

4-1-2010

Did He Ever Return?: The Forgotten Story of "Charlie and the M.T.A."

Peter Dreier

Jim Vrabel

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty

Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-Based Learning Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Health Policy Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), [Transportation Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dreier, Peter and Vrabel, Jim, "Did He Ever Return?: The Forgotten Story of "Charlie and the M.T.A."" (2010). *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*.
https://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty/505

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Urban and Environmental Policy at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdla@oxy.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

Did He Ever Return?: The Forgotten Story of "Charlie and the M.T.A."

Peter Dreier
Jim Vabel

American Music, Volume 28, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 3-43 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: 10.1353/amm.0.0046



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/amm/summary/v028/28.1.dreier.html>

PETER DREIER AND JIM VRABEL

Did He Ever Return?: The Forgotten Story of Charlie and the M.T.A.

On a clear, chilly day in November 2004, Massachusetts' then-governor Mitt Romney stood inside a large white tent set up on the plaza outside Boston City Hall. He was there to sing a song—something he did with gusto as he joined the Kingston Trio in a rousing rendition of “M.T.A.,” the well-known ballad about a “man named Charlie” doomed to “ride forever ‘neath the streets of Boston” and become “the man who never returned.” The purpose of this unusual concert was to launch the “Charlie Card,” an electronic fare card that replaced tokens on the Boston subway system.¹

Romney said he had wanted to sing that song in public “since about the fifth grade.” This isn’t surprising because, since the Kingston Trio’s hit recording of the song in 1959, “M.T.A.” has become a part of American culture, recorded by other performers, reprinted in myriad songbooks, and sung at countless summer camps. There are now at least fifty versions of the song on YouTube by professional and amateur performers, including versions from Ireland and Denmark. In 1996 the conservative magazine *National Review* included “M.T.A.” in its tongue-in-cheek list of the 100 “most conservative rock songs” because of its opposition to “a burden-

Peter Dreier is E. P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the Urban and Environmental Policy program at Occidental College. He is coauthor of several books on urban politics and policy, including *Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century* (University Press of Kansas) and *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (University of California Press). He writes regularly on politics, public policy, popular culture, sports, work and labor, and activism for *The Nation*, *American Prospect*, and the *Huffington Post*.

Jim Vrabel is the author of *When in Boston: A Timeline and Almanac*, a chronological history of Boston, and coauthor of *John Paul II: A Personal Portrait of the Pope and the Man*.

some tax on the population in the form of a subway fare increase." In 2007 the Boston Pops performed "M.T.A." as part of its annual July 4 concert on the Esplanade. With a different cast of performers, the Kingston Trio continues to tour and "M.T.A." is one of their most-requested songs.²

As Norm Cohen puts it, "A sure indicator of a song's popularity is the occurrence of parodies," which assumes that the audience is familiar with the song and thus understands the spoof.³ "M.T.A." has been frequently parodied, including versions about library budget cuts, issues of low pay for working women, the Bush-Gore vote count controversy in Florida, the Boston Red Sox trading Manny Ramirez to the Los Angeles Dodgers, and the London subway system.⁴ In 1998 a "Celtic punk" group from Boston, the Dropkick Murphys, recorded a takeoff called "Skinhead on the M.T.A." A minister in Oklahoma used the song as the basis of a sermon, asking whether Jesus, like Charlie, would ever return.⁵

Another validation of the song's cultural importance is how its central idea has become a symbol for people stuck in difficult situations with no obvious hope in sight. In 2004, for example, an essayist for the *New York Times* described his fear of visiting "alienating" and "forbidding" Boston: "For me the primal experience of Boston dread has less to do with shame and guilt than traffic and transit—the automotive equivalent of the eternal torment of Charlie on the M.T.A." Also that year, a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter expressed concern that out-of-town visitors to Boston during that summer's Democratic Party convention would be unable to get around the city:

For now, fuddled first-time visitants are stuck in the Kafka-esque underground gulag singing a broken-record refrain from the 1950s hit of the Kingston Trio ("Charlie and the M.T.A."): "Well, did he ever return? . . . No, he never returned, and his fate is still unlearned . . . He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston, he's the man who never returned."

In 2008 an op-ed columnist for the *Washington Post* warned that the increased screening at airports as part of the war on terror was victimizing many innocent travelers. He wrote: "Thousands of 'misidentified' travelers like me who are caught in the watch-list dragnet, like 'Charlie on the M.T.A.,' can't wait for the implementation of the TSA's Secure Flight program."⁶

Most people think of "M.T.A." as a clever, amusing ditty—a novelty song like others of the postwar era, such as "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" and "How Much Is That Doggy in the Window?" But, in fact, "M.T.A." began as a frankly political song, written for the campaign of Walter A. O'Brien Jr., the Progressive Party candidate for mayor of Boston in 1949. Although the story told in the song is humorous, it was meant to dramatize the left-wing O'Brien's call for a rollback of the subway fare increase. Paralleling twenty-first-century concerns, the song

was a protest against a subway fare increase intended to rescue a troubled private company with insufficient assets by Massachusetts taxpayers and the riders of Boston's first-in-the-nation subway system. The increase was imposed by the Massachusetts legislature to pay for the bailout of the privately owned Boston Elevated Railway Company through creation of the publicly owned Massachusetts Transit Authority (M.T.A.). The song ended with a verse that made sure Boston voters knew which mayoral candidate was on their side: "Vote for Walter A. O'Brien / and fight the fare increase / Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!"

The history of the "M.T.A." song, now largely forgotten, reveals not only how music can be a tool for political movements to popularize radical ideas, but also how radical ideas can be absorbed by popular culture and purged of their original intent.⁷ Moreover, that history suggests how establishment institutions—politics, the media, even academia—can purge our collective memory of uncomfortable truths—in this case, the impact of the Cold War and the Red Scare on the lives of many people.

The American Left and Folk Music

From the 1920s through the 1940s, two overlapping groups—collectors of traditional songs and American leftists—celebrated folk music and "people's music." Carl Sandburg, John Lomax, his son Alan Lomax, Lawrence Gellert, and other folklorists collected work songs, sea shanties, hillbilly songs, prison songs, African American and slave songs, and union songs.⁸ American leftists used songs not only to promote cross-cultural understanding and a sense of common humanity, but also to energize picket lines, enliven rallies, and galvanize labor unions and political campaigns.⁹ For example, the struggle by mineworkers in Harlan County, Kentucky, inspired Florence Reese to write the labor classic "Which Side Are You On?" In 1940 Woody Guthrie wrote both "Union Maid" and "This Land Is Your Land."

Guthrie was part of the Almanac Singers, formed in 1941, who drew on traditional songs and who wrote their own songs to advance the cause of progressive groups, the Communist Party, the CIO unions, the New Deal, and, later, the United States and its allies (including Russia) in the fight against fascism. The Almanacs included Pete Seeger, Bess Lomax (daughter of John Lomax), Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell, as well as a constantly revolving group of others (including Guthrie) who performed for unions and left-wing groups. The Almanacs put out several records of topical songs and flirted with mainstream success, but they were always too ambivalent about commercialism and compromise to gain a foothold in popular culture. During World War II, the Almanac Singers wrote and performed songs embracing President Franklin Roosevelt, the troops, and defense workers, downplaying the domestic class struggle, but defending Russia, then America's ally.¹⁰ The Almanacs were part of a broader

upsurge of popular left-wing culture during the New Deal, fostered in part by programs like the federal theater and writers' projects.¹¹

Immediately after World War II, the American Left, both radicals and liberals, sought to resume its support for progressive unions, civil rights, and internationalism. The Left's folk-music wing hoped to build on its modest successes before and during the war. In 1946 Seeger led the effort to create People's Songs (an organization of progressive songwriters and performers, dominated by but not confined to folk music) and People's Artists (a booking agency to help the members get concert gigs and recording contracts). They published a newsletter and compiled *The People's Song Book*, which included protest songs from around the world, sponsored a number of successful concerts, and organized chapters in several cities and on college campuses.¹²

In 1947 a fragile coalition of independent radicals, communists, and left-wing Democrats, unhappy with the Truman administration, formed the Progressive Party. On domestic issues, they criticized Truman's unwillingness to challenge Southern Democrats' support for Jim Crow and what they considered the president's tepid support for labor unions. They advocated an end to segregation, full voting rights for blacks, and universal health insurance. On foreign policy, they attacked Truman's get-tough policy with the Soviet Union and his support for loyalty oaths to root out communists and radicals from government jobs, unions, and teaching positions in schools and universities. They opposed the Truman Doctrine, which aimed to contain communism through military intervention if necessary. They even refused to support the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, which they considered an instrument of the Cold War. They preferred a multilateral aid program that would be administrated through the United Nations.

The Progressive Party was formed primarily to support the 1948 presidential bid of Henry Wallace, an Iowa farmer, inventor, and crusading publisher who had served as FDR's secretary of agriculture and, after the 1940 election, his vice president. Wallace's increasingly radical and outspoken views alienated FDR and in 1944 he made it clear that he would dump Wallace and replace him with Harry Truman as his running mate. To placate Wallace and his supporters, FDR appointed him secretary of commerce. Wallace lasted in that position until September 1946, when President Truman (who took office after FDR died) fired Wallace over their disagreements about U.S. policy toward Russia. Wallace opposed the Cold War, embraced unions and civil rights, and called for a new "era of the common man."

As a candidate for president (along with his running mate, Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho), Wallace was denounced by some as naïve, a dreamer, and worse, while lauded by others as a champion of the New Deal and a visionary. Some early polls showed that Wallace had the support of more

than 20 percent of the voters. Democratic Party officials, as well as some left-leaning union leaders, feared that even if he couldn't win the election, Wallace might attract enough Democratic voters so that the White House would fall into the hands of the Republicans. Although his campaign initially attracted support from a wide spectrum from liberals to Communists, much of that support soon withered as Wallace became closely identified with Communists. As Culver and Hyde write in their biography of Wallace, *American Dreamer*, "Only the most rabid Red-baiters thought Wallace himself a Communist. But millions came to believe he was a 'dupe' or a 'fellow traveler' or a 'pink' or the naive captive of leftist radicals."¹³

Wallace relied heavily on folk music in his presidential campaign, which paid a small fee to People's Songs to provide songs and performers for events.¹⁴ Seeger, singer Paul Robeson and others traveled with Wallace during the campaign. Alan Lomax (the campaign "music director") and Mario "Boots" Casetta made sure that song sheets were passed out at every meeting or rally so that singalongs could alternate with speeches. Wallace received just 1.1 million votes nationally (2.4 percent of the total). His poor showing stemmed from his opposition to racial segregation and his foreign policy positions, especially his uncritical support for the Soviet Union.

The failure of the Wallace campaign provided a warning of what was to come. The Cold War stopped the Left in its tracks. The fear of communism was used to justify efforts to stifle dissent and protest around domestic economic and social issues. Business feared an expansion of the New Deal social welfare programs, high taxes, government regulation of corporations, and stronger labor unions. Southern Democrats feared the expansion of efforts to promote civil rights and integration, which they also identified as "radical" and "Communist" ideas. Once the Red Scare gained momentum, it divided radicals and liberals and made it extremely difficult to forge a broad and effective progressive movement or for left-oriented folksingers to gain wide appeal.

The O'Brien Campaign in Boston and the Origins of "M.T.A."

Walter O'Brien Jr. was a good-looking, broad-shouldered, charming Irishman. He combined a gift of gab with a passion for radical politics. Born in 1914 O'Brien was raised in Portland, Maine, where his ancestors had fled from the Irish potato famine. At age twenty, he graduated from the Gorham Normal School (now part of the University of Southern Maine), but immediately shipped out to sea as a deckhand because, he later explained, "They were paying teachers \$12 a week."¹⁵ It was at sea that O'Brien discovered a taste and a talent for politics, and became a union organizer. He married Laura Manchester, also from Portland, in 1939

and then served as a radio operator in the Merchant Marine in World War II. After the war Walter and Laura moved to Boston, partly for the opportunities offered by a bigger city and partly to escape the conservative politics of Maine and his own family.

The pair immediately plunged into politics. Walter got a job as port agent of the American Communications Association, a union affiliated with the left-leaning Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Laura did secretarial work for the various political organizations. Both joined the Massachusetts chapter of the Progressive Party, which held its founding convention in April 1948 when 3,000 delegates crowded into Boston's Hotel Bradford.

In July 1948 O'Brien was a delegate to the Progressive Party national convention in Philadelphia that nominated Wallace and Taylor for president and vice president. O'Brien not only campaigned energetically for the ticket but also ran for Congress in Massachusetts's 10th Congressional District. He lost by a two-to-one margin to the Republican incumbent Christian Herter (future Massachusetts governor and U.S. secretary of state), but he garnered 50,000 votes.¹⁶

After Wallace's poor showing in the 1948 campaign, most of the state chapters of the Progressive Party disbanded. However, thanks largely to O'Brien, who was named its executive director, the Massachusetts Progressive Party kept going. "He was a wonderful person to work for," recalled Anne Alach, the office secretary, "although knowing Wally, he



Figure 1. Walter A. O'Brien Jr., demonstrating for repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act.

would have said ‘to work *with*.’” O’Brien, she said, “was committed to all of the causes and serious about the work, but he always had a smile on his face, and an accepting approach to everybody.”¹⁷

With O’Brien at the helm, the Massachusetts Progressive Party attracted idealistic volunteers from different backgrounds—college students, factory workers, professors, longshoremen, and housewives—who agitated for better housing conditions, supported labor unions, and crusaded for civil rights.¹⁸ They put in long hours in an atmosphere that Alach described as “hectic and joyful.” “We worked late and we worked hard,” she recalled, “but thanks to Wally we weren’t all going around with dour faces . . . even though the odds were against us.”¹⁹

Lawrence Shubow, O’Brien’s campaign manager, had just graduated from Harvard and was active in the Progressive Party. Despite his Ivy League education, he once said that he “got my ideology from soap-box orators.”²⁰ In a 2007 interview he described how O’Brien helped “heal a big political breach.” Many of the Progressive Party’s members were college educated and Jewish, he explained, and O’Brien helped attract recruits from Boston’s largely working-class and Irish-Catholic population. “Wally was a solid, tough-minded individual who was asking his own questions when Irish Catholics were not supposed to challenge authority or rock the boat,” recalled Shubow.²¹

O’Brien was described as the Progressive Party’s “Mr. Outside,” as the public face of the organization, speaking at rallies, leading demonstrations, and testifying before committees. Shubow was described as “Mr. Inside,” filing legislation, writing speeches, and preparing issue papers.

But O’Brien and his fellow activists understood that the best way to energize a party and promote issues was through an election campaign, so in 1949 he became a candidate again—this time for mayor of Boston. O’Brien’s opponents included the incumbent, James Michael Curley, a legendary figure in Boston politics who had already been elected mayor four times in four different decades; City Clerk John B. Hynes, who had served as acting mayor for five months in 1947 when Curley was serving time in federal prison for mail fraud; Democratic ward-heeler Patrick J. (Sonny) McDonough; and Republican real estate developer George F. Oakes.

O’Brien ran a spirited, if low-budget, campaign. He and Shubow spent much of their time riding around the city in a boxy old sound truck, draped with banners, stopping to speak, according to a newspaper account, “to whatever audience he can find.”²² When even a handful of people could be coaxed to gather, the truck would stop and the two men would hop out and scramble up to a platform mounted on the roof. Shubow would introduce the candidate, and O’Brien would launch into one of his stump speeches.

O’Brien called for the creation of public works jobs to reduce unem-

ployment and for a city rent control law and a metropolitan housing authority to end the shortage of affordable housing. He deplored “police brutality against strikers and members of minority groups” and urged people to speak out against “jingoists, war mongers, and enemies of world peace and international cooperation.”²³ O’Brien didn’t vary his message depending on the audience. Speaking at Boston’s Harvard Club, he called for a government jobs program more ambitious than the New Deal. Before members of the Suffolk County Republican Club, he condemned the “money interests [for] owning and maintaining the city’s slums for their own profit.”²⁴

But O’Brien was much more in his element among Boston’s working people. On one occasion, he led a picket line of tenant housewives and children outside a meeting of the National Association of Apartment House Owners and charged that the landlords “lie[d] through their teeth” when they said there is no longer an acute housing shortage. On another, he warned longshoremen at Commonwealth Pier, “Unless you take an active part in city, state, and national elections through political action . . . you too will find a city rife with unemployment as it was during the thirties.”²⁵

O’Brien’s biggest issue, though, was his call for a rollback of the recent subway fare increase. In 1897, when Boston opened the nation’s first subway line, 100,000 people lined up to pay the five-cent fare for a half-mile ride inside the tunnel that ran under the edge of Boston Common. Over the years, a chaotic web of individually owned, privately run subway and streetcar lines sprung up all over the city. In 1922 the Massachusetts legislature allowed one company, the Boston Elevated Railway Company, to take over the others. But in 1947, when that company faced bankruptcy, the legislature stepped in to create the Metropolitan Transit Authority (M.T.A.) to take over the system—and, O’Brien charged, to bail out the stockholders of the privately owned company with taxpayers’ money.

In August 1949, despite protests from the mostly working-class riders and a last-minute lawsuit by O’Brien and the Progressive Party, the M.T.A. raised fares by as much as 50 percent on some lines—from ten cents to fifteen cents. O’Brien seized on the issue in his mayoral campaign. He circulated a petition to reverse the fare increase. More than 20,000 people signed it in just a few weeks.²⁶

But O’Brien was looking for something else to generate excitement around his campaign, and he thought some folksongs might do the trick. Through left-wing circles and the Wallace campaign, O’Brien made contact with Bess Lomax Hawes, who lived in the Boston area. She was the daughter of folklorist John Lomax, sister of Alan Lomax (musical director of the Wallace campaign), and a member of the Almanac Singers when she lived in New York and, briefly, Detroit. O’Brien asked Hawes if she could come up with some songs to help boost his mayoral campaign.²⁷

Bess Lomax was born in 1921 and grew up in Texas (where her father worked at several universities) and Washington, D.C. (where her father

became the unpaid curator of the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress). As a teenager, Bess had worked with her father and brother on their 1941 collection of American folk music, *Our Singing Country*. While a student at Bryn Mawr College, she would occasionally travel to New York and sing with the Almanacs. After she graduated in June 1941, she moved to New York, got a job at the New York Public Library (and later with the Office of War Information [OWI]), moved into the Almanacs' communal apartment with Seeger, Hays, and other members, sang more regularly with the group, joined them in making several recordings, and fell in love with (and eventually married) Baldwin "Butch" Hawes, who occasionally sang with the Almanacs.²⁸

Not only did Bess know more folk songs than anyone else, but when the Almanacs needed songs for union rallies, to dramatize particular issues, or to plug political candidates, she could write new songs on short notice—"sometimes on the spot," Hawes recalled.²⁹ These "new" songs were essentially parodies of old ones, lyrics written for the specific occasion modeled after and set to traditional tunes.

Bess and Butch had moved to Boston in 1946, in part in reaction to Bess being harassed by the FBI and other agencies investigating her radical activities while working for the OWI. Butch worked as a book illustrator

Figure 2. Some Almanac Singers (*from left*): Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Bess Lomax, Pete Seeger, Arthur Stern, and Sis Cunningham.



and Bess raised their three small children, while also teaching a course called "How to Play the Guitar." Both continued their involvement in left-wing politics, including the Progressive Party campaigns in 1948. Bess Hawes joined Seeger and others in performing at Wallace campaign events in the Boston area.

Hawes hosted informal Sunday night get-togethers at her house on Shepard Street in Cambridge, where people gathered to sing, play guitars, banjos, and fiddles, swap songs, and, inevitably, talk politics. After O'Brien approached her to write some songs for his campaign, Hawes turned for help to some of the people who came by on Sunday nights.³⁰

One of them was Jackie Steiner, a Vassar graduate who had just dropped out of graduate school at Radcliffe College and was working for the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, a radical group that raised money to help refugees from the Spanish Civil War. Although Steiner had a background in classical music, as she became more interested in politics she found her way to Hawes's folksong gatherings. At one she heard Hawes sing the "Kentucky Moonshine Song." "That converted me," recalled Steiner years later. "I'd been a snob about folk music before that."³¹ Steiner merged her interest in politics with her newfound love of folk music and soon discovered that, like Hawes, she had a knack for making up songs "on the spot" at picket lines, union rallies, and demonstrations.

Brothers Sam and Arnold Berman and Al Katz, the other members of the group, grew up in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, then a largely working-class Jewish enclave. Sam and Al had been high school classmates who knew Lawrence Shubow from the American Student Union, a radical organization for high school students.

Sam had served in the Army Air Corps in Europe during World War II, graduated from the University of Wisconsin, and, once back in Boston, met Bess Hawes when he took her guitar course. Arnold, a year younger, had served in the Army Infantry in the Pacific during the war and was attending Harvard College on the G.I. Bill. Al Katz already had an undergraduate degree in engineering from Northeastern University and had returned there to earn his master's degree.

In addition to working up some songs for O'Brien, these four (all but Bess Hawes, who was too busy with her family responsibilities) formed a group called Boston People's Artists, borrowing the name from the New York-based People's Artists. They sang and played at square dances and other venues around the city. If they got paid, they would decide which charity to donate the money to.

The idea for "M.T.A." came one day when Sam and Arnold Berman were joking about one of the peculiar aspects of the recent fare increase. Although riders of the Boston system were still only charged ten cents to enter underground subway stations, they were now being charged an additional five cents to get off trolleys at above-ground stops. "Arnold and

I were saying that if you didn't have a nickel, then you could never get off the subway and you'd never get home," Sam Berman recalled.³²

Hawes and Steiner were intrigued at the possibilities that this predicament presented. Rather than compose a new melody, Hawes recalled a song that the Almanac Singers had written and performed on May 21, 1941, for a Transport Workers Union (TWU) rally that filled New York's Madison Square Garden with 20,000 people. They called the song "The Train That Never Returned," which, in turn, was based on two earlier songs familiar to those involved in linking traditional and topical songs.

The Almanacs were familiar with the traditional songs collected by folklorists during the 1920s and 1930s. According to Seeger, it was Lee Hays who drew on that knowledge to compose the song they performed at the TWU rally.³³ That song was based on two older songs. One was "The Ship That Never Returned," written in 1865 by Henry Clay Work and popular in the late nineteenth century, which told the story of a young man who goes off to sea and leaves his worried mother behind. The chorus asks and then answers the key question about the vessel:

Did she never return?
She never returned,
Her fate, it is yet unlearned.
Though for years and years
There were fond ones watching,
Yet the ship she never returned.

Work's tune was resurrected in the 1920s with new lyrics, based on a true story about the wreck in 1903 of a Southern Railroad mail train. In 1924 Vernon Dalhart, a popular singer, recorded "The Wreck of the Old 97."³⁴ This version became one of the period's best-selling records. In telling the story of the engineer's effort to reach his destination on time and the eventual crash, the chorus explains

Did she ever pull in?
No, she never pulled in.

In the Almanacs' 1941 version, a group of crooked politicians who were trying to crush the transit workers union board a "yellow scab train." The Almanacs distributed the lyrics (printed in the appendix below) to the 20,000 people at the rally. The opening verse read:

I'll tell you the story of some politicians
Who rode on a yellow scab train;
On a Monday morning they left the station
And they never were seen again

Many people in the audience joined them in singing the chorus:

Did they ever return?
 No, they never returned.
 And their fate is still unlearned.

The Almanacs never recorded (or copyrighted) the song, but eight years later, Hawes remembered it and suggested reworking it for the O'Brien campaign. "I knew that it was a good song that groups of people could sing together," Hawes recalled almost fifty years later.³⁵

Steiner wrote most of what would become "M.T.A." She and Hawes went back and forth "over wording" or "about the singability of a line," but basically agreed with each other's ideas.³⁶ When Steiner brought her draft back to the group, everyone liked it, but they objected to the name she had given the protagonist—"Angus." They thought it suggested the stereotype of a skinflint Scotsman and smacked of "national chauvinism"—the phrase used in 1940s leftwing circles for being "politically incorrect." "Angus" quickly became the more ethnically neutral "Charlie."

Hawes also added what proved to be the song's most memorable verse, the one in which Charlie's wife brings him a sandwich every day, handing it to him through an open window "while the train goes rumbling through." (To this day, people can't resist asking why Charlie's wife couldn't just hand her husband a nickel instead. As Steiner explains "Without that verse, the song wouldn't have been so popular.")³⁷ (See the appendix for the original lyrics.)

In reminiscing years later about the song and its origins, the surviving members of Boston People's Artists make one thing clear: Charlie was never meant to represent a luckless fool doomed to "ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston" for want of some spare change. He was meant to symbolize the working Everyman, caught in a system that was rigged against him and did not care if "he never returned."

Hawes and Steiner ended the song by making sure voters knew which candidate was on Charlie's side—and theirs:

Vote for Walter A. O'Brien
 and fight the fare increase
 Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!

The group wrote at least four other songs for the O'Brien campaign.³⁸ Only "M.T.A." and "The People's Choice" (based on the traditional sea shanty, "Drunken Sailor" with new words by Al Katz) made it onto a record that was made entirely for campaign—not commercial—purposes. The recording session took place in late September or early October 1949 at ACE Recording Studio on Boylston Place, an alley across from Boston Common.³⁹ Sam Berman sang the lead on "M.T.A." and played guitar; Steiner sang backup; Hawes played mandolin, Katz guitar, and Arnold Berman ukulele. Everyone chipped in on vocals for the chorus.

For reasons that none of the Boston People's Artists members can recall today, one verse was left off the record, the one Steiner says was meant to reflect the conductor's working-class "solidarity" with Charlie:

"I can't help," said the conductor,
 "I'm just working for a living, but I sure agree with you
 For the nickels and dimes you'll be spending in Boston
 You'd be better off in Timbuktu."

"M.T.A." made its debut on October 24, 1949, according to a story in the *Boston Globe* (which incorrectly described the song as being "to the tune of 'Casey Jones'"), when O'Brien campaigned outside factory gates in South Boston and Roxbury.⁴⁰ The song was used throughout the campaign. Sometimes the Boston People's Artists squeezed together with their instruments on the platform on top of the sound truck and sang at campaign stops. When the performers weren't available, the recording was played. Either way, the crowds liked the song.

"There was just something about it," Sam Berman recalled. "When people heard the song, they were taken by it." That was true both on and off the campaign trail. Wherever the Boston People's Artists played—at

Figure 3. Some members of Bess Hawes's folk song group in Cambridge, Mass. (from left): Al Katz, Arnold Berman, Jackie Steiner, Sam Berman.



O'Brien events or neighborhood dances—people invariably asked the group to sing "M.T.A."⁴¹

Despite the popularity of the song, O'Brien never stood a chance in the Boston mayor's race. His campaign had always been more about educating voters to challenge Boston's political and business establishment. Three weeks before the election, O'Brien acknowledged as much by saying, "I'm not an evangelist, but I believe I am doing a teaching job which will some day bear fruit." Two days before the election, he reminded his campaign workers that they were "building a movement . . . rooted among the people . . . devoted to the furtherance of progressive ideals," which would outlast his campaign.⁴²

In his closing statement, which appeared in newspapers on election eve, O'Brien vowed,

Whether in office or out, on Jan. 1, I am determined, as my organization is determined, to continue to carry on in union halls, at shop gates, in ward headquarters and on the streets, our battle for a new political party of the working people, small businessmen, housewives and members of victimized minorities who will once and for all end the phoniness, corruption and unholy devotion to the needs of big business that has captured the major parties.⁴³

Boston voters elected John B. Hynes mayor. Hynes received 138,000 votes, compared to 126,000 for Curley, 22,360 for McDonough, and 7,133 for Oakes. O'Brien finished last with only 3,563 votes, barely 1 percent of the number cast.⁴⁴

The Cold War and Folk Music

Although the "M.T.A." went on to become a popular folk standard, hardly anyone today remembers the candidate whose campaign gave birth to the song. That, and the trajectory of the people who participated in the O'Brien campaign and wrote, performed, and recorded his campaign song, is due to the Red Scare.

Senator Joseph McCarthy, the Wisconsin Republican, became the symbol of this effort, but both Democrats and Republicans embraced the domestic anticommunist crusade. The domestic Cold War painted liberals, progressives, radicals, civil rights activists, socialists, and communists with the same brush and was used to intimidate Americans into silence and fear of political activism.

One result of the crusade was the blacklist, which targeted the Hollywood film industry, television and radio, universities, the military, labor unions, public schools and other institutions. The Cold War and the Red Scare peaked in the early and mid-1950s but it cast a shadow over American politics, and folk music, for many years.

The Almanac Singers had disbanded by 1943. The group was being hounded by the FBI. Getting few bookings, they were dropped by the William Morris Agency. After Seeger and Guthrie joined the military, the core of the group was dismantled. But immediately after the war, there was a renewed sense of possibility. Despite the failure of the Wallace campaign in 1948, Seeger and the folk-singing Left put their energies into building People's Songs and People's Artists as vehicles for reaching new audiences and providing performers with an income through bookings and record contracts. By 1949 folk music had become increasingly popular, with performers like Burl Ives, Josh White, and others gaining a foothold in popular culture, but without much of a political edge.⁴⁵

The Weavers represented the peak of folk music's popularity in the early 1950s.⁴⁶ The group was formed in 1948 at the end of the Wallace campaign by Seeger and Hays (both former Almanacs), along with Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman, both active in left-wing political and music circles. They promoted a liberal humanitarianism and universalism by exposing audiences to their repertoire of songs from around the world as well as American "folk" traditions but without the overt advocacy of left-wing political causes.

Decca signed the Weavers to a recording contract and added orchestral arrangements and instruments to their music, a commercial expediency that rankled Seeger but delighted Hays. They performed in the nation's most prestigious nightclubs and appeared on network television shows. They earned glowing reviews in mainstream newspapers and magazines. In 1950 their recording of an Israeli song, "Tzena Tzena," reached number 2 on the pop charts, and their version of "Goodnight, Irene," a song by the then-little known African American singer/songwriter Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter (who died in 1949), reached number 1 and stayed on the charts for half a year. Several of their recordings—"On Top of Old Smokey," "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," the African song "Wimoweh," and "Midnight Special"—also made the charts. In 1951 their recording of Guthrie's song, "So Long It's Been Good to Know You," reached number 4.

But the Weavers' commercial success was short-lived. As soon as they began to get widely noticed in 1950, they were targeted by both private and government witch-hunters. The FBI and Congress escalated their investigations. Seeger and other folksingers were mentioned in *Red Channels*, the semiofficial private guidebook for the blacklist, and the Weavers were mentioned in a companion newsletter, *Counterattack*. A few performers, notably Josh White and Burl Ives, agreed to cooperate with the investigators and were able to resume their careers; others refused to do so and some were blacklisted. The Weavers survived for another year with bookings and even TV shows, but finally the escalating Red Scare caught up with them. Their contract for a summer television show was canceled. They could no longer get bookings in the top nightclubs.

Radio stations stopped playing their songs, and their records stopped selling.⁴⁷ They disbanded in 1953.⁴⁸ In December 1955 they reunited at a concert in Carnegie Hall in New York, and began touring and recording again, although they never had another major hit record. In 1958 Seeger left the Weavers to pursue a solo career. He was replaced by Erik Darling, then Frank Hamilton, and then Bernie Krause, but the group never reached the same level of commercial success. Partly because of the Weavers, folk music itself became identified with the Left—hardly a recipe for commercial success.⁴⁹

The Boston Red Scare

Boston, in recent decades considered a bastion of liberalism, played a central role in the nation's anticommunist hysteria.⁵⁰ Books about Boston in this period pay almost no attention to this aspect of the city's history.⁵¹ In the late 1940s and 1950s, Boston was controlled economically by conservative Yankee Republican businessmen and politically by conservative Irish-Catholic Democratic politicians. It was a city where books were banned, unions were not welcome, and protesters demonstrating for jobs, justice, or peace feared not only hostile mobs but also the police who were supposed to protect them.⁵² Some of Boston's political and business leaders during the 1950s followed McCarthy's lead and made reckless accusations that questioned the loyalty and patriotism of the city's radical activists, unionists, professors, teachers, and clergy.

Indeed, Boston and Massachusetts enlisted early in the war against communists and "fellow travelers." In 1948 the Boston public schools began to require every teacher to sign a "loyalty oath" as a condition of employment.⁵³ In October 1948, speaking at a campaign rally in Boston just days before the presidential election, President Truman said, "I hate communism" and vowed that he would never surrender to the "godless creed it teaches."⁵⁴ In 1951 Massachusetts became one of the first states in the country to outlaw the Communist Party (several years before Congress did so by passing the Communist Control Act of 1954). Not long after that, the Boston Bar Association sent out ballots to its members containing various proposals to expel and disbar any members involved with "Communist or subversive organizations."⁵⁵

As early as 1947 congressional investigators for the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC) identified a group of Boston activists, including O'Brien, as members of the Communist Party or its front groups.⁵⁶ Herbert Philbrick was a Boston advertising salesman whose work as a double agent for the FBI inspired the film and television show *I Led Three Lives*. A star witness before various congressional investigative committees, Philbrick identified between seventy and eighty individuals in Boston businesses, colleges, schools, and even churches

whom he claimed were either communists or “the weak and the jelly fish who crawl before the Communist Party and those who do its dirty work without ever admitting they are sympathizers or party members.” To show the state’s appreciation, Massachusetts governor Paul Dever, a Democrat, declared November 27, 1951, “Herbert Philbrick Day,” and more than 800 people turned out for a testimonial dinner in Philbrick’s honor at Boston’s Hotel Bradford—where the Massachusetts Progressive Party had held its founding convention just three years before.⁵⁷

McCarthy had a large following in Boston. Joseph P. Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy clan, was a generous contributor to McCarthy’s reelection campaign. In 1952, only eighteen months out of law school, Robert Kennedy went to work for McCarthy as assistant counsel of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Two years later John F. Kennedy was the only Senate Democrat who did not vote to censure McCarthy. “Hell,” JFK later explained, “half my voters in Massachusetts look on McCarthy as a hero.”⁵⁸

Like a Broadway producer, McCarthy used Boston as a kind of tryout town, bringing his Permanent Investigating Committee on the road for what the *Boston Globe* called “the most tumultuous congressional sessions ever held in Boston.” The hearings were held in 1954 at Boston’s federal building and televised live by two local stations. Three people were ejected during the proceedings. At one point, McCarthy engaged in a shouting match with Lawrence Shubow, O’Brien’s former campaign manager and one of the few lawyers willing to defend those called before his committee.⁵⁹

For some of those called before the various committees, the pressure was unbearable. For example, noted literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen, who had been active in the Wallace campaign and the Progressive Party, was one of five Harvard faculty members accused of belonging to “Communist front” organizations. In April 1950 he committed suicide by jumping from the twelfth floor of Boston’s Hotel Manger.⁶⁰

Massachusetts even had its own version of HUAC. Created in 1938, it was originally called the State Special Commission to Investigate the Activities within the Commonwealth of Communist, Fascist, Nazi and Other Subversive Organizations, So Called, but “Fascist” and “Nazi” were dropped from its title when the commission was reestablished in 1953. The Massachusetts Commission on Communism (MCC), as it was more popularly known, worked so closely with McCarthy that when he came to Boston he invited its chairman (state senator Philip Bowker, a Republican from suburban Brookline) and vice chairman (state senator John E. Powers, a Democrat from South Boston) to sit in on his committee’s hearings.⁶¹

For the next two years, the MCC held more than fifty public hearings and executive sessions and called scores of witnesses to testify. Like McCarthy’s committee and others that were operating at the time, it did not

confine itself to calling Communist Party members to testify. By then, there were only an estimated 800 Party members in New England.⁶²

HUAC paid its last visit to Boston in March 1958. After issuing reports identifying twenty-two and thirty-seven more individuals as communists or communist sympathizers in 1956 and 1958, the MCC went out of business in 1962, due in part to U.S. Supreme Court rulings in 1956 and 1957 declaring that state inquiries into sedition had to be "justified by a specific legislative need."⁶³ But as late as May 1959, the Massachusetts legislature voted to keep the commission going after one of its members, a state senator from Boston, made an impassioned plea in which he warned his colleagues that if they did not, "there is a chance that tomorrow—Friday—we could be under domination of Communist agents because of an A-bomb attack," and called on them to "show the voices in Moscow that we will stand up and fight."⁶⁴

After O'Brien's unsuccessful 1949 campaign for mayor, Boston People's Artists split up. A few years later, after lasting longer than most of its counterparts in other states, the Massachusetts Progressive Party disbanded as well. Many of its members, however, remained active in the social justice, peace, civil rights, and women's movements.

Walter and Laura O'Brien continued to agitate for social change in Boston with their same level of intensity. In June 1950 Walter was arrested in downtown Boston while demonstrating for an end to the Cold War. At the same time, Laura was pushing their daughter Kathleen in a baby carriage on a picket line just a few blocks away, protesting the extension of the draft. In the fall of 1951 Laura—campaigning on the slogan "As Boston's housewives and mothers we can win this program for a Better Boston and a peaceful world"—received 11,500 votes in an unsuccessful bid for a seat on the Boston City Council on the Progressive Party ticket.⁶⁵ By 1955 the national Progressive Party and its Massachusetts chapter were dead, victims of the Red Scare.

"People don't realize how frightening it was," Sam Berman recalled years later. "If you had subscriptions to certain magazines . . . if you had certain books . . . you hid them." "Being in the Progressive Party was tantamount to being in the Communist Party in the eyes of most people," remembered Arnold Berman. One of the main reasons that Bess and Butch Hawes left Boston and moved to California in 1951 was that FBI agents had come to their children's nursery school to ask both the children and parents about the Hawes' political activities and ideas.⁶⁶

Ever since his tour in the Merchant Marine, O'Brien had been suspected of being a communist, an allegation he consistently denied. "On my first ship I was tagged a Red troublemaker," he once said, "when I complained because I was poisoned by a bug." Both Walter and Laura O'Brien were called to testify before the MCC. Both refused to answer questions. In his statement Walter denounced the commission as "inquisitorial." In hers, Laura called the members "little McCarthys."⁶⁷

On June 9, 1955, the MCC stubbornly completed its mission and issued a two-volume report with the names, addresses, and biographical sketches of eighty-five people it identified as “present or former Communists or followers of the Communist party line.”⁶⁸ Walter and Laura O’Brien were among those named.

After the MCC released its report, Walter O’Brien, like many of those named, could no longer find work. For a while, he tried to use his winning personality and gift of gab as a car salesman. But each time he got a job, FBI agents would show up at the automobile dealership and speak to his employer, and O’Brien would be out of work again.

Days after the MCC issued its report, the eighty-five people who had been named “Communists or followers of the Communist party line” issued a statement in which they complained that the organization had made a “mockery of justice” and engaged in a “witch hunt.” They also vowed “to continue to fight for the rights of labor, for the civil liberties guaranteed by our Constitution, for equality of rights for all Americans, for the needs of youth, and for a peaceful world.” The truth was, though, that few of them were in a position to do so.

The O’Briens had two daughters to raise and had to find work. During his mayoral campaign, Walter had said that he had detected a “stand-offishness” among his neighbors and dreaded how his “little daughter might be treated in a couple of years by other children.” He also said that he would like to find “an apartment in some section of the city where you can be just a little bit left of a capitalist without fear of the consequences.” In 1956, convinced that could not happen in Boston, the O’Briens moved back to Maine. They first moved to the small town of Gray, but after being confronted several times by FBI agents, they moved back to Portland, hoping that a bigger city might provide them—and their children—with a chance at anonymity and a new life.

The 1960s, the Folk Revival, and the Kingston Trio

The Cold War, the Red Scare and the blacklist stifled dissent in the 1950s and divided radicals from liberals who might otherwise have been political allies. These realities were also reflected in the folk-music world. Folk music became somewhat identified with radicalism and many of its major proponents found it difficult to find work as performers. But despite this, several political and cultural undercurrents of the 1950s kept interest in folk music alive, laying the groundwork for a large-scale revival.

The Beat subculture, the ban-the-bomb movement, and the civil rights movement contributed to these trends, particularly in New York (centered in Greenwich Village), the San Francisco area, the Boston area (especially Cambridge), Chicago, and Los Angeles. A handful of coffeehouses, nightclubs, summer camps, and college folk-music clubs continued to draw audiences to hear folk songs. As the folk-music revival took off,

these venues became important places for popularizing the overlapping worlds of topical and traditional folk music.

The Weavers' success in the early 1950s indicated that the public had an appetite for folk and international songs sung in a popular style. Although the Weavers disbanded as victims of the blacklist, other singers adopted folk and international songs without any overt political message. The popularity of Hawaiian music and calypso music—popularized by singers like Harry Belafonte and Stan Wilson—are examples of this trend. Several folk groups—including the Tarriers, the Easy Riders, and the Gateway Singers—gained popularity performing old and new songs with polished harmonies.

In 1956 Nick Reynolds, Bob Shane, and Dave Guard started a folk group and began singing calypso songs, initially calling themselves the Calypsonians. In 1957 they became the Kingston Trio, named for Jamaica's capital city. Guard and Shane, both born in 1934, grew up in Hawaii and attended college in northern California—Guard at Stanford, Shane at Menlo College. Reynolds, born in 1933 in San Diego, also attended Menlo College. They made a big splash performing at the Purple Onion club in San Francisco in July 1957.⁶⁹

The Kingston Trio's first hit, recorded in 1958, was "Tom Dooley," a ballad based on a true story about Tom Dula, who faced execution for killing his sweetheart following the Civil War. The song quickly became the best-selling record in the country and remained among the top 100 recordings for twenty-one weeks, selling almost four million records. It earned a Gold Record and, later that year, a Grammy. Unlike the other major hits of that period, "Tom Dooley" told a story based on a real incident; its lyrics required the listener to hear the story from a particular point of view—that of the doomed Dooley. It was not based on a formula, like the Tin Pan Alley and rock 'n' roll songs popular at the time. "Tom Dooley," and other songs popularized by the group, "developed in audiences, especially young ones, an ear for the topical song."⁷⁰

The Kingston Trio made a conscious choice to avoid political controversy.⁷¹ They chose to emphasize the suburban, crew-cut, college student image and, for the most part, to perform songs that did not reflect social and political tensions. The Trio members were part of the San Francisco folk scene and were familiar with the Beat, bohemian, and radical subcultures of the late 1950s, especially in the Bay Area and Greenwich Village. Lou Gottlieb, a member of the Gateway Singers who was active in left-wing politics, arranged songs for the Kingston Trio.⁷² Their original repertoire borrowed heavily from older folk performers, including those associated with the Left. Their first album included songs from the Weavers ("Sloop John B"), Seeger ("Bay of Mexico"), and Guthrie ("Hard, Ain't It Hard").⁷³

"We were big fans of the Weavers," recalled Nick Reynolds. Reynolds

was a close friend of Weaver Fred Hellerman. David Guard was friendly with Seeger and taught himself to play the banjo by reading Seeger's *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*. "We decided that if we wanted to have our songs played on the airwaves, we'd better stay in the middle of the road politically," Reynolds explained. "We'd just gotten out of school. We didn't want to get blacklisted like the Weavers." Asked if the Weavers had warned the Kingston Trio not to be controversial, Reynolds replied, "They didn't have to."⁷⁴ In a 2007 interview Shane compared the Kingston Trio with Peter, Paul and Mary, who emerged on the scene a few years after the Trio. They were "rabble rousers," Shane said. "Ours was just doing entertainment."⁷⁵

In 1959 alone the Kingston Trio had four albums at the same time among the ten top-selling albums. That year, they performed at both the Newport Jazz Festival and the first Newport Folk Festival. Over the next few years, thirteen of the group's albums, which included such hit songs as "A Worried Man" and "Tijuana Jail," reached the top ten. The Kingston Trio's commercial success opened the door for other folk groups—Brothers Four, Chad Mitchell Trio, the Highwaymen, the New Christy Minstrels, the Serendipity Singers, the Rooftop Singers, and the Limelickers among them.⁷⁶

The Kingston Trio's initial success clearly catalyzed a renewed and widening interest in folk music. The first Newport Folk Festival was held in July 1959, started by a combination of the radical wing of the folk-music world and those involved in recovering traditional music, such as hillbilly, gospel, and bluegrass.⁷⁷ Over the next few years, the festival grew in attendance, reflecting the growing appeal of folk music beyond the culturally bohemian and political radical circles. More and more young people—children of the baby boom—took up the guitar and banjo. One reflection of the trend was the circulation of *Sing Out!* magazine, which began in 1950 as the successor to *People's Songs*. *Sing Out!*'s circulation grew from 500 in 1951 to 1,000 in 1960, to 20,000 in 1964, to 25,000 in 1965. Its circulation growth was accompanied by an increase in ads for guitars, banjos, songbooks, record albums, and the growing number of folk festivals around the country.⁷⁸ The number of folk-music clubs and coffeehouses also mushroomed.

Although purists often deride the Kingston Trio for watering down folk songs in order to make them commercially popular, the group deserves credit for helping to launch the folk-music boom that brought recognition to older folk practitioners like Guthrie and Seeger, newcomers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Phil Ochs, and transitional figures like Odetta, Theo Bikel, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.⁷⁹ Moreover, as the political climate changed, the Kingston Trio recorded some songs with political themes. As early as 1959 they recorded "Merry Minuet," a whimsical song that reflected the nation's anxiety about a possible nuclear holocaust.⁸⁰ They

recorded Seeger's antiwar song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" in 1962, Bob Dylan's antiwar song "Blowing in the Wind" (1963), the antiwar "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" (1964), the civil rights song "Road to Freedom" (1963), and "Poverty Hill" (1965).

The civil rights movement (catalyzed by the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and the southern sit-ins, which began in 1960), the ban-the-bomb movement (begun in the 1950s, initially in England and then in the United States, to oppose nuclear weapons) and the larger anti-Viet Nam war movement helped revitalize the tradition of protest and "topical" folk music. Eventually, the audience for political protest music grew. Tom Paxton, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Peter, Paul and Mary (who had a hit song with Seeger and Hays's political "Hammer Song" ["If I Had a Hammer"] in 1962), and many others linked their songs to the protest movements of the era and appeared at protest events. Mainstream record companies sought folk performers to tap the growing audiences.

Although the Cold War was thawing, it remained a potent force in American culture into the 1960s. Seeger was still banned from the ABC-TV show *Hootenanny* in 1963, the first network show to take advantage of the folk revival.⁸¹ In 1967 the Smothers Brothers defiantly invited Seeger to perform on their popular CBS variety show. True to his principles, Seeger insisted on singing a controversial antiwar song, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." CBS censors refused to air the song, but public outrage forced the network to relent and allow him to perform the song on the show a few months later.

The Folkies Rediscover Charlie

The story of how "M.T.A." became a hit song for the Kingston Trio—minus any mention of Walter O'Brien—illustrates how the reach of the Red Scare extended into culture as well as politics. It begins with Will Holt, a transitional figure between the two generations of folk-music enthusiasts. Born in 1929, Holt grew up in Maine and began taking piano lessons at age six and voice lessons soon thereafter. His interest in the guitar and traditional music began when he attended a concert by Richard Dyer-Bennett at his boarding school in Exeter, New Hampshire. "When I heard him, it changed my life," Holt recalled years later. Holt graduated from boarding school in 1947, attended Williams College for a year, then dropped out to pursue his musical interests by studying for a year and a half at Dyer-Bennett's School for American Minstrels in Aspen, Colorado. The atmosphere at that school was "very left wing," Holt remembered. "I was certainly left-wing."⁸²

Holt spent much of 1950 traveling in Europe collecting songs. After two and a half years in the Air Force, he moved to New York to launch his performing career in 1954. Max Gordon, owner of the Village Vanguard, hired Holt to sing and to run a square-dance group at the club.

He was soon appearing in nightclubs and on television, singing folk songs from around the world. Although he accompanied himself on the guitar, he often recruited jazz musicians to perform with him. He made two albums on the Stinson label—*Pills to Purge Melancholy* and *Will Holt Concert*—reflecting his eclectic style.

In 1955 Holt was performing in a cabaret review with singer Barbara McNair and comedian Jori Remus at New York's Purple Onion nightclub. Richard "Specs" Simmons was a waiter at the club. Born in 1928, Simmons grew up in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. He had been a member of the Progressive Party's youth group and a low-level volunteer in the Wallace campaign and O'Brien's mayoral campaign the following year. A sometime-folksinger himself, he performed "M.T.A." in his occasional gigs. One day at the Purple Onion, Simmons taught Holt the "M.T.A." song.⁸³

"He sang the song for me. I thought 'this is very funny,'" recalled Holt in a 2007 interview. The three performers added the song to their show's finale. According to Holt: "It just hit. The song got to be very popular" with his audiences.⁸⁴

Holt added "M.T.A." to his solo repertoire, changed the tune a little, and recorded it as a single and as part of an album, *The World of Will Holt*, for Coral Records in 1957. The song quickly began to receive airplay on radio stations and seemed well on its way to becoming a hit. "It was going to be a hot song . . . a novelty song," Holt recalled. *Life* magazine even sent a reporter/photographer team to Boston to do a feature story on Holt, taking pictures of him at the various subway stops mentioned in the song.⁸⁵

But soon after Holt's recording of "M.T.A." began to climb the music charts, radio stations suddenly stopped playing the song. Stores stopped selling the record. *Life* magazine abruptly pulled the story on Holt before that issue of the magazine hit the newsstands. Holt says that the reason for the sudden turnaround was that radio stations—particularly those in Boston—had received complaints that the song "glorified" a communist, because it mentioned Walter O'Brien. *Sing Out!* magazine corroborated Holt's account, noting at the time that "the record company was astounded by a deluge of protests from Boston because the song made a hero out of a local 'radical.'"⁸⁶ Holt does not know if the attack was part of an orchestrated campaign or just a handful of people complaining. "It was still the McCarthy era," Holt said. "It was nuts."

In a desperate move to salvage the song, Coral Records removed the line about O'Brien. They literally cut it out—without replacing it—so a careful listener can notice a gap in the subsequent version. Coral rereleased the song without that line, but the damage had been done. Holt's new version of "M.T.A." went nowhere. "My fame and fortune was suddenly out the window," Holt recalled.

Nick Reynolds recalled learning "M.T.A." from Holt, whom the Kings-

ton Trio had met through San Francisco folk-music circles. “We sang Will Holt’s version,” Reynolds said. “We didn’t even know who the writers were.”⁸⁷

The Kingston Trio recorded “M.T.A.” on February 16, 1959, at the Capitol Recording Studios in New York. A slightly older folk group, the Gateway Singers—whose style had influenced the Kingston Trio and whose bassist and arranger, Lou Gottlieb, had provided and arranged several songs for the Trio—recorded the song the same week, but its version did not become popular.⁸⁸

Like other folk groups, the Kingston Trio frequently made changes to the lyrics of folk songs. The most obvious change they made was to add a spoken introduction, done by Dave Guard in a somewhat whimsical tone that put the story in context:

These are the times that try men’s souls.
In the course of our nation’s history,
the people of Boston have rallied bravely
whenever the rights of men have been threatened.
Today, a new crisis has arisen.
The Metropolitan Transit Authority,
better known as the M. T. A.,
is attempting to levy a burdensome tax on the population
in the form of a subway fare increase.
Citizens, hear me out!
This could happen to you!

Their minor changes included switching “dark and fateful day” to “tragic and fateful day” in the opening verse. In the original version Charlie, stuck in the subway, lamented being unable to see his *brother* in Roxbury; the Kingston Trio turned him into a *cousin*. They also dropped two verses to get the song down to the three-minute range that radio stations then preferred. (See the appendix for the missing verses.)

Finally, and most importantly, they dropped the real-life *Walter A. O’Brien* and replaced him with a fictional namesake, *George*. In separate interviews in 2007, Shane and Reynolds offered different explanations for the change. Shane said he wasn’t sure, but *thought* it was because George “sounds a lot better” than Walter. Reynolds said he *knew* why they did it. “We changed the name so we wouldn’t get into political trouble. This was the McCarthy era,” he recalled. “Who knows who would come knocking on your door?”⁸⁹

“M.T.A.” was released by Capitol Records as a single on June 15, 1959, and on the Kingston Trio’s *At Large* album a week later. Without Walter O’Brien’s name holding it back, the single of “M.T.A.” made it to number 15 on the *Billboard* chart, and the album reached number 1 on the pop charts and stayed on the charts for 118 weeks. *Life* magazine, which had

abruptly abandoned Holt two years earlier, ran a two-page feature on the song, "Ballad of Captive Rider," in its June 29, 1959, issue. It included a photo of the group and a brief history of the song that mentioned it had been written for Walter A. O'Brien's Progressive Party campaign. The magazine also ran a photo of a woman (a model hired for the occasion) at the Scollay Square subway station brandishing a picket sign that said, "Get Poor Charlie Off the M.T.A.," and a cartoon from the *Boston Globe* of a woman running alongside a moving subway train handing a passenger a sandwich. The feature was part of a story, "Outbreak of Oddball Songs." Five weeks later, *Life* ran a cover story on the Kingston Trio in its August 3, 1959, issue. A photo of Guard, Shane, and Reynolds in striped shirts and with their instruments appeared on the cover, with the caption, "Kingston Trio: Top Sellers in Albums." The group went on to be voted Best Group of the Year and won a Grammy as best folk performers of the year.

Living in Maine, O'Brien thought his past in Boston was behind him—until one day in the summer of 1959, that past came calling in an unexpected way. Sam Berman remembered getting the phone call from O'Brien. "He'd just heard 'M.T.A.' on the radio, and he was very excited, very happy," Berman recalled. "'We're famous!' Wally said."⁹⁰ Although it was typical of O'Brien that he would use the plural pronoun, in this case he had an additional reason. The song he had just heard on the radio was almost identical to the one written and performed for his campaign by the Boston People's Artists—except that it did not include his name.

The Legacy

"M.T.A." was written and then recorded in 1949 for use in a left-wing political campaign. Ten years later it became a hit for the Kingston Trio. It has been half a century since the Kingston Trio released its version of "M.T.A." Since then, the song has become a deeply ingrained part of American culture.

Why has the song lasted? "It's a good tune, first of all," Pete Seeger explained, "and the whole idea of getting on the subway and not being able to get off . . . it's a great poetic switch."⁹¹

According to Bob Shane, "The music had been around for many years," referring to the original tune of "The Wreck of the Old 97." "People hear that tune and they say, 'I've heard it.' The music caught you immediately. It sounds familiar."⁹²

The song has persisted through the twists and turns of politics and culture. In addition, the biographical trajectories of the people involved in the writing, recording, and popularizing of "M.T.A." reflects the many ways that the Cold War, the Red Scare, and the folk revival shaped many lives.

It never bothered O'Brien that his name was removed from the

"M.T.A." song. In fact, it helped him protect the anonymity that he sought.⁹³ After moving from Boston to Maine, Walter became a librarian, Laura an elementary school teacher. They put their political lives behind them. Even the FBI noticed the O'Briens' withdrawal. An entry in Walter's FBI file stated, "In view of the absence of reported activity on the part of the subject since 3/15/58, it does not appear that he meets the current requirements for inclusion on the Security Index and, accordingly, it is recommended that he be deleted."⁹⁴

The O'Briens kept in touch with their former Progressive Party friends, driving down from Maine to Boston for periodic visits and exchanging cards at holidays. They remained particularly close to Florence Luscomb, the Party's candidate for governor in 1952 and a stalwart of Boston radical politics, who had also been named by the MCC and whom Walter considered his political mentor. In Maine the O'Briens lived a quiet life. In the 1960s they occasionally took their three daughters to local civil rights and antiwar demonstrations, but they avoided the spotlight. "They don't know who I am up here," he told a friend, "and that's the way I want it."⁹⁵ They eventually retired to a cottage at Cundy's Harbor, Maine, where they ran a small used bookstore described as open only in the summer or "by chance."

In his last years, though, Walter let his guard down and even began to enjoy the attention when someone interested in the song would track him down. In 1997, for example, Tony Saletan, a Boston area folksinger who had begun performing a program of songs from the Progressive Party era that included "M.T.A.," stopped by the O'Briens' home to sing and play them for them. By then, O'Brien was in poor health, but "he seemed to enjoy the musical interlude," recalled Saletan. "The only problem was that I wanted to ask him about the songs, but all Wally could talk about was the issues behind them."⁹⁶

Those issues were evidently on O'Brien's mind until the end, according to his daughter Julia, who recalls that her father would be asleep, "but in the middle of the night I'd hear him say: 'I've got to get these petitions signed.'" Walter died in 1998 at age eighty-three. Laura died two years later at age eighty.

Before he died, though, O'Brien led one final campaign. In 1995 the Massachusetts legislature established another commission—this one to celebrate, not persecute, progressive political activists. Its mandate was to recognize "a woman who through her actions, has made a major contribution to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

Despite his poor health, O'Brien mounted an effort from his home in Maine to have Luscomb nominated for this honor.⁹⁷ Eager to make sure that Luscomb got the recognition he felt she deserved, O'Brien phoned Anne Alach, who had worked with both of them in the Massachusetts Progressive Party almost fifty years before. "I asked him 'How are you

feeling?" Alach recalled. "He said: 'Well enough to sit on the bed and call you.'" But O'Brien didn't have time for pleasantries. What he needed, he told Alach, were the names and phone numbers of people that he wanted to contact to help lobby on Florence's behalf.⁹⁸ Before he died, O'Brien learned that his campaign had been successful.

Unable to choose just one woman, the commission decided to honor six—including Luscomb. A memorial honoring them was dedicated in the Massachusetts State House on October 19, 1999. It consisted of portrait bas relieves of each of them, quotations from their lives, all mounted on a wall papered with what is described as "the official language regulating the conditions these women worked to affect." The language relating to the other five women concerns laws they helped enact. The language relating to Luscomb is an excerpt from a hearing of the MCC, which reads, in part: "Miss Luscomb, on the grounds stated, refused to answer."

The ceremony to dedicate the memorial took place in the ornate Hall of Flags at the Massachusetts State House. Speakers included then-Massachusetts governor A. Paul Cellucci, chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court Margaret Marshall, and historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. Each talked about the need to remedy the "exclusion from history" suffered by the honorees. Seated in the audience were two of Walter and Laura O'Brien's daughters and many of their friends. For them, O'Brien's "exclusion from history" was at least partly remedied after the speeches were over and the last song of the evening was sung—by a special group of singers and musicians that included Jackie Steiner and Sam Berman. Julia O'Brien-Merrill, O'Brien's daughter, said later that she felt that the ceremony "validated my parents' activism and all they went through." Sam Berman admitted "there was a pleasure in feeling that something that came out of our left-wing past is now part of Boston history." He also says that he "got a charge out of Governor Cellucci singing along—even though I'm sure he didn't know the background of the song."⁹⁹

Saletan had assembled the group and he introduced the song by saying that it had been written back in 1949 "when Florence Luscomb campaigned for Walter A. O'Brien for mayor." The mere mention of O'Brien's name prompted cheers from the many former Progressive Party members in the crowd. Then, with banjo, guitar, and bass strings blazing, the group launched into the familiar opening line of the song: "Let me tell you the story of a man named Charlie/on a dark and fateful day . . ." Recognizing the song immediately, the audience burst into applause. Everyone—including Governor Cellucci—joined in on the chorus. By the end of the song, everyone in the hall was standing and singing. That was when the rightful name of Walter A. O'Brien Jr. was restored to the final verse.

Bess Lomax Hawes continued the family tradition. After moving to California in 1951, she gave guitar lessons, taught anthropology and

folklore at what is now called California State University–Northridge in Los Angeles, made documentary films about folk culture and music, occasionally performed at folk festivals and coffeehouses, and stayed connected to the left-wing political world. In 1975 she went to Washington to work on folklife festivals for the Smithsonian Institution and the following year she accepted an offer from the National Endowment for the Arts to develop its Folk Arts Program, distributing grants to folk musicians and artists. Hawes retired in 1991 and two years later she received the National Medal of the Arts at a reception at the White House with President Bill Clinton. In 2000 the NEA created the Bess Lomax Hawes Award, which honors people who make major contributions to folk and traditional arts. Her autobiography, *Sing It Pretty*, was published in 2008.¹⁰⁰ She died in November 2009 at age eighty-eight.

Jackie Steiner and Arnold Berman married and moved to New York so that Arnold could attend graduate school in physics at Columbia University. (They divorced in 1954 and both remarried.) Steiner remained politically active, worked as an editor for several publishers, pursued a career as both a classical and folk performer, and was a member of Peoples Artists. She sang on an album, *Hootenanny Tonight*, with Seeger and others, and fondly recalled Paul Robeson inviting her to join him on stage at a Harlem nightclub. During the civil rights movement, she and her first husband were involved in trying to integrate an apartment complex in Queens. Over the years, she developed a wide-ranging repertoire of classical and folk songs, singing in nine languages, and performing around the country in concerts and benefits for political causes. During the Vietnam War she released an album of original songs entitled *No More War* and in 1991 released *Far Afield: Songs of Three Continents*, which includes her own rendition of “M.T.A.” Whenever she performed the “M.T.A.” song, she always explained to audiences beforehand that it wouldn’t be the version they were probably familiar with from the Kingston Trio, but the original one.

Neither Steiner nor Hawes ever anticipated that the song would outlast O’Brien’s campaign. They viewed the song, Hawes explained, as a “throwaway.” Steiner called it a “toss-off, an occasional song that would soon be forgotten”—one of many topical songs written for a particular political cause at a particular moment in time. Both found it ironic not only that the song has endured, but also that they continued to receive royalty checks for “The M.T.A.” The royalties have provided a “nice extra comfort zone,” Steiner said, although never enough to retire on.

After receiving a Ph.D. in physics, Arnold Berman worked for many years as a research physicist for IBM and other companies. While enjoying retirement in Wappingers Falls in upstate New York, he has created an elaborate Berman family Web site that features pictures of the Boston People’s Artists group and a recording of their original version of “M.T.A.”

Sam Berman took over the family trucking business and continued his interest in music and politics. In 1952 he wrote and performed another campaign song at a rally at Boston Symphony Hall for Vincent Hallinan, the last Progressive Party candidate to run for president. In 1988, using "M.T.A." as a model, Sam and some friends wrote a campaign song for the presidential campaign of Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Democratic candidate. "They didn't use it, though," said Berman in a 2007 interview, "because they said they were afraid of infringing on somebody. I couldn't figure that out. We [the original Boston People's Artists] were the only somebodies that could have been infringed on."

Despite earning a master's and three Ph.D. degrees in engineering, Al Katz was never able to find steady work in his field. According to one of his sons, Katz was blacklisted from employment with companies that did business for the government, especially the military. Instead he took short-term jobs teaching and doing research. While living in Franklin, New Jersey, he was elected president of the school board and led the fight to integrate the schools. He later taught computer science at Fairfield University in Connecticut. Katz continued to play the violin, guitar, banjo, ukulele, and mandolin at parties and community events, and just for fun in a group called the Possum Glory String Band. He died in 1997.¹⁰¹

Lawrence Shubow (O'Brien's campaign manager) completed Harvard Law School and became a defense attorney. His clients included some Progressive Party members who were being investigated for their radical politics. Despite complaints raised about his left-wing past, Shubow was named a municipal court judge by Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis in 1978. Shubow is retired and lives with his wife on Cape Cod. On Saturday mornings—often in the company of their daughters—he and his wife could be found taking part in "standouts for peace" at the Mashpee Town Common, opposing the war in Iraq.

Anne Alach (O'Brien's office manager) married a man she met through her Progressive Party involvement. They moved to suburban Canton and raised a family, but continued to participate in civil rights and peace demonstrations. She later moved to nearby Quincy, Massachusetts.

Since the 1960s, "Specs" Simmons, has been a mainstay of San Francisco's bohemian scene. Although he disdains the Kingston Trio as "a bunch of college kids who couldn't tune their own guitars," he acknowledges that the royalties from the group's recordings of "M.T.A." allowed him to purchase a North Beach bar near the famous City Lights bookstore in 1968.¹⁰² Simmons had helped Hawes and Steiner copyright the song in the 1950s and he received part of the royalties. Specs Bar remains a hangout for the city's artists and musicians.

Will Holt went on to become an accomplished performer and songwriter. He collected songs from around the world and performed them on records, concerts, and cabaret shows. Whenever he sang "M.T.A.,"

Holt insists proudly today, he kept the line with Walter O'Brien when performing the song in clubs and concerts. He also wrote many songs, including "Lemon Tree" which was a big hit for Peter, Paul and Mary, and Trini Lopez, and "Raspberries, Strawberries," a hit for the Kingston Trio. In the 1960s Holt's career changed course when he collaborated with Martha Schlamme on an off-Broadway review, *The World of Kurt Weill in Song*. The show was a huge critical and commercial success. During the 1960s and 1970s, Holt wrote and performed in musical theater, including his Tony-nominated and Obie-winning musical, *The Me Nobody Knows*, a show based on the words of inner-city children. He lives in New York and Maine, and still occasionally performs.

Pete Seeger never recorded "M.T.A.," but he played a role in the song's evolution as a member of the Almanac Singers that performed "The Train That Never Returned." His spirit and political activism have shaped the entire folk-music scene, linking the Depression, the Wallace campaign, the Cold War, the folk revival, and the Kingston Trio, and the persistence of topical folksongs since the 1960s. Through determination and unrelenting optimism, Seeger endured and overcame the controversies triggered by his activism. His critics faded away and the nation's cultural and political establishment eventually began to recognize Seeger's unique contributions.¹⁰³ In 1994, at age seventy-five, he received the National Medal of Arts (the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the U.S. government) as well as the Kennedy Center Honor, where President Bill Clinton called him "an inconvenient artist, who dared to sing things as he saw them." In 1996 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame because of his influence on so many rock performers. In 1997 Seeger won the Grammy Award for his eighteen-track compilation album *Pete*. Since the 1990s some of the nation's most prominent singers have recorded albums honoring Seeger, including Bruce Springsteen's *Seeger Sessions*. In 2008 PBS broadcast a ninety-three-minute documentary on Seeger's life, *The Power of Song*. Seeger became, despite his ambivalence about commercial success, a part of American popular culture. In a segment of the popular TV show *Law and Order*, a character says, "The Hudson River's clean now, thanks to Pete Seeger!" His invitation to perform at President Barack Obama's inauguration event—and his insistence that the performance include Guthrie's little-known radical stanzas of "The Land Is Your Land"—reflects the ways that folk music shapes and is shaped by the political and cultural currents of our history.

The Kingston Trio, the most popular folk-music group in American history, disbanded in 1967 but later regrouped with different performers. Guard had already left the group in 1961, replaced by John Stewart. Guard continued to perform, moved to Australia, returned to the United States, and died in 1991. After 1967 Reynolds moved to Oregon, spent twenty years ranching and raising four children, then rejoined the trio

in 1988. He retired for a second time in 1999 and lived in Coronado, California, where he died in October 2008. Shane purchased the rights to the Kingston Trio name and continued to tour and record with various configurations of the group until he retired in 2004. He still directs the group from his home in Phoenix, and says "M.T.A." is still one of the group's most-requested songs. The group continues to sing it their way, using the name of the fictional George O'Brien.

Appendix

"M.T.A."

Let me tell you the story of a man named Charlie
 On a dark and fateful day
 He put ten cents in his pocket and he kissed his loving family
 And he went to ride the M.T.A.

Chorus:

Did he ever return? No, he never returned
 And his fate is still unlearned.
 He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston
 He's the man who never returned

Charlie handed in his dime at the Kendall Square station
 Then he changed for Jamaica Plain
 When he got there the conductor told him, "One more nickel!"
 Charlie couldn't get off that train.

[Note: The Kingston Trio did not record this verse]
 As his train rolled on through Greater Boston
 Charlie looked around and sighed
 "Well, I'm sore and disgusted and I'm absolutely busted
 I guess this is my last long ride."

Now all night long Charlie rides through the tunnel
 Saying, "What will become of me?
 And, how can I afford to see my sister
 in Chelsea
 Or my brother in Roxbury?"

[Note: Hawes and Steiner wrote this stanza but it was not included in the original recording.]

"I can't help," said the conductor
 "I'm just working for a living but I sure agree with you
 For the nickels and dimes you'll be spending in Boston
 You'd be better off in Timbuktu."

Charlie's wife goes down to the Scollay Square station
 Every day at a quarter past two
 And through the open window she hands Charlie a sandwich
 As his train goes rumbling through

Now, citizens of Boston, don't you think it is a scandal
 That the people have to pay and pay?
 Vote for Walter A. O'Brien and fight the fare increase
 Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!

The "M.T.A.," by Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Lomax Hawes. Used by permission Atlantic Music Corp. Above is the original song written in 1949. The Kingston Trio version, recorded in 1959, is available on several Web sites.

"The Train That Never Returned"

I'll tell you the story of some politicians
 Who rode on a yellow scab train;
 On a Monday morning they left the station
 And they never were seen again

Chorus:

Did they ever return?
 No, they never returned,
 and their fate is still unlearned.
 And a last poor man was a scab conductor
 On a train that never returned.

Well, the scab train stopped at the City Hall station
 And the politicians got on board
 they were drinking and gambling and making speeches
 As round the bend they roared.

They had passed the Wicks bill against the union
 They were all puffed up with pride
 Little did they know when they left the station
 They were going on their last long ride

They were going round the bend
 Making ninety miles an hour
 When the whistle broke into a scream;
 And the last we saw of John Delaney
 He was passing through Bowling Green

Come all you people
 Who ride the subways,
 If you want to see you loved ones again.
 Take warning by this strange occurrence
 And ride on a union train

The lyrics to this song were written on a one-page leaflet titled "Transit Tunes for 1941" and distributed at the Transport Workers Union rally at Madison Square Garden on December 21, 1941. The leaflet indicates: "Words by Almanac Singers. Tune: 'The Ship That Never Returned' or 'Wreck of the Old 97.'" The song was never copyrighted.

NOTES

In addition to the people interviewed for this project and listed in the endnotes, the authors wish to thank the following for their help during our research: Ross Altman, Naomi Bishop, Barbara Brown, Bill Bush, Tom Cartwright, Ellen Cassidy, Ron Cohen, Norm Cohen, Ed Cray, Lew Finfer, Dick Flacks, Josh Freeman, David Green, Robert Hannan, Paul Jenkins, Betty Katz, Larry Katz, Tim Lynch, Gail Malmgreen, Judith McCullough, Mark Moss, Ed Pearl, Dave Samuelson, Allan Shaw, Lillian Shubow, Shira Stark, Gary Stewart, Robert Wechsler, and Jim Whitters.

While in printed sources the abbreviation "M.T.A." appears with and without periods, we have normalized all herein to include periods, per the earliest sources.

1. Anthony Flint and Mac Daniel, "'Charlie' to Begin New Ride with Modern Fare System," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 9, 2004. None of the original members of the Kingston Trio were on stage with Romney. The group has changed members over the years but kept the same name, style, and repertoire, under the supervision of original member Bob Shane.

2. Bob Shane, interview by Peter Dreier, April 2, 2007 (hereafter Shane interview).

3. Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 200.

4. Some librarians in Illinois drew on the song to protest cuts to library budgets: "Oh, she may never return, She may never return, And her fate is still unlearned, She may ride forever on the information highway, She's the librarian who never returned! Sung to the tune of 'M.T.A.,' with due apologies to the Kingston Trio. Neelima June, Paula Leiner, & Martha Mitchell, Reference Librarians, Algonquin Public Library, Illinois" ("Letters," *Library Journal*, April 1, 2001). Nine-to-Five, a group that organized working women and was founded in Boston in the 1970s, parodied the song for its organizing campaigns. This version of the song, written by Jan Levine, was recorded by Bobbie McGee on her 1981 album, *Bread and Roses: Songs for Working Women*. The first verse: "Let me tell you the story / of a woman named Susie / who applied for a job one day / They tested her for typing / for shorthand and speed-writing / Then they gave her the lowest pay." In 2000 Florida singer/songwriter Rod MacDonald used the song to write a parody focusing on the controversial vote count in Palm Beach County in the Bush-Gore election, noting "To the Tune of 'M.T.A.'" (<http://www.rodmacdonald.net/usa.htm>). An amateur performer named Buck Bolton wrote "Manny on to LA," to the "M.T.A." tune, about Red Sox outfielder Manny Ramirez going to the Los Angeles Dodgers (<http://www.youtube.com/user/BuckBolton>).

5. Norman Dake, "Will He Ever Return?," Ascension Lutheran Church, Tulsa, Okla., Oct. 5, 2008, accessed at <http://www.ascensionlutheran.net/sermons>. Cohen mentions a British song, "The London Underground," which he describes as "an English take-off on 'The M.T.A. Song'" (Cohen, *Long Steel Rail*, 218, citing *Sounds Like Folk, no. 2: The Railways in Song* (London: EFDS Publications, 1973).

6. Ron Rosenbaum, "Oh, Boston Devil, How You Taunt Me," *New York Times*, July 25, 2004; Daniel B. Wood, "Lost in Boston," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 26, 2004; James K. Robinson, "Where's Secure Flight?" *Washington Post*, July 19, 2008.

7. For example, few Americans know that Woody Guthrie, a radical with close ties to the Communist Party, wrote "This Land Is Your Land" as an answer to Irving Berlin's popular "God Bless America," which he thought failed to recognize that it was the "people" to whom America belonged. Among the hundreds of artists who have recorded the song, and the many more who have performed it, few have included the two most radical stanzas (which Pete Seeger sang at the preinaugural concert for president-elect Barack Obama on January 19, 2009). For a history of the Guthrie song, see Mark Jackson, *The Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

8. Good sources on the overlapping worlds of folk collectors and Leftists include the

following: Steven Garabedian, "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, 'Negro Songs of Protest,' and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s," *American Quarterly* (March 2005); Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Ronnie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger*, 2nd ed. (New York: Villard Books, 2008); Ed Cray, *Rambling Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Bess Lomax Hawes, *Sing It Pretty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2000); Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Doris Willens, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); and Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

9. In the early 1900s the Industrial Workers of the World (the "Wobblies") adapted the music and lyrics of church hymns and popular music to promote left-wing ideas and activism. The most enduring, "Solidarity Forever," written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915, used the tune of "John Brown's Body" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

10. The Almanacs had opposed U.S. entry into the war as late as 1941 because Russia had a nonaggression agreement with Nazi Germany. The Almanacs even recorded an album of peace songs against U.S. preparations for war. After Germany attacked Russia in 1941, the Almanacs literally changed their tune(s), stopped singing their antiwar songs, and began writing, performing, and recording prowar songs. During the war Earl Robinson wrote a patriotic song, "The House I Live In," with lyricist Lewis Allan that was a hit sung by Frank Sinatra in 1945. "The House I Live In" was exceedingly popular for several years but became controversial during the McCarthy period and has largely disappeared from public consciousness. Its coauthor, Lewis Allan, was actually Abel Meeropol, a high school teacher who also penned "Strange Fruit," the antilynching song made famous by Billie Holiday. In the 1950s Meeropol and his wife adopted the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after their parents were executed as atom spies. Despite this, Sinatra kept the song in his repertoire. (Perhaps the most astonishing performance of "The House I Live In" was at the nationally televised commemoration of the centenary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986, when Sinatra sang it as the finale to the program, with President Ronald Reagan sitting directly in front of him.) Sinatra also starred in an Oscar-winning movie short—written by Albert Maltz, later one of the Hollywood Ten—in which he sang "The House I Live In" to challenge bigotry, represented in the movie by a gang of kids who rough up a Jewish boy.

11. This included oral histories, folklore, radical "agitprop" plays like *Waiting for Lefty* produced by the Group Theater and its counterparts, and murals by left-wing artists like Ben Shahn and Diego Rivera. In novels (such as John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*), murals, plays, musicals (such as Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*), and musical compositions (such as Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and "Lincoln Portrait"), the Left celebrated the "common man" and his (collective) struggle for survival and better conditions. Many of their ideas became incorporated into popular culture of the era, often combining themes of patriotism and political rebellion by ordinary people. In 1939, for example, Earl Robinson, a member of the radical Composers' Collective with Copland, teamed with lyricist John La Touche to write "Ballad for Americans," an eleven-minute cantata that provided a musical review of American his-

tory, depicted as a struggle between the “nobodies who are everybody” and an elite that fails to understand the real, democratic essence of America. Broadcasts and recordings of “Ballad for Americans” (by Bing Crosby and Paul Robeson) were immensely popular. In the summer of 1940 it was performed at the national conventions of both the Republican and Communist parties. The work soon became a staple in school choral performances. For more on this topic, see: Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks, “Patriotism’s Secret History,” *The Nation*, June 2, 2002; Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890—1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Cecilia O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

12. Sources on People’s Songs and People’s Artists include Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*; Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon*; Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*; Cray, *Rambling Man*; Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?*; Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*; Reuss with Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*; and Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*.

13. John Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

14. Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon*

15. Cornelius Owens, “‘I Needle My Rivals,’ Says O’Brien,” *Boston Globe*, Oct. 15, 1949. Also interviews with Julia O’Brien-Merrill by Jim Vrabel, April 20 and May 24, 2007.

16. Cornelius Dalton, “O’Brien Ducks Key Questions,” *Boston Traveler*, March 8, 1955. Pundits attributed O’Brien’s showing less to his stands on the issues and more to his Irish surname and the fact that he also ran on the Democratic ticket when that party declined to field a candidate because they considered Herter’s victory a foregone conclusion.

17. Anne Alach, interview by Jim Vrabel, June 9, 2007 (hereafter Alach interview).

18. The activities of the Massachusetts chapter of the Progressive Party and the radical circles in the Boston area are discussed in Sharon Hartman Strom, *Political Woman: Florence Luscomb and the Legacy of Radical Reform* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). A fictionalized account of some of the main figures in the Progressive Party and the Boston radical scene of that period is found in May Sarton, *Faithful Are the Wounds* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955).

19. Alach interview.

20. Tommie Katz, “Judge Nominee Shubow Always Fighter for Rights,” *Boston Herald*, April 28, 1978.

21. Lawrence Shubow, interview by Jim Vrabel, June 28, 2007.

22. Owens, “‘I Needle My Rivals,’ Says O’Brien.”

23. “O’Brien Pledges to Cut Fares for M.T.A. Riders,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 7, 1949.

24. Cornelius Owens, “Curley, Hynes Taunted Anew by McDonough,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 3, 1949.

25. *Ibid.*

26. “Met Deficit Apportionment Inequitable, Says Fin Com,” *Boston Globe*, Feb. 9, 1948; “M.T.A.’s 6-Month Deficit Double Over Same Period in 1947,” *Boston Globe*, July 22, 1948; “Asks Public Hearing on M.T.A. Fare Increase,” *Boston Globe*, July 26, 1948; “M.T.A. New Chaos,” *Boston Traveler*, Nov. 5, 1948; “Bradford Says He Will Fight M.T.A. Boost,” *Boston Post*, Nov. 13, 1948; “Move to Oust M.T.A. Trustees,” *Boston Post*, Nov. 16, 1948.

27. Bess Lomax Hawes, interview by Peter Dreier, April 13, 2007 (hereafter Hawes interview); Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*; Reuss with Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*; and Porterfield, *Last Cavalier*.

28. For a discussion of the Almanacs, including their living arrangements, see Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*; Cray, *Rambling Man*; and Reuss with Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*.

29. Hawes interview.

30. *Ibid.*; Jackie Steiner, interview by Peter Dreier, April 1, 2007 (hereafter Steiner inter-

view); Sam Berman, interview by Jim Vrabel, April 29, 2007; Arnold Berman, interview by Jim Vrabel, May 24, 2007; and Betty Katz (widow of Al Katz), interview by Peter Dreier, Aug. 16, 2007.

31. Steiner interview.

32. Sam Berman, interview by Jim Vrabel, May 16, 2007.

33. Pete Seeger, interview by Peter Dreier, May 5, 2007. The front-page story in the *New York Times* the next day did not mention the Almanacs' performance. It reported: "Twenty thousand men and women jammed the building and cheered the C.I.O. chieftain (Philip Murray) as he promised the militant support of his organization and its 5,000,000 members in the fight to get the Board of Transportation and the city to renew the collective bargaining contracts assumed at the time of transit unification and due to expire on June 30" ("20,000 Back Union in Transit Dispute," *New York Times*, May 22, 1941). An article about the rally in the June 1941 issue of the union's newspaper, *Transport Union*, reported on "the special songs rendered by the Almanacs Quartet."

34. For more about the history of this song, see Cohen, *Long Steel Rail*.

35. Hawes interview. The lyrics to this song were written on a one-page leaflet titled "Transit Tunes for 1941" and distributed at the Transport Workers Union rally at Madison Square Garden on December 21, 1941. The leaflet indicates: "Words by Almanac Singers. Tune: 'The Ship That Never Returned' or 'Wreck of the Old 97.'" The song was never copyrighted. Three other songs were printed on the same leaflet: "Roll the Union On," "The Union Train" ("Words by the Almanac Singers. Tune: 'Old Ship of Zion'"), and "On His Coat He Wears a Union Button" (Tune: "On Her Hair She Wears a Yellow Ribbon"). A copy of this leaflet was provided by Robert Wechsler, director of education and research, Transport Workers Union of America. A discussion of the TWU event, and the political background that led up to it, is found in Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

36. Hawes interview.

37. *Ibid.*; Steiner interview. Bob Haworth, who was a member of the Kingston Trio from 1985 to 1988 and from 1999 to 2005, also recalled, "People would always ask after a concert why Charlie's wife never slipped him the required nickel along with his daily sandwich" (Bob Haworth, email to Peter Dreier, March 25, 2007).

38. In January 2009 Steiner and Arnold Berman unearthed a recording with several other songs written for the O'Brien campaign. One was called "The O'Brien Train," based on the tune and words of "The Union Train," which the Almanac Singers had recorded and was, in turn, based on spiritual, "The Old Ship of Zion." Another was "We Want Walter A. O'Brien for Our Mayor" (also called "Ridin' Ol' Reaction") based on the tune and words of "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." These recordings are now available on Arnold Berman's family Web site, along with the group's original version of "M.T.A.," two 1957 versions of the song by Will Holt, the Kingston Trio's version, and Steiner's 1991 recording of the song. Around the same time, folksinger Tony Saletan uncovered the same group of songs as well one other, "O'Brien Is Your Man" (to the tune of "Bottle Up and Go") (Arnold Berman, email to Peter Dreier, March 2, 2009).

39. At the time of this writing (2009) the building was in an area with many upscale singles clubs.

40. John G. Harris, "Video Used First Time in Race for Hub Vote," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 25, 1949.

41. Sam Berman, interview by Jim Vrabel, June 24, 2007. The original version of the song can be heard in a ten-CD collection called *Songs for Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs and the American Left 1926-1953*, released in 1997, that includes 296 songs collected by music historians Ronald Cohen and Dave Samuelson

42. "O'Brien Pledges to Cut Fares for M.T.A. Riders," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 7, 1949.

43. *Ibid.*

44. The character of Frank Skeffington in Edwin O'Connor's 1956 novel, *The Last Hurrah*, was based on Curley.

45. Wald, *Josh White*.

46. This overview of the Weavers draws on Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?*, and Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*.

47. Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?*, 69. Folk music historian Dave Samuelson, who compiled a Weavers CD set, believes that Decca's decision not to renew the Weavers' recording contract was not based on political considerations but because their records were no longer selling. According to Samuelson, Decca even invested in another recording session after the group had already decided to disband, releasing single records in April 1953 and January 1954 (Dave Samuelson, email to Peter Dreier, March 16, 2009 [hereafter Samuelson email]).

48. Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 188. According to Dave Samuelson, the Weavers' decision to disband occurred prior to their annual Christmas concert at New York's Town Hall in 1952. They played their last club dates in October 1952, but made their last recording for Decca in February 1953 (Samuelson email).

49. Seeger carved out a career as a solo performer, even though he was blacklisted from the early 1950s to the late 1960s. He was kept out of many colleges and concert halls and off commercial radio stations. He was kept off network television from the early 1950s until the late 1960s. During the blacklist years, Seeger scratched together a living by giving guitar and banjo lessons and singing at the small number of summer camps, churches, high schools and colleges, and union halls that were courageous enough to invite the controversial balladeer.

50. If Boston is mentioned at all in connection with this turbulent era, it is because of the day in June 1954 when Joseph Welch, an attorney with the prestigious Boston law firm of Hale and Dorr, stood up to McCarthy's bullying during hearings held in Washington, D.C., to investigate alleged subversive activities within the Army. Welch asked, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" It was a moment that many historians consider the beginning of the end of McCarthy's influence and political career.

51. A review of books about twentieth-century Boston turned up no mention of this chapter of the city's history. Thomas H. O'Connor's *The Hub: Boston Past and Present* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), skips from describing a city divided between ethnic groups in the 1920s and 1930s to urban renewal in the 1950s, with no mention of the Red Scare. Likewise, Jack Beatty's *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992), paid no attention to McCarthyism, the Red Scare, or local radicalism, even though its subject was part of the field of candidates in the 1949 mayoral race along with Walter O'Brien. J. Anthony Lukas's Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the Boston busing battles, *Common Ground* (New York: Knopf, 1985), ranges as far back as the Puritans, the first slave ships, and the Irish famine to describe Boston's complex social, economic, and political crosscurrents, but fails to mention the controversy over Communism. Francis Russell's *A City in Terror: Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike* (New York: Viking Press, 1975) and Dennis Lehane's novel based on the same event, *The Given Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), do address fears of the "Communist menace," but during an earlier Red Scare. Discussion of Boston's post-World War II Red Scare appears to be confined to a handful of studies of the city's progressive movement, such as Strom, *Political Woman*. A pamphlet published as part of the city's bicentennial celebration, *Boston's Labor Movement: An Oral History of Work and Union Organizing* (Boston: Boston 200, 1977), includes an anecdote recounted by a member of the United Electrical and Radio Workers Union whom FBI agents visited in the early 1950s because of his union activities.

52. James P. Whitters III, "Not So Popular Front: The Progressive Party of Massachu-

setts and the Elections of 1948," unpublished thesis, University of Massachusetts–Boston, 2002.

53. "Unbecoming a Teacher . . . You Are Suspended," *Boston Globe*, March 27, 1953.

54. President Harry S. Truman, address at Mechanics Hall in Boston, Oct. 27, 1948. Accessed at: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/viewpapers.php?pid=2011>

55. "Boston Bar Group Ballots on Plan to Disbar Reds," *Boston Globe*, June 9, 1951.

56. See the testimony of Walter Steele before HUAC on July 21, 1947, http://www.archive.org/stream/testimonyofwalte1947unit/testimonyofwalte1947unit_djvu.txt

57. Gould Lincoln, "House Group Will Probe Reds of Greater Boston," *Boston Globe*, July 22, 1951; Gould Lincoln, "Bares Boston Red Cells," *Boston Globe*, July 24, 1951; "Philbrick to Receive VFW Award," *Boston Post*, August 27, 1951.

58. Quoted in Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

59. "Three Ousted by McCarthy; Stormy Hub Probe Ends," *Boston Sunday Globe*, Jan. 17, 1954.

60. Strom, *Political Woman*. "How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know," Matthiessen said in a note that he left behind. "But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions." "What I Have to Do," *Time*, April 10, 1950. For other sources of this quote, as well as more on Matthiessen's political activities and views, see Arthur Redding, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); and William O'Neill, *A Better World: Stalinism and the American Intellectual* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

61. "State Probers Sitting in on Red Hearings," *Boston Globe*, Jan. 15, 1954.

62. "Bowker Declares State Ready to Break Up Reds," *Boston Evening Globe*, Jan. 20, 1954; "Bill Would Give State Permanent Red-Hunting Body," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 10, 1954; "State Communist Commission Reports: 85 Persons Named," *Boston Evening Globe*, June 9, 1955; "22 on New Red List," *Boston Evening Globe*, Nov. 10, 1955.

63. "Ruling Banning Red Trials by State Poses Problems," *Boston Evening Globe*, April 3, 1956.

64. "A-Bomb Threat Brings Action on Anti-Red Bill," *Boston Globe*, May 21, 1959.

65. O'Brien campaign materials in files of Laura Manchester O'Brien, 1951; "Voters Show They Want New Lineup in Council," *Boston Globe*, Sept. 27, 1951.

66. Sam Berman, interview by Vrabel, April 29, 2007; Arnold Berman, interview by Vrabel, May 24, 2007; Hawes interview.

67. Owens, "'I Needle My Rivals,' Says O'Brien."; "O'Brien Invokes 5th Amendment on 59 Questions," *Boston Evening Globe*, March 3, 1955; statement of Laura Manchester O'Brien, March 3, 1955 (in O'Brien family files)

68. "State Communist Commission Reports."

69. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 130.

70. Daniel J. Geczy, "The Folk Music Movement of the 1960s: Its Rise and Fall," *Popular Music and Society* 10, no. 1 (1985).

71. Dave Samuelson suggests that the Kingston Trio's manager, Frank Werber, played an important role in steering the group away from political controversy. According to Samuelson, the Trio began performing more topical material after John Stewart replaced Dave Guard in 1961. Dave Samuelson, email to Peter Dreier, March 16, 2009.

72. Lou Gottlieb, "Lou Gottlieb," in "Wasn't That a Time!" *Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

73. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 130.

74. Nick Reynolds, interview by Peter Dreier, April 2, 2007 (hereafter Reynolds interview). Reynolds recalled that the Trio met Hellerman in 1958, when they were playing at the Village Vanguard in New York and before they had become well known. Hellerman

came in with his date, Mary Travers, who later became part of Peter, Paul, and Mary. Helleman, who was then working for Harold Leventhal, the agent for the Weavers and other folksingers, arranged one of the Trio's early songs, "Ruby Red." He also gave them a few songs, including "Poverty Hill" and "Hobo's Lullaby," according to Reynolds.

75. Shane interview.

76. Like the Kingston Trio, these groups introduced a wide American audience to folk music, drawing on traditional songs, but without stirring up controversy. These groups had a number of major popular hits, including the Brothers Four's "Greenfields" and "The Green Fields of Summer," the Highwaymen's "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" and "Cottonfields," and the Rooftop Singers' "Walk Right In". Some of the members of these groups later had even more success as solo performers or members of folk-rock and pop-rock groups, most notably John Denver. See Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?*, 75–77.

77. For a history of the Newport Folk Festival, see Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, and Ronald D. Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the U.S.* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

78. Mikiko Tachi, "Commercialism, Counterculture, and the Folk Music Revival: A Study of *Sing Out!* Magazine, 1950–1967," *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 15 (2004): 187–211.

79. For a discussion of the Kingston Trio's role in the folk-music revival that began in the late 1950s see Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?* According to Weissman, "it was the Kingston Trio who really set off the folk-pop boom when their recording of the old folk song 'Tom Dooley' became a number-one pop hit in 1958. An industry infrastructure rapidly developed to promote and merchandise the music. . . . The folk pop groups opened the door, and a large number of revivalists walked through that door performing blues, bluegrass, mountain music, foreign language folk songs, cowboy songs—in short, just about any conceivable variety of American folk music" (11). See also Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*.

80. This song was written by Broadway lyricist Sheldon Harnick, who also wrote *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Fiorello!* The song was introduced by Orson Bean in the 1953 revue *John Murray Anderson's Almanac*. The Kingston Trio recorded it in a live performance at San Francisco's hungry i folk club in June 1958, which became their first in-concert album *From the hungry i*, released in 1959. See Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 130.

81. Seeger was central to the folk-music revival. He encouraged young performers and helped start the Newport Folk Festival. Many young people learned to play guitar and banjo by buying Seeger's how-to books. Many folk performers considered Seeger a role model and traced their musical roots to his influence. Seeger's albums—he has recorded over eighty of them, including children's songs, labor and protest songs, traditional American folk songs, international songs, and Christmas songs—began to sell to wider audiences. His travels around the world—collecting songs and performing in many languages—inspired today's world music movement. Among performers across the *Globe*, Seeger became a symbol of a principled artist deeply engaged in the world. He gradually developed a wider following, partly through his environmental activism. The songs he has written, such as "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" "If I Had a Hammer," and "Turn, Turn, Turn" (drawn from Ecclesiastes), and those he has popularized, including "This Land Is Your Land," "Guantanamera," "Wimoweh," and "We Shall Overcome," became anthems for the Left movements of the 1960s and after. Folk and folk-rock groups like Peter, Paul, and Mary, Trini Lopez, and the Byrds recorded Seeger's songs.

82. Will Holt, interviews by Peter Dreier, April 4 and 6, 2007 (hereafter Holt interviews).

83. Specs Simmons, interview by Peter Dreier, June 22, 2007.

84. Holt interviews.

85. *Ibid.*

86. "M.T.A.," *Sing Out!* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1959).

87. Holt and the Kingston Trio performed at and frequented the Purple Onion and hungry i in San Francisco, according to both Holt and Nick Reynolds. Reynolds interview.

88. The Gateway Singers, a folk quartet formed in 1954, released their first album in 1956. "M.T.A." was on their fourth album, *The Gateway Singers on the Lot*, released in 1959 by Warner Brothers records, and was also released as a single. The liner notes for the album describe the song as follows: "The initials could be those of the transit company of any metropolis. A sudden rise in fare for Boston passengers in 1948 inspired Bess Lomax Hawes to write this merry satire. It's in the healthy tradition of kidding contemporary iniquities. The fact that it was banned in Boston puts it in pretty fast company: e.g., 'Ulysses,' 'Sister Carrie,' 'Well of Loneliness.' Marc offers it in the appropriate serio-comic vein." See Gateway Singers Web site, <http://www.starbeams.com/lot.htm>. In their version, the Gateway Singers, too, eliminated mention of Walter O'Brien. In the final stanza they sing, "Fight the fare increase. Yes, fight the fare increase" instead of "Fight the fare increase. Vote for Walter O'Brien." The Gateway Singers performed the song in a similar upbeat tempo to the Kingston Trio, with guitar and banjo.

Several of the Gateway Singers' original members—Lou Gottlieb, Jimmy Wood, Jerry Walter, and Barbara Dane—were involved in left-wing and Communist Party circles in California and elsewhere. Dane was a polished jazz and blues singer, one of the few white singers who worked regularly with black performers, and was later deeply involved in the civil rights and antiwar movements. Gottlieb was involved in People's Songs. Walter, according to the group's current Web site, "had always been very politically involved, and was active in the first chapter of the NAACP in San Francisco and worked for a time as an organizer for the ILWU." Dane was replaced by Elmerlee Thomas, a black woman, making the group one of the few racially integrated folk groups, a fact that kept them off several network TV shows. See Alan H. Grossman, "Manager of Integrated Quartet Alleges Network Discrimination," *Harvard Crimson*, Nov. 13, 1959, accessed at <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=109574>. Later, Ernie Lieberman (who sang under the name Ernie Sheldon and had also been involved in People's Songs and later an editor of *Sing Out!*) replaced Gottlieb in 1957.

The Gateways "were a clone of the Weavers, with Gottlieb trying to copy exactly their musical arrangements," at least initially (Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 94). They, too, sang for labor unions and other left-wing audiences. The Gateways achieved some commercial success, especially on the West Coast, but never reached the heights of the Kingston Trio, nor did their version of "M.T.A." become popular.

The Gateways met the younger Kingston Trio members at the hungry i in San Francisco and even provided them with some songs for their first album. The Gateway Singers disbanded in January 1961. Gottlieb left the Gateways and in 1959 formed the Limelitters, which had greater commercial success. Between 1960 and 1964, they recorded eleven albums, most of them for RCA, ten of which reached the Billboard 100 and one of which reached number 5 in 1961. According to AllMusic.com, "Between 1961 and 1963, the Limelitters were one of the hottest acts in show business. They made appearances on television, sang on commercials, and embarked on an exhaustive touring schedule which saw them perform as many as 310 days out of each year." For additional information on the Gateways, see Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?*, and Gottlieb, "Lou Gottlieb."

89. Shane interview; Reynolds interview.

90. Sam Berman, interview by Vrabel, April 29, 2007.

91. Pete Seeger, interview by Peter Dreier, May 5, 2007.

92. Shane interview.

93. Julia O'Brien-Merrill (O'Brien's daughter), interview by Jim Vrabel, April 20, 2007 (hereafter O'Brien-Merrill interview). Merrill provided the authors with documents found in boxes that her parents never talked about when their children were young, but which

they refused to throw out. "To think that people actually thought of my father and mother as a threat to this country is frightening," O'Brien-Merrill said in the interview.

94. FBI files on Walter A. O'Brien Jr., BS 100-17300, Feb. 12, 1965, 1.

95. Barbara Brown, interview by Jim Vrabel, June 7, 2007. Brown was one of Luscomb's housemates in Cambridge.

96. Tony Saletan, interview by Jim Vrabel, June 29, 2007.

97. Florence Luscomb (1887-1985) was a longtime fixture at women's rights, labor rights, civil rights and civil liberties, and peace demonstrations in Boston. She never married and for years lived in cooperative households where she was always the oldest member—sometimes by two generations. Luscomb eventually was forced to enter a nursing home, where she received frequent visits from her old Progressive Party friends, including Walter and Laura O'Brien. For background, see Strom, *Political Woman*.

98. Alach interview.

99. O'Brien-Merrill interview; Sam Berman, interviews by Jim Vrabel, May 16 and June 24, 2007.

100. Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*.

101. Larry Katz, interview by Peter Dreier, Aug. 15, 2007.

102. Specs Simmons, interview by Peter Dreier, June 22, 2007.

103. Minna Bromberg and Gary Alan Fine, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces* (July 2002); Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*