



World-weary: Jim White STEVE GILLETTE

Pop

JIM WHITE
 Troubadour Café
 LONDON ★★★★★

"Six thousand words to describe sorrow and eight to describe happiness," lamented the jet-lagged, world-weary alt-country singer. The 50-year-old troubadour (apt setting) was dressed like Harry Dean Stanton in *Paris, Texas*, his weather-beaten trucker's cap almost hitting the ceiling of the tiny Earls Court venue. This very intimate

solo set, in this "legendary room", involved Jim White stepping on and off an array of foot pedals to create his ambient and otherworldly sound. Remarkably, it all worked gorgeously, helped along by White's shiny blue banjo-caster, a one-off instrument made by a friend.

The droll Floridian rose to a degree of prominence on the back of Andrew Douglas's *Arena* documentary, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, an entertaining if faintly alarming travelogue in which White meandered through the Southern states of America in a battered 1970s Chevy,

sharing his thoughts on the quirks and crowds of this distinctive region. He was equally affable company tonight, sharing with us his philosophy ("pessimistic optimism"), some witty anecdotes expounding on the rich characters in his often macabre songs, and explaining why he's no longer a fundamentalist Christian.

Douglas's film was inspired by White's deeply creepy debut album, made 10 years ago, *The Mysterious Tale of How I Shouted Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, which borrowed unashamedly from the likes of Flannery O'Connor, a stoned observ-

er of Southern Gothic. Like O'Connor's stories, White's songs are dark, murderous-absurd, even - ballads that reek of death, sin and religion. The themes are a blend of the grisly and the spiritual, from shotguns to Pentecostal churches, mutilations to Bible bashers.

White started with a tender trilogy of prison tunes - "Handcuffed to a Fence in Mississippi", "Prisoner's Dilemma" and "Jailbird" - from his latest, and most accessible, album *Transnormal Skiparoo*. The highlight was "A Town Called Amen", a heavenly lament with the gentle refrain, "like a bright-

eyed smile/Some long lost friend". He sounded like a fusion of Ryan Adams and Jackson Browne.

In the hare-brained "Turquoise House", however, the frowning artist was more frivolous, singing, "I'll never fit in, so why should I try". The set was far too short and there were some baffling omissions - "Static on the Radio" and the superbly subversive "If Jesus Drove a Motor Home", for example. All the same, this compelling and humble oddball may finally be about to receive his just dues, after decades of musical toil.

BEN WALSH



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