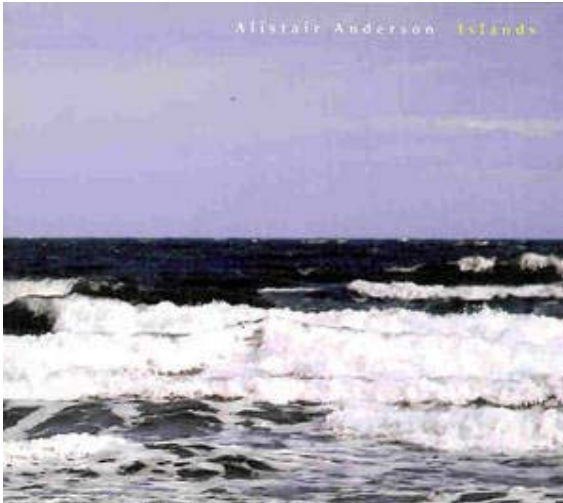


Alistair Anderson - ISLANDS (White Meadow WMRC D. 2008CD)



Alistair's unquestionably one of the most influential figures in the music scene of the north-east, especially that of Northumbria. While over the past 30-odd years he's been feted as one of the most skilled exponents of the English concertina, period (and on the way enabling it to reach repertoire it was never expected to reach!), and no less of a virtuoso on the Northumbrian smallpipes, he's also built himself an enviable reputation as

a composer of innumerable excellent new tunes in the tradition and an indefatigable researcher into old tunes. And more recently, Alistair's been instrumental in helping to launch the Folkworks organisation (whose partnership with Newcastle University in turn facilitated its own degree course in traditional folk music).

This latter activity has left him less time for performing and recording, sadly, so it's a particular cause for rejoicing that he's now got round to releasing a new CD. (On which his playing's even better than I remember it, incidentally!)

Right from the outset, you can't escape the abundantly joyous swing and brilliantly precise and superbly nifty finger work - features that hook the ear at once and keep it totally engrossed through all the twists and turns of the melody line. And that applies whether it's a sprightly reel or jig or a heavily syncopated jazz riff or an atmospheric slow air.

During the course of the new album, Alistair revisits (in fresh arrangements) a few of his earlier compositions (including The Franklin River Reel from his landmark Steel Skies suite), and to telling effect. In fact, the vast majority of the pieces Alistair performs on this disc are self-penned, all but one of the remainder being canny arrangements of traditional pieces.

All the arrangements are by Alistair himself in tandem with one other individual from the panoply of musicians lending his or her talent to the recorded performance on this disc.

The only item performed entirely solo by Alistair is Empty Spaces, his affectionate tribute to the three Northumbrian musicians who most influenced

him over the span of a quarter of a century. Two-thirds of the remaining 12 tracks take the form of an inspired duet.

Three of these are with a top-flight guitarist - either Martin Simpson (on the Quebec-inspired Waltz Montmagny and the gloriously evocative Winter Sunlight) or Ian Stephenson (on the jaunty track 7 hornpipe set) - whereas on the other five Alistair is partnered with inventive young fiddler Emma Reid, and the potent immediacy and intensity of these tracks ensures their status as disc highlights.

The remaining four tracks are by comparison rather more thickly-scored, and employ Alistair's "band" members (fiddlers Sophy Ball and Shona Mooney, cellist Rachael McShane, clarsach player Rachel Newton and whistle/oboe player Joey Oliver). These include two tunes written for a Bath Festival jazz project and another commissioned by a NCC poetry festival; some have a slightly chamber-classical feel to their execution, but the sublime jewel in the crown here is the splendid 23-minute programmatic suite depicting the many moods of The Farne Islands, which in abbreviated form proudly supplies the title for the disc itself.

I don't get excessively excited about all-instrumental CDs - they have to be something really special to get me so fired up, but this one's an exception. It's a simply wonderful record, one that richly deserves the widest possible circulation: especially, I might say, among those who believe themselves immune to the charms of purely instrumental albums, for which Alistair's artistry makes a tremendously persuasive case.

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<http://www.myspace.com/folkworksnortheast>