



# Smithsonian Folkways

## The Power of Pete Seeger's Songs and Stories

Designed by: Brigid Finucane  
Merit School of Music, Chicago, IL

### Summary:

Open the eyes of your students to the beauty and power of American and world folk songs and stories through the iconic figure of Pete Seeger. Explore his important work in promoting peace, understanding, community, and wonder through song.

### Suggested Grade Levels: K-2

**Country:** United States, South Africa, India

**Region:** North America, Africa, Asia

**Culture Group:** Children, Adults, Indian (Hindu)

**Genre:** Children's, folk songs, devotional songs

**Instruments:** voice, banjo, guitar

**Language:** English, Bantu, Hindi

**Co-Curricular Areas:** Social Studies

**National Standards:** 1, 2, 6, 8, 9

**Prerequisites:** Children know and can demonstrate the difference between beat and rhythm, are familiar with the concept of melody, and can identify solo and group singing in listening examples.

### Objectives:

Through these lessons students will:

- Be introduced to Pete Seeger, know what kind of instruments he plays, and recognize that he is a key figure in American folk music.
- Learn what a folk song is.
- Gain exposure to folk songs from the United States, Africa and India, and be able to identify where each song came from.
- Sing songs in different languages.
- Demonstrate steady beat and rhythm in songs.
- Sing simple patterns, and be aware of song sequence.
- Create stories or movement sequence.

**Materials:**

- One or more photo(s) or video(s) of Pete Seeger
- Pictures of banjo and guitar instruments, and (optional) Gandhi
- Map of the world or material globe
- Toy animals of all animals mentioned in “Bought Me a Cat,” placed in basket OR pictures of the animals OR whiteboard and markers to draw the animals
- “Bought Me a Cat” <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=2110>
- Liner notes from *American Folk Songs for Children*, available online: [http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/smithsonian\\_folkways/SFW45020.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/smithsonian_folkways/SFW45020.pdf)
- “Abiyoyo” from *Bantu Choral Folk Songs*, by The Song Swappers and Pete Seeger: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=1222> (choral)
- Liner notes from *Bantu Choral Folk Songs*, available online: [http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/folkways/FW06912.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW06912.pdf)
- “Abiyoyo” from *Abiyoyo and Other Story Songs for Children*, by Pete Seeger: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=2103> (story)
- “Ragupati Ragava Rajah Ram” from *Folk Songs of Four Continents*, by The Song Swappers and Pete Seeger: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=1221>
- Liner notes from *Folk Songs of Four Continents*: [http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/folkways/FW06911.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW06911.pdf)
- Images and objects related to India and the Bantu people (optional).
- Rhythm instruments, resonator bars or barred instruments, scarves, etc.

**Lesson Segments:**

1. **Bought Me A Cat – Introducing Pete Seeger** (1, 2, 6, 8, 9)
2. **Abiyoyo – A Bantu Lullaby** (1, 2, 6, 8, 9)
3. **Ragupati Ragava Rajah Rah – A Story of Peace** (1, 2, 6, 8, 9)

*Note to Teachers: Segments may be extended over many sessions or compressed depending on needs and interests. Adapt the material and make it your own.*

## Lesson 1: Bought Me a Cat

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=2110>

1. Before playing the recording, ask children to listen in order to respond to the following questions:
  - What is the song is about? (animals and the sounds they make)
  - Who's singing? (A man)
  - What instruments are sounding? (A banjo)
2. Listen again to the recording, and ask children to name one animal that was mentioned--and the sound it made. While the recording is playing, take the named animals (ideally, small stuffed animals) out of a basket one-by-one as they are mentioned, and place them so that they are visible to the children, singing the sound of the animal, e.g. "*the cat said fiddle-i-fee, fiddle-i-fee.*"  
Note: If toy animals are unavailable, use individual drawings/photos of animals, or print each animal's name and sound on the whiteboard.
  - a. Review the animals and their sounds, without the recording. Ask children to echo the animal and their sounds, e.g. "the dog said bow-wow, bow-wow." Continue until all animals are named.

### Lyrics:

1. <i>I bought me a cat, the cat pleased me. Fed my cat on a yonder tree. Cat went fiddle-i-fee, fiddle-i-fee.</i>	6. <i>Sheep went baa, baa, etc.</i>
2. <i>Hen went chipsey, chopsy, Cat when fiddle-i-fee, fiddle-i-fee.</i>	7. <i>Cow went moo, moo, etc.</i>
3. <i>Duck went slishy. sloshy, Hen went chipsey, chopsy, Cat went....</i>	8. <i>Horse went neigh, etc.</i>
4. <i>Goose went qua, qua, etc.</i>	9. <i>Baby went mammy, mammy, etc.</i>
5. <i>Dog went bow, wow, etc.</i>	10. <i>Woman cried honey, honey, etc.</i>

- b. Play recording, so children can determine the sequence in which the animals are mentioned. Invite children to sing the animal sounds and pat the beat quietly. Put animals in correct order.
- c. Ask the children what country they think the song is from (United States) and why they may think so (welcome diverse answers). Share with children that the song is from the United States, and sung by someone very special, Pete Seeger.



Pete Seeger of the Weavers performs at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, IL, January 13, 1958. Photo by Robert Malone, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

- d. Tell the children that Pete Seeger came from a musical family, where everyone—mother, father, brothers, sisters—played instruments, sang songs, and collected songs that they considered valuable. Ask the children if they know what *collecting* is (seeking out and gathering things, e.g. baseball cards or Pokeman cards, key chains, coins, books, etc.) Ask whether anyone in their family collects something special. Share with the children that the Seeger family collected songs – and not just any old song, but *folk songs* - songs that have been handed down across one or more generations. “Bought Me a Cat,” for example, is a folk song that Pete Seeger’s step-mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger,

published in her 1943 book, American Folk Songs for Children.<sup>1</sup> All the Seegers loved singing and sharing folk songs. Pete especially enjoyed singing with groups of people large and small, and he took (and still takes) pleasure in humorous songs which delight old and young. He typically accompanies his voice with banjo and guitar.

- i. Explain that folksongs are different than songs written by composers, because they often have several variations. Often, the original composer of a folksong is unknown.
- e. Provide a solo singing opportunity by asking children to sing their favorite animal part individually.
- f. Make available a wide variety of percussion instruments with different timbres. Ask children which instruments should be played for each animal. Sing while playing the beat on rhythm instruments.  
First and Second Grade: Play *do-sol* (1-5) steady beat pattern on barred instruments or resonator bars while singing the song.

### **Extensions:**

- a. Ask children to make up short, easily performed movements for each animal, e.g. a fiddling (bowing) movement for “*fiddle-i-fee*.” Create a circle dance that cumulatively incorporates the children’s movement ideas as the class sings the song. One idea: Four steps in, four steps out, motion for “...*cat went fiddle-i-fee, fiddle-i-fee*.” Repeat, adding each child’s motion as the song progresses.
- b. Listen and learn other cumulative story folksongs. Compare and contrast subject matter, voices and instruments used. Examples by various artists in the Smithsonian Folkways catalog (SFC) include: “*Green Grass Grows All Around*,” “*Aiken Drum*,” “*Old Mr. Rabbit*,” “*Oksn*” and “*La Rana*.”
- c. Literacy component: Procure a book version to sing with the children. Two options are Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee by Paul Galdone , (ISBN-10: 0899197051) and Fiddle-I-Fee by Melissa Sweet., (ISBN-10: 0316758612).
- d. Show video of Seeger singing “*English is Kuh-Ray-Zee*,” for which he co-wrote lyrics with Josh White, Jr. Note: It’s spelled “*Cuh-Ray-Zee*” on Seeger’s lyrics web page. Seeger recorded it at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in 2005. His great sense of humor shines through, as does his passion for “passing it on.” See: [http://www.folkways.si.edu/explore\\_folkways/pete\\_seeger.aspx](http://www.folkways.si.edu/explore_folkways/pete_seeger.aspx)

**Assessment:** Children will (1) know who Pete Seeger is, what instrument(s) he plays (banjo and guitar,) and what kind of songs he sings (folk songs); (2) be aware that “*Bought Me a Cat*” is an American folk song, not a standard composed song; (3) will sing simple embedded melodic patterns; and (4) know the correct sequence of animals and sounds for the song.

---

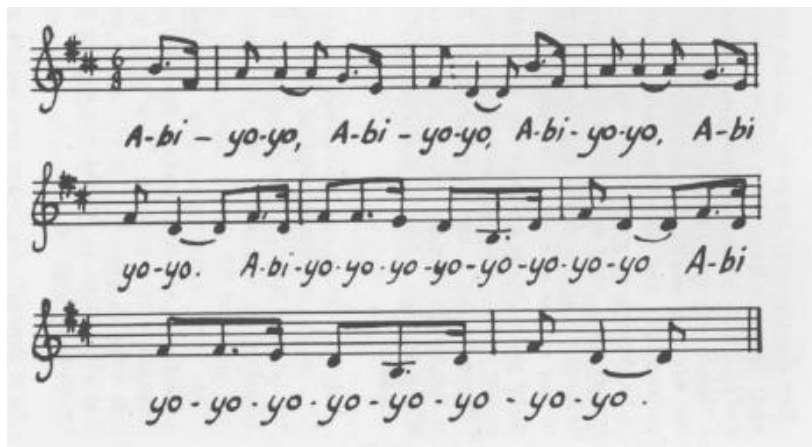
<sup>1</sup> Please refer to liner notes for complete lyrics and information about the book, American Folk Songs for Children by Ruth Crawford Seeger, which is still in print! (ISBN:0-385-15788-6) Pete Seeger selected all the songs on this recording from this book.

## Lesson 2: Abiyoyo – A Bantu Lullaby

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=1222>

Before beginning: Review “Bought Me a Cat” with the class. Listen to the recording, then ask children to name the singer (Pete Seeger), and what kind of song is being sung (folk song). Sing/move/play along with the song using your choice of ideas from the first lesson segment.

1. Tell the children that the special singer, Pete Seeger, thinks every song has a function. Solicit ideas about what kind of functions children think songs can have. Depending on answers and the level of the class, you might mention lullabies, work songs, entertaining songs, songs that teach, songs that tell stories, or songs that make you wonder, imagine and dream.  
Ask children what kind of function they think “Bought Me a Cat” had. (Diverse answers may include “to entertain”, “to amuse”)
2. Tell children that Pete Seeger loves folk songs of the United States so much, and that he wanted to learn folk songs other places in the world too, so as to get more people to sing along. Ask children to think of ways you can learn and collect songs. One way is traveling around the world and learning as you go. Other ways are to swap songs with other people you know or learn songs from a book. Tell children they are going to listen to a song which Pete learned from a rare book given to him as a gift, titled African Folk Songs, edited by Rev. H.C.N. Williams and Mr. J.N. Maselwa.
3. Before playing the recording, ask children to listen and respond to the following questions:
  - Is Pete Seeger singing alone or with a group? (A group)
  - What instruments are sounding? (A guitar and a banjo)
  - What is the function of the song? (It is a lullaby that lulls a child to sleep)
4. Listen to the *Bantu Choral Folk Songs* version of “Abiyoyo,” while marking the beat by rocking gently from side to side.



Notation from liner notes

5. Discuss with the children the meaning of a lullaby as a song usually sung at bedtime to lull a child to sleep. Ask what lullabies they know and if their families sing lullabies to them now or when they were younger. Assisted by a map or a globe, locate South Africa. Tell the children that the song “Abiyoyo” is a lullaby that the Bantu people living in South Africa sing to their children at the end of a bedtime story, which helps allay fears that children may have about monsters. Seeger writes in the liner notes, “...The children are given a charm for their protection which inspires them to sing this song, the rhythm of which affects the monster so powerfully that he is induced to dance. In this state of emotion he is quickly dispensed with by the fathers and mothers of the children. The song is sung till the babe is asleep.”
6. Share that the people of southern and central Africa who are related by Bantu language have a rich tradition of singing in **harmony** – a technique where several people sing simultaneously to create chords. In class, the song will be sung in **unison**, with everyone singing the same melody at the same time.
  - Note: To learn more about the choral traditions of Bantu-speaking people, and adapting the songs for American folk traditions, refer to the liner notes:  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/folkways/FW06912.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW06912.pdf)
7. Invite children to sing with the recording while rocking. Hand out scarves, noting that “You get what you get and you don’t get upset,” and invite them to move to the music, paying attention to the swinging movement of the song.
8. Ask children to stand in a circle and on your signal, and to change from rocking to clapping the rhythm of the song. Depending on the abilities and ages of the children, they will eventually move to the music. Walk to the beat, and when the “change” signal is given, turn to the nearest partner and lightly clap the rhythm of the song into the hands of the partner. Repeat several times.
9. Ask children what they think the word “Abiyoyo” means. Talk with children about how “vocables” – sounds that have no meaning in themselves (e.g. “loo”) – are used in lullabies because of their soothing sound. Invite children to suggest words or sounds to piggyback on the melody of “Abiyoyo.” Time permitting, sing several musical ideas with the class.
10. Tell the children that Seeger was so inspired by the melody and the story behind the song, that he wrote his own story to go with the song. Ask the students to listen to Pete Seeger tell the story. Invite them to sing along whenever “Abiyoyo” is sung, and with the vocal accents (e.g. “zup!”)  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/smithsonian\\_folkways/SFW45001.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/smithsonian_folkways/SFW45001.pdf)
  - Note: The full text is contained in the liner notes.

**Extensions:**

- a. Sit on the floor and rock forward and back with a partner.
- b. Dramatize the story. There are many parts to explore. Instrument parts may be created for the repeated sound effects that occur.
- c. Make a classroom book, with every student contributing a drawing.

- d. Construct simple stringed instruments, out of boxes and rubber bands, to play and conduct simple science and sound experiments.
- e. Connect the story to peace curriculum. Discuss the benefits of peaceful and creative resolutions to problems.
- f. Ask students to create their own story to go with the song.
- g. Literacy connection: Procure the book form of “Abiyoyo,” written by Pete Seeger. Listen to the recording and turn the pages of the book, singing the refrain at the appropriate times. Read the book to the students yourself!

**Assessment:** Children will (1) know that many folk songs have a function, and that the function of this song, “Abiyoyo,” is a lullaby – to soothe children and get them ready to sleep; (2) know that this song is from the Bantu-speaking people of Africa; (3) sing and move to the steady beat, demonstrate the rhythm of the song, and know that the song uses unison and harmony; and (4) become familiar with the story that Seeger wrote, using “Abiyoyo” as a point of departure.



Neils Photography, Creative Commons. Used with permission.

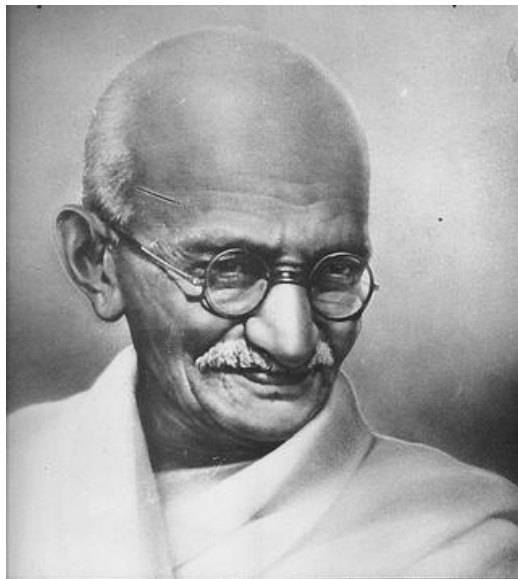


### Lesson 3: Ragupati Ragava Rajah Rah – A Story of Peace

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=1221>

Before beginning: Bring out a puppet and sing the two songs from the preceding segments using a “vocal” or animal sound. Ask children if they can identify the song you are singing. Review “Abiyoyo.” Listen to the recording and then ask children to tell you the name of the singer (Pete Seeger) and any details they can remember about him. Sing/move/play along with the song using your choice of ideas from the previous lesson segment(s).

1. Listen to “Ragupati Ragava Rajah Rah.” Ask students to identify the vocalists (The Song Swappers), and instruments heard in the song (banjo). Ask them where they think the song is from (India), and what the words mean.  
Note: The Hindi translation is in the liner notes.
2. Show a map of India and discuss the geographic variations (mountains, desert, oceans, etc) and climate. Tell children that India is very large and that the millions of people live there use many different languages, ways of thinking and religious beliefs. (Social studies connection)s
3. This devotional song was a favorite of the great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi. *Show a picture of Gandhi.* Tell them that Gandhi believed that all people should live together in freedom and peace. He wasn’t a magician that could make problems disappear with a wave of his wand, but he was responsible for putting events into motion that changed India and the world for the better. Gandhi’s followers sang this song, which in essence asserts that no belief is any better than another – more specifically, that Rama (Hindu) and Allah (Muslim) are the same – to keep up their spirits during the Salt March to Dandi in 1930.
  - Note: The meaning of the song is stated more elegantly in the liner notes.  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/folkways/FW06911.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW06911.pdf)



Mahatma Gandhi, photo from U.S. Embassy, New Delhi.  
Creative Commons, used with permission.

4. Tell the children that Pete Seeger loves people as much as he loves music. Because he loves people so deeply, he loves peace, and it was peace that attracted him to this song. Seeger traveled to India on his world tour, and was attracted to Gandhi's way of thinking, and the great story of India achieving independence from Britain. Seeger is so deeply committed to peace that "*This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender*" is written on the front of his banjo.



Pete Seeger plays his banjo at his home in Beacon, NY, November 3, 2005.  
Photo by Bruce Mondschain, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways.

5. Ask children to stand in a circle and mirror your steady beat movements while listening to the song. Pay attention to the tempo change at the end.
6. Sing the melody of the song on a "vocal," asking children to echo the melody phrase by phrase. Note: Verse one may be an easier entrée than the first half of the song.

# Ragupati Ragava Rajah Ram

Indian Devotional Song

Leader:



Ra-gu-pa-ti ra - ga - va ra - jah Ram. — Puh - ti - ta bha - va - na si - ta - ram.

5 Group:



Ra-gu-pa-ti ra - ga - va ra - jah Ram. — Puh - ti - ta bha - va - na si - ta - tam.

9 Leader:



1. Si - ta - ram je si - ta - ram, puh - ti - ta bha - va - na si - ta - ram.

13 Group:



Si - ta - ram je si - ta - ram, puh - ti - ta bha - va - na si - ta - ram.

Verse 2: First two lines are the same as above, second two lines read:  
Ishuhre Allah tere nam, Tubko sunnutti de bhgawan.

Note: The song notation represents the core of the song, which is repeated over and over. It does not reflect the tempo change at the end, which is a performance function.

7. Count the beats in each of the four phrases (16). Create a 16-beat movement motif which is repeated four times. Depending on the class, this could be developed further. Add instruments like finger cymbals or rhythm sticks to the dance. Start a musical idea by making a sound at the beginning of every measure (every four beats). Scarves could be added for color, to demonstrate contour, and for fun.

## Extensions:

- a. Demonstrate the way people in India count the 16 beat (pattern or phrase) *tala*, called *tintal*. Ask children to watch, while you clap the 1<sup>st</sup> beat, 5<sup>th</sup> beat, wave slightly on the 9<sup>th</sup> beat, and clap again on the 13<sup>th</sup> beat. Touch your fingers to your thumbs on the remaining beats. Invite children to keep the *tala* with you.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 :||  
Clap Clap Wave Clap

- b. Search for versions of the song performed by those who sing it as part of Hindu faith. YouTube is a good place to start. Your search will be more successful if you use a different spelling, “*Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram*”

or “*Ram Dhun.*” Compare and contrast the performance of the song with The Song Swappers version.

**Assessment:** Students will (1) know that Seeger believes in peace and the ability of reaching all people through music; (2) identify that this song is a devotional (Hindu) folk song from India; (3) sing a song in Hindi, and move to it in expressive ways; (4) know that Seeger was touched by the story behind this song because of its meaning and its direct relationship to Mahatma Gandhi.

