

Review: *Lilies Among the Bushes*

People choose what appeals to and inspires them: Moira Cameron is insistent that women's strength and endurance is the inspirational theme running through this album. The CD provides a feminist interpretation of traditional ballads, and there is an emphasis on feminist subject matter. And if we were in any way unsure of her message in the songs, Moira's belligerent and abrasive sleeve notes leave us in no doubt whatsoever. At the risk of giving offence, I have to say that this belligerence turns me off. In any case, it is unnecessary. The songs speak for themselves.

I support many of the goals that feminists fight for, but in choosing ballads and songs to sing, I have never favoured a didactic approach. Ballads/songs are about life, and life covers the whole gamut of human activity and behaviour, including values that do not find favour today. Traditional ballads, in particular, often reflect attitudes about religion, class, and male/female relationships that some of us find irrelevant, distasteful, or downright unacceptable. For me, the strength of traditional narrative ballads is twofold: they are timeless, and yet locked in time; we are like these people whose stories unfold through the verses, and yet in many ways we are unlike them. The story is the story; too much emphasis on 'message' upsets the balance and turns a drama or a lyrical outpouring into a sermon.

Turning to the music, I have to say that this is, in the main, an excellent CD. It is undoubtedly good value - fifty-nine minutes of strong, sweet, mainly *a cappella* singing, innovative instrumentals and accompaniments on autoharp, Appalachian and hammered dulcimers, guitar, 'cello, and recorders, and, above all, compelling material.

Even if I had not made the mistake of reading the sleeve notes in advance, Moira's interpretation/delivery on some tracks would still have surprised, even irritated, me with its one-sided emphasis on female one-upmanship. For example, the sneering ending to 'The Elfin Knight' is too heavy-handed and destroys the playful element that is an integral part of this ancient riddling song. As a result, it was perhaps inevitable that my favourites are three tracks in which Moira is not preaching feminist doctrine: 'Willie of Winsbury', 'The Well Below the Valley' and 'Martha'.

I love this version of 'Willie of Winsbury', which I first heard the magical Anne Briggs sing way back in the sixties. Moira's strong, sweet singing and the enchanting notes of the alto recorder do it full justice. And despite what she says in her note about 'Well Below the Valley', on this occasion she keeps the delivery neutral and lets the listener come to his or her own conclusions. In 'Martha', a straightforward account of a mother's tragic death in a blizzard, Moira avoids senti-mentality and moves us through understatement.

I also enjoyed Moira's performance of 'Barbara Allen', even though I can't understand why she gets so agitated about this song, whose popularity over the centuries and in both hemispheres suggests that the romantic, if tragic, ending (roses forming a true lover's knot) stayed longer in people's minds than the misguided behaviour of the protagonists. In contrast, Moira's rendering of 'The Brown Girl' is vicious! Strong on drama, short (very short) on compassion! Just as she intended....

The only track that disappointed me was 'The Daemon Lover', which seems a bit flat - we lose the full impact of this haunting, ominous ballad, which in this version has lost some of its best verses. On the other hand, I liked 'Jock o' Hazeldean', 'Love Henry' (for the spirited response of the bird, if nothing else), and the wonderfully powerful rendition of 'Lady Diamond', though I see no need to invoke the idea of incest. On this CD Moira is not inclined to give any male the benefit of the doubt!

Beg, borrow, or (best) buy this CD. Although I find its uncompromisingly feminist focus one-sided, and some of the material suffers from this, many listeners will no doubt find it exactly to their taste. Moira's voice is just occasionally a little shrill, but in the main it is strong, sweet and clear - the best kind of voice for singing the 'big ballads'. When she is not using the material as a vehicle for male-bashing, when she lets the words and the music do their magic, she is a worthy interpreter, one of the best.

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