

JULIEN BAKER – THE LANTERN, BRISTOL, UK

You may not automatically think that Bristol based *She Makes War* is an obvious support choice for Memphis' Julien Baker but any doubts were quashed at Colston Hall's The Lantern. The room was bustling as people crowded towards the stage. *She Makes War* (aka Laura Kidd) took to the stage and began a grungy, fuzzy stomp of noise. The crowd were drawn in, this was worth not standing at the bar for. *She Makes War* had arrived. From the opener, *In Cold Blood*, there was a knowing confidence reminiscent of *Rid of Me* era PJ Harvey.

She Makes War commands on stage and the crowd were understandably appreciative. This was something of a home coming, even though it was a solo show, as *She Makes War* does perform as a full band. The solo set fitted the size of the venue perfectly and gave *She Makes War* chance to promote her upcoming album launch. Her songs are intricate and listening to the lyrics, they encapsulate a stark vulnerability. It is that ease at putting herself out there that makes you understand just why *She Makes War* was the perfect choice to accompany Julien Baker. Laura Kidd's song craft is bewitching, particularly on songs like *Devastate Me* and *Paper Thin*. At one point, Kidd climbed down from the stage and used the siren call of a megaphone to stir the audience; the room was witness to an exciting, intoxicating opener.

Then to the headline act, Julien Baker, who entered the stage to a shout of, 'she's so tiny'. Baker burst out laughing and people clapped. She explained how she had wanted to begin with a series of guitar loops to get everyone in the mood but a joke was better. The Bristol date came at the tail end of Baker's first proper European tour and just before her sell out show at London's Union Chapel. Julien Baker has done particularly well in the last two years, gaining both critical acclaim for her debut, *Sprained Ankle* (2016) and the just released *Turn Out The Lights*, which has been getting some heavy promotion due to a deal with Matador Records. What Julien Baker lacks in stature she makes up for in musicianship and vocal ability. Her songs of loneliness and heartbreak never feel isolated. She opened with lead single, *Appointments*, 'I know that I'm not what you wanted am I? Wanted someone who I used to be like', she sang, aware of her perceived shortcomings but also aware of her ability to create from those moments in a way that few can. The set was a mix of songs from both albums. *Happy*

To Be Here, was so raw it almost hurt, 'I heard there's fix for nearly everything, then why not me?'. It's here that Baker's stunning vocal was first given full range to run the song. If anyone else sang these songs there might be deemed too much but for someone so young, Baker is a seasoned performer, having played in bands for years and she knows exactly when to draw on the emotional intensity. Intense encapsulates the whole set, *Sour Breath* and *Shadowboxing*, detailing how Baker's struggles with depression have impacted on relationships make you feel as though you are in those relationships as a third person. Although there wasn't too make chat with the audience, the performance didn't require it, the songs speak for themselves. Baker stood on the stage, bathed in a simple white spotlight, an array of loop pedals at her feet, the whole audience could tell she is a performer filled with grace and humility.

Half way through Baker switched to piano to play the new, *Televangelist* and the earnest *Go Home*, with its pleas of '*I've kissed enough bathroom sinks to make up for the lovers who never loved me*', *I'm tired of washing my hands, God I want to go home*'. To the uninitiated you could say Julien Baker crafts songs of despair and melancholy but it's when she breaks and exposes her soul as evidenced in the final song of the night, *Something*, that the transformative nature of her songs shines through, it is a blissful moment . From the tiny stage of The Lantern, she had the crowd enthralled and somehow feeling less alone.

