

**Witness Watch: Peter Gabriel Live at WOMAD
Charlton Park, Malmesbury, Wiltshire 25 July 2009**

It is unusual to be reporting on another Peter Gabriel appearance at WOMAD. It is, after all, just two years since his last one. But it was a welcome opportunity to see him once again on an English stage, something, up until a few months ago, that he hadn't planned on doing for the rest of 2009.

It was also a refreshing change to find that day tickets were available for the Gabriel set encouraging those fans that aren't into the whole World Music thing to actually attend WOMAD and find out a bit more about the festival that is so close to the heart of their hero.

Gabriel was a few minutes late taking to the main Open Air stage as the clock nudged past nine-thirty on what had been a mercifully dry day. Just one shower at tea time threatened the festival's clay surface with the sort of fate that marred the 2007 event but thankfully the ground stayed solid as thousands of Gabriel fans congregated in good time to hear the familiar sound of 'Zaar' punctuate the still air.

Any suggestion that tonight's show would be similar in content to either Gabriel's 2007 set or his more recent shows in South America were dispelled almost immediately. Taking his customary position stage right, Gabriel announced that the show tonight would contain just three songs common to his 2007 performance, and would feature a couple of songs that were receiving their debut live performance.



Added to these surprises was the employment of a four piece string section, namely the Bus Stop Strings, which represents the first time Gabriel has been backed by live strings within the confines of a solo show.

Before a note of live music had been played, therefore, Gabriel had managed to get even his most relaxed of fans eager to hear what he had planned. It was a strange way to start the show, but one that made sense to those who have seen Gabriel before. He is after all the man who will forever be remembered for which the marketing phrase “Expect the Unexpected”.



The first of the ‘new’ songs was used as the set opener, giving Gabriel the perfect opportunity at plugging his latest project, *Scratch My Back* – a collection of cover versions – which tonight he announced as being “nearly finished”. The album has a companion release called *I’ll Scratch Yours*, on which the artists whose work Gabriel has reinterpreted get to reek out revenge on a bunch of Gabriel tunes. It makes for an interesting project even if Gabriel’s long-starved supporters would wish for an album of original material from the man.

So the show began with not exactly a ‘new’ song then, but in this version, given a world premiere this evening, Paul Simon’s *The Boy in the Bubble* took on a new identity with just the string section, Angie Pollock’s sparsely used piano and just two other musicians (Tony Levin and Richard Evans) used to convey its ironic message of how technology can be used simultaneously to preserve and threaten life.

It was a fitting message to launch tonight's show, it being staged in aid of Witness – a campaign started nearly 20 years ago by Gabriel and others in an attempt to get human rights violations recorded by us ordinary folk on camcorders, mobile phones and such like, in the hope of bringing them to a wider audience.



What this particular audience witnessed was a somewhat hesitant Gabriel as he wrestled with the unfamiliar lyrics set to a much slower tune than the one familiar from Simon's original. But Gabriel did enough to put in a decent job, taking risks with the vocal pitch that Simon had chosen to sidestep on his version from the ground-breaking *Graceland* album. It does beg the question what Gabriel song will Paul Simon tackle in exchange?

The next song in the set, which will also feature on *Scratch My Back*, is a song Gabriel fans already know well, even if its composer is far less well known. Book of Love, written by Stephin Merritt and included initially on the highly acclaimed *69 Love Songs* suite of songs, was recorded by Gabriel for the film *Shall We Dance* some five years ago. It seems odd that for his next project Gabriel will dish up something so familiar to his audience – although having said that, his last studio album, *Up*, pulled a similar trick with the song *I Grieve*, so maybe we shouldn't be that surprised by this move. A questionable decision or not, *The Book of Love* is an interesting enough song – delivered more in a spoken than sung manner with help from Peter's daughter Melanie, who by now had sneaked onto her stage podium to her dad's left. Melanie has been on stage with Gabriel senior for the past eight years worth of shows (well over 100 gigs believe it or not) and slowly but surely has managed to

establish herself among the seasoned musicians as to render any accusations of nepotism all but moot.

Again with effective input from the string section, The Book of Love helped to sustain one of the most understated openings to a Peter Gabriel show since his Teddy Bear-led dates from 1978. This was certainly a long way from the days when songs such as Intruder, Red Rain and Come Talk to Me would surge confidently from behind the curtains before an open mouthed expectant crowd could unleash their tension by joining in with a bit of singing.

After that however, things took a more usual turn and as the rest of the set unfolded, the audience was treated to the sort of Gabriel standards that they've all come to know and love. David Rhodes, Ged Lynch and Angie Pollock joined the stage for Darkness, "a song about fear", prefaced by Peter with a story about a Catweazle type character who lived in a caravan near to his childhood home. This was followed by a great version of Come Talk to Me in which Melanie and her dad entered into a bit of small scale show biz beginning at either end of the stage, gradually moving toward each other as the song reached its climax, the two of them embracing, their expression of happiness as much to do with the relief of synching up these theatrics in time with the final few notes as with their family bond.



A few tracks in the set – Games Without Frontiers, Big Time and Steam among them, wouldn't be among my current day favourites but Gabriel had elected to make this a political show, and so you'd expect him to indulge in a bit of "Hans Plays with Willy" one more time and to his credit, tonight's version of Steam was performed with all the verve and enthusiasm you might have

thought difficult for him to inject into a song that too many view as a poor cousin to Sledgehammer. It certainly made its mark with me, miscued lyrics notwithstanding.

The string section left the stage after the fourth number (their contribution to *Darkness* being of particular merit) which opened up the front area of the stage that permitted Gabriel to come out from behind his keyboards and lock his gaze directly into the eyes of the crowd. These are among the best moments of any Gabriel show for me – being close enough to make eye contact with him from a few rows back my attention channelled his way as he flails his arms and legs about in that inimitable way – a style that goes back to his earliest solo shows that I and a few others (well, one I can be sure of) in tonight's crowd first witnessed some 32 years ago as a teenagers.

San Jacinto – always a highlight of any Gabriel live show - was performed entirely from this position as Peter took the audience through the now familiar tale of the Indian brave that would later find himself on a trumped up charge of murder with just his cat to his name. A couple of lyrical mishaps were evident, as was Gabriel's reliance on the auto-cue concealed in a front of stage monitor cabinet, but this still provided one of tonight's more assured performances and the finale with the hand held mirror never fails to impress.



Without doubt though, the best two songs in tonight's set were those from the relatively obscure *Ovo*, one of Gabriel's albums that never really had the audience it deserved. *Downside Up* provides another opportunity for the two Gabriel voices to work together with Melanie taking this opportunity to really

shine while delivering – in my experience – her finest vocal performance yet. The Tower That Ate People, if anything, exceeds the standard set by Downside Up as Gabriel and band create mayhem within this musical maelstrom, David Rhodes delivering through his distinctive guitar playing the soundtrack of the most eerie of nightmares.

There was a buzz about small sections of the crowd as to whether Gabriel would pull out Wallflower – a song only rarely heard in concert and only twice, I believe, on English soil – to fit nicely into the human rights theme for this evening - but sadly it wasn't to be. Other notable absentees were the too-often played Sledgehammer and In Your Eyes which must have been absent for the first time since 1987. In their stead, we got a welcome return from Washing of the Water (another contender for the strongest performance of the evening) a dose of Red Rain (highly preferable to the absent real thing) as well as a vibrant No Self Control which was one of the three songs that were common to this and the 2007 WOMAD show.



The main set concluded with a rousing version of Solsbury Hill, which did its job at energising an audience that had either been on its feet or on the road most of the day, before Gabriel returned to the stage to deliver one final message on behalf of Witness, ahead of the last song in the set, Biko.

A few days ago I'd caught a news item about the murder of the Russian human rights activist, Natalia Estemirova in the Chechen town of Ingushetia. It all had a familiar ring to it. An ordinary human being, while taking extraordinary steps at protecting others from injustice and persecution, is abducted and murdered in order to throw a shroud of silence over their efforts

- or more likely to act as a deterrent to others from joining their campaign. The irony in all this of course is that as a result, her name, face and cause end up on news bulletins beamed around the World. Appropriately it also ended up on the stage screens within tonight's show as a further example of the sort of work Witness is doing every day of every year, credit crunch or boom time. It offers a stark reminder of the price being paid by a small number of individuals who think less of their own safety than they do about the plight of others.

It's a credit to Gabriel, the performer, and Biko, the song, that despite its 30 year residency within the live set, large sections of the crowd are still sufficiently moved by its message as to plant a fist into the air in time with their chanting of the song's title and refrain. Biko, the man, may well be dead, and that particular cause long ago won, but his name lives on as a measure of what can happen when the right surge of energy and determination is focused in the right direction by enough people as to make a difference.

Peter Gabriel shows are not just about entertainment – although they are often that - they are also about jarring the senses, about delivering a wake up call or simply sharing a message of hope. And because he does so in a measured way, the political injections are never a turn-off in the way that they often can be in the mouths of more aggressive tutors. It's the closest thing I know to attending a political or religious event without the negative connotations associated with both of those polarising concepts.

So, as Gabriel shows go, this one contained some memorable moments – even for a veteran such as I. I came to this show expecting it to be little more than a combination of the material on show over the past two bouts of touring. In reality I got three or four really nice surprises as well as a very steady performance throughout the ninety minute set – thanks in no small part to the group of musicians that now forms his band. I suppose it'll be some time before we see Peter Gabriel on stage again – he has at least one new album to finish and a whole host of other things to attend to before he can devote further time to touring. But at least he has given us a fonder memory of him and his music than two years ago in the unforgiving muddy murk of Malmesbury.

Text by Mic Smith; Photos by Ted Sayers (used with permission)

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