

Reflections on Pete Seeger and The Big Muddy, January 28, 2014

Pete Seeger died yesterday. He was 94. Jane and I saw him only once. He and Arlo Guthrie came to Meadowbrook for an outdoor concert. What I most remember about that event was when someone shouted to Arlo to sing "Alice's Restaurant." He shouted back, "Buy the album." That response to an admiring fan seemed a bit obnoxious.



Pete was accused of being a red-diaper baby, a communist from his birth. More likely, he was a pink-diaper baby. His father, a supporter of Henry Wallace in 1948, had a sympathy for the poor and oppressed of the day (the 1920s and 1930s). He transmitted that to his son. Back in those days, sympathy for the poor passed for leftist.

Seeger founded *The Weavers*, a sort of folk group. I have an album of their songs, which sound very sweet and non-controversial to me. His greatest hit during that time was "Good Night, Irene," a song he adapted from the Black song master Ledbelly. Still, in the madness of the 1950s, it did not take much to convince McCarthyite Republicans that you were a communist. In 1955, Seeger was called before a congressional committee to testify about his political views. He played rope-a-dope with them. Once he was asked whether he was in a leftist march. He said, it sounds like asking Jesus if he was King of the Jews. That did not please the committee. He insisted on his first amendment right to association and political views. He refused to give up names and was blacklisted. That meant he was banned from radio and television. The ban was open ended. It could stay in effect forever. He was also sentenced to ten years for contempt of Congress, but never served. *The Weavers* disappeared.

That leads to what happened in 1968. The top television show in the country by far was the Sunday-night program *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. I was in graduate school and always used Sunday night to relax. I would spend the day on campus, reading or writing papers. Then we would have home-made pizza, put Greg to bed (Ted was not yet around), and watch the Sunday night line up. That show was our favorite. It was creative and funny. They introduced the amazing guitarist Mason Williams and brought The Beatles and *Hey, Jude* to us for the first time. But Tommy Smothers had an edge. He thought there should be more serious content. In the political environment of the day, that was a risky strategy.

In retrospect, 1968 was the worst year in American history. The year started with the Tet Offensive, the beginning of the end for America's misadventure in Vietnam. The Vietcong conducted a nation-wide offensive against the Americans. They seemed to be everywhere. I had been mildly supportive of the war up until that point (confession time). I began to have doubts in 1967 but now realized that the game was up. We were going to have to get out. When General Westmoreland came to Washington, he told Congress that Tet had been a great defeat for the Vietcong. They had failed to achieve their goals and had suffered a serious military setback. That was not what we wanted to hear. Johnson had been struggling to maintain popular support for this war. He had spoken of "light at the end of the tunnel" and had called his critics "Nervous Nellies." But it was not working. At that point, the President of the United States was unable to appear in public because of anti-war demonstrations. We were losing hundreds of men every week, often 400 or more. It seemed there would be no end to this conflict, ever, and now it was getting worse. When Westmoreland asked Lyndon Johnson for an extra 200,000 soldiers to finish

the job (we already had 500,000 in country), the vigoro hit the mixmaster, as they say. Senator Eugene McCarthy declared for the Democratic nomination, challenging LBJ. Then Bobby Kennedy entered the race. Soon Martin Luther King was assassinated, then Bobby. The cities were burning and the streets and campuses were clogged with demonstrators. Pro-war and anti-war groups often clashed. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Many students had trouble returning home, facing the wrath of their parents. In July came the catastrophic Democratic Convention in Chicago when pro-Humphrey delegates and pro-McCarthy or pro-McGovern anti-war delegates fought bitterly. In the streets outside the convention hall, anti-war demonstrators chanted “The whole world is watching,” as the police bludgeoned them. (Jane and I were camping in Southern Illinois. We had left Greg with his Williams grandparents. I rented a small television so I could watch the convention. We sat in horror as the events unfolded). The Walker Commission later declared that the assaults on anti-war demonstrators were led by “storm troopers in blue.” The pain just kept coming, on and on. There seemed to be no end in sight.

The first major domestic political event of that year, the one that in retrospect kicked off the spiral, was the appearance of Pete Seeger on *The Smothers Brothers*. There had been real



resistance to that appearance by the “suits” at the network. They had vetoed it in the fall but Tommy insisted. When Pete appeared on stage in February he introduced us to a new song he had written just a few months ago. It was called, “The Big Muddy.” He sang it in his signature style, with his head tilted back as if he were howling out his message. To tell you why that song was so shocking you have to remember that in that age there was a folk music *genre* that was fairly mainstream (*The Kingston Trio* would be an example). But there was also an underground populist folk tradition that was very different. It

was found mostly in small coffee houses and art houses near campuses. It was very anti-establishment, as we said at the time. Woodstock, the next year, was the quintessential example of that tradition. But Pete Seeger on *The Smothers Brothers* was the breakthrough event.

His appearance on stage defied the blacklist and the restraints of the 1950s. Seeger’s songs always had a double feel to them. Think of “Turn, Turn, Turn,” or “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” or “If I had a Hammer.” They were so sing-able that even children could sing along and feel good and never realize that they were deeply subversive. That night, with the Tet Offensive fresh in the headlines, and the bodies piling up, this performance was an act of near revolutionary defiance. By the end of the television season, *The Smothers Brothers*, the number one television show in America, had been cancelled. It was a bold display of ruthless power.

For those who do not know the words of that song, here they are:

It was back in nineteen forty-two.
I was a member of a good platoon.
We were on maneuvers in-a Looziana
One night by the light of the moon.
The captain told us to ford a river
That’s how it all begun.
We were—knee deep in the Big Muddy.
But the big fool said to push on.



The Sergeant said, “Sir, are you sure,
This is the best way back to the base?”
“Sergeant, go on! I forded this river
‘Bout a mile above this place.
It’ll be a little soggy but just keep slo gging.

We'll soon be on dry ground."
We were---waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool said to push on.

The Sergeant said, "Sir, with all this equipment
No man will be able to swim."
"Sergeant, don't be a Nervous Nellie,"
The Captain said to him.
"All we need is a little determination.
Men, follow me, I'll lead on."
We were---neck deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool said to push on.

All at once, the moon clouded over.
We heard a gurgling cry.
A few seconds later, the captain's helmet
Was all that floated by.
The Sergeant said, "Turn around men
I'm in charge from now on."
And we just made it out of the Big Muddy
With the captain dead and gone.

We stripped and dived and found his body
Stuck in the old quicksand.
I guess he didn't know that the water was deeper
Than the place he'd once before been.
Another stream had joined the Big Muddy
'Bout a half mile from where we'd gone.
We were lucky to escape from the Big Muddy
When the big fool said to push on.

Well, I'm not going to point any moral
I'll leave that for yourself.
Maybe your still walking, your still talking
You'd like to keep your health.
But every time I read the papers
That old feeling comes on.
We're---waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.

And the big fool says to push on.
Waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.
Waist deep! Neck deep! Soon even a
Tall man'll be over his head, we're
Waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.

RIP Pete Seeger. You lost more often than you won but you never gave up.