

## Savant – SCRAPBOOK (Own label, no catalogue number)



Savant is a duo from the Dearne Valley area, consisting of guitarist Bryan Taylor and singer Howard (Anxious) Andrews, both of whom you'll doubtless have seen playing solo around the region's acoustic venues at some time in the past couple of years. Their teaming, which was premièred shortly before their acclaimed recent appearance in the legendary Acoustic Rotherham showcase series, is an inspired one, with the proven talents of each artist proving genuinely complementary to one another. Their approach to their chosen material is, one might say, truly savant, in the literal sense of knowing

– for they're clearly aware of, and can play to, their own individual strengths as performers. Savant are also savvy, in that, while they know their own minds and style, and the musical relationship between Howard and Bryan is a symbiotic one, they are also aware of, and can play to, their target audience, with whom they possess a winning way – as anyone who's witnessed their live act will affirm.

So to their debut full-length CD, then. Scrapbook's 17 brief tracks intersperse songs with instrumental pieces (at a ratio of 11 to 6); the songs are a mixed bunch, comprising five jointly-penned numbers, three covers and three trad pieces, whereas the instrumentals are (with one exception, *The Water Is Wide*) all Bryan's own compositions. These delightful miniatures, at times somewhat reminiscent of early Ralph McTell, are delicate tone-paintings making skilled use of distinctive features such as gentle harmonics; all carried off with an air of easy accomplishment. These pleasingly flowing pieces do have a bit of a drawback in that they're almost all of a broadly similar pace and mood, so they do benefit from being scattered throughout the disc's programme.

As far as the duo's song writing is concerned, well don't expect biting political commentary or angry agit-prop, for theirs is for the most part an affectionate and sympathetic world-view, presenting snapshots of life taken from a more wistful angle, one that speaks of tolerance and understanding; the sensitive and thought-provoking *England Dreaming* is probably the pick of an impressive bunch, although it feels incomplete. Several of the songs (and most of the instrumental pieces) also bear a personal dedication (and yet the most overtly personal-seeming one, *Falling Slowly*, doesn't...). Bryan's mellifluous, tumbling guitar figures form an ideal counterpoint to Howard's lively and attractive vocal melodies and the confident delivery and full timbre of Howard's singing voice; and there's a distinct late-60s/early-70s folk-troubadour feel to these songs generally that's extremely endearing. These self-penned tracks are grouped into the disc's first half, the quality of which, on initial play throughs at any rate, led to my underestimating much of the remainder of the collection including a rather neat treatment of *High Heel Sneakers* (which works much better away from its allotted position in the sequence) and a beautifully plaintive rendition of Cat Stevens' *Sad Lisa*. Earlier on, Dougie MacLean's *Caledonia* also comes off well: it's another of those songs that's well suited to Howard's tenderly expressive and responsive approach. Howard's unaccompanied rendition of *As She Moves Through The Fair* is similarly well-considered, but I don't readily connect with the two remaining "standards" Howard tackles here, *Drink To Me Only* and *I Know Where I'm Going* (these songs clearly mean more to Howard personally, judging by the dedicatee references). I was also a touch disappointed that this well-filled CD didn't include the rather fine versions of

Scarborough Fair and Down Where The Drunkards Roll that feature in the duo's live sets. But I'd guess they're destined to grace Savant's follow up CD...?

Finally, the recording, engineered by Keith Angel, is a model of keeping things simple but effective, and ably reflects the performers' companionable personalities. This is an unpretentious, directly appealing calling-card that represents a duo who care about what they do and think carefully about how best to get it across to their audience.

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