

CHAPTER 16

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