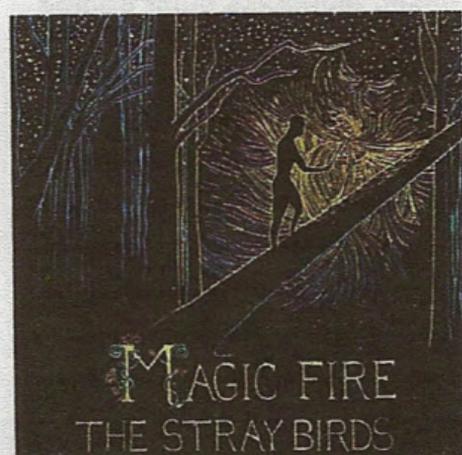


THE STRAY BIRDS

Magic Fire

★★★★★



Magic Fire is the third full-length album by The Stray Birds (the second for the Yep Roc label) and it marks a major change in direction. They have expanded from an acoustic trio of multi-instrumentalists Maya de Vitry, Oliver Craven and double bassist Charles Muench to a four-piece with the addition of drummer Shane Leonard and many of the songs are band collaborations, rather than individual compositions as had been the case on previous albums. They have always self-produced before, so the input of producer Larry Campbell, who has previously worked with the likes of Bob Dylan, Levon Helm, Paul Simon and Willie Nelson has introduced a fuller sound with extra instrumentation.

I felt like a bluegrass purist on first listen, taken aback by the drums and electric guitar. It is quite a shift from their intimate previous recordings which were the trio effectively playing live in the studio. They haven't lost the vital elements of the delectable three-part harmonies and the well-crafted songs; it is just that there is a larger sonic canvas.

They lead us into their new world gently on the opening track *Shining In The Distance*. It begins with just Maya de Vitry's vocal and acoustic guitar on the first verse, but by the time the chorus arrives there are drums, electric guitar, accordion and Hammond organ along with their distinctive harmony vocals. By this time, you know that you are in for a slightly different experience from their previous recordings. The song is a gospel-infused rallying call to action with lyrics full of wonderful imagery, but the focus of the action is non-specific allowing the listener to append their own meaning. The song was apparently inspired by de Vitry and Craven's move to Nashville.

You can hear some of their influences flowing through the songs; in a good way. Craven sings lead on *Third Day In A Row*, with superb lyrics and vocal harmonies and there is a Tom Petty flavour to the way the vocal and electric guitar are used. *Sabrina* has the stamp of producer Larry Campbell with an arrangement anchored in the music of Levon Helm and The Band plus a fiddle riff that has melodic and rhythmic resonances with The Band's *Rag Mama Rag* and Credence Clearwater's *Proud Mary*.

Hands Of Man has a melody that is similar to the traditional song *Shady Grove* (or the British source song *Matty Groves*), which helps to give it a folk vibe, and *Somehow* really highlights the quality of their harmony vocals and sounds like a glorious meeting of The Everly Brothers and Gram Parsons. They adopt a rock feel for *Where You Come From* and a kind of reggae-gospel feel for *All The News*. Gospel music infuses a few of the songs, including *Sunday Morning* and *When I Die*.

Mississippi Pearl is a reflective song in a Gillian Welch vein with thoughtful lyrics set to waltz time and a yearning pedal steel and *Fossil* has a nostalgic, romanticism that includes beautiful imagery. The lyrics on a few songs, such as *Hands Of Man*, *Sunday Morning* and *All The News* reflect on political uncertainty and injustice and the need for engagement. It is not an overtly political album, but like all good songwriters their life experience gets channelled into their work.

Their lyric writing is generally as well-honed as their musicianship, melodic sense and vocal ability. The extended metaphor in *Radio* doesn't fully convince and I am not wholly persuaded by the logic in the words of *Where You Come From*, but they both work well in context as long as you don't delve too deeply.

Magic Fire is full of memorable songs and moulds a variety of musical styles into a coherent body of work. It opens out their sound into new soundscapes without losing the integrity and spirit of their musical identity.

Michael Hingston