



The Impossible Gentlemen

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[Reviewed](#) by: Ian Mann

4-5 out of 5



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(Basho Records SRCD 36-2)

The Impossible Gentlemen is an Anglo/American super-group consisting of the British pairing of guitarist Mike Walker and pianist Gwilym Simcock together with the All American rhythm section of electric bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Adam Nussbaum. The seeds of the project were sown by Walker who had previously worked with Swallow in the Mike Gibbs Big Band and the guitarist's "what if?" idea was enthusiastically encouraged and supported by Christine Allen of Basho Music who helped to bring the all star quartet together and co-ordinated their inaugural UK tour in 2010.

I saw the band last year when, still working under the unwieldy Simcock/Walker/Swallow/Nussbaum appellation, they played an excellent gig at Swansea's Taliesin Arts Centre (a performance reviewed elsewhere on this site). That first tour was a great success with Peter Bacon of the Jazz Breakfast blog site naming their Birmingham show as his 2010 gig of the year. Following the success of the tour the quartet took the material they had played into Curtis Schwartz's studio in Sussex and cut this brilliant album, the release of which has been timed to coincide with their 2011 national tour. Somewhere along the way they have also acquired a band name, "The Impossible Gentlemen", and the music suggests that they have also forged a strong group identity. This is a project with legs and with the potential to run and run.

Walker is the unifying force behind TIG as I shall now continue to call them. At various stages of his career he had played with all three of his colleagues and it was initially his idea to bring them together. As Walker was the the instigator of TIG it perhaps comes as no surprise to discover that he's the main composer here contributing exactly half of the album's eight pieces. Simcock provides a further three tunes and Nussbaum one- the fact that Swallow, a prolific composer with many classic jazz tunes to his credit, is, as yet, unrepresented only underlines the future potential of the group. Not that Swallow's lack of involvement as a writer devalues the album, the standard of the compositions by the other three, and Walker in particular, is exceptional.

TIG's music is best described as an intelligent brand of fusion. There's something of the melodic sensibility of early Pat Metheny in both the the playing and the writing and the eight compositions encompass a pleasingly broad stylistic and emotional range. Even when the playing is complex and muscular there's still a logic and intelligence about it, TIG are far too sophisticated to descend into the excesses of fusion past.

Most of the tunes on this début album featured at that Swansea show and the music on the album has a real "played in" quality. TIG commence proceedings in invigorating fashion with Walker's rollicking "Laugh Lines", chock full of mercurial guitar and piano exchanges and joyfully propulsive grooves. Walker and Simcock link up well, vying with each other for excellence but never getting in each other's way as Swallow and Nussbaum negotiate the rhythmic twists and turns of Walker's tune with aplomb. Something that was evident at the Swansea performance was just how much fun these four guys were having making music together. As if to emphasise this point producers Simcock and Walker have left the spontaneous laughter that erupted at the end of this track in the final mix.

Walker's "Clockmaker" is an altogether more considered affair, building from the tranquillity of his solo guitar intro to quasi orchestral magnificence via the lyricism of Swallow's liquid electric bass and the flowing, rhapsodic quality of Simcock's piano. The poise of the writing rivals Pat Metheny at his best, and of course Walker's own playing is excellent throughout. Nussbaum's colourful, neatly energetic drumming gives just the right amount of support.

The epic ballad "When You Hold Her" is another excellent example of the increasing maturity of Walker's writing. Simcock's reflective solo piano intro sets the mood and his subsequent duet with Walker's acoustic guitar is exquisite. Nussbaum's brushed drums are next to be introduced as the music slowly builds in layers. Walker's heavily sustained electric guitar then takes the piece soaring into the stratosphere before everything comes full circle and the piece ends nearly as quietly as it began. This is a hugely affecting piece of writing and playing.

Simcock's "You Won't Be Around To See It" reintroduces that element of playfulness. The tune is an audacious subversion of "Softly As In A Morning Sunrise" full of sophisticated harmonic and rhythmic ideas. Nussbaum's crisp, intelligent drumming acts as the springboard for inspired solos from Walker and Simcock. It's tricky, bravura stuff but great fun for both the players and the listener.

Walker's last contribution with the pen is "Wallenda's Last Stand", a lovely homage to the German/American tightrope walker Karl Wallenda (1905-78) founder of the Flying Wallendas circus dynasty. Featuring Simcock on melodica the piece is delicately melodic and exudes an air of period charm. Simcock's melodica evokes the sound of the tango, there's a wonderfully lyrical solo from Swallow on his custom made five string bass and Walker's warm lines recall the rosy tones of Pat Metheny. Nussbaum's sensitive drumming with hands or brushes is wonderfully sympathetic throughout.

Simcock's simply titled Gwil's tune is another melodic gem and once again features Swallow at his lyrical best alongside Walker's Metheny-ish guitar and Nussbaum's economical drumming. His final contribution with the pen, "Play The Game" couldn't be more different as Nussbaum drums up a storm and Walker turns up the heat with a scorching solo. The composer contributes an exuberant piano solo reminiscent of early Keith Jarrett and Swallow's springy bass pulse keeps the whole thing moving forward. There are some thrilling exchanges here and also some dazzling ensemble passages that demonstrate just how accomplished this group is.

The album concludes with Nussbaum's slow blues "Sure Would Baby" with Walker turning in a blues/rock solo of slow burning intensity. Essentially the tune is a set piece for Walker who responds brilliantly. As the initial instigator of this exceptional group it's perhaps appropriate that the guitarist has the final word.

"The Impossible Gentlemen" is an exceptional album, one that combines accessibility and melodic sensibility with a high degree of musical sophistication. The writing is excellent and varied and the standard of musicianship superb throughout. One of the most pleasing things about this album is the fact that it should bring the talents of Mike Walker to a wider constituency, hitherto the fact that he has continued to base himself in Manchester has led to him being rather overlooked by both national and international audiences. Hopefully "The Impossible Gentlemen" will go a long way to changing all that.

At last, a super-group that works. "The Impossible Gentlemen" is a certainty for the 2011 "best of year" lists.

The group are currently on tour in the UK. I'll be catching them at Swansea again and reporting on that for this site. The full tour listing is reproduced below. Catch this remarkable line up if you can.