

Anna Shannon - When We Were Young (Own Label)

Over the past couple of years in particular, Scarborough-based free spirit Anna's been gaining a deservedly enthusiastic following due to a succession of absolutely brilliant live performances; these have enabled us to savour close-up her wide range of assured performance skills, which set the seal on her increasingly compelling songwriting.

Seen live, her presence is very intense, and her latest CD brings us the closest possible representation of that experience with a set of intimate performances of a dozen uniformly excellent new songs which run an impressive emotional gamut with a complete lack of pretension.

Partly I suspect due to Anna's bewildering proclivity, each of her solo releases thus far has been mildly compromised, either by a degree of stylistic or artistic inconsistency within the material chosen or by occasionally less than convincing musical arrangements.

Notwithstanding her enviable accomplishment as a multi-instrumentalist, Anna has this time resisted the temptation to over-egg the pudding: indeed she's steadfastly refused to indulge in any overdubbing at all. For on *When We Were Young*, Anna goes back to basics, utilising a pure, stripped-down texture of just voice and guitar throughout - and it's much the better for it, I believe. Not only because it imparts a strong sense of unity to the proceedings, but also because it allows for maximum concentration on the lyrics, which are a fabulous and ever-intriguing combination of simple, evocative poetic imagery and deep compassion, underscored by an uncanny ability to get inside (and really inhabit) the psyche of her protagonists.

The upfront confidence of Anna's personal and idiomatic singing, with its own special, innate sense of dramatic flow, conveys both a wide-eyed innocence of immediate experience and a more composed maturity of attitude and reflection. Anna's stylish and distinctive mode of guitar accompaniment provides the ideal foil for her voice: its filigree textures, gently plucked out of the ether much in the manner of a courtly medieval troubadour performing for you alone, are aided by the close-miked and faithful home-recording.

There are some startlingly good songs here - almost too many to take in at one hearing! First cherrypick yields the delicate tone-picture Frost On The Larch, the poignant, questioning introspection of The Childhood Place, and the magnificent brace of songs inspired by Irish settings (The Gathering demonstrates just how fine an acappella singer Anna is, while The Magic Of Fae is a notable addition to the pantheon of Silkie-legend songs). Then there's the fond remembrances of the lovely title track (whose appealing melodic contours and genially singable chorus seem much inspired by the songwriting of Stan Graham), while at the other end of the spectrum the inner turmoil of often painfully conflicting emotions is tenderly expressed in Rachel and the ballad of The Farming Boy.

The momentum generated by a more insistent rhythmic backing on A Little Piece Of Africa embodies a different kind of passion, one born of childhood ignorance as well as innocence perhaps, which inexorably propels the story's events forward. The wilfully independent come-what-may defiant spirit of Damsel fly mirrors the mercurial (almost Anne Briggs-like) character of Anna's eldest daughter depicted within, and can also be taken to symbolise both those very qualities in Anna's own personality and the endearing qualities of this CD in general, which are further enhanced by its attractive booklet design, complete with photos and helpful background notes.

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