

# Sweep the Nation by Song: The Townsend Plan, Old-Age Pensions, and Popular Music

SIMON BUCK

This article unpacks the music of the Townsend Plan, an ambitious Depression-era pension proposal, and the overlooked, yet deeply influential, national movement of its supporters, which aimed to simultaneously eradicate old-age poverty and revive the national economy. As well as providing a musical account of the media strategies, political tactics, and institutional culture of Townsendism, this article charts how different demographics of US society also mobilized popular music in arguments for or against pensions in the 1930s and 1940s. In the process, the article highlights some of the rich discourse about welfare, health, and aging in the mid-twentieth-century USA.

In January 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration was drawing up what in August would be signed into law as the Social Security Act. The Act's old-age welfare provisions, Old Age Insurance and Old Age Assistance, if flawed in many respects, would provide an unprecedented federally orchestrated safety net for many older Americans. Over the previous two years, the Townsend Plan – the name for both an alternative pension proposal devised by retired California doctor Francis E. Townsend, and the national movement he inspired – had pushed old-age pensions into the national conversation. The Townsend Plan entailed a “transaction tax” (essentially a sales tax) to fund pensions of two hundred dollars each month to nearly all Americans over sixty years old, on the condition that they retired and spent their annuity within the month on domestic products and services, thus, its proponents believed, alleviating old-age poverty and reinvigorating the still sluggish Depression-hit economy.

That month, Democratic representative John S. McGroarty from Los Angeles submitted a “Townsend-lite” bill to Congress, one day before the Roosevelt administration announced what was then named the “Economic Security” program. During Congressional hearings on old-age pensions,

Congressmen interrogated and, by all accounts, publicly humiliated Townsend by highlighting the fiscal unworkability of his plan and the financial corruption in his organization.<sup>1</sup> Wounded by the appearance, Townsendites embarked on a new campaign to rebuild support for their plan. In February, United Press reported that “Townsend Plan advocates, undaunted by severe congressional criticism of their plan, have introduced a new technique. They hope to sweep the nation by song.” Activists had begun distributing sheet music for a “Townsend ballad” called “When Our Old-Age Pension Check Comes to Our Door” (hereafter “Pension Check”) to Congressmen. Townsendites, the reporter speculated, hoped that music might “sooth the savage critics.”<sup>2</sup>

Savagery was not an unreasonable description of the criticism laid against the Townsend Plan. Attacks on the movement came from Roosevelt, his allies, and those sympathetic to, or tolerant of, the New Deal, but also from Republicans and southern Democrats who shared “small-government” or anti-welfare values. The Townsend Plan was frequently depicted as a “crackpot” endeavor led by a demagogue who had manipulated older Americans (comparisons between the thinly mustached Townsend and Adolph Hitler were common). Frank H. Buck, Democratic representative from California, publicly denounced the Townsend Plan as “so full of holes you could drive a six-horse wagon and automobile truck through it.”<sup>3</sup> Townsendites were derided variously as fantasists, populists, fascists, communists, capitalists, hucksters, brainwashers, or senile.<sup>4</sup> Against this chorus of condemnation, Townsendites opted to sing themselves into political legitimacy.

The role of music in social movements is never clear cut. Although, as this article shows, the “Townsend ballad” seemingly had no immediate impact in Congress, it was heard by thousands of Americans, and outlived the movement itself. Townsend music, more generally, functioned as a vessel for the Townsend message; as a tactical weapon in a wider media strategy; as background ambience; as an avenue for fund-raising and personal profit; and as a social glue that helped to harmonize and, sometimes in nearly militaristic

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Amenta, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 134–36.

<sup>2</sup> “Townsend Pension Supporters Plan to Sweep Country by Song,” *Journal Times* (Racine, WI), 8 Feb. 1935, 6. <sup>3</sup> *California Daily Bruin*, 7 May 1935, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Some ideologically diverse anti-Townsend publications include Committee on Old Age Security, *The Townsend Crusade* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, Inc., 1936); Charles Magee Adams, “Who Bred These Utopias?,” *North American Review*, 240, 1 (1935), 8–19; Luther Whiteman and Samuel L. Lewis, *Glory Roads: The Psychological State of California* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1936), 265–67; Alex Bittelman, *The Townsend Plan: What It Is and What It Isn't* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1936); Edwin E. Witte, “What to Expect of Social Security,” *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings*, 34, 1 (1944), 212–21.

fashion, mobilize a wide coalition of older Americans. That the Townsend organization invested so much time, money, and energy into all kinds of music – original songs and “Townsendized” popular tunes, folk songs, national anthems, hymns, and military music – suggests that its leaders believed that the art form could drown out doubting naysayers and unite the faithful. The sheer volume of Townsend music echoing from conventions, clubs, rallies, radios, phonograph players, and parlor pianos suggests that music was equally valued by the average Townsendite, and likely bent the ears of some of the “unconverted.” The afterlife of “Pension Check,” and the wider world of pension-related music, complicate matters even further, as Americans from different generations, regions, ethnicities, and political backgrounds used Townsend music and their own compositions to express their own, often distinct, ideas about pensions.

Despite vital recent scholarship on the Townsend movement, the diverse significances of its music remain overlooked. Edwin Amenta’s essential work on the Townsend Plan covers some of the movement’s cultural artefacts and social life, but little of its music. A recent study by Aaron Q. Weinstein includes some examples of Townsend songs, but primarily in relation to the movement’s civil religious culture.<sup>5</sup> This article shows that the Townsend Plan echoed and helped shape welfare discourses through a musical dialogue. A better understanding of Townsend music, furthermore, disrupts youth-centric narratives about music and social movements, and contributes to long-standing debate about the relationship between music and protest. Many might accept that while mass action (boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and so on) constitutes what civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson calls the “body” of any social movement, it is, in Jackson’s words, music that “breathes its soul.” All too often, however, as Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks caution, scholars put forward “the simple presence of music in or about a movement” as irrefutable evidence of music’s causal powers.<sup>6</sup> The case study of Townsend music provides no clear answers to this debate, but it does identify some of its fault lines, particularly the often fluid borders between “popular music” and “social-movement music.”<sup>7</sup> Further, by drawing upon the musicological concept of “folk song” – songs that are continuously reinvented, redeployed, and redistributed across populations and over generations, reflecting new

<sup>5</sup> Amenta, 55; Aaron Q. Weinstein, “Onward Townsend Soldiers: Moral Politics and Civil Religion in the Townsend Crusade,” *American Political Thought*, 6, 2 (1 March 2017), 228–55.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 8.

<sup>7</sup> For music and social movements see Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jaimson, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

needs, grievances, and contexts – this article calls for a reconsideration of the afterlives of “protest songs” once untethered from the social movements that produced them. Most importantly, this article utilizes Townsend songs as a means to magnify Townsendite visions of old-age welfare that, if unfulfilled legislatively, influenced generations of discourse on the “problem” of old age in an increasingly geriatric and consumerist nation. It was indisputable, Townsendites contended, that the aged had “served” their nation and so “deserved” pensions. But with that right came a socioeconomic responsibility to retire and spend, and so keep the economy “revolving.”

After first outlining some important features of Townsendism, this article asks what the history of “Pension Check” says about the media strategies, political tactics, and criticisms of the Townsend Plan, and about the rich discourse about welfare, health, and aging in the mid-twentieth-century USA. Subsequently, it traces how the song sat both within the wider musicality of the movement, and alongside other songs about pensions from the era that variously promoted, contested, and lampooned old-age welfare. Finally, it considers how, over subsequent decades, country-and-western bands, Hollywood producers, musicians-turned-politicians, and labor unions revived and reinvented the “Townsend ballad.”

### OLD MAN TOWNSEND

In the late 1920s, Francis E. Townsend, after years practicing medicine for cowboys in the expanding West, retired to Long Beach, California, for the health benefits of the sun and sea air. In September 1933, the sixty-seven-year-old physician concocted an antidote to what he saw as the nation’s twin ills: old-age poverty and mass unemployment. During the early years of the Depression, Townsend witnessed profound human suffering while conducting home visits as Long Beach public-health officer. “I saw children,” he recalled in his autobiography, “doomed to be weak, physical runts due to malnutrition. I saw children denied milk. I saw them sent to school without breakfast, because their parents were too proud to beg.” After seeing one multigenerational family after another struggle to survive, Townsend concluded, “The aged were in the way of the young.” One family that had taken in its elderly grandfather encapsulated this generational tension. Townsend wrote that the lame “old man” somehow “kept his dignity so well in the trying position of being compelled to eat food which should have gone to the hungry children.” The next time he visited, the grandfather had “killed himself so his grandchildren might have more to eat.”<sup>8</sup> These and

<sup>8</sup> Francis E. Townsend and Jesse George Murray, *New Horizons* (Chicago: J. L. Stewart Publishing Company, 1943), 132–33.

other horror stories about food and health – including an apocryphal tale that Townsend devised his plan after discovering three aged women scavenging in his trash for food – became the movement’s “myth of origins.”<sup>9</sup> That Townsendites initially justified the need for old-age pensions by drawing attention to the hunger, illness, and poverty in Depression-era California, especially among children, says a great deal about the still difficult process of legitimizing old-age welfare in the mid-1930s, even with Social Security on the horizon.

In 1934, after formulating what officially became his Old Age Revolving Pension Plan over several articles in his local newspaper, Townsend assembled an operational team and incorporated his “nonprofit” organization, Old Age Revolving Pensions Ltd, with the help of Texan estate agent Robert Clements.<sup>10</sup> At its height, the movement claimed around seven thousand Townsend clubs, two million paid-up registered members, half a million readers of the movement’s periodical *Townsend National Weekly*, and somewhere between 10 million and 25 million petition signatories. By one estimation, one-fifth of all Americans over the age of sixty were involved in the movement.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these formidable statistics, Townsend’s “aged army” has been largely relegated to a footnote in US history. Historians and political scientists tend to interpret Townsend as little more than an eccentric “outsider” who exploited the turbulent political climate of the Great Depression. This is partly down to a wider historiographical issue: scholars tend to focus on social movements that were identifiably “successful.” From one perspective, the Townsend Plan failed to persuade enough policymakers to adopt its own proposal, and so inadvertently raised expectations (and fears) too high, thus facilitating Roosevelt’s tamer Social Security program.<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt, the argument goes, simply outmaneuvered the movement. According to one study, approximately 71 percent of those favoring the Townsend Plan voted

<sup>9</sup> Amenta, 37.

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Gaydowski, “Eight Letters to the Editor: The Genesis of the Townsend National Recovery Plan,” *Southern California Quarterly*, 52, 4 (1 Dec. 1970), 365–82.

<sup>11</sup> Amenta, 1–7.

<sup>12</sup> For classic and recent critiques of Social Security see Mark H. Leff, “Taxing the ‘Forgotten Man’: the Politics of Social Security Finance in the New Deal,” *Journal of American History*, 70, 2 (1983), 359–81. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013; first published 1963), 132–33; Nancy J. Altman, *The Battle for Social Security: From FDR’s Vision to Bush’s Gamble* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Larry DeWitt, “The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act,” *Social Security Bulletin*, 70, 4 (2010), 49–68.

for Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election.<sup>13</sup> Another viewpoint portrays Townsend as a victim of his own success. Without Townsendites exerting influence on politicians, this argument suggests, the development of pensions at both state and federal levels might have been slower than it was.<sup>14</sup> Either analysis, however, fails to recognize that the Townsend Plan, whose influence only began to wane in the late 1940s, actually grew in size and visibility *after* 1935. In this respect, the Townsend Plan illustrates some of the weaknesses of the Social Security Act (1935), which was amended in 1939, 1950, and 1965.

Scholars may have neglected to adequately understand the Townsend movement, but it would be wrong to exceptionalize the phenomenon. Townsendism was the latest development in a century of old-age pension campaigning on the part of military veterans, fraternal orders, labor unions, and governors such as Indiana's Paul V. McNutt and Roosevelt himself in New York. State-level pensions laid the groundwork for Social Security, but were hardly a success story: thirty states had old-age pension legislation by 1935, but most systems were inaccessible and miserly.<sup>15</sup> Several Depression-era firebrands – Huey P. Long, Father Charles Coughlin, “Pappy” O’Daniel, and Upton Sinclair – proposed their own pension plans, which, at a local level, were as popular as or even more popular than Townsend’s. In 1931, a Seattle dentist called C. Stewart McCord developed a “revolving” pension proposal that was remarkably prescient of the Townsend Plan. Still, the Townsend Plan’s national popularity, wide political influence, and vast cultural impact mark it out.

This wider flashpoint of “pension consciousness” in the 1930s can be explained by larger historical developments, including improvements in health care and life expectancy, the wider growth of the welfare state, urbanization, automation, the “residential revolution” in generational living arrangements, and the growth of retirement cultures. California’s older population and radical political traditions also played an important role in the evolution of old-age politics out west. But it was the particularly harsh effects of the Great Depression on working- and middle-class elderly Americans, many

<sup>13</sup> Hadley Cantril, *The Psychology of Social Movements* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1941), 209.

<sup>14</sup> For the Townsend Plan’s influence on Congressmen and Roosevelt see J. Douglas Brown, “Proposals for Federal and State Cooperation for Old Age Security,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 16, 3 (1935), 4–9; Dean J. Kotlowski, *Paul McNutt and the Age of FDR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 183; Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 281.

<sup>15</sup> Kotlowski, 139.

of whom lost retirement savings during the crash, that were the key trigger for Townsend's hitherto unseen national pension campaign.<sup>16</sup>

### A TOWNSEND BALLAD

In December 1934, Clair Manierre ("Manny") Stone, a forty-two-year-old songwriter, businessman, and photographer from Melrose, Los Angeles, began to circulate sheet music for his composition "Pension Check" to Townsend clubs across the nation. With a limerick structure, the lyrics (see Appendix) imagine a joyous future in which the Townsend Plan has materialized as policy: "soon we'll all be glad," the first verse ends. The song boils the Townsend Plan down to its key promises: to alleviate financial anxieties associated with aging that had been exacerbated by the Great Depression ("The word Depression won't mean a thing"), and revive the economy by providing government dollars to elders ("We'll buy classy clothes and cars") and thus creating jobs ("There'll be jobs and opportunities galore").<sup>17</sup> "We won't have to dread the poorhouse anymore," Stone's song enthuses, reflecting Townsend's desire to liberate the aged – implicitly understood as vulnerable, disabled, unhappy, and unloved figures of the modern age – from the poorhouse. As Michael Katz argues, American ideas about welfare evolved under the "shadow of the poorhouse," even long after many of the dread-inducing institutions were closed in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> The focus on food (e.g. hamburgers and ice-cream), a central concern of Depression-era life, is equally significant. Pensions, according to Stone, would somehow feed hungry children, adults, and pets. Although comedic in tone, the lyrics

<sup>16</sup> Aside from Amenta's essential study, key works on the Townsend Plan include Abraham Holtzman, *The Townsend Movement: A Political Study* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963); Jackson K. Putnam, *Old-Age Politics in California: From Richardson to Reagan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970), 49–71. For old-age politics prior to the Townsend Plan see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jill Quadagno, *The Transformation of Old Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Gregory Wood, *Retiring Men: Manhood, Labor, and Growing Old in America, 1900–1960* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Manny Stone, "When Our Old-Age Pension Check Comes to Our Door" (Montrose, CA: Stone & Stone Publishers, 1934), in Sheet Music collection (Collection PASC 147-M), Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. Some of the verses were omitted or changed when reprinted in newspaper articles, such as *Journal Times* (Racine, WI), 8 Feb. 1935, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).



reveal an important dimension not only of Townsend's welfare vision, but also of what Rachel Louise Moran describes as wider "New Deal efforts to transform relief programs ... [into] consumer programs." Both the Townsend pension and, to some degree, Social Security were sold to the American public like food stamps, "not as welfare, but as an economic 'stimulus.'"<sup>19</sup> Embedded in the song is the notion that the wider economy and health of the nation would also benefit from pensions, and not just the aged: the movement promised, in Stone's words, to "pension [Old Man Depression] away."

Townsend headquarters adopted Stone's song as the movement's "official" anthem after the Congressional takedown of Townsend in February 1935. The lyrics toy with a criticism made against the Townsend Plan before and during the hearing: that retirees would not know what to do with their newfound "gold among the gray." The Townsend Plan promised, in the words of its motto, "Youth for Work, Age for Leisure," on the condition that recipients spent their entire pension within one month. Critics of the Townsend Plan's "gray consumerism" relied heavily on ageist reasoning. During the 1935 hearing, Senators questioned Townsend as to how a pair of retired farmers who all their lives had scraped by on far less than \$200 a month could possibly spend all of their combined pensions within one month.<sup>20</sup> Around the same time, popular entertainer and broadcaster Will Rogers predicted over his radio show that the Townsend Plan was doomed to fail because "old people are naturally conservative ... [they enjoy] saving, and hate to spend money every week if they [don't] need to."<sup>21</sup> Others held similar doubts: the question whether older people could possibly spend all of their pensions was the main source of debate at a 1934 town hall meeting on the Townsend Plan in Lincoln, Nebraska.<sup>22</sup> The list of retirement plans in "Pension Check," if parodying the movement's critics, also challenged ageist assumptions held by Senators, entertainers, and the general public alike; pensions, Stone's song claimed, would enable the aged to become fulfilled, leisurely, and even virile American consumerists. Arguably, the song constituted a primitive expression of what later became known as "gray power."<sup>23</sup>

Reference to intergenerational marriages ("Every girl will choose a grandpa to adore") and affecting age ("Grow a flowing long white beard and wear a

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Louise Moran, "Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal," *Journal of American History*, 97, 4 (2011), 1001–22, 1001.

<sup>20</sup> US Congress, Senate, *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance, Seventy-Fourth Congress, First Session on S.1130* (Washington, DC: United States Printing Office, 1935), 1025.

<sup>21</sup> Will Rogers, "The Townsend Plan," *Original Radio Broadcasts* (Soundtrack Classics, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> "Footnotes," *Lincoln Star*, 25 Nov. 1934, 28.

<sup>23</sup> On "gray power" see Roger Sanjek, *Gray Panthers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).



cane”) played with another criticism of the Townsend Plan that historically has haunted most US welfare programs: that unscrupulous claimants would inevitably exploit the system. During the 1935 Congressional hearings, Republican Senator James Couzens from Michigan probed Townsend about whether his plan would “encourage the sale of marriage licenses.”<sup>24</sup> Couzens’s concerns were not entirely unwarranted: in previous decades, Pensions Bureau agents had investigated numerous cases of military veteran pension fraud involving young women accused of marrying aged Civil War veterans in exchange for widows’ pensions.<sup>25</sup> Like Stone’s song, Townsend’s rebuttal of Couzens’s accusation (“I should hope so”) used macho humor to deflect this line of attack.

The song’s use of unambiguous future tenses (“when,” not “if”) captured the almost millenarian, religious convictions Townsendites held about the infallibility and inevitability of their plan. Stone’s vision of a Townsend-engineered utopia, especially prominent in the reference to space travel, played ironically with criticisms of the movement’s naive idealism. Critics typically claimed that Townsend foolishly diagnosed revolving pensions as a panacea for all the country’s ills. In a thinly disguised attack on Townsend fanaticism, Roosevelt warned in a speech at the National Conference on Economic Security in November 1934 that “Organizations promoting fantastic [pension] schemes have aroused hopes which cannot possibly be fulfilled.”<sup>26</sup> But, in the context of the Depression, it was the hopeful idealism of this “fantastic scheme” that enthralled millions of Townsend supporters. “Pension Check” was one method of selling a brighter, happier “Townsend future,” or what Edwin Amenta calls the “Twilight Nation.” The song advertised what contemporary critics Luther Whiteman and Samuel L. Lewis called the movement’s “mental real estate,” a nod to the Townsend organization’s cofounder and actual estate agent, Robert Clements.<sup>27</sup>

The song’s real-world uses reveal as much about Townsend Plan tactics and strategy as its lyrics. Club members were instructed by Townsend headquarters

<sup>24</sup> *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance*, 1033.

<sup>25</sup> For pension fraud see William Henry Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1918), 94; Adam H. Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 87–114. For recent research on this topic see Rob Bates, “Civil War Veterans’ Pensions, Politics, and Historical Memory in Gilded Age America,” PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address to Advisory Council of the Committee on Economic Security on the Problems of Economic and Social Security,” 14 Nov. 1934, in Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume III, *The Advance of Recovery and Reform* (New York: Random House, 1938), 453–54, 454.

<sup>27</sup> Amenta, *When Movements Matter*, 41–48; Whiteman and Lewis, *Glory Roads*, 66.

to post copies of sheet music for the song to Congressmen. The campaign mirrored the movement's larger push for supporters to write letters to their Congressmen. A 1935 cartoon in *Townsend National Weekly* visually illustrated the approach: a man representing Congress is bothered by "ants in his pants," each holding a Townsend letter.<sup>28</sup> This coordinated letter-writing campaign continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The Postmaster of the House later reported that the mail pull in 1937 from the Townsend Plan was one of the largest in the history of the institution up until that point.<sup>29</sup> Letters led to some tangible results too. Several representatives, particularly in Western states, openly admitted that it was Townsend letters that had persuaded them to sponsor Townsend Plan-esque bills.<sup>30</sup> Although letter writing has a long history in political activism, as an "age-appropriate" form of protest it complimented the Townsend leadership's wider strategy to present its followers as a coalition of concerned but reasonable senior citizens.

The sheet music campaign, if seemingly not as successful as the letter campaign in enrolling politicians to the cause, gained the song some exposure. But it was only one means to getting the song heard. The Diamond D Cowboys, a country-and-western band hailing from Wilmington, California, home to several Townsend clubs, performed the song at clubs and over radio stations across California, including KGER in Long Beach, where Townsend first began his "crusade."<sup>31</sup> Although little is known about the band (or their sound, as they never recorded), they were involved in politics in other ways: in 1935, the group provided the entertainment for an American Legion Post and Auxiliary meeting on child welfare and the differences between "Americanism" and communism.<sup>32</sup> Other acts soon joined the Cowboys in performing the Townsend "theme song" at live events, club meetings, and radio broadcasts in California and beyond. Ernest Heberlein, secretary of the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir, performed a version of the song after a Townsend talk in Indianapolis.<sup>33</sup> Through live and broadcast performances, the song's message entered the ears and minds of potentially thousands of Townsend members and audiences not yet familiar with or persuaded by the movement.

"Pension Check" became a political tool for Townsend activists, but its composer, Manny Stone, likely had more business-oriented reasons for

<sup>28</sup> "Ants in His Pants," *Townsend National Weekly*, 1 April 1935, 5.

<sup>29</sup> "Taft-Hartley Reaction," *Broadcasting*, 28 March 1939, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Amenta, 85–94.

<sup>31</sup> "Diamond D Cowboys, Radio Artists, to Be Featured on Program," *Wilmington Daily Press Journal*, 28 Nov. 1934, 3; "Diamond D Cowboys Bid for Fame over Radio Station KMPC," *Wilmington Daily Press Journal*, 2 March 1935, 3. The Townsend Plan's detractors also presented it as a "crusade," e.g. Committee on Old Age Security, *The Townsend Crusade* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, Inc., 1936).

<sup>32</sup> "Defense Week Program Held," *San Pedro News Pilot*, 22 Feb. 1935, 8.

<sup>33</sup> "Townsend Outlines Age Pension Plan," *Indianapolis Star*, 9 Dec. 1934, 15.

writing it. Stone was only in his forties when he wrote the song, and seems to have had no direct ties with the Townsend Plan itself. Stone published commercially available sheet music for the song through his own Montrose-based company, Stone & Stone Music Publishers.<sup>34</sup> Stone & Stone sold the sheet music for “Pension Check” – featuring a well-designed, colorful frontispiece depicting a postman delivering a pension check to an elderly white married couple at the doorstep of their picket-fenced, middle-class suburban home (Figure 1) – through music stores and directly for thirty-five cents per copy, or three copies for one dollar. Clearly, Townsend clubs were a likely target market. Stone & Stone produced other Townsend-related products. In February 1936, the company secured patent rights for a Townsend-themed card game, “Pensions 200: The Spending Game” (a reference to Townsend’s two-hundred-dollar pension).<sup>35</sup> As there is no indication that either the sheet music or the boardgame raised funds for the Townsend Plan, Stone probably profited personally from these enterprises. Another hint of Stone’s intentions is that in 1941, Stone & Stone published another topical tune, “Red, White and Blue, It’s Up to You.” Although Townsendites were typically patriotic anyway, for Stone & Stone the publishing of a patriotic number as the US entered the Second World War might have been just as savvy (or cynical) a move as producing a song and game about the Townsend Plan as pensions hit the headlines in the mid-1930s.

Stone was not the only one to profit financially from his song. Although “Pension Check” in early 1935 became a social-movement anthem, in less than a year it was repurposed into a commodity. In March 1935, Decca released a recording of the song by another Californian country-and-western combo, the Sons of the Pioneers, backed by another age-related number, “Will You Love Me When My Hair Has Turned to Silver.”<sup>36</sup> The

<sup>34</sup> Other copyrighted Stone & Stone songs include “Love Is a Delicious Thing,” “When I Look into a Rose,” “So I Won’t Know You’re Gone,” and “June behind the Moon.” United States Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries: Musical Compositions*, Volumes XXIX–XXXVII (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1934, 1935, 1941). It is possible that the other Stone was Manny’s wife, Goldie Faye: *Los Angeles Times*, 31 Jan. 1917, 12 June 1962, 1 June 1962, 57.

<sup>35</sup> United States Patent Office, *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, Volume 465 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 18.

<sup>36</sup> The Diamond D Cowboys recorded the song for Decca a week before the Pioneers did, but their version was never released. The Pioneers’ version was also released in Australia (Decca Australia X1205) and the United Kingdom (Panachord 25874) with the spelling of “Check” changed to “Cheque.” The Pioneers also recorded other “gray-haired parent” songs, including “Silver Threads among the Gold,” “Gold Star Mother with Silvery Hair,” and “That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine.” For more on this songwriting tradition see Simon Buck, “The Aged South: Old Age and Roots Music in the US South, 1900–1945,” PhD dissertation, Northumbria University, 2020.

THE OLD-AGE PENSION SONG

# WHEN OUR OLD-AGE PENSION CHECK COMES TO OUR DOOR



ORIGINALLY  
INTRODUCED  
OVER THE AIR  
by  
DIAMOND'D  
COWBOYS  
of  
RADIO STATION  
K. G. E. R.  
LONG BEACH  
CALIF.

MUSIC  
LYRICS  
by  
MANNY  
STONE

STONE & STONE  
MUSIC PUBLISHERS  
3900 OCEAN VIEW BLVD. MONTROSE  
CALIF.

Figure 1. Sheet music for Manny Stone's "When Our Old-Age Pension Check Comes to Our Door." Image courtesy of Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Pioneers' version, shorn of any explicit reference to Townsend, was primarily comedic, rather than political. Consolidated Film Industries, who bought out Decca during the Depression, cast the Pioneers in the 1935 movie *The Old Homestead*, released through their subsidiary Liberty Films. In the movie, the elderly farmer Uncle Jed and his farmhand musician friends (the

Pioneers) travel from the countryside to a New York radio station. In a humorous segment, incidental to the main plot, the young musicians perform “Pension Check” in a barn. The song’s hilarity is accentuated by the singer’s facial movements and exuberant performance.<sup>37</sup> Liberty Films exploited the song’s value further by including it in a tie-in songbook. As the credited songwriter, Stone likely received royalties for each copy sold, and a fee for its use in the movie.<sup>38</sup>

With all mentions of Townsend removed from the Pioneers’ version, it is unclear whether audiences understood the song’s original meaning or origin. In 1937, a fan of the song from Greenback, Tennessee wrote to country-and-western magazine *Stand By!* to ask whether anyone could send her the lyrics; she made no comment about its politics.<sup>39</sup> In a 1935 review of the Pioneers’ record, a young John Hammond – the soon-to-be colossal Columbia Records producer and talent scout for artists such as Billie Holiday and Bob Dylan – noted with surprise that Decca had “gone very topical in some of their latest hillbilly stuff.”<sup>40</sup> Hammond thought little of the Pioneers’ “bleating” vocals, but his mild interest in the song’s topicality indicates that at least some critics and industry insiders recognized the song’s political message, even if they were oblivious to, or uninterested in, its origins as a “Townsend ballad.”<sup>41</sup>

### “A SONG, A PRAY’R, A MESSAGE RARE”

“Pension Check” was briefly the Townsend “theme song,” but it was just one of many attempts to get the movement singing in harmony. Other Townsend songs included “The Townsend Song” (1935), “Under the Townsend Plan” (1935), “Townsend Victory March” (1935), “America My America!” (1935), “When Grandma Draws Her Townsend Pension” (1936), “The Townsend Rouser” (1936), “The Townsend Plan Will Succeed” (1938), “America Stand Up Today” (1938), “Townsend Triumph Song” (1939), and “March of the Townsendites” (1940).<sup>42</sup> Costing between fifteen and

<sup>37</sup> William Nigh, dir., *The Old Homestead* (Liberty Pictures, 1935).

<sup>38</sup> “Publish ‘Old Homestead’ Songs,” *Film Daily*, 10 April 1935, 4.

<sup>39</sup> “Notes from the Music Library,” *Stand By!*, 19 June 1937, 11.

<sup>40</sup> John Hammond, “Jazz Records in Review,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 April 1935, 41. Hammond’s use of “hillbilly” as a marker of genre reflects the music-marketing lingo of the era: Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71–102.

<sup>41</sup> For Hammond’s politics see Dunstan Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music* (London: Picador, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> “The Townsend Song” (n.p., 1935), in Gordon Solie Oregon Music collection (GSOMC), Davies Family Research Library, Oregon Historical Society (OHS), Portland, OR;



forty cents, some of this sheet music was copyrighted by songwriters or music publishers, who, in theory, might have donated profits to the cause. Maud L. Landes, a member of a Portland, Oregon Townsend Club, freely performed her own composition, "Townsend Victory March," at club meetings.<sup>43</sup> Others were copyrighted by, or raised funds for, Old Age Revolving Pension Ltd. Even without copyright, the Townsend leadership had means of tapping into music-publishing revenues. During the 1935 Congressional hearing, Mississippi Democratic Senator Pat Harrison interrogated Townsend Plan cofounder Robert Clements about another Townsend song, "In This Land of Freedom." Harrison claimed that the song was raising funds for the leadership through the dues that *Townsend National Weekly* charged publishers to advertise the song. Clements's defense that Townsend headquarters received "no percentage whatever from the sale of the song" is doubtful given that the periodical also shamelessly exploited its predominantly older readership through advertisements for dubious Townsend-branded anti-aging remedies, which the organization sold until the Federal Trade Commission shut down that operation in 1953.<sup>44</sup> It appears that a song, "Townsend Pills" (1936), was even written to promote the organization's pharmaceuticals.<sup>45</sup> In this light, Townsend music was just another moneymaking scheme.

Townsend clubs constituted a closed market for music publishers. In a *Townsend National Weekly* advertisement for "In This Land of Freedom,"

---

C. H. Arundel, "Under the Townsend Plan" (Rosenburg, OR: C. H. Arundel, 1935), in Charles Templeton Sheet Music collection (CTSMC), Mississippi State University Libraries; Maude L. Landes, "Townsend Victory March" (Portland, OR: Maude L. Landes, 1935), in GSOMC; Zena Stevens, "America My America!" (Chicago: Townsend National Recovery Plan, 1935), in Piqua Public Library Archives and Special Collections (PPLASC), Piqua, OH; "When Grandma Draws Her Townsend Pension" (Tulsa, OK: Fey Burst, 1936); Robert La Mar, "The Townsend Rouser" (Chicago: s.p.) in University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Music and Performing Arts Library, Urbana, Illinois; "The Townsend Plan Will Succeed" (n.p., 1938), in GSOMC; William Tansey, "America Stand Up Today" (Los Angeles: Leftwich Publishing Co., 1938), in CTSMC; Frank C. Huston, "Townsend Triumph Song" (Indianapolis: s.p., 1939); Uno Sylvanus Augustus Heggholm, Max Bates, and Charles Harmon, "March of the Townsendites" (Detroit, Michigan: America Music Publishing and Recording Company, 1940), in PPLASC.

<sup>43</sup> "Minutes of the 18th Meeting of the Portland Townsend Club #46," 28 Nov. 1935, "Minutes," Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan records, OHS.

<sup>44</sup> *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance*, 1055–56; "News about the Townsend Plan," *Stockton Independent* (California), 12 March 1935, 4; "Will Stop Saying Vitamin Preparation Brings Long Life," *Telegraph-Forum* (Bucyrus, OH), 23 Feb. 1953. Robert Clements made approximately \$50,000 through Prosperity Publishing Company, which sold Townsend Plan pamphlets. By 1943, Townsend's vitamin pills surpassed all others revenue streams in the movement. Amenta, *When Movements Matter*, 140; Holtzman, *The Townsend Movement*, 78–83.

<sup>45</sup> W. D. Freeman, "Townsend Pills" (Portland, OR: s.p. 1936).

readers were encouraged to sing the “New, Catchy, Original, Different!” song at club meetings, and “hum it every day.”<sup>46</sup> Profit was no doubt a consideration for songwriters, but by encouraging the humming of Townsend tunes they also circulated specific messages about the plan, the movement, and their critics to converted, wavering, and prospective Townsendites. Townsend music helped the process by which, as Aaron Q. Weinstein argues, the Townsend Plan became a “sect” of US civil religion, with the movement’s leader, plan, and followers tied “metaphysically to the nation.”<sup>47</sup> According to Stone’s “Pension Check,” Townsend’s pension would reacquaint Americans with the Golden Rule. Subtle and not-so-subtle allusions to Christ, the Founding Fathers, and the Holy Bible abound in the 1938 Townsend tune “America Stands Today”:

Hark, the voice of one now calling,  
It echoes far and near.  
A song, a pray’r, a message rare,  
We want the world to hear.  
Despair still clouds our fair land,  
No helping hand in sight.  
One kindly man with a noble plan,  
Would set our nation right.  
We honor our great fathers,  
Who pointed out the way.  
How well they knew, how brave and true,  
Let’s to each our homage pay.  
If we their footsteps follow,  
Their virtues emulate.  
Then we shall rise ’neath cloudless skies,  
And reclaim our lost estate.

Photographic portraits of, and dedications to, Townsend on sheet music covers (Figures 2–4) reinforced the wider worship narrative of the movement, wherein its founder and leader was idolized as both messianic savior and patriot. More subtle messages are also detectable in these cover designs. The frontispiece to “Under the Townsend Plan,” illustrated with an eagle, the symbol for the nation, and children waving US flags, signified both the patriotic fervor of the movement (with potentially intentional shades of the National Recovery Administration’s “Blue Eagle”), and the plan’s creation of jobs and other cross-generational boons.

<sup>46</sup> *Townsend National Weekly*, 28 Jan. 1935, quoted in *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance*, 1053.

<sup>47</sup> Weinstein, “Onward Townsend Soldiers,” 232. Here Weinstein expands on an idea discussed briefly in Holtzman, 57.



**AMERICA  
MY  
AMERICA!**

*Kingston Townsend Glee Club*

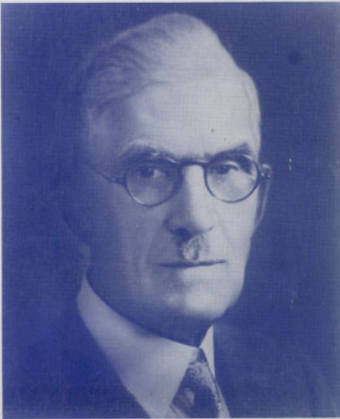
**MARCH SONG**  
*Featured by*

Verna (Tottie) Stevens  
Chicago

Madame Mamie Stark  
Los Angeles

*Words and Music by*  
**ZENA STEVENS**  
STEVENS, SOUTH DAKOTA  
*Also Author,*  
**Heads Up, America**

*Dedicated to*



**Doctor Francis E. Townsend**  
*"A Man with a Plan"*

*Official Song*  
**Townsend National Recovery Plan**  
450 East Ohio Street, Chicago  
**CONVENTION EDITION**

Figure 2. Sheet music for "America My America!" (1935). Image courtesy of Piqua Public Library Archives and Special Collections.

Musically, most Townsend songs are anthemic marches, set to major keys with pentatonic melodies, simple structures, singable choruses, and sprightly tempos. This military-march style symbolically accelerated the momentum of the movement. Townsendites regularly deployed militaristic language to portray the


**AMERICA STAND UP TODAY**

Kingston Townsend Glee Club

**MARCH SONG**


*WORDS and MUSIC*  
*by* **WILLIAM TANSEY**

**FEATURED**  
*by* **MAMIE STARK**



THIRD TOWNSEND NATIONAL CONVENTION  
JUNE • 1938  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

*Official Song*  
**TOWNSEND NATIONAL PLAN**



Leftwich Publishing Co.  
846 SO. BROADWAY  
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

Figure 3. Sheet music for “America Stand Up Today” (1938). Image courtesy of Piqua Public Library Archives and Special Collections.

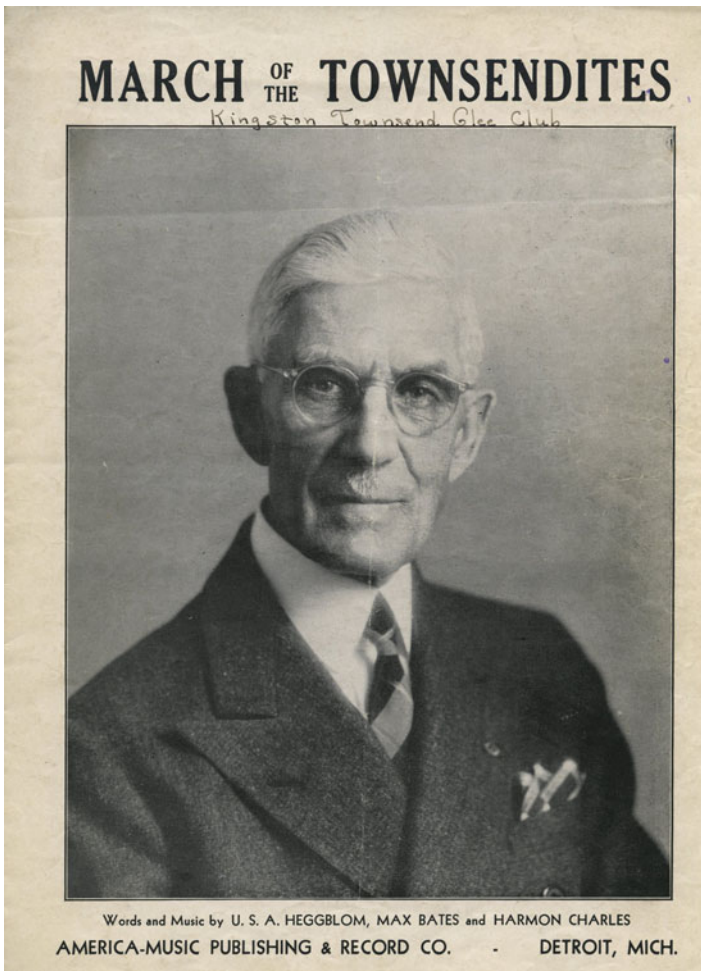


Figure 4. Sheet music for “March of the Townsendites” (1940). Image courtesy of Piqua Public Library Archives and Special Collections.

movement as, in the words of their critics, “an army of the aged.”<sup>48</sup> “Townsendized” versions of songs associated with the First World War, including “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” “Pack Up Your Troubles,” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” both appealed to the tastes of older generations and reinforced Townsend boosters’ battle-ready rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> As well as challenging

<sup>48</sup> Richard L. Neuberger and Kelley Loe, *An Army of the Aged: A History and Analysis of the Townsend Old Age Pension Plan* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1936).

<sup>49</sup> “Hinkey Dinky, Parlez Vous,” typewritten song sheet, n.d., and Col. C. A. Sanders, *Book of Townsend Parody Songs* (Indianapolis: s.p., 1936), in “Songs and Pledges,” Mss 1334,

ageist ideas about older people as needy, martial music established useful associations between Townsendites and military veterans. Veterans had historically been relatively successful in securing pensions, partly through evocations of notions of “duty,” “honor,” and “service.”<sup>50</sup> Musically and lyrically, many Townsend songs are reminiscent of nineteenth-century broadsides about penniless and pensionless aged ex-soldiers produced for veterans’ welfare campaigns.<sup>51</sup> More contemporarily, First World War veterans (the “Bonus Army”) and the militarily styled marchers of the unemployed like Coxe’s Army in the early 1930s used military music and rhetoric in their respective campaigns for veterans’ bonuses and jobs.<sup>52</sup>

Townsendites made tentative efforts to keep up with the times with their music. Songbooks contained “Townsendized” versions of the era’s “popular” songs, including Broadway material such as “Old Man River (now “Old Man Townsend”) from the musical *Showboat*. However, even this “modern” song was from a musical set in the 1880s; its lyrics anthropomorphized a river as an old man.<sup>53</sup> Townsendites regularly scoured popular songs for “gerontophilic” numbers. At a Townsend club meeting in Twin Lakes, California in 1934, musician Beatrice Daley performed a rehashed version of the light-music hit “Just a Little Home for the Old Folks,” popularized by crooner Guy Lombardo in 1932.<sup>54</sup>

The Townsend Plan sold songbooks at club meetings and national conventions. Money raised at the latter ostensibly went towards convention expenses. The 1936 convention songbook included dozens of popular-music standards, hymns, and anthems rewritten with the original religious or patriotic lyrics transfigured into tenuous Townsend references. Both “Old Time Religion” and the Townsend Plan were “good enough” for Townsendites. If, as

---

Townsend National Recovery Plan Records, OHS; Frank Dyer, *The Townsend Convention Songbook* (s.p., 1936). The author would like to thank Aaron Q. Weinstein for kindly sharing a copy of the convention songbook.

<sup>50</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 102–52.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers and William Cumming Peters, “When Sherman Marched Down to the Sea: Marching Song of Sherman’s Army” (Cincinnati, OH and St. Louis, MO: A.C. Peters & Bros. and J. L. Peters & Bros., 1865) in Historic American Sheet Music collection (HASHC), Duke University, Durham, NC; C. Nordendorf, “Stonewall Brigade” (Danville, VA: s.p., 1863); Charles Miner, “James Bird” (New York: Charles Miner, c.1814–30), in HASHC; A. W. Auner, “Patrick Sheehan” (Philadelphia: A. W. Auner, c.1875–91); Patrick Hayes, “The Poor Soldier Boy” (New York: J. Andrews, 1857), in Kenneth S. Goldstein Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen R. Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 30, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Warren Wood, *Townsend Plan Boosters* (Canby, OR: s.p., 1936), in “Songs and Pledges,” Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan records, OHS.

<sup>54</sup> “Twin Lakes Old Age Pension Club Gaining Strength,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 18 Dec. 1934, 2.

Weinstein argues, the Townsend Plan was a sect of US civil religion, then its songs were its psalms. Reimagined versions of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “Marching through Georgia” presented Townsend as a Christlike and Lincoln-esqe savior figure, with Townsend’s allies and enemies taking the role(s) of biblical characters and/or icons of national mythology.<sup>55</sup> Its songbooks functioned much like the hymnbooks of the era’s mass religious revivals. “The Townsend Plan Will Succeed” was based on the words of an actual “Townsend Plan pledge” recited at club meetings and conventions. Communal experiences, whether communion or pledges of allegiance, are potent forces in the formation, development, and solidification of national, religious, and social movement identities; music, or rather, “singing from the same hymn sheet,” in particular, can seal in the faith of the faithful and entice new converts.

Singing structured Townsend activity, opening and closing club meetings and Townsend conventions. Ritualistic collective singing congealed a shared sense of “Townsendite” identity that went beyond its patriotic, civil religious, or even fascistic dimensions. “Musicking” of this kind can reinforce a movement’s aims and vision, (re)ignite the passions of participants, and contribute, if in subtle ways, to the achievement of sociopolitical or economic goals.<sup>56</sup> Much like club meetings, conventions, marches, floats, and other community-building activities, musical performances bound the Townsend movement together, especially in moments of self-doubt.<sup>57</sup> The publication dates of Townsendite sheet music and songbooks largely correlate with significant blows to the movement, such as the Congressional hearings in early 1935, or Townsend’s misplaced support of a third-party bid for the 1936 presidential election. “Delegates to the [1936] Townsend National Convention,” the *Baltimore Evening Sun* reported, “may not be selected because of vocal ability, but it would help. It is the ‘singigest’ convention imaginable.”<sup>58</sup> The metaphorical value of “singing in harmony” was not lost on the *Evening Sun*’s reporter, who speculated that music helped to drown out the factional tensions growing within the movement surrounding Townsend’s possible support of Father Charles Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith (successor to Huey Long’s “Share the Wealth” campaign) in a bid for the presidency on the short-lived Union Party ticket (which, in the end, he did, unsuccessfully). The triumphant feeling of singing collectively encouraged beleaguered constituents to “have faith” in the cause. The unimaginatively titled

<sup>55</sup> Weinstein, “Onward Townsend Soldiers,” 228–55.

<sup>56</sup> For music as “social activity” rather than “object” or “product” see Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>57</sup> Amenta, *When Movements Matter*, 176–92.

<sup>58</sup> “Townsend Says He or Smith Must Go,” *Evening Sun*, 17 July 1936, 19.



“Townsend Triumph Song” (1939) was released at exactly the moment the leadership had *not* triumphed in its latest attempt to pass a Townsend-approved pension bill, and began attacking “double-crossing congressmen.”<sup>59</sup>

To those on the outside, it seemed that the pension plan was less important to Townsendites than the culture that grew around it. In 1935, a *New York Sun* commentator feared that thousands of Americans and some Congressmen had been taken “under the spell” by the all-singing Townsend movement, but few had “bothered to analyze” the plan.<sup>60</sup> Although grounded in ageist ideas about the gullibility of older people, there is some truth to this analysis. A more prosaic explanation is that music helped fill the time between relatively dull lectures on the plan’s various (mis)fortunes on Capitol Hill. But music also gave members a sense of personal ownership in an otherwise highly centralized, top-down organization. At the grassroots level, members produced tribute songs not just for Townsend, but also for local organizers and secretaries.<sup>61</sup> Although the Townsend Plan had some of the characteristics of a leadership cult, the movement’s music paints a more complicated vision of its followers than has previously been thought.

The notion that Townsend music had a purposefully hypnotic effect on supporters fed into a narrative about the movement’s dangerously populist tendencies. This was a period in which growing attention was given to the links between music, fascism, and populism, from the singing groups of the Hitler Youth to the radio campaigns of Nazi sympathizer and anti-Semite Father Charles Coughlin and populist Upton Sinclair’s End Poverty in California, the latter two of which each inspired their own sheet music tributes.<sup>62</sup> Townsend music, though, was not dissimilar to existing gambits in mainstream electoral politics. In 1936, Townsend National Convention attendees sang a parody of “Three Blind Mice”:

Two short years, two short years.  
This is what we’ve done, this what we’ve done.  
We’ve made the donkey shake with fear,  
And made the elephant shed a tear,  
With Townsend marchers far and near,  
In two short years, two short years.

<sup>59</sup> Frank C. Huston, “Townsend Triumph Song” (Indianapolis: s.p., 1939).

<sup>60</sup> “The Townsend Delusion,” *Berkshire Eagle* (Massachusetts), 18 Jan. 1935, 12.

<sup>61</sup> F. K. Maskell. “To Our Townsend Secretaries,” n.d., and Mrs. D. Juttner, “To Our Organizer,” n.d., in “Songs and Pledges,” Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan Records, OHS

<sup>62</sup> Clarence Glaskill, “Shepherd of the Air” (New York: Olman Music Corporation, 1933); “End Poverty in California! And Upton Sinclair Will Show the Way” (Los Angeles: End Poverty League Inc., 1934).

The parody referenced another version of the nursery rhyme that had been sung at the Republican National Convention some months earlier, after a speech Republican Senator Frederick Steiwer gave lambasting Roosevelt for the “three long years” the country had been on the road to bankruptcy. The Townsend song positioned the movement as a legitimate alternative voice to the two main parties. It specifically put pressure on the Republican Party as Republicans grew fearful of the Townsend Plan’s influence on the GOP’s large older voter base in the late 1930s. According to one historian’s estimation, at least forty of the 169 Republican Congressmen in 1938 “owed their elections partly to the backing they had received from the older generation.”<sup>63</sup>

Collective singing was especially useful for Townsendites as it harked back to an older era – the “days of yore,” in Manny Stone’s words – before music was heard via radios, records, and movies. In his 1943 autobiography, Townsend discussed the critical role music played in his early life on the western frontier, and its continuing importance for the movement:

Singing was one of our chief amusements. My father loved to hear the children sing. He traded a horse and some cash for a parlor organ and the young folks would assemble around it for a sing-fest. That’s where I learned many of the old, old hymns that we sing today at every Townsend club gathering.<sup>64</sup>

Townsendites were acutely aware of their leader’s penchant for music. In 1936, club members in Portland nervously wrote one another to speedily organize a “100-voice chorus” in honor of Townsend’s visit to Oregon because “Dr. Townsend loves music.”<sup>65</sup> Townsend’s revival of a purer, religious, and family-oriented musical culture captures how the Townsendite worldview, if utopian, also relied, as Amenta writes, “on many elements of the past and present.”<sup>66</sup> Music provided an aura of organic, “old-timey” innocence that appealed to the tastes and sensibilities of older Americans, and mitigated potentially damaging perceptions of the movement as “radical.”

For all Townsend’s evocations of an idyllic past, the organization wholeheartedly embraced distinctly modern technologies like phonograph records, radio, and film in order to “earworm” the Townsend Plan into American minds. In an advertisement for “March of the Townsendites” (1940), the short-lived National Recovery Music Publishing Company advised readers, “Records of this song and talks by Dr. Townsend” were also available,

<sup>63</sup> James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 310.

<sup>64</sup> Townsend and Murray, *New Horizons*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Paul K. Hutchinson, letters to Townsend Club members in Portland, c. 1936, in “Songs and Pledges,” Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan Records, OHS.

<sup>66</sup> Amenta, 50.



although no surviving copies have yet been found. Like Coughlin and other Depression-era radicals, Townsend headquarters was remarkably active in embracing the vast political power of radio broadcasting. In 1936, the organization employed a head of radio communications, Howard Ray, to invite Townsendite boosters onto established radio shows, and produce a Townsend Plan program, broadcast from stations in Long Beach, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Detroit, Chicago, and Rock Island.<sup>67</sup> During the 1936 presidential election, with Democrats fearful that Townsend's influence might split the vote, leading to a Republican takeover, the Townsend Plan paid tens of thousands of dollars to advertise its message over CBS.<sup>68</sup> For thirteen consecutive weeks in 1937, eleven radio stations in the nation's major cities broadcast fifteen-minute "Townsend Plan Talk" programs, "transcription" recordings of which were syndicated to smaller radio stations.<sup>69</sup> To lighten the presumably quite dense experience of listening to a Townsend broadcast, each talk was bookended by short performances from vocal groups and classical quartets.<sup>70</sup> The Townsend Plan radio division encountered stiff opposition from the broadcasting industry. In a list of contentious on-air subjects compiled by the industry in the mid-1930s, the Townsend Plan ranked high alongside demagogic Huey Long's "Share the Wealth" campaign, narcotics, and "female legs."<sup>71</sup> In 1939, station managers became increasingly cautious of Townsend agents contacting them to request airtime in case they broke National Association of Broadcasters codes prohibiting the airing of one-sided political content in the months prior to public ballots.<sup>72</sup> Like many religious cults, populist politicians, and snake oil salesmen during this period, the Townsend Plan experimented with sound trucks and, less successfully, broadcasting across the border from a Mexican radio station to avoid regulators.<sup>73</sup> The Townsend leadership valued all kinds of mediatized sound, and not just music, in its mission to convert the public to Townsendism. The adoption of modern media tactics

<sup>67</sup> *Radio Guide*, 28 Nov. 1936, 47, 10 Sept. 1938, 26; *Radio Life*, 2 July 1944, 15, 17.

<sup>68</sup> "Campaign Billings Exceed Estimates; Election Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 15 Nov. 1936, 19, 43.

<sup>69</sup> "Townsend's Plan to Use Mexican Stations Balked," *Broadcasting*, 15 Oct. 1936, 38.

<sup>70</sup> "Monday Programs," *Broadcast Weekly*, 6 April 1935, 19; "The Business of Broadcasting," *Broadcasting*, 1 June 1936, 52; "Network Accounts," *Broadcasting*, 1 Sept. 1937, 83; *Radio Daily*, 1 March 1938, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Robert St. John, *Encyclopedia of Radio and Television Broadcasting* (Milwaukee, WI: Cathedral Square Publishing Company, 1967), 133; Robert J. Landry, *This Fascinating Radio Business* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1946), 93.

<sup>72</sup> "Code Developments," *National Association of Broadcasters Reports*, 7, 40 (6 Oct. 1939), 3767–68.

<sup>73</sup> *Broadcasting*, 15 Aug. 1938, 72; Holtzman, *The Townsend Movement*, 195.

further illustrates how the movement embraced the old and the new, and was as much mainstream as it was marginal.

The Townsend Plan recruited many willing performers and composers for its cause. At club meetings near Twin Lakes, California, local singer Beatrice Daley recited poetry and sang songs “especially dedicated to this great movement.”<sup>74</sup> Inez Putney adapted and performed a version of “Marching through Georgia” for her Santa Cruz club. Musicians and entertainers could be club members, children of members, or merely local performers on the lookout for a paid gig.<sup>75</sup> Some gave their musical skills to the Townsend Plan because they thought old-age pensions would bring security for their elderly parents. Townsend songwriter Col. C. A. Sanders dedicated his *Book of Townsend Parody Songs* (1936) to “the sweet memory of my dear old father and mother, whom I firmly believe left this life twenty years prematurely because of unhappy poverty and agonized worry over an inevitable end with helpless, poverty-stricken children or the county poor-house.”<sup>76</sup> The movement drew big-name performers: the left-leaning Democratic Idaho Senator and “Cowboy Singer” Glen H. Taylor performed with his guitar at the 1947 Townsend national convention, and promised his audience he would vote for the plan at the first opportunity.<sup>77</sup> The most dependable Townsend performer, though, was elderly contralto Mamie Stark. Stark’s daughter later recalled how her mother first became involved with the movement:

One day a man came selling the Townsend paper at the door. He heard mother singing and invited her to sing at a local meeting ... Later when she sang at a meeting in the Biltmore Hotel [Salt Lake City], an organization bigwig from Washington, D.C. heard her, and she was invited to be Townsend’s official singer.<sup>78</sup>

In 1936, Stark sang on the “Townsend caravan,” a tour that took followers and a petition from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, stopping at dozens of cities along the way.<sup>79</sup> Through her busy schedule, one Californian newspaper

<sup>74</sup> “Twin Lakes Old Age Pension Club Gaining Strength,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (California), 18 Dec. 1934, 2.

<sup>75</sup> “Minutes of the Portland Townsend Club #46, 1935–1938,” “Minutes,” Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan records, OHS.

<sup>76</sup> Col. C. A. Sanders, *Book of Townsend Parody Songs* (Indianapolis: s.p., 1936), in “Songs and Pledges,” Mss 1334, Townsend National Recovery Plan Records, OHS.

<sup>77</sup> George Dixon, “Radio Senator Whoops It Up for Townsendites,” *Washington Times-Herald*, 9 July 1947, 1. For Glen H. Taylor’s musical–political career see Peter La Chapelle, *I’d Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 119–47.

<sup>78</sup> Dorothy Stowe, “Lady Baritone Sang Her Way into the Hearts of Listeners,” *Deseret News* (Utah), 14 July 1989, C1.

<sup>79</sup> “Townsendites on March Are Given Cheers,” *San Bernardino County Sun*, 6 May 1936, 5; “Townsendites Begin March on Capital,” *El Paso Times*, 6 May 1936, 1.

reported, Stark “sang the Townsend Recovery Plan into the consciousness of thousands.”<sup>80</sup> Stark’s early career also highlights some of outside influences on the Townsend movement and its music. Giving further confirmation of the quasi-religious strains of “Townsendism,” Stark regularly performed at “Elders’ Days,” “Pioneer Days,” and “Old Folks’ Days,” a tradition of community picnicking that had organized older Mormons culturally in a way that was prescient of the Townsend Plan’s own picnicks, bake sales, and bazaars.<sup>81</sup> That the Townsend Plan could solicit support from both Glen H. Taylor, who in 1948 stood as a vice-presidential candidate for the Progressive Party, and Mamie Stark, who was immersed in the socially conservative world of Mormonism, indicates something of the movement’s broad church.

Ultimately, music was one component of a wider Townsendite culture, including periodicals, pamphlets, newspapers, photography, a short film for *Time* magazine’s March of Time series, theatrical plays, and merchandise ranging from badges and kitchenware to quilts, token stamps, and spoons with Townsend’s face engraved on the handle.<sup>82</sup> Through its journalistic, publishing, broadcasting, cinematic, events, sales, and publishing arms, the multi-tentacled Townsend corporation, with the help of thousands of volunteers, commissioned agents, subcontractors, and creatives, moved the movement beyond state and national legislatures, ensconcing the plan and a new sense of “pension consciousness” into US popular culture. Townsendites hoped that through popular culture they might force “Townsendism” into the heads of prospective members, voters, and policymakers. If it is difficult to measure exactly the impact of Townsend culture on the movement’s size, public profile, or impact on policy, the very existence of these wide-reaching cultural productions – produced by the movement’s leaders and members alike – suggests that Townsendites believed culture could play an important role in evangelizing for the Townsend Plan.

## PENSION BLUES

The Townsend Plan was not the only pension campaign to use music. Veterans, formerly enslaved people, and labor unions all produced or deployed

<sup>80</sup> “Distinguished Guests Attend Santa Paula Townsend Meeting,” *Piru News*, 13 Jan. 1938, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Amenta, *When Movements Matter*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> In Portland, Oregon, club members put on a play entitled “Life Begins at Sixty,” which they hoped would be turned into a film. *Variety* negatively reviewed the Townsend drama: “Politics Is All Right, but Not at the B.O.,” *Variety*, 11 March 1936, 1. For Townsend quilts see Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, *Lives, Letters, and Quilts: Women and Everyday Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2019), 113–44. The author owns an original Townsend-engraved spoon.

music as part of their struggles for pensions.<sup>83</sup> Musicians themselves hoped their own craft could help them secure pensions. In October 1935, the Victor label issued a recording of Leopold Stokowski conducting a benefit concert in aid of the Philadelphia Orchestra Pension Fund.<sup>84</sup> Age-related ailments affecting limbs, lungs, and cognition present problematic challenges for older musicians in a fast-paced, highly competitive industry. It is perhaps more than coincidental that it was in Los Angeles, once home to Townsend headquarters, that Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians secured the union's first ever musicians' pension, known today as the Musicians and Employers' Pension Fund.<sup>85</sup>

In the 1930s, it was blues and country musicians from southern states who sang the loudest about pensions, although not for the same reasons as Townsendites. In 1939, Texan country-and-western combo the Shelton Brothers criticized Social Security as a waste of taxpayers' money in their song "Old Age Pension Blues." The same year, the Dallas-based African American boogie-woogie group Dusky Dailey and His Band cut "Pension Blues," whose aged, "doggone poor" narrator cannot provide the adequate evidence to prove his age, and so claim Social Security. Each song captured distinct ambiguities about Social Security amongst white and black Texans. Neither referenced the Townsend Plan, which, for a variety of reasons, struggled to break into the South. Townsend himself did not help matters. During the 1935 Congressional hearings, Senator Pat Harrison asked Townsend whether under his scheme adult children would exploit their elderly parents' pensions to avoid work. In his reply, Townsend insinuated that southerners were naturally work-shy:

The children are what they are because of environment very largely. Now, the children that we have in the North here – I cannot say so much of your southern population of course – but the children of the North I know very well are just as ambitious today as they ever were.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Some examples of veteran group and/or pension-related sheet music include Theo. H. Northrup, "U.C.V. March" (Memphis, TN: O. K. Houck, 1901), in Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, Johns Hopkins University; Harry De Costa, "An Old Grand Army Man: March Song" (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1918), in Gaylord Music Library, Washington University in St. Louis; John J. Moran, "The Eagle's Call for All" (Seattle, WA: Parks Music Co., 1922). For music and Abraham Epstein's American Association for Social Security see Pierre Epstein, *Abraham Epstein: The Forgotten Father of Social Security* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 258. For an example of music in the ex-slave pension movement see Charles P. Henry, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>84</sup> Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, *Concert Performance to Benefit the Philadelphia Orchestra Pension Fund* (Victor CS-92860, 1935).

<sup>85</sup> "Our History," American Federation of Musicians Local 57: the Musicians' Union of Los Angeles, available at <https://afm47.org/about/history.html>, accessed 7 June 2021.

<sup>86</sup> *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance*, 1021.

Likewise, although the movement occasionally presented itself, rhetorically at least, as “nonracial,” it made little effort to actively bring on board nonwhite people.<sup>87</sup> At the same hearing, Townsend attempted to placate Harrison’s concern that his state’s large black population would have no incentive to work if older family members were receiving a two-hundred-dollar-a-month pension by assuring the Mississippi Senator that they would continue to work, “If you use the same coercive methods on them that have been used on the Negroes always.”<sup>88</sup> The Townsend Club’s problematic relationship with black culture is captured well by a 1935 photograph of a white Townsend club band in Sacramento, California, dressed in blackface and rural attire (Figure 5).<sup>89</sup>

Considering Townsend’s difficulties in selling his plan in parts of the South, it is noteworthy that it was a southerner who became the performer most associated with “Pension Check.” In 1939, country musician Roy Acuff, hailing from the mountains of east Tennessee, a source of country music and Republican strength historically, recorded his own interpretation of the song that, country music scholar Bill Malone argues, “poked good-natured fun” at the Townsend Plan.<sup>90</sup> In entirely new stanzas, Acuff predicts that pensions would mean that “old maids” would feel comfortable telling their age, young men would date a “grandma” rather than a “flapper,” and drug stores and cosmetics firms would go bankrupt. In the final verse, Acuff points an accusatory finger at the man to blame:

There’s a man that’s turned this country upside-down,  
With his old-age pension rumor going ’round.  
If you want in on the fun,  
Send your dime to Washington,  
And that old-age pension man will be around.

<sup>87</sup> For the Townsend’s Plan’s racial politics see Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 21–26. The movement also made little headway into “Hispanic” communities, largely because under the Townsend Plan only those who were “natural born citizens” or naturalized for twenty years would receive a pension. Still, at least one Townsend club, in Colorado, appealed to “Spanish-Americans” by presenting a lecture on the plan in Spanish: *World-Independent* (Walsenburg, CO), 26 Nov. 1934, 1. A 1942 cartoon in *Townsend National Weekly* sums up the hollowness of the movement’s “progressive” politics: a broom (symbolizing the Townsend Plan) sweeps away the nation’s problems, including a character labelled “race prejudice.” “A Good Broom Sweeps Clean,” *Townsend National Weekly*, 18 July 1942, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Economic Security Act: Hearings before the Committee on Finance*, 1020; Amenta, 88.

<sup>89</sup> “Townsend Plan,” Sacramento, California, c.1935, in Michael T. Benning collections, 1983/232/13213, Center for Sacramento History.

<sup>90</sup> Bill C. Malone and Tracey Laird, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 159.



Figure 5. Townsend band dressed in blackface at a meeting of the Sacramento, California Townsend Club, c.1935. Image courtesy of the Center for Sacramento History.

In 1935, Townsend headquarters relocated from Los Angeles to Washington, DC.<sup>91</sup> Acuff's message was clear: pensions coordinated by East or West Coast elites would waste taxpayers' money and disrupt traditional gender and generational roles. In a 1939 transcription recording of Acuff performing the song over the nation's leading country music radio program, the *Grand Ole Opry*, announcer George D. Hay can be heard joking that old-age pensions were "kind of a happy thought," before sarcastically promising with a chuckle that he would "take it up with the committee and give [Acuff] a report on it."<sup>92</sup>

"Pension Check" was something of an anomaly in Acuff's otherwise relatively apolitical musical repertoire at that stage in his career.<sup>93</sup> Acuff remarked in a later interview that his version was intended to be comedic rather than polemical:

<sup>91</sup> Amenta, 107–20.

<sup>92</sup> Transcription radio recording, "Grand Ole Opry – Prince Albert – 1939-11-18 – Part 1 and Part 2," Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Digital Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>93</sup> This is not to say that the themes of tradition, family, God, (wo)manhood, and southern identity in Acuff's songs did not have underlying political standpoints, but that he at least did not usually sing explicitly about political policy. John W. Rumble, liner notes for Roy Acuff, *Country & Western Classics – Roy Acuff* (Time-Life Records TLCW-09, 1983).



Some people resented the song, but it still sold well. Songs like this are not received one hundred percent. There are some words in it that are a little touchy for some people: "Send your dime to Washington – get on relief." It was more of a comedy song for me, but it was taken a little bit politically by some.<sup>94</sup>

Acuff does not appear to have spoken publicly about the Townsend Plan, or been aware of the song's origins. He recalled vaguely that he had bought copyrights to the song from "a boy that lived in Knoxville." His version was credited to Ralph Fulton and Sam "Dynamite" Hatcher, once a member of Acuff's band, the Crazy Tennesseans. Ironically, nine years after recording the song, Acuff stood as the Republican nominee in the Tennessee gubernatorial race with pensions as a significant plank of his policy platform. As he argued at one campaign event, "Our old folks should be taken care of in their old age."<sup>95</sup> Old Tennesseans reportedly approached Acuff to complain that they were earning as little as eight to twelve dollars a month. "I think we have been pretty stingy with our old folks," Acuff told one campaign event audience. "The rest of us have gotten pay raises in the last few years and they deserve one, too."<sup>96</sup> Generally, Acuff campaigned against federal tax hikes, but old-age welfare was a notable exception, and a cross-party consensus in Tennessean politics. Acuff's ultimately victorious Democratic opponent, Gordon Browning, campaigned to increase Old Age Assistance.<sup>97</sup> Journalists seemingly did not pick up on the inconsistency between Acuff's positions on pensions in his music and on the soap box. Nor was the contradiction ever raised when Acuff rerecorded the tune in 1962, by which time he was old enough to claim a pension.<sup>98</sup> It is debatable whether Acuff was genuinely interested in winning the election at all, or whether his campaign was a shrewd career move for the *Opry* star.<sup>99</sup> While it is possible that Acuff radically changed his mind on the topic, it is more likely that his commitment to pensions was shaky at best, and just one dimension of a populist political campaign.<sup>100</sup> In summary, Acuff's parody says something about the relative

<sup>94</sup> Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), 220.

<sup>95</sup> H. B. Teeter, "Speaker Portrays Acuff as Bulwark against Isms," *Nashville Tennessean*, 6 Oct. 1948, 18.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Roe Schlappi, *Roy Acuff, the Smoky Mountain Boy* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1993), 197.

<sup>97</sup> H. B. Teeter, "Mountain Troubadour, Serenades Browning," *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 Oct. 1948, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Roy Acuff, "Old Age Pension Check" (Hickory 1178, 1962).

<sup>99</sup> The media normally portrayed Acuff as more interested in promoting himself and the *Opry* than in politics. "Acuff Boosts 'Opry,' Reece in Williamson," *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 Oct. 1948, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Acuff was not the only "hillbilly" musician-turned-politician in the South to endorse pensions: Peter La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World*, 104–9.



failure of the Townsend Plan to break into places like East Tennessee; his political career, however, indicates that citizens and politicians in such areas held strong appetites for some kind of old-age pension.

## CONCLUSION

By the 1950s, the Townsend Plan's influence on US politics had diminished. Aside from growing internal schisms, the reasons for its decline were primarily historical: the Second World War diverted attention away from domestic policy reform and, more importantly, caused an economic boom that made the "economic recovery" aspect of the Townsend Plan redundant. Additionally, as Social Security benefits were gradually expanded, the movement struggled to sustain its own identity.<sup>101</sup> The "short life expectancies of old Townsendites" further thinned out its core membership.<sup>102</sup> Townsend's death in 1960 symbolically sealed the fate of the organization, which, since its beginning, had revolved around its leader.

Townsend music, nevertheless, lived on. The "Townsend ballad" became something of an American folk song, a stock text to be revived and reinvented for a variety of purposes. In 1959, the New Lost City Ramblers released a rendition of the song on their LP *Songs from the Depression*. Considering the broadly left-wing politics of the Greenwich Village folk revival group, it is surprising that the band opted to imitate Acuff's anti-pension version. In 1967, one of the group's members, John Cohen, recorded George Davis, a retired "singing miner" from Hazard, Kentucky, performing his own new version of the song. Retitled "Miner's Dream Come True," Davis's parody of Acuff's parody changed the refrain to "When the miner's welfare check comes to our door," in tribute to the United Miner Workers of America Welfare and Retirement Fund, established in 1946.<sup>103</sup> As these versions suggest, the 1960s, contrary to popular memory of the decade as dominated by an ascendant youth culture, was, like the 1930s, a period of intense old-age politics. The "Long 1960s" saw several White House Conferences on Aging, the passing of the Older Americans Act and Medicare, the National Urban League's landmark report on the "double jeopardy" faced by aged African Americans, and the birth of the Gray Panther movement.

Informed by the new countercultural, feminist, and racial politics of their own times, subsequent generations of anglophone age rights campaigners

<sup>101</sup> Amenta, *When Movements Matter*, 201–5.

<sup>102</sup> Sheldon L. Messinger, "Organizational Transformation: A Case Study of a Declining Social Movement," *American Sociological Review*, 20, 1 (1955), 3–10, 4.

<sup>103</sup> New Lost City Ramblers, *Songs from the Depression* (Folkways FW05264, 1959); George Davis, *When Kentucky Had No Union Men* (Folkways FW02343, 1967).

continued in the same time-honored tradition of musical political activism that the Townsend Plan also drew from. In the United Kingdom in 1964, the Great Yarmouth and Gorleston Branch of the National Federation of Old Age Pensions Associations published sheet music to “Jolly Young Pensioners We (Pensioners Theme Song).”<sup>104</sup> In 1983, American feminist songwriter Elizabeth Freilicher wrote a tribute song for Annette Kuhn, the founder of the Gray Panthers.<sup>105</sup> Since the 1980s, the Raging Grannies, a Canadian older persons’ activist group, have used music as a method of social disruption. In 1987, as Ronald Reagan’s government geared up conservative attacks on the “waste” of Social Security, labor musician Joe Glazer recorded his own version of “Pension Check.” Having decades earlier composed his own pension ballad, “Too Old to Work,” for the United Auto Workers’ pension struggle, Glazer’s new version featured new stanzas that took a glossy-eyed look back at Social Security and the New Deal years.<sup>106</sup> In 2005, with George W. Bush’s administration continuing Reagan’s attempt to dismantle Social Security legislation, country music scholar Chris Willman jokingly pondered whether “Pension Check” might be due a revival, “at least on [political action committee] circuits.”<sup>107</sup> Neither Roy Acuff, the New Lost City Ramblers, George Davis, Joe Glazer, nor Chris Willman are on record as being aware of the song’s origins. But perhaps that says it all. Townsend music has had a profound, if obscured, influence on age- and pension-related music, in much the same way as Townsend politics transformed discourses in the US about Social Security, welfare, and old age, even though the movement remains largely forgotten.

<sup>104</sup> Edward Andrews, “Jolly Young Pensions We (Pensioners Theme Song)” (Norwich: W. E. Wilson, 1965).

<sup>105</sup> Hilda E. Wenner and Elizabeth Freilicher, *Here’s to the Women: 100 Songs for and about American Women* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 247–49.

<sup>106</sup> Simon Buck, “Too Old to Work: Joe Glazer, Labour Music, and Occupational Pensions,” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 18, 3 (2 July 2021), 281–301.

<sup>107</sup> Chris Willman, *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: New Press, 2006), 157.

Appendix

“When Our Old-Age Pension Check Comes to Our Door,” by Manny Stone,  
1934.

We've all had our troubles;  
Troubles made us blue,  
Been running 'round in circles,  
Not knowing what to do  
We've all had to worry,  
Worry made us sad,  
Soon we'll have no worries,  
And soon we'll all be glad.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
We won't have to skimp and worry any more.  
Every dog can have a bone,  
Every kid an ice cream cone,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
We won't have to eat hamburger anymore.  
There'll be liver for the cat,  
Now she's lean, but she'll be fat,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

Sell your troubles for a song and learn to sing;  
The word Depression won't mean a thing.  
Times are surely getting better day by day,  
When those pension checks arrive we'll be okay!

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
Every kid will love his grandma even more.  
Mother-in-laws who are old,  
Won't be locked out in the cold,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
There'll be jobs and opportunities galore.  
We'll buy classy clothes and cars,  
We'll buy planes and fly to Mars,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
We won't see Old Man Depression any more.  
Like a dog that's had his day,  
We'll just pension him away,

When our old-age pension check comes to our door.  
Take a dose of laughing gas and learn to smile;  
We'll all be rolling in the clover after a while.  
Thank the Lord we're growing older day by day;  
When our pension checks arrive we'll be okay!

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
Every man will love his neighbor as of yore.  
We'll all learn the Golden Rule,  
Ride to Glory on a mule,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door.  
We won't have to dread the poorhouse any more,  
Tho we're old and bent and gray,  
There'll be gold among the gray,  
When our old-age pension check comes to our door.

When our old-age pension check comes to our door,  
Dear old grandma won't be lonesome any more.  
They'll be waiting at her gate,  
Every night she'll have a date,

When her old-age pension check comes to her door.  
Grow a flowing long white beard and wear a cane;  
Because you've reached your second childhood don't complain.  
Life will just begin at sixty, so be gay,  
When the Townsend Plan goes thru, we'll be okay!

When our old-age pension check some to our door,  
Every girl will choose a grandpa to adore.  
How the wedding bells will ring,  
Ripe old age will be the thing,  
When our old-age pension checks come to our door.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Simon Buck is a writer, historian, and musician. He currently works as a researcher for the Lothian Health Services Archive at the Centre for Research Collections in the University of Edinburgh. His forthcoming monograph with the University of Illinois Press examines the history of old age, aging, and music in the US South. The author would like to thank Anthony Badger, Aaron Q. Weinstein, Jack Hodgson, David Ballantyne, and Trevor Buck for reading earlier drafts of this essay and offering valuable suggestions and support, and Piqua Public Library Archives and Special Collections, Oregon Historical Society, the Charles E. Young Research Library (UCLA), the Music & Performing Arts Library (University of Illinois), and Center for Sacramento History for their kind support with remote access to archival materials. Research for this article was made possible by a Research Society for American Periodicals Early Career Research Grant and a David Bruce Centre for American Studies Fellowship.