

## Woody's Songs Go to War on the BBC

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During the famed summer Woody Guthrie spent writing songs for the Bonneville Power Administration, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. Guthrie learned of the events as he hitchhiked from Portland back to New York. He appeared on Pete Seeger's doorstep near the end of June 1941, greeting him with the observation, "Well, I guess we're not going to be singing any more of them peace songs."<sup>1</sup> From that point forward, he devoted himself and his songwriting to the war effort, collaborating with the Almanac Singers on numbers like "Reuben James" and "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" even before the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. From morale-boosting choruses to lengthy ballads based on news articles, Guthrie's wartime songs were filled with every bit as much passion and conviction as his union songs and Dust Bowl ballads of the previous decade. Thus, when the BBC sought Alan Lomax's recommendations for American folk music and musicians to utilize in wartime features programs, Guthrie and other members of the Almanac Singers were obvious choices. As a result of Lomax's endorsement, Guthrie appeared in two radio ballad operas on the BBC in 1944-1945, *The Martins and the Coys* and *The Chisholm Trail*. Through his involvement in these productions, Guthrie became an ambassador of American folk music for English listeners as his songs went to war on the British airwaves.

When Hitler opened the Eastern front, Guthrie, Seeger, and other Almanac Singers found themselves forced to "flip-flop" their political allegiances.<sup>2</sup> Once firmly opposed to the interventionist policies of Churchill and Roosevelt, they were now unexpectedly fighting on the same side. Guthrie viewed it as a strange but necessary course of action and truest to Communist ideals, explaining, "The world ain't all good or all bad, things happen fast, and change around."<sup>3</sup> Lee Hays recalled, "All of a sudden, it became one war, instead of two, and there was some chance of beating fascism on its own ground, which everybody was for. But it sure knocked hell out of our repertoire."<sup>4</sup> Over the next months, newly written Almanac anthems like "Reuben James" and "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" replaced the antiwar, anti-interventionist songs of their first album, *Songs for John Doe* (Almanac Records 102), which had been pulled from distribution upon news of the Soviet invasion.

This body of pro-war repertoire launched the Almanac Singers into the national spotlight in the weeks following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Norman Corwin wove their performance of "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" throughout his radio series, *This Is War*, which premiered in February 1942 on all four national networks, reaching some 30 million American listeners. For a time, additional radio appearances, write-ups in major publications, and record deals suggested that the Almanac Singers

had become the new voice of the American people. Their popularity with the general public proved short-lived, as headlines soon emerged calling attention to the group's anti-interventionist past. Media accusations of political hypocrisy reflected Americans' unwillingness to accept patriotic pro-war repertoire from an ensemble that had built its reputation on its antiwar stance.<sup>5</sup> Before the war's end, however, fresh opportunity arose for Guthrie and the Almanac Singers to contribute to the war effort in a transatlantic setting.

In 1943-44, Guthrie served on three merchant marine ships and was subsequently drafted into the US Army as a teletype operator, but he remained determined to see that his songs and writings were his most important offering to the war effort. He explained his conviction in a letter to the local draft board requesting leave to finish his work on two projects, a novel and a songbook. Arguing that the resulting publications would do more good for the war effort than his service as a galley man on a Liberty ship, Guthrie wrote:

I have done a lot of reading and studying about the true nature of the enemy that we are fighting, and it has been my work to create stories, songs, radio programs, and so forth, to inspire people to do more work and to fight harder to win this war as soon and as thoroughly as we can...

MY WORK HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO BRING ABOUT BETTER FEELINGS BETWEEN SOLDIERS AND SEAMEN AND CIVILIANS AND SERVICE MEN, BETWEEN ALL SORTS OF WORKERS AND FIGHTERS IN ALL THE WALKS OF LIFE.<sup>6</sup>

As a member of the armed forces, Guthrie had strong opinions about how wartime songs should sound. "I think the radio songs should be a lot more gutsy than they are and with more of a victorious sound to them," he wrote to Marjorie. "To tell how bad you feel is almost a waste of time these days. Give us reasons for feeling hopeful and good. Those are the best sounds you can hear when you're out here on this ocean."<sup>7</sup> Guthrie wrote the type of songs he felt were needed, his lyrics alternately lambasting Hitler's regime, calling for sacrificial patriotism, buoying morale, and memorializing events in the name of Allied victory.

Folk songs like Guthrie's, both topical and otherwise, were also desirable to the BBC during the war. In June 1943, the BBC transferred one of their features producers, D. G. Bridson, to New York, intending him to create new and innovative programming that promoted Anglo-American cultural exchange as a part of the war effort. Though the corporation hoped that Bridson would travel the country and create programs featuring the regional diversity of the United States, the producer spent most of his time in New York in the company of colleagues such as Alan Lomax and his circle, which included Guthrie and many of the folk singers active in New

York at the time. Bridson first met Lomax, a seasoned folk song collector and radio producer, earlier that year when they had worked together remotely on the CBS-BBC series *Transatlantic Call: People to People*. Now in New York, Bridson called on Lomax's assistance in developing a new idea for radio ballad operas featuring American folk music.

Bridson's notion of creating a ballad opera specifically for the medium of radio was innovative, though the original genre dated back to the eighteenth century. In the spirit of traditional ballad opera, he envisioned a feature program that would be a spoken-word play with vernacular songs and contrafacta interpolated throughout the drama.<sup>8</sup> Between 1944 and 1945, Bridson was involved in the creation of three such programs, each approximately forty minutes long and employing a different archetypal American theme. The first, *The Man Who Went to War*, centered on African American music and experience and was written in collaboration with Langston Hughes.<sup>9</sup> The second, *The Martins and the Coys*, was about Appalachian mountaineers and feuding clans, and the third, *The Chisholm Trail*, was about cowboys and the western frontier. The British producer enlisted Lomax to select and arrange music for the first two of these productions; Alan's sister and former Almanac Singer, Bess Lomax Hawes, took over for the final program when Lomax was drafted. Alan and Bess drew upon their knowledge of folk and roots music and their connections to the New York City folk community to provide the highest quality repertoire and performers, and the cumulative casts of the three productions form an impressive list: Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, Josh White, the Hall Johnson Choir, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Lily Mae Ledford, Hally Wood, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Wade Mainer, Cisco Houston, Lee Hays, and numerous others.

Bridson's radio ballad operas were meant to fulfill important wartime functions while providing British listeners with lively entertainment. Most obviously, they were designed to boost morale on the British home front and encourage perseverance. The programs also contributed to a larger ongoing effort at the BBC to strengthen British-American relations. Strategists believed that the cooperative support and solidarity of the British and American home fronts was critical to Allied success in the war. To this end, early on in the war Britain launched an initiative of Anglo-American cultural exchange intended to cultivate a sense of unity and mutual understanding. Producers at the BBC felt uniquely positioned to assist in these efforts. Laurence Gilliam, Head of the BBC Features department, laid this out clearly in an August 1941 memo entitled, "The Projection of America for British Listeners [and] The Projection of Britain for American Listeners." In it, he wrote:

There is an urgent need to organise the supply of programmes, particularly features, with the object of making the United States, Canada, and South America better understood in both this country and the rest of the Empire...

There is in this country an immediate interest in the United States as an arms factory; the projection of this is dangerous, but careful topical reflection in programmes about the manufacture of bombers, the supply of food and raw materials, the kind of people and the kind of spirit behind these activities will supply an immediate need here.

Much more important is the job of putting across a real and basic understanding of America and American people to the British. Features can play their part in this, supplementing the work of Gram Swing and Alistair Cooke, by giving dramatic and entertaining programmes about Americans and the American scene.<sup>10</sup>

Such broadcast goals dovetailed with topical programs the BBC had begun to develop in the late 1930s. Series like Alistair Cooke's twelve-part American history in song, *I Hear America Singing* (1938) and the BBC New York-produced *The Negro Sings* (1938-1939) on the foundations of jazz, demonstrate the corporation's existing interest in culturally educational programming on American subjects. Reorienting future programming of this type toward the war effort was a natural adaptation, and it was one of the reasons that the BBC sent Bridson to the United States. The ballad operas were, in many ways, an ideal contribution, for they offered British audiences distinctly American expressions of cultural identity while directly addressing the war and assuring Britons of American commitment to the Allied cause.

Though it is worth noting that Woody Guthrie was one of only two musicians who contributed in some way to all three ballad operas, he was only significantly involved in *The Martins and the Coys* and *The Chisholm Trail*.<sup>11</sup> He played a major role in defining the sound of American folk song in these programs, performing songs of his own composition as well as traditional material. In the mid-1940s, the Dust Bowl balladeer would have been unknown to all but the most niche listeners among British audiences. Alongside those of his fellow cast members, Guthrie's performances in the ballad operas offered Britons an alternative to the commercialized "folk" fare of Big Bill Campbell, Gene Autry, and Frank Luther, who were more familiar to British listeners.<sup>12</sup>

Bridson's second ballad opera, *The Martins and the Coys*, was a comedy written by Alan Lomax's wife, Elizabeth Lomax, who was a professional writer employed at the Office of War Information. The play is loosely based on Almanac Singer Millard Lampell's rewrite of a 1936 Ted Weems hit, "The Martins and the Coys," composed by Alan Cameron (Decca 810). Cameron's novelty number was a humorous take on the infamous nineteenth-century feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys that played upon popular hillbilly stereotypes of the day. Lampell's 1942 adaptation, titled "The New Martins and the Coys," brought the feud forward into the twentieth century and depicted the two families setting

aside their differences to join forces against German fascism. The third stanza and refrain summarize the events:

Mr. Coy shook hands with Mr. Martin,  
He said, "We won't be safe till Hitler's through,  
So suppose we call a truce, until we cook his goose,  
'Cause I hate him even worse than I hate you."

Oh, the Martins and the Coys,  
They were reckless mountain boys,  
They'd take up family feudin' when they'd meet.  
But now for the duration  
They have changed their occupation,  
And they're fightin' side by side  
'Til Hitler's beat.<sup>13</sup>

The ballad opera opens with the Martins going bear hunting on Coy property, and a run-in between the two families establishes the longstanding feud. Nearly from the play's beginning, however, family members one by one decide that the war against fascism is reason to put the quarrel on hold. Woody Guthrie plays young Alec Coy, who is drafted and finds himself assigned to pilot training in the same unit as his sworn enemy, Ben Martin; over the course of the play, they agree to call a truce for the sake of the Allied cause. Meanwhile, Alec Coy's sister falls in love with Ben Martin by way of a long-distance relationship, and Dellie Coy and Uncle Boone Martin (the matriarch and patriarch of their respective clans) find solace in one another's companionship in the absence of their enlisted loved ones. When Alec and Ben visit home on leave, Ben and Sary elope during a square dance held in the conscripts' honor. It is discovered at the dance that the various factions amongst the two families have reconciled with one another, and the ballad opera ends with everyone dancing together while the newlyweds daydream about their plans for after the war.

Selecting a musical cast was not one of Lomax's designated responsibilities for *The Martins and the Coys*, but the group of musicians who were engaged for the production unquestionably bears the mark of his influence; in fact, he was already acquainted with every one of the performers. Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie were both Almanac Singers and personal friends, and Lomax was an important patron in Guthrie's career. Seeger was able to obtain military leave for *The Martins and the Coys* rehearsals and recording, and Guthrie and Cisco Houston were between assignments with the merchant marine. Burl Ives had long impressed Lomax and the two had worked together on several occasions, including on Lomax's 1941 CBS program *Back Where I Come From*. Having been medically discharged from the US Air Force in 1943, Ives was available to join the cast as both narrator and musician. Lily Mae Ledford had performed with her band, the Coon Creek Girls, in a 1939 White House

program arranged by Lomax for the Roosevelts, the King and Queen of England, and the Canadian Prime Minister. Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, Wade Mainer, Sonny Terry were among the supporting cast of musicians.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the title number and its reprise in Lampbell's modified form, Alan Lomax chose fifteen songs for the ballad opera. He included several traditional Appalachian folk materials, such as "Black, Black, Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" and "Smoky Mountain Gals," more familiarly known as "Buffalo Gals." He also chose a number of modern folk-styled songs that addressed the ongoing war, most of which were either written by Woody Guthrie or corporately by the Almanac Singers (see Figure 1 for the complete song list). The songs are interpolated logically throughout the play, and often facilitate the dramatic action: for example, Guthrie performs "900 Miles" as the train leaves the station with Ben and Alec aboard, and the fiddle tune "Dance All Night with a Bottle in Your Hand" appears as a part of the square dance scene.

**Figure 1. Songs in *The Martins and the Coys*<sup>15</sup>**

*Alan Lomax edited and re-recorded portions of the original BBC recording for commercial release in 1949-1950, hoping to release the recording commercially in the United States. While the broadcast recording of The Martins and the Coys is not available outside of archives, Lomax's edited version was released by Rounder Records in 2000 (Rounder 1161-1819-2) and is easily obtainable. The information below reflects the show as presented on the Rounder release.*

- "The Martins and the Coys" (Cameron), performed by Pete Seeger and chorus
- "Cumberland Mountain Bear Chase" [or "Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase"], performed by Burl Ives, Will Geer, and Pete Seeger
- "Run, Boys, Run" [or "Run, [racial expletive], Run"], performed by Pete Seeger and chorus, with Fiddlin' Arthur Smith
- "Black, Black, Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair," performed by Burl Ives
- "You Better Get Ready" (Guthrie), performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- "Nine Hundred Miles," performed by Woody Guthrie
- \* "On Top of Old Smoky," performed by Hally Wood, with Pete Seeger
- "Deliver the Goods" (Seeger, originally credited to Almanac Singers), performed by Lily Mae Ledford, Rosalie and Bella Allen, and chorus, with Pete Seeger
- "When We All Go Marching In," performed by Pete Seeger and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- \* "Red Rocking Chair," performed by Alan Lomax and Hally Wood, with Pete Seeger

**Figure 1, cont.**

<p>“How Many Biscuits Can You Eat?” performed by Lily Mae Ledford, Rosalie and Bella Allen, and Will Geer</p> <p>“All of You Fascists Bound to Lose” (Guthrie), performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus, with Sonny Terry</p> <p>* “The Turtledove,” performed by Burl Ives and Hally Wood</p> <p>“Smoky Mountain Gals” [or “Buffalo Gals”], performed by Lily Mae Ledford, Rosalie and Bella Allen, and chorus, with Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith</p> <p>“Dance All Night with a Bottle in Your Hand,” performed by Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith and Woody Guthrie</p> <p>“Round and Round Hitler’s Grave” (Seeger, Lampell, and Guthrie), performed by Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, and chorus</p> <p>“The New Martins and the Coys” (Lampell), performed by Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and chorus, with Sonny Terry</p> <p>* indicates recordings I suspect were rerecorded for the commercial release but were not performed by these musicians on the BBC broadcast.</p>
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The wartime songs in *The Martins and the Coys* are up-tempo, morale-boosting numbers that look to the successful defeat of the Axis forces and encourage continuing solidarity in the meantime. As is common in most songs of this type, the lyrics bear simple messages: staying the course to victory, willingly sacrificing for the war effort, and defeating Adolf Hitler and his fascist regime. The straightforward, repetitive texts and melodies are easily memorized and are fun to sing, especially when they are ridiculing Hitler. The prominent use of a chorus increased the charisma of these numbers as well, inviting listeners by example to join in on the musical experience. As a result, the music in *The Martins and the Coys* had the potential for impact upon its audience well beyond the duration of the broadcast. Those involved on both sides of the Atlantic hoped that British audiences would find the music appealing and memorable, and that their enjoyment would translate into renewed affection for and commitment to their American allies.

“When We All Go Marching In” is one of the ballad opera’s simplest examples of wartime folk music. The song is a slightly modified version of the familiar spiritual and jazz number, “When the Saints Go Marching In,” similar to a recording Woody Guthrie made for Moe Asch around the same time called “When the Yanks Go Marching In.”<sup>16</sup> Replacing the traditional title lyric, “the saints” becomes the more inclusive “we” throughout. The subjects no longer march into heaven, but rather to victory in Berlin:

Oh, when we march into Berlin,  
Oh, when we march into Berlin,  
Oh, I want to be in that number  
When we march into Berlin.<sup>17</sup>

Add to this the energetic, martial performance of Pete Seeger, joined by a large chorus that reinforces the song's inclusive quality, and the result is a catchy and compelling war anthem.

Similar use of inclusive terminology and a boisterous backing chorus occurs in another of the ballad opera's numbers, "Deliver the Goods," a standard in the Almanac Singers' repertoire that appeared on their album *Dear Mr. President* (Keynote 111). The lyrics are full of first-person plural pronouns, emphasizing the message that the war effort included everyone, and valorizing home front vocations ("The butcher, the baker, the tinker, and the tailor; we'll all work behind the soldier and the sailor...").<sup>18</sup> The inclusive lyrics and extensive use of group singing bring to mind populist sentiments of the labor movement, and for good reason. Many populist folk songwriters like Guthrie and the Almanac Singers applied the musical strategies they used in union songs to wartime songs. One song in which this influence is especially clear is Woody Guthrie's famous "All of You Fascists Bound to Lose":

Well I'm gonna tell you fascists,  
You may be surprised,  
People in this world  
Are getting organized  
You're bound to lose  
You fascists bound to lose...

There's people of every nation,  
Marchin' side by side,  
Marchin' 'cross the fields  
Where a million fascists died.<sup>19</sup>

On other occasions, Guthrie draws upon religious themes for inspiration, as in "You Better Get Ready." The song is based on a combination of the gospel number "Walking in Jerusalem Just Like John" (sometimes called "I Want to Be Ready") and the dance tune "Raise a Ruckus Tonight," and it evokes both the gospel and jug band traditions by which it is influenced. Guthrie leads the song, accompanying himself and a rowdy chorus on guitar. The performance also features Sonny Terry on harmonica, who contributes most actively in phrases sung by the chorus. The emphasis of eighth-note off-beats in the ensemble's accompaniment patterns is reminiscent of many jug band numbers. The lyrics are rife with the sort of familial language found in many Christian traditions. The verses employ call and response between Guthrie and the chorus, with the chorus encouraging Guthrie after each line to "sing on, brother, sing." More gender-inclusive language permeates the refrain:

You better get ready, brother,  
You better get ready, sister,



You better get ready,  
'Cause you know you got to fight.  
You better get ready, brother,  
You better get ready, sister,  
You better get ready,  
'Cause you may be called tonight.<sup>20</sup>

The refrain's repeated references to readiness for imminent events harkens to Christian preparedness for death and anticipation of Heaven. "Walking in Jerusalem Just Like John" demonstrates this in its repeated chorus, "I want to be ready,/I want to be ready,/I want to be ready,/To walk in Jerusalem just like John."<sup>21</sup> Here, Guthrie appropriates that attitude of ready anticipation toward the needs of the war and the sacrifices it might require.

What is amusingly ironic about the prevalent stylistic and textual references to Christian traditions is that the lyrics themselves invoke not God, but the Devil. In the song's premise, the Devil has appeared to the narrator in a dream. Appalled to find Hitler's name in his book, the Devil promises, "If you will win this war, and drive the fascists out for sure, I'll never raise hell on earth no more!"<sup>22</sup> Guthrie, of course, was not the first person to unfavorably compare Adolf Hitler with Satan. Perhaps most famously, Winston Churchill in June 1941 reputedly told his private secretary, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons," and later publicly proclaimed Hitler "a monster of wickedness."<sup>23</sup>

Guthrie's Devil narrative intentionally casts the war in a humorous light. Despite the abhorrence of Hitler's actions, the tremendous loss of lives, and the hardships of home front air raids and rationing, the song invites audiences to pause and laugh momentarily at the Devil's witty outbursts, such as, "Compared to them fascists, hell, I'm tame!" Even while acknowledging Hitler's repugnance, Guthrie removes the lion's teeth by making Hitler's depravity the punch line of his joke. While the song was written a number of months (if not more) before *The Martins and the Coys* was recorded, Guthrie's lyrics are effective in part because of the state of the war. The program first aired three weeks after the successful invasion of Normandy, and the outcome of the war was increasingly certain. Hitler's Third Reich was still a threat, but now one that could be poked fun at with growing confidence.<sup>24</sup>

One of the final songs of the ballad opera is "Round and Round Hitler's Grave," a rowdy contrafact of the well-known square dance tune, "Old Joe Clark." With lyrics attributed to Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Millard Lampell, it was a well-established part of the Almanac Singers' repertory and, like "Deliver the Goods," was featured on the album *Dear Mr. President*. Having already reached a large American radio audience in *This Is War*, Alan Lomax gave "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" yet another opportunity to do some good by including it in *The Martins and the Coys*. Pete Seeger sings lead, as he did on the performance for *Dear Mr. President*. The "gleeful dance of

death,” as it was described in one of the Almanac Singers’ brochures, exemplifies a boisterous, optimistic anthem crafted to bolster morale.<sup>25</sup>

Now I wisht I had a bushel,  
I wisht I had a peck,  
I wished I had ol’ Hitler  
With a rope around his neck.

Hey, round and round Hitler’s grave,  
Round and round we go,  
Gonna lay that poor boy down,  
He won’t get up no more.

A subsequent verse pokes fun at the German army, accusing them of marching a hundred miles in the wrong direction, and the final stanza concludes, “I don’t care exactly just where we go in, as long as the road we’re travelin’ leads right to Berlin,” signifying for British listeners perseverance through to final victory.<sup>26</sup> Notably, the performance for *The Martins and the Coys* omits verses of the song that mention Mussolini or Hitler’s invasion of Russia. It is possible that this abridgement was made because of time restraints; it also conforms to the streamlined message of the ballad opera. As in “When We All Go Marching In” and “You Better Get Ready,” the hearty enthusiasm of the chorus and the use of first-person pronouns give the song a strong sense of inclusive camaraderie. The spirited and audacious attitude of the performance is intended to inspire listeners’ confidence in the abilities of the Allied forces to win the war.

Approximately two-thirds of the music in *The Martins and the Coys* was drawn from traditional folk repertoire, and this proved the part of the production that British audiences liked best.<sup>27</sup> The balance was certainly intentional on Alan Lomax’s part. These songs represented a dynamic American musical heritage, and programming them for broadcast on BBC airwaves invited English listeners to learn about and understand this segment of American culture. In some instances, these songs called attention to a common Anglo-American past. “The Turtledove” (also called “Fare Thee Well”) and “Black, Black, Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” were especially popular with audiences, perhaps because they had English roots and were likely already familiar. Elsewhere the songs create an aural picture of Appalachia, as in the old-time string band number, “How Many Biscuits Can You Eat,” “Smoky Mountain Gals/Buffalo Gals,” and “Dance All Night with the Bottle in Your Hand.”

The musicians delivered their performances without gimmickry, with instrumentation limited to guitar, banjo, mandolin, harmonica, and vocals. British audiences perceived the music as authentic; many listeners described it as the “genuine article” and “found the spontaneity, liveliness, and gusto of the performance most exhilarating.”<sup>28</sup> This sort of music programming deeply appealed to many at the BBC; as Felix Greene, Head of the BBC in North

America, once wrote to folk song collector John Lomax, Alan's father: "In my view, the more authentic information our listeners have in England regarding folk music of America, the better. In fact, I think that is one of the most important things we as a broadcasting organization can do."<sup>29</sup>

The emphasis on traditional American folk music continued as work began on the third ballad opera, *The Chisholm Trail*. Britons had long harbored a fascination with the mythology of the American West, thus prompting the idea for a cowboy theme. Hollywood westerns, Zane Grey novels, and cowboy entertainers were popular throughout England. Typical depictions of the West and its residents included open, sweeping landscapes through which men rode faithful steeds. They wore neck scarves, cowboy boots, chaps, and generous variations on Stetson hats. Aurally, colloquialisms such as "mighty fine," "howdy," and "pardner" were used to establish western settings, as were names like Wild Bill and Spanish Johnny.

*The Chisholm Trail* in some ways met established English expectations of the American West. The ballad opera's plot is a typical western drama: a Kansas cowboy, Kansas Jim Johnson, comes to Texas and strikes a deal with rancher Diamond Joe Chisholm to drive five thousand head of cattle to Dodge City to be sold. Diamond Joe soon suspects that Johnson is actually a cattle thief, and he takes off for Dodge City in hopes of reclaiming his herd. Meanwhile, the Texas rancher's two daughters have each fallen in love with cowboys, one of whom is, predictably, Kansas Jim Johnson. The narrative traces the honest delivery of the cattle herd to Dodge City, the eventual (if grudging) blessing on daughter Kate's romantic relationship with Johnson, and reconciliation between Kansas Jim and Diamond Joe.

*The Chisholm Trail* was underway by May 1944, more than a month before *The Martins and the Coys* first aired. Bridson had been recalled to his post at BBC headquarters in London midway through the production of the second ballad opera, and so he acted primarily in an advisory role. Alan Lomax was called away as well, having been drafted into the military. Bridson suggested that Alan's sister, Bess Lomax Hawes, was a suitable choice for his replacement. He also hoped that they again might ask Elizabeth to write the script, though there had apparently been considerable friction between her and director Roy Lockwood during the production of *The Martins and the Coys*. Bridson recommended in an internal memo:

It seems to me that as the Lomaxes have already been associated with two successful productions out of three projected, we should be very well advised to use them for the third... they are probably the greatest authorities in America on Folk Song itself and have personal interest and ties with all the best folk singers. I am sure that they would be able to get together a far better team of singers and folk musicians than anyone else.<sup>30</sup>

The BBC heeded Bridson's advice. Elizabeth Lomax was engaged to write the script, and Hawes—who, like Alan and Elizabeth, worked at the Office of War

Information—selected and arranged music for the ballad opera. A number of the musicians featured in *The Martins and the Coys* returned in *The Chisholm Trail*, including Woody Guthrie (who sang but did not act this time), and Almanac Singer Lee Hays joined the ranks as well.

Limited to an aural portrayal of the American West, music in *The Chisholm Trail* is crucial in conveying the setting to audiences. As daughter and sister to folk song collectors John and Alan Lomax, Hawes already had considerable familiarity with appropriate folk repertoire as she selected and arranged numbers for the ballad opera. Her experience as an Almanac Singer and connection to the burgeoning New York folk music scene only increased the breadth of her knowledge of folk music. Most of the songs she selected are included in John Lomax's published collections, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) (see Figure 2 for a complete song list). Hawes decided upon the repertoire for *The Chisholm Trail* based not only on her own familiarity with these materials, but also her confidence that they would be received by British audiences as entertaining and “authentic.”

**Figure 2. Songs in *The Chisholm Trail***<sup>31</sup>

The *Chisholm Trail* was never made available commercially, though Alan Lomax hoped that it would be. The broadcast is available to stream online free of charge via the Association for Cultural Equity.

- “The Old Chisholm Trail,” performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- “Diamond Joe” (Hawes) [to the tune of “The State of Arkansas”], performed by Cisco Houston
- “The Railroad Corral” (Hanson), performed by Cisco Houston and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- “Kansas Boys” [or “Johnson Boys”], performed by Lily Mae Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls
- “I Never Will Marry,” performed by Lily Mae Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls
- “My Hosses Ain’t Hungry,” performed by Burl Ives and Lily Mae Ledford
- “Cowboy’s Gettin’ Up Holler,” performed by Lee Hays
- “Git Along, Little Dogies,” performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- “Git Along, I’ll Marry You Someday” [or “Cindy, I’ll Marry You Someday”], performed by Lily Mae Ledford and chorus
- “The Colorado Trail,” performed by Burl Ives
- “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” performed by male chorus
- “The Dodge City Jail” [or “The Cryderville Jail” or “The Durant Jail”], performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus, with Sonny Terry
- “The Red River Shore,” performed by Burl Ives and Lily Mae Ledford

**Figure 2, cont.**

<p>“Wild Bill’s Vision,” performed by Lee Hays and chorus “The Old Chisholm Trail” (reprise), performed by Woody Guthrie and chorus</p>
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Notably, the performances in *The Chisholm Trail* avoid the flashy showmanship of acts like Big Bill Campbell’s, which tended to incorporate novelty elements and western swing instrumentation. Instead, the instrumentation in the ballad opera is limited to guitar, banjo, mandolin, violin, harmonica, and voices. Such folk-derived instrumentation was certainly more typical of the production’s musicians, many of whom had also performed in *The Martins and the Coys*: Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Lily Mae Ledford, The Coon Creek Girls, Wade Mainer, Lee Hays, Sonny Terry, and Cisco Houston. Intriguingly, Roy Lockwood introduces the production to British listeners with the explanation:

The songs you will hear are traditional and are sung by people who are not professional musicians in the ordinary sense. They know these songs as part of their everyday life. They came to New York specially [*sic*] for this broadcast, some of them for the first time, from various parts of America many, many miles away.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, this was not the first time that any of the performers had been to New York, and they were all professional musicians of one kind or another. Yet, the claim to authenticity itself seems important in establishing the show’s credibility with British audiences, as does positioning the music within Americans’ everyday lives.

Many of the song lyrics in *The Chisholm Trail* conform to the contemporary British image of what cowboys should be: whooping, swearing, cattle-punching, horseback-riding men bound to the trail. A prime example is the opening number, “The Old Chisholm Trail,” led by Woody Guthrie at a rousing clip:

Come along boys, and listen to my tale,  
I’ll tell you of my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail,

Come ti yi youpy, youpy yea, youpy yea.  
Come ti yi youpy, youpy yea.

Oh, a ten-dollar hoss, a forty-dollar saddle,  
I’m a-goin’ to punchin’ them Texas cattle...

Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,  
I’m a-goin’ to rattle them Texas cattle...<sup>33</sup>

Other songs depict the life of the cowboy on the cattle trail. “The Railroad Corral,” led by Cisco Houston, gives a sense of the daily routine of a cattle drive

through imagery of steers, broncos, and chuck wagons. Sonically, the swaying 6/8 meter suggests the rhythm of riding horseback. The same loping meter appears later in the drama in "Git Along, Little Dogies," performed by Woody Guthrie and a male chorus. The modal melody and long, sustained notes mid-phrase are a haunting contrast to the major tune commonly found on commercial recordings. Coupled with plaintive harmonica and vocal harmonies, Guthrie's performance effectively conveys the tedium and loneliness of the trail:

It's whooping and yelling and driving the dogies  
Oh, how I wish you would go on;  
It's whooping and punching and go on, little dogies,  
For you know Kansas will be your new home.

Whoopee ti yi yo, git along little dogies  
It's your misfortune and none of my own  
Whoopee ti yi yo, git along, little dogies  
For you know Kansas will be your new home.<sup>34</sup>

Even the slower ballads in the program contribute to the western frontier imagery. "My Hosses Ain't Hungry" begins with the couplet, "My foot in the stirrup, my bridle in my hand,/I'm leavin', sweet Mollie, the fairest in the land." "I Never Will Marry" is more idiosyncratic, in that three out of its four stanzas reference the ocean; nevertheless, it opens in a loping triple meter with the line, "One day as I rambled across the wide plains."<sup>35</sup> Later, Burl Ives's haunting delivery of "The Colorado Trail" effectively depicts the loneliness the open trail often offers:

Weep, all ye little rains,  
Wail, winds, wail,  
All along, along, along  
The Colorado Trail.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," performed as a mournful response to the death of one of the cowboys during a raid, describes the lonesome isolation of the prairie.

Other numbers in the program, including "The Old Chisholm Trail," feature faster tempos and robust, energetic performances by the chorus. These songs also contribute to the overall western imagery, though their major themes often deal with romance or other unrelated ideas. Early in the program, Lily Mae Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls rowdily belt, "Kansas boys go a-courting,/Riding on a sway back mare,/Holes in their hats and pants all patchy,/Sand and cockleburrs in their hair." Later, "Get Along I'll Marry You Someday" opens with the stanza:

Oh, I wisht I had a lariat rope  
As long as I could throw,

I'd throw it round my sweetheart's neck  
And down the road we'd go.<sup>37</sup>

Such songs do little to advance the drama. Rather, their purpose is purely to entertain and to contribute to the show's sense of authenticity.

Though *The Chisholm Trail* was unlike its predecessors in that it did not overtly address the ongoing war, the ballad opera nevertheless contributed to efforts to strengthen British-American relations in the final year of the conflict. Designed to showcase folk repertory of the American West as a unique and dynamic representative of American cultural identity, *The Chisholm Trail's* entertaining nature made it all the more appealing to British listeners. Each positive, memorable experience of American music that British listeners enjoyed strengthened the American image in the minds of its audience, and thereby the British-American alliance as well.

Of equal importance is the vehicle that the ballad opera provides for a message of reconciliation and cooperative commitment to a better future. An early script of *The Chisholm Trail* reveals the American Civil War as an important subtext virtually eliminated from the final production.<sup>38</sup> In the draft, opening narration explains that the recently concluded war forms the story's backdrop and that it is the fundamental catalyst of conflict: "millions of cattle swarmed over the Texas plains [and] had multiplied and run wild while the men were away fightin' the Civil War. But the Texans weren't drivin' 'em north. The Old Chisholm Trail was closed," and distrust between Kansans and Texans—enemies during the war—was strong.<sup>39</sup> All mention of the Civil War was removed prior to the final production, however, and the play offers no explanation for why the Chisholm Trail has fallen into dysfunction. Unfortunately, one can only speculate whether these edits were the result of time limitations or ideological reasons. The broadcast version of the program retains only a single reference to any sort of political or national subject. It occurs in the concluding scene, in which Dodge City Sheriff Wild Bill Hickok "speechifies" before a crowd of Texas cowhands and the citizens of Dodge City. He reflects that if one were to look out over the plains:

You'd see the whole West—Indian Territory, and desert, brushland and grassland, all turned into one big cattle pasture. You'd see in them cattle a store house of plenty for Uncle Sam's people, and all people, for generations to come, in time of war and famine. And you'd see that it's up to us people back in Kansas and Texas to keep them moving—up the trail and on to the railroad, and out acrost the world.<sup>40</sup>

Hickok's speech is central to the ballad opera, both in terms of internal dramatic structure and as the show's moralizing element. The restoration of the Chisholm Trail was important not only to the livelihood of Kansans and Texans; it was also critical to the prosperity of the entire nation. The sheriff's speech forms the climax around which the behavior of Kansas and Texas cattlemen begin to change.

The situation Hickok describes had current, if indirect, relevancy for contemporary listeners. The war had caused massive devastation and loss, and Britain in particular was reeling at the prospect of recovery. Still, Allied victory in Europe was nearly certain by the time *The Chisholm Trail* aired in February 1945. Though the conflict was not yet over, policy makers in Great Britain had been planning for a postwar Anglo-American alliance since 1943, and possibly earlier.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the war, Churchill famously cultivated the notion of a “special relationship” between the two countries, first in efforts to persuade the United States to come to Britain’s aid, and then to ensure postwar peace both nationally and globally. In 1944 he wrote, “It is my deepest conviction that unless Britain and the United States are joined together in a special relationship... another destructive war will come to pass.”<sup>42</sup> As the war entered its final months, it became apparent that Great Britain’s position as a world power was weakening, and the ongoing alliance with the United States became all the more critical. American policy strategists shared similar desires for a postwar relationship with Great Britain. All the same, the countries had differing ideas concerning economic, imperial, and foreign policy in such an agreement, especially as regarded the Lend Lease Agreement and the British Empire in India. Nevertheless, just as Wild Bill identified cooperation between Kansans and Texans as crucial to the future prosperity of the United States, English and American tacticians viewed a strong Anglo-American alliance as essential to the future prosperity of their countries and of a peaceful world. The creators of *The Chisholm Trail* expressed their support for a continuing British-American alliance by recasting this message as a parable dredged in musical entertainment.

*The Chisholm Trail* was the last of the wartime ballad operas. Whether this was due to a lack of audience (2.37 million, in contrast to 5.4 million listeners who tuned in for *The Martins and the Coys* and 7.5 million for *The Man Who Went to War*), the imminent end of the war, or the possibility that only three programs were ever envisioned is unclear.<sup>43</sup> Guthrie’s only other appearances on the BBC during the Second World War were a pair of episodes of the *Children’s Hour* in July 1944, made when he walked into the London BBC studios during a layover after his U-boat had been sunk. Though Ramblin’ Jack Elliott would proselytize his music from English stages throughout the 1950s and raise up a new generation of Guthrie fans in the form of budding folk revivalists, the next time Woody Guthrie’s voice would air on the BBC would be after his death in the late 1960s.

And yet, Guthrie’s participation in *The Martins and the Coys* and *The Chisholm Trail* was significant. For Guthrie, the ballad operas were not only paid gigs, but also an opportunity for his songs to provide a greater service for the war effort than his physical contributions as a mess man ever could. The impact of his music now extended beyond the borders of the United States and across the Atlantic, fighting for the Allied cause on British airwaves. For the BBC, Guthrie was an ambassador and an important representative voice, championing the war effort and helping to define the sound of American folk music for British audiences. His performances of traditional and original material invited British listeners to partake in American musical traditions, and his infectious wartime songs compelled



them to embrace the camaraderie of their American allies in an attitude of solidarity that was essential to winning the war and maintaining a lasting peace.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 82-4.

<sup>3</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Big Guns (By the Almanac Singers)," in Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Levanthal (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Doris Willems, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 84-88.

<sup>6</sup> Woody Guthrie to Local Board #17, dated September 28, 1944. Woody Guthrie Personal Papers: Merchant Marine and Military, Military Service: Correspondence with Selective Services System, Box 1, Folder 5, Woody Guthrie Archives (WGA), Tulsa, OK.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie to Majorie Mazia, January 20, 1944. WGA, Woody Guthrie Correspondence, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ballad opera was a predominantly British genre and was most commonly associated with the first of its kind, *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay (1728). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, common usage of the term expanded to include a variety of musical dramas. Though a few ballad operas had been adapted for radio presentation, Bridson's were the first to be created solely for broadcast and not for the stage. Additionally, Bridson's productions differ from the historical genre in that they did not employ satire, unlike the works of Gay and some others.

<sup>9</sup> For more on *The Man Who Went to War*, see my dissertation. Christy J. Miller, "'You Better Get Ready': American Folk Music as Wartime Propaganda on the BBC," (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2018), 52-81.

<sup>10</sup> "The Projection of America for British Listeners [and] The Projection of Britain for American Listeners." Laurence Gilliam, August 6, 1941, E1/153, Countries: America, Exchange of Recorded Programmes, 1942- 1943, BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), Caversham, England.

<sup>11</sup> Sonny Terry was the other musician featured in all three ballad operas. Guthrie's involvement in *The Man Who Went to War* was minimal and indirect, but also the most intriguing since the production was crafted to showcase African American performers and traditions. In one scene, Josh White performs a bluesy rendition of Guthrie's topical number, "Sally, Don't You Grieve." With two Caucasian men—Bridson and Lomax—so deeply involved in its creation, the production was fraught with race issues, despite all best intentions.

<sup>12</sup> Big Bill Campbell (aka Zeke Winters) was a Canadian expatriate who had relocated to England following the First World War. Having already established a successful stage career, Campbell and his band, the Rocky Mountaineers, became a staple on the BBC beginning in the late 1930s.

<sup>13</sup> Millard Lampell, "The New Martins and the Coys." Reprinted in the liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*. Elizabeth Lomax and Alan Lomax, *The Martins and the Coys*, concert and recordings produced by Alan Lomax, Rounder 1161-1819-2, CD (2000).

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<sup>14</sup> The commercial reissue of *The Martins and the Coys* also features Hally Wood and notes that she was uncredited on the original BBC recording. However, a reel-to-reel recording of *The Martins and the Coys* at the Woody Guthrie Archives that appears to be copied from the BBC original does not feature Wood. Lomax is known to have edited and rerecorded some of the material prior to the commercial release, but the exact details of these alterations still need confirmation.

<sup>15</sup> Lomax and Lomax, *The Martins and the Coys* (compact disc). Unless otherwise indicated, songs are part of the traditional folk canon and original authorship is unknown.

<sup>16</sup> Woody Guthrie, *The Asch Recordings*, Smithsonian Folkways SFW40112, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> "When We All Go Marching In," as sung by Pete Seeger and chorus in *The Martins and the Coys*, reprinted in liner notes to *Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>18</sup> Pete Seeger, "Deliver the Goods," reprinted in liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>19</sup> Woody Guthrie, "All of You Fascists Bound to Lose," reprinted in liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>20</sup> Woody Guthrie, "You Better Get Ready," reprinted in liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>21</sup> "Walk In Jerusalem Just Like John," Hymnary.org:

[http://www.hymnary.org/text/o\\_john\\_o\\_john\\_now\\_didnt\\_you\\_say#authority\\_media\\_flexscores](http://www.hymnary.org/text/o_john_o_john_now_didnt_you_say#authority_media_flexscores).

<sup>22</sup> Guthrie, "You Better Get Ready," reprinted in liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Andrew Nagorski, *The Greatest Battle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 150-1, and Winston Churchill, Martin Gilbert, ed., *The Churchill War Papers: The Ever Widening War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 835-6.

<sup>24</sup> It became increasingly easy to ridicule Hitler as the war shifted in the Allies' favor, and Guthrie's songs were not the only ones to mock Hitler and the German regime. One of the most famous examples is "Der Fuehrer's Face," recorded by Spike Jones for American radio broadcast in 1942 and featured in a Walt Disney animated short propaganda film of the same name in 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Richard A. Reuss, "American Folklore and Left-Wing Politics," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1971), 222.

<sup>26</sup> Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, Woody Guthrie, "Round and Round Hitler's Grave," reprinted in liner notes of *The Martins and the Coys*.

<sup>27</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, *A Listener Research Report: BBC Starred Program #3, "The Martins and the Coys,"* July 13, 1944. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>28</sup> BBC, *A Listener Research Report: BBC Starred Program #3, "The Martins and the Coys,"* the Lilly Library.

<sup>29</sup> Felix Greene to John Lomax, January 31, 1939, John Lomax Correspondence 1938-1941, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax Papers, AFC 1933/001, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>30</sup> D.G. Bridson to ADF, May 18, 1944, R/45/51, WAC.

<sup>31</sup> The song list reflects the repertoire appearing in the broadcast version of *The Chisholm Trail*. Additional songs were listed in the script housed at the Woody Guthrie Archives but absent from the broadcast version: "I'm Bound to Follow the Longhorn Cows" and "I Ride an Old Paint." Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail: Ballad Opera of the Old West* (script), Woody Guthrie's Personal Papers, Series 2B, Folder 33, Woody Guthrie Archives, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), September 11, 1944, <http://research.culturalequity.org/get-radio-detailed-show.do?showId=9> (accessed August 4, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail* (script), 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), Part 1, 1:46.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), Part 3, 3:17.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail* (script), 26; Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), Part 2, 8:00.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), Part 4, 0:46.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, "The Chisholm Trail" (radio broadcast), Part 3, 7:56; Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail* (script), 37.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail* (script). Comparison between this script and the final sound recording reveals a number of cuts in both dialogue and musical material, presumably to meet length requirements.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, *The Chisholm Trail* (script), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Lomax, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Brewer, *To Win the Peace: British Propaganda in the United States During World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), *passim*; David Reynolds, *The Creation of The Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), *passim*; Christopher Thorne, "The Near and the Far: Aspects of Anglo-American Relations, 1919-1945" in *Border Crossings: Studies in International History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988), 59-85.

<sup>42</sup> Winston Churchill to Richard Law, February 1944, Prime Minister's Records 4 27/10, Public Records Office. Quoted in Brewer, *To Win the Peace*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> BBC Listener Barometers for February 16, 1945, June 26, 1944, and March 6, 1944. WAC.