

THE ARTS

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AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

Pete Seeger will be honored with a singalong concert in Astoria May 4, the day after the 100th anniversary of his birth. He died in 2014 after decades of providing a musical soundtrack to social activism all around the world.

Seeger tribute taps into healing power of singing

More than three dozen performers tuning up for PAC

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

ASTORIA — For Joseph Stevenson, singing the protest anthem “We Shall Overcome” has more than musical significance.

The longtime Astoria resident remembers vividly a day in 1961 as a Freedom Rider battling Segregation laws in Texas when he was arrested in Houston.

“We were traveling to jail, handcuffed in a police wagon, when we started singing,” he recalled. “It

gives you strength. It gives you courage.”

“We Shall Overcome” — which Stevenson and his activist comrades sang that day — will be on the setlist for The “Pete Seeger 100th Birthday Tribute Concert and Singalong.”

The event will take place at the Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center, 588 16th St., in Astoria 7 p.m. May 4. The concert, one day after Seeger’s birthdate, is a

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IF YOU GO

“Pete Seeger 100th Birthday Tribute Concert and Singalong.”

Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center, 588 16th St., Astoria.

7 p.m. Saturday, May 4.

Admission, \$15 at the door, cash and checks accepted, children under 12 free if accompanied by an adult.

Or in advance from brown paper tickets, www.brownpapertickets.com/event/4209071



A teenage Keith Clark, left, wearing a then fashionable extra-thin tie, and his father, also named Keith, perform on their banjos at a Chicago folk festival in the late 1950s.

Clark family photo

And the mystery player is ...

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

The most unlikely guest banjo player in the history of Astoria music will perform at the “Pete Seeger 100th Birthday Tribute Concert and Singalong” May 4.

Keith Clark.

When the world-traveled conductor and classical music teacher, learned of the second event to commemorate Seeger’s contribution to music, he contacted organizers and offered to join them.

And he will play a long neck, 5-string that Seeger had made for him.

“I haven’t practiced for nearly 40 years!” Clark confessed. “I was so involved in all this kind of music until midway through college when I went the opposite direction.”

He will bring with him stories of his childhood, playing with his father, also named Keith, who was good friends with Pete Seeger and his wife, Toshi.

The Clarks lived on farm acreage in Ottawa, Illinois, southwest of Chicago. His father built a theater for public performances in a barn, giving artists black-listed during the McCarthy era and African-American musicians a venue.

“He was often a guest in our house, performed a lot in my Dad’s theater where they often performed and wrote songs together,” Clark recalled. He recalled Seeger with admiration. “There was no artifice. What you saw was what he was. There was no phoniness or commercialism.

“He was a powerful presence in my childhood, as you can imagine, and although my musical path took a different direction, I count him as a great influence — he showed me what commitment and sincerity are in life as well as music.”

Home movies of Seeger appear on his performance DVDs. Some, featuring blues-folk performer Sonny Terry and his nephew, blues harmonica player

J.C. Burris, were shot at the Clark family farmhouse.

“I didn’t know they were famous people,” Clark said, “They were just friends of my father.”

Banjo

Clark said Seeger made him a banjo around the time he was in eighth grade.

“Long neck 5-strings weren’t readily available back then, so Pete had Philadelphia luthier Sidney Locker make it for me,” he said. “That has hung on my wall for 30 to 40 years. It has been a wall ornament. It is one of my fondest possessions.

“Now I am trying to play it and turn it back into a musical instrument. Anyone who says that playing an instrument is like riding a bicycle is wrong!”

Clark will perform Lee Hays’ song “Wasn’t That A Time,” a song closely associated with the anti-communist controversy about Seeger which led to a court conviction and accusations of contempt of the U.S. Congress.

“It is the song that helped get Pete in trouble at trial,” said Clark. “It maybe is needed even more today.”

‘Stoked’

Clark said Seeger’s father, Charles, a pioneer in ethno-musicology, was one of his teachers at UCLA. He laughed, recalling stories of Seeger’s mother Constance, a concert violinist who taught at Juilliard. “She had high hopes of him becoming a concert violinist, too, but he said he just wanted to have fun.”

Joseph Stevenson, who is organizing the May 4 Seeger birthday event with Kit Ketcham, is delighted at Clark’s involvement. “It gets me excited to have somebody like that in the show,” Stevenson said. “This has really stoked a fire in him.”

Editor’s note: for a longer version of this interview, log on to www.coastweekend.com