

Stormcrow – TALES OF THE CROW (Stormcrow)



Stormcrow's a four-piece outfit based in the north-east (and not to be confused with an American rock band of the same name), who've gone through various incarnations since arising out of the ashes of local 80s bands English Smog and Malachi but have (it appears) now settled into the line-up of Mark and Amanda Hadlett, Sarah Mason and Sam Coles. Strangely, though, prior to receiving their 2010 album *Behind The Mask* for review, the only time I'd come across the Stormcrow name before was when a track of theirs, *Gargoyle*, appeared on the tremendous John Barleycorn Reborn compilation that came out a couple of years ago.

I guess Stormcrow might be classed a folk-rock band, but their instrumental complement is decidedly basic. Not that this is a problem – for they deliver a very rich, well-detailed sound that starts out punching right at the front of your speakers and resolutely stays there. Mark plays a large number of guitars and some bass, while Sam takes care of the percussion with some keyboard work here and there – and for most of the time that's all, folks, apart from what seem like fleeting appearances from guests Graham Brotton (keyboards), Ian Swinburne (lead guitar on some tracks) and Glenn Coggin (vocals). The trademark Stormcrow sound is a strident brand of acoustica which happens to have thrusting rock overtones, and sounds thoroughly up to date – apart from some slightly misjudged throwback (in production terms) sound effects which feel superfluous.

On the *Behind The Mask* album, Stormcrow had reminded me quite a bit of some of the idiosyncratic early-70s wyrd-prog-folk acts like Jan Dukes De Grey and Forest, even the nascent electric incarnation of Tyrannosaurus Rex (Beard Of Stars or Unicorn). Little has changed for *Tales Of The Crow*; once again, Mark has written virtually all the band's material, and (probably as a direct result) the majority of tracks are built around an insistent guitar riff and battering djembe rhythm. On first acquaintance with this new CD there's a feeling of slight disappointment, for at least in its early stages there doesn't feel to be quite the degree of contrast (either in the settings or the writing) this time round. But there are still some very persuasive songs here, especially those where Sam or Amanda take the lead vocal role. *Equinox* (a group composition) is a highlight, as are *New Moon Rising* (with its gorgeous multitracked Judy Dyble-vocal sound), the Tull-like *The Crow*, *Daze Of Nostalgia*, *Chasing Clouds* and *Waters Of The Moon*. If I'm honest, though, one or two of the other songs have a whiff of artificiality, even self-parody, which I feel misfires (*One May Morning* struck me particularly in this regard); to be fair, this impression of self-parody may also occasionally be given by Mark's declamatory, sometimes over-theatrical vocal performance. Happily, Stormcrow's lyrics mostly reference tradition without sending it up, concerning themselves as much with obliquely expressing the everyday inner fears of humanity in magic symbolism as with the more direct retelling of esoteric mythology or legend in line with the wyrd-folk ethic (*Green Knight*, ostensibly a song of winter, is a good example).

Tales Of The Crow is nicely packaged, with attractive artwork – but unfortunately loses points through its liner notes not being all that easily readable (it's printed in black on a dark photo background). And for some weird reason, you won't find mention of the new album on the band's website...

<http://www.stormcrow-online.co.uk>

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