

Peggy Seeger Notebook

A Yankee road trip in Britain, the tweets of Hocus-Potus, and why some women stop riding horses



Romezrio.com told me it would take three hours and ten minutes to get from Oxford to north Devon via motorways and A roads. I prefer Q and Z roads: when you're stuck staring at someone else's licence plate, you have more interesting vistas all around. A Yankee by birth, I wear my political heart on my vehicular sleeve by putting up bumper stickers for those stuck staring at the backside of Rosie, my little red van: "SUPPORT THE ARTS - KISS A MUSICIAN." "THE CLIMATE IS CHANGING FASTER THAN WE ARE." "CAUTION - DRIVER SINGING."

Brits don't do wacky things like that, but what the hell... When in Rome, do as the Athenians do. Tomorrow, I'm at the Appledore Book Festival, where Robin Denselow and I will discuss my memoir - I swear, the one and only book I will ever write. Eventually the route takes five unedifying start-stop hours. I sing and talk for free. You pay me to travel.

27 September

I take the word "diary" to mean a daily record of interest only to its creator, like the dreaded holiday photos. Dear Diary: I woke up feeling 83. Not good, because I'm 82. It took me years of travelling for a living to adjust to sleeping in a different bed every night. Remembering daily where you are upon waking can be trying. The excitement begins: a tea bag into a Lilliputian cup, wrestle with tiny capsules of watery semi-skimmed, turn on the news, turn off the news. At breakfast, the *New Statesman* or the *Positive News*, perfect for small table space. No time to explore the town - a pity because so many of the Apple-towns are unique: Appleby-in-Westmorland for its yearly horse fair for Travellers and Gypsies; Applecross, where the Gulf Stream touches north-west Scotland, bringing weather that encourages extravagant tropical flora.

Anything that has anything to do with apples interests me: two apples a day, apple crumble, scrumpy - a west of England rough apple cider reckoned to be ready to

drink when it's strong enough to dissolve rats and iron chains.

28 September

Ewan MacColl was my first life partner. During our 1956 courtship, I gradually gave up my teenage habit of daily journaling. That's small stuff. Some females give up riding horses when they take on their first real lover. Ponder on that, pommel and all.

Drove to New Malden in Surrey to overnight with son Calum and daughter-in-law Kerry Harvey-Piper. Turned on the news, turned off the news, turned on at 10am for the comforting voice of Jenni Murray. The motorway pit stops have improved immensely in my 61 years here. Rows of neat white lines have coralled the old parking prairies into order. A rainbow of ethnicities is on the move. The loos are clean(er), there's a variety of food (most of it edible) and coffee that tastes like coffee. Am boycotting Starbucks. I buy the *Oldie* for the first time ever, and not for the last time.

When the first motorway was built (in 1958, the Preston Bypass), it became a race-track, a graveyard. Pile-ups were frequent. We drivers are more socialised now. I liken us to shoals of fish, brought into synchronicity by Department for Transport sharks (cameras and road signs) that can change our group velocity from 30 to 70 and back within a micro-blink. Kind of like Donald Trump's tweets. DT - also an acronym for delirium tremens. Don't you think the most powerful leader in the world should be elected by the whole world? One of these days, Hocus-Potus will find a way of charging the world for the entertainment and life-threatening adrenalin rushes he is providing.

29 September

Today I'm bound for the South Downs for the Small Wonder Short Story Festival at Charleston House, the old Bloomsbury group watering hole. Another esteemed interrogator: Dorian Lynskey (the author of *33 Revolutions Per Minute*). No time to visit the wondrous house properly. Kent and Surrey

are the terrain of 30 years of days out from Beckenham with the kids, weekends gradually made impossible by gridlocked traffic. Overpopulation looming, my Oxfordshire will soon be one of the Home Counties. London will move north, leaping over the Roman wall to the Scottish border. I open the car window and treat fellow drivers to my voice exercises. Arpeggios, scales, ooh, eee, aah, aww, ververver, mamama, DECIBELS! My fellow sufferers smile, frown, look worried - but, hey, at least it's something different to report upon arrival. You won't believe it! There was this old bird being tortured in the driver's seat of a post office van...

30 September

Woke up feeling 81. The festival was a wonder, and full. The night drive back to New Malden was peaceful, the road uncrowded - time for reflection. At night this country could be any in the Western world, the only identifying features being the road signs as they flash by. Stay under the speed limit, fearful of animals that might have the mistaken idea that they are safer on or near the road at night. Driving: one of the most astounding examples of human co-operation. Channel pre-Bruno/Galileo, the world ending where the headlight beams give out, drivers trusting that someone else's world isn't rushing at us out of the void.

Today I'm rehearsing with my son Calum, always the productive same-old, always creativity anew. Treasured time. We're rehearsing again tomorrow while Kerry wrestles with transport, finance, accommodation, meals, communications. She also plans for inevitable hitches while she plans dinner. Singing is simple compared with managing our 15-gig autumn tour. Tickety-boo forecast: after a late dinner, I will head home and collapse in bed. My bed. Phone my better two-thirds, who lives in New Zealand. Safe home and "Goodnight, Irene". I won't set the alarm clock. ● *Peggy Seeger's memoir, "First Time Ever", is published by Faber & Faber. She is currently on tour in the UK until 17 November*