

Words and Deeds

THE HANDSOME FAMILY

Daniel Knox

Harvest Sun @Leaf

Now reaching a wider audience thanks to the success of the excellent Far From Any Road (used as the theme tune to True Detective), THE HANDSOME FAMILY hit Leaf tonight with their blend of macabre, magnificent southern gothic.

Before their set, the somewhat vaudevillian DANIEL KNOX opens, accompanying himself on piano, melodica and kazoo, with a number of songs looking back on what seems a rather unsettled childhood; they included By The Venture, David Carmichael and what sounds like an unsavoury sexual fantasy about a female teacher. His introductions seem longer and more informative than the songs themselves, which may be one reason why the crowd hold back from full engagement, earning a “Will you all shut the fuck up!” admonishment. Perhaps he needs a good psychoanalyst to help him work through his issues, rather than doing so in front of an audience.

Maybe it's the strong meds (mine, not theirs), but the Sparks seem extremely, hmmm, ‘sparky’ tonight. Although it's certain that part of the ‘bickering couple act’ – honed over 20 years of collaboration – is just that, when, late on in the set, Brett removes his Telecaster and threatens to walk off, there is a slight ‘will he, won't he?’ feel. In-between, we are treated to the engrossing spectacle of an intimate performance from a couple (plus very good but uncredited drummer) whose lyrics (Rennie) find beauty and meaning in the everyday – frogs, owls, onion rings, etc – and take a theme and run with it. They move from folk-blues melodies to darker, reverb-laced numbers and back, Rennie's acoustic bass and autoharp anchoring Brett's wandering Telecaster riffs.

Songs such as So Much Wine – a ‘true story’ of an alcohol-fuelled row – demonstrate how perfectly their vocals (and personalities) complement each other. A couple of songs later, Brett has a short rant about downloaders (“Here you go, m*therfuckers – just take it all”) in reference to their new album, highlighting many artists' frustration with this phenomenon. His interjections are angrier than hers – she is sometimes placatory, talking him down, and also funnier – at one stage asking him, “Did you have that beard yesterday?”, then turning to the audience and remarking: “We so rarely look at each other – I could hardly pick him out of a line-up”. Actually, if all the men in the room had been asked to form a line-up, she might truly have had a problem – I've never seen so many beards in one place before.

Weightless Again epitomises Rennie's lyric-writing approach: take the everyday (stopping for coffee in the redwood forest), add some history (“Those poor lost Indians/When the white man found them/Most died of TB/The rest went insane”), and pull the strands together in the modern-day with a suicide theme (“This is why people OD on pills/And jump from the Golden Gate Bridge/Anything to feel weightless again”).

At the encore, Rennie states, “My husband's gonna fight you all – bare-knuckle”. This threat never materialises, and we are left to drift out into the night, haunted by the gothic melodrama – in songs and words – that we have witnessed.

Let me turn your deeds into words