ROUTLEDGE

PETE SEEGER

In His Own Words

Selected and Edited by

Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal

Foreword by David Amram

Pete Seeger in His Own Words

Nine Lives Musical Series

Edited by David Amram

Pete Seeger in His Own Words,
Pete Seeger, Selected and Edited by Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal

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David Amram

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Editors' Note

Pete originally wanted to make changes that would reflect his evolving political understandings, such as changing "he" to "he or she," or "Negroes" or "Afro-Americans" to "African Americans." We felt it was important to preserve the historical accuracy of the pieces; they shouldn't reflect a political sensibility that was not part of the times when Pete wrote a particular entry. Our compromise has been to leave the pieces as originally written and include this note.

Foreword by David Amram

Pete Seeger in His Own Words is destined to become a classic for the ages.

Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal painstakingly selected from countless letters and articles in Pete Seeger's personal archive this collection of gems—most of which are now being published for the first time. Together these writings reveal the unique strength of character that has made Pete Seeger a blessing for American society. Pete has helped to create a better world ever since he left Harvard in 1938, traveling the ribbon of highway with Woody Guthrie to Oklahoma and Texas.

As with Hector Berlioz's classic memoir *Evenings with the Orchestra,* the letters of Mozart and Beethoven, Dizzy Gillespie's spirited *To Be or Not To Bop,* Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory,* and Bob Dylan's *Chronicles,* we enter worlds of music that few of us have experienced before. Pete encourages us to join him in celebrating these musical highlights, sharing what he has learned during his journeys in the same inclusive way that he brings us together every time he invites us to sing along.

Pete's articles about folk music are among the best ever written. His knowledge of the history of thousands of songs has always been legendary among musicians. Now a wider audience has the opportunity to see Pete as a historian of the music he plays, as well as a brilliant and incisive biographer of himself and others.

One of the book's highlights appears in a previously unpublished letter to be read by his grandchildren after his demise. Fortunately, Pete gave permission to publish it here to share his philosophy of politics. He describes the story of some of his forebearers, a group of dissenters, who arrived on these shores on a ship called the Mayflower. *Pete Seeger in his Own Words* details how this descendent of the settlers has become a voice for all Americans. On every page, his words ring as clear as his banjo playing.

For more than fifty years, I have been fortunate to know Pete and play music with him. I continue to marvel at his dedication to his ideals. A recent event sums up what he has always been like—and how he remains, at the age of ninety-three—an idealist in action.

After an energy-packed concert for the Clearwater organization in New York City in September 2011, Pete's grandson, Tao Rodriguez Seeger, invited us to march from the stage and walk through the aisles

of the Symphony Space theater as if we were going to march back onstage, the way musicians in New Orleans often end their concerts. But instead of walking back onstage, Pete led us on a march thirty-six blocks from West 95th Street to the Columbus Circle Fountain.

Arlo Guthrie joined Tao, Pete, and me as we left the theater to begin the march, where we were to give an impromptu concert at midnight in front of the water fountain at Columbus Circle for all the people who couldn't afford the gala concert at Symphony Space. As we left the theater, we were greeted by a mob of marchers and well-wishers who knew from someone's website about our plans. As we walked, Pete commented on how useful his two new canes were to make this walk, which he felt was an addition to his many marches for freedom over the years. We agreed it was a pleasure not to walk through clouds of tear gas, as we had done in some marches in Washington, DC, decades ago.

The police officers who escorted us were friendly and supportive, and some even sang along with us. Pete told me how happy he was to see marchers with picket signs from the United Auto Workers and other unions, as well as teachers' groups and hordes of young people, including participants in Occupy Wall Street.

Pete hoped the march and the spontaneous midnight concert would be a peaceful message to all New Yorkers to find their own way to help assure a future for our kids and restore a world where fairness and decency for everyone was celebrated. As a child he was taught that we have to care for our family, friends, and neighbors, and to strive to be compassionate toward one another. Equally important, while we had to champion our right to make our voices heard, we also were obliged to pay attention and give respect to those with whom we don't agree, because freedom of speech is the precious right of everyone.

Pete, now in his nineties, seemed as energetic as he was when I first saw him playing for Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. Marching beside him, it was all I could do to keep up with him. Suddenly, Pete bent over and scooped up a scrap of paper from the sidewalk. Folding it carefully, he placed it in his pocket and resumed marching. I looked down a moment later and saw a discarded popsicle stick. Inspired by Pete, I made a touch-your toes-calisthenics movement and scooped it up. Pete leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You may put it in my jacket pocket if you wish."

Pete's gesture reminded me of how littered the streets of New York once were, when Pete initiated his pioneering efforts with the *Clearwater* to clean up the Hudson River. It was an example of what all of us who know Pete have heard him say: "Think globally, act locally."

Pete Seeger in His Own Words is a treasure trove of stories told by Pete himself. His words ring true; he celebrates the unique beauty of our country, and he inspires people of every political persuasion to celebrate living together in harmony. In his own words, Pete Seeger calls on us all to join together to create a better world for our children.

Preface

I was asked to write a short last chapter to this book. But Rob and Sam said it would be better as a preface. So here 'tis.

Dear Reader:

For 30 years or more, I had put copies of letters, unfinished diaries, and miscellaneous essays in a filing cabinet and forgot about 'em. Then four years ago, a professor asked if he could look through them, perhaps reprint some. I said "sure" in my usual unthinking way.

Behold. The professor and his son have made a book. I'm now age 93. Whatever insights I've had and whatever mistakes I've made in my long life are now displayed. The inconsistencies, the contradictions are all here. All? Well, at least a lot of 'em, thanks to Rob and Sam.

Yes, thanks also to Dean Birkenkamp and the folks at Paradigm Publishers, you can now read them.

Now, I'll waste a little time to say that I found myself wanting to rewrite almost all of the pieces in this book. But Rob and Sam thought it best not to go down that road. What was, is.

To all of you I say, stay well.[1] *Keep on,*
Old Pete Seeger

1. "Arabs are proud that the whole world uses Arabic numerals. If you have your health, put down a number '1.' If you have a family put a '0' next to it. 10! If you have land, put another '0' next to that. 100! If you have a good reputation, 1,000! You got it all. But take away the 1, whatcha got? Three zeroes. (In a book around the year 1200 CE, an Italian mathematician, Fibonacci, urged people to stop wasting time dividing and multiplying with Roman numerals. Use Arabic numerals, said he!)" —P. S

Introduction

Pete Seeger, an Appreciation

Pete Seeger is quite arguably the most important American folksinger of the 20th century.

Pete—as he's invariably known to everyone—would hate almost everything about that sentence. He would take out his black pen and start editing, as is his wont. "I'm just one link in a chain," he'd say. "There are much better singers and writers than I, the people I learned from and still learn from [see chapter 3, entry 1]. Those are the important people to listen to."

"And why talk about 'American'? If there's anything I've learned in my travels all over the world, it's that people want to hear and learn about American folk songs, but they all have wonderful, vibrant traditions of their own [see chapter 12]. All this emphasis on one country—any one country—is foolish. We ought always to be thinking about the whole world" [see chapters 10, 11, and 20].

"I don't even know what you mean by 'folk singer' [see chapter 4]. The biggest mistake I ever made was letting people call me a folk singer, when all music is a mixture of all kinds of influences. Anyway, this whole emphasis on who's important and who's not—we're all important, and the artist no more than anyone else. The goal isn't to be an Important Artist, a star, separate from everyone else. The goal is to get *everyone* to be an artist, a singer, a participant [see chapter 14]. As my father said, 'Judge the musicality of a nation not by the presence of virtuosos, but by the general level of people who like to make music'" [see chapter 20, entry 2].

Well, all good points. What, then, makes a volume like this worth doing and worth reading? What has made Seeger important enough to the rest of us that we think his words worth pondering?

Seeger matters, first of all, because he has provided a model of an alternative way of being for musicians, for activists, for all those who want alternatives to the American Way of Life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He and his wife Toshi have lived most of their adult lives on 17 acres overlooking the Hudson, where they built their

first home, a log cabin, in the early 1950s, and where they continue to live in a modest one-bedroom home, often surrounded by their children and other members of their extended family. They tap the trees for maple syrup, split wood for their stoves, and attend local meetings and protests.

This is particularly striking given the privileged lives of most entertainment stars in the United States (and in many other places), a model Seeger has quite consciously rejected. He washes the dishes at home; he takes his turn cleaning up after the pot luck meetings. He has never sought a "career" in which personal advancement was the goal (although he's been quite happy to have made a living all these years doing something he loves). His alternative kind of career has instead proclaimed to others: it's possible to use your art for our collective good, not just for individual advancement. This has been an extremely powerful model for young artists, a way of thinking about what they're doing and what their aims should be that has rarely been offered elsewhere.

This commitment to the collective good is implicit in a second great contribution Seeger has made: his emphasis on the importance of participation by those normally thought of as "the audience." With his gently enthusiastic manner, carefully honed and recalibrated over the years, he encourages his audiences to join him in performance. For Seeger, the politics of the activity itself is its most important aspect; a musician encourages democracy by encouraging people to lift their voices in song. Solidarity and equality are not only stated, but also felt. In a 1998 interview with one of this book's editors, he said

> I'm singing a wide variety of songs, trying to touch base with these different kinds of people, get 'em involved, not just listening but singing. I think the act of singing is very important.... Even singing a sentimental old song can actually be a very political thing if people are singing together. It might be *You Are My Sunshine*. Because Black and White people are singing that together, getting a little harmony together, it becomes a very important thing.... When it first came out I was rather contemptuous of it—one more attempt of the ruling class to give us nice, pretty songs and forget about problems we should face up to. Well, now I see that it's not just the words of the song, but the singing of the song which is even more important.

Repeatedly, Seeger has expressed this as his primary goal: "It all boils down to what I would most like to do as a musician. Put songs on people's lips instead of just in their ears."

Seeger's importance as role model, committed to collective singing and collective struggle, has endured for over seventy years now, a span that's hard to fathom, and in this lies his third major contribution: he has served as a bridge between eras, struggles, and peoples. Seeger

has always argued that movements for social justice, whatever their particular focus, must link up together: "You can't really solve the problem of poverty on earth unless you can also solve the problem of pollution on earth," he writes in "There Are No Old, Bold Pilots" [in chapter 20]. "And vice versa. My guess is we won't solve the problem of racism and sexism and a whole lot of other things until each of us, individually, realizes how much we depend on others—sometimes those near and dear to us, sometimes those faraway and unknown." Seeger was a visible, embodied link between the Old Left and the New Left, the labor movement and the civil rights movement, the civil rights movement and the movement against the war in Vietnam, the antiwar movement and the labor movement. He spoke of women's issues while he discussed the Israeli/Arab conflict; he raised questions of race while he supported the Cuban revolution. Issues of justice and freedom, he has insisted, are always intertwined, and our attempts to deal with such issues must always acknowledge these interconnections.

As a bridge between movements for so long, Seeger has also spanned the generations, consciously mentoring younger generations of musicians and activists and appealing to an audience—his coparticipants—that ranges in age far more than most "entertainers." Of course, his impact has been greatest among those who grew up at about the same time he did, but it's a legacy that has been handed down as well. The various celebrations of his work in the last decade—the *Seeger Sessions* concerts and album by Bruce Springsteen, the film biography *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song,* and other recent works—have introduced or reintroduced him to younger generations, in some cases rekindling buried memories of listening to his records being played by their parents when they were growing up. And the songs he has written and/or made famous—"Turn, Turn, Turn," "If I Had a Hammer," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," "Little Boxes," and so on—have never faded from public consciousness nor artists' repertoire, with new versions constantly finding their way into popular and folk culture, making his work, if not always his name, familiar to successive generations.

As he has linked generations and struggles, Seeger has consciously, intentionally, relentlessly linked lands and cultures. He has travelled the world for well over sixty years, singing songs from the United States to and with audiences in other countries, but always also picking up songs in each country he visited and bringing these back home and around the globe. Some of these, like "Guantanamera," have become among his most readily recognized songs. At each stop, he has delighted in showing others what he feels to be authentic cultural products of the United States (as opposed to what he refers to as the "Coca-Cola" products of the society), but as he has done so, he has urged those who come to hear this music to also treasure their own culture, to resist

being overwhelmed by the popular culture being beamed in from the dominant economic powers.

In this sense, he has been a repository of the traditions of many cultures. When he traveled to Spain after the fall of Franco and heard people singing revolutionary songs that had been banned there for the thirty-six years Franco was in power, he asked them, "Where did you learn those songs?" and they said, "From tapes of your records."[1]

He would demur: "You can sing [your own songs] better than anyone else," he tells us [in chapter 12, entry 9]. But this has not always been possible for all people. Censorship or social disapproval or disuse, and therefore loss of a tradition, have robbed different people at different times of their cultural heritage. His struggle against that loss—in general, and in specific cases of specific songs—is another of his important contributions.

In his dual identities as ambassador of U.S. folk culture and respectful collector of the cultures of other societies, Seeger has been adopted by widely disparate groups of people as one of their own. Several years ago, one of this book's editors gave a talk at a local arts center about the work we were doing with Seeger, accompanied by YouTube videos of groups across the world singing just one of his songs, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?": Joan Baez at the1994 Kennedy Center ceremony honoring Seeger; Earth Wind and Fire on their 1972 album *Last Days and Time*; children in a school chorus in Singapore on parents' night in 2006; Marlene Dietrich in a London concert in 1963; Pedro Capeto, a young man sitting on a plaza in Mexico with his guitar in 2007; Ase Kleveland, a Swedish/Norwegian singer, who later became the minister of culture in Norway, on a television show in 1963; Saint Peter's Church Chorus in Saskatchewan in 2008; The Tansads, an English punk band, in 2009; Gogliola Cinquetti, an Italian singer, in 1969; and Pete and his grandson Tao in Barcelona in 1993.

When we began working with Pete to assemble this book, he had only one request: "Don't make me out to be a saint. I'm no saint!" The writings to follow make that clear. We present not a saint but a man struggling with the complexities and conflicts of time and place, making good choices, making other choices he now regrets, seeking to understand what makes sense and what is right in a world of turbulence and confusion.

But that said, we answer the question of why create or read a book about Seeger by insisting that no matter the mistakes, no matter the confusion, no matter the obvious truth that his glory and his errors were not his alone, Seeger has lived a life of such impact—and lived it so honorably—that understanding how he navigated that life is important.

1. Hear this story on the song "Jarama Valley," on the album *Spain in My Heart* (Appleseed Records APRCD 1074, 2003).

Seeger would be the first to say that his approach to life was in large part a legacy from others, beginning with his parents, and in particular his father, Charles Seeger, whose radical democratic tendencies in politics and in music were cornerstones of Pete's understanding of the role of the citizen and the artist in modern society. His family—first the extended family he grew up in, and then the extended family he and Toshi created—has been central to his intellectual and emotional life and to his ability to live the kind of life he has lived. It's a truism among Seeger's friends that he "could not have been Pete" (as it's often expressed) without Toshi, who has functioned as manager, agent, and political consultant/confidante, all while doing the lion's share of raising the three children (and in a house that, for a time, lacked modern conveniences such as an indoor toilet). Seeger's musical mentors (including Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and above all Woody Guthrie) and those with whom he grew to musical maturity (Lee Hays, Bess Lomax Hawes, Mill Lampbell, Sis Cunningham, Ronnie Gilbert, and many others) provided the education and inspiration Seeger's hungry mind and heart were more than ready to exploit. There were those like Woody who consciously strove to educate the young, idealistic, naïve Seeger in the ways of the world and the ways of the folk, but the truth is that Seeger was a sponge, soaking up new ideas and licks as fast as they came, convinced he had a date with destiny even as he despaired of ever amounting to anything [see chapter 2, entry 10].

If specific relationships were crucial to Seeger's growth, these occurred against the backdrop of a time and place that framed them in particular ways. Seeger came from an old genteel Yankee family, yet one that had largely lost its money. He went to boarding school as a scholarship student during the Depression, and then on to Harvard (until he dropped/flunked out) as massive unemployment, the rise of fascism, and the opening skirmishes of World War II emerged. The old Yankee values—honor, duty, fairness, self-reliance—confronted a world that seemed to have little to do with the world those values assumed; nonetheless, it was his interpretation of those very values in the context of that world in turmoil that led Seeger to position himself in ways some of his ancestors would hardly have understood, allying himself with an international working class against the power of the elite class from which he descended.

Coming of age in the late '30s, in New York, in the left-wing world that grew up around the Communist Party and other progressive groups—an environment that included not only political groupings but all variety of cultural initiatives tied to those groups—was a heady experience. In that ferment, Seeger helped form the Almanac Singers, in many ways the group that remains closest to Seeger's ideal: "We were a strange combination of people and we put out some good songs, and lived through exciting times," he recalled many years later in a piece

written just for his fellow Almanacs [see chapter 2, entry 6]. "We participated in these exciting times.... We called ourselves Communists. Probably none of us agree even now exactly on the definition of Communism. But I don't think any of us are ashamed of what we did way back in the days of 1941 and '42."

The Popular Front policy of the Communist Party in the 1930s had already laid the groundwork for a political and cultural philosophy that encouraged alliances beyond the narrow confines of just the Left, a conflating of the radical class-struggle tenets of Marxism with the homegrown radical democratic tradition of Tom Paine, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. With the exception of the years of the Stalin-Hitler pact between August 1939 and June 1941 [see chapter 2, entry 6], it was entirely possible to be a dedicated leftist and still celebrate existing American society: "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism," Community Party leader Earl Browder had famously declared in 1935.

Against the background of these (shifting) theoretical and political concerns, the practical daily task was the building of industrial labor unions, and it was this task beyond any that preoccupied Seeger and his friends. The Almanacs' best-known album was called *Talking Union;* their famous, almost mythical, 1941 tour was designed to support organizing efforts of the newly emerging Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) [see chapter 2, entry 6]. In this critical period of Seeger's formation, if one objective summed up what he wanted to do, it was to build "a singing union movement."

A worldview that combined culture with politics and socialism with Americanism was relatively easy to sustain in the years of World War II. In the army, Seeger was able to serve his country and fight fascism at one and the same time. In the aftermath of the war, however, that conflation was no longer possible. As the cold war set in, anticommunism became a hysteria in the United States; Communists, Communist allies, and leftists and liberals of many stripes became subject to legal and economic sanctions. Seeger suffered being blacklisted for the next two decades, on the one hand a great economic hardship, but on the other (as Dick Flacks has argued[2] and Seeger himself has said), a narrowing of commercial opportunities that compelled him to further develop the very grassroots democratic approach that was implicit in the worldview he inherited from his father, visible in his work with the Almanacs before the war, and which came to be the epitome of what he stood for: singing *with* people rather than *to* people.

The blacklist was ongoing; similarly, the threat of going to prison for contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with investigations into Communist "subversion" by the House Un-American Activities

2. "Richard Flacks on Pete Seeger." www.truthdig.com/arts_culture/item/200090806_richard_flacks_on_ pete_seeger/, August 7, 2009.

Committee (HUAC) hung over his head for five years, from 1957 to 1962. But a single event, born of the same hysteria, may have marked Seeger more than either of these—the Peekskill riot of September 1949 [see chapter 5, entry 5]. His car and over a thousand other cars were stoned by right-wing anti-Communists as they left a performance, the lives of his family endangered; sixty years later, conversations with Seeger still tend to circle back to that night as pivotal, a first-hand look at what a world of fascism might really mean, a personal touchstone and reason for never giving up his political work.

Seeger and his family survived that day, survived the blacklist, survived the threat of imprisonment, and gradually the country caught up with him. As the great social movements of the 1960s and '70s changed the nation, Seeger emerged first as a hero to the younger generation of activists, and eventually, in large part due to his work starting a clean-up of the Hudson River [see chapter 8], to a broader, more mainstream population. Though to this day he encounters people who hate him for his past, who call him "Stalin's Songbird" and think he's a traitor to his country, he has achieved a level of respectability he could scarcely have imagined when he set out to become a political musician in the late 1930s. He's received, for example, the Presidential Medal of the Arts from Bill Clinton and a Lifetime Legends medal from the Library of Congress. Perhaps the crowning moment of this new status came when, supported by Bruce Springsteen and Tao Seeger, he performed at the 2008 Inaugural Concert for President Barack Obama. There, in the center of the spotlight, he sang Woody's greatest song, "This Land Is Your Land," including the long-suppressed verses that question private property and celebrate the radical democracy, the small "c" communism, in which he's always believed—a very sweet moment, earned by a lifetime of commitment.

We were asked to take on this project by Dean Birkenkamp of Paradigm Publishers in the spring of 2009. At the time, Dean spoke (with some slight reverence) of "The Barn" on Seeger's land in Beacon, New York, which, it was rumored, held all sorts of papers from Seeger's past. David Dunaway, author of the most authoritative of the Seeger biographies, *How Can I Keep From Singing?,* had already made use of many of those files, but Dean's idea, which he'd discussed the previous fall with Pete, was that a book could be created exclusively from Seeger's writings, drawing on his published writings and some of the many unpublished pieces that could be found in the file cabinets, cardboard boxes, and accordion folders to be found in The Barn and the loft office in Seeger's house. The published writings were fairly daunting in themselves—Seeger has written or cowritten more than thirty books (including songbooks), he contributed a regular column called "Johnny Appleseed, Jr." (later simply "Appleseeds") to *Sing Out!* magazine for over fifty years, and he

has penned an astounding number of book forwards, articles for other journals, album liner notes, and so on. The unpublished materials, it turned out, were equally daunting: 70 years' worth of letters, notes to himself, diaries, lists, and so forth.

For a year and a half, we drove over to Seeger's house a few times a month, going through everything he had, reading it all piece by piece and scanning anything that seemed important. ("I believe you're going to know more about me than I do," Pete told us once, with a chuckle.) The thousands of letters, to and from him (he kept carbons from very early on), were particularly striking. Although we were only planning on using those from him (since this was a collection of *his* writings), it was hard not to be fascinated by the letters that he received. The collection embodied the Seegers' democratic perspective, with letters from former presidents lying in a folder next to letters from a fan, an inmate in a prison down the road, an activist in South Africa. The tone of many of the letter writers mirrors that perspective, an equation of all letters as equally important, equally familiar, even from those who don't know him personally. People send him their stories and songs and poetry; they feel like he's their personal friend. For many years, he and Toshi personally answered every one of these letters.

The letters that arrive are stunning in another way as well: many arrive from political activists, from all over the world, in all kinds of situations—in prison, in struggle, in defeat, in victory. One message appears over and over: "Thank you for your music! It's helped me bear the burdens and celebrate the joy of my struggle."

Once we had scanned everything we thought might be of use, we spent another year reading and re-reading it all, picking the pieces we thought most important and trying to form chapters around themes. As folksingers rework the old folk songs they interpret, Seeger uses and reuses his own ideas, refashioning them for different purposes and audiences, revising them until he feels satisfied with how they turn out. Thus, different versions of pieces often turned up in different forms, and in those cases, we chose the one that we felt best represented the theme he was developing.

Above all, our goal was to let Seeger's voice come through with as little interference from us as possible (and indeed, after this introduction you will hear very, very little from us again). We have edited only to maintain focus or clarify passages we thought hard to follow because of references that might be unrecognized by some readers, or because words were obviously missing, or to add or omit punctuation when we thought it made Seeger's intent clearer. We have signaled where we omitted more than a few words by adding an ellipsis. But by and large, we have presented these writings as Seeger originally wrote them. We have added explanatory footnotes when needed; explanatory footnotes

written by Seeger (either at the time or in later readings) are followed by his initials and presented in quotation marks.

Our agreement with Pete was that he would be able to read everything we wanted to include and reject anything he didn't want to appear. True to his editor's nature, he did indeed read everything, commenting on many things, filling the margins of some readings with his suggested edits. But he did not ask us to remove a single entry.

"Don't make me out to be a saint" is what he told us, and we have held him to his word. Our intent in our selections has never been to beatify Seeger, or make him look good (or bad). Our goal has been to present the perspective of a fascinating man of our times, to trace his evolution as he struggled to make sense of a world in pain and the groups of people who wanted to make the world a better place. Our thanks to Pete, and to Toshi, Danny, Mika, and Tinya (son and daughters), for letting us try to do that.

Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal
Middletown, Connecticut, and New York City

Part 1
The Early Years: 1919–1947

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1

Growing Up (1919–1934)

"My Family Background," 1957

Draft of letter to Paul Ross,[1] dated
May 10, 1957; found in Seeger files

Dear Paul,

You wanted some résumé of my family background and life, so I sit me down and try to organize a teeming memory.

First of all, like many people, 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. Now, at the sage and sober age of 38 I have finally come around to assess them more objectively, to be grateful for their strength and character, for their making it possible for me to be alive on this world today, and to realize that a good honest streak of independency has run through them for as much of the last three hundred years as I know about.

Most of them seemed to be teachers, doctors, teachers, preachers, businessmen, teachers, artists, writers, or teachers. The generations seem shot through with pedagogues. In this century, both parents, several brothers, aunts, and uncles have all been teachers. Going back a few generations, we find several doctors, and more teachers. Back further, even a few soldiers, perhaps a lawyer, a hymn writer, and more teachers. Even old Elder Brewster on the Mayflower was as much a scholar as anything else. So: my hat off to them all, and the pursuit of knowledge. "Where men gather to seek truth, that spot is holy ground." Probably the most financially successful was old great grandpa Charlier,

1. Seeger's attorney who represented him during the blacklist years. See chapter 5.

whose select Institute was one of New York's most elegant a century ago. But then he was the only one also ever brought before a congressional committee and asked how come some rich men's sons were arranging bribes to congressmen for West Point applications. So maybe it's just as well most of them weren't too successful.

As for radicals, Lordy, the family seems shot through with them, too. In earlier centuries, this took the form of religious protest: Pilgrims, puritans—and I'm proud to see a lot of Quakers around, on both sides of the family (and now I find, in Toshi's family, too). Even great grandpa Charlier was the son of a French Huguenot preacher.

Later, the radicalism took a more political turn. 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. Even the businessman I knew best, my grandfather, had the independence to quit his job in the local bank (Springfield, Mass.) and seek his fortune in Mexico. Made it, or at least got it. Lost a good deal of it, I'm told, when a partner defaulted and a firm went bankrupt. My grandfather spent many years of his life conscientiously paying off every single debt, although he was not legally required to do so.

The main radicals in the 20th Century seem to have been of an aesthetic bent. I won't mention the respectable relative who took me (at age 14) walking in the New York May Day parade. In those days, as the *New Yorker* magazine recently remarked, everyone was a social reformer. Sitting around the house without a job, it was the natural thing to do. I will mention my uncle Alan, whom I never knew. He was killed in 1914. He was a Shelley[2] type poet. I only found this out recently. As a kid, I was unable to make out his poetry. But now, upon reading it, I find lots of it very good. He was in the famous Harvard class of 1910, along with Lippman,[3] Broun,[4] and his friend John Reed.[5] My grandparents thought him a ne'er-do-well, because he then wouldn't settle down to the life of a respectable businessman. Instead he went to France, fell in love with the country and the people, and when the First World War broke out, enlisted in the Foreign Legion, and was the second American to be killed. He left behind a slim volume of verse, and some miscellaneous writings,

2. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was an English Romantic poet, known for combining elements of fantasy and reality in intensely personal poems.
3. Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) was a political commentator and journalist who co-founded *The New Republic* magazine.
4. Heywood Broun (1888–1939) was a journalist and the founder of a journalists' labor union, the American Newspaper Guild.
5. John Reed (1887–1920) was a journalist, war correspondent, and Communist activist, best known for *Ten Days That Shook the World*, his first-person account of the Russian Revolution in 1917.

to tell what a wonderful contribution he could have made, had he lived. As I say, I only recently appreciated this. When I (at age 6) was forced to read before the 2nd grade class (mispronouncing almost every word): "I have a rennn—dezzz—voozz with death …" Poor Uncle Alan!

Oh, and in this century, miscellaneous other relatives experimented with Christian Science, yogism, nudism, advocated woman's suffrage, pacifism, vegetarianism, organic gardening, and one was part of the NY *Daily Worker.*[6] This might all add up to sound like a family full of crackpots, but believe me, they have all have all been well-thought-of members of their communities. It does all point up to a remarkable streak of independence and I, at age 38, take my hat off to it.

Me? I was born in 1919. Never had to go hungry, but witnessed a good deal of family penny pinching. Been at boarding school almost all my life, first starting at aged five. Went for five years to a small private progressive school in Connecticut, where I became a fervent disciple of Ernest Thompson Seton, the Canadian naturalist, whose descriptions of the primitive communist lives of the American Indian communities seemed ideal to me. Loved the woods and hills above all, till I was sixteen. Once argued that I wanted to be a hermit, live by myself on a mountainside, and let the sinful world go its way. (Cracks Toshi now: Yeah, but why ask your wife to do it too?)

"All Mixed Up," 2009

From *Where Have All the Flowers Gone,* Revised Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009

My mother was a good violinist.[7] My father was head of the music department at the University of California, Berkeley. But, he got radicalized by some fellow professors. In 1918 he was making speeches against imperialist war and got fired. Back east he got the great idea to take the music of Bach and Beethoven out to the countryside. He built one of America's first automobile trailers in his parents' barn in upstate New York. It looked more like a covered wagon, with a canvas top and [big wheels with] four solid rubber tires, pulled by a Model T Ford. It was to be kind of a one-family Chautauqua[8] tour.

6. *The Daily Worker* was the most important newspaper published by the Communist Party USA, beginning in 1924.

7. "Constance De Clyvver Edson (1886–1975) was ⅜ English descent, ¼ French, ¼ Irish, ⅛ Dutch. My father, Charles Louis Seeger (1886–1978), was ⅛ German and the rest English settlers in Massachusetts. So far as I know. One never knows what went on between the sheets. We're all distant cousins, all 7-plus billion of us. A grandfather and a great-grandmother played piano, another could rattle the bones, another loved to sing and dance, into her 70s." —P. S.

8. Chautauqua tours were touring lecture series, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. The tours were aimed at educating adults about issues of the day, usually catering to a Christian populist viewpoint.

But, roads in 1921 were mostly unpaved. The Tin Lizzie [slang for a Model T] pulled the trailer at an average speed of 20 to 25 miles an hour. My mother had to wash my diapers in an iron pot over an open fire. She finally said, "Charlie, this is not going to work." They returned to New York and got jobs teaching at the Institute of Musical Art (now Juilliard). It was a world of high ideals, long training, great discipline. But, early in life I learned that rules were made to be broken. Henry Cowell,[9] the modern composer, was a family friend. When I was six, I remember him playing the piano with his fists.

My mother had hoped that one of her children would play the violin. She bought miniature fiddles for my two older brothers. They rebelled. When I came along my father said, "Oh, let Peter enjoy himself." But she left musical instruments all around the house. I remember having fun at age four or five making a racket on Autoharp, pennywhistle, marimba, a pull-push accordion, a piano, a pump organ. All by ear.

At age eight I was given a ukulele. Started picking out chords, learning their names. At boarding school I learned popular tunes of the day. Silly words but clever rhymes. Plunk, plunk. My father was researching some of the few collections of folk music available in those days. I learned from him that there were often different versions of the same song. People changed words, melody, made up new verses. This was an important lesson: you can choose the version of the song you want to sing.

"A Laissez-faire ***Upbringing," 1972***

From *The Incompleat Folksinger,* Simon and Schuster, 1972

I said I had a *laissez-faire* upbringing. I'm forever grateful for it. From age eight I was away at boarding school. It was the decade when the term "progressive education" first flowered. Our class would take up a "project" (ancient Egypt, the Middle Ages, etc.). We'd write a play about some event in those times, stage it and act in it. Shop class, English class, even math would be drawn into it. The main thing we all got from it: learning, real learning, is fun.

And summers at home we were forever building things. One summer it was model boats, another summer model airplanes. Music? We made music for the fun of it. My parents, bless them, decided to let me find out for myself what kind of music I liked.

9. Cowell (1897–1965), a composer and music theorist who studied under Charles Seeger while he was a member of the faculty at UC Berkeley, is among the most important American avant-garde composers of the twentieth century. In addition to his experiments in Western music, Cowell was a student of many other musics of the world, occasionally helping to compile and writing liner notes for Folkways releases in the world music genre.

I did get one strict lesson at school, which I'll not forget. At age fourteen I started a school newspaper, just for the hell of it.[10] It was in competition with the official school paper, which was dull, respectable, and always late. Mine was pure Free Enterprise, a mimeographed weekly; I gathered the news, typed it up, sold it for a nickel, and kept the money.

But after a few months I'd had my kicks and decided to quit it. The headmaster called me in. "Peter, I think you ought to continue the paper." He explained that the wealthy old woman who paid the school's deficit liked reading it; its informal tone made her feel closer to the school. Her journalist friends, the young Alsop brothers,[11] had complimented her on it.

I demurred. It's a lot of work, says I, and doesn't leave me as much free time as I'd like. But the headmaster was firm. "Better get your copy for next week's issue."

My favorite teacher sided with the headmaster. "You can't be a butterfly all your life, Peter." So for two more years I brought it out on schedule. Years later I discovered that this was why I got a complete scholarship to an otherwise rather expensive school. But just as valuable was what I learned in running the *Avon Weekly Newsletter*: typing, writing, editing, cartooning, and learning how to walk up to a stranger and try to ask the right questions. The goofs I made! Edna St. Vincent Millay[12] visited the school when we put on her play *Aria Da Capo,* an antiwar allegory. (With my hair in curls, I'd played the female lead—Avon was not co-ed).

The English teacher said I should take the opportunity to get an interview with her. "She's an important modern poet."

"What the heck will I ask her?"

"Don't be silly."

So I found myself seated awkwardly before this demure and beautiful woman, blurting out, "What do you think of Shakespeare?"

"I Would Like to Buy a Big Banjo," 1932

Letter to Constance de Clyver Edson Seeger from Avon Old Farms boarding school, Fall 1932; found in Seeger files

Dearest Mama,

I'm really awful mad at myself for not writing sooner, I'd put it off and put it off and put it off until I just had to.

---

10. "No. I hoped to make a few nickels." —P. S.
11. Joseph and Stewart Alsop, newspaper columnists who co-wrote a column for the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1945 to 1958, were natives of Avon, Connecticut, where Seeger's boarding school was located.
12. Millay (1892–1950) was a feminist playwright and poet whose works often addressed the horrors of war.

I'm getting along pretty well and am fitting in very well with everything. Did you get the card of my monthly marks? I got an "A", a "D", a few "Cs", and a "B". I'll try to pull 'em up because I know that they aren't very good.

I'm going to try and write one letter every day to somebody or other at least. Some time along now, pretty soon, there will be what is called a "long weekend" and if one wants to, one may come home for it. May I? I'll write as soon as I find out when it is.

If one gets on the Dean's list one may get an extra weekend home and so I'm going to try and get on it.

I think I'll start a diary. It would be terribly useful only I wouldn't know what to put in it. And then I'd put off writing something down that night and put it off till evening, the next morning, and so on.

I would like to buy a big banjo and play in the very little jazz band up here that has just been started. I have been practicing on one of the masters' banjos but it's awful awkward to keep borrowing it. It's not half so hard to play one as I thought and I've already learned about ten chords the last week and can read "B# dim." and play something that sounds okay and is technically correct. I'm having lots of fun. The music teacher said that he would go into Hartford with me and help me choose one from a pawn shop and I could use my allowance money to get it if it wasn't over nine dollars or so. Will you let me get one? Please.

Your loving son,
Peter

"I'd Like to Buy a Good Banjo," 1933

Letter to Constance De Clyver Edson Seeger from Avon Old Farms boarding school, Winter 1933; found in Seeger files

Dearest Mama,

How are you? Don't work too hard. I'm getting along quite well. My shoe-shining business is thriving, only now that there is so much snow on the ground, shoes get wet and then they don't take a shine.

I was wondering what I should do about my banjo, you see, being second hand, as it is, it will naturally cost quite a bit to repair it because small parts will be constantly falling apart or breaking. Only two days ago one of the pegs broke from long wear and I will have to buy a new one. Do you think that I should spend $15 or $20 of my savings in the bank to buy a good banjo with a nice tone and everything? I'd like to a lot and honestly I think that it would be worth it because I'm awfully interested in the banjo and I'd like to learn how to play it really well.

You know, so I can dance around on it the way some of the guys who play over the radio can.

Our orchestra is coming along very well and last night we played for supper. It made quite a hit. The only trouble is trying to get guys to harmonize and practice. (Y'know, these temperamental artists!) But we're having heaps of fun.

Give my love to everybody and please write me.

Peter

"On Awakening in Camp the Morning After a Snowfall," 1934

From *The Winged Beaver,* Avon Old Farms' literary magazine

Still, white trees,
Softly drawn on a blue sky,
Are weighted down
With the white ashes of
Wahkonda's pipe,
Now he has finished smoking.

Only a murmur's heard,
Where once proud waters flowed.
A deer drinks at black waters,
Then bounds away.

Up! Up! Make the fire,
Chop the ice from the spring below!
Up! Up! And look at the world!
It's white in a foot of snow!

Still, white trees,
Softly drawn on a blue sky,
Are weighted down
With the white ashes of
Wahkonda' s pipe,
Now he's finished smoking.

"Forbidden," 1934

Found in Seeger files

I saw a frightened child
Peering through a crack
Which looked out on the courtyard of the world.

His mind was full of wonder
Trying hard to comprehend
The forbidden, secret, good things that he saw.

But voices of guardians,
The secret, silent guardians,
Came floating down the hallway, and he fled

I saw him again
And he'd brought along a chisel,
Trying, trying, to see more clearly.
But once again the guardians,
The stealthy, ghostly guardians
Came gliding down the passageway.
Again he fled.

"That's forbidden."
"That's not right."
"Run and save yourself
Before you fall to Hell."

And then, very satisfied,
They walked slowly back
With their rusty, unused keys
In their mouths.

I've never seen him since,
For he's stayed
Where all good children should.
But he's dropped his chisel.
Let's pick it up.

"An Interview," 1935

From the *Avon Weekly Newsletter,* May 7, 1935

Ladies and Gentlemen: We here present to you an interview at last, a human interest episode, too.

Sunday afternoon while seeing Bill Worrall for some dope of the *Winged Beaver,* we were ignominiously cornered by those two athletic gentlemen, Messrs. Geyelin and Harriman. There was nothing to do about it; they wanted themselves interviewed, and had the upper hand, so the following conversation ensued:

Mr. H.—"Say, listen; we're getting pretty sore. Here I've been subscribing to your newssheet all year and you haven't had my name in once."

Mr. G.—"Well, the only time I get my name in is when I go to the infirmary, and that isn't very good publicity."

Etc. When we told them that all they needed was to do something and we would print it if possible, they obliged by relating achievements and heroic deeds known previously (as far as we can find out) to none but themselves, which unfortunately, we have now forgotten. (Apologies to Mr. H. and Mr. G.) But at last it ended:

"You can quote us on that, too."

"Crow Shooting," c. 1935

From the *Avon Weekly Newsletter*

Through the kindness of "Brooks," Baekeland's father, the school now has a very fine owl decoy and also a crow call. Commander Hunter and Mr. Thayer will soon rig up a place for the "Avon Owl" to roost, so that boys from a blind may be able to make him flap his wings and appear lifelike. The owl plus the crow call should attract many birds to the vicinity of the blinds, so that boys can shoot them. Crow shooting is an excellent sport, and has the advantage of killing a very undesirable bird. They (the crows) eat birds' eggs and are known to do away with a half grown chicken. Another black mark against them is the fact that they make sufficient noise to wake up those who do not sleep soundly in the morning. Boys interested in crow shooting should buy 5 cent shot and then see Commander Hunter.

2

Becoming a "Folk Singer" (1935–1947)

"The American Folk Song Revival," 1963

Dated November 1963; found in Seeger files

When I was a child, it seemed to me that there were two kinds of music: "Good" music, like Bach and Beethoven, all of which came from Europe. And American popular songs which one could hear on the phonograph or radio. I liked to sing but the words of the "art songs" didn't seem very interesting. And the words of the "pop" songs were obviously pretty cheap and trivial.

Oh, there was one other kind of music: the kind of songs we were taught in school. Some of them weren't bad. But most had rather wishy-washy words, and sometimes downright silly words. I didn't know then, as I know now, that often a good folksong was spoiled when they put it into a school songbook: they took all the sex out of it, took all the protest out of it. In the schoolbooks these were called "folksongs," but frankly, they weren't very interesting to me or the other children. They were emasculated folksongs.

Then in 1935 I discovered folksongs with teeth. I was sixteen years old, and met some folklorists who had spent years collecting songs among the poorest of the working people of the country: Irish miners and railroad workers, Negro cotton farmers from the deep south, and among the most musical were the white settlers, "backwoodsmen," who had remained in isolated small mountain communities while the tides of "civilization" flowed around and past them.

I had never heard any of these songs before. 95 percent of Americans had not heard these songs. It was understandable. We Americans are an uprooted people. Our ancestors crossed an ocean. Then we were

uprooted to go west in covered wagons. Worst of all, we then went to live among strangers in strange cities, working in factories and offices. We had, most of us, completely lost the rich heritages of folk music which our ancestors had possessed in various parts of Europe. So the average American, if he liked music, was told that he should learn the foreign "art" music. If he wanted something more American, he was stuck with the cheap popular music, which changed in fashion from year to year, as its promoters restlessly sought new ways of making money. (Do you know Oscar Wilde's definition of fashion? "A form of ugliness so unbearable it must be changed every few months.")

In the 1930s some of the younger folklorists such as Alan Lomax[1] said, "American folk music is too good to die out. Let's give it back to the folks, and see if it can grow and flourish again." And I seized upon it with enthusiasm. Here were songs with words full of all the richness and variety of life: love, hate, satire, protest against injustice. Fine poetry. Fine melodies that had stood the test of time. I said to myself, "These are great songs. Twice as good as anything that the Tin Pan Alley songwriters are writing. Ten times as good as anything Stephen Foster wrote. And it's American down to the core."

And I, born in New York City, started learning songs of Kentucky miners, Wisconsin lumberjacks, and Texas farmers. It appears I was just one of the first of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Americans from the city, who felt the same way.

"I Dropped Out of College," 2009

From *Where Have All the Flowers Gone,* Revised Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009

I dropped out of college in 1938, aged 19. Got too interested in politics. Let my marks slip. Lost my scholarship. Family finances too low.

I'd run school newspapers for six years in boarding schools, so I looked for a job as a reporter on a newspaper. No luck. Studied watercolor painting for a short while. Spent a summer bicycling, camping, painting watercolor pictures of farmers' houses in return for food.

In the winter of 1939, I was a member of a young artists group in New York City. It was a branch of the Young Communist League. We met weekly, 25 to 50 of us, in a loft near 14th Street. Come spring I helped build a set of puppets. Come summer I joined three others giving puppet shows in the small towns of upstate New York. In August 20,000 dairy farmers went on strike against Bordens and Sheffields, the big companies that dictated the price of milk. Farmers were getting 2 cents a quart ($1 for a 48-qt. can), when milk was selling for 10–12 cents a quart in stores.

1. Lomax (1915–2002) was, with his father, John, among the most important early collectors of folk, country, blues, and other marginalized musics. See chapter 3.

Our puppet show went from strike meeting to strike meeting. I played the part of a cow who tells the farmer he's foolish not to get together with other farmers to demand a decent return for their labor. Between acts I sang "The Farmer Is the Man That Feeds Them All" in front of the stage. And it wasn't hard to change the 1920 cotton farmers' song, "Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat, How in the World Can a Poor Man Eat," to sing it to dairy farmers as "One Dollar Milk and 40 Cent Meat." I also changed "Pretty Polly," a Kentucky ballad about seduction and murder, into "Mister Farmer," telling how they were seduced and cheated by the big-money boys.

Writing songs was a heady experience. The folk process was working for me. In the fall I was persuaded by Alan Lomax to quit looking for a job on a newspaper and come to Washington to help him go through stacks of old country music records looking for interesting songs.

And in February 1940 Woody Guthrie hitched from California to the New York Island, and my life was never the same again.

Woody must have liked my banjo picking, because everything else about me must have seemed pretty strange to him. I didn't drink or smoke or chase girls. He said to someone, "That Seeger guy is the youngest man I ever knew."

"This Young Fella, Pete," 1999

From *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie,* Wesleyan University Press, 1999

In February [1946] Woody had written "This Land Is Your Land" as he hitchhiked across the nation. Some of his other well-known songs—"So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Do Re Mi"—he had already written a few years before. Woody came to New York because Will Geer, who by this time was in New York playing the lead in the Broadway play *Tobacco Road,* had written Woody that he'd help find work for him. Will got the use of the theater for a midnight benefit concert for California farmworkers. In addition to Will, the evening also featured Burl Ives, Leadbelly, Josh White,[2] Earl Robinson,[3] Aunt Molly Jackson,[4] and the Golden Gate Quartet,[5] among others. I was allowed to sing one song on the program because my friend folklorist Alan Lomax insisted on it. I wasn't entirely welcome; it was a full program and there were a lot of dependable performers already part of it. But Alan said, "If you're asking me to be on it, you've got to have this young fella, Pete." So the director gave me one song to sing. I remember

2. White (1914–1969) was a folk singer and civil rights activist. He became among the first black musicians to gain mainstream success in the 1940s. White, who was a personal friend of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, reached a career peak in the early 1950s on a goodwill tour of Europe. While he was in Europe, the FBI began investigating White's Communist affiliations, and he was subsequently blacklisted.

3. Earl Robinson (1910–1991) was a classical composer and a folksinger with whom Seeger collaborated on many recordings of labor songs.

walking out to the front of the stage and singing, very amateurishly, the outlaw ballad "John Hardy." I got a smattering of polite applause.

Woody was the star of the show. This midnight concert was a benefit for California agricultural workers, and there was Woody, a genuine Okie with a cowboy hat shoved back on his head. He'd tell a joke and sing a song, and then he'd tell another joke. He must have been onstage for twenty minutes, more than any other member of the cast. Backstage, he was still singing, so I got to accompany him with my banjo. We got well acquainted that night.

I was a very naïve, puritanical New Englander. It's a wonder Woody put up with me. But I was a pretty good banjo picker who also happened to have a good ear. I could find the right notes to accompany him anytime. I didn't try anything too fancy. Woody didn't like a lot of fancy chords, so I stuck to the chords he wanted.

"So Many Different Schemes in the Wind," 1940

Letter to his grandmother from the Division of Music at the Library of Congress, February 16, 1940; found in Seeger files

Dear Grandmother,

Note by the letterhead that I am now a man of position. I type out cards, and listen to and file phonograph records for my friend Alan Lomax, who is Librarian in charge of the Archive of American Folk-Song here. All in all, it is very interesting and enjoyable work.

Life down here is always full of a lot of talk. New projects, books, shows, trips, jobs, etc., etc. In a way, my position is that of lying in wait for some nice, juicy opportunity to float unsuspectingly by—one that I can capably swallow—then I jump out and grab it.

On March 3rd, in the theatre where Tobacco Road is given, the folk music program that was discussed last December will take place. It is much different from what was originally envisaged, and I have a good deal smaller part, but it is all for the best, and may lead to more programs of folk music in the future. I will be up in New York between now and then, helping to get things ready—I think and hope—and shall, I trust, see you.

4. Jackson (1880–1960) was a folk singer and activist, especially as a member of the United Mine Workers, for which she wrote many pro-union songs. Jackson and her songs were discovered in Kentucky in 1931, and she traveled to New York, where, along with raising money for union causes in Kentucky, she became a part of the New York City folk scene.

5. The Golden Gate Quartet was an all-black vocal gospel music group with a rotating membership. The Quartet achieved great fame in its time and sang at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration in 1941, the first black group to sing at a presidential inauguration.

I wish you would give my love to Elie and Anita,[6] and hand them this letter—as a matter of fact. I would like to know what they are doing these days.

I am living less on my own reputation, as I was in New York, and more on my friends and associates, whose influence pulls me up. March eighth I go to sing at a conference of the Progressive Education Association at the Mayflower Hotel. What do you think?! In a dress suit, I understand. I guess I'll borrow father's. About the same type of songs as I sung at the Earl Browder[7] meeting last fall, which you remember, but what a far cry it is! Well, we shall see what the future brings. I really don't know what to expect myself; there are so many different schemes in the wind.

You will be glad to know that I am eating and sleeping regularly.

The children[8] are thriving, as one's ears tell one. Peggy is becoming a little girl. And the youngest is learning to talk. Peggy and Mike are learning to play the piano—not by intention of their parents, especially, but because they have insisted on being allowed to poke out tunes. I have heard the first four measures of "Silent Night" played consecutively for fifty minutes by Peggy. Then a little later she was at it again for another half hour.

Well, my love to yourself and everyone.
Pete

"The Only Sensible Way to Travel," c. 1947

Early draft of a piece which eventually saw publication in *The Incompleat Folksinger,* Simon and Schuster, 1972; found in Seeger files

The first train I ever hitched a ride on was in [St. Joseph], Missouri. Up until that time I'd only hitch-hiked along the highways. Some professional hoboes assured me, however, that the only sensible way to travel was by freight. After lurking around the yards all night, I finally jumped on what I thought was the right train, only to find after an hour of switching back and forth that I had been shunted on a siding.

Later on, I got the right train, but when we finally pulled into Lincoln, Nebraska, where I was assured that I'd have to jump off before the

6. Elie Edson (~1882–1971), Seeger's uncle on his mother's side, and Anita Pollitzer (1894–1975), his wife. Edson was a press agent for theater actors, and Pollitzer was a women's rights activist who campaigned for women's suffrage in the early twentieth century.
7. Browder (1891–1973) served as General Secretary of the Communist Party USA from 1929 to 1945. He was a comparatively moderate leader and expressed support for Popular Front policies, embracing some facets of establishment politics, including Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Toward the end of World War II, he sought to establish the Communist Party USA as independent from Soviet influence, even declaring that Communism and capitalism were not mutually exclusive. These attitudes alienated many members of the Party, and Browder was removed from power and expelled from the Party in 1946.
8. Charles Seeger (1886–1979) and Constance de Clyver Edson (1886–1975), Pete Seeger's mother, divorced in 1927. In 1932, Charles married Ruth Porter Crawford

yard bulls came around to check the cars, in my inexperience I broke my banjo when jumping off. This really put me in a spot, since it was the only way I had to make a living. I hocked a small camera I had for a five-dollar guitar, and started playing in saloons. In about three days I was able to get the camera out of hock and continued west, exploring one new city after another.

In Butte, Montana, I told some members of the local miners union that I knew some miners' songs, and they asked me to sing at the next union meeting. I had planned to catch a freight train east at nine o'clock, and as the agenda grew long, I became afraid I wouldn't be able to make it. I heard the train whistle down at the foot of a hill, and told the chairman that I was afraid I would have to go on then or not at all, so he put me on, I sang a few songs, and then he gave me a check for five dollars. I looked at it in dismay, because it was of absolutely no use to me, since I didn't know where I could cash it, "Oh," says he, "the bar downstairs will take care of this for you." Down I run, and what did they give me but five silver dollars. I started running downhill and the damn things kept falling out of my jeans pocket, rolling down the sidewalk, and me trying to find then in the grass—and all the time that train whistling down at the bottom of the hill, just like it's ready to start. Finally, I never did find one of the silver dollars and ran on without it. Considering that it was 20 percent of my total capital, you can see I really wanted to catch that train.

P. S., I did.

"History of the Almanacs," 1987

From a letter to Millard Lampell, dated October 1, 1987; found in Seeger files

Dear Mill,

I was talking with Harold Leventhal[9] the other day that sooner or later somebody will try and make a novel or a play or a movie out of the story of the Almanac Singers. It is a dramatic story with humor and tragedy all wrapped in it on several different levels, personal and political and musical. A natural. I thought I'd put down my version here.

Here goes:

I returned to New York City in the fall of 1940, after having spent five or six months hitchhiking around the South and West, and most recently to New England. I believe it was the month of December, but it might have been early January, when I tackled the problem of the manuscript

(1901–1953). Together they had four children: Mike (1933–2009), Margaret "Peggy" (b. 1935), Barbara (b. 1937) and Penny (1943–1994). Mike and Peggy both had successful musical careers, Mike with the New Lost City Ramblers and Peggy as a solo artist and with her husband, Ewan MacColl.

9. Harold Leventhal (1919–2005) began managing The Weavers, Seeger's commercially

to the book, *Hard-hitting Songs,*[10] and wondering whether I should try and find a publisher for it. At that time, somebody told me that a man named Lee Hays, who used to teach at Commonwealth College, was in New York, also trying to find a publisher for a book of union songs. And it seemed to me logical that we should get together and not duplicate each other's work, or at least not get in each other's way too much. Perhaps we could join forces. I don't know whether I called him up first or he called me; but I remember coming around to a small dark one-room apartment where Lee and Mill Lampell were staying. I believe it was on the West Side. And we hit it off right away, Lee and me, and Mill too. Lee pointed out that he could use my banjo accompaniment, and I knew that he knew a lot of great songs and was a good songleader. So we teamed up together and started singing at some little fundraising parties, I guess in January, 1941. And pretty soon Mill was joining us, although Mill made no claim to being a singer or musician. He was very quick at making up verses, which we always loved to do, adding new verses to "Crawdad," or whatever song we happened to be singing, about the latest headline of the day.

I believe it was about February when we decided really we should get a name for the group. By this time we had got a loft on the corner of 12th St. and 4th Avenue and we had Sunday afternoon songfests with a keg of beer and charging 25 cents and paying the rent. On one of those days, I took out the manuscript for *Hard-hitting Songs* and started leafing through it, trying to find ideas for a name for this trio. I came to the word, "almanac." Lee was sprawled out on another bed twelve feet away, and he says, "Wait a minute; wait a minute. You know, back in Arkansas there were really two books that a poor farmer might know about: the Bible would help him get through the next world, but the Almanac would help him through this world. And we have an Almanac too of sorts, although not everybody knows how to read it. And why don't we call ourselves the Almanac Singers." Mill and I must have agreed pretty quickly. I don't remember there being much argument.

And so we were the Almanac Singers, I think probably from late February on. And we were getting publicity in the *Daily Worker* because we had the sassiest songs about the drive of Franklin Roosevelt and others to have the U.S.A. join the war over in Europe on the side of England. Roosevelt had said, "[W]e must be neutral, but we do not have to be neutral in our sympathies." And pretty soon all sorts of help was going over to England. Well, we were making up verses according to the Communist Party line of that time, which was that this was another

successful group of the late 1940s and early 1950s, in 1949. The group disbanded under blacklist pressure in 1952 but regained popularity with their Carnegie Hall concert in December of 1955, an event for which Leventhal was the primary proponent and producer.

10. A joint project between Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Woody Guthrie, *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People* is a selection of Depression-era protest and topical songs, mainly selected by Lomax, arranged and with musical notation by Seeger and Guthrie. Although the project was begun in 1940, the volume wasn't published until 1967.

imperialist war like World War I, and Hitler was bad, but Churchill wasn't that much better. He simply wanted to perpetuate the capitalist system. And we were saying, as pacifists had said for so many decades, it was another rich man's war and a poor man's fight.

Early in February, I believe it was, Lee and I had visited Helen Simon, and sprawled out on the floor of her apartment, we made up the song "Plow Under" and a peace version of "Billy Boy" and a peace version of "Lisa Jane," and these songs were getting around; and in April we recorded them. Several Hollywood actors (Lionel Stander, for one) and some people in the radio business like Joe Thompson and a script writer at the radio, Peter Lyon, arranged for a party at Pete's house near Washington Square, and in one short evening we raised $300, which in those days was worth like $3,000 now. It was a lot of money. And Keynote Records, a small independent label (there were not many independent labels in those days) agreed to put out a record. We were going to call it, *Songs For John Doe.* We recorded it all in two or three hours, and my banjo was the only accompaniment except for Josh White's guitar. Keynote handled the recording session and the distribution, which was mainly through left-wing circles. The Communist Party had bookstores in dozens of cities, and these records went to those bookstores immediately.

I am told that Alan Lomax took a copy of the record to Archibald MacLeish,[11] who was a little bit shocked but could take it all in stride but figured he should play it for the Chief himself, and he took it to Roosevelt. That's what I'm told. And Roosevelt said, "Can we stop this in some way?" And MacLeish said, "Well, not unless you want to break the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." And so Roosevelt, I suppose, shrugged and said, "Well, not many people will hear it. It won't get played on the air." But the songs did get around. Within a few weeks, the Almanacs' record was known from coast to coast in this narrow circle of left-wingers, and peaceniks of one sort or another. So right away Eric Bernay, the head of Keynote Records, asked us if we'd like to make another album, since that was selling well in its small way. And we decided to put out an album of union songs.

We went to the same little studio, as I remember, on Central Park South. This time I know we had Sam Gary and Carol White, and Bess Hawes[12] was there. We must have had six or eight or ten people in the studio, because we wanted to sing, "Union Train." As Lee Hays led off, "What is this I see yonder coming coming coming?" we needed a large group of people to sing like a congregation.

We weren't completely satisfied with the songs which we picked out to sing, and they asked me if I had any suggestions. And I thought of the great

11. MacLeish (1892–1982), a Modernist poet, was the Librarian of Congress under Franklin Roosevelt.
12. Bess Lomax (1921–2009), daughter of John and sister of Alan, was a frequent member of the Almanac Singers and lived in the Almanac House in the early 1940s. Lomax married Butch Hawes in 1942.