

## Folk icon Pete Seeger on songwriting, philosophy and the world

Ryan O'Connor

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with Pete Seeger. A folk music icon, he has also been recognized by such organizations as the Kennedy Center and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame — of which he is an inductee. It was indeed an honour to discuss such items as the fixed link, songwriting, and the world's situation, with him.

**Ryan O'Connor:** How are you?

**Pete Seeger:** Well, I'm losing my hearing, my voice is about 80% gone, and I'm getting blurrier in the eyes too, but otherwise I'm still here.

**RO:** Good health?

**PS:** Ah, moderately good — for people my age. I'm eighty.

**RO:** When I phoned, you indicated you knew P.E.I. Have you ever been here, or do you know much about it?

**PS:** I may have been there once or twice in my life, but I never went to see

Anne of Green Gables.

Unlike most Americans I've only heard of Prince Edward Island. I don't really know much about it.

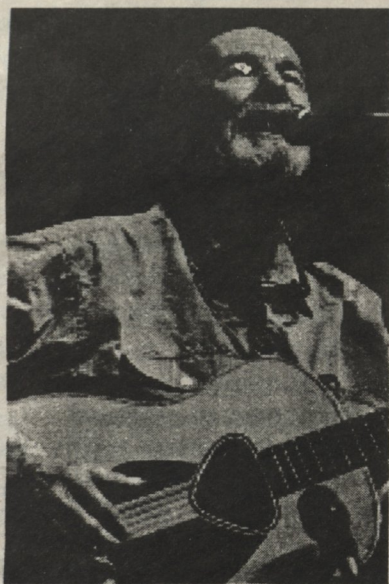
Have they put in that fancy bridge so there are more tourists now?

**RO:** Yes.

**PS:** Oh dear! The beginning of the end.

**RO:** Are you planning on a new CD, or are you trying to take it easy?

**PS:** I'm not trying to make any recordings. With my grandson helping me I made a one track for a new recording by the tiny little company "Appleseed." They put out a record of my songs sung by other people about a year or two ago. It's called Where Have All The Flowers Gone, and that song was sung by Tommy Sands over in Ireland. I'm very proud, it is the best recording ever done by anybody. He and an Irish woman alternated verses, and Vedran Smailovic, the Sarejvo



cello player, was on the record. They had Bruce Springsteen singing "We Shall

Overcome," and Jackson Browne and somebody singing "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine." This record actually sold better than any record of my songs ever, and now they're putting out a second one.

**RO:** When I phoned you to line the interview up you mentioned you have too much publicity, and you're just trying to keep your head above water. Is this really a problem?

**PS:** Yes, I don't have a secretary - I don't intend to - my wife and I drown in paper these days. I don't know how to file things properly, so there's tens of thousands of pieces of paper stacked here and stacked there.

**RO:** I spoke to Tommy Makem, and he mentioned that he believes the song writing tradition is dying. Do you believe this?

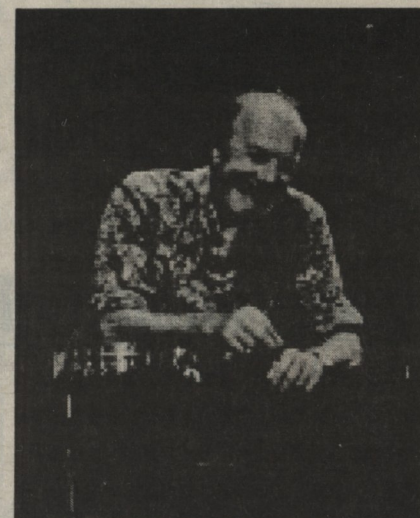
**PS:** Oh, it depends on your definition of the word "tradition," because it means different things to other people. Songs are being written all over the country now, and people change songs, they'll add words, add verses, and sometimes they're quite good. I don't know if you've seen a book I've written called Where Have All The Flowers Gone which is a long discussion of how I learned, or tried to learn, to be a songwriter. One

chapter is all about putting verses to other peoples songs. I've done it myself. No, I think there's a great deal of songwriting going on, it may not be done in the traditional sense though, yet there are similarities just because a lot of it is done by ear, a lot of people don't bother learning how to read music these days, they learn a song from record, and then they make another record and they change it a little bit (laughs). Somebody else hears the new record, and they learn it and they change it a little bit. So the folk process is no longer what it was a hundred years ago. The folk process involves recordings, computers, and Lord knows what else.

**RO:** Of all the songs you wrote, which one are you the proudest of?

**PS:** Well, that's like asking a mother "what's your favorite child?" At any one time, one gets my attention, but there's probably several dozen songs that I think are better than the others. However, some of what I think are my best songs are hardly ever been sung by anybody. Like where I put a melody to a Japanese poem called "When I Was Most Beautiful," and it'll finally get in this next recording of Where Have All The Flowers Gone. [the tribute CD] I put a melody to another poem, written

by the quite famous writer E.B. White, and he called his poem "Natural History," but I call it "The Spider's Web" 'cause that's what it's about.



**RO:** That was on your Pete CD, right?

**PS:** I'd forgotten that. Maybe it was. I never listen to records myself, not my own or anybody else's. Only time I listen to records, I really mean it, is during January when we have a skating rink in the back yard, and I usually turn on steel drum music because I like to skate to steel drums.

**RO:** In the past, you were involved in the fight against fascism, against racism, and now you're involved in promoting the environment. Can you pick any of these as the most important?

**PS:** I'd say the struggle for peace in the world, and the struggle against ethnic conflict, whether

its in India, Yugoslavia, or in Peekskill, New York, are the two most important sides of what I look upon as THE world crisis. I look upon it as one crisis,

and if there's a human race here in a thousand years we'll have a name for it, like we have a name for the Renaissance. We don't say the Renaissance in printing and the Renaissance in art, or the Renaissance in anything else, it's a general rediscovery of classic Greek and Roman culture by the

Middle Ages, and lead to a whole batch of new ideas coming along. And right now there's a crisis in the human race, we've brought it upon ourselves by our own cleverness and our own shortsightedness. It's one thing to invent something and make a profit out of it, and it's another thing to solve the problems which these changes bring about. And they're very, very big problems. As you know, there's a lot of people quite sure that there'll be no human race here in a few hundred years. T.S. Elliot says "This is the way the world will end. This is the way the world will end. Not with a bang, but a whimper." I used to disapprove of him greatly, and now I think that there's a real grain of truth there.