

CHARLES PARKER

Aspects of a Pioneer

A Personal View by Trevor Fisher



The Charles Parker Archive 1986



Charles Parker recording a conversation with a worker at Sattley Gasworks in preparation for **The Maker and the Tool** a Theatre Folk Ballad for the Centre 42 Festivals 1962. Photograph Euan Duff

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Cover illustration: Eric Fraser's *Radio Times* drawing for **The Big Hewer**, transmitted BBC Home Service August 18 1961 (by permission of Radio Times and the family of Eric Fraser)

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Charles Parker Archive

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A Man of Two Worlds

When historians come to write the history of British Culture in the twentieth century, the development of the Documentary will prove one of the most significant themes. In Film, Radio, Television and the Theatre, documentary forms and techniques have become amongst the most potent available to artists. This pamphlet illuminates one aspect of this story; the work of a pioneer of documentary radio and theatre; Charles Parker.

Charles Parker was a man of two worlds. When he died in 1980, both the Establishment paper *The Times* and the Communist daily *The Morning Star* carried obituaries. They reflected the fact that he had moved from the safe, conventional career of a Cambridge educated, officer-class BBC producer, to the radical fringe of community theatre. Why Charles Parker's career took this path, and why it was and remains significant is a tale largely untold. This pamphlet is an attempt to bring some of the story into the light.

I have only dealt with aspects of Charles Parkers' life and work, and concentrated on the last twenty years of his life, when he impinged directly on me. No short pamphlet could hope to paint a comprehensive portrait of a man who spread himself extraordinarily widely, but I have focussed on what I believe to be the two major elements of his working life: his work in documentary radio with the Radio Ballads, and in documentary theatre with the Banner Group. I have only been able to sketch his other activities, and merely outline the concept of oral culture (which Charles developed), and its significance. I hope, nevertheless, that I have given some sense of the man, his qualities, and their lasting impact.

It is a very personal and partial view. I am conscious that many aspects of the man, notably his teaching, are barely touched on. There will undoubtedly need to be more written about Charles Parker, and the Charles Parker Archive exists to make this possible. I hope I have shown, however, that Charles Parker was not a man who would have relished being put on a pedestal. He was a pioneer whose point was not to explain the world, but to change it.

I would like to thank the many people who have helped me to write this pamphlet, and in particular to express my appreciation to Pam Bishop and Philip Donnellan, who made an impossible job possible.

Trevor Fisher
May 1986

1 Radio and the Popular Voice

“The most important thing that Charles ever said to me was “Listen! Listen to people around you”. And you will find great richness — that is what he meant ...”

Peter Cheeseman,

Director, Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent

In the Golden Age of Radio during the 1950's, “the wireless”, as many people still called it, was the premier arm of the BBC. Television was in a rudimentary state; ITV only began in 1955, BBC2 not till 1964, and the BBC could and did ruin the opening of the commercial TV channel by arranging a dramatic death on *The Archers* for the same night. Money was still available for prestige radio projects. This was the age of Louis MacNeice's verse dramas, and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. A comedian like Tony Hancock, or scriptwriters like Galton and Simpson, built their reputations in radio and only later moved over to television. Radio still held a massive audience, and the radio pages of what is still called *Radio Times* were scanned with interest to see what was coming up for the evening's entertainment.

The pages of the *Radio Times* for the week of July 2nd 1958 featured a remarkable drawing by Eric Fraser illustrating a programme about the death of a railway driver. Those people who turned on and tuned in heard the distinctive voice of Ewan MacColl, set against a driving American style folk banjo, singing, “*John Axon was a railwayman, to steam trains born and bred, He was an engine driver at Edgeley loco shed, For 40 years he followed and served the iron way, He lost his life upon the track one February day...*”

Within seconds the listener was on the footplate of a locomotive rushing headlong down a mountainside to smash like an avalanche into a stationary train at the foot of the hill.

This was the opening of the first in a series of programmes entitled the *Radio Ballads*, **The Ballad of John Axon**, a remarkable documentary about the life and times of an ordinary Stockport railwayman. Axon became a hero by staying on the footplate of his engine when it got out of control in order to give warning of the runaway. Charles Parker, a Midland Region radio producer, heard the story and commissioned Ewan MacColl to write a programme about the incident.

MacColl was a writer and singer with great experience in radio and the theatre. He had performed and written for the radio for twenty years, and had been a founder-performer and dramatist in Theatre Workshop. Above all, he came from a family of traditional Scots folk singers.

Charles Parker intended the programme to be a conventional studio-performed feature using narrator, actors and the usual apparatus of BBC radio. What emerged on the night of 2nd July, however, was anything but usual. To begin with, the programme had no narrator. The firmly insistent guiding hand which gave the BBC the title “Auntie” was conspicuously missing, and the listener was carried along by an exciting blend of music with jazz and speech. It drew on talents as diverse as folk singer Bert Lloyd and jazz clarinettist Bruce Turner. There were no actors pretending to be workers. Instead the programme used the voices of the people themselves, known as ‘actuality’ in the trade, recorded on site. And what actuality it was! Relatively unknown people from Stockport, friends and workmates of John Axon, revealed an ability to express themselves with flashes of extraordinary poetry. John Axon's next door neighbour, himself a railwayman, summed up his view of the job succinctly and eloquently: “The old railwayman, it was a tradition, it was part of your life. Railways went through the back of your spine like Blackpool went through rock”.

The critics greeted **John Axon** with enthusiasm. Paul Ferris in *The Observer* commented, “Last week a technique and subject got married, and nothing in radio kaleidoscopy or whatever you like to call it, will ever be the same again”. Robert Robinson in *The Sunday Times* called it “as remarkable a piece of radio as I have ever listened to”. Tom Driberg in *The New Statesman* wrote that “Flecker's dream of being read by a poet living a thousand years hence is unlikely to be realised, but a generation from now, I would say even centuries from now, listeners will surely be still moved by the recording of **The Ballad of John Axon**.”

The programme was nominated by the BBC as its entry, in the documentary section, for the prestigious Italian radio prize, the Prix d'Italia.

The Genesis of the Radio Ballads

July 2nd 1958 had seen the birth of something new in radio, but was it? Where had it come from and where was it going? The idea for **John Axon** had originally come from Charles Parker, the Senior Features producer in the BBC Midland Region in Birmingham. Parker was an RNVR wartime volunteer who had risen to captain a submarine and won the DSC. After demob, Parker went to Queens College, Cambridge, graduated in English Literature in 1948, and joined the North American Service of the BBC. At this

point, he was a conventional enough establishment figure, if anything a Conservative and a devout member of the Church of England.

In 1953 he was appointed Senior Features producer, Midland Region, and arrived in Birmingham early the next year. Just as the new man took up the position, a portable tape recorder, the EMI Midget, became generally available for the first time in the Regions. Tape recording was still relatively new. Recording had traditionally been carried out on disc, with severe limitations; a disc ran for four minutes, whereas tape allowed virtually unlimited recording. For the first time, vernacular speech could be recorded in abundance.

Parker was predominantly interested in Drama and the dramatic rather than documentary handling of material; but more and more he was interested in folksong. During the war he had been much in demand at wardroom parties for his powerful versions of American train songs such as *Casey Jones* and *The Wreck of the Old '97*. Now this interest was being taken further.

At Christmas 1957 he had produced *The Christmas Day Round Up* from Birmingham, including MacColl and Alan Lomax. Lomax, Texas folklorist and broadcaster, had been in Britain since 1951, a refugee from MacCarthyism; he probably also introduced Parker to a variety of folk material on American radio, notably *The Lonesome Train* produced by Norman Corwin. Parker had been moved to tears by this folk opera about the death of Abraham Lincoln. The programme used conventional Hollywood-style music with actors to read prose extracts, and narration by singer Burl Ives, but the effect was impressive.

When he heard of the heroic death of John Axon, Parker felt the time had come to emulate the Americans and produce a "folk opera". Parker and MacColl visited Stockport equipped with a tape recorder but expecting to use it only as a notebook. In the event, they spent fifteen days spread over two months, collecting forty hours of recording. MacColl, together with his partner Peggy Seeger, who was eventually to become musical director, then listened to the tapes for a fortnight, and concluded the material did not need narration, caption voices or actors; the actuality, raw spoken material, was too potent not to be used as it stood.

What made **John Axon** distinct was firstly the use of the speech of the actual participants through tape-recording; secondly, the absence of narration and actors, letting the actuality tell the story; thirdly, the use of folk song and jazz; and fourthly, the attempt by MacColl to use the form and techniques of the folk ballad as the model for the programme. There were weaknesses in **John Axon**; some of the dramatic devices used were over-theatrical, the attempts at using

Establishing a form

folk song, jazz and calypso did not always succeed and the music was predominantly American despite the intense Englishness of the material, but overall the formula worked remarkably well on its first journey out. The actuality, in particular, is as fresh and exciting thirty years later as when it was recorded.

Nevertheless, sceptics did not regard **Axon** as a breakthrough. "It's just a slice of English life which by accident fits into the *Casey Jones/Wreck of the Old '97* formula", many said. Louis MacNeice commented "So you have proved that the ballad form and the idiom of traditional music can be a valid form of expression for the twentieth century, and for the mass media... but only when it is applied to a simple black and white situation". The Radio Ballads team of Parker, Seeger and MacColl, set about their second essay in the form, conscious of the criticism that **John Axon** was a successful accident, and bedevilled by technical problems.

The recording engineers in Birmingham, Mary Baker and Irene Bailey, who also had to cope with the needs of the other producers, never had enough time allowed for the painstaking editing of the actuality speech and the complex post-production assembly of the studio sequences. So Parker took to going into the Broad Street studios and working at night editing tape himself: one of the few recorded instances of a worker breaking *into* the plant to get on with his work.

A second ballad was made on the building of the M1 motorway, **Song of a Road**, and broadcast on 5 November 1959. The team recorded some magnificent actuality, but the subject and material brought out disagreements as to how they should proceed. There was no predetermined form as there had been in **John Axon**. The programme became bogged down in the technical complexities of motorway construction. MacColl later described the team as behaving "as though our intention was to create a programme which would inform the listener how to build his or her own motorway" and while the *Sunday Times* radio critic described it as "a near triumph by **John Axon** standards and an absolute marvel by any other"; behind the scenes fierce discussion raged.

MacColl and Seeger compiled a statement drawing out lessons from the experience, which was the basis of discussion with Charles Parker. It was agreed that in future the selection of actuality should be left to Seeger and MacColl, and that the Radio Ballads should not be concerned with processes and things, but with people's attitudes to processes and things. On this basis, the team proceeded to make the next Radio Ballad, **Singing The Fishing**. Here they produced a triumph, gaining international acclaim by winning an Italia Prize for the BBC.

The Ballad Style Explored

MacColl and Parker had been fortunate to discover two exceptional men whose lives encompassed the high point and decline of the East Coast fishing industry, Sam Larner, an eighty year old Norfolk fisherman who had first gone to sea in 1892 in a sailing lugger, and Ronnie Balls, a sixty year old veteran of steam drifters.

Sam was a fine traditional singer and storyteller who was later commercially recorded in his own right. His language expressed a love of life undimmed by his age. He recalled the ever-present threat of death on the high seas, for example, as a personal duel with the Grim Reaper: "It won't be the first time I cheated him!.. That time in the North Sea, when he come for me in the storm, when all the young chaps were crying and a praying down below, I done him down then!"

Ronnie Balls, who spoke of the era of the steam drifter: "Loveliest ship for the job that ever was built.." with the affection a jockey might reserve for a favourite horse, was a more laconic but an equally compelling speaker. The actuality recorded by the team was of inspirational quality.

MacColl had by now perfected the skill of writing songs from the actuality in a style indistinguishable from traditional folk song, and produced some of his best work for this Ballad, including the immensely popular *Shoals of Herring*. **Singing The Fishing** was an unqualified success, and deservedly won the Italian Press Award of the Prix d'Italia for the BBC in 1960.

Singing The Fishing marked the maturing of the Radio Ballad(1) style. Despite this, many critics were not convinced of the viability of the form. The success of **Singing The Fishing**, it was argued, was due to the exceptional quality of Larner and Balls, and the epic quality of the life of the deep sea fisherman. The next Radio Ballad, **The Big Hewer**, did not settle this argument, but according to MacColl it had a shattering effect on Charles Parker.

The Big Hewer, broadcast in August 1961, was about miners, and took as its theme the legend of a miner of superhuman strength and capacity. Stories of this mythological character, with echoes of John Henry, were found all over the British coalfield. The legends formed a superb theme for the portrait of the miner which emerged.

The programme was successful, the *Times* arguing that "the total impression left behind is as genuinely heroic as that of the fishing communities in *Riders to the Sea* and *La Terra Trema*". The heroic, epic quality of the miners certainly left its mark on the producer.

According to Ewan MacColl, prior to this he had

(1) For a detailed study of the Radio Ballads, see Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger *I'm a Freeborn Man* Oak Publications, New York 1968.



Charles Parker recording a member of the crew of *Honeydew* of Gardenstown during the collection of material for **Singing the Fishing**, 1960. Photograph Ewan MacColl

maintained a conventional BBC attitude to the interviewees, even seeing Sam Larner and Ronnie Balls as "characters" rather than equals. Working with coal miners changed that. Charles could not do other than regard these people as remarkable human beings, neither quaint nor in any way inferior to him despite his professional status. From the time of **The Big Hewer** to his death, Charles maintained links with the people he had met in the coalfield, cultivating close friendships with some of the most militant and regarding these relationships as among the most important in his life. After working on **The Big Hewer**, Charles adopted an increasingly radical political and cultural stance.

None of this was visible to the listeners like me, who simply looked out for the next Radio Ballad with anticipation. The next two programmes were **The Body Blow** (March 1962) and **On The Edge** (February 1963). These dealt respectively with the world of polio victims and teenagers, and were an attempt to answer the criticism that the Radio Ballad style was only suitable for epic themes with elemental participants. The Radio Ballad team did not regard either as entirely successful, though Peter Wilsher in the *Sunday Times* wrote "I have sometimes had serious reservations about the way this method tends to swamp this material. With **On the Edge** I withdraw these completely. The match was near perfect". The Radio Ballad team were not so sure, but regarded the seventh Radio Ballad; **The Fight Game** (July 1963), as an unqualified success.

The team thought boxing might offer room for light relief. They found to their surprise that boxers had a

2 From Radio to Theatre

remarkable sense of history and the absurdity of their profession, and consistently drew parallels between boxing and the bread and circuses of ancient Rome. The participants repeatedly referred to the boxing ring as a symbol of wider society, and themselves as being like the gladiators thrown to the lions. The conflicts and hypocrisies of boxing allowed MacColl to give full reign to his talent for satire, and the result was a programme which no critic could accuse of being either overly heroic or sentimental.

The eighth and last Radio Ballad, broadcast in April 1964, was **The Travelling People**, a study of gypsies in Britain. The Travellers were the ultimate closed community, rejected by the mainstream of society, and in turn rejecting the "gorgios" and their ways. They preserved the traditional folk culture of Britain in an unusually rich form. The richness of the actuality inspired the Radio Ballad team; the callous treatment of the Travellers by the authorities angered them, and added fire to their inspiration. The mixture of actuality and song was potent, and the team produced a near flawless blend of their previous innovations.

The End of a Road

The Travelling People was the last Radio Ballad. With audiences ebbing from radio towards television, and bland pop programmes costing a fraction of the Radio Ballads claiming much higher listening figures, the BBC decided to axe the series. The decision provoked strong criticism, particularly of the argument that the Ballads were too expensive. Paul Ferris of the *Observer* argued that "If this is the best reason anyone could produce for the act of murder...it's a miserable one...by the evidence of eight programmes, beside which many of radio's attempts to mirror life sound like baby talk, it makes the charge of extravagance seem a very thin and impotent reason for ending radio balladry".

However, the Radio Ballads had been created. They made a major impact on the British folk song revival especially after being issued on disc by Argo Records. Francis Newton in the *New Statesman* described them as "the most valuable products of the British folk song movement". There was, however, and alas still is, a tendency to regard the Radio Ballads as marvellous but outdated products of an archaic mass medium, radio. Charles Parker never agreed with such a dismissive opinion. For Charles, the Radio Ballads had uncovered fundamental truths about modern society, about its music, speech, popular culture, media, politics and general state of spiritual health and sanity, which society could only ignore at its peril. For the last fifteen years of his life, Charles attempted to work through the lessons of the Radio Ballads, draw out their conclusions, and apply them to radio, drama, folk music and the development of the mass media. It was at this point that I encountered the man behind the name.

"I must admit that when we first talked about actuality in the early days I was not at all convinced by this, I couldn't understand when we first started what Charles was on about with actuality, and it wasn't until I got out and started recording some actuality myself that it actually made any impact. It seemed a rather quaint idea, to use actuality. Charles struggled fiercely for that idea — I don't think a lot of people took it on until we had actually got into it ourselves".

Dave Rogers, Founder member, Banner Theatre

In the autumn of 1965 I signed up for a class on folk music given by Charles Parker for the Birmingham Workers' Education Association. I was then nineteen years old, and deeply interested in what had become known as the "Culture and Society" debate. This was a dispute about the relation of High Art, Pop Art and Mass Society, begun by Leavis and Thompson in the Thirties. During the Fifties it had been taken up by the New Left, and had resonated through the arts and intellectual life.

A key book in the debate was Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). This contrasted, unfavourably, the working class culture of the Thirties with the Americanised pop culture of the Fifties. The book had won Hoggart a chair at Birmingham University, and found a sympathetic ear in Charles Parker. Like Hoggart, he was deeply suspicious of modern pop culture, and concerned about its effects on working class culture. Unlike Hoggart, he was deeply engaged in resistance to the drive for Americanisation. Hoggart had offered a careful, useful, academic working of the Culture and Society debate; Charles Parker offered a declaration of war.

When I first encountered him, Parker was 45 years old, a tall lean man with something of the wiriness of Abraham Lincoln. Unlike a conventional lecturer, he had no set body of knowledge, ideas or skills which he was seeking to criticise or impart. Instead, he was using his classes to develop a thesis, which he did by the Socratic method, through polemic. If Humanism is not to be swamped by barbarism, Charles held, traditional values had to be reasserted and the dominant structures of capitalism swept away by a cultural revolution.

The new humanistic culture which Charles wished to see created was, for him, essentially rooted in traditional song and vernacular speech. His experience

in making the Radio Ballads had convinced him that these embodied the values and techniques essential for a new humanistic culture, using the modern technology of the electronic mass media.

It was a long time before I understood that this was Charles' thesis. Charles was no theorist, and struggled to articulate his ideas. He faced many difficulties in working out his theory. His criticism of mass culture pleased the Leavisites, but his advocacy of an alternative popular culture offended their elitist notion of value. His stress on working class culture interested many on the New Left, but his criticism of commercial pop music, and passionate advocacy of folk music and traditional speech seemed quaint, even bizarre. Charles moreover remained deeply influenced by Christianity. The radical left, who shared Charles' belief that the modern world was wracked by crisis, found a cultural revolution wrapped in the Book of Common Prayer a strange mix to handle. Bob Etheridge, a militant car worker comments: "I couldn't understand...the strange combination of a religious fervour and yet such a revolutionary attitude toward social things...We were discussing something once, and he advised me to read the Book of Job!..."

There were many contradictions and complexities in Charles' views, but for those who stayed with him he offered exceptional insights into modern culture. He did this as much by practice as theory, for what he offered was not just a body of ideas and arguments, but also an artistic practice to meet the needs he identified. Having diagnosed a sickness in the culture politic, he attempted to prescribe a cure. Charles Parker was, in the middle sixties, pursuing a bewildering range of activities. He was in regular contact with a group of folk singers and artists in London working under the direction of Ewan MacColl and known as the Critics Group. The Critics Group was recording for Argo Records, and gathering a London-based repertoire of regional songs. Charles was the driving force behind The Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre, heavily influenced by the Critics Group, undertaking similar trawl for Midlands song. (Some of the results were issued on the Topic record 'The Wide Midlands', Topic 12TS210 in 1971, and in the books of Roy Palmer.) The Folk Centre was also presenting concerts by luminaries such as Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, the Exiles and Ravi Shankar, and organising semi-formal folk sessions (these resulted in its own club, 'The Grey Cock Folk Club', opening on 26 February 1967). Charles Parker's classes thus took place not as a detached reflection upon an intellectual debate, but as an active element in a thriving sub-culture.

What was the keynote of all this activity? Charles tried to sum up his personal philosophy in a talk given

for Radio 3 in 1971, when his position at the BBC was already under heavy pressure. Arguing for a new approach to the teaching of oral English, and speaking to the [highly] educated literati who patronise Radio 3, he said; "I think there is the intellectual's difficulty in exercising humility..., in that what it means is that brilliant minds, men who have had an experience of life, are well educated, who have had great achievements, if they're honest in this they've got to go back to school, they've got to go back and sit at the feet of ... a Connemara construction worker, or an East Anglian herring fisherman, or a Scottish Traveller, and learn what language is like on the lips. And this, of course, is an exercise in humility that very few of us are prepared to make, involving, as it does, all the difficult questions of identity ... that if you begin to question a person's language, or his ways of speech, he's terribly vulnerable to this. We are so sensitive in these areas. So it's a very difficult question, but I don't think there's any alternative..." *The Tape Recorder and the Oral Tradition*, transmitted Radio 3, 11th September 1971.

Charles argued that this was not merely a question of teaching spoken English: "The point is that this is not simply a matter of English, of language, or preoccupation with speech, which indeed I have, but it's much deeper than this. I think it is the survival of the race. I think that inbuilt into our language is our memory, is our past. If we lose this we lose ourselves: this, I think, is where we die. I came across an extraordinary quotation from Adorno and the phrase which sticks in my mind is where he stated: 'The spectre of mankind without memory...in a galloping technology of mass production where men are expected to have four completely different jobs in their lifetime, the inherited skills and all the cultural utterance that surrounds them are discredited.' Therefore there is economically a danger that all the cultural heritage, the history, of this people that goes with this will also be put on the scrap heap, and this, I think, is precisely our danger." (op cit)

Charles' style was convoluted, and almost designed to prove his oft repeated argument about the stiltedness of middle-class speech. The two essential points of his position are, however, set out. Firstly, he believed that vernacular speech was the key to good communication in our epoch, and that the educators had to learn from the unlettered in order to communicate well in the era of electronic communication. Secondly, he argued that the development of industry and technology was in danger of destroying the social and historical roots needed to establish personal and collective identity, and that this posed critical problems for the well being of society. Had Charles Parker developed these lines of thought, and his related critiques of pop culture and the folk

revival, as a coherent body of thought, he might have shared some of the limelight which writers like Adorno, Marcuse and McLuhan enjoyed in the sixties. Parker was essentially a practitioner rather than a theorist, however, and someone who believed that it was through local, regionally-based initiatives close to working-class communities, that the trail had to be blazed. As the space for his type of radio closed down in the late sixties, he was driven more and more towards his other great love, documentary theatre.

Charles had had an involvement with theatre at least since his Cambridge days. By the early sixties this took the form of an ad hoc theatre company connected to St Peter's Church, Harborne in Birmingham, where he worshipped. At the same time as he maintained a devout Christian humanism, however, he associated with communists such as Ewan MacColl, and Professor George and Mrs Katharine Thomson. Through the latter, Charles came into contact with working class activists such as Bob Etheridge and Bill Shreeve. It was integral to Charles' ideas that he would spend as much time with workers as with literati. His social commitment was strong at all times. He produced a nativity play, *Dog in the Manger* in the early sixties which unlike the usual cosy celebration of the conventional, drew uncomfortable parallels with contemporary treatment of the homeless, as in the song he wrote for the show, *No Room for Jesus*.

*O where were you, my brother,
When we laid that baby there?
I was watching television,
And I didn't have the time to spare.*

*And where were you, my sister,
When we laid that baby there?
We had some company coming,
And I didn't have a thing fit to wear.*

*No room, no room for Jesus,
No room, no room nowhere
We'd still have no room for Jesus,
After two thousand years to prepare.*

A song which, whatever its merits or de-merits, was certainly not calculated to soothe the prosperous burghers of Harborne during the festive season.

Parker's interest in documentary folk theatre had, however, been sharpened and around him a group of people had come together who were both active in the folk revival and committed to his ideas. He was inspired to produce various shows with the group. Through these shows, Charles was working toward a distinctive form of drama documentary in which tape recorded speech or other actuality, newspaper clippings, or historical material for example, provided the base into which traditional or contemporary folk song, was woven.

The Development of Banner

Wesker's Centre 42 project. This was an attempt to bring artists and the organised labour movement together. Six Trades Councils in major cities invited Wesker's organisation to put on festivals, and Charles Parker's contribution was to be a documentary drama, **The Maker and the Tool**. He took a key trade in each area and built the production around tape recorded actuality of workers in the trade, supplemented with slides to make a multi-media presentation. The official report commented: "Parker...maintains that you can take any theme and find people who can talk about it in a poetic and revealing way...Folk singers listened to the recordings and composed new songs based on the actual language of the workers: films and slides were found which gave shape to the thoughts they expressed; poems and music were assembled which enhanced...their feelings, and dances were worked out...All the elements were married to make an extraordinarily dramatic presentation." (Report 1962 p14). However, the result was only a qualified success. The report concluded: "In theatre folk ballad many of us laid our hopes for the emergence of a new form of entertainment. Those hopes are not in the least diminished, but this year did not see them fulfilled" (p13) Slides were then flashed up onto screens during the performance to illustrate and amplify the action on stage.

In the early seventies, Charles Parker's energies were fully occupied in an unsuccessful fight to retain his position within the BBC. After losing this fight, Charles took stock, and returned to his theatrical work. In the autumn of 1973, out of the residents of the Grey Cock Folk Club, came a new theatre group, the future Banner company in embryo, to produce a version of the **Big Hewer** known as **Collier Laddie**. The show had the three main elements of Charles Parker's earlier work: actuality, folk song and slide projection, but had the added elements of dance and movement. These were provided by Rhoma Bowdler, a dance and drama teacher who gave dimensions to the work which Charles Parker, trained to concentrate on the spoken word and song, had not had the experience to conceive.

Collier Laddie was worked up as a one-off by an amateur group, without any thought of forming a permanent company. It was produced at the Birmingham and Midlands Institute to an enthusiastic audience. Many of the onlookers were miners who had been specially invited; some of them Charles' original sources for the **Big Hewer**, who had become his friends. The show was so successful that the group decided to tour it.

Collier Laddie was a triumph, but it could be argued, was merely a rehash of an existing proven success. Then in 1975 came the first completely original Banner

In 1962 Charles was invited to take part in Arnold production, **The Saltley Gate Show**. This was a triumphant retelling of the Saltley Gate incident in the 1972 miners' strike when the workers of East Birmingham came out to support the NUM and close the Nechells coke depot of British Gas at Saltley Gate. On the final morning some ten thousand workers had marched over Saltley viaduct to swell the numbers and force the police to close the depot. How were these epic crowd scenes to be re-created?

The solution chosen was superb. The stage was evacuated but for a solitary miner, talking the audience through the mounting suspense as Saltley waited to see the response from the factories to the call for support. Then, from the back of the hall, the cast burst in, marching behind a banner and singing in unison!

A solid wall are we

CLOSE THE GATES, CLOSE THE GATES

Our strength is unity,

CLOSE THE GATES!

No power in all the land can gain the upper hand

When we united stand

CLOSE THE GATES! CLOSE THE GATES!

When we united stand

CLOSE THE GATES!

The group moved round the hall, inviting members of the audience to join them, then swept up onto the stage to confront the forces of the state. Faced with this demonstration of working-class strength, the forces of law and order capitulated and ordered the gate to be closed.

By a delicious irony, the actor chosen to play the forces of the state was ... Charles Parker. Dressed as a policeman, Charles symbolised authority with complete authenticity. Here, as part of his work for the exploited, Charles could use his training as one of the managerial classes. It was a moment to be savoured.

Saltley Gate was an outstanding success, and it established Banner Theatre as a force in the emerging community/radical drama scene. Charles Parker had clearly played a major role in its establishment, but it would be wrong to suggest Banner was simply "Charles Parker's theatre company". Dave Rogers, a founder member of Banner and a resident singer at the Grey Cock, has recalled having doubts about using actuality. Others shared these, and Charles could not simply lay down the law. He had to convince his colleagues that the elements of his kind of theatre: actuality, slides, the use of folk music, actually worked. He was, however, like a British Prime Minister, first amongst equals. Dave Rogers argues: "He was the fountainhead of knowledge; the 'guru'...He provided the bedrock, the actual cultural base of the group very much came from him...He was part of the collective, he was generally

involved in the script compilation and later on the song writing, though he didn't do much song writing to begin with... he was one of the stronger members of the collective and had a lot of influence because of his knowledge and very considerable experience."

Banner's work was never just confined to the actuality folk theatre which Charles Parker had pioneered. Immediately after **Saltley Gate** Banner produced an agit-prop show on the fascist coup in Chile, followed by **Womankind**, a show about feminist issues produced for International Women's Year, using Commedia dell'Arte and mumming techniques. For their fifth show Banner returned to the locality and one of Charles Parker's most abiding concerns, racialism. **The Great Divide** was an actuality-based show emerging from the problems facing Asian workers at the Conygreve foundry in Smethwick. Charles and Banner had strong links with Joshi, leader of the Indian Workers' Association, and used them to make a telling and powerfully-made production about the racism rife within British society and British labour.

Banner had by now a considerable reputation within both the Labour movement and the community arts world, and in 1978(9?) the local regional organisation of the builders' union UCATT, through the secretary Ken Barlow, approached them to make a show about the abolition by local councils of direct labour public works departments. The **Direct Labour Show** was again written from actuality, by Charles and Dave and Chris Rogers.

Further shows followed. Charles was now sixty years old. Every other member of Banner was under forty, and the demands of a professional touring community theatre company were crippling for a man of his age. In addition he was in constant demand as a lecturer around the country. For financial, personal and artistic reasons, his premature retirement from the BBC had left him in a difficult financial position, and his personal and political commitment to Banner he regarded as total. Charles refused all advice to slow down and reduce his workload. Charles Parker had always demanded and given total commitment to whatever he was doing. He refused, if indeed he understood suggestions that he moderate his efforts and take on the role of elder statesman. While he had had no desire to dominate, neither did he wish to retire from the firing line.

The strain had, however, become too much. In the second week of rehearsal as one of the professional company working on a show about the steel industry, the efforts of the years finally caught up with him. Following a full rehearsal on the night of December 9th 1980 he suffered a severe stroke. He died the following morning.

3 Theory and Practice

“There were no lines of demarcation... everything was fused together; all Charles’ activities, and all the people he met, they were all connected in some way or other, however tenuous or however strongly, they were connected... he was so interested in everything that went on, and other people were so interested, they would introduce people to him...”

Bill Shreeve, Gas Worker

The Radio Ballads and Banner dominated the major areas of Charles Parker’s mature working life. Highly visible though they were, however, they were only aspects of his extraordinarily complex activities. No one person could hope to keep track of what Charles was doing, and any sketch is inevitably bound to be selective and partial. Which aspects of Charles’ volcanic personality one observed at any time depended on which lava flow happened to be heading in one’s direction at that time.

In October 1967 I went up to University, and for the next three years observed Charles at a distance. This was a crucial period, in which Charles entered the final stage of his BBC career, took on an active role within the folk song revival, and became involved in Ewan MacColl’s *Festival of Fools*. When I returned to Birmingham in the autumn of 1970, Charles was facing a situation where his post within the BBC’s formal structure was about to be abolished and his job was at risk.

Radio: The Final Years

After the Radio Ballads had been stopped in 1964, Charles Parker continued to make innovative radio, but under increasingly difficult conditions. He provided platforms for Ewan MacColl to give illustrated lectures on folk music, in **The Song Carriers**, and for Stuart Hall to explore the contradictions of pop music in the programmes **Vox Pop**. In 1965 he and Philip Donnellan tried to use the opportunity provided by the new TV channel BBC2 to produce a linked series of radio and TV programmes on the Ages of Man, called **Landmarks**. Ewan MacColl wrote the title song, but the budget was too small to afford MacColl on the series proper. The radio programmes were only broadcast on Midland Region, like most of Parker’s later work.

Despite lack of funds and the chilly response from the BBC authorities, Charles continued to produce remarkable work. He made a programme in 1971 which took a subject ideally suited for radio; the experience of being blind, and created a sensitive and memorable

study, **The Blind Set**. It made a great impression on a young reviewer just starting out as the *Guardian’s* radio correspondent: “I heard a programme one night about what it was like not just to be blind but to live inside a blind world. I had to write about that one. I did not know that much about ‘art’ radio and, being a bit rash, I did not intend to be a respecter of persons. That Charles Parker had won the Italia Prize, that everyone spoke of his work in reverential tones did not, I must admit, make much impression on me then. It was when I heard the work, coming out of the air and into my ear and making new worlds, that I made all speed to get to know the rest of what he had done”. Gillian Reynolds, Annual Report of Charles Parker Archive Trust 1984, p6.

As far as Charles Parker was concerned, however, **The Blind Set** was made do and mend. “I was led further and further away from the direct use of music...and the last programme I did in which I used music at all was **The Blind Set**, which was a sequel to a TV programme which I did with Philip Donnellan on blind people... We used certain re-written elements from **The Body Blow**... and straight traditional songs, and there was an interesting expansion of technique here. Because I was forced away from using specially written music, I explored the business of using in this case folk sayings, proverbial utterances on blindness, so that one was extending the form...” (Interview with the author, 1971).

Shortly after, Charles produced **The Iron Box**, a programme devoted to the Black writer and militant George Jackson, using recordings made inside San Quentin prison, California, by the local radio station KPFA Pacifica Radio. Charles set this actuality against folk blues recordings to express the anger and frustration of black youth in America. Jeremy Randall, of the *Sunday Times*, eulogised the piece: “...A brilliant production by Charles Parker from Birmingham on Tuesday. Recordings of Jackson’s own voice; the screams of hysterical women in a prison program, and the gentle infinitely melancholic Blues music of the occasion added up to a superb ‘radio verite’...”. 21 November 1971.

Gillian Reynolds commented: “He gave me, as a listener, an experience which transformed my levels of perception...he created the world of George Jackson in Soledad Prison in a way, beyond the power of words on a page or pictures on a screen, lifting the listener over rage and despair into passionate comprehension”. *Guardian*, 17 November 1971.

Opinion within the BBC was less enthusiastic. Parker’s work had for some time been criticised for being not just expensive but also not as good as it used to be. His actual post had disappeared in a re-structuring exercise, and he was working directly under

the Controller of Radio 4. CR4 did not like Charles Parker's work. Of *The Iron Box* he said "I think I could have tolerated the poor quality of some of the recordings if you had contrived to minimise their unintelligibility by all the means that one could use in these difficult circumstances..." and he criticised the music which the *Sunday Times* had found so moving.

When Parker's post had been abolished in 1970 he had been offered a job making ten minute inserts for Woman's Hour on a grade MP2/3. His previous grade as Producer, Features Documentary, had been MP4. Charles refused to compete for this post, both because he would be denying the job to a younger producer for whom such a junior post was designed, and because he would have been at a disadvantage in the competition, having been promised he would take his own pay with him if he was appointed to the post. Charles having refused to apply for this position, the Corporation was free to dispose of him. After the necessary formalities had been completed, including a formal hearing by the Director General, Charles Parker was dismissed from the BBC on 31 December 1972. Widespread protest, including a question in the House of Commons, had been to no avail. Charles Parker's career in radio was over.

There is no doubt that for a bureaucracy, primarily concerned with the ordered running of a neatly packaged system, a maverick like Charles Parker is a difficult challenge. It is, however, in dealing with creative individuals of a high order of talent, bordering on the prima donna, that an organisation's artistic temper is tested. In the case of the BBC, it was tested and failed. It is an outstanding indictment of the BBC that it regarded him not as a talent to be nourished, but a nuisance to be removed. Its treatment of Charles Parker will remain as a permanent stain on the historical record of the Corporation.

Into the Folk Revival

Although Charles Parker had an abiding interest in folk music from the forties onward, he played only a marginal role in the BBC's unwitting seeding of the folk revival. It was not till the Radio Ballads that he used the music extensively in his programmes.

By then he had become totally hooked on folk music, largely through the Hootenanny sessions organised at the Princess Louise in London in 1957 by Ewan MacColl. Charles travelled to London virtually weekly to attend these sessions, and when the folk revival took off in Birmingham became an enthusiastic amateur performer in the clubs.

The folk clubs were the heartland of the folk revival; a virtually unique network of self-managed cultural collectives, normally meeting in the back room of pubs, run by amateurs and built round groups of resident performers, with varying policies toward the music but

normally hiring guests at a fee. The typical club would meet weekly and build up a regular clientele for whom the social ambience played a role second only to the music.

Charles was drawn into the club scene in the early sixties as a performer, but his talents were not for singing or playing. Alan Bishop recalls booking him for the Peanuts Club he and Pam ran for CND in Birmingham in 1963: "Charlie would have been 43. And the people in the club were in their late teens. Most of them members of YCND. Yet here was this guy who had them in the palm of his hand. He would come on, singing on the same platform straight after Spencer Davis or Steve Winwood... To see him being able to perform on that same platform and get those same people just as involved as someone who had been singing bawdy Irish songs just five minutes before, or singing American blues with twelve string guitar and foot-operated cymbals; yet Charles was just as much at home there as the other stuff..."

Charles was by the middle sixties involved with The Critics' Group, the organisation of mainly young singers active in the folk song revival and run by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. Based in and around London, the Group met weekly to develop singing style and repertoire, collect material, and stage performances of song, music and drama. As a result of his involvement with the 'Critics', Charles came to feel that a focal point was needed in the West Midlands for the collection and dissemination of regional song and music, and for the establishment of high standards of performance and repertoire. In the early summer of 1965 he called a meeting of folk clubs at his home. The response was limited. Pam and Alan Bishop handed over the Peanuts folk club to others, and became totally involved in the new body created at that meeting, the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre. The Birmingham Folk Song Club, founded in 1950 and run as a monthly meeting (latterly by Joan Smith) disbanded and joined the BMFC en masse.⁽²⁾ Most of the clubs in Birmingham regarded the new body with suspicion, either disagreeing with the attempt to define a hard and fast policy on performance and repertoire, or feeling that they had little to gain from the new organisation.

Out of the BMFC and at the suggestion of Ewan MacColl came the Grey Cock Folk Club, initially an informal singing session at the Roebuck Pub off Islington Row in Birmingham. This was never Charles Parker's folk club; like Banner Theatre he did not control it. Nevertheless, he was a major influence on

⁽²⁾ A valuable source of information on the history of the BMFC and the Grey Cock is *The Grey Cock Ten Year On* by Mike Turner, summarised in the Annual Report of the Charles Parker Archive Trust, November 1984.

the club and its work. Unfortunately the club, and the Folk Centre, rapidly became isolated from the rest of the Birmingham club scene. Two decisions played a major part in setting the club aside. Firstly, the club issued questionnaires to its audience to establish their views on folk music; this seemed to many to be an unacceptable probe into matters of personal taste, and created suspicion. Secondly, the club charged floor singers an entrance fee, an unprecedented practice in the free and easy atmosphere of the club circuit, where floor singers travelled free. In both instances this was an insensitive application of a policy agreed in the abstract. It is difficult not to see Charles' hand at work. The strengths of his life and work lay in his rigorous, logical intellect and his passionate commitment to the causes he espoused. In the context of a lecture or workshop, this rigour could be stimulating and productive. In a folk club, it sometimes led to disaster. Charles' own passionate love of English folk song often led him to assume others felt the same, or that a hard sell could lead to conversion.

An example of this lack of sensitivity was an evening of unaccompanied traditional ballads organised at the Grey Cock early in its career, with Charles as one of the participants. Traditional ballads can be of great beauty and power, but the demands they make are not light. They are often sung unaccompanied by field singers, but for modern audiences they are usually provided as part of a mixed menu with lyrical songs, contemporary songs, shanties and so on. An unrelieved diet of unaccompanied ballads runs the danger of losing its audience.

So, according to legend, it was on this evening. By the half-time interval, the audience was restless and in danger of voting with its feet. There was a hurried conference amongst the resident singers and committee members, an angry defence of the programme by Charles, and as he and the other singers refused to back down, they were summararily replaced on the roster, and a new group of singers took over for the second half.

By any measure, this was a considerable snub for a man of Charles' position and reputation. It testifies to an unfortunate rigidity of approach which undoubtedly limited his impact. There is, however, an important epilogue to this story. A prima donna after receiving such a snub would have stalked out in anger and never returned. Charles Parker did not. He stayed with the Grey Cock, modified his position, and admitted he had been mistaken. Such willingness to admit fallibility is rare. It was an aspect of his character which those who only saw Charles Parkers' passionate integrity did not appreciate.

The Park House Convention

When I returned to Birmingham in the autumn of 1970 after Charles continuing to throw himself into an extraordinary range of activities. Apart from his radio work and his lectures, he was travelling to London weekly to the Critics' Group and had become actively involved in Ewan MacColl's political cabaret, the *Festival of Fools*, for which he undertook to make tape inserts and sound effects. He had instigated the West Midlands Gypsy Liaison Group, which was actively involved in defending Travellers from eviction all over the West Midlands, and his opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam war had led him to participate in the organisation "Folk Singers for Freedom in Vietnam".

Dominating all, however, was Charles' concern for the state of the folk revival. By the early seventies, the earlier hopes which he had entertained for the revival had faded. When the folk song revival had first emerged as a spontaneous, semi-underground movement out of skiffle in the late fifties, Charles had welcomed it unreservedly. He saw it as the beginning of a Renaissance in popular culture, rooted in the traditional British oral culture and closely related to the vernacular speech which he had been working on in the Radio Ballads.

Charles was now profoundly alarmed by the growth of an acoustic pop music which, while masquerading as folk music, had no relationship at all to the tradition. Charles had no objection to 'contemporary' folk music as such; indeed, he regarded the approach of those who simply performed traditional music without any attempt to create new songs or music in the traditional idiom as mere antiquarianism. What he disliked was the opportunity provided by the 'folk' label, and the folk club circuit, for singer/songwriter pop artists like John Denver, Al Stewart, James Taylor or Paul Simon to gain steps up the ladder at the expense of those people like himself who were genuinely trying to develop the use of traditional idioms.

Matters came to a head at the 1971 Loughborough Folk Festival where Bob Pegg of the electric folk band Mr Fox opined that he couldn't care less about the state of the revival; "I'm only in it for the money". As this statement was made in a BBC interview broadcast without comment or criticism, on *Folk on Two*, it appeared to be a new low in the cynical exploitation of folk music.

Charles Parker's WEA class, of whom I was one, decided that the situation could not be allowed to develop unchallenged. Charles hosted a meeting of concerned people over a weekend at his home, Park House. The meeting decided that an attempt had to be made to counter the trends in the folk revival, and the wider degeneration of popular culture. I was

commissioned to write a pamphlet setting out an analysis and alternative direction, aimed not only at the folk revival but at other radical cultural movements, of which there were more than a few developing at the time.

Two further meetings were held at Park House, and the group, now called the **Park House Convention**, published my pamphlet in the summer of 1972. Entitled satirically *We're Only In It For The Money* it drew on the work of Charles Parker, and the Culture and Society debate, to provide a critique of the failure of the radical cultural movements of the sixties, starting with the hippies and tracing their roots back to the People's Song Movement of the early fifties in the USA.

The Park House Convention was not an academic exercise. The pamphlet was aimed specifically at the Loughborough Folk Festival of 1972, and Charles was chosen to represent the Convention at the centre piece debate which marked the high point of the weekend. A large number of Charles' friends went over to Loughborough (to the alarm of the organisers, who apparently believed that "Charles Parker is coming to take over the festival") and took part in a series of intense discussions which spilled over into the corridors and workshops of the university campus. The consensus was against the arguments which Charles and the Convention advanced, but we had clearly shaken the complacency of the activists who had made up the audience, and it was clear that a bridgehead had been established.

In January 1973 a national conference was held at the Sparkbrook Community Centre, Birmingham, and it was agreed to set up the Park House Convention as an ongoing national initiative; up till then it had been based around the Birmingham Folk Centre. During that year it attempted to develop national links and intervene in the national debate on the revival.

Unfortunately, by the second national convention in November 1973, a split had occurred. The support of the Critics' Group had been expected for the Convention, but internal disagreements had led to the group breaking up at the time the Convention was formed. The young Critics, grouped around the Combine Theatre Company, initially supported the Park House Convention, but by the November meeting indicated that they wanted a much narrower initiative than was being proposed. Combine withdrew, throwing the Convention into chaos. While there was a wide geographical spread of supporters for the Convention, the Folk Centre in Birmingham and Combine in London provided essential nuclei in two key areas. Moreover, the Folk Centre did not contain singers and performers of national repute, which Combine did. The job of trying to improve standards and policies in the folk revival



Charles Parker with members of Banner Theatre giving a performance in support of Chilean Solidarity outside Birmingham Town Hall 1975.

Gypsies, Politics and the Radicalisation of Charles Parker

without having a cadre of high quality artists at the centre was not feasible. Without Combine the Convention was trying to build bricks without straw. In the autumn of 1974 Charles Parker took up a one year fellowship at Swansea University, and became increasingly involved with Banner. Without his drive and vision the Park House Convention collapsed.

Throughout the sixties, Charles was being forced to take a more and more radical position on social issues. His sense of the social crisis facing the modern world had been sharpened by his awareness of the nuclear issue, and he was a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He developed a similar sense of outrage over the war in Vietnam. His contact, and many arguments, with Ewan MacColl, a committed marxist, fundamentally changed his views. Equally important was his work with Professor George and Mrs Katherine Thomson, who like MacColl had taken the Chinese

(Maoist) line during the Sino-Soviet split in the early sixties. By the early seventies, Charles was a marxist of the maoist persuasion.

Added to these influences, and in my experience crucial to Charles' sense of outrage and anger at the injustice of capitalist society, was his experience of the mistreatment of the Travelling People. In recording for **The Travelling People** Charles became aware of the massive ill-treatment of romanies, gypsies and tinkers. Then in 1969 there was a particularly controversial eviction of travellers living in Birmingham. Charles Parker was goaded into action. He called a meeting, a score of people turned up, and the West Midlands Gypsy Liaison Group was formed.

There were conflicts nearly every week for the next five years. The group tried to get long term negotiations for sites for the travellers. Philip Donnellan recalls: "The Midlands became one of the areas where the civil rights of traveller people was a subject on continuous debate in the papers; the *Walsall Observer* was particularly odious, and on television *Man Alive* did a programme direct from Walsall Town Hall. And on the ground. In obscure cold halls three miles from Brownhills or Brierley Hill we could find ourselves nose to nose with National Front organisers whipping up feeling... Charles was effective because with the submarine commander/ BBC manner he combined an obvious and assertive humanity which threw up at security officers and Town Clerks their undeniable responsibility as human beings and, he tended to assume, as Christians." Annual Report of Charles Parker Archive Trust, November 1984.

Charles undertook this work not merely because he saw the travellers as magnificent carriers of the tradition, which was an angle few people even began to appreciate, but because they were human beings under attack from the state. Under these circumstances, Charles Parker knew which side he was on, and what his duty was.

Whether he saw it as a Christian duty by this time is open to question; it is unlikely that he had any commitment to formal conventional religious practice by the seventies, but the Christ who befriended the poor was certainly a figure Charles Parker could identify with. Whatever the precise nature of Charles Parker's humanism, whether Christian or Socialist or a mixture of both, there was no doubt after his work on the Radio Ballads that it was not a generalised, liberal humanism, but one committed to the cause of the underdog. Whether it was gypsies on a demolition site, or miners at Saltley Gate, who found themselves confronting the forces of the state, Charles Parker had the courage to take a stand of principle, and to do it without flinching. His work and example continue.

Charles Parker Brief Biography

- 1919** Born 5th April, Bournemouth, Hampshire.
- 1937** Awarded Intermediate BSc, London. Two years metallurgical research.
- 1939-45** War Service, RNVR, Submarines, Distinguished Service Cross 1944.
- 1945-48** Queens College Cambridge, BA (Hons) in the Historical Tripos.
- 1948-54** Producer, BBC external services and North American Service.
- 1954-72** Senior Features Producer/Talks Producer (Documentary) BBC Midland Region.
- 1958-64** Co-Author and producer of the Radio Ballads.
- 1965-72** Radio works include 'The Song Carriers' (14 part critique of British Folk Song with Ewan MacColl), 'Vox Pop' (8 part critique of Pop Song with Stuart Hall), 'The Blind Set' (the experience of Blindness) 'The Iron Box', the life and times of George Jackson.
- 1962** Compiled and Directed 'The Maker and the Tool, multi-media drama work on the trades of six towns, for Arnold Wesker's "Centre 42".
- 1965** Founded the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre.
- 1964-72** Extra-Mural lecturer in folk song, University of Birmingham and Workers Educational Association.
- 1972** Left BBC (Guest producer 1973-76).
- 1973-80** Visiting Lecturer, Media Studies, School of Communication, Polytechnic of Central London.
- 1974** Co-Founder, 'Banner' Theatre of Actuality.
- 1975-76** Welsh Tinplate Labour Trust Fellowship, University College of Swansea. Produced "A comparative study of attitudes to industrial action among South Wales Miners, 1926, 1972-74".
- 1977** Open University. Two 20 minute documentaries on the Inner City, 'Growing up in Tower Hamlets', and 'Black Parents'.
- 1978** Departmental Visiting Fellow, Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences University of Reading.

CHARLES PARKER

Aspects of a Pioneer

During the twentieth century, the Documentary has emerged as one of the key developments in British culture. In Film, Radio, Television and the Theatre, documentary forms and techniques have become essential. This pamphlet celebrates the work of a pioneer in documentary radio and theatre — Charles Parker.

Charles Parker (1919 to 1980) was a BBC radio producer working in Birmingham who produced a series of pioneering radio programmes, the Radio Ballads, between 1958 and 1964. In making these, he came to radical conclusions about popular song and speech which transformed his approach to documentary radio, and documentary theatre, where he was an early pioneer. He produced some of the first multi-media drama work for Arnold Wesker's Centre 42, and through his continuing work with documentary theatre became founder member of Banner Theatre in 1974.

This pamphlet outlines the career of Charles Parker from the Radio Ballads onward. It is a personal view by Trevor Fisher, who knew Charles Parker as a friend and colleague for the last fifteen years of Charles Parker's life. The pamphlet outlines the evolution of the Radio Ballads and Banner Theatre, sketches the extraordinary range of cultural and political work which Charles Parker became involved in, and discusses some of his controversial ideas on oral culture and social crisis. **CHARLES PARKER, ASPECTS OF A PIONEER**, provides an essential introduction to the life and work of a neglected pioneer of documentary art.