

CHAPTER 17

# 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

## SET INTO SONG

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.