

A New Generation

The 2006 Radio Ballads



We couldn't get it through the door it was so big. We mike up the drum outside because the control room's inside, no line of sight, so John Leonard and the engineer are inside and I'm in the doorway cueing the drummer. Boom, boom, boom. We're alongside a lake that goes on to the Irish border, and that sound – well, lights go on everywhere ... On the journey home, the drummer told me later, driving back through Newry, the back doors of the van swing open and the drum comes out and rolls across a roundabout. Out they went to get it, everyone stopping. Ten years earlier, no way, they'd have been away.

VINCE HUNT, IN 2007, ON USING A PROTESTANT LAMBEG DRUM IN A CATHOLIC AREA WHILE RECORDING FOR THIRTY YEARS OF CONFLICT, 2006

Thirty years after Philip Donnellan’s film, and 40 years after *Travelling People* ended the original series, the concept of the Radio Ballads was unexpectedly revived. A Sheffield-born radio executive and one-time folk singer, John Leonard, who for years had nursed a desire to produce a modern equivalent of the original series, came to the BBC (repeatedly) with a proposal. For years they weren’t interested, but remembered him when they launched a new initiative, *RealVoices*, which aimed to illustrate the richness and diversity of regional accents. Consequently Lesley Douglas of Radio 2 asked Leonard’s company Smooth Operations to produce a new set of eight; she later described it as one of her best-ever commissions. Another enthusiast who had been egging Leonard on from the beginning would be musical director, John Tams.

Tams had much in common with MacColl, through a kind of convergent evolution. Born into a working-class Derbyshire family, he was radical in politics, he had been a journalist and presenter on radio, and he had acted, sung, and written songs. He, too, had been a folk song collector, in Ireland, North and South. He had been musical director for the National Theatre for 15 years, working for Bill Bryden on memorable productions of *The Mysteries* and *Lark Rise to Candleford*, before taking the part of rifleman Hagman in the Napoleonic War series *Sharpe*, for which he wrote and sang the songs, and through which he became known to a wider public.

Tams did *Six Men of Dorset* at Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre for 7:84, opening two days before the police cavalry charge at Orgreave during the 1984 miners’ strike. (A year later, after a play about miners’ wives, the English 7:84 lost its Arts Council grant and folded. The Scottish 7:84 battles on to this day.) One of Tams’s songs was sung on the 1984 picket line just as Ewan’s were. Here his life and Ewan’s intersected: ‘Just imagine Ewan doing a Ballad of the Strike.’ Tams’s public success as a singer came late in his career when Folk awards began. He won Album of the Year in 2001, three awards in 2006, including Folk Singer of the Year, and one in 2008. He has recently worked on the songs for *Warhorse* at the National Theatre, and shows as little sign of slowing as Ewan did in his 50s.

In the end there were six Radio Ballads in the new series, with two, on football and teenagers, dropped from the original proposal, the latter after interviewing was well under way. They were made during 2005 and broadcast in early 2006 in successive weeks on Monday nights from 27 February to 3 April on Radio 2 – so the equivalent of the 1950s Light Programme rather than the Home Service. The six final subjects were the steel and shipbuilding industries, both in terminal decline, HIV/AIDS, foxhunting, fairgrounds and Northern Ireland. So, while there is some mapping onto the original subjects, it’s hardly slavish. Nor is their adherence to the original approach, though what is eloquently clear is their desire to honour the original makers, pioneers who went before them, in Tams’s words from his stage act, ‘carrying