

# Folk Chronicles

*Two recent books highlight how the folk rock heyday continues to influence and inspire down through the years. A folk tradition as alive today as it ever was.*

**Brian Hinton** salutes *Rob Young's Electric Eden* and *Jeanette Leech's Season's they Change*

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**Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music** by Rob Young (Faber 2010)

**Seasons they Change: The Story of Acid and Psychedelic Folk** by Jeanette Leech (Jawbone 2010)

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There is something about a great compilation album that can move the tectonic plates of popular music, especially when it gathers up a whole forgotten genre, if put together with love and in obsessive detail, and dressed in an iconic sleeve. The template was Lenny Kaye's *Nuggets*, which resurrected lost US garage bands, and helped invigorate the early 70s pub rock boom, out of which arose punk rock. And that double slice of Elektra vinyl, with informative notes, in turn inspired the likes of Bam Caruso's *Rubble* series – an archaeological dig into English psych – and a generation later the Amorphous Androgynous – an offshoot of electronic dance act The Future Sound of London – remixing and sequencing a mix of heavy sounds and the wilder reaches of acoustic music from the late 60s.

But the first resurfacing of the latter strain of hippie self-expression, touched by psychedelic alchemy, now generally known as “acid-folk”, was a 2004 CD compilation from reissue specialists Sanctuary. *Gather in the Mushrooms* came with an iconic painted sleeve of a fey long-haired couple, the girl in a floor length dress patterned with hearts and holding a lute, the two set in a landscape of flowers, tendrils, and the dove of peace. Taking up the hint of drug soaked debauchery in its title, the CD was subbed *The British Acid Folk Underground 1968-1974*, gathered tracks by lost bands with iconic names like Comus, Heron, Fresh Maggots, Spirogyra (not the slick jazz rockers) and Trader Horne, plus solo troubadours like Vashti Bunyan, Andy Roberts and Sandy Denny.

Inside was a photograph of Vashti playing violin standing on a rocky shore, and detailed notes on each track by Bob Stanley, whose band St Etienne has had a

long creative engagement with lost sounds of the past. He carefully distinguishes the music here from the finger-in-the-ear bellowing of the likes of Ewan MacColl, describing a “wild array” of bands like Pentangle, Fairport Convention, and Trees who led the way into “folk, but not as anyone knew it”. Bob adopts the name “acid folk” – not much used at the time – to point up the links with other outcrops of psychedelia, from Noggin the Nog to the early Pink Floyd. “This is truly folk art, part of a lost English landscape, beautiful, mystical, mysterious music”. He even references totally obscure bands like Stone Angel and Oberon – their privately pressed albums known only to a fanatical few collectors at this point – who “today sound as distant and mysterious as the field recordings of Alan Lomax”. And just about as low fi, it could be added. But *Gather in the Mushrooms* – which restricts itself to more mainstream recordings – was a bolt from the blue at the time, and taking its opening track from the soundtrack to the *Wicker Man* was a masterstroke, setting the disc from the start in a mysterious nether world of pagan mysteries.

The thought that Comus could reform and play the Borderline, that a member of Forest should now be recording with his son, or that songs by the exaggeratedly obscure Bill Fay should now be forming the climax of concerts by Devendra Banhart, or Alison from Mellow Candle could re-emerge in middle age to sing with kids in the Owl Service, was like some kind of weird dream. To see Vashti Bunyan in 2011 float her delicate melodies over the night air of the *Green Man* Festival, or bring its sublime subtleties to a Brighton church – with a young and fully tuned-in band – was literally beyond the possible, given the extreme rarity of her debut album, and her own total disappearance from the music scene. The idea that anyone would ever write a serious book-length survey was about as unlikely as the literal existence today of the landscapes and legends that such music sought to evoke.

And now here are two, published within months of each other.

