

Review

The Onion Club Larger Than Live @ Hospitalfield

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A circular chord sequence, at the back of the room, played on an accordion. The woman with the Louise Brooks bob began a slow, meandering walk between the tables towards the stage. The lights were low, as they have to be, to hit the right mood; the cafe layout in the room is a prerequisite, too.

This isn't really an arts centre in an ornamental castle down a potholed track (though that setting would be special enough). This is Berlin in the '20s. It's Pandora's Box, it's Dr Mabuse the Gambler.

Tim Buckley, Nina Simone, Nick Cave, Tom Waits, the singers whose catalogues have been appropriated in the cause of the show, have yet to be born. Billie Holiday is still a child.

Kurt Weill walks its streets, inhabits its shadows, and usually a highlight of these... concerts? Let's call them spells. Witching hours. They usually have 'Alabama Song' at their core. Not last night, but it was only thinking back that I noticed its absence. All the other songs, despite the breadth of the selection, and the variation in performance — they're all 'Alabama Song' too. They're all athirst. We must have whisky or you'll know why.

Pauline, she of the bob, did slug from a whisky bottle, but word has it that it contained apple juice. She had a cold and her singing was fractionally bluesier than a month ago, when we last saw The Onion Club, but not spoilt. Her patter was mostly the same, with cold-related ad libs thrown in. A string of twentieth century witticisms: 'One more drink and I'll be under the host' (Mae West); 'I'd rather have a bottle in front of

me than a frontal lobotomy' (Tom Waits). It's a good script, worth sticking to.

Also courtesy of Tom Waits was 'God's Away on Business', for which Pauline took the radio mic and went on the prowl, taking delight in throwing out an arm while half undressed and shouting 'KILLERS, THIEVES AND LIARS!' in whoever's face was closest.

This song, at the mid point of the first half of the set, upped the ante and cured the singer's cold at a stroke. Lithe and livid, this is why it's worth driving to a different town to see The Onion Club live. Stephen, the pianist, whose playing always makes me think of 'Time' and 'Lady Grinning Soul' from Aladdin Sane, thumped the low notes with heat seeking precision, and God may be away, but this pair mean business.

Costume changes are always a feature of Onion Club shows. Their signature prop is a coat stand with a pair of angel's wings hung on it (which no-one puts on), along with whatever else might be required.

Last night there was a screen standing to the right of the stand, ostensibly for Pauline to change behind. 'No peeking,' she warned, disappearing behind it for about a second, which was quite enough down time from audience adulation

In a way, The Onion Club are a very twenty first century proposition. Kenneth Goldsmith would probably approve of the emphasis on re-appropriation over creation. Praising Pauline's singing and Stephen's piano playing (which does need doing) is missing the point, because what you get at these shows is a powerful and entrancing aesthetic vision, stitched together from lust, joy and abandon as much as it is from the songs which give it shape, or the era which gives it much of its style.

'My Funny Valentine', augmented with trombone and muted trumpet, was so tender and beautiful; 'Strange Fruit', similarly paced, was its deathly flipside. At last Pauline put the accordion back on and played 'The Ship Song', and she meandered back through the audience, who all knew all the words, and sang them, way down low, in this lilac-lit stone room in the ornamental castle, down a potholed lane in Arbroath, where the car sat waiting patiently in the rain on a muddy verge. Wading the water. Sandman's mud, sandman's mud.