

Brother Crow - Hollow Hills (Brother Crow Records)



Since around this time last year or just before, the profile enjoyed by this charismatic Weardale duo (guitarist-songwriter Andrew Davison and mandolinist-tunewriter Graeme Carroll) has risen considerably, largely due to their hard graft in putting themselves about by some intensive gigging around and about in far-flung places.

The word has certainly spread, to the extent that Hollow Hills, their second CD, has been very eagerly awaited.

For those of us who were captivated by Brother Crow's debut (*One For Sorrow*), *Hollow Hills* feels very much like a continuation of that disc.

In the nicest possible sense, it's more of the same - excellent original songs, delivered with a gentle passion to a typically finely judged and unobtrusive stringed accompaniment: no more, no less. And that's meant as a compliment to the consistency of the lads' output, the unity of their distinctive vision which embraces a deep spiritual connection with their native landscape.

The flipside to this coin of consistency, though, is the inescapable fact that a significant number of their original songs tend to inhabit a broadly similar chord sequence and melody contour - and a fairly uniform medium-slow pace into the bargain. This observation is exacerbated, I feel, by the running-order chosen for the new CD, where four out of the first five songs seem to lack variety in these purely musical respects and thus the listener may well end up missing out on the impact of the powerful narratives being spun.

And yes, they are powerful, shot through with a passionate empathy with the characters and their plight and a keen sense of local history that's strengthened by the lads' thorough research into their sources (they've definitely taken a leaf out of Tom Bliss's book here!).

Here we learn of the lost industries of Upper Weardale and Teesdale (lead mining, dairy farming), there's stories of a parting couple (*St. Cuthbert's Day*), a railway accident (*As Children We Would Run*) and the local Union Workhouse (*Child Of His Time*); and *Hollow Hills* even takes up where *One For Sorrow* left off by providing (in *Dead Man's Coat*) a sequel to the earlier CD's tale of Tom Lowrie. Having got the above

(necessary) reservation out of the way, then, you'll find the second half of the disc somewhat more contrasted and the songs thus somehow more immediately memorable.

Hollow Hills also contains some comparatively uptempo material: the punchy No Money For The Widows, the folk-friendly singalong refrain of The Road To Who Knows Where, and the playful little instrumental Bingology. But lest the potential purchaser be deterred by a cursory glance at the tracklist, not failing to notice the "heavenly length" of Brother Crow songs (again, only one clocks in at less than five minutes), let me say that in truth one barely notices the passage of time when caught up in the narrative flow of the tales being recounted.

So in a nutshell, this new CD's another quality product (both in music and presentation terms), and (my reservations notwithstanding) is unlikely to disappoint Brother Crow's growing fan base.

www.brothercrow.co.uk