



Behind the Song

The American culture has looked for the perfect world that Thomas More described in his book *Utopia*, meaning “no place.” The idea was continued by John Winthrop’s sermon of the “city upon a hill” that is referred to every four years during presidential elections. The 19th century Utopian communities made several efforts to bring that idea to life in America at places like Brook Farm, New Harmony, Oneida and others. By the end of the 19th century, farmers were forming alliances to challenge railroads, big business and control of the financial flow of money. Social issues were reported in the press by muckrakers and yellow journalism.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had published their ideas on how to improve workers’ Socialism with the doctrine of Communism. Then, with the Russian Revolution, Communism developed into a government of working people. The idea of a worker’s utopia was real in Russia. Many people around the world during the 1920s moved to the Soviet Union for this new way of life. As with all utopian ideas, once established, human nature takes its place. The idea was changing in the Soviet Union—Joseph Stalin was the supreme leader by the time the Great Depression came into being.

The Great Depression in America had started in the farmlands during the 1920s. Then, the Dust Bowl hit the Midwest and its farmers. Woody Guthrie came out of the Dust Bowl era with songs about the plight of workers and farmers. One song he wrote in 1940 was a reaction to one sung by Kate Smith, “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin. The song was constantly played on the radio, and Guthrie hated it. He felt that it ignored the out-of-work citizens and impoverished farmers. So, he wrote an alternative song with the original title “God Blessed America for Me.” The song was recorded in 1944 but did not get much attention.

By 1950, Woody was with “fellow traveler” Pete Seeger and his group, The Weavers. They recorded the song in 1951 without two original verses—the fourth and the sixth. Three or four of The Weavers, including Seeger, were members of the Communist Party at one time. The 1930s provided good, fertile ground for the Communist Party, although many who were members later withdrew from the party.

The Second World War was over, and the United States’ recent ally, the Soviet Union, was expanding into central Europe. The country sponsored the civil war in Greece and cut” off supplies to the city of Berlin. The United States was in the midst of the McCarthy investigations, known as McCarthyism and the Red Scare, when “This Land Is Your Land” was released. The song became an instant hit without the fourth and sixth verses and would be recorded internationally.

There was a move to make the song the national anthem and replace “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Here was a song written with Socialist/Communist sentiment that was viewed as the shining example of capitalist America during the McCarthy Red Scare, much like Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.”

And here are the missing verses:

As I went walking, I saw a sign there.
And on that sign it said, “No trespassing”
But on the other side, it didn’t say nothing.
That side was made for you and me.

In the shadow of a steeple, I saw my people,
By the relief office, I seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

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