

**Peggy Seeger with
her favourite
pebble**

**Photograph:
Antony Moore**



Sylvia Vetta discovers why singer and political activist Peggy Seeger loves living in Oxford

Peggy Seeger, now 77, is probably the nearest thing the folk music scene has to genuine royalty. She is singer Pete Seeger's half-sister, and was partner to the legendary Ewan MacColl, the well-known champion of traditional music.

She was born in 1935 in Washington DC. Her father was Charles Louis Seeger, a pioneer of ethnomusicology. Peggy, who has four older brothers, was his first daughter.

"I was the apple of my father's eye and that gave me a confidence and a self-centredness, which often got me into trouble," she said.

Peggy's mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, was a superb pianist and composer and an inspiration as a pioneer in American modernism. In 1930, Ruth became the first woman to win a Guggenheim Music Fellowship. She is now considered the foremost female composer of modernist music of the 1900s.

Peggy explained: "My mother was the daughter of a Methodist minister. By the age of 15 she was teaching and composing charming pieces for her pupils. I particularly love what I call her 'bird compositions' where she builds compositions out of bird songs.

"She studied music under my father, then a professor at Juilliard who was separated with three young sons.

"When my mother returned from Europe they were married. I never knew her properly because I was 18 in 1953 when she died. I do not think you can really know your parents when you are a child."

Peggy is well travelled, but loves the UK, which is why she chose to settle in Iffley, Oxford. She feels Oxford epitomises all that attracts her to Britain – its compactness, its history and culture.

"I fell in love with the British Isles the minute I landed in 1956 – the country, the smallness of it, the oldness, the people," Peggy explained.

"Ewan (MacColl) and I criss-crossed the country for 30 years and I learned to appreciate the architecture and the way the landscape and speech patterns change every few miles."

Folk music is as deeply ingrained in Peggy's character as is her love of our country, largely thanks to her mother.

"During the great depression, one project in President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) programme of the 1930s involved collecting folk music from all over the United States," she said.

"People were on the move and it was an attempt to stabilise communities by opening up locally-based cultural projects. John and Alan Lomax recorded thousands of songs and interviews and deposited them in The Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, where they were made available on aluminium, cardboard and acetate discs.

"My mother helped the Lomaxes put their songs into books and spent days, weeks and months listening to them and transcribing them.

"The aluminium records were played using thorn needles. As children, we were given the task of sharpening the thorns. We heard chain gang songs, murder ballads, love laments, long ballads and so on played over and over. Those songs are etched deep in my memory," she said.

"When I was almost three, I scalded myself

badly and was whisked to hospital. I caught whooping cough in the hospital and so was put in isolation. My parents said they knew exactly where I was when they heard a little voice singing far down the corridor."

Singing was only one of young Peggy's skills.

"I started playing piano aged six and guitar when I was ten. My father was born in Mexico, so we sang Spanish songs together. The five-string banjo followed when I was 15, the autoharp at 20 and the concertina at 24.

"I do not remember when the Appalachian lap dulcimer crept in. I think my mother had hoped I would be a concert pianist. I got pretty good on piano but never got through one piece in a recital – or got through a recital in one

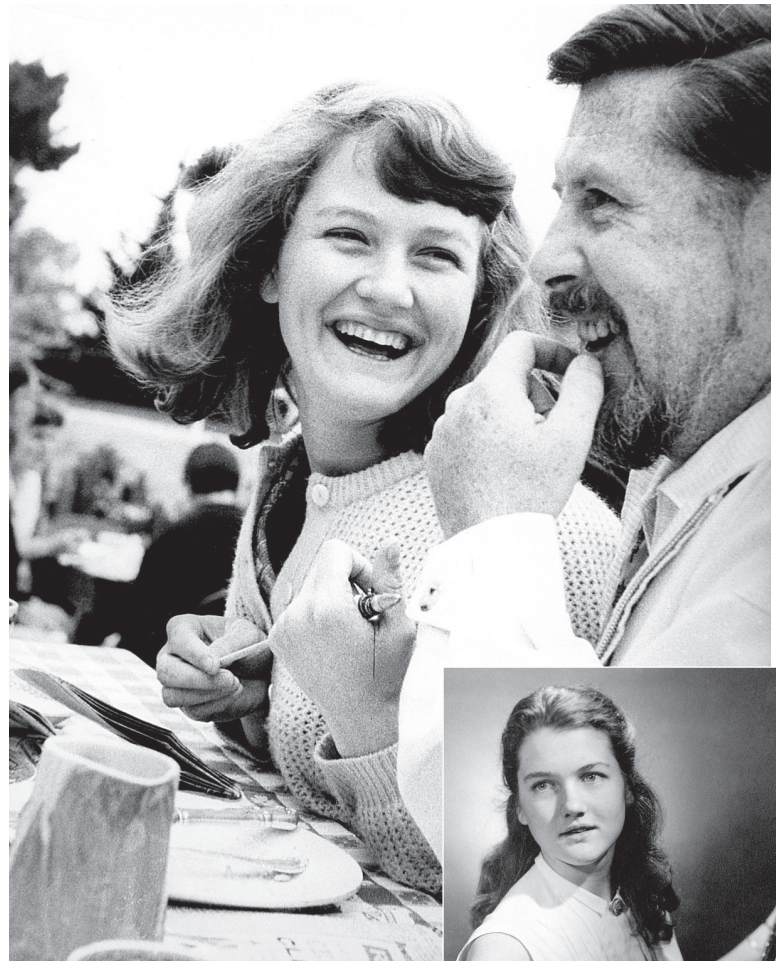
piece! Nerves are something I never rarely had playing folk music, but I broke down every time playing classical music in front of an audience."

Can she explain the difference?

"Classical players always produce their interpretation of a set piece. Folk musicians improvise as they go along. The accompaniment is never ever the same.

"Ewan and I ran The Singers' Club at The Union Tavern, near St Pancras in London. This guy came every week, sat in the front row and always asked for the same song, *Henry Lee*, which has a fast banjo accompaniment.

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Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960. Right. Peggy starting out in 1955



Seeger's songlines

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“One day he asked: ‘How do you remember all the notes? It is different every time’. I told him that in folk music you do not remember the accompaniments – you make them up as you go along. He still came along night after night. It turned out that he was a violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra.

“My mother couldn’t improvise easily. Like all classical musicians, she tied herself to the notes on the staff lines. If you make a mistake in classical musical, everyone sits up in shock.

“A mistake in folk music is different. If you make a mistake you can resolve it, or get yourself out of it and sometimes incorporate it. If you do that well then sometimes, just for fun, you repeat the mistake and challenge yourself to get out of it in a different way.”

“In 1953, I was at Radcliffe College, Boston, the sister college to Harvard, and I just began singing around, with fellow musicians or alone. I made my first recording in 1954 but I had not intended singing as a career.

“It was a tough time. My mother died in 1953. Her piano teaching fees had enabled me to go to college and her death was a family tragedy and a financial disaster. My father was threatened with blacklisting by the House Un-American Activities Commission. He resigned from his government job before he could be fired. So there was no money for college.

“At that time, my older half-brother, the astronomer Charles Seeger, was living with his family in Holland, so it was arranged that I would go and live in Leiden. It was meant to be a gap year – it became a lifetime abroad.

“My sister-in-law and I fell out so I took to the road, hitch-hiking. With my long hair and a banjo or guitar, I did not usually have a problem attracting a lift but there was one occasion I will never forget.

“I was on the thumb in Luxembourg at dusk in a snow storm. I was near frozen. A Catholic priest, Father Joseph Vloebergh, stopped for me. He saw the musical instruments and asked if I would like to join him and his Belgian theatre troupe who were going to West Berlin. Of course I would!

“I was reckless and adventurous in those days and said yes to everything. We went to East Berlin as well and came back with 13 children from a displaced persons camp.

“I looked after them for about three months, 12 Catholics and one Protestant. It was hard work in a very small cold house and I was on my way to being evangelised by Father Jos.

“Then Two friends came down from Leiden and squeezed me, my guitar, banjo, knapsack and so on into the back of a little Fiat and we set off for Denmark where I was courted by a Finnish guy who said my eyes were the colour of time and would I come north to a logging camp with him. I think he needed me to do his laundry.

“That’s making a lot of long stories short!”

A timely phone call to Copenhagen youth hostel from political activist and film-maker Alan Lomax – one of the great American field collectors of folk music – brought Peggy to England.

He had a job for Peggy on TV and also an idea for a new singing group. Twenty-six hours after the telephone call, Peggy arrived in London to meet TV producers and a group of musicians and singers.

“I was filthy. Alan’s girlfriend, Susan Mills, a



Peggy Seeger in Moscow, 1957

drop-dead gorgeous model, stripped off my clothes and literally scrubbed me clean. She did my hair up in a beehive, put heavy make-up on me, dressed me in her model’s clothes and her high heels and pushed me into the audition room (aka front parlour).

“That is how I looked when Ewan MacColl first saw me and the rest is history. It was true love at first sight – his feelings did not change when he saw me in my jeans and dirty old clothes the next day.”

It was this meeting that inspired Ewan to write the classic love song, *First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*.

But Ewan was 20 years older, and married with a family. So any relationship appeared doomed.

Along with Peggy’s brother Pete, Alan Lomax had been blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Commission, so he moved to London. Here Lomax rapidly became a catalyst for the burgeoning folk revival.

Alan Lomax’s ballad opera, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, had premiered in December 1955 at Theatre Workshop in Stratford East, London. It was a hit and he was inspired to form a group called The Ramblers.

The Ramblers’ first album was recorded in August, 1956. There were ten band members including Peggy. They were Bruce Turner, Jim Bray, Shirley Collins, Alan Lomax, Bert Lloyd, Fitzroy Coleman, Ewan MacColl, Brian Daly, Johnny Cole and various one-off guest

musicians. The Ramblers never made it, but the sessions solidified the Seeger-MacColl love affair.

Confused by her relationship with Ewan, Peggy bought a Lambretta scooter and rode to Aberdeen and back – before deciding that the best thing to do was return to the States.

“Being in love with a married man was not what I wanted. I sailed home in December 1956 and stayed in the States for six months.

She left Ewan behind – but the Lambretta joined her on the voyage home.

“I loved my scooter. I rode it from New York to Chicago. That’s about 1,000 miles. I was hauled in by police at Harrisburg who had never seen a motor scooter, only motor cycles. They made me take a driving test on a kind of slalom course, and insisted that I buy a helmet and a windscreen,” Peggy recalled.

“Even with those accoutrements taking the scooter out on trucking roads was like asking to die. I did a lot of stupid things and that was one of them. I was lucky to survive that trip. When my father found out, he was horrified.

“My first real singing engagement was in Chicago at a club called the Gate of Horn. I lived on the fifth floor of an old warehouse and sang every night at the Gate. The other half of the ‘act’ was Big Bill Broonzy.

“The performances began at 10pm and wound up at 3am and I did 45 minute sets.”

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In the summer of 1957 Peggy was on her way to the Moscow Youth Festival. With 300 young Americans she took the three-day train trip east and sang at the festival.

"At the end of the festival all 300 of us were invited to China. That is when the phone started buzzing," she said.

"It was headlines in the States. All 300 received telephone calls from the Under Secretary of State Christian Herter threatening us with a \$2,000 fine and imprisonment if we went to China.

"My father called me and said 'go and we will deal with it when you come home.' Forty Americans including myself went. They spent 40 days travelling from Manchuria to Nanking to Canton.

That trip was to have consequences for Peggy.

"I travelled back West via the Soviet Union and Poland, singing in youth clubs and nearly dying of pneumonia in a student dormitory in Poland. When I arrived back in England I was hired as music director in the making of the first Radio Ballad for the BBC. But the American government wanted me back in the USA.

"The British government colluded and expelled me to France. The French pushed me over the border to Holland and the Dutch pushed me over the border into Belgium. Each time I held tightly to my passport.

Peggy Seeger and Ewan McColl were always regarded as purists on the folk scene. They aimed to remain as faithful as possible to the way they assumed the songs were originally sung. Which is why Peggy's latest recording has caused such a stir.

She co-operated with experimental electronic dance music producer Broadcaster to create what clubgoers everywhere are proclaiming as the year's best dance track.

This is the lead single from *Folksploitation*, a highly innovative album by the mysterious Broadcaster

— who some in the music business have whispered may not be entirely unrelated to the 44 year-old ex-indie musician Lewis Atkinson.

The track bravely fuses Peggy's still rich and potent voice with the heavily-rhythmic, multi-layered sounds and electronic wizardry that is Broadcaster's trademark.

Even more bizarrely, the song featured on the lead track that has unexpectedly propelled Peggy into this ultra-modern world is *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. There have been more than 60 cover versions of this song including by Elvis, Johnny Cash, George Michael and, perhaps best known, by Roberta Flack.

This song was originally written in 1956 for and about the 21 year-old Peggy by Ewan. It was during what was then a rare and hugely expensive phenomenon, a transatlantic telephone

"If I had been extradited to the USA they would have confiscated it, so I held onto it for dear life. After my final shove over the border (Belgium to France in the middle of the night) a wonderful woman, Lucille Idoine, took me under her wing.

"She put me up in her tiny flat in Paris. I was there from September, 1958 until January 1959. Ewan came over regularly to see me.

In March, 1959, I was expecting our first child when Alex Campbell, a Scottish musician and singer, helped me into England. He offered me a marriage of convenience. Thanks to him I got back to England in the nick of time.

"Ewan and I were together for the next 30 years."

Peggy and Ewan had three children together — Neill (1959), Calum (1963) and Kitty (1972). Calum is musical director for Ronan Keating and has his own record company; Kitty is involved in music management though she trained as a graphic designer and did the artwork for Broadcaster's *Folksploitation* album. Neill is a musician and producer, too.

"We were not at all well off for the first 11 years of our life together as we were supporting two families," Peggy said. "When Roberta Flack's rendition of *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* sky-rocketed it was the first time in our partnership that we were financially stable."

From 1959 onwards, she and Ewan tried to set standards for the burgeoning UK folk revival. They formed a 'self-improvement'

call, that the love-sick, Salford-born Ewan first sang those lyrics to Peggy Seeger.

"I love the recording," Peggy said. "Broadcaster's identity is secret, of course, but I have known him for 15 years. He is a good friend of my daughter Kitty. I think he is a genius. He does things others would not dream of. People imagine I am a purist but down the years I have done classical music, pop music and written rap songs. I

Am very open to new ideas. I like pushing the boundaries and making people listen and think."

"I had always thought of *First Time Ever I ...* as a happy song. But Broadcaster wanted to make it sad, more poignant — an older woman reflecting on the past. My son Calum worked with me on the recording and he insisted I

sing it at the very bottom of my range."

Peggy's work has always been lyric-centred with timeless and often quite dark themes — including violence, exploitation, drug addiction, abusive relationships. These have a contemporary resonance which fits Broadcaster's production style perfectly — and the new album combines his edgy techno beats with Peggy's distinctive vocals surprisingly effectively.

"It is true that *Folksploitation* has put the cat among the pigeons with some in the folk scene. But I can live with that," Peggy said.

NICK DENT-ROBINSON

group of singers, called the Critics Group, which later extended its activities into documentary theatre.

They trawled field recordings from the USA and UK to track down traditional songs. And, along with the BBC radio producer Charles Parker, continued to develop the revolutionary *Radio Ballads*.

"*Radio Ballads* are 'audio-tapestries' consisting of recorded interviews, new songs, instrumentals and sound effects, the purpose of which is to describe the effect of work or a way of life on the people who perform or undergo that way of life. We made eight programmes."

As well as being active musically, Peggy and Ewan were involved in the burgeoning protest movement.

Peggy explained: "Together, Ewan and I were chiefly involved with 'movement' issues — nuclear power, low wages, homelessness, strikes, fascism, the poll tax, racism. We wrote songs, gave benefit concerts, and marched endlessly.

"In the 1970s, I became involved in the Women's Movement and began writing feminist songs. Since then I have been more occupied with ecological issues."

Ewan was taken ill in 1979 with severe heart trouble. He died in 1989.

"The last five years were very hard and I got quite ill myself. I do not like talking about those days," Peggy said.

After Ewan died, Peggy gave more than 60 boxes of Seeger-MacColl material to create an archive in their name at Oxford's Ruskin College.

In 1994, the USA brought in an amnesty for political exiles and Peggy moved back to the United States. Here she rediscovered the pleasure of singing with her brothers, Mike and Pete.

But, after 12 years in Asheville, North Carolina and four years in Boston, she got homesick for her children and for Britain and moved back to the UK. "In many ways life has come full circle," Peggy said.

She says Oxford was a logical choice of a place to live. And she has found a new cause to champion — the battle to save Temple Cowley swimming pool.

We had reached the point where Peggy had to make a choice of object for our desert island.

She held out a small oddly shaped stone — smooth and sensual, like a miniature Barbara Hepworth sculpture.

"For years, Ewan and I collected and polished stones from streams and beaches all over this country. This one has travelled with me for years," she said.

She also showed me another tactile piece, an Inuit sculpture of a seal.

"Ewan and I loved this piece. We got it in Alaska. We travelled so much my atlas would give me hours of pleasure finding places and remembering them. But if I can only take one thing then it must be the little stone.

"I am into preserving the planet and travelling light. The stone would not litter the island but just merge into the beach."

■ Find out more about the *Radio Ballads*, the Critics Group, Ewan MacColl, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and much more on Peggy's website www.peggyseeger.com

