SPOTLIGHT ALBUM: FREAKWATER, Thinking Of You

-Julie Flaskett

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It's been a long six years since the last Freakwater album. *End Time*, appeared at CMP but it's been worth the wait. *Thinking Of You* is a terrific piece of work from Catherine Irwin and Janet Bean, as their voices - hard nasal whines and Emmylou-like overtones - weave around the lines, the pair coming together in a stunning and hypnotic combination. The girls don't exactly harmonise as just sort of sing out at the same time, each seemingly with their own agenda. It's an incredibly effective sound, so suited to their raw, old-timey ballads of heartbreak and despair.

Their songs, too, can be just as startling. Some, lyrically obscure, will have you concentrating hard to make sense of it all, whilst others are slightly unnerving in their simplicity: "I fell like a thing that falls, I crashed like a thing that crashes..." from the hauntingly sad, economically titled "Sap". It's a song that tears at the heart, its sweet melody lingering in the air.

The titles can be as baffling and intriguing as the lyrics, e.g. "Cricket Versus Ant", with its terrific pump organ echoing a rural church, and "Right Brothers", with its strangely halting melody line. The traditional waltz-timed "Loserville" is a more straightforward hillbilly weeper with rolling, tinkling piano notes.

Admittedly, most of the songs are slow, downbeat affairs though occasionally the high, ethereal tones come to the fore, softening the edges, while the amusing '60s pop feel of "So Strange" is a welcome change of pace.

The girls are ably supported by regular band members, bass player Dave Gay and Jon Spiegel on a wonderfully rich pedal steel, while filling out the sound with an odd assortment of instruments, including a strangely appropriate grungy lead guitar, are members of Califone.

Freakwater apparently lost out on a Nashville record deal because of their refusal to compromise their earthy, raw sound, and thank the Lord they did. Freakwater are never, ever going to get played on mainstream country radio, but that's really radio's loss. This isn't music for the faint-hearted - the melodies may be sweet but the vocals are about passion rather than perfect pitching - but I do urge you to make the leap into the intriguing world of Freakwater.