

## Kev Boyle - PALESTINE GROVE (Blue Sky Music BSM-CD. 02)



The Boyle family from Donegal have for many years been mainstays of the London-Irish folk music scene, latterly embracing residencies at Hammersmith's Riverside Studios and even playing for Ballet Rambert's production *Sergeant Early's Dream*. Throughout the 60s and 70s, father figure Paddy had inspired and encouraged his three children Kevin, Maggie and Paul, nurturing their undoubted musical talents.

Paul (who sadly was to die young) was by all accounts a brilliant fiddler, and Maggie, whom we know from her many wonderful ventures including harmony trio *Grace Notes*, is one of the country's finest singers and a flautist and bodhrán player of no mean stature.

Kevin, on the other hand, is a multi-instrumentalist who carved an early reputation as skilled (piano) accompanist for fiddle maestro Sean Maguire, moving on to become the driving force behind the fiery supergroup *Le Cheile* which was built around the talented musical regulars at Fulham's White Hart.

But I first encountered Kev's music over ten years ago in quite another context, on his very unusual CD *Bon Cabbage*, which was (less than helpfully) credited to *Movies CB* (the initials somewhat perversely standing for *Ceili Band*, which the contents of the CD itself most definitely did not reflect...). That album was a collection of original songs written by Kevin himself, defiantly idiosyncratic in character, which took a wry slant on aspects of London life. On that album, Kevin's voice was backed by a host of other excellent musicians; but on his long-awaited followup record, *Palestine Grove*, the majority of the backing is provided by the album's producer/engineer, that remarkable multi-instrumentalist Gerry Diver, the address of whose Wimbledon studio where it was recorded gives the collection its name.

So, although (aside from Kev himself, and uilleann piper Paul Brennan guesting on one track) the new record's personnel are almost entirely different, its dominant presence is still - as it should be - formed by Kev's ultra-distinctive singing voice, a voice that gives shape and personality to the engagingly quirky character of his songwriting. His gruff, growling, gravelly timbre is something really special, and will appeal to anyone who appreciates the singing of Tom Waits, but there's an added fire in Kev's full-bodied delivery, a rich and powerful passion that pervades his very being and breathes the lyrics right into the listener's soul - a quite extraordinary achievement.

Kev's writing has a combination of deep humanity and sardonic sideways humour that at times put me in mind of Michael Marra perhaps, although Kev's messages, while every bit as thought-provoking and intrinsically truthful, are arguably less obscurely expressed. The commanding authority of Kev's voice certainly constitutes a binding thread for the dozen almost maddeningly diverse songs presented here: there's a dark, poignant beauty in *The Walls Of Eden* and *Lines On The Death Of Martin Israel*, whereas the title song is a *cri-de-cœur* from us helpless individuals, a rather savage indictment of those in control of our destinies.

On the other hand, *O We Who Dream With England* movingly counterpoints Kev's poet's address with a paraphrase of the tune better known as *Dives And Lazarus*. The latter is one of four songs (not quite correctly identified on the booklet credits, by the way) which capably utilise individual melodies from traditional folk songs (well, maybe I'm not quite so convinced about *The Blue And The Gray*, but this may be due to inevitable associations impinging too vividly from the tune used). On the lighter, almost playful side, there's contrast from the rollicking *Big Blue Train*, the breezy cartoon-style gallop of *Sunny Little Avenue* and the jaunty 60s-holiday-twang of *So Summertime*. And Kev brings back the old Beefheartian gambit of putting the previous album's would-have-been-title-track (ie. here, *Bon Cabbage*) onto album number two - and it turns out to be one of those gloriously eccentric concoctions that wouldn't have sounded out of place on a *Strangelies* album.

All in all, Kev's songs hit home so successfully with their companionable simplicity of expression that the sometimes almost inordinately busy instrumental settings - though delightful in their own right - can distract just a little with their plethora of skittery, clattery percussion and occasionally cluttered (albeit brightly, cleanly recorded) textures.

But the other way of looking at it is that there's such a degree of genuine creativity and invention here, whether in the settings or performances or in Kev's sharp, vital lyrics, that you'll never get bored and most likely gain an enormous amount of pleasure and stimulation from many successive play through's of this consistently intriguing album.

[www.kevboyle.com](http://www.kevboyle.com)

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