

# FATEA

## Reviews

### Merry Hell

**Album:** Head Full Of Magic, Shoes Full Of Rain

**Label:** Mrs Casey

**Tracks:** 14

**Website:** <http://www.merryhell.co.uk>



Merry Hell is a brilliant seven-piece outfit that took its musical cues from the mighty Tansads, not only including six of that cult combo's members but maintaining continuity while attaining a separate identity - not an easy thing to pull off, but their debut CD *Blink... And You Miss It*, released a little over a year ago, was both a triumphant debut and a resounding success, and emphatically not just a one-off flash-in-the-pan, as its followup now defiantly proves. Basically, if you've any taste for barnstorming folk-rock with a powerhouse charge, excellent musicianship placed at the service of anthemic no-nonsense lyrics unpretentiously detailing simple pleasures and everyday concerns and set to intensely memorable melodies and punchy, attractive and intelligent arrangements... well you'll be in heaven in merry hell (if you get the drift).

*Head Full Of Magic...* takes the already formidable band sound forward with the addition of extra colours (including a guest contribution from Dave Swarbrick on one track), and the conciseness of expression is if anything even more persuasive with the band's growing expertise. I can't make up my mind yet as to whether it's better than *Blink...*, but it's certainly a serious contender for the upcoming year-best-of list: a joyous affirmation of the power of music to stir the emotions and uplift the heart and soul, blessed with a fabulously presence-full recording that gives the finest possible definition without losing anything in thunderous impact.

Merry Hell make a suitably blistering frontal attack on your senses, a big but fabulously well-controlled sound that captures and enraptures you straightaway with its well-proportioned full textures and masterly attack, and launches headlong into a series of perfectly-crafted songs, every one of which seems to vie for the title of immediate favourite in your affections, full of canny hooks and riffs to die for. Each track is arresting in its own right, but disc opener *Loving The Skin You're In* is a perfect demonstration of the band's skill, distilling in barely three minutes the essence of Merry Hell's appeal: driving forward-thrust rhythm, confident positive lyric, charismatic upfront, rasping vocal (Andrew Kettle) and perky, quirky - and unforgettable - melody. This is but one of the album's eight compositions by lead vocalist/banjoist Virginia Kettle, who again shows herself a real force to be reckoned with, whether on the crowd-pleasing *Let's Not Have A Morning After* (already a well-established live favourite) and *Bury Me Naked*, the delicate *Emerald Green* (a real standout) or the insidiously catchy *My Finest Hour* - but she's also still an exceptional singer too (if in danger of being under-used in the lead role). The band's other

songwriters - mandolinist Bob Kettle, guitarist John Kettle and keyboardist Lee Goulding - also do the album proud, Bob's majestic Dreaming Of The Time being especially impressive. I'm glad, too, that the band have addressed charges of skimpy presentation with their debut and this time have chosen to produce a decent booklet that includes the lyrics in full.

My only criticism is that the set could perhaps have done with one or two more tender, reflective items for balance. But back to the positive: the big trick is that so many of these songs feel as though you've known them for ages: perfectly coordinated and natural little masterpieces of "the sort of pop that deserves to dominate radio": take Hope You Don't Mind and I Never Loved Anybody Like I Love You for starters, or the self-evident stance of Let The Music Speak - for let's face it, these things still need to be said in this increasingly depressing world, and we're reminded of the need to celebrate these straightforward values.

Merry Hell is the sound of open-hearted freedom of expression, honestly and unpretentiously conceived. It's not yet closing time in Accrington, so you can play this CD loud and proud from every possible orifice; it's fair guaranteed to make you feel good!

David Kidman