

SMALL-LABEL BRITISH AND CELTIC MUSIC

THE REEL WORLD

BY TOM NELLIGAN

People have always learned traditional songs and tunes directly from each other, and still do, but over the last century, recordings in formats from wax cylinders to mp3 files have become an equally or perhaps even more common way for music to travel from one person to another. What's still fairly uncommon, though, is the idea of going to college to study folk music. One name that keeps showing up in the biographies of young British performers these days is that of Newcastle University in the northeast of England, which offers a degree program in "Folk and Traditional Music" that seems to be a growing influence in perpetuating British roots styles by educating the next generation of young musicians. The fact that such a program exists is a credit both to the institution that sponsors it and the students who enroll in it.

That all comes to mind because North-of-England singer and multi-instrumentalist **Andrew Cadie** lists a Newcastle folk degree among his credentials, and he certainly seems to have studied well. His debut solo album, *The Snow Tree* [Border Fray Records BF 06001 (2006)], is a solid collection of songs and tunes, both traditional ones and originals written in traditional style, accompanied by or played on guitar, fiddle, Northumbrian smallpipes, whistles, and more. Cadie has an earnest, plaintive voice that's well suited to his serious material, such as the traditional "Sandgate Dandling Song," which mourns a ruined childhood, or his own "Emigrant's Song," which holds out hope amid a hard life. He balances the moods with upbeat instrumentals: for example, his fiddle jig set, "Seven Streets," and "Devilstick Dawson," a joyful little hornpipe written in memory of a deceased friend.

And with at least one Newcastle student in the group, **Kerfuffle** is a young, tradition-oriented English quartet whose third recording, *Links* [RootBeat Records RBRC05 (2006)], contains some delightfully sophisticated instrumental arrangements based on piano accordion and fiddle and backed by guitar and bass. Its tools are relatively simple, but

members make the most out of them through creative interplay. Teenage accordionist Hannah James is particularly impressive, as in the swirling, uplifting "Maggot" set (the 17th-century dance, not the squirmy insect larva!) and the high-flying reel set they call "Hangover," which sounds like anything *but* what you'd want to play in that condition. The four songs feature James' small, sweet voice. The group does an impressive job of covering Pentangle's challenging "Light Flight," and a live medley of the song "The Brisk Young Widow" followed by a couple of fast tunes shows that they're at home onstage as well. Definitely a promising young band.

John Richards is a socially conscious English songwriter whose name is not well known in North America but whose work will be familiar to some readers from covers recorded by Fair-

port Convention and Show of Hands, among others. With **The John Richards Band** on *Wall of Hope* [Working Joe Music WJMCD2006 (2006)], he offers a collection of powerful, timely, and melodic original and adapted songs sung with conviction and feeling. "Billy Shaw" is a powerful lament for a soldier who believed that he was doing the right thing in going to war but came home emotionally shattered, while "Ploughman Lads" mourns a vanishing traditional scene. Richards' trio backs his reedy voice and his guitar with a blend of accordion, flute, whistles, and banjo, and whistle player Emma Nijs shares the vocal leads.

Another English singer/songwriter whose music may be familiar from another context is **Kate Bramley**, the fiddler and harmony vocalist in Jez Lowe's band, the Bad Pennies. Her solo disc, *Little Canaan* [Tantobie

Records TTRCD 108 (2006)], is a warm collection of largely original songs that often recall better times, and, like Richards' album, it has a very English feel to it. "Carters Fair" is a foot-tapping memory of the days of draft horses, "Northern Songbird" (by writer Jacquie Hanham) is a lovely, evocative look back at a woman's life through changing seasons and years, and the driving "Hard Times Around the World" (an updated Newfoundland traditional song) is a sadly self-explanatory rouser. Bramley is backed by Lowe and the other Bad Pennies, as well as Canadian singer/songwriter James Keelaghan and others.

Heading across to the United States — and in fact all the way across it — melodeon and button accordion player **Dan Possumato** is the first Alaskan musician to appear in this column. The Anchorage resident's *Land of Sunshine* [self-released BBR-001 (2006)] is a smooth collection of mostly traditional squeezebox tunes recorded in Ireland with guitar accompaniment and a few bonus additions, like the winsome singing of Laura Mulcahy on a couple of tracks. Possumato is a capable, spirited player, and as the title suggests, this is happy Irish dance music that's a good antidote for a dark winter night, even one that's 20-plus hours long.

When a group called the **Fish Family** releases a disc called *Age of Aquarium* [self-released (2005)], you pretty much have to mention it just for its witty name, but the music here is fun, too. The Fish Family is a New York City-based quartet that plays traditional-style New England contradance music on twin fiddles, accordion, and piano. They don't try for blazing speed or fancy arrangements, just sets of graceful, solid dance tunes from rural New England town halls via the British Isles, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada that show why this style of music is enduringly popular.

Finally for this month, **the Town Pants** is a good-time Celtic/pop quartet from Vancouver that brings to mind some other eclectic roots bands from their city, like the Paperboys and the Clumsy Lovers. *Weight of Words* [Maximum Music TTP003 (2006)] is full of upbeat original acoustic pub music that raises a glass to the enthusiasm of Irish rebel songs and laughs at the quirks of modern life. These comfortably loose-fitting Pants sew their songs together with lots of fiddle and tenor banjo, singalong choruses, touches of mariachi horns, and didjeridoo, and plenty of smiles. There's nothing stylistically earth-shattering here, but it's fun, and that's something we can all use these days!



Kate Bramley

