

## THE BALLAD OF EWAN MacCOLL

### Editor's introduction:

This is the script of a presentation by Sam Richards. It was intended to be performed by Sam (and indeed was) with one or two other musicians with live and recorded music at events mostly in the South West of England. In this form it has the appearance of an anthology, or rather collected works, with recorded examples. The original was much more of an interactive performance for folk song clubs and such like.

We think the merits of this paper go beyond the modest, though in retrospect successfully achieved, objectives Sam seems to have set himself.

We have maintained almost all the script with the exception of small typographic corrections and in some cases additional brief (very brief) notes and headings or titles to the songs. Sam's notes such as "play these on the piano" have been retained for their reference to the original intent of the presentation.

Where a particular song or version of a song has not been cited we've provided a link to something we feel fits the case in point. In a couple of instances where Sam used vocal accompaniment for his example we've located a suitable song from the often, conflicting, YouTube choices. Performances are not always as good as we might have wished. But access to material from the internet is not always easy.

What you have here, what Sam has provided for anyone wanting an informative but musically varied (it does end with Hans Eisler's "Song of the United Front") presentation, is an enlightened summary of Ewan MacColl's song writing work, with, we think, interesting and varied examples.

All the recordings have been referenced from YouTube. That in itself is testimony to Ewan MacColl's omnipresence in popular culture. And the availability made by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC., USA of recordings from its archive is here acknowledged also.

We hope you enjoy this assembly as much as we have in reviewing it.

### Opening sequence: "The Press Gang"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wc6PQC52bE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wc6PQC52bE)

That was the voice of Ewan MacColl, and he was singing a song called *The Press Gang*. For me it's one of his finest recorded performances, emphasizing a quality of bleakness but presented with wit and timing, and a compelling tone throughout. *The Press Gang* comes from the storehouse of popular broadside ballads that were published in their thousands until the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and sound recording and radio. Ewan was known for his singing of ballads, broadsides, folk lyrics, occupational songs and the rest. But he had no sympathy with the idea of reviving these old songs from some kind of antiquarian impulse. For him they had to be part of a bigger picture, the making of a new vernacular popular song culture, based on the old but creatively rooted in the present. He once said: "The artist should struggle to live in the same time as himself". Ewan's song writing was very much part of this objective.

Ewan MacColl had many facets and many talents. He was a theatre maker and playwright, actor, radio artist, folklorist and field researcher, song anthologist, writer, political activist, singer and songwriter. And he was a pioneer of the British folksong revival – along with people like A.L. Lloyd, Peter Kennedy, Alan Lomax, a small group whose big influence is still felt today. This evening I will concentrate on MacColl's song writing, although it isn't possible to disregard other aspects of his life and work. So, with song writing in mind, I'll jump in the deep end and see what happens. First some background.

Ewan MacColl was born in Salford in 1915. He was christened James Henry Miller and known in his youth as Jimmy Miller. The story of his name is that he enlisted in the British Army in July 1940 but deserted in December. No one knows why, and no one knows why he wasn't prosecuted after the war. In an interview not long before he died he claimed he was expelled for anti-fascist activity – but surely the entire war against Hitler was an anti-fascist activity. It is true that MI5 kept a file on him as a known left-wing agitator, but this doesn't really explain all that much. Whatever happened, after going to ground for a while Jimmy Miller re-emerged with the Scots name Ewan MacColl. His parents were both Scots, and he made much of his Scottish connections, singing Scots ballads in as broad an accent as you could wish for.

Back to Salford. Now in the metropolitan borough of Greater Manchester, it was initially a textile town, but was always in the shadow of Manchester. A Salford man once told me that this is symbolized by the fact that Salford never had a first class football team whereas Manchester has two – famous ones at that. Just before Jimmy Miller's birth Salford's fortunes had declined so much that a 1931 survey mentioned parts of it as among the worst slums in the country. MacColl himself, much later in life, said that he had a love-hate relationship with Salford. Here's what he said for a TV interview:

"I can't bear the place, or the idea of going back there. At the same time everything I do, everything I have ever written, is to some extent informed by it, by my experience in Salford. We were poor because we grew up in a landscape where everything offended the eye..."

He added that:

"...Two streets away from us was the Irwell. If you fell in the Irwell you didn't drown; you were poisoned – this was the local folklore."

Some impression of MacColl's Salford can be gained from the paintings of L.S.Lowry showing industrial life, crowds of working class people, factories coming out, chimneys, town halls, town clocks, streets, mills and so on. Or there's William Blake's words describing industrial England's "dark satanic mills". The allusion to Hell isn't misplaced when you consider that underpaid working people toiled often to the edge of endurance in overcrowded factories and mills, that the constant clatter of machinery made people deaf, and many worked in the extreme heat of furnaces or in coal mines beneath the earth. When MacColl wrote a preface to a collection of songs from such areas he began by commenting "There are no nightingales in these songs".

But MacColl referred to a love-hate relationship with Salford, there was the positive side of things too, and this was focused primarily on a culture of enormous richness and depth. He recalled that in his youth he walked around Salford for miles and miles, and in particular was fascinated to find where Friedrich Engels had lived. Engels' book, "The Condition of the Working Class in England" of 1845 relied heavily on observations of Salford and Manchester where he lived and worked in the

office of the German family firm Ermen and Engels which made sewing threads. Jimmy Miller and his young left wing friends identified the very mills and places mentioned by Engels. MacColl said:

“Engels was ours. He was a buddy, a mate. We loved old Friedrich because he walked the same streets...”

Jimmy’s Scots parents were political as well as both having good repertoires of songs of all kinds. They had moved from Scotland because William Miller, MacColl’s father and an iron moulder, was blacklisted throughout Scotland due to his union activities. But as well as the politics MacColl recalled the Workers’ Arts Club, a three storey building with a snooker hall and bar on the first floor, a dance floor on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, and a boxing ring on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. William Miller could bring snooker games to a standstill when he sang ballads like “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” – twelve or more slowly paced verses about a lady who is courted by nine gentlemen and a ploughboy lad. The poor ploughboy, the only one the lady loves, is forced to fight the gentlemen, gets rid of eight of them, but is slaughtered by the ninth – a class conscious story if there ever was one.

MacColl also remembered a circle of men that included his father, who argued and debated politics and philosophy for hours on end. He describes the scene:

“They’d sit there with their pint mugs in their hand, two thirds of them unemployed, and they’d sit there and they’d argue. They’d argue philosophical points. Somebody would bring a volume of Dietzgen or of Feurbach or they’d read Engels’ “Anti Feurbach” and they would argue by the hour about these things...”

And he observed, further, that:

“These were a brand of working class intellectuals interested in all kinds of things.”

So he was brought up in what he called a “gigantic slum”, yet where a grass roots working class culture thrived, including songs, and where politics and ideas were regarded as important in the lives of working people.

In my own childhood I knew this kind of industrial landscape and its culture very well, and empathize with the mixed feelings it produces – the love-hate relationship. My mother’s family was from Preston, a mere 30 miles away, another seminal town of the Industrial Revolution. And like Salford, Preston was initially based on the cotton industry but also had its engineering, its wood yards and docks, back-to-back Coronation Street housing and cobbled streets as well as its own folklore – which I know a little of. There was even a song about Marsh Lane where my mother was brought up and where I remember her mother living in a tiny, dingy industrial terrace till she was aged and blind.

Down Marsh Lane there are some dirty women  
If tha wants to kiss ‘em, tha has to pay a shilling

Soldiers half a crown, sailors half a guinea  
Single men two pound ten, little kids a penny

I too grew up knowing something about the brand of working class intellectuals that MacColl referred to. And although Preston had its share of these, I mainly met such people from my father's friends and acquaintances in London. In fact my Dad was one such person. And like the characters that MacColl recalled, and like MacColl himself, he too had minimal schooling, educated himself, read voraciously, and as a young man could frequently be found in the nose-bleed seats in London theatres. He got involved in debates and campaigns in left-wing circles including, again like MacColl, the Communist Party. Such people imbibed many levels of culture very keenly. From my father I learnt about Freud, A.S.Neill, George Bernard Shaw, modern novels, jazz and Karl Marx. Ewan MacColl's conversation had an even wider range: from Elizabethan theatre – he quoted Shakespeare and Ben Jonson extensively – to poetry, classical music (especially Wagner) the theatre of Meyerhold, Brecht and Laban and many others. By the time I knew him, however, MacColl was also deeply versed in vernacular poetry, music and theatre – the oral traditions, what his generation called folk culture – the songs and tales of Gypsies, of country labourers and industrial workers.

The working class intellectual's thirst for knowledge, culture and the arts was partly a way of arming oneself against a society, against a politics and a power that was subject to scrutiny because it perpetuated the self-interest of the ruling classes. Academic objectivity and detachment was deemed untrustworthy and, furthermore, a convenient myth that served the powerful. For the kind of working class intellectuals MacColl described education was hard won at night school after work, in public libraries during terms of unemployment, or in self-help political discussion groups. It was not handed to them as a kind of birth right. Knowledge, education, was not and could not be socially neutral. These people had a relationship with learning and knowledge rooted in social experience, a relationship which began – and insisted on - the view from below.

What does all this have to do with MacColl's song writing? The answer is: everything. On the one hand there is an immensely strong root in an industrial local culture, a sense of aspiration and deep empathy for the people he grew up with. On the other there is an insatiable thirst for education, for the arts, for established arts but also for innovative and even experimental arts. We might characterize this dichotomy as oral traditions as opposed to literate ones; or the informal and the formal; or vernacular and official languages. Or we might just say high art and the vernacular. This dichotomy comes out in MacColl's song writing. On the one hand he wrote songs which aped folk tradition. An example of this might be:

EXAMPLE "Champion at keepin' em rollin" [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSn0vpDeUAU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSn0vpDeUAU)

On the other hand he attempted extended forms such as the “White Wind” cantata about South Africa under apartheid, or a long free form song about an unemployed man looking for a job. Here’s a passage from “White Wind”.

EXAMPLE: **From White Wind** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfMMelo8p9M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfMMelo8p9M)

These two ends of a spectrum, however, were the extremes. The majority of MacColl’s songs were located somewhere in the grey area between.

There are also literary references – a-plenty if you care to look for them. A song lampooning academic detachment begins with a borrowing from T.S. Eliot: “We’ve learned to distinguish the hollow men from the rest”. Or there’s the use of Christopher Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be my love” (also used by John Donne) and reinvented by MacColl in his love song for the age of the bomb.

EXAMPLE: **Come Live With Me** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a64TGGZb06k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a64TGGZb06k)

One bit of autobiography that MacColl told many times involved his move from theatre to folksong. His work in theatre before and just after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War had been ground-breaking. It had led to Theatre Workshop with his first wife Joan Littlewood, and was internationally recognized as of exceptional quality. None other than George Bernard Shaw, who MacColl knew, had said – with characteristic immodesty: “Apart from myself, MacColl is the only man of genius writing for the theatre in England today.”

MacColl sought a theatre of the working class – not *about* it, not *for* it, but *of* it. Modern theatre, he claimed, lacked a language which moved working class people but did not talk down to them. He and Littlewood replaced orthodox theatre conventions by barnstorming around the country, playing to local audiences in local venues, rethinking what training and rehearsal could consist of, until Littlewood eventually felt the urge to have a permanent theatre home in London near critics, where audiences could come to the theatre as opposed to the theatre going to them. Around the early 1950s, however, MacColl had entered a crisis of artistic conviction, and the move to a permanent base in Stratford East in London caused the final rift. “We did not create this company to court critics”, he once told me. “We created this company to make a theatre of the working class, and the chances were that if we were doing our job the critics wouldn’t like it anyway”. But there was more to it than this. Despite the international acclaim for his work he was, his words, “in despair”. And the reason was that the theatre language of the working class that he sought was still eluding him. Enter the American folklorist and whirlwind proselytizer for all things folk Alan Lomax - in 1950. It was Lomax’s influence, his political understanding of culture from below, and the fact that he

introduced MacColl to A.L. Lloyd - another left-winger and lover of folksong, that finally tipped MacColl into throwing himself into a folk revival and away from theatre. MacColl re-examined the song repertoires of his parents. He devoured the repertoire established by an earlier generation of folksong collectors and became curious as to whether the industrial working class had anything equivalent. He and A.L. Lloyd can be credited with adding the category of “industrial song” to the folksong canon – although heavily influenced by equivalent researches in America.

Folk revivals typically construct, out of available and selected vernacular materials, the traditions they are based on and then fetishize these constructions. And this is true whether the resulting constructions are nationalist, democratic, socialistic, global or combinations of these. In all cases a “peoples’ past” is invoked (to use Eric Hobsbawm’s words) and is then developed in various ways. The old symbolic languages, in order to become relevant and credible, need to be extended beyond the limits they have “in the raw”, as it were. The “folklorized” language is used to simulate a sense of community and shared values – based largely on the folk revivalist’s pitch to claim folk languages as a kind of mother tongue. Suffice to say that the art critic Herbert Read once said of modern art that it proceeds “by accident and misunderstanding” – which could equally be said of folk movements.

As a songwriter Ewan MacColl used the vernacular, conceptualized as “folk”, in various ways according to the needs of the song he was working on. But he also allowed in elements from other artistic realms. According to need he varied the ingredients and the amounts of ingredients used in his own creative practices. We’ve already seen two possibilities - quasi-folk song and compositions in more extended forms. But the most notable extended forms MacColl created were the hour-long Radio Ballads, eight BBC radio programmes broadcast between 1958 and 1964. Each programme took a social group – railwaymen, road navies, fishermen, adolescents, people with poliomyelitis, coal miners, boxers and gypsies – and combined the real recorded speech of these people with sound effects, Peggy’s Seeger’s musical arrangements, producer Charles Parker’s virtuosic studio and editing abilities, and MacColl’s dramatic and song writing talents. The Radio Ballads remain an unsurpassed beacon of radio art in the epic vernacular. They were made over half a century ago, and included some of MacColl’s best-known songs. This was in no small measure due to his technique of transcribing spoken interviews, analysing the speech patterns, the use of metaphor, parataxis, and inclusive language rather than official language which tends to protect the speaker by avoiding imaginative effects, and so on. This was how songs like “The Big Hewer” or the “Thirty Foot Trailer” were created.

EXAMPLE: **The Thirty Foot Trailer** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpsnoCd6QTo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpsnoCd6QTo)

I'd like to outline five basic approaches to song making that MacColl regularly employed. Then when I sing my selection of his songs we can perhaps relate them to this schema.

First, there were songs based on classic balladry, perhaps the most fundamental way of singing a narrative, stemming originally from techniques of oral composition. For example, MacColl wrote a ballad about the miscarriage of justice to Timothy Evans, wrongly accused of murder and hung in the year 1950 but given a posthumous pardon in 1966. The song, "**Go Down You Murderers**", simply tells the story in classic ballad style. It has verses like this:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh6eaxv2uDg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh6eaxv2uDg)

The governor came in one day  
And the chaplain by his side,  
Said, "Your appeal has been turned down,  
Prepare yourself to die."  
Sayin', "Go down, you murderer, go down."

Anyone who knows the classic ballads knows the style and the meter. There were plenty of MacColl songs cast in this mould, even including one about Jesus who is portrayed as a political leader.

Jesus was a working man  
And a hero you will hear  
Born in the town of Bethlehem  
At the turning of the year, yes  
The turning of the year

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg2pikuciU8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg2pikuciU8)

There was a second type of song - in the style not so much of oral balladry, but of broadside balladry. For centuries broadsides were sold on the streets, at markets, fairs and gathering places. They were more dense verbally – mainly because they were originally written songs, journalistic, satirical or sensational – rather than having audible links to oral composition as the classic ballads generally did. They are very good vehicles for political lampoons and there are many of them in the MacColl Songbook.

Third, despite MacColl's antipathy towards popular song he composed more than a few songs whose dominant influence was popular in origin rather than purely folkloric. "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" became a pop song as sung by Roberta Flack, Elvis Presley and others, but it bore distinctive marks of popular idiom before these singers got hold of it. Popular influence therefore occasionally seeped into MacColl's work – which was none the worse for it.

Fourth, there are what might be called radio ballad songs. I have already mentioned the method of listening to interview material – even down to a speaker's breathing patterns. Songs thus written are descriptive and largely non-narrative. The classics of this type are "The Shoals of Herring",

from the radio ballad “Singing the Fishing”, and “Freeborn Man” from “The Travelling People”. I’ll sing both of these later.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ov81aogaxg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ov81aogaxg) **“The Shoals of Herring”** (Editor’s note! Look at the comments on YouTube about this song and ask yourself if there is any other composer in the last 150 years who has so touched people of such disparate backgrounds)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=joNTYxROyGo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joNTYxROyGo) **“Freeborn Man”**

Finally, there is what I call Ewan’s Weimar style. From 1919 until 1933 when it was stamped out by the Nazis the Weimar group of artists included the likes of Walter Gropius, Thomas Mann, Kurt Weill, Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Mary Wigman, Hans Eisler and Paul Dessau. They were determinedly experimental and left leaning, hostile to bourgeois society and capitalism, and sworn enemies of militarism and authoritarianism. The fact that they promoted the music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern illustrates their commitment to the avant gardism of the time, but there was also another strain in Weimar music. The communist Hans Eisler had studied with Schoenberg and had composed some music using the 12-tone serial technique, but decided to concentrate on songs and anthems with political content, workers’ songs and so on. For these he, and others, employed a kind of militant workers-on-the-rise marching feel, and it was this that influenced some of MacColl’s more philosophical songs. Compare, for example, Eisler’s well-known **“Song of the United Front”** with MacColl’s **“We Are the Engineers”**.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZarYb3muqNg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZarYb3muqNg) “We are the Engineers”

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd6iGi5CR5Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd6iGi5CR5Y) Eisler

PLAY THESE ON PIANO

So why pay attention to Ewan MacColl today? After all, his political style can appear dated, and even his life and artistic partner Peggy Seeger now questions some of the positions she and Ewan took in their heyday. I will list three reasons for engaging with MacColl and his work today.

One is quite simply his example of being an engaged artist with an active view of the relationships between art and society. He is part of this history and part of this debate, the loss of which would be, in my view, catastrophic. Today’s political artists – from Billy Bragg to Grace Petrie – are the continuing end of a story that reaches back many centuries.

Secondly his approaches to song making, his various negotiated relationships with tradition, are a strong model for anyone who wishes to use them. In particular the radio ballad technique of song writing remains as useful now as it ever was: listening to people, interviewing them, recording them, understanding, analysing and using their speech as the basis for song words and melodies.

Finally, and to return to what I discussed earlier, Ewan MacColl’s creative practice and ideas represent a confluence of the vernacular on the one hand and experimental art on the other. Put simply, a “folk” community tends to have little use for experimental arts. And the reverse is the case

with the experimental milieu in which orthodox forms and utterances are often avoided. The possibility of disregarding these barriers on both sides and allowing the rootedness of the vernacular to encounter the freedoms of the experimental is something that I find inspiring and is, in fact, a major force in my own work. Ewan MacColl is certainly a major player in this creative search.