

# Old Songs for New Folks

## Early Music and Folk-Rock



As we've seen in recent issues, the crossover between folk-rock and early music has been fruitful since the 1970s, and is seeing something of a renaissance today. We've already reviewed the first reissues from German medieval rock band **Ougenweide** [see "A Medieval Bestiary" in *Dirty Linen* #128], so we'll start with an update. The catalog of the group's classic albums was completed in 2007, on three Bear Family CDs. The first, *Ungezwungen* [BCD 16141], was originally a double LP consisting of live-in-concert versions of the group's best-known songs. This is the album to get if you want to understand what the group sounded like live; indeed, some fans say it's the first CD you should buy, since it's a "greatest hits" album.

However, be warned that the group was more improvisational onstage than on record, and several of the tracks have extended jazz solos in the middle of the medieval and folk material. Classic tracks have grown in length: "Der Fuchs," a translation of the English folksong "Daddy Fox," has grown from about five minutes to almost nine, while "Ougenweide" has gone from just over six minutes to just under 12! These are extreme cases, though, and mostly we get more-relaxed versions of the studio tracks, which make for a very enjoyable CD and a good introduction to the band.

The second reissue features Ougenweide's fifth and sixth studio albums, *Fryheit* and *Ousflug* [BCD 15962]. *Fryheit* was a set of traditional and historical songs recorded

for the soundtrack of a TV series on German history. This material comes from a later period than the band's usual fare, from 1525 to 1848. *Ousflug* was a return to its usual material, a mixture of medieval song texts and new words on medieval themes, set primarily to the group's own music. The playing style remained much the same for both albums, combining rock guitar, bass, and drums with medieval instruments, orchestral textures, and touches of world music; non-German speakers might not even notice the differences in repertoire. *Fryheit*'s highlights include "Ich sinn', ich denke hin und her," a traditional song arranged with a modified Bo Diddley beat that picks up xylophones and great 70s synthesizers along the way, and "Lang' erhoffte Friedenstaube," a light,

quick song backed with strummed dulcimers, keyboards, recorder, and xylophone. On *Ousflug*, several of the instrumentals are standouts, including "Basse Danse La Gatta," which uses organ, recorders, and percussion to state the theme, then adds guitars, a rhythm section, and wordless vocals for a richer sound.

The final Ougenweide CD includes *Ja-Markt* and *Noch Aber ist Abril* [BCD 15974], the band's seventh and eighth studio albums. These were recorded without the help of the group's longtime producer Achim Reichel, which may help explain the radical change in the group's sound. Gone are most of the medieval elements, leaving a more conventional rock band with only a few folk touches. There are moments of beauty on both these albums, including some pretty oboe playing and Tull-style flute on *Ja-Markt*. They're well-done early-80s pop albums, much like what its contemporary Malicorne achieved with its final two albums. Like those Malicorne albums, however, these appealed less to the group's original fans than the earlier material, and have aged less well since. Thus, this is my least favorite of the Ougenweide reissues. One note on all the Ougenweide material: The two CDs reviewed in # 128 had extensive liner notes in English; these three CDs have all the notes in German only.

Staying with reissues for the moment, *Giles Farnaby's Dream Band* [Walhalla WH90324 (2004)], the 1973 album by the short-lived band of the same name, must count as one of the classics of early-music/folk-rock crossover. The band was formed by combining two existing groups: Trevor Crozier's Broken Consort played a mixture of folk music and medieval tunes, while St. George's Canzona was one of Britain's leading medieval ensembles. For the album, they were augmented by folksinging quartet the Druids, and a rhythm section from the burgeoning Canterbury jazz scene. Named after a prominent composer of the 16th and 17th centuries, the band recorded mainly dance tunes from John Playford's 17th-century collections. Period instruments include the delicate-sounding citole and bowed psaltery and the raucous, bleating crumhorn. Meanwhile, folk instruments like banjo, concertina, and harmonica ensure a uniquely anachronistic blend, and the bass and drums give it a very 1970s sound.

This album includes classics of the period, including “Nonesuch,” “Childgrove,” and “Pastime With Good Company,” along with folk standards like “The Helston Furry Dance” and “Ratcliffe Highway.” But it also includes many tunes rarely recorded on the folk scene, including the stately “Hole in the Wall,” the sprightly “Shrewsbury Lasses,” and the jaunty “The Happy Clown,” which is given a particularly apt, goofy-sounding arrangement. The recording sessions were apparently relaxed, as flubbed notes and other clams were tolerated. No matter. They do little to spoil the fun.

Now on to newer releases. **Corvus Corax**’s breakthrough album, *Seikilos* [Noir DFD 20517], was finally released in the United States in 2007. The album begins with truly early music — an arrangement of the “Seikilos skolon,” the earliest reliably dated complete piece of music in the world, an ancient Greek song notated onto a tombstone about 2,000 years ago. Other songs include an ancient Greek poem by Longinus, an Old High German saying set to music, and a 15th-century French ballade by François Villon. The vocals are



delivered in thick, deep harmonies using unusual and bone-shaking intervals. It sounds quite apocalyptic, like the scene in the movie where the Devil finally appears — which is exactly the dramatic flair this band enjoys! On both the song arrangements and the many instrumentals, shawms, bombardes, crumhorns, citterns, hurdy-gurdies, and lyres all appear, but here as elsewhere Corvus Corax thrills mainly with its massed medieval

bagpipes and rumbling drums. With subtle textures, fascinating harmonies, catchy melodies, and strong rhythmic drive, this album has all the elements that make this group a favorite on the European Medieval fair scene.

The oddly named German band **Subway to Sally** currently has two domestic offerings. *Nackt* [Noir DFD 20137 (2007)], German for “naked,” is its unplugged album, recorded live in concert. It’s an

impressive offering, including guitars, mandola, mandolin, bagpipes, violin, renaissance lute, oud, flutes, bass, drums, and percussion... among other things. The band got its start playing Celtic music, and here it performs “Horo,” a piece of mouth music that was taught to many singers by Ewan MacColl. It does a creditable job, though members didn’t understand all the words. The rest are original songs on medieval themes, influenced by ballads and other folk traditions; two songs are made up of riddles, another is about a court jester, and “Sieben” seems to be a variant of the fairy tale “Bluebeard,” also known as “Mr. Fox.” This album will be a pleasant surprise to adventurous folk-rock fans. *Bastard* [Noir DFD 20187 (2007)] is a studio album that adds the element *Nackt* is missing: heavy metal guitar. As on *Nackt*, the songs are well-written, literate pieces on medieval and biblical themes. Anyone who likes European folk music and heavy metal should find a lot to like here, but the crunchy chords can be overpowering. So, folk fans beware: You might find you like them better naked!



## Dirty Linen is changing publication schedule!

In order to realign our newsstand and subscriber mailing dates, Dirty Linen will publish a one-time only three-month issue for Dec '08/Jan/Feb '09. We will resume bimonthly copies with the March/April 2009 issue.

Subscribers will still receive the six issues (and three bonus sampler CDs!) they signed up for. Future issues will be mailed well ahead of newsstand dates, and they will probably see each new *Dirty Linen* in their mailboxes long before it hits the store racks.

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