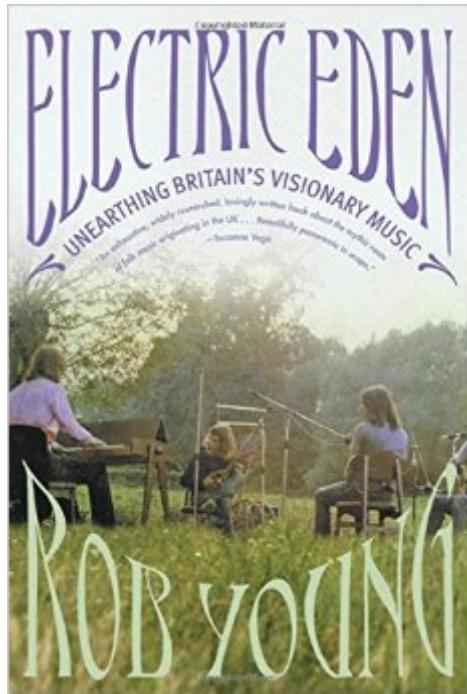


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# Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music



## Synopsis

A Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction of 2011 title In the late 1960s, with popular culture hurtling forward on the sounds of rock music, some brave musicians looked back instead, trying to recover the lost treasures of English roots music and update them for the new age. The records of Fairport Convention, Pentangle, Steeleye Span, and Nick Drake are known as "folk rock" today, but Rob Young's epic, electrifying book makes clear that those musicians led a decades-long quest to recover English music-and with it, the ancient ardor for mysticism and paganism, for craftsmanship and communal living. It is a commonplace that rock and R&B came out of the folk and blues revivals of the early 1960s, and Young shows, through enchanting storytelling and brilliant commentary, that a similar revival in England inspired the Beatles and Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and Traffic, Kate Bush and Talk Talk. Folklorists notated old songs and dances. Marxists put folk music forward as the true voice of the people. Composers like Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams devised rich neo-traditional pageantry. Today, the pioneers of the "acid folk" movement see this music as a model for their own. *Electric Eden* is that rare book which has something truly new to say about popular music, and like Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, it uses music to connect the dots in a thrilling story of art and society, of tradition and wild, idiosyncratic creativity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rob Young's quest spans the last century's search for pastoral evocations and folk recreations of a British quest to summon its lingering "ghost memories". Over 600 pages, narrated with verve and

ease, this editor at The Wire music magazine conjures up the contradictions of sound technology harnessed to rural moods, and an urban audience longing for antiquarian lore. In a nation built along Roman roads, the lure of open space limits the adventurer. In a land so long civilized among landscapes tamed, modern freedom seekers turn to the imaginary tale, the mythological ritual as liberating paths. For the British listener, nostalgia and fulfillment lurk in a golden age before machines, yet one which plugs into electricity, and exotic instruments and moods, to convey a retelling of the elusive past. He begins with the "inward exodus" by singer Vashti Bunyan, whose 1968-69 trek away from London by horse-drawn caravan up finally into Gaelic-speaking Scotland symbolizes this era's idealism. Young's discography lengthens as hippies crowd out folksingers; Bunyan's search brings her to Donovan, producer Joe Boyd, and his clients The Incredible String Band, who epitomize the fashions and styles she imagined but did not know. In "the dual landscape/dreamscape of Britain's interior", rock met and blurred and blended with folk. The preliminary section, "Music from Neverland", efficiently explains the contexts for this Aquarian Age. Young charts the contributions of Cecil Sharp and Francis Child as song and ballad and dance collectors. Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams enriched classical forms with folk melodies drawn from the last remnants of the oral tradition, its untutored composers from the peasantry.

After a teaser of an opening chapter that chronicles the story of Vashti Bunyan, Rob Young traces a thread of sensibility beginning with William Morris' utopian fantasy "News From Nowhere" (he doesn't mention that "News From Nowhere, like all utopian fantasies, is deadly dull); through British composers like Vaughan Williams, Holst, Britten etc. who incorporated British folk music into their work; through the song-collecting of Cecil Sharp; through the political activism of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger; through pioneers of eclectic, multicultural sounds like Davy Graham and Bert Jansch and the groundbreaking DADGAD guitar tuning; to the heyday of Fairport Convention, Pentangle, The Incredible String Band, Steeleye Span etc. Exactly how that thread of sensibility is defined I'd be hard pressed to say, but Young comes close with "folk is a sonic 'shabby chic' that contains elements of the uncanny and eerie, as well as an antique veneer, a whiff of Britain's pagan ancestry." Unfortunately, though Young is an engaging writer with valuable insights, he is not a reliable historian. He writes, for example, that "[Donovan] released the double album "A Gift From a Flower to a Garden" in 1967... its sleeve included a picture of Donovan in Rishikesh, India, where he had just been staying with the Beatles and other celebrity truth-seekers on a high-profile creative retreat under the tutelage of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. He flew back high as a magic carpet with a pipe-load of Eastern mysticism and a newly piqued interest in Celtic medievalism and Victoriana,

manifested in songs such as "Guinevere," "Legend of a Child Girl Linda[sic]," and "Season of the Witch.

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