

CHAPTER 19

Old Hands and Young Voices

The Performers



A folk singer is a guy who lies in bed all day and goes out at night to sing songs about work.

ANON, REPEATED BY JIMMIE MCGREGOR, 2007

Those guys could read fly shit.

ANON, REPEATED BY JOHN CLARKE,
STUDIO MANAGER ON SINGING THE FISHING, 2007

What gives us the Radio Ballad sound? It's a mix made up largely of highly skilled session musicians with years of experience, a group of enthusiastic and fast-learning young folk singers – and of course Ewan MacColl's stirring voice. The same core of musicians played throughout, though the disjointed nature of the series meant that they had to be re-assembled each time. Most of them had played with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger at some time or other, and some had been part of the jazz band formed by the immensely talented Humphrey Lyttelton, born and educated at Eton College – a mile away in upbringing but not in politics from Ewan. Lyttelton had led the 'house' band for the MacColl/Lomax *Ballads and Blues* radio series in 1953.

Almost all the singers, apart from that 'toby jug', Bert Lloyd, were in their twenties, people who were starting to make a name for themselves as folk singers, but often still with a day job. Many became key figures in the story of the folk song revival, and many are still performing in their seventies. And with very few exceptions those who took part – and that includes the studio managers and technicians – speak with great warmth of the period, describing making the Radio Ballads, as does Peggy, as an unforgettable formative experience. So who were they?

Old Musical Hands

The only musician apart from Peggy to play on all of the Radio Ballads was **Alf Edwards**, a concertina player of genius at a time when the instrument was decidedly passé. In the late 18th century the appearance of a novel Chinese 'free-reed' instrument – where air is forced past a vibrating reed – led to a frenzy of invention in Europe. First came the harmonica and accordion, then the concertina and harmonium. Devised in the 1830s by Charles Wheatstone, a scientist and inventor born into a family of instrument-makers, the concertina sold in large numbers in the 1850s and 1860s. It was originally played only by the Victorian upper and middle classes – even dukes and earls, an Archbishop of Canterbury and Prime Minister Balfour took it up.

However, once the concertina began to appear on the second-hand market it became attractive as a cheaper alternative to brass instruments for village bands. As soon as it became common, in both senses, the middle classes stopped buying it, and in England it became a working man's instrument. For a time it was popular in dance bands and music halls as well as for traditional rural music. In fact it led to the growth of concertina bands, and with them the development of instruments with amazingly high and low registers. His proficiency on these enabled Alf Edwards to reproduce both growling storm and spooky pit to such wonderful effect. As a solo instrument it has been described variously as the electric guitar of its day and the successor of the one man 'tabor-and-pipe' of the Middle Ages.