

DOWNBEAT

Mag. Ideas & Beyond SINCE 1934

The Impossible Gentlemen Debut Tunes at
PizzaExpress
Posted 7/2/2012

During their four-night club residency at London's PizzaExpress on June 25–28, The Impossible Gentlemen unveiled new songs from their forthcoming second album, which the group plans on recording this month. Formed two years ago, the Gentlemen are a long-established dream team consisting of five-string electric bassist Steve Swallow, drummer Adam Nussbaum, pianist Gwilym Simcock and guitarist Mike Walker.

On June 26, the band had settled in nicely at the Dean Street venue, especially after a well-attended opening night performance.

The new tunes included a song by Swallow, who had not contributed material to the first album. The self-titled debut was released by U.K. indie label Basho records and was nominated for a Parliamentary Jazz Award earlier this year.

Swallow's still-untitled ballad was in the mold of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "It Might As Well Be Spring" but with melodic flourishes that only hinted at the melody before delicately going off on a completely different harmonic journey. Like much of the band's repertoire, the complex-sounding romp managed to make an emotional direct connection with the audience.

Walker also unleashed his latest tunes, "The Slither Of Other Lovers" and "Modern Day Heroes." During a hilarious and surreal chat with the audience at the beginning of the second set, he recalled that one of his other tunes had been inspired by a character named Humphrey, who sojourns in the Caribbean and amuses himself by making impromptu announcements from his balcony to passers-by with the aid of a megaphone.

Nussbaum hit the ground running with formidable energy and a tantalizing way of metrically dividing compositions. Even if the songs were in 4/4, such



From left: Steve Swallow, Adam Nussbaum, Mike Walker and Gwilym Simcock (Photo: David Forman)

as Walker's "Laugh Lines," they ended up sounding hugely unexpected with many a twist and turn along the way. It's the kind of heat you'd expect from a heavily amplified jazz-rock player, but Nussbaum doesn't need the wattage. He has a deceptive subtlety that drives the band into surprising territory.

In an earlier conversation, Nussbaum explained that his association with Swallow started in 1980 when he was playing with John Scofield, and although Nussbaum was at pains to explain how different Walker's approach really is, there is an uncanny flow to Walker that certainly recalls "Sco."

DownBeat sat down with The Impossible Gentlemen over dinner in the restaurant above the PizzaExpress jazz club before the band played the second night of their residency.

How did Gwilym Simcock first get on your radar?

Steve Swallow: I heard an arrangement of my tune "Ladies In Mercedes" from this tape that singer Norma Winstone sent me. I did some things with Mike Walker before The Impossible Gentlemen, with Mike Gibbs on big band tours and with saxophonist Julian Arguelles. We were kind of aware of each other.

You didn't write any tunes for the first album. Have you for this one that you're about to record?

SS: Yes, there's a ballad. It's something I wrote between December and March just past, specifically for these guys with their voices very much in mind.

You've been quoted as saying you want your tunes to be ones that anyone would be able to whistle. Are your tunes for this new record like that?

Mike Walker: It's as if you're just listening to something you can sing along to, but the structure is not simple. It can be tricky when you play it. When I write that way, I have to look at it afterwards, and then I realize the complexity. I'm

bringing a new tune to the session, “The Slither Of Other Lovers.”

Adam Nussbaum: The tunes shouldn’t sound unnatural...

SS: They have very asymmetrical structures but keep their integrity. We have eight new tunes that we’ve worked up in the last eight to 10 days. I have to go through that door so they seem natural like they’re in 4/4 even if they’re not. As a band we do reflect our life’s history, and moving ahead, it’s a conscious decision to extend.

AN: We’re from different generations and different countries. You can’t deny your roots and point of view but we’re able to find the common ground, although it’s not like “Kumbayah” all the time.

Who came up with the name for the band?

Gwilym Simcock: Mike and me came up with the name The Impossible Gentlemen. We dreamed it up after a long Skype conversation, and whittled it down from a very long list of names!

—*Stephen Graham*