



RICHARD THOMPSON

Dream Attic

(Proper Records/Planet)

★★★★★

In the past decade, there has been a huge paradigm shift in the record industry. Suddenly, major record companies – now reduced to a few global behemoths – are relatively unimportant, unless you are a mass-market pop act. New, independent strategies are opening up exciting and radical possibilities.

Major bands, including Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails, are working outside the constraints of the major labels. Musicians including John Butler, Ani DiFranco and John Prine have created their own labels. And small, independent labels have suddenly reappeared with such success that Canadian band Arcade Fire, whose records are released on the tiny Mergelabel, have just sold out Madison Square Garden, while their album, *The Suburbs*, has reached No. 1 on the US and British charts.

The one-time member of Fairport Convention and doyen of English electric folk guitarists, Richard Thompson, was dropped by Capitol Records in 2001 and since then has shuffled from small label to small label. Currently on the London-based indie Proper Records, Thompson has been allowed the freedom to write 13 new songs and record them live with a hard-rocking four-piece band, record the same 13 songs in acoustic mode (they call it “the original guitar and vocal demos” but it sounds like a very well-recorded acoustic album) and release the end product in different formats. Thus *Dream Attic* can be bought as a single CD, double CD or double vinyl album.

This is not a truly great Thompson album but, having said that, it still has so many highlights that it is infinitely more creative and original than most contemporary releases. There is a blistering, swingeing attack on bankers (*The Money Shuffle*); a very funny, if very oblique, attack on Sting’s renunciation of his English-Geordie roots and his egotistical desire for



Facing a bright future ... the folk songwriter has bounced back after being dropped by his record label. Photo: Pamela Littky

fame (*Here Comes Geordie*); beautifully crafted and melancholy modern ballads with breathtaking guitar solos (*Burning Man*, *Stumble On*); and a plaintive ballad about recently deceased friends (*A Brother Slips Away*), which seems to have been inspired by the death of the hugely influential English folk guitarist Davy Graham.

Perhaps the weakness of the album is highlighted by the murder ballad *Sidney Wells*. Thompson is perhaps the greatest of all the folkies when it comes to taking

ancient forms and giving them a unique contemporary twist. His justly famous 1952 *Vincent Black Lightning*, recorded in 1991, employed an ancient ballad structure to explore the universality of a very modern story about a renegade biker and his girlfriend.

In *Sidney Wells*, Thompson tries to tease universal significance from a cautionary tale of a modern serial killer. It’s a good song but it pales when compared with 1952 *Vincent Black Lightning*.
Bruce Elder

