

Ewan MacColl: The Debate

In the last issue we published an article on Bob Dylan and Ewan MacColl written by CP Lee. We have received a submission from Ben Harker criticising the article which we print below together with a reply from CP Lee. We welcome (polite) debate on the content of the *Journal* and look forward to receiving more such submissions in the future. *The Editor*

CP Lee's article (issue 26), which set out to uncover the "real Ewan MacColl" and to establish whether or not he was "The People's Friend", seemed to me to be wide of the mark in many respects. Lee makes much of MacColl's attitude to Bob Dylan, and offers some elaborate theories for it. He describes, for example, Dylan's appearance at the Singers' Club on 22nd December 1962 as a turning point. For Lee, Dylan's performance exposed MacColl to "the future and it was a future that had no room for an anachronism like MacColl" (p. 37). But Colin Harper's excellent biography of Bert Jansch, *Dazzling Stranger: Bert Jansch and the British Folk and Blues Revival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), offers a very different account of the evening, which Lee doesn't mention. (Harper suggests that other club members were opposed to Dylan being admitted, and that MacColl's partner/collaborator Peggy Seeger intervened, insisting that Dylan should be let in and allowed to perform). It's also worth noting that in spite of Lee's claim that the future had no room for MacColl, Dylan himself continued to hold MacColl in high esteem after this episode: in a *Melody Maker* interview from 23 May 1964, Dylan cited MacColl as one of the writers he most admired; in 1985, MacColl's daughter Kirsty wrote home to her father from Los Angeles: "I was at a party with Bob Dylan. He's still one of your great fans in spite of the fact that you don't think much of him."

Far from having his "parade pissed on," as Lee puts it, MacColl enjoyed a long and distinguished career in and beyond the early 1960s. Lee mistakenly states that the *Radio Ballads* were made in the 1950s, an error which helps to give the impression that MacColl had passed his peak by the time he encountered the young Dylan: in fact

five out of eight of these truly groundbreaking programmes were made between 1960 and 1964. MacColl and Seeger's involvement with the Critics Group (which began in 1964, and not in the 1950s as Lee implies) inspired some fine recordings and launched some important careers. MacColl albums such as *Solo Flight* (1972) are a measure of his status as an interpreter of songs; MacColl and Seeger's involvement with travelling communities resulted in two important books and some seminal recordings. One of the most arresting features of MacColl's career is his remarkable return to song writing form in the 1980s: the social and political polarization of the Thatcher years unleashed some of his finest compositions, ranging from 'My Old Man' – a powerfully unsentimental song about his father – to the savage satirical bite of 'Public Unpublic' and 'The Grocer.'

So was MacColl "The People's Friend?" That's certainly a debate worth having. Arthur Scargill thought he was. On his seventieth birthday he presented MacColl with a miner's lamp inscribed, "To Ewan MacColl for outstanding service to the British working class". Many in the movement against apartheid shared this view and a clutch of MacColl songs were translated into African languages and used to galvanize the struggle. Others have argued that MacColl's persistent defences of Stalin disfigured his politics and damaged the causes he championed; Peggy Seeger has herself recently taken issue with his Old Left attitudes to gender and environmental issues. These are significant matters. But far from revealing the "real Ewan MacColl," CP Lee's article reproduces a now familiar caricature.

Ben Harker



Bob Dylan at the Singers' Club, London, 22nd December 1962. Ewan MacColl is at the right-hand edge of the picture. (Photograph by kind permission of Brian Shuel)

In response

The main thrust of my article was that MacColl's Traditionalist intransigence stifled the Folk Revival just when it was about to break out beyond the confines of smoky rooms at the back of pubs and onto a wider stage. In my penultimate paragraph I state unequivocally that MacColl's contribution to the Revival was "immeasurable", but I still stand by my statement that he drove as many young people away as he attracted by his insistence on implicating the infamous "Policy Rules".

As I stated in the introduction to my article, I became fascinated by the almost total division of opinion on Ewan MacColl and attempted in my piece to suggest how these bi-polarities have come about. I was also intrigued by his apparent hatred for Bob Dylan, and as the gig at the Pindar of Wakefield in December 1962 had the two of them in the same room at the same time its historical resonances should be clear to the reader.

As regards Colin Harper's Bert Jansch biography, *Dazzling Stranger: Bert Jansch & The British Folk & Blues Revival*, I hadn't read it when I wrote the article. Having now done so I'm intrigued as to how Mr Harker sees it offering "a very different account of the evening"? All the relevant section consists of is one paragraph related by Bruce Dunnet where, when Dylan turns up at the pub, MacColl says, "No, I don't want to let that shit in", and Peggy Seeger insists that he does. That's it, end of account. No description of what Dylan played, or of how he was received by the people present. The information for my account came from two sources – the late Anthea Joseph, who took Dylan there in the first place and whose account is reproduced in my article, and another from a former colleague of MacColl's (also present that night), who I interviewed personally.

In trying to reach any conclusions about the dichotomy of Ewan MacColl and his contribution to the Revival, *Dazzling Strangers* leaves the reader even more mystified. Here are a selection of comments about MacColl taken from the book:

Ewan was very heavy about the tradition. I admired him, I thought he was a brilliantly talented guy, but he couldn't resist being phoney at times.

Wizz Stanley

In fact, when Ewan wasn't there it was like the mice playing when the cat's away. Everyone was a lot looser. Stan (Kelly) would be great fun – people would shout up witty remarks and Stan would answer them back. You wouldn't dare do that when Ewan was there! But for good or ill, a lot of people followed him. I found him to be very intolerant.

Andy Irvine

I didn't like him. I loved his *Radio Ballads*. But him and Peggy. I found their public performances full of shit compared to people who sang the same songs naturally.

Dolina MacLennan

Anyway, enough of this, as these extracts do little more than portray the familiar caricature Mr Harker accuses me of perpetuating. One final point about Colin Harper's book, however. I agree that it is an excellent work, but as regards his research on Dylan, it contains a glaring error. On page 111 just preceding Bruce Dunnet's memoir, he states "Like Bert Jansch, Bob Dylan may not have made any records yet but his reputation was preceding him."

Dylan's unimaginatively titled first album, *Bob Dylan*, had in fact been released nine months previously and was available in Britain. It was, however, heartening to hear that Peggy Seeger played a part in Dylan being admitted to the Pindar club. As she herself said in a recently published Dylan biography (*Down The Highway*, Howard Souness), regarding that night – "Ewan and I were rather stand-offish at that time, and perhaps we should have been a little more welcoming."

Regarding Dylan's later comments on his admiration for MacColl's song writing, I think this displays Dylan's generosity of spirit particularly when placed against MacColl's continuing litany of bile aimed at Dylan's abilities.

To conclude, Mr Harker states that I give the wrong impression about the Critics Group, the *Radio Ballads*, and MacColl's later career. Firstly, I assert that the Policy Rules, which did start in the 1950s, led directly to the ideology of the Critics Group, which, yes, did commence activities in 1964. Regarding the *Radio Ballads* – I apologise for giving the impression that they were made in the 1950s. Obviously, only the first three were produced in the 1950s.

I don't deny that Ewan MacColl's career continued after that night in 1962, and that he received recognition for his song writing and participation in many of the struggles of the latter part of the 20th century. That was never to be part of my article. What I do argue is that he was responsible for building up a Folk revival and then crippling it through his stubbornness. It is my considered opinion that despite all his efforts, to the general public, all he'll be remembered for is 'Dirty Old Town' and the music for an Oil of Ulay advert.

Absolutely finally – as someone who's writing a biography of Ewan MacColl I'm surprised that Mr Harker didn't pick up on one blazing error in my piece – MacColl was born in Salford, not Scotland as I stated, so that'll teach me to be more wary about relying on statements by Ewan MacColl himself.

CP Lee