

Heroes and Villains

Pete Seeger

The mesmerizing folk troubadour was a target of the red-hunters

August 1955: It was hot and crowded in Room 1703 of the Foley Square federal building in New York City when a genial young folk singer named Pete Seeger

refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his associations with communists and communist fronts. He would not name names, expose subversion, or speak about anything other than his music.

Rather than invoke the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination, which he said would make him look guilty of something, Seeger stood on his First Amendment rights. "I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs," Seeger told the visiting congressmen, adding: "I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this."

For his refusal to "sing" to HUAC, Seeger was charged with contempt of Congress, eventually found guilty by a jury and sentenced to a year in prison. (Actually, it was 10 one-year terms, to be served concurrently; the charges were thrown out a year later.) More importantly, his career was sidelined when the entertainment industry blacklisted him for a decade. Seeger was in his 30s, a mesmerizing performer at the peak of his career.

Today, Pete Seeger is fondly remembered for music he wrote or adapted that has become part of the American songbook — Good Night Irene; Where Have All the Flowers Gone?; If I Had a Hammer; Turn, Turn, Turn; We Shall Overcome ...

Seeger was practically born a leftie in 1919. By 17 he was a member of the Young Communist League. He joined the CPUSA in 1942, and stayed until 1949. In 1941, his contributions to the anti-war, anti-draft, anti-capitalist record album "Songs for John Doe" earned him the enmity of anti-communists. (Sample line: "It wouldn't be much thrill to die for Du Pont in Brazil.") Time Magazine said the record promoted the "mendacious Moscow tune." Harvard Professor Carl Friedrich warned that Seeger's brand of folk music was "strictly subversive and

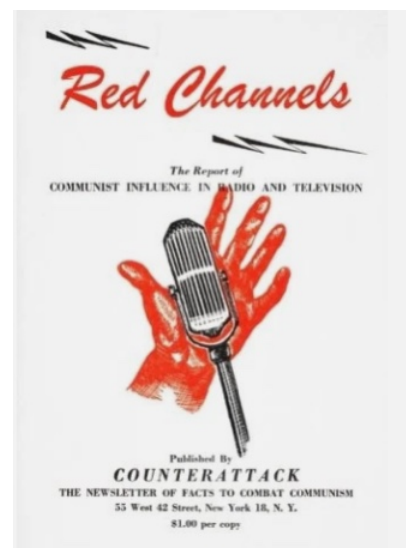


illegal” and “a matter for the attorney general.” It was reported that President Roosevelt, upon encountering the record, was underwhelmed: He surmised (correctly) that few people would even hear it. Later that year, when the USSR turned on its former Nazi allies, the CPUSA abruptly dropped its pacifist stance and got behind the war effort. Most of the remaining copies of “Songs for John Doe” were destroyed.

Returning from World War II service, Seeger helped create People’s Songs, promoting American folk music and social justice. He campaigned for Henry Wallace in 1948, and continued to work and sing on behalf of civil rights, racial equality and world peace.

Seeger was among 151 show business folk listed in “Red Channels,” a slender paperback published in 1950 that aimed to expose broadcast entertainers’ links to communist or communist-front organizations. The book’s cover featured a red hand grasping at a microphone. In his book on the red scare, “The Great Fear,” author Stefan Kanfer called the book “the most effective blacklist in the history of show business.” Fred Friendly, a producer at CBS News, recalled discussing a hire with a network vice president in 1951 who “glanced at the top name and asked, ‘Is he in the book?’ I started to ask a secretary for a telephone directory when the vice-president pulled open a drawer of his desk and said, ‘This is the book we live by.’ The book, of course, was ‘Red Channels.’”

The links between those listed and the suspect organizations were weak, but they had the patina of scrupulous accuracy. In Seeger’s case, there were 13 citations, including entertaining at a Communist Party event in 1946 and a Wallace for President campaign rally in 1948. The listings documented the sources, from government investigations to the



communist Daily Worker, including dates and page numbers making it all look official. A glossary at the end explained how groups like “American Youth for Democracy” and “People’s Songs” were thinly disguised communist propaganda assets.

Dozens of entertainers lost work because of “Red Channels.”

PETE SEEGER

Folk Singer

	Reported as:
People’s Songs	National Chairman. <i>Bulletin of People’s Songs</i> , 11/47.
Progressive Citizens of America	Entertainer, “Show Time For Wallace.” <i>Daily Worker</i> , 4/5/48, p. 12.
Wallace for President Campaign	Led singing at rallies. <i>Daily Worker</i> , 10/18/48, p. 7; <i>Daily Worker</i> , 9/13/48, p. 6.
Communist Party	Entertainer. Peter V. Cacchione Supper for benefit of Community Club No. 2, Thomas

Here is an archived page from “Red Channels” with part of Pete Seeger’s entry.

For Pete Seeger, the charismatic pied piper of the folk movement who had long been a target of the red-hunters, this was just another bump along the hobo road. He performed when he could with the Weavers at protest rallies, such as one back in 1948 for an expelled Syracuse University student organizer, Irving Feiner.

Syracuse would become an anti-communist hotbed. In 1951, the Un-American Activities Committee of American Legion Post 41 took aim at Seeger and the Weavers. In the inaugural issue of the post's publication Spotlight, John Dungey wrote that he started the newsletter after listening to a Weavers record featuring Pete Seeger, of People's Songs and People's Artists. "Both organizations have been cited as subversive by the U.S. government," Dungey wrote. "I quote from a Government publication: 'All of the productions of People's Songs, Inc., follow the Communist Party line as assiduously as do the people behind the organization.'" " Dungey said Legion Post 41 passed a resolution "which in substance asked that all Radio, Television stations, Music stores, and 'Juke' box distributors withdraw all Weaver records from their libraries."

The result? "These people were then contacted and we wish to congratulate them," wrote Dungey, "for without exception all the local radio and television stations, as well as the coin machine operators cooperated. This my friends is the kind of cooperation that is most heartening and this is how we can fight Communist fronts."

The group had less success in November 1954 when it put pressure on board members of the New York State Historical Association to drop Pete Seeger and other blacklisted artists as feature writers for the New York Folklore Quarterly. Spotlight noted in January 1955 that "only two of the twenty-two who were warned of the conditions in their organizations bothered to answer the letters sent them." Not only that: the next issue included another listee's byline.

In 1960, the [San Diego](#) school board told Seeger he could not play a scheduled concert at a local high school unless he signed an oath pledging he would not promote a communist agenda or overthrowing the government. Seeger refused, the ACLU obtained an [injunction](#), and the concert went on as planned. Fifty years later, the San Diego School District apologized.

Seeger never gave up his musical activism, protesting the war in Vietnam, promoting disarmament, environmentalism and human rights. In a 1995 interview he delivered one of his characteristic provocations. "I still call myself a communist," he said, "because communism is no more what Russia made of it than Christianity is what the churches make of it."

Pete Seeger died in 2014, age 94, a beloved figure to most Americans (if they only knew...). He had become a cultural icon, worthy of appearing on a U.S. postage stamp, which happened in 2022. (see top)

Years after FDR's death in 1945, following Seeger's trial in 1955, Eleanor Roosevelt, living at Hyde Park, expressed her doubts about the folk-singer's culpability. "He lives not far from me near Beacon, New York," she said, "and is loved by many people, young and old, who have enjoyed his music. The accusation against him was that he had performed before very questionable, even Communist, groups — although I doubt that Seeger, like most performers, could list the innumerable people before whom he has played and sung."

No doubt. Seeger was an indiscriminate troubadour. "I have sung in hobo jungles, and I have sung for the Rockefellers," he told the HUAC panel. "I am proud that I have never refused to sing for anybody."

END

