

BOOK REVIEW

“Talkin’ Union” : A Review of Recent Biographies on Folk Singers Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger

Reviewed by Roger House*

BOOKS REVIEWED:

Will Kaufman. *Woody Guthrie: American Radical*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Allan M. Winkler. *“To Everything There Is a Season”: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Throughout United States history, the folk singer has played a role in the articulation of humanitarian reform campaigns. From spreading the spirituals of 19th century abolitionists, to composing the ballads of 20th century factory workers, the folk singer has promoted the ideals of a better life and equal society. In some cases, the songs have become part of the canon of national music such as “John Brown’s Body,” “We Shall Overcome,” and “This Land is Your Land,” which reflects public sentiment during an era of hard-hitting ballads, the Great Depression. In the 1930s, the folk singer spoke out on behalf of grassroots campaigns for the unemployed and the homeless, and for the employed seeking the right to bargain collectively. Two singers that left a mark on this decade—and afterward—were Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

In these current times of economic troubles, when the political debate in the U.S. is largely framed by conservative pundits—and the progressive singer is denied access—it is heartening to see the recently published biographies of these folk music icons: *Woody Guthrie: American Radical* by Will Kaufman and “*To Everything There is a Season*” : *Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* by Allan M.

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Winkler.

Guthrie and Seeger were among the most important contributors of music to the American Left from the 1930s onward. Through their songs, they helped to create the heroes, myths, and symbols for economic and racial justice campaigns. Through their actions, they established a pathway for artists engaged with the pressing issues of their time. This essay will consider their activities during the depression, a decade when they came to maturity professionally. The economic crisis gripped the industrialized world between 1929 and 1941, with up to 25 percent of the U.S. workforce cast aside. The collapse sparked militant protests as citizens normally supportive of capitalism lost faith in the economic system.

Such was the climate when Guthrie stepped to the forefront of writing and performing for working-class audiences. Kaufman portrays Guthrie as the voice of an aggrieved segment of white America, the dispossessed farm workers of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas, among other states. Woodrow Wilson Guthrie (1912-1967) was raised in a conservative, middle-class family in the town in Okemah, Oklahoma. His father was a real estate speculator whose fortunes rose and fell with the oil industry boom and bust during World War I and the 1920s. The family, however, faced personal tragedy and financial insecurity that sensitized the young Guthrie to the perils of the less fortunate.

Kaufman chronicled Guthrie's evolving political outlook in the years of depression and war. In 1933, a sustained drought left the Midwest mired in an environmental disaster known as the "Dust Bowl." Over the years, the drying up of farmland forced thousands of farmers to relocate, and many headed to the state of California. There, they were met with hostility by state authorities dealing with the fall-out of local unemployment and homelessness. The migrating "Okies" were often treated as an invading horde of inferior whites rather than as victimized citizens.

In 1939, Guthrie moved to California after a stint as an itinerant laborer. He left Oklahoma imbued with the ideals of the "prairie socialism tradition" that championed poor midwestern and southern farmers against the powers of landlords, merchants, bankers and lawyers. Such sentiments were an extension of late-19th century populist reactions to the agents of capital as poor whites dealt with their weak economic position and failed self-reliance mythology.

Guthrie found work as the host of a left-leaning radio program on KFVD-Los Angeles, and as a columnist for *People's World*, a communist newspaper in San Francisco. He cultivated the persona of a displaced "Okie" farmer-laborer, and

composed popular “Dust Bowl” ballads on the Okie experience such as “Dusty Old Dust,” which commented on the effects of the drought:

And that dusty old dust storm blowed so black,
 The preacher could not read a word of his text
 And he fold his specs and he took up a collection,
 Said, “So long, it’s been good to know yuh.” (Kaufman 10)

In California, Guthrie was introduced to the teachings of communism by friends in Hollywood. He was drawn to its vision of social equality through class struggle and, like many leftists at the time, came to embrace the Soviet Union under Stalin. His allegiance was solidified when he moved to New York City and became involved with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA).

Among folk music enthusiasts in New York, Guthrie was appreciated as a product of the rural communities of the U.S. His music provided a window on the experiences of people working on the farms and in the factories of Middle America for urban audiences. To the cultural radicals of the NY Left, Guthrie spoke in the authentic vernacular of the people. Their attempts to communicate with such audiences encountered obstacles of class and region that impeded trust. Over the years, the efforts to compose music through organizations such as the American Music League and the Composers’ Collective—often with little regard for the real preferences of audiences—found little support outside of political circles. Kaufman chronicles Guthrie’s output of songs and writings for cultural outlets of the CPUSA. In reaction to the deplorable conditions of the urban poor, most notably in New York’s Skid Row district, he crafted the poem “I’ll Not Beg”: “I won’t beg nobody / I just won’t go abegging / I ain’t that lost” (Kaufman 34).

The Left’s response to depression and pending war vacillated as the political situation shifted domestically and internationally. Its various positions were reflected in the propaganda songs of Guthrie and other singers, such as the young Pete Seeger. Most segments of the Left—such as liberal reformers, trade unionists, humanitarian activists, and some socialists and communists—endorsed the social democratic policies of the Democratic Party under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

However, Kaufman shows that Guthrie, along with many socialists and communists, thought the New Deal measures too little, too late, and capable of co-opting the sense of despair believed necessary to bring about revolutionary

change. His affiliation with the CPUSA made him beholden to the positions of the Communist International, the world association of parties largely under the control of the Soviet Union. The CPUSA lobbied for the interests of the Soviet Union both directly and indirectly by leading, participating in, and sometimes infiltrating established organizations, even when its positions were disconnected from the pragmatic interests of those organizations.

Guthrie wrote numerous songs that built on his support of the policies of the Comintern in the early 1940s. For example, he composed "Union Maid"—co-written with Pete Seeger—during an initiative to highlight class conflict and the benefits of unified action in the industrial workplace. He wrote "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?," to promote the Soviet position for non-intervention in the World War: "Now the guns of Europe roar as they have so oft before/They butcher and they kill, Uncle Sammy foots the bill" (Kaufman 56). After Germany invaded the Soviet Union, he penned lyrics that supported the Soviet desire for the U.S. to intervene: "Stick a bayonet in Hitler's rump/Gonna open up that second front today" (Kaufman 100). Most memorably, he wrote the anthem that articulated the democratic creed of U.S. society, "This Land is Your Land."

Kaufman wants to restore Guthrie as a central figure in U.S. radical music in the 1930s and 1940s. In this effort, the professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Central Lancashire, England, and the author of three earlier books, is successful. The book is well-researched and written and provides a rich context of social and cultural history. It places Guthrie together with other influential political singers and bands of the era such as Leadbelly, Paul Robeson, and the Almanac Singers.

The book includes a selected discography and filmography with useful information. Among the Guthrie recordings in reissue are *The Asch Recordings* on the Smithsonian Folkways label, a four CD set of songs recorded with the acclaimed producer Moses Asch between 1944 and 1949. Volume 3 in the series, *Hard Travelin'*, offers a wonderful display of Guthrie's songwriting and performance, including "Hard Travelin'," "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You (World War II version)," "Ludlow Massacre," and "Union Maid."

The strength of Kaufman's work is putting the life and songs of Guthrie in a historical context, which enhances the meaning in the songs and writings, and fosters a strong narrative. One of the weaknesses of the biography is the lack of a critical consideration of the Left's debate over its allegiance to the Soviet Union. The biography adds to a growing scholarship on the significance of Woody Guthrie.

Recent studies include *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* by Mark Allan Jackson, and *The Life, Work, and Thought of Woody Guthrie: A Critical Assessment*, edited by John Partington. Jackson provides a literary study of Guthrie's songs and explores the social commentary on subjects such as racial violence, famous outlaws, unions, and the depression. Partington edits a collection of essays by scholars examining the importance of Guthrie's activism, writings and songs, and impact on U.S. and international folk culture.

Guthrie, in the prime of life and career, suffered the debilitating neurological condition of Huntington's disease. Over time, the disease eroded his physical and psychological abilities and eventually led to his premature death in 1967. In addition to his creative legacy, Guthrie left behind a son, Arlo, who became a successful folk singer during the revivals of the 1960s and afterward.

Allan Winkler's biography of Pete Seeger chronicles his public life, music, and association with reform campaigns as artist and organizer for over 60 years. It portrays a man who pursued causes of the Left with missionary zeal and largely kept his own counsel. Winkler suggests that Seeger has an emotional reticence spawned by his privileged, but problematic upbringing: he grew up receiving sporadic parental affection.

Peter Seeger, born May 3, 1919, was the only child of the upper-class New York family of Charles and Constance Seeger. He was provided with the benefits of his class such as social networks, private schools, and Harvard University. His father was a pianist and music professor; his mother was a violinist. They divorced when Seeger was eight years old, and he was shuttled to their respective homes on Central Park, as well as to the homes of relatives, and to boarding schools. Charles would remarry to Ruth Crawford and have two other children, Peggy and Mike Seeger, both of who became respected folk singers in their own right (Winkler 4-6).

Seeger's social position afforded him the luxury of choices in life, and he chose the way of the rebel. At 19, he joined the Young Communist League influenced no doubt by the political sympathies of his father. During the 1910s, Charles Seeger, the son of a businessman, was involved with the promotion of union activism within the rarified setting of a university classical music department. He promoted, for example, the radical Industrial Workers of the World at the University of California, Berkeley. During the depression, he worked with the American Music League and the Composers' Collective.

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Pete Seeger was introduced to the folk music community by way of his father's contacts. He made arrangements for Seeger to work with a family friend, Alan Lomax, in Washington D.C. Lomax, along with his father, John, collected the songs that laid the foundation of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. In the 1930s, Lomax took the banjo-playing Seeger under wing and provided him with access to the vast repository of U.S. folk music. He gave Seeger a debut to a community of political singers such as Leadbelly, Burl Ives, Josh White, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Woody Guthrie.

Lomax introduced Seeger to Guthrie at a "Grapes of Wrath" benefit concert for migrant workers. It was held at the Forrest Theater in New York City in 1940. At this point, Guthrie was an established folk singer and Seeger was a promising talent trying to make a name. Lomax encouraged the two artists to co-author a book of songs on the dispossessed, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*. The project was completed in 1940 but took 26-years to publish due to publisher fears of retaliation by conservative censors (Winkler 20).

Guthrie, older than Seeger by seven years, was a mentor artistically and socially. He convinced Seeger to leave the inbred circle of Eastern elites and discover the factory towns and farms areas of the heartland. The two men drove across the country in Guthrie's car. Within weeks, however, the capricious Guthrie found the monkish Seeger difficult to understand, saying, "... he doesn't look at girls, he doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke. Fellow's weird" (Winkler 21).

Guthrie taught Seeger to be comfortable with working-class audiences. They composed songs such as "66 Highway Blues" and "Union Maid" for worksite and tavern audiences. Seeger returned to New York City and teamed up with two vocalists to form the Almanac Singers, a folk group dedicated to music of conscience. The band, which included Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, and other artists, including Guthrie, recorded albums and performed at political functions in New York.

In the Postwar years of economic abundance, the folk community was concerned with different issues than the class themes of the older generation. Singers like Guthrie, while highly regarded, were out of favor with the youths of the 1950s and 1960s. Seeger, however, served as a bridge between the generations through his presence in festivals, TV shows, publications, and reform efforts. Winkler tracks Seeger's involvement with campaigns against nuclear armaments, the war in Vietnam, environmental pollution, and student rights. He also composed the song that became a soundtrack of the African American civil rights

movement, “We Shall Overcome.”

In addition, Seeger was a co-founder of *People's Songs* and *Sing Out!*, late-1940s journals that became invaluable repositories of American folk songs. He was a central figure in the popular 1950s folk group, the Weavers. The group included Lee Hays, a member of the Almanac Singers, Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman. One of its most popular songs was “If I Had a Hammer”:

Well, I got a hammer,
And I got a bell,
And I got a song.
It's the hammer of justice,
It's the bell of freedom,
It's a song about love between all of my brothers. (Winkler 58)

Seeger's activities drew the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative arm of the U.S. House of Representatives. It was established in 1938 to look into alleged subversive activities of organizations with ties to facism and communism, and remained in operation until 1975. While there was ground for concern about subversive elements in U.S. institutions, the conservative politicians on HUAC blew a relatively minor issue out of proportion for political leverage. It ignored the murderous activities of racial terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, for example, and used its powers to target political enemies like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Programs and the American Civil Liberties Union. It encouraged a public hysteria as a tactic to justify attacking the Left with impunity.

Seeger was one of the many artists to come under investigation for his work with leftist organizations. Seeger, however, stood up to the Committee in a public hearing in 1955. As a result, he was charged with showing contempt of Congress, tried and convicted in federal court in 1961. He was sentenced to serve one year in prison, blacklisted from public performances, and locked out of the entertainment industry. While free on bail, his conviction was overturned by the federal appeals court in 1962 (Winkler 84-85). Winkler describes how Seeger reentered public life in the aftermath of the appeals court victory. He resumed performances in concerts, festivals, television shows, and albums. At the same time, he continued to promote social democratic causes into his late

years.

The biography adds to a small number of works on this iconic figure in folk music history, including the recent republication of David Dunaway's *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger*. The Dunaway biography was first published in 1981 by McGraw Hill and updated as a companion volume to a 3-part radio series. The series was broadcast on over 230 stations of the Public Radio International network in 2008. While the Dunaway book is valuable, the Winkler study is the preferred biography. It benefits from Winkler's interview with Seeger, distillation of his writings, and expertise in U.S. social and political history. He is a distinguished professor of history at Miami University in Ohio, and the author or editor of 10 books, including *Franklin Roosevelt and the Making of Modern America* and *Home Front U.S.A.: American during World War II*.

The book, however, does cry out for a discography. It attempts to compensate for the omission with a complicated internet address to an iTunes playlist. This is an unacceptable option when one considers the cultural importance of Seeger. Fortunately, his work is available on CD from Smithsonian Folkways, such as *If I Had a Hammer: Songs of Hope and Struggle*, *American Favorite Ballads: The Complete Collection*, vols. 1-5, and *American Industrial Ballads*.

The albums showcase Seeger's interpretation and preservation of ballads and work songs. For example, among the union songs in *American Industrial Ballads* is a cover of "Raggedy, Raggedy," composed by troubadour John Handcox to rally black and white sharecroppers in Arkansas in the 1930s. Seeger was the subject of the radio series by David Dunaway and more recently the excellent film *Seeger: The Power of Song* by producer Jim Brown. The film was broadcast on the U.S. public television series *American Masters* in 2010.

In closing, the two biographies are worthy contributions to the field of American studies, and in particular to the role of folk music in social movements. They are useful resources for college and university courses, although in different ways for different audiences. The study of Guthrie, for example, is probably more accessible to professors of modern U.S. social and cultural history, American Studies, and American literature with a focus on songs as oral poetry. It could also serve as a reading material for graduate courses. The biography on Seeger, however, is appropriate for undergraduate courses in modern U.S. social and cultural history, American Studies, and for general readers.

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