

Turning point

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How Can I Keep From

Singing: Pete Seeger

by David King Dunaway

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breath in my body. I need songs with melodies so unforgettable that listeners will be humming them at their work... And we need songs with strength to make cowards stop fleeing, turn around, and face the future with a breath of courage, he once wrote. Song alone, he believed, could not change the world, but it could inspire people to want to try.

Certainly, as Dunaway shows, it has endured throughout many battles, ever hopeful, always believing that the world was worth battling for. Nature inspired him through his childhood, in particular the work of Ernest Thompson Seton, and he probably learned about principles and ideals from his father, Charles Seeger, who was virtually run out of the music faculty at Berkeley for

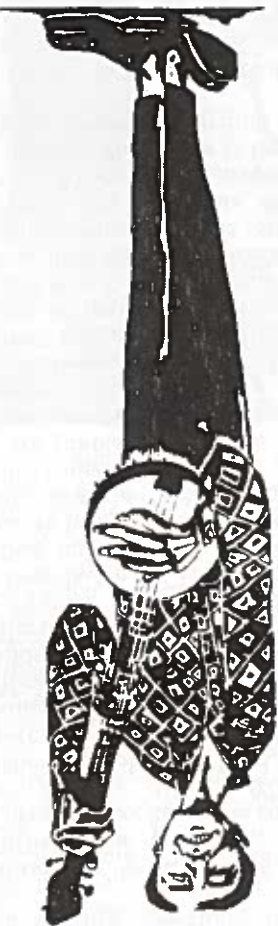
It is both ironic and highly appropriate that Pete Seeger should have been a prime target for J. Edgar Hoover, god-father of the FBI, and Senator Joseph McCarthy, self-appointed guardian of the worst of Middle America: ironic in that Seeger's ancestry can be traced right back to the passenger list of the *Mayflower*, appropriate in that the Pilgrim Fathers went to the New World were regarded as subversives in their own country.

David King Dunaway's excellent and fully annotated study reveals for the first time the final irony: that Seeger was, in fact, a member of the Young Communist League and later the Communist Party. But the House Un-American Activities Committee did not know that when he stood before them in 1955, accused of Communism by association. He pleaded the First Amendment - freedom of speech and action, challenging HUAC's right even to ask the questions - and was eventually sentenced to ten years for contempt of Congress. Seeger spent an afternoon in jail during which time he learned a new folk song, before his wife and lawyer could raise the \$2,000 bail; the case was later thrown out on appeal.

While some branded Seeger 'Kruschev's songbird', others conceived of him as 'America's tuning fork'. The poet Carl Sandburg, writing on Seeger's group The Weavers in 1949, commented that they were 'the grass roots of America... when I hear America singing, The Weavers are there.'

Dunaway's research comes straight out of the folk tradition: aside from journals and notebooks, newspaper clippings and, of course, the infamous FBI files, very little of Seeger's life has been documented; the book is rooted in the 110 interviews conducted by the author between 1976 and 1980. From this oral history, Dunaway has woven together the facts of Seeger's remarkable life thus far (since the subject is a youthful 65, an update may be needed).

While a former protégé, one Bob Dylan, has described him as 'a saint', Seeger sees himself as just a New England Puritan whose job it is to get America singing: 'My songs must be so good that they reach out to 190 million Americans... I have not succeeded yet, but I must keep trying, as long as I have



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