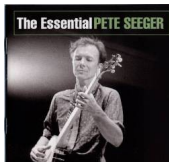


Pete Seeger - The Essential Pete Seeger (2005)

Written by bluelover

Tuesday, 28 January 2014 16:41 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 May 2017 15:22

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1. *If I Had A Hammer* 2. *Goodnight Irene - The Weavers* 3. *Barbara Allen* 4. *Talking Union - The Almanac Singers* 5. *Wimoweh (Mbube)* 6. *John Henry* 7. *Little Boxes* 8. *Michael Row The Boat Ashore* 9. *This Land Is Your Land* 10. *Guantanamera* 11. *Where Have All The Flowers Gone?* 12. *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)* 13. *The Bells Of Rhymney* 14. *Waist Deep In The Big Muddy* 15. *We Shall Overcome* Pete Seeger – banjo, guitars, vocals Fred Hellerman – banjo, vocals Lee Hays – vocals Ronnie Gilbert – vocals

The Essential Pete Seeger is perfect: perfect for people who are comfortable with abdicating the freedom of determining what is or isn't essential for themselves. You don't distill one of Mom's freshly baked apple pies down to a fat-free cookie and call it "essential' apple pie." The reason is not because the cookie isn't delicious, but because the word "essential" connotes "this is all you need." And as undeniable as the music on The Essential Pete Seeger is, suggesting 15 songs on a single disc is definitive for a life as multi-faceted and enduring as Seeger's is ludicrous. As a friend of mine just pointed out, Kenny Loggins' Essential collection is a two-disc marathon! Surely, more could have been done with this project.

Granted, it's a much different world from when Seeger recorded "Goodnight Irene" with the Weavers in 1950. Every facet of American life has accelerated to the point where this kind of reduction feels completely warranted and even desirable. Who's got the time anymore? If you're jonesing for canonized, pivotal American folk music and you want it hot and fast, this collection is definitely where it's at. But is that really what you want? If there are actually people out there jonesing for iconic folk music, aren't they also the kind of people who tend to avoid cursory overviews of important artists? Wouldn't they already have definitive versions of "This Land Is Your Land", "If I Had a Hammer", and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"?

Even the liner notes are of the pithy, VH-1 flashback variety. A collection of endorsements and

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testimonials features everyone from Joan Baez and Billy Bragg to the Dropkick Murphys' Ken Casey. They're nice enough, as are Dave Marsh's brief opening notes, but they also feel essential-ized, extracted from larger conversations and debates that would prove more insightful and rewarded if presented in full. Maybe it's a lure, giving you just enough of a tease to make you think, "I really should investigate his catalog further." And thank heavens if it does. To be fair, Legacy's website does offer a good deal of his in-print Columbia catalog for very affordable prices. But the disc itself is presented in such a way to make think that all the messy work of exploration and immersion has been done for you, and now you need look no further. Each selection seems to put a cap on a different mood and style. The Guthrie-inspired 1941 Almanac Singers' recording of "Talking Union" showcases his radical and humane politics, while "Guantanamo" and "Wimoweh" represent his forays into world music and his work to bring it to the attention of U.S. audiences. And then there's Seeger's adaptation of passages from the Book of Ecclesiastes, "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season)", made popular by the Byrds, but timeless and achingly good in any incarnation on the strength of Seeger's music.

Each individual selection on its own merits full marks, and there are more nefarious schemes being plotted out in the world than repackaging and presenting Pete Seeger songs to a new audience. But one of the most gratifying aspects of the live-recorded selections like "Michael Row the Boat Ashore", and "Little Boxes" is the audience participation and interaction, adults and children hanging on every word and note, laughing and singing along. As David Marsh writes, "If Pete Seeger had a plan, you could boil it down to this: Encourage more people to sing more songs. More people listening to one another. More people singing and saying things worth hearing." Reconcile that with Sony's big fat FBI anti-piracy stickers and protections that imply: keep it to yourself, don't share it, stay in your houses. Yikes. If you really want to honor Seeger's music, do the opposite. Learn it, sing it, spread it. Make it more than a time capsule or quick-fix summation; make it more than essential. --- Michael Metivier, popmatters.com

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