

NORTH WALES COUNTRY MUSIC FESTIVAL 2008

The 14th North Wales Country Music Festival was held on the 5/6/7th September at Llandudno's Theatre Cymru. This review covers the Saturday (6th) evening concert and we would like to firstly thank Richard Jones, the Theatre's Marketing Officer for excellent positioned seats to review the Show.



Chwilog Country duo, **Iona ac Andy** are the Festival organisers and hosts. The evening



kicked off with **Nick Barraclough and the Burglars**. Nick of course presented Radio 2's weekly Country Music Show for 15 years. First impressions were of casual dress and a laid back approach. They looked like they wandered through the wrong door accidentally and almost absent minded, ended up on stage together. A very low key introduction to their part in the evening's entertainment. They played through a set of mainly slow to mid tempo songs, quite a few self penned, but with other songs like Ry Cooder's "Borderline", Hank Snow's "Yellow Roses" and a very tasty version of Doc Watson's "Deep River Blues". They came across as very musically proficient in all departments and they displayed their versatility in the interchanging of instruments throughout. To us, they scored the biggest hit of the evening with their chat and presentation of the songs. The audience in general were advanced in years and they so much wanted to know the people on stage. The self depreciating humour between band members was superb as were Nick's 'off the cuff' remarks which had the audience in stitches. Stan Dallas, of the Dallas Boys once told us that the most important part of a live show is the chat in between the songs and he was right because it draws the audience into you and makes the music more 'user friendly'. The sound was beautifully balanced and you could hear every word and every note in a very natural, acoustic way, so congratulations to the sound guy. We were also much impressed with the stage-craft and years of experience that has gone into this approach to performing, which is very difficult to pull off successfully, thus inviting the audience to listen to every word and watch

every movement. It takes great skill from everyone concerned. The last song was an up tempo, self penned song about a Chicken Farmer on LSD. This earned them a genuine and well deserved encore from the very appreciative audience.



Next up were **The Fabulous Picasso Brothers**, entirely different to Nick and the Boys. Full blooded band line up and the sound level plus adrenalin, shot up. They were well dressed, polished and near perfect in all departments. Tight arrangements, great sound balance yet again and a high standard of musicianship in all departments. The lead guitarist, Steve Breakell, was a cut above the norm, playing just the right amount of lead riffs when needed and great solos, with subtle tonal changes. Strong vocal delivery by Jonty Martindale and this is the type of band that would grace any evenings entertainment. Good selection of fairly modern Country songs including Hal Ketchum's 'Tonight we just might fall in love again' and 'Till the coast is clear'...the well recorded 'Liza Jane'.....'When she cries' by Restless Hearts and their encore was Tom Jones's classic hit 'It's not Unusual' not really a Country song but then they were in Wales! They could do with a little improvement in the 'chat between songs' department which the first act did so superbly. Overall they put on a great show and all looked promising going into the interval.



Top of the Bill was the much lauded **Albert Lee and Hogan's Heroes**. After a praiseworthy introduction by Andy, the band sauntered on stage, plugged in andAlbert's guitar wouldn't amplify. Oh! Dear.....LBO syndrome. Last Band On. Obviously something had gone amiss whilst breaking down the other acts equipment during the interval or the roadie hadn't checked the gear - who knows, but it happens to most of us at one time or another. Iona and Andy tried their best to cover the delay with some audience participation but one sensed Albert would have preferred to be left to his own devices. Finally, electric connection

between guitar and amp sparked up and the band roared into their set. Albert has always been highly rated as one of the best Country style guitarists in the World and rightly so. He has played with the best over the years. The Everly Brothers, Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton and Eric Clapton to name but a few. The band usually features keyboard great Pete Wingfield (absent for this tour), who I (Paul) have worked with in the past. This was a superb outfit in the 1970's. Most South London Musicians played at The Nashville Rooms at one time or another as did Albert and our old mate John Joyce. It was a great venue for all that was Country. Here in a seated Theatre in Llandudno, North Wales was a little different. Unlike the previous two acts, it took awhile to get the sound balance right. Perhaps sound personnel changed in the interval or the band had brought their own techs. Whatever...it took realistically about five numbers before it sat comfortably within itself. The main problem was that the bass was too loud and Albert's vocals were slightly inaudible by comparison with the earlier singers. Having mused over the technical issues, the band was as tight as a bus ticket between the cheeks of a miser's rear - end. Superb musicianship, especially from keyboard player Elio Pace, who incidentally fronts his



own band. Elio is a great showman as well. He's one of those rarities who can make playing look easy, whilst putting it over to the audience as even easier. His sensitivity on Accordion is also noted. **Gerry Hogan** on Pedal Steel is a great player. He wasn't really audible off stage until about half way through the set. Brian Hodgson (bass) and Peter Baron (Drums) laid down a solid foundation throughout. Songs included 'Hanging On', 'Brand New Heartache', Ray Charles's 'Leave my Woman Alone' and a host of other Country songs. "Tiger Rag" the early 1900's Dixieland instrumental was absolutely brilliant, with the individual musicians shining in all departments. All the stunning and up tempo guitar work from Albert apart, one of the best moments of the performance was when he played piano and sang "Crying in the Rain". To us 'Country Boy' was the show stopper, with Albert really reaching the notes and fluidity others find difficult or near impossible to reach at speed. The band encored with "Tear it Up". It would have also been a nice insert if Albert played something on acoustic guitar just to break up the pace. Apart from the sound issues, again, chat and dress presentation was barely in evidence and it is so important in a Theatre situation, especially to an older audience.

At the end of the night, it was a great success and Iona ac Andy are quietly confident that the event will happen again next year and full marks to them and their team for organising the Festival. Having done many ourselves, we know just how difficult it can be to make all the nuts and bolts fit.

by Paul Brett & Michele Breeze