

# Pete Seeger Part II: More on life, politics, and the world

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*Ryan O'Connor:*

Based on your experience, do you see any future threats to our freedom of speech?

*Pete Seeger:* I'm convinced that as long as we have speech, there will be a question of

thing." Can they prove it? No, it's a religious belief for them. Yet sooner or later, at the rate we're going, it will be possible for any insane or power-hungry person to put an end to the world. I can see somebody fifty years from now finding out that they can make a

and in other company you can loosen your tongue.

RO: Some people think that just because science gives us the ability to do something we should.

PS: And there's some people who think that if a thing is profitable to do we should be able to do it. And in many cases, I believe laws will not do the job. For example, I find myself agreeing with Milton Friedman and William Buckley that marijuana should be decriminalized, just as alcohol was decriminalized and prohibition was stopped. All prohibition did was create a gangster class running liquor up from the West Indies or down from Canada. It was a much better thing to decriminalize alcohol and AA has done much more to try to limit people's alcohol input. I believe we have to do the same for drugs. There's drugs of many kind, I'm a sugar-holic myself; I have to watch it every time I pass an ice-cream store. I take one bite of ice-cream and the next thing I know I'm going through a whole pint. On the other hand, it's another joke, I'm a magazine-holic. I've got work to do, but a new magazine comes into the house, I'll find some excuse to lie down and leaf through it. On the other hand, I have a

vast store of trivia in my head, and ridiculous little stories because of things I pick up. I read very widely. I'll read the Wall Street Journal at one time, and People's Weekly World, a communist newspaper at another time, or Forbes at another time, or the Earth First Journal at another time.

RO: Would you be able to tell me what it was like in the early days, taking part in Union activities and singing with Woody Guthrie.

PS: Well, you have to realize that the 1930's was a very, very different time period. Roosevelt had helped to try and get us out of the depression, but there was still a huge amount of unemployment until World War II came along, so it was very easy for me to take off and hitchhike. There were thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of people hitchhiking in America in those days and riding on freight-trains. I've written about this. The CIO changed the union picture and accomplished small miracles, some pretty big miracles, in a space of four or five years, so that Woody and I sang for unions in New York, and the Almanac Singers did all across the country.

RO: How would you describe Woody himself?

PS: Well, he was a very curious guy, and he

was also an omnivorous reader. I remember the week when he read Rabelais, the French writer – of course in an English translation. I could see in his own writing in the subsequent year him borrowing tricks from Rabelais, like accumulating a whole batch of phrases to say something that could be said in a brief way, making a whole joke about saying the same thing in ten or fifteen different ways. Rabelais described Pantagruel saying "He was gross, he was huge, he was enormous!" [laughs] Woody would do the same thing.

RO: Are you happy with the advances that unions have made, with minimum wage laws and labour codes? Do you think they have to go farther?

PS: Well, I agree with Franklin Roosevelt, "If I worked in a factory, the first thing I would do would be to join a union." I think it should be a standard thing. On the other hand, I have to admit some unions have been very racist and still are very racist. When I put out a book called "Carry It On" with a friend of mine, which had a lot of union songs in it, we had to point out in Boston, this was ten years ago so I don't know if it's still true. There was an Irish hod carriers union, and an Italian hods carrier union. All in the

building trades union. They got high wages, but if you were neither Irish nor Italian, you didn't get a job as a hod carrier in Boston. I think it is ridiculous, and I think unions everywhere should really be forced, and to realize, that the big job is to organize the unorganized, that was the slogan of the CIO in the late '30's, "Organize the Unorganized." The craft unions will say "well, there's only so many jobs for us, and we want those jobs, so let's make it hard for people to join the union. If there's too many of us, then we'll have to share these small number of jobs more widely."

RO: I guess it comes down to the role of the union, which is to unify.

PS: Yep. I also think that very often a problem that comes along, a big problem may turn out to be forcing you to do a good thing, and it may be that the problem of jobs leaving the US for Mexico or Korea will force unions to become truly international organizations. One of these years a union will do this successfully. It has not been done successfully except for Canada and the USA, and only occasionally. For example, there should be international seaman's unions to ensure safety at sea and standards worldwide for

**"I'm convinced that as long as we have speech, there will be a question of freedom of speech."**

freedom of speech. I'm of the opinion that every freedom that you can think of eventually has limits. For example, you've heard of Justice Holmes' saying "Freedom of speech doesn't give you the right to shout fire in a crowded theatre," and in a poetic sense the world is evermore full of crowded theatres. My father, who taught me perhaps more about such things than anybody else, ended his life saying things like "The most dangerous religion in the world is the religion of scientists who think that an infinite increase in information is a good

new bacteria that will wipe out every human being. They get the information off a computer, and they say "Ah! Once I've created this, I and my friends will all go to heaven, and all those wicked sinful people in the world will go where they deserve to go!" There goes the human race. I do believe that scientists, as well as everybody else, will learn to be "self-censors." I think what the world needs is six billion censors, and one of the parts of every education is learning when to say what. You learn in certain company you mind your tongue,