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Southern Tenant Folk Union  
St John's Arts Centre, Listowel

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If there's one thing that sets bluegrass and old time American music apart, it's their inherent devil-may-care attitude, their defiant refusal to be constrained by the laws of physics that govern the rest of us lesser mortals. Odd then, that the Southern Tenant Folk Union should cut such a restrained shape on stage, coralling rather than unleashing their genteel ensemble sound.

St John's Arts Centre provided a welcome backdrop for the Folk Union's first tour outside of the UK. Granted, their genetic lineage owes more to south London than it does to the deep South, but still, Pat McGarvey and his band of (not quite) merry men and woman would inject some much-needed vim into their highly original set list if they just gave themselves permission to loosen up and fly right, just as Mose Allison would've urged them, had he ventured in the direction of north Kerry on this night.

Eamonn Flynn's songwriting provides the Folk Union with a handful of superb calling cards, each one tapping into the deliciously esoteric inheritance left over by the Stanley Brothers, the Carter Family and Flatt and Scruggs. *The Suitor's Lament* cast a wry smile over the many amorous adventures of musicians ever-blessed, or cursed, by their chosen instrument, with, for once, the banjo player garnering all the laurels, while the Union's next single, *Cocaine*, was a fine study of the dark underbelly of the nose candy that's become a staple of dinner parties from Derbyshire to Doolin.

Overly reliant on vocalist and guitarist Oliver Talkes, who bears closer kinship to Don Henley than to Ralph Stanley, this Folk Union shimmies and sways at times to Frances Vaux's irritatingly self-effacing fiddle (at times barely audible) and Pete Gow's competent but reserved guitar and vocals. McGarvey's front-of-house duties salvages his decidedly shakey vocals, and he counters his easy banter with a well-targeted salvo towards apathetic electorates everywhere on *Mesopotamia*, surely the most politically-charged bluegrass specimen ever to raise a hackle either north or south of the Mason Dixon line.

Without a strong vocalist to navigate the high Cs so beloved of bluegrass the Folk Union still managed to hawk some charming wares through a meadow strewn with bluegrass, gospel, soul and English folk. It was a mix 'em, gather 'em that whispered of some promise, if only they'd jettison a tincture of their self-possession and throw caution to the wind.