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ARTIST: CHRISTA BURCH TITLE: LOVE OF THE LAND LABEL: SELF-RELEASED RELEASE DATE: MARCH 2009

By KATHY BAWN AND OBIN STURM



Love of the Land is the first solo CD by Christa Burch, a Southern Californian who has contributed her many musical talents to a variety of West Coast music projects, playing bodhran with the Syncopaths and Blackwaterside, singing as one-half of the a capella group Lintie. *Love of the Land* is a vocal CD, a collection of Celtic songs, some traditional pieces, mostly from Scotland and Ireland, but also some new compositions in the Celtic tradition. The CD is produced by Dennis Cahill, best known for his haunting, sparse guitar-playing with Irish fiddler Martin Hayes. Fans of the Hayes-Cahill recordings will find some of the same sweet, evocative and exploratory playing here.

Christa has a warm, versatile voice. Her singing commands the listener's attention, but in a gentle, direct, and natural way, a way that gives you space to hear and think and react. She's a singer who clearly thinks and cares deeply about the songs she sings. You feel as if she's looking you in the eye and singing straight to you. With each song, she's telling a precise story, a story she wants you to pay attention to and understand the nuances of. And as you listen, you do understand -- not just the plot contained in the pristinely delivered lyrics, but also the complex emotions and associations that make the stories real and relevant.

The CD features an array of top-notch musicians: Cahill playing bouzouki, guitar, mandolin and bass, John Doyle on guitar, Olivier Longuet on bouzouki, John Williams on accordion, Liz Knowles on strings, Richard Mandel on guitar, Kieran O'Hare on the pipes, Larry Grey on upright bass. Kat Eggleston sings harmony on several tracks. The back-up musicians blend in seamlessly. The playing is first-rate, but not remotely flashy - musicianship and technique are completely in service to the songs. Indeed, it's possible to listen to the CD focusing completely on the songs and singing - the back-up never intrudes or draws you away from the songs and the stories they tell. But it's also possible -- and well worth it -- to listen by focusing on the CD's musical ensemble, letting the lyrics recede and experiencing Christa's lovely voice as another instrument in the synergistic musical interplay.

The songs themselves cover a wide range of moods and themes: loss and disillusionment, the price of war, the joys of youth, love, adventure, and music. Roughly half are traditional songs, half recent compositions. Many listeners will find themselves hard-pressed to tell which are which. *Leaving Australia*, for example, is a traditional song, but the mandolin, bouzoukis and bass creates a syncopated, almost Latin, pulse that produces a fresh and distinctive groove. On the other hand, *Keg of Brandy* - a wistful admission of the shallow transience of youthful passion - sounds like it's been sung in pubs for generations, despite being a new composition by Robbie O'Connell.

One of our favorite tracks is the unabashedly happy *Lochanside*. The tune is a pipe retreat, a "march" played in a slow, lilting three-four time. Retreat marches are not sad tunes of defeat, but rather lively tunes played at the end of one day by those eager to carry on again tomorrow. They are tunes of renewal. Here, the theme of renewal is joyfully elaborated by Jim Malcolm's words celebrating the changing of seasons, and Christa's warm, sweet delivery. We can't listen without smiling.

This is a CD with wide appeal. There's lot of great stuff for Celtic music aficionados to appreciate, and be inspired by, but it's also the kind of CD you can give to friend who doesn't relate to traditional music. It is a CD that will reach out to the uninitiated and draw them in with its craftsmanship and quality. Our congratulations and our thanks to Christa for a CD that has become part of our family's soundtrack to the summer of 2009.

Kathy Bawn is a mom, raising Obin and Anya; a political science professor, teaching at UCLA; a musician, playing banjo and guitar with little talent but much enthusiasm, and a fan of traditional music of all kinds.

Obin Sturm is a fiddler, singer, and student at Santa Monica High School.

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