

# Sam Lee, *Old Wow*, review: folk tradition brought brilliantly up to date

*Old Wow* is Sam Lee's third album.



CREDIT: DOMINICK TYLER/COOKING VINYL

[Neil McCormick](#), MUSIC CRITIC  
30 JANUARY 2020 • 11:30AM

“Wow” seems an appropriate response to this sublime album, an exclamation of amazement that has the zing of a modern buzzword but actually dates back to the early 16th century. Sam Lee’s *Old Wow* is a spine-tingling collection of traditional songs, artfully reinterpreted for contemporary ears and concerns. It is folk music that demands to be heard in the 21st century.

Lee, a 39-year-old Londoner, works with the Song Collectors Collective to preserve material from aural traditions of the British Isles. His own recorded work, though, is concerned less with historic preservation than with relevance, seeking out the timeless qualities that can cut through folk’s mustier tendencies.

His 2012 debut album, *Ground On Its Own*, received a Mercury Prize nomination, attracting critical attention with its striking blend of field recordings and exotic

instrumentation. There were signs of progression on 2015's *The Fade In Time* but Lee's long-awaited third album operates at a masterful new level of sophistication.

This is his first album to feature electric guitar, played by producer Bernard Butler, once axe hero of Britpop pioneers Suede. Yet there is nary a hint of rock swagger in these sinuous arrangements that merge into tapestries of atmospheric sound, configured around the jazzy flow of pianist James Keay, double bassist Misha Mullov-Abbado and percussionist Josh Green.

While entirely analogue, the mood has something in common with the dreamy, downtempo pop of Lana Del Rey and Billie Eilish. Perhaps it is a particularly intimate focus on the voice; like Eilish and Del Rey, Lee sings with a quality of understatement that nevertheless conjures intense emotional presence.

Lee is an exquisite vocalist whose gentle, pure tone takes the centre, dictating rhythmic fluctuations that quicken and slow with his delivery. He has learnt his art from a cappella folk singers, but he softens the droning edges for modern sensibilities, making notes stretch, float, bend and flutter melodiously.

Liz Fraser of the Cocteau Twins joins him on a secular interpretation of gipsy carol "The Moon Shines Bright", singing a spooky refrain from folk standard "Wild Mountain Thyme" in her equally immaculate voice as Lee plays with the punning metaphor "For our time is not long/ Time's an old folk song." Throughout *Old Wow*, Lee offers a novel spin on ancient lyrics, as folk singers have done through the ages, introducing such anachronistic terminology as "liminal" and "anima". A committed environmental activist, he sets out his stall on the bold and beautiful opening track "The Garden of England (Seeds of Love)", celebrating "the songs that tell of our own kith and kin/ The old wow never wears thin".

The album is divided into three sections, "Heart", "Hearth" and "Earth". From a brooding interpretation of American spiritual song "Lay This Body Down" to his hypnotic reinvention of English counting song "Soul Cake" ("One for the seas, two for the soil/ Three for a spin on this mortal coil") and a tender reading of mountain ballad "Balfanen" ("I will build my love a bower/ By yon clear crystal fountain"), Lee's expert curation conflates the preservation of our folk heritage with conservation of natural resources. In the age of the Anthropocene, pop can't get much more timely than that.

***Old Wow* is released by Cooking Vinyl Records on January 31.**