

DownAtTheFront

The place to be to experience new music

Issue 1 March 2022



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Benefits



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ISSUE 1 - MARCH 2022

Welcome to Issue 1 of 'Down At The Front'. The first of what we hope is a regular online magazine gathering together reviews and articles published on our website.

In the first issue, a reaction to Brexit? Noise merchants Benefits at the Grace. A vital new band to give us a shake out of our trance.

An update on Hertfordshire's newest venue, Corn Exchange Hertford.

Plus live reviews of Yard Act, Sea Power, Lounge Society and many more.

We hope you enjoy our first magazine. The next issue will be available June and be a Great Escape special. If you have any feedback, please contact us at:

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Benefits

The band BREXIT made

In 2011, I saw an excellent documentary at SXSW about a record store in Stockton-on-Tees, 'Sound It Out'. It was odd to fly thousands of miles to reconnect with the area you still call home, but only visit three times a year. The documentary featured several Teesside artists. One of these was the Chapman Family, who produced angsty gothy noisy indie.

Towards the end of their run, the Chapman Family released the excellent 'Cruel Britannia' EP which featured several songs that foreshadow Benefits. Reacting to the early years of the Tory/Lib Dems austerity and the rise of UKIP, it featured angry songs concerned with the darkening mood of country and what this might lead to. Sadly, not long after the EP was released they were gone. But clearly Kingsley Hall still has a lot to say and he's back with his new band, Benefits.

As some kind of symmetry, Benefit's first headline London show was at the Grace, previously the 'Garage Upstairs'. I'm sure this was the location of the Chapman Family's last London gig.

Teessiders are an interesting bunch. While proud of being Teessiders. We have what was once described by a southerner friend as having 'a chip on our shoulder'. A sense that we have been dealt a poor hand and that no one is bothered about us, leaving the area to decline. We feel like we're up against the odds from birth and so we have to stick together through thick and thin.

I guess there is some truth in this.

After lockdown I returned to walking around London. Everywhere I walked there was signs of change. Something I have never seen walking around Boro when I go home. Areas of the town that were run down when I left for Uni 30 years ago, are still run down. Crime, especially drug related, has increased significantly. More industry has gone, replaced by insecure jobs. The local schools are amongst the worst in the country. Kids on Teesside amongst the least likely to go to University. Even life expectancy is amongst the lowest in the UK. Sadly, the area doesn't feel like it has got a future and understandably many feel abandoned.

Sadly, this has seen the rise in a fear of foreigners, which has built upon an existing prevalent casual racism. Teesside is a



predominantly white area. 6% of the population is Asian. Less than 1% is black. It has never quite shaken off its racism. As you find in many Northern towns, there is little mixing between whites and Asians and the level of racism always surprises me when I visit home or I mix with Teessiders at an away match.

When all your industry has closed, unemployment is high and opportunities for the young, poor. A government policy to dump more asylum seekers in Teesside, than in the whole of the affluent South East, was always going to stoke fires. Teessiders like to think they are a friendly bunch. But to me as an 'outsider Teessider', if that was ever true, it has long since passed.

Teesside is BREXIT central. After 40 years of EU membership with things only ever getting worse. Remaining for many, was just as much a unicorn position. Stay, things are unlikely to get better. Leave, things might change. Sadly, taking in the lies and half truths has turned Teesside into a place where if you don't look or sound like a Teessider. You are to be feared.

This is the world of Benefits. Benefits is a reaction to the reaction. While I see Teessiders as the abused and make (too many) excuses for their 'brexity attitudes'. While I try and make comfortable southerners realise when they visit my home town and come back and call it a 'shithole', to reflect on what that says about the opportunities the place offers to those that live there. Benefits have decided to tackle the 'little Britain' thinking in many working class towns head-on. There is no way they are going to make excuses. It is clear they think it is time you saw through the lies.

I have a lot of time for Kingsley. I can see a clear connection between the last few years of the Chapman Family and Benefits. Chapman Family sounded the warning. Benefits are dealing with the aftermath. It is good Kingsley is back doing what he is best at. Shouting at the world trying to be a positive action of change. And it most definitely is a world that needs to be shouted at.

I wasn't sure what to expect tonight. Tracks released so far I guess could be described as industrial noise poetry. Think Nirvana's 'Endless, Nameless' with angry reactionary performance poetry. It is the most punk thing I have heard for many years. But usually after listening to a single Benefits track, I feel wrung out. What would I feel like after a whole gig?

I should not have been worried. Now don't let anyone know, but they have a few tracks you can actually dance to. Angry noise disco! Okay. The tracks aren't going to hit the clubs, but they add a welcome break for Kingsley's voice and our stress levels. Kingsley himself is always affably earnest between songs. I think he is as surprised as anyone by the recognition they've received from people like the Sleaford Mods and Frank Black. But

A man with a shaved head, wearing a dark jacket, is captured in profile, singing passionately into a microphone. He is in a dimly lit club or bar, with several large, reflective disco balls hanging from the ceiling. The scene is filled with colorful, shimmering light reflections from the disco balls, creating a vibrant and energetic atmosphere. The man's expression is one of intense focus and emotion as he performs.

“Kingsley is back doing what he is best at. Shouting at the world”

based on tonight. It's well deserved. Benefits are visceral and just what 2022 needs.

Going back to SXSW in 2011. Bob Geldof gave a keynote. He was pissed off with modern artists. He decried the fact that too much music was produced by the middle classes and none of them were reacting to bankers forcing austerity on to the poorest for the mistakes they made. In his view we needed a 'new punk' of miserable, shouty, sweary, angry voices, who want to change the world.

Clearly that didn't happen. No one shouted and things got worse. Nationalism has been on the rise and the gap between rich and poor, widening at a rate greater than at any point since the turn of the century.

Well Bob. Your wish is granted. Benefits are the angry voice you asked for.

Right from the off. We are hit with a wall of noise as Kingsley deftly builds each piece of well observed, but seething poetry, up to the point where he is screaming into the microphone as the wall of noise crashes into the crowd and we hold on like a little boat in a storm. Just when you think they've reached 10. They find 11. I have not seen anything like them. To quote Douglas Adams. Listening to Benefits is like 'having your brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick.'

The themes are similar across most of songs. Pretty much all are reflections on 'little Britain'. Written as a plea to those fooled by the lies of nationalism to look up and not down. To ignore false dreams of a 'Great Britain, of Empire, of isolationism, of 'Britain first'. To stop punching down. To look up and remember to punch those who want misdirect you. This isn't an 'arm around the shoulder' kind of music. Benefits want to shake you out of your trance. Part of me is uncomfortable attacking my own. But maybe this is the only way. Reactionary music for a reactionary time.

The hype is justified. Benefits are just what 2022 needs.

Before finishing, I have to mention the support, Arch Femmesis. I love when artists surprise me. My initial reaction when they started was that I was going to hate them. I've seen loads of bands over the years wander onto the stage with a knowingly '80s art school' vibe that have turned out be terrible. Instead, they have some cracking danceable electronic music with driving post-punk bass lines. Zera, the lead singer is funny, angry and a great performer. This is 80s electro art pop, but with a 2020 twist. It worked for me. Yes, I'm surprised to be saying that too.



Bad Vibrations All-Dayer at the Moth Club

It has ages since I have been to a Bad Vibrations All-Dayer. Even before lockdown, Saturday gigs didn't work for me. Since Govia took over my train line, Saturday cancellations increased. With Saturday gigs often running later than 11pm. I either leave early, missing the headline act, or risk waiting around on a Saturday evening dodging cancellations to catch a late jam-packed train. But with less people heading into London at the moment and an advertised early headline set. I thought I would catch the Bug Club playing the Moth Club.

QUADE

First up were Quade. After a slew of experimental rock bands like Black Midi and New Country Old Road, Quade are another four piece willing to play with indie boundaries bringing in wider influences. The four piece featured a fiddle player who added an extra dimension.



IN TONGUES

I hate when bands turn up late. They mess up the day's schedule. Messing up a Saturday line-up often means I miss part of the headliner's set, who are often the reason for me attending. In Tongues turned up late pushing back the schedule so I knew I was going to miss some of the headline set. It is a good job therefore, that they turned in a good set. My favourite of the day.



THE BUG CLUB

Closing the evening were the Bug Club. In 2021 they released the enjoyable garage rock album, Pure Particles. Listening to the album they sounded like the Lovely Eggs crossed with the Velvet Underground. Live, they lacked the energy and humour of the Lovely Eggs. But the Velvet inspiration was right at the fore, maybe too much. 'My Baby Love's Rock'n'Roll Music' feels like a rip-off of the Velvet Underground. As much as I love the Velvet Underground and New York bands who still wear the Velvet Underground influence on their sleeves, for some reason Bug Club didn't work as well as I hoped. I think my expectations of a Lovely Eggs vibe meant I didn't enjoy the gig as much as I thought I would. Given how much I enjoyed their album, at some point I will have to catch them again and give them another go.



POLYSCRAPS

Polyscraps were another band mixing styles. Featuring seven members including a trombone and singer escaped from an 80s pub rock band with gruff voice, they weren't afraid to hit us with a bit of funk.

THE EARLY MORNINGS

The Early Mornings set was error strewn. With the drummer often playing at the wrong speed. In fairness, he looked like he wanted to play faster music in a punk band. But mistakes usually only detract when you don't like the music. But I was enjoying the set and their music. But to be brutally honest, in the cold light of day, I can't actually remember much about the music! (and I wasn't even drinking)



CHOOSE CAREFULLY

In 2003, I picked up an album simply because of its title and the design of the cover. That album was 'The Decline of British Sea Power' by 'British Sea Power'. It has become one of my favourite albums and I have seen the band too many times to count.

The design of the album was understated and harked back to an earlier time, as if it has been screen printed. With its simple serif font. Mustard, black and grey colour with simple leaf icons and a quote.

"We ourselves may be loved only for a brief time... Even so, that will suffice... There is a land for the living and a land for the dead."

Inside the cover, if you still had concerns about the militaristic nature of their name, three guns had turned into a shovel, rake

and hoe. The design looked like old albums from the 1950s. I am not sure why, but it just felt to me that this band were going to be different.

Nearly 20 years on from their debut album, the band have decided their name is problematic and have just announced their latest album will be under the moniker of 'Sea Power'. They feel that 'British' has been hijacked by recent events like Brexit and the right of politics playing-off nationalism. For a band with a pro-immigration song in 'Waving Flags' and a wistful look back, rather than wanting to turn back the clocks, that's not them.

For the last few years, I have to admit, I sometimes had to think twice about wearing one of my many British Sea Power t-shirts. For me it hasn't been 'British' that's bothered me, but the whole term. 'British Sea Power'. If Sea Power had kept their original name, British Air Power, I wouldn't have had an

issue. But each time I decided that by not wearing the t-shirt I would be giving up 'British' to the nationalists and I'm proud of much of what Britain and England are now. So what is it about the term 'British Sea Power' that caused me concerns?

The most obvious is that it was Britain's power at sea that drove our expansion around the world and with it some reprehensible activity that we are still living with. Front and centre is the transatlantic slave trade was driven by the sea. Britain was centre of that trade for 200 years. Britain moved around 3 million Africans to our colonies in the Americas and Caribbean. While we didn't start the trade and pretty much every country in the world has some history of slavery. The industrialisation of the trade, the wealth it generated for Britain, millions of displaced people, and the destruction of communities across Western Africa is a long lasting a legacy we are still living with.

The second area where 'British Sea Power' has been problematic, the Royal Navy was used to project British power across the globe. After reading about the Opium wars (something not covered in history at school). It was clear the vastly superior Royal Navy was used to throttle China, forcing them to accept immoral British terms. The term 'British sea power' was used throughout the articles and made me feel extremely uncomfortable about the band's name.

Now set against that and to some extent the mindset I had when I first bought the album, the 'decline' of British sea power harks back to positive things we have lost. We aren't that nation anymore. Maybe we can see the good as well as the evil carried out in the past when we think about the decline.

For example, it was the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy that kept us supplied during WWII. Our country survived because of our sea power. It also calls into mind the gutsy actions of the 'tiny boats' at Dunkirk. The great explorations carried out by the admiralty, such as Darwin's voyages (although, we're now starting to view some of these in a different light).

Possibly the biggest area where I take some weird pride is in the end Britain stopped our slave trade and then went one step further and British sea power was used to end the transatlantic slave trade. We did wrong. But unlike most countries with a slave trading past, at least we seemed to learn that our actions were immoral and tried to make stamp the trade out. But to be perfectly honest this has always been my way of rationalising supporting a band with a problematic name.

Britain is a nation that faces our legacy on a daily basis.



Hinds at the Boston music room, a few hours after they change their name

Our Empire became the commonwealth and many came to Britain to help us rebuild after the war, often to a hostile reaction. In the last 50 years, racism had seemed to reduce. But it seems it just went underground waiting for a chance to rise again. As we have seen in the last decade. There has been a massive rise in nationalism and with it, unfortunately, racism is creeping back out into the open. With Nationalists trying to take ownership of 'Britishness' and defining it in their twisted image. 'British' in Sea Power risks being a contaminated idea.

"Over the years, I gradually found British Sea Power quiet awkward at times"

Talking to Shaun Keaveny, Yan reflected 'we'd been considering on and off for a long time. We even considered changing our name after our first album.... for one thing our fans generally call us Sea Power anyway.... Over the years I gradually found British Sea Power quiet awkward at times'. (in terms of the length of the name). 'But we've been

around for 20 years as British Sea Power.... The world seems to have changed a bit since then. It does seem more of a loaded name than ever. The world seems to have, dare I say it, moved towards nationalism.... and that's not what we're about.. We've always been the opposite to that really. It just taken us 20 years to realise that the name can easily be wrongly interpreted."

Now I wear a BSP t-shirt every week because it has the word British in it. I don't like how the word has been owned by the right for the last few years. Wearing a t-shirt for a band who talk about a different Britain helps me feel like I have some ownership. I'm not willing to allow the nationalists tell me what Britishness is. So I have to admit, I'm sad to see the word British dropped from their name. But it is completely understandable.

Sea Power aren't the first artists to reflect on their names. There's been a long history of bands and artists changing their names for various reasons, from Prince dealing with contractual issues, to Led Zeppelin, changing their name from the Yardbirds when the Yardbirds had basically split.

“Why would a band of white dudes name themselves slaves?”



Slaves at Wilkstock 2019

changes are self-inflicted. From bands with ungoogable names that return too many results, or using weird spellings that can't be found. To bands who haven't checked for cultural issues. To bands who don't appear to have googled to see if the name had been used before. Despite the tools available. It is amazing how many bands still mess up their names.

The Slaves were criticised by Fader of appropriating the term. “Why would a band of white dudes name themselves slaves?” they queried in an article at the time.

Laurie speaking to the NME commented ‘If you pick up an Oxford dictionary and look up

the word “slaves”, there is no mention of any racial context. A slave is a person who is owned by another person and forced to work for free. In that manner, people who deem you a racist are being incredibly small minded because slavery has happened to every single creed, race and

“Oh man, why did we pick this name?”

religion and it's not a racist term' continuing. ‘There are days when we think, ‘Oh man, why did we pick this name?’ But now I look at it, it's important. It says a lot about the time we live in that freedom of speech is so over analysed that you can't even use words.’. Maybe from a US perspective,

slavery is intrinsically connected to the enslavement to African Americans. But I know when I studied history at school, slavery was covered in many different contexts, from Roman slavery right up to the 20th Century with Germans forcing 6 million civilians into slavery during

the WWII and the death of 5 million Jews in the holocaust. Is slavery really owned by African Americans? Clearly not from a world-wide perspective. But it doesn't matter. When they chose the name. They failed to think about the context elsewhere and had to deal with the fallout. Another band who change

their name were the Canadian band Preoccupations. Originally they were the ‘Viet Cong’. Not surprisingly, the name didn't go down well in the USA. Eventually, after a year of negative press, they changed their name. But how do you come up with a name like ‘Viet Cong’ without understanding that it might not play well in the USA?

Another common issue is bands choosing bands names that are taken. Joy Division made the mistake of calling themselves Warsaw which clashed with a punk band, Warsaw Pact. While the name Joy Division is now iconic. Even after changing their name, it didn't end their problems as the name comes from a novel ‘The House of Dolls’ about

Jewish women forced into sexual slavery in concentration camps called ‘Joy Divisions’. Luckily they learnt their lesson. After Ian Curtis's death. They changed their name to ‘New Order’.... Ah! Some people never learn.

I remember hearing hype for a band called Deers. On the way to their first UK gig, I heard they had to change their name as there was another band called ‘The Deers’ objected to them using the name. It was fun seeing people turn up to the venue see the sign on the door saying ‘Hinds’ and wander off to try and find the correct venue.

It must be difficult for new artists to consider how their name will be perceived down the line. How

many bands honestly believe they're going to be a worldwide hit or have a decade long career? I guess the best thing to do is google your ideas and spend some time checking that it hasn't been used, is too generic so won't be found in search results, isn't a cussing or sexual word or phrase in a foreign language and that the name has no cultural baggage. You don't want to have to change you name 20 years into your career.

Anyway, I'm off now. I have some duct tape and several British Sea Power t-shirts to fix.



Meet your new favourite band.....

Yard Act

The new hot ticket in town. Leeds-based Yard Act started to make waves during lockdown with their well observed songs and cheeky humour. I have missed out on seeing them so far. Tonight was my first opportunity to see what the fuss was about.

Earlier in the month, Yard Act cancelled their early January gigs so they wouldn't miss their album launch gigs. Completely understandable. Gigs, like this one at Rough Trade East, are a really good way of getting your album into the charts, generate radio play and building a live audience.

Following on the heels of bands like IDLES and Shame, they are taking a look at modern society, but unlike many of the other bands, they do so with a wry sense of humour. That sense of humour was at the fore all night, with the band clearly enjoying what was a big day for them, joking about selling out to the capitalist gods. It was great seeing a band up there enjoying themselves.

Musically, they were excellent. With the confidence in their own tracks and their abilities, they had no set list and asked the audience for suggestions. This was my first listen to the album. So I have no idea what the song titles were. But I loved every song. The band are clearly going to be one of my favourite bands of 2022



CORN EXCHANGE HERTFORD

We have heard a lot about music venues closing in the last few years. So it is a cause of celebration when a new venue opens

Before COVID, many venues were finding themselves under financial threat or threatened by unscrupulous developers building flats nearby and applying for noise orders. During the pandemic, they have faced unprecedented pressures, with a number sadly closing. So it is something to celebrate when a new venue (re)opens backed by an established team who have the expertise to make the venue work. In this case the team behind The Horn in St Albans, Adrian Bell and James McLaughlin and promoter Luke Hinton of Juicebox Live.

The opening party featured local singer/songwriter Ed Tattersall and covers band The Maida Vales and showcased the kind of music that will be on offer. With plans to promote a mix of new music,

local bands and covers bands. The formula works well for the Horn. The packed cover band shows helping subsidise slower new music nights.

Personally, I wasn't too bothered about seeing a covers band and left after a few songs. Ed on the other hand, I think is a great local musician and a really good choice for the opening night. But the night wasn't really about music, it was about celebrating the venue and it was great to see so many locals coming out for the reopening. There had been rumours the building was going to be converted into flats. But the landlord decided to keep the building as a music venue. It was great to see so many enjoying the evening. This is what we missed when we were stuck in our houses last year.

For reopening, there has been a lot of work upgrading the venue. A new bar has been installed and it was great to see the Music Venue Trust lager on tap. The

stage has been reworked with great new sound and lights. The stage is big enough to host larger bands that would struggle to fit on the Horn's stage. As 'Down At The Front', the stage is a bit high for 'down at the front' photography. But it means there are great sight lines throughout the venue which is more important.

With such an established promotion team. I am certain the Corn Exchange will become an important venue for Hertfordshire's music scene. Chatting to Luke, he mentioned there is potential to increase the capacity of the venue which would make it an attractive venue for established bands who might bypass the smaller Horn. With Dreadzone, The Wedding Present and Buzzcocks booked in already. I am sure mid-sized new indie bands will be encouraged to come to Hertford. Very exciting times for Hertfordshire's music scene.



Priestgate

INDEPENDENT VENUE WEEK

THE SOCIAL

One of those evenings that makes me love live music. This was an Independent Venue Week show of three bands I had not seen before.

I had come into London to catch Dry Cleaning at Rough Trade and looked for an evening gig. I saw Deep Tan were playing who I saw play an online DIY session during lockdown and I thought I were worth catching live. The two other bands were completely unknown to me.

First up, DEADLETTER, a five piece post-punk band from South London. Their lead singer sings/talks the delivery of a set of well observed songs about modern life. Taking every opportunity to go into the crowd and climb across tables. The band were fun to watch and seemed to go down really well.

The band I had come to see, Deep Tan, actually didn't do much for me. They were messier live than on record and in their

DIY session. I think part of problem was that the bass amp was too loud, over powering vocals and guitar and PA. I will have to catch the some other time.



Deep Tan



DEADLETTER

Closing the evening were Priestgate. More mainstream indie than the other two. Musically, I think DEADLETTER were better. If the singer had just stood still and sung the songs like most bands. I think the songs would have washed over me. However, Priestgate's performance was explosive. The singer didn't stand still for a second, jumping around the stage, putting his all into the performance. Helping them stand out from the mundane.



SEA POWER

PRYZM, Kingston

When established bands release new albums there's usually suggestions, often unfairly of it being 'a return to form' or it is the 'best album since...'. Friday, Sea Power released their first album under their new name, 'Everything Was Forever'. It has garnered great reviews with many saying that it is a better album than their last few. In my opinion, a completely unfair assessment. Every one of their albums has something of note, often taking on a new life live.

To some extent I can understand why reviewers are so positive about this album. Maybe due to lockdown, the band maturing, or their producer Graham Sutton. There's a sonic depth maybe missing from other albums. It is a great album. But for me, Sea Power songs live in the live arena and most of these songs haven't had a live airing. With their last album, songs I wasn't keen on, became a different beast live. Let us be clear, there are no bad Sea Power albums and this album will have to prove itself live and with it being arguably their most 'studio



album', I have to admit I had some doubts if this would be the case. I shouldn't have.

Tonight at their 'in-store' performance at Pryzm for Banquet Records, Sea Power, minus Abi, played eight songs from the new album. All sounding great live. The most 'studio' track of their new album, 'Scaring At The Sky' was one of those omitted. (I really hope it gets an outing at some point). Everything else didn't seem to suffer from the move from the studio.

Working out which songs might become a stable track on future tours is difficult.

Doppelgänger, Two Fingers and Green Goddess are 'bangers' and proved themselves on their brief October tour. But Sea Power have a lot of 'bangers' from previous albums they don't play.

Lakeland Echo has already captured the hearts of many Sea Power fans and is an incredibly beautiful track and sounded great live. I suspect this might feature irregularly on set lists.

Transmitter might end up on set lists. With a short guitar solo, I thought Martin especially enjoyed playing this. And many fans think this is the best song on the album.

I hope Green Goddess doesn't. It actually sounds great live, but it will depose other similar tracks. Other tracks have tracks on earlier albums bring similar energy to the set and the familiar

My train app suggested I could get to Kingston and back without any serious delays. So I decided to head into London. Stupidly I didn't check the stations I needed to use.

On the way in, I checked Waterloo and Vauxhall stations. 'Cancelled'. It was if the lines to Kingston has said something controversial. Storm Eunice had seemingly blocked all train lines



will trump them.

My favourite, 'We Only Want To Make You Happy' I do not think is destined to find a place in the set, despite sounding great live. I am not sure how it will fit with their regular set.

I am really hoping at this summer's Krankenhaus festival, Sea Power will play a set or rarities, as there are so many good songs that never get played. (A big plea for Bear)

I am really glad I made tonight's gig. I suspect many didn't. I was close to turning around.

After storm Eunice caused travel chaos the previous day, my line into London opened and regular trains were starting to run on a reduced service.

home and try and drive to the gig or chance it? In the end I decided to book a Travelodge and worry about getting home tomorrow. I am so glad I did.

Mixed amongst the tracks were 'bangers' from other albums. Opening with the beautiful 'Heavenly Waters' seemed right. It could easily sit with this new album. As always, the simply perfect The Great Skua closed the show. Phil added some beautiful extra texture to the 'The Lonely' that hopefully will see future airings. But justifying the trip, my perfect song, 'Lately' found its way onto tonight's set. At over ten minutes long, it understandably doesn't get many airings. But for me, it is the seminal Sea Power track. Everything they became is in that track.

I find it hard to describe why I love this band so much. I guess their mixing of musical styles with idiosyncratic topics, tickles my sensibility. I often wonder why the band aren't bigger. But looking at tonight's set list. Is too much to ask an audience to enjoy the slow pace and spatial 'Lake Land Echo' after the high energy Doppelgänger? Maybe? There has to be a reason why Sea Power aren't the biggest band in the country. But at the end of the day. I don't care. For me, there is no better band than Sea Power. Round two on Monday.



'their music conjures images of future worlds. Some optimistic. Some weird. Some collapsing into dystopia'

TEETH OF THE SEA

THE LEXINGTON

Originally arranged as two socially distanced gigs, one in the evening and a matinee show. This gig had already been moved twice. Last time, I had just ordered a pint at the bar when I received the message the gig had been cancelled due to a positive test upstairs. So my gig consisted of watching Utopia Strong pack up their car as I sat outside drinking my pint. Thankfully, today's gig went ahead as a full capacity show.

Supporting Teeth of the Sea were the Utopia Strong. For somebody my age, the big draw is that snooker legend Steve Davis is a member of the band. I have seen Utopia Strong before and like last time, I was more star struck seeing Steve, than just about any artist or sports person.

While obligatory to mention Steve. The Utopia Strong are a very good band. They create experimental ambient electronic music. Mixing old electronic instruments, guitar, flute and even Northumbrian pipes to create a wall of ambient music that washes over you. I rarely want to sit listening to music, but this is music to lie down to while staring at a stream of psychedelic imagery projected onto the ceiling. As the music doesn't have a base line. It's not something I can necessarily move around to and I realised halfway through their set, I was stood completely still, mesmerised. Looking around at the audience, so was everyone else. No one was talking. Everyone listening. Clearly, their music works.

I first saw Teeth of the Sea support GOAT. It was one of those times when you leave a gig having enjoyed the support act more than the headliner. Their lineup has changed since then and they no longer have a drummer. But they are still as

impressive now, as back then.

I find their always conjures images of future worlds. Some optimistic. Some weird. Some collapsing into dystopia. A few years ago they added a soundtrack to a documentary about the Moon landings. They are an obvious choice as their music can be full of optimism. But more often than not, their music can paint a very bleak picture of the future with strong heavy guitars and a nod to 90s industrial metal. Today, accompanied by dystopian projections and with everything we have experienced in the last two years in politics and with COVID. Today, their music felt more like a warning.

To say this was the first of two shows, they didn't hold back with a full energy set. I really enjoyed it and it was nice having a gig finish early not having to rush for trains. But as I left The Lexington, I would have happily played chicken with Sunday trains for the evening show.



PORRIDGE RADIO

THE HORN

Despite the Horn being my local venue, tonight was my first night back. I have been careful with my return to gigging. Sticking to venues that I know have good air-conditioning. I haven't felt comfortable going back to The Horn as it doesn't have aircon. I have still been buying tickets. I have a lot of time for the venue and the promoter, who does great work bringing live music to Hertfordshire. But having recently caught omicron, I am a bit more willing to take a chance with what should be a minimal risk to me and me to others.

Tonight Porridge Radio had asked for COVID passes. They didn't seem to make things much more complicated. While omicron seems to bypass the vaccines, maybe the pass isn't much use now. But lateral Flow Tests have been a way of life for me since gigs returned. I can't believe that more don't test before gigs. Tested and masked, it felt good to be back. With my name on the wall for contributing to its Crowdfunder. I feel this is my venue. I am so pleased it survived.

I bought tickets for tonight's gig over a year ago. Like many gigs, it has been moved multiple times. With all the recent cancellations, I was expecting this to be cancelled. Thankfully, it wasn't the case and with a recent headline performance at Rockaway Beach, Porridge Radio are finally starting to make some overdue headway. It's good they kept the momentum going. I guess this is probably the last time they play these small venues. So I wasn't going to miss it.

While sold out. It didn't feel like a sell-out. Understandably, maybe 15% of the audience stayed away. So it never felt too busy.

Opening tonight was Dear Laika. An unusual support, better suited to a seated venue and maybe venues like Cafe Oto. Apparently she's classically trained and her music seems to want to explore elements of modern classical and experimental electronic music. In all honesty, it didn't work for me. I've listened to a lot of music like this at Daylight Music. Most of it better than this. Playing keyboards and adding layers of vocals, which sadly at times were out of tune (the disadvantage of wearing ear plugs is that it is usually obvious when there are tuning issues), some of the ideas were interesting. But the music sounded very muddy. Unfortunately, there was some guy twiddling knobs adding stupid phaser sounds or compressing the main audio at what seemed inappropriate times. It just didn't work. Maybe in a different venue with the cleaner sound of a piano it might have worked. Tonight just didn't work for me.

I first saw Porridge Radio in 2016 at a Shacklewell All-dayer. They were the standout act of the day. At that point, there was only Dana Margolin and her emotional vocals. But she rightly expanded to a full band, giving the songs a bigger dynamic. Every time I've seen them since then, they have just got tighter and tighter. Dana's vocals though are still what makes the band special. I love the way on many songs they start off melodic but more often

than not trail off into an increasingly emotional repetitive chanting, her voice cracking or becoming ever more frantic as the chant draws you in. 'Circling' for example, as Dana's vocals get more frantic, they subtly crack. As if the emotion is overpowering her.

Tonight, on the back of 2020's excellent 'Every Bad' album and recent headline performance at Rockaway Beach. They were as tight as I have heard them. 'Long' being a particular highlight. They now have a core of excellent songs to build longer sets around. Hopefully, we will continue to see them kick on in 2022 and feature higher up festival bills.

GRANDMAS HOUSE

THE HORN

Tonight's gig was part of the MVT & National Lottery Revive Live tour. Like Independent Venue Week, the idea is to get people to go to their local venues.

Revive seems to have gone down the route of the 'buy one get one free' approach' with the aim to fill the room and get people buying beer at the bar. It does mean the focus is more on up and coming artists, which sadly in the current climate possibly isn't going to generate the ticket sales they expected. But it provides audiences with a great opportunity to connect with bands who may not yet be ready for their own tours, but who may well be big names in the future.

Tonight's gig was originally billed with Grandmas House as headline. But Panic Shack were added to the tour as co-headliner and they took the honours tonight.

Opening the evening were Tragic, a grungy three-piece band from Northampton. Initially, I wasn't impressed. The first song was a bit heavy, without anything to differentiate from the hundreds of loud bands I have seen

over the years. But as the song and session progressed, early 90s grunge influences came to the fore and they wouldn't have been out of place on Sub Pop. The bass especially was heavily influenced by Nirvana. While maybe staying at the punk end of grunge, I really enjoyed their set.

Grandmas House are another classic three-piece lineup. I spent half of Grandmas House's set trying to remember who they reminded me of. Then it twigged it was the Coathangers. Like the Coathangers, they all can take vocal lead and they have a punk sound not exactly heavy on lyrics, but heavy on the attitude. The repetitive nature of some of the songs allows them to hit home the attitude. With lead vocalist, Yasmin shouting out to be answered by their awesome singing drummer, Poppy. Meanwhile Zoë adds a the occasional layer of melody with her more tuneful voice. It all worked rather well. The risk with this type of band is that it become too 'shouty'. But it managed to stay away and remain tuneful, but with attitude. Very enjoyable set.

Closing tonight were Panic Shack. In all honesty, I thought they were the weakest of the three acts. They weren't bad. I enjoyed their set. But I felt there was a piece missing. They veered between punk and pop punk. They were serious and yet frivolous. But I didn't find their 'attitude' convincing. Songs I felt should maybe sung with more venom, seemed to be sung in a mildly annoyed way. I was more convinced when they were larking around. I kept thinking they need to decide if are they a punk band, shaking us with venomous attitude, think Petrol Girls. Or take it down a notch and go more pop indie, say like Life. Hit the audience with a bit of humour and deliver the songs with wry observations. I can't say which would work best. Either do the silly dance moves or hit us with spit as you hurl your words at us like a spear. (Ok personally, I think the wry and silly might be the way to go)



LOUNGE SOCIETY

THE HORN

I don't why, but Yorkshire seems to be producing a lot of good bands at the moment. Another comes along in the shape of Lounge Society. A band finding the post-punk sound helps voice their dissatisfaction with the society their parents have left them. Like other Yorkshire bands, they have managed to find their own distinctive voice.

You know the quality of the band if they are signed to Speedy Wunderground. It was no surprise that tonight's gig at the Horn was relatively busy for a band who have yet to release an album. Often, these bands play to a handful of people. Many no doubt drawn in by regular 6Music airplay.

We were greeted by a band who will undoubtedly get greater recognition this year. Tight and confident. In Cameron Davey the band has a vocalist who can do the classic disconnected stare and then be the explosive a few seconds later.

I predict a very good 2022. These guys are only going to get bigger.

Support came for Bollo Bollo and Anyone's Ghost.

HERTFORDSHIRE GIG GUIDE

MARCH

WEDNESDAY 9TH

SICK JOY

The Horn

Grungy Brighton three piece with music following the Nirvana song book.

FRIDAY 11TH

'All Female Night'

Club 85

With the exception of Loud Women gigs who only put together great female led and non binary gigs. I am never too keen on venues putting on an 'all female night'. It is usually an indication their line-ups on other nights are under representing the many excellent female or female led bands. This gig features JOANovARC, Sam Walker, Bianca, Cara Beard and Roxy Seale. I am sure it will be a great evening. But there's a clash of styles which maybe shows how artificial the line up is. Maybe Club 85 you could do a better job of featuring more female led bands and artists on other nights?

SATURDAY 19TH

TRASH BOAT

CORN EXCHANGE HERTFORD

Noisy St Albans hardcore quintet Trash Boat have a dedicated loyal following. This is certain to be a popular gig at new venue the Corn Exchange, Hertford.

THURSDAY 24TH

THE WOODENTOPS

Club 85

Reformed 80s stripped back pop group hit the Horn

FRIDAY 25TH

BUZZOCKS

CORN EXCHANGE HERTFORD

Punk royalty. The Buzzocks are the seminal British punk band. Sadly minus Pete Shelley who died in 2018. This is sure to be a popular gig.

FRIDAY 25TH

GONG

Club 85

GONG keep on rocking. Current line up head to Club 85 for their rescheduled gig

THURSDAY 31ST

ENTER SHIKARI

Club 85

St Albans band play Club 85 as part of the National Lottery's #ReviveLive Tour (SOLD OUT)

APRIL

FRIDAY 15TH

BIG COUNTRY

THE HORN

Popular 80s band.

SATURDAY 16TH

THE WEDDING PRESENT

CORN EXCHANGE HERTFORD

Ever popular The Wedding Present play Hertfordshire twice in as many months. Their first visit is to the Corn Exchange Hertford

WEDNESDAY 27TH

EADES

THE HORN

Another Leeds band describing themselves as "David Byrne and Lou Reed's dyslexic child playing out of a Motorola Pebbl".

MAY

WEDNESDAY 4TH

COACH PARTY

THE HORN

Rearranged from January. With 6 Music airplay and positive music press. This is bound to be a hot ticket

SATURDAY 7TH

DREADZONE

CLUB 85

80s dug, reggae band. Still packing out venues with their unique sound

SUNDAY 8TH

THE WEDDING PRESENT

CLUB 85

Punk rock stalwarts come to Club 85 in May. Still rocking as hard as ever. Sure to be a noisy show

SATURDAY 14TH

BLYTH POWER

CLUB 85

Punk rock stalwarts come to Club 85 in May. Still rocking as hard as ever. Sure to be a noisy show

See our website for up to date listings: <https://www.downatthefront.co.uk/>



6

Studio 666

Dave Grohl is a nice guy? Everyone seems to agree. Well not in Studio 666, the Foo Fighters new movie.

The idea of the devil and music goes back decades. Artists starring in their own movies is now well established. It seems at some point big bands reach a point when they want to act or star in their own movie. So the idea of a horror movie featuring the Foo Fighters kind of make sense.

The premise is that the Foo Fighters are looking for a location to write their 10th album. Their manager suggests a house with a connection to music. Unknown to the band, the house has a dark past. The last band to record there had 'musical differences', leading to their singer murdering the band. Not long after they move in, the house starts to possess Dave.

I can't say I'm a fan of horror films. The trailer suggests this is a horror film that leans heavily on comedy. I was thinking 'Shaun of the Dead' with drums. But within the first five minutes the film had nailed its horror credentials to an upside down cross. If you are squeamish, be warned, there are grisly scenes that aren't played for laughs. I'm sure horror aficionados will not be

shocked the scenes. But if like me you don't watch certain types of horror because they are needlessly grisly. Some of the scenes might make you squirm. Saying that, the film is not 'psychologically scary', which are the horror films that tend to haunt me.

Written by Dave Grohl, the film is at its strongest when it plays for laughs. Dave Grohl is such an affable guy, it's easy to laugh along to him. Given that none of the band are strong actors and seem to be happiest with the scenes where it is more like them larking around. It might have been advisable for them to lean more heavily on the comedy and some of the funniest moments are the little quips between band members. The film picks up a bit when the band members start to become the 'Mystery Gang' and investigate Dave, as their fun interchanges between band members who works well.

If you are a Foo Fighters fan, this is a must see. If you are a horror fan it will be worth watching for curiosity reasons. But it is not likely to scare you. If you don't like horror. I'd probably give it a miss. For everyone else. For the rest of us. It is not a bad film. There are worse films in the cinemas at the moment.



9

Sea Power
Everything Was Forever

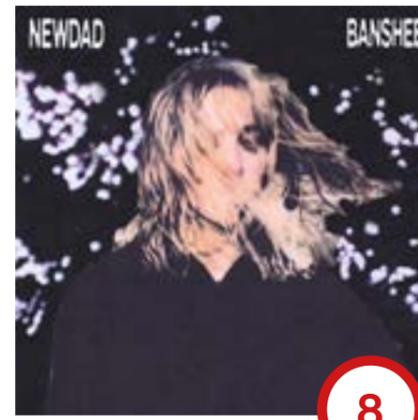
Sea Power's eighth study album and first under their new name reflects a more mature band. Neil and Scott having lost both parents since their last outing and seem in a more contemplative mood that producer Graham Sutton appears to have encouraged them to explore. Sonically this pays off with probably their most spacial album to date. The album has the usual rockers in 'Green Goddess', 'Dopplerganger' and 'Two Fingers', the later a reference to their dad's habit of pouring out two fingers of alcohol. The beautiful 'Lakeland Echo' is a wistful walk through childhood memories of parents and Cumbria. 'Lakeland Echo' being the name of the local paper. On 'Transmitter', Martin Noble gets a chance to throw in a guitar solo. The album feels their most personal to date and that isn't a bad thing.



8

Yard Act
The Overload

Following the lead of bands like Dry Cleaning, James Smith speaks most of the songs weaving interesting tales full of wry comment on modern society. At no point does it become sneary but it is angry. Six minute long Tall Poppies is a good example. The cautionary story of a handsome man who is a big fish in a small village. When you think it might turn sneary, it spins you around. 'He wasn't perfect, but he was one of us', James explains after the man's death from cancer. On Dead Horse, concern for post-Brexit England being overrun by nationalist 'nob heads morris dancing to Sham 69'. Unethical business men, the middle-classes, the compensation society are all targets. Driving the narrative is the current trend of a post-punk bass line. Several songs make good use of breaks from relentless bass with the music fading away leaving just the vocals, to then kick back in at a different speed. All combining to a fresh sounding debut album.



8

NewDad
Banshee - EP

Banshee is the new EP from Galway band NewDad. 20 minutes of infectious dreamy indie pop. There is a spacial, shoegaze quality to many of the songs, with guitars and drums low down in the mix to allow Julie Dawson's quiet conversational layered vocals. The first track, 'Say It' is their recent single. A tale of unfrequented love and heartbreak which the hazy bright guitars seem ignorant of. It is a beautiful slab of indie pop that wouldn't be out of place on a Mazy Star album. Banshee with its screeching guitars and Cure bass line explores frustrations and anxiety experienced during lockdown. These frustrations are explored further in 'Spring' and 'Think too Much'. Closing the album is Ladybird, a song inspired by the film of the same name. A bit like the film, this song washed over me. But overall, a great EP. I was meant to see NewDad before Christmas, but was unable to make the gig. After listening to this EP, I'm more I missed them.



8

caroline
caroline

The debut albums from caroline is a remarkably confident piece of work from the London eight piece. Mixing Appalachian inspired folk with minimalist classical. Apparently, the album was five years in the making. The time seems to have been well spent honing each song to perfection. Featuring a range of instruments from violins to clarinets, it would be easy to overdo each track. However, each instrument always appears to be used at the right time. For example at the end of 'Good Morning (Red)' there are short bursts of discordant instruments that give the track a brilliant fresh feeling. While there are vocals on the album, they kept to a minimum, added like ghostly chants giving parts of the album a timeless feeling. This is a remarkably assured debut album. Hopefully, they won't take another five years for a follow-up.



10

The Beatles
The Beatles - Get Back

I know this review is late to the table. Peter Jackson's 'Get Back' was released before Christmas. At nearly eight hours, this is an amazing look at the Beatles at a critical point and deserves your full attention.

The documentary is edited together from 60 hours of film and 150 hours of audio recordings made for an aborted TV documentary of the Beatles creating new songs for their first live concert in three years, culminating in the famous rooftop concert at Apple headquarters and the 'Let It Be' album and film.

Split into three parts. Part one focuses on frosty rehearsals in a cold film studio. Tension is obvious. Paul is acting as if he is manager and musical director. Clearly annoying the rest of the group. Meanwhile there is the pervasive presence of Yoko sitting next to John throughout rehearsals. The atmosphere isn't helped by director, Michael

Lindsay-Hogg encouraging the band to play overseas. Eventually the atmosphere leads to George leaving the Beatles.

Part two sees George return and a relocation to their new studio in their Apple headquarters. The atmosphere cut by the lucky arrival of Billy Preston who becomes a fifth Beatle. Tensions are still there, but Billy's presence lifts the mood.

The final part, covers the decision to play the rooftop concert. (This has been released as an IMAX film).

Jackson has created a fascinating look behind the curtains at a band who had grown apart. While Yoko's presence doesn't help. It shows the band had already grown apart and were ready for solo careers. A must watch.



6

The Voltarol Years
Half Man Half Biscuit

John Peel's favourite band continue their unique career with 'The Voltarol Years'. Filled with their customary wit and observational humour. The album is recognisably HMHB. Not straying too far from their tried and tested formula. 'Tess of the Dormobiles' is a fun tale of a mismatched couple. 'I was Betamax, you were VHS'. 'In a Suffolk Ditch' shows HMHB's ability to use macabre humour, with a list of people and things that they would like see end up in a ditch. Kevin McKenzie we can all understand. Though annoying, what has Nicholas Witchell done to end up on Nigel's list? Yes, there is the customary football song. 'Midnight Mass Murder' laments away supporters and suggests they 'Take your chips and fuck off home'. Even their 'Token COVID song' takes a swipe at social media influencers. It is the usual HMHB fair. Sadly, other than 'Tess of the Dormobiles', I don't think any of the songs stand up against earlier albums and sadly, it feels like a filler album



6

Buzzard Buzzard Buzzard
Backhand Deals

The Cardiff band's bright debut, 'Backhand Deals' wears its 70s influences for all to see. The breezy 'New Age Millennial Magic' wouldn't be out of place being sung by a 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' era Elton John. 'Good Day' has the band sharing harmonies on the chorus like Queen. 'Crescent Man vs Demolition Dan' isn't afraid of big riffs. They are not averse to a big ballad. Singer Tom Rees, hits the high notes on 'Yourself' as he plays piano. 'On the Kill Again' is full of the power cords you haven't heard this side of 1980. With bands currently raiding the early 80s for their influences. The album is no more derivative than their peers' post-punk efforts. Sadly, the breezy nature of the album feels out of place in post-Brexit Britain.



ANDY BELL

Rough Trade East

I'm not a fan of Ride. In fact I've walked away from their sets at two festivals. It is not that I dislike them. They are perfectly pleasant. But at festivals, if something doesn't hold me, I head off to find something that might interest me more. However, as this was a free gig with Andy playing his solo work, I thought I would drop by Rough Trade and give him a listen.

For such a popular band. I was surprised there were no queues forming, so had a few pints in the bar opposite Rough Trade. Even at 5.45. There was still no one queuing. I was worried that maybe no one was going to turn up. Which isn't fair on any artist. Luckily once the doors opened, it gradually filled up. Hopefully, he did reasonable sales.

I have to admit. I did leave before the end of this set to catch a train. Partially this was due to me expecting a 6.30 start. But part of it was that like Ride, I wasn't watching anything special. Again, it was enjoyable enough. Washes of guitar feedback played over drum patterns. But this type of performance usually is accompanied by animated guitar playing. I think you can see this from my photos, Andy hardly moved except to tweak something on his pedal board or queue a drum pattern. Hardly Thurston Moore. So there wasn't even anything to hold me from a photography point of view. Pleasant. Just nothing special.

BUZZARD BUZZARD BUZZARD

Rough Trade East

I stumbled upon Welsh indie 70s inspired rockers, Buzzard Buzzard Buzzard at a random gig at the Sebright Arms. I was struck by the lead singer's excellent Jagger-esk performance. Musically, they sounded like they were stuck in a timewarp. But that's not a bad thing. Good music doesn't stop being good music just because fashions change. So when I saw there was an album launch show at Rough Trade, I thought it would be worth catching up with them.

Sadly, tonight's performance was a stripped back performance. So the singer wasn't prancing around the stage, instead he sat behind a keyboard. Surprisingly, this didn't detract from the performance. Tom, the singer is very affable, chatty and engaging, explaining the stories behind each song and was not averse to a bit of self-deprecating humour. So it was a good performance, but in a way I wasn't expecting.

Musically, the songs were stripped back acoustic versions. Still very 70s influenced but with wry lyrics. At times ELO, other times Elton John 'Yellow Brick Road' era, with occasion touches of Queen. All familiar but at the same time a refreshing change from the darkness of the post-punk bands on the scene. I really enjoyed the session.





ANDREW WASYLYK

Moth Club

This wasn't meant to be my first gig of the year, but a positive COVID test put paid to my visit to the Rockaway Beach festival. This was my first day out since the positive test and tonight was the nice way to start the year.

During the lockdowns, many of us discovered a connection to the place we live. The areas around our homes we had ignored became an unexplored country and a brief salvation from our own homes. Our empty roads allowed wildlife to find new spaces and the sound of bird song was heard everywhere. Those of us lucky to live near countryside walked the same paths again and again, noticing changes as the season came and went. Tonight's gig featured two films exploring the notion of place from Andrew Wasylyk and Modern Nature, followed by a live set from Andrew's band.

With so many cancellations, having two videos as your support was probably a good idea. First up was a video made

to accompany Modern Nature's, 'Island of Noise'. Released as a double LP in December. The album is loosely based on the Tempest. Here with visuals, it really felt like a reflection on lockdown with images of mundane sights changing with the seasons.

Andrew introduced his video of Balgay Hill, reflecting on his own experience exploring this old Dundee park during lockdown. The album combines 'found recordings' from around the park with music of shifting textures. The visuals created using homemade pin-hole lenses, perfectly suited the music, with the daydream like textures of the album.

The last time I saw Andrew was in the vast Union Chapel. The cavernous space oddly allows for intimate performances that tonight's concert at the Moth Club lacked. Tonight however, Andrew made up for the lack of intimacy with his eight-piece band offering a fuller sound, all

somehow squashed onto the Moth Club's tiny stage. The addition of a viola, sax and trumpet adding extra textures to the tracks.

Rather than replaying the music from Balgay Hill, tonight's performance featured music from his back catalogue that flits its way from ambient to jazz and classical. Andrew's simple repeating patterns on the piano anchor each piece as other instruments add textures to Andrew's dreamlike patterns. Each piece respected by a very attentive and appreciative audience. Highlight for me was the 'In Balgay Silhouettes' which unfolds a hypnotic journey around Balgay.

I think what was most interesting was the difference between the Union Chapel performance and Moth Club. The band added elements of ambient and jazz to what were modern classical tracks when played in the chapel with piano and single trumpet. Yet both equally strong musically.



JARROD DICKENSON

THE HORN

Photos from Jarrod Dickenson playing blues and Americana at the Horn with his wife Clare. Not the biggest fan of Americana. It can be a little bit too 'country' for my liking. I don't like the affected vocals of country. In the main, tonight walked on the right side of the fine line. The set stronger when it edged towards the blues end of Americana. It was great to see genuine chemistry. At times they reminded of the Civil Wars. Jarrod's Texan vocals and sense of humour also brought to mind Josh T Pearson.





DRY CLEANING

ROUGH TRADE EAST



YARD ACT

100 CLUB





GOUNCHA'S LOWLY SOUL BAND

SHACKLEWELL ARMS



GIRLS IN SYNTHESIS

SHACKLEWELL ARMS





JOYERIA

100 CLUB



HONEYGLAZE

100 CLUB





LOUNGE SOCIETY

100 CLUB



THE UTOPIA STRONG

THE LEXINGTON



