



Chris Smither

CHRIS SMITHER

Call Me Lucky Signature Sounds SIG CD 2093



Chris Smither has the magic ability to weave words that float in and around a theme, drawing you in, then keeping you mesmerised as the verses unfurl. Both head and heart are engaged by Chris's creations and *Call Me Lucky* has some really excellent

examples... *Down To The Sound*, *By The Numbers*, *Everything On Top*, and *Lower The Humble* all have a captivating, wistful, ethereal quality. But Chris also has a bluesier, more rock'n'roll side which surfaces on his song *The Blame's On Me* and his versions of Chuck Berry's *Maybellene* and the Mississippi Sheiks' *Sitting On Top Of The World*. Chris has such a recognisable individual sound, both vocally and playing guitar, that his recorded performance of Lennon & McCartney's *She Said She Said* feels as though he was the actual writer of the song.

This CD (Chris's eighteenth) has a ten-track 'A Side' on one disc, and a six-track 'B Side' on a second because he went into the studio with the intention of recording eight originals and two cover songs (those on CD 1) but, on impulse, he, his fellow musicians and his regular producer David Goodrich also recorded second versions of some of the songs featuring quite different arrangements.

The song that undergoes the biggest transformation is *Everything On Top* developing from the gentle, delicate delivery on CD 1 to, on CD 2, a full-on high energy electric blast with Chris sounding remarkably like Bruce Springsteen! Drummer Billy Conway really drives this version along but he can also drop the rhythm to a whisper as required. Keith Gary, Matt Lorenz, Mike Meadows, and David Goodrich show versatility playing a variety of instruments sympathetically behind Chris's own guitar playing. There is no bass player in the line-up, leaving room for the acoustic instruments to be heard clearly in the mix.

Coming after his 50-year career retrospective double CD *Still On The Levee* in 2104, *Call Me Lucky* proves that, at the age of 73, Chris Smither is still a creative, stimulating and vital artist.

smither.com

Dave Peabody

TOBY HAY

The Longest Day The State 51 Conspiracy CON214CD



The light's just dimming as I type these words and as I gaze across my garden from the study to the copse just beyond, the hedge frames two sides of the hill behind, in the twilight. It's a peaceful sight at any time but just now with Toby Hay's title

track spinning in the background it's entirely appropriate. His guitar playing is butterfly light and with bucolic support from a small ensemble of brass, percussion and various strings, the music is the equivalent of dappled light playing through the branches of a woodland. Debut album *The Gathering* released last year was one of those recordings which kept nagging at the back of your head for repeat plays, here was a guitarist so connected to place – in Toby's case Rhayader in Wales – that it seemed to form naturally within his music; one listen is to be transported.

Stylistically kin to Jim Ghedi, his northern cousin, both have the happy knack of turning out melodies that speak of the physical as well as the more ancient. (Their upcoming joint album will be one to savour.) That doesn't mean Hay's stood still and gazed inward with this new offering. Whilst obviously still happy with his own backyard, *At The Bright Hem Of God* is a glistening, gliding thing redolent of the Welsh hills and a huge sky, at the same time observing the smaller details that happen without anyone really noticing each and every day. It sent chills down my spine. Equally evocative *Late Summer In Boscastle* catches Hay just as concentrated and slightly off his patch, listening to the tide and natural sounds, pushing the boundaries of his influence.

Though England's his calling, touring over in the States turned out to be a positive thing, forcing him to write a tribute to the harsh urban environment of Chicago. *Leaving Chicago* is written with an easy roll and the motion of a train winding through a vast landscape, whilst the slow starting *Marvin The Mustang From Montana* has slight Western and blues tinges, hovering up other influences. The playful and brief *Bear's Dance* turns out a fiddle duet in praise of his border collie (named Bear should you ask) – great bowing from David Grubb incidentally. All this and a suite *Curlew Part 1 & Part 2* into

which are woven fabrics of history, lore and personal experience. Inspired by a bird whose call and cry is sadly becoming less common, the guitar suitably disturbed as it chimes the chords of decline.

Recorded with precision and detail in an astonishing four-day burst of creativity at the splendidly named Giant Wafer studio, mixed by brother Tim and produced by the man himself, aided by a simple sleeve with fascinating notes and thoughts on each track, Toby Hay has produced a small package of wonder. Listen to it in your quieter moments, the contents are thrilling.

tobyhay.com

Simon Jones

BRYONY GRIFFITH

Hover Selwyn Music SYNMCDD009

ROBBIE SHERRATT

Provenance Robbie Sherratt RS01



Here are two fiddle-centred albums of invitingly contrasting character, both comparative rarities on the market even in the narrow field of fiddle albums, but with an interesting and unexpected common denominator, the involvement of Ian Stephenson (not a fiddle player, but a mean guitarist and a skilled producer/engineer).

Bryony Griffith's new album is that rare beast, a quintessentially English solo fiddle album, but with the above-mentioned difference. *Hover* is her second solo CD, but her first wholly instrumental outing. Consisting entirely of "traditional tunes for an English fiddle player", it's very much a what-it-says-on-the-tin job – but a thoroughly excellent one at that. Bryony's sparky, honest-to-goodness playing style is justly famed, and the sheer vigour and fun with which she invests each bow stroke makes for both compelling and stimulating listening. There's an immediacy to Bryony's playing that's thoroughly captivating whether she's tackling hornpipes or tunes for morris or rapper dance; but there's also a flowing elegance that complements the attack. This juxtaposition undoubtedly stems from Bryony's background in playing for dancing (including of course the Demon Barber Roadshow), yet her playing and arrangements also exhibit considerable sensitivity and imagination. Especially intriguing is her conversion of the South Yorkshire manuscript tune *Burnett's Jig* into a slow air (now *that* takes some doing!). The disc is equally divided into solo fiddle excursions and selections on which Ian deftly yet fiercely accompanies and supports Bryony, either on guitar or double bass – the latter's cheeky syncopations spicing up *Radstock* (on this issue's *fRoots 69* compilation) and the *Hodgson Square Hornpipe*, for instance.

I can best recommend *Hover* by saying that anyone who thinks they'll get bored with a whole album of tunes played on the fiddle will have their expectations well and truly dashed by Bryony's stimulating playing, her artistry and good humour.

bryonygriffith.com

Robbie Sherratt's name is undoubtedly less well known than Bryony Griffith's right now, but *Provenance*, his debut album, may well change that at a stroke. Robbie hails from North Staffordshire and he proudly embraces the traditional music of his home region, hitherto somewhat under-represented on the circuit, yet in a manner befitting a classical violinist who's studied at the Sibelius Academy. His instrument is the five-string fiddle, and with it he confidently desists from

merely reproducing fiddle tunes in 'the usual' shape or format. He retains a strong sense of continuity of folk tradition while embracing modes of arrangement more akin to modern-day classical music. His chosen accompanists play oboe, bassoon, cello, concertina and occasionally vibraphone, and Ian Stephenson's supportive guitar makes an appearance unobtrusively driving along some of the album's tracks. Robbie's homage to his native Potteries is cemented by his borrowing of a theme from the landmark first symphony (*The Gothic*) by that region's composer Haver-gal Brian (an underestimated figure in 20th Century English music if ever there was one).

Robbie's own playing is always carefully considered, and yet it's also often shot through with a feeling of almost gleeful abandon, as on the decidedly sprightly *Mooted Jigs* set, while not without a certain demonstrative flair. Finally, Robbie also treats us to two songs, and though he's clearly not developed this skill to the same extent as his instrumental prowess, the songs – *Old Wooden Plough* and *Oxford Murder* – are certainly worth exhuming, and Robbie makes a good case for them.

Any listener picking up this album in search of traditional-styled fiddle playing will have his/her expectations confounded – but in a thoroughly stimulating way.

robbiesherratt.com

David Kidman

THE FRETLESS

Live From The Art Farm The Fretless
TFCD004



The Fretless are an innovative, multiple award-winning Canadian acoustic quartet of fiddles, violas and cello whose origins lie in Berklee College of Music (Boston, Massachusetts). They combine traditional Irish and Scottish traditional music

with jazz, bluegrass and classical chamber music, distilling these disparate ingredients into a single musical sound that is distinctively their own. This, their fourth album, is an exploration of traditional Irish tunes recorded in front of a live audience, using only three microphones. You can hear the buzz and yelps of the crowd, and the spontaneity that feeds the performance of every tune. You can absolutely feel the atmosphere of the live concert on this CD. Fans of the Natalie Haas/Alasdair Fraser band's recordings will be sure to enjoy the way this music is powered and driven by the sonorous percussive grounding of Eric Wright's cello.

The Fretless certainly weave their own particular magic with Irish traditional tunes, and bring to the material the different musical influences that they have in their locker. In these arrangements, the playing styles flit effortlessly between Irish traditional, Americana, jazz and chamber classical. Try the heady mix of bluesy jazz, Irish trad and chamber classical in *The Killavil Fancy* (hear it on this issue's *fRoots 69* compilation) and *Holton Alan Moore's*.

The sheer poise, polish and energy of this music make it sound like a classically-trained fiddlers' rally held in Nashville: try *Star Monster (The Star Of Munster)* or the *Bixie's* set or the *Miss Thornton's* set. And yet The Fretless never lose sight of the beauty of Irish traditional tunes: the poignancy of their rendition of *Fáinne Geal An Lae (The Dawning Of The Day)* makes it one of the standout tracks on the album.

thefretless.com

Paul Matheson

WILL POUND

Through The Seasons: A Year In Morris & Folk Dance Lulubug
LULUBUG004



Will was born into a dancing family and says that he has been "involved with morris and folk dance since I was born". He is, of course best-known for his virtuosic harmonica playing which has already brought him a flurry of top awards but on this release it is his melodeon that is more to the fore. One of the outstanding tracks is a solo performance of the Kirtlington version of *Trunkles* which shows his inventiveness and considerable technique which can add to a tune so often played in a straightforward manner.

His musical partners on most tracks are Benji Kirkpatrick and Ross Grant, and as this is being written the three are on tour along with storyteller Debs Newbold presenting a show associated with the album as a celebration of the year in folk dance with archive film and photos to enhance the live performance. The tunes encompass traditions from the Cotswolds to Papa Stour in the Shetlands with stops in the Welsh borders, the North West, the Molly dancing of East Anglia as well as taking in rapper and longsword dancing. The rhythmic idiosyncrasies required of each tradition are brought out and there is even the delightful footwork of the Newcastle Kingsmen recorded to illustrate playing for rapper.

On two tracks we hear Will playing alongside John Kirkpatrick and what a combination that makes! As you might expect, John is involved in playing a border morris tune *Not For Joe*. They also share a lovely tune that was once a favourite for Carnival morris played by a brass band, *The Liberty Bell March* though Will sounds regretful in the notes when he writes, "even if the music for Carnival morris has changed out of all recognition since this was first used".

A final track to mention would be the one where Will combines with Eliza Carthy for a lovely romp through *The Nutting Girl*.

Hear a track on this issue's *fRoots 69* compilation.

willpound.com

Vic Smith

Dom Flemons



DOM FLEMONS

Presents Black Cowboys Smithsonian
Folkways Recordings SFW CD 40224



Mention the phrase 'singing cowboy' to folks of a certain age and chances are you'll evoke happy memories of Saturday morning cinema watching the heroic exploits of Roy Rogers & Trigger, and Gene Autry "drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds". Yet beyond the dated Hollywood fantasy, a more insidious fiction still persists. As Professor Mike Searle noted in a 2010 NPR interview (quoted in the CD booklet) "Many people see the West as the birthplace of America. If they only see it as the birthplace of white America, it means that all other people are interlopers – they're not part of what makes an American." But the cowboys were (and are) an ethnically diverse bunch – white, black, Mexican ('los vaqueros' being the original cowboys) and Native American. Many of the songs compiled by John Lomax in his 1910 book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* were collected from black cowboys.

In singing these "songs from the trails to the rails" and telling the stories of the people who sang them, Dom Flemons – 'The American Songster' acts as educator, documentarian and (as anyone who's seen him perform will testify) a consummate entertainer. Supported by a compact crack squad of old-time and country blues musicians (including Alvin Youngblood Hart), Flemons whoops, hollers, yodels, croons and recites his way through iconic songs like *Home On The Range* and *Old Chisholm Trail* and lesser-known vintage material, while his own original compositions (*One Dollar Bill*, *He's A Lone Ranger*, *Steel Pony Blues* – the latter on this issue's *fRoots 69* compilation) sit comfortable alongside songs by Lead Belly and Henry Thomas.

Released as part of Smithsonian Folkways African American Legacy Recordings series, with excellent booklet essays by both Flemons and University of Arizona Research Associate Jim Griffith, *Black Cowboys* provides both important historical background and much-needed present perspective, while being as much fun as a Saturday morning picture show.

theamericansongster.com

Steve Hunt