

*Sunday February 2, 2014*

## **Pete Seeger: the song is ended**

By Jim Taylor

Another spark of idealism flickered out this week.

Last Monday, legendary folk singer Pete Seeger died at the age of 94. As countless eulogies will have attested by the time you read this column, Seeger was the godfather of folk music in the Americas. He taught millions to play the 5-string banjo. He inspired folk groups through the late 1950s and most of the 1960s.

The list of Seeger's emulators could fill this page. Groups like the Kingston Trio, Peter Paul and Mary, the Limelites, the Chad Mitchell Trio, the New Christie Minstrels. Solo performers and songwriters like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Gordon Lightfoot, Stompin' Tom Connors...

From his early days with the Weavers to his later solo career, he got people singing. It wasn't enough for him to perform; he wanted people to sing along with him.

### **Singing together**

I look back on the folk song period as a golden moment in music. People sang.

Before Edison captured audio on wax, people gathered around pianos in parlours and sang. But that, of course, required someone who could play the piano. Remember those ads, "They laughed when I sat down at the piano"?

Then recorded music came along. People swung and swayed, cheek to cheek, dancing in the dark. If they sang along, they crooned softly in a partner's ear. But they didn't sing boisterously, joyfully.

Seegers' folk song movement, backed by acoustic instruments, gave us back the sheer joy of singing. Briefly. Until electrically amplified instruments made singing along a waste of time – you couldn't hear yourself over the wall of sound blasted out by loudspeakers, and later by earbuds.

The songs that Pete Seeger popularized still echo in our memories. We Shall Overcome became the theme song of the civil rights movement; If I Had A Hammer and Where Have All The Flowers Gone embodied anti-Vietnam war protests; Little Boxes made of Ticky-Tacky satirized suburbia.

There were also pretty songs, of course, often picked up by other artists: Kisses Sweeter Than Wine, Turn Turn Turn, Kum Bye Yah...

### **Political outlaw**

In the warm glow of nostalgia, though, we often forget that most of his songs were fighting songs, songs that railed against injustice and prejudice and exploitation. Seeger spent his life on the side of the underdog, the victim.

It made him a communist in the late 1930s. Even though he later disavowed Stalinist communism, he and other idealists were blacklisted by Senator Joseph McCarthy – whose ruthless witch-hunts of dissent ironically resembled Stalin's own purges.

Despite his leftist leanings, Seeger considered himself a religious person. For much of his life, Seeger attended a Unitarian/Universalist church in New York.

He told an interviewer, "I used to say I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God."

I never hob-nobbed with Pete Seeger. The closest I came was through one of Seeger's disciples, a young George Hewison, then rising fast in the United Fishermen's and Allied Workers' Union on the Pacific Coast. Like the early Seeger, Hewison was a communist. And an atheist.

I recruited him as a Sunday school teacher anyway.

I didn't care about his politics; I thought he could be good with the kids. He was. He brought his guitar and taught us to chant the words of Wimoweh. When we got rocking with it, Hewison threw back his head and let fly with one of those Seeger howls that hit a high note and held it, and held it, and held it...

## **Idealist to the last**

When I listen to Seeger recordings from his prime years, I still get goosebumps.

Because he never gave up. He believed, always, that the world could be fairer, better, more compassionate, more equitable. He believed we could live in harmony with each other and with nature. He quit the Weavers when he felt other members of the group had sold out to corporate profiteering when they agreed to sing for a tobacco commercial.

When thousands of Swedes gathered in 2012 to protest the mass murder of 77 people by Anders Breivik, they chose to sing Seeger's Rainbow Race. Not long before his death, he and some friends got together to record – in a single take – a new song about the environment called Solartopia.

The author of a book by that name, Harvey Wasserman, wrote of Pete and his wife Toshi, "They showed us it's possible to live lives that somehow balance political commitment with joy, humour, family, courage, and grace."

Amen to that.

To borrow a line from a song often sung at Seeger concerts, "So long, Pete, it's been good to know ya."

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## **YOUR TURN**

I'm not sure what it was about last week's column, but I don't think I have ever had as many requests for permission to re-publish it on Facebook pages, local newsletters, personal mailing lists, etc. (If I knew what it was, I'd bottle it and sell it!) Whatever it was, thank you for recognizing it, and for spreading it around by your own means.

Harold Neufeld agreed with my summary: "A friend sent me your reflections on Harper's visit to the Middle East. I spent a month there two years ago and travelled mostly in the West Bank as well as Israel and Jordan and have written a half-dozen times to Harper and Baird et al about my dismay regarding our current government's policies and postures vis-a-vis the Israeli/Palestinian situation. I'm of Mennonite background and attend a Mennonite church in Winnipeg where your views both on Harper and on the Middle East are fairly broadly shared."

Don Grayston wished I hadn't referred to "the ultimate truths" of the Bible.

"I would have appreciated it," Don wrote, "if you had added 'as they interpret them.' Text and interpretation are two different things. If we accept that Harper and co. are announcing "ultimate truths," then we have to let go of the Bible, not so? But if their interpretation is simply one among many (and a mistaken one, bien sur!), that's different."

David Scott thought I could have chosen a more catchy title: “I found your reflection on Stephen Harper's triumphal procession immensely more engaging than the title suggests.”

Dale Perkins is no fan of Stephen Harper: “Harper and his obedient servants are a menace not only to Canadians, but to anyone who might look to Canada for leadership in global affairs. The guy is so deeply ensconced in a literalist, Biblical mind-set that he seems incapable of thinking outside that paradigm. That not only is sad; it is dangerous. We've witnessed tyrants throughout history; Harper seems to be quite content to be numbered among them.”

Jorgen Hansen wrote, “I always wonder what hold the Israelis have on other countries — i.e., USA sends them unlimited arms to fight the neighbors, etc. Is there any truth to how the Jewish people obtained the right to the land by way of England and USA in 1946-9? I read that the Rothschilds threatened to sink the English pound if they did not do the deal.”

I had heard that rumor too, but I treat it as evidence of our desire to find a conspiracy under every deal we don't like.

Bruce McGillis suggested that all the “holy” writings of various religions are “civilization codes” – not about the divine but about acceptable human behavior within that society.

He went on, “Hundreds of past codes are not active living features of today. Yet when it comes down to the crunch we readily fall back on biblical beliefs. Must humans forever require this biblical crutch; as a salve? I find it disturbing that after all these years, trumped-up religious beliefs are still being used to attain ruling power. Although church attendance is down, the general populace readily plays the religious card.”

Jim Pankratz wrote a long letter, which included, “There are many Christians who regard the Bible as authoritative for their lives, but they do not therefore regard the policies of a political party on one issue to be binding on them...”

I agree. But my point was not whether all Christians regard the Bible as authoritative, but whether Harper does.

Jim went on to suggest that I had made a simplistic connection between Harper's attitude to Israel and his gutting of scientific research: “As much as I dislike Harper's policies and practices on many issues, he is not that much of a fool. He dislikes science or any information that challenges his policies and perspectives and if he has the capacity to silence that information he will. . He has never suggested that freshwater policy or other similar issues can be reduced to a simple ‘What does the Bible say about this?’ formula.”

On the subject of science, Linda Saunders drew attention to a recent CBC Fifth Estate program, “The Silence of the Labs” (which I think can be viewed on-line).

“It certainly covered many of the concerns many of us have regarding the tar sands and the loss of the world respected Experimental Lakes Project. Is there nothing we can do? Are we really limited to waiting for another opportunity at the polls? Can another leader/party really undo the damage which has been done under the Harper government? Where is the media's relentless probing when it is sorely needed?”

Walley Lightbody drew my attention to two books: “The Armageddon Factor” by Marci McDonald, and “The War on Science” by Chris Turner.

Steve Roney questioned my electoral math: “The number of votes is only one third of the electoral calculation. It also matters whether a given group will organize, and whether they will donate.

“The Jews in Canada and the U.S. have been politically influential not because of their numbers, but because they are wealthier than the average, and so have more money to donate; because they strongly self-identify as Jews; and because they are already well-organized on this basis, in synagogues, B'nai Brith, etc.

“The same circumstances have led to the high political visibility of another group with similar numbers recently: homosexuals. Though only 1-3% of the population, they are wealthier than average, strongly self-identify

in recent years as homosexuals, and have begun to organize as such. This is also why the NRA is so powerful in the US: well-organized, with members who, if not wealthy, feel very strongly about the cause. And feminism: women have control of 80% of all disposable income, and have much more free time on average than men. So they can organize to pressure for 'their' issues.

"Muslims are less wealthy than Jews, and far less inclined to self-identify politically as Muslims. Shia Iranian-Canadians may not feel that they have a lot in common with Sunni Indonesian-Canadians, for example."

There were at least a dozen other writers. I hope they will find their views reflected in the excerpts I have shown above.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith.

To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsraps@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsraps@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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