

‘Only Dogs As Friends’ by Bird In The Belly

Reviewed by Carl Filby (September 2026)

This is the fourth album by Bird in the Belly who were totally unknown to me before I received the CD for their previous album ‘After The City’ back in early 2022. I hadn’t long been running Unicorn Folk as the successor to the much-loved Unicorn Magazine run by Sandra Lawes and that was one of the first CD reviews that I wrote. Subsequently, I have come to realise that being represented by Jane Brace means that you must be good! I fell in love with that third album, checked out their back catalogue of course and wondered why they are not much better known, though I didn’t get to see them perform until 2 years ago in St Neot’s Folk Club in a relatively small room with no amplification at all! They were brilliant!



Subsequently, I was delighted to be able to invite them to perform in the Opening Night Concert for the 2025 Royston Arts Festival in Royston Parish Church. Again, they put on an excellent performance and their very distinctive sound perfectly suited the acoustics of the Church. So, I am still somewhat bewildered that they are not more widely known. Perhaps it is their subject matter or perhaps that they don’t play a huge number of gigs collectively, or maybe just that life and other stuff gets in the way as they all work and Laura had recently given birth when I saw them in St Neot’s. Maybe it is because they are based in Shoreham-by-Sea which is at one end of the country in West Sussex, though as some of their songs come from the locality that is perhaps both a blessing and a drawback.

Clearly, I am already a big fan of the band and I think this fourth album is in many ways the best yet. I like it partly because all the songs tell a story but also because I think the music has a more mature, confident sound in the way that bands do when they are all confident in each other’s abilities and have been playing together for a few years, about eight in the case of Bird In The Belly. When I first heard them I was initially fascinated by Ben Webb’s voice, variously described as gravelly and guttural, including by me, and amazed that it fitted so well to the subject matter of their songs and harmonised so perfectly with Laura Ward’s very pure and strong vocals. Having played their third album many times since reviewing it I think I may have grown used to the sound but I also think that, if anything, those dual voices work together now in a better way than before, again I suppose down to practice and experience.

The PR material that came to me with the album describes their sound as representing “Songs of outsiders, the feared and the fearful” and I think that is a pretty good description of what to expect from the album alongside the notion that the band’s genre is ‘Folk Noir’. The songs certainly represent the diversity of human nature with an emphasis on the darker side of that which makes for fascinating stories provoking a whole range of emotions from outright horror to a very real sympathy with the characters at the centre of the songs. If there had been more sympathy and less horror at the time of some of the so-called ‘offences’ involved then there would have been no stories and no basis for the songs.

The opening and title track, **Only Dogs As Friends**, starts the album with a story of an apparently friendless man in the band’s native Shoreham who was shot during a failed attempt at burglary. He was finally identified as John O’Hara when his better-known dog turned up to sit beside his glass coffin, on display and attracting large crowds, in a local pub. The song sets the tone for the album and immediately establishes the sound of the band which is distinguished by Laura and Ben’s vocals to the fore but underpinned by the multi-instrumental talents of Tom Pryor and the clever, original percussion provided by Adam Ronchetti. Tom also produced and mixed the album and provided many of the

melodies, whilst Ben provided most of the lyrics with some help from original sources and the whole band mostly responsible for the musical arrangements.

The third song on the album ***Hen's Egg*** tells the appalling story of Amelia Dyer who advertised her paid-for services mostly looking after the children of unmarried women, except that once in possession of the money the children were thrown in the local river. Fortunately, the anthemic sound of the song punctuated by one of Laura's elegant contributions on the flute takes the listener's mind away from the immediate horror.

The song that follows ***I Once Built A Boy*** is truly heartbreaking giving voice to the mother of James Rook who was hanged in 1792 for stealing a half sovereign without violence. James' body was left hanging on the gibbet and his mother secretly returned to the gibbet over a series of nights to retrieve his body parts piece by piece and then rebuild him before burying him in St Nicholas graveyard in Shoreham. The lyrics observe that the mother is in fact building her boy for the second time the first time in giving birth.

The stories are not easy to read or digest but they are beautifully and poignantly told through the music and vocals which seem to perfectly suit these dark tales from a less tolerant age and in a sense give a belated voice to the victims.

The album is released on 30th October and the band have a number of live dates scheduled for the rest of 2026 and early 2027 which you can find on their website: <https://www.birdinthebelly.com/>
