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## Nomad: the Cowboy Junkies on tour

**On a cold evening in a classical venue *The Leisure Review* came face to face with the modern music industry and wondered whether the Cowboy Junkies represent the past, present or future of rock and roll.**

For the first time for a good few years the Cowboy Junkies were in the UK, bringing their unique blend of country, blues and jazz to four venues as part of a low-key tour supporting the release of new recordings. After performances in Glasgow and Manchester, their Nomad tour arrived in London and it is perhaps indicative of the vagaries and contradictions of the modern music industry that the venue is the Barbican Hall, a grand auditorium with a capacity a few dozen seats short of 2,000 and a programme with a heavy bias towards classical productions.

Low-key is the Cowboy Junkies' defining style so it was no surprise to find the huge stage sparsely lit and laid with a variety of rugs and carpets to mark out the performance territories of each member of the band. In a smaller venue these carpets might provide a suggestion of wall-to-wall luxury but on the Barbican Hall's boards they create a series of rectangular islands, an Axminster archipelago awaiting musical travellers. It was also reassuring to find the auditorium pretty much sold out, confirmation of the affection and respect accorded these alt-country virtuosos beyond their native Canada. On a freezing January night that will have made the band suspect that the weather has been specially arranged to make them feel at home, a large and loyal crowd had braved the snow-blighted transport system of greater London to see the band perform their introspective and articulate songs of love and life, loss and living.

Although determinedly downbeat, the band are also energising and engaging, and, given their critical acclaim and lengthy back catalogue, any music fan would be inclined to wonder whether a Cowboy Junkies UK tour should be quite as low key as it has been thus far. Formed in 1986 with three members of the Timmins family as its focus, the band left the major record label environment in the late 1990s and set up their own label, Latent Recordings, to manage their own way in a rapidly changing music industry. The travails of touring are a staple of musicians' conversations the world over but one would hope that such elegant and celebrated performers would be able to take home better memories of the UK than long drives in a small van to odd venues hoping that the tickets had sold. While it might provide plenty of things for the band to laugh about later, the image of the Cowboy Junkies taking to the roads of Great Britain having hauled their bags of CDs and merchandise off the Air Canada luggage carousel at Heathrow is not an image we should dwell on.

But for all these indignities, the band had arrived and the Barbican Hall was ready to welcome them. The Barbican is a fitting venue for the Cowboy Junkies in that it is beautiful, comfortable and acoustically suited to performance but also in that it is not a conventional 'rock' venue. The Junkies are certainly not a conventional 'rock' band. The stage set hints at their approach: the stage and its surrounds are black; the band's instruments, microphones and amps are arranged on and those carpets would not look out of place in any traditionally appointed sitting room; there is a glass acoustic screen between the drum kit and

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the rest of the band; and, in the only nod to rock and roll excess to be discerned, there are flowers in a vase next to Margot Timmin's microphone at the front of the stage.

When the band appears, the five members dressed in black against the black backgrounds, the lighting makes sense of the stage set, making each musician visible and distinct while still part of the whole. Early in the set Margot Timmins, the band's vocalist and embodiment of a self-effacing front person, explained how the evening will work out. The first set will comprise new material taken from the recently released four-volume set of albums, which itself comprises an album inspired by Michael Timmins' travels in China, an album of Vic Chesnutt covers, a Cowboy Junkies rock album and a more conventional Junkies album which Margot reveals is "my mother's favourite album of the four". She apologises if anyone is a bit disappointed at having to listen to the new stuff but reassures them that "I won't take offence if you want to get your phone out and start texting". The second set, she says brightly, will be old stuff, including – and she pats a large book on a music stand next to her mic – some of the very old songs that have been requested via the band's website.

With these formalities completed, Margot's voice – a rumbling growl, a soaring flight and all points of expressive excellence in between – fills the space. Few other bands would expect to encounter such warmth for new material but this is a Junkies crowd so any material that is thoughtful, literate, warm, complex and engaging, all of which this is, will be welcomed. Sat in broad, comfortable seats, the audience was able to focus on the music.

All too soon comes the intermission and the audience is left at liberty to explore the Barbican, this venerable piece of aged modernism that offers a confusion of routes and levels among the vast spaces outside the performance areas but which still somehow feels welcoming and purposeful. The gents' toilets with their elegant tiling incorporating what was probably London's longest ashtray hint at the habits and expectations of a time passed, while a bill in excess of a tenner for two modest drinks brought us back to the present.

We were also left with time to consider the past, present and future of the music industry, an industry that has dominated popular culture in its various forms since rock and roll emerged from the Mississippi delta and took to the road looking for new souls to convert. Where once record sales were the *raison d'être* of music corporations, the age of digital delivery threw a Fender into the works, bringing more than half a century of accepted industry practice to a shuddering halt. With the dominance of downloads even the biggest record companies have found themselves increasingly outdated and largely irrelevant, hard-copy recordings have become the preserve of collectors, hipsters or someone's dad, and performers – the artists and creators who once fuelled a vast music machine – are now trying to work out how they might make a living.

Various models have been, and are being, explored by everyone involved in the business but few certainties have emerged. In 2007 Radiohead released their album *In Rainbows* as a download for which people could pay what they wanted but in a recent interview in *The Observer* Thom Yorke explained that the band's enthusiasm for the opportunities of the internet had waned: "We were so into the net around the time of *Kid A* [the band's previous album]. We really thought it might be an amazing way of connecting and communicating. And then very quickly we started having meetings where people started talking about what we did as 'content'." Yorke explained that he and his band-mates quickly came to the conclusion that the corporations dominating the online environment had effectively made all content, including music and newspapers, worthless in their efforts to generate shareholder value.

For many performers the renewed emphasis on live performance has been a welcome development, putting the artists in direct contact with fans without recourse to the confusions and uncertainties of the digital interface. However, the music industry is still a difficult environment in which to operate. As part of the publicity for her book, *Bedsit Disco Queen*, Tracey Thorn, singer in *Everything But the Girl* and as a solo artist one of the UK's most respected musicians, told *The Guardian* of her ambivalence to her teenage daughter's ambitions for a career in music: "What's gone is the middle class of the arts. Where you could just be a worker, respectably, and do respectable work and earn a respectable living and have respectable ambitions – that's just vanished, I think, as an option. You either sell millions or nothing." She is sympathetic to the X Factor generation of would-be performers because that may well be their only route into the business.

Back in the Barbican Hall the Cowboy Junkies returned for their second set and went about the business of bringing their back catalogue to life for an appreciative audience. As the evening drew to a close Margot Timmins introduced the band members and thanked the audience for coming out to see them play. She explained that over the years she has found the best way to say thank you to the Junkies' fans is in person so she would be in the foyer in about half an hour, happy to say hello, thanks and chat about life, the music and everything.

Next stop Warwick. Hope to see you there.

**You can find details of the Cowboy Junkies, their music and their gigs at <http://latentrecordings.com/cowboyjunkies/>**

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