

ONE

Songs Are Dangerous

Songs are dangerous. So said HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee) in the 1950s, and its anti-communist investigators did their best to prevent us from being un-American in public. Nevertheless, the Weavers endured, and on November 28, 1980, at New York's Carnegie Hall, four aging Weavers waited to walk onstage for our first reunion concert in nineteen years, and presumably our last. Actually, only three of us would walk. Lee Hays, "the 'senior member' of the Weavers," as he liked to call himself, would roll on in a wheelchair. A double amputee with a bad heart, he was losing his long battle with diabetes. As we waited for the signal to go on, I wondered how the audience would handle the shock of seeing big Lee so cut down. And how would he, grinding his teeth, face and hair already wet with sweat, handle his key role as emcee?

Movie cameras rolled and the noise of wild welcome cheering and applause flared as we entered, but it gradually subsided as we crossed Carnegie's huge stage, wheeling Lee, a blanket covering his stumps, to his microphone behind a small table.

The air was electric with anticipation. Then, in the silence, a familiar baritone voice, gravelly with disuse and age, announced: “Good evening, I’m Lee Hays . . . more or less.” A nanosecond of quiet, and then an explosion of cheers and laughs rocked the staid old auditorium. The tension evaporated. Onstage, backstage, and in the audience, we all settled down to enjoy the concert. The years had altered us: Pete with turkey neck and his hair almost gone, Fred with a full goatee and post-middle-age paunch, and me with my plus size 3X figure. But we were survivors, and we were there anyway. If I hadn’t known that Lee would be annoyed and embarrassed, I would have said in public what I know we were all thinking: that Lee’s appearance that night was the most valiant and generous act of his career. To which he might have replied, as he had to a showbiz promoter twenty-five years earlier: “Act? That was no act; that was the real thing!”