

for a community choir.

Shift & Change is the sort of album I take on a road trip – always fresh and with something to say but not too demanding.

Dai Jeffries

YE VAGABONDS

★★★★★

The Hare's Lament

(RIVER LEA) www.yevagabonds.com



The Hare's Lament is the second album from Dublin duo Ye Vagabonds, aka Brian and Diarmuid Mac Gloinn. Singing all-traditional

material, the brothers' organic harmonies are front and centre of the arrangements, while their own violin, bouzouki, guitar and mandolin and occasional guests on harmonium, whistle and smallpipes boost but never dominate the sound.

Four of the ten songs are in Irish, collected on the island of Arranmore off the Donegal coast, where the brothers have their own roots, including one culled from a recording of a grandfather they never met. The other songs are mostly familiar and sung in English, and they have evolved arrangements that are both interesting and different.

A lively version of 'The Hare's Lament' runs into a Macedonian dance tune. A stunning 'On Yonder Hill' starts unaccompanied and builds to a crescendo. A churchy harmonium leads into 'Willie O'Winsbury' which is then delivered with simple strummed guitar and those fabulous fraternal harmonies.

Good songs with strong melodies and raw arrangements combine to create a fresh, contemporary take on Irish traditional song. It is a rather wonderful album, underpinned by the empathy between brothers, and with some of the most extensive sleeve notes that I've seen for years.

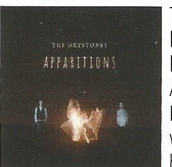
Ian Croft

THE DRYSTONES

★★★★★

Apparitions

(SHEDBUILT) www.thedrystones.co.uk



The striking thing I learned about this latest release from Alex Garden and Ford Collier is that it was recorded at home. The previous

albums from the Somerset duo have all been studio produced. Yet with *Apparitions* we get a big sound of textured, multi-layered arrangements featuring a staggering and inventive array of instruments.

The direction they take traditional material is bold and confident. Opener 'Oscar's Ghost' has lyrics from the tradition, but their treatment is distinctly 21st century, albeit led by Garden's fiddle and underpinned with brooding cello and tinkly percussion. Their take on 'Nonesuch' from Playford's *Dancing Master* is even more futuristic, building menacingly yet driven along by the sound of a shaky egg.

Original compositions are likewise inventive – grounded with a folk sensibility but benefiting from instrumental prowess and a modern

production. Collier's composition 'Losing Your Way' is an understated example. It was good to hear the blend of their two voices on 'Jack Crook', the grizzly tale of proto-highwayman, Spence Broughton. Their musical dexterity and experimental mindset is encapsulated in 'Rain', a pair of tunes written by the artists and featuring spoken-word weather forecasts.

Colin Bailey

DAMIEN DEMPSEY

★★★★★

Union

(SONY) www.damiendempsey.com



When Damien Dempsey first emerged he was startlingly original, so original that the stock reaction was to package him as the new Finbar

Furey, the new Luke Kelly, singers that he viewed as heroes. Standing on the shoulders of giants, I don't think he fully accepted that he had the measure of them. He sees himself as part of a living tradition – one face towards the past, another fixed on the future.

On *Union* he carries this feat onto record, sharing a platform with his heroes, with his peers, and with the younger musicians who see him as a beacon, a lightning rod. Having to appear as neither acolyte nor totem, he is more himself on this record than he has been on many. One of the joys of this record is seeing him grab hold of his abiding love of reggae and knock it out of the park.

Often there is one track that is the making of a record and here it's 'A Child Is An Open Book' (with Kate Tempest), which provides incontrovertible proof of greatness. 'You're Like The Water' (with Maverick Sabre) gives it a damn good run for its money though.

Greag Mac a' tSaoir

DAN WALSH

★★★★★

Trio

(ROOKSMERE) www.danwalshbanjo.co.uk



It's been said before but it bears repeating; there really is no better banjo player in the country than Dan Walsh. And when he augments his music with ace fiddler Ciaran Algar and mandolin master Nic Zuppari on his new album *Trio* then the results are likely to be outstanding. And they are.

It's a mix of songs and instrumentals, most of which are original. Walsh's songwriting has matured enormously over the years, as shown by the powerful 'Life On The Ground' about a homeless woman, and 'Same Time Different Place' which tells of a street cleaner in Stafford. His instrumental influences extend across the globe, from the Indian hues of 'Lylian Set' (Walsh has spent time in India learning and playing) to the bluegrass 'Late Night Drive'.

This is not a one-man show though. Algar's fiddle is given plenty of space and Zuppari's mandolin weaves in and out, over and under, with each adding wonderful texture and depth as well as some great leads. Walsh has been recording for a decade now: solo, with Will Pound, and Urban Folk Quartet but with *Trio* he's made his best album yet.

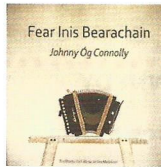
Jeremy Searle

JOHNNY ÓG CONNOLLY

★★★★★

Fear Inis Bearachain

(CLÓ IAR-CHONNACHT) www.cic.ie



This may sound fanciful but accordion/melodeon player Johnny Óg Connolly's *Fear Inis Bearachain* is a skeleton key of a

work. In terms of the Connemara/Conamara accordion/melodeon tradition, it is comparable to John Kirkpatrick's *Plain Capers* unlocked Morris dance tunes from the Cotswolds tradition. To say simplistically it's fifteen tracks long would be numerically correct but profoundly inaccurate. It is far, far more and greater than the sum of its parts.

In part, *Fear Inis Bearachain* is a tribute to his father, the melodeon player Johnny Connolly. The material here also taps into other, wider Connemara sources. Most notable of these is the Gurrane, County Galway-born maestro Pete Conlon (1892–1967) whose reputation as the 'World's Most Famous Irish Accordionist' (February 1935) is based on his U.S. recordings. (Do check out *The Genius Of Peter Conlon* (Oldtime Records OTR 104/105, 2012).

Every track, bar two, is a dance tune miniature. Each is a multiple foray into bardances, hornpipes, hop dances, jigs, slip jigs, reels or waltzes. Or maybe an instrumental rendering of a *sean-nós* song. The two exceptions are absolutely breathtaking. The first is just over three minutes in length: the exquisite lullaby (*suantraí*) 'Suantraí James Agus Eilidh Patricia'. The second at double that duration is his dreamy, steal-your-breath-away slow air commission, 'Caoineadh Aisling Na nGael'. Like *Plain Capers*, this is not a solo free reed recording. Like it, it is a thing of beauty.

Ken Hunt

EABHAL

★★★★★

This Is How The Ladies Dance

(OWN LABEL) www.eabhal.com



I confess that I have not the slightest idea of what the traditional *waalking* song 'Beir Soiridh' is actually about, but I can say, hand on heart, that no song has made me smile in quite this way in a long, long time. The infectious rhythmic sway of accordion and acoustic guitar, coupled with Kaitlin Ross's pure, warm vocal, rounded out with the rise and fall of fiddle and flute, and slightly ragged ensemble choruses... well, we're still on the first song and already I urge you to seek them out.

I'm not the only one, of course, and this wonderful quintet from South Uist have already been named Up and Coming Artist of the Year at last year's Scots Trad Music Awards, alongside other accolades. The secret – which is no secret at all – is in those good old-fashioned values of being at perfect ease with their instruments and with one another's playing. The tune sets, whether led by gravity-defying flute or full-throttle highland pipes, are organic in their melodic progression, while the songs carry the twin spirits of youthful vigour and timeless tradition.

This Is How The Ladies Dance is a wonderful record by one of the most exciting young bands to emerge in recent years.

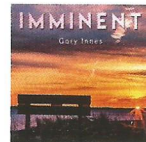
Oz Hardwick

GARY INNES

★★★★★

Imminent

(GHI) www.garyinnes.com



This is the third solo album from Scottish accordion maestro Gary Innes who is also a member of folk-rock band Mànran. All bar

one of eight tune sets and three songs were composed by Gary, and they serve to emphasise his good ear for melody. His accordion sits front and centre of a cast of stellar guests on guitar, keyboards, whistle, fiddle, double bass and drums who range from full-blown rock arrangements to much more restraint as required.

Of the tunes, 'Welcome To New York' rattles along with added banjo from Damien O'Kane. In contrast, 'The Sheerwater' starts with a lovely air and builds to a big climax. 'The Alpha Runrig' contains a fine rocking tribute to a much-missed band, and 'Valle d'Aosta' has a distinctly Italian flavour.

Guest vocalist Karen Matheson takes on 'Swan Song', a song of goodbye to a dying friend, and 'Dream Fields', sung by Ross Wilson (Blue Rose Code), centres on mental health and suicide – both are heartfelt rather than mawkish. Gary himself takes lead vocals on the happier 'Starlight' in praise of his young niece.

The title, *Imminent*, reflects the impending arrival of his first child this spring, and this really good album is an apt celebration of such an auspicious occasion.

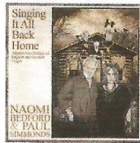
Ian Croft

NAOMI BEDFORD & PAUL SIMMONDS

★★★★★

Singing It All Back Home

(DUSTY WILLOW) www.naomibedford.com



The link between Appalachian and British folk song stretches back centuries within a noble history of emigration.

Cecil Sharp was among the foremost collectors of these songs, with Shirley Collins being a modern standard bearer for the tradition. Now comes a fresh interpretation in the hands of Naomi Bedford – a singer who can stun and astound – along with Paul Simmonds, writer of much classic fare for The Men They Couldn't Hang.

Keeping things nicely cracker-barrelled using harmony vocals and acoustic instruments, each piece on *Singing It All Back Home* is gorgeously rendered without fuss or ornament. 'I Must And Will Be Married' and 'The Fateful Blow' breeze like Gaelic winds over the Blue Ridges. 'A Rich Irish Lady' waltzes elegantly, whilst there's skiffle and rockabilly notes on 'The Rebel Soldier' and 'Hangman' (the latter done as 'Gallows Pole' by Led Zeppelin). Simmonds revels in his guitaristic role as musical leader, with pedal steel, mandolin and harmonica (hello Rory McLeod) adding bawdy or bluesy touches.

'Hands On The Plough' makes merry with an old spiritual, 'Matty Groves' is searing folk-rock, 'Who's That Knocking' (aka 'Silver Dagger') gets old-timey and 'The Foggy Dew' is pitch-perfect a cappella from Bedford. New life is breathed into some old ghosts on this very fine collection.

Gareth Thompson

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