

The Imagined Village - Empire & Love (ECC Records)



An intriguing folk 'supergroup', spearheaded by Afro Cely System's Simon Emmerson, the project initially developed as a loose collective of musicians, launching at Womad 2007 and releasing a debut album on Peter Gabriel's Real World label, featuring a variety of guest singers. Since that time the personnel has stabilised with a line up of Martin and Eliza Carthy, Chris Wood, Andy Gangadeen (drums), Emmerson (cittern), Simon Richmond (keyboards), Ali Friend (bass), Sheema Mukherjee (sitar), Barney More Brown (cello) and Johnny Kalsi (dhol, tabla).

As the instrumentation would suggest, this isn't your usual folk ensemble but that's all part and parcel of their manifesto to interpret traditional folk material in non-traditional, world music, beats friendly fashion.

They lay their cards on the table with an impressive six minute reworking of My Son John which lays tabla and sitar over puts a crunching marching rhythm and timely updates the song's Napoleonic setting to the present day war in Afghanistan and Iraq, swapping cannon balls for landmines.

Close on eight minutes, Sweet Jane follows, an adaptation of a Wood song blended with a Mukherjee sitar line that quickly sets and sustains a steady rhythmic drive that billows around a 60s psychedelic vibe. That's also true of their reimagining of their treatment of Scarborough Fair (sung here by Wood but, of course, first featured on Carthy's 1965 debut) which, floating on the back of sitar clouds, sounds as though it might have come from a trip folk remake of Zabriskie Point.

A similar cosmic vibe informs the quirky Space Girl, a Ewan McColl curio about intergalactic miscegenation on which Eliza Carthy takes lead to a backdrop of bleeps, clanks, Ottoman market fiddle and snake charmer sway.

If all this has the Arran sweater brigade breaking out in hives, they'll be relieved to hear a relatively conservative reading of Byker Hill with Martin Carthy leading it through the hiccuping rhythm. Of course it does erupt mid-section into a goblin rave with fiddle and percussion frenzy and an extract from Coal Not Dole, an 80s song written by Kent miner's wife Kay Sutcliffe.

And, other than, the tabla drone and hand percussion, The Handweaver And The Factory Maid is reassuringly unlikely to give traditionalists too many palpitations. Likewise Lark In The Morning on which, the only guest vocalist, Jackie Oates harmonises with Eliza Carthy against salt air tanged fiddle and percussion and electronica that pair aural images of bird calls and the sea crashing over rocks.

Segueing out of the darkly sung Rosebuds In June, they'll also be pleased to discover that Mrs Preston's Hornpipe shows that some folk forms brook no tinkering. On the other hand, traditional jig Mermaid lopes along sounding remarkably like Eliza Carthy had a copy of Stackridge's clumpfest Slark to hand when she was doing the arranging.

Scarborough Fair gets a six minute album closing reprise, this time shorn of the Asian spices and replaced with dark rumbling strings, but not before Carthy Snr deconstructs Slade's Cum On Feel The Noize, reinventing it as a slow, world weary lament that could have come from a broken down music hall. You'll never hear the song the same way again, but then that's true of pretty much everything they touch.

www.myspace.com/theimaginedvillage

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