

Moore (*The Companeros*), Martin Simpson (*The Father's Song*) and Paul Brady (*Freeborn Man*). Mostly, their interpretations are exactly as you'd imagine, respectively recognising the innate beauty and emotional strength of such peerless material requires no fireworks to connect it to listeners, from whatever era or musical persuasion they may emanate.

Special mention to Rufus and Martha Wainwright for the precious fragility of their *Sweet Thames Flow Softly*; to Karine Polwart for her heartfelt *The Terror Time*; and to Dick Gaughan, the one artist who played on a previous (very good) MacColl tribute album in 1978, who gives us a characteristically stirring *Jamie Foyers*. And while I'm loathe to admit it after his appalling speech when MacColl was inducted in the BBC Folk Awards Hall of Fame this year, David Gray does a decent job with MacColl's valedictory *The Joy Of Living*.

There are one or two minor curiosities. Paul Buchanan of Blue Nile thankfully keeps a handle on the emoting levels on a pleasingly understated *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*; Ewan's grandson Jamie impresses with Jack Steadman from his band the Bombay Bicycle Club on an edgy *The Young Birds*; Damien Dempsey typically lays his heart and soul on the line on *Schooldays Over*; The Unthanks perform *Cannily Cannily* with breathy intimacy; Steve Earle sounds like he's trying to sound like a cross between Ronnie Drew and Shane MacGowan on *Dirty Old Town*; and whispering Jarvis Cocker makes a complete pig's ear of *The Battle Is Done With* as he strives for Brel-esque dramatic effect.

Great album, though. None of us will be around to hear them, of course, but you'd imagine many of these songs will sound equally current in another hundred years.

www.ewanmaccoll.co.uk

Colin Irwin

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Lost In Mali Riverboat TUGCD1091

Just the type of anthology to set the mouth watering: all new artists, just one song each, sympathetically recorded, playing as if their careers depended on it. Mali is legendarily

Lucy Ward



Photo: Eily Lucas

fertile in music, and here is the cream of the upcoming generation as picked out by a couple of sharp-eared producers. Variety, depth and intensity are here in full measure. Musical styles meet and interconnect and there is no chance to get bored. Interesting to see how much respect these young musicians show for the past – for the purposes of this review I think we can include reggae as a traditional Malian form – and on the face of it there isn't much in the way of novelty. We hear shifting permutations of parched desert passion, testifying Wassoulou voices, scratchy lutes, mesmerising xylophones and flutes, jaunty beats and the heavy underground surge of the Sahara. It's a rich and satisfying mix that brings promise for the future.

www.worldmusic.net

Rick Sanders

LUCY WARD

I Dreamt I Was A Bird Betty Beetroot Records BETTY 01

Right back to her debut album *Adelphi Must Fly* in 2011, Lucy Ward's fearlessness as an original songwriter prepared to push the boat out in terms of lyricism, structure and melody was clear. Then, she didn't have the tools to make it work properly, but her writing flourished further on her revelatory second album *Single Flame*, which unaccountably missed out on at least one nomination for Song Of The Year at the BBC Folk Awards.

Like Bella Hardy her writing continues to expand and challenge at a rapid pace and, equally importantly, she's now developed her other skills of staging and delivery to properly support the ambition of her songs. Her singing, for one, has leapt from adequate to striking and, with Stu Hanna calling the shots in the control room, this is an album that carries a real sense of drama and majesty. After the sepia-tinted opening track *Summers That We Made*, we head into some darkly challenging territory involving a couple living in a car in 1950s Wales (*Connie & Bud*); 21-year-old rifleman Robert Loveless Barker, shot for cowardice in the Great War (*Lion*); capturing mermaids off the Isle Of Mull (*Daniel & The Mermaid*) and post-Second World War austerity (*Ode To Whittaker Brown*).

Hanna has a field day conjuring weirdly disquieting atmospherics, while the band – Anna Esslemont (fiddle), Lukas Drinkwater (double bass), Sam Pegg (double bass), Stephen MacLachlan (drums) and Hanna (guitars, organ) – play a prominent role in establishing the momentous soundscapes. We even get the Brighthouse & Rastrick Brass Band painting the doom-laden backdrop to *Lion*, one of a couple of tracks on which Ward teeters dangerously on the edge of tipping into the pit of the overwrought.

The album concludes in raging manner with a stray banjo leading the jagged charge of *Return To Earth*, a comment on the state of the English countryside which climaxes in jangling disharmony with Ward spitting out "We are choking – I can no longer sing".

It's not entirely self-written. Indeed, the most illuminating of many ambitious arrangements is the meandering electric guitar and fierce percussion underpinning the well-thumbed Child ballad *Lord Randall*.

There are, perhaps, parallels with the last Unthanks' album *Mount The Air* in the way it painstakingly builds tension and mystery without any obvious crowd-pleasing gambits or heed of what will play well in radio programmers' offices. As such, it creates its own rarefied niche ... even in Ward's own catalogue. Sadly, though, if you've seen her live lately, there's no *Come On Eileen*...

www.lucywardsings.com

Colin Irwin

KATY CARR

Polonia Deluce Recordings MDL513

Born in Nottingham to a Polish mother and a Scottish-English father, Katy Carr is an artist (and glider pilot) unafraid to tackle the big questions of national and personal identity.

Polonia, her fifth album, takes its title from Elgar's symphonic prelude of the same name, composed for Ignacy Paderewski to benefit the Polish Victims Relief Fund in 1915. Shirley Collins is fleetingly evoked by the title track's opening line: "Sweet England, am I leaving you behind?" delivered across some magnificent pedal steel playing from BJ Cole.

The core of the record is an examination of World War II's Eastern Front, and the role of the Polish freedom fighters in securing the freedom of the west, only for their homeland to be ceded to the Soviet Union at the war's conclusion. These then are difficult themes, but Carr's facility for a sweeping melody, a lyrical hook, delivered in her soaring voice, makes this an enjoyable listen.

Women war-heroines Brigadier General Elzbieta Zawacka ("the most important and decorated female Polish freedom fighter in WWII history") and Krystyna Skarbek ("the first female agent of the British Special Operations Executive" who "became Churchill's favourite spy.") are celebrated in *Jumping With Zo* – and *Christine The Great*. Levity is provided in *When Charlie Met Pola*, which documents Charlie Chaplin's affair with actress Pola Negri – a story which received the speculative newspaper headline, "The Queen of Tragedy To Wed The King of Comedy" (they didn't).

While the music (superbly arranged and produced by Nigel of Bermondsey) is frequently epic, Carr's affecting narratives focus on the everyday lives of individual people, like *The Mathematician* code-breakers at Bletchley Park, and *Mr Trebus*, the elderly, traumatised exile who achieved notoriety when his home and compulsively-hoarded possessions were featured on the TV series *A Life Of Grime*.

With sleeve-notes by (Bob Marley and Joe Strummer biographer) Chris Salewicz and artwork and design by Susan Burghart, this is a very desirable artefact, a fascinating insight into Britain's relationship with its historical closest ally, and a powerful collection of hugely original songs.

www.katycarr.com

Steve Hunt

STEVE RILEY & THE MAMOU PLAYBOYS

Voyageurs No label

"OK, now what?" asks Barry Jean Ancelet, contributing liner notes to Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys' fourteenth album in their 25th year, and their first without founder member David Greely, sidelined with hearing problems. Well, a band for so long at the very apex of supercharged but authentic Cajun music would find it hard to take a radical new direction at this point, so the mixture here will be pretty familiar to the band's followers.

Familiar, but never dull: this really is a terrific combo, and replacing the excellent Greely with virtuoso fiddler Kevin Wimmer was a very smart move. Alongside him, Riley on accordion is master of all he surveys, Sam Broussard continues to coax tasty dark tones from his guitar, the bracing sound of twin fiddles gets a hearing, and the harmony vocals are sweet as ever. The rhythm section of Brazos Huval and Kevin Dugas has been a very funky unit for many years now, and never more so than on zydeco-influenced songs