

Dambuster DAM 12

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Ever since I can remember, the term "Folk comedian" has carried with it the automatic assumption that while the fare on offer will, to a greater - or more frequently, lesser extent be comic, the "folk" content will be nil. If only for the reason that this is no longer the case the 'Kipper Family' are welcome; even if they are not very good, they at least demonstrate that Tradition and Humour can go further than archaic bawdry and facetious introductions. But their phenomenal success is not simply attributable to novelty value. As club and festival goers, record buyers and radio audiences can affirm, the originality of their act is but the base on which they build a comic/theatrical creation of an astoundingly high order, which stands comparison with humorous work in any genre, not just by the notoriously indiscriminating standards of the 'folk scene'.

Dick Nudds and Chris Sugden (the secret is out, isn't it?) have created a pair of stage characters that live. Makeup and costume help, but the keystone of their performance is their unshakable commitment to their roles once adopted. Dick and Chris vanish without trace as Sid and Henry swagger and creak respectively into place. Their mannerisms of speech and body-language are drawn directly from life, as any Norfolkman will attest, and are so little overdrawn that many an audience has, even at the end of the show, remained convinced of their reality.

All of which is a tribute to the exceptional professionalism of their stage-craft, but that in itself would not carry them through; ultimately they stand or fall by their repertoire and their ability to sing it. And stand they do. In the past, many have tried their hand at lampooning certain traditional pieces through straightforward parody, but the "Kippers' " work is of quite another order. Never before have we seen such wickedly brilliant pastiches of themes, melodies, idioms, cliches and concepts ♦ and all solidly based on authentic traditional foundations. Mines are always familiar yet original (the true folk process in action!) and phrases and images from countless authentic pieces interchange and overlap, jostling each other into totally unexpected formations to uniquely hilarious effect.

And there is, to this writer at least, an unexpected bonus; when I first encountered their work I feared that, brilliant though the songs were, they depended on a traditionally informed audience to succeed. Wrong. While it is undoubtedly true that a knowledge of traditional songs as deep as Nudds' and Sugden's must enhance the appreciation of their work, the fact remains that the results of their artistic synthesis

is so genuinely funny that even audiences without the background references can and do appreciate their humour unstintingly. Another fear was that their humour must prove self-limiting; just how many times can what is, essentially, the same joke work? The answer would appear to be – well – limitlessly. The Ever Decreasing Circle is their second LP, at its weakest as funny as anything on their first, at its strongest, miles ahead ♦ and those who have had the opportunity to hear them trying out material for their next opus (a ballad-opera, no less!) know that there is no indication of the well running dry. As to the singing, both solo and in harmony Nudds and Sugden rank with the finest of revivalists (the indispensable few whose styles are based on close attention to source singers, not to other revivalists).

Nutshell time: the “Kipper Family” are certainly the most original, and possibly the most important performers to have emerged from the revival in nigh-on twenty years. The Ever Decreasing Circle is a milestone on what promises to be a long and side-splittingly rewarding road. PETER BELLAMY

(supplied to us by Chris Sugden)