

some time ago' is an unexpected treat. Her vocal range may not be what it once was, but she remains a magical singer, and her agile concertina is supported by guests, particularly daughter Nancy and son-in-law James Fagan.

Sandra's own song 'Young Girl Upon The Road' about environmental activist Greta Thunberg immediately nails her political colours to the mast. Two other self-compositions ring the changes. 'Five Lives Of A Bucket' exhibits Sandra's clever use of words which are both witty and down-to-earth. 'Women Having A Hard Time Round Here' is about the North East suffering from government cuts, with great harmonica from Will Pound. Among a couple of covers is a new Robb Johnson song, 'Anne Frank's Sister', about racism today.

Three traditional songs run the gamut of emotions, and several tune sets range from the beautiful to some lively Northumbrian pieces. They all combine to make up *Rebel With Her Chords*, an excellent album by one of the loveliest people on the folk scene.

lan Croft

KAREN MARSHALSAY

★★★★

The Road To Kennacraig

(CRAMASIE) www.karenmarshalsay.com



Karen Marshalsay is a harpist and teacher, currently at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and previously at Plockton. She has worked on cross-cultural projects and published her compositions but *The Road To Kennacraig* is her first solo recording.

Karen has an interest in the piping tradition and the opening title track experiments with piping ornamentation played on the wire-strung clarsach. It doesn't sound like any harp you've heard before but I regret to say that I found the tones rather harsh, perhaps because the decoration gets in the way of the instrument's natural sustain. The same is true of 'The Battle Of The Perth Bridge' although 'Carrill's Lament' works much better. However, as I have actually driven the road to Kennacraig, I'll be forgiving.

The rest of the material is played on a gut-strung harp and is therefore rather mellower but Karen is a technically accomplished player so if you want pretty you'll have to wait until 'Ellen's Dreams/PM Donald MacLean Of Lewis'. The first is by Robin Morton and the second was written by one pipe major for another, and I marvel at how Karen has turned a pipe march into a composition for harp.

The final track features the clarsach, the gut-strung, and the Renaissance bray harp which produces a buzzing tone and, paradoxically, I'd like to hear more of that.

Dai Jeffries

HENRY PARKER

★★★★★

Silent Spring

(OWN LABEL) www.henryparkermusic.co.uk



Channelling the ghosts of Jansch and Renbourn through his fingertips, the fluid playing and emotive singing of Yorkshire-born Henry Parker evokes the spirit of the early-60s folk revival as if it were yesterday.

This, his recorded debut after teenage years spent cranking out metal riffs, pits eight original compositions alongside

poised arrangements of the traditional 'Willie O Winsbury' and 'Sylvie', but such is Parker's way around the fretboard, and so strong his songwriting, tracks as sculptured as 'Prospect Of Wealth', 'False Guidance' and the jaunty, Martynesque spring of 'Door Walk Blues', more than easily hold their own.

With a lyrical adulthood belying his twenty-five years, Parker explores themes of ecology, money, politics and landscape, though he's equally as effective on the personal, such as the childhood holiday journey depicted on 'Drive East'. 'Marbled Wren' is a gentle instrumental, titled after a canal boat on the Leeds-Liverpool canal.

Subtle Fender Rhodes, bass, percussion, and the flute of Soft Machine's evergreen Theo Travis enhance *Silent Spring* but in truth, this is all about Parker himself. Quite superb. Helpful tuning notes are supplied for those who understand that sort of thing.

Nicholas John

MATT CALLAHAN & YVONNE MOORE

★★★★

Working-Class Heroes – A History Of Struggle In Song

(FREE DIRT) www.freedirt.net



This song collection, messed up and rough-edged with the dirt of working-class politics, is a nice addition to the tradition of great American union and protest songs, featuring classic workers' ballads by both famous and little-known songwriters.

Stripped-back and direct, on *Working-Class Heroes* Matt Callahan and Yvonne Moore sing a history of strikes, protests and struggles with a pointed emphasis on the songwriting of women, notably Sarah Ogan Gunning, whose 'I Hate The Capitalist System' is brilliant: it not only performs the feat of making a banner-slogan into a melodic lament, it tells the truth – when Moore sings Gunning's words 'My husband was a coal miner, he worked and risked his life' and 'I had a blue-eyed baby, the darling of my heart – but from my little darling, her mother had to part' she's voicing Gunning's own story of poverty and suffering, as a songwriting labouring woman who lost her husband to black lung and her children to starvation.

I would have liked a detailed chronology (or at least the songs to be dated) but then again, this no-frills, poignant and timely collection will hopefully send me off searching for histories, rebels and poets I knew little about.

Boff Whalley

VELVET & STONE

★★★★

Velvet & Stone

(OWN LABEL) www.velvetstonemusic.com



This is the eponymous debut album by Devon band Velvet & Stone, following three EPs released in the five years of their existence. Fronted by Lara Snowdon's vocals and songwriting and Kathryn Tremlett's sparky fiddle, the album (and selected gigs) has a supporting band adding guitar, bass and drums, enabling them to shift into a full folk-rock sound as required.

It all starts with 'Fisherman's Blues' – not the Mike Scott song but their own composition about losing a loved one at sea – in which Laura's haunting vocals

and Kathryn's fiddle lead a dark rocker that is helped along by a subtle banjo. A similar tone is picked up by other tales of love and loss throughout the album.

On some songs, the pace is taken down and the atmosphere becomes rather dreamy, as on 'Breathe', or 'Forget About The Rain', a song in praise of summer and love. Final track 'I'll Dream Of You Tonight' starts as a thoughtful piece lifted by a fiddle riff, and moves into full folk-rock mode to finish off the album. While *Velvet & Stone* was very enjoyable, I would have appreciated a bit more of that sort of fire.

lan Croft

MARTIN SIMPSON

★★★★★

Rooted

(TOPIC) www.topicrecords.co.uk



How long it takes to get an act of creating something down, meaning capturing something on canvas, on paper or some kind of sound-carrier (to rework the German word *Tonträger*)? There's that old yarn about Picasso saying it only took a lifetime to dash something off.

Martin Simpson recorded *Rooted* – and the deluxe edition's *Seeded* companion – in stages between June 2018 and April 2019. Over the same period he was road-testing and fine-tuning the *Rooted* repertoire, granting sneak-peeks into the work in progress, working on song introductions and refining the booklet notes here. But nothing I witnessed prepared for *Rooted*'s expanded arrangements.

As he explains in the notes some songs go way back. Shel Silverstein and Jim Friedman's 'The Hills Of Shiloh', for example, was part of an American Civil War suite he and June Tabor performed during their time together (1977–1988). The basket of songs he brings is utterly splendid. It is woven from the recorded legacies of, say, Hedy West ('Joe Bowers' and 'Queen Jane') and Jackson C. Frank ('Kimbie') but likewise richly provisioned from his own recent song output.

'Trouble Brought Me Here', 'Henry Gray' and 'Ken Small' are outstanding – as is the *Seeded* instrumental 'Arbutus Turnaround' (*Arbutus* is the strawberry tree genus). The song that really gets me, though, is David L. Grimes's reading-my-mind 'Born Human' ('I don't know why I was born human...').

Simpson has grown into one of a kind. Listening to this consummate package reaffirms that in spades. This is an album that took a career to make.

Ken Hunt

PAULA RYAN

★★★★

Turas Cumadóir

(MAVERICO) www.paularyan.co



A singer-songwriter? Well, that's easy: it's guitar, vocals, and their heart slapped firmly on their sleeve. Such might be the expectation, but Paula Ryan's latest album, *Turas Cumadóir*, demonstrates the versatility, breadth and potential of the singer-songwriter, even when every song on the album is written, arranged and performed by the singer-songwriter herself.

Her ode to the 'Handsome Irish Man' is also an homage to the American-tinged campfire song, with ample opportunity for the appreciative partners of Irish

men to join in, lifted and made sweeter through close harmonies. The album closer, 'O My Blue Eyed One' is an unaccompanied and timeless song, as the soldier leaves his beloved for the frontline. 'Garryroe' uses heavy percussion to show her listeners her physical longing for her much-changed ancestral home.

Ryan also likes to surprise her listeners by bedding them in to a particular way and then throwing us off into a completely different direction. 'Raise Our Voice' begins with the drone of the tanpura before launching into a Seeger-style collective anthem, while 'You Make Me Laugh' opens in a church, all husky sacred vocals, until fast, funky percussion takes us somewhere unprecedented. *Turas Cumadóir* is a varied compilation of original songs from an evidently experienced composer and performer.

Supernova

GRANNY'S ATTIC

★★★★

Wheels Of The World

(GRIMDON) www.grannysattic.org.uk



With third album *Wheels Of The World*, Granny's Attic have reached the Premier League. Since their early twenties, they have matured rapidly and brought Lakeman as producer provided the icing on the cake. Cohen Braithwaite-Kilgus and George Sansome are two of the finest young singers around, with expressive voices and very different timbres. Sansome plays subtle violin, which, along with Cohen's concertina or melodica and George's guitar, creates a very full sound. Apart from three tunes composed by Lewis, the material is all traditionally arranged to carry a clear Granny's Attic stamp. 'What I Saw In My Dream' is a song from the Napoleonic era, sung by George, adding a current issue of relevance to those from 200 years ago. 'Banish Sweet Willow' is the well-known ballad of mother and baby being thrown overseas with Cohen's vocal held in contrast as the tragic drama develops.

Three instrumental tracks are full of energetic and imaginative playing, together they form a very tight and cohesive piece, Lewis's 'Fenland' is a lovely waltz tune taken at a more relaxed pace. The informative and witty sleeve notes and the result is a rather wonderful album, a superb folk trio.

MIKE VASS

★★★★

The Four Pillars

(UNROOFED) www.mikevass.com



Surely it's only a few months since Mike Vass released his genre-bending *Save His Calm* collection. Overkill, maybe?

Well, actually, no. For while his predecessor showcased Vass's skills as a songwriter and arranger, *The Four Pillars* very much focuses on his compositional talents. Originally written as part of a multi-media performance for the 2008 Scots Fiddle Festival in Edinburgh, this is a suite rooted in the four major modes of Scottish fiddle tunes. Accompanied by string quartet, piano and vibraphone, the movement features a different fiddle.

Lauren MacColl opens the sequence with two beautifully controlled airs, before Vass himself leads into the