

Reviews

QFTRY and Tom Lewis. *Poles Part Too: The Song Goes On.* ASM 106D; Self-Propelled Music Ltd., 14 Library Rd., Bournemouth BH9 2QH, U.K. (new address, different from packaging); tom@tomlewis.net; www.tomlewis.net

The hardest part of writing this review is explaining who the performers are. QFTRY is a group of five Polish musicians: Grzegorz Hatylak, Wojciech Krawetkowski, Lukasz Kruszynski, Grzegorz Opaluch, and Bartosz Wasik. Tom Lewis is an English singer/songwriter, known primarily for writing and performing songs of the sea, who was resident in Canada between 1983 and 2013, and who now lives in Bournemouth, England. In the late 1990s QFTRY and Tom Lewis met on the European festival circuit and began performing together occasionally. In 2001 they released the CD *Poles Apart*. This is their second CD together.

Poles Part Too contains 13 tracks, nine from the U.K., three from the U.S., and one from the Caribbean. Three of the tracks are songs written by Tom Lewis, but none sees its first release on this CD. The first track, and arguably the best on the disk, is a rendition of Cyril Tawney's "Grey Funnel Line", with QFTRY singing a very well-constructed harmony behind Lewis's lead. A five-part harmony must be carefully arranged in order not to collapse from its own weight, and the QFTRY harmony is indeed carefully arranged, but it does not have the overly-smooth, vocal-competition-ready sound that can mar such arrangements.

An interesting aspect of the disk is the poet's corner at Tracks 8 and 9. Track 8, "All Coiled Down (So Long)", is a setting to music by Alan Fitzsimmons of a poem by the English poet Cicely Fox Smith, who resided in Canada for about two years just before the outbreak of the First World War. "All Coiled Down" is a leaving-ship song; again QFTRY sings a very effective harmony behind Lewis. Track 9 is Peter Bellamy's setting to music of a poem by Rudyard Kipling, in this case "Anchor Song". In this song the rhythmic effect of the words is quite striking; the words, however, are somewhat difficult to understand. All hands stand by to swot up nautical vocabulary.

Also of interest are the two traditional English sea songs on the disk, "Great Grimsby" and "Spanish Ladies" ("...we'll rant and we'll roar..."). In these tracks Lewis's lead is dominant and the QFTRY harmonies more subtle (but no less good) than in other tracks on the disk.

One track is Jesse Fuller's "San Francisco Bay Blues". I have never thought of SFBB as a sea song, but I suppose it is, even though the only conveyance mentioned for the first person in SFBB is a freight train. If SFBB is a sea song, does that make the Lone Cat a mariner? I think he'd have liked the idea. The guitar solo on this track is played by Dariusz Kabacinski, who was the recording engineer for the CD and is not a usual member of QFTRY.

Other notable tracks are Tom Lewis's song "Swallow the Anchor", the last track on the disk, which was performed by QFTRY as a tribute to Lewis; Lewis does not sing on this track. The song speaks of the reasons that sailors eventually leave life at sea ("...his wife wanted more than a part-time first mate..."). Lewis, having served 24 years in the Royal Navy as a submariner, would have some cause to know about such matters. Lewis is also the writer of "Last Shanty", a lighthearted look at the changes in Navy life over the years ("...a bunting tosser doesn't toss the bunting any more..."). One chorus of this song is sung in Polish by QFTRY. Finally, there is a song by English singer/songwriter Mick Ryan, "The Song Goes On" ("...sing and you'll be singing both the singer and the song..."), which is the source of the CD's subtitle. This song was written for a 2006 memorial concert for Cyril Tawney; here again Lewis leads and QFTRY sings a very appealing harmony. This is the only song on the CD which is not directly a sea (or at least boat) song.

This CD is very interesting to listen to; the songs are well chosen and the pairing of English singer with Polish harmonic and instrumental back-up works quite well, despite the unlikely sound of such a collaboration. It will appeal even to those who are not normally aficionados of sea songs.

Jim Grabenstetter, Calgary, Alberta

Elena Young. *The Gravedigger's Daughter.* EY2008CD. 1036 Huscroft Rd., Creston, B.C. V0B 1G2; chickwhopicks@gmail.com; www.elenayeung.com

The Gravedigger's Daughter is the 2008 debut album of Elena Yeung, an independent bluegrass artist based in British Columbia. The 11-track album is an all-acoustic, old-time bluegrass affair, with all songs containing lead vocals by Yeung, accompanied by banjo, guitar, bass, fiddle, and mandolin. This is a genuinely pleasant collection of original bluegrass music from a very talented singer-songwriter and fine banjo player.

All 11 songs were written and produced by Yeung, who also created the layout and many of the photographs in the CD booklet (with the front and back covers by Peter McLennan). The CD cover features Yeung, in a simple white dress, sitting at the corner of a wooden country house, holding a banjo. The entire CD cover and booklet are rendered in sepia tone and covered in images of various parts of an old country house and a few pictures of Yeung in the same environment, giving the album a nostalgic, rural visual character, which suits perfectly the music contained in it. The lyrics and musicians' and production credits are printed in full inside the booklet.

I must admit that, on receiving the CD and seeing the cover, I was surprised to see an Asian female artist holding a banjo. Even more impressive was to find that Yeung is as talented a banjo player as she is a songwriter of the bluegrass genre. Her vocals, although raw and maybe not to be considered technically sophisticated, are assertive and charismatic. Her songs have clear narratives, and she demonstrates a versatility in conveying different imagery and emotions while writing very authentically within the genre. If I had not looked inside the CD booklet, from just listening to the songs, I would have thought that some of these pieces were cover versions of standard bluegrass repertoire. This is by no means an assumption about Yeung's songwriting ability, but rather a compliment to her success in being able to produce such authentic-sounding bluegrass tunes.

Standout tracks include the upbeat and catchy opening title piece, "The Gravedigger's Daughter", showcasing Yeung's excellent banjo playing as well as Greg Spatz's great fiddling. "When I was Young" is a poignant, first-person narrative about domestic violence and abuse ("One night he staggered in and threw me on the floor/And I prayed to God I'd make it through that door"). Although I have no way of knowing whether this song was inspired by real-life events, it immediately inspired me to draw parallels with Tori Amos's "Me and a Gun", another first-person a cappella song, which describes Amos's own near-rape experience. The final track, "A Little Rain", is an endearing, leisurely piece with simple, optimistic words of wisdom fitting perfectly with the genre ("Though it's hard now, we both know/A little rain will help you grow").

The artist's website reveals that Yeung was born – like myself – to Hong Kong immigrant parents. She was raised in the farming community of Carberry, MB, and had lived variously in Regina, SK, Kingston, ON, St John's, NL, and Inuvik, NWT, before settling in interior British Columbia. Coming from the same cultural background (though not in the same part of the country), in my experience most Hong Kong immigrant parents often do not encourage their

children to learn musical instruments other than piano or violin, let alone banjo. It is even more rare to be exposed to and allowed to pursue a musical genre such as bluegrass, although perhaps the community that Yeung was raised in made it more accessible. Perhaps it is my limited knowledge of the experiences of Hong Kong immigrant families in other parts of the country that made this album a fascinating narrative, and it was a truly pleasant surprise to know that there is an Asian female banjo-picking bluegrass singer-songwriter in British Columbia.

The album runs at an efficient length, at just over 37 minutes, and Elena Yeung has released a second album, *Dandelion*, which can be purchased through her informative website, www.eleyenyeung.com.

Heidi Chan, Toronto, Ontario

