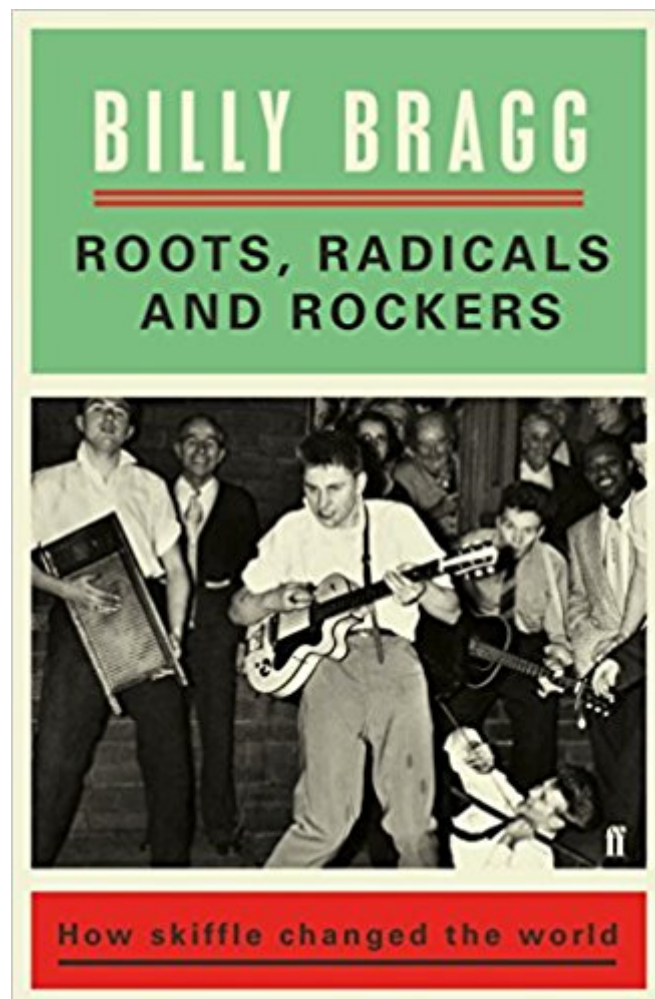




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# Roots, Radicals And Rockers: How Skiffle Changed The World



## Synopsis

"Nothing short of masterly."- The Wall Street Journal"A remarkable history of skiffle.... Bragg impresses throughout with engaging prose and painstaking research. He further enlivens the text with personal insights and witty asides that give the material a unique cast few professional writers would dare.... an accomplished work." ÂÂ Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)"Superb account of the politically aware, working-class skiffle craze of the 1950s.... Writing with an expert practitioner's appreciation for music, Bragg tells the story of British rock-'n'-roll's forerunner with verve and great intelligence." ÂÂ Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)Skiffle - a "do-it-yourself music craze with American jazz, blues, folk, and roots influences - is a story of jazz pilgrims and blues blowers, Teddy Boys and beatnik girls, coffee-bar bohemians and refugees from the McCarthyite witch hunts. Skiffle is reason the guitar came to the forefront of music in the UK and led directly to the British Invasion of the US charts in the 1960s. Emerging from the trad-jazz clubs of the early '50s, skiffle was adopted by the first generation of British "teenagers" ÂÂ working class kids who grew up during the dreary, post-war rationing years. Before Skiffle, the pop culture was dominated by crooners and mediated by a stuffy BBC. Lonnie Donegan hit the charts in 1956 with a version of Lead Belly's "Rock Island Line" and soon sales of guitars rocketed from 5,000 to 250,000 a year. Like punk rock that would flourish two decades later, skiffle was home grown: all you needed were three guitar chords and you could form a group, with mates playing tea-chest bass and washboard as a rhythm section. ROOTS, RADICALS AND ROCKERS is the first book to explore the Skiffle phenomenon in depth ÂÂ Billy Bragg's meticulously researched and joyous account shows how Skiffle sparked a revolution that shaped pop music as we have come to know it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In his passionate history *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, Billy Bragg — a punker-turned-folkie musician of some 40 years' tenure — has written a thorough, compelling survey of a transitional genre that burned briefly but brightly in the U.K. in the latter 1950s."— *The Dallas Morning News* "A first-rate work of history."— *Financial Times* "Nothing short of masterly."— *The Wall Street Journal* "*Roots, Radicals and Rockers* does a good job of demonstrating the working class's potential to influence culture."— *In These Times* "A thorough, compelling survey of a transitional genre that burned briefly but brightly in the U.K. in the latter 1950s."— *The Dallas Morning News* "A fascinating read."— *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* "Best known as a musician with a notably political bent, Billy Bragg is also a talented writer.... *Roots, Radicals, and Rockers* [is a] a deeply researched yet lively look at the musical craze that hit England in the mid-1950s."— *The Boston Globe* "Nothing short of masterly. It would be hard to cite another historical book of such depth, quality and reasoned analysis by a working, nonacademic musician." — *The Wall Street Journal* "Superb account, by British folk-punker Bragg (*A Lover Sings: Selected Lyrics*, 2016, etc.), of the politically aware, working-class skiffle craze of the 1950s. The so-called British Invasion of the 1960s was a repurposing of American music, a mix of blues, jazz, and country, that young people on the other side of the pond were hearing over American Armed Forces Radio and on records brought by Yankee ships. Yet there was a forgotten intermediary: skiffle. Born of old-school British takes on jazz, it added a rebellious racket, with a strong rhythm section built on bass, drums, and often washboard; throw thunderous guitars into the mix in the place of trombones and clarinets, and you have a homegrown recasting of an alien art form, one populated by unsung heroes and forgotten moments. Bragg finds skiffle on what he calls the "dead ground of British pop culture," and he aims to sing of those heroes and to recall their glories — and glories they were, marking a movement that anticipated punk in its insistence on DIY performances hampered largely by a lack of outlets for recorded music. The author traces skiffle to the early '50s, giving pride of place to Lonnie Donegan, a player whose recording of the old Lead Belly song "Rock Island Line" covered at about the same time by Elvis Presley in the U.S. — was a kind of declaration of skiffle's intent. It took some time for the moment to get going; as Bragg writes, "David Whitfield and Mantovani could sleep soundly in their beds," at least for a little while, until skiffle overwhelmed their easy-listening ways. But when it did, there was little to stop the likes of Alexis Korner and the Ghouls from raising a ruckus — and after them not just the Beatles, famously founded on skiffle, but also the Rolling

Stones, whose founders cut their teeth on the skiffle sound. Writing with an expert practitioner's appreciation for music, Bragg tells the story of British rock-'n'-roll's forerunner with verve and great intelligence." illustrations throughout

— Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)"In his first book, musician, left-wing activist, and sonic archivist Bragg has crafted a remarkable history of skiffle, a particularly British music genre. Initiated by amateur players obsessed with the blues, jazz, and folk, skiffle lured teenagers obsessed with all things American and eager to dance away post-WWII conformity and deprivation. With a DIY ethos and three-chord tunes, skiffle inspired a generation of British lads to pick up guitars, including among them Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, Jimmy Page, and a young extraterrestrial who would later take the name "David Bowie." Roughly a cross between folk and R&B, skiffle quickly succumbed to the other two genres and faded from the charts, even as its former disciples led the British Invasion. Bragg impresses throughout with engaging prose and painstaking research. He further enlivens the text with personal insights and witty asides that give the material a unique cast few professional writers would dare. The introduction of dozens of new figures in the last third of the book diffuses the narrative but that's a minor demerit to an accomplished work. Ending with a flourish, Bragg convincingly argues for the emotional connection between skiffle and punk rock, something Bragg would know about better than most."

(July) — Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

"The story of the first DIY revolution: a perfect mix of author and subject" - Jon Savage (Jon Savage)

It all makes sense now! Thank you Billy Bragg. I now understand. I now have the context and the background to comprehend what it meant when John Lennon said, "We started as a skiffle group." All my life I have loved the Beatles and the music brought to our shores by The British Invasion. Skiffle and Lonnie Donegan were references to ghosts I had but vague impressions of. Now I have the context and the foundation for understanding what led up to the birth of Rock and Roll and The Beatles. How did the guitar get to the front of the band? How did folk, blues, country, jazz, and traditional music become the rock and roll and popular music we know today? Skiffle!!!! Thank you, Billy for laying out the entire social, cultural and musical history that led to birth of Rock and Roll. Compelling and well-written; this is a musical history lesson worth digesting. This book is fascinating and I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

Amazingly well researched. You'll learn early on what Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee had to do

with the development of Skiffle music. I'd suggest that before you start the book, that you hunt down the 4 CD set "Rock 'n' Skiffle" which contains most of the music referenced in the book. Hearing the music really brings the narrative to life. I only hope that someone does a similar book on the Jug Band revival that was taking place in the US at about the same time.

Great and quick service.. highly recommend.

This is a terrific book. Billy Bragg is immensely knowledgeable about the history of Skiffle and has done some meticulous research and what's more he can really write. *Roots, Radicals and Rockers* is a detailed history of Skiffle, that uniquely British phenomenon which was the precursor to so much of the great British music which followed. For example, Bragg gives the full context of George Harrison's famous line "No Lead Belly, no Beatles." What Harrison actually said was, "If there was no Lead Belly, there would have been no Lonnie Donegan; no Lonnie Donegan, no Beatles. Therefore no Lead Belly, no Beatles." Well, quite. This is a thorough account of the origins, development and impact of Skiffle, reaching right back to early Blues, Jazz and Ragtime. Bragg certainly hasn't skimmed the surface here because there is a wealth of detail, anecdote and illustration, all of which I found extremely interesting. He also shows a real cultural and political awareness of the context of the music on both sides of the Atlantic, and there's real social history here, too. The style is very readable and enjoyable. This little quote, which I liked a lot, is a good example: "Before commerce made ownership the key transactional interest of creativity, songs passed through culture by word of mouth and bore the fingerprints of everyone who ever sang them." It's a real pleasure to read. I have admired and enjoyed Billy Bragg's music and his work in other fields for a long time now. Here, he has shown that he can also produce a fascinating book of real scholarship which is also a pleasure to read. Don't miss this if you have any interest in the history of popular music; it's a gem and very warmly recommended. (I received an ARC via Netgalley.)

Popular music is a house of many mansions. Consider not only the main rooms of jazz, blues, country, folk, hip hop, electronic, easy listening, Latin, R & B and soul, rock and roll, and pop but also all the myriad sub-divisions, ranging from rockabilly to reggaestep, from lounge to liquid funk, and salsa to shoegaze. All forms of music have their ardent champions and skiffle has found its most eloquent advocate in Billy Bragg whose *Roots, Radicals and Rockers* is subtitled *How*

Skiffle Changed the World

At first this seems a vain boast, given that skiffle is often derided as a moribund sub-set of an entire category - folk music - which is all too frequently characterized as terminally uncool. Bragg himself concedes that skiffle exists "in the dead ground of British pop culture, between the end of the war and the rise of the Beatles", having left "little tangible evidence" of its relatively brief period of popularity, so that in the popular consciousness it registers, if at all, as a footnote to the formation of the Beatles (the original Quarrymen being a skiffle group) and in the recordings of Lonnie Donegan who sold out in making novelty songs like "My Old Man" as a Dustman just as clearly (but much less profitably) as Elvis did when he started making films. The modern British teenager was certainly shaped by more profound forces than skiffle including the baby boom, full employment and the end of National Service but when Bragg talks about skiffle changing the world he's really thinking more about its musical legacy and in the book's last chapter "The British Are Coming" he makes a convincing case for the argument that skiffle was boot camp for the British Invasion by pointing to the origins in skiffle of John Lennon, Alan Price, Paul Jones, Wayne Fontana, Dave Clark, Bill Wyman, Gerry Marsden, Graham Nash, Roger Daltrey, Ronnie Wood, Rod Stewart, Marc Bolan, Ian Hunter, Jack Bruce, Joe Cocker, Jimmy Page and a host of other seminal figures in the UK pop and rock scene of the 1960s and beyond. An interesting connection not mentioned by Bragg and further proof of skiffle's pervasive influence is that John Howlett, the co-writer of *Crusaders*, which eventually became the radical 1968 British feature film *If I Stay* about revolution in a private school, had partly expressed his own rebellious spirits by belonging to a skiffle group when he was as a student at Tonbridge School. It is clear that what appeals to Bragg is not just the music but its practitioners' attitude and the way in which skiffle was produced: "the first music for teenagers by teenagers in our cultural history".

Not surprisingly then, Bragg sees punk as the spiritual heir of skiffle: music produced at a time of austerity, which rejected the overproduced confections of the then mainstream and comprised a rough-and-ready three-chord DIY form of expression which was raucous, energetic, empowering and authentic. It is not possible to read this highly entertaining and informative book without being swept away by Bragg's enthusiasm. He deserves high praise for this exercise in musical archaeology which successfully rescues skiffle from near oblivion and belatedly gives it its

due.

The book "Roots, Radicals and Rockers, How Skiffle Changed the World" is very well written and informative. Billy Bragg enjoys his topic very much, and is anecdotal and thorough in his research. He makes it fun to read.

The rocker can really write. This is a solid history of a seldom-discussed period. And Mr. Bragg has done his research, and then some. One of the season's better books.

It is a good history of pre-Beatles folk/rock and roll in England.

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