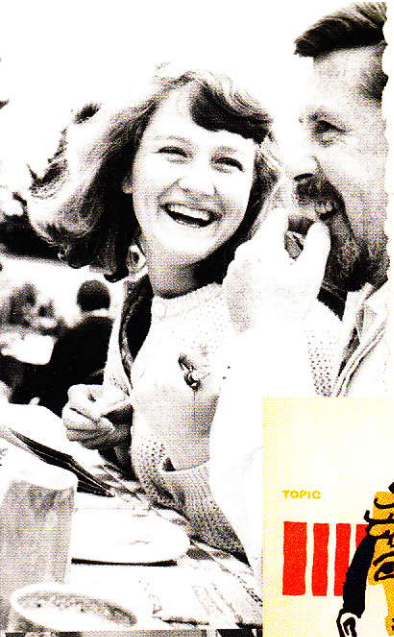
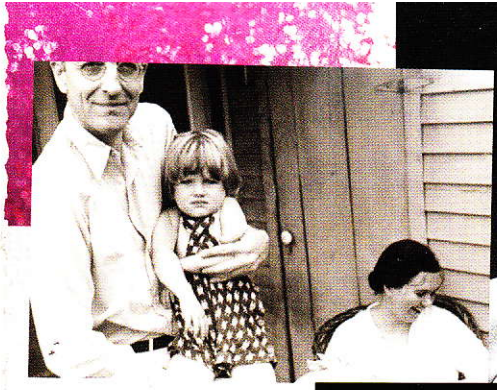
The *Rebellious* MUSE

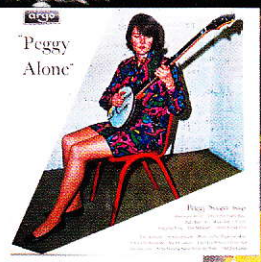
In a truly remarkable 60-year career, Peggy SEEGER has spearheaded a British folk song revival, written the defining anthem of the women's movement, dissed Dylan, and inspired one of the 20th century's greatest songs. To celebrate her 80th birthday, the folk legend took tea with Colin IRWIN.

Truth seeker: Peggy Seeger, 1960; (opposite, clockwise from top left) singing with brother Mike Seeger, 1955; Peggy in Moscow, 1957; playing at the Enterprise pub, Covent Garden, London, circa 1960; at Moscow Station, 1957.



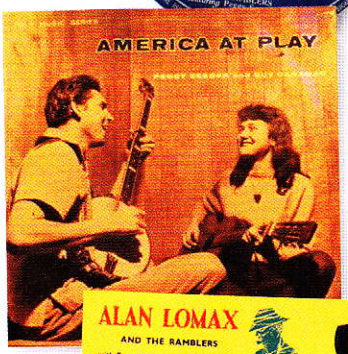


Everything changes: (top row, from left) with Ewan MacColl, Newport festival, 1960; Big Bill Broonzy, "We got on well…"; aged two, with dad Charles and mother Ruth Crawford, 1937; at Newport Folk Festival, '61; (second row, from left); young Seegers, singing on the stairs, 1950s.



Folk engineers: (main) Peggy at home in Beckenham, 1965; (clockwise from right) with Ewan MacColl; Elizabeth Cotten; with Ewan, Cora Hotel, 1957; Alan Lomax (centre) and Pete Seeger (right); "Wow!", it's house guest Leadbelly.

IN 1956 PEGGY SEEGER, STILL NOT 21, decided to hitchhike across Europe. An ornery child who acted on whim and instinct and didn't think greatly about the consequences, Peggy had been so horrible to her mother that she'd been sent to boarding school to instil some manners. But she could play the banjo. And sing. And growing up in a smart Washington DC neighbourhood with father Charles Seeger, a renowned folklorist, and mother Ruth Crawford, an avant-garde composer and pianist, who hosted a stream of itinerant singers, she knew her folk music.



Leaving an America rife with McCarthyist paranoia, veiled threats of revoked passports and deep-seated suspicion of any musician of a leftish hue, Seeger crossed the Atlantic and, for reasons not immediately apparent, wound up in Belgium, living in a tiny house looking after 13 displaced children from Berlin, where a Catholic priest tried to talk her into running a nearby nunnery. "I wonder what happened to those children," she muses today.

Alarmed by her letters home about this bizarre situation, friends descended to rescue her, driving her to Denmark in the back of a freezing Fiat. They stopped at a youth hostel, where Peggy met a Finnish logger who said her eyes were "the colour of time" and that she should go to Finland with him immediately. She might've done so, too, were it not for a phone call at the hostel from American folklorist Alan Lomax, who was in London and needed a banjo player for a TV show he was working on. "I'd never been to London," she says, "and never been on television, so I took the trip."

It was a fateful decision. Once there, almost immediately something happened that musically, personally, socially and politically, would shape the destiny of the rest of her life. All these years on, she remembers the moment with astonishing clarity. March 25, 1956. A Chelsea basement. 10.30am. Meeting Alan Lomax. And there, sitting across the room, was a strange-looking man with black hair and a big red beard. Ewan MacColl, actor, singer, writer, orator, left-wing activist.

That night he was appearing as the balladeer in The Threepenny Opera and offered Peggy a ticket. The die was cast. "He wore an old battered hat and his stomach pushed out," she says. "I'd had boyfriends in the past but never a man friend. He was 41 and had a bit of a paunch by then and had braces and dirty old trousers and make-up that made him look twice his age. But I was entranced by that voice.

"Two days later he told me he was in love with me and he was going to make love to me. I didn't even know what lovemaking was. In America they don't say that. You just screw or fuck. So that was romantic. And then I found out he was married with a child. But he was fascinating. For 30 years, 24/7 he was fascinating..."

> "He was 41, had *a bit* of a paunch, braces *and* DIRTY old trousers."

RELUCTANTLY, VERY RELUCTANTLY, PEGGY SEEGER celebrated her 80th birthday on June 17. She says it's a milestone that weighs heavily but, pouring tea in the idyllic surroundings of her home in the outskirts of Oxford, she's relaxed enough, pontificating studiously on the ramifications of an extraordinary career rooted in the American folk tradition, which branched off significantly into the very engine room of the British folk revival.

She's a warm host, dishing up lunch and anecdotes with great bonhomie. An elegant, serene presence, she answers questions in a soft, measured voice that belies a long history championing a culture of dissent and struggle, and many hours on the campaign front, ranging from anti-nuclear Aldermaston marches in the 1950s and early '60s to anti-apartheid rallies in the '60s and '70s and numerous feminist causes since.

Three awards decorate the mantelpiece of her front room: one from a music industry weekly for services to women in music; another from an American folk club; but taking pride of place in the centre sits a small sculpture of two musicians, presented to her at the BBC Folk Awards in Cardiff in April when she won Best Original Song for Swim To The Star, a poignant story about one of the Titanic survivors written with her son Calum MacColl. It's one of several darkly intimate narratives that make her latest album, *Everything Changes*, such a disquieting revelation.

You don't imagine she's an awards type of person but, after years of pursuing an isolated path as a dissenting folk singer whose relationship with the music industry has been either non-existent or fractious, she seems genuinely delighted by the belated recognition. She's full of praise, too, for Guy Garvey, who took on the task at these awards of singing The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face, the song Ewan wrote for her 58 years ago, to celebrate the centenary of MacColl's birth.

"Oh, I did like the way he did it," she says with genuine warmth. "He changed it ever so slightly, but I liked what he did with it. I might try to do it that way myself. It's one of the best versions I've heard."

She talks offhandedly, yet graphically, about the horrible operations and life-threatening illnesses she's had in recent years, but there's a skip in her step and a glint in her eye and after an unavoidable break, which she found oddly satisfying ("I was happy in hospital – I felt safe. I could watch a whole new scene going past every day and I liked it") she's back with a vengeance.

After a glut of ecstatic reviews for the album, her sons Calum and Neill put together a band to take her on tour. "I don't play on the album, I just sing, which is why it's so wonderful working with other musicians. I can't play as well as I used to. I have arthritis in both hands. It happened to Bill Broonzy. He played complicated when he was young and more simply as he got older. I do that. I take things slower and think more about the text of what I'm singing."

Peggy Seeger grew up at 10001 Dallas Avenue, in the Washington DC of the late '30s where "you could run free and pick four leaf clovers in the fields and there were no kerb crawlers or paedo-rats chasing you... [but] I grew up in a racist town. Washington DC was very racist then. Not one of the garbage men was white and everyone had black helpers, although some poor white women would knock on the door and say, 'Do you want any help, missus?'"

The *Everything Changes* title track reflects on those days, especially on her mother. "I lost her when I was 18," she says, "and we weren't getting along. No fault of hers – she just didn't know how to cope with a sulking, rude teenager. Like a lot of women she wanted babies and instead got children, and teenagers. She wrote a string quar- ➢

The family that plays together: (from left) Ewan and Peggy with sons Neill and Calum MacColl.

tet piece which won a prize. I was so proud of her. It's a tragedy she died so young. If she'd lived another 25 years she would have flown but didn't get the chance. Cancer runs in our family."

She looks you straight in the eye and points to one of her breasts. "This one's false..."

Growing up, there was no escape for Peggy from her folk heritage – her half-brother Pete was already making a name for himself as one of the most influential voices on the new folk scene.

"I didn't want to escape it," she insists. "My mother had these big aluminum records she got from the Library of Congress. We'd go there and hear a number of songs and she'd choose the ones she wanted to transcribe and they'd create these big 16-inch aluminum records that we'd lug home on the bus and play with a thorn needle. You can't use a steel needle on aluminum because it wears out. You sharpened these needles on something that looked like a sparkler, put the needle in and a sandpaper thing would whizz around and sharpen it.

"My mother would play those records through my early childhood. We'd be playing on a corner and hearing these chain gang songs, murder ballads, children's tunes, work songs, everything. People now have the background of the telly but that music was our background. And she had me transcribing music by the time I was 11. Just simple tunes. She'd pay me a nickel for each one. So I was immersed in folk song and classical music together."

Her mother wasn't so keen on the musicians who came to the house. "We were like a way station because Washington DC is right up that eastern corridor of multi-urban settlement," she says. "We had lots of visitors though the only ones I remember staying were Jack Elliott and Guy Carawan. I think the reason they stayed was they did their own laundering and baked bread. My mother didn't take to Woody Guthrie visiting at all. Pete would have brought Woody. He was quite little [and] he was a bit too rough for my mother. He'd put his guitar on the floor and pretend it was a dog, pulling it around by the strap.

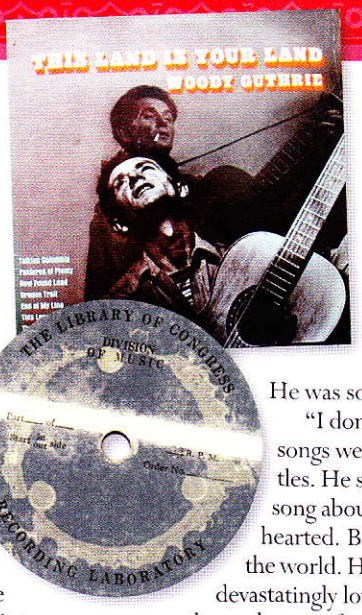
"John Jacob Niles would come by. And when I was five or six I went to the door and there was this great big black man and I thought, Wow! That was Leadbelly. He came in with Alan and probably John Lomax. He was doing a concert with Pete. I remember going to see them at a boxing ring in Washington sitting on my mother's lap in about 1941. Leadbelly was only let out of prison if he was with Alan Lomax."

Another member of the Seeger household was Elizabeth Cotten. The story goes that Peggy's mother was shopping in a department store when Peggy, then a toddler, wandered off and got lost. Working there at the time, Cotten repatriated the child with her mother, who was so relieved she offered 'Libba' Cotten work as a maid.

One day the family heard music gently coming from the kitchen. Libba had taken down a guitar hanging on the kitchen wall and, though she hadn't played for 25 years, wondered if she still remembered a song she'd written as a teenager, Freight Train. The family were mesmerised. Peggy's brother Mike Seeger took her under his wing and Cotten became an unlikely folk star.

"Libba was very modest but once you got her on stage you couldn't get her off," says Seeger. "You didn't want her to come off. Mike did a wonderful thing and took her out on tour and the last 20 years of her life were a great adventure. He opened for her, drove her from this place to that and did that for a number of Southern singers. He was the most altruistic of the three of us and didn't have the ego problem Pete and I had. He serviced a lot of other singers and took them round and encouraged them and dug up a lot of those old singers we'd grown up with on those old aluminum records. He found them, gave them an audience and they flowered under it. And, of course, everyone was fascinated by the fact that Libba played the guitar so-called backwards."

> *"No way* were we *envious* of DYLAN's fame, we *never* wanted attention."



Asked if she was close to her half-brother Pete, she pauses at some length. "I don't know if anybody was close to Pete," she says. "It was difficult to get close to him. You meet, you hug and have a little talk about his life and he'd go off into talking about things he knew and had read. When that mind closed down when he died we lost an encyclopaedia of Americana. He knew so much and was still learning right up until he died. He was so well read and didn't exaggerate what he knew.

"I don't know that he ever name-called in his songs. His songs were in the main optimistic. We had a few little battles. He sang me a new song, We'll All Be A Doublin', a fun song about over-population, which I thought was too lighthearted. Because the way we're going we're going to eat up the world. He had a very fertile mind and some of his songs are devastatingly lovely. I do one of his songs, Quite Early Morning. I changed some of it. He listened intently to what I did and said, 'That's very nice Peggy, but I don't think I'll be singing those words.'"

Her own early forays into performance included a memorable residency at the Gate Of Horn in Chicago with Big Bill Broonzy, in spring 1957. "He'd sing for an hour, then I'd sing for an hour," she says, "and we'd have a break and then we'd go back on from 11 to

three in the morning. It was a little dive but it had the best burgers you ever tasted. Bill would sit there drinking brandy straight. We got on well... as well as somebody as green as I was at 20 could get on with someone like him. He didn't talk very much. He had a pink Cadillac and took Blind Lemon Jefferson around in it."

Much to the consternation of the American authorities, she went on to sing in Russia and China and, while pregnant with her and MacColl's son Neill, she busked on the streets of Paris with the great Scottish singer and carouser Alex Campbell, and ended up marrying MacColl so she could stay in Britain.

SHE LEANS FORWARD, LIFTS THE EXPENSIVE-LOOKing teapot with the exceptionally long spout and refills her china cup, proffering it across to MOJO. She sighs slightly, sits back neatly and continues. "When I got together with Ewan it just seemed so natural because we clicked very quickly. Everyone predicted doom and gloom because a lot of mid-life crisis men go off after younger women and it doesn't work, so everyone was waiting for us to fall apart, but there was so much to hold us together."

They were together for 30 productive, sometimes controversial years. In that time they established a sort of blueprint for the British folk song revival with their Singers Club in London, fertilising it further with the groundbreaking Radio Ballads series on the BBC, merging traditional and self-written material to illustrate vivid documentaries about British industry involving, for the first time, authentic reportage and the voices of workers.

The doctrine at their own club – musicians should only perform music of their own provenance (enacted after an embarrassing try at Southern blues by Northampton-born Long John Baldry) – divides opinion to this day, while the harshly analytical approach of their Critics Group also ruffled feathers. There was sound reasoning behind both and there's little doubt that refusing to allow British singers to play songs from America or elsewhere enforced the research and digging that helped drive the revival of musical traditions closer to home.

"We were snobs," she says unequivocally. "A lot of artists are probably snobs, but we were vocal about it. We did make a study of other cultures, the way they sang, and tried to get a study going about the way to sing these songs. Most people singing them knew about pop songs or classical music or music hall or jazz but they didn't know about folk songs, so how would they know how to sing folk songs? Some of the Americans who sang folk songs, like Martha Schlamme and The Kingston Trio and John Jacob Niles, souped it all up and lost a lot of integrity and balance, and we were trying to figure out a way of singing that was true to the music. Because folk music is different from any other kind of music. A lot of these songs have a class allegiance. They are not made up to show how well you can sing, they are made up to represent a way of life and they deserve a certain objectivity that involves setting yourself apart from an egotistical exhibition of yourself or your voice. People with very good voices sometimes have trouble singing folk songs because they are so busy listening to how good their voices are. So we tried to work out a way of singing but we went about it the wrong way."

They also went public in their disapproval of Bob Dylan. "We were being defensive of what we did," says Seeger. "No way were we envious of Dylan's fame. We'd never have wanted such an obscene amount of attention. Dylan was writing songs for his time and the poetry of some of them is good, but others it's not. Like Woody Guthrie. He wrote some brilliant songs but some crap ones too. Like This Land Is Your Land. That is so homocentric. I find it quite offensive. I don't like the song. Unfortunately it's universal now.

"Back then," she insists, "we felt we needed political songs with more focus. Dylan's songs were very general. Blowin' In The Wind in a way helped the making of teenagers and youth culture – parents get out of the way – but to completely diss the wisdom of the past and the older people, which essentially is what that song does, turned the generations against each other. And I was still a teenager when I was 50! Blowin' In The Wind has some memorable lines but some of them are easy get-outs. Ewan liked his political songs to be more naming of names."

Peggy and Ewan never wrote a song together but always swapped ideas. If MacColl's most famous creations are The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face and Dirty Old Town, Peggy's most iconic song, I'm Gonna Be An Engineer, is virtually the women's movement's anthem.

"My original version had a very depressing last verse so I went upstairs to Ewan and he said, 'You need a cheerful last verse.' So I went back downstairs and wrote one. It was written for one of the Festival Of Fools shows when, ironically, there were eight of us women standing in a V on the stage in very short mini-skirts. Oh dear! When it was taken up I didn't know anything about the feminist movement but I was suddenly getting invited to all these very radical meetings and I'd sing the song and they'd say, 'Sing us another one!' and I didn't have any more. I just had folk songs which, let's face it, are hardly feminist."

After Ewan died in 1989 Peggy returned to America for some years, fell in love again with new partner Irene Pyper-Scott, and is now back in the UK, raging at fracking, concerned about over-population, worrying about war-mongering men destroying the world, writing her memoirs and enjoying the unexpected twist of events which has seen her profile rise to unexpected highs as she goes back on the road, still intent on fighting the good fight. She admires Billy Bragg and other political songwriters who've manned the barricades and ponders the age-old question: can singing or writing a song ever change anything?

"Why do I write political songs? Hmmmm. I write political songs because I have to," she says, eventually, a trace of mischief in her knowing smile. "More tea?"

Peggy Seeger plays the Cambridge Folk Festival main stage on Friday, July 31. The Ewan MacColl centenary album, The Joy Of Living, is due out in September on Cooking Vinyl, a series of tribute concerts across the UK in November.

The SINGER *and* the SONGS

Peggy SEEGER's greatest hits. By Colin IRWIN.

The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face

"We weren't really getting along at the time," says Peggy Seeger of the romantic epic Ewan MacColl wrote for her in 1957. "After all, he was married to someone else then." First popularised by The Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul & Mary, the song was made an international hit by Roberta Flack in 1972. It's since been covered by many, including Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Isaac Hayes, Diana Ross and Norma Waterson. The most extreme take may be Seeger's own dance version on Broadcaster's 2012 LP, *Folksploitation*. "I couldn't sing it for 15 years after Ewan died but now I love to," she says. She's not fond of Roberta Flack's histrionic performance, but is grateful for the royalties.

I'm Gonna Be An Engineer

Originally performed at the Festival Of Fools, a satirical revue staged by the Critics Group in 1970, the wordy story song – telling of one woman's determination to defy male chauvinism – quickly became an anthem for the burgeoning feminist movement. "Dashed off" in a hurry when Ewan MacColl told her he needed a song relating to Women's Year, it led to a barrage of invitations for Seeger to address and perform for radical women's groups and inspired her to escape the traditional folk format of women as victims and write more aggressively about contemporary women's issues.

The Ballad Of Springhill

A 24-year-old Peggy wrote the song in a French café while watching a live TV broadcast of the 1958 mining disaster that devastated the Nova Scotia coal town and made international headlines. Using an old traditional tune, she originally sang it unaccompanied with MacColl, but the raw journalism struck so deep it was soon adopted and embellished by the wider folk world. "In those days I'd sing protest songs without knowing much about them, I just thought they needed to be sung." The song was popularised by Peter, Paul & Mary and The Dubliners and later covered by U2. Seeger performed it at Springhill in 2008 on the 50th anniversary of the disaster.

The sun rose in your eyes: Roberta Flack, hit with The First Time Ever...