

The Scotsman Review Album Launch Show 12th Jan 2013

Gig review: Southern Tenant Folk Union, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh

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Published on **Saturday 12 January 2013 01:34**

IT FEELS safe to say there are no other folk and roots rock troupes out there quite like Edinburgh octet Southern Tenant Folk Union.

Southern Tenant Folk Union
Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh

Performing here on the back of their recent fifth album Hello Cold Goodbye Sun, it seems they've cornered the market in delicately composed acoustic Americana with a heavy hint of post-apocalyptic sci-fi permeating the lyrics.

Singer and banjo player Pat McGarvey insisted "about 13.2 per cent" of their back catalogue enjoys such a preoccupation, but somehow it felt like more.

A subscription to Interzone isn't required to enjoy the music, however. McGarvey may have pointed out the song Crash's influential origin as being JG Ballard's identically titled book – "Autoerotica and car crash sexuality are actually good metaphors for the economy," he struggled to explain, "it's quite complicated, but here's a three-minute summary" – yet the music was an atmospheric blend of nerve-twitching mandolin and banjo laid over sinister, slow violin and clarinet strains.

Similarly, The Men in Robes may be about "if big business was a religion, like in Rollerball", but the levels of political allegory in its lyrics were satisfying.

Elsewhere the stripped-down, Ewan MacIntyre-sung A Relic of a Reasonable Mind recalled Nick Drake, while fiddle player Carrie Thomas' vocal parts were particularly haunting. Chest Fever reflected not so much The Band's song of the same name as a kind of bluegrass Jeff Wayne's War of the Worlds, bringing both sides of this band's unlikely muse together in a distinctive and skilfully composed whole.

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