

'Music heals': Astoria celebrates Pete Seeger

Three dozen performers offer tribute to activist folk singer

By PATRICK WEBB
FOR COASTWEEKEND

Singing together can heal. That philosophy from folk artist Pete Seeger will be on show Saturday, April 28, in Astoria.

Three-dozen musicians will appear at the Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center to mark Seeger's 99th birthday and raise money for Partners for the PAC, the group working to preserve the building.

They'll perform "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" and "Goodnight Irene" and ask the audience to sing along with "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?" "If I Had a Hammer," "Turn, Turn, Turn," Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" and the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome."

Co-director is Kit Ketcham, minister since 2013 at the Pacific Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Astoria, which is based at the PAC. She staged a similar concert in 2009 while pastoring in Whidbey Island, Wash., as progressives celebrated hope early in the Obama administration.

Times have changed. "The mood of our country is sad, angry, fearful and vengeful," Ketcham said. "Pete Seeger and his philosophy of bringing people together to sing is an antidote to that negative mood, and I want people to start singing together."

"I want us to go into this concert with the understanding that music heals, that songs of justice and of caring and of joy and purpose bring people together, lift our spirits



PATRICK WEBB PHOTOS

The Clatsop County Stringband consists of (from left) Larry Moore on mandolin, Gina Kytr on fiddle, Hobe Kytr on banjo and Knox Swanson on guitar. They will perform "Union Maid" and "Cindy."

and fill us with renewed hope.

"Pete Seeger has been a major influence in my life since I was fresh out of college and sitting around with friends singing his songs," said Ketcham, who graduated from Linfield College in 1963 and worked as a teacher/counselor in Colorado.

Seeger's path led him to the Unitarians, whose values Ketcham describes as, "concern for the environment, love for nature, harmony in human living, working collectively to solve problems, celebrating life in quirky ways."

Ketcham and co-director Joseph Stevenson have recruited musicians, including the Brownsmead Flats and the Clatsop County Stringband; Jim Dott will narrate. Seeger's birth date is May 3, but the concert is scheduled early to avoid conflicts with the Hispanic community's Cinco de Mayo.

Seeger died in 2014 aged 94 after a lifetime marked by controversy: Environmental

activism, plus opposition to the Vietnam War and nuclear armaments, alienated factions of American society and government. Seeger embraced then later rejected communism; his early band, The Weavers, was blacklisted during U.S. Sen. McCarthy's "witch-hunt" era of the 1950s.

Singing Seeger

Tom and Siv Barnum appreciate Pete Seeger from different angles; the couple will perform with guitarist John Snyder.

Tom Barnum attended Astoria High School in 1972, "a volatile period" as the Vietnam War waned during the last turbulent years of the Nixon presidency. A year later, Nixon fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was investigating presidential impropriety. "It seems like full circle. 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes,'" Barnum quipped, using a phrase attributed to Mark Twain.

Siv Barnum moved to Astoria in 2016 to become college registrar. A native of Norway, she lived in Sweden and Africa before emigrating to the U.S. at 17. With Nelson Mandela in prison in South Africa, and all-white schools like hers practicing riot drills amid escalating racial tensions, she recalls an assembly at which she soloed during "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

A distinguished guest commended the singing — but "reprimanded, in a very polished, artful way" — her choir director for choosing "the 'most depressing' music she had heard." Despite the climate of violence, Barnum recalls the visitor suggested they lived in "peaceful times."

The Barnums will sing "Old Devil Time," which addresses "old devil hate" — "Help me rise to fight you one more time."

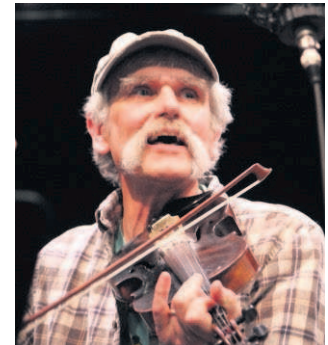
"The lyrics pierce me with reminders of South Africa," Siv Barnum said.

Bob Lennon, who is retired from the U.S. Postal Service, now drives a school bus in Seaside. He and Dale Clark, a gallery owner, will perform together. Lennon recalls high school in the 1960s, the decade Seeger inspired Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Bob Dylan.

"The thing I love the most about Pete Seeger was he had the courage of his own convictions," Lennon said. "Whether it was his simple home, his music or his activism, he was true to himself."

His anti-pollution publicity, sailing his sloop Clearwater on the Hudson River, inspired others, said Lennon, whose song list will include "My Dirty Stream." Federal authorities eventually labeled a New York industrial plant as a Superfund cleanup site.

Ray Raihala will perform with wife Denise and daughter, Teresa Raihala-Sethe of Portland. Raihala recalling buying Seeger's book on how



Dan Sutherland from the Brownsmead Flats gives his all on the violin during a rehearsal for the Pete Seeger event planned for Saturday, April 28.

IF YOU GO

What: Pete Seeger 99th Birthday Tribute Concert and Singalong

When: 7 p.m. Saturday, April 28. Doors 6:15 p.m.

Where: Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center (PAC), 588 16th St., Astoria.

Tickets: \$15 (12 and under admitted free). Available in advance from BrownPaperTickets.com, or at the door.

Funding provided by the Clatsop County Cultural Coalition through the Oregon Cultural Trust.

The event is a fundraiser for the Partners for the PAC, coordinated through the Pacific Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

to play the banjo. "Pete was the quintessential folk musician. You can't name a song that he didn't cover or write," he said.

For Denise Raihala, Seeger's influence was central. "He's probably the reason we are musicians . . ."

Editor's note: For a more detailed version of this story, visit coastweekend.com