Biography & Memoir

First Time Ever by Peggy Seeger – roots and reinvention

A funny, incisive and affecting memoir tells the story of the British folk revival

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017 by Ludovic Hunter-Tilney

Peggy Seeger is folk music royalty, although she would doubtless bridle at the description, contrary as it is to folk's humble roots and her own egalitarian ideals. Born in the US in 1935, she is the daughter of the modernist composer Ruth Porter Crawford and the musical folklorist Charles Seeger. Among a distinguished clutch of musical siblings was half-brother Pete Seeger, architect of the 1950s folk revival.

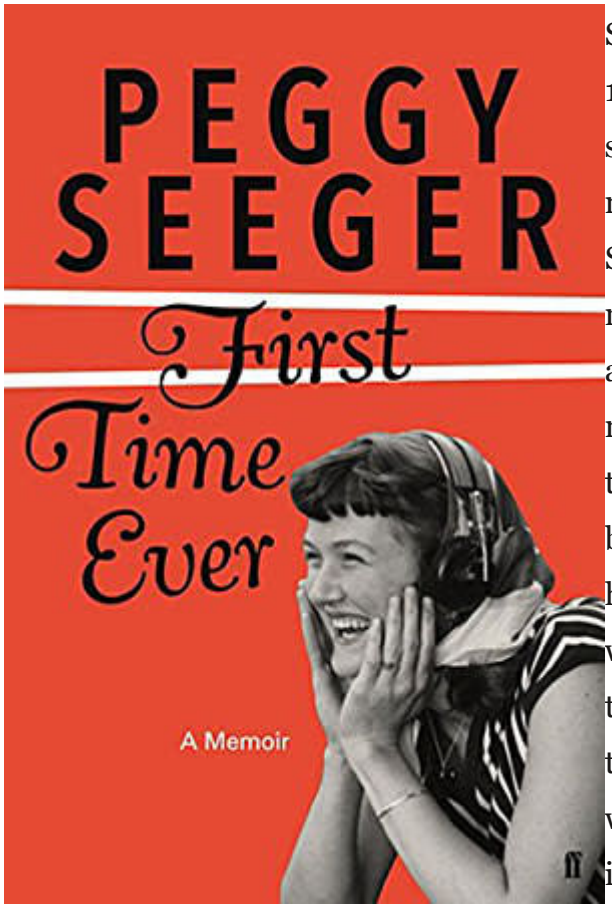
Most of her life has been spent in Britain, where she moved to in 1956 after auditioning for a folk group. “At 10.30am, banjo in hand, I tottered in on high heels to meet my next thirty-three years,” she writes in *First Time Ever*. That was the future awaiting her with Ewan MacColl, the influential musician-activist with whom she played a crucial role promoting the British wing of the folk revival.

First Time Ever is named after a song MacColl wrote for Seeger in 1957, “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face”. An account of a love affair, it has changed in significance for her over time, variously evoking sensations of embarrassment, celebration and grief. “Music creates meaning each time it is heard,” she writes. A similar spirit of roaming comes across in her memoir, an impressionistic and gripping tour of the “strange country of Myself”.

The book begins with her American youth, growing up in a bohemian household in Maryland where visitors included Jackson Pollock and Woody Guthrie. “Never bored as a child, never bored in preteens,” she recalls. But it was no apple-pie idyll. She never got to know her “dear, dear stranger-mother” properly, a distance made permanent by the latter’s death when Peggy was 18. A certain skittishness came to characterise relationships with others too (“my sad pattern — once I leave a location I leave its occupants”). Hints of neglect arise when she writes about a rupture in later life with her daughter Kitty, although the topic proves too raw, prompting the candid evasion: “I can’t write about that.”

The attraction between Seeger and MacColl was instant. He was double her age at 41 (although he claimed to be 38), married and with a child. Seeger was heedless about breaking up the family (“I was not a feminist back then” runs as a refrain throughout the book), although the pair also developed a deep professional partnership.

Classically trained, Seeger was a multi-instrumentalist with a strong, supple voice. She and MacColl, a dominating personality with doctrinaire communist beliefs, made for a formidable duo. At their London folk club a mangled Cockney version of the American railroad song “Rock Island Line” that reduced Seeger to tears of laughter led to a controversial policy that singers should only perform music to which they had a cultural link. Seeger partially recants this approach now — an emigrant herself, she personifies the fluidity of identity — although she plausibly defends “the Policy” as “largely responsible for the huge resurgence of interest in British material”.



She and MacColl toured the nation in the 1950s and 1960s making an innovative series of programmes about traditional music for the BBC, *The Radio Ballads*. Song-collecting among Gypsies is recollected in a rosy hue, while a woman in a housing estate complaining about a nearby encampment is presented with a tang of grande dame folk snobbery ("No books, a flock of ceramic ducks flying across her living-room floor"). But Seeger writes well about music, community and the oral tradition ("In the future, memory may be the one and only reliable 'device' to carry with us"), interpolating lyrics from songs into her text.

The 1980s find her living in the London suburb Beckenham with three children, a difficult Scottish mother-in-law and an ailing MacColl, declining through a series of mini-strokes towards death in 1989. Life as a jobbing folk musician, even a regal one, is a grind. Afterwards she writes an angry posthumous letter to MacColl, tasking him for failing to help her adequately through abortions she suffered. To her surprise, she falls in love with a woman, her current partner Irene Pyper-Scott.

Folk music and activism tend to come freighted with connotations of earnestness. But Seeger's writing goes against the stereotype. *First Time Ever* is funny, incisive, and affecting. At 82, despite the health problems outlined at the end of the book, she continues performing. Both she and her vigorous autobiography are testament to folk's tenacity in a modern world that is proving increasingly antithetical to its values.

First Time Ever: A Memoir, by Peggy Seeger, *Faber, RRP£20/$29.95, 464 pages*

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