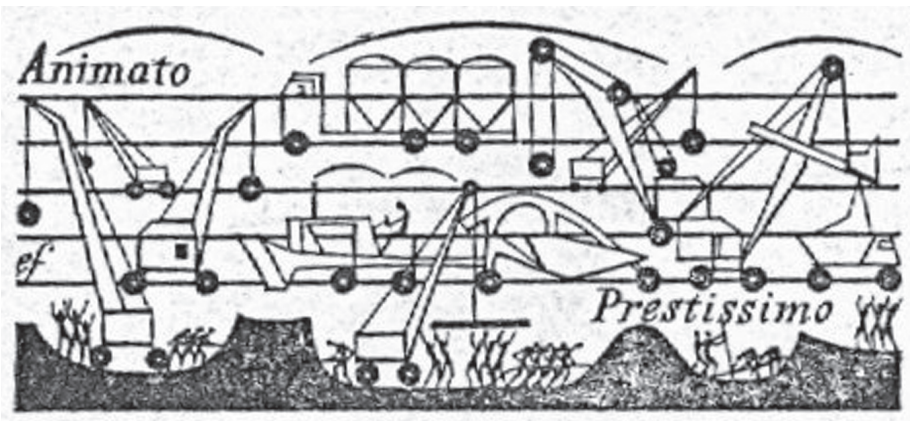
CHAPTER 8

Muck Shifting

Song of a Road



Are we jumping from the frying pan into the fire? From the thralldom of the 8.45, the limited flexibility of railways ... to an anarchic uncontrolled torrent dominated by self-interest and the dehumanising effects of power sans understanding. The cult of the motor car versus the old-style locoman. Why does the thought of the traffic on the Great West Road today inspire revulsion compared to Clapham Junction on Easter Monday?

CHARLES PARKER, FROM A 1958 IDEAS PAPER FOR *SONG OF A ROAD*

When you're up on the seat in the cold and the heat
You never think what you're lifting
You're bashing away every hour of the day,
You're working at the old muck shifting.

EWAN MACCOLL, 'CATS AND BACK-ACTERS',
FROM *SONG OF A ROAD*, 1959

Vindicated after his internal struggle at the BBC before *John Axon* could be broadcast, Charles Parker put the programme's success down to the way it allowed the listener to identify with the action. It hadn't won the Italia Prize in the end, but he was delighted with the way the songs and musical setting had helped to make the everyday experience dramatic. He craved more, but he would have to secure Ewan and Peggy if there were to be any more Radio Ballads. He knew the nature of the relationship between them, and he disapproved of it, as he'd told Peggy over tea in Heal's department store one day. So he was well aware that Ewan wouldn't come on board if she didn't, and Peggy was trapped on the continent by what we came to know as a Catch 22.

The US State Department had been against her trip to Moscow, where the CIA had monitored the US delegation, and was incensed by the subsequent visit to Peking against its heavy-handed 'advice'. Peggy had been warned that her passport would be impounded were she to return to the USA: she was told later she was on a blacklist sent to European governments. She was stuck. The problem was that the British government wouldn't issue her with a visa unless she had a BBC contract. But the BBC would only give her a contract if she already had a visa … So 12 days after the broadcast of *Axon*, and doubtless with Ewan's urgent encouragement, Charles went into battle. In an internal BBC memo to both his Midlands boss Denis Morris and the London Head of Features Laurence Gilliam he pressed for support in getting her back to England:

> She was responsible for the brilliant orchestration in John Axon, herself played the banjo in that production and she brings to her technical mastery of the banjo and guitar a unique understanding of the modal forms of popular music and their rhythmic and harmonic potential. I am hoping to commission a radio ballad series from Ewan MacColl, using Peggy Seeger if possible, and am at present negotiating for her return for the Italia production of John Axon. Douglas Cleverdon also wants her for Homer … How can we sort the hand-to-mouth work permit situation with the Ministry of Labour?

He draws a blank, and two days later his agitation increases in a further memo, his prose purpling as he goes. Worried that *John Axon* will prove a 'flash in the pan', Charles insists Ewan is essential: 'His finger is on the true pulse of the emerging music.' He tries to get a commitment for, say, a further five Radio Ballads, wanting to guarantee Ewan enough income to devote himself to it for a year. If he can get this, Charles is confident they will have 'a body of performed work unique and unmatched.' They mustn't miss 'a golden opportunity to write a new page in the history of broadcasting.' He goes on to press two buttons that he hopes will influence Gilliam – the potential income from TV rights, and the danger of losing Ewan to commercial television. But