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NJ Folk Fest Singer Inspires Awareness and Change

By Diana Kelly RC'04, SCILS'04

If you heard the talented musician Spook Handy RC'82 play at last year's New Jersey Folk Festival on Rutgers' Douglass Campus, you'd probably be surprised to learn that this enlightened singer, who is often compared to singer/songwriter Pete Seeger, finished college with a math degree and only a few months' worth of guitar experience under his belt before deciding to commit his life to music.

Growing up in a conservative household, Handy didn't get to listen to mainstream music. "When I got to college, I heard music I never heard before and it opened up a whole new world for me," he says.

Before graduating, Handy bought a guitar and picked up a few tips from his neighbor, the late Howard Schwartz RC'77, who was a professional musician in a local bluegrass/country rock band called Wood N Strings.

"I learned from Howard about being a musician. It's not about playing scales. It's about your lifestyle, philosophy, discipline, and attitude," Handy says.

Handy is known as a folk revivalist, meaning he learned music by studying it and practicing this genre on his own, as opposed to traditional folk musicians who learned the style from their families and communities while growing up.

After listening to musicians like The Beatles and Pete Seeger, Handy said he started to see music as something other than just fun. "It has social purpose. It can have messages about history and culture and values."

Handy's 2007 folk album *Whatcha Gonna Do?* included political messages, and his song "Vote" (from his 2001 album, *Breakfast at Bill's*) hit No. 10 last October on the folk radio charts.

Handy says the songs on his 2010 album will be about "having the strength to go the distance" and "opening our hearts and making the changes that need to happen." He thinks that people are ready to change and his music encourages them to do that.

When Handy is not working on his album or performing, he also runs songwriting and stage performing workshops for all types of performers, including poets, actors, and public speakers.

On April 25, you can find the Spook Handy Trio on the main stage at the [35th Annual New Jersey Folk Festival](#), part of the university's first-ever [Rutgers Day](#). Handy will be accompanied by singers Dennis McDonough and Mara Levine CC'86.



Folk musician Spook Handy RC'82 is performing (as part of the Spook Handy Trio) at the [New Jersey Folk Festival](#) on April 25 on Douglass Campus in New Brunswick.



Spook Handy (left) performed with Pete Seeger, a key figure in the mid-20th century American folk music revival and an artist to whom Handy is often compared. Photo by Econosmith.

Angus Kress Gillespie, a Rutgers professor of American Studies and Handy's friend, founded the Folk Fest and continues to run the event. "In recent years, [Handy] has been very helpful to us in our seminar stage and he's composed and organized different tributes," Gillespie says.

**Related Links**SpookHandy.com[New Jersey Folk Festival](#)[Rutgers Day](#)

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