

FOLK AND ROOTS

Merry Hell – BLINK... And You Miss It (Mrs Casey Records)

Hey, remember that storming Wigan-based band Tansads? Yes, those cult 90s post-punk folk-rockers who for some reason never achieved either the profile or the success they deserved – heck, I never even managed to catch up with them properly before they split (as bands do!). Fast-forwarding to 2010, and coming up to the band’s 20th anniversary, the idea was mooted of doing some reunion gigs, a series of three of which duly took place at the band’s “spiritual home” (The Citadel in St Helens); following which, perhaps inevitably, many of the participants decided that the bond was too strong to resist the call to continue – thus, in effect, unleashing the proverbial and literal Merry Hell (the name comes from a line in Tansads’ song Separate Souls)! So we now have a blazing Tansads successor, one that carries on the spirit and drive of the original band and retains six of its members. Still at the heart of things is the vital Kettle dynasty – brothers Andrew, Bob and John – with keyboardist Lee Goulding, guitarist Tim Howard and drummer Phil Knight, who are now joined by new members Andrew Dawson (bass) and John Kettle’s wife Virginia (who takes over the vocal role from Janet Anderton). This fresh studio album emphasises the continuity between lineups and eras, opening as it does with a revisit of Drunken Serenade (the final cut on Tansads’ swansong Reason To Be), and in many ways it seems as though they’ve never been away. I stress – that doesn’t mean the Merry Hell sound is a dated throwback locked in the 90s – it still sounds thoroughly contemporary, even if it resolutely refuses to embrace the world-fusion experiments of the intervening decades (and why should it? I say). 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 memorable and perfectly-crafted songs, every one of which seems to vie for the title of immediate favourite in your affections, full of catchy hooks and canny musical gestures. Merry Hell are blessed with two truly exceptional lead vocalists that really complement each other – the tremendously versatile Virginia and the distinctive upfront rasping Andrew K – and a really crack instrumental backup that never flags, and John K’s production makes the very most of every nuance within textures that in lesser hands would become unduly cluttered. And what a superb range of material too, from punchy anthems (The War Between Ourselves, Lean On Me Love, Peace and Love), and the pounding, angry The Crooked Man, to the tender, loving and simple acoustic ballads Rosanna’s Song and It Won’t Be Long; from bouncy romantic ditties (One More Day, This Time) to the vignette of The Gentle Man and the ultra-quirky little observational tale of The Butcher And The Vegan; the album closes with a majestic new treatment of the classic early Tansads song Pendle Hill. But in truth each and every song is an object lesson in supreme economy of expression and execution. It’s a measure of the songwriting talent within the band that no fewer than six of the songs here,

including several of the standout tracks, were penned by Virginia! But why not shout it out loud and publish the lyrics in the skimpy booklet, which contains only the minimal personnel credits and thanks (attractive artwork notwithstanding)... It perhaps only remains for me to invoke some comparatives or reference points for the uninitiated – Levellers, Oysterband, U2, chart-era Chumbawamba, a heavier version of Lindisfarne... but in the end, whether deafeningly belting out the decibels or gently insinuating their way into your head, Merry Hell turns out like no other band. A reunion and a triumph, and a project that will I trust live to see plenty more mileage.

www.merryhell.co.uk

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