Introduction

For her first birthday, my daughter Lila received a book of nursery rhymes. On its cover a moon smiles down upon an array of memorable characters: three blind mice, a cat playing a fiddle, cutlery eloping with crockery, an accident-prone egg. Stars shine and the suggestion is that these short poems will sooth your baby to sleep. A pleasant fiction. Having exhausted the book, I turned to the foreword by the children's author Mary Ann Hoberman and was struck by its echoes of folkloric thinking. She describes these songs and verses as 'treasures of the English language . . . handed down through the generations'; reading them aloud, we are 'bestowing a precious heritage' in a world where 'connections to our common past [are] disappearing'.[1] Collectors of folk music would be familiar with this way of understanding tradition: something that needs to be kept alive through creation of small links in a chain stretching back into the storm of history, coupling the present with the past before it's lost forever. Folk song is often thought about in this way as a storehouse of obscure treasures handed down from person to person within a cultural environment becoming ever more saturated by the ersatz delights and detritus of globalized mass consumption. It offers a source of collective memory haunted by the extraordinary and unfathomable, the notorious and quotidian. Its melodies appear to connect us with our ancestors and the common (wo)man, with patterns of labour, ritual, pleasure, and play sunk deep into the landscapes we inhabit. But what makes this music *folk* music?

Defining folk music has proved an extremely difficult thing to do. It took until 1954, for example, for the International Folk Music Council (IFMC) to agree on the following:

> Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.
>
> The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and

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has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.

The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character.[2]

There are several problems with this definition. First, it stresses 'oral' and 'unwritten', whereas we know that promiscuous migrations between print and orality have occurred for centuries. The oral and written are not antitheses. What folk song collectors would later identify 'as the products of an unmediated oral tradition', Adam Fox writes, 'turns out to derive from the print culture of the early modern period' – an era in which 'no one lived beyond the reach of the written and printed word'.[3] Moreover, what are we to make of published collections or guitar tablature of traditional songs: do these then no longer qualify as folk music? And what about recordings? Second, we are told nothing whatsoever about time. The definition is strikingly ahistorical, placing emphasis not on a time-honoured repertory or genre of music, but rather on a continual *process* of alteration by a community, the scale of which is unclear. There's no real indication of how long it takes to generate 'folk' music from different origins and no mention of how old the 'surviving' forms are. Is this evolutionary process still thriving to this day, or has it produced traditions that no longer evolve and are now extinct? Third, it's quixotic at best to believe that any tradition originating in the West is entirely 'uninfluenced by popular and art music' (a claim undercut by the subsequent admission that work by art music composers has been 'absorbed' elsewhere). As Oskar Cox Jensen points out, English ballad hawkers were often remarkably itinerant and their repertoires 'above all else mixed'.[4] Use of the term *popular* here is thus rather dubious, suggesting as it does a misleading binary between music 'of the people' (*folk*) and music 'for the people' (*popular*). The definition, in short, is constructed on a veiled anti-capitalist underpinning – one that has been central to the idea and appeal of the folk.

This definition bears the hallmarks of a specific era, and one song collector in particular. In 1907, Cecil J. Sharp claimed in *English-Folk Song: Some Conclusions* that 'folk-song has not been made by the one but evolved by the many' according to 'the three principles of *continuity*, *variation*, and *selection*'.[5] It is no coincidence that the first paragraph of the IFMC definition is a precise restatement of his theory: Sharp's close associate and literary executor Maud Karpeles not only served on the commission that drafted it, but also offered the provisional definition for

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a plenary discussion the previous year.[6] The idea that folk music had 'evolved', however, was nothing more than conjecture – a tenuous metaphor employed in the service of Sharp's politically motivated project to establish that folk and popular musics were 'two distinct species', the former 'a communal and racial product' and hence the true cornerstone of nationalistic education.[7] Sharp's hypothesis is a sign not only of his Fabian sympathies, but also of a pervasive apprehension about the effects of urbanized mass society and an intellectual climate immersed in evolutionary thinking on account of writers such as Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and the anthropologist E. B. Tylor. The IFMC definition contains traces of this Victorian outlook both in Sharp's choice of language and the reference to 'rudimentary beginnings'. If we turn to Hubert Parry's 1896 book *The Evolution of the Art of Music*, for instance, folk music is situated chronologically as a fulcrum between 'music in the rough, in animals, in savages' and 'incipient harmony' – evidence of a teleological vision in which the apex of global development is European art music.[8] Such historiographical ideas, like the IFMC definition, carried an undertone of social reproach: as 'the spontaneous utterances of the musical impulse of the people', folk music differed emphatically from the 'vulgarised and weakened portions of the music of the leisured classes'.[9]

What's really going on in these definitions is a habit of opposition in which folk music is situated as a paradigm of authenticity in contrast to something else tainted with commerce, frivolity, or bourgeois individualism. As Richard Middleton notes, 'to define either "folk" or "popular" music is inevitably to offer at least a partial definition of the other'.[10] Folk music, in other words, has always tended to be defined *relationally*. The term conveys a sense not simply of *the people*, but a conception of the people as the humble, labouring, rural population – aging and isolated inhabitants of country hinterlands juxtaposed with the seething, avaricious, and unruly mob of the metropolis. It is this idea of the folk that guides the widespread assumption that their music exists as a counterpoint to the reign of the commodity. To quote Parry's inaugural address to the Folk-Song Society in 1898, folk music apparently 'grew in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves so assiduously to the making of quick returns'.[11] What we find here is not a careful examination of historical or current musical practices among the working class, but (as Simon Frith puts it) 'a nostalgia for how they might have been'.[12] The appeal being made through the term *folk* is to a set of values revolving around community – values that would in turn come to shape the countercultural discourse of rock. In Frith's words, 'the description of folk creation (active,

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collective, honest) was, in fact, an idealised response to the experience of mass consumption (fragmented, passive, alienating)'.[13] It is no accident that interest in folk music arrives hand-in-hand with industrial modernity in Britain: it offered a reformist antidote to the havoc of social transformation and what Parry depicts with Miltonian zeal as 'unhealthy regions' rife with 'snippets of musical slang'.[14] As I've argued elsewhere, interest in the folk is hence always political – part of an ongoing debate over the identity and scope of 'the people'.[15]

Indeed, it is at this point that we can turn to Theodor Adorno – not usually known for his approval of popular culture – to explain an enduring anti-capitalist fascination with the folk. Reflecting on his and Max Horkheimer's now ubiquitous term 'culture industry' some twenty years after *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published, Adorno stresses that this coinage had been employed to replace 'mass culture' in their early drafts so as explicitly to refute the idea

> that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above.[16]

What we find here is a characteristic form of Marxist nostalgia integral to Adorno's aesthetics: prior to the gloomy, mechanistic reign of mass-market capitalism, there existed an authentic and (comparatively) autonomous popular sphere arising from the people themselves. As Adorno puts it: 'the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as the social control was not yet total'.[17] Whereas the culture industry 'transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms', pre-industrial forms circulating in a marketplace nevertheless 'sought after profit only indirectly', raising 'a protest against the petrified relations' under which people lived.[18] In folkloric thinking, these old and mythical forms of art are delightfully unruly, disobedient, even defiant – offering the faint susurration of utopian possibility and the model for a culture of opposition. The same theme can be found in a passage Walter Benjamin notes down from Jules Michelet's

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book *Le Peuple* in which he expresses regret that 'worker-poets' are now 'sacrificing whatever folk originality they might have' by dressing up in suits and gloves, 'thus losing the superiority that strong hands and powerful arms give to the people when they know how to use them'.[19] This leitmotif tends always to accompany mention of the folk, suggesting that their appeal in the modern world has chiefly been as a vehicle of critique – a way of identifying alternative ways of being.

A prime example of this distinctive form of utopian desire grounded in nostalgia can be found in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's 1909 *Essays in National Idealism*. In it, Coomaraswamy grants art a central role in anti-colonialist opposition to what he portrays as India's 'life and death struggle with an alien bureaucracy'.[20] This struggle, he affirms, 'is much more than a political conflict': it is, rather like Frantz Fanon would argue fifty years later, 'a struggle for spiritual and mental freedom from domination'.[21] How was this freedom to be achieved? Through national awakening and self-realization inspired 'by artists and by poets, not by traders and politicians'.[22] Indeed, he continues, 'I believe that it is not through politics that revolutions are made, and that National Unity needs a deeper foundation than the perception of political wrongs' – an ideology that foreshadowed key elements of European fascism.[23] Coomaraswamy looks back to William Morris for his ideals, noting that the 'vigour and vitality' of such work emerged from a conscious attempt to 'recover the thread of a lost tradition and carry it on'.[24] Towards the end of the book, Coomaraswamy draws on another contemporaneous English socialist: Cecil Sharp. In fact, the kind of spiritual revitalization Coomaraswamy is encouraging shares far more with Sharp's Fabianism than Morris's Marxism: in Indian music, he argues, 'change must be organic, not sudden . . . it must be an evolution in accordance with the bent of the national genius'.[25] Quoting Sharp, he stresses the need for folk songs (and those embodying 'love of the land') to be taught orally in elementary schools as a form of nationalistic education in order to create 'good Indian citizens'.[26] With the exception of his belief in the 'fundamental unity' of music across distinctions of folk and art, Coomaraswamy embraces Sharp's ideas unreservedly, berating India for allowing neglect of 'the one thing vital, that is the music living in the hearts of peasants, uneducated and illiterate – but more truly Indian than their "educated" "superiors"'.[27] What's particularly striking here is that we find Sharp's chauvinistic form of English nationalism (in which he bemoans the rise of cosmopolitanism) being used strategically in the service of Indian resistance to English colonialism and cultural imperialism. In both

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instances, folk music is called upon as a tool to cultivate kinship and resist foreign influence. It is positioned as an art form that springs organically from the humble, ordinary inhabitants of the homeland and is diluted or washed away by the shifting currents of modernity, globalization, and intercultural contact.

We might, then, think of folk music very simply as music that has been framed (and thus received) in a particular way. The terms *folk music* and *folk song* are in truth devices that have been used to collate, animate, and make sense of a diverse range of material. As frames, they belong above all to those who collect and theorize, write and curate. To borrow Michel de Certeau's words, they are examples of an attempt by song collectors and folklorists to 'express what is *other*' that nevertheless 'remains *their* discourse and the mirror of their own labors'.[28] This particular vocabulary emerges around the same time as the seminal work of French painter Édouard Manet, including *The Spanish Singer* and *The Old Musician*. This latter canvas should interest us for a number of reasons. It is among Manet's earliest paintings, inaugurating a body of work widely accepted as a pivotal moment in the history of art. As T. J. Clark writes, the course that painting begins to take around this time 'can be described as a kind of scepticism, or at least unsureness, as to the nature of representation' – a growing awareness that 'things and pictures do not add up'.[29] Debates about the folk are inseparable from this modern world of uncertainty and displacement. Manet's *The Old Musician* shows us an epoch struggling with its own fragmentation: a bucolic scene rendered jarring and unreal, populated by marginal figures personifying urban decay and isolation (from street urchins and the Gypsy violinist to a cloaked and behatted figure on the right, a spectral return from his earlier work *The Absinthe Drinker*). Folk music performs a similar kind of representational act – though one that, instead of revelling in the dark Parisian *demimonde* of Charles Baudelaire, attempts to rescue and restore a lost unity. Such dreams, of course, reveal far more about the plagues and desires of modernity than they do about the pasts they envision. In folkloric hands, history is always a precious talisman for the future.

In exploring folk music, however, our task is not only to confront the troubled contours of its past, but also to analyse its contemporary appeal in an unfinished series of revivals. In so doing, we might better understand what Kay Kaufman Shelemay describes as 'music's generative role in social processes' – the multitude of ways in which music functions to create, galvanize, and sustain communities of people.[30] Folk music has given birth to a vast number of social groupings and continues to inspire new

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communities in the age of surveillance capitalism.[31] A prime example would be the 'ShantyTok' trend. Late in 2020, a young Scottish postman by the name of Nathan Evans posted a video of himself singing an old whaling ballad known as 'The Wellerman' on TikTok. The song soon went viral as millions of people listened and offered their own embellishments. News stories proliferated, including a *Guardian* article claiming that such songs were 'at least 600 years old'.[32] A little research reveals that the song could be no older than the Weller brothers to whom it refers – English merchant traders who founded a commercial whaling station in New Zealand during the 1830s. Rather than being a timeless product of cultural evolution, the song was intimately related to colonial capitalism and had, in fact, been published in a 1973 compendium entitled *New Zealand Folksongs: Song of a Young Country*.[33] What mattered, however, were not details of the song's history, but the *sense* of history and temporal distance it carried – one indebted to the imagination and the specifics of our modern world. The 2021 revival was closely bound up with social conditions experienced during the Covid-19 lockdowns as people across the globe were forced to confront death, confinement, monotony, dwindling supplies, and a lack of communal activity. The song and the medium afforded not only active participation, but also access to a fading realm of seaborne adventure and rugged outdoor labour, and in consequence a social experience of solidarity and shared, communal endeavour. Shelemay encourages us to consider how such groupings might be unified through 'descent' (collective identity), 'dissent' (opposition), and 'affinity' (shared preference). We can find folk musical communities existing across this spectrum – from the Fisk Jubilee Singers and klezmer ensembles (*descent*) through the Highlander Folk School and Civil Rights movement (*opposition*) to Newport Folk Festival and labels such as Topic Records (*affinity*). Folk music, in other words, is inseparable from the social collectivities it has brought to life.

As the essays in this *Cambridge Companion* demonstrate, folk music has endured in spite of – or rather owing to – such elusiveness and imaginative investment. As Middleton puts it, if such terms are suspect 'they are not necessarily *empty*'.[34] In response, this volume brings together repertoires, artists, collectors, and regions in a revisionist attempt to understand folk music from a critical and diverse standpoint. **Part I** opens the book by offering different perspectives on folk music that map the field and provide ways to begin thinking about its history and meaning. In Chapter 1, I show when and how the term 'folk music' entered Anglophone discourse, arguing that it is, above all, an *idea* that has conditioned our reception of culture

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and the past. In Chapter 2, Jeff Todd Titon provides an authoritative survey of the field's history focusing on tools and methodology, tracing a turn from text-based understandings towards anthropology. In Chapter 3, Timothy Hampton draws attention to how media such as the LP record in conjunction with the countercultural spaces of Greenwich Village afforded a new kind of public sphere. In Chapter 4, Brahma Prakash tackles questions of power, meaning, and critique by paying close attention to the democratic undercurrents of contemporary folk performance in South Asia. In Chapter 5, violinist Yale Strom offers a uniquely personal perspective on klezmer and Romani music, recounting unexpected moments of connection and cultural exchange.

Part II then delves into some of the primary elements that, together, have constituted folk music as a recognizable cultural practice – from instruments and texts to movement and melodic structure. In Chapter 6, Joshua Dickson leads us on a journey through the history and practice of Celtic music by following interlaced threads of function, bestowal, structure, variation, and memory. In Chapter 7, Dianne Dugaw spotlights the lyrics to folk songs, uncovering their formulaic patterning as well as recurrent themes of infancy, lost love, disaster, and social marginality. In Chapter 8, Maeve Carey-Kozlark showcases the nature and uses of folk instruments and the convoluted ways in which they have been employed to serve ideals of authenticity. In Chapter 9, Theresa Jill Buckland takes a synoptic approach to folk dance, paganism, and embodied movement, tracing this nexus from its earliest incarnations as a discipline up to the present. In Chapter 10, Jon Boden of the band Bellowhead confronts a pervasive element of professional folk performance that frames reception and yet often escapes notice: spoken introductions.

Part III widens this focus on specific elements to explore a powerful and entangled series of imaginaries that have animated and continue to sustain folk music in our globalized world. In Chapter 11, Katharine Ellis offers a wonderfully informative take on the troubled relationship between those two great inventions of the European nineteenth century: folk music and the nation. In Chapter 12, Erin Johnson-Williams relates this history to the wider context within which it was nested, exploring visions of difference shaped by colonialism that endure to this day. In Chapter 13, Britta Sweers explains the structure of folk revivals with particular reference to folk rock. Such revivals, she points out, bring imaginaries into play that are at once both nostalgic and utopian. In Chapter 14, Helen Phelan joins three of her former doctoral students to illustrate the extent to which traditional music fosters a sense of belonging among migrant communities in Ireland. In

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Chapter 15, Angeline Morrison gives us an exquisite account of what mythopoeic singing means to her and why it is central to reimagining and decolonizing the history of British folk music.

Developing this theme, **Part IV** turns to questions of identity, uncovering how and why folk music has traversed histories of race, gender, class, and political radicalism. In Chapter 16, Katrina Thompson Moore foregrounds marginalized traditions of Black folk music, from their roots in transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage to W. E. B. Du Bois, blues, and hip hop. In Chapter 17, Elizabeth Bennett looks at another neglected presence in folk music history: women collectors. Her discoveries accentuate the need for a feminist re-reading of the archive. In Chapter 18, Mark Steven drills down into the seams of class conflict, manual labour, and solidarity, showing us how songs such as 'Which Side Are You On?' create political subjects. In Chapter 19, Oskar Cox Jensen situates such questions within a longer trajectory by unearthing the ways in which song has been received as a channel of popular vocality. Finally, in Chapter 20, legendary performer Peggy Seeger draws together – in characteristically virtuosic fashion – the themes of this book as a whole through the trio of song, singer, and community.

Notes

1. Mary Ann Hoberman, 'Sharing Nursery Rhymes with Your Baby', 6. In Penny Dann, *The Orchard Book of Nursery Rhymes for Your Baby*. London: Orchard Books, 2010, 6–7.
2. 'Resolutions'. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955): 23.
3. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 411, 19. See also Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
4. Oskar Cox Jensen, *The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 203.
5. Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*. London: Simpkin & Co., Novello & Co., 1907, x, 16.
6. See Maud Karpeles, 'Definition of Folk Music'. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7 (1955): 6–7.
7. Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, x. On this point, see Ross Cole, *The Folk: Music, Modernity, and the Political Imagination*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.
8. C. Hubert H. Parry, *The Evolution of the Art of Music*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896, vii, viii.

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9. Parry, *The Evolution of the Art of Music*, 80.
10. Richard Middleton, 'Editor's introduction to Volume 1'. *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 3–7, 3.
11. C. Hubert H. Parry, 'Inaugural Address'. *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 1 (1899): 1–3, 1, 2.
12. Simon Frith, '"The Magic That Can Set You Free": The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community'. *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159–68, 160. For a corrective, see Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
13. Frith, 'The Magic That Can Set You Free', 160.
14. Parry, 'Inaugural Address', 2, 3.
15. See Ross Cole, 'Notes on Troubling "the Popular"'. *Popular Music* 37 (2018): 392–414 and Cole, *The Folk*.
16. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', trans. Anson G. Rabinbach. *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 12–19, 12. See also Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming. London: Verso, 1997.
17. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', 12.
18. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', 13.
19. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 727. This is a quotation from Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple*. Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, Hachette, Paulin, 1846. On the legacies of this idea in postwar Britain, see Ross Cole, 'Industrial Balladry, Mass Culture, and the Politics of Realism in Cold War Britain'. *Journal of Musicology* 34 (2017): 354–390.
20. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism* (Colombo: Colomo [sic] Apothecaries, 1909), i.
21. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, i. See for example Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963. For context, see also Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 and Nalini Ghuman, *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897–1947*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
22. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, ii.
23. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, ii. See Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
24. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, 42.
25. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, 193. See Cole, *The Folk*, 74–103 and 132–58.
26. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, 193.

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27. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, 195–6. On this theme, see Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019.
28. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 36. See also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, new ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
29. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 10, 12. See also Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism; or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
30. Kay Kaufman Shelemay, 'Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64/2 (2011): 349–90, 351.
31. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books, 2019.
32. 'Not just for drunken sailors: how sea shanties took over TikTok'. *The Guardian*, 13 January 2021. www.theguardian.com/music/2021/jan/13/not-just-for-drunken-sailors-how-sea-shanties-took-over-tiktok.
33. Neil Colquhoun, *New Zealand Folksongs: Song of a Young Country*. Folkestone: Bailey Brothers and Swinfen, 1973.
34. Middleton, 'Editor's introduction', 5.

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