

The Owl Service - THE VIEW FROM A HILL (Rif Mountain)

The acclaimed psych-folk collective has returned to recording with a vengeance this year, though it's still proving hard work keeping track of their various releases! A nine-song themed EP of winter songs, *The Burn Comes Down*, appeared a few months ago, followed in May by *The View From A Hill*, intended as the centrepiece of this series of four linked releases entitled *The Pattern Beneath The Plough*.

This is a major new project which sees The Owl Service refining both their sound and their approach to arranging traditional folksong. In a way, I guess you could say that they're bringing folk-rock back to its basics, taking an elemental stance that has its roots as much in acid-folk as in *Liege And Lief* or *Hark The Village Wait*, say. One immediately apparent feature of The Owl Service's approach is their stunning, and often experimental, use of individual resonances both instrumental-tonal and vocal-textual, which serve to bring the source material alive in a quite unique, and extremely beguiling, way yet retaining the clarity of vision necessary to convey the essence of the text. *Banks Of The Nile* is a prime example, where the fairly standard version of the narrative (referenced as from Sandy Denny/Fotheringay and *The Young Tradition*), voiced with keening clarity by Jo Lepine, is enterprisingly set to the tune Nick Dow originally used for *Jenny On The Moor* - and to strikingly appropriate effect, with an intriguing instrumental build that almost reaches the opulence of Joe Meek before pulling the plug on its reverb.

Another key element in The Owl Service's success with this bunch of traditional songs is the thoughtful choice of singer for each narrative - after all, they're now spoilt for choice! Nancy Wallace turns in a fetchingly defiant unaccompanied rendition of *Sorry The Day I Was Married*, which functions as a canny coda for *I Was A Young Man* (instrumentally the most early-Steeleye-inspired of all the arrangements on the disc), which shares the vocal duties between Dom Cooper, Jason Steel and Steven Collins. Katie English does an exquisite job on the delectable *Willie O' Winsbury*, which from its cool sitar-stroked shuffle develops more of an Appalachian bluegrass-ballad gait. *The Bold Poachers* has a brooding character that exudes as much *Grace Slick* as it does *Trees*, Jo's vocal powerfully offset by spooky clarinet, cello, electric guitar and mellotron. *Cruel Mother*, which closes the disc in style, is similarly compelling in this stark but tender new interpretation by Jo.

The eerie cello majesty of the album opener, *Polly On The Shore* (which comes complete with tolling and tinkling bells, drum-rolls and authentic vinyl crackle - very strange!) is a taster for several of the other tracks which are little more than fragmentary sketches or fleeting impressions, either deliberately basic acappella readings (eg Diana's charming *In Thorney Moor Woods part 1*) or pithy instrumental depictions that make up for their untimely brevity by their unusual, often illuminating scoring. A rustic brass canon with medieval recorders graces *Dancing At Whitsun* (informed partly no doubt by *No Roses* or *Anthems In Eden*), while trombone also features on the *Wicker Man*-style reprise of *Winsbury*; unusual some of these arrangements may be, but they seem entirely natural in their conception.

The disc's only slightly unnatural moment comes with guest Alison O'Donnell's over-aspirant vocal on *The Lover's Ghost*; but still, *The View From A Hill* gives an exhilarating bird's-eye scan across the aural patchwork of the fields of English tradition.

And the neat card digipack is in the best traditions of the label too.

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