

Different Therefore Equal

Peggy Seeger



My battlefield is the concert stage, the lecture hall. My job, like so many songwriters, is to place, in a memorable and enticing form, a message that, were it not hummable, might not be so easily remembered. Quite apart from that, it's enjoyable to write songs. And it's rewarding to hear other people singing a song you've written even though, as has happened a number of times in my life, they attribute it to (a) the 'folk' or (b) to another songwriter.

PEGGY SEEGER, FROM HER WEBSITE, UNDER ACTIVIST WITH ATTITUDE

SET INTO SONG

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 ...

... 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 –

1971 had been labelled the Year of the Woman, so for that year's *Festival of Fools* (the last) they decided to celebrate women, and at the last minute Ewan MacColl asked Peggy Seeger to write a suitable song. Peggy, as usual up to her eyes in the show's organisation 'and the customary domestic chaos that came with it', rather reluctantly agreed. In the event the song came to her quickly: 'It appeared so fast on the page that it almost seemed to write itself – you'd have thought I'd been brooding on discrimination and prejudice all my life. Not so.' For the show she had her first-ever short haircut, and loved it – she said she felt like a new woman. Later she wryly reflected on how incongruous it was for a group of women to be singing 'I'm Gonna Be an Engineer' while wearing miniskirts. She was surprised when the song became a feminist anthem. Consequently it was increasingly in demand, and its success led to a gradual shift in her life, later accelerated by Ewan's illness.

Until then she had largely been defined in relation to other people – daughter-of, sister-of, partner-of. Before the 1970s letters usually arrived at Beckenham addressed to the entity 'MacColl-and-Seeger.' After 'Engineer' people began to write just to Peggy Seeger. She was increasingly asked to play for gatherings of women, which caused her problems at first because she hadn't really written any other feminist songs. The nearest was 'Darling Annie', a witty love song where the woman is happy to cohabit but not to marry – a slight stirring of a breeze of independence. Written earlier in 1971 in a rain-bound car next to Loch Lomond, it's in the form of a he/she dialogue, alternate verses sung first by Ewan, then Peggy. She has the last word with the song's final verse: