

JEZ LOWE – JACK COMMON’S ANTHEM
Tantobie Records TTRCD 109
(Barcode 805397010928)

The North East meets the South West, as acclaimed County Durham songwriter Jez Lowe calls on Devon’s top folk duo Show of Hands to assist him with his 14th collection of original songs, and his first solo album since 1988. Producer Steve Knightley steers Jez through eleven new songs, including three from Jez’s contributions to last year’s acclaimed BBC series The Radio Ballads, with assistance from The Bad Pennies (Kate Bramley on violin and vocals, Andy May on piano and tin whistle and David de la Haye on bass guitar) plus recording engineer Phil Beer on slide guitar and violin, Jenna on vocals, and Dave McKeown on clarinet.

Jez’s Radio Ballads role as wordsmith and musician, interpreting the lives and attitudes of the working men and women of Northern Britain, is further explored in this set of songs, harking back to his own family roots in Ireland and in the coal-mining community of East Durham. The cover photographs show Jez back in the streets where he grew up, recognisable to many of us from the hit movie “Billy Elliott”, which was filmed in this very location, and the story of which mirrors closely the overall concept of this album – the conflict between the artist and his working class beginnings, whether applied to Billy Elliott, to Jez Lowe or to Jack Common, the hero of this collection of songs.

Jack Common was a writer and novelist from Newcastle Upon Tyne, who’s most celebrated work “Kiddar’s Luck” portrays the adventures of a boy growing up in North East England in the early 20th Century. Jack Common himself went on to work and write in London, forming a strong bond, artistically and personally, with the writer George Orwell, but never gaining the latter’s fame or success. He ended his life in obscurity in the late 1960’s but enjoys a cult following among many political and social commentators to this day. In the two songs that “bookend” this album, Jez guides the character known as Jack Common back to his roots and observes the changes that perhaps he would observe as North East England, and the whole world moves into a new century.

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THE SONGS

1 – JACK COMMON’S ANTHEM (3.57) – (J.Lowe/ Lowelife Music) - (Jez – Vocals, cittern/Steve – guitar, vocals/Kate and Phil – Twin fiddles/David – Bass)

Jack Common returns to his hometown, though whether it’s the real Jack Common or a character representing “The Common Man” within all of us, is open to interpretation.

2 – THE SEA AND THE DEEP BLUE DEVIL (3.48) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez – Vocals, guitar/Steve – Tenor guitar, vocals/Andy – Tin whistles.)

A love triangle, wherein a woman chooses between two men, both called up to serve their country in World War Two, one as a sailor in the Navy and the other as a “Bevan Boy”, to work in the coal mines.

3 – TAKING ON MEN (3.20) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez - Vocals, guitar/Phil –Tenor guitar, vocals)

From The Radio Ballads programme The Ballad of The Big Ships, about ship-building on the Rivers Tyne and Clyde, this songs has already entered the folk tradition among singers and bands around the UK’s folk clubs and festivals.

4 – BLACK TRADE (4.02)– (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez – Vocals, guitar/Steve- Guitar, vocals/Phil- Slide guitar)

Another song from The Ballad of The Big Ships. The men known as “black trade” worked in the depths of the ship, doing the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs.

5 – THE MIAMI (5.02) –(J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez – Vocals, guitar/Kate –Vocals/ Clarinet/Andy- Piano/Phil-Violin/Steve-Cuatro)

The final Radio Ballads song included here is from the programme entitled “Thirty Years of Conflict”, dealing with the experiences of musicians during the troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The Miami Showband were a leading Irish group, caught up in a terrorist incident in 1973, which left many of them dead, and the music world shocked by such a tragedy. Jez based this song on the recollections of one of the surviving members of the band, who recalls realising he was still alive when the rain started to fall on his face as he lay shot and wounded at the scene.

6 – WILL OF THE PEOPLE (4.35) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez- Vocals, guitar/Steve – Tenor guitar/Phil –Mandolin/Steve, Phil, Kate, David – Chorus)

A song written in the “Outlaw Ballad” tradition of Robin Hood, Jesse James, and Pretty Boy Floyd, but carrying an overlying message of “people power”.

7 – YELLOW HAIR (3.45) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez-Vocals/Andy-Piano/ Jenna-Vocals)

An oft-told story, as a woman steps into the spotlight and her partner struggles to accept the path she has chosen to take. The title is taken from a letter written by Marilyn Monroe towards the end of her life, and is a “turn around” of a famous line by the Irish poet W B Yeats.

8 – HEANEY’S FINGER (3.23) – (J.Lowe-K.Bramley/Lowelife Music) – (Jez-Vocals, guitar/Kate-Violin/Steve-Cuatro)

A poem called “Digging” by another Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, lies somewhere behind this collaboration between Jez and kate, dealing as it does with the relationship between a writer and his father, and the distance between them.

9 – WORKING DIRTY (4.47) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez-Vocals,guitar/Phil-Slide guitar)

Dealing with similar issues to “Heaney’s Finger”, but pre-dating it by some years, this is the first outing for a song written during a tour that Jez did with sometime partner in crime James Keelaghan across North America in December 2001.

10 – A FEW FRONTIERS (3.44) – (J.Lowe/Lowelife Music) – (Jez – Vocals/guitar/Andy-Piano/David-Bass)

Written during the Bad Pennies' "Around The World in 40 Days" tour of 2006, which took them across America, New Zealand, Australia and Europe.

11 – JACK'S RETURN (2.39) – (J.Lowe/Lowlife music) – (Jez-Vocals/Andy-Piano/Steve-Vocals/Phil-Violin)

A reflective reprise of the opening song to close the album.