

The Woodbine & Ivy Band The Woodbine & Ivy Band

Folk Police Recordings, FPR004

'Traditional songs recast as country-tinged folk rock with an impressive cast of guest vocalists,' says the press release, before continuing 'one for fans of Joe Boyd's Witchseason Productions and much of the music released on the Harvest, Leader and Transatlantic record labels.' If that sounds like your cup of tea, then you're going to love this, especially as the guest vocalists include singers of the calibre of Jackie Oates, Fay Hield and Jim Causley. The arrangements (and the choice of material) display a strong seventies influence, but the record still sounds contemporary, not simply an exercise in nostalgia. And, while they're not in themselves especially modern, the pedal steel guitar and brass, which feature strongly here, are instruments which you tended not to find in British folk rock of the golden era.

I'm a sucker for a pedal steel in almost any context (and brass for that matter), and I find the way it's used on tracks like 'Spencer the Rover' and 'Poor Murdered Woman' really effective. Those two tracks are among my favourites – in fact, I think Olivia Chaney's singing on the latter may well be the vocal highlight of the album. But it's a tough call. Nancy Wallace's 'The Green Wedding' and Jim Causley's 'Out With My Gun in the Morning' would be not far behind (initially I thought the hint of menace in the instrumental playing on Jim's track didn't really suit the bucolic rusticism of the song, but actually I've found that if I turn the volume up sufficiently these doubts disappear!). I've never been a fan of Elle Osborne's vocal style, but otherwise the quality of singing here is strong throughout, and the arrangements are consistently both inventive and well played. As a final incentive to those of a certain age, it appears that Bill Leader had some involvement in the recording sessions. 'Nuff said. www.folkpolicerecordings.com

Andy Turner

Folk Tale Christy Moore

Sony Music, 88697973042

His voice is one of the most distinctive in any field; those clipped consonants cutting into and breaking up the richness of his vowel sounds. Not that it was always so; those who knew Christy as a folk club regular of the 1960s and early 1970s will remember him sounding quite different from the totally prepared, disciplined performer that we have been hearing for the last two decades or more. Christy is now one of the few folk artists in these islands with a major label contract. Perhaps it is this financial backing that makes this album such a delight to handle and to listen to because there has clearly been a great attention to detail in all aspects of its production.

The songs are really well chosen. Some are re-workings of earlier compositions with Christy updating and improving previous efforts. Choosing items like 'On Morecambe Bay', 'Tiles and Slabs' and 'Haiti' shows that there are still the socio-political concerns that have characterised his choice of repertoire, but these



days the delivery is more likely to show quiet reflection rather than anger and somehow this is more effective. Only people with a deep understanding of traditional song could have come up with 'Farmer Michael Hayes', which he wrote in collaboration with Donal Lunny.

The production in the hands of long-term associate Declan Sinnott is superb, as is the eye-catching booklet design by David Smith. The backing musicians are of the quality of Tim Edey and Gerry O'Connor and, along with Declan, they make a major contribution.

Christy has been one of the seminal figures of Irish music for decades now, and his involvement in ground-breaking bands such as Planxty and Moving Hearts has been followed by establishing himself as an iconic solo performer. Producing outstanding, well-programmed albums like this one can only add to that huge reputation. www.sonymusic.com

Vic Smith

Northern Cross Albireo

own label, CYG001

Tom Kitching's feisty fiddle is a spectacular feature of this band, which draws on a rich tradition of tunes from mainly the UK. There is a peppering of other traditions: the first track – a *forro* from Brazil via Sam Pirt – grabs you by the ears in no uncertain way. The most convoluted provenance is an old-time American tune learnt in China from a Welsh fiddler, Christine Cooper.

'Gathering Peascods' is one of the most accomplished arrangements. It starts with the fiddle, enhanced by a fine keyboard accompaniment, but after a couple of repeats gradually encompasses the whole band: bass guitar, hammered dulcimer, concertina and melodeon: a glorious sound that I wanted to go on for much longer. The set of reels composed by Steve Hodgskiss, the piano-player, deserves to become a session favourite. It starts with piano, but soon becomes a showcase for the full band, including the hammered dulcimer which takes pride of place in the last repeat. Purcell's 'The Hole in the Wall' is a glorious arrangement with piano taking a starring role – the harmonic invention is a delight.

Three American reels show off Tom's fiddling versatility to perfection and I defy anyone not to want to get up and dance to them. Howard Jones' hammered dulcimer comes in for the last number – 'The Kitchen Girl'. It is an inspired finale to the set, finishing it off with a bang.

South-west England is represented by a couple of very rhythmically-played hornpipes – Thomas Hardy's 'Gypsy' followed by Baldwin's 'Gloucester'. Great dance music!

The tracks are beautifully contrasted throughout. Different instrumentation, different rhythms – there is so much variety in this CD that you won't get tired of playing it. I have listened to it so many times since it crossed my desk and it will go with me on the long journeys to gigs: keeping me awake and singing to it all the way.

www.albireo.co.uk

Mary Humphreys

The Unbroken Surface of Snow

Andrew Cronshaw

Cloud Valley Music, CV2009

Multi-instrumentalist and renowned zither player, Andrew Cronshaw, has released his first album for seven years: the product of a collaboration with Armenian duduk maestro Tigran Alexsanyan, who joins him on all the tracks except for Cronshaw's gentle rendition of the pretty Scottish song air 'Gentle Dark-Eyed Mary'. The duduk is an Armenian oboe-like wind instrument with a mellow, expressive tone – perfect for Cronshaw's restrained and minimalist compositions, which are based upon miniscule fragments and hints of English and Armenian tunes set upon swirling washes of sound. So tenuous is the link with the English tradition though, it is likely that even the expert listener's 'Spot the Tune' score will be low.

All five tracks are recorded live, which surely enhances the empathy that the musicians must have in the performance of music of this nature. Indeed, though the musical roots may lie in far-flung parts of Europe, the improvisational and interactive approach is rather reminiscent of a classical Indian ensemble. Much of the music is glacier-like in its pace and development, and obviously rhythmic sections are a relatively rarity. Bass clarinet/soprano sax player Ian Blake joins the duo on the spacious 34 minute long title track, which includes a stirring vocal piece by Finnish vocalist Sanna Kurki-Suonio. While the clarinet produces some interesting tones, the soprano can be somewhat strident at times in the otherwise rarified atmosphere of this album. Also unconvincing are Cronshaw's tin whistle parts, which seem a little trite in their plaintive pseudo-celtic style. This is a recording that will either transport the listener with its evocative Zen-like quality that might make the average *Tai Chi* practitioner seem as though they are dancing a

