

thejazzbreakfast

23 May 2010 by peterbacon



Mike Walker at the CBSO Centre yesterday (Picture: Russ Escritt)

CBSO Centre, Birmingham UK

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Gwilym Simcock might have been the instigator, but if the composing credits fell mainly to the two British players – the other was guitarist Mike Walker – the stature of the US rhythm team – Steve Swallow on bass, Adam Nussbaum on drums – meant this was very much a band of equals.

I'm always intrigued by at what point in a gig the band really takes flight and moves from giving a merely pleasing performance to one that will live long in the memory and always bringing a warm smile. If we're lucky it's in the third or fourth tune, but sometimes, this being the unpredictable world of jazz, it never happens at all, not on that night, not at the gig we're at, anyway.

For me, this band took flight in *Clockmaker*, Mike Walker's rich composition which, like all his pieces, sound both immensely complicated and yet really easy for the listener to assimilate and to enjoy. It was the opening piece of the concert, and our first taste of what four exceptional and open jazz musicians sound like when they are both challenging themselves and having a damn fine time.

Steve Swallow's knees bent as he focussed in hard on the music on the page, Nussbaum kept eye contact with Simcock and Walker as the tune flowed from improvisation to improvisation, always in a developmental way, never merely

processional. And the two younger British men just looked so pleased to be here and making music together with these older Americans.

It was Swallow's *Real Book* album, in which he wrote new tunes based on the chord sequences of standards, that Simcock said inspired his *You Won't Be Around To See It*, based on *Softly (As In A Morning Sunrise)*. On a balmy night this raised the temperature further, with Nussbaum showing his full volume range, from a snare thwacked with his considerable might, to a cymbal stroked with fingertips.

After the unoriginally titled *Gwil's Tune*, it was time for two more Walker compositions, the intricate and explosive *Laugh Lines*, and the richly lyrical and quietly climactic *When You Hold Her*. Again, these are such rich compositions, full of melody and emotion and fully explored by the band.

The Americans provided a token tune each in the second half, but for the most part they seemed really delighted for Simcock and Walker to share the writing and playing limelight. Walker's *Wallenda's Last Stand* was gorgeous, with that slightly Latin feel he sometimes favours, and Simcock's *Plainsong* was a sublime encore.

A guitar and piano frontline is not the easiest line-up to manage. Those of us who saw the Pat Metheny/Brad Mehldau band in Symphony Hall a few years ago will know that even for two musicians of such standing, it is by no means plain sailing. There are icebergs lurking dangerously out there. Pat and Brad could learn a lot from Gwil and Mike. They never got in each other's way, neither did they inhibit each others' natural style.

And, in a world where some jazz musicians can still be a little too cool, what a joy to be witness to the clear warmth and mutual respect of all the musicians on the stage.

This feels like the start of something special and I was pleased to see the recording mics out last night. I haven't been as excited by an Anglo-American project since I first heard Julian Siegel with Greg Cohen and Joey Baron. Let's hope it becomes more than a one-tour stand.

The band is going on to play around Europe but if you are within driving distance of either Leicester (Embrace Arts Centre tonight) or London (Ronnie Scott's tomorrow) – so, anywhere on the mainland, in other words – I'd urge you to get along. It's the real deal.