



Peggy Seeger

Julian May marvels at the remarkable career of the influential American folk singer, feminist icon and activist, who is still touring in her ninth decade

It's my birthday today," Peggy Seeger tells me. "I'm 80 today. I'm spending most of it horizontal. I was performing yesterday and I'm performing tomorrow."

The gift she most wished for from her children on this momentous birthday was, characteristically, not a material present, but time and attention. The singer-songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and campaigner asked her musician sons Neill and Calum to join her on tour – her first tour with her own band. June has seen this family band travelling the length of the UK, including a joyful concert on June 6 at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, packed to the rafters.

"I'm getting used to life on the tour bus," Seeger says. "I love it! The boys have made a

sort of nest for me at the back. They treat me like glass. But I'm not breakable."

She certainly isn't: in 1955, aged scarcely 21, Seeger arrived in Holland from the US. Soon she was off to China, Russia and Poland. She's been exploring, musically, culturally and politically, ever since.

Hers is a famous name: her father, Charles Seeger, was a renowned ethnomusicologist; her brother Mike devoted his life to the old-time music of the American South; Pete, her half-brother, was a towering figure in the American folk revival of the middle of the last century. Peggy's mother, Ruth Crawford, an avant-garde composer was the first woman to be awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship award for music composition.

Woody Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, Leadbelly and Jean Ritchie are among the legendary musicians who visited Seeger's childhood home. But folk and blues are by no means her only influence. Her most recent album, *Everything Changes* (reviewed in #103), is a collection of her own songs on which, crucially, she sings, but does not accompany herself. It sounds somehow refreshingly free.

"That's because I was not tied to folk music," Seeger explains. "I had a classical education. I know what I'm doing on the staff line. I know what I'm doing harmonically." She heard her mother painstakingly transcribing songs from a very young age, and was doing the same by the time she was 11. Seeger has played the piano since she was seven and read music at Radcliffe College in Massachusetts. Intriguingly, she says that she loved classical music too much to pursue it as a performer.

In 1956 Seeger came to London at the behest of Alan Lomax in need of a banjo player (she also plays guitar, autoharp, Appalachian dulcimer and concertina). On her first day she met the singer, dramatist and activist, Ewan MacColl. Theirs did not seem a promising relationship: he was 20 years older, married

and a father. Also, his political activities attracted the attention of the security services.

At one point Seeger took herself back to the US. But when she needed a love song for a show in Los Angeles, MacColl sang 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' down the phone. The transcribing skills she had picked up from her mother came in handy and in a few minutes she had noted it down. That song would go on to make Roberta Flack a star, and has been covered by artists from Elvis Presley to Stereophonics.

Seeger returned to the UK, married MacColl and they lived and worked together until his death in 1989. Between 1958 and 1964 Seeger, MacColl and producer Charles Parker made the *Radio Ballads*, a series of groundbreaking radio programmes weaving voices with music and the sounds of industry.

These were among the first programmes in which working-class people actually spoke. Seeger and MacColl took the speech of the people recorded by Parker, and created songs using their rhythms, honouring even their breathing patterns. Some, such as 'The Travelling People' and 'Shoals of Herring' are sung all over the world today by people with no idea of their authorship. They have become folk songs. Seeger uses this songwriting method to this day. 'The Ballad of Jimmy Massey' came from her conversation with a marine about his experience in Iraq. It is a setting of his words to her music.

MacColl and Seeger emphasised the connections between vernacular culture and radical politics. They held strong views too, about authenticity and ownership. Weekly meetings at their home were part music sessions, part political study groups. The Critics Group, as it became known because performances were rigorously assessed, eventually broke up acrimoniously.

MacColl could be proscriptive, but Seeger's outlook is expansive. Her work engages with equal rights, the anti-nuclear movement and ecology – and she does so with humour. One of her great songs, 'Gonna be an Engineer', mapping a girl's determination to follow this vocation is still topical today.

Her partner these days is Irish singer Irene Pyper-Scott, with whom she started working in 1983 as the duo No Spring Chickens.

Everything Changes includes loves songs, observational pieces and an elegy. Yet many of Seeger's songs have been written in response to

injustice. Does she think protest songs change anything? "Songs are part of a change," she muses. "They help the people who are trying to make the change. People think protest songs are angry. But if you can make one that ridicules, that is almost more powerful. When you ridicule someone you put them below you. You make them feel foolish."

She is certain, as well, of the power of singing together. "People often say, 'you're singing to the converted.' Well, the converted need creative glue. They need slogans... singing together makes for happiness, a feeling of belonging – and that makes us harder to beat." Seeger's output is prodigious, more than 20 albums of her own and more than 100 appearances on other people's. There is a song book. She lectures, writes, sings and plays.

Most recently, the council has closed her local swimming pool, and she has written a song and recorded it with the children, adults and those like herself of riper years who use Cowley Temple Pool. It is not so much a protest gesture against the closure as a persuasive argument for keeping the place open. Like its author it is humane and forward-looking. Peggy Seeger is 80; she's on tour; she's learning the electric guitar. ♦

+ **LIVE** *Peggy Seeger plays at this year's Cambridge Folk Festival on July 31*

+ **VIDEO** *Watch Seeger's song about the closure of her local pool on our YouTube channel*



"Singing together makes for happiness, a feeling of belonging"

BEST ALBUMS

Peggy Seeger
Everything Changes
(Signet Music, 2014)
Seeger's most recent album of fine, wide-ranging songs, beautifully arranged and performed. Reviewed in #103.

Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl & Charles Parker
The Travelling People
(Topic, 2008)

The final *Radio Ballad* programme, broadcast in 1964. "By that time we had the technique down to a fine art," Seeger says.

Peggy Seeger with Irene Scott
Almost Commercially Viable
(Sliced Bread Records, 2000)

Funny, touching and hard-hitting songs reveal Seeger's skill as a writer and, with some interesting arrangements, a musician. The women's voices weave well together.

Peggy Seeger
Animal Folk Songs for Children
(Smithsonian Folkways, 1957)

Seeger has a special affection for this album she made for Smithsonian in 1957. It is a selection from a collection her mother published, drawing on field recordings in the Library of Congress.

IF YOU LIKE PEGGY SEEGER, TRY

O'Hooley & Tidow

The Hum
No Masters (2014)
Belinda O'Hooley and Heidi Tidow's brilliant album with themes close to Seeger's heart: motherhood, sacrifice, industry, war, the natural world, all innovatively realised. A Top of the World review in #99.

Broadcaster featuring Peggy Seeger

Folkspoilation
Red Grape (2012)
The boundary-pushing artist Broadcaster's first, full-length album, featuring the unlikely pairing of Seeger's vocals. 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' appears as a dance track, all loops, samples and off-beats.