

PETE SEEGER, BOOMER ROMANCE, AND THE RED DIAPER BABY

What do a deceased [folk music hero](#) and the color of your diapers have to do with Boomer Romance? How do politics and music shape your possibilities for mature love?

[Pete Seeger](#) -a singer/songwriter/banjo player, long-time folkie, social activist, died on Monday, January 27,2014. “Pete Seeger, the singer, folk-song collector and songwriter who spearheaded an American folk revival and spent a long career championing folk music as both a vital heritage and a catalyst for social change, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 94,” wrote [the New York Times](#).



If you're a [baby boomer](#) and/or went away to summer camp, you already know who Pete is, even if your [baby diapers weren't red](#). Remember “If I Had a Hammer,” “Good Night Irene,” “Turn, Turn, Turn,” “Where Have All The Flowers Gone,” “Wimowee,” “Kumbaya?” “If you're too young, know that Pete Seeger profoundly influenced and sang with virtually every important American singer/songwriter, far beyond the boundaries of folk music—Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Arlo Guthrie, Judy Collins, Peter, Paul and Mary...the list could go on for ninety-four years. His last public performance was with Arlo Guthrie, [Woody Guthrie's son](#), a few months before Pete died. If none of these artists still ring a bell with you, think [This Land is Your Land](#) and [Puff the Magic Dragon](#).



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Pete's death resonated for me because I come from a special Boomer sub-set—the [Red Diaper Babies](#). We Red Diaper babies were raised by parents who were leftist, “progressive,” socialists, or communists, in a range of settings, from [communes](#) to suburbia. My own parents were strictly schizophrenic—they raised us to the left of left field—but still expected pristine behavior, great grades, popularity, and entrance to the best universities. (I didn't meet any of these goals. Besides all my other issues, it's not easy to be the [Prom Queen](#) while espousing the overthrow of the government and world revolution).

Raised in families who practiced an Old World Judaism that they didn't understand, my parents became [militantly atheist](#). Their version of the [High Holy Days](#) was when Pete Seeger came to sing in Philadelphia every year. It was an annual gathering of the tribes, where every leftie and/or folkie gathered from miles away to sing along and bask in the glow of shared self-righteousness. Progressive politics and social change were like religion, and everyone was as high on shared faith, fellowship, and ideological orthodoxy as any [born-again at a revival](#).

Like anyone raised in a sect or doctrine, I've encountered numerous reality checks and transformations on the road to maturity. As a Red Diaper Baby in recovery, having left the fold for more pragmatic, liberal-ish politics, it still affects my dating life. First is that built-in belief in the brotherhood of man—except for any man who don't agree with you. What-date a Republican? (Shudder). Someone who believes in God? (Heaven forbid). A man who doesn't agonize about world affairs on an hourly basis while permanently plugged into [NPR](#)? (A godless heathen).



One relationship was founded on mutual recognition—I grew up on the East Coast with a copy of [Soviet Life](#) on the living room [Danish Modern](#) teak coffee table—a full-color, glossy magazine full of photos of apple-cheeked peasants dancing with tractors. He grew up on the West Coast with a copy of “China Life”—apple-cheeked, dancing [Maoist](#) peasants—on his family's coffee table.

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It takes time and experience to realize how truly complex and contradictory human beings are—and that ideological purity doesn't necessarily equal moral probity, compatibility, or love. I spent yesterday with a friend who owns a gun and belongs to the [NRA](#) (both of which I think are nuts). He also believes in gun control and abhors war. We won't make a couple, but we can recognize each other's peculiar humanity.

Pete Seeger's most noteworthy quality isn't that he was a performer—Pete was the [King of the sing-along](#). He sang with everybody and he wanted everyone to sing.

Pete did join the Communist Party when it made sense to many concerned young people, and later left it. He never lied about it, because he thought it was the right choice to make at the time, and he was [blacklisted](#) from television and the music industry for many years as a result. He lost many years of income, continuing to chop wood for the log cabin he built for his family and sing everywhere he could, supported by his [indomitable wife and producer, Toshi](#). He had another career as an environmental activist, building a boat—the Clearwater— and assembling a [coalition to save the severely polluted Hudson River](#).



When called to an interrogation by the [House Un-American Activities Committee](#), Pete brought his banjo and offered to sing his songs to the [inquisitors](#) so they could understand

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why he did what he did. He knew if he could just get them humming along with their toes tapping and fingers beating out the rhythm, feeling the power of the music, they could all come to some kind of accord. HUAC being HUAC, they refused to hear a note.

And that's Pete's legacy for me that I can bring to my personal life—it's all one big singalong. We contribute our own individual voices, united by the notes and rhythms. Even if we don't always agree on the lyrics, we can still harmonize. Let's all join hands in a chorus of [Kumbaya](#), followed by [We Shall Overcome](#). Amen, Brother.

