

Gig Review

Byron Wallen
7th March 2007
Cargo, Shoreditch

Trumpeter Byron Wallen has travelled through North Africa, in search, he tells me, of something abstract and essential within the Gnawa peoples, and has spent much of the past ten years exploring Moroccan music. He was joined here by longstanding collaborator Tony Kofi on saxes and Moroccan singer Boujemma Boubul, with a rhythm section of bass, drums and traditional percussion.

The music compares favourably with Miles Davis' Sketches of Spain era music, both in its embrace of tonalities once alien to jazz (it would be hard to find a scale that hasn't been jazzed by now, though this doesn't undermine Wallen's achievement in embracing the breadth of a musical culture) and in its modal song structures, suggesting Miles' small group work of the late fifties. It is something that Miles himself might have attempted, if he'd had enough lifetimes to try. Chord fans (you will know who you are) may have found it lacking – most songs were one chord grooves – and the bass player himself may have found it tedious (if he wasn't listening to the solos) – but the soloists, and Wallen in particular, showed a skill in exploiting the piano-less setting, moving in and out of keys, building tension. Some songs resembled religious ceremonies, with the singer laying down the gospel, and the musicians manipulating the piece, with accelerandos and slow crescendos (bringing Mingus fleetingly to mind), and the singer manically dancing in the centre.

After the interval came a short selection of tunes with the quartet of baritone sax, trumpet, bass and drums, playing moody free-bop, with little of the Moorish influence. After the fierce trance-like explorations of the opening set, here was a moment of dark repose, as if gathering wearily around a desert camp-fire: the clarity of the night, and men in their thirties, wrestling with the first bargains of existence.

Cargo is a difficult jazz venue, a series of railway arches in Shoreditch with ostentatious, and, as far as I could tell, purely decorative industrial ventilation pipes, and a concrete floor. Lacking tables or chairs, many in the crowd chose to sit cross legged by the second half, with the veteran jazz fans finding walls to dignify themselves against. It would not have hurt to have had somewhere to sit, as after all, they weren't expecting us to dance. Still, it all added to the sense of adventure.

David Walter Hall