegregated, and ruled that the idea of separate facilities being equal was not only unethical, but also unconstitutional.⁸⁹ In 1955, a successful boycott of buses in Montgomery, Alabama ensured that public transportation would also be desegregated.⁹⁰ Throughout the late 1950s, and into the early 1960s, student groups, activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and black and white people from around the country staged sit-ins, boycotts and marches to call attention, and work to put a stop, to racial segregation.

Music was easily integrated into the civil rights movement because participants in the movement could draw on a shared cultural heritage. Gospel and blues songs were widely known in most African-American communities, and were often repurposed and turned into freedom songs.⁹¹ The practice of using religious and traditional songs in movements of struggle was not uncommon in African-American communities. Subversive music had a long history, reaching back to the early days of the country's founding when slaves would pass secret messages in songs. Songs like "Follow the Drinking Gourd" contained directions for slaves who were hoping to escape, by urging them to follow the North Star, which was part of the Big Dipper, or drinking gourd,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 521.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 524.

⁹¹ Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*. 207.

constellation.⁹² As slaves were allowed to practice their religion on plantations, spirituals and church songs were used alongside work songs to pass messages in fields. Sometimes these songs were used to discuss planned escapes, or give advice to those escaping, and other times they were merely to communicate where meetings would be held. With songs, overseers would not know that information was being exchanged, since messages were layered in metaphor and code. The tradition of subversive music provided a foundation for activists to build upon when writing and searching for freedom songs.

By the early 1900s, gospel music was used alongside older spirituals in black churches, and it was from here that many activists drew material for freedom songs. Many of these spirituals could be used as freedom songs without changing a single word. These songs, like the coded songs of the early 1800s, could be “subversive” and even “revolutionary,” and could even be used to “stir up a spirit of resistance.”⁹³ Black churches, as well as black singers, interested in using music to address the issues affecting society, kept these traditional songs alive. Paul Robeson was one such revolutionary singer. Throughout his career, Robeson used his fame to share spirituals both with the black audiences he was most popular with, and with anyone who came to his concerts.⁹⁴ The use of spirituals was not just to educate people about the music of the past, but also to show that the messages in old spirituals are still relevant and useful today. Sam Cooke, a successful pop singer, also sang and promoted socially conscious spirituals, which allowed him to share the messages of freedom songs with a large audience.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 66.

⁹³ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest* (New York: Praeger 1989), 49.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 59.

The message of “ultimate redemption in heaven” was popular in both spiritual and gospel songs, and can be found in many freedom songs as well.⁹⁶ “Oh Freedom” a song that gained popularity after the Civil War, but was also often used in the civil rights movement, contains the line “before I’ll be a slave / I’ll be buried in my grave / And go home to my Lord / And be free.”⁹⁷ “Oh Freedom” with its theme of ultimate redemption and air of militancy was often used by black singers during the civil rights movement to show both their unwillingness to be pushed around as well as their hope for a better tomorrow. Gospels and spirituals were repurposed by participants in the civil rights movement to create songs with the same themes, which was not a difficult task, as many songs centered around freedom.

While there was a wide variety of songs used in the civil rights movement, a large majority of them discussed freedom, whether ultimate freedom in heaven, or freedom on earth.⁹⁸ This was likely because the idea of “freedom” summed up the activists goals in a way that all people could understand. Few songs mentioned “voting” or “civil rights” or even “equality” by name during the civil rights movement.⁹⁹ However, songs about freedom, an idea that had been present since the earliest days of African-American life in this country, was something that everyone could commit to.

The use of overarching ideas instead of specifics also created an easily digestible message, one that was broadcast to the entire country when Dr. King gave his speech at The March on Washington in 1963. Dr. King ends his speech with a powerful quote, that he dreams that all people “will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old

⁹⁶ Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, 96.

⁹⁷ Odetta, “Spiritual Trilogy: Oh Freedom / Come And Go With Me / I’m On My Way,” *Essential Gold*. © 1956, Essential Media Group, VCD-43/44, Compact disc.

⁹⁸ Sanger, 67.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”¹⁰⁰ Spirituals were not only used by participants in the movement, but by organizers who used the simple but powerful messages to communicate their goals and draw new people into the movement.

The young character of the civil rights movement led to several different forms of freedom songs. College students, both white and black, did much of the activism on the ground, like sit-ins and voter registration.¹⁰¹ As college students and other young people were participating in the movement, they brought their songs that felt more relevant to their lives. Some were lifted directly from the gospel, or spiritual tradition, while others were rewritten and sometimes students even reworked “gospel-oriented pop songs of the day.”¹⁰² This idea became more popular as there were more successful black popular singers. “Hit The Road Jack” a song popularized by Ray Charles was turned into “Get Your Rights Jack” and a number of Curtis Mayfield songs with subtle civil rights messages were used as freedom songs.¹⁰³ The music of the civil rights movement was not always based in gospel songs or spirituals, but the messages in the songs were consistent no matter what style they were.

These characteristics of freedom songs, drawn from a shared tradition, with a focus on ultimate redemption and an easy to follow message, coalesced in one of the most successful protest songs of the civil rights movement. “We Shall Overcome” was arguably the most widely known protest song by participants in the civil rights movement. Even people outside of the movement knew and were impacted by the song.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Luther King, “I Have A Dream” (Speech, Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Aug. 28, 1963).

¹⁰¹ “Freedom Summer” *10 Days That Unexpectedly Changed America* Dir. Marco Williams. (New York, NY, A&E Television Networks, 2006). Online clip.

¹⁰² Weissman, *Which Side*, 139.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

“We Shall Overcome” has a message that was not only representative of the early civil rights movement, but is still relevant and powerful today.

Like many freedom songs, there is no clear writer of “We Shall Overcome.” The spiritual it was based on can be traced back to 1901, when Reverend Charles Tindley wrote a hymn called “I’ll Overcome Someday,” which is based on the Biblical verse of Galatians 6:9.¹⁰⁴ By 1945, during a tobacco workers strike, black workers sang Tindley’s lyrics, set to the tune of an old gospel song “I’ll Be All Right.”¹⁰⁵ Throughout the strike, the song underwent changes. Lucille Simmons, one of the workers, slowed the song down to accommodate for the fact that workers “carrying placards” would not be able to clap along to a faster gospel song.¹⁰⁶ Simmons and other workers on the strike added new verses and changed the “I” to a “We” to create a feeling of unity in the song.

In 1947, two workers from the strike were invited to the Highlander Folk School where they taught the song to Zilphia Horton, who eventually taught it to Pete Seeger.¹⁰⁷ The Highlander Folk School, started by Don West, and Zilphia Horton’s husband, Myles Horton, was founded in the 1940s to lead workshops for “union organizers and civil rights workers.”¹⁰⁸ While the school provided many folk outlets for striking workers, it was Zilphia who encouraged music, by teaching songs and helping singers learn how to lead a crowd in song.¹⁰⁹ Most singers had no problem learning new songs, but learning to lead songs was challenging, as it required singers to perform the song, while almost simultaneously providing the words to those listening. It was not a skill that every

¹⁰⁴ Phull, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁸ Weissman, *Which Side*, 140.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

musician possessed, but those who learned it could become successful song leaders. The Highlander Folk School was a place for musicians to hone their song-leading techniques, learn new songs, and modify old ones, all of which Seeger did while he was there.

Although the song was quite old, and had been used in many other strikes, Seeger made very important changes to it that are still used today. Seeger adopted the slowed down style of the song, which worked better when accompanied by a banjo, his instrument of choice.¹¹⁰ He wrote several new verses, including “we’ll walk hand in hand” and changed the word “will” to “shall.”¹¹¹ According to Seeger, he changed it “to ‘We shall.’ Toshi kids me that it was my Harvard grammar, but I think I liked a more open sound; ‘We will’ has alliteration to it, but ‘We shall’ opens the mouth wider.”¹¹² Seeger published a version of it in 1948 in his *People’s Songs* songbook, but the book did not sell widely, and this was not how the song spread across the country.¹¹³ In fact, the song traveled “without a recording...across the south, a widely known non-hit.”¹¹⁴ While Seeger did eventually record the song, the blacklist he was subject to prevented the record from having major airtime on the radio, or wide promotion and sales.

The song’s travel speaks to Seeger’s skill and the sheer amount of performances he did. Seeger put a lot of pride in his skill as a performer, almost above his other abilities. In a column for the magazine *Sing Out!* Seeger wrote, “as a performer, yours truly does not have much of a voice, and there are plenty of young people who can play rigs around me on guitar or banjo. But I’m proud that I’ve hardly ever met an audience I

¹¹⁰ Phull, 3.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Dunaway, 222.

¹¹³ Pete Seeger, *Where Have all the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 32.

¹¹⁴ Dunaway, 222.

couldn't get singing.”¹¹⁵ Seeger “kept the song in his armor for tense situations” whether that be a protest that was about to be broken up by the police or an audience who was not responding to these other songs.¹¹⁶ Through performances, the song spread to people across the country, as well as to influential leaders of the movement. In 1957, Seeger performed the song for the Highlander Folk School’s anniversary celebration, which was attended by many musicians and activists. One attendee was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who reportedly left the event humming the song.¹¹⁷ Performances and word of mouth spread the song across the country during the early days of the civil rights movement, but the popularity of the song is due in large part to how it is written, and the ease with which people could learn and sing it.

“We Shall Overcome” employs a traditional folk pattern which relies on repetition to make the song easy to learn and sing. Like blues songs, which evolved out of black culture, “We Shall Overcome” uses an AAA style for the verses, with a single line repeated three times.¹¹⁸ This line changes with each verse, but the song leader only needs to call it out once and then people have three lines of uninterrupted singing. The last two lines of “We Shall Overcome,” which could be considered its chorus, are sung after every verse and never change, and the combination of a repeated line at the beginning, and two consistent lines at the end make the song easy to teach, follow and sing.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Seeger, *Incomplete Folk Singer*, 197.

¹¹⁶ Dunaway, 223.

¹¹⁷ Phull, 3.

¹¹⁸ Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, 79.

¹¹⁹ Pete Seeger, “We Shall Overcome,” *We Shall Overcome - The Complete Carnegie Hall Concert*. © 1963, Columbia Records, C2K 45312, Compact disc.

The structure of the repeated line in the beginning facilitated the creation of new verses, as anyone could become a song leader, by calling out the next line the entire crowd was going to sing. Rhyming was not necessary, and participants only needed to think of one line to write a new verse. For example, in a police raid of the Highlander Folk School, an “impromptu chorus of ‘We are not afraid’ began.”¹²⁰ For Seeger, this later became the defining verse of the song. In his Carnegie Hall recording, Seeger says that “the most important verse is the one they wrote down in Montgomery Alabama that said ‘We are not afraid.’”¹²¹ He argued that this verse “taught us all a lesson” about the importance of standing up for what was right.¹²² The ease with which people can adapt this song to suit their own purposes meant that the song could easily travel from one protest to another, and if people did not know the lyrics, it was not difficult to teach them.

The accessibility of “We Shall Overcome” can be seen in recordings of those singing it at protests. Professional singers and those with untrained voices are singing together, creating a blend of all types of voices.¹²³ In a movement that is supposed to bring equality to the country, it is fitting that the song is an equalizer as well, as easy for amateurs to learn and sing, as it is for professional singers. The tune is simple enough that it can be taught with or without a guitar, and different types of protests would utilize the musicality of the song in different ways. For example, sit-ins, or vigils outside courthouses and jails would often accompany the song with a guitar.¹²⁴ However, in marches, the song would be sung without the aid of any musical instruments.¹²⁵ Instead,

¹²⁰ Phull, 3.

¹²¹ Seeger, “We Shall Overcome.”

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Everyman*, Produced by volunteer labor. (Oakland, CA: Estuary Press, 1962). Online clip.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ “1963-1968.” *Class of the 20th Century*. Dir. Merrill M. Mazuer. (New York, NY: A&E Television Networks, 1991). Online clip.

marchers would link arms, forming a chain, and sing the song as they marched past police in riot gear and hostile spectators. Whether in sit-ins with a guitar, or marches with participants linked arm-in-arm, the song maintains its power, and blends all different types of voices to create a unified message and song.

“We Shall Overcome” not only borrowed from the spiritual tradition in its lyrics, but in the themes it discussed. Much like the ideas of ultimate freedom that were present in many hymns, gospel songs, and spirituals, “We Shall Overcome” outlines the eventual success of the civil rights movement. However, the song does not call for immediate action, or give a time frame for when this action would be achieved. The song made no demands, instead resting on the idea that activists and black Americans would overcome their struggles “someday.” This idea, of waiting for ultimate freedom, caused tension within the civil rights movement, which spawned debates over the use of the word “someday” in the song. One activist told Seeger directly that she objected to the use of the word “someday” in the song, on the grounds that it was not revolutionary enough.¹²⁶ Seeger discussed this criticism with Bernice Reagon, who had gained notoriety as a civil rights singer at a young age and eventually became part of a group Seeger founded called the Freedom Singers.¹²⁷ When Seeger discussed the song with her, she argued that the use of the word “someday” was appropriate because “if we said ‘next week,’ what would we sing the week after next?”¹²⁸ “We Shall Overcome” articulated a positive view of the future, but did not create a strict time frame.

“We Shall Overcome” was not the most popular song of the civil rights movement just because it was easy to sing and contained themes that resonated with

¹²⁶ Seeger, *Singalong Memoir*, 35.

¹²⁷ Dunaway, 224.

¹²⁸ Seeger, *Singalong Memoir*, 35.

marchers. Something in the song itself made the hardship and troubles that civil rights activists faced seem manageable. As one activist, an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee remembered, “when you got through singing [We Shall Overcome], you could walk over a bed of hot coals, and you wouldn’t notice.”¹²⁹ Another participant described it as generating a “power that is indescribable.”¹³⁰ Something in the freedom songs, whether it was the unifying experience of singing them together, the uplifting content of the songs, or something more ephemeral, a power in the songs themselves, gave people courage to face hateful crowds, jail and seemingly insurmountable odds. This is especially shown in one activists’ memory, when they argued that “there is no armor more impenetrable than song.”¹³¹ Despite whatever was going on around them, activists who were singing had no fear and felt protected by the songs.

Guy Carawan, the music director of the Highlander Folk School argued that the songs were “sung to bolster spirits, to gain new courage, and to increase the sense of unity” that protestors felt.¹³² In particularly difficult moments of jail, beatings and police intimidation, the unity that came from singing together was invaluable for the protestors. Freedom songs gave them “significant power to face the internal enemies of fear and doubt as well as the external trials of the movement.”¹³³ In jail, when activists were stripped of the ability to organize, or orchestrate direct action campaigns, songs served to “communicate their refusal to be rendered impotent.”¹³⁴ The power that participants and

¹²⁹ Dunaway 223.

¹³⁰ Sanger, 16.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 17.

¹³³ Ibid., 17.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 19.

activists of all types drew from songs led to freedom songs playing an integral role in the civil rights movement.

Participants were not the only people who were moved by the power of freedom songs. Journalists observing the civil rights movement discussed the feeling they had when listening to the songs. One onlooker described the mood as “mystical, inspired and excited, ecstatic” and said that the music “could not be described—or recaptured.”¹³⁵ This same idea was expressed to Seeger when he was running through a protest, trying to collect all the freedom songs he heard. When a woman saw what he was doing, she smiled and said, “Don’t you know you can’t write down a freedom song?”¹³⁶ Anyone watching the protests noticed the power and effects of these songs, but the true spirit of them were tied up with the souls of people in the movement.

Despite that, the songs had resonance for people outside of the Civil Rights movement as well. By 1965, the song had reached its peak popularity, and President Lyndon Johnson quoted it while speaking to Congress in support of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Johnson used the phrase in the same way that white activists like Seeger, black students, and participants in the early civil rights movement used it. President Johnson used the phrase to show unity, and the group effort that would be needed to change society, when he said, “their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹³⁶ Pete Seeger, *Everybody Say Freedom!* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 200.

¹³⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson. “Speech Before Congress on Voting Rights.” (Speech, United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. Mar. 15, 1965).

However, President Johnson also used the phrase to highlight the long road ahead before true progress and equality was achieved. Much like the song “We Shall Overcome” argued that these sweeping changes would happen at some unspecified day in the future, President Johnson’s speech used the phrase to show that the road to full equality would be long, but possible, when he said, “these are the enemies: poverty, ignorance, disease. They are the enemies and not our fellow man, not our neighbor. And these enemies too, poverty, disease and ignorance, we shall overcome.”¹³⁸ What had been an unpublicized freedom song that gave courage and strength to marchers had become a symbol of an idea that the President himself believed in enough to quote.

When President Johnson quoted “We Shall Overcome” in his speech, it served as a symbol, with a meaning and purpose that was known to most assembled. The song had become so widespread at protests in recent years that it is likely that most Congressional representatives had heard it, or knew of its existence, especially those that President Johnson was trying to persuade. This served as an easily packaged symbol to show Southern representatives the public opinion that they were fighting when they opposed the Voting Rights Act. It is telling that, as the protests that “We Shall Overcome” was sung at integrated the buses and schools, the speech that quoted “We Shall Overcome” likely helped to pass the Voting Rights Act. This song was influential not just for its ease of singing, and the courage it gave activists, but also for the powerful symbol it represented, which was used by powerful people.

Some remember this quote as having an impact on conservative segregationists who were listening to the speech. Bill Moyers, President Johnson’s press secretary was there when the speech was made, and remembers almost the entire chamber breaking into

¹³⁸ Ibid.

applause.¹³⁹ In the midst of the thunderous applause, a group of white segregationists ultimately “had no choice but to join in that great hurrah” a symbol Moyers took as an indication that “these people...now couldn’t help but join history.”¹⁴⁰ Not only had “We Shall Overcome” become so influential that President Johnson had used it in his speech, but the phrase was inspirational to members of Congress, even going to so far as to potentially change some of their minds.

It is clear that “We Shall Overcome” and other freedom songs had power as symbols and gave participants in movements a sense of unity and strength. However, there is also an argument to be made that the songs in and of themselves, held power as both pieces of art and political tools. Considering the way that “We Shall Overcome” spread around the country shows the unique ability a song has to reach large and diverse groups of people. After all, “songs can go places and do things and cross borders which people cannot.”¹⁴¹ “We Shall Overcome” spread around the country without the use of a recording, and in a much easier manner than if it had been a speech or a pamphlet. Songs are easier for people to understand and easier for people to reproduce, which leads them to have influence as they spread around the country.

There is also a quality and strength to music that other forms of expression do not possess. Singing has a power that is noticed not just by artists like Seeger, but by leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Seeger remembers that Dr. King would use music at the most pivotal points in the moment by saying that certain demonstrations were “to be a silent demonstration. No songs, no slogans, no replies to any obscenities shouted at them.” However, Dr. King would add, this would only continue “until you’re arrested.

¹³⁹ Mazuer, “1963-1968.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Seeger, *Incomplete Folk Singer*, 209.

Then the singing can begin.”¹⁴² The powerful songs of the movement were seen as a method of last resort to be used when the movement and participants needed the most strength. Dr. King did not advocate that participants chant together, or come together to listen to a speech. He used singing at the toughest points of the movements, because songs held something special for participants, something that could not be conveyed in any other way. There are many ways unity and community can be achieved. It is telling that the one used most often was based around music, which points to the inherent power and worth of songs.

While “We Shall Overcome” was powerful, it was not the only freedom song that gained widespread notoriety and provided strength and a sense of solidarity to participants. In the early days of the movements, specific songs were used to cultivate a sense of solidarity between white and black participants. “We Shall Overcome” was one such song, but “We Shall Not Be Moved,” a union song, and “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” both highlighted what could be achieved when white and black activists worked together.¹⁴³ “This Little Light of Mine,” a song that was taught to all Christian children, white or black, was also used in protest.¹⁴⁴ This song ensured that there would be at least one song in the movement that a vast majority of people could draw from and sing together, further fostering a spirit of unity between the races. However, the song also reminded those observing the movements of the unity of all people under God, by taking a religious song and applying it to those participating in the movement.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Ibid., 246.

¹⁴³ Sanger, 121.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

For the first half of the 1960s, “We Shall Overcome” was arguably the most popular song in the civil rights movement. However, in the later part of the decade, the ideals and techniques of the movement shifted. The non-violence preached by Dr. Martin Luther King gave way to a more militant style that Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael advocated. As these ideas shifted, so did the music. “We Shall Overcome,” with its rhetoric of black and whites walking hand in hand, and the slow, but eventual achievement of freedom slowly fell away. This song that had been so non-threatening to whites, was retired in favor of more militant songs.¹⁴⁶ New songs discussed the danger that black people, and participants in civil rights movements faced when they loved their enemies.¹⁴⁷ On occasion, songs like “Move On Over” took direct aim at the ideas of “We Shall Overcome,” and even the song itself. In one verse of this song, Chandler sings “You promise use the vote and sing us, ‘We Shall Overcome’/But John Brown knew what freedom was and died to win us some/That’s why we keep marching on.”¹⁴⁸ The reference to John Brown, a violent abolitionist, marked a shift that was being felt in music, activism style and the presence of white activists. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, whose members had previously talked about how much “We Shall Overcome” meant to them, shifted towards a “Black-led, Black-dominated” group.¹⁴⁹

These new songs fit in with the wider rhetoric of black power that was present in groups and in the media. Pete Seeger noticed the shift, and like many white activists, chose to take a back seat in the movement. This coincided with the quieting of freedom

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴⁷ Dunaway, 243.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

songs in the latter half of the 1960s. One reason for this could be the stereotype that many held of freedom songs being weak, and not the best way to facilitate change. However, as the 1960s wore onward, the presence and influence of large marches and direct action campaigns weakened. According to Julius Lester, a black songwriter, “the days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with love” were over.¹⁵⁰ To him, and many others in the movement “‘We Shall Overcome’...sounds old, out-dated and can enter the pantheon of the greats along with IWW songs and the union songs.”¹⁵¹

“We Shall Overcome” is certainly one of the greats, but it has not yet been retired to the pantheon. The song is still put to use today, not just by those who took part in the civil rights movement, but by young activists as well, including young activists on Columbia’s campus. On November 24th, a grand jury did not return an indictment for Officer Darren Wilson in the case of the killing of Michael Brown. Outrage spread around the country with rallies planned in every major city. At Columbia University, students had planned for a vigil on the sundial at the center of campus to await the verdict. When the lack of an indictment was revealed, the mood shifted to one of profound anger and sadness. Students and members of the Columbia community read poems, talked about their own personal experiences, and shared their anger and reactions to the event. At a lull in the event, one girl, without stepping up to the sundial, began to sing. In a moment of betrayal by those in power, in a moment that shows how far this country must go before everyone is truly free, she chose to express her hurt and anger through song.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 243.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Quietly, the opening notes of “We Shall Overcome” filled the air. A handful of students joined in, not always in the correct time, or on the correct key, but singing. After the first verse, the song leader stepped up to sundial, and asked us all to link arms. This was a tradition that developed in many singings of “We Shall Overcome” where participants would cross their arms in front of them, holding the hands of those next to them to form a chain that would not be broken. On the night Darren Wilson was not charged in the killing of Michael Brown, we were asked to link arms to feel a sense of community, and take strength from those around us. Students swayed slowly as a group, singing with a quiet strength that encompassed the rage, frustration, and sadness of the current moment.

Fifty years after the 1964 Voting Rights Act, people are still taking solace in “We Shall Overcome.” Fifty years later, the quiet power of the song, and the hope it gives for a better tomorrow, still resonates with activists and participants in modern day civil rights movements. Community can be experienced through gathering together in speak outs, anger and self-expression can be given a voice through poetry. A song, specifically a song like “We Shall Overcome,” does all that and more. Songs give a voice to anger and an idea of tomorrow. Songs create a community and allow people to draw strength from each other.

Art of any kind provides solace for people in times of trial. However, it is only especially great art that can stand the test of time and hold meaning many years after its original creation. The message, the style and the innate power of “We Shall Overcome” means it was not just an influential song of the civil rights movement, but an important, necessary and powerful song today.

“Waist Deep In The Big Muddy”: Popular Protest Music and the Vietnam War

“I may be right, I may be wrong...but I got a right to sing this song. Bring ‘em home,
bring ‘em home.”¹⁵² –Pete Seeger

As the Civil Rights movement shifted towards a more militant movement, with a focus on Black Power, Seeger and other white folk musicians took a step back and chose to use their talents in other arenas of social protest. In the late 1960s, the biggest area of popular protest was over the escalation of the Vietnam War, and as Seeger’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement waned, his involvement in the anti-war protests increased. At the same time Seeger shifted into anti-war activism, protest songs were making a shift from the communal freedom songs of the civil rights movement to more popular protest songs that received airtime on radio and television. The late 1960s were a crucial point in Seeger’s career, where he not only broke the blacklist that had been following him since the 1950s, but contributed to the wider anti-war movement and used his music to affect change at the highest levels of government. This moment of the blacklist falling away, and Seeger’s new style of popular music being used for political change is encapsulated in his performance of “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour in 1968.

Seeger’s shift in priorities matched a shift that was taking place across the country. Although civil rights had captured the nation’s attention for the early part of the 1960s, by 1965, the Vietnam War had replaced civil rights in the American consciousness. The majority of Americans saw the war as the most important problem

¹⁵² Pete Seeger, “Bring ‘em Home,” *The Johnny Cash Show* (Nashville, TN: American Broadcasting Corporation, 1970). Online clip.

facing the country, though many of them also still supported the war.¹⁵³ Anti-war opposition was beginning to build, and was concentrated on college campuses. The influence of these movements spread across the country, and by 1966, 35% of Americans saw the war as a mistake, and by 1967, protests had begun to hit critical numbers, with as many as 20,000 people participating in a march on the Pentagon.¹⁵⁴ As the war escalated, so did student and popular protest, and by 1969, 55% of people saw the war as a mistake.¹⁵⁵ One large student protest happened on Columbia's campus, with between five and eight hundred students occupying buildings across the campus for three days, until the police forcefully removed students in the middle of the night.¹⁵⁶ This was just one of the many violent protests on campuses in the late 1960s, which were fueled by anger over the war and the escalating draft. These protests, like the civil rights movement protests, were accompanied by music, but not in the same way.

Unlike the civil rights movement, where music was played in churches, at colleges, and at protests, much of the protest music of the Vietnam War era was consumed through the radio and the television. Students at Columbia and Kent State did not join hands and sing, and the songs they listened to influenced them, but were not incorporated into their protests. While an artist like Seeger, who could engage and hold any audience's attention, had thrived in the climate of the civil rights movement, he had less success in the anti-war movement. Students who had before invited him to play on their campuses, did not make space for his performances during student protests, nor did

¹⁵³ Doug McAdam and Yang Su, "The War at Home: Antiwar Protests and Congressional Voting, 1965 to 1973," *American Sociological Review* 67 no. 5 (2002): 698.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 699.

¹⁵⁶ Blake Slonecker, "The Columbia Coalition: African Americans, New Leftists, and Counterculture at the Columbia University Protest of 1968," *Journal of Social History* 41 no. 4 (2008): 967.

they sing any songs when they took over buildings or marched. Instead, they relied on chanted slogans, powerful physical actions, like occupying university buildings, and spreading knowledge through things like teach-ins, where students would gather to discuss the war. The blacklist that had followed Seeger since the late 1950s was still in place, and to find radio stations, let alone a television program, that would play his songs was almost impossible.

This crossover from protest music centered around performance to protest music centered in popular media was brought about by a new generation of folk singers. Bob Dylan, in particular, was responsible for bringing folk music into the popular consciousness. In the early 1960s, Dylan quickly became the darling of the radical left, and was adored by folk musicians, and the public alike.¹⁵⁷ As he matured as an artist, his songs became more radical, and more popular. His socially conscious music was played on major radio stations, and found by young people who identified with the frustration in many of Dylan's songs.¹⁵⁸ Folk and protest singers like Dylan, Joan Baez and Phil Ochs had ushered in a new era of folk music, one that spoke to young people, but left blacklisted artists like Seeger behind.

This did not stop Seeger from writing anti-war protest songs. Seeger had never been able to keep himself out of a movement, even if this particular one did not fit his preferred style. Seeger had a long history writing and performing pacifist songs. In 1941, when he was still performing with the Almanacs, he had been a part of the *Songs for John Doe* album, which was full of anti-war songs, as well as songs that connected war with

¹⁵⁷ Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*, 209.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

capitalism.¹⁵⁹ Many of these songs targeted President Roosevelt and his administration directly, with one song in particular, “The Ballad of October 16th” causing President Roosevelt to question if these types of songs would be grounds for arrest.¹⁶⁰ As WWII wore on, it became obvious to Seeger and other pacifists that the Nazis were a group that needed to be dealt with militarily, and the Almanacs stopped singing peace songs. But Seeger never lost his conviction around pacifism, and continued to write songs that spoke to this belief.

Although this new type of popular protest prevented Seeger himself from being as influential as he had been in the civil rights movement, it did not stop his songs from being played. It was only Seeger himself that was blacklisted, and songs that he wrote that were covered by other artists were able to be played on the radio, and reach the masses. In 1961, soon after his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Seeger wrote “Where Have All the Flowers Gone.”¹⁶¹ Like many traditional folk songs, it is fairly easy to sing, with repeating lyrics and a clear melody. The anti-war message comes at the end of the song when Seeger asks “Where have all the young men gone?/They’re all in uniform/Oh when you they ever learn?/Oh when will you ever learn?”¹⁶² This lyric, interestingly, was changed when Peter, Paul and Mary recorded the version of “Where Have All The Flowers Gone?” which became famous.

With this lyric, Seeger asks listeners to examine their behavior in sending young men off to war, but in a way that the listeners have to be paying attention to the message

¹⁵⁹ Robert J. Kodosky, “America’s Contested Wartime Soundtrack,” *The Routledge History of Social Protest Music* 75.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 77.

¹⁶² Pete Seeger, “Where Have All The Flowers Gone,” *Rainbow Quest* © 1960, Folkways, M1629, Compact disc.

of the song. Seeger trusted his audience to understand what some of the more hidden meanings in the song, but also tried to write a song that could be applied to any conflict in the future. When Peter, Paul, and Mary put this song on their debut album in 1962, they expanded on the three verses Seeger had written.¹⁶³ The Peter, Paul, and Mary version is more circular, with the next verses asking where the soldiers have gone, and answering that they have turned to graveyards. The graveyards then turn to flowers, and the final verse of the song is a repetition of the first verse, showing listeners in no uncertain detail that war is a futile cycle that will not be broken.¹⁶⁴ Unlike the original version, Peter, Paul and Mary felt the need to make the message of the song as clear as possible, signaling a new trend in folk music. The coded messages and metaphors were on their way out by 1960s, and folk singers had room to be more radical.

Even though “Where Have All The Flowers Gone?” was a modern protest song, it was still very different from the most successful songs of the day. The best example of the new style of song is Dylan’s “Masters of War, a song with a complicated lyrical pattern and no chorus.¹⁶⁵ The style of the song does not make it easy to be sung by large groups, while marching hand in hand. “Masters of War” discusses the faceless people behind war, who Dylan sees as cowards, who make the instruments of war but refuse to put their own lives on the line.¹⁶⁶ The song does not hide its anger behind metaphors the same way “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” does, and instead argues that the people behind the war are not “worth the blood that flows through [their] veins.”¹⁶⁷ As Dylan

¹⁶³ Kodosky, 77.

¹⁶⁴ Peter, Paul and Mary, “Where Have All The Flowers Gone,” *Peter, Paul and Mary* © 1962, Warner Bros. Records, 1449-2, Compact disc.

¹⁶⁵ Bob Dylan, “Masters of War,” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* © 1963, Columbia Records, CK 92396, Compact disc.

¹⁶⁶ Phull, 29.

¹⁶⁷ Dylan, “Masters of War.”

himself was young when he wrote it, the song includes a verse about how these comments could potentially be dismissed due to his age. He fires back, telling the faceless masters of war that there is one thing he knows, and that is “that even Jesus would never forgive what [they] do.”¹⁶⁸ While this song, written in 1963, the song was originally about the idea of a military industrial complex, but it quickly became, almost to the dismay of Dylan, an anti-war song about the Vietnam War.¹⁶⁹ While Dylan was the most popular protest singer of the late 1960s, he accepted that mantle almost reluctantly, all but dropping “Masters of War” from his concert repertoire by 1965.¹⁷⁰

A further separation between Seeger and these new artists was the inclusion of electric music. At the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, Bob Dylan played an electric set, shocking many people in the folk industry. Seeger himself reportedly said that he wished he had an axe to cut the wires during Dylan’s electric set.¹⁷¹ Seeger has since said he wanted to axe the wires because Dylan was playing “Maggie’s Farm” and Seeger felt that the audience could not understand the poetic lyrics Dylan had written over the noise of his electric guitar.¹⁷² Following Dylan’s performance, many protest songs, especially anti-war songs, began to fuse with rock music.¹⁷³ This further put Seeger on the outside, as he was a more traditional folk musician, who never would have considered lugging an amplifier around to his performances.

Despite his folk music and song-leading background, Seeger began to write new types of songs in the later years of the 1960s. Disgusted at the continuation of the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Phull, 31.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “Weavers Loom Large in Pop-Folk,” *The Washington Post* (Jan. 28, 1994). 16.

¹⁷² “Pete Seeger & His (re)actions during Bob Dylan’s electrified performance at Newport in 1965,” dir. Amy Goodman for *Democracy Now* (New York, NY: National Public Radio, 2013). Online clip.

¹⁷³ Ben Arnold, “War Music and the American Composer during the Vietnam Era,” *The Musical Quarterly* 75 no. 3 (1991): 320.

Vietnam War, Seeger expressed his frustrations in a new song. In a departure for Seeger, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” was not written with the intention for group singing. Unlike “We Shall Overcome,” which is easy to learn and encourages people to join in, “Waist Deep In The Big Muddy” followed the new trend in protest music, and was art to be consumed, not necessarily performed by large groups.

Written in 1967, “Waist Deep In The Big Muddy” followed the new protest song tradition at the time, and used a more complicated verse structure to tell a story. A photo of soldiers wading through the Mekong Delta reminded Seeger of another war story about wading in a river, and inspired him to write a song.¹⁷⁴ While the song is an obvious allegory for the Vietnam War, it describes a real story of a 1942 platoon on maneuvers in Louisiana that ended in tragedy.¹⁷⁵ The Captain of the platoon asks his men to cross a river, the “Big Muddy” mentioned in the song. When other members of the platoon express concern, the Captain urges his men to push on, which gives the song its only real chorus, a repetition of “the big fool says to push on” at the end of every verse.¹⁷⁶ Ultimately, the Captain leading the men drowns in the river, as he did not know that the area of the river they were crossing was deeper than the place he had crossed the river in the past. The song indicates the foolishness of blindly following leaders, and the consequences that can result from unquestioning loyalty. Though Seeger had adopted the new style of protest music, he continued to use metaphors to convey his meaning, as opposed to stating his opposition outright, the way Dylan did in his early days. Also like Dylan, the song is played on the guitar instead of the banjo. This change is just one of the

¹⁷⁴ Winkler, 124.

¹⁷⁵ Pete Seeger, “Waist Deep In The Big Muddy,” *Waist Deep In The Big Muddy and Other Love Songs* © 1967, Columbia, CK 57311, Compact disc.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

many ways Seeger tried to adapt his style to fit in with the popular protest music of the era.

President Johnson, and the Vietnam War, are not explicitly named in the song, but the parallels were likely obvious to anyone who paid attention to the news in the late 1960s. At the end of the song, Seeger sings, “Now every time I read the papers/That old feeling comes on/We're waist deep in the Big Muddy/And the big fool says to push on.”¹⁷⁷ In addition, at one point, the Captain tells the Sergeant, who is worried about the fate of the men crossing the river, not to be a “Nervous Nelly,” an expression that President Johnson used about people who criticized his policy of escalation of the war.¹⁷⁸ Seeger’s anger comes through in the song, calling the leader of the platoon, and by extension, President Johnson, a “big fool” and the ominous, minor key that song is written in suggests dismay and trepidation about the further escalation of the war.

Seeger likely wanted the song to be consumed by a mass audience, the way many other folk and protest music was consumed in the late 1960s, but had no control over where it would be played. With the new character of protest movements, his only options for mass exposure were the radio and television, both of which were all but closed to him. However, in 1967, Seeger had an unexpected reversal of fortune when the Smothers Brothers invited him to perform on their comedy hour.

This was likely the best venue for Seeger to perform, due to the political leanings of the Smothers Brothers, and their willingness to challenge the network about censorship.¹⁷⁹ The Smothers Brothers had themselves started out as a folk song parody

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Winkler, 126.

¹⁷⁹ Steven Allen Carr. “On the Edge of Tastelessness: CBS, the Smothers Brothers and the Struggle for Control,” *Cinema Journal*. 31 no. 4 (1992): 4.

act, though they managed to avoid any political material.¹⁸⁰ The brothers became such a successful comedy duo that CBS gave them an hour-long variety show in 1967. Despite competing with some of the biggest shows of the day, the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was the number one show in its first and second seasons, likely because their show appealed to young people.¹⁸¹ The Smothers Brothers fought with the network regularly, writing sketches that were deemed too scandalous for television, and inviting politically inappropriate guests, like Seeger, who saw their performances or interviews censored in whole or in part.¹⁸²

When the Smothers Brothers invited Seeger to perform on their show, it was the first time in seventeen years that Seeger had played on television.¹⁸³ In a way, the Smothers Brothers lifted the blacklist that had been following Seeger since his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Seeger had originally been invited to play two songs, but upon arriving to tape his segment, had been given extra time, which he used to play “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy.”¹⁸⁴ The segment opened with Seeger playing “Wimoweh,” with one of the Smothers Brothers, and coaxing the audience to sing along.¹⁸⁵ As the camera pans over the crowd, it is a reflection not only of the different audience Seeger is performing for, but the different time. Few people in the audience sing along, instead regarding Seeger with polite detachment, unaccustomed to his style of performance. As Seeger finishes “Wimoweh,” he is introduced as a man who “has been criss-crossing back and forth across our country,

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁸² Ibid., 4.

¹⁸³ George Gent, “Seeger Accuses C.B.S. Over Song,” *New York Times* (Sep. 13, 1967). 95.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ “Pete Seeger Performance.” *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. (New York, NY: Columbia Broadcasting System, Sep. 12, 1967). Online clip.

singing songs old and new for all shapes and sizes of people and getting them to sing with him.”¹⁸⁶ Despite the tepid response to “Wimoweh” Seeger received a long applause.

After the song, the other Smothers Brother talks with Seeger about what a folk song is, and asks him if he wants to tell a story about the next song. Seeger, who had been playing the ominous, opening chords from “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” responded that he “told too many stories” and would prefer to let this song stand on its own.¹⁸⁷ With the Smothers Brothers legacy of pushing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable on television, it made sense that they would try to have Seeger directly discuss the Vietnam War. More than happy to go against the network, the Smothers Brothers were likely hoping for an on-air discussion of the immorality of the Vietnam War. In retrospect, this likely would have been a better move for Seeger.

When Seeger declined to comment further on the song, with the opening chords of “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” still ringing in the air, the camera switches to a shot of the audience, and in the next shot, Seeger is not only not playing the song, but is playing a completely different instrument.¹⁸⁸ The network had cut the politically left-wing song before the broadcast before the show went to air, a decision made easier by Seeger not commenting on the song or saying its name. However, Seeger did not know the song had been cut until he returned home to watch the broadcast.

Seeger’s performance on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour marked the first time in seventeen years he had been on television. However, because Seeger chose to perform the entire song, with the final verse, the song was cut from the program. Despite only recently returning to television, and being in the good graces of those at the top,

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Seeger used his newfound influence to immediately and publicly call out CBS for cutting his most political song. Seeger was outraged by the censorship, and spoke with the New York Times, to let the public know “that their airwaves are censored for ideas as well as for sex.”¹⁸⁹ When asked if the song was too political to be played on television, Seeger argued that, “it is wrong for anyone to censor what I consider my most important statement to date.”¹⁹⁰ Although he had only recently left the blacklist behind, Seeger was willing to fight the establishment to ensure that his song would be heard by as many people as possible. Seeger was upset about the war, but believed that if he reached enough people with his music, “he could persuade people to demand an end to the war.”¹⁹¹ This inspired him to put his reputation on the line again, if it meant the possibility of his song being played on national television.

However, later in the season of the show, CBS allowed Seeger to return and play the entire song. Allegedly, the performance was scheduled for “the first show of the season and found objectionable.”¹⁹² Later in the year, the network decided to air the song, in an “obvious relaxation of censorship” standards.¹⁹³ Seeger returned in late February to play the song again. In contrast to his first performance, which was brightly lit, and had Seeger and the hosts making jokes and having the audience sing along, this new performance matched the more sinister style of the song. Standing on a stage so dark that all viewers can see is his head and characteristic sweater, Seeger plays the guitar and sings without a microphone.¹⁹⁴ There is no microphone stand or amplifier in front of him,

¹⁸⁹ Gent, 95.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Winkler, 129.

¹⁹² “CBS Comments on Seeger Censorship.” *The Los Angeles Times*. (Feb. 28, 1968). D18.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ “Pete Seeger Performance.” *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. (New York, NY: Columbia Broadcasting System, Feb. 25, 1968). Online clip.

nothing to separate him from the audience. Unlike other performances of Seeger's, he does not try to get the audience to sing along, instead choosing to perform alone. This mirrors the new style of protest song, with the audience listening to a more complicated song. "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" allowed Seeger to wrap his political convictions in an allegory that the audience likely picked up on, and agreed with, based on the applause Seeger receives at the end of his performance.

While Seeger was allowed to play the entire song, and it was shown on most stations across the country, the CBS station in Detroit cut the last, most objectionable verse. According to the station, they cut it "because it calls the President, by inference, a big fool" which was exactly Seeger's intention, though obviously it was not appreciated by everyone.¹⁹⁵ The Detroit station was the only one to censor the performance, which meant that Seeger's message did reach the wide audience he intended, and just as he predicted, soon after, there was a draw down of troops in Vietnam.

Seeger's performance on the Smothers Brothers show came at a pivotal point in the Vietnam War. On March 31st, 1968, just weeks after Seeger's performance of "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," President Johnson told the country "I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party as your President."¹⁹⁶ In the same speech, the President announced that he was "taking the first step to deescalate the conflict" by "substantially reducing" the number of hostilities.¹⁹⁷ In other words, the night that President Johnson announced that he would begin to remove troops from Vietnam, and

¹⁹⁵ "CBS Comments."

¹⁹⁶ Tom Wicker, "Johnson Says He Won't Run," *The New York Times*. (Mar. 31, 1968). A1.

¹⁹⁷ Lyndon Johnson. "Address to the Nation Announcing Steps To Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection," (Speech, White House, Washington D.C., Mar. 31, 1968).

start peace talks to try to bring an end to the war, was also the night that he informed America that his time as president was drawing to a close.

This move reflected President Johnson's popularity at the time. By August of 1967, his approval rating was at 39%, one of the lowest points it had been in his presidency.¹⁹⁸ This was a far fall for a president who had elected with a plurality of fifteen million votes and with public opinion polls that were almost entirely positive.¹⁹⁹ By 1968, few people supported President Johnson or his war, and this unpopularity was widespread enough that the president chose not to run for another term.

This unpopularity manifested itself in Seeger's performance. Opposition to the war was so high that not only was this blacklisted artist invited to perform on television, but also, outrage that he had been censored was widespread enough to have him invited back for another performance. Opposition to the war was so strong that people were willing to forgive the blacklist to hear Seeger play an anti-war protest song on national television. In addition, the distrust in the government and institutions of power was so high, that when Seeger took to the press to protest the censorship of his song, there was enough public outcry to enable Seeger to return to the show and play the song again.

President Johnson was reacting to this anger when he announced he would not be running again. The public outcry that brought Seeger back to television was the same that clued President Johnson in to his unpopularity. The incredible amount of dissent and anger around the Vietnam War had both forced President Johnson from office, and transformed Seeger from a blacklisted artist who would only be played on the smallest radio stations to a musician that people would fight for to ensure that he would not be

¹⁹⁸ Altschuler, 291.

¹⁹⁹ "L.B.J. and 1968." *The New York Times*. (Jan. 14, 1968). E16.

subject to censorship. The 1967 performance was a turning point in Seeger's career, and from this moment on, he began to build his reputation until he transformed into the American cultural institution he was when he died. Seeger had time and again shown his adaptability in front of an audience, knowing which songs to play to liven up a quiet audience, and how to weave together serious and humorous songs. Now, Seeger had a chance to showcase his wider adaptability as an artist, transforming his public persona and style of song to fit the current mold of protest songs. Once again, Seeger became a popular force for positive political and social change, and began to occupy the space of a popular, musical activist that he would inhabit for the rest of his working life.

Beyond Seeger's own transformation was the growing conviction, based on close to ten years of experience, that songs in and of themselves, were powerful agents of change. By the end of the 1960s, Seeger had watched the President quote a song he had helped write a speech trying to pass a major piece of legislation, and then seen that same president step down because of a popular uprising that he was a major part of. He had seen people gain peace and strength from music, and watched as people were influenced by both live and recorded music. He had seen music make a change in the way people approached social movements and issues, and had seen the inexplicable power music had on its own to spark societal change. These experiences, more than anything else, followed Seeger throughout his life, sustaining him during challenging times, and always pushed him to use music to affect a positive change.

“This Land was Made for You and Me”: Pete Seeger’s Musical and Political Legacies

“You sing it with us! We’ll give you the words.”²⁰⁰ –Pete Seeger

The day before the inauguration of President Barack Obama, a gigantic crowd lined up in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Thousands of people filled the space around the Reflecting Pool, and stretched all the way to the World War II Memorial, in the middle of the two mile long Washington Mall. They were there for the “We Are One” concert, one event in a weekend of inauguration festivities for the 2009 inauguration. The energy and excitement in the air was indicative of the new optimism in the country that was brought in by the election of President Obama, the nation’s first black president, and a politician who had inspired a feeling of hope across the country.

The concert had performances from some of the most popular musicians of the early 21st century, with Beyoncé, Bono, Stevie Wonder and John Mellencamp lending their talents. Several actors and public luminaries also volunteered their talents to read historical passages or give speeches.²⁰¹ Among the many performances was one by a man widely known to be the godfather of American folk music, Pete Seeger. Seeger took the stage with his grandson, Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, and Bruce Springsteen. Bruce Springsteen, a popular rock musician has many songs with socially conscious lyrics, in the tradition of the popular protest songs of the late 1960s. Springsteen and Seeger share a common goal of uniting people through music, and often use their songs as political tools. The collaboration between the artists made sense musically, as well as logistically.

²⁰⁰ Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen and Tao Rodriguez-Seeger. “This Land is Your Land.” (Washington D.C.: We are One, Jan. 18, 2009). Online clip.

²⁰¹ Tina Daunt, “Letting the trumpets, and electric guitars, herald Barack Obama,” *The Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 13, 2009).

Springsteen was the reason Seeger had agreed to come down for the inauguration. According to Seeger, Springsteen took care of transportation, lodging, and food, so that all Seeger had to do was memorize the six verses of “This Land is Your Land.”²⁰² Armed with his banjo and trademark flannel, Seeger stood before thousands of people, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and led the crowd in “This Land is Your Land,” a song written by his old friend Woody Guthrie in 1940. Originally written to counter “God Bless America,” the original song touched on the many beauties of America, as well as the poverty and inequality in the country. One verse of the song discussed the freedoms Americans enjoy, one of which was the freedom to disregard private property. Over the years, the most left-wing verses have been phased out of the song, and schoolchildren are left with an overwhelmingly positive oath to America that does not resemble Guthrie’s original idea. Guthrie himself noticed this towards the end of his life, and implored his son Arlo to write the left wing verses down so they could be preserved for prosperity.²⁰³

Though certain verses have been forgotten, the rest of the song has entered the public consciousness. Almost every American schoolchild knows the words, and has likely performed the song at some venue or another. On this day, the chorus of children behind Seeger sang along to the song, and eventually the audience of thousands was singing along to the familiar words. While the crowd tripped up on the largely unknown verses decrying private property and poverty, the roar of the group during the chorus was a powerful expression of the unity that can be created through songs.

At 90, Seeger still had his left-leaning views, and the passion and drive to speak out for what he believed in. He had no qualms singing a verse that ended, “as they stood

²⁰² “Pete Seeger on Music, Woody Guthrie, and Bruce Springsteen,” intv. Alec Wilkerson (Beacon, NY: Knopf, 2009) Online clip.

²⁰³ Ibid.

hungry/I stood there asking/Is this land made for you and me?”²⁰⁴ He also included one verse about a sign that said “Private Property” but since the other side “didn’t say nothing/That side was made for you and me.”²⁰⁵ These verses about equality and communal spaces fit with the general theme of the inauguration, which had free tickets to this concert and the swearing in ceremony, as well as neighborhood and community balls.

This song in particular was a powerful moment for an artist who had been brought before the House of Representatives and questioned about his political beliefs. It was a powerful moment for an artist who had experienced a government-inspired blacklist that nearly ended his career. The inclusion of the radical verses of “This Land is Your Land” showed that this was a new era of American history, one where all ideas could be shared without fear of government retribution.

Playing for the first black president was a powerful moment for an activist who had assisted in writing the seminal song of the civil rights movement. To play on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, which venerated a man who facilitated the end of slavery, and whose memorial was later the site of the 1963 March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech, connected Seeger’s activism to the past, and reminded him how far the country had come since 1963.

To play with a popular artist like Bruce Springsteen, who uses his fame to address issues of social importance, likely reminded Seeger of the new style of protest music, and the success that this socially-conscious music had enjoyed. To have a whole crowd of people, from the leader of the country, to an elementary school child, people of all races, ages, beliefs and backgrounds, to have a whole crowd of Americans, singing together, led

²⁰⁴ Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land,” *This Land is Your Land: The Asch Recordings Volume 1* © 1997, Smithsonian Folkways, SF 40100, Compact disc.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

by him, had to have reminded him of the innate power of song, and the beautiful things that can be achieved when people sing together.

Today Seeger is most remembered for his environmental activism, which he devoted his life to as the antiwar movements of the 1960s drew to a close. As his political activism waned, Seeger returned to his cabin on the river, and noticed how dirty the Hudson had become, how it was not a place his children could play or swim in. Seeger began to use his music and his newfound celebrity to raise awareness of the dirty river, and even worked to build a boat called the Clearwater, which would travel up and down the Hudson, playing small concerts and talking about the importance of cleaning up the river. Today, the Clearwater Folk Festival has grown to a massive concert, there are bills protecting waterways, and the Hudson is clean enough to swim in.

Seeger himself has become something of a cultural institution. The once-blacklisted artist is now considered the godfather of folk music, and his songs are sung in schools, churches, and at events across America. While this has been good for Seeger's legacy, it runs counter to his idea that "the worst thing you can do to a song is make it official."²⁰⁶ Since the 1960s, Seeger has become "official" and respected by people from all walks of life. His political beliefs that almost led to jail time have been smoothed over by time, and more than anything else, he became America's good-natured grandfather, with a passion for protecting the rivers.

While that may be how the majority of Americans perceive Seeger, the man himself has no intention of being seen this way. Given a big enough platform, he would have used it to push forward the ideals he had held dearly for his entire life. This can be

²⁰⁶ "Honoring Pete Seeger," *Kennedy Center Honors* (Washington D.C., The Kennedy Center, 1994). Online clip.

seen clearly in his performance at the inauguration. He could have taken the stage and sung the version of “This Land Is Your Land” that everyone knows. Instead, he included more radical verses that are lost from the general cannon, to challenge the “official” nature of the song, and of himself. Singing a verse about the need for more equality would not change society, but Seeger believed that even if he was not making a big impact, he would, as he said, “rather throw my weight, however small, on the side of what I think is right” in order to make a change.²⁰⁷

Until the day he died, Seeger lived the life of the radical young man who faced down powerful elected officials and refused to compromise his principles. He lived as the energetic song leader, running to different parts of the march to collect and play freedom songs. He lived as the angry musician, writing and playing critical songs, even when those in power did not approve. Above all else, he lived as the man who loved nothing more than encouraging a crowd to sing together, and believing in the power that held.

Seeger spent the majority of his life encouraging people to sing together, believing in music’s ability to unite people, to give them strength, and ultimately, change history. His life, his work, and most importantly, his music, show that it is possible for art and music on their own to affect change in society. Folk songs have political roots, and they have accompanied the great moments in history for a reason. They can make a change, they can alter history, and they are, above everything else, powerful tools.

²⁰⁷ Seeger, *Incomplete Folk Singer*, 253.

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