

P&O Blues Mini Cruise

6-8.11.2015

P&O's 'Pride of Rotterdam' hosted a stellar blues line-up to illuminate the North Sea in November. With two nights of inspired music onboard and a very special exclusive gig in Amsterdam both the many cruisers and the dozen musicians were left buzzing from this very-legal-high and already demanding more. Such was the impact that it seems inevitable that this 'Floating Festival' is destined to become a cornerstone of the UK blues calendar.



First to take to the small stage on Friday in the 400 seat Show Lounge was the debonair and erudite 'Living Bluesman' Tom Attah. After a blistering rendition accompanied on his Godin 5th Avenue arch top guitar of Lightnin' Hopkins' 'How Long Has It Been Since You Been Home?' Tom called Katie Bradley to join him. Katie is a rising star of the UK blues scene having recently been honoured for her vocals and song writing. Supplementing Tom's guitar with fine blues harp she drew the audience into the show on call-and-response standards like 'You Got Me Runnin'' and 'Got My Mojo Working'.

Blues-jazz quartet 24Pesos next bounded onstage to raise the temperature with their explosive take on the genre, full of funky rhythms and complex arrangements, thoughtful lyrics and catchy hooks. With Julian Burdock on guitars, vocals and harmonica, Silas Maitland on bass and backing vocals, Moz Gamble on keyboards and backing vocals and drummer Bryan McLellan this outfit define the term 'tight'. They are building up quite a back-catalogue now and plundered it freely during this dynamic set with 'Waiting at the Station' (from *Busted, Broken And Blue*) and the title track from their latest album 'Do the Right Thing' drawing huge applause; although Julian trumped that with a solo rendition of Muddy Waters' 'Can't Be Satisfied' on a glimmering National steel guitar.

If the MC Michael Ford had any doubts about programming a solo acoustic singer-songwriter to follow that Pesos-frenzy those doubts were dispelled the moment that the bari-tones of Marcus Bonfanti thundered the first line of 'Devil Girl'. No wonder this 'sit-up-and-notice' vocalist has twice been voted UK Blues' best. With his Rasputin-meets-Jesus beard and mane, Marcus is as charismatic as he is talented - which is very! His self-deprecating anecdotes of life off-stage belie a man brimming with confidence on it as he sings of 21st century urban relationships in his songs like 'Layla' and 'Honey' (He admits that he's cornered the market in writing songs with titles that have already been used on huge hits) and the acidic 'Now I'm Gone (Is Your Life Better?)'. Marcus is a major and very British talent who could charm the gulls from the mast and most probably did.

Next onstage with his band was the 'eminence grise' of UK



blues, Norman Beaker. Over a forty year career Norman has played with many UK blues greats: Van Morrison, Jack Bruce, Chris Farlowe and Alexis Korner amongst them. He is affable and unflappable and with his band exudes a cheerful bonhomie invaluable in this setting. Their new album is *Live in Belgrade*, their previous one *A Good Night in Vienna* which clearly emphasises their pan-European status. The quartet rocked into their set only five minutes after Marcus had left the stage (which reflects well on *Sound Alliance*, the PA crew brought onto the boat especially for this event) their opening number being a Beaker original 'Only I Got What The Other Guys Want'. With John Price on bass and backing vocals, Steve Gibson on drums and Nick Steed on keys this is a travel-hardened band whose musical understanding is almost telepathic. Lonnie Mack's 'Tough on Me Tough on You' followed before Norman demonstrated virtuoso guitar skills performing solo on 'Love Her Like the Sky' in tribute to Peter Green. He then called the phenomenal chanteuse Kyla Brox to the stage to guest with the band. Etta James' 'At Last' and Irma Thomas' 'You Can Have My Husband But Please Don't Mess With My Man' were powerful and impeccable and a testament to their shared musical heritage. (In fact it was Kyla's dad Victor who renamed Norman live on TV in the 60s!) And so the first leg of this adventure drew to a close - but there was more to come, much more!

On Saturday chattering cruisers clambered aboard with tales of shops, museums, cafes and bars; the smuggest-looking though wore Waterhole T-shirts and rhapsodised that their landfall gig would prove the highlight of the cruise. How wrong they were. With showers to be taken and dinner to be eaten it was a more leisurely start to the music than previously but things became frantic soon thereafter. MC Michael had promised that whilst the same artists would appear we "...shouldn't expect the same show as Friday as blues artists just love to jam..." A promise kept!

After a brace of acoustic numbers from Marcus Bonfanti he was joined on stage by 24 Pesos for the funkiest take on Lee Dorsey's 'Get Out of My Life Woman' this side of the Crescent City: sadly, this was to prove an unknowing tribute to its author

Allan Toussaint who was to pass the following day. They followed this with Freddie King's 'Pass It Up' with Marcus and Julian sharing the vocals and the latter throwing in a "very Freddie" guitar solo'. The collaborative die was cast: the magic had begun. Marcus stepped down whilst The Pesos revived excellent material from early albums: the up-tempo 'Make A Man' contrasting nicely with the gentler, harmony-drenched 'Rise Up' from *Do The Right Thing*. Julian decided now was the time for a little audience participation: whether a mass-rendition of "We're all going to need a little help 'When The Ship Goes Down'" was the best choice as the boat began to buck is a good question but it was performed lustily by the 400-strong crowd. Kyla Brox stepped up to join the Pesos and continued the weather-defiant theme with 'Rock Me Baby' before calming the mood as only she can with her much-requested reading of Anthony Newley's 'Feeling Good,' and in truth everyone was, secure in the knowledge that what was developing was a unique, exclusive event.

Soon it was time for Norman Beaker and his band to resume this time with Tom Attah in tow, resplendent with his Les Paul Goldtop. Tom sang Rice Miller's 'Help Me' and alternated solos with Norman as excitement grew on and off stage. Up jumped Katie Bradley and back bounced Julian, both with harps in-hand for Jimmy Reed's 'Big Boss Man'. Whilst the guests took a breather Norman resumed vocals with Big Bill Broonzy's 'Southbound Train' (taught to him, it transpired by Kyla's Dad, Victor). Several tracks from his new album followed including Little Milton's 'Ain't No Big Deal' and, in memory of his late colleague Jack Bruce, Albert King's 'Born Under A Bad Sign'.

Almost three hours of top-class blues music laced with unique collaborations had almost passed when the 'magic hour' began. Kyla and Katie returned and swapped verses on a stunning version of the classic Etta James song 'I'd Rather Go Blind' with Norman and Nick Steed laying down tasteful solos. As the number built to a soulful crescendo a standing ovation became inevitable and was duly delivered; it was the first of many! Up jumped Marcus and Julian again to share vocals with Kyla on an extended version of Willie Dixon's 'Wang Dang Doodle'. The audience was in full-voice, enhancing this genuine show stopper. But the show didn't stop. Katie and Tom rejoined the throng to lead a thumping take on BB's 'Little By Little' before the evocative 'High Heel Sneakers' shuffle rang out. Tom sang the verses which were punctuated by blistering guitar duelling between himself, Norman and Marcus. At this point it was hard to judge if the smiles were broadest on stage or in the enchanted auditorium. With the temperature still rising and midnight approaching the stage was packed (Moz and Nick even sharing the same keyboard) for the finale, a memorable and rousing slice of classic blues, 'I Just Want to Make Love To You'. With audience applauding artists and artists reciprocating this amazing performance came to an end. It's often said "You had to be there", we were lucky that we were.

Martin Nott
Images: John Ashton



Little Stevie & The Big Beat

Waterhole Music Bar, Amsterdam



Image: John Ashton

After a late night and a lost hour, bleary-eyed bluesters came ashore eager to sample the multifarious attractions of Amsterdam. Around ninety cruisers hopped aboard the a tram and headed for the Waterhole Music Bar, located in a cobbled street deep in the Museum District for this concert arranged exclusively for the cruisers.

Little Stevie and the Big Beat, a coup for the organisers, is virtually unknown in the UK. Or rather 'was', since their high-standing in the Netherlands (nominated for 'Best Band', 'Best Vocalist' and 'Best Drummer' in this year's Dutch Blues Awards) is surely destined to be replicated soon here. 'Little Stevie' van der Nat leads the band with fine vocals and clean, ringing lead guitar. A rhythm section of 'Bird' Stevens on bass and the youthful Jody van Ooijen on drums provide a perfect, disciplined foundation for the band's 50s/60s rhythm and blues. What sets them apart both musically and visually, though, is the wonderful brass section of Martijn van Toor on Tenor and Evert Hoedt on Baritone saxes. They riff like the Memphis Horns and throw in King Curtis-style solos on demand.

The audience were quick to show their appreciation of this unexpected treat and their warm applause clearly inspired the band to even greater heights, mutual admiration was secured!

The combo's material sets it apart from their contemporaries in eschewing guitar histrionics and focussing on the songs of the late 50s and early 60s that emanated from Kansas City, Chicago and Los Angeles. Wilbert Harrison's 'Kansas City' got the break-neck treatment with excellent solos from Stevie and Evert whilst the languorous mood of Magic Sam's 'Easy Baby' was replicated in a fine vocal performance. Chuck Willis' influence in bridging jump blues and rock 'n' roll is sadly overlooked today by many but this band made amends with their take on his classic, oft-recorded, 'Feel So Bad'.

The Big Beat, though, is not simply a 1950s juke-box trading on the songs of the past. Their own compositions add to the oeuvre. Their 2013 self-composed single 'Brand New Man' rocks along fuelled by incessant horn-riffing and a soaring vocal from Stevie, whose phrasing and command of idiomatic English would shame many UK vocalists. 'Working Overtime' (another original) from their eponymous EP carved the hypnotic danceable groove even deeper. They are currently completing their first full-length album and plans are advanced to bring this outstanding outfit across the water; see them and you'll understand what the stalwart cruisers drinking at the Waterhole were making such a fuss about!

Keith Lee