

Mary Hampton - My Mother's Children (Navigator)



This has been a really difficult record to review, basically since it's nigh impossible to capture the incredibly individual essence of Brighton-based Mary's wildly original and very very special talent as a singer and songwriter.

It's also one of those "less is more" jobs that makes much out of exceedingly minimal resources. And it's a seriously scary experience from beginning to end - at times it's almost too disturbing to listen to at all except in the comfort of your own mind.

But the first thing you'll hear, after the bald tenor guitar intro that is, will be Mary's totally extraordinary voice, which will bring your ears stark upright, for it takes the art of singing into an unearthly place indeed (you'll either love it or hate it with a passion, I suspect - and I love it!). It's a voice of paradoxes: if I must provide an aural reference point, well there's a deep hint of Anne Briggs in Mary's utterly assured yet almost diffident timbre. It's an airy and breathy voice, replete with that hushed, naïve intensity that exudes total immersion in, and direct expression of, experience (accentuated and emphasised by the close-miking, I don't doubt).

Mary's writing - and indeed her whole sound-world - is peculiarly haunting. It's shot through with true wyrd-folk sensibility (think of artists like Pamela Wyn Shannon, Sharron Kraus and Alasdair Roberts): it might be said to embrace the closest kinship with goth-folk, but for all its dark simplicity you'll uncover abundant layers of meaning in every carefully phrased line. Imagery is spellbindingly strange, both significantly eldritch and properly poetic, sometimes ostensibly impenetrable but always keeping a firm handle on the boundaries of perception. Melodies sound primordial, ancient, modal, yet with adventurous turns of the screw.

The feel of the music, and some of the instrumentation Mary has at her command, is imaginative and often distinctly ISB (for instance, there's a gorgeous swooning cello line on Honey that just cries out to be played on bowed gimbri!). A small complement of extra musicians (including Alice Eldridge, Jo Burke, Alistair Strachan, Grant Allerdyce and co-engineer Joe Watson) supplement Mary's guitar, being used eminently selectively and to brilliant effect.

Perhaps the most striking marriage of words and music comes on *The Bell They Gave You*, but every song here has much to offer in terms of aural and verbal stimulation and even the interpolated samples (on *Free Grace* and the cryptic *Exeunt*) don't grate or disrupt the album's curiously logical flow. Features that might in lesser hands become just a gimmick here prove essential to the impact of the songs - for example, the hidden track *Encore For Florence* (a weirdly touching tribute to celebrated "tuneless, tone-deaf soprano" Florence Foster Jenkins) sets a parlour piano amidst the faux-crackle of an ancient 78 in the manner of a fusty attic discovery. And maybe the strangest (and most immediately memorable) among the host of strange songs, is the acappella *Ballad Of The Talking Dog*, which takes the time-honoured "bunch of green holly and ivy" refrain from classic folk balladry and twists it around multiple vocal chords to the creepy accompaniment of hand and mouth percussion, with spectral whistling, discords and spoken counterpoints - it sounds like the Addams family singing a *Child Ballad* at their fireside on a bleak winter's evening! Like the whole album in fact, this track is at once soothing and discomfiting. All in all, an extraordinary record: spiritually rewarding, totally mesmerising and (yes) unique.

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