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CD review: The Impossible Gentlemen

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The Impossible Gentlemen **(Basho Records SRCD36-2)**

The first recording by this perfectly balanced transatlantic band – guitarist Mike Walker and pianist Gwilym Simcock from this side of the pond; drummer Adam Nussbaum and electric bassist Steve Swallow from the other side – builds upon and confirms what those of us who heard them playing live in the spring of 2010 already knew: that it's one of the most exciting and satisfying collaborations for a very long time.

Comparisons with other bands of musicians might be odious, but they are also useful when used to put across a subjective view. There are two that occur to me. One is the rather dispiriting and lacklustre sound of James Farm, a new collaborative band formed by saxophonist Joshua Redman, pianist Aaron Parks, bassist Matt Penman and drummer Eric Harland; the other is the ultimately dissatisfying mismatch of Metheny Mehdau, the supergroup with the guitarist and the pianist's trio.

The latter is of particular interest here, because Metheny Mehdau shares the same, potentially tricky instrumentation. There is a reason why few bands pair guitar and piano in predominant roles: they can so easily get in each other's way and cancel each other out. To hear some of the problems made manifest was to hear Metheny Mehdau in concert; to hear how a guitar/piano quartet can enhance both instruments, listen to The Impossible Gentlemen.

The reasons this band works so well are difficult to explain but easy to hear – they just gel so well.

Walker has always been a favourite of mine, with elements of both Pat Metheny and John Scofield in his playing, but over the years – and he has been active on the UK scene since the late '80s – he has developed a wonderfully rounded and personal voice – or should that be voices, since he is a master of a whole range of sounds from delicately jazzy to powerfully rocky.

Simcock is a much more recent arrival on the scene, and has quickly and justifiably risen to be considered one of the most complete pianists in the business. He thrives in this company and there is clearly a magical musical connection with Walker as the two Brits spark off each other.

And what of the Americans? Well, Steve Swallow has the most unmistakable bass sound in jazz and it gives every band he plays in – from the Carla Bley big bands to his own modest-sized combos – a lithe basis and a springy rhythm. Adam Nussbaum is a drummer of the incorrigible kind, a hugely talented player with an expansive style, and the ability to move from a whisper to a depth charge thump with perfect logic.

The music on this disc will be in large part familiar from that 2010 tour – Walker's lovely *Clockmaker* and *Wallenda's Last Stand*, Simcock's *You Won't Be Around To See It* and *Gwil's Song* – and the performances have benefitted from some live development before being preserved in the studio. Their ebb and flow, the slow builds to intensity, the gentle settling from emotion to resolution – all are brilliantly realised.

The band originally toured as the Gwilym Simcock Quartet – The Impossible Gentlemen is a more accurate reflection of this four-way band of equals. There is also, for me, a particular joy in hearing Mike Walker finally getting some of the attention and acclaim he so thoroughly deserves.

The Impossible Gentlemen are currently on tour in Britain. They have already played Gateshead and Ambleside, tonight they play the second of two nights at the Pizza Express in Dean Street, London, and they then go to Colston Hall, Bristol tomorrow, the Stables at Wavendon on Thursday, Taliesin Arts in Swansea on Friday, Edge Arts Centre in Much Wenlock on Saturday, and then Southport, Manchester, Barnstaple and Dorking next week.

For full details go [here](#). And don't miss them: they are sensational live!