



SONGS FROM THE COMPLEAT ANGLER - PAUL BRETT

The quest to produce the perfect 'concept album' has perennially been one of the most elusive challenges in an artiste's locker as second-hand bins of record shops around the country readily attest. But to take one of the most enduring canons in English literature and attempt to paint a soundscape faithful to its 17th century origins would seem to require an act of supreme savoir-faire or plain misguided heroism.



First published in 1653, *Izaak Walton's* seminal work, *The Compleat Angler*, has not only become the de facto fisherman's reference book but is one of the earliest works to extol the virtues of rural England and the natural environment in a century awash with political and religious upheaval. It is this classic piece of post-Jacobean pastoral narrative (and associated poems) — which traces a four day fishing trip between two friends — that Paul Brett has succeeded in forging into an album of exquisite beauty.

As both a virtuoso acoustic 12-string guitarist and keen angler since childhood, you could argue that scales have probably been a central feature of Brett's life. It was one such fishing

trip with Eric Humphreys, captain of the Welsh National Angling Team — and an incident in which he accidentally hooked a gudgeon — that provided the impulse for the CD. Once the tiny embryo was born the momentum became unstoppable.

Bringing to mind an episode of the eponymous TV series, in which actor Geoffrey Palmer goes in search of gudgeon, he was soon converting John Chalkhill's *The Gallant Fisher's Life* to music, followed by Christopher Marlowe's mighty madrigal *The Passionate Shepherd To His Love*. The compulsion was so strong that within a week he had written and arranged a CD's worth of material.

This provides insights into rural life equal to the great ballads that would later form the bedrock of the folk song tradition.

Of *The Compleat Angler*, which remained a work in progress for many years after its first edition was published, Paul Brett says, "It's a timeless work, but there is something in that book that compels you to propagate its existence ... which is why it has survived through the centuries. It's not just about angling, it covers the whole spectrum of life at the time and features poems by some of the greatest poets of the period. Christopher Marlowe was Elizabeth 1st's favourite playwright. She preferred his works to Shakespeare's.

Unfortunately, he was a bit of a rogue and was killed in a bar fight before he could really add to his writing talents. Walton writes about comradeship, the countryside, cooking his catches, the joy of being outside and conservation. In fact, the Izaak Walton League of America is one of the largest conservation groups in the States having many thousands of members. When you think that Walton's life began in 1593 and

ended in 1683 when he was 90 years of age it is incredible when you consider he lived through the reigns and events of Elizabeth 1st, James 1st, Charles 1st, the English Civil War, Cromwell, Charles 11, the Plague and the great Fire of London. I always thought that if you kept your head down and went fishing, you'd miss all the excitement ! "



Although Brett's early career belonged to the more strident school of acoustic 12-string guitar playing — requiring the strength and attack of a wrestler's hands combined with the dexterity of a concert pianist — in later years he has brought a more romantic touch, exploring the



Paul with carp at Bron Eifion Lake



early music of the Elizabethan lutanists, writing his own baroque instrumentals, listening to Renaissance and Courtly music. This has enabled him to evoke the sentiment that exists between the book's two central figures (the experienced Piscator and his student Viator), often as madrigals or fancies.

He could already hear the guitar parts — and realized the six-string element would best be implemented on a small Parlour guitar, in combination with a fatter 12-string. The solution was a single-bodied, double-neck instrument, which was promptly commissioned from Luthier Steve Jones (the twin necks set sufficiently close to enable the guitarist to leap as seamlessly as the salmon between the two fret boards).

But some of the other lyrics — by eminent writers such as Christopher Marlowe and Izaak Walton's fishing chum, Sir Henry Wotton — Paul sensed would require a string quartet and an arranger with a highly-sympathetic ear. Enter respectively Carla Zappala and Vaughan Jones. Zappala provided an intuitive amount of seasoning to the mix with her scoring for string quartet, piccolo and oboe ; whilst Jones's group The String Section, (who specialise in studio work) fulfilled Brett's vision for the sound of the whole piece.



The Compleat Angler is no excursion into unchartered waters for Brett — his Eclipse album (and a track called Overture For Decadence in particular) in many ways provided the foretaste. This is especially poignant in the elegiac darkness of Herbert's Vertue (Virtue), depicting a landscape in which "the whole world turn to coal". Once again Carla Zappala's light touch with the arrangement is astonishing.

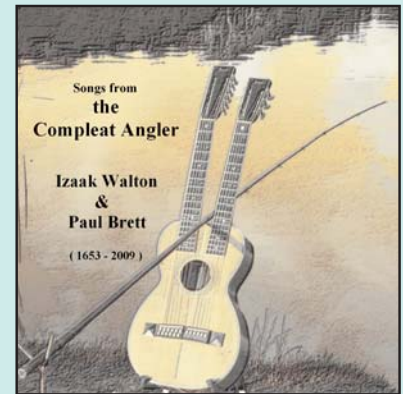
Musicians often spend a lifetime searching for the perfect room acoustics and instrument miking to do justice to the compositions. Paul Brett's search ended at Woodworm Studios in Oxfordshire, the residential facility originally set up by Fairport Convention's Dave Pegg, and the holy grail for many of the folk movement's acoustic performers. Engineer Steve Hill transferred the mastered guitar parts to digital and the strings were mostly added in a day, just leaving the vocal overdubs and final mix. The CD was mastered and manufactured by DMS of Plymouth and I would like to mention Michele Breeze's superb photography that adorns the accompanying booklet. Brett compiled all the artwork and produced the CD.

And so a journey which began benignly on the banks of the Bron Eifion lake, in Criccieth, North Wales had reached its epic conclusion. Izaak subtitled his book 'A Contemplative Man's Recreation'. Three and a half centuries later, I am certain Paul Brett would also settle for that.

I genuinely love this album and I'm sure that if Walton, Marlowe and their ilk were alive today, they would be very happy with Paul's interpretation of their timeless works.

Jerry Gilbert

Photographs by Michele Breeze



SONGS FROM THE COMPLEAT ANGLER by Paul Brett

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The Compleat Angler: Or The Contemplative Man's Recreation was first published in 1653 and has become a classic, not just as the seminal fisherman's reference book, but as a portrait of rural England's virtues in a century of upheaval.

Now that you're up to speed, let me introduce you to the latest work by acclaimed virtuoso 6 and 12 string guitarist who has set to music Walton's songs and poems and those of others contained within the book. Played on a double neck 18 string acoustic guitar with accompanying string quartet and wind instrument, the musical arrangements are in keeping with the period from which the writings come; chamber pieces, madrigals and minuets with Brett's falsetto conjuring the courtly troubadours entertaining the assembled nobility. The playing is, as you would expect dazzling, while Brett's vocals and Carla Zappala's arrangements superbly capture the mood of the lyrics. The set opens with John Chalkhill's O, the Gallant Fisher's Life and includes George Herbert's Virtue, Henry Wootton's hymn to Spring, a darkly swirling setting of Michael Drayton's watery journey Of Rivers and an elegantly airy arrangement of Francis Davison's In Praise of a Beggar's Life that embraces the poem's pastoral naiveté without any note of modern day irony.

There are two instrumentals. Titled from the book's final words. Study To Be Quiet is a superb nimble interplay between strings and guitar that makes you wonder why Brett doesn't enjoy the same high profile as John Williams, while the The Compleat Angler itself is another remarkable display of picking. My personal favourite is Christopher Marlowe's The Passionate Shepherd To His Love and Brett's interpretation, invested with a twinkling lust, is far removed from the usual images of chaste swains and virginal nymphs. It's a tremendous piece of work that deserves to be treated to a full live Royal Festival Hall performance.

Mike Davies