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Abstract

The great singer-songwriter Phil Ochs was a powerful critic of the American empire in the 1960s. He saw imperialism as corrupting the very ideals and soul of America. Thus “Cops of the World”, from the album *Phil Ochs in Concert* released in 1966, was a stinging indictment of inflated and brutal masculine racist war practice. The “cops of the world” are conquerors of land and sea and women. The conquered are told to “bring their daughters around to the port” so that the cops of the world can “pick and choose as we please” and then get down on their knees.

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“Cops of the World”: Phil Ochs, the American Empire and American Soil

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The great singer-songwriter Phil Ochs was a powerful critic of the American empire in the 1960s. He saw imperialism as corrupting the very ideals and soul of America. Thus “Cops of the World”, from the album *Phil Ochs in Concert* released in 1966, was a stinging indictment of inflated and brutal masculine racist war practice.¹ The “cops of the world” are conquerors of land and sea and women. The conquered are told to “bring their daughters around to the port” so that the cops of the world can “pick and choose as we please” and then get down on their knees:

And we don't care if you're yellow or black

Just take off your clothes and lay down on your back

Cause we're the Cops of the World, boys

We're the Cops of the World

This was penned a couple of years before women's liberation was a public protest movement and many years before we knew the full stark reality of what American soldiers were doing on the ground in Vietnam to civilians generally and women in particular. Phil Ochs was nothing if not prescient, as

¹ Full details of songs and albums are in the Discography at the end of the article.

exemplified by his sad and ultimately tragic songs “When I’m Gone” (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966) and “No More Songs” (*Greatest Hits* 1970). “Cops of the World” is one of the most powerful and poignant attacks on American imperialism ever penned by an American songwriter. Even his discordant mode of singing (unusual for one with a voice of rare beauty and grace) cuts to the quick and exposes the dark underbelly of American empire.

Yet, there was also a Phil Ochs who saw grandeur in the very soil of America, life breathing through its mountains and rivers and shaping an American dream of soulful rather than monetary enrichment. In a very real sense, there were not two Phil Ochs but one who simultaneously celebrated and critiqued American society. The same, of course, is true of Pete Seeger and, in particular, Woody Guthrie. Ochs’ “Power and the Glory” from his first album, *All the News That’s fit to Sing* (1964), is indebted to “This Land is Your Land”, yet there is a sense in which it employs the language of American exceptionalism even more so than Guthrie’s anthem. Ochs implores his listeners to walk with him “through this green and growing land”, across the meadows, mountains, rivers and plains:

Here is a land full of power and glory

Beauty the words cannot recall

Oh, her power shall rest on the strength of her freedom

Her glory shall rest on us all

Yet Ochs saw that “freedom”, the very “power and glory” of America being sacrificed on the altar of an American empire that not only conquered foreign soil but engaged in sexual violence.

This is not to suggest in any naïve way that Ochs was a feminist before his time but rather to acknowledge that he understood that imperial conquest was also sexual conquest of the most brutal and degrading sort. What should now be common knowledge, although sadly is not, was pointed to rarely when Ochs wrote that song. The investigative work of both Nick Turse and Seymour Hersh highlight the fact that the mass murder and rape of innocent civilians including children was not confined to My Lai.² Rather, it was widespread practice in the American War in Vietnam and one sanctified by the highest level of military command and by government as well.

Critical investigative journalism has uncovered this and there is a very real sense in which Ochs was an excellent investigative journalist. He was more than this, of course – a poet, a songster of great skill and imagination. He was even, to use the hilarious witch-hunting words of David A. Noebel, the writer of “flaming Red folksongs” .³ His album *All the News That’s Fit to Sing* suggests Ochs was not merely satirizing the *New York Times* masthead but also acknowledging that he felt it his responsibility to spend at least some time documenting, and commenting upon critically, the events of the day. He did this while also celebrating the idea of America, the vitality of American soil, as in “Power and the Glory”. Thus his tribute to James Dean begins “Grown in the fields of grain, Jim Dean of Indiana” and his two tributes to President Kennedy also resonate with a sense of the American

² Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: the real American war in Vietnam*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2013; Seymour M. Hersh, Seymour M. “The Scene of the crime: a reporter’s journey to My Lai and the secrets of the past, *The New Yorker*, March 30 2015.

[http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime.](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime)

³ David A. Noebel, *The Marxist Minstrels: a handbook of communist subversion in music*, Tulsa, American Christian College Press, 1974, p. 153.

natural world. Here is a paradox, because Kennedy was very much a figure in charge of American empire. Yet Ochs also saw in him an idealism and spirit that captured the promise of America, his assassination signalling the loss of a genuine American hero. Ochs, apparently, failed to see in him a betrayal of that promise, as the paean of praise “That was the President” suggests (*All the News That’s Fit to Sing* 1964):

The bullets of the false revenge have struck us once again
As the angry seas have struck upon the sand
And it seemed as though a friendless world had lost itself a friend
That was the president, that was the man

The powerful “Crucifixion” (*Chords of Fame* 1976), which he once sang to Robert Kennedy, positively glitters with the American “circle-studded” sky and land:

‘Til the universe explodes a falling star is raised
Planets are paralyzed, mountains are amazed
But they all glow brighter from the brilliance of the blaze
With the speed of insanity, then he dies

Nonetheless, Ochs was not entirely blind to the Kennedy of American empire despite his admiration of a certain Presidential image projected and sorrow at the killing of that image. In “Talking Cuban Crisis”, (*All the News That’s Fit to Sing* 1964) Kennedy is the subject of stinging satire:

And then President John began to speak

And I knew right away he wouldn't be weak

Well he said he'd seen some missile bases

And terrible smiles on Cuban faces

Kennedy, argues Ochs, was out to teach the Russians a cold war "lesson for trying to upset the balance of power". Yet the balance is an ironic reference, as American power, he acknowledges, stretches throughout the world and this hegemony is sustained by a mere "twenty thousand submarines".

The dialectic of praise for and critique of America is also true, in different ways, of not only Guthrie and Seeger (more recently, if less powerfully, Springsteen) but also, of course, "the young Bobby Dylan". This is how Ochs refers to him in "The Ringing of Revolution" (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966), a splendid song he described as cinematic and in which he "played" Dylan. Ochs never got over the fact that Dylan, with whom he had been close, came to dismiss him as a mere journalist wallowing in a nothing world of politics.⁴ Dylan once chastised Ochs and suggested that what he was writing "is bullshit. It's all unreal – the only thing that's real is inside you. Your feelings. Just look at the world

⁴ Dorian Linskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: a history of protest songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*, New York, HarperCollins, 2011, p. 63 & p. 69; Mark Kemp, "Song of a Soldier: the life and times of Phil Ochs, essay accompanying the compact disc collection *Phil Ochs: farewells & fantasies*, Elektra RT 73158, 13-60, 1997, p. 30.

you're writing about and you'll see that you're wasting your time. The world is, well...it's just absurd.”
(Dylan quoted in Scumacher 1996: 83).

Fellow folk singer and friend Dave Van Ronk has observed that Ochs' early hero-worshipping of Dylan constricted him and contributed eventually to a process of disillusionment and decline.⁵ (Van Ronk 2005: 207). Interestingly, Van Ronk shared Dylan's skepticism about some of Ochs' songwriting, seeing it as too much of its time, too indebted to the news of the day: “it always struck me as a tragedy that so much of Phil's material became dated so quickly”.⁶ This, I would argue, along with Michael Schumacher, is short-sighted as Ochs was a clever crafter of songs who was able to make the politically immediate story into one of much larger consequence, one which still has significance fifty years later.⁷ Van Ronk does acknowledge that “at its best, there was a deftness to his writing that went beyond straight journalism”.⁸ Yet, he saw it as a “shame” that “he would never sacrifice what he felt to be the truth for a good line”. If he had been able to do so, “he would have come up with more good lines”.⁹ I would argue, to the contrary, that his truth-telling and his poetry combined, in the main, to produce songs of lasting quality. Thus a song Van Ronk singles out as typical of

⁵ Dave Van Ronk (with Elijah Wald), *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: a memoir*, Cambridge, Da Capo Press, 2005, p. 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁷ Michael Schumacher, “Who Was Phil Ochs? And why should we care about him today?”, essay accompanying compact disc compilation of various artists, *What's That I Hear? The songs of Phil Ochs*, Sliced Bread records, SB712176-1, 1998, no pages.

⁸ Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, p. 202.

⁹ *Ibid.*

reporting with a limited life span is “The Ballad of William Worthy” (*All the News That’s Fit to Sing* 1964).¹⁰ This is a song about an American journalist whose passport was withdrawn when he dared to enter Cuba without the authorization of the CIA:

William Worthy isn’t worthy to enter our door

Went down to Cuba, he’s not American any more

But somehow it’s strange to hear the State Department say

You are living in the free world, in the free world you must stay.

This song is, to be sure, historically specific and yet the paradoxical reference to “the free world” gives it historical depth. To suggest that songs like “William Worthy” are not only of their time but also speak beyond their time is simply to recognise the sad fact that history repeats itself. Phil Ochs’ marvellous song “Celia” could be placed in the same restricted league of contemporary reporting but that would completely miss the transcendent qualities of what is the celebration of a love that political circumstance forbids. Indeed, “Celia” from the *All the News That’s Fit to Sing* album, is a very moving song about Celia Pomeroy, the wife of the great critic of colonialism in the Philippines, the American writer and activist William Pomeroy.¹¹ Celia, a Filipino, and her husband had served two

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

¹¹ William J. Pomeroy, *An American Made Tragedy: neo-colonialism and dictatorship in the Philippines*, New York, International Publishers, 1974;
William J., Pomeroy, *The Philippines: colonialism, collaboration and resistance*, New York, International Publishers, 1992.

years gaol for supporting the Huk rebellion. Pomeroy was then deported to his home country, England, but Celia was not initially allowed to leave. While eventually reunited in London, Ochs wrote the song to celebrate both their love and their commitment to the Filipino revolution. Ochs' evocation of lasting but cruelly separated love is not simply bound by time or place:

When the wind from the island is rollin' through the trees

When a kiss from a prison cell is carried in the breeze

That's when I wonder how sad a man can be

Oh, when will my Celia come to me?

To reduce this song to one of its moment only is to ignore its profound transcendent qualities. To be sure, Van Ronk is right that such a song and the one about William Worthy are not played today but that is more a commentary upon the culture industry and its shaping of preferences than it is upon the songs themselves.

A documentary on Greenwich Village that is, in the main, both good and affectionate, includes in its narration the following observation about Ochs after the opening verse of "I Ain't Marching Anymore" has been played:

Phil's songs were journalistic, restricted to a specific subject or event. To write topical songs is risky because as time passes the songs lose their relevance. They have a built-in expiration date

but that doesn't lessen the validity of a well-written song – it serves its purpose within its limited shelf-life. Phil was good at what he did.¹²

The analysis, if we dare use that label, is based on a complete misunderstanding of what Ochs was doing and an ignorance of his *oeuvre*. He wrote more than topical songs but even those that could be labeled, in some way, journalistic have a personal quality that radiates through the immediate subject of the lyrics. The personal side of Ochs was to come out brilliantly in songs like “Changes” (“Sit by my side, come as close as the air, share in a memory of gray”) or “When I’m Gone” (“And I won’t feel the flowing of the time when I’m gone”), both from *Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966. These sorts of debates about the songs of Ochs do does raise old questions about the separation of the personal and political. Think back to “Cops of the World” – is that not deeply, indeed painfully, personal?

Ochs wrote with passion and insight about Vietnam and his song “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” became the real signature tune of the antiwar movement. That, in a way, is fascinating because it is hardly a song you can sing along with easily. It lacks the embracing solidarity of “We Shall Overcome”, just as Ochs’ “Here’s to the State of Mississippi” (*I Ain’t Marching Anymore* 1965) is caustic and explosive compared to the warmth of Seeger’s “Those three are on my mind”. And with regard to the politics of participation, I must acknowledge readily that Seeger (whom I saw twice in concert, Ochs only once) had a remarkable capacity (as is obvious to anyone who has heard the 1963 Carnegie Hall concert recording) to get people to sing together, almost unbelievably in tune and to forge a community. That said, Ochs did charge (perhaps slightly unfairly, albeit sardonically) in “Love Me I’m

¹² Laura Archibald, Dir., *Greenwich Village: music that defined a generation*, written by Laura Archibald, Robert Lindsay & Kevin Wallis, Solomon’s Signatures Productions, K1143, 2012.

a Liberal” (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966) that Seeger’s audience was liberal rather than radical when it came to commitment:

I go to all the Pete Seeger Concerts

He sure gets me singing those songs

I’ll send all the money you ask for

But don’t ask me to come on along

So love me, love me, love me I’m a liberal

Van Ronk, in typical contrarian fashion, insists that Ochs was merely a “Jeffersonian democrat” not a socialist (Van Ronk 2005: 203). Arguably, however, he was measuring Ochs against his own somewhat confused quasi-anarchist, quasi-Trotskyist, idea about what it was to be beyond liberalism.

The fans and followers of Ochs tended to be more radical than Seeger’s core audience and, moreover, listened to rather than harmonized with his repertoire. “Draft Dodger Rag” (*I Ain’t Marching Anymore* 1965) was a possible exception, if only because of its humorous and catchy chorus:

Sarge, I’m only eighteen, I got a ruptured spleen

And I always carry a purse

I got eyes like a bat and my feet are flat, and my asthma’s getting worse

Ochs wants the “sarge” to also take into account his career, his girlfriend, his “invalid aunt” and the fact that he simultaneously goes to school and works “in a defense plant”. I do recall this being sung at marches against the war in Australia but there are fascinating questions that can be raised about audiences of protest music (folk in particular) and their expectations. We wanted to, indeed were implored to, sing in a Seeger concert (he was a master of call and response) but when it came to Ochs, listening was the preferred mode (and a lot of laughing as he was very witty). Yet, listen we did and his critique of American war-making and empire building was particularly powerful, as was his refusal of the very idea of war itself, reflected in both “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” (*I Ain’t Marching Anymore* 1965) and “The War is Over” (*Tape from California* 1968).

Oh I marched to the battle of New Orleans

At the end of the early British war

The young land started growing

The young blood started flowing

But I Ain’t marching Anymore

“The War is Over” partly presages the Yippie surrealism Ochs had embraced by 1968, so it is hardly surprising that he approached the great political surrealist cartoonist Ron Cobb, who became a good

friend, to take photographs of the first “War is Over” rally in Los Angeles in June, 1967.¹³ Yet he did see it also as serious political engagement, as a challenge to declare the war over so that it would be:

The mad director knows that freedom will not make you free

And what’s this got to do with me

I declare the war is over

It’s over, it’s over

Very few undergraduates in my 1960s subject (taught for well over ten years) had heard either “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” or “The War is Over” and fewer are familiar with his other anti-empire anthems (that said, most become fans). Popular music tastes change, of course, so I am not going to invent a conspiracy theory here – except to observe that those students I referred to invariably knew “Masters of War” or “Blowing in the Wind”. And they were even more likely to have heard of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s Montreal “War is Over” campaign, if only because it involved a hotel “bed-in”. Yes, Dylan was more recognizable to a larger audience, his records were much more popular and his songs had great resonance. The same is true of Lennon and Ono.

Nonetheless, I would suggest there is more going on here. You can fit Dylan easily into the American popular music canon. Ochs cannot be slotted in so neatly, despite his celebration of American soil. This is precisely because his critique of American power, the corruption of American ideals and, in

¹³ Marc Eliot, *Death of a Rebel: starring Phil Ochs and a small circle of friends*, New York: Anchor Books, 1979, pp. 131-2.

particular, the conduct of the American War in Vietnam, along with the creation and preservation of empire elsewhere, is just too unsettling. Even “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” and “Draft Dodger Rag” were considered “controversial” in their day and thus got little public exposure beyond the Movement. So, too, compare Lennon and Ono’s “Give Peace a Chance” to “Cops of the World”. Little wonder, then, that Ochs’ radical song and campaign “The War is Over” is eclipsed in historical memory by the later one organized by Lennon and Ono.

In 2016 the *New York Times* published an article about how to teach protest songs.¹⁴ The fact that a mainstream newspaper could focus upon this as a subject for teaching was, at one level, promising. Yet, almost predictably, the absences in the article spoke to the limitations of contemporary popular discourse about protest music. This piece rounded up most of the usual suspects (Seeger, in particular) but not Phil Ochs. Even in the categories of songs listed at the end of the article - antiwar, labour and civil rights - he does not rate a mention. This would be extraordinary but for the fact that it fits a pattern of amnesia that characterizes post-Vietnam America. The amnesia also applies to Seeger, of course, and others as their Communist pasts are expunged from the historical record or they, themselves, are written out. So, Bing Crosby’s version of “Brother Can You Spare a Dime” is included in the *Times* article but not its author Yip Harburg who also wrote the lyrics for the *Wizard of Oz*. Harburg was a socialist and thus subject to the politics of forgetting. And so, too, Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” makes the list but not its author, Abe Meeropol, a New York teacher who was a Communist Party member.

¹⁴ Michael Gonchar & Katherine Schulten, Katherine 2016, February 4, “Lesson Plan/Teaching With Protest Music”, *New York Times*, Feb 4, 2016.

http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/04/lesson-plan-teaching-with-protest-music/?_r=0

Since America's defeat in Vietnam, both neo-conservatives and neoliberals have constructed a political agenda that involved the **forgetting** of Vietnam. This political amnesia has many manifestations: journalists who still persist in referring to it as a civil war when various memorials are occurring; those very memorials hiding the reality of what went on, sometimes in spectacularly dishonest ways; the way journalists, except those like Hersh, almost always refer to **our** troops and obliterate the memory of those troops, of those brave people, who actually won the war; and the continued failure of governments involved (including my own, Australia) to give proper reparations to the Vietnamese.

This process of forgetting at the very least touches on the reception of popular music. In many ways Ochs was sidelined in his own day, except by the antiwar movement and even then his radicalism struck at a core of American liberalism that left moderate critics uneasy. All this is not idle speculation but rather analysis based upon historical research that has uncovered a desire amongst those in power to forget real history.¹⁵ There are other explanations for Ochs' placement on the margins, of course. These include the fragile last years of life culminating with his tragic suicide in 1976. This, after all, coincided with the origins of a concerted campaign to forget Vietnam originated by Reaganite neoconservatives. More popular artists like Dylan and Lennon were also for much of the time associated with bands that magnified their musical contribution. We can also all suggest exceptions to the rule whereby radicalism is expunged from memory – “This Land is Your Land” being sung by Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen at Obama's inauguration (with the radical verses intact),

¹⁵ Nguyen, Viet Thanh 2016, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the memory of war*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016; Anthony Ashbolt, *A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2013, pp. 9-24.

awards to Harry Belafonte, official acknowledgements of feminist and gay activists. Yet we can also point to the domestication and de-radicalisation of Martin Luther King Jnr. and the way that this is closely connected to the forgetting of Vietnam. So, despite other factors being involved, political amnesia about Vietnam and American imperialism helped displace Ochs from popular memory. It is only relatively recently, after all - with honourable exceptions, including his biographers - that his formidable contribution to the folk music tradition has been recognized but that recognition has not only been belated but also somewhat less than substantial.¹⁶ To be sure, there are musical tributes like "I Dreamed I Saw Phil Ochs Last Night" by Billy Bragg (*The Internationale* 1990). Yet some of the acknowledgements, including the very good documentary *Phil Ochs: There but for Fortune*, hardly focus upon his extensive critique of American empire.¹⁷ Take one essay on protest music that refers only to his "songs about civil rights and the struggles of ordinary people".¹⁸ Eyerman and Jamison, on the contrary, did stress his "understanding of American imperialism".¹⁹ Yet even a recent exception to the amnesia about Ochs is a fine newspaper article by Richard Just emphasising his monumental relevance (Just 2017). The article deals with a range of songs, beginning with "The War is Over" and

¹⁶ Marc Eliot, *Death of a Rebel*; Michael Schumacher, *There But for Fortune*; Marc Kemp, "Song of a Soldier"; also see Ron Eyerman & Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.128-130.

¹⁷ Browser, Kenneth, Dir. 2010, *Phil Ochs: there but for fortune*, written by Kenneth Browser, First Print Features, FRF 914741D.

¹⁸ Ájay Heble, "Take Two/Rebel Musics: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making", in D. Fischlin & A. Heble, *Rebel Musics: human rights, resistant sounds, and the politics of music making*, Montréal, Black Rose Books, 2003, p. 235.

¹⁹ Eyerman & Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, p. 129.

Lady Gaga's performance of it in concert. Yet Just sidesteps, peculiarly but also conveniently, his blistering critique of empire. He does want Lady Gaga to perform another of his songs, "Power and the Glory". Why not "Cops of the World"? The answer, at least and if only in part, is to do with what can be accommodated, absorbed and regurgitated by the culture industry.

Ochs was very supportive of the Cuban revolution, as captured in songs like "Talking Cuban Crisis" or "The Ballad of William Worthy". Moreover, he talked openly of his solidarity with Cuba when I saw him in concert in 1972. We know also of his later connection with Chile under Allende and his friendship with Victor Jara. One of his finest songs is about the American conquest of the Dominican Republic, "Santo Domingo" (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966). A focus on the pain of women in the song brings back memories of "Cops of the World":

"In the cloud dust whirl", the soldiers whistle at the girls,

they're getting bolder

The old women sigh, think of memories gone by, they shrug their shoulders.

The marines have landed on the shores of Santo Domingo.

Recognition of the suffering and fear of women is reflected also in his references to "All the young wives afraid, turn their backs on the parade with babes they're holding" together with "And the eyes of the dead are turning every head to the widows screaming". And he is well aware of the soil of the country conquered not just the soil of America as he captures the essence of the shore with crabs and fish and seagulls and the sea itself taking centre stage just as rivers, plains, rivers and hills do in "Power and the Glory" or "Hills of West Virginia" (*I Ain't Marching Anymore* 1965):

From the flat plains of Ohio we drifted one day,

For the southern part of the journey

Underneath the bridge, the Ohio river sang

As we headed for the hills of West Virginia

It is not just a dialectic of land or soil and liberation that runs through many of Ochs' songs but also one of soil and conquest. His reference to "a young land with many reasons why" in "There but for Fortune" (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966) simultaneously suggests America itself and all those subjugated colonial and post-colonial peoples struggling for freedom for their land. His commitment to a revolutionary surge throughout Latin America is highlighted initially in "Bullets of Mexico" (*All the News That's Fit to Sing* 1964) and there we see the soil of country as a central motif:

Rube'n Jaramillo kept up the tradition

He fought for the land once again

He lived for the land

And there on the land he was slain

It was, of course, primarily the American war in Vietnam that propelled his critique from 1964 on. Vietnam was not referred to directly in "I Ain't Marching Any More" precisely because it did not need to be. It was the point of the song. He wrote a few fine songs specifically about Vietnam, including "Talking Vietnam" (*All the News That's Fit to Sing* 1964) but perhaps none better (although it was not

simply to do with Vietnam) than “White Boots Marching in a Yellow Land” (*Tape From California* 1968). This song, as has been pointed out in a recent historical narrative, “deftly connected racism with imperialism”²⁰:

The pilot’s playing poker in the cockpit of the plane

The casualties are rising like the dropping of rain

And the mountains of machinery will fall before a man

When your white boots are marching in a yellow land

Like many of his generation, Ochs’ life and commitment was defined, in part, by Vietnam. And in reporting on this war, through the medium of song, he was as always prescient and poetic. The following verse is from “We Seek no Wider War” (*Broadside* 1965):

Over the ashes of blood marched the civilized soldiers

Over the ruins of a French fortress of failure

Over the silent screams of the dead and the dying

Saying please be reassured, we seek no wider war

President Johnson had used the words “we still seek no wider war” in a speech on the great progress America was making in Vietnam. The song became even more prophetic when Nixon extended the

²⁰ Cohen & Kauffman, *Singing for Peace*, p. 90.

war into Laos and Cambodia. This helped prompt Ochs to update “Here’s to the State of Mississippi”, although the “secret” wars are a minor reference point in “Here’s to the State of Richard Nixon”.

Phil Ochs “There but for Fortune” (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966) was made into a major hit by Joan Baez. It is a beautiful song for the downtrodden, the vulnerable, the homeless and helpless, a song about American soil, but also a song against American empire:

Show me the country where the bombs had to fall

Show me the ruins of buildings once so tall

And I’ll show you a young land with so many reasons why

And there but for fortune may go you or I, or I

How fitting then that at a concert organized by Ochs in 1975 to celebrate the end of American war, he was joined on stage by Baez to sing “There But for Fortune”. And how appropriate also that this song brought together many themes in Ochs’ rich catalogue.

Ochs was always able to connect disparate things, to make parts into a whole, to see the ties that bind, the “Links on the Chain” (*I Ain’t Marching Anymore* 1965):

Come you ranks of labor, come you union core,

And see if you remember the struggles of before,

When you were standing helpless on the outside of the door

And you started building links on the Chain

Ochs was acutely aware of a political amnesia that beset the labour movement in America. Thus his “Links on the Chain” makes explicit reference to workers forgetting solidarity with “the black man”, being on the wrong side during the freedom rides, missing moments when the power of capital crushed labour: “the automation bosses were laughin’ on the side, as they watched you lose your link on the chain”. And in “I Ain’t Marching Anymore”, he points to the complicity of elements of the labour movement with American imperialism, with “labor leaders “screamin’ when they close the missile plants”. Even the majestically mournful “When I’m Gone” (*Phil Ochs in Concert* 1966) draws threads together in a way that elucidate connections between the personal and the political:

Won’t see the golden of the sun when I’m gone

And the evenings and mornings will be one when I’m gone

Can’t be singing louder than the guns when I’m gone

So I guess I’ll have to do it while I’m here

We can always be grateful for the fact that Ochs did do it while he was here in a way that both celebrated the power and glory of American soil and condemned American expansion. In a poignant reminder of the contemporary vitality of his words, his daughter Meegan Lee Ochs acknowledges that the great singer-songwriter would be pleased that he is being remembered again today but disappointed that it had to be in a context where his words, far from being simple journalism of its

time, speak directly to us today.²¹ And it is true that his voice is still needed now to sing louder than the guns and reflect upon the reality of American empire.

Discography

Bragg, Billy 1990, *The Internationale: "I Dreamed I Saw Phil Ochs Last Night"*, Utility Records, L-28034.

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²¹ Megan Ochs in Kenneth Bowser, Dir. *Phil Ochs: there but for fortune*.