

REVIEWS

Photo: Lieve Boussaïw



Blowzabella

BLOWZABELLA

Strange News Blowzabella3



Celebrating 35 influential years of instrumental diversity, musical unruliness, cultural bravura and an unremittingly colourful sense of adventure, Blowzabella produce a brand new album that satisfyingly reflects all those attributes. Flying

English bagpipes, fiddles a-go-go, that wonderfully eccentric hurdy gurdy drone, Jo Freya pitching in with her sax and clarinet, Andy Cutting's inimitable accordion and Barn Stradling's dextrous bass work giving the glorious cacophony of ideas, melodies and instruments a coherent root.

In many ways, this album marks a return to their early years as a rampaging dance outfit with benefits, except that now they are far superior instrumentally and there's more – but not total – order to the chaos. Happily there's no dilution of imagination or intent, and when they let rip in full Gallic splendour on rousing tunes like *Cotillon* and *Malique*, with its intriguing divergence into jazz, you can only marvel at the exhilarating confusion of it all. Whether an Andy Cutting schottische, a Gregory Jolivet waltz, a Jon Swayne mazurka or a Paul James step-dance tune, they make a splendid racket that lifts the soul and electrifies the feet. When it all comes together in perfect instrumental harmony as it does on the beautiful tune set *The Muffer/Bhaskar's*, the effect is enthralling.

Back when it all began, of course, they had no singer and now the potent counterpoint to the instrumental ingenuity is the singing of Jo Freya, bringing an almost sedate Englishness to traditional songs like *All Things Are Quite Silent*, *Searching For Lambs* and *The Blacksmith* (the *Strange News* of the title) which is topped off with a lively instrumental treatment of *Lovely Joan*. The air of studied gentility amid the blazing colour and intense rhythms around her is one of the most engaging characteristics of this uplifting album.

There was nothing like Blowzabella when they started all those years ago... and there's nothing like them still.

www.blowzabella.com

Colin Irwin

LAL WATERSON

Teach Me To Be A Summer's Morning
Fledg'ling FLED3095



Even now – maybe especially now fifteen years after her cruelly untimely death – the voice and songs of Lal Waterson seem to emanate from a different universe entirely. There's a wild freshness that mirrors nature and earthy environment but follows no conventional sense of structure melodically, lyrically or even in terms of vocal phrasing. Lal's music was so intuitively individual and rarefied it's small wonder that, while many

have tried, few outside her immediate family have ever successfully got to grips with the mesmerising mystery of her songs.

That mystery is well preserved even as so many different layers and dimensions are revealed on this extraordinary CD and hard-back book. The relative primitiveness of these home demos – mostly with the most rudimentary guitar accompaniment that sometimes seems to bear little relationship to her songs – would damn most artists. With Lal, however, you instinctively want to get as close as you can to the nub of her inspiration and, while elaborate arrangements and sophisticated production never came remotely into play on her studio recordings, hearing her music stripped to its barest bones, sounding so vulnerable and intimate, adds plenty to its dark beauty.

Most of the songs here are already familiar to devotees in some shape or form – *The Scarecrow*, *Never The Same*, *Evon Our Darling* (rather than *Evona Darling* as it was titled on the *Shining Bright* album), *Shady Lady*, *Red Wine And Promises*, *Song For Thirza* and *Black Horse* (one of the standout tracks on the new Lisa Knapp album with Marry Waterson guesting) are all popular favourites, but the stark informality of these recordings dating back to the early '70s and beyond offer a very different flavour and a deeper understanding of them. *To Make You Stay*, one of the less celebrated *Bright Phoebus* tracks (a line from which gives this set its title) seems to have acquired an extra layer of pathos and desperation in its sparseness.

Rare gems are also secreted within. Some classic Mike Waterson accompanying whooping on *Shine*, a shuddering piano arrangement of *Anna Dixie*, a bravura vocal performance on *May Butterfly*, a nod to the Beatles on *Marvellous Companion* and a beautiful, long-forgotten McGarrigle-esque song, *Once In A Blue Moon*, full of sumptuous harmonies with daughter Marry.

The project is curated by Marry and the beautifully produced book she's put the CD inside isn't merely a gorgeous artefact full of portraits, drawings, oil paintings, photographs and Lal's handwritten lyrics, it offers genuine insight into the creative mind behind the songs. Not through long, garbled explanations of the songs – clarity was never the point with Lal, and slightly irritatingly there's actually very little information about the circumstances of individual tracks – but through a loving portrait of a multi-dimensional artist whose paintings, poetry and weaving were clearly as important to her as the music.

In a sense they are they are all part of the same creative process and the way the book presents illustrations alongside Lal's scribbled words – crossings-out and all – is reminiscent of the way Woody Guthrie's work has sometimes appeared.

The whole thing is very precious and profoundly moving.

www.thebeesknees.com

Colin Irwin