



<http://peterbruntnell.net/>

Frequently tagged as an English Americana artist, no amount of pedal steel, time spent on the other side of the pond or high profile American alt-country friends (Son Volt, Richmond Fontaine, Willard Grant Conspiracy) diminishes Bruntnell's essential Englishness for my money. This career retrospective offers seventeen tracks from a seventeen year recording career and, interestingly, offers them up in strict chronological order. The implication might be that there is a notable development to follow but, if that's the case, I'm not really getting it. Rather, it seems to me, Peter Bruntnell arrived on disc as a fully formed artist. He has jumped around in styles from album to album but that only seems to have been to express all the facets of his musical personality, and the journey here seems to be around the circumference of a circle, rather than along a line from A to B.

So, on the whole, I'm stuck with the impression that was made on me by *Black Mountain UFO*, his most recent studio album. The dreamy, sometimes delicate, sometimes slightly detached vocal is the focus of a particularly English psychedelic vibe, the kind that is in touch with middle class neuroses and the geography of middle England. There is so little in the lyrics to really support this impression, but the more I listen, the more it persists, and I really wish I could put my finger on it more precisely. Perhaps it's all in the tone of voice.

There are occasions when the pedal steel comes to the fore, bringing an intense moodiness as per Richmond Fontaine, but more times when electric guitar (or pedal steel) arrives with all the pent-up energy of a schoolkid plugging in a guitar for the first time, only with the tunefulness and sense of direction of road-hardened players. On record, this electric-powered intensity can sound kind of repressed, though you can hear that on stage it might well carry the kind of visceral thrill that would recall Neil Young in full flow. With Peter Bruntnell, it's only ever a short step from there to a delicate piece of acoustic introspection. The single lifted from here (*Played Out*) is one such small gem, an old song re-recorded recently with the assistance of Rumer; it shows off the quiet intensity that can be heard in his singing though I think there's not enough of a hook in there for a radio audience to latch onto. His writing does tend toward the elliptical, always fighting shy of the big tune. With the alt-country company he keeps, it's no surprise that he's well in touch with the dark side of life, with loneliness and depression; his songs spring from unlikely beginnings – such as those who can't afford the full cryogenics package choosing to have just their heads dispatched to the freezers in Phoenix – but generally it all boils down to the intensely personal as he weaves ever-interesting arrangements around his quirky musings.

John Davy

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