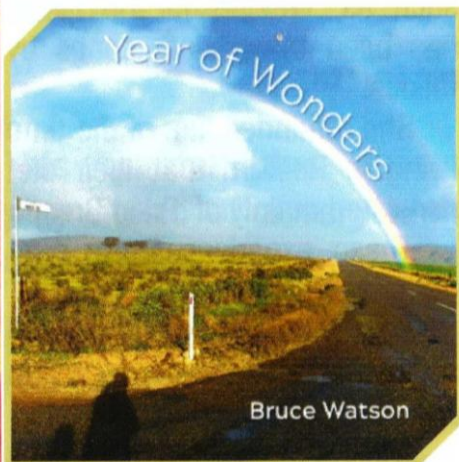


CD book Reviews



Bruce Watson - Year of Wonders

CD review by Tony Smith

The variety and balance in this latest album by prolific singer-songwriter Bruce Watson is extraordinary.

Just on the basis of his ability to locate and write about people who deserve to be remembered in song, Bruce belongs in the front rank of folk artists.

Some outstanding individuals who now have songs about them include the chess champion Bobby Fischer of 'Endgame', the 'Three Lives' of dancer, scientist and feminist Shirley Andrews and teenage pop icon and Vietnam veteran, Normie Rowe.

Rowe's 'Ballad' begins with a riff from his hit 'Shakin' All Over'.

Watson is equally perceptive about social phenomena such as the invasion of public spaces by private conversations over mobile telephones 'On the Train'.

Meanwhile, his environmental consciousness is shown clearly in his concern for the endangered 'Pangolin' about which we know more after listening to his song.

In 'Blobfish', voted the world's ugliest creature – 'but what about axolotl? What about the scrotum frog? What about Peter Dutton?' – Watson reminds us 'not to judge someone's worth by how they look because true beauty lies within'.

There is exploration of philosophical concepts also in 'The Glass', which for Watson is always half full, and in the title track 'Year of Wonders'.

Both express the philosophy of optimism and recognise that 'you can't have the rainbow if you don't have the rain'.

Human relationships are to the fore in 'These Old Bones' and 'Your Letter'.

Both have moving lyrics, the first about love enduring through time and the latter about estrangement and the hope of reconciliation.

For me, 'These Old Bones' is the stand out track on the album.

Watson expresses his interest in maps in two songs.

One concerns 'John Snow', father of epidemiology who by mapping the occurrence of cholera in London in the 1850s, was able to diagnose the cause in the water quality and so dispel many superstitious ideas about how the disease spread.

The other 'The Land is a Map' continues Watson's admiration of Victoria's Indigenous peoples.

In this case, he notes the removal of Aboriginal place names and the effect this process has had on our ability to see the land and to read it: 'their memory is gone now, lost in the mists of time'.

Watson also reminds us of the 'The Wreck of the Schomberg', one of many ships which came to grief off Victoria's shipwreck coast.

It is always a pleasure to find that a musician keeps developing.

Originally, Bruce Watson concentrated on voice and guitar.

Now he can arrange for many instruments and he has the confidence to make a song about three lives run to a waltz tune.

Supporting artists include Caitlin French (violin), Darryl Thompson (dobro, electric guitar), Ellen Hundley (piano, accordion), Gavan McCarthy (double bass), Hugh Belfrage (cello), Peter Ryan (electric bass) and Moira Tyers and Wendy Ealey (backing vocals).

As well, on the brief 'Deja Vu', there are some 86 guest vocalists.

There is of course a sense of irony and self-effacement in 'Old Songwriters Never Die' – they just 'repeat and fade', which Watson does here.

In Bruce's case, there is no need for any flippant riposte.

The fact is that this album demonstrates quite clearly that some of them just get better and better.

Watson is happy to share his work and the sleeve has all lyrics and guitar chords.

Bruce Watson's latest album Year of Wonders is undoubtedly his best.

This album is not available from Trad&Now but most of his previous albums are.