

LIVE!

RED HOUSE PAINTERS/EARWIG

BORDERLINE, LONDON

YOU get nowhere, I'm afraid, calling yourself Earwig. Such a name triggers off subliminal associations with smallness and insignificance in the mind of the punter. It's a well-known fact that bands named after small insects never make it big. They might just as well be called The Beetles... okay, fair enough, so what do I know? Still, Earwig don't sound like their moniker. They're good. Their sound is like porcelain, pretty, fragile and prone to shatter. Their female singer looks like Miki from Lush, having been stretched on a rack. She coos numbly, like a fugitive from a conservatoire, out of place in the tarnished, chattering surroundings of The Borderline which, unfortunately, don't serve Earwig well. It's only with the inevitable closing noisy wig-out, a great, retching, lurching riff that's like a live fish being splatted against a wall, that the occasion rises to them, as it were.

All the chatter, of course, is about Red House Painters. Their album "Down Colorful Hill", though slightly marred by one or two grating moments of sub-Morrissey swooning and wallowing, is probably the debut of the year. It's a question of whether they can preserve their exquisite, intimate sound live without its being muddled by the inevitabilities and expediencies of gigging.

They can and, oh God, they do. What's more, they're moons ahead of the album these days, sticking resolutely to a set of all-new material. "Grace Cathedral Park", the opener, establishes the tone immediately - a pitch black awning against which the guitars flicker ominously, like fireflies or headlights in the distance - and then Mark Kozelek sings, too close for comfort: "We walk down the hill, I feel/The coming of the fading sun/ And I know for sure that you'll/ Never be the one... Tell me why are you like this?"

Red House Painters songs *down* upon you, light trickles through them slowly and painfully. At times, they're as close as you can get, say, to the traumatic melancholy of a really bad bust-up with a partner, that horrible, sickly, sulking moment of mutual silence as the impact of a brutal exchange of home truths sinks in. "Things Mean A Lot" deals in stark terms with the terror of such a rift, each word intoned with icy lucidity against the subtly unobtrusive musical backdrop. It's rare at a gig, without lights or props or distractions, to be drawn into such a cinematic experience, to be drawn so far into the music, oblivious to one's surroundings. Only the increasingly imploring screams between songs for something off the album ("24/7 'Michael'!") remind you where you are.

Best of all, however, is when the exquisite mood of hideous impasse is violently shattered, when words suddenly give out and Kozelek breaks into an eerie, banshee wail, as on "Evil", or the wordless "Mother". This isn't mere climactic histrionics, nor even the self-dramatising Morrissey's falsetto wail. This is f***ing weird, like a man entranced, finally possessed by his demons. At these moments, the black clouds of guitar suddenly unleash their thunder and rain.

They only play six songs, yet it seems to have amounted to so much more. They're dragged on for three encores, apparently confused by gig etiquette, each time the begging for something off the album increasing in volume. Finally, finally, Kozelek reappears, straps on a guitar and obliges with "Michael" ("I can't believe I'm doing this"). Finally, a re-affirmative experience, a rock'n'roll celebratory experience, the relief of what we know. Everything that's antithetical to the spirit of Red House Painters, in other words. After their dark splendour, the November night outside seems warm and luminous, by comparison.

DAVID STUBBS

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Pic: Piers Allardye

I SECOND THAT EMULSION