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How does this work?

Danny Smith: Skinner in the Underworld

26 February 2011
By Danny Smith

Going Through Hell is Mike Skinner's first single from his last album as The Streets. It's an oddly poetic title that has a lot of resonances, including echoes of the Greek myth Orpheus when our titular hero walked through hell to return his wife, Eurydice, to the Land of the Living. It wouldn't surprise me if this was completely intentional, Mike Skinner strikes me as a smart guy.

The image of a Greek hero is also apt, an all-conquering hero after many trials and tests returning home but finding this his hardest test yet is an old rote. It was, after all and as he kept reminding us the last time he would be performing in his home city. And I don't use the word 'hero' lightly. The gig tonight was a story of someone facing adversity, and overcoming it with aplomb. The adversity being the crowd. When I first got there the crowd was notable by its diversity, a massive age range. But as the venue started filling up, the mid-twenties gym rat started to swell the ranks, polo-shirted skinheads stinking of Lynx deodorant. In the half an hour between the support acts and The Streets starting things were already getting unruly, plastic cups being launched and people leaving the dance floor with worried and angry looks. At the point where two guys were carrying a obviously paralytic girl to get some air I knew something was up.

Skinner exploded onto the stage with lights and sound with the now anthemic Don't Mug Yourself and the crowd, understandably, went batshit. But halfway through the second song you could see him gesture for the music to be cut. The house lights went up and he officiated between an obvious fight that had broken out. "If you're going to fight anyone, fight me" was his shout, a clever one because it got everyone's attention then "I'm here to bring the love" getting the crowd back on side for one of his gentler songs, of which there are a few. Mike Skinner is known for his banging anthems, but if you check his catalogue, let's not forget Orpheus was a poet that was able to make even the gods cry when his wife was taken from him, similarly Mike is more of an artist of sensitive observation, honesty, and poetry, his songs reflect that.

The crowd of course don't care, and then began a night that only a really skilled performer could pull off. He managed to play a really good gig, but still keep some semblance of order, and his temper. There were a couple of mis-steps, soon after breaking up the fight he got into the crowd, something he's done every night on the tour by all accounts. Except tonight he barely made it back on stage, and when he did he was missing several buttons off his shirt, his shoes and his mic. He performed the rest of the gig exasperated and barefoot. Of the mic he said, somewhat bitterly "to whoever got my mic, keep it, it's lucky that is, it brings luck. Luck and musical credibility".

It didn't stop there, all night he battled the throng, performing for the eager, looking out for the weak "he's just proper punched in the back of the head" and confronting the aggressive by singling them out and demanding eye contact, hoping that the spotlight on them would shift focus away from the situation and remind them why they paid for tickets. My last count he got hit by two full plastic cups, one empty, two t-shirts and, remarkably, a scarf.

But you could tell it was wearing on him towards the end, towards the end of Never Went to Church it was a little too much for him explaining at the end that Selly Oak hospital was where his father passed away and took a visible effort to shake himself out of it.

The crowd were as bad as I've seen at a gig, despite being at hardcore gigs and punk rallies I've never seen a viciousness and boorishness to a crowd before. And one of the reasons I think that this is The Streets last album is that Mike has realised you can't pick your fans. "this is our last time performing in Birmingham" and almost under his breath but into a microphone to a crowd mostly too caught up in being dickheads to care "ten years of singing shit".

But just as the crunching encore advised, which was the recent single, and Orpheus, he kept going. But unlike Orpheus I don't think Mike Skinner will be looking back at all.

The opinions of Danny Smith do not necessarily reflect the views of the publishers of this blog, its affiliates, or any sane adult human beings. He currently lives in your cupboard, watching, always watching.

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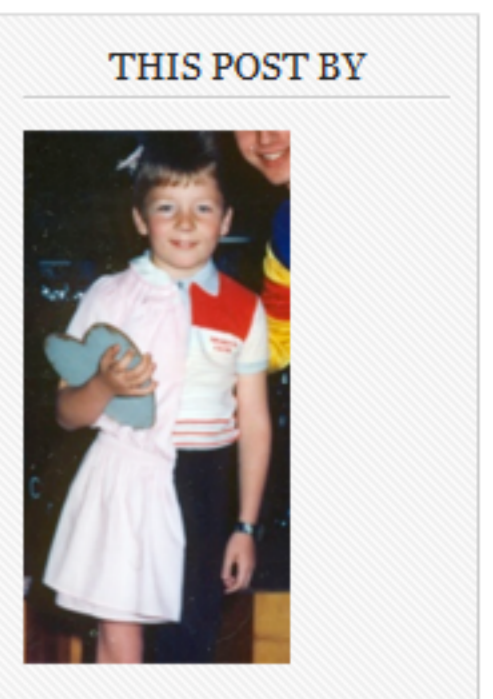
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BiNS is mostly by Jon Bounds, a Birmingham based social web consultant, producer and writer. You can hire him to work on your stuff, or follow him on twitter. There's also the odd bit of stuff from Danny Smith.

Feel free to send us anything you're interested in - or think we might be. If you've got gigs to promote, best to chuck them on the talk board.