

## Tony Trischka talks about Pete Seeger

Where do you begin with Pete Seeger. There is much too much to say in a short (or even long) space. Rather than detail his towering moral authority for standing up to the McCarthyites, giving voice to the opposition during the Vietnam War, and composing tunes such as "If I Had A Hammer" and "Where Have all the Flowers Gone", or helping to clean up the Hudson River, or being a key player in the Civil Rights movement, I'll focus on his love for the five-string banjo.

I grew up with Pete's banjo ringing in my ears. My parents were on the left side of things in the fifties and they listened to 78s of the Almanac Singers, plus the Weavers and Pete's children's albums. "Union Maid" is still etched in my memory.

When I first fell in love with the banjo, I immediately picked up Pete's famous red book, ***How to Play the Five String Banjo***. It gave me a mega-jolt of inspiration. In the ensuing years, I've become ever more impressed with his banjoing.....subtle things he does in back-up, his fluency in a variety of styles, his fearless embrace of old-time, flamenco, bluegrass, classical and jazz styles adapted to the five-string. Listen to his ***Goofing Off Suite***, recorded for Smithsonian Folkways Records in 1955. Let it all wash over you, particularly Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies". Back then, nobody was playing with such insouciance in the face of technically challenging material. And Pete has music flowing through him at all times. One time about twenty years ago, Pete and I were appearing separately at the Winnipeg Folk Festival. As I got on the bus at the hotel to head out to the airport, I saw Pete sitting across from the bus driver, with no one else on board. I sat down just behind Pete as he turned to me to say, "You know, Tony, audiences these days don't know how to sing bass parts to songs. I'll show you what I mean. Do you know the words to "Study War No More"?" I averred that I did, and began to sing. Almost immediately, Pete chimed in on the low harmony part as we duetted our way to the airport.

Once we arrived, we found ourselves in unmoving, excruciatingly long lines waiting to go through customs. Most folks were in business suits. Pete and I were clad in jeaned folk garb....with banjos. At some point I looked over at Pete in the adjacent line. He was hunched over his banjo case, unlatching it and, indeed, taking out his banjo. As he started to play, his uncomprehending neighbors began to look ill at ease. Not wishing to let an opportunity like this pass me by I took out my own banjo and joined in. We picked our way to the front of the line.