Stuart George
listens to
Esteesee
by Ange Hardy
(Story Records, 2015)

AWARD-WINNING SINGER-SONGWRITER ANGE HARDY is Somerset-born and continues to live there but had never heard of STC until she realised that he was the inspiration for the Coleridge Way, a 51-mile footpath opened in 2005 that runs from Nether Stowey to Lynmouth. Having fallen under STC's spell, a Lottery-funded Arts Council grant was given to Hardy to enable her to compose and record her fourth album *Esteesee*.

Hardy has written 14 songs "inspired by the life and work" of Coleridge. Only "The Curse of a Dead Man's Eye", which uses some lines from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and "Kubla Khan", which features a hushed reading by Tamsin Rosewell of the poem above a guitar and dulcimer arrangement, are direct borrowing from Coleridge. But *Esteesee* is not just Coleridge's poetry set to music, à la "Léo Ferré chante Baudelaire": these original compositions have an interest of their own.

The songs embrace Coleridge's life up to 1798, though there is more than enough drama in his first 26 years to inspire an opera of Wagnerian dimensions. The themes are well-chosen and pertinent, such as Coleridge's relationship with William and Dorothy Wordsworth ("Friends of Three"); Coleridge's older brother George, who was such an important influence on him in his early years ("George"); and the optimistic attempt at Pantisocracy ("Pantisocracy"). It's a good overview of the young Coleridge, though perhaps something about his relationship with Mary Evans could have been included.

Do not expect eolian harps and loud bassoons. Hardy is a self-described "folk songwriter and singer", though she performs her own original material rather than traditional songs. Her music is based on folk genre traditions, though defining what "folk" is can be challenging. As a broad definition, folk music is performed using acoustic instruments and employs certain traditional scales and time signatures. "Might Is in The Mind" stands out as not being particularly folk-influenced, the descending violin and vocal lines having a semi-classical feel.

What distinguishes Hardy's music are the lush vocal arrangements, constructed for a recording with multi-tracking and in live performances with a loop machine. This Phil Spector-like "wall of sound" technique creates the illusion of multiple singing voices in the folk tradition of harmony singing, as demonstrated by the first bars of the opening track "The Foster-Mother's Tale". Steve Knightley's vocals on "Mother You Will Rue Me" contrasts to the mostly female voices on the rest of the album. The vocals are typical of folk singing styles: semi-spoken, with little or no vibrato; few or no sustained notes;

and highly rhythmic. "My Captain" is a good example of the clipped delivery that is so typical of English folk singing.

Hardy herself plays guitar, traditional whistle, and harp. She is accompanied by several very fine musicians and readers, including David Milton, the Watchet town crier. The songs are always melodic and fit the lyrics and poetry well, though the macabre line "as death in life finds life in death" is incongruous to the jolly tune of the closing track "Elegy for Coleridge".

Essteesee fits into the not always reputable history of the "concept album", in which a collection of songs fits into a larger overall theme or narrative. Coleridge has previously been the inspiration for recordings by David Bedford and the British heavy metal group Iron Maiden. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was set to music by Bedford in 1975 and featured a cast of thousands as per the then fashionable "progressive rock" bombast and self-indulgence. The album's credits include "Choir (Singers)—Classes 2 And 3, From Queen's College, London". Instruments played by David Bedford include "Grand Piano, Organ, Strings (Piano Strings), Recorder (Descant and Treble), Chimes (Chime Bars), Flute (Swanee), Violin, Cymbal, Gong". After all that, one can only hope that Bedford "A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn."

Iron Maiden's 13-minute take on the Mariner from 1984 is characteristically overblown, all thudding drums and bass with squealing guitars. By contrast, only four of the songs on *Esteesee* exceed three minutes in length. Neither Maiden nor Bedford grasped that what defines "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", as well as the other poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, is the beautifully unadorned language. If the poems are to be set to music, then the accompaniment needs to be without "gaudiness and inane phraseology". Ange Hardy understands this. Indeed, she barely puts a foot wrong and it's hard to imagine what she could have done better in this extremely accomplished work. The CD's packaging is beautifully presented in a gatefold sleeve that contains a 35-page booklet. The only slip is a reference to "the American painter Washington Allston who painted the portrait of George on page 19." The painting is Allston's 1814 portrait of Coleridge, not brother George.

Essteesee is great introduction to Coleridge for the neophyte and a thoroughly enjoyable concept for those more familiar with his life and work.