

Wendy Arrowsmith - SEEDS OF FOOLS (Own Label)



In the two years since releasing her debut CD (*Now Then?*), the multi-talented Glasgow-born, North-Yorkshire-based Wendy has become a very familiar (if close on ubiquitous - tho' I do mean that in a nice way!) face at folk clubs and festivals around the region and beyond, either as a solo performer or as one-quarter-part of the band *Blind Summat!*.

She's also scored a well-deserved hat-trick in winning songwriting competitions: at Saltburn (2007), Scarborough (*Seafest* 2008) and Ryedale (2009). *The Visitor* appeared on *Now Then?*, while the latter two are proudly included on this latest CD. Right at the outset, I

I'd say that *Seeds Of Fools* definitely fulfils, and exceeds, the promise Wendy had already showed in spades on *Now Then?* It's not quite perfect - but what it does so very well is present all the various facets of her musical personality in sensible proportion, in a sympathetic and largely very believable recording which enables her enviably many talents to be heard to really good advantage.

It's also an extremely well balanced collection, showcasing seven of her own compositions (that's half of the 14 tracks) alongside one exceptional contemporary cover, an attractive and atmospheric setting of Lady Nairne's *Land O' The Leal* (1798), and five well-contrasted traditional songs, at least two of which prove to be especially brave interpretations of classics of the repertoire. The whole disc is impressive, but the first four tracks make an especially strong impact.

The disc leads off with what can only be described as a stunning interpretation of *The Blacksmith* (adapted from an arrangement by Kim Guy from Cornwall) that eclipses virtually any other version I know. Wendy's special achievement here is to lay bare the singer's intensely fragile, volatile emotional state, creating an intriguing internal dialogue (one key moment of realisation is especially tellingly dramatised); this is achieved by thoroughly rethinking the song in terms of expressive response and then creatively reflecting this in the musical accompaniment, which marries an unsettling interruption to the metricality of the accepted bar-lines to a singularly queasy swoon of weaving fiddle and cello while the guitar part almost numbly tries to keep things calm and controlled. After the emotional turmoil of *The Blacksmith*, we're treated to

Sleep Well 'Til Morning, Wendy's 2008 competition winner, which could easily be taken for a traditional fisherman's lullaby from the Western Isles, on which Wendy's own multitracked voice is boosted with some sensitive and delicate harmonies from *The Young 'Uns*.

Then comes the first of two highly individual responses to modern-day war crises: *Holy Ground*, a cracking song by Missouri songwriter Steve Bailey, beautifully sung by Wendy and embellished with the sweetly intricate guitar of Chris Davison. This is followed by a compelling, menacing drone-based arrangement of *Cruel Mother* (featuring Blind Summit's Becks and Joolz), and Wendy's catchy and stirring anthem *The Ribbon*. Following which (space considerations preclude discussion of each and every track!) we're treated to spirited, full-sounding takes on *The Gypsy Laddie* and *Twa Recruiting Sergeants* (where Wendy's Scots lineage surfaces authentically!), and the lovely *Counting The Dolphins* (Wendy's experience of motherhood evidently informs songs written to be sung to children!), one of a clutch of Wendy's own songs which rounds off the disc in quite intimate fashion. *Gaza To Argyll* strikes home most poignantly (if a little too consciously recalling *From Clare To Here* perhaps), and the closing *Hearth Song* makes a real virtue out of its simplicity of sentiment and arrangement; with the disc's title song, however, although built around a great central concept, its theme then feels insufficiently developed to fulfil its initial promise.

Performance-wise, it's hard not to remark on just how good a singer Wendy is, her voice displaying tremendous presence and her singing having also developed increased assurance (especially in the handling of contours and dynamics) since *Now Then?* (itself a not unimpressive demonstration of her vocal versatility); even a mild imperiousness, or the occasional trace of self-conscious articulation (the tarrily legato approach to John Anderson, for instance) doesn't spoil the ship. Instrumentally, Wendy's very capable too (although she's the first to over-modestly undersell her accomplishments, which here embrace guitar, banjola, mandolin, whistles, accordion and bodhrán!) - she plays to genuinely enhance the musical landscape rather than call attention to tricky note-spinning.

As regards the recording, I could criticise a few matters of internal balance - e.g. Marjorie Paterson's fabulous cello playing is unduly recessed, too far in the background, and Wendy's own guitar sounds over-forward at times (heavy and clanging on *The Ribbon*), as are Joolz's congas on *Cruel Mother* maybe - but these are minor details that will in all probability not seriously mar your enjoyment of this well-rounded, truthful (and well-packaged and appealingly designed) portrait of Wendy's artistry.

www.wendyarrowsmith.com

<http://www.myspace.com/wendyarrowsmith>