



Sing Out America! The Best of Pete Seeger

[Pete Seeger](#)

Dynamic Records - DYN4931

Available from [MVD Entertainment Group](#).

A review written for the Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange
by **Mark S. Tucker**
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Dear reader, in honor of this CD two-fer and the esteemed gentleman in question, allow me, if you will, and even if you won't, to regale you with a couple bits of music history you'll never hear in the parameters of the 'Left' media Pete Seeger was occasionally honored by, a media I'm well to the Left of. My little story involves censorship, something I, and perhaps you as well, am all too familiar with, myself after decades of arts and political commentary in somewhere in the vicinity of 30 venues. My experience, though, and perhaps yours, is actually irrelevant to the matter to hand, I just wanted to pitch it for a quick moment as a matter of establishing resonance.

Seeger was more than familiar with a censorship too often willingly abetted by this so-called 'Left' and its 'radicals' and 'Humanists', all chattering over airwaves (now almost completely collapsed), through cathode rays (likewise), and within print forums (still all too alive in such sites as OpEdNews.com), but I'm not going to relate that either. Instead, in my contrarian wont, I'll tell you of Bob Dylan's and Woody Guthrie's censorings by...well, Pete Seeger. Yep, it's true, and fairly amusing.

With the passing of one of this country's greatest folk musicians, a guy who fell only six years short of reaching his centenary mark upon his meeting with mortality this year (Jan. 27, 2014), it's well past time a collection such as this was once again issued, gathering the most lauded of Seeger's extensive catalogue of tracks self-written, co-written, and popularized from traditional origins. The man issued from a long musical family heritage, growing up amid musically inclined progenitors and half siblings: most prominently Peggy Seeger, the woman for whom *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* was written (by husband Ewan MacColl), but also Mike, Barbara, and Penny.

Pete's only problem as he grew up, seeking his way in this country, was that he was convictedly and unshakeably Leftist and never for a moment hesitant to act upon his political positions. Too bad we aren't all that way, but then one all too clearly sees what such an ethos brings: the enmities of the Republican Party, of the business communities, and of a so-called "Left", a cabal of Centrists (what Noam Chomsky calls 'the soft Right', including Democrats in that fold) often preferring the camouflaging taglines of "progressive" and "liberal" to hide alliances with the capitalists they pretend to declaim. Ah me, ah my, as the Wicked Witch of the West said, what a world, what a world!

But what you're not told whenever the story of Seeger's journeys and travails are related is that Pete could himself be a bit of a reactionary when the occasion arose. Perhaps most infamously, in middle years he grew tremendously irate, indeed apoplectic, when Dylan turned electric right in front of his ears. He even tried to unplug Bob at the Newport Folk Festival when the Butterfield Blues Band backed him on electric instruments, became something of a maniac in attempting to pre-empt the ensemble right in the middle of a song. On the other hand, much earlier, it was he who had urged Dylan's first LP on Columbia Records A&R guy John Hammond and who had also secured Zimmerman's big time debut at that same 1965 Newport he would come to regret. Pete, after all, was a board member therein.

Ironically, almost as preparatory staging, days earlier, Alan Lomax, famed folk historian, and Albert Grossman, Dylan's manager, had been in a fistfight over several matters. I'm told Dylan's new conversion was one of the matters of ire, but that may well be apocryphal. While Bob's on-stage move may have threatened to renew the Lomax/Grossman bloodlust, it even more so inflamed Seeger, who took mortal insult at Dylan's new converso status. Pete moved to squelch the heresy. Fortunately, he didn't succeed, he hadn't an axe with which to chop the power line, and had to settle for yelling like an insensate Republican at the sound man, who would not cooperate with disabling things, thenceafter stomping off, indignities flared and glowing.

Many years later, for it took quite a while for Seeger to cool down on the matter, he, in an interview, chuckled at his own wrongheadedness, freely admitting it was all his fault and even that he should've yelled back at the booing crowd "You didn't boo Howlin' Wolf yesterday! He was electric!" Ah, how late we sometimes learn!

But, unlike so many of the 'Lefties' who hide behind a political puerilism excused by desk-jockey sobriquets of 'journalist' and 'commentarist', taglines excusing them from duty while sanctifying a punditry not all that distanced from corporate Rightism (tune in any Pacifica station and you can listen to a bit too many of them), Seeger himself was perennially in hot water with the Establishment, as is most anyone daring to be one micron to the Left of Stalin and Rush Limbaugh. He was attacked ceaselessly for overt spoken and musical tactics. He lived his philosophy while the lion's share of the 'Left' merely talked about it, adjourning after dinner with Arianna Huffington to stare blank-faced into a television.

You hear Seeger's defiance and working class humanity in just about every song he wrote or covered, and so you get in this collection of songs such gems as the trad standard *What Shall We Do with a Drunken Soldier* and Woody Guthrie's *This Land is Your Land*, but, oh my, it's in that latter song we locate our second Seeger censorship.

Guthrie had written his refrains with a purpose, very mindfully throwing Irving Berlin's bourgeois *God Bless America* back in Big Irv's face (Woody had originally titled his rebellious anthem as "God Blessed America for Me" but redrafted the title for reasons not clear), and I'm sorry to note that Pete, in his rendition here, censored the stanzas his buddy most wanted sung, pre-empted the lines (eight verses) the Establishment glared at, the ones about property and hunger. To repair that deficit, I present them to you now:

*Was a high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property
But on the back side, it didn't say nothing
God blessed America for me*

*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the Relief Office I saw my people
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
God blessed America for me*

Pete was more than aware of the problems and just as knowing that the ditty also appeared once, maybe twice, in a version with a stanza almost never covered anywhere regardless:

*Nobody living can ever stop me
As I go walking that freedom highway
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me*

...after which one of the earlier pre-empted stanzas re-appeared as:

*In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple
By the relief office, I'd seen my people
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?*

Upon such poetry, the squalls of protesting politicians, priests and rabbis, and businessmen, not to mention the general foofrah of the bourgeoisie, have forever seen to it that we never hear the full version ever. Pete Seeger, in presenting what he should have refused to truncate, kinda sided with that reptile garden.

But he and Guthrie were good friends, and Pete loved to cover the song regardless, so when Bruce Springsteen covered the track at President Obama's inaugural ceremony, Springsteen, at the behest of Seeger, restored the near-full version, a stinging but then-unknown presage of things to come as the Second Republican Depression continues to grind on, initiated by Bill Clinton and George Dubya Bush, heirs to Reagan atrocities and purposeful mismanagements setting everything in motion, unabated under our latest prezdawg.

Interesting, no? But, all that to the side, expect lots of explicit and metaphorized lyrics all through this collection, oft in the stripped down musical format Seeger favored. If you're one of those people who treat such historic rebels and rabble rousing figures in the same way many regard Adam Smith and Karl Marx—that is to say: prattling on, echoing radio nonsense while never knowing a damn thing—then now's the time to repair that deficiency. Here's the place to do it. Or have I been too political?

Let's ask Pete.

Track List:

DISC ONE

- Turn! Turn! Turn! (traditional)
- Wayfaring Stranger (traditional)
- John Henry (traditional)
- Union Maid (Pete Seeger)
- Deliver the Goods (Pete Seeger)
- Liza Jane (traditional)
- Coast of High Barbary (traditional)
- Teeroo Teeroo (Pete Seeger)
- Erie Canal (Pete Seeger)
- All I Want (Garland)
- Casey Jones (traditional)
- Talking Union (Pete Seeger)
- Sinking of the Reuben James (traditional)
- Wimoweh (Seeger / Gilbert / Hays / Hellerman)
- Midnight Special (Seeger / Gilbert / Hays / Hellerman / Ledbetter)
- So Long (Woody Guthrie)
- Lonesome Traveller (Hays)
- Wreck of the John B. (Sandburg / Hays)
- Kisses Sweeter Than Wine (Seeger / Hays / Hellerman / Newman / Gilbert)

DISC TWO

- If I Had a Hammer (Seeger / Hayes)
- Where Have All the Flowers Gone? (Pete Seeger)
- Red River Valley (traditional)
- This Land Is Your Land (traditional)
- Shenandoah (traditional)
- Molly Malone (traditional)
- Talking Blues (traditional)
- Oh Susanah (Foster)
- Barbara Allen (traditional)
- Big Rock Candy Mountain (McClintock)
- What Shall We Do With A Drunken Sailor? (traditional)
- Time's a Getting Hard (Pete Seeger)
- Foggy Foggy Dew (traditional)
- Johnny Has Gone For a Soldier (traditional)
- Rifleman of Birmingham (traditional)
- Wreck of the Old 97 (Cash / Johnson)
- Delia's Gone (traditional)
- Around And Around Old Joe Clark (traditional)
- I've Been Working on the Railroad (traditional)
- St. James Infirmary (traditional)

- Roving Kind (Cavanaugh / Syanton)
- I Know Where I'm Going (traditional)
- On Top of Old Smokey (Ledbetter / Lomax)
- Tzena, Tzena, Tzena (Spnecer / Davis)
- Hard, Ain't It Hard (Woody Guthrie)
- When the Saints Go Marching In (Seeger / Gilbert / Hays / Hellerman)
- Blue Tailed Fly (Jimmy Cracked Corn) (traditional)
- Wagoner's Lad (traditional)
- Living in the Country (Pete Seeger)
- Ida Red (traditional)
- We Shall Overcome (Traditional)

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