RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER

The MUSIC of AMERICAN FOLK SONG

and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music

edited by Larry Polansky
with Judith Tick

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With a Historical Introduction by Judith Tick
and Forewords by Pete, Mike, and
Peggy Seeger

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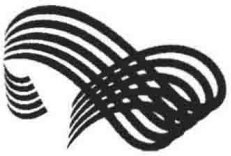
Ruth Crawford Seeger, ca. 1949–50.



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"The Music of American Folk Song" and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music
Ruth Crawford Seeger

Foreword

Pete Seeger

I was 11 or 12 when I first met Ruth Crawford, who became my stepmother a couple years later. She seemed to me the most honest person I had ever met in all my life.

One of my last memories of her was her leaning against a door jamb listening with me to a short piece of Japanese music which was especially eloquent because of its silences at various points.

The world lost a truly great musician when she died so young, so full of promise.

August 13, 1999

Foreword

A Few Personal Words about Ruth Crawford Seeger's *The Music of American Folk Song*

Mike Seeger

As I read my mother's introduction to *Our Singing Country* for the first time, it puts me to thinking about what was going on in my life at that time and its influence on my direction since. A lot of the core issues dealt with here seem both familiar and basic.

I was about seven years old as this introduction was being written. Both my mother and father had gotten me started singing ballads and songs such as *Barbara Allen* a couple of years earlier. The singing really took. Not so the piano.

I remember my first lesson well, when my mother sat me down at the piano and tried to get me started. I couldn't stand the idea of "practicing" and wouldn't do it. Perhaps I was already absorbing my parents' new devotion to traditional music and the informal ways that one can pick it up.

Also about the same time, either Charlie or Dio (childhood name for my mother) showed me how to operate the family record player that was used for transcribing all those field recordings. It was a black box with a hinged lid, and it was just large enough to have a variable-speed 12" turntable and about an 8" speaker. The needle that followed the grooves in the record could be removed by loosening a little thumbscrew, and there were two kinds of needles: a metal one that had to be replaced every few playings for commercial pressings, and a cactus one that played either commercial pressings

or the aluminum field recordings that made up most of our family's recorded music collection. The cactus needle had to be sharpened after every playing of a side, or sound became dull or sometimes you'd play two grooves at the same time.

Our family collection consisted of a Wanda Landowska harpsichord record; a few commercial recordings of southern vernacular music such as Gid Tanner's Fiddler's Convention in Georgia (I almost wore it out); artists such as Sonny Boy Williamson, Fats Waller, Norman Phelps, Virginia Rounders, Billie Holiday (*Strange Fruit*), and Josh White; several off-center pressings of Ruth Crawford Seeger's *String Quartet, Andante*; and about 200 aluminum copies of field recordings by the Lomaxes, Sidney Robertson Cowell, Herbert Halpert, and my father. So I sat on the floor next to the piano playing those records and soaking up all that great music. I didn't play instruments except very basically on the autoharp; I just listened and sang the songs.

If I was stubborn about the piano and practicing, so was Dio persistent about her mission, the one so strongly expressed in *The Music of American Folk Song*. She wanted her children to appreciate this body of music and help carry it on. I'm sure she wanted me to try to play instrumental music. And she made what I think she probably thought of as her last try with me about ten years after she finished the *Our Singing Country* project.

When I graduated from high school she asked me if I'd like to take guitar lessons. I didn't like the idea of lessons but I did go along with it. I got on the bus and went downtown to take guitar lessons. For about three months my instructor was Charlie Byrd, who taught me a C chord and basic hand positions. He was gracious and easy-going and let me play approximately what was written in a book of scale exercises. The high point in my "studies" was an impromptu ten-minute jam session during one of my lessons, with Charlie and a country guitarist that happened to drop by. Now THAT was music education. Shortly after Charlie left the teaching staff, I quit the receiving end of formal music education and began learning traditionally the music that I had been hearing around home all my life.

I'm sure that our parents' response to the enduring musical, textual, and cultural value of traditional vernacular musics set my direction. Their radical feeling of mission from the 1930s became part of me. Many of us who remain engaged in and devoted to strictly traditional music are still discussing, learning, grappling with many

of the issues that are dealt with in great detail and depth here. They are as interesting and timeless as the music itself.

My singing, my instrumental playing, my attitude towards the music, and my feeling of strong direction couldn't have happened any other way. As I read this introduction, written sixty years ago, I see what was a large part of how and why I got here.

December 2000

Foreword

Peggy Seeger

When I first read the last draft of Judith Tick's biography of my mother, I was in tears—tears of compassion and rage: compassion for my mother's battle to combine music and motherhood, and anger because she had died so very soon, before I had grown up enough to regard her as my comrade. She died when I was 18 and even had we known each other better at that time it is possible that my youth would have made complete understanding impossible. Children have a way of avoiding knowing their parents until they have gone from home or had children themselves. So now, at age 65, with a life behind me that much resembles my mother's as regards combining children with a creative musical talent, I have come to understand how difficult it must have been for her even to find time (much less concentration) to write this magnificent dissertation. In financial straits and with four children, she spent most of her time mothering and teaching piano. The transcribing was, of course, paid work—but I doubt that those who commissioned her to do that work counted on such a production as this. They probably wanted a simple reduction of the tune, a suggestion, a *soupçon*—that was the way things were (and are) done in most songbooks. They didn't know that Ruth Crawford Seeger was a perfectionist and that her main goal was to write down the tune exactly as she heard it.

Our house was run like a military campaign but it echoed with love, clean clothes, good food, freedom, and evenings of singing. Music was always playing somewhere in the house. Dio (as we called her) was always busy, always busy—and whether it was mending, cleaning the refrigerator out, or transcribing *Bad Bad Girl,* it was done meticulously. She'd put the needle down on the record, play a phrase and then lift it up again. Scribble something. Then the same line again. And again. And again. Scribble scribble. Very frustrating

if you're six years old and want to hear the rest of the song. She'd sing *Groundhog* to us while we were running clothes through the old manual wringer or *Hanging Out the Linen Clothes* while pinning the sheets up on the big rack in the cellar. When Charlie (our father) came home at night, there would be supper, family time, and then music when we were in bed. They'd talk a lot about the work and then she'd play classical music on the piano.

This monograph, unedited, sat in my attic for 20 years awaiting my attention as editor. I never could have done it. It needed someone with a better understanding of the whole Ruth Crawford Seeger, the RCS that I did not confront until I read Judith Tick's superb book. But now—my anger has dispersed. After all, what do my children really know of me? Now, every publication, critique, recording or review that appears makes me glow, makes me wish so hard that she was here NOW—not only to see that she has at last been acclaimed as she deserved, but to know that I, for one, regard myself as her comrade.

Historical Introduction: The Salvation of Writing Things Down

Judith Tick

This is a small book about small things. Sharps and flats, ties, dots and rests, flags added to note-heads here not there, movable bar lines, tiny curved lines called phrases, words altered by consonants added or subtracted, breaths taken in and let out later rather than sooner.

Making decisions about such small things occupied Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) from about 1937 to 1941, as she prepared transcriptions based on field recordings collected by John and Alan Lomax for their second American folk music anthology, *Our Singing Country* (1941).[1] As pioneering collectors of American folk music, the Lomaxes planned *Our Singing Country* as a sequel to their very successful *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934). Although the book did not sell as well as its predecessor (disappointing Alan Lomax in particular), *Our Singing Country* today commands indisputable stature in the literature of American traditional music. Crawford Seeger's superb craftsmanship in capturing what the composer Marc Blitzstein called "the alive musical moment" set standards for thoroughness and excellence which remain unsurpassed in twentieth-century anthologies devoted to this repertory. Blitzstein, who praised her "extraordinary precision and love," noted how the complexities of folk style held "no terrors for her."[2]

Blitzstein was right about the quality of her work, but wrong about the terrors. The more she listened, the more she heard. The more she heard, the greater the aesthetic challenge loomed about making the right choices. "She was just going to do the absolute best job possible—whatever it required," says Pete Seeger, witness to his stepmother's "fantastic determination." "I remember one week she

was asking everybody to listen to a certain work song—some guy was hollering out in the fields and she said, 'Is that an A or an A sharp there?' And we'd listen to it and she knew she had to put down one or the other, and you know, what to do, what would be the best thing."[3] How to make clumsy Western-music notation express the intricacies of oral tradition? How to capture what Alan Lomax later described as its "ultimate originality"?[4] As Crawford Seeger traversed the minefields of African American spirituals, Caribbean part songs, cowboy ballads, Cajun lullabies, and Anglo-American fiddle tunes, a project which was supposed to take one year stretched into three. About 300 transcriptions later, when it came time to write her music editor's introduction for *Our Singing Country,* she produced *The Music of American Folk Song.*

The table of contents immediately shows the depth and range of her systematic investigation. Separate sections on "A Note on Transcription" and "Notes on the Songs and on Manners of Singing" are elaborated through precise scientifically articulated categories. Validating the idea of singing style as a worthy area of investigation, she documented every aspect of performance practice as fully as possible and then theorized her conclusions from the results. Concepts such as "majority usage" (Section 8) and "song norm" (Section 7) still retain their relevance. Fascinating case studies of multiple solutions to one transcription treat the level of detail as a negotiation between transcriber, singer, and new audience.

Crawford Seeger brought the powers of a composer to her project. Space here does not permit much recounting of her career as a pivotal figure in the post-Ives generation of American modernist composers, of her contemporary stature as an explorer of modern dissonance, or of the challenge such great works as her *String Quartet 1931* continue to pose. Small wonder, then, that *The Music of American Folk Song* allows us to hear American folk music through the ears of a composer and to appreciate musical nuances that might otherwise be missed. Of many cases in point I particularly relish the diagrams showing levels of transcription detail, moving from simple to complex in layers. As Crawford Seeger adds subtleties of pitch and rhythm to increasingly elaborate transcriptions for her illustration of options (as in the holler *Make Me a Garment,* Figure 8), we see through her x-ray ears to the inside of music-making.

Crawford Seeger intended *The Music of American Folk Song* to partner *Our Singing Country* as a long appendix. Perhaps a less ide-

alistic person would have known from the start that such a visionary project, written in highly technical language—"an academic thesis" as the publishers described it—just might not get published as part of a commercial book. But Crawford Seeger, believing quite rightly that her treatment of American folk music was unique, assumed that the sheer originality of her work would jump over market hurdles. "She felt she'd have an argument, but she'd win," Pete Seeger recalled. [It was] "a big disappointment of the last ten years of her life. I was down in Washington when the Lomaxes said no and stood firm. She was very downcast for a while. I think she hoped she'd publish it some day."[5] Crawford Seeger was right about *The Music of American Folk Song*. It was unique then and it is unique now. Nothing else like it exists in the scholarly literature about American folk style.

How to make sense of the whole enterprise? As we explore its historical contexts, themes that shaped the century come into play: the link between nationalism and folk expression; the use of tradition as a wellspring for modernism; the transatlantic and transpacific interest in comparative musicology (or ethnomusicology, as it is now known).

Transcription loomed large in the early seminal work of pioneers in comparative musicology, such as Béla Bartók and the Hungarian émigré-scholar George Herzog. Crawford Seeger's work shares their intellectual intensity and accepts the profound responsibility they placed on the transcription process. In his posts at various American universities, Herzog had a major influence on the early priorities of comparative musicology. Crawford Seeger knew his work well, citing it in *The Music of American Folk Song*.[6] Here Charles Seeger 's early interest in the field—he was a co-founder of the pioneering American Society for Comparative Musicology—also played a part.[7] She "had read her Bartók and she had taken it very seriously, as she should," Alan Lomax said. "And she had read her Herzog; and she set out to make music look that way . . . and we went with her."[8] Their optimism drew on the energies of the moment, coalescing around the American urban folk revival movement.

The Music of American Folk Song stands at the threshold of the American urban folk revival movement in the late 1930s and 1940s—just at the time when folk music was being "discovered" by a middle-class urban public and coming into the consciousness of the country. We can only summarize briefly a historical narrative that many

writers have shaped.[9] In the early decades of the century it was widely assumed that America had no folk music because it was a "mongrel" nation, where vestiges of old-country culture survived in isolation but nothing new of value was being created in this vast place that lacked pedigree. Such restrictive ideology was somewhat destabilized in the 1920s and 1930s through a variety of media, including race and hillbilly recordings and new folk song anthologies in print. Now the musics of the people deprecated by some in the scholarly establishment as "Niggah convicts and white bums" and the "underdog classes"—in short, the ethnic styles of the rural poor—were beginning their odyssey from the margins into the center of defining American identity.[10] By the end of the 1930s and early 1940s, in some important ways "regional" went "national," as folk music laid claim to the stature of an inclusive "American" legacy and the prestige of symbolic democratic art. In 1939 a famous modernist critic, Paul Rosenfeld, acknowledged the dynamic of conversion and the before-and-after that shaped the urban folk revival:

> A sensitiveness to the American folksong . . . on the part of the members of the urban and "educated" public was an event of the most recent years. It was said that, unlike Russia, France and Germany, the United States possessed no folk music. That of the Negro was quite simply "African." That of the mountaineers—one had the word of earlier ballad-collectors—was entirely Anglo-Celtic. The emergence into full view of the American folksong, if not the main musical event of the present, is its main American-musical one.[11]

Among those who pushed "the emergence into full view of American folksong," Crawford Seeger and her New Deal colleagues deserve major credit. This story, so often told in terms of its great performers like Huddie Ledbetter and Woody Guthrie, unfolded through office-desk memos as well as purple-ditto-machined songsheets and through explicit cultural policy formulated by the White House. Decades later Alan Lomax stated it succinctly: "The revival really began under the New Deal in Washington. . . . They [the Roosevelts, the Hopkinses and the Tugwells] . . . saw that the country lacked a feeling of unity. They hoped that the cultivation of folk music, and the spread of the feeling of cultural unity that lies somehow embedded in our big and crazy patchwork of folksong, would give Ameri-

cans the feeling that they all belonged to the same kind of culture."[12] In 1939, when the king and queen of England visited the Roosevelt White House, they heard Marian Anderson sing art songs and black spirituals, Alan Lomax play cowboy songs, and the Coon Creek Girls of Kentucky sing Southern mountain music.

In Washington, D. C., Crawford Seeger worked within an informal collective of New Deal activists, which in addition to her collaborator, Alan Lomax, included her husband, Charles Seeger, and their friend, the writer Benjamin Botkin. Empowered through federally funded cultural programs (such as the WPA Federal Writers Project and the Federal Music Project, the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, and the expanding Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress), they provided ideological momentum and centralized projects of collection and documentation. As one historian has recently remarked, "they were creators as well as caretakers of a tradition."[13] Focusing on literature, Botkin argued for a dynamic view of folk expression as "functional" rather than antiquarian.[14] Charles Seeger jump-started American ethnomusicology from his analysis of folk-tune variants, and he reproached professional musicians (particularly teachers) for "deserting" American music.[15]

So much passion flowed from New Deal values into Crawford Seeger's work. She wrote *The Music of American Folk Song* as if she were writing a lawyer's brief for the Supreme Court of national cultural justice. She grappled with these questions: What constitutes American musical traditions in a multiethnic nation of immigrants? How do we experience (both appreciate and participate in) "folk culture" including folk art and folk music as living realities rather than antiquities? The more convention argued that folk song originated in some netherworld often labeled the "childhood of the race" and characterized its essence as "primitive" simplicity, the more she documented its complexity.[16] The more the music-appreciator movement touted classical music as the only kind of "good music," the more she celebrated the oppositional aspects of folk song practice. Her work acted as a gateway between past and present, creating different access points for multiple ways of hearing the old as new. Like Bartók, she admired oral tradition for the ways it flouted Romantic aesthetics. Just as he stressed the potential of Hungarian peasant music to counter the "excesses of Romanticists," so Crawford Seeger pointed to aspects of American folk music practice which were oppositional: where singing without dynamic variation seemed less