

JOE TOWNSEND and MARTIN GREEN

Return To The Woods

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Late in 2005 Joe of this duo gets in touch and said 'I think what we're doing fits with your site' and a few days later a CD arrives in the mail. On the front sit Joe and Martin, sat in the woods with a fiddle and accordion. Putting the CD into the player, there is structured piece of instrumental music in a kind of formal duet for violin and accordion. The instruments used in a variety of ways to give differing tones and sounds, but each playing around the central theme. It's like a folk

dance composed by Ennio Morricone and performed by Astor Piazzolla.

There are touches of early jazz, of the repeating phrases of minimalism, the expansive vistas of ECM or in east European folk. These are all seamlessly fused without fuss, often in the same piece. It's a natural music that stems from their ability to play and interact in the moment. This is perhaps understandable when we know that Joe has played in the theatre, with Laurie Anderson and with a number of world fusion artists. Martin meanwhile has played with folk figures such as Eliza Carthy, Kathryn Tickrell and Joan Baez. It's not that their music is rootless, it's that it can integrate multiple roots.

After the aching ballad of 'Bellwether' we are at present on 'Return To Slender' with its electric Rhodes piano, swinging violin lead and accordion chords played like a sequencer pattern evoking Weather Report. For a music fan who can resist but explore many different genres, this music is a joy as it will remind of so many but thankfully without ever trying to copy or recreate somebody else's sound.

'Greetings and Partings' meanwhile is like a 60s Italian spy thriller theme arranged by Joe Meek, the mysterious yet seductive music altered by distant curious noises. Every breath of the instruments is heard with close miking, indeed the accordion is often miked inside. This produces an intimate and detailed sound for which credit must go to producer Grant Showbiz. Over the whole album it develops this high standard of musicianship and constant invention whilst ensuring there is structure and melody. It is in some ways a more formal and conventional take on the improvised acoustic experimentation of a band like Volcano The Bear. Whereas that band leaves

you full of awe but unable to rest, this duo lulls and seduces. Whilst never even approaching the soporific, this is for all the invention, easy to digest. The music leads the listener, it's not confronting but is often quite moving such as on the serialist chamber lament 'White'. This piece is similar perhaps to the gone but never forgotten 'Penguin Café Orchestra' who are overall the nearest comparison artist.

As we enter the double time mixture of classical music and folk dervish with a central plucked-fiddle motif the validity of this comparison is reinforced. '36 this day' uses a late night blues as though 'In A Silent Way' era Miles Davis band was backing Stefan Grappelli. 'Garden Sound-Check' may only be intended as a relatively brief interlude but it is sublime, the poise and Gavin Bryars' like restraint emphasizing every note.

'Friday Morning' has a lazy USA traditional music feeling with a kind of Cajun rhythm. It becomes frankly impossible to describe the fusions as this could be a homage to Booker T on the accordion and a 40s Western Swing tune on the fiddle. You know, they'll never fit into any genre and for that they should be glad. It's a cliché to say it, but good playing such as this doesn't need pigeonholing, even if it makes describing what it sounds like easier. 'Swirli Wurlli' is fantastic, quiet ripples of 70s analogue synth over a static drone. It sounds stunning, music of your imagination, Tangerine Dream playing over a backing by Pauline Oliveros and her 'Deep Listening Band'. Even more impressive is that I fully suspect this is all played in real time.

At the end we hear a short reprise of 'Bellwether' played like the end of a film. In many senses this album has the same feeling as a film, a journey played out, a narrative shared with the listener. However this album is about four things all sadly too rare, strong composition, innovative arrangements, an insightful vivid production and last but most of all, highly talented players in tune with each other. You genuinely won't hear many as good as this, a joy to hear from start to end now and in the future.

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