

PETER YARROW - Biography

(Of Peter Paul & Mary)

“We’re part of a long train ride,” is the way Peter Yarrow visualizes the many events that have highlighted a career spanning more than four decades. With characteristic care, Yarrow places the success he’s had within a greater context, seeing his accomplishments as part of a tradition, to be credited and carried on. “When I was in high school,” he recalls, “I heard The Weavers’ concert at Carnegie Hall where they sang songs such as ‘If I Had a Hammer,’ and ‘Wasn’t That a Time.’ It was inspiring, and it showed me the extraordinary effect that music of conscience can have.” That lesson launched Peter on a lifelong path that is now, perhaps, in its most vital phase.

Over the years, many issues have moved Peter to commit his time and talent: equal rights, peace, the environment, gender equality, homelessness, hospice care and education. All have utilized his skills as both a performer and an organizer. Along with his singing partners, Paul and Mary, Peter participated in the Civil Rights Movement, which brought them to Washington in 1963 to sing for the historic march led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the equally historic Selma-Montgomery march in 1965. He went on to produce and coordinate numerous events for the Peace/anti-Vietnam War movement, including festivals at Madison Square Garden and Shea Stadium. These efforts culminated in his co-organizing the 1969 Celebration of Life, a now-famous march on Washington, in which some half-million people participated.

Though much of Peter’s activism has been directed toward the social/political arena, Peter has been equally active on behalf of more personal projects such as his advocacy on behalf of the Hospice Movement. He is a board member of the Connecticut Hospice, the first hospice established in the United States, where he frequently sings for patients and staff and for whom he has been a voice of media advocacy for over a decade. Also in the health care arena, Peter founded the “Save One Child” Fund at Beth Israel Hospital’s Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery (INN) in 1996. Over the last five years, New York-based effort has provided free medical care for, and saved the lives of, some 70 children from all over the world whose families could not afford their critically needed neurosurgery.

Peter’s talents as a creative artist—both with Peter, Paul & Mary and as a solo performer—are frequently directed at using music to convey a message of

humanity and caring. His gift for songwriting has produced some of the most moving songs Peter, Paul & Mary have recorded, including “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” “Day is Done,” “Light One Candle,” and “The Great Mandala.” As a member of the renowned musical trio, he has earned many gold and platinum albums, has been awarded numerous Grammys, and nominated for several more. More important to Peter, however, is the acknowledgment of the central role that he and his partners have played in bringing the folk renaissance of the 1960s to the hearts and homes of the American public.

Peter has explored his talents in filmmaking as well, producing the critically acclaimed feature, “You are What You Eat,” as well as three animated television specials based on “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” for which he received an Emmy nomination.

Nurturing and validating the talent of new songwriters who write from heart-to-heart—as opposed to focusing on the marketplace—is something to which Peter has been committed throughout his career. In 1962, he became a founding board member of the Newport Folk Festival, and in that context conceived of and hosted a special concert dedicated to emerging folk performers and songwriters. The New Folk Concert gave important early recognition to artists such as Buffy St. Marie, Eric Anderson and Tim Hardin.

In 1970, building on this concept, Peter conceived of and co-organized the New Folks Concert, which became the signature event of the Kerrville (Texas) Folk Festival, which is considered his most important achievement in this arena. Now, thirty years later, this concert is arguably the most respected platform in America for launching new singer/songwriters. Peter strongly believes that, “music, penned without commercial intent, the way traditional folk songs were once created, lets people recognize each other’s hearts and can be a vital help in creating a community of caring and mutual acceptance.” In 1995 Peter was awarded the “Spirit of Kerrville” award for his outstanding contributions to the creation of the festival, which is now a treasured American institution.

All of his creative and organizational achievements haven’t caused Yarrow to rest on his laurels. On the contrary, they have given him the wisdom and the experience to address what he considers to be perhaps his most meaningful undertaking to date. This project, called Operation Respect: “Don’t Laugh At Me,” is based on his passionate belief that music, with its power to build community and catalyze change, can be a particularly powerful organizing tool as well as a source of inspiration for children. In Peter’s newest project, the song, “Don’t

Laugh at Me,” is used to create a climate of respect in the schools of America. It struck Peter that the song with its arresting lyrics, “Don’t laugh at me, don’t call me names; don’t get your pleasure from my pain,” when properly positioned in a classroom-based character education, social/emotional learning program, could serve as an anthem for the growing movement to build safer and more respectful school environments for children.

Just two years since the birth of Peter Yarrow’s brainchild, the strength of this vision has already proved to be enormous. Through personal appearances, Peter has motivated the majority of America’s educational organizations, as well as over 100 members from both houses of Congress—Republican and Democrat alike—as well as individuals from the private and non-profit sectors, to join the effort by contributing their time, talent, and funds to the development and free dissemination of the “Don’t Laugh at Me” (DLAM) Program. The McGraw-Hill Companies have led the way with critical support right from the beginning as DLAM’s most important sponsor.

In August 2001, DLAM made a major breakthrough in the legislative support arena. After a year of planning and organizing by Peter and Jim Costa, California State Senator and President of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the NCSL and DLAM crafted a resolution with the input of the major educational associations of America which was subsequently endorsed by the NCSL. It outlines model legislation designed to advance state legislative initiatives that will expand the implementation of social/emotional learning and character education programs, and encourage funding and other support for professional development of educators in this area.

Peter Yarrow’s life and work, culminating in the founding and leadership of Operation Respect, embraces the premise that if each person finds a way to articulate his or her own voice and joins with others, together they can become a powerful force for the transformation of society.

Peter is not about to give up the demanding path he’s chosen. “We’ve lived through a time in which people have felt they could forge their own future and make a better world,” he said. “We may not have achieved our dreams in the time frame that we once believed was possible, but the magnitude of what is yet to be achieved only confirms the importance of our commitment. Knowing this, we can’t stop now.”

Honors and awards:

1982 – American Jewish Congress—The Allard K. Lowenstein Award, for “remarkable efforts in advancing the causes of human rights, peace and freedom,”

1986 – TransAfrica forum—“In recognition of twenty-five years of commitment to justice, peace, and human rights,”

1989 – PS 6 Auditorium, New York, NY—The Peter Yarrow Auditorium, “In honor of Peter Yarrow: an alumnus, a parent, a benefactor, and friend—our magic dragon—whose music resounds in our conscience and whose joy and love inspires us all,” renamed and dedicated

1995 – Miami Jewish Federation—Tikkun Olam Award

1996 – University of Notre Dame—“Peter Yarrow Award for Peace Studies” given to Notre Dame students, created

1999 – People for the American Way—Defenders of Democracy Award, “to ordinary people who have done extraordinary things, giving their time and energy to defending our liberties and our democracy,”

1999 – Central Synagogue, NYC—Shofar award, “For fulfilling a lifelong commitment to tikkun olam, in accordance with the highest principles of the Jewish people,”

2000 – Reclaiming Youth International—The Spirit of Crazy Horse Award

2001 – Kentucky School Counselors’ Association—School Counselor of the Year Award

2001 – The Life Foundation—Gandhi World Peace Flame

2001 – Project Love—Rescuer of Humanity Award

2001 – Starr Commonwealth Foundation—Starr Commonwealth Board of Trustees Child Advocacy Award