



REVIEW

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I am always on the lookout for people who are doing something different and innovative on the harp, and I think D-Squared has discovered a whole new breadth of expression for the instrument. Deb Gessner's harp interweaves gracefully with Don Charles' guitar and vocals to create a new sound on the face of the singer-songwriter scene. The result is a stark and hypnotic landscape of sound, deftly drawing the picture of the great Southwest, their home. In their music, this duo from Arizona has chosen to tackle tough issues and the meaning of it all. The result is well worth checking out.

Their first release, **matter of life & death**, has an earthy feel, as if freshly dug from the parched soil. The CD opens with a highly-percussive, almost a capella song titled *Rain* which paints a picture of a rainstorm through the sounds of the congas, the harp and the vocals themselves. From this start, we proceed through a series of songs about such diverse subjects as the lottery, use of public lands (the great outdoors), baking bread and relationships. There's a nice song about how we are tied to the earth, *The Wind in the Willow*, which features a delightful trade-off of lines between the guitar and the harp. Besides all these original songs, there is also a traditional Appalachian track, *Tater Patch/Little Red Rockin' Chair*, which gives the impression of a gentle lullaby by the way the tunes are slowed down and backed by the harp in this arrangement.

My favorite things on this recording are the instrumentals. Almost tone poems, they delicately paint a picture of the subject matter through music. *When the Monsoons Finally Came* gives the textures and sounds of rain arriving in the parched Southwest. In *Whirlybird* we get the image of maple seeds spinning down from the trees, over and over again. My very favorite is titled *Aaron Dreams of Bees*, a musical story of a small boy busy gathering pollen with the bees. This waltz has just the right timbre, with the harp taking the lead with a slightly Slavic sound, backed by concertina, mandola and clarinet. It's a merry-go-round of the joy of investigation.

Big Sky Full o' Dumb Stars continues where the first recording left off. Featuring original songs that explore the sometimes bizarre, sometimes intense environment of what we call life, D-Squared manages to capture the humor as well as the joy and the pain. Their love of music shines through on this recording.

There is a wider diversity of sounds on this second recording, although the harp still features prominently on many of the tunes. When it is not a featured instrument, it is deftly used to provide variety to the music. Small harp riffs keep the music interesting, without overpowering the subtleties created by the varying sounds. Along with the harp, guitar and well-blended vocals are occasional uses of tenor banjo, mandolin, psaltery, accordion, concertina, harmonica and percussion.

D-Squared advertises itself as being "Chamberfolk with a twist." This description seems adequate, but incomplete. There is a certain chamber quality to the instrumentation — a delicate balance of strings and things carefully blended to create the atmosphere of the music. The vocals add a completely different dimension, however, bringing in a bit of an Simon and Garfunkel feel. Unusual, unclassifiable tunes such as *Sparrows Falling*, a prayer of a mother as her only son departs from home, keep the music haunting — familiar and avant-garde all at the same time. It is this untenable mystique that makes this music worth investigating.