

Seeger Sings Again (In Canada)

Lorne Brown

They were the most eagerly sought after tickets. No advance publicity, no media release, no advertisements. Good old-fashioned word of mouth (or maybe word of email) and magically the news spread: "Pete Seeger's singing in Toronto! Pass it on!" "He's singing in Hugh's Room with his grandson! Pass it on!"

Now how on earth could this happen? Mr. Seeger is 89 years old and vowed some years ago that his touring days were over. "I'm so busy at home with chores, answering mail, that I never think of leaving the [Hudson] valley," he said, "My banjo's hanging on the wall and if anyone visits I can take it down and play it." As usual, Pete is being too modest. People dropping in include the Boss himself, Bruce Springsteen, who made a recording with Pete. And banjo virtuoso Tony Trischka, who did likewise, thanks to the mini-digital recorder.

But the question remains: how could this happen? Well, it seems that Pete's grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, with his folk rock group the Mammals on maternity leave, recently performed a concert with his grandfather and Guy Davis at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York. "We had a really good time," said Rodriguez-Seeger. "We got home and Grandpa was bouncing off the wall with excitement. 'Let's do that again,' he said."

A Canadian tour was quickly arranged: Montreal (River's Edge Community Church), Toronto (two nights in Hugh's Room), Kingston (the Grand Theatre), and Ottawa (Library and Archives Canada). No airplane travel; they would drive in a van. No large venues, only small intimate ones. The tour would be a benefit for the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, which assists farmers in developing countries. (\$35,000 was raised!) The tour sold out immediately.

So I found myself arriving with my wife on the evening of July 7, 2008 at Hugh's Room. The problems I had with a kidney stone—which caused me to cancel all sorts of gigs, including one in Saskatoon—had finally passed, so to speak, and this was my "First Night Out". There was the Seeger van parked outside Hugh's Room. The marquee billed tonight as the "Seeger Family Concert". That would be Pete, grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, and "honorary cou-

sin" Guy Davis, son of actor/activists Ossie and Ruby Davis.

Already Hugh's Room was filling up with diners. People waited in line, some carrying banjos, which I thought strange. Turns out they were hoping Pete would sign them after the show. He didn't; he went up one flight of stairs to the green room and down another and out the door to his van. Eventually we got seated at Bram Morrison's table, a table for nine directly in front of the stage. Unfortunately, Bram and Ruth were unable to attend, but Sharon Hampson and her daughter were there, along with other friends and relatives. Larry, a tablemate, said that Pete Seeger was just ahead of him when he came in. "There was Pete Seeger with his banjo!" he kept repeating, like some teenage girl talking about the latest heart-throb band hero. In fact, the whole room seemed to be filled with old friends and relatives. It was "Old Home Week", with Toronto's folk community out in full force, all feeling, truth to tell, somewhat teenage-ish.

There were banjo whiz Arnie Naiman and his singing wife, Kathy Reid-Naiman. They were sitting so close to the stage I suggested Arnie could retune the 5-string banjo lying on a chair on stage. Tao's banjo, since Pete never appears anywhere without his banjo. Ken Whitely was there with his wife, Ellen. Guitar virtuoso Paul Mills walked by. The "Backseat Balladeers" were there, four storytellers with a love for the traditional ballad. Jerry Gray of the Travellers was greeting old friends. Alumni of the legendary Camp Naivalt, some in Camp Naivalt t-shirts, were everywhere. Gordon Lightfoot sat in relative obscurity. Seeger fans are passionate; Bob Biderman of the Common Thread Choir was there, having also attended the previous night's concert, where Seeger invited Sylvia Tyson to help sing "If I Had a Hammer". Pete's step-brother Rufus Dickinson, who lives in Toronto, attended both performances. In fact, Pete had lunch (an egg salad sandwich) at Rufus's home today and discussed politics and family. Lilian Wauthier of the Acoustic Harvest folk club sat near me. The place was alive with excitement. Wordsmith Holmes Hooke, who books acts for Hugh's Room and MCs shows there, was talking to various people. "I'm glad to see you here!" he said to me, "I was hoping you'd make it."

The waiters and waitresses were a perfect example of grace under pressure, and by 8:30 p.m. everyone had been fed and watered. People were still coming in and excitement was mounting, if that were possible. (The show was billed to start at 8:30.)

At 8:50, Hooke mounted the stage and started speaking into the microphone. Alas, what he said will never be known, for at that exact moment applause started at the back of the room as people started to stand and clap. The trio of performers had appeared in the back of the room. Everyone else now stood and applauded, and Tao, Pete and Guy made their way to the stage, walking directly past me. Pete, toting his banjo, looked frail; his grandson carried Pete's 12-string guitar. They mounted the stage to a prolonged standing ovation. Pete Seeger was here and all was well with the world.

Pete stood, looking a bit bewildered. Of course he has always been bewildered by applause meant for him that he feels should rightly go to others. But tonight he looked like an 89-year old man, not quite sure what to do next. Then he stepped to the mike and started to sing, "One day, one day, sir, I was walkin' along, and I heard that Special singing a lonesome song ..."

We all quickly and silently sat down, like obedient pupils when the headmaster appears. Meanwhile, on stage, 5-string banjo, 6-string and 12-string guitars all started to play, and the three singers sang, "Oh let the Midnight Special shine her light on me ...". By the repeat of this line, the whole room was singing and clapping along. I doubt there's a performer in the world who can have such an instantaneous effect on an audience.

And so the unbelievable evening unfolded. Guy Davis sang blues and told stories, using his mouth harp to great advantage. Grandson Tao played his 12-string as to the manner born, and frailed a new tune on his banjo he called "Hugh's Tune". He told a story of how, after living in Nicaragua for nine years, he came home to Beacon, New York, fluently bilingual, and told his grandpa that he shouldn't sing Spanish songs since his Spanish was so bad. "I was 16 years old and thoroughly objectionable," he said. "Grandpa said, 'Well, if I sing Spanish so badly, why don't you join me on stage and help me do it better?'. I did, and we've been singing together now for 19 years." Great applause, during which we calculated that Tao must be 35 years old now. "Too bad," said Tao, "that we couldn't deal with George Bush like that—tell him he's doing a bad job and have him ask you to join with him to make it better." He then sang a Cuban cowboy song with a Spanish refrain we all joined in on, albeit no doubt in bad Spanish.

Despite how well Guy and Tao performed—and they were excellent; in fact Guy invited "the unoffi-

cial mayor of Toronto", Ken Whitely, on stage to help out (superlatively) with his mandolin—we were all waiting for Pete's turn. Forget any thought that an 89-year old would only lead us in some romp of old nostalgia; Pete kept singing one new song after another. "Take It From Dr. King", which he wrote after 9/11, has a tricky refrain to sing which Pete taught to us so simply and naturally that in less time than it takes me to write, he had us all singing it as if we'd known it all our lives. He is a great teacher.

2008 is the year Jim Brown's documentary *Pete Seeger: the Power of Song* was released. It played nationally on PBS and closed Toronto's Jewish Film Festival. The phrase "power of song" was used to show how songs can change the world. Pete is a great believer in that sentiment. But as I watched this concert, I had a new appreciation for the phrase "power of song". Song transforms Pete. (Historical note: back in the 1970s, Pete decided to quit singing. He actually became physically ill because he wasn't singing. He decided to resume singing, and his illness was cured.) Song transforms Pete. Let me explain.

Watching Seeger on stage tonight was most interesting. When not leading the singing he sat quietly at the back, picking his banjo in a sparse style. Single notes played on a single string. For the most part he seemed almost uncertain of what was happening. His eyes were the watery eyes of an old man. His hearing has deteriorated. "What key are we in?" he asked Guy. "G," replied Guy. "B?" asked Pete. "G," Guy repeated. At one point, when Pete was introducing a song, Tao spoke in his ear, "Grandpa, don't you play the guitar for this song?" "Oh, yes," replied Pete, and exchanged banjo for guitar.

But when he starts to sing he is transformed. His eyes are pure fire, shooting sparks. His whole body radiates energy, the energy of his convictions. His voice grows stronger as the evening progresses. He throws his head back and cuts loose, a famous Seeger gesture. The audience sings its heart out and Seeger is ageless. For a brief shining moment we all believe we can make the world a better place.

It is almost certain that Seeger will not sing in Toronto again. As the evening draws to its conclusion, I start concentrating on the words Seeger is singing, realizing that he is giving us a profound lesson on life:

*With the poor people of this earth I want to
share my fate.*

*One blue sky above us, one ocean lapping
all our shores,*

*One earth so green and round, who could
ask for more?*

*And because I love you, I'll give it one more
try,*

To show my rainbow race it's too soon to die.

I've long believed these next are the wisest words I know, the words of a nameless preacher a long time ago:

*A time to be born, a time to die,
A time to plant, a time to reap,
A time to dance, a time to mourn,
A time of love, a time of hate,
A time of war, a time of peace.
A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing.*

Grandson Tao says that "Turn! Turn! Turn!" is a metaphor for Pete's career: early on he was declared "Un-American" and sentenced to jail (1955). While the jail time was only a few hours, for 17 years Seeger was blacklisted and couldn't appear on American television. But now he has received his nation's highest artistic honour, the Presidential Medal of the Arts (1996), and is one of the most revered of artists.

I was pleased when Pete sang a verse especially for me and my kidney stone problem:

A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together.

And I nearly forgot this important line:

When will they ever learn?

Aftermath

The evening was over. To delirious applause, the four singers (Ken Whitely had joined them) left the stage and made their way through the standing audience. A stage crew member shone a flashlight ahead of Pete so he could see his way through the darkness. They climbed the stairs, but the applause wouldn't cease, so back they came. Pete looked transported. He went directly to the mike and started in:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine ...

Three hundred people joined in before he finished the line. For over seven decades, Seeger has let his light shine all over the world. The world hasn't always wanted to see it; bushels come in all shapes and sizes. But Pete Seeger never hid his light under a bushel.

The immediate aftermath was a room full of transformed people, hugging each other, laughing, weeping. Old Ecclesiastes had it right. We were reluctant to go out into the night.

The Seeger Family Concert was back on the road in their van, travelling to Kingston and then to Ottawa – five concerts on five consecutive nights for an 89-year old! Pete Seeger so enjoyed this mini-tour that on August 5, he and Tao and Guy were giving a concert in Sellersville, PA. On September 13 the three give a benefit concert in Brattleboro, VT, in aid of "The Strolling of the Heifers" to help New England farmers.

And then what? Every week Seeger drives to the Staples parking lot in Wappingers Falls, Dutchess County, NY, slings his banjo on his shoulder, and goes to the intersection of Rtes. 9 and 9D, the Hudson Valley POW-MIA Memorial Highway, about an hour north of New York City and not far from the Seeger home in Fishkill. He picks up some litter – "That's my religion now," he says – and holds up a PEACE sign. The weekly peace vigil against the war starts again, with a few determined protesters. Pete's been at it for four years. Drivers speed by, most of them unaware of who is holding up the PEACE sign. A small group in favour of the war gathers on the other side of the highway.

And the future? Will this world ever learn? Can we right our environmental and social ills? Pete himself is optimistic. "Children give you hope for the world," he says when asked if he's optimistic about the survival of humankind. "If there's a world here, it will be because of people learning how to work with children."

This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine.

