

Minstrel, oh Minstrel, Sing Me a Cause

By Seymour Raiz



Seymour Raiz has been Vice President/Communications for the Greater Columbus Convention and Visitors Bureau the past six years, but before that was a journalist for most of his career. He spent 25 years at the Cleveland Press followed by eight years as Managing Editor of the Columbus Citizen-Journal. He earned a B.A. degree in English at Adelbert College, Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve). One of his enduring interests has been music, from folk to classical, which explains this paper he presented in 1993. Raiz is a member of the Board of Directors of Torch's Columbus chapter.

(The above is the original biography that ran in 1994. Mr. Raiz has left Torch, but still resides in Columbus. A fascinating interview he gave to a local Jewish historical organization can be found at http://columbusjewishhistory.org/oral_histories/seymour-raiz/.)

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In a 1991 profile of Pete Seeger, the *Christian Science Monitor* said, "If the United States followed Japan in recognizing the masters of traditional arts as 'living treasures,' few could better claim the honor than this performer/historian who has devoted his career to folk music." But Seeger is more than his musical accomplishments; his life reflects recent history as well.

Who is Pete Seeger? My first surprise in exploring Seeger's life was discovering his genealogy and early years. Based on his persona, I assumed he had been born of poor parents, grown up loved but deprived of creature comforts. Not our Pete Seeger. He was born with a semi-silver spoon in his mouth, one he spat out in short order. His grandmother was a member of the Mayflower Society. His father traced his lineage to a Gebhard von Seeg of the Crusades. In David Dunaway's biography, *How Can I Keep From Singing?*, Seeger characterized his Mayflower ancestors: "They were staunch upholders of independence among the colonists, all subversives in the eyes of the established government of the British colonies." And, "My ancestors were, to a man,

abolitionists." Not that Seeger thought about his ancestors often: "I spent much of my life trying to forget my antecedents. I felt they were all upper class."

Maybe that was because of the immediate family into which he was born back in 1919, about ten miles from Peekskill, New York. His parents were a bizarre and fascinating couple. His father, Charles, was brought up as a gentleman scholar on the family estate on Staten Island, studied music at Harvard, and later became the youngest full professor in the history of the University of California. He married Constance de Clyver Edson, a violinist reared in Tunisia and Paris and trained at Juilliard.

In 1914, when he was 25, the haughty Prof. Charles Seeger attended a lecture by a young Socialist. It changed his life and, without question, cast the die for his yet-to-be-born son, Pete. Charles developed a schizophrenic existence, juggling radicalism and his academic career. When World War I began, Prof. Seeger announced his opposition, claiming that both Germany and England were imperialists. He became a campus pariah, and the Seegers were driven back East.

Their marriage was suffering, and suddenly Constance was pregnant with her third child—our hero.

The family moved to the Seeger estate in Paterson, west of New York City, and on May 3, 1919, Peter Seeger was born. A year and a half later, Charles and Constance, hoping to rebuild their faltering marriage, decided to explore the musical back roads of America. In November 1920, with Pete just an infant, the family of five headed south to Pinehurst, N.C., where they explored the hills and gave free concerts of classical music. The performances went badly, and the Seegers decided to return to New York, but on the family's last night in Pinehurst, the locals provided their own concert: hillbilly music. At the age of two, Pete Seeger heard his first folk music.

Unfortunately, the marriage soon failed and Peter, at the age of four, was trundled off to the first of a succession of schools he would attend until he was seventeen. He returned home during summers and holidays, but usually to a home of grandparents, not parents.

When Pete was eight, Charles and Constance had their last big battle, and it was over Pete's musical education. His mother was a traditionalist and his father, predictably, favored the experimental. He was fascinated by the newcomers, names like Bartok and Shostakovich. Pete himself resolved the fight. He refused both piano and voice lessons. Reading notes bored him. He was given a violin and a ukelele. You can guess

which he preferred and which he began to play.

His father settled in New York City and remarried. His new lifestyle became a major force in the life of his lonely son. When Pete was thirteen—in 1932—he spent his summer vacation with Charles and his new wife, Ruth Crawford Seeger, today widely acknowledged as an important composer. The adults took him to a meeting of a left-wing club to hear a speech by a musician who was to become one of the giants of 20th century American music, Aaron Copeland.

Attending the meeting were prominent New York composers, who brought their scores and instruments. They were passionately political and some—including Pete's father—belonged to what was called the Composers Collective. Their self-appointed mission was to compose songs for picket and unemployment lines.

About this time, Charles Seeger was writing music columns for *The Daily Worker*, which was published by the Communist Party. Pete was enthralled by his father's milieu. He began reading the radical newspapers. Their father walked Pete and his brothers through the slums. Pete learned about strikes, the Scottsboro Boys, Norman Thomas. And Pete Seeger, the boy, met and was captivated by Communists.

Then came a fateful day, one even more dramatic than his encounter with the Composers Collective and the Communist

Party: He chanced upon a teacher's old banjo. He persuaded his mother to send him \$10 to buy the banjo, and he was off and running—or picking. He began playing in his school's jazz club. He sang in the Glee Club. He was finally learning music.

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By the time Pete graduated, his father was administrator of music programs for the Farm Security Administration. Pete joined his father and his father's associates, all famous musicologists and leftists. Part of the summer was spent in North Carolina, where Pete learned banjo from a famous picker, Bascom Lunsford. And it was there Pete attended his first folk song and dance festival, another momentous point in his life: "I discovered there was some good music in my country which I never heard on the radio. I liked the strident vocal tone of the singers, the vigorous dancing. The words of the songs had all of the meat of life in them. Their humor had bite, it was not trivial. Their tragedy was real, not sentimental. In comparison, most of the pop music of the '30s seemed to me weak and soft, with its endless variations on 'Baby, baby, I need you.'"

Charles Seeger, despite his own new lifestyle, was determined that Pete would follow the same educational path as the rest of his family, and that path led to the ivy of Harvard. Pete was granted a partial scholarship and got a job washing dishes. He was an average student, but he was bored. He suffered from acne, was nearly six feet tall and

terribly thin, and was too shy to approach girls. But he did write tunes for the Hasty Pudding show.

The summer after his freshman year, Pete was a counselor at a camp run by left-wing friends. Once he was back at Harvard, he began to pass out leaflets for Spanish War Relief, founded a radical paper and, as his biography puts it, traded the Banjo Club for the Young Communist League. The inevitable happened; he was put on academic probation and lost his scholarship. Pete Seeger left school forever, becoming perhaps the most celebrated dropout of Harvard's Class of 1940. (The most famous graduate of that class, by the way, was John Fitzgerald Kennedy.)

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Returning to New York, without a college degree or demonstrated training, Pete moved in with his brother, washing dishes to help pay for his keep. He thought of trying journalism, but he visited several newspapers without even a nibble. He also attempted to become an artist but was told bluntly by one teacher to stick to the banjo.

Which he did, by default. A relative got him a job playing at a dance, which led to a few other bookings. At one of those events, he met a young woman who was to affect the rest of his life.

Toshi Ohta was the daughter of a Virginian whose forebears included Jim Bowie. Her father was a Japanese exile of noble birth. Born in Europe, Toshi had

to be smuggled into the United States because of the Oriental Exclusion Act. Her education was in progressive schools in the East. An attraction between Pete and Toshi was born, but little happened immediately because Pete suddenly became swept up in a new phase of his life.

Huddie Ledbetter —Leadbelly— began teaching Seeger the guitar.

Through Alan Lomax, a friend of his father's, Pete began meeting some of the many folk musicians in New York at the time. Lightning struck. Pete was introduced to Huddie Ledbetter—Leadbelly—the burly ex-convict from Louisiana known as “King of the 12-String Guitar,” composer of “Goodnight, Irene” and “The Midnight Special.” A relationship was struck and Ledbetter began teaching Seeger the guitar.

To make ends meet, Pete worked as a porter at the 1939 World's Fair and graded aptitude tests. Finally, he got a real job—one related to his skills and interests. Alan Lomax, a power in the folk music world, worked at the Library of Congress in Washington, and he offered Pete a job there for \$15 a week, cataloguing and transcribing songs.

He also continued his practicing, though not to everybody's joy; a friend later recalled, “He had begun to play the five-string almost continuously. Peter just never shut up, and it was driving everybody mad. [...] He played all night and he played all day and after a while you wanted to ship him off somewhere.”

A folk-political song movement had begun to blossom in New York City. Lomax, an activist as well as folk song intellectual, decided to push Seeger into performing in this new, yeasty environment. Pete's debut was at a benefit for California migrant workers, following a group of folk stars including Burl Ives, Josh White and Leadbelly. Our hero was awful—wrong notes, forgotten verses—but that night Pete met Woody Guthrie.

Lomax later said, “Go back to that night when Pete first met Woody Guthrie. You can date the renaissance of American folk songs from that night. Pete knew it was his kind of music, and he began working to make it everybody's kind of music [...] It was a pure, genuine fervor, the kind that saves souls.”

Guthrie invited Seeger to travel with him and discover America. They took off in Guthrie's car, first heading south and then west. As Dunaway describes it:

No sooner would they stop the car and pull themselves out, stretching and wiggling their toes after the long drive, than someone would ask if they could play those

instruments [...] They needed no American Express or Visa cards; their songs were always good for a round of drinks and a bowl of chili.

But they were a disparate pair. Woody was rough and tough, a heavy drinker who sometimes wore his cowboy boots to bed. And Pete? Woody said of him: “I can’t make him out. He doesn’t look at girls, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke, the fellow’s weird.” That was the young Pete—and later, the older Pete.

Seeger spent a year with Guthrie, learning about America but also learning music. They began to compose together. They ended up at Woody’s home. Pete returned to New York, knowing he could always earn a living if he had a banjo. And he also knew a lot more about the country and its people. He began performing, traveled some more and burrowed deeper into the world of folk-song activism. At the end of 1940, he and three others formed the Almanac Singers, hoping to change the world.

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After a few minor engagements, the group sang at a Madison Square Garden rally of 20,000 members of the Transport Workers Union. The group was a huge success. The performance brought an offer to tour CIO unions across the country. Pete, the only real musician in the group and also a leader, became the chief organizer. Woody Guthrie joined them.

It was a time when the left wing was very romantic about America, when labor organizing had the tough glamour investigative journalism had in the 1970s, the days of Carl Sandburg and Stephen Benet. It was as if the music of America had arrived, “carried on the shimmering strings of a young Yankee banjoist.” But as they began their tour, the Almanac Singers and Seeger received a shock: Hitler had invaded Russia. Left-wingers traded allegiances, and suddenly, the anti-war songs Pete and his group had been singing were obsolete. They tried to remain true to pacifism, but were attacked by everybody, including the left-wingers.

The group was menaced from still another quarter. The FBI was on their trail and soon sent alerts to its field offices about the group, and fattened the growing file on Seeger himself.

The group finally made it to the West Coast, performing along the way. They separated there, and Pete and Woody traveled east together, just like old times. Back in New York, the singers provided what was called “cheap, mid meeting entertainment on the Communist Party circuit.” Although the Party continued to treat Pete and the group shabbily, Pete decided at this point in his life to join the Communist Party. He was bored by ideology, but admired commitment and activism. His biographer says, “No one in the party knew what to do with a mind like this. Partly because of his value as a fund raiser, administrators tended to let him have his head, reminding him

to look at *The Daily Worker* when they disagreed with one of his comments.”

Late in 1941, another paroxysm: Pearl Harbor. Seeger stubbornly held to his antiwar convictions, and the Almanac Singers sank toward the bottom. Pete finally had a romantic interest, however: Toshi, the striking Nisei girl he had met earlier. She was good for him, teasing him out of some of his more righteous and compulsive moods.

And, of all things, his professional life suddenly took a sharp swing upwards. The Almanacs, at last, figured out the Free World was fighting bad guys. They began writing war songs and their fortunes took off. One of their most famous songs was “Reuben James.” Pete sang on the radio show “We the People.” The group was invited to audition for CBS. The William Morris Agency, a bastion of the capitalist world, wanted to represent the singers. Decca Records began knocking at their door.

Some other folks also were at the door, or maybe peeking through the windows. The FBI and newspaper reporters were looking more closely at the suddenly popular group. The reporters took the first shot, and it was fatal. New York newspapers broke the story of the former pacifist group that suddenly was aggressively pro-war, and also made known their affiliations with the left wing.

The career of the Almanac Singers crumbled. Almost on cue, Pete was drafted into the army.

He returned to New York to marry Toshi, and he was ultimately shipped to Saipan, where he spent most of the war as an entertainer. When he returned from his army duty he was more polished as a performer. And he was rarin' to go. His new cause was an idea he had helped hatch called People's Songs. Its purpose was to promote thousands of union choruses across the country. Characteristically, Pete became the chief, the editor of the bulletin, and also taught, composed and performed. He tried enlisting the Communist Party in the project—but in vain. Pete was not considered a team player. "At least one committee on backsliders chided him for not having the right attitude," his biographer reports.

In 1948, Seeger energetically supported Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for the presidency, but as with many of Seeger's crusades, this one, too, collapsed. And shortly afterward, People's Songs were bankrupt. Pete tried to pursue a singing career, but his past dogged him. And he was disillusioned with the Communist Party.

So Seeger decided to return to his roots, the woodlands. He and Toshi, who had two children by now, spent their last savings to buy a plot of land away from New York City, overlooking the Hudson River. Pete began building a log cabin from instructions in a library book. He used the wood from his own trees.

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He was doing some other

building about this time, too—a singing group called the Weavers. The Weavers opened Christmas week, 1949, at the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village. When Alan Lomax, Seeger's old champion, brought Carl Sandburg to hear the group, that was the breakthrough. Sandburg wrote: "The Weavers are out of the grass roots of America. I salute them ... when I hear America singing, the Weavers are there." Suddenly, crowds packed the club.

The Weavers lost bookings but their records continued to sell.

After one Weavers show, Gordon Jenkins, the band leader who had become famous working with Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong, approached the group and asked them to record for Decca Records. The Weavers auditioned dismally and were spotted as "leftists" by the head of Decca, but Jenkins persevered, and the group did, indeed, record. Their first record had on one side an Israeli soldiers' song called "Tzena, Tzena," and on the other, Leadbelly's ballad "Goodnight, Irene." The record rocketed into success. The Weavers appeared on the Milton Berle television show and in top nightclubs throughout the country. (In Reno, puritanical Pete was the only Weaver not to gamble.)

Guess who showed up to rain on his parade? The old friends from the FBI, who were less than thrilled with the Weavers' success. Some other old friends attacked, too. The Communist Party ripped the Weavers for being an all-white group, among other things. At this point, Seeger left the Communist Party. According to his biography, it had drifted too far from the idealistic organization Seeger thought he had joined.

Seeger also was impaled by the opposite side at this juncture. The anti-Communist publication "Red Channels" accused Seeger and 146 other artists—among them Aaron Copeland, Lee J. Cobb, Lillian Hellman, and Dorothy Parker—of leftist sympathies.

The Weavers promptly lost bookings, especially on television, where nervous sponsors dropped their support. But their records continued to sell. A new one, featuring "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" and "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," was swept up by record buyers.

Then, in August 1951, Ohio Gov. Frank J. Lausche, concerned about the Weavers' scheduled appearance at the Ohio State Fair, requested confidential information on the group from the FBI. Even though it was illegal, J. Edgar Hoover approved the request. The Weavers' appearance was canceled after Lausche read the file. According to Seeger's biographer, Lausche promised Hoover he wouldn't reveal the source of his information, and offered to circulate the material to reporters.

A week later, a New York paper ran an exposé on the Weavers.

The Weavers then became a federal case—literally. An informer, Harvey Matusow, told the House Un-American Activities Committee that three of the singers were members of the Communist Party. The Weavers' career dropped to the basement. They could find bookings only in small venues and were forced to disband. But here's another piece of fascinating trivia in the Seeger history. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the couple sentenced to death for allegedly selling American A-bomb secrets to Russia, asked to hear the Weavers' recording of "Goodnight, Irene" on their way to the electric chair.

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With the Weavers gone, Seeger began criss-crossing the country, appearing in churches and small campuses. He survived by playing in 40 states over the next several years. He taught, and he began specializing in children's audiences.

In 1955, he was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Toshi hired a New York lawyer, who explained that Seeger had three gloomy alternatives if he chose not to cooperate with the committee. He could invoke the Fifth Amendment, refusing to testify against himself; he could take what was called the Modified Fifth, refusing to testify about others; or he could challenge the committee on First Amendment—free speech—grounds. The last

option was the riskiest; it could drag on for years and end with a prison sentence. Naturally, Seeger chose that one.

In preparing for his appearance, Seeger was warned to be polite and not argue. His lawyer told him, "Don't try and be a smartass." Seeger said he'd do his best. He appeared before the committee in New York on August 16. Not too long into the questioning, Seeger made his stand clear:

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 the private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this [...].

The sparring continued. At one point, when he was questioned about the lyrics of a song, he offered to sing it for the committee. The offer was refused. At another point, he said:

I love my country very dearly, and I greatly resent this implication that some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I have known, and some of my opinions, whether they are religious or philosophical, or I might be a vegetarian, make me any less of an American.

Seeger knew that citations for contempt of Congress lay

ahead. The legal battle began, with Toshi managing the defense campaign. Seeger's blacklisting escalated. He was almost kicked out of the American Federation of Musicians, certainly an irony. And on July 26, 1956, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 373 to 9 to cite for contempt Seeger and seven others, including playwright Arthur Miller.

Indicted the following March by a federal grand jury, Seeger pleaded not guilty and was released on \$1,000 bail. However, he was forbidden to travel out of the New York court's district without notifying the authorities, which he began doing by sending telegrams. Pete continued his career, but painfully. He traveled widely for insignificant bookings, separated from his growing children for long periods. Right-wing harassment followed him everywhere.

His trial finally began March 27, 1961. It ended with the jury taking one hour and 20 minutes to pronounce him guilty. A week later, he was sentenced to 10 years in jail, one year on each charge of contempt of Congress. The counts were to be served concurrently, meaning a year and a day in prison. He was refused bail, handcuffed, and led away. His lawyer, though, rushed to the Court of Appeals, where he successfully petitioned for bail. Seeger was released.

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Right on schedule, the Seeger roller coaster took another wild swing. Despite his court troubles, Seeger became a full-blown

commercial success. He cut his first record for Columbia; his song royalties helped drive his income to six figures. In some ways, this was as upsetting to Seeger as the prospect of jail; he loathed commercialism. He began demanding that ticket prices for his performances be reduced.

In 1961, with the court's permission, he and Toshi traveled to England, where he performed before 4,000 at London's Prince Albert Hall for a special Seeger concert whose sponsors included Benjamin Britten, Doris Lessing, and Sean O'Casey. The following year, the Court of Appeals dismissed Seeger's conviction. It was less than a clear-cut victory—the court ruled that HUAC's authority was vague—but Seeger was free.

Almost as a reward, one of the many songs Seeger had written, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?", became a big hit the following week. Another song he co-authored, "If I Had a Hammer," also became big. "Guantanamera," which he had discovered, followed. The folk music craze of the 60's was motoring along, and Seeger was riding high. He played before packed audiences. *Time* magazine called him the "current patriarch of folk singing," even though "His voice sounds as if a corn husk were stuck in his throat."

Seeger's past kept him off most network television, including folk music shows such as *Hootenanny*. The blacklist clearly continued. Yet Pete clamped onto controversial causes, even as his career and the

blacklist marched in lockstep.

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Seeger took time out for a trip around the world with his family that included 30 countries. While in India, he visited with a member of the U.S. Ambassador's office and his family—Richard E. Celeste. (Please remember that name.)

As soon as he returned to the States, Seeger plunged into the civil rights struggle. At the personal invitation of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he had met years before, Seeger and Toshi joined the famous march from Selma to Montgomery. He was later involved in the Vietnam antiwar struggle as well. With a few lonely exceptions, he never won his battle to appear on network television, but he prospered as a singer and a writer, and remained the patriarch of American folk singers.

A friend of mine in New York City, a music teacher in the public schools, described to me his concerts for children during those years:

He would appear in a flannel shirt and Greek fisherman's cap with worn-out jeans on his skinny frame. His cheeks were always red, and in those days, he had a high, reedy voice. He'd sometimes have an easel on the stage and while he sang young children's animal songs, he'd rapidly sketch terrific animals with pastel chalks on huge pieces of newsprint. Always, there was audience

participation. Pete's policy was to charge as little as possible for these, and indeed all, concerts in which he participated.

In the 1970s, he finally leaped into a cause that has become politically correct: Pete Seeger became an environmentalist. From his woodland retreat overlooking the Hudson River, he became a catalyst in a campaign to clean the river. There were fund-raising concerts, other activities, and darn if the river didn't start improving.

Speaking of causes, the resolution of another little battle should be noted. Guess who appeared at the Ohio State Fair in 1985 with an all-star folk singing lineup? Pete Seeger. Decades after being yanked by Gov. Lausche, Seeger played the fair at the instigation of Gov. Richard Celeste and his wife Dagmar, his acquaintances from India. The singers were even invited to stay overnight in the governor's mansion.

Seeger is still around [*as of 1994 -ed.*], although he doesn't sing anymore. He wears a hearing aid. He probably still wears his trademark mismatched socks. He breeds his own worms. He's probably still grumpy, still righteous and maybe still looking for a cause.

He is, after all, by breeding, by life experience, and by choice, a minstrel and an activist. Not a bad combination. And not a bad man.