

## *Grace Notes ~ CD Reviews*

### *Northern Tide*

Fellside, FECD209

Individually, Maggie Boyle, Lynda Hardcastle and Helen Hockenhill are fine singers, firmly rooted in traditional music. Together they have performed as Grace Notes for more than fifteen years, blending their vocal and instrumental skills with apparent ease, evidently comfortable with each other and their material. Perhaps because of this, there is little to distinguish Northern Tide from their earlier recordings: there are no real surprises. They have settled into their way of doing things and here is some more of it. But make no mistake, they do it very well. Their choice of material, although mostly contemporary, is rarely mainstream and is always delivered in a very approachable way. The opening track is a prime example. Bob Dylan's 'When The Ship Comes In' is presented with piano accompaniment as a parlour ballad that only towards the end reveals the bitterness he was feeling in 1964. This is followed by an excellent a cappella interpretation of the traditional song 'The Gardener', led by Maggie.

Grace Notes have the knack for combining material. Two juxtaposed Donovan songs are followed by a short instrumental 'The Wind That Breaks The Barley', and Lynda's own song 'Northern Tide' slips effortlessly into the 'Mingulay Boat Song', only to reappear cleverly in a rousing finale. My pick from the traditional material would be 'Rue', learned from the incomparable Maureen Jelks. On the contemporary side, Tom Wait's 'The Briar And The Rose' and Steve Tilston's 'The Dewy Ones' stand out but, for me, all comes together on the penultimate track, Steve Ashley's song 'Best Wishes'. After a pleasing introduction on flute and piano, the three voices blend perfectly, a cappella, to remind me just how good Grace Notes can be. As the song says, 'Long may the music keep you underneath its spell. Long may you keep it live and always play it well.'

**Jack Crawford**

Grace Notes comprises three wonderful singers (Maggie Boyle, Lynda Hardcastle and Helen Hockenhill), who are blessed with voices which are so very different in character yet so highly complementary. Harmony heaven, with an ever-fabulous choice of songs embellished selectively with keyboard and/or

flute (and sometimes - though not on this CD - a smidgen of bodhrán). So any CD they produce is bound to be special... Northern Tide, Grace Notes' fourth recording, has taken its time in appearing, but as ever the ladies have sensibly waited until the material has been successfully embedded in their repertoire before committing it to CD. It's not an easy task conveying the true essence of Grace Notes in the cold light of a studio production, but Paul Adams has managed to do so once again with sympathy and feeling, and what could in lesser hands easily have been turned into a one-dimensional aural plane has a three-dimensional depth and bloom in sufficient proportion to give a credible representation of the intimate experience of Grace Notes live - always a seriously sublime one. And not just because I could probably listen to any one of these three fine singers all night in a solo capacity (and Maggie's would definitely be one of my desert-island voices!), but together they weave so compelling a magic. For each of the three has always had an ear for a great song, and it helps enormously that they share and complement each other's good taste. Putting it bluntly, then, and hopefully without underselling: Northern Tide is one of those "more of the same, doing what they do best" type of releases that can't disappoint - predictable in the nicest possible sense, yet all the time filled with the excitement of new discoveries. Northern Tide could be described as an enchanting maidens' voyage through some beautiful, if relatively uncharted, waters of song. And although the sea makes for a convenient linking device (I was tempted to say that for a good half of the album it flows through the grooves!), Grace Notes aren't "tide" to that theme, for they include at least three contrasted traditional-sourced songs with no nautical content as well as embracing the magical Utopian depths of Mike Silver's The Power (a rare co-write with Ewen Carruthers), Richard Thompson's Hard Cash obscurity Mrs Rita and Nick Burbridge's heartfelt tribute to the feisty spirit of revolutionary politics in the form of Rosa. The whole CD glides effortlessly through a well-planned sequence that more or less alternates acappella with accompanied items: a singularly well-balanced menu that finds room for fun amongst the forlorn with the sweet delights of Charlie Poole's "airship" song, the "ancient joke" of The Old Man Of Lee and the quirky observational humour of Loudon Wainwright's White Winos: and of course, one of the glories of Grace Notes is that their handling of both the lighter and the more thoughtful material can be equally persuasive. Having said that, for me the highlights of this new CD just happen to fall within the latter category: the disc's centrepiece is a spellbinding interpretation of the traditional song Rue (which Lynda first heard in the singing of Doreen Leighter and later Maureen Jelks), while Maggie leads Grace Notes in a superb rendition of Tom Waits' neo-trad The Briar And The Rose that creditably complements the fine recent versions by Niamh Parsons and Cloudstreet. Two of this country's illustrious (if still criminally underrated) songwriting Steves get some welcome airtime here too: Mr Tilston with a truly beguiling three-part rendition of his sensuous genius-loci invocation of The Dewy Ones, and Mr Ashley with a touching and sincere performance of his abundantly beautiful Best Wishes. And the disc closes with a masterstroke, a conflation of two songs (a favourite Grace Notes gambit, that!), where Maggie's heart-stopping rendition of the exceptional

Linda Kelly song that gives the CD its title is harnessed to the hoary old Mingulay Boat Song - and, surprise surprise, it works. I'm pleased too, that Grace Notes have resisted the temptation to over-arrange this finale, instead leaving the accompaniment as a straightforward piano line (the overbearing glossy synth drone of yore now a mere subliminal haze on the horizon). Now I've always harboured a bit of a reservation about the use of keyboards in folk repertoire, in that they can occasionally bring an undesired air of mannered or overly-cultured art-song to an interpretation; it's symptomatic of Grace Notes' artistry that it just ain't an issue here - I suspect partly because their particular approach to vocal styling and their specific choice of contemporary folk material is well suited to this, and then not least because the accompaniment is always genuinely at the service of the song rather than providing an all-purpose "nice chords for their own sake" wash. Even if you're prejudiced against (a) female voices, (b) contemporary songs and/or (c) albums where there's not a single guitar within earshot, Grace Notes are likely to be your one exception to that rule; I can't put it plainer - they really are that special.

**David Kidman**

### *January 2008 Grace Notes' CD Launch, Two Hours When The Ship Goes Out, The New Variety Club, Keighley*

I'm far from the first to say it, but there is definitely a nautical feel to the new Grace Notes' album Northern Tide: framed by a remarkable version of Dylan's When The Ship Comes In and the medley of Northern Tide/ Mingulay Boat Song which has been the finale of their set for over a year, the album also has at its heart a shrewd segue of the two maritime songs from Donovan's Gift From A Flower To a Garden. So a launch was singularly appropriate.

Taking place in what has developed into a particularly fine local music venue, The New Variety Club in Keighley, the event provided an opportunity to play the album right through, live, almost exactly in sequence. It was the second time this year that I've heard a live version of complete album: the other was Liege & Leif: Grace Notes won hands down!

#### *The Launch*

The event started with the voice of record company boss Paul Adams congratulating the ladies on their latest release. Then it was straight into side one track one. Unlike many of the songs, which have been in Grace Notes' repertoire for some time (indeed I actually thought one of them had already been released, so familiar has it become), this was new to the audience - a familiar song, of course, but one of which Grace Notes' arrangement prompts reconsideration. Each Grace Note led one of the first three songs. Helen Hockenhill was the main voice on Dylan's song; Maggie Boyle was to the fore on the traditional song The Gardner; Lynda Hardcastle led Rosa, a revolutionary tale from Nick Burbridge.

Then, saving Steve Tilston's Dewy Ones to close the first half, they moved on to The Power where Helen's liquid piano part was joined by Maggie's flute behind the full rich harmonies which perfectly complement the lyricism of the song's inspiring words.

I Once Loved A Sailor, the next song, does not continue the nautical theme, despite its title: the sailor in question is the pilot of an airship in a delightful ditty from the start of the last century. It makes for charming light relief after the intensity of the preceding songs.

Richard Thompson's Mrs Rita is an overlooked gem – a bitter indictment of the plight of female workers in sweatshops where GN's arrangement brings out both the bitterness and witty subtlety of RT's writing. Then it was back to the tradition for Rue, picking up the flower imagery of The Gardner: sung unaccompanied, it is the perfect vehicle for Grace Notes' harmony – the final chord in this performance had the fulfilling resonance of a Tibetan singing bowl.

The first half concluded with a Steve Tilston song (an inevitable inclusion where Grace Notes are concerned). This time they have chosen one of his best, Dewy Ones, which first appeared on the album he made with WAZ. With lyrics that challenge intellectually, a chorus to die for, a theme that embraces myths, minotaurs and holiday makers, it was an ideal break point. Cue an inevitable queue at the sales stall – anyone who didn't want to own a copy of this music at this point can't have been listening!

If the songwriting roster of the first half had been impressive (Dylan, Thompson, Tilston...), the second half consolidated the list adding Donovan and Steve Ashley as well as more surprisingly Loudon Wainwright and Tom Waits. Lynda Hardastle's combination of The Naturalist's Wife and Widow With Shawl is imaginative, adding weight to both songs; combining Maggie Boyle's playing of The Wind That Shakes The Barley is little short of inspired. Tom Wait's Briar and The Rose was written for The Black Rider, a play by William Burroughs: Waits' version features organ and banjo and is to say the least strange; Grace Notes rescue the song and take it back to its roots which lay in Barbara Allen – it sounds like a traditional song, but isn't!

Another song which they have very much made their own is Loudon Wainwright's White Winos, delivered on this occasion with a suggestive vigour that left one feeling their sense of empathy was more than a little empirical. It was back to the tradition for an exuberant take on The Old Man From Lee, before their version of a song which has appeared on three albums this year – Best Wishes by Steve Ashley. Another Fairport Connection here; again GN come out on top!

Finally the sublime medley of Northern Tide and Mingulary Boat Song. Like the Tom Waits number, the latter song seems trad arr., but isn't: written by Hugh

Richardson in 1938, it evokes the ghostly atmosphere of the Hebridean island uninhabited since 1912; Lynda's performance linked it seamlessly to the widow with shawl we had met earlier. Northern Tide, the title track of the CD, was written by Linda Kelly of Hull: along her partner in Hissyfit, Hazel Richings, and Linda Adams, she joined Grace Notes for a unique rendition of the song.

They'd played the whole album...but the audience demanded an encore....Fay Hield was summoned from the floor and the entire audience swelled the chorus on John Ball.

### *The Album*

You now know about all the tracks on this CD – which is of course what a launch should ideally achieve. We've waited quite a while for a new Grace Notes album. Several of the songs included on Northern Tide have been in their repertoire for some time. Produced with a greater stereo spread between their voices, this is the album which truly represents that musical alchemy that makes any Grace Notes gig so special. Here the three constituent elements – voices which are each superb in their own right – interreact before your ears to produce something greater even than the parts; what's more each time the album plays through one hears something different. This is most definitely not a "play it once and file it away" CD; it is rich, rewarding and mature.

Even though some material here is familiar, Grace Notes have given it a freshness which continues to surprise: the contrapuntal flute in the Donovan songs; the closing descant in Mingulay; Dylan's Ship rendered less vaingloriously triumphant and more defiantly ominous by an inventive new arrangement.

Perhaps we should let the contributing songwriters judge: Linda Kelly feels "honoured"; Steve Ashley was "bowled over"; Richard Thompson, 'Wow – that's really something'. We await Dylan's response, but Dave (Dylan Project) Pegg thinks it's "[expletive deleted] great". Dear old Mr Trad no doubt said "aaah".

It is, in short, everything one expects from Grace Notes – great songs, meticulously selected, beautifully sung, exquisitely arranged, perfectly programmed.

**Nigel Schofield**