

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Go-Betweens

Governor Hindmarsh

I don't know what The Go-Betweens went between when they started out in the late Seventies but now they are marvellous emissaries for a period when popular music really got its mojo back. It began in 1977 in New York and London with punk and power pop, but Australia was also in the hunt with bands such as Nick Cave's Birthday Party, The Saints, Laughing Clowns, Radio Birdman and, Brisbane's answer to Talking Heads - The Go Betweens.

There has always been a spark in the combination of the band's songwriters, Robert Forster and Grant McLennan, and they still rate with the best of the dynamic duos - Partridge and Moulding of XTC, Difford and Tilbrook of Squeeze, even middle period Lennon and whatsisname. They rescued the perfect lineaments of three minute pop from the meanderings of prog rock and the excesses of the synthesiser and, over twenty or so albums and a sizeable number of memorable singles, The Go-Betweens defined their own sound.

It has been a turbulent time, of course. After the first half a dozen LPs, the spark turned to fizzle when the band disintegrated in the late 1980s. The various members went on to productive solo careers - only to reform again around the Forster McLennan axis ten years later. Now, the Go Betweens are really back in business with a steady line-up and, recorded last year, a strong new album.

Match fit from a month touring in Europe, followed by performances in Japan, the Go Betweens are in Adelaide for a night at The Gov, supported by whimsical Melbourne art band, Architecture in Helsinki. As Forster leads the band on stage there is an air of foppish irony about him. A tall lanky figure, his hair parted in thick Wildean clumps, he peers into the crowd from under heavy eyebrows. There is something distracted looking about him and in a floral shirt with high rounded collars and a pair of winklepicker shoes, the like of which I haven't seen since 1963, he is elegantly eccentric. Grant McLennan, in contrast, is inconspicuous in manner and moleskins. They worked out, long ago, who does what in the performance department. Bassist Adele Pickvance and drummer Glenn Thompson are notably younger and quickly get down to the rhythm business.

The set is a nice mix of Go-Between standards and new material from the current *Bright Yellow, Bright Orange* CD. Forster's songs feature first, including *Make Her Day*. She's got eyes that really know how to sting, Forster intones while Pickvance and Thompson lay down jabby beats and McLennan picks out lively acoustic runs in breezy conjunction with Forster's electric riffs. It is a boppy, sunny sound in contrast to the sardonic lyrics. Thank you Adelaide hipsters, Forster deadpans to a rapidly warming crowd. Then with a lookaway stare he sets off into *German Farmhouse* with its dreamy geography and warm thrummy basslines. Grant McLennan steps up for lead vocal on *This Girl, Black Girl* - the two musicians working effortlessly on harmonies and guitar. Touring has made the band supple and confident and the time is right for the gentle satire and classic pop of *Surfing Magazines*.

Two new songs, *Caroline and I* and *Poison in the Walls*, the first sung by Forster, the latter by McLennan, each highlight the fact that the band's material has never been stronger, more subtle and intriguing. And like junior siblings who know big brothers are watching, the accomplished Pickvance and Thompson click straight in to complete the picture. *Streets of Your Town*, the famous single, never sounded fresher or more tender. This is not an obligatory greatest hit but a celebration of a younger spirit and signals in both Forster and McLennan (they sound like Cambridge spies) renewed pleasure in their music. Forster, evidently enjoying the vibe at the Gov, introduces *Too Much of One Thing*, another track from the new album, played with an airy string band pace that almost echoes Dylan, circa *Tangled up in Blue*. With McLennan and the rest of the band smoothly taking the corners and guitar changes, Forster croons his confessions of a crowded hour.

The Go-Betweens are having a new golden age - not only with strong current material, but a lineup that is nimble, thrifty and as appealing as any around. The old echoes are there - a tip of the Velvet, the brightness of early 80s English pop - but there is also ... a mellow fruitfulness, you might say. Listen to the encores - *The Clock, Spring Rain, Was There Anything I Could Do*. They have never sounded better or more crisply intelligent. And how, if you are a Go-Between, do you say goodbye? - with a Batchelor kiss and a panegyric to glamour. *I love Lee Remick, she's a darling*. Forster is in heavy lidded rapture, and a grinning McLennan is briefly back on the bass. Back to the very beginning, Forster observes, as they take a final bow. Yes, and, at the end of exploring, knowing the place for the first time.