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**THE MAN UPSTAIRS: In Concert In Germany 1978 [DVD] • John Martyn**

Englishman John Martyn (born Ian David McGeachy) started his career around the same time as his friend Nick Drake and Richard Thompson. Easily as talented as either, he is not nearly as well known. This despite having recorded over two dozen albums, some with guests and supporters like Phil Collins, Eric Clapton, and Pink Floyd's David Gilmour. When he is considered at all, it is usually as part of the Sixties British folk movement--and that has been part of his problem.

Martyn is not really a folk artist; he is a jazz singer and electronic experimentalist. Neither of which have ever washed particularly well in the world of traditional music. As early as 1970, Martyn was putting his acoustic guitar through fuzzboxes, phase-shifters, volume pedals and delays. And, like a jazz musician, he has re-recorded his own compositions many times, never singing them quite the same way twice.

If you are among the many who have yet to discover the joys of John Martyn, *The Man Upstairs* DVD is a fine place to start. He may appear onstage like a folksinger--a man alone with an acoustic guitar--but various pickups attached to the instrument with gaffer's tape, a floor full of devices, and an amp behind him indicate that we are in for something other than your conventional singer/songwriter of the Seventies.

From the moment he launches into the opener, "One Day Without You," it is obvious that this love song, though strictly acoustic, is rooted more in the modern drive of pop and jazz than in the courtly airs of medieval Britain. All ties to the past are severed when he launches into the next tune, "Outside In." Plugging in his magnetic pickup he employs echo, wah-wah, distortion, and octave devices to transform himself into a one man band, delivering an instrumental composition (with some scatting), replete with sections of ethereal ambient beauty and others of scathing noise--not your father's folk artist.

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Excursions like this and the echo driven, Bo Diddley inspired groove of "Big Muff" no doubt confused folk fans of the Sixties and Seventies, especially when juxtaposed with tunes of simple beauty like "Bless The Weather" ("...that brought you to me / Curse the storm that takes you away."), "Certain Surprise," "Couldn't Love you More," and "Solid Air." It is hard to imagine what they thought of his Eighties recordings and live shows, with their fusion/smooth jazz backing. Timing is everything. Today the John Martyn of the Seventies would slot right in with artists like KT Tunstall, Swati, and St. Vincent.

But there were other problems over the course of his career. Drinking and depression made for some erratic live performances; on the DVD you can see that he keeps the beers coming. But despite some rambling, profane monologues while tuning his guitar and a general air of impending chaos, the musical performances here are stellar. Martyn wields his whisky-soaked voice with the sure-footed rhythmic and melodic adventure of the best jazz singers, while demonstrating an adept and unique guitar style, whether processed or not.

In 2004 Martyn recorded a terrific record--*On The Cobbles*. That record and the consistency of his recorded work in general make me hesitate to describe this wonderful concert as depicting the man in his prime--he appears to be have been going strong all along.

If you are new to John Martyn and like what you see here, you have four decades of brilliant records to discover. Newbie or already a fan, *The Man Upstairs* is a fine visual and sonic documentation of the man at work.

- Michael Ross

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