The Friday Session - Carlisle Blues Rock Festival, 28 September 2018

It’s Friday, it’s 5 to 7, and it’s standing room only in the ballroom of the Crown & Mitre Hotel as we arrive for our first visit to the Carlisle Blues Rock Festival.  But it turns out to be well worth standing for the duration to see the four acts on offer.

First up are local favourites **Redfish**, and they turn in a much stronger performance than when I last saw them, in a support slot in Edinburgh. They deliver a solid set of old school R’n’B, with warm vocals and relaxed patter from bunnet-wearing front man Stumblin’ Harris.

There are funky undercurrents on the likes of Bill Withers’ ‘Use Me Up’, with nimble bass from Rod Mackay and some neat drumming diversions as a bonus.

Their own material fits in well alongside a punchy version of ‘Messin’ With The Kid’ and Magic Sam’s ‘Every Night And Every Day’, with measured solos from guitarist Martin McDonald and boogieing piano from all action keys man Fraser Clark.  It all adds up to an entertaining set that has me acquiring their new EP at the interval.

The **Chris Bevington Organisation**have produced one of the albums of the year so far with *Cut And Run*, so I was looking forward to seeing them live, and they didn’t disappoint. With a nine-piece line-up it’s no wonder that other commitments mean there are stand-ins depping for two of three of the usual band, and sadly this includes guitarist and core contributor Jim Kirkpatrick.  I suspect the loss of his interaction with co-conspirator and vocalist/guitarist Scott Ralph dilutes the dynamic of this ensemble affair a bit, but Jordan Swann does a good job of filling in.  He contributes a sizzling lead guitar intro on ‘Coming Down With The Blues’, eloquent playing on ‘Tin Pan Alley’, and a squealing solo on the excellent ‘Got To Know’. The last of these also features pumping bass from Chris Bevington, gutsy rhythm playing from Ralph, and strong punctuation all round.

‘Better Start Cookin’’ features a trumpet solo and call and response organ and guitar, underlining the variety they can bring to bear.  Ralph fronts operations with brio, and by the time they get to ‘Ain’t Got Nobody To Love’ his Cheshire Cat grin sums up the enjoyment both on and off the stage. They close their 50 minute set with the totally danceable ‘Rollin’’, closing a live show that emulates the vibrancy of their latest album.

**Elles Bailey**is a more soulful proposition, but gets the ball rolling with a couple of familiar barn-burners in the form of ‘Let Me Hear You Scream’ and ‘Same Flame’ from her album *Wildfire*, before offering us something new in the form of the soulful ‘What’s The Matter’.  A cover of Levon Helm’s ‘When I Go Away’ suits her nicely, with some very Stax-like keys from stand-in ivory tinkler James Graham, and some good vocal interplay to boot. Depping drummer Craig Connett also shows up well, with good cymbal work to rev up the intensity on the Muscle Shoals tribute ‘Perfect Storm’, with its strong melody, while another newie in the form of ‘Medicine Man’ is offbeat, driving and dynamic, with appealing slide from Joe Wilkins.

‘Shackles Of Love’ continues to be my favourite among her material though – a song with a great hook that wouldn’t be out of place on a Bonnie Raitt album.

She tells us that another new song, the thumping, train-like ‘The Road I Call Home’ will be the title track to her new album in the spring, before returning to familiar territory with the emotive ‘Girl Who Owned The Blues’, with its stomping conclusion, and ‘Wildfire’ with its moody slide solo from Wilkins.

Elles Bailey’s amiably daft and self-deprecating chat always makes for an engaging performance.  But more to the point she has a great voice, strong original material, and bags of potential still to be explored.

Topping the bill for the night is **Ian Siegal**, who has gone way past the point of being described in terms of potential.  Still, I do believe that he’s found another gear this year with the release of his latest album *All The Rage*.  Coming on wearing a headband, with his festival lanyard flapping around his knees, he eases in with the characteristic, immediately sing-able melody of ‘Shotgun Rider’.  He and the band raise the temperature with the clacking favourite ‘I Am The Train’, with inimitable guitarist Dusty Cigaar being – well, inimitably Dusty.  But they really hit the bullseye with ‘The Shit Hit’, on which a wild slide solo from Siegal is a prelude to a bout of finger wagging, electrifying truth telling.  On an entirely different note, the classic blues of ‘John The Revelator’ interpolates ‘Back Door Man’ in rowdy fashion, and leads to an outbreak of dancing from some of the ladies.  Then it’s back to Siegal at his most withering with ‘Eagle-Vulture’, its spiky guitar line embellished by wafting notes from Cigaar.

A different kind of highlight comes with the North Mississippi Hill Country blues of CeDell Davies’s ‘She’s Got The Devil In Her’.  It’s followed by ‘Gallo Del Cielo’, which apparently a patron begged for tonight, and on which the poor damn chicken inevitably meets a sticky end once again, before Siegal closes out the night with the lovely ‘Sweet Souvenir’.

The clock strikes twelve and it’s time to head for bed.  Will twelve hours be enough to let us rest up for the next day’s fun and games?

The Saturday Sessions - Carlisle Blues Rock Festival, 29 September 2018

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

It’s the afternoon after the morning after the night before.  Saturday afternoon that is, around about lunchtime, and the Carlisle Blues Rock Festival is getting under way again.  It’s a gentle warm-up in the semi-acoustic hands of **Jon Bowie and Phil Saunders**, with the former delivering some hypnotic acoustic picking, and slide on a resonator, while Saunders plays an assortment of oddball guitars, a box with a foot pedal, and harp on a rack.  Their relaxed set includes Dylan’s ‘Crash On The Levee’, the rhythmic, pulsing ‘Stranger Blues’, and a highly effective folky reworking of ‘Johnny B. Goode’, featuring fluid interweaving of picked guitars to conjure up an elegiac mood.

Then we get a sideways step from folk blues to post-war jump blues’n’jive in the hands of the **Deke McGee Band**, led by the sharp-suited cool dude Mr McGee on sax and vocals.  Right from the off, with the honking ‘Gravy Train’, it’s toe-tapping, hand-jiving stuff.  There’s a slower groove to Eddie Vincent’s ‘Kidney Stew’, with jazzy, brittle-toned guitar from Conor Smith, who later produces a great solo on the uptempo dance number ‘Jumpin’ Jesus Holy Cow’, from Deke’s 2016 album *All Night Long*.  Along the way Tim Brough garnishes ‘Mr Cornbread’ with excellent honky tonk piano to go with David Stone’s bouncing drums, and also adds the woogie to ‘Swanee River Boogie’.  Hank Williams’ ‘Jambalaya’ is a delightfully swinging affair, with great stand-up bass from guest Al Gare.  It’s all a bit incongruous at half one in the afternoon, but with McGee’s sax playing at its core it’s a quality display of what “small big band” vintage R’n’B is all about.

A bit of time travel is needed after that to get in synch with the sound of **Rainbreakers**.  On opener ‘Need Your Love’ the Shrewsbury four-piece meld funky, driven riffing with soulful but gutsy vocals from rhythm guitarist Ben Edwards and a balls-out solo from lead guitarist Charlie Richards.  It’s the start of an impressive set drawing heavily on their debut album *Face To Face*.  ‘Got Me Where She Wants’, with its stop-start riff, features some very Hendrixy guitar and a big bass motif from Peter Adams, but they’re also capable of more laid-back sounding funk on ‘Set Yourself Free’, and blissed-out soul-blues on ‘Lost With You’ - introduced as “totally a love song” and displaying good variation as well as some novel guitar-vocal harmonising that could have been extended. The slow and suspenseful ‘On My Knees’ is just one example of their strong songwriting, with a quavering vocal from Edwards and a tough bridge.  And there’s more variety in the form of ‘Waiting On You/Moving On’, with its shimmering wah-wah and cymbal intro, and delicate strumming a la ‘Rain Song’, and an impressively soulful vocal at its heart.  It’s different, and also bravely sparse, whereas the following ‘I’ll Be Ready Now’ explodes into life with a big riff and crashing drums. Mid-tempo but weighty, it showcases a howling solo from Richards ahead of a powerful finish, and garners a big round of applause from the crowd.

Edwards makes a frank admission of his connection to the issues of mental health that inspired set closer ‘Heavy Soul’, and the honesty is done justice with effective use of distorted chords over a heavy drum beat, a rattling riff courtesy of both guitars, and some audience participation over wailing guitar notes.  Job done, Rainbreakers appeared to be shifting a bundle of CDs to new fans at their merch stall, and justifiably so.  They’re a sophisticated band, worthy of continuing attention.

Closing the afternoon session, **The Stumble** are everything I hoped they would be on my first encounter with them live.  They let loose with three salvos from their rollicking 2016 album *The Other Side*, with opener ‘Just Stop’ inspiring an immediate outbreak of dancing in the corner of the room.

From the git go, singer Paul Melville simply owns the room, blending powerful vocals with teeth-clenching passion and wry schtick as they crank out hugely entertaining songs from the pen of drummer Boyd Tonner.  They’ve been at it a long time these guys, and know exactly what they’re about.  Tonner, along with bassist Cameron Sweetnam and guitarist Ant Scapens, dig out deep foundations over which Melville leads from the front, ably supported by sax man Simon Anthony Dixon and lead guitarist Colin Black, who rocks a Billy Gibbons look resplendent in long coat, long beard, and big hat, and delivers a great slide solo on ‘New Orleans’.

Frankly I’m having too much fun for systematic notes, but ‘My Life’ is a ballad with heartfelt vocals from Melville and a defiant uptempo coda, ‘C’mon Pretty Baby’ is rock’n’rollin’ R’n’B that brings to mind Bob Seger, and ‘Bus Stop’ (I think) is Stax-like soul featuring squealing sax from Dixon.

A new song called ‘Walk In The Park’ (maybe) has a restrained verse and tough, staccato chorus, building to a wild guitar/sax collision and a ballistic finish, before a big bluesy ballad dedicated to BB King.  But these are details.  The Stumble are a band built to entertain, and they do it with a bluesy rock’n’roll brew that’s all their own.  Catch ‘em if you can.

SATURDAY NIGHT

Saturday night at the Crown & Mitre Hotel, and it’s time for action again at the Carlisle Blues Rock Festival.

John Bowie and Phil Saunders return to get the ball rolling with a more electrified set than in the afternoon, with a half-hour segue-way of rolling, pulsing blues including ‘Just In Time’ and ‘Roadhouse Blues’.  Bowie is on electric guitar this time, serving up some delicious warm tones, while Saunders lays down a percussive groove, weaves in more guitar, and injects occasional harp to boot.  Then they pick up the pace towards the end, revving everyone up for the rest of the evening.

**Northsyde** follow, fronted by husband and wife duo Jules and Lorna Fothergill on guitar and vocals and respectively.  It’s the first time I’ve come across them, and the immediate impression generated by Lorna Fothergill’s singing is, basically, holy cow!  The woman has a resonant, rhythmic voice with buckets of oomph to spare.  “Tina Turner”, it says in my notes – which is bizarre, given that we’re talking about a woman whose look is tall, blonde, sinuous and slinky.  Whatever, she puts it out there with style and conviction, while the rest of the band cook up a funky groove, and husband Jules weighs in with a spot-on solo.

They follow that up with ‘Who’s Been Talking?’, on which Fothergill’s vocal gets fathoms-deep – though it soon becomes clear that she can go both low and high with equal facility. The arc of their reading goes from a quiet opening, through some jazzy and smoky moments, towards a well honed dying ending.

They get funky again on ‘Cherry Picking’, lock tight, punctuating the arrangement stylishly, and playing with smiles on their faces – Lorna, is visibly *into*it, while Jules watches her moves with a grin on his face and a glint in his eye.  ‘Tuesday’s Flowers’ is a new song with a deeply Stevie Wonder-like bass line, and a solo from Jules that recalls Steely Dan.

Apparently Northsyde have a penchant for bending and twisting covers, and tonight’s selection is ‘In The Air Tonight’ – yep, the Phil Collins song.  They take it a bit more uptempo, with a ton of reverb on the vocal.  It’s less tense/intense than the original, but still cleverly done, and La Fothergill carries it off in the mode of an old-fashioned rock chick in a smart black dress.  This is nothing though, compared to the following ‘Travelling Shoes’, which starts with a spartan beat over which Fothergill delivers a bravura, gospel-style vocal – growling, soaring, with skilful melisma, the woman is stupendous. Not to be outdone, Jules produces a great solo, buzzing, halting, diving and dashing, as a prelude to another beautifully controlled quiet ending.

That’s the highlight of a set that then shifts through a version of ‘Today I Sing The Blues’ that could be a bit more down to earth, with a less jazzy guitar solo, to the Allman Brothers’ ‘Whipping Post’ on which they deliver an all out instrumental section, and finally a mash-up of ‘Smokestack Lightning’ and ‘Spoonful’ on which they give it large.  Northsyde may not quite have a stand-out, signature sound of their own, but they’re not run of the mill either, and in Lorna Fothergill they sure have a knock-your-socks-off singer.

Having seen **Mike Vernon and the Mighty Combo** at the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival, we decide to retire to the bar for a while which gives us the chance to regroup in readiness for the night’s headliners, **Thorbjørn Risager & The Black Tornado**.

And their headline status is justified, because Denmark's finest are a very good band. I mean, *really* good.  From the first bars of ‘If You Wanna Leave’, with its crunking, Quo-like, two-guitar riff, the space between the stage and the front row of seats is immediately filled with dancing punters, and by the time Hans Nybo rips out a wild sax solo the blue touch paper is well and truly lit.  They follow that up with the stomping, Stonesy groove of ‘Maybe It’s Alright’, with its big soulful melody, swirling keys, and sizzling solo from Peter Skjerning.

You know what?  A few years ago I was in a pub when a covers band started knocking out hits by the Stones, the Who, Bad Company et al, and the clientele, of a similar vintage to me, couldn’t help but get up and dance.  Thorbjørn and chums have exactly that effect – and with fresh, original material that absolutely stands comparison with those classics.

As they go on to prove by knocking out the funkier ‘Paradise’, before cooling things off with ‘I Used To Love You’, a beautifully constructed song that’s restrained but has all the right parts in place, and features a lovely solo from Risager as the icing on the cake. And these songs slot into their set alongside cyclonic (geddit?) reworkings of blues standards like ‘Baby Please Don’t Go’ and ‘Let The Good Times Roll’.

An injection of piano boogie from Emil Balsgaard gradually leads into the rock’n’roll of ‘The Straight And Narrow Line’, with more honking sax from Nybo, before they find room for a new song in the form of ‘Over The Hill’, which does absolutely nothing to diminish the appetite for dancing down the front, and has room for a singalong that succeeds at the first time of hearing.

They slow things down again with the cinematic ‘China Gate’ – well, it does come from an old film, after all – which again underlines their ability to deliver something different.  But from there on it’s pretty much party time, with the likes of the aforesaid covers, ‘Train’ with its imaginative percussion from Martin Seidelin, the growling ‘All I Want’ with Risager’s gravelly voice to the fore and its teasing false ending, and the suitably titled ‘Rock’n’Roll Ride’.

You think I was taking copious notes amidst all these fun and games?  To hell with that.  I was up dancing with my other half, having a ball like the rest of the Carlisle audience.  Which sums up the irresistible charms of Thorbjørn Risager & The Black Tornado.  When this lot are onstage the good times do indeed roll.