

PALE SAINTS

LONDON BRIXTON ACADEMY

SUPPORTING THE Pixies currently is tantamount to being warm-up act for the big bang. Latest unlucky nominees are 4AD labelmates the Pale Saints, stealthy atmosphere manipulators in the face of belligerent wonder-workers. An uneven battle, if ever there was one.

But it's not the only style clash tonight. For Pale Saints have turned schizoid, flitting between the temperamental, mood swing music of their first releases, and a more linear, spectral pop, as displayed on the new 'Flesh Balloon' EP.

Both have intrigue, insidious charm and glorious moments, and both are carried off with a blatant, purposefully baffling disregard for conventional stage-craft. Ambient snippets and jarring solos blur songs into one another, communication is minimal and Ian ostentatiously stands centre-stage with his back to the audience, playing his keyboard in 'Porpoise'. The overall effect is bewitching and alienating in equal measures.

The set – shortened by Ian's guitar amp packing up early in 'Time Thief' – is book-ended by denser, older stuff. For 'Half-Life Remembered' they let lush harmonies be artfully smothered by rumbling, deliberate awkwardness. Similarly, 'Insubstantial' alternately scratches and coos and a brilliant 'True Coming Dream' toys mercilessly with our expectations, unleashing two tautly orchestrated false endings.

'Little Hammer's' drum-programmed delicacy ushers in the sleeker new material. 'Porpoise; with resonant grand piano effects and driving, almost dance-worthy, samples, menaces like a spy movie theme from a parallel universe. 'Hunted' is a little more predictable, a little more sparse, and quietly dramatic.

Newish guitarist Meriel's clear, crisp vocals neatly complement Ian's anguished whispering throughout. For her party piece, the kitsch version of Nancy Sinatra's 'Kinky Love' on the current EP is ignored in favour of a parched, harrowing crack at Mazzy Star's 'Blue Flower'. Surrounded by Enoesque hums, it's reminiscent of nothing so much as a This Mortal Coil cover (that's not a criticism, incidentally).

Tricky to the last, Pale Saints evade categorisation, flirt with our affections and laugh behind our backs. A precious idiosyncrasy on the indie scene, but they defy you to love them.

John Mulvey