

ItsAcoustica – HERE WE ARE (Organic Soup OSRAC. 04)



I greatly enjoyed *Welcome To...*, the earlier studio offering from Andy and Cath Higgins, who up till now had called themselves plain Acoustica. That CD was followed by a live set, *The Oban Sessions*, which – while pleasing – (with hindsight) didn't amount to more than a stopgap, a snapshot of where the duo was musically at the time. A few years further on, and extensive gigging has won them plenty of new friends and boosted their already impressive confidence, especially with regard to the songwriting but also now in the increasingly professional presentation of their material.

This new album is a massive leap forward, and much more of a conscious studio production, resulting in a richer, fuller palette that makes excellent use of the possibilities of multitracking (without overdoing it), also focussing on the two musicians' clearly developing instrumental skills (Andy's plethora of guitars make a truly wondrous sound, while Cath's added accordion, tin whistle and bass to her grand violinistic armoury – and they've both taken up the ukulele!).

Importantly, this latest set also manages to build on the strengths of their fresh and vital live presence by bringing their self-penned songs into the forefront (no covers this time), and Ron Angus's ever-impressive, brilliantly intuitive engineering and production expertise has again scored a bullseye in bringing out both the essence and the intensity of the performers' personalities in a genuinely responsive studio environment within an utterly classy recording. Perhaps the album's title also reflects the duo's greater ambitions and definitely more fully realised sense of presence and individuality of late (there had been times when previously I'd felt them to be slightly unassumingly hiding their lights under the proverbial bushel). And the standard of the CD's ten new songs is unfailingly high – even though I didn't immediately feel I could grab and isolate a standout track, this was simply because virtually every song makes quite an impact even on first playthrough.

The prevailing mode of ItsAcoustica's music is tuneful acoustic-based contemporary folk-pop, and increasingly I found myself reminded of Pete and Maura Kennedy (in the best possible way), for both Cath and Andy have excellent voices for that kind of material and a keen flair for instrumental colour and flavouring appropriate to that of the message of each song.

The opening song, *Magnificent Light*, engages the ear immediately with its sensuous tex-mex cha-cha vibe, while the tender ballad *Your Heart Makes Room* employs a gorgeous string arrangement and the cascading fairground-waltz tempo of the title track is quite charming. *Happily Ever After* bounds along in on a driving percussive riff before entering more reflective territory, while *Overcoat Days* harks back to the early-70s rootsy-folk of Lindisfarne (with a nod to The Band in there too perhaps). A sparse, uke-centric backdrop enables *Twisted Path* to make its mark in a quirky kind of Roches/Kate-Bush way (love Cath's harmonies on this track too!); the ringing, chiming guitars and soft string-scape of *Close My Eyes* invokes CSN and the west-coast sound as much as anything else (and the

slide solo is glorious!), and the harmonica-flecked Just One captivates with its mood of Paxtonesque wistful nostalgia. And so it goes.

Although serious accomplishment is the order of the day here, Andy and Cath always manage to retain an essential accessibility and listener-friendly lightness of touch that ably complements their songs' messages and clear-sighted sense of purpose. And the accompanying design, artwork and packaging are all first-class and very attractive indeed. What an achievement all round! (But as a footnote: altho' I can appreciate the reasoning, the duo's adoption of that rather unwieldy extra syllable upfront makes for a bit of a typographer's nightmare, just like the fad for illogical or inconsistent use of lower-case that dogs so many other acts nowadays – grr!)

“Here We Are” is, I believe, at present available only from

[www.itsacoustica.com](http://www.itsacoustica.com), at just £10 incl. P&P – great value!