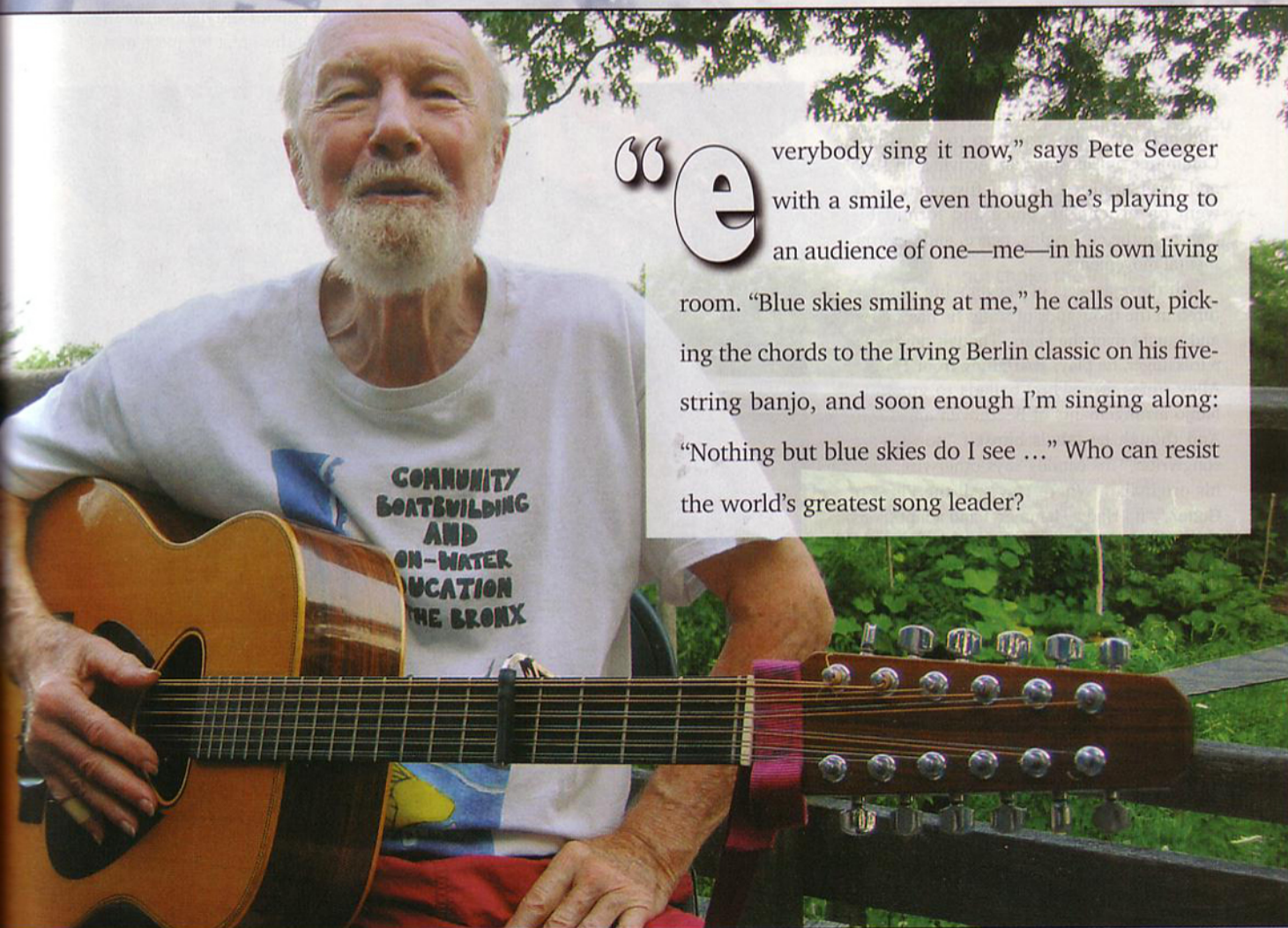


seeger session

Bruce Springsteen's big-band folk extravaganza, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, shone a bright spotlight on **pete seeger** as an interpreter and popularizer of traditional songs. In an in-depth interview at his home, with banjo and guitar in hand, Seeger shared the stories behind those songs—and much more.



“e verybody sing it now,” says Pete Seeger with a smile, even though he’s playing to an audience of one—me—in his own living room. “Blue skies smiling at me,” he calls out, picking the chords to the Irving Berlin classic on his five-string banjo, and soon enough I’m singing along: “Nothing but blue skies do I see ...” Who can resist the world’s greatest song leader?

by jeffrey pepper rogers

pete seeger

At 87, Seeger relies on others to carry the tunes that his own voice no longer holds so well, but he remains remarkably vigorous. Up since 4:30 on the morning of my visit, he spent the dawn hours working on a new postscript to his autobiography/songbook, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, and scheming a sequel to his song "We'll All Be A-Doubling," about population growth. "Can we keep doubling forever? Of course not," Seeger says. "All we know is that if we don't do something, we are in trouble. And if we don't admit that," he adds, his voice suddenly surging, "we are a bunch of f---ers who just want to make money and don't care what happens to our grandchildren!" The archetypal protest singer has lost none of his fire.

It's humbling to sit in the home of Pete Seeger, high above the Hudson River in Beacon, New York, and consider the range of his contributions to music and American life. This is a man who collected songs with Alan Lomax in the 1930s, traveled with Woody Guthrie in the '40s, and carried folk music to the top of the charts with the Weavers in the '50s; who laid the foundation for modern lesson books with *How to Play the Five-String Banjo* (and even coined the terms *hammer-on* and *pull-off*); who stood up to the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1955 and was blacklisted for his leftist politics, but went on to lend his voice and formidable energy to the civil rights, peace, and environmental movements.

All these aspects of Seeger's life are captured in the thousands of songs he has shared and taught over the years. Though nominally a folksinger, he plays everything from Tin Pan Alley tunes to cowboy ballads to gorgeous banjo arrangements of Beethoven and Bach. And though he labels himself "not a good songwriter," his catalog says otherwise; both his originals ("Where Have All the Flowers Gone?," "If I Had a Hammer") and adaptations ("The Bells of Rhymney," "Turn! Turn! Turn!") have left an indelible mark.

None of these famous songs, however, figure into the project that has brought so much media attention to Seeger in the last year: Bruce Springsteen's *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, on which the Boss revisited mostly traditional tunes from the vast Seeger songbook. Who woulda thunk that 2006 would see arenas full of fans singing "Froggie Went A Courtin'" and "Jesse James" and boogying to a 17-piece folk/gospel/Dixieland band led by an icon of rock 'n' roll? Certainly not Seeger himself, who feels he should have been credited in Springsteen's liner notes, not the CD title, and wishes the Boss had included a more serious political song (a wish that came true, belatedly, with an expanded *American Land Edition* CD/DVD set that featured

Seeger's Vietnam-era "Bring 'Em Home"). The *Seeger Sessions* project served as a springboard for a nearly five-hour conversation with Seeger, on a muggy summer day at the rustic compound where he lives with his wife, Toshi, and where he first built a log cabin 57 years ago.

I'd like to ask about your memories of some specific songs on the Springsteen CD.

SEEGER I was always curious about songs. You know, I recorded about 60 LPs for Folkways in a ten-year period. If you figure you can get ten songs on an LP at least, that's 600 songs! I got started through Alan Lomax, and I'd like to give him credit for starting the folksong revival. As a teenager, he said to his father [John Lomax], "I want to carry on your work." He was full of ambition. And his father got him appointed at age 22 to be in charge of the Archive of American Folk Song. He was called the "acting curator" because he'd graduated from college but didn't have a PhD. Well, Alan, with the confidence and energy of youth, did more in six years than the average person would do in a lifetime.

How would you describe your work for the Archive?

SEEGER Through Alan Lomax I learned hundreds of songs. He had me listening to all the banjo records that I could find in the Library of Congress, and by the time I got through [song] I just had to learn it. There wasn't anybody in Washington who could teach me, so I started hitchhiking through the country in 1940. By the time I got back I was a halfway good banjo picker because I'd learn one trick from one person and another trick from another person.

You once wrote about "John Henry" that "a good song is like a basketball backboard bouncing back new meanings as it reflects one's changing life." What does "John Henry," about the steel-driving man racing the steam drill, mean to you now?

SEEGER When I first heard it, I just thought it was a strong man beating the machine. The later on I saw the bawdy verses: this man's sitting in the ground and right between his crotch he's holding this great big piece of steel.



But as I'm now 87 years old, the tragedy, I confess, hits me more—of the machine doing a lot of bad things for the human race. Whenever I sing in schools I say, "Don't let the machine tell you what you want to do with your life." Maybe a machine can do it quicker and cheaper, but can it really do it as well as you can? I whittled a little chain, and I hang it above the bed where Toshi and I sleep; it has two hearts at each end. A machine wouldn't do that. If the human race survives, we will learn when to say no to the machine. You might say I'm anti-machine, almost. I use 'em—I drive a car. On the other

Beginner's Tip: Start with "Freight Train"

"If I was writing my banjo book over again," Seeger says, "I would start with single strings, not with chords. As a matter of fact, I think maybe guitar too: I would urge people, don't just go bass-plunk bass-plunk bass-plunk; start with Libba Cotten's fingerpicking style. Libba was so good at it. She didn't try many fancy tunes, but what she played she played so perfectly."

hand, I love to bicycle, and I'm glad to see bicycles coming back all around the world.

The Springsteen CD has brought some unlikely songs back into circulation—like "Old Dan Tucker."

SEEGER Oh, Bruce did a good job on that song. I think Daniel Emmett would have been proud. Dan Emmett, you know, was a great songwriter. He also wrote "Dixie," in 1850. "Old Dan Tucker" was the hit song of 1844, and there were parodies of it. There was an abolitionist group of singers in New England who sang, "Roll it along through the nation / Freedom's car, emancipation."

Since "Dan Tucker" comes out of the minstrel tradition, did you edit out offensive lyrics when creating your version?

SEEGER That's right. They had what they called "darkie dialect." This probably is the only way they could get away with singing these songs, because slaves were looked down on so much. I cut out the foolish racist dialogue and sang ordinary American like I know it.

Springsteen arranged two songs into minor keys that you play in major keys: "O Mary Don't You Weep" and "Mrs. McGrath." Since many traditional songs were originally

sung unaccompanied, aren't they wide open to interpretation when it comes to adding chords?

SEEGER You're quite right. Often in African-American songs, the third of the scale (and quite often the seventh) is flatted. So if you're not careful you might play that song in minor, but it's a mistake: you should play it in major, sing it in minor.

I would argue with Bruce about [the keys of] some of these songs. [Sings] "Mrs. McGrath," the sergeant said, 'Would you like to make a soldier out of your son Ted?' No, that's a major song. However, I'll leave it up to Bruce. My father [Charles], the old musicologist, said, "Don't bother arguing, is it authentic or not, is it folk song or not? Just know that the folk process has been going on for thousands of years and occurs in every field."

When you arrange a song like "Jacob's Ladder," which you play in 12/8 time, are you anticipating what it'll be like to lead an audience?

SEEGER Exactly. I'm trying to get a crowd singing it, and I play 12 notes every measure with my thumb. In the songbooks they usually print it in 3/4 time. I have no proof, but I'm sure that there were times when black people sang it in 4/4 time.

Without strings,
I am silent...

But my best songwriting of the year 1973 was thinking of three words for the last line ["brothers, sisters, all"]. Back in the 19th century, when this was first sung by Methodists and Baptists and Lord knows what other Christian groups, they sang "soldiers of the cross." But I wanted to sing it for everybody. I didn't want to take it away from Christians, but I wanted to reach out to whoever was listening, whether they thought of themselves as atheists or Unitarians or Jews or Baha'is or Buddhists. I sing for them all.

Like "We Shall Overcome," "Eyes on the Prize" has deep associations with the civil rights movement, but seems to apply to any sort of struggle.

SEEGER Yeah—what's the prize? It doesn't say what the prize is, and that, to my mind, is the best thing about the song. At age 87, I am wary of the word *the*. Because most of us go through life, "Oh, that's *the* way to make that recipe. That is *the* revolution, that is *the* Savior, *the* this, *the* that." We fool ourselves.

The prize right now is getting rid of Jim Crow. The prize later on may be being able to say no to money, which we don't know what to do with.

I understand that "Pay Me My Money Down" inspired your guitar instrumental "Living in the Country." What's the connection?

SEEGER Oh, that's an amusing story. There was a famous painter, an early 20th-century American, named Maxfield Parish. He would paint romantic scenes of the sunset light shining on a rocky slope, and a beautiful maiden in flimsy garments stretched out. He made a lot of money with his romantic paintings and bought a place in the Georgia Sea Islands. They're a strip of sandy islands that for years were just inhabited by African Americans, descendents of slaves. That's where the song "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore" came from: They had to row a boat to the mainland to buy groceries, because out on this little sandy strip they didn't have any towns.

Lydia Parish, Maxfield's wife, loved to listen to the singing of the African Americans there and put out a beautiful book called *Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. "Pay Me My Money Down" was one of the songs. The melody is an African-American version of one of the most famous old English sea shanties, "Blow the Man Down," and once again, they made it into 4/4 instead of 6/8 time. Well, my sister [Peggy] was singing it with me one night over there in that log cabin, and I was fooling around on the guitar. Son of a gun, I had a new song ["Living in the

Country"] at the end of the week. Leo Kottke plays it extremely fast.

I tried for years to make words to it, but failed. However, Frank Hamilton made a beautiful high [countermelody], and I made up words to that: "If you would be patient and teach me, I think that I could learn to dance / Who knows, who knows? We might improvise." Good words, if I say so myself.

You whistle a melody in that song too.

SEEGER Oh yes, I whistle in 3 time; 3 against 2 is not so widely used in this part of the world, but in Latin America it's standard. With all sorts of songs, you'll have one guitar playing 1-2-3, 1-2-3, and the other will play 1-2, 1-2. It's a lot of fun, 3 against 2. Some people get so expert at it they can do 3 against 4—that's a little more difficult.

"Erie Canal" sounds like an old work song, but it was originally composed and sold as sheet music. Do you see a difference between commercial songwriting and any other kind of song?

SEEGER No, there's a blend all the time. My father explained pop music this way: He said, thousands of years ago, when our ancestors lived in tribes, there was one kind of music in the tribe. All the men knew the same warrior



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pete seeger

songs and the same hunting songs, and all the women knew the same lullabies. Then clever people discovered agriculture—how to herd sheep, how to grow grain—and now there were two classes of people: You had a class of people that owned land, another class of people that worked the land. And then cities developed, and you had a class of people that lived in the cities, and they were a middle class. This is within the last five or ten thousand years, depending on what part of the world you are. But the ruling class had music made for them. So expert musicians made expert music in the castles, and it led to symphony orchestras in the 18th century in the castles.

Out in the country, people played their old music like they'd always played it, just by ear, and it didn't change that much—somebody might make a new song occasionally. But in the cities, musicians found that they could pick up coins in the marketplace, and this was the first pop music. And pop music has throughout the ages changed more rapidly than either fine arts music or folk music. It has borrowed a melody from the castle, or a melody from the countryside.

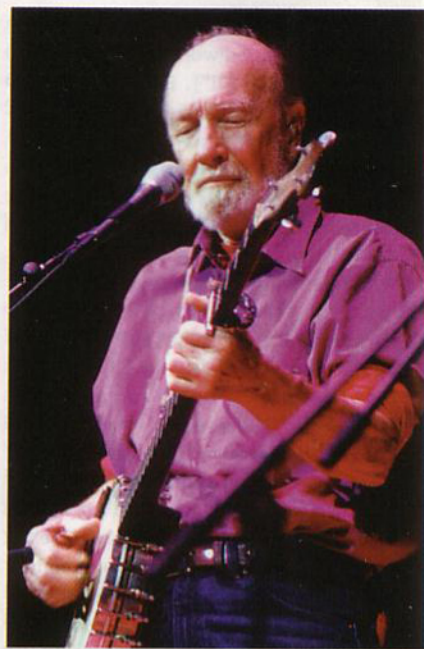
You do "Shenandoah" with just a hint of banjo accompaniment—it's almost a cappella.

SEEGER It's interesting that that song is so famous, and the words don't make that much sense. What's a sailor singing about the wide Missouri for? I think it's because the song was first made up by the French trappers, the voya-

"Don't think that you can improve on the old version just automatically. You can try, but be willing to say maybe you didn't do as good a job."

geurs, who went a thousand miles west of Quebec to get furs to ship back to Europe. The voyagers made canoes and paddled across the Great Lakes and down the rivers, and they got as far as St. Louis. Think of it: St. Louis, and Louisville, Kentucky, named after their king. I bet some voyagers made up that song, "across the wide Missouri."

Well, the same young men who were voyagers got jobs on sailing ships, and pretty soon they'd made a sea shanty out of it, because it had such a beautiful melody. I've heard some Caribbean versions that are very different. It can be sung with rhythm or with no rhythm, high, low. I can't remember how Bruce did it—I only heard his record once.



His version is odd: it's basically in 3/4 time, but then he throws in a few irregular measures. It's such a free-flowing melody that I guess you can divide the time however you want.

SEEGER I think that you're right. The free-flowing melody can encourage people to enlarge or change any particular element. So Bruce used the folk process.

I'm putting two or three pages in my new book urging people: Don't think that you can improve on the old version just automatically. You can try, but be willing to say maybe you didn't do as good a job. There have been times that I've changed songs and gone back and said, "No, I like it better the original way."

You might consider that our ancestors' music was often very sacred to them. My nephew, Dr. Anthony Seeger, is an ethnomusicologist, and for several years he was in charge of the folk song archive of the University of Indiana. A tape arrives from Australia, completely sealed with sealing wax, and says,

Seeger on CD

Curious about Springsteen's source material for the *Seeger Sessions* CD? Check out Pete Seeger's four-volume *American Favorite Ballads* (Smithsonian Folkways, www.folkways.si.edu), a treasure chest of traditional songs recorded in the 1950s and '60s. For a broader view of Seeger's music, try *Darling Corey* and *Goofing-Off Suite* (Smithsonian Folkways), a reissue of two classic '50s albums featuring great trad tunes and some of Seeger's best banjo playing.

pete seeger

"Dear Dr. Seeger: You are not supposed to listen to this tape, nor is anybody else. But please deposit it, because at some time in the future, whether ten years or 100 years or 200 years from now, if somebody comes with written proof that they are a descendent of the such-and-such tribe in Australia, they will be allowed to listen to it. We are recording it so that they can know how the song is correctly sung."

You've been active in so many spheres as a musician: writing, arranging, and adapting songs, recording, performing, teaching. Looking back, is there a particular aspect of your life in music that makes you the proudest?

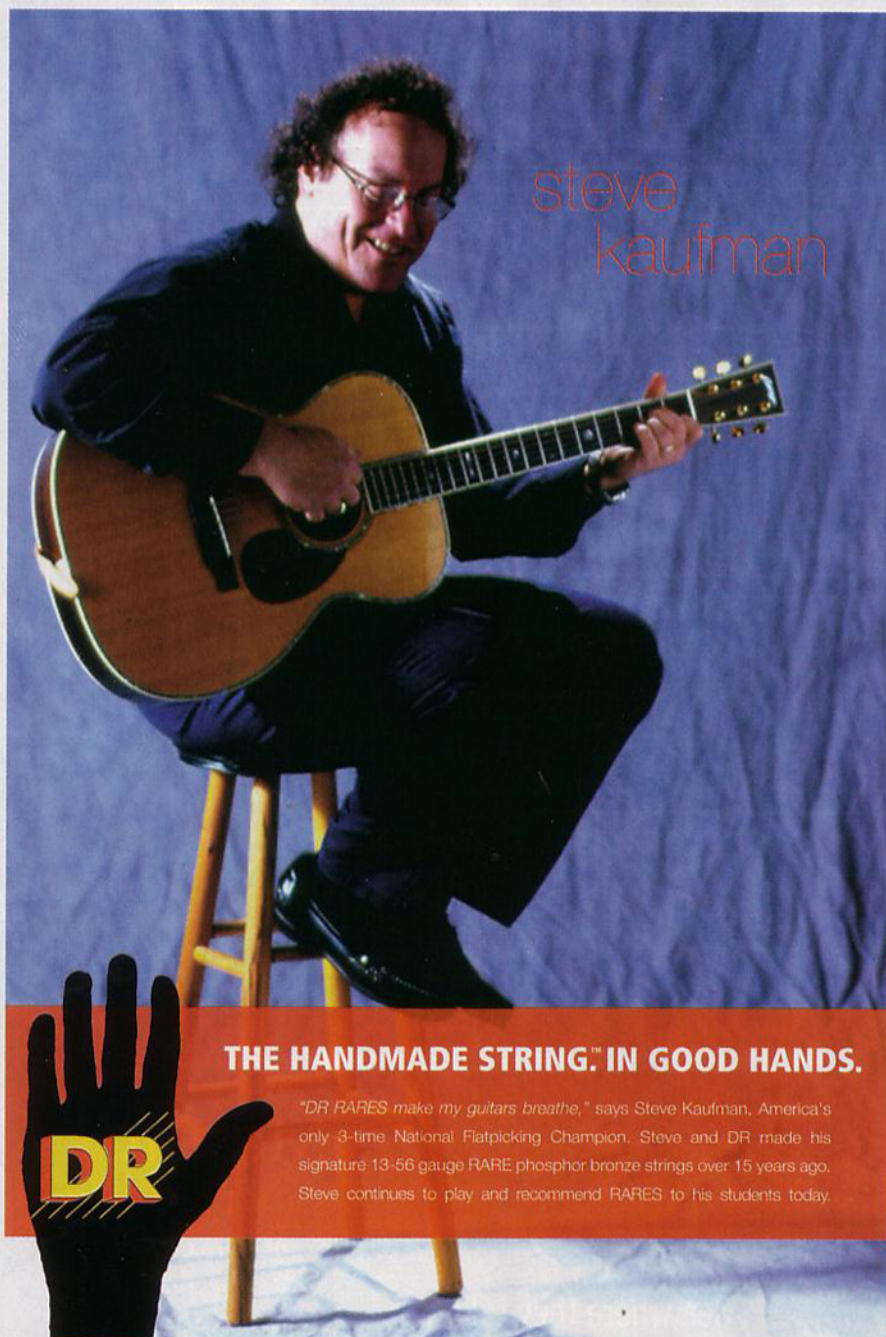
"I'm exceedingly proud that there are not dozens or hundreds, but thousands of people who started singing these relatively simple songs, and not to get rich and famous."

SEEGER I'm exceedingly proud that there are not dozens or hundreds, but thousands of people who started singing these relatively simple songs, and not to get rich and famous. It's true, it's a temptation to want to be heard

by millions, and I'll not deny it was an interesting experience to be with the Weavers. But I'm not sorry I left the Weavers, and I was actually happier when I was not singing for the Weavers—I could sing a different show every night and experiment.

Some [contemporary folksingers] like to make a living, but they don't think of the music business as getting famous and making a lot of money. They'll sing at a coffeehouse here, and make enough to go a few miles to another coffeehouse and sing there. They'll sing for ten people here and 50 people there. And I'm very proud that I've encouraged people to do that.

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what he plays

"Really, I don't take good care of my instruments," confesses Pete Seeger. "People say, 'You mean you haven't changed these strings for a year? Look, the windings have come off!'" His more serious instrument-care infractions include running over a guitar with his car, and cracking another by hanging it on the wall in direct sunlight. (But don't blame Seeger for the time during the Vietnam War when someone at the airport opened his guitar case, which was covered with peace and protest stickers, and kicked in the top.) His main surviving instruments are:

- **Guitars:** 12-string guitar built by Bruce A. Taylor, based on a design by Stanley Francis, with an almost 28-inch scale and a triangular soundhole, tuned to a low version of* dropped-D (typically B^b F B^b E^b G C) and then capoed up the neck; Vicente Tatay nylon-string guitar, given to Seeger at a concert in the 1940s by a woman who professed to have a "tin ear."
- **Strings:** Custom E&O Mari phosphor-bronze, gauges .034/.070, .023/.047, .016/.034, .010/.026, .018/.018, and .013/.012 (on the Bruce A. Taylor).
- **Banjo:** Custom 1955 five-string, with a long neck (three extra frets) designed by Seeger, Vega Tubaphone pot, and a drum famously inscribed with the words, "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender" (echoing Woody Guthrie's more bellicose "This Machine Kills Fascists").
- **Capo:** Shubb.