

There's a solid groove on most of the tunes, with twin violins leading the fray and whistles and muted trumpet providing contrast. A couple of favourites are 'As Starlings Gather', which weaves around a lovely melody, and 'The Watcher', a thoughtful piece in which Jim Molyneux's accordion leads the band to a great climax.

This quietly effective album will keep old fans happy, and help spread the word about the band's new identity.

Ian Croft

ROB HARBRON & EMMA REID

★★★★
Flock & Fly

(OWN LABEL) www.robertharbron.com



Flock & Fly is the second album from the pairing of Cumbrian multi-instrumentalist Rob, known for his work with

Leveret amongst others, and fiddle player Emma, who has roots in Northumberland but is now based in Sweden. The varied repertoire is delivered in an expressively polished fashion, largely with English concertina, fiddle and occasional guitar. Memorably, they bring to life baroque country-dance in 'Camberwell', from John Offord's seminal book of North West England triple-time hornpipes, *John Of The Green - The Cheshire Way*. This leads into 'Polska Från Mörkö Efter Anders Gustaf Andersson'. The tune sounds like it is from the same heritage, yet its origin is from near Emma's hometown of Järna in Södermanland, Sweden. In 'Big Set' they exemplify how combining seemingly unlikely partner melodies can produce a pleasing montage, deploying *accelerando* through the four tunes.

There are more memorable motifs in 'Polkas', where Emma makes her fiddle both sing and swing in 'Jullien's Original Polka' (from Scan Tester's manuscript), while Rob adopts a restrained, but crucial, complementary part. The album is an object lesson in creating a powerful yet unostentatious sound from a harmonious musical partnership.

Colin Bailey

PLU

★★★★
Tir A Golau

(SBRIGYN YMBORTH) www.pluband.com



'Alternative Welsh language folk music with hints of country' is the specific description that Plu

give themselves although, to the untrained ear, alternative Welsh folk music sounds pretty much like Welsh folk music. *Tir A Golau* is the third album by the Rhys siblings – Elan, Marged and Gwilym.

I have to say that Plu are sometimes uncompromising. Searching through photographs indicates that guitar, electric Autoharp and keyboards are involved, with guest fiddle, pedal steel and drums, and there are no translations of the lyrics. So just settle back and enjoy the sound, which is very enjoyable indeed.

The opening title track is gentle with sweet harmonies and ringing notes, which give the hint of country – something sounds like a banjo but I don't think it is – and 'Ambell I Gân' begins in the same vein but suddenly bursts into a different sort of life. Don't get too settled: 'Arthur'

and 'Simsan' also feature some rocking instrumental work.

The final live track, 'Hedfan' proves that Plu can cut it on stage, too and it's easy to see why they are so well regarded at home.

Dai Jeffries

THE OLD FASHIONED

★★★★
Strawberry Leaves

(NO MASTERS) www.theoldfashioned.co.uk



Strawberry Leaves is the first album from a band that has gigged only occasionally over its six-year lifespan.

Regardless, those esteemed musicians Pete Bullock (keyboards), Fi Fraser (fiddle and vocal) and Howard Mitchell (double bass and melodeon) have created what they describe as 'a cocktail of music', and very tasty it is too.

A quintet of favourite traditional songs are given sparkling arrangements by Bullock with his own sublime piano and Mitchell's upright bass supporting Fraser's lovely voice, which has rarely had much of a solo outing. 'Bonny Labouring Boy' and 'Our Captain Cried All Hands' are just two examples of great songs, beautifully played and sung, and there's a strong version of Jez Lowe's poignant 'Last Of The Widows' aided by Jude Abbott's flugelhorn.

It's rare to see comic songs in the mix, but here are three – one each from Derek Pearce and Joyce Grenfell, plus 'Rest Of The Day' once sung by old Tom Forrest from *The Archers*. There are also three instrumental sets, highlighting the trio's vast experience of playing for dance. The final track, which puts together Vera Lynn's 'When They Sound The Last All Clear' with John Tams's 'Dear Auntie Vera' layers the cream on top.

Ian Croft

ALICE JONES

★★★★
Poor Strange Girl

(SPLID) www.alicejonesmusic.com



There isn't a single thing about Alice Jones's debut album that is in the least bit trendy. And all the better for it. No, the

Yorkshire singer and multi-instrumentalist drinks at a well that is deeper and more authentic than fickle fashion. Of the dozen songs presented on *Poor Strange Girl*, nine are drawn from traditional British or American sources.

Whether accompanying herself with piano, harmonium or tenor guitar it is her voice that shines out of the music. Blessed with the clarity and sympathy for the folk canon of a Sandy Denny and a rootsy Yorkshire twang, it is the perfect vehicle to deliver these songs.

Many of the arrangements are sparse but the music suffers not a jot from this simple approach. Having listened to Jones performing 'Woody Knows Nothing' it is almost impossible to imagine it delivered in any way other than just piano and voice. Nothing else is needed. Similarly, the harmonium and fiddle introducing 'The Cruel Mother' add an air of foreboding to the gruesome tale of infanticide.

Where Jones throws in her own compositions they are beguiling instrumentals that allow her to wander free with her penny whistle. Reels, mazurkas and polskas, they all demand your toes tap along.

Trevor Raggatt



West Of Eden are probably the biggest band you haven't heard of. They have been together for twenty years under the leadership of Martin and Jenny Schaub and have recorded nine albums in a sophisticated Celtic style with thoughtful songs and fine playing. The thing is – they're Swedish. I asked Martin how it all began.

"Jenny and I went to Ireland for a vacation many years ago and were overwhelmed and taken by the music that seemed to pour out of every city and every street corner and every man and woman. Wonderful sounds and melodies. From deepest melancholy to the most upbeat dance tunes in no time at all..."

"Back in Sweden we put together some of our best friends and started a band just for fun. Then we wrote some songs of our own and things soon started to develop. Now here we are, almost twenty years later. Who would have guessed?"

"The Celtic music struck a chord within us. We suddenly found a musical tradition that we could identify ourselves with. It actually felt natural to take on another country's heritage. Jenny's voice fitted right in, and the way that the Irish and English tell stories and write melodies suited us both well.

"Neither Jenny nor I grew up listening to Swedish traditional music. If anything we listened to things like A-ha and Abba, which on the other hand do incorporate a very strong sense of melody that has a Scandinavian feel to it... but we are far more inspired by acts such as Fairport Convention, Kate Rusby, Mark Knopfler, Laura Marling, Andy Irvine and The Waterboys than their Swedish equivalents."

West Of Eden's catalogue of nine albums in less than twenty years is a very high output rate. What is the

secret behind their work-rate? "We truly love to write songs and to create something new. That's the best thrill there is! And it's such a reward when you rise to a challenge and pull it off!"

Even with Scandinavian/Scottish musical fusions being the thing in the U.K. right now the band won't be jumping on the bandwagon. "We do what we do," says Martin. Their new album, however, delves into a period of Swedish history and Jenny, the band's lyricist, explains some of the background.

"In the late 19th century almost a third of the Swedish population decided to leave in search of a better future on the other side of the Atlantic. They left to get away from poverty, from the church and the feeling of no prospects whatsoever for the future. 1.2 million people took the steamboat from Gothenburg to Hull and from there they went by train down to Liverpool or Southampton where the boat for America waited.

"They all walked down Herring Street, which is on the inside of our CD cover, and there they found the offices of all the big shipping agents. The street leads down to the customs house and the harbour where you could find 'the crying stairs', the place where they said their final goodbyes to their old country, family and friends."

Look To The West is clearly a very important album for both of them. Martin has the last word.

"Musically it is still rooted in the Celtic tradition, but lyrically it tells the story of the big Swedish emigration. Over a million Swedes sailed out from our hometown of Gothenburg and we felt that there weren't enough songs preserved here in Sweden about this part of our history. Hence the lyrical theme which is reflected in the artwork and production of the album."

Dai Jeffries