

SET *into* SONG

Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger
and the Radio Ballads

PETER COX

In memory of

Ewan MacColl, 1915–1989

Charles Parker, 1919–1980

And in celebration of

Peggy Seeger, born 1935

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By the same author: *Sixty Summers – English Cricket since World War 2*

For Angela, without whose encouragement this book would not have been possible.

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Preface

In a chilly church in Maida Vale, in late January 1958, a group of musicians and singers assembled to record an unusual radio programme. The popularity of radio would soon be irreversibly usurped by television, but not quite yet. When in July of that year the resulting *Ballad of John Axon* was finally broadcast, after a prolonged battle both with primitive technology and the programme's detractors within the BBC, it was universally acclaimed by reviewers. Although the BBC, perturbed by the instant success of independent television when it began in Britain in 1955, was already siphoning money away from radio, television as yet offered poor competition. But by 1964, when the team were producing their eighth and last programme, the picture had changed completely. Living rooms began to be dominated by the new box in the corner, and radio, with its demand that listeners create their own images, was in rapid retreat.

The three people who came together to create the Radio Ballads formed an unlikely team. Ewan MacColl was a playwright and actor who had recently turned his back on 20 years of pioneering radical theatre to concentrate on folk song. Charles Parker was a former wartime submarine commander now making radio programmes for the BBC. Peggy Seeger was a much younger American musician, born into a family steeped in music. Seeger's college education had been abruptly ended, Parker had a Cambridge degree, MacColl had left school at 14. MacColl was a Communist and an atheist, Parker was Christian and a conservative, Seeger had little interest in politics. They brought contrasting backgrounds and personalities, but complementary talents. Without any one of them the programmes probably couldn't have been made, and certainly wouldn't have been as successful. What they did have in common was a desire for perfection and a determination to achieve it. The obstacles they faced were formidable, and the series very nearly foundered before it began.

So why write a book about a largely forgotten series of radio programmes nearly 50 years old? What possible interest could they have for us today? Before these programmes were made, radio and TV in Britain rarely featured real people talking about their own lives. The Radio Ballad creators made listener and programme-maker alike realise that 'ordinary' people can tell extraordinary stories. That to do them justice, scripts, actors and narrator are not only unnecessary: they're inadequate. Yet these aren't just pioneering documentaries. Woven into the stories are carefully crafted songs, written by Ewan MacColl after long study of the vocabulary and vocal rhythms of the

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speakers. Their words are literally ‘Set into Song’, as the preamble to each programme announces. They are set into music by Peggy Seeger, and finally set into sound, onto tape repeatedly chopped and spliced into its final form, by Charles Parker, a man convinced he could combine tape recorder and radio into an art form.

When I started researching the book, armed with an out-of-date list of phone numbers, I didn’t quite realise the extent of the old folk singer network. Nor did I expect the enthusiastic reception and help I would receive from everyone who had taken part in the programmes, from retired radio producers and engineers to old folk singers and even older jazz musicians, many of them still performing at over 80. All were eager to recall their part in making the Radio Ballads, usually an intensely exhausting but exhilarating week under Charles Parker’s direction and Peggy Seeger’s banjo-neck baton. This book is for them.

Acknowledgements

The book is designed for the general reader. For those who wish to pursue an interest in the Radio Ballads, the book’s website, www.setintosong.co.uk, shows footnotes, a full list of sources, the complete text of the programmes, and an opportunity to buy the Topic Records release of the CDs. On the website readers will have an opportunity to comment, criticise and correct. In a book of this kind, dependent on individual memories as well as written sources, conflicting interpretations are inevitable. You have only to compare the recall of Ewan MacColl and Bert Lloyd to the same events – such as their first meeting – to understand the dilemma. Great stories abound, most of them based on fact, but often embroidered in the retelling.

The principal source for the period of the Radio Ballads is the Charles Parker Archive in Birmingham, which holds the copious files he kept on each of the programmes, as well as on every aspect of his working life until his death in 1980. This has been supported and maintained by the energetic Charles Parker Trust. In addition, the Ewan MacColl/Peggy Seeger Archive at Ruskin College, Oxford, keeps track of their joint working lives until the death of Ewan MacColl in 1989. The BBC Archive at Caversham records the BBC employment of all three. The Archive of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) contains much invaluable material on their participation in the folk song revival. The help of those in the Archives has been unstinting: my thanks to the teams led by Fiona Tait, Valerie Moyses, Jeff Walden and Malcolm Taylor.

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Finally, a book about radio programmes is seriously hampered if you can't listen to them. Fortunately you can: if you don't already have some or all, they're available from this book's own website, www.setintosong.co.uk, and at www.topicrecords.com. I'm grateful to Tony Engle of Topic for his efforts with the BBC to ensure that the Radio Ballad CDs are now once more available.