

Client: Dan Papps Yellow News
Source: The Times (Saturday Review)
Date: 27 October 2018
Page: 10
Reach: 450064
Size: 693cm2
Value: 21122.64

The first time ever he saw her face

Peggy Seeger talks to Sarfraz Manzoor about the birth of an iconic song, Ewan MacColl and late, lesbian love

The first time ever that Peggy Seeger saw his face, she was 20 years old and freshly arrived in Britain having left her native America to study in Europe. It was spring 1956 and Seeger, who hailed from a celebrated musical dynasty — her brother Mike was a musician and her half-brother, Pete, a key figure in American folk — was in London; she had been invited by folk music collector Alan Lomax to appear on a television show.

“He picked me up at Waterloo and we went to his flat in Chelsea,” says Seeger, who was already an accomplished folk musician by then. “I was filthy so I had to get washed and dressed.” She was led into a room and it was there that she saw a man with a shock of black hair and a red beard sitting in the corner smoking. He was the folk singer, political firebrand and playwright Ewan MacColl. On meeting Seeger, MacColl invited her to *The Threepenny Opera* in which he was appearing the next evening. MacColl drove her home after the performance and it was only when he parked that he told her that he had fallen in love and he wanted to make love to her.

“This was a man who knew exactly what he was doing,” says Seeger. The couple started seeing each other, but MacColl, who was 41, was already married to Jean Newlove, with whom he had a son, Hamish. Newlove and MacColl would go on to have a daughter, Kirsty, who had her own music career. Seeger went back to the

US — “I was running away from him” — but while she was in California she talked to MacColl by phone.

“I told him that I was doing a radio show and they wanted a love song and they would prefer a new one,” she says. “He said, ‘How about this?’” Then he sang *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* — the song that would later be a hit for Roberta Flack and covered by Elvis Presley and George Michael. It would also become a signature song for Seeger and MacColl, who eventually got married in 1977 and remained together until he died in 1989.

As well as having three children, the pair made countless albums, toured the world, produced radio documentaries and founded the Critics Group, which trained folk singers. “I was with Ewan for 30 years and it was a very fruitful period,” says Seeger.

We are in the living room of the house that Seeger rents on a tree-lined road in Oxford. There are musical instruments hanging on the wall, framed photographs of her parents and a certificate confirming that a star has been named after her. Seeger revisited her years with MacColl in her memoir *First Time Ever*, published last year. “I have a photographic gallery in my head,” she says of the writing process. “I can remember what people wore, the background, it is like endless snapshots.”

The earliest musical memory Seeger recalls is of her mother, the composer Ruth Crawford, playing classical music on the piano to her father. Peggy was three. “My mother was a piano teacher and she taught in the house,” she recalls, “and my father, Charles, was involved in a lot of cultural

things.” Jackson Pollock came to visit at her Washington DC home when Seeger was ten. “He spread paint all over a canvas and told me, my brother and sister to walk in it,” she says. “My mother was furious because we dragged it into the house.” Woody Guthrie was another visitor. “He dragged his guitar around pretending it was a dog,” she says. Seeger’s mother died when Peggy was 18 and after her father remarried she left for Europe.

It was while she was there that the phone call came from Lomax, a family friend, inviting her to London, which led her to meet MacColl. He was 21 years older than her and I wonder if the woman who later wrote the feminist anthem *I’m Gonna Be an Engineer* felt that he was exploiting the imbalance in power and age. “No — the poor man was infatuated like crazy,” she replies. He was also married. Wasn’t he out of bounds? “No, because it was quite thrilling and he was a fascinating man,” she says. Did you feel guilty? “Not really... I was selfish,” she says. “If a husband or a wife is unfaithful, there is something wrong with the marriage anyway.”

The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face is indelibly associated with Seeger, but, despite what the lyrics imply, she was not immediately taken with MacColl. “It is a lie because the first time I saw his face I thought he was the funniest looking creature I had ever seen, red beard, black hair, ears sticking out, two inches shorter than me and 21 years older.”

Alongside their own recordings and concerts, Seeger and MacColl also presid-



Client: Dan Papps Yellow News
Source: The Times (Saturday Review)
Date: 27 October 2018
Page: 10
Reach: 450064
Size: 693cm2
Value: 21122.64



ed over folk clubs including Ballads and Blues at the Princess Louise pub in High Holborn, central London, where they enacted a strict policy. "The rule was that

you had to sing a song only from the culture you came from in a language you understood," explains Seeger. "Folk songs ... are made by people who live hard lives."

Except that Seeger came from a solidly upper-middle-class family. What gave her the right to sing those songs? "I do because the folk aren't singing them and they are wondrous works of art," she says.

Among those who played at their London club in the early 1960s was a young Bob Dylan. "He had this really tiny voice and he just stood there looking at his

feet." Seeger was also present on the now mythical night in 1965 when Dylan went electric at the Newport Folk Festival. "It was insanely loud," she says. "Apparently Pete [Seeger] pulled out the wires because he hated that it was electric."

Pete Seeger wasn't the only folk singer to be apprehensive. When Dylan emerged MacColl dismissed him as "a youth of mediocre talent". "I think it was a man thing," says Seeger.

MacColl's health declined in the 1980s. "He was having little heart attacks every day for ten years," she says. "I became more powerful and Ewan became weaker and weaker in the relationship." His death left Seeger feeling like "I was dissolved with grief because I had lost him". Alongside that grief was something else. "I realised I had not been in love with my partner of 30 years," she says. "I had never had that overwhelming tsunami of love."

The first time that tsunami struck was in November 1988, when Seeger began a relationship with her best friend, Irene Pyper-Scott, who became her partner. They spend six months of the year together; three months in New Zealand, where Irene lives, and three months at Peggy's in Oxford. They have known each other since the early 1960s. "It was always just a friendship and all of a sudden I realised, 'Wow!'" Seeger says. "I had never fancied a woman before, [but] she was the only one that physically I have been absolutely taken with."

Seeger is 83 and despite two back operations, a mastectomy and stomach surgery she is still recording and performing.

She did not sing *The First Time Ever I*

Saw Your Face for 15 years after MacColl died because it was too painful; it is back in her repertoire, but filled with new meaning. "When I fell in love with Irene, the song became entirely different," she says. "I used to be cautious, but now I just lay myself open on stage. If you sing a song long enough, you have a new view on it." **Peggy Seeger is at the Courthouse, Otley, tonight and her tour continues until November 30; peggyseeger.com**

He was 21 years older and married but 'the poor man was infatuated like crazy'



GERAIN LEWIS FOR THE TIMES; GETTY IMAGES



Client: Dan Papps Yellow News
Source: The Times (Saturday Review)
Date: 27 October 2018
Page: 10
Reach: 450064
Size: 693cm2
Value: 21122.64



FOLK TALES Peggy Seeger today; below, with Dean Gitter and, seated, Ewan MacColl 50 years ago