

Words and Deeds

The Bluebird at the Bluecoat, part of LIMF 2015



“Follow the blue bird footprints.” The instruction is compelling, said footprints (clawprints?) guiding us to our destination: the recreation of Nashville’s world-renowned Bluebird Café in the Bluecoat as part of a talent development initiative for Liverpool- and Nashville-based singer-songwriters.

The evening is split into two shows: the first features the two local singer-songwriters, Kirsty McGee and Karen Turley, who were selected from an open call earlier in the year to go to Nashville to hone their craft by collaborating with other musicians and songwriters, and Grammy Award-winner Don Henry and Grammy-nominated Kim Richey.

Turley opens proceedings with The Mountains, a foot-tapping song with a distinct bluegrass feel, and later endears herself to me by confessing to a severe Nashville TV show addiction. The others follow, one by one, joining in with each other’s songs when they can, and this format continues for a few rounds. The music is interspersed with chat about the collaborative style of songwriting in Nashville – and it’s great to hear.

Being sequestered with press and guests on the balcony makes it more difficult to fully experience the Bluebird’s famed ‘in the round’ format, but the complimentary Jack Daniel’s cushions the blow. It also means that, when an eerie, wailing sound not unlike a Theremin echoes around the room, I am at a loss as to what it is, until the comments of the other musicians enlighten me: McGee is playing a saw, yes, a hardware-shop saw – with a bow, which she keeps well-rosined. It’s utterly brilliant – the highlight of the evening well and truly nailed... She later introduces a song she’s written as a direct result of her Nashville time by saying, “This song is from the Mojave desert”, echoing Dylan’s Budokan intro to All Along the Watchtower, and I’m further hooked. The song, Little Stars, clearly demonstrates the impact that going to Nashville has had on her songwriting. McGee has a beautiful voice, husky and deep, well suited to the jazzy songs she showcases tonight, like Sandman, and she plays bass flute as well as guitar and saw. They close their part of the evening with a song Hurly, McGee and Turley co-wrote in Nashville, about how the city brought them together, which contains the lyric, “We’ve all come here on love and speculation”, which encapsulates the Nashville vibe.

The second session is hosted by Bob Harris with award-winning singer-songwriters Beth Nielsen Chapman and Jim Lauderdale, and Andrea Davidson, who has recently had a song taken up by Nashville the TV show. It again follows the ‘in the round’ format, with Harris’s contribution being to engage the musicians in discussing their craft. All stress the importance of collaboration on their work, and mention how Nashville today is a magnet for all artists, not just musicians and songwriters but visual artists as well, all tuning into the city’s authenticity and capacity to enhance creativity. Lauderdale also comments on Liverpool as being “a musical energy vortex”.

The event is advertised as ending at 11pm, but it’s still going strong almost an hour later as I leave, sated on love and speculation – and a drop of Jack Daniel’s.

Let me turn your deeds into words