

Shaking Out the Sheets: Dirty Linen Classics

by Steve Winick



FIVE HAND REEL 5 Hand Reel/*For A' That*/ *Earl O' Moray*

Beat Goes On BGOCD712, reissue

In the early 1980s in New York City, those of us interested in Celtic music heard about Five Hand Reel, a great Scottish folk-rock band that had existed for only the latter half of the 70s. Similar to Fairport Convention, but featuring the vocals and guitar of the already legendary Dick Gaughan, the band was rumored to be fantastic. Sadly, its records were already out of print and impossible to find, and it never toured in the United States. I had pretty much given up on ever hearing the band when, in about 1987, I stumbled upon its third album, *Earl O' Moray*, in the landmark Manhattan shop, Colony Records. A couple of years later, word reached me that the two earlier LPs, *5 Hand Reel* and *For A' That*, had been reissued in England. Taking advantage of the fact that my dear friend Philip Hemming had a trip to Old Blighty scheduled, I sent him off with a shopping list and soon had those two LPs, as well.

Flash forward to 2006. I hadn't heard from Philip in years. I hadn't listened to my Five Hand Reel LPs in even longer. In the same week, two things happened: Philip sent me an email out of the blue, and *Dirty Linen* sent me this reissue to review, encompassing the three LPs on a two CD set. Funny old world, eh?

There was some inaccuracy in the buzz we had all heard in the 80s; this was not strictly a Scottish band. Three of the band's members were Scottish, including Gaughan on vocals, guitars and whistles, Bobby Eaglesham on vocals, guitars, mandolins, and dulcimers, and Dave Tulloch on drums and percussion. However, the group also included Belfast fiddler, keyboardist, and singer Tom Hickland and English bass player Barry Lyons. The latter was a former member of both Trees and Mr. Fox, and therefore one of the top musicians in English elec-

tric folk. The band combined Irish and Scottish elements with punchy rhythms that Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span had been working with in England. In that sense, it was an international Anglo-Celtic electric folk band.

Five Hand Reel's eponymous first album won the coveted Folk Album of the Year designation from *Melody Maker*, the runner-up being June Tabor's debut disc. It marries solid musicianship, impassioned vocals, and imaginative arrangements. It opens with a medley of Scottish songs sung by Gaughan, interspersed with Irish fiddle tunes led by Hickland. It continues with a mix of Irish and Scottish material: the old Scottish ballad "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter," the Irish love song "The Maid of Listowel" (both in jolly, enjoyable folk-rock arrangements), the sad Irish emigration ballad "Slave Gallion Braes," and several lively sets of tunes. Five Hand Reel ventures into serious historical songs, as well, including an original song by Eaglesham on the death of the Earl of Argyll, still reviled by many Scots for bearing witness against the popular Marquis of Montrose, leading to Montrose's execution for treason in 1650; Argyll suffered the same fate in 1661. In the song, Eaglesham decries Argyll as a traitor, creating a stirring, bitter lyric that could be mistaken for a traditional song. (Historical note: Argyll did not "hang" or "swing" as in the song; like Montrose, he was beheaded.) The genuinely traditional song "Wee Wee German Lairdie," sung here by Gaughan, pokes fun in very round terms at George I, the first Hanoverian king of England, who was never accepted in Scotland due to the popularity of the pretender James Stuart.

Two other highlights on the first album: On the set "Frankie's Dog," the band introduced on record one of the best tricks of its live show. As it happened, three members of the group, Eaglesham, Tulloch, and Lyons, played the side drums and tenor drums featured in Scottish pipe bands. This allowed the three to form a rousing, hard-hitting, and iconically Scottish percussion section, which they use to great effect here. Also, the band's sensitive arrangement of the Irish song "When a Man's in Love," relying on Hickland's shimmering keyboard and Lyons' fluid bass playing under Gaughan's voice and guitar, was not only beautiful, but also influential. Almost 20 years later, it inspired another keyboard-driven folk-rock arrangement of the

song, by the U.S.-based group the New St. George.

The 1977 followup, *For A' That*, was recorded less than a year later in the same studio, with the same producer and engineer and with the same lineup of musicians. Not surprisingly, it sounds like an extension of the original album and could have been recorded at the same sessions. Themes and genres are revisited; Irish emigration is treated in "Carrickfergus," the Irish love lyric in "P Stands for Paddy." Two more sets of jigs and reels get the blood flowing. Scottish history is covered in "The Haughs of Cromdale," and old Scottish ballads are represented by the hardest-hitting track on the album, Gaughan's magnificent version of "The Cruel Brother."

Two new elements make this album even more interesting, however. First of all, the opening track, "Bratach Bana," was arguably the first rock arrangement of any song in Scottish Gaelic, and thus certainly the first folk-rock recording in the language, predating even Runrig's more rudimentary attempt on 1978's *Play Gaelic*. (To make the story even better, the song came to Gaughan through family tradition, from his mother, who was a native Gaelic speaker.) On this track, Five Hand Reel's exemplary rhythm section takes the naturally mesmerizing pulse of the Scottish waulking song and turns it into a satisfying groove, while the guitars, fiddles, and especially the rich voices, make a mighty sound. The second new element was the band's discovery of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. The title track, "A Man's a Man For A' That," is one of Burns' most timeless political songs, and is delivered with punchy, polemical fervor. "Ae Fond Kiss," on the other hand, is one of Burns' most tender love songs. Here it is sung beautifully by Eaglesham and given a particularly rich and mature arrangement, with Lyons' bass, Hickland's fiddle, and Gaughan's guitar all playing separate, dovetailing melodic lines while Tulloch's drums and cymbals provide gentle emphasis. These three tracks take *For A' That* beyond the level of the band's debut album and make it truly outstanding.

By 1978, it seemed like electric folk was going out of style. Only two years after its top five hit, "All Around My Hat," Steeleye Span broke up. The Vertigo label put the brakes on Fairport Convention, buying them out and leaving them with no record contract.

In this strange new world, Five Hand Reel was arguably the top folk-rock band recording in Britain, and, in RCA, it certainly had the biggest label of any such group. RCA provided a heftier budget for recording and promotion of its third album, in the hopes of making the band into the new Steeleye Span. Fairport's Simon Nicol was enlisted as producer, and the band went into the studio and produced *Earl O' Moray*, an album quite different in sound and tone from the first two. The album is heavy on anthems, from Burns' effusive "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" to Hamish Henderson's "Freedom Come-All-Ye." It's also heavy on "big ballads," including the title track, mourning the murder of the Earl, which occurred in 1592. Arrangements venture into complex musical territory. On "The Trooper and the Maid," a song usually performed as a straightforward ditty, Eaglesham and Gaughan alternate verses, each singing a completely different traditional melody. Each fiddle break introduces yet another tune, and as always, the rhythm section handles it all deftly. In general, however, the arrangements are a little more staid and stately than before, and a little more predictable, too. The group uses fewer instruments, and the lineup is nearly always the same: double guitar, bass, drums, and fiddle. It would be nice to see the band making more use of the whistle, keyboards, mandolins, and other instruments that graced its first two LPs. For my money, then, *For A' That* is the best album of the three, but both *5 Hand Reel* and *Earl O' Moray* have more than a few brilliant moments.

BGO has done a fine job with this reissue. The sound is crisp. The liner notes are very complete, including full details on each track, full lyrics to every song, a 10-page historical essay by John O'Regan giving all the necessary background, and even a glossary of Scots words! With such supporting material, the music of Five Hand Reel becomes even more attractive. To complete the story of the band, Gaughan left the group in late 1978; it recorded one more album in 1979 and broke up in 1980. Although there have been periodic rumors of a Five Hand Reel reunion, Gaughan has consistently said he isn't interested, and Eaglesham passed away in 2004. This excellent package will thus probably remain your only chance to hear this pioneering electric folk band, making this reissue a must-have for any fan of British folk-rock.

