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# The Kingston Trio and the Red Scare

The death of Nick Reynolds, one of the Kingston Trio, last week at 75, provoked fond memories of one era and painful reminders of another. **Peter Dreier and Jim Vrabel** October 14, 2008 | This article appeared in the October 27, 2008 edition of The Nation.

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Nick Reynolds can be seen as the lead singer in the Kingston Trio's version of "M.T.A." on this YouTube video:

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### Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

recognition to older folkies and radicals like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and for paving the way for newcomers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, who were well-known for their progressive political views and topical songs. By the time these younger folk singers arrived on the scene, the political climate had changed enough to provide a wide audience for protest music.

Reynolds was candid about the difficult position that the Kingston Trio took to navigate their way through those interlocking eras. In an interview last year, he told us that the members of his group were "big fans of the Weavers," the folk group with Pete Seeger that had a number-one hit in 1950 with "Goodnight Irene" but were blacklisted for their left-wing sympathies and forced to break up in 1952.

Reynolds, who was friends with Weaver member Fred Hellerman, acknowledged that what happened to the Weavers caused the Kingston Trio to choose a different course.

"We decided that if we wanted to have our songs played on the airwaves, we'd better stay in the middle of the road politically," he explained. Asked if the Weavers had warned the trio to

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The fond memories are of the folk music revival that began in the late 1950s with the clean-cut, college-boy Kingston Trio and within a few years was closely linked to crusades for justice. The painful ones come from remembering that the period was accompanied by the cold war and the McCarthy era, when what you sang-- as much as what you said--could get you in trouble.

Reynolds, Bob Shane and Dave Guard formed the Kingston Trio in 1957, originally as calypso group. The next year, their first hit, a rendition of the traditional folk song "Tom Dooley," earned a gold record and a Grammy. Thirteen of the group's albums, which included such hit songs as "A Worried Man" and "Tijuana Jail," reached the Top Ten. In 1959 alone, they had four albums at the same time among the ten top-selling albums.

Purists often derided the Kingston Trio for watering down folk songs in order to make them commercially popular and for remaining on the political sidelines during the protest movements of the 1960s. But the group deserves credit for helping to launch the folk boom that brought



avoid controversy, he replied: "They didn't have to."

Even after they'd made it big, the group never aligned itself with protest causes, said Reynolds, who described himself as a "very liberal Democrat." Onstage, "the most we ever did was give a plug for John Kennedy" during his 1960 campaign against Richard Nixon.

Reynolds recalled that despite their personal support for the civil rights movement, the Kingston Trio didn't perform songs like "We Shall Overcome" at their concerts.

Reynolds also admitted that the Kingston Trio even resorted to changing the lyrics of one of their biggest hits in order to avoid controversy. It happened when they recorded "M.T.A.," the ballad about a man named Charlie doomed to "ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston" for want of a nickel to pay the fare to get off.

The lyrics to "M.T.A." had been written as a campaign song for Walter A. O'Brien Jr., the Progressive Party candidate for mayor of Boston in 1949. (The tune was taken from "The Ship That Never Returned" by Henry Clay Work, written in 1865, and later transformed into "The Wreck of the Old 97" by Vernon Dalhart in 1924, then "The Train that Never Returned" by the radical Almanac Singers in 1941.)

An admitted long shot, O'Brien recruited Bess Lomax Hawes, daughter of folk song collector John Lomax, and Jackie Steiner to write the song for him. Although the story told in the song is humorous, it was meant to dramatize O'Brien's call for a rollback of the subway fare increase in Boston and protest the recent bailout of the privately owned Boston Elevated Railway Company by the Massachusetts legislature through creation of the publicly owned Massachusetts Transit Authority (MTA). Hawes and Steiner ended the song with a verse that made sure Boston voters knew which of the mayoral candidate was on their side: "Vote for Walter A. O'Brien/and fight the fare increase/Get poor Charlie off that MTA!"

The song didn't help O'Brien much, since he finished dead last in the election. He continued to practice progressive politics until he was caught up in Massachusetts's own version of the Red Scare. After refusing to answer questions when called before the Massachusetts Committee on Communism, O'Brien and eighty-four others were branded "Communists or Communist sympathizers." They had their names, addresses and places of employment published in the newspapers. Unable to find work, O'Brien returned to his native Maine, gave up politics, became a school librarian and tried to stay out of the glare of the Red Scare headlines.

The song endured. In 1957, folk singer Will Holt recorded it for Coral Records and it seemed well on its way to becoming a hit. Radio stations played it, record stores sold it and *Life* magazine even planned a feature story on Holt and the song, including photographs of him at the various subway stops mentioned in the song. Suddenly, though, radio stations stopped playing the song, stores stopped selling the record, and *Life* abruptly pulled its story--after protesters objected to the song for including the name of Walter O'Brien, and thus "glorifying" a radical.

The Kingston Trio later learned the song from Holt, whom Reynolds recalled meeting through Bay Area folk music circles. They decided to record it, but knowing what had happened to Holt, they made a slight change in the lyrics--dropping the name of Walter O'Brien and replacing it with the name of a fictional character, "George O'Brien."

Reynolds did not deny why they did it. "We changed the name so we wouldn't get into political trouble," he recalled last year. "Everything in those days was controversial. This was the McCarthy era. Who knows who would come knocking on your door?"

With Reynolds singing the lead, "M.T.A." was released on the Kingston Trio's second album on June 1, 1959, and as a single a week later. The single made it to number fifteen on the

Billboard chart that year, and the album reached number one on the pop charts. *Life*, which had dropped the story on Will Holt and his Walter O'Brien version of the song, ran a cover story featuring the Kingston Trio and their George O'Brien version. Later that year, group won a Grammy as best folk performers of the year.

Fifty years ago, Nick Reynolds and the Kingston Trio were folk music pioneers. Since then, "M.T.A." has become a part of American folklore, reprinted in myriad songbooks, a staple at summer camps and recorded by many different performers--but only after the name of the man for whom it was written was removed from the lyrics.

In the 1950s world of folk music, there were places that even pioneers feared to go.

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