

RUNA: “Stretched On Your Grave” Album Review

By Lori Lander Murhphy

I first heard RUNA perform live almost two years ago, shortly after they had recorded their debut CD, “Jealousy.” I fell in love with that album, and I fell in love with the band that has pioneered their own innovative style of taking traditional Irish songs and “Celting them up” in a way that is uniquely their own.

With the release of their second CD, “Stretched On Your Grave,” they have only managed to surpass themselves.

RUNA is Philadelphia-based: singer Shannon Lambert-Ryan is a home-girl who grew up at The Irish Center in Mt. Airy, first as a step-dancer with the O’Donnell School of Irish Dance, and later dancing at the Friday-night ceilis with her mom, Julie Lambert. Percussionist Cheryl Prashker may have been born in Canada, but she was adopted by the folk scene here years when she joined up with the band Full Frontal Folk. And Dublin-born guitarist, Fionán de Barra, had no choice; he became a full-fledged Philadelphian when he showed his brilliant taste by marrying Lambert-Ryan.

This is an album whose release I have long been awaiting, if only because I knew it would contain the song that I have come to think of as RUNA’s signature piece, “The House Carpenter/Jolene.” “The House Carpenter,” a traditional ballad that is also known as “The Daemon Lover” and “James Harris,” is a well-known work that tells the story of a young wife and mother who is lured away from her home by a former lover who promises her the world. Shortly into their voyage, she regrets her decision and is drowned, never to see the face of her young child again.

Lambert-Ryan and de Barra were playing around with the tune one day, working with the verses: “There are many versions of the song...we wanted to craft the song to fit our style without changing it,” Lambert-Ryan explained. At the same time, they were listening to Dolly Parton’s classic song “Jolene,” and they realized that they could both be sung in the same key. Adding Prashker’s percussion underneath, the two songs blend perfectly, and create a brilliant and addictive take on an old ballad.

This is what comes through on the cd, the band’s love of “haunting melodies and universal themes.” Lambert-Ryan’s pure vocals shine on “I Wish My Love was a Red, Red Rose/Hector the Hero,” accompanied only by de Barra’s guitar playing. Simple, quiet and affecting, Lambert-Ryan preserves the original grace of the song while imbuing it with the passion that she imprints on everything she sings.

The title song, “I Am Stretched On Your Grave,” opens with Lambert-Ryan singing sean-nos, and then builds on the raw emotion of the tune as de Barra comes in with guitar, and fiddler Tomoko Omura draws the energy of the song to its conclusion. It’s an artistic fusion that creates a captivating and satisfying arrangement to the 17th century Irish poem originally titled “Táim sínte ar do thuama”.

Lambert-Ryan also sings several songs in their original Irish, “Cailín deas Crúite na mbó” and “Siúbhán Ní Dhuibhir.” The lovely ballad “Cailín deas Crúite na mbó” is performed with an effortless straightforwardness that captures the tale of “The Pretty Girl Milking a Cow,” while “Siúbhán Ní Dhuibhir” is infused with energy and percussion and the peerless flute playing of Isaac Alderson.

de Barra displays his own vocals on “Fionnghuala,” a tour de force of what has been described as Gaelic scat. The Scottish song was made famous by The Bothy Band, but de Barra’s version is a joyful gem that deserves its own place in the annals of Celtic music.

Throw in the instrumental “The Star of Munster,” which showcases Prashker’s percussion, de Barra’s guitar, and Alderson’s flute, and you have an album overflowing with stunning tunes and songs.

“Stretched On Your Grave” is an inspired album from a group that has found its voice, and its place, in the world of Irish music. With songs like “The Newry Highwayman” and “Lowlands of Holland,” played to traditional perfection with RUNA’s Celtic twist, it’s a CD that will get frequent play when you add it to the music shelf.

And those of you fortunate enough to live within traveling distance to Philadelphia can see them play live at their launch concert this Saturday, March 26th at The Irish Center in Mt. Airy.

For more information, check out their website: <http://www.runamusic.com/>