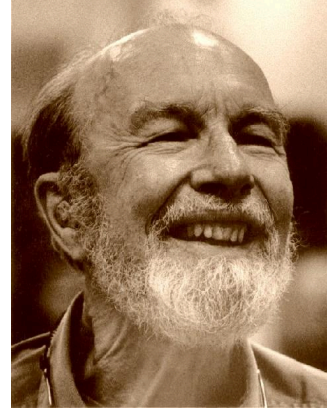


## A Tribute to Singing Legend Pete Seeger on his 90th Birthday May 3rd. 2009

by Koozma J. Tarasoff, May 3, 2009

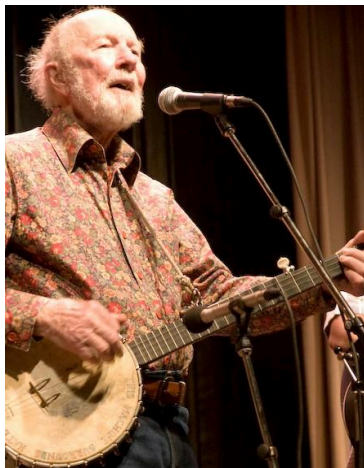
[Last 2 photos by Dave Haggarty, Ottawa 2008](#)

American-born [Pete Seeger](#) has had a long and illustrious life as a global ambassador of peace and social justice, as singer, composer and folk musician. On Sunday May 3rd he celebrated his 90th birthday at his log home 60 miles north of New York City, USA. Many people around the world joined in the celebration by showcasing the many causes which he tirelessly devoted his great life.



In Ottawa, Canada, I attended such a celebration at the Public Archives of Canada where some 200 people came to hear his songs and watch a 2007 film documentary on [Pete Seeger: The Power of Song](#). As I sat and watched this wonderful film on the power of song to create change, I looked back beginning with my youth to the many times that I have heard and sang his [songs](#) with others at countless peace rallies:

- Songs which question the institution of war and nuclear weapons.
- Songs which engage us to work for international solidarity and against racism wherever it is practiced.
- Songs that condemn narrow patriotism and instead urge us to stand up and be counted as the true basis of human rights and democracy.
- And songs that encourage us to be responsible citizens of planet earth.
- According to Pete Seeger, we are all brothers and sisters of this earth. We can only survive if we learn to live with one another. In that spirit Pete worked ceaselessly in support of cultural diversity.



I am inspired by Pete Seeger and his message as are my many friends and colleagues around the world. It appears that I have met him or his likeness in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada in the late 1940s or early 1950s. At a very small gathering in the local progressive Ukrainian Hall I watched a tall fellow with a high reedy voice singing folk songs and playing the banjo. Inspired by his sounds and lyrics, I and most others stood up, joined him in the singing. One of those memorable songs was [This Land is Your Land](#), composed by his friend Woody Guthrie. In this Hall, we as Russians, Ukrainians, English and Americans found that music indeed brought us closer together across boundaries and confirmed our common humanity. Of significance was the fact that the music appealed to us, inspired us and we were participants in the message.

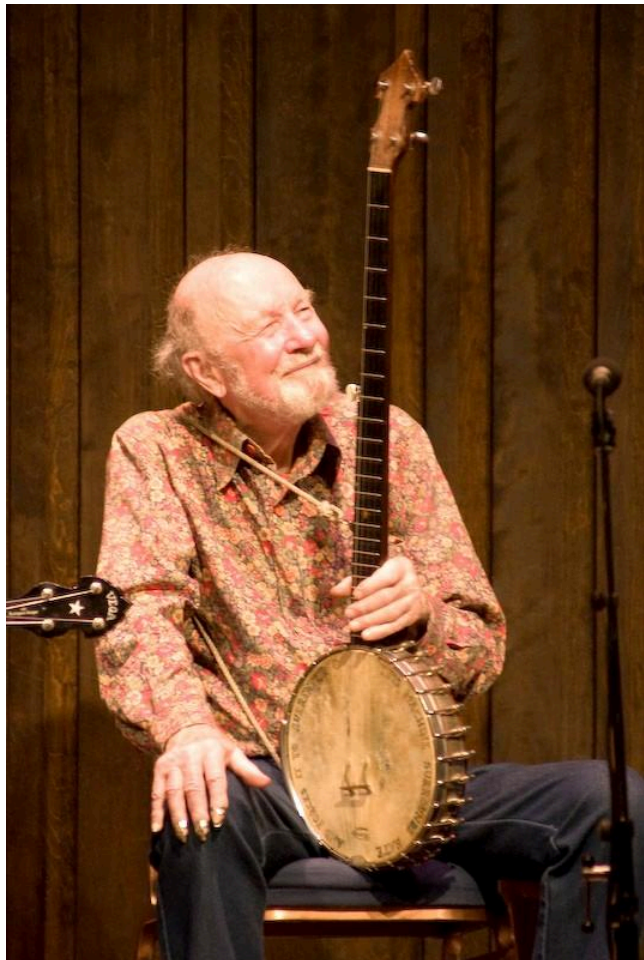
In reading about Pete Seeger, I learned that he didn't drink, he didn't smoke, and he didn't like night clubs. He enjoyed the outdoors. And he did not want to exploit others economically and otherwise. These are traits that fit my personal character as well. Pete fits into my description as a 'wisdom' person in the manner of Lev N. Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Fast forward, on TV in January 2009, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, I saw Pete Seeger [sing the same song](#) (with his grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger) as part of Barack Obama's inauguration festivities before some 500,000 people live and tens of millions more on television around the world. The performance was noteworthy for the inclusion of [two verses](#) not often included, one about a 'private property' sign, and the other was a passing reference to a Depression-era relief office.

Pete was born to Charles Seeger a noted musicologist and Constance a classical violinist and teacher. His family was from the earliest years involved in New York City musical and radical circles, believing that we as human beings ought to be a force for good. His father later divorced and remarried Ruth Crawford Seeger who in 1948 published a pioneering collection [American Folk Songs for Children](#). In 1943 Pete married Toshi-Aline Ohta who worked with him on a wide variety of shared causes since that time. Toshi and Pete had three children Danny, Mika and Tinya.

By the age of six, the young Pete Seeger could play the organ, piano, marimba, and the squeezebox, and later he mastered the guitar and banjo. Pete was a founding member of 'The Almanac Singers' which in 1950 was reconstituted as 'The Weavers'. In the poisonous atmosphere of the 1950s red scare [Joe McCarthy era](#), the Weaver's performing career was abruptly halted in 1953 at the peak of their popularity when blacklisting prompted radio stations to refuse to play their records and all their bookings were canceled.

Pete himself was called to testify before the [House Un-American Activities Committee](#), but he refused to name other members of the various left-wing groups that he had belonged to over the years. He was an extraordinarily upright person who stood up to these people. He told them 'The questions you asked me are not proper for Americans.' One's beliefs are personal. For contempt of court, he was found guilty and sentenced for 12 months in jail. After worldwide protests, the Court of Appeals ruled that Seeger's indictment was faulty and dismissed the case. Although freed from prison, Seeger continued to be blacklisted into the late 1960s and he was not allowed to appear on American TV for 17 years. (That was a great loss for North Americans and the world.) Seeger's songs written during this time reflected his left-wing views and included *We Shall Overcome*, *If I Had a Hammer*, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, *The Bells of Rhymney*, *Guantanamera*, and *Turn, Turn, Turn*.



In 2000, Michael Enright, host of CBC Radio program '[Sunday Edition](#)', interviewed Pete Seeger and discovered him as a courageous person who never abandoned his principles as he supported many social causes and went about creating scores of well-known songs of the people. He has been a tireless advocate of the idea that songs belong to all, not just the few.

Pete Seeger told Mr. Enright that today we are living 'in the Dark Ages' that settling problems with guns and bombs 'has to be phased out because war has become outdated.' The important thing is to keep this world rolling in a better direction — so that we do not have to spend the trillions of dollars on armaments with the horror of destruction and a bloodbath that follows; and so that people will not have reason to complain that they do not have enough money for the basics of health, education, housing, clean air and water, culture, and jobs. Surely that is a vision of all citizens in the world!

Some people may wonder what is left for this master folksinger to accomplish? How about the [Nobel Peace Prize](#)? I would support that.

**More**

[Pete Seeger sang about Zealots? : "Do as the Doukhobors Do"](#), Questions & Answers, Comments — July 23, 2009.

---

[Back to \*\*Spirit-Wrestlers.com\*\*](#)

