

'Belle' of the ball

Belle & Sebastian prove once and for all that "twee" doesn't suit

by Jordan Youngblood

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Certain bands build cults. The instrumentation, the lyrics, the aura of the band – all congeal together to make a band completely irresistible to some people, and repelling to others.

For a while, Scotland's finest band of misfits, Belle & Sebastian, were the epitome of such a cult-maker. The band never appeared in pictures, anywhere; on stage, they were shy, rarely interacting and hiding behind the amp stacks around them; their singles never appeared on album, thus forcing fans to accumulate not only the full-lengths but the EPs. Stuart Murdoch sang of boys whose gay brother "took the heat off of them for a while", of girls who slept around but had romantic dreams of horses, and ultimately just a request to "get me away from here, I'm dying." They were the ultimate representative of quiet, sexually confused, intelligent kids who couldn't fit in (outside of Morrissey, of course).

Not to say this was a bad thing – *Tigermilk* and *If You're Feeling Sinister* stand as two of the greatest albums of the 1990s, and *The Boy with the Arab Strap* not far behind – but after a while, the band couldn't escape the label of "precious" or, God forbid, "twee". Murdoch started letting other members place more of their compositions on the albums, but even at their best they tended to fall short of their frontman's effortless songcraft. Murdoch's own efforts started to fall into a rut, and by the time *Fold Your Hands Child, You Walk Like a Peasant* and ill-advised soundtrack *Storytelling* came out, most people were willing to write off the band as a one-trick pony. Violinist Isobel Campbell left the band, along with bassist Stuart David.

And then something odd happened.

Murdoch started to take back over the band. The people who remained really wanted to play. And from their start as a ramshackle group of college kids recruited to play with Murdoch, each member was now fairly accomplished at their instrument. Enter 2003's *Dear Catastrophe Waitress*, where Murdoch described his love for Thin Lizzy and staying loose while the band played (comparatively) muscular riffs and rhythms. The whole affair had a jovial, easy-going vibe; "If You Find Yourself Caught In Love" might be the happiest song to describe attacking a village, being too pretty to kill yourself, and God saving your sorry ass. This year's *The Life Pursuit* was an all-out embrace of funky basslines, fuzzy keyboards, and (gasp!) *guitar solos that rocked*. Belle and Sebastian 2.0 were born. But how would the older fans embrace the change? Could they still convincing play the older songs? Would Stuart hide behind the amps again?

To answer each: yes, yes, and my God, no.



At the Granada on Tuesday night was an energized, swinging, all-out rocking band playing with the confidence of knowing the material could win over any audience. And from the first notes of the night – a tribute to the older fans, playing "Expectations" from *Tigermilk* – the audience was completely theirs, ready to applaud just as much for the new songs as the approved classics. As a longtime fan, it was incredibly exciting to hear the older stuff; "Get Me Away From Here, I'm Dying", "Like Dylan In The Movies" and encore barn-burner "Me and the Major" (complete with a possessed guitarist Stevie Jackson playing harmonica like a true Southerner) all gained a new layer of muscle and power from their recorded versions, and listening to yourself singing along quietly with hundreds of other people to the first lines of "The State I Am In" has to rank with the greatest concert experiences I've ever had. But the newer material was as good or better – "If She Wants Me" from *Dear Catastrophe Waitress* chimed along beautifully, "Sukie in the Graveyard" was as effortlessly catchy live as on record, "Dress Up In You" stood proudly among the B&S tradition of quiet ballads, and "White Collar Boy" unleashed keyboards that literally shook the Granada stage. Even the "bad" material was excellent, with "The Wrong Girl" from *Fold Your Hands*... a thousand times improved live, the chorus bolstered by thick electric guitars and sharper drums.

And Stuart... well, he was on fire, dancing like a madman on stage, flirting with girls in the audience ("I wish you guys

were me so you could see what I'm seeing; we've come from Minneapolis to find some real Southern belles"), slapping his ass and finally running out into the audience during "If You Find Yourself Caught In Love," bobbing and laughing in the aisle while every camera phone in the crowd was put into use. The band was all about dancing last night – showstopper "Your Cover's Blown" featured bassist birthday boy Bob Kildea playing a mean cowbell, "Electronic Renaissance" had a hilarious broken robot dance from Stevie, and general tomfoolery ruled. From people too shy to appear in photographs to absolutely owning the stage, Belle & Sebastian gave everyone at the Granada the best possible outcome of those quiet, confused kids: fully embracing their quirks and getting the confidence to, quite simply, rock.

I'd be remiss to not mention openers The New Pornographers, who ironically were minus the two members reviewed across the page. No matter; lead man A.C. Newman and replacement female vocalist Kathryn Calder brought some stunning harmonies in their stead, and the band punched out their particular brand of intricate power-pop in a great opening set. "The Laws Have Changed," "Use It", "It's Only Divine Right", and "Mass Romantic" barreled along with ample energy, "The Bleeding Heart Show" was just as pretty live as on record, and personal favorite "The Slow Descent Into Alcoholism" shimmied along to a wickedly simple rhythm and bobbing keyboards.