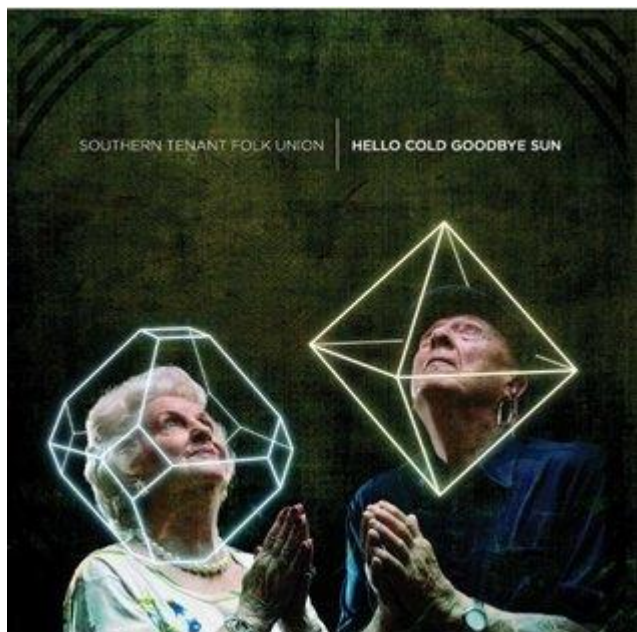


American Roots UK review 4th Feb 2013

"All of it unusual and some with a surreal otherworldly atmosphere, but all of it rewarding"
Mike Morrison, 5 Stars, American Roots UK

SOUTHERN TENANT FOLK UNION – HELLO COLD GOODBYE SUN



2013– Johnny Rock Records

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I've followed the Southern Tenant's since their first incarnation when they played an original blend of music that consisted of a very British Isles folksiness and music rooted in the old Appalachian 'hillbilly' or 'old timey.' Their first couple of tremendous albums, were mainly written by band leader and banjoist Pat McGarvey, giving them a strong recognizable identity, with Pat's generally dark tales fitting lead vocalists Pete Gow (Case Hardin) and Oliver Talkes like a pair of gloves. That band eventually split and Pat, in pursuit of his musical vision reformed the band with some hugely talented Edinburgh based musicians who had their own styles but were as open to Pat's ideas as he was to theirs.

The first album after the split was a shock to the system despite being of a similar quality to the first two, but was more rooted in the British isles. This is their third album since that new lineup came into being and in the main the orientation away from the U.S brand of folk music has continued. The other big change has been in the songwriting. Pat with his usual modesty told me several years ago that him writing the songs was more a matter of convenience and that as soon as it was felt that any songs written by other band members were worthy of recording they would do so. Gradually over the course of those albums he has been true to his word, so much so that on this current offering he is credited with writing just three songs plus a co write with Chris Purcell, whilst the other songwriting credits are well spread amongst Purcell and other band members, more so even than on previous recording 'Pencaitland.' Are the songs better than what Pat could write? No has to be the answer to that, but they are different to what Pat could have written, if of the same uniformly high quality, with that variety of writers ultimately the reason for the slight directional change.

Fairly obviously the similarities between the original and this lineup are few but the big thing is that the 'old band' couldn't have made this music, giving rise to the question 'Is Pat's musical vision still intact?' I rather think that it is but that the direction has had a slight change of angle. Whereas before it was a question of evenly blending the two genres that had the same or similar roots, i.e the British Isles was the place that much of the 'old timey' music was conceived back in the dense mists of time as starving people set out for the new world, those boundaries are now less defined. In many ways this album, more than the previous two, probably echoes folk music that was made before the days of recording, although with no hard evidence to back this up,

the truth or otherwise of that statement is open to argument. What I would say is that this album with its cinematically dramatic atmosphere in many ways harks back to a time when folk musicians carried the news from town to town and village to village with all of the dramatic colouration that getting people to listen implies.

The band's sound has now expanded to the outer reaches of any generic boundaries, gathering and implementing ideas that in many ways go way beyond what we (or the U.S) know as folk music but always with an undercurrent of the rootsy blend they started out with. It's almost as if the original vision was too restrictive for the talents contained within this band of five songwriters, all of whom bring a different perspective to their 'roots music.' It's worth noting the lineup that has gradually evolved over the years, now boasting seven members on this album, Adam Bulley on Mandolin, Tenor Guitar, Ebow, Vocals, Marty Camino, Double Bass, Chris Purcell, Guitar, Harmonica and Lead Vocals, Pat McGarvey, 5-String Banjo, Guitar and Vocals, Ewan Macintyre on Harmonica, Guitar and Lead Vocals, Jed Milroy plays Clarinet, Guitar, Clawhammer Banjo and Vocals and last but far from least Carrie Thomas on Fiddle, Octave Fiddle and Lead Vocals. It's always easy to praise the fiddle, banjo and guitar that are usually the dominant lead instruments but Camino's tremendous double bass playing lays the solid foundation that allows the lead instruments to shine. Quite an epic lineup but the instrumentation is never over done, always allowing the songs room to breathe and to build the unusual, at times tense atmosphere. That atmosphere and variety is not harmed at all by the fact that at least four of their number are high quality lead vocalists who bring their own individuality to the final blend, also ensuring some quite stunning harmonies.

Even on the less dark songs the atmosphere is often overwhelming in its intensity and yet at the same time the sheer quality and uniqueness of the recording is uplifting. It really does have the strong cinematic quality of a darkly intense musical drama despite the various writers and if there is a theme that runs through the album it is in many ways one of high ideals, bemoaning the society that we and our predecessors have made for ourselves and the world we are leaving as an inheritance for those who will follow. That is probably an overblown summation but there are little snippets that indicate reflections on life, the world at large and regrets. Of course there are also songs that stand alone, such as the Carrie Thomas penned *Days At The Seaside With Ice Cream*, with Carrie's own lovely lead vocal and Pat's dominant banjo driving a song that has a nice light feel but lyrically is anything but, being such an extraordinarily harrowing dark murder ballad that it actually seems to have a little darkly humorous touch. All of the songs are beautifully written, arranged and performed so that the disparate writing and vocal styles are so well blended that the whole album holds together as a concept without any joints showing! It is churlish to pick on any individual songs but a couple of examples of the quality are Pat McGarvey's *Crash* with its unusual banjo sound that contrasts with the vocals and enhances the dark tension of the song that in a strange way has an almost operatic feel. Jed Milroy's *Aberdour* includes some lovely fiddle and banjo on another song with an operatic feel that could easily be the background to a 19th century film drama, something that can be applied to much of this tremendous recording.

This is a hugely dramatic album that has its tap root in British folk music with smaller offshoots that lead to American folk, possibly a fibre of jazziness, cinematic operatic songs and music (similar in some ways to such as *Les Miserables*?) all of it unusual and some with a surreal otherworldly atmosphere, but all of it rewarding. If it has a fault it is that it is so multi faceted that fitting it into a genre for promotional purposes is going to be incredibly difficult and yet by the same token that is the great beauty of this extraordinary music! They have made albums that I have enjoyed more than this one, but nonetheless this is essentially a five star recording for its sheer musical quality, its invention and ultimately its even more fully formed originality than previous albums.

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