

An impressive debut... **Rachel Hill's *Through Rain or Snow* EP**

Review by Cevanne Horrocks-Hopayian, 27th January 2020



I hadn't been in Cambridge long before I noticed that Rachel Hill, a final year music undergraduate at Girton College, had created her first EP, *Through Rain or Snow*, and planned to release it at the Portland Arms, a longstanding local gig venue. On launch night, I set off through the rain (and thankfully no snow) to hear Hill for the first time.

Turns out it was the first time Hill had listened to her own music with a live band, too, as the players could only get together that day. After a

short support set from Jos Eckert, Hill and her new band took the stage, beginning with her old songs, and finishing with her new ones, in the end accompanied only by a cajon drum and her acoustic guitar. The audience — a mix of regulars, students, and Girton College staff — had begun the night with a noisy, sociable buzz. By the time Hill sang, the crowd hushed, greeting her lyrical phrases with warmth and applause.

Hill's EP is a delicate dance through light and shade, moving from confessions of heartbreak to declarations of unconditional love, and from vulnerability to safety. The opening track, *I Will Never Leave Your Side*, ends a relationship with sad resignation: "please take me home". But, in the next song, love returns, promising to last *Through Rain or Snow*. There is often a sentiment of longing — here for a past which has not yet begun: "Take a picture and hang it on the wall so we can reminisce when we have grown old". *Paper People* contrasts with a story of risk and isolation. The intensity gradually builds after a chromatic passage on the bass and low piano chords, finally joined by a kick-heavy beat as it's revealed that the Girl alone "on a silent island" with a "heart of paper" is all of us: "we are Paper People" longing for the warmth of a flame and the safety of its light, but we fear it turning us to "smoke and ashes". *Safe Haven* concludes with a gentle celebration of trust in the support of someone else. It gestures to a soothing lullaby with requests to "rock me gently 'til I fall asleep [...] stay here with me [...] you're my Safe Haven" ("I go there in my dreams").

And then there's the bonus acoustic track: *You've Lost Me*. I think it could be a chart hit. The vocal jumps straight in with hooks that would suit a full-fat Pop arrangement. I'd like to hear this produced by the team of magicians that surrounds Ed Sheeran (his grandmother studied music at Girton, I wonder if the college could make some introductions!). The decisive statement of this short, uptempo song is a bright envoi to the EP and offers another perspective on a finished relationship, where the record began. Here, she's better off without a partner who wanted "someone to tame, like a puppy on a lead". The sense of humour in her direct critique brings a sparkle to the collection, and a departure from some of the more typical metaphors which run through the songs.

Other than the bonus track, there's a consistency to the compositions and arrangements, produced with clarity by Fionn Connolly to Hill's specification to maintain a 'live' sound. Songs are introduced with her picked guitar chords, sometimes pivoting around a single string. Connolly has added momentum with percussion, and a wash of strings. For my taste, I'd like Hill to add a little irregularity to her song structure, and throw in a shorter line, here and there, as found in traditional British folk music and the hybrid creations of Sam Lee, Kate Bush, Simon & Garfunkel, or Joan Armatrading.

I think she's only just started to share her beautiful singing voice. Hill has a refreshing command of what some techniques refer to as the 'head voice'. It means she can fly through her higher register with intricate ornamentation as light and consistent as she wishes. In a full album, there would be potential for her to bring contrast to her phrasing (which currently pushes and pulls back quickly) with more sustained tones, or varied timbres — perhaps to explore her subjects with greater intensity.



Back to the night at the Portland Arms, where we sheltered from the rain. Hill succeeded in maintaining a true reflection of the live performance and sound in her recorded EP. Her repeated plea of “hope you like it” before sharing her new material with the audience was unnecessary: they loved it.

Rachel Hill's EP *Through Rain or Snow* is an impressive debut which remains authentic to her life, loves, and voice. Writing, recording, distributing, and launching a record whilst studying for a challenging undergraduate degree is no mean feat. The changing structure of today's consumer market has made self-publishing in some ways more accessible to artists, but in turn it requires advanced levels self-management and media savvy. So, I recommend you support her work in both the digital and physical worlds, if, and when, you can.



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