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A RAGAMUFFIN BAND - GLENABBEY, BELFAST

Sun 23 Apr 2000

A Ragamuffin Band in Ireland will be a series including a diary to come soon. Here is the first installment - a review of the Glenabbey gig.

RAGAMUFFINS AT GLENABBEY, BELFAST – 20.4.2000

I'd been quite fascinated for some days – what would be the makings of a Ragamuffin set. Would it be just the entire Prayers Of A Ragamuffin with a couple from the Jesus Album or would they throw in a wee gem from their phenomenal solo careers. Where does the Rich fit into this whole thing. I was pretty sure in my head of one thing Faith Hope and Love would kick the show off. So I had the honour of saying “please welcome A Ragamuffin Band” and guess what – yip Faith Hope and Love.

The guys had told me that they had decided to leave their solo careers to the side when it came to the Ragamuffin project just now so my answer to where the set list came from was indeed a jump back and forth from the Prayers album to the Jesus album. The other decisive factor is that vocal responsibilities are all Mark and Rick for tonight anyway. So after Rick's Faith Hope and Love we get Mark taking over for Surely God Is With Us and the hillbilly shared vocal of You Did Not Have a Home. Rick lets us know that Make Me Instrument has been chosen by the Pope as a key anthem for world Youth Day in August before opening his lungs to a breath taking passionate vocal. His voice can sound so fragile and almost brittle and broken in the quiet moments but the strength and bravery of it when he lets rip is a whole other world.

All of these songs are laced with real and vulnerable audience connection and the Robertson humour trump card. Explaining his recent marriage, Mark tells us that went onto the street of England to buy her something romantic or something for the new house. He then produces a fish on a plaque and after the laughter subsides and we think the joke is over he informs us that he paid £30 for it and that it sings. We get a rendition of Take Me To The River with fish tail a boogie and fish head reaching for the microphone and the crowd are in stitches. A fifth Muffin!

So with the crowd moving into an intimate bunch of friends these boys take the connection with the punter a step beyond anything I've ever seen in such a setting. They move into Rich songs and ask everyone to get on their feet for I See You and Awesome

God. The crowd sing absolutely beautifully and we are moving into something much more than a night out at a concert. Then Rick leads us into Creed. Well! If anyone had told me that the song of the night would be creed I'd never have believed it. It was a remarkable work of passion and conviction and musical brilliance with special mention to Jimmy Abegg at his guitar hero station on this one making the question about where the hammer dulcimer is redundant.

So where from here. Well the crowd are standing for congregational worship again as Rick's voice again moves to it's most vulnerable on the verse of Sometimes By Step. After a moving declaration of following in the chorus and as all night some convicting Aaron Smith drumming (he really is the real thing drummers!) the music stops and the sensing of a Psalm is lifted. When it finishes and before the audience can move from worship to applause, Rick prompts Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow and as the by now congregation sing the benediction the one time rock musos that have during the past 80 minutes become friends in fellowship leave the stage. By the time the benediction is sung Jimmy is at the back of the hall encouraging an Amen and we are left in silence and wonder not at great music, though that is on our minds to but at the blessing this life can give when God allows songs to unite us with one another and Himself.

One of the many weaknesses of today's Christian music scene in the UK is that worship is the only thing that sells and therefore business heads in record companies want us to have a very strict diet of such pound making and impoverished artistic stuff. This I have been to many gigs that supposedly start as a worship thang but end up as concerts with pop stars instead of worship leaders. What we get tonight is just the reverse. We have what we think are rock stars (well these guys may never have been Amy or Michael W but they have a long and healthy resumé) who start a gig as we expected but who end up with a congregational sing song that leaves an audience amazed in much more than the art. I saw a glimpse into heaven one guy said to me and I wonder if he'd ever heard of Rich Mullins or these guys before he came.

The other inevitable question is where did Rich fit in. Well he wrote the majority of the songs but something spookier than that happened in this gig. It was as though Mullins was there on the stage too. It was spooky but almost very real indeed. I sense that as these guys brought us a marriage that is rare in modern CCM of spiritual insight and artistic integrity that he was laughing a Rich laugh. He was the boy band manager who had brought these guys together much like someone brought Boyzone and The Spice Girls together. They of course picked the cover looks and fashionable youth and are wealthier than Rich. Or are they?

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