

Electric Folk



THE CHANGING FACE OF
ENGLISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC



BRITTA SWEERS

"Britta Sweers has written a fascinating account about a radical change that the centuries-old tradition of English folk song underwent in the 1960s. With her rigorous scholarship, comprehensively and passionately researched, Sweers honors an unjustly neglected music form with the attention it merits. Full of entertaining and frequently controversial quotes from leading protagonists of the folk revival, it should satisfy musicologists and fans alike."

—Shirley Collins, leading singer of, and authority on English traditional song and author of *America Over the Water*

"*Electric Folk* is an unusually rich and rewarding study. The wealth of detail goes far beyond the clichéd adulatory gaze to provide insights into individual creativity, the way in which the music hybridised and flourished, its transformative power and meaning, its contextualization in the larger world of popular music, and the quest for a distinctive contemporary English voice, rooted in tradition."

—Ian Russell, Director of the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen

"This is important reading both for ethnomusicologists and for those interested in revivals."

—Tina K. Ramnarine, author of *Ilmatar's Inspirations: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Changing Soundscapes of Finnish Folk Music*

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of British musicians rediscovered traditional folk ballads, fusing the old melodies with rock, jazz, and blues styles to create a new genre dubbed "electric folk" or "British folk rock." This revival featured groups such as Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention, and Pentangle and individual performers like Richard Thompson and Shirley Collins. While working in multiple styles, they had one thing in common: they were all making music based on traditional English song and dance material. After reasonable commercial success, electric folk disappeared from mainstream notice in the late 1970s, yet performers continue to create it today.

In *Electric Folk*, Britta Sweers provides an illuminating history of the electric folk scene, exploring its musical styles and cultural implications. Drawing on rare historical sources, contemporary music journalism, and first-hand interviews, Sweers argues that electric folk resulted from both the American folk revival of the early 1960s and a reaction against the dominance of American pop music abroad. Young British "folk-rockers," such as Richard Thompson and Maddy Prior, turned to traditional musical material as a means of asserting their British cultural identity. Yet, unlike many other revivalists, they were less interested in the "purity" of folk ballads than in the music's potential for lively interaction with modern styles, instruments, and media. The book also delves into the impact of the British folk rock movement on mainstream pop, American rock music, and neighboring European countries.

Ultimately, Sweers creates a richly detailed portrait of the electric folk scene—as cultural phenomenon, commercial entity, and performance style.

About the Author

Britta Sweers is Junior Professor in Ethnomusicology at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Rostock (Germany).

COVER DESIGN: LISA HAMILTON
COVER PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLEY HUTCHINGS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.oup.com



9 780195 174786

ISBN 0-19-517478-X