

Songwriters' Circle a kind of reversal of roles

By Amy Fuller, Record staff

KITCHENER — Last night's Songwriters' Circle performance at the Centre in the Square was a reversal of roles in more ways than one.

The audience took the stage to watch Ben Rollo, Mike Todd and Allister Bradley perform against the backdrop of a softly lit, empty seating area. And the threesome seemed more star-struck than their listeners, even taking photos of the crowd.

"You look good," Todd told the audience, seated cabaret-style at tables of four. "It's cool, but you're paying a lot of attention to us. We're not used to that."

Awed by the Steinway, the lights and a taste of stardom, the trio of homegrown talent hardly knew how to start. They relied on a rock-paper-scissors shtick with an unclear outcome. Bradley took charge, playing the soft title track from his latest album, *Too*.

A solo artist with blond locks and a lean frame, Bradley writes and records more than he performs. At times, he seemed ill at ease, unaccustomed to the antics of his rowdy new frontmen.

Rollo and Todd looked more relaxed, having once played as a duo (*Benefits of Doubt*) and produced a CD together.

From the start, they added backup vocals, guitar strumming and a bit of shaker and hand drum percussion to Bradley's soft chords and moody lyrics. He, in turn, embellished their harmonies with his own voice and bright piano notes.

During some numbers, including a tribute to Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan, Todd and Rollo sat in the shadows to let Bradley's clear voice, mellow tunes and thoughtful lyrics fill the hushed space.

Occasionally, Todd began plinking his guitar strings, an out-of-sync and unfortunate distraction.

He looked bored.

But he complimented Bradley's pretty style.

"I'm screwed, that was really nice," he said, then shook a handful of curls, stomped his sneakers, and launched into *Why'd You Lie?*

"After all those beautiful songs, shake it off!"

Todd's gruff, authentic personality won the loudest laughs of the night, and of the three, his rockster voice filled the house best — compensating for some thin, repetitive lyrics about guys in bars and friendships gone awry.

Rollo got into his groove with *Hello Brother*, a memorable John Mayer-like piece for his older brother that sparked appreciative intermission chatter between ladies' room stalls.

"Now that our fighting days are through, it's time I got to know you," he crooned, his

voice shifting through a range of dynamics supported by skilful strumming.

Bradley's upbeat *What a Day* single, his most convincing, showed off the threesome's new-found togetherness. Rollo turned his guitar into a percus-

sion instrument, drumming the body with his hands, and Todd's guitar glinted gold as he jammed.

They should do that more often.

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