

Keeping the Faith

After forty years of folk singing, Pete Seeger is still asking, "When will they ever learn?"

By Tom Chaffin

"I can't—it's against my principle," says Pete Seeger, the forced smile behind his graying beard not quite masking his irritation.

"Ah, come on," says the photographer, clicking away. "Relax!"

Seeger hates this sort of thing, but a promise is a promise; so he stands, banjo in hand, straight as a cadet, ill at ease. Tall, tanned, still thin as a young birch at sixty-two, resplendent in jeans, mismatched socks, and a bright T-shirt, he dutifully poses behind the stage where he'd been singing moments before.

"Just a few more, Mr. Seeger . . . Just a few more . . . Now, hold it . . . OK . . . One more like that . . . Smile."

"That's enough," says Seeger, and he walks off—only to be stopped a few paces away by reporters. Patiently, he answers their questions, more uncomfortable with each moment.

Then something happens: more people gather. This is no longer a press conference but an audience. "We've got cooking work. We've got publicity work. We got writing work, picture work, singing work," says Seeger, now buoyant as he seizes the opportunity to plug for the *Clearwater*, the sloop he and a few friends built ten years ago and around which they organized efforts to clean up the Hudson River. "We got sailing work. There was an old navy man—almost as old as I am. He dropped down and asked, 'Need some help?' Somebody found that he's great at splicing rope. Now he splices every rope we need spliced. There's a lot of work to be done here."

Thinking now about his getaway, Seeger pauses, catches his breath, and concludes, "There's so many jobs that need to be worked on. There's so many jobs that need to be done that, *honest to gosh*, I hope some of you will get involved!" He pauses again, and the audi-

ence applauds, freeing him to walk away to a nearby cabin, where he will close the door and relax for the first time this afternoon.

It is the fourth annual Hudson River Revival Festival—this year held in a sprawling state park tucked between the wide river and the tiny railroad town of Croton-on-Hudson, just above New York City. A few minutes before, the Weavers—the folk-revival quartet Seeger has worked with off and on since 1949—performed its final concert in a yearlong reunion. During the two-day festival, which lends support to the *Clearwater* and its conservation efforts, Seeger will spend much of his time, when not performing, talking with old friends, touring the booths set up by activists and artisans, and avoiding the reporters sprinkled among the thousands here this weekend.

Late in the day, I catch up with Seeger as he inspects an exhibit of custom-made wooden boats. His answers to my questions are mostly set-pieces, platitudes celebrating the dawning of a new day and the richness of American pluralism: "You know people don't use the term 'melting pot' like they did fifty years ago. They know this is an unmelted pot—and hooray!"

It is classic Seeger—a display of the left-wing Rotarianism, the unbridled faith that has made him for more than forty years a sort of Don Quixote of the American Left. Finally, I ask him if there is a dark side, a cynical side, even a nihilistic side, to this optimism.

"Oh sure," he says. "And some people don't like a lot of my songs because they tease too much. I don't know if you'd call them cynical. But to a certain extent, a lot of humorous songs contain a certain element of—you could say—cynicism. Like 'A Hole in the Bucket.'"

"'A Hole in the Bucket'?"

"Yeah. You know"—he proceeds to sing—"There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza/There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, there's a hole. . . ."

Several days later, Seeger and I are picking raspberries for breakfast in the patch that lies below his mountain cabin overlooking the Hudson River town of Beacon, sixty miles above New York City.

"I have to guard against moving too quickly from one area to another," Seeger says. "Toshi's very well disciplined. She picks one area clean and then she moves on. And because of her discipline, we do a good job when we pick strawberries for the annual *Clearwater* Strawberry Shortcake Festival."

As we harvest, talk turns to journalism, to Seeger's aversion to the cult of personality—"There's already been far too many stories on me"—and to a feature he still misses: "There was something *Reader's Digest* used to do regularly . . . and I've often wondered why they discontinued it. Maybe it was basically *too* darned democratic. That was a series called 'My Most Unforgettable Character.' They'd take some otherwise completely unknown person and tell why he or she was an extraordinary human being.

"And I think that was *great*. Every magazine should do this. Make a point that this is a rank-and-file-type person. Most magazines don't want to do it that way. They want to say: 'Well, they were unknown, but they were really great, and now we've made 'em a star.' I read a lot of these magazines just to see what the enemy is up to. And when I say the enemy, I mean the spirit of selfishness that lives in every one of us. And which is unfortunately encouraged in all too many schools.

"*Oh*, it really pissed me off when I saw an advertisement in a New York subway. It had a picture of a bright, young, high-school graduating class, all looking very smart. The heading was, 'Look at your competition. You'd better not drop out of school.' The reason not to drop out of school was that you'll be licked in the race for jobs. Instead of saying, 'Look at your cooperation,' they were

Seeger at the Hudson River Revival Festival: "All my life I've loved to sing, to make a racket. I suppose I was show-offish."



“When the world can’t change you, then you can change the world.”

saying, ‘Look at your competition.’ ”

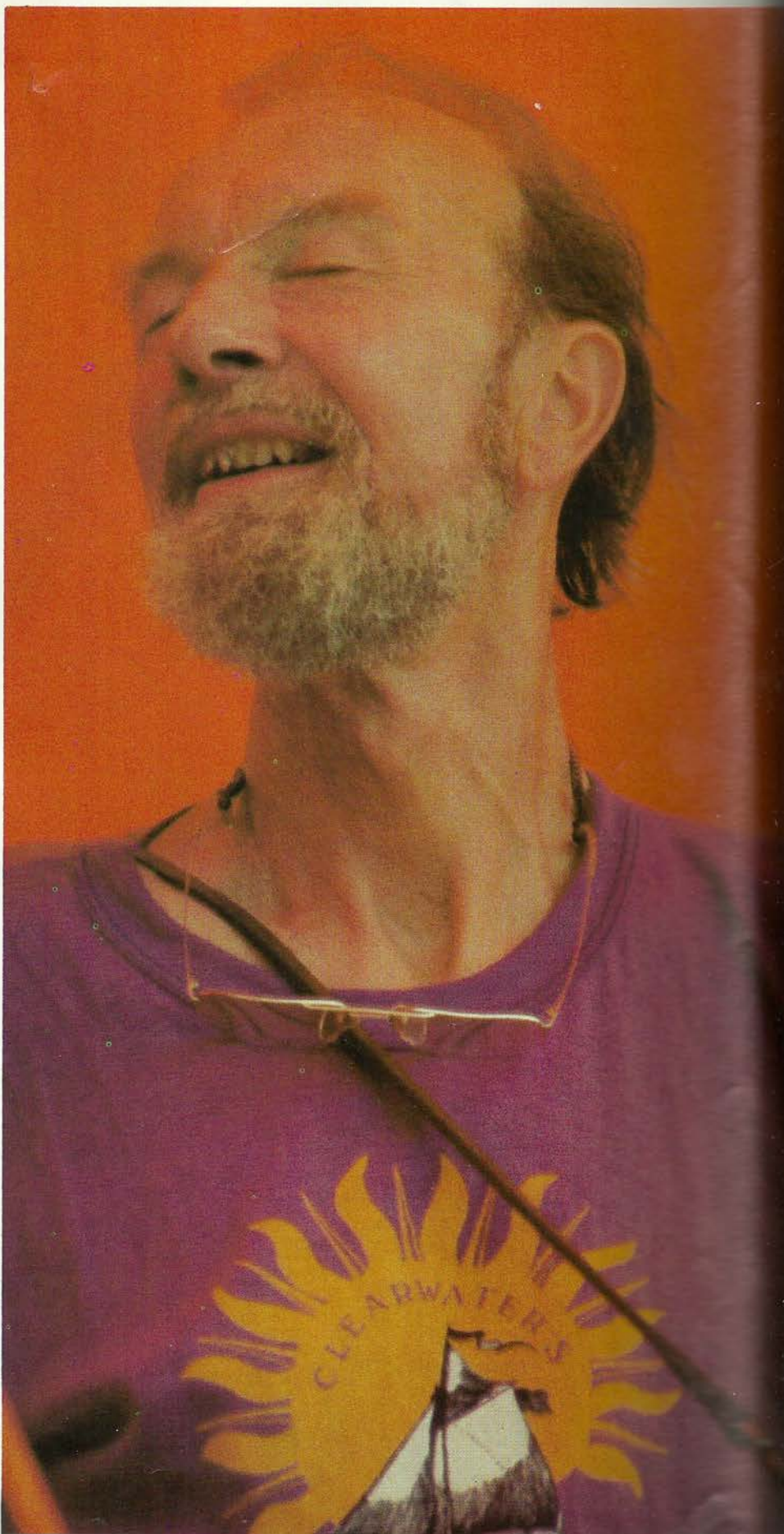
Over breakfast, this brings to mind a trip from the fifties: “Toshi and I drove out to meet the Weavers in Las Vegas, and we passed through villages where people lived who hardly saw \$100 from Christmas to Christmas. Their diet was a little beans and rice, and they made their houses out of mud—went barefoot except in the very worst weather. Then we emerged over the crest of a hill, and there was Las Vegas spread out on the floor of the valley, and the lights made it look like a handful of diamonds flung out on a black carpet.

“We went down there and saw a group of friends we knew, with glazed eyes, pushing \$1,000 back and forth across the table.” Seeger pauses, as if taking a step back from the image. “It was just too *unreal*, so *immoral!*” Matter-of-factly, he continues, “But we sang there for a couple of weeks, and I guess it was a worthwhile experience. Lee Hays [of the Weavers] used to say, quoting the old Communist poet Walter Lowenfels, that ‘everything is grist for the writer’s mill.’ Lee and I would just look at each other and say, *grist*. Then he’d say, ‘But where do you start shoveling when it’s up to your neck?’ ”

This innocent abroad got his decidedly unproletariat start in this world of sinners in New York City in 1919. His father, Charles, was a Harvard-trained musicologist; his mother, Constance, was a concert violinist. Charles Seeger’s family had made a small fortune in Mexican sugar refining and claimed a Mayflower Compact pedigree. Constance grew up in Tunisia and Paris and came from good Philadelphia stock. Charles Seeger had become a convert to socialism in Berkeley at age twenty-five; by the outbreak of World War I, he was too old to be drafted but, as an act of conscience, insisted on registering—as a conscientious objector.

Not finding steady work—in part because of Charles Seeger’s radicalism—the family moved frequently: Patterson, New Jersey; upstate New York; New York City. By 1927, when Charles and Constance divorced, Charles, along with the rest of the American Left, had been swept by a new interest—folk music. When Charles Seeger married the avant-garde composer Ruth Crawford in 1932, he had little

Seeger does a dozen or so big commercial concerts a year. These and song royalties pay the bills and free him to do benefits.



trouble infecting her with his new interest. Although Pete Seeger was growing up in exclusive boarding schools, he saw family at Christmas, Easter, and summers. In their home, his own growing interest in folk music and the banjo was nourished, ultimately leading him to abandon his long-standing ambition to become a journalist. He dropped out of Harvard his first year, leaving behind John F. Kennedy and the rest of the class of 1940.

In 1941, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie enlisted singers Lee Hays and Mill Lampell and christened themselves the Almanac Singers. With a repertory of political and traditional songs, the group earned a recording contract and modest commercial success. Setting a pattern that would become familiar, the group's ascent was halted by FBI harassment and blacklisting; in 1942, Seeger was drafted.

Returning home from the war and the island of Saipan—where he worked on entertainment at the army hospital—Seeger plunged into a new project: People's Songs, Inc. The leftist talent agency promoted, published, and booked folk music. Seeger soon drifted away from the agency, preoccupied with performing.

During the stateside term of his army hitch, Seeger married Toshi Ohta, a dark-haired, half-Japanese woman almost a foot shorter and three years younger than he. She'd grown up in Woodstock, New York, and met Seeger through New York City folk-dance circles. A formidable woman, possessed of a devilish sense of humor ("I don't know why you want to ask Peter all those questions. I've been hearing the answers thirty years. It's just one big cliché."), Toshi today invests her energy in family and the array of projects for which she is organizer and sustainer—music festivals, recycling stations, the *Clearwater*, Pete Seeger.

The late Lee Hays of the Weavers said, "I don't see how he could carry out any of his numerous projects if she wasn't there to pick up the pieces. Both Toshi and Harold Leventhal [Seeger's manager] have a full-time job keeping Peter on the track."

"Self-reliance." "Stick-to-it-iveness." "Let's buckle down and *do* something about the problem." Such phrases run through Seeger's speech like some secular liturgy of his New England Yankee Puritan heritage.

"Yeah, probably so. I'm kidded about it a lot," he says of that ancestry. "I would tend to agree with the reason Lincoln never joined a church. He said if he could find a church



Singing for the Hudson River: "We want to organize an annual swim across the Hudson—like it to be like the Boston Marathon. . . ."

which simply put the Golden Rule above the door, he'd join it. But even that wouldn't work. You know, Shaw said the Golden Rule's not really dependable: How do you know the other person wants done unto him what you want done unto you?"

Seeger's best work—songs like "If I Had a Hammer," "Old Devil Time," even "Talking Union"—rings with old-fashioned Protestant millennialism. "This has been true of a lot of grassroots revolutionary work," he says. "It's a weakness in some ways. I was criticized for this back when I was a teenager, for millennial philosophy—thinking that everything's gonna be hunky-dory all of a sudden. I quite consciously try to work against this. I used to introduce 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder' as a much more truthful account of things, an endless ladder you take one rung at a time."

He likes to tell this story: "There was a young pacifist at midnight in Times Square with a peace sign. They were having a Quaker peace vigil there way back in the fifties. A second guy stops and says, 'Do you really think you're going to change the world by standing here at midnight with this damned sign?' The young fella says, 'Oh, I suppose not—but I'm gonna make sure it doesn't change me.'

"I relayed this story all through the fifties and sixties and seventies. I told it to a poet in Vietnam once, and he smiled and said, 'Yes, when the world can't change you, then you can change the world.'"

It is one of his better set-pieces, testimony to what one critic called Seeger's "breathtaking naiveté." There's more, though: catacombs of

darker vision. "I'd say Peter thinks there's less than one chance in ten that mankind can survive more than another hundred years," says one friend. "So he puts all of his efforts into that one chance in ten."

"Everybody's like a two-sided coin, and he's more so than most," said Hays. "Everybody's entitled to his dark side. I've known him for forty-one years now, and the side he shows to me is invariably the bright side—and that's the side that does the work."

Seeger's work ranges from the quotidian chores of mountain life—chopping wood, clearing vines, picking berries—to the public responsibilities of his musical and activist careers. The *Clearwater* was part of the latter. He got the idea in 1967 after reading *Sloops of the Hudson*, a turn-of-the-century volume lent to him by a friend. Seeger was fascinated by pictures of the sloops that once regularly plied the Hudson, and decided that if he and his neighbors could build and sail such a vessel, it would be a great way to get people interested in using and cleaning up the Hudson.

"I think the *Clearwater* taught me a lesson in how important it is to work in your own community," he says. "After twelve years of the *Clearwater* and our Strawberry Shortcake Festival, our town voted to put in a million-dollar park down by the river. I can now say that power comes out of the door of an oven. It broke down the resistance—even of the Birchers. They like strawberry shortcake, too."

Seeger himself tells the parable of the sower to explain his role in these projects, and it's a running joke among his friends that he sows more seeds than he could ever personally cultivate. Said Hays, "He has complained to me that he has too many great ideas and not enough people to carry them out."

“If they couldn’t put me behind barbed wire, they would put me under house arrest.”

Late one afternoon, we are in the riverside park at the Beacon shore. Seeger points to a pile of rotting seaweed three feet-high on the bank: “When we gathered that seaweed from the river one morning, that pile was this high. What we’re gonna do is give it a few more weeks to rot, then get all the local gardeners down here, and we’ll have a seaweed mulch-pile workshop.”

On another day, we are leaving his manager’s office in New York and Seeger notices a copy of the *New York Times Magazine* lying on a couch. The issue features a cover story on Tin Pan Alley music. “You know what I’ve been thinking about,” he says, picking up the magazine. “We ought to have a workshop on Tin Pan Alley music. We’ll call it, ‘In the Twenty-first Century, They’ll Call Them Folk Songs.’ And what we really ought to do is get Irving Berlin to come down from his Catskill Mountains home and lead it.”

One of Seeger’s more bizarre plans calls for the United Nations, that cathedral of an earlier liberal faith, to distribute temporarily deactivated nuclear bombs to every nation on earth. The UN would then go on worldwide television with the existential choice: “‘We’re ready to hook these bombs up now,’” as Seeger puts it, “‘or we’ll take them apart—which shall it be?’” Seeger has no doubt as to how the world would answer. “And after they’ve taken the bombs apart and put the uranium back in the ground where it belongs, we’d put exhibits all over the world to commemorate the event. We’d call it ‘The International Museum of the Beginning of the End of the Age of Fear.’”

It is the central paradox of his celebrity that Seeger condemns the “cult of personality,” yet realizes it is his most potent weapon in furthering his political ends. The decision to embrace celebrity was deliberate. One afternoon in 1948, a call from the American Labor Party came into the offices of People’s Songs. The organization wanted to book folk singer Richard Dyer-Bennett for a benefit.

“Perhaps I can help you get him,” said the People’s Songs agent. “But in case he can’t make it, how about getting Pete to do it?”

The ALP organizer was not enthusiastic: “Oh, we know Pete. He’s sung on our sound truck for years. We need someone who can bring a mass audience. We need to raise money.”

It was a moment for pause, Seeger says: “I looked at myself in the mirror that night and

realized, here I was, I’d been knocking myself out for the ALP for three or four years, and I was not as much use to them as Bennett, who had gone out to build a career with a capital C. I’d been patting myself on the back and saying, ‘I’m gonna stay pure, I’m not going to go in for all that phony career business,’ but I was not as much use to the people I wanted to help. I decided to go in for publicity and all those things. Toshi took a photograph of me here with a big smile on my face, and we sent out hundreds of pictures all over the country.”

In 1949 Seeger joined Lee Hays, Ronnie Gilbert, and Fred Hellerman in a quartet they called the Weavers. The group had a few successes; “Goodnight Irene” became a number-one hit. But the Weavers’ star would fall as abruptly as the Almanacs’: within three years after their first record, FBI-backed blacklisting had frozen the group out.

In 1956, Seeger’s refusal to name names—coupled with his refusal to plead the Fifth Amendment—before the House Un-American Activities Committee brought him contempt citations. In 1961, charges resulting from the citations drew a one-year prison sentence. In 1962, six years after his appearance before HUAC, a federal court of appeals ruled Seeger’s indictment was improper and overturned the conviction.

Seeger did not serve any of the prison sentence. But the controversy surrounding the Weavers and the legal limbo of the contempt charges cast a long shadow over his career during the 1950s and into the 1960s. His first network television work would not come until 1967—a famous, censored appearance on CBS’s “Smothers Brothers’ Comedy Hour.”

Looking back, Seeger reveals little bitterness. “When the Weavers quit, I could have gone right back to leading a modest, unnotorious life. I got a job as a school teacher. I could sing at summer camps and so on, and that seemed fine.”

In 1953, after an invitation to sing at Oberlin, Seeger developed a circuit of small, liberal-arts colleges. “See, the object of the blacklisters was to put me in a corner and keep me there. If they couldn’t keep me behind barbed wire, they would, in effect, keep me under house arrest. So I decided, nope—I’m not going to give them the pleasure. Much though I like singing for little left-wing parties in New York and singing for kids in summer camp, I was going out and see if I could get bigger audiences across the country.

“Only by the end of the 1950s was I able to sing at the bigger, state-run universities, because the American Legion would get in there and make a big stink if I was going to sing at a big state college . . . It was a matter of pushing back the blacklist inch by inch.”

Late in the afternoon, seated on a rock outcrop just off the gravel road that leads to the cabin, Seeger is talking songcraft: “I’d had the line ‘long time passing’ in the back of my mind for several years. That’s a good phrase—‘long time passing.’ That sings well. But I didn’t know where to use it. I copied out the lyrics: ‘Where are the flowers? The girls have plucked them. Where are the girls? They’ve taken husbands. Where are the men? They’re all in the army.’ I was trying to figure out how to make a song out of it. All of a sudden the last line popped out to me: ‘When will they ever learn?’ It’s a typical complaint of intellectuals. In twenty minutes, I had the whole song. I fiddled with it, changing a line here, a line there, for a day or so, and it was set.

“I rarely have written a song that didn’t borrow a melody or an idea from somewhere else. Somebody wanted to put out a songbook of songs I had written, and I had an idea for a title. I said I’d call it *The Songwriter as a Joiner*. This is a pun in a sense: Beethoven said, ‘I am a joiner,’ implying that he puts together notes and instruments like a cabinet-maker. But I’m a joiner, too, also in the sense of joining organizations, and this and that. And the songs have also been put together in the sense that Beethoven meant. Like, ‘Where Have All the Flowers Gone’—getting the idea from a Ukrainian song and swiping part of the melody from an old Irish lumberjack song.

“At this particular age of life, I’m trying to sing a few old songs better, rather than trying to learn new ones. This is rather typical behavior, and I think there’s a certain musical logic to it. If I could do a really good job on ‘John Henry,’ I’d be happier than if I could sing a half-job on fifteen new ballads.”

It is dusk by now; a lone sparrow warbles in a tall birch. Seeger pauses to yawn. “You know,” he says softly. “I was singing for one of the audiences the other day and I did ‘The Internationale.’ It’s funny. Old lefties and socialists still cry when they hear it.” □

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