

Jo Hamilton - GOWN (Poseidon PSDN. 001)



Most readers will doubtless be approaching this singer's debut solo recording from the perspective of her recent stint with Ashley Hutchings' *Rainbow Chasers*, in which context she proved herself both as a stunning singer and a rather creative classically-trained violinist.

Here on *Gown*, though, Jo shows she has many more strings to her bow (so to speak), on a set of self-penned songs that give fullest rein to her voice while exploring the possibilities of electronica alongside fuller textured backings and occasional more delicate acoustic passages.

It's a brave step to take, and its alternation of intimate empathy with lavish canvases and more strident experimentation will doubtless scare away those used to more traditional forms of expressiveness - but that would be a pity, for Jo's work deserves to be treated with an open mind.

Although at times her delivery can variously recall Imogen Heap, Kate Bush, Annie Lennox, P.J. Harvey and even Regina Spektor, Jo's actually quite an individual singer whose voice is hard to pin down, and though some of Jo's sonic experiments might recall the recent albums of Rose Kemp the innate optimism in Jo's lyrics is a world away from the latter's goth-poetic shadowings. Jo's mixed parentage and whirlwind world-travelling upbringing are both reflected in the field-recordings from Cambodia which are threaded between the songs, and refracted in the songs themselves in their kaleidoscopic myriad of influences.

The genuinely eclectic, obstinately complex multicultural bazaar that is the world of today is represented in the at times overwhelming music Jo uses to clothe her songs, from the insistent Gabrielesque pounding African beats of *How Beautiful* to the cheekily swooning jazzy reeds of *All In Adoration*, the fractured breathiness of *Exist*, the tentative but ultimately jubilant quest of *Deeper (Glorious)* and the obscure, enigmatic, multi-layered intimacy of *Paradise*.

Some of the most strikingly memorable tracks are the more intimately or acoustically scored, like the swansong *There It Is* and the drifting, gamelan-inspired *Mekong Song*. *Winter Is Over* starts like a primitive old-time waltz but soon acquires a *They Shoot Horses* opulent decadence, and the closing *Think Of Me* stays just the right side of whimsical in its eccentricity, whereas *Liathach* errs in the other direction, disappointing in its ponderous prog-like posturing, too smooth to evoke the rough grandeur of the majestic and terrifying Torridonian mountain.

All through *Gown*, I'm amazed at how much Jo is able to conjure from simple means and creative programming, and she gets plenty of currency from around a dozen well-chosen musician-collaborators.

Brilliant and attractive package design too, by the way.

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