



## 'Wide String Tremelo'

an antidote to mundane tv and the muddle of 'the swells'  
a loose salute to Winchester's South by South Central  
at the Railway Inn, Winchester [www.myspace.com/sxsc](http://www.myspace.com/sxsc)

## Close On Winter

From Devon, Peter Bruntnell Band plus support  
from Ox from Canada  
Sunday, November 10th, 2007

One of those wet Sundays when the multi channels on the tv spew out the mundane which is so bad it becomes funny. Another of those reality shows from America putting budding wannabe starlets through their paces and all the angst that entails for them. Bless 'em.

Perhaps I'm missing something. I was. It was getting late and it was time to head the old car towards Winchester with the CD player spinning Laura Nyro and Jay Farrar. One phrase from Nyro is enough to wash the sour taste of angst with sod all talent from my mind and Jay Farrar kicking into Neil Young's Like A Hurricane did the rest.

After eight I reached my destination, out back of Winchester railway station, the Railway Inn tucked away like some refuge for the hobbits in Lord of the Rings. Down the narrow corridor to the back bar where Richard and Oliver are on the door with the customary bowls of jelly babies and liquorice all sorts on the table.

There is time to have a beer waiting for Ox to come on stage. I'm keen to hear them, keen to hear the Gretsch waiting there, to be plugged into a small amp precariously atop of three beer crates. I know the barest details of the band, they're from Canada and they've been on the road here for the past three weeks. From a beat up old suitcase in front of the sound desk they are displaying their wares, CDs, vinyl, bumper stickers, t-shirts

hanging from the back wall. Dust Bowl Revival looks like an album to keep ten quid back for.

Appropriately fellow Canadian Joni Mitchell comes on the pa, me not being an encyclopaedia on music don't have a clue what the song was just that it's Joni and it's bloody wonderful.

And then the band Ox comes on stage and they're bloody wonderful too. The first song Carolinah nails me to their mast. The guy in a hobbit hat had plugged in the Gretsch and started singing with the bass, electric guitar and drums curling in behind him. He sang "*Carolinah do your lips still*

*taste like strawberry wine, summer air and chamomile*" so evocative you could taste that women on your tongue.

First thing I warmed to was the strength of Matt Browning's vocal and the deft touches of Gretsch as it spiralled on top of the unfussy anchor of the band who hit this relaxed groove that rocked.

After that first magical song I was drawn into what I term the classic Canadian songwriter lured further on down

the road. Like Neil Young driving out of Ontario in a hearse. A rootless Jack Nicholson, headed somewhere down the road in Five Easy Pieces.

Matt Browning's road map tonight is littered with classic cars. The half Cadillac, half truck, centaur like Pontiac of his song Transam. And in L.A. City he's bound for the city of angels looking for an angel to call his own: "*in a beat up four by four and a girl I'll pick up along the way, I'm going down just to see how far that I can go from Ontario,*



Matt Browning, Ox,  
photo by Oliver Grey

*I'm goin down with a 24 and a carton of cigarettes, I'll bet all my friends I'll make a big time movie star, I'm gonna go down to L.A. city, the girl ain't pretty but the girl is mine, bye bye Canadian peach bowl beauty, L.A. here I come, bye bye Canadian peach cuty let your pig tails down cause American beauty here I come."*

"There are a lot of cars in my songs," he confesses. One of them Stolen Car is stark and achingly beautiful. It's set in a kind of world inhabited by Bukowski, Tom Waits and the Tropicana Motel. Browning sang *"I've seen a whole lot of trouble when the night comes down"* like he'd been hanging out with Warren Zevon listening to the air conditioner hum. Some lovely electric piano from the guitarist sealed the lament till the tune made a glorious twist like a turn in a Cohen Brother's movie and the band and the Gretsch and the vocal rocked up the chorus about a Camero car 'glory bound' out of LA for Mexican highways. It was like a fantasy playing in the Big Lebowski's head, some belief in paradise regained through a stolen car, a Magdalene and the road out of the hills and over the horizon. Brilliant.

I eagerly parted with a tenner for a copy of Dust Bowl Revival and had another beer while Peter Bruntnell got set up. It took a while but that's not important, there needs to be time to drink a beer and clear the head and you can guarantee here it

won't mean slipping back into some crap tv music wrung out of angst cuties.

In fact the intermission on Sunday night was akin to one of them legendary Kaleidoscope gigs way back in sixties in burgeoning Los Angeles. A young lady has begun to turn her willowy form to the music on the PA as though she were one of Solomon Feldhouse's Turkish belly dancers. Evocative stuff and the quizzical look from the band sound checking on stage was a picture.

The young lady slip danced through most of Peter Bruntnell's set too and rather than detract it seemed to make perfect sense.

Oliver hinted that the set would be a new departure for Peter Bruntnell. The band pared down to a guitarist who doubled on harmonium and a double bass player, Bruntnell playing his customary acoustic. I much prefer musicians to be moving forward than doubling back with a formula.

The only formula tonight was something conjured up by Pythagoras to denote the perfect triangle. I struggled with numbers at school but had my old maths teacher left it to the Peter Bruntnell band, I'd have had a better education. What they played was in perfect symmetry but not some dull class book symmetry but poetic symmetry, the kind to tingle the spine.



Peter Bruntnell at the Railway, photo by Oliver Grey

The set was largely new songs from an as yet unreleased album and each one of them was plain stunning. The moment Danny Williams on double bass arc the bow just above the bridge on the opening song to give a chill to Close On Winter you knew this was going to be something special. The edgy touches of electric guitar from Dave Little and the first haunted notes of harmonium behind the spot on stroke Bruntnell achieves when he chords his guitar sealed it and Bruntnell's voice, as smooth as Tupelo honey. It was all as natural as breathing and it blew all that crap I'd watched on the tv that afternoon into dust.

I borrowed a set list after the gig which did indeed read like a formula, being a collection of initials, from it I could make sense of some of the song titles, Close on Winter, Sea of Japan, Domestic, False Start, John. It was a fantastic tapestry that is going to make a new album priceless.

Peter Bruntnell introduced John with a simple "I wrote this after watching that film about Johnny Cash." Then they belted out this rock arse song that tore the room up and I thought sod all these Nashville smarmy tributes to the late Johnny Cash this bloke from Devon and the Scotch songwriter Jackie Leven living here in Hampshire with his Elegy For Johnny Cash have nailed it. Awesome.

Most of Peter Bruntnell's introductions tonight centred on the frustration of an artist up against the slick, book smart layers of a record company. He went into a routine of repeating record company jargon that the album depended on "logistical something or other" clearly he has hit the same blank walls of many artists.

In my wayward way of things I always think that if there is room for the angst and acne prima donnas to be shrink wrapped and clinically sold like bars of soap of the same old, same old drivel then the masters of melody deserve more than a shout.

With the audience's applause ringing in their ears the Peter Bruntnell band tailed the set off with some old favourites. I didn't know them all but amongst the gems was a favourite of mine Ends of the Earth:

*"Clockwork days that never end, cups of coffee filled and spent counted out to pay the rent and billed by the hour, those ready to begin this awful wait has done us in and now the taste inside my mouth has made time south, it just takes a minute dear for a*

*feeling bound to fade I 've got no future country I can claim the stranger in the picture here won't recognise my name, because he doesn't know what number flight he's taking."*

At one point the band sat out and Peter Bruntnell played solo and they rejoined for a cracking closer or so they thought. The audience thought otherwise and roared and roared for more.

They had all left the stage but Peter Bruntnell found his escape blocked by Oliver's wife Birgit who pushed him back towards the stage. The final song was a happier one he declared and with the audience singing along Peter Bruntnell performed Here Come The Swells, a classic swipe for me on dull as dishwater well ordered folk:

*"They don't knock upon your door, they don't ring the bell, but look out ma here come the swells what's that line they sell that helps us to wake up on the east side, with the sunday hymn on the sunny side sanitorium."*

It had been one more cracking night at the Railway where Oliver and Richard continue to give a platform to passionate musicians from all points of the compass and without them believing in bands like Ox and Peter Bruntnell music in Winchester would be back to the bland wallpaper of the finger cake art café's and the muddle of the swells. Already the city's Tower Arts Centre has fallen foul of them. The Railway and Oliver and Richard are Winchester's last bastion of sanity in a sad world of swells. Long may it be so.

I put Laura Nyro and Jay Farrar back in their covers and pushed Ox's Dust Bowl Revival into the CD player, turned the volume up to eleven and the car for home. It's been that way ever since.

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