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HEARINGS REGARDING COMMUNIST INFILTRATION
OF MINORITY GROUPS—PART 3
(Testimony of "Josh White")

HEARINGS

5. Congress. House. BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

EIGHTY-FIRST CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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SEPTEMBER 1, 1950
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HEARINGS REGARDING COMMUNIST INFILTRATION OF MINORITY GROUPS—PART 3

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1950

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON
UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES,
Washington, D. C.

PUBLIC HEARING

A subcommittee of the Committee on Un-American Activities met, pursuant to adjournment, at 10:15 a. m., in room 226, Old House Office Building, Hon. John S. Wood (chairman) presiding.

Committee members present: Representatives John S. Wood (chairman), Francis E. Walter, John McSweeney (arriving as indicated), Richard M. Nixon (arriving as indicated), and Harold H. Velde (arriving as indicated).

Staff members present: Frank S. Tavenner, Jr., counsel; Louis J. Russell, senior investigator; Donald T. Appell, Courtney Owens, and Alvin W. Stokes, investigators; and A. S. Poore, editor.

Mr. WOOD. The committee will be in order, please.

Mr. TAVENNER. Mr. Chairman, there is a witness here who desires to appear voluntarily before the committee this morning, and I would like to call him, Mr. Josh White.

Mr. WOOD. Hold up your right hand, please. You solemnly swear that the evidence you give this subcommittee shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. WHITE. I do.

Mr. WOOD. Let the record disclose that for the purpose of this hearing a subcommittee has been set up by the chairman consisting of Mr. Walter, Mr. Velde and Mr. Wood. Mr. Walter and Mr. Wood are here. Mr. Velde will be here in a few minutes.

TESTIMONY OF JOSHUA DANIEL WHITE

Mr. TAVENNER. Will you state your full name?

Mr. WHITE. Joshua Daniel White.

Mr. TAVENNER. When and where were you born?

Mr. WHITE. Greenville, S. C., February 11, 1914.

Mr. WOOD. Have you any objection to photographers making pictures?

Mr. WHITE. That is quite all right.

Mr. TAVENNER. What is your occupation?

Mr. WHITE. Singer, actor, and musician.

Mr. TAVENNER. If you will speak a little louder, please. I believe you specialize in singing folk songs, do you not?

Mr. WHITE. Yes.

Mr. TAVENNER. How long have you been engaged in singing folk songs?

Mr. WHITE. Since I was about 7 years old.

Mr. WOOD. For the record, who is the person accompanying the witness?

Mr. STOKES. Mrs. White.

Mr. TAVENNER. I believe you are accompanied by your wife rather than by counsel; is that right?

Mr. WHITE. That is right.

Mr. TAVENNER. You have expressed a desire to appear before the committee to make a statement with regard to your own activities?

Mr. WHITE. That is right.

Mr. TAVENNER. And I believe you have such a statement prepared, have you not?

Mr. WHITE. I have.

Mr. TAVENNER. I am going to suggest that you read it to the committee, and if you desire to add anything to it, that you do so, but before doing that I want to ask you, are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. WHITE. No.

Mr. TAVENNER. You may proceed with such statement as you desire to make.

Mr. WHITE. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am here, as you know, quite voluntarily, and I want to thank you for this opportunity to clear up some misunderstandings about myself in some quarters. I have prepared this statement, which I shall read with your permission, after which I shall gladly answer any questions you may wish to put.

My conscience is clear. I intend to do some explaining for my own sake, and for the sake of many other entertainers who, like myself, have been used and exploited by people who give allegiance to a foreign power.

In recent years a lot of us have been drawn by our heartstrings into groups fixed up to look like noble causes which were later found to be subversive. I regret, and I suspect that many artists share the same deep regret with me, that an effective exposure of communistic activities in the theatrical and musical fields had not been made long before now.

Artists are not often smart about politics. We know mighty little about the ins and outs of "movements" and parties. But we're apt to have strong feelings and therefore an easy prey for anyone who appeals to our sense of justice and decency. Though it's not pleasant to talk about myself in public, I feel I owe it to my family and to other artists in the entertainment field to do so.

I have never knowingly belonged to or supported any organization designed to overthrow the Government of the United States. But I did on many occasions appear at benefits and rallies which I was led to believe were for worthwhile causes. I did not even suspect that some of them were Communist inspired. I did on some occasions sign petitions against lynching or poll tax or other evils.

(Hon. Harold H. Velde entered hearing room.)

Mr. WHITE (continuing). Dozens of other artists of all races and colors, I have no doubt, have also given their names and talent and time under the innocent impression that they were on the side of charity and equality. Let me make it clear, if I can, that I am still on that side. The fact that Communists are exploiting grievances for their own purposes does not make those grievances any less real.

As I've said, I am no politician. On the other hand, I do know what injustice and discrimination and Jim-Crowism mean. I know these things not as theories but as cruel facts that I've seen and suffered in my own life. Against these things I have protested and will go on protesting, because I love my country and want to see it a better, more tolerant, place to live in. I'm proud of the fact that under our system of freedom everyone is able to speak out—or in my case, to sing out—against what we consider wrong and for what we consider right.

I am what is called a folk singer. I was a folk singer long before I knew what it is called. Even when I was a boy I made up and sang songs of ordinary people, trying to convey their joys and sorrows, their grievances and their hopes. In this, I was expressing not only my own sentiments but the feelings of humble people generally, whatever their color or their names.

A folk singer, it seems to me, is the voice and the conscience of his time and his audience. He tries to put into words and music what those around him feel. This I shall continue to do, with God's help, as long as there is suffering and discrimination around me and freedom and equality to be won.

But that's not communism, even if Communists try to use us for their own foul ends. As I see it, it's simple Christianity. And I say this as the son of a minister brought up in a religious family. I say this as the father of four daughters and a son whom my wife and I are trying to bring up as patriotic and religious Americans—which is to say, as decent human beings.

I was 7 years old when I left my home in Greenville, S. C., to help support myself and my family. My job was to lead a blind man while playing the tambourine. Before I was 8 years old I knew what it meant to be kicked and abused. Before I was 9 years old I had seen two lynchings. I got to hate Jim Crow for what it did to me personally and because Jim Crow is an insult to God's creatures and a violation of the Christian beliefs taught by my father.

That's how I became a folk singer. I discovered that I had some talent for putting together words and fitting them with tunes on my guitar. When I was about 16, a man from Chicago convinced my mother and father to let me record some songs. I recorded under the title "Joshua White, the Singing Christian." My mother received \$100 and no royalties for 28 recordings. After that I went on the radio. Of course, I was thrilled by the career opening up for me—but I was even more thrilled by the chance to tell my fellow Americans, through my songs, about the wrongs that needed righting.

After that, I had some bad luck. I hurt my hand in an accident and for 5 years it remained paralyzed. Because I couldn't play, I felt as if I had been struck dumb. The doctors wanted to cut off three fingers, but I was stubborn—just hoped and prayed for a cure, meanwhile doing all kinds of jobs, running an elevator, anything, to keep alive. Then the paralysis ended. I got a role in a play, "John Henry," in which Mr. Paul Robeson had the lead.

I have a great admiration for Mr. Robeson as an actor and great singer, and if what I read in the papers is true, I feel sad over the help he's been giving to people who despise America. He has a right to his own opinions, but when he, or anybody, pretends to talk for a whole race, he's kidding himself. His statement that the Negroes would not fight for their country, against Soviet Russia or any other enemy, is both wrong and an insult; because I stand ready to fight Russia or any enemy of America.

There are some Communists among Negroes, as I am told, just as there are among other Americans. But they don't speak for the rest of us, any more than white Communists speak for white Americans. I am told that the proportion of Negro members in the Communist fold is even smaller than the proportion of other races; and that says a lot for their common sense.

When Communists and their kind talk about "democracy" and "equality," they are using double talk. They use good words in their own topsy-turvy way, to cover up bad intentions. But for simple folk who don't know the art of turning words inside out, it takes time to catch on.

Anyhow, after John Henry I was pretty well launched. I made two albums: the Chain Gang album by Josh White and His Carolinians and another by myself I called Southern Exposure. Gradually I began to rise in my profession.

At that point, I suppose, my name began to have some value for publicity purposes, to attract a crowd and raise money. All kinds of invitations came to me, and when they sounded right, I was happy to accept. Many times, between my professional shows, I'd go to perform where my only reward was the belief that I was helping some good cause. When I received invitations from men I trusted, or groups with fine-sounding titles and lists of prominent citizens on their letterheads, asking for my time or signature, I gladly agreed. Inside me I felt I was doing a little to extend the area of freedom in my native South and in the world generally.

Looking back, I just wish someone had told me! Many of the organizations were genuine. Some others, as I learned the hard way, were phony, false-face political rackets, exploiting my eagerness to fight injustice. I didn't become aware of this, however, until about 1947.

I was in California at the time. In the newspapers I came across a list of committees and organizations which the Attorney General had just labeled "subversive." And I was horrified to learn that a number of them were organizations for whom I had performed in the course of years, without knowing their character.

It was an awful blow. I realized that I had been played for a sucker. There I was, a devoted American who had let himself be used.

I discussed the situation with my manager, Mary Chase, who took over my affairs in 1947. She was as distressed as myself. We decided to check on those invitations for benefits and rallies. More than that, we made contact with a New York newspaperman, Howard Rushmore, who knows a lot about the Communist rackets and could give us some guidance. Despite this, as I have discovered recently, I was again taken in or had my name used, without my permission, several times by the disguises. A few of them even advertised me without my knowing.

Permit me to quote from a letter I wrote to Mr. Rushmore almost 2 years ago, when it came to my attention that I was being charged with Communist sympathies. After denying the absurd charge, I wrote:

The love I have for America, the land of my birth, which has given me every opportunity, is far too great to permit of any other allegiance * * * I have no interest in any particular party. I am solely devoted to the principle of a democracy like ours, that stands for the welfare of all its people regardless of race, creed or color.

My one consolation, as I think back to the many nights I gave to concealed subversive groups, is that I never sang anything I didn't believe. Often I sang the powerful song *Strange Fruit*, which is an indictment of the horror of lynching. But I always followed it with what I call the answer to *Strange Fruit*, *The House I Live In* or *What Is America to Me*, which expressed the other side of the story—my profound love for our America.

Why shouldn't a Negro artist—and for that matter any decent person—raise his voice against lynching? Here's how the song *Strange Fruit* goes:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit; blood on the leaves—and blood at
the root.
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze—strange fruit hanging on
the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South of the bulging eyes and the twisted
mouth.
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh—and the sudden smell of burning flesh.
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck for the rain to gather and for the
wind to suck;
For the sun to rot for the trees to drop.
Oh, here is a strange and bitter crop.

My records of this song have sold big. If they helped make my fellow Americans more aware of the evil, I am pleased. But then I would insist on also performing *The House I Live In*, which seems to me to express the things for which all good Americans are ready to stake their lives if necessary. Here's how it goes:

What is America to me?
A name, a map, a flag I see
A certain word, democracy.
What is America, to me?
The house I live in—a dream—that must come true
A land of food and shelter—and there's work for all to do
The right to earn a living
To make us really free
Where everyone is working
That's America to me.
The house I live in—the same for black and white
My Country right or wrong—if it's wrong to set it right
A land where all are equal
The house I want to see
Where all will have four freedoms
That's America to me.
The loved ones we remember—who fought that we might live
The nameless unsung heroes—who gave all that one could give
Defenders of our freedoms—the women and the men
Who love the house we live in
But won't come home again.
The house I live in to cherish and to love
To make a worthy dwelling—in the image they dream of
A welcome on the doorstep—for everyone to see
And a window to the future
That's America to me.

I believe that no one who sings such songs honestly, from the heart, can be a Communist. They're songs that put a high value on human life and on personal freedom. But the Communists don't consider those things important.

Some months ago I made a concert tour in Europe. I was both amazed and annoyed that somehow only one of my dozens of recordings was being circulated in those countries, namely, Strange Fruit. So wherever I appeared, the audiences requested me to sing it.

But I refused, and I told my audiences why. I tried to make them understand that America is the best and freest country in the world. It is the kind of democracy that makes it possible to fight injustice and to achieve progress.

It's one thing to complain of lynching in America, where your listeners know that it does not detract from your loyalty and love for your country. It seemed to me quite another thing to complain of it abroad, where the listeners might think it's the whole story. Jim Crow and the rest of it, we all know, are on the decline. More and more Americans are ashamed of it and doing something about it. In any case, it's our family affair, to be solved by Americans in the peaceful, democratic American way.

In some of those European cities I was interviewed by reporters. There are the clippings to show that I spoke of my pride in our country, and denied the libel that my people would not fight and die to defend America.

In the midst of all this, I got the news that I was being attacked back home as fronting for the Communists. Considering that I was doing the very opposite, that was quite a blow. So I cut short my tour, in order to return and expose that lie. That, Mr. Chairman, is how I happen to be here today.

My entertainment for these subversive groups was innocent on my part, and is far in the past. I am concerned, however, for my wife and children. The very notion that their father and husband is partial to communism has come to them as quite a shock. I want to reassure them on this score, in the open and without question.

About 2 years ago my boy, who was then 7 and is very gifted musically, gave a concert in Chicago at Orchestra Hall. Among other things he sang *Marching Down Freedom Road*, and that's a fine, rousing plea for true democracy. He also sang *The Lord's Prayer*, one of his favorites, which he sings often in his Sunday School. But some paper, believe it or not, said the child was communistic. It took us some time to get over that insult.

Besides the family, I decided that I also have a duty to other folk singers and artists in general, especially young people just getting started. They face the same things I did. I want my sad experience to stand as a warning to them. I hope they will give themselves to good causes as generously as I have tried to do. But I hope also they will be more careful who uses them and why. My advice to them is plain and clear: Be sure to look under the label.

Personally I have little to retract or regret, other than the auspices under which I have sometimes appeared. As long as my voice and spirit hold out, I shall keep on singing of the hope, joys, and grievances of ordinary folk. I shall stand shoulder to shoulder with those who are pushed around and humiliated and discriminated against,

no matter what their race or their creed may be. That, as I see it, is the least I can do for the country we all cherish.

But those who would tear down our America, those who hold a double allegiance, those who turn words upside down and inside out in support of a foreign tyranny—they're my enemies. Better than most people in this room I know the blemishes on our American civilization. I think we should all devote ourselves to removing them, not merely because they give aid and comfort to the Communists, but because they're wrong in themselves.

I thank you.

Mr. WOOD. Any further questions, Mr. Counsel?

Mr. TAVENNER. Mr. Chairman, I believe I have no questions to ask.

Mr. WOOD. Mr. Walter.

Mr. WALTER. You have stated that had you known that some of these movements that you were assisting were Communist fronts, you would not have participated in their activities?

Mr. WHITE. That is right.

Mr. WALTER. I think by that statement you have made out a very strong case for the enactment of the Wood bill that the House just passed this week, because under the provisions of that law Communist-front organizations will become known.

Mr. WHITE. I am glad.

Mr. WALTER. And the names of these organizations and who supports them will become public property.

Mr. WOOD. Mr. Velde.

Mr. VELDE. No questions.

Mr. WOOD. The committee appreciates your coming before us and making this contribution. I hope that others who have been similarly imposed upon by Communist-front organizations will wake up to that fact. We appreciate your presence here.

Mr. WHITE. Thank you so much.

(Whereupon the witness was excused.)

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