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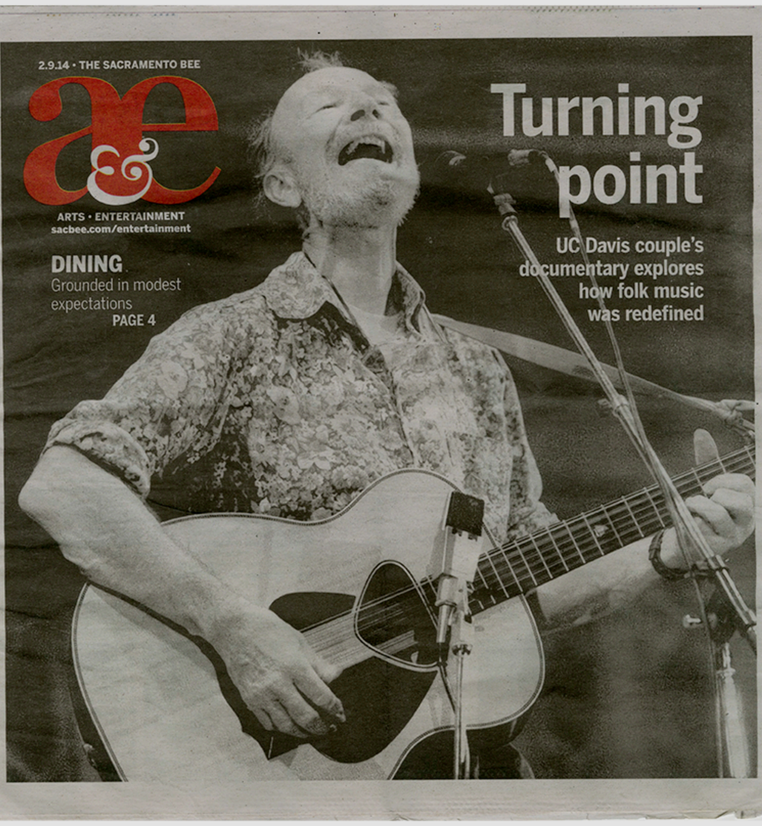

Turning point

UC Davis couple's documentary explores how folk music was redefined

COVER STORY

Folk and country and Pete Seeger

Late singer key to UC Davis pair's music documentary

By Carla Meyer
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The voice mail from folk legend Pete Seeger came in 2008, nine months after Davis filmmaker Jesse Drew first wrote the singer to see if he would appear in his documentary about country music.

Drew was in his car, retrieving messages on his cellphone. He was not expecting this one.

"I thought he was having a heart attack in the car – he was going, 'uh, uh, uh,' " said Glenda Drew, who is Drew's wife and collaborator on the film "Open Country."

Jesse was anxious about Seeger leaving a return phone number. His only contact for Seeger, known for songs such as "If I Had a Hammer" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," had been a post office box, and he did not want to "wait another nine months" for a reply, he said. But Seeger left a return number at the end of his message. He later would welcome Jesse and a small film crew at his upstate New York home.

Though that was years ago, amassing interviews and archival footage for a historical documentary can take time. The Drews, both UC Davis professors, have screened parts of "Open Country" publicly, but they do not expect to reach the finish line for another six months. Seeger, who died Jan. 27 at age 94, will be a key part of it.

The documentary explores country music's roots in folk tradition and what the Drews say was a strategic, McCarthy-era separation by the music industry of the folk classification from a new genre dubbed "country and western." The distinction, the Drews assert, aimed to distance country from associations with politically minded folk artists like Seeger, who was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1955 and later was convicted of contempt of Congress. (He successfully appealed).

"You can't really talk about this split without talking about the person who was at the center of it," Jesse said of his desire to interview Seeger for his film. "And we wanted his background, and his expertise, in what we consider to be 'country' music."

The Drews' idea of country is not today's "commercial Nashville pop kind of stuff," Jesse, 58, said during an interview with Glenda, 48, at the airy, brightly painted Davis home. The youthful, bohemian-elegant couple share the place with their two children, enthusiastic Labrador retriever and three backyard chickens.

Their country is the roots music that sprang from West Virginia coal mines and central California farm fields.

In their home office, where they are still editing "Country," the Drews show clips of Seeger, taken from that 2008 interview, in which he talks about early country music, citing artists such as Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family and Woody Guthrie.

"He was basically a country musician," Seeger said of the Oklahoma-born Guthrie. " 'This Land Is Your Land,' you could say, is a country song."

The Drews also interviewed Billy Bragg, the British political folk rocker, and Hazel Dickens, the West Virginia-born feminist, unionist bluegrass singer who died in 2011 at age 75.

These artists helped lead the filmmakers through evolution of country music along with Seeger, who, like his musicologist father, Charles, collected traditional folk songs passed down in the oral tradition.

The temperature was below zero when Jesse, traveling without Glenda but enlisting a friend and the friend's daughter to help with filming, made their way to Seeger's home in Roxson, N.Y.

"We didn't now if we were in the right place – we (were on) this kind of dirt road," Jesse said. "And we see this old guy chopping wood with his knit beanie hat on."

The visitors joined him. "We all put our (film) equipment down and chopped wood," Jesse said. "We built a big fire, and just sat around" in the house Seeger shared with his wife, Toshi, who would die in 2013.

"He basically talked about his history in the union movement, his history in the civil rights movement, and in the Vietnam war movements," Jesse said. Seeger, eyes a-twinkle, also performed the Guthrie song "Union Maid" for Jesse's camera.

"One of the things he was *not* interested in was the commercialization of music," Jesse said. "He is a true believer in 'folk' music. He didn't bother claiming ownership of his songs or making any money from them."

Rather, Seeger helped usher folk songs "from movement to movement," Jesse said. One of those songs was "We Shall Overcome," a union organizing song that became a civil rights anthem.

But Seeger spent enough time in the popular-music spotlight – his group the Weavers scored a hit in 1950 with a version of Lead Belly's "Goodnight, Irene" – to draw the attention of the HUAC.

"One of main goals of McCarthyism was to root out the left-wing influence, and one of the key targets was folk music," Jesse said.

A one-time Communist Party member, Seeger became the face of that crusade. Seeger went before the HUAC but did not names and proclaimed "I love my country very much."

Those who "control the country are very concerned about what kind of music the people of America hear," Seeger said in a clip from Jesse's 2008 interview with him.

Seeger was blacklisted from television appearances until the late 1960s. More lasting was the music industry's relabeling strategy.

"They said, 'We have to do something,' " Jesse said. " 'We have to separate ourselves out from the Woody Guthries, the Pete Seegers and the Weavers.' Suddenly, in 1952, what was always (labeled) as folk music was 'country and western.' "

Jesse points to tearsheets from industry publications of the time that suggest the transition sometimes was awkward: One top-records chart carries the heading "Country & Western Records Most Played by Folk Disk Jockeys."

This transition marked the start of popular country music's shift from a genre that explored larger social themes to one that rarely took on "life past the screen door," Jesse said.

Country and western lyrics were "all about your personal life and your family life," he said. "If you are singing about issues, then clearly you are a 'folk' musician."

To see how well the rebranding succeeded, the Drews say, one need only look at Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams. Both were raw-boned rural guys with lonesome voices, but Guthrie sang about unions and hobos and Williams about affairs of the heart. Guthrie now embodies "folk" and Williams "country" in the cultural consciousness.

The finished film will trace how mainstream country's representation of home and hearth eventually became associated with conservative politics, Jesse said, and with conservative backlashes like the one against the Dixie Chicks that followed lead singer Natalie Maines' public criticism of President George W. Bush in 2003.

Jesse Drew, who teaches in UC Davis' cinema and technocultural studies departments, and Glenda, who is in the design department, are not preaching from an ivory tower. They went into the "Open Country" project as country fans wanting to know more about the music.

Glenda, a former waitress, grew up in Chicago, where her truck-driving father played country records. Jesse is a former labor activist and plant worker who listened to country music while working at an East Bay glass factory in the 1970s. It was around that time Jesse first saw Seeger up close, after a pal took him to an East Bay gathering of Spanish Civil War veterans.

"It was in this kind of dingy carpenters' or VFW hall, and there are these 50 old guys, and right in the middle of them is Pete Seeger, just hanging out and playing his banjo," Jesse said. "No one else is coming out to thank these guys, but here he is. He came all the way out from New York. It was important to thank them."

Jesse said that Seeger made clear, during the visit to Seeger's home in 2008, that he viewed Drew as just as important as his more famous visitors.

Jesse recalled Seeger pointing to where the filmmaker was sitting in a chair. "He said, 'A few days ago, Bruce Springsteen was sitting there,' and shrugged it off," Jesse said. "And I knew there was also a huge film crew from Europe coming in (afterwards). To Pete, it was all the same."

Any one spark could lead to change. The pedigree of that spark did not matter.

Glenda said Seeger's legacy will include his songs, his ability to "connect communities," and the quality underpinning it all: unflagging optimism.

During Jesse's visit with Seeger, the filmmaker expressed his concerns about global warming to the singer.

"It's one more thing we gotta fix," came Seeger's determined reply.

"He was sure we were going to fix it," Jesse said. "*I'm* not sure. But he was sure."

Call The Bee's Carla Meyer, (916) 321-1118. Follow her on Twitter @CarlaMeyerSB.

Courtesy of Woody Guthrie publications

Though now regarded as a folk singer, Woody Guthrie "was basically a country musician," Pete Seeger told Jesse Drew. " 'This Land Is Your Land,' you could say, is a country song."

Courtesy of "Open Country"

Bluegrass singer Hazel Dickens was among the musicians interviewed for "Open Country." The feminist-unionist died in 2011.

Courtesy of "Open Country"

Pete Seeger, left, is shown with filmmaker and UC Davis associate professor Jesse Drew in 2008, when Drew interviewed him for "Open Country." the documentary Drew is making with his wife, Glenda.

Country Music Foundation, Inc.

Country music legend Hank Williams sang about affairs of the heart.