

Jackie Oates – SATURNINE (ECC Records ECC004)



Jackie's latest solo album follows closely on her appearance on two other key releases: she was a participant in the Cecil Sharp Project (songwriting house) and (as a member of Imagined Village etc.) on Lush Cosmetics' Fresh Handmade Sound discs. As with her previous solo records, it results from what Jackie terms "a frenzy of current fascinations", in this case the sounds of viols, hand bells and eccentric percussion, and other matters as diverse as the Saturn return, Joseph Cornell and Alphonse Mucha.

Actually, you'd be hard pressed to discover much in the way of direct reference to the specifically non-musical associations, unless

you're previously acquainted with the work of either Mucha or Cornell, which turns out to have heavily inspired David Owen's album artwork, with its highly emblematic nature and the slightly disconnected aura of an array of objets-trouvés of west-country folk-art, for aha, therein actually lies the connecting thread with the music within, which possesses its own sonic signature, consistently carefully crafted, perhaps surprisingly even-textured (sometimes almost to a fault), and seriously lovely, gently luscious in tone. Distinctive chamber-folk timbres which might on their own seem mildly austere (Jackie's violin and five-string viola, Mike Cosgrave's piano) are embellished by bouzouki and mandolin (Neil Davey) and accordion (Karen Tweed, Mike C), with occasional interjections of viola da gamba and cello (Barney Morse-Brown), guitar (Tristan Seume), hurdy gurdy (Steve Tyler), double bass (James Budden, Miranda Sykes), English border pipes (Katie Tyler), piano (Belinda O'Hooley) and percussion (Ged Lynch), then (on two songs) further sweetened by the presence of hand bells (Ross & Melanie Henrywood).

Nine of the album's dozen tracks are drawn directly from traditional sources, and many of the selections have strong west-country connections (several of the versions used here originate in, or were collected in, Devon or Cornwall). An especially potent device is the interpolation within The Trees They Are So High of the recitation by Elizabeth Stewart of a poem in the Cornish language specially written by Tim Saunders, which eerily counterpoints the bare-bones, Lied-like voice-and-piano setting of the ballad. Elsewhere, Jackie turns in thoroughly likeable personal reinterpretations of other quite familiar fare – The Sweet Nightingale, Brigg Fair, Marrow Bones and Four Pence A Day; the two last-named fairly breeze along, with lusty chorus support from that excellent male vocal quartet The Claque, from one of whose members, Barry Lister, Jackie also learnt the altogether darker ballad Poor Murdered Woman. This song, which we learn was originally destined for Jackie's previous collection Hyperboreans, is here a definite disc highlight; it boasts some other-worldly scoring that embraces viola, shruti box, harmonium, plucked piano strings and hand bells and also prominently features the impressive talents of Jim Moray.

The album's second really dark ballad, Young Johnson (Child 88), although bravely characterised, might here be thought a touch too prettily countenanced in Jackie's tripping rendition. I guess there's the danger that some listeners might level the criticism that a similar impression could be felt to prevail on any song visited by Jackie's tender (and yes, sweet and dulcet) tones... Having said that, Jackie's singing is always highly persuasive, genuinely charming and pleasing, while also replete with hidden depths of expression that may escape the less attentive listener; moreover, her command of phrasing is noticeably increasingly confident with each successive album. And her choice of material, while sometimes a touch quirky (the current album's "wild-card" is a rather fine and not-all-that-widely-known Paul Metsers song, IOU), is almost always ideally suited to her voice and approach.

Finally, the disc also contains two sprightly, lively instrumental tracks; one a sequence of two Cornish five-steps composed by Neil, the other a medley of three tunes penned by Mike, all heavily inspired by Finnish tango music. No quibbles with the bright, characterful recording either, so you need feel no shame about indulging yourself in this gently sumptuous yet thoughtful aural feast. You can't fail to be drawn in...

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