

THE NEXT GENERATION: PEGGY AND MIKE SEEGER

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The Seeger family was a powerhouse of talent, musically and beyond. Charles Seeger (1886–1979), their father, was a renowned musicologist who held a number of prominent university positions. His political convictions, obviously on the left, were also instrumental in forming his children’s ideological worldviews. The first wife of Seeger Sr., Pete Seeger’s mother Constance de Clyver (1886–1975), was also a musician although not as accomplished by far as his second wife Ruth Seeger (1901–1953) (mother to Mike and Peggy), who also significantly contributed to the area of ethnomusicology in cooperation with the pioneers of field recordings John and Alan Lomax. Charles’ younger brother Alan Seeger (1888–1916) was a poet who died in World War I, most famous for his classic poem “I Have a Rendezvous with Death”.

Pete Seeger (1919–2014) was mostly known for performing traditional songs and songs by contemporaries (Malvina Reynolds, Tom Paxton, Woody Guthrie) as well as making new arrangements of older material such as “We Shall Overcome”, an African-American spiritual; “Turn, Turn, Turn” from the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible; “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” from a Cossack song quoted in the Russian novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov, and many more. Due to the age gap, Pete was more of an uncle to his younger half-siblings and apparently Ruth Seeger would have her children skip school when their half-brother would visit as they would learn a lot more from him than they would at school.

Mike Seeger (1933–2009) was the most musically gifted of the siblings (at least according to Pete), playing the banjo, guitar, violin, autoharp and a range of additional folk instruments. His band The New Lost City Ramblers, which came to prominence in the late 1950s, was a key group in the Folk Revival. He described

his music with the labels old-time, early country, or hillbilly. According to the critic Ross Altman: "... he played old-timey 'non-violent banjo,' to distinguish it from hi-powered bluegrass." (Altman 2024) Mike Seeger's musical career actual began with field recordings of older musicians, who often had not received deserved recognition. In his own words, this was "music from the true vine" (the title of Bill C. Malone's biography of Mike Seeger): in other words, the genuine tradition of American roots music. He was justifiably proud of his field recordings as he felt they not only helped listeners learn how to play traditional songs, but also gave them a sense of tradition and history, preserving many tunes for posterity. He also recorded renowned figures such as Tommy Jarrell from North Carolina, the father of the Round Peak clawhammer banjo style, and another influential banjo player, Dock Boggs from Virginia. Malone discusses the importance of Boggs for Seeger's development: "This collection included an artist and a recording that were destined to play crucial roles in Mike Seeger's awakening musical consciousness: Dock Boggs and his starkly gripping version of the mountain murder ballad 'Pretty Polly'." (Malone 2011: 20) He also recorded famous musicians such as Ernest Stonemason, Grandpa Jones, and cooperated with legends such as Doc Watson and Maybelle Carter. Last year [2023], my Náměšť colloquium contribution touched upon the remarkable story of how Peggy Seeger as a young girl got lost in a department store in Washington, DC and how Elizabeth Cotten found her and brought her back to her mother. After accepting a job in their home, Cotten was 'discovered' playing the guitar, once again by Peggy. Mike eventually not only made the first recordings of Cotten, but also became her manager and collaborator.

Seeger's group The New Lost City Ramblers was formed in the year 1958 and was made up of Mike Seeger, Tom Paley (later replaced by Tracy Schwartz), and John Cohen (who incidentally married yet another Seeger sister, Penny). They were greatly inspired by the North Carolina hillbilly band Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, which experienced short-term fame in the 1920s. They played a number of their songs, but in a much

calmer and soberer tone. The New Lost City Ramblers were also very different from popular ‘preppy’ bands of the day, like the Kingston Trio, but were also not an ‘authentic’ southern band. In the words of Seeger’s biographer, Bill Malone:

Again, the New Lost City Ramblers offered a unique fare and were popular with many fans because of their attempts at authenticity. Unlike the other musical acts that proliferated in the revival, the Ramblers never described their music as ‘folk,’ since the term had become largely meaningless through its widespread and careless usage. Nor did they often use the name ‘hillbilly’ as a description for the songs and instrumental tunes that they performed on recordings and in concerts. Instead, they embraced the label ‘old-time’ or ‘old-timey’. (Malone 2011: 84)

Jan Sobotka, a long-time participant in our colloquium, had some excellent insight into the band. This citation comes from an article he wrote for the magazine *Rock & Pop* and was included in the collection *Jízda v protisměru (Going Against the Flow)*.

All three members were remarkable masters of technical playing on all practical instruments which were considered part of Old Time music. Their repertoire was mainly inspired by recordings from between-the-wars from the Appalachian region as well as from their own collecting activity in the region. This was not, of course, the norm, by any means, at that time. They would perform, however, their quite bizarre songs for the public with poker faces and in period hick clothing, with the result often being somewhat in the Cimrman style,¹ this being something which had no parallel at this time in the days of rock ‘n’ roll.” (Sobotka 2023: 101)²

I am personally not sure about the analogy with Cimrman, but this is definitely food for thought and Sobotka correctly picks up on their idiosyncratic look and style.

1. Jára Cimrman is the fictional centerpiece of a series of popular Czech plays written by Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák.
2. The author’s translation from the Czech original.

Mike Seeger later cooperated and recorded with the influential vocalist and guitarist Hazel Dickens from West Virginia and with the musician Alice Gerrard, originally from Washington state (who was also married to Seeger). They played together under the name Strange Creek Singers and released several albums. Dickens had previously experienced difficulties as a woman gaining recognition in the music industry and later acknowledged that Mike greatly helped her career by recognizing and touting not only her musical talent, but also her rural southern culture. Mike also played and performed with his siblings (especially with Peggy).

Mike was not all that prolific a songwriter, but was mainly known for interpreting other people's work. One of his most characteristic songs, "When First unto this Country", originally recorded by the legendary ethnomusicologist John Lomax in the 1920s, became part of the repertoire of the Ramblers in the 1950s. Seeger played the song up until his death and its lonely, subdued sound and text reflected his personality and style extremely well. The first two stanzas of this, his 'signature song', are presented below.

When first unto this country
A stranger I came,
I courted a fair maid
And Nancy was her name

I courted her for love,
Her love I didn't obtain;
Do you think I've any reason
Or right to complain?

(Seeger, Mike 2016)

The song chronicles the struggles of an immigrant to the United States, who not only fails in love, but is imprisoned and humiliated. Both the style and the subject matter are typical examples of his approach, demonstrating almost a complete lack of showmanship, a definite modesty, almost self-effacing, and a dedication to the song as opposed to himself as a performer. According to Altman:

Mike Seeger wasn't a show-off; he was the consummate traditional singer and (multi)-instrumentalist who reduced the music he performed to its essence, always in service of the song or tune. (Altman 2024)

Seeger also influenced bands such as the Grateful Dead, the Byrds, and many others; for example, Bob Dylan, who in his autobiography *Chronicles* delivered the following poetic tribute:

He was extraordinary, gave me an eerie feeling. Mike was unprecedented. He was like a duke, the knight errant. As for being a folk musician, he was the supreme archetype. (Dylan 2004: 69)

Unable to compete with Seeger on his own turf, Dylan explains his decision to pursue the writing of his own songs:

Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood. Nobody could just learn this stuff [...] maybe I'd have to write my own folk songs, ones that Mike didn't know. (Dylan 2004: 71)

Mike Seeger was, to resort to a cliché, a true musician's musician. Malone observes, “[e]verywhere, Mike was remembered for his musical versatility, his generosity, his patience and willingness to help anyone who sought his counsel on a musical question, and his sense of humor” (Malone 2011: 169). Although, much less of a household name than his brother Pete, he left an indelible legacy behind him, leaving folk music much the richer through his multifaceted musical endeavours.

Peggy Seeger (b. 1935) is still actively performing, writing songs and making recordings. In 2017, she published a remarkable autobiography, *First Time Ever: A Memoir*. She has written and popularized hundreds of songs, with in all probability the most well-known being her feminist anthem “I'm Gonna Be an Engineer”.

3. Karel Gott also recorded the song, translated by Zdeněk Borovec as Už víckrát viděl jsem já tu tvář, in 1973.

Her marriage to the British folk singer and activist Ewan MacColl (1915–1989) is recalled, amongst other things, by his song “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face”,³ written by him in 1957 for her, and made into a smash hit by Roberta Flack in 1972. Seeger and MacColl collaborated on a number of projects and radio shows and often her contribution was downplayed or unrecognized, something which her husband MacColl acknowledged in his autobiography, published soon after his death:

Peggy had taken part in every stage of the work, had collected in the field, transcribed tapes, chosen actuality, planned sequences, suggested subjects for songs, arranged the music and directed its performance. It was grossly unfair that she should be credited with only the arrangement. [...] Peggy was definitely denied recognition as part creator of the radio-ballads. Was it naïveté or was I just another male chauvinist? I hope not, although it could have been that automatic attitude to women that also made Peggy and I call our joint company Ewan MacColl Ltd. (MacColl 2009: 326–27)

They were both deeply involved in left-wing politics and tried with their music and work to write and perform folk music which would address the needs and concerns of the industrial society of the day.

I would like to examine three songs of hers from different periods of her life in order to illustrate her style and textual content. As mentioned, her most well-known song “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” from 1972 has become a feminist hymn. The song is not autobiographical but chronicles the obstacles which women traditionally face in the area of education, and which frequently include stereotypes as to what kind of professions and specialized knowledge a woman is able to handle:

When I was a little girl I wished I was a boy
I tagged along behind the gang and wore my corduroys
Everybody said I only did it to annoy
But I was gonna be an engineer

Mamma told me, Can't you be a lady?
Your duty is to make me the mother of a pearl
Wait until you're older, dear, and maybe
You'll be glad that you're a girl

(Seeger, Peggy 2015)

Although Peggy Seeger did not study engineering and certainly did not hear messages of this sort from her own artistic mother, the message rings loud and clear.

Dainty as a Dresden statue, gentle as a Jersey cow
Smooth as silk, gives creamy milk
Learn to coo, learn to moo
That's what you do to be a lady, now

(Seeger, Peggy 2015)

The song chronicles the obstacles women used to face (and still face in some countries) when obtaining an education. Women are discouraged from pursuing the hard sciences and are pigeonholed into secretarial work. Women are consequently expected to breed children and sacrifice any ambition they used to have in order to support their career-driven husbands. When women try to assert themselves, they are often made to feel guilty by their husbands and family that they are doing so at the expense of others. With the final verse, the would-be engineer is resigned to being a wife and mother, while her husband dedicates himself to self-realization through his work.

You owe it to the kids to be a lady
Dainty as a dishrag, faithful as a Chow
Stay at home, you got to mind the baby
Remember you're a mother now!

(Seeger, Peggy 2015)

Although not necessarily all that radical from today's perspective, the song definitely ruffled feathers in the early 1970s and placed Peggy Seeger at the forefront of a new generation of female folk singers ready and willing to use their voice for the feminist cause.

The song “Reclaim the Night” from the album *Different Therefore Equal* (1979) is focused on the issue of rape and arguably predicts the emergence of the MeToo movement. The song points out how women are frequently blamed for provoking rape due to walking alone at night or wearing provocative clothing.

If we choose to walk alone
For us there is no safety zone
If we’re attacked we bear the blame
They say that we began the game
And though you prove your injury
The judge may set the rapist free
Therefore the victim is to blame
Call it nature, but rape’s the name

Reclaim the night and win the day
We want the right that should be our own
A freedom women have seldom known
The right to live, the right to walk alone without fear

(Seeger, Peggy 2022)

The song is both courageous and forceful, mincing no words about a topic which many people have preferred to keep silent about. Jean R. Freedman comments on the song in her excellent biography of Seeger: “ ‘Reclaim the Night’ has a haunting tune and beautifully crafted lyrics; it is one of the first songs to treat rape as a political problem.” (Freedman 2017: 15)

After MacColl’s death, Peggy Seeger eventually came out as a lesbian and began to draw attention to this often taboo subject in her music. She openly spoke not only about this, but also about a range of additional controversial themes both on her albums, in public during performances, and in her earlier mentioned autobiography. She has continued both recording and performing up to the present, first with her siblings and consequently with her own sons. Her last album *The First Farewell* (2021) contains the remarkable song “The Invisible Woman”. The song is a challenging account of women in advanced age. It begins with an obvious heart-felt and lived account

of the way in which elderly women are expected to step aside and assume a backseat role in society.

I can't recall when it first happened
Don't know how I became so unseen
When my tangible self was put on the shelf
These words on the label: 'has-been'

Here comes the invisible woman
She's been on the planet for years
You can't make her out
But there's never a doubt
The invisible woman is here

(Seeger, Peggy 2021)

The implication here, of course, is that men do not face the same discrimination and are still granted not only agency in old age, but are also accepted as sexual beings.

Why should I feel so much less than I am?
There is so much more of me now
Grey hair, whiskers, wrinkles and such
Dressing for comfort, longing for touch
It should be so simple
It feels like so much
To ask you to see me

(Seeger, Peggy 2021)

The protagonist in the song refuses to be marginalized and invisible and instead celebrates her sexuality and beauty despite her wrinkles and grey hair. Peggy Seeger has lived in the UK for more than 60 years and remains a key figure in the English folk revival, initially alongside her husband, later on her own, and currently in cooperation with her two sons. Her songs touch on a number of additional controversial themes, which concern women of all age categories.

While Pete Seeger encouraged and even coerced his audience and listeners into singing along and participating, the younger Seegers were different. Mike was more of a traditional performer, displaying his virtuosity on various instruments and focused on keeping alive traditional Old Time American music. He rarely used his music as a political platform, in contrast to Pete and Peggy. He was also an educator and ethnomusicologist who preserved for posterity and popularized with his recordings and marketing a number of important folk/country/bluegrass musicians. Musicians like Nora Brown,⁴ at the festival for the second time in 2024, are following in the footsteps of Mike Seeger.

Brown and other female banjo players have Peggy Seeger to also thank. Peggy Seeger was a prolific songwriter, with many of her songs seminal for the feminist movement. She was a pioneer in terms of introducing earlier marginalized or even taboo subjects into folk music: sexism, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, menstruation, LGBTQ issues, abortion, women ageing, etc. Peggy Seeger was also instrumental (pun intended) in introducing the four-string banjo to the UK and should be credited for her role in the English Folk Music revival (along with her husband of course) and arguably for her contribution to the genre of Skiffle music which the Beatles and others started with.

4. Nora Brown played at the Náměšť Folk Holidays Festival for the second time in 2024. In a personal conversation with the author, she related how she had performed alongside Peggy Seeger just recently at the Cambridge Folk Festival. Seeger organized an all-female banjo event and asked everyone involved to deliver a “banjo joke”.

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Summary

This article explores the legacy of Mike Seeger (1933–2009) and Peggy Seeger (b. 1935), the lesser-known half-brother and half-sister of the legendary Pete Seeger (1919–2014). Although greatly influenced and inspired by not only their generation-older brother, but also by their musician and ethnomusicologist parents, both of them were pioneering figures of their own. Mike Seeger was considered the most versatile musician in the family and was one of the key popularizers of old-time and roots music, both with his influential band The New Lost City Ramblers and also as a solo artist and educator. Peggy Seeger has not only been an important songwriter, musician and social activist in her home country, but was also a key figure, along with her British musician and folklorist husband Ewan MacColl (1915–1989), in the English Folk Music Revival. She has also used her music and songs to promote feminist and social justice causes.

Key words: Seeger family, folk music, old-time music, singer-songwriters