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Pete Seeger's persistent hope

John Dear | May. 12, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last week, to celebrate legendary folksinger Pete Seeger's 90th birthday, family, friends and the folk-music world threw a party for him at Madison Square Garden. We sang, we cheered, and we raised money for his Clearwater Foundation, a project to clean up the Hudson River. The music and the musicians were terrific -- Bruce Springsteen, Joan Baez, Ani DeFranco, Kris Kristofferson, Roger McGuinn, Ruby Dee, Ritchie Havens, Bruce Cockburn, Arlo Guthrie and Bernice Johnson Reagon.

Dar Williams, one of folk's best singers, and her husband Michael, invited me along. It was thrilling to meet old friends and great musicians and join the festivities. But it was more than a party; it was a celebration of the grass-roots struggle for justice and peace.

"It is better to have struggled and lost, than never to have struggled at all,? Pete once said. His life has been a long nonviolent campaign, using the weapon of music, for civil rights, disarmament and social justice.

Born May 3, 1919, Pete joined the movement early on, traveled the country singing songs of protest with Woody Guthrie, and found success with the singing group, The Weavers. He was subsequently condemned as a Communist, regularly attacked and on one occasion nearly killed by a mob.

He testified before Congress, and in 1961, the House found him guilty of contempt and sentenced him to 10 years. The case was thrown out a year later but only because of a technicality.

Along the way, he wrote songs, taught "We Shall Overcome" to Dr. King and the civil rights movement, and inspired Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and several million others to "sing out" for justice and peace. In 1970, he turned toward the environment, founded the Clearwater project, and organized to clean up his beloved Hudson River. Over the decades, he has turned out more than a hundred albums and many books. He's become a one man Gandhian *satyagraha* "truth force."

In the early 1960s, when I was in first and second grade in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the nuns at my elementary school taught us to sing his songs. I knew every word to "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?," "If I Had a Hammer," "Guantanamera," and Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." I often ponder the effect of this political, humanizing music as a teaching tool on my life.

Over the years, it seemed only natural that I would meet the great man. He has helped me with various causes and events, beginning in 1996 with a great 75th birthday party for our friend Daniel Berrigan, followed by various projects and rallies. On several occasions, I called him to confirm his appearance at this or that event, and he would sing a song in the making and ask what I thought. One became my favorite: "Well May the World Go" (available on the CD, If I Had a Song: The Songs of Pete Seeger, Vol. 2).

"Behind Pete's somewhat benign, grandfatherly façade," Bruce Springsteen said with a laugh the other night, lies a "nasty optimism." This is true. At the end of my latest book, *Put Down Your Sword*, I quote Pete about his steadfast hope. For years, he has questioned audiences as follows:

> "In the early 1970s, did you ever expect to see President Nixon resign because of Watergate?" "No, I didn't," people answer.
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> "Did you ever expect to see the Pentagon leave Vietnam the way it did?" "No, we did not," everyone answers.
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> "In the 1980s, did you expect to see the Berlin Wall come down so peacefully?" "No, never."
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> "In the 1990s, did you expect to see Nelson Mandela released from prison, apartheid abolished and Mandela become president of South Africa?" "Never," they say.
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> "Well, if you can't predict those things, then don't be so confident that there's no hope! There's always hope!"

I'm amazed at his steadfastness, his "no-matter-what" commitment to the future. He simply never gives up. He keeps on singing songs of protest in the hope that his music will inspire people to work for peace and justice. He inspires me to keep at it, too. Not to give up, give in to despair, or burn out -- even though there are plenty of reasons to do all of these.

Pete Seeger is a new kind of Johnny Appleseed, with an eye out for the long haul, sowing seeds of peace and justice. He knows that after decades of sowing, one day a field, a grove, a new forest will emerge, a harvest of peace will be made.

"Realize that little things lead to bigger things," Pete once told Amy Goodman. "That's what?.this wonderful parable in the New Testament is about: the Sower scatters seeds. Some seeds fall in the pathway and get stamped on, and they don't grow. Some fall on the rocks, and they don't grow. But some seeds fall on fallow ground, and they grow and multiply a thousand fold. Who knows where some good little thing that you've done may bring results years later that you never dreamed of?"

"I think the world's going to be saved by millions of small things," Pete told *USA Today* last week.

So there we were at the great Hootenanny, singing "We Shall Overcome," "This Land is Your Land," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" "Amazing Grace," "Bring ?Em Home," and "This Little Light of Mine," all of us reenergized under the light of this hopeful, persistent peacemaker.

May he live on, and may the harvest of peace and justice come soon. God bless you, Pete!

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For information, see www.peteseeger.net, www.joanbaez.com, and www.darwilliams.com. St. Anthony Messenger's Press has just published *John Dear On Peace*, by Patricia Normile. John's two new books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). For information on his books and speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org

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