

Photo: Judith Burrows



Ray Cooper

RAY COOPER

Palace Of Tears Westpark 87267

Ray, a.k.a. Chopper, is best known to readers as a long-serving member of Oysterband, from whose ranks he departed in 2013 in order to pursue the successful solo career he'd begun in earnest with his well-received 2010 debut solo album *Tales Of Love, War & Death By Hanging*.

Like its predecessor, *Palace Of Tears* is a mighty sounding record, one which audibly means business right from the outset: rugged and bold in character, intent and delivery. It also voices Ray's continuing preoccupation with history, though its perspective is altogether more personal, sometimes unashamedly romantic, and yet both more recent and often unavoidably nostalgic, which is not the contradiction it might appear in light of the eternal predicament of never being able to reclaim the past. The widescreen nature of the sound of this new album is firmly northern European, with key elements in the texture being on one hand the sturdy chords of piano and cello, on the other hand swirling, keening Swedish fiddles and ringing, chiming Finnish kantele.

The confrontation of the personal with the impersonal and the historical pervades the dark, brooding vision of the disc's powerful opener *A Line In The Sand*, after which *Mountainside* provides an even more potent sense of identity and place that's thematically linked to *Sleeping Giant*, bringing Ray's Scottish roots into focus through the prism of the Swedish winter. *Destroying Angel* is a dramatic, almost cinematic portrait of a deadly fungus found in the Swedish forest, while the title track, in namechecking the border control point at Friedrichstrasse station, resonates with a painful, if wistful, nostalgia whose personal import overshadows the (historically more significant) tearing-down of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The strong sense of place and history permeates and accentuates the bittersweet character of Ray's songwriting in *Calling Of The Dove* (his tribute to the harbour town of Hamburg) and the more intimately reflective chanson *This Foolish Dream*, and finally the disc transports us directly back to Ray's adopted home of Sweden by means of the staggeringly-home polska *When The Curtain Falls*.

www.raycooper.org

David Kidman

THE TWO MAN GENTLEMAN BAND

Enthusiastic Attempts At Hot Swing & String Band Favorites Own label

Apt, that's what that title is, apt. Following last year's excellent *Two At A Time*, tenor guitar and banjoist Andy Bean and string bass man Fuller Condon switch from their own songs to, well, what it says, showing off the songs and styles that have influenced them. And a nice selection it is, too: from standards like *My Blue Heaven* and *These Foolish Things* to more esoteric fare (on this side of the pond, anyway) along the lines of *Sweet Irene From Illinois*, all the way to the Mississippi Mud Steppers' sole claim to immortality, *The Jackson Stomp*, on which Bean shows he can wield a mean mandolin and the quasi-anarchic tone of the original is neatly invoked.

The two-man format is beefed up with drums, extra guitars and banjos, and the virtuoso clarinet and accordion of Joshua Kaufman, all of which put a swing into *The Palm Springs Jump*, *The Dallas Rag* and *Chinatown My Chinatown* (Lord, Bean even sings the words!); Fats Waller gets a look in with *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*, while Condon, aka the Councilman, rounds it all off with an idiosyncratic rendering of *On The Sunny Side Of The Street*. It's all good-natured and happily performed, and the modesty of the title is matched only by the hilarity of the sleeve notes. Live, they're stunning, and this album captures that feeling. Did I say apt?

www.thetwogentlemen.com

Ian Kearey

ROBB JOHNSON

Us & Them Irregular IRR091

Uncle Robb's latest assemblage of "contemporary folk songs firmly engaged with the realities of not-so-Merrie Olde Condemned Englande" was originally going to be called *Some More Recent Protest Songs*, referencing his 2011 collection, but in a quest for less obvious (and ostensibly more creative) titling *Us & Them* was subsequently judged to be more appropriate. Plus ça change, history repeats itself, the cycle recycles endlessly (cue the inevitable Tour-de-France jibe!), and so the good guys like Robb will always have plenty to protest and sing about.

The fifteen (mostly pretty recent) songs on *Us & Them* are archetypal RJ creations, with their right-minded and / or air-punching sentiments running the gamut from mature and powerful expressive condemnation (*The Last Good War*), via wistful reflection and tenderness (*Goodnight And Goodbye*), to old-fashioned music-hall-style knees-up (*St Gove's Academy*) and comparatively simplistic schoolboy sloganeering (*Who Was That Man?*). Robb celebrates our gift for "getting up in the morning and getting on with it", with that characteristic blend of affection and penetrating insight, especially delivering on *When I Bring You Roses*. On a similar trajectory lies *Banks Of England*, while he paints an even bleaker (though informed) picture of history and hindsight on *The Losing Side*.

Elsewhere Robb pays tribute to miners' leader Terry French and RMT boss Bob Crow (appending judicious soundbites of Bob himself), whereas *The Spawn Of Tony Blair* spits justified venom on yuppified pubs (today's *Hope & Anchor?*). Maybe some of the riffs seem a bit too familiar (*Know Your Place* and bonus track *Sunny Afternoon In Ilmenau*), and sure, there are one or two cases where Robb's enthusiasm for hitting the bullseye might seem to get the better of him, but hey, what the hell? His engaging attitude and infectious chumminess invariably wins us over.

With Robb and his guitar (and occasional overdubbed dobro, bass or harmonica) backed only by son Arv on cajon, this is a "recorded as live as possible to make sure it sound like it means it" offering; Robb's stated intention was to replicate the qualities of energy and directness that characterised early Dylan and Pete Seeger records, and I think on balance he's succeeded.

www.robbjohnson.co.uk

David Kidman

KASSA TESSEMA

Ethiopiquest 29: Mastawesha Buda Musique 860257

DANIEL TECHANE

Jammin' With Kassa Buda Musique 860258

Without the Amharic, you're not going to get the best out of this latest in the *Ethiopiquest* series. Kassa Tessema lived from 1937 to 1973, his style not distinguished by changes in tempo or melody, and he has only his deep, ancient voice and minimal accompaniment from his lyre to convey meaning to us. What he did have is – so we are told – was the most brilliant sense of word-play, a true poet of song in a tradition that welcomes ingenuity, aptness and a wicked accuracy. Goodness knows what sublime frissons are denied to us unenlightened.

But his music is brought much closer to home and comprehensible by serving it up as meaty samples, his extraordinary voice and presence clothed in modern colours by an Ethiopian who absented himself from the hardship of the Derg period of Ethiopian history in 1991 and set up in Australia. Daniel Techane has listened to Tessema since the age of twelve, and is a subtle and sneaky practitioner of music technology. So rather than the standard western / Ethiopian collaborations we have seen over the last few years, he gives us modernisation from the inside. What he does is startling, brave and unexpected. Funky night-spot jazz suddenly gives way to Mantovani-like sweeps of lush digital strings, then to a Latin groove, then to Ibiza, then some Egyptian relative of *Tubular Bells*. A strange dreamland, and at the heart, the other-worldly vocals of a great singer beaming out from the past like new-born. Techane has done a great job.

www.budamusique.com

Rick Sanders