Sailing on a Strange Boat

*The* W*aterboys,* Hall for Cornwall, Truro, 25 October 2023

The Waterboys have covered a lot of musical ground since they began. A trio of 'big music' albums – energetic and expansive rock – were followed by a shift to folk-inflected music, before the band disbanded and then reformed, returning to rockier climes but also visiting the poetry of Yeats and Hendrix's wailing guitar. The one constant has been Mike Scott, on a constant search for and reflection on the meaning of life and how to live it.

Tonight he has a mostly low key bass player and drummer keeping time, whilst he moves between acoustic and electric guitar with occasional visits to the piano, although this is mostly played by virtuoso James Halliwell. And on stage left, looking like Bill Bailey crossed with Rick Wakeman appearing in *Night of the Living Dead*, is Brother Paul, shaking his hair who hammers away at his Hammond organ or freaks out across the stage on his keytar. (When did you last see one of those in use?)

It's his initial antics which provided a poor start to the proceedings and distract from the music but after a few songs the band seemed to have warmed up enough, and warmed the audience up enough, to chill into the music, reinventing songs from all over the last few decades, often in totally different arrangements.

'How Long Will I Love You?' remains wistfully romantic, the nostalgic narrative of 'Ladbroke Grove Symphony' turns almost ska, 'The Pan Within' becomes hard rock, bookended by versions of Patti Smith & Bruce Springtseen's 'Because the Night'. The most radical new version is a deconstruction of 'This Is the Sea', which is not only slowed right down but features sheets of improvised sound from pianist Halliwell, who quite rightly gets huge applause for his efforts tonight.

Another beautiful section of calm amongst the storm comes when Scott reads the 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' from *Wind in the Willows*, over a mystical, blues-tinged instrumental. Encore and closing song 'The Whole of the Moon' of course returns to singalong and wig-out territory, offering a joyous and uplifting end to the evening.

There's a kind of default setting the Waterboys fall into, a kind of lazy boogie-rock circa 1970s, which Brother Paul's organ attack doesn't help rise above the cliché, but most songs tonight avoid this, reaching for something more. There are occasional echoes of Van Morrison, hints of the original Waterboys sound, plenty of new age imagery and impassioned folk melodies in the mix, and asides, limericks ('There was an old man from Truro...') and comedy from Scott, all adding up to a lively, busy and engaging gig. I wonder where the music will go and what they will do next? Whatever it is, I'm looking forward to hearing it.

Rupert Loydell