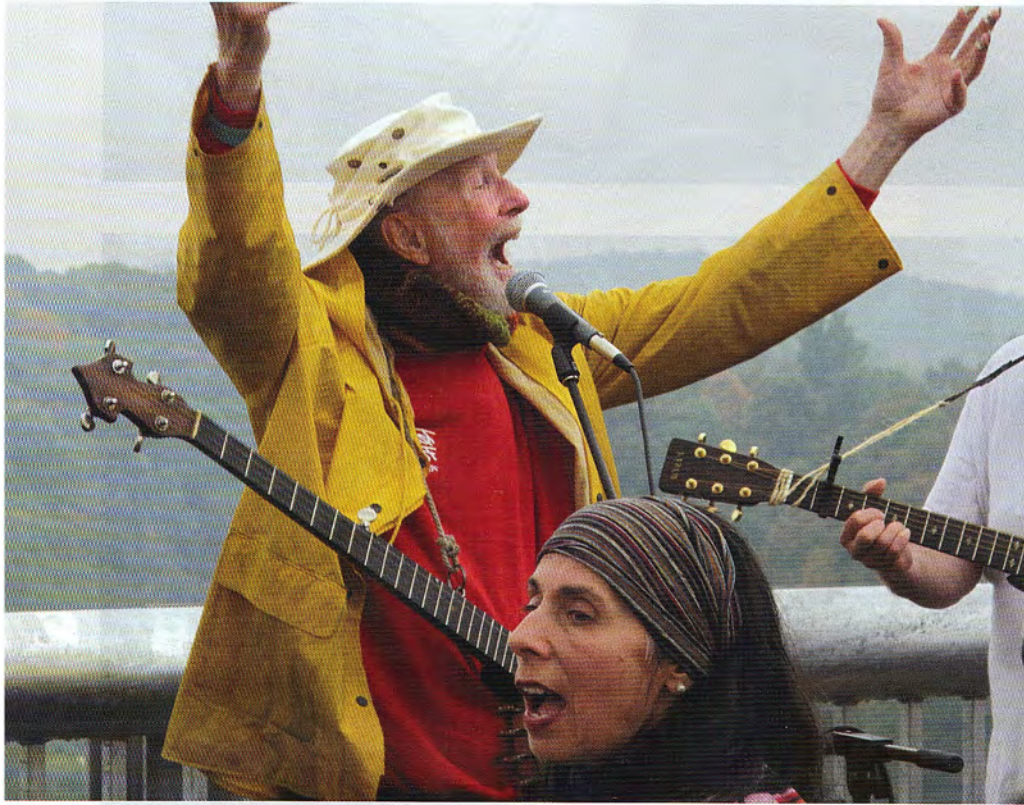


Pete Seeger's Lasting Legacy

by John Rowen, *photography as noted*



above: *Pete Seeger singing with children at the opening of The Walkway Over The Hudson, a rehabilitated railroad bridge for use as a foot and bicycle path. It goes between Highland and Poughkeepsie.*

Through his music and activism, Pete Seeger has influenced *Kaatskill Life* country and the world beyond. It's impossible to relate every story about Seeger, who died, at age 94, on January 27, 2014. However, the following stories suggest what made him special and how his imprint defines the region.

Seeger's father, Charles, and Ruth Crawford, his stepmother, were avid students of traditional music. Despite loving music, Seeger really wanted to be a journalist. At Harvard, he immersed himself in a progressive magazine, but the project took so much of his time that his grades suffered. He was compelled to leave Harvard but could not find a job in journalism.

right: **Clearwater buttons**, photography by Julia Church, communications manager for Hudson River Sloop Clearwater.

below: *The Clearwater sloop traveling on the Hudson River.* photography by Augusto Menezes



In a radio interview on WAMC in 2001, Seeger described the moment his life changed. His aunt, a school teacher, said, "Pete, come and sing some of your songs to my class; I can get you five dollars." His response was, "It seemed to me like stealing to do what I had done all of my life for the fun of it." "I took the money," he concluded, "and have been singing...ever since."

From singing to children, he start-

heard Seeger's songs at day camp. "The traditional tunes Seeger adapted took us on a trip around the world," Wyatt said. "Pete's own songs showed that the tradition of making homemade music was alive and well." On a live album, Seeger sings a spiritual and then remarks that a particular verse could be heard as commenting on black kids not being able to attend public school. Wyatt said, "This was a



Pete Seeger singing with children from local schools and joined by Apache musician Victor Roland Moussa, right.

ed singing with Woody Guthrie. While living in New York City, music brought him to his wife, Toshi; they wed in 1943. Returning from serving in World War II, Seeger was appalled by the conservative turn in American politics and society. As a solo performer and member of the Weavers, he used music to promote social change. He and Toshi moved to a cabin near Beacon, New York, and started homesteading.

Lorre Wyatt, Seeger's songwriting and frequent performing partner, first

moment that changed my life. Pete reinvigorated an old song with fresh meaning and showed how their verses could comment on today's headlines."

As a teenager in Connecticut, Manna Jo Greene, environmental action director of Hudson River Sloop Clearwater and an Ulster County legislator, knew about Seeger's folk singing career, including how he and southern musicians made "We Shall Overcome" the civil rights movement's anthem.

Dr. Alan Chartock, president and CEO of WAMC, Northeast Public Radio, recalls, "When I was a teenager, we sang all of his songs, over and over again. Many nights I fell asleep listening to Pete's songs on my stereo."

T.C. Boyle, a Hudson Valley native, who teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California, brought Seeger with him to the West Coast. In a recent email, Boyle, no relation to environmentalist Bob Boyle, said that Will Connell in *World's End*, the epic novel about Peekskill, "channels Pete Seeger."

Seeger came to the sloop *Clearwater*, and the environmental programs it inspired, serendipitously. In a 2008 interview with Chartock, Seeger said he discovered sailing when a teen took him sailing off Cape Cod. "I was amazed," he said, "how sailing used the power of the wind, which is blowing against you, to move forward." Later, while visiting Vic Schwartz, a friend who lived in the Hudson Highlands, Schwartz told Seeger about Hudson River sloops. He introduced Seeger to *Sloops of the Hudson River*, written by William Verplanck and Moses Collyer in 1908.

What happened next, according to John Mylod, *Clearwater's* former executive director, was a case study in Seeger's and Toshi's gift for bringing an idea to life. With no how-to book on building a Hudson River sloop, Mylod recalls that Seeger and naval architect Cyrus Hamlin used sketches, logbooks and paintings to design *Clearwater*. "Verplanck and Collyer," Mylod explained, "described what they thought were the most beautiful boats in the world and were sad they were gone. But for Pete, the book inspired him to bring back the sloop."

As Greene explained, "Pete had a dream. He would build a boat and

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take people out on the river, which at the time was an open sewer. He would share his dream to clean up the Hudson; people would come back to shore inspired to start the work."

Mylod recalls, "Pete decided the first thing to do was lay the sloop's keel, to attract financial support." When Gamage Shipyard in Maine finished *Clearwater*, Pete had to borrow money to pay Gamage and then stage concerts to repay the loan.

Clearwater set sail for New York on June 27, 1969. Most crew members were musicians; folksinger Gordon Bok, a sailor, was the mate. Many others had to learn to sail: Don McLean reportedly slapped the boom and said, "What is this? The bowsprit?" Fran Dunwell, author of two books about the Hudson, is the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Hudson River Estuary program coordinator. She says, "The sloop is at its best when you have a strong wind and it is under sail. It takes every person on the boat, pulling as hard as they can, to raise the sail."

above: *The album A More Perfect Union (2012) with Pete Seeger and Lorre Wyatt. This was Pete Seeger's last recorded studio album and the only one he made of all new songs they wrote together.*

below: *Pete Seeger and Lorre Wyatt in 1971 singing at the Pumpkin Sail.*
photography by Patricia Greene ©



Greene estimates "about half a million children" have sailed on the *Clearwater*. Robert Boyle, founder of the Hudson River Fishermen's Association and author of *The Hudson: An Unnatural History*, observes, "The sloop has done an unmatched and superb job at taking kids out on the river and telling them what it is all about." Regarding the sloop's influence on children, in the early 1970s, Boyle, his wife, and son Peter were aboard *Clearwater* and Peter disappeared. The Boyles found Peter, who was 11 at the time, at the top of *Clearwater's* mast!

Seeger and Toshi were more than activist impresarios. Meg Smith, a friend from Beacon, said, "Pete's genius was understanding that a boat, like a whistled tune, needs no explanation, no translation, to communicate. Both the symbol and tune have the power to touch people on an elemental level, and connect them to a river, a movement and to one another."

Dunwell said Seeger "campaigned all of his life for human rights and justice. For him, human rights and access to a clean environment were always intertwined, never separate." Wyatt

observed that some songwriters look for a subject in the news, not because it's "a real part of their lives, but rather just another item on a checklist." "For me and Pete," he continued, "writing about the environment...came from deep inside. These were things we believed in, breathed in, and lived every day."

Seeger's wife, who died in 2013 at age 91, was key to his success. Toshi inspired and changed lives. When Greene began attending Hudson River Revival concerts she saw how Toshi instituted recycling. This inspired Greene to make Ulster County a recycling leader. "Pete and Toshi," Mylod recalled, "used their gifts to broaden the audience to come aboard and participate. You didn't have to sail or swim, they would find a niche for you to help." Wyatt remarks, "In Pete and Toshi's

later years, their daughter Tinya played an increasing role in their lives, tending to their health and daily needs."

As Seeger neared the end of his life, and as the Hudson became cleaner, he brought his concern for social justice to river communities. He poured much energy into *Clearwater* programs in Hudson Valley cities, to improve the environment and offer careers to low-income teens.

Seeger often found time for humor. Wyatt recalls going to the head (i.e. bathroom) on *Clearwater*. As he approached, he heard Seeger, in the head, singing a verse over and over. Pete told Wyatt, "I'm writing a song!" When Wyatt asked, "Why are you doing it here?" Seeger replied, "Well, I was having a little trouble, and I figured two heads are better than one!"



Mylod saw Seeger at an anti 2003 Iraq war rally in New York City. The audience likely expected protest songs but Mylod said, "He sang 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.' 'Somewhere' was a brilliant choice; everyone knows it. And it says that we are all in this together — and can dream of a better world." 🐼