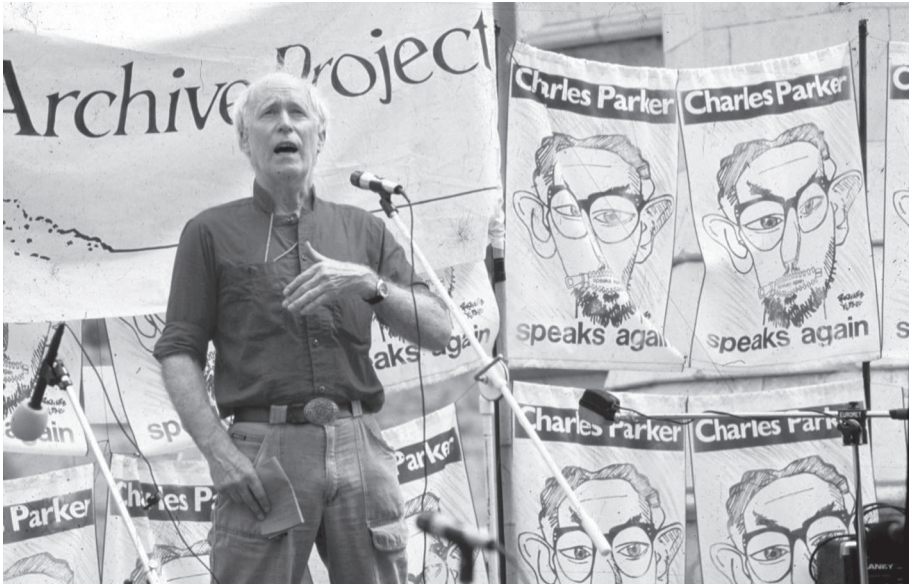


Sound in Vision

Three Radio Ballads on Film



You may well ‘assert’ the relationship between the acceptance of violence in boxing and the tolerance of institutionalised violence in other fields – notably the military – but this is a personal view which is hardly acceptable when grafted on to an original script which, as far as I know, pointed-up no such relationship.

ROBIN SCOTT, CONTROLLER BBC 2, TO PHILIP DONNELLAN,
ABOUT FIGHT GAME, 1973

When the last man leaves the pit for the factory floor,
Where the work is clean, the danger less and the pay is more,
When the last of the oil is gone who will
Remember the miners’ rejected skill?
Who will – Go Down?

NEW VERSE BY EWAN MACCOLL FOR THE BIG HEWER, 1974

The impact of the Radio Ballads on documentary makers in both radio and television in the 1960s was immense. While no one attempted to copy their dense texturing of words and music, and few entirely dispensed with a narrator, it became increasingly unthinkable to reassemble the words of real people in actors' mouths. The programmes were used in the BBC for training courses, where later radio feature makers like Piers Plowright were fascinated by them. But, apart from *The Camera and the Song* (p. 213), there was really only one attempt to do something comparable on film, and that was a set of direct adaptations of three Radio Ballads made by Philip Donnellan, Charles Parker's old friend from BBC Midlands radio in the 1950s.

Donnellan's *Joe the Chainsmith* had been made in the same year as *John Axon*, and in television was just as influential. But by the end of the 1960s the BBC regarded their producers with an equal degree of exasperation. Both made brilliant programmes but they insisted on embedding their own viewpoints, they wouldn't do what they were told, and they ignored any rules that obstructed them. Their talents were complementary – one had an amazing ear, the other a keen visual sense but less feeling for sound. They had collaborated, and each created controversy, on their programmes about the blind. Donnellan was unstinting in his praise for the way Charles created sound pictures: to him it was as though Charles shared with the blind their super-sensitive aural ability.

In making a film version of a Radio Ballad, Donnellan faced a question akin to one you must ask of any radio programme that adds music to words. MacColl, Parker and Seeger had to make sure that their songs augment the power of the message inherent in the words, not diminish them. Is it a better programme than with the words alone? When it works, yes. Music taps into the mind at a different emotional level (researchers increasingly believe that song in humanity's early history was a precursor of speech) and can slip in under our guard to manipulate our feelings. But you have to be careful – how much more careful do you have to be, then, if you have something that already works really well with sound only? The majority of our sensory input arrives through the eyes, so the images, still or moving, must be chosen with great sensitivity if you want to heighten the emotional impact of the original rather than dissipate it. Especially if the original is brilliant.

Shoals of Herring

Does Donnellan succeed? In 1963 he had tried a TV version of *On the Edge*, to reviews no better than for the original. Then in 1971 he approached Ewan, Peggy and Charles with a view to producing a film version of *Singing the Fishing*. (Charles had incidentally tried to put together a film of *John Axon* in 1959, but had been thwarted by copyright issues.) It was Donnellan who had first encountered the man known locally as 'old Funky' Lerner,