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Machine Translations

Saturday June 05, 2010 at 08:00 PM

Audience: 18 and over

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The Vanguard

42 King St, Sydney
NSW, 2042, Australia.
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Machine Translations

It's been two years since Machine Translations were in Sydney to launch seventh album *Seven Seven* at The Gaelic Club. This time they've traded a pub setting for the creature comforts of Newtown's jazz, blues and roots venue, The Vanguard. What a relief. Earlier this week, after walls of rain for weeks, Sydney copped a tornado. Our city is sodden. Our umbrellas are defeated. Water seeps from every imaginable crack and overhang, and the appeal of a warm, civilised dinner/show combo burns as bright as a hearth fire.

Thus, the lull between support act Caitlyn Park and Machine Translations finds me belly-full of lightly seared salmon, glass abrim with Barossa Shiraz, relaxing into the Vanguard's tasteful 1920s ambiance.

Five men traipse onstage to the homely tinkle of cutlery. Machine Translations' current line-up features two drummers and The Boat People's James O'Brien and Robin Waters on bass and keyboard, respectively. The manly line-up is incongruent considering how much of Machine Translations' back-catalogue involves women in various musical guises. I keep squinting around the stage, looking for the lady. But, so it goes. For 14 years the band has dissolved and coalesced in new forms around the songwriting of J.Walker. Likely, it'll all change again.

They open with a re-jigged arrangement of 'Walt Must Die' from 2001 record *Bad Shapes*, which gives The Boat People fellows the chance to flaunt their back-up vocal duties. They relish the role and do a fine job playing songs birthed long before they came on board. A couple of new tracks from the forthcoming album follow. When you've been a fan for more than a decade, the perspective delivered by a song you've never heard – live or on record - is refreshing. You hear the band as if for the first time, unencumbered by nostalgia. Both tracks reaffirm my faith and promise excellent things for the new album. Older material is wheeled out too – as far back as 1999's rather eerie release *Holiday in Spain* with tracks 'Life's Dangerous' and 'Radium'.

A hush comes over the room when Walker introduces 'Oh Ma, the Sea is Rising', the opiate centerpiece of 2007's *Seven Seven*. While Walker's lyrics are usually encoded in riddle, this song offers a rare literal interpretation of humanity asleep at the wheel as the oceans rise around it. "Oh ma the sea is rising/There's stormbirds in the air/ Oh ma the sea is rising/ There's nothing left out there." Drones frontman Gareth Liddiard snarls a similar concern on Havilah's 'Oh My' ("The icecap's getting skinny/Still they're not concerned they're very near extinct") but in a future where Liddiard sees death, Walker sees dreaming. Like the Russian state adrift at sea in the film *Russian Ark*, the waters rise but we sleep on, buoyed by delusion, clinging to the past. "And everyone will say/We should have learnt before/But we were sleeping deep in eiderdown."

The band of blokes deliver it beautifully – all pacing and delicacy. It can't be easy finding the right musos to slot into the Machine Translations ecosystem, unburdened by their own stylistic baggage. Although multi-instrumentalist Walker is omnipotent in the studio – he writes, records and produces most of his music – onstage he needs help replicating Machine Translations' essence. Yet his songs

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Track: All I Know



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- **Eagle And The Worm**, Track: All I Know
- **Dan Kelly**, Track: Hold On, I'm Coming On
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- **Halfway**, An Outpost Of Promise

aren't simple: they layer discord and harmony, sounds that grate with sounds that soothe, off-kilter timings and instrumental flourishes on top of precise, repetitive strumming. They follow a logic I like to imagine only Walker can divine.

A jammy number called 'June' is debuted, darting from jazz, to funk, to something unclassifiably Machine Translations, followed by the slow-building 'Everything Feels New'. Here, the current line-up reveals both its weaknesses and strengths. While the fuller, rockier band can flex its muscles and layer the song into a fittingly dense dénouement, the backing vocals go "aaaaah" (like "tsar") instead of "oooooh" (like "moose") and don't manage to smother it in the treacle-thick overtones that make its finale so hypnotic on record. It's a small deviation, one vowel, but how it makes me crave a female vocalist to pitch in! Walker takes a couple of requests. The guy who's been asking for 'Bee in a Cup' all night is left disappointed as it's 'Poor Circle' and 'Amnesia' that see the night out.

Dinner, warmth and wine have taken their toll. Sated and somnolent, the crowd dissipates. We stay among the washout, talking by The Vanguard's lovely bar while The Whitlams' Tim Freedman holds court down one end. Sipping on nightcaps contemplating home and bed, a file of hipsterish-looking folk begin to needle into The Vanguard. A friend tells me Dappled Cities are hightailing it over here, fans in tow, to play their second gig of the night after their eye-melting bonanza at The Manning Bar. "Nup," I think. "Not possible. Not now. Not the Vanguard." But someone starts tuning up on stage and I turn to see the dinner tables have been spirited away.

I feel like I'm on a carousel, giddy, sitting still as the night spins and settles into a new tableau before me. A poor circle, indeed.

by **Kate Hennessy**



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noice.



HennessyKate says ...

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