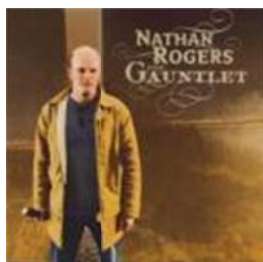


THE GAUNTLET - Nathan Rogers (Borealis BCD. 196)



Released here in time for Nathan's upcoming summer tour of the UK (which includes a date at York's Black Swan Folk Club on 11th August), his second album continues the good work and heavy promise shown on his debut CD *True Stories*, which I reviewed belatedly a couple of years back.

If anything, the support from his fellow musicians (who this time include members of the Duhks and other fellow-Winnipeggers) is even more notable on the new album, with imaginative arrangements and lively yet generally accessible settings that really do bring Nathan's songwriting alive in your living-room (or wherever).

As a writer, his stock-in-trade is a familiar one: rugged, rough-hewn tales of vengeance, abandonment, disillusion, anger and - finally - redemption and freedom. And he shares with the best songwriters that special skill in making those at times very personal themes applicable for a universal audience; and in doing so, you might say he runs his own gauntlet, with its own set of challenges and obstacles to overcome.

Now at the outset, one still can't resist (or escape) the inevitable comparisons between Nathan's singing voice and that of his famous father Stan, especially in terms of glowing richness, overall warmth of tone and matters of phrasing (on some songs more than others, admittedly). Something in the Canadian psyche, y' know!... But there's also a stylish and highly contemporary brand of dynamism present in Nathan's delivery, as his full-on live performances demonstrate par-excellence: a facet which seems also to be exceedingly well captured in this new recording. The level of energy is highest on songs like *Moving Mountains* and the distinctly rock-influenced *Fingerprints* (which comes complete with a seriously wild electric-guitar break!), while there's no lack of passion in the memorable and persuasive historical narrative *The Jewel Of Paris* or the genuinely touching (if slightly oblique) tale of *Land Of The Living Skies* - another triumph and an early standout track. The disc's closing stages furnish the next crop of highlights, where a striking juxtaposition of extremes of toughness and tenderness in Nathan's skilful retelling of the traditional ballad *Willie O' Winsbury* makes for a very stirring experience indeed.

Then, the disc's final song, *The Puddler's Tale*, is equally stirring: a seriously rousing rendition of his own brave completion of an unfinished work of Stan's dating from 1983 (I wonder if this "missing link" is now destined to enter the hallowed canon of Stan's songs that's already achieved worldwide currency...). It forms a magnificent conclusion to proceedings, and those latter two tracks mentioned provide confirmation that

Nathan's more than capable of proudly carrying forward the crucial folk tradition of his forebears into the present day.

There's just one or two inconsistencies, isolated moments of weakness which may just stem from Nathan's predilection for running the gauntlet of stylistic diversity. For instance, although Nathan's command of overtone technique and Mongolian throat-singing on the galloping Naamche Bazaar is undoubtedly impressive, this quirky display might be considered "a bridge Tu-va" (to coin a particularly bad pun!) for the more conservative-minded of our folkie listeners. And o On the other hand, the necessary romantic life-contradictions of *Better Than Me* arguably deserve something more stimulating than their somewhat routine hoedown setting. Yet *The Gauntlet* still proves a strong set overall, and sure makes a mighty impression.

<http://www.nathanrogers.ca/home.html>