

# Making the “voice of the people” heard again: 70 years of Topic Records

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The British folk music record label Topic has recently published a 7-CD and book set, *Three Score and Ten: A Voice to the People*, to mark its 70th anniversary. Such longevity is unusual in an independent label. As the book notes, most major labels now belong to one of the four big multinational music companies.

The label’s history, which closely reflects the development of ideas about folk music, is of cultural and political interest. It emerged directly from the intervention of the Communist Party in the mid-1930s.

Topic issued its first record in 1939 as a record club label of the Workers Music Association (WMA), formed three years earlier by the composer Alan Bush, following a meeting of five London socialist choirs.

Bush is an under-rated composer who, like contemporaries such as Michael Tippett, was politically engaged. He joined the Independent Labour Party in 1924, when it was still affiliated to the Labour Party. On its disaffiliation in 1929, he resigned to join the Labour Party. Bush devoted much time and effort to organising politically-oriented popular choirs such as the London Labour Choral Union, and in 1934 he staged “The Pageant of Labour” in collaboration with Tippett. In 1935 he joined the Communist Party.

Through the 1930s, the Stalinised Communist Party attracted into its ranks many artists who were concerned at the growth of fascism. However, it was the Popular Front policies pursued by the Communist Parties that helped lead to the victory of fascism in Germany and Spain. Rather than mobilising the working class independently against the bourgeoisie and its fascist representatives, Stalinism insisted that the struggle against the fascist danger took priority over the struggle for socialism. The CPs demanded the subordination of workers’ organisations to a broad coalition of “anti-fascist” forces that were the political representatives of the supposedly democratic bourgeoisie. Workers were disarmed, and the way left open for fascism to seize power.

The Popular Front took specific cultural forms, with the promotion of national “people’s”, or “folk”, music and

poetry. The WMA was formed in 1936 to promote the composition and performance of music “which expresses the ideals and aims of mankind towards the improved organisation of society; music which exerts an influence against the social injustices of our present society,” as the book puts it. It won support from many of the leading artistes of the day, such as Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, and John Ireland.

The WMA established Topic to release “gramophone records of historical and social interest.” Its first release was the socialist anthem *The Internationale* matched with *The Man That Waters the Workers’ Beer*, both included here.

Much of the documentation for this early period has been lost, but a survey of the accompanying complete 1939-2009 catalogue shows the political line of the early years. Alongside pieces originating in Unity shows, and the occasional item by a contemporary composer, a substantial number of the records were versions of songs from the Soviet Union and across Europe. In 1950 Topic issued a 2-disc set of Paul Robeson’s “Message of Peace,” recorded at a rally to mark the 20th anniversary of the CP’s paper *The Daily Worker*.

The WMA also published collections and books on folk song. They published important works, for example, by Ewan MacColl and A.L. Lloyd, both active in the cultural work of the CP. Between them, Lloyd, a musicologist, and MacColl shaped much of what we think of as English folk music in terms of performance and of repertoire. (MacColl’s London folk club insisted that singers only perform material from their own cultural background, although he recorded more widely.)

Lloyd did not have a great voice, but was an engaging performer with a love for big magical ballads. There is one track from him here. MacColl was a performer with an impressive and theatrical voice. His later recordings are a tiresome affair, pompous and politically moribund, but the selections here catch him at his best as a singer and songwriter. His song about the wrongful execution of

Timothy Evans for the Rillington Place murders, *Go Down Ye Murderers*, remains powerful.

In part inspired by Lloyd and MacColl, as well as a resurgence of political songwriting around the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, there began to emerge a new folk scene. MacColl was not alone in seeking out and recording traditional singers, and Topic acted as an outlet for such recordings. The astonishing Irish street singer Margaret Barry was amongst the first, and this would provide an impetus for a later generation of collectors to issue field recordings through the label.

Several albums charted Irish rebel songs old and new (Dominic Behan can be heard here singing his *The Patriot Game*).

The explosion of folk clubs in the 1960s led to a renewed interest in songs reflecting workers' lives from an earlier period, like the late 19th century pit ballads collected by Lloyd. The success of the folk scene led to younger professional singers appearing. The influential singer Anne Briggs had been part of the Centre 42 concerts organised under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress. Martin Carthy's father was a secretary to the social democratic Second International. Many of these singers, influenced by Lloyd in particular, merged a vague political sentiment with an interest in older songs.

The results could be striking. The Watsons, a family group from Hull, produced one of the most glorious noises of collective singing. They are heard here singing *Three Score and Ten*, about a disaster befalling the Grimsby fishing fleet. Lloyd gave them the songs for their key album "Frost and Fire," an album of ritual and calendar songs.

Topic lost ground to younger record labels in the 1970s in regard to professional folk club performers, but became the most important label for field recordings of traditional singers and musicians from across the British Isles. The label also began to issue older recordings of Music Hall artistes. An album was released by the music hall comic Billy Bennett, whose skewed wordplay is a joy to hear.

Obscure acts from the 1930s were championed like Bob Smith's Ideal Band, a Glaswegian group mixing traditional tunes with humorous skits, dance band music, and communist songs. Their rendition of *The Red Flag* (sung to its later tune "Maryland" rather than "The White Cockade" to which it was written) was a revelation to me.

For all the label's development over the last 30 years, it remains loyal to the statement of aims of the WMA from 1944. It sees its role as being, "To present to the people their rich musical heritage." Alongside releases by professional artists, it continues to re-release compilations of traditional performers. The label is currently working on a second series of *The Voice of the People*, based on field recordings

made in the 1950s, and has been releasing CDs of field recordings from around the world in collaboration with the British Library.

It still aspires to "stimulate the composition of music appropriate to our time," and "To foster and further the art of music on the principle that true art can move the people to work for the betterment of society."

The first and last CDs here are selected highlights from the catalogue. Three of the CDs are organised regionally into English, Scottish, and Irish material. One features songs recently composed, and the remaining disc is dedicated to explicitly political songs, containing some interesting and powerful responses in song to contemporary events. Maggie Holland's song *The Perfumes of Arabia*, written after the first Gulf War, gets a powerful reading from Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick. Elsewhere I am less convinced by the material being produced.

Much of the material will be familiar to devotees of a small field that Topic has dominated for so long. I wonder how far this collection will be a point of access for new listeners, but there are some highlights of which the label has every right to be proud. Despite the political limitations of the theoretical foundations for the movement, it has produced some musical achievements of note.

The set opens with the warm singing and remarkable guitar playing of Nic Jones, who continues to influence new performers over 25 years after a car-crash ended his playing career. Mike Waterson's *tour de force* 11-minute unaccompanied performance of the ballad *Tamlyn* is one of my favourite folk revival recordings. It remains compelling. In other ballad readings, there is little vitality or development in the tradition.

Alongside the familiar moments the set manages to include plenty that was unfamiliar. This includes most of the political pieces, although Paul Robeson's wonderful reading of *Joe Hill* is deservedly well-known. Ewan MacColl's version of Tennessee Ernie Ford's *Sixteen Tons* surprised me greatly. A whole album of the earlier political material might be interesting, although this does not appear to be planned. For all the musical treasures here, this may be the most disappointing aspect of the release.



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