Pete Seeger and Social Justice

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Pete Seeger's passing at the age of 94 last month gives lawyers reason to reflect not only as fans of his music, but as potential stewards of his lifelong mission of social justice.

Seeger was long and lean. Although he's been called the Hammer, I think of him as more of a nail. and what a nail he was. In his commitment to folk music, as in his drive for social justice, he went in deep and held fast. Outside his music, he lived a simple, almost Spartan life through almost 70 years of marriage. Listening to tributes after his death, one got the sense that Seeger had that special gift that allowed millions of people feel as if they knew him. His music carried his message, but he lived it out in his life, too, lending a kind of moral credence to his musical force.

Seeger wasn't the first American folklorist to tilt at inequality and abuse of authority -- Woody Guthrie, for example, had a sign on his guitar that said "this machine kills fascists" -- but out of that tradition he lasted the longest, sang the loudest, and may have been the most steadfast. His voice pulled people in -- spoke to them in a disarming vernacular rhythm -- and his vision kept them close. He did this for me and, because his music hewed so closely to some of the most important civil rights issues of our time, I think a case can be made that Pete Seeger should be the musical patron saint of social justice lawyers everywhere. He constantly hit two notes that any effective social justice action must have: honesty and courage.

From the 1940's right on through, Seeger tackled the big social justice issues of his day. In the 40's, it was workers' rights and the labor movement. During this time, he joined and left the communist Party, but that was enough to sweep him up in the anti-communist furor of the 1950's. He was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955, where

he refused to give names. He was indicted in 1957, convicted in 1961, and won on appeal in 1962.

Under sharp questioning, Seeger told HUAC, "I feel that in my whole life I have never done anything of any conspiratorial nature." Prodded again and again for names, he stated: "I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this." If the Committee was interested in what he was up to, he offered to sing his songs for them. If the committee was interested in what the music was all about, he wondered if they'd ever thought about "the great Negro spiritual, 'I'm Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield, Down by the Riverside'." The Committee was uninterested.

He prevailed as a matter of principle, but his ascending career, which had soared with The Weavers, was torpedoed. In the 60's and 70's, he slowly built it back up, rising ever higher in the public consciousness by singing against the winds of war and racism, lighting up protest marches and folk festivals with songs, like "Knee Deep in the Big Muddy," "Where Have all the Flowers Gone?" and "We Shall Overcome" that became intertwined with the civil rights and peace movements.

These songs and others, like "Turn, Turn, Turn" and "If I Had a Hammer," were anthems on a national scale, but also on a personal one, because they were simply great songs, easy to internalize and sing along with, so his audiences not only sang with him in concert, but carried his lyrics around with them as an internal soundtrack through the decades, as accessible to new listeners as to old, familiar chords connecting yesterday's struggles and today's.

More recently, Seeger turned his attention to environmental justice, acting locally to protect the Hudson River, along which he lived for most of his life, while thinking, and singing, globally. He built the 106-foot sloop Clearwater and founded the Clearwater Festival to raise awareness of the predation of

our waters, land and air. He shamed General Electric into cleaning the Hudson, which it had dumped toxins into for years.

One wonders if at the end of his life Seeger remained the optimist he professed to be since his days riding the rails in the 1940's. And if he did, some might say history had passed Seeger by, that there was nothing left to sing optimistically about. But that was just his point: we can't tackle our problems today without a song in our hearts about what tomorrow should look like. If Seeger's songs presumed the promise of a more perfect union, his words were only echoing those of the founders in the Declaration, Whitman in his poems, Lincoln in his speeches, and Norman Rockwell in his drawings (think "The Four Freedoms"). What he wanted most of all was for us to sing along with him. He not only taught children how to sing, but he insisted on sing-alongs when he played for adults. After joining Pete Seeger in song, you were one step closer to joining a protest march or sit-in. To see the need, to give it voice, to act in service, these too are the paths of the social justice lawyer -- day by day, row by row.

Late in his career, he kept on singing, but the Hammer was getting heavy and his voice didn't hit like it used to. So Seeger, ever the teacher and ever-purposeful, did what he had really already been doing all along, he passed the torch. "I can't sing anymore," he'd tell his audience, "but you can sing."

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