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Bagarap empires (Fred Smith)

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Bagarap empires

Fred Smith

independent release (available www.fredsmith.com.au)

Fred Smith has had an interesting short career as a recording artist. A few songs from his debut *Soapbox* album (1998) received Triple J airplay. Shortly afterwards he traveled to the Solomon Islands as part of the peace monitoring mission. During his stay he recorded an album of peace songs in Melanesian pidgin, and also wrote most of the songs for *Bagarap empires*.

Smith is a singer/songwriter in the political folk music tradition. His lyrics are narratives of his experiences and the experiences of the people he meets. They are at once political and personal, witty and moving, and with a large measure of powerful or clever poetic imagery. On first hearing, Fred Smith's voice sounds raw, but in fact his broad range of vocal delivery styles variously suit the messages and moods of his songs. Although *Bagarap empires* was recorded in a number of cheap studios and domestic locations, the production is pretty good, the backing musicians are mostly excellent, and the arrangements are unique.

Most of the songs on *Bagarap empires* focus on the experiences of the Solomon Islanders. There are songs about the trauma of rape, the deaths of spouses and other family members, the failure of the PNG nation concept, the revenge culture ('pebek'), and attempts to get back to normalcy. Some songs, for example 'When She Cries' and 'Kusi and You', are treated in a suitably sombre and heart-rending manner, while others, for example 'Blue Guitar', present the grim picture in the Solomons in a more humorous manner. There are a few songs of a more personal nature. 'Dark Shadows', for example, reflects on Smith's experience as a young boy when confronting the reality of death for the first time.

Smith uses his own very effective guitar picking style as the basis of the arrangements. To this he adds subtle pedal steel guitar to highlight the emotional impact of songs such as 'When She Cries' and 'The Infinite Ocean'. Violin and cello are also used in judicious ways. The combination of instruments and the interesting way they are used makes the album very special in its genre. Only once, on the song 'Sweet Anne Marie', is the arranging overstated and untidy.

Many parts of this album are particularly infectious. I listened over and over to 'The Infinite Ocean', with its slow bluesy shuffle groove, gentle vocals and magical arrangement, never tiring of its compelling sounds and its universal message: 'The Infinite Ocean is waiting to take you inside'.

