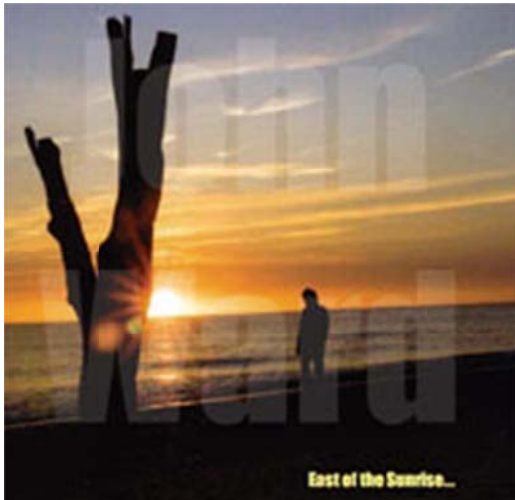


EAST OF THE SUNRISE...- John Ward (ION Music UK, IONCD9)



East Of The Sunrise is Lowestoft-based singer/songwriter John Ward's sixth CD, and forms the sequel to his 2008 release Praying For The Alien.

It's interesting that the accompanying press release includes a glowing quote from this very magazine, since this is the first of his records that have come my way for review - but no matter, for on this evidence I'm glad to be catching up with his music now.

There's something appealingly independent (rather Village-Thing) in the feel of the best of John's music, unpretentious yet evidently deeply felt and with a clear strong empathy for his subject-matter. The understated yet highly individual poetry of the East Anglian landscape is well conveyed, in John's powerful tales which embody a really strong sense of place. These range from the superstitions of local fishermen (Ashore) to explorations of lost industries (shipbuilding on The Day Slips Away, for instance), canny depictions of the lives of the region's "working girls" (encompassing both Scots fisher girls come down from Stornoway, and Yarmouth prostitutes).

There's a thoughtful optimism about John's writing, however, as we can hear on The Ebb And The Flow (an observation of how the east coast towns somehow manage to stay afloat despite the decline of both industry and tourism); the bustle of Station Square is well portrayed, while The Last Resort crystallises all the gentle fog-bound beauty of that winter environment into a neat six-minute audio frame.

The disc also contains a small number of songs which, with the aid of ambient sounds (curlews, waves, etc) potently evoke the unique beauty of the land- and sea-scapes of the Broads, and it's to John's credit that this device doesn't swamp the songs concerned, instead genuinely enhancing their character.

The lighter side of local life rears its head (so to speak) on the retelling of the legend of The Lowestoft Ness Monster and a version of The Collier Brig (normally associated with Bob Roberts, and here re-titled The Worst Old Ship).

Instrumental backings are kept simple, with John's own deft guitar work and the violin of his long-standing musical partner Mario Price often the only accompaniment, making the occasional augmentations for effect all the more telling (John also contributes

banjo, mandolin, bass, percussion, and other musicians some selective piano, squeezebox and backing vocals).

There's some dramatic drumming on the wave-bedecked Dunwich, and some minor jazzier excursions elsewhere, otherwise the largely minimal folky-acoustic settings do the songs best justice, whether they be John's own compositions (the vast majority) or songs collected from the tradition.

My only minor criticism is that perhaps some of John's melodies are insufficiently distinctive to lift the poetry of the songs out beyond their immediate straitjacket. Nevertheless, it's clear why John's music continues to make a strong impression on his audiences at live gigs.

www.johnward.org.uk