



Dirty Linen

#128 — FEBRUARY/MARCH 2007

Folk & World Music

Autoharp Master BRYAN BOWERS

Bryan Bowers*Bristlecone Pine*

Seattle Sounds CR0400-2 (2006)

Like the venerable pine of the title track, autoharp virtuoso Bryan Bowers' vocal style and instrumental prowess have grown in depth and genius over the decades. Each of these 18 tracks shines like a jewel, cut and polished by a master. The eclectic material ranges from the haunting title track to a spicy version of "Liza Jane," from the I-can-relate humor of "Workin' on the Car" to a heart-stopping delivery of the Beatles' "Let it Be." Bowers' original "Magnolia" is as utterly romantic as his "Why I Love Bluegrass" is silly. He harks back to his Celtic roots with sentimental favorites like "Star of the County Down" and "Flowers of Edinburgh," and you'd be hard pressed to find more gorgeous performances.

Throughout, Bowers' voice is stunning, his playing mesmerizing. But equally impressive is the judicious use of some stellar backup musicians. Years ago, when Bowers collaborated with producer Mark Howard on *Autoharp Legacy*, Howard made a promise: Come back in a few years, and we'll do the recording of your dreams. True to his word, he assembled the dream team: Tim O'Brien (mandocello and vocals), Sam Bush (mandolin, vocals), Ron Wall (autoharp, executive producer), John Mock (harmonium, whistle), Dennis Crouch (bass), David Ferguson (recording), Stuart Duncan (fiddle, mandolin), Pat Enright (vocals), Alan O'Bryant (vocals), and even a little bit of jug from John Hedgecoth, of the Nashville Jugs Band. Each rose to the challenge, with a full battery of skills, tempered with sensitivity and musical insight. This collection is brimming with character and nuances. Turn up the volume; the production quality can take the heat.

Bowers selected each song for its personal impact. Choosing standouts is also subjective. The title track is so breathtaking, it makes you want to just sit down and cry. "Friend for Life," by Bowers and Billy Danoff ("Country Roads"), is almost a hymn, with its beautiful melody, heartfelt lyrics, delicate autoharp, and masterful backup. And Bowers shows off on mandocello with instrumentals like "The Friar's Britches" and the lovely, somber "Flat World." Romantic favorites include "When You and I Were True," a tearjerker of love lost, and Bowers' true-life "Magnolia": *My armor is rusty/_ My horse swayback too/_ I'm a far cry from a prince/_ But I do cherish you...* Again, the team comes through with sympathetic ornamentation, building momentum, imbuing each song with a life of its own.

A true interpreter of song, Bowers employs his own considerable skills wisely in each of these dynamic performances. His vocals and instrumentation can be strong or outrageous, but there is also a gentle power in his softer songs. To listen to this recording is to experience all the colors and emotions of a lifetime. Truly Bowers' finest work to date, *Bristlecone Pine* is a deeply moving album that will satisfy the mind and linger in the heart.

— Linda J. Morris (Glen Rock, PA)

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