

## HICKORY SIGNALS

Turn To Fray GF\*M Records GFM010



Hickory Signals is the Brighton-based duo Laura Ward and Adam Ronchetti (who also form two-fifths of folk collective Bird In The Belly). Having released two very promising EPs in 2014 and 2016, they're now ready to release their debut full-

length album. It presents an intelligent, atmospheric sequence of songs, mostly original compositions but with thematically relevant side excursions into traditional song. Although the duo's trademark is Laura's strong voice, often in tandem with her haunting flute playing, those elements by no means upstage Adam's complementary guitars, banjo and percussion. Credit is also due to album producer Tom Pryor, who plays violin, piano and guitar and is responsible for coordinating some subtly layered string arrangements.

There's a deliberate unity in the songs chosen for this album, in that they explore different aspects of lives at the margins of society that are frayed at the edges and in the process of "unravelling" due to personal crises. These include figures from real life (poets Rosemary Tonks and Zelda Fitzgerald) and a Kurdish refugee (Kana), as well as scenarios and types familiar from folk song culture (*Two Girls*). Traditional songs *Bushes And Briars* and *Who Put The Blood* focus on women who dare not speak up for themselves, contrasting with the narrator of Frankie Armstrong's anthem of empowerment *Doors To My Mind* voiced by Laura in a restrained yet powerful account and given an edgy pulse by Adam's percussion.

Hickory Signals have consolidated their distinctive sound and approach with this thoughtfully assembled collection of songs.

hickorysignals.com

David Kidman

## SUISTAMON SÄHKÖ

Etkot, Pectopa Ja Etnotekoa Kihtinäjärvi LC14502/Nordic Notes NN120



Reviewing the first Suistamon Sähkö CD, released in 2015 as part of Anne-Mari Kivimäki's series revolving around the history of the evacuated villages of Suistamo in the Russian, once-Finnish part of Karelia, I wrote, "Its insistent patterns

and melodic phrases, dark wild nightmarishness, restless high-energy industrial power, fierce and silky vocals and danceability could well evoke comparisons with Trä-period Hedningarna, and that's no bad thing indeed, particularly if they can carry it off, without too obvious lap-topper, as a live band."

Well, a live band is what indeed it became, gigging substantially in Finland and occasionally Estonia, Russian Karelia, Norway and Germany, and here's the second album, following the same path and more so.

It's a quartet, with Kivimäki on vocals and her trademark insistent chugging push-pull 5-row and toy accordion, Sväng's Eero Grundström on gutsy, glitchy electronics and vocals, and Reeta-Kaisa Iles, Kivimäki's Puhti duo colleague, and Tuomas Juntunen on vocals. It's not really Hedningarna-like – its vocals tend towards rappy-spoken with sung melodic phrases coasting over, and it has



Hickory Signals

more electronic manipulation and cut-up editing – but it has kinship in its grainy, powerful non-rock energy, and there's plenty of space in that field that hasn't been colonised as much as it could be.

The material is part traditional, part band-composed, with strong roots in the hypnotic, narrow-compass melodies of Karelian traditional music, imbuing them with modern power and lyrics of the post-electricity, industrial age.

The latest of their videos, a sort of spoof-Western treatment of the album's opening track *Hummani Hei*, shows just how committed, theatrical, witty and self-image-effacing the band's members, barely recognisable in dirt and bad dentistry (not their own), are prepared to be.

nordic-notes.de

Andrew Cronshaw

## SETH LAKEMAN

The Well Worn Path Cooking Vinyl COOKCD709P

A lot of guff is written about the effects of studio, engineers, environment and producers, though we all know that ultimately an album's strength rests on the artist and material. That said, Seth Lakeman has always had a powerful faith in the importance of surroundings – he went down a mine to record part of *Tales From The Barrel House* in 2011, *Word Of Mouth* was made in a Cornish church in 2014, and he adjourned to a Jacobean manor house to record *Ballad Of The Broken Few* with Wildwood Kin in 2016 – the lyrical themes of each enhanced by atmosphere as a result.

Between tours dashing around the globe with Robert Plant's band the Sensational

Space Shifters, he probably didn't have time to book anywhere weird and wonderful this time, recording the whole thing in a few days in his own garden studio in Dartmoor. But he did engage the services of producer Ben Hillier, who has clearly played a key role in an album that Seth likens – with some justification – to a garage band record, with all the spontaneity, grit and rough-hewn freedom that suggests.

The clattering industrial rhythm on *Judge Not A Man*, the chiming backdrop on the ominous *The Well Worn Path*, Evan Jenkins' formidable drums at the front of the mix, the chunky guitar of Kit Hawes a constant weapon, bass man Ben Nicholls firmly in the mix on both stand-up and electric... at times it sounds like one of Richard Thompson's stroppier albums. And very occasionally there's a burst of vocals from Seth's sister-in-law Kathryn Roberts to add soul, drama and – with a trusty bout of foot-stomping fiddle – even a touch of folk.

There's the odd throwaway track when the band meander somewhat aimlessly into a wilderness of rock and R&B, and Seth still hasn't completely eradicated the irritating vibrato vocal affectation acquired during the pop star years, but he's come up with some classy songs too. *Educated Man* and *Lend A Hand* – mature, well-constructed and rather touching – are good enough to be translated into different styles, *Fitzsimmon's Fight* follows an arresting narrative about Cornwall's 19th-century heavyweight world champion Bob Fitzsimmons, and he even dips his toe into a bit of politics on *Dig New Ground* and the anthemic *Divided We Fall*. And when all else fails, he primes his fiddle and off into battle they go. It always works.

sethlakeman.co.uk

Colin Irwin