**The Church 2007 European Tour**

After 2006’s acoustic tour, TV appearance, the 2nd acoustic album and the support slot with The Pretenders, finally came the chance to tour ‘Uninvited Like The Clouds’ in electric form – something that had always been on the agenda but only now a possibility. Choosing to visit some countries for the first time and revisit others after a long period away the band covered a lot of distance and faced awkward logistics to make it happen, along the way the usual blend of familiar faces, new friends, a mixed bag of venues, good and disappointing turnouts, OK nights and very special atmospheres.

Starting off in Budapest then moving on to Vienna, Zagreb, Belgrade, Prague, Berlin and Krefeld they arrived in **Amsterdam at the Paradiso**, familiar territory for some, set alongside a river and just a couple of hundred yards from the ‘Milky Way’ café, inspirational in the bands history (and which clown was without his camera as band members walked past it – doh !)

The venue itself has a large ground level room with balconies as played in on previous occasions and tonight’s location a smaller upstairs room, with its polished wooden floors and fairly low stage, very much like a junior / infant school hall.

Support band Heaven Street Seven were immediately effective with their uncomplicated groove based indie-pop. Some of the UK regulars were present and I spent time distributing tour date flyers – with the up to date addition of ‘Hengelo’ – more of which later. Watching from the back of the hall it initially seemed too small a room and stage for them and I feared another Paris ‘ Glazart’ (help me doctor the flashbacks are beginning again). However the bulk of the set list works well in any environment and ‘Nothing Seeker’, ‘Hotel Womb’ and ‘Myrrh’ particularly enforced there was a bloody good band in the room and that all would be alright. ‘Never Before’ was one I was particularly looking forward to and didn’t disappoint. Towards the middle of the set whilst Tim addressed a problem with his kit there was an impromptu drum-less ‘Lost’ which had the room singing along. A return to a four piece for ‘She’ll Come Back For You Tomorrow’, then another unexpected filler ‘Wide Open Road’ as a three piece as Tim continued to sort out the technical problem. ‘Destination’ seems to have developed a newly extended instrumental part that surprised and stunned the crowd – where did your head go during it ? ‘Hounds Of Love’ was a first for many of us and only took seconds to feel ‘right’. The slower version of ‘Unguarded Moment’ surprised those who hadn’t invested in a copy of ‘Descuidado’ and the set closed with the biggest surprise of all – not the choice of song ‘Invisible’ but its new form – yes, the 2006 acoustic tour version was up-tempo and intense but this one seems to have a surging electric riff, turning it into a punkish onslaught gloriously unrestrained and stunningly energetic.

Heading away from the venue, the decision to stay up and head straight for Utrecht on a 2 a.m. train because of the scarcity of available Amsterdam Hotel Rooms, seemed less ingenious than it looked on paper.

**Utrecht or ‘You Trecked’** – The venue has a beautiful canal side setting on a scorching hot day, the tranquil view of the venue exterior and the surroundings seem to influence everyone into a slower relaxed pace, everyone except for me that is as my make it up as you go along itinerary was becoming unstuck due to being given wrong directions to hotels all morning and running out of time to find one what with it being Flower Festival weekend.

In a fairly small, loud room, with a great audience and cracking atmosphere this gig was a great experience. Just the right intimacy, a bit basic but not particularly uncomfortable, with the sound all consuming without being distorted. There were plenty of highlights including ‘Grind’, ‘Nothing Seeker’, ‘Never Before’ and ‘Block’. A slightly shorter set due to a late start and strict curfew meant no ‘Almost With You’, ‘Hounds Of Love’ or ‘Unguarded Moment’. This gig proved that smaller gigs can work well , the singing along crowd, loud sound that consumed you within it and great atmosphere before and after as the band mingled with fans made it one of those special nights. Remember Hengelo ? People leaving the Koko in Utrecht were saying “That was fantastic, amazing, I want to see them again, I must see them again.” I suggest, Will you be going to Hengelo” which results in a glare more suited to if I’d asked them how many people have you murdered this week. That, or “Hengelo, Hengelo, ha ha ha ha ha, nooooooo !” Hengelo became a name that would raise frowns, smiles, laughter, ridicule, many emotions apart from respect ! For starters, it sound like a single story accommodation for poultry and it was fitted into the schedule not straight after the other two Dutch dates but as a return to Holland after German dates, presumably en route to the ferry port that would enable travelling to England for the Brighton gig. Despite insisting to many fans, “Yes, there IS a venue there”, it was poorly attended (rumours around 50), knowing at least one artiste who would cry Laryngitis and do a no show in such circumstances the bands integrity meant they would not be letting anyone down. Whilst it became a thing of exasperating black humour it should be remembered that nights like that challenge the profitability of the tour and unpick the hardly earned positives of previous nights work.

**The Concorde 2 venue in Brighton** 300 yards or so from the remaining pier and just opposite the beach and open air sports facility (no not the sea, the volleyball place). The theme of the night sound check was ‘Where’s The Lift’ – in a strange unique arrangement members of the public can stream across the centre of the hall to use the lift which takes them up to street level. Some of the more intelligent ones hovered and caught a bit of the band and were flyered and fully informed about the band if they stood still for more than two minutes. What was surprising for a UK gig was the amount of different faces, new, young, fresh faced like they’d never before scraped off the walls of the Borderline after a sweaty encore in their lives. Encouraging signs indeed, we need to show these younglings our lightsabers and keep the flame burning and all of that, Brighton you did us proud. Having spent lunchtime on the pier with ‘Quadrophenia’ on the IPod for the full Audio visual experience (rumours that I visited the often heavily populated alleyway to re-enact one of the famous scenes are unfounded “but darlin, it’s in my favourite film, we have to….”

 With that ‘Who’ theme in mind, the thought of seeing another great band that night with stuff like ‘Nothing Seeker’ and ‘Block’ that have that shared kind of fire and intensity that a Who fan can appreciate brought the whole thing full circle – live the moment, there’s a great gig on tonight. There’s some fun with ‘Almost With You’, “Do you want to hear ‘Almost With You’” – “Or what else”, came the reply, “No, there’s no alternative, it’s not a choice, it’s that or nothing”. ‘Block’, ‘Hotel Womb’ and ‘Myrrh’ were particular stand outs, the band really didn’t seem to want to leave the stage and the enthusiasm from the crowd and the number of young faces , showing UK gigs outside of London are viable on a night that surprised many who were resigned to seeing something a little lower key than this.

No room at the Inn meant a 3 a.m. five hour coach journey home via the airports route and the preconception of getting 5 hours sleep was quashed by the slamming of luggage doors every now and then. Never before and never again.

**London brought another new venue**, despite locating it on a map I was puzzled that it was in the same location as an Islington shopping centre. Beneath or above, I can’t recall but stairs were involved. A fairly large hall, good sized audience, no ‘Almost With You’ but an amazing ‘Grind’, ‘Numbers’, ‘Block’ and a mesmerising ‘Pure Chance’ which was my misty eyed moment of the tour. A lot more ‘Killer Filler’ was required tonight, unfortunately if they try to tour with two or three additional stage techs there’s no tour so Tim, Tiare or whoever can locate the problem has to deal with it themselves hence the need for the unfortunate gaps between songs. This really felt like a ‘Big’ gig, with a bigger, higher stage, great sound from a guy who’d had minimal time to acclimatise and a phenomenal response from the audience to an inspired end of tour performance. It always risks being the last time we’ll see them here, hopefully it’s not but you feel that added to the audience’s intensity and enthusiasm.

Having ignored the set lists from the European gigs in the days leading up to Amsterdam I relished the idea of being surprised but having seen some of the Australian set lists had an idea of what to expect. Think of those classic openers over the years such as “Aura”, I thought “Block” would be ideal as it was for the acoustic tour. Whilst it was great to see ‘Back With Two Beasts’ material being incorporated, ‘Saturation’ as an opener initially puzzled me. My biggest fear was that a sizeable chunk of the audience wouldn’t know it and also its patient gradual build up on a steady incline may lack the explosion of an “Aura” lead riff to announce the bands arrival on stage. However, despite a fair amount of chat amongst the audience it proved to be a brave new way to open the set. The ‘If only, if only’ part shook the room and yes, you knew there was a band in the room, a bloody good one at that. Like smoke seeping under a door it enters gradually and becomes all consuming, with ‘opener’ credentials of its own albeit a more subtle style and a variation on the traditional explosive entrance. Following with ‘Nothing Seeker’ was also bold and positive, it’s fairly recent, a strong part of the previous electric tours set and has deservedly kept its place. Its contrast to ‘Saturation’ in being unsubtle and loud is a perfect balance and hearing it away from the other similarly expressed ‘Forget Yourself’ tracks makes you even more convinced at its quality and right to a place as a live favourite, with its sinister intensity it’s a song you experience, not just witness.

A double whammy of set in stone Church classics redresses the balance between old and new – ‘Hotel Womb’ and ‘Myrrh’, neither were singles but both are such a part of the bands history that the most casual of followers is sure to know them and treasure them. The solo’s in both are breath taking and although they’re ‘safe bets’ in that they’ll always work well live, the solo’s and Tim’s explosive underpinning drums during them show how much they have to be worked to succeed, there’s no case of stand there and churn it out, if they don’t put the extra in there’s not going to be that adrenaline pumping spark that they achieve here. Four songs in and any first timer has a rounded and jaw dropping picture of the band !

 ‘Almost With You’, was in and out of the set, “A present for coming to Brighton.”

It can sound overly simplistic against some of the more complex arrangements and styles the band have evolved into playing but at the heart there’s a great song, with Peters solo always interestingly different to the recorded version (electric rather than acoustic).

‘Never Before’ was something I was really looking forward to, could it achieve the huge dynamic spectrum of the album version ? Who plays what on it ? Steve takes the weaving Keyboard role, Marty is on bass whilst Peter fronts the band with the sole electric guitar and lead vocal. Tim’s powerhouse drumming extends to the verses not just the huge climatic second half giving the whole song a raised vibrancy. Blending the sublime moments such as “Even filmed in grey” and its Genesis / Floyd texturing with the huge playout it’s a dramatic spectacle that stretches the parameters as ‘The Theatre and Its Double’ did on the previous electric tour. The audience, particularly in Utrecht where they sang along to every word of it, seemed really into it.

‘Day 5 / Tantalised’, having heard ‘Day 5’ succeed in sounding fully substantial on the acoustic tour it was initially surprising to see it also feature in the electric set. When you hear the additional scope Peter has with his Electric Guitar to further texturise the sound it seems wholly justifiable. Slipping into the ‘Siguente’ version of ‘Tantalized’ surprised some, especially those who weren’t familiar with that version.

‘Grind’, as on the acoustic tour threatens to steal the show (indeed it stopped the show in London) and has become something really special, the two long solo’s seem to peak higher than ever before. The piano part is starting to feel a little cursed with David Lane’s brief error on the televised ‘Live At The Basement’ show and Peter’s error in Brighton that lead to a galvanising ‘rescue’ ending. Heaven Street Seven’s keyboard player had joined the band onstage for the rest of the tour to play it, as far as I know without any problems.

‘All I Know’ from ‘El Momento Descuidado’ is something that emphasises the fresh approach to the set – essentially an acoustic based song it is included as it an impressive highlight of recent times, refreshingly different. Tim’s Piano, Peter’s Mandolin, Marty’s Bass and Steve’s expressively sung and performed vocal which really draws you in combine to create something of substantial quality in a unique style. Rather than being left for acoustic nights only it’s featured here bringing further variety in style and source of material. It helps that it’s a lovely song too.

Time for some banter ? :- After hearing a loud distorted shout from the audience, Steve:- “It sounded Like African”, Marty:- “He’s A Geordie”, Steve:- “I Like Wales.”

“We’re gonna do some Space Rock”, introduces ‘Pure Chance’, another ‘Uninvited Like The Clouds’ track that was played on the acoustic tour, it’s great to hear it even more densely expressive and surprisingly dynamic. It really draws you in with its dreamy floating feel (Steve commented about rowing coming to mind) before switching dynamically.

Marty’s lead vocal ‘She’ll Come Back For You Tomorrow’, lifts the tempo and is another that worked fine acoustically but makes a welcome addition to the electric set. With a surprising amount of punch and Peter’s slide guitar style playing it’s significantly different.

More banter about not trusting guys who sing in high pitched voices and then ‘Destination’, another long established inclusion that will always well, this time it seems to have had a mid-song extension with an upreaching instrumental passage verging on or crossing over into psychedelic.

With its “I knew this man….” Intro, one of the most extreme positives of the tour was the response to the opening riff of ‘Numbers’. It has become a fans and apparently band favourite and having come from ‘After Everything Now This’ makes it still fairly recent in the career perspective. Hearing it at concert volume with the visual intensity of the band enhances it to its full potential. Surprisingly not left until later as an encore it raises the intensity in the room in preparing for the closing run in.

After a passing conversation with a talking dog (apparently) in which the dog insisted it was time The Church performed a song about Dogs, next is Kate Bush’s ‘Hounds Of Love’, having heard it was being covered it seemed initially a strange choice – something you’re used to having a female vocal – and distinctive one at that. Rhythmically and melodically though you could begin to imagine them playing it and it only takes moments to hear how comfortably accomplished a version it is. Briskly delivered and with a strong vocal melody, the worries of it being lightweight musically are un-necessary, the powerful drumming and solid piano give a strong robustness to it.

‘Under The Milky Way’, announced with its honours list attached is sometimes over familiar but importantly it generates a real buzz in the audience that benefits the whole gig – something a rarer substitute wouldn’t be able to do.

Banter contd:- (After a request is shouted out forcefully), “Get your own band then you can play whatever you like.”

‘Block’ – When it wasn’t used as the set opener eyebrows may have been raised, but as someone once exclaimed upon reviewing the album version “It’s like an opener and show stopping closer at the same time”, mystic Maven had spotted its potential back then and indeed it works to end the standard set. As with ‘Numbers’ it feels heavier than the recorded version with a dark sinister edge. There’s extra intensity towards the end before the big finish and thankfully it sounds different every night. It draws a huge response of appreciation and again being from the latest ‘proper’ album it brings heart-warming assurance that the list of Church live classics is still being added to.

‘Unguarded Moment’ is not quite what I expected, close in tempo to the ‘Descuidado’ acoustic version, it has a wavering fragility to it, when it peaks in the last chorus the audience are riding on the crest of the wave and it has all come together. Realistically they were never going to come out and play the 1981 version live but this is something that at least gives an opportunity for a misty eyed sing-along.

‘Reptile’ with its exciting tempo is another that always works. Again it’s one that seems to have been tweaked a little, slowing down three minutes in and steadily climbing up before spiralling upwards. The dual soloing (there must be another term for that – Dualing, no not duelling, dualing ?)

Despite witnessing the re-addressing of its tempo and intensity on the acoustic tour ‘Invisible’, the real surprise of this tour opens in fairly orthodox manner, gentle and slow. A busy dominant electric guitar rides over the intensifying blend of piano, drums and acoustic guitar with Steve switching to bass as the song plays out in dramatic style.

In his blog on the following Monday Steve outlines the realities of The Church touring Europe, rightly including his assessment of what The Church can still offer, “But the kids ain’t interested in 50 year olds and I don’t blame ‘em yet we don’t make oldies music, we still have edge n grit n darkness and most people my age ain’t interested in that. We are an anomaly, we fall through the cracks, we are neither one thing nor another.”

Earlier in the blog he expresses the problem in sourcing guarantees to cover costs and that the option of shrinking down, jettisoning things, there’s little left to trim with minimal road crew and equipment, what do you go down to next – less band members ? It’s the contradiction of these realities with the quality of the show, particularly London where they sounded big, loud and edgy and the phenomenal audience response to it that makes their situation – if not unique, a sad, frustrating reality.

On the positive side it’s now 27 years of touring and still it’s no retro show, still not (officially anyway) the farewell leg and the likes of ‘Block’, ‘Numbers’, ‘Never Before’ and ‘Nothing Seeker’ – all songs from recent years, stand out. Every tour has memorable songs specific to it, things like ‘Hounds Of Love’, ‘Grind’, ‘Saturation’, ‘All I Know’, all felt like part of the ‘show’ in that rather than throwing together a set of songs that work well time and time again things like these are embedded into the set giving a rounded and brave example of the broad repertoire, some may not be repeated on further tours but none of them will be forgotten when looking back at this one.

The tour was still promoting the ‘Uninvited Like The Clouds’ album and the five songs from it were effective inclusions in the set. The degree of repetition from the acoustic tour with ‘Day 5’ and ‘Pure Chance’ was fully justified as hearing them with electric guitar brought another dimension to already interesting songs. A little surprising was the omission of the instantaneous pair ‘Easy’ and ‘Unified Field’ but the scope and quality of the album has been adequately demonstrated. The inclusion of ‘Saturation’ (though no ‘Ionian Blues’ regrettably) and ‘All I Know’ shows that these albums tracks are in the mix for selection along with everything else and the new slight amendments to ‘Destination’ and ‘Reptile’, more radically reworked ‘Unguarded Moment’, ‘Invisible’ and part of ‘Tantalized’ brings a freshness to the set and the willingness to play quieter more acoustic based tracks in the electric environment means that the electric shows are all encompassing showcases of the best of the band resulting in a broad and rewarding show. A few years ago it would have been unlikely to see them include something like ‘All I Know’ on a big electric stage (although to be fair they often found room for ‘Don’t Look Back’ or ‘Fly’), seeing Steve without a bass or guitar physically expressing the vocal dominated song accompanied by piano and mandolin, this is a long way from being a strictly rigid twin electric guitar band. The transition to this has been longer than we in Europe may think, at Australian shows for some time now there has been this mixing up of things and blurring the lines between the semi-electric / acoustic shows and full electric shows.

The set selection went beyond ‘difficult’ a long time ago with so many albums worth of material to choose from and the addition of not just one strong studio album with 7 or 8 highlights but also ‘Two Beasts’ and ‘Descuidado’. Of the omissions ‘Aura’ is missed and the traditional extended ‘You Took’ and electric version of ‘Tantalized’ are bravely removed / rested and in essence replaced by ‘Invisible’ and perhaps ‘Block’ in that intense psych out role. Some highlights of the previous tour are gone too (the stunning ‘Theatre and It’s Double’ which excelled live) but that’s what makes it all the more engaging, capturing the moment in time and enjoying it.

The switching of roles is again evident and it all comes together as a show that has as its theme flexibility – the surprising successful opener, re-worked older material, the contrast of a gentle ‘All I Know’ and dynamically intense ‘Never Before’, all resulting in a fresh unique blend that was the 2007 tour.