

Musical Time Travel

50th Anniversary Ashes Are Burning: An Anthology/Live In Concert, Renaissance (2CD + DVD + BluRay, Esoteric/Cherry Red)

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Deluxe Edition, Oberon (2CD, Grapefruit/Cherry Red)

I'd kind of misunderstood the announcement of this new Renaissance album and concert film, assuming it to be an expanded reissue of the band's classic *Ashes Are Burning* album, perhaps with a live album attached. But it isn't.

What we get is the current incarnation of the band, helmed and fronted by Annie Haslam, coupled with the ten-piece 'Renaissance Chamber Orchestra', in concert. Renaissance have worked with a full orchestra before (the New York Philharmonic, no less) as captured on their wonderful *Live at Carnegie Hall* double album, but that was firmly rooted in rock, especially the 23-minute bass-led wig out of 'Ashes Are Burning' that ended the album. Here, however, the music feels prettified and ornamented, devoid of the punch that the band used to underpin Haslam's spectacular vocals with.

Haslam still has a strong vocal range, but to be honest it's not what it was, and the whole affair seems somewhat pedestrian: what was once gutsy hard-edged prog with operatic vocals soaring above has drifted into orchestrated MOR. 'Carpet of the Sun' and 'Ocean Gypsy' still offer up beautiful melodies and the succinct 'Ashes Are Burning' on offer here is still a great song, I just wanted more. Even a couple of appearances by 'special guest' Jim McCarty from the original band line-up doesn't add much sparkle to this somewhat neutered and over-polite offering. Which is a shame.

Oberon's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a much better if somewhat different listening option. It couples the original obscure album with a 1971 live recording from three months before the album was released. The studio recordings offer fresh-faced Sixties folk, rooted in tradition and gentle re-interpretation, with an openness to the music drifting in from elsewhere: traces of raga rock, different tunings and folk-rock are sometimes hinted at, as are a willingness to embrace moments of improvisation and unadorned instrumental breaks or complete tunes.

The scarcity of this album has no doubt helped the word-of-mouth cult acclaim that has sprung up since that initial run of 99 albums, as has the more recent mp3 distribution on various musical websites. Here, however, the album is presented in great sonic shape, with the live album being pretty stunning considering its age and the fact it seems like an audience recording.

The concert bonus disc evidences the band still gently feeling their way toward the definitive album versions of many of the songs. 'Epitaph' is the standout track for me, and evidences the band's ability to give each other space and room

even as they intertwine instruments and vocals. It's an engaging and involving sonic document, especially in conjunction with the remastered album.

Rupert Loydell