



Megson “On The Side” EDJ Records

Megson is a British bred acoustic duo composed of twenty something’s Stu Hanna and Debbie Palmer, whose eleven-track debut album merges songs drawn from traditional sources with Hanna/Palmer composed originals, the end result being a folk/pop melange. There’s no doubting that Palmer possesses the voice of an angel, but as an end product “**On The Side**” comes off as under-developed since the only sounds, other than their voices – apart and in unison, are Palmer’s occasional input on whistle, and Hanna’s contributions throughout on acoustic guitar, mandola, bouzouki and occasional keyboards. Granted Hanna indulges in sufficient finger-picking throughout the collection to confirm that he’s an adept string player, but there’s also too much extended strumming on occasions – for example on the opening pairing “Rose On The Stem” and “Grace Darling” - resulting in cuts that lack depth of colour.

The collection opens with the aforementioned Megson original “Rose On The Stem,” while it’s appropriate that the first traditionally sourced cut is “Grace Darling,” a lyric that recalls the Longstone [+]
lighthouse keeper’s daughter who in September 1838, aged 23, helped her father save nine survivors from the S.S. Forfarshire that had foundered on nearby rocks. Music by Megson is married to traditional lyrics on the cut, as is also the case on the later “Oak & Ash.” Cuts drawn direct from traditional sources, albeit with the melody arranged by Megson include “The Loom” and the nursery rhyme “Sandy Dawe.” On the latter cut, supported on the chorus by Debbie, Hanna takes the lead vocal on this cyclical and [far too] repetitious melody. As for the close of the cut, it simply falls away as if Hanna had simply forgotten the words to the closing line.....of course, like I said, it’s a nursery rhyme.

The pop sounding Megson original “Freefall,” *“a song about the day-to-day grind of life....,”* also finds Hanna taking the lead vocal. Returning to a seafaring theme, a ship’s captain spies a beautiful “Maid On The Shore” and promises that if she’ll sail with him for a day he’ll show her his *“jewels and our costly array.”* In truth she’s a siren like being who, once aboard, entrances the captain with a song and steals his possessions. Megson’s “Maid..” amounts to a sanitised version of what is usually a rather bawdy lyric, and the cut is also the first occasion on this collection where Palmer’s flat northern vowels – ala Kate Rusby - become apparent in her delivery. Those flat vowels reappear on “Oak & Ash,” the tale of a north-country girl who feels out of her depth now that she’s living in London, and dreams of once more of seeing the oak and the ash *“in her own country.”* “Butternut Hill” is the wistful trad. arr. tale of a woman whose true love has enlisted in the army, and features a Palmer vocal that is utterly exquisite. Subjectively speaking, based on an American Civil War version of this traditional song, the latter cut confirms how history keeps repeating itself!

The segue of Megson originals “Just Stay” and “More Than Me” are run-of-the-mill love songs with a high saccharine content, while in the liner booklet the trad./arr. album closer “Last Rose Of Summer” is quoted as *“an Irish folk song with poignant lyric by Thomas Moore.”* The latter Moore is the eighteenth-century Irish poet and nationalist, not to be confused with the American born, Irish based contemporary songwriter of the same name. There’s little doubt that Palmer’s voice is the secret to the success that Megson has enjoyed to date, while their song lyrics – original and traditional – consistently failed to land any knock-out punches.

Note.

[+] – The Longstone lighthouse is located on Brownsman Island, part of the Farne group of islands, which are located a few miles off the Northumberland coast in N.E. England. The group includes the

better-known island of Lindisfarne. Grace passed away three years after the rescue, a victim of tuberculosis. In addition the **“On The Side”** liner booklet claims that the rescue occurred in 1837.

Folkwax Score 6 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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