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The Ghost of Tom Joad: Social Activism in *The Grapes of Wrath* and its Impact on American Music and Society

Chad Kallauner

*They's gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin' wes' — outa all their farms lef' lonely. They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country.*

- Jim Casy, *The Grapes of Wrath*¹

Introduction

In this paper I intend to focus on the novel by John Steinbeck, the controversies surrounding this work, and how the novel has influenced key activists as well as the American music landscape, most notably the genres of folk and folk rock.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath*, written in 1939, is Steinbeck's sixth novel. It tells the tale of the Joad family being evicted from their land in Oklahoma and heading west in a used jalopy, looking for “Eden.” They become wage laborers, treated like animals with little food and no home. Little by little, the Joad family grows smaller, with three men abandoning the family in the course of the story. The rest of the family is held together by the courageous characters of Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon.

In the 1930s, Steinbeck worked for *The San Francisco News*, writing

(1) *The Grapes of Wrath* 224.
about the rural poor. This job helped him learn about the class structure of California. He observed the manual laborers in fields, canneries, and bunkhouses. They were mainly unmarried men from Mexico and Asia. Around the same time, new transient laborers called “Okies” began arriving in California from states such as Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas. “Okies” differed from other migrant workers at that time in that they were of Northern European descent, and they were also born and raised in the United States. They had at one time owned land and were hungry to have their own land again. “Okies” traveled with families, heading west any way they could, mainly in caravans consisting of old used cars or trucks. Steinbeck talked about these people in an essay:

I liked these people. They had qualities of humor and courage and inventiveness and energy that appealed to me. I thought that if we had a national character and a national genius, these people, who were beginning to be called Okies, were it. With all the odds against them, their goodness and strength survived.

Steinbeck wanted his novels to capture a new outlook on America, contrary to the jolly optimism that he saw everywhere. He wasn’t interested in becoming a rich, popular writer. Instead, he wanted to expose the myths of society and portray reality, however unpopular that was. In a letter that Steinbeck wrote in 1939, he said about The Grapes of Wrath:

This book wasn’t written for delicate ladies. If they read it at all,

\[2\] America and Americans 25.
they're messing in something not their business. I've never changed a word to fit the prejudices of a group and I never will... I've never wanted to be a popular writer—you know that. And those readers who are insulted by normal events or language mean nothing to me(3).

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a story about a revolution that was already taking place, according to Steinbeck. He believed that the people referred to by the derogatory term “Okies” would slowly take over society, create a new world under the old, and affect the future of the nation. The change would be gradual but imminent(4).

Controversies surrounding the novel

Decades after its initial publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to be one of the most commonly banned books in U.S. public schools and libraries. In it, core beliefs that Americans hold dear are trampled on, according to some readers. Sacred notions such as the democratic process of local government and the benefits of a free-market economy are treated with contempt. On the other hand, the novel supports traditional beliefs including the proper social duties of women and the freedom to own and work one's land.

Some people called Steinbeck a communist for what they saw as an anti-capitalism novel. As well, some scholars and commentators believe that *The Grapes of Wrath* resembles old-fashioned communist art. Leslie

(3) Steinbeck: A Life in Letters 175.
(4) Ibid 194.
Fielder mentioned that the novel would please "the Cultural Commissars in Moscow." Representative Lyle Boren of Oklahoma said about the novel, "I cannot find it possible to let this dirty, lying, filthy manuscript go heralded before the public without a word of challenge or protest." On the other hand, President Roosevelt and the first lady defended the novel, saying it was an accurate depiction and a valuable work.

In the 1940s, the California Chamber of Congress believed that Steinbeck, through the message in his novel, was encouraging migrant workers to revolt. Therefore, Steinbeck greatly exaggerated the plight of laborers. Clues abound, including the frequent mention of strength in numbers and the need to organize and resist the system. Others believe, however, that Steinbeck's purpose was only to warn the owners and government that they must do something to help migrant workers and avoid a rebellion.

When the novel was published, many Californians were angry about the book because they believed it was grossly exaggerated and misrepresented their state. There were suddenly anti-Steinbeck public meetings taking place and pamphlets were made and distributed. Author Ruth Comfort Mitchell, wife of the Republican State Senator, organized one of these meetings and wrote Of Human Kindness, her response to Steinbeck's libel.

In 1938, California corporate farmers didn't take kindly to the continued migration of Okies into their state. Two groups, the Associated
Farmers and the California Citizens Association, began a campaign to expose the migrant “problem.” These groups were supported by banks, oil companies, and various other businesses. Through articles, they tried to stop further migration and encouraged migrants in California to return to their home states\(^{(10)}\).

Real-Life Activists

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad, the central male character, kills the man who killed his friend Jim Casy. After going on the run, Tom meets secretly with his mother and tells her these words:

> Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there\(^{(11)}\).

Tom’s famous soliloquy sounds similar to the words of Eugene V. Debs, one of the most famous and eloquent labor leaders in U.S. history. In 1918, after being sentenced to jail for leading a strike, Debs told the court:

> While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free\(^{(12)}\).

Debs, the man who seems to have influenced Steinbeck, was born in

\(^{(10)}\) *The Critical Response to John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* 183.

\(^{(11)}\) *The Grapes of Wrath* 537.

Terre Haute, Indiana in 1855. During his life, he fought for the rights of laborers, speaking up for them in his eloquent way and with his unwavering tenacity. In 1893, Debs organized the first industrial union in the U.S., the American Railway Union.

One of the most interesting endeavors that Debs pursued in his lifetime was running as a candidate of the Socialist Party in each American presidential election from 1900 to 1912. Then in 1920, while Debs was serving a prison sentence, he ran for president again; surprisingly, he received nearly one million votes but was defeated by Warren G. Harding. Debs was the only candidate in U.S. history to run for president while in jail.

The hard times experienced by migrant workers like the Joads had been changing a little during this time. However, in other ways, the conditions stayed the same until the end of the twentieth century.

In 1927, Cesar Chavez, another important leader, was born in Arizona. He would go on to become an extraordinary farm labor leader, creating an effective grassroots alliance of minority farm workers. He was self-educated and did not receive any schooling past the eighth grade. He had to quit school in order to work and help support his family.

Chavez' life was a lot like that of the Joads. His father lost his land in 1937, and the family was forced to travel west in search of odd jobs. At that time, just like in Steinbeck's novel, labor contractors had a scheme where they would spread the word about temporary jobs and round up many more men than were needed. Then the contractors would lower the wage considerably, and only the most desperate men would stay and accept the measly pay. Farm workers had never been included in national labor law protections. Interestingly, in 1949, a congressional subcommittee led by California congressman Richard Nixon, in order to
protect growers, recommended that farm workers continue to be excluded from labor law protections.

Chavez arrived at his own philosophy after reading extensively during the middle years of his life. His was an eclectic mix of ascetic Catholicism, Thoreau, and Gandhi. He often fasted for long periods of time to gain moral strength and to draw attention to the needs of the poor. In 1966, Chavez also drew attention to the poor and oppressed by organizing a 340-mile march in California, from Delano to Sacramento. About 5,000 people participated in the march. Eventually, his exploits would get the best of him, however. Due to stress from his mission and his many fasts, Chavez died in 1993 at the age of 66(13).

Activists in the Novel

Tom: *Prayer never brought in no side-meat.*

Casy: *And Almighty God never raised no wages* (14).

Tom Joad has been called California’s most enduring fictional figure of the twentieth century. People on the political right and left have used him to stand for something over the years. In fact, the whole Joad family has been viewed as real by a lot of people. A literary critic of the 1940s said, “The Joads are alive; it is impossible to regard them as mere characters in a story.” (15)

Tom is the hero of the novel, the central male character. At the

(13) Johnson 231–236.
(14) *The Grapes of Wrath* 322.
beginning of the novel, Tom is hitchhiking to his home in Oklahoma from the state prison at McAlester where he was incarcerated for killing a man in self-defense. At first, he is hot-tempered, tough, and self-centered. Through the course of the novel, however, he becomes a combination of his mother's sympathy and his friend Casy's thinking. He and his sister Rose of Sharon are the only characters in the novel who undergo change. Tom also listens, observes, and learns more than any other character. He is around the ex-preacher Jim Casy a lot; and although Tom doesn't always listen to his friend's constant talking, it all comes back to Tom by the end of the story. Tom actually becomes Casy's disciple and follows in his footsteps, becoming a labor activist.

Jim Casy is the most important character in the novel who is not a Joad. He is possibly Steinbeck's mouthpiece or a tribute to a model activist. Before the beginning of the story, Casy was an itinerant preacher. He puts the social message of the novel into common words. He comes to realize his own sinfulness, quits preaching, and starts to believe more in a humanist philosophy. Casy's new beliefs are: sin and virtue do not exist, he loves people instead of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is actually the love of other people, there is no God, and prayer is meaningless and ineffective.

Rose of Sharon parallels Tom's moral growth. At first she is self-centered and peevish. She gets worse when her husband abandons her. But later in the novel, she denies herself and works in the cotton field to help the family. The lessons that Casy taught Tom are illustrated at the very end of the story when, after her baby is stillborn, Rose of Sharon nurses the sick man. This is also what Ma learned when she said goodbye to her son after he avenged Casy's murder.

Ma Joad is a pillar of strength for her family. She is the one who
throws away cherished possessions before the family leaves Oklahoma, and she holds the family together longer than any other person could have done. Her actions show that she understands Casy’s philosophy about the decency of life and universal holiness: She is kind to her family, fierce when her family is threatened, and friendly with strangers. An important truth that she learns is that the more a person suffers, the greater must be the effort to help others. She endures intense emotional pain when family members die or leave the group, but she almost never shows the extent of her pain. She sums up the message of the novel:

If you’re in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They’re the only ones that’ll help—the only ones\(^{16}\).

Musicians influenced by the story

_The Grapes of Wrath_ has inspired several big names in the American music industry, from early folk pioneers like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan to more contemporary acts like Bruce Springsteen and Rage Against the Machine. One of Steinbeck’s other novels, _Travels With Charley_, even inspired the Beach Boys to mention it in one of their songs\(^{17}\).

Woody Guthrie was born in Oklahoma in 1912. He is famous for using American folk songs as a form of social protest. His themes are social

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* His death at the end of the novel makes him partially a Christ figure. Interestingly, Casy’s initials are J.C.

\(^{16}\) _The Grapes of Wrath_ 483.

justice, the American dream, and the challenges and struggles of daily life. His songs, however, were not recorded until 1940. Guthrie had a great influence on Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the folk revival of the 1950s. In fact, John Steinbeck himself had this to say about Guthrie:

Woody is just Woody... He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people. There is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit.(18)

Guthrie is probably most known for his song “This Land is Your Land,” which he wrote after World War II in response to the wartime favorite “God Bless America.” People often confused him with Steinbeck’s character Tom Joad. Radio producers and Guthrie’s own record label described Guthrie as resembling Tom, from his local dialect to his clothing and attitude. The Joads were in Woody Guthrie, and he insisted that the Joads were him.

In 1940, Guthrie wrote a song entitled “Tom Joad.” Inspired by the film version of the novel, Guthrie was so moved that he wrote the 17-verse song immediately after seeing the film. The song is nearly a complete summary of the story. It was over seven minutes long and had to be issued on two records. On The Grapes of Wrath, Guthrie says:

Seen the pitcher last night, Grapes of Wrath. Best cussed pitcher I

ever seen. It says you got to get together and have some meetins, and stick together, and raise old billy hell till you get your job, and get your farm back, and your house and your chickens and your groceries and your clothes, and your money back\(^{(19)}\).

Bob Dylan, another music legend, is regarded by many as the most creative and influential American performer of the 1960s. He invented a new creative medium by fusing poetic lyrics with rock and roll. The Beatles made rock accessible to the masses, but Dylan first came up with the idea of joining significant words with popular music. Dylan was famous for protest songs in the early part of the decade. “Oxford Town” is a song about the first black student at the University of Mississippi, while “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” tells about the death of a black maid.

During the 1960s, singers such as Dylan emulated Guthrie and his style. Wearing faded denim clothes, alluding to being from Oklahoma, wandering about the country, speaking in a colloquial rural-American dialect, and identifying with oppressed minority groups, Dylan imitated Guthrie from 1959 to 1961 after reading Guthrie’s autobiography, *Bound for Glory*. He even visited Guthrie in New York.

Another musician who was affected by the character of Tom Joad was singer Bruce Springsteen. Critics called him the single artist who brought together all the exuberance of ’50s rock and the thoughtfulness of ’60s rock. His political statements started with his 1975 album *Born to Run*. It tells the story of young people who feel trapped in dying towns. Two decades later, Springsteen began searching for political meaning in

\(^{(19)}\) *Woody Sez* 133.
modern-day America. Reaching back to the 1930s, he wrote the song “The Ghost of Tom Joad.” Through the song, the problems of the nation are addressed:

Mom, wherever there’s a cop beatin’ a guy  
Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries  
Where there’s a fight ‘gainst the blood and hatred in the air  
Look for me, mom, I’ll be there  
Wherever there’s somebody fightin’ for a place to stand  
Or a decent job or helpin’ hand  
Wherever somebody’s strugglin’ to be free  
Look in their eyes, mom, you’ll see me

During concerts to support the album, Springsteen began every show with this song. He also repeated Tom Joad’s lines from the story to the audience. Half of the songs on The Ghost of Tom Joad are about California where Springsteen lived through much of the 1990s. The stories he tells are about Mexicans trying to achieve the American Dream in California, but what they find is more of a shadow than the fulfillment of a dream.

Springsteen’s song was so influential that it was remade by political rap/rock group Rage Against the Machine in 2001.* Singing against corporate America, cultural imperialism, and government oppression, Rage Against the Machine was a popular act during the 1990s. The band

* The song was also remade in 2005 by Swedish rock group Junip.  
(21) “Steinbeck and Best Sellers” 106.
contained some interesting profiles: Singer Zack de la Rocha is the son of Chicano political artist Beto, and guitarist Tom Morello is the nephew of Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya.

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen how Steinbeck’s character Tom Joad has survived from the initial publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 all the way up to the twenty-first century in the American music landscape. People will always be fascinated by the novel. It has inspired three generations of screen and playwrights, theater troupes, composers, and muralists. It was at the top of best-seller lists in 1939 and 1940. Sales tapered off a bit during the Cold War decades, but by 1975, *The Grapes of Wrath* had sold two million copies in hardcover and paperback. The novel is still assigned reading in high schools and universities throughout the U.S.

The character of Tom Joad was probably inspired by real-life figures. He is still dangerous, frightening, and very much alive, as evident in school districts that are still banning the novel and groups that are still opposing his message. Playwright Arthur Miller has stated that “there was a time” when Steinbeck’s novel “would rouse Congress to pass legislation to ameliorate conditions in the transient labor camps of the West.”

With all the different groups and individuals looking into the past and enlisting Tom Joad in their causes, one would come to the conclusion that Tom has become some sort of superhuman figure or an avenging

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(22) *Echoes Down the Corridor* xi.
knight in shining armor on a white horse. Actually, he is just a figment of a writer’s imagination and nothing more - a ghost with a story to tell and an important lesson that is still relevant in our time. He has stirred the anger and passion in individuals for decades and will continue doing so for many more to come.

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