

Show of Hands Reviews

Country Life

The Independent on Sunday

18th Jan 2004

Country Folk (Not!) ****

The enigmatic acoustic duo Show of Hands are formidable operators in the roots arena. They've been likened to U2, "Crowded House without the drums" and, in the case of songwriter Steve Knightley, Bruce Springsteen. You'll gather then, that this is by no means off-the-peg folk music, and that they are as likely to be seen playing the Royal Albert Hall as their home county of Devon. Country Life represents a new move towards the mainstream. The title track is a finely-honed rock rant on the desecration of English country life, complete with punning agri-barons "cap in hand", while their haunting take on the trad. folk classic "Reynardine" is arguably the best since Fairport Convention's. A class act.

- Jane Brace

The Daily Telegraph

8th November 2003

A bitter blast from rural Britain launches the new album from one of the classiest of folk duos. "No trains, no jobs, no shops, no pubs," they cry with enough force to make townies feel thoroughly ashamed. The choice of grievances is meant to distance Show of Hands from Tory squires and countryside marchers, a respectable but flawed approach that overlooks the inconvenient reality that the issues often unite rather than divide people. But folk music was never intended to be even-handed, and, while they have never truly been folk's angriest folk, Steve Knightley and Phil Beer take it upon themselves to articulate the disaffection felt by a large body of the population. Country - especially West Country - themes extend throughout this compelling CD, which comes complete with a video of the pair in action live. Knightley writes punchy, literate songs that he and Beer sing and play with impeccable professionalism and flair. Track for track, it may be their best yet.

- Colin Randall

Western Morning News

5th December 2003

This could be the breakthrough album for the Westcountry acoustic duo Show of Hands. Often pigeonholed as a folk act, their latest album Country Life sees them cross a range of musical divides and further defy the stereotype.

They have released the title track as their single, which, although much praised for its fantastic production, has already been classed as "too political" in some quarters. Talk of empty holiday cottages, closing pubs and cattle burning on pyres does not make it an easy listen for the majority of the record-buying public.

A far more obvious choice, is the excellent Hard Shoulder, which with its strong narrative has definite shades of a Springsteen ballad.

Perhaps more importantly it is about something everyone can relate to - relationships from our youth and breaking down on the motorway. And the Spanish guitar on

Suntrap perfectly captures the lazy frisson of the hot days of summer. What sets the album apart is the range of musical styles on the album which show the skill and versatility of powerful vocals of Steve Knightley and Phil Beer's musical talents. The CD is beautifully packaged and also comes with a CD ROM featuring the promotional video for the title track, and footage of Show of Hands live at the Royal Albert Hall, which was filmed for a television special by Carlton TV.

- Andrea Kuhn

Uncut ***

February 2004

Guesting on Tom Robinson's Radio 6 show recently, he blind-played a Show of Hands track and invited me to guess its provenance. I hazarded Kentucky. The answer turned out to be Devon. I tried it on friends and nobody had a clue. Yet the West Country acoustic duo have serious form as stalwarts of the English roots scene. Phil Beer has played mandolin for the Rolling Stones (a distinction shared with Ry Cooder) and Steve Knightley was all over Mick Jagger's last solo record. Their latest Country Life, cleverly mixes English and American influences with pleasing echoes of both Richard Thompson and Steve Earle.

A revelation.

- Nigel Williamson

Tom Robinson

Six music

..Also, protest music is alive and well with SHOW OF HANDS. They have a new album "Country Life" - the title track is one of Steve Knightley's finest songs ever, and the whole album is an absolutely stunning package.

Mojo 2*

February 2004

The duo of Steve Knightley and Phil Beer are an object lesson in grass roots marketing, as their rabid following and two recent shows at London's Royal Albert Hall testify. They offer a one-stop shop for folk with Knightley's neatly structured songs as the centerpiece. But they still don't have the tools to deliver the gravitas or depth suggested by the impressively elaborate sleeve."

- Colin Irwin

'Show of Hands' - the track records release

One of the enduring questions of life - above the meaning of life but below "The aristocracy - why?" - asks why there should be such a low profile for English folk music, even for legends of the scene. My own theory is that, in contrast to Ireland and Scotland say, all too many English people still voluntarily pigeon-hole themselves in terms of music, defining themselves as much in terms of what they won't listen to as what they will.

The presence of this and other sites dedicated to musical exploration, as well as the ever increasing success of WOMAD and the Cambridge Folk Festival among others, do happily suggest that this state of affairs is gradually being eroded. It's just as well, because the idea that an act as marvellous as Show of Hands is only known to folk fans - wise and lucky souls - and not to the nation at large is, quite frankly, a scandal. They are fantastic! Steve Knightley and Phil Beer's subject matter, dealt with in ways

ranging from heartfelt to witty but always intelligent and lyrical, includes topics many songwriters would be unable to approach as perceptively. The Bristol Slaver not only highlights the role of "the Triangular Trade" in bringing prosperity but also unwillingness today to face up to the past: a society that denies its past fails to understand its present and thus imperils its future. The myth of discovery is shattered and its grisly repercussions laid bare in the tragic, scathing Columbus (Didn't Find America) and Tall Ships explores the world of a generally covered up element of this country's maritime past - the wreckers. Cutthroats, Crooks And Conmen brings us face to face with more modern threats - the privatising carpetbaggers charging you for what was already yours.

Along with Knightley's own songs there are fine arrangements of traditional numbers and some first-rate interpretations of such folk classics as The Crow On The Cradle, which I first came across on Mary Black's Without the Fanfare album. Perhaps because of many years involvement with the development agency Concern, my current favourite is the moving and dignified Exile, a song inspired by Ethiopian refugees in the 1980's. I can not recommend this double CD compilation of the work of Show of Hands too highly. It is quite simply one of the finest folk collections - forget that, any collections - I have ever heard. (DM) www.revolutionsuk.com

Dark Fields

An astounding album from Show of Hands. A bigger, fuller sound to this CD, aiming at a wider market, and encompassing all the influences hinted at on earlier albums. Bob Dylan's, 'Farewell Angelina' lends an almost country feel to the album, while the cold menace of 'Flora' and the grand sweep of 'Cousin Jack' take us through the whole emotional spectrum. The 'live' feel is still there, one track actually recorded on the legendary 'Five Days in May' tour earlier in 1997, and featuring Kate Rusby, Chris Wood and Andy Cutting. Many other musicians have lent their talents to this album, but one of the great moments of modern acoustic music must certainly be the title track, a sublime duet with Steve Knightley and the silky female voice of Chris While that tears at every heart string.

Yorkshire Evening Press

'Stunning! Acoustic duo Steve Knightley and Phil Beer on top form with their latest album, which comes complete with songbook. Two more memorable characters can now be added to Knightley's rogues gallery: the Cornish miner in Cousin Jack; and the Poacher in Longdog, which rattles along with Beer on fiddle...'

Colin Randall, Daily Telegraph

'...the range of themes, the thoughtful lyricism and mood shifts...outstanding in a comprehensively appealing set.'

Tony Slinger, Venue Magazine

'When you pick up a SOH album, you automatically expect top quality songs, stunning vocals, wonderful harmonies and breathtaking instrumentals - which must make it very hard for Steve Knightley and Phil Beer to make each album better than the previous one. The subtle use of studio guests...adds that something extra, but when it comes down to basics, it is the sheer musical quality of Show of Hands that makes all the difference. Songs include a superb version of Nic Jones' Warlike lads

of Russia, the brilliant Bristol Slaver and Bob Dylan's Farewell Angelina. Definitely the best of their many superb albums.'

Lie of the Land

Q Magazine - February 97 issue Folk Album of the Year!

Lie of the Land is the fourth album from Show of Hands, and has received a 4 star rating from Q magazine. It combines traditional techniques and forms with a new approach to acoustic music, creating a power and directness normally associated with rock music. The songs, the melodies, the stories, are dramatic for the uninitiated, 'Captains' is the track to start with - for those who know Show of Hands already, just press play!

The Telegraph

'Songs of substance and stylish arrangements....a formidable partnership'

Q Magazine: 'Startlingly good....lyrical, sophisticated folk songs with their eyes firmly on the future....Maybe Wembley beckons.'

Mojo

'Steve Knightley's vast windswept voice and elementally inspired songs conspire with Phil Beer's multi instrumentalist colourings to create a powerful, fresh sounding music....with both integrity and potentially widespread appeal'

Rock 'n Reel: 'A masterpiece... yet another stunning release from possibly the best acoustic duo around.'

The Living Tradition: 'Pretty slick stuff this....deserves its fair share of critical acclaim'

The Ledge: 'An intensely thought provoking album which should be on everyone's shelves....with the CD in the player'

Folk on Tap: A new album, a new selection of distinctive songs - all

pedigrees....Another excellent album from the unique talent that is Show of Hands. It is a must for one's collection'

24 March 1996 - SHOW OF HANDS Live at The Royal Albert Hall

Tony Slinger, Venue Magazine

Recorded at the Duo's big gamble, self promoted gig earlier last year, this CD gives a great idea of just how superb a live act Show of Hands really are. Although the vast majority of tracks feature just the deadly duo, the use of guests Matt Clifford (keyboards), Sally Barker (vocals), Sara Allen (accordion), and Vladimir Vega (pan pipes) gives tracks such as 'Columbus (Didn't find America)', 'The Well' and 'Santiago' that extra little bit of bite.

Three things stand out on this album: first, the quality of the songs - I love the lyrics on 'Cutthroats, Crooks and Con-men' - second, the lovely tone of Steve Knightley's voice, and lastly, the incredible instrumental ability of Phil Beer (just listen to the acoustic guitar work on 'Day Has Come' or his demon fiddle work on 'Soldier's Joy). It is also evident that the audience were having a ball - if you were there you will need this as the perfect souvenir, if you weren't then buy it to persuade you to see Show of Hands.

Live at Kensington Village Hall!

On Sunday 24th March, 1996, Steve Knightley and Phil Beer made their dreams come true. After five years of playing the UK's pubs, clubs and village halls, they went for the big one - and hired London's Royal Albert Hall. Fans arrived by train, car and coach from all over the UK, and the pair played to a near sell-out crowd. Show of Hands proved they could not only play, but play in style.

They performed like seasoned professionals, perfectly at home in a vast auditorium. Guest musicians Sarah Allen, Vladimir Vega, Sally Barker, Nick Scott, Biddy Blythe and Matt Clifford joined them on stage at various times during the two sets, adding accordian, flutes, uilleann pipes and keyboards to the the band's own accomplished playing. Highlights of the evening included 'The Hunter' from their recent album 'Lie Of The Land' and 'Cars' from the 'Beat About the Bush' CD.

Steve Knightley proved himself a natural raconteur and adept at handling an audience. He drew roars of approval from the crowd at various points throughout the evening and effortlessly led the show to a natural climax. The duo drew three standing ovations at the end of the night and, were it not for closing time, would have happily played longer. The party continued long after the lights went down, however, with Steve and Phil being joined at a back-stage party by friends, families and celebrities including Toyah Wilcox, Steve Harley, Tom Robinson, Ralph McTell and Frank Holland.

The concert was a resounding success, and in addition, Show Of Hands raised £1500 for a local children's centre in Exeter (Honeylands, part of Exeter hospital), by raffling a custom made cello-mandolin donated by the band's instrument maker, master craftsman David Oddy. The event cost a cool £24000 to stage including the cost of hiring the hall, but Steve and Phil were able to cover their expenses, pay the musicians and still have enough money to pay for the petrol back home. Asked if they would make it an annual event Steve commented 'Perhaps we'll come and busk outside each year, to remind us of our incredible night!'