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Reviews

Artist: Lyndon Morgans

Album: Of Gods And Men

Label: Junkyard Songs

Tracks: 10

Website: <https://www.songdog.co.uk/> (<https://www.songdog.co.uk/>)

Hitherto recording as Songdog, this is the Welsh singer-songwriter's first album under his own name, but fans will be pleased to hear that's the only thing that's changed. So, dark, tortured vocals, downbeat lyrics and Cave, early Cockney Rebel era Steve Harley, Brel and Bowie influences then. It opens with 'Song For A Five-String Guitar', originally intended for 2007's A Wretched Sinner's Song that never made the final cut, revisited here in acoustic form swathed with mellotron strings that sort of retells 'Space Oddity' with a musician rather than an astronaut ("I still play guitar though it don't mean much up here/I mean, who the hell's to hear?/I broke a string too and you can't find guitar-strings a hundred light-years beyond Proxima Centauri").



Another one recovered from the archives, the lyrically playful 'My Own Worst Enemy' was written in the late 90s and is, he says, basically about his tendency to have things fuck up around him ("I was busking outside some dive, songs nobody needs in their lives, death-bed ditties and balls-ache blues/There's Dirty Nina in white suede shoes, I recognise her, she's heading my way, she's the coolest DJ of the day, she comes up, smiles right in my face, throws up in my guitar-case").

The steady strummed, tinkling keys, strings graced slow march title track racks up ten verses as he sums up his feelings about the world today ("Heaven's reception desk is empty, nobody's hearing anybody's prayers/God's not exactly dead yet but he's lying in intensive care"), the song populated by losers like Tubby who "looks at you like a gibbet would" and Champ who "sits listening to the fridge hum, watching his future melt" while he's "the man who came last in the loser's race, though I had dreams to take your breath away, but I always did struggle to connect".

He has a brilliant way of investing despair and dysfunction with romance, case in point being 'A Love Song To Mabel', which paints a picture of a violent man ("I'll put the gun down here on the table if it makes you feel better... I wish I hadn't grabbed your arm so hard I bruised it") and his lover, but wraps it in disarming tenderness as, referencing Sartre and De Beauvoir, he declares "There's this café I know off Beggar's Roost, the jukebox rocks like 1966 and I'll show you those pretty saints in St Anne's window/We'll be Jean-Paul and Simone drinking brandy and vermouth, and you'll tell me I'm handsome, it don't have to be the truth/You can be as shameless as you want to be, your scars are like lines of poetry to me"), ending on the evocative "I'm the sandcastle and you the wave".

Another woman is the subject of the beautifully sad, cello-caressed 'Wild As Ophelia', a mercurial, complex personality ("a nightingale with a broken wing... You'd punch a pill from a blister-pack, swallow it down with the whiskey you'd keep") cut down in her prime by disease ("Now I'm out alone on a moonless night, I'm thinking of you singing your songs, and watching timer-lights blinking on all over the valley") that feels like a synopsis to a Leonard Cohen novel.

Taking the tempo up to a staccato strut with pub piano, 'Between Punk & Thatcher's Fall' is a recollection of his arrival in London in 1976 and playing "rebel songs and south London blues" on the pub circuit ("Some of us shone like quasars, some threw up in pre-dawn streets, others hunted for a place called the fuck-out-of-here, but didn't life taste sweet?"); happy days even if "all I got left to show are some bad reviews as the only drum I hear beating still is sounding my retreat...my first heart-attack is in the post and all my old bones creak."

The deceptively dreamy 'A Normal Life' is a post break-up number with the guy admitting he got what was coming ("I made so many wrong calls, I'm just bad luck and I know it, there's not a promise I never broke/I'm a hard man to love, I've got a grenade for a heart") and steeped in regret ("a handful of songs and you, my love, are all I ever knew of paradise ... I hate us being apart").

Awash with mellotron, 'Pearl' is a six-minute theatrical-styled breathily sung reflection on a childhood infatuation that came to an end ("I left home, burning bridges just to light my way, what is there to say?"), with the narrator wondering how, if they rekindled the flame, it would fit with his less than sunny life on a lyrics that nods to both 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'Ring-a-ring-a roses', and proffers the blunt but sensible advice to "Grow up, eat shit, make peace with the world and be happy".

And yet another love affair slowly runs its course in the synth brass and piano ballad 'A Schmaltzy Hear' ("she says less and less, she's as quiet as the moon, she just sits upstairs watching old black-and-white movies So that's just how it goes, it's just people living lives ...My flesh is sagging, my tail's done wagging"), the melody traced out in some late night smoky bar as a melancholic accordion plays.

'Rap Sheet' is a jazzier affair but still soaked in ageing despondency ("When I was young I thought I'd capture the moon, eat the sun, heckle the Queen, but time catches up so suddenly exactly like it just swung in on a vine/And now sometimes I feel almost happy, sometimes I feel so afraid with the wind going bang at the window like a shovel of dirt on a grave"). Keeping it jazzy, 'The Mooch' is a lurching gypsy swing instrumental with (synthesised?) woodwind and plinketty piano that leads into 'The Queen of the £10 Deal', with a 70s MOR-style arrangement counterpointing the grim vision of the lyrics ("she cooks up a spoonful, ties off her arm, dabs off the blood and whispers amenI raise a dirty glass to this fucked-up land with its plague-wind howling down the road and to the diners and dive-bars and donut shops and to the goodtime groovers of old and to the anarchy sticker on the lamppost outside and to the hell-bound everywhere"), but spiced with the belief that "all will be well in the end and if not, then it's not the end" so just "live for the fuck of it".

Time passing and growing older is a thread running through the album, expressed in the final lap with the music box tinkling of 'Little Light's as idealism gives way to pragmatism and when once "We'd plot insurrection in bed-sits and palaces" now "These days I stay home, I'm a dog who loves his basket", rounded off with the wry observation that "man cannot live by scotch alone, oh no, sometimes he's going to need a little soda".

Couched in guitar and cello, it almost bids goodbye with 'Sayonara', another reminiscence of an old love affair and the memories of when the flame burned bright ("The bloom is off my rose, I know, but come back twenty-five years ago, you're made of love from head to toe. And, baby, we had times") and the wish to rekindle it ("As the needle drops on another year, maybe we could arrange to meet back here, retrace our steps while the trail is still warm?"

It finally ends with 'The Whole Box Of Stars', a lockdown number and the last song written for the album that offsets the pessimism and regret that's preceded it with the upbeat benediction "I hope you live to hear sirens in the night or a wood-pigeon's call come first light, watch fireflies sparking over the plain, feel a boy's awe at a certain girl's face, spend a long, cold winter in a lonely place, may you be baptised in the tears of some beautiful boy, I wish you the whole box of stars". Stellar stuff indeed.

Mike Davies

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