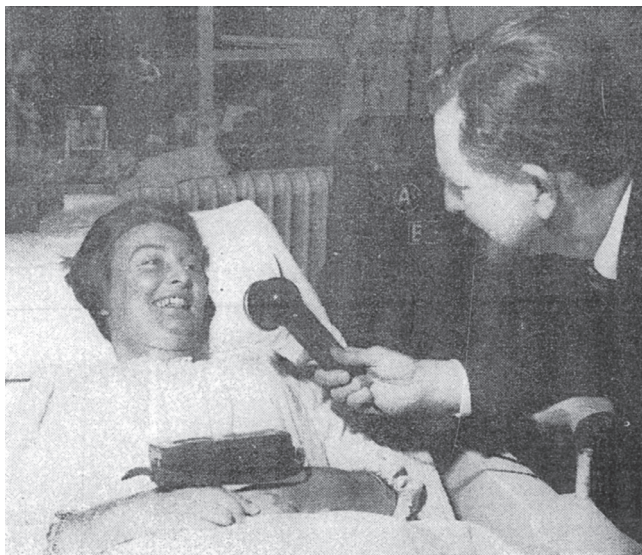


CHAPTER 12

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