

CHAPTER 1

Prologue

Dear Ewan



Dear Ewan

I have an idea for a radio ballad which is absolutely up your street ... a dramatic ballad treatment of the story of John Axon, the Stockport engine driver recently awarded the George Cross posthumously for staying in the cab of a run-away goods train until it crashed and he was killed.

CHARLES PARKER, 12 JULY 1957

The man who started his letter with these words was a gangling red-bearded BBC radio producer in Birmingham. Charles Parker had been a wartime submarine commander, who subsequently studied History at Cambridge before taking a job with the BBC North American service. He was a devout Christian whose politics could then be described as caring Conservative. What enthused him was making much more out of radio, still the dominant communications medium in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In particular he wanted to capture in home and workplace the rich voices of real people, rather than lose their vibrancy and authenticity in the mouths of actors in the studio. The voices of working people and their varied dialects were rarely heard over the airwaves at that time. By 1957, when he was with BBC Midlands, his abiding passion for sound had been further stimulated by the recent arrival of the new 'midget' portable tape recorder. Midget for the 1950s, anyway.

The letter was addressed to a man ostensibly as different as it was possible to be, apart from the red beard. In 1929, at the age of 14, Ewan MacColl had left school in a Salford where unemployment was on its inexorable rise towards the 30 per cent it reached two years later. A failure at school, he managed to find just three jobs, the longest lasting a year. But he read voraciously in public libraries, and became an active Communist, a lifelong fighter against injustice. He revealed a talent for singing and writing, and by the time he was 16 he had started a street theatre group called the Red Megaphones. He was married before he was 21 to Joan Littlewood, who became one of the great theatrical innovators of the 20th century.

With Littlewood he spent the rest of the 1930s acting, writing, singing, on stage and for BBC radio, as well as using theatre to campaign against poverty, support the poor and unemployed in Britain, and oppose the rise of fascism in Europe. About his own war he spoke little, but he emerged from it to continue writing imaginative plays and performing for the roving Theatre Workshop that he and Joan ran. When Charles met him on one of his radio programmes in the mid 1950s, Ewan had given up the theatre – though it stayed deep in his bones – and was creating a new career as one of the main instigators of the so-called Folk Song Revival.

When Charles and Ewan had been working on that 'radio ballad' programme on and off for four months, a third person joined them. Peggy Seeger came from a New England family steeped in music. Now 22, younger than Ewan by 20 years, she had met him in England two years earlier in a basement flat in Chelsea. She had been called up while in a Denmark youth hostel, recruited for a television play because of her skill on the five-string banjo. She and Ewan had an instant meeting of minds, of singing and of songwriting, so when she returned from another continental sojourn in January 1958 her musical skill made her the ideal person to help Ewan set to music the songs he'd written for the new programme. Self-taught musically

PROLOGUE – DEAR EWAN

as in everything else in his life, Ewan was nevertheless floundering when it came to creating musical accompaniment.

When they had spent several days rehearsing and recording the programme, Charles Parker came away with a mass of assorted reel-to-reel tapes, voice and music separate from sound effects. But on trying to combine them into the coherent hour they'd planned, he found himself facing a technical nightmare, with flawed tapes, some running at different speeds. In the following weeks, night after illicit night, he slipped into a studio and worked on what he could retrieve. If genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains, he became an editing genius in those weeks. So, in that make-it-up-as-we-go-along manner, three remarkable people came together in a creative partnership that exploited to the full their very different talents.

Before we examine how that first programme started its journey, let's go back to track the route each of them took to that BBC studio in January 1958, when the first Radio Ballad, *The Ballad of John Axon*, was created.

CHAPTER 2

The Red Megaphone

Jimmie Miller



I remember ... coming in when Jimmie was there with four or five other boys. I listened to him from behind the door – he was laying the law down, stuff he'd read in books. He was about eight.

He stayed up reading till midnight often as a boy. I never made his bed but there was a book under the pillow ... He was only nine when he started to write. I watched him from day to day and knew that he'd be a writer. Writing stories for the school, here and there, and I read them all.

EWAN MACCOLL'S MOTHER BETSY MILLER,
RECORDED BY CHARLES PARKER IN 1962

What made Ewan MacColl tick? Fascinated by and distinctly in awe of him, in 1962 Charles Parker went down to Ewan and Peggy's new home in Beckenham to interview Betsy Miller. Ewan's mother was a tiny but formidable Scot, who was instinctively severe on every other woman in her only child's life, if not on the men. Ostensibly Charles was interviewing her about her own early life for the sixth Radio Ballad, on teenagers, but the recording shows he was also eager to pick her brains about her son's childhood.

The man we know as Ewan MacColl was born Jimmie Miller in Salford, near Manchester, suitably enough on Burns Day, 25 January 1915. He was Betsy and William Miller's third child, but only one other had lived for long, and that 'darling boy' had died before he was three. Betsy had also miscarried twice, so it's no surprise that she was fiercely proud and protective of her only surviving child. The Millers had been born in Scotland into poor working-class families, he in Stirlingshire, she in Auchterarder in Perthshire, from where she'd been sent into domestic service at the age of 12. Will Miller was by trade an iron moulder and developed a recurrent asthma worsened by the often vile conditions in the foundries in which he worked. A horrified Jimmie saw them for himself when as a boy he took in his father's lunch, and he was later to liken the foundry to Dante's Inferno. Sixty years later he wrote 'My Old Man':

My old man was a union man, skilled in the moulding trade;
In the stinking heat of the iron foundry my old man was made.
Down on his knees in the moulding sand,
He wore his trade like a company brand.
One of the Cyclops' smoky band, yes, that was my old man.

Will Miller was a working-class intellectual, a militant union man with much to be outspoken about, and many of his jobs were short-lived as a consequence. Encouraged to come to Lancashire by Betsy's sister, who had moved there, the couple came down from Scotland and settled eventually in a street of grim and grimy back-to-backs in Salford. In the summer of 1912 Will went with some of Betsy's family to Australia for his health, leaving her behind with their first child. He found work in a foundry in the naval dockyard on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour but, before he could call for his family to join him, his inevitable participation in a long-running union dispute saw his entry permit revoked. He was back after less than a year, his short-lived son dead, and Jimmie was born 18 months later. From 1913 until 1925 Will was in work more often than not, but in that year his health deteriorated severely, and as unemployment and his asthma worsened he would find work only sporadically in the time left to him.

SET INTO SONG

The union's funds paid him eight to nine shillings a week unemployment money, very much less than he would have earned as a skilled foundry worker. Betsy did her best to make up the shortfall, initially by taking in laundry. To the young Jimmie the house seemed always filled with washtubs and the smell of hot linen, and he recalls coming home at dusk to see her standing ironing by the dim light of the fire, singing old Scots songs from her childhood. But the shortage of money soon obliged her to be up before dawn, taking the tram into Manchester to clean offices. She was tough, still alive at over 90, when her son wrote 'Nobody Knew She Was There':

Working shoes are wrapped in working apron,
Rolled in an oilcloth bag across her knees;
The swaying tram assaults the morning,
Steely blue-grey day is dawning,
Draining the last few dregs of sleep away.

For Ewan, his father's work had dignity, but hers was an insult. From those office floors, 'cleaning the same wide sweep each day anew', she would hurry across town to scrub the houses of the better off, making in all just two shillings and sixpence a day. Once Jimmie was invited in and given a cast-off coat. The feeling of humiliation so incensed him it stayed with him for years. Occasionally Betsy would come back with a bag of chicken bones. Chicken was unknown in working-class homes, which seems startling today when factory-raised chicken is a cheap staple. Somehow this emphasises the grinding poverty more starkly than the familiar picture of parallel terraces of identical smoke-blackened two-up, two-down houses, bare floors, a single cold tap, a coal fire, a tin tub, and an outside privy. Terraces that faced each other across 28 feet of cobbled street.

Childhood

Children played, argued, fought, sang and grew up in those streets. Jimmie did too, but his mother's fiercely protective nature ensured the best for her only child, and in a way set him apart: she dressed him so smartly that at primary school he came to be called Jimmie the Toff. From an early age there was an odd contradiction in his inner life. As soon as he could read he devoured books at home and absorbed his father's radical ideas and ideals. But like many bright yet disadvantaged boys Jimmie disliked school, and he didn't prosper. He was thrashed for reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* beneath his desk, a book bought by his father from a barrow in Pendleton Market. Told one day to bring in an apple to draw, he was ridiculed by the teacher because, with none in the house, he turned up with an onion, filched from a stall on the way to school. Such humiliations corrode, and while his

passion for reading, his writing and his enthusiasm for political argument were growing, what he was being taught at school by often hostile teachers seemed to him increasingly irrelevant.

His political education began early. He remembered being hoisted on his father's shoulders among the masses packed at a rally for Sacco and Vanzetti – 'two Italian folk, working class like you, son, and like me.' Immigrants to America accused of armed robbery, they became an international cause célèbre in the 1920s. He listened with fascination to his father's intense and profound political debates with other working-class intellectuals at places like the Workers' Arts Centre. Here Will would sit over a beer with those of a similar political disposition and argue for hours over fine philosophical points, Engels v Feuerbach, or the works of the American rationalist Robert Ingersoll, in great debates that were almost theatrical. Ewan said, 'They would quote from Tom Paine as though he was a contemporary.'

Jimmie's informal musical education began early too, absorbed from his parents and from the streets. Betsy and Will had an apparently inexhaustible fund of Scots songs that Jimmie would memorise without conscious effort. In his early days in Scotland Will had supplemented his income in pubs and music halls as 'Wally MacPherson, a Fellow of Infinite Jest'. At the Workers' Arts Centre he could hold the floor and even silence the clack of snooker balls by standing at the bar, singing all the verses of some long Scots ballad. Betsy, too, had a fine voice, with perfect pitch maintained until old age – in a Pete Seeger home movie of 1961, when she was 75, she sings in a voice that is weak, but still pure. Pete, Peggy's much older half-brother, described being intensely moved by Betsy and Ewan's singing of 'A Wee Drappie O't'. In Salford, Hogmanay parties lured Jimmie back from bed down to the stairs long after bedtime to listen to their often bawdy songs into the small hours. Song was everywhere. He later described the singing streets of his childhood:

Of course there was tremendous entertainment in the street, with mass unemployment everywhere. In summer especially in good weather singers would arrive around 11 am, street singers with the technique to make the verse of a song last all the way from the top to the bottom of the street. Fifteen Welsh miners singing, say, 'David of the White Rock'. Choirs of fishermen from Grimsby or Hull. Blokes who played the bones, two bones held between the fingers sounding like castanets, spoons, barrel organs, piano accordions. I've even known guys come round the streets with a piano on a handcart. Clog dancers ... Songbook sellers, 100–300 songs very poorly printed. They'd go down the streets singing them as though it was one continuous song!

It was as though he resisted being taught – he'd learn everything for himself. Straight after his 14th birthday in early 1929 he joined the hopeless army of school leavers with little prospect of a job: since the General Strike

in 1926 unemployment had doubled. Intermittent jobs – in a wire-drawing mill until he pinned a scurrilous ‘151st’ psalm to the noticeboard, a textile magazine about to go bust, and as an apprentice car mechanic – all petered out in turn. His prime consolation was the public library, where, he told the BBC radio producer Geoffrey Bridson later:

The old men are standing against the pipes to get warm, all the newspaper parts are occupied, and you pick a book up. I can remember then that you got the smell of the unemployed, a kind of sour or bitter-sweet smell, mixed in with the smell of old books, dust, leather and the rest of it. So now if I pick up, say, a Dostoyevsky – immediately with the first page, there’s that smell of poverty.

I went through a phase in the 1930s when I literally read anything I could get my hands on. I could read Swinburne one week and Langland the next, and I found that for certain types I had a photographic memory almost, so that I could sit down and read *The White Devil* perhaps a couple of times and know most of the main parts; the same with *King Lear*. I could remember large passages of them.

He read a girlfriend’s *King Lear* ‘as she was undressing’, as he said with a typical flourish, and he wrote her essay for her. Leaving school had unleashed his hunger for knowledge (and women). He soon discovered John Stuart Mill and Tom Paine, then Engels and Lenin, who gave his radical instincts a historical underpinning. Engels’ *The Peasant War in Germany* deeply impressed him. A need for action as well as learning was answered through a lodger, Charlie Harrison, a Communist Party branch organiser, and soon Jimmie joined the youth wing of the CP, able to convince them he was as old as the minimum 16. Charlie had a gramophone and a stack of opera records, and hearing Jimmie’s wittily accurate mimicry of them he suggested he should join the Clarion Players, a socialist drama group. He began with them by performing Upton Sinclair’s play *The Singing Jailbirds*, set in California – ‘We speak to you from jail today, six hundred union men.’ So in the same year the twin motors of revolutionary politics and the theatre powered him up, and would propel Jimmie through the 1930s and for the rest of his life.

Dirty Old Town

Soon his life was transformed from one where he had to find ways to fill his time to one that was a rush from morning to night. On a street corner he sold the new Communist *Daily Worker*, the forerunner of today’s *Morning Star*. As young as 15 he began to write pieces for radical factory papers in the party’s office in Ancoats, and there he would set to at whatever work needed doing.

A ‘proper’ education might have been a hindrance in his writing, because for his simple articles and songs to sound plausible to factory workers he had to get the wording just right, to know an industrial worker’s terminology. They were blunt pieces of political satire, but they were effective.

Unemployment accentuated the North/South divide. To Geoffrey Bridson, a left-wing radio producer from the middle-class Lancashire seaside town of Lytham, Manchester was ‘a grimy and despondent city wallowing in the backwash of the Cotton slump. During the slow strangulation of the Cotton trade, the city had an almost embattled air – that of the waning capital of a grimly autonomous Northern republic.’ The writer JB Priestley talked of ‘sooty dismal little towns, and still sootier grim fortress-like cities.’ Another BBC man, sent to Birmingham, had in three months seen just two men begging, and no bands of unemployed. On his first stroll in Manchester he saw ‘hundreds of men, the good tough Northern brand of English, sitting or wandering about, workless.’

Salford itself seemed little more to Jimmie than a gigantic slum, a landscape where ‘everything offended the eye.’ The Millers’ Coburg Street was in a network of identical roads bounded by the canal and the River Irwell, a ‘quiet oleaginous sump with a scum of coloured oil and grease’, where if you fell in you were said to asphyxiate before you drowned. Bordering the canal opposite were a glassworks, a small mill, a finishing mill, a bleaching mill, all dating from the late 18th century, and each had its unique smell. Salford was where Engels stayed in 1842–4 before writing *The Condition of the English Working Class*, in which he described most houses there as unfit for human habitation. Jimmie famously recalled it later in song:

I found my love by the gasworks croft,
Dreamed a dream by the old canal;
Kissed my girl by the factory wall.
Dirty old town, dirty old town.

To Jimmie and Bob Goodman, the close friend with whom he strode the streets delivering radical literature and running errands for the CP, Salford seemed little different a century later. ‘Engels was our mate ... he walked the same streets, looked on the same factories, same mills, knew the same kind of people ... There, look – that’s the place Engels mentions in that letter to Marx.’ (Well, in fact it had been pulled down, but why let that spoil a good story?) As ardent hill walkers Jimmie and Bob were thrilled to learn that Engels had taken his sweetheart Mary Burns to a little place outside Marple they knew from their hikes. Engels, too, had been keen to escape from the ‘wretched, damp, filthy cottages ... the streets which surround them ... usually in the most miserable and filthy condition.’

SET INTO SONG

I'm going to take a good sharp axe
Shining steel tempered in the fire;
We'll chop you down like an old dead tree.
Dirty old town, dirty old town.

This became Jimmie's creed. He was unashamedly out to change the world – there was plenty to change. Betsy said she and Will once saw him in St Peter's Square in Manchester on a soapbox lecturing to 1000 people, with policemen listening for anything 'seditious'. Will laughed – 'he's got it right'. In the autumn of 1931 the National Government (the Labour Party was emasculated because it could only rule with the support of the Liberals) responded to the spiralling costs of the unemployed by cutting their benefit by ten per cent. The Family Means Test deprived nearly a million of the poor of their benefit payments. A public protest meeting was called in Salford for 1 October 1931. *Love on the Dole*, the outstandingly successful novel by Walter Greenwood, a Salford door-to-door salesman earning 28 shillings a week, uses the meeting as a centerpiece. That day became notorious for unprovoked police brutality, begun by a horseback charge. Ewan takes four pages to describe it in his autobiography *Journeyman*, such an impact did it have on the 16-year-old Jimmie. A literal impact, for he and his companion Nellie Wallace lay bleeding on Salford Town Hall steps, struck while holding a banner. Jimmie escaped arrest, but his friend Eddie Frow was one of several imprisoned.

Nellie Wallace was a miner's daughter, an ex-weaver, who by then was acting with Jimmie in the Red Megaphones, a street theatre group of young unemployed activists he'd formed with others after a split in the Clarion Players. By his own admission they were not very good collaborative scriptwriters, and even worse actors, a pale amateurish imitation of the German Blue Blouse agitprop groups that were their inspiration. Nevertheless they cobbled together a first show on May Day 1931. Soon they had the perfect cause close at hand. The devastation of an ageing textile industry was exacerbated by the attempts of increasingly desperate employers to wring more out of their workers. The four-loom weavers' strike was a direct result. Each employee looked after four looms, often ancient machines dating back to Victorian times, and constantly had to stop to mend snapped threads. The employers' decision to require them to supervise eight looms each brought a surge of rolling strikes. Two thirds of all the days lost to strikes in Britain at the turn of the 1930s were in the weaving industry. Nellie's inside knowledge of the trade helped Jimmie write sketches and songs that spoke directly to the textile workers, using tunes familiar to them. They performed them to strikers, and at factory gates from the back of a cart, touring the mills of Lancashire. They used megaphones to be heard by a huge mass of strikers awaiting a food convoy assembled by South Wales miners.

It seems extraordinary now that singing in the open air was against the law. No air could be more open than that above the hills of Derbyshire, where Jimmie and his friends rambled and sang. Jimmie's songwriting then was never anything he agonised over, and many of the early songs, like the sketches, are raw polemics. But they came easily to him, never more so than when he was out walking. He would stride out ahead, inventing songs as he went, as Natt Frayman remembered: 'Hello, Jimmie's off again.' He was making up new song lyrics constantly, instantly – so much so that when hikers heard the original words they assumed someone had pinched Jimmie Miller's tune. One such was 'Mass Trespass 1932', using the tune of 'Road to the Isles', and, yes, Jimmie had found a fresh-air cause. Like his more famous 'Manchester Rambler', also written when he was 17, it was a protest against the private ownership of moorland, often by those who also owned the factories. Despite an Access to the Mountain Bill over 40 years old, less than one per cent of the High Peak was accessible to the public. That we can all walk there now is due to hiking activists like Benny Rothman, who organised the Kinder Scout mass trespass of 1932. Jimmie's energetic publicity ensured the attention of the press when a Derby Assize jury packed with landowners sentenced Rothman and four others, none older than 23, to several months hard labour for riotous assembly and assault. Widespread reporting of this harsh justice helped to change the law – eventually.

Radio

It was Jimmie's singing that gave his career an unexpected and vital turn. Early in 1934 he was spotted singing Border ballads to the queue outside the Paramount Cinema in Manchester. Kenneth Adam was a *Manchester Guardian* journalist who later joined BBC radio and ultimately became Director of Television. On Adam's advice, Jimmie went to audition for Archie Harding, an Oxford-educated socialist banished to BBC's Northern Region for an outspoken *United Europe* programme the previous New Year's Eve. This had so enraged the Polish ambassador that he demanded heads should roll: Harding's rolled to Manchester. The BBC's overlord, John Reith: 'You're a very dangerous man, Harding. I think you'd be better off up in the North, where you can't do so much damage.' In Harding's renegade view all broadcasting was propaganda, because if it didn't attack the anomalies of capitalism it became propaganda in tacit support of them. Reith had sent him to fertile territory. Archie Harding was to preside over a brilliant period in broadcasting history.

From 1933–9 the unpaid radical theatre would be the centre of Jimmie Miller's life, while his radio work would give him employment and entry to another world. Within weeks of Archie Harding's arrival in Manchester he'd recruited Jimmie Miller as his 'Northern voice' in Geoffrey Bridson's *May Day in England*. Jimmie read an extract from Bridson's unemployment poem 'Song

for the Three Million'. Bridson describes him 'snarling out in seething anger [in] a vigorously proletarian voice that must have rattled the coffee cups in sitting-rooms all over the country.'

Cut the cost somehow, keep the balance whole;
Men are in the making, marching for the dole.

Marching on Manchester a few months later was a young actress of 19 to whom Harding had awarded a prize for verse-speaking at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the most prestigious London drama school. A small, feisty, gap-toothed Londoner, brought up by a single mother, she was as far from the typical RADA entrant as could be imagined in those days. She soon despised the place and the theatre it set out to train her for. Only the fascinating movement classes inspired by the theories of the German émigré Rudolph Laban had interested her. After a year she walked out, and most of the way towards Liverpool to 'stow away to the New World.' After a typically picaresque journey, sleeping under hedges and catching pneumonia, she was actually working as a charwoman in Burton-on-Trent to earn some cash, when a letter with a radio contract found its way to her from Archie Harding. Her name was Joan Littlewood, and her new world was Manchester.

As she tells it in her gloriously gossipy *Joan's Book*, with its great chunks of recreated dialogue that have the ring – if not the precision – of truth, she was being taken to the canteen on arrival at the BBC in Manchester when she was disconcerted by a Voice booming out over the loudspeakers. In her memory 60 years later it becomes:

Eighty two thousand cast iron segments from Ilkeston, five hundred and ninety four thousand, five hundred and eighty bitumen-grommeted boltings, one hundred and thirty tons of iron washers. My guide explained: 'Archie's rehearsing Bridson's *Tunnel*. We've been at it all day. The King's opening the new Mersey Tunnel next Wednesday ... the Voice is Jimmie Miller. You should try these scones.'

Jimmie's first experience of Joan was identical – her voice before her face. He describes how he was prompted by Archie Harding to listen to it – 'the most beautiful and compelling voice I had ever encountered' – also coming over the BBC loudspeakers. They didn't meet for several weeks, but when they did they stayed up all night in exhilarating discussion, finding their views on life and the theatre coincided on almost every point. Joan knew immediately that Jimmie's agitprop was for her – actors male and female in blue overalls, just a different hat and voice to change a character, simple props. Not the ASM (assistant stage manager) of the local repertory theatre with occasional acting parts, which is what she found herself doing. Jimmie thought her a superb actress in the making:

She was able to invest even the smallest walk-on with the deep shining passion of real art ... But she didn't look the way actresses were supposed to look ... she made no attempt to conceal her opinions about the level of production and acting ... and could be dangerously and woundingly outspoken ... That deep velvety voice could be wonderfully soothing one moment, and the next dismissing you as a lousy piss-kitchen.

For her Jimmie Miller was an inspiration – 'he had a way of talking to you that knocked you down.' By then the Red Megaphones had disbanded and reassembled as Theatre of Action, and Joan took time off from her unimaginative repertory theatre to invigorate their faltering start. By his own admission Jimmie was desperately inexperienced as a director, but Joan soon displayed her brilliant theatrical instincts.

Theatre of Action

Theatre of Action had been constituted as a club, which enabled them to avoid sending their scripts in advance to the Lord Chamberlain's office, a censorship process that was not abandoned in Britain till 1968. After *Fire Sermon*, a version of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*, came *Newsboy*, a reworking of a long American poem about a news vendor's awakening to the iniquities of big business. It was followed by *John Bullion*, about the arms trade, a short and bewilderingly surreal 'ballet with words'. 'The finest piece of expressionistic craft seen in Britain', said the *City News* of its performance at the Round House in Ancoats. But in early 1935 *Draw the Fires*, by the exiled German Ernst Toller, was not a success. A play about a mutiny, suitably enough, it became a fraught joint exercise with the professionals from the repertory theatre, who Jimmie, Joan and Toller regarded as decidedly unprofessional. That persuaded Joan to join Theatre of Action full-time.

In August 1935 they toured a series of Lancashire towns with Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, about the previous year's New York taxi strike. Its success in attracting more, and more varied, recruits to the group was double-edged. Some of these, often older people with a middle-class background, were unconvinced either by the attempt to preach to uninterested working-class audiences, or by Jimmie and Joan's distinctly dictatorial approach. In fact Theatre of Action was on the verge of a split when the pair were offered places at the Moscow Academy of Cinema and Theatre. Among their teachers would be Stanislavski, Eisenstein and Meyerhold, magical theatrical names.

By now they were lovers, and lack of money had obliged Joan to move in with Jimmie's parents. Betsy Miller, thin and bent, affected by the chronic skin disease psoriasis, didn't take to Joan: 'Betsy would always speak of the class enemy, and that meant everyone but Jimmie and her husband.' Will Miller told Joan that Betsy 'would take the skin off her back for Jimmie', one

of the few things he did say, for 'he'd hardly breath to speak.' His depression was so severe that one Sunday he was found only just in time to stop him gassing himself. Betsy turned on Joan in her own anguish, but was later astute enough to spot Joan's pregnancy before she herself did, which led to a London backstreet abortion, illegal and squalid. Betsy wanted the pair married, but Joan was adamantly against it. Soon after her 21st birthday, though, she yielded, Jimmie ultimately persuading her that it would be more prudent if they arrived in the Soviet Union married. Not that she gave in without a flaming row in the street, mind, one 'that came to blows', settled according to her by an amused driver who stopped his tram and came over to separate them. At Pendleton Town Hall Joan, who wouldn't wear rings, was obliged to borrow one from one of the two witnesses for the few minutes of the ceremony. And so on 2 November 1935 the 20-year-old 'radio features writer' James Henry Miller married the 21-year-old 'actress (stage)', Maudie Joan Littlewood. They never referred to themselves as man and wife, but as 'co-workers'.

Back to Radio

Then the promised Soviet visas failed to come through, they cut short an attempt to start a theatre school in London, and a few months later were back in Manchester. There they were met by a timely bequest of £100 in the will of Jimmie's uncle, a Glasgow butcher. They moved with the Millers to a house in Fallowfield, and immediately got more work from the BBC. Harding and Bridson were delighted to see them back. They loved their voices, apart from anything else. In a verse play of Bridson's called *Prometheus the Engineer* back in 1934 Jimmie had played a militant workers' leader. Unfortunately the nation never heard the muscular verse that made exciting listening, said Bridson: 'belted out by MacColl and others above the steady roar of the machines.' It was banned as 'dangerously seditious'. Harding had pushed the script upstairs, cautious after being upbraided again by Reith for actually putting hunger marchers on the air without having censored their criticisms of the government. Such were the times.

Joan and Jimmie became friends with a young producer, an unaffected Oxford graduate from London, Olive Shapley, who was another early pioneer of the use of real Northern voices in radio features. For *Homeless People*, broadcast in September 1938, her *Radio Times* article averred: 'You will hear no BBC voices at all.' Working opposite Jimmie was the young Yorkshire actor Wilfred Pickles, recording testimony on a tour of doss-houses, children's homes, Seamen's Institutes and Street Missions. With powerful simplicity, Jimmie's introduction to *Homeless People* ran:

Do you know what happens to you if you apply for a night's lodging in a casual ward? To begin with you're booked in: then you're searched to make sure you

THE RED MEGAPHONE – JIMMIE MILLER

have no money (at least no more than a shilling); then you get your supper, you're given a bath and you go to bed. Next morning you get another meal and two ounces of cheese to take away with you. You can't come back within a month; if you do, you have to stay four days and work in the institution. Normally you sleep in a dormitory ... a big, bare room, the floor scrubbed to whiteness, smelling faintly of disinfectant – and then lie there all morning. Men of all ages and types. War heroes who have never won back to work and security since 1918. Young lads tramping, perhaps from Glasgow to London, still young and silly enough to have hope and trust. Old men lying like sacks or heaps of rags on the hard floor – no mattresses, no covering.

It ends:

We came out into the bustle and light of Saturday evening shopping in Newcastle – gleaming fruit and succulent meat and melting pastries; soft beds and rich carpets; warm bright clothes and strong, shapely shoes – all this a few feet away behind frail pieces of glass, yet as inaccessible to those lying on the Refuge floor as if they had been stars in the sky.

That was the painful reality of Northern life they were trying to reveal, and Jimmie was fighting to end. Joan worked with Olive Shapley on *Classic Soil*, a quote from Engels – Manchester was the 'classic soil' where capitalism flourished. It was unstinting in its depiction of inner-city misery. Olive later described the result in an unnecessary tone of apology as 'probably the most unfair and biased programme ever made by the BBC.' Asked by Olive to find a pregnant woman to describe what it was like to bring new life into Manchester in 1939, Joan arrived in the BBC studio with eight, some with small children, to tell their stories. This was rare reality, as was a terrible sequence of the voice of a mother, numb with grief, watching her 14-year-old daughter waste away from consumption in a damp tenement block.

Olive describes driving Jimmie and Joan in her battered open-top car to France, where they slept in a tent. The car broke down. After they'd got it fixed, they arrived in Paris with Joan performing an impromptu pantomime as she sat on the luggage at the back of the car, to the delight of passers-by. They promptly ran out of money, but earned enough to get back by working in a restaurant, Jimmie singing to the guitar for tips, while Joan and Olive washed up at the back.

Another producer with whom they worked was the poet John Pudney, who preferred to dispense with narration altogether. For Pudney, Jimmie wrote or co-wrote a series of programmes: on the Chartist underground press; on Seafarers; an early experimental blend of songs and emigrants' voices; and a foray into the traditional music of immigrant societies in the North of England. Less successful was an ambitious piece for the centenary

of the Chartists' petition for universal suffrage in May 1938. Jimmie found it difficult to write sketches with convincing dialogue, or a marching song that the young Benjamin Britten could put music to. Pudney had to step in and rescue it, a chastening experience. Still, it was some consolation that a man like Pudney had chosen to commission as a writer a 23-year-old who had left school at 14, and Ewan learned an instructive lesson from it.

Theatre Union

After a lull, the couple had restarted their theatrical career in 1937 with a play by Hans Schlumberg to mark Manchester's annual Peace Week. In *Miracle at Verdun* the dead of World War I return from their graves to inspect the results of their sacrifice. To perform it Jimmie and Joan attracted a new set of actors: each directed alternate scenes, and they played to packed houses at the Lesser Free Trade Hall. Back in business, now as 'Theatre Union', they adapted a play by Lope de Vega, a Spanish contemporary of Shakespeare, never before performed in Britain. A great success, it was to support the International Brigade, for which over 500 Britons would die fighting in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the elected Republican government. Another innovation in their support was a series of pageants in which Paul Robeson took part. Among the war dead were Jimmie's friends Alec Armstrong and Bob Goodman. To honour them Jimmie adapted 'Jamie Foyers', a song his mother had sung about a Scots soldier who had died in the Napoleonic Wars over 100 years earlier:

He's gone frae the shipyard that stands on the Clyde –
His hammer is silent, his tools laid aside;
To the wide Ebro river young Foyers has gone
To fecht by the side o' the people of Spain.

Theatre Union, still an amateur group but with Harold Lever (later a post-war Labour cabinet minister) as business manager, had a formidably professional approach. Rehearsing five nights a week, they took on Jaroslav Hasek's witty anti-war satire *The Good Soldier Schweik*, about a dumb-insolent Czech soldier in World War I. Jimmie dramatised the German translation, they managed to create a revolving stage at the Lesser Free Trade Hall to cope with the many scene changes, and Joan described it later as their most successful play ever. By now it was 1939, the war was looming, and they decided to orchestrate a 'Living Newspaper' production which would catalogue what they saw as the shamefully feeble response of the Western democracies to the rise of Fascism.

They scavenged every possible source, assisted by journalists who shared their views (many on right-wing newspapers), and in March 1940 mounted

a breathtaking multi-media performance at the Round House in Ancoats. *Last Edition* had five separate stages, dance sequences, a novel electronic news display, impersonations of living people (actually banned then), and nightly changes of content. Fast and furious and funny, it was a spectacular synthesis of all they'd learned. *The Manchester Guardian*:

The acting and production are of such quality that weak spots go unnoticed in a pervading sense of urgency, relieved at times by an interval of delightful fantasy and witty satire, rising on occasions to a climax of startling emotional force.

Closed Down

Living Edition toured into Lancashire through March and April, with standing ovations every night. But with men from Special Branch often in the audience, it was only a matter of time before the police closed it down, and by a grim irony it was on the day of the German invasion of France, 13 May. Miller and Littlewood were arrested, found guilty at the end of May for mounting an unlicensed performance, fined and bound over to 'keep the peace' for a year. 'That's what we've been trying to do', said Jimmie. Some of the younger members of Theatre Union left after their parents had been leaned on by the police. Soon afterwards, when the pair turned up to act in an Olive Shapley children's play, they were barred from entering the BBC: they were on a blacklist. Unable to perform, Theatre Union spent the second half of 1940 studying and teaching across Lancashire, with the remaining men anxiously scanning the post for their call-up papers. Jimmie created a lengthy reading list, Joan got some journalism work, and they secretly rehearsed an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, but their cast leached away.

In July 1940 Jimmie Miller got his own call-up papers. Posted to Richmond in the Yorkshire Dales for basic training, he loathed it, his misery relieved only by Theatre Union friends arriving each weekend with food parcels from Betsy, and by getting some free time to write. Despite his antipathy to army life and the loss of freedom, he was described as a model soldier by the regiment's lieutenant colonel. It was a query from MI5, keeping tabs on him, that brought that observation, its positive tone doubtless helped by the songs and sketches he produced for a concert party, including 'Browned Off', which included verses like:

The medical inspection, boys, is just a bleedin' farce –
He gropes around your penis and he noses up your arse –
For even a private's privates boys, enjoy no privacy –
You sacrifice all that to save democracy.

SET INTO SONG

His basic training complete, a weekend's leave at the end of September allowed him to join the remnants of Theatre Union in a show to raise funds for the *Daily Worker*, still defiantly printing. Finally closed down a few months later, it was supporting the Communist Party's line of opposing the war against Nazism as an 'imperialist adventure', forced into that uneasy position at the start of the war by the Nazi/Soviet Ribbentrop Pact. Jimmie was shuttled around a circuit of northern barracks while awaiting a posting, and took a medical, which he failed for reasons unknown. He was posted to the 10th Battalion of the King's Regiment, one due for Home Duties. Not therefore destined to fight abroad, he was sent to Derby on 11 December 1940.

At some point in the following week he disappeared.

CHAPTER 3

An Officer and a Gentleman

Charles Parker



I found early on that the only way in which a microphone could be got near enough ... without halting the flow, was for me to approach as unobtrusively as possible with the equipment slung well behind my back, advancing the microphone diffidently towards the source of sound, but myself ignoring the microphone and by refusing to comment on it either in speech or in facial expression, convincing the victim that I was just rather rude and perhaps slightly odd.

CHARLES PARKER, FROM AN INTERNAL BBC MEMO, 1952

I'd say to him, Charles, go home pretty soon ... 'Oh, yes, I will, I'll just finish.' I'd get home, about an hour later, when I was cooking, I'd pick up the telephone: 'Charles, you'll ruin it, you'll go over the top with it. GO HOME.'

PEGGY BROADHEAD, CHARLES'S BOSS FROM 1948–53,
SPEAKING IN 2007

At the BBC in the early years after the war, Charles Parker's background seemed to epitomise that of the typical producer. Wartime submarine commander, 'good' war, History at Cambridge, and the accent to go with it. He differed from the stereotype, though, by being enthusiastically religious, and by being Conservative in politics, if not in his humane outlook. Many of the post-war broadcasters who hadn't already entered the war with left-wing views certainly tended to acquire them. As with the pre-war Manchester producers such as Olive Shapley, exposure to the post-war hardships of many working people served to accentuate that leaning.

Few who knew Charles Parker realised that his background hadn't been as privileged as his headline CV implied. He had been born in 1919, son of a disabled railway clerk who made a living tramping the streets of Bournemouth, selling paraffin from a handcart. He had died when Charles was seven. His mother, the daughter of a railway worker, had been in domestic service when they married, and later kept a boarding house. For her, cleanliness was next to godliness, a lesson the young Charles absorbed. His father's father had been a seed merchant's clerk in Wisbech, in Cambridgeshire. Theirs was not the grinding poverty of the industrial North, true. But if Charles was to escape a humdrum existence it would have to be by his own efforts.

The first step was to win a scholarship to the local grammar school in Bournemouth. Afterwards, a place at university for someone in his financial position was out of the question, so at 18 he got a job in the metallurgy lab at the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, down by the Thames in London's western suburbs. Like many in his position, while there he studied in the evening for an Engineering degree at a London Technical Institute. He was about to return for his third year when war was declared.

Submariner

Charles had loved sailing since he was a boy and had worked in a boatyard in the Solent in his school holidays. Before the war he'd joined the RNVR, the naval volunteer reserve, so when it began he was called up. Like so many, afterwards he would speak only sparingly about that period. We do know that he started as a signalman in a minesweeper and saw action at Dunkirk. He was plagued in later life by nightmares following an incident during the evacuation, when his vessel couldn't pick up burned and drowning Indian soldiers whose ship had been blown up alongside his own. He was commissioned as a sub lieutenant in 1940, and for a year was in destroyers before going into submarines – not ideal for a man of well over six foot, who became known as 'Dip-Rod' Parker, constantly bent double. In submarines he saw action with HMS *Porpoise* in the Mediterranean off the North African coast, including escorting relief convoys under continuous fire through the notorious 'bomb alley' to the strategic and beleaguered island of Malta.

In the North Atlantic in 1943 he was promoted temporary lieutenant on HMS *Sceptre*, towing the new 'X-craft' that successfully attacked the battleship *Tirpitz* off the coast of German-held Norway. The tense and protracted operation involved snaking through fiercely defended Norwegian fjords at night. This action and others won him the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) the following year. The X-craft, better known as midget submarines, were small four-man craft with a short range that had to be towed silently close to their target so that they could lay depth charges, and be picked up later. Sometimes. It was extremely hazardous for everyone. The citation read:

For outstanding efficiency and devotion to duty in HMS *Sceptre* during eight war patrols, in which five enemy ships have been sunk and one damaged and in which two successful operations with X-craft have been carried out. Lieutenant Parker has been First Lieutenant throughout this time and has been partly responsible for the training of the crew. His handling and control of the submarine, not only under difficult attack conditions but also under the more difficult conditions of counter attack has been uniformly excellent. In the X-craft operations, it fell to him to make nearly all the arrangements for the towing and recovery of the X-craft, and the success of these operations was largely due to his outstanding zeal and devotion to duty. Working with the Engineer Officer, he has always kept the submarine in the highest possible state of efficiency in spite of adverse conditions, and of long periods away from base.

In March 1945 he took over HMS *Umbra*, becoming the only ex-RNVR officer to command a sub. His colleagues remember him telling how, off the coast of Egypt, he had shelled King Farouk's pink confection of a palace in error during a firing practice. A typical story against himself, as was the one he told of hearing a local dignitary at Scapa Flow in Orkney, when Charles went back to the naval base to make a radio programme after the war. The man was complaining about a 'bloody idiot' submarine commander who had inadvertently sent a torpedo towards the town. Charles didn't let on it was him, a mistake when cleaning torpedo tubes. He rarely spoke about his successes, nor about what gave him nightmares.

The war widened his horizons. Rather than finishing his Engineering degree he took advantage of a scheme set up for returning officers and won a place at Queens' College Cambridge to study History, specialising in the USA. With him went his wife Phyllis (Phyl), who he'd married in 1944 in full naval dress uniform, with the dangling sword he was unused to wearing 'threatening his manhood', as he later remarked. While at Cambridge he was bitten by the theatre bug. He acted whenever he could for the college, directed their 400th-anniversary production of *As You Like It* in the college cloisters, and appeared for the Cambridge Footlights in its tentative post-war resurrection, the annual Cambridge revue which would later launch the

1960s satirists. With the Oxford Marlowe Society he took Webster's Jacobean tragedy *The White Devil* to Berlin. They were there in the breath-holding days of 1948 when the Russians blockaded the divided city, which was relieved ultimately by the Allied Berlin airlift.

Into the BBC

Graduating 'with astonishment', as he said in an early CV, he eschewed the teaching career that he'd originally planned at the end of the war, and applied to join the BBC. They took him on in November 1948, and after induction training and a brief spell in the European Service he joined the North American arm as a talks producer in March 1949. He was 30 a month later. At that time the North American Service (NAS) was based in Great Castle Street in central London, and its brief was to create programmes that would interest US and Canadian radio stations. The NAS attracted an eclectic mix of 'rugged individualists', as their Australian boss Peggy Broadhead put it. Among her 'boys' was Tony Benn, later to be a minister in the 1960s Labour government of Harold Wilson – 'Tony immatures with age', said Wilson. Benn would later become an articulate and tireless left-wing scourge of all governments everywhere. Charles's views would in due course be close to Tony Benn's, but not yet.

Charles was essentially a jobbing producer, creating radio programmes designed for a North American audience. He produced plays, covered industrial fairs, Christmas traditions – anything with a religious component gravitated towards him and became a speciality – and duty stuff like the world of the Women's Institute and their agricultural work. Having had enough of such fare, and after being turned down for a transfer to Nigeria in 1951, he tapped an old naval colleague for a chance to take one of the rare new mobile tape recorders on the annual race round Fastnet Rock, not something for the faint-hearted. The resulting programme, like almost all in this period, has been wiped, but circulating round the BBC for years was a tape he made of crew members being sick (including, it must be said, himself). The indelible picture it conjures up is of Charles leaning over with a 'Just vomit a little closer to the mike, would you, old boy.'

A vivid memory of Charles at that time comes from a fellow radio man who would later move into television, Philip Donnellan. Later a great friend, indeed soulmate, he first met him in 1950, after being warned that he was difficult:

We met a tall rather gangling figure with a lock of gingery hair over his eyes and ... beard below scarred cheeks. He was enthusiastic and punctilious about the simple recording we had to do ... I was in a good position to note his mannerisms: head on one side, attention riveted on what his informant had to

say; the rather elaborate use of a bony hand and fingers to unlock, almost, what he was trying to obtain. I thought he had difficulty in asking precisely formulated questions: he seemed to use a method of challenging the interviewee's ideas – and it worked. In casual talk afterwards I found him efficient, pleasant and slightly unusual, no more than that. I could not understand why I had been warned that he was difficult.

Charles was creating a reputation for eccentricity. Peggy Broadhead recalls an occasion at the end of 1951 when Charles's wife Phyl called her to say he'd sustained a head injury and wouldn't be able to go down to RAF Brize Norton to record American airmen for the traditional pre-Christmas broadcast. Perturbed – Charles never missed an assignment – she went round to his flat in Charlotte Street to find a gaunt face and tattered beard surrounded by a mass of bloodied bandage. The tailor living below, his child's nights and his own rendered sleepless by Charles's night-time pacing, had ambushed him on the stairs and smashed a teapot over his head. Peggy went off to make the programme with Eamonn Andrews, later a big name in television.

Broadhead remembers Charles as eager, imaginative, excitable, and increasingly fascinated by the voices of 'real' people, as opposed to actors speaking their words. Charles and the others were allowed a free rein – 'The essence of the North American Service was that we had all come in through our own doors.' Broadhead saw her job as one of tugging at the reins only when their enthusiasm for novelty ran away with them, as it could easily do in Charles's case. She had a shrewd eye for what their North American customers would just about accept. Unfortunately, she said wistfully, this did not include an army of Hoovers advancing on New York City, in a programme Charles planned on the Revolt of the Machine. She had been prepared to run with that one, but New York wasn't. Charles's enthusiasm, then and later, meant he was inclined to arrive unannounced at someone's home late in the evening, bursting to talk about something he was doing.

One night he was beguiling us all, and missed the last train, so we bedded him down in front of the fire. He was a long man. Later my five-year-old arrived crying, having gone down to find a naked man thrashing about in the midst of a nightmare.

Charles relished the occasional chance to visit the US, get out and about and record real people's voices, the 'actuality' in BBC jargon. The US, which unlike Britain was dominated by commercial radio, led by the innovative Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), was increasingly attracted to outside broadcast programmes that used mobile recording equipment. Pioneered in Germany before the war, AEG's Magnetophon tape recorder had been much refined after being enthusiastically adopted by the Nazis. In dollar-starved

post-war Britain mobile recording equipment was hard to get hold of, and Charles was fascinated by the prospect. EMI's Midget was a home-grown version, late on the scene and expensive at £100, and the BBC had only six available by 1952. They were earmarked for the Indian Service and for the Helsinki Olympics, but Charles wangled the loan of a rare new American Stencil-Hoffman Midget from friends in CBS. He got a chance to use it when assigned to record the crowd at the annual agricultural Royal Show for a 15-minute feature that July. In the period between her accession and her coronation the public was eager to see the new Queen, and she attracted huge crowds through which Charles pressed, trying to record real voices as inconspicuously as possible.

Afterwards he wrote a three-page memo of his experience, trying to interest his NAS colleagues (and doubtless support his lobbying for their own kit). 'I cannot express strongly enough my conviction' – Oh yes he could – 'that the use of this equipment can give a quite new dimension to the actuality feature, and I personally am very excited by the possibilities.' His enthusiasm and engaging naivety shine through in the extract that heads this chapter, which continues:

I soon found that an invaluable refinement was to simulate a hearing aid by running the lead from the playback equipment to an improvised deaf-aid ear piece, and this seemed to be the most successful. The whole secret seems to be in the approach to the victim and in the positioning ... so that he never has a clear view of the recording box, but only of the microphone and the deaf-aid mock-up. This may appear to be rather suspect ethically...

Indeed it was, but he did at least seek the victim's permission afterwards. He goes on to describe his day with great relish, particularly his 'tragic failure to record the Queen's arrival' because a new tape reel hadn't engaged properly, and his falling backwards in a surging press of people onto a pram containing a sleeping infant 'which did not even wake up.' (One imagines students in a modern Media Studies course being asked to comment on the use of the words 'diffidently', 'victim', 'ethically' and 'unobtrusively' in the whole extract, especially given the massive microphone he was wielding.)

This piece goes on to provide copious advice to the BBC Engineering department on how to use the recording equipment. It illustrates his growing compulsion to achieve spontaneity of recording, an intense desire for perfection of recorded sound, and an enthralled technical curiosity that would enable him to overcome the horrendous difficulties set to plague the British counterpart of the American recorder he'd cadged. The EMI Midget was boxy, unwieldy, double its size and a third heavier. These notes were just a sighting shot for the ten-year siege that he would undertake of the

engineers' stubborn defences, with mounting exasperation. Whole filing cabinets would be filled with his advice...

That Royal Show programme in 1952 was one of a series of 15-minute features he was engaged in for a series called *London Column*. Week in, week out, he was out and about, with the same challenging deadlines as a journalist but with a decidedly more nerve-racking climax, as every item went out live, as much of the BBC's radio output did then. Being a perfectionist meant that he was constantly working late as well as traipsing all over the country. In a fortnight in the spring of 1951 he had clocked up 120 hours unpaid 'overtime', which he used as a basis for a time-in-lieu request. There weren't to be many such extra holidays in later years, but Phyl had recently given birth to their daughter Sara, whose arrival elicited a classic first-child response in a letter to one of his many American ex-servicemen friends:

But what an extraordinarily hopeful thing it is to have a small baby in the house. It brings a blessed sense of proportion into one's being. The nightmare fantasies of the future fade before the immediate necessity of feeding the little brat at 2 o'clock in the morning, and despair for humanity just cannot compete with one's fascinated awareness of a dawning intelligence in this scrap of humanity. As you can imagine, Sara has got me just where she wants me. [Later] Sara has just started to walk ... at present she shows no signs of taking after her father except for a raging temper. [Later still] Sara is now quite unbelievably enchanting and too believably infuriating by turn.

The family man was 34 when he applied for promotion to Senior Features Producer in BBC Midlands in September 1953. Three earlier transfer applications had been turned down since 1950. In one of them he'd expressed his enthusiasm for recording actuality simply: 'My duties with NAS have taken me more and more out into the field, producing the actuality type of programme most suited for North America, and I have found myself presenting sound-pictures ... exclusively in terms of actuality.' But by 1953 this had extended to a clear view that radio could emulate some of the techniques of the pioneering documentary film-makers:

I believe that the documentary idea of Grierson and Rotha is valid for the radio feature, that 'creative editing' can apply to sound actuality as to film actuality; that the function of the documentary should be the interpretation of society to itself ... and I believe that this can yet be done in terms of true 'entertainment' in its widest sense.

He had begun to see what could be achieved on film, and saw no reason why he couldn't apply the same technique on radio. The reference to 'entertainment' was to convey the impression that he had his feet on the ground,

and was not just a dilettante out to make arty minority programmes. He convinced the Head of BBC Midlands Region Programmes, Denis Morris, and his deputy David Gretton, and he started working for them in Birmingham in January 1954. Gretton's letter of congratulation concluded with 'at last you will be able to get down to real features without feeling constricted by the short wave medium's grass roots requirements.' But for Charles they weren't mutually exclusive.

Birmingham

Charles and Phyl eventually found a flat to rent in the Birmingham district of Harborne, where he entered enthusiastically into the life of the parish church. During the next four years he made 42 major features for radio, a few that were not broadcast, and a couple for television. Many of these programmes would sow seeds of more ambitious ventures later. Among them were features about a miner going to work, the deaf, Lowestoft trawler men, Offa's Dyke, a village bus, guitar teaching, foreign students and a Wisbech gypsy. Typical of his desire to test the midget recorder's capabilities was a 1954 broadcast, *The Polar Bears' Picnic*, about a military exercise on Salisbury Plain, where Charles spent four days eavesdropping with his recorder. Introducing it in the *Radio Times*, he said: 'I wanted to catch the territorial soldier on the job ... wanted to overhear – and record for you to share – everything, from the General outlining his plans ... to a private's ... earthy observation on the slit trench.' Unfortunately the equipment couldn't cope, and Donnellan describes helping him assemble the programme from 'the tattered shreds of conversations, and weave them into a compelling garment of sound.' He was working on the edge – he was the kind of man who would use every spare minute titivating an ambitious programme until he was (sometimes) satisfied – and he was meeting all kinds of people. One of them was a man named Ewan MacColl.

Charles had for some time had a growing interest in folk song. In 1942, in a Lebanon hotel for a spell recovering from sandfly fever, 'surrounded by Druze princesses protected by bodyguards with six-foot scimitars', he met a group of roistering American airmen who had mistakenly tried to bomb his submarine a few weeks before. They intrigued him with their own traditional songs, like 'Casey Jones' – 'The fact that you could actually sing about railway engineers was incredible ... I used to regret bitterly the fact that I was not American and therefore could never live.' As he said ruefully later, all he had were dreadful things like 'Farmer Brown he had an old Sow', and music-hall songs. He had thought that English folk song no longer existed, but later came across some while picking through the BBC's invaluable sound library, much in demand because BBC recordings were the cheapest way for a producer to add music to programmes. He was enthralled by Isla Cameron

singing 'Queen Jane', and by MacColl's barnstorming 'Eppie Morrie', sung at a speed that would get it on a three-minute 78 rpm disc. At the BBC Charles had used the Irish piper and folk song collector Seamus Ennis on some of his *London Column* pieces, though when he proposed a programme using Seamus for rural songs and Ewan for urban, he was warned off using MacColl, who was on an unofficial BBC blacklist again. (This man is dangerous. He may alter your opinions.)

He eventually met Ewan when producing a programme on experimental theatre, and told him he was longing to get his teeth into something worthwhile. Superficially they were as different as could be, the Marxist and the Christian Conservative, but, although radio was hardly Ewan's major preoccupation at this point, they shared a desire to make imaginative yet 'true' radio programmes, and a fascination for the human voice. The portable tape recorder, however clunky and unreliable, was nevertheless allowing Charles to get out into homes and factories. But was BBC radio prepared to be imaginative? Could it afford the investment in time and money, when television was starting to tug at its purse strings? Fortunately, he had a sympathetic boss, who was prepared to give an imaginative producer his head. Charles wanted to emulate in radio the reality that he was just starting to see on television. He was casting around for a subject to experiment with when he heard about a train driver awarded the George Cross for bravery.

So it was that on 12 July 1957 he sounded out Ewan MacColl. The idea piqued Ewan's interest, but they couldn't meet until he returned from a Moscow youth festival. He was about to fly there with Theatre Workshop, a group now run solely by Joan Littlewood. He was no longer married to her, but to Jean Newlove, the company's dance teacher, who was also in the party. A third woman came along, too, on a more protracted journey among hundreds of young musicians, first on an overcrowded boat, then for three days on a train in which 'singers and musicians hung from luggage racks.' Her name was Peggy Seeger.

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

in Washington to take up the new job with a somewhat elitist belief that traditional music had died out in America by 1900. Throughout the South he visited homesteads and camps set up by the Federal government for the hungry and dispossessed, like the one in which Johnny Cash was brought up in Arkansas. Seeger was surprised and delighted to find folk song was alive and well. He acquired an early sound recording machine, which cut grooves in aluminium discs, to make field recordings for the musicians he was hiring to work in the camps.

The Seegers and Traditional Music

Thus began the Seeger family's great love affair with traditional music, the music that Peggy grew up with. That summer the 17-year-old Pete accompanied Charles and Ruth to one of the burgeoning traditional music festivals, at Asheville in North Carolina, and described it as 'visiting a foreign country ... past wretched little cabins with half-naked children peering out of the door.' There he heard the legendary five-string banjo player Samantha Bumgarner, and set out to learn the instrument he would later master and popularise in the post-war American folk song revival. One-year-old Peggy didn't hear it quite yet: she was parked in a nursing home at a dollar a day. Ruth too was eager to absorb this music, new to her, and worked in the field with her husband whenever she could.

Peggy's mother embraced this change to her own musical direction. As a promising young avant-garde composer, she had been the first woman to win a Guggenheim music scholarship to Europe. Keen to be taught by Charles Seeger, she had ignored his initial rejection – he didn't think much of women composers – and had browbeaten him into taking her on as a student and amanuensis. They fell in love, and moved in together when she was 30, in 1931, the year in which ten years of constant composing had culminated in her *String Quartet*, then much admired in 'modern' music circles. To Peggy later this music was simply alien. She couldn't understand how the woman she knew as a mother could create something like 'someone crying, someone beating on the walls.' Her mother was 'the folk song lady', and one who was far too sane to have produced something so disconcertingly scary.

From 1936 Peggy's mother turned from composing atonal music to become that folk song lady. During the period she described herself as 'composing babies', she went on to teach music while managing a household of three children under five, often with the help of babysitters running a 'combined drugstore and hospital ward'. But above all she was transcribing traditional music. She was astonishingly painstaking, listening to scratchy aluminium field recordings brought to life by a sharpened cactus needle, endlessly replaying tricky swooping phrases till she got them right. For the

father-and-son team of John and Alan Lomax, who were busy recording for the Folk Song Archive at the Library of Congress, she transcribed over 200 songs, eventually published in 1941 as *Our Singing Country*. After the war, with Charles she transcribed and arranged over 100 more for voice and piano for the Lomaxes' *Folk Song USA*. Then she branched out on her own with *American Folk Songs for Children* and *Animal Folk Songs for Children*, inventive piano arrangements of songs she'd listened to countless times, in countless versions.

As Pete said, the Seegers and the Lomaxes were 'high on dreams of how this music would capture the heart of America.' As Mike and Peggy grew older their mother recruited them into the book-making process. No longer the 'golden-haired tot with the high voice, which when excited would go through the ceiling', for whom Pete remembered playing the banjo and singing whenever he stopped over, Peggy was learning transcription at the age of nine. At 11 she was transcribing for Ben Botkin's *Western Treasury* for a nickel a song. The family had no radio, nor later did they have television, but they made music together at weekends. Peggy and Mike would learn new songs and trade them with Pete's whenever he dropped by. Pete, the 'tall exotic half-brother, with his long, long-necked banjo and his big, big feet stamping at the end of his long, long legs.' Often he'd come with his musical friends, who would jam late at night, fall asleep in front of the fire, and confront the young Seeger children with a tangle of sprawled bodies and instruments in the morning.

Among Pete's fellow musicians passing through would be Woody Guthrie, hardly bigger than Peggy, the massively imposing Leadbelly, in prison for murder when first recorded by Alan Lomax, and Aunt Molly Jackson. Pete had started The Almanac Singers in 1940 to sing labour songs, and moved on to form The Weavers with Woody Guthrie. They sold millions in their heyday from 1949–52, starting with Leadbelly's 'Goodnight Irene'. Pete wrote or co-wrote 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone'; 'Turn, Turn, Turn'; 'We Shall Overcome'; and 'If I Had a Hammer', all such iconic songs of peace and protest that many people don't know who wrote them. 'If I Had a Hammer' is innocent to us now, but it was controversial because back then, as Pete said, 'only Commies used words like peace and freedom.' Actually part of the household was Elizabeth Cotten, recruited as a Saturday help after she'd found the eight-year-old Peggy lost and wandering on the wrong floor of a department store. The floors were segregated, black from white.

'Libba' Cotten was a black singer who, at the age of 11, had written 'Freight Train', which many years later would be a success in a skiffle version for Lonnie Donegan. Libba's singing was in such demand by the Seeger children that Mike and Peggy would do the clearing up for her so she could sing and play her guitar. And yet, according to Peggy:

She had been ordered by the church to lay her guitar down by the riverside when she gained puberty. And she did. Let it alone for over fifty years ... I don't know how long Libba listened to us before that day when Mike walked into the kitchen and found her playing the guitar, left-handed without having re-strung it – index finger swinging away doing the job of the thumb, thumb relegated to fingerdom. That's how we heard 'Freight Train' for the first time. Mike was fascinated and learned to play exactly as Libba played, left-handed and without re-stringing the guitar. I waited till he had it, transferred it to the right hand and then we were 'Freight Train' mad.

The Working Mother

In the early post-war period Peggy's mother was working a 14-hour day, away teaching students of composition, giving lessons to children with 'fingers like cooked macaroni', and at home working on her transcriptions till late into the night. By then she had four children, and Peggy, not yet a teenager, would get the youngsters' breakfast and lunch ready before she went to school. Her mother would have the supper menu written out, and Peggy would have to shop for it. 'She'd run the whole thing like a battle, with notes saying: Peggy get two chickens, Mike you're making dinner so peel the onions. We're having chicken cacciatore in *Joy of Cooking* p225.' Peggy would cycle off down to the shops, or walk there pulling an old wooden wagon, sometimes loaded with a younger sister. Charles was by this time over 60, still working but not the main breadwinner, content as most men then were (then?) to have the world arranged for his comfort. Nevertheless he was proud of his wife's achievements and supported her in every sphere except the domestic.

And he supported his musical children: 'What my father gave me was a freedom to do what I wanted. That was quite unusual in those days.' He played dual piano with Peggy, sitting together at one piano, or each at one of the two grands, 'bashing away at piano versions of the Beethoven symphonies. If I came to a part that was difficult he just sat and let me work it till I got it.' Her mother had originally taught her the piano in an engaging and unorthodox style, such as:

Playing the 'Irish Washerwoman' in every key on the piano (including two Turkish modes) and explaining the circle of fifths, resolutions, cadences, sight-reading ... But when it came to playing the piano and practising when I knew she was in earshot, I couldn't ... She was the best teacher of music I've ever come across, and yet I couldn't learn piano from her.

Her mother's musical energy and enthusiasm still coursed through the house, though. For Peggy: 'The music came right into us, we osmosed it.

I can still sit there listening to music, seeing it on the staff line, all the sharps and flats, dancing on the staves.' By the time Peggy was a teenager she played piano, guitar and banjo, as did the equally talented Mike. She had to overcome the stage fright that afflicted her at 15 when she entered a talent show at her High School: 'Fear flooded my entire being; my voice developed a brilliant but uncontrollable vibrato; my lungs shrank to half an inch in diameter.' She swore she would never sing for a living, an oath she soon broke, fortunately for this story. She and Mike would sing and conduct folk song sessions to help publicise their mother's books in department stores and schools, and as teenagers they recorded an album for Folkways.

But with no warning, in the space of a year their lives began to fall apart. In 1951, at the height of their success, Pete Seeger's Weavers were blacklisted by Senator McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee. Once openly radical too, in the 1930s Peggy's father had seen the danger and, fearing he'd lose his livelihood just as he was raising a second family, Charles Seeger moved to a safer haven as a supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal. Peggy later reflected:

My parents were radical in a certain kind of way in the Thirties, tempered in the Forties, intimidated in the Fifties. I don't ever remember being disturbed, even by Hiroshima. We didn't talk politics as I remember at our table, and yet I was of a liberal family that was supposed to be progressive and supposed to be political.

'Progressive' was all right, but Charles was wary of hearing his politics called left-wing or revolutionary. When much later Ewan and her father started talking politics together she was astounded by her father's views. It made her bristle that he had never talked to her about it, angry that: 'He didn't want to prejudice my thinking. Bollocks. He prejudiced my thinking by his very manner, by our very way of life, by the place we lived, the social milieu that I now took for granted, that comfortable desert called middle-class suburbia.' And by having black servants (as he always had) who were treated courteously but not as part of the household.

Charles Seeger's past came back to bite him when in 1952 his passport was downgraded so he could only travel abroad on official business. The following February he had its renewal turned down on the grounds of Sedition, as a person 'supporting Communist movements', and, now 67 and with the writing blazoned on the wall, he retired from the Pan American Union, an organisation he'd worked for since 1941. McCarthy's witch-hunt was in full swing. But Charles hadn't shopped anyone (nor would Pete), as others like Burl Ives had. Ives cooperated with the Committee, and in consequence Peggy's mother had withdrawn from a joint book project with him. Later this 'rooting out of reds' would be the reason for their friend Alan Lomax's crucial spell in England.

Worse was to follow, much much worse. When Peggy was 14 her mother had started tentatively composing again in the evenings, her disturbing music floating up from the room below Peggy's. (Peggy had never even realised until then that her mother had composed anything at all significant before.) In 1952, with her first major work for 20 years, Ruth won a prize for new compositions. She had worked on it flat out despite feeling increasingly unwell. When her *Suite for Wind Quintet* was performed for the first time at the award ceremony that December, she accepted her prize shyly, wearing a black taffeta skirt that Peggy had made for her. Then, in February 1953 she discovered she had intestinal cancer. She ignored it for as long as she could. She went on teaching, started a flurry of new projects, and worked as intensively as ever to finish a new book, just as she visibly wasted away.

By November 1953 she was clearly dying. Peggy, away at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was summoned back and spent a last few days with her as she slipped away, drugged with morphine, uncomplaining. 'I sang to her conscious and I sang to her unconscious as dusk and dawn changed guard outside the windows.' Peggy was there when she died. On the same day Peggy and Mike were due to be at the Children's Book Fair at the Washington Post building, promoting their mother's *American Folk Songs for Christmas*. The book was another great success – for other people's Christmases. For Peggy 'the life went out of the household when she died. It just vanished.'

In September 1955 in Quebec City Peggy boarded a ship bound for Holland, accompanied by little more than her new long-necked Vega banjo. In the intervening period she had gone back to college at her father's insistence, and before long she had been joined in Cambridge by her father, her younger sisters, and her mother's huge grand piano. She kept house for this odd ménage for the academic year of 1954–5, but her father soon fell in love once more with a childhood sweetheart (after whom Peggy had been named) and moved in with her in California. He was now nearly 70, but his new wife's money made him financially secure and would help to bail out Peggy at crucial moments in the next couple of years. Peggy was packed off abroad alone to the Dutch university town of Leiden to live with one of Pete's elder brothers. The plan was that she would continue (in Dutch) with the Russian studies she had begun at Radcliffe, and then go back to college after a year in Europe.

On the Road

It didn't work out like that. The chemistry between the two sisters-in-law was not as it had been when Peggy was ten, and she and the banjo hit the road. In a Belgian snowstorm that winter she was given a lift, and promptly recruited, by a pastor who ran a home for Catholic children displaced by

the war. He would go to East Germany, find them in camps set up in aircraft hangars, and bring back a dozen 12-year-olds to a Belgian village. Peggy was asked if she ‘wanted to be their little mother’, and puzzled over the period in retrospect, especially her slide towards Roman Catholic belief after long debates with the persistent priest. ‘I guess I needed structure ... and he had a crush on me. But the boys were little Nazis.’ She became the household skivvy and had to sleep in a vast double bed with the five girls. On the freezing afternoon walks she would be besieged by the pastor: ‘That’s the nunnery. If you stayed, I could head the monastery and you could head the nunnery.’ She needed rescuing, and wrote to an American couple she had met on the boat. They drove up and took her back with them to Copenhagen, happily jammed under the luggage in their microscopic Fiat.

She was in Copenhagen in March 1956 when a call came through for her on the youth hostel phone. It was Alan Lomax, now in England, who had tracked her down via her father. The BBC needed someone for a televised version of the play *Dark of the Moon*, specifically someone who could play the five-string banjo, act a bit, and sing ‘Barbara Allen’. Lomax told the producer he would dig out the best banjo player in Europe – ‘Oh, he was always full of superlatives.’ (He actually had something else in mind too, for he was starting a band and her banjo playing would be ideal for it.) He found her in a Danish youth hostel, and over 24 wearying hours later she arrived at Waterloo Station to a reassuring Lomax bear-hug. She was dishevelled and unwashed, with little more than the banjo and the clothes she stood up in. The clothes would have stood up of their own accord. Lomax’s then girlfriend was a model, and she sluiced her down and spruced her up, put her long hair up in a lacquered beehive creation, and stood her in unfamiliar high heels. At 10.30 on 25 March 1956 she tottered into Alan Lomax’s basement flat in Chelsea, and all heads turned. One head in particular.

CHAPTER 5

Man of Many Parts

From Theatre to Folk Song



A fine documentary play, dealing fearlessly and poetically with the crucial problems of our day ... Marlowe is in the wings ... Why is it being ignored?’

SEAN O’CASEY, THE IRISH PLAYWRIGHT,
ON READING EWAN MACCOLL’S *URANIUM* 235 IN 1949

The main objective of the series was to show that Britain possessed a body of songs that were just as vigorous, as tough, and as down-to-earth as anything that could be found in the United States.

EWAN MACCOLL, IN *JOURNEYMAN*,
ON HIS 1953 RADIO SERIES *BALLADS AND BLUES*

One of the entrepreneurial successes of the immediate post-war period in England was the holiday camp, an opportunity for cheap and cheerful holidays, fresh air and fun, for largely Northern working-class families. At the Butlin's camp in Filey, on the bracing Yorkshire coast, entertainment was laid on in a massive tent – ballroom dancing, music hall variety turns, wrestling. But whether you were a holidaying miner or a visiting *News Chronicle* reporter, the last thing you would be expecting after the wrestling was a radical theatre group playing Lorca, Molière and MacColl.

MacColl? Who was he? And a play about nuclear energy called *Uranium 235*? The reporter there that afternoon in the May of 1946 blinked in disbelief, but went back and described something very different from what he'd imagined, a 'theatrical event of the greatest importance.' The play's name hadn't been announced, which was probably as well, and the packed Butlin's audience took it as it came, as if it was a game of football, as Ewan would say later:

They cheered, groaned, shouted their approval, and when one of the actors tried to make a planned interruption from the auditorium they howled him down... It was a triumph and a complete vindication of everything we had said about the theatre. A working-class audience could be won for a theatre which concerned itself with the social and political problems of our time ... what was regarded as wildly experimental by theatre buffs and representatives of the theatre establishment was accepted by our Butlin's audience as a perfectly sensible way of doing things. 'And the wonderful bare stage!' enthused our theatre friends. But it wasn't bare to our audience ... If there were moments when they regretted the absence of 'real' sets and stage furniture, there were other things to stimulate the imagination, such as the amplified sound of machines, passing cars, railway trains, explosions, whispering voices, announcements of news items ...

How does the new theatrical voice of Jimmie Miller, reborn as Ewan MacColl after the war, become the voice of the folk singer who Peggy Seeger met in a Chelsea basement ten years after his *Uranium 235* excited an afternoon audience at the seaside? He was still a theatre man through and through – Peggy would see him later that first day performing in the West End in a part that bridged his two worlds, the street singer in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. But the theatre had been usurped in his affections by an interest long dormant. The British folk song revival was under way, and Ewan would play a crucial part in that national awakening.

After Jimmie Miller absconded from the army in December 1940 he turned up briefly at the home of his parents, where Betsy burned his uniform in the boiler and gave him her blessing, before he moved in with the Theatre Union actress Rosalie Williams. She was alone in a big Victorian house in the Manchester suburb of Urmston, vacated by parents who had gone to the USA. It became the unofficial wartime HQ for the company's

dwindling remnants. Jimmie stayed there out of sight, reading as widely as ever and working on adaptations of plays. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 soon changed the attitude of the Communist Party to the war and of the British government to the Soviet Union. Joan Littlewood was allowed back into the BBC, earning £10 a week making a series for Geoffrey Bridson (and discovering for herself the arcane art of tape splicing well before Charles Parker did). For Jimmie, though, to emerge after his desertion to fight what was now legitimised as a People's War was too dangerous. So he stayed put.

Understandably perhaps, the *Journeyman* of Jimmie Miller stops in 1939, restarting in 1945 with the birth of Ewan MacColl and of Theatre Workshop. The new group formed again around a Theatre Union nucleus of Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl, Rosalie Williams, its future archivist Howard Goorney, and a (necessarily) tireless young business manager, Gerry Raffles. With an uncertain future if he were ever recaptured by the military, probably a spell in prison and a tour of duty abroad, Jimmie Miller grew a startling red beard to go with his dark hair and re-emerged with a new name and a Scots identity. Ewan MacColl is an anglicisation of the name of a famous 19th-century Gaelic poet and songwriter who left his native Perthshire for Canada, Eoghan MacColla. Though the original MacColl translated it as Evan, Ewan is the name of two characters in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* trilogy, a series Jimmie Miller had read avidly (one was a Communist, the other a deserter eventually shot.) You can see the connection, for Ewan, who considered himself another émigré, was always proud of his Scottish parentage. Moreover, the Scots literary scene had a tradition of pseudonyms: indeed, Grassie Gibbon itself was one.

Ewan MacColl and Theatre Workshop

The new Ewan MacColl wasn't finally clear of the old Jimmie Miller until April 1947. After the success of *Uranium 235* was repeated on a Scottish tour in the autumn of 1946, Theatre Workshop settled down to study and rehearse in the palatial surroundings of Ormesby Hall outside Middlesbrough. They were the unlikely guests of an amiable retired colonel, James Pennyman, and his theatre-fixated wife Ruth. Ewan had finished his adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in December 1946 when the military police finally caught up with him. Now what? Joan abandoned plans to accompany the group on a tour of West Germany, and stayed to fight for Ewan's cause for both personal and professional reasons – and to provide moral support for his new love. Ewan had by now fallen for the company's dance teacher Jean Newlove, as had Joan Littlewood for the young and handsome Raffles. Joan and Ewan were nevertheless still collaborating and on good terms – from the very start theirs had been a working partnership more than a domestic one.

Jean was stunned by the turn of events, having been entirely unaware of the threat hanging over him. Joan canvassed sympathetic MPs, and raised money for a psychiatrist. Ewan's court martial was set for 17 February, but was cancelled after the psychiatrist's report confirmed a form of epilepsy. Betsy Miller was convinced her son had 'played it up a treat' and diddled them, but Ewan never spoke or wrote of it, nor of the unpleasant 11 weeks that followed in a grim military hospital. He was at a low enough ebb anyway, in Joan's view genuinely suicidal for a time, and while awaiting the court martial he'd had to cope with his father's final physical disintegration and death. But in early April 1947 he was discharged after nearly four months in prison, and he could finally start his life again free from the fear of capture, if not from the taint of desertion.

Before we whisk Theatre Workshop from its peripatetic beginnings to its eventual home in the other Stratford, let's have a closer look at the startling success of *Uranium 235*. It will underline what didn't happen in British theatre afterwards. As soon as the prolonged war in the Far East had been abruptly terminated after the dropping of two atom bombs on Japan in August 1945, Ewan was persuaded to write a play to explain it all. *Uranium 235* owes its existence to Bill Davidson, an aircraft designer who ambled into a rehearsal one day. His interest was piqued and, given a problem that intrigued him, he designed and built a revolving stage using a novel system of tensioned wires, and stayed for three years. Typical of the brilliant eccentrics that Theatre Workshop attracted in those early days, he went on to fire Ewan's enthusiasm and tutor him on the history of the atom from Democritus to Einstein. Ewan found it hard, but he got there.

For a few weeks the world of the company becomes, in Joan Littlewood's words, 'a mass of electrons, protons and neutrons, and the millions of stars at night mere molecules in a Milky Way.' From that unpromising material Ewan fashions a dizzying two-hour play which Joan directs with her growing verve and assurance. Everyone plays a dozen parts. The first half is billed Democritus to Dalton, with mime, dance sequences, and a Chorus of Alchemists. (Democritus was an Athenian who came up with a remarkably prescient theory of atoms 2400 years ago, Dalton his 19th-century successor. Both thought atoms indestructible.) During the second half, Dalton holds forth at a roll of velvet to represent a lectern, held flat by two assistants squatting on empty air. The 'Release of Energy' becomes a whirling atomic ballet. A morality play interlude has Energy on a leash held by Greed, Lust and Death. A scene with Marie and Pierre Curie seems to Joan at first impossible, but she stages it as a waltz punctuated by verse, until Death slowly dances Pierre away. Bill Davidson plays the Scientist, who invites and answers impromptu questions from the audience.

Actor friends came to see it and were bowled over, and scientists who saw it couldn't fault it. At the end of the launch of the short version with

which it opened in Newcastle the stage was besieged by fascinated young people. The Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid (another Scots pseudonym – he began life as Christopher Grieve) called Ewan ‘by far the most promising young dramatist writing in English ... at the present time.’ *Uranium 235* was later, for the normally hostile *Scotsman* newspaper, ‘the only striking event’ at Edinburgh’s so-called People’s Festival in 1951, where Ewan is described as ‘the Picasso of Drama’. The festival was inspired by an uninvited trip to Edinburgh that Theatre Workshop had made in 1949, where they had become a much-admired alternative to the new International Festival of the Arts. This People’s Festival was a forerunner of the annual Fringe that now transforms Edinburgh into a seething August of live events, outgrowing the international festival it had originally merely fringed. (Now it’s peopled by Theatre Workshop’s noisy sprawling grandchildren, most of them ignorant of their first illegal immigrant forebears.) In 1952 *Uranium 235* was brought to London by Michael Redgrave and Sam Wanamaker, two of the few Men of the Theatre who bothered with Theatre Workshop. Alan Lomax, just arrived from the USA, watched ‘Ewan running through the history of science, leaning on the proscenium arch like Shaw but far more witty.’

The eminent Irish playwright Sean O’Casey enthused about *Uranium 235* when sent a copy of the script (thus he wasn’t influenced by the brilliant staging). But his modern Marlowe, ‘waiting in the wings’, was to stay off-stage, despite a further plaudit from George Bernard Shaw, who called MacColl the only genius working in the theatre of the day – apart from himself. Perhaps it took one prolific polemicist to recognise another. Ewan later felt of his post-war plays that in each of them ‘there are moments when the language takes off, comes alive, but they are only moments.’ He could write brilliantly at his best, but reviewers not in tune with his politics could find his work heavy going. He had been trying to ‘evolve a dramatic utterance which would crystallise, or at least reflect, a certain kind of working-class speech.’ In the Radio Ballads he would in due course find that dramatic utterance in the mouths of working people themselves, and discover that for him song was a better vehicle with which to express it.

For eight years after the war Ewan acted as playwright and artistic director for Theatre Workshop, and frequently performed leading roles in their plays. Much of his writing was adaptations of, or new works based on, originals by Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Ben Jonson, Lorca and Molière – he cast his net wide. The endlessly travelling Theatre Workshop troupe had mixed success with these and with his own original plays – *Hell is What you Make it*, *Johnny Noble*, *The Flying Doctor*, *Landscape with Chimneys*, *The Other Animals*, *The Travellers*. The Arts Council, for whom Joan Littlewood reserved her most venomous scorn, simply refused to support them through all their years of touring – it’s indicative of its mindset that it gave more to the Covent Garden Opera than to the whole of British Theatre. Theatre Workshop was acclaimed abroad,

ignored at home. They were way ahead of anyone in Britain in their use of voice coaching, acting exercises based on Stanislavski, and the movement techniques pioneered by Rudolf Laban. They were creating the theatrical language we now speak. If they'd had greater support, who knows what would have happened to British theatre, and to Ewan.

If they'd had that greater support, they wouldn't have been constantly on the move looking for a new base, touring in places where they often had to perform miracles of improvisation to put on a show at all. The company was threadbare, its members often hungry, exhausted and ill. In the middle of one debilitating Welsh tour the wonderful 'Doc' Thomas took them in hand and doled out antibiotics and vitamin injections between his visits to grievously sick miners. (Ewan used him later in *The Big Hewer*.) In Britain they were helped by a few inspired individuals, but never by institutions. Abroad they were feted by both – though their touring had started inauspiciously in February 1947, with a cold and miserable trek through a still-devastated Germany in that vile winter. This tour was the one disrupted by Ewan's arrest, which to Gerry Raffles' annoyance kept Joan Littlewood in England, so neither of the company's theatrical twin engines were there. Half the company left after their return, and they had to retrench.

Those that stayed toured Czechoslovakia in 1948, a few months after the Communist takeover that February. Not surprisingly, Ewan's plays were always popular behind the Iron Curtain, but it was on the Swedish tour which immediately followed that they had their greatest success. Theatre Workshop played 16 sell-out shows, some in vast theatres, despite the fact that they performed everything in English. But Littlewood productions teemed with life and were visually vivid, so foreign audiences were captivated even when the play's themes provoked fierce debate, as they often did. One critic was amused by a beautifully dressed audience applauding 'Red propaganda'. The newspapers described a packed audience of reserved Swedes stamping with joy, and applauding with 'southern spontaneity':

The means of expression, rhythm, movement, design of light and shade, the spoken word, all were worked together to create a liberating, expressive whole ... The actors are like acrobats ... *Johnny Noble* gripped the audience ... concluded with an ovation. [They filled the 1200-seat Opera House in Stockholm, where] the storm of applause was fully justified ... use of light is especially important, use of sound is wonderful, full of nuance ... The performance has a richness and film-like quality.

So it was all the more galling, after they returned glutted with praise, to find the burghers of Little England still content with drawing-room comedy viewed through a proscenium arch, and the small target working-class audiences were rarely as excited as the Butlin's holidaymakers had been. It's

a tragedy that, commonplace as it is to us now over 60 years later, the Theatre Workshop style took years to catch on. It wasn't until the late 1950s that their brand of theatre reached the populace at large – and the critics. That was long after the wandering Theatre Workshop of Butlin's and a trail of less welcoming venues had, after a fierce debate, found a permanent home in the run-down East End of London. The successes of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* were quickly followed by that of the 18-year-old Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and Frank Norman's *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*. They were all new plays. The conventional wisdom today is that it was John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* that revitalised the stagnant British theatre, and the Royal Court that began to foster new British writing. But in truth its roots lay in the Theatre Workshop and their hard years after the war.

The company had settled, like weary Travellers, at the Theatre Royal 'and Palace of Varieties' in Angel Lane at Stratford-atte-Bowe. Theatre and location sound exotic, but both were seriously run-down, as far as could be from the Stratford of Shakespeare. To Ewan MacColl, though, whose involvement had steadily reduced after they found a permanent home, they had been obliged to water down their heady brew to earn the approbation of the West End critics and theatre managements. The theatre hadn't captured his working-class audience – it was at home watching television. It would not be until the late 1960s that imaginative political and community theatre picked up where the early Theatre Workshop left off.

Ewan's disillusion isn't at all surprising. Although touring was exhausting, he still felt that their aim should be to take theatre to working people all over the country, so he was against its settlement in a London of which he was still suspicious. Gradually, for he hadn't stopped writing for them, he drifted away with little lasting rancour, though Joan was saddened and thought him a fool:

One day ... [our] prime mover, inspiration, Daddy o't, walked out, quit, buggered off ... Theatre Workshop had been his life, his inspiration, his pride and joy, the vehicle for all his plays. Whether improvised in the back of a lorry or on some God-forsaken railway station, Jimmie's songs had always lifted our spirits.

It would gall him later that the eventual success came to 'Joan Littlewood's' Theatre Workshop. After 20 years at the heart of the movement his name had been quietly expunged from the record. (Given this, his sensitivity in later years to the expression 'Charles Parker's Radio Ballads' is hardly a surprise.) He came down to London with them, still supported them, adapting plays and putting on fund-raising concerts for the cash-strapped company, which for years remained solely dependent on box office receipts until 1955, when a few minuscule grants arrived. Jean Newlove would remain the company's choreographer for years. They had married in April 1949, and in July 1950

Hamish was born. A child changes perspectives, and Ewan was besotted with him. For Ewan too, it was undoubtedly his discovery that people would pay to hear him sing that weakened his enthusiasm for Theatre Workshop. Enter the folk singer.

The Folk Singer

In a BBC studio in February 1951 sits a larger-than-life figure, born in January 1915, womaniser, enthusiast, hugely knowledgeable, a man who ‘gorges himself on ideas, concepts, systems, philosophies.’ With him is Ewan MacColl. Ewan is not often swept off his feet by a man – he is just as likely to see him as a rival – but on this occasion he is taken by storm. Alan Lomax, an older but no less energetic version of the young man who collaborated with Peggy Seeger’s mother before the war, has become an expert on folk music and much else besides. To Ewan this enormous Texan ‘is big but not gigantic. The illusion of size is the result of his expansiveness and the warmth he generates. At times he gives the impression that he is expanding in front of your eyes.’

They hit it off instantly. Lomax described Ewan in turn as someone who could take an idea new to him, talk eloquently about it non-stop for half an hour, and emerge with a complete philosophy of a subject that he had known little about. His comment was less a criticism than admiration, and they were invigorated by each other’s intellect and energy, and empathy with working people. Lomax had been recording American source singers in the field, and the recording process worked its magic on him:

Every time I took one of those big, black, glass-based platters out of its box I felt that a magical moment was opening up in time ... For me, the black discs spinning in the Mississippi night, spitting the chip centripetally toward the center of the table ... heralded a new age of writing human history.

As well as being an indefatigable field recorder, he was an experienced and innovative radio programme maker. As early as 1941 Lomax had made a novel programme about a Tennessee valley about to be flooded for a dam, in which he recorded a local farmer talking to his friends, in a way that would anticipate Charles Parker and Ewan:

For several days I let him do all the talking and make all the decisions about where we were to go and whom we were to talk to. Whenever he said anything that was particularly memorable, which I was unable to record, I tried later on to reproduce the circumstances of the statement, and to record it with the same emotion as he had originally.

Lomax's ability to help people be themselves in front of a microphone had deeply impressed Geoffrey Bridson, who described him as having a 'zest for living' and for his work. 'I never knew any American who more fully embodied the virtues – and the more engaging vices – of all his countrymen.' Later in the war Lomax produced *The Martins and the Coys*, a family rivalry piece with music by Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, which found its way to British radio in wartime Manchester. It very much influenced Ewan's *Johnny Noble*.

After nearly two decades collecting folk songs in the USA, Lomax crossed the Atlantic with a new recorder he'd bought with the proceeds from the Weavers' first hit, whose copyright he shared with Leadbelly. 'In 1950 I set sail for Europe with a new Magnecord tape machine in my cabin and the folk music of the world my destination.' Lomax had blagged his way to a contract with Columbia to produce a 40-disc anthology of world music. It took eight years to produce just 18, but it was a landmark. It had the useful by-product of getting him out of McCarthy's firing line – anyone with anything to do with folk music was a prime target for his committee. The Weavers were by now in its sights. Ironically, Senator Joe McCarthy was thus in part responsible for the British folk revival.

Lomax tracked Ewan down after hearing of his fund of Scottish folk songs, and immediately began recording him. In the Durham town of Tow Law, as they rigged the night's set, he entranced the Theatre Workshop company by singing American folk songs, ballads and blues, chants and hollers, all collected in prison camp and workplace. This was compelling, and Ewan was hooked, spending much of the year debating with Lomax and listening to his massive music collection. Ewan was now meeting more people from outside the theatre. Through Lomax he met the Irish collector Seamus Ennis, met again Hamish Henderson, the Scottish folk song collector, and – eventually – one Albert Lancaster Lloyd.

AL Lloyd, or Bert Lloyd – or AL Bert, or AL Lewd as the fancy took him – was a journalist, writer and translator, a fellow Communist, and a friend of Peggy Seeger's father. He had picked up songs in outback Australia over several years, and had even signed on in a whaler, so his sea songs had the tang of authenticity. A 'walking toby jug', in Ewan's words, like him self-educated, an outstanding linguist with a remarkable ability to absorb new languages, it was he who had translated *Blood Wedding*, a play by Lorca that Littlewood planned to stage. Lloyd had been researching English folk song since before the war. As they had so much in common it was rather odd that he and Ewan had never met, but Lomax made sure they did, and their animated impromptu songfest outside the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, was only ended when a policeman moved them on. The debate continued across the months – Ewan 'believed from the outset there was a strong correlation between language and music. Bert wasn't convinced, but was eventually converted.'

Since before the war Bert Lloyd had been interested in working men's songs, and was now compiling a book of songs from coal miners, *Come All Ye Bold Miners*. In 1947 he had selected the songs for a Bridson radio programme, *Johnny Miner* (though the songs had original settings by the Hungarian émigré Matyas Seiber and weren't sung by folk singers). Bridson had to steer it through the flak from coal owners fighting the industry's nationalisation. There were far more mining songs than Ewan had realised, though he was able to contribute a few he knew. Alan Lomax was excited by the idea of a British folk song revival, seeing the 'waulking' song – a traditional Hebridean work song form, sung while women prepared tweed cloth – as an underlying form as powerful as the Blues. The combination of the two ideas of traditional and urban song was a potent mix for Ewan. Here was a form that was still living, and deeply imbued with the rhythms of working-class speech, a working man's culture that was lying hidden and waiting to be dug up. A seam was there to be mined, and Ewan and Bert took pick and shovel to it.

Ewan sang with Bert Lloyd at union meetings all over London, in an unprecedented but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to engage the leaders of the working class with their patrimony of song. But the unions had other preoccupations and, moreover, in Ewan's later view, they approached them several years too early – it had needed to come during the folk song revival, not before it could begin. The radio was a more fertile field. He had managed to get work for the BBC again in Manchester since 1948, a useful sideline in Children's Radio that allowed him to have fun creating new voices, not explicitly 'Northern' this time. Animals mostly, whose regional accents hadn't yet been pored over by anthropologists.

In 1953, however, he was allowed back on grown-up radio, with a series of six Saturday morning programmes with Alan Lomax exploring the roots of folk song in the English language. Produced by Denis Mitchell, *Ballads and Blues* was a breakthrough, reaching an eager audience and reaping a rich postbag. Ewan was even allowed on television (after an internal BBC argument) on Lomax's *Song Hunter* series. For one programme Lomax flew down twenty Hebridean women to illustrate the waulking song – testing the nerve and budget of its young producer, one David Attenborough. *Ballads and Blues* introduced Ewan to a gallery of musicians and contacts he'd use over the next 20 years: members of Humphrey Lyttleton's band, the Theatre Workshop graduate Isla Cameron and Seamus Ennis, as well as Alan Lomax and the old blues singer Big Bill Broonzy. The programmes didn't attract a particularly wide audience, but they enthused a generation of potential young singers. A key message for them to take away was that the British Isles had just as much traditional song as America for them to learn.

September 1953 was perhaps a pivotal moment. Ewan was in Edinburgh with Theatre Workshop, where the previous year they'd mounted an imaginative and well-reviewed production of his latest play, *The Travellers*. A

driving political thriller set on a train hurtling across Europe to war, peopled with passengers of many nationalities and attitudes, its staging problems were solved by constructing the train down the main aisle of the auditorium, with the audience on raked seats at either side. Not the kind of thing you'd normally see in 1952. From that high point his play-writing energies began to wane. A year after the success of *The Travellers*, in the same Edinburgh venue he launched a series of Scottish traditional songs he had been working on for a Workers' Musical Association (WMA) anthology. It was a tour de force, a masterly unaccompanied solo concert, lasting three hours before a spellbound audience.

Here was an intellectually satisfying quest, and with it the emotional charge brought by an enthusiastic live audience. And he was brilliant at it. With Bert Lloyd, Isla Cameron, the guitarist Fitzroy Coleman from Trinidad, the jazz clarinet and saxophone player Bruce Turner, and the (actually the only) English concertina player Alf Edwards, he performed with increasing frequency. This loose 'Ballads and Blues' group performed a sell-out benefit concert for the *Daily Worker* in July 1954 at the new Royal Festival Hall on the South Bank. He described it as 'a fantastic success, and that's what launched the folk revival as far as the left wing were concerned. They didn't really understand it, mind.'

On the same bill was Ken Colyer's band. Colyer, according to Ewan, was the first to see the link between the blues and English folk music, which he loved though he never played it. He unwittingly pioneered the 'skiffle' craze in the intervals of his concerts, triggering a two-year explosion of interest in getting up and performing on instruments, often home-made, a trend of which Ewan approved. After all, working people were taking to a form of folk music. He hadn't yet met the woman who would listen incredulously when she first heard her very own Libba Cotten's *Freight Train* sung by Lonnie Donegan. How could he do that to it?

Ewan and Peggy

Early in 1956, at the time Donegan's version of the chain gang song 'Rock Island Line' entered the charts, Ewan – now almost a full-time singer and songwriter – was making a rare acting appearance in the West End. It was during the run that Ewan met Peggy Seeger, coiffed and made up by an expert, in Alan Lomax's basement flat in Chelsea. Peggy could barely see the man in the opposite corner for cigarette smoke. Her features, though, were clear enough to him. There was to be no *Dark of the Moon* – the play she had been summoned for had been cancelled – but instead a rehearsal for a new folk group that Lomax was forming, to be called The Ramblers. Banjo flying, she launched into 'The House Carpenter', and earned a smattering of applause, though not from Ewan, who sat leaning on his elbow in the

opposite corner, chain smoking and regarding her intently. They were both now Ramblers. They talked, he offered her a complimentary ticket to watch him at the theatre. 'Complimentary anything, that was me. I had no money and was interested in everything.' That night she turned up at the theatre in her workaday clobber, hair tousled. His picture of her underwent an instant revision, but he became increasingly obsessed by her.

Ewan was appearing as the (definitive) street singer in the British premiere of Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. Directed by the American anglophile Sam Wanamaker (later to be the driving force behind the rebuilding of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre) and including Warren Mitchell in its cast, it had been a landmark production for the Royal Court theatre. It ran for several months at three venues, and had moved to the Comedy when Peggy saw it. 'I'd never been in that kind of theatre – plush seats, goodies being sold during the intervals, dressed-up people. Well, up goes the curtain and this beery, leery old man starts the show singing. What a lovely voice! I was entranced.'

O the shark has pretty teeth dear,
And he keeps them pearly white,
Just a jack-knife has MacHeath, dear,
And he keeps it out of sight.

'Then I realised it was Ewan, with his belly poking out and toggled out in a torn shirt, a filthy stovepipe hat and ragged jacket! I was appalled at how such a change could be wreaked.' They met backstage, had a drink, and as he drove her back to the cheap room in Chelsea she'd rented he began to lay siege to her. She was flattered, intrigued, but a married man twice her age with a child? A shark with pretty teeth but nicotine-stained fingers? There was no way she was going to fall, she told herself. Yes, well.

The Ramblers were based in Manchester, making a six-part series for Granada television in the summer of 1956, and hoping to be Britain's answer to The Weavers. Their first broadcast took place the night before Peggy's 21st birthday. The long train journeys there and back each weekend gave Ewan and Peggy ample opportunity to talk and talk, and she too was in a whirl: 'Ewan and I courted all the way up and all the way back every week for 11 weeks.' Alan Lomax was in precisely the same state (and same age gap) with a young singer from Sussex, Shirley Collins, who was the other female singer in the group. With Ewan MacColl and Bert Lloyd, Fitzroy Coleman, Bruce Turner, the bass player Jim Bray, the session guitarist Bryan Daly, and a Nigerian drummer, they formed a ten-piece band. The line-up looks stuffed with brilliance to a modern eye, but it was over-rich, and Lomax's bluff American hoedown introductions set the tone. Considering his later interdict against those who sang outside their own tradition in his club, Ewan would have cringed at the American songs he sang (he even recorded

the Merle Travis hit 'Sixteen Tons' that year). Peggy got a hay fever reaction to the straw bales that littered the set, and all in all, as she said, 'we didn't deserve to succeed, and we didn't.'

Peggy and Ewan became lovers. Jean found out, and there began a fraught period of nearly three years when neither woman could be sure which of them Ewan – 'frustration, exhilaration and guilt were my constant companions' – would eventually settle with. In late 1956 Peggy escaped from an increasingly untenable situation by taking a boat back to the USA, running the gauntlet of fierce Atlantic gales – 'the sickest I have ever been, and the longest I have ever been so sick.' Diverted to St John's Newfoundland by a strike in New York, she arrived on Christmas Eve 1956 to be met by customs officials who spent hours opening her suitcases, instruments – and motor scooter. After that it got better. While staying in California with her father, she made some radio appearances and secured an engagement in Chicago. Collecting her scooter from Philadelphia, she piled it high with suitcases and instruments, hit the road, and was swept along bare-headed in the slipstream of giant trucks. When the police stopped her she discovered that a car licence didn't allow her to ride a scooter, and that she was required to take their test there and then. This was a cinch for someone used to rush-hour London, and she wowed them by weaving her scooter and its teetering load expertly through their obstacle course. Now helmeted, she completed her 900-mile journey.

At a Chicago dive called the Gates of Horn owned by Albert Grossman, later to be the manager of Bob Dylan, she performed around midnight for three months, sharing the bill with Big Bill Broonzy. He was wonderful on stage, she said, and off it he sat in the bar with glasses of brandy which he drank neat, one after the other. As well as American folk songs she sang 'The First Time Ever', which Ewan had composed over the phone to her when she was in California and had needed a love song to sing on a radio show the following night. It's a song totally uncharacteristic of him back then. It describes how he felt at that first meeting, and he would never sing the song on stage. It was written for her, though it was others who would popularise it later. Ironically, as she said, she had not actually felt this way herself at that first meeting ...

The first time ever I saw your face
I thought the sun rose in your eyes,
And the moon and the stars were the gifts you gave
To the dark and empty skies my love,
To the dark and empty skies.

CHAPTER 6

Riding the Engine

The Ballad of John Axon



Last week a technique and a subject got married, and nothing in radio kaleidoscopy, or whatever you care to call it, will ever be the same again. This was music with a purpose: its picture of a morning in winter, a family and friends, things to look forward to, a train, a broken brake, and a man staying on to die, was sharp and strange and powerful ... Anecdote turned into song, song turned into the hiss of steam. It didn't, presumably couldn't, keep still for a minute.

PAUL FERRIS, *THE OBSERVER*, 1958

I broke in to the BBC in Broad Street every night at half past twelve when the night shift went on, took over the three tape machines there, and edited the programme till seven in the morning for about two months, when I did finally get it together, and was only rumbled on the last day, luckily.

CHARLES PARKER, INTERVIEWED BY TREVOR FISHER, 1971

Hugh Carleton-Greene, Director-General of the BBC through the 1960s, called *The Ballad of John Axon* 'the most originally conceived, the most brilliantly executed and the most moving radio programme I've ever heard.' In fact, it didn't turn out as originally conceived, it was executed after months of hard labour, and the BBC very nearly didn't broadcast it at all. When Charles Parker wrote to Ewan MacColl in July 1957 he had in his mind's ear a 1944 programme, part of a 26-week series produced by the legendary radio journalist Norman Corwin for CBS. Written by Millard Lampell and Earl Robinson, the writer of the song 'Joe Hill', and narrated in song by Burl Ives, it told the story of Abraham Lincoln's funeral train. Charles had wept when he first heard it.

A lonesome train on a lonesome track,
Seven coaches painted black.

Charles writes that the idea is still 'very much in embryo', but wants to sound Ewan out because it clearly hinges on his participation. We could have a British equivalent of *Lonesome Train*, he tells him, 'drawing its strengths from the tradition and pride of the railwayman, and from the work songs, of which [you are] such a master.' He envisages a shape built around the last journey of John Axon, giving a reiterated 'bass tune' of the doomed goods train working up to the climax, out of which he anticipates flashbacks into the dead man's life. From meetings with Axon's workmates they could create 'impressionistic dramatic vignettes to build up the character of the man.' He goes on to praise the music Ewan had written and performed for Denis Mitchell's recent television programme *Night in the City*. Mitchell is the radio producer who had made Ewan's *Ballads and Blues* series: he had since defected to television.

Charles clearly sees Ewan's participation as crucial, but flattery isn't necessary. In his reply Ewan is eager at the prospect of working on that kind of programme, and points out that he has already collected some old English railway songs with a 'somewhat vague notion of writing a ballad-opera on the subject', which could provide useful raw material. He won't, though, be able to start on it straight away. He's off to Moscow for five weeks with Jean (and Peggy...) and isn't due back till 25 August.

His support galvanises Charles, who replies immediately. Although he's tied up with a couple of programmes himself, he hopes to meet Axon's widow Gladys early in August to get her agreement, which is vital. He then goes on: 'Depending on the actuality characters themselves [BBC-speak for the real railwaymen] I am toying with the idea of using actuality recordings for the flash back sequences with yourself as the link between them and the dramatico-musical evocation of the goods train, but it will have to be actuality well up to Denis's standards before this could begin to work.' Denis

Mitchell has used ‘actuality’ impressively in his programmes, and Charles wants to try it here. So Charles at the outset has a pretty clear idea of the kind of programme he wants to make, in particular using actuality where he can, as well as actors.

A fortnight after the initial letter Charles interviews Gladys Axon with enough sensitivity that she agrees to the programme. He excitedly despatches a series of interview transcripts to Ewan, and meets him in London at the end of August. Two weeks later he formally commissions Ewan to ‘compose and arrange music and lyrics for a railway ballad.’ At the moment, he tells his BBC superiors, the programme is conceived as a 30-minute musical radio ballad of a somewhat unusual form, possibly involving a small amount of actuality (he knew they’d be nervous about actuality), but consisting largely of music and musical effects in a modern folk song idiom. Estimating 20–25 minutes of music, he suggests an initial fee for Ewan of 100 guineas, for at least two weeks’ location research and four weeks of composition and experimental arrangement, with a specially recruited ensemble. No mention of Peggy at all, for she hadn’t come back from Moscow. (In fact Ewan had fallen out with her there when she sang rousing American religious rather than political songs. She’d gone on to China against the ‘advice’ of the State department, and then to perform in Poland, where she said she nearly died of pneumonia, alone and freezing in a student dormitory. In effect it was an international crash course after her cloistered childhood.)

The decks cleared, the necessary footplate and guards’ passes issued, Ewan and Charles arrange to go to Stockport late in October. In the run-up Charles sets himself to learn more about folk music, discovering that he can go to folk and jazz clubs virtually every night of the week in Birmingham. He writes to Ewan cadging a bed for the night after an event in London, and asks him for records of guitar technique. And for several days he’s on a high, recording some ‘very exciting actuality’ from an old traveller in Wisbech, an ex-prize fighter with a ‘wonderful sense of timing and instinctive feeling for words: “He hit me and the blood came into my mouth like liver – I was spitting it out in lumps”.’ Charles signs off ‘Ha, life is good.’

At Edgeley railway sheds they enjoy themselves hugely. For someone like Charles in that era, a romantic about steam and mad about sound, the chance to mess about on and around trains seems to have brought out the small boy in him. Having budgeted for three or four days, they spend a fortnight there. Charles records every clank and hiss and whistle. Ewan recalls them recording on the footplate of a night goods train, bouncing up and down, until they had to change tapes – when if they were not careful they would have tape reeling out in the wind behind them. They take a room above a pub in Edgeley and interview the railwaymen there. They track workers through Edgeley railway yards for ten days till the men were ‘absolutely sick’ of them. Later Charles remembers vividly the moment he is knocked out by

the words of the engine driver, about 'railways going through the back of the spine like Blackpool goes through rock.' He stays up after Ewan has returned, recording the Axon family among others, and discovering an earlier accident which Mrs Axon 'is anxious shouldn't be mentioned ... There's something especially terrifying about a locomotive collision. The sort of look they had in their eyes is the sort of look one sees in returning prisoners of war.'

Ewan took the 40 hours of actuality and set to work on it night and day. It wasn't going to be easy, and he was so amazed with it that he realised that he'd have to try a completely different approach. As he says in *Journeyman*:

In that railway shed ... it was dark and gloomy, there was the constant hiss of steam ... and the great shuddering noises of the big steam locomotives starting in, and getting steam up. There was also a fair amount of shouting went on, so I began to see that the problem was a much bigger one than I had originally envisaged ... Previously, in any work I'd done for radio ... the way of using the material was merely to interrupt the programme at certain points and have the narrator sing [but] the impact of this great mass of material was staggering, and it was immediately apparent that what we had got in the can was a unique picture of a way of life, told in words which were themselves charged with the special kind of vitality which derives from involvement with a work process. Furthermore, it seemed to us that the railwayman's speech was full of the same kinds of symbols and verbal nuances which inform the ballads and folk songs of our tradition, and it was obvious that we could not rewrite it without reducing and falsifying it.

This was even better than they'd hoped, and from then on reliance on the richness of voices of working men and women became their creed. Combining the need to tell the story with the desire to have the best of the voices they'd collected, a pretty daunting task in itself, Ewan set to on the songs, and wrote them in ten days. Each was an 'extension of the actuality or a framework for it.' But he was disappointed by his rough assembly: 'I can still remember the feeling of excited anticipation when I pressed the playback switch on my Ferrograph. The excitement gave way to dismay. The programme in my head and the one on the tape were so far apart that I almost abandoned the project there and then.'

By his own admission he was floundering when it came to orchestration – all he knew was that he wanted a driving banjo to signify the train – until he was rescued when Peggy arrived back from Europe after Christmas. She was supposed to have participated in *Sing Christmas and the Turn of the Year*, an ambitious live countrywide recording on Christmas morning put together by Alan Lomax and produced by Charles, but she hadn't made it in time. Once back, she got a grip on the John Axon material, 'transforming it into

a smoothly flowing whole', all carefully timed apart from some sections to be improvised, and the final version took shape. In fact her first mention in the correspondence is not until well after the recordings, when Charles has to badger for £35 for her contribution. She hadn't been signed up originally. Charles had already secured an extra 50 guineas for Ewan. (Weren't women worth guineas?)

When Charles first saw what Ewan had produced his reaction was 'What do you expect me to do with this?' He was expecting a normal script of 30–40 pages. What he got was nine pages of foolscap, with cue numbers for the voices and effects rather than the complete actuality. For a while he got cold feet, and no wonder. He had intended to use raw actuality, certainly, but this much? And some of Ewan's extracts were so short he worried whether they'd register on the listener's ear. But he was soon tremendously excited:

For the first time you were telling a story without a narrator and without actors coming in, and being able to tell a story by context. After the crash ... you have simply some chords on the guitar, another verse of the ballad and then the entry of his fireman, saying it was still dark when they got to the shed that Sunday morning, and you realise it works. It works!

He got to work on splicing together the actuality around which they could build the music in the studio. But he soon realised what a huge task it was, aggravated by unexpected difficulties with variable recording speeds. He only had two days available for editing, explaining: 'It was half-cut, I mean, we only got about one third of the sequences edited crudely by the time we went into the studio ... I didn't get any sleep for about seven days, seven nights, you know ... [I created] a furore there by sleeping in the Red Cross room, never been heard of before ... If I'd slept with the Director General's wife I'd have been better received.' Nevertheless they were ready to rehearse in London in late January, shuttling between a studio and St Hilda's church in Maida Vale, where after a day's break they recorded the music component of the programme in two days, 26–27 January 1958.

Unlike the method they'd develop for the six final Radio Ballad programmes, the musicians and singers recorded 'blind' – they couldn't hear the recorded voices and sound effects they were playing over and between. Moreover, they behaved as jobbing musicians – there was little sense yet of a musical team. One of the instrumentalists from that programme, still alive in 2008, the fiddler Bob Clark, who had been to Moscow with Ewan, recorded his contribution totally unaware until two weeks later that Jim Bray had also been recording for *John Axon* – despite the fact that the pair of them roomed together in Soho. The double bass player Bray was to become a key part of the Radio Ballad ensemble, but it was Clark's only appearance before he went off round the world with a jazz trio to play on cruise ships.

Peggy laughed ruefully when she recalled her first stab at orchestration. 'Although I'd had some musical training at college ... and I could transcribe anything, it was the first time I'd ever scripted for real.' Still only 22, she acquired a copy of a Henry Mancini book on composing and gave herself a crash course. She says she learned a vast amount on that original Radio Ballad. Her first orchestration draft took in only the songs themselves. 'Charles understood that the instrumentation I did was not enough. Every now and then he'd say we need a little twiddle here – Give us something, Bruce.' He realised they'd need occasional musical 'colour' as mood setting, behind a voice, or as a link. Only Alf Edwards, brilliant player of his array of concertinas and ocarinas, couldn't improvise, though he could 'write music as fast as anyone else could write English': he had a sheet music business. For the rest – particularly Bruce Turner on saxophone and clarinet, for whom she hardly needed to write out anything – improvisation was natural, as it was for Peggy herself on banjo and guitar.

As well as the musicians and Ewan, they had Bert Lloyd, whose voice, workaday but atmospheric, stood for the ordinary railwayman. For Fitzroy Coleman, an exquisite guitarist and singer from Trinidad, Ewan wrote an engine fireman's calypso in perfect idiom:

**Got me paddle iron, that's a ten foot spoon,
Got me pricker and me dart like a long harpoon,
Mama, I tell you positive,
Going to serve me steam locomotive.**

Stan Kelly-Bootle, an early computer pioneer and polymath, on his only Radio Ballad performance, sang 'Manchester Rambler', written when Ewan was 17. Another pre-written song, 'The Fireman's Not For Me', was given with some new verses to Isla Cameron, who had joined Theatre Workshop as a 16-year-old in the 1940s. It was the sole song for a woman, a piece spiced with innuendo about an engine driver who loved his engine more than her:

**He said my dear Molly 'Oh won't you be mine –
Just give me the signal and let's clear the line.
My fires they are burning, my steam it is high –
If you don't take the brake off I think I shall die.'**

Extra singers were brought in to complete a chorus line-up, including the roistering and unreliable Dominic Behan, before Ewan sacked him. They bashed out work songs, Ewan insisting that they mime shovelling coal as they did so:

**Put your weight behind your shovel.
From your middle swing.
Swing your steel-bladed shovel!
From your shoulders swing.**

This is sung at a tempo that mimics the slow initial motion of the train. As the speed builds, the chorus quickens and the pace changes to the rocking rhythm of the train in full motion, written by a man who has made sure he, too, sweated on the footplate, shovelling that coal.

**Sweat on your back,
Sweat in your eyes,
Feed the fire,
The steam'll rise.
Bend and thrust,
Twist and turn,
There's nine tons of coal to burn.
Breathing steam,
Swallowing coal,
Brace your legs to take the roll.**

The thrust of the storyline is carried by Ewan's voice. He had the theatrical intelligence to know that he could maintain and build the tension despite telling the audience the ending right at the beginning, as the old ballads often did:

**John Axon was a railway man, to steam trains born and bred,
He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed,
For forty years he followed and served the iron way,
He lost his life upon the track one February day.**

There follows a spectacular 30-second crash. No suspense there, then. When Charles Parker first played out Ewan's concept with the tapes he doubted whether the programme could be carried without a narrator. But, through a series of scene-setting diversions – life in the railway yard as a spoken and sung recitative, the long years as a driver's fireman shovelling that coal, off on the Derbyshire hills where he met his wife – Ewan gradually returns us to that routine Saturday morning in February, and the minor irritation of a

leaking steam brake pipe. A wait while the fitter fixes it, and the long slow haul at walking speed up to Bibbington Top, on a bright crisp morning. Then all hell breaks loose when the pipe fractures, as scalding steam fills the cab. They can't reach the driver's 'regulator' to close it down even with coats over their heads and a fire iron to reach it. 'You only had to put your face anywhere near and it would peel like an onion', says Ron Scanlon the fireman. Axon orders him to jump off, try to pin enough of the brakes down on the 33 loaded wagons to stop the train before the top of the hill (a forlorn hope with such an archaic and dangerous system) and warn the guard at the back. The last Ron sees is the train disappearing over the top and down the stretch to Chapel en le Frith, a little under three miles, over which the train will inexorably gather pace.

MacColl's voice and the music ratchet up the tension as the story unreels, and takes us down that doomed descent with Axon spreadeagled outside the cab. In the final section MacColl tries to recreate Axon's last thoughts, declaiming against the sound of the thundering train and a wailing trumpet:

**All alone now. Ron's gone. On my own now, all the way, all the way.
Never make it. How far's all the way?
There's a gradient all the way into Whaley.
Seven mile gradient. One in seventy. One in sixty. One in fifty eight. WAIT!**

**Dove Holes passed.
Going too fast to see if they saw me hanging outside the cab.
Down the curving line, through the hill of limestone, Eaves Tunnel.**

**Was I born for this? To hang like a fly on an iron ball.
Helpless, on a moving wall.
To die, to end, in a welter of blood and oil. Twisted metal, splintered bone.**

That twisted metal and splintered bone we can imagine all too easily in the climactic crash that follows. Ending the programme are the framing tones of the BBC announcer reading the letter to Gladys Axon that confirms the Queen's assent to her husband's George Cross. It guarantees we have a lump in the throat.

With the raw programme in the can Charles came back to Birmingham with a stack of about 30 tapes – music, railwaymen's voices, and sound effects – made incompatible by variable recording speeds, even on the Maida Vale machines, which had somehow got out of sync. He saw his great new concept crashing with his career in a mass of twisted tape: 'Then I had the problem of assembling the programme and it was just going to

be impossible to do this in the normal facilities of studio time – normal nine-to-five working day, so...’ He knew the night security man wouldn’t give him away, but if caught he knew he risked the sack. ‘Probably if the programme hadn’t been finally successful, I would have been sacked.’

Charles had rescued the programme ultimately by speeding up and slowing down the editing machine manually at key moments. Down in London, Alan Ward, a radio engineer who would soon enter the story, remembers being told of ‘this mad red-bearded producer in Birmingham who cut up recording tape and suspended it in his office from a washing line.’ Nobody did that sort of thing. In the BBC tape was still intended as a more convenient replacement for acetate discs which deteriorated rapidly at each replay, not to be cut and spliced on that scale. It was, well, cheating.

When Charles was able to cut a demo tape to play to colleagues in the BBC, the response was lukewarm at best and hostile at worst. Nearly two months after the programme was recorded, the feature writer Sasha Moorsom writes in an internal review that ‘the thread of the story is sometimes lost in the songs and background actuality.’ That their density and construction required an unusually intense concentration was a constant theme in early responses to the Radio Ballads, one that was echoed in the audience research comments. You were either absolutely spellbound or you couldn’t be bothered. The underlying problem, for listeners used to a story simply told from start to finish, lies in Ewan’s espousal of the ‘ballad form’ in his construction. In a sung ballad, you don’t tell the story straight out, but jump between present and past, dialogue and narrative, switch tenses, swap viewpoints. At worst it’s a maddening jumble, at best it’s brilliantly illuminating. Films have increasingly done it in recent years, but it was unfamiliar then.

One who couldn’t stand it was the head of the Light Programme, George Camacho, who ‘execrated’ it, said Charles later: ‘He described it as technique run riot.’ And although Charles was supported ‘through thick and thin’ by the head of the Home Service, Ronald Lewin, and by Laurence Gilliam, the Head of Features in London, the piece was disliked by the producers in Gilliam’s Features team. Gilliam wanted the name changed to The John Axon Story, and Charles had to fight to keep the word ‘Ballad’ on the card. ‘One of these ridiculous things was this gulf between the London Features department, who were then sort of the aristocrats of the business, and ... the regions ... so I was very unpopular.’

On 22 March his script labelled ‘final transmission tape as edited’ ran to 40 seconds under an hour. It was no longer a 30-minute programme. But it wasn’t final, and it wouldn’t stay at an hour either. In this period the BBC pressed the Foreign Office successfully for Peggy, whose visa was about to run out, to secure just a month’s extension to work on the changes needed to get it down to 45 minutes. (The recorded Topic version you can hear is

the original hour.) It wasn't until 10 pm on 2 July 1957, over five months after the recording, that the 45-minute version of *John Axon* was broadcast on the Home Service, as Radio 4's predecessor was then called. A letter from Charles's fellow producer Douglas Cleverdon after the broadcast hints at what he must have gone through: 'I trust that this will be some slight salve for the lacerations that you endured so patiently at our hands.' He refers to the news that the BBC has chosen *The Ballad of John Axon* to be its entry for the Italia Prize of 1958, the prestigious award for European radio documentaries. The pain was worth it: the forced revision exercise was probably essential in enabling Charles to stand back from the results of his editing efforts and hear it as others did.

The press reaction was immediate and congratulatory. Those were the days when radio reviews received as much prominence as television, with column inches to match. Paul Ferris in the *Observer* gave it the review quoted at the chapter head, which continues: 'Ewan MacColl's words and music were enriched by the fragments of flat thin voice from the fireman and the quiet voice of Mrs Axon ... It was a brilliant success for the producer Charles Parker.' Later Ferris would say in his end-of-year review: 'For pure radio and pure pleasure in 1958, this was far and away the best piece of original writing and production. It was a new dimension, and there was nothing else quite like it all year.' Another plaudit came from Robert Robinson in the *Sunday Times*:

As remarkable a piece of radio as I have ever listened to. It was not only skilful, it was honest ... The total effect was overwhelmingly convincing ... truthful as documentary, truthful as art ... One criticism – the tradition in which the ballad was sung seemed to be of American provenance ... at variance with the voices of singers and railwaymen. But I will not carp ... It worked, and worked magnificently. I congratulate all concerned.

This criticism of 'American influence' was taken on board by Ewan, but as Peggy said later: 'There was no English traditional music being played back then. It was all in dusty tomes in the British Library. That came later.' 'WLW' in the *Manchester Guardian* said this:

The great danger of 'experimental' radio is that the experimenters may be so proudly intrigued with their new technique that the result for the audience is all elaborate means and no end. After the first ten minutes of *John Axon* one had one's doubts – too much seemed to be happening in too short a time. But as the story gathered speed and rattled on to its tremendous catastrophe the pulse caught up with the pounding rhythm and the mind caught on to what Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker had been driving at – something like the experience a drowning man is supposed to undergo in his last minutes...

RIDING THE ENGINE – THE BALLAD OF JOHN AXON

The other aim of the writers was to honour a hero of the people and the tradition of service out of which his heroism grew, and to do this in something like the idiom of the people, through a series of ballads and a curiously effective sort of recitative with folky overtones, linked by scraps of reminiscences and engine-shed lore ... It passed the test of 'experimental' radio by proving to be a powerfully effective way of telling the story. Peggy Seeger's orchestration of a weird folky combination of instruments was frequently brilliant and the songs themselves were direct and simple and never self-consciously 'folky' in their effect. But the really memorable bits of the programme were the gentle, reminiscing Northern voices of Axon's mates ... This really was some of the characteristic poetry of the idiom of the people.

An uncredited report in the *Stoke Evening Sentinel* made this shrewd point: 'The niceties of our present day code of courtesy require that we speak of the dead only in hushed tones as if we stand still at their open graves. To people of such reserve the ballad must have come like a ramrod blow from a locomotive's piston.' In the *New Statesman* Tom Driberg, the Labour MP and an active supporter of Theatre Workshop in its early days, went so far as to say:

A generation from now – I would even say centuries from now – listeners will surely still be moved by the recording of *John Axon*, a panegyric ... A great naturalness was achieved ... by a combination of art and artlessness. If less well done this could have been pretentious. This superb piece of radio ... is 'by' Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker, but one would like to give a long credit list of all involved in it.

The only discordant note was struck by the *Daily Mail*, which had got hold of a 'complaint' by railwaymen to whom the programme had been played, about the calypso. In fact the calypso was genuinely born out of a remark from an old driver with a mesmeric Lancastrian voice, Jack Pickford: 'I had a West Indian fireman with me, on long distance trains, and he's been as good a fireman as I've ever had on the job. He definitely has it in his blood, and he comes from Jamaica.' Although Adrian Clancy's *Mail* review was strongly supportive, and correctly reported that Gladys Axon not only approved but took part in it – 'a very good and fine tribute to my husband's work' – it received an editorial twist with a further piece under the heading:

IT'S DYNAMITE, SAY TWO RAILWAYMEN

Two engine drivers who worked with Driver Axon at Edgeley ... referred to a comment concerning colour and religion which was followed by a calypso and asked – 'What has this to do with John Axon? This is dynamite. It is a trimming that had no right to be in it ... Why was this controversy brought in?'

Why indeed, one might ask the *Mail*. Clancy reported that one railwaymen broke down and wept when he heard it, and other railwaymen were strongly supportive. It was a mark of Charles and Ewan's concern for authenticity that, whenever they could, they played the end result to the participants to gauge their reaction.

The journalists liked it, so did the railwaymen, so did Gladys Axon. What about the listening public? The BBC had pioneered an audience research panel before the war, to keep them in touch with Middle England (or at least Home Service listeners). For John Axon the audience reaction was mixed, with a sharp divide between enthusiasts and loathers, and little middle ground. For every 'Ambitious. Adventurous. Wonderfully unusual. A real break into a new art form. Unconventional, untraditional, but all completely right, nothing jarred', there was an 'I hope to calm down later ... It, by its very method, smothered and almost buried the story, the heroic story – even cheapened the iron courage of the man by putting him on ... with banjos, guitars and, worse still, calypsos.'

Of views of the music, these were typical extremes, from: 'Monotonous, a racket, un-British, a travesty of music unsuitable for the theme of tragedy', to 'Apt and varied, rhythmical and stimulating. Various instruments were used with clever effect.' But Charles will have been pleased by this one: 'The effects were terrifying and suggested the impending tragedy as no words could have. I felt I was riding that engine.'

It's no oversimplification to conclude that the audience split more or less down social fault lines – the research report includes the occupation of the respondent. For later Radio Ballads this blurs, perhaps as the listener's ear gets more attuned and the mind less startled. It's a telling point, though, that among the BBC's respondents was a loco driver – 'Please please re-broadcast this programme. A magnificent tribute to John Axon and all his fellow locomen ... marvellously true and beautifully put over.' His view was reinforced by the wife of the railway accident clerk for the area where the tragedy happened: 'The railwaymen concerned in the mishap or having knowledge of it found the programme remarkably good, and a very new approach.' A warehouse salesman's wife made a point that delighted Charles: 'There would be no folk songs or stories or ballads at all if events in the past had not been given similar treatment.' Exactly.

Charles was by turns exultant and relieved at the Press reaction, and at the news that the BBC, earlier doubts emphatically dispelled, had chosen it as their entry for that year's Italia Prize. That led to a debate about possible improvements. The problem was that they would have to be done without Peggy. She had been living with Bert Lloyd's family in Greenwich, learning the fiddle, when she was shopped to the Home Office by the wife of a rival banjo player who knew her visa had expired. Given two days to leave the country, she slipped out, slipped back, was caught, spent a night in a cell

RIDING THE ENGINE – THE BALLAD OF JOHN AXON

and was deported, and she was then shuttled like a stateless person between France, Belgium and Holland before holing up in Paris. She was there on 2 July straining to hear the broadcast, as she told Charles in a postcard from Paris XVI, and in a subsequent letter:

I cannot tell you what a pleasure it was to hear John Axon on the radio here in Paris. Every minute of work, every detail of its conception was a reward. I think we both grew up a little more then, yes? Cheers for the future! ... Keep the guitar going and don't forget your friend Peggy.

I am deeply disappointed that we are not rerecording the programme – I have been spending the weeks (since I heard it faintly over the French radio) past just thinking, cursing myself for not doing a better job and hoping I could redeem some of the more serious faults with the arranging. But if that's how it is, I'll refer my improvements to the next show of its kind, which I hope we do together.

But that would depend on her. And Peggy was stuck in Paris, with no visa. If she returned to the US her passport would be impounded. And she was pregnant with Ewan's child.



CHAPTER 7

BBC Voices

Documentaries Before the Radio Ballads



In his continued determination to break away from the tyranny of the scripted programme Bridson put a group of Durham miners into the Newcastle studio and told them to talk ... After a few minutes I was sent in with a large piece of cardboard on which Bridson had hastily chalked 'Do not say BLOODY or BUGGER.'

OLIVE SHAPLEY, IN *BROADCASTING A LIFE*, 1996

Why did *The Ballad of John Axon* excite its radio reviewers so much in the summer of 1958? To listeners today hearing a Radio Ballad for the first time, the sense of novelty lies in the use of music and song helping to tell the story, and – when we stop to think about it – the lack of a spoken narration. And what jars to our ears is not the Lancashire dialect spoken by the railwaymen, but the classic BBC voice of the announcer. As much a dialect as Lancashire, it has now almost died out, but that was the typical sound of the BBC – the orotund tones of John Snagge giving the train's destination not as Arpley, but Arpleah.

So what was radio like then, what was the sound landscape in 1958? To start with you really had just four main channels to listen to. The BBC had three – the Home Service (with its regional variations), the Light Programme, and the Third Programme – though a few could pick up the embryo World Service. The fourth, catering for the growing number of pop music enthusiasts, was Radio Luxembourg, virtually the only commercial station then in existence available to British listeners.

The Birth of the BBC

For those of us for whom the BBC is a national institution, born long before we were, its origins seem rather odd. It was set up in 1922 simply because the manufacturers of the new radios, then called wireless sets even though they weren't, needed something to broadcast to induce the general public to buy them. The Post Office invited the manufacturers to form a limited company, financed by a licence fee augmented by royalties from the sale of the sets. The licence cost ten shillings a year, and it stayed at that figure till it was doubled to one pound at the end of World War II. There were heavy restrictions though: to appease the newspaper magnates, powerful then as now, news could only be broadcast once it had been printed. They could cover only educational and religious topics, plus entertainment and music, and at the beginning couldn't even start until 10.15 am.

The General Manager was the severe Presbyterian Major John Reith, who ensured that a puritan straitjacket would tightly restrain that 'entertainment', particularly on Sundays (broadcasts didn't begin then till after 12.30 pm, when church services were over), which allowed the few early pre-war independent stations to thrive. There was certainly radio drama, but it was hampered at first because poor reception made voices hard to discriminate. Initially there was very little written specifically for radio, but it took off once the BBC realised its potential as a medium for the imagination.

Drama had begun tentatively with simple adaptations of existing plays, but early in 1924 the producer Nigel Playfair asked Richard Hughes, later the author of *A High Wind in Jamaica*, to produce the first specific 'Listening' play. He tossed him a first line – 'The lights have gone out!' – and overnight Hughes

wrote a play about an accident in a coal mine. That night he confronted all the issues of radio drama for the first time. *Danger* would have, in his words:

total darkness; explosions and running water; the picks of the rescue team ... But all miners' voices would be hard to tell apart. Better a party of visitors – an old man, a young one, a girl ... With rehearsals and production however, a cold awakening! I had spread myself on sound effects without considering how they were to be done ... The primitive transmission of those days ... reduced all sounds to a single indistinguishable 'wump' which might be the buzzing of a gnat, the clash of swords, the roaring of Niagara or the shutting of a door. Moreover, the studio was a vast padded cell designed to make voices sound as if they were floating in outer space.

Playfair turned outer to inner space by getting the cast to speak with their heads in buckets so the audience could be convinced they were in a tunnel; assembled an impromptu Welsh choir from among unemployed miners singing for pennies in the London streets; put them in the corridor outside the studio singing continuously; and opened and shut the soundproofed door to cue them in and out. An explosion? Tricky – anything in the studio was out of the question. However, reporters had been assembled in a special room with its own loudspeaker to listen to the broadcast, and they couldn't be fobbed off with the feeble 'phut' that ordinary listeners would hear. So Playfair rigged up an impressive explosion in the room next door to them. No one twigged that the sound came through the wall, and the press were mighty impressed with this new sound play. Thus, bizarre as it was, radio drama, sound effects, and live music were combined for the first time. Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl would set themselves a different problem nearly 40 years later, using musical effects to recreate their pit in *The Big Hewer*.

BBC Manchester

By the time the BBC's new Manchester chief Archie Harding arrived in his Siberia in 1933, Reith had nurtured the fledgling BBC through a trial of its independence during the 1926 General Strike. With almost all newspapers off the streets, the Home Secretary Winston Churchill had wanted it to broadcast only government news bulletins, but Prime Minister Baldwin disagreed and Reith was allowed to broadcast his own. Critics on the Left regarded them as indistinguishable – who needs government bulletins when you've got Reith? But it was the birth of a crucial principle. Away from London and Reith, Harding set about encouraging his producers to create programmes about the world as it really was. His New Year's Eve 1932 programme that so affronted the Polish ambassador had used recent news reports from around the world, largely Europe, and two narrators – one factual, the other poetic.

His documentary feature *Crisis in Spain*, about the formation of the Spanish Republic in 1931, had been universally admired. To Ewan MacColl, Harding was the creator of a new art form, the radio feature. His 'early programmes were not only stylistically brilliant and innovative, they were also passionate political statements, vibrant with anger and impatience.' No wonder he was despatched north, and no wonder Ewan admired him.

The great advantage of being out of sight, if not entirely out of mind, was that Harding could turn Manchester into his laboratory for creating programmes about important events that could be heard by as many people as possible. Radio had now reached the whole country: 98 per cent could get a signal. To achieve his aim Harding employed three key figures, all as middle class as he was and university educated, but each with a radical leaning and a sympathy for working people: Geoffrey Bridson, Olive Shapley, and John Pudney (though strictly he was on loan from London). They complemented each other: Bridson was a poet first and playwright second, Pudney a journalist first and poet second, Shapley a historian with an abiding interest in people. Only Bridson was a Northerner, but his middle-class Formby was a world away from the Salford of the Millers. Like Harding, these three felt passionately, and they shared the view – one that Bridson described as perhaps the only opinion the self-mocking Harding took really seriously – that everyone's opinion was valuable. Although documentary programmes were being made elsewhere in the country, it was Harding's team in Manchester that was constantly breaking new ground, and it was for him that Jimmie Miller and Joan Littlewood began working in radio when they were in fact still teenagers.

Harding's producers had several key aims. They preferred to focus on issues of contemporary relevance, so were constantly nudging forward the borders of what their London masters would accept. They were keen to publicise what ordinary people had to say just as much as experts. Eventually, too, they edged tentatively towards allowing people's lives to be revealed by their own words (though largely through the voices of actors) in an era where tight editorial control from the centre dictated that virtually everything should be scripted. And they wanted to use sound imaginatively: they were strongly influenced by the photomontages of the German-born John Heartfield, and by the revolutionary early Russian film-makers. In particular they wanted to emulate in sound the topics and techniques explored in the cinema documentaries of John Grierson. (In 1929 he had made *The Drifters*, about North Sea herring fishermen, good enough not to wilt alongside Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, with which it was first shown as a double bill. Grierson went on to head the imaginative GPO film unit, where he commissioned *Night Mail* and *Coal Face*.)

Harding's producers were also influenced by the so-called New Poetry of writers like TS Eliot and Ezra Pound. Pound, in fact, had written experimental

SET INTO SONG

operas for the BBC. As well as its music by Benjamin Britten, *Night Mail* was paced by a specially written poem by WH Auden, cut and pasted to the images, and matching the train in its driving rhythm –

Here is the Night Mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order...

Harding consciously saw radio as a tool for poets. Bridson echoed *Night Mail* in his *Coronation Scot* of 1936. He had used his own poetry in the *May Day in England* that had launched Jimmie Miller's 'Northern voice', the programme contrasting the old English round-the-maypole tradition of *May Day* with its modern incarnation as a day of social protest. In his *March of the '45* Bridson wanted to evoke the tidal surge and ebb of the Jacobite Rebellion in a way that would 'make the listener become emotionally involved; make him grip his chair and be caught up in the action.' He co-produced it with London (with Laurence Gilliam, who had taken Harding's job there) and BBC Scotland. The Scottish readers brought his words 'down the line from Glasgow like a Highland river in spate.' Recognising by then that his normal poetry was hardly likely to appeal to a mass audience, he had switched to a fast-moving narrative verse in the Walter Scott style to trace Bonnie Prince Charlie's route today. The march moves on through a Northern English landscape, now rather altered since 1745, as had working conditions:

Not many joined him, as it was;
And traces vanish as the years lapse.
Very few would join him now –
Apart from the unemployed, perhaps ...

When Harding was shunted off from Manchester to a siding as the head of Staff Training at the end of 1936, he used *March of the '45* as a key demonstration piece, one Charles Parker would have heard in his BBC training in 1947. But there were no genuine working-class people on radio yet, just a few actors like Jimmie Miller to give them the dialect they needed. The first working-class regional voices to be heard with any regularity appeared in Bridson's series *Harry Hopeful*, featuring a genial old Lancastrian clock repairer named Frank Nicholls. Now an actor, he was adept at drawing out working people in country villages from the Derbyshire Dales to the Scottish Border. Bridson jotted down their stories, noted their dialect and tricks of speech, and constructed a script whose parts he posted out to the original speakers. He then recorded them in their own homes, listening to the outcome in headphones in a car at their front gate, and inviting their families to criticise anything that sounded unnatural. In that laboured way he was able to create an approximation of the real thing that sufficed to make

the programmes extraordinarily popular, and not just in the North. But these programmes didn't threaten the status quo, and there were still no genuine real and unscripted voices. As Bridson said:

That the man in the street should have anything vital to contribute to broadcasting was an idea slow to gain acceptance. That he should actually use broadcasting to express his own opinions in his own unvarnished words, was regarded as almost the end of all good social order. Never once in history had the man in the street ever been consulted.

Even the magisterial playwright GB Shaw was not allowed to simply talk into the microphone – everything had to be scripted and vetted. Bridson was scathing: 'That spontaneous speech should have been banned by the BBC for the first 20 odd years of broadcasting is almost unbelievable.' It wasn't quite banned – the voices of the unemployed were heard in a programme in 1934 called *Time to Spare* – but the uproar it caused made sure repeats would be few and far between. In fact it didn't happen again to any extent until early in the war, when the Socialist Nye Bevan ran such rings round the stammering Conservative Quintin Hogg that Churchill decreed that no member of his party would ever appear live and unscripted again. Moreover, apart from the occasional 'character' speaking dialect, the voice of the BBC remained that of the Southern English upper middle class: not until 1941 was a non-standard voice allowed to read the news, when Southern listeners were jolted by the Yorkshire 'good neet' of Wilfred Pickles.

Mobile Recording

Before the war mobile recording equipment was scarce. This made it particularly hard to break through the effective ban on using real people, real regional voices. (The few outside broadcasting facilities the BBC owned were used to record royal visits and football matches rather than hunger marches.) Olive Shapley was another determined to get them on air, despite an unfortunate early studio experience. For Bridson's *Coal*, the 1938 programme for which he and Joan Littlewood spent a week down a Durham pit, Shapley was his fascinated assistant whose quote about swearing heads the chapter. She went on: 'These are not really swear words in the north-east, but for many people are woven into the fabric of everyday speech. The sight of these poor men trying vainly to form some sort of sentence without resort to them was enough to have me sent back into the studio to say "As you were".' There was a terrible row about it.' That Bridson was nearly sacked as a consequence tells you all you need to know.

Olive Shapley was the first to use to its full advantage a massive outside broadcast van BBC Manchester had acquired, 27 feet long and seven tons

loaded, maximum speed 20 mph. Needing a pair of technicians employed to work two turntables – which recorded alternately on four-minute discs – it was an expensive operation. It hadn't been intended for Manchester, but was too unwieldy to manage the narrow lanes of Wales and the South-West. Like Bridson she took it out to create programmes – scripted still, true – and recorded by the original speakers from a text using the language and vocal rhythms she studied from her recordings. But while Bridson had used his scribbled notes, she could listen again and again to the actual voices in assembling her script. Fifty years later on Radio 4, in her introduction to *Classic Features*, which included the second Radio Ballad, *Song of a Road*, she described how 'we wanted to wrest John Reith's BBC from the grip of the stuffed shirts by taking the microphone out of the studio and into the country at large.' As Scannell and Cardiff report in their *Social History of British Broadcasting*, as a contrast to her predecessors she was a breath of fresh air:

She used a language that was informal, relaxed and intimate. Her programmes set up an equal relationship between speaker, subject and audience. That, combined with the sympathetic skill of the interviewer (a quite new technique which she had to learn for herself) led a contemporary critic to describe her programmes as little masterpieces of understanding and authenticity.

John Pudney came to Manchester originally on loan. He had been one of the first to use recorded voice actuality in 1934, hiring a film company's recording van to make the excruciatingly titled 'Opping 'Oliday, about the London poor who descended on Kent in August to pick the hops. Pudney was the producer Ewan most admired:

He was far and away the most talented producer I ever worked with in radio. He was a poet of some standing and was able to attract artists of the calibre of Auden and Britten to work with him. He had a nice sense of irony and an engaging schoolboyish sense of humour ... Here was this upstart from the south, this effete poet who looked like a prosperous farmer up for a day in town, intent on riding roughshod over the well-kept pastures of the featureocracy ... Pudney's approach to radio documentary was not aimed at subverting the classic feature but at humanising it. He was able to invest the dullest subject with humour and irony and one was never allowed to lose sight of the fact that a human intelligence was at work in even the most grandiose project.

At the outbreak of war, once over an initial startled paralysis, the BBC was galvanised to improve and professionalise its news gathering and outside broadcast capabilities. Producers of news and feature programmes from the War Reporting Unit followed the armies and brought the sounds of war and immediacy of battle into people's homes, conjuring up images in sound

that newspaper journalists couldn't match on paper. Moreover, the war had brought to the microphone many ordinary people whose personal stories were a crucial part of the war effort and indeed were told by the people themselves. This could have been the pattern for the broadcasting of the post-war peace, when documentaries and drama flourished, but the imaginative use of real people in broadcasting dwindled. They appeared largely as 'characters', and were rarely allowed to speak on any serious issues.

During the war the separate BBC London departments of Drama and Features had been evacuated to Manchester and combined under Val Gielgud, elder brother of John the actor. Proximity there, combined with their distance from London, brought the best out of the talents thrown together, like Geoffrey Bridson, Laurence Gilliam, who was a huge flamboyant character known as Lorenzo (the Magnificent), and Stephen Potter of the later *Gamesmanship* series of books. Gielgud pursued a policy of encouraging established writers to write for radio, with successes such as Potter's *The Last Crusade*, Louis MacNiece's *Christopher Columbus*, and Dorothy L Sayers' brilliant 12-part series for Children's Radio about Jesus called *The Man Born to be King*, produced by Gielgud. This was a landmark in many ways. Sayers offended the ultra-devout Christians by using an actor to depict Jesus (some blamed that blasphemy for the fall of Singapore) and upset many more by using modern colloquial English. But she brought the dry text alive for many, and was among the first to humanise Bible characters.

After the War

In 1945 Drama and Features were split out again, with a London Features department under Laurence Gilliam, and Geoffrey Bridson as his number two. Imaginative radio continued to be encouraged, and the Italia Prize, created in 1948, became an additional spur to creative writing and production. Douglas Cleverdon (the man who would sympathise with Charles Parker over the criticism he received before *John Axon* was aired) produced several classics, including *Under MilkWood*, written specially for radio by Dylan Thomas after years of Cleverdon's patient coaxing. That won an Italia Prize in 1954, the same year as did a play by Louis MacNiece. In fact between 1952 and 1960 the BBC won ten prizes, its winners including programmes by Jacob Bronowski, Henry Reed, John Mortimer, Samuel Beckett and John Arden. Only two of the winners, though, were radio documentaries: a programme about Mahatma Gandhi's last days, made in 1957, and the third Radio Ballad, *Singing the Fishing*, in 1960. Moreover, until the Radio Ballads, music was used only for scene setting and illustration, and there were hardly any voices other than those of actors.

Ewan recalls creating songs for *Lorry Harbour* for Denis Mitchell, who had been hooked on folk music after hearing Ewan, Bert Lloyd and Alan Lomax

at a Theatre Workshop benefit concert. Mitchell had been amazed by their 'flying' – trading songs competitively from subjects sent up by audience members on slips of paper.

For Lorry Harbour we went to two or three places on the A1 and A5, truck drivers' all-night caffs. We recorded 60–70 truck drivers onto acetates. Denis Mitchell took it away and rewrote it and said could I still speak it like a lorry driver. None of us thought how crazy not to use the lorry driver! Then I remember auditions to see if people could sound like a driver.

By 1957 Bridson was getting disillusioned with the BBC's radio documentary output. For him the decline dated back to the appearance of independent television (ITV) in 1955, which 'had proved something of a shock to the BBC directorate, and was viewed with some resentment. To begin with, it was the love-child of the Conservative Party, which the BBC had done much to conciliate over the years. It posed a serious threat to BBC television.' ITV soon had double the BBC's viewing audience. Bridson was summoned to a meeting of senior programme staff in late 1954, where he argued in vain that radio needed to change radically to meet the threat. But 'Bow Bells continued to peal between programmes, and radio audiences continued to shrink.'

In an analysis of radio features that he made in 1962, after the sixth Radio Ballad, Ewan MacColl concluded that the imaginative pre-war 'documentary poetic epic commentaries on historical, industrial and political processes' had been replaced by 'journalistic, non-poetical, factual documentaries, with quotes from official documents rather than literature.' The Establishment was now rarely criticised. Bridson agreed, feeling that as far as serious listening went, apart from what was produced for the Third Programme's intellectual minority, 'cosiness was the watchword, where the real need was for trenchancy. In popular terms, radio stayed on the defensive – it never went on the attack.' In the 1950s, he felt, they merely balanced points of view until they cancelled each other out.

Radio Begins its Decline

Radio was becoming starved of income: the mother bird had eyes only for the fattening cuckoo in the nest: the cost of making BBC television programmes doubled in the two years after ITV arrived. There were more of them too, for the hitherto sacrosanct 6–7pm Toddlers' Truce hour was soon plugged. In 1957 the Third Programme's output was abruptly halved, which led to an ultimately useless protest by a deputation led by Ralph Vaughan Williams and TS Eliot. Elsewhere news and current affairs coverage was increased at the expense of drama and features. Gielgud and Gilliam saw their independence

reduced by political manoeuvring. Bridson was affronted by the inevitable reduction in creativity and experimentation. The post of Controller of the Home Service was downgraded to Head of Planning, Home Service, and given to Ronald Lewin, an Oxford modern historian, which Bridson lamented: 'His personal interest seemed to veer towards the flood of war memoirs, would-be contemporary history, political testaments ... The result was ... painfully dull radio.' The audience research figures confirmed it.

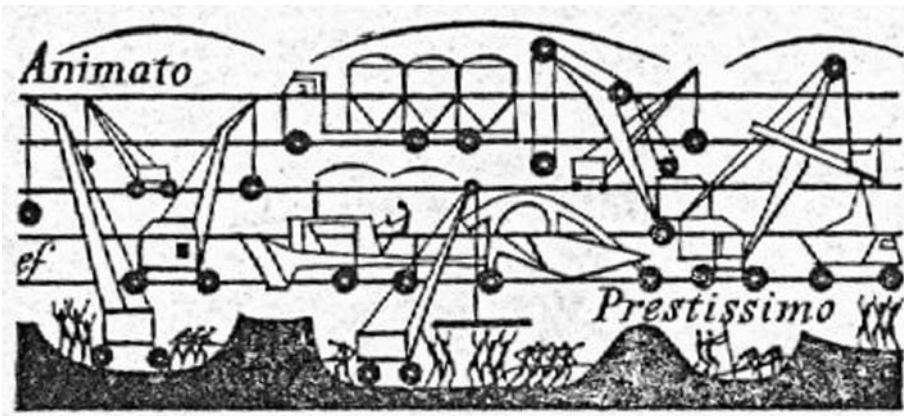
Bridson lost his job and was sidelined as an independent producer. It was telling that when he started making programmes again, his greatest pleasure was to write and produce a 'ballad opera' in 1959 called *My People and Your People*. It was about a group of West Indian immigrants and the love affair between one of them, played by Nadia Cattouse, and a 'young' Scots skiffler... Ewan MacColl. 'The music, arranged for me by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, was lively and magnificent, the contrast between its Scots and West Indian rhythms being no less intriguing than the contrast between the two idioms and accents.' (One of the West Indian actor/singers was John Clarence, who worked on two of the Radio Ballads. Peggy Seeger learned about colour gradations in the black community. Pointing to a girl a shade paler than him Clarence whispered: 'I'd stand no chance with her. See, I'm black black.') Though it stood no comparison with Charles Parker's programmes – entirely scripted and without the music integrated – *My People and Your People* received good reviews. A last throw by one of the pre-war Manchester radicals. But now, 25 years after *May Day in England*, Ewan MacColl was back in radio, with the bit clenched between his teeth.

So when Ewan MacColl joins Charles Parker to go off to Edgeley to interview railwaymen, although BBC Radio features could demonstrate many literary successes since the 1930s, the original enthusiasm for allowing real people to tell their own stories has diminished. Actors are still making money out of dialect. The use of voice actuality is a rarity in radio again, though it's notable that someone trained in sound radio, Denis Mitchell, has been employing voice actuality in television documentaries. When in Charles's letter to Ewan in July 1957 he talks of using the railwaymen's voices, his caveat is: 'It will have to be actuality well up to Denis's standards before this could begin to work.' Mitchell's *Night in the City*, about a typical Manchester night, had been broadcast four weeks earlier, and his use of sound owes much to his radio training, as well as to Ewan MacColl's songs. Charles is galled that it's being done on television better than on radio, but after much strife he has shown what he can do. Real railwaymen, telling their own tale, a story enhanced by the music – and lauded by the critics. Now, will he get a chance to make another? Well, Ewan has made it quite clear that without Peggy he won't take part in any more. So Charles goes into battle with the BBC.

CHAPTER 8

Muck Shifting

Song of a Road



Are we jumping from the frying pan into the fire? From the thralldom of the 8.45, the limited flexibility of railways ... to an anarchic uncontrolled torrent dominated by self-interest and the dehumanising effects of power sans understanding. The cult of the motor car versus the old-style locomotive. Why does the thought of the traffic on the Great West Road today inspire revulsion compared to Clapham Junction on Easter Monday?

CHARLES PARKER, FROM A 1958 IDEAS PAPER FOR SONG OF A ROAD

When you're up on the seat in the cold and the heat
You never think what you're lifting
You're bashing away every hour of the day,
You're working at the old muck shifting.

EWAN MACCOLL, 'CATS AND BACK-ACTERS',
FROM SONG OF A ROAD, 1959

Vindicated after his internal struggle at the BBC before *John Axon* could be broadcast, Charles Parker put the programme's success down to the way it allowed the listener to identify with the action. It hadn't won the Italia Prize in the end, but he was delighted with the way the songs and musical setting had helped to make the everyday experience dramatic. He craved more, but he would have to secure Ewan and Peggy if there were to be any more Radio Ballads. He knew the nature of the relationship between them, and he disapproved of it, as he'd told Peggy over tea in Heal's department store one day. So he was well aware that Ewan wouldn't come on board if she didn't, and Peggy was trapped on the continent by what we came to know as a Catch 22.

The US State Department had been against her trip to Moscow, where the CIA had monitored the US delegation, and was incensed by the subsequent visit to Peking against its heavy-handed 'advice'. Peggy had been warned that her passport would be impounded were she to return to the USA: she was told later she was on a blacklist sent to European governments. She was stuck. The problem was that the British government wouldn't issue her with a visa unless she had a BBC contract. But the BBC would only give her a contract if she already had a visa ... So 12 days after the broadcast of *Axon*, and doubtless with Ewan's urgent encouragement, Charles went into battle. In an internal BBC memo to both his Midlands boss Denis Morris and the London Head of Features Laurence Gilliam he pressed for support in getting her back to England:

She was responsible for the brilliant orchestration in *John Axon*, herself played the banjo in that production and she brings to her technical mastery of the banjo and guitar a unique understanding of the modal forms of popular music and their rhythmic and harmonic potential. I am hoping to commission a radio ballad series from Ewan MacColl, using Peggy Seeger if possible, and am at present negotiating for her return for the Italia production of *John Axon*. Douglas Cleverdon also wants her for *Homer* ... How can we sort the hand-to-mouth work permit situation with the Ministry of Labour?

He draws a blank, and two days later his agitation increases in a further memo, his prose purpling as he goes. Worried that *John Axon* will prove a 'flash in the pan', Charles insists Ewan is essential: 'His finger is on the true pulse of the emerging music.' He tries to get a commitment for, say, a further five Radio Ballads, wanting to guarantee Ewan enough income to devote himself to it for a year. If he can get this, Charles is confident they will have 'a body of performed work unique and unmatched.' They mustn't miss 'a golden opportunity to write a new page in the history of broadcasting.' He goes on to press two buttons that he hopes will influence Gilliam – the potential income from TV rights, and the danger of losing Ewan to commercial television. But

SET INTO SONG

Gilliam needs a stronger case if he's to tangle with unsympathetic government departments to get Peggy's visa, and asks for more facts to buttress the case. Charles gets yet more exasperated. He does exasperation well:

Specific proposals for employment? Alas, I would need to be an expert in International Jurisprudence, The Laws of Contract and the BBC's staffing policy to be able to meet this request. Peggy Seeger is only allowed into the country by the Foreign Office for just so long as she has a work permit and evidence of income ... Only on BBC urgent representations was she allowed to extend her last visit for a month to allow for the re-recording of certain passages of John Axon to meet your criticisms. This was in April, when she was on the point of deportation by the Foreign Office! She tried to return on June 4 to work with Ewan MacColl on *Homer* just on a student's visa, but was arrested at Dover, kept in the cells all night, and shipped back to France the next day. Her French visa is due to expire soon, and if we can't fix the problem, she'll be deported back to the USA. Under these monstrous conditions, it's unreasonable to talk of 'normal ad-hoc arrangement' ...

The 'undesirable alien' aura the FO seem determined to force on Peggy Seeger is quite outrageous. So I am asking the BBC to make up its mind whether it wants more and better John Axons, and if it does, to realise it won't get 'em without Peggy Seeger. More specifically I am asking the BBC:

- a To obtain agreements to her re-entry to work on the John Axon re-make for the Italia Prize – a supreme piece of irony!
- b Vide my previous memo, I am hoping to commission another five radio ballads from Ewan MacColl, a condition of which is the employment of Peggy Seeger. This really means a year's concentrated work for Ewan MacColl, but the c £250 that Peggy Seeger could expect to earn would not support her for a year, says the Ministry of Labour.

So we need to have a staff contract. But how to frame it for so intangible an employment as Folk Style Instrumentalist cum Jazz New Popular Music Arranger and Developer of Emerging British/American Folk Song/Popular Music Idiom?

And with that he signs off with a brusque flourish: 'Over to you. Over.' It's no surprise that this doesn't work, even on a sympathetic ally like Laurence Gilliam. They meet a few days later, when Charles is put firmly in his place: you must enter Axon for the Italia Prize in its current form, because Peggy Seeger's not available for work in this country for 'the reasons stated'. As for Ewan MacColl, you can commission him for one or two new Radio Ballads but not a series. You 'took the point' – classic bureaucratic jargon

to reflect that he realised Charles didn't – that it would be wise to look for other writers and composers to work with. No chance of that, of course, for Charles realises now that nothing can match the combination of the pair, who had shown on Axon how well attuned they were to his own intentions and sensibilities – let alone to each other's. To all appearances Charles is like a lover denied a chance to repeat a first ecstatic experience.

Denis Morris writes to Gilliam thanking him for 'the diplomatic and helpful way he has dealt with this.' Charles doubtless conveys to Peggy via Ewan that he's drawn a blank, so she and Ewan, communing in Boulogne on New Year's Eve over bread, cheese and a bottle of port, come to a simple if drastic conclusion. She'll marry a British passport. Another itinerant Paris folk singer, with whom she has been working occasionally, is Alex Campbell, tall and skinny, flamboyant, flame-haired, red-bearded. 'A complete and utter romantic, totally outrageous and a wonderful entertainer – full of jokes but also close to tears as well', as the singer Dolina McLennan recalled. Campbell had been singing with marked success in the streets of Paris since 1955 when he'd left a solid job in the Civil Service. Alex said that in Paris then there were no folk singers in the street: 'It was against the law. It was foreigners like myself who could do it. I was singing Leadbelly, skiffle numbers, occasional Scottish songs that I've known since I was a wee boy ... I was called King of the Quarter at one time.'

The romantic Alex was happy to oblige, and they were married by an American priest in surplice and sneakers in January 1959. Alex took his dressing-down for his new wife's now blatant condition rather well, thought Peggy, who was back in England next day, Ewan's 44th birthday. As she said: 'The following day I arrived unimpeded in London, six weeks before the birth of my first son. In the flyblown office of a Commissioner of Oaths, I swore allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen (and all her issue thereof into perpetuity).' So Peggy, or Mrs Alex Campbell as the BBC now punctiliously addressed her letters, was now a British citizen by marriage and the BBC was happy to employ her. (It would be some years, though, before the domestic arrangements were finally settled; Neill was born in March, but Ewan's daughter Kirsty was born to Jean later that year. Life was fraught for everyone.)

Meanwhile Charles had been casting around for the next Radio Ballad subject – he needed a strong follow-up. Among several topics that he touted were The English Labourer and Whaling (which was perhaps a fall-back alternative, using Bert Lloyd for his fund of whaling songs rather than Ewan). But when he returned from an apparently fruitless tour of the Midlands in October with Ewan looking at the labouring possibility, his next subject was presented to him. Whatever misgivings he might have had were suppressed because the idea came from his boss, Denis Morris. After hearing from its chief architect about the building of the M1 – the first stretch of Britain's first motorway was just being started – Morris felt it would make an ideal subject

for a second Radio Ballad. A problem that would rear its head later was his view that it should involve everyone concerned with the road's making, not just the labourers. Charles was not going to demur, and started to get his head round The Road.

I shall dwell on this project at some length because it illustrates the problems Charles and other producers had (and still have) in getting their programmes off the ground. In early November 1958 he met a representative of John Laing, one of the two major contractors, and a Miss Phyllis Faulkner, who worked for the Information department of the Ministry of Transport. You can imagine their perplexed reaction from this quote from an ideas paper he wrote a few days later: 'I asserted my position as that of an artist and not as a reporter, and our principal interest being to convey the epic and poetic qualities in this immense project ... not to deliver ... a piece of high level reportage. After some astonished discussion they found this acceptable.' Or so he imagined. What Charles saw as a possible epic, Laing naturally viewed as a high-profile engineering project, absolutely crucial to their future, with a challenging deadline, and the last thing they wanted was highfalutin intellectuals tramping all over the route, probably inciting their navvies. Phyllis Faulkner, though, eventually turned out to be an ally, and without her greasing of some very obdurate wheels the programme would probably have run into the M1 mud and stuck there. It wasn't just Laing who thwarted him either. He tried to speak to an eminent geologist, to find out about the strata the road would cut through, but:

An approach to Dr Casey of the Geological Survey Museum as an acknowledged expert in the field ... was also denied me... I should stress that all I wanted was for a Geologist of Dr Casey's standing to wax lyrical on matters dating back 150 million years... This apparently was still not of sufficient antiquity ... to be considered safe for publication.

Charles put together an ideas paper. He mused about Sir Owen Williams, the road's chief engineer: 'the engine-artist figure transforming the physical world', and about earlier builders – the Romans, Offa, the canals, the railways – helping Civilisation to spread. Perhaps a River of Man approach – the flood of history, men flooding to work on it, a flood of cars on it? 'How to treat upon the automobile, civil engineering, the ruthless dominance of the machine, in a way that speaks of poetry and the epic, and its implications for man and civilisation?' Difficult. Especially when he felt he was facing the 'arrogance of technical advance without spiritual values, no sense of service to the community at large ... ruthless exploitation of labour, the ultimate objective profits not engineering achievement in the service of men.' You can imagine the boyish steam train enthusiast, fresh from the Axon footplate. Railway travel gives a sense of community, the car one of competition.

Doubtless the thought that it was his boss's idea in the first place stops him flinging his papers out of the window, and he goes on to produce a topic list that was close to the programme's blueprint. He carries out a recce along the line of the motorway and, energised, at last commissions Ewan on 27 November, 1958: 'I think we have struck oil with the London/Yorkshire motorway.' He'd met James Cryer, the project manager of the southernmost 12-mile section, a third-generation Rochdale builder, who had waxed lyrical about the surprising pleasures of 'muck shifting'. This is the kind of attitude he wants to capture. He books a trip for 8 December, anxious to start recording before the expected winter slowdown. But despite an encouraging note on 1 December from Morris, the following day he walks into a plate glass window erected by Laing. 'It's too difficult to proceed at present.' Laing have been stung by criticisms of the road's construction on BBC TV's *Panorama* and *Tonight* programmes, so the subtext is clear, and next morning Charles spectacularly loses his temper with a startled woman at Laing's head office, and writes to her hastily: 'I must apologise for tearing into you on the telephone this morning. I am afraid that the news that greeted me on my desk came as a shock to a flu-debilitated system and, plus a migraine headache, rather mitigated against quiet reasonableness.' Charles's tempests were becoming legendary, but neither he nor the recipients seem to have borne grudges.

The other contractor, Tarmac, is altogether more accommodating, but without Laing's support he might as well give up. Charles takes up a three-month secondment to television from January to March 1959 (where he's appalled at the poor sound recording facilities) but throughout the period he is wheedling away, tiptoeing round sensitivities, trying to get key mid-management figures on his side, to break down Laing's resistance any way he can. Eventually on 20 March he gets through to Sir Owen Williams, whose immediate support forces Laing to yield, and he and Ewan are allowed on site on 13 April.

So far so good, but, told to accompany them everywhere and vet the people they interview is a lady from Laing, deputed by a head of PR with the exquisite name of Captain Sir Aubrey St Clair-Ford. Charles and Ewan respond by trudging through the muddiest parts of the site they can find, and they shake her off after two days. They're under way. To Peggy, nursing baby Neill back in Surrey, Ewan writes of a homesick Irish lad of 16 crying his eyes out while operating a ferociously noisy machine without earplugs, and of the workmen eating great mountains of spuds but hardly any meat or green vegetables. (Well, the Irish, they're used to it.) They do a further recording stint in late April, and another in late June with Peggy riding a massive truck in the wind and rain for her first recording trip. Ewan recalls in his autobiography *Journeyman* that during 25 days of recording:

SET INTO SONG

We patrolled the constantly changing length of the road, recording in hostels, dormitories, pubs, canteens and shelters. We recorded in the cabs of bulldozers and earth-moving machines and helicopters, in offices and plant headquarters. We found ourselves asking questions about bridge-building, about running a concrete batching-plant, about prefabrication techniques, about maintaining and running the Shavian Finisher and, in short, behaving as though our intention was to create a programme which would inform the listener how to build his or her own motorway.

Ewan makes clear here his distaste for what he saw as the concentration on machine over man. They wound up with a lively evening recording session in a pub with a party of Irish labourers on 10 July. Ewan and Peggy then spent over a fortnight wading through 120 quarter-hour tapes to select an initial 30–40 minutes of actuality, juggling it into the framework for a script. After another three or four weeks Ewan had written the songs and Peggy constructed musical arrangements, and on 3 September they presented Charles with a rough tape-assembly of actuality and related songs.

But Charles was unhappy with the balance of the material. He felt that his remit from Morris was to write about the building of the M1 rather than concentrating on the workmen who built it – to Ewan it meant that Charles wanted to tilt the balance crucially towards the work process, away from the working human. This fault-line led to the repercussions discussed in the next chapter that would ultimately settle their way of working: they were still fumbling towards it by trial and error. Charles, keen to finish the job so the programme could go out when the motorway was completed – a couple of months or so, but they had no date confirmed yet – selected some extra actuality. Ewan had to write new songs dealing with some pretty mundane stuff. He had a tight deadline, but he worked best that way and despite his reservations came up with several new songs in very little time, to which Peggy gave a fizzing jazzy orchestration that would give them the suitable air of pomposity Ewan felt they needed. Well, he could write a song about anything. A letter to the Ministry? Sure, and it trips along with Peggy's syn-copating typewriter clacking in rhythm behind, carriage return and all:

**Wrote a thousand letters to the Ministry:
Dear Sir, your memo of August three,
Your reference BL stroke CT
Re alteration of existing drainage systems...**

And straight into some actuality about the nightmare of drainage. That doesn't read like a song, till you listen to it. Now Charles had to manipulate the revamped actuality into decent shape before rehearsals and recording,

set for 28 September to 5 October in various not-entirely-suitable London studios. But it was a horrible job. The Midget tapes were the worst he'd ever had to use: of 120 at least half were marked by speed variation, amplifier crackle, induced echo and peak distortion. By his reckoning he spent over 250 hours (that's over six weeks of solid eight-hour days – so four weeks for Charles) getting the doctored actuality into 'tailored and polished actuality inserts' ready for the studio. And so they began:

**Come all you gallant labouring men,
Leave your family and your friends
You're needed on the job again,
On the London Yorkshire highway.
A job to do, a job for you,
And nineteen months to see it through,
A chance to earn a quid or two
On the London Yorkshire highway.**

The designation M1 wasn't yet commonplace, and it was as the London Yorkshire Highway that it was commissioned. Besides, it scans better. For this programme Ewan, Bert Lloyd, Isla Cameron and Fitzroy Coleman were joined as singers by Fitz's compatriots John Clarence and Big Thomas, who had just appeared with Peggy on the Bridson programme about West Indian immigrants. With them were the young Scot Jimmie McGregor, appearing on his only Radio Ballad. Jimmie found it fascinating:

For me as a young fellow – I was really excited – it was wonderful to watch. I've got enormous studio experience behind me now on both sides of the microphone, but to watch someone like Ewan at work, he was very, very professional ... Bert Lloyd, lovely man. I was standing beside him – when we sang a chorus about the rhythm of the big scrapers – it went Dig and Scrape and Load – but I realised Bert was singing: Pig and Ape and Toad. When we finished the thing, he shrugged and smiled. It really amused me – the idea of these two very eminent men scoring these boyish points off each other. There were some great choruses in that, great work songs. Ewan would say 'Don't sing harmony', because I'd have instinctively sung harmony.

The harmonies he sang with Robin Hall made Jimmie a fixture on the regular weekday *Tonight* news programme on BBC TV, and very popular, so his diary was solid for the rest of the Radio Ballad period. The other singers would have included the luckless Bob Davenport, had he not been struck down by TB at the last minute and replaced by Louis Killen, another young singer from the North-East, who happened to be appearing at Ewan and

Peggy's Singers Club just the Saturday before rehearsals began. When Ewan casually asked him if he was free on the Monday, Louis needed no second invitation. He took the train back to a doubting mother in Jesmond, packed, wrote a sick note for British Rail who employed him as a clerk, and came back down. When he returned home it was to the sack. He had lost a job, but gained a life he loved.

Louis stayed in London in a bedsit with Rambling Jack Elliott and his wife. It was his first real professional engagement. 'It was lovely, a privilege taking part. I was in awe. I had a great time. Though it was quite beyond me at first – I couldn't sight-read – they would go over it all and I would pick it up quickly. This wasn't singing in the church choir, I was in a recording studio with professional musicians, plus the big guns of folk music. I did what I was told and kept my ears open.' He got one of the scene-setting songs with a cracking chorus:

**The consulting engineer's the man who formulates the plan,
The contractor gets it moving and he does the best he can.
But the labourer's the bloke who gets the blisters on his hand –
He's the one who keeps the muck a-moving.
With his dumpers and his scrapers and his ten-ton excavators,
With his rollers and his shovels, and his digs and lodging troubles,
He's the one, who fills the truck –
He's the one who earns his bonus shifting muck.**

That 'But' shows where Ewan's sympathy lies, but that dig is forgotten as the song rollicks along. Louis, though daunted in that exalted company, found a sympathetic drinking partner in another newcomer, a former merchant seaman from Devon, Cyril Tawney. The same core set of musicians was employed – Alf Edwards, Bruce Turner, Jim Bray, and Bobby Mickleburgh. They engaged two singers from Ireland because of the strong Irish flavour of some of the songs, reflecting the homeland of many of the labourers, forced to seek work across the Irish Sea for long stretches away from home. One was the BBC veteran Seamus Ennis, the other the uilleann piper Francis McPeake, who had mugged up the new songs back in Belfast before coming over.

The rehearsals took six evenings – it might with advantage have been 26, said Charles later, as he battled with obstinate tapes – and the recording three days. Somehow they got through it, despite a whole new set of technical problems as well as obstruction by a hostile studio manager, who Charles was convinced was tacitly encouraged by his London management to be difficult. Paranoid he had every reason to be by then, and he was probably right – don't let that bugger Parker get away with anything ... Charles

expanded on this later in a vitriolic memo. When recording was over he took away two sets of 16 reels of 10½-inch programme tape, one of pure music, the other of music/effects mix. But programme assembly was once more a severe challenge and, with an uncertain deadline looming, to his intense frustration he took another three weeks lashed to the tape-editing wheel to overcome vagaries of balance and rhythm.

All through this fraught period he has to deal with other pressing concerns. Having commissioned and contracted the performers, just before rehearsals are due he gets a memo from one of Denis Morris's nervy assistants. Since a certain David Martin is making a TV film, he'd better suspend work on his radio ballad until they can see how it goes down. You can just imagine his appalled reaction to that, but he ploughs on. In the week after recording when he's now in 'a terrible post-production state of depression with the programme in bits on 32 tapes', he has to deal with some infuriating distractions. A tight-lipped memo from the Head of Engineering ticks him off for bypassing him and acquiring a scarce TR/90 tape editing machine from Staff Training so that he can do the first-cut editing himself, wicked man. Another complains about the amount of overtime he has extracted (willingly) from the engineers so he could get their wretched kit to work properly.

He'd already had to fight to get the programme broadcast for the road's opening, rather than at Christmas, as had been suggested. 'The future of this programme really hinges on its being broadcast when the motorway is opened – its whole dramatic point resides in the completion and achievement. To have this for Christmas is MADNESS (although a lovely repeat!).' The exasperated emphases are his. He gets his way, and on 15 October he writes in haste to the Editor of the *Radio Times* that the revised broadcast date of 5 November has 'caught us a bit on the hop', and asks for another boxed illustration to match the brilliant one Eric Fraser had produced for Axon. Fraser isn't available, so he gets something he loathes, looking like a 'dinky toy'. In his *Radio Times* article he writes:

The main centrepiece of the programme which seeks to give the impression of the interminable pace and inexhaustible tempo of construction ... is the Waulking Song, a direct application of a traditional Hebridean melody to which the women waulk [shrink] the cloth, endlessly repeating itself. We had to synchronise music to machine, which was very tricky. The inexhaustible movement of the final song is an adaptation of Galway Races, in which the singer sings each 4-lined verse and the first of the chorus in one breath. The effect of this is to lilt the suggestion of speed with which the motorway will be used.

Seamus Ennis still has the breath all right, and his brogue speaks for all the Irish labourers when he gives us:

**So when you're in the driver's seat and belting with your load
Don't forget the casual labourers who sweated on the road,
When you're racing under bridges, under clover-leaf or flyway,
You can thank the roving boys who built the London Yorkshire highway.
With me whack, fol a doo, fol a diddley dum a day.**

On 22 October Charles hears from the Tarmac Managing Director, who has been helpful throughout, that the road will formally open on 2 November. Laing hadn't bothered to tell him. He provides them with a draft script out of courtesy, but on 23 October they send him a letter saying that, provided two offending items are removed, 'permission is given for broadcasting the radio ballad.' They want a 'bloody' to be altered – collapse of stunned producer – and a reference to a workmen's hostel as a concentration camp removed. Charles is incandescent but contrives to write an emollient reply and takes no action. Laing evidently continue over his head, because Morris's deputy David Gretton writes to explain to them that 'Parker is over his boots in mud, so to speak', but he doesn't budge either. In fact the hostel that the diminutive Irish bulldozer driver Jack Hamilton refers to wasn't even run by Laing, or even on their section of the motorway, but they're twitchy about any further adverse publicity. If *Song of a Road* has a characteristic voice, it belongs to the jocular Jack Hamilton of Cork. He starts a roll call of a dozen labourers with different accents telling us where they're from – 'Jack Hamilton, yes, Cork City' – which at the end he sums up with:

**They're black men, white men, and they're all colours up there, brindle
and all. Oh they're a good old crowd, oh they are yes. Oh they're a good
old crowd. Oh, ah, we get on good.**

The programme was broadcast on 5 November, Guy Fawkes Day, three days after the road was opened. Charles got his complete hour this time. Ewan and Peggy, who were off on a singing tour of Canada with their baby Neill, were not there to hear the broadcast and read the reviews. Their subsequent unhappiness with it, due to that lack of process/people balance which led to the summit meeting described in the next chapter, meant that they hardly heard it afterwards. But Peggy, listening to it intently again in 2007 after nearly 50 years, was surprised by its freshness and power. She concludes: 'This is much better than I remember it. I've always dismissed this as not working.'

Its last quote is from another Irish labourer, keen to get home at last: 'The motorway there. There's one thing I'd like to do when it would be finished.'

I'd love to drive the whole length of it. Just, and that would finish me with it.' Charles, too, was finished with it, and can't have spent much time at home either. But he perked up somewhat when the first reviews came in. While it didn't achieve quite such universal approbation as its pioneering predecessor, for Paul Ferris it was:

A near-triumph by Axon standards and an absolute marvel by any other. John Axon had a story and this only a theme, so someone should have weeded out the superfluous statistics, but it was when the writing and singing got away from figures and sizes that things began to hum in a very new-fashioned way. Men, recorded working and drinking and lovingly stitched into the programme, sounded just like men. Ewan MacColl's songs were charged with sadness and adventure. There was the feeling not that an artificial legend was being created for a minority audience, but that the sources of real legend were being tapped. If Joan Littlewood were still working for radio, this would be her kind of programme. These are certainly the most exciting pieces of pure radio you can find nowadays.

Robert Robinson though, who had loved John Axon, felt it was indeed an artificial legend. His was a criticism of the use of folk song at all:

I felt that the producers were guilty of ... supplying a romance not inherent in the events. You felt that the producers had wanted to use such songs long before they ever met a contemporary worker on a contemporary road. In Axon the story gave rise to the treatment, in the later work the treatment was imposed. The abiding impression was not of a folk song but a folksy song.

An unexpected reviewer turns up in the Birmingham Post, and he was entranced. He seems to have missed John Axon, for he hopes 'this blend of song, music and speech' will be repeated:

First, because it exhilarates by the emotions it deals with and its uninhibited way with them. There is a pioneer elation about it. The wonder is that it has appeared in a project so mechanised, up to date and unproductive as the M1 ... And the form it took was ideally happy ... Months were spent recording men talking and at work, months more editing and orchestrating and shaving off a scrap of speech, teasing it into place, adding new words to old work songs and ballads, employing, in the way Kipling loved, craft or trade terms, lists of machines, inventories, the whole part and parcel of engineering. Sixty seven miles may not seem much. But *Song of a Road* turns its achievement into an offshoot of the epic.

Peggy Seeger set every scrap to music, with instruments like guitar, ocarina, banjo and trumpet, which a man might sling across his shoulders or stuff in his

SET INTO SONG

haversack. Sea chanties, Dixieland jazz, a snatch of oratorio, the diddle-a-dum a day ceildh jog-trot, even the authentic *musique concrète* of the mixers. It's all there, stimulating and ingenious ... It's equally apt for an Irish mother to be singing new words to an old separation song [sung by Isla Cameron]:

**But remember lad, he's still your Dad,
Though he's working far away,
In the cold and the heat,
All the days of the week,
On England's motorway.**

Waxing so lyrical was Alexander Walker, later a celebrated film critic. This will have cheered Charles, not least as sceptical views had been expressed after *John Axon*, by such as the poet and broadcaster Louis MacNeice: 'You have proved that the ballad and the idiom of traditional music can be a valid form of expression for the twentieth century, and for the mass media ... but only when it is applied to a simple black-and-white situation.' But Charles was stung to violent irritation by one of two articles in the same issue of *The Listener*, the BBC's own highbrow magazine. In the first Ian Rodgers had said that its approach to the treatment of a documentary subject raised problems which it solved most interestingly, and concluded that Ewan and Charles were working towards a new and exciting form. But David Paul scorned the end product in the second article, in which he compares it to:

a bomb made of ham ... as patented by Brecht and Littlewood. Good ingredients – splendid voices, exciting tape documentary, good tunes, nice musical noises. Why is the result so portentously unreal? The rigours of socialist realism balladry demand that the grass-widow sits at home rocking the cradle with her toe and crooning a lullaby, all about daddy away working on the roads ... For me ... the bits of real individual lives were lost inside the total concrete-mixer.

So Walker's meat is Paul's poison. Charles let himself get absolutely livid, and he blasted off a long intemperate letter to *The Listener*, piled high with towers of mixed metaphor. Perhaps it would have been published had he, as Denis Morris subsequently told him in a sharp letter of reproof, cut it severely. Perhaps it would have passed muster had he confined himself to assuring Mr Paul that 'the words of the lullaby that he so castigates did indeed emerge directly from words quoted by a labourer away from home for months on end', and to asking whether he 'really believes that the inhabitants of Oklahoma habitually sing "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" on rising?' But Morris liked the programme, fortunately, and sent him a congratulatory letter. So did Norman Corwin, who gratified Charles by writing that he even preferred it to *John Axon*.

The BBC audience gave it a more unanimous thumbs-up than it had offered for *John Axon*, though there were still plenty who wanted a story uninterrupted by music. A solicitor described it as confused, involved, repetitious, jerky and flippant, and a perplexed farmer's wife missed the point: she 'couldn't believe workmen sing while engaged in mechanical labour.' Some simply found it unintelligible. But a woodworker spoke for the majority. (Note incidentally the point about the writing: there was of course no actual writing at all apart from the songs, just selection and assembly.)

Surely radio at its best. A joy to listen to such an intriguing story told in such an original manner. The writing was imaginative and clever, the music appropriate, the whole integrated into a most entertaining hour. The atmosphere was one of hustle and bustle in which one could almost see the road growing. The speech was authentic and moving, the words of the songs gloriously muscular and genuine, refreshing stuff compared to the ersatz neurotic slobbering of Tin Pan Alley.

Charles is soon back into his usual post-programme tidy-up. He writes praising the magnificent support he has received from the studio staff, especially his tape editor Mary Baker who has 'devoted herself unsparingly to the programme' and would become absolutely crucial to the *Radio Ballads*' success, and probably to his own sanity. He writes to every reviewer, replies to every letter whether of praise or criticism. He goes into battle with BBC bureaucrats on behalf of Louis Killen, whose fee the accountants were cavilling over – '£23 does the barest justice to his appearance and performance' – and of three singers without proper contracts (and thus not guaranteed repeat fees) to make sure they get them.

What next? As the *Times* reviewer had said, sympathetic but not entirely convinced: 'The idea which the authors are pursuing is fascinating; one hopes that they will next time hit upon a style which gives it the force of integrity.' This time he already has an idea. An achingly sad Scots voice on *Song of a Road* had said –

**There's no work in Peterhead. I have to leave home for work you see.
Travelling the fishing, working among the herring. Then when the
war's finished you see, the steam went out and the diesel come in. So I
had to take off somewhere else. Pick and shovel.**

But before Charles can start on the Fishing he gets a nasty surprise in a letter from Ewan and Peggy on their return from Canada. An ultimatum.

CHAPTER 9

From Microphone to Broadcast Engineering the Programmes



I am fairly clear that there are several members of your staff who have passed through the stage of finding Parker so odd as to be laughable, and have reached the stage of finding him so original as to be exciting. They forgive his demands because they have learned that it is a stimulating experience to do their best to respond to him.

CHARLES PARKER'S IMMEDIATE BOSS DAVID GRETTON
TO THE BBC CHIEF ENGINEER, 1959

Charles wasn't desperately good at explaining things and when we began he kept saying everybody must Create, all the time, and the phrase I've never forgotten is, when we were all punch drunk, he said we should be aiming at a mood of Controlled Despair. My only question, had I dared ask it, would have been 'How do we control it?'

GILLIAN FORD (NÉE REEVES), PLAYING IN THE SOUND EFFECTS ON
SINGING THE FISHING, INTERVIEWED IN 2007

An Ultimatum

At the end of 1959 Charles, Ewan and Peggy all wanted to make changes to the way they constructed the Radio Ballads before they started work on *Singing the Fishing*. Charles was exasperated by all the technical difficulties he faced before and after recording. They exhausted and dispirited him. But he was totally unprepared for a letter from Ewan and Peggy threatening to pull out of future collaboration entirely. They would only continue if they were allowed to make the final choice of the sections of actuality in the programme, and they stressed their view that the team should concentrate in future on working people and their attitudes to the job, not on the job itself.

As we saw in the last chapter, a disagreement had emerged between Charles and Ewan over the programme's main target. Because the idea for *Song of a Road* had been 'suggested' by his ultimate boss Denis Morris, Charles felt his remit was to mark the actual creation of the M1. It was, after all, designed to be broadcast when the road's first section opened. Ewan thought that the programme's strength lay in celebrating the workmen who had created it, their diversity of voice, background and job, rather than the process of road-building itself. He had been convinced of this principle as long ago as Bridson's *Tunnel* of 1934. It's tempting to conclude that this view was obviously because of Ewan's political convictions, but it wasn't quite as simple. The Radio Ballads aren't polemics: he does deliberately let working people have their say, rather than speaking for them.

Despite the difficulties of achieving his Radio Ballad concept, Charles was utterly convinced that they were pioneering the future of radio, so the letter upset him deeply. It was clearly an ultimatum, and once more he could see a potentially wonderful series foundering just as it was out of port. He dashed off an intemperate 12-page reply in longhand in which he charged them with putting at risk the entire future of radio, and condemning him to a 'life of professional drudgery and bleak mediocrity' if they abandoned the form. He waited for a reply, stewing, but none came for several days. Was that to be it?

In this chapter I want to step back to look at the key issues they had to resolve in late 1959 before they could agree on an approach to the programmes and a consistent workable method of making them. First we'll examine the gist of Ewan and Peggy's complaint, and how it was resolved, then look at the struggles that Charles faced and overcame in those pioneering early days of tape editing, when he was taking the process as far as it would go, then further still. At the outset it's worth reviewing the stages in the making of the first two programmes:

- a) several weeks of recording in the field, usually by a pair or all three of them,

- b) a short period for Charles to sort out the resulting tapes and send the voice tapes to Ewan and Peggy while he worked with the sound effects,
- c) several weeks for Ewan and Peggy to painstakingly transcribe all the tapes, select the actuality, create the songs and a script, and produce musical arrangements,
- d) a variable period for Charles to assemble the chosen actuality, get the sound effects recorded on acetate disc, finalise the booking of rehearsal and recording studios and times, contact, commit, and create contracts for the other performers, and manage all the tedious administrative grind that entailed,
- e) a rehearsal and recording period in London of about a fortnight,
- f) a protracted post-production period of several weeks for Charles while he wrestled with vagaries of tape quality and recording speed to make the final programme, which he was then forced to modify again...

Rules of Engagement

As with *The Ballad of John Axon*, for *Song of a Road* Ewan and Peggy had delivered to Charles an orchestrated script of songs and music, with their voice actuality choices marked. But when he'd come to run it through, Charles had felt that some of the work processes were neglected, and was clearly concerned that he would face internal criticism as a consequence. He had to make sure that he could continue to make such enthralling programmes (whether or not anyone else was enthralled, he certainly was), and he'd had a bad enough time with his BBC colleagues after playing them the first version of *John Axon*. So he had come back to Ewan with a further selection of actuality, and asked for more songs to amplify it. Ewan was not best pleased, but complied. As Ewan said –

When Charles heard the tapes, he felt that we hadn't achieved the desired balance between 'the human expression of the job' on the one hand and work processes on the other. He decided, therefore, to choose some alternative actuality himself. This was the only occasion on which he did so in any of the Radio Ballads and the results were less than satisfactory. The introduction into the script of actuality dealing exclusively with technical matters meant that new songs had to be written, songs dealing with technical processes such as building cantilever bridges, songs explaining geological systems, songs celebrating chains of command in management...

A modern listener, hearing the surveyors and engineers often expressing, however awkwardly and flatly, their own enthusiasm for the job, can enjoy the contrast with the more piquant colloquial phrases employed by the workmen. But Ewan was convinced it was a mistake, and, when they

returned from a tour of Canada soon after *Song of a Road* was broadcast, they wrote to Charles.

After receiving Charles's reply, Ewan and Peggy were still equivocating about whether to continue the collaboration – they had plenty of other work, as they did throughout the Radio Ballad period. A few days later an agitated Charles appeared at their house with peace offerings – 'a large bunch of flowers and a sticky mass of chocolate melted in the glove compartment', in Peggy's words. They made up, and in several meetings over the next few weeks they thrashed out some rules of engagement. They agreed in principle that the Radio Ballads 'should not be concerned with processes but with people's attitudes to them; not with things but with people's relationships with those things, and with the way in which those attitudes and relationships were expressed in words.' Charles bought into Ewan's view completely, and thereafter there's rarely a sign of anything more than a cigarette paper between them. (Although of course they would occasionally argue furiously over that cigarette paper thickness.)

The working method would change too. Ewan and Peggy would still sit down with the tapes and transcribe them all, make a first-cut selection, create songs, orchestrate them, and choose the final pieces of voice actuality. Now, however, they would send off sections to Charles to Birmingham as they were complete, with their actuality choices plus alternatives, so he could finalise the voice actuality and sound effect context for the songs while they were still working on the remainder. Indeed, Ewan would record a whole trial script for Charles, doing all the songs and dialect voices himself, with Peggy's rough accompaniment – and laughter. (The one for *Big Hewer* still exists, and it's very funny.) The alternative voice actuality gave Charles some freedom to manoeuvre if the original choice simply wouldn't work. This would clearly save time in the long run, though that would be offset by the sheer volume of tapes they brought back from the field, which increased all the time.

Mobile Tape Recording

So that was their combined working process sorted, but Charles's relationship to his own work process was still pretty unhappy. He had encountered fiendish technical problems. We've seen that the use of the mobile tape recorder was relatively new in 1957 when Charles started on *The Ballad of John Axon*. The technology was just over 20 years old, the first Magnetophon having been unveiled by BASF at the Berlin radio fair in 1935. No other countries exploited the new technology, but Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry used it extensively, and there were steady refinements through the war. (The Magnetophon and the accompanying Volksempfänger radio receiver, which was of deliberate short range to avoid Allied broadcasts getting through,

allowed Hitler's long speeches to be recorded and heard in every German home.) In late 1945 Geoffrey Bridson found himself making a programme in Norway, using commandeered German recording gear, and was astounded by its sound quality. In London the BBC had a single captured Magnetophon machine to play them back on:

Here was something that completely outclassed either wire or disc or film recording ... in quality of reproduction ... A single day's practice in editing them, snipping away with a razor blade, was all that I needed to convince me how obsolete all other mobile recording systems had become. I loudly sang [its] praises ... only to be told that it failed to come up to the exacting standards of BBC engineering!

Bridson was scathing about the administrators who 'never made a recording or ever entered a studio in their lives.' Philip Donnellan was amazed in 1953 to find that the tiny state radio in Copenhagen had eight tape editing channels at a time there was only one in the whole BBC. A conservative attitude to tape, together with a chronic money shortage, meant that by 1952 only six of Britain's long-gestated Magnetophon successor, the EMI Midget, were available to producers. By 1955 there were 100. After 1957 its valves were being replaced by transistors, the speed was halved so you could get 15 minutes on one tape running at 7½ inches a second, and a more robust version emerged, created for a Polar expedition. From then on there was constant aggravation between the engineering and programme production arms of the BBC. To the engineers the EMI Midget was 'small, light yet robust', as the BBC's official engineering history proclaims, and it 'held the field unchallenged for over 15 years.' Not unchallenged by Charles Parker. As he never tired of pointing out, they were heavy, boxy, sharp-cornered, poorly designed for the field. He was constantly nagging for a Nagra, a smaller, superior Swiss machine, but twice the price. They didn't even get him one in time for *Travelling People*, the last Radio Ballad – they used one Ewan and Peggy had bought. (She still has it, in perfect working order. She tells the tale of the BBC man arriving at Nagra's Swiss factory carrying a possible order for 2000. He wanted a few changes. Nagra's MD responded stiffly 'We don't make toys.' Hence no BBC Nagras. Eventually the German Uher emerged, a quarter of the Midget's volume and half its weight.)

Manipulating Tape

In 1957 nearly half of all recording was still done on disc. Cutting and splicing tape was still an arcane art, and only specialist editing assistants were allowed to do it. You couldn't possibly let a producer loose in the editing studio. At this time the young radio engineer Alan Ward was working for the BBC in London. Since getting his first radio set at the age of five, he'd always

wanted to make programmes, starting on the RAF station where he did National Service. He joined the BBC as a trainee engineer in Birmingham in 1953, when everything was still disc-based, and was working in the Aeolian Hall in London in 1956 when the big 'BTR/2' machines were installed there, used for playing tapes for broadcast. Ward said that you were only rarely allowed to edit tape in emergency – 'it simply wasn't done.' An episode of the comedy *Take it From Here* had to be rejigged after its star Jimmy Edwards had arrived in the studio drunk, but that was an exception.

A radio fanatic, Ward had started secretly cutting and splicing tape for himself to examine the effects and was told he should listen to a programme made by this 'mad red-bearded producer in Birmingham, who cut up bits of tape that he suspended from clothes pegs in his office.' He listened to *John Axon* and was not ashamed to say he cried at the end, it was so powerful. And original: as an engineer he realised how many hours Charles must have spent working on the tapes to achieve the effect. Back in Birmingham, Ward was seconded to help Charles Parker on *Song of a Road*.

'He sent me out to record trucks on the A45. I spent most of the night doing it – the trouble was they kept stopping, thinking that I was thumbing a lift, the microphone stuck out like that.' He eventually got the job he craved. 'On Friday I was an engineer, on Monday a studio manager. I sat with my engineer friends in the canteen that morning and was told by my boss in no uncertain terms that I wasn't to any more. There was such a divide then.' Philip Donnellan said there was criminally little exchange of ideas between producers and engineers. 'To us the engineers were a class apart, like the ... commissionaires or canteen ladies ... the chief victims of the class system in the BBC ... Charles changed all that by crossing the line.'

Charles Parker had incurred the wrath of the Head of Engineering when he was discovered at the end of his weeks of secret nightly editing sessions on *John Axon*. In an exchange of letters Charles pointed out that he could edit tape perfectly well, and was backed up by his assistant, who got a flea in the ear in consequence. Moreover, Charles was convinced that he simply had to do some of it himself:

This is not in any way to criticise the capacities of orthodox tape editors, but simply that editing of this nature is ultimately a question of unconsciously applied rhythms and the achievement of an organic synthesis between natural rhythms of speech and the singer, and natural rhythms of the ... piece of actuality ... to be used. Such subtleties of rhythm can only reside in the fingers of he who feels the rhythms ... It's like asking a painter to paint with a brush in somebody else's hands.

The BBC Engineering hierarchy clearly thought this was just so much bullshit, and they'd wanted to ban him from editing altogether. But a few

months earlier Charles had got his Birmingham management to send him on the tape editing training course. He then managed to intercept one of the scarce new TR/90 playback machines, due for Norwich, and hang on to it for a crucial three weeks. Because of all the obstruction he'd encountered Charles was so infuriated at the end of *Song of a Road* that he fired off two scathing memos of complaint. In the first he wrote a withering piece to Denis Morris, his Midlands head, about 'political' interference and obstruction by Laing, the main contractor. It begins:

Song of a Road was completed in despite of difficulties – not to say deliberate opposition – to a degree which all but stifled the work many times over. I hope personally that never again will I have to endure the frustrations, the deep rooted prejudices and ignorance, the desperate Philistinism which have marked virtually every stage in the production of this programme.

In a second fulminating memo he turned his attention to his technical problems. He was particularly exercised by his knowledge that commercial recording facilities were so superior to those of the hidebound BBC. 'I have so often expounded at great length upon the inadequacies of the EMI tape recorder that I am sick at heart to have to add to it.' But he overcame his nausea to launch another five pages of foolscap. He was incensed by several issues that were making the final assembly of the programme so infuriatingly complicated. First were the difficulties of speed and balance he frequently encountered when he came to play back the tapes, as well as the tape's sheer unreliability. Second was the time it often took to get the studio equipment working properly while he had the performers ready and waiting. His embarrassment at being made to look incompetent led to this engaging outburst:

The original gelding of all Ferrograph machines by removing their control knobs and sealing them off at mid-position is an insult to intelligent use ... The machine itself – with its vicious spooling hook wiping head guide and felt padded ironmongery – is a menace to tape joins. And the savage psychological effect of using inadequate inferior badly lashed-up equipment can be devastating especially while an expensive cast have to stand around kicking their heels and burning up rehearsal time. I was ... in an office with no power points of any sort – which meant illegally operating the machine from the light socket.

Hmmm ... A fusillade of memos ensued between Charles, his immediate boss David Gretton, and the obdurate Chief Engineer, who complained that Charles had worked two of his engineers for 13-hour days for over a week (including one Geoffrey Leonard, who Charles said 'wrought marvels' with the poor equipment). Gretton, though, was both sympathetic and a master

of the deflating memo. To the Chief Engineer, following his complaint that Charles had ‘worked alone in the principal tape editing channel, contrary to regulations’ (original emphasis), Gretton wrote to point out that the engineers enjoyed working for Parker. On his memo copy Charles scrawled a biblical reference – Matthew XII 3+4 – which is when the hungry David eats the bread reserved for the priests (I’ve sorted out Goliath for them, now they fuss about this). Gretton’s memo had begun with a crisp rejoinder:

The regulations are based on certain propositions:

1. This expensive equipment might be damaged. But this hasn’t happened.
2. The work might involve danger by electric shock. So might the submarine branch of the Navy.

A further difficulty Charles faced was in matching the music created in the studio with the voice actuality recorded in the field. In the studio while they were recording Charles was in charge, accompanied by a studio manager, and Peggy would direct the musicians and singers. Charles would listen through headphones to decide whether a particular take – on its own, or in combination with previous takes – seemed OK, then they’d move on to the next. In rehearsal they’d have decided what extra musical bridges and colouring passages to improvise, and often that would be altered in recording. The big problem was that in both *John Axon* and *Song of a Road* the musicians and singers recorded their pieces largely unaware of the vocal and sound setting in which they were to be placed.

The Studio Set-up

There had to be a better way, and Charles decided that if he could scrounge another scarce TR/90 playback machine to put on the studio floor, then an experienced assistant with a musical bent could play it on the spot so that the singers and musicians could hear what they were playing against, instead of in a sound vacuum. He managed to acquire another TR/90, a heavy three-foot cube, to install in the recording studio, where an operator could play back the actuality live, among the musicians and under Peggy’s direction. It needed a soundproof housing cobbled together because the solenoid made a very audible clunk when it engaged, but after some trial-and-error it worked, helped by a tent of acoustic screens. So in the words of Alan Ward, who did the job on *Singing the Fishing*, ‘I almost become a musician myself’, and the singers and musicians could start to match their vocal and playing rhythms to the voices they heard, rather than doing it more-or-less blind (or rather, deaf).

The final crucial change was to where they rehearsed and recorded. As there were no suitable recording facilities in Birmingham, where Charles

worked and lived, they'd recorded *Ballad of John Axon* and *Song of a Road* at different places in London, trailing between them. This was helpful in one key regard, because it meant Ewan and Peggy and the bulk of the other performers were closer and cheaper, but it left Charles prey to London restrictions and particularly the fearsome Engineering hierarchy there, about whom his paranoia was becoming acute. If only he could record in Birmingham, closer to home, where they knew him. In December 1959 Gretton suggested he use the cavernous Studio 6 in Birmingham, home of the Midland Light Orchestra (MLO), when they were away on tour. Although the orchestra was resident there through the year, they were away for three weeks in June, so Charles could use it if the third programme, *Singing the Fishing*, was ready in time. It would be tight, but getting the script in sections as they were complete helped him make it in time, and *Singing the Fishing* provided the working method they'd use thereafter.

The musicians were on the floor of Studio 6, along with Alan Ward playing the voice actuality through the TR/90. 'He was incredibly adept', says Peggy, who was slightly elevated and visible to the chorus and separated soloists. Up a set of stairs above in a control room with a view were Charles and the studio manager John Clarke, while behind them was Gillian Reeves on 'grams'. These were half a dozen machines that played the sound effects through on acetate discs, and Gillian would hop from one to the other like a Lancashire four-loom weaver to bring the requisite needle down at the right instant.

One of the things I was having to do was cross-fade from one disc to another while fading up sea-wash. Not quite sure how I managed it. It was the only programme ever where I've thrown discs on the floor – there wasn't time ... One bit – you know the bit with the auctioneers and the Beaufort scale? I did cheat the auctioneers just slightly, once or twice, to get them so they sounded better against the pitch of the music ... speeded them up. Nobody ever commented on it, so it must have been all right.

Peggy Seeger says Gillian was quite brilliant, going for 10–12 hours at a stretch, never making a mistake. Because Charles had masses of 'wild sound' acetates, she had to lay instant hands on, say, 'the bit with the rattle of a chain when a man shouts Hoi.' Another faultless performer in the team was the fourth player, who wasn't actually there. Out of sight and mind was Charles's editing assistant Mary Baker, sat a mile and a half away from Studio 6, 'in the channel', the editing suite. John Clarke:

Charles had made notes on each take and he decided which he would use for the first assembly, and he rang through at the end of sequence to Mary Baker: 'We'll use take 7, which I'm calling Blue Take.' He's making notes in different colour

crayons ... Because Mary between takes has plenty of time to spare, she decided to compile the first assembly of the whole thing. So we were able, within five minutes of the last recording, to listen to the playback down the line from the studio of what we'd done the whole week. That was very unusual in broadcasting in any context. Ewan seemed bowled over by this departure from the previous ballad – to bring all the elements together into a live performance in the studio, like a concert, was something which they may have had their doubts about, but Charles knew it would be better in the long run to do it like that.

Mary Baker was vital in the post-production phase, for in practice she did most of the hard graft of splicing and editing herself. She was the backstop:

It required very careful listening on my part to determine whether his decisions made in the studio were right. Sometimes only half a take was really good, and then an acceptable take of the other half had to be found and edited together at a point where a join could not be detected, not always easy if there was a thick mixture of sounds in the sequence. In the storm sequence one take was perfect, except that a singer's voice slipped off a note in the most dramatic part, and Charles was doubtful, but when I said 'He's one of those young ones crying below, like Sam says', he said 'Right, on to the next.' He was always ready to listen to ideas that came from involvement in the production.

Mary Baker was a selfless key worker in a seen-but-not-heard job, uncredited on the Radio Ballads. She it was who assembled stretches of silence from brief scavenged moments, as she did to get the right atmosphere for Sam's cottage – any old 'silence' just wouldn't do – and to disguise entry points. To Clarke it was unheard-of finesse. And Mary knew how to manage Charles. Clarke remembers her as 'a very caring lady, patient and kind. But she was also tough. She used to tell Charles: "No, you can't do that." And stand up to him, which was quite a thing.' His rages were famous. Alan Ward said: 'One day Charles was so dire that Mary phoned his wife to come and bring young Sara down. He'd been impossible, but it worked. He calmed down immediately.' She lived to 95, carrying his torch to the last. Late in life she had written a piece describing their editing methods. It ends like this:

Charles Parker's work, especially on the radio ballads, was rewarding in many ways. The material and the way it was handled was an education in itself. He had taste and style and wit, and could make all concerned with him in a project give of their absolute best to it. He could create an exciting and stimulating atmosphere in which to work, and the result to me has been of lasting significance. I am glad I was there.

CHAPTER 10

The Big Catch

Singing the Fishing



I remember Charles looking down on the studio with Peggy in the middle on her podium and conducting and playing the banjo, and he said, 'Look – Peggy Seeger and her Amazing Performing People'.

JOHN CLARKE, STUDIO MANAGER, *SINGING THE FISHING*,
INTERVIEWED IN 2007

Course it's a wonder, too, you see, to pick one of these little fish up, the net's vibrant with life, rrrrrrr, like that ... When you're doing well and catching fish, they talk to them all the time: 'Come on, spin up, my darlings, come on', and they absolutely cajole them into the nets.

RONNIE BALLS, RETIRED FISHING BOAT CAPTAIN,
SINGING THE FISHING, 1960

In November 1959, a fortnight after the broadcast of *Song of a Road*, Charles writes to Denis Morris and David Gretton suggesting they follow it up with a programme about East Coast herring fishermen, an idea he'd discussed with Ewan. It's a familiar theme, and although attracted to it Charles is worried that recently it had been heavily over-fished. In the past five years he had made *Harvest the Sea* with the playwright Willis Hall, and Philip Donnellan had discovered and used the old Norfolk herring fisherman and 'source' singer Sam Lerner in a series of 15-minute programmes. Ewan is enthusiastic, but would prefer to look at a fishing community rather than fishing per se: he has recently been working with Scottish fishermen for Tyne Tees Television. Charles warily sounds out Denis Morris:

I am sure a good programme could be done using Lowestoft and/or Yarmouth, and also possibly exploiting the songs and probably the voice of Sam Lerner, but I know that MacColl is anxious ... to treat a small fishing community which would give a necessary discipline and cohesion to the work ... He met some fishermen from Gardenstoun on the east coast of Scotland and was wildly enthusiastic about their speech and the attitude of the community in which they live. I am therefore wondering if it would be at all possible for Ewan MacColl and me to trespass so far upon Scotland as to visit Gardenstoun and investigate the possibilities there? If we handled the East Anglian story we would not be breaking new ground, whereas the sort of treatment Gardenstoun might stimulate could be original and exciting.

To those who know *Singing the Fishing*, clearly identified with the crusty voice and salty laugh of the 80-year-old Sam Lerner, it's a surprise to learn that at the outset East Anglia wasn't in the plans. But a visit to Gardenstoun revealed a problem. A Scottish features producer who knew the area had warned Charles that, while 'Gardenstoun is probably the most progressive small fishing community in the NE of Scotland ... like the others the people have strong religious views. I do not know the kind of treatment envisaged. What was done in *Song of a Road*, which to my mind was a fascinating, imaginative documentary, would probably give strong offence to the inhabitants.'

In mid-December Ewan writes a when-can-we-start letter: 'The storms last week and the [lifeboat] tragedy which they produced ... made me more convinced than ever that there is a great programme to be done on coastal seamen.' At the end of December Morris gives Charles the go-ahead (though he knows his man – he specifically bans him from making a detour to do a programme on the disaster) and Charles goes up with Ewan and Peggy in mid-January 1960. They find Gardenstoun fascinating but, as Charles writes to David Gretton: 'We didn't expect the village to be quite such a stronghold of Plymouth Brethren, and there may be problems with actuality recording. I think we should bring Yarmouth and Lowestoft in too.' Gretton's response

is immediate and forthright: 'WHOA! May I acknowledge your note without accepting it? What you propose is so far removed from what HMRP [Morris] accepted that we want a fresh brief and fresh approval. Quite bluntly it raises the question of why we spent all this money on taking MacColl and Seeger to Scotland in the first place!'

Charles responds with a squirming justification, and eventually gets a reluctant go-ahead-but-I'm-watching-you. So Charles, Ewan and Peggy meet Sam Larner in the week of 7 February. This is where Ewan takes up the story:

In East Anglia we hit pay dirt immediately when we met Sam Larner, an eighty-year-old ex-herring-fisherman from Winterton, Norfolk. He had first gone to sea in 1892 on board a sailing lugger and, in the course of his working life, had seen the sailing fleet give way to steam drifters. He had lived through the industry's golden age when Great Yarmouth had reckoned up the annual catch by the million barrels. Furthermore, Sam could sing. He knew dozens of country songs, traditional ballads, mnemonic rhymes for navigation and local legends. In the course of recording him, we set up a pattern which subsequently became our recording procedure.

In Sam's Winterton cottage, his blind wife Dorcas listening in – 'I been a wicked man in my time. Ain't that right, Dorcas?' ... 'You have, Sam, you have ... you been a wicked bugger, Sam' – they recorded him for an amazing 30 hours. Not surprisingly, he got irritable when they came back and asked him a question he had been asked before, but that became a technique used to project him – and others, later – back into the moment. After a while, no longer was he just telling the story, he was reliving it, and his verbal imagery became more rich and varied and often biblical. 'That come on a gale of wind, that came down the Sat'dy night and that blew for three or four days a living gale and we were in these little boats.' Ewan described Sam as sounding like Langland at times: 'Piers Plowman coming at you.'

When they'd begun, they only had a vague idea of the programme's eventual shape, beyond feeling that they had to find a novel approach. Charles wanted to avoid a 'mood' piece. Ewan suggested a pattern of tracking the fishermen as they followed the shoals round the coast, but that was a fishing method they discovered no longer operated. After meeting Sam, though, it was soon obvious that because 'he described his own life like a traditional storyteller telling one of the great Indo-European legends', a chronological treatment would work. They had originally thought that too trite. Sam had begun his working life on a 19th-century sailing boat:

... at 12 year old, cabin boy in the *Young John*. I done eight year in sailing boats ... There's something of a 'ooman bein' about a sailing boat, how they answer, and they talk to them, 'Go on, old girl, you'll do this, he'll do it.' They talk to them just so's they were a living being. But as regards the work, it were heaven when we gang to the drifters, the steam drifters, absolutely like heaven. I went in the *Larty*, that was the first steam drifter I went in, in October 18 and 99, and that was the first start of the good seasons. 1899.

'Ah, the steam drifter, the loveliest ship for the job that ever was built.' This was a second voice, Ronnie Balls, a generation younger, who takes over the tiller from Sam as sail gives way to steam. As Ewan said, to hear Ronnie 'describing the finer points of a steam drifter was to know tenderness and love in its purest form – and that's not exaggeration. Ronnie Balls loved steam drifters with the same kind of consuming passion that lovers in the mediaeval romances reserved for their mistresses.' They found Ronnie almost by accident, further down the coast at Yarmouth. Another articulate man, once the youngest steam drifter skipper on the Norfolk coast, he chronicled the terrible lean years between the wars. Throughout the first half of *Singing the Fishing* Ewan would dovetail their two voices, joining them with a third, George Draper, when they come to the storm scene, where Sam's 'living gale' alternates with George's 'she took a tremendous sea and I shall never forget that sea as long as I live.' The final section would move to the post-war diesel-driven, herring fishing of the Scots – Norfolk's moribund fishing was now completely dead – with the new echo-sounding gear for finding the shoals. Ronnie described it as 'if you were playing Blind Man's Buff, it's like taking off the handkerchief, isn't it?'

A second visit to the East Coast is followed by a long trip back to Scotland, where they experience the trawler man's life at first hand, working in shifts so at every instant one of them is available with a tape recorder. Charles, of course, is in his natural element at sea, but Ewan admits to being petrified, sailing in a seven-point gale through the Northern Minch on the *Honeydew*, which 'looks and feels like a toy boat lost in a grey wilderness of sea and sky. At one moment she is lifted to the summit of a great peak and the next she's ploughing through a deep trough ridged by banks of white-topped waves.' He clings onto a steel stanchion with his heavy tape recorder over one shoulder, with only a low gunwale to prevent him sliding into the sea, while 'holding up a microphone in a vain effort to record the storm.' By his side a Huguenot Scot called Lewis Cardno is 'trying to illustrate a theological point ... howling into my ear a lengthy quotation from Fox's *Book of Martyrs*.' Thus Ewan could readily identify with Sam Lerner's view of Death:

That time he come for me in the North Sea, when he come in the storm, when all the young chaps were cryin' and prayin' down below. I done him then ... Ain't got long now, but when he come for me I'll look him in the eye. I ain't got nothing to be ashamed of.

By mid March they had what they needed. Meanwhile Charles's immediate boss David Gretton had been setting out how future Radio Ballads should be made. Having sorted out the location issue and swatted the engineering objections aside, he turned to the musicians:

If you plan far enough ahead, surely they can take leave from their other occupations so that you can record when you like instead of having to do it when they like ... Lastly I must emphasise that this is a team enterprise or else it is nothing, and there must be an assurance that the team has been reconstituted and is going to work together, before we can put this big commitment of money and effort on to the conveyor belt ... You know my feelings on this and I cannot alter them.

Costs were capped. But now that Charles understood how much time he had to organise for the fiendish post-recording editing process, he was happy with that, and set rehearsal and recording dates for the first two weeks of June 1960, when the studio was free because the orchestra was on tour. With a huge map of the North Sea pinned up on the wall beside them, Ewan and Peggy started on the tapes:

The final playback and transcription of the actuality took Peggy and me the best part of three weeks. After choosing and timing the actuality for the programme we compiled a tape of alternative actuality choices. We would categorise these choices by subject or idea, such as 'Hauling', 'The Catch'. The tape machine rolled and stopped as we put markers in the tape reel or correlated the transcript with the tape. The typewriter clacked on. Scraps of paper floated about the work-table: memos on which were scrawled odd words or phrases ('that night it blew a living gale') clipped to another scrap of paper with a couplet: 'In the stormy seas and the living gales, Just to earn your daily bread you're darin'.'

The scraps accumulated; 'we need a song with a refrain here'; 'how about the mandolin on this song?'; 'it's time for something up-tempo'. Or it might be an entire song text that would require only ten or fifteen minutes polishing. The writing of the songs took me about a month or maybe a little longer. Peggy spent another two weeks on the musical arrangements. We then made rough tapes of the songs and played them to Sam Larner, Ronnie Balls and anyone else who was

prepared to listen to them. Occasionally they would criticise a word or a line or a phrase or question a piece of information, whereupon I would rewrite the offending line or phrase and go on rewriting it until it met with approval. There were rare and wonderful occasions when Sam or one of the other fishermen would claim to have known all his life a song which I had just written. When this happened, we knew we had really come close to capturing the true effect of the fishing life upon these men.

They rehearsed and recorded in Birmingham from 29 May to 10 June 1960. The fishermen's voices were now played in by Alan Ward on the TR/90, down on the studio floor with the old hands Bert Lloyd, Bruce Turner, Alf Edwards, Fitzroy Coleman, Jim Bray, and a new fiddler, Kay Graham. Ewan as a solo singer was joined by John Clarence from *Song of a Road* and Ian Campbell, who later ran a successful folk group in Birmingham while still working as an engraver in the Jewellery quarter. Some of the Clarion choir, a Birmingham group with radical origins, were used to form a chorus under Katharine Thomson, and they included Gordon McCulloch, like Campbell an émigré Scot. The Clarion chorus singers, apart from the two Scots, found it difficult to unlearn their usual singing technique to sing in a style more suited to folk song.

Two young singers who had no such difficulty were Elizabeth and Jane Stewart, close sisters from a 'settled' Traveller family, whose mother had been a popular dance band leader in Peterhead. Ewan and Peggy had nipped over to Fetterangus while recording in Gardenstoun, and had been beguiled by their instinctive harmonising on 'The Back o' Benachie' to a jangling piano. Ewan would use the tune for one of two delightful songs written in Scots dialect for the women who came from Aberdeen to Yarmouth each summer for a 'holiday' gutting herring.

**It's early in the morning
And it's late into the nicht,
Your hands a' cut and chappit
And they look an unco' sicht,
But you greet like a wean
When you put them in the bree,
And you wish you were a thoosand mile
Awa' frae Yarmouth Quay.**

The women would spend all day with their hands in brine, where 'the rough salt breaks your skin, the pickle gets in', but they were days with no cooking, no domestic chores waiting when they got back. Elizabeth Stewart remembers coming down overnight, her first ever train journey, leaving

Scotland for the first time at the age of 20. She and Jane had a wonderful time, picking up the songs instantly, and dancing through the Birmingham streets serenaded by the fascinating Fitzroy as he composed impromptu calypsos for them to a guitar accompaniment.

Recording was long, intense, unremitting, take after take for some scenes: the complete storm sequence runs to ten and a half minutes. Here the fishermen's stories are interleaved both with a song whose rising tempo matches the coming gale and with the parallel crescendo of the auctioneer's hectic gabble on Yarmouth Quay. The prices rise with the wind as the men face mountainous waves, waiting for 'the one as is going to git us.' Ian Campbell found it exhilarating but exhausting. The Clarion chorus had been disconcerted at audition to find Ewan insisting they should sing unaccompanied. Not so Campbell. As he sang his solo audition piece he could see in the soundproof control room an enthusiastic Ewan, joining in his rousing 'Barnyards o' Delgaty'. When it came to rehearsal Ian found himself pulled out as an extra soloist, and he describes the recording process:

I had imagined that we should have to learn the songs and record them independently so that they were ready for insertion in the programme ... but the process was not to be so simple ... MacColl had isolated not only obvious elements such as vocabulary and phraseology, but subtler elements such as speech rhythms and vocal patterns. It was not possible to regard the actuality and songs as separate components which could be created independently and then assembled into a finished product; they were overlapped and intertwined ... musical rhythm was synchronised with speech rhythm or sound effects, and songs took their tempo and pace from the preceding actuality ... The edited actuality was played through a loudspeaker into the control room above, and simultaneously to the musical director and her group in the studio. The producer was then able to combine and balance the two channels as he recorded them onto a master tape.

Most of the music took the form of sequences which lasted anything up to ten minutes, and which might demand the rapid alternation of speech with solo song, chorus, instrumental music, sound effects, or any combination of all four. Each sequence had to be recorded in its entirety, and during the longer ones tension would mount to the point where mistakes were inevitable. But it seemed that nothing but perfection was acceptable to Parker; having recorded a sequence for the 24th time the studio would wait with bated breath for the producer's decision, only to be told that one of us had taken an audible breath in a silent bar ... perhaps take 25 would be the successful one?

Every day Charles became a little more dishevelled, a little more wild-eyed and a little more volatile, and it was easy to believe that when our work finished in

the evening he went home to work late into the night ... MacColl also began to show the physical effects ... though it had no visible effect on the intensity of concentration he brought to bear upon his work in the studio. The musicians in the instrumental ensemble, each one a prominent and respected figure in his own field ... did all that was required of them, with an air of confidence and quiet enjoyment, and somehow they managed to adopt an attitude of responsibility towards the music ...[while maintaining] a rather cool detachment from the music they were performing.

Perhaps one of the reasons Charles was so meticulous in the studio, even more determined for perfection, was that he knew two days into recording that the programme would be a candidate for the BBC's entry for the Italia Prize for radio features. The BBC hierarchy in London really liked the script, so he'd better make sure the final recording did it justice. He told John Clarke so, but no one else. Clarke had been surprised to be asked at short notice to be studio manager for the recording – it was only a couple of years since he'd started at the BBC, rattling the teacups for *The Archers*. He viewed Charles with the same kind of anxious awe that the singers had for Ewan MacColl. Campbell had regarded Ewan as a 'rather brooding and imposing presence' on stage, and said: 'I had heard report of him as a brusque and overbearing personality, so I was pleasantly surprised to find him friendly and relaxed and even, a description I am sure he would contemptuously reject, charming.' One key aspect, as Peggy pointed out, was that there in the studio she and Charles were in charge – Ewan was a major figure, certainly, but he was just a singer. Up there in the control room, above the action, Charles drove himself to the limit, said Clarke.

He'd throw chairs about, and scripts ... It was always theatrical with Charles. He knew that there were moments in rehearsal when an explosion is just what's wanted to focus the mind. In the *Fishing* on two occasions he'd say 'Right, it's time for an explosion' and he'd grab these scripts and go charging out the door and down the stairs onto the floor of the studio, ripping up scripts and throwing them about like snow, everywhere ... Funnily enough, I met other producers in BBC Television who did exactly the same ... It was so exciting, it was a rollercoaster ride through a wonderland. Everything was new ... Charles quite often turned to me and said, 'What do you think we should do?' He's asking me? But I think that was part of the humility he had. Because although he was a raging burning brand, he was a very humble person.

At the end of that exhausting fortnight, which had included working all through the Whitsun holiday, Charles got everyone to stay behind, and Mary Baker came through with a completed rough-cut of the programme. It was the first time most of the performers had heard it: they were knocked out,

and broke into spontaneous applause. Earlier there had been some grumbles, not surprisingly. At one point during a break in a rehearsal room which housed a grand piano, in Charles's absence there was some criticism of his obsession with perfection. A moment later they were alarmed to discover Charles emerging from under the piano, where he'd been asleep, perhaps waiting out one of his incessant migraines. But he affected not to have heard anything, and at the end of the week everyone's spirits were high. Indeed Peggy had the music still fizzing in her head when she wrote to Charles a few days later saying:

We arrived back as flat as pancakes. Don't forget we love you ... We had a wonderful experience these last two weeks even if it HAS left us feeling like husks, completely unable to face even moderate inactivity for the next week. Your patience was – I won't say unusual, but let's hope it is the beginning of what we may from now on refer to as 'your usual patience'. Would love to record it all over again. The tunes are gradually fading from my mind, letting me sleep.

After they got back from the Newport folk festival in Rhode Island Peggy added, 'Any chance we could start on the coal programme?' They were far beyond the doubts about collaboration that had followed *Song of a Road*. Katharine Thomson, whose Clarion choir had been mercilessly drilled, and who became a firm friend, wrote thanking Charles for a 'tremendous experience'. Bruce Turner used the same expression, adding, 'Alongside you and Ewan and Peggy I feel roughly on a par with some of those callow young jazzmen who ask to sit in with my band from time to time.' Hearing the fishermen's voices while they were playing had made a tremendous difference to their appreciation of their parts and how it all fitted together, as well as lifting their performances.

In speaking about the programme later, Ewan explained their aversion to commentary, or introductory statements like 'I was a herring fisherman from Great Yarmouth.' In fact Ronnie Balls comes in with an oblique entrance, as Ewan says, 'as though you are right in the middle of a conversation or argument.' Hence his opening words are: 'If you fish for the herring, they rule your life.' Ronnie's words alternate, line by line, with the opening stanza of 'Shoals of Herring', one of the songs that went into the bloodstream of the folk repertoire (two years later it turned up in Ireland, wonderfully, as 'Shores of Erin'). After its last line, Ronnie's 'Come on, spin up, my darlings, come on, and they absolutely cajole them into the nets' leads straight into the pulsating rhythm of the signature song –

**Come all you gallant fishermen
That plough the stormy sea
The whole year round
On the fishing grounds
Of the Northern Minch and the Norway Deep
On the banks and knolls of the North Sea holes
Where the herring shoals are found.**

Having got the audience's feet wet, they drench them with spray – like Sam who as a lad would have a bucket of seawater thrown over him if he nodded off on his feet – with a driving going-to-sea-for-the-first-time 'recitative'. Twelve-year-old Sam recalls his first day at sea, his words interleaved as Ewan sings:

**It's up with the dawn
With your sea boots on
And down to the Yarmouth quay**

Cabin boy in a little boat called the Young John, 1892 ...

To fish Smith's Knoll

... little sailing boat, about forty ton ...

Where the big seas roll ...

And we're off, and we're living there with cabin boy Sam's 'dread, when you first go to sea.' Ewan's operatic recitative starts the listener on a breathless hour until the final plaintive, contemplative notes of:

**Our ships are small and the sea is deep
And many a fisher lad lies asleep
In the salt sea water.
But still there's a hungry world to feed
So we go where the shoals of herring breed.
In the salt sea water.**

It took Charles much less time to assemble the final programme than he'd spent hitherto. This time he got an Eric Fraser classic for his *Radio Times*

illustration, 'absolutely first class'. His article betrayed his excitement, though it ended on this wistful note: 'The great days of the herring trade are over ... it is salutary for an hour or so to sit at the feet of the men who knew and lived through it.' The broadcast came on 16 August, and it was an instant success. Only Charles's detested *Listener* reviewer disliked it. Paul Ferris in the *Observer*:

Without cant or hot flushes ... where the conventional documentary would have looked at effects of men on herring fishing, it cared only about the effects of fishing on man ... it could be the grittiest kind of corn but never is because of the intense dedication with which people have been observed, recorded and patiently embedded in music ... The programmes' style is now firmly established: humanist, unselfconscious, inevitably a trifle Left.

Charles was so anxious about the audience reaction that he wrote an internal memo trying to get the researchers to pose specific questions to listeners. He got short shrift from a Miss Langley, who knew her stuff: 'The fewer and more colourless the questions put, the more freely they respond ... I think you will find much more evidence will emerge than you expect at the moment.' In the event it earned the best response of any Radio Ballad until matched by *Travelling People*, the last. Although the usual minority thought it an 'utter waste of a wonderful rich source of material unintelligible or difficult to follow... a garbled hotchpotch', they were fewer than for John Axon, most agreeing that it was 'a radio epic! ... masterly in conception ... a very exceptional listening experience', and that the 'rollicking mixture of unrehearsed voices and ballad is the product of great skill and method.' (Ian Campbell would have words to say about that 'unrehearsed'.) 'Many tunes were splendidly catchy, rousing and robust, and ... captured the spirit of this tough and dogged breed of men.'

The London BBC bosses agreed, so a 45-minute version was created for, and in due course won, the 1960 Italia Press Association Prize for documentaries. Before going off to Trieste Charles despatched effusive letters of thanks to the hard-driven technical team, saying to Mary Baker that if there had been any justice she would have been there too. (She wrote later that all she had hoped for was to have been on the credits.) Charles replied to a sheaf of letters from performers, fishermen – Sam Lerner proud at being heard in so many countries – anonymous listeners, and old friends. Ian Mackintosh, who had commanded Charles's first submarine, wrote: 'You simply must keep this up, for God knows radio cries out to be used with sensitivity, imagination and comprehension instead of ... being brutalised by turgid banalities.' Charles returned from Italy with a prize that made him a lira millionaire (£500), and bags of presents, including a tie for his stepfather, who wrote thanking him, saying 'The characters portrayed came over still

wet from the salt sea spray ... Am much better since I changed my job at the factory, having got out of the acids and anxieties and am in the stores mainly stock checking.'

Alan Lomax is thrilled when he hears it on WBAI-FM in New York, and asks for a copy to play to the American Anthropological Society. His plaudits on the Italia Prize award are shrugged aside by Charles: 'All that really owes more to Ewan and Peggy and above all to Sam Lerner and Ronnie Balls.' To Ewan and Peggy he writes about issuing the Radio Ballads as records: 'We should get together and plan an assault [on record companies].' He has had many requests from listeners aching to hear the programmes again – no wonder, when they have so much to miss on first hearing, and need good reception and close concentration. Meanwhile he bemoans the prosaic work he's obliged to do in Stoke after returning from a three-week family holiday 'in a state of wildest confusion and contradiction.' To the violinist Kay Graham he confides, 'I have a quite terrible sense of lethargy and inadequacy which makes any sort of past achievement quite unrelated to me as I now am.'

After the family holiday Charles is eager to get started on a programme about Mining. Ewan and Peggy had been making programmes for the National Coal Board for over a year and are convinced they have their next subject. But despite the cachet of the Italia Prize Charles is by no means certain of internal support. He tells Ewan: 'I have not yet got the go-ahead to take on the Mining. Jobs have changed hands at the BBC.' His new bosses are startled by his programme costs and the length of time he takes to make them. However, while Ewan and Peggy are in the USA (Ewan has got a visa at last), he goes off to his first Durham Miners' Gala, and writes to Ewan: 'A folk dance group of us danced and piped until four in the morning – Ye Gods what people!' Ewan would assert that it was Charles's first experience of miners that changed his life.