

Burning Sun

Hilary James - CD review

English Dance & Song

Hilary's acclaimed debut album of 1993 has been skilfully re-engineered and reissued, and it's a magical and atmospheric blend of traditional folk songs and original material. What is apparent, however, by a comparison of this and her more recent work, is how tremendously her voice has mellowed and matured over the past fifteen years.

While her voice undoubtedly rises like a lark on the wing, and she is deservedly praised for her clarity and precision, the voice of '93, re-mastering notwithstanding, is just a promise of the one we hear on *Laughing with the Moon*, her more recent collaboration with long-term musical partner Simon Mayor, who provides top-notch backing on several *Burning Sun* tracks. (Not for nothing is he considered by many to be Britain's foremost exponent of the mandolin). Indeed, compare the exquisite vocals on 'Newcastle' or 'Still the Lake at Evening' (from *Laughing*) and make your own judgement; they're both downloadable as sound clips from Hilary's website www.folksong.co.uk, and how quick off the mark did she have to be to register that domain name?

What appealed to me from *Burning Sun*? Her great song writing...the opening track 'O'er the Ocean', with impeccable guitar and mandolin accompaniment and 'Busy Old Fool', which for days afterwards I was still humming; the final track 'Sail Away' had the same effect. And there's an extremely elegant version of 'Seeds of Love'.

Simon Mayor contributes the main acoustic backing, although of course Hilary proves that

she herself is an extremely accomplished instrumentalist; and there's a credit for the soprano saxophone playing of Alan Whetton: very sweet, very sexy (not, unfortunately, a word often found in folk circles).

Hilary has been described by others as 'a class act', and I have to firmly second that description. Her fans will more than welcome a revisit to these early days.

David Warwick <http://eds.efdss.org>

Folk Diary

Hilary is most often heard playing bass in Simon Mayor's mandolin band. This is a well-deserved solo album for the fact is that Hilary is a very fine singer indeed. Her pure, persuasive voice is heard to very good effect on a range of traditional songs, particularly *The Bay of Biscay*, *Seeds of Love* and *Polly Vaughan*. These are interspersed with songs by Fauré and a composer who seems to be coming in for increasing attention from singers with a folk background, Handel and there are a number of her own gentle compositions making a very satisfying whole.

The accompaniments are used sparingly; Simon's multi-instrumental talents are prominent but there are pleasing contributions from Alan Whetton on soprano sax and Brendan Power on harmonica. It comes as a surprise to see the name of Zoltán Kátaí singing harmony on one song. Presumably this is the outstanding singer who featured so well with the Hungarian band *Mákvirág* in the 1980s.

(VS)

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Rock 'n' Reel

A solo album from Hilary James has been a long time coming. Her work with Simon Mayor on his mandolin albums has been that of a side musician with her vocals occasionally creeping in to add to what were very successful instrumental albums. Now she has issued 'Burning Sun' and its an unexpected pleasure in more ways than one.

Using the James/Mayor base of instrumental highlights she has subtly added sax and harmonica to the basic string line-up. With her own sweet voice given free rein its an album which covers a wide range of material. From such diverse sources as traditional English and Scots ballads to their French counterparts to madrigals and straight classical pieces.

It also has original material which adds to a fascinating collection. The inclusion of madrigals and the Handel piece 'Lascia ch'io Pianga' are not disparate, as her voice, though folk based, has the range and power to cover these perfectly. It has some wondrous moments like the John Donne inspired 'Busy Old Fool' and the extended trad 'Two Sisters' carrying on where Clannad's version left off.

The instrumental line up has some deft touches on mandolin and fiddle from Simon Mayor while the sax and harmonica are both used with stunning simplicity and accuracy. The result is a beguilingly charming album that evokes the old Consulate advert 'cool as a mountain stream' and pleasantly refreshing. Beautiful stuff. More please.

John O'Regan, Limerick

Rambles.net

When you hear Hilary James, you know you have heard Hilary James. Her voice is magically suited to the songs -- varied as they are -- that she chooses. With the wonderful backing on Burning Sun, you can sit back, relax and let the music flow over you.

The dozen tracks on this new CD range from the well-known traditional to the lesser known, with some lovely new works interspersed. She opens the proceedings with her re-interpretation of an old American folk song, "O'er the Ocean." The opening lines of a poem inspired her next track and James has expanded this into a haunting and thoughtful "Busy Old Fool."

"La Marche des Rois" will give you a flavour of the comprehensive musical credentials on this album. It started as a 13th-century carol in Provence, it was borrowed by Bizet and here you hear it French sung by singers of English and Hungarian backgrounds. From carols we jump to a tale of gruesome murder on "Two Sisters," but somehow her lovely voice almost hides the sad nature of the tale. Listen to the wonderful strings on this track.

On "Lonesome Day" she again brings us wild and wonderful mixture with a tune with Eastern European inspiration and words of an American traditional song of English origin.

The magic of this album is that although the origins and mixes of inspiration span time and geography, Hilary James manages to produce a sound that will never jar. Her harmonious voice, perfect diction and the magical backing give the listener a fantastic audio experience.

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NetRhythms.co.uk

Hilary's debut album, *Burning Sun*, was originally issued in 1993; it was the first occasion where she stepped out from behind production and promotion duties on her partner Simon Mayor's mandolin records and took the limelight in her own right, and it brought her much deserved acclaim.

The album gets a 15th anniversary remix, remaster and reissue here, and sounds just great: full and detailed, with admirable presence. Of course, Hilary's superbly pure voice is supported by the considerable instrumental skills of the aforementioned Simon (on assorted mandos, guitar, fiddle and whistle), while old friends Alan Whetton (soprano sax), Brendan Power (harmonica) and vocalists Andy Baum and Zoltán Kátai make guest appearances (the latter's rich bass tones especially noteworthy). (I'm not sure that the box credits are complete, otherwise all seems present and correct.)

The selection of material is an appealing and well-balanced one, almost a template for her albums to follow. It combines traditional folk material (the beautiful *Bay Of Biscay*, together with *Seeds Of Love*, *Two Sisters* and a sensitive version of *Polly Vaughan*) with Hilary's own intelligent arrangements of anything from madrigal to Provençal carol (the beguiling *La Marche Des Rois*), alongside her own compositions *Sail Away* and *Busy Old Sun* (the latter inspired by the opening line of a poem by John Donne).

Hilary also presents a faultlessly crafted rendition of Fauré's *Les Berceaux* and a nicely-turned Handel lament (complete with mandolin choir!). And I really liked her lively Balkan-bluegrass take on *Lonesome Day*. Altogether tasteful and lovingly conceived, this

is a joy of a record that should easily find appreciation with a new generation of listeners.

David Kidman August 2008

Northern Echo

Hilary James is a name that will be familiar to fans of mandolin maestro Simon Mayor, but a new name to many others.

The album is an unusual mix of James' originals, traditional tunes and songs and a classical piece from Handel. Hilary's sweet, pure voice is superb throughout, whether vocalising in English, French or Italian, and the music is superb.

The multi-talented Simon Mayor supplies stunning mandolin passages as well as guitar, fiddle and whistle and Alan Whetton colours the sound with bursts of saxophone. An intelligent release well up to the standards we have come to expect from Acoustics Records.

Michael Ollier

Folk North West

Wonderful - every track superb. For me, the best album of the 90's so far. Oozes class, with arrangements tailored like Saville Row suits.

Take a hammer to the piggy bank and rush to your nearest record store. Buy, buy, buy.

Dave Day

BBC Radio 2

...the fantastic voice of a wonderful musician and singer, Hilary James... I urge you to get hold of it; it is absolutely full of brilliant music.

Mike Harding