

CHAPTER 18

Trickling Marbles

The Sounds of the Radio Ballads



Peggy Seeger set every scrap to music, with instruments like guitar, ocarina, banjo and trumpet, which a man might sling across his shoulders or stuff in his haversack. Sea chanties, Dixieland jazz, a snatch of oratorio, the diddle-a-dum a day ceilidh jog-trot, even the authentic *musique concrète* of the mixers. It's all there, stimulating and ingenious.

ALEXANDER WALKER IN THE BIRMINGHAM EVENING POST, NOVEMBER 1959

The Ballad of John Axon

When Ewan MacColl presented Peggy Seeger with his disappointing rough-cut tape of *The Ballad of John Axon*, she had never tackled anything like it before. But then, nobody had. So she set to with her borrowed book on composing, and came up with some simple accompaniments for the songs. In the studio, though, some of the musicians pointed out patiently that there were one or two things that they just couldn't play:

I was very inexperienced on *Axon* ... I didn't know that you wrote for the trumpet in the key it plays in, but for the clarinet a whole tone lower. Didn't know that the concertina wasn't like an accordion – Alf said you can have a melody or chords but not both. My mother had me transcribing music at an early age, and she used to take me to concerts with the score and say 'Look, the trumpets are going to come in here ... In five bars, wait for it, flutes here, now wait for it.' I remember a boyfriend of mine was King Vidor's son, and I transcribed some complex blues in three days for him while he was gallivanting with someone else. Gave me some ability. At college I had to write a five-part fugue out of my head, but that was very basic.

Moreover, once in the studio it was apparent that her orchestrations, some of which are very clever despite her inexperience, weren't enough. Charles Parker knew they would need musical bridges and he had a good ear for what would work. 'I discovered that he was getting the musicians to record some bits after we'd gone ... I didn't like them all but he knew what he needed.' She cottoned on quickly, and thereafter wrote musical links in advance herself, though some of the sections behind the actuality were improvised or composed in the studio. As we've seen, there was criticism that the *Axon* music was too American. Of course, British folk song was largely lying undiscovered, something they would soon help to rectify. And there were few home-grown instrumentalists – Alf Edwards was virtually the only concertina player available. Moreover, 'Ewan wanted that fast banjo to signify the train. He was still singing American songs at that stage: he loved Alan Lomax's singing. They were always trying to impress each other – and succeeding.'

Apart from Peggy's racing banjo, there are two 'signature' sounds in *Axon*. One was the steam train's chuff, from a slow uphill dragging to a headlong out-of-control downhill; the other was people whistling. The mechanical and the human. (In 50 years there has been a change of musical undercurrent – where working men used to whistle, they're now much more likely to sing. When there isn't muzak.) Everywhere the railwaymen went they whistled – you hear it in the Edgeley railway yard scene, and it's all over the programme