

Transatlantic Troubadours: Pete Seeger, John Hasted and the English Folk Song Revival

E. David Gregory

When Pete Seeger set foot on British soil in October 1961 for a month-long tour of English and Scottish folk clubs, he was already a legend. Knowing the affection and admiration felt for Pete throughout the London folk music community, Bruce Dunnet, manager of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger's Singers' Club, took the gamble of booking the 5,000 seat Royal Albert Hall for a farewell concert. It was the first time a folk singer had appeared at that most prestigious of venues. If anything, Pete was even more popular in Britain than in his native USA, where he was still fighting a prolonged legal battle with the House Un-American Activities Committee. He chose a good time to visit Britain. The (second) folk song revival had just entered its boom phase, and "the movement" (as it was sometimes called) had a mass following at long last. But how had Pete come to be acclaimed in England as "one of the world's great folk singers"?¹

During the 50s Pete had some formidable promoters in the "old country." They included his half-sister Peggy, her partner Ewan MacColl, and their mutual friend, broadcaster and collector Alan Lomax. But the story of Pete's influence on the English revival goes even further back, to 1946 and his days in New York with the Almanac Singers. One of the 78 rpm records he made in 1941 with Mill Lampell, Lee Hays and Woody Guthrie was "Talking Union." You couldn't buy that disc in England during the forties, but merchant seaman Bob Hinds picked up a copy while his ship was in an American port and when he got back to England he played it to a friend, a young Oxford physicist named John Hasted. As soon as he heard the disc, Hasted knew instantly that he wanted, above anything else, to make music like the Almanacs'. John Hasted is not very well known these days, even in English folk music circles. He might be termed—with some justification—"the forgotten man" of the English revival. Yet in fact he played a key role in the revival for more than a decade. One of the many things he did was to imitate and popularise Pete Seeger's way of playing guitar and banjo.

As a student in Oxford before the war Hasted had sung regularly in New College Choir, and his left-wing political beliefs had led him to join the newly formed Workers' Music Association, founded by the communist composer Alan Bush. A career move in 1948 took Hasted to London, to work at University College. He was free, in his spare time, to assist Bush in directing the WMA Choir, and before long he was also running the WMA's Topic Singers and the London Youth Choir. All three groups sang a mixture of English traditional folk songs (usually in arrangements by Bush or by Vaughan Williams), union songs, left-wing anthems such as "The Red Flag" and a smattering of Almanac material, including "If I Had a Hammer." It wasn't folk music, but it was close. And Hasted still had in

mind his goal of making music like the Almanac Singers'. Through the WMA he eventually encountered a kindred spirit, fellow Party member and folklorist A. L. (Bert) Lloyd. Hasted later recalled that on meeting Lloyd he casually asked him if he wanted to start an Almanac-style group in England. To his astonishment, Bert's normally high-pitched and squeaky voice dropped about an octave and he replied very quietly, "Passionately".²

This was the encouragement Hasted needed. But there was a problem. Where on earth could you get a folk guitar in London in the late forties, let alone a long-necked banjo? And even if you did find the right instruments, how could you learn to play them? This is how Hasted described the situation in his *Memoirs*:

When I set out to get hold of a guitar in London, it took me nearly a year to acquire one with a flat front and a hole in the middle. It was an old Martin, and it lasted me until the Suez demonstration in Whitehall, where it was broken by a policeman.... Dance band guitars, with curved fronts and S-shaped holes, were lousy acoustically. Real classical guitars had to be imported from Spain, and would take only very light steel strings instead of their normal gut and covered silk. As for a twelve-string guitar, I had to make the thing myself, out of an old six-string. Classical guitar was taught in London, notably by John William's father, and dance-band guitar was taught by Ivor Mairants.... There had only been a handful of singers-with-guitar in Britain, and these were either troubadour style with classical guitar and rather twee tenor voice; or cowboy-style, wearing Stetson hat and chaps.³

Hasted's solution to the problem of how to learn Almanac-style guitar and banjo was to go to the horse's mouth. As a communist he was well aware of the Peoples' Songs organization in the USA and had seen copies of its *Bulletin*. So why not write to Pete Seeger for help? He did so, and Pete responded with detailed instructions, including tablature, on how to play both guitar and banjo. He encouraged Hasted to begin by learning the Carter family "Church lick" as his basic strumming style. By the end of the decade, Pete's correspondence student was confident enough to pass on his new-found instrumental skills to members of the London Youth Choir, and to form his own folk group, the first of several called The Ramblers.

Bert Lloyd and I formed The Ramblers, consisting of Bert himself, guitarist Neste Revald, myself, and Jean Butler, an American girl who had plenty of experience singing with five-string banjo for American unions, and

had often performed with the Almanacs. The name for the group came directly from Woody's song which Jean sang for us.... The Ramblers lasted only a couple of years as a group, but the sound we made was solid, since Bert had a high-up voice and I was bass-baritone. Jean's voice and banjo were authentic Almanac. But we never possessed or sang into a tape-recorder or even a wire-recorder. Only the BBC had those, and we were not exactly their territory....⁴

One of The Ramblers' first performances was at a rally of the Clerical Workers' Union addressed by Clement Attlee, an occasion on which the Prime Minister and Labour Party leader was roundly booed. Many more such unpaid gigs followed, at left-wing demonstrations in support of strikes or the peace movement, and the group developed a quite extensive protest repertoire of Guthrie and Leadbelly material, union songs, Negro spirituals, African freedom songs, and such anti-American ditties as "Yankee Go Home." But although he campaigned vociferously against the presence of American troops and weapons on British soil, Hasted remained a passionate champion of the music of the Almanacs, and a devoted fan of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Bert Lloyd stimulated Hasted's interest in English traditional song, and around the time that The Ramblers broke up Hasted also met collector Peter Kennedy. Encouraged by Kennedy and by Alan Lomax to try his hand at field-collecting, Hasted did so in the West Country (where he later recorded Charlie Wills) and in the Lake District. In the early fifties tape-recorders were still few and far between in England, so he initially used the traditional method of pen and paper, as he recalled in his autobiography:

At first I collected songs by the old method of copying the words and music out on a notepad whilst the singer was singing them. Singers had been more patient with "dictation" to Cecil Sharp than we found them to be fifty years later. I soon devised a shorthand of my own, but even so I couldn't easily keep up with the singers. One session up in Eskdale became inextricably entangled with the annual docking of lambs' tails. "I can dock they tails quicker than what 'ee can larn they songs" and blood spilt all over the notebook.⁵

After the demise of The Ramblers, Hasted focused his efforts once again on the London Youth Choir. By now he was determined that the Choir should diversify its activities, and he steered it away from agitprop and classical music and towards folk music. This was the time when such figures as Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd, Isla Cameron, Peter Kennedy and Alan Lomax were consciously attempting to kickstart the sluggish folksong revival in England, and were earnestly debating the form it should take. How much emphasis should there be on British material, and how much on American? Should one stick to unaccompanied English songs in local dialect and traditional style, or was it ok to sing the blues and adopt American instruments and playing styles?

Hasted was no purist. Like Seeger's, his concept of folk music was broad and undogmatic: an eclectic mix of traditional and contemporary material, British and American, political and non-political. By this time he was an accomplished "semi-professional" musician, and he had a good voice, but he had a low opinion of himself as a folk singer.

I could never have much success as a solo singer of the sort of material I collected, since my pleasant and patronizing Oxford accent precluded anything except play-acting and mimicry, which is not a satisfactory basis for a singer of folksongs. But there was in the London Youth Choir no shortage of good down-to-earth talent, eager to take part in a folksong revival.... More and more performances were given by small groups of our Choir members, maybe three or four singers, with guitar, and a dancer. There would be solo songs, group singing, a dance, and occasionally a rehearsed script. At first I had no unique folk group of my own, but gradually one emerged, the membership changing less and less. As time went by our repertoire became less directly political in content.⁶

This move of Hasted's away from overt political material paralleled Pete Seeger's own career during the late forties and early fifties, when he was a member of the Weavers. Indeed, in the early fifties Pete was known in England primarily as a member of the Weavers. The Weavers' single releases on Decca were available in Britain, and sold fairly well, so that the group quickly built up a solid following. Seeger was lost to the public eye during most of the fifties, when he experienced black-listing in the US entertainment industry and fought his prolonged struggle with the House Un-American Activities Committee. But his stand made him a hero to British communists and their sympathizers.

Hasted kept in touch with Seeger by mail, and was an avid reader of *Sing Out!*, a magazine Seeger helped to form in the wake of the *People's Songs Bulletin*. It was he who first argued in WMA meetings that the English revival needed a sister magazine as a place to publish both contemporary political songs and the traditional industrial and occupational songs that MacColl, Lloyd, Kennedy and others were beginning to collect.

I proposed to Choir member Eric Winter, a journalist, that we start a British magazine along similar lines, and call it simply *Sing*. The first issues of *Sing* were reproduced by cyclostyle, but we soon turned over to the new offset litho printing technique which was revolutionising small magazines. Eric edited *Sing* for more than ten years, producing more than seventy issues, with about a dozen songs in each. For much of this time I was Music Editor. The circulation was seldom more than a thousand, but *Sing* sold well by hand at folk clubs, and we knew that many of our readers actually learned and sang the songs in each issue.... *Sing* magazine afforded us the opportunity to print songs that we had collected "in the field"—that is, folksong

material from singers in the countryside or in the industrial North.⁷

The first issue of *Sing* appeared in May-June 1954, and the second contained a letter from Irwin Silber conveying good wishes from Pete Seeger, Betty Sanders and Leon Bibb.⁸ Early next year the magazine printed the first of many Seeger songs, "Dig My Grave," perhaps not one of Pete's classics but less an exercise in political doggerel than an early Ewan MacColl effort that appeared that same year, "Ballad of Stalin."⁹ As Music Editor of *Sing*, Hasted devoted many columns to promoting DIY music, patiently explaining how to play different guitar styles and Seeger-style banjo, or how to build a three-string tub bass.* He was one of the earliest and most fulsome champions of the skiffle movement, which he saw as a form of teenage urban folk music. He was also the founder of what may have been the first English folk song club, The Good Earth, at 44 Gerrard Street, Soho, in the heart of London. By 1956, in the wake of Lonnie Donnegan's hit recording of "Rock Island Line," this became a skiffle club, and its resident band was renamed John Hasted's Skiffle and Folksong Group. It included Redd Sullivan and Shirley Collins as its lead vocalists. Yes, Shirley Collins made her semi-professional debut as a member of Hasted's group, and the backing musicians on her first recordings included John Hasted playing Seeger-style banjo.¹⁰

One of the positive side effects of the skiffle movement was that it encouraged the WMA to expand one of its subsidiary activities, the production of a limited number of 78 rpm records for its members, into a full-fledged independent record label specializing in folk music. Early Topic 78s had included Pete Seeger singing "Talking Union" c/w "Dark as a Dungeon" (TRC 92), and among the first few dozen Topic microgroove releases were to be found Pete Seeger's *Guitar Guide* (12T20), *Pete Seeger's 5-String Banjo Tutor* (10T23), *Pete and Five Strings* (TOP33) and *Hootenanny N.Y.C.* (TOP37). Not surprisingly, these received favourable reviews in the pages of *Sing*. Occasional mention was also made of Pete's American releases on

the Folkways label, which could sometimes be picked up—at a price—as special imports in the bins of two specialist London record stores, Collett's and Dobell's. Such LPs as *Darling Corey*, *Frontier Ballads*, *American Favorite Ballads*, *American Industrial Ballads*, *Gazette* and *At Carnegie Hall with Sonny Terry* were rare and prized items until the early 60s, when the Folkways catalogue became more readily available in Britain.

One way or another the name of Seeger was rarely absent from the pages of *Sing* in the late 50s. The August-September 1957 issue, for example, included an article by Pete, "I Knew Leadbelly" and the words and music of "If I Had a Hammer," which he had written jointly with Lee Hays, while the December issue included the words of the Almanacs' "Talking Union" and reprinted an article about Pete from the American folk music magazine *Caravan*.¹¹ The October 1958 issue saw Peggy Seeger writing a self-portrait, and there was a laudatory review by Leon Rosselson of the Vanguard album, *The Weavers at Carnegie Hall*. The issue also contained the words and music of a beautiful song that John Hasted had learned from a Pete Seeger album, "Miner's Lifeguard." On the same page were printed the new words that Hasted, Winter and John Brunner had written to the "Miner's Lifeguard" tune: "The H Bomb's Thunder." It had been the hit of the first Aldermaston March organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament that Easter. "The Hammer Song" was another favourite of the marchers. *Sing's* cover for that issue was a photograph of a trio of guitar-playing folk singers marching for peace.¹²

On the long and weary road from Trafalgar Square in London to the nuclear weapons research establishment at Aldermaston the spirit of Pete Seeger lived on. "If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning, I'd hammer in the evening, I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning, I'd hammer out love between all our brothers, all over this land!"¹³ Thanks to John Hasted and others, Pete Seeger's songs and the warmth of his love for humanity had crossed the Atlantic years before he ever did so in person. That was one reason why thousands flocked to the Royal Albert Hall to see and hear him on November 16, 1961.

¹ Winter, Eric. "Pete Seeger sails in to a hero's welcome," *Melody Maker*, 28 October, 1961.

² Hasted, John. *Alternative Memoirs*. Sussex, England: Greengates Press, 1992, p. 121.

³ Hasted, p. 123.

⁴ Hasted, p. 124.

⁵ Hasted, p. 128.

⁶ Hasted, p. 128.

⁷ Hasted, p. 128.

⁸ *Sing* 1.2 (July-Aug, 1954), p. 15.

⁹ *Sing* 1.5 (Jan-Feb, 1955), p. 92 ("Ballad of Stalin") and 1.6 (Feb-March, 1955), p. 117 ("Dig My Grave").

¹⁰ See, for example, Collins, Shirley. *Sweet England: A Collection of Love Songs and Ballads from Southern England*. [released 1959] Argo RG 150.

¹¹ Seeger, Pete. "I Knew Leadbelly," *Sing* 4.3 (Aug-Sept, 1957), pp. 35 and 39; Blind Rafferty, "A Merry Christmas to Pete Seeger," *Sing* 4.4 and 5 (December, 1957), pp. 45-46.

¹² *Sing* 4.6 (October, 1958), pp. 67-68 (Peggy), pp. 73-74 (Rosselson), & p. 75 (songs).

¹³ *Sing* 4.3 (August-September, 1957), p. 40. Reprinted from *Sing Out!*.

* 3 Aug 1999 15:19:02 -0600 (MDT)

From: George W. Lyon

To: E. David Gregory

Got the Seeger, & w/a little fancy footwork (namely taking the disc to MRC, where I called it up in Word & saved it to DOS), I have it, have edited it & put it in place.... One question—there's a reference to a DIY article on 3-string tub bass. Did you actually see such a thing????? Are you sure it wasn't 1-string? In addition to concerns of editorial accuracy, I'd LOVE to see such a beast if it exists!!

George