

reviews

CDs



Here's the Tender Coming The Unthanks

Rablablous Music/EMI, 6871222

The artists formerly known as Rachel Unthank and The Winterset return with a third album, shortened name and an expanded line-up.

Here's The Tender Coming has already garnered rave reviews from the big papers, and following the group's nomination for the 2008 Mercury Music Prize, and an appearance on BBC2's prestigious *Later... with Jools Holland*, it seems The Unthanks are now fully embraced by the mainstream music fraternity.

Perhaps surprisingly, given their near pop star status, this album has more of a traditional heart than its predecessors 'Cruel Sister' and 'The Bairns'. While those drew from sources as varied as Bonny Prince Billy and Robert Wyatt, *Here's The Tender Coming* stays mostly with songs learned from family and friends, along with a selection from big folk names like Nic Jones, Ewan MacColl and Lal Waterson.

What sisters Becky and Rachel do best is tell these stories with intimacy and beauty; their plaintive, unadorned voices served by the sophisticated and sumptuous arrangements to create captivating and affecting moments in time that cause the hairs on the back of your neck to tingle. The Unthank spell is cast most notably on Anne Briggs' 'Living By The Water' – featuring Becky's finest vocal performance to date – and a devastatingly measured take on 'Annachie Gordon'. Rachel too surpasses herself on 'The Testimony of Patience Kershaw', embodying the character behind this account of nineteenth century labouring hardship without losing musicality.

This isn't yet their masterpiece. On the album's sole original composition, manager/producer Adrian McNally finds the limit of his considerable talents with the lyrically clunky, though impressively ambitious 'Lucky Gilchrist' (written for a departed friend). And you'll need to be quick with the stop button to prevent the

nauseatingly jaunty Scottish music-hall number, 'Betsy Bell' from destroying the magic conjured by the deeply moving title track.

But these are minor niggles within the context of a record that marks an accomplished and exciting stride forward in the career of this unique and spellbinding musical family.

www.the-unthanks.com

Tim Chipping

Frost Bites Belshazzar's Feast

WildGoose Records, WGS366CD

I'm a sucker for a Christmas album. Rousing choruses, massed vocals, jolly tunes... They're not entirely absent here, but neither are they to the fore. The overall feeling is dignified, restrained, sombre even. Opener the 'Cherry Tree Carol' has a major key tune – it could be played as a waltz, but is sung quite slowly over sustained, sometimes rather menacing, chords then segues into 'Yuleogy', a Paul Hutchinson instrumental of glacial beauty. Similarly on the closing track, the 'Hampshire Mummer's Song', they don't play up the potentially rollicking tune, or the feel-good spirit of lines such as 'Then bring us some of your Christmas ale/And likewise your Christmas beer', emphasising instead the spirit of the succeeding couplet 'For when another Christmas comes/We may not all be here'. The resulting arrangement – one of several to feature Pete Flood's percussion – is entirely effective. In fact the only track which doesn't really work for me is Walter Pardon's 'One Cold Morning in December'. I can imagine that live the two Pauls wring plenty of humour out of this song, but on CD it fails to sparkle.

It goes without saying that the duo's playing is exemplary throughout. But since – unusually for them – songs outnumber tunes, it is worth commending Paul Sartin's singing. On early Belshazzar's albums I felt that, after years of classical training, he was still working out how to tackle traditional songs. He's discovered the knack now – not by adopting artificial folkly mannerisms, but by singing very naturally. In fact, his singing and speaking voice recognisably belong to the same person – always a plus in my book.

Finally, I was surprised to see, on opening the CD cover, that my name appeared in the list of thanks. Let me assure any cynics that this wasn't thanks in advance for a positive review; my only contribution was to provide them with



the source of 'King Herod and the Cock'. And a fine job they've made of it.

www.wildgoose.co.uk

Andy Turner

Make Me a Dancer Monster Ceilidh Band

own label, MCB001CD



The Monsters on this home-recorded debut album are Amy Thatcher (accordion, calling), Carly Blain (fiddle), David de La Haye (electric basses) and Kieran Szifris (mandocello). Having looked at their website and their MySpace site, I soon discovered that the core line-up on this CD is augmented or exchanged with a further six band associates described as 'The Minions, who become a part of the Monster sound when needs call!'

Having listened to the CD a number of times, I was able to appreciate the outstanding quality of the musicianship; having read the brief CD booklet, I was starting to get to grips with the way the Monsters work. The accompanying promo sheet indicates the environment in which they are constantly developing their ground-breaking approach, taking the ceilidh tradition into mainstream dance clubs to a completely new audience.

But, I suspect that this music works best live, and that the essence of what it's all about is very hard to capture and convey in a recording, however good the musicians may be and however good the sound quality of that recording. The notion of a non-stop ceilidh night is either fantastic or frightening, depending considerably on the age of the participant.

I'm sorry to say that I probably won't play the Monsters' CD very often, but if they were to come to Manchester's newly re-furbished and re-opened Band on the Wall, I'd go and see them live.

www.monsterceilidhband.co.uk

Jenny Coxon

The Life of Lily Ruth Notman

Mrs Casey Music, MCRCD9002

From the opening strains of 'The Hedger and Ditcher', the first track on this jewel of an album, it's clear that this young lady is indeed something rare and special: her clear vocals shine as, to a background of birdsong and