

Date: February 11, 2012

Artist: Susie Fitzgerald

Album: Plenty

Reviewer: Nick DeRiso, *Something Else! Reviews*

Susie Fitzgerald offers a series of richly textured, bravely constructed, profoundly moving and ultimately deeply inspirational story-songs on *Plenty*.

But first, she kicks up her heels a little. In fact, *Plenty* opens on a hootenanny tear, as “Bring in the Light” quickly assumes a fleet, bluegrass-style rhythmic propulsion. Fiddler Tammy Rogers King and pedal steel player Russ Pahl kick up a thrilling ruckus, as Fitzgerald sings a redemptive, sun-filled lyric. King then leads the album towards a quieter, more contemplative place for “Frozen Sky,” giving us the first glimpse of what becomes a country-inflected Americana folk album of uncommon grace.

Her performance here quickly reveals deeper, darker complexities – both in her vocal range, and in her way with a narrative. Composing new words atop a traditional melody, Fitzgerald brilliantly conveys the shattering tale of empty gestures and false promises – all from the point of view of the cold male lover. “No Drinkin’ Alone” has an appropriately woozy wail, and works almost as an answer song to “Frozen Sky.” Her broken main character, lamenting that “I guess forever meant never,” ultimately discovers a feeling as empty as that wine bottle resting at the bottom of a trash can.

Fitzgerald remains in a ruminative mood for “You Won’t Say No,” but as she’s joined by stratospheric backing vocals of Thom Flora, the song moves from beatific reverie into a theme that’s both beautiful, and girding. The love shared in this song is so deep, and so special, that’s its almost familial – like siblings, holding hands and knowing what the other will say before it’s ever uttered.

A similar sense of blissful contentment surrounds “Lullaby for Baby,” as Fitzgerald expresses a boundless love to a sweetly sleeping child. The sentiment isn’t new, of course, but Fitzgerald connects with a series of specifically resonant lines like “between us, a ribbon that never unties.” The result is a song as simple and direct as it is emotionally powerful.

A slightly different lineup of backing musicians joins Fitzgerald for the rest of the project, beginning on the sweeping, pop-inspired “Angelico.” Scott Williams is replaced on drums by Eddie Bayers, while Gary Morse takes over for Pahl on pedal steel and dobro. King hands to the fiddle over to Larry Franklin, as well. Yet the track itself boasts a similarly inviting musical balance, another tribute to Fitzgerald’s command of her craft.

Before all is said and done, each of them gets an opportunity to shine. Acoustic guitarist Larry Beard, for instance, adds a cascading energy to “Making, Making, Someday Made” – echoing the track’s exploration of an ever-changing life’s journey. “Each season brings its offering, slumbering beneath the snow,” Fitzgerald sings, sounding like a slightly more downhome Alison Krauss. “Flowers planted in a row, not forgotten – just delayed.” That line, timeless but so very

reverberant, ultimately works as a synopsis for much of Plenty – an album that doesn't simply settle for sorting through this world's many insults and hardships, but also holds steadfastly to a sense of hope in overcoming them.

"Making, Making, Someday Made" also provides a glimpse into the artist herself, with its final reformulation of the chorus in Sanskrit. Though a musical child – Fitzgerald has played the guitar since she was about 14 – the Colorado resident was away from music for a decade, working as a museum administrator. Traveling around the world for work seems to have opened her heart and mind to our commonalities, to the things that bind us together.

A difficult breakup and some serious health problems eventually lead her away from one profession and toward another. The music she's made since – like Norah Jones meets George Jones, with a splash of George Harrison tossed in – has carried with it all of those experiences, all of those sounds. What she's added is the hopeful determination that draws us all toward dreamers.

So you have "Safe Harbor," the story of someone who seeks the warm embrace of love, conveyed through the symbolism of a solitary sailor. In Fitzgerald's hands, the lonely seaman finds a quiet contentment by song's end. Troy Lancaster then scuffs up "Peacetime Now" with a sharp, rock-inspired electric guitar signature, as Fitzgerald makes a gutsy, anthemic call for an end to war making. But again, Fitzgerald challenges us to look into our own hearts to find a way out: "Where are the keys to liberate the world? In your pocket all the time."

Even as the title track settles into an easy-going gait, Fitzgerald echoes a similar theme: Be thankful for what you have, no matter the scrapes and stumbles along the way. Finally, there's "Drover's Prayer," a dobro-driven goodbye that focuses more on lasting, tender memories than the awful pain of loss.

In this way, Fitzgerald ends as she begins, seeing things as they are – even as she fervently tries to make them better.

Review by Nick DeRiso  
Rating: 4 stars (out of 5)

Nick DeRiso, writing from various kudzu-covered locales across the Deep South, has explored jazz, blues, roots and rock music for Gannett News Service and USA Today, Blues Revue Magazine, AllAboutJazz.com, Rock.com, Popdose, Living Blues magazine, the Louisiana Folklife Program and NoDepression.com, among others. He's also been programmer and host for a series of radio shows across the same genres. So, yeah, you could call it an obsession.

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