LEGACIES OF EWAN MACCOLL
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Legacies of Ewan MacColl
The Last Interview

ALLAN F. MOORE
GIOVANNI VACCA
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Notes on Contributors

Franco Fabbri is a musician and musicologist, and teaches popular music and sound studies at the University of Turin. His main interests are in the fields of genre theories and music typologies, the impact of media and technology across genres and musical cultures, and the history of popular music. He has served twice as chairman of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM). Fabbri has published on the rapport between music and technology (Elettronica e musica, 1984), on the confrontation of musical cultures in the contemporary world (L’ascolto tabù, 2005) and on the intricate fabric of influences and coincidences in the history of popular music (Around the Clock, 2008). His most read book (Il suono in cui viviamo, 1996, 2002, 2008) contains articles on diverse subjects including genres, analysis of popular music and aesthetics of sound. He is co-editor (with Goffredo Plastino) of the new series Routledge Global Popular Music.


Allan F. Moore is Professor of Popular Music at the University of Surrey. He is coordinating editor of the journal Popular Music, author of a number of edited collections and monographs, including Rock: The Primary Text (1993) and Song Means (2012), series editor of Ashgate’s Library of Essays in Popular Music, and author of some 60 academic articles. He is currently engaged in writing revisionist histories of both modernist concert music and English folk song: a lifelong devotee of English folk clubs, he felt it was about time this fascination bore some academic fruit!

Matthew Ord is a musician and PhD researcher at Newcastle University. After two years of philosophy and ethnomusicology at Queen University Belfast, Matt took a year of continental philosophy at the University of Greenwich before graduating in 2005, remaining in London to work as a freelance musician and teacher. He completed his MA in 2011 and after obtaining an AHRC studentship began work on his doctoral thesis (entitled ‘Ideology and Sound Recording in the Second British Folk Revival’ ) the following year. He continues to perform as a singer and guitarist with a particular interest in the traditional music of Britain and the southern United States. His other research interests include the history of broadcasting and recorded sound, the documentary film movement in Britain, and philosophies of everyday life.
**Doc Rowe** has been documenting British cultural tradition, song and dance for 50 years. Using a wide variety of media – video, film and photography as well as audio – he has accumulated a unique collection of contemporary and historical material on the traditional culture of the British Isles. Doc met Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger through Charles Parker, who produced the BBC *Radio Ballads* in the early 1960s. A working relationship with Charles, Ewan and Peggy over a number of years involved a variety of folksong and drama related projects, including Philip Donnellan’s TV versions of the *Radio Ballads*. Doc also produced artwork for Ewan and Peggy’s LPs and an exhibition on Ewan for ‘The Artist: Maker or Tool’ Symposium held at County Hall, London in March 1986. Teacher, photographer, broadcaster and performer on aspects of folklore and tradition, he has also been researcher, consultant and writer on television productions. His photographs are regularly published and his own books include *We’ll Call Once More Unto Your House* (1982); *With a Crash and a Din* (1984) and *MayDay: The Coming of Spring* (2006). More recently, he joined artists Alan Kane and the Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller in a travelling exhibition ‘Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK’ which is currently touring with The British Council (website: www.docrowe.org.uk).

**Giovanni Vacca** has worked extensively on folk music, folk and urban cultures and song-writing, and holds a PhD from La Sapienza University, Rome. He is the author of *Il Vesuvio nel motore* (1999), on Neapolitan working-class music, *Nel corpo della tradizione* (2004), an anthropological study on Southern Italy folklore, and *Gli spazi della canzone* (2013), about Neapolitan Song. He has occasionally written song lyrics for Neapolitan world music bands (website: giovannivacca.com).
Popular musicology embraces the field of musicological study that engages with popular forms of music, especially music associated with commerce, entertainment and leisure activities. The Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series aims to present the best research in this field. Authors are concerned with criticism and analysis of the music itself, as well as locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context. The focus of the series is on popular music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a remit to encompass the entirety of the world’s popular music.

Critical and analytical tools employed in the study of popular music are being continually developed and refined in the twenty-first century. Perspectives on the transcultural and intercultural uses of popular music have enriched understanding of social context, reception and subject position. Popular genres as distinct as reggae, township, bhangra, and flamenco are features of a shrinking, transnational world. The series recognizes and addresses the emergence of mixed genres and new global fusions, and utilizes a wide range of theoretical models drawn from anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, media studies, semiotics, postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies and queer studies.

Stan Hawkins, Professor of Popular Musicology, University of Oslo and Derek B. Scott, Professor of Critical Musicology, University of Leeds
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Foreword by Peggy Seeger

Who was Ewan MacColl?

He was a Marxist, a playwright, an actor, a singer, a songwriter, a cultural catalyst – but above all, a visionary: one of those dreamers who create a future in their minds then attempt to make it happen in real life. A folk legend, he now exists in many versions. MacColl Sagas are passed on fairly accurately by people who really knew him, but MacColl Folklore abounds, often created and spread by people who know someone who knew someone who heard from someone who thought he or she read somewhere in a book by someone who claimed to have met Ewan (but who, it turns out, was born after Ewan died). Journalists, critics, workmates, biographers, singers and songwriters – all have their own views of him, making him both bigger and smaller than he actually was.

He was a self-made man: a child born in dismal poverty, crippled by a sense of unworthiness and by lamentable schooling; an insecure boy with a passionate appetite for life; a youth driven by class rage into political action, thence into manhood where all of those facets of his life-so-far combined to urge him to self-make the credos by which he lived and worked. He created most of the disciplines that he taught, forgivable possibly in a field that is not represented in establishments of higher learning. He went to no university to which he could refer to verify his impromptu curriculum. He was musically illiterate, creating a huge variety of songs (some of them quite complicated) without once putting pen to staff paper. A voracious reader, he gathered his vocabulary from every possible type of book. A magnet for ideas, he constructed a personal raison d’être that defies description. The need to maintain this image was his Achilles heel.

He was easy to criticize – but ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’. Ewan’s ‘puddings’ were delicious and varied. He had a sense of ‘truth’ as regards artistic creation, stage performance and political allegiance. It was based on instinct rather than on book-learning. This un-academic approach often offended even the un-academics. He only worked well in groups where he was the leader, when he could set the pace and make the rules. We made a gaggle of enemies who loved the puddings but who misunderstood – or feared? – the recipes by which they were made.

So who was Ewan MacColl? He was essentially an evangelist and an entertainer. His familiarity with many subjects made him fascinating to listen to. He spoke without hesitation, his sentences being a good balance between Proust and Hemingway. To Ewan, everything was connected. Working with him may have sometimes been uncomfortable, but you were … connected.
We met many interviewers during our three decades together but to host one – an Italian student – for seven days was unprecedented. After our first meeting in 1987, we invited Giovanni Vacca to visit us once again. It was quite a week, during which he fitted effortlessly into our chaotic routine and we developed a lasting mutual personal and academic respect and friendship. It is largely due to him that this book, with its unique and thoughtful European perspective, has been written. The contributions by Franco Fabbri, Allan F. Moore, Dave Laing and Doc Rowe provide full background and Giovanni’s interviews at last give Ewan a chance to speak for himself. It’s about time.

Oxford, 2011
Acknowledgements

There are some people to whom I am indebted and to whom it is absolutely important to express my grateful thanks here: first of all Peggy Seeger, for providing me with materials and writing a touching foreword that remembers those marvellous days spent together; Professor Sheila Whiteley, who first suggested this project and supported it to the hilt; Professor Giuseppe Massara, for backing me many years ago when I first came up with the idea of interviewing Ewan MacColl; Paola Carra, who spent six months transcribing the interviews; and Peter Cox and Sheelagh Neuling for supervising and correcting them. I’d also like to thank Dave Laing for providing a final overview of the transcribed interviews, and for his essay, Allan Moore for sharing the making of this book with me, Doc Rowe for his photographs, Franco Fabbri for his contribution, Pierke Bosschieter for compiling the indexes, Stefano Pogelli for digitalizing the original tapes, Andrea De Falco for permanent computer assistance and Dai Griffiths for solving a Welsh enigma we found in some of Ewan’s words. Thanks, again, to Valerie Moyses and Felicity Roberts of the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive located in Ruskin College, Oxford, to Paul and Hazel Jennings who put me up over there when I visited, and to Doug Lang. Thanks, finally, to Dick Greenhaus of Camscso Music, Ted Power, Jean Newlove MacColl, Malcolm Taylor of the English Folk Dance and Song Society and to my parents and friends for offering help or supporting me in various ways: Pino Mereu, Domenico Gloriani, Alessandra Morelli, Chicca Vitale, Claudio Vedovati, Nicoletta Giacchetti and Francesco Giannattasio.

GV

My thanks to Giovanni, Dave and Franco for swift and fulsome responses to my niggling queries, to Ashgate for their support for this slightly unorthodox book (and particularly to Derek Scott and Sheila Whiteley for their belief in the project), to Matthew Ord for sterling work chasing up references from the interviews and, far from least, to Ewan MacColl whose ‘Dirty Old Town’ led me to a very early encounter with the folk tradition which remains in my bones.

AM
Introduction

Allan F. Moore and Giovanni Vacca

As E.H. Carr once remarked, the history you tell depends on the perspective from which you view it. As musicologists from very different backgrounds, we necessarily bring our own perspectives to bear on developing an understanding of Ewan MacColl’s legacy. Indeed, we have tried to adopt a single perspective, but one which has two very particular facets: the internationalist, and the labour of MacColl as singer and writer. The perspective is clearly one of re-evaluation. MacColl has been dead now for more than two decades and while critical approaches to his work have developed, they have been somewhat narrow in their focus. One aspect of our perspective is to expand that focus. This collection, then, offers a very European, non-insular take on his work.

From time to time, an artist appears who seems to embody in her/his work the dominant features of a whole historical process, to speak not only for him- or herself but for the unknown, voiceless people around them. Woody Guthrie springs to mind. Thanks both to his notoriety, and to the way cinema has imagined American folk culture, an image of such culture is quite widespread. MacColl is perhaps the nearest equivalent the UK has, although what he represents has little of Guthrie’s mythical presence.

If there is a country in the world that has a stereotyped image outside its borders, it is England. Too often, over most of the European continent, England and the English are still perceived mainly through the most trivial clichés: eccentric, conservative, snobbish and at the same time cohesive and with only occasional disruptive social emergencies like the Mod riots in the 1960s, the Punk protest in the 1970s, the miners’ strike in the 1980s, football hooliganism in the 1990s and knifings in London in the 2000s. The history of social conflicts in England, its proletarian culture, the inner dynamics of power and resistance and the way the Industrial Revolution actually came into being and produced a popular culture are barely known in Europe. Not many know the beauty of its traditional ballads and the fascinating world of its broadsides. Even fewer know about peculiarities like the travelling people and their culture. How many would know the difference between Gypsies and Tinkers, and how many know of Tinkers in the first place? Although historians from E.P. Thompson to Eric J. Hobsbawm have focused their work on the culture of the English working class, it seems that, except for those who happen to read their books, a strong ideological veil surrounds it, preventing access to it for the majority. This was the world in which Ewan MacColl lived and worked.
The centrepiece of this collection can be found in Chapters 2–6. These are transcribed from two lengthy interviews undertaken by Giovanni Vacca in 1987 and 1988, interviews that have never before seen the light of day. Although some of the views expressed here appear in his biography, there is very much that is new, and we have endeavoured to retain the very energy of MacColl’s conversation, one of the reasons he so divided his listeners (his followers, his detractors). The internationalist perspective he adopted is everywhere apparent in these interviews, and provides the rationale for the collection’s closing essay, Chapter 10, where Franco Fabbri discusses MacColl’s relevance for the largest European folk revival outside the UK, that of Italy. In Chapter 1, Vacca offers a commentary on these interviews, contextualizing and critiquing MacColl’s position. Key to this, of course, was MacColl’s awareness of the social role of his activities. For non-British readers, MacColl’s example offers material from which to re-think English/British society from a different angle, particularly in regard to the role that the alternative, minority, cultures had in building it. For British readers it serves, even if only partially, as a reminder that cultural links across the Channel are sometimes more potent than those across the Ocean.

MacColl’s work is also important for the push for renewal he gave both to theatre and to song, and for the social issues he raised in his artistic work: for the focus it gives to manual work, for example, through his powerful ability to describe it in great detail. Manual work is less visible today and is often dismissed as ‘simple’ and unskilled. The cohesiveness of the working class has been lost through the monstrous process of mutation that industrial societies have undergone in the last 30 years (in the transition from Fordism to ‘Post’-Fordism, the financialization of the economy, the dismemberment of large factories into small dispersed units and so forth) but manual work is still as present as ever it was, still as important (immigrants do the hardest jobs, which the locals don’t want to do any longer) and it certainly deserves to be recognized again and be much better paid. Can folk singers help spread a consciousness about all this? They can if the quality of their work is high and penetrates into common consciousness: and the quality of MacColl’s songs is extremely high, in form and content, and it has penetrated society. His melodic lines and ability to capture images, for example, produce pleasure combined with an effect of consciousness and can act not only by providing new ways of observing reality but also as a powerful stimulus in probing deeper into the different human worlds he conjures up. But this ‘work’ is not only that of originator (composer, writer) but also that of performer. Thus, in Chapter 8, Giovanni Vacca writes of MacColl as songwriter, seen against a backdrop of European writers of analogous intent, and reveals how MacColl’s particular technique derived from his previous experiences in the theatre and in the languages of the avant-garde. In Chapter 9, Allan Moore attempts to pin down the particular characteristics of MacColl as singer, in relation to both source singers and other revivalists.
What is really needed is a dialogical evaluation of MacColl’s work, a critical scrutiny, far from the polemics that accompanied his career, even further from the theoretical, discussed stances he took as a revivalist, and focused mainly on the beauty and the strength of his work. In Chapter 7, Dave Laing opens up this argument with a historically focused consideration of his activities, counterposed to critical writing on MacColl to date. We hope that this book can help relaunch discussion about Ewan MacColl and inspire contemporary artists to rediscover his immense heritage: it is important to have a renewed consideration of MacColl’s work, as a folk singer/songwriter and even as a playwright, although our view is that his own songs, often produced with Peggy Seeger, are really the peak of his activity. Even if they had no overt political content, still they would stand out in themselves and shine like diamonds purely for the way they are made.
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