

The Rodney Graham Band featuring the amazing Rotary Psycho-Opticon  
ABC, Glasgow

Hosted by The Common Guild as part of the Glasgow International Festival of Contemporary Art, this concert promised a mixture of 'rock and roll psychedelia with folk music earnestness'. The odd assertion that Rodney Graham would be appearing 'as himself' was a taster of the puzzling fare to come. The curtains drew back to reveal the Rotary Psycho-Opticon, an op art-esque wall of revolving spiral panels. This provided an unlikely human focus throughout, in that it appeared to speed up and slow down according to the tempi of the songs as though cranked by hand. The object's headline part in the band's billing was a nicely wry touch in an otherwise opaque event.

Was this experience the unmediated Rodney Graham as promised or Rodney Graham performing on his own imaginary Ready Steady Go!-type programme? As somebody who has 'played' a number of roles this performance made it increasingly apparent how dry he was as himself. Similarly, the band members were curiously workmanlike, dispatching the songs with a session musician's minimum of fuss. With such a gruff stage presence it was hard to know if their neutrality was designed to throw features of the song writing into sharper relief. Graham and guitarist David Carswell wore suits in vague acknowledgement of a performance but their interaction consisted mainly of mutual nodding to indicate the next number. With waning expectation levels for any particularly wild entertainment it was minute details contained in the words that became the concert's saving grace.

In these Neil Young meets latter-day Dylan strumathons there was often a striking disjunction between lyrics and melody. The music was indeed dutifully earnest, which made its failure to connect with the knowing content in the songs all the more strange. The country-rock sludge was cut through with lines like 'don't trust a person over 30' from the song of the same name. The audience duly responded with knowing smiles to the concluding, 'because they're fucking old'. Looking around the venue, Graham certainly knew how to tease his demographic and be self-deprecating at the same time.

There is something of the troubadour's careworn delivery in Graham's singing voice and, appropriately, he has talked of his love of the gravel-throated Lee Hazlewood. In keeping with his idol's music, Graham's 'The Merry Month of May' was anything but merry. He couldn't 'paint his way out of a wet paper bag' he informed us, as the imploding art gags continued. In an interview with Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon for Bomb Magazine, Graham proclaimed, 'I basically want to get the band out on a little tour for people who are strictly music fans'. Despite much manful strumming on this occasion the impossibility of this being strictly for music fans that were not artists was repeatedly hammered home. As an increasingly weird impersonation of a barroom band, those on stage only allowed Graham's defeatist sketches to gently insinuate themselves into the audience's consciousness when the art world musings were to the fore.

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