

Pete Seeger and the Origins of "Union Maid"

Jodie Childers

[A commentary on the video, "A Reflection on Woody Guthrie's 'Union Maid': An Interview with Pete Seeger." Video on <https://vimeo.com/118369128>]

In the video "A Reflection on Woody Guthrie's 'Union Maid': An Interview with Pete Seeger," filmed in September 2013, ninety-four year old Pete Seeger recounts the story of how Woody Guthrie composed the song "Union Maid." Seeger reflects on his friendship with Guthrie while also foregrounding the dialogic interplay in the making of folk music as he discusses the lyrical and melodic origins of the song. Through this narrative told through his eyes, Seeger shows how songs materialize out of moments and experiences through the push and pull of human relationships. For Seeger, the social and historical context surrounding the song is just as important as the individual moment of its creation, which gives us insight not just into the song's history but also into Seeger's own perspective on the creative process: it is not about the individual imposing a will on the world, but it is about the artist listening to the people.

Seeger frames his story of "Union Maid's" composition by positioning it within a larger narrative of a road trip out west with Guthrie. During this trip, Seeger and Guthrie participate in a union meeting organized by oil field workers. During the meeting, six men in overcoats stand in the back, attempting to intimidate the workers, and the meeting organizer urges Guthrie and Seeger to get the crowd of men, women, and children to sing together. The tenor of the meeting surprises the men in the back who reveal the baseball bats beneath their coats and admit, "Well, we had intended to break up this meeting, but it's a little different than we were told it was going to be. We were told you were a bunch of communists and that you'd be talking about revolution." After the meeting, Ina Wood approaches Guthrie and asks him to create a song about the women's presence and power in the union: "Woody, all these union songs are about men this and brother that. Can't you write a song about the union women? This meeting would have been broken up if it hadn't been for the union women and their children."

According to Seeger, this conversation inspires Guthrie to create the song in the union office the next day. Seeger vividly describes the writing process: "Woody had his guitar, and he'd sit down at the typewriter and type out a few lines, and then he'd get up and see how it sounded, and then he'd sit down and type some more. He claims I helped him." Guthrie's rendition of the story as documented in the song's notes in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, does indeed, include Seeger as collaborator, although according to Guthrie's account, the writing of the song took place in the

bedroom at night, not in the union office during the morning: "Pete flopped out across a bed, and I set over at a writing machine, and he could think of one line and me another'n until we woke up an hour or two later with a great big 15 pound, blue-eyed Union Song, I mean Union – named the Union Maid."¹ The extent to which Seeger contributed lyrical content is hard to say, as Seeger himself observed about the songs he created in collaboration with the Almanac Singers: "[W]hen the song was finished, we knew that there was no one person who could take responsibility for it."² However, we do know the third verse, which places the union maid in an ancillary role in the labor struggle, was added later by Millard Lampell, and as Seeger notes, "It wasn't a very good verse, and we don't sing it now."

Situating the song in its musical context, Seeger then points out that "Union Maid" uses the melody of "Red Wing," derived from Robert Schumann's "The Happy Farmer." Interestingly, however, when Seeger sings aloud a version of "Red Wing," he does not sing the copyrighted 1907 version by Kerry Mills, with lyrics by Thurland Chattaway, but instead a bawdy variant. This is significant because Chattaway's lyrics provide a strikingly different narrative and character portrait of Red Wing than the one Seeger sings. The canonical version tells the story of an "Indian maid" who pines over the loss of her beloved warrior who has gone to battle:

A shy little prairie maid,
Who sang all day a love song gay,
As on the plains she'd while away the day.
She loved a warrior bold,
This shy little maid of old,
But brave and gay he rode one day
To battle far away.³

The song employs a stereotypical, romanticized trope of a Native American love story with stock heroes: the eroticized and racialized "Indian maid" and her idealized "brave." In this version of the song, Red Wing is portrayed as diffident and submissive. Her power is minimized through the repetition of words like "shy" and "little," and her identity is tied entirely to her beloved. While her "brave" is away at battle acting on the world, she can only be acted upon as she weeps "her heart away" with no power to change her state.

Using the same melody with strikingly different lyrical content, Oscar Brand recorded a bawdy version of "Red Wing" in 1950 for his album, *Bawdy Songs and Backroom Ballads*, Vol. 3. In this version, Red Wing is an independent, albeit sexualized and exoticized, woman who uses her intelligence and courage to ward off male predators:

There once was an Indian maid who always was afraid
That some buckaroo would make it up her cou
As she lay sleeping in the [Indian] shade.

She had an idea grand: she filled it up with sand.
And no buckaroo would get into her cou
And reach the promise land.

CHORUS:

Oh, the Moon shines down on pretty Red Wing
As she lay sleeping, a cowboy creeping
With his one good eye he was a-peeping
He hoped to reach the promise land.⁴

In the next verse, the cowboy attempts to assault Red Wing and is thwarted by her when she uses a "bowie knife" to castrate him. She then places her "trophy" at the door of her tent to serve as a warning to other men who may be interested in "scoring." In this version, Red Wing is not the shy prairie maid "weeping her heart away" but a courageous and independent individual who ends up "happy all her life" by defending and protecting her autonomy. Intriguingly, the version that Seeger sings in this video is not the Oscar Brand version either, but still a third variant of the same song:

Oh the Moon shines bright on pretty Red Wing
As she lay sleeping, there came a creeping
A cowboy with his eyes a-gleaming
Into the door of Red Wing's teepee.

As in Brand's version, the cowboy attempts to invade Red Wing's physical space but is thwarted by her knife. Once again, Red Wing's body and home are conflated, and through this act of self-defense she asserts sovereignty over both domains, fending off imperial conquest.

It is likely that Guthrie would have been familiar with both the 1907 version and the bawdy variants. "Union Maid," then, is a work in conversation with these songs and with these character portraits and narratives of "Red Wing." The story of "Red Wing" speaks to and through "Union Maid" as a narrative of resistance to gendered codes and expectations and as an expression of courage against "creeping cowboys" as much as "goons and ginks and company finks."

Seeger ends his telling of the story by describing how he and Guthrie carried the song even further out west: "And Woody wrote a great union chorus. We sang it out west, and it was the hit song of the ... Labor Day Parade in Los Angeles. The whole Labor Day Parade was singing that chorus. They didn't know the verses yet, but they knew the chorus."

NOTES

¹ Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, eds., *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 324.

² Seeger to Millard Lampell, in Bob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal, eds., *Pete Seeger: In His Own Words* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012), 26.

³ Kerry Mills [and Thurland Chattaway], “Red Wing: An Indian Intermezzo” (New York: F. A. Mills, 1907). Charles Templeton Sheet Music Collection, Mississippi State University. Accessible on <http://digital.library.msstate.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/SheetMusic/id/18019/rec/2>.

⁴ Oscar Brand, “Red Wing,” *Bawdy Songs and Backroom Ballads*, Vol. 3 (Audio Fidelity, 1950), Side B, Track 3.