



THE ROOTS OF THE PROTEST ERA: MCCARTHYISM AND THE ARTIST'S VOICE IN 1950S AMERICA

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How were musicians and artists affected by McCarthyism in 1950s America?

OVERVIEW

The so-called “Protest Era” in the United States is largely associated with the Civil Rights movement and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s. But the roots of the protest era, and even some of the songs associated with it, came out of the late 1940s, during the early years of the Cold War.

By the end of World War II in 1945, America’s diplomatic relationship with the Soviet Union, once its wartime ally, had grown strained. During the late 1940s, the Soviets expanded their influence across Eastern Europe and built up a stockpile of nuclear weapons—technology that had previously been in the exclusive possession of the U.S. military. Many people in the United States came to view the Soviets, and the Communist Party that controlled the Soviet Union, as a threat to America’s newfound economic prosperity and position as world leader. In that tension between Soviet and American powers, the Cold War was born—and with it, the U.S. entered into an era in which the flipside of an unprecedented economic boom and rise in world power was the “Red Scare,” a widespread fear and suspicion of Soviets and their ideas, which many viewed as a potential threat to American life.

At the center of the Red Scare was Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, who by 1950 had become the face of a national campaign to identify communists in American society. McCarthy enflamed America’s uneasiness about Soviet power. “McCarthyism,” as his crusade became known, emerged from the worry many Americans shared that the Soviets might drop an atomic bomb on U.S. soil, a threat that led communities to practice air raid drills in preparation for an attack. But McCarthyism also fed off the anxiety that communist ideas could infiltrate the hearts and minds of American citizens. In the early 1950s the U.S. government began to produce films about the dangers posed by the Soviets and their beliefs. These films included information on how to recognize communists by their opinions and activities. Concurrently, McCarthy and his followers compiled—and in some cases publicly read and published—lists of suspected communists in various professional fields, including the entertainment industry. One of these lists appeared in *Red Channels*, a 1950 newsletter that named 151 entertainers whom its right-wing editors accused of associating with the communist party. The list included composer Leonard Bernstein, playwright Arthur Miller, and folk



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

singer Pete Seeger -- all outspoken artists who, under McCarthyism, were labeled as “subversive,” no matter their actual political affiliations or ambitions.

McCarthyism propagated an extreme version of communism that focused on the political and social control the Soviet government held over its state and people. This monolithic version of communism did not account for the multiple variations in communist ideas and practices that had existed for decades, both in Europe and in the United States. Several government programs and professional organizations in America, including social security, public education, and labor unions, had roots in socialism -- a social and economic system based on equal and fair treatment of all people that had connections to both capitalism and communism. But at the height of the Red Scare, any member or supporter of an organization that could be connected to communist ideals, no matter how tentatively, was vulnerable to being branded as a supporter of the Soviet Union.

McCarthy was only one of many political figures determined to expose communist “traitors.” As early as 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began a series of public hearings intended to uncover communists in the United States. Artists known for their political activism were particularly at risk of being targeted by HUAC. Among the hundreds who were subpoenaed by the committee were Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, co-authors of the activist Folk song “If I Had a Hammer.” Seeger and Hays had first performed the song in 1949, at a dinner hosted by members of the American Communist Party. In Seeger’s 1955 HUAC hearing, the committee interrogated Seeger as to where, and for whom, he had performed the song. Rather than answering, Seeger refuted the committee’s line of questioning outright on the grounds of his right as an American to freely express his opinions through his music. Hays, too, refused to cooperate. Both Seeger and Hays were held in contempt and were subsequently “blacklisted” in the entertainment industry. For the next several years, they were denied the opportunity to appear on television, to release music on major record labels, and to perform in many of the country’s top venues.

Unlike many other artists whose lives were destroyed by McCarthyism, Seeger remained a popular act in the 1950s and early 1960s, even with limited support from the mainstream entertainment industry. He frequently performed small informal concerts, released records on the independent “Folkways” label, and cultivated an audience of young people who admired his Folk songs -- audiences who would come of age in the 1960s and often adopt their own activist causes. Seeger’s musical spirit, and his style of activism, carried into the protest era and well beyond. Artists including Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, and Richie Havens, and later, Bob Marley, Public Enemy, and Rage Against the Machine, continued the example set by Seeger that popular artists could, and should, speak freely on issues of social and political injustice. Large scale musical events, such as George Harrison’s Concert for Bangladesh, Live Aid, and Artists United Against Apartheid, provide further examples of ways that artists have banded together to confront unfair power structures not only in the U.S. but throughout the world.

This lesson focuses on McCarthyism, the Red Scare, and how artists were targeted by HUAC during the Cold War. Students will view several government-produced “educational” films and television interviews from the 1950s, and will participate in a group reading of HUAC’s interrogations of Seeger and Hays, discussing how activist artists championed the civil liberties of American citizens.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How the Cold War increased American anxieties over Soviet power and the spread of communism in the U.S.
- Senator Joseph McCarthy and the implications of his mission to expose communists in 1950s America
- Ways that the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and publications like Red Channels targeted entertainers suspected of having communist sympathies
- How folksingers Pete Seeger and Lee Hays refused to cooperate with HUAC, invoking the the First and Fifth amendments of the U.S. Bill of Rights in their testimonies before the committee
- Pete Seeger's legacy as an inspiration for popular music artists to speak out on issues of social and political injustice

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Make connections between popular music and historical events
- Discuss figurative and connotative meanings of folk songs
- Describe the protections provided by the First and Fifth Amendments of the U.S. Bill of Rights
- Common Core: Read closely to determine what a text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text (Reading 1) sources (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Writing 2)

ACTIVITIES

PRE-LESSON ACTIVITY:

[Note to teacher: This assignment is intended as an exercise to simplify various political ideologies so that students can compare them to one another. Its purpose is to help students first understand some of the ideals of communism in relation to other political and economic systems.]

1. Ask students to research the following four terms: capitalism, socialism, communism, and totalitarianism (remind students to use reputable sources for their references). In a separate session preceding the lesson, each student should bring to class a short definition (about two sentences) for each of these terms. Definitions should be written in the student's own words.
2. Display four large sheets of poster paper, each labeled with one of the terms above. Instruct a few students at a time to come up and to write any part of their definitions on the corresponding posters. If any students find a definition previously written by a classmate that sufficiently reflects his/her own ideas, that student should add a checkmark next to the preexisting definition.

PRE-LESSON ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

3. Once everyone has added his/her comments, briefly analyze each poster with the class to explore recurring themes and to help clarify any information about that political ideology.

4. Discuss as a class:

- Why is it difficult to describe a political ideology using only two sentences? Which terms were the most difficult to define, and why?
- In a capitalist system, what is the individual's relationship to his/her personal property? How does this compare with the individual's relationship to property under socialism? Under totalitarianism?
- What is communism? How are communism and these other ideologies similar, and how are they different?

5. As needed, help students to understand that these political ideas are complex. While the government of a country such as the United States is founded on the principles of capitalism, some elements of socialism have also appeared in American domestic policy, such as welfare, social security, police and fire departments, and public education.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play audio clip of the Hip Hop group Public Enemy performing “Fight the Power,” a song released in 1989. As they listen, students should write down any words that reflect the tone of the song.

2. Next, play a clip of Folk singer Pete Seeger performing “If I Had a Hammer,” a song he originally recorded in 1949 and performed here in 1963. Once again, students should write down any words that reflect the tone of the song.

3. Discuss as a class:

- In terms of message, what do these two songs have in common with each other?
- What issues do you think each of these songs is criticizing?
- Why do you think some people might have considered these songs threatening when they were first released? How can music be used to challenge a social or political injustice?

PROCEDURE:

1. Play montage of clips from *The Challenge of Ideas*, a film about the Cold War and the ideological battle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Students should take notes on how the film depicts life in the United States versus life in the Soviet Union, and any ideological differences between the two nations.

Discuss as a class:

- What are some images from the film that illustrate a contrast between life in the United States and life in the Soviet Union in the 1950s?
- Compare the music used in the scenes featuring the U.S. with the music used in the scenes featuring the Soviet Union. How is music used as a propaganda device to make the viewer take a specific position?
- Does this version of communism look closer to capitalism, socialism, or totalitarianism? Why do you think the filmmakers wanted to portray communism this way?
- Why do you think some Americans feared the ideas of communism as much as they feared the military power of the Soviet Union?

2. Ask students: if a so-called “hot war” is defined as a battle between nations using combat and weaponry, discuss how we might define a “cold war.” Why might a cold war have conveyed as much a sense of fear and danger in the United States as a war involving armed conflict?

3. Play a newsreel clip documenting an air raid drill in New York City in the 1950s. Students should take notes on how the film presents the threat of nuclear war to American audiences.

Ask students:

- What kinds of emotions do you think people who participated in this air raid drill felt, knowing that nuclear war with the Soviet Union was a

possibility?

- How might newsreel stories such as this have promoted a sense of fear among Americans?
4. Play a clip from *Recognizing a Communist*, a film produced by the U.S. Armed Forces in the early 1950s. Students should take notes on how a person might recognize a communist, as according to the film.

Ask students:

- How does this film define communist activities?
 - Notice the sign that reads “down with the imperialists.” What does it mean to oppose imperialism, and why might many Americans have supported an anti-imperialist organization in the years immediately after World War II? Do you think opposing imperialism automatically makes a person a communist? Explain your answer.
 - What do you think was the purpose of this film, and what might have been its consequences at a time when many Americans were worried about the growing influence of the communist Soviet Union?
5. Explain that in the early years of the Cold War, the hysteria over the perceived threat of communists living in the U.S. became known as “The Red Scare” -- “Reds” being a term used to describe communists, due to their allegiance to the red Soviet flag.

Ask students:

- During the “Red Scare,” why do you think many Americans became suspicious and began to look for communists living in the United States?
 - Why might a person who publicly supported causes such as labor unions or social security have been labeled a communist during the Red Scare? Do we think of these things as being communist today? Explain.
6. Arguably the most high-profile anti-communist of the late 1940s and 1950s was Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, a

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

Republican from Wisconsin. Due to his frequent appearances on television and radio, McCarthy's public campaign to expose communists in the U.S. came to be known as "McCarthyism." Play clip of a television interview with Senator McCarthy from 1952. Students should take notes on McCarthy's position about the government's role in identifying communists.

Ask students:

- What is McCarthy's position on the government's role in identifying communists living in the U.S.?
- McCarthy claims that "treason isn't like top seed, it doesn't just grow. It's created by men with faces and men with names." Why do you think McCarthy believes it is critical to publicize the names of suspected communists?
- Why is it critical that McCarthy portrays communism as being one monolithic entity, as opposed to a complex set of ideals with multiple variations?

7. Play clip of an interview with Dr. Corliss Lamont from the same television program as the McCarthy interview. Tell students that Lamont was a leader in the American Civil Liberties Union who also ran for the New York State Senate in 1952. Students should take notes on Lamont's opinions regarding Senator McCarthy.

Ask students:

- What does Lamont believe to be the two most important issues before the American people? How does he believe these two issues are "tied up together"?
- What does Lamont criticize McCarthy for having done to the American public?
- Lamont believes that civil liberties are particularly at risk in the field of entertainment. Why might McCarthy and those who aligned themselves with his views have wanted to silence outspoken popular entertainers?

8. Distribute Handout 1: "If I Had a Hammer" Lyrics. Once again, play a video clip of Pete Seeger performing "If I Had a Hammer," a song he co-wrote with Lee Hays. Both Seeger and Hays were members of the Weavers, a popular folk music quartet during the late 1940s-early 1950s. They were also both outspoken artists who lent their musical talents to support a variety of causes, including organized labor, African-American civil rights, and disarmament. Students should examine the entire lyric sheet and the quote from Pete Seeger at the bottom of the page.

Ask students:

- Rolling Stone magazine has referred to "If I Had a Hammer" as "a labor movement anthem-cum-all-purpose activist hymn." Why do you think this song lends itself so well to a variety of causes related to social change?
 - How does the song comment on idea of power? How might it be viewed as a challenge to authority?
 - What are your immediate impressions of Pete Seeger's worldview based on his quote? How does might the quote support or dispute someone accusing Pete Seeger of being an enemy to America? Explain your answer.
9. Tell students that Seeger and Hays first performed "If I Had a Hammer" in 1949 at a dinner supporting members of the American Communist Party.

Ask students:

- Knowing where "If I Had a Hammer" was first performed, how might someone like Senator McCarthy have been able to label Seeger and Hays as being communists?
- How do you think the climate of fear that existed in 1950s America aided McCarthy in his mission to entrap and bring down those he believed to be enemies of the United States?

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

10. Distribute Handout 2: Red Channels. Explain that Red Channels was a right-wing newsletter published in 1950 that listed 151 entertainers in television and radio who its publishers accused of associating with the communist party. Among the figures listed were composer Leonard Bernstein, writer Langston Hughes, playwright Henry Miller, and Pete Seeger. Students should examine the excerpted pages from Red Channels and read the descriptions of the organizations it cited as being “communist.”

Ask students:

- Why do you think many liberal Americans, including people like Pete Seeger or Lee Hays, might have chosen to support causes promoted by organizations such as People’s Songs, the Progressive Citizens of America, and the Wallace for President Campaign?
- What is Pete Seeger’s reported role in said groups? Based on the information provided in Red Channels, can you make the conclusion that Seeger’s activities with these organizations were communist in nature? Explain why or why not.

11. Explain that Red Channels is an example of a “blacklist.” People who were blacklisted were publicly identified as “subversives,” or troublemakers. Many of those who were blacklisted lost their jobs or were unable to get hired, ruining their careers and reputations.

Ask students:

- If you were a professional musician like Pete Seeger or Lee Hays, how do you think being named as a traitor by Senator McCarthy, or having your name listed in a publication such as Red Channels, might have affected your artistic career?

(Note to teacher: blacklisted musicians were generally not able to perform in the nation’s most prestigious or lucrative concert halls, they could not appear on network television, they could not release music on major record labels, etc.)

12. People who were suspected “subversives” were also subject to being subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that interrogated hundreds of Americans accused of treasonous activities during the era of McCarthyism. Those who refused to cooperate with the committee faced the possibility of prison time.

Break students into small groups, and distribute Handout 3: HUAC Trial Transcripts. Groups will perform a dramatic readthrough of excerpts from the 1955 HUAC testimonies of folk singers Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, who had both been accused of being communists.

Students should decide who will read for each role and arrange their desks so that the students representing the HUAC congressmen are facing the defendant (Seeger or Hays).

13. As students finish the role-playing exercise, groups should discuss the questions:

- How would you describe the way that Hays and Seeger addressed the committee in their respective testimonies? What emotions did you feel while performing these transcripts?
- Did any of Hays’s or Seeger’s statements stand out to you as particularly powerful and persuasive? Which ones, and why?
- Why did Hays employ the Fifth Amendment during his testimony? How was Seeger’s testimony supported by the First Amendment?
- If you were subpoenaed to appear before HUAC, what do you think you would do, and why?

When groups have finished their discussions, ask volunteers to share out their observations with the class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Display the following two quotes:

"I think those of us who have been elected by the American people to man the watchtowers. Unless we have the intelligence to recognize the traitors, and...unless we have the guts to name them, we should be taken down from those watchtowers and should not be representing the American people."

— Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, September 29, 1952

"I decline to discuss, under compulsion, where I have sung, and who has sung my songs, and who else has sung with me, and the people I have known. I love my country very dearly, and I greatly resent this implication that some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I have known and some of my opinions make me any less of an American."

— Pete Seeger, August 18, 1955

Ask students to write a paragraph comparing these two quotes. Why does McCarthy believe it is the government's duty to recognize and name traitors? Why does Seeger "decline to discuss" the people he has known and sung with? Who do you think makes a more persuasive argument, and why?

EXTENSIONS:

1. Show students a clip of Bob Marley & the Wailers performing "Get Up, Stand Up" live in 1980. Students should conduct independent research into Bob Marley, focusing on his career as a Reggae musician and an activist.

Ask students to imagine that they attended both the Pete Seeger concert in 1963 (where he performed "If I Had a Hammer") and the Bob Marley concert in 1980. Write a one-page review of the 1980 concert, commenting on how Marley compares to Pete Seeger as an activist, and how Marley's performance of "Get Up, Stand Up" compares to Seeger's performance of "If I Had a Hammer." Be sure to address any changes in the musical style and audience reception in addition to the song lyrics and message.

2. Assign students to watch a 1963 interview with Pete Seeger, in which he discusses why he believes that folk music "has a certain kind of teeth in it." Have students conduct independent internet research into Seeger's biography and career between 1955, when he testified before HUAC, and 1963, when this television interview occurred. Point out to the students that as a result of Pete Seeger being blacklisted in the U.S., this appearance was on Australian television - not American television.

Write a 1-2 page report focusing on how being blacklisted shaped Seeger's career during

EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

the 1950s and 1960s. Be sure to discuss the records and songs Seeger recorded, the venues in which he appeared, the kinds of audiences for whom he performed, and how he interacted with those audiences.

3. Research and write a 1-2 page report on Paul Robeson, an African-American actor, singer, and left-wing activist who, like Pete Seeger, was also subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee and blacklisted during the height of the McCarthy era.

Students should locate the transcript for Robeson's HUAC testimony, delivered on June 12, 1956. Reports should provide background on Robeson's political and artistic life both before and after his appearance before HUAC. Students must also compare Robeson's testimony to the testimonies of Lee Hays and Pete Seeger, using direct quotes when necessary. Possible areas of comparison include: tone of delivery, race politics, references to the U.S. Bill of Rights, etc.

WRITING PROMPT

Imagine that you are an outspoken filmmaker, playwright, or songwriter in the 1940s and 50s. Suddenly, your name has been published in Red Channels as a suspected "subversive." You have been called before HUAC to testify and to give names of others in your industry who may be communists. Using the testimonies of Pete Seeger and Lee Hays as your guide, write a one-page prepared response to read during your HUAC trial. In your testimony, include the following:

- Your thoughts on being called before HUAC to testify
- Whether or not you will share your political affiliation with the committee
- Whether or not you will identify others within your industry that you suspect are communist

As a follow-up activity, set up a mock HUAC trial and invite students to come forward and "testify" before the committee. Afterwards, discuss as a class:

- What were common themes in prepared responses?
- Did anyone comply with the committee's requests, if so, what were his or her reasons for doing so?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Bob Marley – Get Up, Stand Up (1980)
- Pete Seeger – Interview (1963)
- Interview with Dr. Corliss Lamont (1952)
- Newsreel – New York City Air Raid Drill (1950s)
- The Challenge of Ideas (Excerpts) (1961)
- Pete Seeger – If I Had a Hammer (1963)
- Public Enemy – Fight The Power (1989)
- Interview with Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy (1952)
- Recognizing A Communist (Armed Forces Information Film No. 5) (1950s)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Pete Seeger

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: If I Had a Hammer Lyrics and Seeger Quote
- Handout 2: Red Channels Newsletter
- Handout 3: HUAC Transcripts