

# 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*.

**T**hey may 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" Niopa 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 changes."

"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."

The sound of The Unthanks has become increasingly cinematic, influenced by contemporaries like the visionary American singer-songwriter Sufjan 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 singer-songwriter Jon Redfern, featuring the reprise "disappointment is every-



Above, The Unthanks, far right, the album *Last*

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where". It was written in response to disillusionment over Britain's invasion 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 again.

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 Elliot* from."

"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 quite 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 comfortable."

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 >

