

Pete & Toshi

**"To everything, Turn, Turn, Turn
there is a season, Turn, Turn, Turn"**

As I write this chapter, Pete Seeger would have turned 100 years old. Of course, he is not here anymore to enjoy the moment, that will be left up to his family, friends and those who admired him. And this book is not meant to be part of the global deification of the man. After all, Pete sailed up and down the Hudson, he didn't walk on it. Difficult at best to engage in a conversation, he certainly had his imperfections as we all do. But before writing about my neighbor when I was growing up along the Hudson River, let me say a bit about his wife, Toshi.

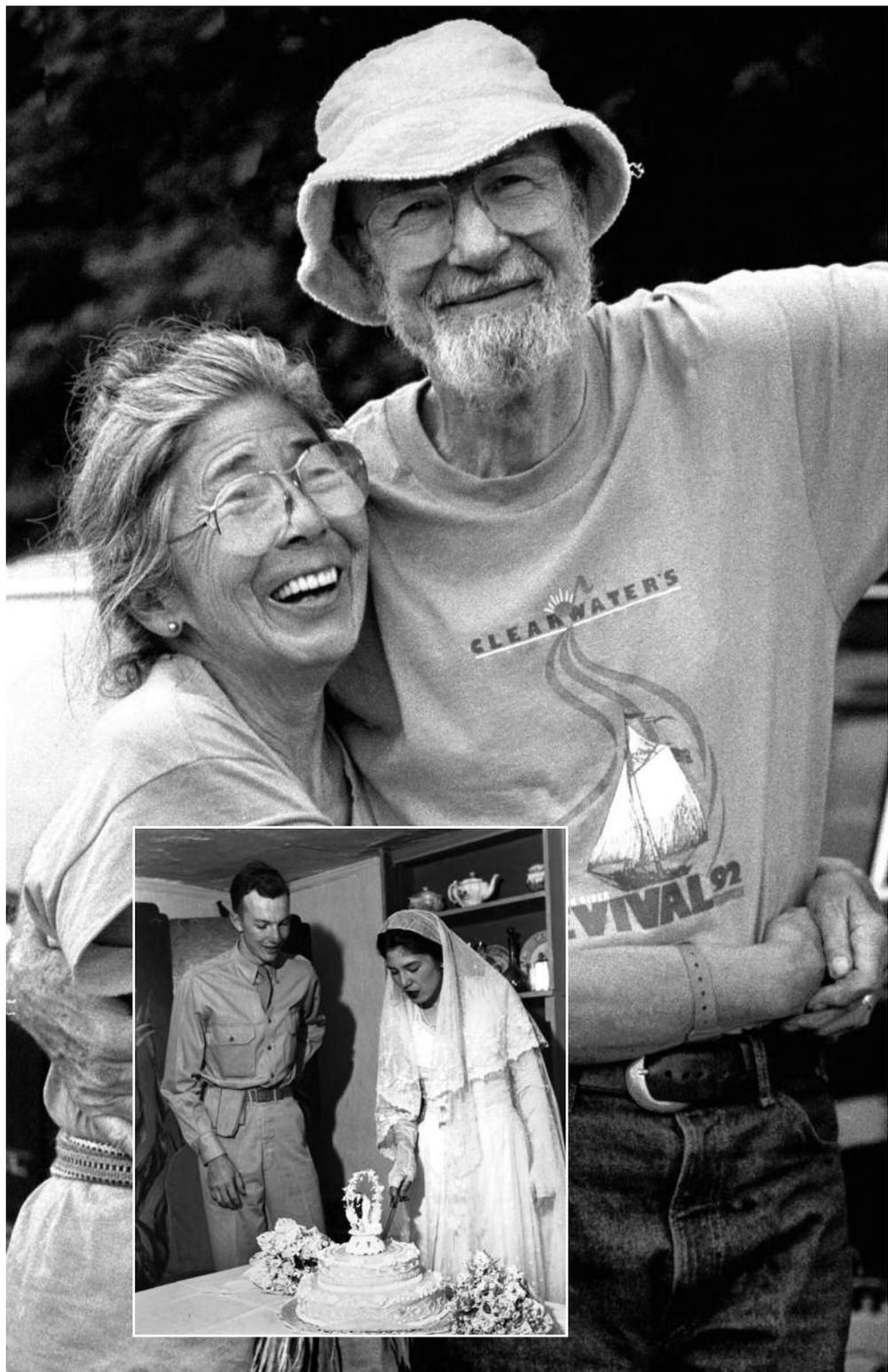
Pete, like many of us, married way above his pay grade. And let me be bold here: without Toshi, there would be no Pete.

She was at his side through every song, every trial, every book, every project, every log he chopped and every child he fathered ... she was there. She was an eye witness to American music history. She knew Woody Guthrie, Paul Robeson and Leadbelly. She marched with Martin Luther King. She heard Bob Dylan perform for the first time at the Newport Folk Festival and she was there when he turned electric. She sat in her kitchen cutting vegetables while Pete and some friends mused about how neat it would be to build a big wooden sloop that would sail the Hudson and bring people to its shore and help clean the river up. And while others rolled their eyes and scoffed, Toshi helped Pete organize the benefits it would take to raise the money and actually build the Clearwater. And she was there when it sailed for the first time.

"I was lucky to hitch on to this extraordinary person."

Pete Seeger

Pete "hitched on" to Toshi at a square dance. Soon enough, he proposed but Pete couldn't afford a ring, so Toshi borrowed money from her grandmother to buy one. Pete was \$3.00 short for the marriage license, so Toshi lent him the money.



Toshi was an artist at heart but her life with Pete turned her into a manager, organizer, visionary, motivator and champion. And she worked hard at it. She navigated the oddities of Pete's thought process and the personalities of his friends. Artists are indeed an odd lot at times. You have to be gentle and tough at the same time. Joan Baez said it best, "... to be married to Pete Seeger a woman would have to be a saint."

... and Toshi wasn't no saint :)

Even married to arguably the biggest folk icon on the planet, Toshi was a humble worker. Instead of taking her position of importance as the queen of Pete's world, Toshi would most likely be seen under a tent in the heat of summer cooking strawberry shortcake in a wood oven and serving it to folks during the Clearwater Sloop Festival. That was where I first met her.

And there's more ...

Back in the 1960's Pete had this idea that going on TV would be a good thing. Since he was blacklisted by virtually every network he might as well have his own TV show. He called up a small public television station in New Jersey, got himself a couple chairs and a picnic table and started his own low budget series he called

"Rainbow Quest." He would sing a song then invite his friends like Doc Watson, Jean Ritchie and others to sit around the table, chat a bit and share some songs. *(Later on, I would enhance the idea ... with Pete's blessing ... add an audience of 500 people every week and called the thing "WoodSongs")*

Pete had some far flung ideas before, but this was different. It took virtually all their savings to pull off, they never found a sponsor and after 39 episodes the show folded after one year.



The amazing Judy Collins with Pete on the Rainbow Quest public television show.

Through it all, Toshi supported, managed, promoted, stood by and plunged forward on behalf of her husband. She was given the title "Chief Cook and Bottle Washer" in the closing credits after each show. Today, *Rainbow Quest* is a genuine treasure-trove of America's finest folk artists of that era and left behind one of the most important and powerful archives of American roots music in history.

But don't get the wrong idea, Toshi had a spine of steel. I remember sitting in their home along the Hudson River in Beacon one evening. In the kitchen was a big bowl full of salad, in the air cosmic conversation and a couple of banjos being passed around. As we were leaving later that evening Pete got up and started washing the dishes. Toshi looked at him, sighed and said, "*You can stop that now, they're leaving.*"

She was always blunt, to the point, never shy about ripping through Pete's veneer but loyal to the bone none-the-less. I liked her, admired her and wished I had someone just like that supporting me.

When I wrote my first book, Toshi and Pete did most of the editing and fact checking. When she read something she didn't like, I surely did hear about it. I saved the manuscript with all their scribbles on it and I could see then what a powerful force Pete had behind him. I could tell she was part of the history he made, a big part. And so in my Woody Guthrie opera I wrote a song about her. Probably the best aria of the whole effort.

Toshi had been sick the past few years of her life, eventually confined to a wheelchair. The last time I talked with Pete and Toshi, we were on the phone for nearly two hours and the American Masters PBS special was brought up. I told Pete one of the things I liked about it was the attention it gave to Toshi and how nice it was to see him doting on her. Pete called out to Toshi and said, "*Michael liked the American Masters film because of how nice it reflected on you!*" Toshi grabbed the phone from Pete and said, "*I was just being a good wife ...*" and then handed the phone back to him.

Classic Toshi.

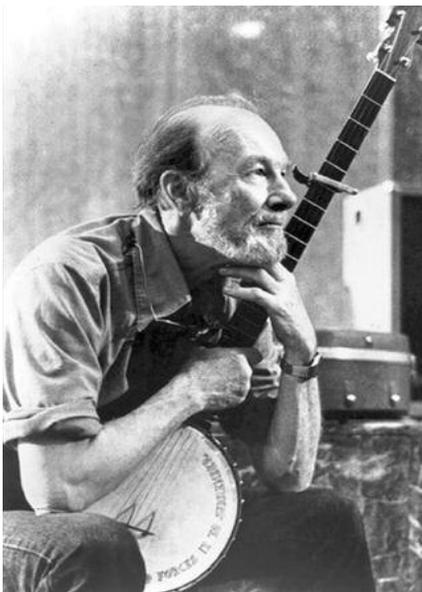
I wonder what it was like for Pete to lose this friend of so many years. I wonder what it is like to watch your soulmate wither with age and leave. I wonder what it's like the next morning to wake and realize she is gone, the space in the bed next to you is empty. The dress she wore, the little items she loved on the book shelf and the children who reflect her life in their eyes are without her spirit and touch. I'm sure, like any couple married for so long, they wondered about this moment. They talked about it, thought about it. Dreaded it. Wondering who would leave first and what it would be like.

"Thanks to my wife Toshi, without whom the world would not turn nor the sun shine. She was the one who steered the boat; she had the chart, she kept off the rocks."

Pete Seeger

And the clock ticked, the sun came up
and the sun came down, the earth turned 'round
and the moment came.

And now it's done.



Pete; Pete & Toshi soon after they married; Pete and Woody at their wedding

Just Pete

**"Aw he just stole from me. But I steal from everybody.
Why, I'm the biggest song stealer there ever was."**

Woody Guthrie

Been having a lot of thoughts about Pete's passing lately. Expected but never expected, you know? It's taken me years to let it all settle in, but here it goes:

Pete was not my musical inspiration ... he was my musical and career exemplar. He was our wood chopping, maple syrup making, protest singing, banjo playing, ship building, song writing, book authoring, album making, concert performing, boat sailing and community involvement friend.

He was America's connection to its own musical legacy. He traveled with Woody Guthrie, archived America's music with John Lomax, helped introduce Dylan and Joan Baez to the world and, with the help of Frank Hamilton, introduced Martin Luther King to a re-worded song called "*We Shall Overcome.*" He sang in Madison Square Garden, concert halls around the world and grammar schools. He would think of nothing, even at 94 years old, to grab his banjo and stand on a cold street corner with protesters for any cause he agreed with.

Pete was banned from American television because of his stand on free speech and affiliations. So in the 1960s he and his wife Toshi took their meager savings ... even famous folkies don't make much ... and convinced a New Jersey PBS station to let him try out a TV series called *Rainbow Quest*.

He had some defined habits: he preferred to respond to fan mail on small, reused pieces of paper or a post card. He would draw a little banjo next to his name, a tribute to his wife's Japanese heritage. He would also glue a small oak or maple leaf to his letters and cards, "*my connection to the earth*" he would claim.

Then of course there was that famous statement he scrolled on his famous banjo.

Pete had this habit of lifting his head upward when he sang. It's an iconic image of him, chin raised high and urging the audience to sing. That put so much pressure on his vocal chords that, as he aged, his voice began to fail him and made it hard for him to sing at all.

I first encountered Pete at the old Grand Union grocery store in Beacon NY. I knew of this neighbor, we all thought he was nuts. Anytime there was a thunderstorm, this old guy who claimed to be a musician but played the banjo, would show up at our school with an axe and chop up the fallen limbs.

Pete was one of a kind.

Right now there are many sincere efforts to "honor" him with various Pete concert tours, tribute albums and more. This book is not intended to be one of them. My friends Rik Palieri and Captain Rick Nestler, both artists who worked alongside and sailed with Pete on the Clearwater, put out an album of Pete's little known maritime sea shanties. Pete would have liked that one.

Others wanted to change the name of the Hudson River to the Seeger River. Pete would rise from the grave and whack those folks over the head with his banjo on that one. Others want to rename a bridge in NYC after him. He would have the same reaction, no doubt.

Others are already laying claim to who will carry his torch



or who his so called heir-apparent might be. All well and good, I suppose. The poor guy deserves to define his own legacy without others siphoning it off or suggesting someone comes close to his passion, music and work. No one does. So let's stop. He deserves better than those with no audience trying to create a career by living in the reflected glory of someone else. It may be well intentioned, but god-awful disgraceful at best.

I'm sure everyone misses Pete and engage in these efforts with good intentions. If you really want to honor Pete, go sing a free concert in a school. Pick up trash along your neighbor's yard. Gather your friends for a front porch sing along. Organize a music festival in a pumpkin patch for a good cause. Volunteer at a homeless shelter and bring your banjo for an after-supper sing.

I think his eyes would twinkle to have a sloop with his name on it, the "Pete" sailing alongside the "Woody" on the Hudson River he loved. They renamed the park in Beacon where the Beacon Sloop Club stands to the *Pete & Toshi Memorial Gardens*, that was nice.

One of the greatest regrets he had was not spending enough time during his younger years with his wife. She gave up many of her own dreams to support his. All of his letters were return addressed to "*Pete & Toshi Seeger*" and he was always thrilled to tell her that some writer or artist was including her in something.

Gonna miss that fellow. A lot. Two days before he passed I got a note from him thanking me for the homemade pasta sauce I sent to him ... can you believe that?



The Maple Tree

Words & Music

©Michael Johnathon/RachelAubreyMusic/BMI

I received a beautiful handmade dulcimer from luthier Warren May, of Berea, KY. My first book was written on the front porch of Jean Ritchie's log cabin and I spent untold hours in the basement workshop of another dulcimer maker, Homer Ledford. Finally having my own dulcimer meant a lot to me. The problem is: I can't play the ding-dang thing. So, I wrote *The Maple Tree* to learn the instrument and played the only song I knew on the mountain dulcimer one time in concert. We tried to capture the song in the recording studio but nothing, not a single take, sounded better than the one time I played the only song I knew on the dulcimer one time.

Here it is, as released on the *Dazed & Confuzed* album.

VERSE

There's a dream that I see of a peace-ful ma-ple
tree; and an oak stands by its side, to-gether those trees re-side
in peace-ful ground, peace-ful ground.

BRIDGE

If we all stand to-gether from sea to shin-ing sea,
then our love grows for-ev-er when we let our an-ger be.

There's a Dream that I see
of a peaceful Maple tree
and an Oak stands by its side
together they reside, on

Peaceful Ground,
Peaceful Ground

And there's a Eagle in the sky
in the clouds that Eagle flies
and a Sparrow in the air
together those birds
will share

Peaceful skies,
Peaceful Skies

if we all **STAND** together
from the **SEA** shining sea
Our love grows forever
when we let our anger be

But there's a man on the the Right
ready to start a fight
with another man on the left
convinced his Left is Right
so they Fight ...



The Mystery of **Music *&* Marriage**

I've been dwelling on a conversation I had with the great Doyle Lawson a couple of weeks ago. He was telling me about the intensity he feels during the recording process, writing and arranging songs. He said during that time his wife will field all the phone calls and tell everybody that, "*Doyle is writing in his head right now.*"



Writing in your head ... that's exactly what it's like. Your body is present, you're sitting in your chair, you're face to face with your partner, but your brain is two weeks in front of you as you are arranging songs for the recording in your head. It's virtually nonstop until you get it done.

And to an artist, a songwriter and performer, that recording is as much a part of your personal legacy as your marriage and your children are. That may not make sense to your partner, but to a musician and songwriter it is as intense as bringing up a child that you love dearly.

If I recall it was James Taylor who said, *“writing a song for your lover is the surest way to end a relationship.”* What he was saying was that the isolation of art can make your partner feel alienated, as though you’re not paying attention to them or that you don’t care.

Another famous artist friend told me once that the worst thing you can do is to take your partner on tour with you. The reason is because you’re there to work, your partner is there for you. When you perform two hours one night and have to drive six hours the next day to do it again, you’re not going to be inclined to talk that much because you’re saving your voice. On the other hand, your partner is there for you, and they feel like you are ignoring them.

It can cause hurt feelings and unnecessary arguments. Couples can get downright harsh with each other. I hate yelling and being yelled at. It does us all good to heed the words of Haviz:

“The words you speak become the house you live in.”

It’s a dilemma, and I think all performing artists need to take special care of communicating with your partner so they understand what is going on. When you make your living at this, especially if you are the sole provider for your family and they depend on your art to provide for them, it can be a clash of good intentions.

Pete Seeger lamented often that his life of an artist robbed his wife of opportunities she could have pursued. Toshi was very proud of Pete and loved helping him and supporting him, but she had to be willing to sacrifice his focus and attention on her, as he worked to become the legend that we all appreciate now.

I really appreciated Doyle’s expressions, and especially the understanding of his wife. We make a living writing in our head,

... an odd but wonderful way of life.



On the Road: 101

HOW to CANCEL a Hotel Room

Me:

Hello hotel, I need to cancel the room tonight.

Hotel:

**Sir, there is a 24 hour cancellation policy,
we are still charging you full price.**

Me:

**Really? Well, can I at least change
the reservation to next Monday?**

Hotel:

**Of course ... there you are,
all set for next Monday**

Me:

**Thank you ... since Monday is three days from now
can I cancel the room?**

Hotel:

um uh well, I guess you can.

Me:

**Good, cancel the room.
Thank you for your help!**