

Ding Dong Lounge, Melbourne

Wednesday, July 29, 2009

Sometimes it's a real stroke of luck when you know the people in a band you love. Because then, sometimes, when they do weird things, you *really* get it. There's always been a lot of humour in the Calculators music and especially in their delivery – witness the version of “Stains” on their record. But reverence? Irreverence more likely I hear you say. Downright derision. Contempt, even.

The other night they played a gig, The Wardrobe Malfunction, loosely linked to a Melbourne International Film Festival program of films from the early 80s, called the Post-Punk Mixtapes. Janis Lesinskis' [clip](#) for the Calculators “I Can't Stop It”, made in the backyard wasteland their house overlooked in 1979 North Fitzroy, was the first film in the five-part program which is a tribute to the time and a credit to can-do curator Michelle Carey. After a polyglot evening of films that fairly served up the melting-pot-of-ideas vibe that characterised the time, many of us headed off to the Ding Dong Lounge to have our ears cleaned by Gossip Pop, Pig and Machine and the Primitive Calculators. The shows were linked by being performances of music embraced by projected imagery and propelled by programmed dynamics – to varying extents.

Tonight, [Gossip Pop](#) was Sue Dodd by herself. I can't get engaged. Maybe it's my fault but I defend myself. I've watched porn and I've investigated myself and maybe I'm a little too old to be preached at by a younger generation. I guess her themes remain, sadly, ongoing concerns for continuing generations but the show just felt like a tantrum delivered from a pulpit. When kids have tantrums you know it's a stage; you just give them a cuddle, say something sweet that you actually mean and hope for the day they get over it and quieten down. Cuddles were clearly off limits – so I probably missed most of what was on offer – but while I giggled a few times and I can remember some of the imagery, I wasn't grabbed. I don't want her to quieten down – it's about the delivery.

But that said – and I haven't a clue what Yuka is singing about – [Pig and Machine](#) just convince me viscerally so I'm happy to let their world consume me and fry my senses. As I said to my learned friend John J, I would never listen to their stuff at home, and maybe I don't actually “like” it, but they're really good. In fact, what I really dug about Pig and Machine, was the balanced combination of pre-recorded material and onstage instrumental nudded-out spontaneity. John Harte is a captivating guitarist and Yukas' immersion in her act is compelling. The backing tracks are ferociously assaultive but employ no cheesy distortion, aggressive vocal samples, overstated bass or any other of the clueless cliches of the much over vaunted drill and bass muthefucka scene whose fascination infects Melbourne improv's flirtation with electronic(a). Pig and Machine are just ferocious, funny, warm, intriguing and mindblasting.

And so to the band. OK, so this is an arty film-festy event. So what do the Calculators do? Well, something with a film of course! First, they set up in front of the stage, standing just off the lip of the stage, looking back at the stage, backs to the crowd and with three sheets draped across the stage as an a/v triptych in a semicircular array. The band made a little soundcheck noise and then the screens were illuminated by (now my memory is hazed by the excitement that followed) three identical b&w images of Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs.

It all hung there for a messy moment, gestures to and fro, intriguing – what's going on? – and then the Aztecs launched into a tune that was on their *Live at Sunbury* record, a bluesy stormer called “[Mama](#)”.

And the Calculators kicked off – The Aztecs and the Calculators played their own versions in sync! The band are all looking at the film, the audience is looking at the film, Billy’s looking at us and it’s shreddingly loud. Stuart goes body-contortion-crazy screaming the vocal and the sound is really great – crisp and clear, especially the drums and bass. The song was long, like most Aztec workouts, and in the middle was a HUGE TOWERING DRUM SOLO from Gil Mathews. Who knows how long the drum solo is/was, but during it the Calculators played gorgeous improvised noise that worked perfectly. After the drum solo they slammed back in kinda sync and crazed up brilliantly to a freak-out rock’n’roll slam-down finish. Hands raised high, we all applauded the film and the show. Well, that’s how I remember it all.

Then there was a short pause while the band set up onstage. All decent bands have some kind of stage act – like a way of being in front of their audience that usually includes some tropes that become affectionately regarded cliches. The Calculators are no different and this moment was the time for Stuart’s ritual abuse of Denise, a tongue-in-cheek blazing of the chick in the band by the frontman. Denise’s laptop was glitchy and the derisive commentary freely flowed. There were other great satirical moments from Stuart including, “Are we READY”, yelled in call and response with, “YEAH!!!”, for a few minutes while sound crappiness was sorted. Sit back, close your eyes, imagine it, play it out – and giggle like we all did.

All of a sudden, I noticed the screen displaying all the saddest images of Michael Jackson’s media life from *Oprah*, news of arrests, the baby balcony incident and some very ordinary late career TV stuff. Well, I thought it was all there. Was it? Who cares? It brought it all back to me. The band did a totally unrecognisable (unless you knew the words – which I didn’t) express-train heavy metal version of “Bad”, complete with new words except for the chorus (cause as Stuart explained, “The words are so terrible I couldn’t sing them”) that stormed along for maybe 15 minutes. (Was it that long? It felt like it, and every minute a gem of a moment.) And that was the Melbourne Film Festival Primitive Calculators show. Brilliant!

Satire and reverence seamlessly co-mingled in a totally committed performance perfectly suited to the event.

Now, listen ... gdang da da, gdang da da, dadung dadung gdang da da, gdang da da, well well... Billy Thorpe wore his guitar high on his hip and had a tendency to point it at ya – a comin’ at ya stance. Like Billy, the Primitive Calculators are always comin’ at ya. Michael Jackson was all about his dance – we should all be so unique. He did his dance. C’mon baby. Be yourself. Do That Dance.