

REVIEW: Wynton Marsalis Quartet at the Barbican

20 June 2018



Wynton Marsalis Quartet
L-R: Dan Nimmer, Wynton Marsalis,
Mark Lewandowski, Jason Marsalis

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(Barbican Hall. 20 June 2018. Review by Sebastian Scotney)

"We're going to play X. We hope y'all enjoy it." **Wynton Marsalis** used a simple throwaway line, but he didn't just use it once. He kept on repeating it several times as he introduced the numbers at last night's quartet concert at the Barbican.

The word 'enjoy' was chosen with care. Marsalis is a man with huge responsibilities in his role

at the helm of a large organization. He also has a habit of knowingly placing himself at the eye of polemical storms. He is a bandleader and composer accustomed to piloting large ensembles, who is regularly either handing out composition commissions or fulfilling them himself. So the act of discarding all the trappings of organisational complexity and performing as a quartet with young willing accomplices and a deeply enthusiastic audience must have seemed something of a breeze. Something, indeed, to just enjoy.

Time and again Marsalis played with wonderful clarity and lyricism, capping it all with the encore, *Stardust*. From the vast selection of mutes he brought on to choose from, he took a plunger mute for the playfulness of *Magic Hour* and a clear-tone for the fluent pyrotechnics of *After You've Gone*. And he chatted: he offered fond recollections of times spent with Roy Eldridge and Ornette Coleman. He also enjoyed several opportunities to roam free and do walkabouts around the audience.

Marsalis was also clearly inspired by the **Headspace Ensemble** which had performed an opening set. He produced a wonderfully articulate paean of praise of trumpeter **Clarence Adoo**, whom Marsalis had known since they were both in their 20s. Adoo was struck down by a road accident in 1995 and is paralyzed from the neck down. Marsalis praised his undimmed positivity and the light of his inspiration.

Marsalis was also clearly lifted and inspired by the other musicians in his quartet. **Dan Nimmer** is a ferociously equipped pianist who is eminently capable of how-many-hands-has-he-got playing à la Oscar Peterson. And yet last night he was mostly playing in an unselfish way, leaving acres of space for the others to intervene. Bassist **Mark Lewandowski** making a high-profile return to London from his role in the Juilliard Jazz Artist Diploma Ensemble (the Juilliard website these days even claims him as New York-born rather than Nottingham-born!) and played solos that had astonishing clarity, presence and logic. Drummer **Jason Marsalis** is always lively and his rhythms have a way of sparkling. His drum feature *Big Fat Hen* was stunning. Looking around the audience, one could see how the sheer infectious rhythmic drive of this group was enlivening and animating people.

There was one tune which (tellingly?) wasn't introduced with the wish for enjoyment: *Knozz Moe King* from the 1983 album *Think of One*. That youthful, hyperactive, roll-with-the-punches, post-Hubbard playing with which Marsalis burst onto the scene in the early '80s provided contrast but now seems like a very distant planet.

The standing ovation at the end said it all. We had enjoyed it too.

SET LIST

Magic Hour

Ramblin' – Ornette Coleman 1959

Goodbye – Gordon Jenkins 1935

Big Fat Hen

After You've Gone – Creamer and Layton 1918

Knozz Moe King

Encore: Stardust – Hoagy Carmichael 1927