

UNCUT

Gina Villalobos

Berwick-on-Tweed, Barrels Ale House, May 6

Gina Villalobos was going to have to go some to match the interest generated by her album *ROCK 'N' ROLL PONY*, the shadow boxing was over, now it was time to see if she could cut it in an intimate venue. Given the quality of the musicians that have graced the Barrels stage, it is understandable if everyone gets a little blasé once in a while, but there was a definite tingle in the air because due to that album, Villalobos came with credentials. But first there was an unexpected surprise in the shape of north east musician Steve Daggett. Daggett undeniably suffers from familiarity on his home turf, however once past that you find a true and talented singer-songwriter. He is a man modest about his talents but once listened to you realise that the modesty is ill-founded. *Mandolin Moon* and *Ballad of Jimmy Forsyth* to name just two are honest and blaze with passion, while *Cyber Café* is a wry and clever take on the modern world. His album *TROUBADOUR TERRITORY* would grace the collection of any lover of real down to earth folk music.

But the star of the night was undoubtedly Gina Villalobos, who on appearance is positively elfin-like. If she went out in a strong wind she'd be a goner but that slight frame houses a big talent. Alongside her on vocals and guitar was Ben Pringle, initially he seemed almost invisible as Villalobos gently introduced herself with *Faded* and *How Do I Say Goodbye* but his influence and effect grew throughout the evening. Plus the harmonies the pair delivered on songs such as *Hard Enough*, (which is likely to be included on her new spring 2006 album) were simply delicious. If, as they protested, the pair are not a 'couple,' they should think about it because on stage they were as tight as a pair of star-crossed lovers.

Given the clamour surrounding *ROCK 'N' ROLL PONY*, it wasn't surprising that the night was largely based around it. However, Villalobos didn't attempt to recreate its slick production, instead she mellowed and stripped the songs down to their barest elements. In front of you was a young lady pouring her heart out. She looks and sounds like a 1960s hippie chick to whom the decade of peace and love hasn't been entirely kind, there is a real hurt and heartache at the root of everything she did. That approach made *California* and *Can't Come Down* as fragile as pieces of antique cut glass and just as beautiful. But never too far away was a barely concealed rocker which burst through on *Not Enough* and *You Don't Like Me*. The contrast between the rock and the delicate gave the night real dynamics. In between songs it was marvellously disorganised, she is not a seller of slick links, instead it was a stream of consciousness

from a wild imagination held together by the golden thread of wonderful music.

From an album full of unforgettable signature songs, I suppose that her cover of World Party's *Message In A Box* is the most memorable. However anyone expecting it to provide a 'big finish' was to be disappointed, albeit fleetingly. It too was given the 'organic' treatment and how it flourished. As Villalobos and Pringle caressed it, the song blossomed. So did Gina Villalobos live up to the billing? Well the acid test, as always, is the audience, they kept the pair on stage way past the set list. Having run out of songs they had to resort to sound check favourites from Neil Young and Ryan Adams. If you're going to see Gina Villalobos live, don't go expecting *ROCK 'N' ROLL PONY* recreated, but hearing her sing on stage is an experience everyone should enjoy at least once.

Michael Mee