

Words and Deeds

JOHN JOSEPH BRILL
LIVES
MICK ROACH

Promoted by Harvest Sun at the Gustaf Adolf Nordic Church

John Joseph Brill

In the spiritual surroundings of the **Gustaf Adolf Nordic Church**, still used for regular services and events, loud music seems faintly disrespectful – as **John Joseph Brill** notes, whilst telling us that this is not his first church gig of the week. The surroundings suit his sound, however: his smooth, warm baritone filling the white, high-ceilinged space with passion and a slight melancholy.

Brill has appeared both as a solo artist and with a band recently; tonight he does both. With the band, he bookends the set with two tracks from his first EP, starting with title track ‘Pieces’ and ending with ‘Muscle and Bone’. The intense lyrics and deep growly vocals of both make the hairs on the back of your neck rise (no – just me?). He’s often compared to Nick Cave, and it’s true that both his lyrics and his vocals have that sweet, sensual, melancholic depth.

Listening to his interview on **BBC Introducing** with Dave Monks a few days earlier, it was clear that this band has afforded Brill the chance to relax and develop his sound in the company of trusted musicians – “It feels more like a band in the room... everyone has ownership”. They’ve collaborated on the new EP, ‘False Names’, the title track of which gets an outing tonight, it’s foot-tapping, driving rhythm propelling it into and through the space.

After ‘Golden Kids’, Brill slows things right down and performs a couple of numbers without the band – they stand, silent and still, around him, spotlighting his solitude at this moment – beginning with ‘The Grape and the Grain’, with its nod to Bob Dylan’s seminal album: “And you’re not coming back, so it’s blood on the tracks”, and the deep sorrow that suffuses his work is tangible. He follows this with ‘We Won’t Cry’, another example of his confessional style of songwriting.

The band take up their instruments once more for the final three tracks, and the night ends with another deeply personal number, the aforementioned ‘Muscle and Bone’, with its achingly beautiful line: “Just because I don’t mourn doesn’t mean I don’t grieve”. Yeah, me too.

No matter how good the band are (and they are), it’s the sound of Brill’s voice, his words and the images he conjures with them that are front and centre of his work. He’s a songwriter who gives voice to his troubles and in doing so – I hope – reduces their power to cause him pain.

Let me turn your deeds into words

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Lives

Lives took a 'wall of sound' approach to their set – no introductions, no chatting to the audience between numbers; they just got on with the business of storming through their loud, energetic indie rock. The bass throbbed through the church pews, and I had visions of the white plaster falling from the lofty ceiling. This feeling intensified as their set progressed, and I was reminded faintly of Glasvegas (remember them?). Luckily, Lives have plenty of harmonies to soften their fearsome sound and burrow into your brain – check out 'White Lies' and 'Short Memory' on their SoundCloud page. In another setting, they might not seem so ferocious – I'm sure we'll have the chance to find out.

Mick Roach

Singer-songwriter and guitarist Mick Roach opened proceedings. He seemed nervous – a couple of false starts and retunings accompanying the first two numbers, one of them ('Meantime', a sad, sweet song), he informed us, making the iTunes chart in Germany. Once he was joined by a female vocalist though, he delivered a delicate, competent set, their vocals blending harmoniously on songs about getting older, especially the gorgeous and slightly upbeat 'We're Old', which was enhanced by the room's echoey acoustics. He's one of a number of very good singer-songwriters in this city, and it is all the better for them.

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