

January 29, 2014—

The world was truly at Pete Seeger's fingertips. America's folk singer-activist-ambassador died Jan. 27 at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. He was 94 years old.

Though a lifelong New Yorker, Mr. Seeger had loyal ties to Chicago.

The first time Mr. Seeger visited Chicago was when he sang at a peace rally in August 1940. Mr. Seeger crashed on the floor of Studs Terkel's apartment.

He was the first performer Chicago folk legends Ed Holstein and his late brother Fred Holstein saw in concert. "Orchestra Hall, 1958," Holstein said Tuesday. "I was 11 years old. Woody Guthrie wasn't a household name in 1958. There was no New York-Chicago thing. Pete sang all these songs before 'world music': African songs and Puerto Rican songs.

"I wasn't a very good student, but because of him I wanted to learn stuff."

Mr. Seeger's last major appearance in Chicago was in the spring of 2002, when he accepted a Living Treasure of North America Heritage Award from the non-profit Prairyerth Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in a performance at what then was called the Chicago Historical Society. He was recognized for his work cleaning up and preserving the Hudson River, two hours north of New York City. Honored with Mr. Seeger was my old comrade and storied pollution fighter "The Fox" (west suburban teacher Jim Phillips, who died in 2001), a favorite subject of columnist Mike Royko.

"Once called 'America's tuning fork,' Pete Seeger believed deeply in the power of song," President Barack Obama said in a statement. "But more importantly, he believed in the power of community — to stand up for what's right, speak out against what's wrong and move this country closer to the America he knew we could be. Over the years, Pete used his voice — and his hammer — to strike blows for worker's rights and civil rights, world peace and environmental conservation.

"And he always invited us to sing along."

Holstein recalled, "Before 2,300 people at Orchestra Hall it was just him and one microphone. He even looked like a banjo. Before that he played colleges and temples." Right-wing groups like the John Birch Society were protesting outside Orchestra Hall.

At the more politically acceptable Chicago Historical Society concert, Mr. Seeger covered his timeless songs "If I Had a Hammer" and "Turn, Turn, Turn (To Everything There is a Season)." His long fingers were brittle and his tenor had trouble hitting high notes. But his mind was still moving fast.

He played a jazzy hip-hop tune, "Take it From Dr. King," assisted by a dozen children from the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale. Mr. Seeger led the kids in lyrics that cited bus boycotts and peace

marches for the impetus for how the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. “showed the way/for a brand new day/without firing a shot.” By the end of the song, the kids were leading the 440 audience members in hand claps.

Mr. Seeger looked at the children and triumphantly raised his old guitar in the air.

He loved the sound of young voices.

Mr. Seeger recorded once with the late Chicago folk singer Steve Goodman. It was when Goodman needed a banjo player for the 1977 Goodman-John Prine composition “The Twentieth Century is Almost Over.”

In the summer of 1985 Mr. Seeger headlined a Goodman tribute at the first City of Chicago Folk Festival at Petrillo Music Shell. He was 65 at the time, and he told me he still wanted to be a newspaper reporter. “It’s a nice way of being where the action is without being responsible for it all myself,” he said. “Now I realize we’re all responsible in a sense. It’s true that a baby that dirties its diapers can’t be blamed for pollution, but I do blame anybody with a college education. There’s the story about a kid who almost got run over by a truck.

“A fellow snatched him out of the road, brushed him off and said, ‘What’s the matter, dontcha want to grow up and have troubles?’ ”