I, Amber Good, hereby submit this as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Music in:

Music History

It is entitled:

``Lady, What Do You Do All Day?'': Peggy Seeger's Anthems of Anglo-American Feminism

Approved by:

Dr. Bruce McClung

Dr. Karin Pendle

Dr. Stephanie P. Schlagel
“LADY, WHAT DO YOU DO ALL DAY?”:
PEGGY SEEGER’S ANTHEMS OF
ANGLO-AMERICAN FEMINISM

A thesis submitted to the
Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

in the Division of Composition, Musicology, and Theory
of the College-Conservatory of Music

2002
by
Amber Good

B.M. Vanderbilt University, 1997

Committee Chair: Dr. Bruce D. McClung
ABSTRACT

Peggy Seeger’s family lineage is indeed impressive: daughter of composers and scholars Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, sister of folk icons Mike and Pete Seeger, and widow of British folksinger and playwright Ewan MacColl. Although this intensely musical genealogy inspired and affirmed Seeger’s professional life, it has also tended to obscure her own remarkable achievements. The goal of the first part of this study is to explore Peggy Seeger’s own history, including but not limited to her life within America’s first family of folk music. Seeger’s story is distinct from that of her family and even from that of most folksingers in her generation.

The second part of the thesis concerns Seeger’s contributions to feminism through her songwriting, studies, and activism. Chapter Two recounts the story of “I’m Gonna be an Engineer,” her first and most famous women’s song. Her personal involvement with the women’s movement begins with the composition of this hallmark feminist anthem. The following chapter outlines trends within her songwriting, which alternately engage with and depart from women’s issues. Her recording and publishing output give credence to these patterns.

The final chapter is an examination of Peggy Seeger’s women’s songs as they pertain to the larger fields of women’s history and feminist theory. One of her major contributions to folk music is the development of this comprehensive body of women’s songs. Her songs tell previously untold stories about the experiences of women and demonstrate that Seeger, although rarely active in the women’s movement, absorbed and documented the dialectical trends of late twentieth-century feminism.
Words and music to “I’m Gonna be an Engineer,” copyright © 1979 by Stormking Music, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Peggy Seeger.

Words to “Another Side of Engineering,” copyright © 1977 by Bob Conway. The author has made a concerted but unsuccessful attempt to contact the owner of this material.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the staff of Ruskin College in Oxford, England—especially Christine Keable and Roland Birchby—for their help and for their patience with this American researcher.

Many thanks to Irene Pyper-Scott and Calum and Neill MacColl, who willingly provided me a close perspective on Peggy Seeger's life in England.

I am eternally grateful to the many kind folks who have read part or all of this paper, including Leanna Booze, Karla Jurgemeyer, Leilani Endicott, Alex MacKay, Judith Booze, Mary Ann Good, and Brian Heck Cook. Thanks to my reading committee, Dr. Karin Pendle and Dr. Stephanie P. Schlagel, and to my most patient advisor, Dr. Bruce McClung.

Above all thanks to Peggy Seeger herself, for living such an interesting life and for her willingness to recount it for me.
CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ 2

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 3

Chapter

1. A LIFE INTERRUPTED: THE STORY OF PEGGY SEEGER ................... 5

2. PEGGY SEEGER DISCOVERS THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT ............ 41

3. THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT DISCOVERS PEGGY SEEGER .......... 64

4. PEGGY SEEGER’S WOMEN’S SONGS AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY FEMINIST THEORY .............................................................. 94

5. CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................... 117

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................................... 120

Appendix

1. COMPLETE LIST OF RADIO-BALLADS .............................................. 130

2. SELECTED EWAN MACCOLL-PEGGY SEEGER DISCOGRAPHY ...... 131

3. “I’M GONNA BE AN ENGINEER” SCORE ............................................. 133

4. COMPARISON OF BLACKTHORNE AND ROUNDER VERSIONS OF PENELlope ISN’T WAITING ANYMORE ......................................................... 135

5. SELECTED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN’S FOLK SONGBOOKS .............................................................................................................. 136

6. FEMINIST THEORIES EVIDENT IN PEGGY SEEGER’S WOMEN’S SONGS ........................................................................................................... 138
# FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Complete Lyrics to “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer”</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Complete Lyrics to “Another Side of Engineering”</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Magazine clipping from Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In 1996 I attended a “First Night” in Harrisonburg, Virginia. These family-oriented celebrations—designated alcohol-free in an effort to reduce drunk driving over the New Year’s holiday—are known for their quality musicians, who perform throughout the evening in downtown churches or municipal buildings. I noticed Peggy Seeger’s name on the performance schedule and thought to myself, “I think I know who that is.” (This is the response that I would later get from anyone who inquired as to the topic of my thesis.) After attending her concert, I tried to find more information about her, with little success. After reading article after article about Seeger’s father, mother, brothers, and husband, I decided it was time someone asked about her.

A newly archived set of materials at Ruskin College in Oxford, England was tremendously helpful in tracing the details of Seeger’s work and personal life, a life that has been so full that one can become exhausted merely reading about it. In researching I was fortunate to find Seeger and her family willing to share stories (and their homes) with me. In interviewing her two sons in London, I found them quite eager to set the record straight, having recognized that Seeger is often overshadowed by her more famous relatives. Her current partner, Irene Pyper-Scott, granted me an interview in the Soho (London) restaurant where the couple often dines and received a phone call from Seeger as we walked toward the Tube. My interview with Seeger herself stretched into a two-day event, which could easily have continued through the following week. In each of these encounters, I felt that I was treading on virgin territory, each person so full of stories and opinions, and delighted to be asked about this person for whom they hold such affection and respect.
The task of compressing notebooks full of biographical information into one chapter was
difficult. This study opens with a forty-page biographical sketch of Peggy Seeger, from her
childhood in Washington, D.C. through her adulthood in England, and then to her present life in
Asheville, North Carolina. I hope one day to see this story told by Seeger herself, whose
unpublished memoirs were the source of much of the information on her childhood. The next
two chapters detail Seeger’s feminist work, beginning with a look at “I’m Gonna be an
Engineer,” her first and most successful feminist song, and continuing with a study of her
feminist activism (and inactivism) in the years following its composition. The fourth and final
chapter examines Seeger’s women’s songs by subject, using the tools of feminist theory.

Steeped in the discourse of feminist musicology, I approached this study from a feminist
perspective. I was interested in placing the story of Peggy Seeger on the academic map, and in
examining her extensive contributions to the world of feminist folk song. A more die-hard folk
scholar would have approached this differently, and I hope someday she or he will. Seeger’s
contributions to the folk world as a transcriber, accompanist, instrumentalist, song collector, and
ethnologist have been largely omitted in this study. This is hardly the final word on Peggy
Seeger, if for no other reason than she is now sixty-six years old and, if the path of her half-
brother Pete (eighty-three and still actively performing) is any indication, she has a lot of work
left to do.
CHAPTER 1

A LIFE INTERRUPTED:
THE STORY OF PEGGY SEGER

On a 1942 reel-to-reel tape, a seven-year-old Peggy Seeger performs a succession of folk tunes, singing a few lines each of several dozen songs. She delivers them with the obliging humor of a child reciting the alphabet or her multiplication tables—getting bored here and there, putting extra verve into her favorite selections. At one point she breathes in as she sings, as if she is exasperated with the activity and ready to go somewhere else. One doubts, however, that there would have been a place to go in the Seeger household that would have been free from music.

Margaret “Peggy” Seeger was born on 17 June 1935 into a family already famous for its musical activity. Her father, Charles Seeger, was an established member of the musical academy. Raised in privilege and described as a “quintessential nineteenth-century New England gentleman,”¹ Charles was educated at Harvard and sent to Europe for musical training. He studied conducting and composition, at one time hoping to write “the first American opera of any stature.”² While his musical education, pursued in Germany and France, influenced his future work, it was his exposure to radical political thought that changed him most profoundly. Shortly after his return to the United States, Charles received a job offer from the University of California at Berkeley, where he located in 1912 with his new wife, Constance.³

At Berkeley Charles was entrusted with the fledgling music department, where he taught

²Charles Seeger, dictated to Penny Seeger Cohen, April 22, 1977, quoted in ibid., 43.
³Ibid., 52.
theory, harmony, counterpoint, and music history. Intent upon revitalizing the program’s approach, Charles outlined his goals for music study in the United States, which culminated in the offering of the first full course in musicology during the 1913–14 academic year. These were not easy times, however, as Charles began to evaluate the usefulness and value of his career in light of the larger societal problems plaguing the U.S. in the early part of the century. His discontent at this stage perhaps foreshadowed his future involvement in proletarian causes and folk music.

By the late 1920s, his life was in a state of upheaval. His pacifist views made him feel unwelcome at Berkeley, and upon relocating to New York, both his marriage and his career looked uncertain. Constance had given Charles three children and supported him through an emotional breakdown, but she no longer shared his interests and did not get along with his friends. After a series of separations and reconciliations, Charles eventually gave up on the marriage, committing time and energy to his newfound group of friends in New York.

It was in this state of personal and professional chaos that Seeger reluctantly agreed to take a composition pupil on the suggestion of Henry Cowell, a former student of Seeger’s from Berkeley. Ruth Crawford had been living at the home of Blanche Walton, which had become the epicenter for the New York ultra-modern music scene. Although Charles’s expectations for Ruth were low, his friendship with Cowell and his need for work led him to agree to a trial

\footnotesize

4Ibid., 53.
5Ibid., 57.
6Ibid., 80.
7Ibid., 87.
period of six lessons, after which he did not expect that Ruth would return. Charles later recalled that he “was very snooty in those days about women composers.” The early lessons exceeded both of their expectations, and after an initial reserve, they found themselves kindred spirits, passionately engaged in musical arguments.

The path from teacher and student to lovers was fairly short, though a few chauvinist missteps, an affair with another woman, and some difficulties regarding divorce on Charles’s part hindered the initial progress. After a summer working together on one of Charles’s book projects, the pair acknowledged their mutual affection and deepened their commitment through a series of emotional letters while Ruth was in Europe. The relationship renewed Charles’s energy, inspiring him to return to interests sparked in Berkeley: “scholarly societies, composer groups, music criticism, new political ideologies, and . . . new social movements.” While much has been made of the impact Charles had on Ruth’s compositional style, recent research also points to Ruth’s influence on Charles, particularly in his compositional theory. Upon Ruth’s return to the United States, Charles entered the period that his biographer calls “a volatile and accomplishing period, professionally, and the happiest time of his life, personally.”

Ruth Crawford—fifteen years Charles’s junior—stood at a period of intense professional

9Ibid.


11Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 123, 121, 167.

12Pescatello, 109.


14 Pescatello, 206.
and personal growth when she first met her future husband. After years of studying and teaching to make ends meet, Ruth was finally receiving credit and assistance from members of the avant-garde community. Her remarkable career as a modernist composer culminated in 1930, when she became the first woman to win the Guggenheim Fellowship for composition.\(^\text{15}\) Her creative and intellectual approach to dissonant music won the respect of such figures as Henry Cowell, Virgil Thomson, and Carl Ruggles. Her time in New York and then Europe while on the Guggenheim was her most prolific in terms of art music, and the works produced during this time, most notably the String Quartet of 1931, remain popular. Crawford's career as a composer of art music has earned for her a place in the canon of twentieth-century music, yet it never had a place in the minds of her four children. Peggy explains:

We revolved around what my father thought and what my father wanted. He was a gentle tyrant, and my mother's independence was somewhat downplayed. Her past life [before her marriage to Charles], I never learned anything about.\(^\text{16}\)

Once Crawford became Seeger, her career found a permanent home on the back burner, the duties of domesticity and providing for a family having supplanted the solitary and financially unrewarding task of composing.

The reality of the Seeger family household was not the one dreamed of by a young Crawford, whose love letters to her former teacher and soon-to-be-husband reveal an almost transcendental wish for harmony among life, family, and work. She had spent a good deal of time in her twenties wondering if she would ever desire a lover and agonizing over the choice between career and personal life which she thought inevitable. During a summer at the MacDowell Colony, Ruth mused, “I must discover for myself whether it is a ‘career’ or life that I

\(^{15}\)Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 125.

\(^{16}\)Peggy Seeger, interview by author, tape recording, Asheville, North Carolina, 15 January 2000.
want,” realizing that one must be at least partially sacrificed in favor of the other.\(^\text{17}\) In Charles Ruth felt that she had found the answer: she would meld life and work in a relationship founded on a shared love of music.\(^\text{18}\)

That this unity was not in fact realized is part of what some scholars see as the tragedy of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Upon becoming a wife and mother, Ruth embarked on a life full of children, house maintenance, and bills, forcing her into a professional hiatus that was first hoped to be temporary, but became nearly permanent. Her children knew her as the “folk song lady” who taught piano lessons, wrote books on American folk songs, held down a household of four children, and entertained frequent houseguests. Even her own daughter didn’t realize that she had ever composed, other than \textit{Rissolty-Rosselty}, until about 1951. . . . She started playing this strange music, because her music room was right under my bedroom. . . . She’d stay up really late, all of a sudden starting to create this weird music that I just could not connect with her. And even then, I don’t remember it being mentioned that she had composed before she met my father.\(^\text{19}\)

An interview with Charles and Peggy in the 1970s shows Charles to be unaware of any conflict for Ruth; he states that she “had no trouble reconciling” home and music, and that it was her interest in folk music that kept her from her previous commitment to formal music.\(^\text{20}\)

The shift in focus from modern art music to American folk music occurred for both of the Seegers and began as a response to growing financial difficulties. After Ruth and Charles began living together in November 1931, Charles immediately encountered professional obstacles. His superior at the Institute for Musical Art—his New York academic home—did not approve of his

\(^{17}\)Tick, \textit{Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 99.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., 170.

\(^{19}\)Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

\(^{20}\)Charles Seeger, interview by Wilding-White, 444.
renewed radical politics or his divorce from Constance, which became final on 2 October 1932, the date of his marriage to Ruth. Charles—and by association, Ruth—began to seek involvement in progressive groups, hoping to find a more meaningful outlet for their musical talents. Charles wrote music criticism for the *Daily Worker* under the pseudonym “Carl Sands,” a move that contributed to the mounting government suspicion regarding his communist sympathies. In 1932–33 Charles and Henry Cowell helped to start the Composers’ Collective, a group that “tried to give agency to music as a weapon in the class struggle.” Ruth and Charles both composed songs for proletarian use, though Ruth’s energy was soon divided by the birth of Mike in 1933.

By the time Peggy arrived two years later, Charles had lost his job at the Institute of Musical Art, and his part-time lecturing and writing was not enough to support his growing family. The Depression had deepened the Seegers’ concern about finding reliable work, but after a dire year, a job offer appeared unexpectedly and the family relocated to Washington, D.C. Charles was hired as a musical trainer in the Resettlement Administration (RA), the least successful of the New Deal agencies. In Washington the pair also found the Lomaxes, the father-and-son team of folk music scholars who would know and be connected with the Seegers for decades to come. It was through the RA and the Lomaxes that the Seegers received their first real exposure to folk music. The discovery of this new professional direction changed everything for the Seeger family. Charles was now gainfully employed, and Ruth found ways to involve


23Ibid., 225.

24Ibid., 229.
herself through transcriptions for two of the Lomaxes’ books and for Charles’s fieldwork. With
this newfound security, the division of labor was complete. A sign of the times, Ruth was
expected to bear almost exclusively the weight of household management and childrearing, and
her professional activities were encouraged only as they contributed to the household income.
Charles’s desire to resume his middle-class lifestyle after the crisis of the Depression led to the
purchase of a home in a desirable Washington suburb, a choice that kept the Seegers in a state of
constant financial discomfort. By the early 1940s, Ruth was occupied with work on the
Lomaxes’ and her own book projects and a six-day-a-week piano teaching load.25 The Seegers’
two youngest children, Barbara and Penelope, were born into this “circus,”26 as Ruth called it, by
which point the older children and housekeepers were helping to shoulder the growing
housework.27

Despite the restrictions placed on Ruth by a hectic domestic life, Peggy remembers her as
a fascinating, fiery woman who enjoyed being a mother and who created a counterpoint to the
calm, passive Charles Seeger. She was constantly captivated by new musical ideas, and engaged
in musical discourse wherever possible. Peggy recalls, “Her mind was fertile—she would
occasionally be playing a classical piece, and she would dart into an improvisation on it, get
amused, start laughing, then go back to where she and Bartók . . . had left off.”28 She was an
admired teacher, making several Music Teachers National Association and television

25Ibid., 294.
26Ibid., 291.
27Ibid., 305.
appearances with children, with whom she had a gift for working."\textsuperscript{29} Peggy remembers the home her mother created being full of “good smells and good sounds,” where “folksong ran through everything that we did.”\textsuperscript{30} For eldest brother Mike and for Peggy—the apple of her father’s eye—childhood was idyllic. “I am a product of a life of comfort. . . . I grew up without anger,” remembers Peggy.\textsuperscript{31} For Barbara, who did not share the family love of folk music, and for Penny, who was only ten years old when Ruth developed cancer, the memories would likely have a different cast.

The Seeger children’s time with their mother was cut short when they were still unaware of just how complex a person Ruth was. Peggy lamented the lost opportunity in her adulthood:

I would like to communicate with her the intense comradeship that I feel with her now—married as she was to a man fifteen years her senior, constantly impatient to get composing, endlessly trying to get across to her children as a person and being rejected not by their direct lack of interest but by any child’s preoccupation with its own life.\textsuperscript{32}

Peggy’s memories of her mother are, however, vivid. Although Ruth “had no ambitions for her children,” just that they “be good and be happy,” Peggy was somewhat intimidated by her mother’s musicianship, which she recognized as superior to her father’s.\textsuperscript{33} Ruth’s attempt to teach her daughter piano failed because Peggy could not practice with her mother in earshot: “I think that was the beginning of my nerves problem, knowing someone who knew better was


\textsuperscript{30}Seeger, unpublished memoirs, 18 July 1989.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 17 July 1989.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 8 July 1989.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 23 June 1989.
Although Peggy recalls a peaceful relationship with her mother, family members attest to a time when she was at such “loggerheads” with Ruth that she was sent to boarding school.\(^{35}\)

Peggy was closer to her father than to her mother: “He was absolutely dependable in his love. . . . I could talk to him about almost anything.”\(^{36}\) It was Charles who sat down with Peggy to explain the facts of life, and he was the physically affectionate half of her parents. He also passed on certain aspects of his personality and worldview to his children, an inheritance about which Peggy has regrets:

Of his seven children, only two do not have my father’s detached impassive manner, his inability to lose his temper, the air that he had that made people think he was a snob. . . . His distant patronizing approach to life has rubbed off on most of us, and I wish it hadn’t.\(^{37}\)

Peggy’s recollections of her father are colored with both affection and anger. While Charles contributed to a loving household, he did so by quietly setting the tone for the family, which included keeping “the help” socially distant, evading less pleasant details of his own past, and keeping Ruth’s domestic and professional desires at arm’s length.

Raised in this highly creative and complex household, Peggy’s career choice seems almost inevitable. As a child she met and marveled over people such as Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Hans Eisler, Guy Carawan, Jean Ritchie, and the family’s housekeeper of some time, Elizabeth Cotten. The visits of her half-brother Pete meant a holiday for the Seeger children:

\(^{34}\)Ibid.

\(^{35}\)Ibid., 29 September 1998.

\(^{36}\)Ibid., 15 July 1989.

\(^{37}\)Ibid., 17 July 1989.
“my mother reckoned he was as good an education for us as the teachers.”  

Peggy excelled in school but did not immediately make friends, aware of how different her home life seemed in comparison to those of her classmates. She remembers always being busy, her time spent “playing piano, learning guitar, drawing, entertaining Penny, doing reams of homework (to please the teachers rather than myself), reading, and reading, and reading. I don’t remember ever being bored.”

The remarkable stimuli of the Seeger home were accompanied by the expected difficulties of adolescence. Already feeling a bit like a misfit, Peggy had her high school years interrupted by a year at a Vermont boarding school, and upon her return to Washington, she found her old social circle had moved on. Although she continued to have some friends and disinterested courtships with several boys, she felt distant from the concerns of her peers, preferring books to the conversations around the lunch table. She left Washington in the summer of 1953, bound for Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she again felt like a “fish out of water.” Here her lineage proved advantageous, however, as she recalled that “social life was patchy at Radcliffe until I got known as a singer, banjo, and guitar player. Then I was taken up in a big way.”

While Peggy’s life at Radcliffe was beginning to come together, her home in Washington

---

38Ibid., 18 July 1989.


40Ibid., 8 July 1990.

41Ibid., 1 July 1990.

42Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

fell apart with the sudden illness of her mother. Charles called Peggy during the first week of November, after which she boarded a plane for the first time, bound for home. Shocked into a reality for which she was not prepared, Peggy helped her father tend to Ruth, whose cancer had left her with only a week to live. Ruth died in a coma on 18 November 1953. The family handled Ruth’s death with characteristic detachment: “We sat, blankly, in the living room, my father telling us that death was a natural part of life.” Peggy wrote the obituary, and the family held a small private ceremony for Ruth’s cremation. After the details were taken care of, and the family was “cocooned” in a “genteel, controlled shock,” Peggy returned to Cambridge.

The remainder of Peggy’s first year at Radcliffe was full of music and social events. She enjoyed her classes and dorm life. Exposed to folk musicians her own age, she made her first record in the throes of a hangover and began to understand politics through the lens of the McCarthy era. She made peace with her mother’s death by speaking and singing to her in private, keeping her alive in her inner life. While Peggy rebuilt her world in Cambridge, the household back in Washington fell apart. When she returned home for Easter, the Christmas tree was still up, and the life had gone from the house. By the summer of 1954, Charles decided to

---

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 20 July 1993.
sell their home and move to Cambridge with his two youngest daughters to join Peggy.\textsuperscript{51}

During the next year in Cambridge, Peggy became both student and mother figure. She and her sisters took care of household chores, and Peggy would wake up early in the mornings to do her studying. While her schedule was rigid, she remembers living peacefully and does “not recall it being stressful.”\textsuperscript{52} Charles, overwhelmed by the prospect of raising three young girls at age sixty-nine, felt the “pressure to marry again.”\textsuperscript{53} After several visits to California, he announced his intentions to marry Margaret Taylor, a girlfriend from his youth for whom Peggy was named.

During the transition of Charles’s new marriage and subsequent move back to California, Charles suggested—with some degree of selfishness—that Peggy spend the coming year in Holland with the family of her half-brother Charles, Jr.\textsuperscript{54} This suggestion, to which Peggy amiably agreed, led to a chain of events which altered not only the location, but the direction of her life. Peggy sailed to Europe assuming she would return in a year to life as she left it at Radcliffe. As it happened she did not return permanently to America again until she was a grandmother.

Peggy spent the latter half of 1955 studying at the University in Leiden and living with Charles Jr., his wife, and their three sons. She came into the household at a time when the couple’s marriage was deteriorating, and while she enjoyed university life, the tensions at home

\textsuperscript{51}Pescatello, 209.

\textsuperscript{52}Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

\textsuperscript{53}Pescatello, 209.

\textsuperscript{54}Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.
drove her to get away whenever she could. She hitchhiked, bicycled, and backpacked through Europe, alone and with friends, and was briefly “seduced by Catholicism” through a Belgian priest who had picked her up in a snowstorm. By the beginning of 1956, Peggy was on the road more often than she was at home. In March she was at a youth hostel in Copenhagen, on the verge of going “off to Finland with a logger who’s telling me that my eyes were the color of time,” when she received a call from Alan Lomax.

Lomax was in need of a female banjo player for a television project called *Dark of the Moon*. This project fell through, and upon arriving in London she was asked to audition for a part in Lomax’s new television project, “The Ramblers,” slated to be “England’s answer to the Weavers.” The story goes that Seeger took a long train trip to London to meet Lomax, at which point his girlfriend, a model, scrubbed and dressed the disheveled Seeger for the audition. When Seeger showed up to play for her potential co-Ramblers, Ewan MacColl was in a corner of the room, clouded by cigarette smoke. As Seeger began to play—stamping her feet, singing, and accompanying herself with a banjo on “The House Carpenter”—MacColl fell quickly and deeply in love. It was this encounter that inspired “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,” a song that became so popular that almost every subsequent interview of MacColl or Seeger required an explanation of their meeting. Within weeks of this first encounter the two were lovers, and within several years, began a life together.

---


56 Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

57 Ibid.

58 Seeger, unpublished memoirs, 8 July 1999.
While MacColl rarely addressed such details in his affectionate tellings of the story, Seeger quickly points out the less savory elements of the meeting. MacColl was twenty years her senior, and had a wife, Jean Newlove, and a son, Hamish. Seeger was only twenty-one when they met and found herself overwhelmed by MacColl’s direct, even raucous manner. The instability of her life and the thrill of sudden intensity contributed to keeping her involved in a relationship which, despite recalling aspects of her own parents’ meeting, nevertheless veered from what she expected for herself.

The MacColl-Seeger courtship was a dramatic one, involving many complications and several separations. Work on the Ramblers program, MacColl’s “Ballads and Blues” folk club, and several recording sessions initially gave the couple time together without arousing Newlove’s suspicion. When the relationship became more intense and Newlove learned of her presence, Seeger decided to return to the United States, promising to meet with the “bereft” MacColl in Moscow the following summer. They carried on a long-distance relationship while she traveled rootlessly through America, visiting various family members and taking her “first real professional engagement” at The Gate of Horn in Chicago. By the time she returned to Europe en route to Russia, she and MacColl were estranged and unsure of their future together.

The World Festival of Democratic Youth, for which MacColl bade her return, was held in Moscow in the summer of 1957. MacColl and Seeger traveled there separately—he with Newlove and Seeger with the throngs of young people leaving by way of a crowded boat and train. Their encounters at the festival served to accentuate the differences between them both in

59Ibid.

60Ibid., 26 July 1996.
age and political development.\textsuperscript{61} By the end of the festival, Seeger no longer saw MacColl and was invited to join a group of the American delegation traveling to China. Despite the lightness with which Seeger accepted the invitation, it was a major historical moment, establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the Chinese for the first time since the Revolution. Novelist Kenneth Tindall used this event in his essay “Playing the Kite,” referring to the setting as “the summer Peggy Seeger went to China.”\textsuperscript{62}

Seeger, while crediting MacColl with most of her political enlightenment, called this trip “seminal in my political development.”\textsuperscript{63} She and delegates from other countries spent forty days sightseeing and learning about post-revolution China. Upon her return to Moscow in September, she and Guy Carawan were asked to tour Russia with a group of Chilean singers. These performances, on which Seeger now looks back with amused embarrassment, ended in November 1957, when the duo was deported to Poland due to the political activities of Carawan’s wife.\textsuperscript{64}

After several months in Poland, Seeger returned to England to stay with a friend of her parents, the folksong collector Maud Karpeles. She reestablished contact with MacColl, who had written sporadically during her travels despite their problems in Moscow. Seeger began to establish a work life in England, performing in coffeehouses and replacing the banjo player with whom MacColl had been working. In the spring of 1958, the wife of the ousted accompanist

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] Ibid.
\item[62] Kenneth Tindall, “Playing the Kite,” \textit{Review of Contemporary Short Fiction} 2 (Spring 1982): 120.
\item[63] Seeger, unpublished memoirs, 26 July 1996.
\item[64] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
reported Seeger to the British authorities, noting that Seeger’s work permit had expired. The American government was intent on returning all of the China delegation to the United States, so Seeger moved carefully after being asked to leave England, slipping over various borders before landing unnoticed in France.

While Seeger was sequestered in Normandy, MacColl visited with the intent of ending the affair. Unsuccessful in this quest, MacColl and Seeger began talking seriously for the first time, dealing with the realities of their relationship and MacColl’s marriage, and in the same weekend, conceiving their first child. The greater part of Seeger’s pregnancy was spent living itinerantly in France, while MacColl traveled back and forth to England, trying to end his marriage and explain the situation to his young son. During this transitional period, Seeger spent time alone with her music. On one of MacColl’s visits, Seeger sang for him "The Ballad of Springhill," one of her most famous compositions, for which he supplied her careful critique. It was their first of many joint efforts and Seeger’s "first legitimate song."

By the seventh month of Seeger’s pregnancy, the couple began to plan for her return to England, which could best be achieved through a marriage. MacColl was not able to obtain a divorce from Newlove, so Seeger looked to a friend and admirer of MacColl’s, Alex Campbell. In a ceremony at the American Embassy in Paris on 24 January 1959, Seeger married Campbell, who was subjected to a stern lecture by the officiating officer about his impending duties as a father. The amused pair boarded a train to England, where they met a now-separated MacColl.

---

65 Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 11.


67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.
After a grateful good-bye to Campbell, the pair set about beginning a life together.\textsuperscript{69}

Despite the maelstrom of their courtship, MacColl and Seeger were professionally productive from the moment they met. The first major project on which they collaborated was the radio-ballads. Commissioned by the BBC, these radio documentaries combined spoken word, composed music, and sound effects in an effort to chronicle the lives of the working class. For each of the eight radio-ballads, MacColl, Seeger, and producer Charles Parker went into the communities of their subjects and recorded “actually,” a term they used for the field recordings they collected on these trips. The manner in which the collaborators employed this material is part of what made the radio-ballads revolutionary. Rather than retell the stories with BBC narrators, as had been initially planned, Parker and MacColl decided the narrative should come directly from the informants, whose voices carried inimitable cadences and dialects.\textsuperscript{70} The first project, \textit{The Ballad of John Axon}, employed this technique, incorporating footage of Axon’s widow, friends, and community members alongside the music and sound effects, creating a new form of documentary.

Upon the success of this first ballad, aired on 2 July 1958, the MacColl-Parker-Seeger team embarked on seven more efforts over a period of as many years (see Appendix 1 for complete list of radio-ballads). The division of labor in these ballads has been disputed, as later reports often credit Parker with the genesis and creative impetus for the series, relegating MacColl and Seeger to supporting roles. In fact, the ballads were a group effort driven largely by MacColl’s vision and energy, and Seeger’s musical leadership.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid. Seeger officially divorced Campbell on 29 April 1968, and married MacColl on 25 January 1977.

\textsuperscript{70}Anne Karpf, “The Voice of the People,” \textit{Guardian}, 27 May 1999, page number not available.
The radio-ballads were conceived during the tumult of MacColl and Seeger’s early courtship. The series’s success added to the excitement of their budding union. Seeger recalls, “[The radio-ballads], the Festival of Fools, having children and falling in love were the four big things in my life.”\(^\text{71}\) Seeger was twenty-two years old during the production of the first ballad. Her previous musical experiences had been almost solely traditional, and the radio-ballads introduced her to MacColl’s political approach and commitment to working-class causes. She was given enormous creative and logistical responsibility. According to MacColl,

> Peggy’s role in the creation of the radio-ballads was a major one. In addition to writing musical arrangements, conducting the recording of the music, and playing and singing in the programme, she took part in the recording of actuality in the field, transcribed all the recordings, joined with me in choosing and timing actuality sequences, collaborated in creating the script, and helped decide which passages of actuality needed a musical commentary.\(^\text{72}\)

Always quick to give Seeger credit, MacColl emphasized: “We really worked in the closest harmony throughout the entire period of the radio ballads. . . . Without her, those radio ballads would have been very inferior.”\(^\text{73}\)

The ballads gained overwhelmingly positive reviews, and Seeger’s arrangements in particular garnered attention. The *Manchester Guardian* praised her “orchestration of a weird folky combination of instruments” as “frequently brilliant,”\(^\text{74}\) and the *Birmingham Post* called her *Song of a Road* settings “stimulating and ingenious.”\(^\text{75}\) The radio-ballad techniques affected

---

\(^{71}\)Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.


\(^{75}\)Alex Walker, *Birmingham Post*, 6 November 1959.
Seeger’s future songwriting, as she would embrace the ballads’ ethnographic approach in her 1998 songbook, citing it as one of her primary compositional methods. Although quick to point out the ballads’ “pre-ecological, pre-feminist” politics, Seeger was enthusiastic about their 1999 reissue on Topic Records.

The radio-ballads and concurrent projects were key to the success of MacColl and Seeger’s relationship. While a young Seeger embarked on love and family for the first time, MacColl was starting over, with aspects of his previous family persisting. Shortly after the birth of Seeger’s first child, Neill, in March 1959, a second child was born to MacColl and Newlove—a daughter, Kirsty. This event came as a shock to Seeger and proved financially and emotionally straining for them both. A further complication was that Hamish had not taken his parents’ separation well, so MacColl agreed to return to live in their household during Kirsty’s infancy. He spent nights with his first family and his days with Seeger and Neill. Questions arose about whether Seeger was willing to wait out the new living arrangement. She decided to stay with him, recalling later that it was primarily because “the music was bloody exciting and Ewan was an exciting person to be with.”

The awkward arrangement ended in the summer of 1961, although MacColl continued to support and visit his first family. Kirsty, a household name as a pop musician in England until her death in 2000, recalled that her father came on Sundays, when he would bring Neill and Calum (MacColl and Seeger’s second son, born in March 1963) to visit her, Newlove, and

---


77Karpf.


79Ibid.
Hamish.\textsuperscript{80} Newlove would not allow Seeger into her children’s lives, a fact that Seeger now regrets, as her relationships with Kirsty and Hamish have been difficult.\textsuperscript{81}

Another remnant from MacColl’s earlier home life was his mother, Betsy Miller, who moved in with the couple after MacColl’s initial separation from Newlove. A traditional, working-class Scots woman, Miller was not pleased with her son’s change of heart, and her relationship with Seeger was strained from the beginning. Seeger explains, “We got on when we weren’t living together. We lived together for sixteen years.”\textsuperscript{82} The living arrangement had its benefits, however, for Miller provided much-needed childcare and domestic help for the traveling couple.

Despite the precarious beginning, MacColl was very much enamored with Seeger, and she settled into the chaos of life with MacColl remarkably well. The family lived in London, but their touring was so frequent and widespread that the city often acted more as a base than as a home. Seeger kept meticulous records of the duo’s concert activity, noting date, program, and location and made program lists for each city so as to avoid repeating material upon a return visit. Their busy calendar was driven by both energy and necessity: “We were so busy trying to make a living for the two families—we were just grotting [scraping by] for the first five years. . . . We weren’t on our feet until . . . thirteen years after we got together.”\textsuperscript{83}

Their hectic touring schedule did not keep the energetic pair from taking on additional projects, such as recordings, books, and political causes. Seeger carried on a family trade by


\textsuperscript{81}Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

\textsuperscript{82}Peggy Seeger, unedited BBC footage for \textit{Arena}, videotape, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\textsuperscript{83}Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.
doing several music transcription projects, including her own and MacColl’s songbooks. As the
musically literate half of the team, she did the vast majority of the accompaniment for their
recordings and concerts, later enlisting her sons to help as they progressed on their chosen
instruments. MacColl did not play an instrument, although Seeger recalls his attempt to learn the
guitar:

When I came back to America for five months, he surprised me when I went
back—he had learned all of the chords in a chord book, bless his soul. . . . His
singing was horrendous when he sang to his own accompaniment. And—say this
for him—I said Ewan, I’m here, I’m going to accompany—put the guitar down.
And I think it was with quite a sense of relief that he put the guitar down.84

Watching them perform together, one is reminded of the quote about Ginger Rogers and Fred
Astaire, though rather than doing what her partner did backwards and in high heels, Seeger did it
while playing half a dozen instruments, telling stories to the audience, and keeping MacColl on
track.

Since the early 1950s, MacColl has been considered an important figure in what would
come to be called the British folk revival, and his partnership with Seeger deepened his
commitment to this movement. As with the American folk revival, musicians sought to
recognize and revitalize folk music as a political force for the people, and the direction of the
British revival was defined largely by MacColl and Seeger. This influence was institutionalized
in 1964 when MacColl took the leadership of the Critics Group. Centered in London and lasting
until 1972, the organization served as a mutual self-help group with a series of objectives, the
ultimate goal of which was to extend and improve the folk revival.85 More specifically, this
gathering of revivalists met to give and receive feedback on issues such as accompaniment,

84Ibid.

85Ewan MacColl, interview by Jim Carrol and Pat Mackenzie, 12 February 1986, tape
recording, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
songwriting, diction, and performance.

Two significant activities of the Critics Group were the Singers Club and the Festival of Fools. The former was an incarnation of an earlier project of MacColl’s, the Ballad and Blues Club. MacColl started this club in the early 1950s with fellow revivalist A. L. Lloyd, and it was the first of its kind in Britain. The British folk club concept became a cultural phenomenon; Seeger recalled that “by the early 1960s, nearly everyone over twenty years of age had been to, or at least heard of, a folk club.” Each club had regular “meetings,” which were informal concerts given by “residents” (standing performers) and volunteers for the open mike. The popularity of these gatherings bred a wealth of folk clubs full of amateurs, a trend alarming to MacColl and addressed by the Critics Group. Although the Singers Club existed long before and after the Critics Group, the self-aware approach of the group and the use of its members as residents strengthened and changed the direction of the Club.

Early in the life of the Singers Club, the Critics Group—under MacColl’s leadership—made the controversial decision to run it as a “policy club.” The stipulation required that singers should only perform in their native dialect, preventing incongruities such as the one Seeger observed in a “cockney singing Leadbelly songs.” The British folk revival had grown out of the skiffle movement, a trend that took its inspirations from Woody Guthrie and jazz, and bred American affectations in its performers. MacColl, with the assurance of Alan Lomax, encouraged British performers to embrace their untapped native music, an encouragement that turned into a dictate with the Singers Club policy. MacColl remembered the initial response:

There was incredible rancor. . . . The following week, I think about ten people

---


turned up at the club, which until this period had been getting huge audiences. . . .
it took about three months for the audience to build up again. 88

The Singers Club policy was one of the first of many stances MacColl took that alienated
members of the folk revival. From the beginning Seeger had to make choices about whether to
apologize for or stand by MacColl, and her tendency to stand by him reflects her support of and
faith in his often unpopular ideas.

The residency of the politically active Critics Group at the Singers Club and the
concurrent conflict in Vietnam ushered in further changes in the club repertory. In a trend that
mirrored Seeger and MacColl’s recording and touring programs, performers turned away from
traditional songs in favor of newly composed, politically charged songs in the folk idiom.
Program books maintained by Seeger show a trend toward contemporary topics: in 1961–65,
traditional songs account for approximately 95% of the repertory, decreasing steadily to 50% by
the end of the 1970s. This trend also reflects what was happening across the Atlantic, although
the politics within the American folk scene were noticeably softer due in part to increasing
commercialization.

The Singers Club operated in several venues, moving from pub to pub as disagreements
between the landlords and the club members forced relocation. The Club met every Saturday for
most of its tenure, and MacColl and Seeger acted as residents for at least half of that time. A
committee handled the Club’s business, although Seeger’s hand dominates most of the
correspondence, newsletters, and program books. As with most of the pair’s endeavors, Seeger
oversaw the majority of the logistical matters. In the case of the Singers Club, the project
remained on her docket for over thirty years, ending with a final meeting on 6 December 1991.

Another activity involving the Critics Group was the Festival of Fools. MacColl—who

88Ewan MacColl, interview by Orr and O’Rourke, interview 7, January–February 1985.
had an extensive theater background and for whom Seeger says stage writing was his “real métier”—attempted to combine his folk music work with his love for political theater.\textsuperscript{89} The Festival of Fools, named after a traditional British celebration of the winter solstice, had a run of five shows, beginning in 1965 and ending in 1972.\textsuperscript{90} Seeger explains:

\begin{quote}
It took its form from the twelve months of the year, and every month had either one or two skits in it about something that happened that month. Each one of the months was introduced by an old English proverb or a saying that had the name of the month in it.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

MacColl wrote scripts for the productions and served as director and producer. Seeger was music director and handled other details under the euphemistic title “production secretary.”\textsuperscript{92} She was also called upon to write several songs; her first feminist song, “I’m Gonna be an Engineer,” was composed for \textit{Festival of Fools 1971}.

The Festivals were quite successful in their runs, often filling the pubs where they were held. They ceased only when the Critics Group broke up in 1972. The fracturing of the group proved quite painful for MacColl, on whom much of the blame was laid. Critics Group members found him tyrannical in his leadership methods and often felt disengaged from the creative process. Seeger defended her partner in an interview in \textit{Sing Out!}: “the cultural groups that continue are run by tyrants, by people who have a viewpoint. That’s the kind of person Ewan is, a brilliant teacher.”\textsuperscript{93} If Seeger understood his methods, the rest of the group did not. The

\textsuperscript{89}Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

\textsuperscript{90}Critics Group [listed as author], Program for \textit{Festival of Fools 1971}, 1. The festivals satirized the year preceding the performance—thus \textit{Festival of Fools 1971} ran during 1972.

\textsuperscript{91}Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

\textsuperscript{92}Critics Group, program for \textit{Festival of Fools 1971}, 3.

\textsuperscript{93}Seeger, interview by Garrison and Plant, 7.
dedication of MacColl as a visionary at first sustained the group, but eventually helped lead to its
demise, as the group “broke up very bitterly—everybody’s fault, ours as well as theirs.”

The time of the Critics Group’s dissolution was a transitional period for MacColl and
Seeger. The success of Roberta Flack’s 1972 rendition of “The First Time Ever I Saw Your
Face” brought the family unprecedented income, allowing them to live more comfortably and to
have a third child, Kitty. The family vowed to spend more time at home, hoping to provide Kitty
with the kind of childhood that they were not able to give Neill and Calum. The later seventies
also marked the beginning of MacColl’s heart problems, and for Seeger “it was the beginning of
ten years of caregiving.” MacColl’s changing priorities and Seeger’s newfound place in the
women’s movement began to take the pair in different directions for the first time, although they
continued to pursue collaborative projects.

More time at home meant that these projects changed in nature, but not in volume. After
years of working with and recording families of Travellers (the term the pair used in lieu of the
more problematic “gypsies”), Seeger and MacColl wrote two volumes on the subject: Travellers’
Songs from England and Scotland and Till Doomsday in the Afternoon. The former is a
collection of traditional songs performed by English and Scots Travellers, transcribed musically
and textually, and arranged by topic. Each song is accompanied by an introductory paragraph
and a small bibliography. The couple had envisioned a much larger project, one which had

94 Ibid.

proposed to supplement the earlier transcriptions of Maud Karpeles and Cecil Sharp. Wary publishers encouraged them to keep the focus smaller, and the limitation is acknowledged in the introduction: “Our objective has been merely to provide a truthful record of the kinds of songs which were being sung by two small groups of Scots and English Travellers in the years between 1960 and 1975.”

*Till Doomsday in the Afternoon* was published in 1986 with an even smaller geographical focus, but a much broader topical approach. As the subtitle—*The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, The Stewarts of Blairgowrie*—indicates, the second book was devoted to one family and expanded its scope to include folktales, riddles, children’s rhymes, and improvised songs, in addition to traditional songs. The introduction relies heavily on interviews—transcribed meticulously in dialect—from the Stewart family, underscoring the editors’ emphasis on language as a medium in folk tradition. In a self-aware conclusion, the editors ponder the future of the Stewarts’ tradition with particular attention to the roles the editors played in changing the informants’ attitudes to performance. This and other aspects of their research projects show MacColl and Seeger to be conversant with current ethnomusicological issues, despite their lack of academic affiliation.

Another project begun in the mid-1970s was Blackthorne Records. After continued frustration with outside record companies, the couple decided to start their own. In a letter to Alan Lomax, Seeger related:

> Our latest venture is a record company. We have finally got it started and it’s

---


called Blackthorne. The purpose of the record company is to put out records of ourselves chiefly, there are a number of small record companies over here which are putting out quite a number of records of revival singers but for some reason we have found difficulty in talking record companies into doing what we want to do. . . . We’ve turned part of our house into a studio which the boys [Calum and Neill] built. . . . The equipment for it was bought largely with the proceeds of the song “First Time Ever I Saw Your Face.”

The pair released albums on Blackthorne first, re-releasing their most successful material with companies such as Rounder and Folkways. The company complemented their other business venture, Ewan MacColl Limited, the name under which most of their music was copyrighted—a name which emerged, as Seeger later pointed out, “back before the days of feminism.”

Another project that concerned Seeger almost exclusively was the New City Songster. This periodical songbook, which ran from 1968–1985, came about partly for practical reasons: friends and fans often requested texts or transcriptions for Seeger and MacColl’s songs, and the Songster provided these in a compact form. The couple also solicited submissions from other songwriters, expanding the initial plan for the magazine as a reaction to a perceived need. In response to a request for advice by a hopeful magazine editor, Seeger replied:

I hope I sounded suitably discouraging, because if you really want to carry on you will get angry at the sound of me. That’s what carries me on with the Songster. It is a single-handed, infuriated response to the apathy of so-called dedicated folk people who say . . . “It should be done.” But who will do it? Will they, bloody hell?

The New City Songster provided an outlet for newly composed songs and encouraged

---

98 Peggy Seeger to Alan Lomax, 7 December 1976, dictated typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

99 Peggy Seeger, interview by Judy Woodward and Pam Mansfield, 12 November 1984, Madison, Wisconsin, transcript, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

100 Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

101 Peggy Seeger, to Sheila Neuling, undated, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
submissions by novice and professional songwriters. In the introduction to the first volume, Seeger explained the magazine’s premise:

   It is not a folk magazine as such . . . but is strictly devoted to circulating new songs. . . . Many new songs have immediate topical relevance and are often out of date before they are published: others may deal with burning issues, too burning perhaps for most “folk” magazines to handle.102

The songsters were 8” by 4”, designed to fit in a pocket, imitating the size and shape of the broadsheets after which they were modeled. Although she does not credit herself anywhere in the songster, Seeger was the sole editor of the publication, taking charge of song selection, transcription, and bookkeeping.103

   Throughout their many projects, Seeger and MacColl managed to record and perform regularly, only slowing down slightly in the last years of MacColl’s declining health. Their recordings serve as documents of their musical direction and show them becoming increasingly political and more musically open-minded through the passage of time (see Appendix 2 for selected Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger discography). The duo’s early recordings consisted primarily of traditional songs, including the ambitious ten-volume series of lesser-known traditional ballads, *The Long Harvest*. By the early 1970s, the pair began to fashion a new kind of album, one that better captured their topical songwriting. As was the case with their concerts from this period, each album consisted of several traditional songs (the ratio of which decreased over the years) and contemporary political songs penned by Seeger or MacColl. The pair sometimes included songs authored by other revival artists or promising amateurs, often after an appearance in the *New City Songster*.

---


103 Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.
As the Seeger-MacColl output became more focused on new composition, Seeger began to emerge as a songwriter in her own right. As will be explored in subsequent chapters, Seeger’s place in the women’s movement resulted in a steady stream of feminist songs, some of which appeared on the duo albums and others that were gathered on her solo discs. Seeger also began to delve into more personal writing, crafting a song for each of her children and the autobiographical “Song of Myself.” These songwriting directions contrasted sharply with MacColl’s, which avoided personal revelation and did not address women’s issues. He believed—as Seeger writes in the introduction to his autobiography—that “political was of interest to everyone and personal was of interest to no one but yourself.”

Recordings played a secondary role for the Seeger-MacColl team as their topics became more current, a trend that coincided with a minor backlash in the folk community. Seeger admits that proper care was not always taken to polish or promote their recordings:

[The record company] would turn it out with the most appalling cover, and with lots of words misspelled in the transcriptions. . . . We could’ve taken the trouble to have seen it all the way through, but no, we recorded it, and that was all we wanted to do.

Beyond technical issues, a changing political paradigm maligned the duo, whose politics had long been identified with MacColl’s concern with workers’ rights. While class politics remained on England’s political radar, they were overshadowed by the conflict in Vietnam, civil rights, and women’s rights. A long-time fan complained in a review that “it is hard to recapture, these days, the significance that a new song or . . . album by Ewan MacColl used to have in the early

---

104 Peggy Seeger, introduction to Journeyman, by Ewan MacColl (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1990), 4.

days of the revival.” While reviews from early in their partnership are almost unanimously positive, some revivalists became critical of the pair’s political single-mindedness, often attributed to MacColl’s being out of touch with the current political scene.

In praising Seeger’s contributions to the 1978 album *Hot Blast*, Karl Dallas pointed to a lack in MacColl’s vision:

> The remarkable thing about Peggy is the way in which she has blossomed out as the songwriter of the partnership, for Peggy’s two songs on the album . . . give the most unalloyed pleasure of anything else on it . . . . It is not merely that Peggy’s songs have more of a sense of gritty realism than Ewan’s faux-naïf romanticism, rooted as he seems to be in the pre-war black and white idealism of the twenties and thirties, but also that she is writing songs entirely of today, in their content as well as their form.107

While Seeger’s politics were acknowledged as fresher than MacColl’s, she was sometimes faulted for his tendency to preach or lecture to their audiences. Gordon McCulloch’s 1979 article “MacColl: Out of Touch?” suggested:

> Ewan MacColl’s polemical songs have about them a self-righteous hectoring quality, unfortunately magnified by the attitude of magisterial condescension which he unwittingly brings to his stage presence. . . . [Seeger] appears to share her partner’s fatal weakness for homily.108

The didacticism noted above was rarely attributed to Seeger and appears primarily in reference to the 1970s, a decade son Neill MacColl jokingly calls “Mum at her most militant.” Reviews outside of this era are noticeably more consistent with her current stage persona. A 1983 review

---

106 Karl Dallas, “A Wrong Medium,” *Folk News* no. 18–19: date and page number not available.

107 Ibid.


noted that “in concert, Seeger’s mischievous warmth was tempered by MacColl’s scholarly understatement.”\textsuperscript{110} This echoes an observation made almost thirty years earlier: “In her public appearances she chats cheerfully, casually, and unstintingly . . . totally without the slightest trace of affectation.”\textsuperscript{111}

It is nearly impossible to separate Seeger’s story from MacColl’s for the years they worked together, beginning in 1956 and ending with MacColl’s death on 22 October 1989. In her introduction to MacColl’s posthumously published autobiography, Seeger mused: “Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger—Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl—for more than thirty years we were inseparable . . . . We were ‘we’ for so long that I now find the singular pronoun unfamiliar to use.”\textsuperscript{112} Seeger continues to credit him as her most valued and sorely missed mentor and source of encouragement. Due in part to the all-consuming nature of their partnership, however, the last years of it were difficult. By the 1980s MacColl’s health was in constant flux, and Seeger was given the added responsibilities of caring for him, raising their adolescent daughter, and preparing to be personally and professionally widowed. The twenty-year age gap became evident and more pronounced as MacColl’s condition worsened. Seeger began to seek outside friends and activities whenever possible, resulting in increased anti-nuclear activism and the women’s singing group Jade.

Nuclear issues concerned both MacColl and Seeger, but Seeger had always paid them particular attention. As she sought independent work, she spent a large portion of her free time at Greenham Common—the site of a women’s peace camp organized to protest the use of nuclear weapons.


\textsuperscript{111}Fred Osborne, “Peggy Seeger,” \textit{B.M.G. (Banjo/Mandolin/Guitar)} 64 (1967): 317.

\textsuperscript{112}Seeger, introduction to \textit{Journeyman}, 1.
nuclear technology on common land—and with B.A.N.G. (Beckenham Anti-Nuclear Group), a self-education group initiated by Seeger for parents concerned about nuclear issues. She engaged in direct political action, including an anti-cruise-missile demonstration in London that led to her arrest. The court hearing for this arrest made the news on 8 February 1984 as Seeger attempted to sing her defense, resulting in a fine for contempt from the presiding magistrate.\(^{113}\) She made papers again that year by swimming 130 lengths in an area pool to raise money for CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament).\(^{114}\)

Seeger’s renewed political vigor coincided with the formation of Jade. MacColl was forced to cancel some concert appearances on short notice as his health declined, and this group often stepped in to replace him. Jade consisted of Seeger and four other women, the most notable of whom was Irene Pyper-Scott. Pyper-Scott and Seeger first met at a concert in 1964, where both were scheduled to perform. Their paths crossed sporadically over the next twenty years, and included Pyper-Scott’s religious attendance at the Festivals of Fools. Through involvement in Jade, B.A.N.G., and Greenham Common, Pyper-Scott and Seeger grew closer. This friendship came at a crucial time in Seeger’s life. MacColl’s health was in serious jeopardy for several years before he died, so much so that Seeger was constantly preparing herself for his death. A letter from Seeger’s brother Mike, written five years before MacColl’s death, expresses concern that his recent visit may be the last time he sees MacColl.\(^{115}\) While the energy of Seeger’s partner deteriorated, she struggled with her own health. By the time of his death,

\(^{113}\) *Morning Star* 8 February 1984; *Guardian* 8 February 1984; *Daily Mirror* 8 February 1984.

\(^{114}\) *Bromley Advertiser*, 5 July 1984.

\(^{115}\) Mike Seeger, to Peggy Seeger, 15 December 1984, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
Seeger recalls that she was “falling apart,” rendering her “ripe” for the love affair that came about in 1989.\textsuperscript{116}

Seeger had always self-identified as heterosexual. Her lovers before MacColl had all been men, and she had rarely maintained even friendships with women until she became close with Irene Pyper-Scott. When MacColl died and Seeger fell in love with Pyper-Scott, everything changed for her. Calum MacColl attests that when his father died, “[Seeger] questioned everything . . . relationships, family, politics, sexuality . . . . It was a house of cards.”\textsuperscript{117} She became effusive, now out of MacColl’s shadow and full of an urge to discover herself. She began to revisit her past, writing installments of her life story which resulted in the unpublished memoirs quoted here. She also became eager to tell her new love story. In the book \textit{And Then I Met This Woman: Previously Married Women’s Journeys into Lesbian Relationships}, Seeger’s chapter is the longest of the forty-three stories presented. She began to write love songs prolifically. Seeger’s son Neill recalled that when he first spent time with Seeger and Pyper-Scott, his mother would “behave like a teenager—very physically affectionate with Irene.”\textsuperscript{118}

Dealing simultaneously with grief over MacColl’s death, joy at finding new love, and the confusion of finding it with a woman, Seeger called this new era of her life “traumatic—years of change, insecurity, and adventure.”\textsuperscript{119} The loss of her partner proved difficult both personally and professionally, as booking agents rejected her as incomplete without MacColl. Calum remembers that “she was told by an agent that she couldn’t get any gigs because she was one half

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\setlength\itemsep{0em}
\item[\textsuperscript{116}] Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.
\item[\textsuperscript{118}] Neill MacColl, interview by author.
\item[\textsuperscript{119}] Seeger, \textit{Peggy Seeger Songbook}, 13.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of a dead duo.” Seeger began to tour with Pyper-Scott as “No Spring Chickens,” a name that alludes to a remark made by another particularly tactless agent. The arrangement worked as a crutch, both hindering and easing Seeger’s transformation into solo performance.

During extensive soul-searching in the early 1990s, Seeger decided to move back to the United States. Her relationship with America had been shaky since her trip to China in 1957. In a 1971 documentary she claimed coldly, “I’ve repudiated America—it’s not America that’s repudiated me.” In the same interview, however, there is a pregnant pause as she claims allegiance to England: “I feel completely [pause] 99% at home.” Friends and family members speculate about the reason for Seeger’s return, with explanations such as greater marketability, a return to her roots, and the need to avoid constant association with MacColl. A BBC interview with Seeger offers some insight, as she refers to a poem about the difficulties of a widow living in her husband’s home: “I couldn’t live in the house anymore, and I couldn’t live in the country anymore because of that.”

In reflecting on his mother’s move, Neill MacColl observed:

When [Ewan MacColl] died . . . it was very strange. . . she seemed to go back to being a teenager again, like those intervening thirty years, she just stopped, lived the next thirty-five years, then put this chunk over here and these two together.

Seeger’s life in England was, in a sense, a life interrupted. At twenty-one, Seeger’s college-track American life was set aside in favor of a family with MacColl, which meant isolation from her

---

120Calum MacColl, interview by author.

121Peggy Seeger, A Kind of Exile, 1971, videocassette, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

122Peggy Seeger, interview for Radio 4, 3 May 1997, cassette, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

123Neill MacColl, interview by author.
roots, her youth, and her birth family. Seeger admits to feeling “culturally displaced. A Yankee who went to England in 1959 . . .then in 1994 she moved back to the South in her native land and is definitely culturally displaced.” On the advice of her brother Mike, Seeger chose Asheville, North Carolina for her new home. She now performs with Mike and Pete whenever possible and has made herself a part of Asheville life, including campaigning for a female mayor and becoming the figurehead of the North Carolina Women’s Coalition.

Returning to the United States may have returned her to her roots in some respects, but it has also created new challenges. Her three children and seven grandchildren all live in England, as does Irene Pyper-Scott. She continues to visit England regularly and takes one grandchild each year on a tour of the United States in her RV, nicknamed “Maggie.” Her relationship with Pyper-Scott is maintained through frequent visits, phone calls, letters, and songwriting, the culmination of which has been her first love song album, Love Will Linger On, released in August 2000.

The end of the 1990s saw changes in Seeger’s professional life as well. She now works primarily as a solo artist, while still collaborating whenever possible with her family members and Irene Pyper-Scott. She has put together several academic workshops, the most popular of which deals with the feminist politics of Anglo-American folk song. She published a songbook of her work in 1998 and one of MacColl’s in 2001. She continues to write and release solo albums, and is beginning to write about the new phase of her life in songs such as “Over the Hill and Up the Mountain.” When asked in 2000 whether she was yet comfortable with the idea of writing autobiographical songs, Seeger grinned and responded, “When I find out who I am I’ll

---


125Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
tell you if I’m writing songs about me.”

Seeger’s constantly evolving sense of self is matched by her changing musical and political paradigms, shaped by a life full of interruptions, twists, and turns.

\textsuperscript{126}Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
PEGGY SEEGER DISCOVERS THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Peggy Seeger was once an unlikely candidate for the post of “feminist icon.” Born to a Victorian-tempered father, partnered with a working-class hero, and working in a male-dominated field, Seeger had little exposure to women, much less the burgeoning women’s movement. In the bustle of her first fifty-four years, her identity as a woman was superseded by her various roles as singer, songwriter, lover, mother, and organizer of one of the busiest folk acts in England. Most strands of Seeger’s life between 1956 and 1989 are inextricably linked with Ewan MacColl and have been chronicled in the preceding chapter. Peggy Seeger’s emergence as a feminist figure has its own history, one that hinges on the year 1971.

Seeger’s childhood home contained mixed messages of female independence and subservience. Memories of her mother illustrate the conflict:

My earliest contact with a real feminist was my mother. She was a good, old-fashioned woman who cooked, sewed, sang to her children . . . but she was also a superb pianist, composer, and music teacher. I was aware from a very early age that it was normal for a woman to do work other than that required by house and family.1

Although her mother “made a tremendous impression on her children,”2 Charles Seeger quietly dominated the home:

My father ruled our household, albeit with a velvet glove. He was gentle and my mother was energetic and always doing things. But my father was the one who really set the pace for the household.3

---


Seeger remembers, “We revolved around what my father thought and what my father
wanted.”

Messages from her school and social life conflicted as well. Idolizing her brother Mike
during childhood, Seeger says she “wasn’t the lacy dress-up girl. I went traipsing around with
my brother’s friends, bicycling, tree-climbing, the whole show.” Even her choice of instrument
was defined by her tomboy nature:

I was always told the banjo was a boy’s instrument. I didn’t have any feminist
leanings then. I just liked hanging around in jeans, letting my hair hang loose,
looking natural. And the banjo was just a way of being different.

“Different” was not encouraged by school or her mother, who Seeger says, “didn’t like it—
particularly that I wore jeans until I was twenty-one.” Mid-century American education had
Seeger taking classes in dating behavior, leading to what she calls “internal colonization”:

I was brought up learning to tease, learning to be nice, and my relations with men
were not those of a feminist. . . . We actually had classes in high school, teaching
us how to do small talk and what to do on the first date, i.e., talk about him, don’t
talk about yourself. It was deadly.

---

3Peggy Seeger, “Peggy,” in And Then I Met This Woman: Previously Married Women’s

4Peggy Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000, Asheville, North Carolina, tape
recording.

5Peggy Seeger, “Folk With Feeling,” Spare Rib (July 1976): 41: volume number not
available.

6Peggy Seeger, quoted in Mark Greenberg, “Peggy Seeger,” in Artists of American Folk

7Seeger, “Folk with Feeling,” 41.

8Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
Close on the heels of this childhood gender training came her union with MacColl, twenty years her senior:

I went from that father to a surrogate one, Ewan, to whom I practically apprenticed myself from the age of twenty-one. Ewan was always on the move with ideas and projects and I was quick to follow. To follow.9

Seeger’s perspective on the relationship’s politics has changed over time. She had always been a working mother, sharing her career and family with MacColl. His politics, however, did not include feminism and rarely did their household. Son Neill explains:

My mum would always be doing the housework and cooking and cleaning . . . . It wasn’t in [Ewan MacColl’s] vocabulary to do those kinds of things, really, but he did try I think. . . . If he was Hoovering he would bang against the doors and walls so you could hear him doing it—it was like he had to be recognized for it. . . . For her part, she colluded with him in it. . . . They were always saying that “politics begins at home,” and I thought “What? Where is it actually beginning here then?”10

Seeger’s awareness of her role in the household’s patriarchy emerged in the last years of their relationship, during her acquaintance with Irene Pyper-Scott:

Irene would tell me that I wasn’t a feminist. I would say I was. She would say that I wasn’t because I had to be home by 11:30. Of course, she was right. This particular aspect of my relationship with Ewan was very suffocating.11

Given MacColl’s disregard for feminism, it is curious that his partner’s emergence as a figure in this movement started largely at his behest. Although Neill remembers his mother’s interest in feminism developing gradually,12 Seeger’s own memory and discography point unwaveringly to Festival of Fools 1971, the setting for her first and most famous feminist song.

---

9Seeger, And Then I Met This Woman, 21–22.


11Seeger, And Then I Met This Woman, 16.

12Neill MacColl, interview by author.
Seeger has often recounted the story of how she came to compose “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer,” and although the details sometimes change, the gist does not: Seeger never meant to be a feminist figure—it just happened.

1971 was touted as the Year of the Woman. It took place, as Seeger now wryly observes, alongside the Year of the Man, celebrated annually. As the topics of the Critics Group’s Festivals of Fools came from the previous year’s events and headlines, MacColl decided to include a segment on women’s liberation for the 1972 production (titled *Festival of Fools 1971*). Running short on time, MacColl asked Seeger to write the song to accompany the skit, to which Seeger grudgingly agreed. She recalls: “‘Engineer’ appeared so fast on the page that it almost seemed to write itself—you’d think I’d been brooding on discrimination and prejudice all my life.” She insists the inspiration for the song was not personal, but that “probably these things are just osmosed.”

The mood of the evening may have helped speed up the osmosis. As production secretary, Seeger dealt with most of the logistical, as well as some of the creative, details of the Festivals. When MacColl approached Seeger about writing the women’s liberation-themed song, she was rather peeved. . . . I was gathering all the editing together, I was arranging all of the stagecraft, I was doing all of the stenciling of the schedules and working out who couldn’t come what night to work on rehearsals, where the rehearsals

---


14 Each Festival was titled after the year it chronicled rather than the year of its performance, thus *Festival of Fools 1971* ran in early 1972.

15 Ibid.

were going to be, have we got the pub, no . . . I gotta write a song as well, last minute.\(^\text{17}\)

Although certain details of the Seeger-MacColl household arrangement might suggest otherwise, the song cannot be called autobiographical. Seeger writes in her 1998 songbook, “I was encouraged personally, academically, musically, and sartorially to do whatever I wanted. And I never wanted to be a boy or an engineer.”\(^\text{18}\)

Whatever her inspiration, Seeger managed to encapsulate successfully in her song the key issues of 1971’s liberal feminism. This era of female consciousness revolved around the notion of “equality,” defined primarily in terms of an accessible job market, fair treatment on the job, and shared domestic duties. The supremacy of the male-defined work and home system went unassailed in this early liberal feminism, remaining a question to be posed by later radical feminists. Liberal feminists operated within the patriarchy, arguing not for a different system, but for more opportunities within the existing system. Seeger’s song reflects the values of liberal feminism as her protagonist fights for the right to become an engineer, one of the most male-dominated occupations imaginable. In Great Britain an engineer is “someone who works in the metal trades, a machinist,”\(^\text{19}\) rendering the song’s narrator even more daring than if she aspired to the more cerebral American occupation.

Seeger presents the song’s narrative in two voices (see Figure 1 for complete lyrics). One is the voice of the aspiring engineer, who tells the details of her struggle in the verses and choruses. The other is the voice of society, whose dictates and commentary are found in “C”

\(^\text{17}\)Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

\(^\text{18}\)Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 110.

1. 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.  
   Momma 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.”

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

2. When I went to school I learned to write and how to read,  
   Some history, geography, and home economy,  
   And typing is a skill that every girl is sure to need,  
   To while away the extra time until the time to breed;  
   And then they had the nerve to say, “What would you like to be?”  
   I say, “I’m gonna be an engineer!”  
   No, you only need to learn to be a lady,  
   The duty isn’t yours, for to try and run the world;  
   An engineer could never have a baby,  
   Remember, dear, that you’re a girl.

3. So I become a typist and I study on the sly,  
   Working out the day and night so I can qualify,  
   And every time the boss come in, he pinched me on the thigh,  
   Says, “I’ve never had an engineer!”  
   You owe it to the job to be a lady,  
   It’s the duty of the staff for to give the boss a whirl;  
   The wages that you get are crummy, maybe,  
   But it’s all you get, ’cause you’re a girl.

   She’s smart! (for a woman)  
   I wonder how she got that way?  
   You get no choice, you get no voice,  
   Just say mum, pretend you’re dumb;  
   That’s how you come to be a lady today!

Fig. 1. Complete lyrics to “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer.” © 1979 Stormking Music, Inc.  
Reprinted by permission of Peggy Seeger.
4. Then Jimmy come along and we set up a conjugation,
   We were busy every night with loving recreation;
   I spent my days at work so he could get his education,
   And now he’s an engineer!
   He says, “I know you’ll always be a lady,
   It’s the duty of my darling to love me all my life;
   Could an engineer look after or obey me?
   Remember, dear, that you’re my wife!”

5. As soon as Jimmy got a job, I studied hard again,
   Then, happy at my turret-lathe a year or so and then;
   The morning that the twins were born, Jimmy says to them,
   “Kids, your mother was an engineer.”
   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.

6. Well, every time I turn around there’s something else to do,
   It’s cook a meal, mend a sock, or sweep a floor or two;
   I listen in to Jimmy Young, it makes me want to spew,
   I was gonna be an engineer!
   Don’t I really wish that I could be a lady?
   I could do the lovely things that a lady’s s’posed to do,
   I wouldn’t even mind if only they would pay me,
   And I could be a person too.

   *What price for a woman?*
   *You can buy her for a ring of gold.*
   *To love and obey, without any pay,*
   *You get your cook and your nurse for better or worse,*
   *You don’t need your purse when the lady is sold—*

7. Ah, but now that times are harder and my Jimmy’s got the sack,
   I went down to Vickers, they were glad to have me back,
   But I’m a third-class citizen (my wages tell me that)
   And I’m a first-class engineer.
   The boss he says, “We pay you as a lady,
   You only got the job ’cause I can’t afford a man.
   With you I keep the profits high as may be,
   You’re just a cheaper pair of hands.”

---

Fig. 1—*Continued.*
You got one fault: you’re a woman.
You’re not worth the equal pay.
A bitch or a tart, you’re nothing but heart,
Shallow and vain, you got no brain,
You even go down the drain like a lady today—

8. Well, I listened to my mother and I joined a typing-pool;
I listened to my lover and I put him through his school;
But if I listen to the boss I’m just a bloody fool
And an underpaid engineer!
    I been a sucker ever since I was a baby,
    As a daughter, as a wife, as a mother and a “dear.”
    But I’ll fight them as a woman, not a lady,
    Fight them as an engineer!

Fig. 1—Continued.

sections (indicated in figure by italics) occurring after most of the choruses. These societal
asides are marked melodically and harmonically. A range of only a fourth—perhaps
underscoring the narrowness of thinking—characterizes society’s voice, while the heroine’s
melodic range is quite wide, with leaps and skips dominating the melody. Seeger likewise
differentiates the two voices harmonically, casting the protagonist in major and the antagonist in
minor (see Appendix 3 for score).

Other voices appear in the verses and choruses as well. Our heroine encounters
opposition from her mother, her boss, and her husband, Jimmy.\(^{20}\) All encourage her to be a
“lady,” which translates variously as someone who does not aspire to be an engineer, prioritizes
husband and family above personal needs, and accepts lower pay for equal work. These
individuals add detail to the generalizations made in the “C” sections, which express sentiments

\(^{20}\)Jimmy—it may be interesting to note—was the given name of Ewan MacColl.
such as “She’s smart (for a woman),” “A bitch or a tart, you’re nothing but heart,” and “You buy her for a ring of gold/ To love and obey without any pay.” All told, the lyrics address feminist concerns about childhood socialization, male-female relationships, and domestic, occupational, and educational inequities.

The original manuscript and the 1972 album *At The Present Moment* contain an additional portion (verse 3) which concerns a much more contemporary issue: sexual harassment. In this verse the protagonist’s employer pinches her thigh and exclaims, “I’ve never had an engineer!” He goes on to warn, “It’s the duty of the staff for to give the boss a whirl.” Seeger later excised this section because of a concern about the song’s length, but it speaks volumes about her sensitivity to an issue that was not even given a name until the late 1980s. This is the most forward-thinking of all the verses, as it anticipates problems that could result from infiltrating a male-designed work structure, a possibility largely ignored by her contemporaries.

As it stands, “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” is a model of early-1970s feminism. This may seem strange, as until this point, Seeger shared Ewan MacColl’s skeptical view of the feminist movement, born mainly from lack of familiarity with it and an overriding loyalty to the working-class movement. This had started to change around the time of *Festival of Fools 1970*, which ran in early 1971. The production’s penultimate scene was framed by the *Washington Post* headline “Do YOU feel threatened by Women’s Liberation?” The skit featured Seeger and the other female performers acting out a scenario in which stereotypical gender roles are reversed. The women harass men at a pub, gripe about their husbands’ lack of gratitude, and lament the onset of “men’s liberation.” The final scene is a processing of the points made in this skit,
followed by a rallying cry to fight, “not against men as men, but against those particular men in
whose interests it is that the status quo should be maintained.”

The Festival of Fools 1970 sketches were written, as were all of the Festivals’ scripts, by Ewan MacColl. Writing in late 1970, MacColl demonstrates an awareness of the dawn of the women’s movement as well as a desire to unite its new energy with the workers’ movement. The rhetoric of the finale changes rapidly as the focus shifts from gender politics to a broader sentiment about “the system,” likening the women’s struggle to “the guerrilla fighters of Mozambique,” “the Palestinian Arabs fighting in the sands of Jordan,” and “the Panthers who taught a generation that you can win enough time to stand up and fight by spitting in the eye of authority.” In MacColl’s political paradigm, all roads led to the workers’ movement.

Festival of Fools 1971 was similarly arranged, with “I’m Gonna be an Engineer” nestled in between a skit entitled “Unemployment” and one called “The China-Watchers.” The news item that introduced the song was from The Guardian:

A new attempt to secure equal rights for women was made yesterday by Mr. W. W. Hamdton, when he presented his anti-discrimination bill in the Commons. The bill proposes to make illegal and provide for the prevention of discrimination on grounds of sex. Questions in Parliament had revealed the widespread discrimination still being practised between the sexes in education, training, entry to the profession, marriage, and in many other ways.

This quotation, with its concern with “equality” and “discrimination,” confirms the climate in which Seeger was writing.

---


22Ibid.

23Program for Festival of Fools 1971, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

24Handwritten note by Peggy Seeger on script from Festival of Fools 1971, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
After the reciting of a proverb and the news item, Seeger performed the song solo, with the cast’s women providing a choreographed commentary. Notes on Seeger’s script indicate movements and facial expressions that correspond to the song’s lyrics. Arms are crossed during the line “he pinched me on the thigh”; fingers wag when Jimmy reminds the aspiring engineer, “Remember, dear, that you’re my wife”; and the instruction “arms around” accompanies the final lines “I’ll fight them as a woman, not a lady, / I’ll fight them as an engineer!”25 (This optimistic stanza was the only change requested by MacColl, who claimed that Seeger’s original ending was unacceptable because of its “sense of despair and hopelessness.”26) The women wore mini-skirts, a memory Seeger finds amusing, “Me, at the head of a group of women. . . . singing ‘Gonna Be an Engineer,’ with a miniskirt on? What?”27

The Festival’s theme returned to women’s issues in the finale. Much like the women’s liberation skit from Festival of Fools 1970, this scene pits the female actors against the males, again ending with a message of unity. The language of the skit from Festival of Fools 1971 demonstrates rhetorical progress from its corollary. MacColl parodies some of the arguments against feminism—proof that the movement had gained enough momentum to draw a stereotypable opposition. His male characters defend their case with the assertion that all important people have been men:

It isn’t our fault that most politicians are men! Sure, we agree it’s unfair, but that’s just the way it is! You’ve only got to look at the news. . . . Generals: men! Captains of industry: men! Bankers: men!28

25Ibid.
26Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
27Ibid.
28Script from Festival of Fools 1971.
At one point the men argue, “Stupidity isn’t an exclusively male phenomenon,” citing beauty pageants as proof of a female lapse in judgment. MacColl shows insight into the complicated notion of patriarchy as the females systematically debunk the men’s arguments. Seeger recalls MacColl’s achievement in this festival’s script, “It was a very good skit, actually—excellent. He could write it better than he could live it.”

The Festival of Fools 1971 finale is also remarkable for its self-awareness. The skit opens with the women—acting as themselves—revolting against the men. They usurp the stage from the men mid-scene, complaining that they are tired of being bossed around:

Susanna: For weeks we’ve been hanging around: Do this, do that!
Lynne: Type a script!
Buff R.: Duplicate a stencil!
Jenny D: Do you think you could get a sewing machine?

The women are “fed up with being ‘crowd’” and “voices.” The script contains a possible reference to this disparity: while the women in the scene are denoted by name, the men are “1st Man,” “2nd Man,” etc. This detail may have been accidental, may have been intended by MacColl, or may have been the choice of the script’s typist, Peggy Seeger.

As the argument between the sexes heightens, the men briefly reprise “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer,” singing a portion of one of the societal “C” sections before returning to the debate. This reference conjures the song’s spirit, further coloring the visual demonstration of women versus society. The scene soon rejoins MacColl’s theme of uniting the women’s cause with the

29Ibid.
31Script from Festival of Fools 1971.
32Ibid.
workers’ movement, albeit with more grace than in the previous year’s production. The transition is flawed only by an abrupt and unlikely soliloquy by one of the women:

That’s where we’re at! At the point where the words LAW AND ORDER justify anything the rulers wish to impose upon the ruled: theft of the world’s resources, ill-treatment, imprisonment, torture, murder of those who question the rulers’ right to rule. That’s where we’re at!33

That is probably not, in fact, where most women were at, although it is difficult to discern whether MacColl was thinking regressively or progressively with this statement. The character of the women’s movement was not yet carved into the nation’s consciousness, and MacColl may have hoped to harness its strength for his own waning cause. This is confirmed in the section’s penultimate statement from one of the women: “You need allies! We do too!”34 It is possible, however, that MacColl foresaw and hoped to correct the weakness that some now notice in the women’s movement: that the primarily middle-class movement has too little concern for the working class.

The festival’s final song, composed by Ewan MacColl, creates an interesting comparison with Seeger’s contribution. “With Love to Angela”35 sets up the show’s finale as the women of the cast offer the men an ultimatum: “You can have us as allies, or as inferiors, but not as both.”36 A duet then ensues, with the cast pairing up and singing each verse two by two.

MacColl wrote the song “after reading the correspondence between Angela Davis and Soledad

33Ibid.
34Ibid. (Emphasis in original)
35Retitled “Angela Davis” on 1972’s release At the Present Moment and “Love for Love” on 1979’s Different Therefore Equal.
36Script from Festival of Fools 1971.
Brother George Jackson,”37 and it portrays the cooperation MacColl envisioned between the women’s and worker’s movements. MacColl later commented that he “felt it was necessary to create a song to say in the Festival of Fools that the struggle that faces human beings is one that has to be waged by men and women together.”38

The song is cast as a duet between a man who is lost in maudlin gestures, and a woman who returns his love but reminds him of their political obligations. MacColl invokes workers’ movement language even in the opening line: “Come, my darling, we’re a union/ Equals all along the line.” The dialogue continues as the woman gently dismisses the man’s platitudes in favor of activist rhetoric:

I LOVE YOUR LIPS SO WARM AND TENDER
LOVE THE LOOK THAT’S IN YOUR EYES,
Eyes to face the facts of life, love,
Lips for shouting battle cries!39

MacColl’s vision for a liberated woman seems to be one who can love and fight alongside her lover in the class war. With lines like “Sharing joy and love and hate,” MacColl confirms his commitment to uniting the two causes, even at the peril of blurring the distinct needs of the women’s movement. In contrast, Seeger’s “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” specifically addresses these needs.

37Liner notes for Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl, At the Present Moment, Rounder Records C-4003. Angela Davis (b.1944) is an African-American activist and author of several books on gender, class, and race issues. She befriended George Jackson (1941-1971) when he was one of three African-American convicts accused of killing a guard at the Soledad State Prison, a case in which Davis and others got involved, leading to a controversial courthouse shooting. See George Jackson, Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970).


39Handwritten note from Script for Festival of Fools 1971: “Ordinary type: girl singer; CAPITALS: male singer; Underlined: both.”
The Festival played from 20 January to 20 February 1972, with performances on every Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night.40 Seeger remembers the run fondly:

It was when I got my first short haircut. I’d had long hair up to then, and when I got my first short haircut, I felt [like] a new woman—I’d never had hair that short in my life! And I loved it, adored it. And the song just took off right away.41

The 1972 Festival of Fools marked the end of an era for MacColl and Seeger. They had worked side-by-side on almost every project since their meeting in 1956, with Seeger always in a supporting role. As the popularity of “I’m Gonna be an Engineer” grew, Seeger’s name began to detach itself from MacColl’s, and critics quickly acknowledged her songwriting skills. Other changes followed closely on the song’s heels. 1972 would see the demise of the Critics Group, the release of Roberta Flack’s wildly popular version of “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,” the birth of daughter Kitty, and a resulting overhaul of the couple’s lifestyle. Although MacColl and Seeger remained a team, the terms had changed, and the road to Seeger’s own career was beginning to be paved.

At first “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” achieved an underground success. In keeping with the pair’s commitment to contemporary music, Seeger began performing the song almost immediately after its composition. She premiered the song at Skipton’s York Arts Association on 2 December 1971, while Festival of Fools 1971 was still in rehearsal.42 Seeger had written over forty songs before this time, but most had not outlasted the year in which they were composed. One earlier feminist song, “Darling Annie,” had debuted in July of 1971 with little

40Program for Festival of Fools 1971.

41Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

42Program book, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
fanfare. She could not have anticipated that her newest song would attain the status of a classic.

Her brother Pete recalled:

> And so there she is making up songs—I don’t know if she even realized herself that she would write a song which would be one of the favorite songs of free women throughout the English-speaking world.43

Before “Engineer,” Seeger had several pillars of her concert performances. Her program books indicate that almost every concert included “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,” “Sweet Willie,” “Barbara Allen,” and somewhat less frequently “Black Lung.” After its debut, “Engineer” became such a mainstay—the first that she had written herself. The program book for 1970 through 1972 attests to its early success: Seeger performed “Engineer” in forty-seven of the forty-eight concerts following the song’s debut. In the next program book, which chronicles concert programs from 2 February 1973 to 10 November 1975, “Engineer” appears in 122 of the 162 performances. Between 16 November 1975 and 24 September 1983, the percentage decreases as Seeger’s feminist song catalog grows: “Engineer” is included in 111 out of 255 dates. Program books of foreign tours, including tours in Australia, Holland, Italy, and the United States, attest to a rate close to 50%.44

Separate program books for the pair’s Singers Club appearances further testify to the song’s popularity. The Singers Club audience consisted primarily of London regulars, hence there was a higher pressure for variety. From its Singers Club debut on 11 December 1971 through the end of 1972, Seeger performed “Engineer” in twelve of twenty appearances. It remained a constant presence on the Singers Club stage throughout the Club’s life, which ended in 1991. This would seem to indicate a consistent demand by the audiences, who often led the

---

43 Parsley, Sage, and Politics.

44 Program books, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
programs by requests. In an appearance in Asheville, North Carolina on 30 March 1999, Seeger jokingly referred to the song as her “albatross,” commencing to perform it yet again.

Seeger was not the only one to perform “Engineer.” Other folk singers adopted the song, including Willie Tyson, Frankie Armstrong, Kristin Lems, and Judy Gorman-Jacobs. Pete Seeger’s performances brought the song to U.S. audiences, although with adjustments that Peggy still laments:

> And my brother Pete started singing it, and when I heard a recording of it, I was astounded, because he had left—he doesn’t like long songs—he had left out all of the parts that are in minor. And those were the “thou shalt behave in this manner” dictates of society to the woman. All he was singing was the woman’s complaint . . . which I pointed out to him. I don’t know if he still sings it that way.45

Cousin Anthony Seeger attests that this disagreement continues to be an issue at Seeger family gatherings.46 Pete’s performances, however altered, did bring her song to the attention of fans and major folk names. A 1976 letter from a California woman confirms, “Pete sang the “Gonna Be an Engineer” here in Berkeley on his last visit. Malvina Reynolds [an American activist and songwriter, best known for songs such as “Little Boxes”] was as tickled as I was—the audience went wild!”47

Amateur performances of “Engineer” peppered women’s conventions in England and, increasingly, in the United States. New York’s *Village Voice* reported that “no women’s songs workshop worthy of its name went without a rendition of ‘Engineer,’ including an American


47Janet Smith, to Peggy Seeger, 14 March 1976, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
translation of Seeger’s witty Englishisms.” A letter to Pete Seeger from a singer in Wisconsin attests to the phenomenon:

> Somehow I ended up singing [“Gonna Be an Engineer”] for a meeting of the local chapter of the National Organization for Women. . . . They really loved it—at practically every line some of them were smiling and nodding in agreement. They gave me the loudest and longest applause I have ever gotten in my life.

The popularity of the song among nonprofessional performers surprised Seeger: “I was amazed at how quickly it took off, because it is essentially a hard song to sing, and it’s a hard song to accompany.”

The song’s publication in volume 7 of the *New City Songster* accelerated its accessibility to a wider audience. The Seeger-run folk song journal had a run of approximately two thousand in the 1970s, and two exclamation points accompanying the song’s mention in the table of contents indicate its popularity. Illustrated broadsides were sold for 5 pence at the *Festival of Fools 1971* and subsequent concerts, further disseminating the song to amateur musicians. Songbooks compiled by other folk singers and scholars continue to include “Engineer,” from *Big Red Songbook* in 1977 to *Here’s to the Women* from 1991.

---


49 Mary Jean Link, to Pete Seeger, 10 May 1978, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

50 Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.


52 Ibid., 2.

53 Program for *Festival of Fools 1971*.

Recordings gave a boost to the dissemination of the song. Its first appearance was on Seeger’s 1972 album *At The Present Moment*, a recording that she followed up with different renditions on *No Tyme Lyke the Present*, *Penelope Isn’t Waiting Anymore*, *Different Therefore Equal*, and *Period Pieces*.55 Ever eager to unite their causes, Seeger and MacColl released a benefit recording of “Engineer” on a 45 r.p.m. single with the union song “We Are the Engineers” for the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. Seeger’s version of “Engineer” is also found many compilation albums, including Smithsonian Folkways releases *American Roots Collection* and *The Best of Broadside 1962–1988*. Other artists recorded the song as well, including a popular version by Willie Tyson on her 1977 release *Debutante*.56

A testament to the song’s popularity is the number of spoofs and cartoons it inspired in the British and American press. After the song’s publication in the American folk journal *Sing Out!*57 Bob Conway’s male-perspective “Another Side of Engineering” (see Figure 2) was published by the journal, “with all due apologies to Peggy Seeger.”58 This backlash-inspired corollary tells of the struggles of a sensitive male pressured into becoming an engineer, enlisting in the military, and providing for his family. A magazine clipping saved by Seeger shows another media reference to the song—this time in cartoon form (see Figure 3).59

---


57*Sing Out!* 22, no.6 (Jan/Feb 1974): 12–13.


59Photocopy, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive. Source unknown.
1. When you were a little boy you learned to climb a tree,
   And to slaughter plastic soldiers with toy artillery,
   And to answer Daddy’s question of “what do you want to be?”
   With “I wanna be an engineer.”
   But what ya really want’s a job out on a railroad;
   To highball down the Mainline where the black steel engines ran,
   Where the road that led to glory was a male road,
   Where it once was fun to be a man.

2. But you found yourself at I.T.T. instead of on a train,
   Enmeshed in piles of calculus, a four-year numbers game.
   It’s results they want, not wisdom, and it really is a shame
   They turn people into engineers.
   But you owe it to the folks to make it, Sonny,
   The fattest future paychecks go only to the best;
   The truth comes out upon that sheepskin, Honey;
   The degree you get’s a fat B.S.

3. Six months out of college and you’re into your career,
   Hustlin’ bucks an’ ladies, drinkin’ lots of beer,
   Till you get a note from Uncle sayin’ basic trainin’s near,
   An’ no deferments for an engineer.
   Yes, you owe your life to Uncle Sam, now, Baby,
   It’s combat boots and olive drab an’ fightin’ hand to hand;
   When you’re a fully trained-up combat monster, maybe,
   You can finally call yourself a man.

4. Straight from basic training to a Southeast Asian War,
   Where men will die for Apple Pie, for IBM and Ford,
   ’Cause bloodshed’s good for business, that’s what you’re fighting for
   In the Combat Engineers.
   You’re tough, you can take it
   But you wonder how you got that way.
   With your world caving in, you just stick out your chin;
   That’s how you get to be a Winner these days—

5. Not three months from your discharge and married-off you’ll be,
   To give your life for loving wife and growing family,
   To be a good provider, working toward that Ph.D.
   As an Aerospace Engineer.
   Yes, you owe it to the kids to work and study,
   Program that computer, hustle, scheme, and plan;

Fig. 2. Complete lyrics to “Another Side of Engineering.” © 1977 Bob Conway.
Kiss the bosses’ asses good and Buddy,
Prove to them that you’re a Man.

6. After five years down at Boeing you feel you don’t belong,
The bombers you’re designing strike you somehow slightly wrong.
One morning you wake up to find what you knew all along:
You weren’t meant to be an engineer.

7. You know you stuck it out through college though it damn near made you crack,
And you stuck it out for Uncle Sam and barely got it back,
But if you stick around the company you’re just a crummy Hack,
Though they tell you you’re an Engineer.
   Oh, you owed it to your folks to make it, Baby,
   To be no less than a big success, to win each race you ran;
   They’d break your ass, they’d break your heart, then maybe
   They’d let you call yourself a Man.

8. So you tell the boss to stick it and you take a month or two,
To grow yourself a mustache and write poems in the zoo.
Your friends and neighbors ask you, “What the Hell is wrong with you?
You’re not acting like an Engineer!”

9. Well, folks are gettin’ nervous ’cause you don’t fit in their plans,
And your wife might start to figure that you’re not much of a man,
But the only friends worth keeping now are the ones who understand
You’re Human, not an Engineer.

Fig. 2—Continued.

Fig. 3. Magazine clipping from Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive. Source unknown.
The song also made its way into educational settings. The first volume of Carol Adams and Rae Laurikietis’s young person’s book series, *The Gender Trap*, opens with the music and lyrics of “Engineer,” using it as a springboard for classroom discussion:

Why doesn’t the woman in the song want to be a lady? Why is it so hard for her to become an engineer? How much truth do you think there is in the song? Could it apply to you?60

The first chapter of the series is titled after the song and contains a cartoon by Andy Johnson of a little girl in a hair bow and a dress explaining to her parents that she wants to be an engineer.61

Correspondence from the 1970s also indicates the enormous impact of “Engineer” on Seeger’s life and public image. Letters written to the MacColl-Seeger household before the mid-1970s are almost unanimously addressed to MacColl and Seeger, with Seeger handling the replies. As 1975 approached, letters began to arrive for Peggy Seeger, consisting mostly of praise for her women’s songs in general and “Engineer” in particular. Many of these letters came from the United States, including a 1975 letter from singer Alice Gerrard: “Everyone over here loves your song, Peggy, and it’s sung very often. It’s a doozer.”62 A Minnesota disc jockey wrote that she “did a radio show the other night and when I first walked in, a request came for your engineer song—the person specified your version.”63

The success of “Engineer” was not limited to Great Britain and the United States. Letters from almost every continent filled Seeger’s postbox during the 1970s. A longtime Australian


61Ibid.

62Alice Gerrard, to Peggy Seeger, 9 January 1975, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

63Petra Hall, to Peggy Seeger, 5 June 1979, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
friend wrote, “I had a wee girlie of ten years of age come up to me last week and she proudly sang the complete ‘Engineer.’” Sandy Greenberg, a Canadian folksinger, reported,

I have been singing your song “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” in my concerts across Canada. . . . I have really enjoyed singing the song and seeing the reactions of the audience. I think shock and then delight are the most common reactions.

After the mid-1970s, most letters came to the household addressed specifically to MacColl or Seeger. Articles in the press dealt with them separately, although both MacColl and Seeger continued to credit each other in their solo interviews. This change in the public’s perception of the duo is also reflected in other areas of the pair’s lives, including their recording, touring, and socializing. After her composition of “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer,” Seeger was allowed access to a world that was separate from her work with MacColl, although it would take her another decade to embrace it fully. The song had opened a door. There began to be the possibility of a different Peggy Seeger, one without the labels “daughter of,” “sister of,” or “partner of.”

---

64 Warren Fahey, to Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, 24 January 1977, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

65 Sandy Greenberg, to Peggy Seeger, 15 January 1979, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
CHAPTER 3
THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT DISCOVERS PEGGY SEEGER

As “I’m Gonna be an Engineer” reached a wide audience, Seeger found herself in an unexpected spotlight. Organizers called her to perform for various women’s events, all hoping to feature the composer of this new feminist anthem. Her sudden popularity was a welcome, but problematic, change. To begin with, Seeger was not accustomed to performing solo—she had been half of a duo for almost twenty years. Many of these groups did not welcome Ewan MacColl or son Neill, whom she sometimes brought along to perform with her. Seeger recalls, “we hit some very, very strident situations. . . . I was attacked for bringing a male along with me.”

Perhaps even thornier was the issue of repertoire—she was being requested as a feminist folksinger, but she had essentially two feminist songs. In the process of putting together programs for these women-themed concerts, Seeger quickly recognized that her standard fare was not going to fly with her newfound audience:

It was only because I started being asked to sing at feminist and women’s meetings that I got interested in the feminist movement. I discovered I’m singing to these people who asked me on the basis of “Gonna be an Engineer” to please come sing for them, and I found I didn’t have any songs that matched up anywhere near to that!

---

1Peggy Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000, Asheville, N.C., tape recording.

2For the remainder of this thesis, I will use the term “women’s song,” using the working definition “a song which deals with women’s experiences from, or on behalf of, the perspective of women.” “Feminist song” may refer to the same or more specifically to an anthem of the women’s movement.

3Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
In 1976 Seeger set about the task of composing a stock of contemporary women’s songs. What began as a practical answer to a professional dilemma soon became a personal quest. Seeger approached the composition of new women’s songs the same way she, Charles Parker, and Ewan MacColl had approached the radio ballads: through fieldwork. Seeger familiarized herself with the concerns of the women’s movement by conducting interviews:

Not having the necessary knowledge in my experience, I sought out battered wives, single mothers, women who had been raped, women on picket lines, and many many others. I interviewed them, listened carefully to their voices of experience and used their words, their tone of expression, even their breathing patterns and cadences. . . . In the process . . . I discovered how other women live. It was quite a shock.4

From the beginning Seeger never considered herself as source material for feminist songs—she turned outward rather than inward. Just as she and MacColl championed working-class causes from the distanced comfort of their middle-class lifestyle, Seeger approached the women’s movement from the outside—not as a woman, but as a documenter of women.

Having never given the movement priority, Seeger had much to learn about modern (1970s) feminism. The breadth of topics in her early efforts indicates a “crash course” approach to studying the movement’s primary issues.5 Program books indicate that as she composed the songs, she began performing them immediately, premiering them on tour dates and then bringing them home to the local Singers Club. Her first round included the contraceptive-themed “Nine Month Blues,” premiered on 8 March 1976; the humorous “Housewife’s Alphabet” on 18

---


5The songs’ subjects will be the focus of the final chapter and will not be addressed here.
November 1976; and “Emily,” a song about a battered wife, which debuted a year later on 18
November 1977.6

Seeger reinforced the performance of these songs with their publication in the New City
Songster (NCS), the internationally distributed songbook that she continued to manage and edit
throughout this busy time in her life. These volumes reveal a shift in her editorial focus that
matched her compositional and performing priorities. Volumes One through Six have either no
songs or one song with women’s themes. 1972’s Volume Seven, which contains “I’m Gonna be
an Engineer,” yielded four women’s songs, accounting for 20 percent of the total contents. In
1976’s Volume Twelve, Seeger went so far as to scold her readers in an editorial:

[This issue] sees fewer humorous songs, and (like the preceding issues) not nearly
enough songs from or about women. Women have traditionally been singers and song-
carriers and, in the United States, in the vanguard as songwriters on the industrial front.
So where are the women songwriters now? YOU HAVEN’T TIME? Write a song about
why you haven’t time. YOU ARE TOO TIRED after your job as a mother, a student,
typist, nurse, breadwinner or breadmaker, whatever? Write a song about that. Or
perhaps write a song on the ploys being used by employers to get round [sic] the Sexual
Discrimination Bill . . . or on the need for daycare centres . . . or about how difficult it is
to get a pair of flat sandals.7

Beginning in 1973 until its final issue in 1985, all but one NCS volume included women’s songs
either by Seeger or by other contributors.

During this first wave of Seeger’s feminist writing, which lasted from 1976 until 1979,
the singer grappled with defining her own place in the movement. She had never identified as a
feminist and had a disdain for the radical feminism present in the media. In a chapter she penned
for a 1984 book, Seeger distinguished herself as a “classical feminist” as opposed to its “modern

---

6Program Book Eight, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

original.
everyday usage (suggesting the exclusion of and often antipathy towards males in general).”

Seeger had few female friends before the mid-1980s, engrossed as she was in her family and the
male-dominated world of the folk revival. Early experiences with the women’s concert
organizers further fueled her suspicion of the movement. She had always gotten along with men
more easily than with women, beginning as early as her close relationships with her father and
brothers, and was suspicious of any argument that would pit her against them.

Another possible contributor to her early opposition was her profound respect for Ewan
MacColl. Seeger often espoused the opinions of her mentor and partner, whose political
education she considered superior to her own. MacColl paid little heed to feminism as a distinct
movement, wishing instead to place it under the umbrella of the workers’ movement, the focus
of his political paradigm. “It wasn’t that Dad was [anti-feminism],” remembers son Calum, “he
was very, very supportive. It just somehow didn’t fit into his scheme.”

Commenting on the
1971 documentary A Kind of Exile, Calum verifies Seeger’s adopted myopia: “I can hear the
stuff coming out of her mouth and it’s Dad—very much Dad.”

Seeger herself admits to
sometimes parroting MacColl’s ideas:

> When you’ve lived with somebody for a long time, you really start to share ideas. I think
I probably do spout a lot of stuff that I learned from him, but I don’t generally nowadays
spout it until I’m sure I believe it. I was probably spouting a lot of stuff that I didn’t—
that I had gotten second-hand. I should’ve thought “what?”

---


recording.

10Ibid.

11Peggy Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000, Asheville, North Carolina, tape
recording.
So for the duration of the 1970s and early 1980s, Seeger was in the uncomfortable position of being considered a feminist songwriter, without particularly being a feminist.

Seeger released two women’s albums during this time: 1977’s *Penelope Isn’t Waiting Anymore* and 1979’s *Different Therefore Equal*, which Ewan MacColl jokingly nicknamed her “soft” feminist album and her “hard” feminist album, respectively. Indeed, *Penelope* reflects a period of transition for Seeger. As she had in the 1967 album *Female Frolic*—a collaboration with Frankie Armstrong and Sandra Kerr—Seeger filled the album with woman-themed folk songs from her traditional repertoire, including “Sweet Willie,” “Poor Old Maids,” and “Katie Morey.” Twelve of the eighteen tracks on the Rounder release of the album are traditional in origin (see Appendix 4 for complete track listings). Seeger defended the use of these songs in a 1984 interview:

> In folksong, women play the varied roles that they do in life: the songs reflect the mores, the social trends of the times in which they were written. . . . For activist feminists the message is often not direct enough. But the songs are those carried down by working-class women—and men; they are expressed in excellent language; they have good tunes; they speak for the times which are not ours; most important, they are accepted by women who are not already “in the movement.”

The circumstances of *Penelope*’s release may have contributed to song selection as well.

A 7 December 1976 letter from Seeger to a friend indicates a time crunch:

> [Blackthorne’s first album is] a women’s lib album called *Penelope Isn’t Waiting Anymore*. . . . The record was sponsored by the Abortion Law Reform Association, who wanted a record out by Christmas to advertise their campaign against the James White bill.

---

12Peggy Seeger, interview by Judy Woodward and Pam Mansfield, 12 November 1984, transcript, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.


14Peggy Seeger, to Nola Day, 7 December 1976, typewritten [dictated], Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive. James White was a member of Parliament who proposed a bill in 1975 that stirred a debate on the legality of abortion.
Seeger’s choice of traditional songs may have been at least partially determined by necessity, not just aesthetics. Seeger did not have a stock of contemporary women’s songs available and would not have had time to compose them for the album’s release. Despite the rush, Seeger’s relationship with the sponsor seems to have been harmonious: a thank-you letter from an ALRA representative indicates that Seeger co-produced the album free of charge.\(^{15}\)

Seeger’s liner notes to *Penelope* cast light on this stage of her feminist attitude. She opens with a reference to the *Odyssey*—the inspiration for the album’s title—and traces the lamentable role of woman through classical literature and song:

In classical song . . . [woman] never works, has children; she never menstruates or sweats or loses her teeth . . . her conversational range is limited to sighs, moans, whispers, and trilling laughter. . . .\(^{16}\)

Seeger goes on to advocate folk song as the place where the “recognizable woman” can be found:

The female protagonists of the folk songs have their feet (real feet) on real ground. They work and sweat at harvesting. . . . Above all, they are prepared to argue and fight for what they want. . . . They are prepared, if necessary, to oppose the entire social structure in order to gain their ends. It is this realistic and positive attitude in folk song which I, as a woman singer, find most compelling. It is through these songs, made up and sung by generations of working people, that I first became conscious of the nature of the class struggle.\(^{17}\)

Seeger as MacColl’s political protégé and reluctant feminist activist is clearly discernible in this introduction and in the notes to some of the songs, such as the apologia for “Talking Want Ad”:

---

\(^{15}\)Jacquie Webbe, to Peggy Seeger, 29 September 1976, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\(^{16}\)Peggy Seeger, liner notes to *Penelope Isn’t Waiting Anymore*, Blackthorne Records, 1977.

\(^{17}\)Ibid.
“Some men may consider this talking blues unfair and (what with the growing army of understanding and helpful husbands) rightly so.”

Other aspects of Penelope hint at the direction Seeger was headed, such as the follow-up sentence to this apologia: “Other men may consider it a threat to their sovereignty in the home—and rightly so.” Although she had not given up on the ability of traditional folk songs to articulate modern women’s issues, there was a growing tension between what she had believed and what she was coming to understand. The album’s coproduction by the Abortion Law Reform Association marked a change, as this was one of the first women’s organizations with which she had been publicly linked and the most open expression of her longstanding support of the pro-choice movement. Earlier roots can be traced to the previous year: on 8 March 1976 (International Women’s Day), a local women’s group released a two-pence song sheet for the National Abortion Campaign. The sheet contained information about an April 1976 demonstration to be held at London’s Speaker’s Corner and lyrics to three songs from Penelope: “Engineer,” “Nine Month Blues,” and “Darling Annie.”

A quietly revolutionary detail in the liner notes to Penelope further indicates Seeger’s changing attitudes. In the album credits, Seeger thanks “Margaret Hardy, for minding my daughter Kitty while the recording was in process.” This appreciation for work in the private sphere is remarkably progressive, even when compared to more radical women activists of the time. A mother from age twenty-four, Seeger had had many co-caregivers throughout the years.

---

18Ibid.

19Photocopy of song sheet, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

20Seeger, liner notes to Penelope.
Now a mother of three, Seeger credits one of these women for the first time, right next to the recording engineers and sound technicians: something had clearly begun to change for Seeger.

_Different Therefore Equal_, the “hard” feminist album, grew from the interviews with and study of women mentioned above. Of the ten tracks on the album, Seeger wrote nine and Ewan MacColl provided one (1971’s “Love for Love”). Seeger’s contributions reflect the pressure for more “direct” songs that she felt from members of the women’s movement. She set out to “write a song about each of the main issues on the feminist agenda at the time.”

The resulting songs are deliberately topical, addressing abortion, rape, female childhood socialization, wages for housework, and so on. The album is more consciously conceived than her previous recordings. Seeger remembers, “I sat down to write the album as it stood, which is something I’ve never done.”

The liner notes for _Different Therefore Equal_ also suggest a different Seeger. The commentary accompanying the individual songs is more detailed and opinionated than that in _Penelope_. Rather than giving a factual account of the songs’ backgrounds, Seeger writes consistently in the first person, creating small essays on the topics the songs address. Her language has acquired some of the stridency she once decried, such as in her description of the song “Reclaim the Night”: “It has to be understood that rape is not just a misdemeanor but a crime that can cause permanent damage.” Her interviews with women of many experiences appear to have infused her sense of urgency and passion for women’s issues.

---


23Peggy Seeger, liner notes for _Different Therefore Equal_, Blackthorne, 1979.
A “blatantly” feminist album, as one writer described it, *Different Therefore Equal* stirred critics more than did *Penelope*.\(^{24}\) Reviews from within the folk community chafed at the album’s tone:

> It’s just about the most political record I’ve ever heard. . . . these songs are so ferocious, intimidating, and single-minded that it’s not a record that inspires much sympathy in this admittedly male quarter, though doubtless the militants of women’s movements will adopt it with a vengeance.\(^ {25}\)

Reviews from outside the folk revival were kinder. *Time Out* praised “the telling detail which makes *Different Therefore Equal* so moving and persuasive.”\(^ {26}\) *Peace News* noted the album’s “gorgeous melodies and clever lyrics,” while criticizing the songs for talking “about individual problems and not about collective feminist solutions.”\(^ {27}\) Seeger’s position was awkward: she was too feminist for the folk community, but not feminist enough for the activist world.

Minutes from meetings of the family-run Blackthorne label show the MacColl-Seegers exploring new promotional strategies for *Different Therefore Equal*. They took out ads in the British women’s magazines *Spare Rib* and *Everywoman*, and sent complimentary copies to organizations such as the Toronto Women’s Bookstore, London’s Women’s Art Alliance, and the B.B.C.’s Women’s Hour.\(^ {28}\) Numerous music and women’s magazines began chronicling Peggy Seeger for the first time. With titles such as “Another Seeger Singer,”\(^ {29}\) many articles

\(^{24}\)From a 1984 Larrakin Records Catalogue, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.


\(^{26}\)Review of *Different Therefore Equal*, *Time Out* 28 (March 1979): page number not available.


\(^{28}\)Peggy Seeger, typewritten list, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

treated Seeger as a newcomer at age forty-five. Although the inevitable references to her more famous relatives persisted, they shrank in proportion as the interviewers focused on Peggy Seeger, the new feminist songwriter.

While the press declared her the new voice of feminism—one reviewer going so far as to say that her lyrics deserve to be studied alongside the work of Kate Millett and Germaine Greer—much was still business as usual for Seeger and MacColl. The hectic touring, publishing, writing, editing, and child-rearing activities of the team never let up. Seeger’s emerging identity as a feminist solo artist coexisted with her identity in the folk world as Ewan MacColl’s right-hand woman in the fight for workers’ rights. Her women’s songs of the late 1970s often appeared on the pair’s joint albums. Soon after the release of *Different Therefore Equal*, Seeger took a hiatus from women’s songs, refocusing her writing on ecological and class politics. She had little intention of returning to the topic until the mid-1980s, at which point Irene Pyper-Scott became a much more distinct influence.

Although loosely affiliated with some women’s organizations and publications through performances and advertising, Seeger had never become a feminist activist. A 1984 interview reveals much about her and MacColl’s lingering suspicion of the movement. When asked a question about British and American feminism, the following exchange ensued:

**Seeger:** That is a hard question to answer because I’m not actually in the women’s movement a lot. I touch it hither and yon, I bounce off it every now and then. I have to do occasionally with activists in it. . . . Can you answer that question, Ewan?

**MacColl:** I think there have been many more working-class women involved in women’s struggles in Britain over the last few years. . . . Right from the 1950s

---

there have been big industrial movements of women. . . . It has become much more directly involved with real political struggle.31

After two successful women’s albums and some exposure to feminists, Seeger remained on the sidelines of the women’s movement, and MacColl remained unconvinced of its legitimacy.

As the two began to work more independently, Seeger found her first real political passion: the environment.32 Her involvement in environmental causes was much less complicated and more consistent than her involvement in the women’s movement has ever been. Her first anti-nuclear song was 1956’s “There’s Better Things to Do,” and environmental topics figured intermittently in her work after that time. Her environmental writing and activism increased dramatically in the early 1980s, initiating a chain of events that would again put Seeger face-to-face with feminism.

During the early 1980s Seeger spearheaded the environmental awareness group B.A.N.G. (Beckenham Anti-Nuclear Group). The small group, centered in Seeger’s London suburb of Beckenham, focused on educating themselves and the public on nuclear issues. Irene Pyper-Scott became involved in B.A.N.G. in 1983, much to the chagrin of Seeger and the other members of the group.33 Seeger remembers:

[Irene] was a constant thorn in the sides of the rest of us, who were content to read books and lecture at schools. She was full of ideas that were theatrical and, to us, quite daring—something that we were NOT.34

31Norman Stockwell, “Peggy Seeger, Recording Artist, To Sing in Madison,” Feminist Connection (October/November 1984): 34.

32A separate study could be done on the history of Seeger’s ecological interests, which have inspired over twenty of her songs and continue to this day.

33Seeger, Peggy Seeger Songbook, 12.

With Pyper-Scott’s participation in the group, B.A.N.G. reluctantly began to focus on creative, direct action, including one protest in which Seeger, Pyper-Scott, and two other members delivered a petition in full radiation suits to 10 Downing Street.\(^{35}\)

As Pyper-Scott overwhelmed B.A.N.G.’s members with her radicalism, Seeger began her first real female friendship. By 1985 Seeger began playing concerts with Pyper-Scott, a gifted singer, when performing for women’s groups or when MacColl was too ill to sing. One of their earliest collaborations was a concert for the Women in Barnet Action Group, in which they shared the stage with a women’s poetry group called London Voices. The program for this concert, dated 13 December 1985, reports that “Irene has been singing with Peggy Seeger for six months.”\(^{36}\) Seeger kept record of a standard repertoire for the early Seeger/Pyper-Scott performances, which included several traditional Irish ballads, many anti-nuclear songs, and a few selections from *Different Therefore Equal*.

Pyper-Scott also introduced Seeger to an activist group that intersected her ecological interests with feminism: Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp. Located just outside the town of Newbury (west of London), Greenham Common was the site of one of the longest and most controversial environmental protests in England. Nine hundred acres of this land—originally purchased by the community of Newbury in 1938—were claimed by the Royal Air Force during World War II. Once peacetime resumed, the land was never returned, and it was leased to the United States as an Air Force base in 1968.\(^{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Undated newspaper clipping, photocopy, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\(^{36}\) Program for concert, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

A 1979 NATO decision allowed the introduction of American cruise missiles onto the base. For many British citizens concerned about the nuclear threat, this was the proverbial last straw. Of the many calls to action at this time, the most stubborn was the work of “Women for Life on Earth.” A group of thirty-six women and four men marched 120 miles from Cardiff, Wales to Greenham Common in ten days, reaching their destination on 5 September 1981. After being refused an audience with government officials, the marchers stayed at the base, creating a camp outside the main gate. The camp grew in number and began to spread around the base to other gates, where protesters sang, chained themselves to fences, or simply stood in the way of approaching vehicles. In 1982 the camp was declared women-only and became a twenty-four-hour-a-day site of female activism until 1997, when the vacated base’s fence was cut down permanently.

Seeger and MacColl sang for the initial group of marchers at Marlborough, a concert during which Seeger was glad to see some of the crew taking a much-needed nap. Seeger began accompanying Pyper-Scott to the campsites in 1982 and made the protest part of her activist docket through 1987. Most of her activity there was concentrated in 1983 and 1984, when B.A.N.G. was in its youth and her obligation to home less pressing. She regretted not being there more often:

I was not there as much as my political self says I needed to be there. Not as much as I wanted to be, but Greenham happened when my husband was ill, and my daughter in a lot of transition, and I wanted to be home as much as possible.

---


39 Ibid., 310.

40 Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 176.

41 Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
When Seeger was unable to be there physically, she sent and received letters from the activists. She composed a song for the Greenham regulars (“Carry Greenham Home”), and a later song details the adventures of one of its women (“Woman on Wheels”). Seeger’s mild celebrity added to the group’s spirits. One member wrote,

Thank you for the song. When your letter arrived with the tape and music, everybody was really chuffed [excited] . . . . It would be great if you felt like coming to play for us . . . . We are all hoping so!  

Seeger’s involvement with Greenham Common was both an inconvenience and a reaction to her domestic situation. A still-young Kitty and a chronically ill Ewan MacColl made leaving home difficult. Ecology, particularly ecofeminism, had no real place in MacColl’s political worldview, and his wife’s new interests were confusing and somewhat alarming to him. MacColl had written several songs about the environment, but from a perspective that Seeger calls “homocentric”:

Ewan’s songs are full of . . . rearranging, conquering nature and bringing it around to doing what man wants it to do . . . . Ewan really talked only about mankind—that the earth revolved around men.  

By the time of his death in 1989, MacColl was beginning to reevaluate his priorities, due in part to his wife’s political journey.

While Seeger’s involvement with Irene Pyper-Scott and Greenham Common caused some discord in her union with MacColl, a 1984 poem called “Greenham Woman” shows MacColl in a rare moment of awe, celebrating his wife’s new endeavor. The poem is a love song, with MacColl praising his partner’s “mouth tasting of wild strawberries/ And skin that had

---

42 Nicky [?], at Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, to Peggy Seeger, 5 March 1983, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

the smell of new-baked bread.” As the poem continues, MacColl narrows to a moment when
he has seen her outside the Greenham Common fence, “facing faceless replicas/ Of men and
women whose eyes appear/ To have been issued at the regimental stores.” His pride is clear in
the final stanza:

If I thought my voice could pierce
The carapace of dumb malevolence,
I would say, consider this:
If five years from now
You still have a face to turn away,
Or lips to give substance to a curse,
Then you will owe both face and lips
To her I love.

Although ostensibly the leader of the Seeger-MacColl team, MacColl’s reverence for his so-
called “junior partner” is clear in his efforts to understand a political viewpoint he had
dismissed for over fifty years.

While Greenham Common brought Seeger into an activist role, the effect on her
composition was at first more “eco” than “feminist.” Between 1980 and 1987, environmental
issues dominate her songwriting, yielding songs like the chilling “Four-Minute Warning” and the
mournful “The Mother.” During this time Seeger composed only two women’s songs, one that
dealt with Greenham Common and one that involved a union strike. In October of 1987, Seeger
performed and composed the soundtrack for a video on the history of women’s trade unions

---

44 Ewan MacColl, “Greenham Woman,” typewritten transcript, Ewan MacColl-Peggy
Seeger Archive.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Calum MacColl, interview by author.
Women’s issues return as a topic of their own during the same year, when Seeger began work for the album *Familiar Faces*.

In the early 1980s, Seeger did some research for a radio ballad on women. Correspondence from Seeger to a friend confirms that she had spent some time interviewing and casting out for ideas in 1983:

> My programme is going very well. My problem is that I keep running into interesting women and the minute I do that it’s out with the microphone and I have another three or four hours of tape which take about three hours each to transcribe and catalogue. It’s going to be years before I finish at this rate.49

The project never came to fruition, however, due in part to the lack of a willing and like-minded partner. Seeger recalls having recorded fifty hours’ worth of interviews. After seeing MacColl’s reaction to some of the material, Seeger realized that the pair could not undertake the project together, nor did she want to do it alone.50

While this project languished, Seeger used some of its ideas for her 1987-88 women’s songs, which continued to address a breadth of contemporary women’s issues. Again Seeger looked outward for her source material, but with a more intimate lens than in the previous decade. Several of the interviews for the songs were with acquaintances of Seeger’s, including women from Greenham Common (such as “Woman on Wheels” Jennifer Jones). This stands in contrast to the interviews for *Different Therefore Equal*, for which Seeger primarily contacted representatives of women’s organizations to get testimonies. Her increased comfort level with

---

48 *Needs Must When the Devil Drives* (Oxford: Oxford Film and Video Makers, 1987), videocassette.

49 Peggy Seeger, to Anne Rhoads, 5 August 1983, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

50 Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
the women’s movement, as well as women in general, is clear. Even the album’s title, *Familiar Faces*, suggests her increased identification with the subject of her songs.

The track list for *Familiar Faces* resembles the arrangement of *Different Therefore Equal*. It features nine contemporary women’s songs by Seeger, one women’s song each by Mike Waterson and Ewan MacColl, and one Seeger song about her relationship with MacColl. The album—although topical and of high quality—was released to little fanfare. Although the Blackthorne team advertised the album in women’s magazines, including *Everywoman*, the MacColl-Seeger unit had lost much of its momentum because of MacColl’s debilitating illness. As with much of her work in the late 1980s, Seeger had little energy left for the promotion of her creations. The circumstances around *Familiar Faces* and the album itself show Seeger in a period of transition: from her identity as MacColl’s counterpart to an identity as a woman among other women.

The liner notes for *Familiar Faces* bear witness to Seeger’s increasing solidarity with her own sex. In the notes to her previous women’s albums, Seeger’s references to women were in the third person, with the word “we” reserved for society at large. In the six-paragraph introduction to *Familiar Faces*, Seeger uses the word “we” or “our” nearly a dozen times, in each case referring specifically to women. Showing a new willingness to differentiate the experiences of men and women, her essay warmly describes female relationships:

Women talk to each other more readily and on a more intimate level than men do. We are public property more than men are. We have a public physical life. . . . We talk about ourselves incessantly to one another in quite a different way than men do. We are, for the most part, not ashamed of our emotions, not apologetic

---

about gossiping . . . in other words, our tongue-strings are reasonably loose and only need the right player or the right combo to start the music going.  

The right player for Seeger was Irene Pyper-Scott. A presence in her life from the early 1980s, Pyper-Scott emerges as the crucial person in Seeger’s life in the latter part of the decade. Seeger credits her for her emergence into the world of female friendship:

I didn’t talk about my private life to anyone then . . . . I do now—endlessly. . . . I especially like talking to women. It’s as if I have entered a community that I didn’t know existed, that I’d been excluded from because of my relationship with (and commitment to) a man.

While exploring these new relationships, Seeger became increasingly interested in and comfortable with feminism. Pyper-Scott recalls that Seeger had to learn her feminism, where she feels she was born with hers. Seeger enrolled in an Open University class in women’s studies, going so far as to request a female professor. Her appointment books from 1989 onward contain lists of books she hopes to read, most of which are feminist titles or by women authors such as Doris Lessing, Mary Wollstonecraft, Adrienne Rich, and Marilyn French. In a 1989 interview Seeger responded to a question with uncharacteristic certainty: “And, yes, I am a

---


55 Ken Bodfish, to Peggy Seeger, 5 October 1989, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

feminist.”57 Pyper-Scott’s influence did not initiate Seeger’s feminism, but nurtured and created a space for its development. She also ignited Seeger’s creativity: 1989 and 1990 are Seeger’s most prolific songwriting years to date.

As the Seeger-Pyper-Scott relationship became romantic, the two operated in much the same way that Seeger and MacColl had: as musical and personal partners. Their musical partnership progressed from their earlier collaborations as a pair and as part of the larger women’s group Jade. It had been formed in 1985 as a way for Seeger to keep performing commitments such as the Singers Club when MacColl became too ill to perform. Seeger had “always liked the idea of having a women’s group,” and found willing singers quickly.58 The group was composed of several combinations of women, as members moved away or had other obligations. The primary members were Seeger, Pyper-Scott, Sue Norwell, Jaqueline Selby, and Barbara Lester. Seeger’s vision for the group seems to have been more far-reaching than its actual tenure. In a letter to a representative of a women’s music catalog, a Blackthorne employee wrote:

Peggy has also asked me to tell you that she is not a solo performer, only doing solo work when appearing either with Ewan MacColl or the group of women singers which has grown out of the Singers Club, unless under extraordinary circumstances. This group, although at present unnamed, would like to be included on your list of performers.59

After MacColl’s death Jade eventually narrowed to Seeger and Pyper-Scott. Accustomed to working in a domestic and professional pair, Seeger slid easily into the arrangement. This


58 Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

59 Trish Carn, to Caroline Hutton, 14 September 1988, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
held true in her private life as well. In Seeger’s appointment book from 1989, her commitments for the week after MacColl’s death are marked out and replaced with the word “Irene.”\(^{60}\) Having prepared herself for widowhood for several years and fallen deeply in love with Irene Pyper-Scott, Seeger seemed ready to mourn quickly. She and Pyper-Scott spent the majority of their time with each other, and by 1992, their doctor’s appointments are planned together, and Seeger’s address labels read “Peggy Seeger and Irene Scott.”\(^{61}\)

The next album Seeger put out was with Pyper-Scott, as the duo “No Spring Chickens.” *Almost Commercially Viable* contains a mixture of songs on topics important to the two: the environment, family, love, and women’s issues. The album marks several changes for Seeger, including a change in singing style. Years of singing in crowded, carpeted folk clubs had instilled in Seeger a need for a piercing vocal sound, one that Pyper-Scott pointed out to Seeger when listening to older recordings.\(^{62}\) A shift to a gentler, less raw sound is noticeable in *Familiar Faces* and consistent throughout *Almost Commercially Viable*.

The album also documents a major change acknowledged by Pyper-Scott and Seeger—a greater focus on humor.\(^{63}\) Golden Egg first released *Almost Commercially Viable* in 1992 as a cassette and in 1993 as a CD, with two additional songs (“Give ’Em an Inch” and “My Joy of You”).\(^{64}\) The liner notes point to this change in attitude:

---

\(^{60}\)Peggy Seeger diary, 1989, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\(^{61}\)Peggy Seeger diary, 1992, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\(^{62}\)Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

\(^{63}\)Pyper-Scott, interview by author.

\(^{64}\)No Spring Chickens, *Almost Commercially Viable*, Golden Egg GRADE 1 (cassette) and Golden Egg GRADE 2 (CD). Title re-released in 2000 by Sliced Bread (SB1204).
No Spring Chickens: A singing duo brought together by politics. . . . With the strength of companionship and the necessary sense of humour, they fly all over the world, carrying two guitars, . . . a change of clothes and a pair of spoons (hoping to find a piano and fresh coffee on every stage). Their music is organic and free-range, traditional and contemporary (most of the latter written by Peggy and interfered with by Irene!).

The spunk of this description, and the decision to name their duo and album after insults from a prospective manager, show a new side of Peggy Seeger, one more willing (and free) to laugh at herself. This came through also in Seeger-Pyper-Scott performances, in which Pyper-Scott convinced Seeger not to rehearse their onstage banter, preferring spontaneity.

Not all was easy, however, as Seeger struggled with the condition of her body and mind after a rocky decade. The British press wanted interviews with Ewan MacColl’s widow, as evinced in hours of unedited footage for a BBC special in which Seeger was made to walk through a graveyard on a blustery winter day, dressed in black, singing “First Time Ever” and answering personal questions about her late partner. Seeger remembers that during this time Pyper-Scott was “literally my caretaker for about five years—emotionally and artistically.” Aside from her own grief about the loss of MacColl, many fans were slow to accept Seeger without him. Pyper-Scott spent time shielding Seeger from several “old folkies” who resisted Seeger’s change of partner and style. Other longtime listeners were kinder: a review of Almost

---

65Liner notes for Almost Commericially Viable, CD version.

66Pyper-Scott, interview by author.


68Seeger, interview by author, 16 January 2000.

69Pyper-Scott, interview by author.
Commercially Viable in Sing Out! commends Seeger’s “wonderful songwriting versatility” and calls the overall quality and musicianship “excellent.”

Another Seeger album was released earlier in the same year as the Almost Commercially Viable cassette: a Folkways compilation entitled Peggy Seeger, The Folkways Years 1955–1992: Songs of Love and Politics. This retrospective includes songs from her earliest recordings with her birth family through the MacColl years to a song by Seeger and Pyper-Scott. This album, her first “greatest hits” collection, caught critics’ attention in a way that other albums had not. Critics show a new perception of Seeger as a living legend, and some appear to expect Seeger’s retirement. One nostalgic reviewer describes the album as an “absorbing history of a musical life,” while others expect to hear from her again, calling this a “fine introductory collection” for listeners new to Seeger’s work. The liner notes to the album contain Seeger’s own evaluation of her last thirty-seven years of work, and it is far more brutal than the words of any critic.

Written in January 1992, Seeger’s self-criticism reflects the soul-searching she did in the 1990s. She compares the process of song selection to “going to a class reunion and seeing as grown-ups all those kids you liked and loathed.” Her comments on her own performances

---


74 Ibid.
resulted from years of being “hypercritical” of other folksingers. 75 She variously laments her vocal style, tempi, accompaniment choices, and intonation, a cringe perceptible through her words. Despite her complaints Seeger writes that she enjoyed listening to every song that comprised the compilation, and that she was grateful for the opportunity to “relive my musical life in this way, for I have learned so much.”76

After the release of these two albums and several years of touring as No Spring Chickens, Seeger prepared for another set of transitions: a move to America and a solo career. “Musically, [Seeger] used Irene as a crutch after my Dad died,” remembers son Neill.77 Pyper-Scott also recognized this, and when she felt the time was right for Seeger to take the stage alone, evidently said “no more.”78 Although her passion for Pyper-Scott kept Seeger afloat for the first few years after MacColl’s death, she was eventually forced to re-evaluate her life, from her sexuality to her career—“it was a house of cards,” remembers son Calum.79 The intensity with which she scrutinized her music was now pointed at the rest of her life. Seeger decided that the answer was to move back to her roots, to find out who she had been “pre-Ewan.”80 She rented out her house in Beckenham and gave boxes of materials to Ruskin College in Oxford, for a Ewan

75Ibid.

76Ibid.


78Ibid.

79Calum MacColl, interview by author.

80Peggy Seeger, “Peggy,” And Then I Met This Woman, 20.
MacColl/Peggy Seeger Archive. In 1994 she arrived in Asheville, North Carolina “with four musical instruments and six boxes of belongings.”

Although now on separate continents, Seeger and Pyper-Scott continue their professional and personal relationship. One of the fruits of their many discussions is a workshop entitled “A Feminist View of Anglo-American Folksong.” The idea for this lecture began when the two evaluated Seeger’s traditional repertoire. Looking for songs the pair could sing together, they discovered that the female depictions in the traditional songs ran counter to the messages Seeger embraced in her contemporary work:

[Pyper-Scott] was very instrumental in pointing out to me a lot of the precepts that I talk about now. . . . the violence, the coercion, the manipulation, the marginalization, the representation of women in those songs that corresponds parallel to the life of women in a patriarchy.

Seeger began piecing this critique into a workshop in 1994 and has presented it approximately fifty times to date.

The workshop is presented in six parts: 1) The Norm at Home and in Love, 2) The Norm at Work, 3) Enforcing the Norm, 4) Bucking the Norm, 5) Subjects that Aren’t Mentioned, and 6) How Are Modern Songmakers Addressing the Issues in #5? Seeger uses musical examples from the Anglo-American traditional repertory in each section of the workshop, which is presented almost exclusively in university settings. Since 1996 details about this workshop and other concerts have been posted on her website, www.pegseeger.com. This website reflects the

---

81 Ibid.

82 Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.

83 Ibid.

changing Peggy Seeger of the 1990s, with whimsical illustrations decorating both serious and light subject matter. One page of the website is labeled “Female Politics” and reflects the current state of Seeger’s views, while other portions are more functional: an updated itinerary, discography, and order forms for her albums.

The late 1990s were not only prolific in terms of new projects, such as the website and the folksong workshop, but also with regard to album and book publication. Seeger recorded three solo albums and compiled two songbooks between 1996 and 2000. The first of these is 1996’s *An Odd Collection*. Similar to *Almost Commercially Viable*, *An Odd Collection* is a mix of topical songs, including but not limited to women’s and environmental songs. The tone ranges from very light (an intentionally silly love song is called “Da Dee Da Da”) to devastating (“Sellafield Child” tells the tale of a baby dead from nuclear-induced leukemia). Judie Bomberger’s artwork reflects the overall feel of the album: colorful, bright, and—with images of women and nature—very much the work of an ecofeminist.

Reviews for this album were almost unanimously enthusiastic, most responding to the relaxed tone. One reviewer noted the “light conversational feel and an optimism that is all Seeger’s,”\(^85\) while another used the words “moving,” “delightful,” and “hilarious” to capture the album’s tone.\(^86\) One would be hard-pressed to find the word “delightful” in reviews of earlier MacColl-Seeger or solo Seeger work. Much of this is because of Pyper-Scott’s critique and collaboration on many of the album’s songs, and a sense of editorial restraint that left many acerbic political songs from the early 1990s unrecorded.


\(^{86}\)Mike Regenstreif, review of *An Odd Collection*, *Sing Out!* 41, no. 2 (August/September/October 1996): 156.
These songs do appear in the 1998 tome *The Peggy Seeger Songbook, Warts and All: Forty Years of Songmaking*, along with over one hundred other hits and misses. One astounded reviewer called this 364-page book “not a collection of songs, but a musical biography.”\(^{87}\) The book includes a short autobiography (“my life up to now in fifteen nutshells”),\(^{88}\) essays on songwriting topics, an “owner’s manual,” and notes, lyrics, and music for 150 of Seeger’s songs. The layout by Irene Pyper-Scott intersperses photographs and Jacky Fleming cartoons throughout the book, keeping it user-friendly. Seeger’s self-effacing song notes and Judie Bomberger’s colorful cover also contribute to the accessibility of this book, which appeals to feminists, singer-songwriters, and folk music audiences. Seeger worked simultaneously on a collection of Ewan MacColl’s songs, released in 2001.

Also released in 1998 was the compilation album *Period Pieces*, which carries the subtitle “Women’s Songs for Men and Women.” The album contains her most frequently performed women’s songs, leading off with a new recording of the evergreen “I’m Gonna be an Engineer.” Seeger explains the album’s purpose in the liner notes:

> I lived in England during the years that span the writing of these songs (1963–1994). I now live in the USA, and I still sing them in concert. I find myself changing them as the politico-gender scene unfolds. I decided to put them all on one album because so many of them: a: needed updating textually or politically; b: were unsatisfactorily recorded or mixed in earlier productions; c: are now unavailable, the albums on which they appeared having themselves disappeared.

Her essay also addresses the possible criticisms of these songs from her 1998 vantage point. She poses and answers questions about the songs’ historical relevance, political correctness,

---

\(^{87}\)Nick Crews, review of *The Peggy Seeger Songbook*, *Dirty Linen* 80 (February/March 1999): 94.

\(^{88}\)Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 13.
heterosexism, and anti-male bias. She concludes that these songs reflect “where feminism was and where I was,” acknowledging their limits and celebrating their historical value.

The *Period Pieces* essay shows Seeger on the other side of her feminist journey. From the reluctant composer of “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer” to a self-proclaimed feminist and author of more than thirty women’s songs, Seeger is now at home with an identity that was at first thrust upon her. This is not to say that Seeger is comfortable being called a “feminist songwriter”—her career and political activism are too diverse to categorize. This is also true of many of her contemporaries, the sum of whom cannot be called a movement, only a collection of loosely affiliated stories.

Throughout Seeger’s feminist work, she had very little interaction with other female songwriters. This was due in part to the lack of a cohesive women’s folk movement. While the folk song revival of the 1950s and 1960s had a decidedly male leadership, several women worked within it. Seeger, Frankie Armstrong, and Sandra Kerr participated in folk revival efforts as members of the Critics Group and as singers on folk club stages. Although the three were friendly (Sandra Kerr was once a live-in nanny for Seeger and MacColl), and they collaborated on one album (1967’s *Female Frolic*), they never developed a strong women’s niche within the revival.

Kerr and Armstrong later became more involved with women’s music as a genre. The two collaborated with Kathy Henderson to assemble the first major songbook of British women’s music, *My Song is My Own.* After the folk boom they, along with other women, drifted from the revival community, committing most of their performance time to women’s music and

---


singing in venues other than folk clubs.\textsuperscript{91} Several women who had worked within the folk community left because of an impatience with a perceived chauvinism in folk clubs. One woman reported being introduced regularly as “the red-haired, petite Peta Webb.”\textsuperscript{92} Another noted that some male performers had begun to be more aware of their choice of sexist songs, although

\[
\ldots \text{some still persist in singing them. The difference is now they get up and say}\n\text{“I’m going to sing my male chauvinist song now.”} \ldots \text{I’m not sure if that’s progress or not.}\textsuperscript{93}
\]

Seeger did not—and has yet to—abandon the folk scene that thrived in the late 1960s. Her involvement with MacColl and her loyalty to the tradition of folk song as the “lodestone of her work”\textsuperscript{94} kept Seeger from moving in the direction of her female peers. After interviewing seventeen professional, semi-professional, and amateur women folksingers in the mid-1980s, Janet Claire Wilkinson noted:

[Some performers] were concerned that their repertoire should not become totally oriented around women’s issues. Peggy Seeger in particular felt that this would be both boring and uncharacteristic of the folk song tradition.\textsuperscript{95}

While not her primary focus, there is some evidence that Seeger did make an effort to learn more about other women singers’ work during her years with MacColl. A letter from the manager of the New Song Library responds to Seeger’s request for more information:


\textsuperscript{92}Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{93}Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{94}Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{95}Ibid., 13.
Got your note. . . . I don’t have Leslie Fish’s address but I immediately forwarded your letter. . . . [Bonnie Lockhart] was with the Berkeley Women’s Music Collective, and they have put out two records on Windbag records. . . . Both are available through the Ladyslipper Resource Guide and catalog.  

These types of inquiries do not seem to have led to direct collaborations, although Seeger does regularly sing Bonnie Lockhart’s “Still Not Satisfied.” Seeger’s involvement seems to be more passive. For example, of the many songbooks committed to women’s music that have been compiled since the 1970s (see Appendix 5 for a selected annotated bibliography of women’s songbooks), several contain songs by Seeger; yet despite her extensive qualifications for such a task, she herself never instigated or participated in the production of such collections. Her creative focus has never been pointed squarely at women’s issues, which makes her somewhat anomalous among her feminist peers.

Many female folksingers and groups emerged beginning in the late 1970s, some focusing solely on women’s music, but most integrating it into a larger repertoire. Groups with names like “Hysterical Tendencies” and “The Ranting Sleazos” entered the 1980s British folk scene with an openly pro-woman stance that defied the “I’m a feminist, but” attitude of many of their predecessors. By contrast, many of Seeger’s musical contemporaries, such as Malvina Reynolds, and younger singers from the present time, such as Dar Williams, regard feminism in much the same way Seeger has. For this segment of the female folksinger population, women’s issues are among the important topics in their repertoires, but they do not define or constitute the trademark of the singers’ work. Seeger reaffirmed this priority system in 2000, rejecting an offer by Ani

---

96Johanna Halbeisen, to Peggy Seeger, 4 October 1982, typewritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.
Difranco’s Righteous Babe Records to market her album *Love Will Linger On* in favor of traditional folk label Appleseed Recordings.97

*Love Will Linger On* is perhaps Peggy Seeger’s most important landmark yet. Among her solo albums, it is the first collection of love songs, the first without direct politics, and the first that deals primarily with her own life experiences. It is also her most experimental album, yielding her first venture into electronic sound and a three-movement, nine-minute song that employs nonfunctional harmony. While Seeger’s political songs have largely been blunt, direct commentaries on given social problems, the songs on *Love Will Linger On* are more quietly political. If the listener did not pay close attention, she may not realize that she just heard a love song album that deals with older, lesbian partners. Love found late in life and relationships between women are so rarely depicted in folksong as to make an album devoted to them a political statement. The remarkable evolution in this album proves that Seeger’s musical and feminist journeys are far from over.

97Peggy Seeger, informal conversation with author, 15 January 2000, Asheville, N.C.
Women’s studies advocates often say “we’re in the business of putting ourselves out of business.” The goal of the feminist academic is the elimination of distinction: working toward a day when there is no “women’s studies,” but rather just history, or sociology, or American literature. Until classes with these names represent the experiences of women, women’s studies departments will thrive. When scholars in this field study the experience of women, they typically write in one of two genres: women’s history or feminist theory. Women’s history is the study of the lives of women, usually as pertains to a certain era or population. Discussions of women’s history may or may not include the feminist or women’s movement, which refers specifically to the ongoing struggle to end women’s oppression.¹ Not all women consider or have considered themselves feminists, and this does not affect their inclusion or exclusion in women’s history. Feminist theory primarily concerns the women who do accept this label. It is an abstract concept, concerned with the way we think and talk about women, particularly as regards different attitudes and approaches to feminism.

Women’s history is considered less radical than feminist theory, but no less necessary. The work of documenting women is one of the most powerful means to changing societal attitudes towards them. When questioned as to the lack of women in a Western history class syllabus, professors traditionally report a lack of pre-twentieth-century documentation on women’s experience, rendering the inclusion of such impossible. This may or may not be a valid excuse. Because of women’s more limited access to education, illiteracy or discouragement

from writing may have kept some women from recording their own or their peers’ experiences. More often these experiences were recorded, but not in a way acceptable to the judges of pertinent history. Storytelling, lullabies, cooking, and techniques of mothering are all testaments to women’s lives, but because they survive primarily in the oral tradition, they are rarely deemed worthy of historical consideration. Concrete proof of women’s lives do survive from centuries past, including needlecraft, artwork, tools, scrapbooks, and journals, but they are often overlooked. When a woman writes, it’s a diary. When a man writes, it’s a memoir.

Other historians might argue that women are absent from Western historical narratives because their contributions have not been as significant as those of men. The assignment of significance typically boils down to a difference of spheres: the public sphere is important and the private sphere is not. Industrialized society’s definition of work as that which yields money, products, and services led to the devaluing of “women’s work”: cleaning, cooking, entertaining, and rearing children, the occupations of many middle-class women for which there was no monetary gain. Less privileged women made money performing these duties for their wealthier peers, but as history has also tended to ignore minorities and the working class, they too joined the ranks of the historically insignificant.

As the division of labor in industrial society crystallized, women virtually disappeared from historical writings, except as footnotes to men in the form of wives, daughters, or sisters. Before the twentieth century, if an exceptional woman crossed over into the public sphere (as some artists, musicians, world leaders, and politicians did), her work might be considered historically relevant. If her experience was mostly confined to a domestic domain, the study of her life was thought to be frivolous, the sort of light anecdotal aside one reads in a sidebar after the hard work of studying men’s achievements. A legacy of ghost women has resulted, such that
if a modern Western woman wants to know the story of her foremothers, she must do her own legwork. The issue has become thornier since the twentieth century, as women have taken prominent positions in the public sphere, including roles as arbiters of historical relevance. Not only are women now living lives that traditional historians consider important, they are also redefining what “important” means.

One of the most effective tools in correcting this tradition of exclusion is the pen that writes these ghost women back into life. Many female and male historians are dedicated to the study of pre-twentieth-century women, using records and artifacts to glean the information that has been ignored.2 Feminists often speak of “writing women,” recognizing that documentation is key to our society’s value system (verbal contracts are far less valuable than written ones, for instance) and thus key to the work of revaluing women’s lives. Writing contemporary women’s history is just as important as writing about the past, as the grooves of historical tradition are deep. Mainstream textbooks continue to report primarily on issues of politics, technology, and the military, fields still dominated by men. Music textbooks continue to favor male composers and musicians—even in discussions of twentieth-century commercial popular music, a genre arguably dominated by women. The struggle to keep women alive through writing is still vital: this thesis is one contribution to that struggle.

The dialogue of women’s history is now also being negotiated in media other than academic writing. It is here that we begin to see the larger picture of Peggy Seeger’s work. Her achievements as a songwriter serve important purposes for both women’s history and feminist

---

theory. First, her recordings and songbooks will serve as proof of her own existence, keeping her voice alive in a way unavailable to many of her predecessors. Her prolific body of work gives evidence of a woman who has lived quite actively in both the public and private spheres. Some of her songs speak specifically to her own experience. Songs for each of her three children ("My Son," "Lullabye for a Very New Baby," and "Song for Calum") give voice to her role as a mother, feeling variously proud, tired, curious, sad, and amused. Many topical and love songs tell us about her political and personal journeys starting with her first writings at age twenty-one and continuing today.

One such song is "Song of Myself" (1968). More directly autobiographical than any of her previous work, this song specifically addresses the story of her life in nine stanzas, from a privileged childhood to her life as a defender of workers’ rights. Seeger was initially reluctant to write such a consciously self-reflective song. She remembers thinking, "This is an egotistical thing to do." Over time, she became more comfortable with the idea of writing personal songs, so much so that she convinced her partner Ewan MacColl to begin writing songs about himself. Although researchers of Seeger’s work are grateful for the glimpses of her life some of her songs provide, she insists that personal songs need to have a universal appeal:

I don’t want to write about my personal problems. If I do I will sublimate them and crystallize them so that it’s not an individual song if you like, not solely individual. I believe that whatever I’m going through, however I am, is the state of a lot of people like me, and a lot of people who aren’t like me who have things in common with me. I don’t think I’m unique in what I’m going through.4

Seeger’s recent personal songs are quite different from the class politics-minded “Song of Myself," but they retain her caution against “navel songs” (defined by Seeger as “by-myself, for-

---

3Peggy Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000, Asheville, N.C., tape recording.

4Ibid.
myself, about-myself pieces which . . . are generally too personalised to be of use to anyone but the singer”). Songs from her 2000 release Love Will Linger On speak to her major preoccupation of the last decade: romantic love. “Autumn Wedding” was written for the wedding of her brother Mike, but was kept open-ended enough to “be sung at the nuptials of any seasoned couple.” The many songs she has composed for Irene Pyper-Scott reveal a woman deeply in love, but the particulars of the relationship (namely that it involves two over-fifty women) are kept vague, allowing any couple to adopt them as their own. While “Birds of a Feather” slyly notes the pair’s orientation with the lines “Birds of a feather / Love to lay back together,” and the anatomy referenced in “Love Affair” is a quiet giveaway, lesbianism is not the focal point of this album—love is.

While many of her personal songs have a universal element, Seeger admits “a lot of the songs that have ostensibly not been about me have been about me.” This is true of many of her women’s songs, which have generally been constructed around the lives and issues of other women. The autobiographical elements in her first major women’s song, “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer,” have already been discussed in Chapter Two. Other songs betray shades of Peggy Seeger as well. “Housewife’s Alphabet” and “Lady What Do You Do All Day?” tell the tale of the prototypically beleaguered housewife, a role Seeger played for over thirty years. While the songs register complaints common to many overworked mothers, some details verify Seeger’s ownership of the narrative. The heroine of “Lady, What Do You Do All Day?” is a Gemini who

---


7Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
cares for three children and a mother-in-law, and “Nine-Month Blues” tells the tale of contraceptive failures, a topic to which Seeger can attest.\(^8\)

Her songs not only tell her story, but also that of dozens of others. Because of Seeger’s fieldwork-style composition, many of her songs document real women, either individuals or amalgamations of individuals. Just as Seeger’s work with Ewan MacColl on their radio-ballads documented the lives of several unsung working-class groups, Seeger’s women’s songs document the lives of women who might have otherwise been forgotten. “Emily” details the harrowing life of a battered woman living at a sanctuary with her four children and contains the performance instruction “slow, almost vacant, slightly free.”\(^9\) “Union Woman II” tells the story of Jayaben Desai, an Asian immigrant who found herself at the head of a London strike in 1976.\(^10\) The text is almost entirely in sentence fragments, and the music’s Dorian mode gives the song a non-Western flavor. In these and each of her biographical songs, Seeger suits both text and music to the character of her chosen subject.

“Missing” is the most poignant of these songs. It tells the story of Ana Maria Navarette, a Chilean woman whose daughter Murielita was a victim of the Pinochet government’s “disappearings” in 1974.\(^11\) Writing a victim of this practice into record is especially important, as public documents and other written records of the person’s life are often destroyed. Written from the troubled mother’s perspective, Seeger’s song is highly improvisatory, so much so that

\(^8\)Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 128.
\(^9\)Ibid., 134.
\(^10\)Ibid., 144.
\(^11\)Ibid., 212. This government practice involved the kidnapping, and usually the murder, of a person for political purposes. The victims were “disappeared” by erasing their government documents and any record of their existence.
her songbook does not contain the music for it. The lyric is written in the short, emphatic phrases of someone who fears that their next words will be ignored, in lines such as “The hunters caught her, caged her, Murielita,” “Give me back my little bird,” and “Even God cannot find her.” The text is simple but poetic, imitating the uneasy English of its speaker. Seeger’s song not only captures Navarette’s story, but also her dialect and desperation.

Beyond the songs she has written for particular individuals, Seeger has given voice to concerns and ideas of countless twentieth-century women. She has written introspective songs about raising children at a time during which motherhood was rarely deemed worthy of artistic or political consideration. She often speaks for segments of the population, such as office workers (“R.S.I.”), victims of rape or battery (“Reclaim the Night,” “B-Side”), mothers of girls (“Little Girl Child,” “Different Tunes”), or women struggling with body image (“Getting it Right,” “Vital Statistics”). Seeger’s interactions with many classes, ages, and nationalities of women give her a breadth of experience that is unique among songwriters. Her passion for telling women’s stories has its roots in her faith in what folk music can do. When asked about the utility of a folk song, Seeger explained:

> This is built out of a language that people speak. This speaks for a time that was not charted in the history books when all the generals and the presidents and the kings were being talked about; this is how people were feeling and living back in the 1840s. . . . So you try to say for your time what is important to speak about. . . . You try to build a link, a cultural link, from the past to the future.\(^\text{12}\)

Where women’s history records the events and emotions of women, feminist theory records the cultural dialogues that surround their lives. The field of feminist theory introduced the notion of “feminisms.” The second wave of American feminism (marked by the popular

\(^{12}\text{Peggy Seeger, interview by Judy Woodward and Pam Mansfield, 12 November 1984, Madison, Wisconsin, transcript, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive, Ruskin College, Oxford, England.}
resurgence of activism in the late 1960s, as opposed to the “first wave” suffragettes) complicated the traditional notion of a feminist as someone who wants equal rights for women. New questions arose: How does he or she want these rights demonstrated? Does he or she believe in the value of the current economic/cultural system? Should “he” even be part of this dialogue? These questions led to the development of several strands of feminist thought, differentiated by their level of respect for capitalism, approach to the idea of “equality,” and vision for the future.

A feminist dilettante until the early 1990s, Peggy Seeger was only peripherally familiar with feminist theory during the writing of many of her women’s songs. Then, as well as now, she has been uninvolved in the academic setting in which feminist theory is debated. For Seeger, as for most feminists, the questions and solutions around feminism are changing as quickly as the culture in which they exist. Of the varying theories that have circulated in the last thirty years, Seeger’s work most reflects liberal, radical-cultural, Marxist, and ecofeminism, although the lines are not clearly demarcated (in her work nor in that of feminist theorists). Seeger uses ideas from each of the feminist theories, borrowing one and then another as they relate to the issues she addresses, making her perspective on feminism particularly intriguing (see Appendix 6 for Seeger’s women’s songs classified by feminist theory). Her work answers an interesting question: as someone who observed rather than participated in feminism, what did the big picture look like?

The first chapter in the narrative of Western feminist theory is liberal feminism.13 Regarded as the starting point for modern feminism, liberalism is the theory on which the earliest

---

13 Each feminist theorist has a slightly different method of defining and cataloguing the various feminisms. I will be using that of Rosemarie Putnam Tong’s Feminist Thought, 2d ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).
feminist work is based: Mary Wollstonecraft’s eighteenth-century hallmark *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and the works of nineteenth-century writers John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill. Liberalism, though not initially conceived as a doctrine for the equality of the sexes, lends itself to the argument that women, as rational beings, deserve self-actualization and opportunity equal to that of men. According to Judith Evans, liberal feminism proposes:

> We deserve to be equal with you, for we are in fact the same. We possess the same capabilities; but this fact has been hidden, or these abilities have, while still potentially ours, been socialized, educated “out.”

The women’s suffrage movement and the Seneca Falls convention rested on this philosophy, and the aims of these women were thought to have been achieved with the passage of the nineteenth amendment in 1920, which granted women the right to vote.

As this first wave of American liberal feminism occurred alongside the abolitionist movement, second-wave liberal feminism followed closely on the heels of the civil rights movement. Epitomized by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the vision of this wave is a former housewife now in the workplace, shoulder-to-shoulder with her husband or brother. With its basic tenets in economic and educational opportunity, liberal feminism (of both waves) has been criticized for its short-sightedness. As with most recent feminisms, it virtually ignores issues of race and class. That it does not address the concerns of women who must work, women with no access to childcare, and women who find the male-designed workplace unrewarding, leaves many critics dissatisfied.

---


In 1971 liberal feminism was the softer, more easily accepted branch of feminism (as compared with the brasher character of the new radical feminism). So when feminist-skeptic Ewan MacColl said to feminist-skeptic Peggy Seeger: “Write a feminist song,” the result was the very picture of liberal feminism. As discussed in Chapter Two, “I’m Gonna be an Engineer” encapsulates the major issues on the liberal feminist agenda. The fact that this remains her most popular song attests to a public preference for liberal feminism’s “can’t-argue-with-that” quality. In this song—and in this theory—the good guys and bad guys are clear, heterosexuality is not threatened, and our democratic sense of justice makes it difficult to disagree.

Other Seeger songs speak to liberal feminism as well. “Twenty Years” addresses one of its primary tenets: childhood gender socialization. According to the song’s narrator, twenty years is the amount of time it takes to teach a girl “to want to be a wife” and to convince her that “you can define a woman: she works in the home.” The song questions the notion of the “trueborn woman,” asking whether it is natural for a woman to want to get married, care for her home, work for free, or have children. Seeger suggests that it is rather society’s influence:

All her life we nurture, we mothers and the men,
That sweet, mysterious nature of the cow, the mouse, the hen;
Diligent in heart and hand, lazy in her mind,
And not till every trueborn woman sees this as a crime
Can every trueborn human leave the past behind.

Seeger indicts not only men, but also women for perpetuating these myths of womanhood. Here she departs from liberal feminist rhetoric, invoking the idea of patriarchy, a radical feminist concept that cites a system rather than a sex for the oppression of women. Here and elsewhere in her women’s songs, Seeger does not adhere strictly to one feminism.

Other liberal-based songs, such as “Housewife’s Alphabet” and “Lady, What Do You Do All Day,” lament overworked stay-at-home mothers, detailing the constancy and repetitiveness
of daily domestic chores. The plight of the intellectually dissatisfied housewife was the focus of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she famously referred to the plight as “the problem that has no name.” Many economically disadvantaged women forced to balance a factory job with house maintenance would gladly trade their problems for the one that has no name, a fact to which Seeger was more attuned than most party-line liberal feminists. While her two housewife songs rely on liberal feminist rhetoric about the redundancy of housework, her prescriptions for a cure differ greatly from that theory.

While the weary heroine of “Housewife’s Alphabet” catalogs the unglamorous demands of domestic work and points a finger at “the system,” “Lady, What Do You Do All Day?” suggests a solution in payment for this labor: “I do the work of a dozen a day / But where are the wages due to me?” Wages for housework is an idea associated with Marxist feminism, evidence that Seeger was moving theoretically further afield with “Lady” than with “Housewife’s Alphabet,” written two years earlier. With the performance instruction “quite fast,” this catalogue song depicts its protagonist struggling with a paying job in addition to her work at home. Seeger identifies this double day three years before Friedan recognized it in *The Second Stage*, with lyrics such as “Men of the world would you think it was strange, / Think it was right, think it was funny / To slog every night at a job for free / After slogging all day for your money?” Also quietly addressed in “Lady” is a criticism sometimes leveled at liberal feminists: the heroine’s husband, Billy, “sits down with the paper, / Says ‘Girl, don’t you ever sit down?’” A man’s role in his own wife’s oppression went unaddressed in liberal feminism. Rosemarie

---


Putnam Tong offers this explanation: liberal feminist writers “sent women out into the public realm without summoning men into the private domain.”19

Dissatisfied with the limits of liberal feminism, many second-wave feminists turned to the more progressive radical feminism. Where liberal feminists are reformers, radical feminists consider themselves revolutionaries, looking to a massive cultural upheaval rather than a reshaping of the current system for women’s liberation.20 Tong breaks radical feminism into two branches: radical-libertarian feminism and radical-cultural feminism. The goal of the former is androgyny, the equalizing of the sexes through the elimination of biological and cultural differences. In an ideal radical-libertarian setting, reproduction would occur through technological, rather than biological, means; sexuality would be restructured in a free, less family-unit-dependent way; and individuals would take on the strongest characteristics of both males and females. Radical-cultural feminism’s goal is a woman-centered society, where the values associated with women (nurturing, compassion, cooperation, etc.) will defeat the inferior male values of competition and violence. Radical-cultural feminism advocates separatism in the form of lesbianism and the valuing of all things female, creating what Ynestra King calls “‘the beloved community’ of feminism—with all the power, potential, and problems of a religion.”21

From the beginning of her feminist journey, Peggy Seeger has rejected any feminism that would completely exclude men. Many of her women’s songs reflect the radical-libertarian belief that both men and women could benefit from the overthrow of the patriarchy (usually defined as

---


20Ibid., 45.

the political, cultural, and economic systems that have devalued women’s experience and worked
toward race, class, and sex hierarchies), but her views on this adhere more closely to socialist
feminism than radical-libertarian feminism. She also has problems with the type of woman-
worship often expressed in radical-cultural camps, favoring the androgynous ideals of radical-
libertarians: “We should look for what is most constructive in each gender and build on that. I’m
not holding a torch for women as the be-all, end-all perfect gender, because we ain’t.”22 One
objection she held to Greenham Common was the separatist philosophy of many of its women
who became lesbians “on principle, because you shouldn’t consort with the enemy. I could
never, ever call men the enemy in my life.”23 Despite her insistence against feminist solipsism,
most of her radical writing has more in common with the cultural branch than the libertarian.

“You Men Out There” (1995) is an excellent example of radical-cultural feminism.
Written for a celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of women’s suffrage, this piece, which
Seeger calls “not a song” but a “poem, a rap, a monologue, a rhymed speech,”24 tells of a history
in which women were once the leaders:

But from where we’re at, here’s how it looks:
Long before the time of books,
Women were magic, women were mystery.
Long before the start of history
Before space travel and megacities
Females were heading planning committees.
Women searched the fields and hedges,
Hunting flowers, herbs, and sedges;
Roots for soups, leaves for healing,
Plants to enhance loving feelings.
Wise women (now called witches)
And powerful women (now called bitches)


23Ibid.

24Seeger, Peggy Seeger Songbook, 330.
Managed life and death and birth,
Cared and shared with Planet Earth.

This vision of a matriarchy follows closely with the radical-cultural prescription for the future.

Describing what she calls “cultural feminism,” Catriona Sandilands writes that the idea was to create an affirmative space for the creation of women-centered literature, art, politics, and other pursuits in which women’s differences from men would result in radically new modes of expression.25

“You Men Out There” asserts that there has been such a space, in what Seeger calls “the Golden Age.” As she recounts the exchange of power that led to men controlling the earth, she invokes the radical-cultural objection to power-based sexuality: “I guess it starts with lust and love / Where a man spends a lot of time up above.” She also accuses the new male culture of exploiting and controlling nature and of covering “the world with fèces / Of one sort or another.” Such accusations resonate strongly with the anti-male tone of some radical-cultural feminists, as does the piece’s title, which evokes “us-versus-them.”

Other aspects of “You Men Out There” fall under the umbrella of the radical-libertarian branch. While Seeger blames men for creating an exploitative society, she also acknowledges that there has been good mixed in with the bad, as in the stanza that lists among male achievements “Money, ice cream, nuclear arms.” Her suggestion is not that women take over the whole of society or create a separate society (as might be suggested by a staunch cultural-radical) but rather take their fair share: “Fifty-two percent of the cake. / Fifty-two percent of control.” This means, of course, the loss of some control for men, a concept embraced by both camps of radical feminism. Her piece ends:

You men out there: it’s a time of change,
Of redirection—and it does feel strange.

It’ll get less so hour by hour,
But remember—it isn’t easy relinquishing power.
We know.

The radical theories expressed in “You Men Out There” are only slightly different from those in “Different Therefore Equal,” written nearly thirty years earlier, at the height of the rift between libertarian and cultural radicals. “Different Therefore Equal” is more self-consciously theoretical than any of Seeger’s other women’s songs, offering an outline of her own feminist ideals. Feminist theories are often classified in terms of “difference” versus “equality” feminisms, the former building on the strengths inherent in women and the latter focusing on gaining equal status with men.26 “Different Therefore Equal” complicates this dichotomy by denying that the positions are mutually exclusive:

Is black better than white,
Day better than night?
Without either
There’d be neither . . .
If her and him are
Indispensable,
Treatin’ ’em similar
Is only sensible.
Reason gives us
The logical sequel:
We’re different,
Therefore equal.

The song is set in a light two/four time, with Seeger often employing spoons or foot-taps as the only accompaniment. The spirited musical accompaniment along with the colloquial language and simple rhyme scheme lend the song an approachable character, one quite different from the “ugly feminist” image available in the media and the more aggressive tone of Seeger’s later “You Men Out There.” Her goal with “Different Therefore Equal” seems to be to make her point in the most straightforward and uncontroversial way possible. While this may have made

26See Evans’s Feminist Theory Today for a complete description of these terms.
the song more digestible to her folk audiences, some feminists objected. One woman wrote Seeger to protest these lines as “homophobic”\textsuperscript{27}:

\begin{verbatim}
Some we-mens
Try to be she-mens
Then say that he-mens
Are worse than demons.
Nature gives us
Equal chances,
And to get ’em
We shouldn’t have to wear pantses.
\end{verbatim}

While the tone of the verse is light-hearted, it is nonetheless a scathing critique of radical feminists of both stripes: libertarians who aim to adapt male qualities and culturalists who decry those qualities. Seeger’s accusation of the hypocrisy of these “we-mens” stems from a belief that these two thoughts (wanting to be “she-mens” and regarding men as the enemy) came from the same camp of feminists. The distinction between the two kinds of radical feminists, of which Seeger was not aware, is thus important to a complete understanding of their missions.

Although Seeger occasionally referenced and borrowed from radical feminism, it was never a theory with which she was comfortable. According to Seeger, this is a point of contention between her and her current partner:

[\textit{[Irene]} is much more of a feminist than I am, although she tends more towards the radical feminist, rather than the socialist. \textit{She says we haven’t got time for socialist feminism. And she might be right.}\textsuperscript{28}]

Socialist feminism is the first feminist theory to which Seeger consciously allied herself. Although the language of feminist theory was not in her vocabulary until her life with Irene Pyper-Scott, Seeger had some awareness of the different camps. Sufficiently repelled by several

\textsuperscript{27}Michoyo Cornell, to Peggy Seeger, 17 January 1981, handwritten, Ewan MacColl-Peggy Seeger Archive.

\textsuperscript{28}Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
anti-male radical feminists who crossed her path, she searched for other ideas. This led her first passively and later actively to socialist feminism, also the branch endorsed by Ewan MacColl.

Feminist theorists disagree about what constitutes socialist feminism. Often grouped with or under the category of Marxist feminism, socialist feminism seems to differ from this theory in the ordering, but not the nature, of its priorities. Both Marxist and socialist feminists hold capitalism responsible for the oppression of women in industrial society, but socialist feminists add patriarchy to their list of culprits. This distinction between Marxist and socialist feminists is the one made by Rosemarie Putnam Tong, although other authors leave out one, or refer to the two concepts as part of the same theory of which Marxism is the root and socialism the mature flower. As it appeared to Peggy Seeger, socialist feminism was an opportunity to explore her own oppression while not alienating the men in her life:

I’m not a strident feminist. I am a feminist who is of the socialist camp rather than the radical camp. And I like to include men in the equation. . . . I think you must include men in the equation—lots of feminists don’t.

While most feminist theorists would not necessarily place socialist and radical feminists on opposite ends of the same scale, Seeger articulates one of the selling points of socialist feminism. In seeking to end women’s oppression through the elimination of the capitalist system, women involved with working-class men or advocates of working-class men (such as Ewan MacColl) could collaborate with their activist partners. MacColl’s views tended toward Marxism (with its emphasis on classism) rather than Seeger’s socialism (which recognizes the multiple oppressions created by patriarchy-fueled sexism and capital-fueled classism), but the common ground was enough to keep the pair on the same ideological page for much of their life.

---


together. Seeger’s location may also have led to her choice of theory: Marxist and socialist feminism are much more central to British feminism than American feminism. According to Elizabeth Meehan, “whereas the politics of race was a factor in the birth of American women’s liberation, class politics was more significant in Britain.”31

Borrowing primarily from Marx and Engels, Marxist and socialist feminists maintain that with the freedom of the proletariat will come the freedom of women. Judith Evans describes socialist feminism this way:

It demanded capitalism’s overthrow; the expropriation of the property-holders; the abolition of private property, and the concomitant emancipation of the proletariat; a necessary preliminary to the liberation of women (though an “as it happens” might well be added here), and to the ending of all other oppressions.32

Evans points to one of the major criticisms of socialist feminism: that it does not go far enough in addressing the specific concerns of women. Under Tong’s definition, this is the problem of Marxist feminism, which is to be corrected by the more progressive socialist feminism. In discussing Seeger’s use of the theories, I will use Tong’s classifications, despite the divergence in Seeger’s own rhetoric.

Seeger has written many songs critical of British government and businessmen. Under the strictly Marxist feminist definition, these songs have contributed to the freedom of women as well as to the freedom of the workers she advocated. Several of her women’s songs come from a Marxist position as well. As mentioned above, her housewife songs deal with the favorite Marxist feminist topic of women’s work, and “Lady, What Do You Do All Day?” advocates one of Marxist feminism’s most controversial ideas: wages for housework.


32Evans, 109.
“Talking Matrimony Blues” (1978) addresses another Marxist critique: the institution of marriage as a capitalist tool. This colloquially written talking blues mixes Marxist and socialist thought, beginning with the narrator instructing a woman not to marry, as the institution will make her the slave to her husband:

A husband’s rights are his by law, whether it’s Rome or Arkansas,
The system ain’t no parvenu, it uses him to manage you.
A wife has rights: her husband gives her food to eat and a place to live,
After that what he bestows
Is up to him, and no one knows,
Mmm-hmm . . . .

Typical of Marxist and socialist theories, “the system” is the active agent, with individual men at worst complicit and at best equally oppressed. “Talking Matrimonial Blues” concludes in a clearly Marxist tone:

So marriage is really to safeguard the boss,
’Cause without a workforce he’d make a loss,
And how could he rob ’em and screw ’em and twist ’em
Unless he had marriage to uphold the system
That supports the class
That exploits the man
Who exploits the wife
Who bears the kids
Who lives in the house that Jack built . . .
And Jill cleans.

Seeger’s 1970s Marxist songs have the light, weary tone of someone overwhelmed by the machinery in which she finds herself a cog. This changes in the 1980s. “R.S.I.” (1987) tells the story of women now in the public work force, dealing with repetitive strain injury (R.S.I.) brought on by constant typing in an environment bent on efficiency. Using a fast, scalar guitar accompaniment imitating the women’s relentless typing, Seeger’s song features a more empowered narrator than those of her 1970s songs, one who threatens to broadcast her
grievances, picket, and sue. The song is sung with a female singer alternating with a female group, creating a Marxist-style workers’ unity:

Mr. Wadleigh, we’re leaving!
’Cause there’s not just me, there’s Denny and Brid
And Kate and Sue and Mary’s kid;
We’re the walking wounded, R.S.I.!
The talking wounded, R.S.I.!
The paralysed wounded, R.S.I.!
The outraged, weeping wounded R.S.I.!
Who won’t do the decent thing and die
And spare your conscience.
[spoken]: The world’s not big enough for conscience AND the profit motive.

The song’s accompaniment rapidly changes key, culminating in the wrenching of the established A-minor chorus to B minor in the final stanza, creating discomfort for the imagined listener, Mr. Wadleigh.

Perhaps because of the song’s public setting, one senses here, more than in Seeger’s private sphere strike songs, that these women will indeed prevail. In the public workplace there is room for grievances and for unity, powers not available to domestic workers isolated in their own homes. Much more socialist than Marxist, “R.S.I.” recognizes how different women’s public work is from women’s private work, and how different it is from men’s work. The typists are called “girls,” and while they are described with first names, we never know the boss as anything but “Mr. Wadleigh.” While many of their complaints could mirror those of male workers, the nature of their oppression is noticeably different. The Marxist edge comes from the song’s solution: “smashing up” the typewriters, picketing, and essentially overthrowing the capitalist leader.

Socialist feminism was Seeger’s theory of choice during her time with Ewan MacColl. Much of her initial political work centered around her husband’s: making the world livable for

33Seeger, Peggy Seeger Songbook, 219.
the working man. Seeger soon questioned MacColl’s work from the perspective closest to her heart: environmentalism. In her introduction to *The Essential Ewan MacColl Songbook*, Seeger writes “As a budding ecofeminist, I find the subject matter of many of the songs in this book very hard to deal with. A developed ecofeminist would probably not have undertaken this book at all.”

Through her work at Greenham Common and her feminist mentoring under Irene Pyper-Scott, Seeger came to understand that making the world livable for the working man often meant making the world unlivable for future generations. By continuing to log, mine, pollute, and mass-produce, industrialized society sacrifices nature for work, a trade-off ecofeminists are not willing to make.

Seeger’s “For a Job” (1992) articulates the struggle between workers and environmentalists. Inspired by a bumper sticker that read “Greens Cost Jobs,” Seeger’s blues-derived song indicts not the employer, as would a purely socialist feminist, but the employees:

He’d give the world for a job, he’s running wild;  
Blindfold, brainwashed, self-centred, Pavlov’s child—  
Turn forest to desert, turn heaven to hell,  
Turn home into nothing, will we live to tell  
How he gave the world for a job?

The sentiment is that of an environmentalist, but the approach is that of a feminist. The song’s harsh words are at complete odds with the seductive music, creating an uncomfortable disjunction for the listener. In her recording of “For a Job” on *An Odd Collection*, Seeger infuses the improvisational blues melody with a whispering, sexualized vocal sound that indicts the riveted listener. Pregnant pauses, ornamented melodic lines, and jazz harmonies evoke an image

---


35 Seeger, *Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 300.
of a woman draped over a piano, crooning in the ears of men after work, pretending to sympathize while cataloguing the sins of their lifestyles.

Using a torch song style, Seeger defines the narrator as feminine, and the text reveals her as an ally of nature. The basic tenet of ecofeminism is that the liberation of women is closely tied to the liberation of nature, first because the preservation of the earth is essential to all humans (“What is the point of partaking equally in a system that is killing us all?”36) and second because the systems of hierarchy and domination prevalent in the patriarchy are rooted in man’s treatment of nature. Of the varying branches within ecofeminism, Seeger is closest to cultural ecofeminism, which embraces the connections between women and nature as a source of power for women’s liberation. Seeger draws on this connection in “For a Job,” implicating the listener in the exploitation of nature (through its lyrics) and women (through its eroticized delivery).

“The Mother” (1986) is a clearer expression of cultural ecofeminism. Using the feminized language of nature that cultural ecofeminists embrace (and other ecofeminists reject), Seeger’s song speaks tenderly of the earth as a mother whose ungrateful children have begun to destroy her. The song, alternately titled “Love Song to the Earth,” describes the earth in human terms with lines such as “[She] Turns her lovely face towards the morning light” and “Who’s laid poison in her body, in her bones?” Praising the earth as inherently wise (“All in balance when the earth does as she will”), Seeger criticizes “wanton man” for disrespecting “her.” Images of the earth as woman are controversial among ecofeminists,37 but Seeger is clearly comfortable with the idea: “Guilty” (1990) also refers to earth as a “her” whose “belly” and

36King, 284.

“blood” men have consistently “ravaged.” In these as well as in her many non-feminist ecological songs, we hear a very passionate side of the songwriter. Seeger possesses what she calls “gut” politics in ecological issues, while her feminist politics have largely been learned.38

Other feminisms have emerged in the past several decades, including psychoanalytic, existentialist, postmodern, and global feminism. While Seeger’s work reflects elements of these theories, they are not yet significant in her work. Until recently Seeger’s women’s songs have used theories available to her only peripherally: through the media, contact with other feminists, Pyper-Scott, or (less often) through her own observations as a woman. This non-academic approach to feminist theory is unusual: most feminist writers (and many activists) have been part of the academy, lending Seeger’s voice a different type of credibility. Seeger’s approach is changing, however: a visit to her Asheville home in January 2000 revealed three shelves’ worth of feminist texts, many of which have been quoted here.

While Seeger’s feminist education is now more deliberate, her first twenty years of feminist writing was almost inadvertent. As someone observant of twentieth-century society, Seeger grappled with feminism alongside the other important progressive issues: environmental issues, capitalism, the peace movement, the civil rights movement, and others. An activist long before she was a feminist, Seeger gave this movement no special priority until compelled to do so. Her women’s songs function as an educational and biographical travelogue through an ever-changing landscape: two homelands, two partners, competing feminist theories, and sixty-five years’ worth of life experience. Seeger’s work is valuable not just as the lifework of a prolific folksinger, but also as testimony of a woman living and working in twentieth-century Western society, and believing in the power of music to effect its change.

38 Seeger, interview by author, 15 January 2000.
The life and work of Peggy Seeger has been largely undocumented. Mostly questioned about her more famous relatives, Seeger has had few chances to speak on her own behalf. Interviewing her in 2000 was like tapping into a neglected wellspring—one question would spawn three pages’ worth of answer, and the intended two-hour interview turned into a weekend stay at her Asheville home. These interviews and the unpublished memoirs used in this thesis reveal a self-reflective Seeger, one looking back on her life’s unusual path and becoming more aware of her own achievements. This thesis primarily examines one such achievement—Seeger’s large and comprehensive body of women’s songs—and attempts to provide a cultural and theoretical context.

In approaching the prolific life of Peggy Seeger, choosing one area of focus is a necessary negligence. Absent are her instrumental abilities, her collaborations with her birth family, her life as a mother, her extensive travels, and her many environmental songs, love songs, and musical parodies of political figures. Someone wishing to pick up the work of studying Peggy Seeger would be well-served to examine these areas, any of which could produce a comparable thesis. I chose to study her women’s writing because that is the primary source of her American reputation and her most current claim to fame. Someone analyzing the Peggy Seeger of 1965 would find quite a different route of study.

The brief biography of Chapter One serves two purposes: to shed light on the experiences from which Seeger’s women’s songs drew and to put into formal record a sketch of Seeger’s biography. Chapter Two provides a history of her most famous women’s song, “I’m Gonna be an Engineer,” the song on which her subsequent feminist work is based. Chapter Three tells the
story of her post-“Engineer” feminist experience, beginning with a reluctant acceptance of her role as a feminist icon and progressing to her current enthusiasm for the movement and for her role inside it. The musical and personal transitions we see throughout her life reflect the changing landscape of modern feminism, a point demonstrated through Chapter Four’s analysis of her women’s songs. The focus narrows throughout the thesis: from Seeger first as a person, then a woman, then a feminist, and finally to a feminist songwriter.

Seeger’s name is found most often in two contexts: among British/American folk musicians or among female musicians. Seeger is most comfortable in the former, having been raised or befriended by many of the other names in this list and having spent all of her life familiar with the folksong idiom. In this context Seeger fits comfortably among the talented musicians of her generation: Tom Paxton, Dave Van Ronk, John Hartford, Guy Carawan, and of course, Mike and Pete Seeger. She fits less comfortably among women folk artists. She is a much more versatile instrumentalist than folk stars such as Joan Baez or Ronnie Gilbert, and much more strictly a folk performer than the musically experimental Joni Mitchell or “folk rock” singers such as Judy Collins. Barbara O’ Dair’s Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock curiously lists Seeger among the “charmed circle” of 1960s women folksingers, despite the fact that she spent most of the decade on a different continent from the circle’s other members.¹

Peggy Seeger defies conventional musical categories. Musically, she is a folk revivalist, but her resume is unlike any female of that genre. Her songwriting often tells of women’s experience, but avoids the popular tendency to write for women only about sex, love, and (more recently) “girl power.” She is a feminist songwriter, but refuses to define herself as

such in the manner of many of the current generation’s “fierce folkies.” Her singing is more varied than that of the most prominent female folk artists, and her instrumental abilities rival those of any folk musician of this century. The previous neglect of Seeger within musical literature may be due to this frustrating set of anomalies. Despite the problems her curious position presents, the study of her work is both musically and historically significant. Her large body of women’s songs speaks to both the lives of women and to the theories that have attempted to free them, and does so in an ethnographically rigorous and musically inventive way.

---

2 Ibid., 481.
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY SOURCES


### APPENDIX 1: COMPLETE LIST OF RADIO-BALLADS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>ORIGINAL BBC BROADCAST</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Ballad of John Axon</em></td>
<td>2 July 1958</td>
<td>British railway engineer and hero John Axon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Song of a Road</em></td>
<td>5 November 1959</td>
<td>The builders of the M1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Singing the Fishing</em></td>
<td>16 August 1960</td>
<td>Herring fisherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Big Hewer</em></td>
<td>18 August 1961</td>
<td>Miners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Body Blow</em></td>
<td>27 March 1962</td>
<td>Polio victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>On the Edge</em></td>
<td>13 February 1963</td>
<td>Teenagers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Fight Game</em></td>
<td>3 July 1963</td>
<td>Boxers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Travelling People</em></td>
<td>17 April 1964</td>
<td>Nomads (“gypsies”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2: SELECTED EWAN MACCOLL-PEGGY SEEGER DISCOGRAPHY

*indicates Seeger as accompanist only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Album Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bad Lads and Hard Cases*</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>traditional songs of crime and criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuttle and Cage*</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>English and Scots industrial songs (trad.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching Songs of Britain and America</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>matching versions of British and American traditional songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steam Whistle Ballads*</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>English and Scots industrial songs (trad.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Shift*</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>English and Scots industrial songs (trad.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lover's Garland</td>
<td>1959-62</td>
<td>Prestige International</td>
<td>British and American love songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs of Robert Burns*</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>settings of Robert Burns songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic Scots Ballads*</td>
<td>early ’60s</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>traditional Scots songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs of Two Rebellions*</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>songs of the 1715/1745 Jacobite Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Scottish Songs*</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>traditional Scots songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Briton Gazette I/II</td>
<td>1960/1963</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Industrial Ballads*</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Vanguard</td>
<td>traditional industrial songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bothy Ballads of Scotland*</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>Scots ballads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Way Trip</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>British and American traditional songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whaler Out of New Bedford*</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>whaling songs commissioned for a film by the New Bedford Whaling Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadside Ballads 1600–1700, I/II*</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>2 volumes of London broadside ballads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Songs and Ballads*</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>traditional British ballads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bundook Ballads*</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>traditional British army songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester Angel*</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>British traditional songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Album Title</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Label</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Long Harvest</td>
<td>1966–68</td>
<td>Argo</td>
<td>10 released and 2 unreleased volumes of British and American traditional ballads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Amorous Muse</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Argo</td>
<td>traditional Anglo-American love songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Angry Muse</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Argo</td>
<td>political songs through history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wanton Muse*</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Argo</td>
<td>British songs with love and sex themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fields of Vietnam</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>songs about Vietnam recorded with the Critics Group; never issued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Present Moment</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Rounder</td>
<td>contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folkways Record of</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Songs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold Snap</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Blackthorne and Folkways</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Blast</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Blackthorne and Folkways</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood and Roses</td>
<td>1979–86</td>
<td>Blackthorne</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilroy Was Here</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Blackthorne and Folkways</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items of News</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Blackthorne</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Wind, Black Tide</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Blackthorne</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming of Names</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Cooking Vinyl</td>
<td>MacColl/Seeger contemporary songs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I'm Gonna Be an Engineer

VERSE

C

When I was a little girl I wished I was a boy, I
tagged along behind the gang and wore my corduroys;

C

Everybody said I only did it to annoy, But I was
gonna be an engineer!

D7

Mama told me, "Can't you be a lady? Your

Words and music by Peggy Seeger.
© 1976 by Stomrking Music Inc.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.
duty is to make me the mother of a pearl;
Wait until you're older, dear, Then maybe
you'll be glad that you're a girl."

CHORUS
Daintiness as a Dresden statue,
Gentle as a Jersey cow,
Smooth as silk, gives creamy milk,
Learn to coo, learn to moo,
That's what to do to be a lady now.

2. When I went to school I learned to write and how to read,
Some history, geography and home economy,
And typing is a skill that every girl is sure to need,
To while away the extra time until the time to breed;
And then they had the nerve to say, "What would you like to be?"
I says, "I'm gonna be an engineer!"
APPENDIX 4: COMPARISON OF BLACKTHORNE AND ROUNDER VERSIONS OF 
*PENELope ISN’T waiting Anymore*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLACKTHORNE RECORDS (1977)</th>
<th>ROUNDER RECORDS (1977)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Side One</strong></td>
<td><strong>Side One</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Willie</td>
<td>Sweet Willie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Built My Lady a Fine Brick House</td>
<td>I Built My Lady a Fine Brick House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging Out the Linen Clothes</td>
<td>Hanging Out the Linen Clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Old Maids</td>
<td>Poor Old Maids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Young</td>
<td>Too Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m Gonna be an Engineer*</td>
<td>Housewife’s Alphabet*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginnie, O</td>
<td>Virginnie, O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Didn’t Do No Wrong</td>
<td>You Didn’t Do No Wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Saunders*</td>
<td>Jenny Bell*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darling Annie</td>
<td>Darling Annie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Side Two**              | **Side Two**           |
| Nine Month Blues          | Nine Month Blues       |
| Good Girl                 | Good Girl              |
| No More Will I Work in the Factory | No More Will I Work in the Factory |
| Katie Morey               | Katie Morey            |
| The Maid and the Horse    | The Maid and the Horse |
| Song of Myself            | Song of Myself         |
| Do, Do, Pity My Case      | Do, Do, Pity My Case   |
| Talking Want Ad           | Talking Want Ad        |
| The Housewife’s Lament    | The Housewife’s Lament |

*Indicates songs that differ between the two releases*
APPENDIX 5: SELECTED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN’S FOLK SONGBOOKS


Collection of sixty-nine American women’s songs, both traditional and contemporary. Contains an extensive introduction about the state of the women’s movement in general and women’s folk music in particular. Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: “This is a songbook about women—many different kinds of women: women of the past, present, and future. . . . We have produced this book as a reflection of our own struggles in a society which still has little room for a woman with a mind of her own—even less room for a woman with a song of her own.” (p. 6)

*Contains two songs by Peggy Seeger: “Darling Annie” and “I’m Gonna be an Engineer,” and one song indicated “as sung by Peggy Seeger”: “I’ll Not Marry at All.”


Collection of one hundred British women’s songs, both traditional and contemporary. Divided into four categories: “Love, Courtship, and Desire,” “Marriage,” “Motherhood and Childhood,” and “Work—the Waged and the Unwaged.” Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: “we have selected material that reflects the experience of ordinary women, throws light on their lives and feelings, and links up the largely invisible tradition of women’s resistance.” (p. 12)

*Contains five songs by Peggy Seeger: “Darling Annie,” “Emily,” “Nine-Month Blues,” “Lullaby for a Very New Baby,” and “I’m Gonna be an Engineer.”


Collection of traditional and contemporary British women’s songs. Tongue-in-cheek introduction and song notes indicate a post-feminist viewpoint. “This is no more a serious book on folk music than it’s a Women’s Liberation Handbook. All these songs have either been sung, written, or re-written by me, and so they completely reflect the views of a female chauvinist.” (p. 5)

Divided into sections that are titled after different types of women, such as “Gold-Diggers,” “Teasers,” “Working Women,” “Women in Drag,” and “Liberated Women,”—a chapter introduced by the statement “Liberated women don’t join societies for Liberated Women. Liberated women are too busy doing whatever it is that turns them on to join in bra-burning sessions.” (p. 76) Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: songs about different kinds of women, without an expressed political agenda.

Collection of seventy-seven traditional American, British, Italian, Jewish, Russian, French, Irish, and German folk songs about women, some with contemporary words. Divided into three subject areas: “Songs of Courting, Marriage, and Domestic Life,” “Songs of the Struggle,” and “They Did Their Thing!” Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: preserving of cultural heritage in order to positively impact future; song as a means to combat injustice (p. viii).


Collection of forty songs (mostly contemporary) and poems dealing with women’s experience. Songwriters included are more famous than in most other songbooks: Malvina Reynolds, Kate McGarrigle, Dolly Parton, Jean Ritchie, etc. Topics include motherhood, abortion, love, housework, body image, widowhood, and others. Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: songs for creative female self-expression and self-exploration rather than direct political action.


Collection of forty British women’s songs, mostly contemporary. Compiled by three members of the Women’s Liberation Music Projects Group in London. Topics include birth control, lesbianism, media images, agoraphobia, and others. Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: “we wanted songs to express our changing consciousness and ideas about ourselves and other women.” (p. 6)


Collection of one hundred American (including a few British) contemporary and traditional women’s songs. Divided into six categories: “Friends and Lovers,” “Activism,” “Labor,” “Contemporary Issues,” “Growing Up,” “Role Models,” and “Women Emerging.” Contains an extensive introduction and research into each song and its composer. Approach to idea of “women’s songs”: research and history-based, finds value in connecting songs by and/or about women to their cultural context. An extension of the approach in *All Our Lives*.

*Contains two Peggy Seeger songs: “I’m Gonna be an Engineer” and “Song of Myself.”
**APPENDIX 6: FEMINIST THEORIES EVIDENT IN PEGGY SEEGER’S WOMEN'S SONGS**

*Key:
L: Liberal feminism  
RC: Radical-cultural feminism  
RL: Radical-libertarian feminism  
M: Marxist / Socialist feminism  
E: Ecofeminism  
P: Psychoanalytic / Gender Feminism  
EX: Existentialist feminism  
MG: Multicultural / Global feminism  
H: Women’s History: addresses  
women’s issues without a specific  
feminist theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SONG TITLE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>FEMINIST THEORIES*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I Support the Boycott”</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My Son”</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nightshift”</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Darling Annie”</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>L, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m Gonna be an Engineer”</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lullabye for a Very New Baby”</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Song for Calum”</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nine-Month Blues”</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Housewife’s Alphabet”</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>L, M, EX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Emily”</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Talking Matrimonial Blues”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>M, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Union Woman II”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>M, MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Little Girl Child”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lady, What Do You Do All Day?”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>L, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Twenty Years”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>L, RL, M, P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Winnie and Sam”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Different Therefore Equal”</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>L, E, RC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Reclaim the Night”</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>RC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Carry Greenham Home”</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>RC, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Belfast Mother”</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Mother”</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Women’s Union”</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Give ’Em an Inch”</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>L, RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Missing”</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“R.S.I.”</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>M, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Woman on Wheels”</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“B-Side”</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>RC, EX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SONG TITLE</td>
<td>DATE</td>
<td>FEMINIST THEORIES USED*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Turn Up the Music”</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>E, M, RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Different Tunes”</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That’s How the World Goes On”</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>M, RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My Friend Pat”</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>L, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Garden of Flowers”</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sellafield Child”</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Judge’s Chair”</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bread and Wine”</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Guilty”</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You Don’t Know How Lucky You Are”</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>RL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Left-Wing Wife”</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>L, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Getting It Right”</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>RC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Vital Statistics”</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“For a Job”</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Baby Song”</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everyone Knows”</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>L, RC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Turncoat”</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You Men Out There”</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>L, RC, RL, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Birds of a Feather”</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>RC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>