

Pete Seeger and the Red Scare

Overview

The Almanac Singers were the first urban folk group. Led by Woody Guthrie, they included Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, and their songs for unions and peace were popular among leftists. Pete Seeger was a tireless champion of folk music. In 1955 he was blacklisted for being a communist and barred from playing commercial venues. Resolute, Seeger traveled the country performing wherever he could and encouraging audiences to join in and make their own music.

The following lesson focuses on the Red Scare and the question of what it means to be patriotic. Students will examine the historical framework of McCarthyism and how it affected freedom of speech. They will use this knowledge to think critically about the term “un-American.”

Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Think critically about the climate of fear in the 1950s that led to a blacklist of artists such as Pete Seeger who sympathized with leftist causes.
- Recognize the prevalence of folk music in both rural and urban areas.
- Understand the significant risk that artists sometimes have taken in order to speak their minds and have their voices heard.
- Communicate using verbal and written means

Materials

- CD player
- Music from Pete Seeger
- Internet access or book/encyclopedia articles
- Learning journals

Introductory Exercise

Complete a Jigsaw activity around the Red Scare and the topic of blacklisting during McCarthyism. Break students into groups of 3-4. Assign each student in the group a different research topic about the Red Scare. Topic suggestions include: Communism, Joseph McCarthy, The HUAC committee, the blacklisting of Pete Seeger, and The Hollywood Ten.

Have each student present their research findings to the other students in their small group. Students should take notes on their peer’s research in their learning journals while they are talking. Allow students the opportunity to discuss their findings as a small group.

Follow this activity by asking each group to create a timeline of the events leading up to and surrounding the blacklisting of artists such as Pete Seeger during this time period. The timeline should include most of these major events:

- 1938: A temporary committee was created in the US House of Representatives to investigate anti-Americanism and subversive activities. It was called the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities and Propaganda in the United States.
- 1945: The committee was replaced with the permanent House Committee on Un-American Activities.

- 1947: A search for communists in the motion picture industry began. The “Hollywood Ten” are blacklisted and sentenced to prison terms.
- 1947: The Truman administration barred Communists or people who associated with Communists from jobs in government
- 1950: McCarthy announced that he had a list of 205 Communists in the US department of state.
- 1951: McCarthy leads the second wave of HUAC hearings and subpoenas some of the most prominent entertainers of the era and demands that they name names of suspected Communists in the entertainment industry.
- 1954: McCarthy conducted televised hearings of those accused of being Communists.
- 1954: McCarthy is censured by the US Senate for his methods of investigation.
- 1955: The HUAC called Seeger to hearings and accused him of being a member of the Communist party. Seeger cited the First Amendment in his defense.

Focus Exercise

Begin this exercise by discussing the following statements or questions about Pete Seeger’s blacklisting and the blacklisting of artists in general:

- Discuss the following quote by Pete Seeger:
“Our reputation throughout the world suffers when citizens in other countries read in their papers about Americans being pilloried or jailed for their opinions. If one truly loves America, one should try to put inquisitors out of business.”
- In your opinion, why was Pete Seeger blacklisted?
- What does the term “un-American” mean to you? Do you think that the HUAC committee had the same understanding? Explain your answer.
- Could this type of situation happen today?
- Have you heard of people being called “unpatriotic” for criticizing the government? Is this a fair judgment? Why or why not?
- Do you think that blacklisting people from work in the United States for their political or ideological beliefs is patriotic? Explain your answer.
- Do you think that Bob Dylan’s music is considered revolutionary? Explain your answer.

Next, stage a role-play activity with students set in the McCarthy era wherein half of the students must argue that his music is a danger to society, and the other half must defend his right to free speech. Students should use specific examples from his music and political activity when applicable.

Follow up

Have students read and discuss the chapter in Pete Seeger’s book *The Incomplete Folksinger* entitled “A Question of Patriotism.”

Read Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* and discuss how his story of the Salem witch trials was influenced by the blacklisting of artists at the time he wrote the play.