

AMERICANA ROUNDUP

BY MICHAEL HINGSTON

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Jerry Douglas

There is still a lingering preconception among some that folk is all about Aran jumpers, beards and sandals. This has never been true, and The Cambridge Folk Festival firmly dispels any vestige of that idea by celebrating the vitality and diversity of music that comes under the folk banner (including a couple of acts that would be stretching the folk definition). There were artists playing music from Norway, Japan, Korea and India in addition to the expected origins of the UK, Ireland, Canada and the USA with what appeared to be an even split between male and female artists. Scottish music was featured prominently but ironically, considering the location, it was English folk music that seemed underrepresented on the main stages.

The relevance to this column is the healthy smattering of country and Americana artists that are included in the line-up every year and possibly more than usual this year. The Transatlantic Sessions combines folk, country and Americana artists from both sides of The Atlantic into a large ensemble and must have helped boost the Americana contingent as many of the participants also had their own slot. Jerry Douglas performed solo on the large main stage, as did Australian guitar wizard Tommy Emmanuel. Aoife O'Donovan delivered a beautiful solo set on the second stage, and the banjo and fiddle pairing of Allison De Groot and Tatiana Hargreaves had their own slot on stage 3 plus a guest spot with the band Flyte. The folk trio of McGoldrick, McCusker and Doyle also had their own set.

There were lots of other relevant acts in the festival line-up. Folk legend Peggy Seeger

performed with her two sons and her daughter-in-law; the sister duo Larkin Poe had a storming set of bluesy rock with their band; guitarist and cellist Leyla McCalla performed an engaging set, Darlingside played their gentle folk-infused music and Lizzie No performed her heartfelt songs on harp and guitar. It was fabulous seeing Taylor McCall with his band as I had only previously seen him play solo and there was a fabulous set from Robert Plant with his latest ensemble Saving Grace featuring Suzi Dian. Blue Rose Code closed the festival in storming style with his Caledonian Soul Cavalcade plus guests Justin Currie (of Del Amitri), folk singer and songwriter Steve Knightley, and Scottish folk singer Kathleen MacInnes.

There will be another opportunity to see Peggy Seeger at The Barbican in London on September 7, where she will be one of the guests of Dawn Landes for her live performance of *The Liberated Woman's Songbook* album, which was released to great acclaim earlier this year.

Mark Brown is originally from North Carolina but lives in New York State. He cites Johnny Cash and Tom Waits among his early influences, but he draws on a far wider palette on his third album *Happy Hour*, which is his first for a few years. There are lots of ideas over 14 tracks of economic duration that were recorded largely with long-term collaborators. The songs move through genres and moods and switch rapidly between quirky ideas, comedic lyrics and darker moments. Brown packs a lot into a varied and entertaining 38 minutes.

Ghosts is the latest solo album from Chicago-based singer and songwriter Steve Dawson who is also part of the alt-country band Dolly Varden. The skilfully constructed songs on *Ghosts* were written between 2017 and 2023 and Dawson explains that the album title comes from how "you decide to move on but ghosts from the past keep showing up". Dawson chose some of his favourite Chicago musicians and the harmony vocals are mainly by his wife Diane Christiansen. The album is dedicated to Ingrid Graudins who sang harmony vocals on the final track and passed away unexpectedly shortly after the recording.

Cheer Up is the ninth studio album from Irish singer and songwriter John Blek where the accomplished set of songs are entirely autobiographical. The heart and soul he put into the writing, his gift for interesting melodies and the beautiful arrangements make the songs really accessible and removes any hint of self-indulgence.

Stick Season by Noah Kahan has returned to the top of the UK Americana Album Chart again! A whopping 94 weeks on the chart. *No Name* by Jack White is straight in at number 2 followed by *Twisters The Album*, the original soundtrack from the movie which features tracks from various artists. In the US, top of the Americana Music Association Radio Play Album Chart is the various artist Tom Petty tribute *Petty Country: A Country Music Celebration Of Tom Petty*, followed by the self-titled Avett Brothers album and *Made By These Moments* by The Red Clay Strays. **cmp**