

American folksinger Pete Seeger dead, at 94

David Walsh
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American folksinger and songwriter Pete Seeger died on Monday at New York Presbyterian Hospital, after a short illness, at the age of 94. In a career that lasted almost three quarters of a century, Seeger wrote, co-wrote or was identified with a number of the most popular folk or protest songs of the second half of the twentieth century, including “If I Had a Hammer,” “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season),” “Where Have all the Flowers Gone?,” “Goodnight, Irene,” “Guantanamera” and “Kisses Sweeter than Wine.”

A member of the Communist Party from 1936 until the late 1940s, Seeger was blacklisted in the early 1950s and indicted in 1957 for contempt of Congress because he refused to “name names.” In his political views, the singer never went beyond populist radicalism, but this has a great deal to do with the dominance of Stalinism on the American left during his youth and middle age.

Seeger’s death has generated a flood of eulogies in the media, from some of the same sources that endorsed, or remained silent about, his blacklisting and persecution in the 1950s. The singer was recognized decades ago by the establishment and lionized as “the grand old man of American folk music.” President Bill Clinton presented him with the National Medal of Arts in 1994, the same year Seeger received a Kennedy Center Honor. He sang at Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009, and, after the singer’s death this week, NSA-president Obama issued a hypocritical statement lauding Seeger, a man who was hounded for years by FBI spies for his political convictions.

At the same time, Seeger’s passing has occasioned a genuine outpouring of sympathy and sadness from those familiar with his life and work. His music, along with his obvious sincerity and principles, touched and affected a great number of human beings.

When I interviewed folksinger Dave Van Ronk in 1998 and asked about Seeger, he replied, “Oh, he’s a wonderful musician. He’s another guy who has been shortchanged as a musician. He’s a very good musician and a very good singer. He phrases well. What am I supposed to say about the guy who invented my profession?”

Peter Seeger was born in 1919 into a highly intellectual and musical family, with “Yankee Protestant” roots. His father, Charles Seeger, was a Harvard University-trained composer and musicologist, who developed left-wing views, including sympathy for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and was essentially fired from the University of California in Berkeley for his vocal opposition to World War I.

Seeger’s mother, Constance de Clyver Edson, studied at the Paris Conservatory of Music and was a talented violinist, who later taught at the Julliard School. According to David King Dunaway, in *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (1990), “Classical music dominated her life. She communicated through her violin.” His parents divorced when Seeger was very young, and in 1932 his father remarried. Seeger’s stepmother was Ruth Crawford Seeger, a well-known modernist composer.

Seeger began attending Harvard on a scholarship in 1936 (John F. Kennedy was a classmate), but dropped out after his second year, dissatisfied with the cynical atmosphere and restless in the face of the Depression and the threatening events in Europe. While at Harvard, he

joined the Young Communist League (his father had also become sympathetic to the Communist Party).

By this time, Seeger was playing the banjo. Just before he entered Harvard, Seeger attended, along with his father, the Folk Song and Dance Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. Writes Allan M. Winkler in *“To Everything There is a Season”: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (2010), “Pete was entranced: ‘I discovered there was some good music in my country which I never heard on the radio.... The words of the songs had some meat in them.’”

Through his father, Seeger met Alan Lomax, the renowned collector of folk music who had recorded Huddie Ledbetter (“Lead Belly”) and Woody Guthrie, among others. Winkler explains further, “Lomax introduced him to people like Aunt Molly Jackson, a folksinger married to an Appalachian coal miner.... He [Seeger] was captivated.” Lomax hired Seeger to work with him at the Archive of American Folk Song and provided him with the first opportunity to sing in public, at a benefit concert for migrant farmworkers, in March 1940. At that concert, Seeger also made the acquaintance of Guthrie, and the pair became fast friends.

On the eve of World War II, Seeger, Guthrie, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell formed the Almanac Singers, who performed mostly at Communist Party-sponsored events and union meetings. Their biggest success was “Talking Union,” which they recorded in 1941. Once the US entered World War II, and the Stalinist Communist Party became the most fervent enforcer of the no-strike pledge, Seeger explained later, “I stopped singing ‘Talking Union.’”

After his discharge from the military, Seeger, along with Lomax, Hays and others, launched People’s Songs in December 1945, an organization created “to make and send songs of labor and the American people through the land.” After some initial success, the organization, which threw its resources into the left-liberal, Stalinist-supported Henry Wallace for President campaign in 1948, came under political and financial pressure as the anti-communist witch-hunting began, and folded in 1950.

One of Seeger’s great disappointments at the time, which reveals his naïveté and lack of a grasp of the social dynamics of the day (failings shared by many in and around the Stalinist milieu), was the refusal of the unions, who were in the process of turning sharply to the right, to support the group. For its part, the FBI, writes Winkler, carried out intense surveillance from 1947 of People’s Songs, “tapping phones, collecting documents, and infiltrating meetings.”

One of the telling incidents of this period, which seems to have had a long-term, demoralizing impact on Seeger and others (and also, notes Winkler, “had a chilling effect on audiences”), was the violent, police-sanctioned attack by ultra-right forces on two concerts in August and September 1949 in Peekskill, New York, at which Paul Robeson, the great African American singer identified with the Communist Party, was the star performer.

A racist, anti-communist mob, organized by the local Ku Klux Klan with the help of the local police, and—one has good reason to suspect—infiltrated and incited by federal agents, prevented the first concert from taking place on August 27. At the rescheduled event, on September 4, 2,000 union members from New York City stood guard to

protect the crowd of 25,000 from the fascist demonstrators. Seeger performed a few numbers before Robeson, and the concert went off peacefully. However, the right-wing mob, protected and positioned by police, lay in wait for audience members along a stretch of road and hurled large rocks at the automobiles leaving the event, including one carrying Seeger, his wife and three-year-old son. His car was struck by 15 rocks over the course of two miles, “smashing nearly every window.”

In 1948, Seeger, Hays, Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman formed The Weavers, “a more polished and better rehearsed version of the Almanac Singers” (Winkler), named after Gerhart Hauptmann’s 1892 naturalistic drama. They had a great success with “Goodnight, Irene,” in 1950, recorded for Decca Records. The song stayed at number one on the charts for 13 weeks. The Weavers had further hits for Decca, which sold 4 million of their records over a two-year period, including “On Top of Old Smoky,” “Kisses Sweeter than Wine,” and Guthrie’s “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You.”

Although the group steered clear of association with left-wing causes or songs, the Red Scare eventually caught up with them, when an FBI informant identified Seeger and Hays as CP members.

In 1950, the scurrilous anti-communist booklet *Red Channels* appeared, which identified various performers in the entertainment industry as “reds.” Seeger’s name appeared in the publication 13 times. The Weavers began finding shows and concerts cancelled and the work drying up. “It grew worse in February 1952, when an FBI informer... testified before HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] about the Weavers’ Communist connections” (Winkler). The group, which even disbanded for a time, was blacklisted for three years. They reunited for a concert at Carnegie Hall in December 1955, which was a resounding success.

In August 1955, Seeger received a subpoena demanding his appearance before HUAC. At his hearing on August 18, the singer acted quite courageously, refusing to invoke the Fifth Amendment (against self-incrimination), as so many had, and instead refused to name names or discuss his own political history on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment, protecting free speech.

In response to the Committee’s intrusive questions, Seeger responded: “I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this. I would be very glad to tell you my life if you want to hear of it.”

The singer was indicted for contempt of Congress in March 1957, and convicted in a trial in March 1961. Seeger was sentenced to 10 years in prison, to be served consecutively, but in May 1962, an appeals court threw out the original indictment on a technicality. The blacklists and purging of left-wing elements had already served their purpose; the ruling class had moved on.

As Dave Van Ronk’s comment indicated, Seeger was a key figure in the folk music revival of the early 1960s, as a younger generation, after the deadening atmosphere of the McCarthyite years had lifted, sought to make contact, with varying degrees of seriousness, with more radical and authentic popular traditions. Seeger and Hays’s “If I Had a Hammer” enjoyed considerable success in a version by Peter, Paul and Mary. The Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul and Mary and Marlene Dietrich were among those who recorded versions of “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” at the time.

Seeger involved himself in the civil rights movement, traveling south, meeting Martin Luther King Jr. and participating in various protests. His version of “We Shall Overcome” became one of the anthems of that struggle. He also participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement, penning “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” an allegorical song, obviously referring to President Lyndon Johnson as the “big fool” who “said to push on,”

deeper and deeper into disaster. In September 1967, controversy arose when CBS suppressed his performance of the song on the “Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour” (his first performance on network television since 1950). There was such public outrage that Seeger was brought back to sing “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” on an episode of the program that aired in February 1968.

The events at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 remain controversial. When Bob Dylan, who once described Seeger as “a living saint,” performed with electrical instruments in a manner that apparently obscured the lyrics, Seeger rushed over to the soundman and—he claimed later—told him, “Fix the sound so you can hear the words!” When told that “this is the way they want it,” Seeger replied, “If I had an axe, I’d cut the cable right now.” He later asserted that he had no objection to Dylan’s “electric songs” and that “Electric music is the vernacular of the second half of the twentieth century.”

Seeger subsequently devoted himself to environmental issues, particularly the clean-up of the Hudson River. He continued to perform and record, and as noted, he fully “came in from the cold” in October 1994, when he was presented the National Medal of the Arts by Clinton at a ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House. Seven weeks later, Seeger was one of five recipients of the Kennedy Center Honor. He remained an opponent, however, of American imperialism’s wars, in Iraq and elsewhere. And in 1995, Seeger told an interviewer, “I still call myself a communist, because communism is no more what Russia made of it than Christianity is what the churches make of it.”

Pete Seeger’s music

I asked WWSW critics Hiram Lee and Paul Bond to comment on Seeger’s musical achievements. Here are their comments, with which I generally concur.

Hiram Lee:

“Pete Seeger had a beautiful singing voice, warm, clear and ringing. While not quite a virtuoso on the instrument, he was also an accomplished banjo player in various ‘old time’ picking styles (as opposed to the three-finger rolling technique of Bluegrass music). As a player his tendency was to stay close to the melody of whichever tune he was performing. He favored full and clearly defined chord shapes and changes, rather than the droning and percussive qualities of the instrument brought out by many of the ‘old time’ musicians he admired.

“Seeger was also an important teacher of the instrument. He literally wrote the book on playing the banjo, with his influential text book *How to Play the Five-String Banjo* (1948). In it, he coined the terms ‘hammer-on’ and ‘pull-off,’ which have entered into standard usage as descriptions of fingering techniques associated with a variety of stringed instruments.

“I think Seeger’s 1963 album *We Shall Overcome*, a recording of his June 8, 1963, concert at Carnegie Hall is perhaps his best and most essential recording. It’s a lovely performance. Seeger seems especially open and relaxed, having fun much of the time. His opposition to racism, to war, to official life, and his determination that ordinary people can fight successfully against all that, are also deeply felt here and deeply felt *in the music*, most importantly.

“Along with this, I think *American Industrial Ballads* from 1956 is among his more significant albums. It features a passionate performance of ‘The Death of Harry Simms,’ a ballad telling the story of a labor organizer murdered by a coal company thug in 1932 in Harlan County, Kentucky.

“Seeger was a musicologist and an educator. I think, at its weakest, his music becomes too pedagogical. The importance with which he presents a

song is not always felt in the music. There are some performances that feel dry and academic. But listen to him really cut loose and have fun in his engaging and entertaining performance of ‘Whiskey, Rye Whiskey,’ from the *American Favorite Ballads* series and you will see the difference.”

Paul Bond comments:

“Pete Seeger was certainly a gifted musician, who had had some serious ethnomusicological background at home from both parents and his stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger. This had a certain radical political bent, with the turn to a ‘people’s’ music. The Communist Party embraced folk music from the mid-1930s, and there was already a tradition of union, political and radical songwriting, most associated with the IWW.

“Seeger’s musical style was certainly shaped by this background, as well as by his own take on such music. His recordings of historic American industrial songs like ‘Peg and Awl’ do stand up, although the political limitations become more apparent in the case of his own material.

“He was ever attentive to the global influences that had fed America’s musical life, as well as the riches of traditional music from around the world. He tried to make the songs accessible and performable to all, but that deceptively simple feel belies the sophistication of his singing and playing.

“He sought constantly to popularise participation. He was instrumental in popularising the five-string banjo in a long-necked version. Some critics have talked about this as a ‘gentrification’ of rural banjo accompaniment styles, but it was perfectly suited to his style overall. His take on traditional music was to encourage mass participation. He had a genuine warmth in performance: Dave Van Ronk pointed out that ‘with every thousand people they added, he’d get better.’

“On record this sometimes does not transcend the limitations of the material, and he can occasionally sound moralisingly earnest.

“On the other hand, his better qualities come across, for example, in his setting of the Turkish Communist poet Nazim Hikmet’s Hiroshima tribute ‘I Come and Stand at Every Door.’ Seeger set this to a tune written for the Scottish ballad ‘The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry,’ and it was an affecting and inspired choice.

“He also encouraged people to make their own music. Alongside his promotion of the banjo, he also wrote an influential guide to playing the guitar.”

An assessment

By all accounts, Pete Seeger was a decent and approachable man. There was an element of deep sincerity in his music and the way he sang. He had an attractive persona, and developed a wide international following. What he sang and what he did mattered to people, affected them. At his best, as Hiram Lee suggests, his music embodied his ideals, a sense of struggle and a sense of the possibilities of life.

Seeger came out of a tradition of genuine American populist radicalism, going back for generations. Speaking of his family background, he wrote in 1957, “Great-great grandpa Seeger got disgusted with Prussian tyranny, came to America and was an ardent Jeffersonian. Refused to teach any of his sons the German language even. Went around New England orating for the new Republican-Democratic party (in between making his living as a doctor). Another branch of the family were all fervent abolitionists about one generation later” (*Pete Seeger: In His Own Words*, 2012).

Many American radicals, including many “Yankee Protestants,” turned to the left under the influence of the Russian Revolution and, of course, the devastating impact of the Great Depression. The greatest tragedy of

Seeger’s life, as of so many, was the growth of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and its grotesque betrayals of and crimes against the international working class. Seeger was hardly alone in his shameful wishful thinking about the Stalinist regime and Soviet “socialism.” He later “apologized” for his misconceptions about Stalin.

The American Stalinists embedded themselves in the native populist radicalism, misused it, exploited it, misdirected it, and cynically handed it over to Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, along with the nascent trade union bureaucracy in the CIO. The results of the Popular Front-style subordination of the working class to the Democrats and bourgeois politics, which Seeger and so many others promoted, have been disastrous. Workers are paying an enormously heavy price today for the failure to establish their political independence.

However, Seeger was first and foremost a musician, not a politician. To a large extent, popular musicians work within the framework provided for them by the conditions of the time.

Elements of his appearance and performance style could be galling: the eternally rolled-up sleeves, for example, and the sometimes unnecessarily “plain” speech. They suggest a “workerism” that strikes one as self-conscious or contrived. I don’t believe, however, that at its heart this was fakery or charlatanry.

These irritating elements spoke, in my view, to much larger problems created, above all, by the dominance of Stalinism. The period before and after the Russian Revolution represented, to a certain extent, the coming together of the most advanced politics and the most advanced art. The Stalinist bureaucracy, to defend its national-privileged existence, was obliged to make war on both.

The counter-revolutionary bureaucracy’s version of “proletarian culture” and, later, its “socialist realism” were not aimed, as they are often presented, at depicting—even in a rough, “second-rate” fashion—the life and conditions of the proletariat. On the contrary, they were intended to stifle critical thought and opposition, and *actively suppress*, by means of trite formulae, insincerity, adulation of the ‘great leader,’ etc., *any genuine artistic concern* with the fate of the masses of the people.

The various Stalinist “theories” had the damaging impact as well of convincing many sincere left-wing artists and intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s that they had to censor themselves, that they should only permit themselves to portray the immediate state of the poor and oppressed, and not—like the great novelists and artists of the nineteenth century—the complex conditions, thoughts and feelings of, and relations between, all the social classes and layers.

Seeger came from a rich background in classical music. He chose a different artistic course, equally legitimate—but why this lifelong, ostentatious denial of that heritage? He refers obliquely to this, although not from the point of view of his art, in his 1957 autobiographical comment: “I have spent much of my youth trying to forget my antecedents. I confess it. I tried to ignore them, to disparage them. I felt they were all upper-class, and I was trying to identify myself with the working people.”

Hence, in my view, the artificial, somewhat contrived “proletarian” image he projected and cultivated.

Despite his limitations, there is a great deal of enduring value in Seeger’s music. For every somewhat over-earnest and simplistic, or politically straitjacketed, performance, there is one—or more than one—of remarkable honesty and beauty. Many videos of Seeger performing, alone or with others, are available online.

I don’t believe anyone could challenge the intense sincerity of his version of “Michael Row the Boat Ashore” in Melbourne in 1963, or his appearance on the Johnny Cash show in 1970. Or the extraordinary appearance (52 minutes long), for that matter, of Cash and June Carter on Seeger’s own short-lived black-and-white television program, “Rainbow Quest,” in 1966. Or Seeger’s duet with Donovan on “Colours,” or his

rendition of “Down by the Riverside” with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, or Seeger and Doc Watson singing “Lonesome Valley.” And many, many more.

One way of measuring the crisis of contemporary popular music in America is to ask: What figure comparable to Seeger has emerged in the last three or four decades? His ideals and concerns were simply no longer part of the musical scene. Of course, the nature of the artistic and musical tasks today is very different, more complex, and what has occurred in life and in various musical genres cannot be ignored or bypassed.

However, if it is to correspond in a rich and meaningful fashion to our present reality, no body of music can do without the integrity, artfulness and determination to base oneself on the mass of the people that Seeger brought to his life’s work.



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