

Richard Kitson – HOME AND DRY (Own Label)



Richard's a folk-blues singer-songwriter based in Barnsley, who has been making quite a name for himself on the Sheffield and South Yorkshire acoustic scene, this in spite of a distinct modesty, an innate tendency to reticence and to hide his considerable light under a medium-sized bushel. Home And Dry is in effect Richard's debut CD, since it reflects what he himself considers the best of his own songs to date (at the risk of confusing you with the background, Richard did issue a very-limited-edition release back in 2007 which majored on his passion for delta blues in both acoustic and electric modes, but this proved little more than a catalyst for reassessing his repertoire and so Home And Dry is to all intents and purposes to be regarded as his true debut).

Richard may have started his musical career in a punk band, later gravitating more significantly towards the blues, but as Home And Dry definitely reveals, his true inspirations are the late-60s troubadours Bert Jansch, Davy Graham and John Martyn, from whom he derives much of his performance style and sensibility in roughly equal measure (although it's probably the Jansch influence that feels the most pronounced).

Even though the songs on Home And Dry were written over a period of some years, they embody a striking degree of maturity and consistency, and Richard has clearly given much thought on their method of presentation, both in matters of musical arrangement and album sequencing. Taking the former, Richard has sensibly opted for a simple acoustic setting, with his own guitar the primary instrumental colouring (and a splash of harmonica here and there), but most tellingly augmented by the sympathetic contributions of a small handful of musician friends. Katriona Gilmore provides some wonderfully lyrical violin on several of the more introspective songs (also some mandolin and backing vocals), while Fyrish's Marjorie Paterson brings her sensitive cello playing to the mix (mostly in the disc's early stage); Gerry McNeice turns in some brilliantly supportive (at times almost Danny-Thompson-esque) double bass, and Leon Davies contributes soft percussive brush-strokes to a couple of key tracks.

As regards the running order, the disc's menu has been intelligently sub-divided in a kind of A-B-A format, with the more reflective, inward-looking material of the "A" sections bookending a lighter-toned, bluesier "B" section that functions almost as an emotional interlude. The first three songs gravitate towards a kind of chamber-folk texture for a sequence that takes us from the seagull-swooping sound-portrait of Robin Hood's Bay and the gentle romance of Elope and culminates in the disc's simply expressed yet almost unbearably heartfelt emotional core, Cruel Road, written in response to the death of a close friend. After which comes a kind of antidote with the distinctly Martyn-esque laid-back cool folk-blues-with-a-touch-of-jazz of Lay Down Your Loving Arms and the attractively ruminative Hold The Line, forming a kind of bridge to the "B" section's laconic observational Redundant Blues.

There's an appealing little instrumental cut (Gypsy Vanner), otherwise the middle few tracks are all quite bluesy, featuring just Richard and his guitar, and appearing more insubstantial, slighter in character than those either side, although Gamblin' Woman features some fine slide playing and lacks nothing in bluesy passion and Low Tide has a certain raggy charm.

Take My Hand's another very Martyn-esque creation, and My Love closes the disc's "B" section with possibly its least satisfying number, the closest it comes to pastiche (but hey, still pretty respectable at that, and redeemed by Richard's superbly nifty guitar playing where easy inventiveness well sidesteps derivative cliché-mongering).

The disc's closing trio of songs, though less lavishly scored than the first, brings us back to masterly reflection with the Chapmanesque rambling guitar setting for Tears which introduces a tender and delicate lullaby that resonates with All My Trials, following which we experience the considered meditation of These Streets. Finally, the closer, Home And Dry itself, lives up to the double-entendre of its title by couching what amounts to a quite bleak lonesomeness within an almost jaunty little ukulele-driven riff, and dries up almost prematurely in mid-air: home safe, yes, but at the same time dry in the sense of being bereft of a loved one. Richard is to be congratulated for producing a keen personal statement that's also warmly accessible; his guitar playing is pretty stunning throughout, though with a very natural approach to both phrasing and attack that refuses to shout its technique but instead is content to quietly impress the listener. If there's any small deficiency to be found in this album, then it's an intermittent quality of tonal flatness that surfaces in Richard's singing voice, which is perhaps born of a lack of confidence; but that's all I can find to say against this unassumingly satisfying disc.

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