

WITNESS REVIEWS

MOJO July 06



Show Of Hands
★★★★★
Witness HANDS ON MUSIC



The poppy arrangements which have taken SOH to the edges of the mainstream have often been at the expense of credibility, but Steve Knightley's songs have developed such an edge it's hard to deny them any longer. The recruitment of Simon Emmerson as producer takes a sound augmented by the likes of Seth Lakeman and Miranda Sykes up several notches; this is a big album.

SATURDAY TELEGRAPH 13.5.06

Not many junior ministers find their bons mots preserved in song, and Kim Howells may wish that Steve Knightley, half of Show of Hands, had not chosen to make his an exception.

Howells is renowned for two outbursts as culture minister: denouncing Turner Prize contenders as "cold mechanical, conceptual bullshit" and defending his government's "three-in-a-bar" assault on live music by saying that listening to three Somerset folk singers was his idea of hell.

Roots, Knightley's best song on Witness, is confined to the second observation, offering as a different hellish vision "pubs where no one ever sings at all/and everyone stares at a great big screen/overpaid soccer stars/prancing teens/Australian soaps/American rap/estuary English/baseball caps".

Knightley and Phil Beer champion a counterculture. With scant mainstream media exposure, they have built a mighty, word-of-mouth following that fills venues from Northern arts centres to the Albert Hall.

This is Show of Hands in intelligent, compelling and imaginative form, full of expert musicianship and driven by West Country themes that have more to do with work migration and rowdy nights on Union Street than cream teas and idyllic coves.
Colin Randall

SONGLINES June 2006 issue

A rural landscape painting in angry graffiti

In 2007 the balance will tip and more people will live an urban than a rural life. On the face of it, the role Show of Hands have given themselves may seem a thankless one – that of voice and champion for the rural poor of the west of England. But the more I hear of them the more I feel they are giving a voice to an entire movement of people who do not want to live in a hyper-consumer urban hinterland.

Witness is a dark album. Singer-songwriter Steve Knightley describes it as a cinematic journey through the West Country. He and multi-instrumentalist Phil Beer truly conjure up a sense of place, with the voice of Miranda Sykes startlingly effective alongside Knightley's rough gravel tones.

The plaintive 'Undertow', with its young person's dreams of 'catchin' waves all day' in Australia, or the genuinely cinematic 'The Bet' with its hushed names of West Country towns, give a sense of time and place as romantic as the hard-bitten landscape of Bruce Springsteen's New Jersey.

And the second song, 'Roots', is probably their manifesto. It is an urgent and angry revolutionary cry to the youth of the nation to recover their identity, centred around former minister of state Kim Howells' personal idea of hell – 'three Somerset folk singers in a local pub'. It rails at an ignorant establishment and demands the St George's flag back from baseball-capped boys in pubs full of piped music. This is a beautiful portrait of modern rural Britain – intensely compassionate and filled with carefully contained rage.

Nathaniel Handy

HMVChoice June/July Issue

English folk favourites team up
with Afro-Celts in winning style

Without a single flashbulb of mainstream exposure, the folk duo of Steve Knightley and Phil Beer have built a large and dedicated fan base simply by playing every folk club and festival in the land and delivering English roots music of the highest quality. Incredibly, they've sold out the Albert Hall twice – and yet they remain criminally ignored by all but the specialist folk media. Perhaps Witness is the album finally to change all that and deliver them the wider recognition they richly deserve.

With a sparkling, technicolour production by Simon Emmerson and Simon 'Mass' Massey of the Grammywinning Afro-Celt Sound System, they've gone and made their most innovative studio album to date. Knightley's highly literate, original songs and acoustic guitar are expertly embellished by Beer's multiinstrumental skills on fiddle, mandolin and melodeon, while folk wonderkidof-the-moment (and fellow Devon resident) Seth Lakeman helps out on guitar and backing vocals. But it's the subtle but dynamic drum programming from those Afro-Celt boys that marks this out as a landmark album.

Nigel Williamson

SPIRAL EARTH (www.spiralearth.co.uk)

Witness album review

Show Of Hands are widely touted as 'England's most popular acoustic roots duo', Witness confirms that they are also the most innovative, observant and relevant English musicians around.

Production by Simon Emmerson and Simon Massey has resulted in a confident enveloping sound, the mixing accentuates the layers of vocals and instrumentation. It's not a huge departure from their past work yet it feels more coloured, surer of itself. Beer and Knightley's musicianship is, as we have come to expect, of the highest order. The alchemy between them is in their arrangements, lifting their music away from divides of genre.

Never one to avoid harsh reality, Knightley has penned another of his acerbic epics in the second track Roots. We are living in confusing times, we have a government that is less in touch with the people and the country every day, a government which has never been in touch with rural affairs. Where Country Life decried this lack of understanding by our city bound politicians Roots takes the bit between it's teeth and gets to the heart of what it means to be English. Putting it succinctly:

'Without our stories or our songs
how will we know where we've come from?
I've lost St George in the Union Jack
It's my flag too and I want it Back'

This where Show Of Hands are so damn relevant, From their West Country roots they have picked apart the fabric of our country and are holding up the warp and weft for our inspection. Whether we heed the warning is up to us.

The sense of place is as strong as ever, Knightley says 'Every original song on the CD is a first person narrative or testimonial. incidents and events are witnessed and recorded and every narrator is a different character. It's really a series of scenes from a cinematic style journey of the West Country.'

It's their connection to their roots that results in the timeless feel of many of the tracks, thankfully Phil Beer gets to sing the lead on a couple of tracks on this album. He has a great voice and it's good to hear it on some upbeat songs, notably the foot stomping Falmouth Packet/Haul Away Joe.

Knightley's writing reveals a deep understanding of the human condition, and often the conflicting joy and melancholy that lies at it's heart. The closing track All I'd Ever Lost is a touching evocation of life's triumphs and regrets.

Everything has come together perfectly on this recording, the best Show Of Hands album ever? it's certainly the best album we've heard so far this year...

Iain Hazlewood

Witness single review 20.3.06

2006 will be a big year for Show Of Hands, their first single in ten years Witness is released in may. Penned by Knightley, who writes the majority of the duo's diverse material, it is inspired by members of a Devon commune and the way their alternative lifestyle weaves in with the outside world.

A song with tangible theatricality and strident impact, it features strong vocals from Knightley, driving rhythms and dynamic fiddle playing from Beer. Fellow Devonian Seth Lakeman guests on tenor guitar and vocals.

Formed in 1991 by Steve Knightley and Phil Beer, both highly regarded musicians in their own right. They are widely regarded as the best acoustic roots duo on the current scene.

One of the hardest touring acts around, they do a major tour every year, taking in large and small venues, as well as several festivals.

Both multi-instrumentalists their music feature guitars, mandocello, fiddle, cuatro, viola and concertina. Their passionate and powerful music is set against the virtuosity of their vocals and harmonies. Their recordings of original material (and trad arrangements) often take their subject matter from the Westcountry where they are based, 2003's The Path is an instrumental celebration of the sights and sounds of the West Country coast line.

In some ways their defining album, is Country Life. Compressing a huge range of musical styles into its thirteen tracks, from the politically charged title song to the soft summery spanish guitar on Suntrap it is of such a consistently high quality that it won praise across the board, Q magazine naming it their folk album of the year.

2006 sees a new album Witness, it marks a collaboration with Grammy-nominated producer Simon Emmerson and 'Mass' (Simon Massey) of Afro Celts fame. It marks a new twist on the genre- defying Show of Hands sound – rich and deliberate with an increasingly inventive and bold musicality that often leans more towards rock than folk.

Show Of Hands also pride themselves on their closeness to their fans, their web site has in-depth info on the band, downloads and reviews. They have had over 17,000 signups to their email newsletter.

MUSICIAN MAGAZINE (journal of The Musicians' Union)

"A gem of contemporary English folk ... many months of hard graft have evidently gone into making this album and boy are the results worthwhile"