



The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger

Alec Wilkinson

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A true American original is brought to life in this rich and lively portrait of Pete Seeger, who, with his musical grace and inextinguishable passion for social justice, transformed folk singing into a high form of peaceful protest in the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing on his extensive talks with Seeger, *New Yorker* writer Alec Wilkinson lets us experience the man's unique blend of independence and commitment, charm, courage, energy, and belief in human equality and American democracy.

We see Seeger instilled with a love of music by his parents, both classically trained musicians; as a teenager, hearing real folk music for the first time; and as a young man, singing with Woody Guthrie and with the Weavers. We learn of his harassment by the government for his political beliefs and his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1949. And we follow his engagement with civil rights, the peace movement, and the environment—especially his work saving the Hudson River and building the ship *Clearwater*. He talks ardently about his own music and that of others, and about the power of music to connect people and bind them to a cause. Finally, we meet Toshi, his wife of nearly sixty years, and members of his family, at the house he built on a mountainside in upstate New York.

The Protest Singer is as spirited and captivating as its subject—an American icon, celebrating his ninetieth birthday.

The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger Details

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From Reader Review The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger for online ebook

John Pilecki says

A good summary of the life of a man who has long been a hero of mine. The transcript of his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955 by itself makes worthwhile adding this book to your bookshelf: A sample, when invoking the 1st Amendment (and risking a jail sentence) rather than the 5th Amendment when refusing to discuss his political affiliations: "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 these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this. I would be very glad to tell you my life if you want to hear of it." A profile in courage. I have included a link that contains glimpses Pete's various activities

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/vid...>

Mark says

The book was short, but provided a nice overview of Pete's life. He was one of my 2 favorite folk singers (Stan Rogers is the other), and one who I've seen live years ago, so this was someone I wanted to learn more about. I am more impressed with Pete now than I already was. An example of how he lived is how he built his own house from scratch along the Hudson, living humbly. He is one of the key people in getting the Hudson much cleaner today than when I lived near it years ago.

De Ongeletterde says

In dit boek schetst Alec Wilkinson een portret van Pete Seeger, die vooral bekend is van songs als "We shall overcome" en "Where have all the flowers gone" en die in één adem te noemen valt met Woody Guthrie als folk-protestzanger. Dit boek vormt een mooie introductie tot wie Seeger is en waar zijn muziek voor staat.

Joanie says

When the author asked Pete Seeger if he could write a book about him he said that too much had been written already and that all the books were too long-what was needed, he said, was a book that could be read in one sitting. I didn't quite finish this in one sitting but had we not been having my son's birthday party on the day I started it, I'm sure that I could have.

This is far from being a complete biography of Seeger's life but it hits a lot of the major highlights. It reads like a conversation with a man recalling his life. If I knew nothing of Seeger's life this book might not have

been enough but after watching the PBS documentary on him I had a general sense of things-the book served as kind of a refresher. Pete Seeger is an amazing person and I am truly impressed with what he has been able to accomplish in his life. Books like this make me feel hopeful that things can change.

Sharon says

In a short book, the author manages to convey a real picture of both the public and private Pete Seeger - one of the few people that I continue to admire after learning the facts of his life.

Paul Frandano says

This slender, charming profile of Pete Seeger is precisely the book he wished for when he told author Wilkinson, "no, not ANOTHER book about me...how about one that can be read in a single sitting?" What we thus have is a nicely illustrated (from Pete's collection), relatively longish New Yorker piece that captures a great man on the move in his twilight years and gets him and others to reminisce about deeds large and small that, added up, make for the proverbial Life Well Lived.

And well-lived it was. Seeger was of course a pioneer in the folk-music phenomenon that blossomed on college campuses from the 1950s through the early 1960s, up to the momentous spike driven into its chest by Bob Dylan at Newport in 1965. (Throw in the release of Dylan's sneering payback song, Positively 4th Street, in the fall of 1965.) But Pete he was so much more than that, as an advocate and an activist, first as a naive American Communist, gentle despiser of Capitalist economics and commercial culture and supporter of the propaganda picture of the Soviet Union as the progressive Hope of the World, and later as a Universal Soldier for all the right things: racial equality, world peace, the First Amendment, anti-poverty, anti-hunger, the environment (following Rachel Carson in the early 1960s), and, almost selflessly, so much more. We talk about public intellectuals. Pete was something of a public conscience of a Whitmanesque American vision.

The stories Wilkinson tells of Pete's personal courage and conviction are many. One that stood out at the time and, still, today is his stand-off with the House Committee on Un-American Activities (which, in its efforts to negate the First Amendment, was itself a supremely unAmerican activity). Rather than taking the Fifth, which many erstwhile leftists and Communist Party members resorted to when called before HUAC, Seeger refused to discuss his views, friendships, or events at which he performed and the attendees thereof, claiming these were his personal concerns and thus leaving him free, on the basis of the First Amendment, to decline comment. Others witnesses, included Elia Kazan on the same day as Seeger's testimony, informed on erstwhile friends and colleagues. Seeger, however, said, repeatedly, "it's really none of your business." For this he received 10 citations for contempt of Congress and, after trial, a year's sentence in prison (which the appellate courts threw out--he never served). For progressives, Seeger came out of his HUAC encounters covered in glory and assumed a place as one of the most estimable people of the left.

But if you come to the story of Pete Seeger, it's because of the music and its history as the background sound of Depression-era labor rallies, Communist Party celebrations, and FDR/New Deal support activities. The music's distinguished practitioners and advocates of the time--Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Lee Hays, the Lomax family--walk on and off the set, but only Guthrie rivals Seeger in influence, and, in truth, doesn't really come close: Woody was a facile, indefatigable songwriter who in a day could compose dozens of lyrics and set them to traditional melodies. Seeger, on the other hand, walked around with an immense

catalogue of songs in his head--including Woody's, and Lead Belly's, and countless hundreds of others: he constantly solicited and wrote down lyrics from his thousands of interlocutors--and wrote his own iconic songs, but he was also the great teacher of and advocate for communal singing. He truly, and cheerfully, believed, as did his folk musicologist father, that songs were purposeful means of marshalling public song participants into motivated activism. (Listen, for example, to Seeger's famous 1960 Bowdoin College concert, at which, time after time, he teaches his enthusiastic audience their parts, four-party harmonies, and gets them all to raise the voices in powerful song.) Wilkinson also tells several lovely late-life stories of Pete performing the same feat in kindergarten classes and in college classrooms, where the students' first reaction is, typically, "Who is this old man with the banjo? And why is he here today?" He also tells the relatively less known story of the sloop Clearview and Seeger's role in the cleansing of the Hudson River.

Seeger died in 2014 at the age of 94, nearly a decade after Wilkinson finished his profile. He has left us with a beautifully satisfying portrait of a great man that fully captures the significance of its subject. For many, however, and particularly for me, it will nonetheless be an *hors d'oeuvre*, a tidbit that leaves one wanting to know more. And more I promptly ordered--many believe David King Dunaway's *How Can I Keep From Singing*, revised in 2008, to be "definitive"--and greatly look forward to reading.

Patti says

Intimate in the title is the key to this book. The events of Pete Seeger's life are highlighted, many of which are well known, but the pearls of the book are the quotes that are included from their conversations as Seeger answered questions about his journey through life.

"People ask, is there one word that you have more faith in than any other word," he told me, "and I say it's participation. I feel that this takes on so many meanings. The composer John Philip Sousa said, 'What will happen to the American voice now that the phonograph has been invented? Women used to sing lullabies to their children.' It's been my life work, to get participation, whether it's a union song, or a peace song, civil rights, or a women's movement, or gay liberation. When you sing, you feel a kind of strength; you think, I'm not alone, there's a whole bunch of us who feel this way. I'm just one person, but it's almost my religion now to persuade people that even if it's only you and three others, do something. You and one other, do something. If it's only you, and you do a good job as a songwriter, people will sing it."

And the pictures; they show a man working hard for that participation from himself and from others with grace and joy and sticking by what he believes is right no matter what. Pete Seeger is a man to be thanked and copied, we need more like him.

Sparrow says

Much as I prefer to be snide about New Yorker writers, this Alec Wilkinson -- a former cop and rock 'n roll musician (if his pithy bio on the flap is to be believed) is a heartfelt guy, not very intrusive, who occasionally finds himself in a syntactical snarl -- like most of us. And Pete Seeger is quite different than one imagines -- haunted by self-doubt and internal ridicule. "Most everything I've done has been a failure," he says, trying to explain the Clearwater sloop. He chops wood almost every day! Or did in 2008! At the age of 89. His original log cabin is unused, and perhaps I should move in there. I keep meaning to tell my wife that. I was a little disappointed that Pete is a real pacifist. Somehow I thought he was a little smarter than that. Alec

ingeniously avoids discussing Obama, so his book won't be "dated." One time a guy came to a Pete Seeger concert to assassinate him. But he was converted by Pete's music. He explained this afterwards, to the "protest singer." (Kind of a weird title. In fact, Pete's idea is not so much to protest as to sing extremely old songs.) Mr. Seeger revised "We Will Overcome" into its present form! Like many people, his life was changed by traveling the world for a year.

Michael says

The book is essentially a set of vignettes of Pete Seeger intended to be read in one sitting, like an extension of the New Yorker pieces author Alec Wilkinson is known for. The portrait represents an interesting attempt to capture a version of the man in a few brushstrokes or as a short cinema verite portrayal. For background, two appendices parallel his father's precepts for a theory of music as a language for participation with Seeger's stonewalling testimony at his hearing with the House on Unamerican Activities Committee. Ultimately, Seeger is revealed to not be very political, but simply one who strives to live simply and contribute to a world where all are equally respected. His interest in anthropology and preserving the environment are clarified. The famous scene of his wanting to axe the cables at Bob Dylan's electronic performance at Monterrey is discounted by him as not anti-rock, but due to not being able to hear the lyrics. Seeger sees the loss of commercial performance jobs during his blackball years as no great loss. He truly seems as happy playing for school children as he did playing with the Weavers. His relationship with Woody Guthrie unfortunately is given short shrift, as Wilkinson stays closely with the current perspective of the octogenarian Seeger, for whom Guthrie exists in a 50 year old set of memories.?

Mary Brown says

I must have already read too much about Pete Seeger because this little book didn't offer anything new. It is well written, and it is short, so it would be a good entry into Pete Seeger's life.

Larry Bassett says

Pete Seeger does not wear the mantle of 'famous person' very well. There have been times he has said that he would rather you sing his songs than buy his records. And a lot of us know quite a few of his songs by heart.

The Protest Singer is a short book, one the author thinks you can read in one sitting. It was published in 2009.

Here is a paragraph from the book jacket that introduces the man and the author:

A true American original is brought to life in this rich and lively portrait of Pete Seeger, who, with his musical grace and inextinguishable passion for social justice, transformed folk singing into a high form of peaceful protest in the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing on his extensive talks with Seeger, *New Yorker* writer Alec Wilkinson lets us experience the man's

unique blend of independence and commitment, charm, courage, energy, and belief in human equality and American democracy.

Pete Seeger was born in 1919 so is in his 90s. He was born in Manhattan and lived in Greenwich Village after WWII. In 1949 he bought 17 acres of land on the side of a mountain in Beacon, NY, sixty miles north of NYC, and moved there with his wife and two young children. They lived in a twelve foot trailer while he built a log cabin for their home.

Born into musical family, he started singing in 1925 when he was six years old. Singing was a part of normal life for him. So he has been singing for almost nine decades and has written songs that we all know: Where Have All the Flowers Gone?; Turn, Turn, Turn; If I Had a Hammer; Waist Deep in the Big Muddy. He also sings some well known standards: We Shall Overcome; Guantanamera; Michael Row the Boat Ashore and a list longer than your arm. Way longer.

When he moved from NYC to Beacon in Dutchess County, he was becoming fairly well known as a singer and musician but he wasn't making much money. Seeger appeared with Paul Robeson, a well known black singer, in a concert in Peekskill, NY to raise funds for a civil rights organization. They had been threatened by the KKK and expected trouble. When they were driving away from the concert, the cars were attacked by people throwing rocks that broke car windows. This was not the last time Pete would have trouble because of his political views and associates.

Some pages in the book are devoted to Seeger's story about his ancestry and youth.

"I come from a family of doctors and shopkeepers and intellectuals," he[Seeger] said. A great-uncle, Franklin Edson, was mayor of New York. He was a well-to-do lawyer, and he came in as a kind of compromise candidate served only one term. He christened the Brooklyn Bridge.

Seeger had a privileged childhood growing up in Nyack, NY. He started a weekly newsletter at the boy's boarding school he attended, selling at five cents a copy. His mother wanted him training in classical music but he "couldn't keep from tapping his foot." With the experience of doing his newsletter, he decided that he wanted to be a journalist.

Seeger was admitted to Harvard on a scholarship but left in 1938 before the end of his second year. In 1939 Seeger meets up with Woody Guthrie and spends some time with him in Washington, DC recording songs for the Library of Congress. He went with Guthrie to Texas to see Guthrie's family and they go separate ways for a while. Seeger spent some time riding railroad box cars and earning money playing the banjo. Later Guthrie and Seeger got together informally with a variety of other musicians and performed as the Almanac Singers. Seeger thought they were pretty good for a group with a lot of member turn over that never practiced except when they were performing.

In that time, Seeger wrote to Toshi, his future wife:

"There have been so many failures. You don't know. Every song I started to write and gave up was a failure. I started to paint because I failed to get a job as a journalist. I started singing and playing more because I was a failure as a painter. I went into the army as willingly as I did because I was having more and more failure musically."

When he was in army training Military Intelligence questioned him because they doubted his opinions. He and Toshi married and finally he was sent to a small island in the Pacific. He had been drafted in 1942 and was in the army until 1945. Fresh out of the army he started singing with three others calling themselves the Weavers. They got a job in NYC and were not having much success – no one was coming to see them – when Carl Sandburg heard them, said some positive things and suddenly they had an audience. They released their first record in 1950 and shortly after that had their best seller hit “Goodnight, Irene” Then all of a sudden they were famous and went on the road touring.

The Weavers sold a lot of records during 1950 but Pete didn’t enjoy himself. He was happier playing the clubs and didn’t like being such a public figure. But because of him teenagers were first hearing what was called folk music. The Weavers had a contract for a television show but when an organization Counterattack put out a pamphlet “Red Channels” with 151 names of men and women in radio and television who were involved with suspicious (communist) organizations. The contract was cancelled. The Weavers continued to perform until 1952 when they disbanded and then started singing again in 1955. Pete left the group in 1957 when the group voted (3 to 1) to do a cigarette commercial.

In the early 1950s if you thought, as Pete did, all human beings are created equal and have equal rights, it was evidence that you were a socialist. Pete, who had been a member of the Communist Party in the late 1940s, withdrew from the party in 1949 after he moved to Beacon.

I realized I could sing the same songs I sang whether I belonged to the Communist Party or not, and I never liked the idea anyway of belonging to a secret organization.

Shortly after the Weavers resumed their singing, Seeger was summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee of the US Congress. Pete’s decision was to agree to talk about himself but not testify against others. His father had been forced out of his job in 1952 when he also refused to testify against others. He appeared before HUAC and in spite of lengthy questioning refused to testify against any group or person. Eventually he was found in contempt and sentenced to one year in jail, a sentence that was overturned in 1962, seven years after it all started.

In answer to the question, Have you seen any pattern to your life?” Seeger answered in part:

“I always hated the word *career*,” he said. “It implies that fame and fortune are what you’re trying to get. I have a life’s purpose. In the old days I felt it should be helping the meek to inherit the earth, whether you call the working class the meek or not.

...

“These days my purpose is trying to get people to realize that there may be no human race by the end of the century unless we find ways to talk to people we deeply disagree with,” he said. “Whether we cooperate from love or from tolerance, it doesn’t much matter, but we must treat each other nonviolently.”

John Cronin, the director of the Beacon Institute for Rivers and Estuaries, tells this story about Pete Seeger:

About two winters ago, here on Route 9 outside Beacon, one winter day it was freezing – the war in Iraq is heating up, and the country’s in a poor mood. I’m driving south and on the other side of the road I see from the back a tall, slim figure in a hood and coat. I can tell it’s Pete. He’s standing there all by himself, and he’s holding up a big sign of cardboard that clearly has something written on it. Cars and trucks are going by him. He’s getting wet. He’s holding the

homemade sign above his head – he's very tall, and his chin is raised the way he does when he signs – and he's turning the sign in a semicircle, so that the drivers can see it as they pass, and some people are honking and waving at him, and some people are giving him the finger. He's eighty-four years old.

I know he's got some purpose, of course, but I don't know what it is. What struck me is that, whatever his intentions are, and obviously he wants people to notice what he's doing. He wants to make an impression, anyway, whatever they are, he doesn't call the newspapers and say, "Here's what I am going to do, I'm Pete Seeger." He doesn't cultivate publicity. That isn't what he does. He's far more modest than that. He would never make a fuss. He's just standing out there in the cold and sleet like a scarecrow getting drenched. I go a little bit down the road, so that I can turn around and come back, and when I get him in view again, this solitary and elderly figure, I see that what he's written on the sign is "Peace."

The appendix of the book includes the ten points of "The Purpose of Music," by Charles Seeger, Pete's dad. It also includes the transcript of Pete's testimony before the HUAC in August 1955.

There are also several dozen black and white photos included in the book. And let me say straight out that I hate it when there are photos and the captions for all of them are on a separate page at the back of the book. Like in this book!

This is easily a four star book that I thoroughly enjoyed reading although going back several generations of family history was a bit much in a short book. The book does have a ring of authenticity and had the cooperation of Pete. The author talks about it being, at Pete's suggestion, a book you can read in one sitting. I had to take some breaks but I did read it in one day when I could devote myself to reading.

Geraldine says

Pete Seeger is one of my heroes, so this isn't a very unbiased review. I'd say that it's not a great introduction to Seeger if you don't know a little bit about him; but since I love him, I thought the author did a wonderful job of allowing me to feel as though I'm just dropping in on a conversation outside the cabin in Beacon.

"I always hated the word 'career.' It implies that fame and fortune are what you're trying to get. I have a life's purpose. In the old days I felt it should be helping the meek to inherit the earth, whether you call the working class meek or not...These days my purpose is trying to get people to realize that there may be no human race by the end of the century unless we find ways to talk to people we deeply disagree with. Whether we cooperate from love or tolerance, it doesn't much matter, but we must treat each other nonviolently."

And: "Folk songs frequently contain every kind of trouble and harm. Often they are songs people sung to themselves or with their neighbors to commemorate a disaster or to give themselves courage or to console themselves for losses and defeats and suffering and hardship. Sometimes they celebrate victories, but typically there is more misfortune than triumph. Folk songs have a lot of dark corners. They don't muse so much. They don't describe life from a balcony overlooking a harbor from which the boat is departing at sunset with your sweetheart. The folk song version of that is We-were-to-wed, but-I-killed-her-instead."

Cailean says

I reallllllllllly wanted to love this book. I adore Pete Seeger. This was less a biography and more a series of stories, not in chronological order. I kind of like the chronological element of biographies - you can see how a person started out, their origins, and what they do with their life etc. I suppose his life is well-known enough? The author explains very early on that Mr. Seeger said so much has been written and overwritten about him - he wanted something short that could be read in one sitting. This is definitely short and I read it in a few hours or less. If you really like him and know enough about him already, you might find this interesting. Otherwise, you won't come away from this book feeling like you understand the whole person -- you should start with a different bio first. I found some of the stories interesting.

Jeanette says

Glad I read it. Love Pete's ideals. Think it was too much for me (or him) to live up to. Learned a lot by reading this book.

Bill Kerwin says

A short biographical essay about one of the most inspiring of performers and the gentlest of radicals. Song as an expression of the people was more important to him than money and fame, and this little book--based primarily on interviews with Seeger--demonstrates his sincerity and character.
