

CHAPTER 1

# Prologue

Dear Ewan



Dear Ewan

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

CHARLES PARKER, 12 JULY 1957

## SET INTO SONG

**T**he man who started his letter with these words was a gangling red-bearded BBC radio producer in Birmingham. Charles Parker had been a wartime submarine commander, who subsequently studied History at Cambridge before taking a job with the BBC North American service. He was a devout Christian whose politics could then be described as caring Conservative. What enthused him was making much more out of radio, still the dominant communications medium in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In particular he wanted to capture in home and workplace the rich voices of real people, rather than lose their vibrancy and authenticity in the mouths of actors in the studio. The voices of working people and their varied dialects were rarely heard over the airwaves at that time. By 1957, when he was with BBC Midlands, his abiding passion for sound had been further stimulated by the recent arrival of the new 'midget' portable tape recorder. Midget for the 1950s, anyway.

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

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

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