

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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How Can I Keep From Singing?
A Tribute to Pete Seeger

Formative Years

I learned Pete Seeger's songs at Girl Scout camp, circled around a campfire, singing late into the starry New Hampshire summer nights. Our counselors had learned them at anti-war rallies; we went on to sing them at anti-nuclear demonstrations. "Rulers," Plato said, "Should be careful about what songs are allowed to be sung."

Folk music, in Pete Seeger's hands, meant singing truth to power. No mere mirror of his times, Pete's music shaped the times by shaping minds and opening hearts.

Having provided the sound track to the better part of a century, Pete sang right up until the end; his last public appearance was with Arlo Guthrie on November 30th, at no less than Carnegie Hall. Pete Seeger died this past Monday. He was 94 years old.

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Pete's mother, Constance, was a violinist; his father, Charles, was a pianist. Pete was sent to boarding school at the age of four. As a teenager, he discovered jazz and folk music and five-string banjo. His parents divorced; he was close to his father, who became a professor and then chair of his department at Berkeley while still in his twenties. As a folklorist, Charles Seeger loved to travel to "small towns to record traditional songs in danger of being lost," songs, he contended, that were "real American music, [reflecting] the homegrown values and mores of the country," music with the power to recall the country to its "authentic national identity at a time of crisis" and tumult.

In the summer of 1936, "father and son drove through the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains." Pete wrote, "I discovered there was some good music in my country [that] I never heard on the radio. I liked the strident

vocal tone of the singers.... The words of the songs had all the meat of life in them.”¹ Back at his father’s home, he listened to recordings from the Library of Congress, hour upon hour, slowing the turntable with his finger so he could catch every note, every word. He was entirely self-taught. That fall, he entered Harvard.

In 1938, at eighteen years old, Pete Seeger stood by the steps of Widener Library at the edge of Harvard Yard. John Kennedy was there, and the poet Robert Lowell, and Pete’s blood was a blue as theirs – far bluer, in fact, than the Irish Kennedys. But Pete was bored. “... His friends were ... the radical, self-appointed champions of the underdog: ... the Young Communist League.”²

He should have been in class. But “didn’t his classmates realize that ... aggressive fascists were crushing freedom not just in Spain, but across the globe? In Europe, the Germans were goose-stepping their way through Austria and Czechoslovakia. In Asia, the Japanese were ... [seizing] China, province by province.” And so, on a cold winter’s day, “on behalf of those fighting a losing battle [in the Spanish Civil War] to save democracy,” Pete Seeger was passing out leaflets to a largely indifferent student body.

That spring, not even bothering to sit for his Sophomore exams, he left Harvard.³

Career

“A tireless supporter” of union organizing in the 1930s and ’40s, Pete traveled the country, singing in his enthusiastic tenor and playing banjo to fire up the crowd. He met Woody Guthrie, and, later, Woody’s son Arlo; they became lifelong colleagues and friends.

In 1939, he met Toshi Ohta, the progressive daughter of a Virginia mother and a Japanese father who would become a filmmaker, producer, and activist. They married and, astonishingly, remained married until Toshi died this past July.

¹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing?* p. 49

² Dunaway, *op cit*, p. 52

³ All historical information and quotations not from Dunaway are from Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There Is A Season*, pp. 1-10

On the eve of World War II, Pete Seeger became a leading voice of the peace movement. But after Pearl Harbor, in 1942, he was drafted into the army and shipped out to the South Pacific, where he disassembled airplane engines and played his banjo. A beautiful photo from Saipan shows him surrounded by kids, singing along.

Pete was also responsible for hospital entertainment, giving wounded soldiers courage in their recuperation. He came to believe, he said, that songs could also “encourage ... collective action that could demand and achieve political change,” and “make the world a better place.” Songs, he said, “can help this world survive.”⁴

In 1945, he was the driving force behind People’s Songs, an informal association to encourage the creation and spread of radical protest songs. He wrote, “The people are on the march, and must have songs to sing.”⁵ Pete wanted, “to have hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of union choruses,” he said. “Just as every church has a choir, why not every union?”⁶ “Now, ... the truth must assert itself in many singing voices.”⁷

In 1949, Pete and Toshi bought seventeen and a half acres overlooking the Hudson River, an hour and a half north of New York City. Pete went to the public library to find instructions on how to build a log cabin.

They raised their four children in Beacon, and lived there for the rest of their lives. Also that year, he teamed up with Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, and Fred Hellerman to form The Weavers. During Christmas week, they opened at the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village. Their first hit was *If I Had a Hammer*. *Time Magazine* called the foursome “the most imitated group in the business.”⁸

And then came the House Un-American Activities Committee, before which Pete made a historic appearance. He and the Weavers were blacklisted. It was a very dark time.

⁴ Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* p. 16

⁵ Pete Seeger, *People’s Song Bulletin*, in Winkler, *op cit*, p. 40

⁶ Mario (Boots) Cassetta, quoted in David Dunaway, *op cit*, p. 117

⁷ Pete Seeger, *People’s Song Bulletin*, in Winkler, *op cit*, p. 40

⁸ Dunaway, *op cit*, p. 155

In the spring of 1962, finally out from under the shadow of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare, Pete joined in demonstrations against nuclear testing, and sang at summer camps and colleges. A new generation of folksingers – Joan Baez; Peter Paul, and Mary; and Bob Dylan, among many others – burst onto the scene, and *Where Have All The Flowers Gone*, a lyrical plea for nonviolence Pete set to lyrics from a Ukranian folk song,⁹ reached the top forty on the charts. *Time Magazine* called Pete “the current patriarch of folk singing.”¹⁰

Pete met and befriended Dr. King, and lent his voice to the struggle for civil rights, inspiring black people and white people alike to work for racial equality. With Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan of the Highlander School in Tennessee, he adapted an old hymn until it became the song we know today as *We Shall Overcome*.

In 1964, Pete arrived in Mississippi just as reports that three Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee volunteers – Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney – were missing. He was in the midst of a performance when word came that the boys were dead. Suddenly, the concert became a funeral.

“O, healing river,” Pete Seeger sang, “Send down your water upon this land.... Send down your water and wash the blood from off our sand.” He closed the concert by exhorting the grieving audience, “We must sing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ now. The three boys would not have wanted us to weep, but to sing and understand this song.”¹¹

Back in the south in the summer of 1965, marching from Selma to Montgomery, “Pete wandered from one group to another [along Alabama's Route 80], listening to new songs, learning different verses to old hymns. “Without all those songs,” he said, “the civil rights movement would not have succeeded.”¹²

Then came Vietnam. Pete fanned the flames of resistance to the war, singing, “If you love your Uncle Sam, ... support our boys in Vietnam. Bring

⁹ Winkler, *op cit*, p. 74

¹⁰ “Folk Singing” in *Time Magazine*, November 23, 1962, p. 60

¹¹ Dunaway, *op cit*, p. 235

¹² David Kupfer, *A Conversation with Pete Seeger*, 2004 (from an unpublished transcript in the Seegers' possession)

‘em home, bring ‘em home;” and “We’re waist deep in the Big Muddy, and the big fool says to push on.”

In 1963, Pete had read Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, and realized, he said, “It might be [that] before we bomb each other off the face of the earth, we may poison each other off the face of the earth.”¹³ Pete turned his attention to the river that flowed past his home, the once-mighty Hudson reduced to a murky brown sludge of chemical waste and sewage. “I’d [always] been a nature nut,” Pete said. “[At] age fifteen and sixteen, I put all that behind me, figuring the main job to do was to help the meek inherit the earth, assuming that when they did, the foolishness of the private profit system would be put to an end. In the early ’60s, I realized the world was being turned into a poisonous garbage dump. By the time the meek inherited it, it might not be worth inheriting.”

Pete and friends raised \$140,000 and built a replica of a nineteenth century sloop – 106 feet long, with a 108 foot mast – and on May 17th, 1969, the *Clearwater* was christened and set sail up and down the Hudson, raising awareness and money at waterfront concerts. “Pete saw the Hudson as an emblem of some of the failures of our democracy,” Robert Kennedy, Jr. said, referring to the fact that it had become a corporate dumping ground. “But,” he continued, “he always pointed out that the constitution of New York ... said the Hudson was owned by the people of New York. He used to say the Hudson River belongs to all of us.”¹⁴

By 1986, people were fishing and swimming in the Hudson again. In 1994, the *New York Times* reported that the river had been brought back from the brink.¹⁵ “You see,” said Pete, “everything in the world is tied together. You try to clean up a river, and soon you have to work on cleaning up the society.”¹⁶

Legacy

Pete Seeger revived American folk music – what he called the sound of America – and knew that hearing it was not enough. We had to sing

¹³ from an interview by Winkler (*op cit*), August 3, 1996

¹⁴ from theguardian.com/music/2014/jan/29/pete-seeger-hudson-river-new-york

¹⁵ *New York Times*, October 9, 1994

¹⁶ Winkler, *op cit*, p. 153

along, to be the medium and embody the message, until “I” became “we.”¹⁷

His influence is everywhere in progressive causes. The labor movement of the 1930s; the peace movement on the eve of World War II; the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s; and the crusade for clean water all bear the mark of his songs, which moved his audiences to action, and gave us courage.

Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary said, “Pete paved the way by using his music to create community and the kind of hard spirit that really became the soundtrack of activism in the 1960s and 70s. The spirit of it really, really was different from pop music. The people who sang this music were expected to be there and put their lives, their hearts, their time on the line for the things that they believed in.”¹⁸ Mary Travers used to call the trio “Seeger’s Raiders.”

Pete received lifetime achievement awards too numerous to name,¹⁹ but they do not tell the story of his legacy. At its heart, Pete’s message to activists everywhere was,

Never give up.
*We Shall Overcome.*²⁰

Pete Seeger, *ipresente!*

¹⁷ James West Davidson and Michael B. Stoff, series editors, in Winkler, *op cit*, pp. xiii-x

¹⁸ “Peter Yarrow reflects on the legacy of folk singer Pete Seeger,” January 28, 2014, at america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/consider-this/Consider-This-blog/2014/1/28/peter-yarrow-reflectsonthelegacyoffolksingerpeteseeger.html

¹⁹ “Seeger received several high honors in the 1990s. In 1993, he received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. He was awarded a National Medal of Arts a year later, and inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996. Following the release of his 1996 album, *Pete*, Seeger won a Grammy Award for best traditional folk album. That same year, he published an autobiography entitled *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*.

“Nearly a decade later, Seeger received his third Grammy Award—this time for best traditional album—for his 2008 release, *At 89*. Also in 2008, the folk icon performed at President Barack Obama’s inaugural celebration.

“In 2010, at the age of 91, Seeger released the album *Tomorrow’s Children*, which he recorded with a group of students and dedicated to environmental awareness. The work garnered him his fourth Grammy Award, for best musical album for children.”

Please see biography.com/people/pete-seeger-9542618?page=1

²⁰ Amy Goodman, “Pete Seeger’s Legacy to Activists,” January 30, 2014. Please see theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/pete-seeger-persecution-songs-folk-justice

