

Rick Fitzgerald - *Earth Without Art*

By Nan Bovingdon

It's a perfect time to spend a pleasant late-spring foggy morning in COVID-19 quarantined Anaconda, Montana, listening to *Earth Without Art*, the new album by Wisconsin singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and former Mountain Laurel Autoharp Champion, Rick Fitzgerald.

Two of Rick's older albums, *Crossing the Water*, largely a solo album with accompaniment by accomplished friends and musicians, and *Chasing Sunshine*, with Maggie Dodd and Michael Poole, have been enjoyed and reviewed at this desk for previous issues of *Autoharp Quarterly*.

The poetic and melodic "Appalachian Rain" immediately brings back memories of John Denver's singing - the same lilting high vocal range, with only voice and guitar, but nothing else is needed. The song is simply beautiful - though as is pointed out in the liner notes, the story is of a guy who was "literally told to take a hike." Sort of an in-person Dear John letter. The melody, vocal, and guitar are completely harmonious and effective together. Who says you can't say, "Get lost, darling," with a smile?

"Pirates Night Out," a spirited tune by Bryan Bowers, is an autoharp soloist's dream, with flashy minor construction somewhat like "Ghost Riders" but add a line of Russian Cossack dancers flashing across the scenery.

Gordon Lightfoot's "If You Could Read My Mind" is a nicely sung nod to our recent folkie past. If you don't hum along with this in all the old familiar places such as, "the feelin's gone and I just can't get it back." You're just too young!

A delightful tune, "Old Zeb," for Zebulon Tilton, a "big, burly cross-eyed schooner captain in the first half of the 20th century," features harmony vocals by Tom Davis, with Rick Schwartz on mandolin.

It's a great love story about a man and his schooner, with wonderful lyrics such as: "A man that's meant for hanging's prob'ly never going to drown..." (so go ahead and take chances. If you're doomed enough, the water

won't get you.)

The chorus is so hummable and pleasing it immediately becomes familiar and you'll be singing along. I hear it's a sign of advanced age when things we see and hear remind us of something from the past - but I'd swear it's Steve Goodman's voice singing this, just as obviously as it was John Denver's on "Appalachian Rain."

This cut is the one I find myself playing over and over, both on my little space ship shaped CD player and in my head at odd times. It's very memorable and sounds like something you've always known.

Bill Staines' song, "Movin It On Down The Line," for those who dedicate themselves to a life on the road, is an ode to the traveler, who 'sees it all,' but keeps moving on down the line.

Hotels, highways, various towns. A good, solid song, well sung and played, again with only voice and guitar.

An impressive all-harp cut is "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," by J.S. Bach, arranged by Rick after hearing Leo Kottke's guitar interpretation, which may have been inspired by Pete Seeger's banjo arrangement.

This doesn't need anything but our humble folk instru-

ment, the autoharp, played by a master, to sound as fine as an instrumentally complex version.

I particularly enjoyed "When Rosalie Smiles," a tune of Rick's, also an autoharp solo, inspired by his lovely and lively granddaughter. It's quite different from another of his family-based compositions, "The Place I Used to Know," about his parents and childhood. This moving song is reminiscent of many childhoods, even those totally unrelated to having a Scandinavian heritage or being from the midwest.

It's about being the child of a caring, memorable parent, takes us back to that time and place.

This is an all-around fine album. The balance of vocal and instruments, the variety and choices of songs and tunes, make for some quality listening.

GREAT MOMENTS IN AUTOHARP HISTORY

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After Pan played the autoharp, he never picked up his namesake flute again