WHAT WAS IT LIKE, listening to thirty-five years of my own recordings? At worst it was like going to a class reunion and seeing as grown-ups all those kids you liked and loathed; like meeting all your old lovers thirty-five years on. At best it was like leafing through a photograph album, pointing at this one and laughing, saying, "did I really look like that?" This photo shows me the year my mother died, that one the week after my first son was born. This one is with friends, that one on the concert stage. In this one I am in love, in that one... I started off with a guitar, added the banjo, then the autoharp, Appalachian dulcimer, English concertina, the piano... Thus did the songs document the passage of time, even as the singing of them has dominated my life. Listening to all these recordings has been revealing, traumatic, nostalgic, sickening and stimulating. The voice of the nineteen-year-old (whose friends formed a record company in order to press her first disc) comes floating out unblemished by experience or (it sometimes seems to me) by thought. I was reminded of a conversation with Bill Broonzy at the Gate of Horn in 1958, when he bemoaned having made all his early records with their complicated guitar work. He confessed that it took him decades to learn to play simply. I was reminded of a Washington journalist's comment on a government diplomatic reception: "Senators — and — were there with the wives they married when they were young." In short, I was treated to a reminder of the process of learning.

The 1950s — listening to songs from this period conjured up an image of the innocence, the brashness of the young who often rush in where angels fear to tread. The 1960s — I found much of my work patchy. A good rendition could be marred by a few notes sung badly out of pitch, by thoughtless interpretation, or (my worst fault) by merely taking the song too fast. I was still trying to sort out how my instrumental techniques could be used, and a number of the accompaniments had classical and popular music influences. The 1970s — certain characteristic problems and habits have crystallized. In the cases where these were not helpful to the songs,
the exuberance of the instrumental work and the clearness of voice often carried me through. The 1980s see me learning, as Big Bill put it, to “play simple.” These years also see the beginning of my sinus and hay fever troubles, due to environmental and dietary factors. The clogged voice crept in so imperceptibly that it is really obvious only when a thirty-five-year survey is being made.

All this is not to say that the performances in question were bad. It is just that the act of recording has different implications than the act of sitting and singing on your front porch or of giving a concert. On a disc, a fault is heard over and over again. I am having to reassess the very act of recording and listen more carefully to myself in concert. Having become hypercritical of other folksingers, I will now have to face myself.

How does a person who was not brought up in the native habitat of folksingers learn to sing these songs? I learned most of my songs from records of field singers or from books. I had an excellent classical music education, which the discerning listener will notice immediately. My father used to say he could hear me thinking when I accompanied a song. True. I can sing a melody and see it written on the staff lines in my mind – my parents taught me well. They had me analyzing and transcribing tunes for an anthology at age eleven. There is a wonderful consciousness and musicality that shines through most of my work – but possibly too much thinking.

From age thirty onwards I was writing songs myself and became quite selective about the songs I would put in my repertoire. Both tune and text were honed by decades of singing, so that often I would return to the book whence I culled the song and find that I had changed it immensely, most often for the better. The words of the songs have always meant so much to me – you can taste them as they go by, savour the way they fit with the tune. Each song has a kernel line or two that is brilliant and you look forward to it as it approaches. You feel good as you sing it and remember it when it is past. Short-listing was very difficult, because I really like all the songs I sing. I have outgrown very few of them – a rare phenomenon, as most revival folksingers will tell you. I have chosen the songs whose performances please me now. They please me for a variety of reasons. Maybe the accompaniment is just right – too fast, perhaps – but it is good. Or maybe the voice is lovely and sweet, even though the interpretation isn’t famous. Perhaps the song has been included to show a particular stage of my development. Four or five of the songs are sung with my family or with people who have been my singing partners at some point or another. Ewan MacColl was my most constant musical companion. Through working together, we became conscious of the responsibility of the revival folksinger. I became more aware of how easy it is to change imperceptibly a folksong to a pop song, simply by altering melodic and harmonic features, by subtly changing the style in which it is sung, or by smothering it in an inept accompaniment. I occasionally went past the mark and the songs became almost stark and purposeful. Then there are my little excursions into more popular presentations of folk songs – quite skillful, self-assured and full of energy. And if their style is dated, it is because folksong itself is dated – it has been ever since it began. That is its ace card.

When I first heard my own recorded singing voice in 1954, I was appalled. I thought I sounded miserable and uninterested. Indeed, for most of my life I have been unable to bear the sound of my recordings. Perhaps this is why so many flawed performances got through onto vinyl. I just couldn’t bear to check the recording! Every item on this CD is, however, one that I enjoy listening to. I am grateful for having been compelled to relive my musical life in this way, for I have learned so much.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents Ruth Crawford and Charles Seeger for their interest and encouragement; my brother Pete for his endless patience in teaching me banjo and guitar, and in writing down texts for me (he does this even now); my brother Mike for endlessly searching for gorgeous instruments for me; and especially Ewan MacColl, my partner from 1958-1989, who not only taught me that singing is an art, but showed me who the “folk” in folk song really are.

Peggy Seeger, January 1992
Until 1940, the singing of folk songs in the English (American) language was typically an occupation of rural people and, for the most part, it took place in those areas most remote from urban influences. The oldest, most stable, and honored tradition was oral. Carriers of that tradition had become familiar with the idiom entirely by ear. There was no instruction in its employment. Individual songs were ordinarily learned by ear. The use of “ballad books,” in which the words were written down, was comparatively rare. The tunes were even more rarely handed down in music notation, except in the books of patent- or shape-note hymns, where folk tunes, set to religious words but otherwise with little or no change, were widely known.

The mass media of communication—phonograph disc and radio—radically altered this state of affairs. Almost overnight, the constant, slow, ages-old interchange of materials between city and country and between folk, popular and fine arts of music was vastly speeded up. Country singers were recorded by phonograph companies and folklorists and were drawn into radio programs. City people, always on the look-out for new things and for broader cultural life, heard the records and broadcasts, and read the books in which notations of the folklorists’ collectaniæ were published. Many of these people, though lacking any formal music education, found that they could learn to sing these songs more easily than the works of the “great composers” or even the current Broadway hits. They could be sung by individuals and by family and social groups without courses in “music appreciation.” They gave participants a sense of satisfaction of communicating something common among themselves by a medium that was common to the American people—a people so often looked down upon because it had no music of its own. And this was recognized as a healthy factor in the broadening democratization of American life.

But in the process, the songs themselves—even the idiom in which they had been molded—began to change. The change was so rapid that folklorists, who are pre-eminently students of change (that is, of the slow change of past centuries) loudly lamented the death of the whole tradition. “Old-time” country singers began to acquire the platform graces of the popular and fine arts, while city singers began to sing the songs in the current styles of those arts—a kind of musical translation, as it were. Thus the “hill-billy” and the “city-billy,” though using the same musical materials, crossed paths while going in exactly opposite directions. Some of the former, indeed, set themselves to “compose” (and copyright) new folk songs; some of the latter, to outdo the country singer in manner and style of singing.

Peggy Seeger is city-bred. But from her first year she was thrown into day-by-day contact with rural styles of singing as heard on the field recordings from all over the United States that had been deposited in the Library of Congress by folklorists and which her parents, Charles and Ruth Seeger, were transcribing for books such as the Lomaxes’ Our Singing Country and Folksong: USA, B. A. Botkin’s Treasures of American Folklore, and her mother’s own publications of children’s songs. Peggy picked up her banjo and guitar playing in much the same way as her singing. More recently, by personal contacts with singers and instrumentalists, both urban and rural, in the fast-growing folk-singing movement, she has broadened her development of a style midway between the “raw” material of rural folksong and the “consciously polished” material of its urban adoption. It is an eclectic, or selective, style. But she “came by it natural.” It reduces to a minimum the usual excesses of urban rendition of rural music—uncalled-for dramatization of words or phrases, over-precise articulation of degrees of the scale, exaggerated contrasts of loud and soft, fast and slow, etc.—at the same time avoiding affectation of the nasal or whining voice found in some—but by no means all—good rural singers. Peggy’s singing style owes most, perhaps, to the Southeastern tradition, for it was that which was at first best represented in the Library of Congress files.

Charles Seeger, 1955
Peggy Seeger on Folkways

Peggy Seeger has recorded over sixteen Folkways albums. On some she is alone, and on some she performs with members of her family, or, later, with Ewan MacColl. Every one of these recordings is available on cassette. For a free Folkways catalogue write: Folkways Catalogue, 955 L’Enfant Plaza Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 20560, U.S.A.; or call 202/287-3262; or fax: 202/287-3699. To order recordings by credit card, call 301/443-2314 during normal business hours.

American Folk Songs, Folkways 2005. Peggy with Charles, Mike, Barbara and Penny Seeger.
Songs of Courting and Complaint, Folkways 2049. Peggy Seeger.
Whaler Out of New Bedford, Folkways 3850. Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl.
Animal Folk Songs for Children, Folkways 7551. Peggy, Barbara and Penny Seeger.
American Folk Songs for Christmas, Folkways 7553. Peggy, Barbara and Penny Seeger.

Different Therefore Equal, Folkways 8561. Peggy Seeger.
From Where I Stand Folkways 8263. Peggy Seeger.
Peggy Seeger with Ewan MacColl: Kilroy Was Here, Folkways 8562.
Hot Blast, Folkways 8710.
Saturday Night at the Bull and Mouth, Folkways 8731. Peggy Seeger.
New Briton Gazette vol. 1., Folkways 8732. Peggy Seeger.
New Briton Gazette vol. 2., Folkways 8734. Peggy Seeger.
Peggy Seeger: Folkways Record of Contemporary Songs, Folkways 8736. Peggy Seeger.
Two Way Trip, Folkways 8755. Peggy Seeger.
Popular Scottish Songs, Folkways 8757. Peggy Seeger.
Traditional Songs and Ballads, Folkways 8760. Peggy Seeger.
Cold Snap, Folkways 8765. Peggy Seeger.

1. Pretty Saro
Peggy Seeger, vocals and banjo (low G/GCGBD);
Calum MacColl, tinwhistle.
Recorded in concert, November 18, 1984.
One of the most haunting of the "lonesome" love songs common in the Southern Appalachians. In it you can hear an American echo of the lyric songs from Scotland, Ireland, and England, but the technique of juxtaposing a slow-moving melody against a fast-moving banjo is definitely North American.

2. Lady, What Do You Do All Day?
Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar; Ewan MacColl, supporting vocal; Calum MacColl, lead guitar.
It always distresses me to hear the housewife put down. A good housewife is a genius, an artist, an organiser par excellence. It is a high calling and a woman should not be made to feel an escapist if she wishes to undertake it. Nor, if she happens to be inefficient at it, should it reflect upon her as a woman. Unfortunately, in our society, women enter motherhood and domesticity with a head full of pre-conceived, often romantic, notions and by then it is too late.

3. Broomfield Hill (Child 43)
Peggy Seeger, vocal and banjo (low G/GCGDD).
Recorded in concert, April 1986.
This is an old favorite, one of the "biter-bit" stories, the oppressor turned victim, but with a subtler touch than usual. The theme was common in medieval romance, and in ballad form it has been found in Europe ever since. It is not very common in the USA. Broom is, of course, a magical plant, and the story is very appealing to women who made, sang and passed down to their daughters songs about the possibility of females using their wits to extricate themselves from difficult encounters with the male. This text is from the singing of Carey Wooster, Gilmer County, West Virginia.

4. The Squire and the Colic
Peggy Seeger, vocal; Ewan and Calum MacColl on refrain.
Recorded in concert, November 18, 1984.
This unusual relic of English humor was collected in Morgantown, West Virginia. I have supplied some missing lines, changed a few words here and there and supplied the tune, which the collector did not include in the book. This type of bawdy song is very European and it is wonderful to think that the song lived in a
countryside where there was no sea-scape, no squares and where the colic is the bellyache.

5. Jellon Graeme (Child 90)
Peggy Seeger, vocal and banjo (G/DGC/D).
Recorded in concert, November 3, 1982.
This is a very rare ballad. Since the publication of Child's English and Scottish Popular Ballads, it has been, to our knowledge, reported only twice in the oral tradition. This text, from the memory of M.A. Yarber, Mast, N.C., is startlingly like the Child A-text. Child's other texts seem over-complicated in comparison. The simpler story remains a grand example of a genre not often found in balladry: that of patricide committed by a grown child.

6. Going to the West
Peggy Seeger, vocal and autoharp; Mike Seeger, vocal and mandolin; Penny Seeger, vocal and lap dulcimer.
Recorded by Mike Seeger, March 5, 1980 at Garrett Park, Maryland.
Jannie Barnard Couch, the Alabama singer from whom this song was collected in the late 1940’s, said of it: “I believe this song was composed about 1800, when there was a large migration of people from the country (Marshall County) going to the new lands of Texas. This is about a young man whose wife would not accompany him on the journey.” I have made some small changes to the text and feel that it is one of the most unusual songs of the pioneering era.

7. Jane Jane (Three Mockingbirds)
Peggy Seeger, vocals and banjo; Penny and Barbara Seeger, vocals and clapping.
From Mississippi, this African-American ring game allows one player to steal partners and jump while the song is sung. It is a popular Afro-American song pattern, melodically akin to “Sewball,” with its call-and-response chorus and short solo.

8. When I Was Single
Peggy Seeger, guitar and vocals.
From Folkways 2049, 1955.
A “white” blues on a theme of British origin, this song has variants which are to be found in practically every collection of folk music. It is interesting to compare this version with those found in Sharp’s English Folk Songs from the Appalachians. It is an excellent example of what American singers do to English folk song. Recorded when I was nineteen years old, the innocence of the voice contrasts with the rich guitar accompaniment, based on a piano accompaniment made by my mother for the song.

9. The Wedding Dress Song
Peggy Seeger, vocal and banjo (G/DGC/D).
This song presents yet another banjo style, a brilliantly original, crisp, sparkling sound with a very unusual approach to accompaniment. It has parallel octave movements against an almost contrapuntal background. Vocally, too, there are surprises, such as omitting the last line of a verse.

10. Freight Train
Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar.
Learned from Mrs. Elizabeth Cotten, a gifted folk musician from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, this seems to be a white blues very similar, in both tune and harmonic progression, to “Railroad Bill” and “Seagull.” The blues break in the middle is an entirely different song, the “Wilson Rag.” Mrs. Cotten taught herself both banjo and guitar and played music with her brothers until about 1935 when she gave up music to join the church. Even 15 to 20 years later, her extraordinary instrumental technique (she played both instruments left-handed but in their right-handed stringing and tuning) were sure and precise. I play right-handed the left-handed accompaniment that I learned by rote. The musical texture, as a whole, is predominantly in the popular idiom. (Mrs. Cotten may be heard playing the song herself on her first album, now reissued by Smithsonian/Folkways on CD and cassette as SF 40099.)

11. Song of Myself
Peggy Seeger, vocals.
I used to write songs on those long car journeys between singing dates. This one was written on an overnight trip from Sheffield to London, travelling at eighty miles per hour on the M-1 motorway. It was intended to answer those people who come up during the interval or after a concert, those who interview you on radio or want to do write-ups. It is an answer to the question about why a middle-class female from a comfortable background sings songs about working class people and revolution.
12. First Time Ever I Saw Your Face
Peggy Seeger, vocal and guitar, played in D-position with the sixth string tuned down to D.
From Rounder Records 3080, Freeborn Man, 1983.
Written for me by Ewan MacColl in 1957 and since recorded by a number of the mainstream popular singers. I prefer this version to the one I recorded earlier for Folkways.

13. My Son
Peggy Seeger, vocals and banjo.
From Rounder Records 4003, At the Present Moment, 1973.
This was written while on a French holiday in 1970 for my oldest son, Neill, who was eleven years old at the time.

14. Song for Calum
Peggy Seeger, vocals.
When Neill was eleven years old, I wrote a song for him. When Kitty was born I wrote one for her. Calum asked when it would be his turn. At twelve-and-a-half, he was difficult to write about and, indeed, difficult to get along with. Mercural, argumentative, he was neither man nor boy. When told he was at a “difficult age,” his immediate response was “Well, let’s face it, Mum, you’re at a difficult age, too!” One Sunday we had a protracted and bitter argument, just before Ewan and I had to leave on tour. This song was written on the M-6 motorway in twenty minutes flat.

15. Little Girl Child
Peggy Seeger, guitar and vocals.
From Folkways 8561, 1979.
This was written for my daughter, Kitty, when she was six years old.

16. Gonna Be an Engineer
Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar.
From Folkways 8561, 1979.
Written in 1970, this piece rapidly became the anthem of the women’s movement in both Britain and the United States. The various ritual traditions that are included in the unions’ union were once considered outside the province of women’s work (except during war-time, when women are welcomed into men’s jobs and generally make unprecedented advances in their own cause, education, and opportunities). Although our heroine wants to be an engineer, her life-story seems to have enormous appeal to women and men in all walks of life, representing as it does the constant fixing of women into stereotyped roles, usually related to, or within the orbit of, the family structure.

17. Song of Choice
Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar; Ewan MacColl, vocals.
From Rounder Records 4003, At the Present Moment, 1973.
Written for a yearly political review, Festival of Fools, presented by the Critics Group (formed and run by myself and Ewan MacColl), this song brings up the ever-relevant point of personal political responsibility.

18. Talking Wheelchair Blues
Peggy Seeger, vocals and guitar.
Recorded in concert, April 27, 1986.
Songwriter Fred Small of Boston teaches us here that you are apt to be part of the problem if you haven’t shared the experience.

19. Nobody Knew She Was There
Peggy Seeger, vocals and Appalachian dulcimer.
Recorded in concert, October 24, 1981.
Ewan MacColl wrote this song about his mother, Betsy Miller, who spent the whole of her married life combining her own domestic “duties” with other “jobs”: laundering and house- and office- cleaning. Betsy died at the age of 96, a wily tough little woman, worn out by a life of drudgery. The song is based on the idea presented in a little northern England children’s rhyme:
O dear, what can the matter be,
Two old ladies got locked in the lavatory,
They were there from Monday till Saturday
Nobody knew they were there.

20. Thoughts of Time
Peggy Seeger, vocals and autoharp; Neill MacColl, guitar.
From Folkways 8563, 1982.
This song was written to greet my fortieth birthday – it has been amended somewhat since then.

21. Garden of Flowers
Peggy Seeger, vocals and high guitar; Irene Scott, vocals; Calum MacColl, high guitar; Neill MacColl, backing guitar.
Recorded at Joe’s Garage in London by Terry Medhurst.
“Garden of Flowers” was written in June, 1989, for Ewan MacColl, who died on October 22 of that year. The tune is Sicilian and the words are by myself and Irene Scott, whose criticism and assistance was invaluable. This excerpt is from our new cassette/CD, Almost Commercially Viable, to be issued by Golden Egg Productions.
Our Singing Heritage (with others) Electra RLDL 151
Two-Way Trip (with Ewan MacColl) Folkways 8755
Matching Songs of Britain and America Riverside RLP12-637
A Lover’s Garland (with Ewan MacColl) Prestige International INT 13061
Newport Folk Festival 1960, Vol. 2 Vanguard VRS
Whaler Out of New Bedford
Whaling Museum New Bedford, Mass ODHS 1 and Folkways 3850
Peggy ‘n’ Mike Argo ZDA 80
The Amorous Muse (with Ewan MacColl) Argo (Z)DA 84
The Angry Muse (with Ewan MacColl) Argo ZDA 83
Peggy Alone Argo ZDA 81
The Long Harvest, Vol. 1-10 (with Ewan) Decca-Argo and Argo, DA 66-75
Folkways Record of Contemporary Songs (with Ewan MacColl) Folkways 8736
Poetry and Song, Vol. 1-14 Argo ZDA 50-63
The Female Frolic (with Sandra Kerr and F. Armstrong) Argo DA82
The World of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Argo SPA 102
At the Present Moment Rounder 4003
The World of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Argo SPA 216 Vol. 2

Penelope Isn’t Waiting Any More Blackthorne BR 1050
Saturday Night at the Bull and Mouth (with Ewan MacColl) Blackthorne BR 1055
Parliamentary Polka/Song of Choice (single) Blackthorne BR 20535
Housewife’s Alphabet/MY Son (single) Blackthorne BR 20525
Cold Snap Blackthorne BR 1057 and Folkways 8765
Hot Blast Blackthorne BR 1059 and Folkways 8710
Different Therefor Equal Blackthorne BR 1061 and Folkways 8561
American Folk Songs for Children
(3 discs) Rounder 8001, 8002, 8003
Blood and Roses, Vol. 1-3 Blackthorne ESB 79-81
From Where I Stand Folkways 8563
Songs for Peace (with Ewan MacColl) Folk Freak 4010
Freeborn Man (with Ewan MacColl) Blackthorne BR 1065
Kilroy Was Here Blackthorne 1063
Blood and Roses, Vol. 4-5 Blackthorne ESB 82-83
We Have a Dream One World
Item of News Blackthorne BR 1067
Familiar Faces Blackthorne BR 1069
Naming of Names (with Ewan MacColl) Cook 036
American Folk Songs for Christmas Rounder 0268-0269

Publications by Peggy Seeger
Doomsday in the Afternoon. Manchester University Press.

Credits
Compiled by Peggy Seeger, Ralph Rinzler and Anthony Seeger with assistance from Neill and Calum MacColl, Kate Rinzler, Jeff Place, and Ethel Rain Notes by Charles Seeger, Peggy Seeger, Ethel Rain and Ralph Rinzler Typing and editorial assistance by Leslie Spitz-Edson Photograph by Ewan MacColl Design by Carol Hardy Mastered by David Glasser, Airshow Tracks 12, 13 and 17 appear courtesy of Rounder Records.

We thank the anonymous engineers at concerts whose work has enriched this album.