

The Fretless

Juno award winning quartet, The Fretless, is an essential player in the emerging movement mainstreaming traditional folk music. Through their deconstruction and transformation of the usual rhythmic, harmonic and structured arrangements of fiddle styles around the world, The Fretless is pushing traditional music to a new place, and has now issued itself an atypical challenge in the mission to find and convert fans unfamiliar with “progressive” traditional music.

Starting with its debut album in 2012, the band has steadily racked up recognition and awards, winning Instrumental Album of the Year at the Western Canadian Music Awards and Instrumental Group of the Year at the Canadian Folk Music Awards; 2014 Canadian Folk Music Award recipients for Ensemble of the Year and Instrumental Album of the Year; and in 2017, the band received their first Juno award for Instrumental Album of the Year.

With its latest recordings, instead of attempting to make a more “accessible” follow-up to Bird’s Nest, The Fretless is taking advantage of the recent recognition by releasing an instrumental album of tunes representing the player’s traditional roots. Recorded live in a barn in upstate New York before a handful-sized audience assembled only a few feet away from the players, Live From The Artfarm (April 6th) is the raw result of this performance.

Live From The Artfarm is a joyous recording that shows off why traditional folk music is finding an audience among the non-traditional, and also why The Fretless is leading the charge. Among the album’s “sets” – the term used in traditional Irish music for groups of three or more tunes arranged and played together – are three new originals by The Fretless.

The album’s total of ten tunes were also beautifully filmed before multiple cameras, and singles from Live from the Artfarm will be circulated that way in order for the uninitiated to fully experience the boundless electricity of the evening.

“We’ve made a record of our favorite pub tunes, but transformed them in our world of arrangement and intricacy,” says fiddle and viola player, Trent Freeman. “We are hoping to bring the current pub crowd audience to us and we are hoping to bring a new crowd to the pub, too. We want everyone involved and there’s no better way than to have you in the room with us.”

It’s a give and take that makes the audience the fifth member of the band towards the end of the new album. As the enthusiastic response from the crowd grows, the band responds in kind.

“I just want to rock as hard as I can with my friends, it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt,” says The Fretless cellist, Eric Wright.

Yes, you read that correctly: “rock as hard as I can” says the “cellist.” It’s no wonder that Wright is thought of as the band’s “drummer!”

Seriously, with that short quote, it's clear even before listening that The Fretless aimed to make not just a live album, but its best album, and the most representative one of its career to date.

"Making this record was a test in getting out of the mindset of recording and into the mindset of performing," Wright continues. "To capture the energy of a concert, we had to play it like a concert. With Live From The Artfarm, we're so excited to share the best part of The Fretless, which is seeing us live!"

If making Live From The Artfarm was a "test," as Wright calls it, then the album's producer, Sean Boyd, was the proctor.

"I suggested to the band that following Bird's Nest, they should put one down the middle with some traditional tunes," Boyd explains of the album's origins. "I suggested we do it live at The Artfarm (Boyd's production facility and property in Accord, New York.) At that point, we weren't even sure what the record would contain, but when they played the first two sets over the phone for me, it was clear that we were all excited about the plan."

Like an episode of "Unplugged" on steroids, the creative approach by the entire team to the making of Live From The Artfarm reflects the life force that keeps The Fretless moving.

"People ask us how to make a living in an instrumental folk band," says second fiddle and viola player, Karrnel Sawitsky. "My answer is simply put: 'creatively.'" Sawitsky continues, "When our four voices meet at the center of agreement is when our music echoes most effectively. It's not the sum of our parts. It's the individual sum of the band."

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