

On this showing, Wilson the songwriter is still a work in progress, but the best among these tracks show the potential is definitely there.

www.littlebackroom.com or send your £10 to 71 Lothair Road, Leicester LE2 7QE.

Nick Beale

PICCOLA BOTTEGA BALTAZAR

Il Disco Dei Miracoli Azzura Music DA 1034

UARAGNIAUN

U Diavule E L'Acqua Sante Felmay FY 8128

I NUOVI TROVIERI

Gira Ra Rôva own label no catalogue number

Piccola Bottega Baltazar are from the Veneto region in north-east Italy and have recorded three varied and unusually titled albums. In 2002 they issued a tribute to Fabrizio André entitled *Poco Tempo, Troppa Fame* (Not Enough Time And Too Much Hunger); *Canzoni in Forma Di Fiore* (Flower Shaped Songs) followed in 2004; and now they have released *Il Disco Dei Miracoli* (The Disc Of Miracles), with its strange cover art of a nun leaping over a flaming landscape. According to the booklet, the album was inspired by Dino Buzzati's *I Miracoli Di Val Morel*. All the material is original and composed by the members of the band, who come from diverse backgrounds and use their wide experience to create some varied and sophisticated textures that include elements of tango, jazz, chanson, musette, opera and classical styles. The spacious, inventive arrangements beautifully blend Marco Toffanin's accordion, Giorgio Gobbo's guitar and voice, Sergio Marchesini's accordion and piano, Antonio De Zanche's soulful double bass and Graziano Colella's inventive percussion. The lyrics are equally erudite and sound glorious in the original Italian, but the band would widen its appeal if they included some translations in the booklet or on their website.

www.azzurramusic.it

U Diavule E L'Acqua Sante translates from the local south Italian dialect as *The Devil And The Holy Water*, which aptly describes this generous, eighteen-song collection of saintly and evil deeds. *Sobbà Na Luggette* tells of the devil making off with two daughters, *Nicola Morra Ierre* is a legendary Robin Hood-like figure who meets a grisly end when he is killed and fed to the peasants he is trying to protect, the eponymous *Sante Rocche* cures a man of the plague and the pious *Santa Luci* (Saint Lucia) responds to the unwanted affections of a suitor by plucking out her own eyes and sending them to him. There are many more equally colourful traditional stories that mostly come from the Murgia area in the region of Puglia. Uaragniaun are essentially a trio of the distinctive, crystalline voice of Maria Moramarco; the guitar and other strings of Luigi Bolognese and the varied percussion of Silvio Teot, but they are augmented by a large and supportive cast of musicians, including Riccard Tesi, Daniele Sepe and Basque musicians Joxan Goikoetxea and Balen Lopez de Munain (who also provide two songs from the Basque tradition). The rich variety of instrumentation from these guests beautifully supports the material without being overpowering, making this an accomplished and extremely enjoyable album.

www.uaragniaun.com, www.felmay.it

Gianni Ghé and Gianfranco Calorio were founder members when I Nuovi Trovieri was formed in the late 1960s. This influential folk group disbanded towards the end of the 1970s, but Ghé and Calorio, revived the name when they started performing together

again in 2002 and the band has since expanded into a six-piece. The album contains 28 traditional songs that were collected by musicologist Franco Castelli in the province of Alessandra in Piedmont and sung in the local dialect. This is an exceptionally large number of songs to squeeze on to one CD and this is only possible because some are short, unaccompanied chants that clock in at around 20 seconds. The songs have subjects that would concern a rural population (such as the changing seasons, religion, war and death) set to varied and imaginative arrangements. Giorgio Penotti's soprano sax and flute and Raffaella Scala's violin work especially well together and weave some interesting textures, with *Canzone Della Uova* being a particularly fine example. The singing styles vary broadly between the vocalists in the band, but they work together well, especially on the delightful unaccompanied harmonies at the opening of *La Satire Religiose*. Not all the ideas work successfully, such as the synthetic joviality of *Donna Lombarda* and the bouncy beat of the war theme of *Canti Sulla Guerra*, but with so many tracks with such diverse settings, there are bound to be a number that please. www.myspace.com/girararova

Michael Hingston

VUSI MAHLASELA

Guiding Star/ Naledi Ya Tsela Wrasse WRASS 203

OLIVER MTUKUDZI

Tsimba Itsoka Heads Up HUCD3124

As I write, Vusi Mahlasela is about to start a long UK tour with Ladysmith Black Mambazo. We'll see how well this national legend of South Africa – he sang at Mandela's inauguration in 1994 – has made the crossover to a wide British audience. He has much on his side: a soft, kindly sort of tenor voice, a lightly-worn sense of conviction and authority, a deft and inventive hand on guitar, and a style which packs together a general compendium of everything we've loved about South African music over the last few decades and still makes it sound fresh. I was particularly impressed by what I took to be his recreation of the Soul Brothers' screeching Hammond *mbaqanga* sound, for example. But then I read that the dazzling keyboard work really was the Brothers' organist Moses Ngwenya – among the wide and starry guest list. Another visitor is

Dave Matthews, singing on *Sower Of Words*. He says of Mahlasela, "He was a voice through the revolution, a voice of hope, a Bob Dylan of South Africa". For though he comes across as clear-eyed and positive, Mahlasela's themes are not always as comfortable as the sound which conveys them. He remains a moralist and poet, well placed to illuminate the great contributions of Africa to humanity in general, and the hardly diminished crimes against. I have to say the only slight difficulty with this album is that it may be too generous – a few tunes held back for next time would not have hurt.

www.wrasserrecords.com

Oliver Mtukudzi of Zimbabwe, much loved, boosted by heavy recommendation from those such as Bonnie Raitt, who likened him to Toots Hibbert and Otis Redding, has already made a pretty successful crossover to western audiences. Like Mahlasela, he consciously calls for morality and traditional African values; he also speaks as, shall we say, a guardian of the revolution. While his former bandmate-in-arms Thomas Mapfumo now fulminates against the current Zim regime from the west coast of the USA, Oliver has chosen to stay in Zimbabwe. So he must temper his concerns and speak in fable and metaphor. This Apollonian stance does not add to his right-on credentials but may, from the artistic and quite possibly the political point of view, be no bad thing. Time will show the wiser: he insists he is writing for the long term, no matter what the circumstances. And, despite stories that since this recording he has sacked half his band and parted from his long-term manager Debbie Metcalfe, widely credited with hauling his career out of the doldrums some years ago, there is not much on his latest album – recorded at the recently-opened Pakare Paye arts centre/ studio, his long-term dream project – to break the flow of recent recordings. Same marvellous old voice, full of implicit pain and sympathy, same immaculate ensemble playing from the band, same interplay, same lilt.

The cover shows a pair of feet, this being the metaphor that governs the album: 'no foot, no footprint'. In other words, watch in whose footprints you place your own feet: "The footprint is a representation of who we are, where we are and where we are going. The quality of life is measured by the kind of steps you take as you walk through it," says Oliver. And the citadel trembles?

www.headsup.com

Rick Sanders

Vusi Mahlasela

