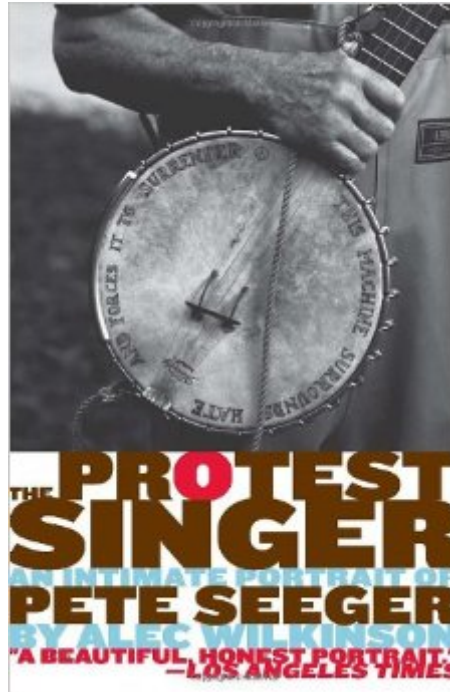


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The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait Of Pete Seeger



Synopsis

A spirited and intimate look at American icon and activist Pete Seeger. Throughout his life, Pete Seeger transformed a classic American musical style into a form of peaceful protest against war, segregation, and nuclear weapons. Drawing on his extensive talks with Seeger, Alec Wilkinson delivers a first hand look at Seeger's unique blend of independence and commitment, charm, courage, energy, and belief in human equality and American democracy. We see Seeger as a child, instilled with a love of music by his parents; as a teenager, hearing real folk music for the first time; as a young adult, singing with Woody Guthrie. And finally, Seeger the man marching with the Rev. Martin Luther King in Selma, standing up to McCarthyism, and fighting for his beloved Hudson River. The gigantic life captured in this slender volume is truly an American anthem.

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Customer Reviews

This short biography describes Pete Seeger's evolution as a person and musician. It begins by describing Seeger's upbringing in a politically-aware, educated family that encouraged and developed his musical talents. After enrolling at Harvard -- where he was in the same class as JFK -- Pete decided that his life's work was as a cultural historian. He left college to travel around the country, and soon began composing and singing to earn a living, meeting and performing with Woody Guthrie and others at political rallies, union meetings and other places where ordinary people gathered. Pete fought in WWII and, after the war, along with three other folk musicians, formed the iconic folk group, The Weavers. Throughout his career, he studied and collected

examples of traditional folk music, while adding his own compositions to the long line of American songs that stretched back beyond the Revolution to the colonial period. Pete viewed such music as the medium through which ordinary Americans recorded and expressed their feelings, experience, hopes and dreams. His family supported him in his endeavors, as well as in his efforts to build a home and life in the hills overlooking the Hudson River, in Beacon, New York, where he and his family still live. Pete's political beliefs, and his courage in standing up to McCarthyism, are linked in Wilkinson's biography to his underlying philosophy, which views all people as members of a single spiritual community. Pete Seeger's goal has been to unite people of many backgrounds, classes, ethnicities, racial backgrounds and religions through the common vehicle of music, which he views as the expression of a common, human spirit. It is this common humanity, not a political ideology, that Seeger seeks to advance through his efforts as a writer and singer. Wilkinson allows Seeger to explain these motives and objectives in his own words. A significant passage in the book describes Pete's response when, after a concert during the Vietnam era, a man came up and said that he'd come there that night to kill Pete, but had changed his mind. Pete sat down and talked with the man, and they sang "Where Have All The Flowers Gone" together. Afterwards, the man had said "I feel cleansed," and left quietly. This episode demonstrated the strength of Pete's faith in the transforming power of empathy and common bond forged by music. Rather than merely accept the man's tacit apology, or feel afraid, Pete tried to heal the man -- a Vietnam war vet -- and succeeded. Wilkinson writes that Pete Seeger wished for him to write a biography that could be read in one sitting. This short book fills that bill. It is informative, entertaining and helps the reader to understand and appreciate the eras through which Pete has lived in his 90 years. An appendix containing Seeger's HUAC testimony during the McCarthy era allows the reader to evaluate for him or herself Pete's actions during that troubled period. Although I do not agree with every political position that Pete has taken in his long life, he is in my estimation an ethical person and American patriot. His patriotism is about honor, integrity and justice, not ideology. Yet those who disagree with that assessment would also appreciate this biography, which is evenhanded, informative and fair. I'll bet that Pete likes it.

Intimate in the title is the key to this book. The events of Pete Seeger's life are highlighted, many of which are well known, but the pearls of the book are the quotes that are included from their conversations as Seeger answered questions about his journey through life. "People ask, is there one word that you have more faith in than any other word," he told me, "and I say it's participation. I feel that this takes on so many meanings. The composer John Philip Sousa said, 'What will happen

to the American voice now that the phonograph has been invented? Women used to sing lullabies to their children.' It's been my life work, to get participation, whether it's a union song, or a peace song, civil rights, or a women's movement, or gay liberation. When you sing, you feel a kind of strength; you think, I'm not alone, there's a whole bunch of us who feel this way. I'm just one person, but it's almost my religion now to persuade people that even if it's only you and three others, do something. You and one other, do something. If it's only you, and you do a good job as a songwriter, people will sing it."And the pictures; they show a man working hard for that participation from himself and from others with grace and joy and sticking by what he believes is right no matter what. Pete Seeger is a man to be thanked and copied, we need more like him.

Alec Wilkinson is one of my favorite essayists and Pete Seeger is one of my favorite people; this lovely short portrait leaves one with a sweet image of this true man of the people. Pete Seeger, a folksinger all his life, shunning commercial success in favor of just singing to whoever asked him--and mainly, to union workers, school children and other low-budget audiences--standing up courageously to the House Un-American Activities Committee and being blacklisted for years afterward, is a true American hero in the traditional sense. He's the genuine article: he really doesn't seek fame and fortune and wishes only to sing for, and with, the people. The more people join in, the better; for Seeger, it isn't about his own voice or his talent. His one shot at serious commercial success was dashed by the blacklists when, in the early 1950s, his group, the Weavers, had been signed by a television network for their own show. A right-wing group published a pamphlet listing notable men and women whom they claimed were Communists, including Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Miller, Orson Welles, and Seeger. Incapable of bitterness, Seeger's only comment was, "I expected it, so I didn't really feel resentful. We assumed that sooner or later they'd get us." Seeger lives with his wife of many decades--who seems to share his unpretentious taste--in a woodsy home where he makes his own maple syrup and entertains his visiting children and grandchildren. His lifestyle is simple and basic, as befits a person with his values, described by Wilkinson thus: "...a reverence for nature, a regard for human life, something like scorn for the nurturing of materialistic values, and a belief in the worth of right moral behavior." Wilkinson writes elegantly, which makes this story even more of a treat to read. Here he is describing Seeger's voice: It was "what is called a split tenor. It was robust--it sounded like the voice that comes from a few rows behind you in church and that everyone follows--and even in complicated passages his pitch was precise." A portrait emerges of a cheerful, uncomplicated, and genuinely folksy man.

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