

After Hiroshima
Interview transcript

Interviewee: Peggy Seeger [PS] D.O.B 17/06/1935

Interviewer: Lucy Anderson-Jones (LAJ)
Ruth Dewa [RD]

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[First part of the interview has been lost]

PS: By the time the late 40s hit it was obvious that this was going to be a huge problem to anybody [rest of sentence obscured by Interviewer 1 murmuring]. I mean, they just didn't discuss politics at the table. So when I got involved with Ewan MacColl, which was 1956, '57, '58, '59, '60, I came to live here actually in January of 1959. And I was on the first Aldermaston March, I remember it very vividly, I mean, anyone who was vaguely left-wing or humanistic or socialist or anything was on that march and they were huge the marches... uh, and of course America was busy ringing Russia with a whole stack of air bases and they were coming to here, so the real question is why not get involved, a huge number of people were involved.

LAJ: And...

PS: I don't think there was any discrimination of people who were involved in that, I don't think we were hounded at the time 'cos it's such a natural thing to be against something so enormous.

LAJ: I read somewhere that there were mothers with prams and things like that?

PS: There were what?

LAJ: Mothers with prams.

PS: Oh gosh yes, there were toddlers, you know, and strollers and babies on backs. Old, young, I mean the march to Aldermaston was epic! I mean, you'd come over one hill and there would be two or three hills ahead of you and the march was snaking ahead of you.

LAJ: Wow.

PS: And different forms of music about every 150 feet.

LAJ: [Interrupts] Didn't they try... sorry go on.

PS: They had music on the marches.

LAJ: I was going to say, didn't they try to start them so that they were silent marches?

PS: Although you marched past Aldermaston silent. **(2:00)** You went quiet when you got near it. But the march itself wasn't silent, not that I remember.

LAJ: Right. And where did the songs come from, where did the music come from?

PS: Well there was music of all sorts. There were West Indian bands, there were jazz bands, there were folk bands, there was brass bands... there were even some classical players. The whole lot, there

was an amazing variety... and then there were some people like us, we handed out song sheets and um, for anyone that was standing near you, I don't have the kind of voice to sing on a march at all, so I hardly sang at all... I don't think I even took an instrument. You just marched and somebody would start a chant and everybody would join in. Ewan made a song called, oh golly, 'Buddy Won't You Join in the Line' and it was based on an American song, 'Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line' and I made one based on a gospel song called 'There's Better Things for You' but I wasn't particularly good at that kind of thing so...

LAJ: But were people writing songs then printing up a song sheet?

PS: Yeah, and one of the good ones that did that was Karl Dallas, you might want to get hold of him because he was instrumental in that... but um... I don't think we were part of a group at that time, we had a new baby. When was the first Aldermaston march?'60? '59 '58?

LAJ: '59 I think.

PS: '59...right. That would have been... I had my first son in March of '59 so...

LAJ: And was he with you?

PS: Sorry?

LAJ: Was your son with you?

PS: No, I didn't bring him on marches, no.

LAJ: [Laughs]. Sorry I stopped you in your tracks. So...

PS: [Laughs] That's alright, no that's ok.

LAJ: I'm surprised you didn't take an instrument.

PS: Maybe I did, I just don't remember. My banjo would be the one I would have taken... maybe I did but I really don't remember.

LAJ: And what were you doing, were you sleeping places at night then joining back again the next day?

PS: We slept over one night. Um, my mother in law was taking care of the baby. We didn't do the whole march, we slept over I think the last night before marching past Aldermaston. We joined the march late, didn't set out from London. **(5:00)**

LAJ: Right. And...

PS: In those days you could move along the line and see people you knew.

LAJ: So it was like, not like the more recent anti-Iraq march where you'd be lucky if you could get four foot ahead of yourself, you could actually catch up with people or fall back?

PS: Oh yes, mmhmm yeah. We marched on a lot of marches, through London, out to somewhere. I remember one march, during the Vietnam War, where we rounded a corner and the police had decided the march, they'd just come right across and we found ourselves in the very front line, which was terrifying. In front of a row of police with the batons and everything. Yes, but the Aldermaston

marches, I don't know how often they were, **(6:00)** we had done several but we only stayed overnight on one.

LAJ: I think they were annual for a while.

PS: No, we marched and marched and marched.

LAJ: [Interrupts] What do you think...

PS: With the big boots on, you know.

LAJ: Yeah sure, otherwise you'd be really suffering. What impact do you think music makes on protest. What difference does it make?

PS: It made a huge difference on the Aldermaston March, because it kept everybody cheery. Um, it could bring things together and there were some of the songs that had really nice chants to them. I don't remember very many of them. In fact I hardly remember any of them. But Karl Dallas would remind you of them without a doubt... I mean we're talking 60 years ago.

LAJ: Yeah I can barely do last week.

PS: [Laughs] Well last week is probably harder than 60 years ago.

LAJ: Probably true. How were the songs devised, do you know?

PS: Well the folk music movement was based on American songs at that time. A lot of people knew, you know, 'Rock Island Line' and 'Midnight Special'. I don't think 'We Shall Overcome' has worked on yet but they were using chain gang songs and there were some of the early shanties that were used.

LAJ: I'd have loved to be able to walk down and hear the different kinds of music from different groups.

PS: That was, that was one of the best things. You could walk a lot faster and catch up with something that was ahead of you. But you had to remember where your section was and if you'd left somebody near and dear there, otherwise you'd lose them forever!

LAJ: Yeah I can imagine, you'd have to have somebody holding an umbrella up or something to find you, like a tour guide.

PS: Yeah but there were marchers of all ages, which was quite extraordinary. **(8:00)** We saw people grow old in the marches... you'd march with them in 1959 and then again in '65 and then again in '71 and you'd watch each other aging on these marches. We went on the anti-fascist marches in the late '70s, early '80s, I didn't recognise anybody, nobody.

LAJ: Well that's when I was starting to get into marches...

PS: Well those had a basic weakness and one of them was that a really famous bands came to play on those and people came so that they could see the really famous bands.

LAJ: Yeah I think you're right.

PS: And when the really famous band stopped doing that then people dropped off because they're not gonna go on a march if they can't see their really famous band. But the bands who marched on

Aldermaston were not necessarily famous in the same way. Humphrey Lyttleton's band marched, Ken Colyer's band marched, but they weren't mega famous, you know? They were famous in England and you could go to Humphrey Lyttleton's club, but they weren't the mega stuff, they weren't the stuff, you know you'd go to Humphrey Lyttleton's club, which I did a several times, and you listened, you didn't howl and scream yell and jump, you listened to what they were doing. So... you went down the march and they happened to be there.

LAJ: Do you think there's still an impact now of the Aldermaston marches?

PS: I don't know, do they hold them yearly?

LAJ: No they don't hold them now, I just meant do you think people recognise how important they were?

PS: I don't know, I mean they have generations now don't even remember now when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. So who are we saying 'people' who are the people you're talking about? People of my generation of course we will remember it – it was huge, it was enormous. The CND scene and the whole Ban the Bomb scene and the Committee of 100 was fantastic. It closed down the whole centre of London.

LAJ: Really?

PS: Yeah, the sit down of the Committee of 100. People sat down all the way from Trafalgar Square down to Westminster Bridge. And the police rode among us with horses...

LAJ: [Interrupts] Wow. Now that must have been scary. That must have been really scary to be loomed over by a police horse.

PS: I've been shoved up against iron railings when I was pregnant. They side-step them. The horses know how to side step and just push you against the railings. You know, they do. They're well trained. Will you call me back? **(11:00)**

[Beeping]

PS: One of the songs that I made which is called 'Four Minute Warning', which I wrote after seeing that film, which I think is called the Four Minute Warning, really... expresses, it takes four minutes to sing. Exactly four minutes to sing. I have to send it to you, it's not one that you would sing on a picket line or anything, no way. It's a frightening one, it's apocalyptic.

LAJ: How did people... The marches seemed to have been quite optimistic, really believing that the bomb could be stopped.

PS: Yeah well you have to keep marches optimistic. There's no use... people won't march in a depressive mood. You have to march with hope.

LAJ: Yeah. Yes I suppose that's true.

PS: I've never been on a depressing march. You march because you're all together and you feel that you're doing something.

LAJ: Yeah I'm trying to think whether I have and I can't think of one. Because you're right, you do think that you're going to make a change.

PS: And it does make a difference, you know the poll tax demonstrations, we had demonstrations later, more than marches. I mean, I don't know if you've been in Trafalgar Square... of course you will have been in Trafalgar Square when it's completely and totally packed.

LAJ: Yes I was on the poll tax march [laughs]. And... it does feel... it's a bit scary but very exhilarating.

PS: Yes it is, yes it is. You're with people who think the same as you who are hoping to do something about it and I think they do have an effect. I think the more people that come out and do it, it does have an effect. Whether it has a lasting effect or whether it has a troublemaking effect or whatever... there's more mass movement now on issues than I ever remember in my life. Masses of people getting together.

(13:18)

LAJ: And the internet has something to do with that I think. Because there are a number of those organisations that, I mean I'm part of a couple of them, that join together to lobby, on the internet. How much do you think... what was the effect on popular culture of the fear... well of the bomb first and the fear that followed it? Did it change the way people...

PS: I think everybody's afraid of that... I think everybody's afraid of it. It's not like, you know, an outbreak of Ebola **(14:00)** in some foreign country.

LAJ: No, or even like the Blitz. Because the Blitz is happening in London.

PS: We came so close to nuclear war several times, in 1963.

LAJ: Yeah the Bay of Pigs...

PS: Oh, you know, we didn't expect to wake up the next morning. You're glued to the television and to the radio and convinced and the only reason – I'm sure you know this – the only reason we didn't have nuclear war then, is because a Russian engineer refused to push a button.

LAJ: I didn't know that actually.

PS: It was one person. I don't know if he's been celebrated, but he had a chance to make a decision and decided against.

LAJ: You do wonder what other people would have decided, don't you?

PS: Well, you only need one crazy leader...

LAJ: Well we've got plenty of those around the world.

PS: Yes we have. Yes we do.

LAJ: What do you want to ask, Ruth?

PS: A lot of people didn't understand... when it was in the news all the time the picture of the devastation. A lot of people understood it, but I was in, what year would that be, Callum was about 25 so he was born '63... 25... 80... so in the mid '80s. And we were doing a tour of America and we went to the Secenca peace camp in New York and uh, it was a women's camp and there were some absolutely unbelievable women there. And one of them told us about the opposition that the local

town had to the women's camp and at one point the women decided to march into the town and explain to people, to walk into town and explain to people... and the news got out that they were walking... and the townspeople met them on the other side of the bridge, chanting 'nuke them'.

LAJ: Oh god, that's awful.

PS: So the ignorance of what nuking somebody means was mind-blowing. They were going to nuke the people on the other side of the bridge.

LAJ: Yeah that's nice, well, by the time they got rid of a ten mile radius...

PS: Yes, well that's gone. That radius is gone.

LAJ: Absolutely. Just blown away. It's just very difficult though to imagine something that big almost. You can imagine it as a person being hurt or a family being hurt when you see the pictures.

PS: **(17:00)** We could imagine it. I had dreams, I had nightmare, I could imagine it. I still remember now one of the dreams that I had, you know, and I mean, that's 40 years ago.

LAJ: What happened in the dream?

PS: Uh, I set off from a distance, I was coming home from a tour and my children were there and it was like the lighting of a match in the distance and the light got bigger and bigger and bigger and then it was black. It was total black. And I knew my children were dead.

LAJ: Horrible. Do you think...sorry go on.

PS: Uh it was absolutely, and it was like living on the edge of a war zone. Where everything else was black and it was just me and Ewan MacColl. That was it.

LAJ: And do you know of other people having those same sorts of dreams? Was it common?

PS: No. No I don't.

LAJ: I've lost my thread. Go on, you go Ruth.

RD: Do you mind if I just jump around a bit, you were telling us about that instance with the police horse and the railings. Do you have any other kind of flashbulb memories of either positive or negative experiences with the police?

(18:22)

PS: Well I was pushed into the railings in front of a restaurant and the diners were sitting in there, watching out the window. And I got myself over to the entrance of the restaurant and I bashed on the door... and the diners must have seen I was pregnant so he opened the door and let me in and shut it.

RD: My goodness.

PS: Which was something that also happened quite a lot, um when the towers came down in New York. Lots of people lives were saved because the people who ran shops opened the doors, despite the fact that all this dust was flying around... it saved people's lives and that... you know.

RD: Did you ever meet any sympathetic policemen who were kind of there because it was their job but weren't against the cause?

PS: They didn't want to talk about it. No, I was arrested on the cruise missiles thing, but that's another story. But, at the trial I was gonna sing a song that I'd made about it and the judge sent me down the cells with this policeman, who happened to be the same one who had arrested me [laughs]. And he was very gentle. You know.

LAJ: And there must be police who are sympathetic, it's just, not on the wrong side, but they're on 'a' side that they can't avoid.

PS: Well, there must must be, but that... you know... **(20:00)**

LAJ: [Interrupts] You don't see them.

PS: Well, they have to do something, you know, that's their job. That's why we had concentration camps – it's their job.

LAJ: Yeah, unfortunately.

PS: There must be... I'm sure there's nice policemen... I'm sure there are. I have about 5/10 minutes more.

LAJ: Ok – Ruth, do you have anything more that want to ask before I...

RD: Um yeah, did feel a sense of accomplishment when the Test Ban Treaty was signed in '63?

PS: Well, I didn't believe in it. I didn't believe... these people... you know. It's like trying to deal with ISIS now. I mean, who are you talking to? Somebody who [incomprehensible word] Russia with bases. And the minute Russia puts one near America, America goes berserk. I know that was before the Test Ban Treaty, but I mean you have a Test Ban Treaty and as soon as... who is it now who's just blown off one ... in the last two or three years. They're not members of the Test Ban Treaty, are they?

LAJ: No, they're not.

PS: Who are the ones that did that? Some Eastern country, I can't remember which one.

LAJ: I can't remember either. There've been so many recently... Korea?

PS: So the fact that Test Ban Treaty just involves certain nations.

LAJ: Yeah it's out of date now isn't it?

PS: Yeah it was probably out of date the moment it was written.

LAJ: Probably.

PS: It was important, of course it's important but, I don't know. Somehow things seem to have gotten rather, um, you know... I don't think a whole lot of the human race an awful lot of the time.

LAJ: No well it's difficult to. It's difficult to think much of the human race when you see what's happening.

PS: Yeah but, going on the marches does definitely help. It helps. And also helps you identify different age groups. Especially now, I mean, I can't remember the last demonstration I was on. But you have a lot of different age groups now which is very good. 'Cos that's what had at Aldermaston. At the anti-apartheid ones were the people who came for the bands.

LAJ: Yes that's very true. Again, I was on quite a lot of those.

PS: Now what songs do you have from this period?

LAJ: Do you know Ruth? 'Cos I don't know.

RD: We've generally just downloaded the, I think someone's compiled the songs of Aldermaston March. Yeah it's a kind of CD.

PS: Ok.

RD: I think it's a pretty comprehensive list as far as we know.

PS: Ok. Right. **(23:00)**

LAJ: Before you go I'm gonna go right off script. Ruth's letting me do this because I'm a fan. I work with Ruth, but I saw you and Pete in Cambridge a few years ago and, I can't listen to 'Everything Changes' at the moment 'cos I've just lost my mum but I'm a big fan.

PS: Thank you, I hope to meet you some time.

LAJ: Maybe, I'm hoping to be able to come to the November concert at the Barbican.

PS: Right oh good. Right ok, good, well come up and say hello.

LAJ: But this has been a real treat for me to be able to do this.

PS: Well great, I'm interested in seeing what becomes of it.

(23:42).

LAJ: Well we'll keep you in touch because the projects that we do here at Bubble are, involve, lots of people all the way through and the two we've done so far, one was called Grandchildren of the Blitz, which was about what happened locally here and then we did From Dockss to Desktops which was the whole shift in working patterns and people being pushed out of the communities around here and people have got very excited about this one because we're also doing a parallel project in Japan with the Hiroshima Peace Centre. So, we're actually getting some input from Japanese people through that project and then feeding it onwards so it's gathering pace really rather nicely isn't it Ruth?

PS: It's very important what you're doing, we have to be frightened of it again.

LAJ: I think you're right. I think you're completely right. I think we've got very blasé.

PS: Mmhmm.

LAJ: Anyway, thank you so much.

PS: Okee dokee. I'll send you the two songs, the one for the trial and the one for Four Minute Warning. They might be useful.

RD: That would be lovely.

LAJ: Thank you so much we're really grateful.

PS: Ok take care of yourselves.

LAJ: And you, take care.

PS: Sweet dreams!

LAJ: [Laughs] Thanks, bye!