

*Whole World In An Uproar:
Music, Rebellion and Repression 1955-1972*
Aaron J Leonard
London: Repeater Books, 2023, £12.99, p/b

John Newsinger

In 2020 Aaron Leonard published his *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA 1939-1956*. That outstanding volume chronicled the FBI's surveillance, harassment and persecution of the likes of Peter Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, Agnes 'Sis' Cunningham and others. It showed how the US state went after the folk music lefties as part of its campaign against the Communist Party (CP). At the same time, it provided a critical forensic account of the trajectory of CP politics – from the Hitler-Stalin Pact to the Khrushchev revelations regarding Stalin's dictatorial rule in February 1956. Leonard has followed up with a further essential contribution, *Whole World In An Uproar*, a chronicle of the FBI's continued persecution of the folk left. This broadens out into the Bureau's attempts to deal with musical support for the civil rights movement and for the black revolt in many US cities; and the bands and singers who provided the soundtrack for the anti-war movement in the late 1960s and into the 1970s.

One problem the FBI had was that, whereas previously the folk music movement they had been dealing with earlier had been dominated by the CP, now the politics they were concerned to contain and repress had no dominant centre on which they could concentrate their efforts.¹ As Leonard puts it:

The upsurge of the Sixties, and the music it produced, was made possible in no small way by the churning of titanic forces operating within and beyond the borders of the United States [. . .] This was the terra firma for unprecedented upheaval: urban insurrections, massive protests, the rejection of established norms, and the quest for an alternative culture. (p. 5)

¹ Leonard, together with Conor Gallagher, published two other books on the FBI surveillance and harassment of the left: *A Threat of the First Magnitude: FBI Counterintelligence & Infiltration From the Communist Party to the Revolutionary Union 1962-1974* (Repeater Books, 2018) and *Heavy Radicals: The FBI's Secret War on America's Maoists 1968-1980* (Zero Books, 2022).

There was a dramatic move from the Old Left to a more disparate New Left. The book is very much a celebration of resistance and its sound track.

The FBI had never confined their activities to the surveillance of the folk scene, but had also monitored the career and activities of the likes of Paul Robeson, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington and Harry Belafonte. Now, with the emergence of rock and roll, they were confronted with music that 'challenged white supremacist social norms by embracing Black musical styles and popularizing them' as well as challenging 'the dominant puritanical mores of the United States'. (p. 13) Leonard goes as far to say that rock and roll – 'albeit unconsciously' – actually 'reinforced the burgeoning Black freedom movement' that was challenging white supremacy, particularly the apartheid regime in the South. (p 23). However, rock and roll was more of a cultural than a political challenge.

'Robert Dylan, a folk singer'

The folk lefties continued with their more political interventions, reinforced, at least for a while, by the young Bob Dylan, who released his great *Freewheelin'* album in 1963. This included classic protest songs such as 'Blowin' in the Wind', 'Masters of War', 'Oxford Town' and 'A Hard Rains Gonna Fall', songs that certainly impacted on this writer back in the mid-1960s. In the run-up to the album's release, Dylan was booked to appear on the prestigious Ed Sullivan Show, where he proposed to perform his 'Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues'. When this was vetoed Dylan refused to appear. What Leonard makes clear is that Ed Sullivan was himself a hardline reactionary who, in the 1950s, had been a supporter of the violently anti-Communist, pro-blacklisting *Counterattack* newsletter. (pp. 27-28) In the aftermath of this incident, Columbia Records ordered a new pressing of the *Freewheelin'* album with the John Birch song removed!

At this time, Dylan was close to the Trotskyist folk singer, Dave Van Ronk, who apparently tried to recruit him, but without success. As Leonard points out, Van Ronk nearly became part of a folk trio with Peter Yarrow and Mary Travers – so they would have been Peter, Dave and Mary rather than Peter, Paul and Mary. This would certainly have been interesting. Somewhat surprisingly, at this time Dylan did not have an FBI file. However his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo (she is on the cover of the *Freewheelin'* album) did, and he features in her file as 'Robert Dylan, a folksinger'. (pp. 57-58) In December of 1963 Dylan received the Tom Paine award from the Emergency Civil Rights Committee. Being a supporter of the Cuban Revolution, he used his acceptance speech to refer to the assassination of President Kennedy, which had happened the previous month. He told the audience that he saw something of himself in Lee Harvey Oswald,

although he did not think he could actually 'go that far and shoot'. (p. 64) This was all faithfully recorded in Suze Rotolo's file but, following the incident, the FBI opened a specific file on Bob Dylan. He recorded one other great protest album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, released in 1964, but abandoned protest in 1965.

'I Ain't Marching Anymore'

Leonard chronicles the FBI surveillance of a host of other singers and musicians, but the files were often not available. For example, it is inconceivable that Nina Simone of 'Mississippi Goddam' never had a file, but he could not gain access. Similarly, Joan Baez's presumably hefty file 'has not been released'. (p. 140) What he does is remind us of how the likes of Phil Ochs intervened in the political struggles of the time. Ochs responded to the US invasion of the Dominican Republic in April 1965 with his *I Ain't Marching Anymore* album that included 'a set of incendiary songs' among them 'Draft Dodger Rag' and 'Here's to the State of Mississippi'. (p. 95) Leonard looks at Buffy Sainte-Marie, whose championing of Native American rights, saw the FBI doing its best to have her music banned by radio stations across the United States. (pp. 97-98) Then there is Miriam Makeba, who compounded her support for the 'Black freedom movement' by marrying Stokely Carmichael, consequently had her career ruined and was eventually driven out of the country altogether. She was, in Leonard's words, 'stalked by the FBI'. (pp. 155-156, 210-214). And then Gordon Lightfoot recorded his song 'Black Day in July', responding to the military intervention in Detroit in July 1967, an intervention that saw tanks deployed on the streets, blocks of flats machine-gunned and prisoners murdered by the police. Forty-three people were killed. The record was due for release in July 1968, but Lightfoot 'confronted a ban from nearly every station in the United States [. . .] banning his song, from the authorities' point of view, was the least they could do'. (p. 152). The FBI even kept an eye on The Monkees who were suspected of being antiwar! In September 2022, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that Micky Dolenz, the band's drummer, was suing the FBI for access to the unredacted file.²

The wave of unrest that had engulfed President Lyndon Johnson was confronted by Richard Nixon when he won the presidential election in 1968. Leonard quotes Nixon's domestic security adviser, John Ehrlichman, on how they determined to deal with the challenges they faced. The administration identified two domestic enemies:

² The *Guardian* 1 September 2022 at <<https://tinyurl.com/5xucpp4d>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/01/monkees-micky-dolenz-fbi-secret-dossier-lawsuit>>

the antiwar left and black people. [. . .] We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.

The War on Drugs was all about politics and by 1970 'key rock musicians were finding themselves arrested for drugs'. (pp. 204-205)³

Quite how paranoid the authorities were – and how dangerous the situation was – is perhaps best shown by Leonard's revelation that in August 1969 Governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller's people seriously considered mobilising the National Guard to close down the Woodstock festival and disperse the some 400,000 people gathering there. While it is generally remembered as a celebration of 'peace and love', as Leonard points out, it was in fact 'shot through with countercultural mores and left-leaning politics – from Richie Havens' opening of "Freedom", Jimi Hendrix's deconstruction of the "Star-Spangled Banner", Joan Baez's anti-draft remarks about her husband in prison for draft resistance, Joe McDonald's leading the audience in the "Fish Cheer" – spelling out the word FUCK – and Jefferson Airplane's song calling for revolution'. (pp. 181-182) Fortunately, Woodstock was allowed to go ahead or who knows how many would have been killed.

From 'Ohio' to 'Chicago' and Beyond

Meanwhile, at the end of April 1970, the United States invaded Cambodia. This provoked protest across the US, particularly in the universities. On 4 May at Kent State University in Ohio, the National Guard opened fire on student protesters, killing four of them. This provoked a fresh wave of student strikes and protests in both schools and universities, involving more than 4 million people. Soon after, on 15 May at Jackson State College, a black college in Mississippi, police opened fire on protesters with shotguns, killing one student

³ One interesting point that Leonard does not explore (and so presumably could find no evidence to support) is the claim in Philip Norman's massive biography *Mick Jagger* (Harper Collins, 2013) that the FBI were in fact behind the arrest and imprisonment of Jagger and Keith Richards for possession in February 1967 as a way of keeping them out of the USA. According to Norman: 'The Bureau had regarded Mick as an anti-American subversive since 1967 when its collusion with British MI5 in the Acid King David affair had led to his trial, imprisonment, and consequent exile from the United States for two years afterwards'. In 1972, Jagger 'still had a fat FBI file, noting such threats to its internal security as his vague murmurs of support for the Black Panthers and the *Exile on Main St.* track dedicated to Angela Davis. According to a former FBI operative, 'J. Edgar Hoover hated Jagger probably more than any other pop-cultural figure of his generation'. (p. 435). For the Acid King David episode see pp. 225-234 of *Mick Jagger*.

and a seventeen year old schoolboy. The Kent State shootings had provoked an immediate response from singer-songwriter Neil Young who wrote his great protest song 'Ohio' which was soon released by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. And after the Jackson State shootings, the Steve Miller Band released their 'Jackson-Kent Blues'. (pp. 199-200) Even the young Bruce Springsteen, at that time twenty years old and heading up the Steel Mill rock band, wrote and then performed his song 'Where Was Jesus in Ohio' on 19 June.

It is worth noticing here that Graham Nash, formerly of the Manchester-based British band, The Hollies, had already written a song, 'Chicago', protesting against 'Bobby Seale being "bound and gagged" in court' during the trial of the Chicago 8 (later 7). (p. 195) Seale got an incredible four years in prison for contempt of court! He appealed and the sentence was quashed. Nash, Dave Crosby, Joan Baez, Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland were also involved in providing financial support for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organisation that, from 31 January until 2 February 1971, held the Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit. Nash turned the testimony of one veteran witness, Scott Camil, into 'the song "Oh Camil (Winter Soldier)", which offered a blistering counter to anyone who thought there was honor in the war the US was fighting'. (p. 218)

Of the many rock bands that contributed to the resistance, Leonard singles out Jefferson Airplane for being 'arguably more than other bands . . . always in contention against the entrenched forces of the larger system, with their record companies, with the rules at venues they played and with the police'. (p. 113) The band's lead singer, Grace Slick, had attended Finch College in New York and in the aftermath of the Chicago Trial she was invited to attend a College reunion at the White House. She turned up accompanied by the yippie Abbie Hoffman, one of those who had been on trial. He was using a false name and was in disguise. They hoped to be able 'to spike Richard Nixon's tea with acid' but she was told that she was considered a security risk and was not allowed in. (p. 195) In the summer of 1972, the band performed at the Rubber Bowl in Akron, Ohio, where fighting broke out between the audience and the police. Grace Slick urged the crowd to take on the 'pigs' from the stage. The police then used tear gas to dispel the fans. Two members of the band, Grace Slick and Paul Kantner, were subsequently maced and arrested. Their 1969 album, *Volunteers*, was an explicit call for revolution.

It is also worth mentioning another band here: Country Joe and the Fish. The band's founding members came from leftist backgrounds, with Barry Melton's father being a friend of Woody Guthrie. The band had Maoist sympathies. At the great antiwar May Day protests in Washington DC in 1971, which saw more than half a million people on the streets and 10,000 troops

deployed, the band played their powerful 'I -Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag'. By the time the protests were over some 12,000 people had been arrested and soldiers had accidentally fired tear gas into the President's Dining Room at the White House, where Nixon's daughter was having lunch. Country Joe and the Fish dedicated their tremendous third album, *Together*, 'To Bobby Hutton - Black Revolutionary 1950-1968'. A Black Panther leader, Hutton had been shot dead by the Oakland police, in his underwear, with his hands up, trying to surrender. (p. 160)

'Battle Hymn of Lt Calley'

Leonard chronicles much more of the soundtrack of the resistance, but he also pays attention to the rival soundtrack, to the singers who supported the Vietnam War. James Brown, for example, was enthusiastic about entertaining the troops in Vietnam. Although the authorities were very reluctant to let him do so, in June 1968 the tour went ahead. He was a strong supporter of the War and on his return 'released the jingoistic "America is My Home"'. Brown was very much pro-capitalist and strongly believed that all black people had to do to prosper in the USA was work as hard as he had. He was appalled when his 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud' song was widely seen as a black power anthem, rather than as an endorsement of the system and working within it. He later complained that 'The white community took it entirely the wrong way'. (pp. 157-158) There was no way anyone could possibly misunderstand where 'Battle Hymn of Lt Calley', by Terry Nelson and C Company, was coming from. This was released in March 1971 while Calley's trial for his part in the My Lai massacre was underway. (Calley was a convenient scapegoat for the MyLai atrocity in which US troops killed over 500 defenceless old men, women and children.) It sold over a million copies in four days and eventually reached a total sale of over two million. As Leonard observes, the fact is 'that there was a sizeable audience in the US for a song extolling mass murder'. (pp. 224-225) Presumably this did not perturb the FBI in the slightest.

John Newsinger is a retired academic. His latest book is

Chosen by God: Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>