

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions

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Abstract: Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901 – 1953), an American experimental composer active in the 1920s and 1930s, devoted the second half of her career to transcribing, arranging, performing, teaching, and writing about American folk music. Many works from Crawford Seeger's collections for children, including "Nineteen American Folk Songs" and "American Folk Songs for Children," are widely sung and recorded, but her monumental efforts to publish them often remain unacknowledged. This article underscores the link between her work in American traditional music and Bruce Springsteen's best-selling 2006 album "We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions" in order to give Crawford Seeger due credit for her contributions. By examining her prose writings and song settings, this article illuminates aspects of her thinking about American traditional music and elements of her unusual and striking arrangements, which were deeply informed by her modernist ear.

Of his 2006 album *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, Bruce Springsteen remarked: “Growing up as a rock ‘n’ roll kid, I didn’t know a lot about Pete’s music or the depth of his influence. So I headed to the record store and came back with an armful of Pete Seeger records. Over the next few days of listening, the wealth of songs, their richness and power changed what I thought I knew about ‘folk music.’ Hearing this music and our initial ’97 session for Pete’s record sent me off, casually at first, on a quest.”¹

A tribute to a key figure in the folk revival, Springsteen’s recording stirs up discussion about the complex processes of transmission and influence in American traditional music. His rendition on *We Shall Overcome* of several traditional American tunes, such as “Froggie Went a-Courtin’,” “John Henry,” “Erie Canal,” “Buffalo Gals,” and “Old Dan Tucker,” can be traced back five decades to Pete Seeger, who first recorded them in the 1950s.² The renewed interest in Pete Seeger spurred by Springsteen’s Grammy-winning, best-selling album and his international Seeger Sessions tours has unfortunately not extended to another Seeger,

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Ruth Crawford Seeger, who brought numerous children's songs to Pete's attention and whose songbooks Pete knew.³ Peggy Seeger, Pete's sister, has observed that several of the songs on Bruce Springsteen's album are ones Pete got straight from her mother, who was Pete's stepmother.⁴

An American avant-garde composer, Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) was also a gifted transcriber and arranger of American traditional music from the mid-1930s until her premature death from cancer.⁵ Springsteen's lively *Seeger Sessions* is a laudable project (Pete Seeger called it "a great honor"⁶), but it is unfortunate that most fans of the album and of Springsteen's performances of the songs associate the "Seeger" in the album's title with only the most widely known member of the Seeger family. Although Crawford Seeger is now entering the "canon" of twentieth-century Western art music through several doors – as an American composer, as a female composer, and as an innovator and experimentalist – she should surely be lauded for the remarkable contributions she made to American traditional music, work that continues to attract musicians and listeners.⁷ I return to the well of Crawford Seeger's song collections from which Pete Seeger dipped his bucket in an effort to establish a link from Springsteen's powerful album back to Crawford Seeger, who listened and transcribed, notated and arranged, described and published hundreds of songs that continue to be sung and circulated around the globe.⁸ In doing so, I hope to draw the attention of another generation of musicians, listeners, and scholars to Crawford Seeger, a critical figure in the folk revival whose contributions deserve recognition.⁹

Unlike Cecil Sharp or John and Alan Lomax, Crawford Seeger was not a collector of folksongs, as she was unable to

travel for extended periods given her family responsibilities. But her contributions to American traditional music are many and include her painstaking work in transcribing tunes collected by the Lomaxes; her brilliant and original arrangements of American traditional music in her songbooks for children; her teaching of these songs through her work with young children (including her own family); and her extensive written commentary on many aspects of folksong transcription and performance, valuable for both scholars and teachers of young musicians. This essay focuses on her work as an arranger of and writer on folk songs, with the hope that it will spur further research on her transcribing, arranging, and writing.

In her memoir *Sing It Pretty*, folk musician and researcher Bess Lomax Hawes recalls Crawford Seeger's work in transcription:

I marveled at her strategies. She took over only a little corner of a downstairs room and assembled a recording machine, a rack for the discs, a tiny desk, and a professional architect's drafting board on which she eventually copied her completed musical transcriptions in a gorgeous kind of penmanship. . . . She used pots of the blackest India ink and large thick sheets of the whitest music manuscript paper. . . . Her minuscule desk contained pencils, note paper, and separate sheets on which she made a tick mark every time she listened to each song she transcribed – eighty or ninety times, some of them.¹⁰

Crawford Seeger's songbooks not only preserved and interpreted American traditional music, but they also helped establish its importance at a time rife with imitations of the original music, watered down to make it palatable to listeners comfortable with sugary songs but

unaccustomed to whole-grain musical victuals. As Peggy Seeger and her brother Mike Seeger noted of Crawford Seeger's *American Folk Songs for Children*:

When our mother made this collection of 94 songs in the 1940s, "folk" had not yet made it into the charts, discs, the concert circuits – or into the national consciousness. It was still associated with the rural backwoods and at that time folk-as-the-folk-sang-it was a really new sound....Standard musical fare for children ...was digested so many times by censors and music editors that the resulting product was cultural pap: gone the meat, bones, nerves, muscles, heart.¹¹

According to Hawes, "[M]ost people at the time [of Crawford Seeger's work on *Our Singing Country* during the late 1930s] thought of the folksong as simple, natural, naive, spontaneous, self-generated, and definitely crude."¹² Crawford Seeger noted that she was "disturbed by the sweetness and lack of backbone in nursery songs."¹³ Her exacting transcriptions, the result of listening to a recording dozens of times, communicated a new, ethical vision of American traditional music, one that tried to remain true to the music as it was then performed.

For someone who contributed such a rich lode to American traditional music, Ruth Crawford Seeger's training as a classical musician is unusual. Born in 1901 in East Liverpool, Ohio, Crawford grew up in Florida and studied piano, music theory, and composition in Chicago, where she met writer and poet Carl Sandburg and taught piano to his daughters.¹⁴ Moving to New York in 1929 drew her into the heady world of modernist music and art, and brought her music to the attention of important musical figures of the day, including Henry Cowell, Marion Bauer, and Charles Seeger. After studying with Seeger, Crawford's style of composition

took a distinct turn toward contrapuntal, linear organization, which can be heard in her celebrated *String Quartet 1931*, *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, and other works dating from 1930 onward. A remarkably fresh voice in what was known as "ultramodern" composition during the 1920s and 1930s, Crawford composed relatively few works, which include a small but meticulously crafted group of songs, pieces for solo piano, a string quartet, and various chamber ensembles.¹⁵

The year 1932 was a turning point for Crawford, as the professional strands of her work continued to intertwine with the personal. She married Charles Seeger, and the first of her four children, Michael (Mike), was born in 1933. Not coincidentally, she stopped composing around the time her children were born, a "decision born of indecision" as she phrased it, and a professional move regretted by many admirers of her compositions.¹⁶ The Great Depression deeply affected Ruth and Charles Seeger's views about their continued involvement with modernist music. From the mid-1930s to the early 1950s, Crawford Seeger shifted the focus of her work to traditional American music, teaching at a number of area schools in addition to working as a music editor for the Lomaxes and publishing song collections of her own.

Musicologists, composers, and theorists of twentieth-century music and of American music have worked to recover Crawford's compositions, wanting to balance the historical record with regard to women composers and to explore noteworthy yet little-known music. Thanks to these efforts, students can now encounter Crawford's compositions in their music lessons, courses, textbooks, and anthologies.¹⁷ Her transcriptions and arrangements of traditional music – many drawn from her husband's and John and Alan Lomax's recordings made across the United States –

Ellie M.
Hisama

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions were published in several collections over a twenty-five-year period and are equally important contributions to American musical life. Yet credit for this important work is not given frequently enough to Crawford Seeger, as the reception of Springsteen's CD and tour demonstrates. "Ruth Crawford Seeger" is still not a household name, although her transcriptions and arrangements are embedded in American musical life through the circulation of her published work, and through performances of the song arrangements by Pete, Peggy, Mike, and many other musicians. Music ranging from the four songs she arranged for Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927); to her work as music editor for John A. and Alan Lomax's illustrious collection *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1941); to her arrangements in her own volumes *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano* (1936–1938), *American Folk Songs for Children* (1948), *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (1950), and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (1953); to her posthumously published *Let's Build a Railroad* (1954) have brought Crawford's work to the fingers, voices, and ears of countless people. For example, former Del Fuegos band member Dan Zanes, who now performs and records music for children, remarked about Crawford Seeger's work:

There's a book by Ruth Crawford Seeger, "American Folk Songs for Children," ... and she talks about the child's experience, understanding the world through music. And so I started thinking about that, and thinking about that was a whole lot more interesting than what I had been doing – singing about old girlfriends to people that were roughly my age.¹⁸

For the musicians, scholars, and students who welcomed the disruption to the assumed narrative about the male-

dominated world of musical modernism, the silence of Crawford's compositional voice between 1932 and 1952 (save for her 1939 orchestral work *Rissoltly Rossoltly*) was profoundly disappointing. At a meeting of the biannual Feminist Theory and Music conference, held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1997, Mike Seeger was asked to respond to an audience member's comment that Crawford's gifts as a twentieth-century composer went to waste when she took on the work of transcribing, arranging, and publishing collections of songs for children. He remarked that the tragedy was not that his mother stopped composing, but that she died of cancer at the age of fifty-two, just after Peggy left home to attend Radcliffe College and Ruth sought to return to the world of modernist music. This exchange underscores the point that in some quarters, the extraordinary work of Ruth Crawford the composer is unfortunately still held in higher regard than the equally significant work of Ruth Crawford Seeger the folk music activist.

One central observation that emerges in several of Crawford Seeger's writings concerns the unfinished character of American traditional music. At the Mid-century International Folklore Conference held at Indiana University in 1950, she noted: "I was impressed . . . with certain values in this music [songs she edited for the Lomaxes' *Our Singing Country*] which . . . should be got, somehow, to children. Here were things that weren't just beautiful melodies – a sort of unfinishedness in the music, it kept on going. Professional music isn't like that; it always tells you when it is going to end."¹⁹

"Turtle Dove," a song she included in both *Nineteen American Folk Songs* and *American Folk Songs for Children* – with a different setting in each collection – illustrates this quality of "unfinishedness."

Example 1
“Turtle Dove”

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TURTLE DOVE

Quiet

Poor lit - tle tur - tle dove, Sit - ting on a
very smooth

4 pine, Mourn - ing for its own true love, And

7 why not me for mine, for mine, And why not me for

10 [1] mine? [2.] mine?
rit. molto

Source: Ruth Crawford Seeger, “Turtle Dove,” from *Nineteen American Folk Songs* (1936 – 1938; New York: G. Schirmer, 1995).

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions The rocking left hand in the *Nineteen American Folk Songs* version (Example 1) plays steady eighth notes throughout the song, pausing on a longer rhythmic value, the final eighth note tied to a quarter note, only at the very end. Crawford's decision to conclude the song on C and G, a perfect fifth, in the second ending makes it sound unfinished, as if it could resume with another verse.²⁰

Crawford's emphasis on the unfinished quality in American traditional music, the result of singers who "keep the song going," returns repeatedly in her writings. Her insights into traditional song and working with children can be mined from her preface to *Nineteen American Folk Songs*; from the introductions to her volumes *American Folk Songs for Children* and *Animal Folk Songs for Children*; and from the monograph she prepared for publication in 1941 as the music editor's introduction for *Our Singing Country*, which was not published until sixty years later as *The Music of American Folk Song*.²¹ This important document serves as a treatise on the process of transcribing the songs from phonographic recordings, while also providing a rigorous discussion of numerous musical matters including rhythm and meter, dynamics, tempo, and singing style. In *The Music of American Folk Song*, she observes: "It has been noted . . . that most singers . . . continue from stanza to stanza with little (and, in some cases, with no) break in the flow of the song as a whole."²² In the introduction to *American Folk Songs for Children*, she remarks: "Keep-going-ness is one of the notable characteristics in traditional performance of music like this. Do not hesitate . . . to keep the music going through many repetitions. . . . Do not fear monotony: it is a valuable quality."²³ And in her text "Pre-School Children and American Folk Songs," she muses: "The traditional (folk) singer keeps his song

going without interruption of the pulse at stanza ends. . . . Neither the rhythm nor the mood of the song are broken into by artificial pauses, breaks, ritards, or 'expression.' This is straightforward music."²⁴

She makes the related observation that a song should stick to a single dramatic mood throughout, avoiding dramatization as one would hear in "the conventional style of fine-art performance": "The singer does not try to make the song mean more, or less, than it does. . . . The tune makes no compromises, is no slower nor faster, no softer nor louder. There is no climax – the song 'just stops.'"²⁵ In remarking upon these differences between the performance of "art song" and folk song, Crawford Seeger does not privilege one over the other or suggest any sort of hierarchy between the two; she simply establishes the different conventions of the styles of performance, emphasizing the importance of keeping them distinct.²⁶

As revealed by the hundreds of transcriptions from aluminum field recordings she prepared for John and Alan Lomax (many of which remain unpublished) and her own arrangements of traditional American songs, Crawford's immersion as a composer in New York's modernist crucible influenced her post-1935 work in traditional music. Crawford's modernist ear informs her striking choices of harmony, melody, and form in many of her arrangements, and her devotion to the smallest detail in her transcription work can be linked to her precise compositional methods.²⁷

Crawford Seeger's writings as well as her music reveal a modernist sensibility applied to an unexpected body of music.²⁸ Her introduction to *American Folk Songs for Children* notes the inclusion of songs with a wide range and "unusual intervals," asserting: "Children sometimes catch easily intervals and rhythms which to us seem

strange or difficult.”²⁹ In her foreword to *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, she writes that she wishes “to present this music in an idiom that savors, as much as possible, the contemporary . . . accustoming the student’s ear to a freer use of contemporary music.”³⁰ One of the most appealing aspects of this volume is that the arrangements embrace intervals (seconds, sevenths, fourths, and fifths) that composers and arrangers often shy away from in music for children.³¹ For example, as shown in the score above, measures four to five in “Turtle Dove” present two sevenths – one major seventh, one minor seventh – in the left hand’s stretch across the barline from G up to F-sharp, landing on the F-sharp-E dyad on the downbeat of measure five.³² The version of “What’ll We Do with the Baby?” in *American Folk Songs for Children* studiously avoids the baldly stated tonic triad in its harmonic setting, beginning each statement of the question in the song’s title with a perfect fifth, F to C, and closing the song with F in the bass and D moving stepwise to C in the middle voice to again sound the open perfect fifth. In setting “Sweet Betsy from Pike” in *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, Crawford Seeger writes a jaunty left hand part that hops back and forth to the low tonic F with a mostly descending line in the middle voice. Interval successions – such as in measures three to four, the diminished fifth B-natural to F followed by an octave F to F on the words “from Pike” – and cross relations – such as in measure five between A-flat and A-natural at the words “crossed the” – all occur over a rhythmic tug between the melody, in triple meter, and the bass, written in triple meter but organized in duple.³³

Crawford Seeger’s conviction that children should be given a taste of the contemporary by being fed the less sweet intervals may correspond with her decision to sing to her children songs with

lyrics about violence, death, and murder.³⁴ Peggy and Mike recall that both of their parents sang “very old, very violent murder ballads . . . in full” to them. Crawford Seeger firmly believed that children should be given “the real or the authentic or the old or the original.”³⁵ “The Babes in the Woods,” included in *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, narrates a tale of “pretty little babes / Did wander up and down” who “never more did see that man approaching”; the song ends with their death “in each other’s arms.” Her acceptance of what she identified as “ugliness” of tone quality and her unflinching use of dissonant intervals reveal a striking openness to a world of sounds, paralleling her openness to the texts she shared with her children.³⁶

Ellie M. Hisama

Although Pete did not live with Ruth and Charles, he was close to his father’s second family. Peggy speaks with special fondness of visits by “beloved Pete,” recalling:

our tall exotic half-brother, with his long, long-necked banjo and his big, big feet stamping at the end of his long, long legs. Dio [Ruth] said Pete was better for us than our teachers, and she kept us home from school whenever he turned up. He’d sit and talk and sing and we’d stay up late and toast marshmallows and bawl out the choruses and try and lay our hands over the strings and detune the pegs while he played. . . . Dio transcribed songs from disc and notated them onto staff paper – we children couldn’t help but listen and osmose the music. . . . We’d always sung as a family, but when Mike and I learned folk banjo and guitar, the singsongs became weekly events.³⁷

Pete and Ruth’s relationship is illustrated further in a transcript of interviews by David King Dunaway with Pete Seeger in preparation for the manuscript that would eventually be published as the

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions book *How Can I Keep from Singing*.³⁸ Dunaway asks, “Do you feel that [Ruth] influenced you a great deal in your children’s songs?”

Pete Seeger: In a way, yes. I put that record [*American Folksongs for Children*] right out of her book. Moe Asch said, Pete, I want you to put out some children’s records, could you do it? I said my stepmother has just brought out a whole book, why don’t we take it right out of the book? And so, I put out *American Folksongs for Children*, just by leafing through her book.

David Dunaway: Did that material go into your repertoire?

Seeger: Some of them, yes.

Dunaway: Charles thinks that in some ways, it was the other way around; that you had already developed a performing style, certainly by the 1950s, that was so audience inclusive and so facile for children, that Ruth herself got some [ideas for projects].

Seeger: That’s interesting. I may have influenced her, yes, I suppose I did influence her. She admired some of the things I did. But I sure admired what she was doing.³⁹

Dunaway and Seeger’s exchange illustrates the back-and-forth flow of influence between Ruth and Pete. The relationship between influencer and influenced is not necessarily unidirectional from older to younger, teacher to student, or male to female, as some have assumed in the case of Charles and Ruth.⁴⁰

In her review of John A. Work’s *American Negro Songs for Mixed Voices*, Ruth muses on the role of the musician-transcriber and how music is passed along:

It has seemed to me for some time that claims for preponderance of white origin in Negro spiritual music have laid too great weight on the importance of tonal skeleton

and the written source, and too little on the rhythmic and tonal flesh in which the skeleton is clothed by the rich and varied singing style of this oral tradition. Also given too little consideration is the fact that in any creative process, either in fine art or folk music, the utilization of materials already current in the tradition is to be taken for granted; that any live tradition, fine art or folk, lives by means of a process such as Mr. Work terms “re-assembling” (I prefer “re-composing”); and that as Mr. Work points out there is a big difference between this process and “imitation.”⁴¹

Ruth’s view of folk music, articulated in her review of Work’s volume as a living, transformable tradition that is “re-composed” from musician to musician, is one shared by Peggy, who writes in the preface to *The Folk Songs of Peggy Seeger* that “the singer is but one link in the chain, and if this is a book of ‘my’ songs, that means that this is the way one singer has treated the common heritage before handing it on. It is my way of adding a bit of the present to what the past has left. In this sense they are ‘my’ songs for a while, but our songs all the time.”⁴² Thus, while Ruth undoubtedly had a distinct influence on Pete’s performance of songs for children, she should be considered a link in the chain of re-composition rather than the songs’ originator.

“*Soldier’s Farewell*,” a song from a live concert at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London to celebrate Peggy’s seventieth birthday, captures several of the Seeger children’s musical qualities that might have emerged from their mother’s approach to traditional music: Mike’s calm, unhurried manner of musicianship (once while playing the banjo at a performance in Harvard’s Paine Hall around 1989, he said that his father told him not to play too fast, or “people would think you’re trying

to show off") and Peggy's singing, powerful yet simple, affective though unsentimental.⁴³ Ruth had a profound influence on Peggy, who recalls: "My mother, Ruth Crawford, was . . . a fiery, creative woman. . . She was an avant-garde composer but her mind was open to music of any kind. . . Two traditions were ever-present and interlaced throughout my childhood: the formal and the traditional. They presented me with a vision of music that is wide and elastic."⁴⁴

In his review "Springsteen's Seegerless Seeger Tribute," Joe Heim notes that the album *We Shall Overcome* does not contain "an actual Seeger song."⁴⁵ By an "actual Seeger song," Heim means one

written by Pete Seeger as opposed to the many he helped popularize. Heim could have also mentioned the failure to acknowledge Ruth's scrupulous efforts in transcribing and publishing the songs, which made them readily available to Pete and, in turn, to Springsteen. Although singers, transcribers, and arrangers may be links in the chain, the substantial work they do in forging those links should be remembered.⁴⁶ Recognizing Ruth Crawford Seeger's tremendous efforts in support of this thriving body of music will contribute to a more just record of American music and of women's history, one that embraces the wide and elastic vision of music she herself encouraged.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ Liner notes to Bruce Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* (Columbia Records, 2006). The "97 session" that he refers to resulted in a tribute album to Pete Seeger to which Springsteen contributed "We Shall Overcome," a song Martin Luther King, Jr., first heard in 1957 sung by Pete Seeger, who learned it in 1946 from Zilphia Horton, who herself had learned it from striking tobacco workers who visited the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. See John W. Barry, "Seeger Introduced King to 'We Shall Overcome' in 1957," *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 31, 2011; and "We Shall Overcome: An Hour with Legendary Folk Singer and Activist Pete Seeger," *Democracy Now!*, September 4, 2006, http://www.democracynow.org/2006/9/4/we_shall_overcome_an_hour_with. Springsteen and Seeger together performed Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," along with Seeger's grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, at President Obama's first inauguration in January 2009.

² Pete Seeger, "Froggie Went a-Courtin'," *American Folksongs for Children* (FTS 31501/FC 7601, 1955), reissued on CD as *American Folk, Game, and Activity Songs for Children* (Smithsonian Folkways 45056, 2000); Seeger, "John Henry," *American Ballads* (Folkways 2319, 1957); Seeger, "Erie Canal," *Yankee Doodle and Other Songs* (Young People's Records 9008/Children's Record Guild 9008, 1954 or 1955); Seeger, "Buffalo Gals" and "Old Dan Tucker," *American Favorite Ballads*, vol. 1 (FA 2320, 1957), rereleased as part of series SFW 40150. Other albums containing Pete Seeger's recordings of songs from Crawford Seeger's songbooks include *Songs to Grow On*, vol. 2: *School Days* (Folkways FC 7020, 1950); *Birds, Beasts, Bugs & Little Fishes* (Folkways 7610, 1955), reissued on CD as *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Fishes (Little and Big)* (Smithsonian Folkways 9628, 1998); and *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Bigger Fishes* (Folkways FW 7611, 1955), rereleased as SFW 45022, 1991 and on CD as SFW 45035, 1998. For a listing

of songs recorded by Pete Seeger, see David King Dunaway, *A Pete Seeger Discography: Seventy Years of Recordings* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

³ *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* won a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album in 2006, and had sold more than 700,000 copies as of 2009. See Ethan Smith, “Born to Run – and Promote,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2009. Seeger cites one of Crawford Seeger’s songbooks in his 1993 memoir: “Of course you can put into a song the name of the child you are singing it to. My stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, gave me the idea to do this when she put out the book *American Folksongs for Children* in 1949.” See Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir*, ed. Peter Blood, Michael Miller, and Sarah A. Elisabeth, 2nd ed. (1993; Bethlehem, Pa.: Sing Out Corporation, 2009), 49. Ruth Crawford Seeger’s songbooks for children are *American Folk Songs for Children in Home, School, and Nursery School: A Book for Children, Parents, and Teachers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948); *Animal Folk Songs for Children: Traditional American Songs* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1950); and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1953). She also published a volume of traditional music arranged for piano, *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano* (1936–1938; New York: G. Schirmer, 1995).

⁴ “Froggie Went a-Courtin’” appears as “Frog Went A-Courtin’” in *American Folk Songs for Children* and *Nineteen American Folk Songs*; “John Henry” and “Buffalo Gals” (as “Buffalo Girls”) appear in *American Folk Songs for Children*; and “Old Dan Tucker” and “Shenandoah” appear in *Folk Song U.S.A.: The 111 Best American Ballads*, ed. John A. and Alan Lomax (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947) for which both Ruth and Charles Seeger prepared the settings for voice and piano. Peggy Seeger shared her observation in my graduate seminar “Ruth Crawford Seeger: Modernism and Tradition in 20th-Century Music,” Columbia University, March 20, 2007. Even the news program *Democracy Now!*, which has admirably focused on stories not told in mainstream media, refers to Springsteen’s *The Seeger Sessions* as an album that “features a collection of songs that were once performed by Seeger,” but does not mention Ruth Crawford Seeger’s work on the songs. See “We Shall Overcome,” *Democracy Now!*

⁵ In this essay, I generally refer to Ruth Crawford Seeger as “Crawford” in the context of her modernist compositions, “Crawford Seeger” in the context of her work on American traditional music, and “Ruth” in relation to her family. Here and in the literature, she is at times also represented simply by RCS.

⁶ Andy Greene, “Pete Seeger: I Feel Optimistic,” *Rolling Stone*, February 27, 2008.

⁷ Judith Tick’s magnificent biography is a foundational study in Crawford Seeger scholarship. See Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Joseph N. Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music*, ed. Ray Allen and Ellie M. Hisama (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester University Press, 2007). Despite the scholarship about Crawford Seeger, she is still sometimes represented as standing in the shadow of her husband, Charles Seeger. For example, William G. Roy’s recent book on American folk music’s relationship with social movements and race relations focuses on two father-son pairings in the chapter “Movement Entrepreneurs and Activists: John and Alan Lomax, and Charles and Pete Seeger.” In a footnote, Roy mentions Ruth Crawford Seeger’s early work with Carl Sandburg after a puzzling reference to Charles’s first wife and Pete’s mother, Constance Edson Seeger (who was a classical violinist but not a performer of traditional music); he does not mention Ruth’s songbooks or work as the music editor of the monumental volume *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (1941; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000). See William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 259 n.11.

⁸ Pete Seeger’s 1953 album *American Folksongs for Children* recorded a number of Crawford Seeger’s arrangements and included copious citations from her book. She did not give per-

mission for the citations or receive any royalties, despite her initial discussions with Moe Asch, the head of Folkways Records, about the idea of Pete's recording such an album. See Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 345. Songs such as "Eency Weency Spider" (also now commonly known as "Itsy Bitsy Spider") from *American Folk Songs for Children* are widely circulated, sung in preschools, and used with children's toys such as on the ExerSaucer Triple Fun, a popular activity center in which pre-toddlers press, bat, and swat objects to activate melodies from a central bouncy seat. Aaron Copland used "Bonyparte" from *Our Singing Country* in his 1942 ballet suite *Rodeo*; see Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 272.

⁹ Writings by Karen Cardullo, Larry Polansky, and Judith Tick have brought much needed scholarly attention to Crawford Seeger's work in traditional music. See Karen Cardullo, "Ruth Crawford Seeger: Preserver of American Folk Music," master's thesis, George Washington University, 1980; Larry Polansky's introduction to Ruth Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2001), xxxi–lii; Judith Tick, "Rediscovering Our Singing Country," introduction to *Our Singing Country*, xiii–xviii; Tick, "Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and 'The Music of American Folk Songs,'" in *Understanding Charles Seeger*, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 109–129; Tick, "Historical Introduction: The Salvation of Writing Things Down," in Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, xxi–xxix; and Tick, "Ruth Crawford Seeger, Modernist Composer in the Folk Revival: Biography as Music History," AMS/Library of Congress Lecture Series (Spring 2008), <http://www.ams-net.org/LC-lectures/seeger-tick.php>. Roberta Lamb's essay on Crawford Seeger's teaching and songbooks is a valuable contribution to studies of RCS as an educator. See Roberta Lamb, "Composing and Teaching as Dissonant Counterpoint," in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 169–195.

¹⁰ Bess Lomax Hawes, *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 25.

¹¹ Liner notes to Peggy and Michael Seeger, *American Folksongs for Children* (Rounder Kids CD 8001, 1996).

¹² Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*, 26.

¹³ Ruth Crawford Seeger, "The Use of Folklore for Nursery Schools," transcribed comments made at panel at the Folklore Institute of America, Indiana University, June 19–August 16, 1946, as quoted in Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 286.

¹⁴ A summary of Crawford Seeger's life and music appears in Ellie M. Hisama, "Ruth (Porter) Crawford (Seeger)," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For additional information about Crawford Seeger's books, music, and life, see Peggy Seeger's website, <http://www.peggyseeger.com/ruth-crawford-seeger>.

¹⁵ For a discussion of musical ultra-modernism, see Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Ruth Crawford, "Letter to Miss Prink," September 30, 1940, excerpts in Matilda Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 210.

¹⁷ For an examination of Crawford's trajectory in music history "from nobody to genius," see Judith Tick, "Writing the Music of Ruth Crawford into Mainstream Music History," in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 11–32. A score of the third movement of Crawford's *String Quartet 1931* is included in Charles Burkhardt with William Rothstein, *Anthology for Musical Analysis: Postmodern Update*, 7th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson/Schirmer, 2012); and a score of the fourth movement is published in J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, *Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music*, vol. 3, 6th ed., 2009 (CD-ROM).

¹⁸ Robert Sullivan, "Romper Rock," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 22, 2001.

¹⁹ Stith Thompson, ed., *Four Symposia on Folklore Held at the Midcentury International Folklore Conference, Indiana University, July 21–August 4, 1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

- The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions* 1953), 192. See also Ruth Crawford Seeger, “Keep the Song Going!” in *The Music of American Folk Song*, 137–144.
- ²⁰ Pete Seeger recorded a version of “Turtle Dove” on *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Bigger Fishes*.
- ²¹ Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 63.
- ²³ Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 35.
- ²⁴ Ruth Crawford Seeger, “Pre-School Children and American Folk Songs,” in *The Music of American Folk Song*, 134.
- ²⁵ Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, 32–33.
- ²⁶ Editor Larry Polansky comments that what RCS identified as “folk music’s lack of ‘drama,’ or ‘artifice,’ also characterizes the compositional aesthetic that RCS helped to develop,” and he writes that her *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* “just stops” when its formal trajectory is complete.” See Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, 89 n.xli. To my ears, the *Piano Study* contains a precise drama knitted into its pitches and form, and its conclusion occurs at a non-negotiable moment at which it *must* cease in order to reach the endpoint of a process set in motion by the compositional motor. For an analysis of *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, see Lyn Ellen Thornblad Burkett, “Linear Aggregates and Proportional Design in Ruth Crawford’s *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*,” in *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 57–72.
- ²⁷ The impact of Crawford’s subjectivity as a modernist on her work in folk music deserves a full-fledged study. Roberta Lamb reads the principles of Crawford Seeger’s work in transcription in relation to the compositional credo she wrote at Edgard Varèse’s request for a class he was teaching at Columbia University in 1948. See Lamb, “Composing and Teaching as Dissonant Counterpoint.”
- ²⁸ Ruth did not bring modernist music into the Seeger household, however, until the last years of her life. Her children heard her regularly play pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann on the piano, but the avant-garde music that had been very much a part of her existence up to the early 1930s was not part of the music making of the Seeger household until the early 1950s, when Peggy heard her mother “start . . . playing something totally new. I wasn’t sure I liked it.” Peggy Seeger, “About Dio,” *ISAM Newsletter: Ruth Crawford Seeger Festival Booklet XXXI* (1) (Fall 2001).
- ²⁹ Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 26.
- ³⁰ Crawford Seeger, *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano*, foreword.
- ³¹ Peggy Seeger aptly characterizes the seconds and sevenths as “uneasy,” the fifths and fourths as “stark,” and the thirds, sixths, and triads as “sweet, full” in her perceptive remarks on the arrangements; see *ibid.*
- ³² *American Folk Songs for Children* contains a simpler setting of “Turtle Dove” (in F major instead of in G) that slows the rocking left-hand motion to a quarter-note pulse instead of eighth notes and uses a sixth to set the syllable “Mourn-.” See Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 179.
- ³³ I do not know whether Crawford would have used the term “cross-relation” (sometimes known as “false relation”) to refer to the clash that occurs between A-flat and A-natural at the words “crossed the.”
- ³⁴ Liner notes to Peggy and Michael Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*. Crawford Seeger excluded some verses in the published songbooks; Peggy and Mike propose that this exclusion may have resulted from her uncertainty as to what would be “acceptable” for other people’s children.
- ³⁵ Thompson, ed., *Four Symposia*, 191.

- ³⁶ “I think we should remember that ugliness is also a very beautiful thing. . . . I like what some people call ugliness of tone quality in some singers.” Ibid., 243. Judith Tick links Crawford’s comments on ugliness to “the empathy of a modernist”; Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 326.
- ³⁷ Peggy Seeger, *The Peggy Seeger Songbook: Warts and All, Forty Years of Songmaking* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1998), 8.
- ³⁸ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981). The book was reprinted in slightly different form (with corrections by Seeger) as David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard, 2008). For a first-person account of Pete Seeger’s life and views, see Pete Seeger, *Pete Seeger: In His Own Words*, ed. Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).
- ³⁹ Transcripts from *David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries*, AFC 2000/019 (Washington, D.C.: Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress). I am grateful to Todd Harvey at the American Folklife Center for his assistance with these materials.
- ⁴⁰ For a discussion about the process of influence between Charles and Ruth Seeger, see Tick, “Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and the Music of American Folk Songs.”
- ⁴¹ Ruth Crawford Seeger, “[Review of] John N. Work. Composer and Arranger, *American Negro Songs for Mixed Voices*,” *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 6 (1) (December 1948); reprinted in *The Music of American Folk Songs*, 144 – 145.
- ⁴² Peggy Seeger, *Folk Songs of Peggy Seeger* (New York: Oak Publications, 1964).
- ⁴³ Peggy Seeger, *Three Score and Ten: 70th Birthday Celebration Live at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London* (Appleseed Records 1100, 2006).
- ⁴⁴ Peggy Seeger, *The Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 7, 14. Also see Lydia Hamessley, “Peggy Seeger: From Traditional Folksinger to Contemporary Songwriter,” in *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 252 – 288. Charles’s immersion in folk music and his paternity of Pete, Mike, and Peggy provide a fascinating foil to the dismissive remarks about folk music he had made years earlier. In a *Daily Worker* column published under the pseudonym Carl Sands, Seeger called folk song “conventional, easy-going, subservient”; see Carl Sands [Charles Seeger], “Thirteen Songs from Eight Countries Included in Book Put Out by Music Bureau Internat’l,” *Daily Worker*, February 1, 1935.
- ⁴⁵ Joe Heim, “Springsteen’s Seegerless Seeger Tribute,” *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2006.
- ⁴⁶ For example, Crawford Seeger credits Fletcher Collins, Jr., for “Eency Weency Spider” and “What Shall We Do When We All Go Out?” – published in Fletcher Collins, Jr., *Alamance Play Party Songs and Singing Games* (Elon, N.C.: Elon College, 1940) – in Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 4. By contrast, “What Shall We Do When We All Go Out?” appears under the title of “We All Go Out To Play” and is identified simply as a “Traditional Children’s Song” in *Ladybug: The Magazine for Young Children*, July/August 2013, 8 – 9.