

Pete Seeger: Changing the World One Song at a Time

Written by John W. Whitehead
Monday, 06 May 2013 13:58

“Any darn fool can make something complex; it takes a genius to make something simple.”—Pete Seeger

Before the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, Jim Hendrix, Bob Dylan and others, there was Pete Seeger. With his five-string banjo in hand, Seeger helped to lay the foundation for American protest music, singing out about the plight of everyday working folks and urging listeners to political and social activism. In fact, Pete Seeger is one of the most important musical influences of the 20th century.

Born in New York City on May 3, 1919, Seeger, whose father was a pacifist musicologist, was plunged into the world of music and politics from an early age. He studied sociology at Harvard University until 1938, when he dropped out and spent the summer bicycling through New England and New York, painting watercolors of farmers' houses in return for food. Looking for but failing to get a job as a newspaper reporter in New York City, he then worked at the Archives of American Folk Music at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In 1940, Seeger met Woody Guthrie at a *Grapes of Wrath* migrant-worker benefit concert. Seeger, Guthrie, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell joined together to form the Almanac Singers, which became known for its political radicalism and support of communism.

In 1942, Seeger was drafted by the U.S. Army and sent to Saipan in the Western Pacific. After the war, he helped start the People's Songs Bulletin, later *Sing Out!* magazine, which combined information on folk music with social criticism. In 1950, Seeger formed The Weavers with Lee Hays, Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman. Targeted for the political messages behind some of their songs, the group was blacklisted and banned from television and radio.

In 1955, the House Committee on Un-American Activities subpoenaed Seeger to appear before them (read his testimony at <http://www.peteseeger.net/HUAC.htm>). During the hearings, Seeger refused to disclose his political views and the names of his political associates. When asked by the committee to name for whom he had sung, Seeger replied, “I am saying voluntarily that I have sung for almost every religious group in the country, from Jewish and Catholic, and Presbyterian and Holy Rollers and Revival Churches, and I do this voluntarily. I have sung for many, many different groups—and it is hard for perhaps one person to believe, I was looking back over the twenty years or so that I have sung around these forty-eight states, that I have sung in so many different places.” He was sentenced to one year in jail but, quoting the First Amendment, successfully appealed the decision after spending four hours behind bars. However, he has been blacklisted most of his life from normal radio and television work.

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During the 1960s, Seeger traveled around the country, continuing to play his folk songs for the peace and civil rights movements. Deeply offended by the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Seeger, along with other folk singers such as Joan Baez, led many protests.

“Wherever he was asked, when the need was the greatest, he, like Kilroy, was there. And still is,” said his long-time friend, Studs Terkel. “Though his voice is somewhat shot, he holds forth on that stage. Whether it be a concert hall, a gathering in the park, a street demonstration, any area is a battleground for human rights.”

In 1963, Seeger recorded the now-famous gospel song “We Shall Overcome.” In 1965, he sang it on the 50-mile walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, with Martin Luther King, Jr. and 1,000 other marchers. That song would go on to become the anthem for the civil rights movement and be translated into many languages. Seeger also turned his attention to cleaning up the Hudson River that ran past his home. In 1966, he helped form Clearwater, an organization dedicated to educating the public on environmental concerns such as pollution and protecting the river. The group offers educational programs for children on a 76-foot replica of a traditional Hudson cargo sloop and holds a two-day festival on the banks of the Hudson River every June.

Seeger was awarded the Presidential Medal of the Arts and the prestigious Kennedy Center Award in 1994. In 1996, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for his contribution to music and to the development of rock and folk music. In April of that year, he received the Harvard Arts Medal, and after decades of creating songs, in 1997, Seeger won a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Album for his album, *Pete*.

Seeger, however, has not always been so lavishly praised. Often chastised for his “communist beliefs,” Seeger has dealt with criticism and misunderstanding. “I say I’m more conservative than Goldwater. He just wanted to turn the clock back to when there was no income tax. I want to turn the clock back to when people lived in small villages and took care of each other,” he says.

While many of the legendary men and women Seeger associated with are gone, he continues his political and environmental endeavors. He still seems to subscribe to the same philosophy he held to four decades ago, when he advised young people to follow their hearts and take

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initiative: “Well, here’s hoping all the foregoing will help you avoid a few dead-end streets (we all hit some), and here’s hoping enough of your dreams come true to keep you optimistic about the rest. We’ve got a big world to learn how to tie together. We’ve all got a lot to learn. And don’t let your studies interfere with your education.”

At 94 years old, Pete Seeger is still speaking out. Indeed, in an interview I conducted with Pete Seeger several years ago, I asked him whether he had found an answer to the question “When will they ever learn?” which he repeatedly posed in his song, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone.” Seeger’s response is one for the books:

We will never know everything. But I think if we can learn within the next few decades to face the danger we all are in, I believe there will be tens of millions, maybe hundreds of millions, of human beings working wherever they are to do something good. I tell everybody a little parable about the “teaspoon brigades.” Imagine a big seesaw. One end of the seesaw is on the ground because it has a big basket half full of rocks in it. The other end of the seesaw is up in the air because it’s got a basket one quarter full of sand. Some of us have teaspoons and we are trying to fill it up. Most people are scoffing at us. They say, “People like you have been trying for thousands of years, but it is leaking out of that basket as fast as you are putting it in.” Our answer is that we are getting more people with teaspoons every day. And we believe that one of these days or years—who knows—that basket of sand is going to be so full that you are going to see that whole seesaw going zoop! in the other direction. Then people are going to say, “How did it happen so suddenly?” And we answer, “Us and our little teaspoons over thousands of years.” But I don’t think we have forever. I now believe that all technological societies tend to self-destruct. The reason is that the very things that make us a successful technological society, such as our curiosity, our ambition and determination, will also cause us to fall.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson corresponded for 13 years before they died on the same day. They asked, “How can one have prosperity without commerce? How can one have commerce without luxury? How can one have luxury without corruption? How can you have corruption without the end of the Republic?” And they really didn’t know the answer. Today I would ask, “How can one have a technological society without research? How can one have research without researching dangerous areas? How can one research dangerous areas without uncovering dangerous information? How can you uncover dangerous information without it falling into the hands of insane people who will sooner or later destroy the human race, if not the whole of life on earth?” Who knows? God only knows!

[The Seeger interview in its entirety is available at www.rutherford.org](http://www.rutherford.org) .