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Almanac Songs and Singers: Protest, *Détournement* and Incorporation

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Abstract: *This article deals with the practice of the radical leftist singing group The Almanac Singers (whose members included Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, among others) from their earliest anti-capitalist and anti-war songs to their later, more liberal contributions to negotiating a unified (war) effort against Fascism. Issues addressed herein include assessing strategies in the practices of musical performers who have political agendas, investigating the usefulness of Guy Debord's terminology of détournement ("turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself"), as well as the Birmingham School's set of terms: commodification, familiarization and incorporation. The article progresses through a lyrics and performance analysis, and contextualizes these with attempts to situate The Almanac Singers culturally and politically in the turbulent public and clandestine discourse climate of the US in the late '30s and early '40s.*

Keywords: *The Almanac Singers, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, 1940s, Communism, agit-prop, protest songs, song lyrics*

This article examines the recording and performance practice of the radical leftist singing group the Almanac Singers, from their earliest anti-capitalist and anti-war songs ("Ballad of October 16th", "Plow Under" and "C for Conscription") to their later, more liberal contributions to negotiating a unified (war) effort against Fascism ("Dear Mr. President" and "Reuben James"). These recordings were all released within a very brief time span, but this particular moment in the history of radical activities in the USA was

extremely volatile, because of the developments in the shifting alliances of World War II and the sudden drawing in of the US in this global conflict after Pearl Harbor. The focus of the present article is therefore to situate the practice of the original Almanac Singers vis-à-vis political and ideological currents and countercurrents in the public and popular discourse arenas in the years of 1940 to 1942.

The original Almanac Singers group was a loose performance collective (founded in late 1940) whose key songwriting members included Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, among others, but also black members such as Josh White, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, as well as female contributors such as Sis Cunningham and Bess Lomax Hawes. The group's original recording career comprised the years 1941-42, during which time five albums were recorded, only three of which, however, had song content of topical political interest. The group chose their name inspired by the traditional function of a farmer's almanac, such as the popular and widespread *Daily Almanac*; namely to provide sound advice in times of need for people who could not necessarily afford to or even had the option of consulting a doctor or another professional expert ("If you want to know what's good for the itch, or unemployment, or Fascism, you have to look in your Almanac", as one unidentified member remarked as explanation for the metaphorical aspect of the group's name (Hays 86)). One critic simply glosses the use of the word almanac in the group name thus: "In other words, the primary function of the Almanacs was that of propaganda" (Denisoff 123). This may be an oversimplification, but undoubtedly the agenda of consciousness-raising and labor organization was openly intended and repeatedly declared as the group's *raison d'être*. The targeted audience for the group was always primarily working men and women, in particular those already organized in unions, as well as those who could possibly be persuaded to join a labor union. The group's propaganda strategies were therefore always tailored towards appealing to groups and individuals representing anti-capitalist countercurrents in American society.

Issues addressed in what follows will include assessing strategies in the practices of musical performers, such as the Almanacs, who have leftist political or propaganda agendas, applying Guy Debord's terminology of *détournement* (here defined as "turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself", cf. Holt 252), as well as the Birmingham School's set of terms: commodification, familiarization and incorpora-

tion (see for instance Hebdige 92-99).[1] One can in fact claim that the Almanacs were practicing *détournement* from their very inception through the *bricolage* (a subcultural process of de- and subsequent re-contextualization of an object or sign) of a name from a trusted source of folk wisdom such as the almanac.

As we shall see, other instances of *bricolage* and role-play can be identified in the group's practice. *Détournement* as an overall rhetorical-political strategy could also be framed as an attempt to captivate the repressed feelings of a specific group, and offering them a way to enter into dialogue with the oppressive mainstream culture without compromising or surrendering the feeling of being different, and representing a subversive countercurrent in society. In the case of the Almanacs, this mainstream culture was figured in their lyrics universe as a perversion of the American Dream of the "pursuit of Happiness" in a competitive capitalist setting, where the strong survive and the underprivileged and disenfranchised suffer and perish. This skewed American Dream was critiqued subtly, first for being too isolationist and parochial in comparison with the Almanacs' proposed internationalism, secondly for being too violent in comparison with the ideals of universal pacifism, and thirdly for being too ruthlessly capitalist and monopolistic in comparison with ideals of a fairer distribution of the material goods generated by hard labor (despite this occurring in a capitalist economy) among the classes.

The argument of the present article progresses through analyses of lyrics and recorded performances, and contextualizes these with attempts to situate the Almanac Singers culturally and politically in the turbulent public and clandestine discourse climate of the US in the late '30s and early '40s. A mixed-race group with clear Communist ties could not escape scrutiny and interference, so the role of the FBI in blackening the reputation of the

1 The argument in the following is not that only left-wing opinions qualifiy as making music political. Obviously, the history of popular and folk music is filled with less openly leftist musical statements that also qualify as political, often in connection with specific (partisan) issues and practices, and equally there is an abundance of overtly right-wing political musical statements. Likewise, the argument here is not that radical political music cannot be simultaneously commercial and popular. That was indeed the case in the US in the 1960s (and true in Scandinavia in the 1970s, too). But the Almanacs were never commercial or popular with a mass market – the Weavers were, but they were not radically political. It is also true that much commercial music uses a *détournement* strategy, or as other critical schools would term it, double-voices successfully. Much post-modern culture, whether books, films or music construct a dual audience for itself – one that consumes happily without much afterthought, and one that enjoys meta-referentiality, intertextual play, etc.

Almanac Singers is also a matter that must be addressed. In this particular dynamics the representatives of the dominant culture would be looking for acts and statements that could be read as univocally subversive, and by implication punishable as sedition. This would be a state sanctioned way of blocking an ideological countercurrent in society from expressing itself. As we shall see, *détournement* is a strategy that is well suited to double-voice countercurrent sentiments by masquerading as mainstream (for instance 'patriotic') discourse statements, while in reality maintaining a radical, subversive rhetoric at the same time.

The most convenient way to tell the background story to the Almanac Singers is through the figure of Pete Seeger, one of the founding members of the group, and until his death in January 2014 at the age of 94 a vibrant and active figure in the music scene, as well as in oppositional, grass-roots movements of the twenty-first century. Seeger became the one constant member of all recording incarnations of the Almanac Singers, and eventually the main vocalist and most prominent songwriter for the group, only rivaled in importance by the presence of Woody Guthrie as a group member, albeit for a brief stint.

Pete Seeger grew up in comfortable circumstances, being of artistic and intellectual stock (his father Charles was a musicologist and his mother Constance was a violinist), and as one source puts it: "Both sides of his family reflected a legacy of Yankee intellectual pacifism. When his political views forced Charles to leave his faculty position at Berkeley, the family moved back East" (Bromberg and Fine 1140). Here we can thus situate the roots of the first central countercurrent present in Seeger's ideological constitution: that of pacifism.

Besides his pacifist leanings, Pete Seeger's father was in fact a Communist sympathizer, and for much of his youth Pete was too, for instance during his brief stay at Harvard in the mid-1930s (he left before turning 20), as well as in his early music career in New York. "During this time [1940] Seeger officially joined the Communist Party of the U.S. (CPUSA). It was only gradually that Seeger disengaged from the party, long after many had recognized the dangers of Stalinism. Even during the Hitler-Stalin pact, Seeger continued to support the party line vocally, singing antiwar songs critical of President Franklin D. Roosevelt until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941" (Bromberg and Fine 1140). The Communist inclination, which especially the young Seeger evinces, constitutes the sec-

ond main countercurrent visible throughout his practice as a propagandist entertainer: that of anti-capitalist, internationalist convictions of solidarity between members of the same class, regardless of nationality and traditional territorial (state sanctioned) boundaries.

Seeger's initial identification with the party line within the US Communist Party is one thing; however, Seeger's persistence in remaining a member of the party is perhaps hard to comprehend. It can as a matter of fact be explained rather differently than as a conviction of the infallibility of the party line. According to Allan M. Winkler's biography of Seeger, *"To Everything There is a Season": Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, the young man was never entirely at ease with the party line, and generally of a philosophical persuasion that made him favor observation and reflection rather than direct political action (12-13). It is thus possible that it was mainly a lack of decisive action to deselect his membership that kept him so long on the party list.

Nonetheless, his early recordings with Millard Lampell and Lee Hays (and occasionally Josh White), under the name of the Almanac Singers, show Seeger very much following the Communist Party line of international working class solidarity over nationalist interest, and as a consequence a resistance to armament and conscription, which was seen as a simple ploy of international capitalism to exploit the working classes to maximize the profits of J.P. Morgan and others. The political system of the US was regarded as being in the pockets of monopoly capital, and legislation such as the Selective Service Act of 1940 was considered state assisted violence against the conscripts' rights to refuse to bear arms against other working class men of foreign nations (especially the USSR), or even direct murder. This is a distinct minority view at the time, and one that dangerously aligns the Communist line with that of other non-interventionist currents of the time, even those of American fascist sympathizers with Germany and Japan, and of course more traditional liberalist non-interventionist ideology.

The very first Almanac Singers recordings thus express a double countercurrent ideology: one that combines the minority sentiment of pacifism vis-à-vis one's fellow man as a general philosophical principle, with an outright solidarity with fellow working class members in other countries (that might coincidentally be political and territorial enemies of the USA). Such a position of rhetorically advocating dual countercurrent status (i.e. both communist and pacifist) would at best be a minority option in the US at any point in time (after all the constitution of the US can hardly be said

to encourage a turning of the other cheek as the recommended strategy in the quest for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness), but in times of war such rhetoric would actually technically be punishable by law as sedition.

President Roosevelt was the main target of these early Almanac songs, as in Lampell's "Ballad of October 16th", where parts of the lyrics run:

> Franklin Roosevelt told the people how he felt
> We damned near believed what he said
> He said, "I hate war, and so does Eleanor
> But we won't be safe 'till everybody's dead."
> […]
> now I'm wearing khaki jeans and eating army beans
> And I'm told that J. P. Morgan loves me so
> […]
> now the government foots the bill
> Gives me clothes and feeds me swill
> Gets me shot and puts me underground six feet.

Not only is Roosevelt depicted as a liar and propagandist, but also as an active participant in the postulated genocide of the working class. The full government apparatus works for J.P. Morgan, and the only possible outcome for a soldier is death.

Other songs on the first Almanac Singers album of three 78RPM discs, titled *Songs for John Doe* (released in May 1941) include "C for Conscription" which uses the form and genre of a blue yodel, a la Jimmie Rodgers' "T for Texas" to state the very simple sentiment that Congress and lobbyists on Capitol Hill had cooked up the Conscription Bill to murder young men who desired nothing more than to stay at home in the country ("even sleeping in a holler log"), as well as "Plow Under" which compares the idea of sending Americans to war with the hated practice of another Roosevelt program, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, instituted in 1933, which reduced the number of hogs brought to market by a quarter and also gave money to farmers who agreed to plowing down already planted cotton acreage. The National Farmers Union strongly opposed this bill, and for farmers and farm workers the practice looked like wanton waste of good products, and furthermore seemed to be designed to create scarcity by driving up prices, thus hurting consumers as much as benefiting producers. In the lyrics of "Plow Down" these lines were particularly anti-war and anti-Roosevelt:

Remember when the AAA
Killed a million hogs a day?
Instead of hogs it's men today.
Plow the fourth one under.
[…]
Now the politicians rant
A boy's no better than a cotton plant
But we are here to say you can't
Plow the fourth one under.

Again the accusation is that it is deliberate government policy to cull the population of working class youth, and that only party activists are there to protest and defy this practice. The record is in sum a piece of radical Communist agitation, but also one that could potentially garner general populist support in its condemnation of wastefulness and big Government control over the individual. As Serge Denisoff puts it in his classic article on the Almanac Singers: "The overall theme of these folk-styled songs – exhibiting little subtlety – was that the United States government had set upon a program of sacrificing a large number of American lives." (25) Perhaps Denisoff underestimates the subtlety of the early Almanacs slightly, but he is correct in diagnosing the sentiments as distinctly confrontational, and unsophisticated as rhetorical underpinnings for a countercurrent ideological position. More sophisticated strategies of partial complicity were required in the immediate future for the Almanacs and their *détournement* of the dominant current of pro-war rhetoric.

The first Almanacs album was recorded in March and released in May 1941, by which time the core members of the group were living in a communal house, affectionately known as "Almanacs House" (Hawes 42), or more accurately a string of large, cheap apartments in a tenement building in Greenwich Village (located first on 12th Street and 4th Avenue, later in a second incarnation, after September 1941, on 10th Street and 6th (Cohen 29-31)), where the large living room spaces would double as performance venues used for events which the group dubbed "hootenannies" (a ticket for which cost 35 cent (Cohen 32)). Much of the songwriting and the political discussions of the group took place in one or another of the kitchen spaces in the "House". Betsy Lomax Hawes describes in her autobiography how even the planning of which members would perform on a given night – and where (since the group quickly became so popular that they were able to

book two or three venues on a weekend night, and therefore had to split up into smaller units) would take considerable time and effort. Even worse would be the repertoire discussions, often fueled by changes in current events, the party line, or even minute deliberations over what type of audience the group would be playing in front of (Hawes 41-2). As Seeger more and more became the dominant ideologue of the group, his choices of rhetorical strategies of apparent accommodation determined the group's continued relevance as an oppositional countercurrent to the general capitalist and increasingly patriotic dominant discourse and ideological current.[2]

The Almanac Singers' second album *Talking Union* (July 1941) saw the group shift their political focus away from anti-conscription and pacifist songs. Geo-political events had forced the group to change their tack on this point: Hitler's June 22 invasion of the Soviet Union meant that the anti-war songs that had been so effective in May were no longer in accordance with Communist Party policies, and the political discourse in the US at large no longer afforded even a limited space for anti-war sentiments of the kind contained in the lyrics of *Songs for John Doe*. The group thus went from dual countercurrent messages of pacifism and international solidarity to a simpler single countercurrent strategy: that of supporting and encouraging unionism at home. In fact the record company, Keynote Records (who had originally insisted that *Songs for John Doe* came out under a separate imprint, Almanac Records (Cohen 29)), in an acute attack of cold feet destroyed the entire back catalogue of that album. In retrospect this turned out to be a wise move, as the FBI came calling a few months later to confiscate the recordings and interrogate the people responsible for its seditious contents, by which time it was too late for the Bureau to collect any physical evidence.

Talking Union represented the group's foray into organizing the workers on the home front, so the anti-capitalist and pro-labor thrust of the songs remained intact, although the geo-political context was strongly downplayed and as it were *détourned* into a future option. The dual countercurrent strategy of the previous album must therefore in sum be said to have been sacrificed for a more straightforward and more easily communicated single countercurrent message: organize now, and in the future be ready for a new

2 Seeger's position as chief ideologue can be determined by the increase in songs where he took the lead vocalist role and even often spoke in the first person singular, as in "Dear Mr. President" which is analyzed below.

form of internationalism. A song such as the title track of *Talking Union* was typical of the almanac-like approach the group still followed, detailing in a how-to mode the problems and obstacles one might be faced with when trying to form a labor union. It starts:

> Now, if you want higher wages let me tell you what to do
> You got to talk to the workers in the shop with you

The lyrics continue in this descriptive vein as a step-by-step manual for organizing, preventing "stools" from reporting to the bosses, striking, picketing, dealing with vigilantes, and eventually winning better pay and working conditions. The song concludes with the famous line: "Take it easy, but take it!" According to Winkler (30-31) it was Seeger who came up with the upbeat conclusion to the song, which was otherwise an attempt at collective lyrics composition.

Another key song on the album, "Union Maid", was an attempt at describing the role of women in the union movement. This song was one of Woody Guthrie's first contributions to the Almanac Singers' repertoire, and was written as early as June 1940 before Guthrie's official entry into the collective, although he had been friends and touring partner with Seeger for a number of years prior. The final verse of the song was added later, and was in effect another collective effort by the group. The pro-marriage sentiments of the last verse have perhaps contributed to the frequent rewrites or omissions of the verse in later performances:

> Married life ain't hard when you got a union card,
> A union man has a happy life when he's got a union wife.

While not exactly feminist in thrust, these lines do represent an effort to also appeal to the female contingent of not only the union membership, but perhaps more directly to the female audience members at Almanac Singers concerts and hootenannies. Space concerns prohibit a thorough investigation into the gender dynamics of the Almanacs' lyrics, but the patriarchal aspects of capitalism never seem to have been high on the list of features criticized by their lyrics.

Their repertoire vastly augmented by Woody Guthrie finally officially joining them in the summer of 1941, adding his unique ability to capture the concrete everyday reality of the workingman and combining that with

seeing the bigger picture of capitalism's alliance with the politicians, the Almanacs began a nationwide tour of the US lasting till September, usually performing at union-backed events in major cities with strong concentrations of industry or transport workers. To keep up their touring ability, they also recorded more commercial and much less politically volatile material on two Alan Lomax produced albums of sea chanteys and pioneer songs, respectively.[3] This earned the group a 250 $ advance which allowed them to purchase an automobile for touring purposes. *Talking Union* also contained songs that had been written earlier by Guthrie, Hays, Lampell and Seeger, and which had not yet been made redundant by the evolving war scenarios in Europe. However, the time for union and strike songs was also quickly coming to an end, as more and more unions followed CIO's edicts and signed non-striking agreements to ensure that armament could proceed unimpeded. The countercurrents the Almanacs had been floating along with were thus in danger of completely drying up in the war time American ideological landscape.

The fifth Almanac Singers album saw them complete their flip-flop on support for the war effort, from pacifism into something resembling militarism, a move which can however still be seen as fueled by a *détournement* strategy, at least as pertains to the Seeger penned songs on the record. After the Pearl Harbor events in December of 1941, the Almanacs recorded *Dear Mr. President* in early 1942, containing patriotic songs that in varying degrees supported the entry of the US into WW II. One commentator sums up this sea change as follows: "Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, the sinking of the U.S.S. Reuben James, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor pushed Guthrie - along with the Communist Party USA and much of the U.S. left - to give full support to what he regarded as a war against fascism" (Borchert 57). The centerpiece of the record was Guthrie's rousing ballad, "The Sinking of the Reuben James", which enticed everyone to feel that they had personally known one of the 115 casualties of the torpedoing of the first US Navy vessel to be completely destroyed by the enemy (October 31, 1941 while on convoy duty – i.e. prior to US entry into the war), ask-

3 Seeger in fact had a genuine love for the traditional material contained on these two records, so it would be a fallacy to dismiss them as mere moneymakers or a deliberate ploy to merely generate income for the group. Rather one should perhaps see them as excellent early examples of what Seeger later became a master at: combining authenticity with popularity – and an eye for the commercial with what was necessary for the greater cause.

ing the not entirely rhetorical question: "Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?" The patriotic sentiment of the song was underscored by lines such as: "She flew the Stars and Stripes of the land of the free", and the final verse becomes downright gung-ho in its nationalist celebration:

> Now tonight there are lights in our country so bright
> In the farms and in the cities they're telling of the fight.
> And now our mighty battleships will steam the bounding main
> And remember the name of that good Reuben James.

Seeger's main contribution to the record, "Dear Mr. President", a talking blues in the style also used for "Talking Union", shows his more cerebral approach to the changing political climate and its demands, including a reflection on the strategic shifts the Almanacs had been forced into. It is impossible not to hear lines such as these: "Now, Mr. President/We haven't always agreed in the past, I know" as giving more than a passing nod to "Ballad of October 16th" and "C for Conscription", especially in a song whose first person narrator explicitly says:

> I can make good use of these two hands.
> Quit playing this banjo around with the boys
> And exchange it for something that makes more noise.
> […]
> So what I want is you to give me a gun
> So we can hurry up and get the job done!

This is a far cry from pacifism and international solidarity among workingmen against the global capitalist conspiracy. However, Seeger still stands firm on several issues, such as free speech:

> I like being free to say what I think
> Sorta runs in the family,
> My grandpa crossed the ocean for the same reason.

Equality among the races and for all classes is defined as the real reason for fighting the war, and this places the anti-Fascist agenda that was to become Seeger's trademark right at the center of this song:

I'm fightin' because
I want a better America, and better laws
And better homes, and jobs, and schools
And no more Jim Crow, and no more rules, like
"You can't ride on this train 'cause you're a Negro."
"You can't live here 'cause you're a Jew."
"You can't work here 'cause you're a union man."

This insistence that America may at this time in history be the lesser evil compared with Hitler, but by no means a perfect democracy because of segregation, discrimination and capitalist injustice, indicates that the fight overseas will eventually be taken back to the home front. This can be taken as Seeger's clever indication that the early ideals of the Almanacs may have been laid to one side for a while, but have not been forgotten or abandoned, and constitutes a successful instance of *détournement* in double-voicing straightforward patriotism and then modifying it with a re-visioned countercurrent of solidarity with one specific side of the power spectrum – that of the perpetually disenfranchised minorities.

However, other aspects of the lyrics are much more conventional and do not carry any revolutionary undertones whatsoever. The following areas point in this direction: a valorization of work ("I never was one to try and shirk/And let the other fellow do all of the work"), of the nuclear family ("I'm an ordinary guy, worked most of my life/Sometime I'll settle down with my kids and wife/And I like to see a movie, or take a little drink"), of the right of the holder of high office to issue orders and rule ("Mr. President/ You're commander-in-chief of our armed forces/The ships and the planes and the tanks and the horses/I guess you know best just where I can fight"), and something that comes close to patriotism, albeit of a less concrete nature than Guthrie's in "Reuben James":

I think of our great land
With its cities, and towns, and farming land
With its so many good people a-working every day
I know it ain't perfect, but it will be someday
Just give us a little time.

These mainstream lines rather echo Guthrie's ballad "This Land Is Your Land", another song composed in 1940, but not recorded until 1944 by

which time Guthrie was no longer an Almanac Singer. In sum, Seeger did not problematize the institution of marriage and the nuclear family, nor the rule of law ensured by the political system and its checks and balances on the last Almanacs record.

By mid-1942 the Almanacs stopped their recording career, and performances also began to dwindle in numbers. This was due to a combination of internal disagreements over politics and increasing FBI and press harassment of the group. Guthrie left before the summer of 1942 to pursue other projects, including the composition of his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*. A fraction of the group relocated to Chicago and had some success as a union-backed act there. By July 1942 Pete Seeger had been conscripted into military service and the Almanacs gradually ceased to exist as a unit, although sporadic billings under the Almanacs name continued into 1943. The press contributed considerably to the group's demise, as *Dear Mr. President* kept garnering reviews (for instance in *Billboard*) that brought up the group's apparently inconsistent political messages by comparing it to their 1941 releases, and also dragged in the group's affiliation with the Communist party. Material causes also contributed, as wartime shellac shortages prevented production in quantity of records, and nationwide distribution was a continual problem. Despite efforts from Alan Lomax to record the Almanacs for radio, most or all US radio stations refused to broadcast these shows (some of which were transmitted in Britain, however), no doubt influenced by FBI warnings to stay clear of a group under investigation for sedition.

Taking a step back from analyzing the practice of the Almanac Singers in a changing political climate that according to some of the group's members themselves had their heads spinning with the speed of adaptation they were forced into (Hawes 43), we can now attempt to evaluate their agency in navigating the domestic and foreign politics of the day, as well as analyzing more closely the reception of the group by the mainstream press, and in this case also the higher echelons of law enforcement and the political establishment itself.

The process of incorporation that any subversive cultural or political practice undergoes in a capitalist society, gently enforcing a hegemonic, yet malleable or tolerant power regime, is a well-known phenomenon. The Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies, led by scholars such as Stuart Hall, Stanley Cohen and Dick Hebdige, stipulate that a deviant phe-

nomenon is always met by society in the following stages: familiarization (usually this process builds on a so-called "moral panic" [see Cohen 1972]), commodification and (material as well as ideological) incorporation into the mainstream. One could also formulate this process, when seen from the point of view of the guardians of the hegemony (or what Althusser has dubbed the Ideological State Apparatuses) as an attempt of the dominant current to contain overly radicalized countercurrents such as pacifism and solidarity with the (potential) political and territorial enemy.

In the case of the Almanac Singers, the familiarization was slow because the group did not gain the attention of a mass market until it had become less radical in its political stance. The shift from rather crude and hard to memorize lyrics on the first album to a more sing-along, refrain-dominated type of song (typified by Guthrie's contributions) had to be in place first. This development goes hand-in-hand with commodification, as an audience for the recordings was slowly built up through relentless touring and countless hootenannies across the country in the very early 40s. The two non-political albums of chanteys and pioneer songs obviously were key in the group's strategy to earn enough money to keep their activities afloat, and they thus actively aided in their own commodification. These apolitical records to an extent also diffused the public image of the group's real sympathies, but since the press seems never to have cited these records in their comparisons, always choosing instead to focus on the political recordings, this potential mainstreaming of the Almanacs never had much effect on the public view of the group.

The moral panic in the case of the Almanacs is indeed represented by the fact that Luce-owned media monopoly publications such as *Time Magazine* (now a Warner company) reviewed their records with great hostility, and kept bringing up the 'Commie' affiliation of the members of the group (turning them from actual persons with nuanced political opinions and stances into what Cohen aptly terms "folk devils" – no folk music pun intended!), as well as specifically mentioning the seditious nature of the debut album. Accusations of opportunism and hypocrisy are barely concealed in this September 1941 review of *Talking Union*: "Their recorded collection *Songs for John Doe*, ably hewed to the then Moscow line, neatly phonograph-needled J. P. Morgan, E. I. du Pont de Nemours and, particularly, war (*TIME*, June 16). The three discs of *Talking Union*, on sale last week under the Keynote label, lay off the isolationist business now that the Russians are laying it on the Germans." Here we note the subtle mainstream ideol-

ogy slippage of terminology, where international solidarity as the Almanacs would have formulated it in countercurrent terms, becomes the politically suspect "isolationism" in the dominant current's parlance. Reviews such as this furthermore led to the FBI actively pursuing the group and attempting to gather evidence against them from completely unrelated record companies such as RCA. President Roosevelt apparently also considered personally whether the *Songs for John Doe* album could be banned.

The group's incorporation process can be deemed to be nearing completion, however, when Alan Lomax writes in a January 21, 1942 letter to Woody Guthrie that: "I played the Almanac songs the other day for Mrs. Roosevelt, and she thought they were swell, and asked for copies of the records. She is playing them for her OCD [Office of Civilian Defense] staff, and I think their fame will be spread abroad."[4] The songs in question are, of course, the *Dear Mr. President* recordings, not the *Songs for John Doe* ones accusing FDR and Eleanor of being murderers. It was access to such high places of power that the Almanacs would have needed to become a complete commercial success, but the amount of hostile reviews and close attention from law enforcement seems to have precipitated their gradual disbanding in 1942-43. As mentioned, Seeger by that time had been conscripted into the Army, although he was considered too great a security risk to be sent overseas. Before that, however, he appeared at a command performance at the White House on Lomax's *Back Where I Come From* show. On balance, Seeger's career path was becoming primed for the much more massive commercial success he experienced with his subsequent group, the Weavers, later in the 1940s/very early 1950s with hit songs such as Lead Belly's "Goodnight, Irene" and numerous a-political revival songs such as "On Top of Old Smokey," but the tainted vehicle of the Almanacs could never have carried him that far.

This is not to suggest that "being popular" could not have meant "being political" – even a cursory look at what was commercially successful music in subsequent decades, for instance the 1960s, would yield multiple examples of political ("protest") music being able to generate financial success for performing and recording artists – but in Seeger's case he had to first work up a familiarization through music with less radical messages than those of the Almanacs.

4 The letter is archived in the Library of Congress and can be viewed here: http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afcwwg/045/0001v.jpg (accessed Aug. 19, 2015.)

What remains is to discuss the active agency of Seeger in navigating specifically his early career between the Scylla and Charybdis of Communism and patriotism. I believe the term developed by Guy Debord for a subversive manipulation of expressions of the capitalist system itself – *détournement* – which has been applied to the group as a whole in the above, can also be usefully employed in the specific micro-case of Seeger, personally. His adherence to tradition should not be underestimated here. Seeger always drew on popular sources both for melodies and lyrics (even mining the Bible on one memorable occasion – "Turn! Turn! Turn!" – the song that the Byrds made into a counterculture anthem in the mid-1960s) and injected his own message by perhaps altering a few words in a line only. Presenting familiar melodies with new lyrics can be a very effective *détournement* strategy for carrying over a subversive message, a practice Woody Guthrie was also a master at, and one that Bob Dylan has continued to this day. A song from Pete Seeger's repertoire, such as "We Shall Overcome" could be argued to be the best case in point, but let us here limit ourselves to material from his early, i.e. Almanacs career.

"Dear Mr. President" in its strange mélange of radical and conventional stances is the best early case of Seeger practicing *détournement* we can find. Seeger's persona in the song is clearly a version of himself (the reference to the banjo makes that clear to anyone witnessing a performance of the song first-hand), yet clearly at the same time the persona is an American 'everyman', with homespun philosophies, earthy turns of phrase and nearly simple-minded humorous interjections ("Lead poisoning", "Old battle axe", "a skunk to skin"), in other words creating what some critics have identified as a "rube" persona – again a practice Seeger may have imitated from Woody Guthrie. These humorous elements are to an extent a generic trait of the talking blues schemata, yet they also create a communication channel to the uneducated audience member who will perhaps unwittingly laugh himself into a political education or epiphany. The corniness of these yokel-like expressions is therefore sophisticated political propaganda in disguise, or *détourned*. Seeger became better at this sort of manipulation later in his career, but already as an Almanac Singer he was adept at turning capitalist logic against itself and persuading the individual to question the motives for such otherwise completely natural-seeming actions as going to war.

Seeger reverted to his ingrained pacifism soon after the end of WW II. One need only read what it still said on his banjo, 70 years later, continuing to the end of Seeger's career and life a dialogue with his old songwriting

partner and fellow Almanac Singer, Woody Guthrie, whose guitar famously was emblazoned with the words "This machine kills Fascists". Seeger continued to wear his pacifism, if not on his sleeve, then on his musical instrument, stating gently: "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender." The two most significant Almanacs members thus chose deviating paths of war and peace after a short spell of fellow traveling, and the images of their two instruments also neatly capture their divergent strategies of dealing with capitalist incorporation. Naturally, one cannot reduce the importance of these figures and their entire careers to this one dichotomy, but since pacifism was an important discourse strand in early (pre-Guthrie) Almanacs lyrics it must be mentioned here.

Guthrie's songs are famous still, but the most radical ones are rarely sung, and the most radical verses are often left out of those that are still frequently performed, such as "This Land Is Your Land". Seeger's oeuvre, on the other hand, was never again as confrontational as on the first Almanacs album, and he gradually became considered an all-American icon of successful liberal resistance to injustice and exploitation, and no longer a Communist and seditious threat to the state.[5]

Pacifism generally lends itself to a more successful incorporation than the advocacy of violence at any given time, and the legacy of the Almanacs is simply one more way of illustrating this truth. They never fully gave up their position as representing and giving voice to less-popular countercurrents, but their growing use of concealed (*détourned*) double voicing meant that they came closer to being indistinguishable from the main currents of 1941-42: those of patriotism and the ideology of fighting "The Good War" against fascist dictatorship and fantasies of world dominance.

5 The 'bleaching' of Seeger's reputation from merely 'red' to 'red, white and blue' is ably described in great detail in Bromberg and Fine's article which concludes: "Seeger's shift from political deviant to cultural icon lends support to the argument that reputations are radically malleable, even when the figure has not changed dramatically" (1151). Seeger's significance as a cultural icon, however, is not exclusively dependent on his reception in the broader public discourse spheres. His own stances and ideologies also changed over time. An example is his choice to take the First Amendment, rather than the Fifth when brought before the HUAC in 1955. While Seeger explains this choice (Seeger 468) as a reflection of the strength of his position (without spelling out where this strength came from), it seems naïve to not consider his popular success with the Weavers as part of the foundation of this very strength.

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