

# Another Bloody Working-Class Epic

## The Big Hewer



Before we were half-way through the field-work he confessed to feeling utterly uneducated in the presence of miners ... how could one feel superior in the presence of men who appeared to have experienced everything and who could talk coherently about anything under the sun? For Charles it was a revelation and he was later to refer to it as the beginning of his education.

EWAN MACCOLL, ON CHARLES PARKER, IN *JOURNEYMAN*, 1990

My, he was a big man. Could you imagine? He was 18 stone. No fat. No fat – 18 stone of man. What they call the County Durham Big Hewer. Like a machine when he was hewing, you could hear the pick pick pick pick as regular as this clock. Never used to seem ever to tire.

THE DURHAM MINER JACK ELLIOTT, *THE BIG HEWER*, 1961

One morning in early 1961 the Newcastle folk singer Louis Killen, the late substitute on *Song of a Road*, answered a knock on the door of his mother's council flat in Jesmond. Standing outside, entirely unexpected, were Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl, loaded with recording equipment. 'Take us to some miners' was the gist of their message, and so he did. He took them to Johnny Handle, a mining friend who had discovered Bert Lloyd's collection of mining songs and began writing his own and singing them in clubs. Handle had been a miner till recently, but had given it up for folk song. Louis Killen:

I sat in on the Johnny Handle sessions ... Six hours. They would just let Johnny talk ... they would interject to get clarification but mostly they would just let them talk on and on. Not an interview with set questions, not a BBC approach!

Louis took them to see the Elliott brothers, Jack and Reece, and was there for one of the several interviews they had with them. The Elliotts were wonderful at igniting those verbal sparks. Ewan: 'We had 12 people in the room at first and metaphor would top metaphor; it's like people firing proverbs at each other. It's the kind of speech that Swift would have been quite pleased to have written down.'

Charles had got the go-ahead for the programme on miners and mining late in 1960. He and Ewan decided to delve in three areas: South Wales, the North Midlands (DH Lawrence country), and the North-East, and all threw up fascinating characters. In the North-East it was Handle and the Elliotts: 'with Jack Elliott we got enough stories for an extra hour.' In South Wales they were put on to soft-voiced Ben Davies, known as Sunshine, a miner with a natural flair for language, to whom they returned for extra material, notably in the Dust section: 'a rare man, a very conscious artist ... [he gave us] tremendous passages.' Another South Wales miner was Dick Beamish. Peggy reflected on Charles's response:

Dick Beamish staggered Charles. It shook him how articulate he was, a littlish man who took them on a long walk underground to a pile of coal where his friend had died in a fall. He made them turn their lamps out to experience total blackness. So dark, dizzy, nauseous. You could hear the earth creaking. Walking back, he suddenly said 'Stop', went very still, and over on the right there was the crash of a rock fall, which he'd sensed. And walked on.

Ewan elaborated:

Meeting miners was, for Charles, a shattering experience. Up until this point he had managed to hold on to the somewhat Panglossian view that everything was all right (or nearly all right) in this best of all possible worlds. The coalfields

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changed all that. We took our tape recorders into the pit-canteens, pithead baths, into pubs and miners' welfares. We dragged them through the galleries of drift mines in Northumberland and West Durham, down the deep shafts of East Durham and the hardrock mines of Wales, along the wide straight roads of East Midlands horizon mines ... and we dragged ourselves along impossibly narrow passages into the hellish places where solitary miners lie on their sides and jab with short-bladed picks at the 18-inch coal-face.

Later Peggy was able to join them for a trip underground. Just like the fishermen, the miners would have ordered her out if they'd known, but in a pit helmet and clobber and with her hair tucked in she wasn't discernibly female as long as she kept her mouth shut. Her worst moment was feeling the claustrophobia while 'swimming' on her elbows in a three-foot seam. She dared not speak, and there was no going back.

Of course, Ewan and Charles were sent first to the 'characters', natural storytellers, and one's first reaction as an outsider is to assume that they're hardly representative. But Ewan stressed that there were many anonymous miners who became just as articulate, like the man who Charles bumped into outside Durham Cathedral. He was Ernest Black, a Nottinghamshire miner who became one of their best informants – once they'd found his lost false teeth. And as students of language, they had a field day. Ewan said:

If you watch the miners as they come in the morning and wait at the pit top, they're talking and suddenly you realise you can't understand what they are saying, their talk becomes broader and broader as they stand there, they're entering into a new language as well, 'Pitmatic', where you never have to complete a sentence ... in its own way it's as economic as Cant [the Travellers' private language]. Completely different world.

At the end of our field-recording stint, we had taped between two and three hundred reels of mining 'crack', the conversation of men who can make words ring like hammer blows on a face of anthracite, who, when they talk, enrich the bloodstream of the national vocabulary with transfusions of local Pitmatic – the bold, bitter, ribald, beautiful talk of miners.

It was a good job Ewan and Peggy had constructed a painstaking methodology for dealing with these tapes, for they'd come back with almost twice as many as for *Singing the Fishing*. In the circumstances, the programme came together remarkably quickly. So attuned was Ewan now to the process that he created the first-day-down-the-pit recitative in just half a day – it had taken three days of sweat to do the equivalent in *Singing the Fishing*. They rehearsed and recorded in two weeks, with the same method but with a little less intensity than last time. That didn't stop Charles throwing things, of

course. One tantrum was ended abruptly, Alan Ward said, by the new woman on ‘grams’, the stunning Diana Wright, walking up to Charles, sitting on his knee, and giving him a resounding kiss.

Louis Killen was one of the solo singers who was used in the chorus, for they’d decided that folk singers would make a more malleable group than the classically voice-trained Clarion Singers. The ‘Big Hewer’ of the title was not in the original template. Louis pointed out that when they arrived in the North East they had been hoping to find a heroic miner, a real person, not a mythic figure. But everywhere they went they found a Herculean semi-historical figure, recurring like some creation myth. ‘Whether he was real, or purely legendary, I never knew, even to this day’, said Jack Elliott. In the Midlands it was ‘Jackie Torr, from Derbyshire’, in South Wales ‘Isaac Lewis in the Anthracite’. This was a crucial device for Ewan, who could let his song-writing imagination loose on a super-hero:

**In a cradle of coal in the darkness I was laid – go down.  
Down in the dirt and darkness I was raised, go down.  
Cut me teeth on a five-foot timber,  
Held up the roof with me little finger,  
Started me time, away in the mine – GO DOWN.**

And the chorus hammers in on the last Go Down. Later, Ewan and Charles were accused of naivety in using this archetypal figure. Dave Harker in his piece on the programmes in *One for the Money* says:

It never seems to have occurred to Parker and MacColl that the mythic figure may have been a deliberate and grotesque caricature of the self-exploitative worker, the man who filled more tubs, dug more coal and worked more hours than any other. Doubtless a symbol of pride and virility to insiders ... it could also be self-mocking caricature and an ideological stick to satirise men who undercut piece-work rates and are hence against the men’s own interest. The limitation of production is one of the pitmen’s few weapons ... Parker and MacColl had a ‘socialist-realist’ prescription ... and were going to make the miner an epic figure whether he liked it or not.

While there’s an element of truth in this – in every industry when setting up piece-rates managers will go for the best worker, who then risks becoming a pariah to his workmates – here it seems that their informants were innocent and eager tellers of the story. To Peggy Seeger the miners quite clearly spoke as if immensely proud of their symbolic Hercules. ‘They meant it. Down the pit the miners are a tight-knit community. Nobody shirks. There’s no gaffer down there.’

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For Louis, recording was no longer quite as nerve-racking as it had been for *Song of a Road*. He had more confidence in his own ability, not least because he had begun to replace the American songs in his repertoire with those from his own tradition. Moreover, at the end of the second day Louis saw tears streaming down Charles's cheeks as he sang for the first time his dialect stanza from 'Schooldays Over', the song that introduces that starting-out recitative, one that echoes but in no way copies Sam Lerner's first day at sea:

**Schooldays over, come on then John, time to be getting your pit boots on,  
On with your shart and moleskin trousers, time you was on your way,  
Time you was learning the pitman's job and earning the pitman's pay.**

(With some trepidation Louis had to correct Ewan's attempt at the tricky dialect pronunciation of shart, 'but he took it'). There were three similar stanzas, each introducing us to the sharply differentiated dialects of each region – Ewan for the Midlands, then Bert Lloyd for the Welsh:

**Come on then Jim, it's time to go, time you was working down below,  
Time to be handling a pick and shovel, you start at the pit today,  
Time you was learning the collier's job and earning a collier's pay.**

**I was 12 when I left school. As soon as I reached the age of 14 I went to the  
pit. The pit was the place.**

**Come on then Dai, it's almost light, time you was off to the anthracite,  
The morning mist is in the valley, it's time you was on your way,  
Time you was learning the miner's job and earning a miner's pay.**

**When I was a boy, we all thought of the mines. When I was in school,  
I used to parade wearing my long trousers, and parading with my, my  
naked lamp on the road at night, as colliers – months before I had a job,  
you see. Oh yes.**

Ben Davies, the last speaker here, has this exquisite Welsh voice, soft and sibilant. Later, when teaching, Charles would illustrate it by holding up an eight-inch strip of tape – 'Look, this is the length of a Welsh S.' Then it's down the pit, with an atmospheric murmur of Pitmatic against a background of zinging cables and clanking cages.

**But you're away, you're bound below,  
And your pit boots ring and clatter as you go, making sparks fly.  
You're on your way, to the pit bank,  
Where men riding cages wait, where the rusty cables lie,  
Where the broken picks and shovels,  
Where the heap of waste and rubble rises up against the sky.**

And we're embedded in the miner's world, where for Ben Davies: 'Everything seemed to close in on me ... the experience comes so horrible and terrible ... the smell of horse manure ... went through everything. I thought it was wonderful.' And where for another: 'The silence in the pit it's, it's like infinity, or the bottom of the ocean ... And you can feel this pressing on you, the darkness.' And where: 'You hear a prop creak, and you ... can see that little part just move that quarter of an inch. You know what's going to happen.' A rock fall, first a friend, then a widow:

**Yes. He was working next to me. And a huge stone came down, and killed him ... He was killed in the pit. He was killed on a Friday morning, on a Good Friday morning. I shall always remember ... I see him now. Brought him in and brought him on a stretcher on the floor, there. In his pit dirt. The men bathing him like, on the floor.**

That image is strikingly similar to one in DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Isla Cameron speaks for the widow in an aching slow lament before we're moved on to the hard times between the wars:

**In from the mine in his pit dirt they bring him.  
The neighbours they stand by the door.  
The fire will gang oot and the bairns will gang hungry.  
He'll walk to the pit no more.**

**I was the only man working out of a street of houses. Forty houses. You daren't answer the bosses back. Because you know what'd happen, there's plenty of men waiting for your job ... I had a sister living in the valley at that time, and oh, what a sight was to see, the pride that was there and yet, they were on the verge of starvation ... A miner has always had the pride thing – he thinks, well if he can't make his living by the muscles of his arms and his legs, well he just doesn't want it.**

**In every village in the Rhondda  
Children cry for want of meat  
Throughout the land their fathers wander  
Singing for pennies in the street.**

This last a slow choral chant. And the Dust. A topic nowhere on their original list that emerged inexorably in interview after interview.

**The curse of underground is the dust. Dust is the giant killer. But it doesn't strike all at once. But he likes his time. And he do takes his time, and he stealthily walks into your human system. Into your lungs. He is the real enemy, so minute in its form, yet so strong in its ravaging powers. I have seen victims of this terrible curse, this dust, I've seen victims of it, reduced to nothing. Couldn't breathe – no lungs to breathe. Only the beating of the heart, waiting for the time to be called away.**

The Dust section is illustrated simply in song only by a chorus of Welsh miners. Moving enough, and yet even more on reflection when Peggy said: 'Twenty to thirty miners singing somewhere, not a pub because most were teetotal. Recorded by Dr Dafydd Thomas of Carmarthen. He said half will be dead within a year: Look at him, he's only 35. Incredible damage ... Dr Thomas was an amazing man with a beautiful face, died of cancer himself.' (Ewan had a vivid memory of him among miners in the Theatre Workshop days, ministering to a company fatigued, under-nourished and ailing.) Jokes about death are constant. After one violent coughing fit: 'Shall I get the doctor? No, get the plumber.' Ewan told Peggy this story in a miners' welfare club, where she sat pregnant with her second son, Calum. He had to get her drink because no miner would be seen dead at a bar ordering milk.

They played their first draft of the programme to a group of miners and were taken aback to be told it lacked humour. So they went back and removed some song stanzas and a few voices, and pasted in a humorous section, without enough time to thread it through the rest, as doubtless they'd have preferred to do. One new song and a few jokes, but clustered together they tend to lose their impact, and they omit one (whether for reasons of good taste or poor recording quality is not clear) that would have capped the lot. It actually follows one of the occasional lines that sounds trite, as though spoken many times before, and comes from an old miner who suggests he has coal in his veins, not blood: 'I think if I cut my finger and it bled it would just come out black.' That's where the extract ends. On the original recording his daughter-in-law turns to her husband instantly and says, 'Well, cut his throat then, the fire's burning low.' Cackles of laughter round the embers.

## ANOTHER BLOODY WORKING-CLASS EPIC – THE BIG HEWER

*The Big Hewer* was broadcast on 18 August 1961. In the *Radio Times* Charles extended the Big Hewer metaphor:

In the programme we have taken [a mythical figure] and made the sounds of the pit speak for him – the uncanny whiplash of the steel ropes of the winding-gear speaking for his sinews, the deep pulse of the pump for his heart, the surge of the cages in the shaft and the constant flow of coal for his very blood ... I knew that only the epic could do justice to him as a subject ... For the sight of him underground in his helmet, with his blackened face and his insistent humanity in that most inhuman of environments – the coal seam – makes him an awesome figure, and the very proximity of the roof makes him of superhuman stature. ... Tough, forthright, politically aware – this we expected; but to find men and women so strongly imbued with a sense of history, of a long struggle shared, and above all who could talk brilliantly, and with an overwhelming sense of their real importance as human beings – this was a revelation.

The reviewers were nearly as enthusiastic as for *Singing the Fishing*. Mary Crozier in the *Guardian*: ‘The miner has an intense and poetic awareness of the elements among which he lives and works. The songs, written out of the actual folklore, continually picked up and carried the movement from one theme to another. The technique of swinging rhythmical choruses, interspersed with recordings of the words of miners from coalfields all over the country, made this an impressive experience.’ Her only criticism was that an hour of sustained listening to such intensity was too long – it could have been ten minutes shorter. The *Sunday Times* agreed: ‘Although ten minutes off would help (it would help any hour-long programme) this stands out as one of the best of the year. “I lost a good man”, her regret as hard and dry as the coal itself.’ Paul Ferris in the *Observer*, usually an enthusiast, this time had doubts, feeling that some of the spoken phrases sounded too cute, too practised:

In the Big Hewer there were uneasy signs of over-awareness. MacColl’s singing was as effective as ever, and there were moments of intensity when no barrier of radio apparatus seemed to remain. ‘I lost a good man.’ But ‘you’re not burning coal you’re burning blood’? Or still worse ‘A miner’s life is a mixture of tragedy and humour’, it sounded as if the miners were talking on the record for any old radio feature. In *John Axon* that mixture of tragedy and humour was overheard, not stated.

The ‘tragedy and humour’ line was one of those added in a hurry later to preface the new Humour section. It just goes to show that when you have something near perfect you can’t insert a new block. For Ferris by now the Radio Ballads were not just any old radio feature. Peggy pointed out later



that these stock phrases – like ‘burning blood not coal’ – were mantras that many miners repeated. A later *Times* correspondent, reviewing a repeat, made a shrewd contrast with television:

A medium that reduces the human figure to the size of a doll is not well adapted to creating heroes ... radio by contrast is a medium in which heroes flourish. It gives unfettered scope to the audience’s imagination and moves naturally in worlds of legend and magic. ... Where the programme scores – setting aside the superb editing – is in its imaginative evocation of the mining life. The title is two-edged – the *Big Hewer* seems at first to be the archetypal collier, but he gradually comes to represent the mine itself, the factory that ‘never stands still ... the ground moves all the time, you can hear it.’ The total impression left behind is genuinely heroic. But doubts begin to creep in when it has the effect not of heightening the atmosphere but of simply inflating it. This happens in *The Big Hewer* when recorded statements are taken up by Mr MacColl as pretexts for a big-gestured ballad. The contrast is similar to that between a real working man, and a civic statue to the dignity of labour in the social-realist style.

There’s a fine line between success and failure in songwriting, especially if you’re trying to give a voice to someone else. A year or so later Ewan cast a critical eye at his earlier efforts. Reflecting on *The Big Hewer*, he concurred with the reviewer: he agreed he’d overdone some of the songs. But overall he felt that the recitative sections were even more effective than hitherto, partly because the whole cast of singers participated: ‘It is at this moment that it becomes apparent that we are dealing with all the miners – the dead, the living and the future generations.’ An admiring *TES* (*Times Educational Supplement*) reviewer, unnamed, stood back to look at the series, making the point that apolitical listeners didn’t feel that they were being lectured to by Marxists:

A new form, being hammered with richly extrovert energy into a fresh and revitalising sound-style, is the ballad-documentary ... To date all such features are not equally successful. Were they, one would suspect author and producer to be lacking in enterprise. The pioneer always has his defeats; they only make victory the sweeter. The *Big Hewer* ... managed to make a father-figure for its subject that was both ideal and human. The indirect approach, avoiding harsh proselytising, persuading the listener by first beguiling, then convincing him that he should accept truths he might at first be loth to accept.

So another ‘bloody working-class epic’, a phrase attributed to the BBC’s Director General Hugh Carleton-Greene, who had enthused so much about *The Ballad of John Axon*. It brought another success for Charles and the BBC, but at a price – and it was the price of the Radio Ballads that his new bosses didn’t like. What could he do about it?

## CHAPTER 12

# Radio on the Cheap

## *Birmingham Ballads and The Body Blow*



Scrubbing away and your mouth stuck up with toothpaste, tons more than you'd use yourself ... and you clench your teeth and say for goodness sake, it's not a doorstep you're scrubbing, it's my teeth. Come along dear, you know, open up. Talk to you as if you're a semi-idiot child and this vigorous scrubbing, on your teeth. Used to dread it ... When you're lying down you feel so much like a landed dab. You feel more like a moth on a pin down there, you don't feel equal to anyone.

NORMA SMITH, IN *THE BODY BLOW*, 1962

Charles told me he was in the shit. One hour of Radio Ballad was costing him as much as one hour of television. He'd done three of them. They cost as much as 20 normal programmes. Could I make one for nothing? It would bring the average down ...

IAN CAMPBELL, INTERVIEWED IN 2007

Let's take stock halfway through the Radio Ballad series. Radio reviewers love them, and *Singing the Fishing* has won the prestigious Prix Italia. But within the BBC itself there are complaints. Before getting the go-ahead for *The Big Hewer*, Charles Parker writes to Ewan MacColl that there are management changes in the corporation and that people have been muttering about how expensive the programmes are to make. He has received a body blow to his self-esteem. Invited to attend an important Harvard radio seminar, he has been refused permission to go by the BBC. Moreover, he's warned that if he continues to confine himself to a narrow sphere of work, his 'continued usefulness to the corporation will be in doubt.' It's a sharp tug on his reins, an unpleasant reality check.

### Changes at the BBC

Radio was in retreat. During World War II its effect had been powerful: broadcast hours doubled and licence numbers tripled. Radio's impact was still immense in the early 1950s, and only Radio Luxembourg was then competing with the BBC. There was precious little television to compete with it either – what there was came from the same BBC stable, and could hardly be described as 'populist'. Moreover, most television sets in use were small, 14 inches on the diagonal, and in 1955 the cheapest cost the equivalent of £3000 in 2008; credit restrictions meant you had to find half of that up front. Not many could afford it – in 1955 fewer than five million households had television, while nearly everyone had a radio.

But the arrival of ITV in September 1954 sent shock waves through the BBC. Within nine months it had taken over 70 per cent of the BBC's television audience. The BBC was obliged to rein back radio expenditure and pour money into television. As the early TV pioneer David Attenborough said 50 years later, 'We laughed at those stuffed shirts and fuddy-duddies [in radio], at the same time taking their money because television was actually financed from the sound licence.' In 1954 three times as many households had radio-only licences than had television sets; in 1958 they were equal; in 1964 only a quarter as many. So money for radio programmes was being husbanded more carefully. Who in command, observing the audience shrinking as fast as its budget, would not look critically at programmes that cost substantially more than the average in money and time, and appealed to a minority audience? How many 'loss leaders' could they afford? The Radio Ballads were prime candidates.

If you examine the 'cost per broadcasting hour', as BBC leaders certainly did, you'll find that the first four Radio Ballads each cost £1500–2000, (£200–300,000 today). To make the 'average' BBC radio programme then cost about £150 per broadcast hour, and the typical radio feature was round £500 – so respectively a tenth and a third of a Radio Ballad. Charles Parker's

bosses were happy to promote such features, especially if they won prizes, but they granted him no unquestioned right to make more. He was allowed a substantial amount of freedom in choosing his own subjects, but the Radio Ballads cost time as well as money. *The Ballad of John Axon* took ten days short of 12 months between his first letter to Ewan and its first broadcast. For *Song of a Road* the period was 12 months, for *Singing the Fishing* nine months, and for *The Big Hewer* another nine months. It wouldn't have been so bad had Charles been making enough other programmes in parallel. Some, yes, but many fewer – his 'broadcast' hours from 1960–3 were a third of what they had been from 1955–7. His 'productivity' had slumped. Never mind the quality, Charles, we can't feel the width.

So while he and his supporters were indignant, it's no surprise that he was under pressure to use less time and money in making the programmes. This led him in April 1960 – before *Singing the Fishing* had even reached the recording studio – to commission a programme from a local writer, the skilful and enterprising Brian Vaughton, who had been out and about independently with his own EMI Midget. Charles felt that Vaughton's first selected topic, Birmingham's old Jewellery Quarter, could appeal to a Midland audience. He decided it could be adapted to the Radio Ballad format – he was looking at everything with that eye nowadays. If he could make them quickly, with local amateur talent, and not Ewan, Peggy and a set of professional musicians staying in hotels for up to a fortnight, he might be able to slash both cost and time, and provide a riposte to the attack he was under.

## The Jewellery

With this in mind, he approached two local folk singers, John Chapman and Ian Campbell. Ian was the Clarion singer picked out by Ewan as a soloist on *Singing the Fishing*. Like Ewan, he came from a musical Scots family, whose Aberdeen-born father (then still singing impressively) had been blackballed after leading a strike in a paper mill. Campbell had also worked with Charles on a Nativity play at the parish church in Harborne. After helping to create a Clarion skiffle group in 1958, Ian and his sister Lorna had transformed it into a successful folk group who were the regular hosts of the Jug o' Punch club at the Crown in Station Street in Birmingham, which Charles frequented, and Campbell's Radio Ballad experience had made him an enthusiast for the form. Throughout this period Campbell was still working as a skilled craftsman, an engraver, in the Jewellery Quarter, so he was flattered and delighted to be asked to come up with some songs for a cheap and cheerful programme about the history of his place of work.

Ian Campbell recalls Charles approaching him, before *The Big Hewer* was broadcast, and explaining the pressure he was under to reduce his programme costs. 'Well, I'd already done a lot of writing and I knew all the

jewellery vocabulary. The actuality had all been collected by then.' In truth, *The Jewellery* was more a feature programme with songs, not a Radio Ballad. Campbell wrote five songs in three days, his group had only the weekend of 4–5 March 1961 to rehearse and record, and the programme went out just two days later. Little time for Charles to wield his tape splicer. The very few interviews were with old jewellers and the daughter of one: the mother of his engineer Alan Ward. Charles was tapping his contacts.

*The Jewellery* was restricted to Radio Midlands, in a three-part series on local industries. The response was mixed. There was a mediocre audience reaction, though those few critics who did write it up were in favour. Next day Charles wrote an over-optimistic assessment to David Gretton: 'I cannot sufficiently express my conviction that in a group of this sort there is tremendous potential for further actuality Radio Ballads of an absolutely regional character.' The Campbell group he used was certainly cheap – he pressed in vain for more money for Campbell, who got a mere eight guineas. No wonder the programme cost well under a tenth of the average of the first four Radio Ballads. Charles thanked Campbell effusively, but Ian wryly complains that his two programmes were always compared unfavourably with the MacColl/Seeger set, which had an investment of time, money and creative effort of an entirely different order. Charles did not at first mention them to Ewan and Peggy.

Charles had overplayed his hand – his bosses didn't share the reviewers' enthusiasm for the programme. Denis Morris wouldn't put it up for a national broadcast, nor would David Gretton sanction a Midlands repeat, deflating Charles with: 'A primitive piece of work ... poor narration ... cursory production methods. At most there are seven or eight minutes of compelling material ... It really is a museum-piece in more ways than one!' Well, of course. Charles knew that narrators should be done away with, and that extensive post-production work was necessary – that's what he'd been telling them! So it was galling that he was being criticised for it on a programme that cost next to nothing. He felt he couldn't win.

## Cry from the Cut

Still, a couple of months later, while he was in post-production on *The Big Hewer*, Charles jumped at the opportunity when Vaughton came up with the subject of canals, of which Birmingham had a network on the scale of Venice. To make the songs for *Cry from the Cut*, Ian Campbell had just eight hours of actuality to work from, and three weeks to write five songs in any moments he could snatch – he was working all week and playing many evenings, and this time he wasn't familiar with the jargon. Recorded in a single day on 10 February 1962 and broadcast on BBC Midlands just three days later, *Cry from the Cut* was the same kind of radio-feature-with-songs as *The Jewellery*,

with no time to dovetail words with music in the elaborate MacColl/Seeger manner. Nevertheless, perhaps because canal boating was a growing pastime that created enthusiasts, it was successful both with critics and audience. Indeed it achieved audience response figures that matched those for *Singing the Fishing*.

For creating the songs and performing them Campbell and his group had to make do with just over £50 in total: Charles wrote and told him he couldn't find more because of the budget. No wonder Ian felt sore when in 1963, after he'd played at the Edinburgh Festival, Charles reacted with horror when Ian told him he was going professional. With so much performing work Campbell could no longer manage to keep his day job as an engraver. 'I resisted it, and held out the longest ... Charles had this romantic idea of me as a traditional craftsman/musician, and he criticised me fiercely. I felt he'd used me.' Frankly, he had, and doubtless Charles was upset because he would no longer have a cheap local semi-amateur option.

There would be no more Vaughton/Campbell programmes. Between the broadcast of their two features Charles had begun preparing for a fifth Radio Ballad. In November 1961 he commissioned from Ewan and Peggy a programme on teenagers, but the following February, just after *Cry from the Cut*, an extra opportunity suddenly arose. David Gretton told him that he had some spare money in the kitty as the financial year drew to a close, so if Charles could make a programme before the tax year ended at the beginning of April ... He needed no further invitation, and immediately thought of an idea Ewan and Peggy had already lobbied at him. The year before, they had written and sung some songs for a half-hour television feature about polio sufferers, *Four People*. They hadn't particularly liked the result, largely because of the 'stagey' dialogue, and because the sufferers' own words hadn't been heard, but thought it would be an interesting vehicle for a Radio Ballad that broke away from the preoccupation with work. Could they succeed with such a subject?

## The Body Blow

They had only six weeks. Charles consulted Guy Brenton, the director of *Four People*, and originally envisaged a 30-minute 'chamber' piece, with fewer instrumentalists, two singers (Ewan and Peggy) and possibly only two effects – the throb of a heartbeat and the wheezing of an iron lung. With Ewan busy, he did all the interviews himself, and used virtually the same subjects as the TV programme. He was certainly not aiming to skip the post-production as he had with the Vaughton/Campbell pair, but the interviews affected him so deeply that despite the tight timescale he sought and was granted a doubling to an hour. As late as 27 February, a month before the broadcast, he had told Gretton:

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The deliberate limiting of time to 30 minutes is another self-imposed discipline to see whether we can ... do it justice ... I am trying to apply the techniques of the Radio Ballad to the intensely personal experience of a group of polio sufferers, with the intention of purging the healthy person's somewhat atavistic fears of the grievously deformed or disabled.

It is clear that Charles himself held those 'atavistic' fears, a mix of repulsion and fascination. Poliomyelitis is a highly infectious disease that attacks the nervous system's motor neurons. It had been a rarity until after the war, when it struck a group of people in Kent, and spread. So devastating was it that when patients recovered a hazy consciousness in one of the specialist polio hospitals, like Rush Green in Essex, the experience was unearthly:

**It is sort of dreamlike. I mean you've had a shock to the body, and of course then your mind, there's a shock to the mind as well. And ... you don't see anybody's face, I mean they haven't got any sort of identity to you. Just eyes, that makes it more weird. They're masked, because you're so infectious. You just see eyes, different sorts of eyes, peering at you.**

Norma Smith, by the time of that interview recovered enough to be in a wheelchair, was a mother who had been struck down at a seaside resort: 'On the Thursday I was in one world. On the Monday and Tuesday I seem to have been thrown into a completely different world.' Day one, normal. Day two, flu symptoms, Day three, progressively weaker, Day four, paralysed from the neck down. The extent of recovery seemed to be a complete lottery. Scots housewife Jean Haggart, like Norma, managed to get back to looking after a home, a husband and a child. She had regained the use of everything but her left arm and part of her right. Heather Ruffell was completely paralysed still but had learned to 'frog breathe', an air-gulping technique that at least got her out of her iron lung. The two men were Paul Bates, an ex-army officer struck down on a patrol in Malaya at the end of his National Service, and Dutchy Holland. Each was still in an iron lung, flat on his back. Each had undergone an emergency operation (tracheotomy) to open the airways. Dutchy was the sole subject who could be described as truly working class, an assembly line worker at Ford's in Dagenham. His condition was so severe that he could only speak on the 'inspiration' phase of the iron lung's breath.

That word 'inspiration' acquired a genuine double meaning. Charles was awed by their suffering, courage and attitude. In a later letter he said: 'The robust no-nonsense self-confidence of Paul Bates, the ironic wit of Dutchy ... the serene objectivity of Heather Ruffell, the indomitable humanity of Jean Haggart ... bowled me over.' For once the usually anonymous subjects were

named in his *Radio Times* introduction, as they would be at the outset of the programme. For him they ‘revealed the flame of the human spirit burning with overwhelming clarity and brightness.’ They were articulate, forthright, and almost entirely without self-pity, although Dutchy had lost his wife and daughters, Heather her husband, child and, most cruelly, an unborn child, and all of them their livelihoods. What’s striking is that their language, while largely ‘educated’, loses little in comparison with the workers’ speech which Ewan and Charles extolled. It’s as though for those still paralysed speech was now hard-won, each breath an effort, and with its relearning came totally different speech patterns. Spare, direct, unwavering.

Charles spent a fortnight recording them, his interviewing empathy eliciting tremendous testimony. But how to assemble it? As early as *Song of a Road*, Ewan had conceived the idea of cross-cutting several pieces of actuality from speaker to speaker ‘and building them into montage blocks which would have something of the quality of the stream of consciousness passages in Joyce’s *Ulysses*.’ Since then he’d been excited by Alain Resnais’s film *Last Year at Marienbad*, which used a similar technique in film. Ewan went on to say that Charles was unconvinced until:

We taped a montage block ... of 19 passages of speech from four speakers, each passage being a comment or part of a comment on the sensation of returning consciousness. The overall effect was overwhelming ... Charles found the technical challenge exciting. Tending to regard the montages as a surrealistic trick, he nevertheless became an expert at constructing them, and they appeared frequently, with electrifying effect, in *The Body Blow*.

With this extra complication, Charles has his work cut out in the time available, for although Ewan has to write fewer new songs the actuality selection has taken as long as usual. Moreover, as well as the audio-montages he has the added task of splicing together Dutchy’s chopped-up speech. But Charles is by now a complete master of the method, the machinery he uses is no longer fouling up, and he completes the first-cut audio-montage in time for a five-day rehearsal and recording stint on 19–23 March with just Ewan, Peggy and three other musicians, all of whom sign away their recording royalties to the Polio Research Fund. Recording is as intense as usual. Charles’s secretary Norah Mash describes in a letter the calm that the slow, steady breathing sound of the iron lung brings to the studio when things get fraught. The finished programme is due to go out only four days later. Throughout this period Charles carries on a full correspondence with each of the five subjects, to whom he’d given copies of *John Axon* to indicate what he’s trying to achieve. Heather Ruffell responds enthusiastically, ending: ‘With All Best Wishes, Heather (All done with my own fair teeth.)’ Heather uses her teeth to type, immaculately, on her own notepaper, headed



with the hospital's address. While such aids are commonplace now, they certainly weren't then. Charles goes back to record Norma Smith at home with her daughter Carol singing and skipping, and arranges for Norma to sit in on one day of the recording. Peggy says she found Norma a 'fabulous' woman.

Their compelling stories punctuate a succession of montages from the moment they're struck down, through returning consciousness, realisation, resentment, resignation, back to the fight for movement and independence, and the determination to lead a useful life. They draw you inexorably into their world:

**Sit up, your brain will say, sit up! And suddenly nothing happens, and you think – I didn't sit up ... And losing the use of my left arm and he says, go on, you're hawering. I said, I'm not. And losing the use of it, I could feel the use going out of the shoulder. Right down to the fingertips. And I can always remember him lifting my arm and turning it round and round and round to try to put the life into it again ... You think, gosh, my legs are gone, I can't move my arms. Well you get such a shock. It felt, to me, it felt like all the muscles were being actually being knocked out of action. It was like electric light bulbs all burning out. One two three four, just one after the other.**

Each of the five different voices assembled in this passage is clearly distinguishable to the ear. Jean Haggart's Scots, Dutchy Holland's East End, Heather Ruffel's soft refinement, Norma Smith's cheerful wit, Paul Bates's army officer, only 26 but with a voice like gravel after his tracheotomy, out of which he emerged, to everyone's surprise, with his voice intact:

**They got me into an Auster to fly me down to Kuala Lumpur, down to the base hospital and I'm rather big, six feet four, which doesn't, you know, go easily into that sort of thing. Had to drag me out feet first. I got into the ward, was helped to undress and I sat on the edge of the bed, and then decided to ... lie down, be more comfortable, lay back, and I couldn't get my left leg onto the bed. And that was the last time I sat on the side of a bed or, or anywhere ... I was transferred to a tank respirator, and I had the form of polio which means the paralysis of the swallowing. It's quite simple – eventually you drown you see, in your own secretions, you can't cope with them. And they, then you can take them out of the iron lung, anaesthetise them, and then cut their throat, literally. Put a shortened tube straight into the throat, which I've still got eight years later, and breathe**

them through that, respire them through it. Now unfortunately I was still fighting when they put this tube down my throat and I bit through it. I also bit the anaesthetist, when he tried to retrieve the, the broken tube ... He's a good strong, strong Yorkshireman – I've met him since and we're extremely good friends, and he always sort of licks his thumb when he comes in ... Anyway they did the operation in what I think they would claim to be a world record of about 28 seconds. No anaesthetics were necessary because I was out, and almost gone anyway.

No one had quite expressed on radio before so cogently what it was like to experience pain and paralysis. The pain, from Norma Smith and Heather Ruffell:

It's deep bone ache. It's in every muscle, and everything. Your whole body seems to shriek with pain. And your heels, little pains start and then they get like flames, then they get like worse flames, and unless somebody lifts them and rubs them to relieve that, it just gets, well it just nearly blots you out. But you just have to give in to it, just have to lie there and bear it, you can't do anything about it, just have to let yourself get carried away on the pain. To me it just felt like being crucified all the time ... You have to know pain, to appreciate being out of pain. That's why the pain when I first got polio, and the no-pain now, that's why I'm happy.

Norma Smith, on trying to move:

And of course you have muscle charts ... That means that they ... sit there with a chart, and they've got every muscle listed down, and then they go through the motions of asking you to move these various muscles ... Of course most of mine were noughts and the next month they were noughts and they just get tired of saying nought so they used to say zero, nothing, nought, nought, zero, nothing, you know, just to make a change, done in front of you. Whether they think of you as a human being while they're doing it I don't know ... And you have to get over that embarrassment of lying stark naked while they all peer down at you ... Somebody's probably got an elbow on your stomach, one end, while they're looking at your feet and saying, now waggle your big toe, and you go blue in the face trying to move your big toe, and you're sure it must be moving with the effort and

**you look down at the toe ... It's best not to look really because if you're not looking you're sure that your big toe's moving but if you open your eye, you see the ruddy thing's still stuck up in the air, it's not even moved an inch ... You feel with such concentration and willing everything, you know, you're saying, move, move, move! And you think that it must move.**

They're not out of danger, either, not least because, believe it or not, the electricity supply to the Rush Green ward was metered. Dutchy Holland: 'I think you've got to be a polio to really understand. We have a saying in this ward that we live dangerously. And by golly you do. If someone's forgotten to put a shilling in the meter bang goes your air supply.' Or if Charles Parker, recording on his knees at the side of your bed, fails to notice that you're turning blue – though he (eventually) realises that he seems to have pulled out the respirator's plug!

And the start of recovery:

**I wasn't afraid while I was in the lung at all, ever, but I was afraid to come out. I can always remember Sister pulling me out a little bit every day. Five minutes, ten minutes, extended periods, and then she said to me one morning: Mrs Haggar we're going to take you out of the lung today and you're going to lie on the bed. I was quite happy with that, but when night came I got a terrific fear. I wanted back in it. And in the morning she said, well, you're still here, aren't you? So I said, yes, it looks like it.**

The reviewers, supportive or critical, were all deeply moved. Patrick Williams in the *Sunday Telegraph* under the heading *The Ballad of the Iron Lung*: 'I doubt whether a listener with full attention on this programme can avoid sympathetic agitation in his own muscles. At a playback for the Press last week we all had trouble breathing ... There's no way of telling whether Charles Parker carefully judged the effect, or hit by accident upon the correct accumulation of stimuli to produce such acute discomfort.' The *TES*: 'It was more than a documentary, it was a tribute paid with aesthetic sense. Reality can move more deeply than a play; no actor could hope to convey the strength of such experience.' They're getting it.

But most disliked the songs. Ian Rodgers in the *Guardian*: 'The excellence of the cutting and the fact that all five were coherent and informative about their condition ... made me wish they could have been heard without the musical treatment. It ... too often tried to strike medals, to draw attention to bravery and fortitude which was obvious in what they said.' Peter Wilsher: 'The Radio Ballads have produced some of the most original and memorable

radio heard in the last couple of years. But ... I could not persuade myself that the method was ideally suited to an illness ... They talked in flat unemotional voices about the onset of paralysis, its effects on mind and body, and its gradual slow partial retreat. But surrounding this was an elaborate framework of smug exposé and comment [in the songs] and doubts crept in.' The TV critic Victor Soanes didn't like the programme, while acknowledging that: 'It was extremely well done and technically brilliant. But the theatrical trimmings were superfluous – twanging guitars, superimposed troubadour voices, third-rate poetry.' Ouch. Peggy agreed later with some of this criticism, if not all: it was her own voice (too sweet, too sweet) that bugged her most. But the time and cost constraints prevented them employing another singer.

The voice actuality was so rich that the songs and music became a problem: we'll look at why in Chapter 18. This would have been an incomparable programme for its time without a note of music, and the combination of the stories, the montage sequences and the few telling sound effects were mesmerising. The programme in fact received stirring approbation within the BBC. An unsigned letter from Head Office in London called it 'staggering, the best thing you've ever done. Technically brilliant and very exciting. It glued me to the edge of the chair for the entire 60 minutes.' Denis Morris wrote that 'Ronald Lewin and Laurence Gilliam both heard your polio programme this morning and were completely bowled over by it ... It should be considered as an Italia Prize entry.' Gilliam wrote saying 'I congratulate you and your team on yet another first class piece of work.' This must have been heart-warming for Charles, but you can't help thinking that among the reactions was an unspoken relief that it had no political edge: it wasn't 'another bloody working-class epic'. And it never did get selected as the Italia Prize entry.

## Charles Parker and the Polio Sufferers

What about the polio sufferers themselves? Heather Ruffell, after recording her instant reaction in a telegram – 'congratulations to all concerned stop programme great success stop' – played the finished programme to her ward when she got a copy. Afterwards she wrote to Charles, while 'wearing her teeth down to the gums' writing the hospital magazine she and Dutchy had pioneered. While they all enjoyed it, she says, 'The criticism from polio sufferers was that there was too much on suffering in the first part, not enough accent on the many compensations we now have.' This was an analogous criticism to that of the miners when they felt *The Big Hewer* lacked humour. The polio sufferers had come out of the other side, and wanted to be reminded of that triumph more than to wallow in the nightmare they had – partly at least – escaped. Similar comment comes from polio sufferers listening to the programme for the first time today.

Charles had more letters from the general public after *The Body Blow* than for any other Radio Ballad. All but three of the 30 correspondents were deeply impressed and affected; the three loathed it. He replies to them all before going back to his planning for the teenager programme, then provisionally titled *On the Brink*, but his correspondence with the five subjects goes on for years. He has the idea of mitigating the boredom of those stuck in hospital with some of their faculties still available and time still on their hands, by using them as an auxiliary transcription service for the BBC. However, after letters to and from the head of the Polio Research Unit, and several hospitals, the idea runs into the bureaucratic sand. But he does employ one Pat Short to transcribe long interviews on old age and death. Short's husband is an amateur inventor who has rigged up for her all sorts of 'brilliant electronic devices, but ... is facing real obstacles getting them accepted.' Charles writes to electronics companies to see if they can help, with no apparent success. But windmills are for tilting at, and the prospect of failure never put him off once his emotions were engaged. He carries on a lengthy correspondence with Paul Bates, the six-foot-four army officer condemned to a supine existence... Well, no:

**I hate to be lying flat, it's very bad for morale. And when people come and look at you as if you're a cabbage it lowers you even further. And if you suddenly sit up a bit, then here you are, independent, typing for yourself, saying what you want, with nobody else's assistance, it gave me satisfaction, pleasure, pride, self-respect.**

Bates has a private income, so can afford round-the-clock support at home in Sussex. He had been chosen to pioneer an instrument called a Possum, which the patient could use as a typewriter 'finger' by blowing and sucking air through a tube. Heath Robinsonesque, maybe, but it worked. So did an array of other devices he had designed that allowed him to manipulate lights, radio, television and even a garden fountain, from the bed where he lay paralysed. Bates was tireless, wrote masses of letters, was a shortwave radio buff, and attracted the fascination of the 1950s motoring ace Stirling Moss. The immensely popular Moss, forever weaving his under-powered British machine through the field by daredevil manoeuvres, responded to Bates's desire for mobility by secretly arranging and paying for a truck to be converted so he could be driven. In fact, Stirling drove him round Silverstone racetrack in it just before he was due to race in his Vanwall in the British Grand Prix on Easter Monday in 1962. Bates watched him start the race, but not finish it, for it was the one in which Moss crashed so badly that he was in a coma for weeks. He made an almost complete recovery, but

never raced again. Bates himself recovered the use of a single finger joint, somehow enough to write his story in a successful book called *Horizontal Man*. His mobility was complete when he had a milk float converted that he could drive himself with that one joint. It wasn't a Vanwall, but what a thrill. He married, and went on to father two children.

Dutchy Holland's story involves his two children, but there's no such positive ending. The correspondence that ensues reveals that Dutchy has tried a spell back at home, but with money and domestic worries (the disablement benefit was just ten shillings a week to add to his wife's eight pounds), he is back in hospital after a few months. Charles subsequently discovers, through his secretary's son, first that Dutchy's wife had taken up with another man by whom she has had two further children, then that she claims to be unable to cope with her two elder daughters, 13 and 9, and puts them into care. Dutchy's in anguish – he has lost his mobility, job, wife, and now children: 'I'm fed up just sitting here when I could be working for my children if only people would realise that there was some use left in folk just like me. I would sell my soul to the devil to look after my two kids.' Charles feels desperately for him and fires off letters, including one to Frank Cousins, general secretary of the TGWU, Dutchy's old union, but predictably gets nowhere. Cousins is 'keen to help the disabled get back to work ... but can't help individuals.' Dutchy and Heather Ruffell had raised £1000 towards a van to transport polio sufferers, and another £1500 towards an ambulance, but can Dutchy play *The Body Blow* at the Essex Show where Rush Green Hospital has a stand? You want what?! Charles gets his knuckles rapped for even passing on the request within the BBC.

Heather Ruffell's father is an ex-brigadier, with whom Charles has an active correspondence on the possibilities of marketing simple affordable tape recorders for polio sufferers, and others disabled. Heather's life is gradually transformed. After Gwen Gibson, the head of Australian broadcasting's transcription service, moved by hearing the programme two years later, had sent her own money to be distributed to the five subjects, Charles gets in touch with them all again. He has a special soft spot for Heather, who tells him that she has won a scholarship with the Mouth and Foot Painters' Association, and is painting pictures for a book she has nearly finished. Her friends have given her a van so she's 'charging about all over the place.' The following year her sister takes her to America, though they have to wait for the ending of a national dockers' strike which prevents her specialised rocking bed from being hoisted aboard the liner. In September 1966 she remarries and settles at last in her own bungalow. Dutchy would have come to the wedding, but, in another savage little irony, can't make it because the van they were instrumental in acquiring for Rush Green has already been booked by someone else.

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That gives an indication of how Charles became consumed with the plight of the people he met. It did not make for a conventional domestic life, as his daughter Sara recalls. Charles thought that Norma Smith and her daughter deserved a holiday, so he invited them away with his family in the summer of 1962. Sara remembers how Norma had to be carried upstairs in her wheelchair every evening. In fact, Charles was too busy to come on holiday. Just think of Phyl, on holiday without her husband, lumbered instead with a wheelchair-bound woman and her daughter – and his secretary too. Charles ‘asked’ Norah Mash to go on holiday with them to look after Norma: ‘If you don’t, Norma won’t get a holiday ... I didn’t want to. Had to. Had fun though.’ Norah at that time was another member of the hidden support team of women that kept Charles on the road.

Charles was in fact on the road for most of the second half of 1962, on a remarkable venture. The next Radio Ballad, about teenagers, would have to wait.



## CHAPTER 13

# Growing Pains

## Centre 42 and On the Edge



There were two or three moments where one literally feels a fire of a new vision, where one is touched and sobered in a profound way, where Haydn and flower-petals and gasworks perceptibly belong to the same world.

MICHAEL KUSTOW, ON ONE OF CHARLES PARKER'S  
CENTRE 42 PRODUCTIONS, 1962

Ewan is at last swinging into the mood of *On the Edge*. He closets himself for 14 hours a day, comes out at night looking like a toad coming out of a dark and slimy pool ... but this one is going to be the best one yet.

PEGGY SEEGER, IN AN UNDATED 1962 LETTER TO NORAH MASH,  
CHARLES PARKER'S SECRETARY



## Centre 42

The sixth Radio Ballad, about Teenagers, had originally been conceived for broadcast in November 1962, the 40th anniversary of the founding of the BBC. Charles commissioned Ewan and Peggy in late November 1961, but he was so busy in the following months that he left the collection of actuality almost entirely to them. Not only had he produced *The Body Blow* and the two Vaughton/Campbell programmes, he was working flat out on an extraordinarily ambitious project for the unions. Not for the BBC, and not paid. A short-lived but fascinating experiment in radical, actuality-based theatre, midway between the end of the travelling Theatre Workshop of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, and the explosion of radical theatre of the 1970s: it's worth a detour.

Resolution 42 at the annual congress of the TUC (Trades Union Congress) in September 1960 asked for 'greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities.' But the TUC did little to bring about that lofty intent. It had involved itself with the theatre very rarely, notably in 1934 when it commissioned a play on the Tolpuddle Martyrs. This time, they set the ball rolling, but it had stopped by the time it was picked up by Arnold Wesker, the radical playwright, recent author of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *The Kitchen*. *Roots* is a play in which a self-educated working-class girl tries to interest her parents in the culture she has come to love – and is met with blank bewilderment. So Wesker knew just what he was up against ... He campaigned for the construction of the first of a series of 'culture palaces' for working people, to be known as Centre 42. He formed an organisation, without any money at first but his own, to create a series of Arts Festivals in conjunction with the annual recruitment weeks of six different trades councils, designed to speak directly to working people. Wesker had a grandiose, if noble vision:

You start off with a picture: orchestra tucked away in valleys, people stopping Auden in the street to thank him for their favourite poem, teenagers around the jukebox arguing about my latest play, miners flocking to their own opera house; a picture of a nation thirsting for all the riches their artists can excite them with, hungry for the greatest, the best, unable to wait for Benjamin Britten's latest opera, arguing about Joan Littlewood's latest.

Now, that seems to teeter on the preposterous, but back then it did fire a genuine crusading energy among many radicals. It was 'Pure New Left subculture', as Alan Filewod and David Watt say in *Workers' Playtime*, an analysis of community theatre. The New Left 'offered a Marxist intellectual context for the essentially middle-class dissidence of the activist theatre workers ... [which] gave them a grounding in left-wing politics.' (An early brochure

even described it as the First Stage in a Cultural Revolution – if not entirely on the Chinese model.) Charles, his politics now transformed, threw himself with characteristic enthusiasm and almost manic vigour into creating a series of six plays in 1962, under the collective title *The Maker and the Tool*. He conceived each as a multimedia production, essentially live Radio Ballads with visuals – films, back-projected slides, recordings – with Haydn’s *Creation* as a musical and structural underpinning.

The six Centre 42 plays were to be performed over an intensive and exhausting ten-week period in separate industrial towns – Wellingborough for Leather (where a pilot Festival had taken place in 1961), Nottingham for Coal, Leicester for Hosiery, Hayes in West London for Electronics, Birmingham for Gas, Bristol for its Docks. Beforehand he went to each town to investigate the industry and to collect actuality recordings, prior to writing an entirely new script for each, albeit with a standard template. While he was doing that he kept an eye out for promising teenagers, occasionally interviewing them himself before passing them on to Ewan and Peggy as useful material for *On the Edge*, as the sixth Radio Ballad would eventually be called.

As performers and technicians Charles used people he had first employed for a modern nativity play he’d written for St Peter’s Harborne, *Dog in the Manger*, which had impressed Wesker. For that he’d augmented the church choir, some of whom had qualms about performing with the godless of the Clarion Singers. Similarly, most of the Centre 42 company were amateurs, including dancers from a boy’s school. Few had acting training, most were under 30, and they went by the collective name of The Leaveners. When you consider the scale of the concept now it seems quite astonishing that they even got near to pulling it off. Michael Kustow, the playwright and critic, then one of a young band of festival organisers, reviewed the Wellingborough performance:

Against the urgency of ... recorded voices ... Parker throws an apparently disparate complex of sensations, a choir singing extracts from Haydn’s *Creation*, a narrator reciting Shelley, the foursquare fiddle and banjo of a folk-group singing industrial ballads, the dancing of 12 boys from a Birmingham secondary school, film of complex mechanical processes, slides of Blake engravings, of Gas Council cartoons, of flower petals magnified a thousand times. Often the result is confused and blurred, with the different elements fighting instead of fusing. But ... there were two or three moments where one literally feels a fire of a new vision, where one is touched and sobered in a profound way, where Haydn and flower-petals and gasworks perceptibly belong to the same world.

Confused and blurred, two or three moments – it sounds like the damning of faint praise, but this was an imaginative attempt, many years after the wandering days of Theatre Workshop. Moreover, for the participants – from

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Ian Campbell and his group, to Bob Etheridge, the motor mechanic who fixed Charles's cars when they'd been thrashed to death – it was tremendously exciting, as one performer recalled. Eileen Whiting:

Of course there was a lot to go wrong and it sometimes did, but when it was all working together it was POWERFUL. Rehearsals – don't remind me – we joked that they were 10am till unconscious, and that wasn't far from the truth ... remember we were all amateurs, which was a great strength but meant that we had to pack up and go to work on Monday. Many of us were young and resilient ... but the older members ... had manual jobs. They were valiant. Flower petals? They were beautiful close-ups of leaves photographed by Bob Etheridge while the narrator related: 'Two hundred million years ago the coal measures were laid down.' Songs were written by Clarion members ... which generated a great rhythm exploited by the dancers to the full. They were ordinary kids from Lozells but their teachers got extraordinary performances from them.

Charles would arrive at rehearsal with sheaves of paper saying: 'Throw out pages 14–56, 62–70 and 73–4 and replace them with these.' Charles would have written them late into the night as usual ... His wife Phyl was an unsung heroine. She ferried him everywhere, she fed him and kept him sane. Charles had two modes – sparking with creativity and keeping everyone at full stretch and happy – and total exhaustion. I remember arriving in Wellingborough and seeing a car draw up. In the front was Phyl and in the back apparently a heap of old blankets. Then they moved and Charles appeared, groaning ... We slept in various places – Bristol was a Civil Defence shelter which seemed to be converted from old air-raid shelters. Swarbrick was told off for playing his fiddle half the night, but I enjoyed it.

*The Maker and the Tool* was a qualified success, a heroic attempt by enthusiastic amateurs, which everyone participating believed would start a movement. Save for its delayed evolution into Banner Theatre (Chapter 20), sadly it prompted no cultural revolution, and nor did much else of the Centre 42 Festivals. Ian Campbell took part in the three closest to Birmingham, and wrote of the experience at length. As well as the performances, his group participated in the folk song concert which ended each week, with others including Louis Killen, Joe Heaney and Cyril Tawney, who all at some point took part in the Radio Ballads, as well as Ewan and Peggy. There were other events too. The linked series of Folksong in the Pubs, Painting in the Pubs, and Poetry in the Works Canteen was an attempt by Centre 42 to make sure that the Festivals should not be wasted on the middle classes and the intellectual minority of the working classes.

A forlorn hope. These Pub events with few exceptions were not a success. Ewan and Peggy didn't take part. Peggy says that (unlike her) Ian Campbell

was an excellent pub singer, with the voice and the bottle to use it, but as he said later: 'I was determined that the people in the pubs were going to hear my message, the songs that I wanted to sing, whether they liked it or not. And they liked it not.' At best they were tolerated, in other places they were received, he said, 'with puzzled derision, cool indifference, or even hot resentment.' The concerts, though, were an unqualified success – but they were played almost exclusively to just the audience Wesker was trying to avoid. It hadn't worked. Wesker and his supporters struggled on, attempting to convert the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm in London, but couldn't raise enough money anywhere. The Arts Council was conspicuous in its refusal of support, as it had been for Theatre Workshop, and the TUC lost enthusiasm. In 1965 it pulled the plug on a brave but doomed experiment.

### On the Edge

1962 was a whirlwind year for Charles, and *On the Edge* kept slipping. In February he had made *Cry from the Cut*, in March *The Body Blow*, and in April he was writing to Ewan and Peggy: 'I have just recorded ten hours of Else Rosenfeld, and a 19 year old for *On the Edge* ... I'm desperate for tape – I've told Centre 42 I must have sixty 5" spools for *Maker and Tool*, but need another hundred for *On the Edge*. I lectured to BBC Staff Training yesterday and *Body Blow* had a tremendous reception.' (Else Rosenfeld was a concentration camp survivor with such vivid recall that Charles went on to make 23 quarter-hour programmes with her.) A fortnight later he tells Ewan and Peggy his planned itinerary: 'Nottingham May 8–11, Bristol 19–22 May. May 23 to June 9 on *Maker and Tool* script. 12–23 June *Not Known* in *Denmark Street*, 25 June to July 14 on the teenage programme with you both, 21 July to 4 August on holiday, then August editing and assembly of *On the Edge*.'

Charles was now continually trying to promote folk music. *Not Known* in *Denmark Street* was a programme about modern folk singers and writers, an attempt to counter what he and Ewan saw as the flood of debased culture arriving from America, exemplified by the pop music he loathed with a passion. These were the days of Elvis's imitators – Cliff Richard and the rest – singing ersatz American songs in ersatz mid-Atlantic accents – and I'm afraid the teenagers round the jukebox weren't listening to folk music or discussing Wesker's latest play, then or ever. This man Bob Dylan, maybe, but he would soon be vilified by Ewan and Charles, no longer a folk revival hero. (Ironically 1962, the year of Centre 42, saw the first volley fired in the British fightback, in thick Liverpool accents. That success was not one Charles liked at all.)

Throughout 1962 Charles is racing around, working all hours, driving himself and his cars into the ground. Bob Etheridge over the course of a few years replaced the engine in his Morris 1000 eight times. That was a resilient

car, but: 'he didn't bother to do basic maintenance like oil and water.' In the event his planned timetable for *On the Edge* keeps on sliding. Not surprisingly it isn't ready for the performers until August, so Charles postpones rehearsal and recording to the week of 21 August, after his holiday. Ewan and Peggy have spent much of June and July talking to teenagers wherever their busy performing schedule takes them – hitch-hikers, coffee bar habitués, grammar school boys at bus stops – and following up with recordings at dance halls, folk clubs, jazz clubs, in their homes. As Ewan explained:

Not that it was difficult – on the contrary, it was as if the teenagers had been waiting for someone to hold a microphone in front of them. We interviewed them singly and in groups, the sons and daughters of labourers and company-directors, of professors and railway-porters, miners and filing-clerks. There were schoolgirls, apprentices, mods and rockers, unemployed. There were 52 of them, from Glasgow and Stirling; Newcastle, Birmingham, Bristol and Reading; from Hackney, Poplar, Mile End, Hampstead, Camberwell, Brixton and the Old Kent Road. Once started, there was no stopping them. Like a stream of consciousness, everything poured out – their hopes, anxieties, bewilderment, fears, doubts, dreams, fantasies. Most of what they said was tremendously moving and we were really spoilt for choice when it came to choosing actuality excerpts for the programme.

Excited, but daunted by the prospect of the teenager programme, Peggy wrote to Charles describing their progress with the interviews, saying that the question that really turned on the tap was, 'There's a stereotype of teenagers in the newspapers. Is it true?' Later she added that he would go on: 'You're all on drugs ... hate your parents ... promiscuous? Is it true? Bang, wow, did they talk!' To Charles she went on:

Writing about such things now gives me the feeling that a mountain climber must have, as he stands at the foot of the Matterhorn in a blizzard, ready to climb and terrified, yet pausing to plan what he'll do when he gets to the top. *If* he gets there. The title *On the Edge* refers to us, not the teenagers.

All that gorgeous material proved too much, as Ewan later recognised: 'The fact is, we had allowed ourselves to be overcome by its richness. We were glutted with it – we had swallowed it whole and still hadn't digested it by the time it went into production.' In explaining his reservations about the programme later, Ewan said that Charles's direction 'lacked the tautness and sense of excitement which had marked most of the previous Radio Ballads.' Charles was ill – Peggy described how he was afflicted during the recording: 'He had a continual migraine ... I don't know how he operated – he was incapacitated for three, four, five days.' No wonder. His self-imposed schedule

that year was brutal. He had to intersperse his post-production work for *On the Edge* with the preparation, rehearsal and performance weeks of the six *Maker and Tool* productions, in which he also acted, as if everything else wasn't enough. His first *On the Edge* effort is way over the hour. He writes to them on 26 November, a full three months after the recording, in something of a frenzy:

Herewith the first assembly ... at 90 mins! Disappointed you were not able to see *Maker and Tool*, as I stand very much in need of your advice. Finished the 90 min version 15 mins before the playback arranged by David Gretton on 23 Nov. His response very enthusiastic but is very anxious it's not offered to London till down to 60, which is why I'm burning up the TR/90's at the moment. I think it's absolutely magnificent and really does constitute a new dimension in the work, and I do congratulate you. How you and Peggy have kept your patience while I have been dicker about on something else I will never know!

It's easy to see Gretton's disquiet at the prospect of a 90-minute version going to London, and hard to resist the feeling that he isn't quite as enthusiastic as Charles likes to think. The broadcast date is now set as 23 December, but in the week before, Charles writes to Ewan to say that his Head of Programmes isn't happy with the musical idiom. There isn't enough use made of the teenagers' own music, and it all sounds 'too much like the adult looking at the teenage world.' He's sensing 'the contradiction between the language ... and the lyrics.'

That's the complaint – how can a programme about teenagers in 1962, their lives heavily suffused with pop music, be effective in a musical idiom alien to their own, and much of it sung by a man of 47, as old as the teenagers' fathers? There were younger singers participating – Ian Campbell, Gordon McCulloch, Lorna Campbell and Ray Fisher as well as the (American-voiced) Peggy – but Ewan sustains a big chunk of it, and his powerful mature voice at times overpowers the message it's trying to convey. When Peggy heard it again over 40 years later, in places she cringed: 'It's montage gone wild ... This section is meant to evoke a bad dream but it only sounds pretentious ... Hate the whoever/whatever section.' In the end she was forced to conclude that it's 'about emotions not industry. There's no progression in the teenage state, just complaint. The other Radio Ballads had a chronology, a progression, this only had a state. You must have a chronology, or a person, or a profession.' Or ideally some combination of them working together: a community.

Charles was getting seriously edgy about the audience's response to using folk music by the time he came to write his *Radio Times* article, before *On the Edge* was eventually broadcast on 13 February 1963.

## SET INTO SONG

By rooting the action in the idea of a quest, and using the classic Quest Ballad form as the main musical thread, set to the mountain dulcimer, and sung in the austere nasal tone of the authentic ballad, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger throw down a musical gauntlet to the pop song idiom so absolutely associated with teenagers.

The teenagers' 'Quest' is set out in the first song when Ewan sings a mournful lament to the sobbing notes of the dulcimer, which echoes the uncontrolled crying of Dot Dobby, whose wide-eyed Lancastrian innocence emerges vividly from the tapestry woven by the other 50 voices. Her words introduce the theme:

**It's all new and like an adventure which you've got to face ... well it could be a nice adventure. You never sort of know how it's going to be like when you go somewhere strange or turn a corner that you don't know what's on the other side. It could be something really beautiful or it could be a cliff edge ...**

**A tale of the children of a troubled world,  
The tale of a search and the long journey.  
Leaving the safe and guarded fortress,  
The searchers walk in the trackless places  
From the world behind the wall ...**

The tune of this song, based on 'Queen Maeve', acts as a measured framing commentary to a parade of young voices from all over Britain. The contrast between Dot's language and Ewan's could not be greater. The triumph of method over content is evident immediately afterwards, with over 20 different voices all telling us their ages, similar to the trick that had worked, but much better, on *Song of a Road*. The cleverly designed and executed audio montage technique used in *The Body Blow* becomes overblown here, and the modern listener's irritation is constantly provoked thereafter. The dated jargon – 'with it', 'beat', 'man', 'dad', 'nit', 'square', 'nana' – jars too. Where the idiom of the miner or fisherman works, this doesn't. That is indeed how they spoke, but it grates, especially when Ewan sings it.

Some of the sequences are brilliant, as are some of the songs with younger voices (Peggy agreed that they should have used them more), but they can't rescue the overall impression of a fascinating failure. A driving back-of-a-motorbike sequence: 'I've got me tight black jeans, got me black leather jacket' does work, once Ewan hands the song over to others and a chorus. The best use of montage is in a long sequence when (only) two girls' voices alternate to a slow guitar as each relives a daydream:

There was just this one boy, he's got a very weak heart, and I save him, you see and it's absolutely wild, triple blood transfusion, he's got a rare blood group, you see and I've got the same rare blood group ...

I'm walking down the street and I stop to cross the road and I go over a zebra crossing and a car draws up quickly. There's a young, very handsome man in the car and he really is a film director ...

He's got to have the blood immediately and the transfusion takes place in the main hall of the men's union at Glasgow university, with a great big long table with the Speaker's Mace at the end of it ...

And he says, would you like to make a picture for us? It's about a young girl. And I say, But I'm not beautiful. And he says we're not looking for anybody beautiful, we're looking for somebody with a face like you ...

And I end up, you know, having given so much of my precious life blood that I am in fact fighting for my life ... [she dissolves in laughter]

Another sequence is triggered by Dot Dobby: 'And blokes have followed me home, but I've never given them a chance ... Walking down the road, you know, sometimes, coming home, get the all-night bus, about twelve o'clock.' This leads to a mesmerising late-night walking home piece, with Ewan (why? – apart from his exquisite singing) as the boy, Alfie Kahn's lazy clarinet, and Dot telling us about her walk home with a lad trying to chat her up. Peggy: 'Fantastically good song, beautiful integration. Sounds like improvisation but isn't ... but where does it come from? Something from Ewan's pre-war years?'

Ewan and Peggy afterwards felt that if the programme had just concentrated on Dot Dobby, whose inner feelings and memories simply flooded out, it could have been rescued, but it's hard to see now how. (Unless, for example, it had set out to examine the interaction between parent and child, which Peggy did 25 years later in her cleverly constructed song 'Different Tunes'. For that song she recorded mothers and their teenage daughters talking separately about their relationships with each other, and assembled the song from their comments.) Peggy later recalled that Ewan had been much moved by Dot Dobby. 'She just talked and talked, and cried. She sewed pockets on aprons in a factory. We sent her to Finland on an international schools festival, but she came back and got drowned in children.'

This is the Radio Ballad that has dated most, because teenagers' words always do, and because now we're far more used to hearing the views



of teenagers canvassed and expressed. Back then it was more novel, and that attracted several of the reviewers. In fact they were divided, but the audience at home wasn't. (Inevitably, there's no record of what teenagers themselves thought.) First the critics in favour. Peter Wilsher in the *Sunday Times* appreciated the montages, and liked what the teenagers had to say:

A remarkable study of youngsters poised between childhood and growing up. In the past I had thought the method tended to swamp the material. Here reservations are withdrawn – the match was near-perfect... MacColl and Seeger apparently talked to the kids till nearly dawn, when what they said was so personal and tender that it sounded as though the dialogue was taking place inside their own heads.

Patrick Williams in the *Sunday Telegraph* extols: 'marvellous bits of radio ... Charles Parker's technique is to edit the actuality like film, as exciting to hear as Grierson's documentaries were to see, and then thread them with song.' But he continues: 'This time the songs were pretentious.' Ian Rodgers in the *Guardian* agreed, after starting with a tag that Ewan will have appreciated:

MacColl and Parker are among the Brechtians of today ... [but] some of his songs were tiresome because they pretended to express the spirit and attitude of adolescents and only succeeded in reminding the listener that the composer and singers were adults. They were demonstrably singing from the outside, but the attempt to convey with music the dilemma of the contemporary adolescent was worthwhile for it produced a few moments of great beauty: Colin Ross on the pipes accompanying loneliness, 'Where is the child that would climb on my knee?' A startling new version of 'Come Live with Me and be My Love'...

Paul Ferris in *The Observer*, usually a forthright supporter of the form:

Abstractions loomed up from the beginning. This was a superior documentary in a superfluous setting ... Although many of the comments were sharp and valuable, they rained down like an actors' chorus in a slightly old-fashioned radio play. At times embarrassingly clever ... Their own fantasies are much richer than the studio fantasy composed of torted-up recitatives. The beauty of these Radio Ballads ... has been that they are hot forgings straight from life, not statements about it.

So far, so mixed. But it's the audience research figures that really hurt. Usually scoring in the range 60 to 70 per cent, around the average for features or a little better, here it plummets to 50 per cent. This was dire for Charles. Most of the good burghers of the Home Service listening panel disliked it with varying degrees of intensity. Many were depressed, angry or both. The

theme was unappealing. They were tired of the subject of adolescence, the perpetual glare of publicity on a natural stage of development.

In my youth it was called the awkward age, and was got over with as little ostentation as possible, not flaunting and exploiting it in the present unhealthy manner ... Heard it all before, and this lot are unimpressive in their attitude to life, their power of expression – embittered, chips on their shoulders ... spineless half-wits who have rejected the wonderful educational opportunities available.

And so on, as Charles's gauntlet was flung back in his face. Actually Ewan and Peggy were at pains to point out that they really did have a broad cross-section, including university students. But most listeners didn't want to hear it, or the music, or to be reminded of the teenagers' preoccupation with the Bomb. For every 'Revealing – I had no idea this was the way young people are thinking', there were many who didn't want to know at all. For every one who found the music contained 'unusual, haunting and moving melodies with a strange beauty that heightened the effect of the speech' (just as the makers intended) there were many who found it a 'miserable caterwauling, all despair in a dismal tone.' And those who admired the 'novel, effective, apt presentation, with the telling repetition of significant words and phrases, skilfully blended, smooth, fast-moving' were outnumbered by those for whom it was 'disjointed, jerky, muddled, with no apparent plan, an Arty, gimmicky approach.'

It was their first major rebuff, not the 'best yet' they'd anticipated. They paused, and in an attempt to analyse why this was so poorly received, got together a group to listen to all the Radio Ballads again. What worked and what didn't, and why? And what next?

## CHAPTER 14

# Boxing Clever

## *The Fight Game*



The problem of the artist is to direct the audience to the heart of the contradiction in its inhuman brutalising ... while asserting the positive virtues of the individual boxer's victory over adversity ... Boxing – damnable; Boxers – admirable.

EWAN MACCOLL, PRELIMINARY NOTES FOR THE FIGHT GAME, 1963

I heard the referee saying six, seven, eight. I thought, well, I'm going to get a right drubbing if I get up. But I get up.

PETER KEENAN, EX BRITISH COMMONWEALTH BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION, THE FIGHT GAME, 1963

Stung by the comparative failure of *On the Edge* with the critics, in early 1963 Ewan MacColl collects a small group of people together to listen to each Radio Ballad again. He then steps back and writes a thorough critique. He concludes that only the first four can be called ‘ballads’ in the strict sense of the word; he decides that *The Body Blow* and *On the Edge* can best be described as documentary radio features with incidental music conceived in the folk idiom. To succeed, he decides a Radio Ballad needs ‘a carefully worked-out musical structure in which the actuality is set like the dialogue in a novel.’ He wants *The Fight Game* to have an almost continuous musical line as in the *Fishing* and *Axon*.

Within a fortnight of the broadcast of *On the Edge* he and Charles put together an ideas paper on a programme about Boxing. Charles and Peggy hadn’t been at all keen, but Ewan wins them round. He said:

We had chosen professional boxing as a subject in an effort to escape from the huge canvas of industry and the intensely private world of the sick and the adolescent. I think we imagined that we were embarking upon a Radio Ballad which, for a change, would be gay and light-hearted. How naïve we were! It soon became apparent that we had entered a world inhabited by people who regarded the prize ring as a symbolical representation of the larger world in which we all live. Boxers, managers, trainers, sports commentators, all stressed this point over and over again.

Here was a sport coming under increasing scrutiny because of the number of boxers suffering from severe pounding in the ring, with an effect extending from minor brain damage (for which punch-drunk was the euphemism) to coma and worse. The death in the ring of Davey Moore soon after they began their interviews made it particularly topical. Since 1900, 450 boxers had died after fights, 200 of them in the 18 years since World War II, one a month. In Britain the doctor and Labour peer Baroness Summerskill was leading a campaign to ban the sport, which in her view exploited and damaged the most deprived in society to satisfy something little better than blood lust. Boxing since the days of Lord Byron had become entirely a poor man’s ‘sport’, and one with little appeal to the middle-class spectator. A manager described the boxer’s motive as:

**Economic necessity. I never met one in my life that went into the boxing game for the sheer love of it. It’s always that drive to get some money. Or perish ... All fighters have got to come off of poor families. Before you become a boxer you’ve got to be poor, you know, off a big family, or a poor family. But you don’t get a doctor’s son coming to be a boxer because he’s, he’s been spoiled, he’s had a good upbringing, he’s never wanted.**

## SET INTO SONG

So they would be taking a risk with a somewhat unappealing subject, however topical. ‘What is happening out there?’ they asked themselves, before they’d talked to any boxer. Ewan wrote in their preliminary notes:

What is the nature of this activity of two men stripped to the waist confronting each other ... feeling no personal animosity but setting out deliberately to hurt each other? What is the balance between sentiment and sport, courage and stupidity, manliness and viciousness? Is it the stylistic representation of the inert struggle into which we are born? Do they personify good versus evil, science versus violence? [We must] explore the relationship between the two boxers, the insistence of it being a job’s work, of having the responsibility to give the crowd its money’s worth, the horrible fact that ... a man might contribute to the mental destruction of an opponent for whom he had a tremendous affection?

They put together a template of around ten different questions for boxers, trainers and fans. As usual after the interviews they debated and listed their ideas for musical themes: this is the Radio Ballad for which the most detailed record of their work-in-progress remains. They decided their opening song should have a lively tune – major, with chorus – one that can be used periodically throughout. Their plan for the song is followed by its eventual first two verses:

It should underline the concept of boxing as a manly art, a character-building sport, an ancient sport, the final test of a man. A sport based on skill, on the ability to give punishment without taking it, a sport demanding the maximum physical fitness from the protagonists. Bring in the British fair-play idea ... The super-athlete with the killer instinct, the noble savage, the gladiator, the scientific fighting machine, the fighting monk abstaining from rich foods, the high life, women, drink, so as to provide the public with the last word in human spectacles – man against man.

**There’s a game some call the fight game and some the noble art,  
Blokes who play this game need bags of courage, bags of heart.  
It’s a rough game, a tough game, needing guts and skill,  
And you’ll never make a boxer if you haven’t got the will.**

**It’s a noble sport, a manly sport, and there’s no better sight  
Than two good boys in prime condition squaring for the fight.  
Eight rounds, ten rounds, round the ring they go,  
A-weaving dodging punching jabbing, dealing blow for blow.**

That's how it emerges – the last line repeating the rhythm of the ring. It's belted out with a jaunty tune against a musical background evoking fairground and music-hall, with a blaring trumpet component, a driving rhythm and a strong chorus backing up Ewan's voice at its harshest, interspersed with swelling crowd sounds and the weathered voices of old pugilists. Sonny Wilson: 'I loved the game, because everybody loved me, you see. They say I'm punch-drunk, but I can't say I am. It's just the way I walk, you see ... I've had some real good tannings, and I've give some back. And I'm satisfied that I enjoyed every moment of 'un.' Then Ewan reflects the viewpoint expressed by the school-of-hard-knocks boxing manager:

**Oh the boxing is a sport that sorts the men out from the boys,  
It's great for building character, it's marvellous for boys,  
It's a great game, a straight game, calls for discipline,  
Teaches you to give or take a bashing with a grin.**

**Boxing to me is the greatest character builder in the world. Anybody can ...  
press the button to blow a ship up ... an atom bomb ... whip you, anybody  
can stick a knife into you, anybody can pull a trigger. But where's the man  
with the character as can take a punch on the nose and keep his temper and  
keep control of himself?**

Ewan's voice in this stanza is just mocking enough. The notes they'd written in advance for this advise the singer to be 'astringent, ironical, but not too obviously so ... somewhat bombastic.' Once he gets his teeth into an idea for a song, Ewan as usual churns out the verses, many of which didn't make the final cut. The idea for this verse came originally from a different song, with a discarded stanza that began:

It's a great sport, a man's sport, a sport that's heaven sent,  
It sorts the men out from the boys and pays out ten per cent.

In the final version this idea of the manager's percentage (25 here is for fights with a bigger purse) emerges elsewhere as:

**They'll punch and maul each other but of course no harm is meant.  
It's all good clean fun and pays the manager twenty-five per cent.**

## SET INTO SONG

This comes from the start of the culminating fight sequence, which lasts nearly nine minutes and apparently took over 80 attempts to get right. Charles had determined by now that he couldn't equal the best continuous take by cutting and splicing the best of the rest. In a later interview Ewan said of Charles:

He was very insistent that the best work we did is where we had long runs and got into a rhythm of performance. He said there was no way the engineer could compensate for that rhythm ... The wear and tear on performers was tremendous. When we were doing it I'd see singers collapse – from standing up 7–8 hours without a break ... The casts got to know Charles very well and they knew if they'd done a take well they could tell from his expression. Though if he said 'that was a very nice take' everybody in the studio would shout 'BUT?!' And, sure enough, there'd be a but.

Ronnie Hughes remembers *The Fight Game*: he was one of the two trumpeters in it. The other was the classically trained Johnny Lambe from the MLO, who Hughes found for them. Still playing at over 80 in 2007, Hughes had in the 1950s been a member of Ted Heath's famous Big Band, and the Radio Ballad work was a real oddity for him. In fact he could remember very little about the experience, until, that is, he was played a few snatches of the trumpet from the recording. His lips began moving unconsciously with the muscle memory, and with that it began to flood back:

I do remember it was a tough workout for a jazz trumpeter, no doubt about it, different phrasing. Especially the use of different time signatures. Everything we did was in 4/4, normal time, for the big band stuff, just sometimes 3/4. This was a completely different world, a challenge, kept us on our toes ... Ewan was quite a taskmaster. If he didn't hear what he wanted he would tell you. There's nothing wrong with that. He was a lovely man. But he was tough. Peggy was charming and professional ... but she didn't really understand the instrument ... consequently sometimes I'd have to say Peggy this isn't going to work, and we'd change it, work something out ...

After the introductory sections, the programme's shape is based on a boxer's typical upbringing, on through his weeks of preparation to the fight itself. Gordon McCulloch sings a song based on the childhood of the scrawny Scots boxer Peter Keenan, a bantamweight who was born in the typical two-room tenement, in which whole families were crammed, a Partick 'single-end'. 'As a kid I was a lump of wood, you know, wasn't very clever. When I started to box, and I found out this was something I was good at, I used to get a lot of medals, I would have done it for nothing just because I was good at a thing, I really loved boxing.' The song uses the traditional Scots tune 'Drumdelgie':

**I fought the tears when the teacher's strap made stripes across me hands.  
I ditched the blood frae my streaming nose when I fought with the rival  
gangs.**

**I had to fight to be recognised in the only world I knew.**

**I had to fight to prove to myself that I'm as good as you.**

**It was come on Johnny, and put 'em up Johnny,**

**I'll belt you black and blue,**

**Stand up and fight, you dirty wee tyke,**

**And show what you can do.**

Then on to the first amateur fights, and the heady effects of success: 'I think when you're young like that, I think it's the glory, more than the money. Being a professional at sixteen, you think it's great, you think it's good, you know.'

**When you're a fighter you're different.**

**You walk in a certain way.**

**Everybody's eager to shake your hand,**

**Everybody knows you're a fighting man –**

**There's Johnny boy, you hear 'em say.**

Then it's on to the build-up to the fight, the long weeks of training, the early-morning runs, the speedball and skipping and sparring in the gym. Ewan went on a dawn run so he knew just how it felt, and came up with a song that mimicked the one-two staccato rhythm of the pounding feet, with each crisp syllable precisely bitten off:

**Grab a slice of toast,**

**There's time to make a cuppa –**

**Mind you spread the butter thin,**

**Go easy on the sugar.**

**That's it. That's the hardest part about boxing is the training. You've got to get up in the morning, you got to run three, four, five miles. You go back home, you clean up, and all the time you're working hard.**



**Lift 'em Johnny. Keep your knees up.  
 Nice and easy Johnny, keep your breathing steady.  
 How much longer? Must have done four miles already.  
 Out and working at the start of early morning.  
 Watch your breathing Johnny boy and stop your yawning.  
 Past the Gaumont in the dark, run three times around the park  
 Along the empty tarmacadam sweating.**

As read off the page, it hardly looks a song, but it works. The same rhythm takes us into the delectable syncopation of the skipping song that follows, based on the Scots 'Cam Ye O'er Frae France'. They imported a local ex-boxer, Bill Shreeve, one of the Centre 42 Leaveners team, as John Clarke the studio manager recalled.: 'It was a lovely sequence – we actually had a skipping rope in the studio, it wasn't just a sound-effect ... working up a sweat too ... The point about the way boxers skip is that they don't jump very high off the ground, their feet just clear about a quarter of an inch, because if they jumped high, like kids do, they'd be knackered in five minutes ... great fun.' As the trainer Joe Gans said:

**I like all my boxers to be perfect skippers. Sometimes I do as high as 25 minutes with them without a break doing all sorts of exercises with the skipping ropes. It's not just a case of 1,2 1,2 1,2 – you skip, astride jump, and there's crossing rope, knocking them to the sides and flashing about from side to side, they're doing highland dancing, everything with a skipping rope:**

**Every day we're here, busy at the skipping  
 With the flashing rope, jumping leaping tripping.**

Peggy's tripping banjo follows the skipping feet, and Dave Swarbrick's fiddle comes in as they switch incongruously to Highland Dancing. As the trainer says: 'I said dancing, not clog-hopping!' Then on without a pause for breath to the punchball work, and the familiar confiding cockney voice of the British boxer Henry Cooper, who once put Cassius Clay on the canvas (before he changed his name to Muhammad Ali):

**When you're training all right, you go on the ball, everything's going fine,  
 you can hit speedball and keep it going, you feel good. I mean as you get fitter you feel better. You push yourself harder as well. And so it never comes easy. Your training for boxing never comes easy. You're pushing yourself all the time.**

In planning each song Ewan and Peggy would prepare a musical ideas sheet. For 'Wives and Mothers' they planned: 'a small song, striking a nice blend of humour and irritation, with a style somewhat in the manner of the song 'Fourpence a Day', in 2/4 or 4/8 time.'

The eventual song articulates their anxieties, bringing us to the boxer as he describes how each time he returns from a fight he finds the furniture rearranged: 'She cannae sit for a minute the night I'm boxing.' Finally he's off to the stadium, which has been a sell-out for weeks. He and we can hear the sounds of the earlier bouts as he waits like a condemned man for his fight to begin:

**Wonder how the other bloke's feeling,  
Wonder if I'm in his class,  
Got the butterflies, cannae stop yawning,  
It's murder waiting for time to pass,  
Wished I'd never left the foundry,  
Wished that I was there the day,  
Wished I'd never put the gloves on,  
Wished that I was miles away.**

To prepare for the long fight sequence they all went to see the bout between Henry Cooper's less famous brother Jim and the local hero Johnny Prescott (again Ewan's archetypal Johnny – Noble, Axon, and the 'Johnny Come Back' of *The Big Hewer*). Charles had actually been to a fight earlier, when he was 'hag-ridden by failure to record the key moment' at the climax of the fight. 'I had to get to the ringside to recharge and was too shy to go while a round was actually in progress ... a squeamishness that must be overcome.' At that fight he was much taken by the concern of a woman who had been:

as a supporter ... possessed with a frenzy for the victory, but when she called out 'Are you all right, Billy?', then the timbre of this woman's voice ... her concern for the man she wanted beaten exactly captures the agony of contradiction of boxing. As an individual – even perhaps as a mother – she was in agony of mind for the boy on the floor.

That romantic notion was soon dispelled. There was no such sympathetic reaction when Prescott was knocked out by Cooper. Ewan and Charles sat with their recording equipment in the front row, at opposite corners, where the boxers' seconds were. Peggy said Ewan came out white as a sheet. He recalled:

## SET INTO SONG

Johnny Prescott was the local favourite, fair, good-looking, the girls surrounded him, nicely dressed, brought up in an orphanage. They cheered and cheered as he came in – we recorded it and it must have gone on for four minutes. A tremendous uppercut caught Prescott, and he seemed to float through the air in slow motion, and landed right next to me, on his side, like a wounded animal. His corner man was shouting ‘Up up up up up up’. When he did get up Cooper’s second right next to me said ‘Right. Cut him down’. Just two blows, then a terrible silence, then the booing started. The man they’d cheered to the echo twenty minutes earlier.

Peggy, further back in the crowd, said:

It was absolutely terrible... the women were horrible, cheering and slobbering, standing up ... Ewan said it was just like seeing a bull being slaughtered, stunned by a sledgehammer ... *The Fight Game* was meant to be about sport, wasn’t meant to be political, but it turned out to be political, turned out damning of boxing. Ewan was brought up in the streets of Salford, and boxers came out of his street. His great friend Alex Armstrong was a boxer ... Ewan had been beaten up as a kid, and by the police: he hated, hated, hated violence.

The long fight sequence that results intercuts ring, trainer and crowd noises with the rhythm of the punchball, which Peggy said sounded much more vivid and effective than real sounds of punches landing from the fight. Over it comes the constant urging of the trainer, the snarling of Ewan’s commentary voice, and the edgy tones of Gordon McCulloch as his young boxer:

**Come on son. The left hand boy, come on fist him boy, box box box box.**

**If he’s a fighter I’ve got to keep boxing him,  
If he’s a boxer, I’ll make it a fight.  
Got to see whether he favours his left hand  
Or likes to come in with his right.**

**Jab him, son, come on, jab, jab, jab, jab. Come on. Get your right hand going now.**

**Come on, Johnny, make it straight from the shoulder boy,  
Come on, Johnny, in and give him the lot,  
Come on, Johnny, in and shake him and shatter him  
And whack him and crack him and wallop him round the ring,  
Hit him with all that you’ve got.**

You flinch as you listen, and you're meant to – how many savage words for physical violence are there in the English language? Ultimately our Johnny goes down, the swelling of the crowd's roar peaks, then shifts into booing – for losing so early and for curtailing their pleasure as much as anything. 'That is the fight crowd. They like you while you're winning. But as soon as you're licked, they'll like the fellow that licked you... The loser creeps out to lick his wounds, while the victor preens himself on the adulation of the mob.' And against the sounds of clearing up we hear:

**When you came in you looked like a hero  
There in the ring with your silk dressing gown.  
We cheered you, we wooed you,  
You failed us, we booed you.  
Johnny, you let us down.**

We finish with a clearing-up song, a 'Dirty Old Town' mood piece based on the American tune 'St James's Infirmary', but slower, wistful, interspersed with a meandering small-hours trumpet, and ending with a sardonic twist –

**The bars are deserted, the dressing rooms empty,  
Stale with the smell of a thousand defeats  
The pain and the glory are already fading.  
What's left is the thrill when you count the receipts.**

With the shape of the programme and their musical ideas firm in their heads, and fewer distractions for Charles, who had been working much more closely with Ewan than usual, they cracked on far more quickly than for *On the Edge*, and had the programme ready for rehearsal and recording for the end of May 1963. It was a particularly tough process this time, though rewarding in the end. As Ewan said:

The demands made on the singers in *Fight Game* were enormous. The fact that each episode was so closely tied to a specific rhythm or a group of rhythms meant that the problem of getting everything working together was just that much more difficult. For the actual fight sequence, for example, there were 86 takes! A gruelling four or five hours for the singers. For the turntable operator, handling four machines and 8 or 9 acetates of effects it must have been a nightmare. My most vivid memory of that recording period is of a trumpet player with lips swollen into small balloons, saying that he had nothing left to give. I think we all felt like that.

*The Fight Game* was broadcast on 3 July 1963, and immediately gained the critics' unanimous approval. Here's a representative pair. Below is Peter Wilsher in the *Sunday Times*, but first Paul Ferris in *The Observer*, for whom the programme was a welcome return to form:

The three people who made *The Fight Game* saw boxing in the round by getting inside it and recreating its highly-charged atmosphere. Charles Parker ... seems to be increasingly concerned with refinement and technical experiment – for instance marrying the rhythms of music and tape-recorded speech, or getting the right studio acoustics ... A boxer called Johnny and a fight (which he loses) provided a carefully under-emphasised story. MacColl and Miss Seeger and others sang with the usual spirit and precision. What emerged was a whole: excitement and involvement in boxing at the same time as disgust at the brutality and irony at the exploitation.

Professional boxing of all sports probably lends itself to the epic approach. The angry hungry boy emerging from the slums, the cauterising ritual of training, a series of single combats, purple and gold rewards, the final hubristic downfall. All caught splendidly in the latest Radio Ballad. Their developing technique of crosscutting real dialogue with their own brand of racy vernacular half-mocking half-philosophical recitative fitted admirably. Some of the resulting sound-pictures are as effective as anything they'd ever done, for example early morning road work round the silent back streets of Glasgow and Liverpool, and the mounting rhythm and tension of the training gym. The choice of conversational snippets remains marvellously apt. My only faint niggling doubt is its apparently universal application. Though I passionately admire Ewan MacColl's metallic voice, whether he's singing about Eppie Morrie ... or the good clean fun of swilling the blood off the canvas, I suspect he'd sing equally eloquently about the groundnut scheme or a six-day international tiddlywinks contest. But of course there's always the chance that these might make excellent Radio Ballads.

Wilsher praises with faint damns. He and the other critics managed to suppress any antipathy they had about boxing in their reviews, but the BBC Home Service listeners had no such professional necessity. For a good half of them nothing could offset the distaste they felt towards the theme, and in fact the split between the responses was as marked as that for *John Axon* back at the beginning. Many felt it a wasted opportunity because they wanted to hear a scathing attack on the sport. The programme itself was much more subtle, as many recognised, 'No built-up glamour, no glossing over ... with some fine ironic touches ... the comments of the boxers themselves were startlingly and sometimes pathetically revealing.'

There's a curious but characteristic contradiction in the reaction of Charles and Ewan after the programme had finished. Charles wrote a long

self-flagellating piece to Ewan, critiquing the production method, rhythmic failures in the music, failures in technical balance, how they use music behind speech. He was having a real downer – ‘I realise how utterly ignorant I am of the overall form of the Radio Ballad and the theories behind it. Everything is still much too intuitive and mystical on my part!’ Peggy is much more pragmatic about the ‘theory’. She says briskly:

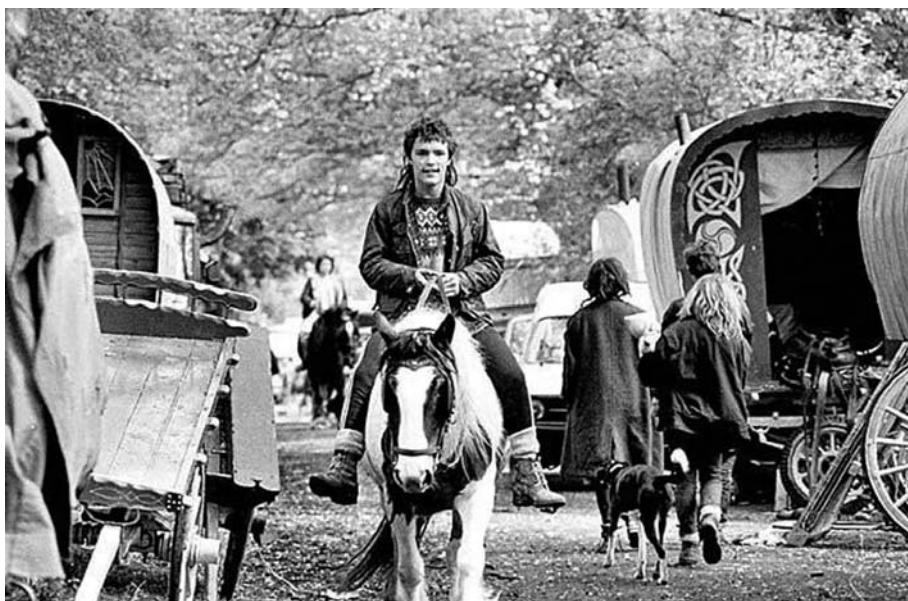
There wasn’t a theory. Each one happened. Certain things recurred: recitative, a classical concept, when you lay out your themes that you might use later on ... You had these things but there was no theory. You were telling a story in two different ways, because the speech would say something different from the music. Charles is looking for a structure? We listened to the actuality and the structure came out of it. You don’t impose the structure on it ... I think we did hit the spot quite well in this, specially in the training and the gym – Bryan Daly’s guitar creating what Ewan and I used to call a graph behind the cardio. A grid. Doesn’t move.

Ewan, of course, did tend to theorise about successes and failures, but this for him was a winner. In all the other Radio Ballads there had been something that hadn’t worked as anticipated; here there was nothing. Charles’s finely tuned ear fussing about minor imprecisions didn’t bother Ewan. In his view, everything worked beautifully. He adapted more of the tunes than usual from folk melodies, which he felt gave it a musical unity, and he himself sang superbly. It’s an irony that, though he wrote some of his very best songs for *The Fight Game*, most are now forgotten, for few could easily be sung away from the boxing setting. And who wanted to sing about boxing?

With the next programme, that was not a problem, so rapidly and permanently did his songs about Travellers enter the repertoire. Unfortunately, Ewan, Charles and Peggy, back on peak form, were about to be forcibly moved on. Just like the Travellers.

# Killed at the Crossroads

## *Travelling People*



My great-grandfather, he looked at me one morning, we was sitting down, minding the horses, we was, he said, 'My son, years ago, when I was a boy,' he said, 'See that place there, that park?' I says, 'Yes, Grandfather.' 'We used to stop on that', he said, 'twelve month, two year at a time. Till a lord came along', he said, 'he put a bit of fence up and that's how they got the ground', he said, 'by pinching it, bit by bit.' That's how you come your squires and your lords. They've no more right to that ground than what you or I have. The ground don't belong to no one.

AN OLD TRAVELLER FROM TRAVELLING PEOPLE,  
OF HIS GREAT-GRANDFATHER, BORN C 1830

It was a perfect Radio Ballad subject. Apart from any other considerations, the Travelling People are now among the chief carriers of the English and Scots folksong traditions, a fact which made the choice of musical idiom a natural one. As custodians of many of the classic folk tales they number in their ranks storytellers of great skill. It was from these that the programme was to take its pace and overall style.

**I**n this extract from *Journeyman* Ewan MacColl goes on to say that he and Peggy Seeger had been recording Scots Tinkers and English Gypsies since 1960, on field trips scavenging ballads and tales before they disappeared from memory. Soon after they finished recording *Fight Game* they spent a couple of weeks in the 'bow-tents of Argyllshire Tinkers; in harvest fields and roadside pull-ins in Aberdeenshire, Perthshire and Banffshire; around campfires where storytellers told tales of the dead returning to the land of the living to pay off old debts.'

After that trip in the summer of 1963 Peggy writes a long letter with advice to Charles, who's about to go off interviewing English Travellers. In the winter most by now are 'settled', sometimes with a caravan on a designated site, sometimes in a sparsely furnished council house that they simply up and leave in the spring. But in the summer finding them can be extremely difficult for 'gorgios', as they call the rest of the population. They constantly move on, or, as their interviewers come to discover, are forcibly moved on. She warns Charles that Travellers are extremely guarded with outsiders, and only relax – a little – once convinced of your sincerity. A 'source' singer and old friend of Ewan and Peggy's, who would sing on the programme, takes them in hand:

We were really lucky to have had Belle Stewart with us. She got us into many places that we may never have known about and even had we known we might have just met distrust and hostility ... We found them to be like children, resentful of the way they've been treated the way a child is resentful, always saying 'We don't understand why?', instead of saying 'What shall we do about it?' They have no idea of organisation and although it might be easy to organise them it would be virtually impossible to keep them organised. Not only due to the fact that they are migrants, but because they compete against each other ... I really put my foot in it with a group of women by trying to get at ... [their] selling tactics. I asked 'What do you say when you go to a door hawking your soft goods?' Silence. So if they can't even combine their community knowledge, how to get them to organise?

This inability of Travellers to organise for their common good was still bugging her over 40 years later, though it wasn't for lack of will – on an earlier trip with them the American trade union organiser Bill Mencken was



besieged by Travellers asking how to start a union. The unit of organisation was the family, often extending for generations down parallel lines – ‘How a person like Belle keeps track of all her “cousins”, as she put it, is beyond my understanding. But every person you meet is a cousin of hers.’ One speaker, a reflective, well-spoken old man, Sylvester (Wester) Boswell, is asked about the origins of the Gypsies, and he says:

**They took them many years to get to this shore, they believe, from India. But my father’s teaching taught to me from his father, my grandfather Wester, and therefore he would get it from his father Tyso Boswell, and Tyso Boswell would get this information from his father again which was Shadrack Boswell. If you refer to Genesis in the Bible...**

So in his biblical ‘begat, begat’ preamble to telling the story of Abraham and Sariae he has returned to a direct ancestor born well before 1800 – a reminder of the way hunter-gatherer groups must have kept track of family lineages. That’s what Travellers resembled, hunter-gatherers in a world that had moved on. Wester’s son Gilbert Boswell invited Ewan and Peggy to the traditional annual horse fair at Appleby in the Cumbrian hills:

There was only one entrance, really narrow. We drew up on the outside and got out and immediately there were about five or ten young men ... What do you want? Mr Boswell ... And they escorted us ... Ewan said the last time that had happened to him was in the slums of Glasgow when he went to visit some activist in hiding. Appleby was a fantastic fair, caravans of all sorts. Gilbert’s was pulled by a car. They had horse-drawn ones there, the old painted ones ... furniture, beautiful painted wood.

A Boswell, Gordon, still in 2008 takes his caravan to Appleby each year, along the public highway, from his Travellers’ Museum in Lincolnshire. Peggy advised Charles:

On the whole, their main preoccupation is with stopping facilities provided for them, or rather not provided for them. Second to this comes the education of their children. Many of them cannot read or write. And the stories they tell about these two aspects of their lives and the discrimination they perceive through these two things are horrifying. Ask them to tell you about particular instances in which they’ve been ‘moved on’, or shifted. It’ll be a river you can’t block, the torrent of words and stories.

Typically unpleasant was the experience of Minty Smith, recorded at Cobham in Kent, on what Peggy described as a horrific piece of wet land they had been dragged to and dumped on, where a two-year-old had drowned in a puddle a month before. They chose to bring it into the piece early:

**I was expecting one of my children, you know, one of my babies, and my husband's sent for the midwife and in the time he was going after the midwife the policeman come along. Come on, he says, get a move on. Shift on, he says, don't want you on here, on my beat. So my husband says: Look, he says, sir, let me stay, he says, my wife is going to have a baby. No, don't matter about that, he says, you get off. They made my husband move, and my baby was born going along and my husband's stayed in the van and my baby was born on the crossroads in my caravan. The horse was in harness and we was travelling along and the policeman was following behind, drumming us off and the child was born, born at the crossroads.**

The punctuation in that extract is for your benefit – there was none in the way she spoke, in a continuous stream. Her story led to the programme's original title *Born at the Crossroads*, which was only displaced at the last minute. It leads naturally to the opening song, one of several from *Travelling People* that has entered the folk song repertoire:

**Born in the middle of the afternoon  
In a horse-drawn wagon on the old A5.  
The big twelve-wheeler shook me bed –  
You can't stop here, the policeman said.  
You'd better get born in some place else  
So move along, get along, move along, get along –  
GO. MOVE. SHIFT!**

Their treatment is emphasised by that blunt monosyllabic repetition from the chorus. The horse's measured clapping hooves beat out the time, and continue as we hear heartless moving-on stories between verses, in a range of voices. This is one of the songs that Ewan and Peggy often sang in folk clubs later on. On hearing this original version again, Peggy's reaction was: 'A bit slow, perhaps, but we had to set the pace to the horse's hooves. It wasn't yet sung-in.' This was a comment she made occasionally – with songs like this they practised constantly and made slight shifts in performance till they felt they had it spot on. The pace here in fact suits the steady slow days

## SET INTO SONG

of the Travellers, no rush and bustle. Verses of this song punctuate the piece, just as being pushed from place to place punctuated their lives. A couple of verses are used to stress society's lack of Christian charity, as a Scots mother talks to her child:

**Our Saviour travelled, didn't he, dear? Our Saviour travelled. He was born  
in a manger among straw. His mother's carried him on a little donkey's  
back, if it goes by the way of the world to the Bible. Must keep up that  
generation to the last of the world. It was the first of it and we're the last  
of it.**

**Born at the back of a blackthorn hedge  
When the white hoar frost lay all around.  
No Eastern kings came bearing gifts,  
Instead the order came to shift -  
You'd better get born in some place else ...**

**The winter sky was hung with stars  
And one shone brighter than the rest.  
The wise men came so stern and strict  
And brought the order to evict -  
You'd better get born in some place else ...**

After a long internal struggle, Charles had by now become a Marxist, but he retained his Christian convictions, and what he heard and saw appalled him. Six years later, following a mass eviction from Balsall Heath, he founded and chaired a West Midlands Traveller Liaison Group. Brought up as a child to believe cleanliness is next to godliness, it did take Charles a while to adjust to the Travellers' lifestyle and courtesies. Earlier, while researching *Singing the Fishing*, he was berated by Ewan after refusing food and drink in the house of a settled Traveller, the aunt of the Stewart sisters. 'But they may be dirty.' 'You'll never do that again, or we'll finish the programme now.' You don't refuse Traveller hospitality: true, Travellers may look dirty, but their utensils aren't, and they keep pots for separate uses in a similar manner to Orthodox Jews. A story Charles told repeatedly from another Scottish trip is when, after an argument about God in the car, Ewan is riled enough to tip Charles out and tell him to ask Him to get him home ... he relents and returns for him, of course. They debated hard, but they very seldom had serious rows, said Peggy. 'It's amazing how well two people so completely different could get on, but they did. I admired Charles utterly and completely. He came so far, so far.'

Before Charles sets off round the Midlands and South-West on his own trip, he fires off letters asking for help and interviews. Alderman Harry Watton is a Birmingham councillor with a special interest in Travellers, and his forthright comments in expressing the view of ‘society’ are so graphic – ‘They seem to come almost from nowhere overnight. They’re a bit like the starlings in Birmingham. They’re here and they’re making a mess’ – that Ewan uses them as a counterpoint throughout the piece. Advice came from the Scots author Naomi Mitchison, Norman Dodds MP, and a Mrs Hugh McCorquodale, a Hertfordshire councillor. She writes back expressing her concern because Romanies are being turned off Colney Heath ‘where they have been since the time of Henry VIII’, and is one of the few helping them retain a remnant of their lifestyle. She’s a romantic, of course – in another life she is the popular and virtually everlasting romantic novelist Barbara Cartland. Philip Donnellan, who, as with Sam Larner, had got there first, points Charles to the Travellers’ ‘Hopping’ gathering in Hereford, if it still exists. ‘If you go to an ironmonger ... and you can buy a heavy frying pan with a loop handle over the top for hanging over a hook, you’ll know there are travellers still about.’ The spoor of the Traveller.

Just before Charles sets off, David Gretton fires a warning shot: ‘It is desirable, though not quite essential, that you should not upset the balance; your present intention to record one Tory and one Socialist meets this very conveniently.’ In other words, don’t come back with something that the BBC’s political opponents can snipe at. Later, when *Travelling People* was circulated before broadcast, Gretton writes: ‘After Lewin had heard this programme he was slightly bothered by Alderman Watton’s remarks. He’s not identified by name, but Charles can we justify it if challenged?’ In other words, have you twisted it in the editing? Charles replies pithily by saying: ‘From a 30-minute interview, the quotations are not merely fair, but are somewhat milder than what the alderman was driving at!’ ‘Not quite essential’ and ‘Slightly bothered’ – such gentle understatement for ‘don’t you dare bugger it up, Charles.’

Charles finds the trip extraordinary and harrowing. He didn’t know people lived like this. Advising for the illustration for his *Radio Times* article he writes that:

The illustration must avoid a romantic Romany caravan image ... Most live in trailers drawn by small pick-up trucks or lorries, but many Scots tinkers still live in bow tents, tarpaulins stretched over bent saplings staked to the earth, and I saw shanty dwellings in the New Forest as bad as anything in Johannesburg. We discovered a people harried by the inexorable pressures and economic processes of modern life, progressively deprived of their livelihood as plastics, aluminium, motor transport, mechanised harvesters, and mass produced furniture, replace clothes pegs, artificial flowers, wicker work, tin pans, horses, cans, their traditional

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crafts. They're driven now to scrap dealing with its attendant problems of litter and scrap heaps. The majority are desperate for permanent homes and acceptance by the community. We found what is virtually a breakdown in communications between them and society, public and private.

Ewan illustrated this in another song that has entered the repertoire, 'Thirty Foot Trailer', a song of farewell to the old travelling life, with a jaunty lilt and a characteristic rollicking chorus. (The title would have been different had Wester Boswell told Charles in a letter before, not after, the recording that the maximum permitted length of a trailer was 22 feet ...) Ewan stresses this forced move away from natural materials in two of the middle verses:

**Farewell to the besoms of heather and broom,  
Farewell to the creel and the basket,  
The folks of today they would far sooner pay  
For a thing that's been made oot o' plastic.  
Goodbye to the tent and the old caravan  
To the tinker, the gypsy, the travelling man  
And goodbye to the thirty-foot trailer.**

**Farewell to the pony the cob and the mare,  
The reins and the harness are idle.  
You don't need the strap when you're breaking up scrap,  
So farewell to the bit and the bridle.**

Charles goes on: 'Along the Wareham Road a convoy of Saracen armoured cars scream by ... drowning out the voice of Caroline Hughes singing "Green Grows the Laurel". Seated at her feet are children and grandchildren in a bow tent fantastically hung with highly coloured cotton prints and smelling of stale bread and sour earth ... Caroline Hughes sings songs old when Shakespeare was a boy.' Peggy still remembers vividly the fraught but spellbinding evening recording the tale Maggie Cameron told in another bow tent near Blairgowrie in Scotland:

There were about 20 people in there. Right in the middle there was a fire in an upturned bucket ... and the kids were all there, everybody was there, they had dogs in there, every inch of space was filled. This was a better sound – we had the Nagra by this time – this beautiful machine. You could have sold everything that everybody had on in that room, all their old cars, and the tent and the pots and pans ... for the price of the Nagra. There was so much poverty ... they're singing and jigging away. Fantastic, the life in there.

Once a child had been hushed, in a silence you could cut with a knife Maggie Cameron told a story of two ghostly wee pipers in the night. Peggy was desperate lest the tape ran out – though fortunately the new Nagra had half-hour reels – while Maggie took her time, telling it the way she always did, and ending:

**... But Mary she heard the pipes coming nearder and nearder and nearder till they come walking right in to the camp, and ... she says, I lifted the side of the door and lookid oot Maggie and as sure as God's in the kingdom of heaven she said I nearly jumped into the bed. My heart went quicker she said than a traction engine. There was two wee men and they would nae be as tall she says as my Cairn terrier, wi' curled up shoes on them and peakit bonnets, lang whiskers on 'em and the size of their airms she says was like just the length of your hand. Two sets of pipes and they kept going in time round the fire and round the fire, one reel after another and she says I was even feared to blow breath, and they kep us waking she says till God sent the first streak of light in the morning before they disappeared.**

The last quarter of the programme focuses on the way Travellers are treated. A gorgio: 'They can't read or write.' A Traveller: 'I would like to read and write.' A catalogue of vile treatment through a childhood of intermittent schooling leads to a long 'Intolerance' section.

**That brother of mine was kept seven years in one class. And my mother went to the teacher and asked why my brother wasn't able even to sign his own name, and the teacher, she says, 'Och I would never dream of learning that laddie on – he's the best message laddie I have in the school.' She's sent him messages here, messages there, message for this teacher, clean the blackboard, sweep the floor, and to this day he cannae sign his ain name.**

By the time they were ready for rehearsal and recording at the end of November 1963, Charles had been given the grim news he'd been half expecting, that this would be the last Radio Ballad. So there's a double meaning when he writes to ask for a pre-Christmas slot for the broadcast 'with its No Room at the Inn connotations.' Charles pours out the story of the ending of the Radio Ballads to Paul Ferris of *The Observer*, who bats on his behalf in an article. That can't have pleased his bosses and, moreover, he missed the Christmas slot by a long way.

The recording was difficult for several reasons. Ewan was going down with bronchitis, though he held himself and his voice together till he collapsed in the studio after the last take was completed. The fiddler Dave Swarbrick

went AWOL for some of the rehearsals, which led to a fusillade of letters and telegrams to and fro, a rambling explanation from Swarbrick after the recording was over about getting his little finger caught in the car door, and a severe rebuke from a livid Charles. Especially for this programme a fiddle was a key instrument, and at the last moment Charles had to pull in the replacement fiddler Danny Levan, who managed with hardly any rehearsal. But the main problem was his decision to do the 'Intolerance' section in one long take, while recording music separate from actuality. Despite taking eight hours in the studio over that alone he just couldn't get it to work, so he had to cobble it together from bits as he had in the earliest programmes.

Before Christmas, furious with the world and himself, he expresses his frustrations across five foolscap pages, beginning: 'These notes are prompted by sense of confused indignation? Frustration? Helplessness? Misguided preoccupation with detail? Professional incompetence? A most complicated state of mind! Product of the pressures which operate on me during the final editing and assembly of a Radio Ballad.' The problem is that he can't sub-optimize, he can rarely bring himself to be satisfied with his editing or the standard of studio performance. 'It is agonising to hear superb performances so lost in a bad mix as to be unusable ... Why is it that we cannot create conditions in which the artists and technical team achieve a definitive performance which can be recorded in one [take]...?'

It takes so long. He belabours himself over the fact that he needs six days of six vocalists and nearly as much of eight instrumentalists, over £400 of a programme that cost £1700 in all. 'All this seems a most extravagant schedule by BBC standards ... The pressures of BBC policy by implication accuse me of unprofessionalism by utilising such methods, or lack of methods, and I accuse myself of this as the hours tick by.' He blames the acoustic of Studio 6, the inflexibility of its control desk and its studio managers. He argues himself into a corner. In the end he convinces himself that with the equipment and people at his disposal it is impossible to achieve the result he's striving for. 'In fact what we are trying to do is to achieve as polished a performance of a Radio Ballad that has only come together for a matter of days, as we expect from a performance of the [Beethoven] 9th Symphony that has been examined and worked at for a hundred or more years.'

*Travelling People* was not heard until four months after Charles's Christmas target, 17 April 1964, still called *Born at the Crossroads* until a few days before broadcast. Ironically, despite its troubles and the anxiety that, like teenagers, Travellers were a group that might alienate the Home Service audience, it elicited the best audience reaction of all. 'This really had the "feel" of the subject to a wonderful degree. One could sense the antagonism of both sides and through it all came the rhythm of movement, constant "moving on" ... Gay, plaintive and sad by turns, the songs were very evocative of the Gypsies' plight and very moving.'

The report summariser feels that ‘listeners apparently have a soft spot for the travelling people’, doubtless meaning in their romantic Romany incarnation. In his song ‘The Gypsy is a Gentleman’, decorated by mocking fiddle flourishes, Ewan has poked fun at those who thought that while the original Gypsy was colourful and welcome, his modern descendant was not:

**Oh the gypsy is a gentleman and he always knows his place,  
He never troubles anyone and he rarely shows his face.  
He knows the ways of nature, he’s reticent and shy,  
And never pesters gorgios to sell or yet to buy.  
And the wind is on the heath,  
And the heath is far away  
From towns and private property  
Where decent people stay.**

**Oh the gypsy is a gentleman, he keeps well out of sight,  
His caravan is picturesque, it’s colourful and bright.  
He’s full of ancient wisdom and of wit he has great store -  
Not like those thieving diddies who come knocking on the door ...**

Two days after broadcast Paul Ferris in *The Observer*, despite feeling that it ‘needed shortening and lacked pace in places, as though the style of the piece had been infected by the melancholy of the content’, nevertheless concluded that it was ‘one of the most remarkable of the Radio Ballads: full of bitterness and raciness, and appalling flashes of everyday inhumanity.’ He takes the BBC to task for ending the Radio Ballads, which have been ‘killed stone dead by the planners in London ... Since they didn’t start till Radio was being eclipsed by TV they have never had the chance to become fashionable with the audience they deserve.’ Exactly.

It was later largely assumed by their supporters that the Radio Ballads were stopped for political reasons. While Charles Parker’s changing political attitude may have been identified by his bosses with his increasing (as they saw it) truculence and intransigence, it’s clear, both in the internal BBC documents and Charles’s own writing at the time, that it was the sheer cost and time – aggravating his loss of ‘productivity’ – that was their downfall, at a time when Radio was losing money and audience. Moreover, the ‘industrial’ Radio Ballads weren’t overtly political – their Marxist authors didn’t batter the listener over the head with *Das Kapital*. It’s indeed ironic that the most vehement Radio Ballad, the one where the hearts of the authors are most visible on their sleeves, should be the last, and one where man’s inhumanity



## SET INTO SONG

to man extends across the class divide. Ewan doesn't shirk the parallels, reminding us what happens when Travellers are seen as pollutants:

**Some of them were gassed at Belsen,  
Some at Buchenwald did fall.  
Others kennt the Auschwitz ovens:  
Men and women, bairns and all.**

You hear this and think: Come on, Ewan, you're going too far here, this is England. Then you hear the last words of this last Radio Ballad, and the complaint dies in your throat. They're spoken by Alderman Harry Watton, JP, a Birmingham Labour councillor. And you realise with a start that this is the only time Charles Parker ever allowed his own voice to be heard:

**Watton: How far does it come in your mind before you say I have done everything I possibly can and I will help the broad mass of these people. But there are some I can do nothing with whatever. Doesn't the time arise in one's mind that one has to say, all right, one has to exterminate the impossibles. I know all that leads to in one's mind, Nazism, who is it next: the Gypsies, the Tinkers, the Jews, the coloured man. I don't accept that really on these particular people.**

**Parker: I don't think ... exterminate's a terrible word – you can't really mean that?**

**Watton: Why not?**

Silence, no credits.

# The Word Hewers

## *Finding the Voices*



If you go into the nearest pub on a Saturday night and hear the story of Saturday's match, people don't tell the narrative in a linked line, like a short story spoken. They create a vigorous image, then they create another vigorous image right up against it and they clash ... between those two little images is a 'spark gap' for you as the listener to jump in and fill in, so that you participate in the creative experience.

CHARLES PARKER, ARTICLE IN FSU QUARTERLY, WINTER 1975

There were times when the force of his memory was so strong in the old man that he would forget that we were present and re-enact conversations with friends and neighbours dead these fifty years.

EWAN MACCOLL, SPEAKING OF SAM LARNER, JOURNEYMAN, 1989

In Chapter 9 I examined how Charles Parker manoeuvred the Radio Ballads down the often potholed track from script to broadcast. In the next three chapters I want to return to the very beginning of the process. How did Charles, Ewan and Peggy go about interviewing someone (usually) working class, unfamiliar with and wary of the microphone? How did they extract such compelling testimony? How did they sift from that ‘actuality’ the extracts they’d use in each programme? How did Ewan conjure such fitting songs from the mass of voices, words, rhythms and intonations that they’d heard, and interleave them with the voices? And how did Peggy orchestrate a motley selection of instruments to bring the whole thing to musical life?

Back in 1960 Charles Parker wrote to Ewan MacColl: ‘The astronomical expense of *Singing the Fishing* has made everyone run into the woodwork.’ The BBC would increasingly be run not by programme makers but by those with an eye on ratings and costs. It’s perfectly true that when you look at the Radio Ballads with an accountant’s eye one of the immediate things that strikes you is the ratio of the minutes of actuality they recorded to the minutes they used in the end. Although the number and length of interviews varied, typically they would return with around 60 hours of recorded material. That means that in an hour-long programme they eventually used perhaps only one per cent of it.

This seems extraordinary at first. How could they justify that expense in time and money? Can they really convince us – let alone Charles Parker’s bosses at the BBC – that, say, half that much would have given us an inferior programme? Ewan indeed says that the actuality recorded from miners for *The Big Hewer* was so rich that they could have made another equally good programme without taking any of the speech from the final version at all. While that may have been an exaggeration, it certainly suggests that they were distinctly self-indulgent in the time they spent on interviews. And everything they brought back they listened to and transcribed, a wearying dawn-to-dusk task that would take around a fortnight for two people. How many hours would a modern radio feature maker bring back? Vince Hunt and Sara Parker (Charles’s daughter), who recorded much of the material for the 2006 Radio Ballads I examine in the final chapter, brought back a third to a half of the original team’s figure. The 2006 total itself seems on the high side for most modern documentary features.

How did they go about persuading people, most of whose formal education ended at 14 or 15, to talk about their lives in a way that would capture a radio audience’s attention? Only a few of us are naturals, instinctive storytellers. Most are not, so an interviewer has to know how to pan for the gold that he hopes is there in the stream somewhere. People often acquire a kind of verbal armour, a habit of speaking which is formulaic and unnatural, cliché-ridden or repetitive, and hard to penetrate. Middle managers writing reports

tend to use a stilted third person and the passive, just as in school science we were taught to write up experiments: 'A solution of nitric acid was taken.' They replicate it in their speech. Ewan said that some of the people from the road contractors Laing sounded virtually incomprehensible, though the meaning was easier to figure out when read off the page. Working people were by no means immune back then, especially if they were union officials, as Peter Sellers illustrated in his wonderful creation Kite in the film *I'm All Right Jack*, released in the same year as *Song of a Road*. Ewan commented:

The blokes in the mining industry, when they start talking at first, you get polemics from them, as if they're talking like a Union Branch meeting in gibberish. What we're constantly looking for is how much the speech is personal and how much an echo. The way the thing is said, not the information conveyed ... Many workers are afflicted by officialese, but occasionally you can identify a gem. John Faulkner once interviewed Jack Dash [the dockworkers' unofficial leader]. First it was like a political harangue, but then he asked him about the comic characters on the docks and his language changes immediately. No longer has he to be spokesman for militant dockers.

One of the recordings for *Travelling People* wasn't used in the programme. In darkness, with 28 people in a tent, a woman speaks of the death of her daughter. As long as she's describing events in the camp itself, she automatically falls into her traditional language and mode of expression. Ewan:

She dreams that a quarry is full of tears and she sees a small body put into a coffin and drawn through the water like a coach, but drawn by a team of rats – it's straight out of Webster. But when she gets to the hospital she begins to change her terminology and delivery style, and becomes pedestrian and very much infected by city speech, the words become ... the clichés of hospital, and the whole thing falls to pieces.

Storytelling is an integral part of a Traveller's existence; brushes with 'gorgio' society might take the life out of their speech temporarily, but it would return. What of us, the 'educated'? The conflict after *Song of a Road* was based on Ewan's conviction that educated people, the managers, planners and white-collared staff, spoke in a boring and over-technical way. It wasn't universal – he later cited scientists he'd met, as in his preparation for *Uranium 235*, and some doctors. They were often brilliant in their ability to conjure up novel metaphors to help the layman's understanding, and equally to express themselves directly and simply when they needed to. 'A scientist in love with his work is quite as likely to get excited as a coalminer. It's not just a matter of education, but how closely the educated person identifies with his work.' But many, exemplified by the road surveyors whose language

had been square-bashed into submission by their army service, are trapped by their profession's unconscious jargon and speech patterns, as in *Song of a Road*:

**During that time the survey's been made to ascertain the amount of material to be moved, till the planning people decide how it is to be moved and where it is to be moved to. That results in a complicated graph called the mass haul diagram on which the whole of the earth moving is based.**

The analysis Ewan and Peggy made of voice recordings after *Song of a Road* convinced them of the close match of 'ordinary' people's speech patterns to traditional song rhythms, compared to those of the educated, who Ewan described like this:

Listening to them, we found that our concentration would begin to dissipate after two or three minutes. To our 'uneducated' speakers, however, we could listen for long periods without any decline in concentration. Now this was odd since the soil-chemists, designers, planners and surveyors were (or so it seemed) getting far more job satisfaction from what they were doing than, say, the navvies, dump-truck drivers or joiners. We analysed the speech in several tapes chosen at random and came up with some interesting facts. Our managerial informants tended to use an extremely small area of the vocal effort spectrum. Their most characteristic effort was that of pressing, combined occasionally with short thrusts; or that of gliding or, less frequently, with subsidiary dabbling efforts. Irrespective of the subject under discussion they scarcely ever varied the tempo of delivery. Almost all of them made constant use of the impersonal pronoun. They were consistent in their use of tenses and rarely changed direction inside a sentence or phrase. Verbs were given no more vocal weight than nouns, and similes and metaphors were almost totally eschewed.

Now, Ewan's own language here needs some explanation, because he's using the terminology of Laban, the radical movement analyst and teacher whose methods became so integral to Theatre Workshop. Their actors were also trained to use a whole spectrum of vocal 'efforts', to keep the listener on the edge of his seat. Ewan applied them to the speaking and singing voice, and he employed them in the way he constructed both songs and (a key point) the Radio Ballads themselves. The eight basic Laban 'efforts' are Thrust, Slash, Wring, Flick, Press, Float, Dab and Glide, and their definitions are expressed by means of three opposite pairs of adjectives – direct or flexible, sudden or sustained, strong or light. In the paragraph above he uses Press (direct, sustained, strong), Thrust (direct, sudden, strong), Glide

(direct, sustained, light) and Dab (direct, sudden, light). This is how Rudolf Laban expressed it:

Effort	Space	Time	Energy
Thrust	direct	sudden	strong
Slash	flexible	sudden	strong
Wring	flexible	sustained	strong
Flick	flexible	sudden	light
Press	direct	sustained	strong
Float	flexible	sustained	light
Dab	direct	sudden	light
Glide	direct	sustained	light

Read or sing something into a tape recorder, play it back, analyse your voice in those terms, change it, do it again. Essentially, Ewan is saying that variety is the spice of speech, and most ‘educated’ people don’t vary theirs enough. It has been trained out of us. His road builders, on the other hand:

used both similes and metaphors liberally. They changed tense constantly, often to emphasise a point or to sharpen an argument. They made use of extended analogies and emphasised verbs in such a way as to give every sentence an effort-peak. Almost all of them used the first person singular and the present historical with equal effect. Their single speaker would, in the course of an extended passage, sometimes use presses, thrusts, glides and dabs in much the same way that a boxer in the ring might use his body. A project manager drew attention to the two language groups in the course of defining the functions of a ganger: ‘He’s the link between us and them. I sometimes think we’d be no worse off if they were speaking Swahili.’

**The grub’s very poor. Some mornings there you couldn’t touch it at all ... The beds, they’ve got bugs and all in ’em. The bed I’m lying in – has humps and hollows in it ... bejakers ... like a camel’s back. It is. I tell you, I was up in the desert ... the first time I slept inside in it – looking at camels – humps and hollows. My arse was all blisters and carbuncles and everything ... In the morning I could hardly walk, I thought I wouldn’t be able to go to work. It’s an, it’s an awful joint. Concentration camp. All they want is some gas chambers now and smother us.**

That’s Jack Hamilton again, the Irish dumper-truck driver, and it’s the extract that so alarmed Laing. In *Song of a Road* you can compare these two

languages readily. If you listen to it – it's hard to do it justice on the page – some of the programme's fascination lies in just that contrast. It's not that the planners and surveyors aren't enthusiastic about what they're doing, for they often are, but it's overlaid by the language and voice they employ. Every now and then a manager does get that feeling through:

**I think one of the most interesting jobs of this class of work is the muck shifting. It's a wonderful job is muck shifting. Specially when there's plenty of it you know, and there's two and a quarter millions of it altogether. Oh yes I admit I enjoy muck shifting, better than anything.**

Charles and Ewan felt that children have an ability to express themselves naturally, but it gets suppressed by the need at school to become grammatically correct, in speech and in writing. Charles largely blamed the tyranny of the printed word, saying that the best recordings succeed by 'triumphantly reasserting the oral tradition after five centuries of submergence by the printed word and all the intellectual and literary pretensions of omnicompetence this has brought.' Ironically, Charles's meaning is often embedded in such word thickets, unconsciously making his own point. In *Travelling People* the most humane non-Traveller they met was named Strangeward, the county surveyor for Kent. Charles said: 'He talked for half an hour about the terrible conditions they lived in, very articulate, but nothing he said would make a listener sit up and think.' Then they met a 14-year-old girl who said simply 'To tell you the truth they treat us like animals, and I think of them as animals too.' In *On the Edge* the 16-year-old Dot Dobby was a rarity in that she could recapture her feelings so instantly and completely, then express them vividly. Ewan:

We explained in great detail what we were going to do, and total recall took place, she went immediately to her feelings and all the conflicts inside her suddenly found voice, whatever we talked about. Occasionally the feeling was so tremendous she couldn't contain it: she wept uncontrollably. Every question got a purely personal response, a mechanism already perfected there, perhaps it's in all young people, and gets destroyed as they get older.

Peggy said Charles was cross with her for keeping the tape recorder running, but Dot's weeping got into the programme nevertheless. By contrast, said Ewan, some boys from Glasgow aged 18 to 21 were 'articulate as hell. There was anger, but there was a damp-course so to speak between their feelings and their language.' They didn't use a single phrase of it in the programme. That analysis of speech patterns increased the team's conviction

that you had to be clever and patient to get a person to express, in direct and vivid speech, what you knew to be there. Feign ignorance, Charles said: 'If you convince people you're interested in them and really don't know anything, you can't go wrong. It's absolutely fundamental. You have to relearn how to listen. Someone's listening to them properly for the first time in their lives.' They concluded that you usually got very little in the first half hour of recording, very little active speech or metaphor, few verbs. But once you get people in full flight their speech is packed with them. Ewan: 'They have to be warmed up, taken to a different level. On TV you get only two and a half minutes, no wonder it's all cliché.'

Charles said that the best extracts derive from the times during the field recording when the particular speaker, 'under the pressure of the moment, relives in his or her own language some deeply felt experience ... and by intonation, rhythm, imagery or all three ... achieves a shattering degree of immediate communication ... and the living language, caught by the tape recorder, takes off and dominates the work.' Sam Larner was the perfect example of this. They had time to discuss overnight how to plan the next day. Often they'd return to something he'd said to make him open up further: 'That storm in 1910, that must have been rough.' He'd be tetchy but he'd go back and often emerge with something else, or a different expression, at some moments reliving a long-gone conversation, his eyes seeing a scene 60 years before, the room and his interviewers fading. Perhaps it's the daily proximity of death: Sam after the storm says, 'Same as miners, I s'pose ... you can't live with the dead, can you?' But they did, and the speech of both fishermen and miners were at times haunted by it.

With the miners for *The Big Hewer* they soon realised the trick was to get them to visualise the pit – as soon as they were back underground, they'd be away. Charles and Ewan hardly said anything after the first few scene-setting moments, just the occasional verbal nudge. Both could talk the hind legs off a field full of donkeys, but by then they had learned how to use silence. In the early days Charles would be too verbose, until Ewan told him he was fed up with listening to his voice on recordings. Thereafter they would both confine themselves to some prompting to bring out what's commonplace to the speaker but crucial to the programme. Then only interrupt when, Charles said: 'Occasionally someone in full flight says something extraordinary. Stop it, isolate the thought, and he or she will say it in a different way.'

The most difficult thing, as Charles realised and every interviewer knows, was to get them to say what they've just said, but in a way that could be spliced into the programme without a lot of fiddly work later. If you listen to a source tape, say, of a Sam Larner interview, in stretches there is constant coaching going on, a point stressed by Doc Rowe, the folk ritual collector who worked with Charles later. Moreover, Sam used his hands expressively, as many people do. Doc said Charles eventually told Sam to imagine a little



man in the microphone who couldn't see him. Sam, arms outstretched: 'About this long,' Charles: 'Little man, Sam.' 'Oh, about three foot.'

The art of interviewing is to know when to interrupt and when to stay silent. If things were getting dull they'd sometimes resort to saying something outrageous, just to provoke a response. But at times silence was the best instrument. Ewan described anticipating moments of a subject's intense recall, and of how you could actually manipulate a pause:

At first we used to abhor a silence, would butt in, supply a word they're looking for, but it's better to let them look [for it]. Long pause, they're breathing shallowly. Hold your breath. At the right moment a deep breath from you will produce one from them and that's often what's needed to set them off again.

Later they concluded that even flat monotone speech can be effective if used in the right way. In *Singing the Fishing*, after much debate, they deliberately alternated Ronnie Balls' excitable but sometimes unintelligible speech with the drier more informative tones of George Draper saying more or less the same thing. In *Fight Game* they realised that they could employ the often mangled uneducated-but-managerial speech of the boxing promoter, but use it ironically. In *Travelling People* two speakers from Cobham used what Ewan called a 'debased' form of speech, but its very monotony was perfect for expressing life just going on and on: '[If] the voice of one was dead, against him we put the other speaker who came from the same family but who had an upward turn in every speech he made. The two in juxtaposition really complemented each other.'

Listen to any of the Radio Ballads. *The Big Hewer* is a good example because of the rich variety of dialect. Listen to the brothers Jack and Reece Elliott from Durham sparking off each other, to Ben 'Sunshine' Davies from the Welsh valleys, to Ernest Black from Nottinghamshire. Imagine recording in their parlours, in the miners' welfare, down the pit itself. Charles was astonished, humbled, captivated. In a letter to Ronnie Balls, the herring fisherman, he said:

I remember Ewan when we were doing *Big Hewer*, and I blenched ... talking about how the hell we were going to match the calibre of this actuality of the miners talking and he dressed me down and said 'if we can't we'd better go out of business.'

Ewan would never blench – he just needed those words to trigger his song-writing imagination. This was a man who never used to see himself as a songwriter. At the age of 40 he had written few that weren't explicitly for theatrical productions. Then he took off.

# The Song Smith

## Setting Speech into Song



He wrote deceptively simple songs as well as wonderfully intricate pieces. He loved the mathematics of poetry and would often play and juggle with the tumbling words. He used words exactly ... He would go to great lengths to learn the terminology of an industry before writing about it; or, as in the Radio Ballads, he would interview someone who knew the subject better than he ever could.

PEGGY SEEGER, INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSENTIAL EWAN MACCOLL  
SONGBOOK, 2001

I maintain that all the great periods of theatre – Greek, Roman ...  
miracle plays, morality plays, Lope de Vega, Commedia del Arte,  
Elizabethan – these were periods where there was no rigid demarcation  
between singing, music, acting. Music's easier to understand than the  
alphabet ... The trouble is that music has become this bloody special  
thing – music, the universal language!

EWAN MACCOLL, TRANSCRIPT OF LANDMARKS DISCUSSION, MAY 1965

The creator of the Radio Ballad songs hadn't seen himself as a songwriter in his early days at all. From childhood, when he discovered a natural aptitude for writing lyrics, he had made up extra verses for the songs he liked. In the Red Megaphone days he wrote snatches he described as song-squibs, to advance a workers' cause or to bash the bosses. Some he fashioned on the spur of the moment; few were written down. He didn't think anything of it. For those he did compose, until he began to analyse his approach in the early days of the folk revival, he had no particular method.

In 1932 in the days of the Mass Trespass he wrote a song with that title to the traditional Scots tune 'Road to the Isles', and 'Manchester Rambler' to a tune thought to be his own. (Until, that is, someone spotted that it came from Haydn's 94th symphony.) It's the only wholly pre-written song in the Radio Ballads. He would make them up as he strode out on the Pennine Hills, or when driving over them in a theatre company van. In the Theatre Union days before the war he produced songs for several of the plays he adapted, including 'Jamie Foyers', whose title and tune he borrowed from a Peninsular War song of the early 19th century, for *Fuente Ovejuna*. After the war he churned them out in the same way for Theatre Workshop, but describes them as only minor elements in the productions, with just two exceptions: *Johnny Noble*, where they formed a more integral part, and *Blood Wedding*. For his adaptation of the Lorca play, in the event never produced, he sat down in the Pavilion Theatre in Felixstowe and spent all day making up Spanish-sounding melodies:

That was the first time I ever felt that I was a real songwriter. The feeling soon passed and I returned to my role as actor-cum-scriptwriter, as one who could be called upon to cobble together a tune in between rehearsals. It didn't bother me at all that my songs were expendable, ephemeral pieces that could be dropped without trace from a production.

In 1938 he had listened to Alastair Cooke's 26-part *I Heard America Sing* broadcast from the USA, marvelling when he first encountered Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and Texas Gladden singing 'House Carpenter'. But it didn't inspire him to take songwriting seriously. Only 'Dirty Old Town', which had been dashed off about his boyhood Salford to an instinctively laconic tune of his own, simply to cover a scene change in *Landscape with Chimneys*, could be regarded as a song in its own right. Ewan said they sang the theatre songs for that and other shows with no accompaniment (or just a harmonica) not out of conviction but because they had no instruments. That had been in 1949. In fact one other song does survive from that production, 'The Trafford Road Ballad', a simple anti-war song which he resuscitated in some of his early concerts, based on 'The Sheffield Apprentice'. It was soon displaced in his repertoire by later anti-war songs of his own making.

## Early Songwriting

Typically, once Ewan decided that songwriting was a craft that needed as much attention as writing plays or any other act of artistic creation, he analysed the process and emerged with a formula. He wanted his new songs to play a part in the folk revival, so they should follow the same disciplines as traditional song: no literary language, few adjectives, simple expressions that ordinary people used day-to-day. He was encouraged by the television producer Denis Mitchell to write truck-driver songs for *Lorry Harbour*, two of which were picked up by drivers: ‘Twenty One Years’ and ‘Champion at Keeping ’em Rolling’. For a Mitchell programme about the so-called railway king, George Hudson, he wrote the narrative in the form of songs, pouring them out. Ewan’s serious songwriting began tentatively, in the idiom based on the Irish street ballads he’d heard Seamus Ennis sing, then he became influenced by Bert Lloyd’s singing and Alan Lomax’s field recordings of English traditional singers. In this period came ‘Cannily Cannily’, a lullaby in Northumbrian dialect to a tune of his own, good enough to be mistaken subsequently for a traditional song. In 1954, on the way to a Christmas party, he wrote ‘The Ballad of the Carpenter’, which begins ‘Jesus was a working man’ and goes on for another dozen stanzas to identify him with the working-class struggle, introducing the word ‘journeyman’ in the fourth verse:

He became a roving journeyman  
And he wandered far and wide,  
And he saw how wealth and poverty  
Lie always side by side,  
Yes, always side by side.

Around the same time he wrote ‘The Ballad of Tim Evans’, a polemic about a simple young man wrongly convicted for the murder of his wife and child. Three years after Evans was hanged in 1950, his neighbour John Christie had been revealed as a serial killer, had admitted to killing Evans’ wife, and was himself hanged. The song hit the headlines, featuring in news programmes and documentaries, but its last verse, which accuses the judge and jury of Evans’ judicial murder, caused broadcasting officials acute anxiety. Describing their panic as a state akin to madness, Ewan said that after that time he never had any difficulty in believing that many of those who plan the nation’s entertainment exist in a constant state of near-hysteria.

For *The Essential Ewan MacColl Songbook*, Peggy Seeger selected 178 songs out of a total approaching 300. Just four of them were written before the war, ten in the 1940s, and 14 in the period before Ewan and Peggy met in the spring of 1956. From that point his output leapt up, spurred on by the

opportunity to collaborate with a brilliant musician with whom he was in love, and by the challenge of the Radio Ballads. He wrote over 70 songs for the Radio Ballads, of which 49 are included in the songbook, part of a great creative burst which produced 113 songs from 1957 to 1970 and several more that didn't make the cut. Peggy wrote this in her introduction:

His best and most popular songs are based on traditional pieces, but even in his experimental works you can find the time-honoured motifs, usages, footages, forms and poetic constants that characterise the folk songs and ballads. When he employed slang he seemed to get stuck in the colloquialisms he had learned in his first 25 years, much of it classical and Elizabethan-based. He continued to use these terms in his songs – words like creep, flash boys, spivs, fakers and wide-boys, words that gave some of his songs a dated flavour. He also favoured the political clichés of the 1920–50 period. These turn up a great deal in the early songs and occasionally in the later ones. He didn't learn or employ new slang because he felt that fashions in language change too fast and that many terms (such as at the end of the day, cool, right on, no way etc.) are taken up solely so that those who utter them may appear to be in the swim. He drew most of his language from his own experience, from his reading and from people, and he was loath to take the easy way out when writing a song.

The paradox for Peggy was that such a 'tunemaster' was virtually illiterate in terms of formal musical knowledge. Jim Bray, the double-bass player who was in seven of the Radio Ballads and who had known Ewan before they began, said that jazz musicians originally used to scoff at him behind his back. In the early days of the *Ballads and Blues* radio series he would sometimes miscount bars and lose the thread. 'We soon revised our view – his was a remarkable talent.' Peggy felt that many of his earlier songs, set to traditional tunes without adaptation, could be stilted, formal and dogmatic, the least successful coming over as political speeches set to music, with the words sometimes ill at ease with the tune. But his approach was transformed by the wealth of the contributors' language he painstakingly studied before each of the Radio Ballads.

*Journeyman* has a chapter called Singing and Song-writing, but it contains nothing about writing songs at all, so you have to look elsewhere for enlightenment about his methods. In a programme called *Singing English*, recorded in 1961 halfway through the Radio Ballad period, Ewan, Charles and Peggy discuss their making, although little about either songwriting or musical arrangement. But in a couple of sessions at their home in Beckenham in 1965, recorded by Charles Parker and transcribed, he spoke at length about how he set about writing the Radio Ballad songs. (Ewan was inclined to exaggerate, but this is trustworthy because it was soon after the last Radio Ballad, and all three of them took part in the discussion.)

These meetings had been set up to help the writers of a new six-part series called *Landmarks* that Charles Parker was producing in parallel with a television version that Philip Donnellan was making (at ten times the cost). Newer writers were involved, interviewing in the Radio Ballad style, and the first programme in the series was stringently analysed by Ewan. Although he didn't participate in the series, he did provide a theme song, the wonderful 'Ballad of Accounting'. It starts amiably enough, and the timeless quality of the first stanza sets the scene for a series that looked at humanity from the cradle to the grave. But then it starts to bite, and you can just imagine the jolt it gave BBC executives when they heard the second verse unfold. But by then it was too late to stop it.

In the morning we built the city –  
In the afternoon we walked its streets –  
Evening saw us leaving –  
We wandered through our days as if they would never end;  
All of us imagined we had endless time to spend;  
We hardly saw the crossroads and small attention gave  
To landmarks on the journey from the cradle to the grave  
Cradle to the grave, cradle to the grave, cradle to the grave.

Did you learn to dream in the morning?  
Abandon dreams in the afternoon?  
Wait without hope in the evening?  
Did you stand there in the traces and let 'em feed you lies?  
Did you trail along behind 'em wearing blinkers on your eyes?  
Did you kiss the foot that kicked you, did you thank 'em for their scorn?  
Did you ask for their forgiveness for the act of being born,  
Act of being born, act of being born, act of being born.

## Writing for the Radio Ballads

Ewan described to the *Landmarks* team how they listened to the Radio Ballad actuality. As they played each tape, Peggy would type the transcription on to foolscap sheets. They would mark up all the tapes with pieces of gummed paper to signify the kind of speaker – gender, accent, their breathing patterns, whether they were fluent or halting, had an upward inflection or perhaps were an emphatic 'finisher' – and to record the topic they had been discussing. When the transcription was complete, they'd cut up the sheets and assemble them in a script book under topic headings, each with a blank facing page (sometimes finding a subject they hadn't anticipated, such as Dust in *The Big Hower*). This became their working book for the programme, with everything carefully timed from the beginning, which Ewan described

as a crucial discipline. As a consequence they rarely overshot by more than five minutes. In the case of *Singing the Fishing* it was 30 seconds.

They would then call Charles in, and the triumvirate would spend two or three days of intense debate in Beckenham to settle the programme's shape. Often, Ewan said, the discussion would seem completely nebulous, almost a waste of time. But when he got down to work he'd realise what vital pointers it gave him, especially in what to avoid. Moreover, back in Birmingham, Charles would have a good idea of what he would be getting later, and there would be no unpleasant surprises. (Only for *The Fight Game*, in fact, did the Beckenham discussion radically alter the shape of the programme). Ewan would then take the rough plan and mould it into a working script where 'the script and songs complement each other and finally result in a work of art.'

Now to creating the songs. Ewan's approach to writing them changed radically after the second programme. For *John Axon* he started out with a number of tunes in mind that he felt would be suitable. (Later, he said, he began to feel that using old tunes unmodified was immoral – though it didn't stop him entirely.) He'd write one to suit the chosen actuality, but would often assemble it without any idea of what came next, even the actuality. Later he felt that this produced a series of disconnected musical episodes, with no organic relationship between them. In *Axon* too, he said, there was little variety, almost all depending on the rhythm of the train, from chugging uphill to charging down dale. Now, there are those who regard Ewan as reacting badly to criticism of his work. Often he certainly did, but he could be as scathing to himself as he was to others:

It's true I said at the time that I was using the rhythms of the clickety-clack of the trains, but looking back I see that was just a get-out on my part, shirking the issue since a railway engine boils down to a single stroke, one-one-one-one indefinitely. You can divide it into threes, sevens, eights – anything – and still get music that's differentiated. But it still relates to the train, so in a way there I was cheating in my arguments.

He regarded the following *Song of a Road* as more scientific musically, though 'a bit of a mess'. The subject and nature of the actuality was often remote from the folk-song form, so he tended to use a 'bridge' type of music, the kind you get in the forerunners of the English music hall, before 1850. He settled for the rollicking sound found in the famous music-hall song collections like *London Entertainment*. At the time he felt all that was really necessary with that kind of lyric was a rather primitive knowledge of rhyming systems. Some worked, some didn't. His retrospective distaste for the compromises they'd been forced to make on *Song of a Road* persuaded him to wear a hair-shirt: 'The bulk of the material was shoddy in the extreme: on the whole it

was bad work.’ Fortunately, the sheer joie-de-vivre of the songs makes most of us more generous.

## Analysing Traditional Music

It wasn’t until he and Peggy sat down and reviewed their approach to folk song before *Singing the Fishing* that they figured out which songs didn’t work and why. If it’s to convey information, let’s make sure a song will be good enough to carry it, ‘still able to appeal to an audience in 500 years’ time which no longer knows a herring boat or even fishing.’ They took stock, too, of their limited knowledge of folk song, which they decided was patchy, had grown organically, and that they hadn’t properly analysed. This was the start of their serious appraisal of folk music forms. Ewan: ‘We had to learn a bloody sight more about folk music. We knew 300–400 songs but we hadn’t explored them. Hadn’t taken them to pieces as people do a Shakespeare play.’ The research they did then was apparent in their exhaustive *Song Carriers* radio series they made within a year of the last Radio Ballad.

They set about breaking down *Singing the Fishing* into around a dozen episodes, with each highlighting a different facet of the fisherman’s character and life. Just as they maximised the variety of the actuality, so they needed to vary the music, subject to the overriding need to stay within the disciplines of the tradition. Ewan asked himself what they were. ‘I hadn’t got it clear in my own head, and it’s only recently I’ve managed to.’ But he knew they had to make differences of tone for the singers, and in the instrumentation. Sometimes he’d make the singers excise all the harmonics from their voices, not an easy thing to do for the classically trained. ‘If we used bel canto singers in the Radio Ballads they’d stand out against the actuality like ballet dancers in a pityard.’ Moreover, they would have to learn an ‘attenuated’ style, using scoops and slides and other devices of the folk tradition.

Until then, he said, their concept of the folk tradition was a limited one. Provided a song was easy, intimate and relaxed, they thought that was enough, as long as the singers could sing in rhythm. But they decided for *Singing the Fishing* that the songs’ variety must be much greater. How, then, to create interest and keep the listener engaged? Vary the melodic style: do what good traditional singers in Bulgaria will do, ringing the changes for all they’re worth on time, pitch, rhythm, melody and mood. Apply the Laban movement approach to the shape of the whole Radio Ballad (just as Ewan had to the construction of his post-war plays). In *John Axon* the songs were mostly in a minor key, in *Song of a Road* largely major. OK, in future exploit the modes more thoroughly, use the change from major to minor to keep the listener alert. And the same with the time signatures – no longer use a preponderance of 4/4, as in *Song of a Road*, but try 3/4 and 6/8, 2/4 and 6/4 and 5/4, and associate these variations with changes in key. When a



key change is needed, make a switch of time signature too, and sometimes pitch, to increase the variety from a number of angles.

### Finding a Tune

A few years after the last Radio Ballad, Ewan described an exercise for members of the Critics Group (see Chapter 21) to help them find a tune for a new song they'd written. Start with a traditional tune that seems to sound right, he said, and whistle it to get it firmly in your mind. This is the jumping-off point. Then keep making variations, and choose the one that seems to fit best with the subject you're writing about. Switch on the tape recorder and continue whistling, varying it as you go. Then play it back, learn one that seems to work, number it Variant 1, then start again.

Maybe after half an hour I'd say to Peggy: do you like any of these, and she'd say ... not quite right, that's weak, that's strong, that third line weakens it, that cadence ... And on I'd go. If nothing seemed to work, I'd say let's make the first movement in the tune down instead of up. And on through different iterations of scale, change of mode, whatever. By then you've either got something that works, or nothing at all. In that case, maybe you've got the whole concept of the tune wrong, and you need to start again: don't be afraid to, don't be lazy.

If he'd got nowhere, he might take a sentence from the accompanying actuality, often with a rhythm of its own. Like, in *Singing the Fishing*, 'that's at the bottom of the ocean. Dar diddie diddie diddie dardar. Put that rhythm in your mind. Now, what ways can we ring the changes? Instead of that, how about Dar diddie diddie diddie dardar didar? It doesn't sound quite right, but it's unusual so it'll hold the attention. What if we were to convert the original tune in the same way, add an extra foot?' Ewan tried this first in a song for a film, putting an extra length of line in each verse. It had the effect of keeping the general feeling of the tune, but every verse was different. In *Fight Game* he successfully used this approach often, and even more in *Travelling People*. 'In fact by that time we were ridiculously preoccupied to see how far the traditional form could be extended without smashing up. We found to our amazement that it could be extended fantastically far. Anybody could do it, provided you're not afraid. Everyone's creative in some way.' The 'we' in these extracts indicates how important Peggy was as a sounding-board.

In *Singing the Fishing* Ewan had real difficulty with the song that became 'Shoals of Herring'. It comes in at the beginning of the chronological sequence with Sam Lerner, an old man with a voice low in pitch, slow in delivery, speaking mostly in the present tense. They decided to contrast it with a song in the past tense. A phrase that emerged frequently from the actuality, especially from Ronnie Balls and the Scot Frank West, was 'the

shoals of herring’, so Ewan decided to write one closely related to their words and inflexions, mimicking the contrast between the Balls and Larner voices. He spent three days on the song, and says he wrote 62 different tunes to it, many, of course, closely related. He had written five versions of the song’s text too, and was ‘in despair’ when he remembered ‘Sweet William’, an ancient ballad he’d tried to learn but abandoned because it didn’t work for him as a singer. It’s usually called ‘Famous Flower of Serving Men’. In its original form it becomes a drag, he said, after a couple of verses. On his fifth variation it suddenly clicked. Its first line is a deliberate old ballad cliché, then it takes off –

**O it was a fine and a pleasant day,  
Out of Yarmouth harbour we were faring  
As a cabin boy in a sailing lugger  
Searching for the shoals of herring.**

It worked perfectly for the voices of MacColl and Lloyd, who echoed the vocal styles of Balls and Larner, and *Singing the Fishing* is threaded through with eight ‘Shoals of Herring’ stanzas, alternating the two voices. He dredges up and integrates a mass of rhymes for ‘herring’ – Peggy said he had a perfectly good rhyming dictionary but preferred not to use it. The song is reflective in tone; when the pace needs to pick up we have the driving beat and lusty seaman’s chorus of ‘North Sea Holes’, a further nine stanzas in several sections, which uses another new tune of Ewan’s. This was what Ewan called a cumulative song:

We said we’d start with the general information of where they go to find the fish – North Sea Holes. This form of song in musical terms is called cumulative – it has an accumulating chorus, you can add a line at any part and it will convolute and join the one before it. The convoluted line always gives a marvellous sense of time, not of rhythm but of time. It always sounds as though it goes back for years and years. We got herring fishermen to mark the main points of the shoals, the spawning grounds ... it all says here’s someone who knows his stuff.

His approach to variety in the songs was mirrored in his selection of actuality. The combination of opposing vocal styles, Balls and Larner, was one such result. It worked if it wasn’t overdone: one for the information, one for the excitement. They used that technique in the storm sequence, in which it’s almost as though we overhear Larner, Balls and Draper chatting together, recalling the worst storms they’d lived through. Of course, they were all recorded separately, and Charles Parker’s skill comes in convincing

you that they were reminiscing over a pint in a fishing village pub at the end of their days. Ewan describes how they tackled the storm scene, combining the need for variety in song styles with the voices available:

After 'Shoals of Herring', we said we've got this song, very gentle, easy tempo, single voice. Now we need something else. We're going to a storm at sea. Sam Larner – 'it blew a living gale' – and Draper with this very flat and dull voice saying spectacular things, and all the more marvellous through its being juxtaposed against Sam Larner. And third we found this auctioneer selling the fish, extraordinarily moving and stimulating. It was Peggy's idea to set them against each other. Fisherman at sea making heroic efforts – like Ulysses getting back to Penelope – and all to earn his daily bread, represented by the auctioneer. OK, it makes sense, but what kind of music? We got another idea, that tremendously dramatic table of winds in Close's *Fisherman's Almanac* which all seamen knew, the basic language of the winds, the Beaufort Scale. The song for the storm sequence was built on a recitation of that scale.

By the time of the later Radio Ballads they weren't building the songs round the actuality so much as arranging the musical sequences first, then injecting whatever actuality would best fit. That would only work, of course, if you were already steeped in the voices and had a wide range of options. They were still working with their original actuality selections, which weren't finalised until the last minute, when the musical idea was elaborated. Ewan explained, holding forth in the *Landmarks* discussion:

That's how we go through. In the next sequence [say] we're going to break down the verse form, we'll use recitative, the equivalent of free verse or prose poetry ... we'll cut the actuality down ... and use it in the present tense ... [When] Sam Larner is saying 'And these old men would say – Come on, yer young buggers, rouse your feathers', we'd cut out the introduction, and go into 'Come on, yer young buggers' just as if he's saying it. Next episode we'd treat the same way – a tighter form of music, back to the verse form but verse and chorus now, two-line chorus, write it in 4/4 or 2/4 so it can be interrupted, because it's difficult to interrupt a 6/8 or 3/4. The point I'm trying to make is that each time there was a different problem, and each time we'd attempt to solve it in a different way within the disciplines of traditional music. And each time it worked.

## Recitatives

The other distinctive feature of his songwriting for the Radio Ballads was what he called the 'recitatives'. He cut his teeth with the 'Iron Road' sequence in the loco shed for John Axon, based loosely on 'Poor Paddy Works on the Railway.' For *Singing the Fishing* he wrote the compelling 'Cabin Boy' sequence,

which follows Sam Larner through his early days at sea in a sequence of nearly five minutes. It intercuts Sam, recalling life on a sailing boat in the 1890s, with a mixture of sung narrative and shouted instructions, all put together with some deliciously inventive musical accompaniment. For *Big Hewer* its equivalent is the 'Going to Work' section, the lad's first day down the pit, and it lasts almost an identical length of time. By now, Ewan said, he'd got so much on top of the method that once he was on a roll 'Going to Work' took him only half a day to produce. 'Cabin Boy' had taken him much longer. He described the recitatives like this:

If this kind of recitative comes off you've created inside it all the themes you're going to use in the rest of the thing, and sure enough this is what we did. It's an interesting idea to take a form exclusively associated with classical music and conceive it in folk not operatic terms, in the actual technical idiom of folk music, conceive it in modes, never transgressing, moving from mode to mode, key to key, extending the rules but not breaking them. If a rule says that a pentatonic scale has five notes, and if you move outside it to another note you get another type of scale, then we'll join three more notes and we'll get an eight-note scale, and we'll have scale run into scale ... It worked beautifully, much to everybody's amazement. This was not improvisation, it was written down carefully, and at this time I couldn't write music, I could only invent music in my head. I did this whole sequence on tape, words and everything; and as we were constantly moving from scale to scale it was a hell of a feat for me because it's almost like composing atonal music in one's head. Next time it was a lot easier.

Then there are the great Brechtian declamatory set pieces, often used as scene- or state-setting, or as a narrative mechanism. Not everyone takes to them. Piers Plowright, the eminent modern radio feature producer who was a Radio Ballad enthusiast, nevertheless says 'There were moments when you think, Oh God, Please don't come in again. I know where it's going ... I don't need to hear you singing about it as well.' He felt Ewan signposted too much, but then not every listener 40-odd years ago was as attuned to the programme makers as Plowright became.

By the end of the Radio Ballads Ewan was rarely at a loss when searching for a tune, and he knew now how to adapt his own – in Peggy's words:

He used his own tunes as jumping-off points too. Compare 'The Ballad of the Big Cigars' with 'The Gypsy is a Gentleman', and 'LBJ Looks After Me' with 'The Fight Game' ... Like many songmakers he had a mode, a scale, he preferred: the Dorian. Start on D and run up the white keys on the piano. There were certain tune formats to which he constantly returned. So it wasn't surprising that he borrowed so much from himself – one tune, with minor variations, often carries three or four texts ... Often, as in the case of 'Parliamentary Polka', he would

## SET INTO SONG

make the new song and be entirely unaware until later that he had plagiarised himself, from *Song of a Road*. He had an aquifer all his own!

Ewan used the same source tune as 'Shoals of Herring' in *Big Hewer* too, for 'Schooldays Over'. Peggy points out that there are elements of it in 'Freeborn Man', from *Travelling People*, but it's very difficult to spot the common origin. 'I used the tune consistently throughout all the Radio Ballads except *Fight Game*, did a variant of it, just to make it harder for myself, but as a matter of pride, to keep extracting fresh ore from an old mine.' Jimmie McGregor, who was on *Song of a Road* before his popularity with Robin Hall on the *Tonight* programme gave him so much work that was no longer available for the Radio Ballads, marvelled at how prolific Ewan was:

His songwriting ability? Well, a year after Ewan died I made an hour-long programme about him. One of the points I made about him: if I'm writing, everybody who writes songs, you think – right, you get your idea, verse, chorus. You feel good if you manage to get three verses, four choruses, a reprise, a wee coda. You've constructed a song. And I made the point that Ewan, the roving journeyman, he just goes on and on and on and on and there's more, an *embarras de richesses*. There's just so much in the guy. He's not rationing himself – I'll save that for the next song? Oh no!

Until the end of his life the ore in Ewan's 'old mine' was never actually worked out. It's just that eventually the mine was forced to close.

# Trickling Marbles

## *The Sounds of the Radio Ballads*



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 haversack. Sea chanties, Dixieland jazz, a snatch of oratorio, the diddle-a-dum a day ceilidh jog-trot, even the authentic *musique concrète* of the mixers. It's all there, stimulating and ingenious.

ALEXANDER WALKER IN THE BIRMINGHAM EVENING POST, NOVEMBER 1959

## The Ballad of John Axon

When Ewan MacColl presented Peggy Seeger with his disappointing rough-cut tape of *The Ballad of John Axon*, she had never tackled anything like it before. But then, nobody had. So she set to with her borrowed book on composing, and came up with some simple accompaniments for the songs. In the studio, though, some of the musicians pointed out patiently that there were one or two things that they just couldn't play:

I was very inexperienced on *Axon* ... I didn't know that you wrote for the trumpet in the key it plays in, but for the clarinet a whole tone lower. Didn't know that the concertina wasn't like an accordion – Alf said you can have a melody or chords but not both. My mother had me transcribing music at an early age, and she used to take me to concerts with the score and say 'Look, the trumpets are going to come in here ... In five bars, wait for it, flutes here, now wait for it.' I remember a boyfriend of mine was King Vidor's son, and I transcribed some complex blues in three days for him while he was gallivanting with someone else. Gave me some ability. At college I had to write a five-part fugue out of my head, but that was very basic.

Moreover, once in the studio it was apparent that her orchestrations, some of which are very clever despite her inexperience, weren't enough. Charles Parker knew they would need musical bridges and he had a good ear for what would work. 'I discovered that he was getting the musicians to record some bits after we'd gone ... I didn't like them all but he knew what he needed.' She cottoned on quickly, and thereafter wrote musical links in advance herself, though some of the sections behind the actuality were improvised or composed in the studio. As we've seen, there was criticism that the *Axon* music was too American. Of course, British folk song was largely lying undiscovered, something they would soon help to rectify. And there were few home-grown instrumentalists – Alf Edwards was virtually the only concertina player available. Moreover, 'Ewan wanted that fast banjo to signify the train. He was still singing American songs at that stage: he loved Alan Lomax's singing. They were always trying to impress each other – and succeeding.'

Apart from Peggy's racing banjo, there are two 'signature' sounds in *Axon*. One was the steam train's chuff, from a slow uphill dragging to a headlong out-of-control downhill; the other was people whistling. The mechanical and the human. (In 50 years there has been a change of musical undercurrent – where working men used to whistle, they're now much more likely to sing. When there isn't muzak.) Everywhere the railwaymen went they whistled – you hear it in the Edgely railway yard scene, and it's all over the programme

once you start to listen. It was that whistling that set the pitch for ‘You’re on your own mate, you’re on the footplate.’ Charles did the incidental whistling himself, and it’s almost worth billing as an extra musical instrument. His widow Gladys said of Axon: ‘He loved dancing and was always whistling the tunes.’ Ewan picked it up:

**John Axon was a dancing man,  
On his pins he was light and nimble,  
And often he’d stand on the old footplate,  
Whistling an old time jingle.**

The train was both a blessing and a curse. It paced the programme, but it could be tricky to keep time to, and of course in both *John Axon* and *Song of a Road* the musicians couldn’t hear the beat when they were playing. So it was all down to Peggy setting the pace from the engine in her earphones as she conducted in the studio. As she listened to it again in 2007 she picked up a few points where it caused a problem – ‘When you’ve shovelled a million tons of coal’ has to go hectically fast. On the other hand the musicians found it hard to match the measured starting-off-uphill chug of ‘The repair was done’, but Bert Lloyd handles the song beautifully, a perfect parallel for the flat voice of fireman Scanlon: ‘After we’d had us breakfast we came off the shed in good time.’ Peggy: ‘Bert always smiled when he sang, with a perfect tone. If he wobbled a bit, it gave the song a natural feel: that’s just how a railwayman might sound.’ Peggy sums up their first shot:

Towards the end it gets too overblown. The climax is dramatic in content and doesn’t need to be so dramatic in form. We’re imposing drama on it – nowadays I would do it more matter-of-factly. I orchestrated that jazz accompaniment before the crash. Does it sound too cheerful? It would have perhaps been better with a single drone behind it. But [overall] it was amazing as an experiment, considering we were making it up as we went along, pulled together out of several disparate elements. The use of the folk song types is very strong, it’s ballads within a ballad, a story within a story. At points it definitely goes over the top and pulls out two handkerchiefs where it only needs one. But it has a vigour and a spontaneity. Very strong, very nice instrumental variety.

Apart from the intermittent chug of the train, which always brings us back to the story after a diversion, apart from the terrifying crash and the fierce hiss of the brake pipe fracture, Charles produced some telling sound pictures on *John Axon*. Those evocative steam train start-up noises – hoot, hiss, clank, chuff – are Parker heaven. The sounds of the engine shed, the clanking and



whistling, the scraping of the shovel. And though he could have recorded anyone shovelling, he was a stickler for authenticity. Standing alongside a steam train in Loughborough 50 years after the crash, the old train driver Edwin Bolus recalled shovelling for Charles, who had come back to Edgeley for the effects to match the work song. 'I get there, he's in my cab, sitting in my seat. You didn't do that, you had to be invited. He sang this song and told me when to shovel – shovel, pause, signal – shovel, pause, and so on. Nice enough bloke.' Terry Burkitt remembers him coming into his signal box to ask him to repeat what he'd said when he sent John Axon on his way at six o'clock on the morning of the crash: 'He came in and sprawled down on the floor with his big black box and his microphone out. I thought, we've got a right one here!'

### Song of a Road

For *Song of a Road* Charles had another set of engines to record, bulldozers and all the rest. He doesn't get carried away, using them simply as links and colour. He takes careful pains over the sound 'setting'. The Chief Engineer's 'I think it's the soil' is backed by birdsong and the distant lowing of cows. He added some faint rustling papers to 'The detailed design had to be done' piece. Machine shop sounds for the roving mechanic's 'A garage is all right but it's a rusty old life.' By now we're getting used to the rightness of a Parker soundtrack.

As for Peggy's music: 'In John Axon what I was doing was just instrumenting the songs; in this one there was more to do. It was a delight to orchestrate. Ewan had had no musical training, could barely read music, yet had an uncanny knack of creating recitatives with harmonies almost already in place, which I just had to dig out. He would know instinctively ... where you transit into another key ... He would write a song recognising that I would know what to do with it.' It's clear they didn't like some of the monotonous cliché-ridden voices Charles had chosen, but they made a subversively witty virtue of it at times by accompanying them with a sardonic trombone.

She was still learning when it came to the incidental passages, and especially the music sitting behind the words. But she and the musicians were hampered while recording because they couldn't hear the voices at the same time:

I think I was beginning to learn what could go behind the actuality. There's too much happening in places – don't need the clarinet all the way along there, but ... the musician has no idea what's going on. I simply gave Bruce Turner a chord pattern and an idea of what he was playing against. In the later Radio Ballads he would have the sound track in his headphones so he would have known when to stop playing and let the speaker speak, so it's a little intrusive here.

I was curious to know how Peggy would react when listening to a programme she and Ewan had written off because of the arguments over Charles's script changes. But because she'd barely listened to it since, it came to her fresh: 'This is much better than I remember it. I've always dismissed this as not working. But it does work, there's plenty to it ... full of life.' Except in the concrete train section:

Charles loved that machine, moving along with great concrete turds dropping out of it, and a brush behind it smoothing it out ... But it's too ponderous. This sequence is too long, and badly instrumented. We're doing in the song what the words and machine are doing, too much emphasis. I should have stopped the background music while they're talking ... I could have instrumented it differently ... perhaps just used a piano.

Back then she never used to play the piano on stage for anything; she does now, though only for her own compositions. 'But then we had a thing that every instrument had to be portable. The concept was important to us. Where did we get that from?' It was part of what so attracted Alexander Walker in his review: 'instruments ... which a man might sling across his shoulders or stuff in his haversack.' The piano reminded Ewan of church and Scottish dance bands, and would rather spoil the idea of the wandering labourer-troubadour.

### Singing the Fishing

Peggy: 'This is the first one that really worked. Some weaknesses in the chorus. It feels more English, with a banjo picked sounding more like a four-string.' This of course is the point where the musicians in the studio can now hear the voices with which they're dovetailing, and it shows particularly in some of the transitions. Peggy was getting steadily sharper with the incidental music, reflecting or anticipating the melodies, which now had a folk-style unity. But as she listened she wasn't short of aspects to criticise. The Clarion Singer chorus found it difficult to unpick their normal sound – a group of younger folk singers, as in *Big Hewer* and after, were quicker to get the effect they wanted. She felt she was still overdoing the incidental music at times. As brilliant as Bruce Turner's playing is, like his descending clarinet marble-slide that follows Sam Larner's 'coil the ropes so as you could trickle marbles down it', it's sometimes too compelling. Of Turner's improvisation behind Sam Larner's description of the rope room, a classically trained musician hearing it for the first time said: 'That clarinet piece was so interesting that I completely lost the words.'

The two most intriguing setpieces are the storm sequence and the going-to-sea recitative. This is the one over which Ewan struggled for three days.

## SET INTO SONG

He's describing Sam's vivid recollection of his first tough days at sea. The tone of the music here might have matched the 'poor little boy, had to answer everyone's call, you know – Boy, where have you got to, do this, go there, go on, get me this ... and they were rough old boys, they were rough at you ... my uncle used to flog me.'

**And the rope drips water down your neck  
As the rope winch feeds it from the deck  
And the big new blisters hurt your hands  
And make 'em burn.**

**Them were poor old times ...**

**And the biting cold has numbed your feet  
And you feel you'll die if you don't get sleep  
Hour after hour.**

**... very poor**

Instead it bounds along at a jaunty pace, forcing us to look at it as a great adventure despite the hardships and the 'knuckle-bones of your arse' trepidation at going to sea again, with a bouncing chorus and an accompaniment that moves from guitar and ocarina to concertina, fiddle and clarinet. Sam recalls the misery all right, but he does it with such an intensity of recall as if saying, 'Ah – That was when I lived!'

The second setpiece is the storm sequence. Here we have three men, recorded separately but sounding as though they were jawing together in a pub over a pint, each taking us through his worst time at sea. Voices punctuated by the weaving of a contemplative concertina take us back to sea to relive their experiences. Imagine a storm at sea in a Hollywood feature film of the period. Masses of wailing wind and spraying spume and straining rigging, overtopped by thrashing music. How should they approach it musically? As we've seen, they decided to use the Beaufort scale of winds mounting from flat calm to howling hurricane, against the barely decipherable auctioneer. A bald juxtaposition: the harbour auction is what you're risking your lives for. A measured beginning, then a quickening of the pace as the wind mounts:

**When the sea grows dark and the glass is low and falling ...**

**Quick rise after low indicate a stronger blow [Sam – sailor's tag]**

**When your nets are stretched out there two miles or more...**

**Winds south to south west force four to six, gradually veering north west  
and increasing to force seven tomorrow afternoon [classically intoned  
BBC shipping forecast]**

**When the wind is freshening to a gale  
And climbing up the Beaufort scale  
And the wind is streaming –  
Your mind's not on the market then,  
The buying then and the selling then  
And the market prices.**

Then Sam comes in with: 'They went in this boat and 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.' No storm sounds, no whistling wind. Just the double bass concertina to personify the threatening sea. The instrument now changes from its amiable ramble in the pub to a menacing growl behind Sam's words. Play the piece and simply listen to the massive concertina when all the keys are pressed down at once. John Clarke, who was upstairs in the control room, recalled that sequence almost with a shudder, so gripping was it:

It needed maybe 12 or 15 takes. Ewan's 'sea and sky without division', it's really chilling. And every time I heard it ... when Sam goes 'there's one as is going to git us' and there's the sound of Alf Edwards' huge bass concertina going like RRRRRR, the big wave coming, and every time he did it the hairs went up on my neck: 'the big 'uns that come a-roaring at you, you can't get out on 'em ... You know there's death there if one of them gets you.' That instrument, Charles said, it's terrifying.

Though they'd been out to sea to record on a Gardenstoun vessel in heavy seas off the Scottish coast, Charles puts no storm sounds in that sequence, or any effects at all. Nor does he behind the cabin boy recitative. In fact he had a problem to solve: there were no longer steam drifters to record, and sailing boats are nearly soundless, so it's not until 15 minutes in that you first hear a sea sound – a gull. Having restrained himself until then, now

he's away. In one place on his working script he scrawls MORE GULLS!! in the margin. Thereafter he gives us diesel engines, boatyards, gulls, winch and nets and chains, harbour sounds, the auctioneer, echo-sounder, radio – and more gulls. He uses gulls as the emblematic sound of harbour and net-hauling: 'Here they are, spin up lovely, bonny herring.' For a long time he resists giving us the sound of the sea itself, and even then just once. It was suggested by the fiddler Kay Graham, who was delighted when Charles adopted her idea when stuck for a link at the start of the pre-war 'poor old times' section. That piece has an exquisite throbbing sad sax and gentle guitar background behind a succession of tales of poverty and bankruptcy. Charles on the *Fishing* usually lets the instruments do the talking. And he did the same down the pit.

### The Big Hewer

If the engine and the banjo are the signature sounds of John Axon, while Bruce Turner and Alf Edwards gave us the characteristic sound for the fishing, for *Big Hewer* it was the Mine. From the moment we hear the first pit-dry voices punctuated by the pneumatic drill, the soundscape is designed to take us down the mine and make sure we stay there. And that's done equally by sound effects, by a range of musical instruments – and by silence.

Within a minute of the drill and the metronomic tick, tick, tick, of the *Big Hewer's* tireless pick, we're going Down. 'Down in the dirt and darkness' we're descending with the cage: a crashing and clanking and rumbling, the echoing whiplash of the steel hawsers, to the hard black coalface of the opening song. Every instrumental trick is summoned to make sure we always remember we're down under the earth. After the haunting 'Schooldays Over', orchestrated sweetly and sparsely with guitar and fiddle, the bass concertina's discordant downbeat diminuendo reminds the young lad what he faces, coupled with a deep sax. A companionable tin whistle evokes the constant whistling of the men as we move into the first-day section.

Ewan said that this recitative flowed out in one creative surge. Looking back, Peggy was once more 'amazed at its musical coherence', shifting between major and minor, with rising and falling chord sequences. Its driving energy takes the 14-year-old on his first day across to the pithead, listening to the miners' Pitmatic, their impenetrable mine-top banter, as they wait to go down to the Beaumont Seam. The interspersed old Welsh and Geordie voices are given space: either silence, or a simple melodic line on banjo, harmonica or concertina. This recitative benefits from a greater variety of singing voices and chorus: Ewan's dramatic voice doesn't over-dominate as it can do. Charles is sparing with the effects – only with: 'At last, I was going to see what lay below' do we get men's voices, a distant whistle, the signal bell, and into song with 'There's the signal bell, now the

cage is coming.' That introduces several voices parading the arcane names of the jobs down the pit, from hewers and putters, brattice men and cutters, on down to the dilly bottom lads. Over 40 in all, which could sound dire en masse. But it doesn't, so well do the occupations fit the tune, and because the rhymes and the alliteration come in such profusion.

The pit sounds are deeply evocative, and Charles is careful to use them sparingly. There's a 20-second rockfall for the danger-underground section, there's the implacable monster machine cutter that 'drags itself along', coal boiling out like a wave, and we hear one final zing of the twanging hawsers at the end. He allows himself just a single echo effect. He recognises that deep underground is best evoked by the instruments. A range of concertina sounds for the hard rock that 'heaves and boils'; for the 'creaking' of the earth; for the 'breathing' of the mine; and a high-pitched edgy note for 'the darkness pressing on you.' The dry voices of the Dust section are accompanied by grim guitar riffs and the bluesy humming of a woman's voice. Fiddle and harmonica bring us back above ground to warmth and humanity in the miners' parlours and pubs. A strangely beautiful flute pastoral illustrates the days of poverty in the valleys when 'all they had was their pride.'

Peggy had lifted for Bryan Daly the blues guitar motif for Dust from a John Lee Hooker song she'd heard at the Newport folk festival, 'Flood at Tupelo.' She also wrote a verse of the signature 'Big Hewer' song, as she sat at the kitchen table feeding Neill, and created a new tune for 'Down in the Dark.' As she listened again there was much nodded approbation, and only occasionally did she frown – what's that banjo doing there? In some respects she felt it superior to *Singing the Fishing*: 'This has a far better chorus ... And it's a lovely ballad for transitions ... Charles did a beautiful job on production.'

## The Body Blow

The fascination of *The Body Blow* is in seeing what happens when the team was chronically short of time, when things didn't work as well. They had six weeks: it had to be broadcast by the end of March, end of the 1962/3 financial year. On one level it's a gripping account of what it felt like to be suddenly struck down, to come to terms with it, and to drag yourself back to as active a life as your limbs and sheer bloody-mindedness can muster. It was subsequently used as a training programme for nurses so they could understand the psychology of pain and paralysis.

Where's the music in all this compelling stuff? Well, too often it's interrupting the flow without adding anything. It's overload. There are just two singers and Peggy later hated her own 'saccharine, sickly sweet' voice. Moreover, just three instruments, with less time to orchestrate them, naturally provided less than the usual variation in accompaniment. There are some good songs, but they're virtually all on one note – aching, plaintive,

concerned, depressing. That partly reflects the nature of the suffering, true, and of course the shortage of time, but perhaps because Ewan hadn't recorded the actuality himself, didn't have the memory of it (a crucial catalyst) ticking away as he sat there composing. So the usual variety of ideas didn't come to him.

If you compare it with any of the previous four, you are promptly struck by the differences. The musical palette is pared down to what three musicians (Seeger, Edwards, Kahn) can play: concertinas, guitar, banjo, flute and harmonica. The sound effects are minimal. The songs lack variety of tone and pace. But there is a complex layering of the sufferers' voices, extremely cleverly assembled by Charles once he'd been convinced by Ewan that the idea could work. The resulting tapestry of voices braids perfectly the common threads of the patients' experience. What was crucial, too, was that the five voices, two men and three women, were soon instantly recognisable. Their stories mean the programme succeeds in spite of the songs' shortcomings.

The shortage of time meant that Charles didn't take what (few, true) opportunities there were to add effects. He had two kinds of respirator sounds, a child's skipping song, and that's it. With more time he'd surely have coloured-in effects at two or three points, notably when Norma Smith describes the system of pulleys fitted above her bed to strengthen her arms:

**There was all little hangers and pulleys and rattles, and they used to call me Budgie, cos I used to look like a budgie in a cage, and I was always hooking from one to the other, like monkeys, and everybody had them, and it was rather funny. If anybody came into the ward we all hung on these things like a load of monkeys in a zoo, all peering forwards ... And I had lots of pulleys put above my bed, which I was told that I was to hang on to and help myself. This was a new angle for me, I used to be chomping all round that bed and all these darn things used to ding ding ding all the way down the bed, it was like a tram.**

The humour in it cries out for something, some effects-instrumental mix. In the event the limited instruments available suited Charles's desire to show he could produce a Radio Ballad more cheaply, at a third of the usual cost. The orchestration could be, and was, understated and simple. But the problem for Ewan and Peggy was that they couldn't escape from the view of the polio patients as 'sufferers'. There are fewer songs, and one or two are attractive on their own, but the cumulative effect is to drench the listener in pathos. Some of the songs had their origins in the half-hour television programme that prompted the idea, but they had no time to think through

the overall shape. As a result the songs are all about suffering and all one-paced. They lift the mood only once towards the end when the recovering patients describe getting back into the real world, but the song doesn't really mirror that optimism, and lapses back:

**Home again with the ones you love this morning,  
An end to the lonely months of hoping.  
Back to work and strife and the cares of normal life,  
Now you'll have to show your skill at coping.**

Strife, cares, coping. You feel that Ewan's songs are reflecting his own feelings about the grim life of polio victims, not their own ultimate view of 'great to be alive each new morning – let's make the most of it.' Of course, it's crucial that he had not recorded any of the actuality – in the time available Charles had to do it all – so their uplifting indomitability didn't make it through to his brain's song-creating factory. As a reviewer said:

All those towering passionate declarations about 'stronger than pain is the human will to survive' all poured out in that splendid black voice of Ewan MacColl's ... only seemed to trivialise and reduce to insignificance their experiences.

## On the Edge

As we've seen, *On the Edge* is the Radio Ballad that was most criticised by (adult) audiences at the time, and the one that seems to have dated most. It's designed as a 'Quest' Ballad, constructed within a framing device of Ewan's narration song, which begins, 'A tale of the children of a troubled world.' The mediaeval Scottish bardic tune, Ewan's spare traditional singing style, and Peggy's wandering eight-string dulcimer accompaniment are designed to give it a timeless quality at the outset. This unique dulcimer is used early on again to counterpoint the sobbing of Dot Dobby, one of the programme's main speakers; thereafter we have the usual eclectic instrument mix.

The music is particularly variable and inventive, with liberal use of harmonica and concertina, piccolo and flute, clarinet and trumpet, fiddle and pipes, dulcimer and autoharp, either solo or paired with each other in unfamiliar ways. The music deliberately makes hardly any concession to what the teenagers themselves were listening to, although for the first and only time on the Radio Ballads we hear an electric guitar – but not for long. It comes in after 20 minutes, playing with bongo drums (drums of any kind were rarely used on the Radio Ballads) behind a collage of voices discussing street gang fights, then disappears again. It's replaced by the roar of a motor-



bike, the only non-musical sound effect that Charles Parker brought in, apart from using an echo machine for reverberation at one point. It wasn't the programme for effects, and in 1962 he was probably far too busy to collect them. However, the instruments and the many, many young voices fill the hour to the brim, and over the edge in places.

The glut of different voices gives us overblown collages, though when allowed to speak for more than a second they provide a wide range of tone and of regional accent, with for once a refreshing preponderance of female voices. If the four young singing voices that speak for the teenagers – Louis Killen, Gordon McCulloch, Lorna Campbell and Ray Fisher – had been used more, and if Ewan was confined solely to songs for narrator or parent, the outcome would have been more authentic. The music is there to create a mood that complements the speakers, which at times it does exquisitely. It's not at all predictable – throughout you have little idea of the sound that will come next. The meandering late-night walking (stalking) sequence is sung and spoken against Alfie Kahn's moody clarinet, similar to Bruce Turner in the depression-era piece from *Singing the Fishing*. It's brilliant, but it's sung by Ewan, not McCulloch or Killen, so it winds up being menacing rather than innocent, as this middle-aged man slows down for the girl to pass him. It's a four-minute dialogue between a speaker and a singer (Dot Dobby and Ewan), the instruments pacing along with them:

**Walking down the road, you know, sometimes, coming home, get the all-night bus, about twelve o'clock.**

**Twelve o'clock,  
Dark, silent,  
Last bus gone,  
Drinkers gone from  
Pubs all closed and  
Streets all empty  
Streets all  
Empty streets**

**It's not a busy place, but there's fellers all walking round, trying to pick me up. I say, 'No, thank you.'**

**Hear beat of shoes and feet on pavement, high-heel statement of shoes on –  
Slow down  
Wait till she comes abreast ...**

Overall it's a frustrating piece, much less than the sum of some fascinating parts. Its design flaw, Ewan's (great but) intrusive and inappropriate voice, and that grating 1960 teenage jargon in some of the songs, mask some excellent individual and combined sections of voice and music. Listening simply to the music is fascinating. Some of the songs are just right – the programme comes alive in particular when the four young singers alternate and combine on songs contemplating first going out together, then getting married. True, the subject is certainly difficult for a Radio Ballad. Ewan wanted to follow his precept of letting the informants shape the programme, but, as Peggy said 'Teenage doesn't have a progression – it's all confusion', so he imposed a pattern that in the end didn't work.

### The Fight Game

The team's reappraisal session after *On the Edge* led them to prepare for the next Radio Ballad with great care. It's Peggy's favourite, because 'everything we tried, it worked.' They felt that the actuality was by no means as compelling as some of the others, but there is a good mix of regional accents – Scots, Midlands, London, Liverpool, Black American. They set it carefully, and Peggy said the result was to her 'speech as music and music as speech, a totality.' Ewan explained its success:

Everything worked beautifully and the reason why it did so is a simple one: the training of a boxer follows a series of rhythmic patterns: running, shadow-boxing, punching a speedball, skipping, throwing a medicine ball ... all actions done to a specific rhythm. Our task was to note these rhythms and incorporate them in songs, musical sequences and actuality blocks. By ringing the changes on a sequence of rhythms we could have a new episode without breaking the links with all the other episodes that made up the programme. I'm gripped every time I listen to the boxers. That is as near perfect as we got.

The key musical decision came from Ewan's research into the Roman gladiatorial contest, the metaphor used most often by the boxing fraternity: he found the gladiators were introduced by trumpets. They picked the two trumpeters from different backgrounds, jazz and classical. Their sound was augmented by Alf Edwards playing one of his other instruments, the trombone, whenever they needed the sound swelling or a sardonic raspberry blown after a manager's pronouncement. *The Fight Game* thus has the brassiest sound of any of the programmes, making us wince as much as Ewan's pugilistic sung commentary during the long and exhausting fight sequence.

There are two distinct sound patterns. For the fight the trumpeters' lips were as stretched to breaking point as the boxers' bodies. A trumpet fanfare

signals actual boxing action – a punchball section representing training ring sparring, the weigh-in, the fight itself – and the trumpets blare and squeal at intervals throughout the fight action. For the remaining scenes there's a wide range of musical colouring, with alternating combinations of instruments giving constant variety. Concertina, fiddle, harmonica, guitar in several styles, piccolo, banjo, dulcimer – evoking fairground, Scots childhood, training run, skipping, the condemned-cell changing room. As with *On the Edge*, Peggy has the confidence now to try pairing unusual combinations. Take a small part of the manager's section, which describes how a fight is set up. Before the verse below come older voices paced by a trombone. 'I don't want any drones in my organisation' leads to a snatch of music-hall fiddle before piccolo and guitar accompany the promoter's refrain:

**Give me the tang of liniment and the heavy smell of sweat,  
Give me the boy who draws them in, give me the certain bet,  
Give me the thud of leather and the music of the bell,  
Give me the clink of money and I know that all is well.**

The trombone then replaces the piccolo, pointing up a comically banal statement from a promoter that follows. For every scene outside the fight there's a different instrument mix, limited only by who plays what. In *John Axon*, ten musicians each play a single instrument. Now three of the eight employed here play nine between them, the versatile Alfie Kahn turning his hand to clarinet, harmonica, flute and the much-used piccolo. The spread of instrument and song style, as much as the songs themselves, keeps our interest alive in the breathers between each hectic skirmish in the ring. The songs are some of Ewan's best, now nearly all forgotten, and as many as seven are based on traditional tunes.

The singing is particularly strong, with the heavy North-Eastern voices of Bob Davenport and John Reavey punching their weight, and the lighter Scots voice of Gordon McCulloch for the young boxer. Peggy Seeger handles the wife-and-mother section in a way that pleases her more now, the men combine to provide old-boxer choruses, and the vocal action is shared out better than on the unbalanced *On the Edge*. Ewan's voice and acting ability are most impressive here, perfectly suited to anything from cheerful music-hall introduction to pompous manager to snarling trainer's second to world-weary summariser, as the piece goes from:

**There's a game some call the Fight Game, and some the Noble Art ...  
... What's left is the thrill when you count the receipts.**

## Travelling People

After the sound-effect-rich Fishing and Mining programmes, Charles had needed to provide little for the next two Radio Ballads. In *Fight Game* he provided the sounds of training gym, the weigh-in, the fight itself, the shuffling-out and clearing-up at the end. For *Travelling People* he had two distinct sound profiles – outside and indoors. The dead sound of office and living room for those who found Gypsies intolerable; outdoor noises for the Travellers – the murmuring of voices, dogs barking, a snatch of birdsong, children's play. And the first noises we hear are set in sharp contrast: our world and theirs. The 'big twelve-wheeler that shook the bed' of Minty Smith as she gave birth on the move, replaced by the steady clop of the horse as it moseys along in harness, finding its own way as she does so.

Before Minty Smith describes giving birth in her 'carryvan', *Travelling People* starts without a shred of instrumentation or sound effect for nearly three minutes. A children's anti-Gypsy playground rhyme, prompting a roll-call of pejorative names for Travellers, is followed by Ewan's opening song. It's sung in the stark unaccompanied Gaelic sean-nós style, a vocal technique described by a practitioner as 'at once the most loved and most reviled' method of Irish singing. Ewan learned it from Joe Heaney, 'whose body shook when he sang.' With virtually every syllable ornamented, it's funereally slow, and can be hard to take if you're not familiar with it. The four minutes allowed the 'Terror Time' song is one of the few criticisms one can have of the piece's construction. Paul Ferris's otherwise admiring review picked this up, saying that it 'was infected by the melancholy of the content.' It was marvellously sung, nevertheless, by Heaney and the young Jane Urquhart (Jane Stewart from *Singing the Fishing*), unfamiliar though she was with the style.

Otherwise *Travelling People* is a near masterpiece musically. As well as Heaney, two new singers appear. One is the magisterial Belle Stewart, a Traveller whose voice appears several times, who like her distant Stewart relative, Jane, took immediately to the studio microphone – and went on to a successful singing career. The other is the young John Faulkner, who gives a fine rendition of 'The Gypsy is a Gentleman'. That, the 'Moving On Song', 'Freeborn Man' and 'Thirty Foot Trailer' are all sung today, often by people who don't realise Ewan wrote them in a fortnight for a radio programme. Although Peggy notes that 'Freeborn Man' hadn't yet been 'sung-in', when it was recorded for the Radio Ballad, Heaney and Urquhart work beautifully together. With Peggy as well there are even enough women to provide a rare women's-only chorus, and to do (some) justice to the key role of Traveller women as income earners. Belle and Jane duet on the hawking verse of 'Gypsy Jack of All Trades':

**In winter when the days are short, It's in the toon we're walking,  
Our baskets on our airms while we dae a bit o hawking.  
We dukker whiles and try and sell oor wares and bits o' laces,  
For every open door there's ten are shut hard in our faces.**

This song, like 'The Gypsy is a Gentleman', is decorated with fiddle flourishes, performed with panache by Danny Levan, the last-minute substitute, who had little time to rehearse (and who didn't even make it to the credits). Once again, there's imaginative use of instruments to suit the mood: harmonica and guitar for 'Moving On Song', fiddle, piccolo and guitar for 'Jack of All Trades', concertina, fiddle, banjo and harmonica for 'Freeborn Man', concertina, banjo and flute for 'Thirty Foot Trailer'. A wickedly witty oboe joins the fiddle for 'The Gypsy is a Gentleman', at one point practising scales for 'towns and private property where decent people stay', at another dipping into a Bulgarian folk tune. It's the funniest piece of music in the entire Radio Ballad series, ending with a mock Palm Court Orchestra sign-off. One wishes Dinah Demuth's oboe had been recruited to the series earlier.

Travellers had their own musical tradition, of course. In a way, therefore, it's a pity bagpipes are missing – Belle Stewart's husband Alec was a piper who at that time was playing the pipes in lay-bys and switchbacks in the Scottish Highlands for American tourists. However, we do get some mouth music and a rattle of the spoons, weird but authentic sounds from an age-old tradition. Despite the tangible air of doom, Belle says defiantly right at the end: 'You'll never get rid of tinkers. They'll be there till Doomsday in the afternoon.' Ewan sums up the Travellers' dilemma succinctly in the final song:

**The hard-eyed men who guard the road,  
They bid us choose our way –  
And yet they will not let us go,  
Nor will they let us stay.**

CHAPTER 19

# Old Hands and Young Voices

## *The Performers*



A folk singer is a guy who lies in bed all day and goes out at night to sing songs about work.

ANON, REPEATED BY JIMMIE MCGREGOR, 2007

Those guys could read fly shit.

ANON, REPEATED BY JOHN CLARKE,  
STUDIO MANAGER ON SINGING THE FISHING, 2007

What gives us the Radio Ballad sound? It's a mix made up largely of highly skilled session musicians with years of experience, a group of enthusiastic and fast-learning young folk singers – and of course Ewan MacColl's stirring voice. The same core of musicians played throughout, though the disjointed nature of the series meant that they had to be re-assembled each time. Most of them had played with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger at some time or other, and some had been part of the jazz band formed by the immensely talented Humphrey Lyttelton, born and educated at Eton College – a mile away in upbringing but not in politics from Ewan. Lyttelton had led the 'house' band for the MacColl/Lomax *Ballads and Blues* radio series in 1953.

Almost all the singers, apart from that 'toby jug', Bert Lloyd, were in their twenties, people who were starting to make a name for themselves as folk singers, but often still with a day job. Many became key figures in the story of the folk song revival, and many are still performing in their seventies. And with very few exceptions those who took part – and that includes the studio managers and technicians – speak with great warmth of the period, describing making the Radio Ballads, as does Peggy, as an unforgettable formative experience. So who were they?

### Old Musical Hands

The only musician apart from Peggy to play on all of the Radio Ballads was **Alf Edwards**, a concertina player of genius at a time when the instrument was decidedly passé. In the late 18th century the appearance of a novel Chinese 'free-reed' instrument – where air is forced past a vibrating reed – led to a frenzy of invention in Europe. First came the harmonica and accordion, then the concertina and harmonium. Devised in the 1830s by Charles Wheatstone, a scientist and inventor born into a family of instrument-makers, the concertina sold in large numbers in the 1850s and 1860s. It was originally played only by the Victorian upper and middle classes – even dukes and earls, an Archbishop of Canterbury and Prime Minister Balfour took it up.

However, once the concertina began to appear on the second-hand market it became attractive as a cheaper alternative to brass instruments for village bands. As soon as it became common, in both senses, the middle classes stopped buying it, and in England it became a working man's instrument. For a time it was popular in dance bands and music halls as well as for traditional rural music. In fact it led to the growth of concertina bands, and with them the development of instruments with amazingly high and low registers. His proficiency on these enabled Alf Edwards to reproduce both growling storm and spooky pit to such wonderful effect. As a solo instrument it has been described variously as the electric guitar of its day and the successor of the one man 'tabor-and-pipe' of the Middle Ages.



Alf Edwards

All this enthusiasm was long gone by the 1950s. The complicated fingering, its buttons designed for chords and for rapid playing, with scales played by alternate hands, was a learning barrier when compared with the louder piano accordion, to which the piano-trained adapted more quickly. No musical slouch, Peggy spoke of how long it took her to learn the concertina when taught by Alf, who wouldn't let her play it in public for two years. He, of course, did himself no favours by teaching her, for now Ewan had Peggy to play the concertina. Her view of Alf is emphasised by everyone who knew him: a lovely man, calm, patient, always in jacket and tie like Bert Lloyd, and a wizard on a range of concertinas and other instruments.

Alf told Ewan that as a boy he had been paid sixpence by his mother for every instrument he learned. He grew up in the circus. His parents were 'Augustes', members of a traditional family of musical clowns, and he said his mother used to play the fiddle above (i.e. below) her head while balancing upside down on a tightrope. Indeed she did so while pregnant with Alf, which would have been around the turn of the 20th century. The trombone was his other major instrument, but he was proficient on many, such as the rarely played ocarina you can hear on *Singing the Fishing*. John Clarke recalls him being surrounded by an array of instruments on the studio floor. Alf was in demand whenever a concertina was needed, for films like *Tom Jones* and *Moby Dick* (when he appears as a seaman) and for Lloyd and MacColl on their groundbreaking early folk revival records. He too had a day job, a music printing business: Dave Swarbrick recalls seeing the Edwards



basement full of Gestetner copiers. Lou Killen said, 'Alf could write music faster than I could write words.' But he wasn't good at improvising, though on the later Radio Ballads he did attempt it, playing, as he said, 'without the security of the dots.'

If Alf Edwards resisted improvising, **Bruce Turner** resisted reading the dots off the page. A brilliant saxophone player and clarinettist, he plays both instruments on the Radio Ballads, the first three and the last. He's responsible for many of the memorable mood pieces, his playing intoxicating the young Scot Elizabeth Stewart on *Singing the Fishing*, and his jazz background enabling him to come up with the right sound quickly. His reluctance to use a score, said Peggy, made him at first somewhat unreliable at timing his entry – 'on *Axon* I had to cue him in and count him down' – though he got better on the later programmes when he could hear the actuality over or after which he was playing. She recalls only ever writing out two complex pieces for him that needed precise timing. He found the crossover intriguing, as he said in a letter to Charles Parker after *Singing the Fishing*: 'It was at least as musically satisfying for us as anything we've done in the more accustomed idiom of jazz.'

Turner took up the clarinet before the war at school, and learned the alto saxophone when in the RAF. He joined Lyttelton's band at the beginning of 1953, and went to Romania with Ewan later that year. In 1957 he formed his own 'jump' band, which he led throughout the Radio Ballad period, and he provided several musicians for the programmes. **Terry Brown** was a trumpeter for the band when he played on *John Axon*, but declined to go abroad with them and was replaced by **John Chilton**. Chilton, later to lead the Feetwarmers band that backed George Melly, was co-opted by Turner for *Song of a Road*. Of this, his only Radio Ballad, Chilton wrote: 'The line-up that gathered under Peggy Seeger's musical direction ... [created] a highly unusual blend of tone colours. It was a fascinating endeavour, combining folk music and jazz.'

Chilton described himself in his *Hot Jazz, Warm Feet* as 'scuffling' for work at this time. Turner's band was popular, but like many others couldn't make a decent living for long, though Turner was well regarded enough to guest star with various bands in Britain and Scandinavia. He was famously disorganised and, because he didn't like buying manuscript paper, he used whatever came to hand, typically the grey cardboard of torn-apart cereal packets, tricky for others to read. Unlike most jazz musicians, Turner was a Marxist, a vegetarian and a teetotaler, and he had a notorious sweet tooth. He once outraged the Tories he was playing for at a party after a by-election, by liberating a chunk of their true-blue-iced celebration cake. He protested: 'It was not a craving – it was a political act.'

Turner was a talented musical impersonator, and to Chilton he was one of the best soloists European jazz has ever produced. Turner's band was featured



Bruce Turner's Jump Band with four musicians who were on the first Radio Ballad: Jim Bray, back left; Terry Brown, centre; Bruce Turner and Bobby Mickleburgh on the right.

in a film made in 1962 called *Living Jazz*, directed by Jack Gold. Turner was excited by the prospect of starring in a glossy Hollywood bio-pic of the 1940s, said Chilton, 'with silhouettes a-plenty, white suits for the musicians, and an audience in patent leather shoes ... Instead, Jack ... accurately portrayed us travelling in discomfort, staying in cruddy digs and playing a style of jazz that was not particularly popular.' The film was referred to later by the band as *Living Death*. Their brand of jazz was being overtaken in the early 1960s by the sudden, if brief, 'trad' revival exemplified by Acker Bilk, Kenny Ball and Chris Barber, then selling records in Britain in huge numbers. That craze overlapped with one for the Temperance Seven, which included **Bobby Mickleburgh**, who had played trombone on the first two Radio Ballads.

The usual driver for Bruce Turner's band was the laconic **Jim Bray**, a tall, balding double bass player. When he met Ewan he was in Lyttelton's band, with which he appeared in Ewan's Warsaw play in 1955. Bray shared with his instrument a taste for large cars. At one stage he acquired the Mercedes-Benz open tourer that had once belonged to King Zog of Albania (whose short-lived and Ruritanian royal throne had once been offered to the England sporting polymath CB Fry) and which still had Zog's coat of arms on the side. Peggy describes the extraordinary sight of Bray chauffeuring his double bass, which sat stiffly upright in the back. He had never played an instrument until he joined the Fleet Air Arm as a pilot at the end of the war. A tuba player initially, he switched to double bass and played it on seven of the eight Radio

Ballads. When jazz work began to tail off in the early 1960s and bands began to split up, Bray found a teaching job in Hyderabad, and it was from there that he spoke a few weeks before he died in 2007. What were Ewan and Peggy like to work with? 'Demanding, but Peggy was patient. They used to change their minds a lot, about the style they wanted things played in, so it was hard. But OK, that was our job. And they were damn good musicians.' He thought Alf Edwards the finest musician he ever played with.

Bray roomed for a while with **Bob Clark**, the 'best street fiddler' Peggy had ever heard, who went with Ewan to Moscow in 1957 and played on *John Axon* before disappearing onto cruise ships with a jazz trio (the one for which Spike Milligan had played guitar for a spell before finding fame with the *Goon Show*). The Radio Ballad violinists varied, and in fact they only used a fiddler on five of them, not least because it was a rarity early in the folk song revival. For *Singing the Fishing* they were to have used Dave Swarbrick, but fell back on **Kay Graham**, who carried on a correspondence afterwards with Charles Parker, feeling that she had been under-used. Perhaps her style wasn't right, but Swarbrick's was, and he was used on three of the subsequent programmes.

**Dave Swarbrick** has now acquired legend status in the folk world. Ian Campbell recalls how this young lad turned up in the railway carriage in which he and his group were practising on the way to the concert for Pete Seeger at St Pancras Town Hall in 1959. Ian Campbell: 'He asked if anyone could join in, got his fiddle out. Amazing. No matter what key we were playing in, he would just listen to one verse and then ... straight in like



Dave Swarbrick

the clappers ... Revolutionary idea to have a fiddler then. It was the days of skiffle, the three-chord trick, rudimentary.' After the concert's rehearsals he asked if he could play with them on their set. At first they were dubious, but not after their success that night – 'we tore the place up, standing ovation.' Swarbrick had given up the violin when taught it at school, but his mentor Beryl Marriott, the pianist in whose ceilidh band he'd been playing guitar, persuaded him to take it up again. Self-taught, he says he always had a 'flat' hand and held the bow half or even three quarters of the way up. He played with the Ian Campbell group for five years, a period when his life was somewhat anarchic, to put it mildly: Campbell recalls redeeming Swarbrick's pawned fiddle three times. But he was very young – rehearsals started for *Big Hewer* on his 20th birthday. Peggy remembers his brilliance and his foibles. They had to insist he wore no shoes in the studio, because he couldn't stop his feet tapping, and if they ever broke for a discussion they had to take his fiddle away – it was an extension of his arm and kept playing of its own accord.

After Swarbrick parted company with the Campbell group he teamed up with Martin Carthy, with whom he has made eight albums across 40 years, and in 1969 joined the 'electric folk' group Fairport Convention as they recovered from a terrible van crash. There he played among others with Richard Thompson and Ashley Hutchings, and recorded a dozen albums with them. Later, Swarbrick's health deteriorated rapidly and he finished up in a wheelchair with chronic emphysema, out of which he eventually and surprisingly sprang after a successful double lung transplant, defying his premature obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1999. Back with Martin Carthy, they won the best duo award at the 2007 Folk Awards, and later that year he joined a re-formed Fairport to play the whole of their famous *Liege and Lief* album at the Cropredy Folk Festival. He recalled the enjoyment of playing on the Radio Ballads: 'I was earning two pounds seven and nine [about £36 at 2008 prices] doing 44½ hours a week at something I hated. Then the Radio Ballads, being paid musicians' rates. Marvellous. When I look back on it now I can't believe I was that young. I was an apprentice printer, would have been the worst in the world. It kept me from the call-up, then they abolished National Service two weeks before I jacked in the printing.' After *Big Hewer* he played on *Fight Game*, and rehearsed *Travelling People* before pulling out.

On the Radio Ballads they only used drums twice, an oboe once, and the brass was sparing too: trombone three times, trumpet four, though of course it was the boxers' signature instrument on *Fight Game*. They used two trumpeters: the Midland Light Orchestra's **Johnny Lambe**, and **Ronnie Hughes**. Hughes had learned the trumpet as a boy, and before settling down with the BBC Radio Orchestra he played with myriad bands, including Ted Heath's. Still playing in 2007 at 82, hearing *Fight Game* for the first time for 40 years brought it all back. He said it had been tough, a fascinating

challenge to play, as Peggy acknowledged: 'I gave the trumpeters a really bad time in *Fight Game*. I gave Ronnie a high note he said he couldn't hit, but he did. He finished each session with swollen lips ... They were great, those jazz musicians – they'd play everything.' The combination of the trumpets' bellow and Ewan's unremitting commentary song brings to life the animal viciousness of the ring. And of the crowd.

Two others played on more than half the programmes, **Alfie Kahn** and Bryan Daly. Immensely versatile, Kahn had recorded on tenor sax with Fats Waller in London before the war, but it was harmonica, tin whistle, flute and piccolo he played on the last five Radio Ballads, as well as the clarinet after Bruce Turner had gone abroad. Growing up in the 1920s in a London Jewish family, Kahn armed himself against prejudice with a fund of self-deprecating anti-Jewish jokes. **Bryan Daly** was a classically trained session guitarist with immensely strong hands, playing acoustic guitar at a volume that once had the engineer telling him to turn the amp down. 'When I was a child playing a guitar was like a secret society. Now everyone does it.' Peggy said he was 'a vegetarian, incredibly solid ... hated performing simple stuff', as she recalled his playing of what they called the 'grid' behind the boxers in *Fight Game*. He accompanied Ewan for some years before Peggy's arrival. 'I improvised everything with Ewan. Went all over with him, but ... hated those Iron Curtain trips, armed guards on the trains ... Peggy? Very determined. Didn't know what she was doing at the start but she learned fast. But we were professional musicians, it was our job.' At any suggestion that vegetarians were wimps he would puff out his chest to be hit, and smile when the crumpled fist retreated. Later in life he found (comparative) fame and fortune when he wrote the tunes for a new children's television cartoon series, *Postman Pat*, following a chance meeting in the street with the animator's wife.

Peggy also played guitar, as well as autoharp, mountain dulcimer, and her characteristic five-string banjo, which she could play at awesome speed. A third guitarist was **Fitzroy Coleman** from Trinidad, where he lives on in retirement. He appears on the first three programmes, playing the guitar beautifully and singing the John Axon fireman's calypso. Fitz had secretly taught himself to play on the prized guitar of his father, who drove a steamroller. 'I started to invent chord constructions and rehearse the popular ballads of the day. It was only when he caught me and realised I could play without any teaching that he allowed me to use the guitar freely.' At the end of 1945 he came to England with Al Jennings' Caribbean All Stars Orchestra with just a guitar and the clothes he stood up in, and learned to read music on the boat. He barely survived that first English winter, but his playing style fascinated people, Peggy among others, and he was never out of work. 'What a player!' said Bryan Daly, and he would know. He was part of the Manchester Ramblers set-up, 'sailing through everything with charm and a



Fitzroy Coleman

beguiling sense of humour', as Peggy wrote in her *Songbook* introduction to the calypso she wrote about him, one of her earliest songs. He joined them on stage on Sunday nights at the Ballads and Blues Club. Those were the days when earnest young guitarists were eager to learn ... Peggy remembers his performances vividly:

We encouraged anyone with a guitar to sit in the front row and help with accompaniments. We hadn't yet realised that democracy and art have a hard time mixing; the first 40 minutes of every evening were devoted to trying to tune several dozen instruments. It was devotion on the part of the seasoned musicians and trying to all. Before you sang your song, you called out the key and the chords. The whole front row would glaze with concentration and left hands would search finger by finger for the correct string and fret. Now Fitzroy was a brilliant calypso guitarist ... So he would reel off the number of bars to be covered by each chord – 2½ bars of A-Flat 13<sup>th</sup>, 6 bars of G 6<sup>th</sup> etc – and then launch into something impossible to follow. One by one we'd drop out of the race and Fitzroy would get happier and happier. He always ended the song by himself.

'But Fitzroy', I say,  
What are all those things you play?  
H-demented and Pi-R Square,  
Chords that make Segovia despair.  
And that formula you explain in a hurry  
Make Einstein worry.

## Young Voices

With the notable exception of Bert Lloyd and Ewan himself, many of the singers were youngsters starting out in the world of traditional song. The most experienced of the rest was **Isla Cameron**, who forms a link with Theatre Workshop, for she had spent a short spell with them after the war when still a teenager. It was her voice singing 'Queen Jane' that turned Charles Parker on to folk music as he sat in the BBC record library. She was the foremost female singer in the early folk song revival, and sang impressively on the first two Radio Ballads and on *Big Hewer*. But film began to take over her career. Between 1958 and 1969 she had small parts in *Room at the Top*, *The Innocents*, and *Nightmare*, and a larger one in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. In 1967 her role in *Far From the Madding Crowd* was cut, but hers was the voice Julie Christie mimed to on the soundtrack (which also includes Dave Swarbrick), and she was the film's music advisor to composer Richard Rodney Bennett.

The singers came and went on the Radio Ballads, usually because of availability, and no one singer apart from Ewan sang on more than half. The eccentrically brilliant **Stan Kelly-Bootle** was a Liverpudlian who appears only on *John Axon*, on which he sings 'Manchester Rambler'. Stan was born a Bootle but acquired the Kelly while running the unrelated Stan Kelly skiffle group. He attended the Liverpool Institute several years before three of the four Beatles were there, and joined the Young Communist League at school along with his friend Alan Durband, founder of the Liverpool Everyman theatre and a key influence on McCartney. After becoming a radar expert during National Service, in 1950 Stan arrived at Cambridge to do a maths



Isla Cameron



Stan Kelly-Bootle, guitar and computer

degree, still only 20, yet with a pregnant wife and two children in tow... There with Rory McEwan he co-founded one of the first folk clubs in Britain, learned to programme the experimental EDSAC computer, and became Britain's first computer science postgraduate.

Thereafter, computing, song and soccer went in parallel. His love of Liverpool Football Club led him to manage several players in their 1970s heyday, and he wrote two sound-and-song albums in Radio Ballad style, about Merseyside and Liverpool FC, after 'lugging a Nagra recorder around the city' to collect the actuality. Stan wrote the Merseyside anthem 'Liverpool Lullaby' and much else. He was one of the first employees of IBM in the UK (slipping under their anti-Communist radar) and subsequently became an independent writer on computing. He wrote the famously witty *Devil's DP Dictionary*, a reprise of Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*, later called the *Computer Contradictionary*. Of Stan it was said that he had more columns than the Parthenon, and he still (2008) writes a monthly online column, where he is a scathing critic of computing pretensions, of which there is an ample supply, and of anything else that comes into his head. A polymath's polymath.

Stan describes **Dominic Behan** as someone who could only sing well if drunk, which is why Ewan expelled him from *John Axon* – he was paid but didn't make it to the credits. He and his more celebrated brother Brendan were from a formidable IRA family, archetypal roistering Irishmen. (Brendan was incarcerated in an English Borstal after trying to blow up Liverpool Docks in 1939, aged 16, and wrote *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, big successes for Theatre Workshop in the late 1950s.) Dominic was a talented writer and singer, creating a number of television plays, including *The Folk Singer*, and well-known songs like 'McAlpine's Fusiliers' and 'Liverpool Lou'. He was a key friend and supporter of Ewan MacColl in the early Singers Club days, despite their falling out at intervals, and with him released an early record of Scots and Irish street songs. Two further Irishmen on the Radio Ballads were **Francis McPeake** and **Seamus Ennis**, both uilleann pipers. Uilleann pipes are traditional Irish pipes, with bellows squeezed between side and elbow. Ennis was an early collector of Irish folk song, responsible for the early folk-song series *As I Roved Out*. Another destructive drinker, he appears just on *Song of a Road*, where he sings the rollicking 'Hot Asphalt'. Stan Kelly-Bootle quotes Seamus as ordering two treble whiskies at the Queen Elizabeth Hall bar, then turning to him to ask what he was having ... Philip Donnellan described his 'gaunt frame, like a clothes horse supporting a battered grey suit.' McPeake, who sang the 'Drivers Song', came from a famous multi-generation family of Northern Irish pipers, who among other things played for President Johnson in 1965.

As we heard in Chapter 8, **Jimmie McGregor** only managed *Song of a Road* before he was whisked off with Robin Hall to a hectic touring schedule and the *Tonight* television programme. They teamed up almost by accident:



## SET INTO SONG



Francis McPeake



Jimmie McGregor

We had just casually got together, Robin and me, and after Moscow we were carted off to the Budapest festival. Performed off the cuff. I could always sing harmonies and they threw us on together. Paul Robeson actually came round and said how much he'd enjoyed what we did – two young lads singing the songs of your own country and good luck to you ... I said to Robin 'Christ, that's something if Paul Robeson gives you a pat on the back. Maybe we should work on this.' We got an agent and a repertoire [not yet of Scots songs] and were asked if we were doing anything on Burns Night. Two Scots lads ... we found one traditional song we both knew, and I literally worked out the chords and harmonies in the taxi. On the strength of that they gave us a week's trial and we did it for four years ... Fantastic learning experience. It was all live – if it under-ran you might have to add a couple of songs. If it over-ran you'd get the signal to stop immediately, and we got telepathic at finishing together at the end of the verse we were on.

*Song of a Road* had an eclectic mix of voices. As well as Ewan and Bert Lloyd, and the Irish pair of Ennis and McPeake, there were the two West Indians **John Clarence** and '**Big**' **Thomas**. Ewan and Peggy had just met them on Geoffrey Bridson's Scots/West Indian culture clash programme earlier in 1959. *Song of a Road* was the programme that decided **Louis Killen** to begin a singing career. 'Lovely Lou', said Peggy, listening to his singing on that and Big Hewer, 'very biddable, quick on the uptake.' Louis: 'My family was Tyneside Irish, sang all the time – cowboy songs, church liturgy, everything.' On *Song of a Road*

Louis befriended **Cyril Tawney**, an ex-merchant seaman who ‘had a hard time with Ewan, who hadn’t picked him – Ewan thought he sounded too like Burl Ives, too sweet.’ Louis displaced **Bob Davenport**, stricken with TB, another Tynesider from an Irish background, whose father and grandfather had been killed in an explosion before he was born. Davenport had an immense voice, and eventually sang (not enough, as Peggy subsequently reflected) on *Fight Game*.

Ewan’s strongly held opinions tended to create both enthusiastic supporters and equally forthright denigrators, and both Davenport and **Gordon McCulloch** grew to dislike him. Like Ian Campbell, Gordon McCulloch was a Scot who had settled in Birmingham – and was an early member of Campbell’s group – and both appeared in *Singing the Fishing*. Peggy admired the voices of both of them, such as in McCulloch’s ‘Up Jumped the Herring’ in *Singing the Fishing*, and his portrayal of the young boxer Peter Keenan in *Fight Game*, born in a Partick single-end. Peggy: ‘We asked him to sing in the fight sequence as if he was out of breath, and he got it instantly.’ Both he and Louis Killen were under-used in *On the Edge*.

I’ve written about **Ian Campbell** and his experience of *Singing the Fishing*, the two programmes he made for Charles Parker, and the Centre 42 productions. His highly popular folk group at the Jug o’ Punch had become the fulcrum of Midlands folk music in the early folk-song revival days. It began life as the Ian Campbell skiffle group, a spin-off from the Clarion Singers: ‘It grew ... the policy was not to audition, so we ended up with 12 members, most of them playing something to shake and rattle. We had only two guitars – it was becoming ridiculous.’ Re-formed as a folk group, they were soon very much in demand, not least to launch new folk clubs, their sound distinguished by intricate vocal harmonies and the unfamiliar fizz of Swarbrick’s fiddle. For a spell they were residents with Martin Carthy on the highly successful Midlands TV *Hullabaloo* folk music programme, broadcast to every region but London. ‘Right at the beginning of the Sixties we were virtually the only folk group in the country ... but we’re forgotten now ... Everyone knows the Dubliners have been around since mediaeval times, but Luke Kelly was in Birmingham for three years stuck to us like a leech, copying out our songs. Everybody copied them back then without permission or attribution.’ Peggy: ‘Ian did a beautiful job on the Radio Ballads, his voice is true, absolutely true.’ Campbell was a hugely talented man who had near misses with fame. In the 1970s BBC2 mounted an occasional series called *The Camera and the Song*.

It was a kind of television Radio Ballad. I did the first one, *Here Come the Polis*. A singer/songwriter and cameraman on any subject they choose. Ralph McTell, Max Boyce, Victoria Wood, Jake Thackray, Alex Glasgow all took part ... I was paired with a cameraman I’d never met, brilliant, he found some wonderful stuff. A day in the life of Birmingham, starts at dawn ... Birmingham as the workshop



Ian and Lorna Campbell, with Dave Swarbrick behind them

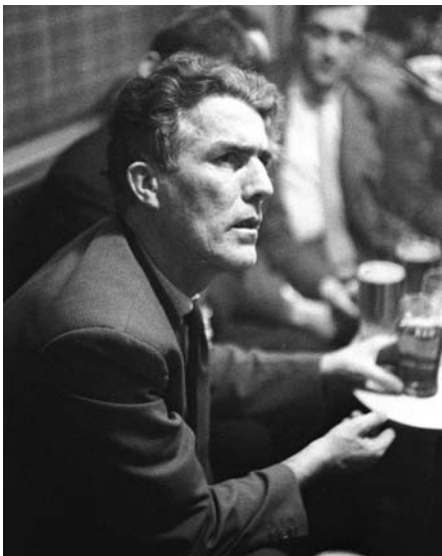
of the world. I wrote new songs like 'Chocolate Paddies', Black Country men cursing black men for taking their jobs. The programme ends at dusk with the lights going out. It was broadcast at 9 p.m. ... the phone started to ring with congratulations ... then Charles Parker came on – 'Ian you bastard. It was wonderful – you learned a lot on the Radio Ballads. Nearly brought it off.' Nearly, oh well. Great reviews – 'a rare experience, a glowing picture' – thought it was one of the achievements of my life.

The Radio Ballad songs for women were scarce. After Isla Cameron came the younger generation, with **Elizabeth** and **Jane Stewart** on *Singing the Fishing*, then Ian Campbell's sister **Lorna** and **Ray Fisher** in *On the Edge*. Ray had been studying in Glasgow when she and her brother Archie were given a 13-week slot on Scottish television's equivalent of *Tonight*, called *Here and Now*. She recalls her lecturers giving her a hard time because she earned more in five days of television than they did in a month – such was television, though it was soon back to the shillings and pence of folk club appearances. **Colin Ross**, now her husband, came down to play the fiddle and pipes for *On the Edge*, pipes which he now manufactures in Whitley Bay as well as playing.

As we've seen in Chapter 10, the journey down to Birmingham was the first the young Stewart sisters had made south of Aberdeen. Jane appeared again in *Travelling People* with her older distant cousin Belle Stewart, the source singer who convinced other Travellers that Ewan and Peggy could be trusted

as they traipsed round camps with a tape recorder in the summer of 1963. (The reverse was true too – Peggy said they could leave money and expensive equipment in a tent for days with no risk of being stolen.) Ewan and Peggy had brought Belle and her husband Alec, a piper, down to the Singers Club and launched Belle's (public) singing career. Peggy said of all the Stewarts that they took to the microphone instantly. Belle Stewart's family had settled in Blairgowrie where the raspberry picking gave summer employment. A singer, songwriter and storyteller, she came to notice through her song 'The Berryfields of Blair', after the collector Hamish Henderson sought her out in the 1950s: 'Collecting on the berry fields was like holding a tin can under the Niagara Falls', he said. Belle was nearly 60 when she sang with such unaffected pleasure on *Travelling People*. In Birmingham the Stewarts stayed with Dave Swarbrick's parents and in London later with Jimmie McGregor when they recorded for Topic Records:

Some of my Muswell Hill neighbours ... they were astounded by them, as if they'd come from the Amazon or something – spoke a different language. When Belle was young she must have been an absolute stunner. Six feet tall, had these big Gypsy cheek-bones, statuesque woman, wonderful-looking person, even in her old age. And a store of the dirtiest, filthiest stories you've ever heard – and these people, middle class, we're sitting with, their jaws dropped. Never encountered anything like it, and of course Alec, Alec McGregor, her husband, a quiet wee guy, playing the pipes.



Joe Heaney



Ray Fisher and Belle Stewart

Two further male singers were recruited just for *Travelling People*, John Faulkner and **Joe Heaney**. Heaney was a source singer from Connemara, whose songs were sung in the Gaelic tradition of sean-nós, the style in which he sings the grim 'Terror Time' in *Travelling People*. He became close friends with Ewan, who he fascinated, and who interviewed him at length in 1964. For a time Ewan imitated the style, as in the unaccompanied 'There's No Place for Me' which opens *Travelling People*, though Peggy wasn't as sold on the sound as Ewan: 'He was experimenting. He stopped it after a while – not a moment too soon.' **John Faulkner** was a younger singer whom Ewan admired, and who became a key figure in the Critics Group (Chapter 21) set up by Ewan and Peggy just after the last Radio Ballad was recorded in late 1963. He and his then wife Sandra Kerr acquired fame ten years later through the immensely popular children's TV series *Bagpuss*. They wrote and performed the songs in the folk idiom, and each spoke a character. Faulkner later made a career writing film music as well as songs, which included the Nelson Mandela anthem 'Lion in a Cage'.

## Bert Lloyd

At that first animated meeting with Bert Lloyd outside the Theatre Royal in Stratford East in the mid-1950s, Ewan's first impression was of a kindly uncle in Dickens who saves an orphan from a life of misery:

A cheerful, minor, plump Dickens character, who looked cherubic but was anything but ... good-natured, yes, enormously skilled and intelligent ... high-pitched and artificial voice ... tremendous raconteur, a very good singer of traditional English songs, especially lyrical songs.

Bert was similarly many-talented, self-taught, a natural writer and an avaricious reader. Bert and Ewan didn't see eye to eye on everything by any means, and once fell out over the origins of folk music. Louis Killen recalled a workshop of Ewan's at Keele in 1965, when 'Bert stood up and questioned Ewan's theory of folk song.' Stan Kelly-Bootle described the disagreements as 'very donnish, historical arguments ... Ewan would date something as 1751, and Bert would say it couldn't have been written before 1815 because it talks of Waterloo porridge, stuff like that.'

But, in the great scheme of things, the differences they had over folk music and the working man were minor compared to their burning desire to champion both. Louis Killen described them like this: 'Ewan would bludgeon you to death, but Bert was more a stiletto man.' Their singing voices were very different. Peggy said: 'Many people don't like Bert's singing because he floats, pitchwise, but I always loved his voice ... He sang with a smile on his face, which gave it that sound.' Studio manager John Clarke liked it too, but,

a Russian speaker, he couldn't share Bert's admiration for 'those proletarian work songs in which girls sing to their work tools.' The young Stewart sisters suppressed giggles as they watched Bert from behind, unconsciously rotating his bottom as he sang. Dave Swarbrick, equally young, 'loved him to bits ... Bert wasn't entirely happy with the Radio Ballads, thought they were too sentimental.'

Seven years older than Ewan – born on Leap Year Day 1908 – Bert had been sent to Australia for his health at the age of 16, odd-jobbing on farms for nearly ten years, and learning songs as he went. He was said to acquire languages 'the way some people collect postage stamps' – ideal for a researcher of European folk song. On his return home in the 1930s he found occasional work as a journalist, and translated Lorca's *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*. Spells at sea, including an Antarctic trip in a whaler, exposed him to sea songs, giving him material for a radio piece, *The Voice of the Seamen*, which led in 1938 to a BBC contract. Soon after the outbreak of war he collaborated on the series *The Shadow of the Swastika*, criticising Britain and America for their failure to stem the rise of fascism, just as MacColl and Littlewood were doing at the same time in their *Last Edition*. His Communist views made Bert suspect at the BBC, and at various times he, like Ewan, was effectively on a blacklist.

Bert's interest in folk song continued to grow and in 1939 he recorded East Anglian source singers in a Suffolk pub for Francis Dillon's *Saturday Night*



Bert Lloyd, the smiling singer

at the Eel's Foot, the first authentic English folk song broadcast. During and after the war he worked on articles for the *Picture Post*, but all his spare time was taken up with researching folk- and work-songs for his *The Singing Englishman*, published in 1944 by the Workers' Music Association (WMA). The first book of its kind, immensely popular and influential, its analysis nevertheless led to conflict with the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS). Bert detested what he called their 'sentimental travesty of lower-class life, with its poems and paintings of romanticised cottage scenes.' When he updated his work in 1967 with *Folk Song in England*, he apologised for the sketchy scholarship of its predecessor, 'put together in barrack rooms away from reference books ... [and] like the okapi, not much to look at but cherished as unique.'

Bert realised that a folk song revival needed to appeal to a largely urbanised post-war society via industrial, occupational and political songs based on traditional forms. Hence his and Ewan's failed attempt to interest the Trades Union movement in the revival. As fellow Communists, song collectors and singers, they collaborated intensely for a few years until Bert was largely displaced as Ewan's singing partner by the arrival of Peggy Seeger. His floating tones were the ideal counterpoint on the first four Radio Ballads to Ewan's commanding authorial voice. Songs like the workman's 'Saturday Afternoon' in John Axon, 'Roving Rambler' from *Song of a Road*, recalling Bert's own itinerant days, and 'Shoals of Herring' in *Singing the Fishing*, all evoke perfectly the slightly world-weary labouring man who has seen it all:

**Oh shift boys, shift, do the job and draw your pay,  
When this road is finished I'll be moving on my way.  
I'll clean my tools and wrap 'em in a pair of oily jeans –  
You'll always find me working where you find the big machines.**

It's that mix of voices – Ewan, Bert, and the young blood – as well as the great diversity of musical colouring conjured up from those experienced instrumentalists, that gives the Radio Ballads a sound that still fascinates today. All were assembled by Charles Parker's deft fingers, fine-tuned ear, and bloody-minded determination. The Radio Ballads had propelled Charles into a world that had delighted him, but that exciting time was now over. What would he do now?

## CHAPTER 20

# From Ballads to Banners

*Charles Parker, 1964–80*



I've never met anyone with an ear like his. The way he made the programmes, every sentence was put together as a piece of art. He wanted to make Art ... He taught me the soft interview, simple questions, waiting, panning for that speck of gold among the dross.

DILIP HIRO, WRITER AND JOURNALIST, INTERVIEWED IN 2007

In the BBC, anyone who by his or her attitudes or behaviour was thought to be different, very easily got a reputation as an eccentric, or a person who was difficult ... Such a reputation clung year in and year out, was nourished and embroidered by the smallest incidents and was passed on, generally enlarged, until it could become a powerfully corrosive force which affected the prospects and possibilities of your work – and even your survival.

PHILIP DONNELLAN, FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 1980S



## Radio 1964–72

Now a tireless documenter of English folk traditions, Doc Rowe was at his parents' house in Torquay when they put Charles Parker up in December 1966. At the time Charles was working with Philip Donnellan, his lifelong ally and friend, who was making a film on the blind, to be called BD8. Charles was helping him with some recording and doing his sound editing, but naturally got so emotionally involved with the plight of the blind that he decided to put together a radio programme on the same subject. Torquay on the English south-west coast held one of the two RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) rehabilitation centres, and Charles was interviewing blind people and their carers. I shall dwell on this programme at some length because it marks the point at which Charles Parker's fortunes at the BBC go into a steep decline, and it illustrates his personality perfectly, as does this quote from Doc:

He came to stay with us at Torquay while he was making it. We watched Cathy Come Home while he was here – that'll give you the date. My mother and sister always talked about this remarkable bloke. All night you could hear the sound of him going through tapes. Throughout breakfast he was reading the paper, working at the Uher [recorder] ... Cursing under his breath, scraping at the cheese. Charles – do you really want cheese on your toast? – Oh, bugger.

Donnellan and Parker were perturbed by many of the things they discovered about the treatment of the blind. In particular they were concerned by what they saw in workshops, where many inmates – a word Charles thought was apt – felt exploited. They had been institutionalised from a young age, sitting at factory workbenches for their subsistence and pocket money. Moreover, there was a general reluctance at the time to encourage the blind to move independently outside the home. In Torquay Charles met Lee Farmer, an American campaigner for the use of the 'Hoover' long cane, invented by an army sergeant in 1944 to help blinded soldiers. This is the now-familiar cane that blind people swing from side to side in front of them. Farmer discovered that Britain – the RNIB and others – was years behind the USA in adopting it, and lacked an ethos which encouraged self-help. The main researcher in Britain, the brilliant Dr Alfred Leonard of Nottingham University, emphatically agreed, and helped with the programme.

Philip Donnellan's television documentary went out in the autumn of 1967. It was welcomed by independent campaigners for the blind, but antagonised those responsible for their welfare, notably the RNIB. Lee Farmer wrote to Charles from Illinois saying that it looked as though 'Philip's arrows had hit their mark', and hoping that the programme had 'pinched the proper toes.' Its title BD8, incidentally, was the name of the form that blind or partially

sighted people were required to complete before they could claim benefit. For various reasons it wasn't fit for purpose, and after years of campaigning it was eventually improved in the 1990s and finally replaced only in 2004, nearly 40 years after the programme was made.

Charles Parker pressed on to make an hour-long radio feature, which was originally scheduled for broadcast in late March 1968. But he was using folk song for illustration, and trouble with fixing recording dates delayed him. Recording eventually took place in Birmingham and London at the end of that month. With no London studio available, they went to Frankie Armstrong's flat to record. Frankie was a young folk singer with severely deteriorating eyesight whose experiences and voice Charles used in the programme: she wrote a song for it based on one in *The Body Blow*. Until recently a social worker for the blind, she had been forthright about her demeaning treatment. And, no, she didn't want to be a capstan lathe operator, thank you.

I talked about the dire state of most of the non-statutory blind agencies, how in my experience those of us who had a visual impairment were stereotyped, and hence limited, by the very agencies who were supposed to encourage our independence ... He ... was appalled at what he found. Charles had the capacity to fire people's smouldering resentments into full-blooded anger. This led to the formation of the Blind Integration Group (BIG), which ... was a crucial step in our moves towards self-definition and self-help.

When in June Charles had a rough assembly of what he wasn't allowed to call by his preferred title *Let Me See*, he submitted it to the then controller of Midland Region, David Porter. Charles felt that what he'd put together so far hadn't done full justice to the actuality, so he was surprised and energised when Porter said that he'd like to propose it for an Italia Prize entry. From that high point of optimism, Charles's work at the BBC began to come under increasingly critical scrutiny, and what happened when *The Blind Set* was finally broadcast on 9 October 1968 came as a terrible shock to him. It was bad enough that the director of the RNIB, then in its centenary year, should on hearing an advance copy promptly send an internal memo to RNIB staff forbidding them to listen to it, as representing only the 'lunatic wing' of the blind. Given that and a vehement letter of protest from the RNIB to the BBC's Director General it was hardly a surprise – but humiliating – that Charles should be carpeted by the same Porter who had encouraged him in June. But that the audience research figures were so poor? And, worst of all to a now-impassioned supporter of the blind, that most of the letters from blind listeners themselves – 24 out of 32 – were so critical?

Newspaper reviews varied. Jeremy Rundall in *The Sunday Times* said: 'A moving and skilful mixture of past and present, ballad and edited tape showed how we treated the man with the white stick as an alien ... a horrific image of a

Dickensian set of attitudes.’ The then *Guardian* journalist Gillian Reynolds, in one of her first reviews, realised what Charles was trying to do: ‘I heard a programme one night about what it was like not just to be blind but to live inside a blind world. I had to write about that one.’

It used the familiar and easily irritating collage form. Usually this form palls as efforts to pad out and brighten up a subject become glaringly obvious ... [It was] used here, in a far more subtle way, to break down the obvious emotional response to the subject of the blind, to allow the listener a more complex and yet more rational appreciation of what it’s like to be blind... A picture was gradually built up of the gradual emancipation of a group from the whipped beggars of the 18th and 19th centuries to now. We don’t want pity, we want help, would rather risk than rot. The impact was far greater because it was in sound only.

Reynolds, who ‘then made all speed to get to know the rest of what he’d done’, compared *The Blind Set*’s approach and impact to that of Peter Nichols’ recent play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, about a couple with a mentally handicapped child. But it was the Birmingham Post’s reviewer Keith Brace who expressed the listening public’s negative majority view:

The technique was like a tape-fiend’s nightmare, so quick, mumbled, muffled, souped-up and electronically rained over that I must have missed every third sentence. The ear must be given time to absorb. The folk songs [organised, not written] by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger had no contemporary relevance. These just got in the way of what sounded like fascinating off-the-spool comments on an often desperate state of life.

David Wade in *The Times* felt ‘there is a terrible insistence about Mr Parker’s productions and though his material was superb he ... could learn to slow down.’ One of the audience research listeners said: ‘There was a whining and self-pitying tone to the programme which blind people might resent.’ They did. In essence, the programme revealed the unheard voices of the disadvantaged blind, often working-class, who had been shovelled into what was effectively a humane successor to the Victorian workhouse, their independence steadily institutionalised out of them. Hitherto inarticulate, they had truly been out of sight and out of mind. The programmes were largely heard, though, by the articulate blind middle class, who had fought their way out of dependence, were proud of it, and wanted that successful struggle celebrated.

Listening now, 40 years on, I was quite ready to find the programme a self-indulgence, an excess of method over content, akin to *On the Edge* in its over-use of collage. It wasn’t – it was compelling, and indulgent perhaps only in its admixture of folk song, folklore and poetry when (as in *Body Blow*) its riveting actuality could stand on its own – and it is by no means hard to

understand. Of course, Charles doesn't give authorial signposts at the start of his programmes, so listeners must be attentive from the outset, and join up the dots themselves. Moreover, Charles was indignant when he made it, and that comes over in the choice of content, if not in his surprisingly emollient voice, deliberately bland and detached. Pam Bishop played the guitar on the programme and recalls Charles's anger at the time. In the grounds of one centre, when walking together the blind weren't even allowed to do what was natural, to hold hands – they had to hold each end of a piece of string instead.

Charles's honest determination to reply to everyone who wrote in after his programmes, however critical their views, reveals a typical agitated self-criticism. He had forgotten, he said, that programmes have to make an impact on a single hearing. He told Lee Farmer it was a pretty devastating failure on his part that the programme had been 'almost universally abominated' by the blind themselves. They 'misconstrued about every element', particularly the irony, and 'one of the most terrible revelations for me was the cultural deprivation of the blind.' He took some heart from a few letters of warm appreciation, thanking him for drawing attention to the RNIB's chronic reluctance to take up new ideas, and to their tendency to portray the blind as 'deaf and daft as well' so they can raise more money, the need for which dominated their thinking. The newly formed Midlands Long Cane Club thanked him for his 'tremendous help to blind people in their struggle for independence.' But his supporters were not the people who mattered. A month after the broadcast Porter, in a volte-face from his original enthusiasm, wrote to him with this devastating conclusion:

The controller of Radio 4 is critical of Radio Ballad style programmes in general, not just *The Blind Set*. It's an expression of his own judgment but also his assessment of the ordinary listener's view. I share his opinion on both points and would welcome a curtailment of the use of MacColl and Miss Seeger in contexts where their contribution appears unnecessary. Why spoil the taste of beautiful home-grown lamb by smothering it with an artificial Spanish onion sauce?

That first sentence wounds Charles deeply – it's now clear that he will be prevented from making anything in the way he passionately wanted. He said of his programmes: 'Reality tends to be fairly uncomfortable. I am not giving information about experience so much as communicating the experience. This is very disturbing because you make demands on the listener.' He writes a tormented draft paper, expressing fierce arguments for the form's retention; they were asking him to:

Renounce techniques that have produced the most widespread and impressive body of Radio Criticism since the war ... the ideal marriage of vernacular speech and traditional song ... On available budgets the only alternative is straight jour-

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nalism. If this is what's expected of me, then I must ask for an official directive to this effect, and the abandonment of radio as a significant form of expression.

But he doesn't pursue it. From that date in late 1968, Charles is on borrowed time, and he has to fight for most of the programmes he makes. Some of them are broadcast in the Midlands only, effectively marginalising him. Many come in for internal criticism, and few receive a favourable audience reaction, though newspaper reviews continue to provide plenty of solace. However, no broadcast gets the kind of plaudits the Radio Ballads received, and Charles gets increasingly despondent. But he won't compromise, continuing to make programmes about contentious topics that set his BBC masters' collective teeth on edge, persisting with the use of traditional song, and defiantly doing without a narrator's voice whenever he can. Philip Donnellan was withering about the BBC's preference for authoritative commentary:

What has evolved is the pattern of the Front Man, the quintessential Whickerwork figure which ... the Controllers find most useful in terms of programme control (you can eat your dinner while they drone on) ... The alternative, a rejection of the mediating godlet ... means programmes must be labelled 'a personal view'.

From 1968 Charles began to work with a brilliant young journalist from India, Dilip Hiro, now an eminent writer and Middle East expert. His 1967 article on Asian teenagers in Britain in *New Society* led to two half-hour radio programmes – one of which went out the night before the UK cabinet met urgently to discuss how to regulate the flow of Asian refugees from Kenya – and Charles went on to make more with him. For the aspiring Hiro, Charles was the ideal mentor in radio:

He was a genius with sound, a true eccentric genius. The most highly attuned ear I've ever met. His hearing was so sensitive, yet visually he was almost blind. Did one documentary, I saw it, I thought the man has no visual sense. But I've never met anyone with an ear like his ... And for him it wasn't 9–5, it was a 24-hour job ... He booked a studio all day for a 30-minute programme, using Stuart Hall for linking. He'd spend half a day on the first five minutes, notice the time ... then he'd have a migraine attack, and – literally, I'm not joking – he'd lie down on the studio floor till it was over.

They went on to make programmes on meditation, on black views of whites in the USA and Britain, and *No Surrender*, which looked dispassionately – without an authorial voice – at the views of Catholics and Protestants in Londonderry before the violence really exploded there. Hiro said Charles held the fervent simplistic view that his programme could make the ordinary combatants see the light, since 'they were all working class, after all.' Radio

critics usually regarded the Hiro/Parker broadcasts more highly than did the audience, whose ears and radios weren't as finely tuned as Charles's. David Wade in *The Times*, in a droll review of an early 1972 programme about students in India, summed up one prevailing view about late Parker:

I'm glad to say that *Snowballs in Calcutta* was one of Charles Parker's more restrained ... Not only did he employ a soft-spoken narrator ... but it was possible to understand almost everything everyone said: some of them were even allowed to utter several sentences on the trot. Mr Parker likes to apply his colours. He is by temperament an action painter, and some of what lands on the canvas would have been better scraped off before showing; but for all the mannerisms and occasional excess I look forward to his programmes. They have a vitality and an interest which is none too plentiful.

Alas, he wasn't going to be able to hear many more. In 1969 came *Broadcasting in the Seventies*, a BBC document heatedly deplored by most of its own programme makers. In both radio and television, imaginative producers were being allowed progressively less latitude. They complained in a public letter signed by a roll-call of brilliant young talent: Tony Garnett, Ken Loach, James McTaggart, Kenith Trodd, Jim Allen, Roy Battersby, among others. Paul Fox, Controller BBC 1, slapped them down in a briskly candid reply:

If you refuse to take our gentlemanly hints we shall censor or ban any of your programmes which deal in social and political attitudes not acceptable to us. The odd rebel may be allowed to kick over the traces occasionally. Providing this is an isolated event, and not part of a general movement, it only helps to preserve our liberal and independent image. But enough is enough.

In Birmingham *Broadcasting in the Seventies* provoked a strike, with Charles and Philip Donnellan in the vanguard of a resistance which would mark their cards (in that small space still unmarked). A BBC reconstruction the following spring removed Charles's job as a Senior Features Producer. He rejected a demeaning offer to work for *Woman's Hour* at a lower grade – this would be known as 'constructive dismissal' to a later generation. He was given a year's grace, working directly for a new Controller of Radio 4, the young Tony Whitby. That he was not a Parker enthusiast was an understatement: in particular he disliked Charles's setting of music against words. He was incandescent at the opening of *Snowballs in Calcutta* because Charles had laid music behind 'difficult' speech – if he can't follow it, what chance do ordinary listeners have? 'Do the Network Controller's views not matter a damn?' was Whitby's rhetorical question. Charles was obtuse on the matter – often he wouldn't give listeners an easy lead-in to programmes before their less well-tuned ears could lock on. Whitby gave him a formula:

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Here is the recipe that has proved palatable. Take a subject of immediate importance in British or International affairs, select a manageable aspect of it and throw the rest away. Clean and chop into small pieces. Add a large measure of intelligence, a general dash of wit, a tongue and a little heart. Allow to marinate for 2–3 weeks and serve very cool.

Whitby had already upbraided Charles the previous month over *The Iron Box*, a powerful programme about the treatment in San Quentin prison of the ‘Soledad Brother’, George Jackson, mostly in Jackson’s own words. After ten minutes Whitby had turned it off in disgust, which left him at a (temporary ...) disadvantage when attacking it. Of all the later programmes that Charles produced – it was written by Godfrey Hodgson, later a distinguished journalist and writer – it had quite the best reviews. Here are extracts from two of them, first from Jeremy Randall in the *Sunday Times*, then Wade again in the *The Times*, this time finding no fault:

Rundall: ‘Brilliantly produced by Charles Parker ... the description of the treatment of the black prisoners in solitary confinement, forced to live naked among their own excrement ... recordings of Jackson’s own voice, the screams of hysterical women ... and the gentle if melancholic Blues music ... added up to superb radio verité.’

Wade: ‘No cries of bias or axes-to-grind will explain away Jackson’s appeal, because it lay in the voice and feeling of the man. He told a tale of prison life that made your hair rise up ... [after which] we heard the prison staff describe some more-or-less benevolent institute of correction. Both were San Quentin, and with all allowances stretched to breaking, there was no connection. In that gap the listener detected something infamous.’

That gap was what Charles liked to leave the listener himself to bridge. What made Charles so indignant was that Whitby was in his view such a philistine that he wasn’t even prepared to make the effort to listen. To Hiro, Charles seemed set on a collision course, determined not to change direction. By the start of 1972 he already knew he was facing redundancy. That November, the letter almost sealed, his programme with Hiro about Sri Lankan terrorism called *Siege of Ceylon* was refused because Charles wouldn’t have a voice of authority to ‘authenticate’ the sounds of torture. It’s sadly ironic that his best remembered late work is the superb *Long March of Everyman*, an immense 26-week series, intended by Whitby to show that radio could match television’s cultural blockbusters, its Clarks and Bronowskis. But it wasn’t Parker’s. Michael Mason, a Parker supporter, had produced it with the young historian Daniel Snowman. It set out to tell the history of Britain through old documents and letters, read out by ordinary people. Charles’s

job was to manage the recording process, advise the researchers, and scour the country for the 800 speakers. That the programme was criticised for having too much incidental sound – it was actually assembled in the BBC ‘Radiophonic Workshop’ – is the crowning irony: Whitby was forced to defend it.

Charles Parker was made to leave the BBC on 31 December 1972 after two years of unavailing resistance to a BBC management tier determined he should go. The news of his sacking angered many within the BBC, and triggered a question in the House of Commons, but the outrage gradually fizzled. (According to Hiro, it did have one beneficial effect on the BBC – the fuss dissuaded them from sacking Philip Donnellan, ‘more dangerous because his programmes were on television’.) Donnellan called it ‘a shameful episode in the catalogue of BBC stupidity and malice.’ Some Parker supporters in the BBC assembled an engagingly scurrilous spoof about the sacking, which they secretly turned into a black vinyl record and smuggled onto every BBC in-tray they could. Gillian Reynolds in *The Guardian* wrote a supportive piece about Charles and ‘his’ Radio Ballads, inadvertently provoking protests from Ewan MacColl. Afterwards Charles continued to pitch ideas to the BBC as an independent, but they were rarely taken up. So Charles turned to his other interests: he had many, and they were waiting to consume him.



The zipped-up Charles Parker cartoon by Richard Yeend that accompanied the Gillian Reynolds article.



## Re-education

His re-education in life had begun, as he afterwards stressed, with the tape recorder. Thanks, moreover, to hours of debate with Ewan MacColl, to the knowledgeable and articulate miners, and to his exposure to the deprivation of the poor and outcast of society, his political views underwent an almost total shift. His humanism, said Philip Donnellan, was a mixture of Christianity and Socialism, one committed to the cause of the underdog. The shift was consolidated when in 1964 he attended a Marxist study group under the brilliant intellectual George Thomson, professor of Greek at Birmingham University. George, the husband of Katharine Thomson, who supervised her Clarion Choir members in *Singing the Fishing*, had spent some years in the remote Blasket Islands off the Irish coast. He'd made a particular study of their persisting Gaelic culture, in which he found echoes of society 'before property ownership'.

This, like most of Thomson's views, appealed to Charles, now a long way from the man who was stunned by the defeat of Churchill in the Labour landslide of 1945. He became first an energetic Marxist, then after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s he joined Thomson, MacColl and Peggy Seeger on the Maoist side of the fence. But Thomson, like Ewan, was an atheist, and this Charles found much harder to deal with. He had held off Ewan's arguments and sarcasm through the Radio Ballad years. 'Say a prayer for an old sinner, Charlie', from a smoking Ewan to a praying Charles, as they dosed down in a twin-bedded room after a long day's recording. But Thomson's subtle questioning was tougher to refute. Ian Campbell recalled an occasion at the Thomsons as far back as 1961 when Charles's belief in God was put to the test. Ian mimicked his anguished pacing:

There we were at Katharine Thomson's house having a discussion, while out in the garden was the gardener, frail little old man, balding, came in, tatty pair of old flannels – of course it was George Thomson. Charles was pontificating. He was putting Ewan in his place about atheism. George came in to get a cup of tea. 'Very interesting' – he never made a positive statement – all he did was ask questions. 'Does that mean you believe...?' Bluster, flannel. 'Then how does that equate with what you said earlier?' Went on for about an hour. Ewan was looking at me – Ewan was not participating in this. Nobody in their right mind would interrupt George Thomson, one of the greatest minds in the world. So gentle, so hesitant about it. 'Well in that case...' Charles was pacing up and down. 'Oh for Christ's sake, George, I can't disprove it, but I know you're wrong.' He was never the same. Within six months – he was no longer a churchgoer. Had become active in the Labour party – active in CND. I don't think he stopped believing in God. I think he stops believing in the Christian church. The argument was about to what extent organised religion was responsible for wars. Of course George said God is a concept vitally needed by people, which is why we invented him – in our image.

Philip Donnellan illustrated this wrestling match between Religion and Communism by quoting from one of the scores of sixpenny notebooks Charles used, this from 1957: ‘By the Grace of God I might do a tiny bit to move us as a people in the right direction ... but how to avoid embracing communism as the only logical end of a growing concern for and understanding of the common man’s potential?’ He resolved his dilemma ultimately by deciding Jesus was ‘the only true communist’, and finally he came down to: ‘The Church is a fantastic distortion of Christ’s teachings. The communist party is I suspect of Karl Marx’s doctrines, The Labour Party of the Webbs, The Bach Society of what Bach himself stood for...’ So it was a plague on all your houses, and especially the BBC, who had fired in him a vision of public service broadcasting, then left him to pursue it as they chased viewing figures. Then fired him. Philip Donnellan, writing of his BBC masters, said:

Incapable of fathoming the humanity of his technical ideas and arguments, unresponsive to the political implications and apparently quite unfitted to offer competent editorial guidance as to how the ideas could be more effectively communicated, they rejected the material and slammed him into a drawer labelled ‘Expensive nuisances sub-category Marxist’ and turned the key.

### Life Outside the BBC

At the same time as he was taking part in George Thomson’s study group, Charles was running a class on folk music at the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) in Birmingham. He hadn’t lectured before, and he wasn’t an academic, so at first he ‘struggled to articulate his ideas’, said Trevor Fisher, one of the eager young WEA group who found him inspiring. To Fisher, Charles was engaged in a war on imported American culture and pop music. ‘Unlike a conventional lecturer he had no set body of knowledge, ideas or skills which he was seeking to criticise or impart.’ He used the classes and a set of young enthusiasts to build up a thesis through polemic and argument, and they thrived on his inclusive approach. The culture he wanted to spread was one based on traditional song and true vernacular speech. He was confident enough after a while to propose that he front a series he’d planned with Ewan MacColl on British folk music, past and present, to be called *The Song Carriers*. In the event his boss felt it better that Ewan should introduce the series, which he did in a typically fluent style but with an atypically ‘cultured’ voice. It ran for 14 weeks in the winter and spring of 1964–5, overlapping with Charles’s six-part *Landmarks* series, and each week’s 45-minute programme was eagerly awaited by the new generation of aspiring folk singers, some of whom took part. To Charles’s chagrin, though, it was only broadcast on BBC Midlands, not that it put off

the enthusiasts. Karl Dallas cheered him up when asking him to write an article for his *Folk Music* magazine:

I think the *Song Carriers* is bloody marvellous, and only wish it could be picked up more easily down here. A small group of keen young revivalists meets here every Thursday huddled round a radio tuned to BBC Midland: the atmosphere is rather like members of the Maquis tuning in to London during the war.

From this point on, Charles never seemed to stop. In practice he achieved increasingly more outside the BBC than he did inside it. His dedication to exploring folk music grew, inspired and reinforced by Ewan and Peggy's new 'Critics Group' in Beckenham. He would flog the car down there from Birmingham every week to take part. It led him to invite members of the local folk clubs to his home and to set up the Birmingham and Midlands Folk Centre. Out of this at Ewan's suggestion came the Grey Cock folk club, which began in 1967 at the Roebuck pub in Birmingham – 'Attracting a rag bag of anarchists, liberals and lefties and lots of young people like myself,' says Dave Rogers, 'with no firm political affiliation at all.' He was one of the Grey Cock habitués who began the experimental Banner Theatre. Charles's lectures 'blew his mind' with its mixture of politics, singing, ballad analysis and folk theatre, and soon helped to give Rogers that firm political affiliation.

Charles's enthusiasm for radical community theatre had been set back by the collapse of Centre 42. But it had been whetted again by his participation in the *Festival of Fools* (to be explored in the next chapter), which was a Grey Cock annual highlight – they used to take two coachloads down to London each year. The Grey Cock group had put together a number of projects based on folk song. *The Funny Rigs of Good and Tender-hearted Masters* used rediscovered songs from an early 19th-century strike of Kidderminster carpet weavers. *Of One Blood* was a powerful piece Charles assembled about racism. The shows were semi-staged in the folk club tradition, with little 'stage' as such, and an ethos of audience participation. This evolved into Banner Theatre more-or-less by accident. In 1973 Charles was struggling to fill the final slot in a series of folk evenings when Rhoma Bowdler suggested they do a staged version of *The Big Hower*.

Rhoma Bowdler was a Shirley Valentine figure, an orphan who had left school at 13, by then a single mother with three children. She had been a 30-year-old comptometer operator when she went on a course on the 'New Maths' to help her youngest, and there discovered a latent appetite, first for learning, then for teaching. By 1973 she was an uninhibited drama and dance teacher, running an evening class in Martha Graham dance, and exploring the use of Commedia del'Arte methods. She'd learned Laban techniques at college, and had to drill the untutored Grey Cock singers, 'to get them from one side of the stage to the other without falling over.' She constructed a

piece from the *Big Hewer* script and mounted it for a single night. Dave Rogers described *Collier Laddie* at the outset as a ‘fairy-light production politically – it focused somewhat nostalgically on comradeship and craft pride in the industry.’ (Later Ewan wrote some new material for them to toughen it up, reflecting the miners’ growing militancy of the early 1970s.) But it still faithfully reproduced the sections on the dole, disasters and dust, and it was such a great success before an invited group of miners – some of them friends Charles had made on *Big Hewer* – that they were invited to tour South Wales with it. It was well received there, in an echo of Theatre Workshop’s tours of 20 years earlier.

### Banner Theatre

By now Charles had left the BBC. He divided his 1970’s life between teaching, folk music and Banner Theatre – while constantly doing favours for anyone who asked. Though he was one of Banner’s main instigators, and was very much the group’s elder statesman and inspiration, he was aged well over 50 in a company most of whom were much younger. Their productions were painstakingly assembled by the group, though it took them a while to get Charles’s persistent point about actuality, about using the words of real people and not constructing their words for them. Dave Rogers, who has been in Banner’s engine room ever since:

I couldn’t understand when we first started what Charles was on about with actuality, and it wasn’t until I got out and started recording some ... that it actually made any impact. It seemed a rather quaint idea.

In 1976 Banner mounted a show about the ‘battle’ of Saltley Gate, a Midlands gas and coke plant that had held a huge reserve of coal during the 1972 miners’ strike. The miners belatedly realised that Saltley was preventing the strike from really biting. The energetic young militant leader Arthur Scargill promptly deployed 400 of his new ‘flying pickets’, supported within a few days by up to 10,000 Birmingham workers. Their action forced the Gates of Saltley to close, and three weeks later the Conservative government of Ted Heath capitulated. In 1974 Scargill actually brought it down, in the heady days of worker power before new trades union laws and the Margaret Thatcher government broke the miners ten years later.

*Saltley Gate* set the pattern for the typical Banner show, based closely on Radio Ballad methods but using visuals as well. In this case the interviews had already been obtained by Charles Parker and others for a potential project that the BBC wouldn’t countenance. After a painstaking transcription process the script and songs were put together by a group that included Charles, Rhoma, Dave Rogers and his wife Chris. It took the form of a series of games

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between workers and the forces of law and order, starting with a polite cricket match and ending with American football that becomes a pitched battle. The lines were given to performers who remained 'anonymous' so it was clear they were retelling the words of real people. The performance began with singers on a rudimentary stage, joined gradually by actors from the audience. Commentary was provided by a combination of slide backdrop, a jester figure, and a simple narrative linking song written by Rogers in MacColl style:

In Birmingham City at five in the morning  
The streets are deserted, the air it is chill.  
A mile from the lights of the brash city centre  
The scarred face of Saltley is silent and still ...

... It's six in the morning, a cold Sunday morning,  
The bus stops deserted, no rush to clock in.  
A clatter of working boots shatters the silence:  
In Saltley a battle's about to begin.

At the end of the play the performers enter en masse from the back of the hall and encourage the audience to join their march onto the stage, singing:

A solid wall are we  
Close the gates, close the gates,  
Our strength is unity,  
Close the gates!  
No power in the land can gain the upper hand  
When we united stand,  
Close the gates,  
When we united stand,  
Close the gates.

Strong simple stuff to stir the soul, and to summon the audience up onto the stage. The folk club ethos out of which Banner was born encouraged this audience participation and made *Saltley Gate* a popular show in Birmingham and on tour. And, knowingly or not (Rogers says not), it contained all the elements of the early agitprop theatre that Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood had pioneered before and after the war. Earlier, Banner had performed an agitprop show in support of imprisoned building workers, *The Shrewsbury Three*. They even did it on a train journey taking workers to a mass rally in London, playing extracts in every carriage in turn. The next year Rhoma Bowdler and the other women in the group mounted a women-only show,

Womankind. Between then and 1980 *The Great Divide* described racism in England; *Dr Healey's Casebook* attacked public sector cuts; *On the Brink* highlighted the troubled Midlands car industry; *Steel* fought closures in another declining British industry. *Steel* was their first production to use professional actors after Banner (praise be) had received some funding. Until then they were entirely amateur, though, like Theatre of Action, as professional as they could be in their approach.

Charles Parker played his part in these productions, though as an actor his part was almost always the authority figure, often from the police. He was dying to portray working-class figures, but was typecast by his voice and his gravitas. He helped to develop the shows when he could, and as with *Festival of Fools* finalised its soundtrack. Not just the sound either. Rhoma Bowdler:

I don't know if I ought to tell you this ... We wanted to use slides, you see ... well Philip [Donnellan], he was doing the mining for television and he'd had a helicopter ... so he could do some aerial shots of South Wales – and the camera hadn't been fixed properly ... it was all shaky so he couldn't use it. We broke into, well, didn't break into the BBC. Charlie knew the bloke on the door ... We went to this studio and we transferred the film onto slides and we were there all night. But you see, you'd start to do one thing, like the transfer, and then Charles would see something ... which you knew was going to be of interest, but he couldn't resist making it there and then, editing, cutting it. Frame by frame. For hours. And hours and hours and hours.

Charles was by now over 60, living with Rhoma, and living as ever at a furious pace. His enthusiasm for Banner, and inclination to lecture for anyone who asked, often unpaid, wasn't helping his finances. After his marriage break-up he had signed his barely sufficient BBC pension over to Phyl, and of course was extremely concerned to make sure that he did right by her and their children. His financial affairs became a quagmire, one which Trevor Fisher waded through over a lengthy holiday, sorting out several years of unfiled tax returns for him. The only regular income was from teaching. Once a week for over ten years Charles set out before dawn for London to lecture on Radio to Tony Schooling's media classes at the School of Communication at the Polytechnic of Central London. His students there were split: he either bowled them over, or alienated them by his vehement dislike of pop music. Tony Schooling:

I like teaching ... it is even better if you can get a genius to do it for you ... For me all this began in 1969 [at the BBC]. Charles Parker came to give a morning's lecture on Actuality. As so often happened with Charles, about half the members of the course saw a great light, including me: that morning I discovered I knew nothing. And about half were disturbed, discomfited, didn't see the point, and

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what they saw they didn't like. Fierce discussion went on all through the lunch hour ... There are few who are neutral about the ideas and the programmes of Charles Parker.

He got up before 5 am as usual on the morning of 7 December 1980 to drive to London for his weekly lecture for Tony Schooling. Back after lunch, he had a meeting with Dave Rogers on Banner matters, then onto an evening rehearsal of *Steel*. Afterwards he was coming back from a meeting in a nearby pub when he called out that he couldn't see. Rhoma called an ambulance and followed it to the hospital in the car. 'And I took his boots with me, ridiculous. I had no idea of the seriousness of it.' She phoned Dave Rogers – 'If anyone brings him a typewriter I'll kill them' – and asked him to tell Charles's wife Phyl. Next morning Rhoma had to be at school for a crucial meeting. 'Dave and Pete [Yates] came over. I didn't know about his dying till then. I was so angry. He could never say no to anybody about anything.' He'd died of an aneurism. Later that same day John Lennon was shot. When Melvyn Bragg was asked a few weeks later which figure most important to him had died in 1980 he said Charles Parker, a brilliant innovator who had died unheeded. Michael Mason described him as:

A real creative genius in radio, a passionately romantic radical, acutely sensitive to oral history. His editor's razor blade was like a sculptor's chisel, releasing the hidden poets in people.

Anne Karpf:

Some people reckon that the decline of the BBC began when Charles Parker was edged out of broadcasting in a cravenly bureaucratic fashion and the whole innovative flowering of radio came to an end.



CHAPTER 21

# Ballads of Accounting

Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, 1964–89



Aince mair the poet's fa'en swack  
And noo lies flat upon his back  
In Bromley hospice  
Whaur a' day, weel-faured sonsie lasses play  
At piercing him wi' lang syringes,  
And greet each new series of twinges  
Wi' eldritch laughter,  
And stroke the patient's head thereafter  
While thinking up new ploys  
And cantraips fresh  
Tae execute on his poor flesh,  
And here comes that auld wife Mistress Dracula  
The deevil's dam for mair o' my blood.  
Here, tak aff your dram.

EWAN MACCOLL, ON A POSTCARD TO BRUCE DUNNET,  
WRITTEN FROM HIS HOSPITAL BED AS HE AWAITED HIS LAST  
OPERATION, 12 OCT 1989, TEN DAYS BEFORE HE DIED



Four weeks before Charles Parker died he wrote to Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger in praise of their new album *Kilroy Was Here*. 'I am at a loss for words as I always am when I try to express what all of us owe to you both.' Charles had admired Ewan from the moment they met, so amazed was he by Ewan's talents. In consequence Charles castigated himself severely after a forthright article by Gillian Reynolds appeared in his support in *The Guardian* in November 1972, as news was emerging of his sacking by the BBC. The article unintentionally raised Ewan's hackles by referring to Charles Parker's Radio Ballads, and occasional further occurrences in the years to come would generate more tension.

This wording was unfortunate, if understandable. It was all part of the campaign to persuade the BBC not to sack him, and radio reviewers then as now tended to cite the producer of programmes rather than the writer, as to a notorious extent do film reviewers, for whom writers seem not to exist. Charles needed all the support he could get. He was at a low ebb at the end of 1972, but so too was Ewan. Peggy – and it had taken a long time for her own crucial contribution to be credited – wrote to Charles on Ewan's behalf. Charles apologised promptly in letters published in two broadsheet newspapers, saying that if any one person deserved the plaudits for the Radio Ballads' success it was Ewan, but the damage had been done.

Ewan felt wounded – it was the second time he had been written out of history. The eventual success of Theatre Workshop after it settled down in East London had been built on the years of drive, energy, writing and ideas he had put into radical theatre with Joan Littlewood after they met in 1934. But now it was Joan's Theatre, and he had been forgotten. Now it was happening again. Just as Charles had put years into the BBC, only to see it eventually spurn his ideas, vision and methods, so Ewan had with the theatre. Now in 1972 he was recovering from seeing yet another imaginative venture founder – the Critics Group. This had brought him via folk music back to the theatre. It had begun in 1965 when he and Peggy were asked to provide study sessions for young aspiring folk singers. It was soon a superb weekly training ground in singing, songwriting and performance, but in early 1972 it had broken up with such acrimony that Ewan was, in Peggy's words, totally devastated. Its misjudged title referred to self-criticism, but by outsiders it wasn't seen that way.

## The Critics Group

The folk revival that had begun in the mid 1950s was alive and thriving ten years after the Radio Ballad period ended. Ewan and Peggy had been running their successor to the Ballads and Blues, the Singers Club, since 1961. They had become virtuoso performers in great demand all over the country and in North America, giving concerts that were rigorously rehearsed and

studiously staged. The combination of Ewan's voice and Peggy's musicianship was compellingly powerful. Moreover, they constantly researched, collected songs in the folk idiom new and old, and tried to find the 'right' way to sing them to do justice to their often unknown writers. They consistently sold out venues, they had a wide and widening repertoire, and they kept a record of what they sang and where, so their listeners kept hearing fresh material. If you go round folk clubs today people seem always able to remember when they first heard Ewan and Peggy, and what they sang, and which songs lifted the hairs on the back of the neck.

They were professional in the best sense of the word. But every movement which develops passionate adherents splits sooner or later, and the folk revival was no exception. Ewan became increasingly keen to focus on Britain's native folk song heritage. Always determined to stave off an American cultural takeover, he was irritated by the number of young singers affecting American accents (as he too had done before he saw the light). One evening in 1960 Peggy laughed so much at a Londoner singing Leadbelly's 'Rock Island Line' at the Ballads and Blues club that members of the audience got cross with her. This led to a vigorous debate that went on for weeks, ending when the club's members voted for a rule that singers there could only perform songs from their own nation's heritage. It applied only on their club's stage – of course you could sing what you like in other clubs or the bath.

Peggy is at pains to point out that this policy was not unilaterally decided by Ewan, as many people outside the club assumed. But because he was of Scots parentage and English upbringing, Ewan, of course, could sing from both cultures with impunity, which did nothing to soothe those who were affronted by the restriction. Hadn't music always ignored national boundaries, as Ewan, Bert Lloyd and the other researchers discovered? Ewan would often appear arrogant, and could easily alienate those whose enjoyment of singing was destroyed by criticism, or – worse – by being casually dismissed or ignored. Soon the folk world was divided into those who mocked Ewan and Peggy as the High Priests of the folk revival, and those who regarded them as quite brilliant, streets ahead of their rivals, and agreed with their insistence on instilling a professional approach. Why must folk music be so amateurish, when no other branch of music was? Why shouldn't singers train their voices as musicians did their instruments, for style and feeling as well as accuracy? Ken Hall, inviting them to be the first guests at a new folk venue in Bradford in February 1969, was first disconcerted, then impressed:

First of all they sent a contract, which stipulated two straight-backed chairs and a stage. A stage? Well, we cobbled one together out of beer crates. They were the first folk singers I'd seen doing strenuous vocal exercises before they began. And they wouldn't start without dead silence. But what performers.

After their second son Calum was born in 1963, Ewan and Peggy invited the young folk singer Sandra Kerr to provide live-in childcare in exchange for musical tuition. Betsy Miller was nearly 80 by now, and though her mind and tongue were as sharp as ever – Peggy said, ‘We got on when we weren’t living together. We lived together for 16 years’ – she couldn’t cope much longer with two children when their parents were touring. They were away one night a week on average through the 1960s, as well as late at the regular weekly Singers Club sessions. Their workshops were increasingly popular. Sandra was bright and keen, and, with other singers eager to learn, the Critics Group was formed in Beckenham late in 1963. Young singers were given long reading lists, exercises in warming-up, voice production and Stanislavskian methods of approaching a performance, and above all learned to think about the origins of what they were singing. After an energetic singing and songwriting career Sandra Kerr now lectures on the only Folk and Traditional Music degree course in England, at Newcastle:

Ewan was just amazing. I’d never met anyone who was so well read, who talked politics and literature and art and philosophy at the drop of a hat ... I know I couldn’t do my job now anything like as well if I hadn’t been in the Critics Group. The stuff they passed on to me, the ways of working, of sourcing material, looking at ballads – things he brought from Theatre Workshop ... like the Laban theory. He translated that into vocal terms and I still use it today with my students. I am working with second year students – they are collecting actuality from their grandparents ... the stories are extraordinary.

One of Sandra’s own experiences illustrates what Ewan called ‘The application and the idea of IF’. Imagine yourself as the original writer of a traditional song. You can’t truly convince when singing a song about a seduced and murdered woman unless you can work yourself into it. As Peggy describes it:

Sandra brought a problem to the meeting. She loved ‘The Gypsy Laddie’ but she was getting tired of it ... Ewan then launched into a ten-minute biography of the girl – it was all out of his imagination and it was like a short story ... he literally brought her alive, gave her a social class, clothes, feelings, hair colour, hopes and ambitions. Then all of a sudden he turned to Sandra and said, If you were that girl, how would you sing ‘The Gypsy Laddie’? She immediately began to sing and it was electrifying. When she finished we all sat there, stunned. She’d never sung that way before. After a short silence Ewan began on another story. This time he described the girl but with *different* given circumstances. Instead of being poor she was rich. Instead of being young and lovely, she was older and disillusioned and plain. He spent another ten minutes on this new scenario and it was just as gripping and detailed (the detail is always important) as the first story.

Then he stopped and asked Sandra again: If you were that girl, how would you sing it? Damn me if Sandra didn't do it again. She floored us – and the song was quite different, had a whole new feel, a whole new aura surrounding it. Ewan did it twice more ... Sandra came through almost in a state of shock herself. She certainly wasn't bored by 'The Gypsy Laddie' any more.

Some of the first Critics Group 'students', like Gordon McCulloch and Luke Kelly (later of the Dubliners) had left early. They found it impossible to cope with the criticism, especially McCulloch when it was made publicly in the *Song Carriers* radio series. 'I didn't agree with him. Why did I have to take it?' Those that stayed largely agreed with Brian Pearson, that: 'It was compelling, enormously exciting. I learned an incredible lot. Ewan was the most extraordinary charismatic kind of person, he could talk ... absolutely beautifully.' A fierce taskmaster but generous with his time, blunt with his criticism but delighted by a good performance, Ewan was passionately determined that his young charges should bring the music of their past to life. He wanted them to share his vision of the world, so he added political classes. They were keen to learn, quick on the uptake, and they soon inspired him to resuscitate his latent first love – theatre.

## Festival of Fools

In 1964 Ewan was asked to write a piece to celebrate the Co-operative Movement at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, and although it only played once the multimedia show he produced restored his appetite. Within a short time he had the Critics Group performing and touring with his version of a mediaeval mumming play, with St George on a Harley-Davidson. The motorcycle motif recurs in the *Romeo and Juliet* for schools radio which followed it. The play, directed by Ewan and produced by Charles, was set in the East End of London among rival used-car dealers. The play uses modern language, its dialogue improvised in Critics Group sessions, and Romeo dies in a motorbike crash. Ewan wrote songs that included the lyrical 'Sweet Thames Flow Softly', and the result was much admired by teachers of working-class children for whom Shakespeare had hitherto seemed entirely irrelevant. From there they moved on to a New Year show, which ran most winters from 1965–6 to 1971–2, the *Festival of Fools*.

The show drew its inspiration from the mediaeval tradition of celebration at New Year. It tracked the past year's events month by month. The first attempt was tentative, but the performers (all initially amateurs) threw themselves into it with such gusto and growing skill that it became ever more elaborate and professionally drilled. Backstage support came from Singers Club volunteers canvassed each September. Ewan wrote the songs and skits from ideas assembled by the group from newspaper cuttings through the

year. He directed, Peggy directed the music, scheduled rehearsals and as ever managed the masses of detail, while Charles, an assiduous participant in the Critics Group despite his full-time job and the long journey, went to town on the sound effects with his usual zeal. The early shows were variable, with 1967–8 severely criticised in *The Guardian*, but once it got into its stride the show always sold out, and its audiences were as passionate as its performers. It was expertly done, high speed and funny, unashamedly pro working class, anti-American, anti-capitalism, and the like-minded audience lapped it up. Peggy loved the shows, describing it as one of the four great things in her life (with falling in love, her children, and the Radio Ballads):

All this was presented in the spacious function room of The New Merlin's Cave, a pub on Margery Street near King's Cross. We had three stages in this rectangular room: one tiny one in the corner, one larger one in the centre, and the third being the high formal stage at the end of the room. Every available space between these stages was taken up by chairs, 170 of them, set without a spare half-inch between them and always filled. Between the stages and between areas of the audience there were very narrow aisles along which the actors would run, dance, leap in the dark, always aware that someone's bag, pint or foot might send us sprawling. Often you had to run these aisles just after the lights had gone out, before your eyes got used to the dark – we'd practise running them with our eyes closed, counting the steps that took us from here to there, from there to there. Step down off Stage Three, then six stride steps and two stairs up onto Stage Two, manoeuvre past two chairs and a table in five steps, down two stairs on the other side, four stride steps to the four stairs of Stage Three, two small steps and sit down in your chair in typing position: I had ten seconds in which to do that run – in the dark.

At its best it had a surreal brilliance. The *Parsley, Sage and Politics* radio series by Mary Orr and Michael O'Rourke about Ewan and Peggy includes two sketches which illustrate it. The first picks up a news story about 'The Battle for the Smallest Room in the House', five companies competing for the toilet paper market. This becomes a 20-minute opera set in a Gents' lavatory, an exposition of monopoly capitalism performed by a row of business men in bowler hats at a urinal. Excuse for a scatological rhyme and pun fest:

We've worked out the logistics and have accurate statistics  
In relation to the nation's pattern of evacuation.  
We have certain fundamental information ...

In this tight little island, and the Republic of Ireland,  
There are fifty eight million souls. Arseholes.  
All members are equal in matters so faecal ...

Less flippant but even more surreally funny is a sketch that begins ‘Once upon a time in the land of Groat Grooting Brit’. It was written with the kind of Joycean wordplay that a few years before had been popularised by Stanley Unwin – a Birmingham radio man who had worked with Charles Parker – and by John Lennon. A virtuoso monologue depicting ordinary people as nut gatherers, it was delivered like a children’s bedtime story by Brian Pearson. Threaded into a dazzling Parker soundtrack that uses every sound trick in the book, it takes Britain from the origins of capitalism through its colonial empire (Oompah Oompah), via war, freedom movements, the devaluation of the (nut) currency, the rise of Armoricar, to the Vietnam War, waged against an enemy so ignorant of the rules that it doesn’t know when it’s beaten. Pearson was a natural as the *Festival of Fools* narrator:

Ewan ran an efficient ship. It had to be – it was very complex, a tight timescale, all sorts of difficulties putting the show on ... Charles produced the sound effects, quite complicated. It was in a nondescript London pub, with three stages, all that lighting, really elaborate. We bypassed the fuse box with six-inch nails, amazing the whole place didn’t go up ... all those chairs jammed in.

For Ewan it was 1940’s *Last Edition* revisited. Young enthusiasts becoming slick exponents of radical theatre, espousing the causes he remained passionate about: the Vietnam war, apartheid and racism, nuclear weapons, the gap between rich and poor inherent in a capitalist system. As with most sketch shows – such as *That Was The Week That Was* (1962–4) and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969–74) – the content was highly variable. Pearson: ‘Some rubbish got through but the best bits were wonderful.’ Attending it became a favoured relaxation for the many West End actors who tended to agree with its politics. Billie Whitelaw, Harry H Corbett and Nana Mouskouri were regulars, but few theatre critics deigned to come. This was before the London Fringe, so there was no *Time Out* to publicise it to mainstream theatregoers. Joan Littlewood overcame her irritation at Ewan’s departure from Theatre Workshop to visit and approve. (Success had inevitably forced Theatre Workshop to become ‘safer’. It was now partly funded by West End transfers so it had to respond to the critics, and the salary gap meant that company stalwarts like Corbett, George A Cooper and Richard Harris constantly moved on. Its strengths were being diluted.) Peggy looked back on the period like this:

We got ... actors and producers from the conventional theatre establishments, as well as some of the Theatre Workshop people, Ewan’s old cronies. In fact, Ewan ran the Critics Group ... as if it were a formal theatre troupe ... He attended and scrutinised every single performance. He sat taking notes at the little bar while Calum sat clapping his hands and giving impromptu cues. Calum was four years

old and he would sit on the counter of the sound/lighting bar, rooted to the action. During one pregnant, dark silence in between sequences, his little voice piped up: ‘You don’t know what’s going to happen next, but I do!’ Then ... we would get those notes. My, would we get those notes! We had to sit, scripts in hand and take whatever he handed out. There was no debate, no defence, no excuse. He laced into Jim for milking his speech, into Pat for walking too slowly, into me for a wrong pace of song, into Sandra, into John, into Bob, into the chorus singers for messy cadences ... nobody ever escaped with a bad or tired performance and the show got better and better. The Festival was often so good by the time the run ended that we all felt that we should be moving it to a proper theatre and making it available to a lot of people ... but of course, we always took it off and started on our next venture: a recording, a series of clubs, a new look at some vocal style or other.

Those who stayed in the Group year after year were totally dedicated. I have often wondered how all those who had 9–5 jobs managed it ... getting up at 6, to work by 9, working till 5, travelling out to Beckenham or to Kings Cross by 7, working till 10.30 or 11, getting home by midnight, then starting the whole thing over again ... for two or three months. As each sequence rolled off Ewan’s typewriter ... I’d make copies, make sure everyone had their parts, arrange a rehearsal schedule, arrange the music, train the musicians, get the singers to all sing exactly together – and on the recitatives, many of them out of the folk song style, that was murder. Our kids saw very little of us during those months, September till the end of February – for the Festival usually ran from the beginning of January for six or seven weeks.

It’s unfortunate that the death of the Critics Group is perhaps better known than its life. Brian Pearson: ‘That’s the kind of thing that happens. Ewan acquires a family, trains them, and then is amazed that they want to leave home. But there were so many spin-offs for everyone.’ Frankie Armstrong: ‘The rhetoric was of democratic sharing and communal ideas, but ... he was in charge – he was keen to have all our ideas but he would do the writing. He was a genius ... and a great critic, but he couldn’t take criticism himself.’ Like many impassioned idealists of the Left (or anywhere), Ewan found it difficult to cede or share control, and in particular to accept criticism of some of his over-long sketches. Comic writing is often best done by more than one person, so variable is our sense of humour – Muir/Norden, Galton/Simpson, Feldman/Took, the Python team – and they do seem to need a screening process. (Spike Milligan as ever excepted.)

At the beginning of 1971 Ewan suffered a severe bout of depression. An exhausting year of touring at home and abroad in 1970 had been followed by the best ever Festival of Fools. But during the run, on his 56th birthday, there began the health problems that would dog him for the rest of his life. It

shook him. He took stock, for once looked at himself critically, and decided he needed to devolve control of the Critics Group. He wanted to turn it into a professional revolutionary theatre group in the immediately post-war Theatre Workshop mould. He left the group to plan it while he took several months off everything but performing, for which he could always psych himself up. While he often didn't like what his erstwhile students came up with, they clearly enjoyed the independence. Though he and Peggy still kept up a demanding touring schedule in 1971, he decided not to risk the huge annual effort of preparing *Festival of Fools*, so it became largely a compilation of their best sketches. The strains began to tell, and at the end of the run the Critics Group collapsed in a rancorous heap. Many of the group went off to form a lively but short-lived East End experiment in co-operative theatre, Combine, before disappearing into new lives – sadder, wiser, and infinitely more skilled and knowledgeable.

Ewan retreated, nursing a sense of betrayal tempered with annoyance at his own shortcomings. The great theatre project had evaporated, but 1972 became an unsuspected watershed year for the family. In April and May Roberta Flack's version of Ewan's 'The First Time Ever' topped the US singles charts for six weeks. Within a year it had sold a million copies and the royalties made the family financially secure – for the first time ever. They bought a new car and a holiday cottage in Galloway in Scotland. In December Peggy gave birth to Kitty, who had to sleep on the dining room table because they were short of space. Betsy was still with them, with her own room in their two-floor flat in a large suburban house, but they never considered moving.

After his great creative period from 1957–70, Ewan now took an almost complete break from writing during the 1970s, returning to it at intervals when the spirit – or a Cause – moved him. Their performing schedule slackened a little, but the illness failed to diminish the power of his performances. Against the backdrop of a fading folk revival, Ewan and Peggy still often filled the clubs wherever they went, at a rate of nearly a show a week. Those who saw them in that period describe them as highly professional, courteous, encouraging and approachable, generous with their time and especially with their song archive in Beckenham. Twice in the 1970s they made successful tours of Australia. However, between the second at the start of 1979 and a projected American tour that May, Ewan began to suffer the health problems that would debilitate his last ten years. He had a heart attack in Italy in 1982, and another in America in 1984. They hadn't stopped travelling abroad – he sang in America again in 1986 and in East Berlin in 1988 – but his increasing physical fragility was making foreign tours perilous, though his vocal power barely diminished. All those years of heavy smoking, though he'd now stopped, were offset by the rigorous daily voice training.



In place of new creative writing came a series of projects that didn't tax him too severely. From 1971–3 he and Peggy worked with Philip Donnellan on television versions of three of the Radio Ballads (Chapter 23). Their record making didn't slow down either – from 1971–89 they produced nearly one a year, the same rate as before. Many were for their own new label, Blackthorne, recorded in the studio they constructed at home in Beckenham. In 1977 they published their long research into *Travellers' Songs from England and Scotland*, a real family effort in which the children took part (echoes of Peggy's childhood, if not the laborious transcription). They went on to publish *Till Doomsday in the Afternoon* (the title based on a quote by Belle Stewart from *Travelling People*), about a travelling family, the Stewarts of Blairgowrie.

Ewan made a brief return to playwriting. In early 1982 John McGrath of the radical theatre group 7:84 decided to incorporate *Johnny Noble* in a season of 'Clydebuilt' plays in Glasgow in early 1982. Directed by David Scase (who had played the lead in the original Theatre Workshop production which came to Glasgow in October 1945), it featured the young Scots singer Dick Gaughan singing the first narrator. This was Ewan's old part, and Gaughan managed to control his alarm when he found the original, his hero, sitting in the front row on the first night. A play set in the unemployed 1930s but playing in Margaret Thatcher's Britain, with steelworkers' livelihoods under pressure and the miners being lined up next, it was illustrated by the simple early songs that Ewan had later dismissed:

In Durham County it is the same,  
The pithead gear is standing still,  
And men are filled with a sense of shame  
For idle hands and wasted skill.

Originally a BBC writer who had scripted some of the episodes of the influential *Z Cars* series, John McGrath had met Ewan when part of Arnold Wesker's original Centre 42 group. McGrath was a man after Ewan's heart, a communist Scot producing radical theatre in Glasgow for 7:84. Named because then 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of Britain's wealth – figures that have barely changed since – it had helped to jump-start a political theatre that had been more-or-less stalled since the touring Theatre Workshop had settled in 1953. The prolific 'Fringe' theatre that we now take for granted had started in Britain at the end of the 1960s with groups like People Show, Portable Theatre, Welfare State International. In those years of student protest, a key factor was the abolition of censorship on stage in 1968, for no longer did companies have to submit scripts for scrutiny, and they could improvise with impunity. McGrath's 7:84 began in 1971, Charles Parker initiated the amateur Banner theatre two years later, and political and community theatre took off.

On and off, Ewan had been working on a play about an ageing sea captain made redundant by the switch from sail to steam, based on Ben Bright, an old mariner they had interviewed at length. Gratified and encouraged by the restaging of *Johnny Noble*, Ewan joined 7:84's board and finished the play, *Shore Saints and Sea Devils*. Although turned down by McGrath (as were two other of Ewan's plays which he modified and submitted) it played at the Library Theatre Manchester in late 1983 with David Scase in the lead. Ewan described it in *Journeyman* as 'Quite the best thing I have ever done.' However, reviews were mixed: Robin Thornber in *The Guardian* called it 'One of the most powerful plays I've seen for years [but] ... becalmed in the doldrums of its own verbosity.' If Ewan had written it in the Theatre Workshop days Joan Littlewood would have briskly sorted that out. Indeed, she ventured from her vagabond retirement to see it, liked the central premise, but was typically brusque about its shortcomings: 'I could put it right in a week.' But Ewan was a soloist now, no longer part of a theatre company.

Disheartened by the intimations of his mortality at the start of the 1970s, and so delighted by Kitty's arrival that he spent more time at home relaxing, Ewan wrote far fewer songs for a period. From the 1970s Peggy selects only five of Ewan's songs for his *Songbook*, though they include the coruscating 'Legal, Illegal'. There were six from 1980, but only one in the next three years, as his health deteriorated further. Was that seam worked out? No. The miners' strike of 1984 generated a further great burst of writing energy, in which he wrote small masterpieces of channelled rage whenever he saw a cause that needed an anthem, and the *Songbook* contains 24 songs from the last five years of his life. His son Neill recalls him being so powered with anger on behalf of the miners in 1984 that he would work 18 hours non-stop. The tunes are now mostly all of his own devising: from 1984 songs such as 'On the Picket Line', 'Holy Joe from Scabsville', and the blazingly indignant 'Daddy, What did you Do in the Strike?' with its varying chorus, the first and last of which follow.

Daddy, what did you do in the strike?

Did you tell the NCB to do its worst?

Or did you save your lily liver,

Sell the union down the river?

A scab, a blackleg, one forever cursed!

Daddy, what did you do in the strike?

Did you scab and let your workmates fight the fight?

How the neighbours stood and booed us,

Said we had the stink of Judas,

Daddy, what did you do in the strike?

He was not going out with a whimper. In 1986 came the angry/touching 'My Old Man' about his father, the anguished/angry 'Looking for a Job', based on one of the traditional Sicilian tunes that increasingly interested him; the angry/angry 'The Great Conspiracy', about deaths in South African prisons, and the puzzled/sardonic 'Public Unpublic'. In 1988 he wrote 'The Island', a rare song about Northern Ireland, where the conflict was one in which both sides were damned, and 'Nuclear Means Jobs'. In 1989, the last year of his life, he was stirred to write the wonderful 'Bring the Summer Home' to a tune of Peggy's, comparing the unpopular modern Poll Tax with its 1381 predecessor that led to the Peasants' Revolt. Three more songs that year – 'The Grocer', 'The Economic Miracle' and 'Rogues Gallery' – mocked the divisive 'successes' of Margaret Thatcher's government.

In 1986 had come his own epitaph, written when he was 71, after his legs for the first time refused to carry him any further on a tough moorland walk, and he let the family stride ahead. He saw the writing on the Pennine crags, where he'd trespassed and sung over 50 years before.

I sat down on a rock, knowing that my mountain days were over. For the first time I was conscious of the full weight of my years. My desolation lasted for several days and then my grief and sense of loss gave way to nostalgia and I wrote 'The Joy of Living'. In an odd way it helped me to come to terms with my old age.

Take me to some high place of heather, rock and ling.  
Scatter my dust and ashes, feed me to the wind.  
So that I will be part of all you see, the air you are breathing.  
I'll be part of the curlew's cry and the soaring hawk,  
The blue milkwort and the sundew hung with diamonds.  
I'll be riding the gentle wind that blows through your hair.  
Reminding you of how we shared the joy of living.

And, high among the Bleaklow Stones, that is exactly what Peggy and their children did.



# Different Therefore Equal

*Peggy Seeger*



My battlefield is the concert stage, the lecture hall. My job, like so many songwriters, is to place, in a memorable and enticing form, a message that, were it not hummable, might not be so easily remembered. Quite apart from that, it's enjoyable to write songs. And it's rewarding to hear other people singing a song you've written even though, as has happened a number of times in my life, they attribute it to (a) the 'folk' or (b) to another songwriter.

PEGGY SEEGER, FROM HER WEBSITE, UNDER ACTIVIST WITH ATTITUDE

## SET INTO SONG

So I become a typist and I study on the sly,  
Working out the day and night so I can qualify,  
And every time the boss come in, he pinched me on the thigh,  
Says, 'I've never had an engineer!'

You owe it to the job to be a lady,  
It's the duty of the staff for to give the boss a whirl;  
The wages that you get are crummy, maybe,  
But it's all you get, 'cause you're a girl ...

... What price for a woman?  
You can buy her for a ring of gold.  
To love and obey, without any pay,  
You get your cook and your nurse for better or worse,  
You don't need your purse when the lady is sold –

1971 had been labelled the Year of the Woman, so for that year's *Festival of Fools* (the last) they decided to celebrate women, and at the last minute Ewan MacColl asked Peggy Seeger to write a suitable song. Peggy, as usual up to her eyes in the show's organisation 'and the customary domestic chaos that came with it', rather reluctantly agreed. In the event the song came to her quickly: 'It appeared so fast on the page that it almost seemed to write itself – you'd have thought I'd been brooding on discrimination and prejudice all my life. Not so.' For the show she had her first-ever short haircut, and loved it – she said she felt like a new woman. Later she wryly reflected on how incongruous it was for a group of women to be singing 'I'm Gonna Be an Engineer' while wearing miniskirts. She was surprised when the song became a feminist anthem. Consequently it was increasingly in demand, and its success led to a gradual shift in her life, later accelerated by Ewan's illness.

Until then she had largely been defined in relation to other people – daughter-of, sister-of, partner-of. Before the 1970s letters usually arrived at Beckenham addressed to the entity 'MacColl-and-Seeger.' After 'Engineer' people began to write just to Peggy Seeger. She was increasingly asked to play for gatherings of women, which caused her problems at first because she hadn't really written any other feminist songs. The nearest was 'Darling Annie', a witty love song where the woman is happy to cohabit but not to marry – a slight stirring of a breeze of independence. Written earlier in 1971 in a rain-bound car next to Loch Lomond, it's in the form of a he/she dialogue, alternate verses sung first by Ewan, then Peggy. She has the last word with the song's final verse:

If you'll marry me I will give to you my name,  
It will shield you from idle talk and envy;  
For when you play the game you're secure from any blame,  
Not ashamed to be my darling Annie.

Thank you, love, I'm grateful for the offer of your name,  
But my own will serve as well as any;  
I don't like the game and the rules would make me tame,  
Not the same girl you married, not your Annie ...

... I will live with you, and I'll be faithful unto death,  
We will share all the burdens we must carry;  
We'll always be free, me for you and you for me –  
But when we're old, love, maybe we should marry!

Peggy and Ewan sang it together often, and marry they did when free to do so on his 62nd birthday in 1977. When they began performing together Peggy had been content to sing traditional songs and to accompany Ewan on stage, where they quickly developed instinctive musical reflexes. She was a skilful accompanist on a range of instruments. Her original five-string banjo was joined by guitar, mountain dulcimer, autoharp and English concertina (the piano on stage came much later). When she sang solo, traditional songs predominated at first: in the mid 1960s over 90 per cent of the songs she sang live were traditional. But by the end of the 1970s traditional and contemporary split roughly half and half.

In her songbook Peggy talks about her musical upbringing: 'Two traditions were ever-present and interlaced through my childhood, the formal and the traditional. They presented me with a vision of music that is wide and elastic.' Her formal music training got her hands in shape with endless scales and arpeggios. From very early on she could inscribe any tune on paper instantly, and has always been able to 'pitch' into an unaccompanied song with ease. The classical training means she readily switches between musical modes, formats and metres. But it's the folk tradition that continues to entrance her:

What a treasure chest of types and formats the folk tradition holds: catalogue songs, riddle songs, narratives, lyric songs, historical, funny, solemn, short, long, philosophical, nonsense songs ... patient Griselda, the bitter bit, the surprise ending ... parody, satire, joke songs ... the ACBC quatrain, the rhyming couplet, the repeated burden, you could go on forever. The old songs have given me so many ideas for new songs!

## The Early Songs

Peggy is as dismissive of her early songs as Ewan was of his own – ‘many 22-year-olds have written far better songs than this, so I can’t use that as an excuse’ – but prints them in the *Songbook* anyway, as she says, ‘to use as cannon fodder when teaching songwriting.’ After describing the ‘clichés and Hollywood B-movie characters’ of the *Songbook*’s second song, ‘When I was Young’, she admonishes the reader: ‘It sings well enough, but I hope you don’t like it.’ The book, whose full title is *The Peggy Seeger Songbook – warts and all: forty years of songmaking*, is an enticing masterpiece of clarity and exposition. With layout by Irene Pyper-Scott, it’s illustrated by the craftily apt cartoons of Jacky Fleming, who under that song’s text has a pensive schoolgirl querying ‘Peggy, this bit where it says: I knew no greater pleasure than to follow where he led?’

The first song of which she (and Ewan) entirely approved was written when she was holed up in France in 1958. During that stay she watched on television as a Canadian mining disaster unfolded, the first gripping will-they-get-out-alive saga to play out in public view. After she’d written ‘The Ballad of Springhill’ – with one technical verse provided by Ewan – she sent a handwritten copy to one of the survivors, Caleb Rushton. She was very moved to meet him 40 years later.

Three days passed and the lamps gave out  
And Caleb Rushton he up and said,  
‘There’s no more water nor light nor bread  
So we’ll live on songs and hope instead,  
Live on songs and hope instead.’

Peggy’s songwriting started tentatively – she cites 1967 as the first year she wrote any song that wasn’t in some way derivative. Her songwriting gained impetus from the Critics Group period – nearly 60 of the published songs are from the 20 years after it began – and burst out with 75 in the period 1985 to 1997 when the *Songbook* ends. Since then she has written about 40 more. Her second song in the book is ‘The Ballad of Jimmy Wilson’ which tells the story of a black janitor sentenced to death in Alabama for stealing less than two dollars. Its final chorus line is ‘Let men be free’, and on the *Songbook* page Jacky Fleming’s wild-haired little girl chides her by replacing ‘men’ by ‘all.’ Peggy’s feminist sensibilities were not fully roused yet.

Her activist humanism was fully roused: from early on she wrote songs about issues of all kinds. She covered apartheid, poverty, the Profumo scandal, Oswald Mosley’s re-emergence, Northern Ireland, teachers’ pay, Vietnam, LBJ, Nixon, damage to the planet, exploitation of workers, including a garbage-collectors’ song she sang on their strike picket line. If that sounds like a

set of worthy polemics, they're leavened by wit and by her own understated singing. Her tunes seem always fresh and interesting, catchy without becoming irritating. She was writing and singing some of her own songs, but never performing alone – her concert appearances were always with Ewan. It was 'I'm Gonna Be an Engineer' which gradually began to change that from 1972 onwards. Although her personality could hardly be described as submissive, she was defined, in public at least, as a tireless supporter and protector of Ewan. Her faith in his ideas, and her expression of them, led her to be bracketed with him in the kind of criticism voiced by Gordon McCulloch, who wrote this in *Melody Maker* in May 1979 under the title 'MacColl – Out of Touch?'

Ewan MacColl's polemical songs have about them a self-righteous hectoring quality, unfortunately magnified by the attitude of magisterial condescension which he unwittingly brings to his stage presence ... [Seeger] appears to share her partner's fatal weakness for homily.

Their early reviews had been almost universally positive, but later their political single-mindedness made them seem tiresome to some in the folk world. Ewan was Peggy's mentor, and provided her political education, and she went where he led. She subsequently recognised:

I went from [my] father to a surrogate one, Ewan, to whom I practically apprenticed myself from the age of 21. Ewan was always on the move with ideas and projects and I was quick to follow. To follow ...

... When you've lived with somebody for a long time, you really start to share ideas. I was probably spouting a lot of stuff that ... that I had gotten second-hand. I should have thought WHAT?

## Writing about Women's Issues

After the success of 'I'm Gonna Be an Engineer', Peggy was chastened to realise that at 40 she was as ignorant of women's issues as she had been of 'male-oriented, left-wing' politics at 20. In 1976 she started a project to write about women, with as much variety of song as possible. Typically, she set about it with the intensive research used in the making of the Radio Ballads:

I sought out battered wives, single mothers, women who had been raped, women on picket lines, and many, many others. I interviewed them, listened carefully to their voices of experience and used their words, their tone of expression, even their breathing patterns and cadences ... In the process ... I discovered how other women live. It was quite a shock.



## SET INTO SONG

The 1976 album *Penelope Isn't Waiting Anymore* was the result. Beginning with the song of contraception (failure) 'Nine-Month Blues', she went on to the ever popular – and never outdated – 'Housewife's Alphabet'. It could be trite but isn't. Based on a traditional English song, it begins like this, and finishes with a double-take ending:

**A** is for altar where we go astray,  
**B** for the bills that begin the next day;  
**C** for the cuffs and the collars of shirts, and  
**D** is for dishes and dusting and dirt.  
**E** is my energy draining away on  
**F** is for floors to be swept every day;  
**G** is for girlhood, gawky and gone, and  
**H**, fed-up housewife that's singing this song...

... **W** is for woman and washing machine  
We both need attention (you know what I mean).

We've got no union, it's eight days a week –  
They're crammed into seven, I'm out on my feet.  
So much to do – where should I begin?  
But I've got my lifetime to finish it in.  
**W** is for wings, if I had them I'd fly,  
**X** marks the spot where I sit down and cry...  
**Y–Z** for yours truly, I've gone on too long,  
And so has the system, and so has this song.

If this song was housework, you'd sing it and then  
You'd go back where you started and sing it again  
And again and again and again and again ...

She calls this piece her 'soft' housewife song – not that its successor 'Lady, What Do You Do All Day' is particularly 'hard' in the often strident feminist terms of the late 1970s, but Peggy is rarely strident and never shrill – she usually prefers humour as her complacency-slicer: 'A nurse and a nanny until I'm a granny, But why is it nobody pays me?' This appears on *Different Therefore Equal* of 1979, which Ewan called her 'hard' feminist album: it's as angry as she gets. She writes songs about crucial current feminist issues – rape, abortion, marriage, wife-battering, sexual typing, exploited women workers. Peggy: 'I sat down to write the album as it stood, which is something I've never done.' Its syncopated conversational title song ends with:

If her and him are  
 Indispensable,  
 Treatin' em similar  
 Is only sensible.  
 Reason gives us  
 The logical sequel:  
 We're different,  
 Therefore equal.

Peggy chose to use Radio Ballad interviewing techniques to create many of these songs, recording people and echoing their words and vocal structures. From interviews with Jayaben Desai, a determined Kenyan Asian strike leader, she constructed 'Union Woman II'. Mrs Desai said 'I hear myself talking' when she first heard the song. For a spell Peggy assisted in a sanctuary for battered women. In her song 'Winnie and Sam', which begins with a deceiving upbeat and jaunty lilt, she derived the song's style from Winnie's taut body language as well as from her words. Its shock effect is increased when we discover 'Winnie is a lawyer's daughter, Sam's got a PhD', overturning any preconceptions of wife-bashers as drunken working-class men. As ever, Peggy varies the song style. The long, engaging 'Talking Matrimony Blues' mixes song and speech to a rhythmic accompaniment, and blames a patriarchal and capitalist system for exploiting everybody and keeping women at home. Written, ironically, in the year after she eventually married Ewan, it starts with a smile and ends with a kick:

Girls, don't hanker for bouquet and veils,  
 They soon turn to cabbage and nappies in pails.  
 The joys and the sorrows of conjugal life,  
 All these can be yours without being a wife.  
 Yes, a good life can come to fruition,  
 You don't need a licence to give you permission,  
 You don't have to marry. You never get completely free choice anyhow. Too  
 many people you can't marry for a start. I always fancied Paul Newman ...

... So marriage is really to safeguard the boss,  
 'Cause without a workforce he'd make a loss,  
 And how could he rob 'em and screw 'em and twist 'em  
 Unless he had marriage to uphold the system  
 That supports the class  
 That exploits the man  
 Who exploits the wife  
 Who bears the kids  
 Who lives in the house that Jack built ...  
 AND JILL CLEANS.

Anger comes out most explicitly in the electrifying 'Reclaim the Night': 'If without consent he stakes a claim – call it rape, for rape's the name.' This album polarised opinion. At one end of the spectrum a reviewer said her lyrics deserved to be studied alongside the work of feminists like Kate Millett and Germaine Greer. At the other, many men couldn't take it. In a 1979 *Melody Maker* article Colin Irwin said:

It's just about the most political record I've ever heard ... these songs are so ferocious, intimidating, and single-minded that it's not a record that inspires much sympathy in this admittedly male quarter, though doubtless the militants of women's movements will adopt it with a vengeance.

From 1968 to 1985 she produced *The New City Songster*, a pocket-sized songbook, in which she assembled contemporary songs of her own, from Ewan, and from many others. With no support it was hard work, and she constantly exhorted others to contribute, and to do some writing. She described her self-imposed task as a 'single-handed, infuriated response to the apathy of so-called dedicated folk people.' In the introduction to the 12th issue in 1976 she wrote cajoling women songwriters to come forward, which illustrated her own approach – everything is material for a song:

YOU HAVEN'T TIME? Write a song about why you haven't time. YOU ARE TOO TIRED after your job as a mother, a student, typist, nurse, breadwinner or bread-maker, whatever? Write a song about that. Or perhaps write a song on the ploys being used by employers to get round the Sexual Discrimination Bill ... or on the need for daycare centres ... or about how difficult it is to get a pair of flat sandals.

Peggy was an active but not a campaigning feminist, nor was she on the extreme wing of feminism that excluded and despised men. She liked and admired many of them too much for that. In 'Dangerous Women' she reverts to sardonic humour to encourage men to imagine a reversed world: 'Cover your legs, remember to button your shirt ... the lawyers are women who say you were asking for it.' Her philosophy was well expressed in 'You Men Out There', a monologue written in 1995 for the 75th anniversary of women's suffrage in the USA, and constantly updated since. It takes pity on men puzzled by feminist anger, and explains in a kindly fashion how it all came to pass:

Long before the time of books,  
Women were magic, women were mystery.  
Way before the start of history  
Before space travel and megacities

Females were heading planning committees.  
 Wise women (now called witches)  
 And powerful women (now called bitches)  
 Managed life and death and birth,  
 Cared and shared with Planet Earth ...

## People and the Planet

The most constant threads that run through Peggy's songwriting and activism are concern for justice and for the planet, starting with that first Ban the Bomb song. Ewan took longer to awake to both feminist and ecology issues, and did so eventually through Peggy, who said in his *Songbook*: 'Ewan's songs are full of ... rearranging, conquering nature and bringing it around to doing what man wants it to do ... Ewan really talked only about mankind – that the earth revolved around men.' Compare Ewan's anguished 'Looking for a Job' from 1986 with Peggy's reflective 'For a Job', written six years later, and the contrast between them is clear. Ewan, writing of the desperation of the unemployed, sings: 'Just try me. I'll sweep the streets, I'll shovel shit, I'll do a bit of anything, willing to turn my hand to anything – anything, anything, anything. Anything.' While acknowledging that: 'without a job a man's not a man, a man needs a job', Peggy's song on the other hand questions any job that will lead ultimately to the Earth's destruction:

He'd give the world for a job, he's running wild;  
 Blindfold, brainwashed, self-centred, Pavlov's child –  
 Turn forest to desert, turn heaven to hell,  
 Turn home into nothing, will we live to tell  
 How he gave the world for a job?

Always a fervent opponent of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, she derived her influential 'Four Minute Warning' from a map printed in a newspaper showing the effects of a nuclear blast in concentric circles radiating from the centre of London. At the right pace the warning takes exactly four minutes to sing. Peggy was active in the early 1980s in the Greenham Common protest against the siting of US cruise missiles in the middle of the Berkshire countryside. She wrote the moving anthem 'Carry Greenham Home', the title song for the 1983 film documentary about the women-only peace camp. The following year brought 'Tomorrow', which she attempted to sing when she came up before a judge after being arrested at a sit-in on Parliament Square. But he choked off her protest and returned her to the cells, threatening to prosecute her for contempt of court.

In the 1980s issues ripe for songwriting continued to come thick and fast: El Salvador, Grenada, Chile, Northern Ireland, smoking, nuclear weapons,

## SET INTO SONG

torture, abortion, the poll tax, more strikes by exploited workers, Margaret Thatcher, whose government Ewan didn't outlive. Peggy continued writing after he died in 1989, only slowing down slightly as she prepared both songbooks. There were still plenty of reasons for protest, most recently the second Iraq War, which led to 'The Ballad of Jimmy Massey', written after long hours interviewing a North Carolina man who left the Marine Corps in protest after a few months' active service. But the world's woes don't let up, and she writes increasingly about the planet and its greatest despoiler, her own native country. Having written about George Bush Senior's failure to take action on the environment at Rio, she adapted this neat squib for his even more culpable son, pausing for effect at the end of every verse pair:

Bush went to Kyoto with his bag of tricks,  
Bush went to Kyoto with his bunch of –

PRIncipled diplomats who want to grab it all,  
The thought of world democracy is just a lot of –

BALderdash and nonsense, what Georgie doesn't want  
Is sharing what we've got with a lot of other –

COUNTRIES who are poor or black or just down on their luck,  
So Bush went to Kyoto to tell them all to –

FUnd other solutions, 'cause he don't want to lose  
The profits and the business, so he's prepared to –

SCREW the people, screw the climate, screw the earth and then  
Make the world a safer place for Yankee businessmen.

### A Life Change

Peggy's personal life underwent a major upheaval after Ewan died. At a time of disorientation, hardly surprising after over 30 years with him in an intensive hearts-and-minds domestic and working partnership, her friendship with the singer Irene Pyper-Scott was a crucial support. They originally met on stage as singers at a benefit for Nelson Mandela and Dave Kitson in the mid-1960s. Irene too lived in Beckenham, and much later they formed a local group called BANG, the Beckenham Anti-Nuclear Group, which tried to convince politically inactive local people of the dangers of nuclear weapons and the transport of nuclear waste. Irene often stood in for Ewan at concerts whenever his health failed him. In the aftermath of Ewan's death Peggy was devastated, and in her *Songbook* she described the next ten years as 'traumatic

– years of change, insecurity and adventure.’ She and Irene fell in love, and they cemented their relationship by entering a civil partnership in 2007.

When they’d first met in 1964, Irene was a singer with a beautiful natural voice who had been called the Joan Baez of Belfast. They sang together for a spell when Peggy was having difficulty with re-establishing a solo career. One prospective agent had said that she was ‘the leftover of a dead duo ... no spring chicken ... and not commercially viable.’ So Irene and Peggy named their duo No Spring Chickens and in 1992 gave their album the title *Almost Commercially Viable*. Peggy’s voice had been trained over the years to cross a crowded smoky folk club without amplification. Encouraged by Irene, she developed a solo career which led to a softer, more relaxed singing style, though she could still turn up the heat when needed. Her voice has stayed in magnificent shape, not least because she sticks to a daily half-hour vocal exercise regime.

At the turn of the 1990s Peggy re-examined her early performances (as she did everything else at that point) and issued *Peggy Seeger, The Folkways Years 1955–1992: Songs of Love and Politics*. An open willingness to criticise herself is apparent on the occasionally scathing assessments of the songs in the album notes, where she likened the selection process to ‘going to a class reunion and seeing as grown-ups all those kids you liked and loathed.’ She was encouraged by the reviews and, as the collection’s title suggests, began to widen her songwriting targets, not that there’s any let-up in the political song output whenever an injustice presents itself. She had written about Ewan and each of her children, now she wrote for and about Irene, for family weddings, for old and new friends. Her recent ‘Bring Me Home’ is a life-summarising song, which includes this verse echo of Ewan:

Songs of love, tales of grace,  
Of flesh and blood and bone.  
The first time ever I saw his face  
His heart became my own,  
Then his heart became my home.

In 1994 she moved back to the USA after a gap of nearly 40 years. She is still (2008) carrying out concert and festival tours in North America, Britain and Australasia. She lectures, holds and participates in workshops, and runs a course on songwriting at Northeastern University in Boston: *Some Perspectives on Songwriting*. (‘*My* perspectives’, she stresses.) She gets a real kick out of teaching, starting with youngsters who know nothing of folk music, who are scared rigid of singing unaccompanied, then go on to startle themselves and their teacher with they can achieve.

Peggy, of course, has years of performance ahead of her to match Pete Seeger, who still plays and sings at nearly 90. Pete flew over with their

brother Mike to join Peggy and her children, amid a battery of seasoned folk singers young and old, to celebrate Peggy's 70th birthday concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London in 2005. Pete orchestrated the audience's participation as boisterously as ever. Mike, an accomplished and versatile folk musician, completes the set of Seegers still performing and recording. Peggy's sons Neill and Calum are both talented folk musicians and singers in the Seeger/MacColl tradition, appearing on and helping with many of Ewan's and Peggy's late albums (for which Kitty has sung and created artwork) as well as forging their own careers in music.

Looking back, Peggy regards the Radio Ballads as a wonderful creative opportunity, crucial to her development. After 1964 for a time she and Ewan worked on a possible Radio Ballad about the impact of nuclear energy called *Day Trip to Golgotha*. In the 1980s she researched a Radio Ballad on women. In 1983 she wrote to a friend:

My programme is going very well. My problem is that I keep running into interesting women and the minute I do that it's out with the microphone and I have another three or four hours of tape which take about three hours each to transcribe and catalogue. It's going to be years before I finish at this rate.

Despite 50 hours of recording it never did finish. She needed a collaborator and by then Ewan was neither willing nor able enough, though he was horrified by some of the women's stories. She says she would definitely tackle another Radio Ballad if there was someone to work with.

We must hope there will be. For many years it did look as though the Radio Ballad form was consigned to history. There have been a few excellent songs-and-words albums made, such as Peter Bellamy's *The Transports*, but none with the dense texturing of the originals. Then, unexpectedly in 2006, an intriguing new series was made for Radio 2, which will be the subject of the final chapter. Until then, the only serious attempt at the Radio Ballad form had been for television. Philip Donnellan made fascinating films of three of the Radio Ballads in the early 1970s, with the help of Ewan and Peggy. Could a form designed explicitly for the ear, encouraging you to form your own images, work on screen, when those pictures are chosen for you and presented to you?

# Sound in Vision

## Three Radio Ballads on Film



You may well ‘assert’ the relationship between the acceptance of violence in boxing and the tolerance of institutionalised violence in other fields – notably the military – but this is a personal view which is hardly acceptable when grafted on to an original script which, as far as I know, pointed-up no such relationship.

ROBIN SCOTT, CONTROLLER BBC 2, TO PHILIP DONNELLAN,  
ABOUT FIGHT GAME, 1973

When the last man leaves the pit for the factory floor,  
Where the work is clean, the danger less and the pay is more,  
When the last of the oil is gone who will  
Remember the miners’ rejected skill?  
Who will – Go Down?

NEW VERSE BY EWAN MACCOLL FOR THE BIG HEWER, 1974



The impact of the Radio Ballads on documentary makers in both radio and television in the 1960s was immense. While no one attempted to copy their dense texturing of words and music, and few entirely dispensed with a narrator, it became increasingly unthinkable to reassemble the words of real people in actors' mouths. The programmes were used in the BBC for training courses, where later radio feature makers like Piers Plowright were fascinated by them. But apart from *The Camera and the Song* (p. 213), there was really only one attempt to do something comparable on film, and that was a set of direct adaptations of three Radio Ballads made by Philip Donnellan, Charles Parker's old friend from BBC Midlands radio in the 1950s.

By the end of the 1960s the BBC regarded Charles Parker and Philip Donnellan with an equal degree of exasperation. Both made brilliant programmes but they insisted on embedding their own viewpoints, they wouldn't do what they were told, and they ignored any rules that obstructed them. Their talents were complementary – one had an amazing ear, the other a keen visual sense but less feeling for sound. They had collaborated, and each created controversy, on their programmes about the blind. Donnellan was unstinting in his praise for the way Charles created sound pictures: to him it was as though Charles shared with the blind their super-sensitive aural ability.

In making a film version of a Radio Ballad, Donnellan faced a question akin to one you must ask of any radio programme that adds music to words. MacColl, Parker and Seeger had to make sure that their songs augment the power of the message inherent in the words, not diminish them. Is it a better programme than with the words alone? When it works, yes. Music taps into the mind at a different emotional level (researchers increasingly believe that song in humanity's early history was a precursor of speech) and can slip in under our guard to manipulate our feelings. But you have to be careful – how much more careful do you have to be, then, if you have something that already works really well with sound only? The majority of our sensory input arrives through the eyes, so the images, still or moving, must be chosen with great sensitivity if you want to heighten the emotional impact of the original rather than dissipate it. Especially if the original is brilliant.

### Shoals of Herring

Does Donnellan succeed? In 1963 he had tried a TV version of *On the Edge*, to reviews no better than for the original. Then in 1971 he approached Ewan, Peggy and Charles with a view to producing a film version of *Singing the Fishing*. (Charles had incidentally tried to put together a film of *John Axon* in 1959, but had been thwarted by copyright issues.) It was Donnellan who had first encountered the man known locally as 'old Funky' Larner, who was fetched to the Mariner's Arms at Winterton 'in his carpet slippers,

to sing unstoppably till midnight.’ East Coast herring fishing had declined dramatically in the dozen years since the radio programme, something Donnellan wanted to illustrate. His approach shines a shrewd sidelight on the original tack taken by Ewan and Charles. For Donnellan, the romance needed a counterpoint:

Their programme is charged with human force and energy and poetry but it does not tell enough of how fishermen are exploited. It gives no indication, however brief, of the structures of ownership and labour. It lacks political edge. They had ignored the most fundamental reasons why the English fishing had collapsed and the Scottish survived. The Englishmen were wage-slaves, they worked for big industrial firms – Ross Group and Boston Deep Sea and others. When the profits dried up for all the usual English reasons the boats were laid up, the men laid off, the industry crumbled. But the Scots families by tradition owned their own boats: they might be up to the neck in mortgage debts but they alone determined how and when and with what they went to sea; and it was they alone who decided whether they would survive or not.

One can imagine Ewan’s reaction at finding someone who thought he hadn’t been political enough. Donnellan’s is a fair criticism, but after the *Song of a Road* ruckus Ewan and Charles had determined to make a programme that looked at fishing explicitly from the fishermen’s viewpoint. Hardship and rough times are illustrated throughout the original, but the piece discusses a way of life without examining closely the state of the industry. The ownership/exploitation question seems to have been one they didn’t probe. Those who criticised the Radio Ballads for their political stance were off-beam: looking back now, and especially in view of some of Ewan’s political songs, the programmes are remarkable for how polemical they could have been but weren’t. But Ewan, despite his political stance, was wedded to the idea that their subjects’ words should tell their own story, and they didn’t set out to find union activists, for example. A dozen years on, Donnellan used the far-sighted fishing vessel owner Gilbert Buchan, who explained why East Anglia had lost its fishing, and who would later help Britain negotiate the EEC’s Common Fisheries Policy.

How do you go about translating a Radio Ballad about fishing onto film? On the one hand it’s trickier than starting afresh, because you’re constrained by the pre-existing story; on the other at least you do have a structure in place. You can go out and film modern fishing, but that would catch only the last third of the original programme, the Scottish diesel-engine era. You could use still photographs up to a point, and what could capture the era better than the evocative images of late 19th-century Whitby fishermen captured by Frank Sutcliffe? ‘Those rough old boys, boy’, came alive in their craggy features. Moreover, there is marvellous old film of sail and steam available, and

Donnellan chose to augment his new material with extracts from three pre-war classics – Grierson's *Drifters*, Harry Watt's *North Sea* and Campbell Harper's *Caller Herrin*. He showed parts of each against segments of the original *Fishing* soundtrack. The storm scene is halved in length but works remarkably well against *North Sea*, with those 'great seas a-coming' and pouring over man and deck as the Edwards concertina roars them on. Moreover:

There was often a startling rhythmic identity between sequences of a film like *Drifters* and sections of the music-voice montage that had been created for the *Radio Ballad*. In several major sections we only had to find a single point of synchronisation between soundtrack and archive film and then let it roll, to see at once an extraordinary affinity which might continue for a minute or even longer: the protracted storm sequence is an outstanding example, set against footage from *North Sea* and running one minute thirty-eight seconds.

Sam Larner and Ronnie Balls were now gone – Sam had 'looked Death in the eye' – and while Donnellan could still use their voices, embedded as they were in some of the best sequences, he needed to film substitutes. The ones he found were apt. The erect and articulate Bill Solomon of Oulton Broad stood in for Ronnie Balls, and 'Crabpot' Rushmore was an even more theatrical Sam. You can't manipulate film-plus-speech as you can speech alone, so there could be no pinpoint sound selection in the Parker style, but some of their testimony was in the Larner/Balls tradition. Crabpot was a man who had clearly fished on both sides of the law. He faltered at one point, while listing his boats just as Sam had, and his wife prompted him with: 'Kessingham, that was the last boat you was skipper on, that was when you were had up for smuggling tobacco.' Her face breaks into a slow smile.

These modern equivalents work well, and the filmed interviews dovetail easily enough with the voices of the originals. Donnellan has his own 1950s film of Sam Larner too, singing 'Sailing over the Dogger Bank, Oh wasn't it a treat', before we cut to his grave. Film from *Caller Herrin* shows us the women gutting fish at a fearsome rate (even allowing for old film speeds) as the Stewart sisters sing of 'lassies at the pickling, and others at the creels.' The Scots women are represented here by Magsie Buchan, the shrewd mother of Gilbert, with expressive face and darting eyes as she tells us how 'there's nae content noo, it's money, money.'

After a day with Donnellan Ewan rewrote extra song stanzas to reflect the industry's decline, in part due to domination by huge Russian and Norwegian factory 'klondikers', their power-hauled nets stripping the last herring from the North Sea. So, intercut with voices from the original *Radio Ballad* and some new ones, we get several extra verses for 'North Sea Holes' to illustrate the changed times:

**The mair fish that are ta'en the day  
The less the mornin's catch will be.  
And when the seas are a' fished oot  
How will fishers earn their fee?**

**Wi' your power block and fancy nets,  
Your mortgage and your heavy debts,  
And an overdraft that must be met,  
We're bound to plunder the herrin' O.**

Plunder it is. The film ends with a new 'Shoals of Herring' stanza, in which: 'As we waste the wild crop of the ocean ... We may see no more the shoals of herring.' Peggy's banjo complains angrily as the titles roll over waves crashing in Gardenstown Bay. She constructed the musical arrangement for the new sections, using two new instrumentalists, and Alf Edwards, for whom she wrote a new piece to back a replacement Depression section. Three old East Anglian fisherman talk about the end of their livelihoods as they pick their way through a deserted boatyard.

The film works. Shown on BBC 2 in September 1972 and again a year later, it was well reviewed: 'as much a delight to the ear as the eye, a rare combination.' Philip Whitehead in *The Listener* got in a dig at a BBC management which at the time was leaning on Donnellan as much as Parker:

The producers of both the radio and television versions are talented men often at odds with the Corporation over their ideas for future programmes. It is the bite and zest of the individual with something to say ... that transforms the schedules from mere competence to something more.

Because BBC 2 coverage was as yet only patchy in the very region where herring fishing was still hanging on, Donnellan took a copy of the film to Scotland and showed it for a week to eager audiences in fishing towns. The BBC, far from being pleased that its reach had been extended, gave him a 'final warning' interview for flouting the rules: 'It was clear the heat was still on, but now I was on my own.' The interview took place five days after Charles Parker had left the BBC.

## The Fight Game

Philip Donnellan, often at odds with his BBC managers, had found a more sympathetic boss in Robin Scott, then Controller of the new minority-audience BBC 2. (One way of minimising Donnellan's influence from the late

1960s was to keep him off BBC 1.) A crucial ally too was Scott's predecessor, David Attenborough, whose successful stint in BBC management now tends to be forgotten. Scott enabled Donnellan to make two more films of the Radio Ballads, choosing *Fight Game* and *Big Hewer*. Of Irish extraction, he had recently been on an eye-opening visit to Northern Ireland, and decided to use his boxing film to imply that the acceptance of violence in sport is linked to its excessive use in society at large and by the military specifically. Nevertheless, of the three films he made, this sticks most closely to the pattern and script of the original.

He has to find a new set of boxers to film, and he follows three in particular, who are due to fight at the Royal Albert Hall on 31 October 1972, two of them future world champions. Both are helpfully named John: the charismatic young John Conteh, and the thoughtful John H Stracey, who talks reflectively of 'the animal in people'. On that night Stracey loses by a low-blow disqualification to the swaggering Bobby Arthur, that bout and the others filmed to provide the setting for the original's fight sequence. It's a match that works perfectly: the boxing footage and editing is often brilliant, the effect repulsive yet fascinating, and its techniques foreshadow what we see in *Rocky* and *Raging Bull*, which were made in the following ten years. It's shot from several angles, with slow motion, successive stills, snatches of the raging crowd turned on by what they see, and – tellingly – a slow pan round a dinner-jacketed front row. The tricks are not overdone, and follow the soundtrack without strain, as for:

**A little breather now they're off again,  
Swapping punches, taking punishment,  
The swollen lips – the angry bruises – it's a lovely fight.  
See where the blood shows each time the glove lands.  
Three minutes heavy punching both the hands two-fisted fighting  
Hard slogging.  
Gloves thudding.  
Eyes bleeding.  
HE'S DOWN!**

Throughout the film Donnellan intersperses images in subliminal flashes. They include soldiers in Northern Ireland, bullfighting, a machine gun's cartridge belt, a joust re-enactment, a poised trigger finger, a Northern Ireland crowd pelting the Army. None lasts for more than a second until the end of the fight, when we see longer cut-aways of wounded soldiers and civilians. The final credits run over a shot of a blazing building and the sound of bullets. Cleverly assembled, powerful and disturbing, the film inflamed

many, not least the Ministry of Defence, who provided some of the film. The BBC weren't too happy either – they can't have enjoyed reading the *Listener* critic: 'The motto of BBC 2 is becoming "Charles Parker Lives" ... An almost unbearable climax of jolted heads and flying gumshields.'

## The Big Hewer

Despite his irritation, Robin Scott allowed Donnellan to film one more Radio Ballad: his memo at the head of this chapter continues: 'I am glad to know that in *The Big Hewer* there will be less problems and that its treatment can be more closely related to *Shoals*.' Scott was prepared to back Donnellan who, though his gratitude was genuine, was still exasperated:

It may seem gratuitous to celebrate anything so simple which should have been supported without question by all our routine claims to a free and independent television service. But my consistent experience of 12 years in that medium had been of censorship, management intervention and threats. It also has to be remembered that at exactly the time when these programmes were being remade for television, the BBC management was preoccupied with firing the man who had made them possible.

Donnellan decided that because of what had occurred in the mining industry in the past 12 years he would have to change *The Big Hewer* far more than he had the other two. Then, when it was ready, he was obliged to delay its screening until after the 1974 miners' strike – lest it inflame the already inflamed, or allow viewers to judge the miners' case for themselves. He included some film of the Saltley Gate picket line that Charles subsequently employed in the Banner Theatre production of *Collier Laddie*, and added footage from the (then and now) forgotten coalfield at Betteshanger, an unlikely colliery to find in the quiet Kent countryside near Dover: 'A couple of thousand people crowded into a cramped and cracking council estate between sea and farming acres', in Donnellan's words. Initially he was forbidden by the NCB (National Coal Board) to film underground, but it relented under pressure from the union. Ewan again wrote new verses, and even more than in *Shoals* of Herring Donnellan decided he had to tackle the politics.

It's in the film of *The Big Hewer* that the distracting effect of the all-powerful visual image is clearly felt. The most atmospheric moments in the Radio Ballad come when it evokes the intense feeling of being underground – or how we imagine it feeling, because few of us have been down there. Radio does the dark well (you'll recall that the first specially written radio drama was set in a coal mine), but film can't. Old still photographs work better, but the first part of the film fails to achieve the impact of its radio original,

despite some imaginative shots. That changes as soon as we get above ground: you can't evoke a pit disaster, but you can show its aftermath: the cluster of anxious wives and men at the pithead, the roll call of the dead – as many as 80 in 1973 – and old black-and-white film of a winding funeral procession. You can hear of the effects of pneumoconiosis – 'He's got inside his lungs a good tombstone of solid coal dust' – while a doctor goes dispassionately through the scarred X-rays. You can see the painful walk of a 50-year-old as he spoke of the fate of his four brothers and two stepbrothers, in whose footsteps he would soon be shuffling.

In its last ten minutes the film jumps out of the original and into the 1974 present. We see miners debating, balloting, striking. Arthur Scargill persuades a lorry-driver to turn back at the Saltley Gate plant, and its gates close. Miners are triumphant. It's halfway between 1962 and the miners' apocalyptic year of 1984, and by this point Ewan needs no persuading to write more stanzas to reflect the current state of the industry. First the new kind of pit, a living factory, men serving machine and each other. Then the effects of an industry in crisis, North Sea oil coming, pits closing.

**A mine is a body with coal flowing through its veins:  
Men are the hands and muscles and nerves and brains,  
Where surface workers and face teams labour,  
Each man dependent upon his neighbour,  
One of a team that serves the machine, Way Down.**

**Sweated in the hot pit, lay in the dark wet seams and froze.  
Been locked out, known despair when pits were closed.  
Agreed to the deal on power loading,  
Watched the terms of the deal eroding –  
Again we're betrayed, and seeing our pay Go Down.**

Rather to Donnellan's surprise it was well received within the BBC – Scott's replacement as Controller BBC 2, Aubrey Singer, called it 'enthalling'. Charles Parker would have been pleased that the reviewers hadn't forgotten its radio origins either. Here are three extracts, from *The Western Mail*, Peter Lennon in the *Sunday Times*, and from Shaun Usher in the *Daily Mail*, who ends with a point just as relevant today:

Any appreciation of the programme should not make one forget that it was radio, with its reliance on the all-important spoken word, which provided its origin.

## SOUND IN VISION – THREE RADIO BALLADS ON FILM

As one would expect from Charles Parker sound was used interestingly. A statement from a miner was stopped to allow a burst of expressive music and then allowed to continue: a tricky device which could go absurdly wrong in insensitive hands, but it worked well here.

Hopefully many documentary makers watched this implied tribute to radio – if only because it would encourage them to listen to words with as much care as they devote to weighing film quality.

It's clear that, despite the inevitable loss of aural impact, his versions were a success in television terms because Donnellan understood entirely the rationale of the originals, they provided him with great source material, and his updating was sympathetic. He was a skilled film-maker, had fine editors, and kowtowed to no one. He managed to cling on at the BBC, pushing the borders of 'balance' in a number of films. Many of them were never shown, such as *The Irishmen*, an impressionistic portrait of Irish immigrant building workers in London. It features songs written by Ewan, including 'The Tunnel Tigers', which used the Irish tune 'William Taylor' to describe them building the Victoria Underground line. Peggy produced the music, wincing later at the editing, which sometimes chopped up the songs oddly. Sandra Kerr later said Donnellan's ear was subordinate to his expert eye. She produced the music for *Gone for a Soldier*, a moving and pointed film which intercut letters from the 'common' British soldier in past wars with film of new recruits being trained for Northern Ireland. One of his last films, it adapted the *Long March of Everyman* technique by employing modern squaddies to read letters home from soldiers long dead. Its broadcast went ahead in the teeth of virulent opposition from the Army at the height of the Northern Ireland conflict.

For another 30 years after Donnellan's films no more was heard of the Radio Ballads until Topic re-released all eight on CD in 1999. Then in 2006 came an unexpected series on Radio 2, with new writers, singers and musicians, on six fresh subjects. How did that happen, and did they work?



# A New Generation

## The 2006 Radio Ballads



We couldn't get it through the door it was so big. We mike up the drum outside because the control room's inside, no line of sight, so John Leonard and the engineer are inside and I'm in the doorway cueing the drummer. Boom, boom, boom. We're alongside a lake that goes on to the Irish border, and that sound – well, lights go on everywhere ... On the journey home, the drummer told me later, driving back through Newry, the back doors of the van swing open and the drum comes out and rolls across a roundabout. Out they went to get it, everyone stopping. Ten years earlier, no way, they'd have been away.

VINCE HUNT, IN 2007, ON USING A PROTESTANT LAMBEG DRUM IN A CATHOLIC AREA WHILE RECORDING FOR THIRTY YEARS OF CONFLICT, 2006

Thirty years after Philip Donnellan's film, and 40 years after *Travelling People* ended the original series, the concept of the Radio Ballads was unexpectedly revived. A Sheffield-born radio executive and one-time folk singer, John Leonard, who for years had nursed a desire to produce a modern equivalent of the original series, came to the BBC (repeatedly) with a proposal. For years they weren't interested, but remembered him when they launched a new initiative, *RealVoices*, which aimed to illustrate the richness and diversity of regional accents. Consequently Lesley Douglas of Radio 2 asked Leonard's company Smooth Operations to produce a new set of eight; she later described it as one of her best-ever commissions. Another enthusiast who had been egging Leonard on from the beginning would be musical director, John Tams.

Tams had much in common with MacColl, through a kind of convergent evolution. Born into a working-class Derbyshire family, he was radical in politics, he had been a journalist and presenter on radio, and he had acted, sung, and written songs. He, too, had been a folk song collector, in Ireland, North and South. He had been musical director for the National Theatre for 15 years, working for Bill Bryden on memorable productions of *The Mysteries* and *Lark Rise to Candleford*, before taking the part of rifleman Hagman in the Napoleonic War series *Sharpe*, for which he wrote and sang the songs, and through which he became known to a wider public.

Tams did *Six Men of Dorset* at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre for 7:84, opening two days before the police cavalry charge at Orgreave during the 1984 miners' strike. (A year later, after a play about miners' wives, the English 7:84 lost its Arts Council grant and folded. The Scottish 7:84 battles on to this day.) One of Tams's songs was sung on the 1984 picket line just as Ewan's were. Here his life and Ewan's intersected: 'Just imagine Ewan doing a Ballad of the Strike.' Tams's public success as a singer came late in his career when Folk awards began. He won Album of the Year in 2001, three awards in 2006, including Folk Singer of the Year, and one in 2008. He has recently worked on the songs for *Warhorse* at the National Theatre, and shows as little sign of slowing as Ewan did in his 50s.

In the end there were six Radio Ballads in the new series, with two, on football and teenagers, dropped from the original proposal, the latter after interviewing was well under way. They were made during 2005 and broadcast in early 2006 in successive weeks on Monday nights from 27 February to 3 April on Radio 2 – so the equivalent of the 1950s Light Programme rather than the Home Service. The six final subjects were the steel and shipbuilding industries, both in terminal decline, HIV/AIDS, foxhunting, fairgrounds and Northern Ireland. So, while there is some mapping onto the original subjects, it's hardly slavish. Nor is their adherence to the original approach, though what is eloquently clear is their desire to honour the original makers, pioneers who went before them, in Tams's words from his stage act, 'carrying

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tape recorders so massive they needed batteries powered by wood-burning stoves.' And to do justice to the new generation of informants that Tams preferred to call the life-tellers: 'At all costs we must honour their stories, moreover we must honour their lives.'

The 2006 Radio Ballads were *Song of Steel*, *The Enemy That Lives Within*, *The Horn of the Hunter*, *Swings and Roundabouts*, *Thirty Years of Conflict* and *The Ballad of the Big Ships*. The first thing to stress about them is that they take place in a completely different broadcasting world. The differences can be expressed simply like this:

Comparators	1958–64	2004–6
Timescale	8 in 7 years	6 in 12 months
Timing	Sequential	Overlapped
Budget	Open-ended (sort of)	Set in advance
Makers	Inside BBC	Outside BBC
Actuality collectors	CP+EM+PS (pairs, mostly)	VH/SP (singly)
Hours recorded for each	average 60–70	average 25–30
Songwriters	One	Many
Writers did interviews?	Almost always	Almost never
Recording medium	15 min reel-to-reel	70 min DAT/Minidisc
Music arrangement	PS, integral	JL, 'framing'
Musicians and singers	Jazz and folk	Entirely folk
Sound mixing	Tape splicing	Computer-based

(VH and SP are Vince Hunt and Sara Parker, Charles Parker's daughter).

That gives some idea of the enormous differences in the way they were put together. The response of audiences was excellent, though there's a split into two populations as with the original BBC research audiences for *John Axon* – only, for the 2006 series, it depends on whether you had heard the originals. The vast majority, people new to the concept, on the whole found this series extremely striking. They had rarely if ever come across anything quite like its combination of the use of song and avoidance of formal commentary. That enthusiasm was reflected in the British domestic equivalent of the Italia Prizes for Radio, the Sony Awards, where *Song of Steel* won the prize for documentary features – a real rarity for Radio 2 – and *Thirty Years of Conflict* a third place in the community programme category. But, so entrenched in their minds had the original series become, that most of those who loved them instinctively found the 2006 programmes difficult to like. Part of their reaction is understandable, 'ooman nature', as Sam Larner would say, and part a reluctance to accept that anything could be as good as the programmes they fell in love with (and they unconsciously tend to

discount those of the originals they didn't much like). We'll have a look at how the two series compare at the end of the chapter.

## Collecting the Voices

How was the new series made? First, the actuality was collected by two people separately, Vince Hunt and Sara Parker, and – a particularly crucial point – rarely by any of the songwriters. In Peggy Seeger's view that was bound to be a drawback for the writers. In the only exceptions, John Tams went to Nottingham's annual Goose Fair for *Swings and Roundabouts*, and sat in on an early *Steel* interview at the Magna museum, formerly Steel, Peach and Tozer, the 'Steelos' of the resultant song. It's telling that the songs he wrote after the Steel visit came extremely quickly: 'I watched their hands, saw how they carried themselves, let it gestate for a while, then it poured out.' But the rest of the interviews were carried out by the interviewers on their own, so the other songwriters didn't have that advantage. As with the originals, once the interviewer had got the recall started the testimony became unstoppable. As Tams said:

Some of the questions Vince put had never been asked or answered out loud before. The common spirit of a community that knows itself so well doesn't always have the need to talk about it – but now it could.

Vince Hunt had been a newspaper 'legman' who had moved into radio in 1990. He could remember the days of tape splicing, so he knew how hard it was: 'Both me and John started with quarter-inch tape. Hands all covered with blood.' He found Parker's assembly skill almost impossible to believe: 'What he achieved with that kit is incredible.' Nowadays, tape editing uses computer software, of course, where you can even see the shape of the sound's wave-form as you listen. Hunt started on the *Steel* programme and went on to the *Shipbuilding*, to industrial sites built on a massive scale. They were unforgettable experiences, and his response to the sounds of the steelworks has echoes of Ewan MacColl in his father's foundry, and of Charles Parker's childlike joy in the railway yards:

I took a trip round the steelworks – amazing education it was. Amid all those different sounds I could hear a faint tinkling, I couldn't fathom it. It was from a roll of steel turning on a lathe, the tinkling of shavings off the lathe, a great chisel thing, a waterfall of shavings. I went back and back and back for those sound effects. The processes are the same as the old steelworks. Red-hot steel on a conveyor. Dark cavernous place, enormous scale. Great castings in heaps everywhere. That Sheffield Vulcan image ... there's something primeval about steel making. It's called a cathedral furnace, and it's that size. A huge furnace with

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blazing hot fire. Dante's inferno. Can I watch? Yes, but keep against that wall. But what about my recording levels? Steel crashes on the anvil. I'm standing 20 yards away, face boiling, puffer jacket starting to melt.

A statue of Vulcan sits atop Sheffield town hall, so a dialogue between Lucifer and the blacksmith of the Roman Gods cried out to Tams to be used. The Lucifer of his song has 'signed up another demon ... Maggie says his name's McGregor' for Dante's Inferno. That's the way Ewan described his father's workplace, voiced again by Hunt. By contrast, when he went to Swan Hunter's shipyard on Tyneside – there are no ships made any more on Clydeside – 'My hands were sticking to railings as I went up, it was so cold'. Hunt did the bulk of the actuality collection in an intensive period, trekking over the country to record foxhunts and saboteurs, and to Northern Ireland. That had a special intensity for him: 'I was there when the [1992] Manchester bombs went off. The second was under a bush and it blew me off my feet. When I was recording the Irish bombing stories over there my heart was going like this ...'

The second interviewer was Sara, Charles Parker's daughter. She had become a radio producer by a roundabout route: it was never in any career plan. It began by accident when she was working as a journalist and did some recording on the Thames for a friend, and she has wound up years later making programmes as her father did, with the same sensibilities. It's not, she thinks, that she absorbed it as a child, but she unconsciously uses an identical approach. When she read about her father's early recording days she was genuinely taken aback to find how similar to hers his mental processes and method had been – the tricks needed to put people at ease, and for shaping the interview to cajole out speech in a form you can use.

Like going fishing. The same question time and time again. I do remember watching him edit ... tiny pieces ... these little bits of tape, all stuck along the edge, a word on each ... I am supposed to be quite good at getting people to talk ... I think now it must be inherited ... My father really listened – a lot of interviewers don't.

She is now a highly regarded radio feature maker in her own right, and, though for several years she didn't let on within the BBC who her father was, John Leonard knew of her work and it was for that reason and not out of sentiment that he approached her. She has a formidable ability to coax out sensitive information, and her HIV interviews with patients and parents had people in tears in the studio, said Hunt – 'We do it quite differently, and she's brilliant.'

Making the 2006 Radio Ballads was a cottage industry. Vince Hunt and Sara Parker were jobbing interviewers and voice collectors. For Vince that

was no problem: ‘The final cut? Not my job. My job’s to dig through the earth for the gems ... Listening to nine hours of material for a 15-second clip. Speeches by Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams. Awful lot of shit to wade through.’ Used to making complete programmes from start to finish, Sara found it more difficult to hand over interviews, and lose segments of speech she liked on someone else’s cutting-room floor. But she was in Kent, the songwriters were dotted all over the place, often on the road. Leonard and a small production team were up in Manchester, Tams close to them in Derbyshire with a studio, which they used because the BBC’s was too expensive.

## Writing the Songs

The actuality – on average a bit over 25 hours for each programme, less than half that for the originals but still a huge workload in their timescale – came back to Manchester and was listened to by Annie Grundy, who did an initial selection, transcription, and aggregation by topic. Often, enthralled by what she heard, she stayed into the small hours, and she was not alone in burning midnight oil. John Leonard further selected and assembled chunks of actuality which were put onto CD for the songwriters. When the songs came back, Leonard and Tams worked on their integration into each programme with Andy Seward, a gifted engineer and producer. Essentially it was five songwriters who created the songs. Tams himself wrote 19, Jez Lowe 18, Julie Matthews 10, Karine Polwart 6. Each wrote for four or more of the six programmes, while the Irish singer Tommy Sands came up with 6 songs for *Thirty Years of Conflict*.

Half of Tams’s contribution was for *Song of Steel*, which was the programme on which they tested out their method. But he had no intention of trying to emulate Ewan by writing everything himself, and so commissioned modern songwriters in the folk idiom whose work he knew. While Tams does write songs, his wide canvas – including theatre, television and the screen – means that he has written less for concert stage and folk club. Moreover, to write them all in just eight months? That would have taxed even Ewan. No:

It’s too big a barrel – I’d scrape it if I wrote the lot. MacColl’s ego was sufficient to the job, he wouldn’t want another writer on. There’s only so much vocabulary, only so many chords ... I couldn’t write the AIDS show. Women wrote most of that, plus Jez. So underrated, Jez, indelible lyrics. A proper songwriter.

Jez Lowe was introduced to the Radio Ballads at college, unlike Leonard and Tams, who heard the songs first without knowing their origin. Moreover, he was used to writing songs ‘from the actuality’. From an Irish family settled in the North-East, like many singers in the folk revival, Lowe was

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commissioned in 1997 by the BBC to write and present a seven-part series on the music of his region, *A Song for Geordie*. His evocative song 'Coal Town Days' was written for the BBC to accompany the announcement of the plan to close the last coal mines in England, and he'd written others for local celebrations:

I did a sort of Radio Ballads thing called *Banners* for the local council, with local musicians, 120 people ... Easington, listening to people talk. I went back to the *Big Hewer* to refresh my memory, but I'd heard them at the Poly in Sunderland where they were in the library, so I was aware of the technique. The originals were much more theatrical too, more visual, this was more pure radio ... Using actuality recordings was telescoping my process anyway. It was easy for me to visualise, listening to the actuality CD, all pre-edited, and many of the songs came straight out at me. The shipbuilding stuff was (literally) riveting. But I had to accept that I was being a hack, had to let it go when I was finished, hand it over like Fitzgerald when he did film scripts while writing his novels. Hard to accept, that, having no time to work on a song later, refine it.

Julie Matthews, on the other hand, was less used to that style of songwriting. Indeed, although her father like Leonard's had worked in the Sheffield steel industry, she had never written about her own background. She was in the back of the van between gigs on tour when she first listened to her CD of wartime women working on the steelyard cranes, tears on her cheeks:

To hear those old women – they sounded like my relatives – and they blew me away ... It was an emotional thing for me, coming from Sheffield, all those beautiful accents ... I put them on the iPod and immersed myself in all the voices for six weeks, wrote seven songs in a rush and the rest in a trickle. The AIDS song, 'Sum of What I Am', was a line from a woman who happened to be HIV positive, but 'I'm all these other things too.' Totally inspiring. I wrote 'Crane Drivers' very quickly. It was a weird way of working for me ... for that first song I literally took some lines word for word. It's the first time I've ever written and sung in my own dialect.

**Me brother said I don't believe it still -  
They're taking on women at the rolling mill.  
So I went down and I put in me name -  
When I turned 18 I was a crane driver,  
Turned 18 I was a crane driver.**

So taken was Julie Matthews with the whole process that she now finds it somewhat unsatisfying to sing the songs without the actuality. So in 2007

she took on tour a concert of ten of her Radio Ballad songs, singing them with the original voices embedded, and will do more. For the Scottish singer Karine Polwart, too, it was an unfamiliar way of working. Insulated from the assembly process, as they all were apart from Tams, it took her a while to key into how her verses would dovetail with the voices with which they were interspersed. Her comment on writing 'Luck Money' for *Swings and Roundabouts* emphasises that, like the original team, they were all learning as they went, but over a truncated timescale. They could do it, of course, through modern technology.

It was the last song I wrote, so I was much more conscious of what was required to make it thread in with the speech ... I recorded the song with very much a full structure in mind of where the speech was going to come in, in and out of the melody ... I was right to the wire with the deadline, so I sent the lyric then literally sang the melody down into an answering machine ... and mercifully the length of the bars and the verses fitted perfectly with the bits of speech John Leonard wanted to convey in that section ... It was good fun to do it that way.

The compressed timescale meant that at one point they were working on all six programmes in parallel, something Charles Parker never had to do. (He'd have been delighted by the computer tools available, and you can't help feeling that he'd have been touching up every programme right up to the last minute.) Throughout the exercise the team was conscious of the legacy, and determined not to let their predecessors down. One early decision Leonard and Tams made was not to try to emulate the musical complexity of the originals. Keep it simple, drop in the actuality between verses. Tams said, 'We adopted the form but adapted the way we approached it ... tried to make it unbroken, so no gaps in the music ... we fought over the music throughout, had a good ruck, all good-humoured.'

John Leonard started with *Song of Steel*, a subject he knew. His father had been an engineer in a Sheffield steelworks and had his own small foundry. He vividly remembers carrying molten metal around, stoking a cupola furnace, going past Steel, Peach and Tozer in the bus feeling the heat through the bus windows. A mile-long plant either side of the road, the massive forge hammer shaking the centre of Sheffield:

I wanted to get the hammer going, keep it going, so it irritates, then keep it going on ... The song's in rhythm, but ... I couldn't get the start of *Steel* right. I'd start with the hammer, then the music, then the speech, then the song. But it distorts on radio. I went back to *Big Hewer* which starts with the drill – deliberately didn't listen to them again, but I did just this once. *Hewer* has this exciting beginning. Ah, yes I see, easy – establish it, take it down – I sat at the feet of the master for half an hour. Otherwise I wanted a free mind, so I stopped listening to them.



**[My] old man used to sit reading t'Star, and this bang bang bang bang going on, then all of a sudden he'd put his hand out and catch t'clock ... that had vibrated off t'mantelpiece ... he said he could gauge the number of bangs ...'**

**Going down to Steelos, get mesen a start.  
Dunna let it cobble, it'll tear the place apart –  
Catch it as it's coming, throw the bugger back,  
Keep your tongs upon the metal and your eyes upon the track.**

Tams was well placed, as Ewan was in Scots, to write in the local dialect. The actuality in the steel and shipbuilding industry is as compelling as anything in the original Radio Ballads. A shipbuilding worker came in from nowhere, sat down in front of Hunt, and spoke non-stop for an hour. 'I usually have to prompt a bit, but there was never a "Go on" in that conversation.' He's the Glaswegian in *Ballad of the Big Ships* who tells a story about chucking the job in – literally:

**One day I thought I'd had enough – I just cannae take this any more. And it was off with the boots and I threw them into the Clyde. Off with the overalls, threw them in, and I swung the toolbag over my head – Splash, into the Clyde. And I walked off and swore that you'd never get me back in the shipyard again. Tick tick tick tick tick tick. Time goes by and needs must and I ended up going back a second time. First day back, the first person you see is the last guy you worked with, and he'll say to you, 'You were a long time at the toilet' – as if you'd been away at the kludgie for 11 years!**

I, you, he'll... all those pronoun, tense and viewpoint switches that Ewan and Charles loved in traditional storytelling and ballads. One novelty which they would have admired was the use of a muscular local poet, Ian McMillan. His was one of a shipyard load of industrial dialects from Tyneside and Clydeside, especially from those working in the 'Black Trades', as they called those down in the dirt and dust in the depths of the freezing ship. The list of trades and implements was an opportunity Ewan would have relished, and Jez Lowe came up with a beautifully crafted song that used the trade list as a background chant. 'Whose idea was that?' said Peggy, 'Brilliant!' Interwoven are descriptions of life deep down that recall the mining:

Your family needs you to do as needs must,  
To the mercy of metal and madness you're thrust,  
And the keels and the girders of darkness and dust  
And a deadly concoction of sweat, fumes and rust –  
'Cos you're Black Trade, you're just Black Trade –

All you welders and riveters and boilersmiths and platemen,  
You gaugers and pipefitters, sparks and sheet metal workers,  
You riggers and coppersmiths, red letters, hard drinkers,  
Cablars and ladders, you pullers and dabbers ...

The bane of your life lies there snug in the slips –  
She's round at the stern and she's wide at the hips,  
And she's proud at the bow and the pout on her lips  
Says this country's an island and an island needs ships,  
And you're Black Trade ...

You can be working in confined spaces, sometimes no bigger than a cupboard under the stairs ... Generally you're working in the dark on your own. Once you put your head down all you can hear is the crackle of the arc.

The two heavy industry programmes mirrored their original equivalents, the railways and the mines: the archetypal Radio Ballad recipe of a tight-knit community of labourers (yes, men). But whereas in 1958 and 1962 the makers could celebrate the courage, hard work and camaraderie of the working man – in nationalised industries – now steel and shipbuilding were in private hands and in terminal decline. The comradeship and the crack were still there, but articulated by old men reflecting, as Sam Larner had, on a tough life that had gone for ever. Like Bill Senior, the cracked-voice steel man who died of the effects of dust before the programme was broadcast. The political component in both is inevitably more explicit now, just as Big Hower became in Philip Donnellan's hands. Here Karine Polwart takes an idea of Jez Lowe's to create a song comparing the fragility of man engaged in dangerous work (as in *John Axon*) with the massive metal structure he inhabits, except that now the vehicle was designed for destruction. The only two ships being built in Britain when the programme was made were warships.

## SET INTO SONG

**You crafted and caressed her with a careful hand,  
But the lady didn't understand,  
And you riveted and plated her till morning.  
But with a coil or a careless spark  
Or a tumble in the dark  
She'll leave her mark upon you without warning.**

**You can float a boat of steel upon the ocean,  
You can fix it up with nuts and bolts and toil –  
But you can't weld a body when it's broken.**

**On a cruiser that was fitted by your father  
You anchored in San Carlos harbour,  
But the lady at the helm she was not for turning,  
And in your bell bottoms blue  
In April Eighty-Two  
You bid adieu and watched all you knew burning.**

The HIV/AIDS programme *The Enemy Within* was a *Body Blow* equivalent, with the same inherent problem. With the moving testimony that Sara Parker brought back, how to avoid the songs simply doubling the emotion without adding anything new? The result was similar – some of the songs were fine on their own, but doleful en masse, and one was left thinking the same: what a marvellous programme it would have been without the music. One difference, of course, was that the modern sufferers had to confront a stigma and hostility – sometimes spoken, sometimes not. This made it as affecting as *Body Blow* but in a different way. Julie Matthews:

**Give it a label, call it by name,  
But the life I made before this  
It cannot claim.  
That life was so much bigger than  
The enemy that lives within  
The shadow underneath my skin  
Is not the sum of what I am.**

As with *Travelling People*, *Swings and Roundabouts* looks at a group who were almost a separate community. They have a stigma to confront too, for the general public is inclined to lump them together with 'dirty Gypsies'. The response,

uncomfortable to hear, was that modern fairground families (though many came from the same background) prefer to distance themselves from Travellers. While it, too, has some good songs and great stories, the actuality seems stretched, and John Leonard feels they should have gone back to more sources. It was perhaps the one programme that became the victim of the rush to the line. In fact, it was only added late on, suggested by John Tams, who had worked on fairgrounds as a lad nearly 40 years earlier, and had a ready-made moving-on song of his own, the atmospheric ‘Pull Down Lads’:

**Pull down, lads, the sets are cooling down, lads,  
The ark’s all packed and the dodgems stacked, a bite of scran then go,  
We’ll leave it as we found it, they’ll soon forget we’ve been,  
For we trade in fun and we go and come,  
We’re often scorned but seldom mourned,  
I hope you’ll know what I mean.**

A justified criticism of the original Radio Ballad series was that women were depicted almost totally as wives and sufferers. The only exceptions were the Scots fishgutters in Yarmouth. Even on the modern series there’s still little to show that there has been a feminist movement, with just the woman crane driver in Sheffield whose job went as soon as the men came back from war, and one formidable woman running a fairground company. This time, though, they did try a rural programme, tapping into the controversy then current about hunting with hounds, about to be banned by law.

On the face of it, *Horn of the Hunter* was a tricky subject, bound to draw the ire and fire of both sides in the dispute. Moreover, they were certain to have difficulty finding any modern folk singer keen to write a song in praise of hunting. But somehow, through a combination of new songs and old – there were several old hunting songs to draw on – it worked. Vince Hunt scoured the country, and it helped the feel of the programme that he went to many hunts not populated by the classic squirearchy of the popular imagination. Many of their participants came across with down-to-earth North Country voices, their pockets unlined with inherited money. And the soundscape was particularly effective. Jez Lowe came up with a song for the fox (no actuality to call on from him), and swallowed his distaste of hunting to use a strange traditional hound-christening rhyme to baptise each of the hunt-followers, from huntsman to saboteur:

## SET INTO SONG

**Next to come the houndsman and that I'm bound to call you –  
Know your pack by name and mark, their ways and whiles and natures.  
Pair the couples, old and young, but pick the babblers too –  
Come the houndsman come, be a good dog and true ...**

**Next to come the saboteur and that I'm bound to call you –  
Risk a life to save a life, with the strength of the law behind you.  
Rituals, traditions, all but killing fields to you –  
Come the saboteur, be a good dog and true.**

The final 2006 programme, *Thirty Years of Conflict*, parts company further from the originals by looking at the Troubles in Northern Ireland, over 30 years after Charles Parker and Philip Donnellan examined them in the early chaotic days. They risked controversy this time as well, though somewhat less than if they'd been making it before the Good Friday Agreement brought an end to (nearly) all the violence. Although Sara Parker was wary – the conflict had surely been observed from every angle – she realised while listening to Tommy Sands' stories of a pre-Troubles childhood that they could use the warring communities' shared love of traditional music. Killing musicians was beyond the pale: song was 'where the orange and the green are just colours on the spotlit stage', as Lowe summed it up succinctly in 'The Miami', referring to the Miami Showband murders that shocked everyone. This story and that of Bloody Sunday were framed by the flat-voiced tales of pub bombings and friends killed. The gut-wrenching songs are from Tommy Sands, powerful in the understatement of his quiet conversational singing voice, a man who has lived through and seen it all:

**Someone died on Sunday, the funeral was today.  
Tonight there will be trouble: someone's going to pay.  
Don't go out tonight love, it's better that you stay,  
For anything can happen in these Troubles ...**

**No sanity, morality, humanity, no mind,  
There's no meaning there's no feeling, there's no reason, there's no rhyme  
It's an eye for an eye till everyone is blind –  
And anything can happen in these Troubles.**

At this stage in history they received no interference from BBC or government, though it didn't prevent some disconcerting moments. 'Different

Drums' was Julie Matthews' song, talking about the distinctive drumbeats that pounded out the quite specific rhythms of the two communities. The Protestant Lambeg Drum is a monster. Vince Hunt gives the background to the chapter-head story of the recording and return of the drum:

We went over to see Tommy, give him the gist. 'Don't Go Out Tonight' he did in front of me in his study, just like that. I recorded it on to minidisk, not via a broadcast-quality mike. Didn't matter, he was perfect straight through ... I interviewed an IRA member about Bloody Sunday – he'd never spoken before. We got two groups of kids from a teacher promoting cross-religion harmony who assembled a mixed choir. We were in Tommy Sands' studio, in a Catholic area. A Protestant with a Lambeg Drum drove over after work, a bit nervous ...

Though it was the *Song of Steel* and *Ballad of the Big Ships* that captured most attention, and were broadcast first and last, the Irish programme is in a sense just as successful because it was the one that could most easily have foundered. As it was the music and songs enhance the actuality in the way the best of the originals did. It signally fails to include women – they were leading peace campaigners, after all – though all the voices are gripping. And one can't imagine this Tommy Sands song ever getting through, 30 years earlier:

Some were chatting with their lovers  
Some were walking holding hands,  
Some were dreaming of a greater future dawning.  
But who could tell that darkness would descend upon their dreams,  
All upon that Sunday, Bloody Sunday.

Screaming, then a burst of blood,  
'Oh Jesus' someone cried –  
A lad of seventeen is lying dying.  
And thirteen more would follow him before the day would end.  
Oh cursed be that Sunday, Bloody Sunday.

They were walking, they were talking,  
They were laughing, they were singing  
And calling out for civil rights and freedom.  
But now it was a flag of blood that fluttered in the breeze –  
A curse upon that Sunday, Bloody Sunday.

## In Conclusion

So how do the two series match up? It depends entirely on your standpoint. Is a comparison even fair? This is what John Tams had to say:

It is my belief that song-making has changed – MacColl was a pioneer of that also – and while imitation is the sincerest form of flattery why produce an entire series of MacColl pastiches or rewrites over 40 years on, for a community of listeners who have moved on and who've never heard of MacColl or the originals? ... Those who had heard the originals are now probably well into their 70s, or had bought the vinyl versions, and would possibly through the mists of nostalgia see the new work as perhaps Radio Ballads Lite. But we saw it as part of our role to back-announce the originals in the hope that [we] would introduce the listeners to the very source that had so inspired us.

Consider also this was Radio 2 – not Radio 4 ... Radio 2 won the Sony awards over Radio 4, who are defined by their documentary output, and ... [so] maybe the 2006 Radio Ballads had a majority of 'first-time' listeners. For those new listeners the 2006 Radio Ballads were the originals. They were never claimed as such but the listener is the final arbiter and I've come to think in fairness to both pieces of work they should be considered entirely separately and on their own merits ... We made six radio documentaries also with songs and music. That's all we did – we claim no origination – we simply focused on our subjects and tried to serve them.

I don't think they should be compared as in a beauty contest. But using the same title as the originals, which were made nearly 50 years earlier under very different conditions and timescales, probably made that inevitable. The new series has been a great success: one reviewer said that it was years since he had been so educated by music. Had they not been billed as 'Radio Ballads', the old folkie reaction might well have been something like this:

Well, they're not the Radio Ballads of course, but there are some wonderful stories in there, and some of the songs are great. Took less than a year to make the series, you say? That's tough. Guess they did a good job, considering.

Instead, those who grew up with the originals, like Sandra Kerr, whose pedigree as a folk singer, songwriter and teacher is impeccable, start automatically on a straight comparison. It all begins with the notion of the Radio Ballad (a somewhat confusing title for the layman anyway) as something that tells a story in an hour of ballad-form, and these aren't quite like that. From the originals' perspective much of the actuality is as spine-chillingly good as in the originals. Some of the songs indeed match up

to Ewan MacColl's, but to admirers of Ewan's songwriting you have to be a paragon to come close. They point to less variety of pace in the music. They go on to compare unfavourably the formulaic song-speech-song-speech, plus a simple instrumental line taken on behind the voices, with the complex tapestry of musical sound of their predecessors. (When that worked in the originals it was absolutely brilliant, but, as Peggy says now, it was sometimes overdone.) Sara Parker, who of course has a loyalty to both series, makes the pertinent comment that nowadays it's anathema in radio programmes to have music behind speech. (Her father knew all about that by 1972.) The 2006 'house musicians' – built around John McCusker and Andy Cutting – do a superb job, though overall there's a smaller range of instruments. Apart from the iconic Grimethorpe Colliery Band in *Song of Steel*, there isn't the injection of other musical influences, jazz and classical, which enlivened the originals. But, as John Tams said 'Jazz, in 2006?' It's a different world now.

My own stance is this. At their best the originals are, and continue to be, enthralling, but I can see the flaws, notably when they attempted subject matter unsuitable for the method. Some of the new series too are superb, but I do think we should look at them in a separate light. Overall, I'm delighted that the Radio Ballad form has been renewed and reinterpreted after a long wait of over 40 years, and with such skill and attention to the spirit of the originals. Let's have some more: there's a host of topics waiting out there. The Leonard/Tams team has been looking among other things at Cotton, Homelessness, The Armed Forces, The Minimum Wage and Old Age. Ewan himself would be salivating at the prospect of those, not least Cotton, which goes back to his Red Megaphones of 1932. Gratifyingly, all will bring women more to the fore.

I'll leave the last word to a distinguished journalist who has listened to radio since the days of Charles Parker, whose work she admired hugely. Gillian Reynolds is Chairman of the Charles Parker Archive Trust. Through the Trust, which looks after a mass of his interviews and other material, she helped to secure a Lottery Grant to digitise and catalogue the collection. They are an incomparable resource for oral historians, as I well know. She, too, might be expected to prefer the originals, and she indeed believes they were magnificent imaginative radio, which moreover opened programme makers' eyes for ever to what could be done with tape recorders and real voices. Yet she admits that at times she resented being preached at. A generation later she called this new series the best radio of 2006. That's just how Paul Ferris described *The Ballad of John Axon* in 1958.

Listen, and decide for yourself. And let's not have to wait so long next time.