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Celebrating Seeger's enduring legacy

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The Pete Seeger concert earlier this week that sold out Madison Square Garden felt more like a reunion than a concert.

It celebrated the life of a man whose commercial success never included filling 20,000-seat stadiums. Yet he sold out in about an hour, helped along with the likes of Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp, Emmylou Harris, Joan Baez and more than 30 other artists singing with him. The event was a benefit for the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, which Seeger had built 40 years ago in the belief that education would clean up the river. And it did.

It was Seeger's 90th birthday celebration, and, in a country that normally has these things after you die, especially gratifying. It also was a celebration of the triumph of the racial, environmental, feminist and political causes that drove the 1960s era, culminating in the election of Barack Obama. As Bruce Springsteen said, "Pete Seeger represents the power of song to nudge history. . . . Behind his grandfatherly appearance is a stubborn, defiant and nasty optimism."

The concert chronicled the folk singer's beginnings in the labor movement in songs that recalled the company "finks and goons" who used to crack heads to break the union. They were "in your face" songs like, "Which Side Are You On?" and "I'm Sticking with the Union," sung by artists whose enthusiasm overcame voices well past their prime. After a stint in the U.S. Army during World War II, Seeger married his wife of 66 years, Toshi, and resumed his single-minded pursuit of what Obama now calls, "The Battles of the '60s," for worker rights, economic fairness, racial equality, the environment and peace.

Most striking for those who lived through that era listening to the songs is their timelessness. The great ones, like "Kisses Sweeter than Wine," or "Blowin' in the Wind," conjured up the universal themes of love, unity and beauty, which is why, 35 years after the Vietnam War ended, they endure. The concert sometimes felt like a group hug, especially when the entire stadium sang along with "We Shall Overcome," a labor song that Seeger adapted for the civil rights movement embraced by Martin Luther King Jr.

But while the film on Seeger made much of his anti-war activism, showing a 2003 picture of him at 84 holding up a sign opposing the war in Iraq, he was no pacifist. In fact, he wrote a song to Franklin Roosevelt called, "Dear Mr. President":

"So Mr. President, we've got this one big job to do,

That's lick Mr. Hitler and when we're through,

Let no one else ever take his place,

To trample down the human race.

So what I want is you to give me a gun,

So we can hurry up and get the job done."

Nearly all of the older artists sounded different from their youth, with one exception. Richie Havens, wearing a smock and a long gray beard, looked like a biblical prophet and sang "Freedom" exactly as he did at Woodstock in 1969. The stadium erupted, giving him a standing ovation. Many performers, and there were 40 of them of all generations on that stage, spoke of the impact Pete Seeger had on their lives. Dave Matthews recalled his very first concert as a child growing up in Croton-on-Hudson. His mother took him to see Pete Seeger.

And Roger McGuinn of The Byrds sang the song written by Seeger that made them a huge hit, "Turn, Turn, Turn." A highlight of the evening occurred when those on stage, including Oscar the Grouch, sang Seeger's "Garbage, Garbage, Garbage," which denounced the waste and emptiness of consumerism, "We're filling up the sky with garbage. . . ." But some of the lyrics sounded prescient, for a song written so long ago:

"What will they do when their system goes to smash

There's no value to their cash

There's no money to be made

But there's a world to be repaid

Their kids will read in history books

About financiers and other crooks

And feudalism, and slavery

And nukes and all their knavery

To history's dustbin they're consigned

Along with many other kinds of garbage."

There were hints that Seeger's life of activism came at a personal price, beyond his blacklisting for more than a decade. A film about his life spoke of his children as having a "visiting father," and none of his children appeared on stage. His wife Toshi was quoted in the film as saying, "If only Pete chased women instead of causes, I'd have an excuse to leave him."

Arlo Guthrie said Seeger "believed in the power of songs to change the world." And, in fact, maybe they did. Springsteen recalled sitting with Seeger at the inauguration and the folk singer/activist was smiling as he looked at the nation's first black president.

"It was like, Pete, you outlasted all those bastards."

Ultimately, the Pete Seeger Birthday Concert celebrated a life well-lived. Perhaps Seeger's greatest legacy is that long after other artists burned out when they lost the gifts of youth, Seeger continued to find meaning and happiness throughout his life. And seeing him made everyone who attended his 90th birthday happy, as well.

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