

Steve Forbert and The Soundbenders/Southern Tenant Folk Union - Dingwalls, London 17th January 2008

Review by Jonathan Aird

Having seen Steve solo a couple of times in the last few years I was interested to see what he'd be like with a full band. Hopefully it would help overcome what has been clearly an annoyance to him in the past - audience members being distracting. Arguably he should just put up with this and play through it, but certainly the last time I saw him he was not happy with one persistent offender!

The second interesting thought was that it's thirty years since his first album "Alive on Arrival" was released, something of a milestone which surely will have an influence on the playlist, although he does have another new album out as well. What would have happened without the years of recording hiatus following his fourth album is of course an impossible question to answer, but he's clearly been making up for lost time over the last few years. The "new Dylan" tag was, of course, a curse, and he isn't Dylan, but he is a songwriter of some clout.

Dingwalls is an odd venue, small, and predominantly seated - tables and rather uncomfortable chairs that leave your clothes smelling of sick. It's probably only with the smoking ban that you get to notice these things - and at least this way it's only the clothes that end up smelling bad ! I got up by the small stage - I'd rather be standing, but that clearly wouldn't go down well with those seated behind me. Looking around I got the odd feeling that, bar staff apart, I'm about the youngest person in the room. That's not an overly good feeling.

The support band was Southern Tenant Folk Union - a five piece of upright bass, violin, mandolin and two acoustic guitars. They are playing without their banjo player, which is a pity. They quote The Carter family and Dillard & Clarke as influences, and they play a hot bluegrass sound, touched with a leavening of Gram Parsons (on the eerie Cocaine) and yes a few licks that the latter-day Byrds would certainly have played. This is indeed a good band. They bash out a 45 minute set which includes Cocaine, Changeling Child, Let it roll, her love's gone cold, and Blackjack David - introduced as a traditional folk song they learnt off an Incredible String Band album ! A good ensemble, I particularly enjoyed Eamonn Flynn's powering mandolin.

Steve and the Soundbenders came out after a very short interval. The soundbenders are Steve Allen (electric lead guitar), Bobby Lloyd Hicks (drums), and Lorne Rall (electric bass). Steve kicked right into Thinkin' (off Alive on Arrival) and everything was as I'd hoped it might be. The band lifted Steve and he seemed in good spirits and unfazed by anything (except perhaps when the spot lights were put into his eyes !).

There followed a great set (full list at the end) with a mixture of mainly the first album, Alive on Arrival, the new album, Strange names & new sensations, and tracks from The American in me (early 1990's). Mixed in was Ray Davies' Starstruck which seems to be a staple of his set and a few oddments from along the way. The middle of the set was the "fossil fuels" section - Baghdad Dream, The American in Me with it's driving theme and the crowd pleasing ecological concerned Oil Song, which was a single that was put out around the time of Jack Rabbit Slim ("but, it's on The Best Of...do we have The Best Of tonight ? Sorry, we don't have The Best Of tonight"). Steve did Grand Central Station and Middle Age with just him and acoustic guitar/harmonica, representing the oldest and the newest songs - the young kid busking for change and the somewhat older man reflecting on life passed being more than life left to come, a theme which also came up on Thirty More Years (and I'm out of here) which is also on the new album. Straight forward reflections that life is not infinite, time passes and you get older. Steve seems comfortable with this.

The Jimmy Rodgers song - Miss the mississippi and you - was met politely. It's understandable that Steve would be interested in a famous singer from his hometown, and since his album of covers earned a Grammy nomination I guess he's got good reason to be proud of his work on it. I guess that Jimmy Rodgers is just not that big a thing over here, and the audience seemed relieved when the "couple of Jimmy Rodgers songs" turned out to be just one.

Sure was better back then was introduced with a discussion of where Jimmi Hendrix had lived in London, and also garnered us some fine guitar work from Steve Allen. In response to calls for Romeo's Tune Steve called back "that one comes at the end", so it was bitter sweet to hear those opening chords, but what a fantastic song it is with the full band, underlining the folk-rock magnificence of Steve's first two albums. At the end the audience was on it's feet calling for more, but from previous experience I was a little doubtful of our chances, but no - out came the band again. A two song encore, then off, and the crowd were up and stomping for more. When Bobby Lloyd Hicks & Lorne Rall reappeared on stage I must admit I just thought they were collecting their gear. I noticed that several people had already left. We clapped on, and beyond any expectation there it was - a second encore of Get Well Soon off Little Stevie Orbit (his third album currently lost to CD release along with the eponymous fourth album). Not a song I'd ever expected to hear live, but driven along by the band it was as good as the day it was recorded. The boy has done it again !

Set List

Thinkin'
Real Live Love
Born Too Late
Going down to Laurel
Starstruck
I just work here
Miss the mississippi and you
Baghdad dream
American in me
Oil song
Grand Central Station
Middle Age
What kinda guy ?
Seaside brown-eyed girl
Baby don't
Sure was better back then
Loch Lomond / Midsummer Night's Toast
Dream
Romeo's Tune

Encore 1:

Thirty more years
Cannot win if you do not play

Encore 2:
Get well soon