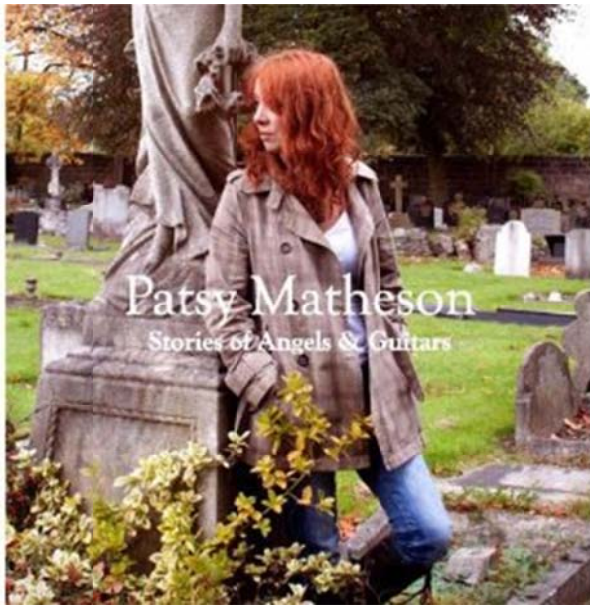


Patsy Matheson – STORIES OF ANGELS AND GUITARS (Tomorrow Records TRCD. 2)



I plead guilty to taking an inordinately long time to get this review written! I've had the album impatiently straddling my priority pile for a few weeks now, but just haven't been able to get down to it properly. Y' know what it's like: being so mad-keen to play it straightaway but at the same time you so know that would almost certainly be the wrong moment! And, having so rated Patsy's last CD (2008's *A Little Piece Of England*), I almost couldn't face playing this new one in case it don't turn out to be as good (ha! me of little faith!)... while at the same time, I knew only too well I'd have to choose the right time, one when life just couldn't be allowed to get in the way and I could savour the music and not rush the experience (the only way, IMHO, to do it justice).

So, finally, the moment of truth comes, and a verdict can be delivered. And wow! OK, I know I shouldn't have had cause to stress out and fear disappointment. Need I say more? Yeah, I gotta... First, well if ever there was a prime case of "less is more", then it's *Stories Of Angels And Guitars*. This album is an object lesson in how supremely effective just a voice and guitar can be in the right hands and with the right kind of production, and how the most unbelievably minimal degree of added embellishment can then so tellingly enhance the result. This album's also probably one of the most intimate musical experiences you could imagine, with each song so very lovingly crafted, assembled and executed. Over some 20 years of writing, performing, recording and touring within the UK acoustic scene, whether purely solo or with the justly-acclaimed band *Waking The Witch* or in consort with Clive Gregson, Patsy has forged her own personal and distinctive style, of which *Stories Of Angels And Guitars* bears all the trademark features: sensitive, feeling lyrics (of which you can hear every word!); a confident singing voice that (notwithstanding its delicately breathy nature) is capable of such incredible shades of emotion and expression through control of dynamics alone; and a quiet instrumental virtuosity whose strength lies in Patsy's ability to gauge the optimum impact of every note and phrase, when to pull back and when to strum out. In other words, no gesture is ever wasted, no angle explored without a reason. Much like the auteur approach in film, I often think – and Patsy's cinematic sixth-sense serves her well on this new batch of songs, which play much like "mind-movies", whether their subject matter be deeply introspective (the acute desperation and longing of *Water Is Over The Weir*), reflective (*Adoption*), or keenly narrative (the panoramic tragedy of the wartime-themed story-song, *Sylvia Jean*, which closes the record).

The latter catch-all observation arises before I get into any detailed discussion of the songs themselves ... well, the opening track, *Under Your Wing*, which manages to be literally angelic and guitaric (is there such a word?) at the same time, just has to be the most bitingly perfect encapsulation of writer's block this here writer's ever come across, supported by some gentle and soaringly poignant harmonies that are (probably literally) heavenly – and tantalisingly, place themselves just out of reach (exactly like that ultra-elusive next-word!). The following song, *No*

Angel, casts the concept of the angel in a different role, this time in the context of a relationship. An eye for the intrinsic truth of a situation is a hallmark of Patsy's songwriting, and she really gets to the heart of relationship issues through simple yet graphically visual portrayal of scenes from within that situation. Framing which, of course, are almost casually precise musical settings that make their point by evoking subtle shades of meaning within the lyrics whose interpretation is achieved by means of mere brushstrokes (literal and metaphorical). To which end Patsy augments her own guitar with occasional mandolin ripples and tuned percussion (xylophone, glockenspiel) and some very selective (and intensely skilful) contributions from Jon Short (double bass) and Hugh Whitaker (drums). As on Adoption, where some gorgeous yet unsettling vocal harmonies give a further dark twist to the air of melancholy resignation in the lyric. And the jazzy If You Ask Me, a classy, if deceptively relaxed, tour through the seasons expressed in terms of desire and fancy. Perhaps the disc's standout performance comes on So The Same, which expresses the core contradictions of a meaningful relationship, telling it like it is through the dramatic device of harmonised backing vocals that carry the internal dialogue. The very next song's a highlight too: the enigmatic Shining Silver, in barely two minutes, marks itself out as a masterpiece of economy, with nothing but a bare harmonium drone as accompaniment to its keening melody and mysterious, haunted subliminal sotto-voce whisperings. But don't be misled – for while in purely vocal terms Patsy herself may sometimes sound distinctly angelic, even demure, just you take heed of her lyrics, for there she'll eagerly pull her boots on and deliver the appropriate kick where needed – Hundred Guitars, for instance, takes no prisoners in drawing its specific barbed parallels.

OK, I've said enough – this is a fabulous and tremendously involving record; but I must emphasise, it so needs your time and attention, you can't just let it wash over you and expect to be bowled over by an avalanche of sound. Phil Snell's production is exemplary, genuinely and wholly simpatico, and has served Patsy's unique vision ideally, while the booklet photography by Ani McNeice is not only beautiful but utterly complementary, being thematically appropriate and evocative in all the right nuances. Stories Of Angels And Guitars is a stunningly fine album, which marks Patsy's return to recording as both an artistic triumph and a definite contender for the 2012 best-lists (already!).

Patsy will be touring in support of the new album during February and March 2012, in tandem with her erstwhile WTW compadre Becky (Bex) Mills (who will also be promoting a new solo album of her own).

www.patsymatheson.co.uk

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