



I've come to love Celtic and British folk music for many reasons. Two of the biggest ones are that I love the vocal harmonies and stylings so often found in the genre; and that I enjoy the variations in subject matter one finds in the songs, where tragic ballads exist side-by-side with comical, and often ribald, songs of wordplay and verbal trickery. Both of these factors are evident on this album.

Roots Quartet consists of singers Michelle Hicks and Yvette Staelens, who exchange duties on lead and harmony vocals. Some of the songs include instrumental accompaniment, and some are *a cappella*. I found myself enjoying the *a cappella* selections more (even though the instrumentals are always clear and transparent, never getting in the way of the vocals), and at times I had to re-read the CD notes to remind myself that there were only two singers performing, so deft are their harmonies. Their diction is also nearly flawless; there is nary a syllable on this entire recording that isn't clear as a bell. The disc is expertly performed and a pleasurable listen.

So what's to say about the **music**?

The title **Somerset Sisters** refers to the many women in Somerset, England who were among the singers from whom Cecil Sharp, a London music teacher, learned indigenous folk songs during his travels in that region between 1903 and 1916. (Somerset is located on the southern side of the Bristol Channel near Bridgewater Bay; it is also the location of Glastonbury, a locale familiar to devotees of Arthurian and Druidic lore.) Sharp collected more than 600 songs for his five-volume set, **Folk Songs from Somerset**, an undertaking that was part of a great effort in the early years of the twentieth century by professional musicians to transcribe English folk tunes for posterity. Musicians involved in this effort also included Percy Grainger, Gustav Holst, and the greatest of English classical composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams, who often included English folk music in his own work. This CD centers on songs collected from three singers in particular: Emma Overd, Lucy White, and Louie Hooper (whose actual voice is heard, fascinatingly, in the CD's final track in an archival recording).

The liner notes indicate that the Roots Quartet attempted to use original lyrics whenever possible, as the lyrics as transcribed by Cecil Sharp and others were often bowdlerized to better reflect the mores of Edwardian England. I can only imagine how a song like "The Crabfish," in which an errant crabfish (a crawdad, crayfish or mudbug, for Americans) ends up in the family chamberpot and makes use of its claws when the mother sits down, might have been made acceptable to Edwardian ears! Other songs include "Banks of Green Willow," dealing with the sailors' superstition of women bringing bad luck; "Creeping Jane," a tune about a race horse; and "Mary on the Well Moor," a tragic and evocative song. Hicks and Staelens, wonderfully convey the emotional character of each song – their voices are plaintive, even sad, when necessary; and during the comical songs, the sense of fun in their singing is so infectious you can "hear" them grinning as they sing.

The CD's liner notes are excellent, with biographical sketches and photos of the three women – the **Somerset Sisters** as well as background blurbs on each of the songs themselves. I would have liked to have lyrics presented. It would be nice to see the bowdlerized lyrics side-by-side with the originals. That, however, is a small complaint. This is a fine CD, both for its performances and for its presentation of a part of musical history that isn't always appreciated outside of the classical realm.

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[Back To Previous Page](#)

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