



#### WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

● At 23, Peggy Seeger (above, 1953 high school yearbook) was living in Paris, barred from Britain and pregnant by Ewan MacColl, who was then married to another. Scottish folk singer Alex Campbell married Peggy to give her legal status and took her to MacColl in London saying, "Here's yer woman."

● Feminist anthem 'I'm Gonna Be An Engineer' was written by Seeger for a Festival Of Fools revue show in 1971. When women's groups started asking her to sing her feminist songs at their meetings she had to confess it was the only one she had.

● Peggy was unable to sing *First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* without breaking down for several years after Ewan MacColl's death.

## The face fits

From Lomax, Leadbelly and Broonzy... to Ewan MacColl, feminism and a hit song.  
By Colin Irwin.

### First Time Ever: A Memoir

★★★★★

Peggy Seeger

FABER & FABER, £20

**P**eggy Seeger's life is the stuff of a rip-roaring blockbuster. A colourful upbringing involving cameos from some of the great and the good of the folk music world – Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Alan Lomax, Big Bill Broonzy, Libba Cotten et al – on to surreal adventures across America and Europe, Russia and China, sexual intrigue, music, politics... and lots of all of it.

Often demeaningly referenced as Pete Seeger's half-sister or Ewan MacColl's partner, she has – uniquely – been a key influence on folk music on both sides of the Atlantic, and is a fine banjo player and remarkable songwriter, who's also stirred passions and inspired political campaigns, notably the women's movement.

With a delicious eye for detail, she recounts it all with nonchalance and a

wry philosophy. Her "progressive" father Charlie – a prominent folklorist who helped set up the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song – is described as a man who could still do handstands in his nineties; her mother Ruth as a "1920s feminist who read Perry Mason detective stories and drank oceans of black coffee". And her future mother-in-law Betty "the size of tuppence, all tongue and temper".

Hard on the heels of Jean R Freedman's rather more academic Peggy Seeger: A Life Of Music, Love & Politics (University of Illinois Press) – with which Peggy clearly co-operated and generously references – this is an illuminating, witty, revelatory and unflinchingly candid account, presented in vivid vignettes and nonchalant anecdotes, often funny, sometimes shocking (notably describing an abortion). Where Freedman painstakingly analyses the content and musical influence of almost every track she ever recorded, Seeger whimsically breezes through the music, barely pausing for breath as she recalls her most famous songs *The Ballad Of Springhill* and *I'm Gonna Be An Engineer*, and debuting *First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*, which ultimately brought financial relief courtesy of Roberta Flack.

Her life changed when – at the request of Alan Lomax to play banjo on a TV show – she diverted to London while

Aiming straight for the heart: Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl at the Newport Folk Festival, 1960.

en route to a logging camp in Finland with an Israeli boy. She wryly describes the fateful "fairy tale" meeting with Ewan MacColl: "I dreamt of being kissed by a prince, but he wouldn't be 44, married with a son and a pregnant wife."

She talks of her long partnership with MacColl with warmth and gratitude without seeking to gloss over the insecurities and paranoia which affected them both as they struggled to hold it together amid society's disapproval, financial hardship and artistic pressures, while fighting for principles, political causes and often the authorities too. There's no self-pity, either, as she talks about their perceived role in the British folk revival, the contentious dictums instituted at their Singers Club and the 'hurt as their Critics group fell apart.

Then, in the post-MacColl years after his death in 1989, she guides us through the trials and tribulations leading to her Indian summer of awards, tours and critical acclaim... falling in love with her new partner Irene, some unspeakably bad gigs and the passions that still clearly burn brightly in her. "I was born joyful and will probably die troubled," she says.



"SEXUAL INTRIGUE, MUSIC, POLITICS... AND LOTS OF IT."