

June 27, 2013


 HUFF  
POST ENTERTAINMENT

---

## Will Charlie Ever Get Off That Train?

Posted: 02/15/09 10:06 PM ET

Fifty years ago (February 16, 1959), at the Capitol Recording Studios in New York, the Kingston Trio recorded "M.T.A.," a ballad about a "man named Charlie" who was doomed to "ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston" for want of a nickel to pay the fare to get off. In the song's most memorable stanza, Charlie's wife brings him a sandwich every day, handing it to him through an open window "while the train goes rumbling through." (Watch the the YouTube video of the Trio performing the "M.T.A." song).

"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 of "M.T.A." made it to #15 on the Billboard chart, and the album reached #1 on the pop charts. *LIFE* magazine featured a one-page article about the song in its June 29 issue and then ran a cover story on the Kingston Trio two months later. The group went on to be voted Best Group of the Year and won a Grammy as best folk performers of the year.

Most people think of "M.T.A." as a clever, amusing ditty - a novelty song like others of the postwar era, such as "Yellow Polka Dot Bikini," "How Much Is That Doggy in the Window?" and "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor On the Bedpost Overnight?"

In fact, "M.T.A." was a frankly political song, a protest against the rescue of a troubled private company with insufficient assets by the taxpayers of Massachusetts and the riders of Boston's first-in-the-nation subway system. 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.

Although the story told in the song is humorous, it was meant to dramatize the left-wing O'Brien's call for a rollback of the subway fare increase. It was imposed by the Massachusetts legislature to pay for the bailout of the privately owned Boston Elevated Railway Company through creation of the publicly owned Massachusetts Transit Authority (MTA). The song ended 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!"

In the 1930s and 1940s, American leftists regularly used folk songs to energize picket lines, enliven rallies, and galvanize labor unions and political campaigns. An admitted long shot, O'Brien asked Bess Lomax Hawes, daughter of folk song collector John Lomax, if she could come up with some songs to help boost his mayoral campaign. Hawes recruited Jackie Steiner, who was part of her circle of music-loving leftists in Boston, to help her.

Rather than compose a new melody, Hawes recalled a song that she had sung in 1941 with the Almanac Singers - a group that also included Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Lee Hays -- for a Transport Workers Union rally that filled Madison Square Garden, which they called "The Train That Never Returned." That song was based on two older songs. "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, America's first million-selling record.

Hawes, Steiner and several of their Progressive Party friends made a non-commercial recording of "M.T.A." for the campaign. Sometimes the group squeezed together with their instruments on the platform on top of the sound truck and sang at campaign stops with O'Brien. When they weren't available, the recording was played. Either way, the crowds liked the song. (That original recording can now be heard in a ten-CD collection called *Songs For Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs and the American Left 1926-1953*, released in 1997, that includes 296 songs collected by folklorists Ronald Cohen and Dave Samuelson).

The song didn't help O'Brien much, since he finished dead last in the election. But he continued to practice progressive politics -- until he was caught up in the Cold War-era Red Scare when he was hauled before the Massachusetts Committee on Communism. After refusing to answer questions, O'Brien and eighty-four others were branded "Communists or Communist sympathizers." On June 9, 1955, these eighty-five men and women had their names, addresses and places of employment published in the newspapers -- an effective way to carry out a blacklist. Unable to find work in Boston, 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.

O'Brien's campaign song, however, endured. In 1957, folk singer Will Holt recorded "M.T.A." for Coral Records and the song seemed well on its way to becoming a hit. Radio stations played it, record stores sold it. *LIFE magazine* even planned a feature story on Holt and the song, one that included photographs of Holt 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. Why? With the Red Scare still a force, right-wingers had objected to the song for including the name of Walter O'Brien, and thus "glorifying" a radical.

Holt continued to perform the song in concerts, however, and not long after taught it to the members of the Kingston Trio. Made up of Nick Reynolds, Bob Shane and Dave Guard and formed in 1957, originally as calypso group, the Kingston Trio had their first hit a year later, a rendition of the traditional folk song "Tom Dooley," which 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.

That year the Kingston Trio decided to record "M.T.A.", but knowing what had happened to Holt, they made a slight but strategic 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, who sang the lead on the song for the Kingston Trio, explained why they made the switch. "We changed the name so we wouldn't get into political trouble," he recalled in a 2007 interview. "Everything in those days was controversial. This was the McCarthy era. Who knows who would come knocking on your door?"

Reynolds explained that the Kingston Trio were "big fans of the Weavers," the folk group that included two former Almanac Singers (Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes) and had a number one hit in 1950 with "Goodnight Irene," but were blacklisted and forced to break up in 1953.

"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," said Reynolds, who died last October. "We'd just gotten out of school. We didn't want to get blacklisted like the Weavers." Asked if the Weavers had warned the Kingston Trio not to be controversial, Reynolds replied, "They didn't have to."

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 recognition to older folkies and radicals like Guthrie and Seeger, and for paving the way for newcomers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, 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 that helped inspire the civil rights, anti-war, feminist, and environmental movements.

That tradition continues today, carried on by the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Bono, the Dixie Chicks, John McCutcheon, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Ani DiFranco, Bonnie Raitt, Billy Bragg, and many others. It was on display last month at the inauguration songfest at the Washington Monument, where the 89-year old Seeger joined Springsteen in leading more than half a million people on the mall and millions of people watching on TV in a rendition of "This Land is Your Land." Still defiant, Seeger not only sang his friend Guthrie's 1940 patriotic anthem, but also, for good measure, included two of the original stanzas-- one about Depression-era poverty, the other about trespassing on private property-- that few Americans have heard before, but which are still relevant today amid escalating lay-offs, foreclosures, and bank failures, and a new wave of political activism.

Since the Kingston Trio's self-censored version became a hit fifty years ago, "M.T.A." has become a part of American folklore, reprinted in myriad songbooks, a staple at summer camps, recorded by many different performers, and frequently parodied. A few years ago, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (the current incarnation of the MTA), even named its new electronic fare card the "Charlie Card" in honor of the song. The Trio continues to tour, with a new line-up. "M.T.A." -- which audiences often call "The Charlie Song" -- is one of their most-requested songs.

The song's enduring popularity was a source of pride to Walter O'Brien, who died in 1998 at the age of 83, even though the Kingston Trio purged his name from the lyrics.

What happened to Bess Hawes and Jackie Steiner, the two radicals who wrote "M.T.A."? Both endured but survived the blacklist, participated in the folk music revival that began in the late 1950s, and helped mentor the Baby Boomer folkies.

Both find it amusing not only that the "M.T.A." song has endured, but that they continue to receive royalty checks for it. Ironically, when she wrote the song in 1949, Hawes considered the song a "throw away" -- one of many topical songs written for a particular political cause at a particular moment in time. Likewise, Steiner viewed the song as a "toss off, an occasional song that would soon be forgotten."

Hawes and her husband left Boston in 1951, after FBI agents had come to their children's nursery school to ask both the children and parents about the Hawes' political activities and ideas. After moving to California, she began a career teaching anthropology and folk arts, giving guitar lessons, making documentary films, and occasionally performing at folk festivals and coffeehouses. In 1975, she went to Washington to organize folk-life festivals for the Smithsonian Institution. The following year she accepted an offer from the National Endowment for the Arts to develop its Folk Arts Program, distributing grants to folk musicians and artists. Hawes retired in 1991 and two years later received the National Medal of the Arts at a reception at the White House. In 2000, the National Endowment of the Arts created an award in her name to honor those who make major contributions to folk and traditional arts. Now 88, she lives with her daughter and son-in-law in Oregon. Her autobiography, *Sing It Pretty*, was published last year by the University of Illinois Press.

Steiner, now 84 and living in Connecticut, continued to be active politically and musically, recording and performing classical and folk songs in concerts and at benefits for political causes around the country. Whenever she performed "M.T.A.," she explained to audiences beforehand that it wouldn't be the Kingston Trio version they were probably familiar with, but the original one - the political protest song, the one with Walter O'Brien's name still in it.

*Peter Dreier teaches Politics at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Jim Vrabel is author of When In Boston: A Time-Line and Almanac.*

**5 people** are discussing this article with **6 comments**

**Comments are closed on this entry.**

Highlighted Most Recent Oldest Most Faved

**classismwatch**

0 Fans

Here's some more historical info about Walter O'Brien & his 1949 campaign in Boston:

Born in Portland, Maine, O'Brien had been a shop steward in the CIO's Industrial Union of Shipbuilding Workers of America, prior to volunteering for the U.S. Merchant Marine in 1943. After World War II, he moved to Boston and was active in the Boston Tenants' Council before first running for Congress in 1948. [Read More](#)

Fave Share 9 Mar 2009 6:56 PM Flag

**LiberalBuzz**

POLITICAL PUNDIT · 3,562 Fans · Voting republican is voting against America.

Great history lesson.

Fave Share 17 Feb 2009 10:39 AM Flag

**Ibram1**

1 Fan

1

Actually, the Trio learned WHATEFG from Mary of the Peter, Paul, and Mary at a club in Boston area. So PP&M did it first and kiddingly say the trio stole the song from them. This was told in a story by Bob Shane himself. Love both groups.

Fave Share 16 Feb 2009 1:30 PM Flag

In reply to: [Ibram1](#)

**Wilburrr**

282 Fans

That's different from the version Pete Seeger tells.

Fave Share 17 Feb 2009 8:17 PM Flag

**Wilburrr**

282 Fans

It wasn't all younger folk singers that contributed to the war and civil rights movements.... Pete Seeger wrote "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" which was picked up by the Kingston Trio and then by Peter, Paul, and Mary. He also contributed heavily (wrote?) "We Shall Overcome" THE anthem of the civil rights movement. I don't believe he placed a copyright on either effort but placed them immediately in the public domain.

Keep singin', Pete!

Fave Share 16 Feb 2009 11:42 AM Flag

**ignorantwillyharper**

27 Fans

For talented people, there has to be ton's of material out there for the Bush/Cheney era.

Fave Share 16 Feb 2009 7:08 AM Flag