

Jacob's Reunion – Thirty Years Later

From the New England Music Scrapbook, 2005

Thirty years ago, Jacob's Reunion's eponymous homegrown debut promised an ambitious artistic agenda: "Original music created under the influence of Gaelic, Eastern European, and Classical traditions; Jazz and Swing; and North American dance tunes and songwriting." But if the throwaway liner notes provoked suspicions of an ambling eclecticism, the album itself – preserved intact three decades later on a long overdue CD release – nailed a distinct and dramatic musical hybrid. Predating the explosions of "new age" and "new acoustic music" that would proliferate in subsequent years, *Jacob's Reunion* offers irrefutable testimony of how a short-lived New England supergroup once captured acoustic lightning in a bottle.

Nominally anchoring the center of an ensemble cast was singer-songwriter-guitarist John Coster, now a well-traveled solo performer but then a recent alumnus of Coster Welling and Walach, an incongruous trio whose bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed ballads and decidedly ungrassy fiddle/mandolin rave-ups had made them the toast of Hartford's early-70s bohemia. At first blush, JR appeared to follow much of CWW's formula of earthy songwriting and energetic dance tunes, but the new quintet mounted Coster's maturing compositions and a handful of choice traditional tunes onto the intense, flamboyant violin and piano interpretations of Yosef Oxenhandler and Barbara Hyde respectively, embellished by the experimental, unhomogenized harmonies of Hyde and Sandy Sayers.

Jacob's Reunion takes its cues from the volatile opening salvo, a thoroughly rewritten "Give the Fiddler a Dram," which alternates a unison fiddle/guitar/piano fanfare with an ebullient lyrical refrain, transforms suddenly into a restive waltz, and eventually explodes into an elaborate, vaguely Gaelic-sounding four-part scat finale. A trilogy of original fiddle tunes sprinkled across the album – all written or co-written by Coster – takes similarly unexpected turns, with various mixtures of unison instrumentals, melodic shifts, implicit imagery, and vocal counterpoint. On "Fat Man's Reel," a simple calliope melody suggests an obese dancer sloshing on a tabletop, punctuated perfectly by Richard Block's gurgling bass thumps and cartoonish kettledrum glissandi. The baroque Coster/Oxenhandler collaboration "Towne Crier Reel" spools off an ornate chromatic theme before rippling into

several herky-jerky variations. And the eerie “E Minor Reel” climaxes with Hyde and Sayers battling the fiddle with a demonic hi-diddle-di scat duo.

While the fiddle tunes and traditional/classical chestnuts (“Hesitation Blues,” Bela Bartok’s “Bagpipes”) generate the most feverish energy, it’s Coster’s lyrical tableaux that mine the deepest passions. On his one-time signature piece “Ontario” – part troubadour’s lament, part homesick love-letter – the shell-shocked player to “dance hall friends” inhabits a “loneliness ten stories tall,” while nursing a desperate, hopeless fantasy of bringing comfort to a faraway lover: “If I had money I’d send it all to you / If I had my way I’d make things all right / If I were a painter I’d paint you a picture / And show you the stars on a clear northern night.” The plangent tone of “Ontario” is accented by the jarring mix of Sayers’s waiflike contralto and Hyde’s shrill mezzo, but also by another idiosyncratic tool in JR’s arsenal, a half-majestic, half-mournful harmonica/fiddle duet which frames the narrative like a set of earthy bagpipes. The quirky arrangements throughout the album similarly fit the rest of their songs like warm winter gloves, from Sayers’s stoic lead vocal and Oxenhandler’s bittersweet mandolin on the nostalgic “If I Could See You Clearly,” to Coster and Hyde’s caustic duet and guest Bob Rouch’s intentionally flatulent French horn on the comic “You Crazy Fool,” to Coster’s choreographed fingerpicking and Sayers’s double-tracked harmonies on the pretty love ballad, “Morning Song.”

But if such innovations demonstrate a particular skill at interpretation and arrangement, they also illustrate a disquieting bit of music reality: the fact that many excellent songwriters sometimes do not understand their own songs – or rather, the *possibilities* of their own songs – as well as do the musicians whom they attract. Nowhere is this more evident than on “Solid Night,” Coster’s anguished wail about the sudden, violent death of George Dorian, a close friend and charismatic fiddler for what would eventually become the legendary Highwoods String Band. Coster envisioned this song as a relentless, overwhelming assault, to parallel the arbitrariness and cruelty of the truck that smashed into Dorian “on the open road one night,” and he was never satisfied with the album version. But Hyde steers “Solid Night” through a series of epic undulations – piano crescendos, sudden tempo changes, Oxenhandler’s anxious percussion, staccato harmony jabs – conjuring up a mood that is stark, ominous, menacing. Ultimately, JR’s “Solid Night” is far more chilling than the version Coster would re-record a few years later over a backdrop of pounding drums and tremoloed electric slide

guitar. Ironically, the other especially creative recasting occurs on a song for which the players had no particular affection. “Mexico,” a three-chord hippy-pastoral fantasy with a dope-smuggler protagonist and oddball lyrical gimmick of holding the first note of each line for an unearthly long stretch, is transformed by piano and violin arpeggios and sinuous harmonies into a romantic, heroic anthem.

Jacob’s Reunion concludes the same way it begins, with a thoroughgoing multi-part reworking of a traditional jewel. They open “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” as the dirge it is, with melancholy quartet harmonies and Spartan accompaniment, segueing into a passionate violin solo and an agitated, avant-garde piano exploration, and eventually fading out on a haunting quasi-Gregorian chant. *Jacob’s Reunion* itself faded out not long after the album was released, surviving a change of personnel but never overcoming the internal clashes of ego and personality that probably gave the band much of its fire. Thirty years later, *Jacob’s Reunion* remains a milestone in New England acoustic music, and the CD release – complete with the snaps, crackles, and pops of the original Chelsea House vinyl – allows us to remember the quintet a little more clearly “in the pale, pale winter light.”

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