

## 'The Trick of the Lock' review in 'Rythmes Croisés' - Translation

Masterfully unknown in France as a singer-songwriter, (Chris) Judge SMITH nevertheless has a fine musical career to his credit, but only a few aficionados of the group VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR may know of its existence; the British artist who co-founded the group in 1967 before leaving it the following year, his contribution being limited to the first 45 single 'People You Were Going To', and more notably its B side, 'Firebrand', on which he exceptionally provides the lead vocals, in an excessively outrageous theatrical style. It is obviously quite marginal and certainly insufficient to become a cult figure in the sphere of so-called progressive rock. Never mind, Judge SMITH later made a name for himself by writing songs and music for English TV (the program 'Not the Nine O'Clock News'), several musicals in collaboration with Max HUTCHINSON, rock-operas with Lene LOVICH and Peter HAMMILL, for whom he also provided songs that have become classics in their stage repertoires.

It was not until the 1990s that Judge SMITH really began to record his own records, alternating between albums of songs ('Democracy', 'Dome of Discovery', 'The Full English', 'Zoot Suit', 'Old Man in a Hurry') and more experimental ('The Vesica Massage', 'Long-Range Audio Device', 'The Solar Heresies And The Lunar Sequence', 'Towers Open Fire'). But above all, Judge SMITH has established himself in the English marginal landscape by designing "songstories", which are not exactly concept albums, but forms of stories sung and set to music, and for which he involved a large number of musicians, singers and even choirs. Released in 2000, Curly's Airships is his most ambitious "songstory" (a double CD), in which we find his former Vandergraafian friends Hugh BANTON, Peter HAMMILL and David JACKSON, but also Arthur BROWN, John ELLIS, Paul ROBERTS, and many other participants. Later there was 'The Climber', performed entirely by a Norwegian choral ensemble, then 'Orfeas', a reinterpretation of the myth of Orpheus played by seven different ensembles, and the 'Requiem Mass', a rather astonishing Latin mass for the dead, bringing together a choir of fifty voices, plus that of a baritone singer, and about fifteen musicians.

In short, if the work of Judge SMITH is not one that corresponds to the strict stylistic canons of progressive rock (in which it has never sought to fit, any more than does that of Peter HAMMILL, for example), it is nonetheless distinguished by its eclecticism, its originality, its adventurous, innovative approach, while keeping a sense of entertainment. Judge SMITH has also developed a vocal and musical inspiration which is certainly less tortured than that of VDGG, but nevertheless singular, with theatrical accents and often a satirical vision. The muse of Judge SMITH, now 74 years old, does not seem to want to sleep, since here comes a new album – his seventeenth! – which seems to be a new challenge for the most offbeat singer and composer in the VDGG family. Against all odds, Judge has wiped the slate clean of his delusions of grandeur, Spanish inn-style creations and emphatic arrangements to favour a pure approach, exclusively in voice and piano mode! Unlike Peter HAMMILL, who has been practicing this since his beginnings, Judge SMITH had not yet tried this adventure!

But Judge not really being a pianist, he preferred to have only his voice be heard here and to call on the talent of a real pianist, in this case Robert PETTIGREW, who has long been active in the world of theatre in Edinburgh. It was at the Traverse Theatre in the Scottish capital

that the two men first met, while Judge was working on the comedy 'The Kibbo Kift' in 1976. They started working together again in 2021, and it was then that Judge decided to record his first disc in vocal-piano mode, a formula he has always loved, having been influenced by the work of several English comedians, including FLANDERS & SWANN.

The Trick of the Lock is truly the work of a duo: Judge SMITH provided the words and music, and Robert PETTIGREW made the piano arrangements, while assisting Judge on vocals at times. Being accompanied by only one instrument pushed Judge SMITH to shape his vocal work even more, more exposed in the mix and propelled by the sophisticated and dynamic arrangements of Robert PETTIGREW's piano and backing vocals.

The result is ten songs that are nicely stripped down but no less cleverly put together, with convoluted and sinuous melodies, sometimes set with subtle rhythmic breaks, but remaining accessible with catchy choruses with texts that are, however, very detailed, cultivating smiling observation, a satirical gaze, vaudeville slyness, smart and sharp rhyme, or critical fantasy.

Where his former vandeergaafian colleague emphatically denounces "bloody emperors" or comments ironically, in heavy rock mode, on the early symptoms of senility, Judge SMITH elegantly curbs false prophets ('Cosmic Commodore') or has fun, with a pinch of melodic exoticism, about no longer complying with social consumption standards ('Best Before').

Whether he casually sneers at those political "missionaries" who cause egalitarian structures to drift ('Mission Creep') or deplors, in a somewhat funereal mode, the vagaries of the growth of this little flower called Democracy ('The Little Flower'), or is tenderly ironic about the little arrangements that everyone feels obliged to make with existence ('Skin in the Game') or kindly slaps the two-speed functioning of Lady Justice ('Nothing to See Here'), or reciting, with great literary pomp, the various instances of the name Mercury ('Mercury') or whether he is confident about the tomorrows that some persist in scaring us with ('Another Day'), Judge SMITH has this gift of juggling, between little stories, individuals, societal facts, national fissures and philosophical metaphors by surreptitiously masking troubles beneath a smile.

Non-English speakers would be well advised to listen to these "skeleton songs" by following the texts reproduced in the booklet, they will discover there a sagacious and clairvoyant pen under its playful and smiling surface. More than ever with 'The Trick of the Lock', Judge SMITH hones his status as an endearing "English songwriter". He had never delivered himself in such a sober and acoustic mode. Notice to those who were closed to his "songstory" albums: this one could well provide the key that opens the lock and unlocks his spirit.

Stephane Fougere

Website: [www.judge-smith.com](http://www.judge-smith.com)

Page: <https://judgesmith1.bandcamp.com/album/the-trick-of-the-lock-2>