



# Entertainment

[Apps](#)
[Home](#) | [Movies](#) | [Television](#) | [Books](#) | [Music](#) | [Populist](#) | [Video Games](#) | [Photos](#) | [Sports](#)


## REMEMBRANCE

# Arlo Guthrie Remembers Pete Seeger: “He Would Just Wave His Hand, and You Could Hear People Singing”

The iconic folk singer shares memories of his colleague and friend

By [TIME Staff](#) | Jan. 30, 2014 | [7 Comments](#)

When [Pete Seeger](#) died on Jan. 27 at the age of 94, the world lost more than a folksinger, more than a songwriter, more than a moral leader who gave a soundtrack to social causes for three generations. We lost an artist who was uniquely American, the product of a musical tradition that was passed down by hand. Seeger took the torch from musical greats like Woody Guthrie and passed them down to a new generation of musical legends, including [Bruce Springsteen](#), John Mellencamp and Woody's son Arlo, with whom Seeger played for 50 years.

Arlo Guthrie, a folk legend in his own right, spoke with TIME about his friend and music partner who inspired generations with his music and activism.



AP Photo

Folksingers Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger during a memorial service for actor Will Geer in New York City on May 12, 1978

**TIME: Can you tell us about the first time you met Pete Seeger?**

Guthrie: I could if I could remember, but I was just a little kid, probably about 3 or 4 years old. I really have no actual date or time in my mind I can go back to and say, “This is when I actually met him.” My father had entered into the hospital part of his life in the mid 50s, which was about the same time I probably met Pete. My mother had introduced me to a lot of my father's friends because she believed that I would get to know the guy my dad was better through his friends than just in the hospital visits.

When I thought about this later on in life, I realized that Pete and my father and that crowd of people that included Lead Belly, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee — all of these guys had grown up before recorded music. The songs that they knew circulated by word of mouth, not by radio or by records or any electronic media. They were handed down from one person to another, from generation to generation. It was not the kind of music you could take a course on; you couldn't get a degree in it. Nobody went to school for it. It was the kind of music you heard around the campfire or hanging out with friends. It was very different from the music we were hearing on the radio.

**What was it like to play with him?**

Probably around 1968, when I was around 18, we did a concert together at Carnegie Hall. That is a tradition we continued, pretty much up until last November. Every year for about 30 years Pete and I had a regularly scheduled show the

## RELATED

Why Pete Seeger Mattered: The Pied Piper of the People's Music

Songs of Peace and Protest: 6 Essential Cuts From Pete Seeger

Folk Musician Pete Seeger, As Remembered By His Goddaughter *NPR*

Remembering Pete Seeger, 94, who made music to unite people *PBS*

Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving. We took over that tradition about a decade ago without Pete, but every once in a while he said that he wanted to come and play.

I remember watching how he handled the audience. I wouldn't have used the words master in those days, but he had an authority over the audience that allowed them to relax and sing along with him. My eyes just opened up and I couldn't believe what was happening in front of me. He would just wave his hand, and you could hear people singing. Of course over the decades that I worked with him, I began to realize that this isn't something you're born with; it's something you can learn. Other people have learned how to do that from him over the years. Anyone who has ever seen him knows what I'm saying, and someone who has not will find it hard to believe. It was almost as if he had some extra sense that allowed that kind of response. There's no one else I have ever seen in my life that has had that, on any country, on any continent or in any city. Nobody came close.

***He was well known for his banjo playing, but he also played the guitar very well. Did he have a favorite instrument?***

It was whatever allowed the accompaniment to sound in the way he wanted. He also was a wonderful player of the recorder. There were moments in the concerts we did where he would play some Native American tune or an Irish tune, and you could hear a pin drop in a crowd that would fill some of these larger venues. You couldn't hear a thing but this wafting air from that flute-like instrument, and it was just magic.

In later years he began to have difficulty singing. About 10 years ago, he must have been in his 80s, he said to me, "Arlo, I can't do those big shows with you anymore. I can't sing like I used to sing. I can't play like I used to play." I just looked at him and I said, "Pete, look at our audience. They can't hear like they used to hear. It shouldn't be a problem." And he laughed and he said, "Maybe you're right." And every once in a while he would keep coming out, and that's where he would transfer his own voice and say, "I can't sing anymore, but you can sing." And he would lead everybody in these songs. Those were wonderful times.

***How did Pete approach writing songs?***

He was the kind of songwriter who could remember a tune or a song that he'd heard somewhere in life, and he had a catalogue of hundreds of thousands of songs. I don't know where the ones that he wrote came from, but I know that he had an awful lot to draw on that was part of his knowledge. He was quite a music scholar. Whenever I wanted information on a song, Pete was the first guy to go to: "where did this tune come from?" or "what about these lyrics?" and he'd say, "You know back in 1782, there was a guy..." and he'd know the names of the people who wrote the songs and where the songs originated. He was fascinated by it and it was natural for him. Every once in a while, as the occasion permitted or demanded, he would just come up with lyrics, write something and try it out.

***Did you have a favorite Pete Seeger song?***

Not really, although if I did, it probably wouldn't be one of his most well known songs. He wrote some really hauntingly beautiful melodies. I've recorded some of the ones I always loved. And like any musician, he had songs and melodies that were important to *him*, but he didn't think were for the public, and he would sing those and play those, either backstage or just goofing off with other people. There was a song called "Melody of Love," and he just loved playing it. It felt good to play. There were songs like that that were part of our relationship that were never public.

***Off the stage, what was it like to be in a room with Pete?***

It was funny. I remember one time we went to play this venue Wolf Trap outside of Washington, D.C., which is one of these big, shed-type venues. We went downstairs to the dressing rooms before the sound check and there was food backstage, and there was a big chocolate cake sitting on the table. Pete he cut what I thought was a fairly reasonably sized piece of cake, then he left the piece and took the rest of the cake into the dressing room. He came out 20 minutes later with a big smile on his face, and he looked around and said, "Anyone want that last piece of cake?" His wife was yelling, "You can't do that." It was very funny.

Just recently he had gone into the hospital for some surgery. His kids called and asked if there was something I could do. I said, "Buy him a cake." They were brought up to eat very healthy, so the Guthrie family sent a chocolate cake to Pete. Because at 84, who the hell cares? The man needs cake. After the surgery, his family went out and bought him another cake. It was not a very good idea to get between Pete and a cake, and no one ever did.

***He has been noted for his heroism, standing up to the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955, especially when we look back on that episode with some distance. But at the time, it must have been a frightening experience to be hauled before Congress, refuse to testify and be held in contempt and nearly imprisoned. Did he ever talk about that time?***

Not really to me personally. I was with him on occasions when reporters would bring that up. I have to tell you, though, just two days ago, somebody posted a release from the Kennedy Library of a letter I had written to President Kennedy about Pete. I have no memory of it; I must have been 13 or 14 years old. I said something like, "Dear Mr. President, do what you can for my buddy Pete." So I was aware of it at the time, but I don't remember him really talking about it very much.

I'm sure he didn't look forward to those kinds of confrontations because he wasn't a confrontational guy. But he would not back down, either. He wasn't looking for trouble, but he wasn't purposely avoiding it.

***What do you think drove his lifelong effort for his many causes and convictions?***

Pete had a real vision of what the country was about. He came from a long line of Puritan stock. His family had been in the country a very, very long time, and he had a sense of history. He wasn't just a scholar of music; he was also a political scholar and a historical scholar. He loved the idealism of a nation founded on the principles he thought were important, and he spread that wherever he went.

I think to be asked about his religion, or about his beliefs, or about his political thoughts, was such an insult to him, because it was insulting to every American. He had a way of taking these personal events in his life and moving them forward so that they included everyone. If it had just affected him, he wouldn't have said anything; he wouldn't have written about it; he wouldn't have made a big deal. But because it affected everyone, he was involved. I think that's one of the things that motivated him about the environment, the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement. Sometimes he was right; sometimes he was wrong, but he was right most of the time. And he set out to make the country in what he imagined it was meant to be, what it could be. Whatever was going on, he was there because he had a sense of how it impacted everyone. It was not just personal. It was America.

***He said something wonderful a few years ago: "My job is to show folks there's a lot of good music in this world, and if used right it may help to save the planet." That seems to perfectly capture what he did with his life.***

He really believed that the more people do things together, the quicker you can get things done. That is not a concept he invented; that's a concept the United States invented. That's why it's called the United States. These commonwealths or provinces didn't stand a chance against the big economies of the world. But together, they could do incredible things. Of course that's history, but you have to apply that. So his fight for unions did not arise from some ideology. He saw that as being American.

A lot of people ascribe political reasons to his becoming involved in different causes, but they were bigger than that. They were not an ideology; they were part of his soul, and part of the American soul.

***What will be the lasting legacy of Pete Seeger?***

I think it's too soon to tell, but I think for me personally it is the incredible feelings that can change a moment in time when people sing. When people voice their opinions together in song, or at a meeting, or in a congress, there are moments that change everything. I remember walking down the street with Pete and half a million other people at the rallies in the 60s and the empowerment that people felt singing together, walking together, standing side-by-side. It changed my life, and it changed everyone's life who was there, whether they became singers or writers or insurance brokers. Whatever they did in life, those feelings remain an integral part of who they are. They know what's possible because they were there to feel it. That is the legacy Pete leaves me personally.

22