

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Bonnie "Prince" Billy
Governor Hindmarsh

The last time I saw Bonnie "Prince" Billy was at the Tivoli at the beginning of 1998. He was trading under the name of Will Oldham then and, like Will Robinson, another of his aliases, he was a little lost in space. It was a brilliant set, but also exasperating and a little worrying. Oldham huddled at the side of the stage avoiding the spotlight, mumbling to himself, and the band (which included the Dirty Two, Jim White and Mick Turner) looked increasingly perturbed, as though it was turning into a bad night in Roswell.

Even from his earliest Palace days there has been a fragile strangeness to Will Oldham. With his wispy lyrics and shunting rhythms he has been more alt. than alt.country and the most poetic of the singer songwriters. Like a bipolar mystic with roots in the courtly, weird balladry that travelled to the Kentucky hills from 17th century England, "Prince" Billy is a time lord with wise blood.

Onstage at the Governor Hindmarsh Will Oldham looks like a man more at ease with his dark gift. He wanders to the bar before the show, happily greeting a slightly awed crowd, many well-versed in his work. His delicate features, immortalised in his cameo as the boy preacher in John Sayles' classic film *Matewan*, are now covered with such an unfashionably full beard he could pass for one of the Kelly Gang. Perhaps the Bonnie Prince has found a new way of staying incognito.

Certainly there are fresh signs of confidence in his recent recordings. *Master and Everyone* is more sprightly and tuneful than earlier work and he has even caused consternation with the smoothed-over Nashville sound of his *Greatest Palace Music* re-recordings. It is as though Will Oldham would like some profile - a bit of success and recognition for his singular talent.

Fronting a four piece band, featuring his brother Paul on bass and Matt and Spencer Sweeney on guitar and drums, "Prince" Billy is very much in charge as he opens with the rippling guitar chords of *Ohio River Boat Song*.

It has a sweet, spare melancholy, with harmonies from Matt Sweeney and singer Cindy Hopkins blending with Oldham's artfully expressive off-note vocals.

It is a varied setlist - Oldhams, ancient and modern. *Ease on Down the Road* from the second Billy album, old Palace drinking songs with beautiful garnishes of accordion from Hopkins, and new work such as *Pushkin* and *Joy and Jubilee*. Highlights include *After I Made Love to You* and *Even if Love*. Oldham's phrasing is assured and reflective with Cindy Hopkins adding a strange childlike yowl of a harmony that hangs just under the line, like the sound of an especially tuneful owl. *We Are One With Birds*, they aptly sing later, along with the oddly affecting *Come In* and *O Let it Be*.

His Bonnyness is generous with encores - the jaunty early favourite *I am a Cinematographer, Horses* (with some Neil Young-ish guitar from Matt Sweeney) and the plaintive recent song *The Way*, again, beautifully framed by Cindy Hopkins accordion. But the call is for *I See a Darkness* and Will Oldham obliges.

It is like a letter from the lower depths - "Did you ever, ever notice/ the kind of thoughts I got/ well you know I have a love / a love for everyone I know/ and you know I have a drive / to live I won't let go/ can you see its opposition/ come a rising up sometimes/ that its dreadful and possession / comes blacking in my mind/ and that I see a darkness".

The words look meagre and archaic but the song is terrible in its directness and beautiful in performance, guided by the constancy of Sweeney's guitar and the eerie call and response with Hopkins. It is also greatly heartening, what William Blake would call a Song of Experience. Will Oldham, now Bonnie "Prince" Billy, has come back from the wilderness - to report that it is full of light.