Turning point

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How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger
by David King Dunaway
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It is both ironic and highly appropriate that Pete Seeger should have been a prime target for J. Edgar Hoover, godfather 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 from England precisely because they 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 protegé, 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 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 seems to have inspired Seeger, for he 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

his support of the migrant farmworkers and for daring to register as a conscientious objector during the Great War. His mother, Constance, also a musician, regretted the loss of status and income and divorced him in 1927. It was through his father and stepmother, the distinguished ethnomusicologist Ruth Crawford Seeger, that young Pete first became acquainted with the Communist-oriented intellectuals and musicians who, in the 1930s, 'discovered' folk music: in the years of the Depression and European fascism, folk music seemed to offer an affirmation of basic human principles, providing a common bond for the Popular Front. This newfound radicalism, both philosophical and musical, meshed well with Pete's son-of-the-pioneers childhood.

Though Pete was a folk enthusiast, his chosen career was journalism, for which he dropped out of Harvard in 1938. But this was the Depression and he was forced to scratch a living first as an artist, then as a banjo-picker, until his Father's contacts secured him a job in the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress. There, the world of folk music opened up for him and pretty soon he was on the road with Woody Guthrie, 'dust bowl balladeer', singing, adapting and writing songs to entertain and energise the workers.

From that partnership, The Almanac Singers emerged, with hopes of getting American labour organised and singing. But the FBI and the War intervened and Seeger went off to do his patriotic duty. After 1945, came Peoples Songs and, in the early Fifties, unexpected commercial success with The Weavers. Hit followed hit, as folk music – albeit in a form less pure than Seeger would have liked – reached a new audience. The Rosenbergs, sentenced on trumped-up spy charges, asked to hear 'Goodnight Irene' on their way to the electric chair.

Once again, the FBI got curious, and The Weavers found themselves blacklisted and forced to disband. Seeger effectively went underground, singing at schools, colleges and summer camps for just a few dollars. In so doing, he (unwittingly) sowed the seeds of the 1960s folk revival which would provide a platform for figures such as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Peter, Paul and Mary and, not least, Bob Dylan.

Dunaway's narrative is detailed yet fluid. Above all, it is evocative – of time and place, and of the folk spirit. He conjures up visions of Seeger and Paul Robeson at Peekskill in 1949, when Klansmen stoned daytrippers while the police stood by; Seeger at Selma, singing his support of Civil Rights; Seeger sailing the Hudson on his sloop *Clearwater*, in an attempt to have people wake up to the dangers of pollution; Seeger in post-Franco Spain, singing old Civil War songs, emotional at hearing how they've been kept alive through underground copies of his recordings; Seeger helping with refuse disposal in his home community.

Seeger found the taste of victory to be always shortlived. He is at his best when embattled and his finest songs – including 'If I Had A Hammer', 'Where Have All The Flowers Gone' and 'Turn, Turn, Turn' – have come out of his darkest hours. For him, singing is a means of survival, a *raison d'être*, a common bond with the rest of humanity.

How Can I Keep From Singing is a scholarly biography of a popular figure. David King Dunaway is an academic, but he has not lost sight of his (and Seeger's) audience. His book sets a standard by which all subsequent endeavours should be judged.