



Various Artists “People On The Highway – A Bert Jansch Encomium” Market Square Records

The word “Encomium” is defined in my aged, dog-eared copy of the Concise Oxford [English] Dictionary as “*formal or high-flown praise.*” That being the case, this 2CD *tribute*, which first saw the light of day in September 2000, consists of twenty-six selections drawn from Jansch’s *musical canon*, performed by, *appropriately*, some sixty musicians. “**People On The Highway**” was originally released to compliment the August 2000 publication of “**Dazzling Stranger**,” [ISBN 0747548102] [*] Colin Harper’s biography of the Glasgow, Scotland born, Edinburgh bred, and since the mid-nineteen sixties, London based acoustic folk/blues guitarist and songwriter. November 3rd 2003, marked Bert’s 60th *birthday* and the re-promotion of this recording formed part of that celebration. Bert Jansch, the songwriter, isn’t a storyteller, is prone to lyrical melancholy, while his canvas is that of the human condition and the planet that we survive upon.

The contributor’s amount to a gaggle of Scots, English, Irish and American musicians, while in terms of their maturity, the line-up includes *contemporaries* of Jansch as well as *youngsters* who have fallen under the spell of the Scot’s music and his unique guitar playing style. Curiously, this collection and, disc one of Jansch’s own 2CD retrospective “**Dazzling Stranger : The Bert Jansch Anthology**,” opens with the classic 1965 original “Strolling Down The Highway.” From that point on the *compilations* diverge, content wise, since “**Dazzling Stranger**” features tracks drawn from eighteen of Jansch’s, then, twenty-one original solo albums [now twenty-three], while “**People On The Highway**” only features material from twelve of those titles, along with two band co-written cuts that hail from Jansch’s first tenure with Pentangle, plus John Challis’ tribute tune “Nineteen Sixty-Five,” which closes disc one. Jansch continued to tour and record as a solo act, in tandem with his membership of Pentangle. The first incarnation of that British folk/jazz *supergroup* spanned the years 1967/73, and saw them release five original discs. Following almost a decade long hiatus [and still featuring Jansch], the band reconvened and occasionally toured through to the mid-nineteen nineties, while concurrently recording a further handful of studio albums. Pentangle *called it a day* with “**Live ’94**,” which was recorded in Germany.

Taken in overview, the opening dozen of the thirteen tracks on disc one feature material that Bert cut in the period 1965/1969, while the opening half dozen cuts on disc two, including the Pentangle composed pairing, cover the years 1971/74. The ensuing quintet first appeared in 1980/82, while the closing pair of tracks date from 1995. Inspecting the foregoing in close-up, the tracks appear chronologically, by date and album, apart from Jansch’s arrangement of the traditional “Blackwater Side” [#], which he originally featured on “**Jack Orion**” [1966] and later on “**Heartbreak**” [1982]. In light of the foregoing, it’s rather amusing that two versions appear on this collection, and are respectively performed by, American Kelly Joe Phelps and England’s Polly Bolton. According to the liner notes, “*next to Anne Briggs, Polly is Bert’s favourite female singer.*” You’ll note from two sentences back that, as well as being an accomplished songwriter, Jansch has covered songs from other sources. Here, apart from “Blackwater Side,” there’s the traditional “Love Is Teasing,” performed by Steve Benbow, while Martin Jenkins contributes Jansch’s arrangement of Brazilian Milton Nascimento’s “Sweet Mother Earth.”

Chris Smither’s trademark guitar, voice and *foot* present the [aforementioned disc one] opening cut “Strolling Down The Highway.” Other Stateside [based or bred] musicians include Al Stewart [“Soho”] and Brooks Williams [“Tell Me What Is True Love ?”], while the native-born talent ranges from the *mature vocals* of Ralph McTell [“Running From Home”], Donovan [a re-recording of “Do You Hear Me Now ?”] and Roy Harper [the legendary “Needle Of Death”] to the sounds of the *less aged tubes* of Eleanor McEvoy [“Where Did My Life Go ?”], Johnny Marr’s Healers [“A Woman Like You”] [+] and Bert’s

youngest son, Adam ["Morning Brings Peace Of Mind"]. Donovan included Bert's "Oh Deed I Do" on "**Fairytale**" [1965], and his original reading of "Do You Hear Me Now ?" was the Stateside B-Side of the 1965 hit single "Universal Soldier." As for Bert's studio/stage collaborators, *old and new*, they include, Rod Clements [ex-Lindisfarne], Duffy Power [legendary guitarist/vocalist on a *million and one studio sessions* of countless shades musically] while from more recent times there's, Bernard Butler [ex Suede, McAlmont & Butler]. Jansch's biographer, Colin Harper, appears as a member of the seven piece The Legends of Tomorrow, who *predictably* perform Pentangle's "People On The Highway," which seems like an appropriate place to draw this *musical journey with Jansch* to a close.....

Note.

[*] – In the UK, in September 2000, Castle Music issued the 2CD compilation "**Dazzling Stranger : The Bert Jansch Anthology**" which featured forty-four recordings by Jansch, Pentangle as well as, the Scot with Loren Auerbach.

[#] – On their 1969 released, self-titled, debut album, Led Zeppelin included a Jimmy Page *penned* instrumental titled "Black Mountain Side," the melody of which resembled Jansch's arrangement of the traditional "Blackwater Side." *I believe they call it the folk process.....*

[+] – Marr was Morrissey's *right-hand* man in The Smiths.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 12/03 & 01/04