

## Barbara Helen - AN UNFAMILIAR PLACE (Own Label)

It's been a while since we heard from this Saltburn-based singer-songwriter (the last occasion being the fine duo album *Beyond The Sand* that she recorded with her partner Les Cameron).

This time round, Barbara treats us to a whole album of her own compositions, now tellingly reflecting on her experiences of love and life and on the essential journey that brought her to her current "safe plateau" state, the "unfamiliar place" that gives the CD its title. Although Barbara's lyrics tell of having been through the emotional mill in her personal quest, she's emerged on the other side stronger and wiser: there's a real sense of being at peace here and now, a contentment that's not born out of complacency but is honest and hard-won.

Her stance is optimistic and uplifting, but realistic: the key would seem to be having the courage to move on from a familiar place, which seemed safe (but was not a good place) while tempering one's belief and trust with a measure of caution.

If you're seeking musical reference points, I guess the most obvious of Barbara's influences is Joni Mitchell, not least in her sharing of a specific vocal characteristic: an enviable fluidity in range and technique which enables her to make effortless glides and leaps over the gap between registers. This can very occasionally lead to an over-use of decoration or unnecessary ornamentation (as on *Stop Me Falling Again*), but for the most part it constitutes an attractive and distinctive feature of Barbara's singing.

The spirit of early Joni also pervades some of Barbara's melodic contours and progressions and her sense of bright-eyed (yet not exactly innocent) wonder (as on the *Chelsea Morning*-like *My Own Patch Of Blue Sky*). Sandy Denny is sometimes called to mind too, especially on *Pretend*, one of the disc's standout songs. Other highlights within a very strong set are the exhortation to *Believe*, the simply expressed dreams and aspirations of *Little Bird*, the touching *When You Look At Me*, the clever expression of frustration *Say Something* and the jazzily insouciant *Let It Go*.

The musical settings are clear-toned and clear-sighted acoustic-based textures centred around Barbara's own simply judged guitar playing, with Les Cameron adding some delicious lead guitar work on two tracks and mandolin on another, together with some keenly-managed additional instrumentation (piano, bass and programmed percussion) courtesy of sound engineer John P. Taylor; I usually find synthesised backings a tasteless and soulless turn-off, but John's contributions are brilliant: softly creative, sensitive and genuinely appropriate.

To many a prospective listener, I suspect the theme and concept of this disc might appear anathema, a merely insular and introspective navel-gazing voyage, yet the end result is actually anything but: for it's an absolutely charming, often profoundly moving - and in the end distinctly inspirational - record of a universal journey.

A release to really treasure.

[www.myspace.com/barbarahelen](http://www.myspace.com/barbarahelen)

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