

The FBI Knocks Again

By Ronnie Gilbert

For the second time in my life—at least—a group that I belong to is being investigated by the FBI. The first was the Weavers. In 1950, we recorded a couple of songs from our American/World folk music repertoire, Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene" and the Israeli "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena," and sold millions of records. Folk music entered the mainstream, and the Weavers were stars.

By 1952, it was over. The record company dropped us, and television producers stopped knocking on our door. The Weavers were on a private yet well-publicized roster of suspected entertainment industry Reds. The FBI came a-calling.

This week, I just found out that Women in Black, another group of peace activists I belong to, is the sub-

ject of an FBI investigation. Women in Black is a loosely knit international network of women who vigil against violence, often silently, each group autonomous, each group focused on the particular problems of personal and state violence in its part of the world.

Because my group is composed mostly of Jewish women, we focus on

the Middle East, protesting the cycle of violence and revenge in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The FBI is threatening my group with a grand jury investigation. Of what? That we publicly call Israel's military occupation of Palestine illegal? So does the World Court and the United Nations. That the Israeli policy of destroying hundreds of thousands of the Palestinians' olive and fruit trees, blocking roads, and demolishing homes promotes hatred and terrorism in the Middle East? Even President Bush and Colin Powell have gotten around to saying that. So what is to investigate? That some of us are in contact with activist Palestinian peace groups? This is bad?

The Jewish Women in Black of Jerusalem have stood vigil every Friday for thirteen years in protest against the occupation. Muslim women from Palestinian peace groups stand with them at every

Ronnie Gilbert lives in Berkeley, California, and is writing a memoir. She, Holly Near, Arlo Guthrie, and Pete Seeger toured together in 1984 as H.A.R.P. The live recording, "A Time for Singing," has just been reissued in a much-expanded version by Appleseed Records.

opportunity. We praise and honor them, these Jewish and Arab women who endure hatred and frequent abuse from extremists on both sides.

We are not alone in our admiration. Jerusalem Women in Black is a nominee for the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize, along with Bosnia Women in Black, now ten years old. If the FBI cannot or will not distinguish between groups who collude in terrorism and peace activists who struggle in the full light of day against all forms of terrorism, we are in serious trouble.

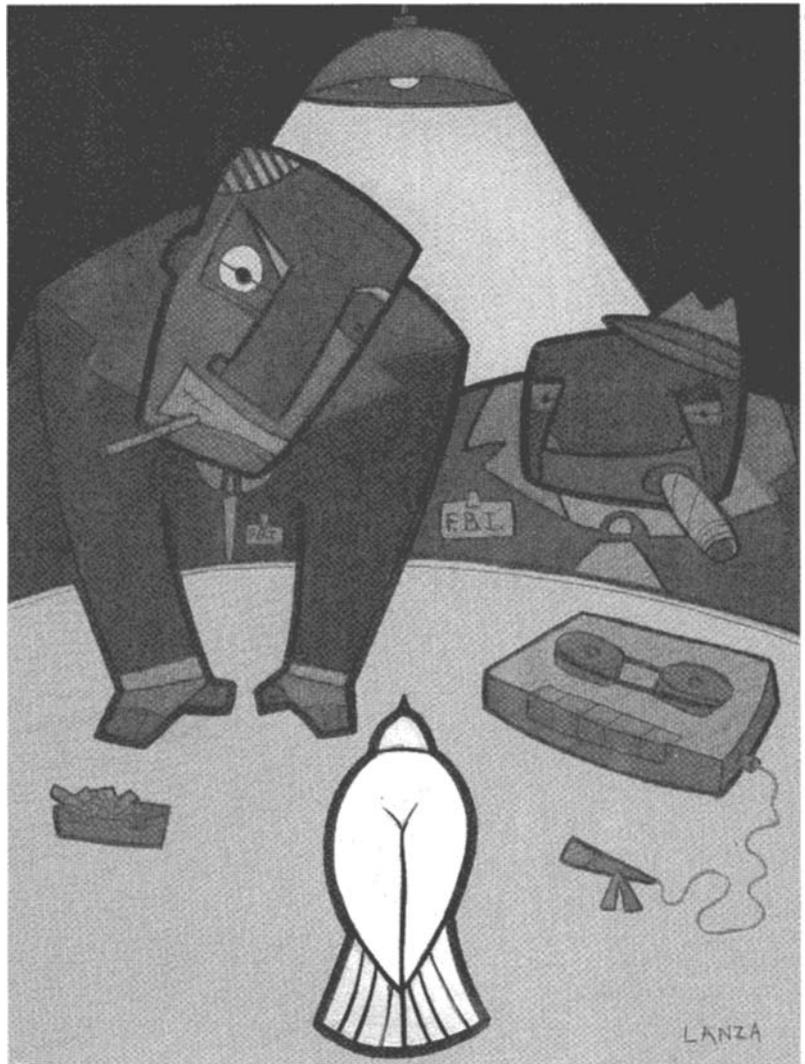
I have seen such trouble before in my lifetime. It was called McCarthyism. In the hysterical atmosphere of the early Cold War, anyone who had signed a peace petition, joined an organization opposing violence or racism, or raised money for the refugee children of the Spanish Civil War—in other words, who had openly advocated what was not popular at the time—was fair game.

In my case, the FBI visited the Weavers' booking agent, the recording company, my neighbors, my dentist husband's patients, my friends. In the waning of our career, the Weavers were followed down the street, accosted onstage by drunken "patriots," warned by friendly hotel employees to keep the door open if we rehearsed in anyone's room so as not to become targets for the vice squad. It was nasty. Every two-bit local wannabe G-man joined the dragnet, searching out and identifying "communist spies."

In all those self-debasing years how many spies were pulled in by that dragnet?

Nary a one.

Instead, it pulled down thousands of teachers, union members, scientists, journalists, actors, entertainers like us, who saw our lives disrupted, our jobs and careers go down the drain, our standing in the community lost, even our children harassed. A scared population soon shut their mouths up tight. Thus came the silence of the 1950s and early '60s,



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when no notable voice of reason was heard to say, "Hey, wait a minute. Look what we're doing to ourselves, to the land of the free and the home of the brave," when not one dissenting intelligence was allowed a public voice to warn against fanatic foreign policies we'd later come to regret, would be regretting now, if our leaders were honest.

Today, another dragnet is out, and we are told that certain civil liberties may have to be curtailed for our own security. Which ones? I'm curious to know. The First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech or of the press? The right of

people peaceably to assemble?

Suddenly, *déjà vu*: Haven't I been here before?

Hysterical neo-McCarthyism does not equal security, never will. The bitter lesson that September 11's horrific tragedy should have taught us and our government is that only an honest reevaluation of our foreign policies and careful, focused, and intelligent intelligence work can hope to combat operations like the one that robbed all of us and the lives of more than 5,000 decent working people. We owe the dead that, at least.

As for Women in Black, we intend to keep on keeping on. ♦