MUSICIANS, SONGS, AND VENUES

THE MUSICIAN: PETE SEEGER

Pete Seeger was born on May 3, 1919. His father was an ethnomusicologist and his mother was a concert violinist. As a young child, Seeger’s parents took him on a road trip through the American South playing classical music and listening to southern folk music. When he was seven, his parents divorced, and his father remarried, this time to a folk music specialist. Thanks to his new stepmother, Seeger’s interest in folk music continued to grow, and he learned to play the ukulele and banjo. Seeger attended Harvard University, used his music to make political statements, and joined with Woody Guthrie and several others to form the Almanac Singers. The Almanac Singers wrote and performed pro-labor and anti-war songs in the 1930s. However, a growing awareness of the evils of Nazism influenced the band to turn from their anti-war views, and in the early 1940s, they became avid supporters of American involvement in World War II. After serving in the war, Seeger formed a new band, The Weavers. During his time with the Weavers, Seeger vocalized his support for socialism. His political views were not always appreciated, however, and in the 1950s, he was both investigated and convicted of contempt of court by the House Un-American Activities Committee. His conviction was overturned shortly afterwards. By the late 1950s, Seeger was a well-known political and musical figure. He died in 2014.

THE SONG: “WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?”

The original version of “Which Side Are You On?” was written in 1931 by Florence Reece, the wife of a coal miner and union organizer. Reece wrote the song about a lengthy coal mining strike in the area around her Harlan County, Kentucky, home. The early years of the Great Depression were not good times for mining companies or miners. Workers had mined a surplus of coal in the midst of a market steadily moving towards alternate sources of energy. As mining companies lost money and the demand for coal dropped, companies cut costs by hiring fewer workers, cutting workers’ hours, and paying low hourly wages. Many miners were confronted with unemployment. Even those that kept their jobs still struggled to make ends meet, on what was at times less than a dollar a day. Poor workers unable to afford their company housing were put out on the streets. Some miners starved. When the workers eventually went on strike, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) union refused to financially support the strike, suffering as they were from the hard economic conditions of the Depression. Left with few sources of support, the strikers joined with communist organizers to form the National Miners Union (NMU). The strike, combined with its communist affiliations, angered the conservative leadership of Harlan County, and local police forces turned violently against the miners. Union organizers did not find recourse for their grievances until the mid- to late-1930s when President Franklin D. Roosevelt began to view civil liberties, collective bargaining, and the right to unionize as incentives to help boost worker morale and production.

THE MUSICIAN: PAUL ROBESON

Paul Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898 to a former slave turned Presbyterian minister. In his late teenage years, he was accepted on scholarship to nearby Rutgers University. He was the third African American to attend the university. For four years he played a number of sports and graduated at the top of his class. After a short stint playing professional football, he returned to school to receive a law degree from Columbia University in the early 1920s. Racism in the workplace drove him from his career in law, and he tried his hand at an old interest in public speaking, acting, and singing. He starred in several films, acted on Broadway, and became well-known for his baritone singing voice. His past experiences with racism and inequality led him to speak out for underprivileged groups the world over. In the 1940s, Robeson traveled the world speaking out for oppressed groups in India, the Soviet Union, Europe, Africa, and the United States. His pro-Soviet views, socialism, and civil rights activism made him many enemies, and in 1950, the United States Department of State took away his passport. He was issued another passport eight years later after a long fight with the government and the House un-American Activities Commission. By that time, however, Robeson’s struggles had drained his strength and he began to physically and emotionally decline. He died in 1976.
THE SONG: “I DREAMED I SAW JOE HILL LAST NIGHT”

The song “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” was written by Joe Hayes in 1930. It memorializes the life of Joe Hill, a Swedish-born labor activist who died in 1915. Hill arrived in America in 1902 at the age twenty-three, but found it hard to hold a job. Instead, he became interested in full-time labor activism. While living in San Pedro, California in 1910, he joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an international organization of workers from any of the skilled trades. Hill became an avid supporter of the IWW and roamed the continent searching out opportunities to support struggling labor activists. He participated in a failed attempt to establish a workers’ utopia in Mexico, protested a San Diego ban on public protesting, helped railroad workers strike in British Columbia, and assisted, and was arrested, during a dockworkers’ strike in San Pedro. Musically inclined, Hill’s most significant contribution to labor activism was a number of pro-labor songs.

His activism would eventually get him into trouble in Salt Lake City, Utah. On the night of January 10, 1914, Hill visited a local doctor following a gunshot wound to the chest. Hill claimed he had insulted a woman, and her enraged husband had shot him. Meanwhile, across town, a father and son had been killed inside their family grocery store. Before the son died, however, he had managed to shoot one of the culprits in the chest. The police investigation matched Hill to the crime and he was arrested, tried, and sentenced on weak and circumstantial evidence. Many in the labor community believed the trial was a ruse to get rid of a dedicated and outspoken activist. People all over the country fought to vindicate Hill. Even President Woodrow Wilson gave his support to the protesters. The struggle was to no avail, and Hill was executed on November 19, 1915. Before Hill died, he wrote William Haywood, secretary of the IWW: “Don’t waste any time mourning, organize!” Hill would be hailed as a martyr by labor activists the world over, and his funeral in Chicago drew a crowd of over 30,000.

THE VENUE: HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL

The Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, Don West, and Jim Dombrowski. Horton was inspired to create the school after he witnessed racism in the Nashville area while attending nearby Cumberland University. Desiring to help people, Horton took up a summer job in Ozone, Tennessee, coordinating vacation Bible schools and organizing discussion sessions within the community. In the course of his work, he discovered that the best way to help people was to let them talk their problems out. Critical self-reflection would soon produce solutions. As a discussion leader, Horton needed only to ask questions and prompt deeper thought. He took his new theories to New York and Chicago where he studied theology and sociology respectively, visited local settlement houses, and participated in labor strikes. He eventually traveled to Denmark to study their folk culture centers. During his travels, he realized that conflict could be used as the basis for discussion and reflection. Conflict was not a problem, it was something that needed to be understood. He also recognized that a people’s culture tended to unify them. With all these ideas, Horton returned to his native Tennessee to found Highlander. At Highlander, he used his theories on reflection, questioning, and culture to organize workshops to train labor activists. He soon was working with the Congress for Industrial Workers (CIO) to train a majority of their organizers in the American South. Still concerned about the racial inequality around him, Horton decided to use his skills solving labor problems to also aid the growing civil rights movement. In 1957, to honor the twenty-fifth anniversary of Highlander, he invited a number of singers, Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan among them, and several civil rights activists, such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, to attend several workshops at Highlander.

THE SONG: “WE SHALL OVERCOME”

The song, originally titled “We Will Overcome,” was written by tobacco workers on strike in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1945. The song eventually made it to the ears of Zilphia Horton, the wife of Myles Horton, at the Highlander Folk School. She shared the song with Pete Seeger in 1946. Seeger changed the title to “We Shall Overcome,” and Frank Hamilton and Guy Carawan eventually increased the beat to 12/8ths time. Hamilton and Carawan were inspired to change the rhythm after listening to gospel music. The new rhythm made the song easier to memorize, sing as a group, and sing on the march. When civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., attended a Highlander workshop in 1957, he heard Pete Seeger sing the song. He was immediately impressed. King never forgot the song, and it would become one of the best-remembered songs of the civil rights movement.
“WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?”
Performed by Pete Seeger

Which side are you on boys?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on boys?
Which side are you on?

They say in Harlan County,
There are no neutrals there.
You’ll either be a union man,
Or a thug for J. H. Blair.

Which side are you on boys?
Which side are you on?
Tell me, which side are you on boys?
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner,
And I’m a miner’s son.
He’ll be with you fellow workers,
Until this battle’s won.

Tell me, which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Sing it, which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

Oh workers can you stand it?
Tell me how you can?
Will you be a lousy scab,
Or will you be a man?

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Tell me, which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

Come all of you good workers,
Good news to you I’ll tell,
Of how the good ole’ union,
Has come in here to dwell.

Tell me, which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Tell me, which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

“I DREAMED I SAW JOE HILL LAST NIGHT”
Performed by Paul Robeson

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me.
Says I, “But Joe, you’re ten years dead.”
“I never died,” says he.
“I never died,” says he.

“In Salt Lake City Joe,” says I,
Him standing by my bed,
“They framed you on a murder charge.”
Says Joe, “But I ain’t dead.”
Says Joe, “But I ain’t dead.”

“The copper bosses killed you Joe,
They shot you Joe,” says I.
“Takes more than guns to kill a man,”
Says Joe, “I didn’t die.”
Says Joe, “I didn’t die.”

And standing there as big as life,
And smiling with his eyes,
Says Joe, “What they can never kill,
Went on to organize,
Went on to organize.”

From San Diego up to Maine,
In every mine and mill,
Where workers strike and organize,
It’s there you’ll find Joe Hill,
It’s there you’ll find Joe Hill.

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me.
Says I, “But Joe, you’re ten years dead.”
“I never died,” says he.
“I never died,” says he.
“I never died,” says he.
**VOCABULARY**

**ACTIVISM:** Working in support of some social or political goal. Activists typically support their cause by protesting, picketing, marching, lobbying, and letter-writing.

**AFFILIATION:** The act of publicly joining or partnering up with some person, company, or organization. It usually refers to partnerships of a legal or financial nature.

**CIVIL LIBERTIES:** Rights granted to citizens that are protected by the government. These rights are often used by workers and can include the right to collective bargaining and the right to gather and peacefully protest.

**COLLECTIVE BARGAINING:** A process where labor union representatives meet with company managers to discuss and change worker’s benefits, hours of work, and hourly pay.

**ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST:** A person who studies the music of different peoples, cultures, or “ethnicities.”

**FOLK MUSIC:** A type of music that is passed down from generation to generation and is often associated with particular cultures, regions, or countries (e.g., people from Kentucky are associated with bluegrass music).

**LABOR:** Used as a verb, it is a term that refers to the act of working, usually working an unskilled job. As a noun, it usually refers to the wants and needs of all the people that work unskilled jobs.

**MARTYR:** A term that refers to someone who has given up his or her life, voluntarily or involuntarily, for a political, social, or religious cause.

**UTOPIA:** A term that refers to an ideal world with few, if any, political, social, or economic problems or conflicts. Utopias exist only in imagination as the word itself means “nowhere.”

**RUSE:** A shady trick that diverts an opponent’s attention to another problem or situation.

**SCAB:** A derogatory term used to refer to a strikebreaker (an individual paid by a company to work during a strike).

**SOCIALISM:** An economic system where the government uses taxpayer dollars to provide services to the public. The government often creates agencies and institutions to manage these public services. Street signs, road improvements, mail delivery, Social Security, and national and state parks are current examples of socialism in the United States.

**SOCIOLGY:** The study of interactions between people on an individual or societal basis.

**THEOLOGY:** The study of religion.

**UNION:** A group of workers associated with a certain company (e.g., Ford Motor Company) or a certain industry (e.g., automobile industry) that work together to improve conditions in the workplace and gain better benefits.

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**UKULELE:** Soldiers are gathered around a man playing a ukulele. *Awaiting orders to detrain at Camp Shelby, a quartet of Japanese-Americans swing out to the accompaniment of a Hawaiian ukulele* [1943]

**BANJO:** *Pete Seeger, half-length portrait, singing while playing banjo* [1955]