

'After the City' by Bird in the Belly

Reviewed by Carl Filby



Bird in the Belly were totally unknown to me before I received the CD through the post so it was interesting to read the backstory of this Brighton based band in the accompanying PR material. Apparently, even before this album, they had acquired something of a reputation, in an entirely good way, for music that has been described as 'folk noir'.

'After the City' is the band's third album and is based partly on a book 'After

London; or Wild England' by nature writer, Richard Jefferies, published in 1885 and described as 'post-apocalyptic fiction'. The novel tells the story of England's rebirth following an unspecified catastrophe and the band fill in the backstory to this by drawing on poems from the cotton famine and plague traditions as well as the Broadside Ballads. All this information, all the lyrics and other credits can be found in the excellent accompanying booklet within the folding sleeve which also gives more information on the band and their musical roles in the album.

The band formed in 2018 and had established themselves with two acclaimed albums and were all set to go on a tour to Ireland in 2020 when Covid struck. The resultant lockdown at least provided the opportunity for the detailed research which went into the creation of the backstory for this album and the result goes some way to compensate for the many frustrating months.

The album certainly has a darkness to it and the music has a visceral quality which to me conveys a sense of the plague as in the original Black Death, though of course we have our own recent equivalent which may be more immediately evocative to some. The first, quite jaunty song 'Tragic Hearts of Towns' sets the scene for the descent into darker times with the advent of plague, war, famine and death with each successive song, culminating with the a cappella 'Smokeless Chimneys' which portrays the dying city. The following instrumental 'Landmark' provides a pleasing contrast to represent 'the End' (of the devastation) and it functions perfectly as a transition into the final 3 pieces which represent the 'Rebirth' (of nature) starting with another jaunty and memorable song in 'After London'.

All this doom and gloom may not suit everyone but I found the quality of the music and the singing easily dispelled what might have become a sombre mood and turned it into one of pure appreciation for the breadth and scope of the concept. Tom Pryor and Adam Ronchetti play most of the instruments whilst Laura Ward contributes her flute and crystal clear vocals in contrast to but perfect harmony with the extraordinary gravelly voice of Ben Webb.

I'm going to be playing this album long after this review and I will be looking out for an opportunity to see the band live. If you want to find out more about the band and their music, check out their website:

<https://www.birdinthebelly.com/>