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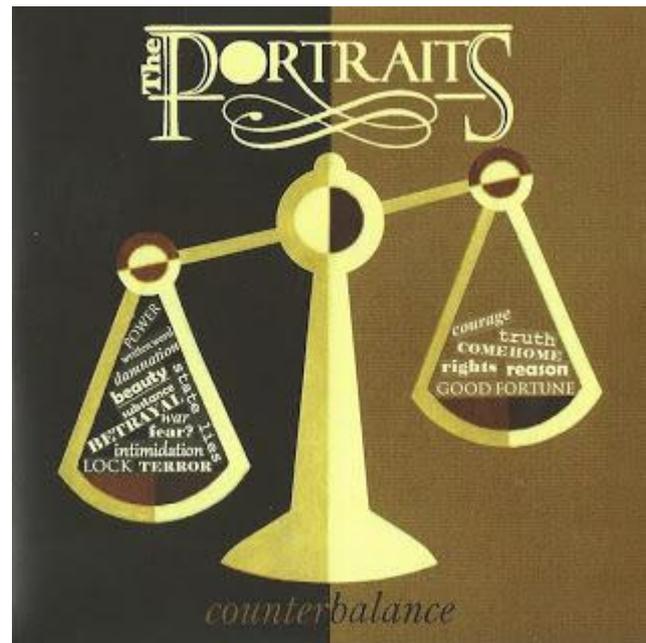
CD Review - The Portraits

Counterbalance

Review by Carys

A little over a month ago, I had never heard of The Portraits. Thirty seconds into “Open Doors”, the opening track on their most recent album, “Counterbalance”, I found myself wondering why they weren't more widely recognised, because they certainly deserve it, and I cannot recommend strongly enough that you give their music a very careful listen indeed. The band is built around singer Lorraine Reilly and pianist Jeremy Millington, but that doesn't begin to adequately describe the complex mix of vocals and instruments that also includes guitar, violin, cello, bodhran and upright bass.

The album starts bravely with just voice and drums, grabbing your attention and demanding you sit down and listen. Immediately those familiar with The Portraits' music will hear how their style has matured since their 2010 album “The Blushing of a World in White” - but nonetheless it's a style that is hard to pin down. Is it folk? Yes, in the sense that it is acoustic, fresh, original and yet somehow timeless.



But there are also aspects of other genres; jazz and classical certainly, but most interestingly none of these songs would be out of place in musical theatre. Indeed, it would be easy to imagine them linked into a kind of opera. My only quibble with the first track is the fadeout ending. Particularly when the music is acoustic it always makes me wonder how the song is performed live and why they didn't choose to give it a “proper”, more definite ending, particularly when this is music that deserves a far wider audience.

Because, not only do they have their own, very definite musical style, The Portraits' lyrics are crying out to be listened to, and they have no fear of standing up for what they believe in. In “Back yard” - a small masterpiece of percussive rhythms and syncopated vocals, we find the lyrics

*“State-sanctioned lies, intimidation
Freedom has spies and strict limitations
They've criminalised
Too much information*

In front of our eyes, assassination

Here in my back yard” ... and yet, at the same time you find your foot tapping as you long to get up and dance.

In “Little Flame”, we get the first real taste of what I think of as “angry violins”! These jagged, insistent little notes drive the tune in a similar manner to a swarm of irritated bees, yet never quite overpowering the tune simply because they are critical to the impact of the song, which deals with the unfairness of how women in the media become invisible as they grow older, something which doesn't seem to apply to men in the same way. Other subjects that are dealt with include depression, tributes to freedom fighters, those who are left behind in the aftermath of conflict and the plight of the Burmese people, a cause particularly dear to the songwriters' hearts.



The Portraits

Overall, I love this album, but at the same time it's a CD that is a little more difficult to simply 'like'. The Portraits' music isn't really something to relax to or play as background music. While some songs, such as “Too Close” work nicely as late-night chillout music, there are many others that grab you, demand you sit up straight and listen with every fibre of your being, and I could more easily imagine The Portraits playing in a chic little backstreet wine bar than a festival field. But there's nothing wrong with that!

www.theportraitsmusic.com

You can hear a song from the album in [FolkCast 081 - free download.](#)

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