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Pete Seeger at 90: Nobel Prize would be a fitting final tribute

BY PETER DREIER | MAY 5, 2009

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More than 15,000 admirers celebrated Pete Seeger's 90th birthday with him at Madison Square Garden on Sunday, which included a greeting from President Barack Obama.

Since the late 1930s, Seeger has been a political activist and a troubadour for social justice in the U.S. and human rights around the world. He has used his remarkable talents as a performer, musician, songwriter and folklorist to engage other people, from all walks of life, across generations and cultures, in causes to build a better and more civilized world. He almost singlehandedly popularized the notion that music can be a force for social change.

This was evident Sunday at Madison Square Garden. The crowd included some of America's most respected musical performers -- including Bruce Springsteen, Dave Matthews, Emmylou Harris, Kris Kristofferson, Joan Baez, Tom Paxton, Richie Havens, Billy Bragg, Rufus Wainwright, Bela Fleck, Taj Mahal, Bruce Cockburn, Roger McGuinn, Bernice Reagon, Ben Harper, Steve Earle, Del McCoury, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Dar Williams, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, Tom Morello, Tony Trischka, Ani DiFranco, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and John Mellencamp.

They sang their own songs, traditional songs ("Jacob's Ladder"), children's songs ("There's a Hole in the Bucket"), and protest songs ("We Shall Overcome") that Seeger popularized over the past 70 years, as well as some of Seeger's compositions, including "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?", "If I Had a Hammer," "Turn, Turn, Turn" (drawn from Ecclesiastes), "Bring 'Em Home," and "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Seeger joined in on several numbers with his banjo and also led the crowd in singing "Goodnight, Irene" and an a cappella version of "Amazing Grace."

Indeed, amazing grace defines Seeger's life and legacy. Most of the people in the audience were Pete's musical and political followers who have been inspired by his songs and his lifelong activism, including his principled stances that threatened his career but which ultimately turned him into a national treasure.

Many were baby-boomers now in their 50s and 60s, but younger activists in their 20s and 30s have also discovered Seeger's music and his crusades for human rights and the environment. Seeger OK'd Sunday's event because it raised funds for the Clearwater project, a nonprofit organization Seeger started in 1969 to clean up the polluted Hudson River.

Through persistence and unrelenting optimism, Seeger endured and overcame the controversies triggered by his lifetime of activism for social justice. His critics faded away and the nation's cultural and political establishment eventually began to recognize Seeger's unique contributions.

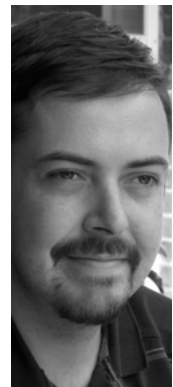
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Sunday's event took place only a few months after Seeger sang at Obama's inaugural celebration at the Lincoln Memorial in January -- leading more than half a million people on the mall and millions of people watching on TV in a rendition of his friend Woody Guthrie's anthem, "This Land is Your Land."

In 1994, at age 75, he received the National Medal of Arts (the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the U.S. government) as well as the Kennedy Center Honor, where President Bill Clinton called him "an inconvenient artist, who dared to sing things as he saw them."

In 1996, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame because of his influence on so many rock performers. In 1997, Seeger won the Grammy Award for his 18-track compilation album, "Pete."

In the past decade, some of the nation's most prominent singers have recorded albums honoring Seeger, including Springsteen's "Seeger Sessions." Last year, PBS broadcast a 93-minute documentary on Seeger's life, "The Power of Song." Seeger is now, despite his ambivalence about commercial success, a part of American popular culture. In a segment of the popular TV show, *Law and Order*, a character says, "The Hudson River's clean now, thanks to Pete Seeger!"

So, what is left for the 90-year old folksinger to accomplish?

How about the Nobel Peace Prize?

Indeed, his admirers have launched a campaign, a petition (signed so far by over 28,000 individuals), and a **website** to nominate Seeger for this honour.

It is much deserved.

Seeger is without doubt the most influential folk artist of the past century. No one can get a crowd singing like Seeger. The songs he's written, and those he's popularized, including "This Land is Your Land," "Guantanamera," "Wimoweh," and "We Shall Overcome," have been recorded by hundreds of artists in many languages and become global anthems for people fighting for freedom. His songs are sung by people in cities and villages around the world, promoting the basic idea that the hopes that unite us are greater than the fears that divide us.

"If the world is to survive," Seeger recently said, "the whole human race must realize how important it is that we learn how to communicate with each other, even if we disagree strongly."

In addition to being a much-acclaimed and innovative guitarist and banjoist, a globe-trotting minstrel and song collector, and the author of many songbooks and musical how-to manuals, Seeger has been on the front lines of every key progressive crusade during his lifetime -- labour unions and migrant workers in the 1930s and 1940s, banning nuclear weapons and opposing the Cold War in the 1950s, civil rights and the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s, environmental responsibility and opposition to South African apartheid in the 1970s, and, always, human rights throughout the world.

During World War Two, while serving in the military, Seeger performed for soldiers and for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In the 1960s, he sang with civil rights workers at rallies and churches in the South and at the march from Selma to Montgomery. In a letter to Seeger, Rev. Martin Luther King thanked him for his "moral support and Christian generosity."

When Seeger launched the sloop *Clearwater* (near his home in Beacon, New York) and an annual celebration dedicated to cleaning up the polluted Hudson River, he helped inspire the environmental movement.

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For a brief period in the 1950s, as a member of the Weavers folk quartet, Seeger achieved commercial success, with several chart-topping songs that reflected his eclectic repertoire -- Huddie Ledbetter's "Good Night Irene," "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," "On Top of Old Smokey," and the Israeli tune, "Tzena, Tzena."

But his career was soon torpedoed by McCarthyism because of his political activism and outspoken views. The Weavers broke up and Seeger was blacklisted for almost two decades. He was kept out of many colleges and concert halls.

He was kept off network television in the 1950s and 1960s until the Smothers Brothers defiantly invited him on their CBS variety show in 1967. True to his principles, Seeger insisted on singing a controversial anti-war song, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." CBS censors refused to air the song, but public outrage forced the network to relent and allow him to perform the song on the show a few months later.

During the blacklist years, Seeger scratched together a living by giving guitar and banjo lessons and singing at the small number of summer camps, churches, high schools and colleges, and union halls that were courageous enough invite the controversial balladeer.

Eventually, however, Seeger's audience grew. He helped catalyze the folk music revival of the 1960s, encouraging young performers and helping start the Newport Folk Festival. Many prominent musicians, including those who performed at his birthday party on Sunday, and those who couldn't make it (like Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks and Bonnie Raitt), consider Seeger a role model and trace their musical roots to his influence.

Seeger's albums -- he's recorded over 80 of them, including children's songs, labor and protest songs, traditional American folk songs, international songs, and Christmas songs -- began to sell to wider audiences. His travels around the world -- collecting songs and performing in many languages -- inspired today's world music movement. Among performers across the globe, Seeger became a symbol of a principled artist deeply engaged in the world.

A truly modest man, Seeger has become a reluctant icon. But he deserves at least one more moment on the world stage -- at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Norway. The prize is only bestowed on people who are living. Although still vital, with more energy than people years younger, Seeger is now 90.

It would be a fitting and much-deserved final tribute for the world's preeminent troubadour for peace and justice.

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Without really knowing it, as a small child, Pete Seeger was part of the culture I was eagerly soaking in, albeit through popular covers of his songs.

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