



At The Barrier

LIVE MUSIC, REVIEWS AND OPINION

BY SEURAS OG ON 14TH FEBRUARY 2022

<https://atthebarrier.com/.../old-salt-live-in-room-13-ep.../>

Sick and tired of keeping up with all the fads and trends of modern music, unable to keep tabs on the many and varied genre categorisations, whether this is hip or that is hype? I really really share your pain and, as a salve, offer this delight, an almost unclassifiable warm dip in enjoying music for the sheer hell of it. I'm going to call it gypsy blues, although there are also distinct whiffs of bluegrass and trad jazz. What the late great Vassar Clements, late fiddle maestro with acts as varied as Bill Monroe and the Grateful Dead, might have called Hillbilly Jazz. But altogether a bit more ragged than that too. In a decidedly good way. All played live.

Based in Ghent, Belgium, Old Salt are the brainchild of wandering US emigre, Dan Wall, who wound up in Europe at a Slovenian world music congress during 2013, hooking up with a motley crew of individuals, hailing from Sweden, Scotland and Belgium. A year later some of the same found themselves at another festival, this time in Sweden. Something was certainly clicking, with a more formal arrangement to further convene in Ghent, where they remain. A first recording appeared in 2016, another following at the beginning of 2019. In between times, they scooped the 2017 European World of Bluegrass award at Voorthuizen, Netherlands. By now the membership had stabilised into one of two combinations, the core band being Wall on banjo, Belgian Lotte Remmen also on fiddle, and fellow Belge Johannes Wannyn on guitar. All three sing, but Wall provides the bluff and gruff lead voice, and they are augmented by whomsoever is available between Frenchman Toby Kuhn on cello or the Chilean double bassist, Tomas Peralta.

For this album, Lara Rasseel is on the bass. Like every other musician, the members of the band have found this last two years a challenge undreamt of. Rather than throwing in any towel, they returned to basics, to revisiting a set of timeless old tunes, chosen to represent the many and varied emotions encompassed during these troubling times. Emotions like monotony, loneliness and loss. And hope. Always hope. Not that those first three are the ones that shine, as, aside from the lyric, these old songs are kicked through with as much fresh air as you can shake a distanced stick at.

From the loping bass that opens Nobody Knows You When You Are Down and Out, and which immediately signifies where they are coming from, letting you know you are on safe ground, a swaggering sway of a version, comfortably hoary vocal tones carrying the message loud and clear, as fiddle, guitar and banjo joust for gentle attention. That attention is caught, ready for the altogether countrier Pastures of Plenty, the banjo a plucking fingerpicked joy. Again the vocals are a gruff and warming baritone, the sensory equivalent of a warm and favourite coat on a cold street corner. Which is just where you can imagine the band, busking away the blues. The song segues into a bluegrass breakdown, Charlie's Dog, a tune by Wall with distinctly Transylvanian violin licks creeping into the woodpile.

Always Lift Him Up And Never Knock Him Down is pure country blues, a morose rendition that somehow leaves you smiling, a clever trick you'll want to replicate. The warmth is building, song by song, these new acquaintances soon becoming the old friends you'll never forsake. At least, not until the end of the night. Or the festival. The harmonies here come under the heading of close enough, all part of the charm. Another old staple, St James' Infirmary, then gets a run down, the bass again a particular delight, ahead of Remmen's fiddle again sweeping in from the east. A full N'Awlins vibe imbues this, to the extent you almost expect some tooting clarinet to enter the fray. It doesn't but the instrumentation offered does fine without, the strummed banjo reminiscent of some old trad band, especially as the song whacks up through the gears. You won't look at Shep's Banjo Boys ever quite the same way again. The closer on this short disc, EP really, is another old chestnut, an acapella vocal run through Cyril Tawney's Grey Funnel Line. This reveals that, even shorn of their strings and wood, you can't get rid of their intrinsic showmanship; the show, literally, can go on, whoever is there and how. And will.

I didn't know the name before. Outside of the low countries, who would, but I am glad I now have. They would blow the clouds away at any festival I can think of and it would be good to see an enterprising promoter get them booked over here.