

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH PETE SEEGER
IN CONVERSATION WITH TAO RODRIGUEZ-SEEGER
Videotaped for *The Banjo Project* on August 30, 2003
Beacon, NY

Sitting in their front yard overlooking the Hudson, Pete and his grandson Tao covered a variety of banjo-related topics suggested by producer Marc Fields.

PART ONE:

TAO RODRIGUEZ-SEEGER: *Tell me again, Granddad, why and when you started playing the banjo?*

PETE SEEGER: I think it's because I've always liked rhythm. My mother was a classical violinist, and she played these long slow melodies. But she left musical instruments all around the house I could bang on a piano or a string instrument and when I was about 8 years old she gave me a ukulele. I sang popular songs I heard on the radio, or Christmas carols, or anything. [Makes strumming motion] Clunk clunk clunk clunk...

And when she wanted me to learn how to read music, I said no, I don't want to be a musician. I just want to have fun. And by the time I was 10 or 12, I was a good ear musician as a result. I tuned by ear and I knew chords, minor chords and major chords and how they were put together. And then, in high school, I heard there was this school jazz band. Oh, I wanted to play in it. The ukulele couldn't be heard, and one of the teachers had a tenor banjo.

I begged, and begged and finally got the twenty-five dollars. That's what, it's like five hundred dollars now.

TAO: *Wow. Must've been a good tenor...*

PETE: It was a good tenor banjo, and I got a plastic pick, and now I got the chords. [Makes strumming motion] Clunk clunk clunk clunk. I'd even occasionally try to play a melody, up and down, up and down, up and down. About three years later, my father was working in Washington DC. He was a folklorist working with Alan Lomax and he found out about a festival, mountain music and mountain dance, out in Asheville, North Carolina. It was started by a country lawyer named Bascom Lunsford.

He [Lunsford] had a wonderful way of running it. He had a great big stage in the local baseball park about 2000, 3000 people were there. He'd get a string band playing on stage right, this was nighttime there'd be a spotlight, and while they were playing he'd be setting up on stage left another band. And he said, "Now you're all in tune with each other and you know what you're going to do, and when the light comes up on you you start playing."

TAO: *They still do that now. That technique is still used in festivals.*

PETE: So when the band on stage right is though, he'd walk in to the spotlight and he'd say, "Weren't they wonderful? Give a big hand for the Bog Trotter String Band and now, over here, we have The Cool Hollow Boys!" The spotlight would move over there, and they'd start playing. There was none of this delay setting up or anything. Microphones had only really come in six or seven years earlier. And you had one microphone for the whole band. And uh, hopefully the fiddle was not drowned out by the banjo or the guitar.

TAO: What was one of those tunes you heard down there that drew your ear to the banjo or the guitar?

PETE: "Cripple Creek" of course. "Old Joe Clark" and I guess "Sourwood Mountain." I can't remember exactly. There was this woman by the name Samantha Bumgarner who I found out later was quite well known. And she always played sitting down in a rocking chair and she decorated her banjo with butterflies and flowers, it was very colorful. And she would rock in her chair and sing these old songs. and she accompanied herself. And that's what really fascinated me. I think I've always been more fascinated with the banjo as an accompaniment instrument. I think the tenor banjo was ruined by people trying to show off, people trying to show how exciting they could be. And I just like the punkinty punkinty punkinty plunkinty plunk.

I couldn't figure out how to do it, though. It was too fast, it was like trying to figure out tap dancing. Until I got to sit down with Lunsford, and he himself said, "Now, you pick up on that middle string, now you pick up on the top string, and do that over and over, and then, right after the top string, you have the thumb string. Like this. Up 'till that time, I could listen to his record, I heard it and I thought you played it with you third finger. But you don't get such good rhythm that way.

It's a rhythmic instrument. The banjo is a rhythmic instrument. [...]

TAO: *Can you play one of those tunes you learned from Bascomb?*

[Pete start to play "Old Joe Clark"]

PETE [stops playing]: Oh, my finger's all froze up. I can't play up tempo anymore. I've slowed down so much that I listen to a record that I made twenty years ago and I say, "How the hell did I play that so fast?" That was Old Joe Clark, and I confess I didn't play it like Bascom played it because over the last few years I've gotten fascinated by the different ways you can play a four rhythm. You can play a four rhythm like one two, one two, one two, or you can (zoom in) split it up into one, one two, one, one two, one, one two. Or it can be one two three, one two three, one two three. Which adds up to eight. And this is what Earl Scruggs did of course. And it's also the most common African syncopation. [He drums on banjo]

It's all through jazz, all through Latin American music. But I don't think it was widely known through Europe.

I think, occasionally, maybe Chopin or someone experimenting may have done it. And I've also gotten fascinated with threes following each other I made up a little song... And as long as you're tapping your foot, you can stay on the beat. It's like one two three, one two three, one two three, one two three, and all of a sudden you're back on the beat again.

I didn't know how to play the banjo, though, from Lunsford or from listening to records, until I spent about eight months, hitchhiking around the country, actually it was four months hitchhiking in the south. And those four months in the south, hitchhiking around, every time I wandered into a banjo picker, I'd watch closely to see what he was doing. And that's when I found out about frailing. You don't play up, you pick down with your fingers.

Some people call it claw hammer style because they just use two fingers, the index finger on the third string and the middle finger on the top string. And of course that way you can get a wonderful rhythm because your wrist is going back and forth. You can't get out of rhythm! [plays] I think the people who really love the banjo love claw hammer picking. Rapping some people call it.

TAO: *This music that you heard in Asheville. Was this pop music that you heard on the radio?*

PETE: No, this was country music that you heard on the radio in the south maybe, but not in the north hardly at all. At least, not then. Not in the nineteen twenties or thirties.

TAO: *Is that part of what drew you to it? Its unpopularity?*

PETE: I confess I have always been a little cynical about pop music. It seemed to me that it was made up to make money. And it was silly. The words were silly. It was clever, sometimes, but it was an exception to the rule, it was a rare pop song that was more than clever. Now, there are some great pop songs. Whenever I tell people about great American composers, I say "don't leave out the person who composed 'Sweet Georgia Brown.'" That's a great jazz song. And Irving Berlin, while me made up a lot of clinkers, made up some absolutely extraordinary songs like Blue Sky. I play that on the banjo. <

TAO: *Are you in the right tuning for that?*

PETE: Yeah.

TAO: *Let's do this....* [They play "Blue Skies" with Pete's added lyrics and the melodic variations Pete composed in the 1950s.]

PETE: I like to get audiences singing these songs. I play it fast with a Clearwater version. It's based on a scat version that Slim and Slam made up back in the thirties. And then I slow it down and I get the audience singing. I sing "Blue Skies!" and they sing blue skies, "Smilin' at me!" Smiling at me. "Nothing but blue skies," Nothing but blue skies. "Do I see!" Do I see. It's what's called lining out a hymn in church. I do this with quite a lot of songs now. Not only old folk songs, but old pop songs. I did it with "Blue Skies" at the big peace demonstration we had last February. [...]

TAO: *We were talking about your father...*

PETE: I should go on with the story of my father 'cause he got fascinated with the American folk music that he heard. Granted he only heard a small little slice of it. Allen Lomax, the young son of John – he was only four years older than I was – but infinitely more experienced. He was born in 1915 and in 1933, his father was going out and collecting, not just cowboy songs but songs of coal miners and lumber jacks in the north woods, and most exciting, African Americans on chain gangs. And boy, what music it was. [Sings a few lines of a chain gang tune]

I mean, these were old African melodies with English words, although sometimes they would take a European tune and Africanize it. This happened in many spirituals, you know. Some of the slaves at the door of the big house would hear a fiddler playing, "da da da da diddle dee dee." Irish washerwoman, an Irish jig in three four time—uh six eight time. "Deedle dee dee dee dee." On the fields the next day, this person, a man or a woman was, "Rock my soul in the bosom of faith/ I've got to rock my soul in the bosom of faith," Africanizing the rhythm and slowing it down.

TAO: *Making it groovy, some might say.*

PETE: And of course we find out now this has happened with many different kinds of music. It's happened with Latin American music, coming up here. You have Tex Mex songs and so on.

TAO: It's true. Salsa was invented in Harlem.

PETE: Well my father, eventually, said, "Don't get in an argument about is it folk music or not, just know that for thousands of years, who knows, for tens of thousands of years, human beings have been taking old cultural forms and adapting them to new situations. It happens in food. Cooks rearrange old recipes for new stomachs. Lawyers rearrange old laws for new citizens."

And my father said, "In classical music as well as jazz, and in different kinds of folk music, people are always rearranging things. A little here and little there. Sometimes they like to keep it the same. And there are some traditions it's not

approved if you try and change it much. A beautiful old melody, "Londonderry Air," was made up four hundred years ago in the year 1603. A harper made it to not forget his relatives who were killed when Castle Derry was conquered by the English. And for three hundred years, this melody was not changed. And not sung to either. You just needed to hum the melody or play it on a fiddle or a harp. And it reminded, "Oh yes, Castle Derry was conquered but we won't forget it."

Then in the late nineteenth century a book comes out in London, *Irish Traditional Airs*. An English lawyer, an English lawyer makes up the words of "Oh Danny Boy," and now it goes through the world. Interesting though, you know what Randy Harris just sent me a record. Ruben Blades has made a record of "Oh Danny Boy" that you wouldn't believe.

TAO: *Really?*

PETE: There is still a Latin rhythm underneath it, but the old Irish melody is drawn out is there. It's astonishing.

TAO: *The folk process lives on... You can't stop it. About the same time you were meeting with Allen Lomax, I supposed your were recording for Folkways?*

PETE: Folkways was very very important in the revival of interest in old time music of all sorts.

TAO: *And you must have learned a lot of songs from Allen and then recorded them for Folkways.*

PETE: Yep. And whenever I learned a song, I'd be walking down the street and I'd find myself near the Folkways office. I'd go up to a room with a tiny room next to it where the recording machine was. It was a two-horse company, Moses Asch, and his secretary, Marion Distler. And they both were quite cautious to keep this little business alive. A big record sale was a thousand records. Many of the records sold only a few hundred copies.

As a matter of fact, when it got started, well this is an interesting story. Moses Asch, his father was a famous writer, Sholom Asch, he wrote novels in Yiddish. And in 1933 he says, "Mo, you bought this recording machine. Can you put it in the trunk of the car?" "Yes" "Well, let's go, we've got to go down to Princeton to interview Dr. Einstein because he's got to record a short message that we can play on the radio to urge American Jews to give more help immediately to their relatives in Germany, to get out of Germany quick."

And so they drove to Princeton, Einstein recorded the short message, and then over supper, Einstein says, "Well Young Mr. Asch, what do you do for a living?" And Mo says, "Well I make a living installing public address systems into hotels, but I've just bought this recording machine, and I'm fascinated with what it can

do. And in New York I've met a Negro musician named Leadbelly who's a fantastic musician but nobody's recording him. They say he's not commercial. But I think this is American culture and it should be recorded. Down in the Library of Congress they record things and just put it on the shelf there and only a few people ever hear them.

Well, Einstein says, "You're exactly right. Americans don't appreciate their culture. It'll be a Polish Jew like you who will do the job." And Mo Asch recorded Leadbelly. And I asked Mo years later how many copies did you sell. And he said the first year we sold one hundred copies.

Well, sales picked up. The next year, Woody Guthrie came into town he recorded Woody. During World War II he found that no one was recording the songs of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the Americans that had volunteered to fight Franco in Spain, back in nineteen thirty seven. And I got a weekend pass from the army, and with three others, Bess Lomax Hawes, Tom Glazer and Butch Hawes, four of us. We rehearsed on Saturday and recorded in our fractured Spanish six songs of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. And by gosh you know, they're still being sold.

And when I went to Spain, guess what, I found they had, they were singing the same version of the song. Everyone sings a different version of songs. And I said, "How come you're singing the same exact version as I'm singing?" And they said, "We learned off your record."

[END OF PART ONE -- MORE OF PETE SEEGER ON THE HISTORY OF THE BANJO, WRITING "HOW TO PLAY THE 5-STRING BANJO," EARL SCRUGGS AND THE FOLK REVIVAL IN PART TWO]