

## FROM WORLD WAR I INTO THE 1950S

Peace songs have never had a mass following, except at particular times and for specific reasons. They have been somewhat popular before a war has broken out, when the usual isolationist feelings are running strong, but once hostilities have begun the general population has been eager to rally around the flag and refrain from any seemingly subversive activities, cultural as well as political. Only members of peace churches, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), secular pacifists, and some left-wing activists, have refused to rush to the colors. They have left a scant musical legacy, however. This was the case through most of the twentieth century until the 1960s and the intervention in Southeast Asia, when an antiwar movement gathered strength as the war escalated through the decade.

Antiwar songs have changed throughout the century with the reshaping of musical styles and historical circumstances. There has been one perennial favorite, however, "Down by the Riverside," also known as "Ain't Gonna Study War No More." Although often assumed to have originated around the time of the Civil War, it does not appear in print until the twentieth century; first in sheet music

in 1902, with different words and familiar music by John J. Nolan, and then in its more standard form by 1918, with the emphasis on "studying war no more." One version from 1913, however, includes the text "Going to Pull My War-Clothes," somewhat countering the peace message. The Fisk University Jubilee Quartet made the first recording in 1920, followed by the Morehouse College Quartet in 1923, Vaughan Quartet in 1924, Norfolk Jazz and Jubilee quartets in 1927, and numerous others. Over 600 versions of the song have been recorded through the century. All have the familiar chorus, "Aint goin' to study war no more."<sup>1</sup>

There is no indication that "Down by the Riverside" was particularly popular during World War I, when peace songs were scarce. Joe Hill, the most popular songwriter for the radical labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and who was executed by a firing squad in Salt Lake City in 1915, composed three peace songs. Both his "Stung Right" and "Should I Ever Be a Soldier" appeared in the IWW's "Little Red Songbook," *Songs of the Workers*, in the 1913 edition. "Stung Right," about a working tramp hoodwinked into signing up for the US Navy on the eve of the Spanish-American War, concludes with a reference to the carnage on and off the battlefield—with the latter courtesy of the poisonous meat industry recently exposed by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906):

Some time ago when Uncle Sam he had a war with Spain,  
And many of the boys in blue were in the battle slain,  
Not all were killed by bullets, though; no, not by any means,  
The biggest part that died were killed by Armour's Pork and Beans.

"Should I Ever Be a Soldier" paints a broader canvas, with "Mammon" sucking the life and livelihood of able-bodied workers across

the country, the "brawny men" who "must walk the street / And face the wintry breezes" even as the gold pours into the war machine:

We're spending billions every year  
For guns and ammunition,  
'Our Army and our Navy' dear,  
To keep in good condition;  
While millions live in misery  
And millions die before us.

A few days before his execution, with the waste (financial and human) of warfare still on his mind, and with the war in Europe now under way, Hill penned "Don't Take My Papa Away from Me":

Her tender pleadings were all in vain, and her father  
went to the war.  
He'll never kiss her good night again, for he fell  
'mid the cannons' roar.<sup>2</sup>

Before the United States entered the war in the spring of 1917, one forceful tune received wide circulation. War had broken out in Europe in late 1914, but there was scant American interest in getting involved. Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson won reelection in 1916 on a strong antiwar platform. Even the German sinking of the British ship *Lusitania* in May 1915, with the loss of 124 American lives, could not rouse a wish to enter the European slaughter. This reluctance was reflected in Alfred Bryan and Al Piantadosi's "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," which was first recorded by the Peerless Quartet in 1914 following its public introduction by the vaudeville artist Eddie Morton. In the song, an American mother declares "thru' her tears,"

There'd be no war today,  
If mothers all would say,  
"I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier."

While the 1914 recording received only modest notice, Morton Harvey's early 1915 Victor release enjoyed much wider circulation. A saloon singer in Chicago, Harvey had made his first recordings in 1914, and quickly became a rising star. But fame was fleeting. With the US entry in the war, backed by the country's newfound enthusiasm, his career floundered, perhaps because of his association with "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier"—a song that soon attracted numerous parodies such as "I Did Not Raise My Boy to Be a Coward" and "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier, but I'll Send My Girl to Be a Nurse."<sup>3</sup>

The outbreak of war initially kicked off a flood of patriotic songs cheering on the troops and denouncing the enemy, although many eligible males refused the draft for political or religious reasons, and numerous others vigorously protested against the war. They were often harshly punished, some with severe prison sentences, while patriotic mobs attacked, and sometimes killed, political radicals, as well as those with German names. War fever, with its harsh propaganda, swept most Americans along. Even Al Bryant, the author of "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," switched sides and added the patriotic words for Harry Tierney's 1917 tune "It's Time for Every Boy to Be a Soldier." George M. Cohan's "Over There," written and recorded in 1917, was particularly popular, as were "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and "Till We Meet Again."

War weariness soon set in, however; the usual nostalgia for hearth and home resurfaced, which was reflected in some of the emerging songs. For example, "Hello, Central! Give Me No Man's

Land," recorded by Al Jolson in April 1918 and released by Columbia, reflected the worries of a daughter whose father was fighting in France. The Shannon Four's "There's a Vacant Chair in Every Home Tonight" included the lyrics,

There's a vacant chair that's waiting there in every home  
tonight  
And the look from mother's dreaming. By the fireside burning  
bright  
She is thinking of her gallant boy who is fighting for the right;  
There's a vacant chair in every home, in every home tonight.<sup>4</sup>

The bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson performed "Wartime Blues," although he did not record it until 1926, which cautiously questioned the drafting of African Americans:

What you gonna do when they send your man to war?  
What you gonna do when they send your man to war?  
What you gonna do when they send your man to war?  
Gonna drink muddy water and sleep in a holler log.<sup>5</sup>

The country had only been involved for a year and a half when the war ended on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918. Soon the battles were pushed aside by thoughts of peace and prosperity, while the great flu pandemic claimed untold numbers of lives. "The Boys Who Won't Come Home," recorded by Henry Burr in April 1919, stressed the carnage rather than the heroism:

He gave his life to Uncle Sam  
He's sleeping o'er the foam

So while you're cheering

Don't forget the boys who want come home.<sup>6</sup>

As the country resumed its post-Spanish-American War isolationist mentality, a full-fledged antiwar song emerged in 1926, the Peerless Quartet's "My Dream of the Big Parade." Penned by the popular song duo Jimmy McHugh and Al Dubin, it ended with the sorrowful, "But all that went over didn't come home." Peace songs could never match the patriotic songs that flooded the country for about two years, but the few that existed indicated that war songs had no popular music monopoly.<sup>7</sup>

### PEACE SONGS RETURN IN THE 1930S

Throughout the 1930s a strong isolationist impulse ran through the country, made up of a variety of ideas and movements, often with clashing political agendas. Universal Studios remade Erich Maria Remarque's popular and chilling 1929 antiwar novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* into a movie the next year. It received the Academy Award for best picture; the film's star, Lew Ayres, became a pacifist and performed only non-combat duties during World War II. Four years later, Twentieth Century Fox studios released *Cavalcade*, also with a clear peace message, which won the Academy Award for best picture.

While various pro-Nazi organizations favored neutrality, as Germany and Italy became increasingly aggressive after mid-decade, they had little musical impact. The traditional peace churches, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), carried on their work, but also with little political effect. There were a few Tin Pan Alley peace ditties, such as Howard Johnson and Willie Raskin's 1935 composition

"If They Feel Like Having a War Let Them Keep It Over There." There were about two dozen such professional songs published from 1939 to 1941, including "(If They'd Only Fight Their Battles with) Little Toy Men" by Malvin Franklin and Bill Gaston (1939) and Fred Fisher's "Go Back Over There" (1940). Harold Rome included the hard-hitting "The Yanks Aren't Coming" in the 1939 version of the left-wing musical *Pins and Needles*.<sup>8</sup>

On the political left there was a variety of groups and organizations pursuing a peace agenda. Many in and around the Communist Party of the United States, which had as many as 100,000 members in 1939, were quick to use music to advocate nonintervention in European affairs, then reversed their policy to support the Republican government in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Indeed, the Republican cause generated numerous pro-war songs, often by the same individuals and groups who otherwise supported an antiwar agenda, particularly student activists after 1933. The American Student Union, a coalition formed in 1935 to promote peace, shed this platform by 1938 as the threat of fascism loomed.<sup>9</sup>

"Pacifism reached a high point in the early to mid-1930s due to a strong consensus that involvement in World War I had been a mistake and that the United States should stay out of another imperialist war," Robbie Lieberman has written. "Communists were also interested in keeping the United States out of war, sharing the pacifists' fears of another war in which the primary beneficiaries would be bankers and munitions makers, while deeply concerned with preventing a war of intervention against the Soviet Union." The American League Against War and Fascism, formed in 1933 and which became the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD) in 1937, united various groups on the left into a broad coalition. Although the peace movement was heating up by mid-decade, books filled with peace

songs were quite rare, except for the Student Peace Union's *Patterns for Peace*. Similar to many of the left-wing songbooks of the time, however, many of the SPU's songs were difficult to sing, apparently not connected with any familiar tunes, and only one included musical notation. Moreover, not all of the twenty-seven songs were about peace, such as "Joe Hill," "Peat Bog Soldiers," and the anti-lynching "Strange Fruit." Neither did the quasi-college cheer, "ASU—Students Fight for Peace," make the position any clearer.<sup>10</sup>

The Theatre Arts Committee (TAC) was formed in 1938, an alliance of left-wing film, theater, and radio entertainers, and for almost two years it staged a variety of politically charged shows. TAC published a monthly magazine and promoted a variety of recordings, radio programs, and a weekly cabaret in New York with a marked anti-Nazi flavor at the same time it promoted an antiwar message. The TAC Radio Division wrote and published a song titled "It Shall Not Come to Pass," probably in 1939, with the refrain,

We, who are this nation say: We will not go to war;  
We have said it oft before;  
But now we command it!  
It Shall Not Come to Pass!<sup>11</sup>

Many on the left were not anxious about supporting another world war, yet remained committed to assisting the Spanish loyalists in their struggle against fascism. All of this changed in 1939 with the combination of the defeat of the Spanish government and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact in August. The ALPD folded soon after, following the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland. Others chose to maintain their commitment, which meant adhering to a peace agenda bolstered by a number of new songs.

In early 1941, a pioneering musical group began performing in New York, when Pete Seeger (1919–2014), the son of the noted musicologist Charles Seeger, met the roommates Lee Hays and Millard Lampell. Hays (1914–1981), born in Little Rock, Arkansas, had attended Commonwealth College, a radical labor college in Arkansas, while preaching in local churches, collecting songs, writing plays, and absorbing the radicalism of his colleagues. He arrived in New York in late 1940 and quickly connected with Lampell (1919–1997), a college graduate and budding writer. Seeger, Hays, and Lampell, joined by Peter Hawes, formed the Almanac Singers, who began performing in New York and at an American Youth Congress (AYC) rally in Washington, DC, in February 1941. (Organized in 1934 to promote jobs and financial support for young people, the AYC by decade's end had been taken over by Communist Party members who now promoted a strong peace platform.) The Almanacs established a loose musical cooperative with shifting personnel that included, variously, Baldwin "Butch" Hawes, Bess Lomax, Josh White, Agnes "Sis" Cunningham, and Woody Guthrie.

Germany had invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, followed by the Soviet Union sixteen days later; Poland now lay divided by its conquerors. All the while, the Almanacs adhered to the Communist Party's neutrality position. By early 1941, as Seeger later commented, the Almanacs "were getting publicity in the *Daily Worker* because we had the sassiest songs about the drive of Franklin Roosevelt and others to have the U.S.A. join the war over in Europe on the side of England. . . . Well, we were making up verses according to the Communist Party line of that time, which was that this was another imperialist war like World War I, and Hitler was bad, but Churchill wasn't that much better." Acting as a collective, the Almanacs usually named no individual composers to their songs, although it was clear that Lampell was the cleverest wordsmith.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after forming, and while mostly singing pro-labor union songs, the group had also begun writing peace songs, which they would perform at Sunday rent parties. Adding new words to old songs (in the tradition of Joe Hill before them), the Almanacs would produce parodies like their unrecorded revision of the Marine hymn, "The Halls of Montezuma":

From the shores of Argentina,  
To the far Aegean Sea,  
We will fight for U.S. Steel, boys,  
And for old A.T.&T.  
We will fight for stock and profits  
To make General Motors rich.  
And if you say that's un-American,  
You're a Bolshevik sonofabitch.<sup>13</sup>

The producer of Keynote Records, Eric Bernay, agreed to issue the Almanacs' antiwar album, *Songs for John Doe*, which appeared on the newly constituted "Almanac Records" label in May 1941; because of the songs' open hostility to Franklin Roosevelt, Bernay was reluctant to connect the album with the Keynote brand. The album included seven songs: "The Strange Death of John Doe," "Plow Under," "Ballad of October 16th," "Lisa Jane," "Billy Boy," "C" for "Conscription," and "Washington Breakdown." The songs pulled no punches, boldly attacking President Roosevelt's creeping support for Great Britain, for example in "The Strange Death of John Doe,"

They found him dead so I've been told  
And his eyes were closed and his heart was cold.  
Only one clue to why he died:  
A bayonet sticking in his side.<sup>14</sup>

*The New Masses*, the Communist Party's magazine, marketed *Songs for John Doe* along with a one-year subscription. The reviews were naturally mixed, including a snide attack in *Time* magazine: "Professionally performed with new words to old folk tunes, John Doe's singing scrupulously echoed the mendacious Moscow tune: Franklin Roosevelt is leading an unwilling people into a J. P. Morgan war." The President was reportedly outraged. A story circulated that Alan Lomax took a copy to Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress, who passed it along to Roosevelt. According to both Seeger and Lampell, Roosevelt asked MacLeish "if there wasn't some way it could be suppressed. 'Possibly,' MacLeish answered, 'if you don't mind trampling on the First Amendment.'" As for the First Lady, she is said to have remarked, "Clever but in dreadful taste."<sup>15</sup>

Some of the songs were published in the Almanacs' *Songs for John Doe* booklet issued by the broadly based, but short-lived, American Peace Mobilization (APM). A few of the songs were performed at the APM's extravagant American People's Meeting rally on April 5, 1941; the printed program included the words to "Billy Boy," "Ballad of October 16th," and also the newly composed "Get Out and Stay Out of War":

They say to the students.  
You better fall in line.  
Bring along a bayonet  
And leave your books behind.<sup>16</sup>

With *Songs for John Doe* initially doing well, and the Almanacs appearing at peace rallies and other events, Bernay asked them to return to the studio to record an album of labor union songs. *Talking Union* was recorded in May and released in July, this time openly on the Keynote label. By then *Songs for John Doe* was all but dead,

having been sidetracked by history: on June 22, 1941, the German armies had invaded the Soviet Union, and the Communist Party immediately dropped all talk of peace, now promoting intervention at full speed ahead. Woody Guthrie surmised to Seeger, "Well, I guess we're not going to be singing any more of them peace songs."<sup>17</sup>

Lee Hays remembered the Almanacs' efforts with some nostalgia. "These peace songs were written from the point of view of a bunch of young fellows who didn't relish spilling their blood on some 'furrin' battlefield to make profits for Standard Oil," he wrote. "But they were full of guts and just as poignant as hell, and very effective. They made audiences weep, some of them; and one of them produced the most startling effect on audiences I have ever seen ["The Strange Death of John Doe"]. . . . They never applauded, as they did the other songs. But they gasped! At first we thought the song must be in poor taste to produce such an effect; but we learned that we had merely done what few songs do—we had written the song, and it was dynamite!" Whatever the initial reaction, by the summer the Almanacs had shelved their peace songs altogether. "So we stopped singing our peace songs, although they were good songs," Seeger recalled. "So we figured if Winston Churchill would give up the idea of sickening [sic] Hitler on the Soviet Union and then backing out, we would give up the idea of trying to persuade our fellow Americans that this was another imperialist war like World War I, and we'd say, 'All aid to anyone who was fighting Hitler, anywhere.'"<sup>18</sup>

The Almanac Singers had not been alone in composing antiwar songs at the time. In 1939, Earl Robinson had composed the music, and Harry Schachter the lyrics, for "Spring Song"—later recorded by Paul Robeson—which ended with the poignant line, "For it's great to be alive in the Spring." Born in Seattle, Washington, in 1910, Robinson had earned a degree in music, developed an affinity with

left-wing politics, and become a seasoned composer and political activist by the late 1930s; he was best known as the composer of "Joe Hill" and the cantata, *Ballad for Americans*. Woody Guthrie had also contributed to the debate with his antiwar song, "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain" (1940). He had arrived in New York early in the year from California and quickly plunged into the city's artistic and political life: "I hadn't been here but a couple or three days til I picked up a noise-paper and it said there that 6,000 had been over to call on Roosevelt at his Whitehouse—and he called their trip and their stuff that they stood for 'twaddle.' It come up a big soaking rain and he made the kids a 30 minute speech in it. Wrote up this little song about it . . . [and] would like to dedicate this song to them 6,000 kids, and about 130 million others in this country that soaked the same day." The occasion had been the American Youth Congress's convention in February in the nation's capital. The delegates, invited by Mrs. Roosevelt, had stood outside the White House demanding jobs and peace. "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain" was soon published by the Modern Record Company, and appeared in the *Daily Worker* on April 18, 1940. It appears to have generated brief popularity. "The song New York has liked best so far that I made up is called 'Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?'" Guthrie wrote at the time.<sup>19</sup>

The Chicago Repertory Group, a left-wing theater organization in the Windy City, published the songbook *Songs for Peace* in November 1940, a singular compilation. "This collection is a modest effort to make articulate in song what the people of all nations must feel," editor Bill Jefferson explained in his introduction. "The cry for peace is not a 'hit' tune of the moment or a passing satiety [sic] with war. The folksongs of all peoples hold within their hymns and popular songs an age-old love of peace." The fourteen songs started out with

"America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)" and "America the Beautiful." The collection also included mostly fresh tunes or songs left over from World War I, such as "Black Man Fights Wid de Shovel," as well as "Ain't Gwine Study War No Mo'" and John Handcox's "Strange Things Happening in This Land." Dick Knell and Bill Jefferson composed "Johnny Wants a Job," originally written for the Chicago Repertory Group's 1940 Peace Revue, "Not on My Life!":

Johnny wants the whole world to know:  
To battle, he refuses to go.  
Fifty millions more want a job, and not a war;  
All the Johnnies in the land are saying, 'NO!'<sup>20</sup>

Radical songbooks during the decade focused on songs about labor and the class struggle but rarely included songs about peace. For example, the *Rebel Song Book*, published in 1935 by the Socialist Party's Rand School Press, included only "No More War," derived from a German folk tune. *Songs of the People*, published two years later by the Workers Library Publishers, affiliated with the Communist Party, also included only one such tune, Jessie Lloyd's "They're Talking War":

They're talking war, who's talking war?  
The yellow press; we know what for.  
They sent us to wallow in gas and mud  
While the rich stayed home, making cash from blood.

(A left-wing journalist and granddaughter of the muckraking author, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Jessie Lloyd had married the labor activist Harvey O'Connor in 1930 but often used her unmarried name.)<sup>21</sup>

When the domestic Communist Party summarily abandoned nonintervention, many of the peace songs disappeared. Pro-war songs had become more popular, although few were folk songs, and they could not in any case compete with the big band swing tunes and popular songs of the day. The Office of War Information (OWI) promoted all aspects of patriotic activities, including songwriting and broadcasting, but with questionable success. "The American public no longer seemed interested in militant war songs," the historian Kathleen Smith has concluded, "and after 1943 their numbers on the charts dropped sharply." Nostalgia and dance melodies, rather than rousing patriotism, sold more tunes, such as "I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen," "When the Lights Go On Again (All Over the World)," "Rodger Young," and even "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer." Patriotic country numbers such as Elton Britt's "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere" also caught the public mood, as did the Almanacs' post-intervention rabble-rouser, "Round and Round Hitler's Grave," which was revived and rewritten for Norman Corwin's stirring CBS show *On a Note of Triumph*, celebrating the end of the war in Europe.

## THE ATOMIC BOMB

Germany surrendered in mid-May 1945, ending hostilities in Europe, and the United States now focused on defeating Japan. The Manhattan Project—the development of the atomic bomb—had been a secret to Vice President Harry Truman until he became President following Roosevelt's death on April 12. He quickly became committed to its use, if necessary. The bloody battles on the Pacific islands appeared to indicate that the Japanese government would fight to the bitter end, although it did send out peace feelers through neutral



countries. Truman, therefore, gave the order to use the A-bomb as soon as it became available, which occurred on August 6 with the massive destruction of Hiroshima and the immediate deaths of over 100,000, followed three days later with the demolition of Nagasaki and another 80,000 casualties. Americans celebrated that the most destructive war in history was finally over, as the world now entered the atomic age.<sup>22</sup>

The horrible, almost unimaginable, force of the bomb caught the public's fancy. The Washington Press Club immediately began serving an "Atomic Cocktail," while burlesque houses in Los Angeles featured "Atom Bomb Dancers." *Life* named the starlet Linda Christians as "Miss Atomic Bomb." A mid-August Gallup poll found that 85 percent of those queried supported the bomb's use. But as the horrors of the destruction became more apparent, such support began to wane, with an increasing number fearing that the bomb might someday be used against the United States. In any case, the bomb, along with the destructive/deforming effects of radiation, had entered popular culture. The French designer Jacques Heim created a skimpy two-piece bathing suit that Paris lingerie boutique owner Louis Réard named *le bikini* because of its explosive appearance. It was shown in public four days after the A-bomb testing over the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific in July 1946, using fabric printed with newspaper headlines of the tests. The Hollywood film industry soon got into the act, with MGM quickly releasing *The Beginning or the End* about the bomb project. The 1946 Academy Award-winning *The Best Years of Our Lives*, directed by William Wyler, a bittersweet reflection on the war's aftermath, included ominous warnings of the dangers of a nuclear world.<sup>23</sup>

Popular music quickly caught on to the atomic craze. Fred Kirby, a country music performer and radio personality in North Carolina,

penned "Atomic Power" the day after the Hiroshima bombing. Kirby celebrated, "Atomic power, atomic power / It was given by the mighty hand of God." Kirby's recording on the Sonora label appeared in 1946, but the Buchanan Brothers' RCA Victor simultaneous issue of the same song generated the greater promotion and excellent sales. Karl Davis and Connecticut "Harty" Taylor, the popular country duo known as Karl and Harty, recorded their composition "When the Atom Bomb Fell" in early December 1945; they celebrated the bomb as "The answer to our fighting boys' prayers." The Slim Gaillard Quartette, a group of talented jazz musicians, recorded the novelty song "Atomic Cocktail" also in December 1945, which appeared on the Atomic label. Country and other musicians would continue to record songs applauding the bomb and its lethal, even holy, power into the 1950s.<sup>24</sup>

There were some notable dissenting songs and recordings, however. The calypso performer Sir Lancelot's "Walk in Peace" was released in 1946 on the Charter Records label, two sides of a 78 single. Born Lancelot Victor Edward Pinard in Trinidad, he had moved to New York and became an established recording artist, then film actor. Charter had been founded by Mario "Boots" Casetta in Los Angeles following the war and was connected with People's Songs, an activist musical organization headed by Pete Seeger and others who supported peace, labor unions, social justice, and other progressive causes. The *People's Songs* bulletin had published two other peace songs in May 1946, "Get on Board" and "United Nations Make a Chain." The *Daily People's World*, the Communist Party's West Coast paper, printed "Walk in Peace" in November 1946, and the following month it also appeared in the *People's Songs* bulletin. Sir Lancelot also recorded for Charter "Atomic Energy," written by Ray Glaser, a Los Angeles leftist songwriter, with music by Lancelot:

We all can have prosperity  
 With this atomic energy.  
 The world can have its pork and beans  
 Or be blown into smithereens.

The popular gospel group the Golden Gate Quartet released "Atom and Evil" in 1947 on the major Columbia label. Having begun in North Carolina in the late 1930s, they quickly became celebrities, and expressed their fears of a nuclear disaster:

I'm talkin' 'bout Atom, and Evil,  
 Atom and Evil,  
 If you don't break up that romance soon  
 We'll all fall down and go boom, boom, (boom), boom!<sup>25</sup>

People's Songs had an active chapter in Los Angeles, which included the newspaper reporter Vern Partlow. On assignment from the *Los Angeles Daily News* he began covering atomic scientists, which prompted him to write "Old Man Atom" (also known as "Talking Atomic Blues") in late 1945. Although published in the *People's Songs* bulletin in January 1947, it was not recorded until 1950 by Sam Hinton. A marine biologist at the Scripps Institute in La Jolla, as well as talented folk performer, Hinton first recorded "Old Man Atom" for the small California ABC-Eagle label, but when it received an unexpectedly favorable reception, Columbia Records picked it up for national distribution. A surprising hit, with rave reviews in *Billboard*, *Cash Box*, and other music trade publications, cover versions quickly emerged from the seemingly conservative Sons of the Pioneers for RCA Victor and others.<sup>26</sup>

"Sam Hinton's dinking of 'Old Man Atom' ('The Talking Atomic Blues') may zoom into national prominence as the most controversial

record of the year," *Movie Stars Parade* announced in August. "Its enthusiastic reception is indicated by its prompt rise to number 2 on the 'Hillbilly Hit Parade,'" noted *Sing Out!* "Old Man Atom" was Hinton's first commercial recording, which he did at the prompting of the music publisher Irving Bibo. "Four nickels of every five deposited in tavern jukeboxes produce Hinton's dolorous ditty, it is reported," according to the *San Diego Union Leader*, Hinton's local paper. Considering the escalating fear of communism, heightened by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the song's popularity was surprising, but soon enough introduced a vehement, conservative backlash. When Columbia quickly withdrew the records, *Life* magazine initially opposed the censorship. Although admitting that the song was "not in line with the latest military views of the atom bomb's effectiveness," it argued "that's no reason why any private group of censors should be allowed to keep the rest of the U.S. people from buying or refusing to buy a recording of 'Old Man Atom' as they choose." The *Saturday Evening Post* and the *New York Times* initially agreed, but this was not enough to rescue the song from a commercial burial. Partlow quickly followed it onto the blacklist, while Hinton had his own political problems, although not so severe, and he began recording folk albums for Decca.<sup>27</sup>

People's Songs was connected with the postwar drive to promote world peace, civil rights, civil liberties, labor unions, and other traditional left programs. The party's connection with former Vice President Henry Wallace's campaign for President on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948 was partly based on his desire for international cooperation. President Harry S. Truman was reelected, and the Progressive Party did very poorly. As the Cold War escalated, there was an increasing backlash against any peace advocates, who were seen as communist dupes in league with the Soviet Union. People's

Songs, which had begun with a flourish in 1946, became a casualty of the country's growing conservatism and declared bankruptcy in early 1949. Peace had now become a dirty word in many circles, indeed a dangerous thought, despite the fleeting popularity of "Old Man Atom." One other song did manage to catch on, however, Dick Blakeslee's "Passing Through," which has Franklin Roosevelt declaring on the eve of his death, "One world must come out of World War Two." A Chicago songwriter, Blakeslee submitted his song to People's Songs, and it became popular during the Wallace campaign, appearing in the pamphlet *Songs for Wallace*. Pete Seeger would first include it on his 1956 Folkways album *Love Songs for Friends and Foes*.<sup>28</sup>

People's Songs and its offshoot, People's Artists, promoted peace in various ways. "An ambitious music organization like People's Artists can, if successful, free a certain number of artists from the censorship and hampering control of the monopolies, give them scope for their talents, and make a start in organizing new music audiences," Vivian Howard wrote in the left-wing *Masses and Mainstream* in 1949. "That will be an important step in the right direction." People's Artists certainly made the attempt. Seeger and his committee sponsored a "Sing Now for Peace" songwriting contest in May 1949; the two winners would be featured at a "Peace Hootenanny" the following month, along with Seeger, Lee Hays, and Betty Sanders. According to Seeger, "songs can do so much to put an end to this very real war danger. A song can be as powerful as a dozen speeches, a song can teach, a song can give us courage, a song can help to put the warmongers on the run." Following the Red Army's growing success in China, although it would not officially form a government until October, in June 1949 the newly formed Weavers—Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Ronnie Gilbert, and Fred Hellerman—appeared at a "Hail

New China Our Great Ally for Peace" rally: "For at this meeting this quartet who've sung the twangy mountain ballads and rousing union songs are going to tackle something new, will introduce for the first time to an American audience some of the new songs and chants which the Chinese Liberation Armies have carried along with them all the way to Shanghai and beyond." In early December, the Unity Chorus and the American People's Chorus performed at an "Outlaw the Atom Bomb" rally at Madison Square Garden. Organized by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, the rally's speakers, including the writer Howard Fast, focused on such topics as "Atomic Energy for Peace versus Atomic Weapons for War," "The Cold War and Our Civil Liberties," and "Why the War Propaganda against the Soviet Union?" At year's end People's Artists organized a "Peace on Earth" hootenanny including the Weavers, Betty Sanders, and Ernie Lieberman: "Christmas carols from many lands, songs of peace and brotherhood and a special musical review of the year highlight the Hootenanny program."<sup>29</sup>

Along with "Passing Through," Ed McCurdy's "(Last Night I Had) The Strangest Dream" would become a perennial peace song favorite and gain worldwide popularity. Born in Willow Hill, Pennsylvania, in 1919, McCurdy left home in 1937 to become a singer and disc jockey at a gospel radio station in Oklahoma, and within a few years had become a popular performer in nightclubs throughout the country. In 1948, he moved to Vancouver with his Canadian wife, where he launched a radio show for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that moved to Toronto. He featured Pete Seeger, Lena Horne, and Josh White on his show, and soon released his first folk music album. He and his family moved to New York in 1950, where he became one of the most popular of the emerging crowd of folk singers, as well as a television performer; he was soon recording dozens

of albums for Elektra and other labels. He wrote "The Strangest Dream" just before arriving in New York, and its grassroots popularity spread rapidly.

"In 1950 Ed McCurdy came up to the hotel room of the Weavers, who were working in the vaudeville show at the Strand Theater on Broadway at the time," Pete Seeger later explained. "He sang to us Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream which he'd just made up. The song has never been on the top forty, but has gradually spread throughout much of the world, and has been translated into several languages." The Weavers had only recently formed, but by mid-1950 the group would have the country's number one hit, the Lead Belly tune "Goodnight Irene," with others soon to follow. Although the Weavers did not initially record "Strangest Dream," it would be included on later Vanguard Records releases of their performances. *Sing Out!* published the lyrics in the July 1951 issue. Seeger included it in his own concerts at the time, and his performance of the song at Reed College in Oregon in 1950 was quickly released in a bootleg album. It next appeared on Seeger's 1956 Folkways album *Love Songs for Friends and Foes*. While McCurdy would frequently perform the song, Seeger would become its most vocal champion, spreading its message throughout the world. In 1980, it became the theme song of the Peace Corps, and in 1989, during the demolition of the Berlin Wall, East German school children were shown on NBC singing "The Strangest Dream." It would ring down through the decades as one of the most lyrical calls for world peace. As for McCurdy, he returned to Canada in the 1980s, where he died in 2000.<sup>30</sup>

In March 1950, Oscar Brand, a local radio personality and singer, performed at a "Rally for Peace—Prevent 'H-Bomb' Destruction" in New York. Two months later the first issue of *Sing Out!* appeared, a compact monthly magazine published by People's Artists, which

had replaced the *People's Songs* bulletin. Although People's Songs had folded a year before, those involved, such as Seeger, Alan Lomax, Earl Robinson, Irwin Silber, and Paul Robeson, did not intend to abandon the link between folk music and progressive politics: the connection would be preserved in *Sing Out!* In his lead editorial, the managing editor, Robert Wolfe, remarked, "there is a much more basic FIRST ISSUE today. Its name is PEACE. This word holds the hope of countless millions throughout the world, and their determination as well. . . . And that is what we must work for—in music as in all life." In the same issue Walter Lowenfels explained that the "new music represents a transformation of the old folksong, somewhat akin to the way the Negro spirituals transformed the Bible. In the heat of the struggle to organize for peace, for freedom, for victories in strikes and against Jim Crow, all the basic sources of American music have become fused into a new medium." These were indeed brave words, as the Korean War broke out the following month. Lowenfels had earlier written, "The enemy [i.e., the government] wants us to hear only the atomic explosions. But we hear and sing the song of the world, every atom a brother to every other, and a sister, not a splitter. This is the song of peace and brotherhood on earth."<sup>31</sup>

In 1949, while Seeger and Hays, along with Gilbert and Hellerman, were launching the Weavers, they had composed "If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)," which was printed in the first issue of *Sing Out!* While not as blatant a call for peace as "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream," "The Hammer Song" had such overtones, calling for "love between all of my brothers," but at the moment it was little heard. In September of that year, Seeger performed it at a concert in Peekskill, New York, sponsored by People's Artists, that featured Paul Robeson; the concert was musically a success, but as the audience began to leave they were viciously attacked by a mob

of self-styled patriots. In late 1949, the Weavers first recorded "The Hammer Song" for Charter Records, a small company connected with People's Songs, but the disc was not issued. They quickly re-recorded it for Hootenanny Records, another tiny company launched by Irwin Silber and People's Artists performer Ernie Lieberman, and the disc appeared in early 1950. When the Weavers became popular, "our then-manager Pete Kameron wouldn't let us perform it. (I'm trying to cool down the blacklists; that song would encourage them.);" Seeger would recall. While the Weavers soon dropped it from their repertoire, People's Artists included it in their 1953 song-book *Lift Every Voice*. Seeger continued to keep it alive, however, and it first appeared on his 1956 Folkways album *Love Songs for Friends and Foes*. Peter, Paul and Mary's 1962 recording finally turned it into a popular hit, as did Trini Lopez's waxing the next year, and it has remained a popular song, with numerous cover versions.<sup>32</sup>

The third issue of *Sing Out!* included "Put My Name Down," based on Woody Guthrie's "Hard Traveling," with updated lyrics by Irwin Silber. "This song, which became known to New Yorkers as the musical theme for the Stockholm Peace Appeal signature campaign, has also been heard by countless thousands throughout the United States and in other countries as well," according to one article. People's Artists held a peace petition party in New York on June 24. In April 1949 the World Peace Congress in Paris, with ties to the Communist Party, had formed a Permanent World Peace Committee, which initiated the Stockholm Peace Petition, distributed by the Peace Information Center in New York. Those signing pledged to oppose atomic weapons, and called for strict international nuclear controls. With widespread official, and at times brutal, opposition—a peace demonstration in New York was broken up by police beating demonstrators—the peace movement nonetheless attracted

numerous supporters, such as W. E. B. DuBois, and approximately a million American signers of the petition.<sup>33</sup>

Jacqueline Steiner's "Peace, It's Wonderful," designed to be sung at a Peace Hoot in Boston a month after the Korean War broke out, also appeared in *Sing Out!*'s third issue. The back page featured a list of peace songs that had been published in the *People's Songs* bulletin, such as "Walk in Peace," "Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier," "Peace on Earth Forever," and "Get on Board That Peace Train." Paul Robeson appeared at a number of peace gatherings, including a "Unite for Peace!" event in early June; there was also a "One World" hootenanny the same month, with Pete Seeger and Betty Sanders, featuring "Put My Name Down." "What started as a songfest at Peekskill has ended in a slugfest at Korea," Charles Griffin noted in *Sing Out!*'s September issue. "The months from Peekskill to Korea have seen a continuous growing attack on peace time cultural workers." Even Woody Guthrie, in declining health, but sticking to his principles, contributed "I've Got to Know" to the October issue. Betty Sanders, the chair of People's Artists, was attending the World Peace Congress in Warsaw at year's end, where she sang "Put My Name Down." In early 1951, Ernie Lieberman and Hope Foye released Earl Robinson's pre-World War II "Spring Song" on the Hootenanny label, again in demand among peace advocates.<sup>34</sup>

In early 1951, *Sing Out!* posted a call for peace songs: "The Peace Crusade competition will culminate in a national cultural festival for peace in Chicago at the end of June. Among the prizes being offered by the Peace Crusade are: a fifty dollar cash award against royalties; a guarantee of commercial publication in sheet-music form of the prize-winning song; a guarantee of recording (on the Hootenanny label) of the two best songs by some of the nation's leading performers." In a letter in the September issue, Woody Guthrie praised *Sing Out!* thus: "I

believe in peace and SING OUT believes in peace; I do my best to fight against war and SING OUT fights just as hard to stop wars as I do."<sup>35</sup>

"Through public peace concerts, recordings and its monthly magazine, SING OUT, People's Artists is bringing its musical message for peace to hundreds of thousands of people throughout the USA," Bob Claiborne explained, with much optimism. But the going was rough. In early 1952, Irwin Silber (now editor of *Sing Out!*) and Betty Sanders were called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). "This investigation comes at a time when America's cultural workers are growing more and more aware of the need to express the peace sentiments of the American people," ran a statement from People's Artists Executive Board. "Betty Sanders and Irwin Silber have been identified with the peace movement, both organizationally and individually as creative artists." The committee soon cancelled the summons, but Silber did testify in 1958, when his peace activities continued to be an issue. Asked about his promotion of Communist peace petitions a few years earlier, and his authorship of "Put My Name Down," Silber admitted writing the song but denied he knew anything about peace petitions.<sup>36</sup>

*Sing Out!* supported the Progressive Party's presidential ticket of Vincent Hallinan and Charlotta Bass in 1952. "We, the readers of and editors of SING OUT, can help make this a singing campaign," Silber declared. "With songs that reach into the hearts of the people we can help bring a message of peace and brotherhood to the millions who will go to the polls in November." Betty Sanders, Laura Duncan, and Ernie Lieberman performed at the party's national convention in July, although the candidates received a miniscule 140,000 votes in November.<sup>37</sup>

Dwight Eisenhower's Republican victory over Adlai Stevenson was partly based on the General's pledge to end the war in Korea, which

happened after he took office in early 1953. With the war soon a sad memory, peace songs would continue to be published, even if few were performed. People's Artists issued *Lift Every Voice! The Second People's Song Book* in 1953, a sequel to *The People's Song Book* that had appeared in 1948. While the latter included only a few peace songs, such as "Talking Atomic Blues" and "Walk in Peace," the new edition had a whole section on "Songs of Peace," beginning with "Study War No More," with selections going back to the Civil War's "Tenting Tonight."

While the election of Eisenhower led to the end of the Korean War, with the armistice agreement signed on July 27, 1953, it also brought the Congress into Republican Party control, with Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy now chairing the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. McCarthy would not only grab the headlines with his outrageous charges of communists in the government, but also interrogate alleged subversives at will. McCarthy himself did not launch the witch hunt that had emerged soon after World War II; it was fueled by various patriotic organizations, conservative politicians, elements within the Catholic Church as well as some fundamentalist Christian churches, the Chamber of Commerce, the FBI, and many in the labor movement. Still, "McCarthyism" became the blanket term for the anticommunist scare. Curiously, just as the fear of communism reached a frenzy, the domestic Communist Party had a small and decreasing membership, while its leadership was either in hiding or behind bars. The Soviet Union and its allies dominated Eastern Europe, while the Communist Party had taken over in China, North Korea, and North Vietnam, which fueled exaggerated fears of communism taking over the world; but there was scant indication of any internal threats. In the midst of this paranoia, People's Artists and its supporters were not alone in their search for peace and other progressive causes, such as civil rights.

In the midst of McCarthyite hysteria, there appeared faint signs of growing political discontent. There were few Hollywood films about the Korean War, for example, and none was popular; while five of the twenty-five top films of 1951 featured the armed forces, they were all about World War II. The few anticommunist films, such as *My Son John*, *Walk East on Beacon*, and *Big Jim McLain*, which reached their peak output in 1952, drew small audiences. Atomic bomb testing, initially quite popular, also ran into its critics by the early 1950s. The government first limited atomic bomb testing to remote islands in the Pacific Ocean, but in February 1951 it partly shifted to atmospheric tests in Nevada, and the hydrogen bomb, known as the "super," soon followed. To calm the children, in 1951 the government sponsored the cartoon *Duck and Cover*, shown in schools throughout the country, with an accompanying booklet. Many children received dog tags, and some were even tattooed with their blood type on their side in the event of an atomic attack.

With word spreading of nuclear accidents and radiation exposure, public concern proliferated. Hollywood's first post-apocalyptic film, *Five*, appeared in 1951. The frightening story followed the lives of five Americans who had miraculously survived an atomic attack. Six years later, Nevil Shute published the novel *On the Beach*, with a scenario about a group of survivors in Australia awaiting their doom; the Hollywood film, with a stellar cast, appeared in 1959. *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*, also in 1959 and starring Harry Belafonte, featured a similar story, with a handful of individuals facing an empty world. On a less frightening note, Bill Haley and His Comets released the male fantasy A-bomb song, "Thirteen Women (And Only One Man in Town)," in 1954, a year before their dance hit, "Rock Around the Clock." Rod Serling produced the television show *Nightmare at Ground Zero* on CBS in 1953, hinting that there

could be innocent victims of the atomic tests. Nuclear scientists increasingly began to raise the alarm. A 1955 Gallup poll found that only 17 percent of their sample knew about fallout's health dangers, which increased to 52 percent in 1957.<sup>38</sup>

Cracks in the anticommunist movement appeared in March 1954 when Edward R. Murrow's CBS show, *See It Now*, featured the critical "Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy." A few months later McCarthy's televised hearings on communists in the Army drew a huge audience, who witnessed the Senator, warts and all, up close for the first time. He had already drawn the ire of the President, and his downfall would soon follow. Also during the summer of 1954, *Them* appeared on neighborhood screens, depicting an invasion of giant mutant ants. Films about space invaders had been around for a few years, but this was the first (and far from the last) to feature the horrible effects of radiation and atomic bomb blasts on all sorts of monstrous insects. The list included *Tarantula*, *The Deadly Mantis*, and *The Black Scorpion*; there was also *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, *The Blob*, and *The Attack of the Crab Monsters*. The first Japanese film in this genre, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, was not released in the United States until 1956.

The political landscape seemed to be shifting slightly, while People's Artists and *Sing Out!* continued to promote international cooperation, the defense of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (soon to be executed for alleged atomic espionage), civil rights, and other progressive causes. There seemed to be fewer new peace songs, however. In New York, the American Labor Party (ALP), an ally of the crippled Communist Party, seldom staged peace events, although it did present a "Rally to Urge Congress [to] Defend Our Freedoms—Stop McCarthyism!! Keep Our Boys Out of Indochina—Stop the War!" The speakers were joined by Pete Seeger and his banjo. While



the war had ended in Korea, another was looming on the horizon. With the Japanese defeat in 1945, France had reclaimed its colonies in Indochina, backed by the United States, but soon a war of anticolonial liberation broke out, finally ending in 1954. At the end, the United States was financing the majority of the French military budget. The final blow came on May 7, when the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered, and soon Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia gained their independence, although Vietnam was divided into two parts. The Communist Party was in control of the North, while a US-backed government took over in the South. Curiously, the ALP rally was held on May 6, surely in anticipation of a French defeat but also in fear that the United States would take over the fighting (as it soon would be doing). A month later Seeger appeared at an ALP "Family Picnic for Peace." When called to testify before the HUAC the following year, Seeger was naturally asked about his peace concerts. His answer: "I have sung for pacifists and I have sung for soldiers." His lack of cooperation was a factor in his indictment for contempt of Congress two years later.<sup>39</sup>

*Sing Out!* had begun as a monthly magazine, but in light of the rather gloomy political and economic landscape, it was changed to a quarterly in late 1954, which it would remain for many years. The Winter 1955 issue opened with "Co-existence on My Mind" by "Cal Grigsby" (the pen name of Lou Gottlieb, a member of the Gateway Singers in San Francisco and later of the Limelitters): "I sure don't dig this H-Bomb jive, / So play it cool, man, be alive!" Ernie Lieberman now issued the album *Goodbye, Mr. War*, including "Spring Song," "Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier," "Road to Eilat," "Mr. War," "Study War No More," "Sheffield Relay," and "Strangest Dream." Irwin Silber noted in his *Sing Out!* review, "The world was never more in need of songs for peace than it is today—and Ernie Lieberman has come

up with a hatful on this new Amerecord release." While enjoying only slight distribution, this was a landmark album including only peace songs.<sup>40</sup>

For the remainder of the decade, peace songs hardly appeared in *Sing Out!*, partly because the magazine focused more on historical songs and less on overt politics. One exception was Derroll Adams's "Portland Town" in the spring 1957 issue, which became his theme song. A five-string banjo player from Portland, Adams had spent some time in the military before moving to Southern California and meeting Woody Guthrie and, particularly, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, who would become his musical partner.<sup>41</sup>

By decade's end, the country's peace movement was quite sluggish, with no visible hot war on the horizon and the general fear of atomic warfare reduced to bubbling beneath the surface. Even the 1960 Democratic Party's presidential candidate John F. Kennedy's specious attack on President Dwight Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon, now the Republican candidate, for losing the arms race with the Soviet Union—an obvious scare tactic—hardly caused a ripple. On the other hand, in late 1960 Pete Seeger published an article in *Sing Out!* on the flourishing peace movement in England. In 1958, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) initiated a yearly fifty-seven-mile Ban the Bomb march from Aldermaston, the British H-bomb center, to London. The first year over 3,000 marchers participated, which Seeger compared to the 700 that year who joined a peace march in New York to the United Nations Building. The number rose to 100,000 for the CND march two years later. The 1960 march produced numerous songs. Ewan MacColl, the activist performer, contributed "Song of Hiroshima," "Join in the Line," and "That Bomb Has Got to Go" (with Pete's sister Peggy), and there were also "We're Marching on Trafalgar Square" and "First Things



First." "The lesson would seem to be that good songs grow naturally out of activity," Seeger concluded. "There have been thousands of peace songs written in the USA during the fifteen years since World War II, but only a few seem to this singer to have hit the mark so squarely as these songs from Britain."<sup>42</sup>

Seeger occasionally would record peace songs, scattering them among his various albums. His Folkways album, *Gazette Vol. 1*, issued in 1958, contained Tom Lehrer's "The Wild West Is Where I Want to Be," "Then We'll Have Peace," and Partlow's "Talking Atom." *Sing Out!*'s tenth anniversary issue, in early 1961, included "Strontium 90," about the dangers of nuclear fallout, and the Japanese song "Never Again the A-Bomb," both recorded by Seeger on a companion EP. About the same time his Folkways release *Sing Out with Pete!* included a live version of "Down By the Riverside," where, along with blues and folk musician Big Bill Broonzy, he leads a college audience in a spirited sing-along. *Gazette Vol. 2*, also on Folkways, appeared in 1961, featuring Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet's "Come and Stand by Every Door" and John Brunner's "The Easter Marchers," the latter about the Aldermaston march.

With the dawn of the new decade, and the election of John F. Kennedy as President, there were few signs of a revived peace movement. Within a few years and the escalation of the war in Southeast Asia, however, the political and cultural landscape would drastically shift, with peace songs taking center stage.

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