
FIONA BEVAN
TALK TO STRANGERS
NAVIGATOR RECORDS/THE
PLANET CO

pop

Initially it's the glorious halo of snow white curls that attracts you to Fiona Bevan's debut album; don't let anybody tell you cover art isn't important. As the beam traces the disc (doesn't have the same ring to it as needle on vinyl!), it's the extraordinary voice that commands attention, an instrument of sweet

beauty lying somewhere between Kate Bush and quirky American folk singer Anais Mitchell. Finally, it is the sheer infectiousness of this literate and, at times, complex music that sinks its claws into you. Having written a global Number One for boy band One Direction, Bevan clearly has an ear for a hook, but don't let her clientele cloud your vision, for this is popular music with intelligence.

The 12 songs were all penned by Bevan and lyrically draw heavily upon her literature background, with numerous film and literary references. Album opener 'Rebel Without A Cause' metaphorically references James Dean in a commentary about the London riots, whilst 'Exorcist' is inspired by Daphne Du Maurier's 'Rebecca'. Despite the uplifting elegance of its melody, 'Us And The Darkness' is cloaked in the heartbreak of a shattered romance, and 'Dial D For Denial' is simply pop artistry.

Talk To Strangers was recorded direct on analogue equipment, with Bevan playing everything from ukulele, piano, guitar, harp, violin, double bass and accordion, truly a one-woman show. The crowning glory is album closer 'Last Days Of Decadence', a lone piano reflecting the emotional ebbs and flows of her exhortations on the financial crisis. Four years in the making, *Talk To Strangers* is pop imbued with folk sensibilities, as idiosyncratic as it is enchanting, and Fiona Bevan as startling a talent as any to emerge in recent years. *Trevor J. Leeden*



LAKE STREET DIVE

BAD SELF PORTRAITS

SIGNATURE SOUNDS/THE PLANET CO

soul/pop

In the cases of singer Rachael Price, multi-instrumentalist Mike Olson, pianist/bassist Bridget Kearney, and percussionist Mike Calabrese, the New England Conservatory Of Music can be justly proud of its alumni. Originally forming as a hybrid jazz/country ensemble, over the last 10 years Lake Street Dive's sound has evolved into a hook-laden, infectious potpourri of soul inspired pop, culminating in *Bad Self Portraits*, their outstanding sixth album.

Given their background, it's no surprise that the playing is uniformly outstanding throughout and sonically it is also an absolute treat; this deserves better than a mere MP3 download. Creatively, there are twists and turns around every corner, and the references come flooding out. Traces of Brittany Howard's Alabama Shakes are in the strutting Memphis soul of the opening title track, and there's plenty of the Motor City's up-tempo sweet soul in 'You Go Down Smooth'. The four-part boy/girl West Coast sunshine harmonies are omnipresent, and 'Bobby Tanqueray' could be Amy Winehouse fronting the Mamas & Papas; it's simply irresistible. There are Beatlesque guitar riffs on 'Just Ask' and 'Rabid Animal' has a vocal performance that is Brill Building reincarnate. If there is a song pinnacle, then it's surely the seductive 'Better Than', a slow churning rhythm underscoring Price's smouldering

vocals. Rachael Price's performance is worth the price of admission alone; she is blessed with the most exquisite of voices, no histrionics, no affectations, she's Carole, she's Dusty, she's Martha, she's Cass and Winehouse - she's a star. After a decade of tinkering, Lake Street Dive has finally found the right combination and *Bad Self Portraits*, effervescent and as fresh as morning dew, will stand amongst the very best of 2014. *Trevor J. Leeden*

ON RECORD

NEW RELEASES





**WILLIE
WATSON**
FOLK SINGER
VOL. 1

ACONY/THE PLANET
CO

folk

David Rawlings and Gillian Welch are justifiably selective about who they

work with. And let's face it, they've deliberately carved themselves a very specific niche - if you want to play an acoustic instrument into a nice room and one or two microphones, they're your team. There's a photograph in the centrefold of this debut solo album from ex-Old Crow Medicine show member that says it all; a big empty white room (Rawlings and Welch's Woodland Sound Studios in East Nashville), Watson sitting in a chair with an acoustic guitar, and three microphones set up over the far side of the room. Nothing else.

And that's all you hear on this volume of ten traditional folk tunes; Watson singing and either playing a banjo or six-string accompaniment with an occasional sprinkle of harmonica. And yet it's relentlessly riveting. Rawlings sums it up: "There's a lot of weight in the way Willie performs." Indeed, he sounds as if he's lived each moment of these timeless tales of tragedy, triumph and desire.

Opening with a song as ubiquitous as 'Midnight Special' is a brave move, no doubt designed to make the immediate statement that Watson will grasp each composition with both hands and make it his very own. Though it's tough to single out highlights, the Memphis Slim blues 'Mother Earth' is unforgettable paired with the up-tempo banjo take on 'Mexican Cowboy'. Utah Phillips' 'Rock Salt And Nails' flows with life-sized melancholy, whilst 'Bring It With You When You Come' and 'Kitty Puss' are gleeful.

Martin Jones

BAP KENNEDY

LET'S START AGAIN

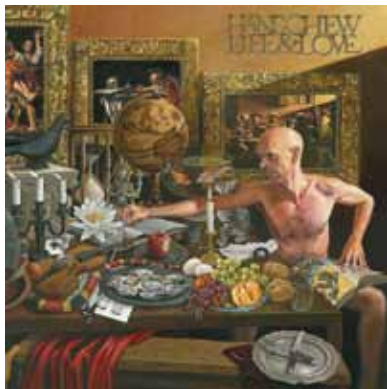
PROPER/THE PLANET CO.

roots

Bap Kennedy's sixth solo studio album is so understated and sing-along friendly that it's hard to equate the Ulsterman with the Celtic rock band

(The Energy Orchard) he fronted back in the '80s. Brian Kennedy's elder brother shows a Dylan bent to the extent that at least two tracks - 'Revelation Blues' and 'Domestic Blues' - could pass as parodies of His Bobness. Elsewhere on *Let's Start Again*, Kennedy's easy-going and hook-laden country-pop cum Americana sounds

like it was recorded in Nashville rather than Northern Ireland. A brief excursion south of the border, in 'King Of Mexico', provides a welcome contrast. But only in the outstanding 'The Truth Is Painful' does the singer-songwriter appear to move outside of his comfort zone. *Tony Hillier*



HANS CHEW

LIFE & LOVE

PROPER/PLANET

soul/blues/r&b

What a cracking record! Two years after his critically acclaimed debut album, *Tennessee And Other Stories*, the New York based pianist/vocalist's sophomore effort has taken the assuredness of its predecessor to another level. The self-taught pianist provides the bedrock for his band as they distil hefty doses of Southern soul, blues, country and New Orleans R&B into a combustible, raw barnstormer, and opting to record the album live in the studio adds to the ramshackle immediacy of the songs.

The ghosts of the Allman Brothers haunt the album, particularly in guitarist Dave Cavallo's frenzied solos. After a restrained opening instrumental refrain, 'Chango' explodes into a writhing mass of tumbling riffs and pounding piano that is simply exhilarating in its ferocity. On more than one occasion, Chew conjures up images of *Tumbleweed Connection*, both

vocally and with his keyboard work. The stunning ballad, 'Tom Hughes Town', the rolling barrelhouse of 'Love' and the glorious slow burning 'The Wedding Song' all evoke memories of Elton's finest hour, and a time when he made great records. 'Mercy' hints at Neil Young's 'Southern Man' before erupting into a sonic mix of gospel choir, pumping horns and searing guitar. The father/son tale of 'The Supplanter's Song' is an epic bearing Led Zeppelin undertones, with Chew injecting a snaking salsa groove below his call and response vocals. One of the strengths of the album is Chew's writing, and an ability to harness a feeling of déjà vu with a refreshing vitality. Album closer, 'Junker's Blues', encompasses all this; it is dominated by the instantly recognisable barrelhouse piano riff of New Orleans masters such as Professor Longhair and James Booker, yet remains furiously original. He may currently be in the shadows of the likes of the Tedeschi Trucks Band and Endless Boogie, but Hans Chew's day in the sun will surely come.

Trevor J. Leeden

IAN MATTHEWS

THE ART OF OBSCURITY

FURROW/THE PLANET CO.

folk

Former Fairport Convention front man Iain Matthews has called *The Art Of Obscurity* a farewell to his long and winding solo career. "There's a certain bittersweet truth to the title," he says. "But I have no quarrel with fame or lack of it." The record is all about rekindling, realisation and redemption.

2014 is shaping up as a busy year. Matthews has just come off the US tour celebrating Gene Clark's 1974 cult album, *No Other*, that also featured members of Beach House, Fleet Foxes and Grizzly Bear. Rumour is it's coming to the Sydney Opera House.

There's autumn on this record. You're asking the big questions of your life. Happy with the answers?

It's all there. Sometimes four seasons in one song. I'm searching for some kind of clarity, same as everyone else. I don't really think I've come up with answers. Are there answers?

The song at the heart of this record is 'Music'. "Music you will take me higher, it's to you that I aspire..."

It was written by my son-in-law, Nemo Jones. He no longer pursues music as a career. He became disillusioned and gave up. But he made this mind blowing album, *Superfruity*, about four years ago. Every song is a fucking gem and no one knows

about him, or his music. This song was his cry for understanding, and I related to it one thousand percent.

Music gives but it also asks a lot too.

It's a real snakes and ladders kind of existence. There have been a couple things I wish I hadn't had to do. Like playing '60s cover songs for loggers, up in the far west of Canada. But these are more life experiences than regrets.

Are you the type of person to hold grudges? Did you feel shafted by Fairport Convention?

Grudges, passing judgment, competition. I work on those little devils daily. In hindsight, it was part of the greater plan. They did what they had to do, to enhance their experience and in doing so, unwittingly also enhanced mine. Their action forced me out of my cosy existence, into a place where I had to think for myself and develop whatever talent I had. Now I thank them for what they did.

As an interpreter, you've always had impeccable taste. What's been your favourite interpretation?

Tim Buckley's 'Morning Glory'. Not the Fairport version but the one I recorded with Sara Hickman (on 1994's *Dark Ride*).

You were one of the first champions of Gene Clark as a solo writer. 'Tried So Hard', 'Polly', 'Spanish Guitar'. What drew you to him?

His poetic honesty and his naive musical ability to find the sequence less travelled. It's funny you ask about Gene. This year is all about Gene. In January, I went to the USA to participate in a live re-enactment of his



album, *No Other*, and now I'm part of a team, compiling a five-disc box set of what we consider to be his life's work.

What connection do you feel with your version of 'Woodstock'?

It's been through several evolutions for me, to the point where we now have a platonic working relationship. I don't play it all the time. When I do perform it, there's a freshness about it that permeates the air.

What's the strangest place you've heard your music being played?

I did hear 'Shake It' being played once, as I sat waiting for my lawyer to call me into his office to renegotiate my Mushroom contract. Not bad timing.

What do people shout at you in the street?

Get out of the fucking way, old man.

Christopher Hollow



THE FURROW COLLECTIVE

AT OUR NEXT MEETING

FURROW/THE PLANET CO.

folk

With its four members established singers and players in their own right, The Furrow Collective could rightly claim to be something of a young British traditional folk supergroup. While most of the songs that Alasdair Roberts, Emily Portman, Lucy Farrell and Rachel Newton interpret on their debut album as a quartet are well-roasted chestnuts, their familiar narratives at least come wrapped in relatively fresh arrangements. The Collective's renditions of time-honoured ballads from the English and Scottish folk canon might best be described,

albeit ambivalently, as deliciously dour, even though they're delivered with a wee bit more passion and chutzpah than, say, The Unthanks or Kate Rusby. Roberts' singing come as a welcome contrast to the three female leads, whose voices are not dissimilar. The ladies are, however, extremely effective in back-up unison and harmony mode. Although the accompaniment is decidedly sparse, it's genuinely eerie and imaginative in versions of the 17th century ballad 'Demon Lover' and the popular Scottish ditty 'Skippin Barfit Through The Heather'. The blend of instruments (guitar, fiddle, viola, harp, harmonium, concertina, banjo and musical saw) is interesting. The decision to morph from 'Handsome Molly' to 'Our Captain Calls' is logical given the songs' thematic connection. *Tony Hillier*



**ALFREDO
RODRIGUEZ**
**THE INVASION
PARADE**

MACK AVENUE/THE
PLANET CO.

latin jazz

If you're gonna resurrect two of the world's most widely covered Latin standards, it's probably prudent to stand 'em on their heads. To his credit, that's exactly what bandleader/jazz pianist Alfredo Rodriguez - another brilliant young musician

off the seemingly inexhaustible Cuban assembly line - has executed in *The Invasion Parade*. This reviewer has not heard a more radical reading of the Latin folk staple 'Guantanamera' - reinvented here as an avant-garde jazz piece - or a darker, more sombre rendition of the normally jaunty 'Quizas, Quizas, Quizas' (Perhaps). Benefiting two of the originals on an album co-produced by revered veteran Quincy Jones is the supernova Esperanza Spalding, whose ultra classy singing and bass playing illuminate 'El Guije' and duet (with percussion player Pedrito Martinez) 'Snails In The Creek', the set's earthiest and most ethnically-inclined work. Inventive brass charts combine with Cuban percussion prowess and a vocal chorus to elevate the timba-influenced 'Cubismo' to set pick status. *Tony Hillier*



DOWNCHILD CAN YOU HEAR THE MUSIC

LINUS ENTERTAINMENT/THE
PLANET CO.

blues

Veteran Canadian blues band Downchild return with this new release after a four year hiatus from studio recording. Their 17th album in a venture spanning over four decades, *Can You Hear The Music* confirms they've lost none of their crackling energy or stylistic panache. Whereas the band's previous CD, *I Need A Hat*, featured special guest musicians Colin Linden, Colin James, Wayne Jackson and Dan

Aykroyd to help celebrate its 40th anniversary, here it reverts to its regular well-oiled lineup that has remained unchanged in nearly twenty years. Led by guitarist Don Walsh, the band's chief songwriter who doubles on harmonica, sonorous voiced singer Chuck Jackson, saxophone player Pat Carey, keyboardist Michael Fontara, bass player Gary Kendall, drummer Mike Fitzpatrick and part-time band member Peter Jeffrey on trumpet perform with unbridled enthusiasm. Of the album's 11 original compositions, Jackson contributes two and Wall one. Jump blues has always been the band's calling card. It's made them a blues institution

in their hometown of Toronto, spirited horn charts driving songs like 'Fasten Your Seat Belt' and the CD's title tune. Around the halfway mark the set loses momentum, regaining vigour on 'One In A Million', an old school R&B stroll punctuated by vocal harmonies and lyrical Lowell George style licks from Walsh's slide guitar. 'I'm Always Here For You', 'Don't Wait Up For Me' and 'Worn In' are all anchored by quintessential Chicago shuffle rhythms, the slow-paced 'Blue Moon Blues' is a vehicle for Walsh's well-measured fretwork, and the instrumental closer, 'Scattered', showcases harp tones that sound like a thundering freight train. *Al Hensley* **R**



LOS MAMBO JAMBO IMPACTO INMINENTE

EL TORO/PLANET CO.

rock 'n' roll / blues

The business plan of Barcelona-based El Toro Records could well make it the Spanish equivalent of Britain's Ace Records the way it resurrects vintage blues, soul, R&B and rockabilly jewels from the vaults of early American independent labels. However, it also issues new releases from top international artists as well as prime local talent. Out of

the latter category comes Los Mambo Jambo, an instrumental quartet that on one hand seems lost in a '50s time warp, while at the same time updating the sound of legendary proto rock 'n' roll bands like Johnny & The Hurricanes and The Champs. From the jump blues of the opening title track, the guitar/tenor sax/upright bass and drums unit jubilantly shifts into a rhythm & blues matrix on 'Un Baile Hipnotico' ahead of archetypal surf rockers 'Sombras Del Este' and 'Carreraderatas' that recall the music of Freddie King, The Ventures and others.

Tremolo guitar and honking sax dance around each other on the bluesy 'Plomo En Tus Parpados', a twangy Duane Eddy-style guitar pervades on 'Poderosa' and "El Cadaver Que Vino A Cenar", and the propulsive mambo of 'Fregona' gives way to bump-and-grind burlesque on 'G-String Murders'. *Impacto Inminente* takes the listener back to the pre-disco record hop days like they were still here. These cats weren't even born when early rock 'n' roll ruled the radio, but they're as hip to the music as a top-line '50s band reincarnated. *Al Hensley*