



Nick Drake **"Family Tree"** Island Records

It is laudable that Island Records have kept Drake's recordings in print for over three and a half decades. For a time the Hannibal label, founded by Nick's mentor Joe Boyd, ran with the baton. Drake would be in his fifty-ninth year if he were still with us – but if he were, would his name possess the *status* that it currently enjoys? His 'real recording' career spanned a mere six years [1969 – 1974] and only produced three full studio albums. Back in the days of vinyl, circa 1979 those albums enhanced by the four songs from Nick's February 1974 final session became **"The Fruit Tree"** box set. Come the CD age, 1987 witnessed the appearance of **"Time Of No Reply"** a collection of home recordings, outtakes and alternate versions, as well as the aforementioned 1974 foursome. Co-opting the latter release, the previous year, **"The Fruit Tree"** had been upgraded to a four vinyl disc set, and it surfaced in the more compact 4CD format during 1991. Since then, remixing apart, there has been a rash of Nick Drake compilations featuring already available material, except, that is, for the previously unreleased "Tow The Line" which appeared on **"Made To Love Magic"** [2004]. Later this year **"The Fruit Tree"** is due for reissue c/w DVD. The larva has grown into a leviathan and swims on....

Since his 1974 passing Drake has been lauded by a couple of biographies. Where Richard Humphries **"Nick Drake: The Biography"** [1997] was workmanlike and informative, **"Darker Than The Deepest Sea: The Search For Nick Drake"** [2006] by former BBC programme producer/broadcaster Trevor Dann was an overblown travesty. Relative to the latter, did we really need copious instructions of how to navigate from St. Mary Magdalene Church, Drake's burial place, in the centre of Tanworth-in-Arden to the Drake family's former home Far Leys. Drake's older, actress, sister Gabrielle did not actively co-operate with either biographer.

Having wrung every last second out of Drake's studio recordings, **"Family Tree"** backtracks to 'home recordings' young Nick made [at Far Leys, in Aix, and in Cambridge with string arranger Robert Kirby] prior to signing with Island Records and recording his debut **"Five Leaves Left"** [1969]. The twenty-eight tracks include Drake originals [some are incomplete works], covers of traditional material and songs by contemporary 'folk' writers Dave Van Ronk [d. 2002], Bob Dylan, Bert Jansch and Jackson C. Frank [d. 1999] plus a rendition of "Been Smoking Too Long" by Robin Frederick the American girl Nick met in Aix en Provence, France. Accompanied by an aunt [viola] and uncle [piano], Nick even plays clarinet on a Mozart piece. On **"Family Tree"** Gabrielle's voice can be heard on one song, while Molly [Nick & Gabrielle's mother] performs two of her songs sat at the Drake family piano. Bootlegs of the Far Leys 'home recordings' have circulated for years – **"Tanworth-in-Arden 1967/68," "The Complete Home Recordings," "Time Has Told Me"** and more. There are songs on the latter titles that don't appear on **"Family Tree"**! While the **"Family Tree"** tracks have obviously been thoroughly cleaned, home recording equipment was unsophisticated three decades ago and the final product remains – well, 'a home recording.'

Eleven Drake originals feature on **"Family Tree."** Of the foregoing total, studio versions of "Way To Blue" and "Day Is Done" appeared on **"Five Leaves Left,"** while a shorter 'home recording' of "Strange Meeting II" surfaced on **"Time Of No Reply."** This new disc is launched by the intro to "Come Into The Garden," while a fuller version turns up later in this collection – on the latter track, the sound of classical music can occasionally be heard playing in the background. Replete with 'tape hiss' Drake's vocal appears hesitant on the melancholic "They're Leaving Me Behind," and supported by the cadence of a metronome it merges into the 'sonically cleaner' spoken narrative "Time Piece." On the latter, a mere forty-three seconds long, Drake's voice sounds 'terribly' English. "Blossom" is a folkie sounding treatise

on the natural world, “Sketch 1” a minute long acoustic guitar instrumental, “Bird Flew By” a wistful communion with nature and the seasons, while “Rain” finds Drake reference the loss of a lover as well as the passage of time.

In one half of the two-part liner booklet there is black & white/colour photographs of the Drake family – mother, father, son and daughter – while in the other you’ll find three essays. Gabrielle’s “Dear Nick...” an open letter to her deceased relative seeks to explain/justify the release of **“Family Tree,”** “Song Of Aix” is by Frederick and, finally, originally written in 2000 there’s an edited version of the self-explanatory and charmingly honest “A Memoir Of My Childhood Friend” by Andrew Hicks. Given the public appetite that has blossomed over the last three decades for all things Nick Drake, in that domain the preference should always be for a ‘genuine’ **“Family Tree”** opposed to a ‘scurrilous, possibly fake’ **“The Complete Home Recordings”** and its ilk. After Nick’s passing his parents [now deceased] would happily welcome fans from across the world into their home. However the ‘monster escaped from the bag’ when Nick’s father generously, but surely unwittingly, gave those visitors cassette copies of Nick’s ‘home recordings.’

That said, I’ve endlessly wrested with the dilemma of ‘an artist and his/her art’ – particularly regarding the issue of whether initial creations should be exposed to, or hidden from, public scrutiny? Assuming that the ‘art’ possesses merit, early creations are forever part of the growing process and integral to ‘who the artist is/was.’ However, where ‘public scrutiny’ of an artist’s non-professional creations is involved, at what point are you honouring or dishonouring that person’s legacy? Due to the aforementioned ‘generosity’ and the subsequent bootlegging, Gabrielle Drake’s hand has been forced. The bootleg releases I mentioned have however been circulating for close on two decades. In terms of **“Family Tree”** that duration raises the question, why now? In this life there comes a time when it really is a ‘bridge too far.’

Folkwax Score 7 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 07/07.