

Bryan Taylor reviews 'Shared' at The Horseshoe Inn

SHARED

THE HORSESHOE INN, RATLINGHOPE, SHROPSHIRE

SATURDAY 25TH JULY 2009

First up, a little background info.

I first encountered The Horseshoe Inn towards the end of 2007. My friend Timothy Parkes decided to drive over to their Monday night Open Mic session & I scrounged a lift. What greeted me was one of the most friendly, welcoming pubs I have honestly ever been too (and there have been hundreds, believe me) and some wonderful musicians, not to mention my old mate Miles Hunt who was standing at the bar (sorry, I just did). Since then, whenever I have been able to, I've read out some of my musings on those nights (I never refer to that stuff as 'poetry'), stayed over a couple of times, made some great friends (particular mention here to licensees Mo & Bob) and never fail to have a brilliant time. I thank you all.

So, to 'Shared', a project inspired by Miles Hunt's Monday night Horseshoe experiences, where he too has been impressed by the sheer quality of the musicianship on offer. This has resulted in an 18 track cd of 6 acts, including Miles Hunt & Erica Nockalls, The Mission's Wayne Hussey, plus four artists who are Horseshoe favourites. To launch the album and to celebrate Mo & Bob's 5 year journey of musical discovery, a stage was set up just over the river opposite the pub itself, with an all day 'Horsefest' of entertainment.

Kicking off proceedings was the legend now known as 'Dirty Ray' (more about him later). Resplendent in shades, armed with maracas & "a bloody great big stick" (thank you 'Nuts In May') which he uses to pound the stage, Ray accapella-ly (???) asks us to 'Bring 'Em All In' in his inimitably rough Waits-ian vocal style – a perfect intro. to an event called 'Shared' as I'm sure you'll agree. Next up was Rob Dunsford, (who, along with Dirty Ray, I'll come back to again), playing (his words) a couple of "kiddie pleasers" & another 2 solo acoustic numbers, setting the relaxed mood for the afternoon in style.

For the next few hours, I experienced a veritable smorgasboard of styles, from solo acoustic & electric (Wazza, Pete Keeley, Kate Lewis, Xenia, Jack Harris ...), bands (The Pantomines, Cheap Magic, Babytwin ...), all very different & offering original material & occasionally some well chosen covers. Not trying to single performances out, I have to give special kudos to Tony Skeggs, host of Wednesday night's sessions at The Horseshoe, for some great sing-along covers & a heartfelt speech about the pub & the performers therein, The Daughters with Beth's ever impressive vocal, recalling Martina Topley-Bird's vocals on Tricky's magnificent 'Maxinquaye' album, The French Sevens featuring little man Thom Morecroft's surprisingly big vocal, and Mk Zero, a 3 piece band with some beautiful 3 part harmonies I certainly look forward to seeing again. Add some Samba drummers, a little dancing hither & thither, plus an afternoon tippie or three, and it was on to the evening's 'Shared' artists.

As The Horseshoe's 'Be Nice Or Leave' motto was placed on either side of the stage, not that anyone was about to misbehave, (it's far too pleasant for unpleasantries here), it was time for Dirty Ray to stop compering & regale us with what he does best – heartfelt, blues inspired songs that hit the head & the heart. Starting with 'The Waiting Song', Ray immediately becomes the best act of the day, his voice & unique guitar technique marking himself out as a cut above most other solo artists I've ever seen. Quite why The Immaculate Fools (Ray's band in a 'former life') were never really taken to this nation's bosom has always been a bit of a mystery to me, but Ray's approach these days is totally different. He's older, wiser & able to use these life experiences and channel them into some beautiful music. Witness 'The Rain Song' as proof – the day's highlight in my opinion. Finishing with 'Moon On A Stick' during which Ray's hands become a blur, his knuckles banging out the rhythm as he batters his acoustic, his set is over, leaving me clapping like I've got a Duracell battery inserted somewhere.

Matthew Derrick had the hard task of following that, and if there were any nerves, they weren't on show today. A quiet fellow from Maesteg, on stage Matthew exudes confidence, starting with 'You're My Heaven' which one immediately is singing along with by the second chorus. Indeed, all of his songs do have a "Don't I know this already?" feel about them, which is not to say they are sound-a-likes, they're just so bleeding catchy. Continuing with 'Head Up, Chin Down' it's obvious that Miles Hunt has been a big influence on young Matthew, but not in a plagiaristic sense. He has the same bile & lyrical approach, but it is delivered in a more throaty, aggressive style than Miles himself. Finishing his short set with 'Not On My Cloud', it's been a

pleasure to be introduced to Matthew's songs & I can't wait to see how his career develops. Buy the 'Shared' album & you too will be singing these tracks over & over again.

Rob Dunsford was next, this time augmented by accordion & female backing vocal & won me over with this approach far quicker than his earlier performance. The melancholic 'Millionaire' showcases his velvety voice perfectly, and in 'Dashboard Therapy' ("We drive all night & sleep all day" – as a friend observed, "How very nocturnal of you"), he has one of the day's & albums highlights. Rob again has played at The Horseshoe many times & I most certainly look forward to catching him again soon (if he sticks around the area long enough, that is – please do, Rob).

Timothy Parkes won over Miles & Erica on his first performance here on that Open Mic night I previously mentioned, and has continued to gather support & fans through his intense performances. Indeed, he has become a regular support on Miles & Erica's 'never ending tour', so it was somewhat inevitable that he too ended up on 'Shared'. Tonight he treats us to 'Looks Like Rain', 'Holes' & Mo's favourite, 'All The White Horses' (mine too, by the way), and is joined by Erica on 'Witchcraft', giving an already eerie track an added air of mystery. He's also one of the most original singer/songwriters I've seen with his vocal style & different guitar tunings marking him out as something truly special to witness. Check him out whilst he's still playing in small venues as he's going places, trust me.

And so, to the headliners & organisers of 'Shared', Miles Hunt & Erica Nockalls. Tonight, Miles eschews the usual 'storytelling' approach, possibly because it was getting late, and so it was all about the songs. And, what a catalogue Miles now has to choose from. The set starts with 'Fill Her Up & Foot Down', another Horseshoe 'tribute' from the current 'Catching More Than We Miss' album, and the duo continue through 'Not An Exit' highlights 'The Cake', 'Corny But True', and the Bono baiting 'Back On The Charm Offensive' (after which Miles can't resist having a pop at manager David Jaymes for going to see U2 in the previous week). Other highlights in a set of highlights were, 'D.W.I.', old favourites from his solo career 'Amongst The Old Reliables' & 'Four To The Floor', plus the last single 'Stay Scared, Stay Tuned' "which nobody bought". The thing is, Miles doesn't have to bother the charts anymore, as the 'never ending' tour has proven, and doesn't necessarily have to rely on The Wonder Stuff songs to get a decent reaction. I personally think that this kind of 'freedom' has given Miles space to breathe a little & has produced (certainly with the last two albums) songs that can sit alongside the first incarnation of The Wonder Stuff's canon with ease. Talking of which ... we get 'Welcome To The Cheap Seats', 'Circle Square', 'The Animals And Me' (which is a great performance tonight, shorn of the production embellishments on 'Groove Machine' I was never keen on), 'Golden Green', 'Piece Of Sky' before finishing off the evening with a charged 'Mission Drive' to fully deserved applause & cheers. Oh, and they did the one about the cow too.

So, how do I end this thing, then? Get the 'Shared' album – it's a rare beast of a compilation in that it ALL works & flows together beautifully, and does not contain a single weak link. No mean feat that, but all of the artists involved are so impressive, it was never really going to fail. Big thanks to Mo & Bob for supporting all of the above, and providing me with a home from home, and to all of the above for a truly fantastic day. I'm up for the next one, you all should be too.

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