

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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### *The Blind Boys of Alabama*

Governor Hindmarsh

It is ten years next month since Brian and Vivien Tonkin took over the licence at the Governor Hindmarsh hotel on Port Road. And in that time it has become one of the busiest, and certainly the best loved, of Adelaide's live music venues. Week after week it programs every kind of music - blues, jazz, old rock, new pop, Scottish and Irish music, garage bands and electronica. There is something on all the time - whether it is a good-timey singalong in the front bar or high profile acts in the now- extended lounge space.

Australian acts such as Paul Kelly, Renee Geyer, Tim Rogers, Chris Wilson, Tex Perkins, Ed Kuepper, and Rebecca's Empire have given some of their most memorable performances at the Gov. So have a raft of international artists. Some that spring to mind are Roger McGuinn, Glenn Tilbrook, Andy Irvine, Waterson Carthy and Jimmy Webb. But you only need look at the listings for the last two or three months for a sample of the venue's range and quality. First we saw John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, Tony Joe White and the dynamic Ellen McIlwaine. Then in March the Irish accordion marvel Sharon Shannon, another great set from Dirty Three, and a show from Scottish legends Teenage Fanclub that had the faithful in a sustained swoon. The Necks performed, so did Brendan Power, Spencer Jones and Irish singer songwriter Paul Brady.

If anything, last month was even more frenetic. With the Byron Bay Blues and Roots Festival came a rush of touring overseas acts - Flook, Sam Carr's Delta Jukes, Michelle Shocked, Angelique Kidjo, Tuck and Patti, Grant Lee Phillips, Womad favourite Bob Brozman and the notorious, dentally challenged former Pogue, Shane McGowan.

Also, in for a second time to Adelaide, are the Blind Boys of Alabama, the gospel singing group founded in 1939 and enjoying considerable chic since moving several years ago to Peter Gabriel's Real Music label and collaborating with musicians of the calibre of David Lindley, Ben Harper and Robert Randolph. They have won Grammys two years running and their latest CD *Higher Ground* includes material from Prince, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and Funkadelic.

It is late Wednesday morning and at the Gov there is something of a situation. The Blind Boys are due to play that night and advance ticket sales are looking very ordinary. In an unprecedented move Richard

Tonkin has emailed journalists and other Gov regulars with an SOS to circulate electronic flyers in a bid to improve numbers by showtime. The fee for Clarence Fountain and his band is substantial and if things don't improve the Tonkins are likely to take a rinsing - and it sure isn't going to be in the blood of the Lamb.

It is not the best moment to be interviewing Brian Tonkin about life at the Gov. Not that he seems to mind. A soft spoken, animated fellow with grey whiskers and a wry laugh, Tonkin, with his wife Vivien, has run pubs all his working life. The Governor Hindmarsh, he tells me, they set up for live music in Adelaide.

“ We were at the end of our commercial lives - and we'd made a fair bit of money so we decided to set up the Gov to pay back all the musicians who supported us over the years.”

A long time member of the South Australian folk scene, Tonkin is a musician himself. He is very diffident about it - preferring to talk up his son Richard instead. But the five string banjo is Brian Tonkin's instrument and he talks intensely about regular visits he makes to the Appalachian mountain region to meet musicians, many of whom are now friends, and make music. He is passionate about the nexus between music and community and, while I want to talk about celebrated headliners at the Gov, he prefers to steer the emphasis back to grass roots action. The Frances Folk Gathering is one of his pet projects - a summer music camp in regional South Australia which is less about watching and more about everybody pitching in and trying. He is mad keen for more music programs in schools and has plans to push for musicians in residence especially for primary pupils to listen to and learn from.

While he is convening a wide range of music styles at his venue Brian Tonkin has strong views about the effects of commercial production. He regrets the way music has become fixed in the aspic of recording, causing artists to endlessly replicate their own work. Bob Dylan gets full points for making his songs new again with variant arrangements and instrumentations. Tonkin also is critical of the tendency to ape American accents and the limited range of subject matter in current songs. You'd think, he muses, that the only experience in life is a broken romance.

For Brian Tonkin community music is the thing. People coming in to his pub with instruments and starting to play. “I'd like to have a pub which would become a mecca for musicians and we'd end up with crossover

music out of the friendships which would develop." He knows it's a pipe dream but he's puffing on it anyway.

And he has had to stand up and be counted to protect his idea. Over the past several years clashes began between developers of new housing in the inner city and live music venues. The Gov had to face down a bid to curtail activity when some adjacent apartments were being built. With a mixture of obstinacy, nerve and the shrewd tactical use of influential friends, Tonkin and his circle rallied support and eventually legislation was enacted ( and proclaimed in the front bar of the Gov) which has become the model for live music protection throughout the country.

As we talk in the front bar of the Gov, phones are ringing, glasses are chinking, Irish pipes are keening through the tannoys, and furniture is being moved in optimistic expectation of the night's, as yet, sparsely ticketed show. Among it all, Brian Tonkin is unfazed, intent on getting his message through - that music is not just a bit of pleasant distraction, it is central to the species, it heals individuals and communities. And if it is blues music in Chicago or street music in New Orleans it can also revitalise tourism and the commercial sector. But that's another whole thing Tonkin is into - reporting on his numerous music pilgrimages in the US, Mexico and Ireland...

It is now later that evening. By 9.15pm the show begins. A young Adelaide singer named Nuala Honan takes the stage. She's eighteen and only got the call to play late that afternoon. She's a little daunted and yet is full of charming confidence. She wears a floppy hat and sings with surprising strength, her phrasing angular, her guitar laconic. This is what Brian Tonkin believes in - local singers performing in their own city. There is a ton of talent around, he's the first to say, it just needs an audience. Nuala Honan asks if anyone has a camera. Her first gig at the Gov and she wants a photo. Someone obliges and she beams with pride. The audience, now a very respectable size, is warming up.

The Blind Boys of Alabama are led onstage. The two originals - singers Clarence Fountain and Jimmy Carter- take up positions, one seated, one standing sublimely still. Blind drummer Ricky McKinnie settles in while the younger sighted band members bring on their guitars. In what look like woodgrain vinyl suits the band is quite a sight - dazzlingly kitsch and otherworldly as well. The singing begins with Fountain's grainy baritone and the bell-like tenor of Jimmy Carter. The rhythm pounds and the vocals soar - Jesus is good enough for me. This is what makes gospel music, that mix of rhythm and blues and charismatic church hymns, so irresistible.

The crowd is in rapture in no time and, in the intimate layout at the Gov, everything is very up close and spiritual.

The Blind Willie Johnson song *Nobody's Fault But Mine* is next, followed by the sweetly phrased Ben Harper song *I Shall Not Walk Alone*. The harmonies are electric even if the band wants for either keyboards or the textures of the gospel style pedal steel provided on the *Higher Ground* CD by Harper himself and the prodigiously talented Robert Randolph. The Blind Boys sing the celebrated *Amazing Grace*, set to the tune of *House of the Rising Sun* and also from the *Spirit of the Century* CD, *Soldier* (in the Army of the Lord). The sound tech is kept busy supplying hand mikes and Ricky McKinnie on drums forms an invincible alliance with Caleb Butler and Tracy Pierce on rhythm and bass guitars.

It wouldn't be a Blind Boys show without some crowd surfing and Jimmy Carter, led by Butler, is lowered in to the audience for some whooping and hollering, some meeting and some greeting. It goes on for a power of a long time, with the band whipped up and the frail, elegant Carter pirouetting as he preaches the gospel blues, *Look What You Brought Me From*. Both Fountain and Carter groove for the crowd who are upstanding throughout the upbeat *Last Time* and settle back down for the soulful strains of *Deep River*.

The band perform several encores for a crowd which, summoned by email and roused by righteous music, is in no hurry to be done. Lead guitarist Joey Williams shines with fine solos on *The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow* and the entourage leave the stage once more, returning for the final song - Stevie Wonder's *Higher Ground*. It starts with a deep moan and then hits the beat. Joey Williams winds in some wah wah guitar and the singers in four and five part harmonies sing triumphantly about keeping on climbing to that higher ground. It is hackles of the neck stuff and a heaven of a good way to bring things to a close. The numbers are good enough for near break even, the Tonkins have been deservedly supported. Another good night at the Gov - and not just a matter of blind faith either.