

ENGLISH SKETCHES

Hilary James - CD reviews

www.folksong.co.uk

fRoots

Born out of a series of concerts based on the English tradition at the Museum Of English Rural Life (MERL) in Reading, English Sketches is a whole album of lively, inventive and charming arrangements of (mostly) English traditional song, masterminded by Hilary herself and given brilliant small-ensemble backings involving, inter alia, long time partner Simon Mayor (on all things mando), Nick Cooper (cello), Phil Fentimen (double bass) and the two Pauls Sartin and Hutchinson (aka Belshazzar's Feast).

The repertoire is a thoroughly pleasing cross-section of quintessentially English material, with especially winning treatments of Beneath The Willow Tree, the less-oft-heard ballad Young Benjie, and the chiming West-Country Bell Ringing Song nestling companionably alongside a gently syncopated Bold Fisherman, with the somewhat awkwardly-titled A Song & Jig For Good Measure here given three bites at the cherry with both a reprise and a bonus "full uninterrupted version" (which is the one to play). As well as the songs of strictly traditional provenance, Hilary's wonderfully pure voice gives us disc-highlight settings (by Hilary and Simon) of poems by Hardy, Shakespeare and Housman (the latter's Bredon Hill is intriguingly dark here); there's even a set of words cobbled-cum-written by Baring-Gould no less, and an idiomatic account of a number from John Gay's The Beggar's Opera.

I'm convinced Hilary's never sounded better, and her accompanists have the full measure of the settings, if at times there's a slight suspicion of underplaying their hand in the softer, more refined edges they impart to the texts. This is a significant, and highly persuasive

addition to Hilary's already impressive catalogue of song recordings, one which is destined to satisfy repeatedly; furthermore, the package design is adorned with Hilary's own beautifully artistic illustrations.

David Kidman

The Sunday Times ★★★★★

Having begun life as a series of folk concerts at the Reading-based Museum Of English Rural Life, Hilary James's celebration of all things rustic has blossomed into a serene disc that blends traditional songs with settings of Shakespeare, Housman and Hardy.

The multi-instrumentalist Simon Mayor, her longtime partner in the cheekily named Mandolinquents, joins a cast of supporting players that includes accordionist Paul Hutchinson and the cellist Nick Cooper. James's voice is a demure vessel; the backing singer Ed Quick adds a dash of rugged masculinity to The Bold Fisherman and The Bell Ringing Song, an endearing tale of West Country life.

The arrangements are a delight throughout.

Clive Davis

BBC Radio 2 - Folk On 2

I think she's got one of the best voices in the world and I love her treatments of traditional songs.

Mike Harding

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The Scotsman ★★★★★

Hilary James largely lays aside the mandobass she plays with the Mandolinquents to showcase her beautifully pure voice in this genuinely charming evocation of pastoral England, with a couple of Scots interludes.

She's accompanied impeccably by fellow Mandolinquent Simon Mayor on mandolin, guitar and fiddle, as well as others including Nick Cooper, whose cello eloquently shadows James's plangent delicacy in Beneath the Willow Tree, while Paul Sartin's oboe sounds perkily through the pastoral jig which bookends the album.

Four poem settings include the beguiling summer languor of Thomas Hardy's Weathers while pipe organ contributes to the olde-English conviviality of Shakespeare's Winter.

Things occasionally get just too nice, notably in a risibly cheerful variant of the hoary old Border ballad The Twa Corbies, about two crows sizing up a new-slain knight as fast food.

The Scots ballad Young Benjie is driven with rather more smeddum. Carping apart, though, I find this album pretty irresistible.

*Jim Gilchrist * * * * four star review*

Genevieve Tudor's Sunday Folk

"Just beautiful, brilliant! It is such, such a lovely CD."

Genevieve Tudor, BBC Radio Stoke

R2 Magazine

Over four previous solo albums, along with numerous collaborations, Hilary James's pure, clear vocal style has proven as versatile as it is distinctive.

For me, though, this latest recording showcases it in its most natural setting, celebrating the essence of rural England through traditional song and arrangements of poems such as Housman's 'Bredon Hill' and extracts from Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost. Songs as varied as 'The Bold Fisherman' and the less familiar 'The Bell Ringing Song' - one of three items derived from the Baring-Gould Collection - are delivered with warmth and integrity, always true to the emotional heart of the material.

Naturally, partner Simon Mayor's mandolin is prominent in the buoyant string arrangements, which are at times augmented by oboe and pipe organ. The one track that falls flat is 'Two Ravens', for which the new tune -altogether too buoyant - seems inappropriate.

However, the lilting, swooning setting of two stanzas from Hardy's 'Weathers' more than redresses the balance, marking the high point of this refreshing, celebratory collection.

Oz Hardwick

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Folking.com ★★★★★

“Pastoral” is the word that first comes to mind when discussing Hilary James’ new album. In fact, ‘A Song & Jig For Good Measure’ which appears in three versions, could provide the soundtrack for a Shakespeare play were the RSC not currently using Elvis hits. The fact that Hilary and Simon Mayor wrote the music and the words came from Sabine Baring-Gould in no way invalidates this.

The record isn’t all shepherds and milkmaids, however. ‘The Two Ravens’, with music by Hilary and Simon marries grisly subject matter with a pretty tune and the beautiful ‘Bredon Hill’ hides a dark secret, for death was never far away from A E Housman’s mind. ‘Young Benjie’ doesn’t even try to hide its gruesome truth.

Other words come from William Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy and John Gay. Elsewhere, Hilary lifts ‘The Bold Fisherman’, which can be a dreadful plodder, with a few grace notes and reintroduces us to ‘The Bell Ringing Song’, a delightfully bucolic piece which has fallen out of favour in recent years.

The band includes Simon Mayor, Paul Sartin and Paul Hutchinson with Nick Cooper on cello, Phil Fentiman on double bass and Simon Price on drums – a line-up that can be as powerful as you could wish. “Pastoral”, yes, but the net curtains are twitching in the village.

Dai Jeffries

Fyfe On Folk

I don’t generally like repeating what has been said in sleeve-notes but for those not in the know, the wonderfully gifted Hilary James possess a voice that is quintessentially English and as such performs with diction that would put many of the current crop of so-called TV presenters to shame.

On this recording (and all her previous albums) James’s dulcet tones will possibly inveigle their way into your memory in much the same way they did for me casting my mind back to when I was at junior school and although nostalgia can be a funny thing I can distinctly remember listening in awe of folk singers such as Shirley Abicair and Isla St Clair.

As you would expect, emanating from the outstanding catalogue of music provided by Acoustic Records this recording has quality stamped throughout it and in addition to the established trad arr, Hilarys settings of the words of Shakespeare, Hardy and Baring-Gould are genuinely exquisite.

Of course, being joined in exalted company by Simon Mayor (mandolins/violin and guitar etc) and Belshazzars Feast aka Paul Sartin (oboe) & Paul Hutchinson (accordion) amongst others the technical, but never sterile skills of all involved is more than impressive.

This is the kind of album that will not only settle comfortably in any true folk enthusiasts record collection but will also impress anyone who feels they want to add the words musical taste to their CV.

Pete Fyfe

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Folk North West

Hilary James, possessor of a sparkling vocal, offers a perfect gentle summer delight in 'English Sketches'. As the sun shines outside, this record captures a quintessentially English feel in both its musical approach and the songs themselves.

If you're unfamiliar with Hilary, she is normally seen in a duo with Simon Mayor or the band format of The Mandolinquents. As you'd expect, their influences carry over to this recording and, as the latter's name suggests, mandolins in all forms (mandola, mandocello) feature strongly. Combined with oboe, pipe organ and the like, these add up to an English feel in the sound which fits its subject matter to perfection.

To consolidate that Englishness; her selections of music draw from some classic sources. 'Can Love Be Controlled By Advice' comes from The Beggar's Opera written in 1728, 'Winter' and 'Spring' use words from Shakespeare's 'Love Labour's Lost' as the basis for some gentle melodies. 'Bredon Hill' sets an A.E. Housman poem to music and shows how the overall feel might be soft and gentle but the lyrics dark and bitter.

Indeed, on material like 'Two Dark Ravens', she chooses a folk song with one of those classic tales of murder and mayhem. Having said that, it's true to say that this record is one for those who like their music to be gentle and calming as well as beautiful. Cups of tea, cucumber sandwiches and Hilary James sounds like a perfect summers day provided that sun keeps on shining.

Steve Henderson

Maverick

An enjoyable record harnessing a musicianship and passion that is second to none...

Hilary James' music career spans almost thirty years and as one of the first musicians to set up her own label in 1979, she has since successfully released twenty-two albums. With one of the finest voices in Britain, she is also a commendable instrumentalist who rarely performs without her mandobass.

English Sketches is 'a celebration of English landscape, weather and seasons through traditional song and new settings of poems by Hardy, Housman and Shakespeare.' The description on the back is a great help to anyone who stumbles upon the record and is pre-requisite of what to expect.

A Song & Jig for Good Measure opens the album on a flighty mix of strings and Hilary's beautiful vocals, with male harmonies from Simon Mayor that really lift this track to new heights. It's a cleverly crafted song, with the layering of vocals becoming quite mesmerising and featuring the oboe courtesy of Paul Sartin that really captivates the listener.

Can Love Be Controlled By Advice is an interesting song with a strong message and a feeling of sadness is carried in Hilary's words and the passionate playing by herself, John Mayor and Nick Cooper. Spring is joyous and almost celebratory, adopting the words from Shakespeare and accompanied by Simon Mayor on mandolin and mandola and Ed Quick on backing vocals. Overall this has been an enjoyable record, vibrant though not as varied as I would have liked, the class of musicianship and the passion explored is second to none.

Laura Bethell

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Classic Rock Society Magazine

Usually working with partner Simon Mayor, this album sprung from a series of concerts at the Museum of Rural Life in Reading, and is a strong return to the English tradition that forms the backbone of Hilary James' work.

Her stunning vocals are ably accompanied here by friends like Simon Mayor, Paul Sartin on oboe, Phil Fentimen on double bass, and the material is all drawn from the English tradition, like the brilliant *Beneath the Willow Tree*, *Winter*, the dark but wonderful *Bredon Hill*, and the *Two Ravens*, and neatly book ended by the wonderful *A Song & Jig for Good Measure* (the complete version is included as bonus track as well!!)

Throughout the album her voice enchants and beguiles as she treats the English material on here with the respect it deserves, and interprets it in ways that bring it to life and make this an organic living breathing album, filled with life, death, lightness, darkness and all four seasons, turning what could have been a worthy exercise into a superb album celebrating the very heart of our culture, and one that is so often neglected. In lesser hands this album could have average, with Hilary James' skilful playing and amazing interpretive skills this is a masterpiece.

JRT

euVue

The English Landscape in all its splendour. Hilary James is a rising star on the English folk scene solo and also with her partner Simon Mayor. In a quantum leap forward in terms of ambition and delivery this new album is a delightful exploration of the English landscape in all its diversity as to seasons, weather, and mankind's relationship with its elemental forces.

This project had its origins in a series of folk concerts at the Museum of English Rural Life based in Reading. Hilary and her collaborators took as their starting point the poems of Shakespeare, 'Winter and Spring', 'Bredon Hill' by A. E. Housman and Thomas Hardy's 'Weathers' and set them to music. From there 'The Two Ravens' and 'The Bell Ringing Song' emerged.

Heartfelt and moving, the CD has a wistful charm and elegance of delivery. Hilary James's voice is as clear as a highland stream. A mood lifter and production of fine quality this album deserves a wide audience for its charm and elegance. Hilary James is a talented lady.

Her art dignifies the CD's cover!

The Beat

English Sketches by Hilary James has her flawless soprano complemented by arrangements with violinist and mandolin virtuoso Simon Mayor to the fore.

Yet James has never needed the glamour of well-known associations to enhance a reputation that rests too on a parallel career as a radio and TV presenter (most conspicuously on BBC2's *Play School* and *The Song Tree* on Radio 5); as an illustrator of children's books and, more recently, as an author - and step-dancer.

Issued on her own Acoustics label (www.acousticsrecords.co.uk), this fifth solo album embraces settings of poems by Shakespeare, Hardy and A E Housman, as well as traditional folk fare such as my fave rave, an overhaul of 'Two Ravens' - whose slaving beaks peck at a lifeless huntsman - blessed with a deceptive joie de vivre and subtle humour.

Alan Clayson

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The Living Tradition

Building on a series of concerts at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, this recording, accurately subtitled *A celebration of English landscape, weather and seasons through traditional song and new settings of poems...*, is a beautifully constructed evocation of Englishness. Book-ended, as overture and doubly reprised finale, by Baring-Gould's lyric to *A Country Dance* neatly grafted on to Simon Mayor's *A Jig for Good Measure*, with an utterly captivating oboe melody line, the musical palette is broad.

There are Hilary and partner Simon's arrangements of other traditionally sourced material (including *The Bold Fisherman*, the West Country *Bell Ringing Song*, the sinister and macabre border ballads *The Two Ravens* and *Young Benjie*, and an exquisite rendition of *Beneath The Willow Tree*), a piece from Gay's 18th century *Beggar's Opera*, and a sequence of new musical settings for some poetry. These include the charming and delightful *Winter and Spring* (from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*), Thomas Hardy's *Weathers*, and A. E. Housman's darker edged *Bredon Hill*.

The musical artwork richly represents the spirit and mood of the wordcraft depicting the pastoral calendar and seasonal cycle, the bucolic fieldscape and woodscape ('greenwood trees' on 'May mornings' etc!) and the joys and woes of rural life. Hilary's clear, sweet and beguiling voice is the foreground to the cleverly balanced combination of Simon Mayor's very exactly refined and precisely executed colour detail of strings (guitar, the customary 'mandolinquency' - mandolin, mandola and mandocello - and violin) with sublime use of cello (Nick Cooper) and oboe (Paul Sartin) for melodic, often arresting and haunting, detail on several tracks. There is also some bass backing, mainly

by Hilary herself, drum work (Simon Price) and occasional but important contributions from accordion (Paul Hutchinson) and pipe organ (David Pether).

Finally, praise must go to Hilary's appealing landscape sketch illustrations that so appropriately adorn the cover and capture the concept of the recording.

Kevin T Ward

Music Maker

Over the last twenty years or so, Hilary James has become something of an institution amid the English folk and traditional scene. Performing widely, occasionally solo, or most often as a duo with Simon Mayor but also as mandobassist and vocalist for The Mandolinquents, *English Sketches* is her fifth solo album to date.

To borrow from the back cover, the songs are a "celebration of English rural life, landscape, weather and seasons in traditional song and new settings of poems by Hardy, Housman and Shakespeare. Hilary James has a wonderfully adaptive voice and it is perfectly suited for the material at hand.

Here it is presented in the form of the quintessential English rose, a touch too twee for some tastes perhaps but light as the breeze, seductively expressive and crystal clear. Her mark upon the music is indelible and together with a fine assortment of guests, a sense of the pastoral and of time and place, are gently conjured up.

Those adding the delicate washes of colour include, Simon Mayor (violin, mandolin, guitar), Paul Sartin (oboe), Paul Hutchinson (accordion), Nick Cooper (cello), Richard Collins (bass guitar), David Pether (pipe organ) and Simon Price (drums).

Peter Stevenson