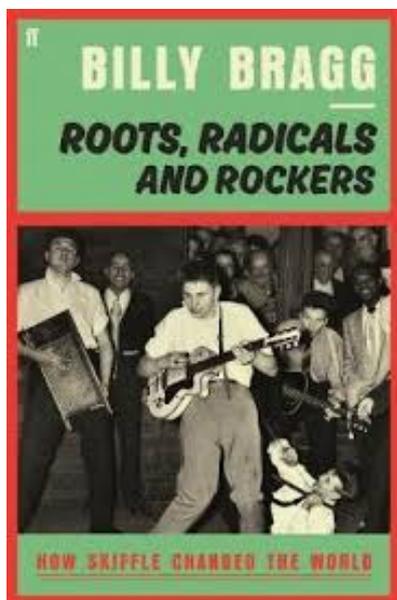


# Review: Billy Bragg *Roots, Radicals and Rockers - How Skiffle Changed the World*

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Billy Bragg *Roots, Radicals and Rockers - How Skiffle Changed the World*, Faber 2017, £20.00

From the celebratory excitement of Ska in the newly independent Jamaica, to the experimental Psychedelic rock of the American 1960s, music often reflects so much of the society from which it is created.

Billy Bragg's own musical work brought the pro-union and anti-Thatcherite politics of the 1980s to many, including myself. Who better then to write the history of a genre which revolutionised British music and reflected the changing society in 1950s post-war Britain. This new genre called 'skiffle', played on guitars, washboards and broom-handle basses, was like nothing heard before in Britain and would have a lasting effect. Even if it has, until now, been largely forgotten by history.

Bragg tracks the development of skiffle music in the 1950s as a new genera-

tion of young people rejected the culture of their parents and instead forged their own. 'Skiffle was the music *for* teenagers *by* teenagers'.

In his comprehensive 400-page history of skiffle music, Bragg traces the origins of this revolutionary movement from its roots in American jazz and blues.

## New Orleans

Skiffle's source lies in a British revival of traditional jazz at the start of the 1950s. Jazz bands in Britain were looking to Houston and New Orleans for its unique sound and repertoire. Jazz music was living and exciting, it astonished young British people who had only the 'bland' music of their parents.

Bragg explains that 'before commerce made ownership the key transactional interest of creativity', songs would be passed from performer to performer through word of mouth. Meaning through each transaction the songs would be moulded and 'bore the fingerprints of everyone who ever sang them'.

With no local equivalent to American jazz, young fans in Britain, who could only hear jazz and blues on rare records, were forced to pick up instruments and try to understand the music through emulating it. Quickly a local trad jazz scene developed through clubs as bands were established, each trying to match that pure New Orleans sound. Suddenly music fans could hear this exotic genre live and compare styles and discuss its rich history.

It is from this pool of musicians that skiffle would emerge. Through the history of the British revivalist jazz scene, Bragg

introduces the reader to key figures in the soon to be skiffle genre.

## Birth of skiffle

The first skiffle tracks to be released on records appeared in early 1955, on two records recorded by trad jazz bands within two weeks of each other.

In both cases the fact that the skiffle tracks were recorded was more accidental than planned. For 'Ken Doyler's Jazzmen' it was an attempt to salvage something from a failed recording session, and in the case of the 'Chris Barber Jazz Band' it was simply a lack of 'pure' jazz material. Both these bands were popular New Orleans style British Jazz bands who helped spearhead the jazz revival. They were used to playing 'breakdown sets' during intervals of their jazz gigs.

These breakdown sets consisted of a much smaller band and marked a 'revolutionary moment in British popular music, when the guitar, for so long stuck at the back of the bandstand... comes to the front and takes control.' Guitars were the star of these breakdown sets not the brass section, as they played the blues.

By May of 1955 the first stand alone skiffle record was recorded by four members of the Chris Barber Jazz Band under the new name the Lonnie Donegan Skiffle Group. They played songs from American musicians like Lead Belly, Big Bill Broonzy and Woody Guthrie. The birth of skiffle 'was more a series of cock-ups and coincidences than anything else'.

## Youth Revolt

Bragg writes that the audiences at the first skiffle clubs were 'mostly between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four'. Ron Gould a washboard player in a skiffle group claimed 'the attraction of skiffle

was that it represented a rebellion against your parents and what they stood for. There was rock 'n' roll, but you couldn't hear much of that... you could hear skiffle because it was being played in the street. It was anti-commercial. We're going to play our music and sod all the rest. Skiffles were often heard to say that 'I've got more in common with a black cotton picker than I have with my dad.'

Many in the traditional jazz scene from which skiffle was born, were irritated by what they perceived as the 'dubious effect' skiffle was having on the young jazz fans. One trad jazz writer condemned the 'utterly stupid antics of fans and fan-nies who cavort and prance like inmates of a mental home during music far beyond their comprehension.'

Skiffle was vilified and resisted by both the trad jazz scene and, of course, the BBC. The BBC was the 'prime provider of popular culture in the UK'. For the BBC directors, even jazz was considered too vulgar and impolite, never mind skiffle.

Despite the misgiving of both jazz and mainstream British society, skiffle emerged as a large underground sub-culture. No doubt helped by the fact that around the same time working class teenagers increased their 'purchasing power'. More importantly though, skiffle was a 'do it yourself' music. It rose from the jazz culture of picking up an instrument and learning it through practice but also relied on cheap and often homemade instruments. Skiffle was not perfected in music schools but in the hands of young working class people.

While commercially skiffle reached its height in the mid-50s with the success of the band led by Lonnie Donegan, Bragg contends that if you scrape the surface one would discover a booming grassroots scene, as people experimented with

their homemade instruments. 'It is estimated that there were between 30,000 and 50,000 active skiffle bands at the height of the craze in 1957.' Included in this vast number was the Quarrymen Skiffle Group, a Liverpudlian band consisting of a sixteen-year-old John Lennon, fifteen-year-old Paul McCartney and a fourteen-year-old George Harrison. Mick Jagger started playing skiffle with friends claiming 'people tend to forget how enormous that was. I was in loads of skiffle groups.' Van Morrison too played skiffle and admits that 'without Donegan I don't know how I would have started.'

Eventually skiffle would be eclipsed by Rock 'n' Roll, R&B and Folk music. Bragg insists that although the style was short-lived it has a long-term legacy. Before the explosion of Rock 'n' Roll, skiffle offered a cheap alternative to teenagers in post-war Britain. Skiffle put guitars in the hands of thousands of musicians and acted as a 'boot camp for the British Invasion' that would see bands like Beatles,

the Rolling Stones, and the Kinks storm both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s.

The interesting development of new musical trends within society is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. How, for instance, does an old 1930s New Orleans song 'Rock Island Line' travel America and eventually cross the Atlantic to influence a generation of young people trying to 'escape the drab world of post-war austerity' Britain? The strongest point of Bragg's book is how he examines the interplaying economic, social and cultural factors that pushed the development of skiffle forward. War, generational divide, multicultural neighbourhoods and many other factors, all play a role in the creation of the skiffle genre and are captured brilliantly in the book.

This book is a great piece of history, which deals in depth with a working-class youth movement which in its attempt to forge a culture for themselves had a lasting impact on pop culture today.