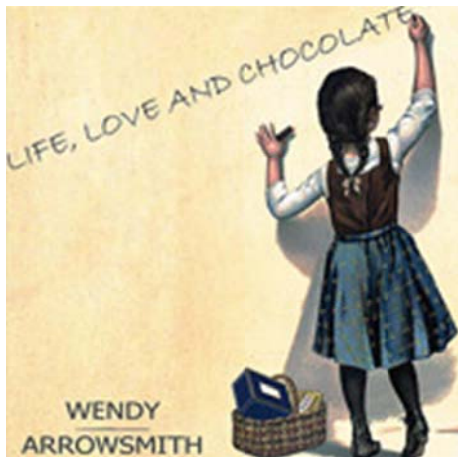


LIFE, LOVE AND CHOCOLATE - Wendy Arrowsmith (Wee Dog Records WDR. 001)



Wendy released her second full-length CD *Seeds Of Fools* just under two years ago; it was a marked progression from her debut *Now Then?* (itself pretty impressive), and showcased her own excellent songs and her grasp of tradition in almost equal measure.

For the potentially difficult album number three, Wendy's been busy cultivating her many useful contacts on the folk scene, who clearly share a keen admiration for her music, to the extent that they've lent their own considerable musical talents to the recording. This means that the sound-world of the new album is more consciously textured: a vehicle for the songs (i.e. quite literally a song-carrier), one that complements and extends Wendy's own superb singing voice (and guitar etc.) in conveying the lyrics of her own (and others') songs.

There's a wonderfully mature sensibility to the whole production in fact, which is attributable to producer Gerry McNeice's acute skill in attaining an apposite proportion and balance to subtle layering's and instrumental colourings. Or should I say, a deliciously warm, brown, mellow, yes chocolatey ambience, especially (tho' not exclusively) on the tracks which involve string players (cellist Marjorie Paterson, violinists Katriona Gilmore and Malcolm Bushby).

It's to Gerry's credit that Wendy's own musical personality is never submerged or sublimated by his understanding and sympathetic production, which keeps all the various elements complementary and in believable perspective throughout.

As far as the material goes (and preserving the chocolate-box analogy!), you'll discover within this delicious, attractively-designed package, songs with soft centres as well as some which prove marginally harder nuts to crack: here, songs from tradition and other writers nestle (as in "from a different chocolate manufacturer"!) comfortably alongside Wendy's own compositions.

Significantly, the opening track sets both the theme (*Sweeter By The Day* was inspired by a trailer for a BBC Radio 4 documentary about the closure of a chocolate factory) and the tone (rich, luxurious and tasty) of the whole album. After which, you think it can't get any better - but it does, with Shetlander Mary Ellen Odie's beautiful *Wild White Swan*, here flying gracefully aloft and resplendent with pipes (John Bushby) and cello and the gorgeous supporting voice of Sarah McQuaid. Wendy's equally sensitive treatment of Bill Adair's phenomenally powerful *Miner's Widow's Lament* (with aptly plangent concertina from Harry Scurfield) is another standout track, as is her stark,

plaintive rendition of *The Southern Girl's Reply* (from the repertoire of Jeff Warner), here given an admirably subtle banjo backing by husband Paul (and further loving caresses from Marj's cello): magic!...

Highlights those may be, but on the remainder of the tracks too Wendy's vocal presence proves as commanding as ever, whether in the role of persuasive storyteller (*The Lass O' Gowrie*, Isaac) or in personifying a specific protagonist (the hapless wife of a Kentish Riding Officer). Before the disc's bonus track (an epic, storm-tossed, cinematic remake of her award-winning tale of *The Visiter*), the CD "officially" ends on a more politically-conscious note with *Midas Men* (which features the energetic harmonica of Will Pound) and the country-style *Moody's Waltz*, a timely reflection on, and reminder of, the desirability of making music instead of war ("Change the shotgun to fiddle and bow, Feed the soul and watch the world grow").

Nice one, Wendy!... And of course, this disc is one chocolate-box-full of delights that (unlike its role-model) you can savour over and again, which is the best possible result.

<http://wendyarrowsmith.com/>