

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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based on the diary of a Colonial midwife that 300th Anniversary University Professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich expounded in her 1990 book of the same name.

Yet there was one film Rogers was never able to finish, despite 20 years of shooting and collecting footage, much of it centered on his own family and the Hamptons town of Wainscott, where they had a summer house. It was left to his student Alexander Olch '99 (Rogers taught filmmaking for many years at Harvard and was director of the

Filmmaker Alexander Olch in his studio on Mott Street in Manhattan, doors away from where his mentor, Richard Rogers, lived and worked.

Film Study Center) to create *The Windmill Movie* from the miles of uncut film and video left behind. "There was a very good reason why he let this one go," says Olch. "Dick completed 18 films, but this was the only one that really gave him trouble, because the subject was on the other side of the camera." In fact, Olch's most basic decision was figuring out that the film was about Rogers, not Wainscott; it's a

The Windmill Movie

Two filmmakers collaborate across the gulf between life and death.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

THE LATE FILMMAKER Richard Rogers '67, Ed.M. '70, who died of cancer in 2001 at age 57, was a passionate and productive artist. His documentary films range from *Quarry* (1970), a slice-of-life look at youths diving, swimming, and lounging around a beautiful abandoned rock quarry in Quincy, Massachusetts, with a late-1960s rock soundtrack and looming shadows of Vietnam, to *Pictures*

from a Revolution (1991), which follows photographer Susan Meiselas, Ed.M. '71, as she returns to Nicaragua 10 years after documenting the Sandinista overthrow of Somoza. There were literary portraits like his 1988 *William Carlos Williams*, done for PBS; quirky films like *226-1690* (1984), a "minimalist soap opera" drawing on a year's worth of messages on Rogers's answering machine; and the historical re-enactment of *A Midwife's Tale* (1996),

O P E N B O O K

The Bible and an Almanac

The book ends with Seeger's unbending testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, on August 18, 1955. It begins, briskly, as follows.

It was the ambition of the singer and songwriter Pete Seeger as a child, in the 1920s, to be an Indian, a farmer, a forest ranger, or possibly an artist, because he liked to draw. He went to Harvard [1936-1938], joined the tenor banjo society, and studied sociology in the hope of becoming a journalist, but at the end of his second year he left

which included Woody Guthrie. The name derived from there being in most working-class homes two books, a Bible and an almanac, one for this world and one for the next. The Almanac Singers appeared mainly at strikes and at rallies supporting the rights of laborers. Seeger says that the band was "famous to readers of the *Daily Worker*," the newspaper of the Communist Party. The Almanac Singers broke up in 1942, after Seeger was drafted. Following the war, Seeger performed on his own for a while, then became a member of the Weavers, whose version of "Goodnight, Irene," by Huddie Ledbetter, called Leadbelly, was, for thirteen weeks in 1950, the best-selling record in America. The Weavers quit playing in 1952, after an informant told the House Un-American Activities Committee that three of the four Weavers, including Seeger, were Communists. (Seeger knew students at Harvard who were Communists, and, with the idea in mind of a more equitable world, he became one for several years, too.) Following the informant's testimony, the Weavers found fewer and fewer places to work. Seeger and his wife, Toshi, decided that Seeger should sing for any audience that would have him. They printed a brochure and sent

before taking his exams and rode a bicycle west, across New York State. If he encountered a group of people making music on a porch or around a fire, he added himself to it and asked them to teach him the songs. He was tall and thin and earnest and polite. To eat, he made watercolor sketches of a farm from the fields, then knocked on the farmhouse door and asked to trade the drawing for a meal.

In the early 1940s, Seeger belonged to a group called the Almanac Singers,

it to summer camps, colleges, schools, churches, and any other organizations that they thought might be sympathetic. Seeger began engaging in what he calls "guerilla cultural tactics."...[H]e grew accustomed to pickets with signs saying "Moscow's Canary" and "Khrushchev's Songbird." In *How Can I Keep from Singing*, a biography of Seeger, David Dunaway writes that a poll conducted during the period by Harvard said that 52 percent of the American people thought that Communists should be put in jail.

On the day of his subject's ninetieth birthday, May 3, Alec Wilkinson's *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (of the College class of 1940) will be published (Knopf, \$22).

choice Rogers himself, who constantly fretted about being too self-indulgent, was unable to make.

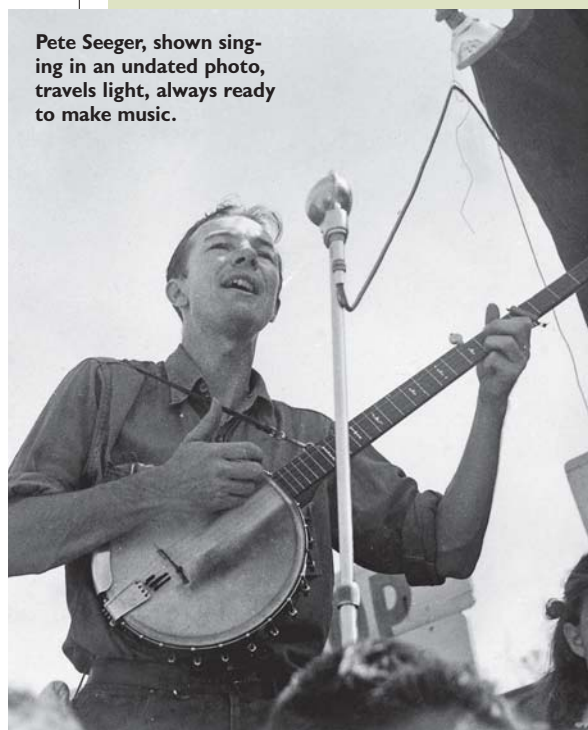
The film, which opens at the Film Forum in New York City on June 17, with national release and HBO broadcast to follow, tells its subject's troubled life story. It's a collage-like portrait of "a compellingly charming and vivacious guy, a WASP Woody Allen," says Olch. The nonlinear narrative skips around among decades from the 1920s to the present; the director tracked down people who had footage of Rogers and shot new footage himself, including scripted scenes with actor Wallace Shawn '65, the late filmmaker's friend. Olch wrote and read

It's a collage-like portrait of "a compellingly charming and vivacious guy, a WASP Woody Allen."

the voice-over narration, taking on his mentor's persona. He compares the movie's structure to a Russian nesting doll.

Indeed, *The Windmill Movie* unfolds on many levels. There's a summertime portrait of a wealthy Hamptons community, with tennis, swimming pools, private beaches, and swank cocktail parties on a lawn with a small windmill, which gives the film its title. There's a dysfunctional-family narrative fleshed out by interviews with Rogers's dyspeptic mother and patrician father, who shot film footage in the 1920s that Olch includes. (He marvels that it took "three generations to make this movie.") There's an absorbing portrait of Rogers's massively self-doubting, self-critical persona, played out within his enviable, well-appointed lifestyle and hectic, nearly farcical sexual and romantic life. (His relationship with the celebrated Magnum photographer Meiselas spanned more than 30 years, but, as the film shows, there were passionate interregna with other partners; the couple finally married near the end of Rogers's life.)

Then there is the embedded meta-movie about filmmaking, including the very movie we are watching. We see Rog-



Pete Seeger, shown singing in an undated photo, travels light, always ready to make music.

PETE AND TOSHI SEEGER



Stills from Olch's film show Richard Rogers at his editing console, watching footage of his mother, and a photograph of Rogers filming.

ers filming Meiselas as she herself takes a photograph; there's a cut of Meiselas struggling with a huge microphone, recording the soundtrack while Rogers films a garden party. Many scenes find Rogers editing film at his console. We see Meiselas, who produced Olch's movie, unpacking old boxes of film—the very footage we have been viewing. Unsteady handheld shots add a home-movie feeling, as do the onscreen countdowns that partition sequences. “These are things you usually don't get to see as a viewer,” Olch explains. “I want you to see the dust on the old film, to hear the crackles of the sound. It's supposed to feel unexpected and messy. Pulling the curtain back on that is a metaphor for pulling the curtain back on Dick Rogers and his story.”

Olch made his first film in third grade

and by middle school, he says, “I walked around with a trench coat and fedora, thinking I was Fritz Lang.” He began work on *Windmill* by “doing everything correctly, making just perfect cuts,” he says. “But it was so boring and so flat. I started looking at sequences I had rejected, and there seemed to be an energy in the reject pile; the movie's style sort of grew out of that, and began to convey the experience I had going through all these boxes of film.”

The two filmmakers had bonded quickly as teacher and student; Olch first saw Rogers hanging open a metal door into a Harvard hallway, “discoursing like a tweed-jacketed studio boss from the 1940s, tufts of red hair flowing from the sides of his otherwise bald head.” Rogers's first words to Olch were, “Seventy-fourth Street. Collegiate,” nailing both

the home address and private school of his new student. (It turned out that the two men had lived in adjacent buildings on East 74th Street in Manhattan.) For two artists to join forces in this way may be unprecedented in cinema.

“Would that I could say there are ghosts or spirits where I will lurk,” intones Olch as Rogers, facing death, “but there is only this, this movie where, just for an instant, I will be alive in this little world, this little séance of flickering light and no one, not even the heavens, can take that away from me.” Shortly before Olch reads these words on the soundtrack, we see Rogers asking his wheelchair-bound father, who has lost some of his memory after a stroke, “Where do the memories go?” *The Windmill Movie* offers one, very personal, answer: they are preserved on film.

Music, Taken Personally

The memoir of John Adams

by RICHARD DYER

FORTY YEARS AGO, composer John Adams '69, A.M. '72, was conductor of the undergraduate Bach Society Orchestra. A *Crimson* critic creamed one of his concerts, and the experience rankled Adams so much that he quotes the review almost in full in his new autobiography, *Hallelujah Junction*.

That old controversy was forgotten last November, when Harvard's Office for the Arts presented a special event honor-

ing Adams, the University's 2007 Arts Medalist. The “Bach Soc,” conducted by Aram Demirjian '08, performed *The Wound Dresser*, the composer's setting of one of the great poems Walt Whitman wrote out of his experience as a nurse during the Civil War. The New College Theatre was full and enthusiastic—and the *Crimson*'s subsequent account respectful.

Afterwards, there was a discussion of the text and the music among Adams,

President Drew Faust, and Porter University Professor Helen Vendler. The grey-haired, softly bearded Adams was earnest, thoughtful, intense, and occasionally disarmingly modest. (Speaking of his most famous work, the opera *Nixon in China*, a collaboration with poet Alice Goodman '80 and stage director Peter Sellars '80, he remarked, “I'm not sure my music comes up to the quality of the libretto.”)

Adams said he was deeply moved by the performance, remarking that soloist John Kapusta '09 was the same age as the slaughtered young men Whitman wrote about. “It is always older men who send

John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, \$26)