

# JARLATH HENDERSON: HEARTS BROKEN, HEADS TURNED

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Uilleann pipe virtuoso Jarlath Henderson is a name that's been on my musical radar for so long I can't remember when I first heard it. The youngest ever musician to win the BBC Young Folk Award (in 2003), Jarlath originally came to Scotland to study medicine (he completed his studies), and soon became a fixture on the blossoming trad music scene. He has since achieved success and acclaim in a simply staggering array of projects. Among them, two duo albums with piper and Scots Trad Composer of the Year Winner in 2015, Ross Ainslie and more collaborations than I could hope to list here. What's been missing, and eagerly anticipated, for quite some time, is a solo album. Until now.

Since it's release last month *Hearts Broken, Heads Turned* has captured a lot of media attention. Jarlath is also one of a number of trad-based artists nominated in this year's prestigious *Scottish Album of the Year Award*.

So, what's so special about an album of uilleann pipe music that would merit the attention *Hearts Broken, Heads Turned* has been enjoying in the music press, and that coveted SAY nomination? Well, the biggest surprise is that this is *not* an album of uilleann pipe music. The quality of Jarlath's singing voice was hinted at when he released *Airfix* with Ross Ainslie, but it seems that was just a taster. For his first solo outing Jarlath has elected to present his own take on eight traditional songs that hark back to his county Armagh upbringing. Other than finally deciding to share the fact that he wields a vocal ability as clear and expressive as a young Andy Irvine, Jarlath has assembled an impressive crew of some of Scotland's top musical talent and pushed the creative boat out in an album that brings those songs storming into the 21st century.

Jarlath's magic touch is in evidence right from the start, in the upbeat *Courting Is A Pleasure*. In a soundscape of guitar, sound effects and synths, Jarlath's voice is clear as a bell for the flawless vocal. Hamish Napier builds a bridge on keyboards that stretches all the way from Tyrone to Motown and a gentle lull for Jarlath's flute gives way to an increasingly passionate conclusion.

It's a powerful, attention-grabbing opening that makes full use of Jarlath's impressive crew. Beatboxer Jason Singh and ace sound engineer Andrea Gobbiconspire to create the host of sound effects throughout the album. That tantalizing muted guitar, and the faint burst of fiddle comes from Border fiddler Innes Watson. Further keyboard muscle is added by bass player Duncan Lyall.

That's an impressive crew, but the full effect isn't always required and the full-on opening is followed by *The Two Brothers* in a ghostly rendition that concentrates on Jarlath's voice and Innes' guitar, but closes on a primal wail of pipes and whistles. The story is the star, and the voice is the perfect vehicle – gently expressive and with a keen taste for drama. Even more gentle is *Ye Rambling Boys Of Pleasure*, where Jarlath's voice takes on all the clarity and charm of Paul Brady and there's the added bonus of warm brass from Bill Fleming, Michael Owers and Phil O'Malley. The same trio provide added depth in the breezy jazz of *The Slighted Lover*, which slows to almost a stop in the final chorus and makes you

hang on every word. The same sweetness to the vocal is a major factor in the appeal of *Sweet Lemany*, with the added bonus of perfectly matched, and truly beautiful, harmonies from Alana Henderson. There's little can beat a brother/sister vocal pairing. Just when things couldn't possibly be any more delightful, brass washes over everything and the world melts away.

Just as readily as this album soothes, though, it also excites.

Hamish Napier's smooth piano opening for *Fare Thee Well Lovely Nancy* is soon ousted by Duncan Lyall's bass and beats, Andrea Gobbi's samples and plenty of drama. The drama reaches its peak, though, in the spine-tingling *Young Edmund In The Lowlands*. Opening with a haunting vocal and sinister drone, amid chattering fiddle and keyboard effects the story of Young Edmund unfolds with growing intensity and menace, closes on a diabolical cacophony of electric guitar and the wail of Jarlath's pipes. Awesome.

Equally epic, but in a different vein, is *The Mountain Streams Where The Moorcocks Crow*, which closes the album on a feast of voice, beats, bass and brass that build toward an exciting conclusion that really makes the most of the contributing artists, as well as Andrea Gobbi & Duncan Lyall's exceptional production.

*Hearts Broken, Heads Turned* doesn't simply take traditional song and place it in a 21st century frame – although that aspect of the work is impressive enough in its own right. Jarlath Henderson and friends have, somehow, succeeded in channeling those traditional songs through a creative filter that recreates the adventure of 1970's folk heroes like Planxty, Moving Hearts and The Bothy Band.

*Hearts Broken, Heads Turned* has drawn a line in the sand. It shows how Jarlath Henderson shines as an arranger, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, the power of his imagination only excelled by his musical skill. Like a growing number of exceptional albums appearing recently in the UK, it also proves that there's ample scope in the tradition for experiment, innovation and sheer excitement.

Source: <http://www.folkradio.co.uk/2016/06/jarlath-henderson-hearts-broken-heads-turned/>