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# The Life Lesson of Pete Seeger

BY DAN BERGGREN

*The most important thing I try to get out of my concerts is a sense of participation.*

—Pete Seeger<sup>1</sup>

**There he was, banjo in hand**, inviting audience members to sing as they moved, row by row, closer to the stage in an orderly fashion to fill up empty seats. I marveled at the scene before me—the power of one man to move people physically and spiritually by encouraging them to sing along.

This experience at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in the 1960s was not my introduction to the Hudson Valley resident and world citizen, Pete

Seeger. I had known his music a decade earlier, thanks to my older brother John, who brought folk records home from the library, bought a Weavers album, played guitar in college, and as a camp counselor, taught me my first chords. As I learned to play the guitar, the invitation to sing along became my method for negotiating difficult teenage years. Pete's example was always there, a constant in my life. He was someone I could depend on for speaking truth through music, teaching me how to get behind a song, not in front of it, and helping me feel the power and potential of an audience joining in harmony.

Fresh out of the Army in the mid-1970s, I was grabbed by a convergence around traditional Adirondack folk music, and soon my focus was narrowed. Three discoveries led me to this folk music: the collection of field recordings made by Essex County historian Marjorie Lansing Porter (she captured songs sung in the North Country from 1942 through the early 1950s); a Pete Seeger album released in 1960, called *Champlain Valley Songs* (half from upstate New York and the other half from Vermont); and a 1963 album by Milt Okun, titled *Adirondack Folk Songs and Ballads*. Both Seeger and Okun credited Ms. Porter and her collection. It's no wonder



Pete Seeger at the "Sprit of Beacon Day," September 26, 2010. Photo by Dan Berggren.

Milt later became producer and arranger for folk musicians like Peter, Paul & Mary and John Denver.

In the 1940s and early '50s, Pete Seeger came to Schroon Lake to entertain at Schroon Crest, a resort owned by Milt Okun's parents. From time to time, these waterfront folk festivals also featured other members of the Weavers (Lee Hays, Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman), plus Cisco Houston, and Woody Guthrie. According to Milt, "Pete was particularly good at involving the hotel guests. Before his performance he would gather together those who wanted to participate and teach them the choruses of several of the songs he was going to sing."<sup>2</sup> There's no question he wanted them singing along.

One summer, perhaps due to Ms. Porter's influence, Pete thought it would be a good idea to search out and invite some local talent to perform at the festival. Someone told him Flora Jane Wilson knew some folk songs and had a lovely voice. At a family gathering, my Aunt Flora (Jane Wilson Whitty) shared a story that connected some of the dots. A musician herself, she sang, played accordion, banjo-uke, and church organ in Schroon Lake. She recalled that one summer Pete had hunted her down at the Sugar Bowl, where she was waiting tables. Her boss wouldn't let her take time off: "It's the height of tourist season, for crying out loud!" She didn't get to sing that year.

I had the opportunity to ask Pete about this bit of family folklore when I interviewed him in 1986. After asking about his life and the new book he was promoting, I brought up the Schroon Lake days and how my Aunt Flora missed her chance to sing at his festival. He smiled, thought for a moment, and said that it was never too late—never too late for Aunt Flora to sing along, never too late for there to be festivals everywhere celebrating local and regional music.

Two years later, after a concert in Schroon Lake, I was talking with a friend Darlene Gregson. I told her about my

Aunt Flora, about Pete's encouragement of supporting folk festivals, and his thoughts about it never being too late to participate and share music. "Wouldn't it be great to have a folk festival here in Schroon Lake?" she asked. I heartily agreed that it would. As a member of the Schroon Lake Arts Council, Darlene brought the idea to the rest of the group, and they worked to make it a reality. At the first Adirondack Folk Music Festival there in 1989, I had my Aunt Flora singing along with me on every chorus. The festival is still going strong 30 years later.

Over the years, I stayed in touch with Pete, occasionally asking a question or sending a song I thought he'd appreciate. He was generous with his time and right to the point with his comments ("Not your best line!"). When he liked something, he forwarded it to *Sing Out!*—a quarterly journal of folk music that he helped to establish in 1950. Several of my songs have been shared around the world, thanks to him.

My last visit with Pete found him on a street corner in his hometown, leading children and their parents in song. Spirit of Beacon Day 2010 was the occasion, and while his voice was weak, it still served the significant purpose of lining out lyrics for all the folks gathered in the street. Hundreds of his neighbors felt the power of singing along. In a lifetime of doing this, Pete had people all over the world feeling like neighbors.

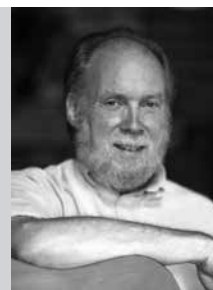
Many of us lost a friend when he died in 2014, and the world lost a musician, activist, humanitarian, and teacher who passionately wanted everyone to experience the transformative power of singing together. In 1945, while serving in the Army overseas, Pete wrote to his wife Toshi, "After the war I want to organize a very large chorus of untrained voices to see what I can do in that respect."<sup>3</sup> Every one of his concerts brought that dream to life.

The author's audio tribute to Pete Seeger can be found at: [soundcloud.com/berggrenfolk/pete-seeger-tribute](https://soundcloud.com/berggrenfolk/pete-seeger-tribute) ▼

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Krajnc, Anita, and Michael Greenspoon. 1997. "Singing Together for Social Change." *Peace Magazine*, July/August, p. 6. <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v13n4p06.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Sparks, Richard. 2011. *Along the Cherry Lane: Tales from the Life of Music Industry Legend Milton Okun*. Beverly Hills, CA: Classical Music Today (distributed by Hal Leonard), p. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Rosenthal, Robert, and Sam Rosenthal, eds. 2012. *Pete Seeger In His Own Words*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, p. 37.

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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