I Declare by Heidi Clare

At first listen I harkened to Shakespeare's line: "Ah, sirrah, this unlooked for sport comes well." *I Declare* is just such a pleasant surprise but not for any of what have become the "usual" reasons in a recording.

What you get here is MUSCLE, pure and simple, powerful and purposeful, seemingly limitless and untiring. Heidi Clare plays like she's defining *bearing down.* This is athletic fiddling done by an athlete. To find fiddle chords and drone notes like these you'd have to listen to John Carson, Ray Cline, or G.B. Grayson. There comes a time in modern convention when even those with the strength, taste, and talent to muscle through a tune tend to lighten up for the sake of melody, clarity, or finesse. But Heidi just refuses. Once she's in her "groove" (her word) it would take an old-time southwest Ohio bluegrass bar fight to dislodge her. And those are as gone as the fiddlers who defined the standards that Heidi Clare emulates.

But playing with strength is not where Heidi's fiddling ends; it's where it begins. She has an unerring ear for what makes "that which came before" worth rendering again. She draws from a deep well of tradition. You can hear the licks and the tunes of the likes of Doc Roberts, Gid Tanner and their ilk come back to life here. Heidi is a conduit for ancient fiddle spirits that are seemingly seeking modern outlets through her.

Heidi earned her stripes as one of the Reeltime Travelers—that esoteric band of oh-so-very-talented performers that took old-time music to its highest pinnacles ever. But her story started in a transient family that worked together selling trifles in flea markets and "posting" (notices) throughout the Southwest. They finally settled in the mountainous California country a few hours north of (and a world apart from) what's known as the bay area. There she and her siblings were raised in a converted barn where berry bushes grew through the cracks in the walls of her bedroom and modern amenities were simply unavailable. Her mother once gave her a choice of "what instrument she would like to play", and Heidi chose the fiddle. Through practice and hard work she got good enough to earn her way through college on scholarships, eventually receiving her Master's degree in music, which she put to good use as a public school teacher in eastern Tennessee.

But in the final analysis she is a consummate performer. Her dancing, like her fiddling, exudes so much energy that it makes you hold your breath for fear that she won't be able to get hers. She is tireless; she has endurance. There's no doubt when you see or hear her perform that she is *working.* This music here is working people's music, and the purveyor is above all a worker.

And she sings. Heidi has the voice of a sprite. She picks good songs that are not likely to have been heard by many. She sings the blues with a near baritone, old-time lyrics with a feminine lilt reminiscent of Moonshine Kate, and verily shouts the gospel. She is accompanied throughout by journeyman musicians, not the least of which is erstwhile fellow-Traveler, Roy Andrade, whose creative rhythms with a frailed banjo are as good as it can get.

It has been said that to fully appreciate a performer's music, it helps to know the individual. Heidi Clare is a person who absolutely *needs* to be outside. She communes with horses (at a spiritual level), loves them as if she were one of the herd, and rides with reckless abandonment. Warren Hellmen (known in acoustic music circles as the man who *gives* the Hardly, Strictly Bluegrass Festival to the city of San Francisco and a world-class athlete himself) reports that he once saw Heidi running eight-minute miles *up* the bowl of his ski resort. Nothing better exemplifies the kind of energy that she brings to her music, her performances, and her dedication to finding, understanding, and preserving by means of excellence her favorite old-time fiddle tunes. And she writes as well—see (I mean hear) for yourself with this CD.

To *declare* is to "make a full emphatic statement", "to affirm." You bet she does.

Ron Thomason, Cotopaxi, CO, March, 2006