



Music  Sonics 

Richard Thompson: *Walking on a Wire* (1968-2009).

Shout!Factory 11087 (four CDs).

As the supporting cast shifts around Richard Thompson through the chronologically arranged four CDs of this new career-spanning anthology, the listener hears the central protagonist develop into one of the most fully realized artists from the baby-boom era. After 71 tracks—starting from the first album by the seminal British folk-rock band Fairport Convention and finishing with 2007's brilliant *Sweet Warrior*—the case for Thompson as a peerless triple-threat musician (scorching guitarist, refined song craftsman, emotionally engaging singer) has been irrefutably established.

Staunch fans of the 60-year-old London-born Thompson need little convincing on those scores; and few of them may need to add this compendium to their collections. But by plotting a steady course through Thompson's catalog of releases, *Walking on a Wire* provides a superb introductory overview to those only familiar with a few "big" songs ("1952 Vincent Black Lightning," "Wall of Death") and cover versions by Bonnie Raitt, R.E.M., et al.

More initiate-friendly than 1993's three-CD *Watching the Dark* and 2007's five-CD RT: *The Life and Music of Richard Thompson*, this compilation breaks little new ground. But it boasts a smooth flow and puts a magnifying glass to the transitions and connections between periods and projects. Hearing Fairport Convention's "Sloth" lead into "Roll Over Vaughn Williams," and "The Angels Took My Racehorse

Away" segue into "The Great Valerio" (with then-wife Linda Thompson) illuminates the evolutionary quicksteps of Thompson's early career. A handful of live tracks ("Beat the Retreat," "From Galway to Graceland," "Persuasion" [with son Teddy Thompson], "Hard on Me," The Who's "A Legal Matter," etc.) show off Thompson's jaw-dropping acoustic and electric solos that tend to be more economically compressed in the studio. A few off-mainstream additions (including the main title theme from the documentary *Grizzly Man* and three songs from the overlooked factory-life-themed *Industry* CD with bassist Danny Thompson) exhibit Thompson's breadth as a composer. And a 60-page booklet, with new notes by biographer Patrick Humphries, fleshes out the context.

Notably untapped are recordings with the Bunch (1972), French Frith Kaiser Thompson (1987, 1990), the GPs (1991), Philip Pickett (1998), and 2005's *Front Parlour Ballads*, but it's hard to fault the decision to highlight Thompson's greatest albums: the Richard and Linda classics *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight* and *Shoot Out the Lights* and the solo-era *Rumour and Sigh* and *Mirror Blue*.

Thompson writes and sings predominantly about love—less like a classic confessional singer-songwriter than a playwright who creates characters and scenes through which to probe tragicomic, bittersweet, and perverse nuances of romance. The results, influenced by everything from Scottish ballads and Fats Waller to Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis, include songs that hold up to the best in folk and rock of the past 50 years: "Dimming of the Day," "A Heart Needs a Home," "Shoot Out the Lights," "Tear Stained Letter," "She Twists the Knife Again," "Valerie," "Waltzing's for Dreamers," "Beeswing."

The sonics on *Walking on a Wire* vary but steadily improve over the course of the set, reflecting technological advances and Thompson's ability to work with the later producers to achieve a more realistic, detailed, and airier sound in the studio.

Derk Richardson

Further Listening: Richard Thompson: *Live from Austin TX*; Various: *Beat the Retreat: Songs by Richard Thompson*

