

# TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

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Standing there by the steps of Widener Library at one edge of Harvard Yard, Pete was at it again. Tall and lanky and not quite nineteen, he should have been sitting stiffly in class. But school bored him, despite the fact that his father was a professor, and sitting stiffly anywhere wasn't his style. He could have just as easily been lounging in his college dormitory with the other children of privilege who comprised much of Harvard's student body, but he never felt comfortable around them. Instead, his friends were his political allies in the Young Communist League, the radical - and self-appointed - champions of the underdog.

So there Pete stood, in the middle of the Yard, passing out leaflets in the winter cold, this time on behalf of those fighting a losing battle to save democracy in the Spanish Civil War. Didn't his classmates realize that in 1938 the world was going up in flames, that aggressive fascists were crushing freedom not just in Spain but across the globe? Even if they were oblivious, Pete stood in Harvard Yard, leaflets in hand, trumpeting one of the many causes that came to consume him all his life.

This was Pete Seeger, who became, over the next fifty years, the best-known and most influential folk singer in America. A wiry banjo player with an acutely-developed social conscience, he was in the forefront of campaign after campaign for social justice for the last two thirds of the twentieth century. He passionately believed in the power of song to improve conditions for working men and women or for the disfranchised in America, and he wrote songs of his own, revived old folk melodies, and revised traditional verses in support of the causes he embraced.

For him, in the wonderful words of Ecclesiastes that found their way into one of his best-known songs, there was a season for everything, a time for every purpose

under heaven. A tireless supporter of union organization in the 1930s, he was for a time a member of the Communist Party. He sang out against American involvement in what was a foreign war in the early 1940s, only to reverse course as the United States was drawn into the war. In the 1950s, he found himself under attack for his radical past in the Red Scare that engulfed American society, and he narrowly escaped a long jail term for refusing to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In the 1960s, he moved into the forefront of the civil rights movement, and he used his music to channel and focus the energy that slowly brought about change in the nation's discriminatory patterns. Toward the end of the decade, he became a vocal opponent of the war in Vietnam, and, like many critics, faced serious opposition for his purported lack of patriotism. Finally, in the 1970s, he became an active participant in the environmental movement, particularly concerned with cleaning up the Hudson River near his home.

I first heard Pete Seeger sing in the summer of 1962. And I have been a follower ever since. This is his story - and indirectly - ours.

Political activity - to make America a better place - was Pete's passion. But it was not his only passion. There was always music. From the day he was born in May 1919, music was in the air and in his blood. His father Charles was a pianist (and later a professor of music at the University of California at Berkeley), his mother Constance a talented violinist. When Pete was born, they wanted him to play, too. "You must take lessons," his mother told him. "You've got the hands that can do it. I'm sorry, but we're going to insist." His father, on the other hand, had his own ideas about how to interest his son. "Don't try and teach Peter how to read music," he said. "Let him find his own way," and that's what he did. Without any formal training, Pete recalled, by the time "I was five I could bang out a tune on a whistle, a penny whistle or an autoharp or a marimba." Pete loved music but *his* music, not theirs. And his music, at least at the start, was jazz. Few could escape its syncopated spell, cast across the decade of the 1920s

with the improvised rhythms and soulful sounds of Dixieland bands.

Music excited young Pete, gave him a sense of confidence and, when he finally performed, a connection to others he rarely felt elsewhere. From the moment he picked up the tiny ukulele his father gave him when he was still young and began strumming its strings, he warmed to its rhythms. As he played and sang, his eyes sparkled and his face glowed.

When his parents divorced, Pete went away to boarding school and he saw them only - separately - on vacations. He looked up to his father, who was something of a rebel. Early in his career, he dipped into radical politics and began to speak in support of the Industrial Workers of the World, the leftwing union that wanted to jettison capitalism and overhaul labor relations in the United States. His radical sentiments cost him his job.

As close as Pete was to his father and as much as he admired his father's principled political stands, he wasn't interested in the new, experimental music of Aaron Copeland, Arnold Schonberg, and Aton Webern that so intrigued Charles. But Pete did take a liking to another variety of music his father was beginning to explore - American folk music. Not yet respected in musical circles, folk music was growing in popularity in the 1930s, especially among radicals like Charles who saw it as a genuine mode of human expression.

At school, Pete found an instrument that bridged his interests in jazz and folk music: the banjo. A teacher had a four-string - or tenor - banjo, often used in playing Dixieland jazz and other tunes. Pete plucked at it and decided that he had to have one. Soon he was playing the songs of George Gershwin and other jazzy tunes. A stint with the glee club taught him how to sing harmony.

But when he tried to play folk music, he had problems. He finally realized that the songs on the recordings done by folklorist Alan Lomax and others were all played on five-string

banjos. His father suggested heading south to hear some of this folk music - and to listen to some five-string banjo players – in person, and in 1936, the two drove together through the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains to Asheville, North Carolina, to attend the Ninth Annual Folk Song and Dance Festival. Pete was entranced. "I discovered there was some good music in my country which I never heard on the radio," he said. "I liked the strident vocal tone of the singers, the vigorous dancing. The words of the songs had all the meat of life in them." Returning home, he found recordings of what he had heard at the Library of Congress and listened to them for hour after hour. He pressed his finger lightly on the disks to slow the turntable so he could hear every note and follow each rhythm. Then he painstakingly picked the same notes on a five-string banjo he borrowed from a friend.

In due course he went to college, enrolling at Harvard. But at the end of his sophomore year, his frustration with school peaked. He was irritated at the cynicism of faculty members who didn't believe that they could help promote change, particularly as war threatened. He was even more irritated at professors who used jargon that no one else could understand. More comfortable himself with natural, straightforward forms of expression, he decided, "If this is the sort that's teaching here, I'm not going to bother studying anymore." Poor grades led to the loss of his scholarship, and he left Harvard before taking his exams, bound for New York City.

Seeger wanted to become a journalist. A friend who worked at the *New York Times* got him an appointment there, but nothing panned out. He telephoned George Seldes, a noted newspaperman and freelance author, who told him abruptly, "Quit bothering me....I've got work to do," and hung up.

Folklorist Alan Lomax came to the rescue. Seeger had met Lomax earlier through his own father, and met up with him again in 1939. Lomax introduced him to people like Aunt Molly Jackson, a folksinger married to an Appalachian coal miner, who

now lived on the Lower East Side. Through Lomax, Seeger also met Leadbelly - Hudie Ledbetter. One day Lomax called Seeger, told him to grab his banjo, and the two went to Leadbelly's apartment. The strong but compactly-built musician could not have been more different from Seeger. A Southerner with a prison record who found it far more comfortable living in the North, he had none of Seeger's family refinement. But he was a wonderful 12-string-guitar player and a great singer and became a fast friend.

Lomax also arranged for Seeger to work with him at the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In his new job, Seeger catalogued archival materials, transcribed songs, and learned a great deal in the process about folk music. He also practiced his banjo incessantly in his spare time, and finally Lomax, who had connections throughout the folk music world, decided that Seeger was ready to perform publicly.

The opportunity came in March 1940. A number of the nation's best folksingers - Burl Ives, Josh White, and Leadbelly, among others - were singing at midnight at a benefit concert to raise money for the migrant farm workers novelist John Steinbeck had described in *The Grapes of Wrath* the year before.

Waiting in the wings of the Forrest Theatre, right near Broadway in New York, Seeger was nervous. Finally, after many of the other participants appeared, his turn came, and he tried to play, but he felt stiff and awkward. Like all musicians at one point or another, he played some of the wrong strings, forgot a verse, and felt embarrassed by his performance: "I was a bust," he said. "I didn't know how to play the five-string banjo. I tried to do it too fast, and my fingers froze up on me. And I forgot words... I got a polite applause for trying and retired in confusion."

But the evening wasn't a total disaster. At the concert, he met Woody Guthrie for the first time. Guthrie, who was 7 years older than Seeger, came from an entirely different - western - background. He sang in saloons, performed on radio shows, played

his guitar at union meetings and political rallies, and wrote thousands of songs.

After a while in the East, Guthrie got restless. He told Seeger he was off to visit his family in Oklahoma and Texas and invited him to come along. "It's a big country out there, Pete," he said, "you ought to see it, and if you haven't got money for a ticket, use the rule of thumb." With nothing to keep him at home, Seeger agreed to go, and the two set out in Guthrie's car.

The ascetic Seeger puzzled Guthrie. "That guy Seeger," he once reflected. "I can't make him out. He doesn't look at girls, he doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, the fellow's weird." Guthrie, in contrast, was a live wire with a growing reputation. He liked a drink, whether in a barroom or a recording studio. Though married, he never failed to notice other women, and his casual ways, often leaving his family to go out on the road, left his marriages in shambles. But his enormous talent, which captivated Seeger, kept him going.

As they headed South and West, Seeger learned all kinds of things from Guthrie. Leadbelly had taught him about the 12-string guitar. Now Guthrie gave him a sense of clean simple rhythm. Guthrie sometimes played verse after verse of a song without changing chords, but he made the simplicity work, and it was a valuable lesson. Guthrie also taught Seeger how to ride freight trains and how to support himself by singing in bars.

And he provided Seeger with a songwriting model. Guthrie was prolific. As Seeger observed, "He wrote verses every day of his life. Kept a notebook in his pocket and scribbled down an idea, wherever he was." He could turn out songs while on the road. Guthrie freely borrowed lines or melodies from other songs, figuring folk music had always been flexible that way, and Seeger, too, learned from that example as he began to write his own songs.

"Union Maid" was the best-known song that came out of the same trip. It began

with a lively, upbeat verse:

There once was a Union Maid,  
She never was afraid  
Of guards and ginks and Company finks  
Or deputy sheriffs that made the raid...

And each verse ended with the same refrain:

Oh, you cain't scare me, I'm sticking by th' Union,  
Sticking by the Union, sticking by the Union,  
Oh, you can't scare me I'm sticking by the Union,  
Sticking by the Union till the day I die.

Though Seeger copyrighted the song in Guthrie's name, Guthrie contended they had written it together.

Back in New York, Seeger met another singer of a similar political persuasion. Lee Hays was a big, burly man, a few years older than Seeger, who had recently taught at the Commonwealth Labor College in Arkansas, a communal organization that trained radical political activists, much like the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

When Hays and Seeger encountered one another for the first time in New York, Hays suggested, "How about teaming up? I know some songs, and you know that banjo." Seeger was receptive, recognizing that his tenor voice provided a nice complement to Hays' bass, and the two soon began rehearsing together. In December 1940, they made their first public appearance at the Jade Mountain Restaurant in New York City. Before long, Hays' roommate, radical writer Millard Lampell, joined them. Still others became part of the group for varying periods of time, though the original three made up the core. They called themselves the Almanac Singers.

Woody Guthrie visited the group soon after they began to meet together. Sometimes Guthrie joined in performances, comfortable with what he called "the only group that rehearses on the stage." One afternoon in 1941, Lampell and Hays were thinking of new

verses for the kind of traditional talking blues song Guthrie had popularized. Within an hour, they had written two-thirds of what came to be called "Talking Union." In verse after verse, it described how to start a union, passing out leaflets, calling meetings, resisting the efforts of the boss to derail these efforts, for "He's a bastard - unfair - slave driver - Bet he beats his own wife." And the song ended:

... If you don't let Red-baiting break you up, If you don't  
let stool pigeons break you up, If you don't let vigilantes  
break you up, And if you don't let race hatred break you  
up -

You'll win. What I mean,  
Take it easy - but take it.

But the Almanac Singers had problems. Different people sang at different events, and sometimes the group was - and appeared - disorganized. With the onset of World War II, Seeger joined the Army and the group fell apart.

After the war, Seeger tried to follow a life-long dream to get people singing. He and his friends organized a group they called People's Songs, which published a bulletin with songs from America's past. Despite the best intentions, the organization, run on a shoestring, went bankrupt by the end of the decade. At about the same time, Seeger and other radicals called attention to themselves by their support of Henry A. Wallace, challenging Harry Truman and running for the presidency on a Progressive Party ticket. Meanwhile, Seeger had begun to sing with a new group, a quartet that included Hays, and sought to be a more polished and better rehearsed version of the Almanac Singers. The other two members, both about 10 years younger, were Fred Hellerman, a member of the Young Communist League, and Ronnie Gilbert, a voice student whose mother was a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and had introduced her daughter to the Wobblies' songbook. Hellerman's baritone voice and Gilbert's beautiful alto, when mingled with Seeger's tenor and Hays's bass, created a pleasing sound. The quartet sang at informal gatherings and performed on a weekly folk music

program hosted by singer Oscar Brand on radio station WNYC. In time, the four singers decided to call themselves the Weavers.

The group put out a record featuring the song "If I Had a Hammer." Hays, Seeger recalled, "had three verses, then a fourth to tie it all together, and he sent it to me in January 1949, saying, 'Pete, can you make up a tune for this?' And as I remember, I sat down at a piano and plunked out a tune. It wasn't a bad tune, but it wasn't as good as it should be..." First sung at a benefit performance to raise money for Communist leaders on trial in New York, "If I Had a Hammer" came out on Charter Records in 1949. It then appeared the next year on the cover of the first issue of *Sing Out!*, a new publication deriving its name from the hammer song itself. The song began:

If I had a hammer  
I'd hammer in the morning,  
I'd hammer in the evening,  
All over this land;  
I'd hammer out danger,  
I'd hammer out a warning,  
I'd hammer out love between  
All of my brothers  
All over this land.

The song had a driving beat, repetitive elements that made it easy to remember and to sing, and, despite Seeger's disclaimer, a catchy tune. But conservative critics complained that the song counseled radical - and hence unacceptable - activism, and the hammer, they charged, seemed painfully close to the hammer which, along with a sickle, appeared on the Soviet flag.

Meanwhile, the group wasn't doing well. Seeger still hoped it could catch on, and finally suggested that the owner of the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village, who had hired him alone earlier, might take the Weavers for the same fee. The Weavers opened at the Village Vanguard during Christmas week in 1949 and remained there for six months. At one point, Alan Lomax brought noted poet Carl Sandburg to the Vanguard, and he commented publicly, "When I hear America singing, the Weavers are there."

The Weavers signed a recording contract with Decca Records, a major label. Their first record had the Israeli folk song "Tzena, Tzena" on one side, and Leadbelly's song "Goodnight, Irene" on the other. Both songs were huge successes. Other hits followed: "On Top of Old Smokey," "Kisses Sweeter than Wine," and a new version that Woody Guthrie wrote of his classic Dust Bowl ballad, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You." Over a two-year period, Decca sold 4 million Weavers records. Critical acclaim accompanied commercial success.

For Seeger, it was a heady experience making a good living doing what he loved. It all came so suddenly. "I remember laughing," he once said, "when I walked down the street and heard my own voice coming out of a record store." Even more important was the satisfaction of creating the kind of singing movement he had been hoping to spark for years. The Weavers were reviving traditional songs, introducing songs from around the world, popularizing some of Woody Guthrie's and Leadbelly's best songs, and promoting the values of racial and ethnic harmony and brotherhood. They were breaking down the often artificial boundaries between different kinds of music. As their songs soared on the charts, they helped make folk music acceptable for public consumption. With their pleasing harmonies and lively sound, they were building a new audience ready to spark a huge folk music revival in the decades ahead.

Suddenly, in 1950, without warning, the Weavers found themselves blindsided. At the height of their popularity, they came under attack for their radical political sympathies, as the United States embarked on a second Red Scare, this one far more destructive than the hysterical right-wing reaction that followed World War I. Seeger, the most outspoken and visible member of the group, was most vulnerable, but all four singers faced scrutiny from those who felt that Communist influence was contaminating their land.

Like other entertainers under attack, the Weavers found themselves victims of a

blacklist that kept them from singing in venues where they had appeared before. "We had started off singing in some very flossy nightclubs," Seeger noted. They had been welcome at fancy establishments like the Palmer House in Chicago. "Then we went lower and lower as the blacklist crowded us in. Finally, we were down to places like Daffy's Bar and Grill on the outskirts of Cleveland."

As the Weavers fell apart, Seeger began a solo career. Always dedicated to making folk music available and sharing old songs, and new ones, he wanted to venture out on his own and find his own voice. Regular concert halls were often not available, given the allegations about his radical past, and so Pete and his wife Toshi decided that he would make a living traveling around the United States, singing in colleges, churches, summer camps, and schools. These venues gave him an altogether different audience than he had known before, not always knowledgeable about folk music but eager to listen and learn, and presented him with a challenge he found exciting. He quickly convinced himself that this was what he really wanted to do. His experience with the pop music world, he later recalled, persuaded him that "I didn't want a commercial career. I looked upon nightclubs as foolish places where people got drunk. People went away to forget their troubles. I wanted to see if we could solve our troubles with my songs. I didn't want people to forget their troubles."

Seeger was not sure where his efforts would lead him, but he was doing what he enjoyed. As he brought America's songs to new audiences, he perfected his own musical style. By now a master of his musical instrument, he could make his banjo sing and he used it to get audiences to sing along with him. People not used to playing an active role at a performance were sometimes surprised. "The concert was like none I've ever seen," remarked one writer in the *Providence Journal*. "He let us sing the ballads with him." When not on the road, Seeger taught at the Downtown Community School in Greenwich Village in New York City, and at Camp Woodland in the nearby Catskill

Mountains. It was a relief to have autonomy over his itinerary, his repertoire, and his approach. Never as prolific as Woody Guthrie, he still wrote his own songs all the time, and some of these took on a life of their own. One of the favorites among children was "Abiyoyo," a Bantu story with a musical accompaniment about a young boy with a ukulele who manages to save his town from an evil giant.

Songs came to Seeger at odd times. On one occasion, as he sat in a plane heading for Oberlin College, he found in his pocket several lines he had copied down from *And Quiet Flows the Don*, a novel by Soviet author Mikhail Sholokhov. The lines, describing Cossack soldiers singing as they went off to serve in the Tsar's army, came from a Ukrainian folk song, and went:

Where are the flowers? The girls have plucked them.  
Where are the girls? They've taken husbands.  
Where are the men? They're all in the army.

Now he remembered a four-syllable musical phrase he had also been carrying around in his head that went: "long time passing." Putting the different parts together, he came up with: "Where have all the flowers gone - long time passing." A melody appropriated from the old folksong "Drill Ye Tarrriers Drill" got him one step further, and finally he added what he later called "the handwringer's perennial complaint," and in 20 minutes he had a new song. That evening, he taped it to the microphone and sang it for the first time.

The song was simple, lyrical, and easy to follow. It had a repetitive refrain and a catchy tune. And, as the United States found itself locked into the ongoing confrontations with the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, and as Seeger faced the fallout from the anti-Communist hysteria, the song had a plaintive political message. It began simply:

Where have all the flowers gone?  
Long time passing  
Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time ago -  
Where have all the flowers gone?  
Girls have picked them ev'ry one  
Oh, when will you ever learn?  
Oh, when will you ever learn?

Seeger was carving out a new career, but once again politics threatened to derail it. The House Un-American Activities Committee - HUAC - intent on uncovering subversive influence wherever it might exist, had been investigating other singers, Josh White and Burl Ives, two popular folk singers, both testified before HUAC, and their compliance troubled Seeger. Now, in August 1955, it was Seeger's turn.

He decided not plead the Fifth Amendment, which guaranteed the right to avoid testifying against oneself, but to confront the committee on the basis of the First Amendment, which guaranteed the right to free speech. But this might well entail a long and costly legal battle to achieve a dubious victory.

On the stand, as the questioning began to focus on possible Communist Party activities, Seeger replied: "I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, 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."

HUAC had the last word. In July 1956, a full year after the hearing, the United States House of Representatives cited Seeger and several others for contempt. Nine months later, on March 26, 1957, a federal grand jury indicted him on 10 counts of contempt of Congress. Three days after that, he pleaded not guilty to all charges and was permitted to go free on bail.

Our legal system moves slowly. The trial began 4 years later, in March 1961. Eventually, after hearing testimony, the judge ruled that HUAC's questions were legal and legitimate, and were connected to the Committee's investigations. An hour and twenty minutes after the jury began deliberating, it returned with a verdict. Seeger was

guilty as charged on all 10 counts of contempt. The judge sentenced Seeger to a year in prison for each of the 10 counts on which he had been convicted, though he did rule that the sentences could be served concurrently, so that he would be free in a year. On appeal, however, a more sensible court reversed the conviction on a technicality, and Seeger was free at last.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Seeger got caught up in the civil rights movement. He learned about the Montgomery bus boycott from an article in the *New York Times*. He was intrigued by the protest and interested to learn that the protesters were singing songs. The next year, he flew to Birmingham to sing at a rally with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Montgomery Improvement Association, which resulted in a thank you note acknowledging his "moral support and Christian generosity."

Seeger was interested both in the struggle for civil rights and in the music coming out of the South. He had long been interested in Southern songs. And that interest had helped refine a Southern civil rights song he had heard at the Highlander Folk School, an institution dedicated to promoting radical social change. Zilphia Horton, working as music director at Highlander, was fond of a song she heard striking black workers singing on the picket line to keep their spirits up. Their song was "We Will Overcome," based on a number of gospel songs, one called "I'll Be All Right," another called "I'll Overcome Some Day." By the time Horton heard the striking workers sing the song, the title had changed from "I" to "We," and that version, sung very slowly, became her favorite song. Seeger learned it from her in 1947, and published it in *People's Songs* that year. He sped up the tempo, singing it with a banjo rhythm. But then he made a significant change, so that "We Will Overcome" became "We Shall Overcome." Why the change? "Toshi kids me that it was my Harvard grammar," he later recalled, "but I think I liked a more open sound; 'We will' has alliteration to it, but 'We shall' opens the mouth wider; the 'i' in 'will' is not an easy vowel to sing well." He also added a number of

verses.

The song took on a life of its own. Seeger taught it to folksinger Frank Hamilton in 1952, and he in turn taught it to Guy Carawan, a student who had earned an MA in sociology in Los Angeles but was now spending more time with his music and becoming increasingly interested in the South. In 1959, Carawan came to Highlander to work as a songleader. The next year, the civil rights movement took another important step forward following the success of the bus boycott in Montgomery. Black students in Greensboro, North Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee launched sit-in demonstrations at lunch counters where blacks were refused service, refusing to leave until they were served. As their demonstrations gained nationwide attention, Carawan organized a weekend for activists at Highlander called "Sing for Freedom" and invited Seeger and other musicians to help him. As they sang "We Shall Overcome," Hamilton and Carawan slowed the song down again, and taught it to civil rights workers that way. "It was," Seeger recalled, "the hit song of the weekend." Several weeks later, at another conference in Raleigh, North Carolina that led to the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Seeger noted, somebody shouted, "Guy, teach us all 'We Shall Overcome.'" He did, "and that's when they invented the way of crossing your hands in front of you so your left hand reaches to your right and grasps the right hand of the person to your right... and your right hand reaches to the left and grasps the left hand of somebody on your left. And your shoulders almost touch as you sway back and forth." Seeger relearned the song this way, and he and others helped spread it around the country.

"We Shall Overcome" became the marching song of the movement. It had a quiet simplicity that reflected the passion of the commitment to social justice and the strength of the resolve to bring about social change:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,  
We shall overcome someday.  
Deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall overcome some day.

Other verses, equally simple, carried the same message.

As the civil rights movement shifted course in the mid-1960s, another issue became the focus of intense national concern. Increasingly embroiled in a guerrilla war halfway around the world in Vietnam, the United States faced mounting criticism for its role in what became an unpopular and unwinnable conflict, and singers like Seeger lent their voices to the growing chorus of protest. New songs, angrier songs helped galvanize the antiwar movement and energize the effort to bring the conflict to an end. Seeger wrote a number of antiwar songs, but the one that caught on best was "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Written in 1965, it told a sad story of pigheaded stubbornness. It was the tale of a platoon of American soldiers in 1942, ordered by the captain to ford a river, despite the warnings of the sergeant and the men that the river was too deep. The captain refused to listen and pushed ahead doggedly. Each verse told the story of him drifting deeper and deeper into the water. It began:

It was back in nineteen forty-two, I was a  
member of a good platoon. We were on  
maneuvers in-a Loozianna, One night by the  
light of the moon.  
The captain told us to ford a river.  
That's how it all begun.  
We were - knee deep in the Big Muddy,  
But the big fool said to push on.

The outcome, described in the next verse, was inevitable:

All at once, the moon clouded over, We heard a  
gurgling cry. A few seconds later, the captain's  
helmet Was all that floated by.  
The sergeant said, "Turn around men!"  
I'm in charge from now on."  
And we just made it out of the Big Muddy

With the captain dead and gone.

The song dealt with the World War II era, of course, but it clearly concerned the war in Southeast Asia. As Seeger noted, "I was thinking about Vietnam. On the other hand, I purposely decided I would just let it be an allegory on its own, like the political nursery rhymes." But the connection was unmistakable. As President Lyndon Johnson hunkered down and refused to shift course despite the growing antiwar movement, he was just like the captain in the song.

Seeger recorded the song on an album, but Columbia Records failed to promote it. He thought television could give his song exposure and was delighted when Tommy and Dick Smothers, folk singing friends, called Seeger to ask if he would appear on their popular television show, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*.

In early September, Seeger went to Hollywood to tape the program. In the videotaping session, he sang a variety of songs, ranging from the old favorite "Wimoweh" to "John Brown's Body" and concluded, as he had told the Smothers Brothers he would, with "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Then staffers took the tape to New York for CBS officials to check it before show time.

When the program aired, Seeger and others were startled and appalled. Without a word of warning or explanation, he noted, "'Big Muddy' had been cut out of the tape." The excision was transparent: "One moment I had a guitar in my hand; a second later I had a banjo in my hand - it was an obvious cut."

Several months later, CBS relented and decided Seeger could sing "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" on the air. With but a day's notice, he flew out to California, taped the song again, and watched it appear on the program in February 1968. Some 7 million viewers saw him perform it on television. Only one station in Detroit cut the song. But CBS had the last word. The next year, it cancelled the Smothers Brothers show.

In mid-November 1969, an estimated half million people gathered in Washington, D.C. to protest the war. Pete and Toshi were present, along with activists from around the country. When it was Seeger's turn to sing, he had trouble getting the crowd to join together. His songs fell flat. Aware his time was almost up, he decided to take a gamble and try a short refrain by Beatles John Lennon and Paul McCartney that he had heard only 3 days before and sung only once. The song was simple: "All we are saying, is Give Peace a Chance." As Seeger noted, "That's all there is to it. A song only seven seconds long." He and a fellow performer sang it over and over, and after about 30 seconds, other people began to join in, first thousands, then tens of thousands, finally, in a couple of minutes, hundreds of thousands. The trio Peter, Paul, and Mary joined them on the left of the podium, and then Mitch Miller, a choir leader who had popularized the sing-along format on television, jumped up on the right, waving his arms to help the crowd keep time.

Despite that sense of good feeling and collective involvement, the moratorium failed to end the war. It dragged on for the duration of Richard Nixon's first term, until finally, in early 1973, a peace treaty allowed the United States to leave. North Vietnam now had the upper hand, and two years later, in 1975, the North Vietnamese reunified the country on their own terms.

Meanwhile, Seeger was becoming involved in another cause. An environmental movement was gaining steam. It had roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but got a tremendous boost when naturalist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962 and alerted the public to the dangers of DDT. Seeger, who lived on the banks of the Hudson River in Beacon, New York, about an hour north of Manhattan, was concerned that the river, once vibrant and alive, had become horribly polluted, filled with chemical and human waste.

He began sailing on the river, going out by himself, finding a peace he

expressed in a song he called "Sailing Down My Golden River":

Sailing down my golden river Sun and  
water all my own Yet I was never  
alone....

Seeger became instrumental in what turned into the *Clearwater* project. He began to dream of building a giant sloop that could sail up and down the Hudson. Many people told him he was out of his mind. They called it a Don Quixote project. But Seeger persisted and pushed on. He canvassed local residents for help with the Hudson Valley Sloop Restoration project. Always keen on using his hands, Seeger helped with the actual building, once the necessary funds were raised. In the summer of 1969, the *Clearwater* was launched. It was 106 feet long, and 24 feet wide. It slept 15, and usually had a crew of musicians, sailing up and down, raising money for the river. It was just one of a host of ways activists helped raise environmental consciousness nationwide. Seeger, now 89, has had a remarkable career. Once vilified, he has become a popular icon. At the age of 75, he had the satisfaction of being awarded the National Medal of Arts, America's highest official cultural honor. Last year, in Washington, D.C., I attended a symposium at the Library of Congress on the Seeger family - including his half-brother Mike and his half-sister Peggy, that included a concert at the end of the 3-day affair. And he still has the respect - and affection - of virtually every major folksinger in the country whose career he encouraged in the 1960s and 1970s, as people began singing the kinds of songs Seeger had always loved.

I went to talk to him in Beacon about a year ago. I thought about taking my own guitar, but finally decided that would seem hokey and self-serving, until my guitar teacher insisted I take it along. Seeger would understand, he said, and I would forever regret it if I didn't take it and then wished I had.

We sat talking in his hot living room for the better part of three and a half hours, and I taped the interview. Then I turned off the tape recorder, and he made lunch for us

out of leftovers Toshi had left in the refrigerator. After eating, I said, "Pete, I'd like to ask you a favor."

"What's that," he asked.

"Would you play that thing for me," I said, pointing to his long-necked banjo hanging on the living room wall.

"Only if you'll play with me," he said, telling me what I wanted to hear.

And so, after tuning up, we played songs I chose. We did "Oh Mary, Don't You Weep," one of his favorite old gospel songs, "We Shall Overcome," "Goodnight, Irene," and Woody Guthrie's great "This Land Is Your Land." On a couple of them, we got all the way through, and then he said, "I really prefer to do it more slowly," and so we did it again. Finally, I thanked him, and we put our instruments down, and he took me back to the train.

Pete Seeger has been in the forefront of every major reform movement in America over the past 75 years. He latched on to one cause after another – To Everything There Is a Season - and lent his voice to the protests that helped make America a better place. He believed then - and believes now - that songs "can help this world survive." As he once reflected, "Songs won't save the planet. But, then, neither will books or speeches... Songs are sneaky things. They can slip across borders. Proliferate in prisons. Penetrate hard shells." He was - and is - fond of quoting Plato: "Watch music. It is an important art form. Rulers should be careful about what songs are allowed to be sung."

Seeger has been a tireless advocate of what are sometimes unpopular causes. And he has always remained true to his own beliefs. He once told the story of a tiny peace demonstration in Times Square in New York in the 1950s. An onlooker scoffed at a Quaker carrying a sign, saying, "Do you think you're going to change the world by standing here at midnight with that sign?"

"I suppose not," the young man said, "but I'm going to make sure the world

doesn't change me."

In the words of Seeger's much loved song: "To everything, turn, turn, turn. There is a season, turn, turn, turn. And a time for every purpose under heaven."