

LOOKING AT A LEGACY

The Man Who Made Folk Music Matter

For more than 70 years, Pete Seeger led the charge of a fingerpicking revolution that hummed from the farm to the White House.

BY KYLE ANDERSON

CALLING PETE SEEGER a legend almost undersells his legacy. When the folk icon and lifelong activist passed away at age 94 on Jan. 27, effusive tributes poured in. Again and again, they reiterated his roles as a living avatar of the last century—he served in World War II, fought for civil rights and nuclear disarmament, and performed at President Obama's 2009 inauguration—and as a musical godfather to everyone from Bob Dylan to Mumford & Sons. To fully understand the man that he was, though, one needs to look at not just his artistry but his integrity.

Take this story: Seeger had found moderate success with the Weavers, a band at the forefront of the postwar folk revival, when he was accused of being a Communist and summoned to testify in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1955. "I resent very much and very deeply the implication of being called before this committee that in some way because my opinions may be different from yours...that I am any less of an American than anybody else," he told the panel—though he did offer to sing for them. He was found in contempt and blacklisted; his association with Communism had already made it difficult to book gigs, but when the opportunity came to make money by lending the Weavers' music to an advertisement for cigarettes, Seeger walked away rather than sell out. "He could have taken a much more comfortable path," says Bill Nowlin, the cofounder of Rounder Records, a leading champion of folk-music preservation. "He would have had numerous options available



Pete Seeger (in 2009) changed the world one sing-along at a time

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—ANI DIFRANCO

to him.... But I'm impressed with how he lived his life. He was steady. He was constant."

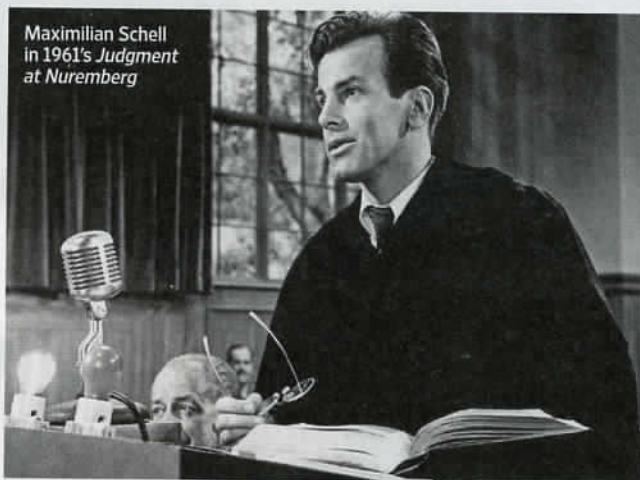
That was Seeger in a nutshell: an uncompromising crusader who spent his entire life putting the music and the message above all else. Even in his later years, when most artists spend their time in reflection, Seeger maintained his perpetual frenzy. "Whenever I fret about something I think I'm supposed to be doing, I think, 'What would Pete do?'" says Ani DiFranco, who captured one of Seeger's final recordings on her 2012 album, *Which Side Are You On?* "Because he wouldn't care about any of that. The career is an afterthought—it's an accident. In his old age he was still focusing on making the world a better place, and not 'the legacy of Pete Seeger.'"

That outlook only helped to grow his legend, especially among the new wave of folk-inspired performers who owe the roots of their art to Seeger. "More than anybody else I can think of, he's responsible for the preservation of American folk songs," says Old Crow Medicine Show frontman Ketch Secor, one of the many artists carrying Seeger's revivalist torch. Indeed, the Weavers almost single-handedly rescued "Goodnight Irene," "On Top of Old Smoky," and other traditional tunes. "Before Pete Seeger, there was nobody scholarly with a banjo," Secor says. "He put the banjo in our hands." Songs Seeger penned—including "If I Had a Hammer (Hammer Song)" and "Turn! Turn! Turn!"—would inspire countless covers, but perhaps his greatest triumph was putting the protest singer at the forefront of the struggle for social equality. (He played a key role, for example, in making the gospel spiritual "We Shall Overcome" an anthem for the civil rights movement.) "He was a great teacher of the activist spirit—that you don't even fight to win, let alone for your own glory," says DiFranco. "You fight because it is a joyous thing to do."

Secor concurs: "It's like Johnny Appleseed, you know? He would go out there and plant. The American folk song is richer because of what Pete gave."

SEGER: MARTIN SCHOELLER/AUGUST; SCHELL: EVERETT COLLECTION; WILSON: DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS/WIREIMAGE.COM; SHERAK: J. VESPA/WIREIMAGE.COM

MONITOR



Maximilian Schell in 1961's *Judgment at Nuremberg*

DEATHS

Maximilian Schell, the actor and refugee from Nazi Germany who won an Oscar for his role in 1961's *Judgment at Nuremberg*, died on Feb. 1 in Innsbruck, Austria, after a sudden illness. He was 83.... Former president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences **Tom Sherak** died on Jan. 28 at age 68 in Calabasas, Calif.



after a battle with prostate cancer.... Producer-director **Arthur Rankin Jr.**, best known for creating the Christmas specials *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *Frosty the Snowman*, died on Jan. 30 in Harrington Sound, Bermuda, at age 89.

DEALS

We might learn what **Jesse Eisenberg** looks like without his signature moptop. The 30-year-old *Social Network* star has signed on to play Superman's archnemesis Lex Luthor in the follow-up to 2013's *Man of Steel*. **Henry Cavill** will reprise his role as Superman, and **Ben Affleck** will play Batman.... Like so many of his former Friends, **David Schwimmer**, 47, is returning to TV. He's on board to produce and star in a pilot for ABC called *Irreversible*, a single-camera comedy based on the Israeli series *Bilti Hafich*.

BABIES

Say hello to a new Bonus Jonas! **Kevin Jonas**, 26, and his wife, **Danielle** (who both starred on E!'s reality show *Married to Jonas*), welcomed baby Alena Rose on Feb. 2.... **Owen Wilson**, 45, and

Caroline Lindqvist, a personal trainer, had a son on Jan. 30. The actor also has a



3-year-old son, Robert Ford, with his ex-girlfriend **Jade Duell**.... Couldn't he name one child Dawson? How about Joey? Former *Dawson's Creek* star **James Van Der Beek**, 36, and wife **Kimberly** welcomed their third child, Annabel, on Jan. 25.... It was recently reported that **Hugh Grant**, 53, had a son with Swedish TV producer **Anna Elisabet Eberstein** in 2012. He also has two children with **Tinglan Hong**, including another son born in 2012. —Stephan Lee, with additional reporting by Maya Stanton