

The Shamrock, The Thistle and The Rose @ Burnley Mechanics

Steve Henderson

The touring packages of the 60's made no effort to mix around musicians. Today, singarounds like those at The Bluebird Café in Nashville let musicians wallow in a mood of mutual admiration and learning to the benefit of the attendant audience. That's progress, of course, but it's a brave man who puts together a bunch of musicians expecting them to gel by playing together in front of an audience. But like all good pub sessions, it's a rare treat when it happens. Packaged as 'The Shamrock, The Thistle and The Rose', we are presented with Niamh Parsons – vocals extraordinaire, her excellent guitarist Graham Dunne, Nancy Kerr and James Fagan – BBC Folk Duo of the year and Alistair Hulett – one of the most underestimated traditionally styled songwriters.

It's the last night of the tour and they've obviously had a lot of fun.

The opening medley allows Niamh to stretch the tonsils, Nancy and James to add some fire, Alistair to roll a few R's in his Glaswegian burr and Graham to loosen up the fingers before we settle in to a delightful vocal from Niamh for their second number. Next up, Nancy and James back Alistair on the traditional song, 'Geordie', before he's let loose on one of his finest songs, 'Don't Sign Up For War'. Yes, Sassenachs may find his Glaswegian accent rather impenetrable but perseverance pays and you can treat this as 'world music' if your ears don't tune in properly. Nancy and James return with a couple of medleys where Billy Pigg tunes feature in 'Bonnie Woodside' and 'Coates Hall' mixed around with 'The American Stranger' which has Nancy in full flight with her percussive fiddle style. Niamh and Graham come back to the fold with two beautiful songs, 'Fear A Bhata' and 'Alexander' before the tempo is upped with by Nancy and James on 'The Banks Of The Condamine'. The first set closes with a rousing version of Ron Kavanagh's 'Reconciliation' performed by the ensemble.

The second set follows much the same pattern but with more ensemble performances such as the superb a cappella rendition of Alistair's 'Blue Murder'. At the other end of the scale, there are great individual efforts such as the unaccompanied 'Gathering Rushes' by Nancy Kerr. A marvellous moment, especially considering she'd spent most of the day recovering from flu. However, the magic moment of the evening comes as Niamh Parsons leads the ensemble on Alistair Hulett's classic song 'He Fades Away'. This starts a triumphant ensemble march to the close with 'Anderson Coast' sung by James, 'The Ways Of A Rover' sung by Ally and the climactic 'Dance To Your Daddy' led by Nancy and James. The phrase 'well deserved encore' is tarnished by its overuse in reviews but herein it's a clean and simple fact. Niamh obliged the audience by leading the ensemble with Alan Bell's 'So, Here's To You' with its words celebrating the making of new friends. The fact that none of them departed the stage during the evening and the knowing glances between this fine set of musicians at the end reveal the sympathetic nature of the lyric. Let's hope that there will be more audiences in the future who have the privilege of seeing this slice of unadulterated musical pleasure.

Part One

1. Lagan Love (Niamh)/Lads Of Alnwick (3/2 hornpipe, Nancy and James)/Mary Mac (Ally)/guitar jig (Graham)
2. Boys Of Barr na Sraide – Niamh lead and ensemble
3. Geordie (Trad) – Ally with Nancy and James
4. Don't Sign Up For War (Hulett) – Ally
5. Bonny Woodside/The American Stranger (trad, English) – Nancy and James
6. Meggie's Foot/Coates Hall (trad/Billy Pigg) - Nancy and James

7. Fear A Bhata – Niamh and Graham
8. Alexander - Niamh and Graham
9. The Banks Of The Condamine (trad, Australian) - James and Nancy
10. Reconciliation (Ron Cavanaugh) - Ensemble

Part Two

1. The Tinker In The Lum (trad, Scottish) - Ally with Nancy and James
2. Gathering Rushes (trad, English) – Nancy unaccompanied
3. (I'm) Done With Bonaparte (Mark Knopfler) - Niamh and Graham
4. The South West Wind/Petticoat Loose (trad, Irish Jigs) - Graham on guitar accompanied by James on bouzouki
5. Blue Murder (Hulett) – Ally with acappella ensemble
6. He Fades Away (Hulett) – Niamh lead accompanied by ensemble
7. Anderson's Coast (John Warner) – James with ensemble
8. The Ways Of A Rover (Hulett) – Ally with ensemble
9. Dance To Your Daddy (trad) - Nancy and James joined by ensemble

Encore

So Here's To You (Alan Bell) - Niamh and ensemble

Set List courtesy of James Fagan