

# Communists, Jews and Folk Music

By Gary Cristall

**W**hile the juxtaposition of those words might be an anti-Semite's or red-baiter's nightmare or dream come true, they seem to me to sum up how folk music became a permanent and enduring part of Canadian popular culture. Having a strong identification with all three, I have always assumed that there was nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, it was always a badge of honour that the political left, and precisely Jews on the political left, had done a great deal of the work of making folk music what it came to be—a vital, diverse part of popular music, pronounced dead a number of times by the industry mainstream but always rising from its purported tomb to return stronger than ever.

A list of fifty names associated with folk music, mainly in its early days, recalled from memory, tells the tale—Harold Leventhal, Herb Gart, Sam Gesser, Alan Mills, Len Rosenthal, Doug Yeager, Sid Dolgay, Marty Bochner, Howie Bateman, Ed Cowan, Manny Greenhill, Maynard Solomon, Vivienne Stenson, Estelle Klein, Sam Goldberg, Jerry Gray, Jerry Goodis, Shimon Ash, Harvey Glatt, Marv Drimmer, Aaron Lipson, Jac Holtzman, Irwin Silber, Searle Friedman, Sylvia Friedman, Perry Friedman, Sol Jackson, Ben Chud, Ben Shek, Fagel Gartner, Claire Klein Osipov, Leonard Cohen, Kari Levitt, Chuck Fine, Sharon Trostin, Shirley Singer, Moe Asch, Emil Gartner, Zalman Yanovsky, Jack Nissenson, Ruben Blazer, Mitch Podolak, Gary Eisenkraft, Bob Silverman, Lenny Dolgoy, Esther Dolgoy, Ruth Budd, Kenny Goldstein, Lillian Marcus, and, to make it an even fifty—me, Gary Cristall.

There is not room to write even a one-sentence profile of what each of these folks did. There are performers, agents, record company founders, record distributors, concert promoters, songwriters and organizers of various stripes. Some are Americans, most are Canadians. They all had something to do with creating and/or disseminating folk music in Canada. They are all Jews and most had some connection with the Communist Party at some point in their lives. It is certainly the case that a number of important contributors to the growth of folk music as an important popular music genre were not Jewish or Communists. The fact that so many were, particularly in the period of its emergence from the late forties through the early sixties, raises the question.

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## Why the Communists?

The Communist movement found and adopted folk music in the mid-thirties. Much of the credit or blame is due to the combination of Socialist Realism and the Popular Front. The former was pronounced as the central feature of Communist culture at the Second Soviet Writers Congress in Moscow in 1934. It posited that culture should be “national in form and socialist in content,” and what is more national than folk music? Three songs written by women who were active in the miners organizing drives in Kentucky in the early thirties, songs which drew on traditional tunes but featured new class struggle lyrics, exemplified this and remain popular—“Which Side Are You On?”, “I Hate The Capitalist System” and “I Am A Union Woman,” by, respectively, Florence Reese, Sara Ogun Gunning and Aunt Molly Jackson. A year later, the Seventh Congress of the Communist International announced a fundamental change from the “class against class” strategy of the 1928 Sixth Congress. Now Communists



The original Travellers, l.-r.: Jerry Gray, Jerry Goodis, Simone Johnston, Sid Dolgay.

Photo: National Film Board of Canada

would make a united front with social democracy and “progressive” capitalists to defend democracy from fascism. One cultural implication of this strategy was the celebration of folk culture. What had been considered backward, rural, peasant music, unfit for the urban proletarian vanguard, was transformed into the essence of the national soul.

In Canada this had little effect until after the Second World War. The bulk of the Canadian Communists were gathered in ethnically defined organizations—“the halls” was the name given to them because each organization had a physical space where they held their meetings and cultural events. These organizations of Jews, Finns, Russians, Ukrainians and others promoted folk songs, among other music, from their countries of origin. A few of these groups integrated other songs from other traditions into their repertoire—“Negro” spirituals as sung by Paul Robeson; anti-fascist songs from Europe (particularly the ones sung by the Spanish Republicans in the Civil War); songs from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), printed in *The Little Red Songbook*; and new songs, written by left-wing tunesmiths in the United States—“I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night,” “The Soup Song,” “Buddy Can You Spare A Dime,” drawn from left-wing cabaret and musicals like *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Pins and Needles*. This laid the foundation for a new popular music, but it didn't yet have a name.

In the period after the Second World War, the Canadian Communists took up the slogan “Put Canada First”. This was supposed to rally Canadians against the imperialist threat to the south. In the field of the arts this meant supporting the creation of an authentic Canadian cultural expression, and folk music was part

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of it. The National Federation of Labour Youth (NFLY)—essentially the youth wing of the Communist Party (now called the Labour Progressive Party) played a big role in this. So did the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), the presence of the Party in Jewish life. Folk songs were hard to find, but dedicated activists searched them out and began to sing them along with the broader repertoire described above. The term folk music came to encompass both. In December of 1946 the NFLY held the first "Hootenanny" at Massey Hall featuring American People's Songs founders Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, then of the Almanac Singers, soon to be founders of a new group, The Weavers. An ad in *The Toronto Star* stated, "Yes sir, the hootenanny is going to be a real bust-up and guaranteed entertainment," and called on "Banjo, ukulele and guitar players who sing Canadian folk songs" to "bring your musical instruments with you."

The UJPO launched the UJPO Folk Singers under brilliant arranger and pianist Fagel Gartner. In 1952 and 1953 they toured Canada from Montreal to Vancouver Island, singing a repertoire of Canadian folk songs, Jewish songs, and political songs from around the world, and some of the few new songs being written that celebrated Canadian history from a Popular Front and Put Canada First perspective—songs like "Louis Riel," which ended with the rousing chorus, "Those who hanged him from the gallows are now forgotten men, but where people fight for freedom, Louis Riel lives again." The tours by the UJPO Folk Singers inspired a host of singing groups, often with the name "youth singers" after a municipal identifier—The Vancouver Youth Singers, Vancouver Folk Singers, Winnipeg Youth Singers, Regina, Montreal, etc. In Edmonton, the Tamarack Singers were formed, and in Ste. Catherine's The Garden City Singers emerged. At the UJPO camp outside Toronto—Camp Naivelt—The Travellers formed in 1953. They went on to become Canada's preeminent and longest-lasting folk ensemble, having a radio hit in with their Canadian version of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land."<sup>1</sup> These groups, and those who were inspired by them, launched folk music in Canada. Tracing their roots back to the Communist Party and its galaxy of kindred organizations is a useful and honourable part of understanding how folk music came to be.

## Why The Jews?

There is a growing body of scholarship about the influence of Jews in the entertainment industry and in dissident politics. A number of ideas have been put forth to explain why so many minor and major figures in the arts were and are Jewish. There was a rich culture among the late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. They read, debated and contained many shop floor intellectuals who were deeply committed to culture and politics. Many of them had been members of socialist organizations at home—the Bund, the various Socialist parties and anarchist organizations. Jews had an identity as a people but not as a nation. Zionism was a minority trend in the Jewish community until after the Second World War. Many children of Jewish immigrants wanted to identify with their new country and were passionate about folk music, part of their identity

as Canadians. They came obsessed with a desire to break down the barriers that had excluded them from full membership in society in the countries they had left. They had experienced oppression as both workers and as Jews.

Jewish immigrants also came with a rich entrepreneurial tradition. While the caricature of the Jew as peddler or small business owner is often overdone, it is also true that most Jewish immigrants were urban, at least coming from small towns—the stereotypical "shtetl." Some gravitated to small trade, and the music business and other arts at the time were not the concentrated capitalist behemoths they later became. The fact that many did not have the resources to attend university, and that many universities had quotas limiting the number of Jews, made their aspirations to higher education impossible. Jerry Gray of the Travellers went on the first UJPO Folk Singers tour because he could not enter the University of Toronto dentistry school in 1952 because the Jewish quota was full for that year. Sam Gesser, who ran Folkways Records' Canadian operation, told me much the same—he did it because there were limited opportunities for Jews in Montreal and this was something he could do without capital. The Communist Party was a training ground for organizers. Organizing meetings was perfect training for organizing concerts. The party and its ancillary organizations were schools that produced a generation of entrepreneurial intellectuals perfectly suited to the arts as marginal, knowledge-based small businesses. Maybe. The fact remains that while the majority of those in the Communist movement were not Jews, the majority of those who got folk music off the ground were.

## A New Era

The Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956 created a crisis for Jews in the Canadian Communist Party and its satellites. The revelations of Stalin's terror and anti-Semitism in the "home of socialism" were devastating. Within a few years, many had left. In 1958 The Kingston Trio put folk music on the pop music map with "Tom Dooley." By the early sixties the world had changed. Many Jews with roots in the left remained in the music business, but they distanced themselves from the politics to one degree or another. The growth of folk music made it attractive to entrepreneurs without any ideological vision of the role of the music. However, the legacy of the role that Jews and Communists played in creating and promoting folk music as a specific genre of popular music carries with it traces of its origins—the acceptance of politics as a legitimate component of folk music, an internationalist vision, a lexicon of Yiddish terms still used widely in the music business, and the fact that the great iconic figures of folk music are also associated with the struggle for a better world and offer younger artists a model that includes using the music for more than simply entertainment.

Folk music was a plot hatched by Communists and Jews. The measure of its success is that, like any successful plot, 60 years later there is hardly a trace of who hatched it. It's time to honour the plotters.♦

<sup>1</sup> See our Jan./Feb. 2002 issue for Gary's review of the film *The Travellers: This Land Is Your Land*. – Eds.