

According to *Traditions and Hearthside Stories*, the crickstone is the centerpiece in a mysterious grouping of three located in a croft in West Cornwall. Crawling through the center stone is said to offer healing for such “cricks” as lumbago and sciatica. The band’s name, recently chosen, is apt because “Insert the Name of the Album Here” is good for whatever ails you.

I’m watching a YouTube video of the Crickstones performing “All Around This World” at their regular gig at McLaughlin Vineyards in Newtown, Connecticut, and it has all the elements that make them great: Incredible harmony singing from Liz McNicholl and Morgan Eve Swain, as well as great Americana playing from John Hurley on guitar, Peter Blossom on dobro, Eric Howell on banjo, and Morgan Eve on fiddle and Fred McKay on bass.

What, you were expecting a slice of Ireland? Yes, Liz McNicholl is Irish, from the warm-hearted lets-share-a-glass branch of that multi-limbed family tree, not the misbegotten *Angela’s Ashes* limb. Her Irish ballad singing is exquisite, emotive and leaves hardly a dry eye at the Gaelic American Club. But, despite fill-ins for Cherish the Ladies and an invitation to sing lead in that band, her heart is in Americana. And this album is a glorious chunk of heartland U.S.A. as experienced by such patriots as Steve Earle, Bob Dylan, Lucinda Williams, Townes Van Zandt and Eliza Gilkyson.

Liz made a fine solo album, *Grand Central Station*, but this Crickstones record is truly a band effort. As she does in concert, Liz encourages her colleagues and yields the spotlight to them: the multitalented Morgan Eve Swain (fiddle and voice) has three originals here, and John Hurley (guitar, mandolin and voice) has two. New member Peter Blossom, whose band resume would fill several pages, is heard from, too. Longtime lead guitarist and singer Chuck O’Donnell, who played with the Liz for many years has now left the band, but it is fitting that he’s here on several tracks.

Listen closely. This is deep music, honed in countless pass-the-hat performances. In Morgan Eve Swain you’re hearing one of the finest young fiddle talents in the U.S., her repertoire recently expanded to songwriting and singing. John Hurley, rooted in Peter Rowan and Jerry Garcia’s acoustic side, transcends those influences to find a highly original voice. Fred McKay is a rock-solid bassist, and his vocal on “My Eggs Don’t Taste the Same Without You” is one of many reasons to see this band in concert. Banjoist Eric Howell, the newest Crickstone, adds an old-timey feel, but he’s a progressive player who is already contributing new songs for the book. Listen to his unique take on “Make the World Go Away” here. Peter Blossom adds a touch of roadhouse spice from his many years as a journeyman rocker.

Of the covers, “Waterbound” is a glorious piece from the old-time tradition, and “It Doesn’t Matter Anymore”—which sounds just as ancient, was actually written by Paul Anka. Trust the Crickstones to process it, via a fine vocal duet by Liz and Morgan Eve, through their sepia lens.

Jim Motavalli

“It Doesn’t Matter...” is one of the staples of the Crickstones’ live sets. As I wrote in a long-ago profile, “On a good night—and they are mostly good nights—you’ll hear John Prine and Gerry Garcia covers, fiddle-guitar features and heartbreaking Irish ballads.” Go see this band.

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WPKN-FM

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