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"THE MASSES ARE SINGING": INSURGENCY AND SONG IN NEW YORK CITY, 1929-1941

by

MARC ENDSLEY JOHNSON

VOLUME I

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfullment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2003

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Acknowledgements

Before I go into the long list of people and institutions without whom this project might never have been completed, I should note that I have attempted to obtain copyright permissions for the use of all musical examples reproduced in this dissertation. Those examples that do not list relevant permissions fall into two categories: public domain, or pieces for which I have been unable either to find or to receive a response from the copyright holder. Any holder of a copyright for an un-permitted usage in this dissertation should contact me and I will gladly obtain the necessary permissions.

As is surely the case for with any project of this length, my dissertation has benefitted greatly from the time and energy of many people. In addition to the authors of the works cited in my bibliography and throughout the dissertation, I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of individuals for their help. To begin with, I would like to thank the staffs of the following libraries for their hours of assistance: Mina Rees Library at the CUNY Graduate Center,; Baruch College's Newman Library; the Morris Raphael Cohen and Music Libraries of the City College of New York; the Brooklyn College Library; the Music, Drama, Odegaard, and Suzallo Libraries of the University of Washington; New York University's Tammiment Institute Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; the New York Public Library's Performing Arts Branch; the Brooklyn Public Library's main branch; and the Library of Congress.

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With permission from the Graduate Center's Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects, I interviewed two individuals who participated in the events about which I write. Henrietta Yurchenco provided me with valuable insights into the personalities and working methods of a number of key players in my dissertation, as well as the general milieu in which they operated. And perhaps more than any other figure, Pete Seeger sustains the legacy of the New York insurgents to this day. It was a pleasure and an honor to speak with both of them, and I am grateful for their time, not to mention the valuable information they provided me.

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Finally, I'm sure I would have given up long ago without the support and interest of my family. Bob, Ellen, John, Bud, Paula, and Dorothy have all treated me like family for years, even though nothing's yet official. I'm grateful to them for their kindness, and also not holding it against me that I'm not good enough for their daughter/sister/granddaughter. I'm happy to be joining the family soon.

Willie, Aaron, and Sarah are more than siblings; they're close friends, and I feel very fortunate to be able to share this with them. This project reflects two fundamental aspects of my wonderful parents, whose commitment to social issues and love of music have shaped my outlook on academics and, more importantly, life, in myriad ways. They have never offered anything less than full support for me, whether I was deciding to major in music, opting to pursue a PhD in musicology, or experiencing crucial doubts about the musicological enterprise. I cannot thank them enough for everything they've given me.

Which brings me to Sarah. Tireless reader, great cook, intelligent raconteur, warm companion, and all of the other things I could possibly want in a partner; is it enough to say that I'm even happier to be marrying her than to be finishing my dissertation? Probably not, but I think she understands that she means more to me than music, politics, fantasy baseball, computer chess, crossword puzzles, and all of the other things that occupy my time, even were they to be combined into one sublime hedonistic melange. She's my everything, and anything good in this dissertation is there because of her.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents. My grandfather Roy, who recently passed away, was a quietly kind, loving person. I didn't see or speak to him very often, but whenever I did he was kind, humorous, and gentle; I miss him very much. Irv and Shirley Leos have been singing beautiful songs of social significance together for more than six decades, and I'm glad I've been able to listen in. This dissertation is for all of them.

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Preface

The fundamental argument of this study is that the dominant common characteristic of the most important music and music criticism of Depression-era New York was a leftist political viewpoint. The interdisciplinary approach I take in advancing this argument is, like the argument itself, rooted in my belief that it is impossible to understand artistic movements, events, and artifacts without accounting for the broader social and cultural contexts in which they occurred and were produced. Conversely, any discussion of a nation's political or social history that fails to address significant cultural (literary, artistic, musical, etc.) products and concepts will necessarily be less complete than one that does. I take my cue here from the work of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, who discuss music as a form of "exemplary action," a concept that they explain this way: "art and music--culture--are forms of both knowledge and action, part of the frameworks of interpretation and representation produced within social movements and through which they influence the broader social culture."[1]

This study began as an examination of "labor songs," a designation that was to include not only those songs intended for use by actual members of the labor movement, but also works that addressed labor issues both practical (e.g., the eight-hour day, the minimum wage) and theoretical (the ownership of the means of production in a capitalist society). I soon realized, however, that it was extremely difficult, and perhaps even dishonest, to attempt to extract these specific concerns from the broader context of leftist politics. For instance, the complex relationship between the Communist Party and the African-American community, exemplified in the trial of the Scottsboro Boys, blurred issues of racial and economic justice. Similarly, it is very much an open question whether or not it is possible to discuss, in any meaningful sense, America's economic

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1. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 23-4.

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organization without addressing its political systems. As Warren Susman has pointed out, the traditional view that the period's left-wing advocates were almost exclusively concerned with labor and other economic issues is incomplete, for closer research into the period "reveals not only a fascination with the 'proletariat' and a literature and reportage concerned with industrial workers, strikes, and coming revolution, but also a widespread agrarian utopianism, in the North as well as in the South, a deep interest in communitarian ventures that smacks more of the America of Brook Farm than of the U. S. S. R. of Five-Year Plans."[2] Susman also notes that "the effort to find, characterize, and adapt to an American Way of Life as distinguished from the material achievements (and the failures) of an American industrial civilization," in which "[c]ivilization meant technology, scientific achievement, institutions and organizations, power and material (financial) success," may be considered "a key structural element in a historical reconstruction of the 1930's."[3] This grappling with the notion of Americanness, in all its musical manifestations, is another central subject of my investigation.[4]

Before proceeding any further, I should define several key terms that recur throughout this study, as well as describe its overall scope. In classifying musical genres, I utilize H. Wiley Hitchcock's categories of "Cultivated," "Vernacular," and "Folk" musics. Cultivated music is "music that America had to cultivate consciously . . . to be approached with some effort, and to be appreciated for its edification—its moral spiritual, or aesthetic values." The vernacular tradition, on the other hand, includes "music more plebeian, native, not approached self–consciously but simply grown into . . . music

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2. Warren I. Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," in Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 153.

3. Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," 156.

4. It should be noted that my study will address sentiments only as they related to the political left. To be sure, a number of right–wing organizations with *raisons d'etre* similar to those of their left-wing counterparts flourished during the Depression. However, none of them, to my knowledge, made any lasting contributions to America's musical culture.

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understood and appreciated simply for its utilitarian or entertainment value."[5] Folk music, according to Hitchcock, is rather more difficult to define, for it has less to do with a music's origins than with its social position. For the purposes of this study, "folk" music will be understood to be music that deals primarily with matters of local concern, whether serious or otherwise; it is the musical equivalent of a linguistic dialect or idiom. It is music that is not tailored for a broader listenership, for folk music is a music more of active involvement than of passive spectatorship. As Robert Cantwell describes it, "'folk' implies mutuality between high and low, and carries with it a predemocratic tradition grounded in feudalism . . . and inherently inimical to ideas derived from trade, from the town, science, money, mechanization, and mass production."[6] Because of this, it is music that typically places less of a premium on precision of execution—Woody Guthrie was, after all, at best a middling guitarist— than cultivated music does; folk music is notionally a music in which all members of a community are encouraged to participate.

Many of the musicians discussed in this study shared a heightened consciousness of such distinctions, often related to the economic and class connotations of each genre. Of course, as Hitchcock's (and my) rather loose definitions demonstrate, these classifications are inherently slippery, and individual pieces—as well as styles--of music frequently migrate, over time, between genres. However, these categories retain great explanatory power, and are at any rate still useful tools.

Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms "insurgent," "subversive," and "dissident" more or less interchangeably to describe proponents of a wide variety of political causes, from Marxism to racial equality to pacifism. I recognize that the three terms are not identical, any more than the views to which they are applied. What I am trying to capture by using them is the sense of unease or dissatisfaction with the status

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5. Hitchcock, *Music in the United States*, Third Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 54.

6. Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 38.

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quo, coupled with the consequent desire for change, that all three terms communicate. Ultimately, this study is concerned with the idea of intentionally employing music as a political agent. In this sense, almost any song that depicts the shortcomings of America's political and/or economic organization, or the concomitant struggles so central to the lives of many American citizens, qualifies for inclusion. While this may appear to be an unnaturally broad definition of insurgent song, it is my sense that the first step in the formation of insurgent or subversive movements is the recognition of systemic problems in need of remedy. Only once this has been achieved can activists, organizers, or musicians call for specific reforms.

In my choices of actual musical repertoire, I generally focus on pieces that explicitly address relevant political issues, which means that I am almost—but not quite—entirely concerned with vocal music. I do not, however, analyze the various rhetorical strategies by which lyricists might attempt to incite listeners to take action.[7] My primary area of concern is the musical tactics that composers and critics advocated for use in the struggle. Moreover, although an interesting case could be made that a relatively abstract work like, say, Varèse's *Ionisation* enacts insurgency on a purely musical level, I'm going to eschew such hermeneutic acrobatics and will instead address pieces or events that more directly express a political viewpoint. There are, however, several instances of musical pieces or productions (a prime example being the initial Hartford and Broadway runs of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, discussed later) that clearly have insurgent aims, although their lyrics fail to specify their precise targets. Throughout, I attempt to demonstrate the significance of insurgent sentiments to musicians, and of music to insurgents, in 1930s New York. If I seem at times a bit too enamored of "high" culture products at the expense of discussions of union songsters or folk songs, this is due not to any value

---

7. For an example of the pitfalls of this approach, see R. Serge Denisoff's typology of song goals and methods, which might just as easily apply to pamphlets, poems, or paintings as to music; Denisoff, *Sing a Song of Social Significance*, 2nd Ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 2-13.

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judgments on my part, but rather to the availability of pertinent sources; simply put, educated composers of "cultivated" music produced a disproportionate amount of the theoretical writing on the issues this study addresses. Moreover, it was only during this period that most music critics began to accord folk and vernacular musics coverage comparable to that given to cultivated music. However, the history of activist music in America encompasses a broad spectrum of styles and subcultures, and this study will examine the contributions of musicians working in each of the folk, vernacular, and cultivated traditions.

Of course, just as insurgent politics were in the air throughout the United States during the Depression, music was used for insurgent ends from Oklahoma to California, from Alabama to New Hampshire, and everywhere in between. This study, however, is restricted to New York City, first, because a study of insurgent music across the United States in the Depression would be simply too broad in scope, and second, because New York, then as now, was the unofficial media capital of the country, as well as a bastion of radical politics. Finally, and most important, in the two decades between the World Wars, New York was host to a concentration of talented and influential musicians without parallel in American history. By the end of 1940, it was home to the nation's premier musicians in the fields of jazz, folk, and classical music.

The period addressed in this study is what I call the "Long Thirties," which stretches from the epochal stock market crash of October 1929 until the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.[8] This seems to be a more meaningful method for a thematic study like mine than the arbitary beginning and cutting–off of the 1930s on January 1, 1930 and December 31, 1939, respectively. For economic reasons, the America of December 1929 had far more in common, I would argue, with the America of December

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8. For a discussion of the concept of the "Short Twentieth Century," to which I owe my own "long 1930s," see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age Of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Random House, 1995), 2–17.

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1930 than that of December 1928. Similarly, while the escalation of hostilities in Europe and Asia meant that the American public was arguably focused more on foreign than domestic affairs by the end of 1939, substantial numbers of Americans continued to harbor isolationist sentiments and live in the social and political world of the 1930s, until the shock of Pearl Harbor. The stock market crash and nation's entry into World War II were the defining moments of the 1930s in America. Both events occasioned seismic shifts in the political, cultural, economic, and social landscapes, and set the intervening years apart from any other decade in American history.

Although this period is one of the most written–about in American history, I know of no work that demonstrates the many and deep connections between its musical thought and practice and contemporaneous trends in art, film, and literature, not to mention politics, economics, historiography, and philosophy. Among all the major cultural histories of the period, only Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* includes any substantial discussion of the period's music. In the chapters "Labor on Revue: The Popular Front Musical Theater" and "Cabaret Blues," Denning alludes to many of the major figures, pieces, and events addressed in my own study. But while his discussions are valuable introductions to their topics, they are limited in both scope and approach: many figures are mentioned, but only a few are examined in any detail, and Denning, a literary scholar, provides no in-depth analysis of the technical and stylistic issues raised in both the music and the criticism of such figures as Marc Blitzstein, Charles Seeger and Aaron Copland, among others.

Likewise, while Barbara Zuck's *History of Musical Americanism* touches on many of the "cultivated" music manifestations of the interaction of musical and political thought--especially in her chapters "Americanism Takes a Left Turn" and "Musical Americanism and the WPA" --and addresses the political inclinations and compositions of its subjects, it too fails to analyze their writings or their activities. More importantly, although her book is well-researched and clearly organized, Zuck gives short shrift to folk and

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vernacular music. The former comes into the story only to the extent that it intersects directly with the cultivated scene (Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and the Lomaxes are barely mentioned) and the latter is not discussed at all. Conversely, the exemplary scholarship of the late Richard Reuss illuminates much of the relationship between folk music and leftist politics but says virtually nothing about cultivated composition or vernacular music.

In my own work, then, I attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of the ways in which social, political, technological, and economic forces interacted with musics of all genres in Depression-era New York. If at times I seem caught up in matters non-musical, I would note that the same could be said about the subjects of this study. The one point that I most hope to prove is that any investigation of the musical thought of this period must account for the extra-musical context in which it was produced; while the composers, performers, and critics studied herein may not have shaped American society in all the ways that they desired, that desire nevertheless remains central to their work, and to this one.

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Roots

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Chapter 1: Who, What, Why, and Where From?

In the popular imagination, New York City in the "Roaring Twenties" is primarily characterized by the glittering social scene portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. And why not? Following the conclusion of World War I, Alexis de Tocqueville's predictions were seemingly confirmed, as the United States and the newly socialist Russian state jointly ascended to the heights of international power. In both economic and military terms, the U. S. was the world's dominant nation. Furthermore, America's combination of natural endowments--resource-rich and fertile land protected by two vast oceans--and technological and industrial savvy made the nation's continued good fortunes seem like a safe bet. The overriding motifs in representations of the period are thus monumental prosperity and a concomitant hedonism. In support of the former, commentators point to the meteoric rise in stock prices over the second half of the decade, ignoring the continued legal racial segregation of most of New York's hotels and nightclubs, as well as the abominable living and working conditions endured by hundreds of thousands of the city's citizens, a disproportionate number of them women, recent immigrants and people of color. The latter quality is divined in the nation's insatiable hunger for novelty and entertainment, which led Frederick Lewis Allen to consider "the unparalleled rapidity and unanimity with which millions of men and women turned their attention, their talk, and their emotional interest upon a serious of tremendous trifles" to be "one of the striking characteristics" of 1920s America.[1]

But like the rosy, bull market version of the 1920s, Allen's picture of national amusements-- focused as it is on such admitted "trifles" as the feats of marathon dancers, the golfer Bobby Jones, flagpole sitters, and the joys of Mah Jong--exaggerates the triviality of American cultural scene. Although it is cited less frequently than the

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1. Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (New York: Harper & Row, 1931), 155.

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economic boom of the 1920s, America's musical, literary, and artistic maturation over the same period may have been even more impressive. While the legendary Armory Show of 1913 was a watershed event in the modernist movement in art, this was due more to the European contributions to the exhibit than to the works of Americans. But in the following decade, the paintings of artists including Joseph Stella and Georgia O'Keefe achieved an international renown never reached by the Ashcan Realists. Similarly, novelists like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and such poets as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot were received as artists of the first order. Despite their expatriate status, they could be seen as the vanguard of American literary lions, whose ranks also included William Faulkner, Willa Cather, and Nobel laureate Sinclair Lewis. In both literature and painting, American artists built upon and drew from the work of earlier figures, including the writers of the American Renaissance and the realist and naturalist movements, as well as painters like Thomas Cole and especially Winslow Homer. These and other American artists, acclaimed for their work's merit as much as its national origin, were by then pillars of the burgeoning American cultural canon, which in the 1920s was only beginning to attain an air of academic and cultural validity. At the same time, the "Young American" critics, Lewis Mumford, Van Wyck Brooks, and Malcolm Cowley among them, advocated a form of cultural nationalism, arguing that American artists and thinkers should find their inspirations in the nation's own heritage.

By contrast, the vibrant American musical scene of the 1920s emerged almost *ex nihilo*, and although it shared some of the European overtones of the literary scene, it was distinctively American in its roots and its aesthetic. The widespread dissemination during the 1920s of vernacular musics including country, blues, and especially jazz, marked the beginning of the reification of a genuinely *American* musical heritage. At the same time, composers of cultivated music enjoyed greater opportunities for the publication and performance of their works than any of their predecessors had known. Even more importantly, a generation of composers including Henry Cowell, Dane

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Rudhyar, Edgard Varèse, and Aaron Copland began to achieve that rarest of things for the American composer of cultivated music: an appreciative audience.

So on Tuesday, 29 October 1929, when the bottom unofficially dropped out of American capitalism in the great stock market crash, it marked the end, not just of an epochal bull market, but also of what was, until that time, probably the most fruitful period in the history of American music. There had been numerous warning signs of impending economic disaster, but many Americans were still caught off guard by the severity of the system's failure. Indeed, it took several years for the full import of the stock market debacle to manifest itself in the widespread unemployment, poverty, and desperation associated with the Great Depression. Even to those who were least affected by the market's collapse, however, it must have been abundantly clear that the Roaring Twenties had come to a screeching halt two months too soon. Although the universality of American prosperity in the 1920s has certainly been exaggerated, that decade was nevertheless the occasion for an economic resurgence after the brief depression of 1920–21.[2]

While the composers who had flourished in the 1920s continued to produce important works of art, their "ultra–modern" aesthetic seemed increasingly irrelevant to a public who now preferred a sense of security to the adventurousness of the 1920s. Naturally, musicians felt these desires as strongly as any other groups of Americans. As a consequence, they began to compose music that addressed these issues head–on. Composers with no apparent previous interest in poltical matters, including such committed avant–gardists as Aaron Copland and Ruth Crawford, now wrote music that grappled explicitly with the problems facing most Americans.

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2. For a lively, informative discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the American economy of the 1920s, see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash 1929*, rev. ed. (New York: Mariner, 1997), 2–7 and passim.

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These and other cosmopolitan artists, often college–educated and European–trained, were busy discovering what a number of their less well–heeled contemporaries--especially folksingers like Aunt Molly Jackson, Leadbelly, and Woody Guthrie, but also union organizers and leaders of other oppressed communities—already knew: music could derive immediacy and relevance, not just through the employment of sophisticated technical means and advanced compositional plans, but also by addressing the concerns of its audience directly, through the use of topical lyrics and themes. Throughout the 1930s, musicians from various strata of American society concerned themselves with using music to effect change. Their songs, shows, film scores, and concert series represent a high point in the relationship between cultivated American musicians and their fellow citizens. At no time since the 1930s have so many of America's finest composers been so overtly political in their music. And aside from the 1960s, no other decade in the twentieth century witnessed anything approaching the intimacy of the connection between vernacular music and political activism in 1930s America. Of course, the musicians to be discussed in this study were not acting without precedent, and they were all part of larger communities: the community of American citizens, the community of workers, the community of artists, and the community of musicians. Each of these groups contributed significantly to the insurgent music of the 1930s, which was ultimately more about community than anything else.

Defining and Opposing Modernity

The problem of integrating seemingly disparate social movements under one comprehensive heading is hardly unique to the present study. In analyzing related trends from the period directly preceding the one I discuss, T. J. Jackson Lears employs the term "Antimodernism."[3] Lears dates antimodernism as a cultural force from 1880 through

3. Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

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1920, and writes that antimodernism "contained a critique of modern culture applicable to all secular, bureaucratic systems, whether socialist or capitalist. The antimodern impulse stemmed from revulsion against . . . the systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity and of individual life for maximum personal achievement; the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare; the reduction of the world to a disenchanted object to be manipulated by rational technique." Among the key proponents of antimodernism were the adherents of the late-nineteenth century English Arts and Crafts movement, a critical but often-overlooked antecedent of 1930s radicalism. Lears notes that "[t]he communal efforts of the Arts and Crafts movement . . . were part of a continuing tradition that looked backward to antebellum utopians and forward to the agrarian communities of the New Deal era and the 1960s."[4] The movement was led by William Morris, whom biographer and labor historian E. P. Thompson calls "the first creative artist of major stature in the world to take his stand, consciously and without shadow of compromise, with the revolutionary working class."[5]

The spur to artistic anti-modernism was therefore not the musical, literary, or artistic avant–garde so commonly identified with the term "modernism." Rather, it was the new structuring of American political, material, and economic society that characterized modernity. Included under the rubric of "modernism" in this sense are such disparate phenomena as the exaltation of efficiency and technology, the commodification of pleasure, the secularization of culture, the professionalization of the arts, and the physical and emotional fragmentation of American society. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the rise of automated production and rationalized industry, promoted most famously by Frederick Winslow Taylor, was a dominant issue in American life. According to the historian William E. Leuchtenburg, from 1914 to 1929, the proportion

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4. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 7, 65.

5. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 727.

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of American industry that was run on electric machinery grew from 30 to 70%.[6] This shift, as well as the related change, around 1910, when "'capitalists' and 'trusts' were replaced in the public mind by 'managers' and 'large-scale organizations,'" led to what the labor historian David Montgomery calls a "'Great Fear' of Taylorism" throughout this period.[7] This process culminated in World War I, when, for the first time in the nation's history, the federal government exercised significant control over the private sector through such organizations as the War Finance Corporation, War Trade Board, War Industries Board, and National War Labor Board. Leuchtenburg has described the rapidity and thoroughness of this transformation in *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*: "In 1916 America still adhered to nineteenth-century values of decentralization, competition, equality, agrarian supremacy, and the primacy of the small town. By 1920 the triumph of the twentieth century--centralized, industrialized, secularized, urbanized--while by no means complete, could be clearly seen."[8]

Many Americans--particularly among the working class--found this prospect an unhappy one, and during the last years of the 1910s the nation witnessed an intense struggle between radicals and the moderate-to-conservative leaders of governments local and national. The battle began while World War I still raged; in the last two years of the war, Congress passed the Espionage and Sedition Acts, under cover of which over 1,500 radicals were arrested.[9] As if in mockery of the Armistice signed in November 1918, 1919 was among the most contentious years in the United States since the Civil War. A

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6. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 179.

7. The rise of Taylorism is discussed in David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 247-251; quote on 250.

8. Discussed Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 34-37; quote on 40.

9. Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 42.

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wave of labor actions roiled the nation: the general strike that paralyzed Seattle in January was succeeded, eight months later, by a local strike of Boston police and a national steelworkers' strike. Meanwhile, the Soviet declaration of the Third Communist International in March suggested to American radicals that they were participants in a movement that was ascendant the world over, as inevitable as Karl Marx had predicted it would be. These developments were, in and of themselves, disconcerting to Americans of more moderate political temperaments. Much more so was a series of bombings--apparently conducted by anarchists, but blamed on labor radicals and Communists--in Seattle and New York City, and at the house of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. These incidents set the stage for the government's reaction to the ongoing political and economic disruptions.[10]

In November 1919, the so-called "Palmer Raids" began with the arrests, in cities across the country, of 250 members of the Union of Russian Workers. During the following several months, hundreds more radicals, including the writer and activist Emma Goldman, were arrested and summarily deported. In early 1920, the New York State Assembly voted to expel five Socialists from its ranks, a decision protested by Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes, Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding, and other prominent conservatives. The "Red Scare" had largely run its course by the spring of 1919, but it received a grim coda that May when the immigrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested for the robbery and murder of a paymaster in Boston. The two were found guilty and sentenced to death in July 1921, following a trial that was derided by radicals, liberals and many moderates throughout the United States and Europe as a clear case of political persecution. Evidence that later came to light suggests that Sacco was guilty and Vanzetti innocent, but this is almost beside the point; by the time of their executions in August 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti had become

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10. For a detailed discussion of the strikes of 1919, see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, Revised and Updated Edition (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 115-58.

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symbols of America's draconian response to political radicalism. Their iconic significance to the radicals of the 1930s caused Leslie Fiedler to assert that "the Thirties start in the year 1927, because Sacco and Vanzetti in the first place were martyrs."[11]

Their martyrdom was representative of the fortunes of American radicalism throughout the 1920s. From 1915 to 1922, the United States Supreme Court repeatedly ruled against organized labor, upholding yellow-dog contracts, banning unionization boycotts, and finding against the United Mine Workers in an antitrust case.[12] David Montgomery discusses the struggles of the American labor movement in the 1920s this way:

> The hostile stance of the state toward labor's demands after 1918, its policies of deregulation and deflation, the ubiquitous repression by local, state, and federal police, and above all the mounting toll of unemployed--first at the end of 1918, more devastatingly during the 1920-2 depression, and then endemic to industrial life through the Coolidge prosperity--all fostered an environment in which open-shop drives could hurl back the union tide in virtually every city of the land.[13]

Meanwhile, pro-business Republicans consolidated their power, and Warren Harding was easily elected president in 1920. Harding's untimely death prevented him from

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11. Leslie Fiedler, "The Two Memories: Reflections on Writers and Writing in the Thirties," in *The Thirties: A Reconsideration in the Light of the American Political Tradition*, ed. Morton J. Frisch and Martin Diamond (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), 58; on the "Red Scare," see Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 66-83.

12. A "yellow-dog contract" is a contract that requires that the worker not join a union, and like the injunction--a court order prohibiting a strike--was a favorite tool of business in the 1920s.

13. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 453.

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seeking re-election, but not even the revelation of massive corruption in the administration, including scandals involving Harding's Secretary of the Interior and Attorney General, among others, dented the Republicans' electoral edge. In 1924, Calvin Coolidge was elected by a wide margin, winning fifteen million votes--almost twice Democrat John Davis's total of eight million--in an outcome that decisively marked the shift from Wilsonian liberalism to an administration characterized by a great sympathy for business and an aversion to concerted government action.

Under Coolidge, Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon pushed through massive tax cuts and deregulation of industry, which combined with the pro-business court decisions mentioned above in effectively ending the era of progressive governmental policy that had begun with the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Of almost equal importance was the rise in public ownership of stocks, a process that had the consequence of distancing actual ownership of corporations from their management. Leuchtenburg calls this last trend "[p]robably the most important development within corporations" in the years following World War I.[14]

The new popular significance of the business mindset was illustrated by the success of businessman (later Congressman) Bruce Barton's 1924 *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*, in which Christ was praised as the ultimate salesman, the Bible viewed as the archetypal brochure, and religious teachings mined for the business lessons they contained. The book was a best-seller throughout 1925 and 1926, and Barton was one of the cultural heroes of the decade.[15] To some extent, the success of business ideology was warranted, as the technological and institutional innovations of the period contributed to a massive growth in national wealth: by the end of the decade, the United States boasted a national income that exceeded those of Germany, France, Japan,

14. Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 199.

15. For more on Barton, see Warren I. Susman, "Culture Heroes: Ford, Barton, Ruth," in Susman, *Culture as History*, 122-31.

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Canada, Great Britain, and more than a dozen other countries combined. On an individual level, this had a profound effect on the way many Americans led their lives, marking the beginning of the modern consumer-oriented leisure economy, as illustrated by the rise of national icons in both sports and entertainment. However, it was also the case that many Americans missed out on the benefits of what was known as the "Coolidge prosperity": throughout the decade, unemployment hovered between seven and twelve percent; seventy-one percent of Americans made less than $2,500 per year, which was then considered "the minimum standard for a decent living"; and the population was subject to a striking economic stratification.[16]

Soon after the war's cessation, American farmers suffered great hardships as a result of unprecedentedly low prices. But during the 1920s, the locus for social reform lay not in rural America but in the nation's cities, as the model for political progressivism shifted from the LaFollette/Bryan-style populism of the turn of the century to a new urban progressivism exemplified by New York Governor Al Smith. First elected governor in 1918, Smith was re-elected to that office in 1922, 1924, and 1926, and was the Democratic presidential nominee in 1928. As a state legislator and then governor, he turned New York into a laboratory of political reform. During his time in office, the state instituted the first major low-cost housing program in the country, approved massive pay increases for teachers, floated bonds to fund hospitals and prisons, and regulated working hours and conditions. Following the 1928 campaign, which was characterized by vitriolic anti-Catholic rhetoric against Smith, Herbert Hoover received 444 electoral votes to Smith's 87. Even so, the election marked the beginning of a demographic shift that favored the Democrats. Once the party of nativist rural populism, the Democrats under Smith developed a base that was predominantly urban, immigrant, and working-class.[17]

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16. Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 108, 193-96.

17. Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 138-39, 235-37; Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 261.

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But while all these political and economic phenomena had a deep and lasting impact on American society, perhaps the single most significant development during the 1920s--one that, like the popular ascendancy of Wall Street and the birth of urban progressivism, was centered in New York City--was the maturation of modern American commercial culture. William R. Taylor describes this process: "Beginning in the 1920s, national network radio, theatre chains, centralized motion picture distribution, and wire service journalism forever changed the previous half century's close relation among cultural producer, cultural consumer, and the city of New York, transforming them into a new mass culture."[18]

Stuart Ewen has also noted the changed relation between producers and consumers, and located the nexus of their interaction in advertising. Because the new, large-scale, national industry required national communities of consumption, advertisers labored, with much success, to filter consumption through the lens of shared culture. Thus, as Ewen writes, "[w]ithin governmental and business rhetoric, consumption assumed an ideological veil of nationalism and democratic lingo." All of this reminds us that, as Thomas Bender observes, the "phenomena we conventionally call *culture* are in fact political once they are framed within the notion of the making of public culture."[19]

Because this is so, the growth of mass media, particularly the radio, was one of the most politically significant phenomena of the 1920s. From the beginning, radio was the site of a struggle between artists, broadcasters, and sponsors, for control of the broadcast materials. To be sure, this contest did not begin with radio. In 1904, Enrico Caruso had signed the first ever exclusive contract, with royalties, between an artist and an American

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18. Taylor, "The Launching of a Commercial Culture: New York City, 1860-1930," in *Power, Culture, and Place: Essays on New York City*, ed. John Hull Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 109.

19. Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 25, 42; Bender, "Metropolitan Life and the Making of Public Culture," in *Power, Culture, and Place*, ed. Mollenkopf, 263-64.

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recording firm. Five years later, the 1909 Copyright Act "guaranteed the *exclusive* right 'to perform the copyrighted work publicly for profit if it be a musical composition and for the purpose of public performance for profit.'"[20]

However, the struggle for control of recorded music intensified greatly with the rise of national commercial broadcasting in the 1920s. By 1921, individual records cost roughly twenty cents to produce, and increased efficiency of production meant that any sales beyond 5,000 copies yielded almost pure profit. This development coincided with experiments in the classic recorded-music and news format that holds sway in radio even today.[21] Two years later, in response to this system, which offered composers and performers no compensation for broadcasts of their recordings, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) demanded "license fees" for radio usage of recordings including ASCAP materials.[22]

Given the fiercely contested nature of the broadcast medium--the National Association of Broadcasters contemplated circumventing ASCAP by making its own deals directly with composers--it was inevitable that the federal government would intervene and attempt to create order out of chaos. In 1927, a landmark federal law stated the terms of broadcasting in the United States. The law defined radio channels as federal property, for which licenses were granted for use, not ownership; forbade censorship except when based on profanity; required equal treatment of rival political candidates; prohibited licensing of applicants found guilty of monopolistic practices; and mandated

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20. Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business In the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 12, xv.

21. Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 20, 25. In 1926, NBC became the first national broadcast network, raising the financial stakes in musical licensing by an almost immeasurable degree. Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States* Volume I--to 1933 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 29.

22. Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 119-21.

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explicit notice of program sponsorship.[23] Thus, less than a decade after radio proved its national importance by broadcasting election-night coverage of Harding's 1920 triumph, the industry had assumed the general outlines that remain to this day.

But while the significance of radio's rapid maturation can hardly be overstated, it remained but one arena in the battle over musical ownership in the era of mass-produced recordings. Erik Barnouw notes that although radio overtook phonographs as the primary means of disseminating recorded music in the early 1920s, synergy between the two media was highly beneficial to latter, so that by 1926, phonographs were owned in twice as many homes as radios. Another area of concern was jukeboxes, of which 12,000 were in operation by 1930.[24]

These developments had analogs and implications that ranged far beyond the realm of music. As Warren I. Susman has observed, during the 1920s, "Americans were made constantly and fully aware that they lived in a new era. Communications was key to this, and no more dramatic instruments of total change had come along than the automobile and the motion picture."[25] That movies stood at the center of the new national mass culture was indicated by the temple-like movie theatres constructed during the period. David Nasaw, who has termed the luxurious movie houses "Palaces for the People," notes that "[w]hen the Roxy opened in 1927, live music was provided by a 110-person symphony orchestra, four conductors, an organ so mammoth it required three organists to play it, the Deagan Chimes with twenty bells, fourteen Steinway pianos, and a music library that was reportedly the largest in the world"[26] Despite the mixed messages sent

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23. Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 119-21, 195-200.

24. Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 22, 41.

25. Susman, "Culture and Civilization: The Nineteen-Twenties," in Susman, *Culture as History*, 108.

26. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 226.

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by such structures, which mixed high-art pretension with a Barnum-like taste for spectacular gigantism, their fundamental meaning was unmistakable when viewed alongside the growth of radio and recording: all three heralded the coming of a national mass culture, and confirming Lyman Bryson's assertion that, "[s]ociologically speaking, popular art is a product of the machine age."[27]

Modernity, Modernism

The work of the artistic and political radicals of the interwar period was, of course, affected in myriad ways by all of these various cultural, political, and economic, and trends, which together helped define modern America. But for the purposes of this discussion, all of these may be boiled down to the tremendous impact of the period's technological developments, which affected the daily lives of our subjects immeasurably, in manners both personal and professional. This engendered strong responses, both negative and positive, as throughout the 1910s and 1920s, many artistic modernists rejected mainstream progressive politics Many of those who embraced modernity grew enamored of European futurism, an aesthetic expression of proto-fascist politics. For those opposed to modern technology, the radicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W., also called the "Wobblies"—see discussion 25-26) proved more appealing. Their message reflected what Susman has described as "the great fear that runs through much of the writing of the 1920s and 1930s . . . whether any great industrial and democratic mass society can maintain a significant level of civilization, and whether mass education and mass communication will allow any civilization to survive."[28] Either way, the preference for radical rather than moderate political doctrines was often rooted in aesthetic concerns, as political freedom--particularly in the areas of speech and

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27. Lyman Bryson, "Popular Art," in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Lyman Bryson, (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 278.

28. Susman, "Culture and Civilization," 107.

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sexuality--was seen as a clear analog for the aesthetic liberty that modernists advocated.[29] Like the European modernists to whom many writers and artists looked for inspiration (and unlike the realists who dominated their fields around the turn of the century), America's modernists were not primarily interested in political issues *per se*. This is not to say that they were immune to the social importance of their art; rather, their political concerns had more to do with cultural mores and civil liberty than with the issues of economic justice and social welfare that had excited the realists.

It would certainly be difficult to argue that the music of the so-called "ultra-modernists"--Edgard Varèse, Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, and Ruth Crawford--evinced much concern with social matters. As their sobriquet suggests, these composers wrote music that emulated and intensified the obsessive concern with new techniques shown by modernist composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky while generally rejecting those composers' particular innovations.[30] But although the music of the ultramoderns seemed largely devoid of non-musical subject matter, the composers themselves were very much a part of the growing cultural nationalism that pervaded American arts and letters in the 1920s. In composing music that rejected most established classical (and even modernist) models, the ultramoderns became the first generation of American cultivated composers to produce a distinctly American kind of music. Ultramodernism was, in this sense, a musical declaration of national independence.

Among the ultra-modernists, this interest dovetailed with a vaguely leftist interest in co-operative ventures. The result was a proliferation of composers' organizations

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29. Arthur Frank Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance: Iconoclasm, Modernism, and Nationalism in American Culture, 1908-1917* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 13-15, 149-50; on modernist composers' fascination with modern technology, see Carol J. Oja's discussion of "The Machine in the Concert Hall" in Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59-95.

30. For a more detailed examination of the technical ideas of several ultramodernists, see David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89-174.

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dedicated to performing contemporary compositions, particularly American compositions. Other than Henry Cowell's San Francisco-based New Music Society, all of the major groups were located in New York, including the Pan American Association of Composers, International Composers Guild, League of Composers, and Copland-Sessions concert series. Similarly, a "Conductorless Symphony," touted as "a thoroughly co-operative organization," performed nine concerts of modern music at Carnegie Hall from 1928 through 1930.[31]

Perhaps the most significant models for these groups were the Soviet arts and music collectives of the 1920s and 1930s. Less obvious, but no less important, is the connection between the composers' groups and the utopian communities of nineteenth–century America, as well as the Arts and Crafts movement. The former stressed the importance of communitarian endeavors, and the latter placed a high priority on workers' engagement with their occupations, insisting that meaningful labor was to be profitable both financially and emotionally. This link is made clear in the progressive political views communicated by several ultra-modernists. The composer Dane Rudhyar (1895-1985) held that modern composition expressed a "social point of view" and asserted that, in music scores, "[n]otes stand as individuals, free, equal--like men in a perfect communistic civilization."[32] While Rudhyar's political views were more explicitly articulated than those of most of his colleagues, it is also that case that many important American modernist composers of the 1920s demonstrated, in their music, what Carol J. Oja calls "a culturally based inclination to champion difference."[33] This proto-multiculturalism

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31. For more on the composers' organizations, see Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 177-200; on the Conductorless Symphony, including quote from leaflet, see Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 199. Oja suggests the group may have been modeled on the Soviet Persimsfons Orchestra.

32. Rudhyar quoted in Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 103, 104.

33. Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 152. Perhaps the most striking example of this trait is Henry Cowell's inclination towards borrowing musical techniques and sonorities from non-western musical traditions.

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manifested itself in a variety of ways, of which perhaps the most notable was the incorporation of jazz idioms into cultivated compositions. On a purely musical level, this move defied existing cultural hierarchies; even more significant were the progressive racial implications.

At the same time that composers like Aaron Copland and John Alden Carpenter were bringing elements of African-American vernacular music into the concert hall, the intellectual leaders of the Harlem Renaissance argued that African-Americans should aspire to enter the world of art music as a means of demonstrating their ability to succeed in society in general. David Levering Lewis writes that following World War I, Charles Johnson, one of the primary theorists of the Harlem Renaissance, "found that one area alone--probably because of its very implausibility--had not been proscribed [to African-Americans] . . . If the road to the ballot box and jobs was blocked, Johnson saw that the door to Carnegie Hall and New York publishers was ajar. Each book, play, poem, or canvas by an African-American would become a weapon against the old racial stereotypes."[34] Paradoxically, though, intellectuals like Johnson and Alain Locke were unenthusiastic about vernacular black music, deriding musicals like the pathbreaking *Shuffle Along* as unpolished and lowbrow. They were concerned that jazz culture confirmed negative racial stereotypes, and as a result they failed to support what many white intellectuals both at home and abroad considered to be a vital and valuable new strain of music.[35]

Despite the successes of African-American cultivated musicians like Roland Hayes--a favorite of Johnson and Locke--it was vernacular music that brought African-Americans into the nation's great halls. In March 1914, bandleader James Reese Europe brought his Clef Club to Carnegie Hall. The gargantuan ensemble that performed there

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34. Lewis, ***When Harlem Was In Vogue*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 48.

35. Lewis, ***When Harlem Was In Vogue***, 95-96.

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consisted of two double basses, thirteen cellos, eight violins, five trap drums, ten pianos, one timpani, one tuba, seven cornets, two clarinets, eight trombones, forty-seven mandolins, twenty-seven harp guitars, eleven banjos, and two church choirs; it was definitely not a typical Carnegie performance![36] Fourteen years later, W. C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues," produced a Carnegie Hall concert that traced the history of African-American music. Despite the protests of the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, it was clear that Black musicians intended to make their names on their own terms, and in this they succeeded. Throughout the 1920s, as new technologies enabled the creation of a national mass culture, the sound of that culture was shaped by African-American vernacular music. As Lewis writes, "[t]he Savoy jam sessions [of Fletcher Henderson's Rainbow Orchestra], broadcast over the radio, were to American popular music what Dearborn was to transportation."[37]

Moreover, although aesthetes like Locke and Johnson may not have recognized the fine distinctions that existed within genres of popular music, one striking aspect of 1920s jazz is its diversity, ranging from the frenetic Chicago school to Fletcher Henderson's highly polished big-band, from the dense, dissonant polyphony of Duke Ellington to the sweet sounds of popular bandleaders like Guy Lombardo. Jazz in this period was no more monolithic than cultivated music, although by the end of the decade it was already clear that the sweeter, less driving forms of the music were more likely to achieve popular success.

By the end of the 1920s, jazz existed at once in several separate cultural worlds. Because of its role in popular culture, jazz was often viewed as the quintessential packaged, mass-produced art. At the same time, established composers like Satie and Stravinsky drew upon the jazz idiom, thus helping to validate it as a legitimate musical

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36. Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, 31.

37. Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, 173.

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style in much the same way as Nietzche's admiration for Emerson had ratified the Concord sage as more than a coiner of affirmative aphorisms. Finally, many well-to-do New Yorkers visited jazz clubs with a spirit of adventurous exoticism; they considered the music relatively uncivilized, and although this was part of its appeal, it was hard to miss the undertone of Rousseauvian racial condescension.

For all of its diversity though, jazz, like the music of the ultramoderns, the economics of the Coolidge prosperity, the management techniques of Taylorism, and the pro-business politics of three Republican administrations, may be viewed as merely one facet of the modernity--musical, political, social, and economic--to which the radicals of the Depression reacted.

Classic Anti-Moderns

As mentioned earlier, the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century was one of the earliest organized expressions of antimodernism. T. J. Jackson Lears notes that, in addition to their own achievements, "Arts and Crafts leaders also served as the intellectual ancestors of decentralist intellectuals in our own time . . . who have had to remind us once more of the deadening effects of rationalization and the desperate need for creative, useful labor."[38] While antimodernism was deeply concerned with the problems of modern industrialism, however, it was not simply a reactionary expression of cultural Ludditism. To the contrary, it possessed a deeply affirmative core that could best be described as nationalistic (without the jingoistic connotation often attached to that term.) In the years following World War I, many Americans washed their hands of international engagement, disgusted with the carnage that resulted, they thought, from European cultural decadence and imperialism.[39] This sentiment was particularly

38. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 65.

39. Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 12.

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pronounced in the realm of culture and the arts. By 1927, when the publication of Vernon Parrington's seminal *Main Currents in American Thought* laid the foundations for the academic American Studies movement, the hunt was already on to uncover and extol the previously neglected gems of American culture, whether literary, philosophical, or artistic.[40] This movement led to, among other things, the canonization of the many mid–nineteenth century writers who now constitute the core of the "American Renaissance."

Throughout the second and third decades of the twentieth century this antimodernist nationalism manifested itself in a growing interest in folk culture. The connection between the nascent folk revival and the Crafts movement was exemplified by New York's Museum of Folk Arts, which opened in 1926 and emphasized crafts in its collections.[41] In addition to material culture, the vogue for folk art was evident in a new attention paid to folksong. Although some argued that jazz and other modern arts could plausibly be considered folk arts, many antimodernists considered jazz too compromised by commercialism, and also too clearly identified with a specific cultural provenance. What they wanted was folk music that transcended class hierarchies. At least since Antonin Dvor˙ák's visit to the United States from 1892 to 1895, American musicians had been admonished to choose their influences from their own nation, and not to privilege "highbrow" European sources over native "lowbrow" ones.[42]

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40. See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) for a detailed exploration of the evolution of America's relation to its own history and construction of what leading Young American Van Wyck Brooks called a "usable past."

41. Gail Levin and Judith Tick, *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2000), 46.

42. See Antonin Dvorak, "Music in America" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 90 (1895): 429–34; Van Wyck Brooks, "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow'" in Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age* (Mattituck, NY: Amereon House, 1990), 1–19, originally published 1916; and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

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Gene Bluestein has observed that the scholarship of George Lyman Kittredge, who was a pioneering researcher in the field of folk ballads, "suggests a relief from the complications of civilization and the problems inherent in the level of social life which literacy represents."[43] In this view, the oral tradition becomes identified with a sort of pre-modern utopia, and folksong is thus marked as inherently utopian in its meaning. Kittredge's influence on ballad scholarship was immense, and with the 1910 publication of his student John A. Lomax's classic *Cowboy Songs and Other Ballads* (complete with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt), published collections of American folksongs began to appear with increasing regularity. In 1917 alone, three major volumes--Josephine McGill's *Folksongs of the Kentucky Mountains*, Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway's *Lonesome Tunes*, and most famously Cecil Sharp's *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*--were published.[44] All of these collections presented folksong as musical anthropology. They introduced readers to the songs of specific groups or regions, at once preserving and disseminating them.

A different kind of collection, one that was in its own way at least as influential, was the *Little Red Songbook*, first published by the I. W. W. in 1909. A radical labor organization, the Wobblies, in the words of Archie Green, "perceived their songs as instruments of class struggle, as banners on which they emblazoned their affirmation of a world to come, and they attached no special virtue to folklore. A half-century later we see IWW songs as: folk songs, elements which bound persons together in a movement, symbols of solidarity and elan."[45] The Wobblies, perhaps the best known radical labor

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43. Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press, 1972), 94.

44. Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), 68-69.

45. Archie Green, "American Labor Lore: Its Meaning and Uses" *Industrial Relations* 4 (2/65): 68. For more on the *Little Red Songbook*, see Richard Brazier, "The Story of the IWW's 'Little Red Songbook'"

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group of the early twentieth century, attained a good deal of influence in the years leading up to World War I, particularly in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest regions, where their membership was strongest. The I. W. W. were both more radical in its methods and rhetoric and more inclusive in its membership than the staid American Federation of Labor. They were an industrial- rather than craft-based union, and they advocated direct action against those who abused workers; allegations of Wobbly involvement in industrial sabotage and even murder were not uncommon. Much less lurid, but perhaps equally important, was the significance of music for the I. W. W.

The radical journalist John Reed wrote of the Wobblies, "this is the only American working class movement which sings. Tremble then at the IWW, for a singing movement is not to be beaten."[46] When the Salvation Army--with which the I. W. W. shared a mutual antipathy--disrupted I. W. W. meetings with a loud bass drum, Wobblies sang parodies of Salvation Army songs.[47] Such songs formed the core of the *Little Red Songbook*, in which the labor standard "Solidarity Forever" was also first printed, and which influenced musicians as diverse as New York composer Elie Siegmeister and Woody Guthrie, who owned a copy.[48] The book was thus a seminal document in the field of American protest songs. This was due, in no small part, to songs like "Casey Jones," "There Is Power in a Union," and "The Preacher and the Slave," all of which were composed by the Swedish immigrant Joseph Hillstrom, better known as Joe Hill (1879-1915).

Labor History 9 (Winter 1968): 91–105. The latest edition of the book, its thirty-sixth, was published in 1995.

46. Quoted in Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 57.

47.; Fred Thompson, *The I. W. W., Its First Fifty Years: The History of an Effort to Organize the Working Class*. (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1955), 38-39. Wobbly Mac McClintock, who also wrote the well-known "Big Rock Candy Mountain," composed the song "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" for this purpose

48. John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 175, 179; Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Delta Press, 1980), 84.

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Hill was as compelling a figure biographically as he was influential musically, and he later became a huge influence on the Depression-era radicals.[49] Hill was doubly oppressed, both an immigrant and a worker. He was also an ardent proponent of labor organization, one of the most articulate members of the Wobblies, and a skilled songwriter. Hill explained the efficacy of political songs in the following manner: "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read but once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over: and I maintain that if a person can put a few cold common sense facts in a song, and dress them up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them he will succeed in reaching a great number of those who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science."[50]

Like other Wobbly songwriters, Hill was primarily a lyricist, fitting original words to existing melodies. Perhaps the most famous example of this procedure is Hill's adaptation of the old railroad song "Casey Jones":

The Workers on the S. P. line to strike sent out a call;
But Casey Jones, the engineer, he wouldn't strike at all;
His boiler it was leaking, and its drivers on the bum,
And his engine and its bearings, they were all out of plumb.

Casey Jones kept his junkpile running;
Casey Jones was working double time;
Casey Jones got a wooden medal,
For being good and faithful on the S. P. line.

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49. See Gibbs M. Smith, *Joe Hill* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969) and Wallace Stegner, *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) originally published as *The Preacher and the Slave* (New York: Doubleday, 1950).

50. Quoted in Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 59.

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The Workers said to Casey: "Won't you help up win this strike?"
But Casey said: "Let me alone, you'd better take a hike."
Then someone put a bunch of railroad ties across the track,
And Casey hit the river with an awful crack.

Casey Jones hit the river bottom;
Casey Jones broke his blooming spine;
Casey Jones was an Angeleno,
He took a trip to heaven on the S. P. line.

When Casey got to heaven to the Pearly Gate,
He said: "I'm Casey Jones, the guy that pulled the S. P. freight."
"You're just the man," said Peter; "our musicians went on strike;
You can get a job a–scabbing any time you like."

The angels got together and they said it wasn't fair
For Casey Jones to go around a–scabbing everywhere.
The Angels' Union No. 23 they sure were there,
And they promptly fired Casey down the Golden Stair.

Casey Jones went to Hell a–flying.
"Casey Jones," the Devil said, "Oh fine;
Casey Jones, get busy shoveling sulphur;
That's what you get for scabbing on the S. P. line."[51]

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51. As reproduced in Stegner, *Joe Hill*, 39–41; for more of Hill's lyrics, see "Joe Hill: Wobbly Bard," in *Rebel Voices: An I. W. W. Anthology*, ed. Joyce L. Kornbluh (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 127-57.

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At times, as in "Casey Jones," Hill alluded to the original words of songs from which he borrowed, but just as often the tunes were retained more for their familiarity and for their generic import. Most common were melodies from hymns and marching tunes, both of which resonated with the Wobblies, confirming both the righteousness of their cause and the militancy with which it was advanced. Of course, the setting of new words to familiar tunes is an ancient practice, but in these labor *contrafacta*, Hill and the Wobblies were establishing a new way of subverting the artifacts of mainstream, conservative America. According to Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison,

> By appropriating the materials of popular culture—both commercial and religious tunes—for the articulation of the collective identity of a social movement, Joe Hill helped to reinvent, and radicalize, the populist legacy. Cultural resources, and, in particular, the resources of the populist tradition, were recontextualized by Hill and the other Wobbly songwriters. In a way, the hegemonic culture was turned against itself, and the seeds for an alternative popular culture for the twentieth century were given new vitality.[52]

The climax of Joe Hill's oppositional career fulfilled an almost perfect dramatic logic. Convicted of a murder he may not have committed—Hill refused to speak in his own defense, and while the evidence against him was strong it was also purely circumstantial; further, the trial was beset with glaring procedural irregularities—he became an international figure. The United States Supreme Court was inundated with letters protesting his conviction and the Swedish government officially requested

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52. Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 60.

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clemency from Woodrow Wilson. It was all to no avail, however, as Hill was executed by a firing squad, ending his career but confirming him as a martyr to the struggle against big business and corrupt bosses. In the final letter of his life, to I. W. W. boss Big Bill Haywood, Hill wrote "Don't mourn, organize!" Nevertheless, Fred Thompson reports that 30,000 mourners attended Hill's funeral in Chicago.[53] Not only would Hill's songs live on for decades after his death, to be performed later by a number of 1930s insurgents, but he himself became the subject of one of the best-known works of Earl Robinson. the *de facto* composer laureate of the American left in the late 1930s. In time, Hill became a model for emulation by countless socially conscious musicians.

While Hill was directly engaged in the labor movement both as a worker and as a musician, another American composer was busy carving out his own niche of musical innovation coupled with, and indeed inspired by, sentiments very much in keeping with those of the antimoderns. On the surface, Joe Hill and Charles Ives could hardly be more different. Ives (1874-1954) came from a family that had been in Connecticut for several generations. Educated at Yale University, he had become a highly successful insurance executive, authoring a pamphlet on life insurance that remained in use for decades. Despite his rather conservative resume, though, Ives had a progressive streak that extended far beyond the radicalism of his pathbreaking musical ideas. In addition to his musical compositions, Ives also produced several hundred pages of prose. The most substantial of his prose works deal with musical technique (*Memos*) and aesthetics (*Essays Before a Sonata*). But his writings also include a lengthy essay titled "The Majority" that dealt with the oppression of ordinary people by the political and economic structures of the United States; a fragment of a scheme for what he called "A Peoples' World Nation"; and letters to several presidents proposing the adoption of a constitutional

53. Thompson, *The I. W. W., Its First Fifty Years*, 96-97.

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amendment mandating that all governmental actions require approval by popular referendum.[54]

Ives's prose writings have often been dismissed as the ramblings of an unsophisticated curmudgeon, and his vivid Whitmanesque style and decided lack of political subtlety seem to confirm this verdict. However, when his prose is viewed in the light of his musical ideas, a new picture of Ives emerges; Ives's music and prose are two sides of the same coin, both of them expressions of an outlook at once aesthetic and ethical. The ideal of a Whitmanesque "Union of Diversities" fueled many of his creations.[55] Ives believed fervently in the dignity and quality of the "masses," and in the song "Majority," first published in 1921, the underlying coherence and radicalism of his vision are quite clear. Here, where Ives's words and music intersect, the masses come into their own (see example 1.1).

Except for the song's final couplet, which is borrowed from Browning—"God's in his heav'n/All will be well with the world," which Ives, significantly, changes from Browning's present tense to the future—the lyrics are Ives's, and their all–embracing humanism is mirrored in the song's piano accompaniment, which contains numerous tone clusters in which the individual pitches matter little, the point being their membership in a larger whole. The song's communality is further reinforced by Ives's indication that the vocal line is "preferably for a unison chorus." This direction is justified by the assertion, somewhat exaggerated, that "it is almost impossible for a single voice to hold the part against the score"; it seems more likely that Ives wished for the chorus because of the dramatic impact of a massed group of singers working together quite literally in unison.

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54. See Charles Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata, The Majority, and Other Writings*, selected and edited by Howard Boatwright (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961) and Judith Tick, "Charles Ives and the Politics of Direct Democracy," in *Ives Studies*, ed. Philip Lambert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133–162.

55. See Larry Starr, *A Union of Diversities: Style in the Music of Charles Ives* (New York: Schirmer, 1992).

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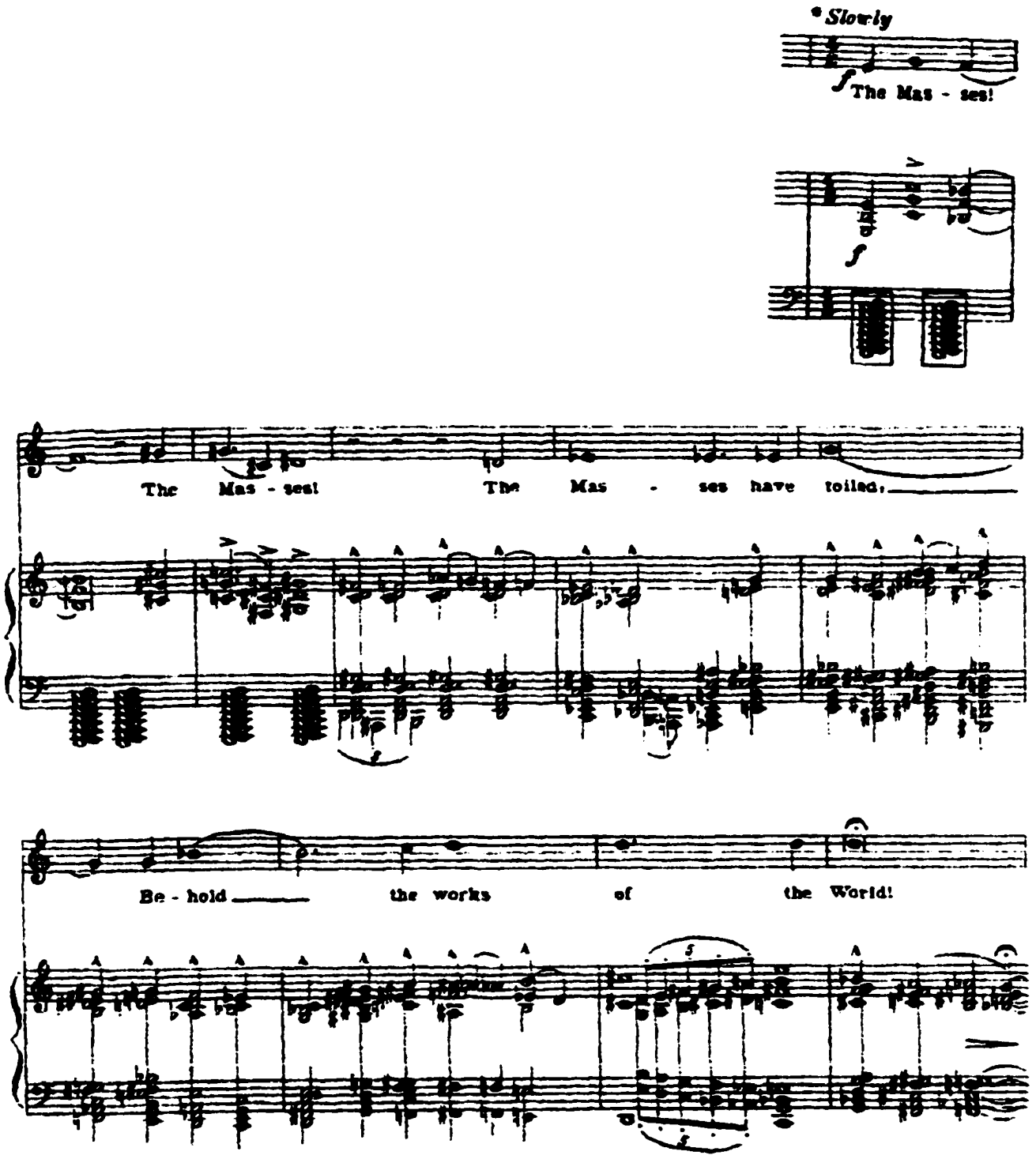
Example 1.1: Charles Ives, "Majority," mm. 8-17



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Working in isolation from the musical community, Ives began to receive some recognition, often coupled with derision, from the American press in the 1920s upon his self–financed publication of *114 Songs* and the "Concord" Sonata. But it was only in the 1930s, more than a decade after Ives had stopped composing new works, that a number of progressive critics, performers and composers realized that their country had already produced a master composer who worked in a distinctively American idiom. Aaron Copland, Goddard Lieberson, John Kirkpatrick, Elliott Carter, and Henry Cowell, among others, developed important relationships with Ives and his music, bringing him to the attention of a wider public. At the same time, Ives provided valuable financial backing to ventures like Cowell's *New Music Editions*.[56] It seems indisputable that the primary reason for Ives's importance to the young composers of the 1930s—many of whom will figure significantly in this study—was the integrity and inventiveness of his music. But the ideological grounding of many of his individual works, and indeed of his *oeuvre* as a whole, must also have exerted a strong appeal.[57] As relevant as Joe Hill's militant rhetoric, Ives's singing masses stand as a pitch–perfect representation of the ideas behind much of the finest art and music of Depression America.

International Anti-Moderns

If the insurgent musicians of the 1930s adopted Joe Hill and Charles Ives as their ancestors, then the Soviet socialist realist composers, the Berlin composers of agit–prop music and theater, and the neoclassicist proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik* became something like instructive older cousins for their younger American contemporaries.

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56. On the symbiotic relationship between Ives and the composers' organizations of the 1930s, see Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 195.

57. On the connection between Ives and socially-aware artistic realism, see my "Charles Ives's (Utopian, Pragmatist, Nostalgic, Progressive, Romantic, Modernist) Yankee Realism," *American Music* (hereafter "AM") 20/2 (Summer 2002): 188-233.

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Although Schoenbergian serialism is the most frequently discussed of Austro–German musical innovations from the inter–war period, it was far less significant for that generation of American insurgents than either Brechtian agit–prop or the contemporary movement toward *Gebrauchsmusik*, which roughly translates to "music for use." Chiefly associated with the composer Paul Hindemith, *Gebrauchsmusik* arose from the same impulse that inspired the better–known French trend of neoclassicism. Reacting negatively to a (stereotypically Germanic) modernist aesthetic that stressed the autonomy of the artwork, the irrelevance of audiences' preferences, and the primacy of cutting–edge technique, the artists associated with *Gebrauchsmusik* and neoclassicism sought to please their audiences by creating works that would be both pleasant and practically useful.

In his short essay "Shifts in Musical Production," Kurt Weill addressed this very topic, asserting that "music is seeking a rapprochement with the interests of a wider public since only in this way will it retain its viability." After citing stylistic concerns ("lightness and musical facility"), fresh avenues for music composition ("mechanical music and film music"), and composers' burgeoning concern for the listening public as the central tenets of the new musical aesthetic, Weill predicted that "the clarity of language, the precision of expression, and the simplicity of emotion, which new music has regained by pursuing a straight line of development, form together the secure aesthetic foundation for a wider dissemination of this art." The essay concludes with a brief discussion of the relevance of these concepts to the field of musical theater, as well as the potential significance of Brecht's epic theater in making musical composition important to the public far beyond the narrow confines of the traditional concert–going public. Such ideas proved very attractive to many American composers trying both to make sense of and to overcome the Depression. Also of vital importance to that generation was Weill's admonition that "musicians ought first to overcome their fear of

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truly equal collaborators."[58] Thus, as Eisenberg writes, *Gebrauchsmusik* was "at least potentially antitotalitarian. For where totalitarian ritual was manipulative and depended on the blindness of the listener, Gebrauchsmusik tried to make the listener aware of the music's mechanics and his own responses."[59] Such ideas were obviously quite attractive to the antimodernist musicians of the Depression, several of whom cited *Gebrauchsmusik* as a model for radical composition.

The impact of the agit–prop music and theater produced in the Weimar Republic was even more immediate. Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, with its combination of leftist politics and a dramatic language at once innovative and accessible, stimulated much discussion in American theatrical circles. In works of epic theater, characters and settings are important only as symbols. They are not conceived as dynamic, three-dimensional subjects; their actions and experiences are symbolize broad social and political conditions. Audiences for epic theater were not expected to enjoy the viewing experience in the traditional manner, identifying with and rooting for or against characters in the drama. Rather, they were to be educated. The primary technique of epic theater was known as *Verfremdung*, or Estrangement, which Frederic Ewen has defined as "the process of seeing the object you are examining at a 'distance,' looking at it anew, finding it 'strange,' and rediscovering it."[60] Estrangement was achieved by the use of broad, archetypal plots, in which readers and viewers could not help but discern the outlines of real-life social organizations and phenomena. The concept of estrangement may also describe not only the objectivity with which audiences were expected to view

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58. Kurt Weill, "Shifts in Musical Production," translated by Stephen Hinton, in *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, Revised Edition, ed. Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 1394–95. The essay originally dates from 1927.

59. Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 49.

60. Frederic Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times* (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), 219.

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epic theatre, but also the self-consciousness of Brecht's characters; their words and gestures often operate non-diagetically (i. e., outside of the dramatic framework), to borrow a filmic term, acknowledging their presence onstage in front of an audience. It was this sense of estrangement that inspired Walter Benjamin's description of epic theater as a "filling in" of "[t]he abyss which separates the players from the audience." In Ewen's words, epic theater was "not only a new aesthetic of the theatre and a new kind of drama, but an examination of the very basis of these forms, society itself."[61]

Brecht's collaborations with Kurt Weill on *Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*), and with Hanns Eisler on *Die Massnahme* and *Die Mutter*, were well known to New York's progressive artists, and provided them with a model of how to write musical theater that was at once artistically valid in its employment of a sophisticated modernist aesthetic, and morally and politically sound in its didactic espousal of proper left-wing ideals. In addition, Brecht and Eisler both met—and in Eisler's case, collaborated—with a number of America's most prominent politically active musicians. The central position Eisler occupied among New York's radical composers will thus be discussed in detail later in the dissertation.

Like many of their radical peers, American insurgents held up the Soviet Union as a model to be emulated by an American society that appeared to be disintegrating right before their eyes.[62] Several of the Americans, including Henry Cowell, conductor Ashley Pettis, and singer/actor Paul Robeson, actually visited the Soviet Union, and they returned singing its praises for all to hear. I explore the specifics of their reactions to the

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61. Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre," in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 154; Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 207.

62. For a broad discussion of the impact of the October Revolution on American left-wing politics, see Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962)

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U. S. S. R. in depth later; suffice it to say that among the more frequently remarked strengths of the new state were the importance it accorded to education in the arts, including music, and Moscow's financial and rhetorical acknowledgements of the significance that art should hold in a socialist society. The early Soviet leaders, especially Lenin, believed that, while a new culture must be nurtured by the state, it would be valid only if it arose from the experiences of the citizens of the nation. "Proletarian culture," wrote Lenin, "must be the result of the natural development of the stores of knowledge which mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist society, landlord society, and bureaucratic society."[63]

Over the course of the 1920s, a rift developed between old and young Bolsheviks regarding cultural policies; the former, often members of the intelligentsia, preferred highbrow culture but were relatively open-minded in terms of stylistic preferences, while the latter advocated the creation of a militant proletarian aesthetic. But as Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, both groups "shared an idea of culture as something that (like revolution) an enlightened minority brought to the masses in order to uplift them. There was no sense on either side that the culture that was best for the masses was the culture that the masses liked."[64] This led to the Cultural Revolution of 1928-29, in which old and young Bolsheviks struggled for control of Soviet culture.[65]

Ultimately, the Party decided that the artists, writers, and composers of the Soviet Union needed to forge a new proletarian idiom, creating the culture of which Lenin had written. Out of this mandate came the development of a new way of making art known

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63. Lenin quoted in Boris Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 1917–70 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 21.

64. Fitzpatrick, "On Power and Culture," in Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5.

65. Interestingly, the Cultural Revolution was initially framed, in *Pravda*, as class warfare, and it focused primarily on engineers and scientists; "culture" was equated with knowledge, rather than *Kultur*. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 120-21, 129.

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as Socialist Realism. Actively promoted by the Soviet government, this new school of artistic thought held that music and other arts must be used to further the cause that lay at the heart of the Soviet Union. Fitzpatrick, while acknowledging that many critics have approached Socialist Realism as "a blueprint for literary production that the regime handed to Soviet writers, or the organizing principle of a particular body of literature," adopts a different view. To her, Socialist Realism is most productively seen as "a method of representation characteristic of the Stalin period and the Stalinist *mentalité*. . . . In the socialist-realist view of the world, a dry, half-dug ditch signified a future canal full of loaded barges, a ruined church was a potential kolkhoz clubhouse, and the inscription of a project in the Five-Year Plan was a magical act of creation that might almost obviate the need for more concrete exertions." As Fitzpatrick's definition suggests, education and construction were seen by Soviet authorities as much more important elements of culture than the arts. Thus, she writes, "'[t]o study' and 'to build' were the ubiquitous verbs of the 1930s."[66]

Socialist Realist music—like its literary, cinematic, and artistic cousins--was, in theory, an honest art of the people; it did away with the bourgeois subject matter and conventions of earlier music, and instead reflected on and celebrated the glory of the first socialist state. According to the Soviet Composers Union, "[t]he main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful. This distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength. Socialist Realism demands an implacable struggle against folk–negating modernistic directions that are typical of the decay of contemporary bourgeois art, against subservience and servility towards modern bourgeois culture."[67] In other words,

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66. Fitzpatrick, "Becoming Cultured: Socialist Realism and the Representation of Privilege and Taste," in Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 217, 225.

67. Quoted in Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 114.

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Socialist Realism was to be realist only insofar as its composers chose as their subjects the sunny side of life in a socialist country. Of course, it did not take long for this paradoxical credo to collapse in on itself, as the travails of Dmitri Shostakovich, the most gifted composer the Soviet Union produced, amply demonstrate. But before these and other evils of the Stalin regime became common knowledge in the United States, the musical culture of the Soviet Union exercised a great degree of influence on the young turks of American composition.

For all of their differences, the one thing that all three of these approaches (epic theatre, *Gebrauchsmusik*, and Socialist Realism) have in common is an acute awareness of the social context of art. This quality pervades much of the art of the Depression, although quite often the primary model for this comes, not from other art, but rather from reportage. Some of the most famous works of the period in the fields of literature, photography, film, and music, grew out of what William Stott has termed a "documentary" impulse. According to Stott, "documentary tries to influence its audience's intellect and feelings" in order "[t]o right wrongs [and] to promote social action."[68] It does so, paradoxically, by relating contemporary societal conditions—typically adverse—in a style that strives to appear objective and unemotional.

The photographs of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange exemplify the documentary style perhaps better than any other products of the Depression, and to be sure, the visual and literary arts are more naturally suited to documentary forms than music, but the music of the Depression also contains many instances of the documentary aesthetic. Music acquired a documentary tinge when it was employed in collaborative works in combination with verbal and/or visual texts of a decidedly documentary stripe. However, as we shall see, the most effective uses of the documentary style in music occurred in the

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68. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 26.

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talking blues and folk music of Woody Guthrie and other musicians who made their way to New York City—among other reasons—in the hope of using the city's media empire to raise awareness about the dire emergencies other parts of the nation faced.

All of these elements, and many more, were percolating throughout New York in the 1930s, and it will be the purpose of this study to demonstrate the ways in which they influenced, and were influenced by, the musical thought and practice of the period. In their quest to change American society through their art, the insurgent musicians of 1930s New York established music, and themselves, as significant cultural forces. And although the political consequences of their work may have been less pronounced than they had desired, the cultural significance of their music can hardly be overestimated. The radical musicians of Depression-era New York City had a deep and lasting effect on the sound of America, and in their songs and their scores, they announced their intention to create a truly national musical identity. In their music we may hear a second, musical declaration of independence, for during this period, American music finally came of age.

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Nascence: 1929-1934

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Chapter 2: From Denial to Discontent
October 1929—November 1932

The period between the collapse of the stock market in late October, 1929, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's election three years later was among the darkest in American history. The millions of American citizens who had invested in stocks over the course of the 1920s felt the Depression's effects first. However, the brunt of the crisis was borne not by investors, but by workers. A decade of adverse court rulings and stringent anti-labor corporate policies had greatly undermined the power of labor unions, whose membership had declined from a high of five million during World War I to just 3.5 million in 1929.[1] At the same time, the Palmer Raids and Red Scare of the late 1910s and early 1920s had put American radicals on notice: the business of America, in the words of Calvin Coolidge, was indeed business, and anyone who questioned this view risked imprisonment or deportation. In the famous case of Sacco and Vanzetti, the penalty for leftist politics was death.

The adversarial dynamic that characterized the relationship of American radicals and their government was exemplified by events of 6 March 1930, which the Communist Party had designated "International Unemployment Day." In New York City, a series of leftist orators addressed 35,000 demonstrators gathered at Union Square. Following the speeches, Communist leader William Z. Foster proposed that the crowd march on City Hall, at which point they were dispersed by police. Meanwhile, demonstrators at the White House were assailed by police armed with blackjacks and tear gas. The next day, Hoover asserted that "[a]ll the evidences indicate that the worst effects of the crash upon unemployment will have been passed during the next sixty days." Almost exactly sixty days later, on 1 May--the ideologically freighted date was surely coincidental--President

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1. David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

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Hoover assured the U. S. Chamber of Commerce that he was "convinced we have now passed the worst and with continued unity of effort we shall rapidly recover."[2]

The economic collapse, combined with Hoover's unfounded optimism, would presumably have provided the radical left with additional ammunition in their fight against the conservative government and its business allies. However, as Lawrence W. Levine points out, "the most interesting and possibly the most important element [of the American mood in the early years of the Depression] was the tendency to internalize the responsibility for one's position which often led to feelings of shame."[3] This tendency was further encouraged by prominent industrialists like Henry Ford and the authors of popular self-help manuals, who espoused the notions of social Darwinism that dominated the rhetoric of American business culture over the last half of the nineteenth century.[4]

This philosophy was shared, if not explicitly articulated, by President Hoover. Ignoring calls for the federal government to play an active role in the relief effort, Hoover insisted that the power (and the responsibility) to effect recovery lay with the private sector. He persisted in this belief for some time, despite evidence that, far from improving, economic conditions continued to worsen at an alarming rate. In October 1931, a full two years after the stock market crash, Hoover met privately with the heads of America's strongest private banks in an attempt to convince them to lend aid to the myriad weaker financial institutions on the brink of failure. Clearly, by this point Hoover recognized that the Depression was not a temporary setback, and his meeting represented a good-faith effort to address the problem. At the same time, he maintained his doctrinal

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2. Both quotes in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 165.

3. Lawrence W. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression" in Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213.

4. Levine, "American Culture," 216-17; see also Warren I. Susman, "Culture and Commitment," in Susman, *Culture as History*, 193-97; and Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983; originally pub. 1944).

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reluctance to take substantive governmental action. By early 1932, more than ten million workers--nearly twenty percent of America's workforce--were unemployed.[5] Across the nation, shantytowns full of unemployed and homeless workers sprang up. They were dubbed "Hoovervilles." One of the largest of these was located in New York's Central Park, immediately behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The city's landscape was changing in other ways. On 25 February 1930, New York State Parks Commissioner Robert Moses presented his dramatic vision for the New York City of the future at a dinner held by the genteel, privately-run New York City Parks Association. The plans Moses unveiled that day encompassed such present-day cornerstones of New York's transportation infrastructure as the Belt, Grand Central, Cross Island, Henry Hudson, and Hutchinson River Parkways, as well as the Whitestone Bridge. This dense network of roadways was particularly significant in that it linked such ongoing and recently constructed Moses projects as the Southern and Northern State Parkways on Long Island; Westchester's Sawmill River Parkway; and the Triborough Bridge, which alone would connect Long Island, Manhattan, and the mainland Bronx.[6] Although Moses's grand design was at least partly rooted in an almost Emersonian belief in the importance of nature--hence his construction of parks and beaches, as well as the means to reach them--automobile ownership was a prerequisite for its enjoyment, from which many hundreds of thousands of working-class New Yorkers (including disproportionate numbers of African-Americans and immigrants) were thus effectively barred. In Robert Moses's New York, even the enjoyment of nature required machinery and the wealth to purchase it; paradoxically, pre-modern tranquillity could only be accessed by modern means.

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5. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 87.

6. For more details on Moses's New York, Caro, *Power Broker*, 339-43 and *passim*.

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This Janus-faced quality was shared by the other major alteration in the city's physical aspect during this period: on 1 May 1931, the Empire State Building opened its doors to the public, a little more than one year after construction had begun. The sheer excess of the building, which on its completion far and away the tallest man-made structure in the world, clearly designated it an architectural artifact of the 1920s. The connections between architecture, technology, and economics were not lost on Frank Lloyd Wright, who loathed the new skyscrapers. In a brief 1931 essay on the subject, Wright asserted that

> [t]he [skyscraper] has the same 'picturesque' as has any piling up of wreckage by way of blind forces. To admire, you must forget what is happening to humanity. This space-enclosure to the "Big Buddha"--otherwise the banker's mantrap [*sic*] is rooted in greed. It rises regardless of human life or human scale to impose exaggeration on a weak animal . . . skillful engineering inside and stone draped on it outside by the architectural-tailor is not architecture except by grace of such sentimentality for lies as has "built" the Nation to a standstill.[7]

Moreover, the massive office building was, on a functional level, entirely gratuitous in the business-poor environment of New York in the early 1930s, where, by 1932, nearly one third of workers were unemployed, roughly 1.6 million citizens depended on some form of public relief, and more than one third of the city's manufacturing firms had gone out of business.[8] It had been calculated, noted Edmund Wilson, "that, if [the Building] were full, there would be 25,000 people working there and 40,000 more people going in

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7. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Concerning Skyscraper," in Wright, *Collected Writings*, Volume 3, 1931-1939, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 21-22.

8. Caro, *Power Broker*, 323.

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and out every day." But whereas, during the 1920s, such numbers had not seemed particularly unreachable, Wilson pointed out that "[i]n the immediate future . . . there will not be by any means that many, because business is extremely bad and even the office buildings already erected are full of untenanted space. Of the offices in the Empire State Building only a quarter so far have been rented, and, in moving into it, most of the tenants will merely be leaving more vacancies elsewhere." The situation grew so dire that the building's managers soon stopped elevator service between the 42nd and 67th stories; all of the intervening floors were unoccupied.[9]

As the Depression's third winter drew to a close, the two biggest news stories in the country both had similar resonances with the bygone prosperity of the Twenties. The abduction, on 1 March 1932, of Charles Lindbergh's twenty-month-old son from the bedroom of his rural New Jersey home, and the subsequent hunt for the perpetrator, were among the nation's first around-the-clock celebrity and true-crime media events. Lindbergh, whose legendary transatlantic flight had rendered him a living symbol of the brash, can-do attitude that typified 1920s America in the popular imagination, was a national hero, and his personal tragedy seemed like yet another nail in the coffin of the Roaring Twenties.

Meanwhile, a case that promised to become a Sacco and Vanzetti for the 1930s was being fought in the courts of Alabama. In March 1931, nine African-American youths traveling by train through Alabama were accosted by a group of white men. A brawl ensued, following which the African-Americans were accused of raping two young white women who were also aboard the train. After a three-day trial that was widely judged a travesty of justice, the "Scottsboro Boys" were convicted and sentenced to death. Three months later, the first of the Boys was executed. The case became a international

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9. Edmund Wilson, "May First: The Empire State Building; Life On the Passaic River" in Wilson, *The American Earthquake: A Chronicle of the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the Dawn of the New Deal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1958), 293, essay originally published 1931; Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, 248.

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incident, as well as a forum for organizational power struggles, as the Communist Party's International Labor Defense (ILD) battled against the NAACP for the privilege of representing the Scottsboro Boys on appeal. Despite one of the purported rape victim's subsequent refutations of the allegations against the Boys—corroborated by other testimony that suggested a racially motivated frame-up--and numerous procedural improprieties, the Alabama Supreme Court, in March 1932, upheld seven of the eight death sentences, overturning on technical grounds the sentence of a minor. The remaining executions were stayed pending review, however, by the U.S. Supreme Court. In November 1932, the high court reversed the convictions of the Scottsboro Boys by a 7-2 vote, finding that their rights to adequate counsel had been violated. This was not the end of the matter, though; the Scottsboro case, like that of Sacco and Vanzetti, would drag on for years and attain a symbolic importance that far outstripped its tangible effects.[10]

Whereas the plight of the Scottsboro Boys was widely seen as a case of racial injustice, the involvement of the ILD also indicated the extent to which racial issues were tied to economic matters. And in the early 1930s, the Scottsboro Boys notwithstanding, economic affairs were front and center in the American consciousness. On 7 March 1932, three thousand jobless workers marched on the Ford plant in Dearborn, Michigan. They asserted that, as a citizen of Dearborn, Henry Ford was obliged to ease the suffering of his neighbors by offering them employment. In a perverse sense, Hoover's insistence on the responsibility of the private sector had come home to roost. Not surprisingly, Ford disagreed with the marchers' claims, and the Dearborn police took his side. They attempted to disperse the marchers, first by using tear gas and then by dousing them with freezing water. When both of these methods proved fruitless, the police opened fire on the crowd, killing four and wounding many others. If the Dearborn incident represented

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10. For a detailed account of the initial trials and convictions in the Scottsboro case, see Edmund Wilson, "The Scottsboro Freight-Car Case" in Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 334-47.

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the birth of a new militancy among America's working class--despair and self-blame turning at last to anger--the suicide, five days later, of Swedish businessman Ivar Krueger provided a fitting symbolic cap to the boom period of the Twenties. Krueger had been one of the great beneficiaries of the market boom in the 1920s, a prominent industrialist and public figure; after his death it was discovered that Krueger, assisted by American financiers, had swindled American investors out of several hundred million dollars. During 1931 and 1932, such stories had come to seem all too predictable to the millions of Americans who were coming to feel that they had been victims, not simply of governmental neglect, but of a massive confidence game as well, in the form of the stock market bubble.

Naturally, business conditions had a direct impact on the livelihoods of America's musicians. Following the stock market crash in October 1929, RCA stock dropped from $114 to $20 in just weeks. In 1930, record sales declined by 39% from the previous year, and at the same time the federal government initiated an antitrust suit against several major players in the radio and recording industries. Broadcaster AT&T settled in late 1931, but the Depression continued to take a toll on the music business.[11] Lewis Erenberg notes that while sales of record players dropped 90% in 1930, "record sales took longer to drop. Purchases went from 104 million in 1927 to six million in 1932." African-American musicians were particularly affected by this decline, as major companies terminated the production of "race records" by the end of 1930.[12]

While musicians lost employment opportunities in the recording industry, the audience for radio continued to explode. In 1925, it had stood at roughly sixteen million; five years later, roughly sixty million Americans listened to the radio on a regular basis. Several of the most successful musicians of the 1930s, including Guy Lombardo and

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11. David and Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 24, 31-32.

12. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 14.

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Bing Crosby, built their careers through exploiting the possibilities of radio.[13] But radio was hardly the answer to the employment problems of musicians. It provided employment to relatively few musicians, while at the same time making attendance at live performances unnecessary. Here Win Stracke, founder of the Old Town School of Folk Music, describes the difficulties he and his fellow musicians faced even when they were lucky enough to obtain a radio gig:

> In the Depression, the business of being a singer had lots of hardships. We were all hurting for dough. During one job, a once-a-week radio broadcast, our compensation was a room in the Allerton Hotel. The idea being: if we showed enough initiative, we'd rent the room and thus have compensation for our singing. I was never able to rent my room. The hotel was only about thirty percent occupied, so they weren't giving anything away.
>
> We had one sponsor of a Sunday morning radio program, who owned cemetery lots. We sang old-fashioned hymns and talked about the memorial park. We were paid fifteen bucks apiece. He persuaded us to make recordings, so he could save money. Somehow the old codger talked us into taking, not money, but cemetery lots. I still have seven of them.[14]

While America's musicians developed a new awareness of the consequences of industrialization and their roles as skilled but dispensable workers within the new

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13. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 18-19, 20, 163. Erenberg notes that Lombardo was particularly sensitive to the potential for commercial tie-ins with radio broadcasting.

14. Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 166.

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technological society, America's workers turned to song for solace. Edmund Wilson observed the role played by music in a Communist "hunger march" on New York's City Hall held on 20 January 1931: "Only when the Communists sing one of their songs--*Solidarity Forever* or *The International*--does any note arise from among them of enthusiasm or human warmth . . . The bald words, the banal tune, by reason of all they have been coming to mean, do lift up the heart for a moment as the Communists raise their arms and wave them in time to the refrain."[15]

In these early days of the Depression, as musicians came to grips with the grim new realities they faced, their responses to the problem were typically halting, tentative, and isolated. The most sustained calls for change in this period came from perhaps the least likely of quarters: New York's modernist composers. This was particularly noteworthy because one of the standard criticisms of modernist and ultra-modernist composition in the 1920s had been a complaint about its supposedly hermetic aesthetic. In the early 1930s, modernism continued to be viewed as hopelessly solipsistic and spiritually empty. Modernist composers, critics asserted, addressed themselves to technical problems of composition, producing music that embodied the Keatsian notion of "art for art's sake." Arthur Lourie, writing in *Modern Music* in 1931, castigated modernist composers for having neglected artistic content while engaging in purely formal experiments. Asserting as a given that "form is inseparable from its content," Lourie insisted that "creation of a form for its own sake [as he felt the modernists had done] is merely academism." In his view, "the key to a new form of the future lies in the restoration of the lost equilibrium between form and content."[16] Of course, the process described here by Lourie, predicated on the possibility of free experimentation, might seem more likely to take place in times of ease than of hardship. But as we shall see, Lourie's prescription was

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15. Edmund Wilson, "Communists and Cops," in Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 209.

16. Arthur Lourie, "The Crisis in Form," *Modern Music* (hereafter "MM") 8/4 (May-June 1931), 9, 11.

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very much like that of many leftist composers, performers, theorists, and critics, who sought the creation of a music that would be proletarian in both form and content.

Interestingly, the dissatisfaction of the American working class during the Depression received its first systematic musical expression in the works of middle-class, educated New York composers of cultivated music. This situation confirms Alberto Melucci's contention that, in situations of political unrest, "[t]he first to rebel are not the most repressed and emarginated of groups, but, instead, those who perceive an intolerable contradiction between an existing collective identity and the new social relationships imposed by change."[17] But over the years that followed, the cultivated composers were joined--and often bettered--in their search for an American proletarian music by musicians of humbler origins. We will now investigate how several of these composers came to be interested in radical politics, and also examine their initial attempts to express this concern musically. In terms of actual compositions, the ideological seeds that were sown bore little fruit in this period, but it is essential to discuss their planting before we can see the rich harvest they ultimately yielded.

Politicizing Modernism

When the Crash struck, the aspiring young composer Ruth Crawford (1901-1953) was comfortably ensconced in the Manhattan apartment of her patroness, Blanch Walton. A Chicago native, Crawford had made a small name for herself as a pianist in the Midwest. But she had increasingly been drawn to composition, and her early efforts in the area were promising enough to convince both Crawford and her teachers that a career as a composer was a real possibility. New York City provided the most favorable environment for aspiring young American composers in the 1920s, offering an unparalleled variety of options for study, performance, and publication to modernists like

17. Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 295-6.

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Crawford. In addition, the assistance of women like Walton--a wealthy widow of a kind who seem to have been particularly prevalent in New York during the first three decades of the twentieth century--greatly eased the difficulties inherent in making a career as a modernist composer.[18] Henry Cowell (1897-1965), who thought highly of Crawford's abilities--he had already published four of her piano preludes--arranged for Crawford to take up residence at Walton's in the autumn of 1929. It was through her acquaintances with Walton and Cowell that Crawford would eventually gain *entrée* into the small group of "ultra-modernist" composers whose music was creating a stir that reached even across the Atlantic. But during the fall of 1929, Crawford was still looking for a composition teacher who would be forward-looking enough not to frown upon her admittedly unconventional music.

Charles Seeger seemed to fit the bill. Then resident at New York's Harvard Club, to which he had been driven by marital difficulties, Seeger (1886-1979) was fifteen years Crawford's senior. He had already helped establish the music department at the University of California's Berkeley campus, where he taught both musicology and composition--Cowell was his first composition student there--from 1912 until 1918. During his time at Berkeley, Seeger also developed a deep interest in non-musical matters, especially history and philosophy; his musicology syllabi from this period included readings from Hegel and Marx. Seeger's interdisciplinarity was highly unusual in the American musical establishment. Equally striking was his passionate engagement in political and social matters, also a product of the California years. Descended from a well-to-do, old New England family, Seeger came face to face with the dismal plight of migrant workers on a trip taken during his years at Berkeley, thus putting a real-life face on the economic theories of Marx and Veblen in which he was immersed. Unfortunately,

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18. On Crawford, see Matilda Gaume "Ruth Crawford: A Promising Young Composer in New York, 1929-30" *AM* 5/1 (Spring 1987), 74-84; on Walton, see Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 210-14.

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Seeger's outspoken opposition to American involvement in World War I resulted in his dismissal from the Berkeley faculty.

Responsible for supporting his wife and their young son Peter, Seeger drove across the country, ending up in New York. During the 1920s, he made his living by lecturing at the Institute for Musical Arts (later to become the Juilliard School), and also taught several private composition students, although he himself had stopped composing in the early 1920s. His decision to refrain from composition stemmed from an unsettling realization that he came to in this period: "I couldn't admire the music that moved me and I couldn't be moved by music I admired."[19] As a practicing composer, Seeger had come to an impasse.

As a scholar and critic, however, he began to show signs of an intelligence both penetrating and unorthodox. Throughout the 1920s, Seeger published a number of articles on such diverse subjects as "A Fragment of Greek Music," "Dissonance and the Devil," and "The Problem of the Musical Point of View and the Bias and Linguistic Presentation." [20] Despite the apparent catholicity of his interests, Seeger nevertheless remained consistently focused on the systematic working-out of one or two large problems that confront any serious music critic: the formulation of a "complete criticism," which "should have both its scientific-critical, or logical, section and its impressionistic, or rhapsodic section" [21]; and the difficulty of effectively discussing music in verbal language. As might be expected, his work drew on contemporary

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19. Quoted in Ann Pescatello, *Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 77.

20. "A Fragment of Greek Music" The Baton (Institute of Musical Art, New York), 8 (May 1929), 5-6; "Dissonance and the Devil: An Interesting Passage in a Bach Cantata" The Baton 9 (May 1930), 7-8; "Prolegomena to Musicology: The Problem of the Musical Point of View and the Bias of Linguistic Presentation" Eolus 4 (May 1925), 12-24.

21. Charles Seeger, "Carl Ruggles," in *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium*, ed. Henry Cowell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1962), 32-33; originally published 1933.

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philosophy, linguistics, and historiography. By 1929, when Crawford contacted him on the recommendation of their mutual acquaintance Henry Cowell, Seeger had thought longer and harder, and written more originally about music than most anybody in America, except possibly Charles Ives.

Seeger and Crawford began composition lessons that year. Although their relationship was at first a bit strained--Seeger professed some doubt as to whether any woman could be a truly worthy composer, and Crawford found him to be personally rather difficult--the two soon established a comfortable working rapport. Seeger recognized his new student's immense innate gifts, but he felt that Crawford would truly blossom as a composer only after finding a systematic way of expressing her ideas. Not coincidentally, he was then working through a rigorous method of his own, called "dissonant counterpoint." Expanding the conventional usage of the term "dissonance," Seeger applied it not only in terms of intervallic pitch relations, but also in the areas of rhythmic proportions, timbral quality, dynamics, and tempo, among others. In each of these fields, dissonant counterpoint effectively stood traditional Western notions of consonance and dissonance (and their counterparts, tension and resolution) on their heads. For instance, rather than viewing stable, consonant harmonic intervals--octaves, perfect fifths, etc.--as the baseline for composition, any deviations from which had to be both prepared and resolved as in classic counterpoint, dissonant counterpoint posited that it was consonances that required preparation and resolution. This system was thus a re-evaluation of the fundamental assumptions governing not only the composition of cultivated music, but also its reception and analysis. As we shall soon see, Seeger's desire to look beyond received orthodoxies in the musical arena had important parallels in the domains of politics and economics. The most basic animating impulse behind Seeger's work in all of the fields in which he was active seems to have been this combination of curiosity, irreverence, and intellectual rigor.

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In his music-theoretical writings, Seeger drew heavily on the acoustical research of Herman Helmholtz, the theoretical work of Hugo Riemann and Moritz Hauptmann, linguistic concepts, and archaic modal systems for organizing composition. According to Taylor Aitken Greer, Seeger had two primary reasons for his innovations: "to rebel against the received tradition through an exercise in pure negation (Seeger waggishly called [the tradition] a 'school-room discipline'); and to discover a new intervallic sensibility."[22] Regardless of the motivations behind dissonant counterpoint, Seeger had been formulating the system since his days at Berkeley; in Crawford he found a sympathetic partner in his ambitious undertaking, perhaps even one capable of converting his abstract theories into actual compositions. Their studies continued through the school year, during which time the two grew increasingly friendly.

Given Seeger's interest in political issues, it seems quite likely that he and Crawford discussed the political significance of the deepening Depression, which must have confirmed Seeger's deeply held skepticism towards America's socioeconomic structure. However, there are no records of such conversations, and when it came to musical matters, both Crawford and Seeger remained focused on the arcane problems of dissonant counterpoint. In the summer of 1930, Crawford accompanied Seeger to his family home in Patterson, New Jersey, where they worked in earnest on putting Seeger's ideas into publishable form. The two produced a highly polished draft of the treatise, but it was never published in Seeger's lifetime.[23] In the meantime, their relationship had grown from one of mere tutelage to friendship to nascent romance. However, in the fall of

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22. Taylor Aitken Greer, *A Question of Balance: Charles Seeger's Philosophy of Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 131. This attitude is much like that of Ives, as expressed in his discussion of a pair of his own polytonal fugues. See Charles E. Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 50.

23. The tract was recently published as "Tradition and Experiment in (the New) Music" in Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology II: 1929-1979*, ed. Ann M. Pescatello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 17-273.

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1930, when Seeger returned to New York City, Crawford headed across the Atlantic for a year of compositional study under the auspices of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

While in Europe, Crawford operated primarily out of Berlin, where she attended performances of such new works as Schoenberg's Orchestral Suite, Op. 29, Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*, and Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* and *Symphony of Psalms*. She also met with Hindemith, Alban Berg and Béla Bartók. Perhaps most importantly, Crawford began work on *String Quartet 1931*, generally considered to be her masterpiece. As concerned as she was with contemporary compositional trends, though, Crawford apparently evinced no interest in the growing field of political music then sweeping Germany. Her correspondence with Seeger made no mention, for instance, of the music of Hanns Eisler (1898-1962), whose works created a tremendous stir in Berlin during Crawford's time there. As Judith Tick has noted, "[t]he controversy surrounding *Die Massnahme* ('The Measures Taken'), the controversial didactic Communist theater piece by Berthold Brecht and Hanns Eisler that premiered in 1930 [in Berlin]--to no comment by Crawford--marked the battleground between radical left and right. It would take just a few years for Eisler to become the heroic model for the American radical left [including both Crawford and Seeger]; in Berlin she did not take note." The two major musical products of Crawford's time in Europe, *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* (1930) and *String Quartet 1931* are both--despite the emotional intensity of the latter--ostensibly works of "absolute" music, lacking any narrative or programmatic import and concerned with the working-through of purely musical problems. When she did venture into the composition of vocal music, in *Three Chants* (1930), Crawford set a nonsense language of her own invention--presumably meant to evoke the Eastern mysticism in which she had been interested for several years--showing no interest in the conveyance of semantic meaning.[24]

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24. Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 144, 147-50.

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Shortly after she returned from Europe in November 1931, Crawford set to work on another group of songs, this time setting three poems by Carl Sandburg in her increasingly distinctive modernist idiom. Around this time, Crawford 's growing reputation in contemporary music circles began to net her commissions for new works. In early 1932, the Society of Contemporary Music in Philadelphia requested a set of songs from Crawford. She responded with *Two Ricercare*, a pair of songs that demonstrated a newly topical sensibility. In composing the songs, Crawford set the poems "Sacco, Vanzetti" and "Chinaman, Laundryman" from Chinese dissident H. T. Tsiang's *Poems of the Chinese Revolution.* At least in their English incarnations, Tsiang's texts are not particularly good poetry. However, Crawford's selection of such lyrics, most notable for their barely controlled rage and political radicalism, marks a clear departure from the vague mysticism of *Three Chants* and the humor and lyricism of the Sandburg texts. The lyrics of both "Sacco, Vanzetti" and "Chinaman, Laundryman" share the following broad outline: an initial expression of outrage mingled with despair over economic and political injustice is transformed into a call to action. In the first song, the topic is the absence of revolutionary activity following the execution of the two immigrants. The second details the racial and economic discrimination encountered by a Chinese immigrant working in America.

One of the most striking shared features of Crawford's *Two Ricercare* is the apparent disjunction between voice and piano. Seeger once asserted that "the singer doesn't even have to be very much with the piano except just to end together."[25] Both songs have free, irregular vocal lines accompanied by highly structured piano ostinati. As Judith Tick notes, in "Chinaman, Laundryman" the accompaniment is derived from the number nine, as expressed in its metronome marking (quarter-note=99), its pitch collection, its phrase structure, and its larger structural organization. The ostinato of "Sacco, Vanzetti"

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25. Seeger quoted in Ray Wilding-White, "Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger: An Interview with Charles and Peggy Seeger" *AM* 6/4 (Winter 1988): 451.

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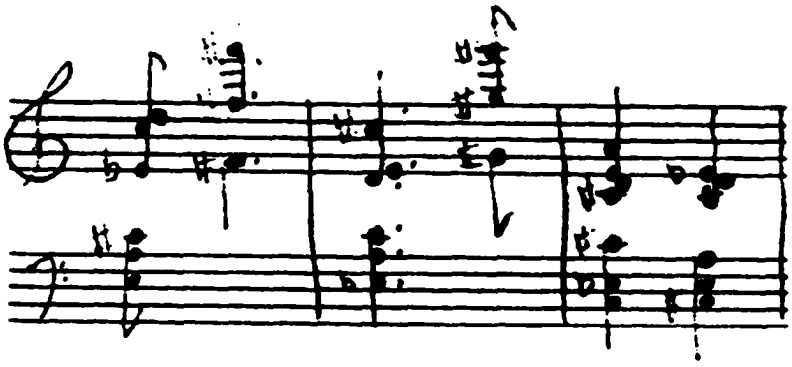
operates rather differently; Tick calls it a "texture-ostinato," because the primary pattern is an alternation of chord and octave textures (see example 2.1).[26] Tick also suggests that, through the discordance of voice and piano, "Crawford embodied class conflict into the music itself."[27]

Example 2.1 a) Ruth Crawford, "Sacco, Vanzetti" (mm. 146-48)



Example 2.1 b) Ruth Crawford, "Chinaman, Laundryman" (mm. 4-6)

Of course, such text-painting is no more than we would expect from a sensitive composer like Crawford. It is also true that, as Joseph N. Straus has pointed out, with the exception of Crawford's use of *Sprechstimme* technique in the vocal lines, the *Two Ricercare* "do not depart significantly from her mature, ultra-modern idiom," which included serial procedures and irregular phrases. This leads Straus to conclude that

26. Judith Tick, "Ruth Crawford's Proletarian Ricercari," *Sonus* 15/2 (Spring 1995): 63-64.

27. Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 192.

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"Crawford's politics did not impinge in any deep way on her music." [28] But his analysis assumes that the only way in which Crawford's new political sensibility could have affected her composition was by causing her to alter the style she had forged in earlier, apolitical works. Another reading is possible. Crawford's refusal to modify her means of expression to fit her new message suggests an intellectual self-confidence with important consequences: she continued to believe in her compositional voice, and may have felt that, in retrospect, it had already been proletarian in its implications, without her having known it.

Paul Gorman has pointed out that "[t]he Proletarian Culture movement that developed in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s aimed to change the much-lamented facts of the working classes' popular culture tastes by weaning them from the bourgeois arts and letters." The goal, according to Gorman, was "to establish a unique order of expressive forms by and for the working class."[29] Because Crawford's distinctive ultra-modernism was a compositional *tabula rasa*, untainted by bourgeois (or any other) associations, it could easily be placed in the service of a political radicalism that demanded a new, contemporary voice. Her settings impart a visceral force to their lyrics, a characteristic that caused Charles Seeger to describe the *Ricercare* this way: "the songs really are two declamations of tremendous dramatic power accompanied by piano ostinati that pay no attention whatsoever to the song; they go right ahead on a remorseless course."[30]

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28. Joseph N. Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 211. On the highly sophisticated procedures employed by Crawford in the *Ricercare* see Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 114-19, and Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 60-98.

29. Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 111.

30. Quoted in Wilding-White, "Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger," 451.

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There were surely multiple reasons behind the political awakening exemplified in the *Two Ricercare*. Although Crawford was once viewed as Seeger's impressionable musical acolyte, several scholars have recently offered convincing counter-evidence. In fact, their relationship in musical matters may have approximated much more closely a partnership, in which Crawford was clearly the junior partner, but a collaborator rather than a servant none the less. Yet it does seem more than likely that Seeger's longstanding interest in leftist politics was a prime factor in Crawford's own increasing engagement.[31] Of course, the increasingly pervasive effects of the Depression--manifested, by the time of the composition of the *Two Ricercare*, in omnipresent breadlines and apple-sellers in business suits--surely provided an important spur to the change, as Seeger described: "what we were both struck with all of a heap, too, was the depression itself and the terrible suffering in New York, where hundreds of people had to sleep in the streets covered with newspapers and burlap if they could find any with the snow on top of it, because even the police stations couldn't hold any more."[32]

Conventional Radicalism

Although, as mentioned earlier, Crawford professed no interest in the work of Hanns Eisler during her stay in Berlin, she almost surely was aware of it, if only by reputation. Eisler's landmark collaborations with Bertolt Brecht have long since been overshadowed by those of Kurt Weill (1900-1950), but works such as *Die Massnahme* and *Die Mutter* were hugely successful in Berlin in the early 1930s, and seemed, to many composers in

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31. Carol Oja notes that Crawford had earlier expressed admiration for Rudhyar's more impressionistic radicalism. writing in her diary of his "vision of the brotherhood of man, which blends all as human beings, despite slight exteriors which are discordant." Quoted in Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 146.

32. Quoted in Wilding-White, "Remember Ruth Crawford Seeger," 451-52; on the Seeger-Crawford partnership see Judith Tick, "Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and 'The Music of American Folk Songs'," in *Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in American Musicology*, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 109-29.

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both Europe and the United States, to offer a promising blend of musical modernism and political radicalism. A native of Leipzig, Eisler had studied composition in Vienna with Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), who considered Eisler one of his most gifted students. Eisler was just as deeply impressed with Schoenberg's music, writing that "[Schoenberg's] new theory, 'composition with twelve notes', based on his new conception of tonality, tries to place craft and knowledge on a healthier footing. This cannot be praised enough, for in music . . . all intellectual problems are connected with problems of the technique of composition."[33] Eisler, however, was also drawn to the radical politics that swept through central and eastern Europe in the late 1920s, and he quickly came to consider the serial composition of the Second Viennese School too apolitical. Eisler therefore abandoned pure Schoenbergian serialism in favor of a personal style that fused modernist techniques, including serialism, with resources drawn from both contemporary and archaic musics, all in the service of political messages. By the early 1930s, Eisler's name was well known in both modern music and radical political circles, and on both sides of the Atlantic. As we shall see, he wielded considerable influence over the New York radicals. It is therefore important to understand the philosophical foundation on which his musical edifice was built.

Eisler articulated his thoughts on music, society, and the interaction of the two in a number of essays written over the course of his career. From the very beginning, a few key issues were stressed. On several occasions he decried the notion, particular to modern capitalism, that "[t]he content of leisure must not be the content of work."[34] Eisler felt that the sharp distinction between work and leisure was not only artificial but malignant, containing as it did the implication that work, as the opposite of leisure, is

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33. Hanns Eisler, "On the Situation in Modern Music," in *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, ed. David Blake (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 66; essay written 1928.

34. Eisler, "The Builders of a New Music Culture," in Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel In Music: Selected Writings*, ed. Manfred Grabs, trans. Marjorie Meyer (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999), 39; essay written 1931.

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supposed to be completely onerous, and leisure is conversely to be devoid of difficulty or challenge. One important consequence of this divide was to render music impotent; by confining it to the concert hall and circumscribing its possible meanings, capitalism made music irrelevant to most of the lived experience. This insight of Eisler's was closely related to *Gebrauchsmusik*, insofar as it rested on a conviction that composers were well advised to account for the relation between their music and the extra-musical world .

In a similar vein, Eisler was deeply concerned with the aesthetic consequences of the modern business of music, the structures of musical production and consumption. Like the socially-concerned cultural philosophers of the Frankfurt School—in particular, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin--Eisler deplored the "Culture Industry," and the concomitant professionalization of music. One favorite target of his was the concert business, which he found debasing toward artists and listeners alike. Eisler frequently reminded his readers that the public concert, as such, was a recent invention, and one that was both historically and philosophically a product of market capitalism. This recognition led to the formation of worker's music societies, umbrella organizations that could include orchestras, choirs, and schools for the musical education and participation of the working class.[35]

The question then naturally arose: was music from the classical, "bourgeois" repertoire appropriate for these groups? After asking himself this very question, Eisler offered a detailed program for workers' concerts. He even allowed for the performance of traditional masterworks, albeit only within a broader context of "fighting songs," lectures, displays of photography, and other multi-media endeavors.[36] If all of this seems a bit much, it must be remembered that Eisler conceived the mission of such organizations to be far more than simply entertainment. The function of workers' music

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35. On Eisler and the Frankfurt School, see Gunter Mayer, "Eisler and Adorno," in *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, 133-58; see also Eisler, "On the Bourgeois Concert Business," in Eisler, *A Rebel*, 69-72.

36. Eisler, "Music for Workers' Orchestras," in Eisler, *A Rebel*, 64-67; essay written 1932-33.

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groups, he wrote, was "to activate their members for struggle and to encourage political education. This means that all music forms and techniques must be developed to suit the express purpose, that is the class struggle."[37]

Of course, performance was only one aspect of the production of music. Eisler was just as concerned with the issues raised by the composition of proletarian music. One thing that makes Eisler so fascinating is that, despite his rather doctrinaire Marxism, he maintained an open mind in terms of music. Eisler explicitly argued against the creation of a new, specifically proletarian style of composition. In fact, he derided the very notion of an overriding compositional style that would predetermine every piece produced by a composer or school. According to Eisler, "[i]n the workers' music movement we do not aspire to 'style' but to new methods of musical technique, which will make it possible to use music in the class struggle better and more intensively."[38] But this begs the question, what were those new "methods" to be?

Perhaps the best way to answer this is by example. One idiosyncrasy of Eisler's music was its bold use of archaism. For instance, Eisler frequently employed modal harmonies in his compositions of the late 1920s and early 1930s. On a superficial level, Eisler's anachronisms were not particularly different from the contemporaneous musical archaisms of Stravinsky and his neoclassicist colleagues. In fact, even fellow Viennese modernists like Schoenberg and Webern often deployed techniques and forms from the Classical period and earlier. Eisler's compositional anachronisms, however, were distinguished by their explicitly ideological--rather than aesthetic--foundations.[39]

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37. Eisler, "Our Revolutionary Music," in Eisler, *A Rebel*, 59; essay written 1932.

38. Eisler, "Our Revolutionary Music," 59.

39. Of course, the anti-German rhetoric frequently employed by the neoclassicists was motivated, at least in part, by nationalistic political attitudes that had been reinforced by World War I. Similarly, Schoenberg's casting of himself as heir to the great Germanic tradition can be read in a political light. However, the cultural chauvinism that these composers articulated was couched in aesthetic terms--i.e., valuing French "lightness" over Germanic "heaviness," or preferring the structuralism of Germanic music--and was not a

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Albrecht Betz has speculated that Eisler "did not seize on modal elements in order to enrich his palette with an unusual (because forgotten) harmonic colour. They rather seemed to him a useful means of recalling what was associated with them: *pre-individual collective consciousness*."[40] While this suggestion is appealing, and may indeed have some truth to it, its explanatory power is limited to the use of pre-classical methods, and cannot account for Eisler's uses of later classical music, let alone jazz and serialism. Eisler's polyglot idiom is perhaps best explained by reference to the aesthetic ideas of his sometime-collaborator, and fellow modernist radical, playwright Bertolt Brecht.

Eisler's music relied heavily on the tools of the epic theater, particularly Estrangement. His acontextual combinations of the archaic and the modern cast each element into sharp relief. Gerd Rienacker has described the process of Estrangement in Eisler's music this way: "Whatever is usual, all-too-usual, must be converted into the unusual, i.e., made alien, by introducing gaps and breaks, by reorderings, by thwarting the expected just at the moment of fulfilment, by procedures which are foreign, or seem to be, to the material, so that the vocabulary is wrenched out of what is usual--while, at

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coherent ideological belief system, unlike that espoused by Eisler. It was, nevertheless, quite strident. Eric Gordon reports that the American composer Marc Blitzstein, who studied under Schoenberg briefly in the late 1920s, was "offended by [Schoenberg's] intense national chauvinism," exemplified in the comment, attributed to Schoenberg, that "'Ten years from now you will all be writing German music again'." Eric Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 26.

Schoenberg's feelings took musical form in his *Dreie Satiren* (1925), a parody of the supposed triviality and trendiness of Stravinskyan (which in the 1920s and 1930s meant "French" to modernists) composition. Scott Messing writes that "[n]eoclassicism affronted Vienna because its use interpreted the history of music in terms other than that of German dominance"; Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press: 1988), 147.

That control of music history was important to Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and their followers is made clear in Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). For a contemporary view of the nationalist musical squabbles, see Arthur Lourie, "'Neogothic and Neoclassic'" *MM* 5/3 (March--April 1928), 3-9.

40. Albrecht Betz, *Hanns Eisler Political Musician*, trans. Bill Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 79-80. This antiquarian utopianism, in which Communism was cast as a return to the natural, pre-industrial state of things, acted in counterpoint with the Soviet identification of itself as the future.

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the same time, not being wholly foreign or external to the material."[41] Eisler thus felt free to employ virtually any musical materials that interested him, knowing as he did that, if presented in a strange context, even the most familiar musical figure could be invested with entirely new meanings.

Given their close aesthetic and political sympathies, it is not surprising that Eisler's collaboration with Brecht on *Die Massnahme* produced a paradigmatic work of political musical theater. The piece was one in a series of *Lehrstucke* ("didactic pieces") written by Brecht throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s. The *Lehrstucke*, primarily intended as instructional rather than enjoyable, were especially pure musical distillations of *Verfremdung*. This homiletic quality was a central element of *Die Massnahme*, which Frederic Ewen has characterized as a "secular cantata."[42]

The work's story is told by three Chinese Communist agitators who recount, to a chorus that represents their governing body, a mission they have recently completed. Along the way, the agitators were compelled to execute one of their colleagues who had allowed emotion to cloud his judgement, thereby compromising the success of the assignment. In the end, their difficult decision meets with the approval of the chorus, which praises them for their cool realism. Not surprisingly, *Die Massnahme* stirred a great controversy in Germany's cultural circles. Its scheduled premiere was canceled by the directors of the Berlin Music Festival, and it ultimately received its first performance under the auspices of one of Berlin's several workers' choral societies. Heated debate over its radical political implications followed the piece, but the appeal of Eisler's music transcended sectarian divisions. Contemporary writers reported that working men and women sang Brecht and Eisler's songs, inspired by Brecht's radical text and apparently unintimidated by the succession of tunes based on chorales, jazz, and modernism.

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41. Gerd Rienacker, "The Invigorating Effect of Music? Making Music About Music in Brecht and Eisler's 'Song of the Invigorating Effect of Money,'" in *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, 95.

42. Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 238, 248.

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Paradoxically, *Die Massnahme* was criticized almost as much from the far left, which viewed it as a misrepresentation of Communist Party policy, as from the right. Unfortunately, the work, like all of Eisler's *oeuvre*, has been largely neglected since its first sensational appearance. When it was revived in London in 1987, "most papers treated this as a musical work and saw Eisler's Schoenbergian past as more interesting than his supposedly un-American activities."[43] But what makes Eisler and Brecht's collaborations so unique is their combination of a solid dose of "anti-American" (or at least anti-capitalist) political rhetoric with archaic techniques and vernacular idioms.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of these works was their popularity: songs from *Die Massnahme* and *Die Mutter* were heard in venues ranging from concert halls to beer halls and taverns, where they were sung by crowds of workers. Seven decades later, it is perhaps a bit difficult to imagine German workers--or laborers from any other country, for that matter--lustily breaking into "United Front" over a pint of lager and a wurst. This should probably be viewed as a tribute to the delicate balance achieved by Brecht and Eisler, whose songs contained enough popular appeal to keep their more modern aspects from intimidating amateur musicians.[44]

In terms of both music and drama, these works were indeed revolutionary in form and content, without being particularly strident. The song "United Front" (seen in example 2.2), originally part of *Die Mutter* was at once singable and modern. As a result, it became one of the most widely-known revolutionary songs of the period in both Europe and the United States.

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43. John Willett, "Die Massnahme: The Vanishing Lehrstuck," in *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, 79-90. When Eisler was called to testify before the House Un-America Activities Committee in 1952, the work was cited as a justification for Stalin's show trials, although the work was completed several years before the trials began.

44. On Eisler in beer-halls, see Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 236; Betz notes that during this same period, Eisler transformed the "partisan" song, a traditional genre in which the lyrics merely state a general form of idealism, into his own genre of "militant" song, which would speak to the specific issues of the day, often calling for particular remedies; Betz, *Hanns Eisler*, 84.

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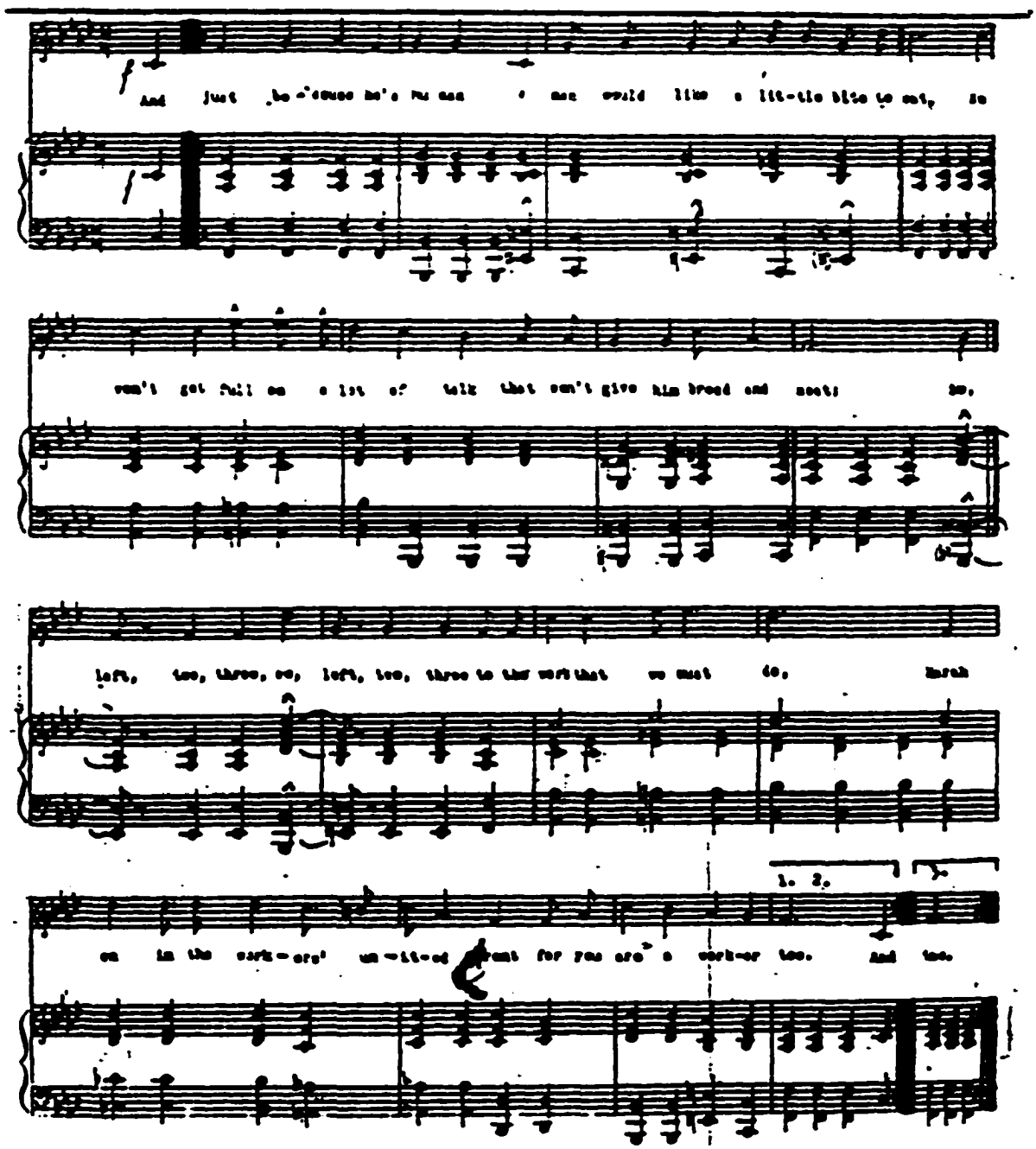
Example 2.2: Hanns Eisler: "United Front"



Given Eisler's radical bent, his musical openness, and his popular success, it is not at all surprising that he became a role model for radical young American composers. If

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Crawford was not yet ready for or interested in such politically loaded music, her fellow American composer Marc Blitzstein could hardly have been a more likely Eislerian. Blitzstein (1905-1964) was interested in the interaction of radical politics and music from an early age, having grown up in a Russian-Jewish Philadelphia household where left-wing politics were constantly under discussion. The first of his compositions to receive a public performance was his incidental music to a Soviet play titled *King Hunger*, which had its world premiere, complete with Blitzstein's score, in the Philadelphia suburb of Rose Valley in December 1924.[45] Biographer Eric Gordon, however, asserts that Blitzstein's interest in radical politics was essentially superficial until the early 1930s. Until that time, it was fueled by equal parts family tradition and radical chic. Indeed, with the exception of *King Hunger*, Blitzstein's professional activities through the1920s were fairly conventional for a gifted young American composer interested in modern music: occasional performances as a pianist, sporadic commissions from wealthy patrons, lecture series in music history and appreciation, and composition studies in Europe. A precocious talent, musically and otherwise, Blitzstein gave his first public piano recital at the tender age of seven, and enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania when he was sixteen. Soon after, he found himself drawn to composing.

Blitzstein was studying composition in Berlin when the Depression began. He set sail for the United States on 8 November 1930, just as Crawford was beginning her own journey to Europe. While overseas, Blitzstein had studied briefly with the two leading teachers on the Continent. His studies in Berlin under Schoenberg were of little benefit, as Blitzstein was unsympathetic to what he perceived as the rigidity of serial composition. Gordon writes that Blitzstein "distrusted almost everything about Schoenberg. He found his formulaic approach inappropriate . . . Blitzstein furthermore

45. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 21.

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felt that Schoenberg wrote badly for the piano and wind instruments."[46] Not surprisingly, Blitzstein considered the spiritual poverty he found in Schoenberg's music a direct result of the "frustration and defeat of an age which persisted in divorcing art from life, forcing spirituality into mere pomposity."[47]

Blitzstein was much more directly influenced, at least musically, by his studies with Nadia Boulanger. An organist of some renown, Boulanger (1887-1979) had established herself in the 1920s as the leading teacher in the Russo-French tradition. In contrast to Schoenberg's highly systematized method of composition, geared toward the production of masterpieces and the upholding of the great Germanic tradition, Boulanger advocated music that would be light, music that made no outsized metaphysical claims for its own importance. This did not mean, however, that technique was unimportant to her; on the contrary, Boulanger's students absorbed lessons in counterpoint, harmony, orchestration, and numerous other technical matters. They studied both canonical masterworks and the latest in modern music, often hearing new pieces performed by their composers. Blitzstein found Boulanger's teachings more valuable than Schoenberg's, but she, too, frowned upon the freighting of music with political--particularly radical, left-wing--messages, and Blitzstein felt her to be, like Schoenberg, too enamored of a specific compositional style, at the expense of ideological content.

Despite his independence from both Boulanger and Schoenberg, Blitzstein did not create a new version of proletarian modernist composition out of whole cloth. Instead, he simply chose another model: the music of Hanns Eisler, with which he became acquainted while traveling in Europe in early 1930.[48] Upon returning to New York in November 1930, Blitzstein divided his time between public lecturing, composing

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46. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 27.

47. Blitzstein quoted in Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 27.

48. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 55.

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ideologically-neutral compositions such as his *Piano Sonata* and the incidental music to the abstract film *Surf and Seaweed* (both composed in 1931), and experiments in a new, Eislerian agit-prop style. Among the latter were such works as his ballet *Cain* (1931) and the short opera *The Harpies* (1931), the score for which, in Gordon's words, "drift[s] in and out of radio-commercial style, barbershop harmony, and implicit references to the Valkyries and the three genii of *The Magic Flute* [and] is a send-up of Stravinsky's neo-classic style."[49] In August 1931, he set sail on a recreational cruise to Europe. The trip apparently turned into something of a working vacation, for while at sea, Blitzstein came up with the concept for a work that demonstrated quite clearly his growing preoccupation with the didactic possibilities of music. It was to be a choral opera based on the story of Sacco and Vanzetti. According to Blitzstein the piece was intended to show "the background of the capitalistic machine against a radical individual."[50] The opera's leftist politics were expressed allegorically, with a surrealist cast of characters including Eugene V. Debs, the Maccabees, Socrates, and John Brown. The work, far and away his most ambitious to that point, would occupy Blitzstein for over a year.

Completed in November 1932, *The Condemned* was Blitzstein's first large-scale work of musical theatre. Unfortunately, Blitzstein, feeling that "form was all," had forgotten--as Eisler never did--to make his opera musically engaging. After examining the score, Aaron Copland wondered "[h]ow are we to be moved for half {an} hour about one situation which abstractly gets us but not really?" and complained of "a kind of unpleasantness" in Blitzstein's musical idiom.[51] Blitzstein was unable to arrange for a performance, and to this date *The Condemned* has never been published, performed, or recorded. Fortunately, Blitzstein was a musician with many talents, and when *The*

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49. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 57-59, 69.

50. Quoted in Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 71.

51. Quoted in Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 80, brackets Gordon's.

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Condemned went nowhere, he picked himself up, dusted himself off, and sought other ways to contribute to the cause. He had already enlisted his pianistic talents in the forces of radicalism, appearing on a concert on 7 November 1931, in celebration of the fourteenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and continued to perform at similar events.[52] At the same time, Blitzstein, through his employment as a lecturer at the New School for Social Research, was making personal and professional connections with figures who would be central in New York's radical musical circles for much of the next decade and beyond.

Modernism and Beyond

In teaching at the New School, Blitzstein joined a core group of American modernist composers, each of them representing a different musical approach. Blitzstein was hired by Henry Cowell, who had been charged with organizing the New School's division of music and dance. Under Cowell's leadership the department offered lectureships to a number of important figures of the musical avant-garde, including Blitzstein, Seeger, and Blitzstein's fellow Fontainebleu alumnus, Aaron Copland.[53] Largely self-taught--when he met Seeger, at age fifteen, Cowell had composed more than one hundred pieces--Cowell was also an avowed leftist, and in 1929 he became the first American composer ever invited to visit the Soviet Union, which he did in 1929. Yet despite his handful of "proletarian songs" and clear sympathy with the Left, Cowell's primary interests were

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52. According to Gordon, Blitzstein performed unspecified "contemporary American music" on the program; Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 72.

53. Actually, although Cowell did participate extensively in New York's musical scene in this period, he was nominally a resident of northern California, where he had founded and run first the New Music Society and then *New Music Quarterly*. For discussions of these groups, see Rita H. Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music, 1925-36: The Society, the Music Edition, and the Recordings* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982).

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aesthetic rather than ideological.[54] An early proponent of American ultra-modernism, neo-primitivism, and musical multiculturalism, Cowell had, by the early 1930s, published a systematic treatise of advanced compositional theory, toured as a piano prodigy and compositional *enfant terrible*, and received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study ethnomusicology in Berlin with Erich von Hornbostle, one of the pioneers in the field. Almost from the beginning of his compositional career, Cowell incorporated elements of non-Western musics into his own works.[55]

Because of his intellectual curiosity, his musical innovations, his leftist politics, and his interdisciplinary interests, Cowell was the perfect musical director for the New School, which was, as its name suggests, an experimental institution. The New School was founded in 1919 in response to Columbia University's dismissal of two distinguished professors for their public professions of pacifism during World War I. In its then-brief lifetime, the New School had defined itself as a haven for unconventional thinkers--often of leftist political persuasions--in the arts and humanities. Classroom lecturers in the years leading up to the Depression included art critic Leo Stein, literary scholar Waldo Frank, cultural historian Lewis Mumford, and architectural commentator Henry Dana, each a pioneer in his respective field. In addition, the school hosted public lectures by such notable figures as Felix Frankfurter, John Dewey, Sidney Hook, Bertrand Russell, Morris Cohen, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Erich Fromm. The New School also

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54. The *New Grove Dictionary* worklist for Cowell includes more than 1,000 pieces, of which exactly four are expressly leftist: "Canned," "Free Nations United," "Working Man Unite, We Must Put Up a Fight," and "We Can Win Together," all of which were composed 1930-33, have never been published, and are listed under the heading "Proletarian Songs and a March." Worklist for Henry Cowell, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Volume 6, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Grove's Dictionary, 2001), 626.

55. Henry Cowell, "Towards Neo-Primitivism," *MM* 10/3 (March--April 1933), 145-53; Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); originally published 1930. Hornbostle, in turn, was later hired under the auspices of the New School's University in Exile, established to provide employment for refugees of European fascism, but died before his term began. Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 102.

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became a home to innovative musical thought: during the 1925-26 school year, music critic Paul Rosenfeld gave the first series of lectures on modern music in the United States at the school.[56]

As the Depression had dried up many traditional sources of funding--commissions, performances, and publication--for composers, the New School lectureships were particularly welcome. That the New School also provided a place at which composers could come together, learning both from each other and from their fellow faculty members in other departments, came as a bonus. Within the music department, such relative youngsters as Cowell, Copland, and Blitzstein surely benefited from Seeger's pedagogical experience and scholarly bent, just as Seeger must have enjoyed his contact with several of the most talented composers of the young generation.

But even more important for Seeger (as probably for others) than the collegial atmosphere was the simple fact of gainful employment. Seeger had been scrambling for work since the collapse of his marriage in the late 1920s. He had become *persona non grata* at the Institute of Musical Arts, which was run by friends of his former wife's family, and his scholarly articles obviously did not pay the bills. The liberal environment offered by the New School was also highly congenial to Seeger. Years earlier at Berkeley, the intensity and catholicity of Seeger's intellectual curiosity had been exceptions to the institutional rule. In contrast, the New School offered an environment where the interdisciplinarity by which he came naturally was actively encouraged. This institutional openness was evident to Seeger right from the start, in the first course he taught there: beginning in January 1931, he and Cowell co-taught the school's first-ever class in ethnomusicology.[57]

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56. Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 38, 56.

57. Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 109.

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But the music faculty were not the only instructors at the New School who made musical contributions there. Seeger's professional explorations of music's role within a culture coincided precisely with his introduction to Anglo-American folk music at the weekly gatherings held by painter (and New School colleague) Thomas Hart Benton. In the beginning, Seeger's interest in folk music was more personal than academic, as evidenced by his stint playing guitar with a "hillbilly" band at the dedication of Benton's *America Today* murals in January 1931.[58] And though he could not possibly have known it at the time, Seeger's engagement in this music, so different from the experimental composition in which he and Crawford had previously been engrossed, would prove to become a lifelong involvement for both of them.

New York Intellectuals and the Idea of the "Folk"

Seeger's new musical interest was initially a product, at least in part, of his native intellectual inquisitiveness. For a number of his fellow intellectuals, however, the appeal of American folk culture was rooted in a sort of aesthetic populism. To them, folk culture was significant as an organic tradition, untainted by the commercialism and sophistry that made both popular and modernist art inappropriate vehicles for social change. This conception of folk culture was further strengthened by the abysmal conditions that obtained among America's rural poor in the early 1930s, in comparison to which the lot of many urban dwellers seemed mild.

Nowhere was this more true than in the Deep South and Appalachia. Workers in this area lived under conditions that would have seemed almost inconceivably backwards to most Americans. After a trip through the region in the mid-1930s, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace was "tempted to say that one third of the farmers of the

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58. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 133.

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United States live under conditions which are so much worse than the peasantry of Europe that the city people of the United States should be thoroughly ashamed."[59]

One of the most dramatic illustrations of the hardships endured by southern workers came, not surprisingly, as the result of an attempt at labor organization. In 1929, textile workers throughout North Carolina went on strike. The bloody culmination of this dispute between labor and management left at least seven strikers dead, and several dozen injured. Among the dead was Ella May Wiggins, a union agitator and songwriter best known for her "ILD Song."[60] Although the conflict had thus far gone more or less unnoticed outside of the region, Wiggins's death marked a turning point in terms of public interest. The radical singer Margaret Larkin, who was then active in New York's leftist circles, wrote articles on the subject for *The Nation* and *New Masses* in October 1929, and the matter spurred a group of northern intellectuals to action.[61]

Under the leadership of Theodore Dreiser, a group of writers including John Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford formed the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, commonly known as the Dreiser Committee. The Committee's sympathies extended beyond the traditional definition of political prisoners, and were in fact particularly drawn to the plight of miners and sharecroppers of Appalachia and the Deep South. Two years into the Depression, the Committee's

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59. Quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 375-76.

60. The "ILD Song" is reproduced in Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 249-50.

61. Archie Green notes the popularity of the subject among contemporary writers, pointing out that Gastonia was used as a setting by six novelists during the period 1930-34: Mary Heaton Vorse, Myra Page, Grace Lumpkin, Fielding Burke, William Rollins, Sherwood Anderson; Archie Green, "A Southern Cotton Mill Rhyme," in Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 281; for more on southern textile songs, see Doug DeNatale & Glenn Hinson, "The Southern Textile Song Tradition Reconsidered," in *Songs About Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss*, ed. Archie Green (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 77-107. The Gastonia incident was the subject of an entire issue of the *New Masses*. "Gastonia," *New Masses* (hereafter "NM") 5/5 (October 1929).

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members decided to visit some of the most deeply affected areas and interview citizens of the region.

Upon arriving in Pineville, Kentucky, in early November 1931, Dreiser, Dos Passos, and the other committee members began taking testimony from anyone willing to come forward. Among the many compelling witnesses, one in particular stood out: Aunt Molly Jackson (1880-1960), a fifty-year old midwife, who appeared before the committee in Straight Creek, Kentucky, and testified that "[t]he people in this country are destitute of anything that is really nourishing to the body . . . Even the babies," said Aunt Molly, "have lost their lives, and we have buried from four to seven a week all along during warm weather." After praising the work of the National Miners Union as "one of the greatest things that has ever come into the world," Aunt Molly concluded her testimony by performing a song she had written called "Hungry Ragged Blues."[62]

Stanzas depict "Ragged and barefooted . . . children a-crying for bread"; insist that "If we can't get no more labor, we will starve to death and die"; and tell of "bumming around from place to place to get a little bite to eat." The penultimate stanza abandons the AAB line structure, as the voice shifts from narration to advice: "All a-going round from place to place bumming for a little food to eat./Listen, my friends and comrades, please take a friend's advice,/Don't put out no more of your labor, till you get a living price." Then the AAB structure and despairing tone return for the final stanza: "Some coal operators might tell you the hungry blues are not bad;/Some coal operators might tell you the hungry blues are not bad;/They are the worst blues this poor woman ever had."[63]

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62. National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism on the Kentucky Coal Fields* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 279. A detailed description of the meeting is provided in Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 39-42. See also "The Harlan Miners Speak," *NM* 7/7 (December 1931): 5-6.

63. Lyrics quoted in introduction, *Harlan Miners Speak*.

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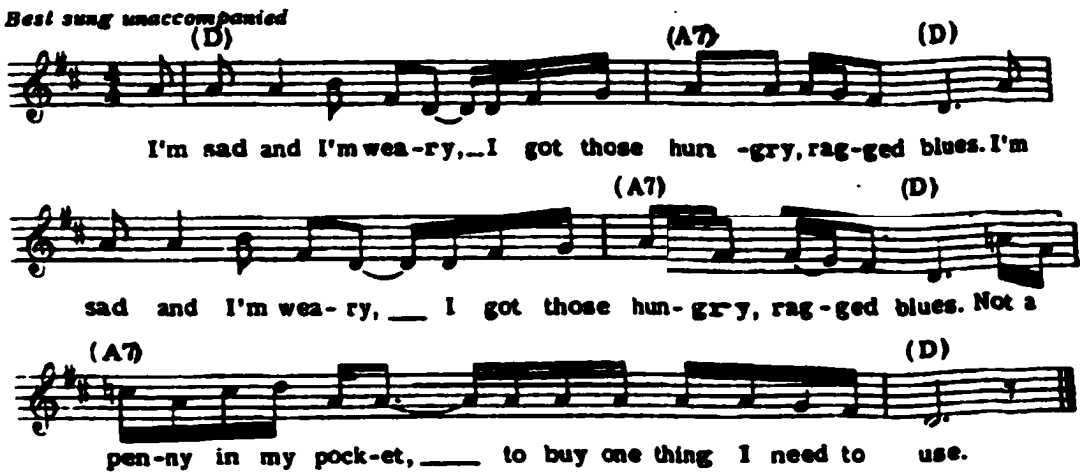
Example 2.3: Aunt Molly Jackson, "Hungry Ragged Blues" (Chorus)[64]



The visitors from New York were floored by Aunt Molly's "Hungry Ragged Blues" and her testimony as a whole. Her rough performance style was unlike anything that could be heard in urban America in that period, and must have seemed to them the very embodiment of proletarian honesty. The song's lyrics, while not particularly poetic, were similarly direct, and they articulated, in an unaffected vernacular, ideas that the Committee members dearly wanted to bring back to New York. Their booklength document of the Kentucky trip, *Harlan Miners Speak*, opens with Aunt Molly's lyrics, here called "Aunt Molly Jackson's Kentucky Miners' Wives Ragged Hungry Blues." Clearly, the Committee saw in Aunt Molly a powerful potential symbol for their crusade.

In fact, as Jackson's biographer Shelly Romalis explains, the Committee's adulation of Aunt Molly was not shared by many of her peers, who considered her to be something of a freeloader and a showboat. Her elevation by the out-of-towners to representative status seemed to the townspeople--including several members of her own family--a typical example of the ultimate inability of the would-be proletarians to relate to the

64. KENTUCKY MINER'S WIFE'S HUNGRY RAGGED BLUES by Aunt Molly Jackson Copyright © 1967 by STORMKING MUSIC, INC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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conditions of the workers in a more meaningful way. The actions of the Dreiser Committee thus exemplified the complex dynamic between intellectuals and workers that lay at the heart of the creation of the labor movement in America, described here by Richard Hofstadter:

> In the United States, as elsewhere, the labor movement was in a very real sense the creation of intellectuals. But it was a child that turned upon its own father in order to forge its distinctive character. It was not possible to develop labor leadership of the type that could finally succeed in creating permanent organizations in America until a curious dialectic had been gone through: first, the influence of intellectuals and their systematic critique of capitalism created an awareness of the necessity for and the possibilities of a labor movement; but then, in successive stages, this influence had to be thrown off before the labor movement could shed distractions and excrescences, devote itself to organizing job-conscious trade unions, and establish itself on a durable and successful footing.[65]

Of course, it is also true, as Romalis points out, that Dos Passos and his companions recognized the need for emblems--however inaccurate they may be as representatives of their realities--around which to rally their cause. The lionization of Aunt Molly was thus probably the result of equal parts genuine interest and calculated strategy.

In any event, and regardless of the reasons for the Committee's fixation on Jackson, she so impressed them that less than one month later she was bound for New York, at the invitation of the Committee. On 1 December 1931, Dos Passos, accompanied by fellow

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65. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 282.

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Committee members Charles and Adelaide Walker, met Aunt Molly at the bus station in New York City. She had come for an undetermined amount of time, to stay with the Walkers. On returning to the couple's apartment, Aunt Molly was greeted by cards and notes of welcome from Dreiser, Mumford, Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, and others.[66] Jackson and her sponsors on the Committee lost no time in exposing New York audiences to the exotic musical activism she had brought from the mining towns of Kentucky. The day after her arrival, Aunt Molly performed at the Bronx Coliseum before a crowd of roughly 8,000 attendees at a farewell rally, sponsored by the Communist-affiliated Unemployed Councils, for participants in the National Hunger March in Washington, D.C. Four days later, she was on stage again, this time before an audience of 3,000 at a meeting of the Dreiser Committee, held at the Star Casino, at Park Avenue and 107th Street. The *Daily Worker* reported that Aunt Molly "was given a big ovation by the audience" after she sang "a special song she had written for the occasion."[67]

Jackson created enough of a stir to spark commercial interest. On 10 December, accompanied by Margaret Larkin on guitar, Aunt Molly recorded two songs for release on Columbia Records. The record contained the unlikely--for commercial recordings, anyway--pairing of Jackson's "Kentucky Miner's Wife" and (naturally) "Hungry Ragged Blues." Apparently, it was not successful, and although Aunt Molly returned to the studio a week later and recorded two more songs, "Poor Miners Farewell" and "I Love Coal Miners," they were never released.[68] When viewed in terms other than record sales,

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66. Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 89.

67. Romalis, *Pistol Packin'*, 90, 90-91; "Sherwood Anderson Says That Writers Must Join Struggle On Side Of Militant Workers," *Daily Worker* (hereafter "DW") 8 December 1931, 2.

68. Romalis, *Pistol Packin'*, 92. Recording available *on Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records FH 5457, 1961.

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however, Aunt Molly's career continued to thrive, and she spent the better part of 1932 on the road, raising money for destitute miners.

However, Jackson's immediate impact on the New York intellectual crowd was mostly confined to the literary set that comprised the Dreiser Committee. Meanwhile, musicians like Seeger, Crawford, and Blitzstein, all of whom would presumably have shared the Dreiser Committee's ideological affinity for folk music, were reluctant to take the logical next step and advocate that the new proletarian music that they were seeking should be based in some way on folk culture.[69]

Spheres of Influence

This reluctance on the part of composers to turn to the "folk" begs the question as to why they believed that the artistic products of revolutionary America needed to be modernist in idiom, a notion that was far from obvious. Because the relevant arguments at issue were most clearly defined in the world of literature, we will now briefly turn to that field. As Daniel Aaron has noted, the 1920s were marked by a severe schism between modernist and Communist writers in America; the modernists considered Communists too willing to sacrifice aesthetics on the altar of ideology, while the Communists considered the art of the modernists to be morally decadent, even bankrupt.[70]

In Soviet Russia, however, the two camps co-existed more peacefully. Throughout the 1920s, the new Soviet republic was an intriguing concept to many intellectuals in western Europe and the United States, although only a few prominent Americans--most notably the writer John Reed--loudly advocated emulation of that fledgling nation, and

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69. Composers were in this sense behind the curve; Richard Reuss has documented both popular and scholarly interest in folk tales, songs, and dance in 1920's. Richard Reuss, "The Roots of American Left-Wing Interest in Folksong," *Labor History* 12 (Spring 1971), 263-64.

70. Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961). See especially Chapter 3, "Expatriates and Radicals," 68-90.

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even those voices were largely quelled by the government-instigated Red Scare of the early 1920s. By 1932, however, the Soviet Union, with its planned economy and rumored prosperity, seemed to many Americans to contrast very favorably with the Depression-ravaged United States and western Europe. George Bernard Shaw, a long-time Marxist who had recently visited the Soviet Union, captured the feelings of many in an address he gave on CBS radio on 11 October 1931. "Hello America!" he began,

> Hello, all my friends in America! How are all you dear old boobs who have been telling one another for a month that I have gone dotty about Russia? . . . Russia has the laugh on us. She has us fooled, beaten, shamed, shown up, outpointed, and all but knocked out. We have lectured her from the heights of our modern superiority and now we are calling on the mountains to hide our blushes in her presence. . . . Our agriculture is ruined and our industries collapsing under the weight of our own productiveness because we have not found out how to distribute our wealth as well as to produce it.[71]

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Shaw's speech was the venue in which it was delivered. Initially to be given over the BBC, his remarks had run afoul of network censors. Executives at CBS--eager to tweak the BBC while showing off their own openness to all viewpoints--agreed to have Shaw on, while providing time for a rebuttal by a Vice-President of Georgetown University. The willingness of executives at a major American broadcasting corporation to provide a forum for Shaw's views is both a testament to the relative acceptability of his ideas, and proof that the executives believed in the existence of an audience sufficient to make the broadcast a likely winner for CBS.

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71. Quoted in Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 249.

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However, it was one thing for Shaw to rub America's nose in her failures and the Soviet Union's successes. It was another thing entirely for working-class Americans to do something about it, absent an armed revolution or imminent election. America's artists felt that they possessed the potential to effect social change through their work. But in order for the bourgeois artists and intellectuals to become engaged in the struggles of America's poor, unemployed, and working-class men and women, they felt the need to overcome the understandable skepticism of the very public with whom they wished to identify. Richard Pells has articulated a number of the dilemmas that faced Blitzstein, Seeger, and all of their colleagues, musical and otherwise, who sought the trust and approval of working-class America:

> How were bourgeois intellectuals to convert themselves into loyal allies of the laboring man? What form of participation was appropriate for those who had never operated a lathe, fed a blast furnace, or endured the monotony of the assembly line? If writers were not by necessity members of the working class, how could they possibly pretend to share its oppression, absorb its outlook, and speak in its name? Might they realize any benefits in return? What did "action" really mean for men who had rarely been authentic partisans of any political cause?[72]

Seeking answers to these questions, many of America's most talented young writers, including John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, Edmund Wilson, and John Dos Passos looked to their Soviet colleagues, drawing inspiration perhaps from the fervent social concern of such famous muckraking literati as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and Dreiser. The American writers' admiration for Soviet culture had aesthetic as well as

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72. Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 161.

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political roots: the innovative techniques of the modern Soviet theater were surpassed in their acclaim among admirers of modern arts and culture only by the accomplishments of the Soviet cinema.

American musicians, too, were fascinated by their Soviet counterparts. In 1932, the American composer and conductor Ashley Pettis undertook a tour of the Soviet Union, "for the purposes of observing musical conditions under the new regime." [73] Earlier visits by musicians as diverse as Henry Cowell and Sidney Bechet had yielded reports of a culture that embraced its artists and celebrated the national culture--including music--in a variety of ways. Upon returning from his trip, Pettis published three articles that corroborated the positive nature of earlier reports. The periodicals in which Pettis's articles were published are themselves significant: two of the three, the *New Republic* and *The Nation*, were (and remain) general-interest left-wing magazines covering news and politics. Only *Modern Music* was primarily concerned with matters musical, but under the editorial direction of Minna Lederman, the official journal of the League of Composers was in the habit of running articles that used musical subjects as means for entering into broader discussions of culture and society. Pettis thus had an opportunity to influence a fairly broad readership, and one that was likely to be sympathetic to, or at least open-minded towards, the Soviet Union.

Pettis addressed several areas of Soviet musical culture in his articles, and in each case, his assessment was positive. Although he stopped short of explicitly recommending that American musicians, educators, and audiences emulate their Soviet counterparts, the laudatory tone adopted throughout the essays makes it clear that Pettis viewed his writings as not only descriptive, but potentially prescriptive as well. The contrasts between American and Soviet cultures--particularly when considered in combination with the common knowledge that the Soviet Union, alone among major Western powers,

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73. Ashley Pettis, "Musical Flashlights from Moscow," *MM* 10/1 (November-December, 1932): 49.

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had escaped the grips of the international economic collapse--suggested that perhaps the radical restructuring of American economic, political and cultural life along Soviet lines was all that could help rescue the foundering republic. We should examine Pettis's work in some depth, discussing his view of Soviet achievements in three basic areas of musical life: education, popular reception and participation, and composition, for by investigating how Soviet ideas and practices were described for the New York composers, we will gain greater insight into the actions they later justified with reference to the Soviet Union.

The involvement of the Soviet government in musical and other cultural matters was an issue of prime importance to Pettis. This priority is especially evident in his discussion of the government-run schools of the Soviet Union. In fact, Pettis considered the government's active support for the arts one of the most appealing aspects of Soviet cultural life: "With the government sponsoring all quest for knowledge, and particularly the technical preparation of those possessing creative talent, artistic souls from the far ends of the earth have gathered in Moscow to receive schooling, inspiration and opportunity for self expression *in conformance with the new social ideals*. [Italics added]"[74] As the italicized passage indicates, Pettis was aware of (and apparently not fazed by) the ideologically-based strictures the Soviet government placed on musical education. In fact, Marxist-Leninist thought dominated the nation's music schools. According to Pettis, "[i]n the teaching of music, the social influences which affected the technique as well as the spirit of the master are considered. In the study of Bach, not only the more obvious spiritual qualities of his writing, but the character of his counterpoint as it was influenced and developed in a period of religious reformation, is studied profoundly. The technical and spiritual aspects of music of all periods are, from the Marxian point of view, interdependent."[75] This idea of the interdependence of music and

74. Pettis, "Musical Flashlights," 49.

75. Ashley Pettis, "Proletarian Music," *The Nation* 145 (November 23, 1932): 501.

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its cultural and social contexts, would have had great resonance for musicians like Cowell and Seeger, whose ethnomusicological work had such concepts as its basis.

Of course, the Soviet conservatories still retained much from traditional musical pedagogy, and Pettis applauded the rigor of their curricula, writing of the "splendid example of technicum" offered at the former Gnessin Conservatory in Moscow. Equally noteworthy, however, were the "experimental classes for workers, where those of mature years who show musical aptitude are given an opportunity to test their musical potentialities." Even the multitude of Soviet citizens who lacked musical gifts were included in the government's musical plans, witness Pettis's detailed description of the many means through which the Soviet government pursued the "development of *intelligent* musical audiences [Italics added]."[76] For starters, "[t]he Soviet state [was] doing everything in its power to foster and develop understanding and appreciation of the new music as well as the music of other periods through state musical publications."[77] Moreover, "[t]he part played by musical 'collectives' both among workers and in the Red Army is a vital factor in imbuing the masses with the conception of music as an integral part of their lives." Pettis was further impressed by the "growth of public forums for the discussion of new musical works."[78]

Apparently, the government's extensive efforts paid off, for Pettis's descriptions of audiences at several concerts he attended read like a Socialist music appreciation professor's dream:

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76. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 501. Although Pettis's identification of workers' music groups and classes as a recent, post-Revolution innovation is understandable, it is not altogether accurate. S. Frederick Starr notes that the tradition of the Russian workers' choir dates back as early as 1911, when such groups were organized by Bolsheviks in Russian factories. Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 39–40.

77. Ashley Pettis, "Music in Russia Today," *New Republic* 72 (August 31, 1932): 73.

78. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 500.

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> An intensity of spirit animates the masses of Russians who make up the musical audiences, so that they seem transformed into something very different from what one can see anywhere else. A performance of Tschaikovsky's *Pique Dame*--the old operas are in great favor--at the Bolshoi Opera! How amazing to witness such a production given before people mostly in working clothes, occupying orchestra, box and loge seats where formerly only nobility and aristocracy sat. . . . A concert at the High School of Music, (formerly the Imperial Conservatory of Moscow)! Another full house! Was it something new? An old name, Beethoven; but they were listening to old music with a new spirit, and not only applauding, but cheering. For Beethoven is the man whose art, from the Communistic point of view, is a protest against the social and political conditions of his time![79]

This description is also very revealing of Pettis's biases. Not surprisingly, he seems to have agreed with Soviet authorities that, to an "intelligent" listener, Beethoven's value is as much political as it is musical.

This retrospective annexation of Beethoven to the Socialist cause was but a symptom of the overall proletarianization of music desired by the Soviet government. Pettis also wrote of the "special encouragement given proletarian musicians to compose popular songs."[80] Although he had been informed that all of these songs were marching tunes, Pettis found that "while songs in march time predominate, there is a great diversity in the

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79. Pettis, "Musical Flashlights," 51.

80. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 501.

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character of the rhythm and the musical content, as well as in the words. The scores are rich in bold melodies, and are frequently of extraordinary harmonic richness."

Perhaps most impressively, for Pettis, the Soviet strategy had already proven successful. "With the advent of certain works for full orchestra and chorus, such as the 'October' of Shostakovich and the opera '1919' of Davidenko, a new epoch in music in Russia may be considered to have been inaugurated."[81] Although *1919*--and indeed, Davidenko's entire *oeuvre*--has long since been forgotten in the West, in the early 1930s his martial, tuneful music was considered by many in the Soviet Union to be the pinnacle of proletarian composition. Pettis rated *1919* highly enough to discuss it in all three articles. In one of them, Pettis wrote that "[t]he musical idiom [of *1919*] is modern in vein, coherent in form, the influence being derived from the proletarian spirit and not traceable to any direct musical source." With "its glorification of collective labor and in its preservation of the proletarian character of peasant songs, [*1919*] may be considered as a fulfilment of the new tendencies in the music of Soviet Russia."[82]

Alfred Schlee, writing in *Modern Music* in early 1932, provided a more detailed explanation of the officially-sanctioned musical idiom of the Soviet republic, describing musical socialist realism as "realism that does not seek to photograph reality in exact detail, but to present the motivating laws of the actual in clearer, truer fashion than life itself!" The music produced by the Association of Proletarian Musicians, wrote Schlee, contained "simple, singable tunes, the basis of whose texts is preponderantly a program of construction." In addition, "[m]artial characteristics prevail[ed]." Schlee cited Davidenko, as well as fellow forgotten composers Koval and Bieli, as exemplars of this style.[83]

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81. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 502.

82. Pettis, "Music in Russia Today," 72; "Proletarian Music," 502.

83. Alfred Schlee, "Under the Red Flag," *MM* 9/3 (March-April 1932): 110, 111.

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To Pettis's ear, these composers' contributions constituted a much-needed improvement on the traditional tendencies of Russian music: "Though formerly much of the Russian folk music was filled with a sense of inevitable suffering, oppression, despair and hopelessness, the music of present-day Russia epitomizes the spirit of reconstruction, the will to live and do, the vitality of collective labor and the struggles and aims of the proletariat."[84] Just as surely as the October Revolution had declared an end to Russia's imperial form of government, the revolution underway in the conservatories and concert halls of the Soviet Union was purging the nation's music of its bourgeois heritage:

> The old Russian folk music, which influenced certain works of Moussorgsky and Borodin, and the ancient peasant life of Russia, to whose beliefs, ceremonies, and prejudices the revolution brought death and substitution, have no direct influence on the work of modern Russian composers, who have sought to eliminate all those melodic and harmonic influences of the earlier folklore. At the same time they abjure, above all, the "foreign" and "bourgeois" traits of European and Russian composers who have striven for brilliancy and imposing effects. They are attempting in their new proletarian songs and words to deal with the realities of life in a workers' state and to develop a new Russian school of music free of all bourgeois and pseudo-Russian influences.[85]

The accuracy of Pettis's descriptions is questionable--what of Shostakovitch and Prokofiev, for example?--but the picture he painted of a wholesale reinvention of an entire nation's musical culture, involving both the eradication of undesirable

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84. Pettis, "Music in Russia Today," 73.

85. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 500-01.

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anachronisms and the creation of a new, more appropriate musical language, was quite exciting to his American colleagues. Regardless of its actual achievements, however, the merits of such a plan are highly debatable on both ideological and pragmatic grounds. Do ideologically-motivated, politically-mandated changes in musical style have any significance beyond the symbolic? More importantly, when a nation's populace is faced with the very real problems of industrial growth, agricultural inefficiency, and economic uncertainty, should the creation of an ideologically pure national musical style be given the priority it was accorded by the Soviet government? If so, is it really possible to effect such change? Is a centuries-old musical culture in fact susceptible to reform on demand? In his article for *Modern Music*, Pettis asserted that "the enormous vitality, determination and hope of the people find outlets not only in work but in many forms of expression, the most vital of which seems to be music."[86] However, Pettis neglects to mention whether this vitality embraced the music that was produced by the reforms of which he was so enamored, or whether it was instead restricted to existing forms. Pettis's statement thus begs the question: how vital can a peoples' connection to a musical idiom that arises, not organically, but rather through government fiat, be?

Although Pettis insisted that "[Lenin's] principle that the worker should have an outlet for his energies, thoughts, and emotions along some line other than his daily work has paved the way for the birth, development, and recognition of the proletarian composer,"[87] he neglected to mention the reservations Lenin himself had regarding the manufacture of proletarian culture. While Lenin would most likely have appreciated the encouragement--financial and otherwise--that Stalin's government provided to composers of "proletarian music," he would have viewed the strict construals of proletarianism in music far less favorably. "Proletarian culture," he once wrote, "is not something that has

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86. Pettis, "Musical Flashlights," 51.

87. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 502.

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sprung from nowhere, it is not an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture. That is all nonsense. "[88] But Lenin's successors in the Soviet government did not feel like waiting for an organic Soviet musical tradition to emerge.

Pettis found the Soviet position to be ultimately a sympathetic one. "After studying the methods adopted by the state to further this ideal," he felt "convinced that the new proletarian music of Soviet Russia is the most significant and complete expression of the Communist order."[89] This may indeed have been true, although not entirely in the way in which Pettis meant it. To be sure, the Soviet government's active role in cultural life, as in economic planning, contrasted quite favorably with the not-so-benign neglect that characterized the actions of the Hoover administration. The notion that music and other cultural activities were worthy of government funding and encouragement understandably induced many American composers to view the Soviet government as far superior to the business-dominated administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. As in many other areas of Soviet life, however, the government's productive initial "encouragement" mutated into the repressive dictates of a new tyranny.

American Collectives

Pettis's glowing reports were fairly representative of the perception of Soviet culture among many of New York's (and the nation's) prominent young artists. Indeed, by the time of his trip, a number of them had begun to emulate the model of the Soviet arts collectives. Perhaps the most significant example of this phenomenon was the national network--based in New York City--of John Reed Clubs, named for the author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, an account of the October Revolution of 1917. In the "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs," published in the June 1932 issue of *New Masses*, the

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88. Lenin quoted in Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 21.

89. Pettis, "Proletarian Music," 500.

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club's founders advocated a new art that would be the aesthetic expression of Communism. Their actions were motivated by a belief that "[t]he general crisis of capitalism is reflected in its culture," as demonstrated by the fact that "[t]he economic and political machinery of the bourgeoisie is in decay, its philosophy, its literature, its art are bankrupt."[90]

According to the Manifesto, the previous two years had "witnessed two major movements among American intellectuals: the Humanist movement, frankly reactionary in its ideas; and a movement to the left among certain types of liberal intellectuals." They explained this rift in the following manner:

> The best of the younger American writers come, by and large, from the middle-classes. During the boom which followed the [First World] war these classes increased their income. . . . The crash in the autumn of 1929 fell on their heads like a thunderbolt. They found themselves the victims of the greatest expropriation in the history of the country. The articulate members of the middle-classes--the writers and the artists, the members of the learned professions--lost faith in capitalism which during the twenties trapped them into dreaming on the decadent shores of post-war European culture.

Not wishing to exclude any potential allies, the authors asserted that "[s]uch allies from the disillusioned middle-class intelligentsia are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working class itself."[91]

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90. "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs," *NM* 7 (June 1932): 3-4.

91. "Draft Manifesto," 3, 4.

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They then listed their goals, which were (as they themselves pointed out) directly influenced by a similar program produced at the famous "Second World Plenum of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature," held at Kharkov in November 1930:

> (1) Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
>
> (2) Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social-fascism;
>
> (3) Fight for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement;
>
> (4) Fight against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of the foreign-born;
>
> (5) Fight against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary writers and artists;
>
> (6) Fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.

Having established their foe, the authors concluded with a call to arms: "we call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides. . . . We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world."[92]

The writers who formed the John Reed Clubs were parts of a growing trend, centered in New York, that included the Group Theatre, the Artists' Union, the Film and Photo

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92. "Draft Manifesto," 4. The Kharkov Conference was earlier discussed in Fred Ellis, Michael Gold, William Gropper, Joshua Kunitz, A. B. Magil, Harry Alan Potamkin, "The Charkov [*sic*] Conference of Revolutionary Writers," *NM* 6/9 (February 1931): 8.

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League, and several other artist cooperatives. Some of the groups had ties to the International Communist Party, or ComIntern, while others were unaffiliated. All of them shared parallels--of which the participants were surely conscious--to the Depression-inspired resurgence of American labor unions, the worldwide ascendancy to power of Communist, Socialist, and Workers Parties, and the government-by-committee practiced at virtually every level of Soviet society. At least on a symbolic level, they aligned bourgeois artists with their working-class neighbors, connecting them to something larger than the insular arts community.

In late 1931, New York composers interested in the movement formed a collective of their own. The Composers Collective met under the auspices of the Pierre Degeyter Club, which was named for the worker who had composed the "Internationale." The Degeyter Club, in turn, was a constituent group of the Workers Music League, which was the musical wing of the American Communist Party. There seems never to have been an official membership roster for the Collective, and attendance at meetings varied widely, but it is clear that Cowell and Seeger were among the group's earliest members.[93]

Over the course of its existence, the Collective compiled and published songbooks, organized public performances, and presented lectures. During its first year, however, the Collective accomplished little of substance and was primarily important as a forum for discussion. Members met regularly to discuss both one another's compositions and the appropriate musical means for composing proletarian music. Here is Seeger's description of the first meeting he attended, at Cowell's invitation:

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93. There is no definite information about either the group's origin or its membership, although several writers agree on a core group of the Collective and date its beginnings from around this time. See Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 115-21; David King Dunaway, "Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers Collective Years," *Ethnomusicology* 24/2 (May 1980), 159-68; David King Dunaway, "Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers Collective of New York," *New York Folklore* 5/1-2 (Summer 1979): 1-19.

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> [Cowell] took me around and introduced me. And they asked me if I'd give them a lecture. So I gave them a lecture on the dictatorship of the linguistic: Marx, just like everybody else, was a philosophical proletarian who was being exploited by the bourgeoisie of the intellect. Oh, you could just see their hackles rising . . .
>
> Well, they came up afterwards and thanked me very much and said, "But you know, of course, we don't agree with you." "Well, that's the reason I spoke," I said. "I don't expect you to agree with me all of a sudden, but you'll find out eventually."[94]

Years later, Seeger reflected that he "was interested in the emotional situation and could put up with the difficulties of the intellectual side." From his experiences with the Collective, he "learned that you've got to put your reason in your pocket when you start to talk about revolutionary change being automatic and inevitable." Despite his intellectual misgivings about the enterprise represented by the Collective, he realized that "[i]f you were going to try to use music in the attempt to make history happen faster than it would otherwise--which is what we're all trying to do--you've got to shut up on some things."[95]

Another musical collective then active in New York was the Young Composers' Group. Founded by Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991), the Young Composers group, which included Lehman Engel, Bernard Herrmann, Arthur Berger, Vivian Fine, Israel Citkowitz, Henry Brant, Jerome Moross, Johnny Green, and Oscar Levant, allowed only composers under the age of twenty-five, except for Aaron Copland, who acted as something of a mentor for the Group. Most of the members were politically committed to the left. Their meetings, like those of the Collective, revolved around discussions of

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94. Dunaway, "Charles Seeger," 161.

95. Dunaway, "Charles Seeger," 161.

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one anothers' works and colloquies about the direction that cultivated music should take. The group did not last very long; apparently the discussions often grew quite heated and would occasionally take on a rather nasty edge. Following its dissolution, several members, including Siegmeister and Engel, "graduated" to the Composers Collective.

A paradoxical characteristic of the Collective, as Seeger noted, was the fact that, although its members were ostensibly concerned with producing music for workers to use in the class struggle, "[t]here was very little thought in the Collective of people singing our songs. The emphasis was on writing things for them to listen to."[96] It seems, then, that the Collective's members viewed it first and foremost as a professional association for left-wing composers, almost like a musical think tank. Its impact was greatest not with the public whose interest it purported to serve, but among the peer group that comprised its membership. Thus, although the Collective was a distant subsidiary of the ComIntern, it contributed little, at least early on, to that group's expansionist ambitions.

Perhaps this disconnect was a function of the Collective's distance, within the organizational hierarchy, from the ComIntern. As an adjunct of the subsidiary (Pierre Degeyter Club) of the subsidiary (Workers Music League) of the musical section (International Music League) of the ComIntern, the Collective appeared to operate with a surprising degree of autonomy. In the early 1930s, the cultural institutions located higher up on the organizational chain appeared to be adopting a more participatory musical strategy. In October 1932, the Workers Music League produced its first major publication: the *Red Song Book*--not to be confused with the I. W. W.'s *Little Red Songbook*--a collection intended for use by amateurs (see appendix for Table of Contents). Not surprisingly, the collection opened with the "Internationale" and included several songs of Soviet origin, including Varshavianka's "Whirlwinds of Danger" and the unattributed "Oh, Tortured and Broken in Prison," which, according to its subtitle, was

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96. Dunaway, "Charles Seeger," 163.

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"Lenin's Favorite Song." Also presented was Eisler's "Comintern," unattributed in the *Red Song Book* but already well known to workers both in America and Europe. A majority of the songs were presented as bare melodies, and most of the rest were in two parts; all were *a cappella.* The musical idiom is generally very simple, with conjunct melodies and regular rhythms. Only one song seems to have been written expressly for the collection: "Stand Guard," an unmemorable two-voice setting by Collective member Lahn Adohmyan of a V. J. Jerome text, was composed in a "folk"-style idiom much like that of the other songs in the collection.

The *Red Song Book* contained two arrangements by Collective members of existing songs. Both Adohmyan's spare two-part arrangement of "Solidarity" (a "Scotch Worker's Song") and Jacob Schaeffer's four-part arrangement of Joe Hill's "The Preacher and the Slave" (a parody of the hymn "In the Sweet By and By"; see ex. 2.4) are homophonic,

Example 2.4: "The Preacher and the Slave," arr. Jacob Schaeffer

(Responses in chorus should be spoken mockingly rather than sung)

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completely consonant, and rhythmically straightforward. The chief merits of these two arrangements are their eminent singability and ease of execution. Even when the tunes may have been unfamiliar, they would have been very easy to retain for any but the most tin-eared of singers. And as in the case of "The Preacher and the Slave" and a number called "Red Marching Song," the melodies were likely already familiar.

Stanza one of "Red Marching Song"--text by L. Spier, a little-known leftist associated with a group called the "Rebel Poets"--reads:

> We have suffered for the ages,
> Built upon our blood and bone,
> Now the day of days is near,
> Our final foe near overthrown.
> Hear our voices, hear our marching,
> Hear how they make the despots quake!
> We have suffered for the ages,
> But the fruits shall be our own.

The tune, attributed in the book (as few others are), is Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." The attribution here is interesting, and reflective of the proletarian Beethoven celebrated by the Soviets and mentioned above.[97] Familiar, easy to sing, and with simple arrangements, the music presented in the *Red Song Book* was clearly intended for use. This was music to be sung on picket lines and at demonstrations, music with which working men and women could feel comfortable, and as universally accessible as its message was politically specific.

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97. Of course, Beethoven's music has been used in the service of radically different political messages, as well; see David B. Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

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Looking Within

While the contents of the *Red Song Book* were predominantly European or European-influenced, the book also included four recent American songs: the already-mentioned "Preacher and the Slave"; Aunt Molly's "Poor Miner's Farewell" (included in her second recording session); the late Ella May Wiggins's "I. L. D. [International Labor Defense] Song"; and Maurice Sugar's famous "Soup Song," here attributed to "unemployed workers in Detroit in the heat of their struggles against hunger and evictions." The songs by Aunt Molly and Ella May were in the Anglo-American folk tradition, while the "Soup Song" was more in the vein of contemporary popular songs, and "Preacher and the Slave" used a hymn tune.

Another potential approach advocated by several contributors to the *New Masses* in the early 1930s involved looking to African-American folk music for proletarian expression. In the May 1930 issue of *New Masses*, journalist Philip Schatz wrote that "Negro culture is perhaps the most genuine workers' culture in America despite the fact that it is being corrupted by bourgeois influences." Decrying the fashionable appeal of African-American spirituals, Schatz clarified his claim: "spirituals are not the most genuine expression of the Negro worker." This was because, according to Schatz, spirituals were rarely incorporated into the everyday, working lives of African-Americans. Perhaps realizing that this claim was so broad as to be unsupportable, he then made the point that "even when the Negro worker sings spirituals in his workday occupations, the songs express his desire to be free of his job and from the danger of going to bed with an empty belly." The brief essay is sprinkled with song lyrics, each of which supports Schatz's major arguments. The songs from which he quotes are largely obscure, but the final fragment comes from that most proletarian of folksongs, "John Henry." Schatz closed with his dream that "[a]bove the madhouse noises of the

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American machine-age the new, black slaves of the Belt will join their voices with those of their white comrades in a song of revolution."[98]

Six months after Schatz's article appeared, Lawrence Gellert, brother of *New Masses* illustrator Hugo Gellert, published the first in a series of articles on "Negro Songs of Protest." Gellert eschewed the overheated ideological dogmatism that characterized Schatz's contribution, offering only a terse explanatory introduction of the larger project to which his article belonged--a book including some fifty-odd songs that he had "gathered in the Carolinas and Georgia," with arrangements provided by an anonymous "New York musician."[99] Gellert then presented nine song lyrics, each prefaced by commentary that described the musical setting and detailed the song's origin.

These two different approaches to African-American music, the one primarily polemical and the other more scholarly, both served the same end. Schatz and Gellert's attempts to provide a musical linkage between race and class had its political analog in the ILD's involvement in the Scottsboro case. Culturally as well as socially and economically, African-Americans were defined, like white working-class men and women, through the oppression of the dominant culture.[100] Ultimately, the goal was a unity in opposition, and if that meant a broadening of the musical appeal, then many on the left--if not yet in the Collective itself--were willing to make that concession.

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98. Philip Schatz, "Songs of the Negro Worker," *NM* 5/12 (May 1930): 6-8.

99. Lawrence Gellert, "Negro Songs of Protest," *NM* 6/6 (November 1930): 10-11; other installments in the series can be found in *NM* 6/8 (January 1931): 16-17; *NM* 6/11 (June 1931): 6-8; *NM* 7/11 (May 1932): 22; *NM* 8/9 (May 1933): 15-16; ***Music Vanguard*** 1/1 (March-April, 1935): 3-13; ***Music Vanguard*** 1/2 (May-June, 1935): 68-71; ***Unison*** 1/1 (May 1936): 4. The "New York musician" was Elie Siegmeister, a member of both the Young Composers Group and Composers Collective (see above).

100. Several influential African-American intellectuals, most notable W. E. B. DuBois, had similarly made common cause with Soviet revolutionaries, and their overtures were generally welcomed. For example, the poet Claude McKay, visiting the Soviet Union in 1922-23, addressed the Fourth Congress of Third International in Moscow. Lewis, ***When Harlem Was in Vogue***, 56-57.

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Several popular musicians were similarly involved in leftist projects during this period. This is particularly understandable given their greater dependence, compared to modernist composers, on the disposable income of the middle- and working-class consumers. Indeed, the Depression took a severe toll on some prominent musicians. For instance, Lewis A. Erenberg describes how the popular bandleader Paul Whiteman's film *King of Jazz*, in which he modestly assumed the title role, was a commercial failure in 1930. Soon after, Whiteman's record contract and radio show were canceled. Increasingly successful were the swing bands of Chicago, Kansas City, and Harlem. The Depression-era end to "race records" forced the majority of bands to take to the road; in 1931, Duke Ellington's orchestra embarked on the first national big-band tour. Ellington was also among the first popular musicians to participate in the leftist activities of the period, performing as a soloist at a Rockland Ballroom party commemorating International Unemployment Day.[101]

Mainstream Insurgency

The increasing public dissatisfaction with Hoover's passive style of governing was illustrated by the runaway success, in 1932, of George and Ira Gershwin's topical musical *Of Thee I Sing*. Although best known for their light-hearted musical comedies, the Gershwin brothers had in fact ventured into topical waters before; *Strike Up the Band*, a bitter disappointment during its initial Philadelphia run of 1927, was based on a George Kaufman book. Rife with political satire, *Strike Up the Band* lampooned such targets as the reflexive nationalism and industrial imperialism that many on the left felt had characterized World War I and the early 1920s. After some significant revisions by Morrie Ryskind, *Strike Up the Band* was revived in New York in January 1930 and had a respectable run, lasting some 191 performances in a version that was far less acidic than

101. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 11-12, 26-27, 131.

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the original.[102] This was apparently enough to persuade the Gershwins that a politically-charged musical could succeed with audiences.

Initially conceived in January 1931, *Of Thee I Sing* was a biting satire of government corruption and hypocrisy. In a letter from the summer of 1931, George Gershwin wrote, "Ira & I have been working on a George Kaufman book--a satire on 'Politics & Love'--called Of Thee I Sing. It is most amusing & we are looking forward to writing a score for it."[103] *Of Thee I Sing* opened on the day after Christmas 1931, and was an instant critical success. Several months later, it became the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. It ultimately ran for some 441 performances before touring the country, making it the most successful production of George Gershwin's storied career.[104] Certainly, Gershwin's catchy melodies accounted for much of the work's success, but the work's book--a collaboration between Kaufman and Ryskind--was sufficiently trenchant and humorous to be a draw in itself.

It tells the story of a presidential candidate who campaigns on a platform that centers on the importance of love. This mockery of the platitudinous nature of political campaigns is sprinkled with allusions to the Hoover administration's perceived obtuseness and unwarranted optimism. Hoover's reluctance to address the nation and apparent ineffectiveness are lampooned when President-elect Wintergreen, facing a crisis of public opinion, admonishes his aides, "[y]ou've got to be careful about speeches. You only make a speech when you want the stock market to go down." When Wintergreen is threatened with impeachment he wriggles out of it and curries public favor by

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102. Joan Pirie, "Winning the Battle and Losing the War: The 1927 Strike Up the Band" *in Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 253-56; Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals of the 30s* (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 20; Edward Jablonski, *Gershwin: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 196.

103. Jablonski, *Gershwin*, 217.

104. Green, *Broadway Musicals*, 41; Jablonski, *Gershwin*, 208-20.

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impregnating his wife. A senator notes approvingly: "You're doing your duty by posterity." Wintergreen responds (echoing Hoover) "Posterity? Why, posterity is just around the corner!" Kaufman and Ryskind saved some mockery for Congress, as in the announcement by "Senator Jones" that "[t]he Committee on Unemployment is gratified to report that due to its unremitting efforts there is now more unemployment in the United States than ever before." The sweeping success enjoyed by *Of Thee I Sing* was thus a testament to both the excellence of the show and the timeliness of its subject matter.[105]

Gershwin was not the only composer of popular musical theater who waxed political around this time: in February 1932, *Face the Music*, a collaboration between Irving Berlin and Moss Hart, opened on Broadway. *Face the Music* was a broader kind of satire than *Of Thee I Sing*, and its topics were more specific to New York, playing on such themes as the financial chicanery of show-business impresarios, the effects of the Depression on the American moguls of the 1920s, and police corruption. Despite great critical acclaim and several hit songs (as measured by sheet music sales and radio play), the show ran for only 165 performances. Most likely, *Face the Music* was a direct casualty of the Depression. By 1932, Broadway had fallen prey to the general lack of disposable income, as the dearth of new productions, and especially of new hits, made clear.[106] Indeed, the box-office triumph of *Of Thee I Sing* was particularly striking given the harsh climate on Broadway.

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105. George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, *Of Thee I Sing: A Musical Play* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), 169, 187, 177. Lawrence Levine has noted that several films of 1932 told stories very similar to *Of Thee I Sing*. He specifically mentions *The Phantom President* and *The Dark Horse* in this respect; Lawrence W. Levine, "Hollywood's Washington: Film Images of National Politics During the Great Depression," in Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*, 241.

106. Edward Jablonski, *Irving Berlin: American Troubadour* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 150-54.

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Out With the Old

As the public's restiveness grew, Hoover retreated to the White House, avoiding the press and public whenever possible. Always known more for his competence and seriousness than for charisma, empathy, or rhetorical skills, Hoover had never established a comfortable rapport with the public.[107] By 1932, the relatively shallow reservoir of goodwill had run dry, and the administration's siege mentality came to seem eerily prescient. That summer, a large group of World War I veterans, calling themselves the Bonus Army, marched on Washington, demanding payment of their service bonuses. Bitter battles over payment ensued in the House and Senate, while the Bonus Army set up camp on the Mall; the capital was effectively, albeit peacefully, besieged. Hoover insisted they would not be paid, a position that was not without its merits, as the government was cash-poor, the payments were not due for a number of years, and it was unclear why the veterans were any more deserving of governmental largesse than millions of their fellow citizens. However, rather than let the protests peter out of their own accord, Hoover committed a staggering error in judgement. Without a specific provocation, and citing only the flimsiest of justifications, the U.S. Army, led by Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur (with the assistance of Dwight D. Eisenhower and George Patton), ran the Bonus Army out of Washington. The ensuing press coverage, complete with footage of veterans and their families run off the Mall by soldiers wielding bayonets and tear gas, was highly unfavorable to the government's actions. How could the United States Army be so easily turned against heroes from its own ranks? As summer flowed into fall, and the presidential election neared, America's patience with the Hoover administration seemed at an end. Public dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the governor of Nevada's declaration, in October, of a bank holiday. The American

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107. Richard Hofstadter, in a wonderfully evocative phrase, writes that Hoover's prose was "suggestive of a light fog moving over a bleak landscape." Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 374.

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economy seemed to be crumbling at an unbelievable pace, and Hoover's re-election appeared to be a likely victim. He had already lost Congress, which in 1932 passed the pro-labor Norris-LaGuardia Act barring the "yellow-dog contract" and the labor injunction.

His Democratic opponent was New York governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. A distant relation of former President Theodore Roosevelt, F. D. R. seemed in many ways Hoover's opposite. Although he lacked Hoover's focus and discipline, Roosevelt possessed an outsized personality, was famously articulate and charming, and had a tremendous gift for interpersonal warmth. He also brought a record of liberal reform from his two terms as governor that contrasted sharply with Hoover's more passive model of governance. While governor, Roosevelt had enacted the New York Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, making New York the first state to implement government-sponsored work-relief programs, and had authorized an investigation of municipal corruption in New York City, which led in the fall of 1932 to the resignation of Jimmy Walker, the city's legendarily unethical mayor. Roosevelt also declared his support for government-funded old-age pensions and unemployment insurance, as well as a general openness to governmental experimentation. The American public was thus presented with a clear choice between Hoover's laissez-faire policies and the interventionist tactics of Roosevelt. The voters responded decisively: on 8 November 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt carried all but six states, winning election as the thirty-second President of the United States. He inherited an economy in tatters, and a public that demanded action.

In retrospect, late 1932 marked a turning-point--a bottoming-out--of the Depression. With the election of Franklin Roosevelt, the nation's fortunes began to change for the better. These changes were mirrored in the insular community of New York composers. On a personal note, Seeger and Crawford were wed on 3 October, one day after Seeger obtained a divorce from his first wife. More importantly (for our purposes), the

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increasingly active Collective was growing in influence, and joined on the left by ever more musicians during the next few years.

There are several traits characteristic of the musicians who moved to connect music and politics during these early years. One was their relative youth; Seeger, who was forty-three years old in 1929, was the elder statesman of the bunch. Another was the prominence among them of composers of cultivated music, a group that had traditionally tended towards political agnosticism, at least when it came to their art. Frederick Lewis Allen writes that "[t]o understand the thrust of American literature during the nineteen-thirties one must realize how strong was this mood of social evangelism among writers and critics and the intellectual elite generally. . . . It was more widespread among the young and rising--and frequently jobless--intellectuals than among the older and better-established."[108] In other words, first among many reasons for the musical activism of the Depression years was self-interest.

The 1920s had been marked by an unprecedented congeniality toward the music of American composers on the part of the New York public. Flush with cash and desirous of the cultural cachet that came through involvement with the arts, wealthy patrons like Blanch Walton were eager to sponsor young composers, either through commissions or simply by general largesse, thus obviating the composers' need to take part-time jobs in order to eat. The concert-going public, although generally conservative, contained enough listeners who were interested in the cause of modern American music--whether because of patriotism, or adventurousness, or both--to enable the avant garde Pan-American Composers Association to flourish along with the staid New York Philharmonic under Toscanini. Finally, the rise of radio and recording technologies provided a host of new opportunities for enterprising musicians to be heard, or at least heard about. But in the 1930s, much of the cash had disappeared, cultural patriotism was

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108. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930's in America, September 3,1929--September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939), 252-53.

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at a low ebb, and cultivated music, like all other non-essential commodities, became highly dispensable.

For all of these reasons, the early 1930s marked the transition of a number of New York's composers from the modernist denial of politics to a new affirmation of the same. Their protests were still embryonic, and they lacked a unified theoretical justification for their works, but it was clear--to the Collective, to the authors who brought Aunt Molly to New York, to George Gershwin and George Kaufman--that music had a part to play in the social upheavals that now seemed all but inevitable.

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Chapter 3: Defining Proletarianism
November 1932—May 1934

The continuing deterioration of the American economy through late 1932 was poignantly symbolized by the runaway popular success of the song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Bing Crosby's recording of the song reached Number 1 on the pop charts on 26 November, where it remained for two weeks. Crosby's hit record was replaced in the Number 1 spot by Rudy Vallee's rendition, which spent two weeks of its own in the top spot.[1] But "Brother" was no fluke or novelty hit; rather, in its plaintive, impotent pleadings it exemplified the outstanding traits of the most popular music of the early 1930s: sweet jazz and lovesick crooners.

Moreover, Yip Harburg's lyrics insisted that the Depression was not, as Hoover had so long insisted, a mere momentary setback, and they did so by emphasizing the passage of time since the salad days of the 1920s: "Once in khaki suits,/ Gee, we looked swell . . . Say, don't you remember I'm your pal--/Brother, can you spare a dime." At the same time, the song contains the growing tension between despair and anger animating many Americans, as Harburg (1898-1981) explains: "In the song the man is really saying: I made an investment in this country. Where the hell are my dividends? Is it a dividend to say: 'Can you spare a dime?' What the hell is wrong? Let's examine this thing. It's more than just a bit of pathos. It doesn't reduce him to a beggar. It makes him a dignified human, asking questions-and a bit outraged, too, as he should be." He goes on to remember:

> Everybody picked the song up in '30 and '31 [*sic*]. Bands were playing it and records were made. When Roosevelt was a candidate for

1. Joel Whitburn, *Pop Memories, 1890-1954: The History of American Popular Music* (Menomenee Falls, WI: Record Research Inc., 1986). Harburg is perhaps best known today as the lyricist for such songs as "April in Paris" and "It's Only a Paper Moon," as well as the songs from *Wizard of Oz*.

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> President, the Republicans got pretty worried about it. Some of the network radio people were told to lay low on the song. In some cases, they tried to ban it from the air. But it was too late. The song had already done its damage.[2]

Harburg was not alone in making such outsized claims for the political significance of popular records. Indeed, Herbert Hoover is reported to have said to Vallee, "If you can sing a song that would make people forget their troubles . . . I'll give you a medal."[3] Of course, even without "Brother," Hoover's days in office were numbered. The song merely added insult to injury.

Because Hoover's term in office did not expire until early March, President-elect Roosevelt had roughly five months in which to conceive a strategy for his administration. Roosevelt surely hoped that economic conditions would improve somewhat over the winter. Such hopes, however, were in vain, as the winter of 1932-33 marked the nadir of the Depression. When Roosevelt did assume office, on 4 March, he faced challenges of staggering proportions: since the crash of the stock market three and a half years earlier, more than five thousand banks had closed, costing depositors roughly seven billion dollars; over 600,000 homeowners had lost their property; the Gross National Product had fallen by half; farm income had decreased by two thirds; and national unemployment had reached twenty-five percent.[4] Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the Depression's severity was the situation at U. S. Steel, one of the corporate leviathans of

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2. Terkel, *Hard Times*, 21.

3. Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 252.

4. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 164.

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the gilded age. In 1929, U. S. Steel boasted 224,980 full-time employees. By 1933, it had none.[5]

In addition, international affairs were becoming increasingly unsettled. On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler assumed the chancellorship of Germany, and within two months--following the Reichstag fire of 27 February, for which he was very likely responsible--the Reichstag granted him absolute dictatorial power. Within a week of Hitler's ascension, he announced a boycott of Jewish businesses, foreshadowing the evils to come. Meanwhile, an increasingly belligerent Japan announced its intention to cease participation in the League of Nations within two years. The unrest came home to Roosevelt in frightening fashion on 15 February, a little more than two weeks before his inauguration: a would-be assassin fired upon him in Miami, killing Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak, who was riding in Roosevelt's car. Roosevelt displayed both tender compassion for the dying Cermak and unflappable cool in the face of catastrophe, qualities that would be at a premium in the coming months.

As he had promised, F. D. R. proved to be a man of action. The day after he was inaugurated, the President declared an indefinite national bank holiday, which gave him time to push the Emergency Banking Act through Congress on Thursday, 9 March. By tightening federal control of banks, Roosevelt demonstrated his willingness to intervene in the worlds of private business and finance to an unprecedented extent. On 10 March, the President received congressional approval to cut government expenses; despite the conventional wisdom that portrays Roosevelt as a profligate spender, he detested government deficits and believed that a reduction in government spending would stimulate economic growth. That Saturday, in a show of great confidence, Roosevelt announced that banks would reopen the following Monday, 13 March. He concluded his first week in office by giving his first radio "fireside chat," yet another act that provided a

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5. U. S. Steel figures from Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in Levine, *The Unpredictable* Past, 265-66.

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stark contrast with Hoover; Roosevelt would engage the American public, and he was savvy enough to recognize the potential of radio technology to forge a bond with his listeners. As many subsequent commentators have remarked, the personal connection felt by Roosevelt's listeners was unparalleled in American history. In his first week in office, the President received mail from 450,000 Americans, and the public's continuing correspondence necessitated that the White House mail room increase its staff from the one person who had manned it during Hoover's presidency to some seventy workers.

The blistering pace set during Roosevelt's first week in office continued for more than three months, as the President continued to develop and sign significant legislation. During the first two months, in addition to those acts already cited, Congress passed the Economy Act, abandoned the gold standard, and--perhaps most noteworthy to many citizens--ended Prohibition. In the month of May Roosevelt took the first steps towards a positive governmental response to the unemployment crisis, winning passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act and the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The government also sought to lessen the obstacles faced by rural Americans, passing the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act and establishing the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Roosevelt also held the financial industry partly responsible for the Depression, signing the Truth in Securities Act to prevent future misdeeds by the nation's financial barons. By the end of the day on 16 June 1933, Roosevelt had also signed the National Industrial Recovery Act, which, with the establishment of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), was arguably the single most ambitious attempt at government regulation of industry in American history; the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, which mandated that commercial and investment banks be separated; the Farm Credit Act; and the Railroad Coordination Act.

However one felt about the actual policies instituted by the new administration, the so-called "Hundred Days" in which the New Deal was born were an astonishing display

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of executive energy, legislative creativity, and sheer force of will on Roosevelt's part. Government agencies--particularly the Civil Works Administration (CWA), established in September 1933 under the leadership of former social worker Harry Hopkins--were charged with the mission of providing meaningful employment (as opposed to a simple "dole") to millions of out-of-work Americans. Within four months, a staggering 4.2 million Americans had found employment under the auspices of the CWA.[6] To be sure, the administration of the new programs did not always go smoothly: Lorena Hickock, employed by Hopkins to report on the results of the federal works programs throughout the country, described "a great deal of confusion" in New York's relief offices during the last week of 1933, noting the disparities in pay between different federal agencies and the pre-existing state relief program as contributing factors.[7] Nevertheless, the new "alphabet agencies" had an undeniable impact in New York, where by Christmas 1933 the CWA had hired roughly 68,000 men to work on the city's parks alone.[8]

Not surprisingly, this burst of activity energized many of America's previously despairing citizens. Roosevelt's openness encouraged further input into and involvement in government from the public. He was a staunch advocate of voluntarism and the virtues of public service, and for the first time in a long time much of the American public was actually excited about its government. Perhaps the most striking display of this sentiment came in September 1933, at a parade for the National Recovery Act held in New York City. Roughly 250,000 people marched in celebration of a government initiative; even more astounding, there were approximately 1.5 million spectators present! The public's enthusiasm for the New Deal was expressed in a folksong from the

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6. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 175.

7. Lorena Hickock to Harry Hopkins, 29 December 1933, quoted in Lorena Hickock, *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickock Reports on the Great Depression*, ed. Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 138-42;

8. Caro, *Power Broker*, 363.

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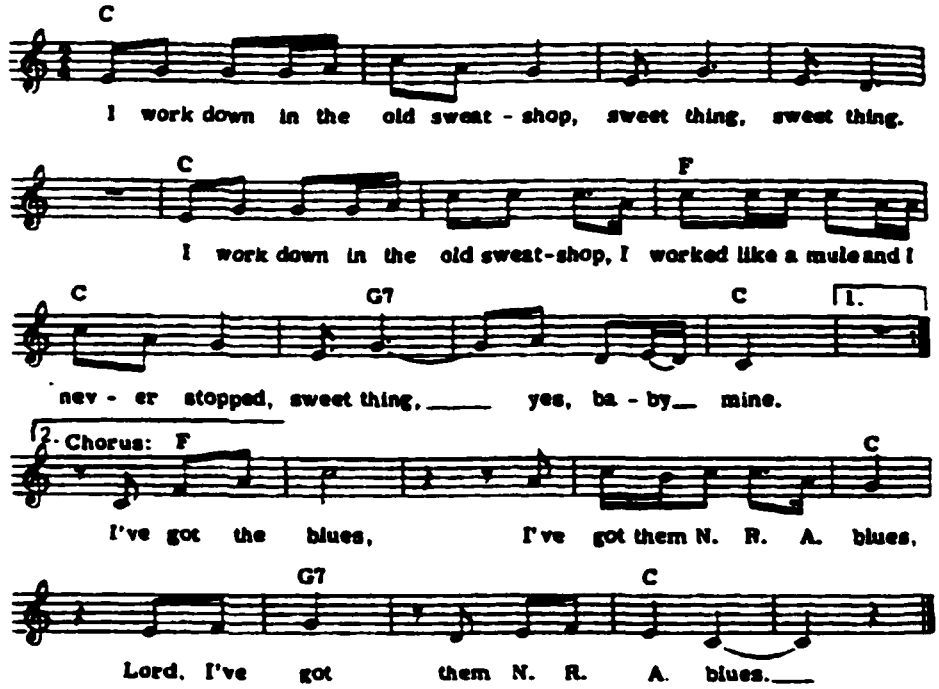
period titled "NRA Blues" (see example 3.1). In addition to those lyrics seen in example 3.1, the "NRA Blues" asserted that "When you're working for the NRA,/Sweet thing, sweet thing,/When you're working for the NRA,/You'll get shorter hours and get th' same pay,/Sweet thing, yes, baby mine." Most of the song conveys the singer's disappointment at not having landed a job with the NRA.

Example 3.1: "NRA Blues" (verse 1 and chorus)[9]



Similar sentiments were voiced by Jerome Moross and Carleton Brown in the song "Under a Blanket Code of Blue." Initially published in the magazine *Americana* at the height of pro-government fervor in November 1933, the song, addressed to the NRA, includes such lyrics as: "You've put an end to our want and privation!/You gave us more leisure you made no error!/You shielded us from the Communist terror!/Now miner and

9. *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-hit People*, ed. Pete Seeger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999; originally published 1967), 192-93.

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farmer and millhand too,/Are all for you, Eagle of Blue!/Eagle we love you!"[10] To many Americans on both coasts, especially those in urban areas, it seemed that the country might at last be on its way out of the Depression. Roosevelt took bold action internationally as well: on 16 November 1933, he initiated diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union for the first time in that nation's short history. The importance of this act was mostly symbolic, but the American left viewed it favorably nonetheless; perhaps Roosevelt was less moderate than they had feared.

But even during the autumn of 1933, a period of almost unmitigated triumph for the Roosevelt administration, there were signs of a new menace on the horizon. On 11 November 1933, the first severe dust storms of the Depression rolled through the South Dakota plains, harbingers of disaster to come. At the time, few Americans outside the region noticed as the clouds blackened the skies and shredded the fragile topsoil.

More citizens were following events in Decatur, Alabama, where the case of the Scottsboro Boys continued its unpredictable path through the courts. In November 1932, the U. S. Supreme Court had reversed the Boys' convictions, remanding the case to the Alabama courts. After months of competition with the NAACP over the right to represent the accused, the Communist Party's International Labor Defense (ILD) was retained in January 1933 to defend the youths. On 9 April, the first of the retrials ended, familiarly enough, in a conviction and death sentence. The presiding judge postponed the other trials, citing the local public's high tempers. Less than one month later, on 7 May, protests erupted across the United States; thousands marched in Washington, D. C. Throughout the remainder of 1933, several of the defendants were convicted, had their convictions overturned, and were retried, only to be convicted again. The Communist Party brandished the Scottsboro case as evidence of the impossibility of justice in a racist

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10. The Blue Eagle named in the song was the official symbol of the NRA. Song reproduced in *The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual Record of the Nineteen-Thirties*, ed. Daniel Aaron and Robert Bendiner (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), Plate 26.

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capitalist society. The ILD further established the Party's racial sensitivities by working to overturn African-American Communist Angelo Herndon's Georgia conviction on capital charges of insurrection--he was found guilty of attempting to organize workers. Both cases were central to the CPUSA's drive to establish a firm foothold in the African-American community.

Of course, one did not need to be a card-carrying Communist, or even a sympathizer, in order to see the Scottsboro case as a hideous injustice. Likewise, Party membership was not a prerequisite for political activism and agitation in this period; wide swathes of the American public, frustrated by the Roosevelt administration's failure to end the Depression instantly, began asking themselves deep, fundamental questions about the nature of a citizen's obligations toward his nation, and more importantly, about the responsibilities a democratic government had toward its citizens. Whereas the winter of 1932-33 had been characterized by the American public's gloom and resignation, the winter and early spring of 1933-34 was typified, among the citizenry, by action. In January 1934, Dr. Francis Townsend incorporated Old Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd., in California. The group called on the federal government to provide elderly citizens with financial assistance to cope with the woes of the Depression. That same month, Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long launched the Share Our Wealth Society. The Society's goals included the equitable redistribution of wealth, a guaranteed minimum income, education subsidies, shorter working hours, and old-age pensions. Subsequent commentators have pointed out that the specific proposals of both groups were completely unfeasible from an economic standpoint, but their broad popular support spoke to the public's impatience with Roosevelt's reforms, which--although they had put millions to work and alleviated the intensity of the Depression for many--had failed to put an end to the crisis. The actions of Long, Townsend, and others exemplified a

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growing tendency to organize popular groups around definite, detailed, government-based solutions to the nation's ills.

As the unofficial headquarters of American political radicalism, New York City played host to many groups and individuals at the center of this new activism. The mood in New York during the first year of the new administration, as throughout the nation, was somewhat schizophrenic, oscillating between, on the one hand, excitement about and approval of the New Deal, and on the other, dissatisfaction with the country's inability to shake completely free of its economic difficulties.

All of this was painfully relevant to America's musicians: in the winter of 1932-33, the national rate of unemployment among musicians stood at 70%. In New York City, the center of the country's music business, conditions were even worse. By 1933, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) estimated that 12,000 of its roughly 15,000 members in the New York City area were unemployed, while nationally two-thirds of the union's members were out of work.[11]

The situation was exacerbated by the continued growth of radio and recording, which rendered live performance increasingly obsolete. We can see, in Edmund Wilson's description of Radio City Music Hall, which opened in December 1932, how even live performances in new halls were coming to seem and function like reproductions of recorded art:

> On such a stage, the frame, although gorgeous, is so far beyond and away from the actor that it can no longer focus interest on him: he might as well be trying to hold an audience in the grand concourse of Pennsylvania Station. Even the girls cannot make much impression except by appearing in quantity and executing 'precision' dances that suggest setting-up

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11. Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 1; I. A. Hirschmann, "The Musician and the Depression," *The Nation* 3567 (November 15, 1933): 565.

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> exercises. One can almost believe them controlled by a photo-electric cell. The comedians and the singers have actually been partly electrified: though their faces may go for nothing, their voices have been swollen by loud-speakers--fifty--till they devour the whole house. And they also talk into microphones for the benefit of radio audiences--with an effect rather disconcerting on the audience in the theater who have paid. The theater is, thus, no longer really a theater, but rather a source of canalized entertainment; the performance is no longer for you, but something that is also directed at thousands of scattered old ladies sitting around in mortgaged farmhouses, at thousands of stocking-footed men reading the paper in Statler hotels.[12]

The music discussed in this chapter reflects the intensified effort to find solutions to the problems that were discussed in the previous chapter. We will begin with an examination of the theoretical frameworks set up by several key figures for infusing music with politics, and conclude by comparing these theories with their actual realizations in musical practice.

Musical Pragmatism

Of all of the writings on aesthetic problems from this period, the most articulate, systematic exposition of the link between art and its origins came from a writer who was neither a Marxist nor a musician: the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey had taught at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Michigan, and was also one of the central figures in the establishment of the New School. Above all, Dewey was a public intellectual, perhaps the last such figure from the

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12. Edmund Wilson, "A Great Dream Come True," in Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 475-76; essay initially published 1934.

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American left to exert a significant level of influence in both the academy and public policy; as Henry Steele Commager wrote, "[i]t is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken."[13] His "experiential" model of education, for example, continues to command the adherence of numerous educators, and the latter-day public leftist Noam Chomsky has cited his childhood experiences in a Deweyan school as a crucial factor in his later intellectual development.

In 1934, the seventy-five-year old dean of American philosophers published his first work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*. Dewey had established his reputation primarily by addressing such topics as education and political liberalism in the language of pragmatist philosophy, and *Art as Experience* represents a logical extension of his ideas into the field of aesthetics. Since William James's death in 1910, Dewey had reigned as America's leading exponent of pragmatism. This meant, among other things, that Dewey's philosophizing always displayed a concern for (in James's much-abused phrase) the "cash-value" of ideas. So *Art as Experience* contains no idle speculation about purely aesthetic values. Instead, it is a work of liberal political philosophy, which takes as its subject the relationship between the realms of art and of lived human experience. As Alan Ryan points out, "[o]ne might plausibly compare Dewey's views on the history of philosophy to his views on art: In both fields he was hostile to what one might call museum culture. Ideas were not to be hung on the walls, mummified, set apart to be approached with a reverence that most spectators would have to fake. Paintings were to be enjoyed; ideas were to be rethought."[14]

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13. Quoted in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 236.

14. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 350.

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As a political liberal, Dewey was appalled by the general nature of work in America. Naturally, he abhorred the sweatshop conditions endured by many of the nation's laborers, but his concerns went deeper:

> The labor and employment problem of which we are so acutely aware cannot be solved by mere changes in wage, hours of work and sanitary conditions. No permanent solution is possible save in a radical social alteration, which effects the degree and kind of participation the worker has in the production and social disposition of the wares he produces. Only such a change will seriously modify the content of experience into which creation of objects made for use enters. And this modification of the nature of experience is the finally determining element in the esthetic quality of the experience of things produced. The idea that the basic problem can be solved merely by increase of hours of leisure is absurd. Such an idea merely retains the old dualistic division between labor and leisure.[15]

In this passage, as in a number of others throughout *Art as Experience*, Dewey attempts to establish a common ground between the utilitarian work in which most members of society are engaged and the work of artists and artisans. While his title implies that the world of art should be connected to that of everyday experience--an important message of the book, to be sure--Dewey could just as easily have named his work "Experience as Art," for perhaps its primary argument is the idea that the "banal" matters of normal life ought to hold up under artistic scrutiny. If work could be made less onerous--not the same as less difficult or less challenging--spiritually or

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15. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 1980), 343; originally published 1934. The similarities here with Eisler and the Frankfurt philosophers (discussed on p. 59) are worth noting.

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intellectually, its value would not be limited to the arena of commerce. In fact, Dewey felt that neither work nor leisure, as they were then (and remain today) understood, would continue to exist. This is not to suggest that Dewey's model would allow anyone who wished to do so to receive financial compensation for playing games, or reading novels, or engaging in other "leisurely" activities. Nor should it be taken to mean that all people had sufficient intellectual abilities for performing those jobs that are perceived as more intellectually or aesthetically stimulating. Rather, it is a rejection of the idea that a profession such as, say, entertainment criticism is inherently more interesting than janitorial work. All that was needed, Dewey felt, was to figure out the vantage point from which the appeal of mopping floors would become apparent. Such notions, with their combination of the utopian and the practical, can be traced directly to the theories of William Morris and the Crafts movement.

Dewey's debt to Morris and his colleagues is even more apparent in the another passage:

> That many, perhaps most, of the articles and utensils made at present for use are not genuinely esthetic happens, unfortunately, to be true. But it is true for reasons that are foreign to the relation of the "beautiful" and "useful" as such. Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree--that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life. The story of the severance and final opposition of the useful and the fine is the history of that industrial development through which so much of

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> production has become a form of postponed living and so much of consumption a superimposed enjoyment of the fruits of the labor of others.[16]

Thus what Dewey urges throughout the book is a marriage of the "aesthetic" and the "functional," an idea that had been implicit throughout his earlier writings. The mundane items that dominate the lived experience should become useful, not only as means to clearly established ends (i.e., transportation, communication, manufacture, etc.) but as ends in themselves, through the contemplation of their designs. In the end, Dewey was "more interested in emphasizing the social roots and the social value of art as an activity than in crossing swords with other theorists of art."[17] For this reason, Frederick Lawson asserts that for Dewey, art was most significant as an area in which a perfect balance could be achieved between the individuals and the community.[18]

Dewey's aesthetic world was thus inextricably linked with his political or practical one, and the idea of artists dictating the terms of art on the basis of abstract theories, whether political or aesthetic, was anathema to him. By 1934, Charles Seeger had also become concerned about the distance between aesthetic theory and lived experience. Despite his involvement in numerous musical activities--from scholarly organizations to journalistic criticism to his renewed interest in and attempts at composition--his interest in musicians and artists had become as much sociological as aesthetic. As Ann Pescatello writes, "Seeger's publications from this period [the early 1930's] indicate a new attention to musicological ideas and to social activism in music. In writing about

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16. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 26-7.

17. Ryan, *John Dewey*, 261.

18. Frederick Lawson, "The Cultural Legacy of the New Deal," in *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*, ed. Harvard Sitkoff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985): 160.

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composers, he is less interested in their compositional processes than in their character and opinions."[19]

In early 1934, Seeger, writing under the pseudonym "Carl Sands," began his employment as music critic for the Communist *Daily Worker*. His first article, a review of a concert by the Pierre Degeyter Club Orchestra, was most notable for the stridency of its Marxian rhetoric.[20] However, Seeger's next contribution, a "Program for Proletarian Composers," is among the most clearly articulated descriptions of musical proletarianism from this period.[21] Written in anticipation of the Workers' Music Olympiad scheduled for that spring, the "Program" instructed composers on writing "music for the proletariat." Expressing the Composers Collective's belief that revolutionary purposes demanded revolutionary music, Seeger asserted that "[n]ot too much emphasis should be placed upon sensuous appeal, for this tends to lull the listeners into luxurious daydreams that foster inaction and acceptance of things as they are. Songs should arouse and maintain the will to victory." To this end, "[r]evolutionary music should have emotional 'drive' and 'lift' and be optimistic, not morbid."

Seeger recognized that workers would favor music that was "predominantly bourgeois in character." Nevertheless, he insisted that proletarian music should "contain some departures from conventional bourgeois styles--enough at least, eventually to distinguish [workers'] music from that of the decaying bourgeois society." Seeger evaluated available musical idioms in terms of their applicability to musical proletarianism: "religious music of whatever kind, specific pieces or even resemblance to religious styles should be avoided, as should also the music of leisure-class entertainment and dissipation" [presumably a swipe at jazz]. Seeger also rejected the notion that folk

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19. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 94.

20. C[arl] S[ands], "The Concert of the Pierre Degeyter Club Orchestra," *DW* 2 January 1934, 5.

21. Carl Sands, "A Program for Proletarian Composers," *DW* 16 January 1934, 5.

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music was inherently proletarian: "Not all folk-tunes are suitable to the revolutionary movement. Many of them are complacent, melancholy, defeatist--originally intended to make slaves endure their lot--pretty, but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed upon. Folk-music that shows clearly a spirit of resentment toward oppression or vigorous resistance to it are valuable." So while Seeger presumably approved of the types of songs presented by Gellert and Schatz (discussed in Chapter 2, pp. 95-96) he did not feel that a proletarian source was sufficient proof of a music's appropriateness. While he acknowledged that "[i]f [the American worker] does not like the music arranged or composed for him, he will not sing or listen to it," Seeger maintained that it was "essential that the music of workers' songs as well as their words should be revolutionary in character."[22]

The contradictions inherent in this viewpoint mirror a confusion among leftist composers that was as much political as it was aesthetic. Was their mission to be primarily "revolutionary" or predominantly "proletarian"? To American leftists the two terms seemed virtually synonymous, as the achievement of a socialist America, in which the proletariat would control the means of production, required revolutionary action. But of course, revolutions are no more inherently proletarian than working men and women are innately revolutionary. When debate moved from the political to the cultural or artistic arena, the identification of proletarianism with revolution became even more problematic. Was proletarianism in music to be a means (to achieving a proletarian society) or an end in itself? If the latter, then the demand for innovative concert music makes some sense. If, on the other hand, the goal was the creation of a music that workers could call their own--a goal that assumed, of course, that no such thing currently existed--the neglect of folk sources seems, at best, a product of ignorance, and, at worst, a consequence of arrogance. Naturally, this ideological muddle neither originated with,

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22. All quotes are from Sands, "A Program for Proletarian Composers," 5.

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nor was confined to, Seeger and his musical colleagues. To the contrary, it pervaded the American left.

Without attempting to minimize the sincerity with which many radical intellectuals held their Marxist beliefs, it seems plausible to assume that, in many cases, Marxism simply provided a convenient framework around which an otherwise diffuse--not to say incoherent--ideology of dissent could be structured. Richard Pells explains the intellectuals' fascination with Marx by asserting that, "[h]aving literally grown up with the century, [young writers] felt an additional obligation to help shape the country's future course. Consequently they adopted a radical stance as a way of expressing this general desire for community and social responsibility. Their romance with the workers became a symbol of how every individual could hurdle the barriers of race, nation, and class."[23] In other words, having already decided, in abstract theoretical terms, what qualities were essential elements of bourgeois and proletarian identities, and being further convinced that these two states were inherently opposed, all that remained was for the formerly bourgeois artists to separate themselves from their origins. If one was not bourgeois, in this view, then one had to be proletarian. Rather less charitably, Richard Hofstadter addresses the party-line mentality that prevailed among much of the American intellectual left:

> in the 1930's a number of American writers gave way to the fatally maudlin notion that the sufferings and the "historic mission" of the working class endow it with an immense inherent moral superiority over middle-class intellectuals. To atone for their tainted class origins and their middle-class character, many such intellectuals felt they must immolate themselves on the altar of the working class by service of one kind or another to the party. The Communist Party itself, keenly aware of the

23. Pells, *Radical Visions*, 169.

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> usefulness of its intellectual converts and at the same time of the danger that might be posed to its discipline by an influx of independent minds, adopted the strategy of exploiting the guilt and self-hatred of intellectuals as a means of keeping them in line.[24]

Part of the problem for intellectuals was the Communist Party's history of disdain for white- collar workers, particularly academics. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser point out that "[a]nti-intellectualism had long been traditional among American Communists," an attitude that extended beyond professionals to students, whom the Party viewed "as petty bourgeois, unreliable, and unstable by their very nature."[25] Pells suggests that the simplistic binarism embraced by left intellectuals in the 1930s--in which the bourgeois was as inherently bad as the proletarian was innately good--led to confusion on the personal, as well as the aesthetic, plane. "In part," he writes, "this crisis of identity accounted for the wide use of pseudonyms among those who had moved to the left."[26] This explanation runs counter to the conventional assumption that pseudonyms were adopted in order to preserve the authors' anonymity, precluding their identification as political radicals by powerful conservatives. However, this belief is the result of our retrospective view of the period, filtered through the prism of McCarthyism and the ordeals of the Hollywood Ten. Indeed, although in 1934 Communists and Socialists were certainly not in the mainstream of American politics, neither were they perceived by a majority of Americans as a lunatic fringe, congenitally dangerous to the American body politic; the virulent red-baiting that had so marked the early 1920s would not be revived until the late 1930s. Hence Pells' notion that the employment of aliases by

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24. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 292.

25. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 201.

26. Pells, *Radical Visions*, 166.

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Seeger and others was motivated by some instinct other than self-preservation seems quite credible, as does his contention that these acts of naming represented a (perhaps naive) desire to construct a new, proletarian identity from the ground up. To this must also be added the general proclivity towards secrecy characteristic of the culture of the CPUSA, and common to many other groups with similar tendencies towards self-mythologization rooted in an outsider status.

Such superficial forms of "proletarianization," unfortunately, often took the place of serious political thought, for as Howe and Coser note, "not many intellectuals had been careful in thinking out their new allegiance, let alone the organizational forms it might take, and fewer still troubled to read very deeply or critically in the Marx from whom it became fashionable to quote. The political involvements of the left-wing intellectuals may have spoken glowingly for their moral warmth and certainly testified to a flair for rhetorical abandon, but seldom did credit to their powers of analysis."[27]

Perhaps recognizing the contradictions inherent in his "Program," Seeger attempted, in an essay published in three parts in March 1934, to examine the role that critics should play in the creation of a vital proletarian music: "The revolutionary [still conflated with "proletarian"] critic will differ from his bourgeois prototype, however, by regarding technique as a secondary matter: to him, **content** must be the first desideratum in a work of art. He must assume, along with the revolutionary composer, that a revolutionary content will eventually lead to the perfection of a revolutionary technique by means of which it can be expressed."[28] This statement seems to run counter to Seeger's earlier insistence that the music be "revolutionary" in character. In the next day's column, he wrote that "[t]he times are indeed auspicious for the inception of a proletarian music criticism," further asserting that "[t]he scope of a revolutionary music criticism [should

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27. Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 281.

28. Carl Sands, "Proletarian Music Is A Historic Necessity," *DW* 6 March 1934, 5; emphasis in original.

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be] enlarged by other than purely musical accretions."[29] In other words, it should be sensitive to the innovations of comparative musicology, or ethnomusicology, a rapidly burgeoning field in which Seeger played an instrumental role. In addition, the new criticism must "include the music activities and potentialities of the masses." Again, his rhetoric has softened. Ultimately, the aims of Seeger's revolutionary music criticism would be "first, to help the proletariat discover its own sense of musical values and to translate, by means of language, to those who are undeveloped or only partially developed musically, the nature of musical values as they appear in music; second, to advance certain values and to check others, also by means of language, in actual music work itself."[30]

In typically ambitious fashion, Seeger's essays addressed not only the problem of proletarian music, but also the "linguo-centric predicament" that besets all music critics.

> When a man composes or plays a certain work he virtually answers the question "what, at this time, constitutes musical value?" He presents it then and there. The study and the discussion of it has already taken place in the studio. But the literary critic of music cannot present musical value itself. He can only present something about, usually round about, musical value, a much slighter and more equivocal achievement. Nevertheless, in spite of its obvious inferiority, qua criticism, this little is of paramount importance today on account of the fact that in our present social system we are all of us, even musicians, better equipped in the technique of language than in the technique of music.

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29. Carl Sands, "The Broad Scope of Revolutionary Music Criticism," *DW* 7 March 1934, 5.

30. Sands, "The Broad Scope," 5.

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This point was significant for Seeger because it led to the insight that if all musical activity carries within it a critical assessment of value, then "art and art-criticism have always been propaganda." Conventional, bourgeois music was just as surely propaganda for the capitalist system as the songs of the Composers Collective were propaganda against it; the latter was simply more explicit than the former.[31]

In the final article of the series, Seeger continued to hammer at the problems of linguistic music criticism, demanding that revolutionary critics be "men who are primarily musicians who know something about writing," rather than "men who are primarily adept at something else and only secondarily at music." For the role of the revolutionary critic was not simply to assess the quality of a musical piece or performance, but more importantly, to "judge which of the values in the old music are best to preserve," and to counter-balance negative judgements with "constructive criticism."[32] It seems entirely plausible that Seeger wrote his meta-critical articles in order to clarify, for himself as much as anyone else, exactly what he had been trying to accomplish in the "Program." Furthermore, their more moderate, less polemical tone may reflect a sort of confession that Seeger knew he had gone farther in the "Program" than he had meant to, particularly in his dismissal of folk and vernacular idioms.

Technics and Proletarianism

Seeger's articles in the *Daily Worker* were addressed to a wide, and presumably diverse, audience of left-wing sympathizers, and consequently they dealt with technical musical matters in a glancing, superficial manner that was all too common in the cultural writings of American Communists. It is interesting, then to compare then with an essay that Seeger (this time writing under his own name) published in the March-April 1934

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31. Sands, "The Broad Scope," 5.

32. Carl Sands, "The Function of the Revolutionary Music Critic," *DW* 8 March 1934, 7.

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issue of *Modern Music*. In it, refined a number of his *Daily Worker* arguments, and did so from the stance of the composer of proletarian music, rather than of the Communist cultural critic. "On Proletarian Music" addressed head-on the problems faced by composers who aspired to write proletarian music while living in a capitalist society, tackling more specialized musical matter than his *Daily Worker* essays had done. After a brief explanation of Marxist cultural theory, Seeger begins the essay proper with an investigation of the vast body of what he calls "music for the proletariat." This is the article's primary subject because, he asserts, "the proletariat has not produced any music of its own as such." By way of qualification, he then mentions the singing societies of European (especially German) and Soviet workers, as well as the works written for them by composers including Eisler, Stefan Wolpe, Davidenko, and Shostakovich ("Naturally, the musical styles are predominantly bourgeois") as the beginnings of a second period in music, one in which the proletariat was beginning to recognize the bourgeois nature of most of the music given to them.[33]

The fundamental problem facing the would-be composer of proletarian music, according to Seeger, is that "[no] bourgeois composer [can] be said to be able to express the grand and the sublime as artists of strong cultural periods have always been able to do. They cannot do this because grandeur and sublimity do not characterize the social system under which they and their art flourish. It is a decaying system." For instance, he asserts that, judged exclusively on the basis of innate talent, modern composers like Schoenberg, Ives, Stravinsky, and Carl Ruggles may have ranked on a level with "the best masters of the past." But because they lived under the "decaying system" of capitalism, their music necessarily reflected that decay. Seeger's negative assessments are not limited to the works of individual composers like Chopin, Schumann, and Wagner; he denigrates the musical styles of entire periods--the "beribboned" polyphony

33. Charles Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," *MM* 11/3 (March--April 1934): 122.

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of the late Renaissance and the "manneristic fugal virtuosity" of the Rococo are both cited here--and genres (perhaps not surprisingly, opera and oratorio are among the culprits). The lone canonical works mentioned by Seeger as exemplars of "what is meant by revolutionary content" are the symphonies of Beethoven. This determination was consonant with the opinions of the Soviet cultural hierarchy, as demonstrated by Pettis's articles on the Soviet Union (discussed Ch. 2, pp. 80-87) and a 1931 *New York Times* interview with Shostakovich in which the composer stated that of all the "old composers . . . [o]nly Beethoven was a forerunner of the revolutionary movement."[34]

According to Seeger, what was missing, and what the proletariat most strongly desired, was "a content expressing, and contributing to the success of, its struggle--a revolutionary content. But it has lacked, so far, a musical technic for the expression of this content." Conversely, "[b]ourgeois art music . . . has achieved much in the twentieth century that is definitely revolutionary in character--not revolutionary as to the class struggle but as to the technic of music." Therein lies the contrast: "Proletarian content, then, is seen as a rising, progressive factor: that of contemporary bourgeois art music, a declining, regressive one. The technic hitherto characteristic of proletarian usage has proven hopeless; but the technic of bourgeois contemporary music, though uncoordinated, is full of promise." Of course, the two were "not separate and disconnected entities," but rather "part and parcel of the present-day situation as a whole." In order to produce the revolutionary mass music that Seeger and the Collective sought, they would need "to connect the two vital trends--proletarian content and the

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34. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 123; Rose Lee, "Dimitri Szostakovitch: Young Russian Composer Tells of Linking Politics With Creative Work," *New York Times* (hereafter "NYT") December 20, 1931: Arts, 8. This interpretation of Beethoven was, of course, not without some foundation: the composer's admiration for the aims of the French Revolution is well known, and some of his political ideas verge on socialist utopianism. See Maynard Solomon, "Beethoven's *Magazin der Kunst*," in Solomon, *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 193-204.

Of course, Beethoven is a notoriously tough nut to crack; despite his expressed radical political views, he also famously pretended to have noble ancestors, occasionally changing the "van" of his name to the honorific "von." Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, Revised edition (New York: Schirmer, 1998), 117-20.

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forward looking technic of contemporary art music. . . . The slogan is 'National in form: revolutionary in content.'"[35]

Apparently encouraged by the blossoming of the Collective and its counterparts throughout the nation, Seeger felt able to declare that "[w]e are moving already to a realization of the third stage in this evolutionary process--the time when there will be music of the proletariat. That the criteria of bourgeois criticism will be reversed is clear. The order: content first, technic second, accords historically with the usual evolution of musical styles."[36] In other words, Seeger believed that the ascendancy of leftist politics in Europe and the United States had necessitated the development of a musical idiom appropriate to new social conditions. At this point in the essay, Seeger has come up against one of the most intractable problems in musical aesthetics, the supposed dichotomy between "content" and "technic" mentioned earlier.

Rather than attempt to reconcile the two sides of this opposition, Seeger cut the Gordian knot and rejected the conventional construction of the problem, asserting instead that the supposed distinction between medium and message was in fact a false dichotomy. "[T]echnic and content are not two separate things, but rather two different aspects or ways of looking at one and the same thing."[37] To Seeger, then, so-called "aesthetic" decisions are rooted in personal (political, economic, social, psychological) qualities and considerations, and comprise only the technical articulation of uncommunicated messages. The aesthetic idiom of the musical work is thus the tangible expression of the intended meaning. This is an important insight, one that was new to the field of musicology, and one that still causes confusion. For example, when Leonora Saavedra writes of Seeger's belief "that pieces of music can become independent from

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35. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 124, 125.

36. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 125.

37. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 126.

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the idiom in which they are produced," she has, I think, got things completely backward.[38] If this were the case, there would be no need for the creation of a new proletarian idiom; older music could simply be appropriated to the cause. It is because Seeger asserted an intrinsic connection between musical idiom and ideology that the new music was necessary.

Like Seeger, Dewey "denied that there was an absolute distinction between form and content, denied that they were related as intellect to sense or reason to emotion, and always and everywhere returned to the claim . . . that the 'formal' properties of a work of art are of interest to the extent that they allow the fullest and most adequate expression and communication of the artist's experience."[39] Furthermore, Dewey also believed in the inherently communicative nature of art, although he was less insistent than Seeger on the fixity of a work's meaning. Dewey's feelings on the subject are perhaps made clearest in his statement that "[w]hat makes a material a medium is that it is used to express a meaning which is other than that which it is in virtue of its bare physical existence: the meaning not of what it physically is, but of what it expresses."[40] In other words, as soon as musical sounds are taken as communicative of anything other than the fact of vibrating air, or cubist painting as a signifier of truths that are not merely geometric in nature, the artwork becomes a potential vehicle for personal expression. And because communication is a social activity, Dewey implies that music and all other arts must be understood primarily in social, and not aesthetic, terms.

In fact, Seeger made very clear that his deployment of the dualistic terms--"content" and "technic"--derived from social, and not aesthetic, considerations, constituting a musical dialectic of sorts: "Content can exist apart from its musical-technical expression.

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38. Leonora Saavedra, "The Social Thought of Seeger and Chavez", in *Understanding Charles Seeger*, ed. Yung and Rees, 45.

39. Ryan, *John Dewey*, 261.

40. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 201.

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It is a characteristic of the structure of society, whereas musical technic is of the superstructure."[41] Form, by implication, cannot exist without a content. Although Dewey would likely have taken issue with the Marxian flavor of Seeger's analysis,[42] he would most certainly have agreed with Seeger's statement that "[a]rt is always and inevitably a social function. It has social significance."[43] And the pragmatist in Dewey would thus have recognized that, regardless of the differing terms in which he and Seeger might justify their respective aesthetic philosophies, they had ultimately arrived at similar views of the artwork. Foreshadowing Marshall McLuhan, as well as much formalist literary criticism, both Seeger and Dewey stipulated an interdependent relationship between meaning and articulation. The resulting combination, both believed, is the product of a complex web of psychological, social, and political forces.

Both men also felt that art's significance goes far beyond its ability to depict or otherwise relate the salient aspects of the society that produces it. In fact, for Seeger, art "is a social force." Its power is not merely reflective; art has real-world consequences. It remains the responsibility of the creative artist to determine what those consequences will be, for art has the potential to either reinforce or subvert the social order. Moreover, Seeger believed that such power was a characteristic of all art, even where there is no explicit connection between the artwork and "extramusical" social concerns. According to Seeger, "[Art] is propaganda: explicit, positive; implied, negative. The better the art, the better propaganda it makes: the better the propaganda, the better art it is."[44] Such a statement is made possible only by Seeger's earlier collapsing of the technic/content

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41. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 126.

42. See Dewey, "Why I Am Not a Communist," reprinted in *The Anxious Years: America in the 1930's*, ed. Louis Filler (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963): 80-86; originally published *Modern Monthly* 8 (April, 1934).

43. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 126.

44. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 126.

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dualism: if the political and artistic cannot be separated, an improvement in one aspect will necessarily result in the enhancement of the other. Related to this concept is Dewey's assertion that "[i]n most cases the esthetic objection to doses of morals and of economic or political propaganda in works of art will be found upon analysis to reside in the overweighing of certain values at the expense of others until, except for those in a similar state of one-sided enthusiasm, weariness rather than refreshment sets in."[45] Thus, as a sort of corollary to Seeger's statements about the interrelatedness of medium and message, Dewey reminds us that, except when preaching to the converted, it is advisable to include other appealing elements in an explicitly propagandist artwork.

Of course, if all art is inherently propagandistic, this means that all artists, no matter how vociferously they proclaim their indifference to political, economic, or social matters, are engaging in a form of political speech. It is then no longer acceptable for artists to absolve themselves of responsibility for the conditions of others, for their art will have consequences that extend beyond the aesthetic arena. According to Seeger, "[c]omposers have three possible paths ahead of them: fascism, which means positive propaganda for the older order; isolation, which means negative propaganda for it; and proletarianism, which means propaganda for the new order. Whether most composers know it, admit it or not, the fact remains--they most of them belong to the proletariat." Consequently, Seeger passionately believed that it was of critical importance that composers embrace their proletarian-ness, not simply by supporting picket lines and otherwise showing their solidarity with their blue-collar brethren; they must write proletarian music. "Let them withhold themselves from it and they will live lives of equivocation, opportunism and frustration. Let them join it openly and their talent will be strengthened, their technic purified, a content given to it and they will have a wider hearing--not of sophisticated individuals who half disdainfully tolerate them, but of the

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45. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 181.

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great masses who welcome them with hungry ears--not an audience of hundreds, but of millions."[46]

Stirring sentiments, certainly, but not ones that Dewey would have supported. As his earlier warning about the effects of "over-weighing" propagandist concerns over aesthetic ones suggests, although "[Dewey] always asked where art was to belong in social life, what its social function was," he did so "not in a way that suggested we might use it for propaganda or 'socialist realist' purposes, since its function seemed rather often to act as a sort of reproach against the ugliness of what we produce and consume and even more against the ugliness of the lives we lead in so doing."[47] In other words, whereas Seeger's Marxian hierarchy of art--with content the equivalent of structure, and technic corresponding to the dependent superstructure--ultimately prioritized the social over the aesthetic, Dewey--like Friedrich Engels--posited an interaction between the two that occurred on terms much more nearly equal. He felt that aesthetic developments could just as easily affect the social arena as the other way around. The accentuation and improvement of the aesthetic qualities of everyday life, he felt, must lead to a concomitant advance in the social aspects. His theory of art thus resembles a feedback loop between the aesthetic and the social. This theory arose from Dewey's feeling that, in Ryan's words,

> to make art in practice play in our lives the role it can play in theory, we must reconstruct the industrial and economic system on which the modern world is based. We could have more experiences worth communicating if we lived differently; we could appreciate what is conventionally called art and located in galleries if we lived differently and produced new forms of

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46. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 127.

47. Ryan, *John Dewey*, 238.

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> art that we did not lock away in galleries. We would learn to hold in a proper balance the tension and serenity that we find in art objects and come to understand that what we enjoy is neither timeless nor merely transitory.[48]

In either realm, failure to progress could have dire consequences. "As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization," Dewey concluded, "neither art nor civilization is secure."[49]

Like Seeger's earlier articles for the *Daily Worker*, "On Proletarian Music" fails to consider seriously the use of folk or vernacular musics, let alone any music hailing from a non-western culture. In a (literally) parenthetical paragraph detailing the growth of the Workers Music League, Degeyter Club, and Composers Collective, Seeger asserts that the membership of the last represents "every shade of musical opinion from the conservatism of Jacob Schaeffer, veteran conductor of the Freiheit Gesang Farein, to the restless radicalism of Lahn Adohmyan."[50] The idea that the gamut from Adohmyan to Schaeffer includes "every shade of musical opinion" is illustrative of the narrow musical focus of the Collective in this period.

A related aspect of Seeger's criticism is his failure to mention the musical preferences of the proletariat as one of the determining factors of the new style. In this, he fell prey to a tendency shared by many of his artistic colleagues on the Left in this period. All too often, as Pells points out, "[r]ather than discovering what the workers might really want, [the intellectuals] spent an inordinate amount of time worrying about whether they had completely suppressed their bourgeois attitudes, whether they had truly been converted to the revolution, whether they were permanently immune to the

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48. Ryan, *John Dewey*, 262.

49. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 344.

50. Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," 124.

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temptations of the old world."[51] This insecurity, not surprisingly, caused many of the formerly bourgeois radicals to espouse a proletarian worldview more doctrinaire than that typically held by actual workers. In turn, this led to a paradox: aspiring rebels who adhered without question to a party line. This contrast is particularly pronounced in the case of Seeger, whose academic scholarship was marked by a willingness to question received wisdom--often down to its most fundamental assumptions--that is in stark contrast to his party-line pseudonymous writing.

Another surprising aspect of Seeger's article, more subtle than his neglect of any non-cultivated music, is the static conception of the musical work that it implies. Although much of Seeger's later writing would concentrate on the fluid nature of music, on the centrality of interpretation to the musical art, "On Proletarian Music" is limited entirely to the composition of appropriate works, ignoring how they would later be used. This contrasts sharply with Dewey's recognition of the relative immediacy of artist-performers. In the following passage from *Art as Experience*, Dewey discusses the phenomenological distinctions between different artistic media:

> The medium through which energy operates determines the resulting work. The resistance to be overcome in song, dance, and dramatic presentation is partly within the organism itself, embarrassment, fear, awkwardness, self-consciousness, lack of vitality, and partly in the audience addressed. Lyrical utterance and dance, the sounds emitted by musical instruments stir the atmosphere or the ground. They do not have to meet the opposition that is found in reshaping external material. Resistance is personal and consequences are directly personal on the side of both producer and consumer. Yet eloquent utterance is not writ in

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51. Pells, *Radical Visions*, 165.

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> water. The organisms, the persons concerned are in some measure remade. Composer, writer, painter, sculptor, work in a medium that is more external and at a greater remove from the audience than do actor, dancer, and musical performer. They reshape an external material that offers resistance and sets up tensions within, while they are relieved of the pressure exercised by an immediate audience.[52]

This is the obverse of Marshall McLuhan's theory of "hot" and "cool" media, in that Dewey considers the relation of artist to medium, while McLuhan is concerned with that between audience and medium. Dewey's emphasis on the difference between composition and performance--a simplification, of course, but a necessary one--has important consequences for the present study.

If, as he asserts, the "resistance" faced by a composer lies primarily in the compositional act itself, the grappling with "external" materials that will be made to conform to his or her vision, then it seems that there may be a concomitant lack of attention paid to the work's ultimate audience. The Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse may have been referring to exactly this gap between art and audience when he wrote, in the early 1960s, that

> [art] is the Great Refusal--the protest against that which is. The modes in which man and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence. But these modes of negation pay tribute to the antagonistic society to which they are linked. Separated from the sphere of labor where society

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52. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 158.

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> reproduces itself and its misery, the world of art which they create remains, with all its truth, a privilege and an illusion.[53]

In other words, the act of artistic creation is by its very nature rebellious, an attempt to alter reality. Such notions of private rebellion are implicit in both Seeger and Dewey's models, which suggest that the primary goals of the act of musical composition are private ones, and have little, if anything, to do with the pleasing or persuading of an audience. Here, composition exists as an end in itself, and whether a composer's goal in writing is to depict the beauties of springtime, bring to elegant perfection the sonata allegro form, or capture in music the nobility of the proletariat, the question of that piece's future life is irrelevant. But what both authors fail to consider is the fact that if a work of music is to act as an agent of social change, it must be performed and heard (or at least silently studied); the insurgent composer who ignores the tastes of his target audience invites obscurity and impotence. Even the great philosopher Dewey, then, was unable to reconcile the public and private aspects of artistic creation.

"Pancake" Aesthetics

Not surprisingly, Dewey unequivocally endorsed the employment of a broad array of styles in art and music, asserting that "[i]mpulsion beyond all limits that are externally set inheres in the very nature of the artist's work. It belongs to the very character of the creative mind to reach out and seize any material that stirs it so that the value of that material may be pressed out and become the matter of a new experience." Of course, he admitted that "[r]efusal to acknowledge the boundaries set by convention is the source of frequent denunciations of objects of art as immoral," but this was hardly adequate justification for avoidance of unconventional sources. Indeed, one might expect

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53. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 63.

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mavericks like Seeger and his friends to embrace the principle of stylistic diversity, for as Dewey wrote, in a statement that would surely have been applauded by most--if not all--of the members of the Collective, "one of the functions of art is precisely to sap the moralistic timidity that causes the mind to shy away from some materials and refuse to admit them into the clear and purifying light of perceptive consciousness."[54] And if the Collective as a whole was not yet willing to agree with Dewey that "the final measure of balance or symmetry [in esthetic objects] is the capacity of the whole to hold together within itself the greatest variety and scope of opposed elements,"[55] at least one important member was coming around to this way of thinking.

Like Seeger, Marc Blitzstein was growing increasingly active in the field of music criticism. But while Blitzstein shared Seeger's wish for the creation of a new proletarian music, he viewed the entire concept of inventing a musical idiom out of whole cloth with a greater degree of skepticism than Seeger. For instance, Blitzstein regarded the fusion of jazz and classical composition in vogue in the 1920s as flawed, commenting that "[n]obody had stopped to realize that an idiom creates itself, or goes unborn; and that the very avidity with which we dogged an 'American culture' throttled its chances for existence."[56]

In "Towards a New Musical Form," an essay published in *Musical Quarterly* in April 1934, Blitzstein was Deweyan in his insistence on an organic integration of musical styles. In this essay, Blitzstein offers his analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the various stylistic options available to the contemporary composer. Written in the style typical of both his criticism and his libretti, with an engaging combination of humorous

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54. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 189.

55. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 180.

56. Marc Blitzstein, "Popular Music--An Invasion: 1923-1933," *MM* 10/2 (January-February 1933): 100.

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insights and oracular pronouncements, the article begins with a succinct summary of the musical scene, as Blitzstein then saw it:

> These facts are to be observed in the musical composition of the last five years:
>
> -- The period of experiment in establishing a new language is ended.
>
> -- Three currents are left in the wake of the "Modern Movement"--Primitivist, Classicist, Popularist.
>
> -- The period of experiment in finding an integration for the three trends has just begun.[57]

For Blitzstein, the central fact of contemporary composition was its tendency towards borrowing. In his view, "composers are no longer testing new materials. The proof can be seen in the fertility of the younger men; unlike the pioneers, they are unhampered by the necessity of inventing a vocabulary while speaking." Blitzstein's three groupings seem fairly convincing, as do his descriptions. The Primitivists, whose most prominent exponents were Bartók, Varèse, Antheil, Copland, and the young Stravinsky, were much influenced by Impressionism, and composed music that was primarily concerned with the basic materials of music, emphasizing rhythmic vitality, novel timbral combinations, and shocking harmonies. They focused on "the moment, the quality in the stuff expressed in successive units," rather than on how the units were structured. Schoenberg and the mature Stravinsky were the unlikely pair at the heart of the Classicist school, which put a premium on formal balance, graceful melodies, and a general feeling of lightness. The music of the Classicists, in Blitzstein's words, "links the new language to a familiar syntax.[58]

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57. Blitzstein, "Towards a New Form," *Musical Quarterly* (hereafter "MQ") 20/2 (April, 1934): 213. Format in original.

58. Blitzstein, "Towards a New Form," 214, 215.

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Each of these two styles was essentially devoid of ideological import, at least as far as Blitzstein was concerned. Not so with the Popularists, who "descend in a direct line from the Primitives. 'We must get back to fundamentals.' Their ideology, displayed in music for the masses, is Communist Russian; their idol is Erik Satie, the Celtic Frenchman; their social system is Central-European (note their utilitarian *Gebrauchsmusik*); they have found practical uses for the virus of jazz, bred in America and spread the world over." Further driving the point home, Blitzstein writes that "[t]hey are internationalists." Blitzstein chose not to explain how the arch aesthete Satie became an icon for Communist ideologues. But Blitzstein's construction of Popularism, in which the employment of jazz idioms, the ethos of *Gebrauchsmusik*, and Communist ideology are natural partners, was very perceptive. All three share a desire to connect the world of cultivated music with aspects of everyday life: "When Satie's dream will be realized, we shall see that popularism is more than a cheap bid for public response, or a big-city snobbishness. In particular, the communist composers are developing the idea with cogency. . . Their theory meets Classicism by relegating individual tendencies to the background." Although Blitzstein lamented that "[the Popularists] are unfortunately committed to a policy of effusive virility and stormy protest, with the result that their music, so far, is for the most part loud and fast," he believed that "they are learning, and they have authentic, purposeful intensity to support them."[59]

The Popularists, then, were most clearly distinguished from their Classicist and Primitivist colleagues by their ideologically informed aesthetic. Like Seeger, Blitzstein ultimately concluded that this hierarchy was the proper model for contemporary music to emulate. However, while Seeger was reluctant to endorse any contemporary music as a model for his ideal proletarian music, Blitzstein saw possibilities all around him. The difference surely stems, at least in part, from the different subjects of the two articles:

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59. Blitzstein, "Towards a New Form," 216-17.

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Seeger was expressly concerned with "proletarian" music, while Blitzstein's interest lay in the more general direction of "new" and "modern" music. Of course, this difference in focus speaks volumes about the two authors' divergent goals. Seeger wrote an ideological manifesto for a new music, whereas Blitzstein's goals were narrower, limited to an exploration of modern composition and its relation to compositional ideology. At least in "Towards a New Form," Blitzstein seems to come at the problem with a more open mind, perhaps a result of his continued identification as a "professional composer." Blitzstein's openness is clearest at the conclusion of the article, where he urges those interested in the cause of modern music to "[g]ive Mr. Cowell's neo-Primitivism room; let a few Classicists hug their camp; keep the most popular Popularists in theirs." Composers and listeners alike should tear down the artificial barriers erected by aesthetic partisans, he declares, for in the end, "[e]verything is usable, even the scraps--'this pulp that makes the pancake.'"[60]

One contemporary of Blitzstein who made great use of the "scraps" was fellow Fontainebleu alumnus Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), a Kansas City native who split his time between Paris and New York. Unlike Blitzstein, Thomson was avowedly apolitical, the very picture of disinterested aestheticism. His music mixed classical counterpoint and occasionally pungent modern harmonies with American vernacular idioms from Baptist hymns to folk songs. This blending of the modernist and the vernacular characterized Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, his operatic collaboration with Gertrude Stein that was completed in 1927 but not premiered until early 1934, when it became the most talked-about musical event of the concert season. On paper at least, the piece has nothing to do with radical politics: Stein's Dada-esque libretto can hardly be read as being concerned with social or economic issues, and Thomson's musical style

60. Blitzstein, "Towards a New Form," 218.

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came without any explicit ideological justification.[61] However, there are two aspects of the production that deserve comment for the purposes of this study.

First, Thomson stipulated, before the work began its initial run in Hartford, Connecticut, that the cast consist entirely of African-Americans. He couched this request in aesthetic terms, asserting that the visual effect of their skin color and their unique vocal style were the reasons for this decision. To take such statements at face value, however, seems rather naive. Thomson was no crusader for racial justice, to be sure, but a Missouri-born composer who often referred to the fact that his ancestors held slaves. He had, however, written perceptively in the 1920s about the musical aspects of jazz, and he was acutely aware of racial issues, as he was of the etiquette of American musical culture. Putting on an opera with an all-black cast (prior to Gershwin's 1935 *Porgy and Bess*) was, like Thomson's musical style, a way of confusing musical categories, complicating the reified concept of opera then held by American audiences. Of course, the headlines that such a casting decision all but guaranteed surely did not hurt.

The second noteworthy aspect of *Four Saints* is its reception by left-wing critics. In an interesting coincidence, the *Daily Worker* review of the piece appeared on the same page as the final installment of Seeger's call for a revolutionary music criticism that would establish the values needed for proletarian music. Harold Edgar's review honored Seeger's request, asserting that the chief problem with *Four Saints* was the work's complete disengagement from reality. "Here there is no idea, no thought, no problem, no passion--no anything!" To Edgar, *Four Saints* was even worse than escapist, "because in 'escapism' there is always a sense of the thing one wishes to escape from, and a twinge of regret for the necessity of escape, but here we have a 'world' so utterly removed from everything but 'art' . . . that it is even beyond the humanly understandable impulse of the

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61. Although it was not produced until 1934, *Four Saints* was substantially completed, excepting the orchestration, in 1927. For an investigation of the Stein-Thomson collaboration, as well as the artistic and social milieu in which the work was fostered, see Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998).

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escapist." Truly creative work, he suggested (echoing Seeger), must engage with reality, acting as a critical medium. But what of Thomson's music? Was it really so divorced from reality? Although, as noted above, Thomson professed political agnosticism, in a speech at the Kansas City, Missouri, Vassar Club in May 1934 he called his unique musical idiom a "new deal in music."[62] Naturally, even this leftist association would not have been favorably viewed by the anti-Roosevelt *Daily Worker*. Thus, even though Thomson's music was not unlike the folk-based style increasingly endorsed by the Soviets, Edgar complained that there was not "an original note in it," concluding that "[p]erhaps '4 Saints in 3 Acts' is an unusual combination of theatrical elements, but the sum total of these elements amounts to zero."[63]

Ashley Pettis, who reviewed *Four Saints* for *New Masses* in August 1934, took a much more favorable view. Although disappointed that its subject was not specifically American (a fault of American opera generally, in Pettis' opinion), Pettis thought that the opera made the listener "conscious of the ludicrousness of all sorts of habits, remarks, and trivial actions of our existence." To him, it was essentially a satire of polite society. Of Thomson's score, he wrote "[i]t must be admitted that the music vastly enhances the words; and not merely for reasons of rhythm. Sentences which may be read and re-read without perception of their intrinsic meaning (if any) suddenly leap into life and lucidity upon being wedded to music."[64] However, Pettis did not discuss the music apart from its dramatic impact. To some extent, this reflects very favorably on Thomson's skill as a composer for the theater, but it leaves us with no idea of what Pettis thought about Thomson's style as a purely musical idiom. This omission is noteworthy in retrospect, for, as we shall see, Thomson's incorporation of American vernacular idioms into

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62. Quoted in Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 263.

63. Harold Edgar, "Sum Total of '4 Saints in 3 Acts' Equals Zero," *DW* 8 March 1934: 7.

64. Ashley Pettis, "'American' Operas," *NM* 12 (August 7, 1934): 30.

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cultivated compositions foreshadowed one of the most crucial trends in leftist composition in the later 1930s.

Entre-acte

While the libretto to *Four Saints in Three Acts* was the very height of apolitical abstraction, topical musical theater in the tradition of *Of Thee I Sing* continued to play on Broadway. Although it is typically remembered in isolation, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" had originated as part of a skit in a theatrical revue called *New Americana* (1932). Stanley Green characterizes the show as "a pioneering effort in the use of modern dance choreography in the commercial musical theatre."[65] Certainly, the choreography of the "Brother" skit, which featured poor citizens waiting on a long breadline, was a vivid reminder of the conditions that were likely to confront audience members once they left the confines of the theater. Like its predecessors *Of Thee I Sing* and *Face the Music*, *New Americana* represented the intrusion of political events into the normally escapist world of American musical theater.

This trend continued in 1933 with *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, a new collaboration between George Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, and George and Ira Gershwin. Citing the show's innovative structure and large-scale integration of musical ideas, Edward Jablonski terms *Let 'Em Eat Cake* a "landmark of the American musical theater."[66] This formal inventiveness was infused with the same irreverent, anti-government attitude that had characterized *Of Thee I Sing*. *Cake*'s libretto, less humorous and more acerbic than that of *Of Thee I Sing*, also satirized anti-government extremists on both ends of the political spectrum. But while *Let 'Em Eat Cake* may have looked like a sure-fire hit on paper, the show was a flop, running for a mere ninety performances. Several factors contributed to

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65. Green, *Broadway Musicals*, 69.

66. Jablonski, *Gershwin*, 245.

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the play's failure. First, the continuing decline in disposable income had deleterious effects on Broadway attendance across the board, as the shrinking number of productions during the Depression's first few years attests. And unlike *Of Thee I Sing, Let 'Em Eat Cake* produced no major hit songs--not promising for a Gershwin musical. Perhaps the single most important reason for the public's indifference to *Let 'Em Eat Cake* was the libretto, which Gilbert Chase has criticized for its "bitter satire and repetitious propaganda that quickly became boring."[67] In 1933, perhaps more than ever before, New York audiences needed their theater to be entertaining and enjoyable; the hectoring tone of *Cake* was simply inappropriate.

Jazz and the Folk

The Depression had had grievous consequences throughout New York City, but its ravages were nowhere more severe than in Harlem. Many of Harlem's residents turned to radical politics, and as mentioned earlier, the Communist Party was eager to court their interest. This interest extended to some of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance: in the election of 1932, poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes had publicly endorsed Communist candidate William Z. Foster, and that same year Hughes joined a group of politically-minded African-Americans on a trip to the Soviet Union. Their ostensible purpose was a collaboration with a Soviet director on a film history about African-American oppression. The film was never made, but the trip was productive in other ways. Hughes, enamored of Soviet culture, remained for several months, traveling throughout the nation. While in Turkmenistan with Arthur Koestler, whom he had met on his journeys, Hughes witnessed an early purge trial. Koestler was

67. Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, revised 3rd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 530.

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shocked to hear Hughes excuse the patently unjust trial he had seen; Hughes argued that the Communists could afford to give no quarter to subversives.[68]

Hughes's cavalier acceptance of Soviet "justice" is particularly ironic when considered in light of the ongoing Scottsboro case. For many of New York's best-known African-American artists, including musicians, the issue had become a matter of great urgency. In December 1932, some of the jazz world's top performers participated in a benefit concert held at New York's Rockland Palace for the ILD's work for the Scottsboro Boys. The most prominent participants were Benny Carter's orchestra and Duke Ellington, who appeared as a soloist. The concert was organized by John Hammond (1910-1987), Vanderbilt heir, occasional Yale student, and jazz enthusiast. Hammond's great interests were black music and radical politics (in that order), and this event allowed him to use his formidable organizational talents in service of both. Since becoming a disc jockey earlier that year on WEVD--the radio arm of the radical Jewish paper the *Daily Forward*, which had chosen Eugene Debs's initials for its call letters--Hammond had developed an impressive network of connections in the jazz world, and within several years had become a seminal figure in the recording and production of early jazz records, especially those of Count Basie and Benny Goodman's groups. The juxtaposition of political activism and jazz, which seemed entirely natural to Hammond, was in fact a surprisingly controversial blend to the cultural theorists of the left.[69]

The official Soviet position on the use of jazz-based idioms in proletarian music had changed several times during the 1920s. S. Frederick Starr has demonstrated an early receptivity to jazz among Soviets in search of a new musical language, citing emigré composer and theorist Joseph Schillinger, a New School colleague of Seeger and Cowell,

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68. Lewis, ***When Harlem Was In Vogue***, 240, 257-59, 288-93.

69. John Hammond, ***John Hammond on Record: An Autobiography*** (New York: Ridge Press, 1977).

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as an early Soviet proponent of the use of jazz as an element in mass music.[70] However, by the end of the 1920s the American export had clearly fallen into disfavor with the leaders of the Soviet artistic community. In 1929, anti-jazz proletarians in the Soviet government forced the premature closing of Ernst Krenek's jazz-inspired opera *Johnny spielt auf*, and then went to the laughable extreme of attempting to have the saxophone banned from the Soviet Union. With typical thoroughness, the Soviet government's policing of musical style covered the full range from popular to cultivated. Composers of concert music were encouraged to write in a modernist, atonal idiom. But by the early 1930s there had been a pronounced shift in musical doctrine. As demonstrated by the Shostakovich interview cited earlier, composers now advocated taking a more listener-friendly direction, writing tonal music, preferably based on Russian folk melodies.[71] This new policy became official with the advent of Socialist Realism in 1933. Jazz remained out in the cold until mid-decade, when Soviet cultural authorities again came to hold jazz in high regard. As if the saxophone imbroglio of 1929 had never happened, a 1934 article in *Soviet Music* "posited that there would never be true revolutionary songs for the modern age unless they were built on a foundation of hot jazz."[72]

Regardless of the party line, many radicals in the United States--including Hammond--viewed jazz as a socially valid music throughout the period, as illustrated by events like Hammond's ILD benefit, as well as the centrality of hot bands to social functions hosted by both the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. A 1933 article by *Daily Worker* music critic Charles Edward Smith advanced many of the central arguments used to justify jazz on ideological grounds: "Jazz has its roots in the oppressive measures of southern plantation owners against the Negro masses. It is specifically a folk music in

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70. Starr, *Red and Hot*, 74-75.

71. Lee, "Dimitri Szostakovitch," 8.

72. Starr, *Red and Hot*, 160.

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derivation." It is noteworthy that Smith felt compelled to classify jazz as a "folk" idiom, in order to allay suspicions about its possible bourgeois associations. Smith also distinguished "hot" jazz--"the music having the folk-quality . . . the kind of jazz played in the dance halls of the proletariat"--from "sweet"--the "jazz played in Central Park Casino for the edification of debutantes." The problem with "sweet and popular" jazz, in Smith's view, was that "[p]opular music is wish-fulfillment music, is folk music 'from above' . . . [which] tries to lull to sleep the growing class consciousness of the masses." By contrast, hot jazz "aims to be genuinely the folk expression of a people," and "has its roots in the denial to the American Negro of 'the right of self-determination.'"[73]

Thus, Smith's endorsement of one musical idiom over another is rooted in ideological concerns. This impression is further confirmed by his assertion that the term "hot jazz" could be "applied equally to slow blues and to very fast stomps." This is because "[i]t referred not to tempo but to quality. . . Hot distinguished the genuine stuff from that which was corny (meaning phony) or that which was sweet, a term which covers the vast field of popular jazz and which is self-explanatory." Significantly, Smith did not fall into the tempting trap of simply equating sweet with white and hot with black musicians, listing Bix Beiderbecke, Hoagy Carmichael, and Jack Teagarden as hot musicians, alongside Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, W. C. Handy, and Earl Hines. Smith wrote that "[hot jazz] is exclusively Negro music neither in origin nor in expression." [74]

Of course there are a number of purely musical elements that distinguish "hot" from "sweet" jazz. But by boiling the distinction between the two down to such a nebulous, essentially unmusical quality as "phoniness," Smith simultaneously exposed and exemplified the serious problems inherent in imputing ideological associations to musical

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73. Charles Edward Smith, "Class Content of Jazz Music," *DW* 21 October 1933, 7.

74. Smith, "Class Content of Jazz Music," 7.

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genres. He wanted to have his cake and eat it too, advocating specifically for hot jazz without offering a musical definition of the genre. Presumably, he was operating on the classical definition of obscenity--"I know it when I see (or hear) it"--but this is insufficient. Many sweet jazz musicians would surely have claimed to be genuine in their music-making, and Smith's use of the term ultimately comes to seem like a way of weaseling out of the "authenticist" corner into which he had backed himself. It is easier, in the end, simply to designate an entire genre as "genuine" and another as "inauthentic" than to go on a case-by-case basis.

At any rate, other, more convincing arguments for the radicalism of jazz were made in this period. The German composer Kurt Weill, believing that a continuation of the traditional relationship between composer, work, and audience--in which the first two were virtually inseparable and the last was essentially superfluous--could only hinder the development of a true mass music, defended the use of jazz in political music. "Unlike art music," he wrote, "dance music does not reflect towering personalities standing above time, but rather the instincts of the masses. And a glance into the dance halls of all continents demonstrates that jazz is just as precisely the outward expression of our time as the waltz was of the outgoing nineteenth century."[75] Consequently, Weill embraced American vernacular musical idioms in his own leftist works like *Die sieben Todsunden* (The Seven Deadly Sins) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at a time when his American colleagues-in-arms were decidedly uninterested in the same sources. Even Eisler, whose harmonic language was inflected far more by the innovations of Viennese modernism than by African-American blues and tin-pan alley standards, often orchestrated his stage works for a combination--typically three reeds, two trombones, two

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75. Weill quoted in Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe, 1900-1935* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 95.

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trumpets, banjo, piano, plucked bass, and drums--that was reminiscent of big-band jazz.[76]

One common thread among the various justifications of jazz--from Weill to Smith to Soviet Music--is the notion that jazz was a "folk music," or at the very least, a "folk-derived" music, one that expressed the "instincts of the masses." This line of thought was not new: in the mid-Twenties figures as diverse as Irving Berlin and cultural critic Waldo Frank had argued for the "folkness" of jazz.[77] Of course, once these writers had situated jazz among the folkways of African-Americans, they still needed to explain what it was about that particular cultural constellation that made its products ideologically correct. We have seen, in Philip Schatz's essay, how leftist journalists stressed the similarities and connections between racial and economic oppression in America. However, both Schatz's and Gellert's idea that African-American music was proletarian seemed to be based, in large part, on the lyrics of selected songs, and had little grounding in the music itself. Similarly, Smith's musical argument for jazz was grounded in a vague notion of "genuineness" that had no relation to specific musical qualities. It seems as if each of these essayists started with a priori conclusions about the meaning of African-American music, then worked their ways backward to find evidence in the music. In a 1934 essay in *New Masses*, Richard Frank took a different tack, arguing that "[t]he emergence of [African-American] music means that Marxism-Leninism is being expressed in native cultural media, for if the Negroes of America do not form a basic section of the native toiling masses in America, there are no such sections."[78] Frank—who borrowed several song lyrics from Gellert--was clearly writing about "folk" music, and not about jazz. But

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76. Starr, *Red and Hot*, 95.

77. See Waldo Frank, "Jazz and Folk Art," *New Republic* No. 626 (December 1, 1926): 42-43; "Berlin Calls Jazz American Folk Music," *NYT* 10 January 1925: Arts, 2.

78. Richard Frank, "Negro Revolutionary Music," *NM* 11 (May 15, 1934): 29.

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the essence of his argument, that any "genuine" musical product of African-Americans was ideologically acceptable because of that group's social position, could apply just as easily to jazz as to spirituals and worksongs. Half a century before the rise of the "New Musicology," Frank insisted that music's meaning was inescapably tied to its social, geographical, and economic origins.[79]

First Fruits

While African-American folksongs that explicitly delivered radical messages had been accepted by many of New York's leftist musicians for several years, the arguments marshalled in their defense did not necessarily apply to the similarly topical products of white laborers. Consequently, white folk music inspired a more spirited debate. A number of left writers encouraged the use of Anglo-American folk songs. In his *Daily Worker* review of the *Red Song Book*, Edwin Rolfe lauded the "inclusion of songs written by workers and workers' groups in the midst of specific struggles." He made special mention of Aunt Molly's "Poor Miner's Farewell," the "Soup Song," and Ella May Wiggins' "I. L. D. Song," asserting that these songs "will become, as they grow more popular, pages of American class-struggle history."[80]

In a *Daily Worker* article titled "What Songs Should Workers' Choruses Sing?," Composers Collective member Lahn Adohmyan extended the repertoire of usable

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79. Although the spirituals and worksongs of slaves rarely made explicit mention of rebellious or insurgent sentiments, both genres can be seen as having such motives at their cores. Ray Pratt has noted that spirituals, and sacred music generally, were among the few means by which slaves were permitted to establish an autonomous cultural identity independent of their owners. Likewise, Lawrence Levine notes that "the work song was a communal instrument. It allowed the workers to blend their physical movements and psychic needs with those of other workers; it provided important outlets for communication, commiseration, and expression; and . . . it well may have affected subtle shifts in the meaning of the work experience itself." Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 215; Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 56.

80. Edwin Rolfe, "Music and Words for Workers," *DW* 5 November 1932, 4; on *Red Song Book*, see Ch. 2, pp. 92-95.

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material to include virtually all of American folk music, pointing out that "[i]n this country we have a virtually untapped source of folk songs which could be arranged, both for the 'club' as well as the advanced chorus." Among these were "Negro songs of protest, work songs, railroad songs, cowboy and hill songs," all of which, Adohmyan believed, "would be a colorful addition to our repertoires. Such an approach would carry us a long way toward rooting our work in the tradition of American music." He closed his brief essay by stating that "the task of revolutionary composers" would be "to learn the needs and desires of the working class and create music sufficient in quantity as well as distinctive in quality, so that workers' choruses from the smallest to the largest--that workers' audiences will declare: 'This is our music!'"[81] The garbled syntax of his closing sentence serves as a synecdoche for the conflicted thinking about folk music then prevalent among left musicians.

In February 1934, Seeger reviewed the *International Collection of Revolutionary Songs*, produced in late 1933 by the International Music Bureau of the International Workers Theatrical Union in Moscow. Seeger enthusiastically cited the inclusion of the American folksong "I Went to Tlanta"--one of the "Negro Songs of Protest" "discovered" by Gellert--writing that it "should be better known here if it is to have international significance."[82] Such advocacy of folk music was somewhat at odds with the "Program for Proletarian Composers," published just two weeks earlier. But then, Carl Sands and Charles Seeger, despite sharing the same body, often disagreed when it came to folk music; Sands wrote of musical "defeatism," while Seeger delighted in the singalongs hosted by Thomas Hart Benton and introduced his New School students to folk musics of cultures Western and non-Western. Many years later, Seeger explained the disjunction in the following autobiographical passage:

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81. Lahn Adohmyan, "What Songs Should Workers' Choruses Sing?," *DW* 7 February 1934: 5.

82. Carl Sands, "Stirring Songs of Struggle in International Collection," *DW* 1 February 1934: 5.

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> despite his recognition of the vitality of American folk and folk-popular traditions, Seeger, writing as Carl Sands, never incorporated this into his political writings. Why? With hindsight, he apparently took for granted that in the DW that [sic] he was writing for the Collective, as its mouthpiece, though at the same time he was devoting an evening in his course "Music Cultures of the World" at the New School each year, 1933-34-35, using Tom Benton's records and admitting he knew very little about the music on them or about their producers and the sociocultural context in which they were active.[83]

And indeed, the anti-folk musical snobbery expressed in some of Seeger's writing (as "Sands") was shared by several of his colleagues on the musical left who disagreed with Rolfe's and Adohmyan's enthusiasm for folk music. In December 1932, the Workers Music League produced the first issue of a new periodical called *The Worker Musician*. The contributors list included Cowell, Seeger, and Adohmyan, and the inaugural issue presented Eisler's "Red Front" in an arrangement by Adohmyan alongside announcements of the formation of workers' choruses, concert announcements from organizations that ran the gamut from the League of Composers and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, and an obituary for Pierre Degeyter, who had died in late September. Despite this seeming diversity of musical opinion, however, the tone of the magazine is best captured by Nathan Nevins' review of the *Red Song Book*. While Rolfe had praised the Book's compact form and simple musical presentation, Nevins suggested that future installments should include piano accompaniments. Nevins singled out Adohmyan's rather pedestrian "Stand Guard" and Eisler's "Comintern" as particularly worthy entries.

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83. Charles Seeger to David King Dunaway, 28 October 1977, Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (hereafter "CRSC").

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Most striking is the contrast between Rolfe's enthusiasm for the Wiggins and Aunt Molly songs, and Nevins's evaluation of the same: "There is nothing I can say musically concerning the songs of the Kentucky miners. They are immature." Then, in a particularly bizarre bit of Marxian criticism, he labels this "immaturity" as "the result of an arrested development" that was undoubtedly "caused by the exploitation by the coal barons."[84]

Frank, Rolfe, and Adohmyan had justified their advocacy of folk music by pointing to the oppression of its producers (thereby exemplifying the cult of suffering referred to by Hofstadter), but Nevins used his negative musical judgment as evidence of the debasement of these very same workers. Of course, this line of reasoning, if followed to its logical conclusion, would seem to leave most of New York's (classically-trained and predominantly middle-class) aspiring revolutionary composers no recourse but to take up another vocation, for if Aunt Molly bore the taint of capitalist oppression, Ruth Crawford must have positively reeked of the bourgeois. Nevertheless, the position of the *Worker Musician* was clear: modern, cultivated music was the way to go.

This was evident not only in Nevins' review, but in the opening article of the magazine, a lengthy essay by the editorial board titled "Fifteen Years: A Survey of American and Soviet Music." There were the predictable comparisons, similar to Pettis's, between the vitality of the latter and the alleged poverty of the former. The most interesting feature of the piece was its short section on American composers of note. Readers were informed that "Charles Ives in his 'Boston Commons' [presumably "The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common" from *Three Places in New England*] sees and feels the revolutionary struggle of the colonies for independence, but cannot see the link of Sacco and Vanzetti and the Boston Commons." Never mind that *Three Places in New England* was composed more than a decade before the famous trial, and several years before the

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84. Nathan Nevins, "Red Song Book," *Worker Musician* 1/1 (December 1932): 13.

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October Revolution, or that Ives frequently advocated democratic political ideas almost as radical as those practiced in the Soviet Union; because it lacked an explicit (and astonishingly prescient) acknowledgement of the rightness of the Soviet, the music was found wanting.

In contrast, the article proudly announced that "Henry Cowell has completely come over to the working class," citing a speech Cowell had given at the Workers' Musicians Club in which he had said that "[m]y music corresponds to the proletarian class which is now in the ascendancy." This was particularly notable because Cowell's proletarianism, although presumably genuine, seems to have been largely restricted to his administrative activities and participation in the Collective, leaving little trace on his compositions. Despite the lack of proletarian messages in his music on any level, the authors of "Fifteen Years" felt that "[Cowell's] fostering of new musical forms, his ruggedness and freshness, are healthy indications of the progress to be made by proletarian music in America."[85] One can not help but wonder: if Cowell had composed the same music while speaking of solidarity with the bourgeoisie rather than the proletariat, would he have been praised so warmly in the pages of *Worker Musician?* Both the magazine's lack of a coherent definition for the qualities necessary for a music to be designated "proletarian" and its rejection of existing proletarian music were surely factors in its rapid failure: the inaugural issue of *Worker Musician* was also its final one.

Certainly, the magazine's demise was not the result of any slackening of musical activities on the left. Just five months after the appearance of *Worker Musician*, thousands of worker musicians and musician workers gathered at the City College of New York in order to participate in the First American Workers Music Olympiad. The Olympiad was held on 21 May 1933, a date that had some significance to its organizers: it fell in close proximity to the International Workers Music Olympiad, held in Moscow

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85. "Fifteen Years: A Survey of American and Soviet Music" *Worker Musician* 1/1 (December 1932): 4, 5.

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on 24 May. As its program announced, the date was also chosen so that the American Olympiad could serve as "a counter-demonstration [to] bourgeois 'National Music Week.'" The program, which termed the Olympiad a "review" of the left's musical "forces," enumerated these forces for those in attendance. Among the Workers Music League divisions were the choral, which included "14 affiliated language groups, totaling approximately 1000 workers"; the instrumental, which boasted a Sinfonietta, the International Workers Union Symphony Orchestra, an unspecified number of marching bands, and the Freiheit Mandolin Orchestra; a publishing division, responsible thus far for the *Red Song Book* and *Worker Musician*; an educational division, consisting of both youth and adult classes; and a "service buro." Moreover, the WML was not limited to New York: there were also active branches in Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago.[86] Clearly, the Workers Music League had been busy.

In celebration of these achievements, the day-long Olympiad presented three programs of music. The day began with a Children's Concert. The Jugoslav Pioneer Chorus presented the Russian folksong "The Builders" as part of an "Agitprop Sketch." They were followed by "piano classes" performing a program that included a Bach Prelude, Tchaikovsky's "The Lark," and Schumann's "Little Romance." Next came a violinist performing a movement from the Wieniawski D Minor Concerto, followed by rhythm bands and then school choruses singing Soviet songs mostly by obscure composers (Koval and Tchembergee, by name). The brief afternoon session contained similarly diverse fare. After the Freiheit Mandolin Orchestra opened with the "Internationale," two Mussorgsky songs, and Gliere's "Red Poppy" Ballet Suite, contralto Radiana Pazmor and pianist Jerome Moross performed Crawford's *Two Ricercare*.

This mixture of music explicitly political, music political by implication (i.e., Russian music), and music seemingly devoid of political import also characterized the

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86. *Program of Workers Music Olympiad*, 14, Tammiment Institute Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter "TIL").

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final program of the day. The evening's program was truly Olympian in proportions, a musical marathon. For starters, the Workers International Relief Band treated the audience to the "Internationale," followed by a Rimsky-Korsakov work titled "Dubinushka," the Prelude to Bizet's *L'Arlesienne*, and Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture. This hefty program was but a prelude to the main event, introduced by a speaker from the WML: a choral competition, featuring nine different groups. The segment emphasized the international flavor of the workers music movement, including choruses of Finnish, Italian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Yugoslav, and American origins. In fact, this cosmopolitanism accurately represented the state of workers' music-making in New York in these years: Richard Reuss notes that "[n]o English-language chorus was even started within the communist movement until 1933."[87]

While the performances included some new works--the Daily Worker Chorus presented Seeger's "Song of the Builders," and Collective member Jacob Schaeffer's "Lenin-Our Leader" and "Strife Song," and several groups presented music by the ubiquitous Davidenko--and some music drawn from the classical repertory (the Italian chorus offered selections from *Nabucco* and *Ernani*), the overwhelming majority of the repertoire consisted of national folk songs, with a clear emphasis on Russian songs. Interspersed among the choral performances were a balalaika orchestra, a brief tenor/piano recital, and a club orchestra performance of a Vivaldi Concerto. Finally, preparatory to the presentation of a prize banner for the winning chorus, a massed group of one thousand voices sang Adohmyan's "Stand Guard," Schaeffer's "Red Brigadier," and a "Song of Wrath" by a composer named Szabo. Even had all the performances been of exemplary quality, the sheer length of the program was agonizing. In their eagerness to display the left's musical might, they sacrificed programmatic coherence and consideration for the audience's attention span on the altar of thoroughness. It could be

87. Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 41.

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said that this approach was a programmatic parallel to Nevins's and Seeger's patronizing attitudes regarding workers' actual musical preferences. The overriding theory of the evening program seemed to be a belief in the inherent and unquestionable appeal of proletarian culture, however defined.

Overall, the Olympiad was somewhat better conceived. The program's vast array of musics was in some degree admirable, leavening the new works of Adohmyan and Crawford with more accessible fare. But it is hard to imagine that audience members found the event particularly entertaining. Of course, in this sense the Olympiad was a perfect representation of the conflict among the musical leftists: they were never able to strike a balance between music as enjoyment and as education (or propaganda.) The event's planners had unintentionally offered a veritable parody of doctrinaire Communist solipsism.

Music for Workers or for Musicians?

As noted earlier, Crawford had never suffered from this particular illness. Even after having composed her political *Two Ricercare*, she remained more closely connected--at least on a musical and professional level--with New York's apolitical modernists than with the Collective. For example, the premiere of "Sacco, Vanzetti" on 6 March 1933 occurred at a concert sponsored by the Pan American Composers. Although it was overshadowed by the premiere of Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* on the same program, "Sacco, Vanzetti" was well received by the avant-gardists, and it was repeated six days later at the MacDowell Club, along with the premiere of "Chinaman, Laundryman." No-one present could have known at the time that these pieces were the last works of new music she would produce for almost five years. In August she gave birth to her first child, a boy named Michael, and for the next few years Ruth's life would be dominated

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by the joys and burdens of motherhood. Her career as a proletarian composer was over almost before it had begun.

However, the movement continued to attract pre-eminent young modernists. Around the time of Crawford's departure from the scene, the left landed a prize recruit: Aaron Copland, arguably the most talented and famous young modernist composer in America. Like Blitzstein and Thomson, Copland (1900-1990) had studied with Nadia Boulanger. In 1921, he had traveled to Fountainebleu and become one of the fabled pedagogue's first American composition students. Through his studies with her, Copland became well versed in both the classic counterpoint of J. S. Bach and the latest developments in French and Russian music.

After returning to New York in 1924, Copland firmly established himself as a leader among American composers of his generation. The successful commissions and performances of his *Music for the Theatre* and Organ Symphony, as well as the *succès de scandale* of his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, contributed to his growing reputation, one that transcended the insular contemporary music circles in which he and his fellow composers traveled. Although this occasionally led other composers to resent him, Copland was also an effective advocate for his compatriots. In 1929, he had organized the Cos Cob Press, funded by Alma Wertheim, in order to provide a venue for serious avant-garde composers--those whose works were too far out of the mainstream to be disseminated by any of the larger music publishing houses--to get their music into print. It also marked the first of many ventures in which Copland demonstrated that his organizational and promotional abilities were as formidable as his musical talents.

In addition to his pioneering efforts in the more entrepreneurial aspects of the music business, Copland continued composing, forging a style that was brittle, lean, and modernist to the core. The culminating work of this period was his *Piano Variations*, completed in 1930. The *Variations* are extremely austere, almost devoid of lyricism.

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Based on a terse, compact motive, they are a perfect illustration of the economy for which Copland strove. This was difficult music to understand, even for serious musicians, and it betrayed none of the extra-musical interests that had found their way into his piano trio of 1928, *Vitebsk*. The trio's eerie quarter-tones and Hebraic harmonies uncannily evoked the world of S. Ansky's play *Dybbuk*, by which *Vitebsk* had been inspired. Howard Pollack has noted that the play had politically radical implications, although Copland asserted that the trio grew out of a musical folk theme used in *Dybbuk*, and not out of the play's dramatic content.[88] It thus seems that the *Piano Variations* can be viewed as the summation of Copland's compositional development until 1930, whereas *Vitebsk* was a work that pointed the way towards his musical future. Regardless of the validity of Pollack's political interpretation of *Vitebsk*, its primary musical sources--namely, folk music--would loom large in his later work.

Just as he had spearheaded the American exodus to Fountainebleu, Copland also preceded his colleagues at New School, where he started lecturing on music history and appreciation in 1927. Although Copland, like Crawford, had never evinced any particular interest in politics, he ran in circles where engagement was the norm; in addition to his associates at the New School, Copland's best friend, director Harold Clurman, was one of the founders of the Group Theatre and a committed leftist. Copland's personal political vision was mediated through his conception of the relation between composers and audiences. He was also close friends with the leftist Mexican composer Carlos Chavez, whom he visited in the fall of 1932 during an extended stay in Mexico. The experience was an eye-opening one for Copland. In a letter to his parents, he wrote that "[Mexico City] itself is the strangest mixture of new and old. It's the first city I've ever been in where it seems quite the regular thing for the poorer classes to go

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88. For discussion of *Vitebsk*, see Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 142-46; Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1984), 162.

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around bare-footed, and this on the busiest streets where there are the most modern office buildings.[89]

For the most part, though, Copland's political engagement through 1932 had been mediated almost entirely through musical concerns, whether aesthetic or commercial. His openness to jazz idioms predates any public record of his political progressivism. Copland was also dissatisfied with the dominant status European composition held in America. In a letter to Chavez in late 1931, he wrote: "I am through with Europe Carlos, and I believe as you do, that our salvation must come from ourselves and that we must fight the foreign element in America which ignores American music."[90]

Related to this was Copland's concern with communication. Although a piece like *Piano Variations* might seem deeply hermetic, Copland desired to connect with his audience. He was thus very unhappy with the isolation of contemporary American composers, in both musical and social terms. He made his feelings explicit in a 1933 *Modern Music* article, in which he wrote that "new music in the future should no longer be confined to the sphere of the special society [presumably a reference to his own modern music activities, such as the League of Composers and the Copland-Sessions Concerts]. Now it must interest the general public through the usual concert channels and the usual interpreters."[91] In a letter to Chavez later that year, he returned to the topic: "Here in the U. S. A. we composers have no possibility of directing the musical affairs of the nation -- on the contrary, since my return, I have the impression that more and more we are writing in a vacuum. There seems to me less than ever a real rapport between the public and the composers and of course that is a very unhealthy state of

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89. Aaron Copland to parents, 10 September 1932, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter ACC).

90. Aaron Copland to Carlos Chavez, 26 December 1931, ACC.

91. Aaron Copland, "The Composer in America, 1923-33," *MM* 10/2 (January-February 1933): 91.

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affairs."[92] The following spring, he appeared on a symposium panel with Seeger, Siegmeister, and Roy Harris at the Degeyter Club. The subject under discussion was "The Problems of the Composer in Modern Society." Whereas Seeger and Blitzstein brought their social concerns to bear on music, Copland's musical misgivings influenced his awareness of broader social matters.

By mid-decade, Copland, who was never a registered Communist, was clearly a devoted "fellow traveler." For example, a letter from Mary Lescaze to Copland written in September of 1933 refers to the latter's "communism orgy."[93] In March 1934, he was feted with an all-Copland concert--the first such program on record--at the Degeyter Club, at which he allied himself clearly with the interests of the American left. Seeger's review of the event described how Copland's prefatory statement "brought still one more affirmation of the belief that contemporary art music has lost contact with the vital trends in present-day life and that the only hope for it lies in its frank identification with the great masses of the proletariat." However, Copland also "warn[ed] the audience against viewing his compositions from a revolutionary angle, for, as he said with charming naivete, he had not, at the time of their composition, any ideas of that sort in his head."[94]

Copland clearly entertained "ideas of that sort" when, in early 1934, he entered a composition contest sponsored by *New Masses*. Other entrants included Composers Collective members Siegmeister, Wallingford Riegger, Isidore Freed, Adohmyan, and Seeger. All contestants were required to set Alfred Hayes's poem *Into the Streets May First*. The winning entry was to be published in the May Day issue of *New Masses* after a performance at the Second Workers Music Olympiad in late April. In an article on the competition, Pettis--who acted as one of the judges--informed readers of a broad range of

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92. Aaron Copland to Carlos Chavez, 16 December 1933, ACC.

93. Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 274.

94. Carl Sands, "Copeland's [*sic*] Music Recital at Pierre Degeyter Club," *DW* 22 March 1934, 5.

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styles. At one pole was Seeger's, which Pettis described as "in no sense experimental," declaring that "[t]he harmonies are simple; the tune 'catchy;' the whole somewhat in the style of Stephen Foster." Adohmyan's entry, on the other hand, was "perhaps too sophisticated and 'modern' for singers in workers' groups." To no one's surprise, Copland's setting won first prize. In a unanimous decision, the judges apparently decided that his entry struck a balance between Seeger's simplicity and Adohmyan's complexity. Pettis lauded the "vigor," "freshness," and "directness" of Copland's setting. While conceding that "[s]ome of the intervals may be somewhat difficult upon a first hearing or singing," he contended that "the ear will very readily accustom itself to their sound."[95] Indeed, Pettis believed that the "unsophisticated" singers comprising workers choruses would not be bothered by the song's "unfamiliar" and "experimental" harmonies because they had not been indoctrinated into the belief that modernist music was inherently difficult to sing.

Pettis's justifications aside, Copland's winning entry (see example 3.2), written in a moderately dissonant idiom, complete with unprepared modulations, occasional chromaticism and a piano accompaniment, raised again the difficult questions about the appropriateness of a modernist style that he and some of his colleagues had avoided answering. Years later, Seeger recalled having the following exchange with Copland:

> "Everybody here knows that your song is best. But do you think it will ever be sung on the picket line? And anyway, who could carry a piano into the streets May First or anytime?" Copland agreed that his song was probably not appropriate for a picket line. Seeger then continued, "Well, take mine, for instance. I haven't tried to make a piece of music I admire. I tried to write a piece of music that I think might be sung on the picket

95. Ashley Pettis, "Marching With a Song," *NM* 11 (May 1, 1934): 15.

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line. Do you think there is anybody in New York who couldn't join in with this the second time they hear it?"[96]

Example 3.2: Aaron Copland, "Into the Streets May First"

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an amateur chorus negotiating Copland's score with any great degree of success. We see, in example 3.2, the unrealistic demands Copland's setting made on workers choruses (particularly challenging passages have been bracketed.) Nevertheless, on 29 April 1934, Copland's "Into the Streets May First" was

96. Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 225.

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Example 3.2 (cont'd): Copland, "Into the Streets May First"

scheduled for its premiere at the Second Annual Workers' Music Olympiad. In a turn of events that essentially vindicated Seeger's complaints, the massed chorus was indeed unable to learn Copland's song, which had to be performed instead by the select "Daily

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Worker chorus."[97] The rest of the Second Olympiad's program was another musical grab-bag, including standard concert repertoire like Grieg's *Holberg Suite* and a Handel Concerto Grosso alongside more thematically relevant works like Siegmeister's "Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die," Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Fifteenth Jubilee March-Red Army*, and the "Hunger March" of Jacob Schaeffer. Reviewing the day's events, Pettis alternated between praise of the generally high quality of performances--citing a clear "technical advance" over the previous year's events, despite his criticism of the Daily Worker Chorus's rendition of Copland's "Into the Streets"--and complaints about the uneven quality of the repertoire performed. Grieg's *Holberg* was "well-made music of astonishing emptiness," and the *Fifteenth Jubilee March* had "all the faults of a bad military march with none of its virtues." Pettis found the inclusion of such works particularly galling, given the "refreshing, invigorating strains of some of the new revolutionary songs being written and sung in America."[98]

Fortunately for Pettis and other advocates of these new American songsmiths, that same spring saw the publication of *Workers Songbook No. 1*. Like the *Red Song Book*, the *Workers Songbook* was produced by the WML. But that was where the similarities ended. The new book provided piano accompaniments; in fact, the accompaniments were integral parts of most songs, all of which were recent works by leftist composers (see appendix for Table of Contents). All but three of the selections, according to the book's foreword, were "composed in 1933 as part of the work of the Collective."[99] The volume did not even include the virtually obligatory "Internationale," let alone reproduce further "immature" products of Kentucky songsters. The focus of the *Workers Songbook*, not to put too fine a point on it, was clearly not the workers.

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97. Ashley Pettis, "Second Workers' Music Olympiad," *NM* 11 (May 22, 1934): 29. Pettis found even this select group's performance of "Into the Streets" unsatisfactory.

98. Pettis, "Second Workers' Music Olympiad," 28, 29.

99. Foreword, *Workers Songbook No. 1* (New York: Workers Music League, 1934).

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The mission and method of the book's contributors are laid out in the foreword, which is unattributed but reads like Seeger:

> The working class of America is developing a new, revolutionary music of its own. It cannot be made over night or out of whole cloth. It is at once a demand of the new, proletarian culture and an inevitable outgrowth of the old, bourgeois art-music. We shall have to use, for some time to come, the basic elements of the old idiom. We can, however, and must subject these basic elements to revolutionary scrutiny with a view of finding which of them we cannot help but use, which must be discarded as unsuitable and which must be given a leftward turn that will yield us a recognizably revolutionary music for recognizably revolutionary words.[100]

It is clear from even a cursory examination of the book's contents, however, that the contributors held different views of these "basic elements." All of Jacob Schaefer's contributions were written in a chromatic late-Romantic idiom, full of metrical shifts, irregular phrases, and huge melodic leaps, as seen in example 3.3. Adohmyan, on the other hand, presented two different styles. The first is represented by "Song to the Soldier" and "Red Soldiers Singing," both of which contain much chromaticism, unprepared modulations, occasional huge leaps, and irregular phrases in an essentially atonal framework. In "A Negro Mother to Her Child," on the other hand, Adohmyan adopts a simple style that was heavily inflected by blues and spirituals. Janet Barnes' lone offering, "God to the Hungry Child," was moderately dissonant but rhythmically simple, and plaintive in style. Despite this diversity, the vague outlines of a mass-song

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100. Foreword, *Workers Songbook No. 1*.

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Example 3.3: Jacob Schaeffer, "Strife Song" mm. 21-31

style, indebted to Eisler, are apparent in Seeger's "Song of the Builders," "Mount the Barricades," and "Who's That Guy" (presented under the *nom de plume* Carl Sands) and Siegmeister's "The Scottsboro Boys." These compositions, at once appealing and modernist, all offer simple, largely conjunct melodies with very clear rhythmic pulses. The style, and its roots in Eisler's songs, can be seen in example 3.4.

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Example 3.3 (con'td): Schaeffer, "Strife Song"

However, if what workers needed were *a cappella* songs that they could reasonably be expected to sing, only Siegmeister's "Three Workers Rounds" fit the bill. A footnote specified that the pieces were particularly valuable as introductions to part singing, which was true, but undersold their value, for Siegmeister's three songs are ingenious compositions in their own right. Although they are not Eislerian in a stylistic sense, they

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Example 3.4: (a) Carl Sands, "Mount the Barricades"

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Example 3.4 (b) Hanns Eisler, "Wir sind der Abschaum der Welt" mm. 1-18

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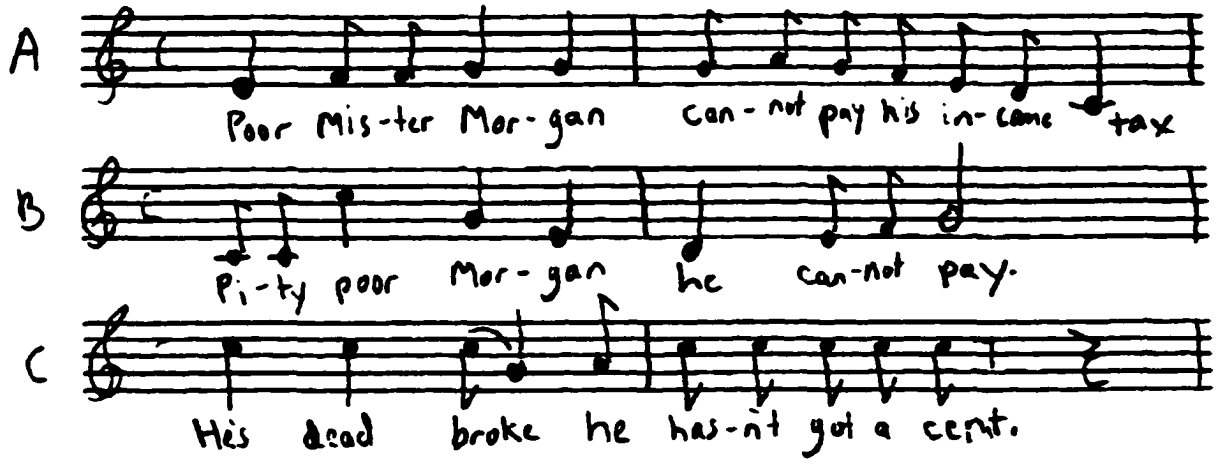
share Eisler's penchant for infusing contemporary mass songs with subtle, archaic techniques: Judith Tick notes that Siegmeister combined "medieval rounds with the voice-exchange techniques German musicologists called 'Stimmtausch.'"[101] But despite the erudition that went into their making, Siegmeister's rounds never feel stuffy or learned. To the contrary, they are both catchy and simple. The texts, written by Siegmeister, are simple and easy to remember. Particularly noteworthy is the sardonic "Poor Mister Morgan," addressed to J. P. Morgan, Jr.:

Example 3.5: L. E. Swift, "Poor Mister Morgan"



All three rounds are harmonically and rhythmically very simple, and they are quite singable. Additionally, their compactness would facilitate memorization by workers choruses lacking first-rate sight-singing skills. As a group, Siegmeister's rounds progress from "Poor Mister Morgan's" consonant melody and sing-song rhythms through "Red Election Round," which has a bit more rhythmic complexity and is more disjunct melodically, to the greater harmonic subtlety, chromaticism, and shifting meters of "Onward to Battle."

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101. Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 197.

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George Maynard and Aaron Copland both responded to the collection, writing in the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, respectively.[102] Both lauded the boldness of Adohmyan's modernist contributions, and both criticized, with differing degrees of harshness, Schaeffer's "anachronistic" compositions. The reviewers shared generally positive opinions of Seeger's songs, with minor reservations: Maynard warned that the chorus of "Song of the Builders" "might easily be, except for its rhythmic accents, a piece of church music, something . . . which is to be avoided at any price." Copland, while conceding that Seeger's were not great songs, nevertheless praised their "directness of attack" and "sure technical grasp." Their verdict on Barnes's song was split, with Maynard declaring it "an incontestable gem," and Copland terming it "immature" and worth omission. The critics split even more sharply on Siegmeister. Maynard wrote that "The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die" was "unquestionably the best mass song the American movement has produced so far," while Copland wrote that "judged from a purely musical standpoint it is certainly not the best song in the collection," and attributed the work's well-established popularity with workers choruses to the immediacy of the song's subject.

What is fascinating about these reviews is that neither writer addresses in any meaningful fashion the issue of technical difficulty: these were songs ostensibly intended for use by workers choruses, and yet they were judged almost entirely on the esoteric basis of the reviewer's respective musical/ideological frameworks. Copland even alluded to the seemingly important matter that "the opinion of the trained musician will not always coincide with that of the masses" right before he proceeded to evaluate the *Songbook* by the criteria of the trained musician (not surprising given the advanced idiom of his own prize-winning song.) Both reviewers criticized Schaefer's three contributions because they were anachronistic, when it would seem that the more

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102. George Maynard, "Songs of Struggle by American Composers in New Workers' Song Book," *DW* 12 May 1934, 5; Aaron Copland, "Workers Sing!," *NM* 11 (June 5, 1934): 28-29.

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relevant basis for such criticism is the sheer difficulty of the songs. The problem is even more glaring with Adohmyan's thorny "Song to the Soldier" and "Red Soldiers Singing," which both reviewers evaluated positively. Evaluated in terms of practical usefulness, the contributions of Adohmyan, Barnes, and Schaefer must be considered failures. Seeger's Eislerian songs are rather better, being simple and relatively singable, although it is worth noting that despite his criticism of Copland's "Into the Streets," Seeger composed songs with piano accompaniment. But of the book's contents, only Siegmeister's rounds offered workers songs that were both topical and singable.

While most members of the Collective did not yet recognize the shortcomings of their approach, other leftist musicians were less blind. Seeger recalled, years later, that Aunt Molly had attended a Collective meeting in 1933. She was as unimpressed by the Collective's atonal compositions--some of which likely found their way into the *Songbook*--as its members were disdainful of her folk songs. She made a positive impression on Seeger though, despite the negative attitude he occasionally took in writing of folk music: "I learned her songs and discovered that they were folk songs simply dolled up, with new words and perhaps a few touches of her own, and that the people could sing their songs and they couldn't sing our songs. So I went up to her and I said, Mollie [sic], you're on the right track and we're on the wrong track."[103]

With this assessment, Seeger marked his willingness to honor the promise, seemingly ignored by most contributors, of the foreword to the *Workers Songbook:* "The composers, one and all in the Collective, take as a basic criterion of their work the following adaptation of the words of Joseph Stalin, viz.: that they must cultivate above all things 'a good ear for the voice of the masses, must pay close attention to their revolutionary instinct, must study the actualities of their struggle, must carefully enquire

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103. Quoted in Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 134-35.

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whether their policy is sound--and must, therefore, be ready, not only to teach the masses, but also to learn from them."[104]

A Critical Juncture

Even as the members of the Collective made their first fitful steps towards the creation of a new, proletarian music, one of the world's most vibrant centers for proletarian culture was rapidly disintegrating. In spring 1933, an anonymous author writing in *Modern Music* detailed Germany's new "Kultur-Terror." After discussing the recent vitality of Germanic culture, with particular emphasis on the innovations of Eisler, "X.T." wrote that "[a]ll these beginnings, which pointed to such a bright future are now destroyed. Not only the new political music, but the works of modern leaders, Schoenberg, Weill, Stravinsky may no longer be performed . . . it will be difficult again to build up what barbarism has destroyed."[105] A year later, Herbert Peyser made a similar case in *New Masses.*[106] If most of America was not yet concerned with the rise of fascism, artists on the left were plainly aware of the growing menace to culture.

The American public remained largely focused on domestic politics. In New York City, former Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia was elected mayor on a platform of governmental reform, hoping to do for city governance what Roosevelt had done at the federal level. After a little more than a year in office, the Roosevelt administration had completely altered the culture of American government. Edmund Wilson, writing in the spring of 1934, compared the Roosevelt and Hoover administrations: "The last administration weighed on Washington, as it did on the entire country, like a darkness,

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104. Foreword, *Workers Songbook No. 1;* emphasis in original.

105. X. T., "Kultur-Terror," *MM* 10/4 (May--June, 1933): 213.

106. Herbert F. Peyser, "Music: Verboten" *NM* 11 (April 10, 1934): 18-19.

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like an oppressive bad dream, in which one could neither speak nor act; and the talk and animation in Washington today are a relief like waking up from a dream."[107]

Yet, attitudinal changes were not all that was required, and the starting promise of the New Deal had not been satisfactorily fulfilled. Millions of Americans remained jobless, farmers throughout the Midwest grappled with ecological and economic hardship, and even those workers who had jobs received poor wages while working in poor conditions. And while it was undeniably true that matters had improved as a result of New Deal reforms, the modest successes of the Hundred Days were coming back to haunt Roosevelt. In addition to the unrealistic expectations created by his whirlwind spate of emergency legislation, the very success of the reforms, by alleviating the worst of the crisis, also increased the President's political vulnerability: during the winter of 1932-33, the need for new ideas was so desperate that the public and Congress alike gave Roosevelt virtual carte blanche. Now that the worst seemed to have passed, partisan politics returned to the halls of the Capitol. Edmund Wilson described the state of affairs:

> The first splendor of the New Deal has faded, and the next development of policy has not yet clearly dawned. The clear and ringing call to play the game with which the President was able at the beginning to inebriate his supporters, to overwhelm and silence his opponents, no longer vibrates in people's ears. The emergency measures which revived our morale have not achieved all that they promised; the Republicans are becoming insulting; Congress is becoming recalcitrant, is reverting to its natural condition of responding to the pressure of special interests; the tough fundamental

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107. Edmund Wilson, "Washington: Glimpses of the New Deal," in Wilson, *American Earthquake*, 536; essay originally published 1934.

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> problems of the industrial situation are embarrassing the NRA [National Recovery Administration].[108]

In late spring 1934, while the nation's situation was far less dire than it had been just one year earlier, the future was no less uncertain, and after almost five years of Depression, certainty and security were perhaps the most crucial needs of the fragile American psyche. Working-class attitudes were like dry kindling; just one tiny spark would ignite them. For Roosevelt, such an event was a nightmarish prospect. But for the radicals of New York, it felt like the fulfillment of a dream.

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108. Wilson, "Washington: Glimpses of the New Deal," 564.

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Apotheosis: 1934-1937

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Chapter 4: Proletarianism Unbound
May 1934--November 1935

By the spring of 1934, the American economy had rebounded significantly from its low point in early 1933. But the Depression continued nonetheless, with no signs of a full recovery in sight. Particularly galling for tens of millions of unemployed Americans was the perceived indifference and seeming invulnerability of their wealthiest fellow citizens. Although 1934 payrolls were 40% below their 1926 levels, dividends had risen by 50% in the same period.[1] In June 1934, following a two-year investigation into irregularities in the nation's stock markets, Roosevelt established the Securities and Exchange Commission. That same month also produced the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Housing Administration. However, these new agencies did little or nothing to improve the immediate lot of America's citizenry.

Against this backdrop, it was not at all surprising that the populist rhetoric of Huey P. Long and Doctor Francis Townsend attracted growing numbers of adherents. Equally influential was Father Charles Coughlin, a Michigan priest with populist leanings who had vocally supported Roosevelt in 1932, but broke with the Democratic Party in late 1934 to found the National Union for Social Justice. Both Long and Coughlin had radio shows with huge and devoted national followings, so when the "Radio Priest" complained that Roosevelt had abandoned the workers and farmers who had elected him, and Long railed against the timidity of the New Deal, millions of Americans were listening. Roosevelt, who had demonstrated his recognition of radio's potency by exploiting the medium more effectively than any previous American politician, had reason to be nervous, for as Alan Brinkley has observed, "[a] dissident leader in the 1930s could reach a larger audience in a single radio broadcast than an orator could have

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1. Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States* Volume II--1933 to 1953 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 17.

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addressed in a lifetime forty years before. There was, it seemed, no pressing need for elaborate local efforts. The message could be transmitted without them."[2] However, for a variety of reasons, none of these campaigns ever came close to threatening Roosevelt. Paradoxically, one of the crucial obstacles to Long, Coughlin, and Townsend was also inherent to radio. For although mass communication may have caused local organizations to appear redundant, "it was just such local organizational activity that worked most effectively to give ordinary men and women a strong sense of connection with dissident politics. By making the relatively passive process of listening to the radio the dominant activity of their followers, Long and Coughlin ensured that their movements would never become what the populist movement had once been: a constant, visible presence in the lives of communities."[3]

That the appeal of radical politics was both broad and deep was made evident by the unexpected success of the legendary muckraking author Upton Sinclair's California gubernatorial campaign of 1934. Running on a platform called End Poverty in California (or EPIC), Sinclair won the Democratic primary that August, shocking pundits and causing grave concern in the halls of business, as well as in the relatively moderate White House. The general campaign was very ugly, as powerful conservatives with ties to Hollywood, most notably Louis B. Mayer, brought smear tactics into the age of film, producing "newsreels" that were in fact thinly veiled attacks on Sinclair. These included allegations of Communism and assertions that, if elected, Sinclair and EPIC would turn the state of California into a refugee camp for Okies and Arkies fleeing the nascent Dust Bowl. In a particularly striking example of the movie industry's hardball politics, anti-Sinclair campaigners circulated a cautionary photo of a "derelict" who had already immigrated to the state, a harbinger of the flood to follow should Sinclair win the

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2. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin & the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 193.

3. Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 193.

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election; the picture was later recognized as a still shot culled from a recent Warner Brothers movie.[4] Sadly though, the campaign confirmed the notion that mudslinging works, as the voters of California overwhelmingly rejected Sinclair's populist message, and elected a conservative Republican instead.

Nevertheless, Sinclair's surprising strength clearly expressed the discontent of many of the nation's workers. In early 1934, after a decade and a half of declining influence and legal setbacks, organized labor--encouraged by Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which guaranteed workers the right to organize--began to flex its muscles. Predictably enough, the first large-scale labor action of the Depression occurred in New York City; in February 1934, taxi drivers struck, taking their cars off the roads. The taxi drivers' strike foreshadowed a season of labor actions that was unprecedented in scope. The pace quickened in May. On 12 May, the Minneapolis Teamsters struck, leading to armed clashes with police ten days later. Meanwhile, on the west coast, a strike by International Longshoremens' Association (ILA) locals from Seattle to San Diego crippled the shipping industry. The ILA strike quickly grew to include members of many others unions, including Teamsters, sailors, and cooks. Both the ILA and Teamsters strikes continued into the summer, and both culminated in July. On 20 July, Minneapolis police fired into crowds of civilians, killing two and wounding sixty-five. Similarly violent clashes had marred the San Francisco waterfront for almost two weeks when, on 16 July, all of the city's workers joined in a general strike. The summer of 1934 also included strikes by auto workers in Toledo, tire factory workers in Akron, a nationwide strike by textile workers, and the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.[5]

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4. Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 16.

5. For a fuller discussion of the strike activity of 1934, see Brecher, *Strike!*, 159-98.

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Even armed with Section 7A, however, unions still had to contend with court injunctions against strikes. After twelve years of Republican appointments, the federal judiciary remained far to the right of either Congress or the Roosevelt administration, as illustrated by several rulings delivered during the winter of 1934-35. On 22 February 1935, an Alabama district court judge ruled that the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) could not compete with private power companies, effectively declaring that the federal government did not belong in the marketplace. Just five days later, a district court judge found for the Weirton Steel Company in its case against the government, asserting that NIRA's regulation of interstate commerce was unconstitutional; such trade, stated the opinion, was simply beyond Washington's jurisdiction. The following spring, the Supreme Court declared both the Frazier-Lemke Act--which provided farm relief--and the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Blue Eagle agency established by NIRA and celebrated in song, to be unconstitutional. It was clear that Roosevelt's legislative *carte blanche* had expired.

Under attack from both ends of the political spectrum, Roosevelt tacked left, neutralizing the complaints of many of his more popular critics. On 17 January 1935, Roosevelt satisfied many older Americans by announcing his plan for Social Security. Several months later, he signed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act into law. The impact of this piece of legislation is perhaps without parallel in American history. Its legacy includes the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), which raised the percentage of American farms with electricity from 20% to 90% in a single decade; the National Youth Administration (NYA), which enabled millions of students to work their way through school; the Resettlement Administration (RA), which attempted to establish model communities throughout the country; and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which employed 8.5 million Americans in its eight-year lifetime, leading to the construction of 500,000 miles of highway, almost 100,000 bridges and the same number

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of public buildings, and 8,000 public parks. No city benefited more from these funds than New York, which ultimately spent more than $1.1 billion in New Deal funds on public works during the following half-decade. This massive infusion of money had predictably large results: Robert Caro writes that "during the first five years of the LaGuardia era . . . the civic estate was altered more than it had been altered in the preceding fifteen . . . [and] New York was able to effect a far greater and more rapid alteration in its physical public structure than had ever before been possible."[6]

In the wake of the invalidation of the NRA, Roosevelt and Congressional Democrats continued to advocate for expanded government aid for workers and regulation of business, and on 5 July 1935, Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act--otherwise known as the Wagner Act--into law. Among other things, the Wagner Act guaranteed the rights to union organization and to collective bargaining. Just as he had done during the first Hundred Days, Roosevelt reached out to poor and working-class Americans, placating (at least for the time being) many of his loudest critics on the left. Emboldened by their victories, as well as by the sense that they were part of a vital, broad-based movement in American society, the activist artists of New York City worked to create a culture that would match the new left politics.[7]

"Strike!"

It was certainly an exciting time to be involved in New York's radical theatre scene. In January 1935, the Group Theatre offered a program that forever changed political theatre in the United States. A courtroom scene from playwright John Wexley's Scottsboro-related *They Shall Not Die* was presented together with *Waiting for Lefty*, a new one-act play by the virtually unknown Clifford Odets. *Lefty* depicted the travails of

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6. Caro, *Power Broker*, 363, 465.

7. For a detailed discussion of the economic import of Roosevelt's "second Hundred Days," see Frank Knight, "The Economic Principles of the New Deal" in *The Thirties: A Reconsideration*, 84-99.

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exploited workers, in this case taxi drivers. On opening night, the audience was so caught up in the righteous fervor of the play's climactic scene--in which the drivers learn that their leader, Lefty, has been killed by company goons and decide to go on strike--that they leapt to their feet and shouted "Strike!" along with the actors. In *New Masses*, the critic Stanley Burnshaw asserted that "[o]ne basic reason for the impressiveness of *Waiting for Lefty* is the idiom used throughout. The phrases are pungent, fresh, simple, mobile, the ringing speech of flesh and blood proletarians."[8] Theater historian Morgan Himelstein, commenting on the significance of *Lefty*, asserts that "by adding realistic characters, situations, and dialogue to the nonrealistic structure of the agit-prop, Odets completed the agit-prop's movement toward realistic human drama."[9] In *Lefty*, American agit-prop seemed to have found its own dramatic voice. The play's success demonstrated that dramatists did not need to sacrifice effectiveness in order to clearly convey their agit-prop ideologies. Odets's achievement therefore held significance for leftist artists in all media, including music. It was also a tribute to the collective ethos of the Group Theatre, and indeed, the unexpected participation of early audiences carried the Group's collaborative conception of drama to its logical conclusion.

At that point, New York composers had yet to achieve a success comparable to Odets's. One obstacle was the ongoing debate about the exact role music should play in the workers movement. The unsettled nature of this issue was evident in an essay by Henry Cowell published in *New Masses* in late 1935. Cowell began by asking, "[o]f what use is music?" Of course, there was an easy answer to this question, and a hard answer. Cowell provided the easy one first: "[the unthinking music-lover] obtains pleasure from music that he likes. He likes best certain pieces of music that he has heard before, has built up a sentimental association with and therefore wishes to hear again. He

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8. Stanley Burnshaw, "Waiting for Lefty," *NM* 14/5 (January 29, 1935): 28.

9. Morgan Y. Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York, 1929-1941* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 40.

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likes best in unfamiliar or new music that which reminds him the most of the music with which he has already built up an association." Unfortunately, this response, while plainly apparent, was also unsatisfactory to Cowell, for "when music is taken in the way described above, it is a very unhealthy form of dissipation. Why? Because the music is being used exclusively to create a mood of sentimental enjoyment." If music was to be of use, Cowell believed, it must be useful in the world, valuable for more than its merely musical qualities. As an illustration, he described the how picketing workers used a song during the San Francisco longshoremen's strike:

> [the song] changed the pickets from stragglers to a solidified single unit, strengthened their purpose. The crowd was also swayed. It changed from curiosity seekers to sympathizers. It took up the song. . . . The police would have had to bring the scabs through the crowd, even before meeting the pickets. It would have been so bloody that they were afraid to try it.
>
> And they didn't bring the scabs in.
>
> Music had been put to use.[10]

Although unstated, the contrast between the musical events described by Cowell and the esoteric songs of *Workers Songbook No. 1* would have been apparent to all of the Collective's members. As Seeger might have pointed out, there was no piano on this particular picket line.

Cowell's article was emblematic of an intensified belief in the importance of grass-roots activism among New York's musical community. Perhaps no other figure more clearly illustrated this trend than Aaron Copland, who was both a colleague of Cowell's and a good friend of Odets's. While vacationing in Minnesota during the summer of 1934, Copland delivered two Communist stump speeches at local meetings of workers

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10. Henry Cowell, "'Useful' Music," *NM* 17/5 (October 29, 1935): 27.

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and farmers. In a letter to the composer Israel Citkowitz, Copland explained how they came about:

> it began when Victor [Kraft] spied a little wizened woman selling a Daily Worker on the street corners of Bemidji. From that, we learned to know the farmers who were Reds around these parts, attended an all-day election campaign meeting of the C. P. unit, partook of their picnic supper and made my first political speech! If they were a strange sight to me, I was no less of a one to them. It was the first time that many of them had seen an "intellectual." I was being drawn, you see, into the political struggle with the peasantry! I wish you could have seen them--the true Third Estate, the very material that makes revolution. What struck me particularly was the fact that there is no "type-communist" among them, such as we see on 14th St. They look like any of the other farmers around here, all of them individuals, clearly etched in my mind. And desperately poor. None can afford more than a 10[cent] pamphlet. (With that in mind I appealed to the Group for funds and they sent me a collection of $30. which I presented to the unit here for their literature fund.) When S. K. Davis, Communist candidate for Gov. in Minn., came to town and spoke in the public park, the farmers asked me to talk to the crowd. It's one thing to think revolution, or talk about it to ones friends, but to preach it from the streets--OUT LOUD--Well, I made my speech (Victor says it was a good one) and I'll probably never be the same![11]

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11. Letter to Israel Citkowitz, September 1934, ACC.

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On 11 April 1935, Copland attended his first and only meeting of the Composers Collective, and throughout the period he continued to compose works intended for radical organizations and events.[12]

Copland placed a particular emphasis on music for children; both his choral piece *What Do We Plant?*--written for the Girls' Glee Club of the Henry Street Settlement Music School—and a set of piano pieces called *The Young Pioneers* employed favorite tropes (planting and pioneers) of the Communist Party. Copland displayed his versatility in these works, tempering (although not eliminating) his penchant for rhythmic complexity and harmonic dissonance, and producing works that are musically interesting but not beyond the ability of advanced student performers. For instance, in *What Do We Plant?* (see example 4.1), the vocal lines begin with six measures of repeated E's, exchanged between the two voices, before having to change pitch. The vocal range is one octave, and there are no leaps larger than a fourth; moreover, the piano accompaniment frequently doubles the voices, and Copland's use of imitation between the voices further simplifies matters. As is so often the case in Copland's music, the greatest difficulties presented by *What Do We Plant?* are rhythmic; the singers must be comfortable switching between duple and triple eighth-notes in 6/8 time. On the other hand, the conflicting meters never occur simultaneously. While *What Do We Plant?* is not a particularly distinguished composition, it manages to reconcile musical interest with simplicity, thus fulfilling the two major requirements of composing for students.

In September 1934, Copland began work on his first piece of dance music in four years, a ballet called *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* The scenario was a courtroom drama--hardly standard ballet fare--that presented three witnesses' testimonies regarding a nightclub murder. Copland called the piece "a satire on justice and how she functions," and his score reflected the topical subject matter through such means as the inclusion of

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12. Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 277, 278.

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Example 4.1: Aaron Copland, *What Do We Plant?* (mm. 1-28)

"segments of 'The Star Spangled Banner,' distorted to convey the corruption of legal systems and courts of law."[13] Cecil Michener Smith, who reviewed the ballet for *Modern Music*, described a score that combined elements of jazz, romanticism, and polytonality. As Howard Pollack observes, in terms of both musical style and dramatic

13. Letter to Paul Bowles, 24 October, 1934, ACC; Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 234. The piece has never been published.

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meaning, *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* "struck a strong transitional note" for Copland by blending "a roaring twenties ambience with a thirties concern for social justice."[14]

At the same time, Copland continued to compose more abstract, modernist works, but even there a new rhetorical boldness can be heard. His orchestral work *Statements*, completed in 1935, seems, in Pollack's words, "very much the work of a man who in the summer of 1934 gave public speeches on behalf of communist farmers . . . in this work," Pollack continues, "[Copland] takes his stand as a public orator."[15] Several aspects of *Statements* support Pollack's characterization of it as an innately public work. The most obvious of these is, of course, the piece's title, which Copland wrote "was chosen to indicate terse, short movements of well-defined character." Further, "[e]ach [movement] was given an additional title as an aid to the public in understanding what I had in mind."[16] This idea is virtually antithetical to the abstract, almost hermetic aesthetic that defined the earlier *Piano Variations*. Also significant is the instrumentation. Although his greatest compositions of the 1920s--the Organ Symphony, Piano Concerto, and *Music for the Theatre*--were all large-scale orchestral works, Copland had shifted in the late 1920s and early 1930s to the intimate world of chamber music: *Vitebsk* and the *Piano Variations*, probably his finest compositions of this period, illustrate this trend. In a way, even the *Short Symphony* of 1933 did not disrupt this trend: both Serge Koussevitzky and Leopold Stokowski canceled scheduled performances in 1934, convinced the work's rhythmic difficulties precluded orchestral execution, and the work remains best known in Copland's arrangement for sextet.

The trajectory of Copland's career during the early Depression can thus be viewed--simplistically, but not inaccurately--as a large-scale movement away from the worlds of

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14. Cecil Michener Smith, "Copland's Hear Ye! Hear Ye!; Ibert's Ballet," *MM* 12/2 (January-February 1935): 86-89; Pollack, *Copland*, 293.

15. Pollack, *Copland*, 293, 296.

16. Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 236.

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bourgeois concerts and esoteric modernism, and toward a rapprochement with the broader American public. Copland expressed both this aim and its roots quite clearly in a letter he wrote to Carlos Chavez in August 1935:

> It becomes increasingly difficult for instance to have that sense that there is any public for our music--in any case, the public that can afford to pay for concerts is quite simply not interested. It's impossible to have one's music played (on the rare occasions when it is played) before a "dead" public without getting a feeling of isolation--which is so bad for an artist to have. In a period of such economic and general social tension music itself seems unimportant--at least to those middle class people who up to now have been our audiences.[17]

At the same time as Copland was bemoaning the lack of popular interest in cultivated (and especially modernist) composition, popular composer *extraordinaire* George Gershwin renewed his own attempts to bridge the gap between the popular and the cultivated. Gershwin was, of course, coming at the problem from the opposite direction as Copland, but just as Copland's jazz-inflected compositions of the 1920s showed his own awareness of American popular music, so Gershwin's forays into the concert hall with instrumental works like his *Concerto in F* and *An American in Paris* displayed his familiarity with modern composition, particularly French impressionism. Likewise, the formal innovations that characterized *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* represented clear departures from the traditional structure of the popular musical theatre. In each of these works, Gershwin complicated the issue of musical *genre*, combining elements of the cultivated and the vernacular to produce entertainments that were equally

17. Letter to Carlos Chavez, August 28, 1935, ACC.

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well- (or ill-) suited to performance in low- or high-art contexts. This pattern reached its culmination in 1935, with *Porgy and Bess*, which Gershwin called an American "folk opera."

This was not Gershwin's first foray into opera; he had earlier contributed the one-act *Blue Monday* to the *George White Scandals of 1922*. *Porgy*, however, was to be a full-length operatic work. Moreover, as the "folk opera" designation suggested, Gershwin considered *Porgy* an artistic synthesis of high and low culture. In fact, he wrote that he wanted *Porgy* to be an opera "of the melting pot of New York City, which is the symbolic and the actual blend of the native and immigrant strains."[18] In order to fully understand the musical and cultural world portrayed by *Porgy*, Gershwin traveled to Folly Island, South Carolina (outside of Charleston), where he composed most of the opera.[19]

Porgy announces its cultivated aspirations from the opening measures of the overture, which contains echoes of both the thematic content and the orchestration of the impressionist-influenced *An American in Paris*. It then unfolds as a fairly traditional scenic opera, complete with occasional recitative, *arioso* songs, and sweeping set-pieces. Larry Starr has also noted the presence, throughout the opera, of a variety of sophisticated unifying devices that operate on both musical and dramatic levels. Among these are Gershwin's large-scale harmonic plan and his occasional employment of "leitmotivs," both of which further distinguish *Porgy* from the popular musical theatre of the day.[20] But perhaps *Porgy's* dual inheritance--both opera and the popular musical theatre--was most clearly expressed in its subject matter. DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's libretto for *Porgy and Bess* was based on a DuBose Heyward play that had

18. Quoted in Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of 'Porgy and Bess'* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 70.

19. Alpert, *Life and Times of 'Porgy and Bess'*, 87.

20. Larry Starr, "Toward a Reevaluation of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*," *AM* 2/2 (Summer 1984): 29.

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been a huge success in the late 1920s; the play was in turn an adaptation of a novel, also by DuBose Heyward, that depicted the daily lives of poor African Americans living in the slums of Charleston, South Carolina. *Porgy*'s portrayal of the banal lives of the indigent suggests that the work may be considered an American example of *verismo*--or realist--opera. The libretto's distance from the popular stage is re-inforced by its general avoidance of broad humor; the dramatic tone is generally more subdued than was typical of the period's Broadway shows. In all, *Porgy* clearly bore the mark of Gershwin's familiarity with European opera: he had attended Berg's *Wozzeck* and was a fan of Italian opera.

However, for all of its European traits, *Porgy* remains a distinctly American work. Gershwin wrote that "[w]hen I think of a grand opera of my own, I simply cannot think in terms of Wagner or Verdi. I want, in turn, to be myself."[21] Thus, with the exception of occasional hints of French impressionism (as in the overture), the harmonic and melodic idioms throughout are reminiscent of Tin Pan Alley, and the opera's libretto and lyrics are unmistakably American, in terms of both language and subject matter. Unfortunately, *Porgy and Bess* is also marked as a truly American work by the extent to which it has been attended, since its initial run in 1935, by controversy over racial matters.

That such issues would arise is not at all surprising; indeed, one almost can not help but remark on the *chutzpah* shown by *Porgy*'s creators--all of whom were white--in collaborating on an opera about black ghetto life. Inevitably, the issues of dramatic authenticity and racial authority played central roles in the critical response to the opera, of which Virgil Thomson's *Modern Music* review was typical. Thomson called *Porgy* "an interesting example of what can be done by talent in spite of a bad set-up." He also

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21. Quoted in Alpert, *Life and Times of 'Porgy and Bess'*, 70. Gershwin apparently saw *Four Saints* and liked it, but his choice of American musical sources—not to mention the narrative style of his libretto—were vastly different. Alpert, *Life and Times of 'Porgy and Bess'*, 80.

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wrote that the opera "has power and vigor. Hence it is a more important event in America's artistic life than anything American the Met has ever done." However, Thomson criticized the "artificiality of the folk-lore," writing that *Porgy* "has about the same relation to Negro life as it is really lived and sung as have *Swanee River* and *Mighty lak' a rose*." Despite his dissatisfaction with the work's dramatic effectiveness and doubts about its musical authenticity, Thomson considered *Porgy* one of just four "little eminences on the flat horizon of American opera."[22] Loren Miller expressed similar complaints in *New Masses*, finding altogether too much emphasis on the "colorful aspects" of African-American life: "*Porgy and Bess* is being touted as the great American folk opera. It is not. It does not probe deeply enough into the life of the folk to deserve that title."[23]

Even more serious were the criticisms leveled by Duke Ellington in a published interview. Ellington's evaluation of the opera displayed an uncharacteristic harshness. Although he granted that the music was "grand," Ellington also felt that Gershwin "does not use the Negro musical idiom." He also agreed with his interviewer's statement that "an honest Negro musical play would have to contain social criticism," concluding that the same "can not be said for *Porgy and Bess*." The interviewer was even less charitable than Ellington, writing that "[The creators of *Porgy*] are totally lacking in social vision, and their art is phony."[24]

While many of these criticisms of *Porgy* were certainly legitimate, they all start from a premise that may not be entirely fair: that Gershwin intended his opera to be broadly

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22. Interestingly, Thomson also counted *Four Saints in Three Acts* among these eminences. Thomson, "George Gershwin," *MM* 13/1 (November--December 1935): 13-19.

23. Loren Miller, "'Porgy and Bess' and 'Mulatto,'" *NM* 17/6 (January 5, 1936): 30.

24. Edward Morrow, "Duke Ellington On Gershwin's *Porgy*," reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 116-17; originally published in *New Theatre*, December 1935.

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representative of African-American life and music, rather than one possible interpretation of the subject. Larry Starr, writing with the benefit of a half-century's perspective, calls *Porgy* "a pure and compelling *human* drama, whose implications were restricted to no single race or ethnic group, and which was built around thoroughly involving, complicated, and distinct personalities." In Starr's view, "*Porgy and Bess* is an opera about black people, not an opera about '*the* black people,' if indeed there could even be such a thing, just as *Wozzeck*, another opera about poor and uneducated people . . . is in no sense about '*the white people*.'"[25] Moreover, Gershwin's importation of working-class African-American characters onto the opera stage was in and of itself a progressive act. Recognizing this neglected aspect of *Porgy*, Robert Cantwell has suggested that "in the blacked-up pastoral allegory there were overtones of 1930s class conflict: Sportin' Life's meretricious polish--'I'll buy you the swellest mansion on upper Fifth Avenue'--smacked of the Filthy Rich, while the crippled Porgy, who must roll himself around on a goat cart, echoed a familiar depression-era streetcorner figure, also with 'plenty of nothin', on a wheeled platform, holding out a tin cup."[26]

Despite all of its dramaturgical flaws and sticky racial issues, *Porgy and Bess* is a seminal text in American culture. Gershwin was not the most subtle or insightful folklorist, but almost seven decades after its premiere, *Porgy* has indeed become a "folk opera," as songs like "It Ain't Necessarily So" and especially "Summertime" have left the opera house and the printed page and become integral parts of the American musical canon, performed by artists ranging from Miles Davis and John Coltrane to Janis Joplin and Prince.

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25. Starr, "Toward a Reevaluation," 26.

26. Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 67.

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Americans and Agit-prop

Within the Collective, many members of which had previously expressed an unambiguous disdain for America's vernacular musical culture, a new interest in popular idioms came to the fore during 1934 and 1935. This was especially true for Marc Blitzstein, whose political vision remained clearly focused even as his musical style evolved. Blitzstein's continued involvement in radical politics caused him some trouble in the autumn of 1934, as a three-month holiday in Europe was rudely interrupted when he and his wife, writer Eva Goldbeck, were deported from Belgium to France for attending a Communist meeting in Brussels. The balance of the couple's vacation was uneventful, at least from a jurisprudential point of view, and on returning to the United States Blitzstein became involved in several disparate projects that showed him to be at a musical crossroads: in a period of about six months, Blitzstein completed three agit-prop pieces that clearly showcase the crystallization of his own distinctive, mature style.

The first work was a cantata titled *Workers' Kids of the World!*, which Blitzstein had begun the previous summer. Like *The Condemned, Workers' Kids* was never published or performed. Although the minutes of a Composers Collective meeting from late March 1935 show that the work was intended to be performed on a Composers Collective program at the New School that May, the piece never made it onto the final program. The shortcomings of *Workers' Kids* were identical to those of *The Condemned*: the didactic proletarianism of the libretto rendered the work unsuitable for mainstream performance groups, and the difficulty of the score precluded performance by the leftist childrens choirs for which it was intended.[27]

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27. Although the authorship of the libretto for *Workers Kids* has not definitely been established, Carol Oja makes a convincing case that the text was by Blitzstein. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," *MQ* 73/4 (1989): 454; the details on the non-performance of *Workers' Kids* are in the CCN minutes of March 22, 1935, and the concert program "*Music Vanguard: A Critical Review* presents the Composers Collective of New York," May 12, 1935. Both can be found, along with other Collective-related material, in Box 7, File 6, of the Marc Blitzstein Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison, hereafter "MBC."

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By late spring 1935, however, Blitzstein had begun moving in a new musical direction. In "First of May" he set a text by Goldbeck, and although the lyrics were typical of Blitzstein's militant songs, the setting was a significant step forward for him. Carol Oja notes the presence of three traits that were to characterize Blitzstein's mature style: textural transparency, a greater simplicity of the harmonic idiom, and a new focus on melodic appeal.[28] This trend towards accessibility was even more pronounced in the song "Send for the Militia," Blitzstein's contribution to the topical theater revue *Parade*, almost all of the other songs for which were composed by Jerome Moross. Produced by New York's Theatre Guild, a drama cooperative, *Parade* included such acerbic numbers as "My Feet Are Firmly Planted on the Ground," which satirized the positions of "sensible" liberals; "The Last Jackass," a number on the unlikely (for musical theatre) subject of the governmental policy of destroying livestock and plowing fields under; and several attacks on the conservative Hearst press. A number of critics complained that the creators of *Parade* seemed to suffer from a basic confusion about whether to produce comic musical theatre or proletarian propaganda. Leftist critics, on the other hand, found *Parade* objectionably moderate. Nathaniel Buchwald, reviewing the show for *Daily Worker*, wrote that "It is obvious that the direction sought to soft pedal the tone of resentment against the follies of the New Deal and the forces of reaction." Audiences were similarly nonplussed, and the show lasted for just forty performances in late spring 1935.[29] Despite the commercial and critical failure of *Parade*, the experience was crucial for Blitzstein, for in "Send in the Militia," which further broadened the appeal of "First of May" by incorporating popular musical idioms, he finally found his mature voice: this

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28. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*," 457.

29. Nathaniel Buchwald, "Soft-pedalled Satire," *DW* 24 May 1935, 5.; Himelstein, *Drama*, 135-36; Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), 184-86.

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was the style that would stick, and the one in which he would make his most lasting contributions to American music.[30]

The most obvious influence on Blitzstein's new direction was provided by such Eisler compositions as "Forward, Not Forgetting," *Die Massnahme* and *Die Mutter*. From Eisler, Blitzstein learned how to combine unorthodox and modernist musical touches with popular appeal in the service of political messages. In "First of May" and especially "Send in the Militia," Blitzstein offers his own Broadway-inflected take on Eisler's mass-song framework.[31]

It is surely no coincidence that Blitzstein forged his new style during the spring of 1935, while Eisler was enjoying his first visit to the United States. Eisler was preceded by his songs "Comintern" and "United Front," his formidable musical pedigree, and a reputation that was lovingly burnished by the leftist press.[32] Eisler embarked on a lecture tour, which opened at New York's Mecca Temple on 2 March and eventually took him to over fifty towns across the country. Apparently, the musical welcome Eisler received at Mecca Temple was not what its organizers would have wished: although Pettis provided a respectful review of the event in *New Masses*, Seeger's assessment in *Daily Worker* was much harsher, finding fault with the contributions of the Theatre Collective and complaining of "the glaring mismanagement of the orchestral and choral part of the program." Seeger also took the opportunity to decry "the anarchy in the music

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30. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's," 457.

31. For a detailed discussion of Blitzstein's developing "mass-song" idiom see Oja, "Marc Blitzstein", 449-50.

32. See for example Ashley Pettis, "Eisler, Maker of Red Songs" *NM* 16/9 (February 26, 1935): 18-19; Jacob Schaefer, "The Music of Hanns Eisler," *DW* 18 April 1935, 5; Joe Foster, "Hanns Eisler: Revolutionary Composer," *DW* 1 March 1935, 5.

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movement in New York, which has been disturbing us more and more during the last year."[33]

Nevertheless, Eisler's own reputation among the left remained beyond reproach, and the tour on the whole was a huge success, further cementing his reputation as the preeminent composer of mass music. In addition to speaking, Eisler often performed his own music, accompanying singer Mordecai Bauman in many recitals. By and large, audiences were both sizable and supportive; receptions were warm across the country. In late April, Eisler returned to New York. There he was treated to a concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music that Seeger, unwilling to let the events of 2 March lie, termed "[t]he kind of concert that SHOULD have greeted Hanns Eisler at Mecca Temple on March 2nd." Seeger singled out the Brooklyn Arbeiter Saengerchor and Adohmyan's New Singers for special praise, citing their admirable "rhythmic precision."[34]

Following the concert, Eisler returned to Europe for the summer--he would direct the International Olympiad of Workers' Music in Strasbourg that June--but he was back in the United States again in September, teaching composition and lecturing on modern music at the New School.[35] The Friends of the Downtown Music School celebrated his arrival with a tribute concert, once again confirming his iconic status among the New York left. The only sour note sounded in Ada Stone's *Daily Worker* review of the event is her complaint that "there was a sad lack in the absence of singing by the entire group present." For her, the program, which included performances by Bauman and Eisler of "In Praise of Learning" and "United Front," was too genteel in its format, a problem that

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33. Carl Sands, "Concert and Reception for Hanns Eisler," *DW* 6 March 1935, 5; Ashley Pettis, "The Eisler Concert," *NM* 15/10 (March 12, 1935): 27. Seeger's unhappiness continued to fester, as evidenced by several references in the notes of Composers Collective meetings from the spring of 1935. See MBC.

34. Carl Sands, "Eisler Farewell Concert Highly Successful Event," *DW* 23 April 1935, 5.

35. On Eisler in Europe, see "An Interview with Hanns Eisler," *NM* 17/3 (October 15, 1935): 27. Eisler was joined on the New School faculty by the German composer Ernst Toch. Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 102.

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resulted in the unfortunate situation in which "the audience, though several times on the verge of spontaneously joining in, was not encouraged, and this was a regrettable waste of a fine opportunity for giving concrete and satisfying expression to collective revolutionary fervor."[36]

Two months later, the Theatre Union presented the first American production of Brecht and Eisler's *Die Mutter*(*The Mother*) in translation at New York's Civic Repertory Theatre. Based on a Gorky book about unrest among Russian workers immediately before the abortive revolt of 1905, the Brecht/Eisler version was written in 1930-1931 and premiered in Berlin in January 1932. Following the work's American premiere, critics in *The Nation* and *New Masses* had very favorable things to say about both Brecht's text and Eisler's music. However, both writers expressed reservations regarding the Theatre Union's production. Even *Daily Worker* reviewer M. J. Olgin, who wrote that the "substance of the play is of a nature to keep worker audiences spellbound," had to concede that "[t]he production showed quite frequently a lack of unity of style [which] weakened the [play's] effect." Brecht, who had journeyed to New York to see the production, was even more critical, unimpressed not only with the English translation, but also with the Theatre Union's staging and sets. Apparently Brecht's complaints were well-founded, as the Union was almost completely unfamiliar with epic theater and the *Verfremdungseffekt*.[37] Nevertheless, Olgin did concede that *Mother* possessed "moments of unusual artistic height." Among these moments were Eisler's songs, which included the well-known "United Front" (see example 2.2, p. 64). Olgin wrote that Eisler's songs "ha[ve] the quality of strength, courage, optimism, fighting determination . . . It is a pity

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36. Ada Stone, "World of Music: Reception to Eisler," *DW* October 25, 1935, 5.

37. In fact, as Frederic Ewen notes, the Theatre Union was particularly unsuited for *Mother*, having been most influenced by Soviet naturalism, the virtual opposite of epic theatre. See Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 316.

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that we do not have more of these songs in the production."[38] In April 1933, New York audiences had shown a complete lack of interest in the American debut of the Brecht/Weill collaboration *Threepenny Opera*, which ran for only twelve performances.[39] Apparently, the audience for German agit-prop theatre had not grown significantly over the intervening period, and *Mother* ran for only thirty-six performances.

However, Eisler's ideas had taken hold with Blitzstein and many of his colleagues on the left, helped in part by the former's published essays. In the spring of 1935--just as Eisler was leaving for his summer in Europe--*Modern Music* published his "Reflections on the Future of the Composer." The article is actually more of a sustained argument than its casual title would suggest. In it, Eisler addressed the "[l]amentable" fact that "in an age which has applied new principles of work and thought to industry, medicine, chemistry, physics, sociology and political economy, music is still practised in a completely antiquated manner, long discarded in other fields." According to Eisler, this "crisis in music has been created by the general crisis in society. In music it appears definitely as a crisis in the technic of composition, which has succeeded in completely isolating modern music from life. The modern composer has become a parasite, he is supported by private connoisseurs and the benevolence of a few wealthy people, and he produces no sensible work."[40]

Eisler's argument rested on his assertion that "the technical standards of the modern composer have deteriorated. Instead of originality we find, even in the best of them, mannerisms. Instead of style, imitation. . . . Anyone who studies a so-called polyphonic

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38. M. J. Olgin, "*MOTHER:* The Theatre Union's New Play" *DW* 22 November 1935, 5. See also "The Theater Union Produces 'Mother'," *NM* 17/10 (December 3, 1935): 27; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Black Bread and a Circus," *The Nation* 141/362 (December 4, 1935): 659-60.

39. Himelstein, *Drama*, 188.

40. Hans [*sic*] Eisler, "Reflections on the Future of the Composer" *MM* 12/4 (May-June 1935): 181.

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work of any gifted young composer will find little counterpoint, but only the imitation of counterpoint, or certain contrapuntal affectations."[41] This insistence on the importance of craft and technique--perhaps a legacy of Eisler's studies with Schoenberg--revealed a fundamentally conventional view of the compositional process. Similarly, his statement that "the crisis in music is the result primarily of the development of technical devices" was emblematic of a growing trend on the American left, as the Soviet celebration of speed and technology gave way to a pastoral, communal vision of American proletarianism. This particular strain of Americanism was an important component of the left's advocacy of folk culture, and it was most famously exemplified by the regionalist paintings of artists like Grant Wood and especially Thomas Hart Benton, who, as we have already seen, was instrumental in introducing Charles Seeger to American folk music.[42]

Nevertheless, the more modernist Soviet aesthetic also continued to fascinate the New York radicals, as demonstrated by the critical reception, in late 1934, of the American premieres of portions of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk*. A political opera with a score composed in the sardonic high-modernist vein popular in the early 1930's (the opera was completed in 1932 and successfully premiered in Leningrad and Moscow in early 1934), *Lady Macbeth* provided Americans with a glimpse of the genuine, Communist-approved version of proletarian music-drama.[43] The leftist press's reaction to Shostakovich's work can perhaps best be illustrated by

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41. Eisler, "Reflections on the Future of the Composer," 181.

42. For more on Benton, including a brief discussion of his embrace of Marxist politics in the 1920s, and his subsequent rejection of the same, see Levin and Tick, *Aaron Copland's America*, 48-49. On the deep roots of the tension between technology and nature in American culture, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

43. On the Soviet press's laudatory initial reception of the work, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The *Lady Macbeth* Affair: Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans," in Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 184-87.

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comparing two *Daily Worker* articles published by Seeger within the space of two weeks. In the first, "On Opera," Seeger had written that "[t]he question whether the workers of America should want or should be encouraged to want opera (as it is known at present) is even more debatable [than whether they want opera houses.]" Asserting that "Of all the vehicles for bourgeois propaganda, none is more typical and few more powerful than grand opera," Seeger warned that "[t]he sugar pill" that made this propaganda palatable was the opera score. Although it was not yet closed, the case against opera seemed to be pretty well settled in Seeger's mind.[44]

But on 28 November, under the title "Shostakovich's Opera Receives Ovation," Seeger favorably compared *Lady Macbeth* to Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and *Petrouchka*. The New York Philharmonic's performance of two *entr' actes* from the opera the previous week persuaded Seeger to write that "Shostakovich is perhaps the most promising young composer of our day." Of course, there was an obligatory nod to Shostakovich's exemplary musical proletarianism: "[H]e says he has and actually shows that he has a sense of the social function of music!" But what is so striking about this particular review is Seeger's palpable excitement about Shostakovich's music, as opposed to his Soviet citizenship: "[The second *entr' acte*] is a magnificent composition, sharp, hard, fast like the Hopak, strongly in the spirit of Moussorgsky, but full of originality and more up to date than the earlier entr' acte." Seeger also eagerly awaited the opera's New York premiere in February 1935.[45]

In anticipation of the event, *Modern Music* published a brief essay on the opera written by Shostakovich himself. The composer asserted his "belief that in opera music should play the principal and the deciding role," insisting that "[o]pera is above all a vocal production and singers should occupy themselves with their real duty--that is, to

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44. Carl Sands, "On Opera," *DW* 15 November 1934, 5.

45. Carl Sands, "Shostakovich's Opera Receives Ovation," *DW* 28 November 1934, 5. *Lady Macbeth's* American premiere took place in Cleveland on 31 January 1935.

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sing, and not speak[,] recite, or intone." Finally, Shostakovich informed his readers that *Lady Macbeth* "is written from first to last note upon a symphonic form; the orchestra must therefore never be reduced to a mere accompaniment."[46]

This formulation, with its emphasis on musical expression over political and ideological instruction, could easily have seemed too lukewarm to the more zealous elements of the leftist press. But Ashley Pettis's glowing review in *New Masses* included the following tribute: "Shostakovich's musical investiture of this drama is assuredly an unique achievement in operatic history. Without recourse to mechanical formulae . . . yet at the same time preserving organic unity, he has heightened the various emotions of the characters as well as the dramatic situations in an exceedingly powerful, convincing manner. He has managed to do this by utilization of *appropriate music expression* which results in a remarkable realism--one without parallel in our lyric theatre." Seeger, terming the opera "brilliant," chose not even to sing its praises directly, but instead devoted two articles to a gleeful dissection of the music critics from New York's major papers, all of whom had written unfavorably of the piece.[47] The verdict from the mainstream leftist publications *New Republic* and *The Nation* was a divided one. Paul Rosenfeld, writing in the former, was not impressed with either the libretto or Shostakovich's score, while Kenneth Burke, writing in the latter, described "sights and sounds of a highly intelligent order . . . written with a confidence which kept a large audience constantly engrossed."[48] Finally, Virgil Thomson, in *Modern Music*, wrote that he "enjoyed the gusto with which the opera was written and performed. I enjoyed the

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46. Dmitri Shostakovich, "My Opera, Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk," *MM* 13/1 (November-December 1934): 23-29.

47. Ashley Pettis, "*Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*," *NM* 14/8 (February 19, 1935): 28; Carl Sands, "Shostakovich's Brilliant Opera And the New York Music Critics," *DW* 18 February 1935, 5; Carl Sands, "Shostakovich and the Critics," *DW* 19 February 1935, 5.

48. Paul Rosenfeld, "The Shostakovich Opera," *New Republic* 82/1055 (February 20, 1935): 45-46; Kenneth Burke, "What Shostakovitch Adds," *The Nation* 140/3633 (February 20, 1935): 230.

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freshness, the liveliness, the terrific gaiety of it all, the vividness of its musical description, the healthy humanity of its sentiment." Thomson conceded that "[i]t is an early work, harsh and green and a little indigestible. But there is a kind of passionate objectivity in it and a kind of idealistic purity that cannot be faked or learned."[49]

Regardless of the content of the various reviews, though, the mere fact that the opera was receiving so much coverage from the mainstream press must have been heartening to the circle of composers around the Collective, who had so far proven incapable of expanding their impact beyond their own members and a few supporters of modern music generally. Believing that proletarian music was nearing a critical mass of acceptance and quality in America, Pettis wrote in early 1935 that "a new order in music is arising to take the place of [the] old music world which is collapsing as surely as is the economic system which has nurtured it."[50]

Collective Unity

This almost giddy sense of optimism produced a flurry of activity on the musical left. Encouraged by the examples of performing groups like Adohmyan's New Singers and the Freiheit Mandolin Orchestra, musicians laid the groundwork for a full proletarian orchestra. There was also an increased emphasis placed on proletarian music education. In a description reminiscent of his articles about Soviet music education, Ashley Pettis described the new Downtown Music School, recently established by the CPUSA: "Conducted by a group of musicians who are specialists in their respective fields, the curriculum will include: theory, music appreciation, choral singing, and instruction in piano, violin and other instruments. These classes have been planned with a view to

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49. Thomson, "Socialism at the Metropolitan" *MM* 12/3 (March-April 1935): 126. See also Elie Siegmeister and Amnon Balber, "Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth of Mzensk," *Music Vanguard* 1/2 (May-June 1935): 71-74.

50. Ashley Pettis, "Music" *NM* 14/1 (January 1, 1935): 43.

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practical work in the revolutionary movement. And there are to be special courses in music criticism from the Marxian viewpoint. Music history is to be studied with the historical, economic and political background taken into consideration."[51] Blitzstein was among the school's first faculty members, and he, Seeger, Copland, and other colleagues also continued their involvements with institutions including the New School and the Henry Street Settlement, as education remained a significant component of the left's mission.[52]

Music criticism also remained a significant focus for the group, which continued to publish reviews and essays in *Modern Music*, *New Masses*, and the *Daily Worker*. In an attempt to address the continued lack of any musical publication that was explicitly leftist, they also founded *Music Vanguard: A Critical Review*, which first appeared in the spring of 1935. The magazine's editorial board included Seeger, Adohmyan, Cowell, Siegmeister, and Max Margulis, an associate of the Collective and critic for the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. An introductory statement announced the aims of the new venture: "to interrelate diverse elements in the field of music itself, so that a clear and simple view of what may be called *the musical present* shall be within the range of every intelligent worker. We wish to do what we can toward the redintegration [*sic*] of music in the culture of the western world, so that it shall no longer stand as a mere side issue in the daily life of individuals nor as a minor factor in the great social developments of the day."[53]

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51. Carl Sands, "Concert Arranged to Build Workers' Orchestra in N.Y.," *DW* 8 May 1935, 7; Ashley Pettis: "A Music School for Workers," *NM* 14/3 (January 15, 1935): 28.

52. Carl Sands, "Music Division in the Workers School," *DW* 31 December 1934, 5. For more on the Workers School, see Marvin E. Gettleman, "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society," in *New Studies In the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, and George Snedeker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 261-80.

53. "Introduction" *Music Vanguard* 1/1 (March-April 1935): 1.

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The introduction noted that since "the masses" had been "[a]wakened by the phonograph, the radio and the sound-film to a sense of the cultural deprivation under which they have long existed, they need and demand, among other things, education in music." This demand could only be met by the dissemination of competent musicological writing, the essay continued. Before this could happen, though, "[musicology] needs to be rescued from the exclusively backward-looking attitude of the old-fashioned, historical method. There are values in the past that should not be allowed to perish; but these may be irrelevant or even pernicious to our minds unless their relation to the vastly more important values of making the music of today and tomorrow is correctly interpreted." The editors proposed to remedy this situation by addressing, in each issue, three different topical areas:

> 1. some aspect, technical, critical or biographical, of contemporary composition;
> 2. some phase of mass music--phonograph, radio, sound-film, or mass-song, amateur chorus, orchestra, band, etc.;
> 3. either, or both, an historical study comprising new material or revaluation of old; a comparative musicological study of folk, popular or other hybrid material, or of non-European music, primitive or of Oriental high cultures.[54]

Both the tone of the "Introduction" and the approach outlined therein thus promised a magazine that would moderate the ideological shrillness of most leftist music criticism. Eschewing Marxian screeds against the practices of the bourgeois musical world, *Music Vanguard* would express its radicalism by discussing music in the broadest possible context, illustrating the economic and social underpinnings of contemporary Western

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54. "Introduction," 1, 2.

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music by close investigation and comparison with other musical cultures. In theory, the magazine was to occupy a middle ground between the rigorous academic musicology of Charles Seeger and the strident proletarianism of his alter-ego Carl Sands. Delivering on this pledge, the first issue included, in addition to the introductory essay, a new installment of Lawrence Gellert's "Negro Songs of Protest," including a statement of the overall project's rationale; "A Note on Young Composers" by Copland; Eisler 's "History of the German Workers' Movement"; and Seeger's "Preface to All Linguistic Treatment of Music" (discussed in detail in the following chapter), an essay that expressed, more fully than anything else Seeger ever wrote, the underlying connections between his radical political views and his pathbreaking scholarship. The magazine continued to present a broad spectrum of left-inflected musicological writing in its second issue, which included an article by Cowell on "The Scientific Approach to Non-European Music"; "Bert" Brecht's "Notes on Translating Songs of Struggle"; four more songs from Gellert's collection; and a discussion of *Lady Macbeth* by Siegmeister and Amnon Balber. In the catholicity of its subject matter and the breadth of its cultural perspective, *Music Vanguard* seemed to offer a viable model for leftist musicology, one that was at once ideologically informed and intellectually rigorous. Sadly, these first two issues were the only numbers of *Music Vanguard* ever published.

During its brief existence, *Music Vanguard* also joined the Workers Music League in sponsoring scholarships to Eisler's classes at the New School, and, along with the New Theatre League, the magazine provided support for several programs of music composed by Collective members.[55] The period following the publication of *Workers Songbook No. 1* had been a busy one for the Collective, which had drawn up and approved formal organizational bylaws in February 1935. All the while, members continued to grapple with the problems of proletarian composition, and the results, on display in concerts

55. "Workers Music League," *DW* 6 October 1935, 7.

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throughout early 1935, seemed encouraging. Reviewing the Collective's first-ever concert, held 27 January at the John Reed Club, Margulis wrote that "the composers of the Collective demonstrated . . . that vitality and direction in music grow out of a clear revolutionary view." Although he felt that the song lyrics were largely "shoddy" and the purely instrumental works undistinguished, Margulis was deeply impressed with the vocal writing and craftsmanship evident in songs and choral pieces by Siegmeister, "Herbert Howe" (Herbert Haufrecht), George Maynard, "Sands" and others. He was particularly taken with new workers' rounds by Seeger and Siegmeister, and also praised "J. C. Richards" (Wallingford Riegger) and Siegmeister's arrangements of a Gellert "Negro Song" and a "Red Mongolian Song," respectively. Two subsequent programs were reviewed even more favorably, as Seeger and Robert Stebbins lauded the contributions of Adohmyan, Siegmeister, Norman Cazden, and "J. Fairbanks" (Henry Leland Clark), particularly their vocal works.[56] Significantly, almost all of the songs performed were new, and had not been included in the first *Workers Songbook*.

As Blitzstein had done, other members of the Collective began to find their mature "proletarian" musical voices. In general, these took two forms, both of them exemplified in the works of Siegmeister, who was fast becoming a leader in the movement. One of the youngest members of the Collective (he was born in 1909), the Brooklyn native boasted an impressive musical pedigree, having studied with Wallingford Riegger in Ithaca, New York; at Columbia University; and under Nadia Boulanger, with whom he was technically, but not politically, impressed. Like so many of his colleagues, Siegmeister was also highly articulate, publishing essays of cultural criticism in *Modern Monthly* as well a description of his trip to the Soviet Union in 1934, of which, citing the apparent success of modern composers, he wrote: "One has the inescapable feeling, in view of all the favorable conditions that have been established for musical composition

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56. Bylaws in MBC; Max Margulis, "Music," *NM* 16/10 (March 5, 1935): 27; Carl Sands, "World of Music," *DW* 23 February 1935, 7; Robert Stebbins, "Composers Collective," *DW* 16 May 1935, 5.

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that a great new art of music, far surpassing anything that has been created in the past is now in the process of foundation."[57] Siegmeister's first great success came with his setting of the Communist critic and ideologue Michael Gold's "Strange Funeral in Braddock." Premiered in March 1934, the song became very popular, as attested by Seeger, Margulis, and others. Although, as Seeger wrote, "Strange Funeral" was technically beyond the ability of the amateur performer, it was nevertheless "easy to listen to."[58]

Siegmeister's rising stature on New York's musical left was illustrated by a series of events in spring 1935. Planning a follow-up to the previous year's composition competition, the Collective mailed letters to fifty composers requesting that they submit settings of either Goldbeck's "First of May" or Robert Gessner's "May Day Song," to be judged by Eisler, among others; it was for this purpose that Blitzstein had composed his own setting of Goldbeck's text. The competition was a failure, as the judges soon decided that they had not allowed entrants sufficient time and officially announced that no prize would be awarded. However, in late April both *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* published Siegmeister's setting of "May Day Song," which had been written prior to the contest's announcement. Thus Siegmeister could be seen as almost a house composer for the Communist party's two leading publications. Indeed, the vogue for Siegmeister's mass-song style was sufficient to engender resentment among those who held a different view of musical proletarianism. In a letter announcing his withdrawal

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57. Carol J. Oja, "Composer with a Conscience: Elie Siegmeister in Profile," *AM* 6/2 (Summer 1988): 158-60; Elie Siegmeister, "Social Influences in Music," *Modern Monthly* 7/8 (September, 1933): 472-79; Siegmeister, "The Class Spirit in Modern Music," *Modern Monthly* 7/10 (November, 1933): 593-98; Siegmeister, "Musical Life in Soviet Russia," *NM* 13 (October 16, 1934): 28.

58. Carl Sands, "Workers Audience Applauds Gold's Poem Set to Music" *DW* 26 June 1934, 5; Margulis, "Music," 27. Siegmeister acknowledged the Ivesian qualities of "Strange Funeral," noting that Ives was a frequent topic of discussion in the meetings of the Young Composers Group. Ives's influence on this circle is further illustrated by Bernard Herrmann's performances of the composer's music and Copland's famous article on Ives's songs. See Oja, "Composer with a Conscience," 161-65; Aaron Copland, "One Hundred and Fourteen Songs," *MM* 11 (January-February 1934): 59-64.

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from the Collective, Irwin Heilner cited the popularity of the modernist proletarian style as one of his reasons for leaving: "The group appears to have unanimously accepted the extremely limited and one-sided conception of what the music and words of a mass song should be, as conceived by [Seeger], Siegmeister and Adohmyan. . . . it is obvious that there is no place in your organization for people . . . who write simple melodies to be sung by large groups of musically untrained workers."[59]

But Heilner's complaint was rather exaggerated. To begin with, even Siegmeister's *oeuvre* also included the eminently singable *Workers Songbook* rounds and arrangements of Gellert's "Negro Songs of Protest" series. More importantly, by early 1935 a number of composers had begun to forge a mass-song style that was simpler and more accessible than that displayed by Seeger and Siegmeister in the *Workers Songbook* and Copland in "Into the Streets." This style was, in large part, a product of the new interest in folk music displayed by the Collective's members. The fascination with American folk idioms was particularly evident in the work of one of the Collective's newest members, Earl Robinson. A graduate of the University of Washington, Robinson (1910-1991) had come to New York in May 1934 after several years of working at odd jobs, including a stint in a cruise ship orchestra. Within a few months of his arrival, Robinson had become an active member of the Young Communist League and its Workers Laboratory Theatre (WLT), for which he directed choral drama.[60] During the next year, he grew more involved in left-wing arts circles in New York, becoming an important member of the WLT's Shock Troupe. In addition to occasional appearances onstage, Robinson wrote songs for the group and gave singing classes. Robinson soon chose to concentrate his

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59. See Composers Collective minutes, 5 and 19 April 1935, MBC; Ashley Pettis, "Between Ourselves," *NM* 15 (April 30, 1935): 30; Elie Siegmeister and Robert Gessner, "A Song for May Day," *DW* 27 April 1935, 11; Elie Siegmeister and Robert Gessner, "May Day Song," *NM* 15/5 (April 30, 1935): 16-17; Irwin Heilner to Charles Seeger, 27 April 1935, MBC.

60. Earl Robinson and Eric A. Gordon, *Ballad of an American: The Autobiography of Earl Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 28-37.

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attentions on composition. This decision led him to enter a 1935 composition contest sponsored by the Downtown Music School. The competition judges, Blitzstein and Israel Citkowitz, awarded Robinson first prize: a year-long course of lessons with Copland. Robinson commenced his studies in September 1935, supplementing Copland's technical instruction with the ideological guidance provided at meetings of the Composers Collective, which Robinson had joined some time earlier in the year.

Through his various activities, Robinson became acquainted with Eisler's music, for which he later professed great admiration. Eisler's greatest contribution, in Robinson's view, was his insistence that revolutionary songs be musically appealing and accessible. As Robinson remembered, "[Eisler] would make a song that had some dissonance and quite a lot of power, when you played it with the piano part, but which could be taken out and sung."[61] In his own compositions from this period, Robinson adhered to the Eislerian model of singability, but while Blitzstein fused Eislerian agit-prop with American popular song, Robinson found his inspiration in folksong.

In this, Robinson was now joined by a preponderance of the Collective's members. The clearest evidence of the new importance of folk music to this circle comes in the music of *Workers Songbook No. 2*, which was published in the spring of 1935 (see appendix for Table of Contents). The different tone is apparent before one even looks at the music, from the foreword's list of the book's "particularly noteworthy" elements:

> 1) the publication, for the first time, of two original Negro songs of protest revealing the rising discontent and militancy of the oppressed Negro people; 2) songs dealing with the struggles for the United Front against war and fascism; 3) songs commemorating American class war heroes, fallen in battle (John Reed, Harry Sims, Sperry and Coundeorakis); 4) satirical songs in the American folk style aimed at the "best" personalities

61. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*," 453.

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> of American capitalism; 5) popular workers' songs from Germany . . . 6) outstanding fighting songs from the Soviet Union, Mongolian People's Republic and Red China.[62]

Unlike the first *Songbook*, which was comprised almost exclusively of new music by American composers, almost half of the selections in the new *Songbook* were either foreign or folk in their origins (several were both). Moreover, the book's original compositions clearly indicate a growing musical "party line" within the Collective: there is an almost unanimous emphasis on simplicity in both vocal settings and piano accompaniments. The new mass-song style was characterized by marchlike rhythms, homophonic textures, syllabic text-setting, conjunct melodies; and consonant harmonies. All of these qualities were closely identified by the members of the Collective with folk music.

It is therefore only natural that these traits were present in the folk-transcriptions of Elie Siegmeister and Wallingford Riegger (see example 4.2). Siegmeister (still employing the alias "L. E. Swift") contributed "I Went to Tlanta" and "Sistern and Brethren," both of them drawn from Gellert's researches, while Riegger, using the pseudonym "J. C. Richards," arranged "The Red Banner," a Mongolian folksong, and "Chinese Red Soldier's Song." Each of the four arrangements is rhythmically simple, syllabically set, harmonically consonant, predominantly homophonic, and set for four-part chorus. Except for textual clues and small harmonic hints—occasional bits of pentatonicism in Riegger's contributions, and blue notes in Siegmeister's--these songs are indistinguishable from many contemporary arrangements of Anglo-American folk-song.

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62. *Workers Songbook No. 2* (New York: Workers Music League, 1935).

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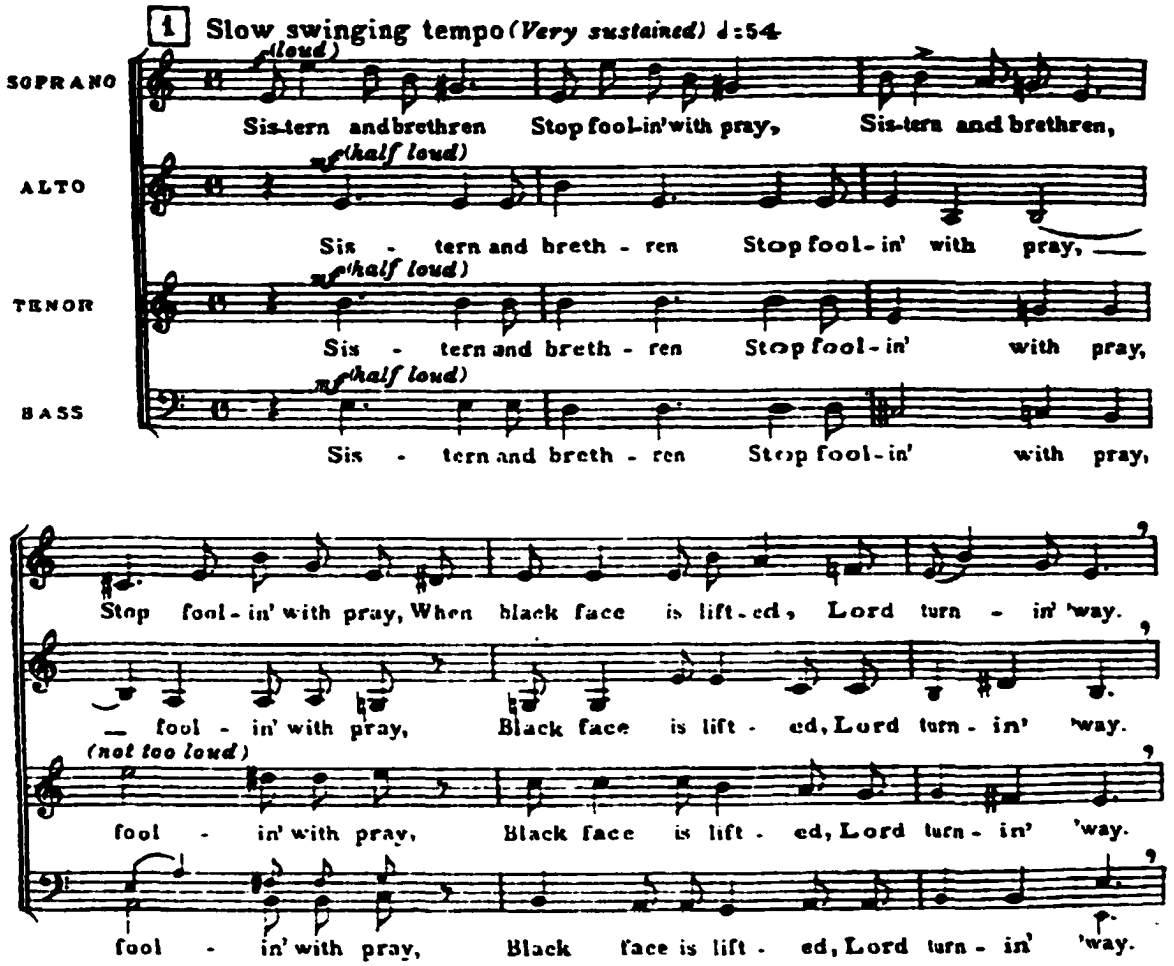
Example 4.2: (a) "Sistern and Brethren," arr. L. E. Swift (mm. 1-6)



Providing a veritable genealogy of the modern mass-song genre, *Workers Songbook No. 2* also included the major European influences on that style, German and Soviet composers. The former were represented by two Eisler songs, "Forward, We've Not Forgotten" and "Comintern," as well as Stefan Wolpe's "Ours Is the Future (Rote Soldaten)." The latter was represented by Davidenko's "The First Red Cavalry."

Equally noteworthy as the inclusion of these eight songs, none of which would have made it into the first *Songbook*, is the stylistic shift evident in the new songs contributed by Collective members. Gone are the late-romantic harmonies and rhythmic

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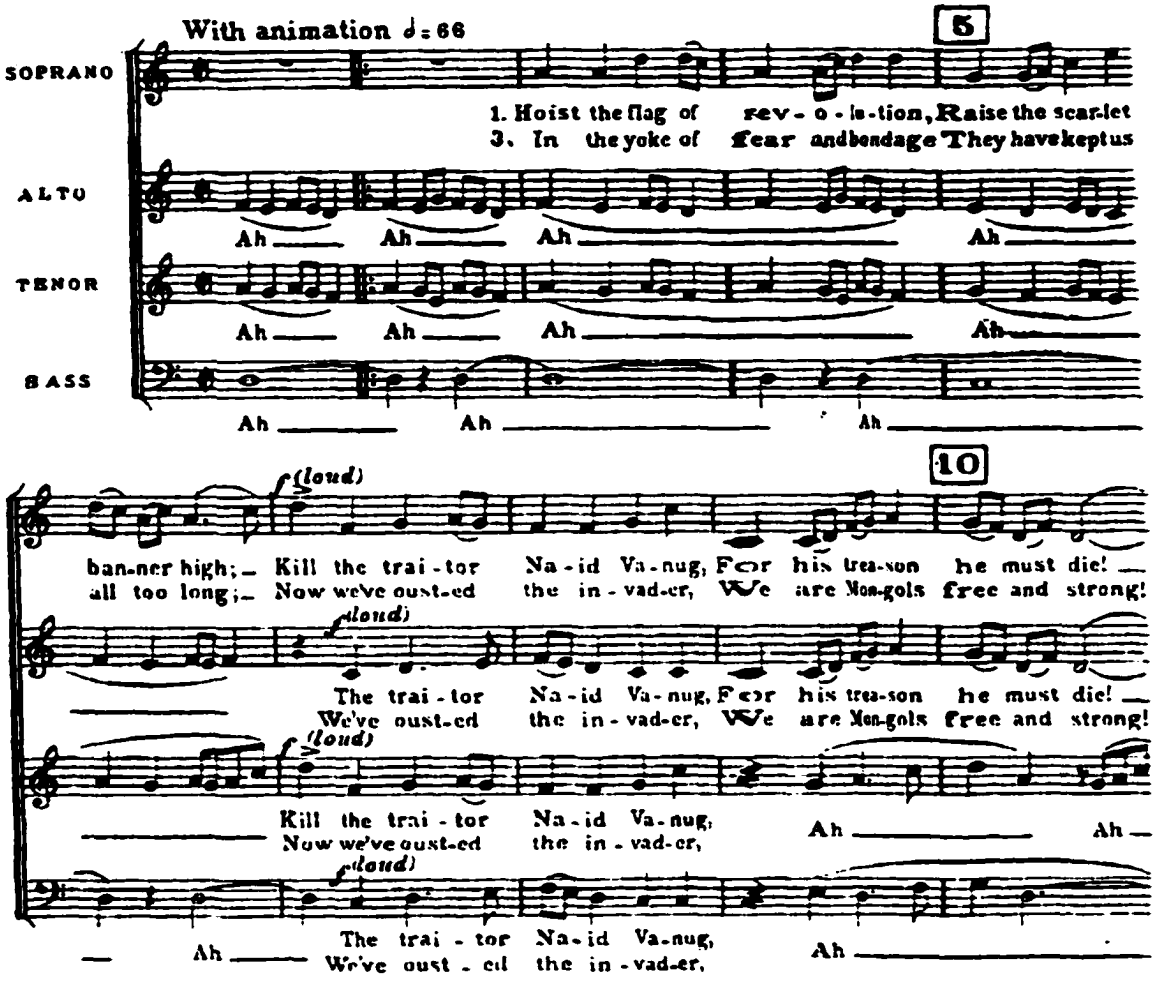
Example 4.2 (b) "The Red Banner," arr. J. C. Richards (mm. 1-11)



complexities of Jacob Schaeffer, as well as the metric shifts and chromaticism of Lahn Adohmyan. The second *Workers Songbook* contains no Schaeffer compositions, and Adohmyan's contributions show a new attention to the technical limitations of workers choruses, adopting the mass-song style that is the book's unifying musical thread. Copland's "Into the Streets May First," also included in the volume, is the most challenging song here, and it is the exception that proves the new musical rule.

Far more representative is "The Flying Squadron (A 'Theatre of Action' Song)," which is both entirely unmemorable and eminently singable. A collaboration between

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Robinson, Peter Martin, and Oskar Saul, the song was apparently intended for theatrical presentation, although it is hard to see any interesting dramatic possibilities in the score (see example 4.3) [63]. Robinson's other offering, "Song of the Pickets," is similarly undistinguished, if unobjectionable. This banality is the most glaring problem of the second *Songbook:* in striving for greater accessibility, several of the Collective's members composed songs that achieve simplicity at the expense of interest. Songs like Henry Leland Clarke's pseudonymous (he wrote as "J. Fairbanks") "United Front" and Adohmyan's "War Is Murder" are both singable and fairly pleasant, but they are also bland and uninteresting.

Two other Adohmyan songs, "The Ballad of Harry Sims" and the anti-lynching "Look Here Georgie!" are more successful from the standpoint of musical appeal, and both follow the mass-song style, with melodies that are simple and largely conjunct, syllabic text-setting, and straightforward rhythms. Like many of Eisler's songs, these two are occasionally dissonant, particularly in their piano accompaniments, but the dissonances are never so central to the songs as to render them unsingable by amateurs. Siegmeister's two songs for four-part *a cappella* chorus, "We Toil, We Work" and "We Want the World," are even more successful. "We Toil, We Work" is homophonic in texture and rhythmically simple, but several subtle harmonic modulations keep things interesting. Conversely, the texture and harmonies of "We Want the World" are consistently basic, but several metrical shifts add rhythmic variety.[64]

Perhaps in recognition that Siegmeister's rounds had been the most effective contributions to the first *Workers Songbook*, the second *Songbook* of 1935 concludes

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63. Words and music by Earl Robinson, Peter Martin, Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz. Copyright © 1934 (Renewed) by Music Sales Corporation. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

64. The differences between the two songs are reminiscent of Seeger's assertion in the previous year's "On Proletarian Music," that when writing for workers choruses, "if something unusual is done in one department it is wise to risk little in others at that time." Sands, "On Proletarian Music," 125.

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Example 4.3: Earl Robinson, et al., "The Flying Squadron" (mm. 39-42)

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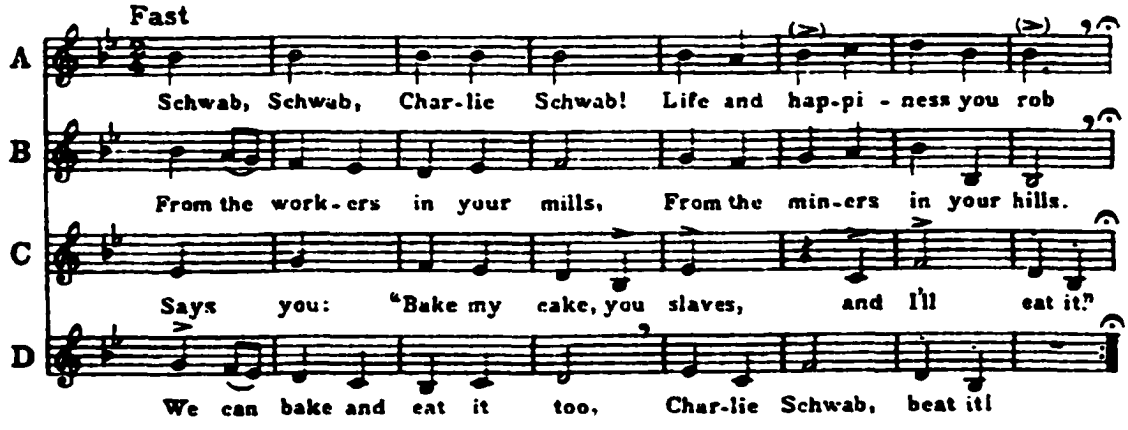
with three new rounds, one by Siegmeister and two by Seeger. Siegmeister's "The Three Brothers," which lambastes the Dupont family for war profiteering, shows the same light touch with voice exchanges and harmonic ingenuity that had characterized his first set of rounds. Seeger's approach was somewhat different, relying more on homophonic textures and block chords--this is particularly true of the four-part "Charlie Schwab"--but he still managed to combine musical playfulness, charm, and performability with agit-prop texts (see example 4.4).[65]

Example 4.4: Carl Sands , "Charlie Schwab"



Reviewing the second *Songbook* in the *Daily Worker*, Blitzstein wrote that it constituted "a remarkable advance over the first Song Book: in the number of works and composers, in the quality of the music, in the matter of policy," an assessment with which it is difficult to disagree.[66] The musical quality is higher on balance, and the vast majority of the songs are plausible vehicles for workers choruses. There is a stylistic

65. Decades later, Siegmeister wrote in a letter to Seeger that "musicology will not be complete without at least a juicy footnote on how the 'proletarians' were regaled with the medieval technique of 'Stimmtausch' cast in saucy, jazzy rhythms--of which we two were the principle exponents. *That's* one thing they shouldn't forget!" This is that footnote. Siegmeister to Seeger, 19 August 1977, CRSC.

66. Marc Blitzstein, "Second Workers' Song Book," *DW* 12 June 1935, 5.

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unity as well, resulting from the prevalence of the new mass-song style, which combined the lessons of Eislerian agit-prop and American folksong. Although some contributors had not yet figured out how to compose in this style while projecting their own voices, in the best selections the mass-song style seems like an organic compositional choice rather than a utilitarian one. The texts set are mostly in the same vein as those of the first book, with two notable differences: the martial language of texts like "Strife Song" and "Song to the Soldier" has largely been eliminated, replaced by the pacifistic "War Is Murder," and pleas for a "United Front." Further, when class warfare is declared, it is typically done in either a humorous fashion, through the mocking of "the 'best' personalities of American capitalism," or in an elegiac one, as in the "songs commemorating American class war heroes." In *Workers Songbook No. 2*, the composers of the Collective and their colleagues found a viable means of composing workers' songs, forging a new idiom out of a combination of German agit-prop and American folk song.

Justifiably proud of its progress, the Collective seems to have planned to mail the songbook to a number of distinguished musicians, as their notes include a mailing list that was apparently assembled for this purpose. The list is quite diverse, including many musicians who had little or no relation to the group. Among the intended recipients were modernist luminaries like George Antheil, Roger Sessions, Edgard Varèse, Walter Piston, Leo Ornstein, and Charles Ives; more conservative musicians, such as Randall Thompson, Douglas Moore, Leopold Mannes, Theodore Chanler, and Bernard Wagenaar; and others more difficult to classify, among them William Grant Still, Virgil Thomson, and George Gershwin. Whether the books were sent is unknown. Without reading too much into the Collective's plans for distribution, it would seem to indicate that the group's members believed that their creations were sufficiently high in quality to share with some of their most eminent peers.[67]

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67. List in MBC.

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Despite the Collective's apparent success, however, there was dissatisfaction within the group during this period. Minutes from the meeting of 10 May 1935 note that Blitzstein refused to review the Collective's concert on 12 May, and Seeger declined to write an advance story on the same subject (the minutes cryptically report that Seeger "admits to a feeling of personal squeamishness in the matter, feels the situation is equivocal at the moment"). There was also an ongoing controversy over the possibility of the Collective's officially joining the Pierre Degeyter Club, a proposal that was ultimately rejected. And Janet Barnes spoke of her desire to leave the group in tones reminiscent of Heilner's letter of resignation, claiming that she had "learned nothing in the time she has been here."[68]

However, Barnes ultimately decided to stay, and the Collective forged ahead: six months later, Seeger wrote a brief item in the *Daily Worker* announcing the assembly of a new volume. Intended as a follow-up to the out-of-print *Red Song Book*, and tentatively titled *Songs of Struggle*, the forthcoming songbook would be "new, larger and somewhat differently arranged." The book would consist entirely of four-part choral arrangements, for ease of performance in variety of formats. Most notable is the prospective list of contents: among the forty-eight songs "most likely of inclusion" are a number of folksongs, several previously published compositions by Collective members, and traditional selections like "The Internationale" and "Solidarity Forever." The list of eleven songs "suggested for inclusion" contains several less familiar items, such as proletarian versions of "Dixie" and "Go Down Moses" (both "with new words"). Finally, "there would be some easy choral numbers and a few of the 'Negro Songs of Protest,' collected by Lawrence Gellert." Seeger closed by soliciting "criticism and suggestions," but the book's contents appeared to be mostly decided. Although its impending publication was a potentially valuable contribution to workers' music, in a sense this

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68. Composers Collective minutes, 10 May 1935, MBC.

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book would represent an admission of defeat. Having been established "to further the composition of music for the workers of America," the Collective's members were becoming aware that this goal was redundant; the workers already had their own musical tradition, with which the Collective was increasingly familiar, and the Collective's best chance to be an effective part of the workers movement lay in the exploitation of this existing repertoire.[69]

Strength in Numbers

The desire to incorporate existing musical idioms into the new proletarian compositions, so clearly expressed in the *Workers Songbook No. 2* of 1935, stood in stark contrast with the rabid sectarianism that had prevailed on the left even one year earlier. In the early years of the Depression, radicals had seemed hopelessly divided against one another, and the prospect of a *rapprochement* with the broader culture was virtually unimaginable. A striking illustration of this schism had come in New York City in February 1934. Socialists and trade unions held an event at Madison Square Garden protesting Austria's repressive Dolfuss regime, but the meeting nearly ended in a riot, as Communists of a more radical stripe jeered at the protesters.[70] It seemed as if the various factions could not put aside their grievances long enough to join in common action against the growing menace of fascist Germany.

Recognizing that the rising fascist movements in Japan, Italy, and Germany represented the greatest threat to organized Communism throughout Europe and Asia, the Soviet government sought to put an end to such poisonous infighting. Stalin insisted that the competing groups should acknowledge their differences without allowing them to

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69. Carl Sands, "Music League Plans A New Book of Songs," *DW* 18 November 1935, 5.

70. The disruptive behavior of the Communists was a token of increasingly bitter factionalism within the Left. Following the fracas, *New Masses* published an "Open Letter" decrying the Communist tactics, signed by fellow-travelers (and some party members) including Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, James Rorty, Meyer Schapiro, and others. Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 299-300.

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detract from the natural alliances to which their shared goals should have led. Georgi Dimitroff, Secretary General of the International Communist Party, announced the tactical shift in his report to the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in August 1935: "We want to find a *common language* with the broadest masses for the purpose of struggling against the class enemy, to find ways of finally overcoming *the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard* from the masses of the proletariat and all other toilers, as well as of overcoming the fatal *isolation of the working class itself* from its natural allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against fascism."[71]

The resulting "Popular Front" policy encouraged integration in both ideological and aesthetic areas. Most significant was the rapprochement it affected between Communists, Socialists, and Liberals. The "big tent" idea of Popular Front Communism was most clearly embodied in CPUSA President Earl Browder's pamphlet title (and endlessly repeated slogan) "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism." In its rhetorical openness, the Popular Front provided doctrinal cover for those composers, like Robinson and Blitzstein, who wished to experiment with new, previously taboo sources (both folk and vernacular) in their proletarian compositions. Moreover, it suggested, for the first time, that the solution to the central problem that confronted the Collective and their peers--how to create a new culture, one that was both American and proletarian, popularly appealing and politically acceptable--was more likely to be found in American culture than in the cabarets of Weimar or the conservatories of Leningrad.

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71. Georgi Dimitroff, "The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International" in Dimitroff, *The United Front: The Struggle Against Fascism and War* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 92. Daniel Aaron has traced the roots of Comintern's United Front policy as far back as the Kharkov Conference of 1930, and points out that Hitler's ascension to the German chancellorship in March 1933 also brought forth calls for unity in the face of fascism. Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 155, 223.

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Chapter 5: The Proletarianness of the Folk
May 1934--November 1935 (Part II)

In the early 1930s, many intellectuals throughout the United States and Europe saw the Soviet Union as a model of modernity. Soviet society, in their view (encouraged by the Soviets themselves), was a paradigm of planning and efficiency. This sensibility also pervaded Soviet art and cultural theory. The Soviet conflation of humans with machines embodied in Meyerhold's "Biometrics" was in certain respects reminiscent of the works of such American modernists as Antheil, Carpenter, and Varèse.[1] In mid-Depression New York, an industrial and consumerist twist was being placed on this aestheticization of the machine, as demonstrated by a 1934 "Industrial Arts Exhibition" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. This was followed, in April 1935, by an exhibit at the newly opened Rockefeller Center, described by Warren I. Susman:

> The exposition proposed to exhibit "industry's present solution of the practical, artistic, and social needs of the average man." The exhibitors demonstrated through a series of model rooms new ideas for the ordinary house in which low cost and efficiency, labor-saving devices, and new ways of decoration were stressed. There were new ways of heating, air-conditioning for the home, new models of efficiency in bathrooms and kitchens . . . Moreover, Roy L. Gray, of Fort Madison, Iowa, who had several years before been chosen as the Average American, was selected to head a committee of one hundred

1. Aileen Kelly notes the unacknowledged debt that the avatars of Communist aesthetics owed, ironically enough, to the innovations of American industry, especially those of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. Kelly, "In the Promised Land," *New York Review of Books* 48/19 (November 29, 2001): 48. See also Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 462-64.

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> Average Americans to judge the show and present an award to the winning exhibitor.[2]

But of course not all Americans gloried in the mundane and the average, and many prominent thinkers resisted the aestheticization of industry. In his 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*, Lewis Mumford describes the effects that the technologies that define industrial America have on the lived experience. The most insidious invention, according to Mumford, was the clock, whether wielded by Frederick Winslow Taylor himself or simply by a line boss in a factory. When Mumford points out that "the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours, but of synchronizing the actions of men," the totalitarian implications of Taylorism are unmistakable. In elaborating on this point, Mumford compares the tyranny of the stopwatch, and of mechanically measured time generally, with the relative freedom of time defined by worksongs:

> To keep time was once a peculiar attribute of music: it gave industrial value to the workshop song or the tattoo or the chantey of the sailors tugging at a rope. But the mechanical clock is more pervasive and strict: it presides over the day from the hour of rising to the hour of rest. When one thinks of the day as an abstract span of time, one does not go to bed with the chickens on a winter's night: one invents wicks, chimneys, lamps, gaslights, electric lamps, so as to use all the hours belonging to the day.[3]

Just as recordings and broadcasts of music were throwing professional musicians out of work, the increasing regimentation of American industrial work eliminated even the

2. Susman, "Culture and Commitment," 189.

3. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1934), 14, 17.

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respite of worksong from the factory floor, in yet another manifestation of the dehumanization of everyday space that Dewey had described in *Art as Experience*.

The period between May 1934 and November 1935, in which these two visions--one offered by Dewey and Mumford, the other by Taylor and Meyerhold--vied for supremacy, was one of extremes. This was also true in New York's musical milieu, where the stylistic and ideological barriers that had separated cultivated music from folk music, radical activists from an activist government, and the popular from the elite, became suddenly permeable. Starting from points of almost maximal antagonism, the opposing sides gradually moved towards one another, all of them engaged in a common effort to define musical America.

Dreaming of Joe Hill

In retrospect, 1935 was a crucial year in the recognition of American folk music as a valuable resource, both within and without Communist Party circles. For instance, in that year the Socialist-affiliated Rand School published a *Rebel Songbook*, which included repertoire very like that of the Collective's planned song anthology. In fact, the book included a number of songs slated for publication in the *Songs of Struggle* volume, from "Casey Jones" and "Hold the Fort" to "O, Tortured and Broken in Prison," "Solidarity Forever," and the "Internationale."[4] Also that spring, Constance Rourke reviewed the second annual National Folk Festival, held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for the *New Republic*. Rourke was impressed with the vitality of the performances she saw there, commenting on the surprising currency of the folk tradition:

> With all the invasions of the radio, the movie, the newspaper, the integrity of traditional forms seems to have been kept almost intact in

4. *Rebel Song Book: Eighty-Seven Socialist and Labor Songs for Voice and Piano*, ed. Samuel H. Friedman (New York: Rand School Press, 1935).

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> many places, and, moreover, the younger generation seems often to possess a warm and instinctive sense of a genuine inheritance, to judge by the interest with which they have entered into many of the small preliminary festivals and have joined in the National Festival. This is not to say that they have produced no alterations. Those who are uninterested in a ballad or a dance unless it has a sixteenth-century prototype will object to these changes, yet surely they are a healthy sign.

Rourke concluded that, far from being either antiquarian or provincial, "folk expression as it exists among us today represents many essential living unities and may form a wide and fundamental kind of national unity."[5]

The left's renewed fascination with American folk culture sparked a revival of interest in Wobbly bard Joe Hill, the godfather of the nation's radical songsters.[6] By establishing a connection with the I. W. W., which was moribund by the time of the Depression, American Communists created for themselves a distinguished patrimony, one that carried weight in both the political and the cultural spheres. That Communists desired to establish such a lineage was apparent in a *New Masses* article of September, 1934, which addressed "The Wobbly in American Literature." Claiming that "[p]oetry to the Wobblies was usually conceived as a tool for direct action, as a naked 'weapon' in the most obvious sense of the word," Alan Calmer made special mention of Joe Hill's place in the movement. In discussing Hill, Calmer clearly articulated the two major points through which Communists saw themselves as heirs to the Wobbly tradition: "[Hill] was a genuine worker-poet, who wrote always as a worker rather than as a writer"; and "Hill

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5. Rourke, "The National Folk Festival" *New Republic* 63/1070 (June 5, 1935): 103.

6. *New Masses* had earlier excerpted John Dos Passos' "sketch" of Hill from his *1919*, as part of a series of such sketches. Dos Passos, "Joe Hill," *NM* 7/9 (July 1932): 19. Other figures profiled included Andrew Carnegie, William Jennings Bryan, and Wobbly leader Big Bill Haywood.

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was a literary martyr of the American proletariat. When he was framed and put up against a wall in Salt Lake City, he died 'game'." The "worker-poet" aspect of Hill's legacy conveniently squared with the persistent anti-intellectualism of the Communists, and his martyrdom in the American judicial system resonated with the ongoing Scottsboro case. Calmer's article also included a quotation from an unpublished poem by the young Communist poet Alfred Hayes, also the author of "Into the Streets May First." In "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Again," Hayes depicts a dream-conversation with the ghost of Joe Hill. One stanza reads: "'Joe Hill ain't dead,' he says to me,/'Joe Hill ain't never died,/Where workingmen are out on strike, Joe Hill is at their side.'" Just in case the Wobbly-Communist connection was not yet apparent, Calmer concluded his essay by reminding readers that although "[t]he Wobbly literary movement was buried long ago," it had indeed not died: "Its revolutionary heritage has passed on to the Communist men of letters."[7]

A little more than one year after Calmer's essay, the *Daily Worker* contributed to the nascent Joe Hill revival, running an article commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Hill's execution. "They Shot Joe Hill 20 Years Ago," by N. F., is little more than a summary of the circumstances leading up to Hill's death before a Utah firing squad. As we would expect, the writer assumes that Hill was innocent, avoiding any discussion of the ambiguities of the case. The story concludes by quoting from the message Hill wired to I. W. W. boss Big Bill Haywood shortly before the execution: "Don't waste any time in mourning. Organize." As in "Sacco, Vanzetti," a judicial martyr of the Left was invoked as a spur to new action.[8]

Intently searching for the new Joe Hill, New York's radicals were intrigued by the appearance, in the winter of 1934-35, of *Songs for American Workers*, published by the

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7. Alan Calmer, "The Wobbly in American Literature," *NM* 12 (September 18, 1934): 21, 22.

8. N.F., "They Shot Joe Hill 20 Years Ago," *DW* 20 November 1935, 5.

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Cleveland John Reed Club. The book contained new songs by folk-singers Ray and Linda Auville, and was reviewed by both Seeger and Siegmeister. Seeger found several aspects of the Auvilles' songs commendable. Writing that the mere fact of the book's existence was itself noteworthy, Seeger also drew encouragement from the presence of proletarian musicians outside of New York City, noting that the Auvilles employed "idioms of language and of music that are familiar to the general run of American[s] of all classes" and were so popular in Cleveland that "they are in the way of becoming current." Finally, he liked the versatility of the songs, pointing out that they could easily be performed in a variety of settings and by various performing forces.[9]

However, both he and Siegmeister were unimpressed with the Auvilles' music. Siegmeister (writing as "Swift") called the music

> the sort of thing one might have heard in some small movie-house about fifteen years ago, set to sentimental love-nest words. It has nothing in common with American folk-music, and, except for being twenty years too old, is typical Tin Pan Alley stuff. One has only to compare the 'Red Front' song of the Auvilles with the 'Red Front' of the German proletarian composer Eisler . . . to realize the strides that the Auvilles in particular, and proletarian music in general, have yet to make in this country.[10]

Seeger concurred, writing that "[t]he musical idiom is mostly 1890 or earlier. It would be counted out by too many young workers as old-fashioned and stodgy." Even worse,

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9. Carl Sands, "Songs by Auvilles Mark Step Ahead In Workers' Music," *DW* 15 January 1935, 5.

10. L. E. Swift, "The Auvilles' Songs," *NM* 14/6 (February 5, 1935): 28.

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"the melodies are not, even in this trite idiom, very good."[11] A quick look at one of the Auvilles' songs suggests that Seeger's evaluation, while harsh, was not unfair.

Seeger also addressed the idea that "if the workers sing and like certain songs, then these must on that account alone be good songs," calling this a "theory of opportunism," and concluding that "[t]he melodies of songs like these of the Auvilles are concentrated bourgeois propaganda of a peculiarly vicious sort." The basic problem, as Seeger saw it, was a confusion over "the relative importance of the music and of the words." While he considered the Auvilles' book a net positive because "for the present, the words are the more important vehicle for revolutionary content," he joined Siegmeister in suggesting that the Auvilles look to Eisler for musical guidance.[12] That this recommendation would have the secondary effect of distancing the Auvilles' music even farther from American folksong seems not to have occurred to either reviewer.

This is particularly surprising given both reviewers' involvement with such music. While Siegmeister's folk-related activities seem to have been confined, at least at this point, to his collaboration with Gellert, Seeger was much more deeply engaged. However, with the exception of Aunt Molly's appearances before the Collective, Seeger's experience with this material took place entirely outside the group's ambit. There were, of course, the Benton folk singalongs, but there was also his exposure to the most significant published sources of folksong collection: "I am not sure that everybody in the Collective knew of [Sandburg's *American Songbag*] until I told them about it and I am quite sure that none of them heard about [George Pullen] Jackson's book [*White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*] until I told them." Seeger learned of the latter

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11. Sands, "Songs by Auvilles," 5.

12. Sands, "Songs by Auvilles," 5.

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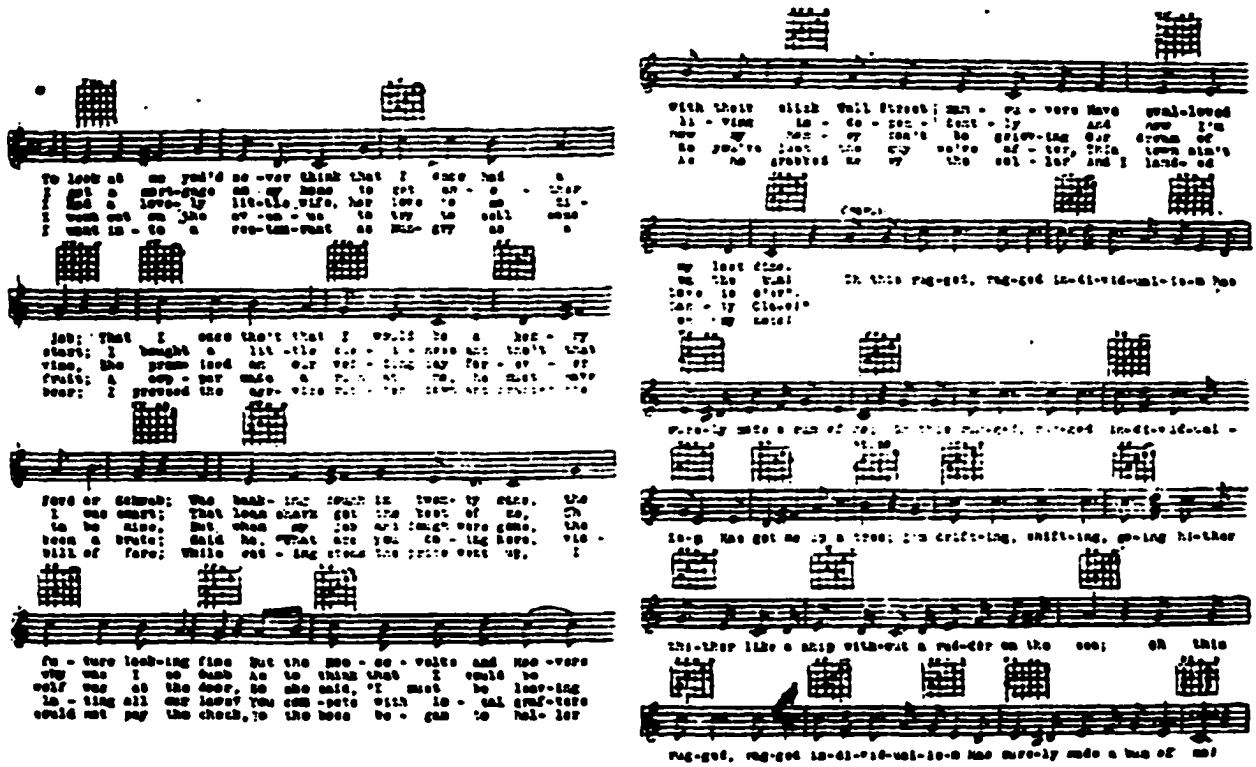
Example 5.1: Ray Auville, "Rugged, Ragged Individualism"[13]



through Benton, and the former through Ruth Crawford, who had provided a number of arrangements for Sandburg's book.[14]

In addition to these other experiences, Seeger had worked, since late 1933, with the most influential folksong collector of the period, John A. Lomax. A native Texan and Harvard graduate, Lomax had made his name with the publication, in 1910, of the collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Ballads*. The book was very successful, applauded most famously in a foreword by former President Theodore Roosevelt. In the early 1930s, Lomax was embarked on another major project, the collection *American Ballads*

13. *DW* 2 January 1936, 7. The Auvilles' original volume is not available at any collection I have searched, including the Library of Congress, the Tammiment Archive, or the NYPL Performing Arts Library.

14. Seeger to David King Dunaway, October 28, 1977, CRSC.

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and Folk Songs. Assisted by his son Alan, then an undergraduate at Harvard, Lomax spent much of the summer of 1933 visiting prisons and work gangs in the Deep South, searching for items to include in the new volume. They conducted their research in these locales because "[o]ur purpose was to find the Negro who had had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man. . . . the Negro's singing, under the influence of the idiom and custom of his white neighbors, is unconsciously yet surely changed by white influences. He is apt to sing as he thinks the whites wish him to sing, and, as a result, he quickly abandons the musical nuances that make his music what it is." The book was not intended as a collection of only African-American song, but because the Lomaxes were seeking folk song that was pure and untainted by modernity, the deeply isolated African-American prison population was an obvious place to start. As they wrote in the book's introduction, "[a] life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads."[15] Moreover, as Lawrence Levine writes, "[i]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, southern whites and blacks shared a large common stock of folk songs," so the convicts and laborers interviewed by the Lomaxes were in fact repositories of a repertoire that was more broadly representative than might be assumed.[16]

In October 1933, after a full summer of work, the Lomaxes traveled to New York for a meeting with their editors at Macmillan. They were greeted there by a group that also included Seeger and Henry Cowell. Seeger described the meeting: "Cowell and I were commissioned by Macmillan Company to pass judgement on John Lomax's book, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. Part of the ceremonies was a presentation to us of the material by John and Alan, who was a young man and extremely belligerent once he saw these two highbrow musicians who were going to pass [judgement] on something they

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15. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), xxx, xxvii.

16. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 195.

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knew nothing about. Cowell and I were tremendously enthusiastic. John's truculence was mollified, and even Alan came around eventually."[17] Following their collaboration on *American Ballads*, the three families maintained contact for decades, joining together in a search for the roots of American music.

The book was completed the following summer, and published in late 1934. The transcriptions reproduced therein were spare and without harmonizations for, as the Lomaxes noted, "even differences in noting down the tunes would probably arise should two musicians transcribe the same tune from a record." However, because the melodies presented were essentially composites, abstracted in some cases from several varying performances of the same song, the Lomaxes made no claim to textual authority. At any rate, *American Ballads* was not primarily intended as a scholarly tome; rather, the Lomaxes wrote of their "hope [that] it will be found a singing book." The organization of *American Ballads* was primarily thematic, and embraced a wide variety of topics, as illustrated by such section-headings as "Working on the Railroad," "The Levee Camp," "Songs From Southern Chain Gangs," "Negro Bad Men," "White Desperadoes," "Cocaine and Whiskey," "Songs of Childhood," "Vaqueros of the Southwest," "Cowboy Songs," "The Miner," "The Erie Canal," "White Spirituals," and "Negro Spirituals."[18]

Freely admitting that *American Ballads* was not in any way comprehensive, the Lomaxes explained their criteria for selection as follows: "[T]his collection represents what seems to the compilers the best among the available indigenous or semi-indigenous folk product, both word and tunes, found thus far in the United States, omitting only Indian songs." In *American Ballads*, they were "offer[ing] a composite photograph of what we and others, in field and forest, on mountain and plain, by the roadside and in the

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17. Charles Seeger, interviewed by Adelaide G. Tusler and Ann M. Briegleb, *Reminiscences of an American Musicologist* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1972), 243.

18. Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballad and Folk Songs*, xxxviii, xxxv, xvii-xxiv.

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cabin, on big cane or cotton plantations and in prison camp, have set down of the songs of the people--isolated groups, interested only in an art which they could immediately enjoy, and thus an art that reflected and made interesting their own customs, dramas, and dreams."[19] Acting on this organizing principle, the Lomaxes produced a seminal text in American cultural history. As Gene Bluestein writes, "The book announced the creation of a new canon of folksong for America, and its principles have been utilized by almost every succeeding editor of American folksong collections."[20]

At the time, however, reviewers were less sure of the book's virtues. The views of the eminent musicologist Carl Engel, who reviewed the book in *Musical Quarterly*, are fairly representative. Engel wrote that "the book of the Messrs. Lomax gives one at first the impression that America depends for its folk-song literature chiefly on 'Niggah' convicts and white 'bums.' This impression is not altogether pleasant. Also it is somewhat misleading. There is probably not another nation in the world that can match this singular array of lyric effusions on a variety of crimes and vices." Lest this seem too dismissive, Engel wrote that he

> ha[d] no intention of trying to minimize what the often deeply inspired Negro has contributed in poems and tunes of an inimitable quality. . . . But we are not entirely convinced that the Spirit of America, when it blossoms forth--as that of other nations flowers in the treasures of epic and lyric folk-poetry--necessarily finds its truest and most telling expression in the songs of black 'boys' who have exchanged their identity for a number and go by such picaresque nicknames as Iron Head, Clear Rock, Chin Shooter, Lead Belly, Mexico, Black Samson, Lightnin', Can't Make It, Butter Ball, Ing Shing, Scrap Iron, Bowlegs, Tight Eyes, Double Head, Bull Face, Log

19. Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads*, xxviii, xxxvi.

20. Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk*, 103.

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Wagon, Creepin' Jesus, Long Distance, Burn Down, Steam Shovel, Rat, Black Rider, Barrel House, and Spark Plug.

Of course, Engel recognized that these complaints were dictated in large measure by his own tastes. But he insisted that "[p]ersonal preferences no longer enter into the musical notation of the tunes," and here he found problems that had nothing to do with taste. Particularly troubling was the manifest "unsingability" of a number of transcriptions, resulting from problems that included the selection of difficult vocal registers to rhythmic notation that encouraged unidiomatic accent patterns. Despite all of these deficiencies, Engel's final verdict was more positive than not: "if this book is not always a 'singable' one, it is an eminently readable one, a remarkable storehouse of verses curiously alive with all the passions, aspirations, and despairs of mankind. . . . Lovers of 'human documents' will revel in Mr. Lomax's book."[21]

Although *American Ballads* was not explicitly ideological, its political implications were unmistakably leftist. John Lomax was a moderate liberal, and his son a firebreathing radical. Hence Bluestein's response to complaints that the book placed a disproportionate "emphasis on the songs of poor people, farmers, laborers, housewives, and Negro convicts": "What this criticism fails to see is the Lomaxes' frankly ideological position that the creation of folk art by the common man *ought* to be used as a justification of political democracy."[22]

The omission of this political aspect from most discussions of *American Ballads* has probably only enhanced the book's influence. Because they did not explicitly express their political views in their work, Benjamin Filene notes that the Lomaxes are generally "treated as preservationists who reclaimed an endangered folk-song heritage. But they

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21. C. E., "Views and Reviews," *MQ* 21/1 (January 1935): 108-09, 110, 112.

22. Gene Bluestein, "The Lomaxes' New Canon of American Folksong," *Texas Quarterly* 10 (Spring 1962): 58-59.

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were creators as much as caretakers of a tradition. As with most canons, the canon of American folk music that the Lomaxes defined says as much about their tastes and values as about the 'reality' they documented." Filene also suggests that "[p]erhaps the Lomaxes adopted a relatively moderate political perspective to secure the widest possible appeal for their work. Certainly they did believe their work had political significance, but they preferred to define its importance in broad, sweeping terms."[23] It is thus not too much of a stretch to say, with Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, that John Lomax and Sandburg--who shared his leftist inclinations--"were perhaps the two most important 'partisan intellectuals' who linked the populists of the nineteenth century to the people's songsters of the twentieth century."[24]

Race and the Folk: A Case Study

One significant manifestation of the Lomaxes' leftist politics was their racial progressivism. Their views on this matter were primarily characterized by inclusivity. While George Pullen Jackson's book concentrated on "White Spirituals" and Lawrence Gellert took up "Negro Songs," *American Ballads* presented songs by blacks, whites, creoles, and southwestern "Vaqueros." And in a time before political correctness, they acknowledged that "Indian songs" deserved to be classed among the best "available indigenous or semi-indigenous folk product[s]," omitting them on other (unspecified) grounds. This aspect of the book leads Bluestein to identify Emerson and Whitman as important ancestors of the Lomaxes, citing a shared ethos of uncompromising egalitarianism. Admittedly, John Lomax expressed a number of essentialist views on race, in generalizations like "the Negro is fond of singing. He is endowed by nature with

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23. Filene, "'Our Singing Country': John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past," *American Quarterly* 43/4 (December 1991): 604, 605, 609.

24. Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 61.

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a strong sense of rhythm."[25] While such statements may be objectionable to some, it is worth noting that the racial generalizations in Lomax's writing tended to come down, like this one, on the side of generalized praise. This is not to say that John Lomax did not also at times behave in a negative racist manner; as we shall see, he did. But when viewed in context, as a middle-class white man who hailed from late-nineteenth century Texas, he expressed racial attitudes that were, on the whole, remarkably progressive.

By mid-decade, the cause of racial justice had some progress among the American left. The ongoing Scottsboro affair likely contributed to this trend, as did many white Americans' increased ability to empathize with the economic victimization of African-Americans. Many liberals, taking a tack similar to that of the Lomaxes, advanced their views by praising the contributions African-Americans had made to the nation's culture as a whole. For example, a September 1935 *New Republic* article titled "What Has Africa Given America?" concluded that America had in fact received a great deal from Africa. In areas ranging from musical styles to speech patterns, and from "religious behavior" to southern cuisine, the author concluded that African influences pervaded the culture of the United States.[26]

The confluence, on the left, of an interest in folk culture with forward-looking racial politics converged in another of the Lomaxes' great contributions to American music: the promotion and recording of Huddie Ledbetter (1885-1949), better known as Leadbelly. The improbable story of Leadbelly's rise to fame was embellished even as it occurred. However, the true story, in addition to being quite entertaining in its own right, is also illustrative of several contradictions between theory and practice regarding race on the American left of the period.

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25. Bluestein, "The Lomaxes' New Canon," 55; John A. Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro," *MQ* 20/2 (April, 1934): 184.

26. Melville J. Herskovits, "What Has Africa Given America?," *New Republic* 84/1083 (September 4, 1935): 92-94.

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When the Lomaxes first encountered him in the summer of 1933, Leadbelly was an inmate at Angola State Prison Farm in Louisiana, where he was serving time for assault with intent to kill. As the Lomaxes soon learned, he had also previously been convicted of murder in Texas. Despite his frightening rap sheet, Leadbelly's impressive musicianship and vast repertoire were almost enough to convince the elder Lomax to petition for Leadbelly's release, but in the end Leadbelly remained in prison and Lomax promised to record him the next time he was in the area. The following summer, Lomax again traveled to the South, returning as planned to Angola and Leadbelly. Leadbelly once again proved a veritable treasure trove of folk and work songs, providing the Lomaxes with hours of material. He also recorded a pardon plea, in song form, for Governor O. K. Allen of Louisiana, a gambit that had supposedly succeeded once before, when he was released by Texas governor Pat Neff after serving just six-and-a-half years of a thirty-year sentence for murder.[27]

Unfortunately for Leadbelly, Governor Allen was not so easily swayed. Happily, there were other--albeit less exciting--ways to win early parole. When he was released from Angola on 1 August 1934, after serving just four-and-a-half years of a six-to-ten year sentence, the decision was a consequence of the "double good time" rule, a provision of Louisiana law allowing early release to prisoners who had served sufficient "good time."[28] Whether or not Leadbelly knew the true reason for his release, or whether he in fact believed that the combination of his own song and entreaties from Lomax had won the day, no one can say. For some time, Lomax continued to perpetuate the myth of his having played a central role in Leadbelly's salvation, and the story has become so widely accepted that, as Lomax biographer Nolan Porterfield writes, "after

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27. Leadbelly's own version of the story can be found in John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly "King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World," Long-Time Convict in the Penitentiaries of Texas and Louisiana* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 21.

28. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 117-21.

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more than half a century, the notion that 'Lomax got Leadbelly out of jail' continues to be a central element of Lomax-Leadbelly lore."[29] Regardless of the reason, Leadbelly had suddenly found himself a free man, or at any rate as free as a poor, black, ex-convict could be in the Deep South in the 1930s. He promptly decided to find Lomax, possibly to offer his thanks, certainly to seek employment as a sort of chauffeur.

Lomax was on his honeymoon when Leadbelly first tried to track him down, but the two connected before too long, meeting up in Marshall, Texas, on 24 September 1934. Leadbelly's arrival was fortuitously timed, for Alan had taken ill and was physically unable to endure the grueling journey planned by his father in search of new song material. Lomax was initially hesitant to take on a man twice convicted of violent crime, and he later recalled saying to Leadbelly, "If you sometime--when we are driving along a lonely road--decide that you are going to take my money and car, you need not stick [your] knife into me. Just tell me and I'll hand you my money, get out of the car, and let you drive on." [30] Leadbelly responded by professing his loyalty and his desire to both assist and protect Lomax. This was enough to convince Lomax, who hired Leadbelly to perform duties including driving, acting as valet, and scouring the towns through which they passed for new songs to record. Apart from a couple of minor incidents, the partnership was a fairly comfortable one for both parties, and Lomax soon conceived the idea of bringing Leadbelly north with him. While they were on the road, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* was published, and its reception was largely favorable. Lomax was thus well positioned to book performances for Leadbelly in reputable settings in the Northeast.

Leadbelly was willing to take his show on the road, so upon the conclusion of their song-collecting trip, he and the Lomaxes--Alan had joined up with the two en route--

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29. Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 330-31.

30. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 30.

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headed to Philadelphia, where Lomax planned to unveil Leadbelly at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. In what surely must have been one of the most entertaining presentations--and strangest juxtapositions--in the history of academic conferences, Leadbelly performed at an informal MLA social event (called a "smoker") on 28 December, sandwiched between English madrigals, informal addresses, and "songs and chanties." As Lomax later recalled the performance, "[Leadbelly's] singing and playing while seated on the top center of the banquet table at the smoker before a staid and dignified professorial audience smacked of sensationalism." The next day, he played and sang as part of a Comparative Literature discussion group. Not surprisingly, the ex-convict with the thick southern accent and the novel guitar sound was the talk of the conference, although his habit of passing a hat around after each performance was disconcerting to audiences both at the MLA and at a holiday tea at Bryn Mawr College, where he also performed.[31]

Flush with their success, Leadbelly and the Lomaxes set off for New York City, arriving there on New Year's Eve. Once there, Leadbelly's new career continued to progress at a breathtaking pace. He ushered in 1935 with a New Year's Day performance for a group of professors from Columbia and New York Universities. Two days later, the *Herald Tribune* featured an article profiling Leadbelly and the story of his acquaintance with Lomax. Leadbelly's success, while primarily due to his tremendous musical skills and abilities, was also a product of fortuitous timing: in 1932, the Paul Muni film *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, based on the true story of an innocent man caught up in the penal system, had been a popular success. The movie vividly portrayed the unfairness of American justice, making its audiences aware of the appalling conditions endured by those incarcerated in the Deep South, where chain gangs and hard labor remained the rule for many prisoners. Although the hero of *I Am a Fugitive* was

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31. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 45; Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 344.

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white, it was also common knowledge--reinforced by the Scottsboro affair--that American (especially southern) justice was particularly harsh for the nation's black citizens. Thus, while the mainstream press was predictably sensationalistic in its treatment of the Leadbelly story, the coverage was largely favorable, or at least morally neutral: after all, this was entertainment. On 11 January 1935, Leadbelly and John Lomax appeared--with Leadbelly performing--on CBS radio's *The March of Time*. Although the performance was surely overshadowed by the show's lead story, which focused on the ongoing trial of Bruno Hauptmann, the alleged kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby, Leadbelly was now reaching a national audience. Two months later, the *March of Time*'s newsreel division released its own version of Leadbelly's story in movie theaters across the nation. Continuing the trend of strange juxtapositions that had so far marked Leadbelly's career, this *March of Time* production led with the story of Hitler's rise to prominence, complete with a notoriously silly "reenactment" of the dictator relaxing at his retreat in the Bavarian Alps.[32]

On 20 January Leadbelly married his longtime lover Martha Promise in Wilton, Connecticut, where he and the Lomaxes had been living in the summer home of Macmillan editor Margaret Conklin and NYU professor of folklore and literature Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. Soon thereafter, Leadbelly went into a recording studio for the first time, producing a number of sides for the American Recording Corporation (ARC--later to become Columbia Records). Prior to the recording sessions, the radio feature, and the newsreel, Lomax had formalized an arrangement with Leadbelly. On 5 January, without any witnesses, the singer signed a management contract with Lomax. The terms were frankly exploitative. Under the agreement, John Lomax was named Leadbelly's sole agent and manager for the next five years, for which responsibilities he would net fifty

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32. The *Herald Tribune* article is reproduced, in full, in Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, 139-42; the script for Leadbelly's segment of the newsreel is reproduced in Herman Gebhard, "'March of Time' 1935: Leadbelly," *Living Blues* 30 (Nov.-Dec. 1976), 26.

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percent of Leadbelly's earnings. As if that was not bad enough, one month later a rider was added to the contract making Alan a partner in the deal, meaning that Leadbelly would receive just one out of every three dollars he earned. This agreement, and the patronizing attitude that it bespoke, became a central factor in the friction that grew to characterize the relationship between Lomax and Leadbelly. Equally bad was the living situation that obtained in Wilton, where Leadbelly and his wife were expected to perform all of the duties of domestic servants. In Lomax's words, "[Martha] and Lead Belly did all the work of the place, having quickly divided it between themselves--he the fire-maker, water-toter, washerman, car cleaner, snow shoveler, and dishwasher helper; she the cook, bed-maker, ironer, house-cleaner. As a matter of fact there was little labor for two active strong people. Lead Belly would perhaps have been happier had more physical labor been given him."[33]

This particular arrangement would seem to be sufficient grounds for dissatisfaction on Leadbelly's part, and yet when Lomax described the situation just one year later, he did not mention that Leadbelly may have had any possible grievance against him:

> Gradually Lead Belly's attitude began to change towards Alan and me. He gave grudging consent to meet engagements I had made for him. For days at a time Alan could get no stories or songs from him, and his refusals were sometimes gruff and unpleasant. He became less attentive to household duties; his cheerful good mornings grew rarer; his demands for extra money more frequent. . . . Whereas he had started the trip without a coat he now owned four winter suits and all accessories. In addition, our table was abundant, and he had the same home comforts as his two

33. In fact, Leadbelly ultimately threatened legal action against Lomax, some of it justified and some not. See Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*, 349, 365-67; see also Wolfe and Lornell, *Life and Legend*, 147; Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 53-54.

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> "bosses." He had money in his pocket, he had his Martha by, and he had his freedom. Yet he grew silent, remote, his face a gloomy mask.[34]

Even granting that Leadbelly's history of violence suggests some degree of emotional instability, a far more likely explanation for unhappiness would be Lomax's expectation that he continue to serve as a valet. This attitude must have been particularly galling since Leadbelly now had a career of his own; although Lomax was undoubtedly a valuable advocate, Leadbelly was the indispensable one in the relationship. He would almost surely have been able to find another manager, probably even one with previous managerial experience. But Lomax could not simply snap his fingers and produce another Leadbelly.

Despite the growing personal tensions, during the next two months Leadbelly and the Lomaxes recorded reels of material for the Library of Congress. Between recording sessions, Leadbelly performed at colleges throughout New England--including Lomax's *alma mater*, Harvard--captivating audiences with his gritty, authentic style and his songs of love and revenge, revelry and hard labor. But despite the almost universally warm reception of the crowds, Leadbelly was increasingly restless; his relationship with the elder Lomax continued to deteriorate, and Lomax had to rely more and more on Alan's mediation in dealing with Leadbelly. Throughout the tour, Leadbelly's behavior was erratic, and tensions reached a dangerous level. So, after a final performance on 20 March in Providence, Leadbelly collected the moneys due him from Lomax--which turned out to be significantly less than he had expected--and he and Martha caught a train out of New York City, heading back to Shreveport, Louisiana. Incredibly, he had only been out of prison for a little less than eight months, and in that brief time he had become a figure of national reputation.

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34. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 55.

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One noteworthy aspect of Leadbelly's meteoric rise was the lack of interest it attracted from the New York left. Indeed, far and away the most scathing words printed on the Lomax-Leadbelly collaboration appeared in *New Masses*, in a letter to the editor from Lawrence Gellert. Gellert vehemently objected to the selection and commentary on the "Negro Songs" included in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. He began by quoting from a letter by Lomax (but not addressed to Gellert): "Leadbelly is a nigger. In addition he is a killer. He tells the truth only accidentally." Gellert saw a connection between the racism of the letter and the selection of songs presented in *American Ballads:* "[Lomax] has included not one single song which reflects unmistakably the contemporary environment and could not just as well have been collected, ten, twenty or even fifty years back." Particularly disturbing to the author of the "Negro Songs of Protest" series was the absence of songs addressing the "savage brutality of the Law and the lynching mob" or "the new attitudes toward all that exemplified by . . . Angelo Herndon, Scottsboro Boys and other vital factors in the lives of the suppressed black masses."[35]

Lew Ney, the recipient of the Lomax letter in question, responded by distinguishing Leadbelly from Herndon and Scottsboro Boys: Leadbelly was indeed a convicted felon whose guilt had never been questioned, whereas the latter were believed to be innocent victims of a corrupt judicial system. However, this difference did not mean that Leadbelly, as a son of black sharecroppers from the Jim Crow South, could not be recruited to the progressive cause. Recognizing Leadbelly's potential symbolic value, Ney suggested that "we get together and make a rebel out of Leadbelly," wondering "How would it be to get him to use his voice in meetings for the Scottsboro Boys?" Gellert ignored the offer, responding that Lomax "embodie[d] the slave-master attitude intact." He implied that the reason that Lomax advocated for Leadbelly rather than for

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35. Lawrence Gellert, "Entertain Your Crowd," *NM* 13 (November 20, 1934): 19.

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Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys was precisely because the latter did not accept their subservient roles in American society. Of course, this notion completely failed to account for the fact that Lomax's support for Leadbelly was rooted entirely in musical concerns; if Herndon or the Scottsboro Boys had been talented musicians, Lomax might indeed have plead their cases as vociferously as he did Leadbelly's. But in Gellert's telling, John Lomax seemed an embodiment of American racial injustice.[36]

As we have seen, Gellert's interpretation was not entirely unwarranted. However, Gellert's letters were written before the signing of the contract and the servitude of Wilton, and although he accurately predicted that John Lomax's patrician racial attitude would be a defining characteristic of the partnership, the main thrust of his criticisms of Lomax concerned musical repertoire. Filene notes that "[u]nlike Gellert's collection, *American Ballads* shows the Lomaxes to be largely uninterested in songs that posit ways for African Americans to change the system that has caused them so much suffering."[37] However, to consider this a shortcoming, as Gellert did, is to complain that the Lomaxes undertook to write the book that they did, and it does not address *American Ballads* on its own terms. Gellert's complaints about repertoire were illustrative of an important element in the left's ongoing debate about the use of folk music: the inherent ambiguity of the concept of "folk music" itself. For instance, the mass-song style that defined the second *Workers Songbook* was explicitly derived from folk music. In the compositions of Robinson, Adohmyan, and the other Collective members, "folkness" was a set of musical characteristics, including stepwise melodies, simple harmonies, and regular rhythms. Likewise, the Lomaxes sought out informants who were untainted by popular musical idioms.

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36. Lew Ney, "A Southerner's Prejudices" and "Lawrence Gellert's reply," *NM* 13 (December 11, 1934): 21-22.

37. Filene, "'Our Singing Country,'" 604.

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Of course, "folk music" can also denote a specific body of repertoire. In this sense, a folk song is defined as such by its provenance. This definition of folk music, perhaps the most prevalent one in the early 1930s, typically embraces music that belongs to an organic oral tradition, often with no known author.[38] For the political purposes of the left, real folksongs originated in the working class, which set them in opposition to the cultivated music of the bourgeoisie. Such origins were doubly appropriate to a leftist construction of the folk because they defined folk music as a communal product.

One final way of defining folk music is as a particular performance practice. Here, perhaps more than in any other area, the tastes of the Lomaxes have had a lasting impact on American musical culture. They advocated a performance practice that was defined by a level of technical execution best described as amateurish. As a virtuoso guitarist and a polished and professional performer, Leadbelly was in some respects ill-suited to the Lomaxes' classification of folk-singer. But in comparing two recordings Leadbelly made of the song "Mister Tom Hughes' Town"--the first made in Angola on 1 July 1934, the second in early 1935 for ARC--Filene notes some significant changes in Leadbelly's performance practice: "the ARC recording smoothes out many of the jagged and jarring aspects of the original field recording. . . . The ARC version revises the tale by giving the narrator a sense of contrition by the end of the song. It adds completely new lyrics in which Leadbelly falls on his knees and begs his mother to forgive him for his past behavior."[39] In addition, Leadbelly's vocal style was more emotive and his guitar work more subdued in the commercial recordings.

Perhaps most notable are the different tempos Leadbelly takes. In the initial, Library of Congress recording of "Mr. Tom Hughes' Town," he maintains a tempo of between

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38. For an extended discussion of folklorists' disdain for non-oral or recorded transmission of stories & songs, especially with regard to African-American culture, see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 217-39.

39. Filene, "Our Singing Country," 614-15.

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112 and 120 beats per minute. For the ARC recording, however, Leadbelly begins his 30-second introduction, which includes the added lyrics to which Filene refers, at around 88 beats per minute. The body of the song starts at around 100 b. p. m., and by the end he has topped out at around 132 b. p. m. A similar pattern obtains in his two recordings of "You Can't Lose Me, Charlie." On the Library of Congress recording, the tempo stays between roughly 108 and 116 b. p. m., while the ARC version of the same song progresses from roughly 80 b. p. m. at its beginning to about 104 b. p. m. by its end. In each case, Leadbelly's initial tempos are slower in his commercial versions than in his archival ones, but the relative steadiness of the latter suggest that they may be his preferred tempos. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that his ultimate tempos in the more variable commercial recordings are closer to those of his Library of Congress versions than to the speeds at which the commercial recordings begin. It thus seems reasonable to assume that the initial tempos adopted in the ARC recordings were intentionally slowed down—another possible concession to their commercial nature.[40]

Of course, Leadbelly himself must bear a large measure of responsibility for such changes, but it is probably not a coincidence that the alterations in his style brought it more closely into line with the Lomaxes' own predispositions. It seems likely that, in the time between the recordings, Leadbelly, a consummate showman, recognized what it was that the Lomaxes most wanted from him stylistically and sought to provide it; paradoxically, he may have followed the exact same process of musical integration that they had so studiously claimed to have avoided in the foreword to *American Ballads*.[41]

Gellert ripped *American Ballads and Folk Songs* for its lack of topical material--implicitly charging that the book was unrepresentative, and thus presented an inauthentic

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40. All of these recordings are available on Leadbelly, *The Remaining ARC and Library of Congress Recordings* Volume 1: 1934-1935. Document Records DOCD-5591.

41. In an interview with the author, ethnomusicologist Henrietta Yurchenco, who produced Leadbelly's radio appearances on WNYC in the early 1940s, termed him a consummate professional, noting his meticulous approach to performance. Interview with Henrietta Yurchenco, September 26, 2000.

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version of the American folk tradition--and criticized Lomax's relationship with Leadbelly, but he completely neglected the issue of Leadbelly *qua* folk musician, an oversight that Ney had sought to address by suggesting the recruitment of Leadbelly. Gellert, like many of his peers, seemed to hold to the repertoire-based model of folk music, ignoring the fact that, while this particular body of music might in fact be inherently proletarian, so were its practitioners, including Leadbelly. Leadbelly would appear to have been uniquely well-suited to the part of a latter-day Joe Hill, for reasons including both his biography and his extensive repertoire of songs that would easily have qualified for Gellert's series. A case could be made that Gellert's racial attitudes were just as inflexible as Lomax's, albeit far less objectionable: without knowing any but the barest facts of Leadbelly's biography, and having had absolutely no experience of his musicianship, Gellert wrote him off as little better than an Uncle Tom, more because of what he was not--a committed radical or a clear-cut victim of the judicial system--than for what he was. This was to be a recurring motif in Leadbelly's relationship with northeastern radicals.

"The People," Yes or No?

Throughout this period, musicians were far from alone in attempting to define the potential uses of art in the class struggle. While technique was the primary area of contention in the musical world, among New York's leftist writers the disputes concerned both technical execution and subject matter. On one thing, though, all were agreed: both technique and content needed to reflect a proletarian consciousness. In an attempt to aid the ComIntern's search for an alternative to literary proletarinism, a group of writers including Lincoln Steffens, Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Meridel Le Sur, Nathaniel West, Waldo Frank, Josephine Herbst, Michael Gold, Joseph Freeman, Malcolm Cowley, and Richard Wright published a call for presenters at a planned

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meeting of leftist authors. The signatories promised a conference "devoted to the exposition of all phases of a writer's participation in the struggle against war, the preservation of civil liberties, and the destruction of fascist tendencies everywhere," a mandate that clearly represented a break from traditional Communist literary themes. The American Writers Congress would also propose new avenues for the publication and dissemination of leftist writing.[42]

The resulting Congress was the first national meeting of American writers, and it led directly to the establishment of the League of American Writers.[43] Predictably enough, most of the Congress's presenters called for the creation of a new Popular Front literature with rhetoric that was stylistically, if not thematically, reminiscent of the writings of the Composers Collective. Several European participants offered descriptions of the repressive policies of Fascists abroad, and made ominous allusions to the possibility that a similar tyranny was brewing in the United States.[44] A notable exception to the generally uniform presentations was offered by the poet and critic Kenneth Burke. His address, titled "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," was concerned with the manner in which "myths" served as unifying principles in political movements, and therefore concentrated entirely on the "*propaganda* aspect of the symbol." Rather than speaking--like virtually all of the other presenters--on the political aspects and implications of art,

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42. "The Coming Writers' Congress," *Partisan Review* 2 (January-February, 1935),\: 94-96; "Call for an American Writers' Congress" *NM* 24/4 (January 22, 1935): 20. See also "Mass Leaders and Prominent Authors Hail First American Writers Congress," *DW* April 25, 1935, 5, for the paper's promotion of the upcoming Congress.

43. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 442.

44. For selected papers presented at the Congress, see *American Writers Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935). For contemporary descriptions of the events, see Kenneth Burke, "The Writers' Congress" *The Nation* 3645 (May 15, 1935): 571; Milton Howard, "400 Authors Gather in Parley to Discuss Their Role in Fight" *DW* 29 April 1935, 5. For a retrospective discussion by some of the Congress' key participants, see "Thirty Years Later: Memories of the First American Writers' Congress," *American Scholar* 35/3 (Summer 1966): 495-516.

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he investigated the aesthetics of politics. As he noted, the radical left in America had long marched under the banner of "the worker." Burke shocked those assembled by stating that "[t]he symbol I should plead for, as more basic, more of an ideal incentive, than that of the worker, is that of 'the people'." He insisted that this decision had its roots not in any quarrel with the proletarian ideal of the left, but rather in a belief that his proposed symbol would be more efficacious in furthering their goals. It would, he felt, better convince those members of the bourgeoisie who were largely in agreement with the socialist agenda that the so-called workers' movement was not closed to the middle class; the movement should welcome all willing participants:

> In suggesting that "the people," rather than "the worker," rate highest in our hierarchy of symbols, I suppose I am suggesting fundamentally that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values--just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into saints. I should also point out that we are very close to this symbol of "the people" in our term "the masses," which is embodied in the title of the leading radical magazine. But I think that the term "the people" is closer to our folkways that is the corresponding term, "the masses," both in spontaneous popular usage and as stimulated by our political demagogues.[45]

Burke believed that "the people" symbolized a vision almost utopian in its connotations; it offered its followers a desirable goal, rather than merely emphasizing that against which it struggled: "[A] poet does not sufficiently glorify his political cause by pictures of suffering and revolt. Rather, a poet makes his soundest contribution in this

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45. Kenneth C. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in *American Writers Congress*, 89, 90.

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wise: He shows himself alive to all aspects of contemporary thought (in contrast with a certain anti-intellectualist, semi-obscurantist trend among some of the strictly *proletarian* school, who tend to imply that there is some disgrace attached to things of the mind." In Burke's view, "the people" also pointed up the artifice of what he called "the doctrine of 'antithetical moralities'," a tradition whose lineage could be traced back to the dialectical materialism of classical Marxism. This doctrine held that between such opposites as the "bourgeois" and the "proletarian" no grounds for discussion existed. Adherents to one were opponents of the other, and advocates for both were engaged in a no-holds-barred, winner-take-all battle. But Burke found this view to be gratuitously conflict-based, believing instead that "[w]e convince a man by reason of the values which we and he hold *in common*. Propaganda (the extension of one's recruiting into ever widening areas) is possible only insofar as the propagandizer and the propagandized have *kindred* values, share the *same* base of reference."[46]

His final argument in favor of the adoption of "the people" was a call for what in current political parlance would be called a "big tent." Whereas America's insurgent artists were in general rigidly doctrinal, brooking no internal disunity, and permitting no broadening of focus, Burke wished to see art that "seeks to consider the problems of *man*, not of *classes of men*." This art would not be a monolith, entirely concerned with the plight of the worker, for "a totally universalized art, if established in America to-day, would simply be the spiritual denial of an underlying economic disunity (the aesthetic of fascism)." By honestly reflecting the fractured state of contemporary society--as well, it might be added, as the diversity of artists on the left--the new art would correct the false unity of previous proletarian art by "embodying within its connotations the *ideal* incentive, the eventual state of unification that is expected to flow from it."[47]

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46. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 92.

47. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 93.

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Although it certainly seems like a sound strategy when viewed from the safe distance of more than six decades, Burke's address was not at all well-received. To the contrary, he was subjected to vicious censure, both in person and in print. However, as Michael Denning points out, the official announcement of the Popular Front policy just a few months after the Congress made Burke look prophetic.[48] Before the year was out, leftist authors had shifted from the militant rhetoric of proletarianism to the conciliatory language of populism. Burke's literary anticipation of this strategy is somewhat reminiscent of the musical foreshadowing seen in the second *Workers Songbook*. For New York's Communist composers, unlike their literary peers, the Popular Front was less a dramatic shift than the confirmation of an existing trend. In essence, the Popular Front gave official sanction to the Collective's use of folk and "native" sources in the service of musical proletarianism.

New York on the Potomac

In the same month during which the formal declaration of the new Popular Front moved Communist politics towards the ideological center, the federal government seemed to be rushing towards them from the center. On 2 August 1935, less than one month after the landmark Wagner Act was signed into law, WPA (Works Progress Administration) director Harry Hopkins announced a significant new department of his agency called Federal One. This was an umbrella program for a group of work-relief programs geared specifically towards artists. Administrators chosen from the relevant artistic fields were named to direct the Federal Art, Theatre, Writers', and Music Projects, and Roosevelt allocated a generous sum of money to the WPA that was expressly designated to fund the Federal Arts Projects. The idea was not without precedent: as

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48. Although the policy had already been formulated, the American writers were not aware of it at the time of the AWC. Burke's own reminiscences of the reaction can be seen in "Thirty Years Later", 506-08; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 442. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Carl Sandburg's volume of poetry, *The People, Yes*, published in 1936.

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head of Civil Works Administration, Hopkins had provided relief funds specifically for the employment of artists as early as January 1934. But the massive scope of the new Projects bespoke a new level of government commitment to the arts.[49] Despite the high financial stakes, the administration gave Project directors a good deal of latitude in defining their individual agencies. As a result of this freedom, and also of the inherent differences between the individual arts and the distinct temperaments of their respective directors, the projects contributed to American culture in varying ways, as we will see in the next chapter.

One thing that the all the Projects shared was trouble with artists' unions. Upon its inception, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) encountered serious difficulties with Actor's Equity over the wages it offered. A compromise allowed the WPA agency to pay its employees reduced wages, but this came at the cost of strict limits on rehearsal time, a concession that inevitably led to artistic difficulties. Similar disputes with labor organizations had an impact on the Writers and Art Projects.[50] Despite their union problems, the Projects were also subjected to accusations of political subversiveness. Naturally, the charges were leveled by individuals who felt that the government had no business funding artists in the first place. By the late 1930s, Congressional allegations of Communist agitation plagued Federal One, especially the Theatre Project.

As objectionable as many administration critics found Federal One, they must have been heartened by the conservative inclinations of Nikolai Sokoloff, the director of the Federal Music Project (FMP). A Russian-born violinist and conductor who emigrated to

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49. A Federal Theatre Project memorandum traces government relief for theatre to late 1933. "Origin and Chronology of Drama Relief in New York City," Federal Theatre Project Collection, Arts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (hereafter "FTPC"). Likewise, the Treasury Department had established a "Section of Painting and Sculpture" in 1934 to award contracts for art in government buildings. Edward Laning, "The New Deal Mural Projects," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 90.

50. Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 51-52; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 87.

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the United States as a teenager, Sokoloff unfortunately possessed many of the elitist tendencies prevalent among the members of America's cultivated musical establishment. According to Kenneth J. Bindas, "Sokoloff wanted the FMP to provide musical relief by creating symphonies, chamber music groups, and other 'serious' musical organizations." He was opposed by Joseph Weber, President of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), who pointed out that "outside of the large urban areas, few musicians of symphonic quality would be found." The AFM therefore complained that greater allocations should be made to the vast majority of musicians who played popular music. Of course, the AFM's policies were progressive only by comparison to Sokoloff's FMP. Like its parent union, the AFL, the musicians' union officially decried communism and remained generally detached from electoral politics. As Bindas points out, "[a] resolution at the [AFM's] 1935 convention called for the purge of all communists from the union's membership rolls and asked that no AFM member be allowed to play the 'The Internationale'." In this regard, Sokoloff and the AFM leadership got along just fine: Sokoloff recommended that Chalmers Clifton, the director of the New York City chapter of the FMP, fire anyone involved in "the agitation of communistic and radical leaders."[51]

Of course, a purge of left-wing musicians from FMP activities, particularly in New York, would have eliminated many of the finest artists from consideration, and so it was never thoroughly carried out. And at this point New York's leftist musicians were certainly not too proud to accept government largesse. While Pettis's claim in a 1934 article that "[p]robably no group has been harder hit by the economic catastrophe than the musical profession" was both self-serving and highly debatable, the fact remained that

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51. Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society, 1935-1939* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 8, 31, 11.

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musicians, particularly in the cultivated arena, had been severely affected by the Depression.[52]

As fundamentally conservative as the administration of the FMP may have been, it was nevertheless a part of the most unabashedly progressive batch of legislation and administration in our nation's history, and this fact was not entirely lost on the New York radicals, who recognized that the brand of reform politics that a number of New Dealers had first tested in New York during the previous two decades was taking hold in the nation's capital. The historian Mike Wallace has said of the opening days of the New Deal that "what happens in '32 and '33 is that New York invades Washington. New York boards and seizes Washington, but instead of treating it as a conquered country, what they do is say, 'Washington has got to do what New York City has been doing [in its social policy]'."[53] And in New York City, even much of the mainstream musical community had become sensitized to political matters.

In November 1935, *New York Times* music critic Olin Downs agonized over the adverse consequences of what he saw as the excessive domination of music by business concerns. Rather than welcoming Downs' recognition, however, Seeger gleefully pounced, mocking the critic's relative moderation and the tardiness of his insight. In fact, Seeger's criticism throughout 1935, particularly that published pseudonymously in the *Daily Worker*, remained stridently ideological, even after the establishment of the Popular Front. Of Schoenberg, he wrote: "the grand old master is tamed at last, his sting removed, his music made safe for 'bourgeocracy'" and "[Schoenberg] went academic, keeping, it is true, the essentials of his new idiom, but forcing it into conformance to certain guiding old notions that he had formerly rejected."[54] Towards older European

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52. Ashley Pettis, "Music and the Crisis" *New Masses* 11 (March 13, 1934): 28.

53. *New York* Volume 6: "City of Tomorrow," Steeplechase Films, New York, 2001.

54. Carl Sands, "Schoenberg's New Composition," *DW* 23 October 1935, 5; Carl Sands, "In the World of Music: Business! Business! Business!," *DW* 8 November 1935, 5.

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masters, he was more respectful, but still skeptical, as in this passage reviewing a recital given by Ashley Pettis: "The Bach, Haydn, Brahms and Schumann pieces played by Pettis are all standard repertoire. They are important workers. But even more important is the question: what do we think of them? what should we think of them?"[55]

Seeger seemed no more optimistic about the work of any American composers not operating within the orbit of the Collective, even though he occasionally acknowledged potential talent. From late 1934 through late 1935, Seeger was particularly fascinated with Roy Harris, of whom he wrote that, despite the composer's shortcomings, "one is convinced that here is real talent. It is simply on the wrong track, in the wrong place. It does not belong in the giant's robe; it does not belong in the concert hall, or in the library . . . It would be much more at home writing simple music for simple people. . . . It is to be hoped that he finds a good, revolutionary song text some day and writes a mass song."[56] Seeger was far less charitable towards Virgil Thomson, despite the centrality of folk idioms in his music. In Thomson, Seeger wrote, "The folk-material is not there for any admiration of the folk. To the contrary, it is poking fun at the lover of folk-song." Without actually bothering to establish how this satire was manifested, Seeger continued in high dudgeon: "To make fun of poor folk-songs by writing poorer ones, and to satirize dull music by writing duller, is a trick met with in others than Thomson. He simply attains prominence by a certain volume of work and a persistence in promoting its performance." Seeger made no mention of the works under review.[57]

But despite his apparent comfort in the role of proletarian music critic, Seeger had been growing disillusioned with the Composers Collective for some time. As he later put

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55. Carl Sands, "A Week of Music," *DW* 22 April 1935, 5.

56. Carl Sands, "All-Harris Concert," *DW* 31 October 1935, 5; see also Carl Sands, "Westminster Chorus Sings Roy Harris Composition," *DW* 6 December 1934, 5, and Sands, "More About Roy Harris," *DW* 20 December 1934, 5.

57. Carl Sands, "All-Thomson Program," *DW* 20 November 1935, 5.

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it, "[w]e were all on the wrong track--it was professionals trying to write music for the people and not in the people's idiom."[58] By the fall of 1935, he had stopped participating in the Collective, which had recently severed all ties with the Degeyter Club and become a completely independent entity. That November, he stopped writing for the *Daily Worker*--the Thomson review was the last byline ever credited to Carl Sands. Seeger remained ambivalent towards his *Daily Worker* articles to the end of his life. In a letter written four decades after he buried Carl Sands, Seeger states that during the Depression he "alternately applied two different codes of criticism: one, the established academic pejorative or merely disregarding of folk music pushed to an extreme by the Communist Party and Eisler; the other, an open mind toward it supported, however, by very little knowledge and practically no direct musical contact, except Leadbelly, already a highly sub-acculturated exhibitionist for white audiences, Woody Guthrie, ditto, and Molly Jackson."[59] But elsewhere he acknowledged that "[i]n writing those Daily Worker paragraphs . . . I learned how to distinguish the propaganda factor that is 'inborn,' as it were, in the speech compositional process."[60] If only for this crucial insight, Seeger's time as a professional proletarian was well spent.

Perhaps the finest testament to the significance of leftist politics in Seeger's mature musical thought is the "Preface to All Linguistic Treatment of Music" that he had published in the inaugural issue of *Music Vanguard*. The "Preface" is, in a sense, Seeger's graduation exercise from the school of proletarian criticism, for in it he integrated Marxian theory, along with linguistics and anthropology, into the theoretical framework that he had been developing for well over a decade. Broadly speaking, the essay is an attempt to address the interactions of music and language as "arts," starting

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58. Seeger quoted in Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 134-35.

59. Seeger to David King Dunaway, 28 October 1977, CRSC; Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 68.

60. Seeger to Richard Reuss, 20 May 1971, CRSC.

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from the premise that "the processes of the two arts should be viewed as comparable, though they may, in various kinds of social organization, function variously as work, communication, play, ritual, magic, affective agent, etc." What bothered Seeger was the implicit prioritization, in modern western culture, of language over music: "There is no evidence, biological, sociological, or other, that leads to the conclusion that one art is necessarily more suitable than another to the needs of social organization by man."[61]

In order to prove his case, Seeger constructed what may be called a social typology of the arts. While acknowledging that there would be exceptions to any statements as general as his, Seeger asserted--based on his researches in ethnomusicology and anthropology--that in a "small, tribal, backward or primitive culture . . . [t]he type of social organization is communalistic or at least collectivist, classes are not at all or only slightly developed, and the arts are primarily social rather than individual functions, not differentiated from each other, as with us, or from their social connections, but highly integrated with each other and with the culture as a whole." Likewise, the individual member of such a culture "is a fairly well rounded individual as regards the exercise of his physiological capacities and his social activities. He is not a worker specializing in one field to the exclusion of others."[62] According to Seeger, this versatility was manifested on the level of communication as well, for individuals in such communities communicated through both language and music.

Such facility stood in stark contrast to the linguistic bias of the average citizen in a modern, classist society. In a classist society, "[w]hile the arts of the ruled retain their generalized social function, those of the ruling class lose them. The ruling class ceases to produce its own art very much as it ceases gradually to produce its other needs. It retains a command of the idioms of language and music, but the employment of slaves and,

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61. Charles Seeger, "Preface to All Linguistic Treatment of Music," *Music Vanguard* 1/1 (March-April 1935): 19.

62. Seeger, "Preface to All," 22.

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later, of paid professionals results in a degree of specialization in the production of . . . works of 'fine' art, in these idioms that establish a new type of social function for the arts concerned."[63]

The scope of Seeger's conception becomes apparent in the following passage, where he discusses how the geographical distributions of different musical styles flow from the social and economic organization of societies:

> the production of this type of art, which we may call *refined*, *cultivated*, or *professional art*, tends to center in seats of government . . . while that of the more primitive strains tends to spread over the more remote parts of the countryside, [so that] hybrid forms are likely to crop up in the intermediate localities . . . Where big estates, railroads, and rivers have brought a strong influence of the professional art, the *folk* or *country art* shows strong signs of derivation from that art. Where the city influence is weaker, the more primitive strains still surviving in out-of-the-way places are the dominating element.
>
> As the population of the city grows by the importation of potential workers, soldiers, priests, servants, etc., various kinds of folk and even primitive art are brought in and form hybrids with the echoes of professional music . . . [Thus, v]arious forms of *popular* or *city art* evolve.

After a brief digression(!) on how this phenomenon had proceeded in Indian, Greek, and Chinese cultures, Seeger traced the development of European culture in similar terms:

> The first generation [of modern industrial workers] brought with it more or less well-established peasant or folk cultures . . . the children of these

63. Seeger, "Preface to All," 23.

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> immigrants knew little of, and cared less for, this culture. . . . The third generation lost all trace of the ancestral heritage; yet no new thing rose to take its place. Echoes of the fine art of the ruling classes . . . did, it is true, combine with various stray elements to make popular arts of language and of music. But these, developed in such close proximity to the ruling class, were characterized by all the weaknesses and none of the strength of professional art.[64]

Freed from the uncompromising anti-bourgeois approach of the *Daily Worker*, Seeger was able to acknowledge that this process had nevertheless produced some art of value: "The strength of professionalized art is found in the works of exceptional mastery that were possible only under the conditions of extreme specialization." Unfortunately, this strength brought with it a tremendous weakness, the consequences of which affected most citizens on a far more basic level: "The weakness of this art is found in the fact that its social function involves well-rounded, complete musical activity on the part of a mere handful of exceptional poets and musicians who are at once creators, performers, and listeners. . . . The great majority of people who come in contact with this art are involved in a one-sided, incomplete musical activity--they listen (or read) only. Thus, professionalized art and its pale reflection, popular art, take on the character of commodities, *produced for consumers who are not themselves producers* [emphasis in original]." Whereas "[i]n the case of language there is at least a rudimentary ability on the part of the average member of society to produce crude constructions in the current idiom . . . in the case of music, not even a rudimentary ability to produce crude constructions in the current idiom was left for the average member of the population of the advanced industrial countries around 1900."[65]

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64. Seeger, "Preface to All," 23, 28.

65. Seeger, "Preface to All," 28-29.

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Seeger here echoed--with his own Marxian inflection--Lewis Mumford's discussion, in *Technics and Civilization*, of the aesthetic and spiritual consequences of industrialization:

> In general, the practice of the physical sciences meant an intensification of the senses: the eye had never before been so sharp, the ear so keen, the hand so accurate. . . . But with this gain in accuracy, went a deformation of experience as a whole. The instruments of science were helpless in the realm of qualities. The qualitative was reduced to the subjective: the subjective was dismissed as unreal, and the unseen and unmeasurable non-existent. Intuition and feeling did not affect mechanical process or mechanical explanations. Much could be accomplished by the new science and the new technics because much that was associated with work in the past--art, poetry, organic rhythm, fantasy--was deliberately eliminated. As the outer world of perception grew in importance, the inner world of feeling became more and more impotent.[66]

Both authors were concerned with the distinction drawn in western culture between the instrumental (language) and the aesthetic (music).

Like Seeger, Mumford addressed the phenomena, peculiar to industrial society, of occupational specialization and the exaltation of regimentation and efficiency, writing that, as the industrial age dawned, "[t]he workshop song, the street cries of the tinker, the dustman, the pedlar [*sic*], the flower vendor, the chanties of the sailor hauling the rope, the traditional songs of the field, the wine-press, the taproom, were slowly dying out during this period: at the same time, the power to create new ones was disappearing.

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66. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 49.

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Labor was orchestrated by the number of revolutions per minute, rather than by the rhythm of song or chant or tattoo." This trend was not limited to the music of everyday life, however. In fact, Mumford found that cultivated music, "in the creation of the new orchestra, and in the scope and power and movement of the new symphonies, became in a singularly representative way the ideal counterpart of industrial society."[67]

Although Seeger had painted a fairly bleak picture--his description of historical processes had an air of inevitability about them--he was not without hope for the future. His essay thus closed with a prescription for remedying the situation. Because "[t]he music-hungry masses [are] . . . a class exploited by language, brought, in fact, to its present state of unemployment, starvation, industrial servitude, and fascist regimentation largely by linguistic techniques," their path to liberation lay in the use of "a special kind of language, namely one that definitely puts limits upon itself, that adopts as a fundamental principle the *contingent* nature of language as a social function--its development from, rather than its priority to, the conditions of material life. Once language abdicates the position of being supreme arbiter of all things, music will have a chance again." This would be accomplished in two steps: "first and foremost, through increasing musical activity by the masses for their own ends; second, through the linguistic study of music--musicology--which must be made to bend its efforts to the freeing, rather than the further imprisonment, of music by language."[68]

Seeger's scholarly writings clearly counted towards the second step of the process, but he had yet to find an effective way to effect the first step. Then, in the fall of 1935, he was offered a position with the Resettlement Administration (RA)--a New Deal agency under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture--in Washington, D. C. There, as music technical supervisor to the director of the RA's Special Skills Division, Seeger

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67. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 201-02.

68. Seeger, "Preface to All," 30-31.

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would help to facilitate music-making and education in the resettlement communities. Recognizing an opportunity for grassroots involvement of the kind he had been seeking, Seeger accepted the offer. His decision may have surprised those familiar with the strident, anti-government rhetoric of Carl Sands' compositions and criticism, but when viewed outside of that context, it was not at all unpredictable. To begin with, the birth that June of his and Ruth's second child, Peggy, made it more important than ever that he find some sort of regularly paying job. More importantly, Seeger was drawn by the promise of active participation in the New Deal. Although some hard-line Communists continued to view those who, like Seeger, joined the Roosevelt coalition as sell-outs compromising their ideals for cushy government jobs, Seeger insisted that his "defection" was the product of his realization of the impotence of groups like the Collective. "If the Democratic party had set up a Composers' Collective for active use of music in fighting the Depression," Seeger asserts, "I would have joined it just as wholeheartedly--as I did, when I was seeing the failure of the actual one I had worked so hard for in switching over with just as much enthusiasm to the Resettlement Administration, for this was down to earth, practical and all economically and politically as the C[ommunist] P[arty] never was or has been in [the] USA." Years later, when Seeger reflected on his decision to accept the government post, the most important factors he cited were all related to his introduction to American folk music: the publications of Jackson's *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, John and Alan Lomax's *American Folk Songs and Ballads*, the folk music he heard and played at Benton's gatherings, and the encounter with Molly Jackson. "Well," Seeger said, "those four things all came together with [the] invitation to go to Washington."[69]

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69. Seeger quoted in Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 116, 134-35 (brackets Pescatello's). It is certainly worth noting that, when he did become involved in government work, Seeger did so, not under the auspices of the FMP, but in an agency of the Department of Agriculture.

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At last, Seeger had found a way to make music a positive force in the lives of his fellow citizens. He would do so by making music useful, employing it as a tool in the creation of community. Seeger had had yet another Deweyan epiphany, recognizing that (as Dewey wrote), "[t]he arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip."[70] In other words, the most vital arts were those that affected the lived experience. To Cowell, "useful music" had meant a song sung on a picket line; to Copland, a piece for student chorus; to Blitzstein, a theatrical sketch; and to the Lomaxes, it had meant folk music. Ultimately, Seeger sided with the Lomaxes, and following John Lomax's lead, he too joined the New Deal: in November 1935, with Ruth and the children in tow, Seeger did as so many other New Dealers had done, and left New York for the nation's capital.

New Concerns

Although Seeger's focus remained on music in the domestic context of local communities, events overseas continued to grow in significance. On the last day of August, Roosevelt had signed into law a Neutrality Act; a little more than one month later, Mussolini's Italy invaded Ethiopia. In Germany, a military build-up was proceeding at an alarmingly rapid pace.

On the domestic front, however, amity seemed to be the order of the day. A series of events had combined to disarm much of Roosevelt's opposition: the establishment of Social Security had neutralized Doc Townsend; Father Coughlin's increasingly extreme rhetoric--flavored by anti-semitism and xenophobia--had marginalized him; and in September 1935 Huey Long was assassinated in a hallway in the Louisiana State Capitol

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70. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5.

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in Baton Rouge. And, of course, the Popular Front had tempered the criticisms of most doctrinaire Communists.

The left had been so successful in driving the national agenda that the most significant political disagreement of late 1935 occurred within the ranks of labor. The annual convention of the American Federation of Labor was a tumultuous affair; minor items like the decision to actively promote the development of labor drama paled in comparison to the fundamental struggle that raged at the meeting.[71] Since the previous year's convention in San Francisco, AFL members had debated the possibility of industrial rather than craft unionism. The AFL, long the preeminent workers' organization in the country, was, and always had been, an advocate of craft unionism. This meant that it represented only workers who had developed specific skills (like needleworkers or pipefitters.) But with the rise of industrial mechanization and assembly-line factories, many, if not most, workers were without such specialized abilities. These workers could only be represented by industrial unions, which advocate for all workers within a given industry, regardless of the individual tasks they perform.

At the 1935 convention in Atlantic City, the AFL's members voted against making the switch. But United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis, long a vocal proponent of industrial unionism, refused to let the matter drop. During a heated exchange on the floor, Lewis punched Big Bill Hutcheson, the president of the carpenters' union and a staunch supporter of the craft model, and then left the hall. Three weeks later, Lewis, along with the heads of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, announced the establishment of the Committee for Industrial Organization, or CIO. Although the CIO was officially a branch of the AFL,

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71. Harry Goldman, "When Social Significance Came to Broadway: 'Pins and Needles' in Production," *Theatre Quarterly* 7/28 (Winter 1977-78): 25.

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two weeks after its establishment Lewis resigned his AFL vice-presidency, making clear that the supremacy of the AFL would soon be challenged.[72]

As the Popular Front doctrine took hold, American Communists turned their attention from attacking Roosevelt to scouring the landscape for likely converts to the cause. In the Midwest, the electoral successes of the Farmers Labor Party augured well for the future of radical politics among rural Americans. However, the Communist Party continued to maintain its greatest strength in urban areas, especially New York City. While earlier Communist attempts to win African-American support had been rather scattershot and unstructured, the Popular Front period was marked by more concerted efforts. In these years, the Harlem branch of the Party was active in local groups like the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, as well as PTAs. The Party also organized sports clubs, dance groups, community theaters, and amateur choral societies. Additionally, the Communists "enthusiastically promoted black arts within their publications and organizations and tried to draw black artists, musicians, writers, and theatrical people into the Party and its affiliated organizations." And Harlem was readier than ever for radical politics, as was tragically illustrated by the riots of March 1935, which ended with three African-Americans dead, thirty hospitalized, and many more in jail, and in retrospect seemed to mark the end of the Harlem Renaissance.[73]

But as one era drew to a close, the foundations of a new one were being laid. In August 1935, clarinettist Benny Goodman's performance from the Palomar in Los Angeles was broadcast nationally, in the process helping to launch the swing craze. Goodman's timing was propitious, as a number of elements of the modern popular music business came together at once. The year before Goodman's landmark show, in an effort

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72. Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York: Viking, 1938), 1-26.

73. Naison, *Communism in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 186; David Levering Lewis notes that the Young Communist League was instrumental in inciting the riots. Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 306-7.

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to expand the market for recorded music, RCA Victor had introduced a low-cost record player called Duo Junior. The following year, as sales of the music began to pick up, the magazine *Metronome* started covering swing bands, and in November 1935, *Billboard* began publishing its weekly popular music charts.[74]

With the Collective disintegrating, swing music ascendant, and folk music the unofficial musical idiom of the left, the future of American musical insurgency was as muddled as ever.

74. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 59, 60-61; Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 50; Whitburn, *Pop Memories*, 16.

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Chapter 6: Proletarianism Becomes Americanism
November 1935--September 1937

In the nation's courts, 1936 began in much the same way as 1935 had begun, with the invalidation of New Deal reforms on both federal and state levels. On 6 January, the Supreme Court nullified the Agricultural Adjustment Act as an encroachment on states' rights. Apparently, however, those rights did not include the right to mandate a minimum wage, for that same spring a state court struck down New York's minimum wage law, finding that it was an abridgement of the freedom of contract. Meanwhile, throughout the nation industrial employers, heedless of the Wagner Act, continued to flout the rights of workers. When unions went out on strike, picketers and their allies were regularly subjected to violent assaults by company goons, local police, or National Guardsmen.

But American labor was not wholly reliant on government support; workers had some tricks up their own sleeves. For several years, tire workers in the factories of Akron, Ohio, had been developing a new tactic in its disputes with management. In late 1935 and early 1936, after months of bitter arguments, employees of Goodyear and Firestone successfully utilized the new sit-down strike--which proved to be both more effective and less risky than the classic picket line--as the workers won the vast majority of their demands. Such tactics were anathema to the staid AFL, which officially suspended the CIO (the United Auto Workers was a CIO union) in August 1936. But as the events of that December showed, the time was ripe for militant, industrial unionism. On 28 December 1936, workers at the Fisher Body Number 1 factory in Flint, Michigan, sat down at their places on the assembly line, demanding a renegotiated contract from General Motors. The strike dragged on for some six weeks, and when GM finally capitulated on 11 February, agreeing to recognize and negotiate with the UAW, organized labor seemed to have decisively demonstrated its new power. Of course, the

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auto industry had no monopoly on anti-labor practices, and despite the Wagner Act's passage and the growing strength of industrial unions, millions of workers in a variety of industries labored under harsh conditions. Nevertheless, the CIO continued to flourish: by the time of its own convention in the fall of 1937, the upstart organization boasted over three million members, many of whom had defected from the AFL.[1]

Emboldened by the resurgence of leftist politics on a grassroots level, and encouraged by signs of economic recovery, Roosevelt campaigned in 1936 as an economic populist; in accepting the Democratic nomination in Philadelphia that June, he inveighed against the "economic tyranny" of his conservative opponents. That summer the nation's attention was focused chiefly on the upcoming elections. Voters looked forward to the opportunity to register their approval--or lack thereof--of Roosevelt's unprecedented experiments in governance. The election promised to answer many serious questions. Had the recent spate of adverse court decisions been a harbinger of Roosevelt's defeat? Would voters hold the Democratic administration accountable for the Dust Bowl and other ongoing national problems, human and economic? Many mainstream publications certainly thought so; throughout the summer and fall, major publications projected a clear Republican victory. Even the vaunted *Reader's Digest* poll, frequently cited as the most reliable such institution, predicted a Roosevelt defeat.[2]

After flirting with Hoover, the Republicans had nominated Kansas Governor Alf Landon. A political moderate, Landon was as unobjectionable—and uninspiring—as Roosevelt was controversial. The electoral picture was further complicated by a challenge from the left: Father Coughlin and Doc Townsend had joined forces to establish a group, the National Union for Social Justice, which would be challenging the

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1. Brecher, *Strike!*, 198-204, 212-21; Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO*, 28.

2. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 280-81.

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major parties that fall.[3] Their presidential candidate was Congressman William Lemke, his running mate railroad union lawyer Thomas O'Brien. The National Union's platform, which combined populist economic and political rhetoric with the assertion that neither major party spoke for the majority of Americans, was calculated to capitalize on the widespread concern over the fact that, although the New Deal had done many fine things and alleviated many of the worst effects of the Depression, serious economic problems stubbornly lingered. Caught between the moderate conservatism of Landon and the radical populism of the National Union, Roosevelt's prospects were far from certain.

All but ignoring the National Union, Roosevelt continued to hammer away at those whom his cousin Theodore had once termed "malefactors of great wealth." FDR was uncharacteristically belligerent: speaking at Madison Square Garden less than a week prior to the general election, Roosevelt "welcomed the hatred" of "old enemies" from world of "organized money." Although a number of Democrats fretted over Roosevelt's unnecessarily harsh tone, they need not have worried: on 3 November 1936, Roosevelt won re-election in the greatest landslide in American history. Racking up a majority of almost 28 million votes, Roosevelt won every state except Vermont and Maine, and in the process he cemented a political coalition that would keep the Democratic Party in control of Congress for the better part of the next six decades. This voting bloc consisted of African-Americans, who were finally rejecting the Republicans' claims to still be the "party of Lincoln"; organized labor, which had seen gains in four years of Democratic rule that almost offset the losses suffered during twelve years of Republican administrations; the educated; and the poor. America's cities became bastions for the Democratic Party, which had once been identified solely as the party of Southern farmers. Perhaps most striking, although the American Labor Party was fairly successful,

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3. Today's labels of left and right are, of course, not entirely appropriate in dealing with the period. As many commentators, both historical and contemporary, have remarked, both Huey Long and Coughlin displayed many fascistic tendencies, but their populist, anti-corporate rhetoric owed much more to the left than the right.

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winning 300,000 votes in New York State alone, many of the most prominent voices on the radical left—including union leaders Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky, and a large majority of Left intellectuals—supported Roosevelt rather than Socialist Norman Thomas. The Democratic party, a shambles just eight years earlier, had reestablished itself as a viable alternative to the Republican party, and America's *de facto* two–party system was re–affirmed.[4]

The watershed election year of 1936 was also one of radical changes in the physical landscape of New York City. In that year alone, Robert Moses presided over the completion of a diverse array of public works projects, including ten massive neighborhood swimming pools; the Henry Hudson Bridge; and the Laurelton, Interborough, and Grand Central Parkways. Moses's comprehensive vision of New York's roadways culminated in the opening, that July, of the Triborough Bridge, perhaps the most impressive public works achievement, in terms of complexity and scale, of the New Deal era. The Triborough and its many tributary thoroughfares revolutionized the city, making travel easy and direct. But a little more than one month after the bridge's opening, the critical flaw at the heart of Moses's grand plan was made painfully clear, as the Long Island parkways snarled in what some commentators considered "the greatest traffic tie-up in the history of the metropolitan area."[5] Nevertheless, the automobile remained the dominant force in Moses' continued re-shaping of the greater New York region.

Although domestic issues dominated the news throughout most of 1936, events overseas were increasingly difficult to ignore. In mid-July 1936, Spanish forces commanded by General Francisco Franco and stationed in Morocco rejected the

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4. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 282; William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Election of 1936," in Leuchtenburg, *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt & His Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 101–58.

5. Caro, *Power Broker*, 516.

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democratically elected Spanish Popular Front government. Franco and his troops returned to Spain as a hostile force seeking to overthrow the political leadership. From the beginning, this was a war that ignited the passion of the American left. In September 1936, a scant two months after Franco's revolt, Earl Robinson and Paul Bowles collaborated on a project to benefit the Spanish Republicans. Robinson worked as accompanist for a radical theatre piece called *Who Fights This Battle?*, which was scored by Bowles. Proceeds from the performances went to the Ministry of Education of the Spanish Republic. And in March 1937, CBS broadcast Archibald MacLeish's radio play *The Fall of the City*, which dramatized the rise of fascism in stark terms.[6] Such support, while surely appreciated, paled in comparison to the infusions of arms and equipment that Franco's forces were receiving from the Italian and German governments, both of which were behaving in an increasingly belligerent fashion.

Culture Wars

These fierce battles, both international and domestic, between the right and the left, played out in miniature in the cultural arena. In New York, a small-scale international imbroglio had rocked the musical world in early 1936. The cultural policies of the Nazi government, which had recently announced its official disapproval of the music of the Jewish-born composer Felix Mendelssohn, became the central issue in a debate over the appointment of German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler as music director of the New York Philharmonic prior to the 1936-37 concert season.[7] Furtwängler's position *vis-a-vis* the Nazi government was somewhat ambiguous; although he had sent a well-publicized letter to Joseph Goebbels protesting the institutionalization of anti-Semitism in German orchestras, defended composer Paul Hindemith against government censure, and

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6. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 70; Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 66–69.

7. M. M., "Mendelssohn Latest Target of Nazi Fire," *DW* 19 April 1936, 7.

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ultimately resigned his positions at the Berlin State Opera and the Berlin Philharmonic, it was also true that he continued to conduct German orchestras in a visiting capacity and to sit on the Reich Music Chamber. However, this decidedly mixed political record stood in stark contrast to the vocal anti-fascism of the New York Philharmonic's departing maestro, Arturo Toscanini. When the Philharmonic's board made public its hiring of Furtwängler, the announcement was met by an outpouring of protest from critics, subscribers, and musicians alike. The AFL suggested that it might bar its members from playing under the conductor, and prominent New York citizens formed an "anti-Furtwängler committee." Less than one month after his hiring, Furtwängler resigned his post. This victory of American anti-fascism, while relatively minor, nevertheless demonstrated that New York's art world remained concerned with developments in Europe.[8]

On the left, the Nazis' totalitarian cultural policies were unfavorably contrasted with the supposedly progressive artistic milieu of the Soviet Union. In February 1936, the *Daily Worker* published an article describing how Shostakovich's new ballet, *The Limpid Stream*, owed its success "in part to a group of workers from the Kaganovich Ball Bearing Plant." Readers were informed that "at the suggestion of these workers, the third and final act was considerably altered not long before the opening night." Critic Stanley Ashton wrote, "[s]o astounded and pleased was Shostakovich at the deep insight and perception of these workers, who pulled the ballet back to earth each time it began to stray from reality, that he insisted on their coming to the dress rehearsal of his new opera

8. Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini: A Social History of American Concert Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 147-48; "Furtwängler Storm Rises," *DW* 8 March 1936, 7; M. M., "Furtwängler Backs Down," *DW* 22 March 1936, 7. Although the *Daily Worker* had long had very little to say about Toscanini, that changed with the Furtwängler affair and the Popular Front. See Max Margulis, "In Praise of Toscanini, Foremost Conductor of Our Time," *DW* 27 October 1937, 7.

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'Katerina Izmailova'."[9] What the article failed to mention, however, was the recent uproar over Shostakovich's previous opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk.*

Lady Macbeth had been performed and acclaimed both abroad and in the Soviet Union throughout 1935. Finally, on 26 January 1936, Joseph Stalin attended a performance of the opera in Moscow. Stalin, whose own tastes in literature and music were fairly conservative, had recently advocated "the creation of Soviet classics," a statement that many interpreted as a call for a more traditional musical idiom, and a gentle rebuke to modernists like Shostakovich. But nobody expected the editorial published in *Pravda* two days after Stalin's night at the opera. The essay, titled "Chaos Instead of Music," was an anti-modernist screed, and *Lady Macbeth* was its target. *Pravda* railed against the opera's "deliberate dissonance," which it called "a confused stream of sounds," further commenting that "[t]o follow this 'music' is most difficult; to remember it, impossible." Shostakovich had produced "a petty-bourgeois, 'formalist' attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. . . . a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly." The author was particularly unhappy with the famously bawdy sex scene, accompanied by Shostakovich's unmistakable musical rendition of *coitus*: "all this is coarse, primitive, and vulgar. The music quacks, grunts, and growls, and suffocates itself, in order to express the amatory scenes as naturalistically as possible." The editorial concluded with a clear explanation of Shostakovich's failure to compose music appropriate to the Socialist stage: "The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience expects and looks for in music. As though deliberately, he scribbles down his music, confusing all the sounds in such a way that his music would reach only the effete 'formalists' who had lost their wholesome taste. He ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all coarseness and wildness be abolished from

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9. Stanley Ashton, "Mechanics Coach the Ballet: Shostakovitch [*sic*] Credits Ball Bearing Workers for Success of New Production," *DW* 14 February 1936, 7.

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every corner of Soviet life." Ten days later, *Pravda* attacked *Limpid Stream* in similar terms.[10]

Presumably, Ashton's article on *Limpid Stream* had gone to press before news of Shostakovich's fall from grace reached the *Daily Worker* editorial office. But within two months, the *Worker*'s arts page was back in line with Moscow. In the essay "Soviet Music Comes of Age," I. F. Boross presented a revisionist version of the reception histories of *Lady Macbeth* and *Limpid Stream*. According to Boross, both works "met with universal rejection from both the more serious critics and the public" (Seeger, Thomson, and Kenneth Burke were apparently no longer considered "serious critics" by the doctrinaire left). Likewise, if the "workers from the Kaganovich Ball Bearing Plant" questioned their exclusion from the category of "the public," no-one mentioned it. In a classic bit of Stalinist obfuscation, Boross asserted that the controversy over Shostakovich's music "is not related to the question as to whether he is or is not a gifted composer. The question concerns his relationship to the epoch in which he is working, and to those masses . . . for whom we must work." Boross regretfully informed his readers that "Shostakovich remained imprisoned by the outlook of the jaded petty-bourgeois intellectuals who desire no longer to pursue the old paths but who can find no new paths." So, although Shostakovich had "sought to erect the structure of a new socialist music upon the foundations laid by Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Stravinsky, and others," he had also failed in finding "no new paths."[11] Such Orwellian double-speak became the order of the day in the American Communist press's discussion of Shostakovich, the arts in general, and indeed in its overall policy.

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10. "Chaos Instead of Music," in *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, Revised Edition, 1397-99; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The *Lady Macbeth* Affair," 187, 198, 205; Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88-90.

11. I. F. Boross, "Soviet Music Comes of Age," *DW* 7 April 1936, 7; see also Joshua Kunitz, "The Shostakovich 'Affair'," *NM* 19/11 (June 9, 1936): 15-18.

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For example, in November 1936, the *Daily Worker* critic Charles E. Dexter lamented the fact that in Nazi Germany, "[a]rt is no longer free and as freedom is as necessary to art as the breath in the flute, there is no longer art in Germany." In the next paragraph, he addressed the cancellation by Soviet authorities of the performance of an opera "based upon the coming of Christianity to Russia in the eleventh century." The two cases were totally different, wrote Dexter, for "Soviet criticism was directed against a flaw in the ideological basis of a theatrical performance. . . . The opera was withdrawn because it was *displeasing to the truth*, misleading, incorrectly planned, unfairly written and therefore not suited to continued presentation. . . . Truth, you see, is very precious in the land of Socialism. Truth is not to be permitted, not even opinion about Truth, in a land of Fascism [emphasis added]."[12] Apparently all officially-sanctioned Soviet art, even when fictional, expressed the Truth. Viewed in this light, the Soviet film "Beethoven Concerto," which told the story of "two young musical prodigies in the Soviet Union," could be cited as evidence of the fact that "[i]n the Soviet Union . . . child labor is unknown." The film, acclaimed by the *Daily Worker* as highly entertaining, was also indisputably "True," and predictably enough its American theatrical release occasioned a spate of articles about both the charms of the film and the glories of childhood in the Soviet Union.[13]

Throughout 1936 and 1937, as the Moscow trials eliminated all vocal opponents of Stalinism--along with countless other individuals--the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* continued to toe the party line unquestioningly, applauding even the grotesquerie of justice constituted by the trials. For some American leftists, however, the trials proved too much to swallow. Although Charles Seeger had stopped participating in the Collective before the trials became widely known, his son Peter attests that once Charles

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12. Charles E. Dexter, "Criticism in Three Lands And the Goal of Critics" *DW* 30 November 1936, 7.

13. "Child Labor And Music: Soviet Film Offers Contrasts Between U. S. S. R. and U. S. A.," *DW* 22 March 1937, 7; see also items from 23 March, 3 April, 13 April, 20 April, 28 April, and 12 May.

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became aware of them, he ended all relationships with the Communist Party.[14] Dewey, while never a Communist, had previously been mildly sympathetic to some aspects of Socialist government. But upon hearing of the trials, he led a "Commission of Inquiry" comprised of fellow artists and intellectuals appalled at the judicial horrors of Stalin's Russia. However, many prominent radicals remained staunchly pro-Soviet. The contrast between the homicidal Puritanism of the trials and the inclusive rhetoric of the Popular Front remained unresolved and unremarked on in the *Daily Worker*, which continued to publish articles touting Earl Browder's equation of Communism and Americanism.[15]

The language of the Popular Front was so effective, in fact, that it pervaded discourse among American artists regardless of Communist Party affiliations or lack thereof, as illustrated by the first ever American Artists' Congress, held in February 1936 in New York City. In front of an audience comprised of many of the nation's most prominent left-leaning artists and critics, the opening session, chaired by Lewis Mumford, announced the Congress slogan "For Peace, Democracy and Cultural Progress." Such terminology was common throughout the Congress, which resulted in the establishment of the League of American Artists.[16] The comparatively soft rhetoric of the Popular Front era was even more strikingly in evidence at the Second American Writers' Congress, which convened in the spring of 1937. There Communist Party head Earl Browder told the audience that "Communists ask for no privileged position among [writers'] ranks. We welcome the free cooperation of all parties. We are especially glad

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14. Pete Seeger, interview with the author, 16 January 2001.

15. For examples of both poles of pro-Soviet rhetoric see Mike Gold, "Trotzky--the Most Horrible Judas of All History," *DW* 12 February 1937, 2; Joshua Kunitz, "The End of the Road," *NM* 21/7 (November 10, 1936): 17-18 (the last in a series of articles he published on the trials); Joe Fields, "Communism . . . The Americanism of the 20th Century," *DW* 15 August 1936, 7.

16. "The Artists' Congress," *NM* 18/8 (February 18, 1936): 4-5; Caroline Evans, "American Artists Take Their Stand: Membership of New League is Roster of Foremost Names in Art," *DW* 19 February 1936, 7; Lincoln Rothschild, "Artists' Organizations of the Depression Decade," in *The New Deal Art Projects*, 210.

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to see this Congress, in contrast to that of last year, addressed by representatives of all political groups which place the preservation of democracy as the main order of the day."[17] Richard Pells describes the second AWC, which presented a sharp contrast to the shrill ideological tenor of the previous Congress:

> [At the second Congress of American Writers] there were few references to the creation of a "proletarian" culture; instead, speakers like Joseph Freeman, Newton Arvin, Granville Hicks, and Malcolm Cowley called for a "democratic" literature more in keeping with the need to protect America's traditional values against attacks from the Right. No longer must the writer expose and criticize the hypocrisies of the bourgeoisie or champion the cause of the workers. The major problem at present, they asserted, was how intellectuals could most effectively utilize their talents in the international contest between "Progress" and "Reaction."[18]

We will now explore the diverse ways in which New York's radical musicians entered into this contest.

Collective Apart

The musical dictates of Moscow were increasingly irrelevant to a number of composers, even those who continued to follow the broad platform of the Popular Front. Prominent leftist composers publicly embraced the new ethos of broad-based anti-fascism, as illustrated by the increasingly marginal role of the Collective in this period. By early 1936, two composers who had been central throughout the group's lifetime were

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17. Earl Browder, "Address to the Second Congress of American Writers," *DW* 5 June 1937, 7; Edwin Seaver, "Writers Lead Defense of American Culture," *DW* 9 June 1937, 7.

18. Pells, *Radical Visions*, 312.

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gone: Seeger was residing in Washington, and Cowell was in prison in California on morals charges. And although the group continued to draw new members, they were far less prominent than their predecessors; moreover, the group's remaining veterans spent progressively less time on Collective activities.

The change can be seen by comparing two concerts of works by the Collective from 1936. A program given in February was mostly comprised of older music from the two *Workers Songbooks*. Of the six new pieces on the program, four were children's songs by Adohmyan, Siegmeister, Haufrecht, and a mysterious "Clayton." The remaining two works, which reviewer M. M. (likely either Max Margulis or Martin McCall) called "the essential accomplishment of the Collective's third year," were Siegmeister's String Quartet and Blitzstein's "Sketch No. 1." M. M. likened the quartet to the music of Alban Berg, and noted similarities between Blitzstein's jazz-inflected "Sketch" and the musical theater of Kurt Weill. It is possible that the reviewer considered the program's diversity to be evidence of the liberating effects of the Popular Front on active composers; in terms of both genre and idiom, Siegmeister and Blitzstein diverged from the relatively defined mass-song template laid out in *Workers Songbook No. 2* the previous spring. At any rate, throughout his overwhelmingly positive review, the critic remained conspicuously silent on the relationship between the musical materials on display and political ideology.[19]

This focus on musical craft, rather than stylistic correctness, also characterized M. M.'s review of the Collective's June program. In this case, however, his verdict was almost entirely negative. Four new composers were represented on the program, none of whom were comparable in stature (then or now) to such regulars as Blitzstein, Siegmeister, and Adohmyan, and whereas all of these composers had been represented on the February program, none played any role four months later. Given the relatively high artistic level that the earlier generation of compositional radicals had established, it was

19. M. M., "The Composers Collective of New York," *DW* 5 March 1936, 7.

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perhaps inevitable that the compositions of Harold Brown, Kenneth Hunter, Mark Severn, and Solomon Pimsleur would meet with harsher criticism. The kindest words were reserved for Brown's String Quintet, which "provided the [program's] most solid material, manifesting . . . an underlying critical intelligence." Nevertheless, Brown's piece "displayed less fulfillment than promise," and was deeply flawed. Similarly, Severn's four *Songs of Protest* were uneven but not unpromising, "dramatic, but in terms of speech rather than of music." Severn's *May First* (see example 6.1), the *Daily Worker*'s third annual "Song for May Day" (following Copland's *Into the Streets* and Siegmeister's *First of May*), illustrates the reviewer's complaints--the repeated rhythmic pattern lends a certain oratorical weight to a text, attributed to Madge Kay, that is otherwise standard Communist boilerplate. However, Severn's setting is virtually devoid of melodic or harmonic interest. M. M. was even more dismissive of Hunter's five *Children's Songs* and Pimsleur's two works for string quartet. The former merited all of two sentences, the second of which informed readers that "[c]hildren are severe critics, and the transparent songs were a serious underestimation." The critic said little about Pimsleur's setting of a Keats sonnet, and his discussion of the composer's *Beethovenesque Sonata*, while more extensive, was also bitterly vitriolic, terming the work "pedantic, archaeological and sterile, a monstrous and vulgar version of Beethoven, overweighed with a museum of effects and tricks culled indiscriminately from the great composer's . . . works."[20] However, while M. M. was unsparing in his criticism of the Collective's latest work, he offered no explanations for the group's demise.

Despite this lack of analysis, the review does allude, if only in passing, to a major proximate cause of the Collective's declining standards. In his introductory paragraph, the reviewer referred to the "Composers' Collective of the American Music Alliance." Although in 1935 the Collective's members had preferred to maintain their organizational

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20. M. M., "New Composers' Concert," *DW* 26 June 1936, 7.

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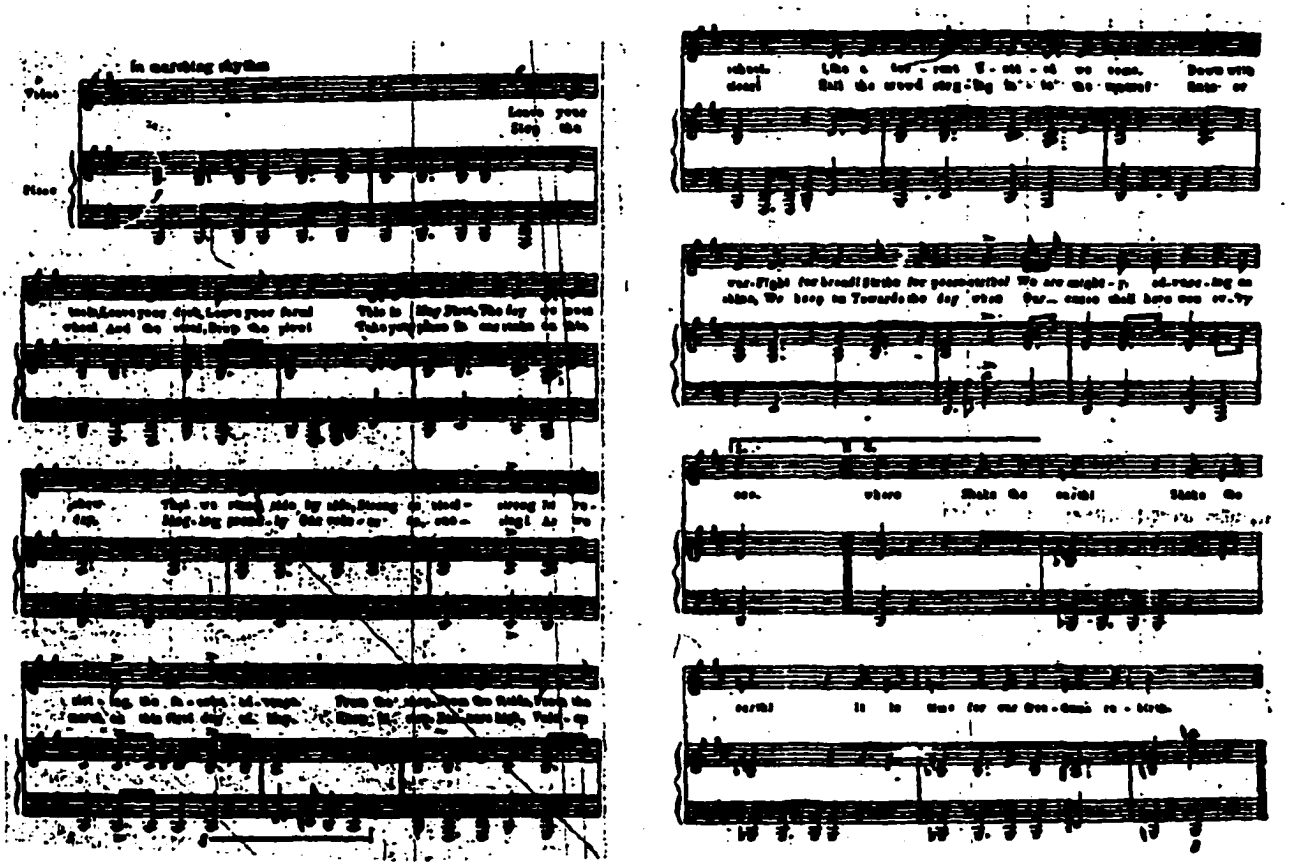
Example 6.1: Mark Severn , "May First"[21]



autonomy from the Pierre Degeyter Club, such solitary behavior flew in the face of Popular Front orthodoxy; niche groups like the Collective, which the leftist press had formerly portrayed as a Soviet-style cadre of experts who would march at the head of the nation's worker musicians, did not exactly exemplify Popular Front inclusiveness. In order to remedy this problem, the Collective seems to have affiliated itself with the American Music Alliance, the very name of which bespoke the politics of the Popular Front.[22]

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21. *DW* 16 April 1936, 7.

22. Margulis, "New Composers'."

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Such cosmetic changes were not sufficient, however, to bring the Collective back into the mainstream of leftist musical thought. The group's problem was a fundamental one: for all its rhetorical radicalism, the Collective was predicated on a traditional high-art notion of the compositional craft; it was a co-operative that consisted entirely of musical elites. Meanwhile, during the Popular Front period the emphasis of the Workers Music League and allied groups shifted from the composition of mass-songs to their use by performers, both professional and (especially) amateur. Not surprisingly, Eisler was at the forefront of the new interest in proletarian music-making. In December 1935, Eisler wrote that "[w]hen [the composer] understands that the present social form has produced musical barbarism, he will seek to change it." However, Eisler no longer believed--if indeed he ever had--that the mere composition of successful proletarian songs would be sufficient to effect desired changes: "[the composer] cannot carry on this struggle alone, but must ally himself with those others who suffer under the present system of society and fight against it. Here is the tie between the progressive intellectual scholar, doctor, engineer, artist and the workers."[23] Here, too, was the tie between composer, performer, and audience, a nexus in the creation of a vital new musical culture.

A pair of articles published in the *Daily Worker* in February 1936 stressed Eisler's awareness of this crucial relationship. In a profile of the Daily Worker Chorus, directed by Siegmeister, author Sidney Street noted Eisler's favorable impressions of a rehearsal by the group. Speaking to the singers, Eisler "urged the workers of the chorus to get more members [and] stressed the value of workers singing."[24] One week later, Eisler was mentioned in a portrait of Lahn Adohmyan's New Singers, which had performed on the Collective's programs in 1935 and February 1936, the same month in which they gave

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23. Hanns Eisler, "The Composer in Society," *DW* 5 December 1935, 7.

24. Sidney Street, "The Moon, Workers, and Song," *DW* 17 February 1936, 7.

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the American premiere of Eisler's concert adaptation of *The Mother*. When asked to evaluate the New Singers, Eisler positively gushed:

> The New Singers play an extraordinarily important role in the American music movement. This is the first time that an English-speaking chorus has the qualities which rank it with the professional organizations, both musically and politically for its progressiveness. The influence of this type of chorus can be and is already very important. The chorus . . . is in position to perform the most difficult left music. But not only this. It can show how the simple things should be done. The chorus is entitled to the honorable name of Advance Guard![25]

Eisler's plaudits were echoed several months later by M. M., who called the New Singers "a first-rate ensemble" and praised both the technical quality and the musical diversity of their 3 May performance, which included a number of Brecht-Eisler pieces, excerpts from *Lady Macbeth*, two of Gellert's "Negro Songs of Protest," and selections by Robinson and Alex North from *Workers Songbook No. 2*.[26] Of course, the need for workers choruses had long been apparent to anyone who bothered to take the time to ponder the eventual fate of proletarian songs. That the Popular Front had stimulated the actual musical involvement of workers was more clearly demonstrated by the extensive coverage the *Daily Worker* afforded to the International Workers Order Symphony Orchestra. Sidney Street wrote in February 1936 that the orchestra, established just two

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25. Anita Garett, "Eisler Praises Chorus Group," *DW* 24 February 1936, 7; "'Mother' Cantata," *DW* 31 January 1936, 7.

26. M. M., "Music," *DW* 8 May 1936, 7.

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years earlier, "has created a following among the workers."[27] Whether or not that is true, it had won over the *Daily Worker*'s critics, who repeated the same inspirational tale of real-life worker musicians in every article about the group. In stark contrast to earlier complaints about the programming of bourgeois concert-music at workers' events, the critics now praised performances of music by Schubert, Beethoven, and Anton Rubinstein without ideological reservations.

The vogue for broad-based music cooperatives led, predictably enough, to the establishment of a new catchall group. The United Music League (UML), described by Eisler as "a broad federation of music societies and organizations," was formed in January 1936, and soon replaced the Collective as home to most of New York's preeminent leftist composers. Founded under the rubric of the Workers' Music League, the UML initially boasted a membership including the New Singers, I. W. O. Band, Daily Worker Chorus, as well as other performing groups. Also on the roster were the Downtown Music School and the Composers Collective. Clearly, education and composition figured in the group's plans, but now the balance of power rested with performers. This was further underlined by the first project undertaken by the UML. Whereas the Collective had introduced itself to the musical public with the publication of *Workers Songbook No. 1*, the UML's first meeting included the decision to plan "a huge music festival" to be held in New York that May.[28]

Some time in the intervening months, the United Music League became the American Music League, but the change was merely cosmetic; the group remained committed to "develop[ing] a healthy musical life in America on the basis of cooperation between professional musicians (performers, composers, musicologists) and people's

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27. Sidney Street, "Symphony Orchestra Built by Workers," *DW* 27 February 1936, 7; M. M., "I. W. O. Symphony Orchestra," *DW* 13 March 1936, 7; Sam Roberts, "Workers Build I. W. O. Band," *DW* 10 February 1937, 7.

28. H[anns] E[isler], "A New Music League," *DW* 10 January 1936, 7.

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music organizations, and to defend[ing] musical culture against the dangers of fascism, censorship and war."[29] The festival also went ahead as planned, with performances of music including choral pieces by Eisler, a Bernard Wagenaar String Quartet, "Negro Songs of Protest," solo piano music by Copland and Norman Cazden, and unspecified "native American [not in the sense of American Indians] songs." Nearly two dozen different performers were involved, among them ten choruses, two bands, two orchestras, vocal soloists, a string quartet, and pianists Cazden and Copland. According to the *Daily Worker*, both sessions were well-attended, and the Spring Festival "marked the first *practical* step toward a people's music movement in America" [emphasis added]. Other, similar steps followed. In January 1937, for instance, the League presented a concert of "War and Anti-War Music," and announced plans for an upcoming performance of music that had been forbidden by the German government.[30]

Of course, in the electronic age, the live concert was just one--perhaps not even the most effective--medium for the performance and dissemination of "people's music." Although Eisler had asserted, in his "Reflections on the Future of the Composer," that broadcast and recording technologies had negatively affected the technical skills of young composers, he also recognized the positive potential of these new means of dissemination. In December 1935, even as *The Mother* was concluding its lackluster run in New York, Eisler sought to exploit this potential, selecting four of his songs to be included on what the *Daily Worker* called "the first American phonograph discs to bear working class and revolutionary songs." The sessions, organized by the Friends of the Workers School, produced six sides: Eisler's "United Front," "Rise Up (Comintern)," "In

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29. According to a *Daily Worker* profile, the group had played a significant role in the fight against Furtwängler's appointment. M. M., "Festival of Music League to Open Here Tomorrow," *DW* 14 May 1936, 7. Significantly, although the AML was comprised of both individuals and groups with Communist affiliations, the League itself seems not to have been officially tied to the CPUSA.

30. M. M., "American Music League Festival," *DW* 22 May 1936, 7; Martin McCall, "War, Anti-War Music Featured," *DW* 22 January 1937, 7.

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Praise of Learning," and "Forward, We've Not Forgotten" were performed by Eisler's frequent collaborator, baritone Mordecai Bauman, accompanied by Blitzstein; baritone Felix Groveman joined Blitzstein in performing Maurice Sugar's "Soup Song"; and both singers assisted the New Singers in recording the "Internationale." Released by the Timely Recording Company, the records were enthusiastically welcomed by the *Daily Worker*. In fact, that paper's critic was convinced of the records' great significance, assuring readers that "[t]he lack of a phonograph or a radio pick-up should in no way deter workers from owning and spreading these songs wherever they may be." Apparently, the performances were powerful enough to enlighten their purchasers by osmosis.[31]

But if hearing the performances was no longer absolutely necessary, it nevertheless remained desirable. In order to introduce workers to the new records of proletarian music, the Friends of the Workers' School sponsored a release party, directed by Eisler and held at Webster Hall. The program was organized in a manner that was consistent with the practices of the early period of the recording industry. Each song was presented twice, first in a live rendition by the performers who had recorded it, then in its recorded form, via an amplified phonograph.[32] The recordings must have been at least a moderate success for Timely Records, because in the spring of 1937 the company released three more records of leftist music. This time, the repertoire consisted of traditional union songs including "Hold the Fort," "We Shall Not Be Moved," and "Casey Jones," performed by Bauman and the Manhattan Chorus, which was directed by Siegmeister.[33]

At the same time, the music of New York's radical composers was making its way onto the airwaves. In early February 1936, WEVD broadcast a live performance by the

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31. A. G., "Working Class Song Records," *DW* 19 December 1935, 7; see also Gareth Ross, "The Phonograph and Labor," *NM* 18/9 (February 25, 1936): 29.

32. M. M., "Revolutionary Songs," *DW* 26 December 1935, 7.

33. "On the Records," *DW* 4 June 1937, 7; Martin McCall, "Music," *DW* 24 June 1937, 7.

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New Singers of songs by composers including Davidenko, Adohmyan, Copland, Siegmeister, and Eisler. According to the *Daily Worker*, the program was the first broadcast of such material in the history of American radio. Later that year, another broadcast--the station was not specified by the *Daily Worker*--featured Bauman performing songs of Eisler.[34]

The American Music League played no official role in organizing the recordings, and if it was involved in the broadcasts, no mention was made. But the group's inclusive, Popular Front ethos--so at odds with the intimidating music of the first *Workers Songbook* and the abstract, theoretical discussions of mass music that had characterized the Collective for most of its existence--was unmistakably present in all of these undertakings. The composers' new credo was as much E. M. Forster as V. I. Lenin: "Only connect" had become their watchword.

Composing the Popular Front

Just as the AML initially included the Collective and drew most of that group's most prominent members into its orbit, the new League's leaders retained those features of the Collective that had the greatest likelihood of reaching the public. Chief among these was the publication of criticism, and in this spirit the AML produced *Unison*, the group's official organ. The first issue of *Unison*, which was made available at the inaugural Spring Festival in May 1936, opened with a mission statement for the AML. In its general outlines, the program echoed similar statements from *Music Vanguard*, the Composers Collective bylaws, and the program of the First Workers Music Olympiad. However, the means by which League proposed to create a vital leftist musical culture was altogether new, showing a decided lack of interest in both theoretical discussions of musical proletarianism and the composition of new proletarian music. The closest that

34. "Workers' Songs Broadcast," *DW* 31 January 1936, 7; "Eisler Songs Heard on the Air," *DW* 10 October 1936, 7.

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Unison came to advocating Collective-style composition was its avowed (if amorphous) intentions "[t]o guide and further the development of an American music addressed to the people, reflecting their lives, interests and problems" and "[t]o defend musical culture against fascism, censorship and war." Far more concrete were the League's plans "to encourage the highest type of amateur musical activities among wide numbers of people . . . to encourage the presentation of, and to create organized audiences for, concerts presenting the best music of the past and present at prices within the reach of everyone . . . [and t]o collect, study and popularize American folk music and its traditions."[35]

This editorial slant was evident in the first issue, which featured articles on the New Singers, the Downtown Music School, and the fight against the Furtwängler appointment. Also included were responses by Blitzstein, Riegger, and Siegmeister to a questionnaire about "The Composer and His Audience," a selection from Gellert's collection of "Negro Songs of Protest," and a notice that Cowell's *New Music* series was releasing a commercial recording of Siegmeister's "Strange Funeral at Braddock." The only item published in the inaugural issue that could not be considered promotional material for the League or one of its constituents was an article on Federal One, which the author asserted fulfilled "a threefold purpose: the inception of a serious and planned effort to bring America's musical culture, with its own indigenous characteristics, into step with that of Europe; the enjoyment of music by large numbers of people who could not otherwise afford it; and the giving of at least temporary security to thousands of musicians."[36]

The second issue of *Unison*, published in June, offered more of the same. In addition to an obligatory positive review of the Spring Festival, readers were offered another Gellert song, as well as "J. Fairbanks's" (Henry Leland Clarke's) response to the "Composer and His Audience" questionnaire. An article on the Collective touted both

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35. "The League Looks Ahead," *Unison* 1/1 (May 1936): 1.

36. "Musicians on W. P. A.: 'Boondoggling' or Vital Constructive Achievement?," *Unison* 1/1 (May 1936): 2.

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the group's planned "regular concerts" and the its compositional legacy, and announced that future concerts would include "An Evening on the Social Back-ground of American Music" with participants including W. C. Handy, Will Geer, and Lawrence Gellert, and "An Evening of Workers Music of all Countries."[37]

Despite the *Unison* editorial board's apparent aversion to Carl Sands-style proletarian musicology, AML was at least tangentially involved in disseminating such writings. In mid-1936, the Downtown Music School--by now an official affiliate of the AML--issued its first publication, a pamphlet by Eisler (and based on lectures he had given the the New School) called *The Crisis in Music*. This publications offered nothing new to readers of Eisler's previous criticism, but was instead a synthesis of much of his recent thought. That the pamphlet was highly praised in both the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* may demonstrate that the rebellious spirit that had animated the Collective in its early years was not completely dead.[38] However, Eisler's extended essay was exceptional among the published products of the AML, which tended more towards the uncritical profiles of allied groups and individuals than towards Eisler's more theoretical perspective. One of the primary goals of the AML was the education of sympathetic workers, and the League's directors seemingly felt that this goal was more easily achieved by information-intensive profiles than by esoteric discussions of musical technique *a la* "On Proletarian Music."

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37. "The Composers' Collective of N. Y.," *Unison* 1/2 (June 1936): 3. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the article is the complete absence of Seeger's name. The essay twice refers to the previously unheard of "Leon Charles," mentioning him as both a founder and a one-time member of the group, and it seems likely that "Leon Charles" was Seeger. The name would, like "Carl Sands," have been a pseudonym based on the actual Seeger's initials (Charles Louis), but because it was not attached to any published criticism or music, it would have been much more difficult to tie to Seeger, who was by then employed by the government and may thus have desired greater anonymity than was afforded him by "Carl Sands."

38. M. M., "The Crisis In Music" [review], *DW* 25 July 1936, 7; Marc Blitzstein, "Music Manifesto," *NM* 19/13 (June 23, 1936): 28.

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The pedagogical emphasis of the AML was clearly expressed in the introductory essay from the first issue of *Unison*. This concern (as well as the need for a steady paycheck) led affiliated composers to continue in their capacities as lecturers and teachers. By the autumn of 1936, the Downtown Music School--which had previously engaged Copland and Eisler (and published the latter's pamphlet) and was an official constituent of the AML--boasted a faculty that included such luminaries of the musical left as Adohmyan, Siegmeister, Riegger, and Blitzstein.[39]

This concern for musical education and communication was, of course, a longstanding matter of interest for composers in the AML orbit. However, the Popular Front period witnessed an acceleration of the search for a rapport with the more general public. To some extent, this may have been simple coincidence--for example, Copland, who was at least nominally involved in the AML, had expressed his desire for such a relationship for several years, in both his music and his correspondence. In 1936, he completed work on *El Salon Mexico*, a composition begun three years earlier following his first visit to Mexico. The piece represented a clear advance in Copland's ongoing trend towards greater accessibility, and was marked by a return to the vernacular materials that had characterized his great works of the mid-Twenties, such as the Piano Concerto and *Music for the Theatre*. But whereas these earlier pieces had drawn on African-American jazz, in *El Salon*, Copland drew on Mexican vernacular musical idioms. In addition, *El Salon Mexico* was consistently more harmonically consonant and melodically conventional than any of his previous music, other than his pieces for students. Of course, all the rough edges of Copland's earlier style had not been worn away--throughout *El Salon*, surprising stops and starts, rhythmic wrinkles, and unexpected "wrong" notes illustrate that Copland was not sacrificing uniqueness for the sake of popular appeal. Perhaps the closest contemporary analogue was the music of

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39. "Downtown Music School," *DW* 9 September 1936, 7.

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Shostakovich, which similarly infused a traditional harmonic idiom with allusions to vernacular styles and modernist quirks. The most obvious difference between the two is one of temperament. At the risk of resorting to musical/national stereotypes, Shostakovich's mordant wit and emotional pathos display a sensibility that seems quintessentially Russian, whereas the buoyant optimism and gentler humor of Copland's new, populist style are characteristically American.

Copland's Americanism was even more evident in his next large piece, in which he drew for the first time on the repertoire of Anglo-American folksong. *The Second Hurricane*, designated "A Play-Opera," was composed, like *What Do We Plant?* (discussed Ch. 4, pp. 185-86) and *The Pioneers*, for the Henry Street Settlement. Intended for performance by high school students, the piece was didactic in both its music and its libretto, written by Edwin Denby. Denby's story was a paean to the virtues of collectivism. Its protagonists are a group of high school students engaged in a good work, traveling to a town stricken by floods. The students have volunteered to deliver food to the victims, but their plane goes down *en route*, and they are stranded in the path of an oncoming hurricane. After much bickering and quarreling, they separate, but they gradually reunite, in the process learning the importance of cooperation. The morality-play aspect of *Second Hurricane* is emphasized by the presence of two choruses, a "grown-up chorus" that comments on the action, first chiding the children for their folly and then celebrating their growth, and a "pupil's chorus," which repeatedly questions its adult counterpart.

Throughout, Denby's libretto is informal in tone; the choruses engage in conversation with one another, and the characters' onstage dialogue is casual and colloquial. Copland's score is similarly light. The harmonic idiom is rather simple, his characteristic rhythmic complexity is noticeably muted, and most of the melodies are genially unmemorable--a perfect counterpart for Denby's text. In short, the music of *Second Hurricane* is like that of Copland's earlier pieces for the Henry Street Settlement,

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remarkable more for its craft than for its inventiveness. To twenty-first century ears, both the musical and verbal idioms sound rather dated: the former seems banal, particularly when considered in the larger context of Copland's *oeuvre*; and the libretto sounds like the attempt of a slightly uncool adult to prove that he understands "kids today" (which, it could be argued, is exactly what *Second Hurricane* was).

In the choral number "How Childish They Are" (see ex. 6.2), the primary, descending motive (marked "A") is neither rhythmically nor melodically distinguishable from schoolyard song; while this may be a fine bit of text-painting, it does not make for much musical interest. Similarly, when Copland makes the unorthodox move to the flatted-seventh (marked "B"), its return to the tonic half a measure early seems abrupt and forced. This may be intentional, meant to impart a questioning inflection to match the text, but it is unconvincing musically. Moreover, this minor wrinkle is the most significant instance in the song of Copland's usual rhythmic flair. It is rather difficult to imagine what about the piece inspired *Daily Worker* music editor Martin McCall to consider it "the richest achievement in current American composition."[40]

However, there is one musical element that merits specific comment. The children, still stranded despite their renewed sense of unity, decide to sing a song to lift their spirits. Their choice of material is quite interesting. Rather than opting for a piece of contemporary popular music, or for a piece of new music composed for *Second Hurricane*, or even for a well-known folksong, they decide to sing "The Capture of Burgoyne," an American folksong about the Revolutionary War. While this was probably an unlikely choice for a group of American teenagers during the Depression, it illustrates a key strategy of the Popular Front left.

Rhetorically, the populist, patriotic strain of leftism frequently involved the co-opting of iconic figures from the American pantheon. American Communists repeatedly

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40. Martin McCall, "Music," *DW* 8 May 1937, 7.

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Example 6.2: Aaron Copland, "How Childish They Are" (mm. 1-20)[41]

41. *The Second Hurricane: A Play-Opera for High School Performance*, libretto by Edwin Denby, music by Aaron Copland (Boston: C. C. Birchard, 1938).

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stressed the deep kinship between their political platforms and those of the great heroes of the past. Abraham Lincoln was perhaps the individual most often deployed in this sense, quoted by Earl Browder and celebrated in Carl Sandburg's mammoth biography, among other places. But not far behind were the heroes of the American Revolution. Throughout the Popular Front years, the *Daily Worker* ran feature articles on the proto-Popular Front politics of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Nathan Hale, and Patrick Henry, among others. Like the Communists, they were for liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the struggle against colonial Britain was analogous to the contemporary battle against fascist oppression. So when the children of *Second Hurricane* cemented their unity by singing "The Capture of Burgoyne," they were merely making explicit the inherent connection between the values of America's mythical founders and those held by the Depression-era left.

That they did so by performing an authentic tune from the Revolutionary War period, rather than a contemporary song *about* the subject, was indicative of the honored place occupied by folk culture on the American left. The vogue for American folk culture, previously confined largely to products of contemporary oppressed groups--primarily African-Americans and poor whites--had been expanded to include virtually any article of authentic Americana. The folksong, which was in the process of being defined as orally transmitted music sung by "the people" (as opposed to "the workers"), was thus the Popular Front vehicle *par excellence*. The appeal of folksongs transcended political divisions in this period, as the growing numbers of non-leftist folksong collections made clear. Of course, musical activists were not deterred by the ostensible neutrality of such anthologies; rather, they appropriated the songs for their own purposes, attempting to make the songs living elements, once again, of American political culture. For example, Copland discovered "The Capture of Burgoyne" in a book issued by Brown

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University, called *Old American Songs*.[42] Similarly, in September 1937, the *Daily Worker* reproduced a selection from *The Music That Washington Knew*, without any explanation of the song's contemporary relevance; apparently no such clarification was needed (see ex. 6.3). As we shall now see, Copland's new respect for folk sources was shared by most of his colleagues in the leftist musical establishment.

From the Ashes of the Old . . .

The widespread popularity of folksong was clearly evident on the arts page of the *Daily Worker*. Whereas, in earlier years, songs had been presented complete with musical notation, in August 1936 a selection of militant songs offered by the American League Against War and Fascism were presented simply with lyrics and verbal indications of the tune to be sung. This was surely sufficient in the case of a traditional union song like "We Shall Not Be Moved," which was presented with additional, topical lyrics--new lines included "We shall not die for Wall Street," "When they draft us for the Army," and "Let Hearst with lies assail us" — incorporated into the song's basic text. Beneath the song's title was the (somewhat superfluous) indication "Tune--'We Shall Not Be Moved'." Such a policy was rather more perplexing, however, in the case of the new song "Ain't Goin' to Study War No More," which readers were informed had an "Original tune."[43] Nevertheless, even when the bare words may not have been sufficient, the decision to reproduce songs in this manner clearly illustrated what was perceived to be the greatest asset of folksongs as political tools: they could be easily learned and sung by

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42. This trend did not start with Copland and Thomson. Of their predecessors, Maurice Gottschalk and Charles Ives are only the two best-known composers who employed folk and vernacular sources. To this group could be added many more, both famous--Edward MacDowell--and the not-so-famous, in the case of John Powell. On Powell's use of folk music in his compositions, see L. Moody Simms, Jr., "Folk Music in America: John Powell and the 'National Musical Idiom'," *Journal of Popular Culture* 7/3 (Winter 1973): 510-15.

43. "Songs for the March," *DW* 22 August 1936, 7.

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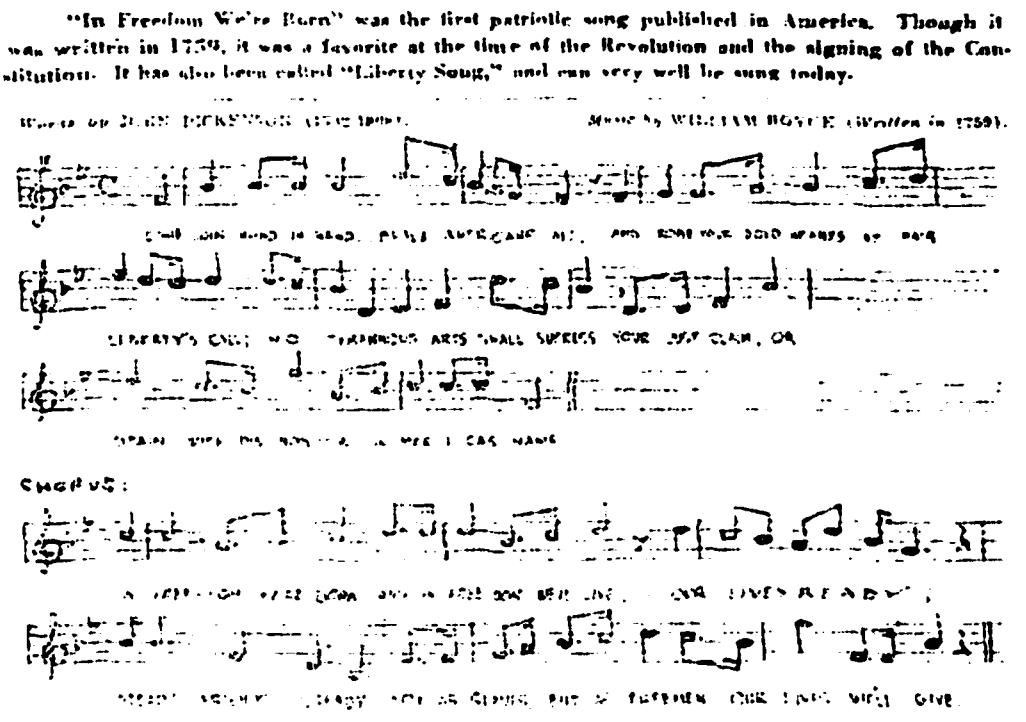
Example 6.3: "In Freedom We're Born"[44]



amateurs unable to read musical notation. The significance of collected, pre-existing music was exemplified by the *Daily Worker*'s 1936 May Day edition. The previous two years, the paper had featured new songs by Copland and Siegmeister, but in 1936, Mark Severn's "May First" was presented in late April. On the first May Day of the Popular Front era, the *Daily Worker* instead provided the lyrics to a number of familiar songs, under the caption "You Know the Melodies--Here Are the Words."[45]

Of course, notated editions of folksongs remained an important part of the equation. The AML, which had stated its intention to "collect, study and popularize American folk music and its traditions," adopted a conventional approach to the dissemination of

44. *DW* 17 September 1937. Curiously, despite Copland's source for the song, its composer, William Boyce, was British and not American.

45. "Songs to Sing While Marching," *DW* 1 May 1936, 7.

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folksong.[46] In announcing the League's inaugural Spring Festival, the *Daily Worker* had noted the AML's plans to publish two collections of traditional songs in the near future, one a compendium of Lawrence Gellert's "Negro Songs of Protest," the other "a volume of American Labor Songs." Several months later, the second issue of *Unison* heralded the imminent publication of "a new and fascinating collection of American folk songs and workers' songs, many of them never before published." The collection described was to include "Union Songs, Farmers' Songs, Songs of the Abolitionists, Anti-War Songs, etc.," and was slated for publication on September 1 under the title *America Sings*.[47]

As described in *Unison*, the forthcoming volume sounded remarkably similar to the collection announced by Seeger in the *Daily Worker* in November 1935. In the intervening months, the Collective had virtually dissolved, but it seems to have bequeathed its project to the AML: although no volume fitting the descriptions offered in *Daily Worker* was published in 1936, in January 1937 the Workers' Library produced *Songs of the People*, which was most likely the culmination of both the Collective and the AML's endeavors. As advertised, *Songs of the People* (see appendix for Table of Contents) was a collection comprised entirely of pre-existing music arranged (musically and graphically) to facilitate amateur performance. Choruses could choose from a wide variety of material, running the gamut from Eisler's "In Praise of Learning" to Joe Hill's "Casey Jones." The bulk of the selections were union standards like "We Shall Not Be Moved" (with alternate lyrics), "Hold the Fort," and "Get Me Out My Union Card," although there were also several selections from the earlier *Workers Songbooks*. The balance of the volume consisted of Wobbly-style borrowings, songs that set new, militant lyrics to familiar, non-political tunes.

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46. "The League Looks Ahead," 1.

47. M. M., "Festival of Music League," 7; *Unison* 1/2 (June 1936): 2.

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Songs of the People, which was initially conceived in late 1935 during the early days of the Popular Front, remained relevant in 1937. Frederick Adam, reviewing the collection in the *Daily Worker*, offered as plain an exposition of the patriotic, folk-centered musical philosophy of the Popular Front as can be found. Adam saw the book as a rebuke to those who asserted that Americans "are not naturally a musical people." His response to the Europhile tendencies of musical academics, symphony orchestras, and their audiences, was forthright and defiant:

> If we consider American musical life to consist exclusively of what goes on in concert halls and opera houses, the thesis [of America's lack of musicality] stands. But if we step outside these sacrosanct precincts and wander along the docks, into mines, mills, cotton fields, if we step into union meeting halls, or factories where a sit-down strike is in progress, we shall find that we have a different story to tell.
>
> America has a musical life of its own, but a life that nobody ever thought it worthwhile to talk about or write down. This life does not concern our music critics nor those who sit on the Board of the Metropolitan or the Philharmonic. In fact, in many cases, this real American music may be dangerous to these gentlemen. Sometimes it requires courage to sing some of these songs, let alone collect and print them.[48]

By some strange alchemy, the book under review thus managed to be at once patriotic and politically rebellious, its very assemblage an act of bravery. This combination, while not apparently a natural one, has in fact been cited as a characteristic trait of 1930s culture. Michael Kammen has written that "[s]urely one of the most striking

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48. Frederick Adam, "Folk Songs of the People," *DW* 30 January 1937, 7.

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developments of the 1930s, one that cannot be emphasized too vigorously, is that patriotism and populism came to be joined—a combination that had not consistently occurred before because populists more often than not voiced major grievances against the regime."[49]

But even ignoring the inconsistencies inherent in this political philosophy--and despite the puffery of Adam's praising the compilers of *Songs of the People* for their courage--there is a serious paradox at the heart of Adam's definition of folksongs with regard to *Songs of the People*. One of the primary characteristics of folksong cited here is its origin in oral tradition. When Adam wrote of music that "nobody ever thought . . . to write down," he implied that the orality of the music was an incidental, rather than an essential, characteristic of the *repertoire*. While this separation of music from its origins was a necessary step if folk music was to be adopted at all, it still ignores a central difficulty that confronts folksong collectors: the act of recording an orally transmitted artwork, whether a song, a poem, or a Homeric epic, is virtually guaranteed to change how that artwork functions. Oral traditions are flexible. The Lomaxes had acknowledged this fact by seeking out informants who were isolated from contemporary American popular culture--they wanted to record songs at a particular stage in their development. Conversely, once they committed the songs to paper, they had in some sense concretized that song; variants certainly remained permissible in the use of a "singing book," but they would now be considered variants from a clearly defined text.

Likewise, notated and unnotated musics typically inhabit different cultural roles. When Cowell celebrated "Useful Music" on a picket line, he was in fact celebrating music-making that was quintessentially oral. On the other hand, the primary flaw of Copland's "Into the Streets," as Seeger had pointed out, was that it was unlikely to be used in such a manner; it was a paradigmatic example of written music. All of this is not

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49. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 464.

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to say that the boundary between the oral and written worlds is fixed and impermeable. To the contrary, it is always shifting, and individual songs may exist on either side of the divide at different times, or even on both sides simultaneously. Thus, Oscar Brand has written that the key question to ask in regard to a song's folk status is "'[w]here did the song go after the moment of composition?'"[50] Obviously, in a 500-word review, no critic can be expected to address such complex issues in depth, and Adam's passing statement regarding orality was not in itself very objectionable. However, it was symptomatic of an aesthetic confusion that had bedeviled the left throughout the Depression.

The central issue here was ambiguity about the role of composition and composers. By 1936, the left's musical pendulum had swung from the Collective's focus on composition to the disregard of composition shown by the AML. Because the anti-modernist aspects of folksong that most appealed to writers like Adam were linked to its orality, and because oppositional thinking remained a characteristic of leftist criticism, contemporary composers became convenient punching bags. But some recognized that this was not a necessary next step. Rejecting Adam's anti-compositional bias as unnecessarily rigid, they advocated a path that combined the best aspects of both camps--the control that came from composing songs specifically tailored to the contemporary situation, and the widespread influence of oral culture. In *The Second Hurricane*, Copland made a tentative first step in offering a middle road, infusing a composed work with collected material, but his "Play-Opera" was obviously never intended to be used in the same way that a folksong could be used; picket lines are not likely to contain stage sets and orchestra pits, and *Hurricane* remains a cultivated work with folk elements. However, many of Copland's leftist colleagues had different plans for folk music; what they most wanted to do was to learn from the folk repertoire how they could write new

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50. Brand, *Ballad Mongers*, 5.

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songs that would be reabsorbed into oral culture, thus shaping that culture and society. In other words, they wanted to make their own folksongs.

Creating Folk Culture

One of the first to advocate this approach was the *Daily Worker*'s resident ideological gadfly, Michael Gold. Gold rarely wrote on music; his column, "Change the World," dealt much more frequently with politics and literature. Originally a novelist and playwright--he was a founding member of the Provincetown Theatre, whose most famous alumnus was Eugene O'Neill--Gold had become perhaps the best-known cultural critic on the far left. In this role, he was more passionate than insightful, and he often went to ludicrous lengths to justify radical shifts in Communist Party doctrine. At the 1935 American Writers Congress, he had been one of the harshest critics of Kenneth Burke's address. Within a few months, he was one of the most outspoken proponents of the Popular Front. Similarly, Gold had, in the past, offered occasional criticisms of mass musical culture, particularly jazz. But in his "Change the World" column of 1 January 1936, Gold offered a ringing endorsement of such music. He did so, characteristically, by attacking--albeit in uncharacteristically tepid language--the music and music criticism of the Collective.

After praising the "useful and noteworthy work" of the Collective, Gold cautioned that "our comrades, the composers of the Workers' Music League and the Pierre Degeyter club, have been apt to fall into sectarianism." As an example of this behavior, Gold cited Seeger's year-old review of the Auvilles' songbook, in which he had welcomed the book as a positive step but criticized the musical idiom used throughout. Unfortunately, in Gold's view, Seeger "bore down on [the Auvilles' book] with all the heavy thunder of professional aestheticism," prompting Gold to write, "Comrade Sands, I think you have missed the point. It is sectarian and utopian to use Arnold Schoenberg or Stravinsky as a yardstick by which to measure working class music." Of course, Seeger had done

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nothing of the sort; his primary criticism of the Auvilles' songs was that they had "nothing in common with American folk-music, and, "except for being twenty years too old, [are] typical Tin Pan Alley stuff." In Gold's opinion, on the other hand, the songs of Ray and Lida Auville were "the real thing, folk song in the making, workers' music coming right out of the soil."[51]

To some extent, this was an argument about taste, and therefore resisted any definitive resolution. But it was also an argument about the definition of folksong. Seeger's judgement was based on his musical evaluation of the book under review. In contrast, Gold's praise for the Auvilles dealt almost exclusively with performance practice, as the following passage illustrates: "Ray Auville fiddles; no, he doesn't play the violin, he fiddles with gusto and native style, as rousingly as any old moustached veteran of the Great Smokies in Tennessee. And his wife, lovely, soft-eyed Lida, she plays the guitar, and they sing together." But the only direct comment Gold made about the songs that the Auvilles wrote and sang was his comment that they wrote "catchy tunes that any American worker can sing and like."[52]

While they were thus to some extent talking past each other, Seeger and Gold did have a common referent: the written music of the Auvilles. And a quick look at the Auville song that accompanied Gold's column (see example 5.1, p. 227) suggests that, from a purely compositional standpoint, Seeger had the better of the argument. Not only is the melody, as Seeger wrote, more clearly influenced by outdated Tin Pan Alley music than by any contemporary definition of folk music--in particular, the chromatic ascent with which it begins seems remote indeed from the Anglo-American folk tradition to which Gold assigned the Auvilles--it is also, *pace* Gold, neither catchy nor memorable. The rhythmic idiom is particularly clumsy, most notably the scotch-snap rhythms of the

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51. Michael Gold, "Change the World!," *DW* 2 January 1936: 7; Sands, "Songs by Auvilles," 5.

52. Gold, "Change the World!," *DW* 2 January 1936, 7.

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verse and the double-time and dotted rhythms of the chorus. As composed folk music, "Rugged, Ragged Individualism" was remarkably unremarkable.

This is not necessarily a knock on the abilities of the Auvilles; the difficulty of creating natural-sounding folksong out of whole cloth was evident in Eisler's attempt to do the same. His ode to the American labor icon Mother Bloor, published in the *Daily Worker* just three weeks after Gold's column, features a melody that was almost completely diatonic. The accompaniment includes some substantial dissonance but it was mostly limited to suspensions and passing tones, although the refrain does contain some more pungent harmonic interactions between voice and accompaniment. Likewise, the rhythms are extremely simple throughout. Despite this, the melody is awkward, and not entirely idiomatic, particularly in the sequential passages of the second line and the end of the refrain (see example 6.4). Repeated melodic leaps and irregular phrase lengths make this song uncharacteristically (for Eisler) difficult to sing, and betray its composed origins. Other than their different accompanimental formats--Eisler's is fully notated, but Auville provides only chord progressions--the songs of the German modernist and the Cleveland fiddler share more in common with each other than with the songs collected by Gellert, the Lomaxes, and others. Neither could be accurately called "workers' music coming right out of the soil"; both songs were composed by professional musicians. And neither of them entered, in any meaningful sense, into the oral tradition of labor songs.

Even in cases where the musical product was of a higher quality, it remained an uphill battle for leftist songwriters to achieve any lasting success. In 1936 and 1937, the *Daily Worker* published a series of short, catchy, topical tunes by Maurice Sugar, the Detroit labor lawyer who had written "Soup Song," one of the few unambiguous successes produced by the movement to that point. Sugar's songs were short enough to be easily memorized, melodically simple, and rhythmically uncomplicated. He provided

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Example 6.4: Hanns Eisler, "Mother Bloor"[53]

53. *DW* 24 January 1936, 7.

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piano accompaniments that showed the influence of popular music, but they added little of import to the bare tunes, in contrast to the piano part for "Mother Bloor," which contributed a layer of musical material that was not at all implied by the melody alone.

The first song in the series, called "You Can't Make a Living," is a perfect encapsulation of Sugar's style (see example 6.5). The melody of "You Can't Make a Living" is almost entirely stepwise, with the sole exceptions being several leaps of a third. It is also entirely diatonic, and most of the few chromatic elements in the accompaniment are unaccented and seem to provide a faint hint of barbershop quartet-style passing tones. The slightly unexpected shift to A on the third beat of the third measure also makes sense in this context, marking the transition to a classic Tin Pan Alley "ii-V" progression. Finally, the rhythm moves almost entirely in straight eighth notes, with no syncopations or disruptions to speak of. To be sure, there are problems with this song. Most obviously, Sugar's voice leading leaves much to be desired, with several leading tones resolved incorrectly, by most standards, in terms of register and even pitch; Sugar was, after all, a labor lawyer by trade.

Similar in style, but more skillfully executed, were the contemporary songs of Adohmyan. In 1936, for example, the *Daily Worker* published "Lawrence Adamson's" (most likely a pseudonymous Adohmyan) tribute to Angelo Herndon (see example 6.6). Adohmyan's "Angelo Herndon: Symbol of Strength," like several of his earlier songs, is replete with "blue notes," drawing on African-American idioms to yield a melody that was appealing and singable (the verse more so than the chorus). However, his song, like those of Sugar, the Auvilles, and Eisler, had no lasting success among workers.

In a sense, the contradictions that had beset the Collective's attempts to compose music *for* workers remained alive and well, merely transposed into a new musical idiom with a different aesthetic. Theory continued to precede practice, as composers strove to

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Example 6.5: Maurice Sugar, "You Can't Make a Living"[54]

make music that would be popular rather than good. But absent massive marketing campaigns and star-driven musical ventures, it is notoriously difficult to manufacture a song that will have any sustained mass appeal, and perhaps harder still when that song's lyrical content is stridently political. In their earnest but forced attempts to create a vital musical culture, the theorists ignored this fact. When composers like Eisler and Adohmyan tried to write folksongs, they were performing a musical masquerade, and the strain showed.

The problem, in a nutshell, was their adherence to a traditional, writing-centered model of composition. Although they professed to be writing music for use, songs intended to becomepart of the living oral culture of protest song, their songs were

54. *DW* 9 July 1936, 7. See also "We Are the Guys," *DW* 28 July 1937, 7; "We've Got a Baby All Our Own," *DW* 7 August 1936, 7; "Bring Me My Robe and Slippers, James," *Sunday Worker* (hereafter "SW") 17 January 1937: Magazine, 7; "Sit Down!," *DW* 15 March 1937, 7. Words and music for all songs by Maurice Sugar.

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Example 6.6: Lawrence Adamson, "Angelo Herndon"[55]

disseminated solely by printed media, and were offered up to workers as finished products; labor audiences and choruses alike had no input into, or investment in, songs ostensibly written for their benefit. They had taken the wrong lesson from folk song,

55. *DW* 29 January 1936, 7.

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reducing a repertoire to a compositional formula rather than a body of cultural practice. Because conventional western musical notation is famously ill-suited to capturing the timbral and affective aspects of music as it is performed, and because many of the New York composers had still had no exposure to folk music in performance, their idea of the repertoire was incomplete. As a consequence, their composed folksongs were transparently artificial; their relation to the population for which they were intended was entirely notional.

However, not all of New York's artistic activists were so distant from their purported constituency. In November 1935, Alfred Hayes published an essay in the *Daily Worker* describing how the actor Will Geer, a well-known figure in the city's left-wing circles, had been involved in a musical capacity with striking textile workers in Paterson, New Jersey. Geer directed a collaborative effort by strikers to make their own protest song, coaching them through the compositional process, and ultimately getting the workers to produce a song that was meaningful for them. The first verse read: "Went down the Passaic River/And what do you think I seen?/I seen factories standin' idle/And mill hands all hungry and lean./Pore boys!" Although it was a rough effort, the song was a success: workers later sang it on the picket line. [56] It is both ironic and somehow entirely fitting that Geer was not a composer, but an actor. But he did play guitar, and he was willing to roll up his sleeves and work with music in a very public manner.

This type of activity also appealed to Earl Robinson, as demonstrated by his involvement in a variety of theatrical ventures. In the summer of 1936, Robinson took a position as the musical director at the left-wing Camp Unity, a summer camp located roughly fifty miles north of New York City in Wingdale, New York. While working there, Robinson maintained his ties to the theater. He assisted composer Harold Rome in auditioning cast members for his upcoming labor revue *Pins and Needles*. Robinson also

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56. Al Hayes, "Paterson Strikers Get a Ballad," *DW* 26 November 1935, 7.

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wrote a sketch, in which President Roosevelt was cast in the role of Noah before the flood, for inclusion in Rome's show.[57] But his primary duties that summer related to the camp's Friday singalongs. Robinson was chiefly responsible for deciding on each week's theme, and then for finding suitable repertoire for the group to perform. He described his activities this way :

> I dug out American folk songs with working–class content, like 'Wanderin" and 'Paddy Works on the Railway,' promoted the book of Negro Songs of Protest collected by Lawrence Gellert, and popularized the blaring folk Americanism of the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW or Wobblies)—'Hold the Fort,' 'Commonwealth of Toil,' 'The Preacher and the Slave,' 'Pie in the Sky,' and the contents of the little red songbook the Wobblies put out 'to fan the flames of discontent.' These songs became American C. P. (Communist Party) standards.[58]

Robinson's beloved Wobbly songs were more humorous than didactic, and their melodies--often borrowed from well-known religious and folk songs--were easy for non-professional singers to follow, even when sung *a capella*. The songs' adaptability was particularly important to Robinson during his time at Camp Unity because there was no standard ensemble employed in the musical programs.

Robinson's exposure to Joe Hill thus confirmed a message he had first learned from Eisler, whose music Robinson greatly admired: "The workers don't carry a piano around with them."[59] Taking this message to heart, Robinson, who had originally trained on the

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57. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 49; Goldman, "When Social Significance Came," 27.

58. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 46.

59. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 68.

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piano, violin, and viola, placed increasing emphasis on the acoustic guitar as his instrument of choice. In addition to its practical benefits--it was easy to play and eminently portable--the guitar also had leftist political implications. Whereas the piano was the ultimate middle- and upper-class instrument, virtually a required piece of furniture in the bourgeois homes of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, the guitar was the proletarian instrument par excellence: guitars were inexpensive, well-suited to an accompanimental role, required little or no training for the achievement of basic competence, and were largely unsullied by association with the bourgeois concert hall and classical canon.

After one particularly successful Friday program devoted to the Wobbly repertoire, Robinson was greeted by the poet Alfred Hayes, who had profiled Will Geer's Paterson adventure and penned the lyrics to *Into the Streets May First!* Excited by the performance of Wobbly songs, Hayes showed Robinson his poem *Joe Hill.* A small portion of it had been included in a *New Masses* article several years earlier, but the poem had never been published in its entirety. Robinson immediately fell in love with Hayes's tribute to the iconic songwriter, and hurriedly started setting it to music. The song first appeared in print that September, in the *Daily Worker* (see example 6.7), but was not published separately until 1938. However, as a result of oral transmission, "Joe Hill" became a labor classic prior to any distribution in written form; by summer's end, before it had ever appeared in print, the song was reportedly being sung by workers from San Francisco to New Orleans, and was soon picked up by American volunteers in Spain. In fact, so embedded has the song become in labor lore that historians have occasionally forgotten its composed origins.[60]

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60. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 52–53; Lori Elaine Taylor, "Joe Hill Incorporated: We Own Our Past," in *Songs About Work*, 26.Rondo W. Anderson, "Joe Hill--The Legend After Fifty Years," *Western Folklore* 25/2 (April 1966): 129, makes this mistake; Richard Reuss, "The Ballad of 'Joe Hill' Revisited," *Western Folklore* 26/2 (April 1967): 187-88, corrects Anderson's error.

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Example 6.7: Earl Robinson, "Joe Hill"[61]

Robinson, who was writing, not with the specific goal of publication and dissemination, but because he was presented with a text that moved him, created what his colleagues could not: a true folk song. "Joe Hill" is plain and quite short; in fact, Robinson elided the usual verse-chorus format, instead repeating the final line of each verse as a closing tag. More importantly, it is very singable, with a natural melodic contour that largely avoids leaps of more than a third; regular rhythms that clearly express the meter; and a harmonic progression that is the height of simplicity.

In "Joe Hill," Robinson had apparently found a viable idiom for the composition of workers' songs. On returning to New York in the fall of 1936, he used this new style

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61. *DW* September 14 1936, 7. Music by Earl Robinson, words by Alfred Hayes. Copyright © 1938 (Renewed) by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and MCA Music Publishing. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Secured. Reprinted by permission.

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once again, this time in writing what was to become another of his best-known songs, "Abe Lincoln." The lyrical inspiration for this song came from Franklin Roosevelt, via Earl Browder, who had quoted from Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address in the pamphlet, "Communism is 20th Century Americanism."[62] This pair of songs, their sources, and their subjects, like Robinson himself, are perfect encapsulations of the Popular Front ethos, marrying populism and patriotism, expertise and amateurism. It is thus fitting that they remain among the period's most durable musical artifacts.

Defining the Folk

While at Camp Unity, Robinson also studied living practitioners of the folk tradition, engaging Leadbelly to perform at one of the Friday musicales. The singer, with his wife Martha and a new manager in tow, had returned to New York City in March 1936. Within a month, he was headlining a musical revue at Harlem's Apollo Theatre. Unfortunately, the show was a failure with critics and at the box office, closing after only a handful of performances. Leadbelly's return was motivated by a belief in his own bankability, an idea that Robinson's interest must have confirmed. For Leadbelly, the Camp Unity performance was, first and foremost, a paying gig. But for Robinson, it represented a rare opportunity to witness folk music performed at its highest level. It was also a chance to introduce his fellow campers to the same, and considering the buzz that Leadbelly had created the previous spring, as well as the basic facts about Leadbelly's life, the denizens of Camp Unity were eager to hear genuine protest music as sung by a real-life victim of the capitalist system. Unfortunately, they were apparently unfamiliar with Leadbelly's repertoire, which was largely apolitical in nature. Expecting to hear "Negro Songs of Protest," musical screeds against racial and economic injustice, the audience was instead treated to a set of songs about drinking, loose women, and labor.

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62. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 60.

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Robinson reported that "[t]he morning after Huddie's first concert, the camp was in an uproar. . . . Instigated by the camp's handful of black Party members, there was strong criticism of Leadbelly, of me, of the white leadership that would allow such a thing to happen. 'Why does he put on that minstrel act?' 'The man's an Uncle Tom.' 'An insult to Negro women!' 'As bad as Step'nfetchit.' 'The very name Leadbelly perpetuates a chauvinist stereotype, all brawn and no brain.' And so on."[63]

As often happened, the radicals had tremendous difficulty in accepting the gulf between theory and practice. Despite their common racial makeup, Leadbelly was culturally more foreign to the *engagé* northeastern African-Americans than their white fellow campers were. Both groups had imagined Leadbelly as simply a wronged black man, perhaps the African-American Joe Hill, whose entire career served as rebuke to the oppression of American society. When he appeared as an entertainer whose subject matter was often not only apolitical, but (to their minds) politically regressive, this was too much, despite the fact that bawdy songs of women and wine were staples of the folk/blues tradition in which Leadbelly worked. Of course, Robinson was unperturbed, and seems to have enjoyed both Leadbelly's musicianship and the stir it caused. But he was also surely gratified when, the next night, Leadbelly displayed his vaunted ability to gauge his audience and won back the crowd by performing his new song, "The Scottsboro Boys," and generally moderating the rawer elements of his performance.

The campers' misguided expectations may have owed something to the publication, in June 1936, of Lawrence Gellert's promised collection of *Negro Songs of Protest*. The book, which contained twenty-four songs (many of them previously published in various periodicals) transcribed and arranged by Siegmeister, was hailed by Max Margulis as "a landmark in American culture." According to Margulis, the songs presented in the book were "an entirely new kind of authentic folk music which had been conspicuously absent

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63. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 57.

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from previous 'standard' collections." In case any of his readers were unaware of the primary culprits behind the deficient collections to which Margulis referred, he then specifically named the Lomaxes. Further, he asserted that Gellert's researches "have convinced professional folk-song collectors that their [the Lomaxes'] 'representative' Negro folk songs are merely 'white man's songs,' sung under the benevolent eye of guards, foremen, and the 'bossman'."[64] This idea, that the protest songs were the only "authentic" folk music products of African-Americans, was at once completely unsupported, wildly inaccurate, and insulting, as it reduced an entire culture to the expression of a single, political idea. Columns such as Margulis's likely contributed to the confusion and disappointment that accompanied Leadbelly's initial Camp Unity performance. However, they were also an entirely predictable response by the critics of the left.

Somewhat less foreseeable was the emphasis that the radical press placed on the painstaking accuracy of the musical presentation; notational precision was cited as further evidence of the representative nature of Gellert's book. In his review, Margulis remarked that Siegmeister's transcriptions were "faithfully rendered, as nearly exactly as sung into the recording machine as our conventional notation allows."[65] This fetish for verisimilitude was reiterated in the *Daily Worker*'s review of a concert presented by the American Music League celebrating the first edition of music published under its auspices. More than half of the *Daily Worker*'s review of the performance was comprised of praise for Siegmeister's contributions to the collection. The reviewer lauded Siegmeister's accompaniments for their unobtrusiveness, asserting that "[t]hey avoid the familiar 'popular Negro' style and the muddy, watery urbane style . . . [they] have no life in themselves, imply nothing in themselves." Praising the transcriptions, the *Worker*

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64. Max Margulis, "Negro Voices Rise in Protest," *DW* 17 June 1936, 7.

65. Margulis, "Negro Voices," 7.

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noted that Siegmeister took great care to indicate, "as nearly as our notation allows, quarter tones, slides, indefinite pitches, etc." Nearly a year later, the *Sunday Worker*, reviewing a performance of the FTP Dance Theatre that contained a dance to "How Long Brethren?" from Gellert's collection, called Siegmeister's arrangements "authentic," noting that they "in no way tampered with the melodies."[66]

Ironically, while the *Daily Worker* had criticized the Lomaxes for their repertorial decision, no mention was made in its pages of the notational issues raised by *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, although Lehman Engel's review in the *Musical Quarterly* had addressed the issue. But the Lomaxes seem to have recognized that the transcriptions in the book, while quite useful for those wishing to learn and sing folksongs, gave readers no sense of the strange and unfamiliar (to most readers) performance practice in which they had originated. If, as John and Alan Lomax believed, performance style was as integral a part of a folk tradition as the songs themselves, *American Ballads* left much to be desired as an introduction to America's folk music.

Their solution to the problem was offered in the book *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*. *Negro Folk Songs*, which drew upon the hours of recordings Leadbelly had made for the Library of Congress, was published by Macmillan in November 1936, and differed from *American Ballads* in many respects. To begin with, the Lomaxes' goal in compiling *American Ballads* had been to present folk music that was virtually untouched by the influences of contemporary popular culture, a decision that led them to the work camps and penitentiaries of the South. In contrast, John Lomax's introduction to the Leadbelly book termed it "a cross-section of Afro-American songs that have influenced and been influenced by popular music." Lomax also wrote that he viewed Leadbelly "not as a folk singer handing on a tradition faithfully, but as a folk artist who contributes to the tradition, and as a musician of a sort important in the growth of American popular

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66. M. M., "Negro Songs of Protest," *DW* 20 June 1936, 7; "'Negro Protest Songs' Created Out of Living Fabric of South," *SW* 2 May 1937, 10.

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music."[67] The difference between the language employed in the two books is notable, first, because Leadbelly had provided much of the material that appeared in *American Ballads*. But the earlier volume was compiled and published before the Lomaxes had spent any substantial amount of time with Leadbelly; as they watched him interact with audiences in the northeast, it became clear that popular music had penetrated even the relatively isolated, poverty-stricken milieu from which Leadbelly hailed. Leadbelly's own musical idiom was informed by influences including jazz, ragtime, country music, and even Tin Pan Alley. And although all of these styles are clearly distinct from African-American folk-blues, they also all share--to varying degrees--African-American cultural roots. In this sense, as Lawrence Levine notes, despite the distaste for popular recordings evinced by folk purists like the Lomaxes, "records can be seen as bearers and preservers rather than primarily destroyers of folk traditions," insofar as they disseminated musical idioms and knowledge among African-American communities that were separated by both geography and chronology. In a culture that had been deeply fractured from the beginning of its time in America, modern technologies occasionally acted as unifying agents.[68]

The more significant distinction between the Lomaxes' two books was that, while *American Ballads* was centered on repertoire, *Negro Folk Songs* was performer-oriented. Of course, Leadbelly's style was more than just the sum of his influences. According to John Lomax,

> Lead Belly believed completely that his way of singing was the best way. Every song that had come to his hand he had changed, because he wanted the song to become distinctively his own. Every melody he had consciously adapted to his own style, tricked out with his ornaments and

67. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, xiii.

68. Levine, *Black Culture*, 231.

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> his guitar accompaniments. The interpolated remarks between stanzas that he called "talkin'" arose our of his creative urge, this thinking in his heart. He wanted to "explain to the peoples what the songs is about," to fill in the gaps that the fragmentary and sometimes enigmatic rhymes of his people have left, to give pattern and sequence to the usually jumbled collections of stanzas that make up their blues.[69]

In order to accurately capture Leadbelly's vocal style, replete with "ornaments" and frequently imprecise pitches, the Lomaxes, in consultation with Columbia University ethnomusicologist George Herzog, tweaked traditional western notation, adding new symbols that were tailored to Leadbelly's distinctive idiom (see example 6.8). Despite this innovation and the presumed cachet of the Leadbelly name, the book was a commercial disappointment. This may have been due at least in part to the fact that *Negro Folk Songs* is an innately confused venture. It is a book that tries to capture, as closely as possible, the sound of Leadbelly in written form, and yet the singer's virtuosic guitar lines are nowhere present. While this omission is certainly excusable, considering the difficulty that such transcription would entail, it is philosophically inconsistent with

Example 6.8: New Notational Symbols[70]

> × (over a note) somewhat higher.
> – (over a note) somewhat lower.
> (If in the signature, these signs indicate that consistently throughout the song the tone is somewhat higher or lower.)
> 𝄐 somewhat longer, but not more than half again as long; otherwise the note is written out with its full value.
> 𝄒 somewhat shorter.

69. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, xii.

70. Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 67-68.

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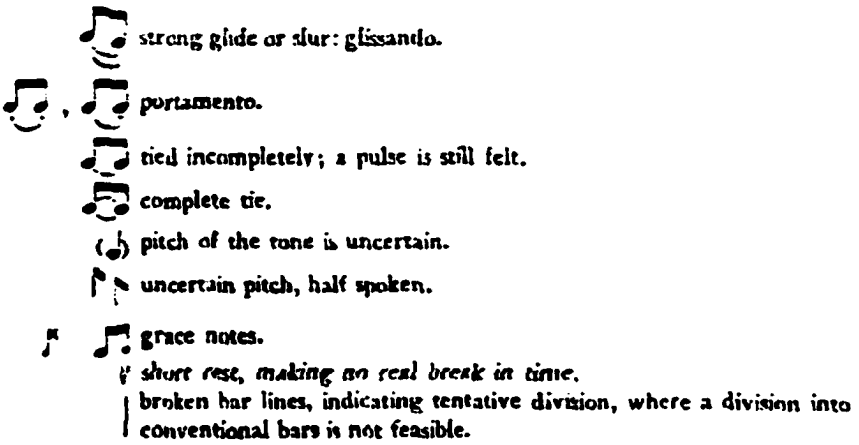
Example 6.8 (cont'd): New Notational Symbols



the rest of the venture. Further muddying the waters is the question of what, exactly, the book is supposed to accomplish. The notation of *American Ballads* may have been imprecise, but its simplicity facilitated its use as a "singing book." A quick glance at the complex notational glyphs of *Negro Folk Songs* is sufficient to disabuse any reader of the notion that it was intended for singing. Essentially, *Negro Folk Songs* was a book that wanted to operate as if it were a sound recording.

Carl Engel, reviewing the book in *Musical Quarterly*, considered these changes to be improvements over the notational problems he had earlier criticized in *American Ballads* (see Ch. 5, pp. 230-31), writing that *Negro Folk Songs* was "a collection of Negroid 'folk-tunes' that, in its visible presentation of the melodies, more closely approaches the actual rendition than has heretofore been the case . . . [Herzog] has gone far in making it possible, even for the uninitiated, to 'get the swing' of this music."[71] However, the very precision that Engel admires is also the book's most glaring flaw, at least in the terms in which folk music was then viewed by the left: by emphasizing one individual's

71. C[arl] E[ngel], "Views and Reviews," *MQ* 23/3 (July, 1937): 388.

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performance practice, the Lomaxes discouraged other would-be interpreters from stamping the music with their own styles. While it may have been an invaluable document for academicians, it was virtually useless for political activists.

Also troubling, albeit in an entirely different way, was John Lomax's lengthy introduction, which chronicled Leadbelly's career through his departure from Wilton. Although it was by turns both informative and engaging, the essay was also transparently self-serving, capturing the most troubling aspect of the Lomax-Leadbelly collaboration.[72] The exploitative dynamic that had characterized the relationship became the central focus in the first published attempt to adopt Leadbelly as a musical spokesman for the left. Richard Wright, who had moved to New York City in early 1937 after a period of employment for the FWP in Chicago, published an article that August in the *Daily Worker*, in which he termed the partnership "one of the most amazing cultural swindles in American history." Recognizing, as Gellert had not, that Leadbelly's status made him a natural ally of the left, Wright asserted that "it seems that the entire folk culture of the American Negro has found its embodiment in him." The article included two songs written by Leadbelly. The first, complete with musical notation, was Leadbelly's second Scottsboro-related song, "The Scottsboro Boys Got Here," written to celebrate the recent release, after more than six years of legal wrangling, of four of the Scottsboro Boys. The second, for which only the lyrics were presented, was "Bourgeois Blues," an indictment of housing discrimination in Washington, D. C. Wright's portrait of Leadbelly, which placed disproportionate emphasis on political songs, was a less accurate representation of its subject, at least on a musical level, than the Lomaxes' book had been, although it showed the extent to which racial matters were intertwined with leftist politics, even in

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72. Significantly, Engel's primary criticism of the volume, while ostensibly repertorial in content shares the moralistic, soft racism that characterizes Lomax's introduction, to which Engel refers in a completely credulous and uncritical manner; see C. E., "Views and Reviews," 394-95.

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the field of music.[73] Indeed, Constance Rourke, in a review of both the Lomaxes' Leadbelly book and Gellert's *Negro Songs*, noted that the "explicit bitterness" of Gellert's selections was "not typical of Negro songs as we know them." This narrow focus was particularly flawed given the absence of any discussion of the songs' place within a broader social or musical context. Rourke was much more sympathetic to the Lomaxes' volume, combined biographical information, detailed transcriptions, and musical commentary in providing a broader portrait of the repertoire and its sources. In fact, Rourke viewed *Negro Folk Songs* as "in essence a novel, a drama or even an opera."[74] Rourke's review, like the Lomaxes' book and Robinson's approval of Leadbelly's performance at Camp Unity, thus reflected a new, more inclusive view of folksong ascendant on the left in the Popular Front period.

A Recipe for Success

In the first two years of the Popular Front, New York's musical leftists made greater progress in advancing their cause than they had in the roughly six years of Depression that preceded the new era. Musically, they had finally hit upon a workable model of leftist composition, one that satisfied their artistic desires without alienating working-class performers and audiences. Having finally made peace with folk culture, the composers of the left had, in effect, come to terms with their own Americanness. Their music had at last taken on a distinctively American character, and the subjects they addressed--particular regarding racial issues--were issues that had a special urgency for American leftists. Although the Popular Front had been declared in Moscow, its primary effect among the New York composers was to focus their attention on specifically American subjects, both musically and socially. After arguing for years that

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73. Richard Wright, "Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People," *DW* 12 August 1937, 7.

74. Constance Rourke, "Work Songs and Hollers," *The New Republic* 1152 (December 30, 1936): 280-81.

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proletarianism could and should thrive in American music and society, they had at last discovered how to make this theory a reality.

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Chapter 7: Proletarian Politics and Popular Culture November 1935--September 1937 (Part II)

One clear consequence of the Popular Front policy was a musical shift toward inclusiveness. While most of the New York composers initially used this idea as a justification for their ongoing experiments with folk-based composition, the potential musical implications of the Popular Front were much broader. As Gellert, the Lomaxes, and others realized, many existing folksongs also had leftist uses, particularly when recorded and transmitted so as to reflect their origins in an orally-based, amateur folk tradition. This connection was most often made explicit when the folk music in question had African-American roots.

As we have seen, the linkage between African-American folksong and radicalism had been taken for granted by some on the left for the better part of a decade. But by 1935, the left also counted such notable "high-cultural" African-Americans as Langston Hughes and W. E. B. DuBois as comrades-in-arms. One of the traits that distinguished the new African-American left from the Black Nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey was its Popular Front-style emphasis on the fundamental kinship between oppressed peoples of all races. In a speech to the International Writers Congress in Paris in 1937, Hughes made the following remarkable statement: "We represent the end of race. And the fascists know that when there is no more race, there will be no capitalism . . . because the workers of the world will have triumphed."[1]

These sentiments were seconded by several notable African-American singers, whose experiences with American racism had, to various degrees, soured them on their native country. In 1937, the *Daily Worker* detailed the story of Coretti Arle-Titz, a singer who had emigrated to Russia in 1913, fleeing American racial prejudice. In the

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1. Langston Hughes, "The Voice of Fifteen Million," *DW* 23 September 1937, 7.

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intervening quarter-century, she professed to have returned to America once, but she said that she "found America, with its oppression, frustration, Jim Crow, and hypocrisy, unbearable." The singer Marian Anderson, on concluding a concert tour that took her to Leningrad, Moscow, Odessa, and other Soviet cities, called the Soviet Union a "land of opportunity for artists" and "the country of tomorrow." And in 1937 Roland Hayes, the *eminence grise* of cultivated African-American singers, brought his considerable prestige to bear, giving a benefit concert--his first ever--to assist the Southern Negro Youth Congress.[2]

But throughout the 1930s, perhaps no individual of any race more clearly exemplified the connection between anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, and anti-racism than Paul Robeson (1898-1976). The story of Robeson's ascent to popular stardom reads like a Horatio Alger novel, viewed through a lens of race rather than poverty. Robeson's first brush with fame came when he was named to the All–America football team while a student at Rutgers, where he was also class president and valedictorian. On graduating from college, Robeson enrolled at the Columbia University Law School, but he soon found that there were limited opportunities in the legal profession for one of his race, no matter how accomplished. However, in addition to his tremendous athleticism and sharp intelligence, Robeson possessed several other gifts, including an incomparably rich voice and an overwhelming stage presence. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he made a name for himself as an actor both onscreen and on stage, appearing in the straight-play version of *Porgy*, the pathbreaking musical *Shuffle Along*, and several plays of Eugene O'Neill. Although most of his films were unmemorable potboilers, Robeson's performance in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* was widely acclaimed, and his stage version of *Othello* was legendary. But Robeson achieved his greatest fame and notoriety for his

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2. Chatwood Hall, "The Soviet Union Honors This Great Negro Singer," *DW* 31 July 1937, 7; Ben Davis, Jr., "Marian Anderson Hails Soviet Union's Culture," *DW* 24 March 1937, 7; Angelo Herndon, "Roland Hayes Sings for Negro Youth Congress at Town Hall," *DW* 7 October 1937, 7.

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dual careers of singing and political activism. An outspoken critic of the racial and economic injustices endemic to American life, Robeson was also an articulate and dogged advocate of both American workers and the Soviet Union. As Mark Naison writes, "[n]o cultural figure in modern American history, with the possible exception of Woody Guthrie, so completely identified his life and art with the fate of American labor."[3]

By mid-decade, Robeson had achieved great popularity throughout the United States and Europe, hailed for both his acting and singing talents. In 1934, the legendary Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein invited Robeson and his family to tour the Soviet Union, and also to explore the possibility of a collaboration on a film about the Haitian Revolution. Robeson returned from his two–week visit that winter with a highly favorable impression of conditions in the world's only Marxist state. His reports, seemingly constructed to provide maximal contrast to the most glaring problems of the United States, asserted that in the Soviet Union workers were happy and employed, artists received encouragement from their government, and, most importantly, there was a complete absence of racial prejudice. In an interview with the *Daily Worker*, Robeson said that he "was not prepared for the happiness I see on every face in Moscow." Prior to arriving, he had been

> aware that there was no starvation here, but I was not prepared for the bounding life, the feeling of safety and abundance and freedom that I find here, wherever I turn. I was not prepared for the endless friendliness, which surrounded me from the moment I crossed the border. . . And this joy and happiness and friendliness, this utter absence of any embarrassment over a 'race question' is all the more keenly felt by me

3. Mark D. Naison, "Paul Robeson and the American Labor Movement" in *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press and The Paul Robeson Cultural Center, 1998), 179.

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> because of the day I spent in Berlin on the way here, and that was a day of horror--in an atmosphere of hatred, fear and suspicion.[4]

That the Soviet Union would feel free and open following time spent in Hitler's Berlin seems reasonable enough, particularly given the dearth of information regarding Stalin's purges, just then getting fully underway. However, American leftists were not entirely in the dark on the purges. And although Robeson may be excused for viewing reports of the atrocities with skepticism, believing them to be anti-Soviet propaganda, his stance towards what the *Daily Worker* termed "the recent execution after court-martial of a number of counter-revolutionary terrorists" remains deeply disturbing. Adopting a cavalier attitude towards actions that amounted to state-sponsored murder, Robeson stated that "[f]rom what I have already seen of the workings of the Soviet Government, I can only say that anybody who lifts his hand against it ought to be shot!" [5] Thus we are reminded of the cruelly glib self-righteousness shared by even the most thoughtful members of the American left. However, impressed though he was by conditions in the Soviet Union, Robeson maintained that he was not yet an advocate of socialism *per se*. Future visits left him feeling much the same way: enthusiastic but officially uncommitted.

Robeson's decisions about musical repertoire were as progressive as his stated political beliefs. As early as 1925, he had given the first-ever formal song recital consisting exclusively of African-American music, primarily spirituals. By 1931, he had expanded his musical range to include the *Lieder* of composers like Schubert and Schumann, although for ideological reasons he placed particular emphasis on Russian

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4. Lewis, *When Harlem*, 217; Vern Smith, "'I Am at Home,' Says Robeson At Reception in Soviet Union," *DW* 15 January 1935, 5.

5. Smith, "'I Am at Home,'" 5; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: The New Press, 1989), 185–91; Paul Robeson, "When I Sing," *SW* 7 February 1937, Magazine: 1, 11.

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music, especially that of Mussorgsky. Three years later, he began including a selection of folk-songs from all over the world. Here too, Robeson paid particular attention to Russian repertoire. So by 1935, a typical Robeson song recital included a group of African-American spirituals, several cultivated songs, and a substantial number of international folk songs (typically sung in their original languages), all sung in his rich, stentorian *basso profundo*, and with diction that was almost comically clear. Naison has observed that such performances "turned music of the common people into high art, providing a model of cultural democracy for his audiences to draw strength from."[6]

However, not everyone viewed Robeson's recitals in this light. In a review of a Robeson recital of "spirituals and other songs" in October 1935, the *Daily Worker*'s critic reported, uncritically, that his neighbor at the concert had termed the program "white man's music"; again, African-American culture was narrowly defined in terms of political struggle. The reviewer reported "echoes of the audience's laughter at the comic dialect songs unpleasantly dominated the evening." Although Robeson's singing received nothing but praise, songs like "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" and "Tell Me" were "delivered with a magnificence better suited to songs of protest."[7] Such statements carried the unfortunate but unavoidable implication that African-American culture was useful or interesting to whites only insofar as it could be used for political ends.

Popular Front, Popular Music

By the second half of the decade, this view was far from unchallenged on the left. As Naison points out, during the Popular Front years "Party leaders began to speak of the black arts . . . as politically 'progressive,' in and of themselves." Indeed, African-

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6. Naison, "Paul Robeson," 185; Doris Evans McGinty and Wayne Shirley, "Paul Robeson, Musician" in *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, 105, 116, 117. Roland Hayes, in a Town Hall recital in December 1923, had performed both spirituals and classical *Lieder*. See also Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 163.

7. M.M., "Paul Robeson's Concert," *DW* 25 October 1935, 5.

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American cultural heroes were celebrated in the *Daily Worker* on an almost daily basis. Politicians, authors, and even, on the paper's new sports page--a product of the entertainment-minded Popular Front--professional athletes were praised as icons of progressivism.[8] Predictably, the left's adoption of African-American cultural figures led directly to a new advocacy for jazz as politically appropriate. During the years preceding the Popular Front, jazz had been effectively banned from the Soviet Union, but Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that following the *Lady Macbeth* imbroglio, the Soviet jazz scene "flourished . . . as never before or since."[9]

This policy change makes perfect sense when considered in the broader political context of the Popular Front. As the Communist Party's emphasis shifted from advocating class revolution to guarding against fascism, the doctrine of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" took hold, and jazz had many desirable enemies. In Weimar-era Germany, jazz had been a favorite target of cultural conservatives. On Hitler's ascension to power, jazz, with its African-American roots and Jewish (Tin Pan Alley) associations, was, predictably enough, demonized. However, Susan Cook observes that "the amount of time spent by the new government to degrade jazz indicates how popular it had been, and they were not successful in their efforts to suppress it."[10]

The impact of jazz in the Weimar Republic was perhaps most clearly felt in the field of musical theater. The legendary cabarets of Sally Bowles thrived on American music, as did the collaborations between Brecht and Kurt Weill. Weill left Germany following

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8. Naison, *Communism in Harlem*, 204; Joe Louis was surely the athlete who appeared most frequently in the *Daily Worker*'s pages, but stars in other sports, especially baseball, were also regular fixtures. See P. C., "Joe Louis vs. White Chauvinism," *DW* 3 July 1936, 7; Mike Kantor, "Dodgers 'Ready' to Sign Negro Star," *Sunday Worker* 17 January 1937, 14; "DiMaggio Calls Negro Greatest Pitcher," *DW* 13 September 1937, 7.

9. Starr, *Red and Hot*, 161; Fitzpatrick, "The *Lady Macbeth* Affair," 209.

10. Susan C. Cook, "Jazz as Deliverance: The Reception and Institution of American Jazz during the Weimar Republic," *AM* 7/1 (Spring 1989): 42.

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Hitler's assumption of the chancellorship, and in 1935, after spending time in London and Paris, came to New York City. He soon became acquainted with the Group Theatre, and in November 1936 *Johnny Johnson*, an anti-war play by Paul Green with a Weill score that alludes to and borrows from German and American vernacular sources, opened on Broadway. Leftist critics were generally positive, although some considered Green's text overly sentimental and muddled. But Weill's music was consistently cited as a great asset. The *Daily Worker* wrote that "[s]everal direct hits are scored, some with the expert musical range-finding of that anti-Nazi exile, Kurt Weill," and the *New Masses* commented that the play, though uneven, was often "hauntingly captivating when Kurt Weill's songs are being sung."[11] Blitzstein, conceding that he had "written some harsh things in the past about Kurt Weill and his music," was very enthusiastic about *Johnny Johnson*, writing that he was "grateful to it for having shown me values I didn't know about before."[12]

While the Tin Pan Alley style of songwriting had long been the music of choice in the American popular musical theater and in nightclubs, the Popular Front of the mid-1930s coincided with its move from the dance hall and the orchestra pit to the concert stage. The jazz concert developed quickly. The Casa Loma Orchestra's Paramount Theater performance in December 1935 spurred a recognition of the potential profitability of such ventures, and as Scott DeVeaux notes, "[b]y the time of Benny Goodman's tumultuous reception at the same theater in March 1937, the place of bands in theaters was assured."[13] Jazz's new forum suggested that it was music suitable for study, listening, and contemplation, not just for dancing and background mood-setting. In turn,

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11. Charles E. Dexter, "Group Theatre Scores Some Hits Against War," *DW* 21 November 1936, 7; A. W. T. "Sights and Sounds," *NM* 21/10 (December 1, 1936): 27. See also "A Musician Who Devotes His Talent to Theatre," *DW* 10 November 1936, 7.

12. Marc Blitzstein, "Weill Scores for Johnny Johnson," *MM* 14/1 (November--December 1936): 44.

13. Scott DeVeaux, "The Emergence of the Jazz Concert, 1935-1945," *AM* 7/1 (Spring 1989): 16.

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the era of the jazz concert coincided with an intense debate about the cultural status of jazz (was it "high" art? if not, why not? if so, what did that mean?)

Frank Norris observed in the pages of the *New Republic* that the rapid rise of swing had "immensely assisted all sorts of charlatans to build jazz music up as a national fad and cash in on the ballyhoo," which he feared would result in the public's being "sold a great deal of spurious music masquerading under the label of jazz."[14] Unfortunately, as Norris pointed out, critics were very much complicit in the state of affairs, primarily because they had such difficulty defining jazz. With this in mind, a number of critics attempted to define, in music-theoretical terms, what made swing swing. One effect of such efforts as Virgil Thomson's analysis of "Swing Music," published in *Modern Music* in 1936, was to suggest that the music merited the kind of serious study that had previously been reserved for the cultivated canon.[15]

The notion that jazz was art music was further enhanced by the music of Duke Ellington. Ellington's early records had been widely acclaimed by jazz critics; in fact, he was the first practicing jazz musician to be taken seriously as a composer by the musical press in both Great Britain and the United States, and his impressionistic orchestration frequently drew comparisons to the music of Debussy and Delius. When George Gershwin suddenly passed away in July 1937, Ellington was cited by Martin McCall in the *Daily Worker* as a composer who brought the promise of Gershwin's fusion of jazz and cultivated music to fruition. Similarly, the *Daily Worker* quoted a young Soviet composer who suggested that "the best examples of jazz music, with regard to technical perfection and purely musical merit, may be found precisely in [Ellington's] type" of jazz.[16]

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14. Frank Norris, "The Music Goes 'Round and Around," *The New Republic* 1104 (January 29, 1936): 335.

15. Virgil Thomson, "Swing Music," *MM* 13/4 (May--June 1936): 12-17.

16. Martin McCall, "He Made American Jazz A Factor in Serious Music," *DW* 14 July 1937, 7; Martin McCall, "Slum Genius," *SW* 25 July 1937: Magazine, 2; "Soviet Jazz," *DW* 8 June 1936, 7.

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In the mid-1930s, Ellington's music showcased a new interest in extended forms, most notably in his thirteen-minute-long *Reminiscing in Tempo*. The release of *Reminiscing in Tempo* provoked a heated controversy among the group of jazz critics David Stowe has described as "a small coterie of young white men, typically from privileged social backgrounds, [who] exercised enormous influence in shaping America's understanding of the swing phenomenon." [17] And since, as Stowe notes, many of these writers were active in leftist politics, the idea of swing they espoused was deeply influenced by the rhetoric of the Popular Front. So when they subjected Ellington's new release to a flurry of vituperation, they were in effect laying down the party line on acceptable jazz. For example, *Daily Worker* critic Max Margulis was fairly tolerant of Ellington's experiments, but he insisted nevertheless that "the traditional less self-conscious 'swing' (Ellington's men play it too) . . . still remains the vital stream."[18]

The most famous statement on Ellington's new style was penned by John Hammond, whose work with Count Basie and Benny Goodman had established him as one of the most important producers in New York's jazz world. Hammond was also an influential critic for publications including *Down Beat* and *Melody Maker*. His review of *Reminiscing in Tempo* displayed many of the same flaws that characterized much of the music criticism published in leftist periodicals: a lack of actual musical discussion, a tendency to lapse into personal attacks, and a habit of drawing unsupported ideological conclusions from debatable premises. In his essay on *Reminiscing*, Hammond said almost nothing about the music; readers were informed that the record under review was "sterile," "superficial," "formless and shallow," but they were left to wonder exactly how these non-musical qualities were expressed in musical form. The bulk of the essay was

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17. David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 52, 53; see also Ron Welburn, "Jazz Magazines of the 1930s: An Overview of Their Provocative Journalism," *AM* 5/3 (Fall 1987): 255-70.

18. Max Margulis, "Swing-hi-de-ho," *SW* 12 September 1937: Magazine, 4.

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spent explaining the causes of Ellington's failure, and Hammond's analysis, although preceded by positive comments on Ellington's personality, was in fact quite nasty. After positing that Ellington had allowed himself to be exploited by record executives because he was averse to conflict, Hammond asserted that "the real trouble with Duke's music is the fact that he has purposely kept himself from any contact with the troubles of his people or mankind in general." That a politically radical Vanderbilt heir felt entitled to castigate Duke Ellington for insufficient racial or political awareness--despite Ellington's involvement in benefits for the Scottsboro Boys, and the racial consciousness displayed in numbers like "Black and Tan Fantasy"--is illustrative of the lack of self-reflection shared by even the most intelligent members of the doctrinaire left.[19]

Despite the undeniable currents of condescension and racial essentialism evident in Hammond's jazz criticism, he remained aware of the difficulties faced by working black musicians, and the importance of their achieving both respect and remuneration. Although his interest in jazz was rooted in a love of the music itself, Hammond also recognized the music's potential as a political force. He addressed this aspect of jazz in a series of pseudonymous articles in *New Masses*. Writing as "Henry Johnson," Hammond noted that the explosion in swing's popularity had presented African-Americans with opportunities that had previously been denied them. In particular, he cited the opening-up of discriminatory musicians' union locals and the relaxation of segregation in many hotel ballrooms. Such developments led him to conclude that swing was a liberating cultural force: "The acceptance of swing music . . . has improved the bargaining power of the black musician immeasurably."[20]

This was as true of recorded swing as of live performances; as Hammond noted, "[t]he phonograph has done wonders in preserving this grand art form from its inception,"

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19. John Hammond, "The Tragedy of Duke Ellington," in *The Duke Ellington Reader*; essay originally from *Brooklyn Eagle*, 3 November 1935.

20. Henry Johnson, "The Negro and the Jazz Band," *NM* 21/8 (November 17, 1936): 15.

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for the rise of swing coincided with the maturation of the record industry. Thus music and medium existed in a symbiotic relationship, which often had the unintended (but not unwelcome) consequence of cultural democratization. Lewis Erenberg has described this phenomenon quite well:

> By creating a national network of musical outlets, for instance, band agencies, radio stations, and jukeboxes brought urban culture to smaller towns, made musicians household names, and gave youth easy access to music of their choice. Without cost on radio or for the price of a nickel in a jukebox or twenty-five cents at a movie theater, young people could hear their favorite bands at will. A combination of ready access and the mechanical reproduction of music removed some of the sacredness surrounding works of art, enabling young fans to treat swing as particularly theirs.[21]

Of course, swing was not the only music so affected, but its history was more intertwined with the record business than that of any other contemporary genre. This link is reflected in the emphasis placed on swing recordings in the record reviews that became a semi-regular feature of the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* in the mid-1930s. Although both periodicals included obligatory reviews of the rare commercial releases of protest music and also evaluated new records of cultivated music, the primary focus of the record reviews remained popular music, largely swing. The relative emphases placed on each musical idiom are well illustrated by the attention accorded them in Hammond's *New Masses* columns of1936 and 1937. Displaying a full range of musical interests, Hammond (pseudonymously) praised Toscanini's latest Wagner interpretations,

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21. Henry Johnson, "The Development of 'Swing'," *NM* 18/10 (March 3, 1936): 27; Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 41.

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celebrated Robert Johnson--"the greatest Negro blues singer who has cropped up in recent years . . . Johnson makes Leadbelly sound like an accomplished poseur"—and complained about the lack of political defiance in most commercial blues records.[22] But most of his critical energies were devoted to jazz records.

Among the most interesting aspects of Hammond's jazz reviews is his disregard for journalistic ethics. For example, Hammond consistently praised recordings by Benny Goodman's various groups, records that Hammond had produced, although he never disclosed this relationship. Further, because his *New Masses* reviews appeared under the name "Henry Johnson," even an attentive reader would not have known that Hammond's reviews could easily be construed as free advertising. As Henry Johnson, Hammond also continued to rail against Ellington, complaining that what was formerly "the greatest band in the country" had been "crippled" by "the bogy of showmanship and Art." But even after Hammond cast aside his *nom-de-plume* in a column from May 1937, the record reviews of *New Masses* and *Daily Worker* continued to raise serious questions, although in this case they were less ethical than political.[23] For by reviewing recordings on an equal basis--in fact, in *New Masses*, a more regular basis--than live performances, the Communist newspapers became complicit in what was perhaps the single most threatening phenomenon to musicians' livelihoods during that period.

Overcoming Modernity

The hardships that new technology imposed on workers in a variety of industries was a subject of frequent debate in the pages of left-wing publications during the period.

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22. Henry Johnson, "Recent Recordings," *NM* 19/11 (June 9, 1936): 28; Henry Johnson, "Recorded Music," *NM* 22/11 (March 2, 1937): 29; Henry Johnson, "New Recordings" *NM* 19/1 (March 31, 1936): 27.

23. For "Johnson" on Goodman, see Henry Johnson, "Recent Recordings," 28; Henry Johnson, "Music," *NM* 21/4 (October 20, 1936): 29; on Ellington, see Henry Johnson, "Music," *NM* 21/1 (September 30, 1936): 29; John Hammond, "Sights and Sounds," *NM* 23/9 (May 28, 1937): 27.

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Even on the entertainment pages, the issue was raised. In 1936, industrialism was repeatedly called on the carpet in reviews of *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin's first film in five years. While it included many moments of typically brilliant physical comedy, *Modern Times* was also a pointed satire of the role of technology in modern industry, particularly the dehumanizing effects of Taylorism. Although there was some disagreement among critics for *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and the *Sunday Worker Magazine* about the extent to which the film was intended as social commentary, all agreed that Chaplin's film exposed the true costs of modern industry. The *Daily Worker*, in its year-end list of notable films, gave *Modern Times* top billing, calling it "an exposition of the life of man caught in the wheels [in one scene, quite literally] of modern industrialism," and a year later, that paper's critic continued to praise the film's "incisive and ironic criticism of the social order." In fact, the *Daily Worker* noted, *Modern Times* was so clearly critical of the totalitarian implications of industrial capitalism that it was banned in fascist Italy.[24]

The struggle between workers and modern technology was also an important issue in the music industry in 1936 and 1937, as a consequence of a series of related developments during this period. Chief among these were the rise of jukeboxes; an increasing reliance by radio stations on recorded music; the monopolization of large theatres by the movie industry, to the detriment of vaudeville; and the explosive growth in record and radio sales to individuals, all of which combined to decrease demand for live performances. Each issue received a concerted response from musicians and their unions, and each was closely covered in the left-wing press. New York's Musicians Local 802 was joined by the American Federation of Actors in picketing movie houses

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24. David Platt, "Chaplin's Best Film," *DW* 11 February 1936, 7; Robert Forsythe, "Chaplin in 'Modern Times'," *NM* 18/8 (February 18, 1936): 29-30; "Charlie Chaplin's 'Modern Times' Stirs Free-for-all Conflict Among Critics," *SW* 23 February 1936, 6; Dorothy Gates, "Chaplin Film Heads List Of Best Pictures of 1936," *DW* November 27, 1936: 7; David Platt, "Charlie Chaplin Belongs to Us," *DW* 8 October 1937, 7; "Fascists Ban Chaplin's 'Modern Times'," *DW* 20 September 1937, 7.

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and calling for boycotts until the movie studios, which owned most commercial theatres, agreed to allow "flesh shows" in their houses.[25] Their demands were not met.

Throughout 1936 and 1937, Hammond reported on the status of unions within record studios themselves. As record companies grew in importance, so did house arrangers, copyists, and accompanists, most of whom were unorganized. Throughout 1936 and 1937, Hammond reported on the efforts of Local 802 to unionize the employees at Decca, Columbia, and other major record studios. Hammond's relentless pursuit of the story eventually won him an interview with a top executive at Columbia, who professed admiration for his persistence in forcing the studio to become a closed union shop.[26]

Hammond also wrote on the unfavorable royalty agreements that record companies negotiated with composers. The proliferation of jukeboxes had particularly acute consequences for composers and songwriters, who were unable to collect any royalties for jukebox performances of their music. This problem was exacerbated by the common practice, among radio distributors, of underreporting broadcasts of records. In response to pressure from ASCAP, record companies decided, in 1936 and 1937, to press many records that were eligible for home use only--not on jukeboxes or over radio.[27]

Because of the role played by advertising in the radio industry, musicians who took on the broadcasters were in effect confronting American business itself. This connection was addressed in several *New Masses* articles from the period, in which authors railed against the power that private, for-profit companies exercised over programming on the

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25. Beth McHenry, "Musicians Fight for Living Music," *DW* 22 November 1936, 7; "Musicians Union States Views on 'Flesh Shows," *DW* 2 March 1937, 7; "Union Pickets On Broadway," *DW* 8 March 1937, 7; "Bring Back Flesh Shows," *DW* 9 March 1937, 7.

26. Henry Johnson, "Music," *NM* 19/3 (April 14, 1936): 29; Henry Johnson, "Music," *NM* 19/5 (April 28, 1936): 29; Henry Johnson, "Music," *NM* 19/7 (May 12, 1936):29; John Hammond, "Phonograph Music," *NM* 23/11 (June 8, 1937): 7; John Hammond, "Phonograph Music," *NM* 24/3 (July 13, 1937): 28-29.

27. Henry Johnson, "Sold--for Less Than a Song," *NM* 20/2 (July 7, 1936): 29; Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 52-53.

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ostensibly public airwaves. In one, Henry Cowell inveighed against a popular talent show sponsored by the Chase and Sanborn Coffee Company. By framing the show as an "amateur hour," the sponsors managed to avoid paying performers, skirted union rules, and under cover of offering an "opportunity" for exposure to members of the general public received an hour of valuable air-time on the cheap. Six months later, a *New Masses* critic analyzed the relative importance of advertising and entertainment on several prominent radio shows, concluding that "American radio is not entertainment. It is not culture. It is not art. It is not education . . . American radio is advertising."[28] And radio was costing musicians jobs.

Socialized Culture

However, even as technological advances threatened the livelihoods of musicians, actors, and other artists, the WPA arts projects provided succor. For instance, in November 1935 WPA administrators agreed to demands from AFM Local 802 for a ban on broadcasts of FMP programs. Across the nation, tens of thousands of jobless painters, writers, musicians, and actors--not to mention photographers, editors, stagehands, costumers, and a host of others involved in the production of art--found employment with the various Arts Projects. In return, they provided the American public with countless books, theatrical productions, concerts, and murals, ranging in quality from the pedestrian to the profound. Predictably enough, the impact of the programs was felt more strongly in New York City than anywhere else. For example, on the Federal Art Project, New York administrators were given special dispensation in hiring non-eligible artists. Because the WPA was intended to provide relief to those most in need, the participation of artists not officially on relief rolls was strictly limited; the statewide quota in New

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28. Henry Cowell, "Major Bowes' Radio Racket," *NM* 17/8 (November 19, 1935): 9-10; R. Peters, "The Radio," *NM* 19/6 (May 5, 1936): 29-30. Similar sentiments inform T. R. Carskadon, "Radio: The Happy Slattern," *The New Republic* 1190 (September 22, 1937): 183-84.

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York was 10%. But because New York City was home to so many of America's leading artists, administrators there were allowed to hire up to 25% of their employees from outside of the relief rolls. Audrey McMahon notes that this exception had the twin purposes of "establishing appropriate supervision for large mural, sculpture, and other important projects, as well as to enable [*sic*] us to employ needy artists of known caliber to give leadership and provide goals for others."[29]

The work these artists produced varied widely. As Bruce I. Bustard has pointed out, the most significant trend in American painting during the Depression was the "American Scene" movement, and to some extent this style became the unofficial mode for FAP painters. However, the FAP also employed a number of abstract painters and sculptors, as well as scholars, designers, and craft-artists, working in a broad array of styles. And although much FAP art was frankly patriotic, the Project did not proceed without controversy.[30]

Because many in government remained skeptical about the arts projects, administrators eagerly sought proposals for projects that could be easily justified as not merely aesthetically valuable, but also practically "useful." No undertaking better exemplified this goal than the American Guide Series published by the Federal Writers Project. Like several other elements of Federal One, the concept behind the Guide Series pre-dated the WPA, originating in a February 1934 proposal by the Authors' League to the Civil Works Administration suggesting "a project that would be of 'social usefulness'." The resulting series of state and regional--and, in New York's case, city--Guides was among the most successful products of Federal One. Although the quality of

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29. "WPA Music Strike Off As Union Wins Demands," *DW* December 6, 1935: 4; Audrey McMahon, "A General View of the WPA Federal Art Project in New York City and State, in *The New Deal Arts Projects*, 57.

30. Bustard, *A New Deal*, 71-72; Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, "The American Abstract Artists and the WPA Federal Art Project," in *The New Deal Arts Projects*, 223-44; Jacob Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project," in *The New Deal Arts Projects*, 163.

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the books was uneven, a number of volumes garnered great acclaim on publication. As Monty Noam Penkower notes, many reviewers discussed the guidebooks in extremely laudatory terms, praising them for contributing to "the rediscovery of America." Such language was only a little hyperbolic, as the Guides did indeed illuminate their subjects in astonishing depth, combining cultural, social, political, and natural histories within individual volumes. In addition, the writing was often at a high level; the Series employed young writers including Studs Terkel, Zora Neale Hurston, John Cheever, and Richard Wright. Project supervisors also recognized the importance of folk culture in regional identities, and in June 1936 John Lomax was appointed "National Advisor of Folklore and Folkways" for the Federal Writers Project. His primary responsibility was oversight for the guides' folklore sections.[31]

While the Arts and Writers Projects were characterized chiefly by their celebrations of American culture, the Federal Music Project was considerably less nationalistic in its emphasis. FMP Director Nikolai Sokoloff's cultural and political conservatism were accompanied by a European musical chauvinism. However, the FMP did make a significant positive impact throughout the United States. Under Sokoloff's direction, the Project helped to create new orchestras in communities from Providence to Oklahoma City, and provided much-needed assistance to ensembles in other small- to mid-size cities including Tulsa, Hartford, Des Moines, and Portland, Oregon. Similarly important were the Project's educational programs, which brought regular concerts into countless public schools throughout the country. But as was the case with all of the Arts Projects, the FMP supported a host of activities in New York City that were unsustainable elsewhere. So in addition to creating ensembles and bringing music to young students, the New York

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31. Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 13, 132; Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*, 386–88.

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branch of the Project established a program called the "Composers' Forum-Laboratory" on 30 October 1935.[32]

The Forum, which was conceived by Ashley Pettis--then officially "New York City FMP Director of Social Music Education"--was intended, in Pettis's words, to develop a "more definite understanding and relationship between the composer and the public [in order to remove] the barrier which has already existed between the composer and the people who are or should be the consumers of his goods."[33] New York's Forum-Laboratory program was sufficiently successful to lead to emulation in several other large cities. Each Forum program followed the same model, beginning with the performance of a composition by a living American composer, who was expected to be present, followed by audience questions and then a general discussion. Barbara Zuck has compiled a list of composers whose works were performed at New York Forums, and it reads like a virtual who's who of then-living American composers. From the eminent musical conservative Daniel Gregory Mason to the young Roger Sessions, from Ernest Bloch to Ruth Crawford, and from Amy Beach to Elliott Carter, no style of composition was excluded.[34]

Despite Sokoloff's concerns about Communist infiltration of the FMP, the Forum-Laboratory programs also presented works by such noted musical leftists as Cowell, Eisler, Siegmeister, and Blitzstein, among others. And when these composers' works were performed, the programs were not restricted to apolitical repertoire: in October 1937, for instance, a Forum program included two of Siegmeister's "Negro Songs of Protest" arrangements and his "Strange Funeral in Braddock." To be sure, composers were not given complete discretion in setting programs; on another occasion, Siegmeister

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32. Bindas, *All This Music*, 21-23.

33. Pettis quoted in Bindas, *All This Music*, 65.

34. Zuck, *Musical Americanism*, 168-82

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had apparently desired to have one or more of his workers' rounds on the program, but Pettis declined. Blitzstein circulated a petition in protest, but Virgil Thomson replied that, since Siegmeister's lyrics mentioned a prominent industrialist by name, Pettis' decision was defensible in both administrative (funding) terms and legal ones.[35]

The "frequently heated" discussion sessions described by Zuck, who has studied the Forum-Laboratory transcripts in great detail, often included "questions pertaining to nationalism and the 'American' qualities of American music." But while the Laboratories enabled many young composers to have their works performed, Zuck notes that the FMP, "[u]nlike the Writers' and Art Projects . . . did not directly sponsor creative activity by individual artists." Thus, "though the WPA was Americanist toward the performance of native music, it was still primarily an institution for the perpetuation of cultivated music in America, not American cultivated music."[36] Despite its fundamental conservatism, however, the FMP provided much-needed aid to many of the nation's musicians, and welcome entertainment to large portions of the population, as *New Masses*'s R. D. Darrell acknowledged in a column from October 1937: "The Federal Music Project is giving a living--at least of sorts--to thousands of Americans; millions of others are being influenced to some degree by its music making. It may be providing enjoyment and education; it [the conservative programming] may be a source only of boredom, but for better or worse it is doing something, it is impacting on many facets of a national consciousness."[37]

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35. Martin McCall, "Music," *DW* 25 October 1937, 7; Virgil Thomson to Marc Blitzstein, 26 February 1936, in Virgil Thomson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page (New York: Summit Books, 1988): 117-18.

36. Zuck, *Musical Americanism*, 168-82.

37. R. D. Darrell, "Concert Music," *NM* 25/3 (October 12, 1937): 30.

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Government-Sponsored Insurgency

Of the four Projects that constituted Federal One, the Federal Theatre Project was both the most acclaimed and the most controversial. In production after production, the FTP defied skeptics who had felt sure that a government-sponsored arts program would inevitably produce pro-administration propaganda. Even more significantly, the FTP's artistic standards were impressively high; many of the most challenging and ambitious theatrical productions of 1936 and 1937 were presented under the auspices of the FTP. It did not take long for Roosevelt's foray into public arts to win over the nation's theater critics, including such notables as Burns Mantle and Brooks Atkinson; the Project even won copious praise from a number of left-wing critics. The American public was equally impressed: between February 1936 and February 1937, FTP programs were seen by approximately 5.5 million people in New York City alone. If the purpose of Federal One was to provide American audiences with affordable, appealing opportunities to enjoy the arts, then the first full year of the FTP was an almost unmitigated triumph, moving even the *Daily Worker* to declare, in a brief retrospective of the project's initial season, that "a peoples' theatre in America lies just across the doorstep."[38]

Much of the credit for the FTP's success could be directly attributed to the leadership of Project Director Hallie Flanagan. Flanagan, the former director of the prestigious Vassar College Experimental Theatre, was not only a gifted administrator, but also a knowledgeable student of the theatre, and one of the early American proponents of the teachings of legendary Soviet directors Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. Flanagan took her responsibilities as FTP Director very seriously, writing that "[f]or the first time in American theatrical history, directors and designers from coast to coast can sit around tables, pool their ideas, and be concerned not with . . . money or personal prestige, but with making an American theatre." Nevertheless, Flanagan gave her directors some

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38. Charles E. Dexter, "From WPA Federal Theatre To Reinhardt in One Paragraph," *DW* 8 February 1937, 7.

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latitude in conceiving their productions, firmly believing that an American theatre must be free to address virtually any topic, as long as it did so in a way that would be thought–provoking and aesthetically interesting.[39]

Although Flanagan did not shy away from topicality in the FTP, her primary concern was with artistic quality, and from the earliest days of the Project, an astonishing number of productions lived up to her lofty standards, none more famously than a presentation of the Negro Unit of the FTP in New York during the spring of 1936. Directed by the 22-year old Wisconsin native and theatrical *wunderkind* Orson Welles, the legendary "Black *Macbeth*" set Shakespeare's Scottish play in Haiti during that country's revolution. Rife with political resonances, Welles's *Macbeth* was also aesthetically daring. Desiring someone who was equally willing to take risks in order to produce an innovative theatrical experience, Welles engaged Virgil Thomson as the project's musical supervisor. Although he did not compose any music for the production, Thomson was responsible for finding authentic voodoo music to incorporate into the drama. John Houseman, who collaborated with Welles on this as on many other later projects, recalls Thomson's search:

> One day, after Orson, Virgil and I had been auditioning [the African drummers'] voodoo numbers, we complained to Asadata that his chants did not sound evil enough. Virgil, as usual, got right down to the point.
>
> "Are those really voodoo?"
>
> "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, Sirs. That is absolutely real, authentic voodoo."
>
> "They don't sound wicked enough."
>
> "Sirs, I . . . "
>
> "Sometimes for the theatre you have to exaggerate."

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39. Flanagan quoted in Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 94; Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 78–79.

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> "I am sorry, Sirs. You can't be any more wicked that that!"
> Finally Asadata admitted what those chants of his really were: they were strong spells intended to *ward off* the beriberi—not to induce it. He dared not give us the real thing, he explained.[40]

If the musical elements of the show were thus not as "authentic" as Thomson and Welles would have liked, it apparently did not bother critics, who gave the production rave reviews. Exulting that "[t]here is a living theatre in America!", *Daily Worker* critic John Chalmers admonished readers, "Don't fail to see 'Macbeth.' The voodoo jungle scenes are thrilling, the play itself moves with its proud destiny toward tragedy. . . . a classic that has come to life, thanks to the great people who have revitalized it."[41] That a performance of this canonical work with an all-black cast also made a strong statement for racial equality hardly needed stating.

Building on the success of the "Black *Macbeth*," Welles was engaged by the FTP to produce a series of similarly provocative modernist productions of "old" plays, a designation chosen "because the WPA theatre is opposed to the word 'classical'."[42] In late 1936 Welles collaborated with Edwin Denby on an updated version of nineteenth-century French comedy *Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie* (performed in English as *Horse Eats Hat*), and soon thereafter directed and starred in Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe's classic *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Both plays showcased Welles' prodigious theatrical gifts, as he achieved the delicate balance between inventive staging and coherent direction that is so often lacking from "updated" versions of classic drama. And in *Doctor Faustus*, Welles once again achieved a production that was a great success

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40. John Houseman, *Run-through: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 193.

41. John Chalmers, "Haiti: Macbeth Emigrates From Scotland to Harlem," *DW* 26 April 1936, 7.

42. "20 W. P. A. Groups to Produce Lewis' 'It Can't Happen Here'," *DW* 10 September 1936, 7;

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with both critics and audiences, as the play became one of the more unlikely hits of the 1936-37 theatrical season.[43] The "old plays" series also seemingly put the lie to conservative complaints that the FTP was little more than a Communist propaganda machine, although, as we shall see, that did not stop Congressmen lacking a proper grounding in dramatic history from cautioning against the Communistic tendencies of Elizabethan playwrights and their classical predecessors.

A number of FTP productions did, however, address political subjects. In October 1936, the FTP's stage adaptation of the Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can't Happen Here* opened simultaneously in twenty-two different productions nationally, including Spanish, Yiddish, and all-Black versions. The novel by the muckraking Nobelist had been a matter of some controversy earlier that year when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, after spending nearly $200,000 on film rights to the book and a screenplay by Sidney Howard, was barred by movie studio censor Will Hays from producing the film. According to Hays, Lewis's novel, which took as its subject the possibility of a fascist dictatorship, could too easily be construed as anti-Republican propaganda, despite the fact that Lewis's fictional protagonist for President was a Democrat. Hays's explanation was particularly ironic for two additional reasons: first, Lewis's novel--published in 1935--is generally believed to have been a response to the successes of neo-populists Huey Long and Father Coughlin, rather than of Republicans (who were rarely successful during the mid-1930s anyway); and second, MGM had been responsible, in 1934, for the blatantly pro-Republican newsreels that helped defeat Upton Sinclair in California. At any rate, while the film was

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43. On *Horse Eats Hat* see Frederick Jacobi, "WPA Shows with Music," *MM* 14/1 (November--December 1936): 42-43; on *Doctor Faustus* see Charles E. Dexter, "Dr. Faustus Comes Back to Life In a Little WPA Masterpiece," *DW* 12 January 1937, 7. For both plays, Welles employed the young composer Paul Bowles, an avowed leftist and good friend of Copland--he had belonged to the Young Composers Group--Blitzstein, and Thomson. Bowles later achieved his greatest recognition as a novelist, most of all for *The Sheltering Sky*.

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never made, the clamor that surrounded it likely contributed to popular interest in the FTP's stage version, which was seen by almost 500,000 spectators across the country.[44]

The best-known of the FTP's politically-tinged productions was its series of *Living Newspapers*. Each installment of the series focused on one particular issue, and was intended to be both educational and entertaining. Perhaps predictably, the *Living Newspaper* concept, fairly innocuous in theory, was a veritable powderkeg once put into practice. The first production, *Ethiopia*, treated the recent Italian incursion into North Africa, and was scheduled to open in February 1936. Almost immediately, it ran afoul of government authorities. Fearing the potential diplomatic consequences of a government-sponsored play addressing delicate foreign policy matters, the State Department convinced WPA officials to prohibit the appearance of foreign leaders as characters onstage; actors would, however, be allowed to quote from the speeches of any such figure. As a consequence, *Ethiopia* never made it out of dress rehearsals, and New York regional FTP director Elmer Rice resigned in protest.

Nevertheless, the FTP continued to support the concept behind the *Living Newspapers*, and in March 1936 the series made its public debut, in a play called *Triple-A Plowed Under*. The play tackled the agricultural policies of the Roosevelt government, in particular the practice of plowing crops under, which provided financial assistance to farmers by raising the prices of their products, but seemed inexcusably wasteful to the millions of American workers, rural and urban, who had difficulty feeding themselves and their families. The play, which combined social commentary with innovative production techniques, was well received by mainstream and leftist critics alike. In a review that opened by calling the play "a remarkable example of the projection of news, living news about economic theory and practice, into theatre," MacDonald Hall described for *Daily Worker* readers how *Triple-A* adapted Eisensteinian

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44. David Platt, "The Case of 'It Can't Happen Here'," *DW* 11 May 1936, 7; "20 WPA Groups," 7; Bustard, *A New Deal*, 96; Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 98–100.

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cinematic montage to the stage, how such experimental touches as "[t]he grouping of masses, the use of amplifiers, of blackouts, of scrim diagrams and lantern slides, of platforms and varied levels, of unusual lighting effects, all give an effect of technical excellence and of freshness." Noting the conservative American Liberty League's public complaints about the play's critical treatment of both the AAA and the Supreme Court decision that ended it, Hall praised the play--which was produced by a collective of unnamed FTP staff writers--for its art and its honesty: "[*Triple-A*] offers, unhampered by private purse strings, the truth."[45]

Of course, not all of the *Living Newspapers* were equally successful; in July 1936, FTP writers offered *Injunction Granted*, a blatantly biased account of difficulties encountered by organized labor in its legal battles against employers. While Flanagan had vigorously supported both *Ethiopia* and *Triple-A* despite the controversies they had caused, even she considered the stridently anti-capitalist tone of *Injunction Granted* inappropriate for a publicly-financed theatre, recognizing as well that such productions would provide ammunition to those who alleged that the FTP was a Communist propaganda machine. More importantly, Flanagan found *Injunction Granted* artistically deficient, a verdict that was echoed by several critics. Frederick Jacobi, reviewing the play in *Modern Music*, wrote that Virgil Thomson's score, which opened with a dramatic chorus of "[s]hrieking sirens and Klaxons" before descending into banal "roll-calls on trumpets and fife," was unlikely "to add greatly to the reputation of the author of *Four Saints*." The problems of Thomson's score, in Jacobi's view, effectively mirrored those of the overall production: "in spite of its remarkable qualities . . . the final effect [of *Injunction Granted* was] something like that of a high school entertainment done with immense conviction and talent." Audiences concurred, and *Injunction Granted* had only a brief theatrical run. *Injunction Granted* was, however, a notable exception to the

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45. MacDonald Hall, "Federal Theatre Play Treads on Some Toes," *DW* 22 March 1936, 7.

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generally high quality of the *Living Newspaper* series. Later installments, including *Power*, which addressed the TVA and public utilities generally, and *One-Third of a Nation*, a searing indictment of urban housing conditions, were quite successful; the former ran for a very respectable five months in 1937, and the latter was seen by some 200,000 viewers in New York and ten other cities.[46]

Documentary Music

The popularity of the *Living Newspapers* was particularly striking considering their reliance on modernist theatrical techniques; by combining these with explicitly political subject matter, the *Newspapers* displayed a great debt to Brecht's epic theatre. The *Newspapers'* intense focus on current social conditions has also led R. C. Reynolds to note the similarities between American drama of the 1930s and the literary naturalism of several decades earlier.[47] In fusing Brechtian agit-prop with Dreiserian naturalism, the *Living Newspapers* displayed the "documentary" impulse that William Stott has asserted to be a defining characteristic of much of the best American art of the Depression. According to Stott, the documentary is an attempt "to promote social action" by relating contemporary societal conditions—typically adverse—in a style that strives to appear dispassionate and unemotional, objectively presenting evidence of social problems. In this respect, as Reynolds has noted, the *Living Newspapers* were theatrical cousins to John Dos Passos's *U. S. A.* trilogy.[48]

One of the greatest works of American modernist fiction, *U. S. A.* was completed in 1936--just as the *Newspapers* were beginning--with the publication of its third volume, *The Big Money*. Despite topical plotlines and references, *U. S. A.* is not most like the

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46. Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon*, 96; Jacobi, "WPA Shows," 43-44; Bustard, *A New Deal*, 81.

47. R. C. Reynolds, *Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties* (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing, 1986), 93.

48. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 26; Reynolds, *Stage Left*, 76.

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Living Newspapers in its subject matter or politics; although Dos Passos was an outspoken leftist from the 1920s through the mid-1930s, *U. S. A.*, while clearly tilted toward the liberal end of the political spectrum, was not primarily a political work. Rather, its major themes include such issues as the capriciousness of fate, the fundamental senselessness of the lived experience, and the struggle of individuals against such unconquerable opponents as time, large social forces, and chance. In this sense, *U. S. A.* was very different from the *Living Newspapers*, each installment of which was narrowly focused on a contemporary political issue.

Dos Passos's trilogy is most like the *Newspapers* in its blending of naturalistic narrative and modernist technique in addressing real-world issues. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, *U. S. A.* offered a narrative fractured by its shifting modes of presentation. While Dos Passos's work revolves around a traditional novelistic tale that alludes to both Horatio Alger and Sinclair Lewis, *U. S. A.* actually tells one story in four radically different formats. Chapters of character–driven narrative alternate with "Newsreel" sections, which intersperse headlines with song lyrics, snatches of conversation, and news items; short biographical sketches of figures (in *The Big Money*, the individuals sketched range from icons of the left such as Eugene V. Debs, Big Bill Haywood, and Bob LaFollette to such popular figures as William Jennings Bryan, Andrew Carnegie, and Thomas Edison); and stream-of-consciousness "Camera Eyes," which relate successions of jumbled, seemingly unedited images, typically banal in nature.

The imitation of filmic techniques in a non-cinematic context was a characteristic shared by both *U. S. A.* and the *Living Newspapers*. This similarity was surely no coincidence, but rather a testament to the growing influence of film among modernists in all artistic media. In the late 1920s, the most influential innovators in film, as in the theatre, were Soviet directors. Sergei Eisenstein was of course the best known of these, and his pioneering use of montage was clearly echoed by both Dos Passes and the *Living Newspapers*. But whereas Eisenstein employed montage in a relatively conventional

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narrative context, his Soviet colleague Dziga Vertov brought his own technical virtuosity to bear on projects that documented contemporary life, in however fractured a manner. Vertov's 1929 film *The Man with the Movie-Camera* brilliantly applied cutting-edge cinematic techniques to what was essentially a slice-of-life documentary. One of the earliest self-conscious films-about-film, *The Man with the Movie-Camera* was a seminal influence on young directors throughout Europe and the United States. The chief American exponent of the Vertov style was the photographer Ralph Steiner, who directed several abstract, artistic films very much in the Vertov vein. Whereas Steiner's projects were essentially devoid of political import, many of New York's modernist directors, recognizing the tremendous potential of film to influence political perceptions (as, for example, in the 1934 California gubernatorial campaign), made more overtly political movies. In the mid-1930s, Nykino--a splinter group that had spun off from the Communist-sponsored Workers Film & Photo League--launched *The World Today*, a pro-labor response to the *March of Time* newsreels; only two installments were completed.[49]

New York's radical composers, too, had shown themselves to be interested in multimedia productions, collaborating with their theatrical colleagues in theatre and dance, and they were also involved with their cinematic counterparts. In 1930 and 1931, Copland helped Steiner edit three of his films, *H_2O*, *Mechanical Principles*, and *Surf and Seaweed*. The first two movies were scored by Colin McPhee, the third by Blitzstein; all three were performed under the auspices of the Copland-Sessions series in 1931.[50] Not surprisingly, these composers also worked on films that were more overtly political, in the process helping to define an American documentary style.[51] And despite Federal

49. William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 126.

50. Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 64.

51. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 15, 97.

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One's general neglect of both film and the commissioning of new compositions-- the Federal Music Project failed to commission a single work from a living composer, the FTP generally relegated composers to producing incidental music and sound effects, and Federal One did not initially even contain a separate film project--the most important contributions the New York composers made to film in the mid-1930s occurred under the auspices of the New Deal.

In 1936, Thomson, who had collaborated with Welles on several FTP projects, met with director Pare Lorentz, who was looking for a composer to score a documentary he was making for the RA (Resettlement Administration). Lorentz, whose primary employment in the early 1930s came as a writer on film and other subjects for such periodicals as *Vanity Fair* and *Town and Country*, was engaged in the early days of the WPA to produce a short film celebrating the effectiveness of the government employment program. The result, called *Hands*, was a short, Vertovian abstract film that consisted entirely of close-ups of hands, which moved over the course of the film from idleness to work and financial reward.[52] Lorentz's new project, titled *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, was to be a medium-length documentary on the causes of the Dust Bowl. In it, Lorentz juxtaposed footage taken by RA photographers (including Steiner) of soil erosion and dust storms with images of suffering farmers. The film also featured a Whitmanesque narration, Lorentz's prose-poem on the missteps that had characterized American agriculture and land management for much of the twentieth century.

Thomson's score, which accompanies virtually the entire thirty-minute film, is an aural evocation of the American heartland, a highly effective complement to the pastoral cinematography. Although Thomson was far from Lorentz's first choice--he was, in fact, the twelfth composer interviewed by the director--the two developed a close working relationship; a number of Lorentz's editing decisions were made in deference to

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52. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 11.

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Thomson's score, rather than the other way around, as is usually the case. Similarly, the film's narration was added only after the music and the footage had been synchronized.[53] Lorentz dealt more in images than in words, and Thomson's score consisted of what could be considered sonic imagery of the Dust Bowl. The music is stylistically reminiscent of *Four Saints*, with open harmonies and snatches of Protestant hymns and Anglo–American folksongs, the most notable difference being, of course, the divergent work done by the two scores. In *Four Saints*, Thomson's score exists in dialectical opposition to Stein's libretto. The music, though beautiful in and of itself, gains in mystery and power when combined with the words; the incomprehensibility of the latter complicates the apparent simplicity of the former. But in *The Plow*, Thomson's score serves as punctuation for Lorentz's message, and the identifiably American musical style feels entirely natural in combination with the quintessentially American images of Lorentz's film. Thus Edwin Denby, who considered the film a failure on a formal and narrative level, still praised both the cinematography and Thomson's score, writing that "I shall certainly go again for the photography and the music."[54]

The film's conclusion, which depicted the government's relief efforts, struck some congressional Republicans as government-sponsored New Deal propaganda, and conservative movie studios--which at the time also controlled most of the nation's movie theaters--refused to show *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. However, the owners of New York's independent Rialto Theater, recognizing that the controversy could boost receipts, agreed to show Lorentz's film, and their advertising shrewdly plugged *Plow* as a taboo film, forbidden from theatrical showing and commercial distribution by Hollywood studios. Soon after opening at the Rialto in May 1936, the movie's generally strong

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53. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz*, 33-35.

54. Edwin Denby, "Thomson Scores for a New Deal Film," *MM* 13/4 (May--June 1936): 47.

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reviews and sensational publicity spurred enough popular demand to necessitate a wider theatrical release.[55]

The Plow That Broke the Plains established Lorentz as one of America's leading directors of documentary films, and Thomson's widely acclaimed music announced him as a force to be reckoned with in the field of film scoring. In contrast to the musical accompaniments of most earlier American films, which had primarily consisted of either popular songs, pastiches of classical warhorses, or neo-Wagnerian compositions by European emigrés like Max Steiner and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Thomson's score for *The Plow* introduced audiences--many of them for the first time--to the folk-based style of American composition that was growing in popularity among serious composers. Thomson's achievement was acknowledged by critics, fellow musicians, and, perhaps most impressively, other documentary filmmakers. In early 1937, Thomson was engaged, along with Blitzstein, to provide music for a film by Joris Ivens, a preeminent director in the documentary genre. Ivens had earlier shown his interest in contemporary composers by employing Eisler to score *New Earth*, a 1934 documentary about the Dutch reclamation of land from the Zuiderzee. That film was not unlike *The Plow* in its focus on the interaction between man and nature, but *New Earth* painted a far more optimistic picture. Ivens's leftist politics, implied in his choice of Eisler, were further expressed in the film's celebration of cooperative, government-sponsored public works. Lorentz's subjects had despoiled the earth through their negligence, but the heroes of *New Earth* worked with nature to achieve a more perfect, livable balance.

Ivens's leftist politics were also apparent in his new project, although the actual subject was quite different. *Spanish Earth* documented the carnage wrought by Franco's fascist army in the increasingly bloody Spanish Civil War. By 1937, this story had come to dominate leftist discourse in America: the War was a front-page story in almost every

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55. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz*, 42-46.

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edition of the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* for that year. Because the 1935 Neutrality Act barred the Roosevelt Administration from providing any economic or military assistance to the Spanish Republican government, a number of young Americans journeyed to Spain as private citizens. Once there they formed the Lincoln Brigade, which fought alongside anti-fascist troops from nations throughout Europe.

The significance American artists accorded to the Spanish conflict was clearly demonstrated by the roster of luminaries who collaborated with Ivens on *Spanish Earth*. In order to produce the film, a group of artists including John Dos Passos, Dorothy Parker, Clifford Odets, Herman Shumlin, Ernest Hemingway, and Lillian Hellman incorporated Contemporary Historians, Inc. The film's scenario was written by Hellman, Parker, and Archibald MacLeish, among others. Hemingway wrote the narration for the film, which was initially read by Orson Welles. However, the producers decided that Welles's mellifluous voice was too beautiful for the film's harsh subject matter, so Hemingway narrated the final version. Blitzstein composed the film's score, which drew heavily on Spanish folk songs, and Thomson, fresh from the triumph of *The Plow*, arranged Blitzstein's composition for use in the film.

The result was a gripping portrait of devastation in a small town in the Spanish countryside. Ivens and his intrepid crew obtained footage that was shockingly brutal, and the film let this footage speak for itself whenever it could. Although George Antheil complained that the film's score lacked direction and "create[d] neither a musical nor a dramatic form," he acknowledged that "many intelligent persons liked the music," and also implied that despite its deficiencies, Blitzstein's approach remained clearly preferable to the "literal method of Hollywood underscoring." A more typical view of the film was offered by the *Daily Worker*'s David Platt, who wrote admiringly that *The Spanish Earth* "tried to show war as it is." His review extolled every element of the production, including the musical score; in his eyes, Blitzstein and Thomson, in collaboration with Ivens and Lorentz, were pointing the way towards a new, more

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sophisticated paradigm of film composition, realizing the potential of the medium to achieve the status of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which music, text, and image were all of a high artistic level.[56]

Weimar on the Hudson

Although Blitzstein's folksong-laden score for *Spanish Earth* was generally hailed as an impressive achievement, stylistically it represented only a temporary detour from the jazzier idiom he had been honing since "Send in the Militia." That he continued to believe this was a fruitful direction in which to be headed was evident in the "Sketch" that had been performed at the Collective concert of February 1936. The short scene included a song called "Nickel Under the Foot," in which a prostitute waxes philosophical on the power of money in a capitalist society. When Blitzstein had played the song for Bertolt Brecht two months earlier, the playwright was deeply impressed, and he reportedly asked Blitzstein, "Why don't you write a piece about all kinds of prostitution--the press, the church, the courts, the arts, the whole system?"[57] Unfortunately, before Blitzstein was able to make any substantial progress on the extended piece, his wife Eva fell gravely ill; she died in late May, and Blitzstein's mourning precluded further work for the time being.

By mid-summer, though, Blitzstein had returned to work. His first project was an essay on "The Case for Modern Music" published in three parts in *New Masses*.

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56. Antheil, "On the Hollywood Front," *MM* 15/4 (May—June 1938): 253; David Platt, "'Spanish Earth' Is Great Dynamic Portrayal of Heroic People's Front Fighting Fascism," *DW* 20 August 1937, 7. Hemingway arranged a private screening of the film for President and Mrs. Roosevelt, both of whom reportedly found it compelling viewing. Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 79; Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 150-53.

57. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 113. Arthur Frank Wertheim notes that the figure of the prostitute, representing at once economic oppression and feminine agency, was a popular one among the Greenwich Village radicals of the "Little Renaissance." Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance*, 87.

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Revisiting the issues that he had first addressed in "Towards a New Musical Form," Blitzstein attempted to make the case that a successful proletarian music must draw on the technical innovations of the European modernists. He began from the premise that the musical revolution of the *fin–de–siecle* had "three aspects: technical, esthetic, [and] social." As in the earlier essay, Blitzstein's most interesting insights concern the intersection of music, society, and ideology. For example, he attributed the mixture of hostility and disinterest that characterized most audiences' responses to modernist music to social, rather than aesthetic, factors: "The riot that took place in Paris at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* in 1913 was no accident or mere gesture. The music broke the bounds of decorum; it dared, in a high place, among genteel surroundings, to expose lust and wantonness and bestiality to the auditors; Caliban saw himself in the mirror, and yelled for the militia."[58]

Conversely, Blitzstein wrote, composers had begun to feel dissatisfied with the concert setting itself, recognizing that it was not necessarily the most fitting setting for music-making and listening. According to Blitzstein, they saw, for the first time, the social and political implications of the concert setting, and were not happy. The similarity between this view and that espoused by practitioners of *Gebrauchsmusik* is unmistakable, despite Barbara Zuck's assertion that there is no clear linkage between *Gebrauchsmusik* and American composition of the 1930s, simply "a similarity in premise between some German music in the 1920s and some American music in the 1930s."[59] In fact, the second installment of Blitzstein's "Case" was largely taken up with his endorsement of *Gebrauchsmusik*:

> Here was a fresh turn for an art which was still submerged in notions of traditional etiquette, of the right time and the right place. The new

58. Marc Blitzstein, "The Case for Modern Music," *NM* 20/3 (July 14, 1936): 27.

59. Zuck, *Musical Americanism*, 97.

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> composers said that music is still music even when heard outside the consecrated concert–hall and opera–house, even when performed before two in the afternoon or after ten at night. They wanted music to be simple, understandable. They wanted to reach someone they called 'the man on the street,' they even wanted to know, and to some extent heed, what *he* wanted and liked to hear. They penetrated to where the 'lower classes' were accustomed to get music: the movies, the radio, the phonographs and schools, the beer–gardens and circuses and music–halls and homes.[60]

However, Blitzstein still considered *Gebrauchsmusik*, when viewed as an artistic movement, "important" but "muddle–headed": "The real lack was that the composers were trying to reach a lot of people, but had as a rule only a very vague idea what they wanted to say to them. They used timely subjects, which was good . . . but most of them had little political or social education, they were satisfied with merely risible satire or superficial comment or no comment at all." Fortunately, Blitzstein had the answer, or at least he knew someone who did: Brecht. In Blitzstein's opinion, "[Brecht] saw the new great public more clearly, more intensely than anyone else. He saw too that you couldn't just give the new public what it wanted; for what it wanted had been conditioned by generations of capitalist exploitation and treachery. He saw the need for education through poetry, through music." Following Brecht's example, "composers at last feel themselves joined to the proletarian movement, to the struggle of laboring classes everywhere for liberation, self–realization. The composer is now willing, eager, to trade in his sanctified post as Vestal Virgin before the altar of Immutable and Undefilable Art,

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60. Blitzstein, "The Case for Modern Music II--Second Generation," *NM* 20/4 (July 21,1936): 28.

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for the post of an honest workman among workmen, who has a job to do, a job which wonderfully gives other people joy. "[61]

In the final essay of the series, Blitzstein laid out a positive program going forward, a musical blueprint for the aesthetic and ideological revolution. Acknowledging that "[The new composer] must have an idiom, then, a language, a vehicle which will carry them as well as him," he insisted that the answer lay in using modern musical techniques. Wary of the accretion of meanings that inevitably colored older musical idioms, Blitzstein advocated new music in no small part because its very newness rendered it *tabula rasa;* if serialism and primitivism were not necessarily proletarian, neither were they bourgeois. Ultimately, Blitzstein wrote that he was "as aware as anybody that the new music of the masses is not going to be the music of Schoenberg or Stravinsky or Hindemith." However, "they were preparing the way" for the musical insurgents.[62]

Following the publication of the "Case," Blitzstein returned to work on the composition he had previewed for Brecht half a year earlier. He started composing in mid-July and wrote at a blistering pace, completing the work, now titled *The Cradle Will Rock*, on 2 September. *The Cradle* met with instant critical acclaim; in October 1936 it received first prize in the New Theatre League Competition, which had previously honored *Waiting for Lefty*. However, the show's themes were too incendiary for any of Broadway's major producers, and *Cradle* remained unacquired through the fall. Ironically, the inherent conservatism of the music industry was a major theme in both *Cradle* and "The Case for Modern Music," as well as Blitzstein's "Music Manifesto" (his review of Eisler's *Crisis in Modern Music*), in which Blitzstein wrote that "[composers] have for so long dwelt in the high reaches of 'art' atmosphere, believing patrons and entrepreneurs, that we are the anointed and the insulated, that it isn't nice to realize we are

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61. Blitzstein, "The Case for Modern Music II," 29.

62. Marc Blitzstein, "The Case for Modern Music III--Technique and Temper." *NM* 20/5 (July 28, 1936): 28.

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the tool of a vicious economic setup. The unconscious (sometimes not so unconscious) prostitution of composers in today's world is one of the sorry sights to see."[63]

Blitzstein's discomfort with--and entanglement in--the meretricious patronage system was highlighted on one occasion late in the summer of 1936, reported by Paul Bowles:

> Mrs. Murray Crane hired a foursome consisting of Virgil [Thomson], Aaron [Copland], Marc Blitzstein, and me to entertain her guests. A week or so before the occasion we spent an afternoon at her house arranging the program with her. Everything went easily until Marc sang an aria from *The Cradle Will Rock*, which he was just completing. The song's title and repeated punch line was: "There's Something So Damned Low About the Rich." While he delivered it with all the precise venom of which he was capable, Aaron, Virgil, and I stole rapid glances at one another and at Mrs. Crane. Apparently she had discovered the words to be in Aramaic, a language which she did not understand. However, she also let one see that she was following the music with polite interest. When Marc had finished, she leaned forward and said placidly: "Yes, it's fascinating. But I always feel that for a song to be meaningful one must hear the words. I was listening carefully, and I confess I got nothing. But of course there's no reason why you *should* be able to sing. Perhaps you have something purely instrumental?"[64]

But Blitzstein had nothing purely instrumental to offer, and anyway, he was absolutely committed to getting *Cradle* produced. During the fall of 1936 Blitzstein auditioned *Cradle* for a number of directors and producers. Actors' Repertory Company

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63. Blitzstein, "Music Manifesto," 28.

64. Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping: An Autobiography* (New York: Putnam, 1972): 190.

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announced they would produce it in early 1937, but had to abandon the project for lack of funds. Ultimately, the FTP picked up *Cradle*. Orson Welles was slated to direct it, and John Houseman, who had earlier produced *Four Saints* and collaborated with Welles on a number of avant-garde FTP shows including the "Black *Macbeth*," would produce. The show promised to be another major theatrical event; Houseman recalls that "Orson had devised an extravagant scenic scheme that called for a triple row of three–dimensional velour portals between which narrow, glass–bottomed, fluorescent platforms, loaded with scenery and props, slid smoothly past each other as the scene shifted back and forth from the night court to a street corner, a church, a drugstore, a hotel lobby, a faculty room, a doctor's office and the front lawn of the finest house in Steeltown U.S.A."[65] (see figure 7.1) The play was eagerly anticipated in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, which called *Cradle* "an important step towards the development of native opera" and repeatedly publicized the upcoming premiere.[66]

Despite the earlier triumphs of the Welles-Houseman collaboration and the acclaim that preceded Blitzstein's award-winning play, *Cradle*'s success was far from assured. In a surprising twist, the show's greatest difficulties came from within the federal government. During the spring of 1936, while the arts projects were still in their infant stage, several Republican Congressmen took to the floor to allege that Federal One, and especially the FTP, were hotbeds of Communist activity. Even the generally more decorous Senate became a forum for such charges in April 1936, as Republican Senator James J. Davis of Pennsylvania excoriated the directors of Federal One for promoting poor, propagandistic art. The legislators charged that Flanagan, well–regarded in both theatrical and academic circles, was using the FTP to promote the Soviet Union, an idea inferred from Flanagan's travel in the Soviet Union several years earlier and her professed

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65. Houseman, *Run–Through*.

66. "American Proletarian Opera Coming in 'Cradle Will Rock'," *Sunday Worker* 16 May 1937, 10; Martin McCall, "Music," *DW* 24 May 1937, 7; "'Cradle Will Rock'," *DW* 12 June 1937, 7.

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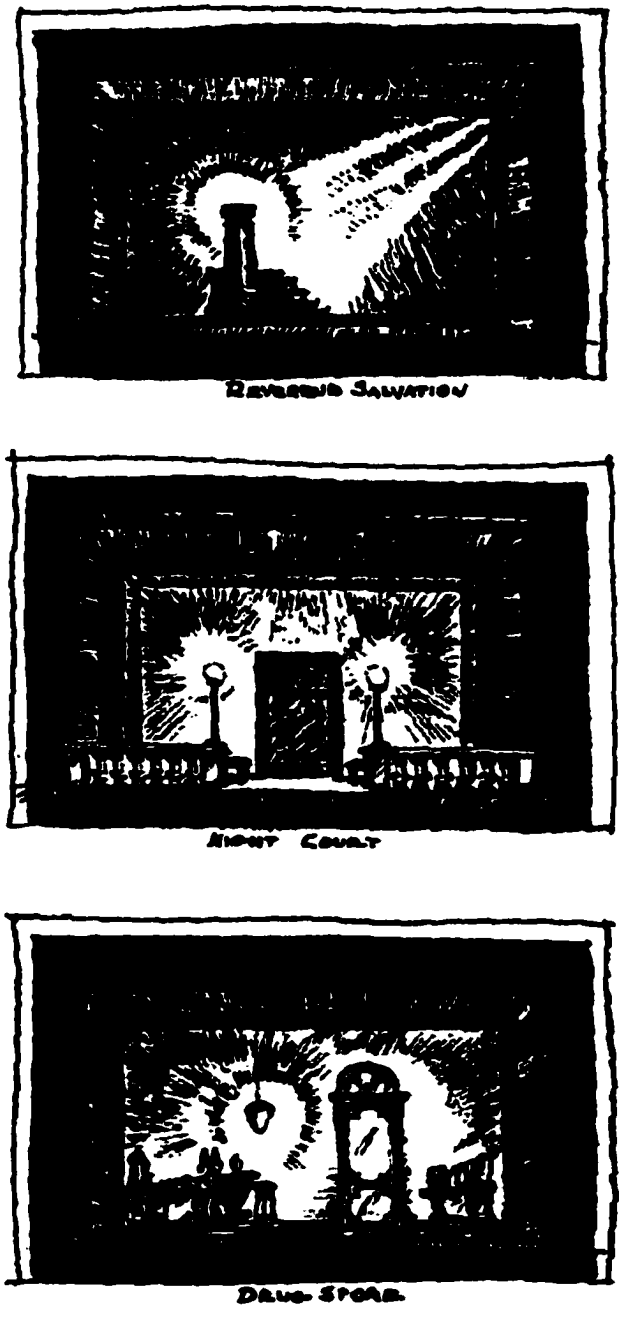
Figure 7.1: Set designs for *Cradle Will Rock*[67]



67. "Scenic Sketches for The Cradle Will Rock," staged by Orson Welles, decors by Edward Shruers, *MM* 14/4 (May--June 1937): 229.

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admiration for the directors and playwrights she had encountered there. Flanagan had also been very clear in asserting the relation between drama and society, and did not shy from social drama. While at Vassar, she had presented *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, a dramatic adaptation of a short story dealing with the plight of Midwestern tenant farmers. The name of the story's author, Whittaker Chambers, was not then so closely associated with American Communism as it is today, but *Can You Hear Their Voices?* was unambiguously leftist nonetheless.[68]

The charges levelled against Flanagan were only reinforced by the controversies that surrounded the FTP's *Living Newspaper*. But the Theatre Project was not alone in experiencing such problems; in a letter from June 1937, the chairman of the National Civic Foundation, one Ralph Easley, informed President Roosevelt that Federal One had been wholly infiltrated by Communists. Easley alleged that nearly 90% of the agency's employees in New York City were members of the Workers' Alliance, and slightly more than one-third were in fact Communist Party members. Regardless of the truth of such allegations, they were surely damaging from the perspective of public relations, so important for agencies dependent on Congressional largess. The FTP was further compromised by allegations that a box-office employee had embezzled FTP funds.[69]

Inevitably, Federal One ran into funding difficulties. These problems had several sources, including resentment of the Projects' indisputably disproportionate concentration in New York; philosophical reservations about the appropriateness of government-funded arts programs; and the purported subversiveness of the Projects' employees. Administrators constantly battled with Congress to maintain adequate funding levels, and when Administration bureaucrats in Washington needed to cut federal spending, the arts projects were always among the first agencies to be targeted. In the fall of 1936, Federal

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68. Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon*, 11.

69. Bindas, *All This Music*, 28; see "Federal Theatre Project, Publicity--1937-1938-Favorable and Adverse," FTPC: 35. 40.

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One was ordered to cut 20% of its employees. Naturally, the uneven geographical distribution of Federal One funds--Richard McKinzie notes, for example, that in December 1937, 44.5 % of all FAP artists resided in New York City--the burden of such cuts fell disproportionately on New York City. [70] On 1 December, New York artists still on the WPA payroll struck to protest the cuts, and during the ensuing protests 219 artists were arrested. New York's actors and musicians maintained their sense of humor, however, as evidenced by the opening, the following month, of the New Theatre League's WPA-related revue *Pink Slips on Parade*. The *Daily Worker* described the show as a "satire on the WPA policy of the Administration, with its mixture of paternalism, patronage and dismissals."[71]

In the spring of 1937, more cuts were announced. Throughout late May, hundreds of workers on each project struck. The action culminated on 27 May, when seven thousand of New York City's nine thousand arts projects employees protested the cuts with a one-day strike. Less than one month later, 2,248 of the city's Federal One employees were fired. Strikes immediately ensued, including a sit-down and hunger strike by dancers at Federal Music Theatre.[72] While Flanagan, under intense pressure from Congress, decreed that no new productions could open before 1 July, actors and

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70. Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 93, 96.

71. Beth McHenry, "WPA Cuts Lives and Quotas On the Living Newspaper," *DW* 2 December 1936, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "The Federal Arts Projects Face an Uncertain Future," *DW* 18 November 1936, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "New Theatre League Revue Satirizes Life in the WPA," *DW* 2 February 1937, 7; see also Charles E. Dexter, "New Theatre League Revue Opens New Musical Era," *DW* 26 January 1937, 7.

72. McKinzie, *The New Deal*, 99; Charles E. Dexter, "300 Federal Writers Strike To Protect Four Arts Projects," *DW* 25 May 1937, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "All WPA Shows to Go on Strike Tomorrow Against Project Cuts," *DW* 26 May 1937, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "Theatre Supervisors Told: 'Fire or Be Fired!'," *DW* 16 June 1937, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "New Rule Stops Production Of WPA Shows and Musicals," *DW* 17 June 1937, 7; Louis Mitchell, "Negro Theatre Sits In; Musicians Follow Suit," *DW* 17 June 1937, 7; Martin McCall, "Brahms And a Sit-Down," *DW* 19 June 1937, 7; Louise Mitchell, "'Economy' Axe Is Swinging On Four-Arts Projects," *DW* 23 June 1937, 7; "Cuts Cripple WPA Theatre," *DW* 24 June 1937, 7.

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musicians bemoaned the loss of their best chance at gainful employment.[73] Against this backdrop, *Cradle* approached its first public preview, scheduled for 16 June, a day on which 250 musicians were engaged in a sit-down strike at the Federal Music Theatre.

The opening night of *The Cradle Will Rock* has become a legendary event in American theatre history, and its events have been described by many writers. Likewise, Blitzstein's piece itself has been a subject of several cogent analyses.[74] The important aspect of the story that has gone largely undiscussed is the extent to which *Cradle*, both as a piece of music and as a cultural event, encompassed many of the most significant cultural issues of its era. John O. Hunter has noted that, in making union organization and related issues of industrial capitalism--the company town, bought politicians, worker safety--the primary subjects of his play, Blitzstein tackled the most prominent topics in American politics during 1936 and 1937.[75] In the scenes featuring Yasha the violinist and Dauber the painter, *Cradle* addressed the issue of arts patronage, which was particularly pressing for out-of-work artists of the Depression. The saga of *Cradle*'s inaugural production further highlighted such issues, and also raised important questions about the role played by government in the arts; the corporatism of the entertainment industry; and the conservatism of craft unions like the AFM and Actor's Equity, which caused Blitzstein and Welles numerous administrative headaches.[76]

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73. Howard Rushmore, "No Work in Private Industry For Jobless Actors, Musicians," *DW* 17 July 1937, 7; Louise Mitchell, "Last Curtain For WPA Shows," *DW* 10 July 1937, 7; "Musicians Hit Project Cuts," *DW* 23 July 1937, 7.

74. Perhaps the most entertaining and informative rendition is in Houseman, *Run-Through*, 257–75; see also Terkel, *Hard Times*, 365–67 for an FTP actor's reminiscences of events. The most compelling analyses of *Cradle* are in Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*," 460-73 and *passim*; Zuck, *History*, 201-20.

75. John O. Hunter, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' as a Document of America, 1937," *American Quarterly* 18/2 (Summer 1966): 227-33;

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But the most striking aspect of Blitzstein's play may be its blending of so many of the important artistic trends of the 1930s. It successfully combined the unreality of Brecht's epic theatre with the naturalistic Americanese of Odets. Musically, as we can see in "Nickel Under the Foot" (see example 7.1), the song from which *Cradle* grew, Blitzstein fused the catchiness of Tin Pan Alley with the pungent dissonance of modernism; "wrong" notes abound, but always within the context of a singable tune.

The exquisite balance of *Cradle* is evident in the responses it provoked from two of its most distinguished commentators, one each from the worlds of literature and music. In his foreword to the published edition of *Cradle*, Archibald MacLeish celebrated the play's Brechtian artifice, which in his view empowered audiences:

> Mr. Blitzstein's operetta, *The Cradle Will Rock*, is direct enough, candid enough, and sharp enough to reduce any audience ever collected to its human components. Under Orson Welles' direction and John Houseman's production at the Mercury the present edition of the play is so unarguably a piece *of* theatre *for* theatre that the theatrical illusion--the illusion, that is, that what occurs upon the stage is 'real'--never has a chance to establish itself. The actors are at all times actors . . . The play is at all times a play. And the effect upon the observer is the human and humanly becoming effect of the work of art upon the man who faces it.[77]

To Blitzstein's fellow Fontainbleu alumnus Aaron Copland, on the other hand, the most striking aspect of *Cradle* was the naturalism of its musical idiom. According to

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76. Charles E. Dexter, "Does 'Cradle Will Rock' Ban Mean WPA Censorship?," *DW* 18 June 1937, 7; Louise Mitchell, "No Federal Theatre Backing For 'Cradle Will Rock' Play," *DW* 18 July 1937, 7; Louise Mitchell, "Steel Barons Hit at Stage," *DW* 21 June 1937, 7.

77. Archibald MacLeish, "Foreword," in Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock: A Play in Music* (New York: Random House, 1938), 8-9.

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Example 7.1: Marc Blitzstein, "Nickel Under the Foot," (verse 1)[78]

Copland, Blitzstein's stage works, especially *Cradle*, "are meant to be performed not by singers with trained voices, but by actors who can sing after a fashion. Consequently they have a reality as stage drama that opera usually lacks. . . . As much as Blitzstein

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sacrificed in giving up the fullness and amplitude of the operatically trained voice he gained in the naturalness and charm of the singing actor."[79] Although Copland and MacLeish described *Cradle* in aesthetic terms that were almost diametrically opposed, both came to the same basic conclusion about Blitzstein's opus: *The Cradle Will Rock* was a work that embodied democracy.

Rocking the Spindle

Even as *Cradle* was stirring up controversy in Washington and New York, rehearsals were proceeding on another show that offered a very different but equally compelling take on the *genre* of political musical theater. Although its impending production was to be a model of collaborative work in which the whole exceeded the sum of its parts, as a written piece *Pins and Needles* was almost entirely the work of one man. Harold J. Rome (1908-1993), who held both a B. A. and a Master's degree in architecture from Yale University, had worked briefly for the WPA, and supplemented his scant earnings by writing songs and lyrics on the side. In 1935, he took a job at an adult summer camp called Green Mansions, where he was required to provide material for weekly theatrical productions. Rome worked there for three summers, and at some point his work was brought to the attention of Louis Schaeffer, an employee of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). It was Schaeffer's job to put together a musical revue of topical songs for production by the ILGWU, and Schaeffer offered Rome the opportunity to compose songs for the show.

In June 1936, an audition was scheduled, with a cast of professional actors accompanied by Rome and Earl Robinson--who had also contributed a sketch to the revue--presenting the show for the members of the ILGWU and the directors of the A.F.L.'s new drama program, which had been established at the federation's explosive

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79. Aaron Copland, *The New Music 1900-1960*, Revised Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 140.

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1935 convention.[80] The preview was attended by *Daily Worker* critic Ben Irwin, who wrote a largely positive review of the event: *Pins and Needles*, he wrote, "is an evening of good fun and honest entertainment. Most of its material is a definite contribution to the social theatre, which needs to look more and more to the native American review and vaudeville technique," which *Pins and Needles* clearly did. The members of the ILGWU, who had initially been reluctant to produce Rome's material, shared Irwin's enthusiasm, and agreed to stage *Pins and Needles* in the old Princess Theater, which they had purchased and renamed the "Labor Stage."[81]

To Rome, this was something of a mixed blessing: "The owner of the Belmont Theatre happened to be there that night and he wanted to put on the show, just as it was, in his theatre. But by now the garment workers were all for doing it, and Schaeffer dashed our hopes by insisting that it could be done only by the ILGWU." This meant that the show's cast would be comprised entirely of members of the ILGWU, a decision that necessarily limited rehearsal time, at the same time as it meant that more rehearsal would be required than would have been with a professional cast. Nevertheless, after roughly fifteen months of rehearsing three times weekly, *Pins and Needles* was ready for the public.[82]

When *Pins and Needles* began its theatrical run in September 1937, it included roughly a dozen songs, almost all of them by Rome, and about half a dozen sketches and dance numbers. The revue's punning title set the tone for Rome's satirical take on the uncomfortable position in which workers in the textile and other industries found

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80. The ILGWU drama program dated from the fall of 1933, but its productions seem to have been on a very small scale, more for the union itself than for public consumption. Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon*, 75.

81. Ben Irwin, "The A.F.L. Theatre Presents: 'Pins and Needles'," *DW* 17 June 1936, 7; Heinz Bernard, "A Theatre for Lefty: USA in the 1930's," *Theatre Quarterly* 1/4 (October--December 1971): 55.

82. Rome quoted in Green, *Broadway Musicals*, 150.

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themselves. While Rome included a fairly conventional call to militant workers titled "Men, Awake," the overall tone of the revue was humorous. Far more indicative was "Not Cricket to Picket," in which a foppish, upper-crust type decries picket lines as "Atrocious and 'gauche'," "Uncultured and unmannerly," and "just not 'comme il faut'." *Pins and Needles* also tackled topics including fascism, in the sketches "Mussolini Handicap" and "Four Little Angels of Peace" (the four "angels" featured were Hitler, Mussolini, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, and Emperor Hirohito); the New Deal, skewered in a sketch called "FTP Plowed Under," contributed by Blitzstein; and even Brechtian agit-prop, with a sketch called "The Little Red Schoolhouse," a parody of *Mother* in which a main character stepped outside of drama, *a la* the *Lehrstuck*, and narrated the action to both the audience and the other characters.[83] Finally, the show even included several numbers that were not at all political.

It is instructive to compare *Pins* to *Cradle*, as the two were far and away the most successful pieces of political musical theater to come from the left during this period. The most obvious difference is the structural distinction between Blitzstein's tight narrative construction and the loose, revue form favored by Rome. But of course neither composer had broken new ground on this level; we have already discussed several examples of both leftist revues, like *New Americana* and *Parade*, and musicals, like *Of Thee I Sing*. The more interesting comparison between the two pieces comes when we consider the stylistic differences that are apparent on the level of individual songs. As suggested by "The Little Red Schoolhouse," *Pins and Needles* did not partake of the morality-play aspect of epic theatre, a characteristic that was certainly present in *Cradle*. Rome even mocked the idea that workers required songs that were primarily educational, rather than recreational, in manner. In addressing this misapprehension, Rome coined a phrase that remains with us today: the "song of social significance" (see example 7.2).

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83. Goldman, "When Social Significance," 35, 28.

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Example 7.2: Harold Rome, "Sing Me A Song With Social Significance" (chorus)[84]

Rome's songs are clearly intended as popularly accessible entertainments; they allude to social themes, but unlike Blitzstein's, do not really tell their audience what to think of them. Whereas *Cradle*, even when humorous, was sharply acidic, *Pins and Needles* was much gentler in its satire. A perfect example of Blitzstein and Rome's s contrasting styles--in terms of both music and lyrics--can be seen by comparing the

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Example 7.2 (cont'd): "Sing Me a Song With Social Significance"

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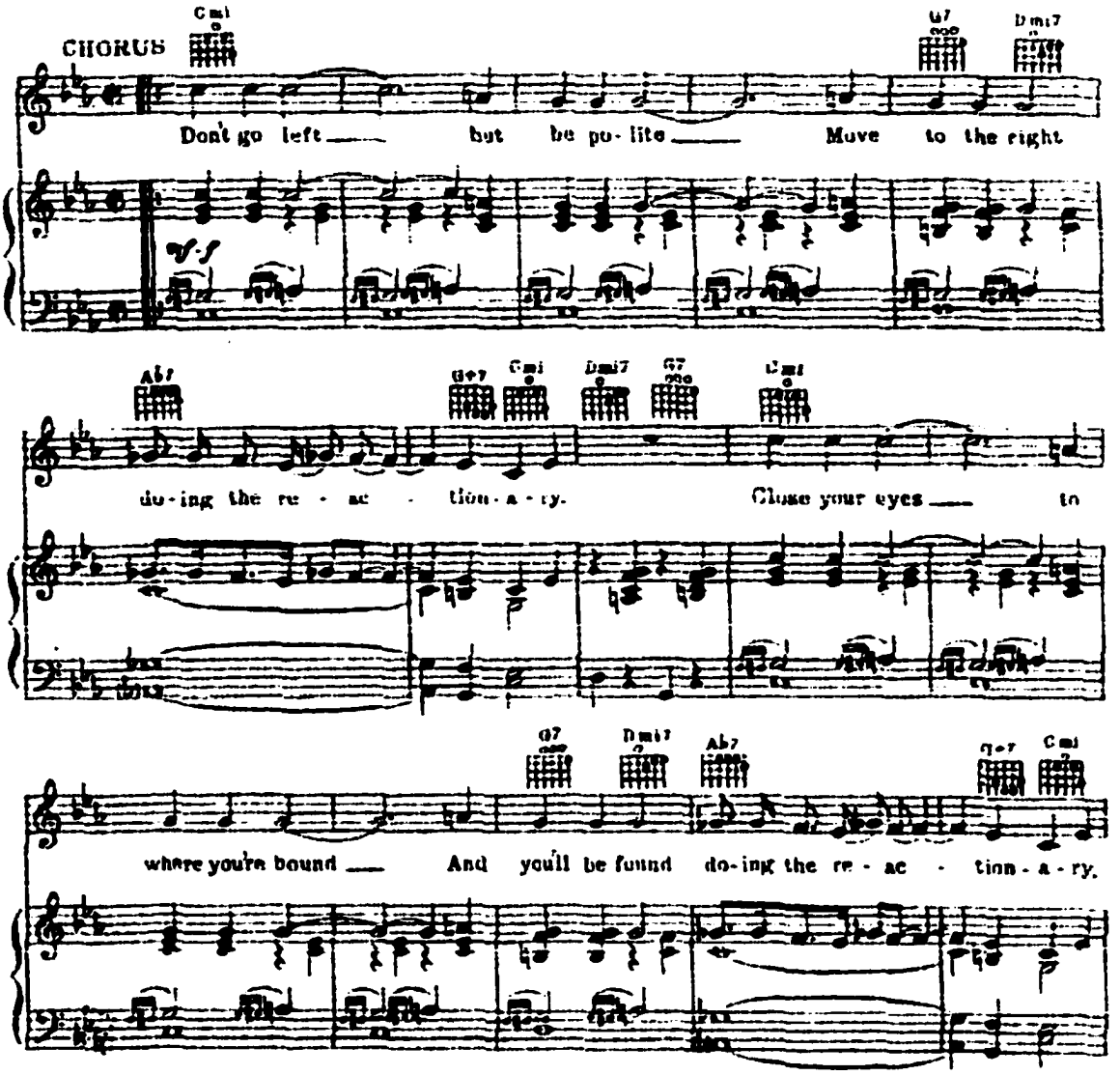
Example 7.3: Novelty songs (a) Rome, "Doing the Reactionary" (chorus)[85]



composers' parodies of popular song styles. In *The Cradle Will Rock*, Blitzstein had spoofed two Tin Pan Alley archtypes, the novelty song (with his "Honolulu") and the "moon, June, croon" sentimental song (with his "Croon Spoon").[86] Rome also offered

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86. Blitzstein's choice of subject matter was not haphazard: New York was the center of a craze for Hawaiian (and pseudo-Hawaiian) song and dance in the late 1910s. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 224-26.

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Example 7.3 (b): Blitzstein, "Honolulu" mm. 57-66[87]

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Example 7.4: Sentimental songs (a) Rome, "One Big Union For Two" (chorus)[88]

versions of these two song-types. His novelty song was "Doing theReactionary," and his sentimental ballad was "One Big Union For Two" (see examples 7.3 and 7.4). The composers' approaches differ in the same way in both cases. Blitzstein's satire is so effective because he plays it almost entirely straight on a verbal level; it is not at all hard to imagine similar lyrics being set by a Tin Pan Alley composer. He twists the knife, as it

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Example 7.4 (b) Blitzstein, "Croon, Spoon" (Chorus)[89]

were, in his musical setting. This is particularly true in "Croon Spoon," where prominently placed "wrong" notes (marked in example 7.4) set everything slightly askew. Rome, on the other hand, plays the musical setting straight, but the topicality of his lyrics is so over-the-top as to render the satire unmistakable. Both shows are heavily indebted to Tin Pan Alley, but *Cradle* presents Tin Pan Alley via Weimar. If it were somehow

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possible to extract the Eislerian influence from *Cradle*, it might sound like *Pins and Needles*.

Beginning of the End

In *The Fervent Years*, a memoir of the 1930s, Harold Clurman described 1937 as a high point among New York's leftist intellectuals and artists:

> 1937 was the year of hope and confidence among progressives, and the songs, skits, and assorted high jinks contrived by young actors and their composer and writer friends added a special relish to their dreams. The folk chants of Earl Robinson about Abe Lincoln and other home-grown heroes were popularized, and not only was the political folly of reactionary thinking mocked, but other symptoms of feebleness (like the preoccupation with death and other-worldliness that showed themselves in such current plays as *Our Town*, *On Borrowed Time*, and *Shadow and Substance)* were youthfully lampooned.[90]

Even without the benefit of hindsight, many of Clurman's peers seemed to share his retrospective assessment. In September, the *Daily Worker*, inspired by the example of *Cradle*, suggested that by "[a]dapting the popular forms of Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood to the realism of the workers' struggles it is believed that musical shows can be produced which will set a jaded Broadway back on its heels." That same month, Max Margulis wrote that *Cradle Will Rock* and *Second Hurricane* "unflaggingly define a new trend in music," and John Houseman, heralding the November debut of the Mercury Theatre--co-founded by Houseman and Orson Welles--wrote, "When the Mercury Theatre opens its

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90. Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 215.

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doors early in November, we believe another step will have been taken towards a real People's Theatre in America." In addition, the ILGWU Labor Stage, which had successfully mounted its first production earlier in the year, was preparing to present *Pins and Needles* to the theater-going public.[91]

What goes up, however, must come down, and even amid signs of triumph there were hints that the progressive cultural institutions were in jeopardy. Throughout July and August, the administrators of Federal One grew ever more aware of their political vulnerability. In a series of hearings before Representative Martin Dies's House Un-American Activities Committee, witnesses --some of them credible, most of them not-- with various connections to the FTP made allegations of rampant Communism and anti-Americanism in the Federal Writers and, especially, Theatre Projects. Predictably, these sensational charges were picked up by opponents of the New Deal in general, and received ample news coverage.[92]

Once again, the Roosevelt magic seemed to be wearing off. In February 1937, his plans to reform the Supreme Court met with vocal opposition from members of both parties and editorial pages throughout the nation, all of whom saw the move as a power grab, which, to some extent, it was. Moreover, the nation's economy, which throughout 1936 had shown strong signs of recovery, began to cool during the summer of 1937, and by September the nation was clearly in the grips of a recession.

And all the while, the international situation worsened. In July 1937, Japan, which had seized Manchuria in 1931, launched a full-scale invasion of China. Meanwhile, the Spanish Republicans, who by almost any measure constituted that nation's legitimate

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91. "Workers' Musical Comedies," *DW* 8 September 1937, 7; Max Margulis, "A New Prospect for American Music," *DW* 25 September 1937, 7; John Houseman, "Again--A People's Theatre; The Mercury Takes a Bow," *DW* 18 September 1937, 7; Charles E. Dexter, "Local 10 Successfully Enacts 'Steel' on ILGWU Labor Stage," *DW* 19 January 1937, 7; Ben Burns, "The Labor Unions Go Broadway," *DW* 28 September 1937, 7.

92. See "1937-38--Favorable and Adverse Publicity," 1, 5, 10-24, and *passim*, FTPC.

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government, were faring quite poorly in the face of the fascist assault. In April 1937, the town of Guernica was taken in a particularly bloody battle that later became the subject of one of the best-known works of political art. Indeed, the war continued to draw attention from a diverse group of leftist artists and intellectuals throughout Europe and the United States, including Pablo Casals and Benny Goodman; Union Square Park was serenaded on a nightly basis by a group of Spanish activists raising money for the Republican cause. But the struggle against fascism was making the limited political effectiveness of art increasingly, and painfully, clear.[93]

93. Martin McCall, "Casals' Fight For Liberty," *DW* 2 January 1937, 7; Beth McHenry, "'No Pasaran' in New York City," *DW* 6 September 1937, 7.

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A

"THE MASSES ARE SINGING": INSURGENCY AND SONG IN NEW YORK CITY, 1929-1941

by

MARC ENDSLEY JOHNSON

VOLUME II

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music
in partial fulfullment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Dénouement: 1937-1941

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Chapter 8: Proletarian Swan Songs
September 1937--September 1939

Despite the difficulties of the recession-within-the-Depression, by mid-1938 labor and its left-wing allies could boast of a series of victories that, together with the Wagner Act of 1935, marked an epochal shift in the struggle over power in the workplace. Impressively, much of this had been achieved by labor itself; the efficacy of the sit-down strike and the might of industrial unionism had combined to bring the nation's unions almost unimaginable advances, as, one by one, the titans of American industry caved to their demands to be allowed to organize. By the end of 1937, every auto company except Ford allowed its workers to join the UAW; the Steel Workers Organizing Committee had penetrated such anti-labor bastions as U.S. Steel, Caterpillar Tractor, and Wheeling Steel; the United Rubber Workers were permitted to organize workers in the factories of the Firestone Tire Company; General Electric, RCA Victor, and Philco allowed organizers from the United Electrical and Radio Workers; and American Woolen recognized the Textile Workers Organizing Committee. William E. Leuchtenburg describes the import of the great unionizing campaigns of 1937 this way: "In a year's time, the blue-shirted workers had succeeded in doing what their fathers and grandfathers had failed to do or had not even dared to do—unionize much of industrial America."[1] These advances were bolstered in June 1938, when Roosevelt signed into law the Fair Labor Standards Act, which prohibited child labor, required a minimum wage, and mandated a reduction of the work week to forty hours.

Despite these achievements, however, the fall and winter months of 1937 and 1938 were difficult ones for American workers. In fact, they were the worst, economically, since the awful winter of 1932-33. Average stock prices dropped by thirty to forty

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1. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 240, quote on 241.

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percent from August through December, and as a consequence millions of workers were fired. In New York City, applications for relief more than doubled over the same period. The voters of New York turned once again to Fiorello La Guardia, who was re-elected on a Fusion ticket that November, to guide them through the hard times. La Guardia was, in certain respects, the ideal politician for Popular Front leftists, as illustrated by an admiring profile published in the *Sunday Worker Magazine* in June 1938. The author characterized the mayor as "a man who successfully combined the fighting progressiveness of the old West with clear government reformism of the East . . . a practical progressive, an advocate of a broad coalition of the democratic forces, regardless of party affiliation, for the defeat of reaction and corruption and for carrying out the will of the majority of the people through American Government."[2]

After the court-packing debacle of the previous March and the relative austerity practiced by the federal government during 1936 and 1937, the recession of 1937 brought the old New York reformers' model of activist government back to Washington. The problems Roosevelt had discussed in his second inaugural address the previous March--"one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished"--continued to plague America's citizens. Of all these problems, perhaps none was more drastic than the shortage of adequate housing, a difficulty exacerbated by the financial recession, and alleviated only slightly by the Wagner-Steagall public-housing bill of 1937. By late that year, the housing situation was critical. As had happened earlier with farm policy, international affairs, public utilities, and labor issues, the housing issue became the subject of a new FTP *Living Newspaper*. The *Daily Worker* noted that the play *One-Third of a Nation*, which opened in January 1938, "ma[de] no bones about being propaganda for good housing and w[ound] up with a call to the people to insist that the Federal Government do something about it." Like the most successful preceding *Living Newspapers*, *One-Third*

2. Harry Raymond, "La Guardia," *SW* 5 June 1938: Magazine, 1.

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of a Nation mixed biting social commentary--the play drew fire from senators who had opposed the Wagner-Steagall housing bill but resented their unpopular positions being included in a publicly-funded drama--with innovative production values, and it went on to become the longest-running installment in the series.[3]

Meanwhile, Roosevelt had been attempting to balance the federal budget by curtailing relief spending. But in a Fireside Chat given in April 1938, he announced plans to increase government spending in order to end the recession. Roosevelt further justified his return to a more activist mode of government by asserting that in several nations inactive, unresponsive governments had preceded the complete disappearance of democracy.[4] Roosevelt's reference to the political situations in Germany, Italy, and Japan was unmistakable. But by the time of his address nothing short of all-out war would have effected any change in those nations' regimes, and this was clearly not an option, for in addition to the legal barrier presented by the Neutrality Act of 1935, there was very little public support for active American involvement in fighting fascist incursions in China and Spain.

Through 1937, both conflicts continued unabated. Before the end of 1937, Japan had conquered the Chinese capital of Nanking. Amid the fighting that December, Japanese pilots sank the *Panay*, an American gunboat docked in Nanking. Although two American sailors were killed and thirty wounded, the American public remained firmly opposed to overseas involvement, and the Administration appeared satisfied with the $2 million reparation paid by Japan in order to avert a full-blown crisis. The war in Spain, which had impinged on the United States less directly, clearly had not yet mobilized general public opinion. On the far left, however--and particularly among artists and

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3. Dave Jones, "Living Newspaper Play Dramatizes Vital Theme," *DW* 19 January 1938, 7; "Living Newspaper Enrages Senators," *DW* 14 February 1938, 7; Lem Ward, "Director of WPA Housing Drama Discusses Play's Significance," *DW* 6 March 1938, 12.

4. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 361–62.

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intellectuals--sentiment continued to favor some form of intervention. The Second Artists' Congress, held in December 1937, featured an exhibition called "In Defense of World Democracy--Dedicated to the Peoples of Spain and China." Although plans to have Picasso address the Congress's public session in Carnegie Hall fell through, the meeting did include the reading of a message from fellow anti-fascist Thomas Mann.[5]

The artists were joined in their support for the Spanish government by colleagues from the worlds of theater and music. The Musicians' Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, chaired by the legendary cellist Pablo Casals (1876-1973), had been established immediately following Franco's invasion of Spain. Its membership rolls included notables from every field of cultivated music, as conductors Serge Koussevitzky, Fritz Reiner, and Alexander Smallens were joined by the writers Olin Downes and Sigmund Spaeth, as well as an all-star roster of performers including Alma Gluck, Leopold Godowsky, Efrem Zimbalist, and the Kolisch String Quartet. A number of prominent composers also participated, among them Blitzstein, Thomson, Roy Harris, Riegger, Edgard Varèse, and Howard Hanson (1896-1981). The Committee planned to commission new works and organize benefit concerts. In late 1937, the Musicians' Committee joined with the Theatre Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy in presenting a "Night of Stars" in order to raise money for the housing and clothing of Spanish war orphans.[6] But for all of their efforts, the Committee and related organizations were unable to persuade the American public to abandon its general isolationism.

Meanwhile, the aggressive behavior of Hitler's government continued to dominate European affairs. In March 1938 Germany annexed Austria, and later that year Hitler did the same to the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. Again, New York's artist community

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5. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 361–62, Rothschild, "Artists' Organizations," in *The New Deal Arts Projects*, 211-12.

6. "Musicians' Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy," *Direction* 1/1 (December 1937): 24; "Theatre Stars and Musicians to Aid Spain in Gala Show," *DW* 9 November 1937, 7.

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responded, holding rallies and raising money to benefit the Czech people.[7] More frightening still were the events of the nights of 9 and 10 November 1938. As gangs roamed the streets of Germany's cities, vandalizing Jewish businesses and assaulting Jewish citizens unchecked (and at times even abetted) by police and security forces, the homicidal aims of the Nazi government were laid bare. But not even *Kristallnacht*, which resulted in the murders of ninety-one Jews and the transfer of tens of thousands more to camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, could draw the United States to engage in international affairs in a forceful manner.

Part and parcel of the widespread isolationist sentiment of the period was a growing fear of invasion or infiltration by foreign armies or agents, a fear that mingled a justified concern over the bellicose actions of international fascists with an uglier strain of xenophobia. This aspect of the national mood was brought into bold relief by Orson Welles's legendary CBS radio dramatization of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, broadcast on 30 October 1938. Thousands of Americans listening that night were stricken with fear, as Welles dramatized--intentionally or not--the pervasive paranoia about alien invaders. The *Daily Worker*, noting that "a great many Americans who listened to the program substituted the monster Hitler for the Martian monsters," took the opportunity to suggest that the American public needed to prepare itself for a possible war with Germany.[8] Welles's broadcast also illustrated the great trust that Americans placed in radio. More dramatically than Huey Long, Father Coughlin, or even Roosevelt, Welles had demonstrated the potential power that rested with the American broadcast media.

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7. Alfred Davis, "Leading Actors, Writers Hold Rally for Czechs," *SW* 2 October 1938, 8.

8. Mitchell Grayson, "Monsters From the Air!," *DW* 3 November 1938, 7.

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Music as Product

By the time of Welles's broadcast, the social importance of the medium was already abundantly clear to his colleagues in the entertainment world. Although *War of the Worlds* showed that radio could have an effect on a national level, radio executives were acutely aware of local tastes, and programming reflected that awareness. For example, in 1938 and 1939, the Standard Broadcasting Company in Los Angeles had great success with "The Oklahoma and Woody Show," which featured a combination of cowboy songs and humorous, folksy sketches. It is unlikely that the show would have achieved great popularity east of the Mississippi, but its sensibility was perfectly tailored to the fast-growing California market, where the vast influx of farm-workers and refugees who hailed from the stricken Dust Bowl helped make the itinerant singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie one of the less likely radio stars of the period.

On a grander scale, radio had the capacity to turn local artists into national stars, without the arduous work of touring and promotion. Similarly, radio made musical stars out of those from film and stage; throughout 1937 and 1938, the most conspicuous phenomenon in the music business was the recognition, by media moguls, of the tremendous cross-marketing potential of film musicals, which produced profits both in movie houses and at record stores. During this period, the concentration of media power also meant that many radio companies also owned record companies, and it was only natural that double-dipping would occur here too. Perhaps the most famous example of this is provided by NBC Radio, a subsidiary of RCA. In 1937, RCA head David Sarnoff created the NBC Symphony Orchestra for the sole purpose of luring Arturo Toscanini, an RCA recording artist, into the radio station's stable of performers. Lionized by American leftists for his vocal anti-fascism, as well as for his support for out-of-work musicians--proceeds from a Carnegie Hall concert in March 1938 went to aid unemployed musicians in New York and Milan--Toscanini accepted Sarnoff's offer, heedless of the adverse impact that broadcast performances had on the livelihoods of the majority of working

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musicians who were forced to compete with them. Also ignored was the effect that such partnerships had on the dwindling number of publicly-owned stations, which remained notable for the independence of their programming, both musically and politically.[9]

Another ominous development, from the standpoint of practicing musicians (as well as anyone who has ever been driven almost to the point of madness by an extended stay in a waiting room of almost any kind) was the birth of Muzak. Former U. S. Senator and Assistant Secretary of State William Benton recalls the fateful moment:

> [I] bought the Muzak Corporation. I never could have bought it except in a Depression. It was a busted, rundown company. That would be around '38.
>
> Muzak was then only heard in hotels and restaurants in New York. It was only thought of as a substitute for live music. Jimmy Petrillo [of the AFM] cursed it as the Number One enemy of musicians. I said to myself: This music ought to be in other places.
>
> I went down to see the five salesmen—we only had five then. They said to me: "We have eighty percent of all the business you can get in New York. There isn't any other place to sell it." I said, "Why don't you put it in barber shops and doctors' offices?" "Oh, you can't put Muzak in places like that!" I said: "Do you all five think that way?" There was a young man, who had only worked there six weeks, he said, "No, I think it's a good idea." I said, "Well, the other four guys had better quit and get some other jobs, and I'll make this young man the sales manager. We'll take Muzak into new areas."

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9. Hy Kravif, "Trusts On the Air," *SW* 27 February 1938: Magazine, 4; Martin McCall, "The Anti-Fascist Maestro," *DW* 9 March 1938, 9; Martin McCall, "Toscanini Starts Brilliant Radio Series," *DW* 30 December 1937, 7; on programming of public radio, see "Folk Music Popular On Air," *DW* 31 December 1938, 9; George Frank, "WNYC--The People's Station," *DW* 25 October 1938, 7.

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> Of course, this made a big wonderful business out of Muzak, now earning $2 million a year. And no extra money has ever gone into it. The Depression put me into it.[10]

The advent of Muzak was but one symptom of a larger disease afflicting musicians during the Depression. A series of developments, including the development of the Hammond organ and the growth of radio programs that relied on recorded music, contributed greatly to unemployment among the nation's working musicians. By 1937, the problem had become so severe that the President of the Chicago Federation of Musicians (the local affiliate of the AFM) urged union members to forgo lucrative recording jobs for the good of their fellow musicians. Rather than make such demands of its members, the AFM instead pressured broadcasters, threatening a national strike unless radio stations guaranteed a certain level of spending on broadcasts of "live" music.[11]

The central issue in the music industry had become one of control. As broadcast and recorded media grew to dominate the consumption of music, leverage in the negotiation of contracts passed from the hands of musicians and into those of broadcasters and record executives. Lacking substantial negotiating power, musicians were left with two primary options: strikes and lawsuits. The efficacy of the former was predicated on a unified front; provided this requirement was satisfied, strikes could prove effective in winning favorable agreements on compensation and hours, as happened in early 1939, when NBC and CBS were forced to accept contractual terms largely dictated by the American Federation of Radio Artists (which included musicians, announcers, and actors). In July 1939, Paul Whiteman's lawsuit against WNEW met the approval of a New York federal judge, who ruled that Whiteman was entitled to legal control of the broadcast rights for

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10. Terkel, *Hard Times*, 63.

11. Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 109–10; "Force Broadcasters to Spend $1,500,000 More on Live Music," *Sunday Worker* 3 October 1937: 10.

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his recordings.[12] Despite these two victories, however, radio was more than ever the province of businessmen.

Naturally, the structural changes in the music industry affected composers as well as performers. The difficulty of enforcing royalty payments in the age of jukeboxes and radio shows was obvious, and required strong responses from ASCAP, just as the problem of unemployment had prodded the AFM to take action on behalf of its members. But while these two groups cushioned the blows of the electronic age for composers of popular music and for performers, cultivated composers lacked a comparable organization. This problem was painfully apparent to New York composers because, as Thomson observed years later, "[i]n the thirties the whole of New York musical and intellectual life was moving into a theory of trade unionism, even occasionally reading Karl Marx."[13] Thomson found the economic weakness of the composers' position particularly galling, as he had long advocated that composers view themselves as professionals working in the marketplace--rather than simply as artists--and behave accordingly. According to Paul Bowles, "Virgil had long . . . stress[ed] the importance of music as a commodity which must be paid for; a composer who gave away his music was simply a scab, he maintained. This applied even to being cajoled after dinner by one's host or hostess into playing a few excerpts from one's work in progress."[14]

Finally, towards the end of 1937--a year that had included so much other progress for American workers--Thomson, with Copland's help, took the lead in organizing the American Composers Alliance (ACA). The ACA was formally established at a meeting on 19 December 1937. By the beginning of 1938, the group's membership included many of the nation's most eminent composers, covering a full range of musical styles and

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12. "Radio Artists Get Wage Increases in Contracts with CBS & NBC Networks," *DW* 4 February 1939, 3; Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 56.

13. Thomson quoted in Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 200.

14. Bowles, *Without Stopping*, 189–90.

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political temperaments. In addition to Thomson and Copland, the ACA's roster also included George Antheil, Marion Bauer, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, Elliott Carter, David Diamond, Lehman Engel, Vivian Fine, Roy Harris, Otto Luening, Daniel Gregory Mason, Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Wallingford Riegger, Earl Robinson, Carlos Salzedo, William Schuman, Roger Sessions, Elie Siegmeister, Deems Taylor, Randall Thompson, and Edgard Varèse, among others.[15]

At its inaugural meeting, the ACA articulated two primary goals: "first to regularize and collect all fees pertaining to performance of their copyrighted music, in other words, to protect the economic rights of the composer; second, to stimulate interest in the performance of American music, thereby increasing the economic returns." The group was to be a "fellow society" to ASCAP, and not a rival; the ACA would "protect [the composer] in all fields not now covered by [ASCAP], such as those of the symphony orchestras, opera companies, choral societies, chamber music organizations, instrumental soloist recitals, music-clubs, schools and colleges, dance recitals, and the movies. . . . Thus, without conflict of interest, a composer may belong to both ASCAP and the Alliance."[16] The ACA thus asserted the shared interests of composers in all musical genres. In its combination of inclusiveness and practicality, the Alliance perfectly embodied the personality of its first chairman, Aaron Copland.

Rocking the Radio and Records

The Alliance also illustrated the difficulty of classifying composers as either "popular" or "cultivated" in a period of growing overlap between the two. No "cultivated" composer better exemplified the porousness of this boundary than Blitzstein, for whom 1937 and 1938 were years of great accomplishment and increased recognition.

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15. Member list in "The Composers Organize: A Proclamation," *MM* 15/2 (January--February 1938): 95; see also "Composers of Serious Music Organize to Get Royalties," *DW* 28 January 1938, 7.

16. "The Composers Organize," 93-94.

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With Copland, he was involved in the establishment of the ACA and the Arrow Music Press, which Eric Gordon describes as "a cooperative composers' publishing group."[17] Such activities, combined with the notorious events surrounding *Cradle*, made Blitzstein much in demand on the left. In December 1937, Blitzstein performed "selections from his most recent works" at a Philadelphia event hosted by the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. That same month, he was one of the left-wing celebrities asked by the *Daily Worker* to list his ten favorite movies of 1937; his top choice was the Soviet drama *Baltic Deputy*.[18]

But despite all his other activities, most of Blitzstein's energies remained focused on his compositions. He continued to work with Welles, providing incidental music for the director's *Julius Caesar* in November 1937, and during the following two years, Blitzstein also scored Welles's stagings of the plays *Too Much Johnson* and *Danton's Death*. Meanwhile, *Cradle*, which had been the pair's initial collaboration, continued its rather remarkable career. After its brief initial run ended on 1 July 1937, a touring company brought the show to real-life "Steeltown," performing for workers in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, later that month. Despite the best efforts of the Bethlehem Corporation to minimize turnout, the performance, organized by the Steelworkers Organizing Committee's local chapter, was well-attended and -received.[19]

Five months later, *Cradle* was revived in New York by Welles and Houseman's Mercury Theatre. Throughout December, the show was presented every Sunday by the Mercury, and beginning on 3 January 1938, it began to run at the Windsor Theatre on

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17. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 175.

18. "Philadelphia Audiences to Hear 'Cradle Will Rock'," *SW* 5 December 1937, 11; "Marc Blitzstein Picks His Ten Best Pictures Of the Year," *DW* 29 December 1937, 7.

19. Howard Rushmore, "'Our Show Will Go On,' This Cast Tells Public," *DW* 30 June 1937, 7; Louise Mitchell, "'Cradle Will Rock' Company Shows Play to Steel Workers," *DW* 14 July 1937, 7.

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Broadway. The production, which replicated the improvised, bare-bones, opening-night rendition of the previous summer, was only modestly successful, lasting for 108 performances. But it was well-reviewed in both the leftist and mainstream press, and received plaudits from labor icon Ella "Mother" Bloor, who was particularly impressed with Blitzstein's ability to replicate the rhetoric of organized labor's enemies.[20] Bloor's praise was echoed by both the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. In the former, John Cambridge cited *Cradle* as evidence of the vitality and quality of the "progressive theatre," called it the year's best play ("memorable both for content and form"), and asserted that it "will be recognized as a classic of the American theatre." R. D. Darrell, writing in *New Masses*, agreed, describing it as "nakedly honest and pungent, packing . . . dynamic, bull's-eye punches."[21]

Although a planned West Coast production never materialized--Welles moved to California and quickly abandoned the theater for film as he began work on *Citizen Kane*--by the end of 1938, *Cradle* had received independent productions in Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago. In New York alone, two different productions were offered that year.[22] Following the closing of the Broadway version, Lou Cooper's Flatbush Players--an outgrowth of the Young Communist League that was comprised entirely of amateur performers aged eighteen to twenty-four--presented *Cradle* on a number of occasions,

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20. Stark Young, "The Mercury and London," *The New Republic* 1207 (January 19, 1938): 310-11; Eric Englander, "'Cradle' Rocks at Mercury," *DW* 7 December 1937, 7; Manngreen, "The Strange Odyssey of 'Cradle'," *DW* 18 February 1938, 7; "Mother Bloor Sees 'The Cradle'," *DW* 12 January 1938, 7.

21. John Cambridge, "The Stage," *SW* 13 February 1938, 11; John Cambridge, "The Stage," *Sunday Worker* 1 May 1938, 12; R. D. Darrell, "Blitzstein Brings New Tunes to Music," *NM* 26/1 (December 28, 1937): 28.

22. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 174; "'Cradle' to Rock on West Coast," *SW* 13 March 1938, 13; John King, Jr., "New Theatre of Philadelphia To Rock the 'Cradle'," *SW* 7 August 1938, 13; "The 'Cradle' In Brooklyn," *DW* 15 June 1938, 7; "The Cradle Will Rock'--Tonight in Brooklyn," *DW* 10 November 1938, 7; "The Cradle' At the New School," *DW* 3 December 1938, 7; "'Cradle Will Rock' and 'Rehearsal' Shown Tonight," *SW* 4 December 1938, 12; David H. Karr, "The Group of Youngsters Known as the Flatbush Players Represent a Cross Section of Modern American Life," *DW* 14 December 1938, 7.

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both in Brooklyn and at the New School. In May 1939, *Cradle* was the major spring production of the Harvard Dramatic Club. As such, it also functioned as something of a musical coming-out party for Leonard Bernstein. The Harvard senior had seen *Cradle* during its 1938 Broadway run and took a very active role in the campus production, co-directing and accompanying the show, and also playing the roles of Clerk and Reporter. Bernstein invited Blitzstein to attend a dress rehearsal and made a great impression on the older composer, both musically and personally. As Carol Oja has suggested, the impact that Blitzstein's mature musical style had on Bernstein's own compositional voice--particularly in his works for musical theater--is undeniable.[23] This influence is felt most clearly in terms of the ambiguity of *genre* shared by both Bernstein's theatre works and *Cradle*.

Blitzstein's desire to keep *Cradle* from being easily classified is reflected in his calling the work a "play in music," rather than an opera. As noted earlier, his musical style, which fused cultivated and vernacular influences, similarly defied traditional categories. Bernstein also learned much on a purely compositional level from both the verbal and musical idioms Blitzstein employed. Thus, although *Cradle* remains relatively unknown today, remembered primarily as a result of the controversy surrounding its initial production, within a year of its premiere the work had been absorbed into contemporary culture, transcending the cadre of New York musical radicals in a way that no other work of the Collective's circle, with the exception of Robinson's "Joe Hill," had yet done.

Cradle's impact was further enhanced by the commercial release, in April 1938, of a "condensed" version of the play on a set of seven records. The recording included virtually all of the music, as well as substantial portions of dialogue, and was performed by the original Broadway cast, with Blitzstein acting as both narrator and accompanist.

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23. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein," 459-60; Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 52-55.

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In addition to gaining bragging rights as the first full-length Broadway show in history to produce an "original cast recording," *Cradle* expanded its already formidable geographical orbit to encompass any city with a record store that carried or could order Musicraft records. The recording was favorably reviewed in both *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, which also published an item noting reports from Harvard that, ever since a student (perhaps Bernstein?) had purchased a set of the records, "the dignified dorms are ringing with Blitzstein's vivid episode on college education."[24]

Having already made significant forays into film (with *Spanish Earth*) and records (with *Cradle* and the Timely Records protest songs), Blitzstein ventured into perhaps the most dominant electronic entertainment medium of the age in late 1937. On 24 October, his "Radio Song-Play" *I've Got the Tune* had its premiere on CBS Radio. *Tune* was another pioneering work for Blitzstein: the first extended piece of musical theater ever written expressly for the radio.[25] *I've Got the Tune* showed Blitzstein's sensitivity to the demands of the medium: its plot was episodic and easily followed; there were few characters, with the two main protagonists almost always "onstage" and the rest making just single appearances; and there was musical material filling virtually every second of the play's allotted half-hour. Aside from these aspects, *I've Got the Tune* was very much in the same eclectic vein as his most recent compositions.

Blitzstein's libretto addressed many of the same themes as *Cradle*. The primary issue tackled was the socio-economic position occupied by composers. The main character, Mr. Musiker, was a composer looking to find the proper audience and patron

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24. Manngreen, "A Condensed Version of 'The Cradle' Will Be Released in Seven Records," *DW* 9 April 1938, 7; Roy Gregg, "The Phonograph Rocks the Cradle," *NM* 27/9 (May 24, 1938): 29-31; Moses Smith, "'The Cradle' Rocks on Records," *The New Republic* 1232 (July 13, 1938): 280; Martin McCall, "Marc Blitzstein's Musical Play Recorded With Words and Music," *DW* 23 May 1938, 7; Manngreen, "The Cradle is Rocking On the Harvard Campus," *DW* 16 June 1938, 7.

25. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 156. Bernard Herrmann had been composing incidental music for radio dramas since 1934, but *I've Got the Tune* was the first full-scale music drama written for the medium.

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for a tune he had composed. Accompanied by his loyal secretary Beetzie, Mr. Musiker--played by Blitzstein, after an over-committed Welles, to whom *I've Got the Tune* was dedicated, was forced to drop out--goes on what is essentially a tour of the ills besetting contemporary American artists. They encounter a condescending, foppish would-be patroness, a gang of xenophobic fascists, a suicidal depressive, and finally a group of workers. Throughout their travels, the pair hears Musiker's song subjected to a variety of treatments, as Blitzstein showcases his ability to mimic the musical styles of Italian organ-grinders, popular radio stars, movie musicals, and Tin Pan Alley songwriters, among others. In the climactic scene, Musiker and Beetzie hear a crowd of laborers preparing for a parade. They want a song to march to, but are dissatisfied with the existing repertoire. Starting with Joe Hill's "Preacher and the Slave," and continuing through labor chestnuts "Hold the Fort" and "Solidarity Forever," the chorus cuts off after a few bars of each song, complaining that they want "a new one." When the chorus director runs out of ideas, Beetzie prods Musiker into sharing his wordless tune with the workers. They are instantly taken with it, and compose words and harmonies on the spot. Musiker triumphantly resolves to "give them my tune," and following this musical consummation, the drama ends.

Blitzstein's message could not be clearer. The songs of Joe Hill and other laborers past are not without value; they have served the movement well, and deserve respect. But a new age requires a new music, and he is providing it. In so doing, he surrenders control of it to the workers, who retain what they can use while altering other aspects of the song to suit their needs (see example 8.1).[26] When it is first introduced, "The Tune" is rhythmically complex in a way that seems wholly inappropriate for the militant march it is destined to become. In the space of ten measures, it includes four metrical changes, several shifts between duple and triple rhythmic patterns, and a sense of instability

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26. All excerpts from *I've Got the Tune* re-printed with permission of the Marc Blitzstein Estate.

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Example 8.1 (a) Marc Blitzstein, "The Tune" (Original version)

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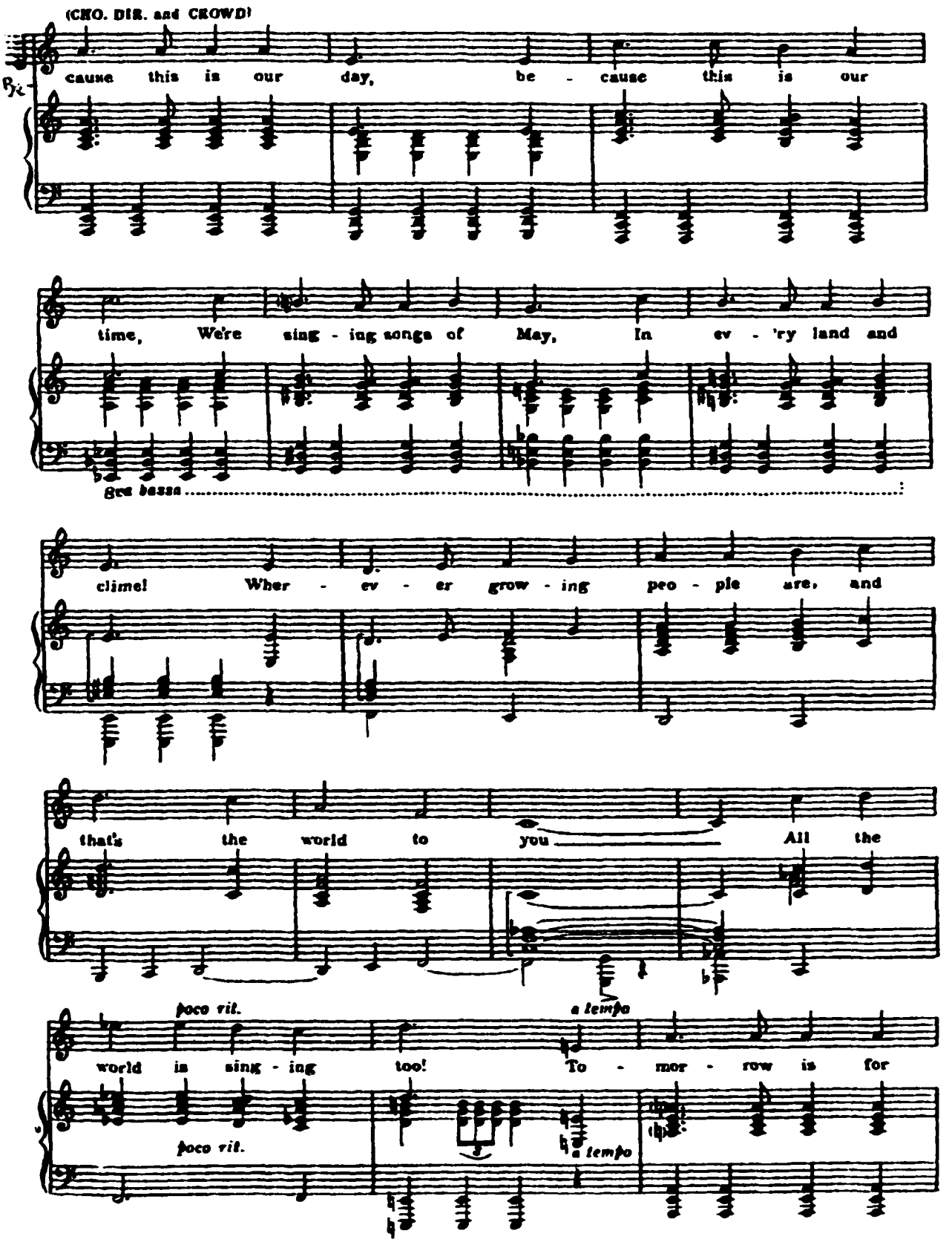
Example 8.1 (b) "The Tune" Final version



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Example 8.1 (b) "The Tune" Final version (cont'd)

stemming from the broad discrepancies in note durations, which range from thirty-seconds to dotted halves. In the workers' hands, these irregularities are all smoothed out: gone are metrical shifts, alternations between duples and triples, and such outsized differences in durational proportions. A number of pitch relations are altered as well, primarily through the elimination of decorative lower-neighbor flourishes, but the overall melodic contour is virtually identical, and "The Tune" is recognizably transmuted into an effective march, rhythmically simple, vocally idiomatic for amateurs, and easily memorized.

A similar transformation occurs on a verbal level, as Musiker's ongoing frustration at his inability to find the right words is alleviated when he realizes that the lyrics to

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proletarian songs need not be artful or clever; rather, they should be clear and to the point, like the lyrics supplied by the workers' chorus. *I've Got the Tune* can perhaps be considered an educational piece, its message--the importance of always keeping the work's ultimate purpose in mind--directed at would-be composers of proletarian song.

Reviewing the piece in *Modern Music*, Goddard Lieberson found the work "disappointing," conceding that this was largely because he had held extremely high expectations after *Cradle*. Even so, he lauded Blitzstein's "interesting use of the radio" as an integral part of the composition. However, Lieberson's complaints were exceptions that proved the rule: despite its unabashedly leftist message, *I've Got the Tune* received largely positive reviews from both mainstream and leftist periodicals. In fact, *Radio Daily* recommended a repeat broadcast, and while CBS declined to honor this request, Musicraft Records--a commercial label primarily known for later jazz recordings by artists including Sarah Vaughan, Mel Torme, and Duke Ellington--soon released a seven-record set of the entire show.[27] In February 1938, *I've Got the Tune* was staged for the first time, as part of a *New Masses* benefit that also featured excerpts from *Second Hurricane*, as well as Earl Robinson's "Abe Lincoln," selections by Eisler and Thomson, and a performance by Count Basie. Although Martin McCall considered Eisler's contributions "the most formidable and serious pieces on the program," he also wrote that *I've Got the Tune* was a work of "astonishing originality and dramatic ingenuity." In early 1939, Lou Cooper's Flatbush Players added *I've Got the Tune* to their Blitzstein repertoire, performing at a benefit for the New Theatre League.[28]

Over a period of roughly two years, Blitzstein established himself as far and away the most successful American-born composer of explicitly political music, in terms of

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27. Goddard Lieberson, "On the Air," *MM* 15/1 (November--December 1937): 54-55; Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 156-57, 177.

28. Martin McCall, "Concert of Contemporary Music Proves Huge Success," *DW* 10 February 1938, 7; John Cambridge, "New Cantata Performed By Flatbush Arts Group," *DW* 27 June 1939, 7.

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both critical acclaim and popular exposure. He was a first-rate celebrity on the left, and consequently the *Daily Worker* frequently ran a number of feature articles on and by him during 1938. In one, he explained to readers what he had in mind when writing *Cradle*: "what I really wanted to talk about was the middleclass . . . The middleclass must sooner or later see that there can be allegiance only to the future, not the past; that the only sound loyalty is the concept of work, and to a principle which makes honest work at least true, good and beautiful."[29] This is the language of Dewey, being used to advocate, at least by implication, the creation of a new musical culture. Blitzstein was even more explicit in another article written three months later, writing that "[the composer] cannot longer remain neutral. Neutrality in culture will no longer work. You've got to say what you mean; you've got to say it as directly and as fully as possible." Blitzstein rebuked "ivory tower" composers who "create[d] pieces which were valued and appreciated by other composers," but not by the public. As his ventures into film, radio, and recording illustrated, Blitzstein was convinced that it was absolutely crucial that composers show more concern for their public. He argued, passionately, that "[t]he people's front needs music, but music, if it is to get along, if it is to be anything at all worthy of the age in which it is created, needs the people's front."[30]

Finally, in an interview from December 1938, he was asked what he would say to "young men coming out of music schools the world over." His reply: "You can't separate music from thinking. . . . You can't separate what people do from life around them. . . . I would say that we should concentrate on building up strong cultural fronts. Good works of art are germs of new things, roots of an era. If you're an artist, you must know the horrible death culture suffers under fascism and you must use that art

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29. Blitzstein, "Author of 'The Cradle' Discusses Broadway Hit," *DW* 3 January 1938, 7.

30. Blitzstein, "Music and the People's Front," *DW* 13 April 1938, 7.

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to fight fascism."[31] Whether on the radio or onstage, Blitzstein insisted, the battle must be joined, and it must be fought in a way that would engage the public, provide it with enjoyment and provoke it to serious thought. The most important measure of a work of art would not be its adherence to an *a priori* doctrine, but rather the extent to which it performed these functions. In a contemporaneous essay in *Modern Music*, Blitzstein explicitly rejected, for the first time, overarching theories about the composition of musical theatre: "the theatre is so elusive an animal that each situation demands its own solution."[32]

Popular appeal, far from being a flaw, as the Collective had once asserted, was absolutely necessary, and the composer should find whatever means best effect a connection with his audience. Moreover, the goals of artistic quality, social criticism, and popular success were not irreconcilable, as the Labor Stage's *Pins and Needles* was demonstrating in spectacular fashion.

A True Workers' Theater

When it first opened, *Pins and Needles* played only on weekends, at least in part as a concession to the scheduling demands of its cast, all of whom were full-time textile workers. Critics initially took no notice of the production, but the word of mouth was extremely positive, and attendance was so robust that the Labor Stage soon decided to begin running performances on a full-time schedule. This decision, however, carried with it unforeseen consequences: although the performers were technically amateurs, the new schedule forced them to take leave from work, which in turn compelled the ILGWU to compensate them for their performances. Enter Actors Equity, which required that they join. As participants in a union-themed revue, it was inconceivable that the cast of

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31. Edith Hale, "Author and Composer Blitzstein, Famed for 'Cradle Will Rock', Tells Some Interesting Things About Himself and His Family," *DW* 7 December 1938, 7.

32. Blitzstein, "On Writing Music for the Theatre," *MM* 15/2 (January--February 1938): 85.

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Pins would not do so. The decision was not as easy as it would seem, however, for while the ILGWU was one of the charter members of CIO, Actors Equity was an AFL union, and in the two years since the founding of both Labor Stage and the CIO, the two federations had parted ways. Not wanting to pay dues to both unions, the cast resisted the change, but by early 1938 the problem was solved: the actors' dual dues were waived, and Actors Equity could boast a number of successful new members. The stagehands' union then voiced a similar grievance, which was quickly resolved in like fashion. Finally, the AFM pitched in, protesting that *Pins and Needles* did not employ a requisite number of musicians. But after some wrangling the AFM leadership backed off and allowed *Pins and Needles* to continue with a bare two-piano accompaniment.[33]

Meanwhile, audiences continued to flock to *Pins and Needles*, and critics could no longer ignore it. Their verdict was almost unanimously positive. The praise of the *New York Times* was typical: *Pins and Needles* "is a witty and tuneful morsel considerably enhanced by the infectious enthusiasm of the performers." The play's leftist politics were not alienating, for although the numbers "do not miss many plugs for the anti-fascism cause and for the working man in general . . . the propaganda is deftly weaved into skits and songs more concerned with providing entertainment first."[34] Given this marked lack of didacticism, the rave review published in the *Daily Worker* was almost as notable as the praise of the *New York Times*. Rather than comparing *Pins and Needles* to *Cradle* or *Die Massnahme*, *Daily Worker* reviewer Eric Englander recognized a more appropriate yardstick, observing that songs like "Doin' the Reactionary," "Not Cricket to Picket," and "One Big Union for Two" were "not merely tops for a labor revue; they are as amusing as

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33. Harry Goldman and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," *Performing Arts Review* 7/3 (1977): 358-60, 362-63. The irony of the difficulties that the producers of both *Pins* and *Cradle* had with unions is so obvious as to be hardly worth mentioning.

34. J. G., "Pins and Needles," *NYT* 29 November 1937, 18.

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any skits and songs you will find now anywhere."[35] A little more than a week after this review, the *Daily Worker* profiled the cast of *Pins and Needles*. The left-wing media blitz continued two weeks later, with an adulatory feature in the *Sunday Worker Magazine*.[36]

Throughout that winter, the revue continued its successful run, drawing diverse crowds comprised, in Virgil Thomson's words, of "right-wing socialists, the communists, some Park Avenue, a good deal of Bronx, and all those intellectual or worker groups that the Federal Theater in general and the Living Newspaper in particular have welded into about the most formidable army of ticket buyers in the world."[37] Early that December, several songs from *Pins and Needles* were broadcast on the radio version of *March of Time*. Four months later, Bluebird Records released recordings of four songs from the revue. Not everyone was so admiring of Rome's songs, however: in January 1938, the *Daily Worker* gleefully reported that NBC radio had banned "Sing Me a Song with Social Significance" and "One Big Union For Two," both of which were deemed "not suitable for broadcast." The controversy had no adverse affect on ticket sales. To the contrary, the show had grown so successful that in January 1938, the producers contemplated moving to a larger venue, prompting several prominent critics who viewed *Pins and Needles* favorably, including Brooks Atkinson, to complain that the move would ruin the amateur ambience of the show. The Labor Stage decided against the move, but the show

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35. Eric Englander, "Sparkling Revue on Labor Stage," *DW* 29 November 1937, 7.

36. "Singing a Song of Social Significance," *DW* 9 December 1937, 7; Alfred Hirsch, "Pins and Needles," *SW* 26 December 1937: Magazine, 8.

37. Virgil Thomson, "In the Theatre," *MM* 15/2 (January--February 1938): 113; Thomson also identified this same audience as the public that had been responsible for the financial success of *Cradle*.

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continued to garner publicity. By early March tickets were reportedly being sold by "speculators" for an exorbitant $3.30, a full one and a half times their face value.[38]

That same month, in the clearest sign yet of the sensation that *Pins and Needles* had become, the cast was invited by Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to perform at a celebration for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Department of Labor. After this public performance, they also gave a private performance for President Roosevelt. The two shows were quite different: for the Department of Labor, the cast omitted "political" numbers ("FTP Plowed Under," "Mussolini Handicap," and "Four Little Angels"); at the private show, however, they omitted the non-political ones! Roosevelt apparently agreed with their decisions, telling the cast that his personal favorite was "Call It Un-American," a satire of red-baiting conservatives.[39]

As the show continued to play to a packed house, the directors of the Labor Stage decided that the time was ripe for a national tour. In keeping with the unorthodox casting decisions that had characterized the revue thus far, the touring arrangement was a novel one. Rather than assembling a new touring company, the organizers of *Pins and Needles* sent the main Broadway cast on the road. Two other casts then split the Broadway shows, with one cast doing evening performances and the other presenting weekend matinees. There was another curious aspect to the casting situation. By late 1938, a role in *Pins and Needles* had become a highly desirable job for most working actors, so when word of the revue's need for new cast members got out, a number of professional actors sought ways to obtain membership in the ILGWU, a prerequisite for casting in *Pins and*

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38. Harry and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 363-64; "'Pins and Needles' Goes on the Air," *DW* 2 December 1937, 7; Martin McCall, "New Recordings From Toscanini to 'Pins and Needles'," *DW* 17 March 1938, 7; Manngreen, "'Union Members' Put N. B. C. on Pins and Needles," *DW* 26 January 1938, 7; Manngreen, "I. L. G. W. U. Members Can't Get In to See Own Show," *DW* 4 March 1938, 7.

39. Goldman, "When Social Significance," 29-30; Manngreen, "The President Sees 'Pins and Needles' and Prefers 'Call It Un-American," *DW* 14 March 1938, 9.

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Needles. As Rome recalls, "[p]eople were coming from all over and joining the ILGWU just so they could audition for the show."[40]

In both incarnations, the show maintained its momentum throughout 1938; in mid-November, the *Sunday Worker* reported that *Pins and Needles* had grossed more than $500,000 (roughly $5 million in today's currency) since it had opened one year earlier. Cast members became popular icons on the left, performing at pro-labor rallies and benefits and appearing in *Daily Worker* profiles. Perhaps the clearest indication of the popularity of *Pins and Needles*, and its leftist associations, was the Daughters of the American Revolution's decision to boycott the show.[41]

In early 1939, after more than a year of astonishing success, *Pins and Needles* was still going strong on the Labor Stage, and the touring company continued to play to large audiences across the country. But several of those involved in the production felt that it was growing stale, and Rome's pen had not been idle. So, in April 1939, *Pins and Needles 1939* opened. It was substantially the same as the earlier version, but in recognition of the popularity of Rome's songs, all of the sketches and dance numbers that lacked songs were cut and replaced by several new songs. Unfortunately, the new material was not up to the level of Rome's initial offerings. As original cast member Nettie Harary recalls, "[w]hen we got back to New York after the first road show there were different numbers in the New York show. The new material began to be too sweet,

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40. Harry and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 370. On the changes, see Harry and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 364.

41. Manngreen, "The C. I. O. Gives Hague Plenty of Pins and Needles," *DW* 19 February 1938, 7; "Large Gross for 'Pins and Needles," *SW* 13 November 1938, 12; Sam Chavkin, "'You Have a Great Show . . . ' [which is what FDR supposedly said to the cast], *DW* 28 June 1938, 7; "Pins and Needles Acquires a Versatile Young Actor," *SW* 2 October 1938, 12; "Anti-Fascists Gave Labor Stage Actor His Ideas for Hitler Role," *SW* 30 October 1938, 12; Marcia Minor, "Phil Loeb, 'Pins and Needles' Comedian, Has Some Decided Views on Critics, Broadway, the Social Theatre, and His Own Conception of Character Portrayal," *DW* 16 November 1938, 7; "D. A. R. Boycotts 'Pins & Needles," *SW* 18 December 1938, 12.

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it lacked content, the message, the punch which the earlier numbers had."[42] A greater number of the new selections were indeed apolitical--love songs, spoofs of social convention, and the like--and they replaced the revue's few "serious" sketches. But several reviewers found the changes an improvement, commenting that the new additions were much more consistent with the light, humorous tone of the best original songs.[43]

At any rate, the changes did not adversely affect audience's interest in *Pins and Needles*; the new version continued as successfully as the original one, and in June 1939, the revue finally left the Labor Stage and took up residence at the much larger Windsor Theatre. Just as had happened when the show originally made the transition to a full-time run, *Pins and Needles 1939* was soon confronted with union difficulties. Because the ILGWU was a non-profit organization, it claimed that the revue was exempt from the annual license fee levied by most theaters. This exemption caused the League of New York Theaters to cry foul, complaining that *Pins and Needles 1939* constituted "unfair competition." In order to keep matters from escalating, on 10 August Mayor La Guardia signed a bill specifically exempting Labor Stage from the fee.[44] In addition to providing the producers of *Pins and Needles* with their desired financial break, La Guardia had also implicitly ratified the revue's cultural significance by making legal exceptions for it. *Pins and Needles* offered audiences of all political stripes a radicalism that was at once unambiguous and unthreatening, showing that, as the *Daily Worker* wrote, workers were "capable not merely of satirizing their bosses and class enemies, but also making fun of

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42. Harary quoted in Harry and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 376.

43. John Gutman, "In the Theatre," *MM* 16/4 (May-June 1939): 278; Lawrence Emery, "Thanks to Gilbert and Sullivan," *DW* 20 July 1939, 7.

44. Harry and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 365-66; ironically, the charge of "unfair competition" had also been leveled by commercial producers against the FTP, which charged lower admission prices than private producers. Broadway in the 1930s was thus a classic case of the adage that businessmen are anti-government capitalists when they're profitable, but pro-intervention socialists when not.

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their own foibles and weaknesses." This combination enabled Rome's revue to achieve a much larger cultural impact than *Cradle*, which, as the same article noted, "was like a cry of warning to the audience and a summons to battle."[45] Both plays were successful on their own terms, but *Pins and Needles* was much better suited to the Popular Front era, blurring the line between political and popular entertainments until the two had become virtually indistinguishable.

The popular appeal of leftist politics was further demonstrated on Broadway throughout 1937 and 1938. In a small indication that writers and composers were not the theater world's only possessors of political opinions, Broadway actresses boycotted silk stockings and underwear as a protest against the Japanese incursion into China.[46] But a more striking illustration of the political mood on Broadway during this season was the number of new shows with social themes. Significantly, these shows were all products of high-profile theatrical collaborations: *Hooray for What!* was a Harold Arlen/Yip Harburg musical that addressed disarmament, among other themes; *I'd Rather Be Right*, a musical comedy with a book by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart and with music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, poked fun at a wide array of major figures in government; *Leave It to Me*, which featured new songs by Cole Porter; and Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill's *Knickerbocker Holiday*. Of the four, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, a broad satire on the dangers of excessive government power, was the most explicitly political. However, reviewers complained that its politics were at best muddled and at worst reactionary. Ruth McKenney lamented in the *New Masses*, "what a pity that Kurt

45. H. W. L. Dana, "Five Years of Labor Theatre," *DW* 3 June 1938, 7.

46. "Farewell to Silk, Hello Lisle, Sing More Broadway Stars," *DW* 3 December 1937, 7.

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Weill's beautiful score had to be wasted on a reactionary musical-comedy book."[47] *Knickerbocker Holiday* was also the least successful of the shows, the only one to run for less than 200 performances.

Perhaps the most eagerly anticipated show to open in the fall of 1938 was Rome's follow-up to *Pins*, a new revue titled *Sing Out the News*, co-authored with *Pins and Needles* director Charles Friedman, and produced by the Broadway mogul Max Gordon. Throughout the summer, the show received advance publicity in the pages of the *Daily Worker*. At the beginning of September, the paper ran a review of the show's Philadelphia preview, although the item discussed, not the show itself, but its reception. Noting that *Sing Out the News* was "being awaited by Broadway as one of the most significant shows of the season," the *Daily Worker*'s Ernest Pendrell nevertheless could not help observing that local reviews "weren't enthusiastic" and "could best be described as polite."[48] The same was true of John Cambridge's *Daily Worker* review, published three weeks later, following the New York premiere. Cambridge described the show as "obvious," "lack[ing] the melody and color of Mr. Rome's earlier work," and ultimately "a disappointment." Cambridge followed up his review by noting and then replying to a letter Rome had written him objecting to the initial review. He maintained his original negative verdict, even while conceding that it "arose chiefly from the fact that I judged the show not by Broadway revue standards, but by those which the Messrs. Rome and

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47. John Cambridge, "Reviewer Left in Doubt By 'Knickerbocker's [*sic*] Holiday'," *DW* 24 October 1938, 7; Ruth McKenney, "Notes on Maxwell Anderson," *NM* 29/10 (November 29, 1938): 27. Cambridge complained that it was unclear whether Anderson meant to chastise all forms of activist government, including the New Deal, or simply to celebrate the virtues of individual liberty.

48. Ernest Pendrell, "'Sing Out the News' Scores A Hit in Philadelphia," *SW* 4 September 1938, 12; Manngreen, "Sing Out the News With Rome And Friedman," *DW* 30 June 1938, 7; Cambridge, "Advance Releases of Fall Productions Look Promising With 'Sing Out the News' Leading a Host of Musicals," *SW* 28 August 1938, 12.

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Friedman had previously set for themselves." Audiences, too, found the play lacking, and it lasted for only 105 performances.[49]

It is certainly possible that, purely on artistic grounds, *Sing Out the News* failed to live up to the standards of its predecessor.[50] But there may also be another reason for its poor showing, one that is both more subtle and with potentially broader implications. It is worth recalling that when *Pins*'s producers initially considered moving to more spacious, upscale accommodations, protests came, not just from the leftist press, which might have been expected to oppose such a move on strictly ideological grounds, but also from mainstream critics. Part of the show's charm was its amateurism, and without minimizing the importance of Rome's songwriting, it seems likely that the non-professional stature of its cast and the grassroots nature of its origins lent *Pins and Needles* a sense of authenticity that greatly enhanced its connection to audiences.

When Rome and Friedman's formula was transplanted into the context of a big-budget, commercial production, it may simply have struck audiences as artificial, in much the same way that the Mercury Theatre's decision to consciously replicate the impromptu staging of *Cradle*'s opening night rang false to several critics. This elevation of the spontaneous, amateur performance style to a conscious directorial decision has its parallels in the Composers Collective's development of its folk-popular style, in Cowell's celebration of "Useful Music," in Robinson's admiration of Joe Hill, and in the Lomaxes' simplifying influence on Leadbelly's performance style. In this respect, perhaps more than in any other, *Pins and Needles* was the apotheosis of the decade's leftist music: a quintessentially amateur production that injected humor into its social critique and never sacrificed popular appeal on the altar of technical sophistication. At the same time, the

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49. Cambridge, 'Sing Out the News,' New Revue at Music Box," *DW* 28 September 1938, 7; Cambridge, "Harold Rome's Objection to the Criticism of 'Sing Out the News' and the Critic's Reply," *SW* 2 October 1938, 12.

50. To this day, the musical remains both unpublished and unrecorded, although several numbers, most notable "F. D. R. Jones," are available on an individual basis.

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comparative failures of other, more professional Broadway musicals to achieve similar popular and critical acclaim confirmed the fact that leftist subject matter alone did not ensure a production's success. Moreover, when the respective origins of *Pins and Needles* and its successor shows are taken into account, one might conclude that audiences were skeptical about the leftist political pretensions of major Broadway shows backed by well-funded companies.

Cabaret!

Support for this hypothesis may be found in the acclaim that the leftist press continued to shower on amateur productions of politically-tinged musical theater. Just as New York's theater scene encompassed much more than just the major Broadway houses, so too did the ambit of leftist musical revues. Off Broadway, the narrative, semi-operatic model represented by *Cradle* and the Broadway shows mentioned above was not the dominant theatrical paradigm. There, the primary form taken by political theater was the revue, or more specifically, the cabaret, a genre that, unlike the Broadway musical, came complete with leftist associations. One indication of the cachet enjoyed by the cabaret genre on the American left was an unsigned article in the *Daily Worker* describing how "[u]nder Soviet power a real people's cabaret was born, making cabaret into a complete art and giving it a rich ideological content."[51] To be sure, Brecht, Weill, and Sally Bowles might have disagreed with this reading of theater history, in which the significant musical and dramatic legacies of the Weimar-era cabarets of Berlin, not to mention the pioneering cabarets of late nineteenth-century Paris, were inexplicably elided. The cabaret tradition in New York City itself extended back several decades. But such Soviet

51. "Soviet Political Cabarets Centers of People's Art," *DW* 14 September 1938, 7. Lewis Erenberg notes that cabaret-style revues actually originated in late-nineteenth century Paris, migrating to New York soon after the turn of the century. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 115, 207.

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annexations of cultural history, regardless of their hyperbole, deserve our attention, for they were essentially official CPUSA seals of approval for their subjects.

While the *Daily Worker* provided historical justifications for the use of cabaret, the leftist Theatre Arts Committee (TAC) produced a series of topical cabarets throughout 1938 and 1939. During this period, anti-fascism had come to dominate American leftist politics, and consequently the various editions of the cabaret addressed international affairs, in numbers ranging from a dance number called "Nazi Officer Learning the Viennese Waltz" to the song "The Chamberlain Crawl." But the cabarets were largely taken up with spoofs of domestic matters and apolitical slapstick. One cabaret contained sketches mocking targets as diverse as Newark's notoriously anti-labor Mayor Frank Hague and the *Living Newspaper* series. Another edition featured physical comedian Joey Faye performing a humorous "one-man wrestling match," as well as two sketches parodying Martin Dies's House Un-American Activities Committee. Most of the content changed as new versions of the cabaret were produced, but one constant was the inclusion of songs by Earl Robinson. One edition had a musical section that began with Joe Hill's "Casey Jones," which was followed by Robinson's "Joe Hill" and "Abe Lincoln." The *Daily Worker* wrote of the latter that "[t]his number alone is worth the price of admission," and the TAC organizers, recognizing the song's popularity, featured "Abe Lincoln" again in their next cabaret, where it received "the longest applause of the evening."[52]

There was much overlap between the Theatre Arts Committee Cabaret and the more "mainstream" political musicals, in terms of both repertoire--"One Big Union for Two" and "Four Little Angels of Peace" were included on various programs--and personnel. The Cabaret featured performers like Will Geer, who had appeared in both *Cradle* and

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52. John Cambridge, "A Top Notch Cabaret," *DW* 18 May 1938, 7; Alfred Davis, "Theatre Arts Committee Puts On a Brilliant Show," *DW* 2 December 1938, 9; "New Edition of Cabaret TAC," *DW* 4 January 1938, 7.

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Sing Out the News, and Michael Loring, a veteran of *Pins and Needles* who would star in a CBS Radio series starting in July 1939. It was a mark of the vibrancy of the radical theater scene of the period that politically inclined actors had several viable forums in which they could fuse their professional activities and their personal views, in the process becoming minor celebrities on the left.[53]

Audiences appreciated the personal commitment of the Cabaret's stars, and reviewers commented on the intimate bond that this created. For instance, John Gutman commented in *Modern Music* that the "factor of intimacy" was a major asset to the TAC Cabaret, which he found "uproariously amusing." Likewise, the *Daily Worker* noted the attendance, at a first-anniversary celebration of the Cabaret, of such luminaries as Fredric March, Gypsy Rose Lee, Morris Carnovsky, and Harold Rome, all of them paying tribute to "the actors, writers, and directors who have rushed from rehearsals and their regular work, and even taken advantage of their Hollywood vacations to take part."[54]

The Cabaret and its parent body, TAC, contributed to a variety of leftist causes through more than just their performances. They protested proposed cuts in WPA funding through petitions, protests, and even a sort of political performance art, in which they "releas[ed] in Times Square pigeons bearing pink slips addressed to every Senator." But their major focus, like that of most of their peers, remained international anti-fascism: they organized rallies to aid refugees from the Sudetenland, directed public protests against *Kristallnacht*, and donated the proceeds from the Cabaret shows to aid

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53. Cambridge, "A Top Notch Cabaret," 7; Ben Burns, "Will Geer Laughs Last," *DW* 5 June 1939, 7; Marcia Minor, "'Angel' Sherman Sings Out His Views," *DW* 29 September 1938, 7; Anita Tilkin, "Played Golf in Movies; Now He Sings 'Songs of Protest'," *DW* 20 February 1939, 7; "Loring of TAC Fame on CBS Beginning Tomorrow," *DW* 2 July 1939, 7; "Michael Loring TAC Star on Radio Program," *DW* 8 July 1939, 7.

54. Gutman, "In the Theatre," 127-28; "Cabaret TAC To Celebrate Anniversary," *DW* 29 April 1939, 7; Not surprisingly, the Cabaret spawned imitators. The most successful of these was based at the Village Vanguard, and included the young Betty Comden and Adolph Green, then ages twenty-one and twenty-four, respectively. Milton Meltzer, "A 'Little Revue' That Does Big Things," *DW* 13 April 1939, 7.

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Spanish and Chinese refugees.[55] There is a pleasing symmetry to the idea that the political cabaret, brought to its highest expression in Weimar Germany, was enlisted by American performers in the fight against the Nazis, who had so brutally squashed this form of musical theater for being, among other things, too influenced by "degenerate" American music.

Bitter Harvest

Paradoxically, one issue conspicuously absent from the majority of leftist theater productions of this period is race. More mainstream productions, such as *Blackbirds of 1939*, the latest installment in a long-running series of revues, and a pair of "swing Mikados," discussed later in this chapter, at least alluded to the topic, as did the productions of the FTP's Harlem unit. None of them, however, was explicitly political, unless one considers the inclusion in *Blackbirds* of two comedians in blackface to be an intentional political statement.[56] In fact, the left theater--encompassing Blitzstein's works, Rome's revues, and the Cabaret TAC--was conspicuously white. To the extent that jazz entered into things, it was in the arena of songwriting, drawing on the idiom of (mostly white, Jewish) Tin Pan Alley composers, rather than in the musical and dance performance practices closely associated with African-American musicians. Perhaps even more glaring was the absence of any mention of several major political issues of the day that were racial in nature.

This oversight may have been, at least in part, a deliberate strategic decision. As we have seen, during the previous few years the left, and specifically the CPUSA, made concerted efforts to recruit African-Americans to their cause. As always, their argument

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55. Milton Meltzer, "TAC Has Stirred Screen, Stage and Radio Stars for Cause of Peace and Democracy," *DW* 3 April 1939, 7.

56. John Cambridge, "'Blackbirds of 1939' Fails to Use Rich Store Of Negro Talent," *DW* 15 February 1939, 7.

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rested on the Marxist notion that matters of economics and class were the most salient facts in the political, cultural and social arenas. The ostensible kinship between, say, a highly-educated Russian-American Jew and his uneducated Baptist African-American fellow countryman, was rooted in their shared heritages of economic oppression. This idea worked just as well in framing the anti-fascist cause as a natural one for African-Americans to fight: the Chinese and the Spanish Republicans were victims of a barbarism not unlike that suffered by many African-Americans' slave ancestors. Thus Max Yergan, a prominent African-American leader, could say to an interviewer from the *Daily Worker* that "Negroes fighting in Spain have shown that they understand the significance of what the Loyalists are doing. . . . The Spanish struggle has had the effect of increasing the desire of the American Negro for more genuine democracy; has made him realize the necessity of participating in the progressive struggle for democratic rights in America."[57]

However, whereas the CPUSA seemed largely inclined to concentrate its energies on the international anti-fascist struggle, Yergan also mentioned a significant battle that was then afoot. It did not involve fascism, at least not in any formal sense, but it was quite literally a matter of life and death for African-Americans and one of the central issues in contemporary American politics. The issue was racial lynching, then still very much alive and well in the South and parts of the Midwest. In 1938, bills banning the brutal practice were filibustered into oblivion in Congress. Prominent African-Americans pressured President Roosevelt to throw his weight behind the legislation, and his failure to do so, while politically understandable--Roosevelt feared that such an action would completely alienate his southern Democratic supporters, as Lyndon Johnson's own support of Civil Rights did in the mid-1960s--was morally indefensible. His unwillingness to speak out on the issue, despite his own strongly-held abhorrence of the

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57. Will Lawrence, "Max Yergan, Progressive Leader," *DW* 26 July 1938, 7.

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practice, meant that Southern lynch mobs could continue their abominations with virtual impunity.

Although the issue received relatively little attention from most major leftist organizations, it nevertheless aroused the anger of many Americans, regardless of race. One of them was Abe Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher and Bronx native. In the early 1930s, Meeropol saw a photo of a lynching victim and was moved to write a poem on the subject:

> Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
> Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
> Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
> And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
> Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop.

New Masses agreed to publish his poem in early 1936, but for some reason never did. However, in January 1937, Meeropol's poem finally made it into print in the magazine *The New York Teacher*, where it was presented under the title "Bitter Fruit."[58] Meeropol,

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58. David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Books, 2000), 37.

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an amateur songwriter, also set it to music, and it was occasionally performed at small gatherings of Meeropol's leftist circle.

Almost two years after the poem's publication, Meeropol sent a copy of the song--complete with musical setting--to a club-owner named Barney Josephson. Josephson was the proprietor of Cafe Society, a Greenwich Village nightclub that, upon opening in late 1938, had become the first racially integrated nightclub in New York City south of Harlem. As Josephson himself said, "Cafe Society was very much a part of the New Deal era," a notion borne out by Eleanor Roosevelt's visit, several years later.[59] One of Cafe Society's featured performers was the singer Billie Holiday, and Meeropol, thinking that she would be an ideal interpreter, wanted Josephson to show the song to her. That Meeropol would consider Josephson a likely advocate for his song is not at all surprising, as the club owner's political sympathies certainly suggested a potential affinity for the song's message. It is less clear, however, why Meeropol chose Holiday; although she sometimes included a Communist anti-war song, "The Yanks Are Not Coming," in her nightclub act, she was not generally vocal on political matters.[60] Of course, the most likely explanation for Meeropol's hunch is musical. Holiday's intensely personal style, with its undercurrent of hurt, may have seemed like a natural fit for the disturbing song. According to David Margolick, Holiday first performed the song, now called "Strange Fruit," in late 1938 at a party in Harlem. The effect, as described by people in attendance, was highly dramatic.[61]

The song soon became a fixture of Holiday's Cafe Society performances. Margolick writes that Josephson, recognizing the dramatic power of Holiday's interpretation, "decreed elaborate stage directions for each of the three nightly performances. Holiday

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59. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 145.

60. Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 300-01.

61. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 45.

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was to close each set with it. Before she began, all service stopped. Waiters, cashiers, busboys were all immobilized. The room went completely dark, save for a pin spot on Holiday's face. When she was finished and the lights went out, she was to walk off the stage, and no matter how thunderous the ovation, she was never to return for a bow."[62]

Although some audience members, expecting light entertainment, found Holiday's "Strange Fruit" alienating and inappropriate, the song and her interpretation in particular were generally acclaimed. Nevertheless, when she attempted to record "Strange Fruit," Holiday was rebuffed by her recording company, Columbia Records. So on 20 April 1939, she recorded the song, along with its flip side, "Fine and Mellow," for release on Commodore Records.[63] The record came out several months later and was widely hailed in the press, receiving praise in such major publications as the *New York Post*, *Variety*, and *Time*. The *Daily Worker* was also highly laudatory; Martin McCall's brief review of the record distinguished Holiday's singing from that of most contemporary swing vocalists. Her style was defined, to his ear, by an "intensity and expressiveness common to an older generation of blues-singing artists." Although she lacked the rhythmic sense of Bessie Smith, Holiday's singing was "surprisingly pure, and rings with uncompromising sincerity." McCall considered "Fine and Mellow" to be "easily one of the finest vocal records since Bessie Smith's last record in 1934." He termed the flip side of that song "a dramatic and bitterly restrained call against lynching."[64]

Moreover, "Strange Fruit" soon became one of the most successful commercial releases of Holiday's career. One popular song chart listed "Strange Fruit" at number sixteen in July 1939, and a saxophonist who had played on the record later claimed that

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62. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 49–50.

63. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 64.

64. Martin McCall, "Billie Holiday At Best in New Recordings," *DW* 29 July 1939, 7; Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 74–75.

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10,000 copies of "Strange Fruit" were sold within a week of its release (Margolick notes that this figure is probably high, considering that the record was reported to have sold a total of only 50,000 copies in 1945). The record's success was particularly striking given a general lack of airplay, a result, no doubt, of the song's controversial subject.[65] The opposition encountered by "Strange Fruit" illustrated, just as well as its successes, the *de facto* segregation that continued to characterize American media: African-Americans could now be seen and heard, but only in non-confrontational, subservient contexts, for even a bandleader is the servant of his audience.

Blacks and Bourgeoisie

This musical segregation mirrored that of the society at large. Lynching may have been the most vivid form of racial oppression, but racism was a disease that manifested itself in myriad ways. The administration of the criminal justice system, of which lynching was one particularly deformed branch, remained a serious problem, as demonstrated by the ongoing incarceration of five of the nine Scottsboro Boys. This issue was still galvanizing prominent African-Americans and many leftists.[66] One year after the *Daily Worker* had published Leadbelly's song on the subject, Maurice Sugar's own musical take on Scottsboro appeared in the paper (see example 8.2). A sidebar explained that the song was dedicated to one of the Boys in particular, whose death sentence had recently been commuted to life in prison. The song's lyrics are simple and direct, and the verse form approximates that of a typical blues song, with a tag added on. Musically, the song hearkens back to Siegmeister's "The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die"; the plodding, dirgelike accompaniment carries with it a hint of the funereal, with the

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65. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 68, 91-93.

66. See, for example, the page of articles under the heading "Demonstrate in Harlem Tomorrow for Scottsboro Boys," *DW* 7 April 1939, 7.

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Example 8.2: Maurice Sugar , "Bosses and Judges, Lis'n to Me"[67]

alternation of tonics and flat-sixths in the left hand perhaps alluding to the famous funeral march from Chopin's Second Piano Sonata. The style is thus markedly different from Sugar's earlier songs (see Ch. 6, pp. 299-302), substituting harmonic effects for catchy tunes.

Leadbelly, meanwhile, had maintained the interest in political songwriting he had first displayed regarding Scottsboro. On a trip to Washington, D. C., in 1938, he was

67. *DW* 8 July 1938, 7.

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struck by the rampant racial discrimination he encountered in the nation's capital, and wrote "Bourgeois Blues" in response. The song was first recorded that December, and remains one of his best-known compositions. On the recording, Leadbelly's tone is more one of sorrow than anger, although there is unmistakable bitterness as well, in his delivery of the lines, "This is the home of the brave/Land of the free/I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie."

Leadbelly's experience, immortalized in song, preceded by a matter of months another case of discrimination in the capital featuring a prominent African-American singer, one that became a national *cause celebré*. In early 1939, Marian Anderson, the acclaimed alto, was barred by the Daughters of the American Revolution from performing in Washington's Constitution Hall. The issue was eagerly picked up by the left press, and the D. A. R.'s decision was roundly criticized by artists and politicians. Martin McCall compared the policy to those of Nazi book-burners, and Anderson's recitals became major events across the country.[68] When Eleanor Roosevelt--who had previously chaired an event at which Anderson received the prestigious Springarn Medal and later resigned from the D. A. R. to protest its decision--announced that the concert would instead take place at the Lincoln Memorial, the *Sunday Worker* was pleased to report that the audience would include two Supreme Court justices, the Secretary of the Interior, and numerous other prominent citizens. One week later, the TAC sponsored a reception paying tribute to Anderson that was attended by many of New York's most notable citizens, including Mayor La Guardia, Manhattan Borough President Stanley Isaacs, NAACP Secretary Walter White, W. C. Handy, Maxwell Anderson, and many

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68. "Heifetz Assails DAR Ban On Great Negro Singer," *DW* 21 February 1939, 1; "DAR 'Alibi for Banning Hall to Negro Singer Proved False," *DW* 1 March 1939, 3; Martin McCall, "Why They Fear the Voice of Marian Anderson," *SW* 26 February 1939, 6; "Birmingham Hails Anderson at Concert; Pres Slaps DAR Ban," *DW* 4 April 1939, 7.

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other prominent artists and politicians.[69] Even after the affair, however, and despite the successes enjoyed by other singers such as Robeson and Roland Hayes, the world of concert music remained one of the more racially homogeneous areas of American culture.

In contrast, popular swing music was coming to be characterized by an impressive degree of racial diversity. Consequently, leftist cultural critics lavished an increasing amount of attention, largely favorable, on swing and its musicians. At the height of the controversy over Anderson's battle with the D. A. R., the *Daily Worker* profiled the popular African-American singer Maxine Sullivan, drawing parallels between Anderson's struggle and the endeavors of Sullivan and her colleagues to establish jazz as a legitimate art form. Several months later, an article on Count Basie quoted the bandleader on Eleanor Roosevelt's actions on Anderson's behalf: "That was grand! With more like that, we may all see better times." Basie also asserted that "[w]hen the bonds of race discrimination have been broken, the world of music, for one, will witness miracles of achievement, never before dreamed of."[70]

Martin McCall, the *Daily Worker*'s primary music critic during this period, devoted much ink to demonstrating the racially mixed nature of contemporary swing music. One article, "The Kings of Swing," introduced readers to "the Greatest Negro and White Swing Musicians of All Time." In another article, McCall recalled a time when "the majority of jazz musicians distinguished between Negro jazz and white jazz," then asserted that towards the end of the 1920s, "discrimination was broken down when the Negro style actually set the standard for hot performance." McCall's claims are, of course, highly debatable; white musicians like Bix Beiderbecke, Eddie Condon, and

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69. Capital Hears Noted Negro Singer, Sunday," *DW* 7 April 1939, 7; "Notables to Attend Anderson Concert," *SW* 9 April 1939, 4; "Marian Anderson to be Honored in City Tonight," *SW* 16 April 1939, 4.

70. Jack Weatherwax, "Maxine Sullivan, Swingster," *DW* 14 March 1939, 7; William Wolff, "New Miracles in American Music," *SW* 4 June 1939, 7.

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Goodman had helped define the hot Chicago style in the 1920s. But it was true, as McCall also noted, that this period saw a growing amount of interaction between white and African-American musicians, in both informal sessions and occasionally on recordings. The taboo against live performances by interracial bands, however, remained firmly in place throughout most of the Depression.[71]

Nevertheless, there were encouraging signs indicating that even this last barrier was not insurmountable, and chief among them was the popular success enjoyed by Benny Goodman's integrated trio and quartet. The trio, which featured Goodman, drummer Gene Krupa, and pianist Teddy Wilson, made a string of successful recordings--produced and pseudonymously reviewed, as noted in the previous chapter, by John Hammond--in the mid-1930s. In January 1938, Goodman's legendary Carnegie Hall concert offered the audience a glimpse of the "musical miracles" alluded to by Basie, as the trio (at times augmented by vibraphonist Lionel Hampton) defied the taboo against integrated performance. Other small groups on the program, including members of Ellington and Basie's bands, took the same bold step. Even Goodman's all-white big band, with which he first was dubbed the "King of Swing," played arrangements by African-American bandleader Fletcher Henderson.

Goodman further endeared himself to the left by performing with his various groups in the service of political causes. He was particularly active in his support for the Spanish Republicans. Goodman's generous financial contributions to the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy were noted in the *Daily Worker*, and he, along with Ellington, was one of the first jazz musicians to join the Musicians' Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Both musicians also performed for the leftist American

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71. Martin McCall, "The Kings of Swing, *DW* 12 September 1938, 7; Martin McCall, "Negro & White Jazz Bands," *DW* 16 July 1938, 7.

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Youth Congress's dance party in April 1938; Ellington contributed a new song for the occasion, which he called "jive for the jitterbugs in the left swing groove."[72]

New York's political progressives were not exclusively fixated on swing musicians with marquee value, however. The entire idea of swing was, in some instances, equated with leftist ideology. In May 1939, at the Young Communist League's Ninth Annual Convention, student groups treated the audience at Madison Square Garden to a revue called "Swing America." The songs were written by the student performers, including the following lyric: "Swing America, Swing America,/Hear that good progressive beat,/Swing the nation to its feet,/Here's a tune to carry away." Three months later, the *Daily Worker* featured an article on the famous Amateur Night at Harlem's Apollo Theatre, which the author described as "the concentrated essence of the struggle of hundreds of young Negro men and women to reach up and out and beyond themselves, to attain the heights of perfection in music and movement, to achieve the beat expression in the folk art of a people."[73] Hyperbolic though such language may have been, it is fairly representative of much writing on the left from the period, in which swing was imbued with political meaning. No publication was more enthusiastic than the *Daily Worker*, the arts pages of which showed an interest in all things swing.

The left's music critics wrote about many exponents of swing, displaying a good deal of familiarity with the contemporary scene. But no jazz musician was mentioned more frequently, or more favorably, in the leftist press than Goodman, whose recordings received rave reviews even when producer Hammond was not doing the reviewing. Predictably enough, Goodman's political activities also made him a target of criticism from American anti-Communists. In 1938, his involvement in several public Popular

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72. James Dugan, "The Stars Aid Spain," *Progressive Weekly* [new name for *Sunday Worker Magazine*] 27 March 1938, 8; Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 71; Manngreen, "Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington Swing for Peace, *DW* 30 March 1938, 7.

73. Abel Gorham, "They'll Swing in 'Swing America'," *DW* 3 May 1939, 9; Lawrence Emery, "Amateur Night at the Apollo," *DW* 2 August 1939, 7.

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Front events elicited some 4,000 letters of complaint to his sponsors, demanding the withdrawal of financial support for Goodman's radio show; the *Daily Worker*, in turn, urged readers to show their approval of his Popular Front position.[74]

One facet of Goodman's lionization by the American left that must be considered is its parallel to the similar celebration of Marian Anderson. In a sense, the high-cultural legitimacy that Anderson brought to the issue of racial integration was matched by the musical authority that Goodman's classical pedigree imparted to his status as an ambassador of jazz. This aspect of the clarinettist's reputation was, of course, all but impossible to untangle from his race, which reminds us that, like it or not, Goodman's cultural cachet resulted at least in part from his status as a racial and cultural pioneer, the white man who could play "hot" jazz just as well as his African-American colleagues. But it is also vitally important to keep in mind the political reality that the integration of jazz could only have come from the direction it did, with a white musician acting as leader; had Duke Ellington's band included white musicians, it is all too likely that conservatives would have decried the visible positioning of a white man under a black in a hierarchical relationship. Thus Goodman's race, which was culturally validated, so to speak, by the classical training that was mentioned in many profiles of Goodman, made him the most effective possible advocate of racial integration in the musical field.

The boldness of Goodman's personnel decisions was underscored by their uniqueness; six months later, McCall praised the pioneering Carnegie Hall performance as an example of "a great deal of integrity and courage," but lamented that "what one hoped would provide a precedent has found many obstacles in its way." As James Dugan had noted in the *Daily Worker*, "[t]he jim-crowism of jazz . . . has been dictated from above"; it was merely a symptom of the aversion that the music's sponsors in the radio

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74. For a representative review, of Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing," see Martin McCall, "Popularity of Swing Music Boom for Recordings," *DW* 22 November 1937, 7; Manngreen, "Fascists Swing at Benny Goodman," *DW* 6 May 1938, 7.

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and recording industries felt towards the kind of controversy that racial mixing would inevitably bring.[75]

Defining Jazz and Roots

Just as it is all but impossible to figure out where the racial ends and the aesthetic begins in evaluating the reasons for the popularity of jazz on the left, so too did conservative objections to jazz consist of an admixture of racial and aesthetic considerations. Although some of the twentieth century's most respected composers had drawn on jazz in their music, the genre remained, for many critics and listeners, inherently inferior to cultivated to music. For jazz's leftist advocates, then, support of the music had great significance in both the social and aesthetic arenas, and in fact demonstrated the amount of overlap between the two. However, as discussed in the previous chapter (pp. 324-27), there remained a demonstrable tension between validating jazz in relation to classical music and asserting that it justified itself on its own terms. Goodman's critical stature as a jazz musician was surely enhanced by his being, in Dugan's words, "expert enough on the clarinet to play Mozart with the Coolidge ensemble of chamber musicians." This aspect of his musicianship had several consequences: first, it lent the imprimatur of "serious" music to swing, opening the music up to formal theoretical analysis. Virgil Thomson, who reviewed the Carnegie Hall performance for *Modern Music*, concluded that it was "a quite uninteresting concert on the whole," and decided instead to analyze, in some detail, the rhythmic aspects of swing, which seemed to him considerably more fascinating than the performative aspects of jazz.[76]

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75. McCall, "Negro & White Jazz Bands," 7; James Dugan, "The King of Swing Holds Court," *DW* 31 January 1938, 9.

76. Dugan, "The King of Swing Holds Court," 9; Thomson, "Swing Again," *MM* 15/3 (March--April 1938): 160-66; "Benny Goodman Strikes Up Band To Aid Cause of Classic Music," *SW* 13 August 1939, 7.

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Moreover, Goodman's cultivated pedigree also lent an air of legitimacy to earlier jazz, for which he was considered a strong advocate. In the mid-to-late 1930s, Goodman's "classical" small-band swing style was, of course, far from the only available interpretation of the music, but it was the kind most favored by leftist critics. They viewed the growth of the highly-arranged school of swing exemplified by bandleaders like Kay Kyser and Guy Lombardo with alarm, and their suspicion was closely related to this music's commercial success and wide distribution. Thus Martin McCall wrote, "7 or 8 years ago, swing was at its artistic peak. Ironically, since it has been commercialized, it has begun to degenerate." And trumpet player Frank Newton asserted, in the *Sunday Worker*'s weekly magazine--recently re-christened the *Progressive Weekly*--"I doubt if [the] commercial style adds much to the real tradition of music."[77]

The notion that jazz had reached a critical juncture was most clearly reflected in Max Margulis's article "Where Do We Swing From Here?" Here Margulis voiced many of the unspoken implications of his colleagues' columns: "The uniqueness of hot jazz is that it is an improvisatory musical art"; "swing is not acquired by the artist, but is a gift"; and finally, "Hot jazz is a form of artistic expression which, unfortunately, has disappeared from musical culture in our Western world." Like any good Communist critic, Margulis connected the problem directly with the commercialization of jazz, which "has become a publicity-motivated business." As David Stowe remarks, "It was inevitable that those who deemed themselves arbiters of musical authenticity, as well as many musicians themselves, would regard these market-driven, corporate-supervised changes as signs of commercial adulteration and decline."[78]

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77. McCall, "Ballyhoo Making Myths Out of Swing Music," *DW* 9 April 1938, 7; Frank Newton (as told to Howard Rushmore), "What's Happening to Swing?," *Progressive Weekly* 5 March 1939: 2.

78. Margulis, "Where Do We Swing from Here," *Progressive Weekly* 24 July 1938: 4, 9; Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 99.

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To be sure, not all leftist critics agreed on the worth of even the most "authentic" swing. Mike Gold, ever the contrarian, assailed some of swing's highbrow advocates, "whose expensive education left them flat, with nothing but 'swing' worth living for." Gold, who had criticized Seeger for supposedly judging the Auvilles by the same criteria as Schoenberg (see Ch. 6, pp. 297-98), also wrote that "music lovers still prefer Beethoven and Bach" to swing, and he eagerly anticipated the day when "a great American musician . . . [would] weave some of the lawless ecstasy and rowdy joy of swing into his American symphonies. Until then, it remains but the raw material of music." Gold was answered, one week later, by Martin McCall, who objected to his judging swing by cultivated standards, and noted again the centrality of improvisation to jazz. And although McCall also lambasted those imprecise critics who "crush swing with kindness," he was firmly in the pro-swing camp, and cautioned writers like Gold not to "confuse swing with its commercial exploiters."[79] At the same time, McCall and other advocates of swing continued to sing the praises of the "hot" brand of swing, hailing it as an exemplar of the best aspects of jazz, untainted by commerce.[80]

Related to this was the racial character of hot jazz, which was more clearly associated with African-American performers; as the *Daily Worker* put it, "any really hep swing fan will tell you that most of the best swing bands are Negro." Since African-American culture had come to be identified with leftist causes--a conception that was virtually personified when Joe Louis defeated the German Max Schmeling--this meant

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79. Mike Gold, "'Swing' Is the Raw Material of Music Awaiting a Composer," *DW* 23 July 1938, 7; McCall, "The Art of Hot Jazz," *DW* 29 July 1938, 7; McCall, "Swing Is the Thing In Raging Controversy," *SW* 14 August 1938, 12.

80. McCall, "Hot Record Society Re-issues Limited Editions of Swing or 'Hot' Jazz," *DW* 12 February 1938, 7.

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that the hot jazz roots of contemporary swing required investigation.[81] Beginning in late 1938, the musical ancestors of swing--its pre-commercial, folk roots--became some of the New York left's favored forms of expression.

In November 1938, W. C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues," celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday, a milestone that occasioned a gala event at Carnegie Hall. The concert, co-sponsored by the Harlem and Musicians' Committees to Aid Spanish Democracy, doubled as a benefit for the Spanish Children's Milk Fund, but the focus was mainly on Handy. An elder statesman of African-American music, Handy was famous both as the composer of classics like the "St. Louis Blues" and "Beale Street Blues," and as a successful entrepreneur and publisher. Ten years earlier, he had organized a Carnegie Hall program of music and lectures on the roots and evolution of African-American music, and the Birthday/Milk Fund celebration followed in that pattern. The program, announced in the *Daily Worker* as an "extravaganza of Negro music including all phases," was heavily promoted in the left press. On the first half of the program, three different choirs presented a selection of African-American art songs and spirituals. The second half featured jazz luminaries including Fats Waller (1904-43), Cab Calloway (1902-78), Noble Sissle (1889-1975) and Eubie Blake (1883-1983), Roy Eldridge (1911-89), Lionel Hampton (1908-2002) and Teddy Wilson (1912-86), Maxine Sullivan (1911-87), and Jimmy Lunceford's band.[82]

Despite all this star power, however, Martin McCall was unimpressed, to say the least. His review of the program, and the ire that he provoked, amply demonstrated the intensity of feeling towards jazz on the left. Passing over the concert's first half, McCall

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81. Nemo, "Jim Crow Swing," *DW* 5 November 1938, 7; on Joe Louis, see Richard Wright, "And Oh--Where Were Hitler's Pagan Gods?," and Ben Davis, Jr., "Harlem's Victory Cheers Echo Will of People to Crush Fascism," *DW* 24 June 1938, 1, 3, 6.

82. Lewis, ***When Harlem Was In Vogue***, 208; "Swing Stars to Aid Spain Kids," *SW* 13 November 1938, 12; Martin McCall, "A Handy Birthday Concert," *DW* 17 November 1938, 7; "Brilliant Musical Concert at Carnegie Hall Tomorrow Night," *SW* 20 November 1938, 12.

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focused wholly on the swing portion, which he found "utterly bad." McCall found the music-making shallow and facile, and altogether too concerned with entertainment, rather than expression: he railed against "the gallant spectacle of one trumpeter [in Lunceford's band] grinding out high treble notes and two others throwing their instruments in the air and catching them in unison"; grumbled about the intrusive dancing of "scattered jitterbugs"; and concluded that the program showed "swing as vaudeville, not as musical expression."[83] McCall's complaints were, of course, logical extensions of his own anti-commercial ideal of genuine jazz.

That this view was not necessarily shared by his colleagues quickly became apparent: one week later, the *Daily Worker*'s editorial board published a rebuttal of McCall's review, side by side with a letter from John Hammond asserting that while the concert was indeed poorly organized most of the music was quite good. However, this dispute was not primarily musical in nature. Hammond and the editors' disagreement with McCall was ideological, and their sentiments were recapitulated in another letter, printed several days later on the entertainment page. After thanking the editors for their statement, the writer asserted that "McCall's bitter review played in[to] the hands of the fascist-minded critics who attempt to frighten the Negro artists away from any participation in affairs that are given for Loyalist Spain or for any other progressive cause." In other words, in writing his review, McCall should have taken into account the political value of such prominent performers, and submerged his personal judgement for the good of the cause. Incredibly, despite the bitterness of his review, McCall winds up seeming far more sympathetic than his editors and Hammond, for his opinion is at least his own, and not motivated by strategic concerns. Hammond's final contribution to the

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83. McCall, "Handy Concert For Milk Fund," *DW* 24 November 1938, 7.

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fracas was a note praising the editors' statement, and concluding with several kind words for McCall.[84]

Hammond's compliments for McCall's general acumen certainly may have been honestly felt, but it is also possible that his flattery was a blatant attempt to make nice with the critic who would be reviewing his own foray into the roots music spectacle a few weeks later. The *From Spirituals to Swing* concert, held 12 December 1938 at Carnegie Hall, was sponsored by *New Masses*, directed by Charles Friedman (of *Pins and Needles* fame), and produced and conceived by Hammond. In a *New Masses* essay published two weeks before the concert, Hammond wrote that the program would "attempt to be a survey of the very considerable contribution of the Negro to American music."[85] As such, *From Spirituals to Swing* offered a far more comprehensive version of Black America's musical heritage than the Handy concert had done.

The rationale for the selection of performers was explained in the program booklet, in an essay titled "The Music Nobody Knows," (see program on following page),[86] co-authored by Hammond and James Dugan. David Stowe has accurately summarized the message: "What linked these performers, imbued them with authenticity, was a negative quality." It was noted that they could not read music, had no formal training, rarely performed for whites, and were, by and large, "absurdly poor."[87] Just as McCall had

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84. "The W. C. Handy Birthday Concert [Editorial Statement and Hammond Review of McCall Review]," *DW* 2 December 1938, 7; John Sherman, "On the Handy Concert," *DW* 7 December 1938, 7; Hammond, "The Handy Concert," *DW* 10 December 1938, 7.

85. John Hammond, "Jim-Crow Blues," *NM* 29/12 (December 13, 1938): 27.

86. In addition to those performers listed on the program, Robert Johnson was also scheduled to appear, but the singer died the week before and was thus represented by two records. Hammond, "Jim-Crow Blues," 27. Program reproduced in "An Early Black-Music Concert," 192-93.

87. Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 61; "An Early Black-Music Concert: From Spirituals to Swing," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2/2 (Fall 1974): 195.

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The New Masses Presents

AN EVENING OF AMERICAN NEGRO MUSIC

"From Spirituals to Swing"

FRIDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 23, 1938

Carnegie Hall

Conceived and Produced by John Hammond; Directed by Charles Friedman

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Note: The following program is not in chronological order

Introduction

AFRICAN TRIBAL MUSIC: From scientific recordings made by the H. E. Tracy Expedition to the West Coast of Africa.

THEME. Count Basie and His Orchestra.

I. Spirituals and Holy Roller Hymns

MITCHELL'S CHRISTIAN SINGERS. *North Carolina.* William Brown, Julius Davis, Louis David, Sam Bryant.

SISTER THARPE. *Florida* (Courtesy Cotton Club) with guitar accompaniment.

II. Soft Swing

THE KANSAS CITY SIX. *New York City.* Eddie Durham (electric guitar), Freddie Green (guitar), Buck Clayton (trumpet), Lester Young (clarinet and tenor saxophone), Jo Jones (drums), Walter Page (bass).

III. Harmonica Playing

SANFORD TERRY. *Durham, North Carolina.* Washboard playing by artists to be announced at the concert.

IV. Blues

RUBY SMITH. *Norfolk, Virginia.* Accompanied on the piano by JAMES P. JOHNSON, *New York City.*

JOE TURNER. *Kansas City, Missouri.* Accompanied by PETE JOHNSON. *New York City.*

BIG BILL. *Chicago, Illinois.* Accompanied by himself on the guitar.

JAMES RUSHING. *Kansas City, Missouri.* Accompanied by the KANSAS CITY FIVE: Freddie Green (guitar), Buck Clayton (trumpet), Lester Young (clarinet and tenor saxophone), Jo Jones (drums), Walter Page (bass).

HELEN HUMES. *Louisville, Kentucky.* Accompanied by KANSAS CITY FIVE.

V. Boogie-Woogie Piano Playing

ALBERT AMMONS. *Chicago.* MEADE "LUX" LEWIS. *Chicago.* PETE JOHNSON. *Kansas City.* "A Cutting Session."

INTERMISSION

VI. Early New Orleans Jazz

SIDNEY BECHET and his NEW ORLEANS FEET WARMERS. Sidney Bechet (clarinet and soprano saxophone), Tommy Ladnier (trumpet), James P. Johnson (piano), Dan Minor (trombone), Jo Jones (drums).

VII. Swing

COUNT BASIE AND HIS ORCHESTRA. Count Basie (piano), Walter Page (bass), Freddie Green (guitar), Jo Jones (drums), Ed Lewis (first trumpet), Buck Clayton (second trumpet), Shad Collins (third trumpet), Harry Edison (fourth trumpet), Benny Morton (first trombone), Dickie Wells (second trombone), Dan Minor (third trombone), Earl Warren (first alto saxophone), Jack Washington (second alto sax and baritone), Lester Young (third tenor sax and clarinet), James Rushing and Helen Humes (vocalists). Arrangers: Eddie Durham, Count Basie, Albert Gibson, Buck Clayton, etc.

BASIE'S BLUE FIVE. Count Basie, Shad Collins, Walter Page, Jo Jones, Herschel Evans.

THE KANSAS CITY SIX. Eddie Durham, Freddie Green, Buck Clayton, Lester Young, Jo Jones, Walter Page.

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denigrated commercialized jazz, Hammond's selection of musicians was justified almost exclusively on the grounds of their obscurity and distance from white culture; in a way, it was not unlike the Lomaxes' decision to seek out folksongs in prisons.

This is not to say, however, that this roster of artists required such a justification; indeed, it is a bit shocking to look at this list in the light of Hammond's protests of its exoticism, for it contains some towering figures in twentieth-century American music. *From Spirituals to Swing* received a number of favorable reviews in both leftist and mainstream publications. In the *New Masses*, John Sebastian wrote that the concert "maintained an authenticity which served as a crushing indictment of commercial jazz," while Martin McCall asserted in the *Daily Worker* that the program "considerably enlarged the general knowledge ofNegro musical activity in this country."[88] This verdict was shared by two other reviewers whose approval attested to swing's growing cultural cachet. Howard Taubman informed the readers of the *New York Times* that "almost every one liked the music," and it was clear that he included himself in this group. Elliott Carter's review in *Modern Music* was also positive, but with some reservations; he thought the concert was "fascinating," and seemed to enjoy it. But he raised an important issue that neither Hammond nor McCall had mentioned regarding either historical concert: what did it mean to take swing and its ancestors out of context, so to speak, by presenting them in august Carnegie Hall? Such a change surely altered the music's reception, and therefore its meaning. Carter was not belittling the music as beneath Carnegie's standards; rather, he pointed out the paradox at the heart of such ventures.[89] If

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88. Sebastian, "From Spirituals to Swing," *NM* 30/2 (November 3, 1938): 28; McCall, "'From Spirituals to Swing' Major Event in Current Musical Season," *DW* 29 December 1938, 7.

89. Taubman, "Negro Music Given at Carnegie Hall," reprinted in "An Early Black-Music Concert: From Spirituals to Swing," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2/2 (Fall 1974): 207-08; Carter, "Once again Swing," *MM* 16/2 (January--February 1939): 99-100. To be sure, Carnegie Hall and other similar venues had hosted programs of African-American music since the late nineteenth century. What makes the setting of *From Spirituals to Swing* so noteworthy is the emphasis that its organizers placed on the performers' "authenticity", i.e., their status as outsiders in relation to the American music industry.

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Hammond wanted to introduce listeners to a vital, genuine music that was uncorrupted by the evils of the music business, presenting it on a formal program in the nation's most famous concert hall was a curious way of doing so. It could even be argued that such a setting undermined the mission of the concert, by forcing listeners to (perhaps unconsciously) judge the performers by cultivated music criteria.

Such difficulties, of course, are inherent in the presentation, in concert form (or printed or recorded form, for that matter), of music not originally intended for such venues. Hammond apparently felt that the ontological problems raised by programs like *From Spirituals to Swing* were far outweighed by the prospect of introducing audiences to this musical culture, an assessment with which it is difficult to quarrel. That this opinion was shared by many of his colleagues on the musical left was demonstrated by the reception of his own program, as well as by the imitators it spawned. In March 1939, for example, the Labor Club of American Labor Party presented a program of "Negro Music--Past and Present." Like *From Spirituals to Swing* this concert began with a brief performance of "African music and dance," then proceeded chronologically through genres including spirituals, blues (performed by Leadbelly), and the "boogie-woogie" stylings of pianists Albert Ammons (1907-49) and Meade Luxe Lewis (1905-64). Like *From Spirituals to Swing*, the Labor Club's concert attempted to inform audience members of the debt contemporary American popular music owed to traditional Black music.[90]

Race as Ideology

But while Hammond and his peers, including Carter, agreed that African-American music was valuable on its own terms and deserved to be evaluated according to criteria other than those used in judging cultivated music, this certainly did not mean that the two

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90. Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 212; Martin McCall, "Splendid Program of Negro Music--Past and Present," *DW* 2 March 1939, 7.

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musics had to be forever separated. Indeed, if their aim was the creation of a musical culture that reflected progressive political values, then it would make a good deal of sense for the composers of the left to effect a sort of racial integration within their music. One possible means of achieving this would be to weave themes borrowed directly from the African-American music into new scores. To this end, in January 1938 Lawrence Gellert received a $500 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to work on a "Negro Folk Opera." A lengthy follow-up article explained that the opera would draw on a new set of folk songs, which Gellert was then in the process of collecting. An interesting passage detailed Gellert's thinking on the "Negro Songs of Protest" category, showing that his thoughts on the subject of folk expression--like the thoughts of so many of his colleagues--had undergone a fundamental shift: "as Gellert discloses . . . even [the spiritual] is intrinsically a song of protest."[91] Like his peers, Gellert was now willing to overlook a song's lack of explicit rebelliousness, recognizing that overall context was much more indicative of its social role and political meaning.

However, such clear expressions of subversive politics remained desirable assets for leftist composers. Paul Bowles, for example, made the slave insurrectionist Denmark Vesey the subject of an opera that he composed in 1937. Portions of *Denmark Vesey* received concert performances in early 1938, first at a Composers' Forum-Laboratory and then at a *New Masses* benefit concert. On both occasions, Martin McCall reviewed the excerpts favorably, and his opinion was shared by Virgil Thomson. In his review of the Forum-Laboratory performance, Thomson commended Bowles, writing that his "melodies are suave, the declamation is clear, the act-structure solid and forceful." However, he also took the opportunity to repeat and amplify the same criticisms he had leveled against *Porgy* several years earlier, noting the inherent complications that ensued

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91. "Lawrence Gellert to Write Negro Opera," *DW* 1 January 1938, 7; Samuel Chavkin, "Folk Songs of the South," *DW* 17 January 1938, 7. I have been unable to find any record of Gellert's opera, which, if finished, was apparently never performed or published. For Gellert's earlier opinions of non-topical folksongs, see Ch. 2, p. 96.

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when a white composer tackled a black subject, particularly as regards the use of a black cast:

> The struggle of the American Negro to obtain *from* the American white man social freedom and economic independence is a very poignant part of every Negro's life and experience. If he is to tell that story in public, he must be expected (and allowed) to tell it from a Negro point of view and with the passionate prejudice of one who has suffered, not as a professional musician lending his special gifts of Negroidness as local color to the presentation of what is (however friendly) after all a white man's faraway and poetic point of view about it all.[92]

Thus, Gellert could incorporate all of the folk tunes he desired, and Bowles could travel to South Carolina to immerse himself in Gullah folk music, as McCall said he planned on doing (and as Gershwin had done, though that did not spare *Porgy* from some leftist vitriol), but no matter how sensitive their efforts may have been, it remained an open question as to whether they were actually best suited to speaking on such issues, particularly within an operatic context.

These concerns could most easily be alleviated if the composer drawing on African-American sources and themes was himself African-American. This came to pass in July 1938, when it was announced that *Democracity*, a tone poem by the African-American composer William Grant Still (1895-1978), had been selected as the official musical theme for the exhibit of the same name at the following summer's World's Fair, to be held

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92. Thomson, "Another Negroid Opera," *MM* 15/3 (March--April 1938): 183-84; McCall, "Denmark Vesey, Early Negro Leader, Subject of New Opera," *DW* 20 January 1938, 7; McCall, "Concert of Contemporary Music Proves Huge Success," 7. Although he neglected to mention *Four Saints in Three Acts* and its African-American cast, Thomson's point was in no way undermined, for, even if one were somehow to interpret Stein's libretto as a commentary on African-American life, this would ignore the fact that the casting decision was made several years after *Four Saints* was completed.

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in New York City. Still was lauded for the breadth of his musical accomplishments, which, in his own words, "range from songs for many Broadway shows, the radio and the movies, to ballets and larger works for symphonic orchestras."[93] Although Still was, of course, not the first composer to straddle these racial and hierarchical cultural divides, he was probably the first African-American composer to negotiate the boundaries so successfully, having both played in pit orchestra of the landmark African-American musical *Shuffle Along* and studied composition with Varèse.[94]

However, Still's prominence as a Black composer working in traditionally white idioms paled in comparison to that enjoyed by Black performers of white music, like Hayes and Anderson. And throughout the period, Robeson was the most acclaimed practitioner of racial integration through music. Although his acting career had taken some serious critical lumps by the late 1930s, Robeson remained a hugely popular and highly respected singer. He also continued his involvement in a variety of leftist cultural enterprises throughout this period, in both the United States and Europe. Robeson had returned to Moscow in late 1937 and early 1938, during which time he also traveled to London to speak to an Aid Spain rally at Albert Hall. In early 1938, Robeson embarked on a concert tour in Spain, performing along the front lines for Loyalist soldiers.[95]

Finally, Robeson maintained his advocacy of folk songs through both extensive concertizing and occasional recordings. A record released in June 1938 featured Robeson performing a selection from Gellert's "Negro Songs of Protest" collection. Robeson's programs remained exhibitions of folk song from across the globe, and his association with this body of music became ever closer; one admiring *Daily Worker* profile from May 1939 described his musical repertoire this way: "From the songs of

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93. "Negro Composer Wins World's Fair Honor," *SW* 31 July 1938, 12.

94. Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 331-32.

95. Lewis, "Paul Robeson," 222; Paul Robeson, "Paul Robeson Speaks for His People and All Humanity," *SW* 14 November 1937, 11.

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protest of Negro chain-gang workers to the plaintive music of the Hebrides, from the twinkling humor of the Creole to the battle-songs of the Chinese soldier, Paul is equally at home with all melodies and all languages."[96]

Grassroots

In all of Robeson's concertizing, though, and in all of the high-profile musical activities of the New York left mentioned thus far, one body of folksong was conspicuously absent: the Anglo-American folk music of the South and West. Not since the early years of the decade, when Aunt Molly first won over the Dreiser Committee, and the Red Song Book reproduced songs by her and Ella May Wiggins, had the left advocated the use of this music. To be sure, the neglect was not total: the Lomaxes had included many examples in *American Ballads and Folksongs*, Copland and Thomson had drawn on this tradition in several of their compositions, and the left had rediscovered Joe Hill and the Wobbly tradition. But in the two former cases the music was viewed either as a cultural artifact or a source of "local color," and in the latter case the music was explored only to the extent that it underlay radical lyrics. In none of these cases was the folk music of rural whites considered politically or aesthetically valuable in its own right, unlike that of both rural and urban African-Americans. This oversight is particularly surprising considering that several musical members of Aunt Molly's family had moved to New York in the interim, where they gave frequent performances both live and on the radio. However, as Henrietta Yurchenco notes, although Aunt Molly and her half-sister Sarah Ogan Gunning (as well has her half-brother Jim Garland) played a "crucial role . . . in the birth of an urban folk song movement," imparting to many leftist New Yorkers

96. Clare Jackson, "Meet the Robeson Family," *DW* 9 May 1939, 7; Robeson's record reviewed in Martin McCall, "Two Choruses in Debut," *DW* 21 June 1938, 7.

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both new songs and new ways of playing and singing them, their contributions received virtually no notice in either the leftist or the mainstream press.[97]

But late in the decade, the situation began to change; Ella May Wiggins was venerated alongside Joe Hill as a leftist martyr, and the songs of Appalachia, the Plains states, and the Far West attained a new level of prominence, joining African-American music in the progressive musical pantheon.[98] Forrest Mackay asserted in the *Daily Worker* that "from the time of the Spanish Conquest of the Southwest in the 16th Century to the present day, the popular ballad has been the most prominent art expression of the common folk," while Eric Lucas wrote in the *Progressive Weekly* that "American folk song is always alive with a boundless pride in the workers' labor."[99]

There were two main reasons for this shift: first, with racial unity the word of the day, the *Daily Worker* was eager to find examples of shared musical culture; and second, the real devastation of the Dust Bowl had finally achieved a critical mass of public interest in urban America. No single individual contributed more to the new awareness of the ecological catastrophe of the lower Plains states than John Steinbeck, whose *The Grapes of Wrath* was celebrated by many leftist critics as perhaps the greatest American novel yet written. In the book, and also in occasional essays on the same subject, Steinbeck illustrated that the refugees of the Dust Bowl were as deserving of sympathy as

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97. On Garland and Gunning in New York, see Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 110, 130-32; Henrietta Yurchenco, "Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia," *AM* 9/2 (Summer 1991): 210.

98. Lee Coller, "Portrait of a New Southerner," *DW* 11 May 1938, 7; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Joe Hill-Songbird of the Working Class, *SW* 14 November 1937: Magazine, 7, 9; Harrison George, "About Going West: But Mainly About the Old Time I. W. W.," *DW* 6 January 1938, 7; Margaret Larkin, "'We'll Never Let Our Union Die'," *DW* 14 September 1938, 7.

99. Forrest Mackay, "Ballads of the People's Front," *DW* 17 February 1938, 7; Eric Lucas, "America Sings," *Progressive Weekly* 4 December 1938: 3.

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the urban victims of economic hardship and African-Americans brutalized by Jim Crow.[100]

This new, enlarged canon of American folksong was commemorated in the *Daily Worker* throughout 1938 and 1939, as the paper alternately reproduced such songs, hailed the appearances of new collections, and noted the growth of the songs addressing contemporary topics. The Appalachian region was particularly well represented, with publications including a FWP re-issue of William Walker's 1835 *Southern Harmony Book* and George Korson's *The Miner Songs* and *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*.[101] The *Daily Worker* also continued to pay tribute to the revolutionary heritage of New England, reprinting, on 4 July 1938, verses on the battles of Lexington and Concord. But the clearest indication of the new conception of folksong that prevailed was the collection *Songs for America*, published by the Workers' Library in the spring of 1939. In presenting a combination of old leftist favorites, patriotic songs (the book opens with "The Star Spangled Banner"), folksongs from a variety of cultures, and new compositions, *Songs for America* (see appendix for Table of Contents) was a perfect expression of Popular Front aesthetics.[102] Not surprisingly, one of the book's co-editors was Earl Robinson.

Long an advocate of defining the folksong genre broadly, Robinson advanced his musical agenda during the late 1930s through a combination of composition and performance. He was much in demand as a choral director: in November 1937 he had been appointed director of the new I. W. O. (International Workers Order) Chorus; in

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100. Joseph Davis, "'The Grapes of Wrath' Is Great Proletarian Novel," *DW* 26 April 1939, 9; Mike Gold, "John Steinbeck Tells The Story of America In 'Grapes of Wrath'," *DW* 16 June 1939, 7; John Steinbeck, "'Okie'--a Word of Hate," *Progressive Weekly*, 17 April 1938: 2.

101. "Old Songbook Favorite Issue in New Edition," *DW* 3 June 1939, 7; Willliam Wolff, "The Songs, Dances and Ballads of Our America," *DW* 1 July 1939, 7; William Wolff, "Labor Collects Its Songs In Two New Anthologies," *DW* 16 August 1939.

102. "Songs of Men and Heroes," *DW* 4 July 1938, 7; Wolff, "The Songs, Dances and Ballads," 7.

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February 1938 he had led American People's Chorus at a *New Masses* benefit organized by Blitzstein and emceed by Welles; and at the Y. C. L. "Swing America" pageant of 1939, he conducted a youth chorus in the premiere of his song "Horace Greeley."[103] An article in the *Daily Worker* in May 1938 profiled the I. W. O. Chorus, which had performed at a number of leftist events in New York City in the preceding months and looked forward to its first full-length concert later that month. The group focused on "native ballads," and Robinson said that he hoped, through his work with the Chorus, "to build an organization that can do a good job of spreading the best of the art that comes from the American people."[104] Robinson viewed his composition in much the same way as his conducting. In an admiring profile in the *Daily Worker*, he said that his compositions were aimed at "bringing alive American folk songs and spreading and using them." Robinson's musical open-mindedness was expressed in his statement that labor songs should draw "more and more frequently [on] such American forms as jazz," and cited Blitzstein as among the earliest musicians to recognize that it was "impossible to write abstract music, any more."[105]

While Blitzstein may have been one of the first to reach this conclusion, it would not be inaccurate to say that Seeger was the first to articulate it coherently and (sometimes) systematically. Three years after his move to Washington, Seeger obtained an administrative position in the FMP, where he administered the relatively small folk music program. Seeger's musicological evolution into an advocate of folksong had stuck, and in

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103. "Earl Robinson to Direct IWO Chorus," *DW* 11 November 1937, 7; Gorham, "They'll Swing," 9.

104. Irene Tannenbaum, "Mass Folk Music Aim of Workers Order Chorus," *DW* 27 May 1938, 7; Martin McCall, "'New Singers' Present Popular and Folk Songs," *DW* 2 May 1939, 7. For the concert, they were joined in this mission by the veteran New Singers, whose presentation of "America in Song" included performances of American folksongs from a variety of sources, ranging from Revolutionary and Civil War songs to African-American folk songs of the South--a far cry from the days when the group was best known as a vehicle for the newest works of the Collective.

105. Anita Tilkin, "Singing His Song With the People," *DW* 27 October 1938, 7.

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early 1939 he crystallized the sentiments shared by Robinson and many others on the left in a seminal article, "Grass Roots for American Composers," published in *Modern Music*. Seeger insisted that the American composer must "make up his mind that his place in world music will depend upon finding his place in American music and in American life." This goal could only be accomplished when he "discover[s], for himself, his own peculiar American lineage. This is not easy. Books are of some little help. Phonographs . . . are much better." Further, the composer must "discover America . . . get away from cities, suburbs, summer colonies, large estates and the sweet solitude of little retreats where urban atmosphere, ignorance and prejudice cling ever so easily." Finally, Seeger expressed something that had been implicit in previous discussions of folk music on the left, and only occasionally touched upon in writing on jazz--which, incidentally, he now considered a perfectly valuable musical genre--"A folk art, or for that matter a popular or academic art, is primarily an idiom, only secondarily a repertory."[106] This point is quite significant; it implies that Seeger's "Grass Roots" does not refer only--or even primarily--to musical sources. He was not calling simply for more musical borrowing, but rather for a new American music that was, in some inexplicable way, an organic part of the culture.

Paul Rosenfeld responded in the magazine's next issue, suggesting that either approach was acceptable: "Let the professional American composer, if he inwardly is so impelled, go out and share the people's life. Or, if he is not inwardly impelled to do so, let him study the American folksong and visit rural communities and try to write for every organization which is willing to try out his work." His argument, which was more of a complement to Seeger's article than a refutation, was that Seeger's call for Grass Roots was, in essence, a call for music that was "true to [the composer's] own feeling." Rosenfeld's basic quarrel with Seeger was over the notion, advanced in the latter's "Grass Roots," that true American compositions would be more likely to emerge from musicians

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106. Charles Louis Seeger, "Grass Roots for American Composers," *MM* 16/3 (March--April 1939): 143-49.

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living in certain geographical areas or social situations. Because he did not share Seeger's belief in straight-line causal link between external (political and ideological) factors and musical products, Rosenfeld rejected the importance of settings. Although he did not make the connection in his response, Rosenfeld may have been thinking here of Charles Ives. Rosenfeld had been in the audience the previous November when Ives's *Concord Sonata* had received "to all appearances [its] first complete public performance," and Rosenfeld's review in *Modern Music*--in the issue prior to Seeger's "Grass Roots" essay--called it "possibly the most intense and sensitive musical experience achieved by an American."[107] Ives, of course, had never lived outside of New York or Connecticut, and could not really be said to have been familiar with most of America; moreover, by the time he composed the *Concord*, he had made millions of dollars as an insurance executive--hardly representative of most Americans. Yet Ives's music, which combines compositional techniques and melodic fragments of European classics with snippets of American folksong, marching-band tunes, and Protestant hymns, derives formal designs from both Lutheran chorales and cultivated compositions, and presents them all within the context of highly advanced modernist techniques, could not, in Rosenfeld's view, have been more genuinely American.

Roots Grow

That there was a variety of ways in which composers could "Americanize" their music was quite evident during the period in which Seeger and Rosenfeld engaged in their colloquy. For Douglas Moore (1893-1969), who was by this point one of the nation's best-established composers of cultivated music, it took the form of his one-act "folk opera" *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, based on the short story by Stephen Vincent Benet and with a libretto by the author. Benet's story mixes historical detail--namely, the

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107. Rosenfeld, "Variation On the Grass Roots Theme," *MM* 16/4 (May--June 1939): 214-19; Rosenfeld, "Ives's Concord Sonata," *MM* 16/2 (January--February 1939): 109.

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legendary oratorical powers of Daniel Webster--with the stuff of mythology, and its structure replicates that of the American folk tale. His libretto was supported by a score that alluded to American folk and vernacular idioms within a consonant framework.

Example 8.3: Douglas Moore, "Entrance of Webster and Song," (mm. 90-103)[108]

As we see in example 8.3, Moore's harmonic palette is conservative, although deployed in slightly unexpected ways (e.g., the song's turns to C-major within the context

108. *The Devil and Daniel Webster: Folk Opera in One Act* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1943), 51-52.

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of a tonic on E-flat). The rhythmic idiom is similarly simple—perhaps intentionally so, in order to depict the directness so central to Webster's character--which could be said for Webster's melody as a whole. Structurally--in terms of both music and text--the song is held together by Webster's repeated boast ("They know about Daniel Webster,") and little else. When the work had its premiere at the American Lyric Theatre in New York in May 1938, the *Daily Worker* called Moore's score "charming though perishable," a verdict with which it is difficult to disagree.[109]

Far more durable, because more idiosyncratic and innovative, were Copland's works in the "American" vein. Whereas Moore's musical sources, like his subject, largely hailed from New England Protestant origins, Copland drew primarily upon the folksongs of the American west. In Chicago in October 1938, the Ballet Caravan of Lincoln Kirstein presented a ballet called *Billy the Kid* with a score by Copland. Drawing on a rich collection of cowboy songs and other western sources, Copland fashioned a work that was the purest expression yet of the new style with which he had been experimenting since *El Salon Mexico*. Copland's fresh rhythmic sense, so perfectly suited to music for the dance, speaks clearly through his transparent textures and the simple harmonies of western folksongs. *Billy the Kid* was Copland's most successful work to date from a popular standpoint, and even Paul Rosenfeld, who found the new music less compelling than earlier works like *Vitebsk*, the Piano Concerto, and the Piano Variations, thought that *Billy the Kid* had much to recommend it, writing that the music "sings out its rhythmic variants of Western ballad-tunes without strain and with much gaiety." Years later, Copland explained the motivation behind his simple, "American" style, noting that it grew out of his ongoing frustration with the lack of rapport between composers and their public:

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109. Abel Gorham, "American Lyric Theatre Presents a 'Folk Opera'," *DW* 22 May 1939, 7.

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> The old "special" public of the modern-music concerts had fallen away, and the conventional concert public continued apathetic or indifferent to anything but the established classics. . . . Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that is was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.[110]

Virgil Thomson did not shrink from taking credit for Copland's popular new style, and explained its inception this way: "the social content of theater and films was moving away from complexity--any theater audience wants music that's accessible. Didactic modernism gets nowhere with them. It just doesn't communicate in the theater, whether union theater or Broadway capitalist theater or film for great chunks of the population."[111]

While it is rather difficult to figure out how this statement relates to *Four Saints*, which was among the first of Thomson's works to employ the folk-cultivated idiom, it was clearly relevant to his ballet *Filling Station*, which had its premiere in January 1938, and was later performed by Ballet Caravan on the same program as *The Devil and Daniel Webster* in May 1938. Anthony Tommasini notes that during this period Thomson was greatly influenced by his Trotskyite friend Sherry Mangan's belief in economic determinism, and although *Filling Station* is not overtly political, its subject matter is essentially social. Set at a filling station, it was almost a work of theatrical realism, providing audiences with a slice-of-life document of the cast of characters that might very well pass through such a place on any given day; political matters factor into events

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110. Rosenfeld, "Current Chronicle: Copland--Harris--Schuman," *Musical Quarterly* 25/3 (July, 1939): 374; Copland, *The New Music*, 160.

111. Copland and Perlis, 200.

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insofar as the station becomes the scene of an economic crime, a stick-up. Owen Burke, reviewing the ballet for *New Masses*, described it as "taken with the every-day adventures of such down-to-earth characters as the cocky and thoroughly human attendant, a couple of young and energetic, horse-playing truck drivers, a sympathetic comic strip of a Sunday-driving family, a cavalier of a gunman in an unfortunate and unsuccessful stick-up, and a bepolished and Gilbert-and-Sullivanish state trooper," and, like the reviewers for the *Daily Worker* and *Direction*, commended Thomson's vernacular-inflected score.[112] Although *Filling Station* was a fictional work, in its "realist" setting and in Thomson's musical style it hinted at the documentary form.

Documentary was, then as now, predominantly associated with the medium of film, and as we have seen, Thomson, through his collaborations with Pare Lorentz and Joris Ivens, had a hand in shaping the musical aspects of that genre. In early 1937, Thomson had renewed his association with Lorentz, and late that year, the fruits of their labor came before the American public. *The River*, like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* before it, addressed misuse of natural resources, criticizing (albeit in poetic fashion) the lack of a coherent public policy for the use of America's waterways. Also like *The Plow*, *The River* was a truly collaborative effort. Once again, Thomson and Lorentz worked closely, with music, text, and film coming together as artistic equals. This aspect of the project is apparent in the finished product; Robert L. Snyder has noted that "[o]ne of the outstanding qualities of [these] films . . . is the contrapuntal relationship between sound track and pictures."[113] *The River* received almost uniformly positive reviews. Thomson's contributions, which were very much in the vein of his *Plow* score, were commended by several reviewers. Otis Ferguson, reviewing the film in the *New*

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112. Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 304; Burke, "Ballet Caravan's 'Filling Station'," *NM* 26/11 (March 8, 1938): 30; Charak, "Trends Among the Minor Moderns," *Direction* 1/5 (May 1938): 23; Gorham, "American Lyric Theatre."

113. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz*, 184;

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Republic, wrote that the overall effect was "like the truth of facts set to music," further noting that "Thomson's actual score, thoughtful and indigenous as it is, forms only a constituent part of the total effect; [*sic*] which seems to have used the best of everything."[114]

Thomson was joined in the documentary-scoring field by several of his colleagues. In the spring of 1938, Earl Robinson and Alex North contributed a folk-based score to *People of the Cumberland*, a film that depicted labor conditions in the Deep South. One year later, Copland completed work on a score for *The City*, a film on urban planning that was shown at the 1939 World's Fair (discussed later this chapter).[115] Finally, Eisler once again teamed up with Joris Ivens, as the same group that had produced *Spanish Earth* provided the backing for a film about the Japanese invasion of China, called *The 400 Million*. Eisler's score, unlike all of the others mentioned, did not adapt folk music to a composed framework; the *Sunday Worker* reported that he was "proud . . . that his score contains no effort to imitate Chinese music. It includes, instead, several passages of real Chinese music recorded in Hankow," a concession that may have been inspired by similar compilation that Blitzstein and Thomson had undertaken for *Spanish Earth*. For Eisler remained an unapologetic advocate for composed mass songs, and although this concept was well out of vogue, it retained some adherents.[116]

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114. Otis Ferguson, "Old Man River," *The New Republic* 1197 (November 10, 1937): 18; for the left's reaction, see David Platt, "Story of the Mississippi," *DW* 7 February 1938, 7; James Dugan, "Filming the Story of America," *DW* 15 February 1938, 7. Of course, Thomson's music did change with his subject matter; he spent much time researching different musical depictions of water, ranging from Debussy to folksong, when preparing to write the score. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz*, 60-61.

115. David Platt, "Outstanding Labor Film," *DW* 8 June 1938, 7; "Aaron Copland Musical Score For 'The City'," *SW* 23 April 1939, 7.

116. Peter Sidney, "Film Epic of United China," *SW* 5 March 1939, 7; Peter Sidney, "The People of China Heroes Of Ives 'The 400,000,000'," *DW* 9 March 1939, 7; Alexander, *Film On the Left*, 190-94.

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Legacy

When Eisler returned to New York from Europe in early 1938, the American Music League feted him with another in a long line of tribute concerts. But the coverage of the event in the *Daily Worker* made it fairly clear that Eisler was now revered as a historical figure whose earlier innovations had laid the foundations for contemporary composers of mass music. When Blitzstein wrote in the *Sunday Worker* that "Hanns Eisler has written what seem to be the greatest mass songs of our time," the valedictory tone was unmistakable. Likewise, Martin McCall observed that the inclusion of several of Eisler's best-known mass songs on the concert program depicted Eisler "in the role of the 'first to bring music out of the concert hall' and the first to make it accessible to the 'man in the street'." Although McCall also noted the performance of several new cantatas by Eisler, in which the composer appeared as "writer, actually, for the concert hall," his highest praise was reserved for Eisler's earlier songs.[117]

Eisler, in a way, was a victim of his own success; his mass-songs were essential components of the radical music canon, available on recordings, and performed in Town Hall a recital by Mordecai Bauman. But that canon had grown tremendously in the previous years: Bauman's program located Eisler, along with Ives, as a bridge between earlier composers like Schubert, Wolf, and Mussorgsky and young Americans such as Blitzstein, Robinson, and Alex North. Likewise, in 1935 Eisler's songs had anchored Timely Recordings' first release of proletarian music; two years later, as a sign of the new trend on the left, Timely produced another political record featuring several of the same performers, but this time they were singing the songs of Joe Hill and other, anonymous union songwriters.[118] Eisler continued to project the same message he always had,

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117. Blitzstein, "American Composer Discusses Hanns Eisler and His Mass Songs," *SW* 27 February 1938, 12; McCall, "Welcome Concert for Eisler Proves Highly Successful Event," *DW* 15 March 1938, 9.

118. Martin McCall, "Mordecai Bauman, People's Singer," *DW* 17 March 1939, 7; Martin McCall, "Bauman at His Best in Concert at Town Hall," *DW* 22 March 1939, 7; Martin McCall, "Timely Recordings of Union Songs Serve Mass Singing," *DW* 7 January 1938, 7.

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informing readers and listeners of the ongoing "crisis in music." The terms in which he discussed that crisis, however, made it sound more like a personal crisis, perhaps the result from a sense of the growing irrelevancy of his own music:

> Most average concert audiences, composer[s] and critics know in fact nothing of such a crisis. The very speed however at which styles in serious music have been changing, the constant abandonment of innovations which had been hailed only a moment before, the very experimental character of the innovations and the simultaneous existence of completely heterogeneous styles show that in practice the crisis is real and effective even where it has not yet found its theoretical formulation.[119]

As always, Eisler remained true to his political and musical visions, unswayed by fashion. For a brief time, in the first half of the 1930s, his ideas coincided with those of the American left, and he was justly celebrated. Now he was out of step, and unwilling or unable to adjust to the new trends.

His message was particularly unfashionable because, according to the American leftist press, music was in anything but a crisis mode. To be sure, there were problems, arising primarily from the structure of the commercial music business, but at a grassroots level, music was thriving as never before. In addition, American composers were making an effort to connect with their audiences through the publication of articles and books. Elie Siegmeister's *Music and Society*, a lengthy pamphlet (or short book) published in late 1938, set forth his thoughts on what American society required of contemporary composers. Much of the work reads like a less didactic version of Seeger's early *Daily*

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119. Hanns Eisler, "Music Today as Viewed by Noted Refugee Composer," *DW* 24 August 1939, 7.

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Worker columns, and is primarily a discussion of the use of familiar music in commercial contexts, analyzing the anachronistic political interpretations that resulted. For instance, Siegmeister cited "the shameless perversion in present–day Germany of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, dedicated originally to a great liberator and democrat (the young Napoleon), performed today in honor of Adolf Hitler" as an instance where "ruling class control and utilization of music for its own narrow purposes has become blatant and unconcealed." Similarly, he decried the way that a popular Sunday night radio show used Beethoven's Ninth "as a 'come-on' for [the] vicious anti-labor attacks . . . of Henry Ford's and General Motors' Sunday night speech-makers." Such usage, he asserted, "obviously negates [the work's] own original purpose," and ran counter to Beethoven's own politics.[120]

Siegmeister also showed his awareness of the new trends in leftist music, and he expressed the Popular Front's compositional ideal as clearly as anyone:

> The composer of the people's movement and of the collective society will utilize all the skills and techniques he has inherited from the past to write not luxury music for the few, but music which shall be of, for and about the many. His is the task of breaking down the age–old division between learned or art music on the one hand, and folk or popular music on the other. In doing this he will be helping to break down the class division which these musical divisions have symbolized and helped to perpetuate. It will also be his task to unite learning and popularity into an art which must become a broad instrument of social enlightenment and change.[121]

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120. Elie Siegmeister, *Music and Society* (New York: Critics Group Press, 1938), 16, 17.

121. Siegmeister, *Music and Society*, 58-59.

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As Wallingford Riegger pointed out in the *New Masses*, a "certain specious reasoning occasionally crops up" in Siegmeister's book, and although this did not prevent the *Daily Worker* or *Direction* from showering the book with praise, it drew some criticism from Riegger and caused *Modern Music*'s critic to complain, with some justification, that the book relied on Marxist theory to the exclusion of musical insight.[122]

The career of *Music and Society* perfectly encapsulated the trajectory of Marxist music criticism during the mid-1930s. The book originated in Siegmeister's *Modern Monthly* essays of 1934, but by the time they had been updated and bound, their dour Marxism was *passé*, replaced by the optimism of the Popular Front. For example, Sergei Prokofiev--whose recent score for Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* had cemented his reputation as a giant in leftist composition--painted a fairly rosy picture of the American musical scene in the *Daily Worker*, noting the "great desire in the United States to create its own music," and suggesting that the increasing focus on folk and vernacular sources was bringing this goal within reach.[123] The Communist Party's emphasis on native traditions was further demonstrated by the theatrical pageant *A Song About America*, scored by Herbert Haufrecht, that the New York State Communist party produced and performed at Madison Square Garden in January 1939. It is impossible to know exactly how the song sounded--it has never been recorded or published, and the descriptions in the *Daily Worker* are quite vague--but considering Haufrecht's interest in folk music, it seems safe to assume that there folk elements were incorporated into the spectacle that

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122. S. W., "Music Criticism Of the Highest Order," *DW* 10 November 1938, 7; Muriel Reger, "Music," *Direction* 1/9 (November-December 1938): 27; Riegger, "A Marxist On Music," *NM* 29/8 (November 15, 1938): 24-26; Kurt List, "The Social Approach," *MM* 16/4 (May--June 1939): 285-87.

123. Sergei Prokofieff [*sic*], "Sergei Prokofieff Listens to Musical America," *DW* 13 July 1939, 7; Martin McCall, "Musical Score for 'Alexander Nevsky' Is Highlight in Field of Dramatic Film Art," *DW* 10 April 1939, 7.

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celebrated great radical events in American history, such as the Boston Tea Party, the emancipation of the slaves, and, predictably, the steel strike of 1919.[124]

And what could more clearly indicate the strength of proletarian music than the redemption of Dmitri Shostakovich? In early 1938, two years after *Pravda* heaped opprobrium on the composer's music, his Fifth Symphony premiered to great acclaim, and he was once again hailed as the greatest star in the Soviet musical firmament. The following year, the *Daily Worker* published a two-part essay by Shostakovich on proletarian composition, one prescriptive and the other descriptive. In the former, Shostakovich celebrated "the abundance of important new works" heard at a recent Soviet festival, while in the latter he recommended that young composers "study thoroughly our Russian and European classical legacy." If the cause of proletarian composition was able to so fully rehabilitate a dangerous stray like Shostakovich, there could be little doubt of the movement's fundamental strength.[125]

Which Side Are You On?

Just as the Soviet government's renewed support for Shostakovich was an indispensable asset for his career, the WPA arts projects had continued to provide myriad musicians with opportunities to practice their crafts in a way that affected their communities; it was a governmental embodiment of his "Grass Roots" idea. However, the political winds were shifting in America. In early 1938, the Senate debated and ultimately rejected the deliciously named Coffee–Pepper Bill (after its Congressional

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124. Abel Gorham, "A Song About America," *DW* 19 January 1939, 7; John Cambridge, "'Song of America' Stirring Spectacle of U. S. Traditions," *DW* 25 January 1939, 7.

125. Grigori Schneerson, "Shostakovitch Rehabilitated," *MM* 15/3 (March--April 1938): 174-76; Sender Garlin, "Shostakovich Writes a New Symphony," *DW* 3 March 1938, 7; Shostakovitch, "Notes in a Composer's Handbook," *DW* 10 July 1939, 7; Shostakovich, "Know Your Classics, Shostakovitch Advises All Students of Music," *DW* 11 July 1939, 7. There is no indication as to whether the essay was originally written for the *Worker* or simply reproduced there.

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sponsors), which would have established a permanent government Bureau of Fine Arts. The bill drew opposition, not only from the expected bloc of rural senators who felt (perhaps rightly) that such a Bureau would disproportionately fund urban centers, but also such high-culture figures as Walter Damrosch, who felt that the Bureau would sully the sanctity of the arts with the grime of politics. The bill's supporters argued, to no avail, that it was a vital step towards the perpetuation of a democratic American culture.[126]

That summer, Representative J. Parnell Thomas, Republican of New Jersey, announced that the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), chaired by Texas Democrat Martin Dies, was launching an investigation into the FTP and FWP. That the charges of widespread subversive activity were groundless was clear to those who observed the hearings closely, particularly Hallie Flanagan's testimony before the committee. Flanagan's appearance included a famous exchange with Alabama Representative Joe Starnes, who noted that an article by Flanagan had included a suspicious quote from "Marlowe" and asked her whether Marlowe was a Communist. In response, Flanagan informed the panel that Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) "was the greatest dramatist in the period immediately preceding Shakespeare."[127] Nevertheless, Dies found several incriminating (if less than credible) witnesses, and when the Republicans gained eighty-one seats in the House and eight Senators in the November elections, the outlook for Federal One, long the conservatives' *bête noire*, became grim indeed. In March 1939, the House approved an investigation of the entire WPA, stipulating that future funding of federal work relief was contingent on the outcome of the inquiry. But Federal One had been in trouble before--only the previous spring, the *Daily*

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126. McKinzie, *The New Deal*, 151–55; John Cambridge, "Discussion on the Coffee Bill Poses the Question of Democracy vs. Dictatorship on the Federal Theatre Project," *SW* 27 February 1938, 12; John Harding, "Democracy and a National Art," *DW* 28 March 1938, 7.

127. Quoted in Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 220-21.

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Worker had fearfully predicted that congressional conservatives were on the verge of "completely annihilat[ing]" the project--and workers remained hopeful that their positions would be saved before the project's funding expired at the end of June. Their hopes were surely bolstered by a flood of positive press and favorable statistics. The *Daily Worker* tallied this support in late March, noting that such respected critics as Brooks Atkinson, Gilbert Seldes, and Burns Mantle had called the FTP "the First American peoples' theatre," and reporting that, in a little more than three years, FTP productions had been seen by an estimated 30,000,000 Americans, sixty percent of whom had never before attended the theater.[128]

Meanwhile, the projects pushed ahead with their innovative programming. In keeping with the FTP tradition of updating of theatrical classics, and with that project's blurring of color lines, the most acclaimed production of early 1939 was a swing version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. Originating in Chicago, the "Swing *Mikado*" was well-reviewed, receiving accolades from many critics, and even winning the praise of Duke Ellington, who called the show "the finest thing the Federal Theatre has done . . . a triumph of originality."[129] It was also extremely popular, so much so that it quickly spawned imitators: the same month that the FTP *Mikado* arrived in New York, a commercial theatre on Broadway began offering a "Hot *Mikado*." Although slightly less well-received, it too was a critical and audience success, helped in no small part by the presence of the dancer Bill Robinson (1878-1949). Critics were most impressed by the third *Mikado* of the season. Called the *Red Mikado*, the sketch was one of the additions

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128. S. C. Herbert, "Federal Arts Projects in Danger of Liquidation," *DW* 17 May 1938, 7; "30,000,000 Spectators Saw WPA Shows," *DW* 21 March 1939, 7.

129. John Cambridge, "The Federal Theatre's 'Mikado' Will Be A Welcome Event for New York," *SW* 5 February 1939, 12; John Gutman, "In the Theatre," *MM* 16/3 (March--April 1939): 188-90; John Cambridge, "Swing 'Mikado' Is New Federal Theatre Triumph," *DW* 3 March 1939, 7; Duke Ellington, "Duke Ellington Lauds the WPA 'Swing Mikado'," *SW* 9 April 1939, 7.

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to *Pins and Needles 1939*, and it lampooned the very trend of competing *Mikados* of which it was a part.[130]

That spring the FTP also opened its own theatrical revue, *Sing For Your Supper*. The show, which had been in rehearsals for roughly eighteen months and came in seriously over-budget, was frequently cited by FTP opponents as an example of FTP waste. When it finally did open, *Sing for Your Supper* was a modest critical and audience success, but it did not generate nearly as much support outside of Washington as it did opprobrium inside it. Not even the show's concluding number, a lengthy, patriotic production number by Earl Robinson and John LaTouche called *Ballad of Uncle Sam*, could convince conservative Congressmen that *Sing for Your Supper* was anything other than a colossal boondoggle; Representative Clifton A. Woodrum of Virginia stated that "if there is a line or passage in [*Sing for Your Supper*] that contributes to cultural or educational benefit or uplift of America, I will eat the whole manuscript."[131]

Unfortunately for the FTP, this non-WPA bit of governmental drama had very real consequences, as it was not meant as mere entertainment. In mid-June, a bill was reported to the House floor that would completely eliminate the FTP and discontinue federal administration of Federal One's other agencies, which would be allowed only to continue under local sponsorship. During the remainder of the month, the supporters of the FTP engaged in a furious lobbying effort; Tallulah Bankhead testified on the Senate floor in the project's favor, Hallie Flanagan sent Representative Woodrum, the FTP's chief opponent, an open letter that was also forwarded to newspapers across the country,

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130. John Cambridge, "The Hot Mikado' Is Fast And Polished Performance," *DW* 27 March 1939, 7; Emery, "Thanks to Gilbert and Sullivan," 7.

131. Woodrum quoted in Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 98; "Curtain Rises on 'Sing For Your Supper' Monday," *SW* 23 April 1939, 7; John Cambridge, "Enthusiastic Performance Of 'Sing for Your Supper'," *DW* 26 April 1939, 9; "You Meet Uncle Sam in 'Sing for Your Supper'," *DW* 8 May 1939, 7.

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where it appeared alongside critics' pleas that the project not be cut.[132] It was all to no avail, however: the "compromise" budget approved on 30 June eliminated the FTP entirely, providing three months' severance pay for employees, and allowing the other departments of Federal One to remain more or less intact.

Throughout the debate, and even after its resolution, leftist critics drew parallels between the termination of federally-funded arts programs in the United States and the cultural repression of fascist states and native-grown proto-fascist groups. However, as Picasso's *Guernica*, which first arrived in New York that May, so horrifically illustrated, cultural expression was far from the most serious casualty of international fascism.[133] After completing his conquest of Czechoslovakia in March, Hitler had looked farther north, demanding that Poland cede Danzig and substantial parts of what was then western Poland to Nazi Germany.

On 20 August, the headline of the *Sunday Worker* read, "Europe Draws Munich Lessons; People Demand Halt to Hitler." This was a line in the sand, a gauntlet thrown down, an unambiguous call to resistance against the Nazi *Anschluss*. Three days later, the *Daily Worker*'s front page was dominated by an editorial praising the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, a non-aggression treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union announced one day earlier. The next day Earl Browder weighed in, painting the pact as a

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132. S. C. Herbert, "No Curtain for WPA Theatre!," *DW* 12 June 1939, 7; "Hallie Flanagan, Director of WPA Theatre Sends Open Letter to Congressman Woodrum," *SW* 18 June 1939, 7; Max Weber, "Stop the Project Wreckers!," *DW* 22 June 1939, 7; John Cambridge, "Fight to Save Federal Theatre Remains the Most Interesting and Vital News in Stage World," *SW* 25 June 1939, 7.

133. "Fascist Regime Has Destroyed The Italy of Age-Old Culture," *DW* 5 April 1939, 9; Mike Gold, "The Republicans, Like Hitler, Seek to Destroy a People's Culture," *DW* 22 June 1939, 7; WPA Theatre Dishonor Roll Made Public," *DW* 5 August 1939, 7; "Fascist Groups to Open War Against Modern Art," *DW* 22 August 1939, 7; "Picasso's 'Guernica' To Be Shown To Aid Refugees," *DW* 24 April 1939, 7; "Picasso's 'Guernica' on View for Refugee Fund," *DW* 10 May 1939, 7.

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"weapon for peace," a purely defensive measure to which any other signatories would be more than welcome.[134]

The reaction of American radicals was understandably confused; in early August, 300 leftist intellectuals, including Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961), James Thurber (1894-1961), Clifford Odets, and S. J. Perelman (1904-79), had signed a statement vehemently denying the existence of Soviet totalitarianism. Now, however, the Soviet Union was allied with the most frighteningly totalitarian state in the world. Many leftists, including Paul Robeson, continued to toe the party line by supporting the non-aggression pact.[135] But the feeling was far from unanimous. Paul Bowles captured the bewilderment of the moment, the mixed feelings of betrayal and surety, in his autobiography, recalling a lunch he had with fellow composers the day the pact was announced:

> Being all either CP members or sympathizers, they were a very gloomy lot: the news of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact had just broken that morning. Said one of them bitterly: 'Well, where do we go from here?' I replied that we went straight ahead as though nothing had happened, because we would see it later as a Soviet ploy to crush the Nazis, and I argued that to falter in one's convictions at this point merely because of a detail like the pact would be proof that one's faith in the Soviet government had never been profound. Some of them agreed, hesitantly; the others continued to look sad.[136]

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134. "The Soviet Union and Non-Aggression," *DW* 23 August 1939, 1, 4; Harry Gannes, "Non-Aggression Pact Weapon for Peace, Open to All Nations, Says Browder," *DW* 24 August 1939, 1.

135. Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 315; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 231–32.

136. Bowles, *Without Stopping*, 216.

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The setting for Bowles's lunch, interestingly enough, was a great symbolic event of internationalism: the World's Fair, held in Flushing, New York.

When the Fair opened in April 1939, its theme sounded like a marriage between Popular Front, One-World style politics and techno-industrial commercial industrialism. It was intended, according to its organizers,

> to be everyman's fair--to show the way toward the improvement of all the factors contributing to human welfare. . . . the Fair will show the most promising developments of production, service and social factors of the present day in relation to their bearing on the life of the great mass of people. The plain American citizen will be able to see here what he could attain for his community and himself by intelligent coordinated effort and will be made to realize the interdependence of every contributing form of life and work.[137]

The Fair thus presented a sort of utopian vision, in which far-flung and disparate communities could be brought together by webs of technology and commerce.

From the outset, technology played a starring role: Roosevelt greeted those present at the Fair's opening ceremonies on 30 April 1939 via television, in the process becoming the first sitting president to appear on that fledgling medium. At the same time, machines were presented as instruments to be used, not simply as scientific curiosities. Most often, technological innovations were celebrated for the ways in which they enhanced commerce. As the historian Warren I. Susman writes, the Fair "promoted as a major purpose the availability of consumer goods and services. It was a Fair that from the very start viewed the people not only as observers but also as potential consumers of the

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137. *"Building the World of Tomorrow": Official Guide Book of the New York World's Fair, 1939* (New York: Exposition, 1939), 36.

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products it displayed. Indeed . . . the most popular exhibits tended to be those of producers of consumer goods." Susman cites a Gallup poll from May 1939 which "reported that Fair visitors like the following exhibits best: General Motors, the Theme Center (Democracity), American Telephone and Telegraph, Ford Motor Company, the Soviet Pavilion, the British Pavilion, and the Railroad exhibit." Conversely, visitors evinced "little interest in either the theme or the Fair's meticulous plan. The carefully articulated zones, the focal exhibits, the imaginative and symbolic use of color . . . seemed to make no impression that in any way shaped consciousness in terms of what the Fair planners had seen as their message."[138]

Of course, the Fair's American presenters did offer many interesting cultural exhibits. Kentucky's folkways were represented by a group, including Aunt Molly's relatives Jim Garland and Sarah Ogan Gunning, that sang and danced in authentic clothing. Aaron Copland, meanwhile, scored *The City*, a documentary conceived by Pare Lorentz in collaboration with Lewis Mumford, Ralph Steiner, and Willard Van Dyke that, in Howard Pollack's words, "propagandiz[es] a progressive, humanistic, and essentially socialist approach to city planning."[139] But a more representative film from the Fair would seem to be the animated feature *Pete Roleum and his Cousins*, which was financed by the oil industry and scored by that noted proletarian Hanns Eisler.

The Fair was thus primarily a celebration of modernity, both technological and commercial, its international trappings notwithstanding. In fact, Susman writes, "[t]he Fair itself and its planners and administrators projected an optimism and an enthusiasm that often bewildered and even angered visitors from Europe, who were witnesses to the coming of a world war." This apparent optimism, however, was more show than

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138. Susman, "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society" in *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair 1939/40*, curated by Helen A. Harrison (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 19, 21, 22; Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 126.

139. Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 338; Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 164.

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actuality: Susman also notes a 1939 Gallup poll in which Americans rated neutrality in foreign affairs more important than unemployment, although there was still much economic insecurity. But among those Americans most concerned about employment--respondents to a survey of Americans currently receiving government relief--the reason most frequently cited as "the cause of their unemployment (23 percent) was the increased use of machines."[140]

On 1 September, one week after the announcement of the Molotov-von Ribbentrop pact, the mechanized Nazi *blitzkrieg* rolled into Poland; as the German Panzers eviscerated Polish cavalry and the shrieking whine of the Luftwaffe was accompanied by the sounds of bombs and machine guns, international fascist aggression and the forces of modernity seemed to announce their own alliance. What little optimism remained among the denizens of New York was rapidly fading, as the weight of the decade-old Depression was augmented by the likelihood of a new global conflagration.

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140. Susman, "The People's Fair," 225, 218.

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Chapter 9: End of Insurgency
September 1939--December 1941

On 22 June 1940, less than one year after the Nazi *blitzkrieg* had rolled into Poland, France surrendered to Germany, completing Hitler's lightning conquest of much of the European continent. During the intervening months, Germany had occupied Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium in rapid succession. Meanwhile, the Russian invasion of Finland, begun in November, suggested that Stalin's idea of a "defensive" posture was rather different than that of the United States. The last significant pocket of resistance in Europe came under attack on 10 July, as the Battle of Britain commenced. Winston Churchill, elected Prime Minister just two months earlier, called upon the United States for aid. But despite the dire straits situation faced by its British ally, the U. S. was not inclined to become embroiled in the conflict, if involvement could be avoided.

This did not mean, of course, that the American government was ignoring the global crisis. As early as October 1938, President Roosevelt had begun funding a military buildup, and in November 1939 he had altered the Neutrality Act in order to permit arms sales to belligerent states, provided they made their purchases on a cash-and-carry basis. In May 1940, with conditions in Europe deteriorating at an astonishing pace, he twice asked Congress to increase military spending. Meanwhile, Congress was itself busily continuing its efforts at rooting out domestic enemies. The 1940 Relief Act required all WPA workers to sign an affadavit stating that they were not aliens, Bund members, or Communists. Even more sweeping was the Smith Act, which was passed in June 1940 and criminalized "conspir[ing] to teach" the overthrow of the American government. This was an expansion of earlier laws that barred only the actual "teaching" itself, and the breadth and ambiguity of the term "conspiring" gave the government a potent weapon in prosecuting alleged subversives. Not surprisingly, during 1940 the nation was host to

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many incidents of legalized persecution--primarily in terms of employment and academic censorship, but also including more general harassment--of Communists.[1]

All of this activity played out against the backdrop of an election year of historic importance; for the first time in the nation's history, a President was seeking a third term in office. Roosevelt's Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie (1892-1944), was a utility executive and corporate attorney from Indiana. Willkie had several issues on which to run: the continued depression, the disastrous court-packing scheme, and Roosevelt's seeming desire to involve the United States in World War II were chief among them. By the autumn of 1940, the United States had clearly come down on the side of Great Britain and the Allied powers against the Axis of Germany, Italy, and Japan; in July, Roosevelt had imposed an embargo on sales of aviation gasoline, premium steel, and scrap iron, to Japan. At the beginning of September, Roosevelt announced the Lend-Lease Act, which allowed the United States to lend military supplies to Britain with the understanding that the loans would be compensated for in the future. A little more than one month later, the United States instituted the first peace-time military draft in its history. Nevertheless, Roosevelt continued to insist that he had every intention of avoiding involvement in the war, and while Willkie knew that this was almost certainly not true, he refused to call the President a liar.

This decision showed great strength of character on Willkie's part, for his own staunch isolationism was far more representative of the public mindset than Roosevelt's more open mind towards intervention. Much of the American public remained strongly opposed to intervention, and even to the military build-up, feeling that, while preparedness was desirable, militarization was potentially a self-fulfilling prophecy: even if involvement could be avoided, the significant resources being committed to arming America, in both the public and private sectors, created a sense of momentum

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1. Penkower, *Federal Writers' Project*, 225; Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 400-01.

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towards intervention that may have been unwarranted by political realities. Particularly opposed to American involvement was the CPUSA. Still stinging over the blatant war profiteering that had permeated World War I, American Communists were also forced, by the Soviet-German alliance, to oppose American entry into the war as tantamount to an assault on the Soviet Union. This belief was to some extent exacerbated by America's earlier refusal to be drawn into the Spanish Civil War, a decision that could easily be construed as a reflection of hostility towards the besieged Popular Front government.

As the Communist press's brief romance with Roosevelt soured, he was regularly tarred as a feckless warmonger. Throughout March and April of 1940, the *Daily Worker* serialized Dalton Trumbo's antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, which portrayed the horrific costs of the last great war, and also illustrated that those costs were borne by the foot soldiers who had the least at stake in the war itself. This pacifistic viewpoint would seem to be inherently at odds with that same newspaper's unquestioning support of the Soviet Union's unprovoked invasion of Finland, but the magical logic of the Communist Party managed to transform that Soviet act of aggression into one of altruism, describing it as a war of liberation on behalf of the Finnish people.[2]

Such rationalizations contributed to the cracks that were beginning to show in the facade of the Popular Front. Others on the left, particularly American Jews and Socialists, who were both wary of Stalin's government and alarmed by reports of the Nazi concentration camps, were less certain that the United States should remain on the sidelines. These rifts--and others--were reflected in the results of the presidential election. Roosevelt again won re-election, but his margin was not nearly as commanding as it had been four years earlier. Although by November American unemployment was at its lowest level in a decade--a change due in no small part to the military buildup--he

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2. In fact, the American Artists' Congress justified the Soviet invasion of Finland by calling the Finnish regime "quasi-fascist." The group refused to support a Finnish relief committee, a decision that led many prominent members to resign. Rothschild, "Artists' Organizations," 215-16.

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lost ten states. The geopolitical shift that had been so radically expressed in the 1936 election continued to develop, as the Democratic Party's gains in the nation's urban and industrial areas were somewhat offset by increasing losses in the agrarian, isolationist midwest, once solidly Democratic territory.

The election of 1940 was one of two major events that year that reflected the changing dynamic of American public opinion *vis-a-vis* international affairs. Fittingly enough, the other was the World's Fair, which re-opened in 1940 in a dramatically altered form. Whereas in 1939 the Fair was a *paean* to internationalism and interdependence, the 1940 version was to be, in its new director's words, a "super country fair." The 1940 Fair featured an exhibition of "American Art Today," and Warren I. Susman observes that the Fair's organizers "did away with any talk about the lessons of interdependence; even the World of Tomorrow tended to disappear under the new banner, 'For Peace and Freedom.' Internationalism was played down, and the emphasis was distinctly American. The Fair's 1940 poster featured a rosy-cheeked, middle-aged, middle-American . . . with a caption that read 'Makes you proud of your country.'"[3]

In his discussion of the Fair, Susman observes that the organizers, by insisting that they had created a "People's Fair," were participating in a ritual of national self-definition that was prevalent throughout America in the late 1930s. Following a path paved by Frank Capra, John Ford, Carl Sandburg, and the W. P. A., among others, the Fair identified the United States with the mythical "People," to the glory of both entities. Susman posits that the notion of "The People" possessed such power during this period because of "its ability to suggest that a basic unity underpinned the whole social and cultural structure of America."[4] And although the businessmen-organizers of the New York World's Fair certainly did not intend to identify their brainchild with communism in

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3. Susman, "The People's Fair," 26; on "American Art Today," see Gavert, "The WPA Federal Art Project," 263-66.

4. Susman, "The People's Fair," 18.

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any form, their appropriation of "The People" was highly suggestive of the Popular Front rhetoric of the previous few years. The type of monolithic cultural unity that the idea of "The People" implied was right in line with the CPUSA's calls for racial justice, protests against anti-immigrant discrimination, and celebration of an America that achieved oneness through diversity.

Singing America

Even before the announcement of the Popular Front policy, such a message had been central to Paul Robeson. In his concert programs as well as in his speeches and writings, Robeson espoused the idea that a society's ability to tolerate racial and ethnic difference was a sign of social strength and moral health. The importance of this concept was clearly illustrated by his consistent portrayals of the Soviet Union as a land without prejudice, in marked contrast to the nation of his birth. Nevertheless, by the fall of 1939, extenuating circumstances, in the form of an impending major war, caused Robeson to move his family back to the United States, ending years of self-imposed exile.

The initial impetus for his return, as announced in the *Daily Worker*, was his upcoming stint in a stage version of the John Henry legend, with Robeson playing the title role. He arrived in New York in October, as rehearsals began for the musical play's December premiere. As always, Robeson was vocal on the great issues of the day; he termed World War II an "imperialist war in which the Negro people have nothing to gain no matter which side wins," he praised the Soviet Union and defended its invasion of Finland, and he reiterated that he was not a member of the Communist Party, but rather an independent progressive thinker.[5] Despite his protestations, however, he remained the

5. "Robeson Due in America Soon," *DW* 20 September 1939, 7; Ben Davis, Jr., "The Negro People Have Nothing to Gain From the War'--Robeson," *DW* 26 October 1939, 7; "Robeson, Famous Singer, Lauds USSR In Finnish Situation, Hits Sheean," *DW* 12 December 1939, 7.

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darling of the leftist press, which covered his every political pronouncement as if it issued from a head of state.

But of course Robeson's influence was, at least initially, a product of his popularity as a singer. His music-making had long been infused with leftist politics, manifested in his verbal interjections, creative programming of international folksongs and cultivated music, and the political auspices under which he often performed. In November 1939, while *John Henry* was still in rehearsal, Robeson was asked to perform a relatively new song on Norman Corwin's CBS radio show "The Pursuit of Happiness." The broadcast, scheduled for 5 November, was to feature Earl Robinson and John LaTouche's *Ballad of Uncle Sam*, the finale from the ill-fated *Sing for Your Supper*. In the intervening months, they had re-titled the song in true Popular Front style; it was now called *Ballad for Americans*, and Robeson's performance was eagerly anticipated in the *Daily Worker*, which predicted that the broadcast would "open up an entirely new concept of American music with its freshness of spirit."[6]

The *Worker*'s optimism was immediately and spectacularly confirmed, as *Ballad* became a popular sensation. The studio audience in attendance at the performance greeted *Ballad* with what the *Daily Worker* called "a tumultuous ovation," operators at the CBS office reported that the lines were quickly jammed with calls from appreciative home listeners, and producer Norman Corwin described a veritable avalanche of favorable mail, including a letter in which William Saroyan wrote that the broadcast "revealed what radio can and should be."[7] Reaction was so overwhelmingly positive that Robeson gave a repeat broadcast performance of the song on CBS on New Year's Eve, and in late January 1940 the *Daily Worker* reported that a recording of Robeson singing *Ballad* was due out in short order on Victor. That July, the *Daily Worker* noted that

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6. "Robeson Sings Robinson Ballad on Radio Tomorrow," *DW* 14 November 1939, 7.

7. "Paul Robeson Broadcast Brings Cheers From Vast Radio Public," *DW* 20 November 1939, 7; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 236-8.

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Robeson had contracted to perform *Ballad* in the MGM film *Babes on Broadway*. Perhaps most amazingly, in the first year after the initial broadcast of *Ballad for Americans*, at a time when popular music was consumed primarily in recorded form, 20,000 copies of sheet music for the song were sold.[8]

Robinson's musical idiom was a perfect match for the faux-folk texts he set. Paul Bowles' recollection of a conversation with lyricist John LaTouche nicely captures the perfect popular/populist synthesis that was *Ballad for Americans*:

> Touche [John Latouche] had achieved great notoriety with his song "A Ballad for Americans." He had asked me to write the music for his long lyric, and I had been embarrassed by the subject matter; there were too many concessions to popular taste. Touche then went to Earl Robinson, the Communist Party's unofficial composer, who set it in just the right idiom for it to be immensely popular. Touche used to twit me about my refusal. "Wouldn't you like to have written 'A Ballad for Americans'? I came to you and asked you, you son of a bitch, and you wouldn't." I pointed out to him that my music would have had no popular success. This did not please him either, for to him it implied that the music had a preponderant part in the song's creation.[9]

Although Bowles is surely correct in according the music a "preponderant part" in both the song's creation and its popular success, it is also true that Robinson's score is almost entirely forgettable. There is no primary tune to speak of, but rather a constant

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8. Eric Munx, "'Ballad' Sung By Robeson to Be Recorded," *DW* 30 January 1940, 7; Charles Glenn, "Robeson to Sing 'Ballad' in New Film," *DW* 24 July 1940, 7; Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 96.

9. Bowles, *Without Stopping*, 222.

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succession of breathless narration and bland, "folklike" melody, culminating in a series of overblown, melodramatic cadences. But if the piece is relatively undistinguished, it is also unobjectionable, and its sentiments, however hackneyed, were laudable. Thus, *Ballad for Americans* was a perfect expression of the prevailing, Popular Front-inspired ideal of American composition.

The song was immediately embraced by performers and audiences on the New York left. Within five months of the original CBS broadcast, the *Daily Worker* had reported

Example 9.1: Earl Robinson, *Ballad for Americans* mm. 1-25[10]

10. Music by Earl Robinson, words by John Latouche. Copyright © 1939 (Renewed) by Music Sales Corporation and Sony ATV. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

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performances of *Ballad for Americans* in a variety of settings and by a diverse array of performers: baritone Michael Loring sang *Ballad* at the inaugural concert of the Theatre Arts Committee's Music Division at the 92nd Street Y; Lawrence Tibbet performed the song on NBC radio's Ford Hour; and an unnamed performer serenaded the members of the Harlem-Washington Heights Workers Alliance.[11] Starting in June 1940, the *Daily Worker* offered a recording of *Ballad* by Charles Welch and the American Singers to readers who mailed in the paper's "'Ballad' certificates" along with fifty cents. The song's appeal transcended the left, as attested by its broad commercial success. In fact, it was the featured song at the 1940 Republican National Convention. Although the former finale from *Sing for Your Supper* was thus deemed to be of cultural value, there is no record of Representative Woodrum keeping his promise from the previous year and eating the manuscript as part of the Convention's activities.[12]

For all of its many incarnations, however, *Ballad* remained most closely associated with Robeson. In June 1940, at a Lewisohn Stadium concert dedicated to democracy that was broadcast on WNYC and also featured Katherine Garrison Chapin performing the *premiere* of William Grant Still's *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, Robeson kicked off a national singing tour with his performance of several spirituals and, for the first time in a public concert, *Ballad for Americans*.[13] His popularity buoyed by *Ballad*'s phenomenal triumph, Robeson had a spectacularly successful tour, highlighted by an August performance in Chicago's Grant Park that drew a crowd estimated by the *Chicago Defender* at approximately 165,000. At the beginning of October, Robeson gave his first

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11. "Whitman Cantata, Ballad for Americans, at TAC Concert," *DW* 28 November 1939, 7; Eric Munx, "Lawrence Tibbet and 'Ballad for Americans'," *DW* 25 March 1940, 7; "Music Notes," *DW* 1 February 1940, 7.

12. Advertisement, "The Daily Worker Now Presents *Ballad for Americans*," *DW* 11 June 1940, 5; Barnouw, *The Golden Web*,121.

13. "Robeson Sings 'Ballad' At Stadium, June 24," *DW* 29 May 1940, 7; "Paul Robeson in 'Ballad' From Stadium, WNYC, 8:45," *DW* 24 June 1940, 7; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 240.

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full recital in New York in more than five years. Robeson and theremin virtuoso Clara Rockmore (1911-98) treated a packed Carnegie Hall to a program that combined songs by Mussorgsky and instrumental works of Bach and Ravel with international folksongs, African-American spirituals, and, of course, *Ballad for Americans*.[14]

Throughout this period, whether singing *Ballad* or other repertoire, Robeson maintained his vocal support for various leftist causes. At the beginning of September he sang *Ballad* for an audience including Richard Wright, Carl Sandburg, Franz Boas, Theodore Dreiser, and approximately 20,000 others at a Chicago Stadium event celebrating the founding of the American Peace Mobilization. Two weeks later, Robeson, Wright, and Langston Hughes were among the guests of honor at the Harlem launching of the Negro Playwrights Company. That same week, he introduced a broadcast on New York's WQXR of songs recorded by a battalion of international soldiers fighting for Loyalist Spain. Robeson told the audience that upon first hearing the records he was moved to write that "[t]hese songs of the Spanish struggle deeply reflect the democratic spirit. That Spain, like Joe Hill, 'never died.'"[15] Robeson's dedicated service earned him the adulation of the American left, as reflected in the lengthy, adoring profiles that ran in the *Daily Worker* late in 1940. In the figure of Robeson, as in the *Ballad*, the Popular Front seemed to reach its purest expression, and to achieve its greatest success. In the words of the *Daily Worker*'s Hugh Riddell, who published a history of the *Ballad* on 4 July 1940, "it must be something when Trade Unions, Pursuit

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14. "Robeson 'Recaptures' Chicago," *DW* 6 August 1940, 7; "Paul Robeson In Concert at Carnegie Hall," *DW* 29 September 1940, 7; "Robeson Sings Tonight In Carnegie Hall," *SW* 6 October 1940, 7; "3,500 Cheer Robeson in Carnegie Recital," *DW* 8 October 1940, 7.

15. "'Ballad for Americans' Sung by Robeson at Chicago Peace Parley," *DW* 2 September 1940, 4; Howe and Coser, *America Communist Party*, 394-95;Ben Davis, Jr., "A New Negro Theatre Is Born," *SW* 15 September 1940, 7; "Spain Lives in Recorded Songs, Robeson Tells Radio Audience," *DW* 20 September 1940, 7.

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of Happiness Radio Programs, General Motors and the Republican Convention can embrace [a song] and claim it by inference and approbation as theirs."[16]

As we might expect, *Ballad*'s success also proved a boon for the career of its composer, Earl Robinson. At the time of Robeson's seminal performance, Robinson was primarily known for two things: his activities as a chorus director and as the composer of the song "Joe Hill." As a *Daily Worker* profile from September 1939 noted, the two were connected by Robinson's love of American folk traditions. Since the song's composition three years earlier, Robinson had been more active as a performer and organizer than as a composer. The American People's Chorus, which Robinson directed, was the foremost vehicle for his folksong advocacy. Although Robinson had helped to found the Chorus several years earlier, the group came to prominence in the fall of 1939. On 22 October 1939, they performed a program of international folksongs in celebration of International Workers' Order day at the World's Fair Hall of Peace. Their big break came two weeks later, when they supported Robeson's broadcast premiere of *Ballad*, and during the following months, they were seen at major leftist events at Carnegie Hall and Mecca Temple, while also continuing to perform at union meetings and other smaller venues.[17]

In early 1940, Robinson's group was joined in its celebration of the American musical tradition by a new chorus founded by his colleague Elie Siegmeister. Siegmeister's enthusiasm for this tradition pre-dated Robinson's arrival in New York, and as the American Ballad Singers' inaugural concert program showed, Siegmeister displayed an interest that seems to have been more historical or scholarly than Robinson's. The ambitious first program, performed at Town Hall in February 1940,

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16. John Pittman, "Robeson, Man of His People," *DW* 25 November 1940, 7; Eugene Gordon, "Paul Robeson Draws His Strength From the People," *SW* 29 December 1940, 4; Hugh J. Riddell, "In the True Spirit of the '4th'," *DW* 4 July 1940, 7.

17. Hugh J. Riddell, "Modern Ballads Come to Life," *DW* 27 September 1939, 7; Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 74; "Music Notes," *DW* 18 December 1939, 7; "Songs of, for, by the People," *DW* 27 March 1940, 7.

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offered an overview of "America in Song, 1640-1940," and contained a wide array of music including songs of William Billings, Revolutionary and Civil War songs, African-American spirituals, cowboy songs, and several contemporary compositions by Herbert Haufrecht, among other items. The concert also featured harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick and cellist Janos Scholz performing a sonata by the colonial era composer Raynor Taylor.[18] But despite the differences in the emphases of the Chorus and the Singers, both groups shared a similar vision of the relevance of the nation's musical heritage to its Popular Front present.

The continuing flood of published folksong collections, and the attention accorded them in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, indicated the widespread acceptance of this idea. In a review of two collections of folksongs from Michigan and Virginia, the *Daily Worker*'s William Wolff argued that such volumes were "valuable, not only because they remind us of our rich heritage in music and poetry, but also because they are the living records of the people." Likewise Robinson's *oeuvre* was a testament to the continuity of America's musical heritage. In early 1940, when *Ballad for Americans* was at the height of its popularity, Timely Records released a record of Robinson and the American People's Chorus performing a mixed program of traditional songs--"Grey Goose" and "John Henry" among them--and Robinson originals including "Joe Hill," "Abraham Lincoln," and "Horace Greeley."[19] What each of these last three songs shared with *Ballad* was a deeply felt concern for American traditions; their lyrics, with the exception of Hayes' "Joe Hill," have the clumsy, earnest, didacticism of a civics lesson, at once edifying and accessible. But whereas "Joe Hill," for one, has all of the qualities of the best folksongs--it is at once brief, simple, and memorable, and supremely flexible in

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18. "Program of Native Songs At Town Hall," *DW* 20 January 1940, 7; "Singing the Songs of the Working People," *SW* 28 January 1940, 7; Martin McCall, "American Ballad Singers and Young Composer Heard in Excellent Programs," *DW* 22 February 1940, 7.

19. Wolff, "Folk Song Collections Record Living History," *DW* 12 April 1940, 7; Martin McCall, "Robinson: Composer Of Music That Will Last," *SW* 4 February 1940, 7.

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terms of performance forces and instrumentation--*Ballad* brings the harmonic idiom and the casual diction into the context of a full-blown cantata, ten minutes long and with full orchestra and chorus.

The song's credibility, likely assisted by its classical elements, helped Robinson win a Guggenheim Fellowship, during the tenure of which he intended to complete work on an opera based on Sandburg's *The People, Yes*. In his autobiography, Robinson called the work a "people's opera, using the widest possible variety of homegrown American musical forms--minstrel, vaudeville, musical comedy and revue, folk songs and dances, county fair magician acts and patent medicine salesmen, chain gang and work songs, Arkansas Traveler and cowboy ballads, hi-de-ho choruses, you name it, all fused into an epic with folk heroes such as John Henry, Paul Bunyan, Abe Lincoln, and Johnny Appleseed."[20] Robinson had contemplated the work for some time, but found it very difficult to bring to fruition; a planned broadcast of excerpts in May 1940 had to be postponed because the work was not ready. Robinson spent his Fellowship summer in Seattle, devoting his time exclusively to composition, with some limited success: one year later, a half-hour of the opera was performed on CBS, but still Robinson was not finished.[21] In November 1941, Blitzstein hosted a Robinson evening at Town Hall to celebrate the impending completion of *The People, Yes*. Unfortunately, that completion never came.

Other composers, however, continued to provide working models for the composition of distinctly American songs. One of these was Herbert Haufrecht, the former Collective member who had assisted Seeger in his folksong-related activities in the Resettlement Adminstration. That Haufrecht's folk-inflected songs were chosen by

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20. Robinson and Gordon, ***Ballad of an American***, 107-08.

21. "Earl Robinson To Offer New Sandburg Opus," *DW* 22 April 1940, 7; "New Robinson Score on Radio Sunday at 2," *DW* 18 May 1940, 7; "Farewell Concert In Seattle for Earl Robinson," *DW* 26 August 1940, 7.

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Siegmeister as the only contemporary works on the American Ballad Singers' inaugural program gives some indication of the esteem in which Haufrecht was held by his leftist colleagues. In September 1939, two months before the broadcast premiere of *Ballad for Americans*, Haufrecht had seen the premiere of his own folk-cantata, *From the Hills*, at a WPA Composers' Forum-Laboratory. While Robinson's *Ballad* presented a musically sanitized, lyrically aloof version of Americana, Haufrecht drew, both musically and textually, on his experiences living in one Resettlement Administration community in West Virginia. Rather than attempting to capture all of America in a song, Haufrecht opted for specificity, offering what the *Daily Worker* termed his "reactions to the lives of hillbilly children."[22] Unfortunately, the work was never published or recorded, so we cannot know exactly how these reactions found their musical expression.

But we do know how the songs of another, more significant, model composer sounded. Charles Ives had stopped composing approximately two decades earlier, but in 1940 his works were starting to receive public performances. Paul Rosenfeld's praise for his *Concord Sonata* was noted in the previous chapter, and in October 1940, when Mordecai Bauman programmed several of Ives's songs at Town Hall, the *Daily Worker* gave the event ample publicity. Although reviewer Stanley Hiller ultimately concluded that Ives's songs "stray too far from the mainstream of American thought to exert any definite influence," many young composers found Ives's highly personal form of musical Americanism most inspiring.[23]

Chief among these admirers was Siegmeister, who cited Ives's "Holidays" Symphony and "Charlie Rutlage," along with *Porgy and Bess* and Copland's *Billy the Kid*, as examples of "serious works by very different composers, selected at random,

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22. "Cantata Based On Songs of Mountaineers," *DW* 17 September 1939, 7.

23. "Bauman Sings At Town Hall; To Honor Ives," *SW* 13 October 1940, 7; "Charles Ives Honored In Town Hall Concert," *SW* 20 October 1940, 7; Hiller, "Warm Response to Songs of Charles Ives at Town Hall," *DW* 22 October 1940, 7.

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which have this in common, that they are *genuinely American* [emphasis added]." Siegmeister's list is indeed diverse, and his willingness to embrace Gershwin's *Porgy* (and his Concerto in F, as well) is particularly striking when compared with the disdain that many of his leftist colleagues felt for Gershwin's cultivated works. As one of Tin Pan Alley's most successful composers, Gershwin would forever be associated with musical commercialism. Indeed, although Siegmeister believed that the growth of the radio and phonograph had been in many ways beneficial to America's musical culture, putting "the American masses . . . on the road to the broadest most democratic musical culture the world has yet known," his optimism was atypical.[24] More characteristic of the leftist critics, particularly those who wrote on folk music, was William Wolff's warning that "the stereotyped products of Tin Pan Alley and the radio are swiftly eradicating the last remaining manifestations of a genuine people's culture."[25] For all of Siegmeister and Robinson's attempts to widen the left's definition of authentic folk music--to include both rural and urban songs, and the music of all Americans, native-born or immigrants--the more narrowly-based cult of the pastoral, rural folk remained strong on the left.

Americanism Onstage

At the same time, however, the more urban and commercial musical theater also retained its strong hold on the left. For example, in the spring of 1940 the *Daily Worker* gave a positive review of the *Wholesale Mikado*, a satire produced by and starring members of the New York local of the United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees. The show benefited the union, and had nothing to say on the international issues that dominated party politics, although its producers also loaned the cast and several songs to aid Spanish refugees. Nevertheless, the *Daily Worker* praised it as a "gusty, strong, and

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24. Siegmeister, "The Future of American Music," *DW* 13 October 1939, 7.

25. Wolff, "Use Traditional Tunes For New Union Songs," *DW* 16 November 1939, 7.

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healthy show."[26] In fact, the paper even sang the praises of the *Swing Mikado*, which, following the demise of the Federal Theatre Project, was being produced under private sponsorship in San Francisco, with no apparent ideological connection whatsoever.[27]

In contrast, the revue *Meet the People* was very much a political musical. *Meet the People* originated in Hollywood and was a loosely organized revue featuring songs by a number of composers, most notably Jay Gorney, earlier responsible for "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" The *Daily Worker* called the show "a thrilling lesson in American history," and the descriptions of the musical--especially the song "Bill of Rights"--evoke the popular history and soft civics education that characterized *Ballad for Americans*. When *Meet the People* migrated to Broadway in late 1940, after more than a year of performances throughout the country, the *Daily Worker* termed the show "a revue thoroughly democratic in procedure."[28] To be sure, this may seem like damnation with faint praise; it is hard not to be skeptical of a rave review of a piece of musical theater that makes no mention of the work's musical quality. But as with *Ballad*, the musical aspects of *Meet the People* were likely secondary reasons for its appeal, which was largely rooted in its feel-good Americanism. At any rate, the show was fairly successful: by February 1941, it had been performed more than 500 times around the country and seen, according to the *Daily Worker*, by at least half a million viewers.[29]

The politically-inflected music revue form exemplified by *Meet the People* continued to yield new shows throughout 1940. That October, the leftist New Theatre

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26. Ralph Warner, "'The Mikado' Joins the Union," *DW* 10 July 1940, 7; "Union 'Mikado' To Aid Spain Refugees," *DW* 20 July 1940, 7.

27. "'Swing Mikado'--Also Hit Under Private Sponsorship," *DW* 9 September 1939, 7.

28. "Mighty American Song On the Bill of Rights," *DW* 7 October 1940, 7; "'Meet the People,' a Challenge to Broadway," *DW* 20 January 1941, 7.

29. Sylvia Taylor, "'Meet the People', Musical Hit, Celebrates 500th Performance," *DW* 25 February 1941, 7. The claim that 500,000 people had seen the show, a figure that would have required an average audience of 1,000, is highly dubious.

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League introduced *Inside America*, which the *Daily Worker* wrote was "the inheritor of the best that 'Pins and Needles' had to offer, for it is a hard-hitting 'living newspaper revue,' with forthright and pertinent comment on . . . every aspect and slant of the social scene." Meanwhile, the Cabaret TAC remained active, offering a new revue in October 1940, with proceeds intended "to enlist the arts for Emergency Peace Mobilization and peace."[30]

But despite all of the competition, *Pins and Needles* remained the gold standard for topical musical revues. In late 1939, Harold Rome and his collaborators offered audiences a third edition. *New Pins and Needles*, which retained the *Red Mikado* and other favorite sketches from its two predecessors, nevertheless met with a hostile reception from the *Daily Worker*. Much of the animosity centered on the revised, post-non-aggression pact version of the "Five Little Angels of Peace" sketch. The *Worker*'s critic complained that a "sour note was struck . . . when Stalin appears in the lineup with Chamberlain, Mussolini, a militarist Japanese, and Hitler," although such a grouping would seem fairly sensible in light of both the treaty and the Soviet incursion into Finland.[31] As he had done all along, Rome showed his independence from party-line politics, but his deviation from the pro-Soviet doctrine was written off by the *Worker's* Carl Harris as evidence of "the war bleat of [ILGWU leader David] Dubinsky, who has gone to the front for his Wall Street masters demanding an immediate declaration of war," despite the fact that the new version was, on the whole, anti-interventionist.[32] Tellingly, neither reviewer commented on Rome's music, dwelling entirely on perceived slights toward the Soviet Union.

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30. "Inside America,' New Musical, Scores War," *DW* 18 October 1940, 7; "Cabaret TAC Opens Season With New Show," *DW* 4 October 1940, 7.

31. "ILGWU Revue In New Edition," *DW* 5 September 1939, 7; N. C., "Somebody Has Given the Revised 'Pins' the Needles," *DW* 30 November 1939, 7.

32. Carl Harris, "'New Pins and Needles' A Retreat from 1938," *DW* 10 January 1941, 7.

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On the evidence of the newly added "It's Better with a Union Man (or Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl)," which told of a lecherous non-union man's attempted seduction of the innocent garment worker of the title, it seems that Rome's newest additions may not have merited much discussion (see example 9.2). Although the tune is reasonably catchy, it is certainly not memorable; the harmonies are standard-issue Tin Pan Alley, and the melody is equally hackneyed. All of this would be more forgivable, however, if the lyrics had displayed the sharp wit that characterized so many of the earlier *Pins and Needles*. Unfortunately, the rhymes are pedestrian, and though the concept behind the song has comic potential, Rome does little to develop the idea of unionists' amatory superiority. Audiences seem to have agreed that the new material was not up to Rome's standards, and declining revenue led Rome and the producers to scrap plans for a prospective *Pins and Needles 1940*.[33] Finally, in late May, *Pins and Needles* closed its doors on Broadway. The production had run for 1,108 performances, the most in Broadway history to that point. And the show itself had not yet ended, for touring companies continued to play until May 1941.

The 1940-41 season also illustrated the maturity of the leftist musical theatre, as new and continuing shows were augmented by two revivals of the seminal work in the field, Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*. In October 1940, the American Youth Theatre (formerly the Flatbush Arts Theatre) opened its fall season with a production of *Cradle* sponsored by the College of the City of New York, and the next month brought a version presented by the Drama Society of the City College of New York. The *Daily Worker*'s critic wrote that the "Drama Soc's" production indicated "that time had not dulled [*Cradle*'s] edge, and, in fact, had sharpened it."[34] The *Daily Worker* also reported that

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33. Harry Goldman and Theresa Goldman, "Pins and Needles," 364.

34. "Flatbush Arts Theatre Opens Its Third Season With 'Cradle Will Rock'," *DW* 21 October 1940, 7; "City College Presents 'Cradle Will Rock' Tonight," *DW* 29 November 1940, 7; D. M., "Time Sharpens 'Cradle Will Rock' Message," *DW* 4 December 1940, 7.

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Blitzstein's *No for An Answer*, on which he had been working for several years--and excerpts of which had been featured on several programs, including a December 1939

Example 9.2: Harold Rome, "It's Better with a Union Man" (chorus)[35]

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"Stars for Spain" event[36]-- was finally complete. Throughout its composition, Blitzstein had been distracted by several side projects. Late 1939 and early 1940 had been taken up with the scoring of *Valley Town*, a Willard Van Dyke documentary about life in a steel company town in Pennsylvania. The movie, produced under the auspices of New York University's Education Film Institute, was initially so scathingly anti-corporate that after viewing an early version GM president Alfred P. Sloan promptly decided to withdraw funding from the Institute. Van Dyke responded by re-editing the film, softening its harsh tone. But Blitzstein remained committed to the same strongly pro-labor messages that had animated *Cradle*, and after finishing work on *Valley Town*, he returned to the boldly political *No For An Answer*. The premiere, scheduled for January 1941, was eagerly anticipated in the left press.[37]

The critics for the *Daily Worker* were not disappointed. Ralph Warner, reviewing the premiere performance, called *No For An Answer* "America of today set to words and music . . . an achievement which will long be remembered in theatre history."[38] Although Warner was in some respects wrong--*No For An Answer* has by no means entered the American musical or theatrical canons--he was correct in his judgements of Blitzstein's score, which he called "bright with gems of choral and individual excellence." As in *Cradle*, Blitzstein offered witty, biting parodies of popular song styles. Further, as Warner noted, the numbers that employ large choruses have great power. But perhaps the clearest evidence of a musical maturation since *Cradle* can be seen in the more lyrical moments of *No For An Answer*. Warner remarked upon the greater dramatic depth and subtlety of *No*'s characters, and much of this was effected on a musical level. For example, "Secret Singing," an Act I duet, shows one of the show's major characters

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36. "Blitzstein Presents New Theme Song at 'Stars for Spain'," *DW* 7 December 1939, 7.

37. "Premiere of 'No For An Answer' Jan. 5," *SW* 8 December 1940, 7.

38. Warner, "'No For An Answer' A True People's Opera," *DW* 7 January 1941, 7.

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momentarily stepping outside of his role of political provocateur in order to wax lyrical with his lover (see example 9.3).

Paul's simple, wistful melody seems a clear precursor to the arioso style of Bernstein's musical theater, and Clara's attempts to return him to planet earth make the scene at once more humorous, more political, and dramatically more effective. Equally impressive are the naturalness of Blitzstein's libretto and the fluency of his text-setting. Aaron Copland later wrote of one scene in which Blitzstein " has one of the little guys, in this case a panhandler, sing a song in accents so true as to make us feel that no one has ever before even attempted the problem of finding a voice for all those American regular fellows that seem so much at home everywhere except on the operatic stage."[39]

There is a richness to *No For An Answer* that marks it as an entirely different kind of work from *Cradle*. Blitzstein's primary model no longer seems to be Brechtian epic theater; too much attention is paid to the characters *qua* characters, rather than merely as political symbols. In effect, *No For An Answer* represents a middle ground between traditional narrative opera and epic theater, developing psychologically compelling characters but always with an eye to politics. As Warner wrote in another evaluation of *No For An Answer*--in which he noted, with some satisfaction, the warm praise that Brooks Atkinson and Virgil Thomson had bestowed on the drama in the *New York Times* and the *Herald-Tribune*, respectively--*No For An Answer* is remarkable and appealing for its mixture of dramatic modes, "its joy, its satire, its rich overlay of genuine humanness."[40]

To be sure, leftist politics are never very far offstage in *No For An Answer*, and the great difficulties Blitzstein faced in attempting to mount a production of the opera demonstrated just how far interest in his brand of theatrical radicalism had deteriorated in

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39. Copland, *The New Music*, 142.

40. Ralph Warner, "Marc Blitzstein's Achievement," *SW* 19 January 1941, 7.

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Example 9.3: Marc Blitzstein, "Secret Singing"[41]

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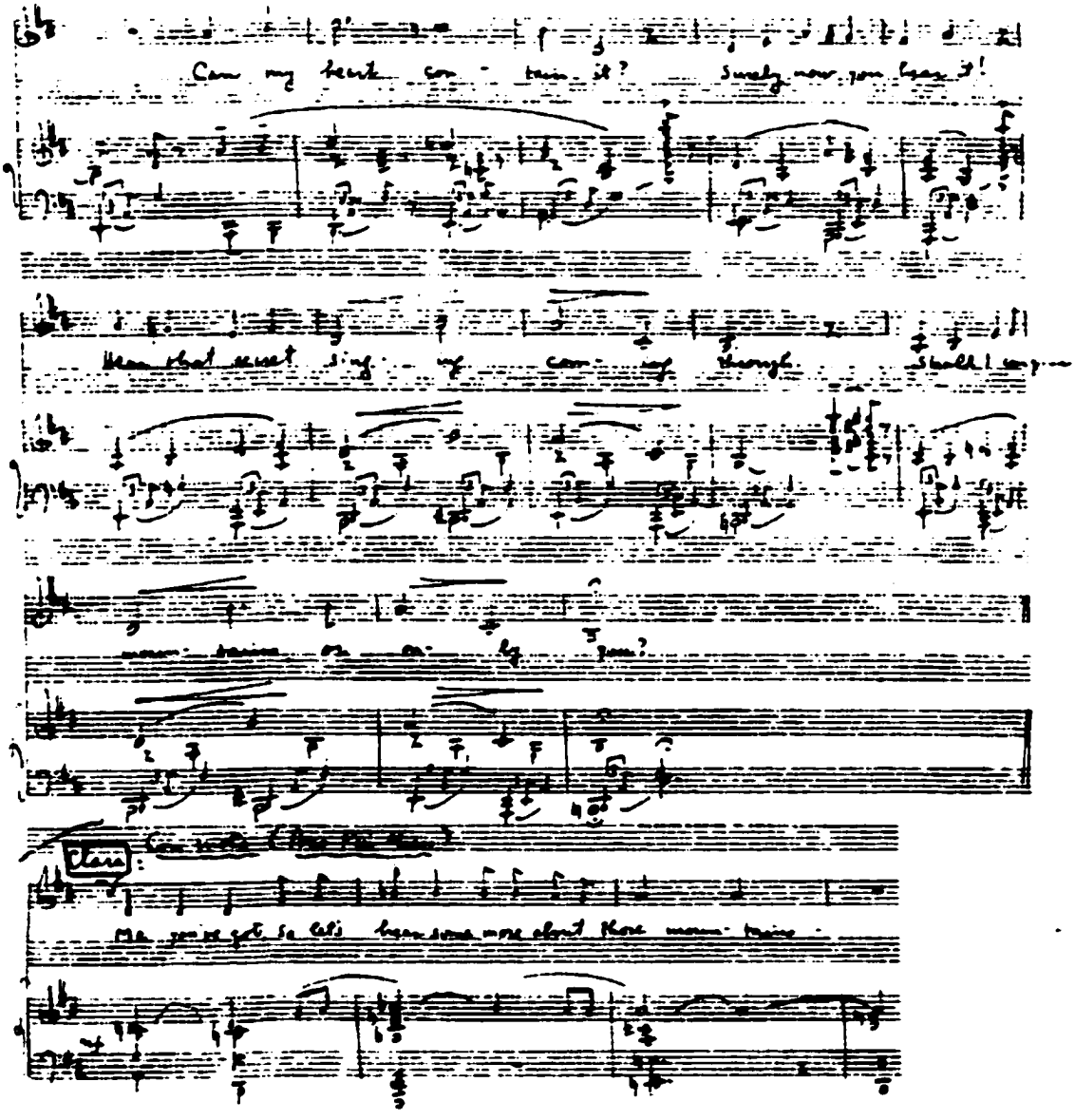
Example 9.3 (cont'd): "Secret Singing"



the space of less than two years. Unable to convince any major sponsors to back a production of *No For An Answer*, Blitzstein and his colleagues worked hard to raise sufficient funding for a bare-bones preview production at the Mecca Temple. Performances were scheduled for the first three Sundays of the year, in the hopes of attracting sufficient funding for a full-blown production. Prior to the second

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performance, New York City License Commissioner Paul Moss announced his plans to prohibit the remaining Mecca Temple productions on the grounds that the venue was not properly licensed for such theatrical events. In response, Blitzstein's supporters, who viewed Moss's ruling as simply a legalistic pretext for ideologically motivated censorship, urged Mayor La Guardia to overrule his commissioner.[42] The Mayor obliged by granting a temporary license, and the final two performances went ahead before full houses, likely an unintended consequence of the free publicity provided by Moss's ruling.

During the next few months, Blitzstein and No For An Answer, Inc., armed with testimonials to the work's quality from Copland, Robeson, and others, attempted to raise the necessary funds; they were assisted in their efforts by various amateur groups and a steady stream of laudatory columns in the *Daily Worker*. By mid-March, Alfred Evans reported that the group had raised $6,000 of the $17,000 required to stage a two-week run on Broadway that April.[43] The fund-raising drive was ultimately unsuccessful, and plans for a production were put off until the fall season. But despite this setback, Blitzstein and company pressed on. That spring, RCA released an original cast recording of selections from *No For An Answer*, which thus became the second work of American musical theater--and the second by Blitzstein--to be so honored. And in July, Blitzstein traveled to Hollywood to search for possible sponsors for a planned October run at the Al Jolson Theater.[44] The production never materialized, however, and *No For An Answer*, most of which remains unpublished to this day, was not mounted again until 1960. Whereas

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42. "Leaders of Theatre World Protest Ban on 'No For An Answer': Show Goes on Tonight," *SW* 12 January 1941, 7.

43. "Youth Theatre Sings to Aid 'No for an Answer," *DW* 22 March 1941, 7; Charles Glenn, "His Work Is Our Work and His Song Our Song," *DW* 24 March 1941, 7; Charles Glenn, "The Common Man Is The Angel of This Show," *DW* 9 June 1941, 7; Evans, "Two Operas--Problem In Musical Finance," *SW* 16 March 1941, 7.

44. "Postpone 'No For an Answer' Until October," *DW* 7 May 1941, 7; Charles Glenn, "Hollywood Meets Blitzstein," *DW* 5 July 1941, 7.

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Cradle's initial production could be viewed as a high point of the artistic radicalism of the Depression, *No For An Answer* looks, in hindsight, like the clearest indication that that brief period of popular and critical acceptance had ended.

Hooray for Hollywood!/Boo Hollywood!

One particularly instructive aspect of the *No For An Answer* story is Blitzstein's appeal to Hollywood for support. Although the New York arts scene remained a center of political progressivism, by late 1938 the *Daily Worker* was able to assert, with some truth, that "Hollywood Has Become the West-Coast Center of Progressivism."[45] Nothing demonstrated this fact more clearly than the sustained war of words between a list of "film notables," including Frederic March and Ernst Lubitsch, and the increasingly powerful Dies Committee (discussed Ch. 8, p. 447). Throughout late 1938, the *Daily Worker* reported on Dies's charges of rampant subversiveness in the Hollywood community, as well as the spirited responses of members of that community. The controversy reached its climax the following summer, when Dies's House Un-American Activities Committee traveled to Hollywood to hold hearings on the matter.[46] As further proof of Hollywood's Popular Front fervor, the *Daily Worker* ran a story in August 1939, on the very day that Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to their non-aggression pact, about a song called "Mr. Roosevelt, Won't You Please Run Again?," that hailed from the film capital.[47]

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45. Alfred Davis, "Hollywood Now!," *DW* 17 December 1938, 7.

46. Don Blackwell, "Come to Hollywood, Mr. Dies . . . ," *DW* 26 August 1938, 7; "Hollywood Mass Meeting Urges Dies Committee Be Dissolved," *DW* 3 September 1938, 7; Alfred O'Malley, "Hollywood Answers The Dies Committee," *Progressive Weekly* 11 September 1938: 4, 10; "Dies Un-American Gang Due Soon in Filmland," *DW* 12 August 1939, 7.

47. "Hollywood Sings 3rd Term Plea," *DW* 22 August 1939, 7.

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Naturally, once the pact had ended the left's taste for American intervention, effectively terminating the usefulness of Popular Front rhetoric, the left press changed the tenor of its coverage of Hollywood. Throughout 1940 and 1941, *Daily Worker* critic Charles Glenn wrote a number of articles exposing the anti-labor practices of Walt Disney, painting the popular creator of Mickey Mouse as a dangerous egomaniac and closet reactionary.[48] In April 1941, Glenn published a series of articles analyzing the fundamental conservatism of the major film studios, which in his eyes constituted a monopoly. Further, Glenn argued that studio heads used their powerful media soapboxes to advocate for policies that would benefit them financially.[49]

In 1940 and 1941, the leftists pointed to the studios' alleged support for intervention in the European conflict as a primary example of Hollywood's reactionary political agenda. Drawing on the example of World War I, these critics asserted that the close ties between media capital and other industries meant that filmmakers desired a program of armament and intervention as a means of padding their profits with gains from military-connected industries. Such suspicions were further exacerbated by an increasing level of co-operation between the federal government and business, including the entertainment industry. In the *Daily Worker*, David Platt described how theatre chains attempted to increase their profits by piggy-backing on a national defense tax, adding their own surcharge to ticket prices. The *Worker*'s Ralph Warner warned readers of the Roosevelt administration's plans to encourage the production of pro-war propaganda films, again

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48. Glenn, "Disney Fires Workers, Announces Dividend," *DW* 18 July 1940, 7; Glenn, "Walt Disney's Halo--A Snare and a Delusion," *SW* 16 February 1941, 7; Glenn, "Exploding Some Myths About Mr. Walt Disney," *DW* 17 February 1941, 7.

49. See for example Glenn, "Birth of a Billion Dollar Baby," *DW* 11 April 1941, 7; Glenn, "Trust Busters Ignore Big Five," *DW* 12 April 1941, 7.

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hearkening back to World War I, when Wilson's Bureau of Public Information had performed a similar function.[50]

Warner also argued that the American public "does not want war films."[51] What the movie-going public apparently did want, if the editors of the *Worker*'s arts page were correct, was a film that illustrated the very absurdity of warfare. And as he had done several years earlier with his *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin again provided leftist critics and audiences with a film that combined comedy and sharp satire. Whereas *Modern Times* had addressed economic issues of industrial capitalism, *The Great Dictator* skewered the ambitions of Hitler and Mussolini. The *Daily Worker* publicized Chaplin's progress on *The Great Dictator* throughout 1939. When the film finally opened in the fall of 1940, the *Daily Worker*'s David Platt acclaimed it as "a genuine people's film against war and fascism." That December, columnist Mike Quin published a *paean* to the humanism that lay at the core of Chaplin's film, and the following April Platt reviewed a retrospective of Chaplin's early films, praising their "preoccupation with the common man" and citing their treatments of class politics as clear forerunners of the more overt political satire of *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*.[52]

The Great Dictator is indeed a brilliant political satire, but while its outspoken anti-fascism must have been bracing for the newly embattled American left, its central message was not one of categorical isolationism. In fact, Chaplin's closing monologue

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50. Warner, "War Hysteria Shakes The Amusement World," *DW* 24 May 1940, 7; Warner, "Pro-War Campaign Starts In Entertainment World," *DW* 3 June 1940, 7; Warner, "Hollywood Aims to Use Big Names in War Drive," *DW* 16 June 1940, 7; Platt, "Chain Theatres Pass War Tax on Public; Also Grab More Profits," *SW* 21 July 1940, 7; Warner, "FDR Hope to Hamstring Amusement Industries," *DW* 2 June 1940, 7.

51. Ralph Warner, "Movie Patrons Oppose Showing of War Films," *DW* 23 June 1940, 7.

52. "Work on 'Dictator' Begins Soon, Says Charlie Chaplin," *DW* 15 September 1939, 7; "Chaplin Moves Ahead With 'The Dictator'," *SW* 5 November 1939, 7; Platt, "Chaplin in 'Great Dictator' Achieves Triumph of Satire," *DW* 16 October 1940, 7; Quin, "The Art of Chaplin in 'The Great Dictator'," *DW* 12 December 1940, 7; Platt, "Chaplin, Master of Film Satire," *DW* 10 April 1941, 7.

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from the film--reprinted in its entirety in the *Sunday Worker* in October 1940--far from providing cover for those who would celebrate non-aggression with German fascism, urges the citizens of totalitarian states to "fight to free the world--to do away with national barriers--to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance . . . In the name of democracy, let us unite!"[53] Although it is true that the movie makes no connections between the Soviet Union and European fascism, neither does it praise the Communist state; rather, Stalin and the Soviet Union are completely absent from *The Great Dictator*. However, even without advocating any political platform more specific than "a world of reason--a world where science--where progress will lead to the happiness of us all," Chaplin's film was sufficiently radical to draw the ire of the British-backed, pseudo-fascist government in Buenos Aires, which banned *The Great Dictator*. Ordinarily, the decisions of the Argentine censorship board would not have received much attention from the *Daily Worker*, but in this case the ban provided the paper with a perfect illustration of the powerful forces trying to suppress Chaplin's message.[54]

As further proof of the staunch opposition of the business sector to *The Great Dictator*'s anti-fascism, the *Worker* published an article detailing the negative reception accorded the movie in most prominent mainstream newspapers. Among these was William Randolph Hearst's *Journal-American*, which was consistently opposed to intervention in European conflicts (as it had been up until the moment the United States entered World War I). Nevertheless, the *Worker*'s Sender Garlin asserted that critics' almost universal pans of Chaplin's final, sermon-like monologue, was a product of their quarrel with its message, rather than with its aesthetic value (or lack thereof).[55]

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53. "Charlie Chaplin's Appeal In 'The Great Dictator'," *SW* 27 October 1940, 7.

54. Samuel Putnam, "Chaplin's Film in Latin America," *DW* 12 February 1941, 7.

55. Sender Garlin, "Those Peculiar Reviews of Chaplin's Film," *DW* 19 October 1940, 7.

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Of course, with the rise of media conglomerates, it was increasingly difficult to separate ideologically-based editorial slants from entertainment and media criticism. For this reason, many American leftists viewed the news media as a reactionary threat perhaps even greater than the entertainment industry, as its power was enhanced by the ostensible objectivity of its product. Not surprisingly, when Orson Welles, probably the most popular stage director among the New York left, riled Hearst with his *Citizen Kane*--scored by Bernard Herrmann, an alumnus of the Young Composers Group--the *Daily Worker* exulted. Throughout early 1941, the paper reported on Hearst's attempts to keep the movie out of theaters, and when it finally opened that spring, the *Worker* ran several adulatory pieces, praising Welles's art as well as his politics.[56] One of the aspects of *Citizen Kane* that was frequently singled out was its pitch-perfect simulacrum of the newsreel genre, of which Hearst was a prime exponent. Each week, millions of American moviegoers viewed newsreels produced by Hearst and his chief rival, Henry Luce. Luce's *March of Time* series, which was in some respects more politically conservative than Hearst's, was a target of frequent criticism in the *Daily Worker* throughout early 1941, as the paper analyzed the political agendas behind newsreels on such topics as American intervention and domestic labor politics.[57]

For all of the power of the newsreels, Hollywood, and major papers, no media outlet was more powerful than radio, which brought both news and entertainment into a huge number of American homes on a daily basis. As with the print media and films, most radio programming was considered by American radicals to be little more than a front for

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56. Charles Glenn, "Hearst's Ire Aroused By Film on Publishers," *DW* 17 January 1941, 7; John R. Chaplin, "What Will RKO Do With 'Citizen Kane?'," *DW* 21 March 1941, 7; "Technical Miracles, Superb Acting Mark 'Citizen Kane' a Great Film," *DW* 3 April 1941, 7; David Platt, "'Citizen Kane' Makes Film History," *DW* 3 May 1941, 7.

57. David Platt, "'March of Time' Leads to Death," *DW* 28 January 1941, 7; David Platt, "Labor Is Target in Current Release of 'March of Time'," *DW* 8 February 1941, 7; Milton Meltzer, "March of Time Carries the Torch of House of Morgan in 'Americans All'," *DW* 24 February 1941, 5.

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the conservative policies of its chief sponsors.[58] It is always advisable to view such generalized allegations with a healthy grain of salt, particularly when they emanate from a source as unabashedly slanted as the *Daily Worker*. However, as Daniel Czitrom has noted, Paul Lazarsfeld's 1940 book *Radio and the Printed Page*, a comprehensive analysis of American reading and listening habits, found that radio did indeed possess great influence as a shaper of public opinion. Further, Lazarsfeld observed that the influence exerted by commercial news and entertainment broadcasts was inversely correlated with income and educational levels: "Lower-income strata of the population were seldom reached by either the printed page or the so-called serious or educational broadcasts. Radio disseminated information to the broad masses, but not via educational programs. Reliance on radio over print for news correlated directly with lower education and income levels." Thus, when broadcasters decided to limit the topics that their writers could address, their decisions in a very direct way limited the access of the working-class to information.[59]

And regardless of any possible ideological bias in program content, there was one respect in which American radio was an undeniably conservative political actor: the relations between labor--in the form of musicians and composers--and management. Throughout the 1930s, a battle had been brewing between the two sides; the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) resented ASCAP's virtual monopoly on musical goods, but ASCAP needed the NAB to air its members' wares. In 1939, the NAB responded to ASCAP's request for a dramatic increase in licensing fees by establishing a rival corporation for composers called Broadcast Music, Incorporated (BMI). BMI

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58. See for example Eric Munx, "Melange of Fact, Rumor--And Lies on the Radio," *DW* 25 September 1939, 7; Eric Munx, "Radio Plays Dominant Role in the Elections," *DW* 11 November 1940, 7; Larry Lane, "Radio Commentators Set New High in Red-Baiting," *DW* 3 February 1941, 7; Paul Gordon, "Radio--Handmaiden to Monopoly," *DW* 6 May 1941, 7.

59. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 130-31; Eric Munx, "Radio Writers Resolve to Defend Freedom of Expression on Airlanes," *DW* 11 June 1941, 7.

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officially opened up shop in February 1940, even as the *Sunday Worker* reported that commercial broadcasters were increasingly relying upon programs of recorded music. For the media companies, this kept production costs down while also allowing greater ease of promotion for individual artists; for artists, this was tantamount to a loss of control over the performance, as the law regarding copyrights and recordings was vague and unsettled. The advent of FM radio later that year quite literally magnified the broadcasters' power.[60]

During the summer of 1940, as ASCAP and the broadcasters negotiated a new licensing contract, it became clear that the two sides were headed towards a confrontation. The NAB, with BMI as leverage in negotiations, proposed a substantial decrease in royalty rates for ASCAP. The musicians' group, however, refused to budge. Predictably, the issue received great attention from leftist media critics, who were, as a rule, sympathetic to ASCAP's demands.[61] A series of events brought matters to a head that December. The U. S. Supreme Court declined to review a lower court's ruling that artists lost the right to determine usage of their recordings upon sale of record; this meant the end of recordings "for home use only," and was a major victory for broadcasters and for manufacturers of jukeboxes. That same month, the Department of Justice named NAB, BMI, NBC, and CBS as defendants in an anti-trust suit, while also complaining that ASCAP had not satisfied conditions of a 1934 consent decree issued in a separate

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60. Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 110; Eric Munx, "Recorded Programs Flood Air Lanes," *SW* 25 February 1940, 7; "First Full-Time Frequency Modulation Station Set Up," *SW* 4 August 1940, 7.

61. "Broadcasters Aim to Cut Songwriters' Earnings," *DW* 19 July 1940, 7; Ralph Warner, "Radio Chains Threaten Songwriters' Guild," *DW* 8 August 1940, 7; Ralph Warner, "Tool of Radio Chains Attacks Bill of Rights," *SW* 18 August 1940, 7; "Song Writers Plan New Fight on Radio Chains," *DW* 7 September 1940, 7; "The Issues at Stake In Radio-Music Fight," *DW* 16 September 1940, 7.

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anti-trust suit against the Society. On 31 December, ASCAP's contract with the broadcasting companies expired.[62]

As 1941 began, broadcasters were forbidden from airing music copyrighted by ASCAP composers, a category that included virtually every major popular songwriter in America. The reaction in the left press was swift and predictably ferocious; the *Daily Worker*'s Ralph Warner asserted that by "lock[ing] out nearly all American music from the air . . . [the NAB] has nakedly exerted a censorship in music just as it secretly censors the news and comment on the air."[63] It was not entirely true that American music had been banned; Stephen Foster's songs, none of them ASCAP-licensed, were in heavy rotation on the nation's airwaves. Larry Lang commented in the *Daily Worker* on the irony of the situation: "Foster, who died a pauper, would have made a living out of his songs--if there had been a composer's guild like ASCAP in his day. In 1941, his music is used as a weapon in a big business fight against organized composers."[64]

Of course, ASCAP was hardly the hapless victim that its defenders portrayed it to be; it was a large, powerful organization with a virtual monopoly on American popular songs, and many of its most influential members were publishers. And while broadcasters, composers, and publishers engaged in their bitter struggle, record companies benefited greatly, for they now provided the listening public with its best opportunity to enjoy the music of choice in a home setting. After suffering throughout the Depression, the recording industry in 1941 had its most successful year since 1921.[65]

The most obvious ramification of all of these developments was the fact that, in the age of recording and broadcast technology, American composers and songwriters needed

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62. Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 57, 65, 77; Charles Glenn, "They Shall Not Have Music'," *DW* 27 December 1940, 7.

63. Warner, "Why You Can't Hear That Music," *DW* 13 January 1941, 7.

64. Lang, "ASCAP Fights Back: Will Produce Own Radio Show," *DW* 13 January 1941, 7.

65. Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music*, 79.

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more than ever to understand their economic position. This was a truth that had long been apparent to Virgil Thomson, as we have already seen. Thomson's interest in the business aspect of musical art was also the *raison d'etre* behind his first book. Finished in the spring of 1939, *The State of Music* was published by William Morrow late that year, and dovetailed very neatly with the commercial controversies roiling the music business. In it, Thomson offered his own take--equally humorous and incisive--on the ways in which economics and politics interacted with music-making.

Central to Thomson's analysis was a tripartite schema of music comprised of "executants" (performers), organizers, and composers. Thomson explained the three musical classes in terms of their economic roles:

> The musical executant is an artisan wage-worker. He executes other men's patterns and is paid by the hour. At least, that is his minimum wage. He has no choice about what pieces he executes unless he is a soloist. A solo artist can choose among various works acceptable to the management. . . .
>
> The organizing of musical performances is a business like fruit-vending, even though it may, as in the case of subsidized opera houses and symphonic ensembles, run a business deficit and count itself hence a philanthropy. . . .
>
> The composing of music, on the other hand, is a profession like engineering or literary authorship. The individual composer has usually, in consequence, a dual or even a triple status in society. As an executant he is a workman. As a publisher's employee, a concert organizer, or a

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> salaried instructor in a school, he is either a business man or a white-collar proletarian.[66]

But despite all of the differences between composers and executants, Thomson still maintained that because musical techniques typically require a significant amount of training at an early age, they occupied a similar place in the socioeconomic hierarchy: "Professional musicians are mostly bourgeois, indeed mostly petty bourgeois. . . . That is why, although there is some ruling-class art-music, there is no proletarian art-music at all except what is written at the proletariat from somewhere above."[67]

One important consequence of Thomson's economic perspective on musical activity was his belief that "[m]usical style, like political action, is economically determined." He freely acknowledged the Marxian overtones of this idea, but also drew a distinction between compositional style and what he called musical usage: "Musical usages . . . are social customs. They transcend political and economic barriers. And the art of designing music to fit them must of necessity transcend these barriers too." Usage thus describes the ways in which music is deployed in society--as ritual, as artwork, or as sonic wallpaper--and Thomson's concept seems to echo the insights of the *Gebrauchsmusik* composers. Thomson envisioned a structure of musical creation that consisted primarily of the interaction between the social (usage) and the economic (style). In this model, every society will have a different set of musical usages, and each usage will admit a variety of styles. Because Thomson conceived musical compositions in economic terms, as commodities, and not in the metaphysical language of aesthetics, he then concluded that composers' need to make their compositions saleable affected their style. It is virtually impossible to disentangle the social and the economic here, which is as it should

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66. Virgil Thomson, *The State of Music*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 66-67.

67. Thomson, *State of Music*, 88-89.

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be, but Thomson's theory runs into trouble when he posits a clear distinction between these realms and the political one. For instance, it is unclear how his economic determinism can be squared with the following passage: "Political theories have, in fact, very little more to do with musical creations than electronic theories have. Both merely determine methods of distribution." And although it may be true that when "revolutionary parties, both in Russia and elsewhere, have tried to turn composers on to supposedly revolutionary subject-matter . . . [t]he net result for either art or revolution has not been very important,"[68] this ignores a crucial distinction between the coercive means frequently employed by the Soviet government under Stalin and the simple encouragement of radical experimentation (as seen especially in the works of Stanislavsky, Vertov, and Eisenstein) with which it alternated. The two were not the same, and their relative productiveness is also fairly clear. Nevertheless, Thomson's book, published by a major mainstream house, and written by a man who professed no political affiliation, can be seen as the ultimate validation of a labor-inflected ideology in the field of music.

John Henry

Part and parcel of this ideology was a healthy distrust of the role played by the mechanical reproduction and transmission of music. In March 1941, the *Sunday Worker* published an essay by Alexander Burton in which he observed that although "[t]he industrial worker has had to struggle against capitalism's use of the machine ever since the Industrial Revolution . . . it wasn't until 1928-29 that the musician felt the full impact of the machine with the introduction of sound movies and radio."[69] Writing at the height of the ongoing ASCAP-NAB imbroglio, which was itself backgrounded by the continued

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68. Thomson, *State of Music*, 149-50.

69. Burton, "Music in a Capitalist World," *SW* 23 March 1941, Section 2, 4.

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Depression, Burton's perspective on the negative impact of technology on musicians was understandably dour. It was also, as we might expect, shared, to various extents, by a diverse body of musicians, and most clearly expressed in the vogue, among prominent musicians in several genres, for musical settings of the John Henry legend.

Before addressing these, we should first briefly examine the legend itself, its meaning and provenance. The folklorist Archie Green has discussed the meaning of the mythical worker's story, making clear its relevance for the technology-fearing musicians of the Depression:

> John Henry in ballad, rhythmic chant, children's story, and pictorial form comes closer than any other folk hero to personifying our work experience. Despite birth in a minority community, he emerges from the tunnel face to tower above other workers. The hammerman does not pound his way to the top, nor does his hammer carry him to fortune. Skill, strength, and endurance, although virtues, lead to a pyrrhic victory. Ultimately, he signifies an individual defeated by industrial might rather than one buoyed by modernity. Does John Henry become un-American because of failure to master his employer's machine?[70]

Equally important, "John Henry did not spring to life on the minstrel circuit or Tin Pan Alley's stages. The legendary steel driver came from the rich imagination and rhetorical skill of two sets of creators: former slaves new to industry; Appalachian balladeers involved in subsistence farming, logging, coal mining, and railroading."[71] Considering these facts, it is not at all surprising that John Henry should appeal to the musicians of New York during the early 1940s.

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70. Green, "The Visual John Henry," in Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, 52.

71. Green, "The Visual John Henry," 56.

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Further, the confluence, in the John Henry legend, of racial oppression, technological development, and economic exploitation, was particularly trenchant for many African-American musicians. In March 1941, the *Daily Worker*'s O. V. Clyde noted that African-American musicians from Paul Robeson to Duke Ellington continued to suffer from racist policies in concert bookings and radio contracts. Lewis Erenberg observes that by 1939 "mass interest in swing pushed white bands [most famously Glenn Miller's] ahead of black orchestras in earning capacity and audience recognition."[72] This transformation was cemented by swing's move from Harlem nightclubs to the ballrooms of midtown hotels, from which black bands were generally barred. John Henry was thus a particularly apt symbol for contemporary jazz musicians.

But because of the multivalence of political meanings embedded in the John Henry legend, its musical incarnations came in a variety of settings and styles. Perhaps the least likely of these was Aaron Copland's setting of the folksong. During the summer of 1939, Alan Lomax offered Copland a commission to arrange an American folk song of his choice for orchestra. The work would be performed on Lomax's CBS radio show *The American School of the Air*, which had as its target audience high school students. Bearing this in mind, Copland produced a short work--it lasts roughly four minutes--that was rhythmically vital and employed colorful instrumentation. It drew on the ballad "John Henry," which was a left-wing favorite in late-Depression New York, included on Earl Robinson's recording with the American People's Chorus and also performed and recorded by Paul Robeson. Copland's *John Henry* announces its folk-song theme at the outset, and the thematic material throughout is derived from this source (see example 9.4). The piece was first performed in March 1940, and Copland later revised it so that it could be performed by high school orchestras.

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72. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 170, 173; Clyde, "Negro Musicians Face A Wall of Hostility," *DW* 30 March 1941, 7.

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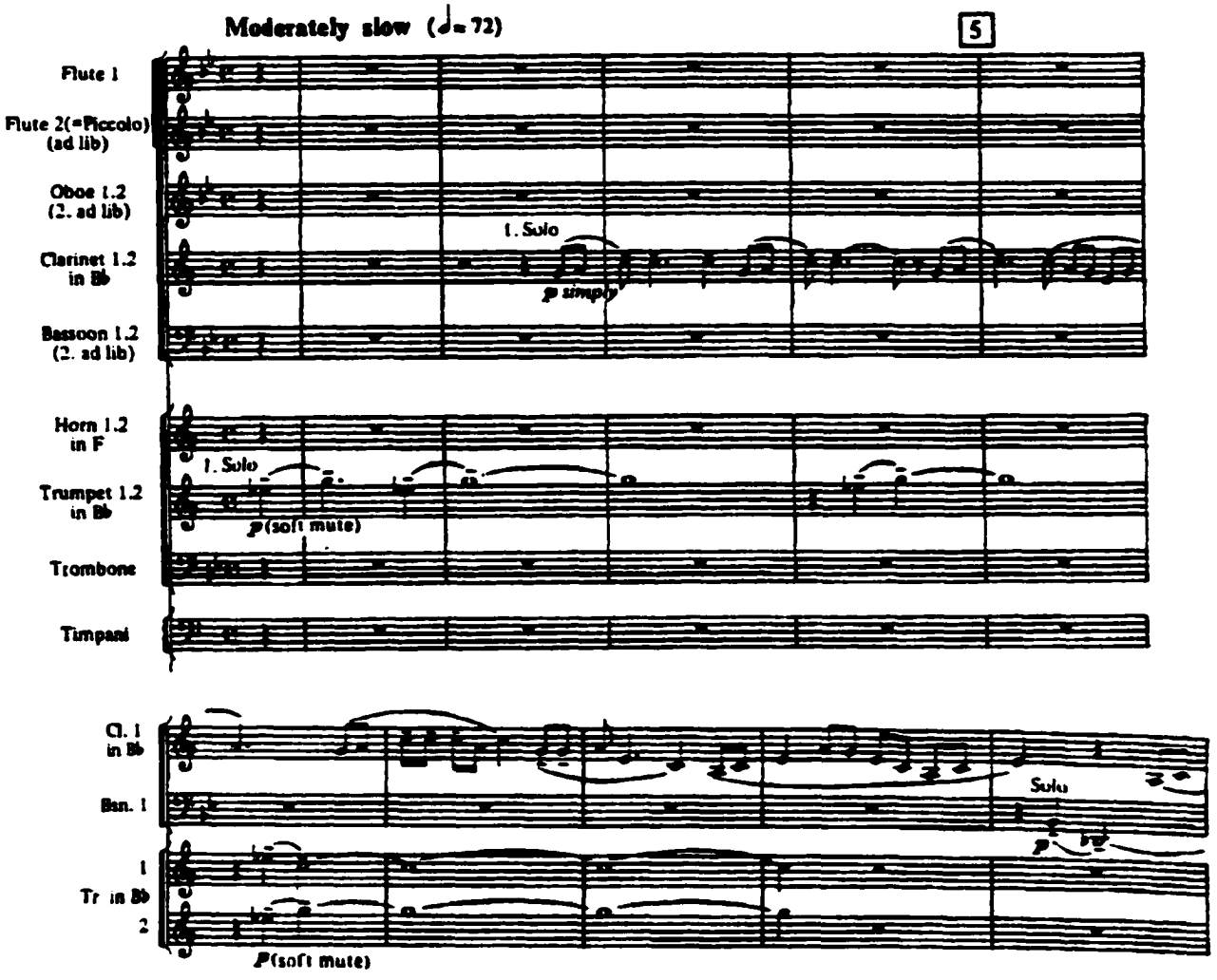
Example 9.4: Aaron Copland, *John Henry* (mm. 1-10)



As mentioned earlier, John Henry was also the subject of the musical play for which Robeson returned to New York in late 1939. The play opened in January 1940 to lukewarm reviews and enjoyed a short run. Nevertheless, in retrospect it acquires a good deal of cultural significance, primarily through the obvious symbolic import of Robeson's casting as John Henry, the preternaturally gifted African-American victim of the forces of modernity. It is not at all hard to understand why Robeson found this role sufficiently appealing to return to New York, and although the *Daily Worker* was only mildly

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enthusiastic about the play as a whole, Robeson's performance was the subject of unqualified praise.[73]

Unremarked in Martin McCall's review were the contributions of featured performer Josh White. White, an African-American singer and guitarist who originally hailed from South Carolina, had moved to New York in early 1932, in order to record a set of blues and spirituals for ARC. In the intervening eight years, White had continued to be active in the recording studio, but his big break did not come until 1940. The appearance in *John Henry* allowed him to showcase his unique guitar style, initially the product of a hand injury, and also introduced him to a politically-conscious audience that was deeply interested in folk music. White's biographer Elijah Wald writes that "[t]here is no reason to think that [White] had given much attention to politics before joining the *John Henry* cast, but he knew plenty about racism and was more than ready to speak out."[74]

Around this time, White also began performing with a backup group called the Carolinians, and the combination soon came to the attention of the ever-alert John Hammond. On Hammond's recommendation, the group received a recording contract from Columbia Records, and their first release, titled *Chain Gang*, received great critical acclaim in August 1940. By the end of the year, Josh White had become one of the most popular performers among the New York left. Beginning in November 1940 he was regularly featured at Cafe Society (discussed Ch. 8, pp. 410-11), initially appearing on a bill with Meade Lux Lewis, Art Tatum, and others. Two months later, Josh White accompanied the Golden Gate Quartet in performing the song "Gospel Train" at an inaugural gala at Constitution Hall that also included readings by Ethel Barrymore,

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73. Martin McCall, "Paul Robeson Stars in New Play, 'John Henry'," *DW* 12 January 1940, 7. This casting decision is particularly poignant in light of the tragedy of Robeson's later years.

74. Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 29-30, 64.

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Raymond Massey, and Charlie Chaplin, as well as performances by Mickey Rooney and Nelson Eddy.[75]

That John Henry's influence was primarily felt in terms of folk music, as that term is conventionally construed, is not at all surprising, given both the significant role of the ballad in disseminating the legend and the popularity of folksong on the left. But John Henry was also the focus of a collaboration that showed the increasing intersection of modern popular culture, high art culture, and folk culture, and the ways in which this combination was employed in the service of leftist ideology. Pianist James P. Johnson, who had performed on Hammond's *From Spirituals to Swing* program, worked with Langston Hughes in the late 1930s on at least two projects. One, a sketch called *Class Struggle in Swing*, was sent to the TAC Cabaret in October 1939; it is unclear whether the piece was ever performed. The other was *De Organizer*, subtitled "A Blues Opera in One Act." Hughes and Johnson completed their opera in the fall of 1938, and although they submitted it for possible performance by Harlem's FTP Unit, it was never performed under its auspices. Hughes met with Robeson in late 1939, and the two are believed to have discussed the play. Perhaps Robeson was asked to play the starring role of "De Organizer." This would have been particularly apt considering the reason that Robeson was in New York. As Susan Duffy has noted, during the course of the opera other characters liken "De Organizer" to John Henry, making the leftist appeal of the legend all but explicit: John Henry stands both for human labor in an age of machine and for African-Americans exploited by a racist economic and social apparatus. However, Robeson did not play "De Organizer," and the work was only performed just three times, most prominently when the ILGWU cultural unit (not to be confused with Labor Stage)

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75. Wald, *Society Blues*, 61-65, 70. The connection between the *Chain Gang* theme and John Henry seems self-evident, and it is surely no coincidence that the popularity of the latter coincided with a resurgence of interest in the former: in late 1939, Lawrence Gellert published *Me and My Captain*, the second volume of *Negro Songs of Protest*. Whereas the first volume had taken a general approach to the subject, *Me and My Captain* was limited to chain gang songs. The following summer, Leadbelly made a recording for RCA Victor titled *The Midnight Special and Other Prison Songs*.

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gave a "concert version" at its 1940 convention. Although Hughes's text remains intact, Johnson's score, with the sole exception of a single song called "Hungry Blues," was long believed lost and only recently rediscovered and performed; it has never been recorded.[76] But while *De Organizer* made no tangible impact, its blending of folk legend, labor politics, and blues idioms--both verbal and musical--makes it a perfect metonym for the cultural milieu in which it was born.

Urban Folk Music

The conception of the blues expressed by Hughes in *De Organizer*, as well as in much of his other writing from this period, made that cultural form the connecting tissue that linked seemingly disparate aspects of the African-American experience, encompassing both the rural music of Robert Johnson and the urban songs of Bessie Smith. Likewise, it addressed the difficulties faced by African-American workers, whether sharecroppers on farms or menial workers in cities. The blues was a song form, with a set harmonic pattern and an established verse form, and it was also a style, a way of singing or playing that transcended its formal structure. Most importantly, the blues was, of course, an affect, one that was inextricably linked with the history of racial oppression in America. As a critic wrote in the *Daily Worker* in December 1939, "The blues is not only an art of singing and playing . . . but a general way of feeling. It is a means of communication, and like certain non-European music, it involves the experience of a whole people."[77]

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76. Susan Duffy, "A Collaboration of Jazz, Poetry, and Blues: *De Organizer*" in Langston Hughes, *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 166-68, 173. James Dapogny of the University of Michigan recently discovered Johnson's score among choral director Eva Jessye's papers. *De Organizer* has since been performed twice, once each in Detroit and Ann Arbor. Stephen Kinzer, "From Oblivion to Ovation: An Opera Right Out of the Harlem Renaissance," *NYT* 28 December 2002, 15, 32.

77. M.M., "Leaders in the Field of the Musical 'Blues'," *DW* 3 December 1939, 7.

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Because of all this, the idea of the blues came to serve as a sort of measuring stick of cultural authenticity for leftist critics who had long struggled to define exactly why certain artists or styles were acceptable and others not. According to the same *Daily Worker* article that defined blues as communication, blues was also "the essential source and core of *expressive* hot jazz. . . . The vivid and poignant expressions of grief, nostalgia, and rebellion, issuing out of the special circumstances of Negro life . . . underlie the content of hot jazz [emphasis added]."[78] Thus, real hot jazz was defined by its fidelity to the blues, and a jazz musician's quality was defined in terms of his bluesiness. Since blues was understood primarily in terms of communication, and jazz was a derivative of the blues, it was only natural that the *Daily Worker* emphasized the efforts of small "cooperative jazz bands" comprised of "select" musicians from major swing bands.[79]

This trend, which was at least partially a consequence of a renewed interest in older New Orleans- and Chicago-style hot jazz, was evident in the second *From Spirituals to Swing* concert, sponsored by the TAC and held in Carnegie Hall in December 1939. Although the program featured many of the same artists as its predecessor there were also a few new faces, among them the Golden Gate Quartet. Most significantly, the new *From Spirituals to Swing* program also featured several white musicians, in the form of Benny Goodman's mixed-race sextet. This slight shift in musical emphasis caused Martin McCall to term the concert "1939's dedication to the phenomenon of hot jazz," a formulation that softened the racial *raison d'etre* of the initial concert. That McCall viewed the concert in these terms stands as further proof of the new historical consciousness that pervaded jazz criticism, particularly on the left.[80]

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78. M. M., "Leaders in the Field," 7.

79. Hugh J. Riddell, "Top Swingsters on Their Own," *DW* 22 September 1939, 7.

80. James Dugan, "'From Spirituals to Swing' In Unique Program," *DW* 14 December 1939, 7; McCall, "'Swing' Concert--Second Edition," *DW* 23 December 1939, 7.

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As noted earlier, this interest in the cultural roots of jazz was part and parcel of a growing sense that African-American culture was a unique and valuable aspect of American culture as a whole. Thus Lawrence Gellert vigorously disputed Columbia University ethnomusicologist George Herzog's assertion, printed in the *New York Times*, that "[s]pirituals are mere versions of white man's music."[81] Similarly, Milton Howard praised newly-established Blue Note Records, which, he wrote, "insisted on the dismissal of all spurious commercial and jim crow considerations . . . permit[ting] some of the finest jazz musicians in America to emerge as musicians expressing the deepest folk feelings of the 'blues,' etc."[82]

To be sure, the cultural cachet enjoyed by African-American music and the blues aesthetic was not limited to the far left. In October 1939, ASCAP organized a weeklong celebration of American music, and the second night, which focused on the contributions of African-Americans, featured W. C. Handy as arranger and conductor and William Grant Still as featured speaker. Three months later, the *Daily Worker* exulted in the success enjoyed by African-American musicians in the generally mainstream *Down Beat* magazine's year-end poll of jazz musicians.[83]

But for all of the growing mainstream respect for African-American culture, its identification with left politics continued unabated. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is little known today, although it brought together several of the most influential African-Americans of the period. On 1 October 1941, Robeson went into a studio in midtown Manhattan to record a new song called "King Joe." With lyrics by Richard Wright and music written and performed by Count Basie and his orchestra and

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81. "'Expert' Is Challenged On Negro Music," *DW* 19 October 1939, 7.

82. Howard, "Recording the Music of the Negro People," *DW* 6 January 1940, 7.

83. Eugene Gordon, "Negro Music Part Of America's Best Art, Says Composer," *DW* 4 October 1939, 5; Stanley Hiller, "Negro in American Music Honored at Gala Festival," *DW* 4 October 1939, 7; "Negro Musicians Win Awards in 1939 Poll," *DW* 4 January 1940, 7.

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produced by Hammond, "King Joe" was a tribute to Joe Louis, the African-American boxer who had been world champion for more than four years. As noted earlier, Louis became a cultural icon when he defeated the German boxer Max Schmeling in 1938, and the record made in his honor was a rare foray by Robeson into the world of jazz.[84]

It was not that Robeson disliked jazz, per se; he considered it a form of folk expression, but to his mind it existed at one remove from the most authentic folk forms. He remained most comfortable with folksong, traditionally defined, and with cultivated music that drew explicitly on folk sources. So in early 1941, when the IWO (International Workers Order) presented a musical tribute to "The Negro In American Life" on several occasions in New York, it was virtually inevitable that the show's climax would be Robeson's appearance, during which he sang a series of folksongs of diverse origins--among them Russian, Jewish, and African-American--and capped the event with *Ballad for Americans*, accompanied once again by Robinson and the American People's Chorus.[85] This event perfectly encapsulated why Robeson was such a strong advocate for folk music: in his conception of the genre, described by the *Daily Worker*, folksongs were "the songs of the people, of farmers, of workers, of laborers, and they come from the direct contact with their work, whatever it is." Robeson himself said,

> I have sung my songs all over the world . . . and everywhere I have found that some bond makes the people of all lands take to Negro songs as if they were their own. I found that wherever forces have been the same, whether people weave, pick cotton or work in the mines, they understand each other in the common language of work, suffering and protest. . . .

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84. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 117-18. Another of Hammond's attempts to express radical politics through the Basie band, with the Hammond-penned political song "It's the Same Old South," was noticeably less successful. Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 72-72.

85. Lee Stanley, "Robeson Will Sing the 'Ballad'," *DW* 6 February 1941, 7; Ralph Warner, "Harlem Stirred by Pageant 'Negro in American Life'," *DW* 1 April 1941, 7.

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> When I sing "Let My People Go" I can feel sympathetic vibrations from my audience, regardless of its nationality. It is no longer just a Negro song--it is a symbol of those seeking freedom from the scourge of Fascism in the world today.[86]

This was the ideal celebrated, however clumsily, in Robinson's *Ballad*, a notion of the folk that transcended racial and national boundaries. By integrating these peoples in his musical programs, Robeson tried to symbolize their fundamental kinship.

Robeson's statement can easily be denigrated as naive, but this misses the point. His view of folksong as a vehicle for humanism was aspirational, and although he occasionally ventured onto the shakier ground of seeking objective justifications for his folk-ideal--Martin Duberman notes Robeson's long-held theory about the pentatonic scale, common to so many musical cultures, as proof of a sort of *ur*-music--his sentiments seem to have been primarily based on his deeply held political convictions. The subtler problem with his conception of folk music, and his thoughts on ethnicity and nationality generally, is that Robeson seemed ultimately unsure of how to deal with the fact of difference. Just as the *Ballad* subsumes all other identities under the blanket identity of Americanism, Robeson asserted that the primary aspect of people's indentities is their shared humanity. But this view, however admirable its roots, is at best debatable. It is certainly surprising that Robeson, a stalwart crusader for racial justice, fell victim to the great myopia of Marxist thought by insisting that economic issues are the defining aspects of human experience, ignoring the unfortunate truth that, although the troubled history of race relations in the United States has economic sources, prejudices based on race, religion, and nationality often bear little relation to economic matters. However, finer theorists than Robeson have been unable to reconcile the tension between tribalism

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86. "'When I Sing I Feel a Great Unity'--Robeson," *DW* 19 May 1941, 7.

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and national pride on the one hand and prejudice on the other, so he should not be criticized too harshly for his apparent inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the complexity of the problem.

However, even within the relatively small circle of New York's radical musicians during this period, folk music had taken on a variety of meanings, and while Robeson's Popular Front style multicultural sensibility underlay most of their conceptions, a number of other singers used folk music in a different manner than he did. These individuals recognized--as even Robeson admitted--that folk music was a record of the particular experiences of a group, and that its more unique, specific aspects were valuable in themselves, and not simply as tokens of a generic shared experience. There was, for example, the issue of racial oppression, and the specific form that it took in Depression-era America. Leadbelly had addressed this in his "Bourgeois Blues," and Josh White, with whom Leadbelly occasionally performed, followed up *Chain Gang* with a recording of songs that dealt in stark terms with Jim Crow laws and the difficulties faced by African-Americans, especially in the south. In keeping with the racial specificity of the subject matter, White's *Southern Exposure* pioneered the use of the rural blues musical idiom in political music. The recording was a critical success, and sufficiently so to gain the attention of President Roosevelt, who requested and received a private performance at the White House.[87]

White's album also pointed up one of the crucial gaps in Robeson's thinking, for while Robeson accounted, however unsatisfactorily, for racial difference, he was virtually mute on the subject of regional distinctions, although these surely shape cultures and individuals in deep and unescapable ways. Of course, this was more true then than now, as electronically-controlled environments and global media had yet to flatten out so many

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87. *Southern Exposure* was also an interesting experiment in what might be called "literary folk blues," as the songs were co-authored by Harlem Renaissance poet Waring Cuney, and the liner notes penned by Richard Wright. Wald, *Society Blues*, 79, 87-89.

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of the differences between geographical areas. The powerful role played by geography was particularly trenchant from the mid-1930s on, as the effects of the Dust Bowl transfixed the popular imagination. On the left, the figure of the "Okie" became the new face of American poverty, his plight dramatized in *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and, especially, *The Grapes of Wrath*. As noted in the previous chapter, Steinbeck's novel, while successful with general readers, was a blockbuster of epic proportions on the left, and when John Ford's movie adaptation opened in 1940, it was acclaimed by the *Daily Worker* as "THE Great American Film."[88]

Woody

Like the Scottsboro Boys, Spanish and Chinese War refugees, and the unemployed, Okies became a *cause celebré* on the New York left. What was entirely less predictable was the massive impact that this political fad came to have on the shape of the American musical tradition. In early March 1940, Will Geer and the TAC Music Division organized a concert to benefit "John Steinbeck's California Committee for the relief of Dust Bowl refugees." The program, emceed by Geer and Alan Lomax, read like a virtual who's who of leftist folk musicians, including Leadbelly, the Golden Gate Quartet, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Josh White. In a preview article, the *Daily Worker* also promised readers a real curiosity: "'Woody,' a real Dust Bowl refugee, and discovery of Geer's who was brought to New York recently especially to appear on this evening's program." Despite the article's tone, "Woody's" appeal was not limited to his status as an anthropological curiosity: "'Woody' is a folk singer who chants not only the genuine

88. Sue Barry, "The Truth Goes Marching On," *DW* 7 September 1939, 7; David Platt, "THE Great American Film Is Here: It's 'The Grapes of Wrath'," *DW* 25 January 1940, 7.

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songs of his region but composes unique and moving ballads of social and topical nature."[89]

Woody Guthrie had in fact come to New York several months earlier, without having been invited by the Steinbeck Committee or anyone else. In addition, although he originally hailed from Oklahoma, and had left in the mid-1930s as the dust storms grew all but unbearable, he had recently been living in Los Angeles, where he starred on the highly successful "Oklahoma and Woody Show" mentioned in the previous chapter. This is not to say that Guthrie was not an "authentic Okie," but to point out the extent to which, even before he had ever played a note of music in New York, he had been mythologized on the left as a pure exemplar of true folk culture.

Whether or not the audience at the Forrest Theatre knew that they were in the hands of a practiced performer rather than a starry-eyed rube, they fell hard for Guthrie, and he was soon the toast of the New York left. Two weeks after the benefit concert, the *Sunday Worker* profiled Guthrie, drawing the natural comparison to Will Rogers and asserting Woody's superiority. The story was replete with anecdotes that established Woody's Wild West local color, and direct quotes were deliberately misspelled, although Guthrie was in fact very well read and quite literate.[90]

Guthrie encouraged the popular image of himself as lacking education; he was playing a character, and that character, unlike the real Woody, had not read the *Rubaiyat*. Woody did not play dumb, however; rather, he projected an image of himself as raw and untutored, a kind of American noble savage who, by asking seemingly childish questions, in fact got at the heart of supposedly sophisticated problems. This is particularly true of the daily column, called "Woody Sez," that he began publishing in the *Daily Worker* in late March. In a brief bio published roughly a week into Guthrie's journalistic stint, the

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89. "Broadway Progressives Aid *American* Relief," *DW* 1 March 1940, 7; "Geer Heads Program at 'Okie' Benefit," *DW* 2 March 1940, 7.

90. Art Shields, "A Balladeer From the 'Okie' Country," *SW* 17 March 1940, 7.

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Worker described Guthrie and his column this way: "He's a native of Oklahoma who's come East for a time. He can tell you all about the Dust Bowl, the original characters of 'The Grapes of Wrath' and of the latest letter he got from John Steinbeck. He strums a guitar, sings peoples' songs and writes columns for the Daily Worker."[91] The column that followed, complete with intentional misspellings, perfectly illustrated Guthrie's "wise fool" persona (and its limits, as he properly spells the possessive "their"):

> The national debit is one thing I caint figger out. I heard a senater on a radeo a saying that we owed somebody 18 jillion dollers. I don't know their name, but I remember the price. Called it the national debit. If the nation is the government, and the government is the people, then I guess the people owes the people, that means I owe me, and you owe you, and I forget the regular fee, but if I owe myself something, I would be a willing just to call it off rather than have the senaters argue about it, and I know you would do the same, and then we wouldn't have no national debit.[92]

During the next few months, Guthrie almost never missed a daily installment, even when he was on the road. Frequently, he tackled the social topics that would be expected in a *Daily Worker* column. He attacked race prejudice and xenophobia: of the Ku Klux Klan, he wrote that "Anybody that gets so far off track as to go around with a sack over his head is just to lose out, well, just because he don't believe in what he's a doing," and in another column he pointed out that "Folks that's born in Foreign Countries can't help it. They went to a lot of work and trouble a gettin' here--most of us is here by accident,

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91. "Woody, Our New Columnist," *DW* 2 April 1940, 7.

92. "Woody Sez," *DW* 2 April 1940, 7.

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anyway."[93] But while he defended immigrants, Guthrie also expressed a characteristic cowboy's skepticism about international involvements, asking his readers, "Why in the devil is the United States so all fired interested in the kingdom of Great Britain? Never was a bigger bunch of thiefs in the world than them fellers of the British Empire." In several columns, he stated his unequivocal opposition to American intervention in the European conflict.[94]

Naturally, Woody also addressed domestic politics. His primary target was Wall Street; when his assertion that he did not like what he saw on Wall Street occasioned a critical response, he admitted that he had indeed been wrong, "because I like all of the picket lines down there." Along these lines, Guthrie regularly attacked the major political parties as lapdogs of entrenched financial interest. After William B. Bankhead was chosen as chairman of the 1940 Democratic National Convention, Guthrie asserted that "[h]is name made him," and when the Republicans selected Willkie, he commented that "I ain't ever been able to pour myself full enough of spirits to put any faith in either a republican or a democrat president."[95] Traveling through Washington, D. C., in May 1940, Woody quoted from Leadbelly's "Bourgeois Blues," and also wrote that "when I just set here and imagine how much money they got in the world I just wonder how everybody's got to be broke." On returning from his trip, he informed his readers, "Boy I been a going through the states almost fast as a WPA Cut--an that's dam fast."[96] As we

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93. "Woody Says Love And KKK Don't Go Together," *DW* 31 May 1940, 7; "Woody Sez Most Here by Accident," *DW* 2 May 1940, 7.

94. "Woody Sez," *DW* 8 April 1940, 7; "Woody Declares He's Got No Yen To Go Enlistin'," *DW* 13 June 1940, 7; "Woody Says No Shell Ever Did Shoot Groceries," *DW* 6 July 1940, 7.

95. "Woody Is Called To Task on His Wall St. Column," *DW* 4 October 1940, 7; "Woody Says No Accident It's Bankhead," *DW* 5 July 1940, 7; "Only Way to Vote Right Is to Vote Left, Says Woody," *SW* 18 August 1940, 7.

96. "Money Plentiful, Says Woody, But Not for the Poor," *DW* 23 May 1940, 7; "Woody's Been Moving As Fast As WPA Cuts," *DW* 20 June 1940, 7.

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might expect, Guthrie had harsh words for the Dies Committee, which he believed was intended "to keep you from spotting anything that's wrong, and to frail the daylights out of you for not putting on a big smile, and just setting there in the middle of the road, not moving a dadburn inch in either direction." The answer to this political and economic perfidy, of course, was to organize. Although he was not actually a member of a union, Guthrie was a staunch advocate of labor groups. During the summer of 1940, when he embarked on a tour of the country, he observed that "I like all of these Union fellers I run onto."[97]

As often as he tackled serious matters, however, Guthrie spent as least as much time on decidedly lighter fare. Many of his early entries detailed the excitement and confusion of a hayseed transplanted into the big city attempting to describe the Empire State Building, the subways, and Broadway, among other notable features.[98] He complained that New York cornbread did not measure up to cornbread from his hometown, and on another occasion sang the praises of Texas hamburgers. Guthrie told his readers about the fictional "hoop snake": "that's the kind that throws his tail into his mouth and rolls where he wants to go. Got a big thorn on the end of his tail and he rolls her up to about 60 per, and he straightens out, and whatever he hits, boy, it's just long gone." He also shared three verses from his 575-verse "Rubaiyat of What?," which he described as "based, at that time, on Mysticism, Nothingness, and Religious Superstition."[99]

Regardless of the subject matter, Woody maintained his persona, but always with tongue slightly in cheek. Even as he studiously projected his cowboy clown character,

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97. "Dies Aim Is To Keep You from Righting Wrongs," *DW* 15 July 1940, 7; "Woody Says He Likes the Union Fellows He Meets," *DW* 1 July 1940, 7.

98. On the Empire State, see "Woody Sez," *DW* 19 March, 1940, 7; on subways, see "Woody Sez," *DW* 21 March and 26 March, 1940, 7; on Broadway see "Woody Sez," *DW* 22 March 1940, 7.

99. "No Cornbread To Suit Woody In New York," *DW* 9 May 1940, 7; "Texas Burgers Best," *DW* 9 May 1940, 7; "Woody Tells All About 'Hoop Snake'," *DW* 30 April 1940, 7; "Rubaiyat of What?," *DW* 12 September 1940, 7.

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Guthrie was not above poking fun at his self-mythologization. This was most evident in one column, allegedly written in response to someone's assertion that he had "been in show business all [his] life and just won't admit it," that took the form of a brief autobiographical sketch:

> I remember when I was sleeping in school, I also bootlegged whiskey 8 hours a day and traveled with my uncle to entertain at school houses with a magic show, and all of his money disappeared along with a Vanishing Act, and then I painted signs for a grocery store up the street 6 years, worked in a drug store 18 hours a day for 8 years, hoboed 9 years, walked 18 years, went hungry 21, sold papers 6, lived in Oklahoma 19, California 4, New York City 29, the Denver Jail 3, Amarillo Jail 4, Santa Fe N. M., 3 . . . Oh yes, I was a Republican 0 years, Democrat 30 minutes, and a Color Changing Tramp 27 1/2. If I was a little better at figures, I'd add this up and see how old I am.[100]

Of course, Guthrie was far from the only individual who contributed to the invention and maintenance of his persona. In June 1940 the *Daily Worker* published a letter from "W. C. McDonald," an Oklahoman transplanted to Washington, D. C., who apparently worked for the paper, and wished to tell Woody that "ever time I read one of your pieces I get home sick."[101] Assuming that the letter was genuine, it demonstrated Guthrie's ability to capture, in his writing, the voice of his native region.

Not long after he began writing his column, Woody's folk authenticity was unofficially validated by the *doyen* of Communist cultural critics. In an expanded edition of his column "Change the World," Mike Gold affected an Oklahoma idiom, saying he

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100. "Woody Says His Columns Do Not Bear Re-Reading," *DW* 18 May 1940, 7.

101. "'Daily' Builder Says Woody's Column Makes Him Homesick," *DW* 8 June 1940, 7.

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had been "infected by [Guthrie's] Okie style." According to Gold, "Woody comes right out of . . . 'The Grapes of Wrath'." The Okie type represented by both Woody and Steinbeck's Joad family "is a symbol of working class America," and Gold, for one, was pleased to welcome "our proletarian Will Rogers," who was a living embodiment of that symbolic type, to the *Daily Worker* family. One week later, sparked by Gold's column, an "Artists and Writers Spring Frolic" was held in Guthrie's honor.[102]

The steady stream of positive publicity, augmented by Guthrie's column, was further supplemented by increasing exposure of the thing that had brought him to New York in the first place--his music. Here, too, the left press, especially the *Daily Worker*, was an active supporter of Guthrie's career. The paper reprinted an article from *Direction* in which Guthrie discussed the lyrics to several of his "Okie songs, or Arkie songs, or just plain old songs of the Migratious Trail." Several months, later, the lyrics to his "Ballad of Harry Bridges" appeared in the *Daily Worker*, which also promoted and re-produced the printed score to "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?" (see example 9.5), an anti-Roosevelt song that was the first Guthrie composition hailed in the leftist press.[103]

Like most of Guthrie's songs, this one is musically unexceptional; the harmonic progression is a basic, blues-derived, I-IV-V, and this structure supports a similarly bare melody, which has many repeated pitches, generally moves stepwise and almost never leaps by more than a third (even leaps of a third usually occur within the context of an arpeggio). Rhythmically it is also fairly unremarkable, although Guthrie does a nice job of text-setting. Obviously, though, since this song was notated only after Guthrie had

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102. Gold, "Pappy Gold Meets Woody And Finds It's Catchin'," *SW* 21 April 1940, 5; "Artists and Writers To Honor Woody at Frolic Next Saturday," *DW* 23 April 1940, 7.

103. Guthrie, "Songs of Migratory Trails," *DW* 16 April 1940, 7; "Ballad of Harry Bridges," *DW* 30 July 1940, 7. Guthrie wrote "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?" after attending the American Youth Congress's meeting in Washington, D. C., at which President Roosevelt scolded the assembled delegates while they sat passively amid sheets of rain.

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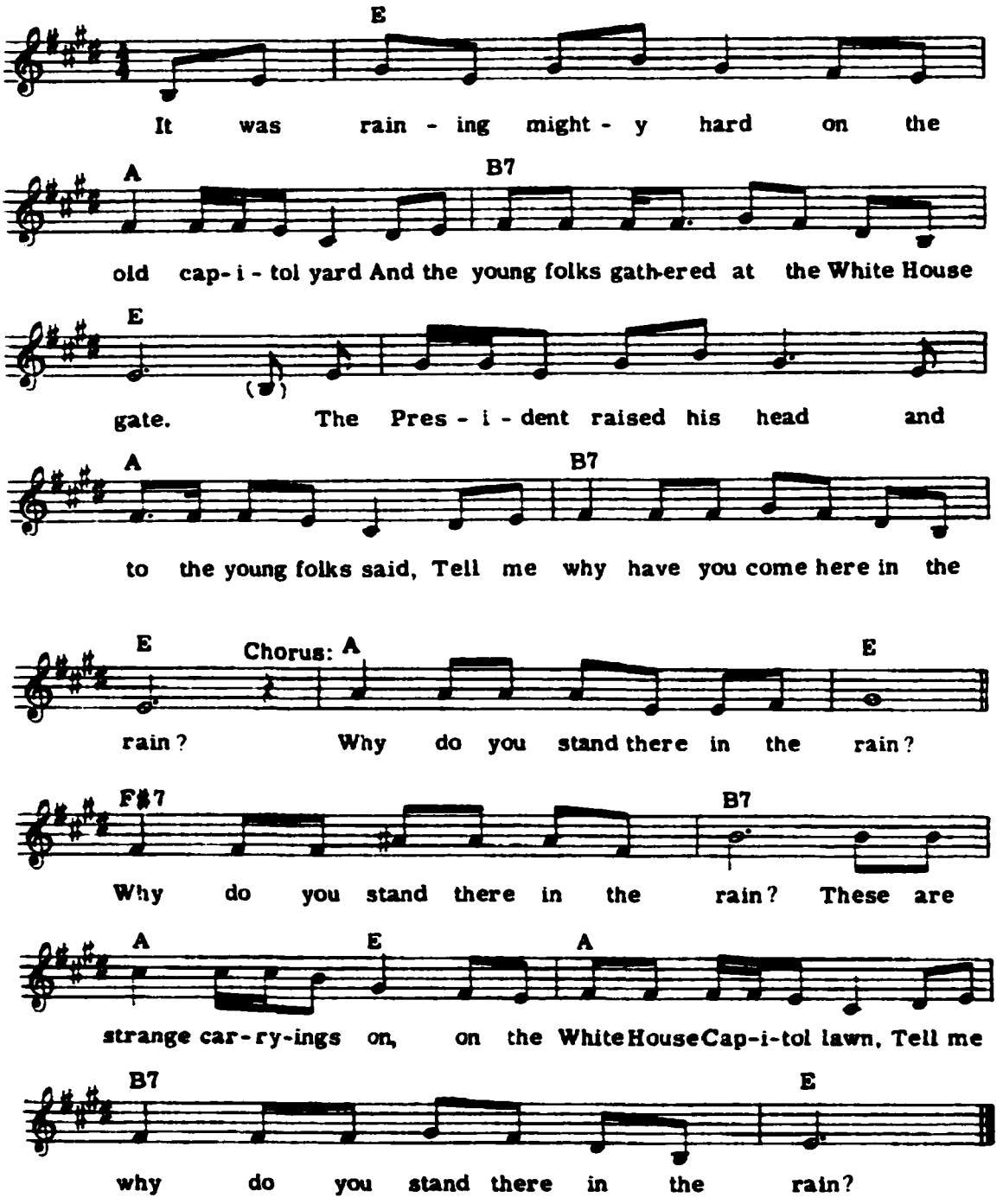
Example 9.5: Guthrie, "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?"[104]



104. WHY DO YOU STAND THERE IN THE RAIN? By Woody Guthrie © Copyright 1967 by WOODY GUTHRIE PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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composed it, the notation is nothing more than an approximation. And at any rate, this song is most notable for its voice; here Guthrie (or his editors) forsook both the rustic voice and the wry humor that characterized his columns, offering instead an angry, slightly stilted voice. As we shall see, this represents a clear exception to Guthrie's typical song-writing practice.

War and Peace

Even as he continued to write songs and columns, Guthrie remained active as a performer. Throughout 1940, he played at a variety of concerts and benefits in New York and elsewhere.[105] He also took full advantage of his presence in the nation's media capital, performing repeatedly on the radio, including an April appearance on CBS's "The Pursuit of Happiness" (which, six months earlier, had hosted *Ballad*'s triumphant premiere) and Lomax's *American School of the Air*. In August, he participated in the pilot of a new show for CBS written by Lomax anddirected by Nicholas Ray--best known for his *Rebel Without a Cause*--called "Back Where I Come From." During its time on the air, "Back Where I Come From" featured such folk-music luminaries as Guthrie, Leadbelly, the Golden Gate Quartet, and Burl Ives, among others.

Guthrie had come to New York to further his musical career, and so in late April he went to the RCA Victor Studios in Camden, New Jersey, to record a group of his "Migratious Trail songs." Guthrie described the recording process in the *Daily Worker*, where he observed, "What I'm glad to see is the Workin' Folks songs getting so popular, as I know they have always led the field." He spoke of his hopes that Victor could convince Steinbeck to write an introduction for the records, and also reproduced the lyrics to his song "Tom Joad," which he called "the best thing I ever done so far."[106]

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105. "Geer, Woody, In Anti-War Songs Tonight," *SW* 10 November 1940, 7; "New Theatre League Ballad Evening Tonight Stars Leadbelly, Woody," *DW* 12 December 1940, 7.

106. Guthrie, "Tom Joad in American Ballad," *DW* 3 May 1940, 7.

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"Tom Joad" is indeed a stronger song than "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?," but it is difficult to say that it is the finest song on *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Throughout the recording, the spotlight is clearly on Guthrie's lyrics, which display the subtle combination of hayseed humor and political astuteness that pervaded his *Daily Worker* columns. But there is also an unexpected emotional range and a narrative ability that had been missing from "Why Do You Stand There," and largely hidden even in his columns. In "Talking Dust Bowl Blues," Guthrie tells the story of a family on the "Migratious Trail" from the Dust Bowl. The narrator is clearly characterized through judicious mis-pronunciations (e.g., "en-*gyne* trouble" and "gas-eye-line"), and the tone is light, although he is narrating a story that is essentially tragic. On "Pretty Boy Floyd," Guthrie creates a traditional-sounding ballad of a western outlaw. At other times, as in "Tom Joad" and "The Great Dust Storm," the mood is decidedly more sober.[107] Although his harmonic range remained limited, on *Dust Bowl Ballads* Guthrie offered listeners some memorable melodies. In particular, "Dusty Old Dust (So Long It's Been Good to Know Yuh)" and "Do Re Mi" have become American folk classics, their simple tunes well known to millions. The critical response, especially in the *Daily Worker*, was highly positive. Mary Reese praised the recording, and one month later Martin McCall, reviewing *Dust Bowl Ballads*, wrote that "the work of Woody Guthrie proves the rich maturity of [American folk] expression." They were joined in their applause by Steinbeck, who agreed to provide an introduction, to Woody's great delight.[108]

Guthrie had fairly steady work, between performing on the occasional radio program, recording *Dust Bowl Ballads*, and writing columns, but he needed to do more than this in order to make a decent living, especially now that his wife and children had

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107. Woody Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Rounder Records 1040).

108. Reese, "Woody Okie Songs on Victor Discs," *DW* 11 July 1940, 7; McCall, "Woody's Records Reflect Hard Life of Migrants," *SW* 11 August 1940, 7; "Woody Is Happy Steinbeck Likes His Recordings," *DW* 8 June 1940, 7.

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joined him in New York. He had made enough of a name for himself to attract the attention of major sponsors, and in November 1940 Guthrie began his stint as star of a radio show called "Pipe Smoking Time," which was broadcast on CBS and sponsored by the Model Tobacco Company. He was miserable playing the role of *de facto* corporate spokesman, and the show lasted barely more than one month.[109] Guthrie described his reservations regarding such performances in a passage from his semi-fictional memoir *Bound for Glory*, published in 1943. Here Guthrie re-created a conversation he had had with Geer about an audition at the Rainbow Room that Guthrie had intentionally blown: "You know dam good an' well I'd play fer my beans an' cornbread, an' drink branch water, 'er anything else ta play an' sing fer folks that likes it, folks that knows it, an' lives what I'm singin' 'bout. I'm all screwed up in my head. They try ta tell me if I wanta eat an' stay alive, I gotta sing their dam old phony junk!"[110]

Guthrie's distaste for music as a profession was due in part to his anti-corporate ideology, but it also sprang from his native stubbornness. He did not deal well with authority, and despite the doctrinaire politics of his columns, he had an intense dislike for being told what to think. His aversion to consensus was doubly tested throughout 1939, as popular radio sought songs that were in step with the heightened nationalism of the period. That year, as Guthrie drove across the country listening to his car radio, the nation's airwaves had carried Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America" with great frequency. The Irving Berlin song, written two decades earlier for his musical *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!*, was revised in 1938, when the producers of Smith's radio show looked for a patriotic song for her to perform on the twentieth anniversary of the Armistice of World War I.[111] It was an instant success, and as such, a clear provocation to Guthrie, who

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109. Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 177-80.

110. Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: Plume, 1983; originally pub. E. P. Dutton, 1943), 307.

111. Edward Jablonski, *Irving Berlin: American Troubadour* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 192-93.

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responded by penning "God Blessed America," which became perhaps his best known song under its later title, "This Land is Your Land."[112]

But despite all of his maverick tendencies, Guthrie also enjoyed being part of New York's leftist musical community. At the Steinbeck Committee program that had launched his New York career, Guthrie had met many of the leading lights in this community, and he remained in contact with most of them, including Aunt Molly, Leadbelly, and Earl Robinson. All three appeared in his *Daily Worker* columns, and the latter two often appeared with Guthrie on "Back Where I Come From."[113] In late 1940, this core group of leftist folk artists was augmented by what might be considered the folk answer to the Composers Collective. The parallel between the two groups is particularly apt considering that one of the founding members of the Almanac Singers was Pete Seeger, Charles Seeger's eldest son. Seeger, who had recently dropped out of college in order to pursue a career as a folk musician--initially under the assumed name of "Pete Bowers"--was joined in the group by Lee Hays, a teacher at the Commonwealth Labor College, and Millard Lampell, Hays's roommate in Greenwich Village. In February 1941, the Almanac Singers made their public debut at the 1941 American Youth Congress, the same meeting that, one year earlier, had moved Guthrie to write "Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?" The group quickly caught the attention of the New York left; in March 1941, the *Daily Worker* profiled them and quoted Theodore Dreiser's

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112. For more on the origins and subsequent transformations of the song, see Mark Allan Jackson, "Is This Song Your Song Anymore?: Revisioning Woody Guthrie's 'This Land Is Your Land'," *AM* 20/3 (Fall 2002): 249-76.

113. "'Want Good Chow?' Asks Woody--Go To Aunt Mollys'," *DW* 4 May 1940, 7; "Woody Says He Likes the Way Leadbelly Sings," *DW* 29 May 1940, 7; "Woody Sez" (on Robinson), *DW* 25 March 1940, 7.

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comment to the group that "[i]f there were six more teams like you, we could save America."[114]

Within several months, the group had grown, acquiring one more permanent member, Peter Hawes, and a number of other adherents who occasionally performed with them, including Bess Lomax (Alan's sister), Josh White, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Arthur Stern, and Earl Robinson, who occasionally acted as director. During this period, the Almanacs became fixtures in leftist circles, performing in both public and private venues; among the former was their March concert for the American Youth Theatre, while the latter included the regular Sunday-afternoon rent-party concerts held at "The Loft," the apartment on West 12th Street where Hays, Lampell, and Seeger lived. Regular visitors to "The Loft" included such leftist luminaries as Mike Gold, Mother Bloor, Dashiell Hammet, Blitzstein, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890-1964), for whom Joe Hill had written his song "Rebel Girl." At the rent-parties, this group was treated to performances by musicians including Leadbelly, Aunt Molly, ballad-singer Richard Dyer-Bennett, Sonny Terry, Burl Ives, and Josh White.[115]

Such informal settings were perfect for the Almanacs, who often composed communally, and who, as Guthrie once said, were the only group he knew of that rehearsed onstage, that is, as they performed. In fact, this informal ethos was an essential aspect of the group's approach, and contrasted starkly with the perfectionist professional that characterized Leadbelly's performance practice. The Almanacs' amateurish approach style said volumes about their folk ideal; like Alan Lomax, they conceived folk music as quintessentially the music of non-professionals. It was music for singers, not for

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114. Most of the information about the Almanacs in this paragraph and those that follow comes from R. Serge Denisoff, "Take It Easy, But Take It': The Almanac Singers," *Journal of American Folklore* 83 (January--March 1970): 21-32; Dreiser quoted in George Lewis, "America Is in Their Songs," *DW* 24 March 1941, 7.

115. "Youth Theatre to Take Part in Almanac Singers Ballad Program," *DW* 27 March 1941, 7; "Ballads for Labor Highlight Program of Almanac Singers," *DW* 28 March 1941, 7; Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 153.

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spectators, and as such, it would have been inappropriate to waste time worrying about presentation. Of course, the working class, from which this music had ostensibly originated, did not always appreciate the Almanacs' casual demeanor. Arthur Stern, a sometime-Almanac, described the group's performance at the Meatcutters' Union's annual banquet, held at the Hotel New Yorker. The Almanacs, dressed sloppily as usual,

> went on after some adagio dancers. The lights lowered and we started to sing our first number, and somewhere in that first number we heard this crash onstage. It was followed by another crash, and then hot and heavy. They were throwing china off the tables, actually skimming plates at us. They were literally doing this. It was because we looked like shit and all these people were in evening clothes. My mother had her hair blued and my father was dressed up, for once in his life, in good clothes. Working-class people dress up and they don't want their entertainers to look worse than they do during the work week, and we were putting on this big romantic, proletarian affectation. They finally told us to get the hell off and leave. They never even paid us.[116]

Nevertheless, the Almanacs' core constituency found their approach quite appealing, and the group's reputation continued to grow throughout 1941. That May, they branched out into new areas of musical activity. As the newly expanded Almanac Singers and Players--a group which included a young Carol Channing, who had debuted several months earlier in *No For an Answer*--they presented a theatrical revue called *Sign of the Times*. The show, which featured straight musical performances as well as skits, burlesques, and a dramatic monologue, received positive notice from the *Daily Worker*'s

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116. Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 222-23.

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Ralph Warner, and Blitzstein called it "The freshest breeze the theatre has had in many a year."[117] The show also yielded a small songbook published by the New Theatre League. Two of the selections, reproduced in the *Daily Worker*, illustrate the centrality of anti-war songs to the group's repertoire during this period (see example 9.6).

Example 9.6: (a) "Get Out and Stay Out of War!"[118]

The songs also showcase the Almanacs' compositional range. "Get Out and Stay Out of War" begins with a verse section that seems to establish a tonic of C-major, although it does so in an unorthodox manner, with B-flat figuring prominently in a harmonic pattern that proceeds irregularly before settling on a C7 chord. Only then does it become clear that, in the overall shape of the song, C is in fact the dominant of the tonic F. Retrospectively, this makes the B- flats of the verse seem eminently conventional, but this would not be apparent upon a first hearing. "Franklin Oh Franklin," on the other

117. "Almanac Singers And Players in Debut May 15th," *DW* 13 May 1941, 7; "Folk Singers In Original Revue Tonight," *DW* 15 May 1941, 7; Warner, "'Sign of the Times' Spirited Labor Revue," *DW* 17 May 1941; "The Freshest Theatre Breeze in Many Years," *SW* 8 June 1941, 7.

118. *DW* 7 June, 1941, 7. The lyrics read: "We hear the same old speeches/We heard in Seventeen./ They call it national unity/But war is what they mean./Get out! Get out! Get out and stay out of war!/Stay out! Stay out! Get out and stay out of war!"

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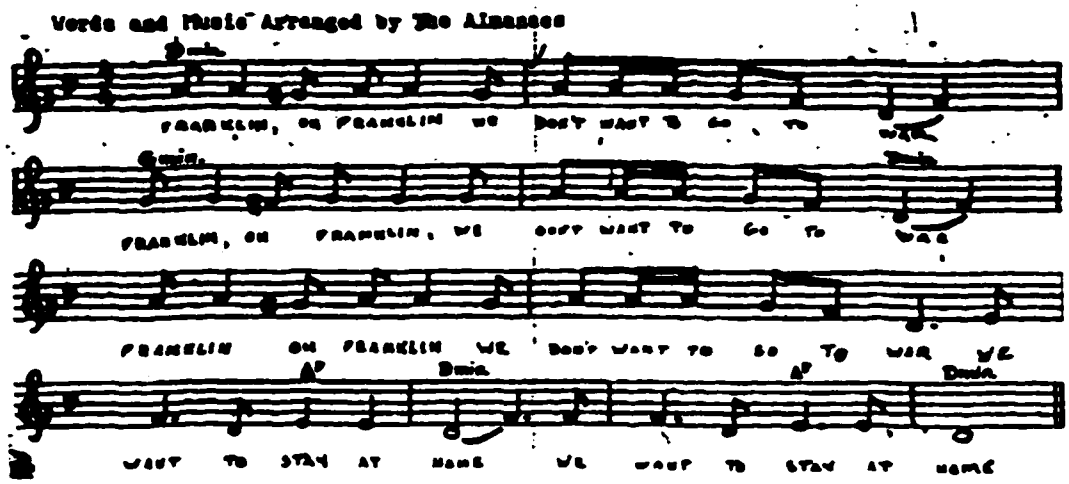
Example 9.6: (b) "Franklin Oh Franklin"[119]



hand, is harmonically unambiguous, tracing a basic blues progression. Here, however, the conventional chord pattern is offset by the song's irregularstructure, which telescopes the typical twelve-bar blues into ten measures, closing with a repeated tag line reminiscent of "Joe Hill."

May 1941 was a particularly busy month for the Almanacs, who, in addition to their stage activities, also saw the release of their first commercial recording. Titled *Songs for John Doe*, the recording was financed by John Hammond, Earl Robinson, and *New Masses* treasurer Eric Bernay, and released by Bernay's Keynote Records. It consisted entirely of original anti-war songs, which the *Worker* called "authentic American ballads packing a real punch."[120] However, sales were relatively poor, and it just may have been the worst-timed topical recording in history: the month after it hit stores, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union, and causing the previously isolationist CPUSA to execute a rapid turnaround and warmly embrace the possibility of American

119. *DW* 13 June 1941, 7.

120. "Songs for John Doe' Recorded," *SW* 18 May 1941, 7.

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intervention to aid the Soviets. Bernay, a good soldier, quickly pulled *Songs for John Doe* from stores.

Their next recording, released in July on Keynote, was called *Talking Union*, and tackled issues of labor and capital that remained fair game on the post-Barbarossa left. *Talking Union*, which featured contributions from Josh White, was well-reviewed (twice, in fact) in the *Daily Worker*.[121] That July, the group embarked on a national tour, but before doing so they recorded two more albums. Both *Sea Shanteys* and *Sodbuster Ballads* were political only to the extent that traditional folksongs had taken on progressive ideological associations, for both albums were, as their titles indicate, collections of songs that were characterized more by their provenance than by any specific messages. This expansive view of the valuable folksong repertoire was relatively new on the left, and clearly owes much to Guthrie, whose influence on the New York scene had remained strong despite his return to Los Angeles in early 1941.

Guthrie had previously written several columns on the uses of folksong, writing that "in times of war and stuff like that, about the best thing that any country can do is to dig out it's [*sic*] real old honest to goodness folk material." He also asserted that because folksongs are "songs that shows you what folks think . . . real Folk Songs is pretty rare." Thus, what people needed to do was write their own songs, which reflected their own experiences, and would by definition be folksongs.[122] The Almanacs were also plainly indebted to the conversational voice of Guthrie's lyrics, and when he was in New York he often performed with the group. Although at this point their songs were largely concerned with castigating the Roosevelt Administration, Guthrie spent May and June of 1941 employed by the Bonneville Power Administration (a New Deal agency similar to

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121. "Those Almanac Singers, Their Songs Are Here!," *SW* 20 July 1941, 7; Lawrence Emery, "Union Idea, Fine Music in 'Almanac' Records," *DW* 6 August 1941, 7.

122. "Dig Up the Real Folk Material Says Woody," *DW* 4 November 1940, 7; "Real Folk Songs Are Pretty Rare, Asserts Woody," *DW* 26 September 1940, 7; "Woody Advises Folks to Write Union Songs," *DW* 24 June 1940, 7.

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the TVA, but situated in the Pacific Northwest), writing songs that celebrated that organization's achievements. In thirty days' time, he produced more than two dozen songs. But these were not merely propagandistic jingles; rather, Guthrie's BPA songs represent perhaps his most impressive body of work, including "Roll On, Columbia" and "Pastures of Plenty." Joe Klein has noted their stylistic diversity, as well as the richness of Guthrie's lyrics, which combined Whitmanesque catalogs and poetic descriptions of nature and man.[123]

The songs were, in their blending of the modern (technology, powerful government action, and Whitmanesque syntax) with the traditional (pastoral imagery, musical idiom, and other, conversational-style singing), the purest examples of Guthrie's ideal of composed folksongs, which he noted in a letter he wrote to the Almanacs while traveling separately in July 1941:

> Boys, what I think needs to be done to old time folk songs is not to give over an inch to jazz or swing as far as the melody goes, but what we've got to do is to bring American Folk Songs up to date. This dont mean to complicate our music a tall [*sic*], but simply to industrialize, and mechanize the words. Why should we waste our time trying to wind the calendar back? Our old standby songs were no doubt super stream lined when they first got out, and possibly that is the reason why they spread like a prairie fire. Within my visit to New York I did not have the pleasure of coming across but a few songs of the wheels, whistles, steams, boilers, shafts, cranks, operators, tuggers, pulleys, engines, and all of the well known gadgets that make up a modern factory.[124]

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123. Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 201-02.

124. Letter to Almanac Singers 8 July 1941. Reprinted in Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait*, ed. Harold Leventhal and David Marsh (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 53.

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Throughout late 1941, the Almanacs seemed to hew more closely to Woody's plan, as demonstrated in the *Daily Worker*'s coverage of the group. Don Russell, profiling the group in August, quoted Millard Lampell's statement that "[w]hen we make up a new song we always fall back on the old folk song form which is pretty familiar to everyone. Often we adopt the music of an old song and fit new words to it." In a feature on the group published in September, just after they had concluded their tour, Lee Hays described the hundreds of songs they had discovered while on the road. Finally, in an essay signed by the group, they denigrated the music industry populated by "fake songwriters . . . with a certain more or less well-set pattern of music," and insisted that "The woods are full of food honest musicians and song writers, artists, and actors of all kinds."[125] All that was needed was to "Decide which side you're on, and say to your own self."

The Almanacs saw themselves, and wished to be seen, as inheritors of a living tradition of dissent. *Talking Union* was dedicated to Joe Hill, and it featured, in addition to a number of original songs, the borrowed "Which Side Are You On?" As discussed in a *Daily Worker* article from June 1941, the song originated in Harlan Country, Kentucky, during the bloody miners' strikes of 1930.[126] Like Aunt Molly--perhaps *with* Aunt Molly--it had migrated to New York City, and in the process shaped regional and national ideas of American folksongs. By the latter part of the Depression, "Which Side Are You On?" had become a standard on the left, and a model for political songs. Its

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125. Russell, "They Sing Hard-Hitting Songs That Belong to the People," *DW* 14 August 1941, 7; Lillian Lowenfels, "One Million Americans Have Heard 'Almanacs'," *DW* 2 September 1941, 7; Almanac Singers, "'Like a Grass Fire in a Gale'," *DW* 20 October 1941, 7.

126. "'Come All You Poor Workers,' She Sang to the Harlan Miners," *DW* 4 June 1941, 7. Joe Klein notes that Guthrie himself owned a copy of the Wobblies' *Little Red Songbook*. In addition, when the group moved into "Almanac House," near West Tenth St., in September 1941, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn brought them many of Joe Hill's papers. Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 84, 214.

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melody was simple, repetitive, and catchy, and its lyrics were adaptable to any struggle. Originally intended for the struggle between miners and their bosses, it could be generalized to address labor and capital. When, in 1940, a special committee of the New York legislature attempted to purge communist professors from college faculties, Earl Robinson composed new, topical verses that addressed the subject, while retaining the song's chorus.[127] It was also a perfect song for the period before the United States entered World War II; whether one was in favor of such intervention or opposed, one could ask whether the United States was on the side of progress or reaction.

During the summer and autumn of 1941, however, the song, and its sentiments, were increasingly applied only to international affairs. That June, Roosevelt made clear that military preparation took precedence over labor disputes, sending 500 soldiers with bayonets to take a North American Aviation plant in Inglewood, California, back from strikers. Two weeks later, Barbarossa further clarified matters, and essentially finalized the conflict's battle lines. In late October, when a German U-Boat sank the American destroyer USS *Reuben James* off the coast of Iceland, killing almost one hundred sailors, the Almanacs responded with a song that became one of their best known efforts. Penned largely by Guthrie, the verses of "Reuben James" constituted a mordant roll call, cataloguing the Americans killed on board the ship. Seeger and Lampell contributed the song's chorus, "Tell me, what were their names?/Tell me, what were their names?/Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?" Less than six months removed from the staunchly isolationist *Songs for John Doe*, the group had joined the growing consensus that recognized America's obligation to become involved in the war.

On the first Sunday of December, Almanac House was ringing with the sounds of one of the group's regular hootenannies when Arthur Stern interrupted the activities to announce the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor. As the nation entered the war, the

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127. *DW* 19 August 1941, 7.

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sympathy for political dissent that had characterized the 1930s was superseded--if not entirely replaced--by an outspoken insistence on national unity even among the paragons of the left. In a sense, the new political mood was the logical culmination of the Popular Front vision, as democratic nations like the United States and England made common cause with the Soviet Union in order to defeat the forces of fascism. Here, at last, the forces of progressivism would do battle with an enemy that embodied a transcendantly evil ideology. But because the scope of Nazism's moral bestiality was so much greater than that of market capitalism's systemic flaws, the economic aspects of the Popular Front program were lost. Likewise, the war effort soon had the support of virtually all of the musical dissenters of Depression-era New York, who, as they defended America against worldwide fascism, also, to some degree, stopped arguing for the semi-utopian American political ideal that had been their *raisons d'etre* for the better part of a decade.

American Music Defined

According to Michael Kammen, this new cultural and political Americanism first achieved critical mass in 1939, a year that, in his words, "seems to have marked a clear turning point in the history of American culture as well as international affairs, and their transformations were quite clearly connected." Kammen adduces a number of examples from the cultural realm to support this theory, observing that 1939 was the year in which Carl Sandburg completed his epic biography of Abraham Lincoln; sculptor Gutzon Borglum all but completed the creation of Mount Rushmore; E. P. Conkle's play *Prologue to Glory*, which also celebrated Lincoln, was a great box-office success; the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Life in America" exhibit "marked the first time that genre paintings had ever been used to provide a kind of visual historical narrative"; the inter-disciplinary discipline of American Studies began to make inroads in America's

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institutions of higher learning; and, of course, Robinson and Robeson collaborated on *Ballad for Americans*.[128]

What happened in American culture in 1939 was that a canonical vision of the nation's cultural tradition, expressed in each of the items listed by Kammen, became a dominant trope in American popular culture and institutions. In this vaguely liberal picture of America, the nation seemed a beacon of hope, its mythology full of martyrs to just causes (like Lincoln). To be sure, throughout the first two years of the European conflict, New York's musical left continued to applaud the contributions of European musicians. Much of this attention continued to focus on Russian and Soviet music. Shostakovich's resurrected reputation remained ascendant, as reflected in a number of *Daily Worker* features and reviews. A number of his works were also performed at a Carnegie Hall tribute to Russian music featuring Robeson and Goodman, among others, in late April 1941.[129]

Shostakovich and his peers were contrasted with such musical "reactionaries" as Jan Sibelius (1865-1957), who railed against the Soviet invasion of Finland, thus showing himself to be "up to his ears in politics," as Mike Gold put things.[130] Of course, Toscanini remained a symbol of musical resistance to fascism, but it was telling that he had been joined in America by a number of other European musicians, most of them far less outspoken in their politics. In October 1940, Martin McCall reported on the difficulties that confronted these musical refugees, who, like their American peers, found

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128. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 509.

129. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 253; O. V. Clyde, "Tribute to Russian Music at Carnegie Hall," *DW* 1 May 1941, 7; Martin McCall, "The Powerful, Intelligent Language of Shostakovich," *DW* 29 February 1940, 7; "Shostakovitch's Fifth Stirs Audience Here," *DW* 11 January 1941, 7; Alexander Gaymor, "Shostakovich, Musical Genius," *SW* 9 March 1941, Sec. 2, 4; Dmitri Shostakovich, "How I Re-Orchestrated the Opera 'Boris Goudunov'," *SW* 27 July 1941, Sec. 2, 4.

130. Mike Gold, "Change the World: Even a Musician Is Capable of Skunking in Politics," *DW* 29 July 1941, 7.

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it increasingly hard to make a living merely from commissions and performances alone. Nevertheless, European emigrés continued to seek refuge in the United States. Although the nation had, over the previous half century or more, sent a vast majority of its promising young composers across the pond for training, it now found itself home to many of the western world's best-known musicians.[131]

But incredibly, at the very moment when the United States could with some justification claim to be the protector of the European cultural traditions--as embodied in their most prominent musical incarnations--to which it had so long been in thrall, the nation's critics, audiences, and musicians were all participating in the codification of a distinctly American musical culture. This musical vision, as we have seen, was to a large extent influenced by ideological considerations. It was most clearly articulated in a pair of programs offered in New York during the 1939-40 concert season. In October 1939, ASCAP's seven-day Festival of American Music, mentioned earlier (see p. 497) offered its audiences a panoramic view of the nation's musical heritage. Each program presented one particular aspect of that heritage; on successive nights, the performances showcased opera and musical comedy, African-American music, American band music, folk songs, classical compositions, swing, and symphonic works. There was also a matinee performance of children's music. Although the *Daily Worker*'s Hugh J. Riddell lamented the absence of traditional labor songs, as well as of works by "composers of workers song," including Robinson and Ives (!), the festival's inclusive conception of American music closely tracked that advanced by the left in the years since the Popular Front's inception.[132]

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131. McCall, "Refugee Musicians Face Many Problems," *SW* 6 October 1940, 7; Martin McCall, "Toscanini--Musical Wonder of Our Times," *DW* 22 October 1939, 7; William Wolff, "America: Refuge for Musicians," *DW* 29 September 1939, 7.

132. Riddell, "Carnegie Music Festival Honors Native Composers," *DW* 8 October 1939, 7.

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That the New York left continued to hold a similar view of American music was demonstrated the following May at a one-night American Music Festival sponsored by the Dorothy Parker Spanish Children's Relief Fund. Held at Mecca Temple, the program was organized in four sections. As announced in several preview articles in the *Daily Worker*, the "concert" section included selections from *No For an Answer*, works by William Schuman, Alex North, Morton Gould, and Paul Creston, and excerpts from Robinson's highly anticipated *The People, Yes*. Next up was the program's folk section, featuring the Golden Gate Quartet, Leadbelly, Guthrie, and Jelly Roll Morton. Theater and dance were represented by several Harold Rome songs, and the concert concluded with a set by Teddy Wilson and his quartet.[133]

All of this music had been either created or supported by the New York left, which thus, in a very real way, shaped many of the most central elements of those sounds that, to this day, constitute America in music.

133. Lou Cooper, "Modern Music At Festival," *DW* 4 May 1940, 7; "Stars of Stage, Concert In Tonight's Music Festival," *DW* 8 May 1940, 7.

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Epilogue

The absorption of the New York radicals into the American political and musical mainstreams, a process that had been ongoing since at least the middle of the 1930s, was symbolically consummated in December 1941, as the nation passed from Depression into war. Two days after Christmas, Earl Robinson performed at a dinner at the White House; at Eleanor Roosevelt's request he sang "Joe Hill," thus bringing the story of one of the left's greatest political martyrs into the very center of the nation's political power structure. Within a month, Robinson had also begun to set portions of President Roosevelt's State of the Union address to music as part of his attempt to "sing the war effort."[1] The mutual embrace of the radical musician and the fount of political power, united under a military standard, makes for a striking historical tableau, and also acts as a metaphor for the large-scale movement that is the subject of this study.

Throughout this study, I have attempted to show how a small group of musicians, active largely in New York City, and bound together by their shared political views, collaborated in the creation of a recognizably American musical culture. I have done so largely by demonstrating the significance that these figures accorded to these views, as expressed in their music, their criticism, and their associations. This has necessarily meant that my investigation of the various figures and organizations has been organized primarily around particular moments, pieces, essays, or productions. It may seem that I have rested my conclusions on an accretion of raw evidence, as if merely by establishing the leftist leanings of Copland, Guthrie, the Seegers and Lomaxes, Blitzstein, Robeson, Gershwin, Leadbelly and other figures of recognized significance, then it necessarily follows that the musical traditions that they did so much to establish must in some fundamental way be leftist. But before I conclude my discussion about of the musical

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1. Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an America* nm, 121-29.

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legacy of the New York left, I want to augment this evidence with a brief examination of several major historical trends whose confluence provides crucial support for my argument. The first few of these are interconnected, mostly uncontroversial, and essentially "supermusical," in that while they directly affected music, they also had consequences for the entire fabric of society. The last is wholly independent of the others, clearly debatable, and entirely musical. When viewed in combination with one another and with the evidence presented in the body of the dissertation, it is my hope that we will better understand how it came to be that much of modern American music was built on a foundation of radical politics.

One of these interlocking developments was a shift in the basic relationship of the American public to the production and consumption of goods, including music. Lawrence Levine has argued that during the course of the Depression Americans moved away from the historical "producer" consciousness and towards the "consumer" consciousness that prevails to this day. For instance, Levine notes a difference between the characteristics emphasized in the popular biographies of the nineteen-twenties and those of the following decade. The former, according to Levine, typically heralded "examples of success that presumably could be imitated," while during the Thirties, the focus "was no longer on how their subjects rose to success but what they did with it [i. e., how they spent the capital, viewed in terms of wealth, fame, or power, that they had accumulated]."[2]

At the same time, social and economic conditions were shifting, enabling millions of Americans to enact the consumption that was expected of them. The increasingly widespread availability of disposable income played a major role in the entrance of large numbers of new consumers into the marketplace. Much of this was due to the massive expansion occasioned by America's move to a wartime economy, which had the nation's

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2. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression" in Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*, 222–23.

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industrial engine churning at record levels. As David Kennedy notes, in addition to erasing the high unemployment figures of the 1930s, the war-related industrial boom also provided work for more than ten million Americans who entered the labor force for the first time, either because they had reached adulthood (and thus the labor market) during the Depression, or because, as in the case of roughly 3.5 million women, they "would not normally have sought work even in a full-employment peacetime economy." Moreover, many of these new jobs were created as a result of generous government contracts and thus "paid fabulously well," in Kennedy's words.[3]

The social legislation of the New Deal also played a part in this process: by expanding the government-sponsored social safety net--which now included such features as Social Security and unemployment insurance, as well as such legislation as the Glass-Steagall, Truth in Securities, and Wagner Acts, not to mention the numerous alphabet agencies--the New Deal offered workers an unprecedented degree of economic security, and freed up money that would previously have gone to supporting elderly relatives or savings against a layoff. This, in turn, allowed vast numbers of Americans to purchase and consume non-essential items. Although wartime rationing restricted the availability of food, industrial commodities (chiefly rubber, metals, and fuel), and clothing materials, the war nevertheless transformed America into what Kennedy calls "a glittering consumer's paradise." But even in this new Eden, musicians, like all other workers, remained both buyers and objects for sale.

Michael Chanan has discussed the economic position of musicians in western Europe and the United States in terms of the labor theory of value, wherein musicians, like all other workers, are valued (and, theoretically, compensated) according to the amount of financial worth they produce. The valuation of most workers in early western economies could thus be calculated by estimating their relative contributions to the worth

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3. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 644.

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of the goods they produced; an apprentice instrument maker (for example) would be worth far less than his master, assuming that the latter is more proficient at the most complex and technically demanding aspects of the craft. This situation is complicated, however, when the workers in question produce no tangible product. Thus, Chanan notes that Marx discussed the strangeness of an economic system wherein professionals such as doctors and lawyers possessed the same economic (as opposed to financial) status as servants and clowns. At the time of Marx's writing, as at all times until early in the twentieth century, musicians, too--with the exception of composers--produced what Adam Smith called a "perishable service" that "does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject, or vendible commodity, which endures after the labour is past."[4]

With the rise of commercial recording, however, musicians became workers in the classic sense, and their worth could be deduced from the relative values of their recordings. The ongoing disputes between ASCAP and the AFM on one side and commercial broadcasters and record labels studios on the other, as well as the formation of the American Composers Alliance, illustrate musicians' awareness of the need for new structural and organizational apparati to deal with the changing economics of music. In short, during the course of the 1930s, American musicians joined the community of professional workers, demonstrating the broad applicability of Irving Kristol's statement that "the Thirties were America's last amateur decade . . . Everything was amateurish about it: its economics, its politics, its foreign policy, even its radicalism."[5] But by the end of the decade, according to Kristol, professionalism had become the word of the day.

We should not be at all surprised that Kristol, the young radical turned neoconservative prophet, views the amateurism of Depression-era politics with a

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4. Chanan, *Musica Practica: The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism* (New York: Verso, 1994), 144–47, and passim.

5. Irving Kristol, "Ten Years in a Tunnel: Reflections on the Thirties," in *The Thirties: A Reconsideration*, 7.

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bemused air at once nostalgic and critical. Certainly, despite the aesthetic appeal of government by amateurs, when we consider how often this was simply an excuse for government by cronyism and appointment by nepotism the end of amateurism in policy-making can be seen as largely beneficial. In the musical realm, however, where the consequences of technical imperfection are trivial (or at any rate confined to that particular sphere of activity), the trend towards professionalization seems in retrospect somewhat more ambiguous. So how did it come about?

The answer lies in a combination of social and technological transformations that took place during the period and had as their nexus New York City. I have already described the nation's shift during the Depression from a producer to a consumer mentality. This process coincided with a profusion of new technologies that enabled the consumption, in material form, of cultural products (specifically music), and this confluence of large-scale trends had vast consequences for the places of music and musicians in American life. The primary factors in this change were the rise of sound movies (particularly musicals), commercial recording, and, especially, radio. Daniel J. Czitrom notes that in the heady early days of the radio industry, when broadcasting was still an emerging field, radio "did not proceed as an independent commercial enterprise, but . . . instead became basically a merchandising offshoot." According to Czitrom, early broadcasters fell into three classes: "those selling radio sets; those seeking goodwill and free advertising, such as newspapers, hotels, and department stores; and religious and educational institutions. For example, of the 570 stations licensed in 1922, radio and electrical manufacturers owned 231; newspapers owned 70; educational institutions owned 65; and department stores owned 30."[6] This condition was solidified in early 1920s under the supervision of Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce.

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6. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 72.

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By the 1930s, commercial domination of the nation's airwaves had become the order of day. Predictably, this led to a narrowing of the perspectives that reached the public via their radios. Czitrom describes the effect this had on broadcast news:

> Where a network or station require a script before a talk, it might demand changes or simply cancel. Political candidates from minority parties frequently could not even buy time for campaign talks. Critiques of public utilities or banks, subjects such as pacifism, and virtually any unorthodox views brought down the hand of censorship. If one relied on radio for news in the 1930s, one might learn very little about a critical movement of the period, namely, the upsurge in organized labor. The most powerful station in the country, WLW in Cincinnati . . . followed an explicit policy stating: "No reference to strikes is to be made on any news bulletin broadcast over our stations." NBC often canceled programs that might undermine "public confidence and faith."[7]

Musical programming, which increasingly occurred under the auspices of prominent corporate sponsors, was similarly affected. Although the percentage of broadcasts that featured music decreased throughout the 1930s, eclipsed by huge spikes in evening talk shows, daytime dramas, and variety shows, there was one illustrative exception: radio stations devoted greater proportions of their programming to broadcasts of pre-recorded performances at the end of the decade than at the beginning. Moreover, there were substantial increases in the aggregate hours of night-time programs of concert music and day-time programs of popular music, a breakdown that clearly suggests a growing generational schism in the musical realm; daytime radio was most likely listened to by

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7. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 82.

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children, whereas night-time programming was the province of adults, or at least whole families.[8] Of course, the ultimate reason for such programming discrepancies was that broadcasting had become fundamentally a marketing tool, and sponsors were increasingly discriminating about their target audiences.

It is likely no coincidence that the growth of the broadcast industry dovetailed in a significant way with the rising importance of corporate market research, surely one of the hallmarks of modern capitalism and consumer culture. And although market research had its roots in the print advertising of the first two decades of the twentieth century, it also seems fair to agree with Czitrom's assertion that "[t]he triumph of commercial broadcasting represented a substantial victory for the ideology of consumption in American life."[9]

Music, which had become an integral part of the profit-making apparatus of modern broadcasting, was incorporated into the very fabric of industrial life, confirming Alexis de Tocqueville's prediction that "[d]emocratic nations . . . [will] cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it. They will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful."[10] Perhaps the most extreme realization of this idea was Muzak, which, as noted earlier, originated during the Depression. In 1977, Jane Jarvis, then the vice president and director of music programming and recording at Muzak stated that it "was never intended to be anything more than what it is: a tool for management. Besides being a pleasant sound, it also has the physiological effect of overcoming fatigue." Evan Eisenberg has called Muzak "architecture of time on a titanic scale," asserting that the basic idea behind Muzak was "conceived by a brigadier general who wanted to pump it

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8. For precise programming figures, see table in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 84.

9. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 76, 125.

10. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* vol II, trans. Henry Reeve, rev. Francis Bowen, ed. PhillipsBradley (NY: Vintage, 1990), 48; translation originally New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

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into the trenches of the First World War and [was employed] in the munitions factories of the Second."[11] Similarly, by 1921, Thomas Edison had seen the potential impact of recorded music on modern existence; in an ad booklet touting recordings of "mood music," the father of recording technologies described how he aimed to "treat music from an entirely new viewpoint—the viewpoint of *what it will do for you.*"[12] When the act of listening to music is divorced from the making of music, as in the case of broadcasts and recordings, music itself becomes an object, rather than a process or an experience. From there it is just a short step to the instrumental (in the utilitarian sense) view of music espoused by Edison; music becomes a tool that can be bought ready-made.

In addition, easier access to the musical activities of remote performers can have a paralyzing effect on public participation in music-making. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton have written on the "narcotizing dysfunction" of modern media, which they believe gives the listener or viewer a false sense of accomplishment, causing them to mistake passive consumption for creative action. They were particularly concerned with how this affected political action:

> As an increasing [amount] of time is devoted to reading and listening, a decreasing share is available for organized action. The individual reads accounts of issues and problems and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualized, rather remote connection with organized social action is not activated. The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and

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11. Jarvis quoted in *Edison, Musicians, and the Phonograph: A Century in Retrospect*, ed. John Harvith and Susan Edwards Harvith (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 312; Eisenberg, *Recording Angel*, 79.

12. Quoted in *Edison, Musicians, and the Phonograph*, 14.

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> action. . . . He comes to mistake *knowing* about problems of the day for *doing* something about them.[13]

Similarly, in the age of radio and the phonograph, although music became more present in people's lives than before, it was experienced primarily from a passive, spectator-like vantage point.

As Evan Eisenberg observes, prior to the advent of musical recordings (and, we might add, radio), "any playing of music (with the single exception of a musician's playing for himself) was perforce a social event. . . people got together, and to simplify matters they got together regularly. Such practicalities had always supported music's link with ritual. When the phonograph arrived, much of that scaffolding collapsed."[14] Soon enough, however, a new scaffolding--less solid, perhaps, but present nevertheless--was erected in its place. Because of status as a consumable commodity, listeners joined one another in what Daniel Boorstin has called "Consumption Communities." Boorstin writes that a Consumption Community "consists of people who have a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests, and common concerns that come from consuming the same kind of objects."[15] The significance of Consumption Communities, according to Boorstin, lies in their ability to "hold together as Americans people who in the older world would have been bound mainly by distinctions of class, ideology, or ancestry."[16] To be sure, members of a Consumption Community may consider their affiliation with their fellow consumers to be of only passing importance; the Community

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13. Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," in *The Communication of Ideas*, 105–06.

14. Eisenberg, *Recording Angel*, 29.

15. Daniel J. Boorstin, "Welcome to the Consumption Community," in Boorstin, *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections on America Today* (New York: Random House, 1969), 22.

16. Boorstin, "Welcome to the Consumption Community," 30-31.

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itself is a rather loose affiliation, but it is an affiliation nevertheless, as confirmed by such phenomena as fan clubs and internet chat rooms.

In the musical arena, Consumption Communities were a virtually inevitable consequence of the rise of radio, as listeners to any major broadcast could be certain that they were not alone in their musical consumption. Here, as elsewhere, they served to create a community that transcended geographical gaps. Media theorists Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan assert that radio restored an auditory form of community that was all but erased by the advent of writing: "Preliterate man was conscious of [the] power of the auditory to make present the absent thing. Writing annulled this magic because it was a rival magical means of making present the absent sound. Radio restored it."[17]

However, this magical aspect of radio and recording comes with a price. In his seminal essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin addressed the ways in which modern technologies adversely affect both the production and reception of the arts. "[F]or the first time in world history," writes Benjamin, "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual." Mechanical reproduction thus renders art (and music) independent of any context, a cultural sign with no clear referent; this in turn enables those who control the sign's distribution (a role increasingly occupied by broadcasters, record studios, and their corporate parents) to determine the art's meaning to an uncommonly specific degree. It was this phenomenon that caused Siegmeister to rail against General Motors' coopting of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, although he might just as easily have objected to the Communist *New Masses*'s sponsorship of the *From Spirituals to Swing* program that included Mitchell's Christian Singers. Further, as Benjamin notes, the prospect of reproduction necessarily changes the creative perspective

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17. Carpenter and McLuhan, "Acoustic Space," in *Explorations in Communication: An Anthology*, ed. Carpenter and McLuhan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 69.

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of the artist, who is surely conscious of the conditions of his work's reception. As a result, it will often happen that "[t]he work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility."[18]

This may (and often does) result in art of negligible quality, designed for obsolescence. Conversely, another related possibility is that art may be created expressly in order to last, but only in a form that is barely liminal, as a vehicle for other messages. In other words, the artwork may be created virtually empty of meaning but packed with dramatic gestures that await the input of its distributor. This is the art that is most easily co-opted (or made) for propaganda purposes, and it is likely no coincidence that the scientific study and creation of propaganda first came into its own during and immediately after World War I, when modern technology made the mass distribution of art a reality.[19] As a citizen of Nazi Germany, Benjamin was most concerned with this phenomenon, writing that "[t]he logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values."[20]

Benjamin's essay is generally regarded as a particularly prescient bit of cultural criticism. I have no quarrel with any of his conclusions, and I find his arguments utterly convincing, but when they are applied to the New York radicals who have been the subject of this study, it seems that the value judgements he attached to his conclusions do not apply. By some strange alchemy, this constellation of musicians, who produced music that was explicitly propagandistic and clearly designated for broad dissemination, also laid the foundations for a vital and humane musical culture that draws upon their

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18. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 224. Essay originally published 1936.

19. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 123.

20. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 241–42.

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innovations to this day. Having discussed some of the primary social, technological, and economic factors that combined to bring the musicians of 1930s New York an unprecedented degree of popular and historical influence, we will now turn to the musical consequences of this influence.

In 1929, Paul Rosenfeld published an essay titled "Beginnings of American Music." Rosenfeld, of course, was an advocate of the New York ultramodernists throughout the 1920s, and taught one of the first classes on modern music in the United States, at the New School. Nevertheless, he did not consider the music of Copland, Ruggles, and their compatriots particularly American, writing that "their work implies as little of a denial of the European past as that of Stravinsky, Bartók, Milhaud, or any other radical European modern." Similarly, although he was quick to acknowledge the value of "Kentucky mountain ballads" and "the Negro spiritual," Rosenfeld insisted that "[t]he peculiarities of each are traceable to extra-American conditions." Put another way, these musics remained essentially artifacts of their ethnic and geographic origins (in these cases, the British Isles and Africa, respectively). In fact, argued Rosenfeld, "American music, the body of music rooted in the American soil, begins with Edward MacDowell and is of our times." That MacDowell's work was not of the highest quality troubled Rosenfeld a bit, for "MacDowell brought something into the world not hitherto present in it," namely, a music that could only have come from America. It is telling that early in the essay Rosenfeld also praised Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* and Roy Harris's melodic style as particularly American. All of these pieces share a diversity of materials; they fuse native elements--either by quoting them directly or by alluding to them stylistically--with European ones, and always retain the distinctive voices of their composers.[21]

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21. Rosenfeld, "Spirituals and Mountain Songs: Beginnings of American Music: Edward A. MacDowell," in Rosenfeld, *An Hour with American Music* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1929), 34. Rosenfeld's rhetorical anticipation of Seeger's "Grassroots" essay seems noteworthy.

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So according to Rosenfeld, as the Depression began, an independent American musical culture was just in its infant stages. Of course, this idea is clearly debatable; what of the hymns and fuguing tunes of William Billings, the compositional melanges of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, or the songs of Stephen Foster? And Rosenfeld's essay contains no mention of jazz, an oversight that is difficult to explain. But if we place his arguments within the context of contemporary critical and historical thought, then Rosenfeld appears to be very much on the mark. For even if we grant that these earlier and other musical streams constituted an organic national tradition, the fact remains that, in the late 1920s, they were only just coming to be recognized as such; the very idea of American musical culture was just emerging, as demonstrated by the appearance, in 1931, of John Tasker Howard's *Our American Music*, the first modern full-length history of the subject. By the end of the 1930s, however, due in large part to the activities of the people and organizations I have described throughout this study, the core of the modern national canon had been substantially established.

To be sure, this was not initially the aim of the New York radicals, who wanted instead to participate in the founding of a trans-national proletarian music. However, as Richard Reuss notes, "the failure in the early 1930s of the Composers Collective and the Workers Music League to develop a meaningful proletarian music, using the forms of expression rooted in the experiences of the American people, meant that a viable left–wing musical culture was stunted for some years."[22] This failure, as we have seen, was largely due to the left's fetishization of musical technique, and their belief that music should (or even could) be emptied of all traces of capitalism. Howard Zinn has compared the radicals of the Thirties to their descendants in that other great decade of American insurgency, the Sixties. The former, writes Zinn, held "marvelously desirable ends," but they "commit[ted] a deadly ethical error: they made absolutes of the means which would

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22. Reuss, "The Roots of American Left-Wing Interest in Folksong," *Labor History* 12 (Spring 1971): 279.

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be used to achieve [their] ends."[23] When they shifted their focus outward, however, spurred by the Popular Front's focus on building broad support rather than on creating ideologically pure art, they achieved their greatest success, establishing a musical idiom with leftist sources that was nevertheless appealing to the general public.

Harold Clurman, who was engaged in a similar process in the theatrical world, describes how the leftist artists of the period ultimately transcended this political label:

> The term "Left movement" in the arts, though perhaps convenient, was actually a misnomer. It was a form of loose talk that misrepresented the true nature of things. The so–called "Left movement" in the arts was not "Left," "Right," or "Center," but was for our day the main movement of the American consciousness in the process of its growth. It was the focal expression of the American genius between 1933 and 1941. Its basic inspiration was not akin so much to the sources that produced the muckraking work of the Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens era as it was to the humanistic tradition of the Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman epoch. The end that the artists of this movement had in view could not be summed up or conclusively defined in a few political–social reforms. The end was man and his relation to the world or life itself on all the planes that the concept implies.[24]

This formulation is equally applicable to the efforts of New York's musical radicals. Although they began by attempting to shape America by musical means, they ended by shaping music in a distinctly American way. For what would American music be without

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23. Zinn, "A Comparison of the Militant Left of the Thirties and the Sixties," in *The Thirties: A Reconsideration*, ed. Frisch and Diamond, 42.

24. Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 290.

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the ballets of Aaron Copland, the folksongs of Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly, the jazz records produced by John Hammond, or the collections of John and Alan Lomax? Radical impulses were central to the evolution of bebop from swing, at the very end of the Depression. Likewise, if we remove Blitzstein's agit-prop musical theater from our heritage, we would also be without the works of his progeny, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. It is often said, and rightly so, that the 1930s were a watershed moment for American politics, economics, and society; what we should also remember is that, thanks to the desires of a number of New York musicians to participate in the changes then occurring in these extra-musical arenas, the 1930s are also the seminal decade in the search for an American music. Long after the decline of anything resembling a vital Communist movement in the United States, and despite the continued decay of union power, the legacy of the New York radicals continues to shape our national musical identity in countless ways. Although they failed to achieve their initial goals, Robinson, the Seegers, Copland, Guthrie, Rome, Aunt Molly, Blitzstein, the Lomaxes, Robeson, Hammond, Leadbelly, and others ultimately accomplished an incredible feat, one that they hardly could have imagined when they first set out: they had defined America in music, at least for a while.

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Appendix: Songbook Covers and Contents

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NOTE FOR TEACHING MASS SONGS

Gather a group of comrades around you, and teach the song as follows:

1. Tell them the story of the song and then read the words aloud.
2. Sing or play the song a few times.
3. Teach the song *phrase* by *phrase*. Phrases will be marked thus: ⌒
4. Insist that the comrades sing the words clearly and with expression.

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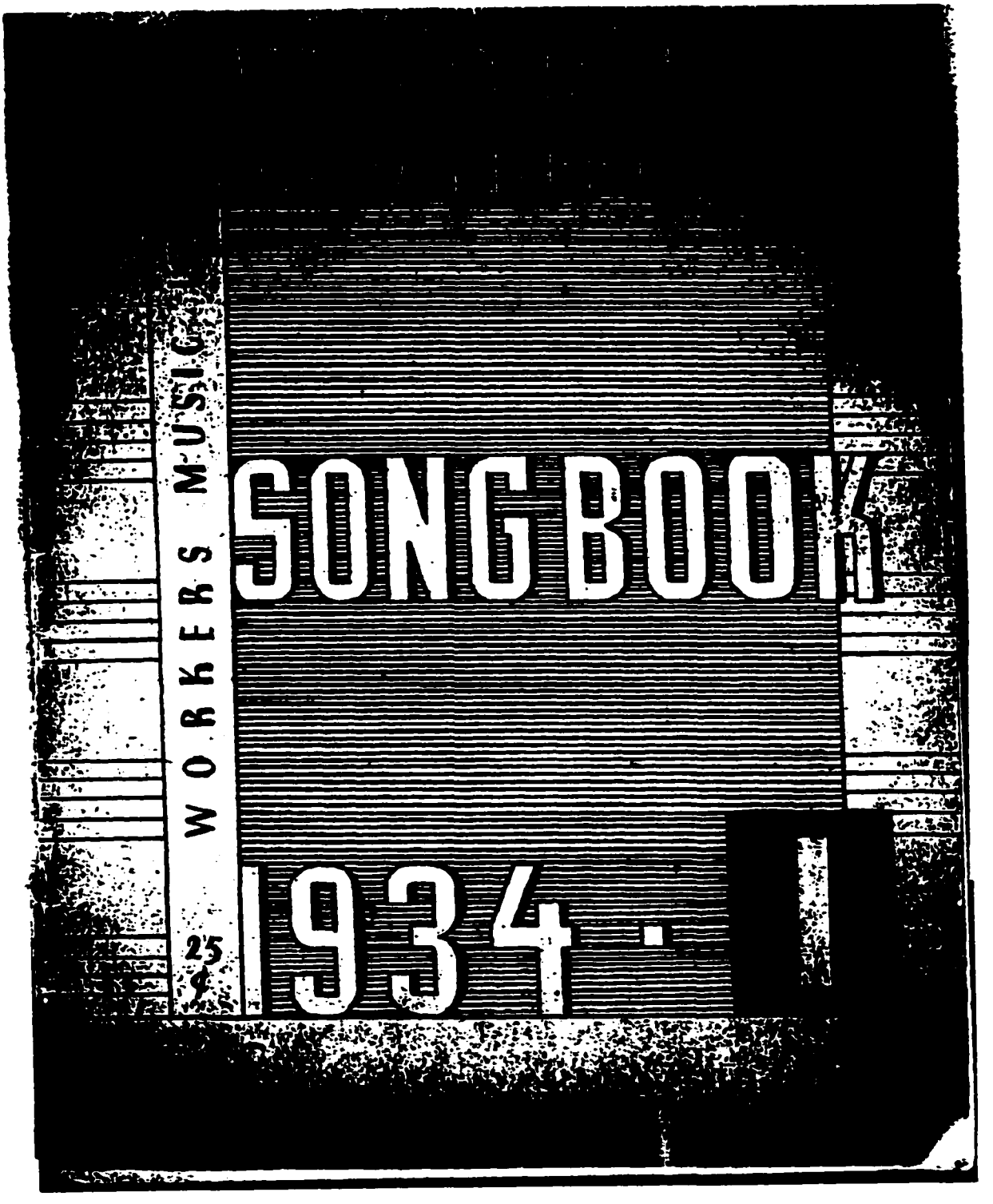

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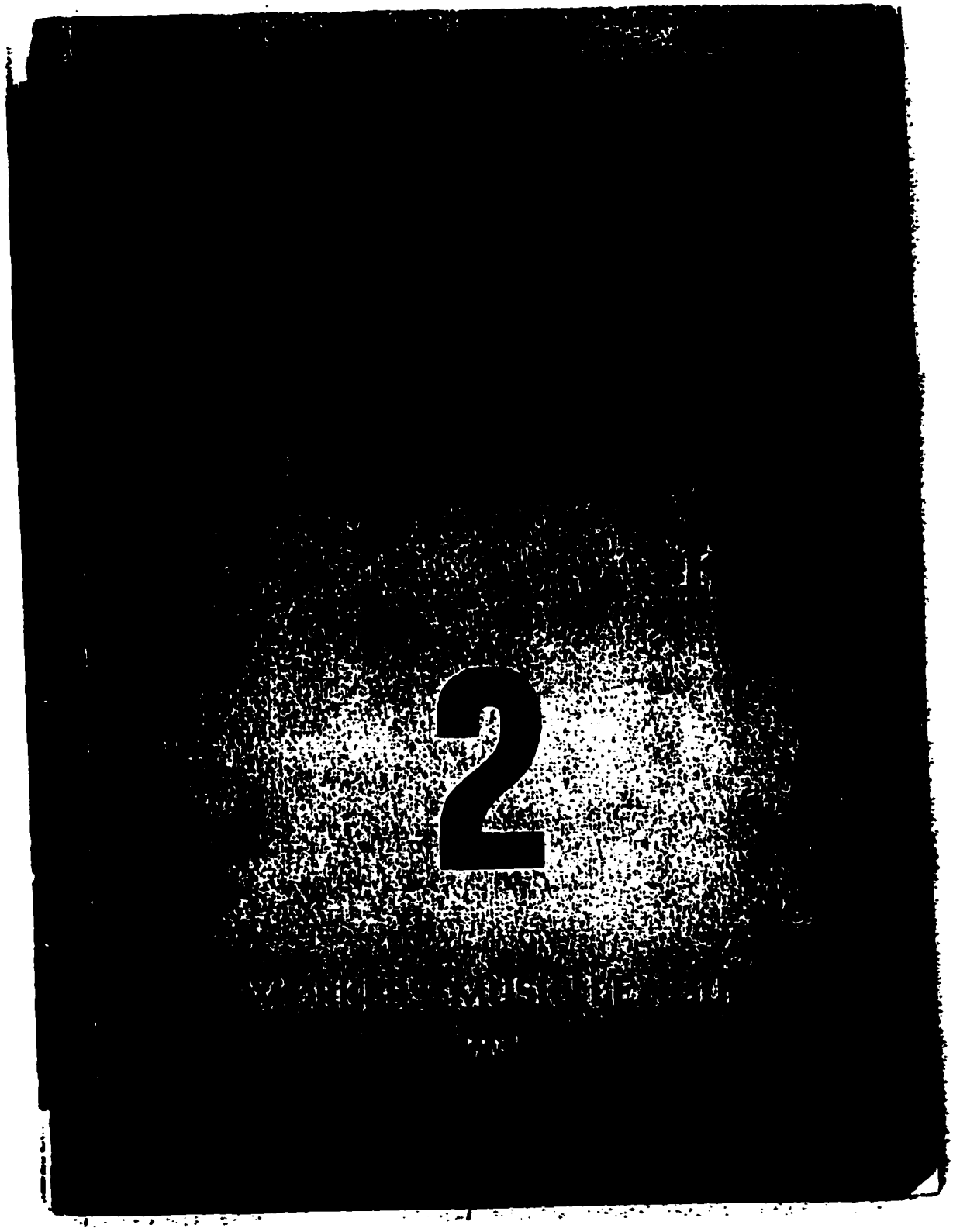

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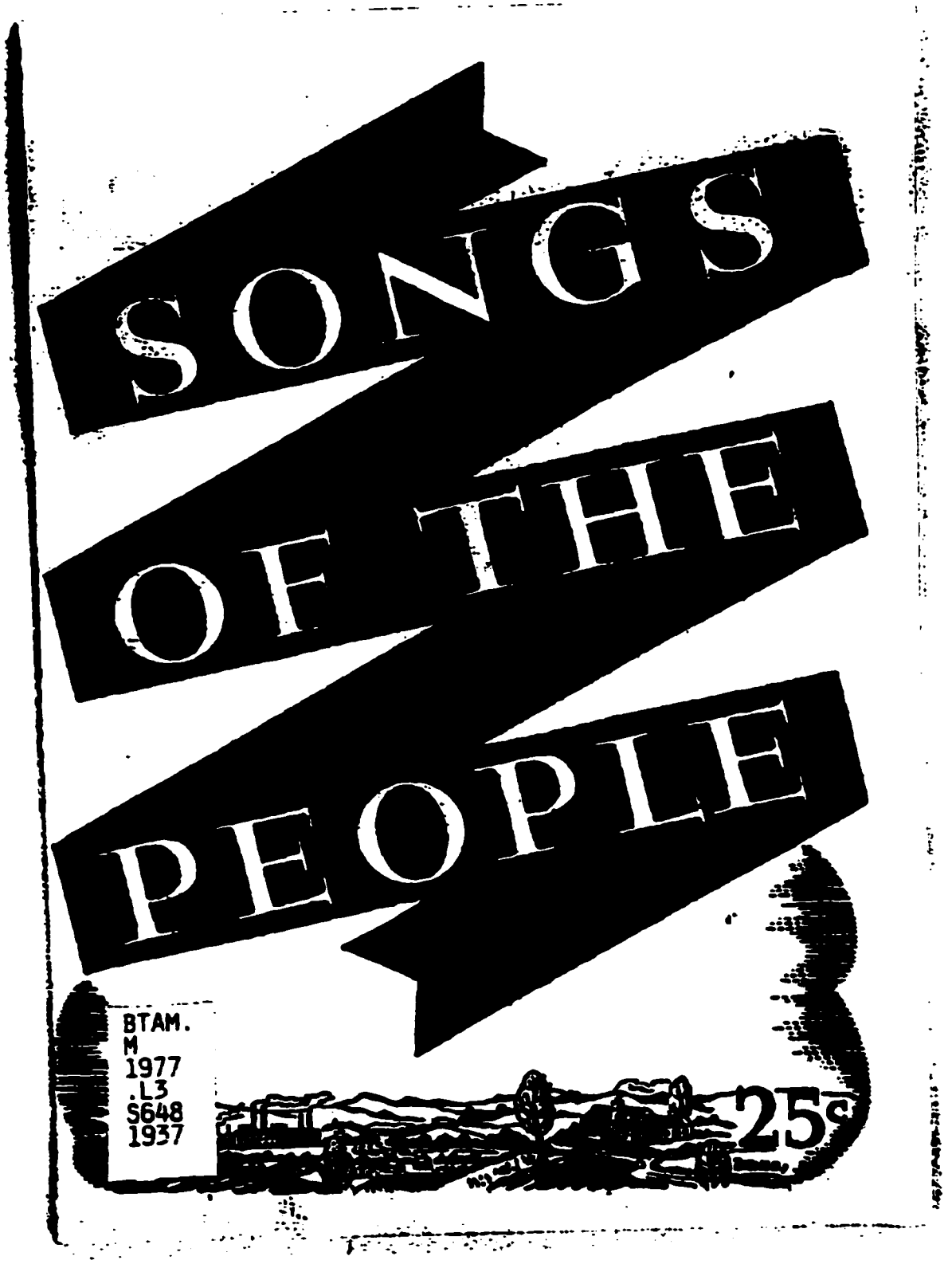

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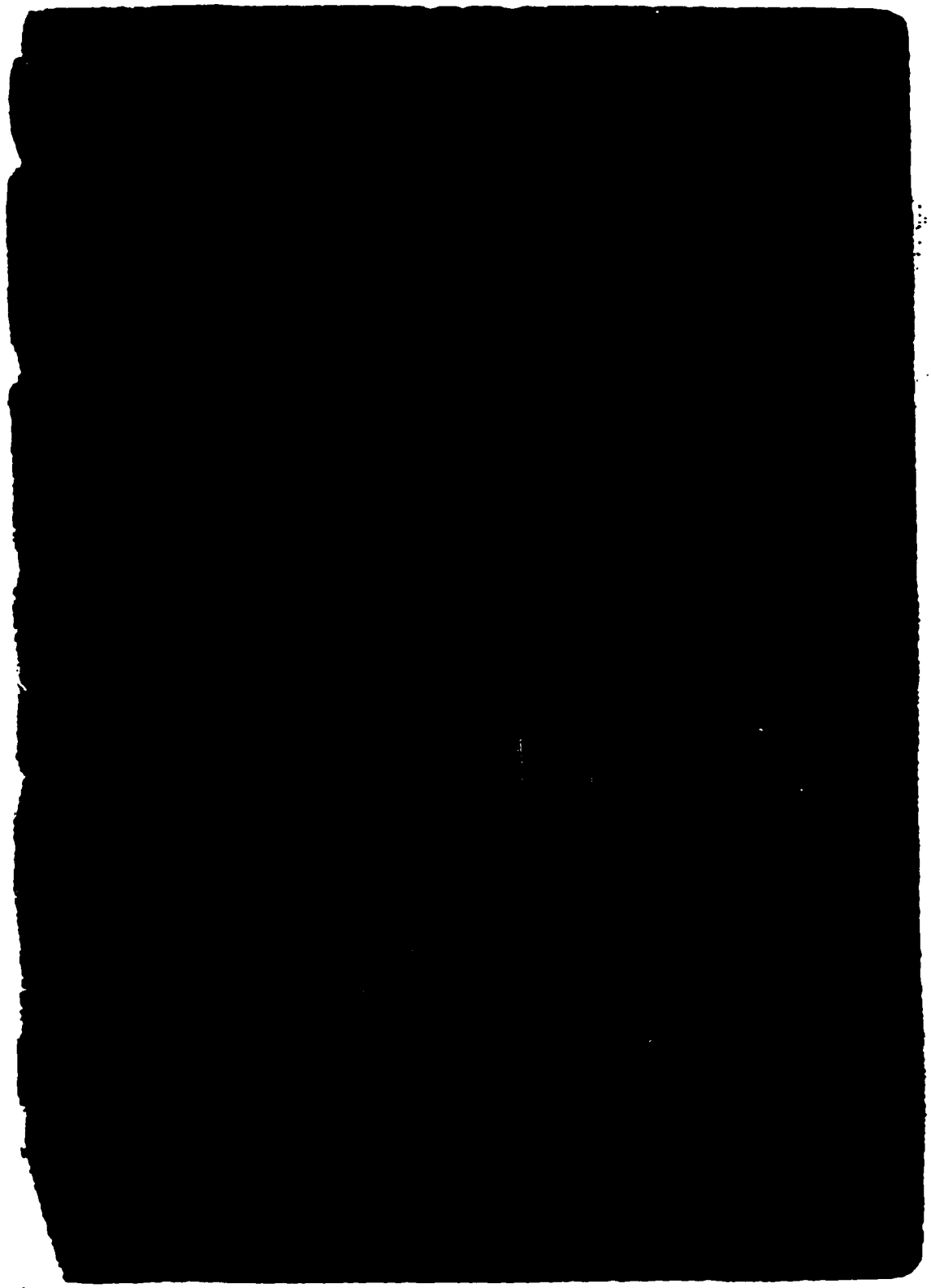

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