

A LETTER FROM PETE SEEGER: Pop, Rock, & Coca-Colonization

Pete Seeger needs no introduction, and we are not going to offer one. Rather, I'd like to discuss why we are presenting this essay now. As we noted in our *News* column in the last issue, the sloop *Clearwater* celebrated its 30th anniversary this year; as I read the announcement, I thought immediately about Seeger, a major force behind the creation of the sloop, as well as a necessary ingredient in the North American folk music revivals that have occurred in the 2nd half of the century. In many ways, our Society is a function of those revivals, and virtually all of our members enjoy music that bears traces of Seeger's presence. Obviously, Seeger introduced suburban North America to ballads, to old time banjo music, to calypso, to the blues, to Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie, as well as to the idea that you and I could write our own songs: without "The Hammer Song" and "Where Have All The Flowers Gone," there'd be no "Blowin' in the Wind," "Imagine," "Early Morning Rain," "Barrett's Privateers," or "Sulphur Passage." Finally, no one has done more than Pete Seeger to remind us of the political significance of music; his role in the development and transmission of "We Shall Overcome" would alone ensure him a place in our musical history.

We must not overlook Seeger's role in the introduction of non-European musics into the Anglo-African American musical mixture. He would certainly be among the first to note that in this case, as in *all* of the trends I've cited, he was not alone: there were other reasons and forces, other tastes and trendsetters that have drawn us to modal improvisation and complex rhythms of Latin American, Africa, and Asia. Nevertheless, the followers of raga-rock, world beat, jazz/salsa and other hybrids have often followed trails Seeger explored during the '50s and '60s. While he has been occasionally criticised as a dilettante (ever hear Dylan's "Talkin' Hava Nagila"?), his delight in experimentation is infectious and entirely consistent with his political goal of human interactivity. One wonders how many later fusionists were able to acknowledge, as Seeger did in the programme to a historic 1963 Carnegie Hall concert, that one cannot expect to comprehend or reproduce all the nuances of a 2nd or 3rd musical language.

The essay which follows is consistent with this sense of cultural particularity, as he reminds non-Americans of the value of what they alone possess. As the title indicates, it was sent as an open letter to students around the world. That's how I first encountered it, in the University of Calgary student paper in 1975. I was at the time coming out of my own rock and roll era, not yet a Canadian, still rather Yankocentric and

temporarily apolitical. Seeger's essay was not the only experience that helped to reshape my esthetics and politics, but it was perhaps the most conscious and articulate discussion of the political ramifications of culture I encountered at that time, and I have often found myself thinking of it during the two decades that have passed.

Some of the ideas Seeger expresses here are treated as passé in some self-styled "progressive" quarters. There is, indeed, reason to claim that *bhangra*, *reggae*, *oy*, *juju*, and so on, not to mention country music, heavy metal, punk rock, perhaps even disco, are not part of a cultural homogenization—in some respects, they do speak to (and *for*, and sometimes *from*) different constituencies, though I still wonder whether or not the similarities don't outweigh the differences. Some theorists suggest that though Michael Jackson records sell across the world, the music and the discs themselves have different meanings in the slums of Bombay and in the suburbs of Chicago. Perhaps, but, as Seeger points out, the meaning for the multinational corporations who sell them remains the same—more money going into their pockets means more power for them. It's relevant here to note that the paper in which I first read this essay included as an illustration a rather well done cartoon in which a hippie with a dope pipe and a fatcat businessman with an expensive cigar in his mouth (he was actually a pig, as I recall) were shown to be siamese twins.

We might add that the purchase of records from whatever centre frequently inhibits the production of music by individuals. Though audio-philosophers and technology enthusiasts continually promise that more sophisticated technology will put control over the means of communication into the hands of individuals and small groups, one could argue just as effectively that each of the "advances" in audio quality merely withdraw the capacity for this control from the neighborhoods. Who wants to listen to 45s when LPs "sound so much better"? Who wants to listen to cassettes when digital CDs are available? Who wants to listen to locals when technology brings Sinatra and the Beatles into our living rooms, anyway?

My point is that this argument has not ended. Seeger's plea is still fresh, two decades later.

When we wrote to ask permission to use it, Pete asked us to note that he "... re-read this 1972 essay of his and tried updating it a little bit. But 99.99% is as he wrote it then."

—GWL

I am writing this letter for young people outside the USA, young people who love music and are strongly attracted by the folk and popular music of the USA. I have met you in 34 countries of Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. I have met you in sophisticated big city universities and in small towns and small countries. I have seen your eyes light up when you hear my guitar or banjo or hear translations of the intriguing words of my songs. I have also seen you tapping your foot in pleasure to the latest popular recordings of jazz and rock-and-roll.

I am writing for three reasons. First, I hope you don't like all of our music. Some of it represents the lives of black and white working people striving and struggling to survive. But some of it represents the US "establishment" trying to distract people and make them forget their problems. Some of it

is such a subtle combination of the above two elements that it is almost impossible to untangle them.

Second, in your eagerness to learn the new styles of music from outside your own country, there is real danger that you will forget the music within your own country, old as well as new. It is true that as our lives change, our tastes in music will change somewhat. But it should be possible to learn new things without completely forgetting old things.

Third, I'd like to try and persuade you that if you really want to be modern young people, listen to the music of all the world, not just the USA. Scientists keep track of developments all over the world, alert to pick up a good new idea. Food experts look through the whole world for varieties of plants to develop. Likewise, in some little known corner of the world right now there may exist some beautiful and inexpensive

musical instrument or style which might prove to be exactly to your taste. Why not help look for it?

Let me go into the above three points in more detail. Stick with me. This is a matter of cultural life-or-death.

First, what is US *pop*?

The music of North America is more hybrid than most. Of course, practically all music shows evidence of ancient mixing. Indonesian-type xylophones have been found in Africa. Chinese instruments made their way to Japan a thousand years ago. Oriental music influences came to Spain—the guitar was originally an oriental instrument. However, the mixing in the USA has been extreme.

West African rhythms and Irish melodies are two obvious elements. But we got a lot more than rhythm from Africa. The custom of one voice answering another ("antiphony") is typically African. We hear it in the blues, when a guitar "answers" a singer's cry. We hear it in the response of the bass singers in popular gospel hymns and played by jazz bands. In addition, basic US attitudes towards music, songs, and dancing are now much more African than most white residents of the USA realize.

Of course, our music also contains European melodies, European harmonic traditions, and other European elements. And the language of our songs is a European "slanguage," half French, half German, with new words being added constantly—*okay*, for example, is either an African or Native American (Choctaw) word.

Some of our musical mixtures simmered slow and long the way mountain folk musicians mixed the English ballads and the African banjo. Sometimes the cookpot had a lot thrown in it all at once, and the result was only half cooked (and half digested, one might say).

How do I define the differences between pop music and folk music?

Let's not bother making a big thing out of it. Look at the matter historically. In ancient times, when men and women lived by hunting animals and gathering nuts and berries, people knew only one kind of music. All the men knew the same hunting songs, the same war chants. All the women knew the same lullabies.

Then mankind learned farming. New prosperity led to the rise of aristocracy of some sort in every land where agriculture replaced hunting. This aristocracy could now afford to pay for professional musicians to make music for them. This was the first fine arts music. In Europe, it eventually led to symphony orchestras in the palaces. In India virtuoso sitar players performed for all-night musicales. In West Africa were large drum orchestras. Out in the peasant huts, people of necessity still made their own folk music.

When cities arose, some musicians found they could make a living playing for coins in the marketplace. This was the first pop music. It was not as elegant as the music in the palace, but not as amateurish as much of the music back in the peasants' huts. Pop music for many centuries has occupied a middle ground between fine arts music and folk music.

Because the main measure of success was the number of coins collected, pop music has tended to change more rapidly, as city fashions do. It has always borrowed cheerfully from folk music and from fine arts music, anywhere and everywhere. The successful styles are imitated and spread from city to city.

In the 19th Century, US pop music only made a small dent in the lives of working people. Only ten percent of America lived in cities. Western cowboys, Irish-American lumberjacks, Welsh-American miners, African-American slaves, and many other working people all had different song and dance styles. "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear," wrote Walt Whitman in 1850.

By mid-20th Century, the carols are not so varied. By this time 90 percent of the USA lived in cities. 95 percent have television in their homes. The great grandchildren of the aforementioned cowboys, lumberjacks, slaves, are listening to much the same music on TV networks, all controlled carefully so as not to permit songs which might upset the status quo. How are they controlled? There is no TV official known as a censor, but every TV producer knows that a "controversial" song can lead to trouble with advertising sponsors or others. This is one reason that I and others have had trouble getting on TV for the past twenty-five years.

What gets promoted is the "respectable" establishment pop music. And now it is promoted around the world by the biggest recording companies, able to undersell and overproduce the world, with billions of little vinyl recording discs, on sale in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, as well as Europe.

Is there "anti-establishment" pop music in the USA?

Yes, but till recently it never received commercial distribution. The labor union struggles of the 19th Century produced songs, as did the movement for abolition of slavery or for agrarian reform. The songs of Joe Hill, sixty years ago, were sung not only by the radical members of the IWW, but their humor and spunk spread them like folksongs through the whole country: "... You'll get pie in the sky when you die!"

In the 1930s, when I was a teenager, popular music was rapidly obliterating many local and regional forms of US music, through films and radio, as well as recordings. The clever and slick orchestras of Broadway and Hollywood helped try and persuade people to dance away their troubles or sentimentally mouth them. I myself was lucky.

After being briefly infatuated with pop music (I played tenor banjo in a high school band), I discovered that there was some good music in my country which I never heard on the radio. My father, an ethnomusicologist, took me to a mountain dance festival, and I fell in love with the idea of homemade music. I liked the strident vocal tone of the singers, the vigorous dancing. The words of the songs had all the meat of life in them. Their humor had a bite; it was not trivial. Their tragedy was real, not sentimental. In comparison, most of the pop music of the 1930s seemed to me weak and soft, with its endless variations on "Baby, baby, I need you." Much of it seemed part and parcel of the ancient attempt to keep the masses satisfied with their lot. In the middle of the severest economic depression, a hit song said, "Wrap your troubles in

dreams, and dream your troubles away."

In the 1940s, Woody Guthrie, the Oklahoma balladmaker, and many others set out consciously to fight this kind of music. We set out to sing for working people, for students, anywhere we could sing our songs of struggle. The radio would not hire us, but we didn't expect it to. We held our "hootenannies"—democratic songfests—in which we sang songs of labor and anti-fascism, as well as ancient ballads, songs of pioneer days, of working people black and white, male and female.

We underestimated our opponent.

Our songs reached a few thousands, while the Hit Parade reached tens of millions. As the Cold War closed in, we were even blacklisted out of the trade unions. In desperation, we then tried to sing our songs in theatres and nightclubs. An old American folk saying is "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em." To our own surprise, we started succeeding with songs which did not attack the establishment. The Weavers' recording of the Afro-American love song, "Goodnight Irene," sold two million copies in 1950.

And so we, too, discovered how the establishment of the USA, culturally as well as politically, has developed expertly the ability to "co-opt" (absorb and disarm) its opposition. Long-playing records in the 1950s began making money from many minority art forms. The tight monopoly of Broadway and Hollywood was broken. Hit records came out of Detroit and Nashville as well.

Since 1965 a large market has developed in what one might term "underground pop music." Like folk music of old, it is "anti-establishment," but the highly professional young musicians often draw larger youth audiences than the diluted "rock" music of such accepted stars as Tom Jones. Their music is often not allowed on TV because it is too frank in the areas of sex, marijuana, and the general anti-establishment politics, but it is probably the most exciting and talented music in America today. Anti-war rock songs have been an important feature of all the big recent anti-war demonstrations.

But note also: these recordings (Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, Elton John, Jefferson Airplane, *et al.*) add millions of dollars to the US music industry. Overall, the power of the music industry has increased hugely. Many young people of Western Europe have fallen hook-line-and-sinker (as a fish swallows bait) for American pop music. The talented pop musicians of much of the world now compete to get a foothold on the US Top Forty (this term replaced the words "Hit Parade"). Four working-class youth of Liverpool became the biggest musical stars in history.

Now the music industry of Western Europe and North America, technically equipped to promote anything it wants from Indian sitars to Russian Gypsy melodies, or the latest electronic inventions, stands poised to provide the music for all 3.6 billion beings on the globe to listen to. (In 1995, 6 billion!) We are on the threshold of a TV revolution, with programs bounced off satellites, to entrance viewers in every village on the globe. The prospect, like so much of modern technology, holds promise of both hope and horror. There are

businessmen in the USA who are preparing a cultural blitz. World Coca-Colonization. And it won't take fifty years, as it once took to wipe out our cowboy music, but only fifty weeks to push aside the national music of Ceylon, Costa Rica, Madagascar, and in a generation erase them.

This leads me to the second reason I am writing you.

No thinking person looks forward to the hundreds of national musics of the world being erased, forgotten.

Compare the situation to biology. Biologists know that for a healthy planet we need maximum diversity of life. If some species of bird or fish becomes extinct, the ecological web of life is torn. But agriculture and industry have enabled mankind to increase so in number that the ecological balance has been alarmingly upset, and there is question if any of our descendants will know the clean unpolluted air and water which our grandparents knew.

In cultural forms, as in biological forms, there is constant warfare, struggle. Usually it is not the war of thunder and lightning, but more the silent struggle as between the roots of trees in the forest, each competing for a share of space. But as with biological forms, cultural forms need each other, even while they compete. One reason that they folk and popular music of the USA is rich is because of the varied musics that found themselves competing side by side. But what is happening now is not competition. A flood of US imported music is swamping, inundating its "competition" throughout the world. Industrialized Man, like Esau of the Bible, sells his birthright for a mess of pottage.

Right now, young people of Western Europe are forgetting the music of their own countries. I get letters from France, Holland, Czechoslovakia, "Dear Mr. Seeger, I love your music because it is so exciting, so varied." I ask them in reply what they think of their own folk music, and they often answer lamely, "My country has very little folk music. It is not very interesting." The truth is, they know very little about their own music. What they learned in school was usually watered down, second-rate. As adults, they did not see "this old-fashioned music" as part of their life as modern people living in cities.

So part of the job of musicians in every corner of the globe now is to rediscover the rich strength and subtlety of *their own music*, and bring it to the attention of masses of people in their own land. We know now that it is necessary to do this with recordings, film and TV, as well as live performing artists. We must not do it with the printed page. Transcribing an African song with European music notation means to partially Europeanize that song. We must preserve the free improvisatory quality of so much non-European music and old music.

Consider this: some of these simple old tunes helped your grandparents to survive through terrible times. Perhaps they made up new words to old melodies. Why don't you try the same? A well-constructed melody is like a well-constructed house. It can serve many occupants and purposes through the centuries.

Beware the person who says that in order to be "modern" one must keep up with the latest European or American styles.

Cultural anthropologists have long noted that in colonial countries people thought that the way to be "civilized" was to ape the ways of the mother country. This was done in "New England," "New Spain," and "New France." And among the quisling classes of Africa (the local leaders who tried to ingratiate themselves with their new European rulers) one saw such things as African chiefs wearing silk top hats or Polynesian leaders living in rectangular houses.

In Japan I was told, "We just want to be modern"—but some young Japanese assume that every fashion from the USA is "modern." The recent Saigon rock festival does not represent the *internationalization* of South Vietnamese youth, but simply their *Americanization*, the result of US imperialism.

And these young people who want to hear the latest American song do not even hear the best pop songs. They hear what the industry promotes. How many youth outside the USA know that the real Number One pop hit in 1970 was never played on radio or TV or listed in the charts of the Top Forty? It was a sarcastic, jazzy satire of the Vietnam War. It had been an "underground" hit for several years; then it got into the movie *Woodstock*. Although it was unknown on TV, every person under age 25 learned the song and could roar out the chorus with me, even when I sang in small towns:

One, two, three, what are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn:
Next stop is Vietnam....

(by Country Joe MacDonald, &c.)

But did you hear this song in your country? It was as well known here among young people as the Beatles' "Let It Be."

Today one can see happening throughout the world what happened within the USA fifty years ago.

Then, the culture marketed from the city was new and spectacular. It portrayed a glamorous and wealthier, and therefore apparently more successful, group. Country persons,

out of shyness or shame, reacted to inhibit their own culture. Just so today, in a hundred nations of the world, people will tend to feel a little ashamed of their own local music. It seems backward to them. As once the young girls in American small towns tried to keep up with the fashions—raising hemlines or lowering them according to the dictates of the clothing indus-

try—so today young people try to keep up with the "latest" pop music.

There may be a good musical idea right under their nose, but they are ashamed to touch it unless by chance it is picked up by "their leaders." In Moscow, 1969, I heard coming out of every hotel orchestra an old Russian pop melody. ("Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end....")

If I had sung this song five years before, when I toured the USSR, I'm sure I would have been asked,

"What are you singing that corny old song for? We knew it in 1928." But in 1969 the Beatles' recording company had made it a world wide hit. It was temporarily in fashion again. Incidentally, I know the author of the English words well. He is a professor of architecture at Columbia University. He is of Russian background and has for many years, as a hobby, sung songs in many languages and made English lyrics for them as well.

Consider this, before you sneer at your own local brand of music. If it is lost or forgotten, it can probably never be recreated, not from books, recordings, or even film. It need not be the only music you like, but it is part of your heritage. Would you want to change your name, deny your ancestors, no matter what mistakes they may have made? And if your own musical heritage is worth saving, who can learn it better than you? Does it seem overly simple to you? There can be great subtlety in simplicity. The Irish usually sang their ballads unaccompanied. Their melodies *had* to be good.

The world at present is richer for its variety.

And if in distant centuries to come there is one musical language, it will be richer for adding to itself the best of many other languages.

Some will say, why not build this one world music as rapidly as possible? I strongly object to those words, "as rapidly as possible." This will be used to justify any music-loving person buying the cheapest and most available music—most likely mass produced in North America. They will be



Pete Seeger in concert with his grandson Tao Rodriguez.

Photograph by Andrew de Lory

listeners of music, not makers of music. They will not learn their own history or be given pride and strength in themselves.

I've already cautioned you to learn your own music by ear, not from the printed page, or from music notation. Here's one more caution: don't be afraid of improvising or changing it. A song may be partly traditional. It must also partly reflect you and your listeners in the present year. Let's not be afraid to see people adding to their old traditions with the ideas from anywhere in the world. To freeze them and try to keep them "pure" is more likely to kill them. Who knows but an old Czech melody may live again accompanied by a banjo? A Ceylonese orchestra may find that African thumb pianos are perfectly suited to certain traditional dances. Lonesome Peruvian panpipes may be perfect for some mountain melodies of Central Asia. It is true that the definition of a weed is a plant that is out of place—but you must decide for yourself what is out of place. Arguments? Sure. Good!

And this leads to the third reason I want to write you.

If you really want to be modern young people, don't learn just from the USA.

Pick and choose from everywhere. There are many wonderful forms of music in the world which American pop music has not yet discovered. Why don't you discover them first? Why do you have to wait for the USA to officially approve it?

For example, the choral music of South Africa is one of the greatest choral traditions in the world, rivalling that of Northern Europe, Polynesia, or the Afro-American churches. A powerful bass section serves as foundation, a rhythmically inventive soloist does exciting work in the tenor or falsetto.

And the gamelan orchestras of Java and Bali have a delicate charm which is unique. They have a way of gradually slowing down the tempo at the end of a piece of music, but at the same time increasing the number of notes played per second.

Are you going to wait for some group like the Beatles to discover them for you, to place their stamp of approval on it before you sample it?

Let's make a new definition of world culture.

The heritages of the world—not just Europe—are ours to listen to if we want. The music-loving person of the future will draw on the riches of a thousand cultures. This does not mean that the glories of Bach and Beethoven are any less, or that a greater jazz artist is any less. But the music of America and Europe will share the stage with many others, just as a bookshelf is big enough for the novelists of a hundred lands.

All this pertains to music you may want to listen to. But you will find that when it comes to making music, there is a special thrill in feeling that you are carrying on an ancient art, and that others will learn from you and carry on after you are gone. This includes the lullabies you sing by ear. The music you make yourself may be limited in range, but within this range can be extremely complex.

A man or woman can spend a lifetime exploring the possibilities of sound from a little box with three strings. You may find yourself at first imitating other musicians, then later putting more of your own self into it, expressing in music what you can't say in words. You may find, as we did here, that you want to carry on the tradition of making up new songs about contemporary events and problems.

You may find some way in your own country of forming small sociable music clubs, as they do in Britain. Twenty years ago there was a wave of popularity in England for a variety of popular folk music from America called "skiffle music." English youth discovered that there were such things as "folk songs with teeth." Up till then they had associated the words "folk music" with the pallid imitations they got in school. Now it was their turn to discover that Britain also had folk songs with teeth.

They also decided that the best way to sing them was in small groups, with no amplification. Today, there are over a thousand "folk song clubs" which meet once a week, usually in a room near a pub, where you can get a big mug of good English beer to help the singing voices. (In '95 I'm not sure how many. 1500? 500?) No two clubs are exactly alike. Usually two or three amateur musicians start them as a labor of love, and the repertoire of the club follows their taste in music. They may be singing old songs or new, or adding to British traditions with occasional songs from elsewhere, but the base they start on is that they make their own music, and they are not pretending that they are learning someone else's music.

They think that it is unfashionable to try and be in fashion, unoriginal to try to be modern.

They are simply exploring the past, present, and future of their country and the world, and making the best music they know how. Isn't this what we should all try to do?

In your country you should be able to build your new music on the best of your old. Some of Bob Dylan's best songs used old Irish ballad melodies. Your country should be developing its own Bob Dylans.

Plato, Confucius, and other philosophers attached great importance to the art of music. The Catholic Church of the Middle Ages tried also to control what kind of music people heard. Today, with modern communication, no attempt to censor music is going to succeed. Don't try to ban US music. Ridicule the worst. Learn from the best. We will have to fight hard to develop music in every land which can help people live and survive, and eventually create a new peaceful, rainbow colored world.

Thanks for reading to the end.

Best wishes,
Pete Seeger
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