

Rachel Unthank & The Winterset

The Story So Far

Before Rachel Unthank & The Winterset, there was Rachel & Becky Unthank; two sisters, born and bred in the North-East, and on the Tyneside tradition of sea songs, border songs and clog dancing.

Mum and dad Unthank are both singers and Rachel (29) & Becky (22) have been going to and performing at folk clubs and festivals for as long as they can remember. It's an upbringing very much reflected in their sense of responsibility to carry and spread the tradition that has been passed down to them. Many critics assume that Rachel and Becky are influenced by female folk singers like June Tabor and Eliza Carthy. The Unthinks are fans of both, but growing up around the impassioned, bawdy harmony singing of male North East bands like The Keelers (of which dad George is a member) and The Wilsons, was a stronger influence on their singing style. For two young female singers to be informed by noisy male shanty singers, its hardly surprise something new came from it! Their ability to project and communicate also owes much to their formative years of singing without accompaniment or amplification.

After performing in several bands and reaching the semi-finals of the Young Folk Award, Rachel finally had a sister old enough to perform with. Singing unaccompanied, they left audiences at Sidmouth Int Festival, Cambridge Folk Festival, Gosport, Bromyard, Whitby and many others, wondering how such a young and breezy pair could evoke such soul and power.

Honesty was the answer. Singing in their own lilting Geordie accents, and lost in the stories of the songs they sing, Rachel and Becky are servants of the traditions they keep alive. They belong to a rare breed of selfless performer - those who perform to let tradition breath through them.



Then there were four. At 27, Rachel Unthank had spent most of her life wondering what her debut album would sound like, whenever she was finally brave enough to make it. Pouring a lifetime of folk upbringing into one pot and expecting to come out with a coherent first album is an unlikely recipe.

The musicians Rachel called upon however helped to create a soundscape that underpinned Rachel and Becky's upbringing in a way she could never have expected. In **Belinda O'Hooley** she found a virtuosic and charismatic pianist, but one completely unaccustomed to accompanying traditional English music. The result is an imaginative and striking sound, free from clichés and predictability. Although Belinda has a singer-songwriting career of her own, her day-job was performing in residential and nursing homes for the elderly. Her ability to play everything from the big band arrangements of the 1950's to the jazz, musical hall and wartime songs of the 30's and 40's, has made her a musician of startling versatility, with an understanding of her instrument second to none. 2004 Young Folk Award Finalist **Jackie Oates** completed the line-up on five string viola.

Rachel Unthank & The Winterset were born in the summer of 2004. In some ways, it was a odd choice of name, as Becky Unthank continued to take equal lead vocal duties. But with Becky about to go to University and unsure of the path she wanted to pursue in life, the band name was designed to alleviate responsibility from her while she concentrated on studies. If the band and studying became too much for her, or she decided she wanted to take a year out to travel, she could do so without the band having to be renamed and re-branded.



Rachel Unthank & The Winterset made their debut performance on the main stage at Towersey Folk Festival in August 2004, and on May 11th 2005, launched the long-anticipated debut album *Cruel Sister* at Holmfirth Folk Festival (photos above). The special concert, held on Sunday afternoon at Holmfirth Folk Festival was the best attended gig of the weekend, and debut album *Cruel Sister* sold more copies in two hours than any other artist managed all weekend.

Debut album *Cruel Sister* has been a huge success. Bob Harris tipped *Cruel Sister* for Folk Album of the Year, Mojo Magazine gave it four stars and then made it their **Folk Album of the Year**, Phil Jupitus said that "one day all music will sound like this", airplay has come from Verity Sharp, Andy Kershaw, Stuart Maconie, Phil Jupitus, Mike

Harding, Jupius and Harris, and in a full-page article in fRoots, the album was described as "simply gripping" by Colin Irwin.

In a review of Chris Wood's album in the same fRoots, Rachel was bracketed with Martins Simpson and Carthy, Johnny Dickinson and Wood himself as representing "a new era, perhaps, of substance over style as the story of the songs reigns once more in a stripped-down fashion that perhaps is truer to the spirit of the source singers of old".



During the last two years they have cemented a reputation for being a truly entertaining and breathtaking live act. Two sell out UK tours (including a London date that was Pick of the Week in The Guardian's Guide) culminated in a 2006 showcase performance to remember at Cambridge Folk Festival. Despite only appearing on the little Club Tent stage, there was an electric atmosphere in the packed marquee for what felt like a pivotal moment of 'arrival'! The official festival review site made the show their **Live Performance of the Year 2006**.

Shows continued to illustrate the musical development of the band, since the debut album, with a stronger emphasis on 4-part harmonies, self-penned songs written by pianist Belinda O'Hooley, all four girls taking lead vocal responsibilities, and alongside their traditional material, covers from unlikely sources such as Antony & The Johnsons and Bonnie Prince Billy.

The music development evident in live shows was such that a second album was overdue when the girls locked themselves away in a rental cottage near Hadrian's Wall over New Year's Eve of 2007. When they surfaced a week later however, they did so without viola player Jackie Oates. A combination of personal differences and the reticence Jackie was expressing towards honouring future commitments gave rise to The Winterset parting ways with Jackie, reluctantly and after exhaustive consideration.

With an album launch planned for Cambridge Folk Festival and interest from EMI Records, the pressure was on to find a new member fast. The band auditioned dozens of applicants, but kept coming back to **Niopha Keegan** – a 30 year old second generation Irish fiddle player, based in Newcastle. Despite her background in a different tradition, Niopha displayed the soul and the balls that Rachel & co. were looking for. Niopha is a singer and fiddle player who comes from a family of

innovative second generation musicians and singers brought up in the cultural melting pot of the London Irish scene. She has won numerous All-Britain titles, she's toured internationally and occasionally performs with her highly renowned brother, the flautist Niall Keegan. When she was approached, Niopha was completing her final year on the Folkworks degree in Newcastle, and ideal positioned to grasp a new challenge and opportunity. The first thing she grasped, or rather was thrown into, was an award ceremony. At the inaugural Journal Culture Awards, run by the North East daily newspaper, Rachel Unthank & The Winterset won **Artist of the Year 2007**.



Within 3 days of joining, Niopha performed 3 90-minute shows with the band, and two weeks later, the new album was recorded. Deadlines were so close that for two weeks the girls went to bed and got up in shifts, so there was always someone recording, while engineer and producer Adrian McNally stayed up most of the two weeks!

After recording the album at home and on location, the new album was mixed at Blast Recording in Newcastle in 7 days and mixed on the Isle of Skye.

The BAIRNS was ready.

Empathically striking and wholeheartedly brave, The BAIRNS brims with the creative force of four young musicians at their peak. Pushing themselves and the listener, the band reach profound levels of emotional and musical complexity, chaos and clarity.

EMI were impressed and the band's label, RabbleRouser Music, agreed to license the album worldwide. To date, Mojo Magazine have made it **Folk Album of the Month** and Rock'n'Reel describe *The BAIRNS* as "**quite possibly the finest folk album of this generation**".

After UK album tours in Autumn '07, plans are afoot to tour internationally during 2008. Despite the license to EMI, Rachel Unthank & The Winterset continue their relationship with their manager and Rachel's partner, Adrian McNally. The arrangement allows the band a consistent artistic vision and committed force right through their music making process. Adrian is involved from the writing/arrangement/recording/production stages, right through to artwork, marketing, record label and tour planning.

The collective background in traditional music of Rachel, Becky, Belinda and Niopha is the anchor that affords them their sense of adventure. In much the same way that Peter Kay's satire of the working class is underpinned by pathos and the sort of deep

understanding it's only possible to have by being one of them, Rachel Unthank & The Winterset subvert folk music with love and authority. That doesn't quite tell the story however; The Bairns also features two self-penned songs and interpretations of songs by leftfield mavericks **Robert Wyatt** and **Bonnie Prince Billy**, while the closing interpretation of Newcastle Lullaby has overtones of a paired-down **Steve Reich**. The reputation they have earned on the road in the past two years now has some focus. Striking out on its own, The BAIRNS is especial, fearless and peerless.



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