

Pete Seeger Biographical Sketch

Pete Seeger was born in New York on May 3, 1919. He is a singer and a songwriter.

In 1940 Seeger formed the Almanac Singers, and their repertoire of radical songs marked the start of the protest movement. They performed mainly at union rallies, strikes, and protests. The group disbanded during World War II when Seeger was drafted. He was a member of the Communist Party. This was not considered a good thing after the end of World War II, which was a time when the American government was looking for people who might undermine its power. In the late 1940's his musical career was greatly harmed when J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the F.B.I., leaked Seeger's file to a newspaper reporter.

The article that this reporter wrote revealed that Seeger and his new group, The Weavers, were the first musicians in American history to be investigated for sedition. His name appeared in a pamphlet distributed to employers of people in the entertainment industry. This pamphlet listed 150 people who were involved in promoting left-wing causes. The Weavers had sold over 4 million records, but now radio stations stopped playing their music. They were also banned from appearing on national television. Because Seeger was a Communist, he was blacklisted and called before Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities. Seeger refused to testify. He was cited in 1955 for contempt, tried, found guilty, and was sentenced to a year in prison. However, due to worldwide protests, the case was finally dismissed on a technicality.

Seeger was freed from prison, but he was blacklisted until the 1960's. He was able to continue performing for college and community groups that didn't have to perform in theaters. His songs written and performed during this period often reflected his left-wing views. One song written during this time was "Guantanamera." Seeger was a leader of the civil rights movement for which his version of "We Shall Overcome," became the unofficial anthem. He sang often at civil rights rallies, college campuses, labor strikes and anti-war protests.

Seeger was awarded the nation's highest artistic honors at the Kennedy Center in December 1994. Also in 1994 he received the NEA National Medal of Arts. In January 1996 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He continued performing into the 1970s through the 1990s, most often at charity shows and benefits.