

Judy Dyble - TALKING WITH STRANGERS (FXTRCD. 113)



Judy's the lady who's come back in from the cold - and with a bit of a cultish vengeance! Originally vocalist with Fairport Convention Mk.1 back in 1967, Judy subsequently co-founded Trader Horne and crossed paths with many prog and rock legends before taking almost thirty years out from music, only returning to appear at the special Fairport anniversary edition of Cropledy in 1997.

Less than a decade on from that momentous occasion, however, Judy made a fabulous comeback with a trilogy of brilliant albums in collaboration with Marc Swordfish, swiftly followed last year by an acclaimed single with The Conspirators.

Judy's certainly astute in her choice of collaborators, and for her latest recording venture, *Talking With Strangers*, she gathers together a batch of brand new songs co-written (co-conceived) with No-Man's Tim Bowness and Cromer Museum's Alistair Murphy. Perhaps uncharacteristically for the work of a librarian (sic!), the disc's contents defy easy classification - for if anything, it's an even more intelligent mix of psych-folk, retro and prog, with spellbinding textures that are lush and heady yet with strands keenly, crisply separated by virtue of abundantly imaginative scoring and an adept use of new technology.

But however consistent the purely musical vision, it's nevertheless Judy's ultra-pure, utterly distinctive (and still tremendously beautiful) singing voice that remains both the most vital unifying force of the project and its aural focus, invariably stopping the listener in his/her tracks and compelling one's attention.

Judy sweeps us along with her on a spiritual journey from the deliberately uncomplicated, gentle acoustics of the deceptively simple folky *Neverknowing*, by way of the mysterious and charming exotic innocence of the swirling, swooning autoharp-rich *Jazzbirds*, the enigmatic chansonnière of (Greg Lake and Pete Sinfield's) *C'est La Vie* (the album's one cover), and the pleading, desperate searching of the title track, thence by way of the confidences of Judy's *Dreamtime* and the melancholy reality of *Grey October Day* onto the final stage of her quest. Here Judy bares her soul and (you might say) lays down

her weary tune (through "the strength of strings", of course) on the epic (19-minute) and necessarily episodic Harpsong; here the joyous optimism and celebration of the power of musical creativity that has become a constant for her personally, conjoining then and now and the future, becomes an overpowering life-mantra. The experimental wyrd-folk of Trader Horne meets the nascent prog-rock of King Crimson head-on during the course of this final track, with an extensive instrumental middle-section that wouldn't have sounded out of place on *In The Wake Of Poseidon*, say. Harpsong sets the artistic seal on an inspirational record: one that's all the more extraordinary an achievement for having been recorded remotely - such is the technological expertise of Tim and Alistair in giving Judy's songs wings in order to fly in contributions from all over the globe.

These have come from near at hand (Simon Nicol, Jacqui McShee, Julianne Regan, Robert Fripp), France (Celia Humphris), and the USA (Ian McDonald, Pat Mastelotto), while the list of other musicians involved includes Mark Fletcher, Laurie A'Court, Rachel Hall, Sanchia Pattinson and at least four different guitarists! And setting the seal on the music on the disc itself is another strongly unifying signature of the project: the exceptionally fine cover and inlay artwork (by John Hurford and Koldo Barroso respectively), which has a very striking visual impact and is acutely well conceived and reproduced.

The press release statement, that "Judy feels it's the best album she's ever produced", proves no hollow claim. I

It's magic, it really is.

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