

Slipping Into the Unknown – Peter Gabriel Draws New Blood in London. The Mermaid Theatre, London – 19 October 2011

Performing in front of an invited audience for a BBC in concert performance Genesis – last night Peter Gabriel took the stage at the intimate Mermaid Theatre at the relative early time of 7pm.

Behind him sat the BBC Concert Orchestra conducted by Ben Foster who has accompanied Gabriel for his selective appearances with the New Blood Orchestra (his normal partners in crime for this type of show) for the past 18 months or so. There was even an unscheduled guest appearance of sorts from Ennio Morricone – but more on that later.

For Gabriel, London now seems to be his city of choice when it comes to playing live in his home land. This is his 5th consecutive UK concert to be staged in the capital and there seems to be little prospect of him taking this particular show to the provinces, which is a pity, for those who haven't been able to see his most recent appearances have certainly missed a treat.

Last night's show, essentially a one-off recorded for Radio 2, is centred around Gabriel's latest CD, *New Blood*, which is essentially a collection of his more atmospheric songs from his thirty year solo career but radically re-arranged supported by a 50 piece orchestra.

For those who have followed Peter's career closely it is evident that Gabriel has chosen wisely with this *New Blood* material. Of the sixteen songs in tonight's set, 9 are taken from his third, fourth and fifth albums (more commonly known as *Melt*, *Security* and *So*) which have formed the backbone of his live sets over the years and are albums that reek of atmosphere, ideal for the orchestral treatments.

For those who have not witnessed this material in its new form, let me reassure you that this is no *Classic Rock* type of production. Arranger John Metcalfe has managed to inject a new sense of drama into Gabriel's songs in a way that the composer himself could never have achieved by simply relying on traditional instruments. Metcalfe's meticulous approach to this masterfully crafted music has yielded some impressive results and as if to acknowledge this and the role of the supporting musicians, Gabriel himself appears to have raised his game in producing vocal performances that are both bold and assured. The simple fact that he hasn't been saddled with the distraction of playing an instrument while singing, nor jumping around the stage nor, for that matter, hanging upside down, accounts for much of this improvement with very few "screw-ups" on show last night.

Given that tonight's concert was intended to promote the new album, the opening song was a surprise – typical of Gabriel to throw his audience off from the outset – as the delicate strings that signal the opening bars of Gabriel's take on 'Heroes' gently percolated their way into the air of the Mermaid Theatre. It was a brave choice to open a set in front of an audience that might only have heard the Bowie classic and not Gabriel's perfectly under

stated version, but it set the scene perfectly and Gabriel delivered the first of many confident vocal performances during his 2 hour shift.

As many of my closest friends will know, tonight's show was my fortieth Peter Gabriel concert since I first saw him live back in 1977, and it took until my thirty-ninth show (and a curious twist of fate) to personally witness a performance of the human rights anthem, Wallflower. Six months later, I got to witness a return visit to this beautifully poignant song which I had so longed to see Gabriel perform live. Wallflower is finally getting the exposure it always deserved – it having lived in the shadow of Biko for too long – and it's truly remarkable to have it as part of the standard set some 29 years after its release.

For this song Peter was joined on stage by his trio of bare footed backing vocalists – a pregnant Melanie Gabriel (“it's a boy” declared the granddad-to-be, later in the show), Jessca Hoop and Rosie Doonen (apologies if I got the names wrong). The arrangement afforded to Wallflower is suitably understated with the song essentially relying on the support of piano for the most part, the orchestra only really coming to the fore in the final third ahead of the lines, ‘So You May Disappear’, which in all likelihood will be the song's fate after the South American tour planned for next month.

Next up was Intruder where the orchestra certainly made its mark – conductor Ben Foster animatedly chopping the air in much the same way as a younger Peter Gabriel had done during this song in its earlier form. With the black-clad singer able to stay rooted closer to his microphone, he produced another strong vocal performance that belies his 61 years.

In a set that was fast turning into a showcase for my personal favourites, Gabriel sets the tone for San Jacinto with the familiar story of the Indian brave, but with a slightly different punch line to one we have all become familiar with - “If he came down from the mountain, he was a brave. And if he didn't, he clearly wasn't very brave”. This touch of light relief was welcomed by the audience but before long it was back to business with Gabriel delivering yet another vocal performance that simply left the hairs on the back of my neck attempting to peer over my shoulder to view the spectacle themselves. The song ended with the by now familiar trick involving the floor mounted spot light and mirror which the singer casually wiped clean on his right trouser leg as he prepared for his big moment.

The first real bonus of tonight's special gig was the appearance of Secret World – the only track from the Us album included in tonight's set. This song didn't make it onto New Blood and isn't, so far, among the various out-takes that have appeared as either downloads (Washing of the Water, Father Son, Signal to Noise) or traditional bonus tracks on the CDs (Solsbury Hill, Blood of Eden). With a gentle reliance upon a dominant, but never over-powering, percussion-based groove (if orchestras do in fact ‘groove’) Secret World has a unique character among the songs on view this evening. It was also the first song in the show that generated enough sparks in the audience for them to clap along and was greeted enthusiastically by those who appreciated the

rarity of this track in the New Blood shows, especially in the UK. It'll be a shame if this arrangement isn't preserved on an official record, but hopefully room will be found for it in the proposed broadcast scheduled for tonight on Radio 2.

Signal to Noise another sole representative, this time from the album Up, featured Melanie Gabriel on the 'Nusrat vocal' section with her dad harmonising to great effect. Not surprisingly this song offered the best opportunity for the orchestra to become centre of attention aided by the fact that, towards the climax of the song, all 4 singers left the stage removing any risk of them distracting the audience's attention. By now it was certainly clear that the BBC Concert Orchestra were playing their part in making tonight a special event in the development of this material in the live situation and conductor Foster looked like he might spontaneously combust, such was the life and energy he brought to proceedings. In a nice gesture of mutual support, Gabriel junior and conductor Foster exchanged a shake of hands on Melanie's return to the stage.

Melanie remained in the spotlight for the next track, Downside Up and produced a steady performance but the liquid tone in her father's voice for the refrain 'Pull Me In' was the real treat for this writer. At the end of the song, Gabriel senior announced with regret that this was the last time he would be singing this song with Melanie – the obvious reason for this being reinforced as he pointed to his middle section of his body.

The atmospheric nature of the show was captured admirably with the next two songs, Mercy Street and The Rhythm of the Heat. For the latter Gabriel delivered that all important opening scream with controlled energy and emotion and for the second time in the show, towards the end of the song, the singers left the stage to allow the orchestra to grab full control of their mesmerised audience.

With a simple introduction, "This is for my dad" Gabriel prepared himself for the high emotion generated by the touching sentiments of Father Son, only to miss his cue – causing a ripple of laughter among both crowd and musicians. Preparing for take 2, the tension was then broken a second time when the theme from *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* could be heard courtesy of someone's mobile phone making its presence felt producing further laughter. When Gabriel finally delivered the song he did so with the customary ease that the audience was, by now, fully expecting.

Oddly enough though, having delivered a masterful rendition of Red Rain the previous week on the *Later... with Jools Holland* show, Gabriel suffered just about his only noticeable loss of form of the evening towards the end of the song as the singer struggled with the repeated vocal refrain 'Red Rain – Coming Down' but the orchestra stood firm and got him through that particular storm cloud.

Biko was next up and what is there left to say about a song that has been practically an ever present part of his live performances for 32 of his 34 years

of life on the road. Well my notes certainly have nothing to add but this is a testament to the power of an all too familiar song which still manages to keep my attention throughout its duration. What I would say – and this is simply a personal view – is that without the thundering drums, and the simple but piercing guitar lines that do so much to stir a response from the crowd, that response on this occasion was a little muted.

With barely a quiet moment in which to catch breath, the orchestra launched into Solsbury Hill and this certainly charged the audience in a way that no other song in Peter's back catalogue can do. Despite the limited room to work with on stage, Gabriel still managed to do a few skips across the stage that brought more playfulness to the show and this was greeted enthusiastically by the crowd who were now really enjoying the moment.

For the encore section, In Your Eyes and Don't Give Up, space was given over to the other two backing singers to show what they can do; Jessca Hoop handling the improvised vocal for In Your Eyes, Rosie Doonen the support vocals throughout Don't Give Up. In Your Eyes – arguably the bigger challenge – worked to a point but Youssou N'Dour's Senegalese shoes are difficult to fill at the best of times. Don't Give Up – likewise due to the high standard set by Kate Bush and maintained by Paula Cole – can never be easy for a lesser known voice to make its impact, but to her credit, Rosie Doonen just about pulled it off.

We were sent to bed to the beautiful mood that is The Nest That Sailed the Sky with a roaming Peter Gabriel eventually taking the place of Tom Cawley on piano to deliver all of three notes (once!). I'm not sure why he only took over piano duties for the end of the song and in this a limited way – but no bother, Nest (as he introduced it as) brought the evening to a close in the most subtle and delightful way imaginable.

Or so we all thought. Remember this was recorded for radio and the BBC technicians had obviously noted a few blips that needed ironing out. So we were asked politely if he would stay while the musicians replayed a few bits again. Of course it would have been rude to say no, and so the seated were treated to short sections of Father Son, The Rhythm of the Heat and Red Rain – everything being wrapped up by the respectable hour of 9pm.

Veterans of Peter Gabriel shows down the years will know to expect something special every time he graces the stage – certainly that has been my experience – and tonight was no different, but then again it was *very* different. The New Blood tour and isolated appearances have shown that at 61 years old, Gabriel is still striving to achieve something new, something old, something borrowed but never something blue.

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