

LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Pete Seeger at 94

Pete Wernick

You're reading this not long after I'm writing it, September 8, just after a concert of one of my all-time heroes, the amazing Pete Seeger, who gives new meaning to the word "venerable." Anyone might wonder, "can he still do this?" but as always, it was a damn good concert, and a testament in spades to Pete's ideals of music and community reinforcing each other. Tickets were titled, "Music Can Bring Us Together," and it certainly did, about 1000 of us in a sold-out theater.

Living as I do in Colorado, and with Pete's life now centered closely around his home and community of Beacon, NY, it was quite a nice coincidence for me that the annual New York reunion of my closest childhood friends occurred on the same weekend as, and just a half-hour drive from, a now-rare performance by this true living legend.

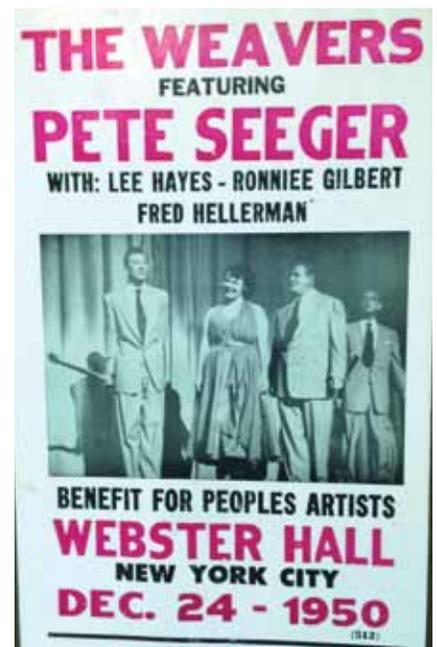


Pete at 91

Tickets at the lovely old and remodeled Paramount Theater in Peekskill were a bit pricey, \$100 (!) for general admission (benefiting the local public radio station)—now the most I've ever spent on a concert. But this was no time to economize. Here was a chance to see one of the very few people I can say absolutely *changed my life*, and at a particularly interesting time of *his* life. Just months ago, Pete's beloved wife Toshi passed away after almost 70 years of marriage. How would he carry on?

It was at age 14 in the Bronx, when my friends (same ones as at my reunion) would get together and play banjos and guitars in the style of the Weavers, Pete's most famous group. The Weavers were prime movers in the burgeoning folk music surge of that time. They were the forebears to the Kingston Trio and Peter Paul and Mary, who took Weavers classics to pop heights, as the Weavers had done in 1950 with *Irene Goodnight* and *On Top of Old Smokey*.

Thanks to YouTube you can dial in Weavers appearances on early TV, and watch Pete



shredding on the banjo on their hit *Tzena Tzena*, sounding remarkably close to Scruggs style, using a rapid-fire version of his own pick/strum technique.

Then came the blot on American history, the disgraceful Blacklist. An article in *Variety* identified the Weavers as “reds”, and their career was suddenly shut down, causing them to disband for most of the 50s. Pete was not to be seen on network TV again until the Smothers Brothers bravely defied the Blacklist in the late 60s. To support his family he turned to playing almost any gig he could, often in schools and summer camps around New York City.

In my opinion, “thus began the folk boom.” So many people in the Northeast were exposed up-close to Pete, he was practically the Pied Piper of Folk. His “Johnny Appleseed” columns in the new folk magazine *Sing Out!*, his prolific recordings on New York-based Folkways Records, and especially his seminal banjo instruction book and inspiring Carnegie Hall hootenannies helped catalyze a New York scene that attracted all manner of folkies, from Dylan to Paxton to Joni Mitchell.

Seeger was there from the early 40s, having achieved high visibility and stature even before the Weavers. Born in 1919, he’d been to Asheville, NC in the late 30s on a family trip organized by his folklorist father Charles. There he heard and fell in love with the 5-string banjo, and began practicing it incessantly. Before long, he had abandoned Harvard and hit the road with Woody Guthrie. The two anchored the Almanac Singers in New York City, providing musical support for the union movement with newly-written songs for picket lines and hootenannies that started a cultural swell whose effects still linger today.

Jump 70 years to September 8, 2013: At 94 Pete is still tall and lean, though a bit bent and no longer singing with his trademark upthrust head, less clear of voice, but yes, a powerhouse of music and soul, who mobilized his adoring audience with a beautiful gentle intensity. *How does he do it?* For one thing he has great help, the tuneful and tastefully supportive Lorre Wyatt (“one of the world’s greatest songwriters,” said Pete), the multi-talented Guy Davis, a bass player and occasional extra guitar or banjo player, plus an enthused choir of about a dozen local kids and adults harmonizing behind.

Pete is not just a singer and player, but a master entertainer. The show was well-constructed, from the slow, sacred-feeling opener *We Shall Overcome* to the finale, *Turn Turn Turn* (featuring all nine verses, five of which, delightful ones written by Toshi, I’d never heard), and some cool encores ending with the jaunty *Up and Down the River*. Pete connected instantly with the audience, who as the emcee said, probably each had their own Pete Seeger story. I certainly have mine!

Having witnessed in recent years the near-last performances of Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, and Les Paul, I was fascinated to see how Pete handled his well-aged powers, and it’s my proud pleasure to report that this man, now one of the oldest people in history to headline a concert, ran the two-hour show with energy and focus right through three encores. He sat only a few times, and when switching between 12-string guitar and

banjo, didn’t even use an instrument stand, but laid the other on the floor.

I wondered whether he’d be clumsy and sloppy on the banjo. Nope. While not the virtuoso of yore, he continually put in musical, cleanly executed runs behind the singing, with banjo tone nice and stout where necessary, other times light, and... there it was, that sweet, rhythmic sound that launched a thousand sing-alongs.

And did we ever sing along! At a Pete Seeger concert, that’s sort of a “given.” I’ll never forget sitting in the upper deck at Carnegie Hall back in the 60s, 3000 of us filling the room with 4-part harmony under Pete’s direction. So many places this man has been, all around the U.S., around the world, living rooms to national TV, *always* trying to get everyone singing. Even on his 60s TV show, *Rainbow Quest*, with the Stanley Brothers singing *I Never Will Marry*, Pete kept energetically exhorting at the camera to the home viewers: “Sing along!” He went from recording banjo showpieces in the 40s to using the instrument mainly to back up a roomful of people.

I wondered if he’d choose to go easy on his aging voice and leave the bulk of the singing to others, and was happily surprised to hear him do a lot of singing, sometimes gracefully helped by Lorre Wyatt supplying elusive verses. Here and there, when the spirit moved him, I was thrilled to hear that unmistakable timeless tenor just *leap* out across the decades. Watching his face as he sang, the sincerity and commitment to his message deeply touched me. Some people much younger than he have a hard time being optimistic about anything. I wish they could see the optimism and positivity that flows forth from the man who’s faced what he’s faced.

He briefly recalled without specifics the unbelievably shameful incident in this very town of Peekskill back in 1949, when he and his young family were viciously attacked by a rock-throwing mob—with police cooperation—in a literal ambush against unsuspecting attendees of a Paul Robeson concert. He spoke of that as “real fascism” in our country. But that was about the only negative note in the whole concert... if you discount a cute song about the devil rejecting a farmer’s wife from Hell after she tore the place up.

It’s hard to imagine the course of “our kind of music” (loosely definable as string-based homemade) were it not for this individual. Think of his seminal role in sprouting and nurturing American interest in its own (and other countries’) folk music, that infused the truly world-changing American and British pop music of the 60s and 70s. Without that interest, and the Newport Folk Festival (which he helped start, and which became Carlton Haney’s model for bluegrass festivals), and his 5-string banjo book from the 1940s that *still sells*, would bluegrass music have reached a national audience? I doubt it. That all happened in large part thanks to, and in the wake of, the “folk boom”, for which Pete tirelessly provided the rocket fuel.

With all that in mind, I brought to Peekskill a very special Granada resonator, autographed only by my supreme musical hero, Mr. Scruggs, the other musician whose work created a life-changing path I’ve been able to follow. I wangled my way backstage after the show, and found Pete, relaxing in a chair wearing his woolen cap. Though we’d met a number of times, I assumed nothing and introduced myself, speaking my gratitude for all he’s done. I handed him a Sharpie and the resonator and said, “In over 50 years of seeing you, I’ve never asked for your autograph.” As he signed the resonator, he said, “Pete Wernick... I know you. I read your columns in *Banjo Newsletter*.”

Well Pete, if you’ve read this far, you have made my day once again!

Visit Pete online at DrBanjo.com