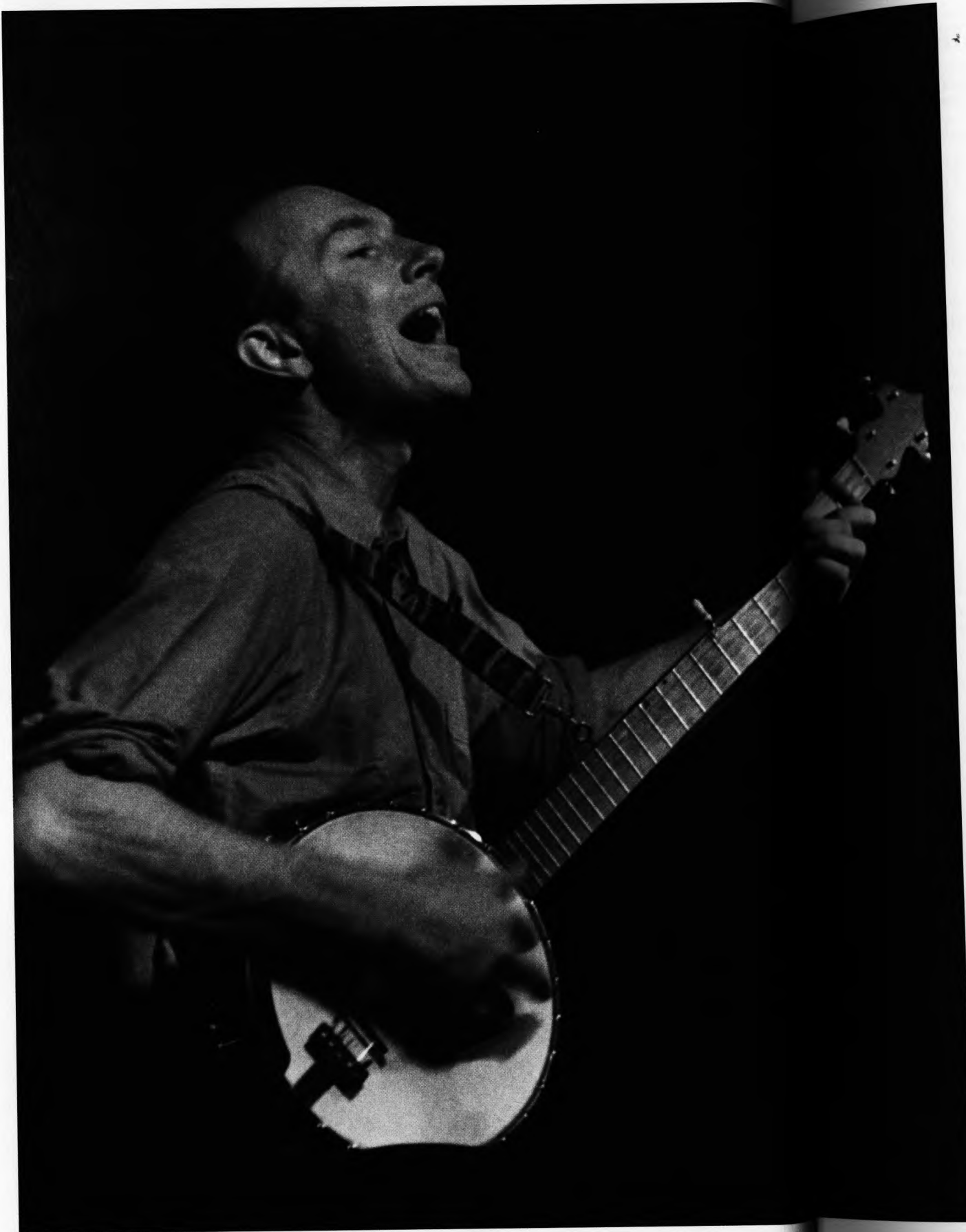


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**NEW YORK
AND THE
AMERICAN
FOLK MUSIC
REVIVAL**

Stephen Petrus
Ronald D. Cohen

FOLK CITY



Pete Seeger performs at the Village Gate, May 1961. Photograph by David Gahr.

ON

March 3, 1940, at the Forrest Theatre on West 49th Street, the Theatre Arts Committee, along

with actor Will Geer and folklorist Alan Lomax, presented "A 'Grapes of Wrath' Evening for the Benefit of the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers." It was a timely event, organized just after the opening of director John Ford's acclaimed film *Grapes of Wrath*, based on Steinbeck's novel published in 1939. Proceeds went to destitute farmers, many of them displaced by the Dust Bowl and struggling as migrant workers in California.²

The concert was a distinctively New York affair, an expression of the city's leftist sensibility, though, ironically, only one of the performers was actually born in New York. The organizers, Geer and Lomax, were themselves from Indiana and Texas, respectively. As they planned the fundraiser, Geer, a social activist and budding Hollywood actor, was playing the lead role in the Broadway production *Tobacco Road*, while Lomax, assistant in charge of the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song, was hosting the radio series *American Folk Song* and *Wellsprings of Music* on CBS's nationally broadcast *American School of the Air* based in New York. The two found abundant musical talent in the city and assembled an ensemble of musicians and dancers, a mix of seasoned veterans and promising newcomers. Performers included Lead Belly from Louisiana, Woody Guthrie from Oklahoma, Aunt Molly Jackson from Kentucky, Burl Ives from Illinois, Josh White from South Carolina, Margot Mayo from Texas, and Richard Dyer-Bennet from England. Only the young Pete Seeger was born in New York City, and even he was more closely linked to New England, where he was primarily raised. Each artist had a rich personal biography and took a circuitous route to New York. Their reasons varied, but all shared the belief that New York's political, cultural, and economic resources offered the possibility of artistic transformation.

The "Grapes of Wrath" evening was a seminal event that forged numerous personal and artistic ties critical to the development of folk music. While several musicians gave memorable performances, Woody Guthrie stole the show, imparting Okie wisdom in fanciful and wry monologues between songs that evoked images of billows of dust and families in jalopies on lonely prairie nights. To remarkable effect, Guthrie cultivated his persona as the embodiment of the Dust Bowl, unpolished but sagacious, attached to the land. Few New Yorkers knew of his middle-class family background or his work as a broadcast performer on the Los Angeles commercial radio station KFVD. About the evening's star, Pete Seeger recollected, "Woody Guthrie just ambled out, offhand and casual ... a short fellow complete with a western hat, boots, blue jeans, and needing a shave, spinning out stories and singing songs that he'd made up." Seeger added, "Well, I just naturally wanted to know more about him. He was a big piece of my education." By contrast, Seeger, a Harvard dropout, floundered on the night of his public debut, fumbling nervously with his banjo on stage, singing the outlaw ballad "John Hardy." "I was a bust," he recalled. "I got a smattering of polite applause." But more than any individual performance, the import was the event as a whole—characterized by Geer as "the first hootenanny"—which created many lasting bonds among the artists, above all between Guthrie and Seeger. Alan Lomax, ebullient by the evening's end, recounted the significance with a smidgen of hyperbole: "Go back to that night when Pete first met Woody Guthrie. You can date the renaissance of American folk song from that night."³

FOLK MUSIC AS NEW YORK BUSINESS: THE 1920S

As Alan Lomax observed, the "Grapes of Wrath" concert in 1940 represented a turning point in the American folk music revival. In the years after World War I, the transformation of network radio and record company industry attracted a wave of musicians to the city.

The development of mass media, especially radio, in the 1920s expanded the possibilities for commercial sales of music of all genres, including folk. New York dominated radio broadcasting in the 1920s as the radio itself became a popular domestic consumer item: six million radios adorned American homes by 1927. New York's NBC and CBS radio networks, founded in 1926 and 1928, respectively, extended their reach nationwide. The stations promoted musicians in classical, jazz, opera, and popular musical genres.

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JOHN STEINBECK COMMITTEE
FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

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Flier for the 1940 "Grapes of Wrath" benefit concert for agricultural workers held at the Forrest Theatre in New York City. Not only did the performance strengthen the connection between folk music and leftist politics, but it also marked the birth of a fruitful artistic relationship between Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Bill Tatnall plays guitar in Frederica, Georgia, June 1935. On a song-collecting expedition to the South and the Bahamas in 1935, Alan Lomax, who took this photograph, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle recorded Tatnall for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Lomax, his father John, and other collaborators contributed more than 10,000 field recordings to the archive in the 1930s and 1940s, providing source material for the folk music revival.

At the same time, New York had become the national center of the recording industry. This supremacy stemmed from the city's ascendancy in the sheet music publishing business by 1900, thanks largely to the success of the firm T. B. Harms over competitors from Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Building off the gains of music publishing companies, the city's budding recording industry blossomed. The trend, combined with the proliferation of phonograph records, signaled the decline of the piano and of sheet music publishing; in the middle of the decade, for the first time, record sales exceeded those of sheet music. During the 1920s, New York labels, including Columbia, Victor, Edison, and Brunswick, became prominent. In 1926 Columbia acquired Okeh Records and, in the 1930s, became part of the giant American Recording Company (ARC) under the CBS umbrella, along with Banner, Vocalion, and other labels.⁴

During the 1920s, the incipient record companies largely concentrated on local and regional markets. As they developed their catalogs, they collected various musical styles and began to play a major role in promoting and exploiting the emerging interest in traditionally inspired music. New York labels focused particularly on ethnic groups in immigrant





above: Bessie Smith, 1936. Called "The Empress of the Blues," Smith recorded for Columbia Records in New York in the 1920s. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten.

opposite: On a trip to Lafayette, Louisiana, in June 1934, John and Alan Lomax recorded blues and boogie woogie musician Wilson Jones (aka Stavin' Chain) performing the ballad "Batson," as seen in this photograph by Alan Lomax. An unidentified violinist provides accompaniment.

communities. Enriched by a massive influx of predominantly Jewish and Catholic immigrants from eastern and southern Europe from the 1880s to the early 1920s, the city's musical mosaic became increasingly complex. German, Swedish, and other ethnic groups formed choral societies to preserve their folk songs, while vaudeville incorporated many of the tunes into variety shows and other stage productions. Record companies such as Victor, Columbia, Brunswick, Gennett, and Okeh produced albums by Irish, Italian, Jewish, Greek, German, and Chinese musicians.⁵

At the same time, the New York labels began to send crews to the American South to record traditional folk songs by black and white musicians alike. The journeys grew out of broader cultural trends in the 1920s. Drawing on a transatlantic interest in reviving rural traditions and seeking more and more to distinguish their own culture from England and Europe, Americans searched for their heritage in folk art. Between 1923 and 1932, New York recording companies made approximately 100 field trips to the South, while at the same time at least 50 Southern performers trekked northward to record in the big city or at the Victor studio in Camden, New Jersey. Recordings by African-American blues singers were generally labeled as "race records," while those by white fiddlers, banjo players, and family singing groups were sold as "hillbilly" records, "old familiar tunes," or just "old time music." Talent scout and record producer Ralph Peer from Okeh Records spearheaded these field trips, focusing initially on recording African Americans and subsequently on rural whites. Peer's competitors at Columbia, Paramount, and Victor followed suit and issued their own "race" and "hillbilly" records.⁶

The output of these trips was impressive, totaling 2,700 master recordings, and helped New York commercial record companies spark popular interest in American vernacular music. The Columbia hillbilly series alone sold an estimated 11 million records between 1925 and 1932.⁷ Drawn by recording opportunities, folk musicians flocked to New York. Clarence Ashley, Uncle Dave Macon, Mississippi John Hurt, Furry Lewis, and Dock Boggs all recorded in the city in the 1920s. Beginning in 1924, the blind guitarist and harmonica player George Reneau recorded dozens of sides for Vocalion Records at its Midtown studio, and Vernon Dalhart, Carson Robison, Arthur Fields, Frankie Marvin, and Frank Luther were particularly active and popular singers. The Carter Family, who initially recorded in Bristol, Tennessee, also made albums at the Victor studios in Camden, New Jersey. Gene Autry, the famous singing cowboy, arrived in the Big Apple from Oklahoma in 1930 to cut his first recordings, and he returned many times over the next five years.⁸

The New York record companies also began to transform rural Southern musical forms. While Southern hillbilly

musicians initially depended on traditional ballads and older fiddle tunes, those recording in the city increasingly had to rely on material written by professional tunesmiths like Carson Robison as record companies built up their hillbilly catalogs with a steady stream of releases. This music generally had a mellower sound than many of the field recordings made in the South and West. While performers crowded the recording studios, they seldom appeared in local concerts or radio programs. (One exception was Vernon Dalhart, who made over 400 recordings between 1916 and 1924 and performed in 1926 on the local WEA radio station, part of the NBC network, and in 1927 on NBC's "Royal Music Makers" show.)

As the Harlem Renaissance flowered in the 1920s, the interest of New York record companies in African-American musical forms increased, and many blues performers recorded in the city. Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," recorded for Okeh Records in 1920, opened the floodgates, and in 1922 Trixie Smith, born in Atlanta, released "Trixie's Blues" on the tiny Black Swan label. She switched to Okeh, which also recorded Ida Cox, a prominent blues singer. Bessie Smith was especially popular, cutting "Down Hearted Blues" for Columbia in 1923; members of Fletcher Henderson's orchestra subsequently backed her in these studio recordings. The often raunchy Lucille Bogan recorded for Brunswick until 1930. While race records in the late 1920s constituted just an estimated five percent of the overall sales of New York labels, they represented a significant part of African-American community life.⁹

Meanwhile, to introduce readers nationwide to folk music, New York publishing firms distributed numerous compilations and anthologies of ballads, most notably Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*, issued by Harcourt, Brace & Company in 1927. Sandburg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and biographer of Abraham Lincoln, had been a passionate song collector since he was a young man wandering across the country. On a national lecture circuit that took him to universities and civic clubs, Sandburg collected songs from friends, labor leaders, and folklorists. Indefatigable in his efforts, he aimed to illustrate the country's collective heritage to a popular audience through folk songs. *American Songbag* presented 280 songs in an accessible manner, with piano accompaniments for each tune, often embellished with folksy notes and line drawings. In contrast to the commercial record companies, Sandburg did not delineate songs into racial divisions but rather treated African-American music as central to the nation's cultural identity. He did include a section on African-American "Blues, Mellows, Ballets," but in general placed black songs in broad categories such as "Railroad and Work Gangs," "Prison and Jail Songs," and the "Road to Heaven." Other groupings, sometimes whimsically titled, included "Picnic and Hayrack Follies, Close Harmony,



above: John Lomax (left) and Uncle Rich Brown at the home of Mrs. Julia Killingsworth near Sumterville, Alabama, October 1940. Photograph by Ruby T. Lomax.

opposite: Members of the Bog Trotters Band, Galax, Virginia, 1937. John and Alan Lomax made over 200 recordings of this group of traditional Appalachian string-band players for the Library of Congress.



and Darn Fool Ditties" and "Tarnished Love Tales or Colonial and Revolutionary Antiques." *American Songbag*, wildly successful and extensively reviewed, went through many editions. But while Sandburg was a popularizer, he also shunned modern recording technology and relied on the songbook tradition of collecting written texts, transcribing songs, and taking down notes and lyrics as he heard people sing.¹⁰

FOLK MUSIC DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN NEW YORK

The 1930s signaled hard times for the nascent commercial folk music industry. The Great Depression caused the decline of the record business, including sales of blues and gospel records, which had significantly decreased by 1931: national sales plummeted from \$46 million in 1930 to \$16.9 million the following year. As the economy collapsed, the Depression inevitably limited the activity of New York record labels. As a result, many Southern rural musicians lost a source of employment and had to return to full-time farm work, coal mining, and factory labor. Economic collapse also led to

the closing of numerous New York nightclubs and theaters. Many composers, musicians, and music publishing companies, lured by the thriving film industry, began to decamp to Hollywood. And yet, the Great Depression political milieu elevated folk music. Against the backdrop of political and cultural trends that celebrated the "common man," New York became a supportive environment for activists seeking to use folk songs to advance their political agenda.¹¹

In the 1930s and 1940s, American radicals redefined the genre of folk music from a quaint musical form associated with rural life to "the people's music"—a weapon in the ideological battle to mobilize workers to develop a class consciousness and create an inclusive democratic society based on socialist political principles. During the Depression, leftists were hardly a monolithic group. They included members of the American Communist and Socialist Parties and an array of other activists, who differed widely in age, ideology, social background, cultural outlook, and political commitment. Attitudes evolved as circumstances changed over the course of the decade, particularly around 1935. As the threat of fascism intensified in central and southern Europe, and as the concern of homegrown right-wing populism increased in the United States, the American Communist Party, in line with the Soviet Communist International, changed strategy from a focus on the overthrow of capitalism to the establishment of a "Popular Front," defined as a broad alliance of liberal and leftist forces to combat the menace of authoritarian tendencies at home and abroad. The Communist Party, led by Earl Browder, announced that "Communism is 20th Century Americanism," in effect depicting communist ideas as a central part of American democratic traditions. In this context, the Left developed a cultural agenda to use not only music but also theater, dance, poetry, fiction, and art as tools of propaganda to convey an ideological message. But while 1930s radicals contributed to the trend of popularizing folk music, they never achieved their dream of creating a singing movement of workers.¹²

The Communists' use of music for political purposes dated from the 1920s and early 1930s, when they organized revolutionary choruses to foster class solidarity. Many eastern European immigrant groups in New York incorporated choruses as part of their cultural traditions; these choruses were led by conductors who chose the music appropriate for the masses. It was a hierarchical organizational model based on strict rehearsals meant to instill discipline among the working class. Communist Party members composed and published songs to help foment class rebellion, though with negligible success. The 1932 *Song Book For Workers*, issued by the Red Star Publicity Service, included only 11 songs, such as the stilted "Comintern" and "Stand Guard, The Soviets Are Calling," along with labor activist Joe Hill's

previous: Alan Lomax (center) and Pete Seeger (right) practice for the "Folksong 59" concert at Carnegie Hall, New York, 1959. Photograph by John Cohen.



above: Published in 1932 by the Workers Music League in New York, the *Red Song Book* included several strike songs from Appalachia and elsewhere, such as "Poor Miner's Farewell" by Aunt Molly Jackson. In a review of the book, *The Worker Musician* criticized the "immaturity" and "arrested development" of the Kentucky mining songs, showing the lack of faith that many New York City radicals had in the political utility of folk music in the early 1930s.

THE SPECIAL TASK OF THE WORKERS MUSIC LEAGUE IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSIC AS A WEAPON IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE.

popular "The Preacher and the Slave." The Pierre Degeyter Club, named after the Belgian socialist and composer of "The Internationale" and based in New York, exemplified the revolutionary chorus tradition. The club consisted of composers, writers, and performers and aimed to develop music for the proletariat. The bulk of the music was avant-garde in nature. In 1932 the Pierre Degeyter Club founded the Composers' Collective, which included composers Marc Blitzstein and Charles Seeger, who was also a musicologist. The collective embarked on "the task of writing music of all sorts to meet the needs of the growing mass working class movement." Most of the music was didactic and in general did not resonate with workers during the Great Depression. In 1931 the Communist Party formed the Workers Music League (WML) in New York to create proletarian music. Most members had affiliations with revolutionary choruses, and leaders came primarily from the Pierre Degeyter Club. On the purpose of the league, Charles Seeger observed, "The special task of the Workers Music League is the development of music as a weapon in the class struggle." Like their counterparts in the Pierre Degeyter Club, composers in the WML chose music to elevate workers' tastes and jolt them out of their "false consciousness." In 1934 the WML published the *New Workers Song Book*, for which Charles Seeger and composer Lan Adomian compiled 22 songs with classical structures and proletarian lyrics designed for trained choruses.¹⁴

Members of the Composers' Collective and the WML, for the most part professional musicians trained at the nation's foremost conservatories, dedicated themselves to edifying workers with "good music." At first they regarded folk music with disdain. As Charles Seeger reflected, "Many folksongs are complacent, melancholy, defeatist, intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed upon."¹⁵

Aunt Molly Jackson, a ballad singer, union organizer, and political activist from Harlan County, Kentucky, personified the gulf between the Composers' Collective and folk music. Jackson was a participant in the violent "Harlan County War" in 1931 between striking miners and union organizers on one side, and coal firms and law enforcement officials on the other. From a family of miners, Jackson had already experienced tragedy. In 1917 her husband was killed in a mining accident, and later her father and brother were blinded in another. Embattled, she wrote protest songs such as "I Am a Union Woman" and "Poor Miner's Farewell," adding to her repertoire of hundreds of ballads that she had learned from her great-grandmother. In November 1931, as the violent struggle intensified for the rights of miners to organize and press for better wages and working conditions, the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, headed by writer and activist Theodore Dreiser and known as the Dreiser

Committee, descended upon Harlan from New York City to investigate the conflict and compile a report for the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners under the auspices of the American Communist Party. Jackson, the self-proclaimed “pistol-packin’ Mama,” testified in front of the Dreiser Committee, which also included the writers John Dos Passos, Lewis Mumford, and Sherwood Anderson. In an account of the living conditions of her fellow Appalachian workers, Jackson told the committee, “The people in this country are destitute of anything that is really nourishing to the body. That is the truth. Even the babies have lost their lives, and we have buried from four to seven a week all along during the warm weather.” She proceeded to perform her song “Kentucky Miner’s Wife (Ragged Hungry Blues).” Startled, the committee invited her to New York to sing and raise money for the striking coal workers. Faced with threats by local police and the mine owners, Jackson accepted the invitation and moved to the city. The musician Margaret Larkin brought her to the Columbia studio, where she recorded the two-sided “Ragged Hungry Blues.” Not surprisingly, the New York political left embraced Jackson. She was a vigorous public orator, at once abrasive and direct, usually colorful and sometimes vulgar, and known to embellish stories about her past. Through her impassioned pleas for assistance for miners in Kentucky, she became a symbol of the struggle of workers in rural America.¹⁶

Around 1933 Jackson attended several meetings of the Composers’ Collective as the group studied the development of music for the proletariat. Presumably, Jackson embodied the connection between song and radical politics. She performed a few of her compositions, in the language and idiom of Appalachia, set to traditional melodies. Most members of the collective were polite but unimpressed. Plain and stark, her hillbilly songs failed to stir them. They preferred the dissonance and complexity of Hans Eisler’s choral compositions and marches. Similarly, their music bewildered her. But Charles Seeger acknowledged the vitality of her songs of social struggle. He remarked to her, “Molly, they didn’t understand you. But I know some young people who will want to learn your songs.”¹⁷

Seeger and his colleagues came to realize that the compositions in their songbook largely failed to engage workers. As the Popular Front emerged in the middle of the decade and the Left-liberal alliance developed an appreciation for folk art forms, the WML recognized the need to embrace indigenous labor ballads and published several in the second edition of their songbook in 1935. Seeger, folklorist Alan Lomax, composer Earl Robinson, and others involved in political activism pursued a strategy to “discover” folk music that would be appropriate for a leftist political movement. Proletarian writer and novelist Mike Gold, who was editor of the American



Folksinger and union activist Aunt Molly Jackson from Kentucky, shown here ca. 1935, epitomized the connection between music and leftist politics during the Great Depression. Though most New York City radicals were at first indifferent to her songs, they eventually championed her as the voice of Appalachian labor.

RECOLLECTIONS

JOSH WHITE JR.

My father, Josh White, had recorded more than 90 “race records” with a dozen hits, and had given hundreds of performances on stage and radio between 1928 and 1936 ... but had never been seen in a live performance by a white person! Then, in 1939, he co-starred on Broadway with Paul Robeson in John Henry and was sponsored by John Hammond in Greenwich Village at Cafe Society, the first integrated nightclub in America. The audience loved his artistry, and he became a star to the masses ... black and white. Soon he would have hit records and his own national radio show. He would become popular on Broadway and in films and headline concert halls around the world. But every year he would come back to the Village to play Cafe Society, the Blue Angel, and the Village Vanguard.

In 1940, while co-starring with Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, Burl Ives, and the Golden Gate Quartet on the national radio show Back Where I Come From, my dad and Lead Belly began a six month run at the Village Vanguard. At the same time, Josh, Lead, Woody, and Burl began helping out some young, socially active folkies in the Village named Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell in a group they were forming called the Almanac Singers. The Village was the first place where Josh and Lead (soon to be joined by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee) had the opportunity to interact with and share their music with like-minded white folk artists. I believe these multi-racial collaborations became the seeds for the national folk music movement.

In 1944, the same year my dad had his smash hit “One Meatball” (the first million-selling folk record), I began performing at his side and at the feet of the master ... literally. He always performed standing, with his right foot on a chair, guitar resting on his knee. Little four-year-old me stood on that chair and sang with him as loudly and passionately as I could. In 1945 Oscar Brand began hosting his Folksong Festival radio show on WNYC and New York’s first public hootenanny shows, on both of which

we regularly performed. It was exciting to come down to the Village in those years to perform and interact with Woody, Lead, Pete, Burl, Sonny, Brownie, Oscar, and all the fascinating people of different races, nationalities, and beliefs.

Our family lived in Harlem, a very nice area ... but the only place in 1940s New York where we were allowed to live. There were unofficial segregation and racial laws for blacks living in New York. Regardless, if we played at Carnegie Hall, in Central Park, on the radio, or at a rally at Madison Square Garden, I never felt threatened in the city. The Village was particularly special. The atmosphere was friendly with all the artists. It felt like family. I felt safe there.

Josh White Jr., one of the last artists connected to the folk renaissance of the 1940s, began his career as a child star in Greenwich Village, performing and recording with his legendary father Josh White, who pioneered African-American folk, blues, spirituals, and songs of social conscience to a multiracial audience in America and then around the world. Branching out on his own in 1961, White Jr. has toured the world's greatest concert stages, recorded 25 albums, starred in four TV concert specials, written songs for Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte, and distinguished himself as a Broadway actor. Named the "Voice of the PEACE Corps" and VISTA in 1980, he has sung for presidents, prime ministers, the Pope, the imprisoned, and the poorest of the poor.

Communist Party's *New Masses* magazine, also endorsed the use of folk music for radical causes. The transformation in attitudes was not simply the result of the emergence of the Popular Front. These activists took a cue from history, citing not only the case of Aunt Molly Jackson in Harlan County, but also the effective use of folk music in the 1929 strike of textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina.¹⁸

Vernacular folk songs and ballads increasingly became part of the Left's cultural and political toolkit in New York City. The local socialist Rand School Press published the *Rebel Song Book* in 1935, featuring mostly older socialist tunes but including the folk labor songs "Hold the Fort," "On the Picket Line," "Solidarity Forever," "We Shall Not Be Moved," and "Casey Jones." In 1935 the New Singers recorded three records for Timely Records that illustrated their leftist labor agenda, and in 1937 Timely issued a folk-oriented three-record set by the Manhattan Chorus that included Joe Hill's "Casey Jones" and "We Shall Not Be Moved." While neither Timely set attracted much interest, they indicated the move towards folk music by New York's musical left.¹⁹

The arrival of African-American blues musician and guitarist Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter in New York at the end of 1934 diversified the city's budding leftist folk community. Born in Louisiana around 1888, Lead Belly was raised on a small family farm. In his early years, he toiled in fields in different parts of the Deep South and learned an extensive array of songs, including primordial blues, spirituals, reels, cowboy songs, and traditional ballads. Lead Belly also had a fierce temper that led to convictions for murder in 1917 and attempted murder in 1930. He claimed that the 1917 murder was committed in self-defense and eventually received a pardon from Texas Governor Pat Morris Neff in 1925, largely due to his good behavior and a persuasive appeal that included a song.²⁰

While serving time for the attempted murder in Louisiana's Angola Prison Farm, Lead Belly was "discovered" by folklorist John Lomax and his son Alan on a field recording trip to the region in 1933. Working for the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress, the Lomaxes traveled to relatively isolated areas and, using modern recording equipment, collected songs from cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, and lumber camps. John was particularly keen on recording music in segregated penitentiaries, reasoning that these institutions had kept prisoners away from the trappings of modern society, especially the phonograph and radio, and thus maintained, to some degree, the purity of the songs. At Angola Prison, Lead Belly astounded Lomax not only with his vast repertoire of 100 songs, but also with his resonant voice and commanding performance style on the 12-string guitar. For the Lomaxes, Lead Belly's song repertoire was a treasure trove, an affirmation of a rich African-American



On a field recording trip to Louisiana's Angola Prison in 1933, folklorist John Lomax and his son Alan "discovered" the African-American blues musician and guitarist Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter (foreground). Lead Belly astonished the Lomaxes with an extensive repertoire of blues, spirituals, and cowboy songs, prompting them to return for another recording session in July 1934, when Alan took this photograph of prisoners in the compound.

musical tradition. The Lomaxes returned to Angola in July 1934 for another session, recording several numbers that included Lead Belly's seminal versions of "Goodnight, Irene" and "The Midnight Special." Following the visit, the Lomaxes submitted a petition to Louisiana Governor O. K. Allen that called for the release of Lead Belly. The plea included a song by the prisoner, appropriately titled "Governor O. K. Allen." The next month, Lead Belly won his freedom. At first Lead Belly and the Lomaxes believed that the release was a result of the appeal and the song. But the truth was that Lead Belly had gained his freedom under Louisiana laws due to good behavior. The fable of rescue and redemption nevertheless became popular, reinforced by media accounts and by Lead Belly and the Lomaxes themselves.²¹

Upon release from prison, Lead Belly strengthened his ties to the Lomaxes, working as John's chauffeur and field assistant on recording trips throughout the South. In 1934 John and Lead Belly traveled to Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, often stopping at penitentiaries to record. John Lomax was determined to broaden the nation's understanding of folk music beyond the Anglo-Saxon Appalachian ballads treasured by earlier academic folklorists, such as the Englishman Cecil Sharp. The Lomaxes' *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), published by Macmillan in New York, included songs by miners, lumbermen, sailors, soldiers, railroad men, hobos, and convicts from various regions of the country. It also featured popular songs taken from the radio, commercial recordings, newspapers, magazines, and literary sources. Especially eager to illuminate the range of African-American traditions, the Lomaxes remarked that black singers created "the most distinctive of folk songs—the most interesting, the most appealing, and the greatest in quantity."²²

Though the John Lomax-Lead Belly relationship was inherently unequal, it was also reciprocal and mutually beneficial in ways. Lomax sought to showcase the talent of Lead Belly in New York and on college campuses and other forums in the Northeast. To Lomax, Lead Belly epitomized a noncommercial, premodern rural past that was quickly fading in an era of expanding urbanization and industrialization. Following his release from prison, Lead Belly desired to embark on a musical career and viewed the institutionally connected Lomax as a valuable resource. But the Lomaxes also arranged an exploitative management contract with Lead Belly, giving themselves two thirds of the singer's earnings in an era when a 50 percent commission was common. John Lomax also represented the racist attitudes of the era. Preparing to take Lead Belly to the North, he submitted a letter to the New York media as part of a publicity blitz. "Lead Belly is a nigger to the core of his being," Lomax



ALAN LOMAX

Authority on American Folk-Lore . . . Archivist to the Library of Congress . . . Commentator and Artist on "Columbia's School of the Air"

As assistant in charge of the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song and host of two series on CBS's nationally broadcast *American School of the Air* in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Alan Lomax worked tirelessly to introduce folk songs to a broad portion of the American population. In New York City, Lomax organized concerts and produced recordings, becoming a prominent advocate for a public role for folklore.



Lead Belly performs in front of an interracial crowd in a New York City living room, ca. 1940. Photograph by Weegee.

commented. "In addition he is a killer. He tells the truth only accidentally. . . . He is as sensual as a goat, and when he sings to me my spine tingles and sometimes tears come. Penitentiary wardens all tell me that I set no value on my life in using him as a traveling companion."²³

Arriving in New York on New Year's Eve in 1934, Lomax and Lead Belly immediately gained the attention of the city's intellectuals, artists, and reporters. On the night of their arrival, Lead Belly performed at the Greenwich Village apartment of Macmillan editor Margaret Conklin and New York University English Professor Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. (A labor activist and a professor of folklore and medieval literature, Barnicle assigned *American Ballads and Folk Songs* in her courses and introduced it to New York singers Earl Spicer and J. Rosamond Johnson.) After the party, Ledbetter went to the Rockland Palace in Harlem, where Cab Calloway's orchestra was performing.²⁴

Through the Lomaxes, Lead Belly formed artistic and commercial relationships with figures in New York's folk music industry. In 1935 he recorded dozens of sides for the American Record Company and subsequently for Musicraft and Victor, although relatively few were actually released. The Lomaxes also arranged numerous performances for Lead Belly at parties and at John's lectures. Intent on maintaining Lead Belly's persona as the epitome of pristine folk music, John was dismayed to find that the blues guitarist was eager to expand his repertoire with pop and jazz songs. As his "exclusive

manager, personal representative and adviser," John signed a contract with Macmillan for a book on African-American folk songs based on Lead Belly's catalog. Published in 1936, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* featured selections by the Lomaxes that discussed Lead Belly as part of the folk process of transmission of traditional ballads to a larger audience. Only a few songs were Lead Belly originals; most were interpretations of ballads, modified by guitar accompaniments that suggested the influence of ragtime and other popular styles. The book generally received rave reviews, but *New Masses* contributor Lawrence Gellert, a field collector of black spirituals and blues himself, wrote a scathing critique. Gellert, a radical with views that contrasted sharply with those of politically conservative John Lomax, showed special interest in chronicling black protest traditions in the South. He denounced Lomax for exploiting Lead Belly and for a romantic portrayal of black life in the South, overlooking the "peonage, poverty, and degradation" that afflicted African Americans in the region and failing to document the songs that challenged the racial hierarchy.²⁵

The New York media covered Lead Belly in sensational articles. *Time* labeled him a "Murderous Minstrel," and the *Brooklyn Eagle* described him as "virtuoso of Knife and Guitar." The *Herald Tribune* announced, "Lomax arrives with Lead Belly, Negro Minstrel" and added the subtitle "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here To Do a Few Tunes between Homicides." The CBS radio news program *March of Time* arranged for Lomax and Lead Belly to do a reenactment of the pardon story. The newsreel featured a magnanimous Lomax agreeing to aid an acquiescent and obsequious Lead Belly in obtaining a pardon from the governor. The program aired in January 1935 and reinforced traditional stereotypes of the benevolent master and the helpless, contented slave. Other news coverage was racist even by the bigoted standards of the day. A 1937 *Life* feature titled "Lead Belly—Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel" captioned an image with "these hands once killed a man." In articles that evoked depictions of primal savages from non-Western societies in a manner reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1913), the New York press portrayed Lead Belly as an exotic "other," characterizing him as untamed, irrational, and unfeeling.²⁶

Conversely, the reports repeatedly made allusions to Lead Belly's musical authenticity, juxtaposing his songs with trends in modern popular music. One article commented, "There is but slight resemblance between his singing and that of the stage and radio singers. There is a deep primitive quality to Lead Belly's songs." The *New York Post* noted the "perfect simplicity" of Lead Belly's music. The guitarist seemed to be an outcast on the margins of American society, a victim of oppression, at once earnest and noble. He thus represented an alluring figure to leftist, middle-class New York audiences.

previous: (From left) Josh White, Lead Belly, and Pete Seeger in New York City, March 1941.

opposite: Lead Belly performs in a New York nightclub with Josh White on guitar behind him, ca. 1940. Photograph by Carlo Pappolla.



above: Lead Belly plays guitar, accompanied by his wife on piano, in a New York City apartment. Shortly after he was released from prison in 1934, Lead Belly traveled to New York City with John Lomax and married his girlfriend, Martha Promise, in Connecticut in 1935.



At Lead Belly's New York premiere at a University of Texas alumni event, John Lomax reflected, "Northern people hear Negroes playing and singing beautiful spirituals which are too refined and are unlike the true Southern spirituals. Or else they hear men and women on the stage and radio, burlesquing their own songs. Lead Belly doesn't burlesque. He plays and sings with absolute sincerity. . . . I've heard his songs a hundred times, but I always get a thrill. To me his music is real music."²⁷

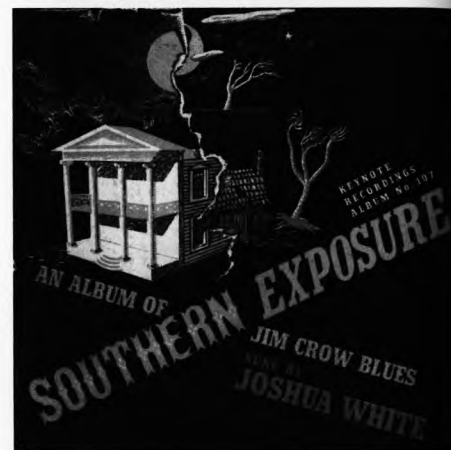
As Lead Belly established a greater presence in the city in the late 1930s, Alan Lomax exerted ever more influence at the Archive of American Folk Song and as a popularizer of the nation's traditional ballads in New York. During the Great Depression, Lomax labored to develop a folk song canon and to solidify the relationship between vernacular music and the Left. In contrast to his father, Alan was active in leftist politics and aimed to promote folk music to a large segment of the American population, not just academic and sophisticated audiences. The younger Lomax believed that the relationship between mass culture and corporate America was particularly pernicious. In his view, it homogenized folk arts and was causing the extinction of the country's vernacular music. He saw the conflict through the lens of class, as the attempt of corporate interests to manipulate, dilute, or embellish the "people's music" and produce mellifluous drivel for profit. Lomax worked tirelessly to collect and preserve vernacular music, scouring the country and contributing thousands of field recordings to the Library of Congress. To achieve his political and cultural objectives, Lomax collaborated with academics, activists, politicians, bureaucrats, performers, journalists, and foundations. He used his CBS radio programs in New York during the Depression to introduce Americans to Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Josh White, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and other respectful practitioners of folk songs. In 1940 he also helped produce Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* and Lead Belly's *Midnight Special and other Southern Prison Songs*, two landmark albums of the folk music revival issued by RCA. And though Lead Belly's relationship with John Lomax ended badly, primarily over finances, Alan Lomax and the "King of the 12-string guitar" became close collaborators. Lomax worked with New York University Professor Mary Elizabeth Barnicle to book Lead Belly for performances in front of left-wing groups.²⁸

Several concerts in New York during this era signaled a turning point in the relationship between folk music and the city and illustrated the trends initiated by cultural entrepreneurs and performers. One performance in particular stood out: "From Spirituals to Swing: An Evening of American Negro Music" presented at Carnegie Hall on December 23, 1938. The show connected progressive politics to vernacular art forms,



opposite: Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*, recorded for Victor Records in 1940, was a milestone album that influenced Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and many other folksingers. The Okie Guthrie documented his experiences during the Dust Bowl. The image on the cover of the 1964 Folkways release, shown here, conjures the hardship of displaced farmers from the Great Plains region who searched for employment in the agricultural sector of California's economy.

below: Lead Belly playing guitar in Tompkins Square Park as children dance, late 1940s.



above: *Southern Exposure* by Josh White, released by Keynote in 1941, was a controversial protest album containing anti-segregationist blues songs. The album cover art juxtaposes the two worlds of the South: white and black, day and night.



embodying the spirit of Popular Front culture that celebrated the common folk and their songs, legends, and myths. The performers, from the South, Appalachia, the Midwest, and other regions, represented a range of musical and dance traditions, mostly rural but also urban in origins. To a sophisticated New York audience, they seemed to be authentic, unspoiled, rooted in a premodern time and place, almost anachronistic among the modern skyscrapers of Midtown Manhattan where the concert occurred.

Presented by producer and jazz writer John Hammond and dedicated to the recently deceased blues singer Bessie Smith, "An Evening of American Negro Music" was performed for a capacity crowd. The concert featured African field recordings, gospel, blues, early New Orleans jazz, boogie-woogie piano, and swing. Hammond recruited a stellar lineup of musicians from the South and the Midwest, personally traveling to North Carolina and signing up blues harmonica player Sonny Terry and the a cappella gospel quartet Mitchell's Christian Singers. He initially wanted Robert Johnson, but the bluesman had died several months earlier in Mississippi. In Johnson's stead, Hammond landed Big Bill Broonzy, a blues singer based in Chicago. Other performers included the Count Basie Band, gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and saxophonist Sidney Bechet.²⁹

Hammond aimed to illustrate the rich history of black music to combat racist stereotypes about the impoverishment of African-American culture. He explained that the



above: Sonny Terry (left) and Brownie McGhee in New York City, May 1959. Photograph by David Gahr.

occasion "would bring together, for the first time, before a musically sophisticated audience, Negro music from its raw beginnings to the latest jazz." Despite acknowledged omissions, the acts illuminated continuity and change in musical forms over time and across place. The concert booklet's lead article, entitled "The Music Nobody Knows," captured the uniqueness of the moment, as this was music seldom performed in New York and, even less often, in front of an integrated audience. Stressing the obstacles of the musicians, the essay observed, "Most of the people you will hear are absurdly poor." Failing to obtain funding for the event from the NAACP and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Hammond secured support from the *New Masses*, a publication to which he contributed a column under the pseudonym Henry Johnson. The *New Masses* not only promoted the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), but also advocated sharecropper unions in the South and campaigned against lynching. In case the agenda of the event's producers was still unclear to concertgoers, they needed only to look at the show's other sponsors. Advertisements in the program were for the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, a Clifford Odets play at the Belasco Theatre, Soviet films from the Amkino Corporation, and the Workers Book Shop.³⁰

The concert received a largely positive response, though not surprisingly some attacked it as subversive. *New York Times* reporter H. Howard Taubman raved, "An evening of

American Negro music shook the stage, the rafters, and the audience at Carnegie Hall last night." He especially enjoyed Mitchell's Christian Singers and the whoops and hollers and harmonica dexterity of Sonny Terry in his version of the song "Fox Chase." Taubman noted, "They represented, in their concentration, true musical feeling, integrity and unaffectedness, Negro music in its pristine aspects." Alan Lomax was also enthusiastic and liked the idea of presenting different but related musical styles on one bill; he obtained Hammond's permission to record five of the performers for the Library of Congress. Buoyed by the reaction, Hammond staged a second "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie one year later, on December 24, 1939. The roster included the Count Basie Band, Sonny Terry, Ida Cox, the Golden Gate Quartet, Big Bill Broonzy, and the racially mixed Benny Goodman Sextet. Emceed by Howard University Professor Sterling Brown, the concert repeated some material from the previous year and received less praise, though the performances were generally solid. In many ways, Hammond was the star of both shows. Not only did he strengthen his reputation as a talent scout and a civil rights activist, but he also set a high bar for presenting vernacular music in New York, luring talent to the city from all over the country.³¹

Hammond's concerts had widespread political and cultural implications and demonstrated the vitality of Popular Front culture in New York in the late 1930s. More than simply a coalition of leftists and liberals that formed to combat the rising tide of fascism, the Popular Front encompassed the convergence of social democratic movements based on racial and labor justice. Popular Front culture dovetailed with the expansion of the entertainment and amusement industries. Increasingly in the 1930s and 1940s, the Left exerted influence on the modern "cultural apparatus," in the establishment of workers theaters, proletarian magazines, and composers' collectives. Radicals and progressives also worked in Hollywood film studios and in radio broadcasting, and many staffed federal government agencies. In these organizations, they developed affiliations and allegiances and formed artistic and social networks oriented around causes of industrial unionism, civil rights, and antifascism. "From Spirituals to Swing" epitomized Popular Front trends, and the impresario Hammond orchestrated performances that challenged prevailing assumptions on race and class. The organizers and the performers by and large considered themselves generic "communists" with a small "c," not ideologues in a party. However, the events were not merely political. Many of the artists already had recording contracts and were part of the commercial fabric of New York folk music. The categories of "protest" and "commercial" singers were not mutually exclusive and did not sufficiently describe the loyalties and commitments of the artists.³²



Flier announcing Lead Belly's performance at Irving Plaza, May 1947.

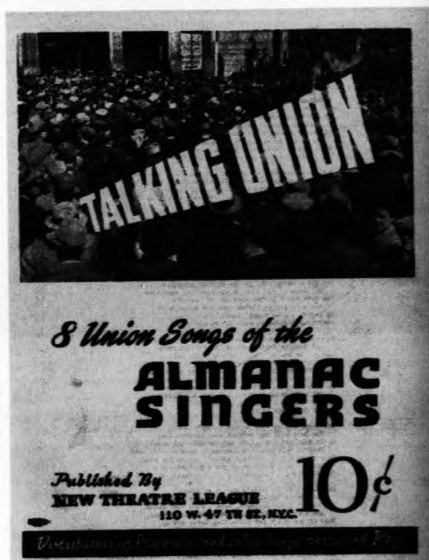
Hammond's events and the 1940 "Grapes of Wrath" concert strengthened the association of folk music with New York. But while the principal performers became highly influential in the folk revival in the city and beyond, folk music remained on the artistic margins at the end of the Great Depression, obscure compared to Tin Pan Alley and big band swing music and poorly understood by the public and media at large.³³

WORLD WAR II AND ITS AFTERMATH

By the start of World War II, a thriving informal folk culture connected loosely, though not officially, with the Communist Party had emerged in the city. The site for much of the folk activity in the early years of the war was the Village Vanguard. In 1935 Max Gordon had opened the Vanguard on Seventh Avenue, where it quickly became a popular Village nightspot. In 1940, inspired by John Hammond, Gordon featured an integrated lineup that included the Golden Gate Quartet and Josh White. Gordon also featured African-American artists Lead Belly and Josh White in 1941. The Vanguard was one of the few integrated clubs in the city at the time, in addition to Barney Josephson's Cafe Society at 1 Sheridan Square in the Village and his Cafe Society Uptown on East 58th Street.

The Almanac Singers, organized in New York in early 1941, were the embodiment of Popular Front ideals. They were an informal group, loosely organized. Members came and went and barely rehearsed. They lived communally in a loft in Greenwich Village. The core consisted of the founders Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell. Woody Guthrie, Bess Lomax (daughter of John Lomax and sister to Alan), and Pete Hawes played frequently with the ensemble. Members were unabashedly on the Left in their politics and champions of the working class, though they themselves were middle-class in background. During the span of their short career, which lasted until late 1942 or so, their topical songs varied in theme depending on the geopolitical circumstances. At times the Almanacs sang antiwar songs, labor ballads, or patriotic tunes. Their main goal, however, was to start a singing union movement. Despite their earnestness and commitment, they were utterly unsuccessful in this regard.³⁴

The Almanac Singers included an amalgam of personalities. Son of composer and musicologist Charles Seeger, Pete Seeger played the banjo and showed discipline as the leader of the group. Lee Hays, a skilled group singer, was the son of a Southern minister from Arkansas and an alumnus of the progressive Commonwealth School. Millard Lampell, from a liberal Jewish family in New Jersey, was a fine lyricist. Massachusetts native Pete Hawes sang sea chanteys in



above: Published by New Theatre League in 1941 or 1942, this Almanac Singers songbook included labor songs with militant lyrics. The Almanacs introduced the song "Talking Union" at a rally of some 20,000 striking transit workers on May Day of 1941 at Madison Square Garden.

opposite: Active during World War II and based in New York City, the Almanac Singers, seen here ca. 1940, aimed to create a singing union movement. They blended music and politics to advance leftist ideology.



above: *Songs for John Doe* was the debut album of the Almanac Singers, released in May 1941, when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany remained at peace. In line with the Soviets' anti-interventionist stance, the album included antiwar songs that were critical of America's peacetime draft. The cover, executed with a hand-drawn quality, depicts a farmer/musician everyman and two laborers—black and white—to whom the Almanac Singers gave a voice.

a baritone voice and had a passion for political theory. Bess Lomax sometimes took weekends off from Bryn Mawr College outside of Philadelphia to sing with the group. Woody Guthrie was the hero of the group, a literary mastermind and on occasion a mentor to other members, but also hard to deal with, especially when he drank too much.³⁵

At first the Almanacs sang mostly antiwar and labor songs in line with the Left's stance toward the Soviet Union during the era of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression treaty. In May 1941, they played at a rally at Madison Square Garden in front of 20,000 striking Transport Workers Union members. Their song "Talking Union" about the struggles of a union organizer won great applause. They also performed an antiwar song from their debut album, *Songs for John Doe*, chiding President Roosevelt for an increasingly militant stance. Their union songs so impressed Mike Quill of the Transport Workers Union that he helped land them a national tour of CIO unions. This would have been the realization of their dreams.³⁶ However, on June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. The event shocked the Almanacs—and the American Left. It was no longer tenable for them to sing antiwar songs as the Red Army mobilized for battle. As *New York Post* journalist Dorothy Millstone recalled, "After hearing that Russia had been invaded, I hung up the phone, and the first thing I did was break my Almanac records." Almost immediately, the group dropped part of their musical repertoire, alienating many supporters.³⁷

Their national tour in 1941 was a mixed bag. Some leaders of the CIO cheered them for their commitment to labor causes while others saw them merely as entertainers. Many workers

only mildly appreciated them. It took others a while to warm up to them. Seeger recollected, "When we walked down the aisle of a room where one thousand local members of the [San Francisco] longshoremen's union were meeting, we could see some of them turning around in surprise and even disapproval. 'What the hell is a bunch of hillbilly singers coming in here for? We got work to do.' But when we finished singing 'The Ballad of Harry Bridges' for them, their applause was deafening."³⁸

Back in New York, the group moved into a townhouse in Greenwich Village at 110 West 10th Street. Music filled the rooms, and, though group living often led to tension, a communal atmosphere developed. Song sheets, instruments, and wine bottles littered the floor. Sometimes friends such as Lead Belly or Earl Robinson came by for a jam session. They frequently held "hootenannies" on Sunday afternoons in their basement to help raise money to pay the rent. It was a lively scene where friends and acquaintances sat around and sang together.³⁹

The Almanacs, though zealous about labor causes, increasingly recognized the chasm between their music and workers in the audience. Most New Yorkers in immigrant

Sonny Terry plays guitar for a crowd including Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger at a People's Songs hootenanny at Irving Plaza, ca. 1946. People's Songs, an organization founded in New York City at the end of 1945, was committed to promoting the labor movement and other progressive causes, such as civil rights.



communities listened to their own ethnic music or to show tunes and pop hits. Topical songs about labor did not resonate with most workers. Bess Lomax observed, "I think we were in the wrong city. In New York, we sang Appalachian songs to Central European or Irish immigrants in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' and the Transport Workers Unions." To some observers the Almanacs seemed paternalistic in their attempts to transform workers into unionists or radicals.⁴⁰

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, America entered the war, and the Communist Party asked unions for a no-strike pledge. The Almanacs had to drop their labor songs, another large portion of their repertoire. Political circumstances transformed the group yet again. They began to play pro-war songs.⁴¹

In 1942 the Almanacs enjoyed success with their patriotic songs such as "Reuben James" and "Dear Mr. President." Once labeled "propaganda," a topical political song that supported the war now became an expression of loyalty. In February 1942, a *Life* photographer chronicled one of their hootenannies. The prominent William Morris Agency made an offer to manage them. Guthrie, Bess Lomax, Sis Cunningham, and Seeger sang on the CBS program *We the People*. Some members also performed on the popular CBS program *This Is War*.⁴²

In an episode both comical and upsetting, the ensemble auditioned to play at the Rainbow Room, the ritzy nightclub on the 65th floor of Rockefeller Center. A successful performance had the potential to launch them on a nationwide concert tour and a CBS radio series. The setting was sumptuous and the views of Manhattan stunning. Guthrie recalled, "There was big drops of sweat standing on my forehead, and my fingers didn't feel like they was mine. I was floating in high finances, sixty-five stories above the ground, leaning my elbow on a stiff looking table cloth as white as a runaway ghost." Bess Lomax added, "We were absolutely unprepared for success of any kind." Dressed casually in an era when nightclub performers wore formal attire, the Almanacs were the proverbial fish out of water.⁴³

The group began with an anti-Nazi song, impressing most of the onlookers. But one manager indicated that the ensemble lacked stage presence. Another proposed that the men wear overalls and the women sunbonnets. Guthrie was deeply insulted. The group changed the lyrics to the next song, Lead Belly's "New York City." They sang:

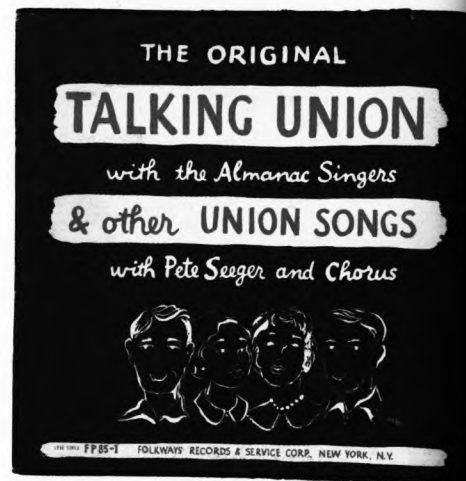
*At the Rainbow Room, the soup's on to boil
They're stirring the salad with Standard Oil*

The managers laughed, and Guthrie became angrier. The Almanacs left in a huff.⁴⁴

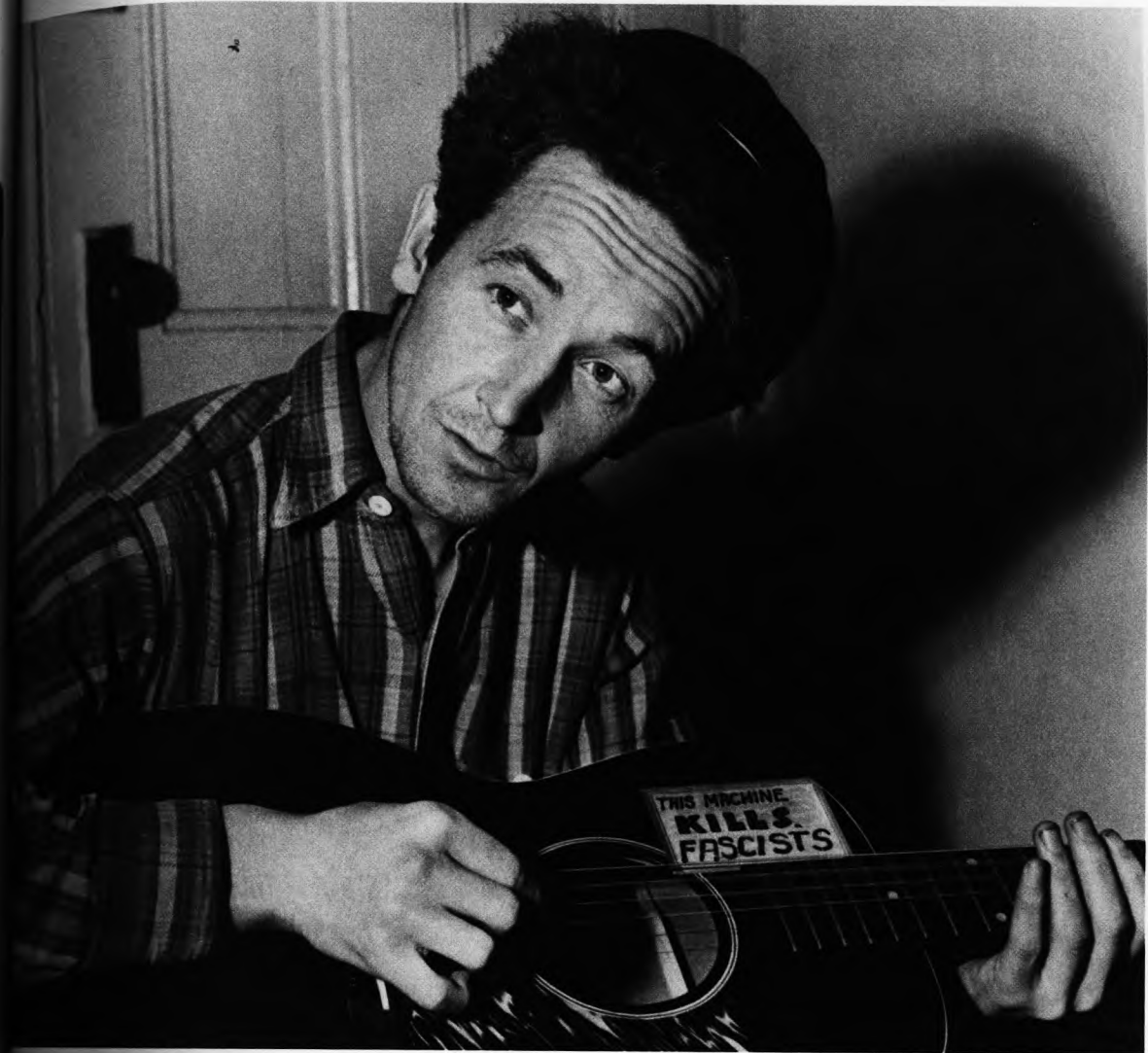
Just as quickly as the Almanac Singers achieved success, their popularity plummeted, in large part due to newspaper articles that referenced their earlier antiwar songs. Damning articles appeared in the *New York Post* and *World-Telegram*. They lost bookings at clubs as well as radio play. On the orders of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI conducted an investigation of the group for threatening wartime recruitment with their music but did not follow through with any prosecutions. Seeger himself did not care about the loss of money, but the lack of an audience perturbed him. By the end of 1942, the group was on the verge of dissolution in any case due to the wartime service of its members. Seeger received a draft notice, and Guthrie joined the Merchant Marine. Other members left New York for Detroit for jobs in war production.⁴⁵

As the first urban folk music group, the Almanac Singers were pioneers. When Guthrie was front and center, they boasted credentials as authentic folk musicians; without him the other members could only emulate rural ways in their dress and speech. They sang the blues, hillbilly tunes, mountain ballads, and Southern Methodist hymns. Alan Lomax told them, "What you are doing is one of the most important things that could possibly be done in the field of American music. You are introducing folk songs from the countryside to a city audience." They were nonprofessional and noncommercial. In their Almanac House in the Village, they brought a diverse array of people together from different racial, class, ethnic, and regional backgrounds. The Almanacs were at once urban and rural, both cosmopolitan and provincial. And they illustrated the possibility of self-reinvention in the New York political and cultural milieu.⁴⁶

America's entry into World War II had a ripple effect through the New York folk scene. In the absence of the Almanacs, folk music in the city was fragmented but still remained vibrant, with Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly, Richard Dyer-Bennet, the Reverend Gary Davis, and Josh White continuing to perform regularly. There were a few recording sessions during the war as performers drifted in and out. In particular, Moses Asch had begun issuing records in 1939 on the Asch label, and in 1943 he merged with Herbert Harris to create the Asch/Stinson label, located at 27 Union Square. Lead Belly continued to record and appear on radio programs through the war. He released *Leadbelly and the Golden Gate Quartet with Guitar* on Victor in 1940, followed by the Asch albums *Work Songs of the U.S.A. Sung by Leadbelly* and *Songs by Lead Belly*, then the Disc album *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly*. In addition, the all-star lineup of Guthrie, Seeger, Cisco Houston, Burl Ives, and Tom Glazer, under the name the Union Boys, cut the *Songs For Victory* album. Such records had scant circulation but captured the attention of the city's creative folk community. Guthrie, too, recorded on and off during the war period. In



Talking Union was the second album by the Almanac Singers, released in 1941 by Keynote. It featured six labor songs, including "Which Side Are You On?" and "Union Maid." This version, released by Folkways in 1955, included seven additional songs.



The anti-fascist message on Woody Guthrie's guitar illustrates his faith in the power of song to combat authoritarianism and transform society. Guthrie, seen here in March of 1943, wrote numerous anti-fascist songs during World War II, including "Talking Hitler's Head Off Blues." Photograph by Al Aumuller.

mid-1944 he recorded extensively for Asch and Stinson, around the time that Tom Glazer and Josh White recorded the album *Citizen C.I.O.*⁴⁷

By the war's end, numerous folk performers had drifted back to the city and again used folk music to promote their political agenda. In March 1945, Norman Studer, a music teacher at the Little Red School House in Greenwich Village, organized a conference on "Folklore in a Democracy" at the nearby Elizabeth Irwin High School. There were papers by folklorists Benjamin Botkin and Charles Seeger and music by Woody Guthrie, Sonny Terry, and Alan Lomax. A few months later, Margot Mayo's American Square Dance Group sponsored a "home from war" party with Lead Belly, Seeger (just out of the Army), Richard Dyer-Bennet, John Jacob Niles, and Guthrie.

Seeger had lost none of his prewar political passion. In late December 1945, he hosted a gathering at his in-laws' apartment in the Village to organize People's Songs, a musical organization that promoted international cooperation, labor

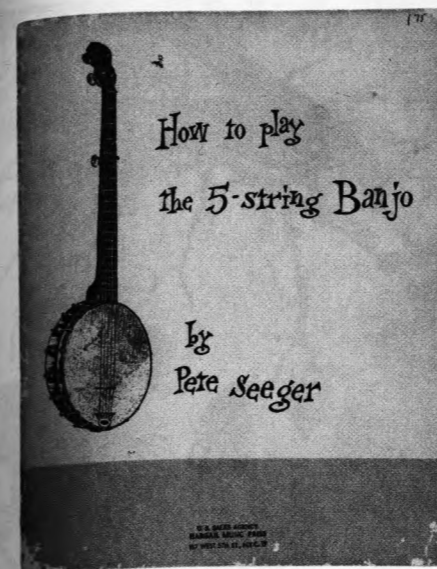


unions, and racial equality. "In 1945 Americans came home from the war," Seeger later explained. "We dived enthusiastically into long-deferred projects. A number of us who loved to sing folk songs and union songs thought it the most natural thing in the world to start an organization which could keep us all in touch with one another, which could promote new and old songs and singers and in general bring closer the broad revival of interest in folk music, and topical songs which we felt sure would sooner or later take place." For the next three years, Seeger devoted much of his energy to promoting People's Songs.⁴⁸

Seeger also carried on an active recording career. In 1946 he joined Tom Glazer, Hally Wood, and Lee Hays on the album *Songs For Political Action* issued by the CIO-Political Action Committee and recorded *Roll The Union On*, with Hays and others, on the Asch label. In 1948 Seeger toured with Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party's presidential candidate, as People's Songs ran the music desk for the campaign. In 1948 Seeger self-published *How To Play the 5-String Banjo*. "Played

previous: Pete Seeger leads the crowd in "When We March into Berlin" at the opening of the Washington labor canteen, sponsored by the United Federal Workers of America, Congress of Industrial Organizations, February 1944. His audience includes First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (seated, center). Photograph by Joseph A. Horne.

above: Leslie Scott and chorus at a Yankee Stadium rally for Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party's presidential candidate, 1948. Photograph by Julius Lazarus.



In 1948 Pete Seeger wrote his instructional manual *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*. Many banjo players cite the book as their inspiration for playing the instrument, and the manual went through many versions, including this second edition from 1954.

by hundreds of thousands of Americans 75 or 100 years ago, today this instrument has nearly died out," he explained. "Today, the five-string banjo is almost forgotten; instrument companies produce very few; a hock shop is the most likely place to find a good one." There were indeed few five-string players in New York at the time. It took three years to sell out the first 100 mimeographed copies, but Seeger continued to use his recruiting influence. By the time the booklet's professionally printed second edition appeared in 1954, issued along with the Folkways 10-inch instruction album, interest in the instrument had expanded.⁴⁹

People's Songs' national board of directors included Seeger, Lee Hays, Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell—the stars of the city's folk community. The first issue of the monthly *People's Songs* bulletin appeared in early 1946. While People's Songs was a national organization, New York remained its organizational base. Seeger and his colleagues were heartened by the upsurge of labor activism at the war's end and the fleeting promise of a peaceful world. Along with a spate of national strikes in various industries, New York experienced a wave of strikes even before Seeger had returned from his Army duty on Saipan at year's end. In late September 1945, the city temporarily ground to a halt with 1.5 million workers on strike, followed by the longshoremen's temporary walk-out in October. The national steelworkers strike in early 1946 hardly affected the city, however, since few workers in New York were employed in large factories.

Following the war, besides the numerous folk concerts and square dances throughout the city, there were various local (and national) radio programs devoted to folk music, in particular Oscar Brand's *Folk Song Festival* that launched in 1945 on the public station WNYC. Born in Canada, Brand served a stint in the United States Army and then settled in New York, where he quickly became a major promoter of folk music as well as a prolific recording artist. Tom Glazer's *Ballad Box* national show aired on ABC from 1945 to 1947, while Elaine Lambert Lewis's *Folk Songs of the Seven Million* began in 1944 on WNYC. Alan Lomax briefly resumed his radio career in 1948 with the weekly show *Your Ballad Man* on the New York-based Mutual Broadcasting Network. He featured a wide selection of music, including country, blues, and jazz. During 1948 Lomax also served as head of the music program for Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign, an extension of his work for People's Songs.

Following Henry Wallace's defeat in 1948—Seeger and Paul Robeson had performed with the candidate at numerous rallies—People's Songs briefly limped along. "New York, A Musical Tapestry," an eclectic show at Carnegie Hall in 1949 that featured jazz pianist Art Hodes, Brownie McGhee, the young Harry Belafonte, Yma Sumac and her Inca Trio, and the Weavers, was intended to raise needed funds but lost



money instead. "We had envisioned a singing labor movement spearheading a nationwide folksong revival," Seeger lamented. "How our theories went astray. Most union leaders could not see any connection between music and pork chops. As the cold war deepened in '47 and '48 the split in the labor movement deepened. 'Which Side Are You On' was known in Greenwich Village but not in a single miner's union local." People's Songs collapsed in early 1949 due to financial problems as well as the mounting federal and local anticommunist crusade.⁵⁰

Despite the demise of People's Songs and the increased charges of communist taint as the decade ended, folk music still seemed alive and well in New York. Both popular and traditional folk musicians passed through to perform in concerts and make records, and the continuing presence of local artists such as Oscar Brand, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Tom Glazer, Josh White, Reverend Gary Davis, Lead Belly, Susan Reed, and Alan Lomax, along with newcomers like Harry Belafonte, kept the movement vibrant. People's Songs' booking agency, People's Artists, located at 13 Astor Place, continued to function. It held a hootenanny on August 26, 1949, and, in conjunction with the Harlem chapter of the Civil Rights Congress, planned a concert on August 27 in Peekskill, up the Hudson River from New York. A violent mob prevented the concert from taking place, but a second attempt with actor and activist Paul Robeson on September 4 was a success. However, aided by the police,

African-American singer and activist Paul Robeson speaks at a concert benefitting the Harlem chapter of the Civil Rights Congress, September 4, 1949. Held in Peekskill, New York, the performance triggered anti-communist riots tinged with racist and anti-Semitic undercurrents. Following the performance, a mob largely comprised of members of local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion chapters threw rocks at departing vehicles of concertgoers and performers, including one that contained Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, and Pete Seeger, his wife Toshi, and their infant children.

a vicious attack by right wing zealots on those leaving the concert grounds vividly exposed the heated anticommunist political atmosphere.

After Lead Belly's death (December 6, 1949), Alan Lomax organized a Lead Belly memorial concert at Town Hall on January 28, 1950. Drawing upon his eclectic musical interests, it included Woody Guthrie, Tom Paley, the jazzmen Hot Lips Page and Sidney Bechet, Pete Seeger with the Good Neighbor Chorus, Sticks McGhee, W. C. Handy, Jean Ritchie, Count Basie, Tom Glazer, calypso performer Lord Invader, Reverend Gary Davis, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and the Weavers. The evening embodied the city's rich musical landscape. As Oscar Brand recalled, "American music today is almost a direct reflection of the kind of amalgam which Town Hall provided that night—blues, ballads, calypso, and jazz, mingled in what is now popular song."⁵¹

As the decade ended, New York's musical scene was complex and vibrant, including jazz, blues, pop, opera, and folk music in the city's clubs and concert halls and also, on warm Sunday afternoons, in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. "Everyone likes to go walking in the park on a Sunday afternoon, and nearly everyone likes to sing," the article "Sidewalk Hootenanny" in the February-March issue of *People's Songs* bulletin announced.⁵²

Meanwhile, the Weavers, a new quartet, emerged in late 1948. Its members included Seeger and his colleague in the Almanac Singers Lee Hays, along with Fred Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert. "I had met Fred Hellerman right after World War II," Seeger recalled. "He and Ronnie Gilbert had both started singing folk songs before the war, as counselors at the same summer camp. ... So now Ronnie, with her exciting contralto, and Fred, a gifted guitarist who could sing either high or low, joined their voices with my split tenor and Lee's big gospel bass." They kept busy through 1949, recording Hays's song "Wasn't That a Time" (which remained unissued) on the Charter label, and Seeger and Hays's "The Hammer Song" for the tiny Hootenanny Records. The songs expressed the group's antiwar and pacifist ideals. The Weavers also released on the Charter label a two-sided single, "The Peekskill Story," with songs and narration by Paul Robeson and Howard Fast. Following appearances at the Panel Room and the Penthouse on Astor Place, the fledgling quartet appeared with the Grito de Lares Youth Club at the "Peace On Earth" hootenanny on Christmas Eve 1949 at Webster Hall, 119 East 11th St. "We helped put on some of the world's best little hootenannies," Seeger remembered, "but in late '49 we were ready to break up. We had never intended to be a professional group. We were dead broke and about to go our separate ways."

Washington Square Park was a good 75 percent of helping me hone my technique. I would practice all week, and then on Sundays I would go to the park and see if I could do it in front of people. I'd go there for hours and hours and do the same things over and over all day, because the crowds would constantly change.

Eric Weissberg, banjoist and member of the Greenbriar Boys and the Tarriers¹

THE BATTLES OF WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK



Washington Square Park,
ca. 1956. Photograph by
Nat Norman.

F

olksinger Happy Traum remembered taking the subway from the Bronx to Greenwich Village as a teenager in 1954 to play his guitar in Washington Square Park. For him, the Village was the epitome of cool. Abstract Expressionist painters showed their work in local galleries. Experimental Off-Off-Broadway companies presented European plays too dicey for Broadway. Modern jazz musicians performed in neighborhood clubs. This was the waning period of the Red Scare, after the spectacular rise and fall of the Weavers and before the craze for folk music became a nationwide phenomenon. The park was decidedly informal and casual. It was crowded but not teeming with people. There were few opportunities for commercial success, just kindred spirits enjoying the musical and social scene. Traum saw familiar faces every week. The enthusiasm was palpable. He was learning to play the guitar and getting good at it. "We felt like we were part of a real something happening," Traum recalled. "In the forefront of something, sort of in the vanguard of some kind of movement, but only we knew about it. It was something very special."²

Sunday afternoon folksinging in Washington Square Park exemplified the communal spirit of the revival. But the tradition of "Square singing," increasingly popular in the 1950s, also became the source of conflict. Opponents—ranging from New York University officials, longtime South Village residents, and lower Fifth Avenue patricians, to the New York City parks commissioner himself—squared off against a multicultural coalition of folksingers and their allies, including beatniks, African Americans, and gays.¹ The conflict was in essence a cultural one. Folk music culture—nurtured in lofts, cafes, hootenannies, private parties, political rallies, and concert halls, and tinged by leftist politics—had come to represent the Village's counterculture and cooperative ethos. To Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris, also chairman of the board of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the quirky



Washington Square scene contrasted sharply with his notion of culture, associated with opera, the symphonic orchestra, and classical music. The fight over folksinging in the park, then, represented not only a disagreement about the use of public space, but also sparked a discussion of folk music revival culture in the city. In fact, it triggered a debate about the notion of culture itself.³

THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK SCENE

The tradition of Washington Square singing had begun after World War II and became popular in the 1950s as New York emerged as the epicenter of the folk music scene. Adjacent to the coffeehouse district in Greenwich Village, Washington Square teemed with folkies belting out tunes and relishing the convivial scene. Sunday afternoons from spring to fall were spirited times in Washington Square Park. Folksingers, accompanied by enthusiasts, would perform for several hours in the public space, playing their guitars, banjos, and mandolins and singing tunes like "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," "Blue Tail Fly," and "Hey Lolly, Lolly Lo." They were mostly white, middle-class young adults, liberal in their politics. Some had cultivated their skills and sensibilities as teenagers at progressive summer camps established under the New Deal (in particular, Camp Woodland in the Catskills).

above: Washington Square, ca. 1957-60. The Washington Square folk music scene transcended generations; professionals played with amateurs, and parents taught children, creating a dynamic atmosphere at once serious and fun. Photograph by Aaron Rennert.

below: (From left) Mike Seeger, Ralph Rinzler, and Bob Yellin perform in Washington Square, 1957-60. These quintessential "citybilly" musicians were committed practitioners of traditional Southern music. Seeger, with the New Lost City Ramblers, and Rinzler and Yellin, in the Greenbriar Boys, introduced a multitude of New Yorkers to old-time and bluegrass music. Photograph by Ralph Rinzler.

Professionals and amateurs congregated and exchanged ideas in the Square, creating a synergy that honed the skills of many. Folksinger Theo Bikel marveled, "Where else could young—or not so young—singers test their mettle in a public place?" Regulars of the 1950s jam sessions included members of the Tarriers, the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Shanty Boys. A Washington Square tradition started by several friends in the mid-1940s, folksinging was an integral part of the park's multihued fabric.⁴

When the gatherings in Washington Square Park began drawing noticeable crowds by the late 1940s, the Police Department started requiring musicians to get permits from the Parks Department. The ordinance allowed license holders to play only "stringed instruments," which in effect excluded percussionists. Though resentful of the regulation, most folksingers were glad not to compete with noisy bongo players, who descended on Greenwich Village in large numbers in the 1950s. Until 1952 George Sprung, brother of banjo player Roger Sprung, organized the events, securing the permits for fellow players. Bassist Lionel Kilberg subsequently assumed this responsibility and persuaded the Parks Department to expand the playing time from two to four hours, from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m.⁵

On a typical warm Sunday during the late Eisenhower era, six or seven groups of musicians would gather in the



park, the majority of them by the Washington Square Arch at the foot of Fifth Avenue or on the rim of the central fountain. Though divisions were never rigid or fixed, folksingers usually gravitated toward others with similar interests. For example, there were the Zionists, who were conspicuous as they danced to songs like “Hava Nagila” in the square’s southern part by Sullivan Street. The Loyal Youth Leaguers, a Marxist-Leninist organization, featured guitarist Jerry Silverman and sang union songs such as “Hold the Fort.” The bluegrassers, led by Roger Sprung and Lionel Kilberg, staked out another area. The colorful assemblies became a launch pad for several careers. As folksinger Dave Van Ronk recalled, “That Washington Square Sunday afternoon scene was a great catalyst for my whole generation.”⁶

THE FIRST BATTLE OF WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK, 1955–1959

In the late 1950s, as city planners redeveloped vast portions of Manhattan and identified Washington Square as a site for modernization, the park assumed greater cultural import, not only for folksingers but also citizens concerned about the direction of development in New York. The conflict stemmed from the plan of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses to construct a roadway through Washington Square. The project—called Washington Square Southeast—was slated to transform nine blocks into three superblocks of high-rise educational, residential, and commercial buildings. Bounded by Washington Square South (West 4th Street) to the north, Houston Street to the south, West Broadway to the west, and Mercer Street to the east, the “blighted area,” as *The New York Times* described it, contained 191 buildings—175 industrial or commercial, 16 residential. According to the Slum Clearance Committee tenant survey, only 132 families, or from 400 to 450 people, resided in the area. Most were working-class Italians. From Moses’s perspective, the residential relocation was manageable, and the displacement of some 650 industrial or commercial establishments was not cause for concern—many of his Title I projects expedited postwar deindustrialization. From the viewpoint of Moses and his sponsors, particularly New York University, Washington Square Southeast epitomized growth, progress, and efficiency, strengthening the city as a center for higher education by helping a small commuter campus transform into a major research university with modern facilities and dormitories.⁷

The proposal galvanized the community. Two dozen Village groups confronted Moses and his allies. In speeches,

opposite: Save Washington Square Rally, ca. 1958. This image captures the spirited local opposition that met Parks Commissioner Robert Moses’s ultimately unsuccessful plans to expand Fifth Avenue through Washington Square Park. Photograph by Ray Sullivan.

below: Washington Square Southeast demolition, 1957. Slum clearance chairman Robert Moses spearheaded the Washington Square Southeast Title I project, which aimed to redevelop a large swath of Greenwich Village south of Washington Square Park and led to the bulldozing of blocks of tenements and factories. While Moses and his supporters viewed the project as a sign of progress in the city, his opponents argued that urban renewal undermined the character of neighborhoods, destroying communal spaces and social networks.



rallies, essays, cartoons, and letters to editors, protesters expressed their view of the park in symbolic and imaginative terms, evoking the character and nature of Washington Square in an effort to win over the public to their vision of the area and for the city's future in general. Echoing a growing chorus of critics of modern urban planning, opponents equated the roadway and superblocks with a trend toward alienation and monotony. They predicted the destruction of their cherished park and of the neighborhood as a whole. The opposition movement gained momentum and media attention as powerful political and civic leaders joined, including Tammany Hall boss and Village district leader Carmine De Sapio, foundation consultant Raymond Rubinow, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, New York University law professor Norman Redlich, *Village Voice* editor Dan Wolf, and real estate investor George Popkin.⁸

Villagers stressed the cultural importance of Washington Square, drawing on folk music revival sentiments, beliefs, and language, as well as ideology that pitted nature against modern development. They focused their critique on what they saw as the dehumanizing nature of the roadway and the new projects. In contrast to the uniform landscape of a geometric superblock, they contended that Washington Square was an idiosyncratic and authentic environment that offered a sense of place in a transient city. Especially on Sunday afternoons, the park was a place where Villagers could experience feelings of community.⁹



previous: Musicians in Washington Square, April 1962. Photograph by Frederick Kelly.

below: The demolition of an artist's studio in Greenwich Village, May 1960. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah.



After a lengthy battle against Robert Moses and his allies, Village community groups defeated the plan to extend Fifth Avenue through Washington Square Park in 1958, which led to a trial period of closing the park to automobile traffic. Here, local activists celebrate the occasion of the "last car" to drive through Washington Square.

In a widely publicized Board of Estimate hearing on the controversy in 1958, Carmine De Sapio distilled the concerns of the road's opponents in an impassioned speech. De Sapio led the opposition in demanding that the park be closed to traffic. He portrayed Greenwich Village as a distinct entity in the city. To De Sapio, the Village was not simply a physical locality but a web of social relations. Villagers had a sense of identity and an attachment to their neighborhood. "And just as Greenwich Village is a way of life, so Washington Square Park is Greenwich Village," mused De Sapio, a lifetime Villager. "To change the character of this beloved central symbol of the Village would be, ultimately, to eradicate the essential character of this unique community."¹⁰

The anti-road advocates carried the day. They not only turned back Moses's Fifth Avenue extension plan, but made Washington Square a vehicle-free zone. Following the hearing, the Board of Estimate ruled to temporarily close the existing road in the park to all traffic but emergency vehicles and Fifth Avenue buses. In 1959, after a successful trial period, the Board of Estimate endorsed a plan to take the emergency road out of the square. Jubilant, Villagers held a "grand closing" ceremony in the park. Politicians, on the eve of an election, posed for pictures and took credit in speeches.¹¹

The result of this clash was a triumph for local roadway opponents in 1959 and, in a larger sense, critics of modern urban planning, including Lewis Mumford and William H. Whyte. The outcome also marked a victory for folksingers. The closing of Washington Square Park to automobile traffic



signified the ascent of their vision of the Square as a communal space. It also translated into larger crowds for Sunday afternoon folksinging.

THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTH VILLAGE, 1959–1961

The expanding folk music scene was rapidly transforming the character of Greenwich Village in the late 1950s. This was especially true in the largely Italian-American South Village, where coffeehouses were cropping up—a development that was met with concern by some longtime residents. As folk-singers streamed in, so did their devotees, as well as hordes of tourists. The MacDougal block between Bleecker and West 3rd Streets was especially frenetic, teeming with pleasure seekers. Occupants of apartments above the cafes and bars complained to authorities about loud noise and pedestrian traffic. To appease neighbors in units above his Gaslight Cafe, John Mitchell banned conventional applause at shows. At the end of a performance, appreciative audience members snapped their fingers instead of clapping their hands.¹²

South Village youths occasionally harassed and even attacked visitors to the neighborhood. African Americans in general, and interracial couples in particular, were primary targets. Pejoratively called “A-trainers,” a term for Harlem

Members from Save the Village arrive at City Hall in a “sightseeing train” to attend a public hearing by the City Planning Commission regarding the Zoning Law, February 1960. Greenwich Village’s association with artistic creativity and social activism earned the neighborhood nationwide fame in the early 1960s. Political and cultural movements frequently merged, as they did in 1960 with “Save the Village,” an initiative led by a coalition of artists and activists against the massive redevelopment of the neighborhood. Photograph by Phil Stanziola.

RECOLLECTIONS

HAPPY TRAUMA

It was 1954, and I was 16 years old, living in the Bronx. I can’t overstate the sense of anticipation that I felt on fair-weather Sundays as I boarded the downtown D train and rode to West 4th in the heart of Greenwich Village, guitar in hand. A short walk east brought me to Washington Square. I could hear the echoes of guitars, banjos, and fiddles before I reached the park. For the next several years I played and sang, made life-long friends, and started a musical journey that has informed my life, music, and career ever since.

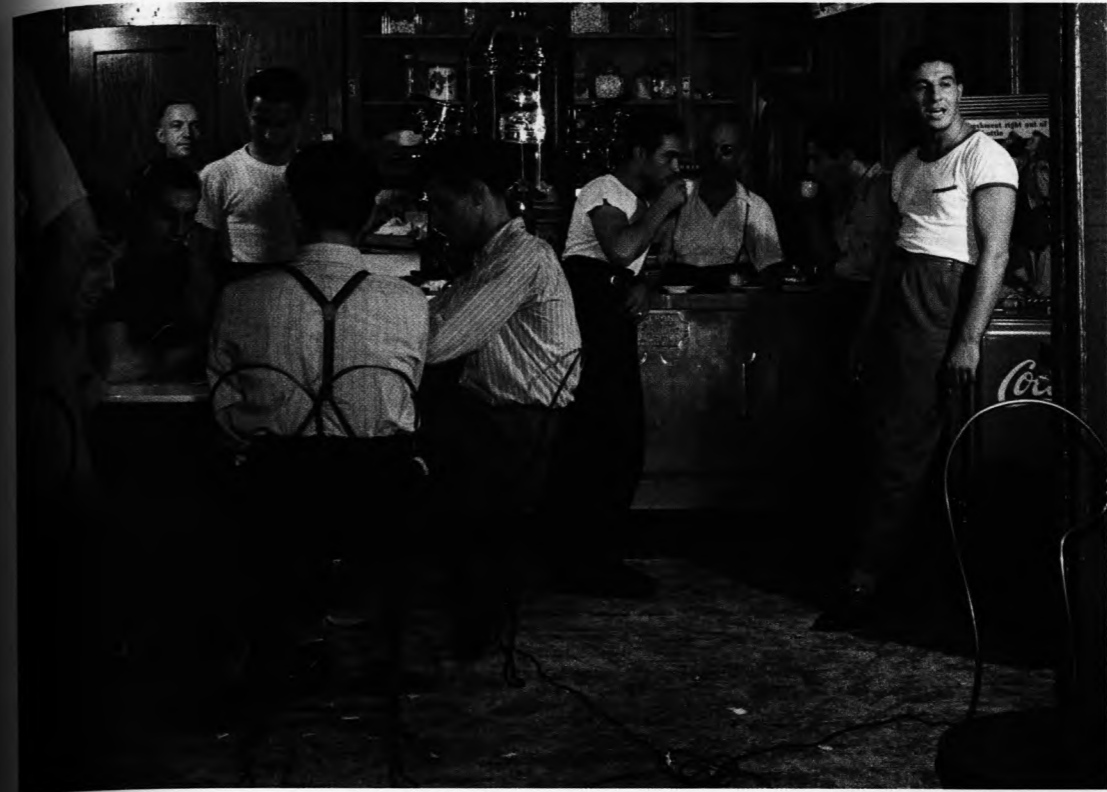
“The Square,” as we called it, was more than just a gathering of folk singers. It was an unorganized, free-form kind of social club, with a revolving set of “members” centered around some stalwart regulars. There was Roger Sprung, big and stern-looking, with his derby hat and driving bluegrass banjo; Lionel Kilberg, the affable, gentle washtub bassist (and holder of the police permit); Roy Berkeley, a tall, acerbic topical songwriter; Tom Paley, whose finger-picking guitar skills influenced and inspired many learning players (myself included); Eric Weissberg, Marshall Brickman, Jim Gavin, John Herald, the Kossoy Sisters, Dave Van Ronk, and many others.

Arriving at the park, I’d make my way through the crowds of on-lookers and tourists to find the musical group that I felt most comfortable joining. There were bluegrass jammers, old-time music aficionados, blues shouters, Pete Seeger/Woody Guthrie acolytes, calypso singers, jazzers, and other musical cliques that inhabited their own spots around the central fountain, under the arch, or in the park’s other areas. The first few times I stood shyly on the edges of the crowd, getting up the nerve to join in, but after a few weeks I got my confidence and started playing my guitar, singing and making music—and friends—with the players, some of whom I am still close to 60 years later.

On rainy days, when we couldn't take our instruments out, we'd retreat to the Labor Temple on 14th Street, where they let us use a big, echoing gymnasium-type room. Sometimes we'd make our way to lofts or apartments in the Village for song-swapping parties that went into the night.

For a kid from the Bronx in the 1950s, Greenwich Village was a revelation. It was exciting, exotic, mysterious, and mind-expanding (before drugs); a place you could see bongo-playing beatniks, interracial couples, homosexuals openly walking hand-in-hand, and all kinds of artistic types in berets, beards, and sandals. The folk music that we played there, and that eventually made its way into the Village coffeehouses, clubs, and concert venues, started out being played by enthusiasts who had no concept of the music as a commercial, professional endeavor. We did it for fun and for the love of it, but as the fifties became the sixties, the music and its intentions morphed into careers, contracts, and the phenomenon that made "folk" a pop culture craze.

Happy Traum, a renowned folksinger, guitarist, author, and teacher, came of age in the Greenwich Village folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. He studied blues guitar with Brownie McGhee; performed and recorded with major figures in the folk music world (including Bob Dylan); taught guitar at leading camps, clinics, and workshops; was editor of Sing Out! magazine; and has produced more than 500 instructional CDs, DVDs, and books for his company, Homespun Music Instruction. For the past 47 years, he and his wife and business partner, Jane, have made their home in Woodstock, New York.



Italian-American espresso shop on MacDougal Street, August 1940. The South Village was a predominantly working-class, Italian-American neighborhood in the mid-20th century.

The area's many espresso shops preceded an influx of coffeehouses in the 1950s that provided venues for the Beat poetry movement and the folk music revival and heralded the community's transformation from quiet residential enclave to vibrant artistic center.

Photograph by Marjory Collins.

residents who traveled downtown via the subway, African Americans were increasingly hanging out in the Village in the late 1950s, embodying to many South Villagers the disruptive local changes. The tension occasionally led to violence. For example, Len Chandler, one of the few African-American folksingers on the scene, was attacked outside the Gaslight by a group of Italian toughs "attempting to clean up the neighborhood." Dave Van Ronk recalled, "There was a lot of that shit going down back then." In 1959 the *Village Voice* reported a series of assaults on black people in the South Village. As a result, the Sixth Precinct added patrolmen to the area, especially on Friday and Saturday nights.¹³

Folk music venues became a lightning rod for the growing social tensions. On several occasions, youngsters vandalized new cabarets and restaurants, concrete symbols of the South Village in transition. Although most proprietors were loath to discuss the matter, the *Village Voice* learned that incidents occurred in 1959 at the Village Gate, Rienzi's, Punjab, and Port O' Call. Village Gate owner Art D'Lugoff was repeatedly the victim of vandals. He suspected the attacks happened just before dawn and estimated the damage at several hundred dollars for broken windows, a smashed showcase, and a stolen flag.¹⁴

The conflict stemmed in part from the stress between old-timers and newcomers. For some longtime residents, the influx of a diverse population into the South Village represented an encroachment on their traditional ethnic

community. Though their enclave was already in demographic decline due to the trend toward suburbanization, driven by the GI Bill, many Italian Americans were intent on maintaining their political and cultural influence in Greenwich Village. A new business owner observed, "This was once an established neighborhood and now it is threatened. Many people feel that their whole way of life is in danger, and naturally they resent it."¹⁵

The strife was also a consequence of rising property values. The growth of the tourist district led to higher rents on Bleeker, Thompson, and Sullivan Streets. Unable to compete, some Italian coffeehouses closed down. A supermarket replaced a butcher and a grocer. Other developments also caused displacement. The expansion of New York University, for instance, was uprooting many residents and businesses. The recently completed Washington Square Village, Robert Moses's Title I urban renewal project, drove up prices for residential units. The new trends disquieted many in the community.¹⁶

Of the many countercultural spaces in Greenwich Village, the liveliest and most integrated was Washington Square Park, especially during Sunday afternoon folksinging. After the Board of Estimate closed the park to traffic in 1958, Washington Square gained cohesion as an enclosed area and attracted larger and more diverse crowds. As *The New York Times* reporter Michael James observed in 1959, "Musicians, many with guitars, some with banjos, a few with mandolins and one or two with bass viols, share the fountain with Greenwich Villagers, tourists, cats and dogs and a clicking corps of photographers." Beatniks amassed in the park on Sundays. African Americans and gays attended the events in increasing numbers. Many New York University students spent their leisure time in the park. New Yorker Robert J. Silverstein described the scene in 1961 as "one place in America where people of whatever race or color could mingle and be with whomever they wished."¹⁷

THE SECOND BATTLE OF WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK, 1961

At the end of the Eisenhower era in New York, folk music culture blended with other social trends in Greenwich Village. Beatniks, blacks, and gays increasingly attended the weekly gatherings, not necessarily to sing but to mingle in the budding countercultural milieu. Single people often looked for dating partners. Parents sometimes brought their children. To some viewers, including many members of the South Village community, the events were disorderly and many of the participants antisocial. But to others, the park was a patchwork of diversity

opposite: Elevated view of Washington Square Park, May 1959. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah.

opposite below: Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, ca. 1965. Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris deemed the Lincoln Center plaza the quintessential public space, recognizing that its modernist interpretation of a classical Italian piazza was intended to edify visitors. Emblematic of American power and prosperity at the height of the Cold War, the plaza sharply contrasted with quirky Washington Square Park, though both featured centrally located fountains. Photograph by Morris Warman.



that fostered social encounters and interactions and reduced racism. These tensions came to a head in a debate that represented not only a disagreement about the use of public space, but also the significance of the folk music revival culture in New York.¹⁸

Key to this debate was Newbold Morris, who had been appointed parks commissioner by Mayor Robert Wagner in 1960. Morris was a prominent figure in Robert Moses's urban renewal coalition, as well as a member of Manhattan's cultural elite. Descended from the city's Knickerbocker aristocracy, Morris counted among his ancestors Founding Fathers Lewis Morris and Gouverneur Morris. Morris received his education at the elite Groton School and, in keeping with family tradition since the colonial era, attended Yale, where he became a member of the Scroll and Key secret society. He was active in New York politics, serving as president of the New York City Council under Mayor Fiorello La Guardia from 1938 to 1945 and on the City Planning Commission from 1946 to 1948.¹⁹

As chairman of the board of Lincoln Center and a founder of City Center Theater in 1943 and the New York City Opera in 1944, Morris worked actively to bring high culture to the public at a reasonable price. Mayor Wagner described him as an "aristocrat in the noblest sense of the word."²⁰ From Morris's perspective, folk music in Washington Square signified the antithesis of the Lincoln Center ideal. As parks commissioner, Morris disdained Washington Square folksinging. He saw nothing of artistic, cultural, or social value in the Sunday afternoon events.

In an internal memorandum circulated on March 13, 1961, Morris announced his decision to stop giving permits for the playing of musical instruments in the square, revealing his attitudes toward high and low culture:

I want to emphasize I am not opposed to the wonderful symphony concerts, bands, quartets or chamber music [in Washington Square Park]. What I am against is these fellows that come from miles away to display the most terrible costumes, haircuts, etc. and who play bongo drums and other weird instruments attracting a weird public.

I patrolled the area on Sunday and I was shocked. Conditions are much worse than when we were down there last year. You cannot call it a park anymore. It is so heavily used, not by the neighborhood, but by these freaks, that there literally was not room on the walks.²¹

Part of Morris's concern involved the regulation of public space and the maintenance of social order. In this regard, he shared the attitude of his predecessor, Robert Moses. (It was

below: Izzy Young in New York City, ca. 1960. Folklore Center owner Izzy Young, along with Judson Memorial Church minister Howard Moody, formed the "Right to Sing" Committee and led the 1961 protests against the ban of folksinging in Washington Square Park. Young contended that the ban infringed upon the civil liberties of folksingers. Photograph by Diana Davies.



above top: The folk music ban in Washington Square by Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris triggered a clash between protesters and the police on April 9, 1961 that was labeled a "riot" by some media outlets, including *The New York Times* and the *New York Mirror*. In this film still from *Sunday*, Dan Drasin's short documentary about the incident, officers apprehend Robert Easton of the Bronx as he plays his autoharp in defiance.

above bottom: Izzy Young in Washington Square Park on April 9, 1961, from Dan Drasin's documentary *Sunday*. "We have been singing here for 17 years and never have had any trouble," Young declared to fellow demonstrators. "We have a right to sing here." Photograph by Harvey Zucker.



rumored that Moses still controlled the parks and that Morris was his puppet.) During his tenure as commissioner from 1934 to 1960, Moses envisioned parks as sites for recreational activity. Throughout the city he directed the construction of swimming pools, baseball diamonds, tennis courts, skating rinks, playgrounds, and other athletic facilities in public spaces, but he limited political and cultural events within them. He clashed with Shakespeare Festival founder Joseph Papp, for instance, about the value of Shakespeare in Central Park (though he eventually relented). Morris adopted a similarly restrictive view.²²

Morris's decision divided the neighborhood, pitting a multicultural coalition of folksingers, beatniks, blacks, and gays against New York University officials and wealthy lower Fifth Avenue and longtime South Village residents. The ban against folksinging in the park also represented a reckoning of revival culture in New York. It was an early culture clash in the 1960s.

After *The New York Times* reported the ban two weeks later, outraged New Yorkers sent letters to the parks commissioner and the mayor. Villager and WNYC radio broadcaster Oscar Brand, whose Sunday show was a crucial platform for folksingers, promised to Wagner, "I intend to join wholeheartedly in any active mass protests against this action." In a letter to Morris, Judson Memorial Church Reverend Howard Moody predicted a local movement against the ban. "If you need community support, it can be aroused," he commented.²³

Despite the objections, the parks department began denying permits to event organizers, including the Folklore Center's Izzy Young. Young requested a permit for "folksinging with stringed instruments" every Sunday in April. The parks department rejected the application without any explanation. In an internal communication, one staff member warned, "I feel certain that refusal to grant the requested permit after so many years, when they were allowed to play, will be questioned and possibly be aired in the press." In fact, musicians and their supporters were already planning a demonstration.²⁴

Passions predictably erupted in Washington Square Park the following Sunday afternoon, April 9, 1961, as folksingers confronted police for several hours. At 2:00 p.m. approximately 50 demonstrators entered the park from the southwestern corner, carrying a cello as a mock coffin and signs that read "Keep the Sound of Music in the Square" and "Comm. Morris, Don't Stop Us, Join Us." Local Sixth Precinct Captain Adrian Donohue and 15 of his men met the group and allowed them to march silently around the fountain. Hundreds of supporters joined the procession as perplexed tourists looked on. Inspired by the occasion, some sang Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." When officers spotted a youth, Robert A. Easton of the Bronx, age 18,

singing while playing his autoharp, they apprehended him and whisked him away to a patrol car. Seconds later, police arrested two more players. The incensed crowd, estimated at 2,000, heckled the authorities.²⁵

At 3:00 p.m. protesters with guitars, directed by Izzy Young, occupied the dry fountain. Taking their cue from civil rights activists, they started singing "We Shall Not Be Moved." Art D'Lugoff ridiculed Morris's latest pronouncement that folksingers and their audiences destroyed the park's grass and shrubbery, pointing out that performances occurred on asphalt by the fountain and the Arch. Addressing the crowd, Young cited the tradition of folksinging in Washington Square. "We have been singing here for 17 years and never have had any trouble," he declared. "We have a right to sing here."²⁶

At 3:30 Inspector Patrick MacCormick ordered police to leave their nightsticks behind and clear the demonstrators from the fountain. Riot squad cops, reinforcing the Sixth Precinct, pushed occupants of the basin toward the rim. A *Village Voice* reporter observed, "A few of the officers reacted as if they had 1917 Union Square Bolsheviks as adversaries." Fights broke out, combatants exchanged blows, and police knocked down demonstrators. There was shoving, kicking, and wrestling. The police ultimately arrested 10 individuals. At least 20 people were injured, including three officers. As patrol wagons hauled off protesters, demonstrators yelled "fascists" and gestured with their arms in a mock Nazi salute. Village Independent Democrat (VID) district leader



Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival

previous: A man (at right) films the scuffle as police officers and riot squad cops clear demonstrators from around Washington Square's central fountain, April 9, 1961. Many local leaders accused the police of employing excessive force during the confrontation. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah.

below: The socially conscientious Judson Memorial Baptist Church, seen here ca. 1975, the socially conscientious Judson Memorial Church had anchored Washington Square South since 1893, and in the mid-1950s, it began to support a vibrant "arts ministry" under the leadership of Senior Minister Howard Moody. Along with Izzy Young, Moody led the Right to Sing Committee in 1961. Photograph by Edmund V. Gillon.



Stills from Dan Drasin's 17-minute, 16-millimeter documentary film *Sunday*, 1961.

candidate James Lanigan told *The New York Times*, "I saw evidence of police brutality. As a citizen and attorney I believe in order. But the expulsions from the park and methods used were unnecessary."²⁷ VID vice president, attorney Ed Koch, offered to provide legal representation to the arrested demonstrators.²⁸

During the mêlée and after, scores of protesters found refuge in Judson Memorial Church. Essentially the front yard of the church, Washington Square Park was especially dear to the church's pastor, Howard Moody. Moody had been an influential voice against Moses's roadway plan in his roles as Judson minister and VID president. The native Texan sometimes attended Sunday afternoon gatherings after his church service and sang along in his sonorous drawl. Moody was livid at the behavior of police and collected signed statements of nearly 100 people who claimed they had witnessed acts of brutality. He gave many reporters interviews and was widely quoted in the Monday newspapers. He received numerous letters from sympathizers, encouraging him to champion the cause of the musicians. Like Izzy Young, Howard Moody was becoming a key figure in the dispute.²⁹

The day after the clash, Newbold Morris issued a statement defending his policy. He stressed his concern for the park's greenery and blamed folksingers for drawing large crowds that trampled the natural features. Moody, his adversary, wryly recalled, "He wanted to turn Washington Square Park into an English garden." Morris professed that as parks commissioner, he aimed to make Washington Square "an attractive area for both passive and active recreation," and

he contended that attaining this goal was impossible due to Sunday festivities. To accommodate the musicians, he advised that they apply for permits to play in the spacious East River Park amphitheater off Grand Street, on the easternmost border of the Lower East Side.³⁰

The parks commissioner received support from New York's mayor and the media establishment. Daily newspapers vilified the protesters and defended the police. Front page headlines in *The New York Times* exaggerated, "FOLK SINGERS RIOT IN WASHINGTON SQ." The *New York Mirror* related in two-inch type that "2000 BEATNIKS RIOT IN VILLAGE." The *Daily News* reported, "Embattled beatnik musicians, joined by friends and veteran anti-cop shouters, turned peaceful Washington Square Park into a wrestling ring yesterday afternoon." *The New York Times* editorialized that Morris "treated the crisis with intelligence and restraint" and implied that his East River Park proposition was fair and reasonable. From Florida, where he was on vacation recuperating from an operation, Mayor Wagner weighed in with approval of Morris's ban on folk music in Washington Square Park and his relocation initiative.³¹

THE RIGHT TO SING COMMITTEE AND WASHINGTON SQUARE CULTURE

To folksingers, if Washington Square represented Shangri-La, East River Park meant Siberia. The battle intensified as Howard Moody and Izzy Young formed the Right to Sing Committee. Many Villagers joined the committee, including VID leaders James Lanigan, Ed Koch, and Sarah Schoenkopf, Village Gate owner Art D'Lugoff, WNYC broadcaster Oscar Brand, and New York University law professors Edmond Cahn and Norman Dorsen. Other influential residents, such as Jane Jacobs and *New York Times* writer Gilbert Millstein, backed the group. The New York Civil Liberties Union aided their cause by filing a petition in the State Supreme Court to direct Morris to issue folksingers a permit.³²

Neighborhood organizations dominated by longtime residents overwhelmingly backed Newbold Morris in his ban on folksinging in the park. Four days after the demonstration, representatives of more than 25 Greenwich Village civic, religious, veterans, and cultural associations met at the Church of Our Lady of Pompeii to form the Committee to Preserve the Dignity and Beauty of Washington Square Park. The groups—collectively known as the Washington Square Dignity organizations—included the Chamber of Commerce, the Washington Square Association, two American Legion posts,

below: Social activists, folksingers, and Village community leaders and residents joined forces in this 1961 "Right to Sing" rally. After several weeks of vigorous demonstrations, held in the park and in local institutions and venues such as Judson Memorial Church and Art D'Lugoff's Village Gate, Mayor Robert Wagner repealed the ban against folksinging.



above: Community organizer and urban theorist Jane Jacobs at a press conference at the Lion's Head Restaurant in Greenwich Village, December 1961. Jacobs led a local movement to defeat a plan to redevelop a large section of the West Village in 1961, in part by amassing evidence about the area's vitality and presenting it at public hearings and at press conferences. Her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) became a seminal work in urban planning. Photograph by Phil Stanzola.

THIS SUNDAY AFTERNOON
APR. 16, at 4pm.

JUDSON CHURCH | VILLAGE GATE
55 Washington Sq. South | 185 Thompson St. (at 10th St.)
SIMULTANEOUS PROGRAM AT BOTH PLACES

**"right to sing
rally"**

SPONSORS: (partial list)
Oscar Brand
John Cooney
Perry Davis
Art D'Lugoff
Jane Jacobs
Gilbert Millstein
Sam Houston Young
Emanuel Hoffeld
Izzy Young

PERFORMERS: (partial list)
Conny Brothers
Sam Miller
Eric Starving
Lynne Spanish
Cynthia Harding
Alan Lomax
Ed McCurdy
Shanty Shop
David Van Ness

There will not be any folk singing in the park this week. This is a protest rally and boycott for the express purpose of maintaining our constitutional right to continue to gather and sing in Washington Square Park. — We earnestly call a return to the tradition of Tolerance and Freedom in Greenwich Village.

Contribution at Door

the Marquette and Knickerbocker Councils of the Knights of Columbus, the Pompeii Parent-Teacher Association, the Village Temple, the Village Business Men's Association, the Mothers' Club of St. Anthony, the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) of Pompeii, and Cub Scout Pack #325. Chaired by William King, head of Pompeii's Catholic Youth Organization, the committee endorsed the Morris relocation plan and disputed Izzy Young's claim that the ban infringed upon the civil liberties of folksingers. In a statement released to the press, the committee argued that the park should be "a quiet oasis for proper and peaceful recreation," not criticizing folksinging per se but rather the effect of the events. The coalition contended, "The Sunday gatherings have attracted crowds from all over the Metropolitan District, creating overcrowded, unsanitary, and disorderly situations. This situation has gotten beyond the proper control and supervision of both the police and Parks Departments."³³

Numerous Villagers who resided in luxury apartments just north of the park on lower Fifth Avenue, a choice New York address, joined South Village residents in this coalition that transcended barriers of class and ethnicity. Most directly affected by the Sunday events, they above all wanted a tranquil Washington Square Park. In encouraging missives, Fifth Avenue residents Sydney F. Spero, Daniel A. Shirk, and John W. Frost informed the parks commissioner that they and most of their neighbors supported him. E. Camoin de Bonilla of 19 Fifth Avenue articulated his desire for the park to Morris, "It would be most pleasant and comforting to sit again under its trees surrounded by some green and perhaps some flowers." Mrs. Abraham Starr of 33 Fifth Avenue rejoiced at the folksinging ban and recommended to Mayor Wagner, "The best strategy would be to rehabilitate the park, remove the hideous and useless fountain and replace it with flower beds, install new, modern benches, re-seed the lawns and enforce a strict KEEP OFF THE GRASS law."³⁴

Morris's supporters argued that their longtime residency in Greenwich Village gave them priority in determining the use of Washington Square Park. In letters to the parks commissioner, they underscored their neighborhood roots and characterized Sunday attendees as trespassers. Marie Di Giorgio of Sullivan Street stressed that she was a "native Villager," Alma Maravelo of the Pompeii CYO noted that she had "lived in Greenwich Village all her life," and Eugenia O'Connor of Bedford Street indicated, "I was born in the Village on Hancock Street and have never lived anywhere else. My children were born here too." These Villagers maintained that they could not relax and enjoy the park with their families as a result of the commotion caused by the jamborees. "To listen to bongo drums at 2 o'clock on Sunday afternoon," proclaimed a Bleecker Street lifetime resident at a community planning board meeting, "is degrading to my mother and father."³⁵

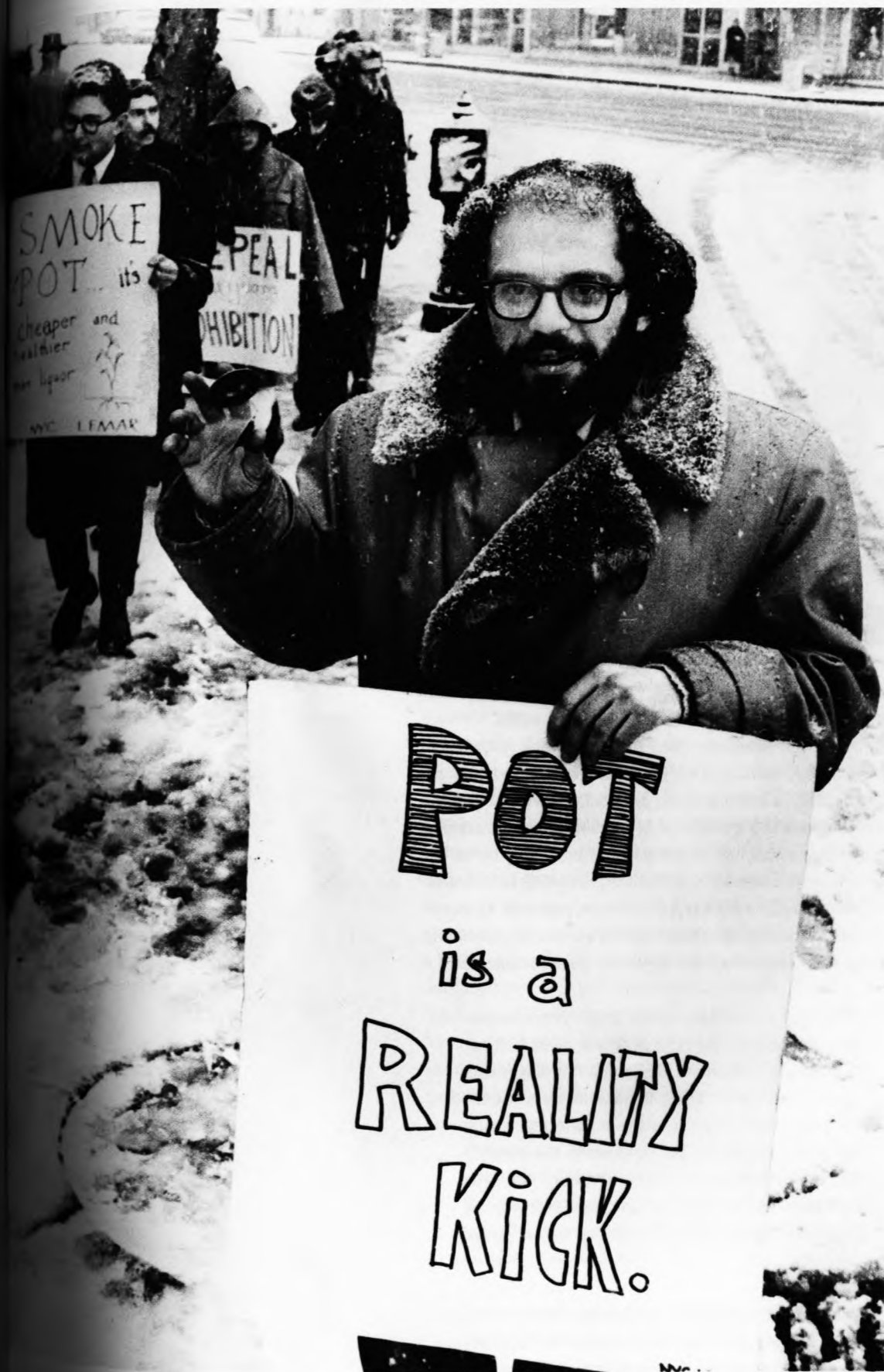
The Washington Square Dignity organizations and their allies cited “misbehavior” in the park and usually singled out “beatniks” as the culprits. In their appeals to Morris and Wagner, they condemned beatniks as slovenly and unclean, listless and effeminate, and vulgar and licentious. Echoing critiques heard in popular culture around the nation, New York University education professor F. Thrasher spewed invective at “degenerate beatnik rabble,” which had “absolutely NO regard for the moralities of normal, decent people.” Charles Rao, president of Tiro A Segno (Rifle Club) of New York, Inc. on MacDougal Street, expressed to Morris, “We of Tiro, the oldest American club of Italian origin in the States, wish to compliment you in the action to do away with the ridiculous display of beatnicks [sic] in Washington Square Park which degrades this fine community.”³⁶

The conflict was essentially cultural. “Beatniks” embodied the values of the nascent counterculture, not only in their use of marijuana, but also in their unconventional attitude toward work. Disdainful of the 1950s American Dream, beatniks shunned the trappings of suburbia and gravitated toward college towns and bohemian areas in cities. “There is nothing wrong with material possessions,” remarked Village Beat poet Ted Joans. “But you should use them and not let them use you.” Beats often decried the depersonalized nature of work and leisure and their desire to avoid the “rat race.” A feature story in *LOOK* commented, “The goals of the Beat are not watching TV, not wearing gray flannel, not owning a home in the suburbs, and especially—not working.” In his study of 300 Village Beats in the summer of 1960, sociologist Ned Polsky reinforced some of the claims made by the scandalized media and in the popular culture. Polsky found that 35 percent of the Beats were working class in background, 60 percent were middle class, and 5 percent upper class. Blacks, women, and gays were all part of the subculture. Most beatniks got by through temporary jobs and a combination of panhandling, borrowing money, living off their girlfriends or parents, selling marijuana, or moving from one apartment to another to avoid paying rent. Some slept on the floor of a friend’s loft; a few became homeless. Beat writer Lawrence Lipton referred to this lifestyle as “holy poverty.” In an era when a generation of Americans attained middle-class status, the beatniks of Greenwich Village represented downward mobility.³⁷

In a letter to Morris, one critic used the oxymoron “beatnik folksingers.” While there was some overlap, these were two different cultures. The Beat and folk music movements flourished simultaneously in Village coffeehouses. There was cross-fertilization of ideas between the artists. The poetry of Allen Ginsberg and the novels of Jack Kerouac, for instance, influenced folksinger Bob Dylan. But in terms of audiences, styles, and politics, the artistic movements were largely distinct. As Dave Van Ronk observed, “The real Beats liked cool

Beat poet Allen Ginsberg was an early advocate of the legalization of marijuana. Outside the Women’s House of Detention in January 1965, he led this group of demonstrators to demand the release of prisoners arrested for marijuana use or possession.

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Musicians in Washington Square Park, 1955-65. Photograph by Nat Norman.

jazz, bebop, and hard drugs, and the folkniks would sit around on the floor and sing songs of the oppressed masses.”

Moreover, folksingers and their followers, in contrast to the Beats, tended to be politically active and to support bolder liberal policies, particularly in civil rights. Nevertheless, the conflation of folksingers and beatniks shaped the viewpoint of Newbold Morris and strengthened his sense of righteousness. A particularly damning assessment of folksingers came from one of the most powerful figures in the Washington Square area, New York University President Carroll V. Newsom. In a letter to Morris, Newsom reflected:

There was a time when a folk singer was a person who sang folk songs; most people enjoyed his contribution to community life. Now a folk singer may or may not be able to sing. Sometimes he is a hoodlum; many believe he indulges in abnormal sexual behavior. Judging by his conduct in Washington Square Park, he dislikes little children, and likes to disrupt life in the community. He seems to be especially happy when he can gather with others of his ilk.³⁸

The Washington Square Dignity leadership also complained that folksingers lured unsavory elements to the park. In the early 1960s, the most popular downtown gay cruising

areas were Greenwich Avenue, Eighth Street, and Washington Square Park. Despite the Sixth Precinct's crackdown, more and more gays hung out in these Village locales. On Greenwich Avenue, gay men sat on doorsteps or car hoods and watched promenaders until cops dispersed them. Their favorite gathering place in the park was a railing known as the “meat rack” along Washington Square West. In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, J. Owen Grundy, *Greenwich Village News* editor and public relations chairman of the Committee to Preserve the Dignity and Beauty of Washington Square Park, fulminated about the changing nature of the Village:

During the past two or three year[s] the community has experienced an extraordinary invasion of homosexuals and professional beatniks, mostly from outside, who seem to take especial pride in appearing in public in the dirtiest and most unkempt attire conceivable. To this is added irregular and shocking conduct. This motley mob attracted by so-called folk singing has made the fountain in Washington Square Park its Mecca each and every Sunday.³⁹

The park conflict also fueled racial tensions in the neighborhood. Though Greenwich Village liberals endorsed a strong civil rights plank in the Democratic Party platform, most were more comfortable denouncing racism in Birmingham than on Bleecker Street. One prominent exception was Howard Moody. In a sermon at Judson Church during the controversy, Moody spoke frankly, “There is some prejudice in Greenwich Village. There are Italians that do not like Negroes, but there are non-Italians that don't like Negroes and there are Negroes who think all Italians belong to the Mafia, and there are Anglo-Saxons who think that neither of the aforementioned ought to be allowed in the park.” The Committee to Preserve the Dignity and Beauty of Washington Square Park vehemently denied that race was a factor in the dispute. But incidents were too numerous and hate mail to Morris and Moody too extensive to discount the issue. Investment advisor Harwood Gilder, of 29 Washington Square West, urged Morris to rid the park of “Bronx A-trainers” (although there was no A train from the Bronx). Mrs. Forrest Rutherford of 33 Fifth Avenue berated Moody:

Please allow me to assure you that the residents of Washington Square do NOT want to see this lovely, traditional, refined community become a skid row for beatniks, degenerates and negro mongrels masquerading as “folk singers.”

We are 100% behind the Police Commissioner and the Mayor and we will wipe out this blot on the fair name of Fifth Avenue. If you are so much in favor of

interracial activities, why don't you invite them to meet in your so-called church?⁴⁰

In response, folksingers and their supporters put forward a defense of the Washington Square scene in cultural terms. In contrast to Morris's elitist interpretation of culture, linked to the fine arts and tied to notions about education, background, and propriety, they viewed culture from an anthropological perspective, drawing on strands of 20th-century thought that embraced the value and integrity of local traditions. Folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Zora Neale Hurston had adopted similar anthropological methods in the 1930s as they studied the customs and practices of groups in the South and made field recordings of rural folk music. By the postwar period this ethnographical approach became increasingly influential in surveys of both rural and urban communities. In the 1950s in New York, for instance, groups displaced by highway construction and slum clearance in neighborhoods like East Tremont in the Bronx and Lincoln Square in Manhattan in effect developed their own local ethnographies as they battled against the urban renewal coalition—in vain—to keep their homes. As critics such as Robert Moses characterized their communities as “slums” that impeded progress in the city, they countered with descriptions of the complex ways of life and vital networks of social relations in their neighborhoods. Coalitions of Villagers and their allies embraced this model of resistance with great success, first against the Moses roadway and second against the Morris folksinging ban.⁴¹

The Right to Sing Committee mobilized neighborhood groups and made strong arguments about the cultural and economic value of the Washington Square scene. The committee received support from many local organizations, such as the VID, the *Village Voice*, numerous coffeehouses, Cinema 16 film society, and the Eighth Street Bookshop. At turns incensed and reflective in notes to Morris, area political and business leaders counted the benefits of Washington Square folksinging. Eli Wilentz, co-owner of the Eighth Street Bookshop, observed that while central city locations throughout America were in economic decline, Greenwich Village remained vibrant, in part due to the Sunday tourism that bolstered community establishments, including his store. Amos Vogel, executive secretary of Cinema 16, contended that the racially integrated gatherings represented the best of an expanding, yet imperfect, American democracy. Dan Wolf, editor of the *Village Voice*, chided Morris for allowing the Fifth Avenue Coach Company to idle its buses around the square and emit fumes and noise while claiming to care about the park's greenery and the quality of experience of local residents.⁴²

Carmine De Sapio's backing of the folksingers was a surprise to many Villagers. With his district race against the VID's James Lanigan just five months away, De Sapio was



Folk music and political activism frequently converged in Greenwich Village in support of both national causes, such as civil rights and pacifism, and neighborhood endeavors, such as the “good government” movement. This flier advertises a 1962 benefit concert at the Village Gate to aid the Village Independent Democrats (VID) in a campaign against their party rivals from the Tamawa Club, run by Tammany boss Carmine De Sapio.

RECOLLECTIONS

DAN DRASIN

In 1961 I was 18 years old, living in a cheap apartment in Greenwich Village a couple of floors above Izzy Young's Folklore Center, where, according to legend, 1960s counter-culture was born. Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris had just banned folk musicians from nearby Washington Square Park in an attempt—driven by local real-estate interests—to erase a funky, joyous tradition that dated back to the late 1940s. In response, the Folklore Center announced a protest event to take place on Sunday, April 9th.

Everyone knew something was going to happen that day, but no one knew exactly what. So it occurred to me that this just might make a good subject for a documentary. Fortunately I was then employed by D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Albert Maysles, pioneering documentary filmmakers who had designed their own highly portable 16mm filming gear (a rarity at that time) and generously allowed their employees to borrow it on weekends. So I commandeered some friends, three cameras, a briefcase-size portable tape recorder, and some expired black & white film that I'd hacked out of the my employers' freezer with an icepick, and off we went to the park.

When we arrived, about 100 folksingers had already come to defend their right to sing freely. Musicians, writers, artists, and activists debated with and confronted the police, eventually joining hands in solidarity until suddenly the police were ordered to clear the square, violence broke out, and many were arrested. Luckily we'd brought just enough film to cover the gist of the event.

\$800 later (all the money I had in the world), I'd edited the footage into a finished 17-minute documentary that went on to earn nine international festival awards and became widely recognized as one of the first social-protest films of the turbulent 1960s.

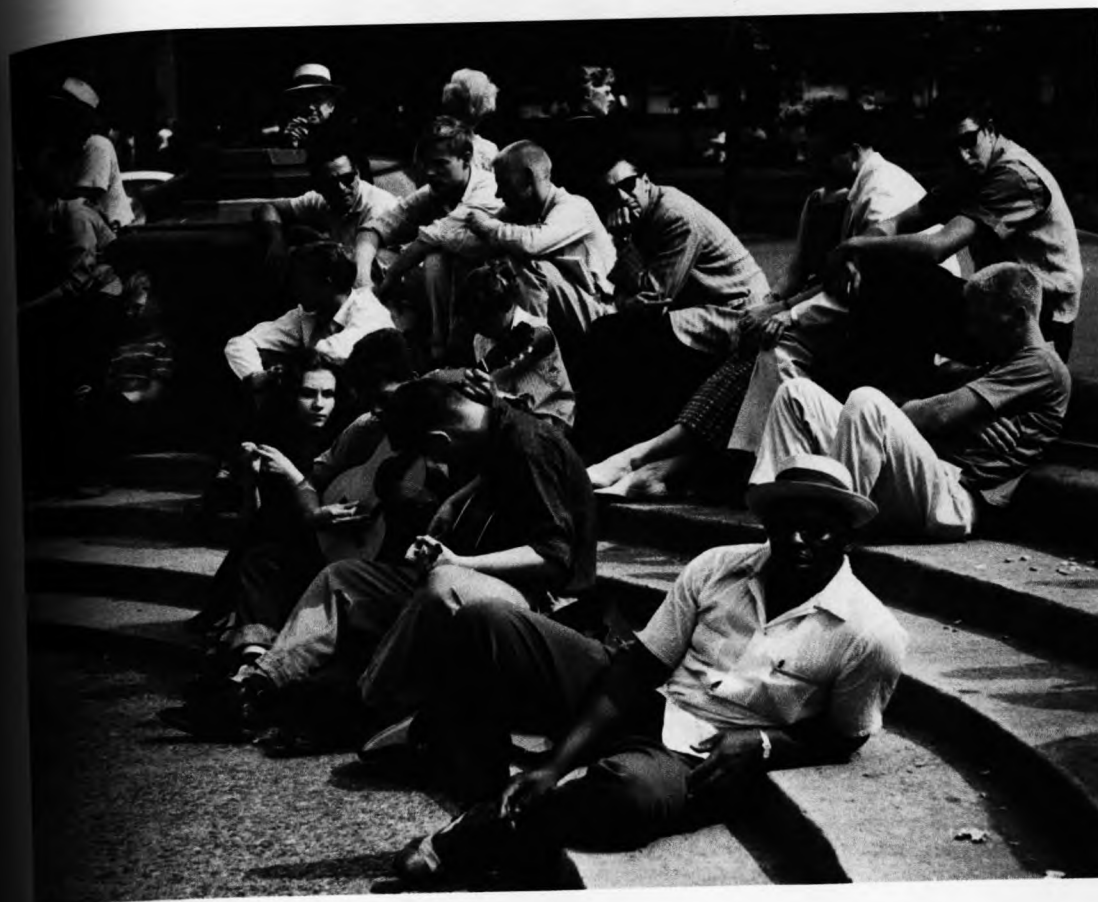
In the end, the protest succeeded. There were no convictions save one, of novelist Harold "Doc" Humes (seen being wrangled into the paddy wagon at the end of *Sunday*), and the parks commissioner agreed to reissue the license for weekly musical gatherings in the square.

At its core, the protest had been a manifestation of the seed that was to grow into a generation's struggle to address social issues across the board. Dissatisfaction with the status quo runs in cycles, with each generation having to learn its social lessons anew. But it always comes down to the same polarities: hierarchy vs. democracy, secrecy vs. transparency, opportunism vs. accountability.

Now, a half-century later, *Sunday* has been restored and preserved at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, thanks to the generosity of Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation.

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Dan Drasin is a media producer—filmmaker, photographer, and writer—whose career spans five decades and whose films have earned over two dozen international awards. His 1961 documentary Sunday is part of the permanent film collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art.



Washington Square Park,
ca. 1956. Photograph by Nat
Norman.

especially deliberate in his actions. Though his base included the South Village and lower Fifth Avenue, he broke from his constituents while acknowledging their concerns. His maneuver represented his recognition of the formidable Right to Sing movement. In an interview with the *Village Voice*, De Sapio explained, "I have no hesitancy in encouraging entertainment if it is not offensive and if performed in an orderly fashion." A lower Fifth Avenue resident himself, he added, "I have never witnessed any of the objectionable acts in Washington Square that I have read or heard about." De Sapio urged both sides to make concessions.⁴³

Folksinging advocates described Sunday afternoon gatherings as wholesome and fun events. They characterized folksingers as respectful high school and college students, young urban professionals, and established musicians. For many attendees, the jams served as weekly social occasions. Historian David Rosner recalled that as a teenager from the Upper West Side, he looked forward to enjoying the free entertainment on Sundays with friends, some of whom were fellow alumni of the progressive Camp Thoreau in upstate New York. Many observers condemned Morris for banning an activity that was a positive outlet for youngsters at a time of high rates of juvenile delinquency.⁴⁴

Local activist Jane Jacobs also backed the Right to Sing Committee. At this same time, Jacobs was leading the

community battle against Mayor Wagner's plan to redevelop 14 blocks of the West Village. She contended that neighborhood parks, such as Washington Square, became exuberant as a result of the creative ways that people used them. The Morris ban represented the kind of autocratic approach to urban policy that she railed against. In reply to the claim that the Sunday gatherings were morally depraved, Jacobs, the mother of two children, affirmed, "I have never seen anything or heard any song in Washington Square Park that would corrupt or hurt a child."⁴⁵

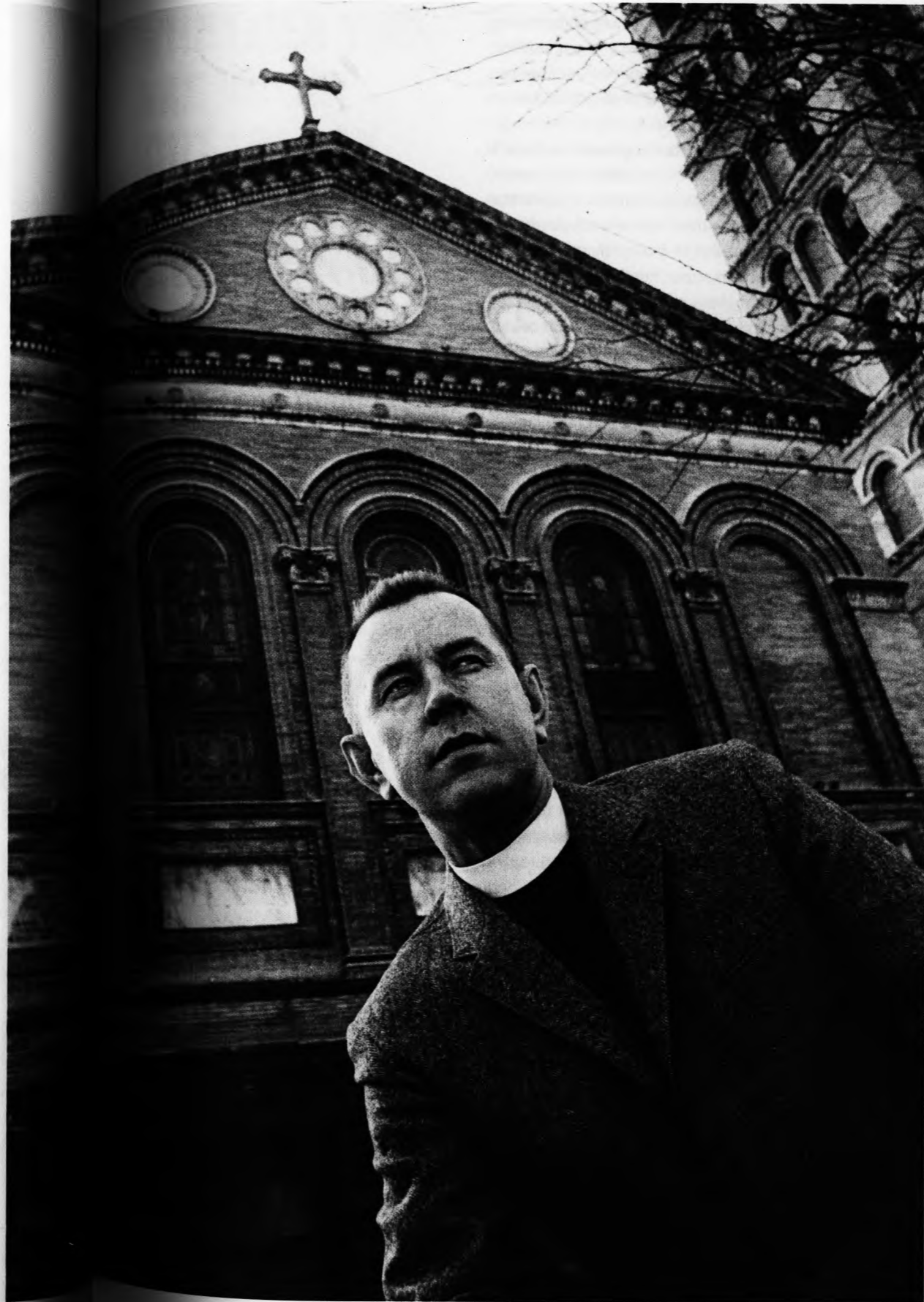
Supporters of folksingers, like their adversaries, expressed concern about antisocial acts in the park, but they largely attributed the incidents to the growing homeless population in the area, not to musicians. The city's demolition of the Third Avenue elevated railway in 1956 had led to the displacement of numerous Bowery derelicts to Greenwich Village, where many slept on benches in Washington Square Park, flaunted liquor bottles in public, used drugs in broad daylight, or panhandled aggressively. The increase in vagrancy contributed to a rise in the number of petty narcotics dealers in the square. At a community meeting, *New York Times* writer and Villager Gilbert Millstein voiced his sorrow for the addicts and his antipathy towards the pushers. But he distinguished folksingers from lawbreakers. "In five years, I've yet to see one fight or arrest among the singers," he noted.⁴⁶

One week after the April 9 demonstration, the Right to Sing Committee held a rally in Judson Memorial Church. More than 500 folksingers and their allies jammed into the building, as rain poured down outside. The featured speakers were Howard Moody, Gilbert Millstein, Ed Koch, Izzy Young, and Art D'Lugoff. Moody delivered the opening remarks, pledging to use all legal means to overturn the ban on folk music in Washington Square. D'Lugoff announced that Congressmen John Lindsay and Leonard Farbstein and City Councilman Stanley Isaacs offered their assistance to the folksingers. Excitement rose to a feverish pitch between speeches as popular musicians sang protest songs. Performers included Ed McCurdy, the Clancy Brothers, Logan English, Erik Darling, and the Shanty Boys. The event ended with a mass singing of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."⁴⁷

The Right to Sing Committee staged another protest on Sunday, April 23. Approximately 2,000 demonstrators filled a block of Thompson Street, just south of Washington Square, on that beautiful spring day. Someone tacked a banner on a fence that scoffed: "Don't trample the asphalt." Protesters performed a musical between police barriers, portraying Morris as a villainous blockhead. Folksingers strummed guitars and banjos on the street, changed lyrics to tunes, and gibed "Newbold Morris is a grizzly bear" and "There ain't no Morris in this land." Dozens of people even picketed Morris's home on the Upper East Side. They carried signs quoting

previous: Jane Jacobs (center) in Washington Square Park, August 24, 1963. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah.

opposite: Howard Moody in front of Judson Memorial Church, ca. 1963. In addition to forming the Right to Sing Committee with Izzy Young, Moody was a prominent Greenwich Village community leader active in civil rights, narcotics rehabilitation, Democratic Party reform, and the campaign against the expansion of Fifth Avenue in Washington Square.



Goethe (in German), Coleridge, and Emerson, and sang a mocking rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Throughout the rally, Howard Moody urged cooperation and restraint from the demonstrators. With 50 policemen on duty, this time there were no incidents.⁴⁸

The following Sunday's protesters were once again orderly, though more restive. As 60 policemen kept watch, more than 2,000 demonstrators amassed outside the park. Early on, some people tried to evade barricades on Washington Square South, but they were pushed back by police on foot and horseback. Later, hundreds of protesters skirted the blockade and gathered near the fountain. They held hands in a circle and started singing "This Land Is Your Land." As police moved to disperse the assembly, Chief Inspector William F. Real intervened and lectured the group. Noting the pending court case on the ban, he admonished, "If you want to act up you're going to make a mess out of everything and probably spoil the decision." Someone then broke into a song, and the police approached. A skirmish occurred between Detective David Yanolotos and New York University freshman William French. As Yanolotos hustled French away, the crowd booed and shouted. The student was charged with disorderly conduct and felonious assault for allegedly kicking the officer in the shin after being ordered to move away from the fountain. The demonstrators left Washington Square riled up.⁴⁹

Days later the Right to Sing Committee suffered a legal setback when State Supreme Court Justice William C. Hecht Jr. upheld the city's ban against folksinging in Washington Square. Persuaded by Morris's contention that the events interfered with those who desired to use the park for sitting, resting, and meditating, Hecht ruled that the court "may not substitute its own judgment for that of the Commissioner of Parks." Before the decision, Izzy Young had sent telegrams to President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy exhorting them to lend "moral support." Preoccupied with the disastrous Bay of Pigs Invasion, the President and his staff had no time for Washington Square. Despite the ruling, folksinging advocates pressed on. The New York Civil Liberties Union announced it would appeal the verdict with the Appellate Division. And the Right to Sing Committee planned another protest.⁵⁰

Hours before the next demonstration, Moody, in his weekly sermon, articulated a defense of folksinging that was in effect an expression of the multicultural ethos that defined Greenwich Village and a distillation of communalism in folk music revival culture. Reprinted that week in the *Village Voice*, the homily was titled "Folksingers, Factions, and Our Faith." Moody identified the "problem of pluralism" as the essence of the park conflict and challenged his congregation, "Can we as a people of very diverse ethnic and religious

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WORLD.**

backgrounds live together with some degree of accommodation so as not to force legally on others our mores and manners?" He blasted Morris and his supporters for trying to impose their ways on others and praised protesters for meeting the decree with spirited resistance. In a meditation on his church's involvement in the controversy, Moody discussed reasons relating to "justice" and "values." For Moody, like his contemporary Martin Luther King Jr., the concept of justice transcended the laws of man. "Even a law that is legal may be unjust," he observed. Moody stressed that social justice was the central concern of his church. In Greenwich Village, Judson Church demanded justice not just for folksingers, but for narcotics addicts ignored or criminalized by society, for Verrazano Street tenants threatened by an urban renewal project, for coffeehouse owners harassed by the Mafia and corrupt police. On the subject of values, he lambasted long-time residents for their hostility toward visitors to the community. Moody eloquently culminated his discourse:

We are all immigrants that live or work or play in the Village whether we or our father came on a boat from Naples, or a bus out of Birmingham, or a flight from Dublin, or an A train on the IND. There is an equality that underlies all our differences. Whether you are "in" or "out," black or white, rich or poor, "square" or "beat," we are children of God created to live together in the neighborhood of his world.⁵¹

After the service, Moody and Izzy Young led 600 folksingers and their allies, singing a cappella, back into Washington Square Park without obstruction from the police. Moody informed Deputy Chief Inspector John E. Langton that the parks department banned "minstrelsy," or singing with instruments, but not without them. Langton agreed and allowed the folk enthusiasts to sing in the park. The demonstration was lively, though the choral group was reportedly frequently off-key. Around the fountain they sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" and a few ditties that lampooned Morris. They altered the lyrics of "This Land Is Your Land" to "This Park Is Your Park."⁵²

After five weeks of protests, Mayor Wagner acceded to the demands of the Right to Sing Committee. In a press conference at City Hall, the mayor, Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy, and Parks Commissioner Morris announced that folksinging with musical accompaniment would be permitted in the square "on a controlled basis." Appealing to both advocates and critics of the musicians, the mayor explained that the revised policy represented a compromise. Folksingers would be allowed to perform from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., restricted to the area between the fountain and the Arch. During the trial period, no permits were necessary. The singers and their

supporters were jubilant. A delighted Izzy Young proclaimed that the originally scheduled Sunday rally would be converted into a "Thank you, Mayor Wagner" demonstration.⁵³

On May 14, folksingers returned to Washington Square with their guitars and banjos and played for three hours, as a crowd of more than 4,000 enjoyed the sunny day in the park. At a short rally held that day, Howard Moody announced the dissolution of the Right to Sing Committee. After the reading of appreciative telegrams sent by the committee to the mayor, parks commissioner, and police commissioner, Kelsey Marechal—co-owner of the theatre One Sheridan Square—quipped to folksingers to "keep in tune and keep your beards combed." The event took place without incident, as 55 policemen stood by.⁵⁴

Furious with the mayor, the Washington Square Dignity committee submitted a petition to City Hall with 2,200 signatures protesting folksinging in the park. Members of the committee met with the mayor and deputy mayor and described alleged acts of immorality in the Square area after songfests. On subsequent Sundays, the crowds were considerably smaller, and the clamor and publicity died down. Still, the battle for Washington Square Park left many longtime residents resentful that their concerns about law and order and family values were disregarded. They bristled with indignation at Democratic Party leaders for submitting to the demands of agitators, beatniks, blacks, gays, and multiculturalists.⁵⁵

In July the folksingers achieved their victory, as the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court unanimously reversed the Hecht ruling. The court ordered the parks commissioner "to receive and reconsider" applications for permits for Sunday singing. A disingenuous Morris remarked, "I never had the slightest hostility toward folksinging or folksingers. I'm a singer myself." Playfully, Izzy Young extended an olive branch to his nemesis, "We all hope that Commissioner Morris will come down to the park and lead us in some songs."⁵⁶

The Right to Sing movement was successful as a result of compelling arguments bolstered by energetic demonstrations. Of 11 people arrested during the five rallies, only one was found guilty of a crime: novelist Harold Humes Jr. was convicted of making a speech in the park without a permit. The demonstrations attracted extensive media coverage in New York and beyond. Articles with photographs often made the front pages of newspapers. Television reports were broadcast as far away as West Germany. The movement showcased the organizational talents of Howard Moody and won him praise throughout the nation. *The New York Times*, whose coverage eventually became sympathetic to the musicians, ran a glowing feature on the "folk-singing pastor." The Judson minister's plea for racial and ethnic pluralism made him the conscience of not only the folksingers, but also a society struggling with the ideas of democracy and equality.



above top: Film still from *Sunday*, 1961.

above bottom: Demonstrators sing Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" in this film still from Dan Drasin's *Sunday*.

In a letter to Moody, City College of New York student David Roberts observed, "Through your actions you provided those protesting with the skilled leadership, purpose, and sense of being right which is so very vital in making protests of any kind effective and meaningful."⁵⁷

