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POST POLITICS

## Happy Birthday, Pete Seeger

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Today is Pete Seeger's 93rd birthday.

What's an appropriate gift for the most influential folk artist of the 20th century? A few years ago some of Pete's fans launched a [campaign](#) to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is time to resurrect that effort.

No one can get a crowd singing like he can. The songs he has written, including the antiwar tunes "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?," "If I Had a Hammer," and "Turn, Turn, Turn" (whose text is drawn from Ecclesiastes), and those he has popularized, including "This Land Is Your Land," "Guantanamera," "Wimoweh," and "We Shall Overcome," have been recorded by hundreds of artists in many languages and have become global anthems for people fighting for freedom. His songs are sung by people in cities and villages around the world, promoting the basic idea that the hopes that unite us are greater than the fears that divide us.

In addition to being a much-acclaimed and innovative guitarist and banjoist, a globe-trotting minstrel and song collector, and the author of many songbooks and musical how-to manuals, Seeger has been on the front lines of every key progressive crusade during his lifetime -- labor unions and migrant workers in the 1930s and 1940s, the banning of nuclear weapons and opposition to the Cold War in the 1950s, civil rights and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s, environmental responsibility and opposition to South African apartheid in the 1970s, and, always, human rights throughout the world.

During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, two overlapping groups -- collectors of traditional songs and American progressives -- celebrated folk music and "people's music." Carl Sandburg, John Lomax, his son Alan Lomax, Lawrence Gellert, and other folklorists collected work songs, sea shanties, hillbilly songs, prison songs, African American and slave songs, and union songs. Progressives used songs not only to promote cross-cultural understanding and a sense of common humanity, but also to energize picket lines, enliven rallies, and galvanize labor unions and political campaigns. For example, the struggle by mine workers in Harlan County, Kentucky, inspired Florence Reese to write the labor classic "Which Side Are You On?"

The son of musicologists Charles and Ruth Seeger, Pete spent two years at Harvard, where he got involved in radical politics and helped start a student newspaper, the Harvard Progressive, but he quit in 1938 in order to try his own hand at changing society by making music. He worked at the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song (where he learned many of the songs he would sing throughout his career), traveled around with Woody Guthrie singing at migrant labor camps and union halls, and perfected his guitar- and banjo-playing skills.

In 1941, at age 22, Seeger formed the Almanac Singers with Lee Hays and Millard Lampell, later joined by Guthrie, Bess Lomax (daughter of musicologist John Lomax), and several others who rotated in and out of the group. The Almanacs drew on traditional songs and wrote their own songs to advance the cause of progressive groups, the Communist Party, the Congress of Industrial Organizations unions, the New Deal, and, later, the United States and its allies (including the Soviet Union) in the fight against fascism. The Almanacs were part of a broader upsurge of popular progressive culture during the New Deal, fostered in part by programs like the federal theater and writers' projects. Even so, the group was hounded by the FBI, got few bookings, and was dropped by its agent, the William Morris Agency. After Seeger and Guthrie joined the military, the group disbanded in 1943.

The Almanacs cultivated an image of being unpolished amateurs. Guthrie once said that the Almanacs "rehearsed on stage." Among them, however, Seeger was the most gifted and disciplined musician, with a remarkable repertoire of traditional songs. He carefully crafted a stage persona that inspired audiences to join him, a performing style that he perfected when he began working as a soloist. Every Seeger concert involves a lot of group singing.

Immediately after World War II, American radicals and liberals sought to resume popular support for progressive unions, civil rights, and internationalism. The left's folk-music wing hoped to build on its modest successes before and during the war. In 1946 Seeger led the effort to create People's Songs (an organization of progressive songwriters and performers, dominated by but not confined to folk musicians) and People's Artists (a booking agency to help the members of People's Songs get concert gigs and recording contracts). They compiled *The People's Song Book* (which included protest songs from around the world), sponsored a number of successful concerts, and organized chapters in several cities and on college campuses.

When Henry Wallace ran for president on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948, his campaign relied heavily on folk music. Seeger traveled with Wallace during the campaign, distributing song sheets at every meeting or rally so that sing-alongs, led by Seeger, could alternate with Wallace's speeches.

By 1949 folk music had become increasingly popular, with performers like Burl Ives, Josh White, and others gaining a foothold in popular culture, but the folk music of this period had lost much of its political edge.

For a brief period, as a member of the Weavers folk quartet, Seeger achieved commercial success, performing several chart-topping songs that reflected his eclectic repertoire. The group was formed in 1948 by Seeger and Hays (both former Almanacs), along with Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman. They exposed audiences to their repertoire of songs from around the world as well as to American folk traditions, but without the overt advocacy of left-wing political causes. Decca Records signed the Weavers to a recording contract and added orchestral arrangements and instruments to their music, a commercial expediency that rankled Seeger but delighted Hays. The Weavers performed in the nation's most prestigious nightclubs and appeared on network television shows.

In 1950 their recording of an Israeli song, "Tzena Tzena," reached number 2 on the pop charts, and their version of Lead Belly's "Goodnight, Irene," reached number 1 and stayed on the charts for half a year. Several of their recordings -- "On Top of Old Smokey," "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," the African song "Wimoweh," and "Midnight Special" -- also made the charts. Their 1951 recording of Guthrie's song "So Long It's Been Good to Know You," reached number 4.

But the Weavers' commercial success was short-lived. As soon as they began to be widely noticed in 1950, they were targeted by both private and government witch-hunters. The FBI and Congress escalated their investigations. Seeger and the Weavers were mentioned in *Red Channels* and *Counterattack*, the semi-official private guidebooks for the blacklist. A few performers, notably Josh White and Burl Ives, agreed to cooperate with the investigators and were able to resume their careers; others refused to do so, and some were blacklisted. The Weavers survived for another year with bookings and even TV shows, but finally the escalating Red Scare caught up with them. Their contract for a summer television show was canceled. They could no longer get bookings in the top nightclubs. Radio stations stopped playing their songs, and their records stopped selling. They never had another major hit record.

Seeger left the Weavers to pursue a solo career, but he was blacklisted from the early 1950s through the mid-1960s. In 1955 he was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to discuss his political affiliations at a hearing called by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, although he never spent time in jail. (The conviction was overturned on appeal in May 1962.) Many colleges and concert halls refused to book Seeger. He was kept off network television. In 1963 ABC refused to allow Seeger to appear on *Hootenanny*, which owed its existence to the folk music revival Seeger had helped inspire. During the blacklist years, Seeger scratched out a living by giving guitar and banjo lessons and singing at the small number of summer camps, churches, high schools and colleges, and union halls that were courageous enough to invite the controversial balladeer. In 1966, on New York City's nonprofit educational television station, he hosted a low-budget folk music program, *Rainbow Quest*, that gave exposure to many little-known country, bluegrass, and folk singers.

Eventually, however, Seeger's audience grew. In the 1960s he sang with civil rights workers at rallies and churches in the South and at the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. He popularized the song "We Shall Overcome" in the United States and during his concerts around the world. In a letter to Seeger, Martin Luther King Jr. thanked him for his "moral support and Christian generosity." In 1967 Tom and Dick Smothers defiantly invited Seeger onto their popular CBS television variety show, the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. True to his principles, Seeger insisted on singing a controversial antiwar song, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." CBS censors refused to air the song, but public outrage forced the network to relent and allow him to perform the song on the show a few months later.

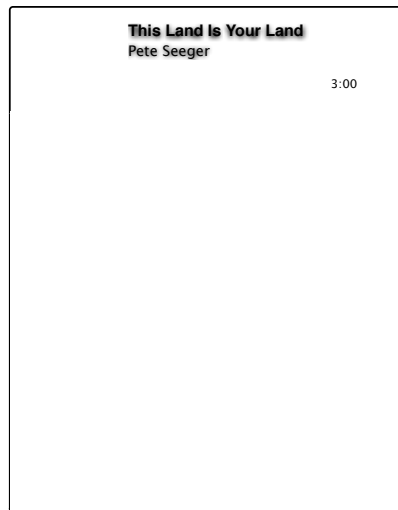
Seeger helped catalyze the folk music revival of the 1960s, encouraging young performers, helping start the Newport Folk Festival, and promoting the folk song magazine *Sing Out!* that he had helped launch. His book *How To Play the 5-String Banjo* taught thousands of baby boomers how to play this largely forgotten instrument. On stage, he always taught his audiences songs from around the world, often sung in their original languages, such as the South African song "Wimoweh" and the Cuban song "Guantanamera."

Many prominent musicians, including Bob Dylan, Bono, Joan Baez, the Byrds, Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks, Bonnie Raitt, Tom Morello, and Bruce Springsteen consider Seeger a role model and trace their musical roots to his influence. Many of his 80 albums -- which include children's songs, labor and protest songs, traditional American folk songs, international songs, and Christmas songs -- have reached wide audiences. His travels around the world -- collecting songs and performing in many languages -- inspired today's world music movement. Among performers around the globe, Seeger became a symbol of a principled artist deeply engaged in the world.

In 1969 Seeger launched the group Clearwater (near his home in Beacon, New York) and an annual celebration dedicated to cleaning up the polluted Hudson River, an effort that helped inspire the environmental movement.

Through persistence and unrelenting optimism, Seeger endured and overcame the controversies triggered by his activism. In 1994, at age 75, he received the National Medal of Arts (the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the US government) as well as a Kennedy Center Honor, when President Bill Clinton called him "an inconvenient artist, who dared to sing things as he saw them." In 1996 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame because of his influence on so many rock performers. In 1997 he won the Grammy Award for his eighteen-track compilation album, *Pete*. In the 21st century, some of the nation's most prominent singers recorded albums honoring Seeger, including Springsteen's *Seeger Sessions*. PBS broadcast a ninety-three-minute documentary on Seeger's life, *The Power of Song*.

On a cold afternoon on January 18, 2009, Pete Seeger stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial and sang "This Land Is Your Land" at a preinaugural celebration, with President-elect Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, sitting nearby on the platform, half a million people standing on the mall, and millions of people watching on television across the country and around the world. Defiantly, the 89-year-old Seeger sang two little-known stanzas of his friend Woody Guthrie's patriotic anthem -- one about Depression-era poverty, the other about trespassing on private property -- that reflect its author's, and Seeger's, radical political views.



In May 2009 more than 15,000 admirers filled New York City's Madison Square Garden for a concert honoring Seeger on his ninetieth birthday. The performers included Bruce Springsteen, Dave Matthews, Emmylou Harris, Joan Baez, Billy Bragg, Rufus Wainwright, Bela Fleck, Taj Mahal, Roger McGuinn, Steve Earle, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Dar Williams, Tom Morello, Ani DiFranco, and John Mellencamp. Seeger joined in on several numbers with his banjo and also led the crowd in singing "Goodnight, Irene" and an a cappella rendition of "Amazing Grace."

Every day, every minute, someone in the world is singing a Pete Seeger song.

What are remarkable life he's led! Happy Birthday, Pete!

**Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His new book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, will be published next month by Nation Books. Pete Seeger is one of the individuals profiled in the book.**

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