

BECKY HOBBS
Nanyehi: Beloved
Woman Of The Cherokee
 ★ ★ ★ 1/2



White Wolf On The Horizon / Song Of The Nunnehi / Stickball Song / O Great Spirit / Battle Of Taliwa / Donadagohvi / Little Fellow My Son / Pass The Whiskey / By The Fire / This Land Is Not Our Land / Long Way Over / There Will Be Blood / Pale Moon / The Same Thing / Brave Little Soldier / Let There Be Peace / Nanyehi
 Producer: Duane Sciacqua
Beckaroo
 55:15

America is a strange country. It spent the first half of its history attempting to annihilate its native American people. In the second half, in a complete volte face, Americans began falling over themselves to claim ancestry to some native American tribe or other, presumably to add glamour and fascination to their otherwise rather ordinary white bread existences. Moreover these claims were, and are still, often quite spurious. However, no one could ever claim that country singer Becky Hobbs is less than genuine in her links with native American people. Her fifth great grandmother was a Cherokee woman Nanyehi who accompanied her husband, Kingfisher, to war against the Creek Indians in the 1755 Battle of Taliwa. He was killed but she took up his rifle and led her people to victory. From becoming "war woman" she then stood for "peace among the Cherokee all others". Later she became the anglicised Nancy Ward upon marrying Bryant Ward, a trader of Irish descent. She was bestowed the honour of Ghigua or Beloved Woman, the highest accolade that a Cherokee could be elevated to.

In case you thought I had suddenly become an expert on Native American history and culture, I haven't; no, what little I know is based upon a new album, *Nanyehi*, by Becky Hobbs in commemoration of Nancy Ward and the Cherokee people. *Nanyehi* is also the name of a musical written by Hobbs (with one or two co-writes) and co-playwright Nick Sweet. It is a two act musical and has the seventeen songs found on this album. For anyone not having seen the musical, Hobbs takes us on a narrative trip in the album notes explaining the events that are panning out on stage with each new song. The music is not completely "ethnic", rather a mix of Native American styles - minor modes with fluttering flutes and rattling, chattering percussion - and "western" pop/folk idioms with occasional rock inputs. Hobbs is the vocalist and keyboard player for most of the tracks with occasional vocalists Eddie Dunbar, Benita Hill and most notably Duane Sciacqua taking part.

Special moments come with the incredibly sad and mournful *Donadagohvi (Until We Meet Again)* which Nancy sings at Kingfisher's grave, the angry *This Land Is Not Our Land*, sung by Eddie Dunbar, telling settlers: "this land is not our land, it's only ours to use / it don't belong to me, it don't belong to you" and later: "this land is not our land, it's only ours to use / it don't belong to us, we're only passing through" and the folksy Celticish love duet between Nancy and

Bryant, *Long Way Over*.

Pass The Whiskey is a complete surprise and a dramatic gear change. It's written in a traditional Irish vein, a sort of Dubliners' vibe and is a merry and contagiously happy song sung by Bryant Ward (soon to become the second husband of Nancy) around the trading camp campfire. But for the line "here's to the King of England" this might have become popular amongst Irish folk groups today. Well, maybe.

Every musical must have its stand-alone love song and *Nanyehi* has *Pale Moon*. This is the only song not specifically written for the show having first appeared on Hobb's 1994 *The Boots I Came To Town In*. The late, much-missed Al Moir described it in his review as "rather oriental ...with a melody that sneaks up on you" which description fits it perfectly.

The album finishes in big and expansive fashion with the title track *Nanyehi* (this review is playing havoc with my spellchecker) with its haunting melody and its closing line, "... you will be heard" looped into an infinite fade.

Nanyehi is a bold move indeed for Hobbs but she describes it as "my baby - the project of my life!". Even without ever having seen the musical I was engrossed by its dramatic story line and characterisation and one can only wish it good luck. Move over *Lion King*, roll over *Les Miserables*, step aside Lloyd-Webber, the Beckaroo and *Nanyehi* is coming!

Jon Philibert

