



## **First Time Ever: A Memoir**

*Peggy Seeger*

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## **First Time Ever: A Memoir** Peggy Seeger

Born in New York City in 1935, Peggy Seeger enjoyed a childhood steeped in music and politics. Her father was the noted musicologist Charles Seeger; her mother, the modernist composer Ruth Crawford; and her brother Pete, the celebrated writer of protest songs.

After studying at Radcliffe College, in 1955 Peggy left to travel the world. It was in England that she met the man, some two decades older and with a wife and family, with whom she would share the next thirty-three years: the actor, playwright and songwriter Ewan MacColl. Together, Peggy and Ewan helped lay the foundations of the British folk revival, through the formative - and controversial - Critics Group and the landmark BBC *Radio Ballads* series. And as Ewan's muse, Peggy inspired one of the twentieth century's greatest love songs, *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*.

Peggy's life comprises art and passion, family and separation, tragedy, celebration and the unexpected - and irresistible - force of love. It would by any standards be an extraordinary story, but what elevates her account is the beauty of the writing: it is clear-eyed and playful, luminous and melodic, fearless, funny and always truthful, from the first word to the last.

## **First Time Ever: A Memoir Details**

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## William Koon says

Peggy Seeger was born into and lived a life of privilege. So why was she so snarky about folk music, which she basically appropriated and profited from all of her life? It was not her music; her music was that of her upper class academic parents who also produced bothers Pete and Mike. Both brothers used the music in different ways than Peggy. Peggy, prep schooled and Ivy Leagued, the snob who found beauty everywhere but in her native land and peoples, found plenty to criticize --be it Maud Karpeles, the helper of Cecil Sharpe, to the English Folk Song Society and its dances. (Only Peggy's dances were authentic.) You would think she was the first person to play the banjo, although sibilings Pete and Mike were far better musicians. She loves to authenticate and to hang with authenticators be they Ralph Rinzler or Alan Lomax.

She reveals. She had several abortions and describes them in great detail. (She also describes her bowel problems in minutely.) Her partner --or one of her partners--Ewan McColl, for whom she supposedly wrote the song "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," she reveals as impotent. She also laments that it took McColl ten years to die. She has opinions on China, women's pubic hair, miners, travelers versus Gypsies. Peggy is like the old guy at the end of the bar.

She talks endlessly about being on the road and the numerous gigs. And she is forever using the phrase, "That was before I was feminist." Ms. Seeger preached to the choir, especially in her smug "I'm Gonna Be an Engineer." In fact smugness and pomposity rule this work. She tells us she is no lesbian although she takes after McColl a lesbian lover, who in turn moves half way around the world. Her favorite phrase is "back then."

If you read between the lines, you can get a fair picture of the brief folk music scene in Britain that lasted a few years. The Coen brothers did a better and more honest job with the US version in "Inside Llewellyn Davis." And she does have the occasional good word for other performers such as Alf Edwards. Only occasionally, I must add. It's Peggy, Peggy, Peggy all of the time. Mostly this is a galactic ego trip by a minor performer with a great deal of rage. Ms. Seeger never reveals the source of the rage.

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## Marianne Szlyk says

The book was interesting and appealing with some very touching moments. At times, though, the timeline seemed a little confusing. It might have been even more confusing if I hadn't read the biography by Jean Freedman. Probably if you have to choose between the two, read the biography. The biography is surprisingly easy to read for a scholarly project. Freedman wears her learning lightly.

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## J says

I received a copy of this book from a Goodreads giveaway.

I doubt very much I would like Peggy Seeger if I met her in person, but this is an interesting, well-written,

very honest memoir.

She was raised in an unconventional household. Pete Seeger was her half-brother by her father's first marriage. At 20, after spending 3 years at Radcliffe, she dropped out and went to Europe.

There she fell in love with Ewan MacColl, a married (for the second time) man with a young son, who was 20 years her senior. She battled his wife Jean for his love and affection, especially at the beginning of their relationship. Becoming pregnant with MacColl's child, Seeger entered into a sham marriage with a mutual friend so she could move to the UK with MacColl. Jean gave birth to her second child with MacColl shortly after the birth of Ewan and Peggy's oldest child. She also renounced her American citizenship.

She and MacColl were important figures in the British folk music scene.

This is an interesting account of her life and times.

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### **Sean says**

I read this, not because I'm a Peggy Seeger fan, but because I hoped the book would include her account of the 60s folk revival (Dylan, Cohen, Mitchell, Simon, Lightfoot, etc) and the Seeger family (Pete and Woody Guthrie, the New Lost City Ramblers, etc). There was precious little on either, so I was disappointed. Peggy Seeger's fans would probably like the book.

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### **Lynne Macdonald says**

At first I enjoyed this book. But afterwards as I read I found that Peggy Seeger life was self centered and selfish. The high point was she was the muse for the song The First Time I Ever sung by Roberta Flack. Her lover wrote it Ewan MacColl. She wrote and loved folk songs as she played the banjo. Her mother was very talented too but died of cancer at a young age. To me her mom called Dios was more talented but at her time could not express it properly. She would have been a fine musician as she interpreted songs with a firmer hand to me. I think Peggy was allowed to do as she wanted without any raising by any adults but a child minder. Yes Peggy was smart but greedy for herself and no consideration for anyone- even her children to me. It was cold. But that was the life she wanted. This is just my opinion. She did show some remorse at end but I feel that is because everyone has left her or now keep her at a arm's length. She is waiting to die.

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### **Bonnie says**

How it felt to have had Peggy Seeger's experiences in life, love, music, in myriad homes in the US and UK, from vivacious youth to gray age, told with candor, pride, humility, and a seasoned storyteller's skill. Seeger biographies dot American music dictionaries like Bach family ones do in Germany. Peggy's father Charles helped found the field of ethnomusicology, mother Ruth wrote a string quartet in 1931 that remains in the chamber music repertoire, half-brother Pete led millions of people in song at his concerts all over the world,

brother Mike was a folk singer and multi-instrumentalist, cousin Tony ran Smithsonian Folkways Recordings . . . and Peggy essentially ran away from home to settle in the UK with Scottish balladeer and songwriter Ewan MacColl where they were central figures in the English 'folk revival'. As Seeger admits, Jean Freedman's book "Peggy Seeger: A Life of Music, Love and Politics" is a true biography. "First Time Ever" is a memoir -- and Seeger is so good at sharing her memories (they jump around as much as she moved around) that her presence jumps off page after page.

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## **Beth Bonini says**

This August I was at the Cambridge Folk Festival when Peggy Seeger was introduced - with great enthusiasm - as the next act on the Main Stage. Her name sounded only vaguely familiar, but the introduction made it clear that she was a legendary figure in folk music. The music began as an exuberant fast-tempo of guitar and banjo, but then a rather warbling voice began to sing. I like folk music, but I'm not really an aficionado of its more 'old style' stylings. Well, there was that excuse, and the fact that it was really hot and I desperately wanted shade and a cold drink. To my everlasting regret, I wandered off and missed the majority of Seeger's performance. Some young musician friends of mine stayed for it, and they were mightily impressed. They thought that Peggy Seeger was really cool.

Two weeks later, and a musician friend of mine caught her set at the Green Man Festival in Wales. He thought that I might enjoy this memoir, so he brought back an inscribed copy of it for me - along with the CD that showcases many of the songs (from a long, long career) which Seeger gives particular mention in her life story. Because it was a gift, I read it straight away . . . and for a few weeks now I have been in the grip of a full-blown Peggy Seeger obsession.

Reading Seeger's memoir is a wonderful shadowing of the 20th century, both in the US and England. As a touring performer from her teenage years, Seeger travelled all over the world - including Russia and China during the height of the Communist era. As a student of folk music traditions, she was always looking backward and trying to capture an oral tradition before it was completely lost. As a singer of protest songs, she was deeply involved with many of the political and protest movements of the 20th century - and thus always involved in the 'present moment' of the times. Age has certainly not withered her; there is a song called "Donald's In The White House" on the "First Time Ever" album. My favourite line has to be: "It's clear he's going to screw the people, screw the climate, screw the earth and then, make the world a safer place for Yankee businessmen."

I was particularly interested in her development as a feminist - and as a woman separate from her roles as daughter, wife and mother. Throughout the book, she tends to joke that certain events happened "before she became a feminist". At the age of 21 she met her future husband and musical collaborator of 30 years: Ewan McColl. He was twice her age and already married. They went on to have three children together and a very prolific musical partnership. However, the relationship (later marriage) was not without pain and sacrifice. She describes, in mostly humorous language, her relationship with her extremely difficult Scottish mother-in-law; she also confides, in sometimes shocking detail, painful experiences with abortions and McColl's ongoing relationship with his wife. After 10 exhausting years of nursing McColl through heart trouble and periods of bad health, Seeger fell in love with her friend and fellow musician Irene Pyper-Scott. Their relationship (later marriage) is just as interesting as her long relationship with McColl, although it doesn't get quite as much airing in the book. After 30 years in England, Seeger felt compelled to "go home" to the United States and ended up, for many years, in Asheville, North Carolina and then Boston before returning to England. As I have also lived much of my adult life in England, I was really interested by her experiences

in trying to go home again.

If ever someone was born to be a musician, it was Peggy Seeger. She was born on June 17, 1935 into a house filled with music. Both of her parents were distinguished musicians, and they were both heavily involved with a project to archive American folk songs for the Library of Congress. Her mother was a concert pianist and composer; the first female composer to win a Guggenheim fellowship. Her father was influential in establishing musicology as an academic discipline. After reading this memoir, I spent some time reading about Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford Seeger - and also Peggy's famous half-brother, Pete Seeger - and I felt like I learned so much about an important and interesting aspect of 20th century American culture. Some of my favourite chapters were about Seeger's childhood memories of Washington DC and its suburbs during the 1940s and 1950s. Her mother worked full-time, mostly giving piano lessons, so much of the household work was done by a succession of African-American women. Seeger's political education seemed to begin at home, in more than one sense.

Ruth Crawford Seeger died of cancer when Peggy (the second oldest of four children) was at Radcliffe College. No doubt her life would have played out very differently if that sense of family stability hadn't ended so abruptly. I was very moved by this observation: *"We are comrades-in-arms, Dio and I. We have so much in common: both united for decades to a man very many years our senior, always impatient to get to our work, endlessly trying to get across to our children as a person and being rejected not by direct lack of interest, but by any child's unwavering belief that no life existed before its own birth."*

Seeger's writing voice is highly idiosyncratic and she tends to write short, almost staccato, sentences. There's definitely a "stream-of-consciousness" feeling to the narrative at times. She says herself that her book is written very much in the present: *"it's how I feel now about back then."* She doesn't bother with strict chronology, although the memoir does follow a mostly chronological timeline. Her writing is filled with humour and personality; and yes, she does tend to get both 'ranty' and preachy, especially in the latter half of the novel. I'm sure she is exactly the same in person! After all, her engagement with politics has been one of the dominant themes of her life. I didn't mind it all; although admittedly, her politics do tend to harmonise (mostly) with mine. In Seeger's own words: *"My book roams freely around time, emotions, opinions, prejudices and a lot of whatever."*

All in all, what a fascinating life - and how generously she shares some of its public highlights and deeply personal moments with her readers.

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## **Jill Loach says**

I have been an admirer of Peggy Seeger since the 1960s. We were fortunate enough to sit at the feet of Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker – literally, for there were rarely enough chairs at our gatherings and they became our teachers and inspiration. I was touched by the fact that Ewan always remembered that I was a keen walker in Derbyshire, only discovering later his part in opening up the hills through the mass trespass. This fascinating and honest memoir opens up a much more complex family and musical history than we somewhat naive young admirers could have realised at the time. The honesty of this memoir is stunning and, just as we followed Ewan and Peggy into some kid of maturity back then, I am now left haunted by her account of ageing, raw but not without humour and resilience.

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## **Christopher Hjort says**

Wonderfully written. I am not a particular keen folk music fan, but seldom have I read an autobiography that drew me so quickly in and held me firm, page after page. I could not resist reading paragraphs aloud to friends. Highly recommended.

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## **Rebecca says**

Ever so much stranger than I expected.

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## **Susan says**

An interesting book by an interesting woman. The younger half-sister of Pete Seeger she talks about her anger at (sometimes) being billed when performing as "the sister of Pete Seeger" rather than as her own person.) She was also the wife of Ewan MacColl, a well-known Scottish folk singer. Seeger was raised in an unconventional though financially comfortable family in the US but ended up spending much of her adult life in the UK where she and MacColl were well known in the folk music scene; she was both a writer and a singer. Much of her life is described as being accidental - she found herself here, there, not where she should have been, pregnant, having an illegal abortion, pregnant again. As she says "not a feminist" for the longest time, which she clearly regrets. A lot of detail about her music and the music scene which was not of great interest to me but would certainly be to others. She cared deeply about many people and that really comes across.

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## **Ruth Brumby says**

Peggy Seeger comes across as astoundingly inconsequential, or as she would say, 'Go on, why not.' - unprotected sex, risky scooter driving, travelling and hoping to find somewhere to sleep, and especially, in the early days quite easily led. She comes across later as fairly opinionated, slightly inclined to name-dropping, scarily ready to move on and leave those she loves behind. She comes across as very hard-working and thoughtful, politically sound, trying to do her best and to understand others. Overall she comes across, clearly and personally, in a fascinating memoir.

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## **Earl says**

First Time Ever is Peggy Seeger's autobiography and is, I think, a wonderful example of what an autobiography can be. A fascinating life, with many professional and personal ups and downs.

One aspect of a good autobiography (or biography for that matter) is that the life examined has been full of peaks and valleys, even more interesting when many of the names are recognizable. Seeger's life absolutely qualifies in this respect and she provides many wonderful stories in the process of telling her larger overarching story. Some passages were simply stunning in both the writing and the reflective insight.

What I think sets this autobiography above so many others is Seeger's willingness to expose her own blemishes as well as her positives. Many readers may decide they don't care for aspects of her personality or some decisions and actions she made during her life. The fact Seeger herself is the one who presented the insight to allow such a view of her is, I believe, a positive about the book itself, aside from what one may think of her personally.

I would highly recommend this not only to folk music fans and music historians but also to readers who enjoy autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs. The work goes beyond just being a chronological retelling of her life into the realm of reflection. Like all of us I think Seeger is less than 100% critical of herself when reflecting but, the part with which I am impressed, she is honest and frank enough to allow readers to make their own conclusions about her life and her actions. Far too many autobiographies gloss over things that would elicit any negative response, Seeger did not do that to her readers.

Reviewed from a copy made available by the publisher via LibraryThing Early Reviewers.

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### **Jeff Smith says**

Very interesting, candid read - life as a musician is not an easy slog, toughest gig seems to have been her time with Ewan MacColl. Thanks though for some wonderful songs including 'Gonna Be An Engineer' and 'Love Call Me Home'. Good that love wins in the end but growing older does have it's challenges.

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### **Beth Anne says**

This memoir by Pete Seeger's kid sister, Peggy Seeger, a folk singer in her own right, intrigued me from the beginning because she's from a famous musical family. Her mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, was a composer and a character in her own right as well. *The First Time Ever* takes us from Peggy's childhood in the greater DC area, where none other than Elizabeth Cotton was a housekeeper, to her adulthood in England (and later Asheville, North Carolina), where she played banjo and gigged around the continent of Europe. She fell in love with a married man and well-known folksinger Ewan MacColl, and broke up his marriage to his first wife. (I have to confess I found her callousness in this matter sort of appalling, but it is a testament to her interesting life that I stuck with the book!) She and MacColl ended up having three children together while working in a variety of musical acts and collecting traditional songs of the British Isles. The book is named for the only song that ever really earned MacColl any money, *The First Time (Ever I Saw your face)* which Roberta Flack covered most famously. It's a wild life she's lead, and just before the death of MacColl, who was 20 years her senior, she falls in love with a female friend but never tells MacColl. It is indeed an interesting life she's lived. The book was chatty and full of interesting stories from a life full of adventures and misadventures.

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