



Aaron Riches of Royal City Interview:

I would estimate that I've attended in the region of 2,000 gigs, maybe more. I've witnessed some amazing things during this rolling cavalcade of sound, light and human interaction. Standing as part of the tight circle surrounding him on the dance floor, I all but spoke in tongues as a Blind Boy of Alabama hollered out the deep scars of his heritage in a gospel frenzy. A mouse held me transfixed, the tiny thing somehow avoiding death by mosh, weaving miraculously through pile-driving boots to bolt for freedom in the gents - as Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee and Marky tore the sucker up. Rickie Lee Jones descended into seemingly serious mental collapse before my very eyes on a rainy evening in Birmingham. I recoiled in horror as Angus Young thrust his naked, stinky, antipodean arse onto my face. (My friend Andy nicked the metal man's tie. Still treasures it. Entry that night was 50p with a voucher from *Sounds* and the support was a film of Kiss. The venue burned down the following week.) I won't go on.

On June 3rd this year, I was presented with a memory to rank up there with them all. It did not involve daredevil rodents, sweaty Australian posteriors or any of that. To many present, such an act of grace may be viewed entirely differently and is probably long forgotten. But it will certainly stick with me.

It was a gig almost not meant to happen. The Broken Family Band had spent a great deal of effort in organizing a long-awaited tour for Knife In The Water, with whom they would go out as a labour of true love. On the eve of the first show, the spook-country Texans were turned away by immigration officials at Gatwick in a pique of post-9/11 administrative bullet-headedness. At Brighton's Hanbury Ballroom, The BFB's creative focus Steven Adams was one inconsolable individual, but in obvious agreement with the promoters that the show should continue, with his band as 'modest' headliners.

A couple of months earlier, Steven's band had performed in Brighton, including in their set a truncated cover of cult alt.country classic *Daisies* by Guelph, Ontario band Royal City. Fate would dictate that whilst Knife In The Water would not appear at The Hanbury show, so Royal City would.

The Canadians were magnificent in support, but did not blast Cambridge's finest from the stage. However, when The BFB had wrapped up a set as rapturously received as the buzz support's had been, Steven strangled the ovation to invite Royal City back on stage. "Ah, one of those fantastic, ad-hoc collaborative moments!" I thought. Not at all. Steven and his band mates left the stage, insisting that Aaron Riches, Jim Guthrie, Simon Osborn and

Lonnie James wrap up the evening – with *Daisies*. It was a heart-warming, astonishing moment. Such ego-free gestures of generosity of spirit are rare in life, and this was not lost on the astonished Canadian musicians.

Daisies is a very strange song. Musically, it is the upbeat pop side of the Oldham-esque, cracked country wonder that is Royal City. It talks of flowers sprouting from an anus (is there no escape?), man-muck covering a door and all manner of horror played out against unreasonably jaunty melody. Playful and horrifying at once, it is a typical example of the oft-inexplicable beauty that pours from the pen of Aaron Riches – an offbeat use of language that spans time and distance. Expressed over yearning or jangly or downright funky, rustic sonic textures, it is totally understandable that this fascinating outfit is wowing the likes of Steven and myself. Much of Aaron's lyrical play may seem obvious, and sometimes is. But often, it is not, and requires the patience and attention that, for example, the works of James Joyce or William Burroughs may demand, in order to penetrate just the crust.

Across the band's two brilliant albums *At Rush Hour* *The Cars* and *Alone At The Microphone* (released domestically by Toronto indie Three Gut, licensed here by Rough Trade) I'd noticed threads and possible moods, tantalizing clues as to what may be driving Aaron's quill. I suspected it originated from another world - a very scary world, where all is restless. Intrigued, I gathered what I considered my (flimsy) evidence, and spread it before him:

Aaron, *Rush Hour* appears to be an album of love songs, examining friendship, loyalty and devotion: Is this true? If so, was it inspired by any one person?

Yes, in some sense it is an album of love songs. But more, I think it might be a record about desire and the place of the heart. One person may have inspired this or that, or not, but the nature of desire seems to me to be something beyond individuality, what a single person can or ought to be to anyone. Maybe the more painful lyrics issue from the realization that an individual cannot fulfill one's desire. I don't know. The record was made a long time ago and I can't remember. Sickness and geography seem to keep challenging communion, the possibility of meaningful friendship and the devotion of one to the other. By the next record 'Alone', sickness and geography became death and absence. Maybe the question of both records is how to love in absence and memory, how to find the comforter in a community of grief, how to make love present in absence?

So, it wasn't about a girlfriend, then. See my theory? There it goes, hurtling to the ground as a ball of fire. I jest, of course. Aaron is a deep, greatly intellectual young man, currently taking a PHD in Theology at the University of Virginia. Where you or I may skim Bill Bryson, he'd pick up Foucault. But, he's not all seriousness and dreams, soul-searching and poetry. He's a right good laff 'n' all. When it comes to his art, however, it is more than apparent that he seeks inspiration beyond the gleam of a Chevy or the fit lass next door.

Animals pop up regularly in your songs: There are mentions of crocodiles and

alligators, elephants, fish, stallions and buffalo, plus there are wolves on the sleeve of *Alone*: What is it with you and animals? Are they metaphors for human qualities or failings?

I think animals can be ‘ways’ of invoking specific qualities and characterizations of self and body. The elephants are clumsy, but gentle and beautiful. I don’t know if they ever run like a herd, but their running bodies rumble the earth. And you can read hundreds of different things into every animal. I don’t think the animals represent human failings – though they might. I think they represent the body in time, the body moving, the body longing and failing in desire, and finally the body decaying.

Travel and transport also feature throughout *Rush Hour*: You mention many places – Havana, Acapulco, Rome, Honolulu, Katmandu, NYC – with cars, buses, trains, trams and ships also playing their parts. You also state *I want to go everywhere*. There appears a deep-seated but uneasy desire to travel, balanced perhaps against the sacrifice of being parted from loved ones that such adventure would bring. Is this your expression of how you feel when you’re away from home?

A search for home: the want of a meaningful homecoming could be a central theme of ‘Rush Hour’. Odysseus is on the sea, hounded by Poseidon; he is journeying for life towards an idea of what his home is. But, his home is full of suitors and the anxiety of cuckoldry.

(Now, *there* is a word you don’t hear every day.)

Penelope is entertaining a house full of unwanted guests, so are we really talking about hospitality? Where do I hang my head? The birds have nests and the foxes have dens and we are searching for the home we lost. We are all Odysseus in some sense. And if I get to a place I thought home was, I am again like Odysseus; I will have to renegotiate my sense of home and place in terms of others, where I belong, and where they belong. How to be hospitable without a home? When I return, I will still be far from my place, as Odysseus who left his wife for war. Homecoming is the end of all desire. I think the singing on ‘Rush Hour’ is of Odysseus’ longing, as well as his confrontation with strange gods, moving rocks, sirens, and the problem of trust in home and place.

Dare I, I thought, tell him I’d not read it? Coming from a skinny singer with an orange baseball cap perched delicately atop his head, this was immense stuff. Life as odyssey represented in nature: I can dig that. The quest for a perfect spiritual self – a journey without end, as completion would extinguish desire. I’m that clumsy elephant.

Alone At The Microphone is a very different record, and lyrically startling. There is some very unsettling imagery in there: Was there an intention to shock with this, or perhaps even amuse?

No, there was no intention to shock. It is a desert landscape... Odysseus visiting Agamemnon in Hades... Jesus will visit here, too. I think the two albums are connected in the way that Purgatory opens from the Inferno. In the spirit of Dante, the two worlds are visions of different places in one journey from death to life, from darkness towards the ineffable light of plenitude and love in the face of the Beloved. There is something rattling about the drunkard's story and the hooker's tale; they are grim and sad, but they are emphatically about real life. The joy of light and belonging makes no sense outside the narrative details of creepy corners, illness and pain, isolation and self-loathing.

It is indeed a 'troubled' collection of songs, laced with dark emotions. I sense bitterness and fear, a tangible feeling of loss and hints of betrayal. Am I getting close?

Yes, but I hope there is more, too. I hear hints of great joy, and in many ways I think 'Alone' is closer to home than 'Rush Hour'. Something new is happening: (In reference to album closer And Miriam Took A Tambourine In Her Hand) Miriam has a tambourine in her hand. She is singing 'I no longer fear the foul fiend underneath.' I hope in the dark night for the ray of light – the ray promised by St. John of the Cross in the ascent of Mount Carmel. Despite, and because of death, there is life breaking into the record in important places. I hope it is heard. If people thought that the record was just a nihilistic revelry in meaninglessness, I would be disappointed.

What of the sense of danger and being trapped that pervades the atmosphere of the album?

Yes, danger and being trapped... I think it's a journey into an uncanny place, an unhomely space, exploring what it is to realize oneself as a stranger, and in some sense, homeless. I think of the record as exploring the real danger of suspicious, empty space. But, having said that, I hear a dare to go beyond that – to expose darkness as death, evil as nothing, and so to find in being, a quickening light and hope.

Beyond Homer, where *do* these inspirations come from? Poe? Bosch?

I'm reading St. Symeon the New Theologian right now. (A-ha!) I read other books – Eliot, Dostoyevsky, James Joyce. (I just knew it.)

Despite its beauty, *Alone* is a very grimy record, as you've smeared it with all manner of filth – blood, shit, mud, cum and puke permeate the musings, as do deformity and sickness. Considering that there is a more acute folk music feel to the first album, did you set out to create something medieval or 'historical' in concept?

Maybe it is medieval! I was fascinated at the time by the body dying – a fascination that blends well with an American folk influence: Dock Boggs, The Stanley Brothers et al. I don't think Royal City had a concept in mind when we set down to make the record, but as we stumbled on what the record was going to be, we ran with it. I think

a lot of it coheres because it grew out of the band being a band, touring and living together. We spent a lot of time together.

(Out of the mists of myths, we arrive back at rock 'n' roll!)

Poison, decay, dogs eating babies; this is not pretty! Was it an aim to make a record as lyrically at odds to album one as possible, maybe as a reaction to it? And straight up, are you taking the piss?

There is probably some fun! I don't know. I didn't have any interest in repeating what was said on the first record. I wanted to tell a different story. But, it wasn't thought out. My fascinations were different by the time we recorded 'Alone'. I was scared of the body dying and rotting, but also being beautifully transfigured into a body never known.

And so intellectually, theologically, literarily mugged, I retired to my table to chew on a packet of ready salted maggots, and puzzle on as to the cavernous, ocean deep musical world of Aaron Riches' Royal City. But, he had given me much to ponder for my very own odyssey; thoughts that may well assist in my own passage through life. He would be delighted to discover months on, no doubt, that I would be visiting Ithaca on my honeymoon. Where one journey ends, so another begins.

So, Aaron, what can we expect next?

Expect light.

CLICK!

TOM SHERIFF

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