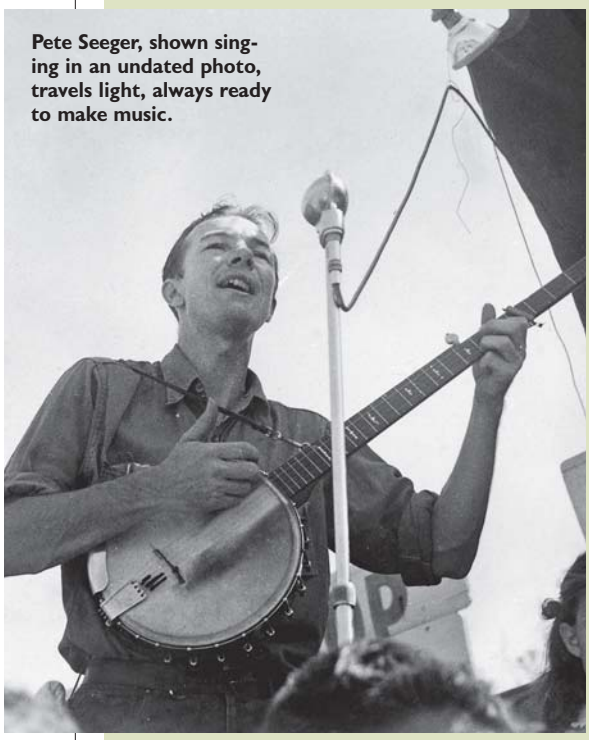
OPEN BOOK

The Bible and an Almanac

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). 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 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.



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

PETE AND TOSHI SEEGER

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

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-