

“We Shall Overcome”—Pete Seeger (1963)

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Essay by Sam Rosenthal (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Pete Seeger

On June 8, 1963, as the Civil Rights movement was gaining broad acknowledgement beyond the American South and the folk revival was picking up steam on college campuses around the nation, Pete Seeger took the stage at New York City’s venerated Carnegie Hall for a solo performance that is, in various measure, barnstorming and somber, angry and playful, and above all else, responsive and in dialogue with the mood of progressive America. Released by Columbia Records in a condensed LP format in 1963, and then at its full running length, on CD, in 1989, “We Shall Overcome” is not just an encapsulation of the time and place in which it was recorded, but is also one of the most thrilling documents in which Seeger and his live performance demeanor were captured.

By the time of his Carnegie Hall concert in 1963, Pete Seeger was already fully enmeshed in the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. He had long functioned as a bridge between musical subcultures and between generations of performers, and was in the midst of facilitating a handover of many of the political anthems of the first half of the 20th century, placing them in the capable hands of a new generation of American folksingers, activists and protest singers.

The concert occurs near the end of Seeger’s forced hiatus from mainstream music venues and channels, during the years he was under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Seeger’s testimony in front of the HUAC is a captivating historical document in and of itself, but it is only one part of the cheery dissidence which he practiced during these grim years of political oppression. Having been blacklisted from the most desirable venues and the mainstream airwaves, Seeger and his management team—including his wife and *de facto* lifetime manager, Toshi-- forged a second career for Seeger, oriented around a grueling touring schedule that took him to the nation’s small auditoriums and, most importantly, its college campuses. Here, Seeger helped to sow the seeds of the coming folk revival, a renaissance of interest in America’s musical past, whose themes of solidarity and national identity dovetailed wonderfully with the developing Civil Rights movement.

It is this movement which most significantly informs Seeger's programming of the Carnegie Hall concert. The set features a host of prominent Civil Rights anthems, including "Oh, Freedom," "Keep Your Eyes On the Prize," and, the record's namesake number, "We Shall Overcome." These musical staples of the Civil Rights movement are amply and entertainingly contextualized by Seeger, as he weaves national news and personal anecdotes into his introductions before, and asides during, the songs. These stories are, in equal measure, funny, heartrending, and poignant, at once bringing both a weight and levity to the proceedings.

The Carnegie Hall concert, though, is not merely a compendium of contemporary protest music. Rather, Seeger, who was ever the connoisseur of folk musics the world over, brings two dazzling sets to his audience, holding them at rapt attention as he effortlessly picks his way through what essentially amounts to a survey of American folk music, its relatives, and its antecedents. However, instead of providing a one-way history lesson, Seeger brings his audience along on the journey. One such sequence of early Americana begins in the second half of the concert, starting with the old traditional "Skip to My Lou." He encourages the audience to sing along, then moves smoothly into "Sweet Potatoes," coaxing the crowd into a basic harmony. Seeger then proceeds to deftly hop through a series of sea songs and early American folk music, before turning to another mini-suite of folk songs from around the world beginning with "Lua Do Sertao," a Brazilian tune.

These changes should be jarring, or at least noticeably abrupt, but Seeger is such a clever and subtle programmer that the listener barely notices a break in continuity; that is, unless, it is intentional, as with the delicate flute solo that introduces "Schtille Di Nacht."

In another such sequence, Seeger embraces the contemporary and the events more recently at hand, beginning with his own "Who Killed Norma Jean?" He then begins Bob Dylan's "Who Killed Davey Moore?" which receives a warm reception from the audience, and embarks on a brief survey of Dylan's most well-known songs, including "Farewell" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." Here, Seeger expresses his commitment to the new generation of protest songwriters, as if giving a public blessing to Dylan and his ilk.

Beyond his abilities as a programmer and a historian, "We Shall Overcome" is also significant in that it presents an opportunity for us to witness Seeger in the format in which he was most successful and potent: the live concert. In hearing Seeger on studio recordings, we truly only access part of what made him such a force in American music. Seeger's live comportment is so singular and unique that it is not a stretch to say that he forged the archetype for the audience-oriented songster.

The record is a master lesson in live musical performance; he draws the audience in slowly, opening with simple, fun, and not terribly political songs. After a few numbers, he lets social significance creep in, while ensuring that it's still served with an ample dose of humor, as in "What Did You Learn in School Today?" and "Little Boxes." These segue into a round of yet more lyrically weighty tunes, but Seeger makes it so breezy and

invigorating that, by the time he reaches the Civil Rights material, the audience is bellowing along with him, their voices echoing in the Hall.

Seeger's off-the-cuff banter belies the tight, highly structured and well-considered nature of the performance. The whole performance is designed to accomplish what Seeger saw as his most essential task as a performer: to encourage the audience to participate, as a collective, in singing songs of protest and resilience.

Seeger's vivacity as a group facilitator is so compelling that we could easily forget what a masterful musician he was. His banjo picking is clean, precise, and, at times, intimidatingly fast and articulate; it is on display as he tears through a bluegrass banjo medley on "Cripple Creek" and when he completely inhabits the Spanish guitar stylings on "Viva La Quince Brigada."

As fantastic a banjo player as Seeger shows himself to be, the recording also provides us with the opportunity to listen to Seeger's bell-clear tenor at the height of its strength. It is lithe and flexible as he mutates and modulates through a dozen different idioms and styles. While chameleonic, Seeger's voice is still somehow identifiable as uniquely his, utterly convincing whether he's singing an old Appalachian ballad, a modern protest anthem, or a Rhodesian folk song.

As a recording, "We Shall Overcome" is also a beautiful document of minimalist production. The storied producer John Hammond knows enough to realize that Seeger's audience is at least as essential a part of the recordings as the man himself. Seeger's voice, often merely with a lone guitar or banjo accompaniment, is nicely balanced with the chorus song of the audience, allowing the participants and performer to meld their voices into a single sound. They are an adept and capable crowd, and, as the program draws to a powerful close, the voices of the audience become more pronounced and sure, enveloping Seeger in song.

It is moments like these that evince the power Seeger had as a performer and as a conduit through which others could find their own voices.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.