

**4Square - 20:20 MANCHESTER
(4Square Music SQR. 0001)**



4Square is a relatively new, Manchester-based (inevitably!), young fusion band, dripping with very obvious talent.

Two of the band's members - accordion/keys player Jim Molyneux and percussionist Dan Day, both currently studying at Chethams School Of Music - were finalists in last year's BBC Young Musician Of The Year contest.

The others have both been active members of the Stockport-based Fosbrooks Trust: fiddler/singer/clogger Nicola Lyons has played in a duo with accordionist Jamie Schofield, and banjo/mandola player James Meadows, a semi-finalist in the 2006 BBC Radio 2 Young Folk Awards, currently plays in a duo with songwriter/guitarist Jon Lacey.

And the outstanding musicianship on display on their debut CD naturally reflects their pedigree, of that there is no question as one negotiates its generous 71 minutes for the first time: all members of the band perform with total assurance, abundant energy and exceeding confidence.

However, the initial listening experience also generates a distinct sense of bewilderment, for there's also a slight sense that 4Square are pulling in too many different directions over the course of the disc. And yet this is countered by an equally strong sense that they're fully in control - even when things threaten to stray across the tenuously drawn line (and don't misunderstand me - eclectic is good!). For they're also unafraid to experiment, and the disc contains some decidedly strange aural escapades amongst the funkily jazzed-up reels and other tunes with at least a foothold in folk tradition.

Yet even these weird excesses of youthful exuberance have their own peculiar logic and don't detract from the overall experience. At times it's rather like listening to some of those late-60s/early 70s UK underground/prog albums by obscure bands where after three or four listens you could be persuaded that a minute and a half of apparently unstructured and unrelated electronic treatment actually contours logically into a keyboard riff or guitar segment or even a song.

Just over half of the tracks centre round a tune arrangement of some kind,

whether fast-and-furious-and-funky or cool-and-reflective; standouts include *Balls*, which infectiously marries fun with showmanship and genuine creativity, and *The Inconspicuous Egg*, which takes a cheeky banjo tune by James as a springboard for copious, and felicitous, pass-the-riff invention. Beatrice also brings in guest brass musicians in a kind of mini-Bellowhead/BottineSouriante hoedown.

There are, as you'd guess, also moments when the listener's appreciation turns to a mild case of "so what!", and perhaps the "clappy-hands-and-feet" interlude during *Celerity* works better on stage than on disc, but that's not a criticism in the context of what's an impressive and more-than-promising debut set.

And yet it's within the vocal items that 4Square exhibit the most diversity. Jim takes the lead vocal on two of his own compositions, of which the lushly-scored *Falling Wings* (featuring guest string-quartet) is especially beguiling. Dan enterprisingly tackles Pete Scrowther's *Lily Of Barbary* (which he learnt from P.J. Wright's album, and makes his own in a fresh, driving new setting) and Bob Blinn & Jimmy Moore's *I Still Can't Say Goodbye* (slighter, but still appealing).

Nicola takes on two contrasted songs: Chris Thile's *Lighthouse Tale* and Richard Thompson's *Farewell Farewell*; the latter is a particularly brave choice, and receives a strikingly adventurous epic-episodic treatment that's both unexpected and significantly different from any you'll have heard.

Yes, it can all sometimes seem a very strange disc; there really is a lot going on here: far too much to take in on just a couple of playthroughs, and although it can sometimes feel like "mix and mismatch" it's very much worth persevering.

<http://www.4squaremusic.co.uk/>

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