

They really don't agree with Nick

Emma Hartley, May 4th, 2010

Of all the faintly sinister things to be carrying around in your handbag, a stuffed black sock with a cut-out of the face of the BNP leader, Nick Griffin, sellotaped to it wouldn't ordinarily be top of my personal pops. Eyelash tongs, perhaps, and I did walk off with a leather whip from the Telegraph's burlesque themed Christmas party last year, but that's a different story...

The "rat" (see above) was special guest star at the Folk Against Fascism village fete at the South Bank centre on Sunday and by the time I found him he'd had ten bells knocked out of him on the splat-the-rat stall for several hours, making Griffin's face look even wonkier than usual.

The fete itself had been chased indoors by hammering rain that could easily have led one to the conclusion that God himself is a bit of a fascist – were one given to brandishing this term around like Rick from The Young Ones – so it was a slightly misted up affair, preparation for a concert in the evening that put two of folk's biggest hitters on the same bill.

But first there was Chumbawumba, the hard-to-pigeonhole outfit most famous for their hit Tubthumping (I get knocked down), which they didn't do on Sunday, choosing instead to greatly amuse the audience with a series of wry and often political vignettes about modern life. One, about the slightly fraudulent activity of being "friended" on the internet, introduced a series of undesirable characters agog for online comradeship but whom you wouldn't touch with a bargepole in reality. The band's spot-on five-part harmony was further enlivened by a zydeco tie worn (and indeed played) by one of their number.

Next up was Show of Hands, who are pretty huge by folk standards, having written a series of anthemic songs that pull off the neat trick of being both timeless and topical. Cousin Jack – expat readers take note – is about a Cornish tin miner driven abroad in the search for work to Canada and then assaulted by the visions of his homeland (I see the English living in our homes, The Spanish fishing in our seas). More about them in a sec.

Then after the interval there was the divine Bellowhead, an 11-piece folk phenomenon with a bulging brass section, a need for a shave (female band member Rachael McShane excepted) and a penchant for songs about getting ripped off by prostitutes. They are loved with a wild passion by folkies because they're young (ish), supremely talented and energetic – a rare combination in a sector of the industry where longevity and recognisability are often more highly valued.

The edge of desperation, in a lyrical sense, that lends so many of their songs credibility was strongly in evidence on Sunday. When Jon Boden flung his arms wide during Prickle Eye Bush, which is about a man standing on a scaffold hoping that his lover (or anyone really) will save his life by paying off

the hangman, he looked like a man embracing the possibility of his imminent demise.

Their class and professionalism is undoubted. But it was Show of Hands's evening, in large part because it may well have been their song, Roots, that catalysed the Folk Against Fascism movement. It's a piece of work that has been wilfully misinterpreted by the Right but the possibility that it would be has always been a part of its everyman beauty. For an explanation of this please read my earlier blog.

I was especially pleased for Show of Hands on Sunday because the same qualities that kept them outside the mainstream of the folk world for several years – their sophistication, political savvy and intelligence, to be blunt – appeared finally to have worked to their advantage and got them to the heart of the folk scene, where they belong. The social spadework and networking that they've done along the way have paid off. Hurrah!

Now immigration is a mainstream election issue perhaps the need for Nick Griffin will begin to ebb: the instinct to oppose him produced a fabulous evening's entertainment though.