Rumours of Glory

Bruce Cockburn, O2 Academy, Shepherds Bush, Friday 25 August 2023

Bruce Cockburn is a blues player nowadays, and he has the beard to prove it. He looks old these days and used a couple of sticks to walk on stage, although they were quickly abandoned. With two guitars and a few pedals (rather than the digital box he has used previously) he conjured up wonderful songs from not only his recent album *O Sun O Moon* but also from across his extensive catalogue.

Having started the concert with 'The Blues Got the World...', Cockburn continued in a laid back, comfortable groove for both his two sets. He seems to have accepted old age and the ways of the world, rather than raging against violence, wars and evil as he once did. The perky 'On A Roll' acknowledges that 'Time takes its toll / But in my soul / I'm on a roll'. And judging by this concert he is on a roll, although Cockburn didn't chat as much as he sometimes does, and mentioned that he can't play some of the requested tunes any more because his fingers don't work as well as they did.

What he hasn't lost is the ability to turn snapshots of society, the world around him, into poetic song lyrics. Instead of an *us* vs. *them* divide, Cockburn notes not only that 'Like it or not the human race / Is us all', and that 'Our orders are to live them all'. Sometimes that takes people to strange places, and Cockburn in his time has been in various war zones, inner city fronts, and elsewhere; but as he sang in 'Strange Waters' he has learnt that 'Everything is bullshit but the open hand'. That doesn't mean he doesn't care of course, and the second set contained acoustic versions of both the declamatory 'Lovers In A Dangerous Time' and the ecologically concerned 'If a Tree Falls'.

The singer's settled performance was at times slightly melancholy, with a seeming acceptance of old age and inevitable death. Although Cockburn performed the questioning 'Soul of a Man' (a cover of a Blind Willie Johnson song) early on in the first set, it seems that he has found some sort of answer. He performed contemplative version of both 'Wondering Where the Lions Are' and 'All the Diamonds', the latter a song which rejects man-made wealth in favour of the momentary:

All the diamonds in this world  
 That mean anything to me  
 Are conjured up by wind and sunlight  
 Sparkling on the sea

Towards the end of the first set he also performed a marvellous version of 'The Rose Above the Sky', from his *Humans* album, which draws on the imagery of T.S. Eliot's poetry. Despite 'the weight of inherited sorrow', the song describes some kind of mystical or spiritual union 'in the silence at the heart of things / Where all true meetings come to be'. As well as many other songs and an instrumental I haven't described, there was also the more down-to-earth 'When You Arrive' as a closer to the second set, which perhaps describes a very low-key heaven:

And the dead shall sing

To the living and the semi-alive

Bells will ring when you arrive

It felt like an effort to travel to London for this – bank holiday weekend, crowded trains, tourists and rain – and I nearly didn't, but I am so glad I made myself go. Cockburn continues to have interesting things to say, or rather sing, and interesting ways to sing them. His days of lengthy electric guitar solos or hybridising world music may be gone, along with the poetic visions inspired by the strange occult novels of Charles Williams and political anger, but his straightforward and accomplished blues evidence a maturity and balanced world view that more than makes up for any previous musical excitement. This is simply great music which provided a great concert.

Rupert Loydell

(645 words)