

Pete Seeger: Pantheist Folksinger and Planet Patriot
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By Harold Wood

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On July 21, 2022, the United States Postal Service issued a “Forever” postage stamp celebrating famed folksinger *Pete Seeger* as the 10th musician to appear on the Postal Service’s popular Music Icons series.

In a press release, the Postal Service summarized Pete’s importance well: “Pete Seeger (1919-2014) promoted the unifying power of voices joined in song to address social issues. His adaptation of “We Shall Overcome” became a civil rights anthem. Led by his ringing tenor voice and emblematic five-string banjo, his sing-along concerts mixed traditional songs and Seeger originals like “If I Had a Hammer” and “Turn! Turn! Turn!” During his long career, the charismatic and idealistic performer became a folk hero to generations.”

Unlike most musicians, Pete Seeger was not merely a performer, but a “song leader” who transformed mere “audiences” into powerful singers. The songs sometimes were just expressions of pure joy; but more often than not, Pete was promoting environmental and social causes, and the power of unified voices could be transformed into powerful social movements.

Pete had a saying - - - that his mission in life was “speaking truth to power—without being thrown in jail too often”! How did he do this? For one thing, Seeger's banjo was emblazoned with the motto "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender." That motto is exemplified in his song, “To Everyone in All the World.” This little ditty was a “Peace Song” that with humor and an utter lack of guile showed how everyone in all the world can make friends:

To ev'ryone in all the world
I reach my hand, I shake their hand
To ev'ryone in all the world
I shake my hand like this

All, all together
The whole wide world around
I may not know your lingo
Bur I can say, by jingo
No matter where you live
We can shake hands

His music is so closely associated with values of fairness and equality that many people, focusing on the message of his music which seem universal, don't realize that the songs were written by anyone in particular. Songs just grew out of him as part of the folk tradition, and millions of people learned to sing along to anthems like "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," and "If I Had a Hammer." Growing up in the Sixties, these were the songs we sang around the campfire at summer camp!

Pete Seeger was the folksinger most responsible for popularizing a great many folk songs, especially the spiritual "We Shall Overcome", which became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, changing the lyric "we will overcome" to "we shall overcome."

Pete Seeger believed his music could change hearts and minds, and his music was always in service of his activism. He was an activist on many fronts - the environment, civil and labor rights, racial equality, international understanding, and anti-militarism.

"Songs," he said, "can penetrate hard shells, proliferate in prisons. If we bring life to them, they will bring life to us and our children. . . . Songs can help us explore our past and our present, and even speculate about our future."

Part I

Formative Years

Oddly for someone so rebellious, Seeger got both his vocation and his politics from his father. Both his parents were professional musicians, and at age 17 Pete accompanied his father on a field trip to collect traditional songs for a project of the Library of Congress. In 1940, at age 21, Seeger went to Washington to work for Alan Lomax, the project's head and catalyst. There he befriended the legendary ballad-maker Woody Guthrie. Soon the two had left on a cross-country jaunt.

Part II:

Career

Singing for the workers

In 1941, not long after the trip with Guthrie, Seeger, together with folk artists Lee Hays and Mill Lampell, formed the **Almanac Singers** and started singing at left-wing fundraising parties in New York. Soon, they headed west, singing for CIO Unions in Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Denver, and San Francisco. Barely out of his teens—tall, lean, his head thrust forward and his face tilted up—the banjo-playing Seeger became a familiar figure in labor's militant wing.

Singing for the war effort

After Germany invaded the USSR, the party line switched. Seeger recalls Woody Guthrie's wry remark: "Well, I guess we won't be singing any more peace songs for a while." Peter Seeger later said, "In early '42 our *beat-Hitler* songs actually got us a radio job or two." But then a New York City newspaper attacked the Almanac Singers for their politics, and they lost not only their contracts but their agent.

Later in 1942, Seeger was drafted. The following year, in uniform, he married Toshi-Aline Ohta — his partner until her death in 2013 (age 91), "without whom," he wrote, "the world would not turn nor the sun shine." Shipped to Saipan in the South Pacific and assigned to a special service unit, Seeger drove a jeep all over the island, putting up notices asking: "Are you a musician? I can get you instruments if you will play in the army hospital." He booked jazz trios, gospel quartets, and hillbilly bands to cheer up wounded soldiers. After the war, in 1949 Pete and Toshi moved to a log cabin without running water or electricity, with a view of the Hudson River.

Singing for joy and freedom

Back in civilian life, Seeger sang at the 1948 Progressive Party convention that nominated Henry Wallace for the presidency. But the left-wing movement, so strong in the late 1930s, had lost its momentum, and protest songs had gone out of fashion, even with most labor unions. Meanwhile, an ugly mood fell over much of the public. In September 1949, when African American Communist Paul Robeson tried to sing at a rally in Peekskill, New York, the Ku Klux Klan broke the concert up. Many of the 10,000 who attended—including Seeger and his family—had their car windows smashed as they ran the gauntlet of "patriots" as they tried to escape the clamor.

Earlier that year, Seeger, together with folk musicians Lee Hays, Ronnie Gilbert, and Fred Hellerman, had formed the Weavers. But for the first year the group earned little money. "We were dead broke and about to go our separate ways," he recalls. "As a last desperate gasp we decided to do the unthinkable: get a job in a nightclub." Six months later, they had a recording contract and a string of hit records. Suddenly songs they had written or adapted—"Goodnight Irene," "Tzena Tzena," "On Top of Old Smoky," and "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You"—were on the lips of millions of Americans who neither knew nor cared about the singers' politics. But the blacklists kept after them, and in 1950, when the Weavers were offered a contract for a network TV show, the red-baiting publication *Red Channels* "exposed" them, the contract was torn up, and the Weavers had to call it quits for a while.

Despite the Weavers' overall commercial success, Seeger stayed true to his convictions. Often, after an audience had sung a rousing chorus of "If I Had a Hammer"—he always

loved getting a crowd to sing—he would challenge them by saying: “All our militance, enthusiasm, bravery will count for nothing if we can’t cross the oceans of misunderstanding between the peoples of this world.” Many in those Cold War days considered such sentiments suspect if not subversive. But as Seeger has said: “I don’t mind being controversial. . . . The human race benefits when there is controversy and suffers when there is none.”

For Seeger those were words to live by. In 1955, at the height of the McCarthyite red scare, Seeger was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He had already, as he puts it, “drifted out” of the Communist Party, no longer wanting to belong to a secret organization. Pete Seeger has always been considered a left-wing radical, but he defined the term “left extremist” as “someone who stands up to defend the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Sixth Commandment (Thou Shalt Not Kill).”

But the HUAC interrogators weren’t interested in such political nuance; they wanted “names” — the names of party members. Unlike most witnesses, Seeger not only refused to snitch, but refused to take refuge in the Fifth Amendment. He told the committee: “I am not going to answer any question as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs, or my political beliefs. . . . I think these are improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under threat of reprisal.” The committee cited him for contempt, and in 1961 he was sentenced to a year in jail. Awaiting appeal, he took on every singing assignment he could get, in expectation of a year without any income. When the sentence was finally reversed on appeal, his wife thought she would have seen more of him if he *had* been jailed. “Next time, no appeal,” said Toshi Seeger.

Part III

Legacy

Singing for peace and racial justice

If there was ever a progressive cause Pete Seeger didn’t sing about, the record doesn’t show it. As early as 1947, long before it became well known, he started singing “We Shall Overcome.” During the 1960s, he went South to oppose Jim Crow, and during the Vietnam War, he performed at college protests all over the country. “If you love your Uncle Sam, bring ’em home,” he sang. “Support our boys in Vietnam, bring ’em home, bring ’em home.” When the Smothers Brothers invited him to appear on their top-ranked television show, he sang his antiwar “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy”—but CBS higher-ups cut it out of the show.

His best known anti-war song is probably “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” which became an anthem of peace movements worldwide.

Singing for the environment

After taking up sailing in the 1960s, Seeger learned how polluted the Hudson River had become. He said: “The world was being turned into a poisonous garbage dump. By the time the meek inherit it, it might not be worth inheriting.”

Typically, he plunged into activism to tackle this latest concern.

In 1966, he released an album of environmental songs, titled “God Bless the Grass.” featuring a song written by UU songwriter Malvina Reynolds. Unfortunately, the message it delivers is just as relevant today as it was 47 years ago. Nevertheless, in characteristic Seeger style, none of these songs are preachy; in fact most use a delightful dose of humor to convey the message!

Pete’s song, "My Dirty Stream (The Hudson River Song)" became the linchpin for the album **God Bless the Grass**. Malvina Reynolds composed six of the songs on the album. But the album is not all negative; two of the songs extoll the beauty of America: Phil Ochs' "The Power and the Glory," and Eric Anderson's "My Land is A Good Land."

Pete Seeger put his environmental concern not only into music, but also integrated it into an unique environmental education organization, the [Hudson River Sloop Clearwater](#). The Clearwater is a replica of an old-fashioned Hudson River sloop that he had built. It is huge —“75 feet long, 25 feet wide, mast 105 feet, carrying one of the largest mainsails in the world.” If the Hudson was to be saved, he said, “people must learn to love it again, to come down to the water’s edge and see it close.” *The Clearwater* still sails the river today, docking at towns large and small. School children help raise the sails, and, in Seeger’s words, “get a whiff of Hudson history, and of its biology and politics, as well.” The boat is given much credit for progress in cleaning up the Hudson. Having realized what many thought an unrealistic dream, Seeger asserts: “There is a little of Don Quixote in everybody—and a good thing, too.”

Religious Views

Pete Seeger explained his religious views simply: “My church has always been the outdoors.”

That said, needing rehearsal space, in the 1960’s he joined the Unitarian Universalist Community Church on 35th Street, in New York (because his mother was Unitarian).

Later, Pete and a group he formed called the *Street Singers* gave two benefit concerts to help the UU Community Church raise funds to make itself accessible to people with disabilities. Reinforcing Seeger's bond with the church was his relationship with CommUUnity, an interracial singing group of five church members whom he supported and nurtured. "He not only provided professional advice," one of the members says. "He was our spiritual guide."

Adds group member Hope Johnson: "Without Pete Seeger we would not have succeeded. We did not think of ourselves as performers—we were just singing for fun." But having joined the Street Singers, they met Seeger at a party where he heard them sing. They asked him to recommend songs that reflect UU principles, and he became their mentor, encouraging them to sing at Clearwater and other folk festivals. Aided by a grant from the UU Funding Program, CommUUnity has now sung at two of the UU General Assemblies, as well as at numerous district meetings and other UU events.

Pantheist Views

In 1996, Pete Seeger told the interviewer in *UU World* that "I am no longer leery of using the word 'God,' though I have my own definition. I particularly like what a French mystic said: 'The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me.'"

In a *Beliefnet* interview in 2006, Seeger clearly confirmed this belief in *pantheism*. He said:

"I feel most spiritual when I'm out in the woods. I feel part of nature. Or looking up at the stars. I used to say I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God."

Conclusion

There are those who remain uncomfortable with Seeger's radicalism. But Pete's essential philosophy was one of brotherhood and mutual cooperation: "I've decided that if there's a human race here in one hundred years, it will be because we learn how to participate with each other, even though we may disagree about many things."

But appreciation for humanity and the Earth is universal, no matter what our race, creed, or color. Pete most movingly expressed that viewpoint in one of his best songs, “My Rainbow Race.” Listen to the song on YouTube [here](#):



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