Hanne Hukkelberg

Featherbed

Propel CD/UL

There’s something distracting about how deftly the absolutely diverse instrumentation of Featherbed dovetails together. Each element on its own – a dusty, detuned autoharp, a cheap thumb piano, a floor tom, etc. – has an odd energy and uniquely specific function. In this way they’ve been integrated into the compositions that reveal the true depth of Hanne Hukkelberg’s talent. Pairing a scratchy violin with fanger percussive guitar (the exact tone of Souris & The Banshees’ "Israel", for whatever reason) and three layers of vocals doesn’t sound like an easy prospect, but Hanne has probably made it work. And yet. And yet, miraculously, she shapes the contours of each piece perfectly. It fits, and the song sings with its own weirdly harmonious hermetic logic.

The creative success of Featherhead – the Norwegian artist’s fourth album – isn’t exactly a surprise; both her parents are musicians, and she’s been making music since she was old enough to hold an instrument. Not only that, but Hukkelberg’s immense vocal breadth spans both Doon Metal and Disney, perhaps the two most radically opposed artistic institutions imaginable. She sang lead on Scandinavian Doon Metal-pioneers Funkenfarer’s 2002 opus, In Fields Of Pestilent Grief; she also awoke an aching piano ballad for inclusion on the soundtrack to the Norwegian Chronicle of Morna: Prince Caspian, alongside Switchfoot and Regina Spektor. If she can triumph in realms as mutually exclusive as those, it is really so strange that she can craft melodic crescendos out of field recordings of a tea kettle whistling.

And we haven’t even mentioned her voice yet. Most reviews attempt to triangulate Hukkelberg’s vocals within some sort of Björk/CocoRosie/Joanna Newsom axis, a comparison that isn’t entirely baseless, but doesn’t do her justice either. While she can push and freewheel and pirouette in the throaty, acrobatic mode of Madonna-era Björk, and dip into the (somewhat overly precious) whispered fable intimacies as practiced by the Gadsby sisters, she can also strip it back to a rawer, nerrier edge, emulating the haunting and tension of mid-90s PJ Harvey. Ultimately, her voice is as versatile as her instrumentation, shapeshifting to suit the mood and moment. Which may also explain why it’s another Norwegian Grammy to display alongside the award she got for her last one, that only is because it’s too tattered and legitimately challenging to consider as a compliment, because it isn’t.