



Ron Milsom

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Rowan Rheingans
The Lines We Draw Together

Red Dress Records (52 mins)

★★★★★

Folk music takes to the stage on an anticipated solo debut



ROWAN RHEINGANS

The Sheffield fiddler, banjoist and songwriter taps into the rich new vein of folk music with

theatre, historical memoir, poetry and classical music that Karine Polwart has recently mined with her *Wind Resistance* shows and album. Indeed, Liam Hurley – co-writer of the script for Rheingans' stage show – also worked on Polwart's show.

Rheingans' one-woman theatre piece, *Dispatches on the Red Dress*, chronicles her grandmother's experiences in 1940s Germany. This solo debut from a musician usually associated with the bands Lady Maisery, The Rheingans Sisters and Songs of Separation is an extension of that live show. It's spacious, elegant stuff. Drawing not only

on family memories of war, but also the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch woman killed at Auschwitz, sparse existential meditations are complemented by delicate, rhythmic melodies.

Rheingans is unafraid to pause and let the silence in, or the birdsong, or the sound of children on a street outside. When a particularly fine turn of phrase or musical hook appears, she will repeat it, loop it, sit with it and let its magic infuse the wider song. She is beautifully assisted by a host of guests, notably clarinettist Jack McNeill, bassist Michele Stodart and percussionist Laurence Hunt, whose light, brushed and insistent rhythmic accompaniment is the making of one of the standout tracks, 'Traces'.

NATHANIEL HANDY

TRACK TO TRY *Traces*

Jones's version of 'Seven Yellow Gypsies' ends with them 'all in a row' – hanged.

Jones' pursuit of a strong story to sing takes him beyond the canon of traditional song. 'Humpback Whale', in which the cetacean causes serious damage before succumbing, is by Harry Robertson, who also wrote 'The Little Pot Stove' (sadly not included here), one of the lines of which provided the title for his 1980 album *Penguin Eggs*. This Nic Jones masterpiece, provides five of the tracks here. His guitar rings and swings and he chops the tunes so they don't simply accompany the song but help tell the story. His singing is engaging, with a break in the voice, the hint of a laugh, a meander off the melody.

Jones was at the height of his powers when in 1982, after a performance, his car hit a brick lorry. He suffered horrendous injuries and did not perform publicly again for almost three decades. Recently he has been working with Belinda O'Hooley and his son Joe. From this collaboration come two new tracks, 'I Only Speak Portuguese', proving he still has a nose for a strong song, and 'Now', an expression of his personal philosophy – don't look back. Well, Jones has here, and he should be well pleased with what he sees.

JULIAN MAY

TRACK TO TRY *Isle of France*

The Paul McKenna Band
Breathe

PMB Records (36 mins)

★★★★★

An amiable album from the Glasgow-based group



The fifth album from the Glasgow-based Paul McKenna Band finds their frontman in familiar hushed, quavering-voiced form, singing nine songs, mostly from his own pen or co-written with Australian Liz Stringer and Nova Scotian Dave Gunning.

Produced by the current go-to man of the Scottish trad scene and a former bandmember, Mike Vass, the album's focus is strongly on songs with uncluttered arrangements that use fiddle, flute, whistle, *uilleann* pipes and various fretted instruments alongside McKenna's guitar and piano. It creates a relaxed group sound and lends impetus to narratives such as the Donegal racehorse ballad 'Fanad Mare'

and JP Cormier's Canadian trawler disaster, 'The Molly May'.

McKenna takes 'Holding On' largely solo, with finger-picked guitar and a shadowy drone, and 'Broken Houses' slips into gentle folk-rock, with judicious electric guitar and effective backing vocals. Overall it's an amiable album, despite several songs' gloomier concerns and the theme of exile in the closing 'Foreign Land' (although our hero eventually returns to Ireland), and is a good showcase for piper Conal McDonagh's concise chanter skills.

ROB ADAMS

TRACK TO TRY *Fanad Mare*

Moenje
Klarvær

Kirkelig Kulturverksted (43 mins)

★★★★★

Debut from the group mixing Sámi and Norwegian folk



MOENJE

Klarvær (Clear Skies) is the debut album from Moenje, a new group led by the Norwegian south Sámi *joiker* Marja Mortensson and accordionist Hilde Fjerdingøy. Joined by Jo Einar Jansen (fiddles), Fredrik Luhr Dietrichson (double bass) and Øystein Aarnes Vik (drums), the band go about exploring the borders between Norway's traditional fiddle and accordion music and *joik* – the Sámi's unique vocal tradition, once attacked as 'heathen practice' and all but destroyed in Norway (partly due to its connection with shamanism).

Contrary to popular understanding, Sámi communities have long existed below as well as above the Arctic Circle (another reason why *joik* should be recognised and valued as an important part of Norwegian and Fennoscandian culture in general). In recent years, Mortensson, who comes from Engerdal in south-eastern Norway, has brought new attention to the distinctive south Sámi *joik* tradition. To me, she sounds more 'at home' within Moenje's sonic environment than on her previous and more heavily jazz-influenced solo albums. Tracks such as 'Polaris' and 'Lapp-Nils' (based on a composition by the renowned Swedish-Sámi composer) achieve a particularly graceful balance as *joik* weaves around terrific accordion, fiddle and double bass arrangements. An album of unassuming and gentle strength.

MERLYN DRIVER

TRACK TO TRY *Lapps-Nils* ▶