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Folk collective reaps quirky rewards from genre-crossing.

Ninian Dunnett 2013-02-07

Opening with a slow-building instrumental that recalls the anthems of Tex-Mex romantics Calexico, this is an album that makes its seductive pitch straight away. Soon the big sky theme is overtaken by dreamy harmony vocals, and it's no hardship at all to jump on for the ride.

This is not a straightforward journey, though. Pat McGarvey earned his spurs in 1990s London among the talented pool of musicians in country bands like The Coal Porters and The Arlenes, but his own outfit (named after a pioneering multi-racial farmers' collective in Depression-era Arkansas) takes a quirkier approach. Southern Tenant Folk Union are based in Edinburgh, and they have more in common with cross-genre Scottish experimentalists like the Cauld Blast Orchestra and Mr McFall's Chamber than any devotees of rural tradition.

On this fifth album, you'll hear 70s prog atmospherics (that's McGarvey damping his banjo strings to simulate the synthesiser of Tangerine Dream), jazz inspirations and plenty of cabaret staginess. It's a risky mix, variously written by five of the seven players, and the danger of losing coherence is not lessened by the sort of doomy sci-fi lyrics that would raise a few eyebrows on the front porch. Yet Carrie Thomas' breathy voice and the plaintive delivery of Ewan Macintyre make a fine job of selling the words.

There's technical virtuosity aplenty, and a vibrant (self-made) production that balances the rustle of brushes on drums and the tickle of banjo strings with warm bowed fiddle and tenor guitar. And just when you think the collective might have teetered over the line into the portentous (Crash), they bounce right back onto the dance floor with a dizzy hoedown like Men In Robes.

A date with a passionate eccentric, then, if not a sheer case of multiple personality. But aren't the wacky ones the most fun?

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