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ON PAGE 14 Sec 1

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Nicaraguan revolution a familiar tune to Pete Seeger

By George de Lama

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—An old fighter of wrongs, a singer of hopeful songs, is standing up to be counted in yet another corner of confrontation.

"Too many rectangles in the world," said Pete Seeger, admiring the stark revolutionary murals that adorn some of the crumbling walls of bombed-out buildings here. "What we need is more murals."

Strumming his trusty banjo beside one large and colorful depiction of triumphant guerrillas leading women and children into liberation, he smiled broadly.

"Yes, sir, that's a nice one," he said. "If I hadn't become a musician, I often think I would have been a muralist. Yep, a muralist."

Seeger, of course, became a folk star and a prince of protest. Civil rights, Vietnam, Nixon, Watergate. His has sung his songs, lent his presence, taken a stand on all of them.

LAST WEEK he found himself in an unfamiliar place but a familiar setting, joining more than 80 Latin American musicians from 16 countries here to lend their support to the leftist Sandinista government and to denounce a guerrilla war armed and directed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

If the issue sounds familiar, to Seeger it is. He recalls the CIA-sponsored coup that deposed President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and he often has opposed U.S. hostility to leftist regimes in his ballads. Latin American politics, however, is something new, said Seeger, who will be 64 next week. "I'm really learning, most of all."

Seeger was the most prominent North American musician to answer the Sandinista's invitation to the International Festival of New Latin American Song, a musical extravaganza that is billed here as a cultural and political rebuke to "Yanquis and imperialism."

"We know so many others who would have come if they could have but didn't have the money," said Seeger, graying but tall and trim and still lighthearted enough to break into song in a hotel lobby at 8 a.m., to the delight of onlookers.

JOAN BAEZ was supposed to come, according to some posters advertising the event in Costa Rica, but the only other U.S.-based musicians to attend were those of Grupo Rica, a jazz and salsa group mostly made up of Chilean exiles

who live in Berkeley, Calif.

Seeger emphasized in an interview that the festival was also a forum, with tightly scheduled discussion sessions and a firm political stance. To him, "la nueva cancion" ["the new song"] being promoted here is a throwback to the days of black music during the freedom movement in the South.

There are differences, though. In today's Nicaragua, the stage for musicians' performances is draped with a banner reading "The [armed] struggle is the highest of all songs." Armed revolutionary movements, not the nonviolence preached by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists, are being championed here.

Seeger sees Nicaragua—and all of Latin America—as the Sandinista government does: As a small, poor place under attack from a hostile, overbearing United States.

HE HAS a daughter, Mika, 35, and a grandson, 10, who have lived here more than two years. [Asked how old Mika is, Seeger's wife, Toshi, replied: "Let's see, she was born during the [Henry] Wallace campaign, in 1948. We do everything by campaigns back home."]

"When I was my grandson's age, I remember growing up in Connecticut and seeing a picture of a stoop-shouldered peasant with a big sombrero who had fought U.S. marines in Nicaragua," said Seeger. "Later I found out he was Sandino and that he was a poet who became a freedom fighter, like so many poets."

Agusto Sandino is the Nicaraguan peasant for whom the revolution that overthrew dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979 is named.

"I consider it an honor to be invited here," Seeger said. "We welcome the chance to express our solidarity with this heroic people at a time when criminals of the CIA are trying to organize an invasion. One wonders how the heck you keep the CIA from doing things like this. Do we have to abolish the agency?"

FOR ALL his commitment and solidarity, Seeger admits he doesn't know much about what is happening around here.

"I'm really sorry I don't know Spanish," he said. "I feel like I'm missing half of it." But as he watches and learns, he said, the feeling that comes over is an old one.

"This is nothing new to us," said Toshi. "We feel right at home here."