

Pete Seeger in Oregon

By Michael Munk

Between 1941 and 1995, folksinger and composer Pete Seeger made as many as seventeen visits to Oregon. His sponsors, venues, and themes reflect the changing political and cultural conditions that both launched his career and limited it for many years until he emerged as a national cultural hero at President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009.

Seeger first came to Oregon with Woody Guthrie in September 1941, a time when their Almanac singers tour group was boosting the organizing drive of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO). Appropriately, the two sang at union halls, where they probably performed "Talking Union," which Seeger wrote with Millard Lampell and Lee Hays, and "Union Maid," written by Guthrie and Seeger with Lampell.

Following service in the U.S. Army in World War II, Seeger, who had become a member of the Communist Party in 1942, founded Peoples Songs to "create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people." In 1948, Portland Peoples Songs sponsored a concert with Seeger and Earl "Joe Hill" Robinson at Reed College in Portland. Seeger left the Communist Party in 1949.

During the McCarthy Era, Peoples Songs was disbanded, and the Weavers, Seeger's popular quartet, was blacklisted. Seeger himself was blacklisted from performing on television and radio, as well as commercial concert venues. He turned to college groups for his concerts, along with a few churches and other noncommercial sponsors. In Oregon, he performed five concerts at Reed College between 1954 and 1958, sponsored by FOCUS, a leftist student group. In 1959, the student-run Portland State College Arts Festival sponsored Seeger for two concerts on consecutive nights; for the first time, the local press reviewed his concerts.

During the 1960s, the civil rights and antiwar movements welcomed Seeger and other folk musicians as allies. His next concert in Portland was in 1962, when he filled Reed's largest auditorium and was sponsored by the college's Music Board. On July 10, 1965, he performed at Portland's Civic Auditorium in the "Freedom Concert," an event supporting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Seeger did not return to Portland until March 1971, when he reportedly "mesmerized some 1,500 devotees" in Portland State University's Smith Memorial Center Ballroom. A party after the concert was a benefit for the Black Panthers Party's Fred Hampton Health Clinic.

Most of Seeger's other concerts in Oregon were benefits for popular causes. In July 1971, for example, Seeger gave his first and only outdoor concert in Oregon in Portland's Washington Park, a benefit for the Multnomah County Community Action Agency and the Community Coordinated Child Care Council Program. "The sun's rays shimmered down on a couple of thousand bodies," the *Oregonian* reported, "and Pete was at his best. He says he loves Oregon, that there's still some unspoiled beauty left here."

In March 1982, Seeger performed a benefit concert for the Oregon Citizen's Party, the Oregon Environmental Council, and the McKenzie River Gathering. A sold-out crowd filled the Benson High School Auditorium in Portland. He drew his largest audience in 1986 when he sang with Arlo Guthrie before a full and diverse house at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in Portland to benefit the World Music Foundation.

Seeger's last concert in Oregon was in April 1993, a benefit for the Northwest Tree Planters and Farm Workers United (PCUN) at Benson High School Auditorium. He returned to the state for the last time in 1995 to accept the first lifetime achievement award from the Folk Alliance International at its annual convention in Portland.

Sources

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