



## The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party, USA – 1939-1956

By Aaron J. Leonard, London, Repeater Books, 2020, 322 pp., US \$16.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780717807697

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To cite this article: Daniel Rosenberg (2021): The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party, USA – 1939-1956, American Communist History, DOI: [10.1080/14743892.2021.1877070](https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2021.1877070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2021.1877070>



Published online: 02 Feb 2021.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party, USA – 1939-1956**, by Aaron J. Leonard, London, Repeater Books, 2020, 322 pp., US \$16.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780717807697

Aaron J. Leonard has contributed a solid piece of research to the history of FBI repression of the Communist Party USA by tracing the surveillance, investigation, and harassment of folk singers, many of whom belonged or were sympathetic to the Party. Most impressive is his relentless scouring of the FBI files of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Josh White, Cisco Houston, Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly), Burl Ives, Ronnie Gilbert, Sis Cunningham, Alan Lomax, Millard Lampell, Oscar Brand, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman and others. It is hard to imagine a more distinctive group, however varied their styles, marked by originality of performance and writing drawn from a deep range of musical sources: church songs, African American spirituals, work songs, prison songs (often exemplified in the work of Lomax and Ledbetter). The artists frequently brought extensive knowledge of music history to the table, not confined to the roots of music in the U.S. Their seriousness and scope was borne out in the research of Seeger's father Charles, a leading musicologist, the dogged efforts of Lomax, and studies by Paul Robeson.

Moreover Leonard makes excellent use of the testimony by folk singers before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The author is not a newcomer to the historical inquiry of the many-sided nefarious roles of the FBI. His *Heavy Radicals*, co-written with Conor A. Gallagher, documents the Bureau's infiltration of U.S. Maoist organizations in minute detail. Leonard's examination of the suppression of Left folksingers places their experiences into the broader persecution of the Communist Party USA. Accordingly, he traces FBI targeting of folk musicians over several conventionally studied periods of Party history.

Thus he establishes the emergence of folk singers in tandem with the CPUSA's espousal of the Popular Front in the 1930s, amidst the struggle against the Great Depression, fascism here and abroad, and the rise of the mass industrial unions aided by the Party. Represented by labor-based Woody Guthrie, Sis Cunningham, Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and others, singers formed a buttress to union organizing. Once united in such groups as the Almanac Singers, they performed for striking workers all over the country, releasing and popularizing such songs as Guthrie's "Union Maid," ("based on a Robert Schumann melody") and "Which Side Are You on" by Florence Reece. They identified the fight against fascism as parallel to the expansion of U.S. labor rights, thus devoting albums to the support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. For this, they would pay the price of repression and blacklisting in the late 40s and 1950s.

Opposition to racism suffused the work of the soon-to-be persecuted singers. Ledbetter's "Bourgeois Blues" directly attacked housing segregation in 1930s Washington D.C. Party-tied Barney Josephson opened Café Society in New York with integrated seating and a diverse cast of performers, including musicians not necessarily identified as folk artists. Leftist John Hammond booked the performers. Billie Holiday debuted "Strange Fruit" by Communist composer Abel Meeropol, who, like folk singers Betty Sanders and Earl Robinson, chiefly made his living as a teacher. Café Society featured performances by Left sympathizers Lena Horne and Josh White. Heavy FBI scrutiny characterized the venue as a Communist haven, eventually inducing its collapse. After the 1950s Red Scare, other clubs formed in the Café Society tradition, for example the Cookery in Greenwich Village (first run by Communists Vita Barsky and her husband Edward, but later operated by Josephson) with a mostly jazz format, though folksinger Oscar Brand performed regularly.

Leonard goes on to assess the effect upon Party-related artists of the opening years of World War II (1939–1941), for whose initial outbreak the CPUSA and its sister parties overseas blamed all sides equally rather than Nazi Germany and fascist Italy: British and French leaders had appeased Hitler and Mussolini in the common cause of anti-Communism. The CPUSA thus pronounced a “plague on both your houses.” Thus, the Party adopted an “anti-war” stance up until the point when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and its affiliated singers likewise sustained the message “The Yanks Are Not Coming,” in a peace movement. Insofar as their messages diverged from the Roosevelt administration’s sympathy with Britain and France, the FBI considered their lyrics subversive. But Leonard outlines the changing lyrics of these same musicians once the Soviet Union was invaded. Now calling upon the United States to enter the war as Soviet ally, musicians returned to pronounced pro-war, anti-fascist themes, among them “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave” by Woody Guthrie.

The combined victory of anti-fascist allied nations yielded to Cold War. Leonard’s following chapters dramatize postwar anti-Communism in domestic and foreign policy. Anti-labor law swung from supporting the right to organize unions to the Taft-Hartley Act, by which Communists were forbidden to hold union office: unions violating this prohibition would lose negotiating rights in collective bargaining. Defanging militant unionism accompanied the muzzling of pro-labor music and stifled the singers, while cutting off their ability to make a living. An intense Red Scare caught many folk artists in the headlights, denying them the right to perform or record. U.S. culture thereby narrowed, depriving listeners from hearing voices independent of the status quo.

A re-energized folk movement known as Peoples Songs boded well in the late 40s, but suffered the misfortune of adding future informer and anti-Communist witness Harvey Matusow to its staff. He would wield great influence in the blacklisting of performers. Anti-Communist pressures, Leonard submits, induced sectarian and doctrinaire responses by Communists associated with People’s Songs and its journal *Sing Out*. Thus some Left artists attacked other Left artists for being insufficiently principled, joining what Leonard terms CPUSA “self-inflicted errors”: supporting the third party presidential candidacy of former vice-president Henry Wallace in 1948, waging a well-intended internal battle against white chauvinism with destructive results, and finally sending Party members underground to avoid persecution. Leonard cites Woody’s Guthrie’s “My 30,000” which lauded the protectors of Paul Robeson at what turned out to be a disastrous violently-attacked 1949 concert in Peekskill, New York as an example of the Party’s “doctrinal alternate reality.” (136). Sensitive to the latter, Pete Seeger left the Party at the time, though remaining a firm supporter.

As Matusow fingered progressive folk artists for the FBI and HUAC, the noose tightened around free speech and assembly via the Smith Act (banning conspiracy to teach and advocate governmental overthrow) and the McCarran Act (compelling members of defined organizations to swear that they were foreign agents, while establishing a structure of detention centers for the potential imprisonment of conceived enemies of the United States). The government considered Woody Guthrie’s detention for allegedly advocating sabotage. After the Supreme Court upheld the convictions of Party leaders under Smith Act, the organization assumed fascism was nigh and went underground.

Leonard notes “the Party was understandably, though incorrectly, conflating the efforts against them as a more generalized attack on the standing form of the U.S. government, i.e., democracy was being abandoned for fascism ... Given such harrowing circumstances the group instituted measures aimed at preserving their ability to function under heightened repression” (164–165). The rightwing, police-abetted, riots against Paul Robeson at Peekskill,

appeared to confirm the rise of fascist bands to accompany the increasingly persecutory laws and trials. Relevantly, the FBI went after folk singers with alacrity in the 1950s. Not that the latter stopped seeking performances and record dates. Leonard submits the example of the leftwing stalwart members of the Weavers: Pete Seeger, Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, tracked closely by the Bureau. The group nevertheless found a niche in popular music that skirted politically risky issues, while the members maintained their Left convictions.

However, the Weavers, along with Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, Guthrie, Alan Lomax and others, did not turn upon their fellow singers or name names as was expected in all fields of endeavor pressured by HUAC and the FBI. Others did: Leonard analyzes the capitulations that Josh White, Burl Ives, and Oscar Brand before HUAC were induced to make by the Bureau, including and especially denouncing the Communist Party, as well as naming names. Leonard points out that HUAC made sure that White sufficiently condemned Robeson in particular. The suffocating pressures brought to bear upon such singers were dire indeed, but again, many others stood fast.

A few points of clarification may be noted. When Leonard describes the Party's decision to send members underground, he cites the case of Smith Act victim Gus Hall, who went to Mexico to avoid prison, but was kidnapped and taken back by the FBI. Hall's attorney John Abt would have been a good source to use here: he argues that the intention of going into hiding was to facilitate guidance of the beleaguered Party precisely by remaining in, not leaving, the country.

While focusing on folk singers who were investigated and targeted by the FBI between the late 30s and early 50s, and who worked together and were part of a movement, Leonard might have touched on what he means by "folk singers." This would have aided in understanding the common occupation of the persecuted artists. Thus Leonard's book includes Paul Robeson, who is "not largely remembered as a folk singer, though folk music was at the heart of some of his best work." And "while Robeson himself was not at the core of the left-wing folk circle, he was a central figure in the larger left-wing cultural mix and as such intersected with it in important ways" (32–33). And "there were others" under FBI watch, "some anchored in folk music, others straddling different genres" like Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry (45).

Yet Leonard writes too little about singer-composer Earl Robinson, who ran in the same circles, was persecuted and blacklisted, whose folk-based repertoire straddled "different genres" as much as Robeson's, Terry's, and McGhee's. Why not say more about him? Harry Belafonte's extensive FBI file grew later than the other singers' but perhaps this key figure of the Left deserved a word or two. Odetta came to the FBI's attention too, after performing at leftwing functions in the early 50s.

To help convey the nature of the music shared by singers in the Red Scare, Leonard might have found useful such sources as Robeson's "A Universal Body of Folk Music: A Technical Argument by the Author" in the appendix of *Here I Stand*, Sidney Finkelstein's work *Composer and Nation: The Folk Heritage in Music* and A.L. Lloyd's *Folk Song in England*. Nevertheless, Leonard makes outstanding use of sources explicating the FBI's destructive work in detail. His dissection of FBI files is masterly, complemented by autobiographies, secondary sources, contemporary newspapers, and collections of government documents.

Leonard concludes that the onslaughts of McCarthyism produced the demise of the Communist Party by 1957, a prelude to the end of the "socialist project of the last century" (236–237). Nevertheless, McCarthyism was not in the end all-conquering, for as Leonard notes, the Supreme Court began to "reign in" the Smith Act in the late 50s. The Court

found for example that outlawing conspiracy to advocate governmental overthrow in the absence of concrete evidence to undertake it was too abstract, and a number of convictions were thus dismissed. Though his view of the Party's collapse is subject to debate, his tracing of the ferocious attacks upon it prove the immense damage suffered by the organization. Since Leonard associates the brute force of the FBI and HUAC with the essential end of the Party, it is no surprise that he takes his discussion of folk singers no further. He does however note the continuation of the protest tradition in music into the present, naming such exemplars as the Dixie Chicks, Joan Baez, and Beyoncé. Yet he correctly emphasizes that censorship and political repression continue to threaten the newest incarnations of the progressive folk spirit.

One wonders why he did not point out later and contemporary artists with heavier folk roots and political affinities for Seeger, Guthrie, and Robeson: Belafonte, Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Odetta, Richie Havens, Bruce Springsteen, Tracy Chapman, Billy Bragg, and others. Leadbelly's influence transcended the Red Scare too, manifested for example in tribute albums by jazz musicians: Harold Land's "Jazz Impressions of Folk Music" and "These are My Roots: Clifford Jordan Plays Leadbelly." One of the most popular U.S. singers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roberta Flack recorded a piece by long-blacklisted Weaver Fred Hellerman in 1970, and by Scottish folk singer Ewan MacColl (a Communist) the year before.

The greatest credit for the extension of progressive folk music after McCarthyism belongs to Pete Seeger, for his songwriting, recording, and performing never ebbed, even under difficult circumstances. Excluded from mainstream media until the late 60s, Seeger hosted a blacklist defying mid-60s PBS show "Rainbow Quest," which expressed his own broad encouragement of peoples' music of all kinds. His guests ranged widely: Bernice Johnson Reagon, the Mamou Cajun Band, Sonny Terry, the Clancy Brothers, the Stanley Brothers, Johnny Cash, Brownie McGhee, Reverend Gary Davis, June Carter, Donovan, Judy Collins, Mississippi John Hurt, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Doc Watson, and Richard Fariña and Mimi Fariña. Thus he preserved and extended folk *musics*, which continue to evolve. In fact, the pro-labor, anti-racist, and leftwing trend among folk artists outlived the McCarthy period.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2021.1877070>

