“If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)” – The Weavers

Encased in repetitive lyrics sung with childlike innocence and simplicity, a message to the American public emerges from the melodic tune “If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)” by The Weavers. Using the “hammer” as a metaphor for power, writers Lee Hays and Pete Seeger sing to America that power should be used for love and as a remedy to injustice and inequality. It is a call-to-hearts rather than a call-to-arms, a message laced with pro-union, pro-labor, pro-racial-equality sentiments that appear in the phrases “I’d hammer out love between my brothers… and all over this land,” “It’s a hammer of justice,” and “It’s a song about love.” An undercurrent of Hays and Seeger’s leftist sentiments manifests as allusions to the labor movement – a hotly debated, arguably communistic, concept in postwar, pro-capitalism America – with references to hammers and bells, both of which were associated with manual labor. Despite the merry cadence of the tune, the singers’ statement, “I’d ring out a warning” with reference to the “bell of freedom” implies that freedom, with the help of progressives such as Seeger and Hays, is crying out in fear of its violation.

Although the song’s lighthearted lyrics partially masked its hopeful yet passive-aggressive tone, public response was dreadfully antagonistic. In 1949, The Weavers performed the song at a concert near Peekskill, NY, where infuriated police and right-wing groups attacked them with rocks and told them to “go on back to Russia.” The song’s premier, however, provoked the most significant consequences; the *Daily Worker*, a paper published in NYC by Communist Party USA, printed a notice of the song’s debut, which occurred at a testimonial dinner for Communist Party leaders who were on trial for violating the Smith Act. This association with the Communist Party, an organization targeted by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), placed The Weavers in a precarious position, and only 4 years later, US Communist-turned-FBI informant Harvey Matusow identified Pete Seeger and Lee Hays as Communist Party members.

With a call to testify in front of the HUAC in 1955, Lee Hays and Pete Seeger bid adieu to the idle music scene as their art was debated not on the basis of musical taste but on the basis of its political implications. Although Hays plead the Fifth, Seeger refused to answer any inquires, not on the grounds of the Fifth Amendment but on the grounds of the First, the first person to do so since the Hollywood Ten. Although found guilty of contempt, Seeger's conviction was reversed in 1962 when Matusow admitted to "perjury and conspiring with the U.S. attorneys to give false testimony." Officially blacklisted as a result of the HUAC hearing, the Weavers were banned from radio and television, dropped by their recording label, and effectually expelled from the music scene, a common occurrence among victims of the HUAC's sensational anti-Communist pursuits. Here exists this situation's primary irony: a song espousing peace triggered violence from the hands of those Americans proclaiming the utmost concern for national peace. Thus, The Weavers were trapped in the paradox of a nation scared so Red that it failed to see the value of the art and social movements it fostered and the importance of the rights that were sacrificed by its radical designs. Matusow's fallacious account is a prime example of the fear that so deeply rattled the American government that it would turn against its entertainment culture which had been born from the consumer culture its capitalistic tendencies had so effectively cultivated.