Rearguard of the Revolution: MI5, Communism and British Musicians

Introduction

This paper starts with what might seem a preposterous notion: that, for a short period, the British state saw musicians as a majorly subversive force.

This stems from the close connections between musicians and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) before, during and after the Second World War.

Today I will interrogate the two overlapping relationships at work: between musicians and communism and between the State - primarily in the form of its security service, MI5 - and musicians.

This will be in three parts.

The first will provide some pre-Cold War context and will discuss some existing sources on communism, the state and music in the UK. I will briefly outline the initial appeal of communism to British musicians and the ways in which musicians and the CPGB connected through a range of both well-known and obscure organisations and societies.

In the second, I will examine the methods employed by the state to gather information and how they infiltrated the music profession; the mechanics of the espionage.

And thirdly, I will draw on a range of examples to show how this played out in the case of both organisations and associated individuals.

Specifically, I will examine MI5’s interest in the Musicians’ Union and will then will use Alan Bush (the composer and founder of the WMA), Ewan MacColl (the folksinger whose early releases were on Topic Records) and Peter Pears (the singer who was a vice-chair of the Musicians Organisation for Peace) as short, individual case studies.
Each of these individuals represented very different versions of left-wing politics, but were all treated as some form of threat by the security service.

I will conclude by evaluating the effectiveness of such espionage in either securing the state or limiting the influence of the musicians in question, arguing that, despite considerable resources and personnel being employed to monitor parts of the music profession, the impact of either the musicians on the state or vice versa was relatively minimal.

Context and Archives

Sources and starting points

To begin I will say a little about my route in to this research, the existing literature and some new sources that have added to our knowledge of the interest the British state took in musicians during the Cold War.

This research began when I was working with Martin on a history of the British Musicians’ Union.

Investigation of the Union’s own archive showed that, like other trade unions, there were clear ideological fault lines among its members, though these were rarely articulated in party political terms.

Since 1943, the MU has been affiliated to the British Labour Party, which has traditionally catered for a broad coalition of leftist viewpoints, albeit one where the centre of gravity has shifted many times in the intervening years.

But in the MU’s own records, there was very little in the way of direct and open discussion of communism generally or the CP.

In trying to figure out who the Communists were within the Union, I cross-referenced Union archives with those of the CPGB (which are held at the People’s History Museum in Manchester), and a number of MI5 files in the National Archive.
The latter files, which have all been released since 2010, as part of a wider opening up (or PR offensive on behalf of) the security services, are both a fascinating historical insight and a source of great frustration.

While they answered my initial questions by giving a comprehensive list of those musicians who were active in the Party at various points, a combination of selective release and redaction mean that they, by no means, tell the whole story.

As a further note of caution, Studer and Unfried warn of the danger in using such documents of becoming trapped by ‘the policeman’s view of history’ (1997:420), while Kevin Morgan cautions that ‘as with any cinematic record, we merely need to keep in mind who it was that wielded the camera, and who decides what footage we get to see’ (2018:2).

Nevertheless, they have been a catalyst a new batch of work on relationship between UK and various artistic pursuits.

For example, work by Raphael Samuel (2017) and David Aaronovich (2017) give new insights into the mechanics of the British Communist Party and Christopher Andrew’s history of MI5 (2009) offers considerable new knowledge in spite of the associated problems of being officially sanctioned.

And while older accounts on British communism rarely mention music, those that do offer some important context as to why the Party was interested in musicians and vice versa.

Andy Croft’s 1998 collection ‘A Weapon in the Struggle’ was the first major work to recognise that’ CPGB took its cultural work very seriously indeed ’(1998: 128), and in the same collection, Richard Hanlon and Mike Waite put its general appeal down to ‘the failure of capitalist economics, a concern about Fascism and a commitment to progressive politics’ (1998: 69).

More specifically, Morgan adds that mass unemployment and the large Jewish element within the profession meant that it was particularly open to the overtures of the Party. He describes a new breed of 1930s’ London musicians gathered to look for work on Archer Street, where:
‘out went the old bald-headed guys and in came a younger breed of dance band leftists, gathering in the small hours in West End cafes and then setting their alarm clock for the next morning’s union business’ (1998:128).

Such gatherings were made all the more urgent by the situation the Union found itself in. With membership having quartered in the period from 1929-36, remaining members with Communist leanings began a successful recruitment campaign by offering reduced price memberships to unemployed and underemployed musicians.

The so-called ‘Voluntary Organising Committees’ within the Union, were, in effect the first recruiting sergeants for the Communist Party within the music profession.

Their success meant that Party members became increasingly prominent in the Union, though in the late 1930s and early 1940s, both Union and Party membership fluctuated.

The Union began to rebuild from its historic low of 7000 members in 1936 while membership of the CPGB unsurprisingly dropped on the announcement of the Soviet-German pact in 1939 before reaching record levels around the time that the Soviets entered the War on the side of the allies in 1942.

By 1943, the CPGB was a legitimate political party which, with nearly 60000 members and had 2 MPS elected in 1945. In short, as Francis Beckett puts it, for a brief period, ‘the party had become respectable ’(1995: 98).

Partly because of this, it was also, as Morgan notes, was one of the ‘very few Communist Parties that was never proscribed by the state’ (2018: 1), but one which ‘had an influence, in industrial environments, far beyond its modest numerical strength’ (2001: 106). check ref!

It was in this context - industrial organisation - that MIS turned its attention to musicians and the Musicians‘ Union.

In the next part I will describe how it went about investigating communism generally and musicians in particular.
MI5 and Communists

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Here Andrew’s work offers important background to the security service’s interest in British communists, which was triggered by fears of the Party’s subservient relationship with Comintern, the Communist International, run from Moscow.

Initial attempts to monitor every British communist was downgraded during the War due to ‘pressure of work’, with observation restricted to ‘party officials’ and ‘keeping track of communist activity in the armed forces and other sensitive areas’ (2009: 400).

However, this changed again in 1948, when the Attlee government, under pressure from some Conservative MPs to recreate the same sort of Communist witch hunt that was underway in the USA, instituted what became known as the ‘purge procedure’ the main purpose of which was to ‘exclude Communists and Fascists from work vital to the security of the state’ (ibid).

Assisting them in this quest, MI5 had successfully acquired detailed membership records belonging to the Party.

So 1948 could be seen as the start of the period of peak anxiety about the infiltration and influence of Communists in Britain, something that lasted until around 1956, when the Soviet invasion of Hungary, coupled with the coming to light of Stalin’s atrocities resulted in a sharp fall in party membership.

The second aspect of such anxiety, identified by Andrew, was a focus on trade unions. He reveals that MI5 ‘believed the CPGB had acquired astonishing influence in the trade union movement, thanks, in part, to the apathy of most non-Communist trade unionists’ (2009: 406).

Musicians

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The released MI5 files provide some evidence of this. They show how espionage relating to the music profession was organised from two perspectives: that of organisations and individuals.
Specifically, there are three types of files related to the music profession.

The first batch were organised around ‘communist activities among musicians and actors’ (KV3/375-KV3/478). These focus on the trade unions of the two professions: the Musicians’ Union and Equity, though it its the former that dominates due to its larger membership.

The second is a file dedicated to the Workers’ Music Association (WMA), seen as a Communist front, and the third are those files relating to individual musicians. Although, there were evidently hundreds of these, only a few have been made publicly available.

Even so, the full extent and popularity of the Party with the Union and profession is still difficult to measure.

MI5’s starting point in 1942 was a list of approximately 80 London musicians who were all members of the Party’s Music Group, but this was hardly comprehensive, omitting Party musicians outside the capital and also sympathisers who, for various reasons, did not join. **SLIDE 6**

However, a measure of its fleeting popularity was reflected on by the pianist, James Gibb, who claimed that around this time ‘there were so many musicians in the CP that it got around the profession that it was not a good thing to be outside the party if you wanted to get on’ (quoted in Croft 2013).

Regardless, each of the musicians on the list were assigned a case number and personal file, where MI5 would note any activities that were suspicious, and even more that were not.

So, that is a brief outline of the extent of, and relationship between, communism and the music profession in the UK in the period leading up to the Cold War.

I will now focus on the methods used by the state to infiltrate the organisations and gather evidence.

**Methods**
In practical terms, MI5’s intelligence gathering, according to Chris Northcott, comprised a mixture of ‘sources, surveillance, the interception of communications and what he terms ‘intrusive surveillance’ like eavesdropping (2007:471).

In the case of musicians and musicians’ organisations, it would appear that most of the material was gathered from sources within the Party, the profession or both.

In most instances, information and suspicions were passed to the police, whose Special Branches around the country acted as ‘as MI5’s legmen’ (Hennessey 1982: 971). Thereafter, details would be passed to the security services.

The seriousness with which these reports were taken is reflected by the level at which they were conducted, with the files revealing Chief Constables from around the country communicating with Sir Percy Sillitoe, the then director-general of MI5.

Examples

I will now consider how these methods played out for some of the aforementioned organisations and musicians starting with the Musicians’ Union itself.

1. Musicians’ Union

In keeping with the aforementioned fears of Communist infiltration of trade unions, the bulk of the files on Communist activities among musicians focus on the MU.

These begin with a 1941 police report that details how ‘Communist infiltration into the Musicians’ Union started about six years ago and from time to time the extremist element has set up a series of committees and political groups with the object of gaining control of the union’ (M3/375).

To counteract this, MI5 initially focused on gathering information on elected committee members and salaried officials of the Union.
Those under observation included Union officials, Harry Francis, Ted Anstey and Alex Mitchell but also a wide range of musicians including Phil Cardew, Ben Frankel and Thomas Russell, along with many members of the London Philharmonic.

And while, like the profession and union generally, those spied on were predominantly male, there were a few women musicians active in the Party and under investigation, including Mary and Geraldine Peppin, who performed regularly on the BBC Home Service at the time.

However, the State’s peak interest in the Union coincided with the purge procedure and focused on its General Secretary and Executive Committee elections later in the decade.

By 1948, the police and MI5 were clearly better informed on the Union’s internal machinations than they had been during the War, and, for the first time there was evidence of organised opposition to the Communist faction within it.

This manifest itself in the emergence of a mysterious group called the London Fellowship of Musicians, which, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, appeared at around the same time that the Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, told a cabinet committee that ‘one of the most urgent tasks [for MI5] is to organise effective opposition to the election of Communists to key positions in the executives of trade unions’ (cited in Andrew 2009: 406).

It may have been that in the case of the MU, they had already been doing this.

Whether prompted by MI5 or not, the LFM played an important part in harnessing national support for non-Communist candidates in the Union’s elections of 1948 and 1949.

Initially, this was ineffective.

The former saw the election of Hardie Ratcliffe as General Secretary. Although not a member of the Communist Party, he was treated with suspicion by MI5 and seen as something of a ‘fellow-traveller’, because he had been nominated and supported by members of the Party. As a Special Branch report to MI5 noted, this meant his ‘position may prove to be unenviable’ (KV3/379).
Although this proved not to be the case, his leadership was immediately plunged into crisis when Van Phillips, a known Communist, who was ‘suspected of being a police informant by members of both the Musicians’ Union and the Communist Party’ (KV3/377) was elected chair of the Executive Committee in 1949, resulting in a walk out by non-Communist members of the committee.

Even more tellingly, this was a rare occasion when the Musician’s Union received prominent coverage in the national press. The *Daily Mail* headlined a story ‘Red Coup in Music’, the *Musical Express* led with the headline ‘Communist is now chair of the Musicians’ Union’ (11 February 1949: 1) and SLIDE 9 The *Daily Herald* quoted a member of the committee as saying that ‘Communists are in control of our union’ (11 February 1949).

But this was not strictly true.

There were only three known Communists (including Phillips) on the 22 member executive and their influence was limited.

Further attempts were made to remove both Ratcliffe and Phillips from their posts during 1949: and while the former survived as General Secretary until 1970, Phillips was replaced as chair at the end of the year.

This meant Party members and fellow travellers retained prominent positions and an influence on the Union through the following decades, but at no stage did their influence (or anxiety about it) return to the levels of the late 1940s. Similarly, organised opposition to CP activity in the Union virtually disappeared around the same time.

Furthermore, it appears that MI5’s interest in the music profession generally tapered off towards the end of the 1950s.

Three things become apparent from examining the role of Communists within the Musicians’ Union.
The first relates to the role of MI5. Even from the sources that are available, it is clear that the state was paying close attention to the music profession in the early years of the Cold War and in many respects it was treated in the same way as larger industrial unions.

Second is to note the importance of informants within the union. Members from around England were supplying the police with material from within the Union, which were shared at the top level of MI5.

Lastly, it is worth reiterating that the state’s interest in the music profession extended beyond the MU and included a whole host of other organisations and individuals that had connections with the Communist Party.

I will briefly mention some of these before turning my attention to some of the individuals involved.

**Organisations**

The MI5 documents give some sense of the plethora of groups and organisations of musicians - largely based in London - that were either officially part of the Party or closely connected with it.

Given that many of the same individuals were involved, it is easy to imagine that these musicians spent more time in the numerous committee meetings than they did making music.

But for both the Party, in its attempts to organise among musicians, and the State in its attempts to spy on them, the nature of the music profession was to prove something of a barrier to their efficacy.

Joanna Bullivant illustrates the ‘problematic’ nature of the Party’s attempts to engage musicians via the existence of separate groups within the Party for professional and amateur musicians (2016:102).

As she argues, prior to this, ‘most left-wing musical activity had involved the co-operation of both amateur and professional musicians’ (ibid: 103) as in the case of the Workers’ Music Association.
Though this is contestable, there is no doubt that the number of leftist and radical groups in and around the music profession served to fragment its left-wing elements.

For the remainder of the paper I will now focus on individual musicians [Bush, MacColl and Pears] but will use them to unpack both the perceived threat of the organisations with which they were associated and their own, very different relationships with communism as an ideology.

Here what is notable throughout MI5’s interest in both individuals and organisations is a lack of nuance: it would appear that all on the left politically are communists and every group with Party members in it is a either referred to as ‘Communist-front’ or a ‘communist-penetrated’ organisation.

So to take the individuals in turn beginning with the composer and academic, Alan Bush.

(i) Alan Bush and the WMA

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Of the three examples, Bush and the WMA were those subjected to the greatest scrutiny, perhaps because of their proximity to the Party.

For Bush, music and politics always intertwined and his loyalty to the Party was unflinching. Writing in 1950, he observed that ‘joining the Party helped me to clarify my musical ideas. I came to understand that music is a form through which the class struggle is fought out’ (WMA archive). He also observed that he was unlikely to ever give up on his beliefs.

When he began his academic career at the Royal Academy of Music in 1925, he was a member of the Labour Party, but resigned in 1929, and on his return from Berlin, where he studied in the early 1930s, he joined the CPGB in 1935.

But it was his role, as a founder, chair and President of the Workers’ Music Association from 1936 that attracted the interest of MI5.
The WMA stemmed from the tradition of labour and socialist choirs that Bush had been involved with in London, and has contributed in a number of ways to musical life in the UK subsequently: by organising events, releasing records and publishing sheet music from around the world; creating work for musicians and running regular summer schools and educational events.

However, to the State, it was both a threat and, as Michael Brocken describes it ‘a rather nebulous offshoot of the Communist Party of Great Britain’ (2003: page).

There was some justification for such claims. Asides from Bush, the majority of those involved at the start of the WMA including AL (Bert) Lloyd and Rutland Broughton, were party members, but initial concern about it was based on the claims of MI5 informant, Norman Himsworth, who told his handlers that the WMA was to be used as a front for communicating with Party members in the armed forces during the Second World War.

Post-war, the Association achieved a degree of respectability and slightly diluted its links with the Party. It published its ‘Policy for Music In Post-War Britain’ in 1945 and won the support of an increasing number of musicians and writers who were not in the Party like Benjamin Britten, George Bernard Shaw, HG Wells and Paul Robeson.

Nevertheless, Bush as an individual remained a subject of close scrutiny by MI5 during the Cold War era, with particular interest in his foreign travel during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Unusually among the British Communists of the time, Bush was well travelled and connected. He had visited the Soviet Union in 1938 and 1939 and had also met with Georgi Dmitrov, who at the time was head of Comintern.

In the post-War years, Bush regularly visited Eastern Europe for what were arguably legitimate musical reasons. He performed in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria. Most famously, his opera, *Wat Tyler*, was premiered in Leipzig, in the GDR, in 1953.

For Bush, the rationale for this was simple: that there was no support for, or limited opportunities to have his work performed in the UK, partly because of his politics and partly because of the lack of opera companies able to perform it.
On his death in 1995, it was also recorded that ‘Alan’s view, which is now repeated by most of our older WMA members, was that his political views cost him the support of the BBC during the period 1938-53’ (WMA, 1996:7).

But this may be exaggerating the case: for example he performed regularly at the Proms during the period and there were plausible other reasons as to why the opera companies shunned his work at the time.

In the context of this paranoia - and letters in the Party newspaper, *The Daily Worker* - about the lack of state support his work as a result of his politics, it should also be noted that Bush received Arts Council funding when writing *Wat Tyler*.

So, at the very least, there was no evidence of co-ordinated state suppression of his work.

For the remainder of his career, Bush remained a Party loyalist, and even continued to be, as Bullivant puts it, ‘convinced of the rectitude of [Stalin’s] attacks on composers’ (2016: 140) long after these had been rescinded by Khrushchev and the Soviet party.

Bush retired from the RAM in 1978, but remained a Party member and President of the WMA until his death in 1995.

(ii) Ewan MacColl and Topic Records

My second example, Ewan MacColl, makes for something of a contrast with Bush when it comes to both the reasons for MI5’s interest and his relationship with the Party.

MacColl - or plain Jimmy Miller as he was known at the time - joined the Young Communist League in 1929 at the age of 14 but initially came to the attention of MI5 because of his work with a range of left-wing theatre groups in the thirties.

In his case, the interest was largely down to his association with the BBC where he had worked as a producer immediately prior to the War.
Especially in the light of MacColl’s desertion from the army, there was particular sensitivity about his re-emergence at the BBC in the late 1940s and a particular sensitivity about communists using the state broadcaster to deliver - directly or indirectly- political messages.

By now predominantly known as a folk-singer, MacColl had begun working again at the BBC in the North Region in 1948, something that had alerted his local constabulary, and as result, MI5.

In 1949, the Chief Constable of Cheshire wrote to them with a stern warning that ‘this man is still an active Communist. He is periodically employed by the BBC Manchester in producing small plays, usually in the Children’s hour’ (KV2/2175).

In turn, they dutifully wrote to a Miss Wadsley at the BBC in Manchester informing her that ‘you may therefore care to know that he has a long Communist record and is still active politically’.

But such information had little impact at the BBC. Some two months later, Wadsley replied only to confirm his employment as a producer and add only that ‘we are very interested to have your information and have carefully noted it’ (KV2/2175). No action was either taken or pursued.

In another document, MacColl was listed as ‘one of four party members prominently associated with the BBC’, but this did not prevent him from gaining further work, including his acclaimed series, ‘Ballads and Blues’ in 1953.

Indeed, as James Smith notes, ‘there is no evidence. . .that MI5 attempted again to influence the BBC to drop or limit MacColl’s work, and it appears that the rebuff of 1949 continued to stand’ (2019: 103).

MacColl’s other activities that were subject to scrutiny in the 1950s were similar to those of Bush: mainly consisting of trips overseas and membership and associations with communist affiliated organisations. In his case, this included a trip to the World Youth Festival in Bucharest, work with the WMA and his continuing association with the Theatre Workshop.
Perhaps the most remarkable document in MacColl’s file is a memo of the 31st March 1954 that reveals ‘he recently received a cheque, out of the blue - so it is said - for £1750 from Moscow, representing certain royalties’.

It adds the detail that ‘members of the Theatre Workshop were inebriated for an entire evening celebrating’ (KV2/2175), but like some of the other material gathered by local police this seems speculative and imprecise, coming only from ‘a reliable source’ and appears not to be verified by any bank account checks or hard evidence.

On the other hand, his files seem to omit what would be pertinent details regarding his relationship with the Party and his career.

Apparently unbeknown to MI5 he had been threatened with expulsion from the Party in the 1930s and, it was only an intercepted communication, when he reapplied for membership in 1952, that alerted them to his long lapsed membership.

Interestingly, this began a short period of close engagement with the Party that is curiously absent from MacColl’s own autobiography, which only mentions his affiliation during his early years in Manchester.

They also appear not to notice the start of recording career and its association with Topic Records, the record label that was set up by the WMA in 1939. This was initially a means of releasing Soviet music in the UK, but after the war took an increasing interest in the British folk revival and released music by the likes of MacColl, Shirley Collins, Anne Briggs and Martin Carthy.

It was courtesy of Topic, that in 1951, MacColl released one of his least celebrated songs - *The Ballad of Stalin* - a somewhat uncritical account of the Soviet leader. [SLIDE 12]

However, a more serious point is that, as Raphael Samuel wrote, ‘MacColl never found a niche within the Party’s cultural apparatus’ and ‘was constantly at odds with party discipline’ (1990: 220).
Instead, he pursued, until his death in 1989, ‘an unreconstructed ‘left wing politics of his own’ (ibid), which took little or no cognisance of changes within the Party or global communism.

**Peter Pears / Musicians Organisation for Peace**

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I will say less about my final example, Peter Pears, other than to suggest that his MI5 documents serve as an indicator of the depth of the State’s investigation of Communist musicians.

Unlike Bush and MacColl, he was not a communist, and was described by his biographer, Christopher Headington, as someone who, ‘though not affiliated to a political party, held broadly liberal views’ (1992: 320).

In his case the reasons for interest were his pacifism, which brought him into contact with communists, and his association in the early 1950s with the Royal Family.

As a member of the Peace Pledge Union who was exempted from military service on the basis of his pacifism, it was perhaps, therefore, unsurprising that he was to be later become a member and Vice-President of the Musicians’ Organisation for Peace.

The organisation first came to the attention of MI5 by way of a Special Branch report in 1951, which reported that it has been set up ‘at a meeting of 60 musicians sponsored by Sir Adrian Boult (its president) and Arthur Benjamin at the Bonnington Hotel on 10th April’ (KV2/3844).

It would appear that MI5 subsequently opened files on all the vice-presidents, among them Pears, Britten, Sir Arnold Bax, on the grounds that the organisation was (again) ‘communist-penetrated’. A further indication of such fears was that the organisation was also proscribed by the Labour Party at its conference in the same year.

But while both Pears was associated with the MOP and took part in the occasional performance for pacifist causes, it would appear that their commitment was limited: documents in the WMA archives show Pears rarely attending meetings and withdrawing from a number of planned events.
However, concerns about his beliefs were amplified when the Foreign Office approached MI5 in 1953 for an urgent assessment on Pears and Benjamin Britten on the grounds that they were members of the MOP and ‘were both in close contact with the Royal Family’.

The latter stemmed from Britten writing and Pears performing an opera for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth 2 - hardly a typical endeavour of committed communists.

MI5 responded in the negative, downplaying the significance of such associations, something they did again in 1959 when Pears applied for an American visa, alerting the US embassy to his potential communism.

On this occasion, MI5 told them that ‘we do not know precisely what are Pears’ motives in associating himself with the Musicians’ Organisation for Peace. There is no evidence from other sources to suggest that Pears has Communist leanings’ (KV2/3844).

By 1961, his file was closed and there is no evidence that MI5 continued to follow his activities after this point - but it shows that the mere association with communists was often a trigger for suspicion.

**Conclusions**

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I’ll end by making a few general points about what the MI5 files tell us about musicians and communism in Britain during the Cold War, from the perspective of first the State and secondly the musicians themselves.

**State**

That the State was interested in the music profession could be attributed to a general concern about communism and a need on the part of the State - from MI5 down to local police officers - to be seen to be doing something about it.

For those involved in the espionage, it was easy to identify communist musicians through the Party and affiliated groups. In addition, the abundance of splits within the profession and the left, meant that there were plenty of willing, though not always knowing, informers.
Yet the most striking characteristic of the files is the lack of revealing or incriminating detail and the lack of nuance or understanding of the profession more generally.

Instead, vast swathes of paper work were produced and time was spent gathering - often long after the fact - the type of biographical information that would have been publicly available, or which required, at the most, basic research.

It is also notably that even in possession of such information, MI5 adopted a relatively laissez-faire approach towards musicians.

From the available documents, there is little evidence of them intervening to restrict the movements or work of the musicians in question; but nor is there much to suggest that they fully understood either different types of musicians, or for that matter, communists, that fell under their radar.

**Musicians**

This is also apparent when considering the types of left-wing views in the music profession during the Cold War and the consequences of being associated with them.

Here there appears to be little understanding of the difference between the ideologically committed - like Bush and MacColl - and those, like Pears who were merely representative of what Adlington calls ‘the left-leaning tendencies of artists and intellectuals’ (2011: 2) or who had joined the party for primarily social or careerist reasons during the War.

Morgan claims that the CPGB and its members were ‘more continuously, intrusively and systematically monitored by the state than any other political movement’ (2018: 2), and there is evidence that this holds true of communist musicians.

But there is much less evidence of MI5 directly interfering in the work of the musicians they monitored.
For example, both Bush - in spite of his protestations - and MacColl continued to appear on the BBC, and neither was prevented from traveling or notably restricted in their public activities.

As Bullivant notes, Bush was ‘a communist intellectual able to act with relative freedom, working within the peculiarities of post-War Britain’ (2016: 142). MacColl became a respected songwriter who was much eulogised on his death in 1989 in spite of his politics and Pears, despite having an MI5 file became a knight of the realm in 1978.

For musicians, Smith correctly observes that ‘allegations of communist affiliation did not carry the same career-killing taint as they did in the USA ‘(2015: 464) during the early part of the Cold War, something that allowed the musicians themselves to be relatively transparent about their beliefs and activities.

And despite the efforts of some of the informers and local police, MI5 played a part in creating such an environment.

The combination of the paucity of their informants and their passivity when dealing with such reports successfully muted many of the hysterical voices in the police, the press and on the right of British politics when it came to taking action against suspected Communists.

In doing so, they inadvertently made the British music profession of the 1950s and 1960s more politically diverse and tolerant in the process.

**References**


Smith, J. 2015. 'The MacDonald discussion group: a communist conspiracy in Britain's Cold War film and theatre industry – or MI5's honey-pot?', Historical journal of film, radio and television., 35 (3). pp. 454-472


Thompson, W.

**Archive Files**

KV2/3844 (Pears)

KV2/ 2175

KV2/2176 (MacColl / Miller)

KV2/3515 (Bush)

KV2/3516 (Bush)

KV2/3517 (Bush)

KV2/3518 (Bush)

KV2/3519 (Bush)
KV3/377 - Communist Activities among musicians and actors

KV3/378 - communist activities among musicians and actors

KV5/132 - Workers’ Music Association