

# Firsts and lasts

At age 82 American folk legend Peggy Seeger admits to Steve Lee she'll have to slow down soon, but not just yet

**"When I was a kid Lead Belly came to our house. And Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax - those were big names but I was young at the time," says American folk singer Peggy Seeger. "When Woody Guthrie visited he dragged his guitar around with the strap and pretended it was a dog and I just remember Lead Belly as enormous and very, very black."**

Seeger discusses the presence of such legendary musicians in her life with a nonchalance born of growing up in one of America's foremost musical families. Her father, Charles, was a highly respected musicologist, while her mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, was the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for her pioneering musical work.

Seeger's own status in folk music is only matched by her half-brother Pete. Seeger was born in 1935 in New York, began playing music and singing shortly afterwards and continues to this day. Recently she's completed *First Time Ever*, a full and frank memoir and now she's touring the UK.

Looking back over a career that covers 60-plus years at the vanguard of folk music, feminism, political activism and, periodically, exile from the US - due to visiting communist China during the years of McCarthyism - you have to wonder if recalling her turbulent times for the book made her realise what a full and fearless life she's led?

"Well, I've always known that," Seeger replies sharply. "I started writing notes about 12 years ago, actually started working on the book six years ago, then began to take it seriously around three years ago. But the idea really started when Ewan died in 1989."

Ewan MacColl, the Salford-born folk singer who began a relationship with Seeger in 1959, famously penned the beautiful *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* about her.

The song has now gifted its title to her autobiography but, as a committed feminist, is Seeger comfortable with frequently being described as MacColl's muse?

"His initial feelings towards me were all very dramatic but that wasn't my fault and I didn't encourage it. I practically didn't realise he was in the room so it wasn't mutual," says Seeger.

"He was kind of in a midlife crisis and along comes this American girl of 21 with a long-necked banjo and long hair, singing ballads. He chased me for years, so if that makes me a

muse then, yes, I suppose I was. Well, I certainly was until we began to live together."

Of his passing in 1989, she says: "I didn't know who I was by myself - we'd been a duo for so long." Thankfully she rediscovered her musical mojo and has recorded and performed live ever since. British based since the late 1950s - with time spent back in the US once the authorities' stance toward her softened - Seeger still loves playing concerts.

"I'm continually thrilled with how it feels when everyone in the room is on the same

page," she says. But now an octogenarian, she says her touring days are numbered. "I'll have to give up in the next three or four years. I'm running like hell just to stay in the same place and know that if 82 years old isn't easy, 83 won't be any easier. And I'll never write another book - I'll tell you that!"

**Peggy Seeger plays *The Crescent*, York, 27 Nov; *Philharmonic Music Room*, Liverpool, 28 Nov; *Square Chapel*, Halifax, 29 Nov; and the *Platform*, Morecambe, 30 Nov. Her memoir, *First Time Ever*, is out now (Faber, £20)**

