

**Translating Pete Seeger:
The challenge of recreating an American legend
in all its popular glory and complexity**

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TRANSLATING PETE SEEGER: THE CHALLENGE OF RECREATING AN AMERICAN LEGEND IN ALL ITS POPULAR GLORY AND COMPLEXITY

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Abstract

The oral historian Studs Terkel has called Pete Seeger “America’s tuning fork” and many US historians have referred to Seeger as America’s conscience. In this paper we consider the challenges of translating from English to Spanish Seeger’s unique musical autobiography *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* (SingOut! Publications 1994) which has involved collaborating with Seeger (our suggested title of the as yet unpublished book, *¿Qué habrá sido de las flores?*). The book is written in a folksy, easy to read style as Seeger discusses complex issues which concern US culture and politics, though not necessarily in that order. Seeger’s unflagging faith in the popular *hoi polloi* betrays a highly literate thinker whose background reflects more affinity to Boston Brahmin than to the working class socialist tradition that Seeger celebrates in his songs, discourse and public persona. Translating this work involves combining literary and technical-scientific theories, providing a unique challenge to the translator.

TRADUCIENDO A PETE SEEGER: EL DESAFÍO DE RECREAR UN MITO ESTADOUNIDENSE SIN PERDER SU BRILLO Y COMPLEJIDAD

Resumen

El cantautor, ecologista y activista Pete Seeger ha sido considerado «el diapasón de los Estados Unidos» y también un artista que mezcla elementos políticos y crítica social en su canción y discurso. En esta comunicación consideramos el reto de traducir el libro autobiográfico de Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* (SingOut! Publications 1994), del inglés al castellano (nuestro título propuesto de la obra traducida aun sin publicarse *¿Qué habrá sido de las flores?*) que pretende repasar más de siete décadas de carrera musical y activismo en un libro insólito que incluye muchas canciones. Sugerimos que el acercarse a esta obra implica el recurrir a teorías traductológicas tanto literarias como científicas ya que el libro intenta ser popular mientras dialoga sobre temas culturales y políticos bien complejos.

Introduction:

To discuss the life and work of Pete Seeger at a translation congress may surprise some delegates. Indeed, the name Seeger would fit more easily into a folk music context. Perhaps my colleagues will have heard some of his songs such as “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” and “Turn, Turn, Turn,” either sung by Pete himself or else a legion of other artists ranging from The Byrds to Marlene Dietrich. You may also be familiar with the five-string banjo through the unique style that Pete Seeger developed. Indeed, his tall thin physique has even been equated with the banjo he plays (Cantwell). Some may know of Seeger’s early experience on the road where he met Woody Guthrie and Huddie Ledbetter, who both became strong influences and collaborators in Seeger’s early career. In this paper I will discuss Pete’s music within the context of a translation project which involved both him and me. I would like to share what I have learned from this collaborative effort. I should mention before I begin that I am a professional translator and amateur folksinger and musician.

Certainly Pete Seeger comes from a rich family tradition of music scholars and practitioners. His father Charles Seeger has been credited with founding the modern social science of ethnomusicology. As philosopher and social activist, Charles Seeger helped organize the New York City-based Composers Collective in the 1930s and also founded the American Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology. His ideas about music and musicology, which incorporated perspectives as wide-ranging as physics, philosophy, and anthropology, led directly to the rise of what we now refer to as ethnomusicology. As musicologist Helen Rees has noted, Charles Seeger was a scholar-musician active in nearly every area of music.

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953), Charles Seeger’s second wife, was a significant 20th century American female composer. Along with Aaron Copland, she led the 1920s musical avant-garde, and was the first woman awarded a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in music composition. But her legacy extends beyond modern music. Collaborating with poet Carl Sandburg on folk song arrangements in the twenties, and with folk-song collectors John and Alan Lomax in the 1930s, she emerged as a central figure in the US folk music revival. She also campaigned for social change in the 30s and fought for progressive causes throughout her final twenty years on planet earth. Her pioneering project on children’s music,

which culminated in the anthology “American Folk Songs for Children” laid the groundwork for many of today’s children’s classics including Old Paint, By'm Bye, Jim Along Josie, There Was a Man and He Was Mad, Riding in the Buggy, Miss Mary Jane, Old Joe Clarke, Roll That Brown Jug Down to Town, She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain, Juba, Run, Chillen, Run , All Around the Kitchen, Frog Went A-Courtin', The Juniper Tree, This Old Man, Skip-a to My Lou, Where Oh Where is Pretty Little Susie (Pawpaw Patch). These songs were among the proverbial porridge that sustained my own childhood singing tradition. As I have rendered them and their musical cousins on the guitar myself over the last 25 years or so, I have found they strike a familiar chord with other US citizens with whom have I sung and shared songs.

Charles and Ruth had two more musical offspring. Like their half-brother Pete, Mike



and Peggy Seeger are consummate musicians dedicated principally to folk music although Peggy is also well-known for the political song network she championed in London with her late husband and musical partner Ewan MacColl. Both Peggy and Mike are extraordinary banjo players, although Mike also plays an array of other instruments. He has also followed in his mother’s footsteps, researching and recording many old-time musicians across the rural South.

Internationalism as a translation motor

All these Seegers could be drawn together under an internationalist banner. In their varied musical ventures, the Seegers and Crawford Seegers have all dug for the roots of their tunes and found links that bind our common human condition. For example, Ruth Crawford Seeger’s famous “Juba up and juba down, juba dancing all around” a rhythmic masterpiece performed masterfully by her son Mike accompanied by an ancient jaw’s harp commemorates the African tradition that underpins much of US traditional folk music and even pop song.

But it is Pete and Peggy who have most sought to link their songs to social crusades for a fairer world. Peggy is a prolific songwriter with a powerful voice. For Pete, the campaigns for a cleaner and more peaceful planet has led him to forage through the folk song and traditions of many lands. In this sense, he is a true internationalist although not necessarily a gifted linguist. More on this later when I discuss the challenge of translating Pete' s writing.

Inspiration gives way to Translation

For the purposes of this paper, it is worth noting that Pete Seeger' s link to Spain—and to the author of this paper living in Spain for most of the past twenty five years-- emanates from the heroic battlefield of Gandesa, where, in song at least, a raggle taggle band of socialists and well-meaning humanists would fight the good fight to “defeat fascism,” as Seeger put it on countless occasions. With Almanac and Weaver-bandmate Fred Hellerman picking out an irresistible lead guitar on the acoustic guitar, Pete churns out a convincing flamenco solo on the five-string banjo. They created a force of purpose on “Si me quieres escribir,” “Venga jaleo” and “La Quince Brigada” that would immortalize the struggle on that hallowed front of fronts. As with Rafael Alberti' s “A galopar” powered by Paco Ibáñez music, everyone wanted to be part of the struggle to rid the world of the roots of Nazi terror and hatred. Pete and Moses Asch of Folkways Records provide that opportunity. Here is the text of “La Quince Brigada” as it appeared in the People' s Songbook way back in the 1950s. Despite the grammatical and spelling errors, the Almanac rendering packed a punch:

LA QUINCE BRIGADA

Viva la Quince Brigada, *rhumbala, rhumbala, rhumbala.*
Que se ha cubierta de gloria, *ay Manuela, Ay Manuela*

Luchamos contra los Morros, *rhumbala, rhumbala, rhumbala.*
Mercenarios y fascistas, *ay Manuela, ay Manuela*

Solo es nuestro deseo, *rhumbala, rhumbala, rhumbala*
Acabar con el fascismo, *ay Manuela, ay Manuela*

En el frentes de Jarama, *rhumbala, rhumbala rhumbala*
No tenemos ni aviones, ni tankes, ni canones, *ay Manuela!*

Ya salimos de Espana, *rhumbala, rhumbala, rhumbala*
Por luchar en otras frentes, *ay Manuela, ay Manuela!*

In tribute to the international Lincoln Battalion, Seeger and Hellerman sing the Woody Guthrie classic “Valley in Spain called Jarama”, set to the most All-American of all tunes “Red River Valley” (Canadian folklorist Edith Fowkes has traced the tune back to Britain). It is worth noting that Pete Seeger’s engaging musical legacy is linked, in the public eye, to both these songs. In less politically engaged circles, his singing of “Red River Valley” rivals the work of Burl Ives as pure Americana. “Jarama” of course, is cherished by all those who recall the attack at Peekskill and who, like the Weavers in their day, and more recently John McCutcheon, Si Kahn, Ani Di Franco, Ruth Pelham and so many others who believe that a good song can change the world in a profoundly spiritual and political way. Oral historian Studs Terkel has called Pete Seeger “America’s tuning fork” and many have referred to Pete as America’s conscience. At least in his public statements, Pete has always avoided dividing his fans into non-political and involved activists and has joked about his own role as a crusading artist for a more just world. There is no doubt, however, that his on-going Clearwater Sloop campaign to clean up the Hudson River, for example, and his anti-war stance have both inspired millions to march and express their voices.

It is important to remember the Weavers and the Almanac Singers because Pete Seeger has never been an isolated player in his campaigning work. In fact, the People’s Song network that he started with Irwin Silver, Ronnie Gilbert and Lee Hays in the late 1940s would fall victim to the McCarthy anti-communist witch hunts, but give way to a less directly political *Sing Out* magazine which today champions international folk and roots music and also supports a more just society within the USA and beyond its borders.

In fact, the People’s Song movement inspired legions of folksingers and musicians for years to come. An academic folk rebel named Gene Bluestein from the University of California (Fresno) would eventually coin a school of thought which encapsulated what Pete and his colleagues, such as Barbara Dane, Jean Ritchie, Woody Guthrie and others were up to. Bluestein called it “poplore” describing a movement of folk singers and musicians who revitalized folklore by consciously extolling the virtues of the common soul. Based to a great extent on the work of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Bluestein’s work would see the light of publication in the 1990s with what, a decade later,

seems rather evident but worth asserting anyway: that there is nothing isolated anymore and that we are all interconnected. In this sense, Bluestein recognized early on the syncretic relationships between a grandmother singing a baby to sleep in an isolated Namibian village with Elvis Presley crooning on the radio. Although the obviously dominant influence that the world's rich exert over the poor concerned Bluestein in this scenario, he confidently predicted that smaller communities would develop beyond market force hegemonies.

As noted, many in Spain many have been affected by Pete Seeger's singing and his politics, and even more have been inspired by the work of those folksingers considered Pete's musical offspring, including Bob Dylan. So poplorist theory could be extended to include other cultures as I have done in my study of Spanish folksingers since 1979. To fit into Bluestein's model as an artist, you have to be open to world currents. The poplorist figure I chose for my research was Luis Eduardo Aute. This work on Aute and his contemporaries culminated in a doctoral dissertation in 2001 and also a book called *De la luz y la sombra: latido de una canción* (published in 2003). Both Pete Seeger and Aute's assistance were crucial in researching both projects.

I chose Aute partly because he openly acknowledges his debt to Dylan both in interviews and in his very songs--he even accuses himself of being a Dylan plagiarist in one song entitled "Siglo XXI" (The 21st Century) from the early 1990s. Aute is also interesting from a linguistic perspective because he speaks not only Spanish, but English, French and Tagalo fluently (he grew up in Manila) and thus fully understands the texts of the US, British and French-speaking artists he worships. When Aute cites his heroes in song, from Dylan and Leonard Cohen to Jacques Brel, he does this in a most interesting and engaging way.

I say Aute worships these other authors because Bluestein's work consciously blurs the distinction we make between fans and performers and even questions the general notion of professional and amateur. Perhaps Seeger best exemplifies this blurring with his tendency to play down his own music as a hodgepodge or stew of influences that he serves up with his own special relish.

The Challenge of translating Pete Seeger

While researching Aute and socially critical brand of contemporary song in Spain and the US I contacted Pete Seeger in 1999. I should note that I was already a longtime Seeger fan and

my love for his music and the folk style he championed only increased when I came to study in Madrid in 1979. The Transition years I lived as a student were filled with hope and contradiction, but for me they were also a wonderful time to be a folksinger. For my friends among the radical chemistry faculty at the Complutense, Pete Seeger was a bellwether.

Anyway, I finally interviewed Pete Seeger at his house overlooking the Hudson in Beacon, upstate New York, in the summer of 1999. We spent a day talking about songs and social causes and how these two phenomena were related. My questions drew on the data I had culled from Pete's musical autobiography *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* which Pete mentioned that he was interested in translating into Spanish. He also said a Barcelona publisher had approached him about this project. Although I generally work as a medical translator, I expressed my interest and Pete provided the contact publisher in Cataluña. There was one small catch, Pete mentioned in passing. The original autobiography, which came out in 1993 through Sing Out publications, was too long, in Pete's opinion and so he was in the process of cutting it in half for another edition. He asked if I would like to help in the editing process as well as translate? Not only would I get to translate my hero's work, but I could provide input into the editing process. This proved to be the most interesting translation process I was ever involved in although our final product still has not been published.

One challenge in seeing the book through was that Pete does not use email so correspondence was carried on through paper post (snail mail, for pessimists!) and fax machines. Although this slowed us down, it also gave the work a lot more personal touch.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of translating Pete Seeger's autobiography has been finding a consistent style. For all his efforts to present a folksy style, Pete deals with such a wide range of social and political issues in his work, that he comes over as an intellectual in the Spanish version. There are also many passages in the text when the author employs short, postcard-type form or even a note magnet-posted to a fridge (E.g. *Back north, decided to hitchhike through my old homeland of New England. It was December. Almost froze. Back to New York*). This type of discourse does not translate well into Spanish. Similarly, his extensive use of the passive voice to create a folksy style does not work in Spanish, as in the following phrases:

- *I was persuaded by Alan Lomax (p. 17)*
- *Harry Truman is supposed to have said that we should try to... (p. 19)*
- *...ballads which were recorded soon after Pearl Harbor (p. 26)*

The clash of style and content may require a certain amount of background information for the book to be more readily accessible to younger audiences in the Spanish speaking world. For example, it is important to note how directly Pete Seeger's activism over the years hampered his musical career. His position in mainstream music was stifled by blacklisting, as controversy surrounding his ties to the Communist Party led major television networks to keep him off the air. The House Committee on Un-American Activities called Seeger to hearings in 1955; instead of citing the Fifth Amendment as grounds for silence, Seeger cited the First, a move for which he was sentenced to a year in jail for contempt of court. Citing his unconditional willingness to share his music regardless of supposed political alliances -- Seeger even offered to play a song for the court. Not surprisingly, the committee rejected this offer. Although his sentence for contempt was soon reversed, Seeger continued to be blacklisted by many organizations -- briefly including even his alma mater, Harvard University, which finally invited him to Cambridge when students protested this prohibition. Nonetheless, he maintained his love of sharing music. "I'd sing for the John Birch Society or the American Legion, if they asked," he said. "So far they haven't."

Finally, the most ambitious part of my translation of Pete Seeger's wonderful book never made it past page 14. I had hoped, with the help of a band of determined friends, to come up with singable Spanish lyrics for all the songs that Pete included in his work. Unfortunately after working for hours and hours on his "All Mixed Up" and only coming up with one convincing verse, I gave up. I include our version here with Pete's. I note that in this instance, we seek future collaboration with singers who may or may not speak English. At the end of the day, it's the singing of the song that counts, perhaps as much as the faithfulness to the original text. That would be my take as a singer anyway. To not provide singing translations of *Where Have all the Flowers Gone* would seem to me a great disservice to the spirit of the original work. Unlike Pete's previous semi-autobiographical *The Incomplete Folksinger* published two decades earlier as a sort of instructional guide to aspiring folksingers and activists, *Where Have all the Flowers Gone* is packed with wonderful songs

which Pete has even been involved in writing or adapting or popularizing or sharing. Indeed, when Pete and his friend Peter Blood-Paterson were sending me the edited lists of songs for the new version of the book, I was shocked at the ones which were being eliminated. I felt we were dumping old friends, pieces of my own personal development, slices of my soul. It was painful.

The obvious targets were the topical ones that had long since reached their sell-by-date. “Who Killed Norma Jean” and Malvina Reynolds’s classic “Mrs. Clara Sullivan’s Letter” would get the chop, I was informed to my shock horror. Then there was the anti-arms build-up “Andorra” which included a line about going to speak to “MacNamara’s band.” After all, who really cares who served as secretary of defense in the 1960s under which federal US administration? Okay, I said, but can you really axe Charlie King’s updated version “I Want to Go to Azoty” from 1991? That’s cutting too close to the bone! I calmed down after re-reading the acknowledgments when I noted that many of the folks whose were being cut were also being thanked profusely, from Ruth Pelham to Joe Stead, Greg Artzner (of the wonderful duo Magpie) to Oscar Brand and Fred Hellerman, from Dario Toccacelli to Kan Yazawa, people from many lands and whose lives spanned generations, many of them had written song which I sing all the time. One good thing about working with Pete Seeger, I thought, you’re not alone!

So although we may not yet have a publisher for our translation yet—the folks in Barcelona changed their mind—I have learned much from the translation and gained an invaluable insight into music and contemporary history from a former hero—and now colleague—Pete Seeger. I hope all your translation work is full of song and joy in this new year, that you learn from every word you translate.

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