



Joe's Jottings #3: Pete Seeger (1919-2014) & Oberlin College: Some Memories and Reflections

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

After Pete Seeger passed away on January 27, 2014, I was asked on several occasions about my memories of Pete, especially during my student days at Oberlin College (1953-57). Perhaps some of you witnessed my presentation at Pete's 95th birthday celebration at the Clinton Street Theater on May 3, 2014. I'll devote this month's column to some of these reflections.

I first saw Pete at a Progressive Party campaign event in New Haven, Connecticut, in the autumn of 1948 ("Wallace and Taylor in '48!"). Lean and lanky, he stamped his foot to the beat of the music; the louder he sang, the stronger the pedal percussion. I was mesmerized by his bobbing Adam's apple, and his performance of stirring songs (e.g., "The donkey and elephant bob up and down on the same old merry-go-round"). I was again attracted to his banjo and voice when The Weavers had their very successful hits on the pop music charts in 1950-51, beginning with "Tzena Tzena Tzena" and "Goodnight Irene" (this was #1 for 13 weeks). I bought all their singles (75 cents each) and was soon singing the songs with ukulele, then guitar, accompaniment.

Then, on April 1, 1954, toward the end of my Freshman year at Oberlin College, Pete Seeger gave his first concert at Oberlin in the Allen Art Museum. It was organized by Michael Horowitz (class of '55) and Kent Sidon ('54), with assistance from Stephen Lee Taller ('55); they guaranteed Pete \$100.00. Tickets were \$1.00 each and there were ca. 200 attendees, including me. On April 3 I wrote to my parents: "It was a complete sellout ... with people turned away." I also wrote: "I have never seen anything so wonderful in my life." I was hooked! (And thank goodness my mother was a proto-archivist and saved a bunch of my letters.)

On April 22, 1955, Pete's second Oberlin concert was at Hall Auditorium and drew 491 people. This was organized by Stephen Lee Taller, with me as assistant. The concert was recorded with six microphones by Taller and Jean Pierre Williams ('55); the tapes were sent to Moses Asch for possible release on Folkways Records, but he decided not to do so. In midSeptember, 1955, Pete was an invited guest at the annual student YMCA/YWCA Retreat a week before classes started. I didn't know about this until I arrived on campus a few days later. Boy, I would have joined the Y's just to be that event!

On February 11, 1956, Pete did an afternoon children's concert at Hall Auditorium (over 400 people) and an evening one at First Church (over 850 people, including Oberlin President William Stevenson). I was the chief organizer, so I was rather busy and missed some of the songs. I do remember his taping to the microphone some words to a song he had written on the plane on his way to Oberlin; I did not remember what the song was. It turns out it was the first three verses of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" (that's all he wrote!). [I did not write the 4th and 5th verses until May 1960 in Bloomington, Indiana, after hearing his 3verse version on a recently issued Folkways LP (but that's a story for another column).] The next day I talked with Pete about future concerts, including at other colleges. On February 17 I wrote to home: "The trend was started in April 1, 1954, and the first Pete Seeger concert, and it will continue to grow, at least as long as I'm here."

On October 20, 1956 (my 21st birthday), Pete did afternoon and evening presentations at Hall Auditorium and Finney Chapel, to over 300 and 850 attendees respectively. Again, I was the organizer. I led a post-concert folksing in the backyard of Grey Gables Coop, which was recorded and simultaneously aired from the adjacent studio of WOBCFM. Pete can be heard playing the washtub bass. As far as I know, this is the first recording of myself, albeit unissued.

I traveled to Oberlin from graduate school at Indiana University for at least two more of Pete's concerts, on October 5, 1957, and October 17, 1958. For one of them, I ended up helping him carry a heavy log from The Arboretum to the stage of Finney Chapel for an axe-chopping song. The 10/17/58 post-concert

folksing was in Peters Hall and featured a limbo contest (Pete was hard to beat!). I remember it also due to the fact that I sang "Bonny Highland Laddie," which I had just learned, and Pete learned it from me. He then passed it on to Dave Guard and the Kingston Trio. (It was the first song Pete learned from me, after I had learned countless songs from him and his group, The Weavers, starting in 1950.)

Pete has said in person and in print that these Oberlin concerts, beginning in 1954, were extremely important in kickstarting his career as a solo singer on college campuses after The Weavers were blacklisted in 1951⁵². It is obvious from the above that an increasing number of students in neighboring colleges were coming to Oberlin to see him perform (PFS calendar-meister Barry Gorden from Kenyon College was one of them), and then inquiring about bringing him to their institutions. Pete had so many offers that he had to hire a separate booking agent for the area.

Pete's annual concerts at Oberlin College were of central importance to an increasing interest in folk music on campus. In 1957 we formed the Oberlin Folk Song Club and a performing/teaching group, The Folksmiths (which included PFS member Ruth Weiss Bolliger). The first Oberlin College Intercollegiate Folk Festival occurred in May 1957. The next 20 years saw increased activity on the extracurricular level and, of course, additional Pete Seeger concerts. The class of 1972 selected Pete as the keynote speaker for their graduation ceremonies.

Thank you, Pete, and thank you Oberlin College!