

Live Reviews

**CLUBHOUSE RECORDS
LAUNCH NIGHT
ALAN TYLER, THE SNAKES
TWO FINGERS OF FIREWATER,
THE HI AND THE LO**
The Lexington, London
March 15, 2010

This is probably not the best economic climate to launch a new record label, but the brave guys behind Clubhouse Records marked their first release with this celebratory gig. The CD is a compilation of UK Americana bands titled *Divided By A Common Language* and four of the bands featured on the album performed at this launch night. Simon Moor of The Snakes alluded to the (probable) originator of the quote from where the title of the album is taken by uttering a phrase not often heard from a country band,

"Let's hear it for George Bernard Shaw".

UK Americana is a paradoxical and not wholly satisfactory term, but no-one has managed to come up with a better description; so we are stuck with it. It is difficult to exactly define this new genre, but it is basically British bands taking various forms of American roots music and interpreting it through their own musical experiences. The range of styles involved is therefore quite broad and individual bands often roam quite freely between different stylistic influences.

The Lexington is a room above a pub that holds around 220 people and the gig was a sell-out with a demand for tickets that could have filled a venue over twice the size, which is pretty impressive for a Monday night on relatively little publicity. The CD also seems to be doing well, selling out the allocated stock on Amazon on the first day. This all goes to show that despite being poorly served by radio and the media in general, there is a growing audience for this music.

The duo The Hi and Lo kicked-off the evening in some style. Nick Bott played banjo, drums and sang at the same time, which was pretty impressive. He later switched to electric guitar for a couple of songs and commented,

"It wouldn't be an Americana evening without a tremolo Telecaster."

Paul McClure contributed acoustic guitar, mandolin and harmonica and the pair sang some rich harmonies. Their lack of numbers didn't prevent them providing a full sound and a variety of styles as they moved between gentle acoustic songs, bluegrass flavourings and even a quite rocky number. They finished with the track from the compilation *Ray Of Sunshine*, which capped a fine performance.

With their long hair, beards, dress sense and musical influences, Two Fingers

Of Firewater looked and sounded like a seventies time-warp from the Old Grey Whistle Test, which is not altogether a bad thing. This five-piece band consists of guitarist, pedal steel, keyboard player, bass and drums; so they have plentiful resources and can produce a full country-rock sound with great harmonies. So everything was in place for some great music. The Gram Parsons-influenced *I'm Not Sad*, the Uncle Tupelo-like version of the traditional *Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down* and the acoustic country of *The World Can Turn* lived up to the expectation, but some of their other arrangements were contrived and they were prone to overdoing the instrumentation and occasionally rambling off into self-indulgent jams; which brings us back to the downside of their seventies influences.

The Snakes are country rock with an edge. They take their inspiration from Exile On Main Street-era Rolling Stones and Gram Parsons, but Simon Moor's lead vocals have shades of REM's Michael Stipe. They began their set with the catchy *Tin Foil Town* and included the drinking song *Amaretto*, the moody country of *I'll Be Around*, and *Promised Land*, with its Springsteen-like anthemic chorus. There were a couple of weaker songs, including the formulaic *Refrigerator Blues*, but they were slight blemishes on a strong set with some excellent lead guitar from Pete Smart. The Snakes have matured into an assured live act.

Alan Tyler is a veteran of the British country scene. He used to be in the band The Rockingbirds, but the music he has produced recently as a solo artist and with his band The Lost Sons Of Littlefield is among the best of his career. I have only ever seen Tyler play solo in the past, so it was a real treat to see him backed by a full band of Jim Morrison (fiddle), Paul Lush (guitar), Chris Clarke (bass) plus a drummer. Tyler stood centre stage; strumming guitar left-handed and wearing a thick woolly hat that must have given him a very warm head and made him look a little like Badly Drawn Boy.

This experienced bunch of musicians produced a lovely sound in a set in a set that included the glorious twangfest *Everybody Is A Cowboy Now*, the Johnny Cash feel of *Rambling Girl*, and the song from the compilation *No Easy Kind Of Loving*. Timings had slipped a little through the evening, leaving only 30 minutes for Tyler before the 11pm curfew. His set may have been short, but it was certainly sweet and rounded off an enjoyable evening that demonstrated the depth of talent we have in the UK.

Michael Hingston