

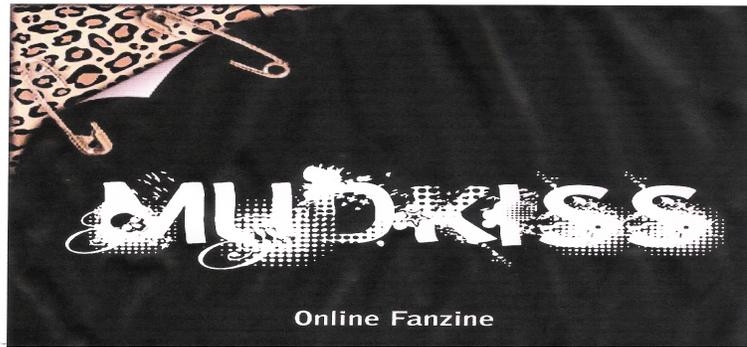


### **The Bitter Springs - *Everyone's Cup Of Tea* (Harvey Records)**

Spring seems a long way off as I sit indoors in my woolly hat, frostbitten fingers fumbling across the keys... but luckily musical salvation's here, like a St Bernard with the brandy. The music gods have decreed that the Bitter Springs and the Band of Holy Joy should simultaneously release new records. They're both double albums, packed to overflow with musical and lyrical ideas. There are strong links between the two groups - taking in Subway Sect along the way - gigging together and guesting on each other's records. "Everyone's Cup of Tea" has been a long time coming as an album, due to all kinds of problems along the way, which meant that there's been a steady trickle of singles and downloads over the last couple of years. They're all here, but remastered to very good effect, and should hopefully make up for some of the frustrations along the way. This is the fullest, best-produced Springs sound I've heard yet, deeper and richer than before, with skilfully added brass, Hammond organ, strings and electro fx, making a really powerful patchwork of sounds and textures. Think Love c. "Forever Changes" meeting Tindersticks in a Thameside boatyard as Dexy's chug past on a tugboat... Meanwhile "City of Tales" has also been a while coming - the first part dating from 1985, and the other half as here and now as a papal resignation or a horsemeat sandwich.

Bitter Springs main singer Simon Rivers is an incredibly prolific writer, scribbling ideas down as he does his post round, composing little miracles of compression and wordplay, all set to catchy simpatico tunes. The double set comprises two discs, 13 songs each (and probably a lot more left out). The first disc - "Everyone's Cup of Tea" itself - kicks off with "Better Offer", driven by some stormin' Hammond organ. Then, just as you're tapping a foot to the wah-wah guitar and synth motifs, you pick out snatches of lyrics, "Softly Marvin tells his Dad...", that subtly take the song in another direction, so compressed but so evocative. Keep the lyric book handy, it'll come in useful.

"Cruel Britannia" has a brassy upbeat Kinks feel to it (trumpeter Terry Edwards - Tindersticks, Gallon Drunk et al - is one of the heroes of this album), providing a subversively jolly take on the state of the nation, "So little contentment" indeed... "My Life as a Dog in a Pigsty" is one of the strongest tracks on the album, and I'd venture one of the best songs by anyone for a very long time. Gorgeous arrangement too - brass interweaving with dubby melodica - and some great wordplay, both serious and comic, and then suddenly, mid-song it takes off, transcendent, soaring above the river and the City, sweeping thru history: "I travelled the Docklands Light/ The buildings that swallowed the sky/... Flies filled the pizza canteen/ In the health and fitness suite/ Where ghosts of long-dead dockers/ Join guests on the running machines". I could go on a lot more about the lyrics on this album, but I'll rest my case there.



Several songs go for a historical, narrative approach - notably "Lifeboat Man", "The Wounded" and "The Life and Not Entirely Uneventful Times of a McAlpine Fusilier". You won't find many songs these days about lifeboat men or the navvies and labourers who mapped out the land in road, rail, and canal back in the day. "Don't Write a Song" bursts with all manner of West London atmosphere, references and angst, and Johny Brown joins in as the Birdman of Wormwood Scrubs.....The first time I saw the group live, I was stopped in my tracks when they did a stunning version of Bobby Womack's "Harry Hippie", one of my all-time favourite songs and a very poignant take on addiction, friendship and when it's time to move on. Done wrong it can come across as maudlin and sentimental, but done right - as here - it's a real heartbreaker. Simon's added lyrics relocate the song to your local drug-spot, and its real lump-in-the-throat stuff by the time Harry gets his final kiss-off.

The second disc - "The Bitter Springs Ruined My Life" - comes from a 'making of the album' DVD about "Everyone's Cup of Tea", and is generally darker, more personal and less upbeat than the first disc. There are some great revisits to some of the recent singles like "Sirens Every Day", its skewed reggae sounding just like the "penguins dancing on harpooned whales" of the lyric. There are some gorgeous quieter moments too, like the "Midnight Cowboy" vibe of "Free to Kill Again", "The Hospital Run" (a personal favourite) and "Our Ghosts". Back in the dub/remix zone, there's a further instalment in the "And Even Now" saga - "White Noise" (will we ever hear the legendary 18 minute version with Vic Godard?), and "TV Unplugged", a dub "version" of the great "TV Tears" single.

Bitter Springs have really raised the bar from what I've heard before - other positive reviews suggest that at long last the word is getting out about what's happening on the riverbank. The group's greatest strength - Simon Rivers' song writing and storytelling - is at full strength here, while the rest of the group - Phil Martin, departing Daniel Ashkenazy, Paul Baker, Paul McGrath, Nick Brown and Andrew Deevey - match the lyrics with their music. The additional elements - Terry Edwards' "joyous horns" and the 'wild mercury sound' of assorted keyboards - are the icing on the cake. I've already heard someone coming out with the cliché "There's a single album struggling to get out of every double album" about "Everyone's Cup of Tea". Oh yeah, Electric Ladyland? Exile on Main Street? Blonde on Blonde? Bitches' Brew? London Calling? Anyway I'd suggest this is more like a box-set of "The Wire" - you aren't going to sit down and watch that all in one go, and in the same way this is like a collection of short stories to suit any mood or time. **Review by Den Browne**