

Southern Tenant Folk Union: The Maze, Nottingham, March 22nd

There were four vocal mikes positioned across the raised corner of the room on what is euphemistically called a stage at the Maze in Nottingham. Behind the microphones lay an upright double bass, its back to the audience, no longer upright, asleep, waiting. At the side of the stage there was a small table covered with a green cotton table cloth and a table lamp placed on it; a tasselled, flowery lampshade. It was like something out of a Terrence Rattigan play, or part of a seedy Soho strip-joint from the Sixties. What sort of a five piece acoustic band, already intimately close to each other from the way the microphones were spaced, could afford to waste room on ambience or effect? After all, Southern Tenant Folk Union were going to be taking up almost as much space on stage as their name. Perhaps they were looking to seat an honoured guest during their set; Alan Cackett, editor of Maverick magazine, was, after all, somewhere in the audience.

Four guys in dark shirts and grey suits wandered on. The suits were formal but a little creased, they were clean cut, earnest looking, funereal; a librarian's convention on a sight seeing tour of the local mortuary. They looked a little Gilbert and George, a little scary. A girl in a dress with a fiddle joined them. She had red hair and the dress was pale with a green mottled pattern, layered, delicate, like a Botticelli painting. Frances Vaux may come from Australia but she looked a little like Sissy Spacek, the Coal Miner's Daughter period, all dressed up, on the edge of the stage, not quite with the guys, a little lost, a little beautiful; this was a scene from a David Lynch film and the band hadn't played a note. Pat McGarvey leaned into his microphone and said who they were and what they did. He slapped and scratched his banjo, percussive stabs, and gave everyone else in the band, the violin, the mandolin, the guitar and double bass, the chance to join in, get up to speed. It was an opening, an instrumental, nothing much, seemed to be a little low key, a little disappointing and then they moved, seamlessly, into the smoothest, blue-grass tinged, measured, acoustic country singing and playing you could wish for this side of the Atlantic. Southern Tenant Folk Union may come from Irish London with an Australian fiddle addition but there was more than a hint of Appalachian white gospel in their playing; the banjo picking always chuckling through the mix, letting you know where the music came from, if not the band.

The first song *Sweeter Times*, with its "Hello sweet darlin' oh, how I missed you" had all the elements; the main vocal from Pat with the high harmony from guitar player Oliver Talkes. But, in the next song, when Oliver took the main vocal, and Eamon Flynn on mandolin took over the high lonesome sound, they seemed to be up somewhere beyond the human frequencies, into the territory where only dogs, wolves and mountain music fanatics roam with impunity. Matt Lloyd played the upright double bass notes through the floor directly into you and who can fail to be anything but charmed by that wonderfully warm, totally absurd instrument; never easy to carry around as they don't come flat-packed from Ikea. It would be wrong, however, to pick out the ability of this band to do just blue-grass flavoured, measured, acoustic country music. Yes, of course they can do it, and they seem to be in good company these days because there are quite a few really good bands in this country doing just that already, but they can do more with the genre than just showcase it; they have their own twist, their own signature. They may have a passion for the instrumental props and arrangements of the Thirties and Forties, when acoustic string band music was about to rule the valve radio air waves, but they take the imagery and the phrasing of the times and the sparse, more threadbare, moments in the music, and write 'modern' songs, or at least songs that

explore universal feelings and anxieties, while they celebrate a heritage and a tradition. They did some songs that defied easy description other than to say they were nerve tingling and exciting both at the same time; eerie, beautiful and ultimately disturbing. Matt's upright double bass thumping a heart beat pulse; an intensive care, heart monitor, flat-line vibrato from Eamon's mandolin; foot stamping coffin percussion from Pat's banjo; funeral parlour harmonies, moving into some dark territory, chilling, where the banjo was no longer a grin but a sad sigh, and the fiddle, a long moan for the whole of humanity; still, sad music that both celebrated life and mourned it for its brevity.

Blue grass music doesn't just reward tight playing it depends upon it; you cannot enjoy that driving, careering, almost out of control, helter-skelter sound unless it is totally under the control of the musicians who are playing. Southern Tenant Folk Union are good musicians; everything is measured, carefully layered, to get that enviable, easy feel. They use the eerie harmonies, the parlour ballad restraint, the sweet and sour taste at the heart of old time mountain music, to sing songs about life's ultimate promises and threats.

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