Nationalisation

The National, Eden Sessions, Tuesday 2 July

When my daughter asked me a few weeks ago if we could go and see The National at this year's Eden Sessions I simply said 'Who?' I don't think I had ever heard of them, let alone heard their music. I hadn't been deliberately ignoring them, I just didn't know anything about them. That, of course, has all changed.

If you watched any of the TV coverage of Glastonbury you will no doubt have come across The National. My daughter ensured that we watched the whole of their energetic performance; two days later we were in the comparatively small crowd (certainly compared to the small city at Glastonbury) at the Eden Project to see them again. In the meantime I had skimmed through some album downloads and read reviews and overviews of the band. Enough, I thought, to know what I was getting into.

What I hadn't reckoned on was simply how dynamic, complex and charismatic the band are live. Their moody, sometimes downbeat music is punctuated by their singer's dramatic singing and strange, awkward antics, blocks of dynamic guitar and the wail of trumpets. It may not be music to dance to, it may be introverted and at times dark stuff that is somewhat oblique and introspective – thus earning them the SAD DADS moniker they now use as a t-shirt slogan – but it is original and exciting, rewarding careful and sustained listening.

Ok, I'm older and sadder than them, and part of me knows they sound like REM back in the 1980s when they were good, but they are much more than geek-rock or indie-rock pretenders. Their lyrics are funny – funny peculiar *and* funny ha-ha, as my mother would say – and their music takes unexpected twists and turns as each song progresses. One moment a heavy guitar solo rends the air, the next a keyboard elegantly punctuates the tune, the same guitarist starts channeling U2's effects pedals, the singer starts chanting or falls to the floor screaming, or drums and percussion combine in a visceral low-end duet. They played loud, too, far louder than anything I have heard for a while, loud enough to vibrate your body but so well mixed the vocals still soared and the instrumental separation was precise and clear.

I don't know their songs well enough to list them all for you. They played my daughter's two favourites, they played a song addressed to someone now in London in the rain, a song about being homesick for Ohio, a satirical attack on 'Fake Empire', other songs about love, angst, growing up, growing apart, and songs that simply seemed utterly strange and bewildering. And they hauled Kate Stables, the lead singer of support band This Is The Kit, on for a couple of songs too.

She added some intriguing backing vocals as well as duetting with the lead singer, but ultimately her voice seemed quite frail and at odds with the energy of the band. This Is The Kit suffered similarly for me: a somewhat 70s-sounding, heavy-handed folk-rock group, struggling to contain themselves from diving into noise and disarray, as Stables struggled to link the tune of her vocals to the music. I'd like to have heard the band without her to be honest.

Anyway, The National. Clever staging, with what appeared to be some live video mixing and treatments of band members playing, along with fairly subtle lighting (it had to be really, it didn't get dark until near the end of their set), hopefully proved that bombast and OTT staging may be passé (or soon will be) and let the band themselves and their music be the focus of the evening. They're not 'alternative' in any way – although they might have been 40 years ago – but I am looking forward to getting to know their albums much better and, of course, wearing my Sad Dads t-shirt. I might even go and see them again, given the chance.

Rupert Loydell

(690 words)

By the way, Eden Sessions were back to their regular organised and friendly selves. Easy access, lots of parking space, smooth-running food stalls and bars, sunshine, and space to move around.