

Dreamed a Dream by the Old Canal.....

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This year marks 100 years since the birth of Ewan MacColl. Born James Henry Miller in Salford on January 25, 1915, he adapted the stage name of Ewan MacColl to acknowledge his strong Scottish heritage.

MacColl became a great influence on the folk music scene of the 50's and 60's and wrote several songs mostly relating to working class identities. One of his compositions has gone on to become a much loved staple of ballad singers across Britain and afar.

Dirty Old Town was written by Ewan MacColl in 1949. The song offers a snapshot of life in the industrialised town of Salford in Manchester, where MacColl was born and reared.

The song was composed by MacColl for a play he wrote called Landscape with Chimneys. Dirty Old Town served as a three minute musical interlude during a difficult scene change in the play. Like the song, the play was set in Salford but the song outgrew the play and took on a life of it's own when the folk ballad scene became popular.

MacColl intended to sing the song with no instrumental backing but by the mid 1950's he had recorded it with Peggy Seeger and the Ramblers, along with the help of renowned folk music collector Alan Lomax. Since then, several artists have covered the song including The Pogues in 1985, Donovan in 1964 and Rod Stewart in 1969 among many others.

Dirty Old Town plays out as a love song against the backdrop of gritty industrialisation. The singer takes his girl for a stroll down by the canal tow path as it is the only place which isn't touched by the grime of factories and the dirty smoke of chimney stacks.

The gasworks croft, which is mentioned in the first verse, was a patch of wasteland next to the gasworks, while the old canal is the old Manchester Bolton and Bury canal. The sirens mentioned in the song resonate from these canals. At the time the song was written, Manchester played host to heavy canal traffic and Salford in particular was very busy, so much so that ships often sounded their sirens.

MacColl's conscious leanings were on the far left of the political spectrum and the socialist voice of the northern working class shines through Dirty Old Town.

MacColl's song concerns life in Salford but it could be about any town in any country. When Luke Kelly brought it to the fore with the Dubliners in the 1960s, there then came a common

misconception that the song was about Dublin! It's easy to make that mistake because Dirty Old Town is a simple yet powerful song which resonates with many across Britain, Ireland and further a field with its tale of a working class life.

While many love songs in the folk ballad scene were set by riverbanks or meadows, Dirty Old Town is set in industrial reality, where courting is done beneath the shadow of tall chimney stacks instead of willow trees!

It's a song packed with the smell and sounds of a working class town, the narrator hears the sirens from the docks and smells the spring on the smoky wind, but there lies within the song a rebellious streak which is MacColl's voice sounding for the destruction of the town and the rebuilding of new one. The singer repeats the words of the title twice at the end of each verse, just to solidify the state of mind he is in when describing the place he calls home, which he sees as just a dirty old town.

While MacColl wrote so poetically about how the smoke from the steam set the night on fire and how he could smell the spring on the smoky wind, he reserved the last verse for a tint of regret for living in such a town, he wants to cut it down like an old dead tree.

The song reflects MacColl's love-hate attitude with the working class realities of Salford. He composed a song full of contrasting feelings, even the title, Dirty Old Town, denotes disgust in the narrator.

Some controversy did arise from the song. 'Smelled the smoke on the Salford wind' was an original line in Dirty Old Town but, members of Salford council were displeased and even asked MacColl to change the lyrics. The line was subsequently changed to 'smelled the spring on the smoky wind' but for many who later recorded the song, they stayed true to the original lyrics because it painted a perfect portrait of the realities of Salford in 1949.

The song is an ideal snapshot of life in a town built on industry but the Salford of today is a far cry from the one Ewan MacColl wrote about in 1949.

The gasworks have since been demolished and the factory walls where the singer courts his girl are now sites full of expensive apartments while the steam trains that set the night on fire are now electric trams.

The song remains a simple one with a strong working class voice, and in recent years urban renewal in Salford has brushed away some of that grit that drench through Dirty Old Town, but as long as the song lives on so too does the smoky romanticism of towns such as Salford and beyond.

I met my love by the gas works croft,

Dreamed a dream by the old canal,

I kissed my girl by the factory wall,

Dirty old town, dirty old town.

Clouds are drifting across the moon,

Cats are prowling on their beat,

Springs a girl from the streets at night,
Dirty old town, dirty old town.

I heard a siren from the docks,
Saw a train set the night on fire,
Smelled the spring on the smoky wind,
Dirty old town, dirty old town.

I'm going to make me a good sharp axe,
Shining steel tempered in the fire,
Ill chop you down like an old dead tree,
Dirty old town, dirty old town.

I met my love by the gas works croft,
Dreamed a dream by the old canal,
I kissed my girl by the factory wall,
Dirty old town, dirty old town.