



Playing More Merry Hell



It was once said of American slide guitar player Elmore James, that 'he only had one riff but he meant it.' Wigan based folk rockers Merry Hell have a more extensive repertoire, but listen to *Blink...and you miss it*, their debut album, and you get the feeling that they aren't for messing about either.

Merry Hell are an eight piece outfit formed from the remnants of 90's band the Tansads, and they're a bit folk, a bit rock, a bit punk and more than a bit good.

An out of the limelight hero of this release is Virginia Kettle with six solo writing credits, and whose backing vocals provide a calming counterpoint to the lead. She also gets equal billing on the title track, a whoopy, hollery question and answer type number that's reminiscent of the Beautiful South in places.

Toward the end of the cd, when you're starting to flag from all the high octane stuff, there's a chance to catch your breath with the simple but beautiful, *It Won't be Long*, penned by husband, John. One suspects that it might be much covered in the future.

However, the band are inevitably defined by lead singer Andrew Kettle's voice. 'Gravelly' is a convenient way to describe the sound, but there's a warmth too and an impressive range of expression.

He's defiant on the opening track, *Drunken Serenade*, accompanied by a bass that may blow your speakers up, and regretful on the final offering, *Pendle Hill*, as schoolboy optimism gives way to the realisation that life's a bit crap.

In between there's the round the campfire feel of *This Time*, with drummer Phil Knight energetically beating his kit into submission, along with the outstanding *One More Day*, reviewed on this site previously.

While there are well placed interludes, this is a rousing, uplifting album, stuffed with great melodies and songs that make you want to get up and move. The musicianship is highly competent and cohesive throughout and producer John Kettle has engineered a sound that's distinctive without being in any way precious.

Merry Hell are currently doing the rounds in both their full sized configuration, and also as a cut down, unplugged version, in which form they're available for 'big spots' at folk clubs. The advice from this listener is to take up that offer. Given the broad appeal of their music it would be no surprise if they're playing the big venues before long.

The next stop is Bolton's Dog and Partridge on Saturday 15th October. If you're within travelling distance, then remaining in plain spoken mode, you should get your arse down there.