

Posted May 2, 2009 by ■ [Stephen Dohnberg](#)

Still Hammering For Justice: Happy 90th Birthday Pete Seeger Special

Throughout the following piece, we'll see proof that the influence of Pete Seeger, on his 90th birthday, spans generations. People from across the globe share testimonies, songs, and poems sent specifically for this article. Six Musicians offer renditions of Seeger material (their bio's and links are posted below), as well tributes and comments from political party leaders, schoolteachers, poets, and citizens. Enjoy!



File photo.

Seeger on a farm.

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The songs Pete Seeger wrote or popularized through recordings will outlive him, but Seeger has outlived the injustice and hardship, to shine the light of social justice on the human condition. On turning 90 this May 3rd he proves that, as Martin Luther King Jr said, *"the arc of history is a long one but bends toward justice"*.



power of song doc

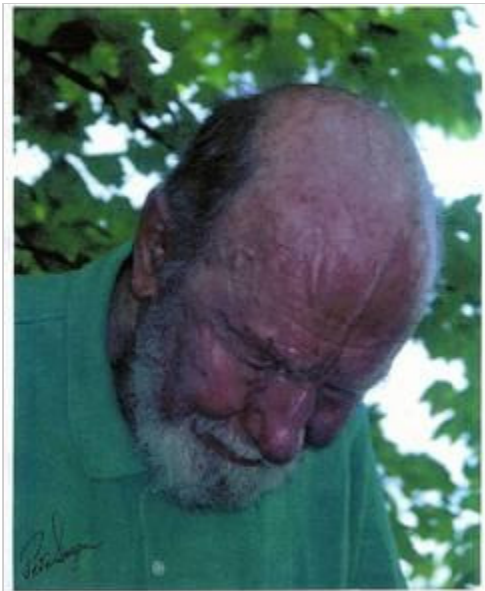
Seeger among fans

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MLK once came away from a Seeger performance after hearing 'We Shall Overcome', saying *"that kinda sticks with you"*. The reverend was right, because the notion that justice will prevail is the essence of hope.

It would be next to impossible to encapsulate Seeger's life and his impact on the history of this century and the

last. It's a tapestry that requires a study of those who have been touched by him at some point in their lives.



Charlie Cody

Seeger by C Cody, 2006 - signed

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Born in 1919 in Patterson, New York to a musical family, Seeger attended Harvard on a partial scholarship to study sociology, but his involvement with activist movements kept him too busy to focus on grades and left him just shy of graduation. He reportedly wanted to be a journalist, but as events transpired, he quickly found himself as part of the folk revival scene in the United States, particularly after travelling through the south after originally landing a job in D.C. assisting archivist - pioneer Alan Lomax.

He was an outspoken supporter of the antifascist forces against Franco in Spain, penning songs and releasing records with the aid of Moe Asch (who later reissued the material through Folkways. Asch has been responsible for hundreds of archival and folk releases chronicling this period).



File photo.

Seeger on a farm.

Seeger was initially opposed to U.S. intervention in World War 2, but a revisionist angle could make allowances for Seeger's actions. Civil rights and fair employment measures for African Americans were years from being implemented, and desegregation was a glaring point of hypocrisy in the U.S. war machine. The spectre of war profiteering from WW1 loomed large, and as early as the time was, early pacts and diplomatic engagements were still being engaged by the U.S. and Russia.

It was a complicated time, all the more complicated for those who pondered the ethical components of warfare. The Almanac Singers found themselves in the sights of Life Magazine publisher Henry Luce, and Seeger and the group were attacked for their initially "anti interventionist" views of WW2.

On Dec 3, 1940 when Seeger "[\[i\]met Woody Guthrie at a migrant worker benefit concert\[/i\]](#)," the two went on to help form the Almanac Singers, "a loosely organized musical collective that included Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, Sis Cunningham, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Leadbelly, Josh White, Burl Ives, and Richard Dyer-Bennett at different times"

The Almanac Singers position moved from anti to pro intervention with the breaking of the Non Aggression Pact, one that saw Hitler immediately invade the Soviet Union. The damage was done for the Almanac's. Their anti-war material was removed from stock and sale and destroyed, but nevertheless the FBI forever relegated the band into the "subversives" category.



unknown

Pete Seeger's banjo - a reprise on Guthrie's 'This Machine Kills Fascists'

Vote up this image!

Seeger himself served in the Air Force in the Pacific Theatre as a draftee, but prefers to say he "*strummed his banjo*" during that time.

In the Almanac Singers "pro-intervention" release, Seeger reached out across the ideological divide and in their 'Dear Mr. President' LP, Seeger, singing solo, offered:

"Now, Mr. President, / We haven't always agreed in the past, I know, / But that ain't at all important now. / What is important is what we got to do, / We got to lick Mr. Hitler, and until we do, / Other

things can wait./

Now, as I think of our great land . . . / I know it ain't perfect, but it will be someday, / Just give us a little time. // This is the reason that I want to fight, / Not 'cause everything's perfect, or everything's right. / No, it's just the opposite: I'm fighting' because / I want a better America, and better laws, / And better homes, and jobs, and schools, / And no more Jim Crow, and no more rules like / "You can't ride on this train 'cause you're a Negro," / "You can't live here 'cause you're a Jew," / "You can't work here 'cause you're a union man."/

So, Mr. President, / We got this one big job to do / That's lick Mr. Hitler and when we're through, / Let no one else ever take his place / To trample down the human race. / So what I want is you to give me a gun / So we can hurry up and get the job done."

As the encyclopedic [AllMusic.com reports](#), "Upon the dissolution of the Almanacs, Seeger, and Hays formed the Weavers with Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman who found universal success with their bright renditions of folk songs and spirituals like "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," "Wimoweh," "Goodnight Irene," and "On Top of Old Smoky."

The facts remain - Pete helped start such influential bands as the Weavers, the Almanac Singers, shook up the right wingers, and found himself under the radar not only of the FBI, but also of the opportunistic Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy and the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC). Because of his various affiliations including his earlier membership with the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) he became persona non grata.

In 1948 Seeger campaigned for Progressive Party candidate and former VP Henry Agard Wallace. The belief system held by Seeger was consistent with that of Wallace; they both supported civil and labor rights, racial equality, international understanding, and anti-militarism. Even though the campaign drew large crowds (similar to Nader's 2000 Presidential run) Wallace fared poorly in 1948, even being beaten by Dixiecrat and Segregationist Strom Thurmond -- but one can't help wonder what the Cold War years would have been like under Wallace rather than Truman.

When Seeger was finally called to testify under the HUAC, during the period of McCarthy anti Communist hysteria, he refused to plead the Fifth Amendment (a protection asserting that one's testimony could be self incriminating). Rather he refused to name personal or political associations, claiming it would be a violation of his First Amendment rights. He famously 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."*

Indicted of Contempt of Congress by this action on March 26, 1957, Seeger was legally mandated to report of his travels if he were to ever leave the Southern District of New York. More astonishingly, in 1961 he was convicted in a trial by jury for contempt and sentenced to serve ten consecutive years. In 1962 an appeal found the indictment to be a flawed one, and overturned the conviction.

It was in August of 1963, during MLK's March on Washington that Seeger and other folk singers performed 'We Shall Overcome', making it an instant and identifiable anthem of the civil rights struggle - one that Seeger had

been an advocate of during his entire career.

During this period dating from the HUAC hearings onward, Seeger's previous success with the Almanac Singers, and the Weavers (who had a massive chart hit with a rendition of his friend Leadbelly's 'Goodnight Irene') was undermined by to the ensuing blacklist and ban on television performance. He continued to make a living performing at colleges and churches and various other events, as well as, engaging in educational ventures. By the 60's however, Seeger was recognized - along with an ailing Woody Guthrie - as the elder statesmen and ambassadors to the folk and protest movement.

Eventually the TV ban was lifted and Seeger hosted, with the assistance of WNJU Studios in Newark, an "educational program" produced by his wife Toshi and Sholom Rubinstein. It aired in 1965 and 1966 as 'Rainbow Quest' in a regional capacity, Seeger featured, during these 39, hour long programs, such notable performers as June Carter, Mississippi John Hurt, [Buffy Sainte-Marie](#), Roscoe Holcomb, The Stanley Brothers, Doc Watson, Tom Paxton, Judy Collins, Donovan, and [Johnny Cash](#). Eventually, the funding dried up and the groundbreaking series was discontinued. This variety program would be attempted again with varying degrees of success by everyone from Marc Bolan to Johnny Cash.



unknown

pete seeger and dylan

[Vote up this image!](#)

Much has been made of the "electric performance" of Bob Dylan at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, of which Seeger was the MC (and an early backer of Dylan's music). The persistent rumour over the decades was that Seeger, infuriated by the use of electric instruments as a purist, sought to hack the cables during the non acoustic performance of Dylan's set. But in a spring, 2001 interview David Kupfer for Whole Earth Magazine entitled 'Longtime Passing: An interview with Pete Seeger', Seeger explains the persistent rumour by saying

"I couldn't understand the words. I wanted to hear the words. It was a great song, "Maggie's Farm," and the sound was distorted. I ran over to the guy at the controls and shouted, "Fix the sound so you can hear the words." He hollered back, "This is the way they want it." I said "Damn it, if I had an axe, I'd cut the cable right now." But I was at fault. I was the MC, and I could have said to the part of the crowd that booed Bob, "you didn't boo Howlin' Wolf yesterday. He was electric!" Though I still prefer to hear Dylan acoustic, some of his electric songs are absolutely great. Electric music is the vernacular of the second half of the twentieth century, to use my father's old term"

In 1967 Seeger again courted controversy on the Smothers Brothers' Comedy Hour with his anti Vietnam protest song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" (one could almost credit Seeger the use of "quagmire" to describe the events in Iraq and Afghanistan). The song, with its lyrics "Every time I read the paper/those old feelings come on/We are waist deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool says to push on." irked CBS executives, who cut the performance from the September, 1967 appearance. Largely viewed as a metaphor and a cautionary tale of Vietnam directed at President LBJ, [the performance was reinstated in the January 1968 airing of the program.](#)

Seeger again faced TV controversy when his scheduled 1970 appearance on Johnny Cash's variety program brought angry letters from viewers accusing Cash of allowing a "communist" on his program. [Cash would have none of it, and brought Seeger on for another successful performance.](#)

For those who think Seeger may have slowed down in the intervening years, far from it. He continues to raise the banner of activism and environmentalism. As far back as 1966, he championed the cause of the Hudson River Valley, and for decades engaged in fundraisers and awareness, making adversaries into friends, such as former NY Gov. Joe Pataki. It was in 1966 that he co-founded Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, and the construction of the sloop 'Clearwater' made an inaugural sail in 1969 from Maine and eventually down the Hudson to South Street Seaport Museum in New York. To this day, the sloop takes inner city kids on treks to educate them about the ecology of the Hudson.

In recent decades Seeger has received countless awards and honours but those that know Seeger have noted he expresses discomfort with the formality of such events.

[He recently performed at the Inauguration of Barack Obama alongside Bruce Springsteen at the Lincoln Memorial, performing compatriot Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land'](#)

At other such events, such as his reception of the Congressional Medal of Honor by Bill Clinton where Seeger was serenaded by the Byrds' Roger McGuinn, singing Seeger's 'Turn, Turn, Turn', Seeger clearly looks uncomfortable in a tuxedo and all the attention.

The accolades keep coming. Springsteen recently released an album of Seeger material, bands continue to discover and interpret the music he either penned or made famous, and even on this May 3, as [MonstersAndCritics.com reports,](#)

"On Sunday the titan of American folk music will celebrate his 90th birthday. To mark the occasion, 40 musicians, including Bruce Springsteen, Joan Baez, Kris Kristofferson, Emmylou Harris, Eddie Vedder and Taj Mahal, are to serenade him at a party in New York's Madison Square Garden."

It will be a huge celebration for a man whose personal demeanour is one of humility, with an inclination for privacy.

Not only that, a full day of tributes - entitled 'For Pete's Sake, Sing!' - is scheduled in cities across the globe.

[From cities throughout Australia](#) (where Seeger had a massive hit with Melvina Reynold's 'Little Boxes'), and to points in almost every city throughout the U.S., such as [Ann Arbor, MI](#), [Richmond, VA](#), [Columbus, OH](#), as well [events in Europe, Canada, and across the globe](#) his life will be celebrated.

'For Pete's Sake, Sing!' is not only as a simple 90th birthday tribute, but is also [a call for Seeger to receive a Nobel Peace Prize](#) for what is considered to be an unmistakable contribution to the cause of social justice and a highly influential body of work.

[Even most recently, a moving documentary has been released on the life of Seeger, 'The Power of Song'](#), and last year he still released another album called 'Seeger at 89'.

Most importantly, Seeger was never about his singing in front of an audience. Archival footage shows him often knee deep in the crowd, teaching the audience the songs he sings. In 'The Power of Song', there is a comment one will recall where Seeger (and I am paraphrasing here) said the best moment is when the crowd is participating and the sound is blowing the roof of the place.

[emusic correctly notes about Seeger](#)

"As a recording artist, Seeger can seem a paradox. A champion of the communal sing-along, of folk song as an ongoing collaboration between performer and audience, it might seem to make little sense to isolate him in a studio, and even less sense to listen to him in the privacy of your own home, when you should be strumming and belting the old standards at some impromptu gathering of pals."

[Witness this undated performance of 'Guantamera'](#)

It must be noted that Seeger is not without his critics. Even in recent years Voice Of America and NPR contributor, member of the Cato Institute, and general libertarian curmudgeon David Boaz recently criticized Seeger as "*Stalin's songbird*".

In spite of that, all the world laughs. And Sings. And wishes Pete Seeger a happy 90th birthday.

People from across the globe share testimonies, songs, and poems sent specifically for this article. We thank them for their time, efforts, and talents in helping prove that Pete Seeger currently lives well on beyond his 90th birthday!

***Additional sound engineering and composition assistance from Ryan Mills. Ryan is the proprietor behind [masteringbymills.com](#).**

Poet Charlie Cody shares this verse 'Because You Were There' for Pete, as well as sends us a Poem he penned for Seeger, called 'The Saint'.

Because You Were There

When his country called hi to serve - Pete was there
 When there was injustice to be addressed - Pete was there
 When there was a song to be sung - Pete was there
 When Woody sang for farm relief - Pete was there -- when the rocks were flying past and the glass was breaking -
 Pete was there and so were the cops, but no, they didn't care
 when there was a war to protest - Pete was there - and so were the censors and they did care! ---when there was
 a sloop to be built and a river to be saved - Pete was there
 Pete was there when there were people who needed a voice to be heard - Pete was there
 When the committee wanted him for questioning - Pete was there, and when he faced a year in jail - Pete was
 there, never wavering from his innermost convictions -ready to take what they dished out -
 When there was a cause worth fighting for - Pete was there - When there were a legion of singers and musicians
 who needed a hand - Pete was there
 When there was a cradle to be rocked and a baby to be fed - Pete was there -
 when Toshi called him to supper - Pete was there - and when there were myriads of bright young faces looking up
 to hear his stories and songs - Pete was there - looking back down -smiling - and playing his well worn banjo to
 the delight of them all...Pete was there - yes Pete was surely there...
 And because you were there - we are all here in body and spirit - all of those you helped - stood up for - inspired
 and befriended -to say thanks and celebrate your ninety years on this good Earth - because Pete, you were there
 epitomizing what being a true American is all about - one who stands up for his beliefs - fights for what is right -
 who sees the good in people and not the bad -- putting the good of all above the privileged few - being the person
 who brings us all together - a true American hero - someone whose ideals and examples we can all look up to
 and learn from - to help make the world a better place for the short time we are here -
 So from all of us - from the bottom of our hearts - Happy Birthday Pete - because you were there for us when it
 counted - when we needed you - and the World needed you - some we know we can always look up to - and
 depend on as the moral compass of our conscience when the winds of life shifts the sails...
 It's been an extraordinary journey - but it ain't over yet...it ain't over yet...
 So thanks, Pete - thanks for just being who you are -

Charlie Cody

Charlie Cody is a writer poet lyricist living in ny- he is the author of Gutrumblings-a collection of poems and writings -has another book of poetry under way and is continually working on his ongoing life's workWitness to History-a collection of his poems and photographs that have been signed by the people they were written about or events that they represent-of which the originals are to be left to the Smithsonian Institute archives for future generations to see a glimpse of our time in history -

"So Pete Seeger is turning 90! As a child of progressive parents who grew up in Westchester, NY (not too far from Pete and Toshi's cabin), Pete was a ubiquitous presence during my childhood. I had several of his albums, would see him at all kinds of human rights functions and always got a big thrill when I'd see him on television. My fondest memory took place at The Clearwater Festival. I must have been around 10 or 11 years old. I had been wandering around the grounds further and further away from the crowd and spied Pete napping under a tree. After standing over him and watching him rest for a few minutes, I decided that I was not going to let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity go and decided to join him. My friends caught up with me, had a good laugh, and I went packing. Pete never knew I was there."

Nadiine Lubka is a teacher and activist from New York

"Just how great it is to have someone of Pete Seeger's legendary stature spend the time to give a grassroots workshop the tips on how he ran the campaign to clean the Hudson. That session in 1986 at the Conference on the fate of the Earth in Ottawa was when he broke down the dynamics of a positive organizing meeting. Deal with business items, make decisions ,Have a pot luck supper, bring out the instruments and play music. I always share with groups in my organizing workshops his great advice" Don't have the kind of meetings that only attract the kind of people who like going to meetings."

Some celebrities will occasionally do things to help activists. Pete Seeger IS an activist. An incredible and inspiring leader in the movement.

Elizabeth May is an academic, an activist, and leader of the Green Party of Canada

"While living in Toronto in the 1980's I found it difficult to get Weavers albums. Many stores did not even know who they were, had to look them up and found it strange that I was interested in this group.

This may have been the long term results of their blacklisting during the McCarthy era. Pete's refusal to testify should be worn as a badge of honour and sets a great precedence for civil disobedience. Pete Seeger's songs are still know and sung today by people of all ages with the young not knowing the meaning of words and the history of those times. eg: Where have all the flowers gone? & he popularized We shall Overcome.

Pete Seeger and the Weavers continued the social conscience songs of Woody Guthrie. eg: This Land is Your Land and all the various versions that have spread throughout the world ie: Canadian version & New Zealand version (from Cape Reinga to the Stewart Island)"

Bruce Zimmerman is the host of one of the most popular and listened to programs in Southern Ontario - The Open Line Garden Show - Saturdays from 8 am to 10 am 105.1 The River FM. For 20 plus years Bruce has been educating listeners on the benefits of gardening.

"Camp in the very late 50's early 60's. The camp counselors, most of them were musicians (I was so blessed to be sent to this camp) and sung folk songs around camp fires or indoors when raining, It was my first introduction to Pete Seeger and Woodie Guthrie songs and music, and others of the same genre, If I had a Hammer, This Land is Your Land.

It was music that brought people together. It was also my first major influence and awareness of social change and "perceived" norms at large; the counselors quietly reflected the beatnik movement. My early adolescent years listening to AM radio blasting out the backyard window with Seeger songs Turn Turn Turn. In my early 'hippie' years the songs continued to influence change; again no matter who sung them, my adolescent years had quickly turned into young adult hood and activism with the influence of the times.

The huge movement for freedom and love, against capitalism, conservatism, social justice, "the summers of LOVE", flowers and all, were massive, with sit-in's, protests, culture change and shock and the Vietnam War protests that eventually emerged as well with "Where Have all the Flowers Gone".

The influence of the songs and the events that occurred during these years has had a profound and positive effect on my life, albeit often a controversial one as has been Pete Seeger's. Who could say it better than Pete "Down through the centuries, this trick has been tried by various establishments throughout the world. They force people to get involved in the kind of examination that has only one aim and that is to stamp out dissent".

Pete Seeger encouraged me to get involved in dissent and activism, not sit by the way side or stamp it out. Happy Birthday Pete Seeger!"

"Cheryl Benson is a citizen of Toronto and an activist for social causes, including those of physically challenged."

" As a child of the 70's, my parents had some wonderful friends. One of their closest friends, Betty Puleston, just passed away this past week (at the age of 92). She was involved in all kinds of projects that > > brought all kinds of people into her home, and our world. As the "community grandmother" she included the community in everything she did, in one way or another.

One of these "projects" of hers was helping George Stoney make the documentary movie "Wasn't That a Time" about the Weavers reunion at Carnegie Hall (1980). We traveled up to Lee Hays' house in Croton on the Hudson, where my mom helped with the catering of the rehearsal party. It was truly amazing meeting not only Pete, but Lee, Ronnie, Fred as well as other artists that were there that day. As a 10 year old little girl > > I had no idea of the significance, but KNEW somehow that the day was so special. The other children and I bugged Pete to no end, to sing us a special song. We loved "Little Boxes" and really had no idea at the time what the REAL meaning was behind the song.

I didn't realize at the time that I was meeting such famous people; and even listened to a new artist Holly Near, as she sang "Hay Una Mujer Desapareceda" with Ronnie. All I knew was that the song gave me goose-pimples (and still does today), even though I had no idea of the meaning. It was such an amazing day. As kids we couldn't quite

figure out why there were cameras filming us all day; but all the same, George and Betty ALWAYS had cameras around, and were always working on collaborations. My parents made the whole event that much more special by taking us to the premier of the movie at the Plaza Hotel in New York.

Can you imagine an 11 year old girl watching herself on a huge movie screen, in her hand-made shirt with a strawberry print, as she carries a big bowl of strawberries to the table; as Lee's voice said "and they ate, and they ate, and they ate." While searching through the you-tube videos, I found some of the songs they performed that day on Lee's lawn. My mom's face peeks over the table between Pete and Fred as we watched, and I'm trying to get a copy of the movie on DVD. Looking back on that day, almost 30 years ago, I had no idea how these great people and their wonderful songs, would influence /*so many*/ of my adult decisions. Watching Pete's performance at the inauguration had> > me feeling so proud, as well as a little melancholy.

I can't help but feel truly blessed to have had him touch my life; and can only hope that I can influence the people around me a portion of how he's done."

Adele Michelsen is a citizen of the world, and a resident of East Patchogue (Bellport, Brookhaven), New York

"When I was 18 I lived with and cared for Pete's bandmate in The Weavers, Lee Hays. (I didn't meet Pete, but briefly met Toshi. I did hang out with Don McLean.) Last year I got Pete's endorsement for a project I've worked on 20 yrs"

Evan Ravitz is a political activist - [you can read Seegers recent endorsement for Ravitz's 'National Initiative For Democracy' here.](#)

SONG CONTRIBUTORS AND LINKS



justin coutu

Justin Coutu Studied at Berklee in Boston, worked in Nashville, and is now studying at Potsdam, NY*

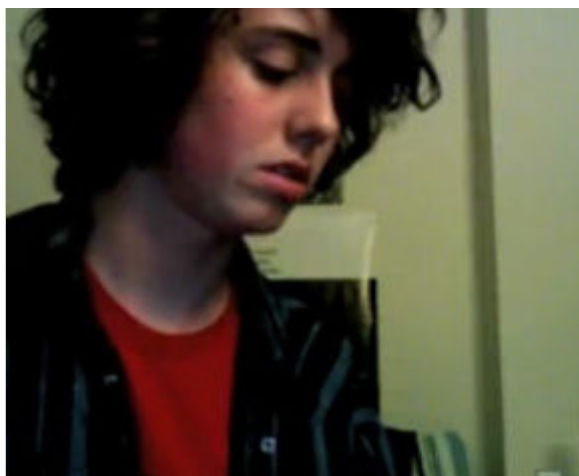
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k farnell

Gravity Wave (aka Kenneth Farrell) is an ex pro Hockey player turned musician. you can hear his work at myspace.com/gravywave.

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nigel ward

Nigel Ward *studying at Berklee in boston. he currently plays in band called The Tangible Ears from Kingston, Ont. you can hear more at www.myspace.com/thetangibleears

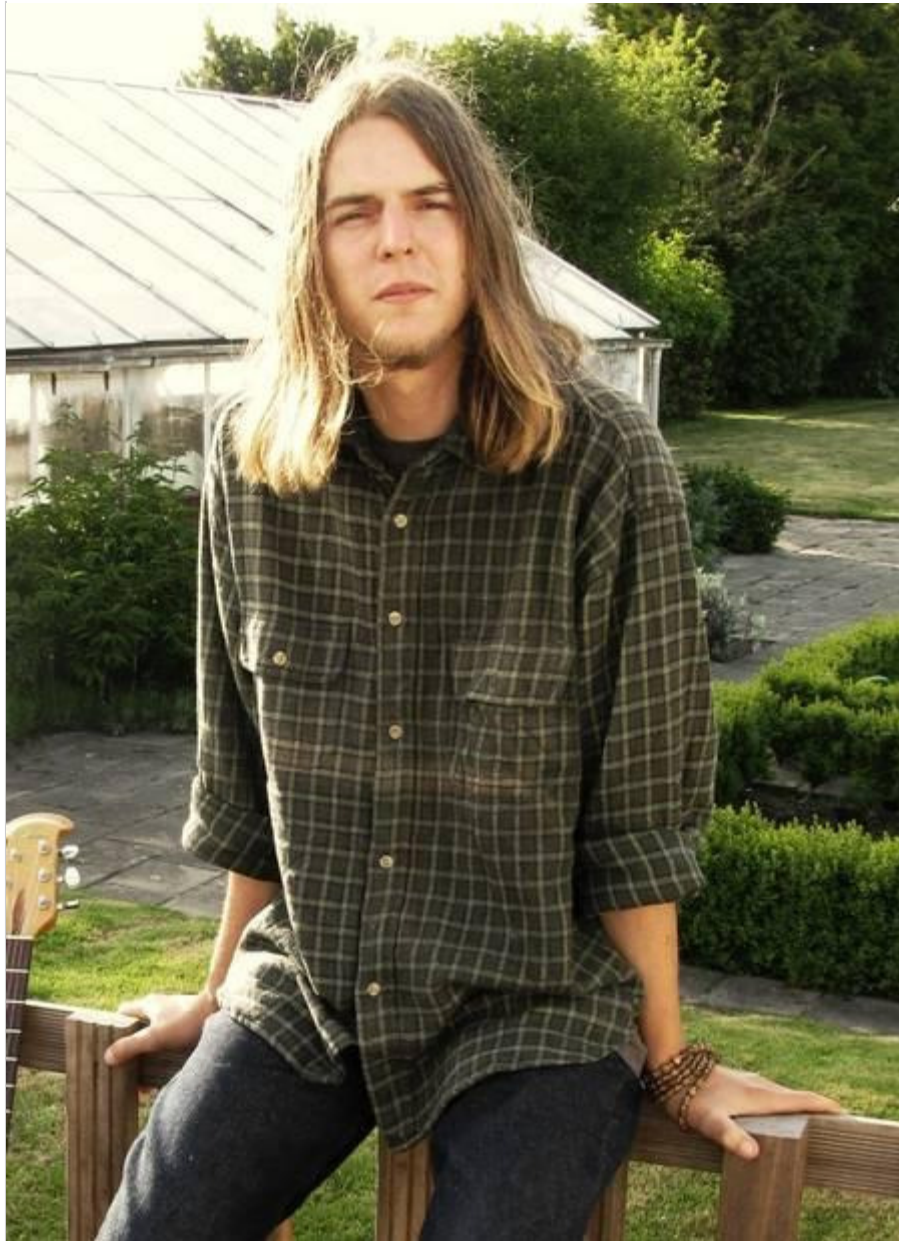
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david como

David Como - David is main man behind a recording project / live music group called Sing Leaf from Toronto. hear more at myspace.com/singleaf

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max radings

Max radings is the guitarist for the phenomenol Brant Bjork and the Bros (whom i first reviewed in 2000) as well as the Bros as well his own band Muddy Grande - from Amsterdam

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akira alemany

Akira Alemany singer songwriter of
Modernboys Moderngirls -
originally from spain, hear more at
www.modernboysmoderngirls.com

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The saint

*Charlie - I'm no saint!
old Pete*

As I shook his weathered hand and looked into his eyes - his bald head shining
in the afternoon sun - I felt a sense of greatness as I spoke with the folk legend -
The man to whom so many owe their lives and careers - the conscience of several
generations at eighty-seven years young - as he played his banjo to a group of us
who had gathered at his feet to hear his stories and wisdom spoken in his caring
grandfatherly way - he lifted us in song - "summertime" - which it surely was
that hot June day - his jaw reverberating to every note - as his eyes looked upward -
his hand guiding us in harmony - it seemed as if the light from heaven was shining
down on him and him only - the saint among us - who so unselfishly gives of his
time and his life to those of us who look up to him- never wavering from his inner
most beliefs and deepest convictions - and as a feeling of reverence and holiness
overcame me in his presence - one of which I had never quite felt before - a thought
passed through my mind - who in the world will ever be able to fill his shoes -
once he is gone -

charlie cody
6/18/06

Clearwater festival 2006
Watching Pete Seeger perform

charlie cody

poem by charlie cody-'the saint' - signed by seeger in the upr RH corner

Vote up this image!