The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face

When an artist puts a definitive stamp on a song, it can sometimes obscure the history behind its writing. Such is the case with Roberta Flack's languorous, luscious performance of "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." Flack included it on a 1969 album titled *"First Take,"* where it languished relatively unknown until it appeared in the 1971 Clint Eastwood flick *"Play Misty For Me."*
A year later it was released as a single, becoming a #1 Billboard hit for a stunning six-week run at number one on both the pop and adult contemporary charts while peaking at number four R&B in the spring of 1972. Its success spurred the two-year-old 'First Take' to gold status. The song won Grammy for Record of the Year and Song of the Year.

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The song's origins, however, are neither pop nor R&B. British communist folksinger Ewan MacColl (1915-1989) wrote the ballad in 1957 for the woman he loved: American folksinger Peggy Seeger, the half-sister of Pete Seeger. There are two different versions of the story of its origins. MacColl, who died thirty years ago, used to say that he had sung it down the telephone to Peggy, who was on tour at the time in America. He had been forced to stay behind in England because the US authorities believed he was too dangerous a subversive to be given a visa, and he claimed to have composed it off-the-cuff when Peggy said she needed a two-and-a-half- minute song to fill a gap in her show.



Roberta Flack - "First Take", album 1969

Peggy Seeger had met MacColl in 1956; she was 20, he was 40 and married - for the second time - with a young son. They started an affair, and at the beginning of 1957 Seeger returned to her father's house in California. *'Things were so confused between me and Ewan that I went home,'* she says. *'He used to send me tapes with him talking on them, and one of them had him singing 'The First Time Ever' on it . . . The intensity of it quite frightened me.'*



Peggy Seeger

Seeger's description of how they fell in love is far from starry or sweet. He had, she recalls, a *'h airy, fat, naked belly poking out, and was clad in ill-fitting trousers, suspenders, no shirt, a ragged jacket and a filthy lid of stovepipe hat aslant like a garbage can.'*
On their first night together he couldn't get it up. The second time round there was time for a quickie.
'I was discomfited but compliant.'















Roberta Flack - First Time Ever I Saw Your Face