

artsfirst night

Jazz

The Impossible Gentlemen

Pizza Express, W1

★★★★☆

It is unusual for jazz groups to have a title that isn't simply the leader's name or a reference to their home town or club. But the Anglo-American quartet the Impossible Gentlemen are an unusual jazz ensemble, bridging both the Atlantic and the generations. There are 40 years between the group's oldest member, the bassist Steve Swallow, and its youngest, the pianist Gwilym Simcock. At the London launch of their eponymous album, Simcock confessed that it is also the first time in his career that there has been a T-shirt to sell as well as records.

So what kind of band are they? Combining the British players, the guitarist Mike Walker and Simcock, with the Americans Swallow and the powerhouse drummer Adam Nussbaum, they are an out-and-out improvising jazz group. Any thought that their instrumentation would lead to sameness between the numbers is banished by the sheer variety of compositions that each member has brought to the table, and by thoughtful touches that change the timbre. These range from some wistful melodica playing on the Latin theme of Walker's *Wallenda's Last Stand* to some clever low-key funk on Simcock's *You Won't Be Around to See It*, on which high guitar and bass harmonics combined with inside-piano effects over Nussbaum's intricate beat.

Like the best jazz groups, there is plenty of space for individual and collective improvisation. The opening *Circle-maker* included a delicate solo from Swallow, some exceptionally sensitive cymbal work from Nussbaum and a final jam as the drums opened up and Walker swayed into some powerful phrasing. Walker was the star of the show, ranging from beautiful finger and thumb-picked melodies to incisive rock-inflected solos, with singing harmonics teetering on the edge of feedback and distortion as he finally sent us away with the down-home blues of Nussbaum's *Sure Would, Baby*.

Alyn Shipton