



Aengus Finnan "**North Wind**" Borealis Records

Finnan was one of the six annual winners of the Kerrville Folk Festival's New Folk Songwriting competition in 2002. Born in Dublin, Ireland and raised in Shelter Valley, Ontario, "**North Wind**" is his sophomore solo release. The fourteen songs include ten Finnan originals, which we'll come to in a little while. First though, we'll take a look at the four cover songs.

The first pair, respectively tracks 4 and 7, subjectively feature the *typically* Canadian activity of sending log floes downriver, coupled with the reality of the occasional drowning of those who practice the trade. The traditional "Lost Jimmy Whelan" recalls the 1878 drowning of Whelan at the King's Chute on Ontario's Mississippi River. Finnan's version, arranged with collaborator Trevor Mills, finds the narrator relating the story [*part fantasy*] of stumbling upon a heartbroken girl mourning the loss of her lover by the riverside. In her mind the girl conjures the ghost of her *lovely Jimmy* from his watery grave, and as the song closes she leaps to join him in eternity. In the liner booklet that accompanies this disc, Finnan comments that 27 graves associated with log floe fatalities can be found in the immediate area of those rapids and adds that there were, "*no doubt an equal number of broken hearts.*" On first hearing "Sandy's Story," I had a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. It transpires that supported by sound effects – a flowing river, chirping birds, a distant coyote, the howling wind etc. – the song is a mostly spoken adaptation of Slaid Cleaves composition "Breakfast In Hell." Set on a May Sunday morning on the Musquash River, Sandy Gray leads his team of loggers in an attempt to unblock a major jam. In the process of successfully freeing the logs, Gray perishes.

Maria Dunn's "Orphan Hand," brought further feelings of *déjà vu*. In this instance, it related to "Home Boys" a cut on Tim Harrison's recently reviewed Second Avenue release "**Wheatfield With Crows**" [Folkwax, Issue # 102]. Dunn's song, like Harrison's, recalls how orphans and the children of destitute families were transported from England to Canada in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. In the *new-world* they literally became slave labour, mainly on rural farms. Included on Dunn's 1998 solo debut, "**From Where I Stand**," her "Orphan Hand" lyrics are a stinging and bitter indictment of a barbaric and abusive system – "*My name it might as well be John, For all you care from where I've come, I'll break my back on your homestead, To earn my daily bread*" and "*Your hardship in this cold, cold land, Has left you a bitter, tired man, To your own you still allow small joy, But you're blind to a fatherless boy*" being telling examples. Three cuts on this collection are performed a *cappella*, and one is the final cover, "One Hand On The Radio" which was penned by folk musicians, Bill Caddick and Pete Bond and could be loosely described as *British truckers anthem*. The Finnan, Mills and David Rogers arrangement of "Radio," is dedicated to the Canadian broadcasting legend, Peter Gzowski, who passed away in January 2002.

The other a *cappella* cuts are, "Swing Boys Swing" and "O'Shaughnessy's Lament." Both sound as if they come from authentic traditional sources, yet are Finnan originals. The consistent rhythm of the former could well have been sung by a gang laying railway track, yet, as Aengus states in the CD liner booklet, he only composed it after an *inspirational walk* along a section of overgrown rail track just north of Welcome, Ontario. "Lament" features a silver miner [the narrator] and his beloved wife, Rosella May McCarthy, who dies giving birth to twins. The narrator equates his loss to a "*mine cave in*" and Finnan's gentle reading of the lyric is truly heartfelt.

The album opens with "Rollin' Home" the tale of a trucker heading home to a spouse who patiently awaits his return, and the opening words "*Clothes on a line, ravens on silos, Sweet smell of fresh cut*

hay” perfectly create the sensation of motion. An old farmer faces the loss of his farm in “Ruins” and relates, *“Long gone are the bumper years, When I could make her pay, A wagon of dirt and stones, Is all I get these days.”* After driving his herd into the hills, uprooting his fences and driving his tractor into the lake, the farmer shuts the windows and locks himself into his home, then touchingly recalls his late wife before striking a match.

Raised on a farm in Shelter Valley, “Apple Blossom Tyme” is Finnan’s tribute to the legion of transient summer workers who pick the annual harvest. Set to a jazz/swing rhythm, and without revealing the outcome, a love story also unfolds verse by verse. “My Heart Has Wings” is a melodic as well as a melancholy love song, while “North Wind” possesses a *call to wander the highways* theme. In “Last Dance” ballet gives way to nudity in this paeon to unfulfilled dreams, while the act of unconditional generosity is praised in “Man Of Plenty.” The transitory nature of a musician’s life is explored in the image filled, album closer “Moon On The Water.” *“In the daisies of springtime, In warm summer rain, In the golden woods whispering winter, It’s there that I will see you again.”* Now doesn’t that kind of say it all.....

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

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