A lot of folkies will be thrilled to find the Kippers in their stockings this Christmas! The long-awaited magnum opus from the folk world's answer to Hinge and Bracket has come out just in time for the festive season. It's almost, but not entirely, unlike anything they have ever done before. For a kick-off, Sid and Henry don't sing a word, although they are responsible for 'remembering' all four sides of it, with the able assistance of Dick Nudds and Chris Suqden. They do talk a lot. though. The double album comprises father and son in conversation at the Old Goat Inn, recalling the legend of the non-existent Crab Wars Opera, while the Trunch Glee Club, in association with the Thorpe Market Thespians, are performing the very same at the Village Hall, St. Just-outside-Trunch. Confused? You will be after listening to this recording.

The plot of The Crab wars is as tortuous as it is contrived, and several devices are required to give the listener an even chance of what is going on. It takes the combined services of a prologuer (Ashley Hutchings, every bit the Thorpe Market Thespian), a narrator (a studied deadpan performance from the fab John Kirkpatrick) and a Town Crier (Peter Bellamy, in his element) to explain what's going on. Mind you, it takes the rustic ramblings of just one old Kipper to nearly undo all their good work, with such 'helpful' asides as, "He were a boatswain … that mean he do love boats".

In the thick of all this plot, the protagonists play out their crab roles. The "stark cross" lovers, Cromeo and Sheriet (Mick and Sarah Graves), make declarations of love while their fathers, Ben Bow and George Upspoke (not necessarily in that order), make declarations of war. Admiral Bow and Upspoke the captain are performed by Martin Carthy and Shep Woolley. Both are in excellent form, their rendition of Sealed With A Curse is the high point in the set. Martin is also involved in another duet, this time with Cathy Lesurf, who plays the part of his wife, Belle Bow (nee Push), in the song I Wish I Was Plural No More. As you can see, the titles of the Kippersongs are as clever as ever. Another good example is Jolly Boasting Weather, sung in fine swashbuckling style by Tim Laycock. Who else is there? Oh yes, Phil Beer makes a very passable parson. And there's also Fairport Convention, who burst in three-quarters of the way through the proceedings with The Mason's A Prune, which has absolutely nothing whatsoeer to do with the opera. And why not?

I must say, I've certainly got a great deal of enjoyment from The Crab Wars, even though it does not really bear comparison with their previous two Dambuster albums. There are no folk parodies of the high quality of The Unlaid Maid or Spencer The Wild Rover to be found here. But then it is supposed to be a burlesque of a

ballad opera, not a skit on traditional music. I'll be filing it alongside my Hitchhiker's and Python albums. Every so often I shall set aside an evening to give it a listen, have a good laugh and wonder where on Earth the Kippers can go from here.

Lawrence Heath

(supplied to us by Chris Sugden)