

CHAPTER 4

Dancing on the Staves

Peggy Seeger



I would like to communicate to her the intense comradeship that I feel with her now – married as she was to a man 15 years her senior, constantly impatient to get to 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.

PEGGY SEEGER SPEAKING OF HER MOTHER,
UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS, 1992

Whenever Pete came down we got off school. My mother reckoned he was as good an education for us as the teachers. Mike and I would sit while he played the banjo, putting our fingers on the strings to see what would happen. He was in his early twenties at the time and never got annoyed.

PEGGY SEEGER, *IBID*, 1992

In June 1935, a few months before Jimmie Miller married Joan Littlewood, Ruth Crawford Seeger gave birth in New York to her second child Margaret, known ever after as Peggy. At that moment Ruth's husband Charles Seeger was picking blueberries on a farm 60 miles away to make ends meet, and it was several weeks before they were back together, living in a trailer on a ridge at his parents' farm, coping with dirty nappies and no running water. They were consigned to the trailer rather than the farmhouse because Charles's parents disapproved of this, his second marriage. He was already 49, and had three boys by his first wife, Constance: Charles and John were grown-up, and the young Pete Seeger was 16. He had been four years old when his parents' marriage broke up – and was promptly sent away to school. He survived rather well in the circumstances.

Seasonal fruit picking for a few extra dollars sounds rather like a symptom of American rural poverty, a variant of the British urban version that Jimmie Miller had lived through in the same period. Indeed, the terrible blight that had swept the American South and Mid-West, exemplified by the familiar images of desperate dustbowl homesteaders, was only just being tackled by President Roosevelt's 'New Deal' government. In his State of the Union address that January the President had proposed a twin programme for emergency public employment in the cities and in rural areas. The rural Resettlement Administration (RA) was designed to move destitute 'sharecroppers' and unemployed miners into refugee camps, there to re-equip them for a new life. Its enlightened head, Rexford Tugwell (known as Rex the Red to the right-wing opponents who engineered his downfall two years later) set up a Special Skills division, aimed at fostering art and music recreation to create a sense of community in these 'colonies'.

However, Charles and Ruth Seeger were not the rural poor, but the urban educated, suddenly short of work and money. Charles was a professor of music, and (using a pseudonym) the part-time music critic for the *Daily Worker*, the American equivalent of the Communist newspaper that Jimmie Miller had sold at factory gates. Charles had lost his main teaching job, more because his music was too radical than because his politics were – though this would become a problem 20 years later – and for a spell had been living on money from occasional jobs and handouts from friends. He and Ruth were almost broke. He had paid for his boys to go to boarding school, and Pete remembers once coming home from vacation and lending his father five dollars to buy milk for Peggy's older brother Mike, then a baby. Charles could stump up enough for rent and food but little else. But late in 1935 came an invitation to set up the RA music programmes, so ending a tough year for the family on a more optimistic note.

That new job was a dramatic turning point. Quite apart from keeping his new young family afloat, it signalled an abrupt change in his musical interests, as well as those of Ruth and his son Pete. Charles Seeger arrived