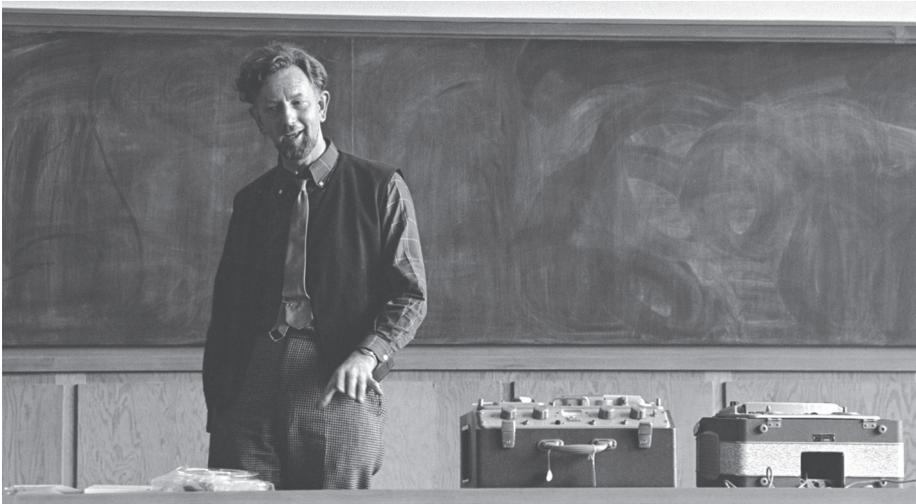


CHAPTER 20

From Ballads to Banners

Charles Parker, 1964–80



I've never met anyone with an ear like his. The way he made the programmes, every sentence was put together as a piece of art. He wanted to make Art ... He taught me the soft interview, simple questions, waiting, panning for that speck of gold among the dross.

DILIP HIRO, WRITER AND JOURNALIST, INTERVIEWED IN 2007

In the BBC, anyone who by his or her attitudes or behaviour was thought to be different, very easily got a reputation as an eccentric, or a person who was difficult ... Such a reputation clung year in and year out, was nourished and embroidered by the smallest incidents and was passed on, generally enlarged, until it could become a powerfully corrosive force which affected the prospects and possibilities of your work – and even your survival.

PHILIP DONNELLAN, FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 1980S

Radio 1964–72

Now a tireless documenter of English folk traditions, Doc Rowe was at his parents' house in Torquay when they put Charles Parker up in December 1966. At the time Charles was working with Philip Donnellan, his lifelong ally and friend, who was making a film on the blind, to be called BD8. Charles was helping him with some recording and doing his sound editing, but naturally got so emotionally involved with the plight of the blind that he decided to put together a radio programme on the same subject. Torquay on the English south-west coast held one of the two RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) rehabilitation centres, and Charles was interviewing blind people and their carers. I shall dwell on this programme at some length because it marks the point at which Charles Parker's fortunes at the BBC go into a steep decline, and it illustrates his personality perfectly, as does this quote from Doc:

He came to stay with us at Torquay while he was making it. We watched *Cathy Come Home* while he was here – that'll give you the date. My mother and sister always talked about this remarkable bloke. All night you could hear the sound of him going through tapes. Throughout breakfast he was reading the paper, working at the Uher [recorder] ... Cursing under his breath, scraping at the cheese. Charles – do you really want cheese on your toast? – Oh, bugger.

Donnellan and Parker were perturbed by many of the things they discovered about the treatment of the blind. In particular they were concerned by what they saw in workshops, where many inmates – a word Charles thought was apt – felt exploited. They had been institutionalised from a young age, sitting at factory workbenches for their subsistence and pocket money. Moreover, there was a general reluctance at the time to encourage the blind to move independently outside the home. In Torquay Charles met Lee Farmer, an American campaigner for the use of the 'Hoover' long cane, invented by an army sergeant in 1944 to help blinded soldiers. This is the now-familiar cane that blind people swing from side to side in front of them. Farmer discovered that Britain – the RNIB and others – was years behind the USA in adopting it, and lacked an ethos which encouraged self-help. The main researcher in Britain, the brilliant Dr Alfred Leonard of Nottingham University, emphatically agreed, and helped with the programme.

Philip Donnellan's television documentary went out in the autumn of 1967. It was welcomed by independent campaigners for the blind, but antagonised those responsible for their welfare, notably the RNIB. Lee Farmer wrote to Charles from Illinois saying that it looked as though 'Philip's arrows had hit their mark', and hoping that the programme had 'pinched the proper toes.' Its title BD8, incidentally, was the name of the form that blind or partially