

Rachel and her colleagues now have the chance to stretch the envelope further out on a full-length album, and it's every bit as impressive in all the above respects, while playing down the feeling of slightly too easy accomplishment that had occasionally beset the earlier EP. There's still a lightness of touch, notably in the sense of onward momentum that drives many of the chosen tempos—and in the cheeky interspersions of tunes amidst some of the song structures—but Rachel's singing is invariably cannily phrased in order to gain the maximum effect from the words without overplaying her hand, and her musicians display the virtue of restraint without feeling the need to grandstand their skills. Just occasionally I find the chosen tempo a touch too breezy, as on disc opener *Blue Sunset*, Graeme Miles' slightly sinister, if colourful poetic depiction of the effect of industry on nature. The song's an apt choice for inclusion here, however, since the band are proud recipients of the Graeme Miles Bursary which played a large factor in enabling the EFDSS to fund the album. The remainder of the disc's menu is no less exciting: there's a healthy quotient of songs from Rachel's native north-east alongside traditional songs capably reworked (*Gypsy Laddie* and a very fine a capella account of *What A Voice*) and repertoire classics like *Alice White* (Alan Bell) and *Schooldays Over* (Ewan MacColl). Several of the songs have a mining theme, including two Rachel learned from her dad—*Jean Ritchie's West Virginia* and *Andy Duffield's tribute to Jarrow miner Will Jobling*.

All in all, a boldly configured collection, with accomplished performances to match and a comparably clear-sighted production by Ian Stephenson (who also contributes some double bass and cello). *Hard Ground* represents a formidable full-length introduction to the Rachel Hamer Band.

David Kidman

JIM ELDON

Songs And Fiddle Tunes

Stick Records SDCCD012

www.thefretless.com

Brexit! Trump! Le Pen! The world is getting madder and darker by the moment. I was about to abandon myself to utter despair at global events when this CD came through the letterbox. Saved!—There's no surer physic for a battered spirit than a sharp, neat dose of Jim Eldon.

There are some that don't get Jim, so I'm told. They're unnerved by his bristly, uncompromising delivery, his abrasive fiddle style, his sheer inscrutable originality. Fair enough. We worship in a broad kirk, but if you want to get a sense of the real nuts and bolts of folk music, he's the go-to guy.

When it comes to album titles, Jim doesn't mince words. Songs and fiddle tunes are indeed what you get here, put down live in the studio with no frippery or trickery. He doesn't need it. It's just like having him in the room with you, except you won't have to offer him a cup of tea. The aforementioned songs and tunes are, as usual, a singular selection. Apart from Lily Smith's popular *Adieu To Old England*, the trad songs will almost certainly be unfamiliar to you. They're all taken directly from the singing of "social" singers, mostly that he's known personally. The one exception is *Fair Ones Are Shining*, a striking version of *The Cruel Ship's Carpenter* lifted from the *Journals of the Folk Song Society*. Alongside it you'll find

unusual and arresting versions of such staples as *Our Goodman* (here called *The Merry Cuckold*) and *Good Luck To The Barley-corn*. He's unearthed a real purler in the stately *Queen Of Tavendor*, which has a tune to which resistance is entirely futile.

There's also a happy handful of Jim's own inimitable compositions. *It's Still Around Somewhere* is a tessellation of wily aphorisms that might be profound, or possibly artfully meaningless. Experts are divided, but what do experts know, eh? I'll go for profound. He's been singing *A Message From Genghis Khan* for more than twenty years. Guess what?—It's more topical than ever. And *A Puffin In My Pint* harks back to his days fiddling on the Scarborough pleasure steamers.

That's the songs. The tunes come largely from his long service with the *Goathland Plough Stots*, and usually sound like well-known tunes that have had their atoms reassembled by alien technology. You're intrigued, I can tell...

The only Eldon speciality not represented on the CD is his unique take on the popular songs of today. No Clash, Springsteen or Meatloaf covers here, but it would be churlish to complain. And there's too much churlishness around these days. Just be grateful for another forty minutes of undiluted Jimness. It's already cheered me up. I think I'm even getting over the death of Ronnie Corbett...

Raymond Greenoaken

(There's no Jim Eldon website at present, so keen purchasers need to send a ten pound note and a large letter stamp to Jim Eldon, 21 Corona Drive, Hull HU8 UHH, or contact him at jimeldon@outlook.com Tell him Stirrings sent you.)

