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## Peter Cox: Set into Song – Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads

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**Peter Cox: Set into Song – Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads**

London: Labatie 2008, 298 S., ISBN 978-0-9551877-1-1, GBP 20,-

With *Set into Song*, his readable and highly detailed study of the BBC *Radio Ballads* (1958-1964), Peter Cox presents a rare historical case-study of the aesthetics of O-Ton, a field which remains something of a grey area of media-historical research. Cox points out that the major innovation of the *Radio Ballads* – a critically-acclaimed series of eight non-fiction broadcasts, part O-Ton documentary, part folk oratorio – was in breaking with the studio-bound and theatrical aesthetic then still prevalent in the British (and European) radio feature, in favor of a new approach both ethnographic and montage-oriented. Equipped with newly-available portable tape technology, the writing/production team made repeated field-recording trips to industrial communities, recording location sound and vernacular speech, the voices of railwaymen and fish-factory workers, amateur boxers and horse-dealers. In a remarkably labour-intensive and expensive process, they edited the material into a form influenced both by Brecht and by nineteenth century American song forms, integrating ‘actuality’ recording with the music and orchestration provided by prominent figures of the British folk revival movement. Cox’s book is a work of media-historical journalism rather than an academic study. In his broadly chronological account, further divided into a range of thematic and biographical vignettes, he does not attempt to impose an overarching analytic model. The book’s theoretical reflection comes not from the author but from its subjects, who transpose John Grierson’s ideas on film documentary to radio, and apply Rudolf Laban’s theories on vocal performance to the editing of field-recorded interviews. Within its generic conventions, however, Cox’s account is distinguished by its unusually diligent research, especially in the private archives of British broadcasters. Embedded within a compelling and well-written narrative aimed at a general readership, his study provides new and useful information on topics such as pre-war British radio documentary, or the variation in the post-war diffusion of tape technology across different European broadcasting cultures.

Above all, the book’s strength lies in its detailed, imaginative reconstruction of early techniques of O-Ton recording, editing and composition. Combining both interviews with participants and an analysis of the writings of Parker and MacColl, Cox vividly reconstructs the challenge of integrating semantic content, musical form and documentary sound while improvising solutions to a series of technical problems. In part, *Set into Song* is a paean to the ingenuity and tenacity of early pioneers of such form, and to the underappreciated arts of editing and collation, arrangement and orchestration, sampling and sequencing. While Cox’s book will be of immediate interest to historians of British and comparative broadcasting, it also speaks to recent discussions of the intermedial history of referentiality and constructions of realism.

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