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Insider's guide to folk lore

FIRST TIME EVER: A MEMOIR

Peggy Seeger
(Faber, £20)

Review by Fiona Sturges

For Peggy Seeger, born to folk royalty, a life in music was a foregone conclusion. In the 1930s, her father, Charlie, was instrumental in setting up the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Culture, while her mother, Ruth, was a celebrated classical musician who went, says Seeger, "from mother to music, music to mother, day and night". Such was the critical and commercial success of her half-brother Pete Seeger that it would take years for Peggy to stop being referred to as "sister of Pete".

In her twenties, she set up home with another folk hero, the British musician and left-wing activist, Ewan MacColl, who was twice her age and who would write the song "First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" for her. Seeger was working on a radio project in America at the time, and needed a song to flesh out the show. MacColl obliged and, having finished it, called her up and sang it down the phone.

Her memoir is an epic journey through her childhood spent in Washington DC, where Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie and Mississippi John Hurt would drop round, and her early adventures in music, which began in the bosom of the family and later took her to London where the folk song collector and Seeger's mentor, Alan Lomax, needed a banjo player. He wanted to form Britain's answer to The

Weavers, but it didn't quite work out. Having met MacColl at the audition, Seeger stayed anyway.

It's with a clear eye and sardonic humour that Seeger looks back on her tangled relationships. When she first met MacColl in the 1950s, he was married with a young son. The pair maintained an on-off relationship for several years, during which they travelled and performed together in Russia, China and much of Eastern Europe. When she became pregnant with their first child, she moved in with MacColl's mother, Betsy. A few months after Seeger gave birth to her son, MacColl's

wife, Jean, gave birth to her and her husband's daughter, Kirsty. In a rare heart-to-heart, MacColl told Seeger she didn't need to stay with him. "I'm free to go," she decided. "Therefore, I'll stay."

Elsewhere, Seeger recalls researching the ground-breaking *Radio Ballads*, which gave voice to the working classes on the BBC, and describes entering the homes of ex-miners whose stories gripped her like fairy tales. She remembers The Ballads and Blues Club in London, a musicians' collective that dug down to the roots of old folk songs and, in developing a somewhat po-faced "policy" about what could be sung, kick-started a national folk revival.

Especially beautiful are her reflections on the songs she learnt as a child and took around the world: "I am theirs and they are mine while I'm here. I call them mine since I have nurtured them like children and brought them forth with me in time. Like my physical

children, they form my core."

First Time Ever reveals Seeger as an elegant writer and as a trailblazer, both in her musical life and in her fiercely independent spirit. At a time when most women were marooned in domestic servitude, Seeger was criss-crossing America on a tiny scooter, clambering aboard Siberian trains, rejecting marriage and monogamy and dedicating herself to the socialist cause. The 20th-century folk scene was known for its seriousness, though Seeger's recollections of it are frank, vivid and frequently funny. Hers is an extraordinary story, beautifully told.



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Getting the band together Alan Lomax (top left), Peggy Seeger (sitting left) and Ewan MacColl (sitting centre) playing with The Ramblers in 1956