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TAKE THREE: THE BANJO

Five Strings for Freedom: The Banjo in Cold War America

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In 1952, the banjo-wielding country star Louis Marshall "Grandpa" Jones released the song "I'm No Communist." Recorded one year before the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Jones's song links the Red Scare fears of espionage to the government's ever-expanding bureaucracies and an ever-increasing tax rate required to pay the salaries of allegedly disloyal bureaucrats. In the chorus, Jones sings a banjo-driven loyalty oath from the witness stand of a 45-rpm record: "I'm no communist, I'll tell you that right now / I believe a man should own his house, and car, and cow / I like this private ownership; I want to be left alone / Let the government run its business, and let me run my own."[1] Jones spoke for a version of America rooted in adherence to free market capitalism, private property, and small government. The banjo made that ideology sound down-home.

The banjo-playing folkie Pete Seeger sat at the center of concerns over communist subversion not long after Jones's record hit that free market. At a hearing held by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1955, Seeger introduced himself and his occupation "as a student of American folklore, and I make my living as a banjo picker––sort of damning in some people's opinion."[2] He sang left-wing songs with his banjo like the pro-labor ultimatum "Which Side Are You On?" and the labor-turned-civil-rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." He carried his banjo to the hearing that day in Washington, DC, and offered to play, but his HUAC interrogators declined to listen. Seeger never said he was a communist when pressed by the committee, but he never said he was *not* a communist either.[3]

Both Jones and Seeger performed variations of American roots music, so it made sense that they both played the banjo. According to one manufacturer in 1905, the banjo was America's "national instrument," equivalent to the mandolin in Italy or the guitar in Spain. Invented by enslaved Africans, popularized by white minstrels in blackface, beloved by sheet music consumers, and recorded by the earliest jazz and hillbilly bands on shellac, the banjo served as the most common denominator of American music for a century.[4] By the 1940s, however, most country and jazz bands had abandoned the banjo precisely because it recalled a history of minstrelsy, rurality, and the folk past. The electric guitar took its place in honky tonk and swing bands.

[1]Grandpa Jones, "I'm No Communist" b/w "Pickin' On Me," RCA Victor 47-4771, 1952.

[2]Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 294–5.

[3]Ibid., 295–8; Proceedings Against Peter Seeger, House of Representatives, 84th Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 2920, July 25, 1956, Peter Seeger FBI File, Section 3, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.archives.gov/research/foia/digitized-fbi-files/peter-seeger [hereafter Seeger FBI File].

[4]Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 1.

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That left traditional artists like Jones and Seeger to forge a future for the instrument in the mid-twentieth century, and each spread their political visions as they did so.

Jones's anticommunism matched well with the mainstream politics of the country music industry, while Seeger emerged as a leading radical of the folk music scene during the Cold War era. Those divergent political paths remind us that we should not hear the banjo merely as the sound of conformity, nor is it purely an instrument of dissent. Instead, the banjo functioned as a musical machine that helped artists and listeners process their Cold War allegiances. Scholars have noted how music functioned as a powerful resource for the government during the ideological struggle with communism. The U.S. State Department sponsored tours for Black-led jazz bands to counter Soviet criticisms of U.S. white supremacy, and the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service and the Voice of America broadcast U.S. popular music as soft power propaganda efforts.[5] By centering the banjo through the careers of Jones and Seeger, we acquire a new way to hear music's role in the Cold War, this time from the ground up when these artists played a role in reviving the popularity of the instrument with domestic and international audiences.

The banjo is more than an avatar for America's racial and cultural histories. Jones and Seeger used the instrument to shape the politics of their present day by playing and singing their way into debates over capitalism, partisanship, and the U.S. military. They turned the banjo into a sonic tool of opposing definitions of freedom—one rooted in outspoken anticommunism and another advancing the leftist edge of U.S. progressivism. The Cold War would show just how emblematic of the nation this instrument was, as the politics of the banjo became the politics of the United States itself.

When these artists launched their music careers, no one could have predicted that they would carry the banjo into the geopolitical struggles of the mid-twentieth century. In fact, Grandpa Jones began his country music career playing the guitar, not the banjo. Born on a Kentucky tobacco farm in 1913, Jones moved to Akron, Ohio, with his family in the 1920s. He found success singing hillbilly and gospel songs at dances and talent shows, eventually landing a radio gig while still in high school. Jones relocated to Boston in 1935, where his grouchiness and aged voice affectation earned him the nickname "Grandpa," which he adopted at age twenty-two, wearing wigs, a false moustache, and makeup to lean into the geriatric character.[6]

In 1937, Jones joined the "Midnight Jamboree" on the radio station WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, alongside Cousin Emmy who was a master of the clawhammer banjo technique.[7] This "down-picking" or frailing style of playing developed most recently from folk and minstrelsy traditions, although it likely holds ties to African approaches as well. It predated the three-finger picking technique popularized in bluegrass music and was distinct from the plectrum playing used in jazz settings or with four-string tenor banjos. In the clawhammer style, the musician curls their fingers towards the palm of their "picking" hand, while flexing their thumb up and away from the fingers, vaguely making the shape of a hammer. The banjoist plays by brushing the longest four strings with their fingernails and plucking the short drone string with their thumb, combining to deliver the rhythm and melody of a tune.[8] Jones hounded Cousin Emmy enough that she gave him lessons, and he gradually added the instrument to his show.[9]

[5]Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Alan L. Heil, Jr., *Voice of America: A History* (New York, 2003); David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945–1953* (Columbia, MO, 2000); Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY, 2000).

[6]Louis M. "Grandpa" Jones, *Everybody's Grandpa: Fifty Years Behind the Mike*, with Charles K. Wolfe (Knoxville, TN, 1984), 13, 30–6, 44–52.

[7]Ibid., 62–7.

[8]On the clawhammer/frailing technique, see Robert B. Winans, ed., *Banjo Roots and Branches* (Urbana, IL, 2018); and Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd rev. ed. (Austin, TX, 2015), 25, 327–9.

[9]Jones, *Everybody's Grandpa*, 67.

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The U.S. Army helped Jones become an unwitting global ambassador for the banjo and country music during World War II. Stationed in Germany, he formed a group called the Munich Mountaineers in 1945. They played every morning on the Armed Forces Network (AFN), the continent's branch of the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), and these airwaves offered a powerful medium for making country music fans of U.S. service members and European civilian listeners alike. Although Jones could not find a banjo when the Mountaineers began, a fellow soldier delivered a brand-new Vega five-string to Jones, claiming that he had stolen it from a Special Services club in England. Jones not only played it with the Munich Mountaineers, but he also carried it home to start his postwar career. As Jones recalled in 1984, "You could say that I recorded my first hit with a hot banjo, but if the government ever wants to reclaim it, it sits today in the Country Music Hall of Fame."[10]

Grandpa Jones and his banjo found eager military audiences again in March 1951 during a two-week tour of Japan and South Korea arranged by the country music impresario Connie B. Gay. During the run, Grandpa Jones performed for an estimated 38,000 troops fighting in the Korean War and recorded concerts for rebroadcast on the AFRS's Far East Network (FEN). His repertoire of songs like "Mountain Dew" and "I'll Fly Away" and the portability of the banjo proved to be key for this success (Figure 1). The *Washington Post* described Gay and Jones as playing to soldiers who were "crouching in foxholes and behind Sherman tanks on the front lines of Korea."[11] With his five-string clawhammer style and geriatric routine played for laughs, Jones brought a bit of banjo bonhomie to the front lines.

Jones's warm reception also hinted at the potential of the U.S. service members as country music fans and record purchasers. In 1952, the country music press reported that the genre had swept "the European continent like a prairie fire." The fan magazine *Country & Western Jamboree* claimed in 1955 that, "In Germany, a large majority of the listening audience … is composed of the native European 'eavesdropping' to hear what this 'American music is all about.'" Connie B. Gay took advantage of that international fervor and began booking more country tours of installations for Jones and a stable of country talent in Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean.[12]

The AFN boosted the amount of country music on the air over the course of the 1960s, including rebroadcasts of the *Grand Ole Opry*, where Grandpa Jones became a regular cast member. More country music on military airwaves encouraged international sales for the genre. In 1968, the Post Exchange stores in Europe frequented by Americans deployed there reported that country music made up around 65 percent of their record sales.[13] Jones and his banjo had helped cultivate that market, fostering powerful and lucrative connections between the country music industry and the military during the early Cold War and helping to brand country music as a particularly patriotic, anticommunist genre.

But while Jones spent the Cold War in service to the U.S. military, Pete Seeger was playing his banjo in defiance of the political repression that swept the nation. Seeger was born in 1919 and had grown up surrounded by his musicologist/musician parents' radical politics and avant-garde tastes. He began playing the five-string banjo in 1935 after a trip to a folk song festival in North Carolina. Not only did this trip awaken Seeger to the charms of the instrument, but he also fell in love with the songs he heard, which he believed "had all the meat of human life in them."[14] Seeger had found the songs of the "people" and so began his lifelong pursuit of

[10]Ibid., 91, 94.

[11]Sonia Stein, "He's Gay in Foxhole or Foyer," *Washington Post*, July 22, 1951, Section IV, 1; Joseph M. Thompson, *Cold War Country: How Nashville's Music Row and the Pentagon Created the Sound of American Patriotism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2024), 30–1.

[12]"Europe Goes Hillbilly," *Country Song Roundup*, June 1952; "C&W Goes Big in Germany," *Country & Western Jamboree*, June 1955, 11; Thompson, *Cold War Country*, 43–6.

[13]Omer Anderson, "Country Wins Europe GI's to Tune of $4.2 Mil. Yearly," *Billboard*, Jan. 13, 1968, 1.

[14]Pete Seeger, *The Incompleat Folksinger*, ed. Jo Metcalf Schwartz (New York, 1972), 13.

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Figure 1. The cover of a tour program for Grandpa Jones and His Grandchildren. Jones, along with accompanists Ramona Jones and Mary Klick, who are also featured in the illustration, performed on the front lines of the Korean War in 1951. This tour helped popularize the banjo and country music in general with international audiences (Connie B. Gay Collection, courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum).

performing folk music. He felt that music could be a tool of celebrating and liberating those who existed outside of what he saw as the exploitative capitalist regimes of politicians, businesspeople, and other would-be tyrants.

By 1941, Seeger had formed the Almanac Singers and performed for the most radical elements of the Popular Front with a repertoire of songs like "Talking Union," "Which Side Are You On?," and "The Ballad of Harry Bridges." He joined the U.S. Army in 1942 and

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won a soldier talent contest by singing "Round and Round Hitler's Grave."[15] For a brief window, it seemed that his antiracist, antifascist, pro-labor causes could find a legitimate home in the spectrum of U.S. politics, even in the army.

After the war, Seeger's group the Weavers notched a series of hits including "Goodnight Irene" but lost television contracts after right-wingers accused the group of communist ties.[16] He also withstood the scrutiny of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), whose surveillance of his political affiliations dated back to World War II and only intensified during the first decade of the Cold War. When he appeared before HUAC with his banjo in 1955, Seeger defied the committee's attempts to limit his freedom of political and musical expression, although he ultimately received an indictment for contempt of Congress for his refusal to comply with the government's inquiries (Figure 2).

Seeger's banjo may not have incited the revolution that politicians expected, but it was the key instrument in igniting the folk music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. He played churches, schools, civil rights rallies, and anywhere he could encourage young people to embrace the music and the messages of his progressive politics. With his banjo and songs like "We Shall Overcome," Seeger modeled participatory democracy through his concert sing-alongs. He also mentored Odetta, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan, while teaching a generation to escape the "Little Boxes" where Cold War conformity trapped them.[17] Perhaps a revolution had occurred after all.

The mid-century folk revival also took Seeger and the banjo to global audiences. He toured Asia, Africa, Europe, and even the Soviet Union where he met listeners who knew his songs and his expectation that they would sing along with him. After a performance in Vicenza, Italy, in 1964, communist newspaper *l'Unità* commented, "If all the audience could get up onto the stage … Pete Seeger would be a happy man." Sounding somewhat surprised, the reporter claimed that the Americans in the audience were "undeterred by the fact that Seeger is known to reveal scorching truths and atrocious facts about the circumstances in his great country."[18] Back home, Seeger endured attacks from right-wing personalities who called him a "hillbilly 'proletariat'" and cited his HUAC hearing testimony as evidence of his alleged communism.[19]

The folk revival also launched an interest in bluegrass music and the three-finger banjo-picking pioneered by Earl Scruggs of Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys. Flatt and Scruggs soared in popularity through the festival circuit and appearances on *The Beverly Hillbillies*.[20] Radio play on the armed forces' AFN and FEN had also given bluegrass a boost, particularly in Japan, where college students formed dozens of bluegrass acts and prized Scruggs's virtuosic picking.[21] In 1964, Scruggs believed that the banjo was "experiencing a new vogue" and had risen unexpectedly to "a status symbol for collegians and intellectuals" thanks to the folk revival.[22] He made a fair point, but status was never the goal for Seeger; freedom was.

The meaning of freedom seemed to be on the line in the late 1960s, and once again Grandpa Jones and Pete Seeger embodied the domestic and global politics of the Cold War. In 1968, Seeger took his banjo and performed a medley of historical songs critiquing war on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. He then switched to the twelve-string guitar and ended with "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," a not-so-veiled song about the quagmire of the

[15]Ibid., 15, 18.

[16]Ibid., 21–3.

[17]David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? Pete Seeger* (New York, 1981), 215–29.

[18]*l'Unità*, "A Successful Appearance at the Teatro Olimpico, the Audience Sang with Pete Seeger," Jan. 17, 1964, Seeger FBI File, Section 6.

[19]Rev. Paul C. Neipp, "Pete Seeger, Identified Communist, to Entertain at Walther League Convention," *Through to Victory*, Mar. 1965, 2, Seeger FBI File, Section 6.

[20]Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Urbana, IL, 2005), 259–63.

[21]"Country Music Goes International," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, Nov. 2, 1963, 167.

[22]Earl and Louise Scruggs, "Five String Banjo: Vogue Hits New High as a Result of Earl Scruggs' [*sic*] Influence," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, Nov. 14, 1964, 50–1.

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Figure 2. Pete Seeger sings and plays the banjo in 1955. During the Cold War, Seeger embodied the tradition of the folk-singing radical. His banjo defined the sound of his leftist politics and the willingness to resist HUAC intimidation (Fred Palumbo, *World Telegram & Sun*, Library of Congress).

Vietnam War.[23] Jones, fully embedded in Nashville's country music industry, moved in different circles. He continued performing on the *Grand Ole Opry*, appeared regularly on *Hee Haw*, and campaigned for George Wallace.[24]

Where America went, so too did the banjo. And despite the different visions of the United States reflected by Jones and Seeger, they shared a language and a lineage heard through their chosen instrument. What could be more fitting? To hear the banjo is to hear those national contradictions—freedom and enslavement, liberty and surveillance, performance and authenticity, worldliness and provincialism—all condensed into a simple machine of wood, wire, and skin. These artists, their respective musical styles, and their politics helped to export the United States' political and cultural battles around the world during the Cold War. Which side was the banjo on? That depended on who was playing it.

Joseph M. Thompson (he/him) is assistant professor of history at Mississippi State University. His first book, *Cold War Country: How Nashville's Music Row and the Pentagon Created the Sound of American Patriotism* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2024), analyzes the economic, political, and symbolic connections between the country music industry and the U.S. military since World War II. Twitter: @JM_Thompson.

[23]Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?*, 269–70.

[24]Jones, *Everybody's Grandpa*; "Artists Campaign for Alabama Winner," *CMA Close-Up*, July 1970, Frist Library and Archive, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, TN.

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