

The Electric Muse Revisited — elemental music for a modern world

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Music



A previously unheard 1967 demo of the late Sandy Denny's *Who Knows Where the Time Goes* is one of the highlights of this compilation

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The Electric Muse Revisited: The Story of Folk into Rock and Beyond

★★★★★

In 1975 four music writers put together a book and an accompanying four-disc album that told the story of folk, that most ancient and venerable of genres, colliding with the morally dubious world of rock. Robin Denselow, Karl Dallas, Robert Shelton and Dave Laing's *The Electric Muse* celebrated the earthiness, romance and rugged vitality of a genre that could include a traditional singer like the Irish Traveller Margaret Barry, alongside a *Top of the Pops*-bothering phenomenon like Steeleye Span. Folk rock began in the early 1960s, peaked in about 1970 as it became the soundtrack to a back-to-the-land movement replete with earthenware mugs and Laura Ashley smock dresses, and petered out by the mid-1970s as fashions changed and punk slouched into view. *The Electric Muse* was not so much a celebration of folk rock, then, as a eulogy to it.

It turned out that folk rock was more enduring than expected. Its evergreen melodies and timeless tales of love, death and infidelity could be adapted to all kinds of styles without disintegrating in the process. That has inspired Denselow to put together, a mere 46 years later, *The Electric Muse Revisited*. It is good timing. This box set is suited to a summer where so many of us will be forging a deeper connection with the British landscape, whether we like it or not.

It begins with three songs by Shirley Collins, the Sussex queen of all things rustic, whose career is testament to the way folk singers are not withered by age but strengthened by it. The first is *Sweet Greens & Blues*, an unearthed 1964 recording of a pretty ode to the simple life. The second is *Gilderoy*, a tale of a Scottish outlaw that Collins made with her medieval instruments-playing sister Dolly in 1978, shortly before developing the dysphonia that stopped her singing for the next 26 years. Then comes *Crowlink*, a mysterious, drone-like tribute to the South Downs that Collins recorded in 2020, aged 84. Her voice captures the realities of an innocent girl, an experienced woman and a reflective old lady, making the listening experience deeply affecting.

Highlights elsewhere include a previously unheard 1967 demo of the late Sandy Denny's *Who Knows Where the Time Goes?*, which is simply beauty — stark and timeless. Lavinia Blackwall, formerly of the psychedelic folkies Trembling Bells, offers a tribute to Denny on a soaring rendition of *A Sailor's Life*, while June

Tabor and the Oysterband's Susie Clelland, a tale of a Scottish girl whose father takes an extreme approach to stopping her from marrying an Englishman (he burns her at the stake) sounds like it should have been a huge radio hit.

Electric Muse Revisited also demonstrates just how weird so many folk songs are. Olivia Chaney, a favourite of Robert Plant's who performs here as Offa Rex, her collaboration with the American band the Decemberists, wraps her elegant tones around Willie O' Winsbury. It's the story of a king who plans to hang the youth of the title for getting his daughter pregnant, but when the king meets Willie he's so struck by his beauty that he falls in love with him as well. The album ends with *The Tan Yard Side*, a collaboration between the gypsy ballad revivalist Sam Lee, the London singer Lisa Knapp . . . and a nightingale. This is elemental music for a modern world, and delightful with it. (*Good Deeds*)