

CHAPTER 6

Riding the Engine

The Ballad of John Axon



Last week a technique and a subject got married, and nothing in radio kaleidoscopy, or whatever you care to call it, will ever be the same again. This was music with a purpose: its picture of a morning in winter, a family and friends, things to look forward to, a train, a broken brake, and a man staying on to die, was sharp and strange and powerful ... Anecdote turned into song, song turned into the hiss of steam. It didn't, presumably couldn't, keep still for a minute.

PAUL FERRIS, *THE OBSERVER*, 1958

I broke in to the BBC in Broad Street every night at half past twelve when the night shift went on, took over the three tape machines there, and edited the programme till seven in the morning for about two months, when I did finally get it together, and was only rumbled on the last day, luckily.

CHARLES PARKER, INTERVIEWED BY TREVOR FISHER, 1971

SET INTO SONG

Hugh Carleton-Greene, Director-General of the BBC through the 1960s, called *The Ballad of John Axon* 'the most originally conceived, the most brilliantly executed and the most moving radio programme I've ever heard.' In fact, it didn't turn out as originally conceived, it was executed after months of hard labour, and the BBC very nearly didn't broadcast it at all. When Charles Parker wrote to Ewan MacColl in July 1957 he had in his mind's ear a 1944 programme, part of a 26-week series produced by the legendary radio journalist Norman Corwin for CBS. Written by Millard Lampell and Earl Robinson, the writer of the song 'Joe Hill', and narrated in song by Burl Ives, it told the story of Abraham Lincoln's funeral train. Charles had wept when he first heard it.

A lonesome train on a lonesome track,
Seven coaches painted black.

Charles writes that the idea is still 'very much in embryo', but wants to sound Ewan out because it clearly hinges on his participation. We could have a British equivalent of *Lonesome Train*, he tells him, 'drawing its strengths from the tradition and pride of the railwayman, and from the work songs, of which [you are] such a master.' He envisages a shape built around the last journey of John Axon, giving a reiterated 'bass tune' of the doomed goods train working up to the climax, out of which he anticipates flashbacks into the dead man's life. From meetings with Axon's workmates they could create 'impressionistic dramatic vignettes to build up the character of the man.' He goes on to praise the music Ewan had written and performed for Denis Mitchell's recent television programme *Night in the City*. Mitchell is the radio producer who had made Ewan's *Ballads and Blues* series: he had since defected to television.

Charles clearly sees Ewan's participation as crucial, but flattery isn't necessary. In his reply Ewan is eager at the prospect of working on that kind of programme, and points out that he has already collected some old English railway songs with a 'somewhat vague notion of writing a ballad-opera on the subject', which could provide useful raw material. He won't, though, be able to start on it straight away. He's off to Moscow for five weeks with Jean (and Peggy...) and isn't due back till 25 August.

His support galvanises Charles, who replies immediately. Although he's tied up with a couple of programmes himself, he hopes to meet Axon's widow Gladys early in August to get her agreement, which is vital. He then goes on: 'Depending on the actuality characters themselves [BBC-speak for the real railwaymen] I am toying with the idea of using actuality recordings for the flash back sequences with yourself as the link between them and the dramatico-musical evocation of the goods train, but it will have to be actuality well up to Denis's standards before this could begin to work.' Denis