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The Expatriate Game ~ Gig Review

Sunday 28th June 2009 The Expatriate Game Live reviews

The Love Apple 26/9/04

The Love Apple in Bradford is certainly becoming the place to be for exceptional folk performances locally. This was a one-off concert featuring Maggie Boyle, Duck Baker and Ben Paley. A tour is planned for early next year: watch out for it and, on the strength of this superb evening, do not miss it.

First of all one has to celebrate the impeccable musicianship: three musicians perfectly attuned to each other and to their audience performing with a rare blend of virtuosity and affection for their music. It was obvious throughout that everyone in the room was having an outstanding time, not least the three people on stage. How good it was to hear Maggie Boyle not only in superb voice but also given an unusual opportunity to prove yet again what a thrilling flautist she is.

After years of hearing these tunes played with amphetamine velocity by others, it was more than just refreshing to hear them at the proper speed, played by three musicians you would swear had spent years, not weeks, playing together.

More or less alternating between tunes and songs, they brought together a wide-ranging repertoire based on Irish and American (and in some cases Irish-American) traditions. Outstanding in a set which demanded superlatives throughout was a heart-rending rendition of Bonny Portmore. One can only hope that this trio finds itself in the vicinity of microphones and recording equipment very soon.

Nigel Schofield Tykes winter 2004/2005

The Expatriate Game: The Real-Music Club, Sharpe's Pottery Museum, Derbyshire. Saturday 3rd March, 2007

You may be wondering who The Expatriate Game are. I wasn't sure myself. I'd heard of Ben Paley, son of American folk royalty, Tom Paley, and a fabulously gifted, naturally talented, violin player; I knew of Maggie Boyle, not only from the impressive Grace Notes but also from hearing that wonderful, clear, uncluttered Irish alto voice on records. And, of course, I knew and had admired the work of 'Duck' Baker, the extraordinary, jazz influenced, finger-style guitar player, from watching him play years ago with people like Stefan Grossman. The three of them together, though, exploring Irish and American

music around the idea of emigration, was new to me, and to most other people, especially as they perform as a trio so rarely. One other gig they had done recently was part of a series of concerts arranged at The National Theatre. Mind you, playing at The Real-Music Club at Sharpe's Pottery Museum in Swadlincote is a little like playing at the Albert Hall, if you make allowances for scale, that is!

Ben is thin, with pale, spiky, untidy hair and casual clothes. He looks like he doesn't care about anything but when he rocks gently back and forth, his lips half smiling, his eyes closed, lost in some personal, musical reverie, he plays like the only thing worth caring about is a violin. He moves his right arm up and down like some oriental dancer folding and unfolding their hands, an easy, stylish, fluid motion, offering syncopated fills to the melody of Maggie's flute and the intricately layered structures of Duck's guitar. His playing is warm, rich, sometimes dry, sometimes dusty, never intrusive, always inventive; he's a Zen fly fisherman, only with a bow not a rod. There were traditional songs like Bonny Portmore and Banks Of Claudy but The Game started with some slip jigs; Come Under My Dimity, Humours of Whiskey, followed by Glory In The Meeting House. This wasn't a furious Irish session full of pyrotechnics and glory; this was chamber music, a stately dance, something formal, elegant. When they moved up-tempo, seamlessly, into something foot tapping, it became an energy filled hymn to period dance music not a raucous ceilidh; this trio is made up of proper musicians.

Maggie wore black trousers and green shoes, with a tapestry style top. There was always a sparkle in her eyes and smile, always warmth, a sense of mischief. She played the flute and sang. It all seemed so simple when she sang; there are no rough edges in the make-up of that alto Irish voice. Irish, yes, of course, but it doesn't try to drag you back to Ireland every time she sings. You know where it comes from but you care more about what is being sung than its history; you enjoy its presence not its past. They explained, "The flute is something new to American folk music," and this is surprising, really, as you would have thought the flute's convenient size and portability would have made it an easy travelling companion. More importantly, for me at least, the flute expresses something essential at the heart of emigrant experience. It is the only instrument (apart, perhaps, from the pipes) that can sound both poignant and stirring both at the same time. It seems to express the sadness and sense of loss that comes with parting, as well as the excitement and optimism of exploring something new; the music that lies in the souls of all who leave their homes to look for a new life in another country. "Appalachian musicians didn't have flutes for some reason", says Duck, "but it sounds great", and he's right, in Maggie's hands, or should I say in Maggie's lips, it does.

If ever a man could take a walk around a fret board, sly, suggestive, sometimes with a swagger, sometimes a skip, sometimes with a sashaying dance move, sometimes with a glide, all within an ambitiously intricate tune structure, then it is Richard R. Baker IV. I mean, he can finger and snap a G string like an aging pole dancer, all sexy innuendos and knowing smiles, and then finish with a self-satisfied grin as he charms you out of your money. He's a big man, with big hands and his small, lovingly age distressed, gut strung, acoustic guitar looked threatened in his grasp. Perhaps there's more walrus than 'duck' about his moustached appearance these days but the boy can still play. The trio attempted

some pretty demanding music. There were harmonies in there that a five piece would have thought carefully about playing.

There was no question about their ability, their musical prowess and their delivery; it was impeccable. There was, however, for me, on the night, something impersonal, a sense of distance, a touch of film music about it all. It was beautiful music, beautifully played, but Ben and Maggie have the ability to do more than just engage your critical acclaim; they can ignite your emotions or break your heart slowly if they choose and, when he wants to, the fabulous Baker boy has the surgical skill and technique, the wit and the musical charm to stitch it all back together again.

Neil Dalton (Copyright March 2007)