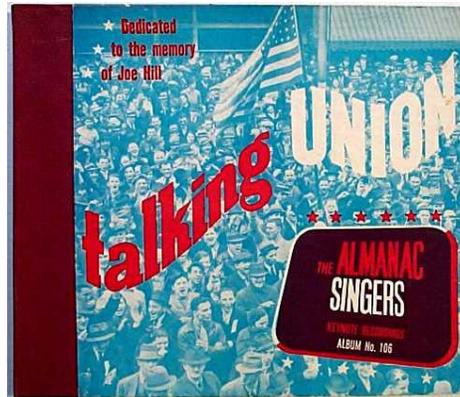


“Talking Union”--The Almanac Singers (1941)

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Essay by Cesare Civetta (guest post)*



78rpm album package

Pete Seeger, known as the “Father of American Folk music,” had a difficult time of it as a young, budding singer. While serving in the US Army during World War II, he wrote to his wife, Toshi, “Every song I started to write and gave up was a failure. I started to paint because I failed to get a job as a journalist. I started singing and playing more because I was a failure as a painter. I went into the army because I was having more and more failure musically.” But he practiced his banjo for hours and hours each day, usually starting as soon as he woke in the morning, and became a virtuoso on the instrument, and even went on to invent the “long-neck banjo.”

The origin of the Almanacs Singers’ name, according to Lee Hays, is that every farmer’s home contains at least two books: the Bible, and the Almanac! The Almanacs Singers’ first job was a lunch performance at the Jade Mountain Restaurant in New York in December of 1940 where they were paid \$2.50! The original members of the group were Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Campbell, John Peter Hawes, and later Woody Guthrie. Initially, Seeger used the name Pete Bowers because his dad was then working for the US government and he could have lost his job due to his son’s left-leaning politically charged music. The Singers sang anti-war songs, songs about the draft, and songs about President Roosevelt, frequently attacking him. After Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941, they sang patriotic and pro-union songs. Many Americans considered the Almanac Singers to be communists, including an accusatory article published in September of 1941 by “Time” magazine. They were officially disbanded by March of 1943, and after World War II their songs were frequently written off as communist propaganda.

The album, “Talking Union,” was the Almanacs’ most popular album, and it and the song by the same title an instant hit. It was recorded in May of 1941 by 22-year-old Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, Josh White, Sam Gray, Carol White, and Bess Lomax Hawes. The Almanacs represented the vanguard of the workers’ rights movement but their influence was weakened by the communist accusation controversy.

Their 1941 song “Talking Union’s” lyrics describe how to start a union, pass out leaflets, call meetings, and resist the obstacles put in place by the boss. It immediately became popular and resulted in the Congress of Industrial Organizations sponsoring The Almanac Singers’ national tour. Much of the song was jointly written in less than an hour, with Seeger completing the composition. Its style is that of Talking Blues, a combination of folk and country music, characterized by rhythmic speech. The Almanacs transformed Talking Blues as a political protest song style. The song promotes labor rights and was often performed by the Almanacs at labor union gatherings. Its style made it easy for laborers to sing along, engendering a feeling of belonging with the union and a sense of solidarity. It was performed, in May of 1941, at Madison Square Garden for 20,000 striking transport workers. Seeger's conviction was that the right song and that right moment could work wonders, having a definitive impact on social issues.

There were five other songs in the original album: “Get Thee Behind Me, Satan”; “All I Want”; “Union Maid”; and “Which Side Are You On?” In 1955, Folkway Records re-released the six songs on an LP titled “The Original Talking Union & Other Union Songs” that included an additional seven selections: “We Shall Not Be Moved”; “Roll the Union On”; “Casey Jones (The Union Scab)”; “Miner's Lifeguard”; “Solidarity Forever”; “You've Gotta Go Down and Join the Union”; and “Hold the Fort.” These seven were recorded by Pete Seeger and the Song Swappers which included a teenaged Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary.

The songs were often not original melodies, but borrowed and transformed for union campaigns. For example, “Which Side Are You On?” was a Baptist hymn tune based on an old English ballad melody. It was composed by Florence Peerce, whose husband Sam, was an organizer of the miners’ “Bloody Strike” in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1932. And the song “You’ve Gotta Go Down and Join the Union” was adapted by Woody Guthrie from the well-known gospel song “Lonesome Valley.”

Cesare Civetta is a critically-acclaimed conductor who has appeared with over 60 orchestras in 15 countries, and was the first non-Russian conductor to perform throughout a transcontinental tour of the former Soviet Union. He is also the author of “The Real Toscanini: Musicians Reveal the Maestro,” and is the conductor of the Beethoven Festival Orchestra in New York City.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.