Review


Why is the CFMS Bulletin reviewing an album called "American Primitive", produced in the U.S. and featuring an American singer? There are a few good reasons, but foremost is the fact that this album is about one third Canadian traditional content.

Lisa Null, who, despite the order of appearance on the sleeve, is the singer on this almost entirely song-oriented record, is well-known in the northeastern United States folk music circles as a small-time recording executive, festival director and singer, and this album makes it quite clear that the one thing she loves to do above all else is sing. She has a strong voice and an attractive voice, but much more striking is the way she gets inside the song: the way she seems to choose songs with which she can be comfortable, rather than those she thinks others may like. The result, in most cases, is a performance with a great deal of soul, and one that demands to be listened to properly, not just superficially. The repertoire is eclectic, but could broadly be described as traditional or traditionally-based, including everything from Child #20 "The Cruel Mother" to an early country song, "Livin' Next to the Soil". The latter features a swing arrangement and clarinet lead by that most versatile musician Ken Bloom, who also plays Northumbrian small pipes on one of the four Canadian tracks, "Remember the Poor". This and two others are from the Nova Scotia-bred repertoire of one Carrie Grover, more recently a Maine resident, who published many of her songs in 1973 in a book entitled A Heritage of Songs (Norwood, Pa: Norwood Editions). The other two represented here are both Irish-Canadian songs, the patriotic allegory "Erin's Green Shore" and "The Bonny Light Horseman", the latter almost identical to the version collected by Helen Creighton, and a beautiful song in all its variants, including this one.

The other piece of Canadian content is the French-Canadian dance tune "La Bastringue", adapted for two guitars by Bill Shute, the other name on the cover. This very quiet and modest-appearing man, who has accompanied Null at a few Canadian festivals, may well be the best guitar accompanist I have heard anywhere. It is unfortunate that his intricate but subtle playing is often gobbled up by inadequate outdoor sound systems, but on record it is another story. He uses no less than eight (count 'em, eight!) different guitar tunings on the record, and an equally impressive array of picking styles - many quite original - and yet his playing never intrudes on the song. The insert notes to the songs, well written by Null, are postscripted in each case by notes on accompaniment, including tunings, by Shute. Thankfully, someone realized that this man has a lot to teach, and came up with this novel idea.

In addition to Ken Bloom, the cast of "American Primitive" includes harmonica great Saul Broudy, Debbie McClatchy, Claudia Schmidt, Todd Purcell, Tom Conger, Leo Kretzner and Anthea and Peter Bellamy. The last-named eccentric bastion of the English folk revival also shows us another of his talents with a very attractive cover illustration.

It would be criminal to ignore the non-Canadian titles which make up most of "American Primitive", as there are some real gems among them. My favourites are "Only Remembered", a totally non-dogmatic gospel song with admirable sentiments, and the closing track "Virginia's Alders", apparently better known in its native Catskills as "Friends and Neighbours".

Shute and Null have done an exceptional job with this record. It is not a work of immediate, powerful impact, neither is it flashy, but just take forty minutes to sit and listen undisturbed (the only way to be fair to a record) and you will surely see why I like it.

- Ian Robb