## The last dance

An elegant new album by The Unthanks marks a homecoming, a pregnancy, an engagement and a new epic style. Rachel Unthank and husband Adrian McNally talk to **Tamzin Lewis** about Last.

mav be rooted in traditional Northumbrian balladry, but folk singers Rachel and Becky Unthank have impressive powers of musical reinvention. Their first two albums were with The Winterset, a four-piece female band also featuring piano and fiddle.

These were sparse, shoestring DIY recordings in cupboards but after gaining a Mercury Prize nomination, a committed following and a deal with EMI, the third album, Here's The Tender Coming, heralded a metamorphosis. The Winterset was thrown over and The Unthanks became a close-knit affair with Adrian McNally on piano, his childhood friend Chris Price on guitar and "adopted family member" Niopha Keegan playing fiddle.

The focus remains on an equal pairing of intimate sibling harmonies but to help furnish the ambitious musical arrangements of their fourth album, another eight musicians provide luscious strings, gentle drumming and muted brass.

I meet Rachel and Adrian at Newcastle's Settle Down Café after they have spent a chilly afternoon filming on the River Tyne for the BBC. Rachel, who is six months pregnant, warms up with a latté and staves off hunger pangs with lemon cake.

"When we started out we were very nervous about recording and performing," she says. "As you change, grow and mature as a person it is natural that the way you deal with music

"I felt confident about our sound for this album. Rather than feeling like it was a new venture, it feels like a natural progression."

The natural progression has been steered by Adrian, who is the band's manager and producer. He says: "The variety of different types of music is a joyous thing. There are so many colours of music to explore, it seems lazy to stand still.

"Rachel Unthank & The Winterset were nominated for a Mercury Prize with second album The Bairns as a four-piece female act with no drums, bass and few instruments. Since then we have thrown the formula away and moved on.3

The sound of The Unthanks has become increasingly cinematic, influenced by contemporaries like the visionary American singer-songwriter Sufian Stevens

But the soul of The Unthanks remains the same. When I first interviewed Rachel and Becky five years ago at their mum's house in Ryton they told me how their favourite songs were usually miserable and tragic.

And there is no shortage of melancholy on Last. It includes trademark traditional songs such as Canny Hobbie Elliot and My Laddie Sits Ower Late Up but also tunes by American singer-songwriter Tom Waits and 70s prog-rock band King Crimson.

There is a poignant version of Alex Glasgow's Close the Coalhouse Door, about the terrible human cost of mining for coal

The spine-chilling Give Away Your Heart is a cover by English folk singersongwriter Jon Redfern, featuring the reprise "disappointment is every-

Above, The where". It was written in response to Unthanks, far disillusionment over Britain's invasion right, the of Iraq and could be a theme tune to our times

> And then there is the album's title track, Last, an original composition, which asks why mankind manages to make the same mistakes over and over

> Rachel says: "We had 34 songs to choose from for Last. Me and Becky trawled our resources and looked for songs that we have meant to get around and do. As always we went back to the Northumbrian Minstrelsy where we got Canny Hobbie Elliott

"The songs emerge from our research, we work on harmonies and then they get life. You have to see if you can get the best out of a song.

She adds: "We use the recording time as a creative process to sit down and explore the songs. We have to work out how we are going to arrange them and tell the story through the music.'

After recording third album Here's The Tender Coming in a "fancy studio", the band decided to "go home" again for Last, recording vocals in the under-stairs cupboard of Rachel and Adrian's cottage in the Tyne Valley.

Rachel says: "I find recording guite challenging and pressurised. For me the natural way to sing is for two people to communicate. I find it a bit false singing for recording and being at home makes it a bit more comfort-

But despite the homeliness, it proved a challenging record to make. Rachel discovered she was pregnant with her first baby; Becky, who now lives in Yorkshire's Hebden Bridge with her fiancée, couldn't sing due to a chest infection; and the big freeze in November had them all snowed in.

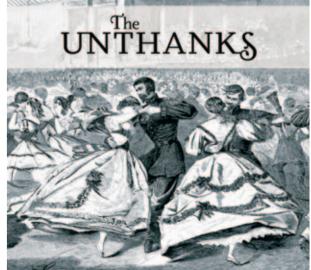
Rachel, 32, says: "I was sick every day during the first trimester; not just in the morning, whenever it took its fancy. People kept coming to stay and our sound engineer thought I had a stomach upset for two months.

"Becky was out of action for most of the recording period. She couldn't sing so we had to hang on."

None of this boded well, but "in reality we were getting on crafting other songs", Adrian says.

The string quartet was recording in the local village hall, which due to remarkable acoustics made it sound "like a symphony orchestra".

And the crucial atmospheric quality of Last was influenced by Snape Maltings concert hall in Suffolk where the composer Benjamin Britten established the Aldeburgh Festival >



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