

Kate Rusby – Holly Head (2019)



01. Salute the Morn (4:01) 02. Christmas Is Merry (4:35) 03. The Holly King (4:53) 04. Hippo for Christmas (3:32) 05. Yorkshire Three Ships (3:53) 06. Lu Lay (4:28) 07. While Shepherds Watched 6 (3:55) 08. Mistletoe Bough (5:01) 09. Bleak Mid-Winter (Yorkshire) (5:11) 10. Celestial Hearts (3:54) 11. I Am Christmas (5:19) 12. B.B.B.B. (3:52)

It's Chriiiiisstttmmaaaaaas! As seasonal as the turkey and trimmings and the annual album from Beans On Toast, there's a new Kate Rusby Christmas album.

We all (or should) know by now that Kate is mad about Christmas. And it's infectious. What probably started as a pleasant diversion back in 2008 (yes over ten years ago!) with Sweet Bells, has now become an 'every other year' ritual, vying with her regular album releases and accompanied by the annual Christmas shows. Fortunately, there are enough seasonal songs from South Yorkshire, including the infinite variants of While Shepherds Watched, to keep us going for some time yet.

Her latest set plays on the fact that she's a genuine Holly Head; a fan to the point of obsession, of all things Christmassy. Plus the fact that she's suffered for her art in posing with some sort of holly based advent crown on the album cover.

As well as A Hippopotamus For Christmas (which I could do without, literally), we get a set of modern folk Christmas songs, Kate's own The Holly King plus the latest in the further tales of Big Brave Bill. He's a character whose growth and increasing number of story songs is soon going to rival the number of variations of While Shepherds Watched. With Bill you know the tune and the fact that there's tea (Yorkshire naturally) involved and with the latest While Shepherds

Watched (now numbered), Bleak Midwinter (Yorkshire) and Yorkshire Three Ships there's no denying that we know where the roots lie. The latter is the perfect antidote to the hippo moment, deflecting thoughts in a much more sparkly and seasonal direction.

Talking of which, The Mistletoe Bough emerges as an earworm after a few plays when the front runners start to emerge. With it's gentle (and simple...just the song title) chorus, it's just made for belting out with a seasonal drink in hand. A nailed-on album highlight.

While the sound of Kate's beloved Brass Boys may add the sort of warmth you'd get from a purely medicinal tot or two, the overarching sound that's graced her most recent work also comes to the fore. Damian O'Kane's production values add a spacious sonic sheen and in parts, an ethereal quality to the songs. That's particularly the case on The Holly King where his combination with Duncan Lyall is entrancing.

As she sings in Celestial Hearts, tune your hearts and raise your voices. Listen, enjoy and sing your praises to who or whatever on high you hold dear and to Kate Rusby. ---Matt Ainscoe, atthebarrier.com

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