

COURTNEY PINE - EUROPA

Exeter Phoenix, Sunday 20th March 2011

Reviewed by Pete Canter



Midway through a live tour timed to coincide with the release of his latest album *Europa*, Courtney Pine's band gave a stunning performance of new material at the Phoenix on Sunday. Courtney describes the music as a chronicle of his journeys around the European continent since the beginning of his career in 1987. The seven piece band had an unusual line up consisting of double bass, drums, piano, viola, electric violin, guitar/mandolin and Courtney on bass clarinet. Not a saxophone in sight.

When I spoke to Courtney earlier in the day he told me that he can get six octaves out of the bass clarinet and believes that more can be found. On stage he struggled and wrestled with the beast through extended solos employing circular breathing, false fingerings and all the consummate musicianship he brings to bear on the tenor and soprano saxophone... and he triumphed showing amazing facility. His penchant for dwelling in the middle and upper registers meant that he was able, from time to time, to drop into the guttural low end of the bass clarinet and surprise the audience, as well as have animated conversations with himself as he moved back and forth between the registers, sometimes wrenching elephant-like screams out of the instrument, sometimes sounding like a tender tenor saxophonist playing a jazz ballad. The evocative themes conjured up the Middle East, Celtic jigs, European folk songs and much more. There was, of course, a strong jazz influence and most of the tunes came to dwell on a rootsy vamp for the improvised sections. Odd time signatures and poly-rhythms were also strongly in evidence and the audience was challenged to participate in the latter. I believe our 4/4 clapping against the band's cross rhythm was at least as good as that of Leamington Spa! I particularly enjoyed 'Darwin's Dream Deferred', 'They Came From The North' and 'The First Flower of Spring' written for Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole.

The rest of the band were no slouches when it came to improvising either. Amanda Drummond, the Jimmy Hendrix of the Viola and Omar Puente both played highly individualistic and virtuosic solos showing off the particular strengths of their instruments without falling into the trap of trying to sound like a traditional jazz instrument. Guitarist and mandolin player Cameron Pierre soloed effortlessly on both instruments and his playing seethed with African and Cuban rhythms. One drawback with a large band like this is that there is not that much time for each performer to show their talents. In particular, I would have like to hear more of the deft and delicate touch of Zoe Rahman on piano. At the heart of the band, Robert Fordjour on drums and Darren Taylor were impeccable and quite rightly took the last bow to loud applause as the performers left the stage one by one. The band played a straight 2-hour set and it was refreshing not to have to go through the ritual of clapping for encores.

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