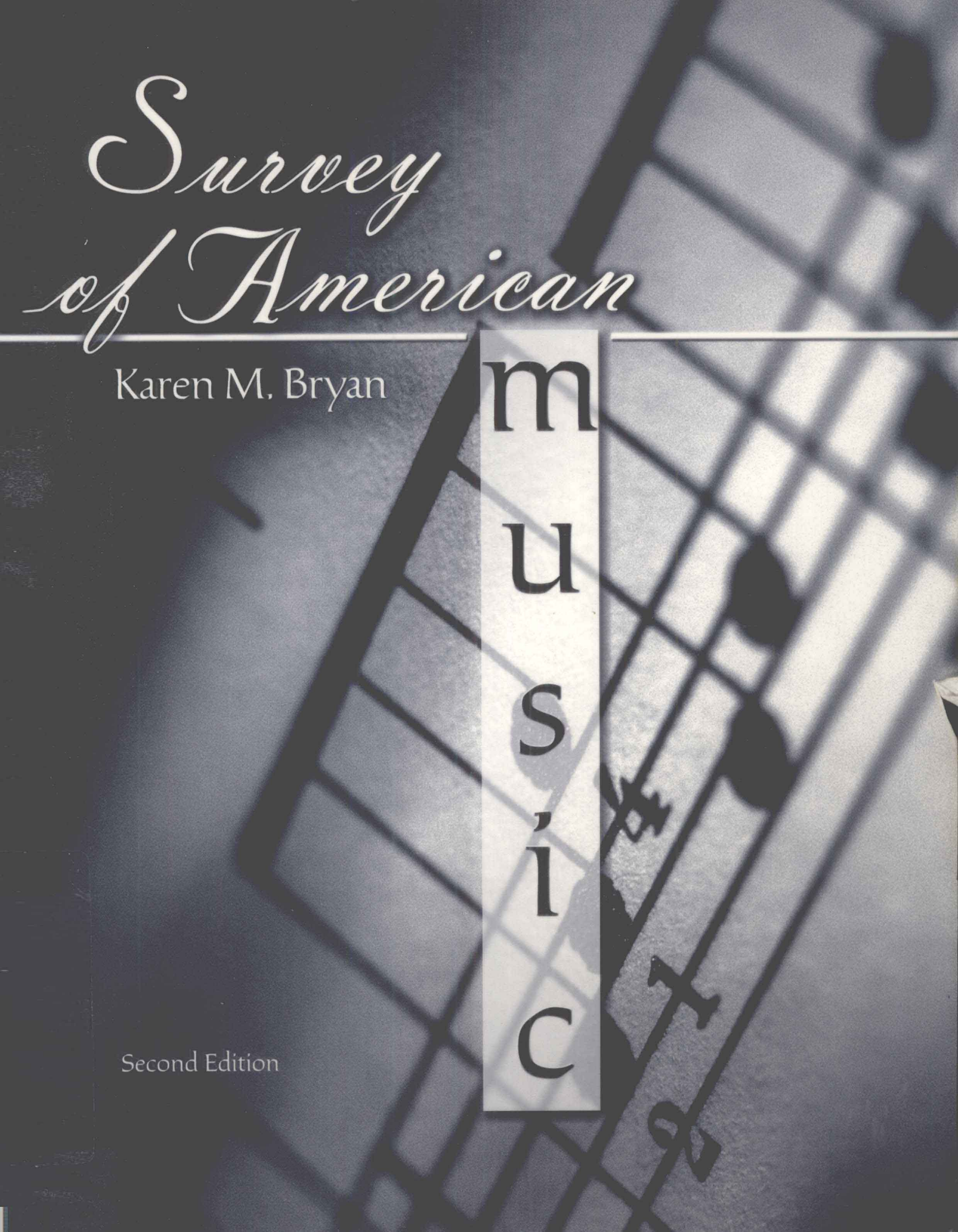
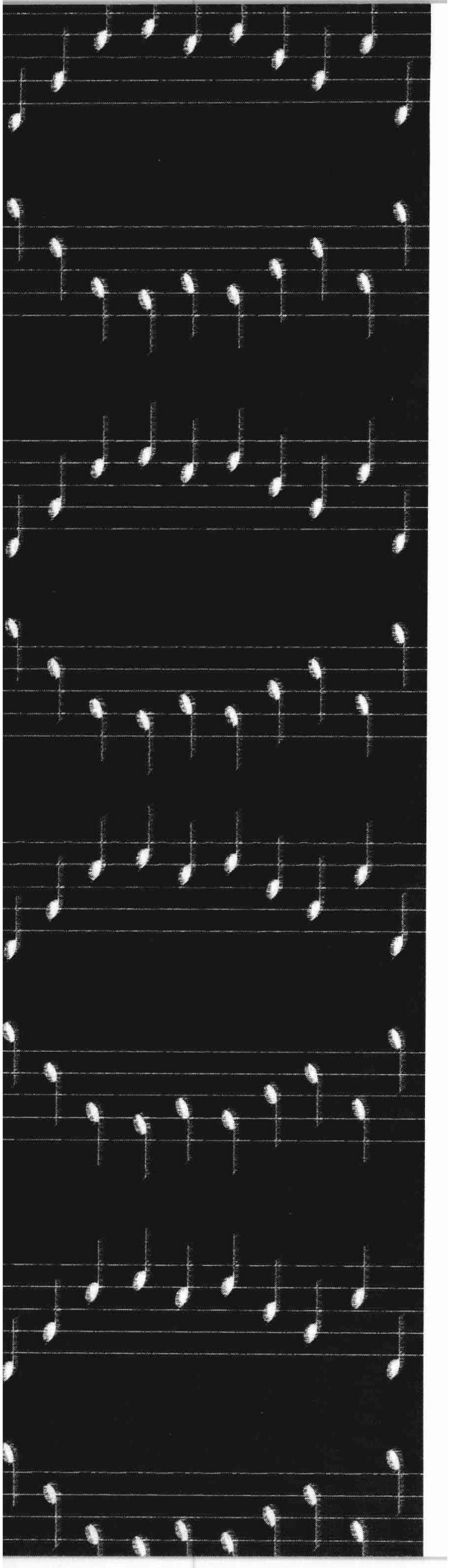
Survey of American music

Karen M. Bryan

Second Edition





Survey of American Music

Second Edition

Karen Bryan

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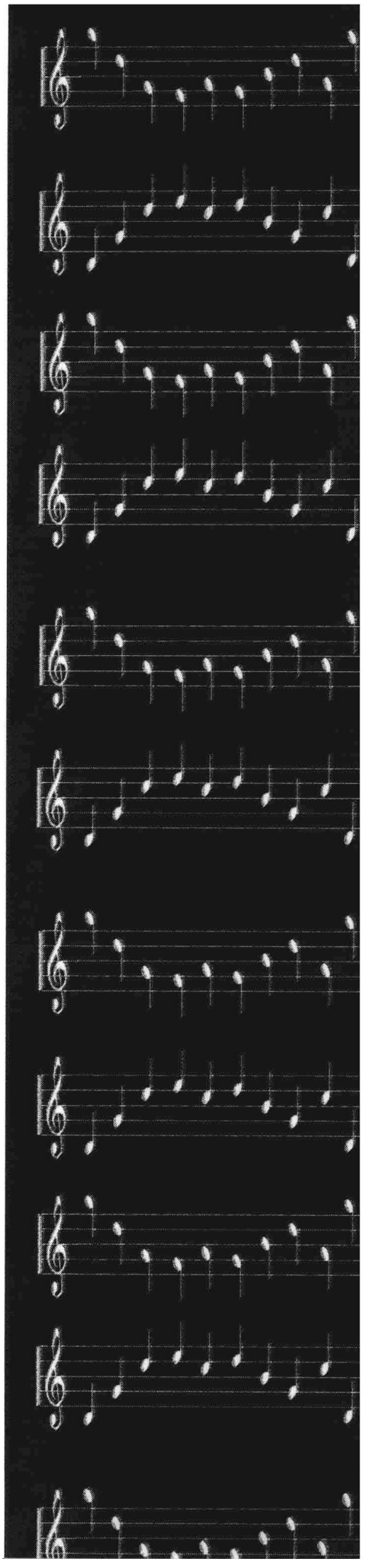
Folk Music of the 1940s— The Almanac Singers

American folk music in the 1920s and 1930s was derived from traditional European, and specifically, British practice. Individual pieces were drawn from a variety of genres, including ballads, religious music, and work songs and included newly composed pieces. Musical characteristics of the style included a relative simplicity of melodic and harmonic structures, a strophic structure based on the underlying structure of the text and uncomplicated rhythmic patterns. The stories they told or the issues they addressed were both universal and immediate, and they spoke to common experiences and universal themes. This very universality lent the songs an immediacy that enhanced their longevity as they were passed from singer to singer.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, folk music experienced a "revival," coming to the attention of the American public through new media and new performers. Through radio programs and recordings, folk music gained a wider audience and acceptance than it had in previous decades. Through the efforts of collectors, more pieces and more performers gained recognition, and the music was used in causes that took on a political edge.

One of the main collectors of this music was Alan Lomax, who traveled the country recording the music of ordinary people: from work gangs, to prison gangs, to people who were known in their communities for singing the "old-time" music. He collected performers as well, and one of the most notable discoveries for which he took credit was Woody Guthrie, a folk singer and songwriter who hosted a local show in Los Angeles called "Here Comes Woody and Lefty Lou." Lomax convinced Guthrie to go to New York, where, in 1940, he appeared in a concert billed as a "Grapes of Wrath Evening," a benefit for migrant farm workers. From that point on, Guthrie made an impression as a singer and writer of songs in folk style that spoke to the issues of the common people in American life—the laborers, the down and out, the downtrodden. He was described in his biography as:

> An unwitting classicist, someone who understood the power and integrity of the traditional forms and sang the old songs in an old-fashioned way, his voice droning and nasal and high-pitched. At the same time, and even more miraculously, he was a political radical, a living affirmation of Charles Seeger's theories of the activist potential of the music—those were *political* songs he was singing in traditional fashion. More important, though, Woody Guthrie was quite obviously



> a genius. His songs had the beautiful, easy-to-remember simplicity of the best of folk art. He was also very funny. Having introduced himself with several of his dust bowl songs, Woody was telling . . . stories about his first few days in New York, and the audience was roaring . . . "Trains were so crowded today, you couldn't even fall down. I had to change stations twice, and both times I came out with a different pair of shoes on." (Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life,* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 613–614)

In 1941, Guthrie, along with Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, and Lee Hays, formed the Almanac Singers, a group whose actions, both as a musical group and as social activists, were devoted to the prospect of working for the good of "the people."

The Almanac Singers: Proletarian "Folk" Culture in Microcosm

Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss

Reproduction of cover of Songs for John Doe *by the Almanac Singers*

On August 23, 1939, a startled world heard the German and Soviet governments announce the signing of a mutual nonaggression agreement. Thus began a so-called "peace" era, lasting for almost two years, during which Germany conquered and occupied much of Europe. Almost immediately the political coalitions forged in the Popular Front era collapsed, as the communists withdrew their support and adopted an extreme isolationist stance. Up until this time, the party had distinguished sharply between fascism and the more democratic varieties of Western capitalism; now it contended that these were merely different forms of the

From *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957* by Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss. Copyright © 2000 by Rowman and Littlefield. Reprinted by permission.

same socioeconomic evil. Consequently, communists and their sympathizers maintained a staunchly neutral and anti-involvement position when Germany launched World War II on September 1, 1939. The party turned savagely on Roosevelt's domestic policies at home, which it recently had supported with nearly equal fervor. Labor agitation within the CIO continued, but operatives made a sharper effort to dramatize the unionization struggle in class terms.

The attitudes and ideology of urban radical folk song writers and performers were a product of the cultural forces at work in the Popular Front era, as was the artistic and thematic content of their performances. It was from this group that the Almanac Singers coalesced into an identifiable entity, just when the Nazi-Soviet pact began to have its effects on the communist movement's members and supporters. The sudden reversal of the party's ideological position on world politics was not paralleled fully in the attitudes and activities of left-wing activists. Art and performances with topical themes made proper deference to the new party line. But, unlike the dramatic shifts that occurred when the Third Period gave way to the Popular Front, cultural expressions favored by the communists exhibited remarkably little fundamental change. The overriding communist concern for folk songs and other traditions of the American and world peoples—at least in an intellectual sense—continued unabated. The Almanac Singers built on and extended the work of the left-wing folklore popularizers of the Popular Front milieu, even though their initial political worldview, like that of the movement itself, now took an almost diametrically opposite turn from the former period.

Origins and Early Activities of the Almanacs

Much of the history of the Almanac Singers is obscure or contradictory because of the paucity of meaningful contemporary documentation and the diverse and sometimes carefully circumscribed accounts offered in interviews with former Almanacs. As one of their number accurately observed, "there are as many versions and interpretations as there were Almanac Singers,"[1] and these totaled more than a dozen. Even their genesis and demise are surprisingly difficult to date precisely since few events at either end of the Almanacs' career can be characterized as decisive landmarks. What is clear is that the group's original personnel consisted of Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, John Peter Hawes, and later Woody Guthrie and that they were a functioning collective entity by February 1941.

Seeger came from middle-class origins and developed an early interest in folk music in response to his family's eclectic musical interests. Hays grew up in a traditional Arkansas setting and brought labor school experiences to the group. Lampell, the son of Jewish immigrants, was raised in New Jersey and attended the University of West Virginia on a scholarship. In his teens, like Seeger and Guthrie, he took to the road on occasional hitchhiking trips, working at assorted manual jobs en route to earn his keep. He also served for a time as a corresponding reporter for the *New Republic*[2] and later became a successful radio and television scriptwriter. Hawes, who grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the son of an author of sea stories for boys, had a keen appreciation for New England lore and culture, especially sea chanteys. Though from a well-to-do family, he professed a staunch interest in working-class radical activities.[3] Just prior to the formation of the Almanacs, Guthrie returned to the West Coast, there to write his much acclaimed Columbia River songs before traveling to New York once more to join the group. Meanwhile, he maintained a steady correspondence with Seeger and Hays as the Almanacs moved through their formative stages.[4]

The Almanacs' genesis was gradual and unspectacular. Hays and Lampell began corresponding while both were still living in the South, and following their meeting in August 1940, they took an apartment together on New York's Lower East Side. Pete Seeger returned from one of his folk song trips the following November and was introduced to them by Peter Hawes, who had met all three within the year. The four quickly confirmed their mutual interests in American folk music and their strong radical political sympathies. Seeger and Hays began singing together at "cause" parties and other left-wing functions in December,

their first booking being a luncheon at the Jade Mountain Restaurant in New York, for which they were paid $2.50.[5] The combination of Seeger's banjo playing and dedicated musical performance with Hays's fine bass voice, dry wit, and song-leading ability was a success, and demands for their services increased rapidly. All the while they sang endlessly in the apartment with Lampell, Hawes, and others who came by, talked current events, and composed their own topical songs in folk style.[6]

In February 1941, the Almanacs, now comprising Seeger (who used the name Pete Bowers to protect his father, then working for the U.S. government), Hays, and Lampell, sang at the national meeting of the American Youth Congress held at Turner's Arena in Washington, D.C. (A fourth singer presumably joined them, but who would fill the fourth position was not yet determined.) No two accounts completely agree on how this came about or what exactly transpired, but the date (February 7–9) is the most logical choice for an "official" beginning of the Almanacs' career. According to one report, the AYC leaders requested that the group sing a number of songs constructed around the political slogans of the meeting, including "Don't Lend or Lease Our Bases" and "Jim Crow Must Go." The Almanacs' peace songs were well received, but the AYC sponsors were less than satisfied by the trio's creation "Jim Crow" because the concluding refrain simply ended with the words "Jim Crow" instead of "Jim Crow Must Go!".[7]

At this point the Almanacs formalized themselves as a collective entity and developed a conscious rationale for their activities as agit-prop entertainers in a folk style. They chose the name "Almanac Singers" from a stray line of Woody Guthrie's, variously reported as coming from a letter written from the West Coast or from the manuscript of what later became *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People.*[8] Asked what the name represented, the group explained:

> Well, if you want to know what the weather is going to be, you have to look in your Almanac. And if you want to know when to plant your spuds or what side of the moon to dig 'em in, or when to go on strike, and if you want to know what's good for the itch, or unemployment, or fascism, you have to look in your Almanac. And that's what Almanac stands for.[9]

The Almanacs' songs, in other words, were intended to serve as an all-purpose topical commentary, guideline, and reinforcement of political and social values for the left-wing movement. Identification with the working class or "people" came, among other ways, through the use of the folk song medium as the prime vehicle of agit-prop communication. "We think this is the first time there has ever been an organized attempt . . . to sing the folk songs of America," Lampell said. "We are trying to give back to the people the songs of the workers."[10] Accordingly, Almanac programs were made up of a mixture of traditional ballads and work songs and topical lyrics created by the group and others.

During the first months, most Almanac compositions exhibited "peace" themes with a strong anticapitalist flavor, reflecting the communist movement's claim that the Roosevelt administration would drag an unwilling nation into a European war fought mainly for the purposes of redistributing world markets and profits among the capitalist nations. The peace songs were the product of the entire group, but most were written initially by Millard Lampell and Lee Hays, with musical contributions from Pete Seeger. As events were to show, Lampell had a sharp wit and a natural way with a clever phrase, but sometimes he lacked a sense of tact. Nearly all Almanac songs were set to old folk tunes, such as "Billy Boy," "Jesse James," and "Liza Jane," and were sung with a verve and flair that helped offset the Almanacs' unpolished voices.

Eric Bernay's Keynote label recorded seven songs that were released in March 1941 as *Songs for John Doe.*[11] The songs were virulent and polemical, containing denunciations of war, the Roosevelt administration's cautious attempts at preparedness, and the chief figures of American government and capitalism. About war, for example:

> I'll sing you a song and it's not very long,
> It's about a young man who never did wrong.

Suddenly, he died one day—the reason
why no one could say.
. . . Only one clue as to why he died—
A bayonet sticking in his side!
("The Strange Death of John Doe")

With regard to the draft and preparedness:

Remember when the AAA
Killed a million hogs a day?
Instead of hogs it's men today—
Plow the fourth one under!
("Plow Under")

As for the war profiteers:

Would you like to see the world, Billy
Boy, Billy Boy,
Would you like to see the world, charming Billy?
No, it wouldn't be much thrill, to die for
Dupont in Brazil;
He's a young boy and cannot leave his
mother. ("Billy Boy")

The most scathing attacks were saved for Roosevelt himself and were so vitriolic that they were to cause the Almanacs acute embarrassment once the Left swung back to a pro-administration stance during the war years. At once the most famous and infamous of these was "The Ballad of October 16th," which commemorated the date in 1940 initiating the first peacetime draft in the nation's history. The chorus (set to the tune of "Jesse James" refrain) said:

Oh Franklin Roosevelt told the people
how he felt.
We damned near believed what he said;
He said, "I hate war—and so does
Eleanor,
But we won't be safe till everybody's
dead."

No other peace song of the Nazi-Soviet pact era proved more popular in the communist movement, and none would be cited more often in later histories of the party and anti-communist tracts aimed at folk singers in general and the Almanacs in particular.[12]

Indeed, the antiadministration lyrics were so polemical that reports circulated throughout the Left that the right-wing Roosevelt-hating America Firsters organization gleefully played the *John Doe* album at one of its meetings. Other lurid, unsubstantiated rumors gave accounts of the alleged reactions of the President and his wife when they heard the same songs. One rumor, for example, described FDR's remark to Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter: "This [group] is the most dangerous voice in America," and Eleanor Roosevelt supposedly observed that the lyrics were "very clever but in extremely bad taste."[13]

The *John Doe* songs brought the Almanacs to the attention of the entire communist movement and generated considerable excitement about the group. After one performance before the League of American Writers, Theodore Dreiser jumped up, planted a kiss on the cheek of a startled Lee Hays, and declared, "If we had six more teams like these boys, we could save America!"[14] The *Daily Worker* publicized the group so much in its pages that a friend of Seeger's once suggested to him that the Almanacs themselves must own the paper. Communist front organizations, left-wing labor unions, and private party givers with progressive sympathies all vied for the appearance of the Almanacs at their various functions, and the American Peace Mobilization unsuccessfully tried to sponsor the group as its own official singers.[15] The *John Doe* album was widely praised in the radical press and its songs were reprinted frequently.

Several factors combined to produce the considerable impact that the Almanacs had on the communist Left in early 1941. The group itself was a novelty, being the first ensemble of its kind in an urban environment to sing folk and folk-styled songs in a nonformal or non-art song manner. The harmonies and arrangements, in other words, were unusual but appealing, notwithstanding the "rough" sound city audiences of that day were unused to hearing. The political content of Almanac lyrics reflected the party's line in specific and comparatively sophisticated terms, much more so than the topical creations of folk figures such as Aunt Molly Jackson or Lead Belly who sometimes entertained at communist functions. The words themselves often were humorous, usually very original and clever, carrying a "punch" that even their most bitter critics admired.

During this period, the movement itself was isolated from many of its former progressive

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allies and hard put to defend the sudden reversal of its antifascist policies of the Popular Front period. The Almanacs' songs provided a much needed positive, if polemical, reinforcement of the prevailing communist worldview and ideological position rather than another defensive apologia. To a lesser extent, the group also helped fill the partial entertainment void created when many progressive but noncommunist musicians temporarily ceased to perform before movement gatherings during the Nazi-Soviet pact era.

In the spring of 1941, the Almanacs moved to larger quarters on West 12th Street. "The Loft," as their apartment was appropriately nicknamed, soon became one of the more important cultural hubs of the movement in the early 1940s, as numerous "names" from the political, intellectual, and artistic spheres came by to sing, exchange ideas, and sometimes dine on the "erratic but interesting" cuisine; among them were Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mike Gold, Walter Lowenfels, Mother Bloor, Dashiell Hammett, Rockwell Kent, and Marc Blitzstein. Peter Hawes joined the group at this time and remained with the Almanacs in a performing capacity for the remainder of the peace period. The four sang in the annual communist-organized May Day parade, participated in an antiwar revue *Sign of the Times* with a progressive actors' troupe renamed the Almanac Players for the occasion,[16] and instituted weekend sings at the Loft that helped pay the rent. Almanac "sings" were the forerunners of the latter-day hootenanny gatherings.

The Almanacs recorded some militant union lyrics that included their own compositions. "Get Thee Behind Me, Satan," "Talking Union," and Woody Guthrie's "Union Maid," as well as other contemporary labor songs; when released as *Talking Union* (Keynote 106), the album became their most successful recording venture. At the end of May, they were well received at a performance for nearly twenty thousand striking transport workers at Madison Square Garden. This favorable audience reaction led them to plan a summer tour across the country, with performances en route for as many labor and radical groups as possible.

With the help of Saul Mills of the left-leaning New York CIO Council, the Almanacs set up several informal bookings at union affairs and made additional contacts to obtain bookings. Through Alan Lomax and Commodore Records, they arranged to record two albums of traditional folk songs, one of sea chanties, the other of "sod-buster ballads," for which the Almanacs were paid $400. That gave them enough to buy a large secondhand Buick, vintage 1931, and sufficient gas for the first leg of their journey.[17]

As these preparations were being completed, word came on June 22, 1941, that German armies had invaded the Soviet Union. Several days of confusion followed in the communist movement as the implications of the "new situation" were debated, but the result was not long in coming. The "peace" period was abruptly terminated, and the party and its allies reverted to their former staunch antifascist position and now urged all-out participation in the war against Hitler. As this switch in outlook occurred, one communist functionary approached the Almanacs and demanded, "Do we have one war or two?"[18]—in other words, one battle with fascism or an isolated clash between European capitalist powers coinciding with the ongoing struggle between working and ruling classes. The answer, of course, was that there now was only one overriding concern: to defeat Hitler and the Nazis.

Amid conflicting party interpretations and arguments emanating from their independent assessments, the Almanacs struggled uncomfortably toward their personal decisions. Seeger, for example, summed up the progression of Almanac thinking:

> [I]t took over a period of about ten days. . . . Churchill really broke the ice, I think, for a lot of us by coming out the day after the invasion of Russia. He said "we must support the Soviet people with every ounce of our energy." And this really surprised the hell out of a lot of us.

Continuing in a philosophical vein, he said:

> I could hardly believe that these nations which had been so violently anti-Soviet were really going to support socialism, even under the press of war. But now it looked like they finally would. We realized that basically the United States

> establishment would get swung into this position, too. . . . And so we felt . . . that the historical situation had changed.

Seeger concluded that "perhaps we were fools not to have seen that it would change. But nevertheless when it did change we weren't going to stand on any foolish consistency. And so two days [after the invasion of Russia] we [stopped] singing 'Franklin D., You Ain't Going to Send Me across the Sea.'"[19] Having discarded the peace songs, the group henceforth limited its topical song repertoire to union and other subjects unrelated to the war until after Pearl Harbor.

Shortly before the Almanacs left on their summer tour in early July, Peter Hawes contracted pneumonia and was forced to withdraw from the trip. Woody Guthrie arrived in New York just in time to take his place and join the group for its recording session with Commodore and then to head West again as an Almanac inside of forty-eight hours. The four began their tour with an appearance at an American Youth Congress rally in Philadelphia on July 4, followed by performances for various CIO and left-wing labor audiences in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, Denver, and elsewhere en route to the West Coast. In California they sang for Harry Bridges's longshoremen's union but otherwise, as was the case in New York, entertained primarily at middle-class radical functions rather than at working-class gatherings. (Most genuine "workers" in the Old Left of this period were to be found in the factories and plants of the Midwest; the communist movement on the East and West Coasts had become heavily middle class.)

In San Francisco, the group temporarily began to come apart. Hays, who tended toward hypochondria, announced he was ill and returned home alone. The others journeyed on to Los Angeles, but there Lampell found romance with a woman who was traveling east and he too departed. Seeger and Guthrie made their way back to San Francisco and then to Portland and Washington, where they performed under the auspices of the progressively oriented Commonwealth Federation, before returning to New York in late September.

The tour and its attendant publicity did much to broaden the Almanacs' popularity in the labor-radical and communist movements outside of New York. But during the trip the group produced noticeably few important topical songs. In part this can be ascribed to the rigors of travel and the shunting of creative energy from songwriting to performance channels, but it is clear that the diminished creative output also reflected the group's uncertain sense of ideological direction, especially with regard to foreign affairs and the war in Europe. As one of the Almanacs observed afterward, "we knew we weren't singing the old peace songs, but still we didn't feel like singing '. . . . let's go in and fight' either."[20] For a time, this lack of direction was so strongly felt that when the group reunited at the close of the tour, the Almanacs and several friends, including Mike Gold and the communist poet and newspaper editor Walter Lowenfels, discussed whether the group should change its name or even disband.[21]

The members soon changed their minds. In September, Pete Hawes found and rented a three-story building on West 10th Street in New York. They took up collective residence, promptly christening the place "Almanac House," and recharged their spirits with expanded personnel and renewed dedication. By the end of the month they once again were appearing at left-wing social and political functions. Peter Hawes, his younger brother Baldwin ("Butch"), Bess Lomax (Alan's younger sister), Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and her husband Gordon Friesen, Arthur Stern, and others all were enrolled on the membership roster during the fall. Other peripheral followers, admirers, and sometime participating performers, such as Jean Rogovin, Bernie Asbel, and Allan Sloane, were in attendance, and the comings and goings of individuals associated with the group soon turned Almanac House's entrance into a veritable revolving door. On a number of occasions, several teams of "Almanac Singers" were sent out to fill various bookings in a single evening, and sponsors were surprised if not irritated to find that the arriving entertainers were not necessarily those whose services they presumably had engaged. The Sunday afternoon hootenannies (as they now were called) were revived, and they brought more people,

intellectual ferment, and a limited amount of cash through the Almanac portals.[22]

Given the amorphous membership and the hectic pace created by the movements of so many people to and fro, the Almanacs' lifestyle was chaotic and a daily routine almost entirely absent. "Life," sighed Butch Hawes much later, "was one big organization meeting." Each individual went his way during the day and might or might not show up for appearances at bookings during the evenings. Only Bess Lomax held a steady outside job, and it was a scramble each week for the group to raise the additional funds needed to maintain even a minimum subsistence living standard. The constant "camping-out" atmosphere inevitably took its toll. On several occasions members moved out of Almanac House to find additional privacy and to escape the mayhem. Personality conflicts and petty jealousies plagued the Almanacs, perhaps an inevitable outgrowth of the close social as well as musical interaction of so many dynamic, strongly opinionated, and volatile individuals. Most accounts indicate that only Pete Seeger remained aloof from these feuds. Tensions reached such a point at the end of November that Lee Hays was expelled from Almanac membership by a vote of five or six to one, his own. Hays's departure temporarily eased some of the intragroup frictions but left a musical, performance, and songwriting void that the others thereafter found impossible to completely fill.

The "Proletarian" Culture of the Almanac Singers

The beginnings of the Almanacs' cooperative experiment were naive and idealistic—devoid of much theoretical superstructure. The decision to live together preceded their agreement to perform or create songs as a unit, and apparently was made without much thought; Seeger, for his part, recalled the original understanding to share the same dwelling and related expenses as no more unusual than a family's tacit agreement to reside in the same house cooperatively.[23] Hays took a much more consciously philosophical view; he was hardly a year removed from his experiences at Commonwealth Labor College in Mena, Arkansas, where communal living was both a necessary and deliberate lifestyle.[24] The other original members, Lampell and Hawes, never indicated their thinking with regard to the initial decision to live cooperatively, but it is doubtful that the rationales for their actions were as highly conceptualized as were Hays's.

Subsequently, and perhaps inevitably, guidelines governing the collective living experience were consciously developed, paralleling the principles of primitive communism familiar from time immemorial. All income was held in the group's name and disbursements for rent, food, and most individual needs were made from a common fund. Each Almanac was to receive a dollar a day as spending money, but their chronically bleak financial picture often mitigated against the actual implementation of this ideal. Cooking, cleaning, and house chores were divided among the members. At various times attempts were made to allocate the business management and musical affairs of the group on a similar basis.[25] Cooperative functioning broke down occasionally, usually in conjunction with financial and personality crises, but on the whole the communal way of life served the Almanacs' physical needs adequately if not sumptuously. In many respects it was a most pragmatic lifestyle, for communal living was cheaper than separate quarters and helped free the Almanacs from reliance on the capitalist system to make a living. Sharing food and shelter, in any event, was entirely consistent with the Almanacs' Marxist sociopolitical worldview, and it complemented the cooperative rationale behind the group's musical efforts.

By comparison, the rationale for the collective artistic endeavors of the Almanacs was far more concretely conceptualized. They believed that any creative effort was apt to be more socially meaningful and artistically satisfying if it was the product of a group experience rather than that of only one individual. As Hays noted later, "There was a critique in tossing verses back and forth which was much more than a mere trial and error, or 'thinking out loud' method. It was truly a matter of the sum being more than the total of the parts." He added, "A qualitative change took place which transcended individual abilities."[26]

In practice this meant communal songwriting sessions or group revisions of the works of particular members. Ironically, this creative process was a telescoped imitation of the traditional processes of community creation and recreation of folk song materials, although it is not clear to what degree the Almanacs themselves were consciously aware of this. Reporting for *People's World,* an observer described one such composing session:

How a Song Is Born

> One night this week I happened to be at a home where the Almanac Singers were engaging in a sort of impromptu rehearsal. . . . They were organizing a new song. They all contributed—Woody a line, Pete a line, Lee a suggestion. Millard was at a portable typewriter, banging out the lines as they evolved. Occasionally they joined together to sing a completed verse or two. Then there were more rapid-fire suggestions, revisions. As they progressed the music evolved, too, beginning simply. New phrases came from the guitar or banjo, music phrases tossed in, very nonchalantly. Sometimes while Pete talked he strummed his banjo catching at a new line. . . . Woody, leaning back on a couch, suddenly broke out with a brand new verse. He jumped to his feet, sang the words, accompanied himself on the "geetar." The verse went down on the typewriter—and then it was revised. At the end of about an hour's work, four verses were completed. They got together and sang the completed song.[27]

Subsequent performances often suggested the need for revisions: ideas for additional lyrics, a new musical arrangement, or deletions of unsuccessful parts of the composition.

This kind of collective interaction lessened the importance of the individual composer or songwriter and shifted attention instead to the entire group, a trend that was actively encouraged by the Almanacs themselves. Seeger explained that "we tried in our publicity to get away from ourselves as individuals." He described an example: "A newspaper reporter would interview us and say 'Now let me find out something about your background and your background and your background,' and we would say 'Look, our individuals don't matter. The group is the important thing.'"[28]

In the same way, cooperative effort highlighted the musical products rather than the composers and performers, also consciously considered desirable by the group. The Almanacs' intentions were in part stimulated by the poets' Anonymous Movement (AM) organized by a close friend of Lee Hays, Walter Lowenfels, during his expatriate days in Paris in the late 1920s. In the Anonymous Movement emphasis was on "that which was written, and not upon the author's reputation."[29] As the AM never published the name of poets whose works it sponsored, so the Almanacs adopted the policy of not listing individual credit for a song produced from within the group. With few exceptions, the policy was observed initially. But later the collective songwriting spirit was somewhat subdued and individual efforts tended to stand out more. Group workshop sessions still took place, but frequently these were limited to offering critiques and polishing the musical ideas of particular members rather than developing new songs from whole cloth on the spot. The Almanacs sociopolitical philosophy and the lifestyle that had emerged were characterized by two principal touchstones: cooperative sharing on all levels of performance, songwriting, and daily living; and identification with "worker" art forms and values, especially as personified in the culture of the rural "folk."

The Almanacs' cooperative values were bound up hand and glove with the group's socioeconomic worldview, which sharply distinguished between capitalist and working-class society and the culture that each produced. In keeping with traditional Marxist theory of the pre-Popular front era, the interests of the two classes were perceived as mutually conflicting and exclusive of one another. "There's the union people and the anti-union people," the Almanacs wrote in *The Clipper.* "Decide which side you're on."[30] Organizing the collective efforts of workers to build a union or create new cultural expression inevitably was regarded as a sign of the "people's" solidarity and identified with the progressive activity of the masses. So was the Almanac's cooperative shar-

ing, which was seen as a means to the same end.

With reference to the class conflict in the area of culture, the Almanacs and the communist movement at this time typically held that the bourgeois establishment controlled the media and all "legitimate" and commercial outlets for artistic expression. It fostered the public's exposure to only the most diluted class-conscious sentiments or else totally subverted the real workers' art in an ocean wash of "June-moon-croon" pop culture. Consequently, genuine "people's" aesthetic products could only be found beyond the pale of the American bourgeoisie's domain: in the folklore traditions of the rural lower classes; in the left-wing theaters, radical newspapers, and publishing houses; and, most important, in the union halls which the Almanacs viewed as the cornerstones of progressive working-class activity in the United States in 1941. "The Union hall," Woody Guthrie declared, "is the salvation of real honest-to-God American culture."[31]

Perceiving American cultural expression to be pluralistic and divided between that fostered by the capitalist establishment and that produced by working-class people and their sympathizers, the Almanacs accordingly rejected the former and dedicated themselves to the promulgation of the latter. They regarded their roles as twofold: (1) to create a portion of the needed people's art out of their personal experiences and (2) to stimulate the production and recognition of workers' cultural expression by workers themselves. "Songs of the people must belong to the people," Lee Hays remarked. "Unions have to preserve and extend this tradition of people's songs."[32] In proposing to service only labor and progressive organizations, the Almanacs foresaw that union and radical organizations of necessity would have to be willing to support artists and musicians so that they would not be forced to submerge or prostitute their talents to earn a living in American capitalist society. Consequently, the group followed a deliberate policy of accepting very few "benefit" bookings.[33]

Clearly the Almanacs advocated the development of a collective people's culture based on the already existing but scattered manifestations of workers' art in evidence around the country. The folk song idiom was ideal for their purposes. The form was not strongly identified with bourgeois music institutions, as was Tin Pan Alley or Broadway; folk music instead was a product of the American cultural experience associated with the rural lower classes. It conveyed straightforward, unpretentious, and sometimes class-conscious sentiments about every aspect of the "people's" life and struggles, and many songs were readily adaptable to a mass-singing context. Group pursuit of folk songs and folk singing supported both spiritual and agit-prop missions. "Folk singing is a form of battle and frontal movement to preserve our own people's culture," Hays was quoted as saying.[34] Woody Guthrie observed, "The biggest parts of our song collection are aimed at restoring the right amount of people to the right amount of land and the right amount of houses and the right amount of groceries to the right amount of working folks."[35] An important by-product of such reasoning was the inevitable blurring of any distinction between the terms *folk* and *workers* (or *people*) and the largely interchangeable usage of these phrases and the concepts they represented.

This employment of rural traditional form and content in an urban context to initiate or further social, economic, or political goals has been defined by R. Serge Denisoff as "folk consciousness"; he notes that the Almanacs were the earliest formalized organization of this concept to appear in the American communist movement.[36] But, while the group utilized traditional songs and the folk idiom on behalf of workers' causes, it never considered that music of any kind in itself was a satisfactory substitute for direct action. As Hays insisted in his characteristic southern Methodist ministerial rhetoric, "Good singing won't do, good praying won't do, good preaching won't do, but if you get all of them together with a little organizing behind [them], you get a way of life and a way to do it."[37]

The "way of life" alluded to by Hays was a consciously sought-after goal for the Almanacs, for while the group allied itself philosophically with lower-class workers and "the people," in fact, most members were the offspring of middle-class parents. As young radicals in search of a revolutionary identity, the Almanacs attempted to flee their immediate pasts by submerging their bourgeois origins in a self-conscious bohemian lifestyle aptly characterized by one

member as a world of "proletarian romanticism."[38]

Almanac's clothing typically consisted of blue jeans, denim shirts, and other garb associated with manual labor, partly for comfort and because of limited finances but also as a result of the conscious efforts of some members to "dress down" to the vaguely conceived "proletarian" level. Seeger, for example, later contrasted his attitude of that period to Lead Belly's: "There I was, trying my best to shed my Harvard upbringing, scorning to waste money on clothes other than blue jeans. But Lead Belly," he noted with embarrassing irony, "always had a clean white shirt and starched collar, well-pressed suit and shined shoes. He didn't need to affect that he was a workingman."[39]

Some of the Almanacs indeed have referred to themselves in retrospect as the "original beatniks." A friend once remarked to Arthur Stern, "Arthur, how is it I always see you with a two-day beard, never a one-day, or three, but always a two-day beard?"[40] The women in the group rarely wore makeup, and the Almanacs generally rejected any use of cosmetics to counteract the harsh effects of stage lighting. Speech tended toward the casual, even folksy, by those for whom "y'all" and "reckon" was ill befitting; occasional malapropisms and incongruous word usages were the result. Almanacs who hailed from suburban areas or cities in New England and New York sometimes consciously or unconsciously affected southern accents when singing; there was enough of a problem in this respect at one point that an inconclusive meeting was called to thrash the matter out.[41] Several in the group also were awed by Woody Guthrie's uninhibited sex life, mistakenly assuming in the process that liberation from Victorian morality ipso facto was a characteristic of working-class culture.

Woody, in fact, was admired for many reasons in addition to his obvious musical and songwriting talents. More than any of the other Almanacs, he embodied the prototype of the worker-poet to which the others aspired. He long since had proven his ability to become a successful entertainer in the commercial world, yet he remained totally committed to the people's cause; on several occasions he had walked out of well-paying jobs when faced with compromising his political and artistic integrity. Woody's knowledge of ballad and folk song forms were deeply ingrained; his refusal to depart very far from meaningful adaptations of these idioms served as a creative anchor and musical counterbalance to the clever but sometimes sophomoric and gimmicky lyrics of Mill Lampell and other Almanacs less well grounded in folk-styled expression. Above all, Woody had "been there;" he had spent most of his life among workers, dustbowlers, hoboes, and the rural peoples of America, and he was most suffused with their worldview and vernacular—or so most of the Almanacs believed. As a result, he was regarded by the others as a model to be emulated. He was, in effect, treated as someone unique and apart from the remaining members. For his part, Guthrie was sufficiently affected by the Almanac "proletarian" ethos to deliberately play down his early middle-class upbringing and stress his later years of poverty and cross-country ramblings.

In view of the Almanac tendency to adopt the presumed lifestyle of "the people," it is worth noting that working-class, even radical, audiences did not always appreciate the group's proletarian romanticism. Arthur Stern remembers one booking for a butchers' union local in Queens, Long Island, where a well-dressed audience threw crockery to drive the scruffy-looking Almanacs off the stage before the first number was over. Some Almanacs muttered about "getting back and singing for *real* working-class people again."[42] Other Almanacs tell of being surprised to learn from Detroit labor officials that union men and women shed their overalls and work clothes after hours and as a matter of course dressed up as neatly as possible when appearing in public. Even left-wing sympathizers were unimpressed with the Almanacs' cooperative philosophy when complete strangers and second-rate singers would show up at radical bookings as "the Almanac Singers" instead of Pete Seeger and Lee Hays. Incidents like these were infrequent, however, and didn't seem to influence the Almanac's lifestyle choices.

Blind romanticization of the real or imagined workers' lifestyle in some cases actually hampered the group's effective communication with the very people whom it sought to emu-

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