

# A Singer for My Time

by Peggy Seeger

## Biography

### PREFACE

I could lay out the chronological bones of my life here, but I won't. I would get too literal and probably begin way before my beginning (1935), include everything, and proceed à la Proust through the years with the speed of geological time. Instead, I'll offer a few isolated anecdotes and snippets offered up by Memory, that wonderful fishing line with which we troll the past, catching and feeding upon the events that are insistent or foolish enough to be caught.

### CHAPTER ONE

I was lucky right from the start. My mother and father (both musicians) came together in love, stayed in love, and had enough money and parenting skills to bring up four children in a loving musical home. As a girl who was encouraged (in 1950s suburban Washington, D.C.) to wear jeans, climb trees, improvise on the Bach Inventions, take a paper route, play the banjo while stamping her feet — I could have gone wild but didn't. I was a good girl, most of the time. I did well in

school and went off to Radcliffe College where I spent most of my time singing and playing and dancing and socializing. I was part of a roving crowd of lively insomniacs who on weekends darted down to Yale or whizzed out to Cape Cod. In the spring of 1954, a gang of us traveled to Philadelphia in a souped-up hearse to the Swarthmore Folk Festival, where I met the first (and best) man-friend of my life, Ralph Rinzler. We hung out together, and with my brother Mike, for most of the festival. We kept in touch and met often. Ralph was cheerful, enthusiastic, caring, and (very important) non-predatory. We played music together and took occasional trips looking for more music. In the autumn of 1955, I went to live in Holland with my older brother Charles and his family. At the University of Leiden, in Dutch, I studied Russian. I joined a coven of young female Dutch students who stayed up all night over weekends drinking milky coffee and philosophizing. I hitchhiked throughout the Netherlands and behaved irresponsibly. This was the first year of a lifetime sabbatical.

### CHAPTER TWO

From 1955 to 1959, I was foot-loose, mostly in the United States, Europe, Russia, and China. It wasn't easy travelling with a knapsack, a guitar, and a long-necked banjo. I kept personal care and wardrobe to such a minimum that when Alan Lomax summoned me from a Copenhagen youth hostel to take part in a London television play, his partner — fashion model Susan



Ruth Crawford Seeger, Mike, Peggy, and Charles Seeger, 1937. Photo courtesy Peggy Seeger

Mills — took one look and one sniff, then stripped me to the buff and shoved me into the shower. She subjected me to a complete makeover. I mean *subjected*, and I mean *complete*, from head to toe and from just under my skin outwards. She scrubbed me clean, gave me the first manicure of my life, and decorated me like a Christmas tree with earrings, bracelets, and necklace. She washed, untangled, trimmed, and back-combed my long, long hair, putting it up into one of those 1950s bouffant concoctions. At her dressing table she sat me down and expertly slapped on me one of those faces that cosmetic companies use to prove that all their products can be used at once. Saying, “Breathe in and hold your breath,” she zipped me into a low-necked, wasp-waisted, 1956-feminine creation, then perched me on three-inch heels and nudged me compassionately into the little room where the audition committee was waiting. Their attention followed me like a spotlight as I wobbled to the high stool that seems to be forever *de rigueur* for folk singers. Battling cigarette smoke and the wasp-waist in a search for oxygen, I launched into my comfort song, “The House Carpenter” (à la Texas Gladden) with a fast banjo accompaniment (à la Hobart Smith). The music plus the appearance? An audio-visual oxymoron. But Ewan MacColl — dramatist, singer, songwriter, author, and 20 years my senior — sat there transfixed, a cigarette burning his fingers,



Above: Peggy, son Neill, and husband Ewan MacColl, 1959.

Photo by Bill Cunningham

Right: Irene Scott, 1999.

Photo by Peggy Seeger



irretrievably plunged into the first stages of the love that would lead him to write “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” for me a year later. (Ah, but his face was a picture when I appeared in my jeans and sneakers the next day at rehearsal. . . .) Ewan was married. I went on the road again.

Ralph and I had kept in touch. He turned up occasionally in England during those kaleidoscope days. We played together in clubs and on recordings and horsed around as was our wont. At one point we drove a glorious Bentley from London to Florence, delivering it to its rich American owner in what we thought was perfect condition. We took our time: ten days, three of which were spent playing music for money at the Domodossola tourist trap. England kept calling me back.

### CHAPTER THREE, ABOUT 30 YEARS LONG

I stayed in England, where I gained a European perspective on politics, music, language, and humor. Ewan and I came together in love, stayed in love, and brought up three children in a loving musical

home. He was the third of the four people who were most instrumental in making me want to sing and keep singing, my mother Ruth Crawford Seeger, the Composer, and my brother Pete, the Folk Singer, being the first two. I cannot thank them enough. Nothing will ever be enough. Lucky, lucky, lucky. I bless them every day for their care and patience and consider it a labor of love and duty to carry forth what they have taught me into the next generation. Ruth, Pete, and Ewan — so different from one another but all natural teachers and all bound to me by love and music.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Ewan died in 1989. Irene Scott, who had been my friend since 1965, fished me out of a maelstrom of terminal grief, hugged me, dusted me off, kissed me, planted an earthquake in my head and heart, and sent me off in a new direction. She is a natural mover-and-shaker, and I was moved and shaken. Irene: the fourth “wind beneath my wings.” We love each other.

## CODA

Time marched on with hobnailed boots, and I tiptoed into my sixties hoping that Mother Nature wouldn't notice. I moved back to the States, to Asheville, North Carolina. Once again, as in 1959, I am a cultural misfit. I fulfill my grandmothering duty by taking one English grandchild out at a time (I have seven) into the North American summer for a fortnight in my small motor home. I can get up and go when I wish. I behave irresponsibly, and I love it. I've never shaken off that touring bug — musical workaholicism has invaded every pore of my body, despite Irene's attempts to slow me down. I'll shift into underdrive one of these days, yes I will. But not tonight and probably not tomorrow or the next day. Too many songs to sing, friendships to tend, places to go, people to meet, days to enjoy, problems to solve, pleasures to indulge. As the song says, “I'll stick around to see what happens next.” That's the trouble with life and love and music. You get attached to them, and you stick around out of curiosity and habit. These are my lucky-me days.

## The Concert Program

Comments from the Gallery:

“Why do you write new songs? Aren't the old ones good enough?”

“I don't like that song. It's like a political speech set to music.”



Peggy Seeger and Ralph Rinzler, 1957. Photo by Toshi Seeger

“I get an idea for a song and then can't go any further.”

“Which do you write first, the words or the tune?”

“I'd love to write songs but I'm hopeless.”

“I'd write songs if I had the time.”

“Where do you get your ideas?”

The ways in which songs are written are almost as varied as the songs themselves. All song makers hope we can find a way to make our song catch on — and the catch is to make a song that other people want to sing. If enough people sing it, then it starts its journey through succeeding generations, and, if we're lucky, our great-great-grandchildren will be singing it without even knowing that we created it. It will have become a folk song or an old favorite. What an honor to create such a piece! Only one of my songs has

achieved this status, “The Ballad of Springhill.” But my role in the making of “Gonna Be an Engineer” is well on its way to being forgotten, too.

I was brought up on a healthy mixture of classical and Anglo-American folk music. The songs I make reflect both disciplines. Folk songs have lasted a long time. It seems to me that one way to ensure your new song endures is to use some of the features found in traditional songs. Many North American songwriters have done this. Woody Guthrie is a prime example, as are many of the protest song makers of the 1930s and 1940s. Ewan MacColl often wrote this way — his “Shoals of Herring” is so well known that it is often credited as traditional and has been reported in Ireland as “The Shores of Erin.” Other songs of his have been retitled and recorded as traditional pieces.

Writing “like” the folk song makers doesn’t mean just putting new words to an old tune or parodying the old words — making “fakesongs,” as Gershon Legman wrote in the 1960s. It means noticing the tune styles, the kinds of words, the rhyming schemes, the relationship between words and melody. It means careful choice of style of singing and accompaniment. It involves the maker’s intent, choice of subject, and attitude towards that subject. It correlates with the ways in which the maker seeks the attention and involvement of the listener, often limiting, defining, and identifying oneself musically, textually, politically, and socially. So many variables go into creating a new song! And there are so many good song makers: Aunt Molly Jackson, Sara Ogan Gunning, T-Bone Slim, Hazel Dickens, Si Kahn, Don Lange, Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, Larry Penn — to name but a few.

I’ve heard it said that one test of a good song is that it can be sung in different styles. I would add that if your song can be sung by many different people, it probably has a better chance of survival. These premises inform my choice of comrade singers for this Festival program. I have asked each to choose one of my songs and sing it in his or her own style. I am most interested to



Peggy Seeger, clay digger, 1993. Photo courtesy *Kentish Times*

hear what they do.

The evening will be divided into three sections, with an intermission halfway through the second.

### **I. 1940s and 1950s: family and traditional music**

We made music all through my childhood. We had weekly family singsongs. My brother Mike and I sang in concerts as teenagers. My brother Pete visited often, bringing new songs and instrumental styles. My children Neill, Calum, and Kitty sang with Ewan and me at home and in concert. My sister Penny’s daughter Sonya sang with her parents and continues with her daughter. My partner Irene sang traditional Irish songs with friends and comrades right through her teenage years. Ralph should have been here tonight as part of this gathering, for this is the music he loved best and spent so much of his life playing and promoting.

### **II. 1959–89: political and agitational music with a principal focus on left-wing politics**

The issues of the Movement have traditionally been homocentric, concerned with the welfare of mankind and our attempts to smooth the flawed facets of the human diamond: human rights, jobs, wages, class antagonism, racism, war and peace,

and gender struggles. My partner, both in work and play, was Ewan MacColl, and this era was dominated by making a family, creating the Radio Ballads, running the Critics Group and the recording projects, and exploring songwriting as a musical, dramatic, and socially responsible discipline. Many of the songs were dogmatic and, with hindsight, somewhat tunnel-visioned, but this was a very exciting era. It gave rise to many of the Old Greats in singing and song making. Our work in left-wing politics and my work with the *New City Songster* brought us into contact with many of the singers and song makers throughout the English-speaking world. That's how I came in contact with Larry Penn, several of whose songs were published in the *Songster*.

Irene Scott and I met for the first time in the mid-1960s in Belfast at a benefit concert for Dave Kitson, who was imprisoned for political activity in South Africa. My sons accompanied Ewan and me to strike meetings and benefit concerts, and on all those demonstrations against Margaret Thatcher's government, the poll tax, the rise of fascism, and violence against women. I sang and wrote songs for the Movement. I am not a prolific songwriter — my songbook only has 150 songs in it — but I was part of the groundswell of song making that became a tidal wave.

**III. 1990 to the present: feminism and ecology** — a two-pronged attempt to move the human race into a world perspective in which the welfare and future of ALL of earth's flora and fauna are major concerns.

We are on the brink of a monumental change in the way humanity perceives itself. To the dignity of man has been added the dignity of woman, along with the dignity of those whose nationality, color, religion, age, and mental and physical ability have meant multiple disadvantages. I had written "Gonna Be an Engineer" in 1971 and followed it with many feminist songs in the ensuing two decades. But my work and partnership with Irene made me see the similarity between the way

human females are treated and the way nature is treated. In the 1990s I established and re-established many friendships with women, among them Ethel Raim and Catherine Foster. I am now aware of the power and companionship of older women. I am ever impressed with the number and variety of new songs that are pouring out.

These are heady days for music makers and songwriters. The new technologies are creating new types of musicians, people who can sculpt a song, mix sounds as a painter mixes colors. At home we can burn our own CDs, create and print the sleeves and covers, advertise and sell on the Web — in short, set up an entire recording operation ourselves (as, for instance, Ani di Franco has done).

And yet ... and yet, we still hanker to sit down with a guitar, a drum, a banjo, a friend and make hands-on, spontaneous music. It's not that we have come back to the fireside — we never really left it. That's where music started, that's where it lives, and that's where it will end up if/when the lights go out. We are born with a desire to sing and make music, and we may not realize it, but part of us starves when we don't. Music makes us vibrate with the rest of the world. When I don't play my guitar for a week or two, it doesn't respond when I first pick it up again. It needs to vibrate constantly. It needs to know that it exists. Our new songs are a declaration of existence. They say, "We were here during our time, and this is how we felt about it."

So:

"Why do you write *new* songs? Aren't the old ones good enough?"

I am trying to speak for my time as the old songs spoke for theirs.

"I don't like that song. It's like a political speech set to music."

It's just one type of song. I'll have another soon. Think about its effectiveness.

“I get an idea for a song and then can’t go any further.”

Try making a very short song to start with, just one verse that pleases you.

“Which do you write first, the words or the tune?”

Sometimes the words, sometimes the tune. Sometimes both together.

“I’d love to write songs but I’m hopeless.”

Try working with friends. Don’t take it too seriously. Have fun.

“I’d write songs but I don’t have the time.”

If you really want to, you will find the time.

“Where do you get your ideas?”

I just got one — from talking with you.

### Suggested Listening

*The Folkways Years* (CD only)

A comprehensive look at 40 years of recording contains traditional songs, her own compositions, and a few songs by other writers; accompanied on banjo, guitar, autoharp, and Appalachian dulcimer, with occasional vocal and instrumental support by family and friends. (21 songs, Folkways SF 40048)

*Almost Commercially Viable* (cassette and CD)

One of Peggy’s favorites — love songs (lots) and political songs (a few). It is easy listening, with accompaniments by her sons and many other excellent musicians. Peggy is joined by singer Irene Scott, who produced the album and helped write some of the songs. Together they form the duo No Spring Chickens. (17 songs, Sliced Bread SB71204 and Fellside FECD 130)

*An Odd Collection* (CD only)

An intriguing collection, all written by Peggy (sometimes solo and sometimes with her friend Irene Scott). Songs about love, loss, violence against women, hormones, housework, unions, smoking, abortion, ecology, old friends, weddings, nuclear pollution, women in the pulpit, bodily dimensions, and the female vote. Instrumentation is simple and effective — arrange-

ments have been done in conjunction with Peggy’s son Calum, who also produced the recordings in the studio. (19 songs, Rounder 4031)

*Period Pieces* (CD only)

An unusual personal selection of women’s songs from 1963 to 1994. Songs about violence, marriage, children, unions, the penis, love, rape, birth control, war and peace, women in the pulpit, women at work, women in wheelchairs, and so on. (17 songs, Tradition TCD 1078)

*Love Will Linger On* (CD only)

Romantic love songs with romantic accompaniments. Produced and directed chiefly by Peggy’s son Calum, with her son Neill as second-in-command. Breaking new ground here in instrumentation and composition. (Appleseed APR1039)

*Parsley, Sage and Politics* (boxed set of three cassettes with notes)

The lives and music of Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl. Made up of interviews and music, this unusual project was conceived in the Radio Ballad style and produced in the 1980s by Mary Orr and Michael O’Rourke. A unique production, unavailable except from its producers and from Peggy.

### Suggested Reading

*The Peggy Seeger Songbook — Warts and All*

The definitive collection of Peggy’s songs, complete with extensive biography, two chapters on song making, music notations and notes for each song, glossary, discography, and the usual indexes. Charmingly illustrated by Jackie Fleming. A must for anyone interested in feminism, songwriting, or Peggy’s work. (Oak Publications, New York, 1998)

*The Essential Ewan MacColl Songbook*

Still in production at time of writing. Two hundred of MacColl’s songs with notes, musical notations, discography, bibliography, introduction, and photographs. (Oak Publications, New York, autumn 2000)

For information: [www.pegseeger.com](http://www.pegseeger.com)

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