

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Pete Seeger
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Location: Beacon, New York
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 57:22

John Bishop: ... second person ambient sound. [Pause] Okay.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Friday, [clears throat] the twenty-second of July, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with our project videographer John Bishop, and we're in Beacon, New York, and delighted to be with Mr. Pete Seeger this morning to do, do an interview for the, uh, Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

John's going to make a quick adjustment. [Laughter] He's moving a little laundry on the clothesline, I think, to change the backdrop just a little. [Laughter]

JB: Okay, we're still rolling.

JM: Mr. Seeger, great to be here and to visit with you. Thanks for –

Pete Seeger: Well, thank you for coming all the way up here.

JM: Oh, it's a pleasure, nice to be here. It's a beautiful day. We've got this beautiful view, and it's lovely. Um, I thought I might ask, since we're here in Beacon and a place you've been for all these years, I thought I might ask you to recall, if you could, the, um, that Paul Robeson concert back in September of 1949 in Peekskill [New York], where I think you opened with a few songs, and it was quite a day, as I understand.

PS: I realized only a year or two ago that that attack on the Robeson concert – there were actually two of them, August twenty-seventh and September fourth – uh, may have saved America from, uh, full-fledged Fascism, whatever J. Edgar Hoover could put into effect. He had concentration camps all readied up for about twelve thousand people, but he had been unable to persuade Congress and Truman to pass the necessary law to let him fill them. I was probably one of the people he was going to put there.

Uh, in July of '49, Truman sent one of his high officials – I think it was the Secretary of State – up to Peekskill and spoke to the American Legion. He said, “This man, Robeson, loves Russia. He hates America. He's coming here to sing. I'm sure you know what to do.” And he went back to Washington. In other words, he gave them the green light to do whatever they wanted.

Uh, fifty years later, I learned more about what happened then, because the Robeson Foundation had a press conference on September fourth, 1999, and people came forth, telling what they knew of the event fifty years before. And a man in his sixties said, “I was a teenager then, and I was talking with some friends on the sidewalk when a truck pulls up, and a policeman gets out, and he says, ‘You all get in the truck. We're going down to Ossining Beach and collect stones to throw at the Commies.’” So, it was not a great big secret. Uh, now, I'm told that the police force as well as the American Legion, uh, were infiltrated by, uh, extreme right people.

There was a Ku Klux Klan, uh, chapter just a few miles south of here, and there were others down nearer to Peekskill.

There were also some German Americans from Lake Valhalla who had never really gone along with the war against Hitler, uh, and, uh, right after the attack, you know, uh, bumper stickers went up – well, they were signs about twenty inches wide, saying, “Wake up, America,” and under, “Peekskill did!” And in Europe they said, “That’s the same sign that went up after Kristallnacht: ‘Wake up, Germany! Munich did,’” or wherever Kristallnacht started. And they had all been printed in advance and they went up, uh, right away.

Interestingly enough, they all disappeared just as quickly as they went up, about five weeks later, uh, and no one has been able to find out exactly where the order came. It was obviously an order from somewhere high up. [5:00] And now, I think, they found out that it had backfired on them. People all over the country saw those hate-filled faces, and, uh, on TV you could hear them shout, “Go back to Russia! Kikes! Nigger lovers!” Wham! And, uh, it was an ugly scene. And, uh, they found now Truman needed to tell J. Edgar Hoover, “No. That kind of thing doesn’t go in America.”

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me ask – let me take you to a place that had a very different spirit about it in the – I think in ’57, ’58, you would make various visits to Highlander [Center].

PS: Woody [Guthrie] and I visited there, because Alan Lomax told us about the place. And when we went west to visit his family out in Oklahoma and Texas, uh, we stopped in to say hello. And the photograph that was taken of me playing the banjo with, and listening to Woody playing the guitar, that was taken there in 1940.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PS: And in 1957, it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of Highlander. Uh, poor Zilphia, Myles Horton's wife, Zilphia Horton – and I guess you know it's spelled Z-I-[L]-P-H-I-A – uh, she was killed by drinking some poison, uh, cleaning fluid, I think. And, uh, I got a phone call, I think, from Myles, saying, "Pete, can you come down here? Uh, it's the twenty-fifth anniversary of Highlander. We can't have an anniversary without music. And without Zilphia here, uh, would you come down and sing a few songs?"

So, I went there, and King [Martin Luther King Jr.] and Abernathy [Ralph Abernathy] and Rosa [Rosa Parks] drove up from Montgomery. And King gave a short speech, and afterwards we all were photographed, uh, in front of the barn, along with, uh, Charis Horton, Myles' teenage daughter. And, uh, that photograph has been well used. That's, that's the first time I ever met King. Uh, the only other time I met him was a year before he was assassinated. I was asked to sing a few songs at a big peace rally outside the United Nations. There must have been eighty thousand people there. And I think it was only the day after that he had spoken at Riverside Church.

JM: Right.

PS: And he probably said essentially the same things, maybe a little shorter. I saw a black car inching its way through the huge crowd and heard people whispering, "He's here! He's here!" And he got – the black car got about twenty feet from the speaker's stand, and it took six men to hold the crowd away, so they could open the door and push their way towards – it took about five minutes to go that twenty feet. And I wondered, "How can a person live with this kind of adulation?"

JM: Ah.

PS: And that's where I heard him say, "I have to face the fact that my country is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. We must get out of Vietnam." I'm sure that LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson] just lost his temper then, said, "After all I did for that guy! Now, look what he does to me!" He just got boiling mad and finally he slams his fist down and picks up the phone, "Hoover, do what you want!" [Birds singing]

JB: Can we pause for a moment?

JM: Sure. John's going to have us pause for a moment.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

PS: Uh, with my reading one morning in the *New York Times* a tiny little two-inch piece on the back pages, saying that there was a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. And I somehow got in touch with the reporter and said, [10:00] "Can you give me the address of the people behind the boycott?"

And he gave me the address of the Montgomery Improvement Association. And I called up and got E.D. Nixon on the phone. He was the person that Rosa [Parks] called when she was arrested and she was allowed to make one phone call. And he said, "Rosa, I'll be right down to pick you up." But he said, "This is what we need. That teenager that tried to stand up, uh, to the police, uh, was pregnant. We couldn't have gotten the community behind her. But everybody knows Rosa." And, uh, don't know the details, but he also knew that King was a fantastic speaker. And he called up – I found this out later – he called up King and said, uh, "Could we hold a protest meeting at your church?"

And King says, "Well, I'm new here, uh, Brother Nixon, and, uh, let me check with my deacons to make sure they approve. Call me back in two hours." And two hours later, Nixon calls up. "I'm glad to say, uh, Brother Nixon, that, uh, the deacons approve. You may have the

meeting at our church tonight.” And Nixon says, “Reverend King, I’m so glad you said that, because I’ve just told two hundred people we are meeting at [laughing] your church at eight o’clock.”

JM: [Laughing] So, it’s a good thing the deacons said yes.

JB: Sure is.

PS: And, uh, that’s when he made that most important statement, probably several times, “We will *win* this bus boycott *if* we are nonviolent.” And I’m sure he had to reiterate this in the future weeks. Uh, there might be some, some, uh, doctors or lawyers, African Americans whose businesses was going to be hurt, saying, “Dr. King, we can make a few compromises, but, uh, this – if we – this will lead to trouble, and, uh, we don’t want to see violence.” And he said, uh, “What are you doing tonight? Uh, can we discuss this?”

And because he’d already gotten phone calls from angry young people, [who] said, “Look, they’ve tried to kill us, uh, and they’ve beaten us. Uh, why don’t we do something to them?” And, uh, he would say, “Are you free tonight? We have to talk this over.” And he’d put these two groups of African Americans facing each other and say, “We have to solve this problem.” And he didn’t need to do too much talking, uh, but they had to each state their position and listen to the other and finally came to a compromise. They would continue, but they would try and find ways there’d be no violence.

And then, of course, this man which should be given more credit in the [laughs] in the Civil Rights Movement, Bull Connor. [Laughter] I knew his name in 1940. I was hitchhiking through the South, and people said, “If you’re going through Birmingham, stay out of the way of Bull Connor. He’s the police chief.”

And I was staying with a man who had been beaten up very badly, Joe Gelders, uh, and, uh, he also knew, “Stay out of the way of Bull Connor.” He lived about twelve miles north – seven miles north? No, I think it was twelve miles north, and I stayed with him and, uh, his teenage daughter, Marjorie. She later on married a man named Friends, Marjorie Friends, and I think she only recently died.

JM: Hmm.

PS: Wonderful person.

JM: But Bull Connor had lots to do with –?

PS: Well, he was, in effect, the mayor, [dog barks] because he had his own people [dog barks] [15:00] and he kind of told them what to do. And it was he, using violence, that really opened the eyes of the country of how terrible, uh, that whole system down there was.

JM: That’s right. That’s right, yeah.

PS: We have neighbors here, uh, and we didn’t realize things like this could happen in America. When they saw the hoses pointed at the people, and people rolling around on the ground, unable, trying to keep the hose from hitting their face, and, uh, the dogs biting the children.

JM: Yeah.

PS: And that was Bull Connor’s work.

JM: Yeah, yeah. I wanted to ask about another, another, uh, another element of your visit to Highlander in ’57 when you met Reverend King and Reverend Abernathy and Rosa Parks for the first time. I think that may have been the occasion that they first heard you play, “We Shall Overcome.”

PS: I didn't know how to play it right, but I did sing it. Zilphia had taught me the song when she was North in 1946, I believe, almost ten years earlier. Uh, and I printed it in our little song magazine, uh, *People's Songs*. I didn't print it right. What really made the song spread was Guy Carawan and Frank Hamilton learning to put it in a special kind of rhythm. It's called 12/8 time. You know, when you have four beats per measure, and if you want to make the notes faster, you usually double them. So, instead of 1-2-3-4, it's 1-and-2-and-3-and-4. But 12/8 time means that you triple each one of those beats: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3.

And, uh, I had known the time. I had used it when I'd sing, "Jacob's Ladder." [Sings] "We are [claps 2-2-3, 3-2-3, 4-2-3] climbing [claps 2-2-3, 3-2-3, 4-2-3] Jacob's [claps 2-2-3, 3-2-3, 4-2-3] ladder [claps 2-2-3, 3-2-3, 4-2-3]." So, it was not unknown to me.

But Frank Hamilton and Guy Carawan, Guy Car-a-wan – I hope you get the spelling right – way back in 1960, or before that, had been learning gospel songs at a local Baptist church, and they got into these subtle variations in rhythm. Uh, rhythm is such an important part of African American music, as it is, of course, in African music.

JM: Yeah.

PS: A song isn't a song unless you know, get the rhythm right. You might have the melody exactly right, but if you don't have the rhythm right, you don't have the song right.

JM: [Laughs] But I think I remember, um, where you have written that, um, well, Anne Braden was there as well, and she was driving Dr. King.

PS: Yes.

JM: After that '57 meeting.

PS: That's right. She drove him north and, going through Tennessee, uh, she remembers him sitting in the backseat, [singing], "We Shall Overcome." That song really sticks with you, doesn't it?

JM: Yeah.

PS: I didn't sing it a great deal, but, uh, I sang it, uh, more. And then, in 1960, Guy Carawan was the fulltime man in charge of music at Highlander, and he decided to have a weekend called "Singing in the Movement." And there were people there, mostly young people, from Maine – pardon me – from Texas, uh, to Florida to Virginia [laughs]. Uh, they came from all over. There must have been about fifty or sixty people there. They raised the money for the fare somehow. And we sang from Friday evening all through Saturday and ended, finally going home on Sunday. And "We Shall Overcome" was the hit of the weekend with that new rhythm.

[20:00]

Uh, it was about five weeks later when the, uh, organization was started in Raleigh, North Carolina, for young people. Now, you tell me the exact name.

JM: SNCC.

PS: SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And somebody shouted from the crowd, "Guy, teach us all 'We Shall Overcome.'" And he did, and they – that's when they adopted the idea of cross your hands, and your right hand grasps the left hand of the person to your left, and your left hand grasps the right hand of the person to your right, and you're closer together, your shoulders touch, and you sway slowly from right to left. And this also is a great African tradition. And, uh, you move your body when you sing. You don't just sing, no matter what a glorious voice you have. You sing, and you get harmony.

Uh, and it was three years later I was able to give a concert in Carnegie Hall before taking my family overseas. Uh, we, we visited thirty-five countries around the world, across the Pacific, uh, to Australia, then up to Indonesia, then to Japan, where Toshi's [Seeger's wife] father accompanied us [someone coughs] and saw his own family that he had not visited for *fifty* years. And his older sister kneeled down with her head touching the concrete and would not rise until he said, "Please rise, sister." He was the oldest male in the family, and many of his brothers and sisters had died, and, of course, his parents had died.

But anyway, uh, that Carnegie Hall concert – I got a number of my neighbors here in Beacon, uh, black and white, uh, to, uh, come down. I guess I must have paid their fare, uh, and I had an afternoon of rehearsal with them. Some sat on my left; some sat on my right. Nobody sat in the back – all they'd see was my rear end. [Laughter]

But, uh, I said, "If you get the answerback in the harmony –" you know, answerback is such an important part of African American music, whether it's pop songs or jazz or gospel songs. [Sings] "De-de-du-du-du-du-du-du, [repeats] de-de-du-du-du-du-du-du," one voice answering another. Uh, and, uh, so I said, "If you get the answerback right, and, uh, there'll be mikes on you as well as on me, then I think we'll get this audience singing."

And, uh, the Columbia Record Company shelled out the cash. Uh, you know, it's not a nice story to tell, but you know if you want to record at Carnegie, you have to pay *one hundred thousand dollars* to the stage crew. They're union members, and this is the union rules.

[Laughter] One hundred thousand dollars if you want to –

JM: But they put up the money?

PS: So, Columbia had the record – and we had John Hammond Jr. He was quite an extraordinary man. I didn't find out until recently he was the great-grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt.

JM: Huh, how about that?

PS: [Laughs] His mother was a granddaughter of – but, uh, she'd gotten religion and hardly looked at her son, so he was raised by servants. And, uh, as a teenager, would go down South and listen to street singers and so on. That's where he found Brownie McGhee [Walter Brown McGhee] and Sonny Terry. And he had them sing at the concert he put on to raise money for, of all things, the *New Masses*, a Communist magazine, [25:00] in 1938. I was up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That's – in my last few weeks at Harvard. But he, uh, the concert was called "From Spirituals to Swing." I think Count Basie's orchestra was there, but I may be wrong. It might have been another swing band. And he had a variety of extraordinary musicians.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JB: So, he put up the money for –?

PS: What?

JB: So, Hammond put up the money for –?

JM: Columbia.

PS: Well, "Spirituals to Swing," I think John Hammond raised that separately.

JM: Yeah.

PS: That was for the *New Masses*. And my concert was in 1963, and I was briefly a Columbia recording artist.

JM: Was that – your appearance at Carnegie – uh, were the SNCC Freedom Singers with you on that occasion?

PS: I'm not sure.

JM: Hmm.

PS: My memory isn't good. But they might have been with me, because it was in '60, I believe, that Bernice [Johnson] was expelled from the local college in Albany, Georgia, and, uh

–

JM: You were in Albany –

PS: Now, wait a minute, wait a minute.

JM: You were in Albany in '62.

PS: Yeah, and I didn't do a very good job. I remember –

JM: Why do you say you didn't do a good job? [Laughter]

PS: I said, uh, "You should know that all kinds of people have different songs." Uh, and I said, "For example, white people came over here with old ballads from England," and I sang them some English ballads. And, uh, somebody leaned over to Cordell Reagon, who later married Bernice. He said, "If this is white folks' music, I'd say I don't think much of it." [Laughter]

JM: Yeah. So, you didn't get quite the crowd response that you thought you might down there, addressing all these civil rights SNCC folks down in Albany?

PS: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. But out of that came your relationship with Bernice Johnson.

PS: That's exactly right. Uh, she and, uh, Cordell and that tall man, who now lives in Kentucky, a good songwriter, and another man, but I can't remember their names. Oh, I'd gone

to the office of, uh – in Atlanta and said, “You know, just like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, these singers could raise a lot of money for you, traveling around.” And that’s when they started the Freedom Singers.

And in ’63, Toshi and I were getting ready to go overseas. I think we left in late July, went to Hawaii first, or maybe we went to the West Coast, sang in California, and then Hawaii, and then went on across the Pacific, stopped at Samoa, two Samoas, and, uh, then to Australia, and so on.

JM: Um-hmm.

PS: Uh, sang for our supper, as I said, it was over thirty countries.

JM: Yeah.

PS: Uh, but Toshi had the names and addresses of all the colleges I’d been singing to, so it was a matter of just a couple of days work to send out letters or recordings, maybe, uh, of the Freedom Singers to large numbers. It could have been over a hundred she sent and gave them the address or the telephone number of Bernice. So, Toshi set up their first tour. And, uh, that’s why a year or two later, Bernice named her daughter Toshi.

JM: That’s right.

PS: Toshi is the best organizer in the family. I’m – uh, get lots of ideas, but I’m not a good organizer.

JM: [Laughs] When you came back from that long overseas tour, um, by summer of ’64, you were in Mississippi. [30:00]

PS: I guess so.

JM: Yeah.

PS: I’ve forgotten where exactly.

JM: Places like Hattiesburg and Meridian [Mississippi].

PS: Yeah. I met Bill Kunstler in the airplane, and we landed in Jackson, Mississippi. I remember when I was saying a couple of things, I saw the body of the man in the seat in front of me stiffen, as though he was probably outraged at some of the things I was saying. And, sure enough, he was waiting for us in the anteroom outside the airport. There was a little place where people take off their overcoats or whatever.

And he said, "You've come down here to sing for the niggers?" I said, "I hope I can sing for everybody who wants to hear me." He said, "Well, you better watch your step. If we weren't here, I'd knock the shit out of you." But there was a *Look* magazine reporter with me, and I guess he didn't know exactly where he was from, and so I was saved that time. And I, uh, might have been in danger, but I did what I was told.

JM: Yeah.

PS: Uh, I went down two or three times, as I remember. Uh, and I was in singing to about two hundred people in a church when they gave me a piece of paper that said, "They've found the bodies of [Andrew] Goodman, [Michael] Schwerner, and [James] Chaney." And, uh, I made this announcement. There was no shouting. There was no, uh, anger. I saw lips moving in prayer. And, uh, I think I sang this song that Fred Hellerman made up, "O healing river, send down your waters. Send down your waters upon this land." Fran Minkoff [Frances Minkoff] wrote the words up in Long Island, and Fred put the melody of it. It's a beautiful song.

JM: Yeah. Any other things stand out when you think back to Mississippi and that Freedom Summer?

PS: I don't know whether it was that summer or when, but, uh, after the killings, uh, in Selma when they tried to have a march to Montgomery, uh, they ended up getting permission,

formal permission, and they said there would be helicopters overhead to make sure it was safe. And Toshi and I were invited; in fact, I've kept the copy of the telegram from King: "The federal government and the courts have spoken, and we will march from Selma to Montgomery on such-and-such a date." And we answered back and said, "We're coming."

We actually didn't start from the center of Selma. I think it was a mile or so outside of town, and we joined about three hundred people, I'd say, maybe more. And, uh, it was raining half the time, but – King and other people were up in the front. We were about halfway down. Uh, I remember Harry Belafonte standing by the side at one and urging us on.

Oh, you'd find out that, uh, the new way of singing "We Shall Overcome." That was the first time I heard it that way. Uh, you'd – not everyone likes "We Shall Overcome." The great playwright – what's her name now? She wrote Broadway hits. She said, "'Someday, someday' – that's been said too long." Lillian Hellman!

JM: Yeah.

PS: Uh, and, uh, probably there were [35:00] others who felt this way. At any rate, we'd sing "We Shall Overcome," and right after it, somebody would shout, "What do we want?" And the whole crowd would shout at the top of their lungs, "Freedom!" "When do we want it?" "Now!" [Laughs] And that took away the softness of "Someday, someday, someday." And, uh, I remember the helicopters overhead flying over the cornfields on either side, as though to watch for somebody with a rifle.

JM: Um. Yeah. [Clears throat] Should we –?

JB: I'm going to stop.

JM: Let's take a little break for a minute, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

PS: Like that on the river.

JM: Yeah.

PS: I have a song, [sings] “Fifty sail on Newburgh Bay, Waiting for the wind and tide.”

JM: Um.

PS: They couldn’t get past Storm King until the tide changed or the wind.

JM: Yeah.

PS: But with both the wind and tide against them –

JM: Um.

PS: They’re making pretty good time.

JM: Sure is pretty.

JB: Joe, will you just note that that’s the Clearwater?

JM: Sure, that is the Clearwater, that sloop in the river.

PS: Don McLean wrote “Bye-Bye, Miss American Pie” as a local Clearwater fundraiser.

JM: Is that right?

JB: Is that where that came from? “Drove my Chevy to the levee?”

PS: Yeah.

JM: You had mentioned earlier the, um, that vivid recollection of the big rally at the UN,
where Reverend King had –

PS: Yes.

JM: Given the address just the day after Riverside.

PS: Yeah.

JM: And, um, like Dr. King, you really thought about these issues of social justice in a,
in a, in a fashion that brought these concerns together as one common broad arena of effort: um,

nonviolence, antiwar, environment, social justice, racial equality. Um, I'm interested in your thoughts about –

PS: And women.

JM: And women, certainly, yeah. Um, interested in your thoughts about the late '60s in the United States and, um, thinking of the shift towards, um, the way SNCC came apart a little bit, um, the movement took a different direction, Dr. King began to lift his voice on economic and foreign policy issues.

PS: Yes. King undoubtedly knew that he'd be assassinated by some local person or somebody high up, uh, and that's why he gave that final speech. He knew he didn't have long and, uh, and saying, "Now –" in effect, he was saying, "You, you have to pick up the torch."

JM: Yeah. [Pause]

PS: Nobody knows if there will be a human race here in a hundred years. Kurt Vonnegut, uh, was so pessimistic he didn't think there would be a human race here. I tell people I think we have a fifty-fifty chance. Uh, I think *if* we are still here, it will be *large* numbers – whether it's hundreds of thousands or millions, I don't know – of *small* things that do it, a few people sitting in an office somewhere, more likely, a few people, uh, doing something together locally.

For example, a woman here in this town of Beacon had a – tried in several ways bringing black and white together. And she – [40:00] her husband was dead, and, uh, she was retired. But she got together with some other women and said, "There should be one day a year when, uh, Main Street could be closed, and we'll have – we can call it the Spirit of Beacon Day."

They, uh, invited, they charged ten dollars for any organization that wanted to get about twelve feet along the sidewalk, to put up a table, and they could sell food, or they could play a

record, or have a piece of paper. They called up first, I think, twenty-four churches, white and black, and Latino, and conservative, and radical, uh, and so, they were on. And then, they had the middleclass organizations, the Kiwanis, the Lions, the American Legion, and they also invited our little Beacon Clearwater Club, the Beacon Sloop Club.

And, uh, at twelve o'clock the police set up barriers. If you wanted to go from east to west or west to east, you had to leave Main Street and go down one of the side streets. Uh, and the first time it was done they had a few hundred people there. And the next year it was twice as many, and the next year it was twice as many. And now, I think now about two-thirds of the town is there, like ten thousand people are there, and there's dancing going on and different kinds of music.

And I think I'll be down there with my friends, uh, helping the kids group. They're now eleven-year-olds. They started when they were nine-year-olds. Uh, maybe they're twelve now. They call themselves the River Town Kids. And they're not only singing some of the songs I taught them, but they're making up new songs and they're singing some old songs.

And, uh, by one, I think by twelve-thirty, uh, they have a parade. In the beginning, it was just the fire engine and the ambulance, but next year it was the fire engine, the ambulance, and some people. Now the parade is an hour long, [laughter] and everybody wants to be in the parade.

JM: Yeah.

PS: And after the parade, then is when they, this improvising – in fact, uh, some women from a Hindu temple now in beautifully colored saris, they're dancing on a platform, with a tape recording of music from India and two hundred people watching them and applauding.

JM: Yeah.

PS: To think that this was a narrow-minded little factory town until, I guess, World War II. It started with a Dutch girl. Uh, I don't know why – this isn't what you're talking – well, in a way, it's, it's the same thing that produced the Civil Rights Movement, uh, people of different backgrounds getting together. Like Viola Liuzzo was Italian American, mother of five, I'm told, and she came down from Detroit and risked getting assassinated and did get assassinated.

JM: Yeah.

PS: Here in Beacon, nobody got assassinated, but, uh – oh, I know what sparked it off! Yes! It was sparked off because there was a, uh, there was a high school race riot.

JM: Ah.

PS: There was a high school race riot, and these women decided, "Let's, uh, get people." And they started with the churches and the respectable groups. Now literally anybody can – the town is a town of [45:00] fourteen thousand, but ten thousand of them are out there. Of course, some are grumbling, "Oh, this town is going to hell," but the kids are saying, "Hey, it's fun, Dad. You ought to come down." [Laughter]

JM: Let me, let me ask a final question for me. John may have questions as well. I'm just interested in what you think these days about our situation. Here we have our first black President, and yet we're embroiled in complicated and long-running war. And I'm just curious about your perspective, thinking about this long arc of history.

PS: Well, we knew there would be compromises. I didn't think he would make so many. However, I'm not a great politician, and it might be that those are the kind of compromises that have to be made. On the other hand, I think if I'd had my brains about me when I – the one time I did see Obama and his wife when I sang that, when I led the crowd in singing "This Land Is Your Land," I'd say, "Don't try –" I would have said, "Don't try and get reelected in 2012. Do

the best job you possibly can and you *will* get reelected in 2016, because there'll be such a contrast between what you do and what they do in 2012." As it is, he may – very possibly won't get reelected, which is a, "See? He didn't make enough compromises." And that won't be the lesson.

JM: Yeah. John, any thoughts –?

JB: No, we've covered –

PS: Yes, I could have done that.

JB: Hmm?

PS: I did speak to him [President Obama] all of ten seconds.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PS: He said to me, "Mr. Seeger, my mother played me your records at age four."

JM: Yeah.

PS: I said, "Don't try and get elected in 2012 and you *will* get reelected in 2016."

JM: [Laughs] What was his reaction?

PS: I *should* have said that.

JM: Oh, you should have said that, right. Right.

PS: I should have said that, but I didn't.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JB: There are a lot of times you should have said something, and it just comes out – after the moment, you got it.

JM: Well, you've said so much through your music and otherwise, and it, um, has sort of picked up and carried our history along. It's a real honor and a privilege to be with you. Thank you.

PS: Well, thank you, and I'm glad to hear that you're going to help this nation remember, uh, that extraordinary man. He had only thirteen years to do what he could do. Of course, Lincoln only had five years. Um.

JM: Yeah. Thank you.

PS: Oh!

JB: Yes?

PS: Let me tell you another story about –

JM: Please.

PS: Which should be interesting – maybe this could help you. I always thought that Rutherford B. Hayes was the worst President we ever had, because he, uh, allowed the troops to go back North after the Civil War and, uh, didn't try to push through the changes with the troops down there. Incidentally, uh, the song "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore," uh, was in a book called *Slave Songs* written by an officer, a Northern officer, who was stationed in Georgia, southeast Georgia.

Uh, but, uh, there had been a lot of, uh, scandals in Grant's second administration. Grant was fairly honest, I believe, but the people he was told to appoint were not, and there was one scandal after another after another after another after another in his second term. And the Republicans felt sure they would not get reelected unless they found somebody squeaky clean. They found it in a governor of Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes, who, uh, had had an [50:00] absolutely impeccable history in Ohio.

And they said when they were running it was a dead tie, uh, and, uh, in the Electoral College. And then the election was thrown into the House, and again it was a dead tie. And Republicans, uh, found one Democrat who would vote for Hayes *if* he would withdraw federal

troops from the South. And it's possible that Hayes might have said, "Well, I could resign right now, but then they'd do it anyway." And he was a lawyer. He felt this kind of job should be done by talking anyway, not by guns. He knew the governor of Louisiana, and they both agreed that if they had schools for ex-slaves, uh, sooner or later, they'd all be voting again. But the Ku Klux Klan was too strong. And, uh, so he was out of office.

However, he liked to make speeches. And he'd jump into one of these – they had this new invention called a railroad – and he gave a speech somewhere. Eight years after he was out of office, the Supreme Court made a very important decision. They said, "There's no capital punishment for corporations." Up until that time, the State could hand, give out a charter, and if they didn't like what the corporation was doing, they could take the charter away – but, uh, not after 1888.

And, uh, Rutherford B. Hayes made a speech somewhere: "Face it! We no longer have a government of the people, by the people, for the people. We have a government of corporations, by corporations, for corporations." *Way* back then!

JM: Yes.

PS: Only radicals made that kind of statement, uh, farmers trying to get better deal for farmers, or unions trying to get a better deal on the job.

JM: Yeah. Yeah, indeed, I'm thinking of, um – you mentioned farmers. You did early work with music and puppet theater around farm strikes here in the Valley.

PS: Half a mile from where we're sitting was a radical summer camp for – uh, put together mainly by Jewish garment workers. And it was called Camp Nit Gedeiget, meaning "no worry" in Yiddish, uh, way back in the '20s. But in the '30s they decided to make some compromises. They called it Camp Beacon.

And I and three others had put together a little puppet troupe, and we had some funny things. We also had a skit, uh, where Governor Dewey has cut the education budget, and now, without sufficient education, Pinocchio gets in trouble. [Laughter] We also, uh, had a skit we'd written about farmers not getting paid enough. And, sure enough, in August, the Dairy Farmers Union went on strike, and we had a skit all ready for it.

Uh, he farmer is milking the cow and he says, "I don't know what to do! My wife has taken the children and left." He says, "I can't afford to feed them anymore. Uh, but they're only paying me two cents a quart for milk. They're selling it in New York for twelve cents a quart. *Somebody* is making some money." And the cow says, "Well, you're very foolish not to get together with the other farmers. If you all stick together, you'll be able to demand a better price." So, the cow was the Union organizer, [laughter] and I played the part of the cow up there. [Laughter] They were hand puppets.

And we went from strike meeting to strike meeting. It was exciting. And, uh, we didn't charge money for it. We passed the hat. And they didn't have much money, but they'd give us a nickel or a dime, and some people even a quarter, which was a lot of money then. That was probably like five dollars, isn't 'cause a nickel was an ice cream cone or a Hershey bar. [55:00] That's what it was back then.

JM: Um-hmm, yeah. John, anything?

JB: No. I – that was a wonderful –

PS: Let me think. Oh! Do you know Stacey White in Mississippi?

JM: No.

PS: Well, she has an annual get-together to remember Fannie Lou Hamer and the things that went on back in those days. Uh, I've got her telephone number in there, so before you leave

–

JM: Thank you.

PS: I'm not sure when. I don't think it's in the dead of summer. I think it's in the spring, but it might be in the fall.

JM: And you've attended, in the past?

PS: No, I've never attended but I've –

JM: But you remember Ms. Hamer?

PS: I've sent contributions to them.

JM: Sure. Yeah. Any thought about Ms. Hamer?

PS: Well, simply, that this is the kind of heroism which it took. Medgar Evers, too. You know, they knew that there were people going to try and assassinate them. She was beaten so badly that a few years later she died of her injuries. And, of course, those three who were not just killed but terribly beaten before they were killed – they finally got the evidence on the man who organized the killing. Actually, there was an FBI man there the whole time, and, uh, he could have gone to – probably did go to J. Edgar Hoover, but Hoover said, “Oh, they're probably all Communists anyway.” [Dog barks]

JM: Yeah. Well, let me thank you so much for welcoming us and allowing us to visit. It's really been a privilege to be with you. Thank you.

JB: Yes, thanks.

PS: [Speaking to JB] And you're hot.

JB: I am hot. I – the sun's getting on, but that's just –

JM: The sun's getting on –

PS: I'll take the –

JM: It's just lovely. Thank you.

[Recording ends at 57:22]

END OF INTERVIEW