

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Dissociatives

Thebarton Theatre

Dissociation is an interesting concept. In chemistry it means the separation of constituent elements in a compound. Psychologically, it is when aspects in the personality hive off to form an independent, even multiple personality. For Daniel Johns, rock star since the age of fifteen, to use the term, I take as a signal that he is reclaiming his stable atoms from that very powerful base element, silverchair. And for a young man, who has himself told us he has been on the edge of psychic disintegration, becoming a dissociative must seem like a safe new place to enjoy having any kind of personality he feels like.

The link between Johns and dance mensch Paul Mac is both surprising and entirely likely - even if they are half a generation apart, and one comes from teenage grunge, and the other from the Very Cool end of the club scene. They met when Mac produced a silverchair mix back in 1997 but now, in the *Dissociatives*, they have a new symbiosis which makes them interesting and equal partners.

Taking a studio project on the road has its challenges - and the *Dissociatives'* Thebarton show is very like a recital. Running not much more than an hour, Johns and Mac perform the album with assistance from second keyboard, bass and drums. They keep the songs in the same sequence as the CD release with the addition of a couple of new songs (no titles given) and two covers (The Fauves and Tom Waits).

There is plenty of fan squealing and great affection for Johns, bobbing around in a beanie and shades, especially when he fawns about Adelaide audiences. But the music, despite its thuddy bass end and Johns' frequent use of effects, is neither silverchair rock nor clubby dance groove and the fans find themselves strangely still. The songs are carefully constructed studio artifacts and they stay that way - no extended jams, no big solos, close to script and game plan.

Much Preferred Customers with its pulsing, lapping beats and Johns' plaintive vocal opens up an hypnotic groove emphasised and enveloped by foggy lighting in strong reds and blues. Then the radio favourite,

Somewhere Down the Barrel, with its Beatle-ish harmonies, strong chorus of nah-nah-nahs and Paul Mac's insistently chiming piano, registers as an oasis of familiarity before the chaotic hurdy gurdy complexities of *Horror with Eyeballs*.

There are some very well wrought compositions here - *Forever and a Day*, *Thinking in Reverse* and the self-referential *Young Man, Old Man*. Daniel Johns uses guitar sparingly but always to good account and vocally he runs the gamut from whistling to a kind of Marilyn Manson dry howl that I am still not sure is him or an effects button someone pushed. For the sake of his sweet larynx I hope he had some help.

I am intrigued by the Dissociatives. Between Johns' dense, often impenetrable lyrics and Mac's carefully layered arrangements this music certainly takes its own time and I am not sure whether it will repay the effort of repeated acquaintance or will end up sounding ... dissociated. But in this ambitious, carefully managed concert, it is clear that not only is the talented Daniel Johns refreshed and enjoying himself again, but his musical explorations have only just begun.