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Boyle Tyrrall Boyle ~ Gig Review

Boyle, Tyrrall, Boyle – The New Variety Club, Russell Street, Keighley; Sunday 28th June 2009

A uniquely mouth-watering combination of musical talents, and one not to be missed! Of course, the two Boyles – wondrous singer Maggie and equally wondrous guitarist Gary (no relation) – have already been teamed for a year or two in the trio Sketch (along with bass player Dave Bowie), The Maggie-Gary combination has hitherto produced some spellbinding music that fluidly roved around the folk-jazz axis, but with the addition of the mighty Gordon Tyrrall to the team, there's a chance for an even more folky mix of talents, ideas and personalities, with the very best of all potential worlds – or so it seemed at this convivial gig, which I was surprised to learn formed this particular lineup's debut live public appearance. It was evident that rather a lot of careful rehearsal and planning had already gone into the musical programme they were presenting, and the easy interaction and high standard of musicianship totally belied any sense of a tentative or nerve-wracked first-performance.

The set-list was well balanced and intelligently planned, to give a thoroughly professional contrast and good variety between successive items. I think it's fair to say that in general the material more or less alternated between Maggie-driven and Gordon-driven items (at least in terms of lead-voice or principal input), but this is a perfectly sensible gambit from which to start out, and satisfies followers of both camps (as it were) while not alienating either faction. Notable features throughout? Naturally, Maggie's superb singing – respectful of sean-nos and tradition, while refreshingly unafraid to utilise other expressive nuances to telling effect, especially when responding to and inspiring the other musicians. Then there was the magical way in which the two guitarists interacted and traded ideas, motifs and melodic lines. And those perennially deeply satisfying embellishments and jewel-like solos that Gary worked (seemingly effortlessly) into the arrangements at strategic points, yet without ever any sense of contrivance or misplaced loyalty. And Gordon's flair and drive, no matter what role he was playing within the trio dynamic, knowing just when to hold back and refusing to dominate even when his voice or guitar was required to be placed forward in the mix (as it were).

The first set opened purposefully with a forthright, and typically adventurous, treatment of the traditional Jolly Ploughboy, before the two flautists embarked on the first of the evening's dazzling instrumental sets. Shortly after which, in direct contrast, we were treated to one of Gordon's beautiful Shakespeare sonnet settings (the second-set counterpart – sonnet 91 – was arguably even finer). The first set concluded with a brace

of contemporary songs, complementing the preceding (predominantly traditional) items: Mike Silver's Not A Matter Of Pride (lovingly phrased by Maggie) and Michael Marra's enigmatic, distinctly quirky Constable Le Clock. After the interval, a pleasing Rocks Of Bawn was followed by Gordon's retelling of the Matterhorn tale, composed in the style of a traditional ballad, and after a further scintillating set of reels came a trio of second-set highlights: a matchless performance by Maggie of Erin The Green, a lovely fluted rendition of the air Lord Mayo (deftly paired off with a hornpipe) and the aforementioned Shakespeare-Tyrrall collaboration! Peter Case's Hidden Love provided the set's (official) finale, after which came riotous applause and (inevitably) an encore, this being the typically Tyrrallian Lennon-McCartney medley of A World Without Love and I've Just Seen A Face (the latter complete with deliberate fluff!!!). Sure, there were some rough edges, and some slightly awkward transitions, but these were for the most part only really noticeable (and then momentarily) by the cognoscenti, and the whole gig was a vastly more than credible debut for BTB (or whatever they decide to be called henceforth!). Finally, just a few words re The Gin Jammers, whose brilliant 45-minute support set opened the evening. It is, I think, pretty evident that Pete & Hazel take their cue from Gillian Welch & David Rawlings – right down to the adoption of their respective stage roles and guitar parts, not to mention incorporating a similar mix of repertoire (covers of Gillian's songs alongside approved oldtime classics, with some of their own material too). If that description makes the Gin Jammers sound like a derivative or plagiaristic tribute-act, then that would indeed be an unduly harsh – and definitely unfair – judgement to pass, because they're actually far more individual performers than that gives them credit for and they have a fresh, easygoing presence and an infectious and winning presentation. Anyway, it's early days yet, so I'm sure that with more experience and confidence they'll get to develop even more individuality in their musical personalities. What mattered most on 28th June was that Gin Jammers and BTB together made for a satisfying and inspirational evening's music-making: one that was clearly warmly appreciated by the capacity crowd.

David Kidman

Maggie Boyle, Gary Boyle, Gordon Tyrrall ~ The Gas Club, Keighley

Though they have played together informally (parties, the occasional guest spot at each other's gigs), this was the debut for this as-yet-unnamed trio.

Maggie has, of course, played with both Gary and Gordon before (in duos, Sketch, Boyle-Devine-Boyle) but no one knew quite what to expect from this combination. What we experienced was a form of musical alchemy.

Despite some difficulties with the sound (a mixing and most definitely not a venue problem), the chemistry of these three active elements is stunning.

Maggie has been (and is) a participant in a large number of musical configurations. Indeed, a Pete Frame-style family tree of their offshoots and connections would while away a fascinating couple of weeks. In most, she is the main vocalist. Here she and Gordon share vocal duties, combining their voices for choruses and harmony; Gordon began proceedings with a commanding take on the pressgang tale of The Jolly Ploughboy; Maggie provided harmonies and added a flute solo. Clearly, from the outset, we knew that this was going to be different to what we had heard from any of the three as individuals.

Vocally, this was most notable in the song which opened the second half of their set – The Rocks Of Bourne. Maggie began the song solo, acapella, a sound as starkly lovely as the stretch of coastline the song describes. Then the two guitars fill around her, casting light and shade on the landscape. In verse two, the song is taken on by Gordon, suiting the melody and phrasing to his own style. It's the only song they actually share vocally but the effect is captivating and richly rewarding.

But the chemistry is not just in the combination of vocals. In Gary and Gordon (sounds like a sixties pop duo, doesn't it?), two contrasting guitar styles combine and complement each other. Gary, eschewing vocals on this occasion, provides lead fills that are understated, delicate and inventive; when he added runs throughout a version of Mike Silver's Not A Matter Of Pride, the effect was sublime.

In a version of Lambs On The Green Hills, both Gary and Gordon use their own instrumental approach to the song, so that Maggie's vocal is flanked on the one side by Gordon's percussive clawhammer picking and on the other by Gary's melodic jazz variations.

The set is interspersed with instrumentals, mainly Irish tunes, some of which allow for another bit of chemistry when Maggie and Gordon duet on flutes.

With the extensive repertoires of the musicians involved to draw on, the quality of the setlist is stunning. It takes in both traditional and contemporary material. The version of Gordon's song about the ascent of the Matterhorn is utterly spell-binding, a truly great song made even better in performance. One hopes the trio record, if only to get a copy of this one magnificent track!

The set also includes his two exquisite settings of Shakespeare sonnets, one sung by Gordon, the other (Sonnet 91) by Maggie. Oh, yes, chaps, I need a copy of "Some glory in their birth" as well!

I won't reveal what their encore was – you're unlikely to guess – but it was a joyous surprise for all the audience.

I'm looking forward to my next opportunity to see them – one hopes next time with sound which enhances rather than masks the brilliance of what they do.

Nigel Schofield