

'In Thin Air' by Spell Songs

Reviewed by Carl Filby (September 2026)

Spell Songs are a folk supergroup coming together for the third in a series of albums based on *The Book Of Birds* a collaboration between conservationist Robert MacFarlane and artist Jackie Morris.

The performing artists pictured to the right (but not in this order) Karine Polwart, Julie Fowlis, Kris Drever, Seckou Keita, Rachel Newton, Beth Porter and Jim Molyneux. Each of them have their own special set of musical skills whether it be as a songwriter, singer or musician and most have more than one such talent. I could easily spend a lot of this review just praising the respective talents of the artists involved!



The album was commissioned by 'Folk By The Oak' known best perhaps for its one-day folk festival in Hatfield Park but lesser known for its additional support of musical folk projects. Spell Songs is both the name of the performing ensemble and the project which extends to the first two albums and books in the series. Another project commissioned by Folk By The Oak is *The Elizabethan Session* in 2014 produced an album of the same name which is a favourite of mine so I had quite high hopes of this album when I received it to review. The common thread between the two is harpist and singer Rachel Newton who, like the other performers has many more strings to her bow, or perhaps I should say 'harp' in her case.

To be honest I have had this album waiting for review for few weeks now owing to other commitments but the advantage of that is that I have had the opportunity to listen to it a few times which is important because the music is not the sort that leaps out at the listener. It is a reflective album for the most part, punctuated by a few upbeat rhythms which add variety to the whole, and definitely one that repays several listens each of which will reveal previously overlooked delights if my experience is anything to go by.

My favourite songs on the album at this stage include ***Bells Fall Still*** where Karine Polwart takes the lead vocal and which has something of an anthemic feel to it and is apparently reminiscent of their earlier song *The Lost Words Blessing* from their first album. That comes immediately after ***An Calman (The Dove)*** performed by Julie Fowlis in that very pure distinctive voice which also opens the following song ***Tàladh Nan Eun (Lullaby Of The Birds)*** which then subtly morphs into something which illustrates the influence of Seckou Keita and the beautiful harmony possible between West African and Celtic music.

Migration is perhaps the song that stood out for me on a first listen to the album with its harmonic voices and instrumentals followed closely by ***Nest Builder*** with some beautiful cello from Beth Porter. The latter is one of a number of shorter pieces on the album which keep it moving along and supplement the narrative.

Another upbeat number with echoes of West Africa, not only due to its actual title ***Senegal***, is the penultimate number on the album written and sung by Chris Drever, and then Beth Porter takes the lead vocal on the final quite plaintive sounding song ***We Only Save The Ones We Love*** which closes the album on a fitting note, perhaps reminding us of the uncompromising reality of the natural world.

The album is in one sense a collaboration between the musicians and the authors Jackie Morris and Robert MacFarlane who themselves have collaborated to produce *The Book of Birds* is a compendium of forty-nine bird species, from Avocet to Yellowhammer, all of which are presently declining or endangered in Britain. Robert MacFarlane evokes each bird's habits and habitat in an attempt to show readers not only how to identify birds, but also how to identify with them. Jackie Morris provides the acclaimed artwork, painted in watercolour and gold which has been described as having an extraordinary attention to detail and sense of life.

I believe that you can buy the CD and the book together though of course I can only recommend the CD, which I certainly do.

You can listen to ***Migration*** in Show 120 of '[Filby's Folk](#)' and the album is released on 4 September in Cambridge as part of a 7-date tour which takes place that month.

You can purchase or pre-order a copy of the album and check out gig details and more information about Spell Songs and their music on their website <https://www.thelostwords.org/live/>.
