

CHAPTER 9

From Microphone to Broadcast Engineering the Programmes



I am fairly clear that there are several members of your staff who have passed through the stage of finding Parker so odd as to be laughable, and have reached the stage of finding him so original as to be exciting.

They forgive his demands because they have learned that it is a stimulating experience to do their best to respond to him.

CHARLES PARKER'S IMMEDIATE BOSS DAVID GRETTON
TO THE BBC CHIEF ENGINEER, 1959

Charles wasn't desperately good at explaining things and when we began he kept saying everybody must Create, all the time, and the phrase I've never forgotten is, when we were all punch drunk, he said we should be aiming at a mood of Controlled Despair. My only question, had I dared ask it, would have been 'How do we control it?'

GILLIAN FORD (NÉE REEVES), PLAYING IN THE SOUND EFFECTS ON
SINGING THE FISHING, INTERVIEWED IN 2007

An Ultimatum

At the end of 1959 Charles, Ewan and Peggy all wanted to make changes to the way they constructed the Radio Ballads before they started work on *Singing the Fishing*. Charles was exasperated by all the technical difficulties he faced before and after recording. They exhausted and dispirited him. But he was totally unprepared for a letter from Ewan and Peggy threatening to pull out of future collaboration entirely. They would only continue if they were allowed to make the final choice of the sections of actuality in the programme, and they stressed their view that the team should concentrate in future on working people and their attitudes to the job, not on the job itself.

As we saw in the last chapter, a disagreement had emerged between Charles and Ewan over the programme's main target. Because the idea for *Song of a Road* had been 'suggested' by his ultimate boss Denis Morris, Charles felt his remit was to mark the actual creation of the M1. It was, after all, designed to be broadcast when the road's first section opened. Ewan thought that the programme's strength lay in celebrating the workmen who had created it, their diversity of voice, background and job, rather than the process of road-building itself. He had been convinced of this principle as long ago as *Bridson's Tunnel* of 1934. It's tempting to conclude that this view was obviously because of Ewan's political convictions, but it wasn't quite as simple. The Radio Ballads aren't polemics: he does deliberately let working people have their say, rather than speaking for them.

Despite the difficulties of achieving his Radio Ballad concept, Charles was utterly convinced that they were pioneering the future of radio, so the letter upset him deeply. It was clearly an ultimatum, and once more he could see a potentially wonderful series foundering just as it was out of port. He dashed off an intemperate 12-page reply in longhand in which he charged them with putting at risk the entire future of radio, and condemning him to a 'life of professional drudgery and bleak mediocrity' if they abandoned the form. He waited for a reply, stewing, but none came for several days. Was that to be it?

In this chapter I want to step back to look at the key issues they had to resolve in late 1959 before they could agree on an approach to the programmes and a consistent workable method of making them. First we'll examine the gist of Ewan and Peggy's complaint, and how it was resolved, then look at the struggles that Charles faced and overcame in those pioneering early days of tape editing, when he was taking the process as far as it would go, then further still. At the outset it's worth reviewing the stages in the making of the first two programmes:

- a) several weeks of recording in the field, usually by a pair or all three of them,