

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Pete Seeger, As I Knew Him

Mitch Greenhill · Friday, January 31st, 2014

I was 13 years old when I first met Pete Seeger. It was through my father Manny Greenhill, who had known Pete from their days as labor activists in New York. And they both had been at Peekskill, when right-wing vigilantes had beaten and stoned a crowd gathered to hear a concert by Paul Robeson.

In that summer of 1957 our family traveled a hundred miles west, to Lenox, Massachusetts, to hear a concert by Pete and the rest of the Weavers. After the concert Manny and Pete had a long and serious conversation, sitting in the barn auditorium of Tanglewood, open to the steamy Berkshire summer that hovered just beyond their words. Pete had a problem — the blacklist was causing local presenters to cancel confirmed bookings — and he expressed a wish to find a local New England presenter who would follow through. Manny said, “I’m your man,” and agreed to present his next Boston appearance.

Pete’s concerns were well founded. Some months later, with the concert booked and advertised, an FBI agent stopped Manny at the trolley stop, on his way to work. After identifying himself, the agent asked why Folklore Productions was presenting Pete Seeger, a known Communist sympathizer, in concert. “He sells tickets,” Manny shrugged, and, feigning nonchalance, returned to his crossword puzzle.

A few weeks later, with the concert just hours away, Pete and my sister Deborah and I went ice skating. He was our houseguest then, along with blues harmonica virtuoso Sonny Terry, who would visit frequently in the years to follow, and Sonny’s nephew J.C. Burris, who started out as their driver, but wound up playing bones in the concert.

It was more excitement than our little corner of Dorchester was used to. Pete’s banjo rang through the rooms, and one afternoon a University of Massachusetts student, who called himself Taj Mahal, took a break from his studies in Animal Husbandry to stop by and pay his respects.

The concert was wonderful, and a big success. It was thrilling to sing labor songs with Pete, to watch him chop a log while he sang a work song, and to hear the big sound of his twelve-string guitar and the high sparkling sound of his long-neck banjo. And staid Jordan Hall was sold out. “The blacklist gave me a lot of free publicity,” Seeger said in later years. “If a concert did not sell out, [manager] Harold [Leventhal] and I used to joke that next time we would need to make sure that the John Birch Society would picket.”

This whirlwind visit, the first time that Pete stayed at our Dorchester home, helped set me, as so

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many others, on a path that would have been far different in his absence.

*Photo: Pete Seeger in light blue shirt, with Mitch Greenhill (at left), in dark blue shirt. Matt Greenhill is at far right.*

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