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In the aftermath of World War Two, American folk music began to engage with topical concerns over the health of the environment. The nuclear arms race was the most immediately pressing focus for the protest song. Stephen O'Leary observes that the American nuclear bombing of Japan in 1945 marked an epochal division in history, in that for the first time fear of planetary destruction appeared to be matched by the technical means to carry it out. "The rationalist world view of scientism," he writes, "seemed to have reached its limit with an invention that threatened the ultimate negation of the dreams of technological progress" (O'Leary 209). West coast journalist Vern Partlow wrote "Talking Atomic Blues" (or "Old Man Atom") in 1946, using black humor to register both this distrust of scientists and the fear that human history was on an irrational course. Recorded by Sam Hinton in 1950, and later by the Sons of the Pioneers, the song questions the undemocratic Faustian power of the "science boys," who have "hitched up the power of the goldurned Sun" and "put a harness on old Sol." The world faces a stark choice: either we "stick together" or "All men / Could be cremated equal" (Hinton; Sons of the Pioneers).

After scientists discovered the presence of Strontium-90 in cow's milk in 1959, anxieties over nuclear war began to focus in particular on the environmental effects of atomic bomb testing (Boyer 352). In 1963, Pete Seeger sang "Mack the Bomb," a parody of Kurt Weill by Nancy Schimmel, in which the threat of invisible nuclear fallout is matched by the secrecy of the Atomic Energy Commission. Compared to a shark, whose threatening nature is at least visible in its white teeth and in the blood of its victim, Strontium 90 "leaves no trace," while the AEC "has figures /

but they keep them out of sight." (The Best of Broadside) In the same year, Malvina Reynolds published "What Have They Done To The Rain," which pictures a boy standing in the "gentle rain," until, because of the invisible and deadly threat concealed within it, the "grass is gone" and the "boy disappears," and the song ends on an unresolved chord (The Best of Broadside; Reynolds 2000).

Ralph Lutts observes that when Rachel Carson published Silent Spring in 1962, she adopted the tropes of invisibility and contagion familiar in such popular discourses about nuclear fallout to describe the newly perceived threat of chemical pollution. (Lutts) By the late 1950s, pollution was one of a number of concerns over the effects of industrial development that began to feature as subjects for the topical folk song.

Katie Lee began to write protest songs about the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam in 1953. As a raftswoman and river guide, her close involvement in the life of the Colorado River fuelled a lasting sense of outrage at what she saw as its sacrilegious violation. "The Wreck the Nation Bureau Song" gave "three jeers" to the "freeloaders with souls so pure-o" who wiped out the "good Lord's work" while standing "at their drawing boards with cotton in the ears" (Lee 1988). A few years later, Los Angeles smog provided Ernie Marris with the subject matter for "Talking Smog Bowl" and "Smoggy Old Smog", the latter set to the tune of Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good To Know You." Written in 1959, the song pointed the finger of blame at the rich: when "some big shot" chokes on the smog, at least it "did some good for the people at last" (Seeger 1959: 41).

Pete Seeger's God Bless the Grass, released in January 1966, became the first album in history wholly dedicated to songs about environmental issues. For Seeger and Malvina Reynolds, who contributed several songs to the album, environmentalist

advocacy was an extension of their earlier involvement in the Civil Rights movement, and, before that, the Popular Front during World War Two. The Popular Front was created in 1935, when the Seventh World Congress of the Communist Party called for the workers and the bourgeoisie to unite across class lines against the greater, common enemy of fascism. The Popular Front continued the aesthetic values of socialist realism which had influenced left-wing folk music in the United States since it was adopted as the official policy of the Communist International in 1928. Socialist realism, or "proletarian realism" as it was called in the United States, had the direct social purpose of supporting the working class in its struggle against the bourgeoisie. Lenin had decreed that art must "penetrate with its deepest roots into the very midst of the laboring masses. It must be intelligible to these masses and be loved by them. It must unite the feeling, thought, and will of these masses; it must elevate them" (*italics in original*). For Lenin, art should be a weapon: classical music only soothed the masses, he said, whereas art should "hit them on the head." Under the influence of Lenin, many members of the American Communist Party chose folk music as the people's art form. Party member Mike Gold wrote that art should be for "lumberjacks, hoboes, clerks, sectionhands, machinists, harvesthands, waiters – the people should count more than the paid scribblers" (Denisoff 15).

Folk "songs of persuasion" were thus works of agitation-propaganda, in which artistic form was considered secondary to content, and language was intended to be a transparent means of communication. The musicologist Charles Seeger, father of folksingers Pete, Mike and Peggy, played a key role in promoting proletarian realism in classical music in the 1930s. His son Pete did the same for folk (Davis; Reuss).

As already mentioned, when Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds became involved in environmental advocacy in the early sixties, their politics were informed

by the same ideologies of nationalism, populism and criticism of big business as their earlier Popular Front commitments. The song collection which Seeger put together with Woody Guthrie in 1940, Hard Hitting Songs For Hard Hit People, contained songs such as "Mister Farmer," written in support of a strike by dairy farm workers over the low prices given by the corporate owners for their milk (Greenway 214). Yet advocacy of conservationism potentially conflicted with the celebration of the industrial worker which was central to the proletarian realist folk tradition. This celebration had a long history in American folk music, from the Industrial Workers of the World to Woody Guthrie. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Wobblies popularized political folk song particularly through union organizer Joe Hill. These proletarian realist songs celebrated male struggles in heavy industries such as mining. Aunt Molly Jackson, a coal miner's wife from Appalachia, sang "Which Side Are You On," written during a coal strike in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1932, to protest conditions in the mining industry and call for the unionization of mine workers (Greenway 169). As Georgina Boyes observes of the similar repertoire of British folksingers Ewan MacColl and A. L. Lloyd in the 1950s, the industries worth researching and writing about "were never catering or nursing, hairdressing or office work, and only the heroic was celebrated" (Boyes 240).

At the centre of Woody Guthrie's songs in the 1930s, however, was a rural nostalgia that partly distanced them from these materialist tendencies in the Left. As Robert Cantwell writes: "Whereas the leftist program was essentially secular and historical, grounded in economic theory and tending toward more or less radical reform, Guthrie's vision – or, rather, the vision around which he and the other cultural seekers and idealists converged – was essentially pastoral and mythical, echoing Christian eschatology and rooted in the Gospel according to Matthew" (Cantwell

137). Nevertheless, Guthrie believed that his pastoral vision of "Pastures of Plenty" would be brought about by industrialization and modernization. America was a land of material plenty and democratic potential prevented only by an artificial scarcity which industrial development would remove. Guthrie's songs thus celebrated the big public works of President Roosevelt's New Deal, such as the building of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River. In the early 1940s, Guthrie was hired by the Bonneville Power Administration to write songs celebrating these new construction projects.

The folk revival of the late 1950s continued this workerist tradition. Phil Ochs' "Automation Song" (1964) returned to John Henry's protest against the replacement of human labor by the machine. The male worker, with "the muscles on my arm and the sweat upon my back," is left walking down the road, jobless and with nowhere to go. Gordon Friesen, in the liner notes to Ochs' album All the News That's Fit to Sing, commented that the "same feeling expressed here has led to Phil to write songs for, and several times visit, the impoverished mining families in eastern Kentucky made jobless by automation" (All the News That's Fit to Sing).

Both Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds inherited this proletarian realist celebration of the heroic industrial worker. Seeger's first group, the Almanac Singers, formed in December 1940, did benefits for strikers at which they sang such songs as "Talking Union," about the struggles for unionization of industrial workers such as miners and automobile workers. Reynolds had also been involved in socialist causes. Yet by the early 1960s, both singers had managed an uneasy reconciliation of their Old Left notions of authenticity through manual labor with their turn to environmentalist advocacy. Reynolds thus continued to write protest songs in support of the rights of industrial workers at the same time as she voiced her concerns on

environmental matters. In 1963, Seeger recorded "Mrs Clara Sullivan's Letter," which Reynolds had written in support of miners in Scuddy, Kentucky, who were striking, as the song put it, "for jobs at decent pay." The chorus noted that "there's no better man than a mining man" (The Best of Broadside; Seeger 1993: 110). Here, allegiance to the working class was predicated on a denial of the wider environmental effects of the mining industry. In contrast, the last verse of "Cement Octopus," which Reynolds wrote for the protests against the proposed construction of a freeway through Golden Gate Park, San Francisco in 1964, took a more environmentalist line, recognizing that constraints on development may cause unemployment, and suggesting a solution in the redeployment of workers into more environmentally sound jobs: "The men on the highways need those jobs, we know / Lets put them to work planting new trees to grow" (God Bless the Grass). In this way, Reynolds' song negotiated the problem of reconciling the new environmentalism with traditional Leftist workerism.

For both Reynolds and Seeger, this growing environmentalist concern for the destructive effects of industrialism came in spite of their membership of the American Communist Party, with its faith in progress through industrial development. Yet their allegiance to Communist Party orthodoxies had always been loose. Reynolds left the Party in the late 1940s, because, as she commented in 1977, its leadership "had no concept of what I was doing or of what effect it would have" (Lieberman 78).

Although Seeger continued to be a member of the Party, his group the Almanac Singers, as Cantwell writes, were not driven by the artistic agenda of the Communist Party, but by a "sheer love of a dreamed-of folk America, or more precisely of American folks, whom few in the group had ever known up close" (Cantwell 131).

Seeger described his next group, The Weavers, which he founded in 1948, as "political in the broad sense – we weren't Progressive Party, Communist Party, or

even Peace Party singers, but we realized that the human race was in a bad situation, and looked on music as part of the on-going struggle to get the human race together, banish war for ever more, bring peace, justice and jobs for all, and all those nice-sounding things" (Denselow 13).

Speaking in 1963, Seeger again qualified his allegiance to Communism, writing that it derived not from his reading of Marx and Lenin, but from his childhood interest in Ernest Thompson Seton. The Canadian naturalist, he wrote, "held up the Indian as an ideal, for strength and morality and selflessness, and in tune with all of nature. Anthropologists call this period of human history "tribal communism." I think next time some character asks me, "Are you a communist?" I'll answer, "Oh, about as much as the average American Indian" (Seeger Summer 1963: 67). Like Woody Guthrie, then, Seeger's political values were informed more by pastoral nostalgia and American nationalism than by the dogmatic economic materialism of the Communist Party. His pseudonym for his regular column in Sing Out! magazine was Johnny Appleseed, the legendary patron of American agriculture and horticulture who dispersed apple seeds as he moved westwards across the North American continent. It was this sentimental adherence to a pastoral ideal of America that smoothed Seeger's transition into environmentalism.

The muscular Christianity of Guthrie and Seton was another important factor in Seeger's adoption of environmental causes. "As a kid," he wrote in 1993, "I'd been a nature nut. Age 15 and 16, I put all that behind me, figuring the main job to do was to help the meek inherit the earth, assuming that when they did the foolishness of the private profit system would be put to an end. But in the early '60s, I realized that the world was being turned into a poisonous garbage dump. By the time the meek inherited it, it might not be worth inheriting. I became an econik..." (Seeger 1993:

201). For Seeger, then, environmentalism, by mitigating the damage inflicted on the world by the capitalist system, was a necessary prerequisite for a future socialist society that would itself be a fulfillment of Christ's humanist, egalitarian vision.

Seeger first made public his environmentalist concerns as early as 1958, when he told a radio interviewer in Cleveland, Ohio: "Look at the waste we make of our rivers, beautiful clear streams like the Hudson which flows past my door – an open sewer! [...] A river which was once clean and clear – Indians speared fish twenty feet down – is now an open sore. Nobody swims in it; you go on a boating trip, you just don't look down" (Dunaway 285). In the same year, he wrote "Oh, Had I a Golden thread," in which he sang of "a land of parks / Where people can be at peace." His concern for pollution could be seen in his wish that the "the land will be sparkling clean" (Strangers and Cousins).

In October 1963, Seeger mentioned his environmentalist views for the first time in his Johnny Appleseed column in Sing Out! While chopping firewood, he wrote, he had made up new verses to "Take This Hammer": "I don't want no s..t (sic) filled river; past my door, no, past my door. I don't want your litterbug highway, through my land, no, through my land. I don't want no d..n (sic) fool strontium, in my sky, no, in my sky." These verses, he added, were "irrelevant, I suppose, to all but me" (Seeger Oct. 1963: 65). The diffident, apologetic tone Seeger showed here had disappeared completely by June 1965, when he recorded God Bless the Grass.

When the album was released in January 1966, the freedom and topical song movement was declining in popularity, due, culturally, to the rise of rock music, and, politically, to the growing schism within the Left over race. God Bless the Grass marked a new social and political cause for Seeger at a time when he was beginning to feel marginalized by the leadership of the Civil Rights movement. He and his wife

Tochi had taken part in the protest march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965 on the direct invitation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, Seeger sensed the new direction that African-American politics were taking. Late in the same year, the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee had begun to purge itself of its white, northern, middle-class elements to become an organization led by African-Americans for African-Americans. Seeger's prominent role in the Civil Rights movement was at an end (Dunaway 236ff). Biographer David Dunaway notes that Seeger was stung by criticisms that African-American organizers had made of his role as a paternalistic outsider in the southern struggle for Civil Rights. Moreover, he suggests that political despair over the failure of Seeger's integrationist dreams, and his exclusion from the movement with the rise of black separatism, were important motives behind his adoption of environmental causes. Seeger began to spend more time on building the Clearwater, the replica of a nineteenth century sloop which, since its launch in May 1969, has been used by the Clearwater organization to campaign for the cleaning up the Hudson River (Wilkie).

More positively, environmentalism was for Seeger a cause which, as Dunaway puts it, was "closer to home, one he had understood instinctively as a child" (Dunaway 280). Indeed, it was the first cause that Seeger had adopted that was located in his own personal experience. Seeger's involvement in environmentalism thus confirmed the shift in leftist activism at this time towards working in one's own community. As the sleeve notes to the 1974 Clearwater album observed, "At some point in the mid-sixties, he decided that it was time to stay home... to fight for his ideals in a somewhat smaller sphere..." (Clearwater) But Seeger's turn to local conservationism in 1965 was not a retreat from global politics, in that it also coincided with his joining the newly formed protest movement against the Vietnam

War. Indeed, a year after God Bless The Grass he released his famous anti-Vietnam War protest song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" (Waist Deep in the Big Muddy). Crucially, Seeger saw the Vietnam War as the murderous product of the same Military Industrial Complex that was responsible for polluting the Hudson River near his home. Dunaway records an incident in which a conservative board member asked Seeger not to sing "Big Muddy" at a Clearwater-sponsored event, saying to him, "We're singing about the water. Can't you stay away from all that Vietnam stuff?" Seeger replied that "all these subjects are tied together. You know why we don't have money to clean up this river? Guess who takes the big bite out of the tax dollar?" (Dunaway 292). For Seeger, then, the global and the local coincided.

The main environmental concerns of God Bless the Grass were with pollution, over-development and resource wastage. This focus on "quality-of-life" issues was mainly anthropocentric: human happiness and well-being were under threat from these destructive forces. The new environmental protest songs thus reflected the main areas of social concern for those mainly white, middle-class Americans who made up the emerging environmental movement. Environmental hazards were seen as threats to a pastoral America whose imperiled green spaces were natural resources that existed to fulfill human needs for leisure and recreation. However, in a handful of songs, a more biocentric perspective also began to emerge, as we shall see. (Eckersley 57; Pepper 48-53)

Malvina Reynolds wrote the four consecutive tracks on side one that establish the album's environmentalist theme: "70 Miles" (co-written with Seeger), "The Faucets are Dripping" (published as early as 1959), "Cement Octopus" and "God Bless the Grass" itself. The album embodies the proletarian realist aesthetic of clarity and accessibility in form, and optimism in content. "Seventy Miles" uses bathos to

make its point: "Seventy miles of open bay – it's a garbage dump." "Cement Octopus" develops its extended metaphor for highway construction with wit and sardonic humor. The refrain is a direct appeal for collective action: "Oh, stand by me and protect that tree / From the freeway misery."

The liner notes to the album were written by liberal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, proponent of the Wilderness Act which had been passed in 1964. Douglas' essay asserts the value of wilderness for American national identity, and argues that wilderness areas should not be overdeveloped to serve recreational uses. "There are dollar values in our mountains to be exploited," he wrote. "But a tree is measurable not only by its board feet or its cellulose content, but by its beauty, the wildlife it shelters, the biotic community it nourishes, and the watershed protection it gives" (God Bless the Grass) This acknowledgment of the need to conserve wilderness for reasons other than its commercial value suggest an extension of environmentalist concerns beyond an exclusively anthropocentric focus on human welfare. Two songs on the album reflect this direction. Seeger wrote of "Coyote, My Little Brother," written by Native American folksinger Peter LaFarge: "Pete told me that the Indian name for the coyote was "Little Brother." His song used the fate of the coyote to symbolize what modern man was doing to all of nature (whereas the Indian lived in harmony with nature)." (Seeger 1967: 54) This quietly understated lament for the declining coyote thus shows a biocentric sensibility growing out of Seeger's sympathy for American Indian cultures.

A similar perspective was also developed in "The People Are Scratching," a witty ballad written by Seeger, Ernie Marris and Harold Martin about pollution of the food chain, which shows the influence of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring. Its nine verses tell a story of complex ecological interrelationships: a cold winter kills the

grass, so rabbits start eating the bark off the trees. The farmers poison the rabbits; the hawks and owls die from eating them, so the field mice multiply and spread to the town; city people poison the mice, and their cats die from eating the poisoned mice, leaving the people scratching from the fleas, which multiply in the absence of their natural predator. The moral of the story is for all small creatures to "Stay clear of the man with the poisonous hand." Even though the factor that initiates the environmental collapse is a natural one, it is human stupidity that escalates a problem that could have been solved, not by poison, but simply by feeding "a few bales of hay" to the starving rabbits.

In the winter of 1965, after recording God Bless the Grass, Seeger began to concentrate his energies on building the Clearwater. "My Dirty Stream (The Hudson River Song)" thus highlighted the cause of river conservation that was to be the focus of his political activism for the next decade. The song, first published in 1961, is an elegy for the lost perfections of an Edenic nature. In The Machine in the Garden, Leo Marx defined the "complex pastoral" as a mode which works "to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (Marx 25). In "My Dirty Stream," as the narrator sails down the dirty Hudson, the lilting melody and gently swinging rhythm of the banjo, suggesting the "tacking to and fro" of the boat, evoke a pastoral ideal ruined by what Marx calls the "counterforce" of industrial pollution. The river is "crystal clear" at its source in the northern mountains, but downstream is polluted by chewing gum wrappers dropped "by some hikers to warn of things to come." Retaining the optimism of the proletarian realist tradition, however, Seeger keeps the dream that some day the river will "once again run clear."

Seeger's use of the pastoral is not merely a late Romantic nostalgic yearning for an impossibly utopian relationship with nature. Instead, it is future-orientated and radicalized by his socialist politics. As ecocritic Lawrence Buell argues, the pastoral mode can take on a reformist or revolutionary political agenda when the act of valuing a pastoral landscape implies opposition to industrial development (Buell 1995: 42-4). "My Dirty Stream" reconciles this criticism of industrialism with a generalized sympathy for the working-class reminiscent of Seeger's Popular Front politics of the 1940s. The workers at the Consolidated Paper Plant have "honest hands," he sings. But the song singles out neither the bosses nor middle-class consumers for blame. Instead, it takes a more liberal view, using the third person plural to attribute collective responsibility for, and complicity in, environmental degradation: "Five million gallons of waste a day / Why should we do it any other way?"

As we will see later in this essay, the political stance taken by Seeger in "My Dirty Stream" can also be seen in the contradictory environmental politics of his Clearwater project. In contrast to "My Dirty Stream," Malvina Reynolds' songs on God Bless the Grass take a more orthodox leftist view of political responsibility for environmental degradation: "The Faucets are Dripping" blames absentee landlords for the wasted water that leads to dry reservoirs; the "cement octopus" of Californian highway construction emerges from the state capital Sacramento; in "Seventy Miles," permission to dump garbage in San Francisco Bay is granted by the "city fathers."

As already mentioned, Seeger's involvement in river conservation can be seen as part of a general shift in left-wing activism at this time towards working in one's local community. But while the autobiographical element in "My Dirty Stream" ("But I live right at Beacon here...") is unusual for Seeger, the notion of self that the song constructs is typically outward looking and social. When the song was published in

Sing Out! in July 1969, it was described as Seeger "sharing a private dream warmly and intimately" (Seeger 1969: 1). The private dream had become a public, political concern.

Newport 1965 and the limitations of proletarian realism

In July 1965, one month after he recorded God Bless the Grass, Seeger, with fellow organizers Alan Lomax and Theodore Bikel, was outraged when Bob Dylan, dressed in a black leather motorcycle jacket, gave a concert of loud, electric rock music with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band on the closing night of the Newport Folk Festival. Within a year of Dylan's ground-breaking performance, writes Greil Marcus, "what had been understood as folk music would as a cultural force have all but ceased to exist" (Marcus 13).

The new rock music challenged many of the long-held proletarian realist values of the topical folk song tradition, those values embodied in God Bless the Grass. Most importantly, in folk circles, the collective response of the audience was considered more important than the artistic demands of the individual performer. Communal singing established a shared identity around a political cause. Dunaway describes the relationship between Seeger and his audience as being like a concave mirror: he "focused his listeners' admiration back out into the balconies, inspiring people with an image of themselves as better (more tolerant, compassionate, international) than they were. He kindled their hopes" (Dunaway 228). Seeger himself revealed his aesthetic principles in a letter to a festival organizer in Japan, in which he wrote that "we need songs with strength to make cowards stop fleeing, turn around, and face the future with a breath of courage." His songs, he said, "must be so good that they reach out to 190 million Americans" (Dunaway 270).

Questions of artistic quality were thus paramount in Seeger's mind. In his introduction to Woody Guthrie's California to the New York Island (1960), he elaborated on his artistic aims by listing the three qualities that singers could learn from Guthrie's performance style. The first was his "matter-of-fact, unmelodramatic, understatement throughout." The second was "simplicity above all – and getting the

words out clearly. They are the most important part of the song." The third quality was "irregularity." He explained: "to avoid a sing-song effect, from repeating the same simple melody many times, Woody, like all American ballad singers, held out long notes in unexpected places, although his guitar strumming maintained an even tempo. Thus no two verses sounded alike. Extra beats were often added to measures" (Heylin 82).

Proletarian realism was not lacking in artistry, then. Nevertheless, the form had its aesthetic limitations. Dunaway notes that that, in the late sixties, Seeger continued to maintain his optimistic public persona even when privately he became more somber and pessimistic as the Vietnam War intensified. "He had endured and persisted," Dunaway writes, "even when his optimism weakened, for revolutionists have to say they will overcome, even when they know they may not" (Dunaway 272). It was the repressive limits of this official optimism, however, that Dylan's new repertoire exposed.

Dylan himself had written topical protest songs between January 1962 and June 1963, but then began to rethink his involvement in the movement. Discussing Another Side Of Bob Dylan, he told journalist Nat Hentoff in June 1964, "There aren't any finger-pointin' songs in here... You know – pointing to all the things that are wrong. I don't want to write for people anymore. You know – be a spokesman... From now on, I want to write from inside me..." (Heylin 160).

Dylan's rejection of the protest song in this period may be seen as part of a growing body of dissent within folk music circles about the political efficacy of proletarian realism. In particular, the suggestion was that listeners to topical protest songs, rather than having their consciousnesses raised, might only be having their consciences salved. When Freewheelin' Bob Dylan was released in May 1963, critic

Paul Nelson criticized the aesthetics of the topical protest song movement as practiced by singers like Dylan and Phil Ochs. He commented later: "We were sort of the anti-topical-song people, not because we disagreed with it politically but just because we thought it was such shitty art, y'know. These songs were like fish in the barrel stuff... It's like patting yourself on the back music, it just seemed so obvious and not particularly well done" (Heylin 123).

By 1966, Julius Lester, an African-American songwriter friend of Seeger's, had also come to doubt the political efficacy of the topical folk song movement. The church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in September 1963, which killed four black children less than a month after the March on Washington, was for him a political turning point. In an article in Sing Out! entitled "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," Lester wrote: "Those northern protest rallies where Freedom Songs were sung and speeches speeched and applause applauded and afterwards telegrams and letters sent to the President and Congress – they began to look more and more like moral exercises. See, my hands are clean. I do not condone such a foul deed, they said, going back to their magazines and newspapers, feeling purged because they had made their moral witness." (Lester 24-5) For Lester, then, as for Paul Nelson, protest folk music had merely come to promote a complacent listening position.

The 1965 Newport Folk Festival saw Dylan's new aesthetics of noise, provocation and interiority clash with the proletarian realism of Pete Seeger and God Bless the Grass. Seeger did not object to his use of electric guitars per se, as Johnny Cash had used electric guitar accompaniment at the previous year's festival. Rather, he thought that the volume was too loud, and it was difficult to hear Dylan's words. As he commented later: "It wasn't a real sound check. They were tinkering around with it and all they knew was, "Turn the sound up! Turn the sound up!" They wanted

to get volume" (Heylin 211). As a result, when Dylan performed "Maggie's Farm", said Seeger, "you couldn't understand a word, because of the distortion" (Seeger 1993: 173). Joe Boyd, who engineered Dylan's sound at Newport, acknowledged that the volume was high, but pointed out that the sound mix was deliberate. By the standards of the day, he said, "it was the loudest thing anybody had heard. The volume. That was the thing, the volume... It was powerfully, ballsy-mixed, expertly done rock and roll" (Heylin 211).

Newport 1965 can thus be seen as a clash between the old Apollonian folk and the new Dionysian rock: the wordy and the ballsy. Seeger's music was genteel, ascetic and emotionally contained; appealing to the superego rather than the id, it was rational message rather than disruptive noise. In contrast, Dylan's new music and performance style signified rebellious individualism, the pursuit of pleasure, and the division of society into the hip and the square, the young and the old. Moreover, in rock music, as Joe Boyd understood, the voice is part of the mix, the music's affect deriving from the overall sound rather than from the foregrounding of lyrical content. In this sense, Dylan's new music was a threat to the entire social and political project of the topical song movement, his performance at Newport in 1965 the symbolic moment in which the Puritanism and populist certainties of the folk movement began to give way to the new, hybrid forms of 1960s rock music and counter-cultural protest.

The ways in which Dylan was reinventing popular music may be sensed in the positive reaction of reviewer Jim Rooney, a member of the Cambridge, Massachusetts folk scene and later a record producer. He described how, at the start of the day, Pete Seeger had played a tape of a newborn baby, and asked the audience to sing to it, and "tell it what kind of a world it would be growing up into." Rooney commented that Seeger "already knew what he wanted others to sing. They were going to sing that it

was a world of pollution, bombs, hunger, and injustice, but that PEOPLE would OVERCOME."

Rooney compared this attitude to the new direction in which Dylan was taking popular music, and asked: "can there be no songs as violent as the age? Must a folk song be of mountains, valleys, and love between my brother and my sister all over this land? Do we allow for despair only in the blues?... (That's all) very comfortable and safe." Dylan was, for Rooney, the only performer at the festival who "questioned our position" and "shook us" (McGregor 31-2). For Rooney, the new rock aesthetic was urban rather than rural ("mountains, valleys"), and rejected the sentimental Popular Front insistence on optimism, collective solidarity and predigested dogma (Seeger "already knew what he wanted others to sing.")

Greil Marcus elaborates on the way Dylan's music allowed for an exploration of individual subjectivity prohibited by the folk revival's insistence on collectivism and ideological orthodoxy. Protest songs such as the ones Dylan wrote in his early career were, he writes, "pageants of righteousness" in which there was no room "for the selfish, confused, desirous individual who might suspect that his or her own story could fit no particular cause or even purpose" (Marcus 27).

After what he saw as the personal humiliation of Newport, Seeger resigned from the board of directors of the festival, and temporarily dropped his Sing Out! column, before resuming it in December 1966. The new rock culture was rejecting as outmoded and restrictive the Puritanism that underlay Seeger's musical aesthetics. In God Bless the Grass, then, Seeger's new found conservatism had been expressed through what for the newly emerging rock audience of the time appeared to be artistic conservatism.

The opposition between Seeger and Dylan should not, however, be overstated. By 1967, Dylan had returned to acoustic folk music with John Wesley Harding, and subsequently wrote topical protest songs such as 'George Jackson' (1971) and 'Hurricane' (1976), as well as more general political songs such as 'Political World' (1989). Nevertheless, for Seeger, the debacle of the 1965 Newport Folk Festival had the immediate effect of giving him further impetus to dedicate himself to his Clearwater project, which, as we will see in the following section, was a practical engagement with the environmental concerns raised in God Bless The Grass.

The environmental politics of the "Clearwater"

The Clearwater organization founded by Seeger in 1969 has won advances in sewerage treatment and the disposal of industrial wastes into the Hudson River. In 1975, chemists hired by the organization discovered contamination from PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl), a colorless, odorless carcinogen, which General Electric had dumped in the river. Seeger warned: "The people of America must realize we've got to organize a defense against these chemical companies – they're getting away with literal murder." The organization took General Electric to court and eventually won one of the largest environmental penalties ever awarded (Dunaway 301-2).

As we saw earlier, if there were some negative motives behind Seeger's embrace of conservationism, this does not mean that he had abandoned his earlier political concerns. He was, however, accused of exactly that by many of his erstwhile comrades in the Old Left, who criticized his involvement as a betrayal of the class war. Dunaway quotes a former friend of Seeger's who described the Clearwater as "probably the closest thing in recent years to Don Quixote tilting at the windmills. It's a diversion. Pete's a playboy with a yacht" (Dunaway 287).

Such comments proved unfair, however, as the boat became a democratic, community resource that challenged the element of class privilege usually associated with sailing. Seeger believed that conservationism was a consensus issue that could unite people across classes, and create a new Popular Front at a local level. He spoke of the Clearwater uniting "wealthy yachtsmen and kids from the ghettos, church members and atheists." It was this appeal to consensus that particularly alienated his Marxist friends, who disapproved of his decision to approach the rich financiers who traditionally underwrite conservationist causes for financial backing. Irwin Silber, one time editor of Sing Out!, told Seeger that he was "capable of wasting a huge amount of effort, energy, time, and funds on hare-brained, diversionary projects." "I wish I could believe that these undertakings and the philosophy behind them were leading us to fundamental change," he went on. "But I don't believe it. And if you think they are, I think you're kidding yourself. Perhaps it's easier that way" (Dunaway 290).

But Silber underestimated the extent to which Seeger explicitly linked his new environmental politics both with his older Civil Rights agenda, and with the newly emerging anti-Vietnam War movement. Indeed, that Silber should deem local, environmental politics "diversionary" reveals the narrowness of Marxist dogma at this time (this was before attempts in the 1970s to produce a "Green" version of Marx and Engels.) In fact, Seeger elsewhere analyzed the causes of the pollution of the Hudson River in Marxist-Leninist terms, linking environmental pollution at the local level with the destructive power of the military-industrial complex which at the same time was fighting the war in Vietnam.

Dunaway tells the story of a Hudson Valley millionaire who had reservations about the Clearwater project. "It's a beautiful boat all right", he told Seeger. "But why do you want to sail the Hudson for? I do my sailing around the Virgin Islands."

Seeger responded: "I felt my fingers clenching in anger, but I didn't say anything. Unwittingly, he had given us our best reason for building the boat... We had allowed some people to make a good profit along the Hudson, and then go somewhere else to enjoy clear water" (Dunaway 285-6).

In Seeger's hands, then, conservationism was not a retreat from class politics. He wrote: "There's as much of a relation between the Clearwater and socialism as there is in putting out a book on how to play the banjo. [Both] are part of a continual struggle to oppose the inhumanity of the technology which capitalism foists on people: "Don't do anything creative yourself, just do your job, and let the machine do the rest for you." But you play a little music yourself, you start making up songs for yourself, and next thing you know, you'll be thinking for yourself. Maybe voting right" (Dunaway 290).

In an article in Audubon magazine in March 1971, Jack Hope quoted a speech that Seeger gave on stage during a concert, in which he placed responsibility for environmental degradation squarely with the power elite rather than with the ordinary citizen. Although we are all guilty to an extent, he told his audience, a black man from Harlem should be considered less guilty than the president of Consolidated Edison or General Motors. 'After all,' said Seeger, 'the man from Harlem is probably demoralized, unable to get a job. And it's simply unrealistic to expect people to be concerned over the environment when they're having trouble holding their own lives together. For that matter, anyone who is poor isn't much of a drain on the environment, because he isn't consuming many resources. But the officers of these big industrial concerns are personally wealthy. They're educated and influential. And they head up companies that are wholesale polluters. Now, if they would speak up for the sake of the environment, people would listen. But they don't speak up" (Hope 6).

Seeger's appeal to Marxist notions of class conflict in this concert speech contradicted the appeal to liberal consensus politics we saw earlier in his stated desire for the Clearwater to unite wealthy yachtsmen and kids from the ghettos, an attitude also evident in "My Dirty Stream." But the speech also demonstrates that Seeger's move into environmental politics, rather than abandoning his earlier Civil Rights agenda of racial equality and social justice, was in fact an extension of it. God Bless the Grass remains an understated expression of such focused political intelligence.

Afterword: folk music and environmental protest since the 1960s

Like the tradition of topical folk song of which it was a part, the folk music of environmental protest did not disappear with the rise of rock music in 1965, even if folk music as a whole had lost some of the cultural prestige it had enjoyed during the folk revival. Songs were an integral part of the Clearwater project, and Seeger carried on voicing his concerns in songs such as Bill Steele's "Garbage" (1969) and "Throw Away That Shad Net" (1975), otherwise known as "The PCB Song." (Seeger 211) Don Maclean was also a member of the Clearwater crew in the early 1970s. His 'Tapestry' (1970) combined a sense of environmental apocalypse with an ecocentric celebration of the web of life that recalls Seeger and Marss' "The People Are Scratching" or LaFarge's "Coyote, My Brother" on God Bless The Grass: "every thread of creation is held in position / By still other strands of things living." In contrast to this delicate beauty, the "smoldering cities" are "so gray and so vulgar": industrialism and urban living are unnatural impositions on the web of life (Clearwater).

Tom Paxton wrote "Whose Garden Was This" for the first ecological teach-in at Northwestern University in 1970 (The Best of Tom Paxton). The song refers to a

world in which nature has been totally destroyed. All that remains are simulacra: the speaker has seen "pictures of flowers" and heard "records of breezes," but longs to experience the real thing. Minor chords evoke a melancholy decorated with recorders and delicate strings, as, like Seeger's "My Dirty Stream," the song concisely states the conservationist cause in the mode of Leo Marx's complex pastoral.

John Prine's "Paradise" (1971) explored the sense of place achieved by Seeger in "My Dirty Stream," by relishing the specificity of place names. His childhood haunt of the Green River in Muhlenberg County has been destroyed by coal mining interests, and the song names names: "Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away" ([John Prine](#)). Lawrence Buell writes that environmental awareness and action develop from a sense of "critically aware place-connectedness." (Buell 2001: 66) The use of concrete detail by songwriters like Prine, Seeger and Reynolds can create this sense of place that is a vital early step in developing an ethics of care for one's environment. Buell also notes that indignation and betrayal are key tropes in narratives of wilderness preservation.

Earth First! supporter Walkin' Jim Stoltz began to write songs that celebrate wild rivers, mountain trails and wild animals, based on walks in the backcountry West he began in 1974. Stoltz's voice is a warm, slurring bass vibrato; set to Dobro, fiddle and female harmony vocals, it makes for a nurturing, uplifting folk music. Like John Prine, Stoltz records the involvement of ordinary people in the history of a place, particularly where the spirit of the place has been irretrievably lost. "The Ballad of Willie and Millie" is about a couple who meet at a dance in the Columbia Gardens in Butte, Montana in the 1930s, before it was burned down and stripmined in the early 1970s. Stoltz adds ruefully in his notes: "The motherlode the mining company expected to find was never located" ([Listen to the Earth](#)).

Stoltz's environmental advocacy emerges from a sense of nationalistic attachment to the landscape of the American west as a scene of future potentiality. Yet his songs celebrate not the solitary man in nature or rugged male individualist, but sociability, generosity of spirit and the optimism of the proletarian realist tradition, as his notes on Spirit Is Still On The Run indicate: "It's still out there. You can hear it in the mountain wind, feel it in the stillness of the desert, and taste it in the freshness of the wild places still left. Get out and experience it. Take a friend. The Spirit will never die as long as there are those who love and respect the Earth" (Spirit Is Still On The Run).

In the 1970s, under the continuing influence of Bob Dylan, many folk singers aspired to be rock musicians, and "going electric" seemed the best option, both artistically and commercially, for many singers who began in the acoustic folk tradition. But acoustic music and the intimacy of the singer-songwriter mode that goes with it underwent a revival with the emergence of "Americana" as a radio format in 1995. This cultural development has led to the increased visibility of environmental protest music. One of the most prolific writers in this vein is David Rovics, whose grasp of the drama and pithiness of the topical song recalls Phil Ochs. Of the many environmental songs Rovics has made available to download for free on the Internet, "Here At the End of the World" (2004) illustrates well his revival of the art of plain speaking (Rovics). His demotic, unaffected voice runs through a familiar list of environmental and political horrors: rising sea levels, the soil erosion and pollution caused by industrial agriculture, globalized trade, polluted cities, and the cause of it all, class inequality. Rovics animates his language with rhetoric familiar to the protest song: the intimacy of direct address, the turning around of colloquial expressions ("Let them eat coffee / Sugar, coca and flowers"), playful alliteration ("political

pundits and corporate crooks"), and visual and metonymic details ("they sit in their mansions / On their plush leather chairs"). He builds up dramatic tension by varying the dynamic range of his simple guitar strumming, based around a repeated minor chord, and releases it at the end of each refrain with a descending riff. In David Rovics, among others, the tradition of folk music as environmental protest lives on, continuing the work begun by Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynold in the early 1960s.

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