



The Impossible Gentlemen, Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea, 17/06/2011.

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Reviewed by: Ian Mann

LIVE

4 out of 5

The eponymous début recording by this Anglo/American super-group was recently reviewed elsewhere on this site and looks set to be one of the albums of the year. British musicians Gwilym Simcock (piano) and Mike Walker (guitar) toured the UK last summer with their American pals Steve Swallow (electric bass) and Adam Nussbaum (drums), subsequently cutting the album "live in the studio" following a round of successful concerts during the course of which the foursome had struck up a strong musical and social friendship and a real band identity.

The album was released to coincide with the current tour which took in many of the same venues. There was therefore a real sense of déjà vu for me as I returned to Swansea's excellent Taliesin Arts Centre (situated on the campus of Swansea University) for the first time since this quartet's previous appearance there in July 2010 when they appeared under the unwieldy moniker of Simcock/Swallow/Walker/Nussbaum. The group have since acquired a band name, The Impossible Gentlemen, and in a nod to the album artwork they took to the stage here in neatly tailored suits with Swallow and Nussbaum also donning hats for the grand entrance, with the shades wearing drummer looking like a refugee from the Blues Brothers.

Needless to say the playing by this all star quartet was as sharp as their suits. Most of the tunes were drawn from the new album but with one or two newer pieces finding their way into the second set. The evening commenced with Walker's "Clockmaker", his solo guitar [opening](#) later followed by a characteristically melodic solo by Swallow on his custom made five string bass. Simcock produced a gorgeously rhapsodic piano solo and also duetted delightfully with Walker. The guitarist's own solo saw him mouthing/singing along to his own melody lines and occasionally striking the strings of his instrument in a less than orthodox manner. "Clockmaker" is a work that builds from quiet beginnings to an almost orchestral magnificence. It's an impressive piece of writing and got the concert off to a great start.

Simcock's "You Won't Be Around To See It" is a clever subversion of the standard "Softly As In A Morning Sunrise". In the hands of the "Gentlemen" it became cerebrally funky courtesy of Walker's rock

influenced guitar solo, Simcock's dampening of the piano strings and Nussbaum's colourful and sometimes humorous drum feature. After this high energy workout it came as no surprise to see Nussbaum, Simcock and Swallow divesting themselves of their jackets, Walker lasted a couple more number before succumbing.

Walker's "Wallenda's Last Stand" was again introduced by a passage of solo guitar. This charming piece also featured Simcock on melodica, a welcome additional voice that added a touch of whimsy to the proceedings. Swallow's liquidly lyrical high register bass solo was another delight on this lovely tribute to the high wire walker Karl Wallenda (1905-1978).

Walker's "Laugh Lines", which opens the album, was a tricky, high energy, meter bending workout highlighted by the dazzling exchanges between Walker and Simcock plus Nussbaum's climactic drum hammering. I thought the quartet might finish then and end the first set on an explosive note but they stuck around to close with Walker's epic ballad "When You Hold Her", a smouldering slow burner of a tune with the composer's stratospheric, sustain heavy guitar solo the undoubted highlight.

The first half had been of the high standard I was expecting, my only quibble being exactly the same as last year i.e. the distinctive sound of Steve Swallow's bass was buried too far in the mix. During the break I mentioned this to Fran Hardcastle, one of a trio of staff from Basho Records (including label boss Christine Allen) who were managing the tour. Fran promised to pop backstage to see if something could be done about this but I didn't really hold out too much hope.

Set two began with an impressive segue of three compositions, two of them as yet unrecorded, beginning with Simcock's "Fremantle Doctor", written after a recent visit to Australia and honouring the cooling wind that brings welcome relief to sweltering South West Australia. The tune itself was based around a nagging phrase cum riff that was first spelled out by Nussbaum's hand drums and Simcock's dampened strings. As the tune developed we were treated to another thrilling series of exchanges between piano and guitar. It also became apparent that whatever Fran had said at half time had been listened to and that Swallow had now achieved sonic parity with his colleagues and was much more audible. His excellent solo exemplified the benefit of this. Thanks Fran.

Nussbaum's "We Three" took the music into a more chilled out zone with the composer switching to brushes. When he picked up the sticks again it was to provide a link into Simcock's mercurial "Play The Game" (sourced from the album). The composer's dazzling, quicksilver piano solo was matched by Walker's Metheny-esque guitar, his dazzling, boppish single note runs later giving way to rock and blues inflections. This three tune tour de force received a rapturous reception from an appreciative crowd. Hitherto Simcock and Walker had shared the announcing duties but it was Nussbaum who introduced his own tune "Sure Would Baby", the slow blues that closes the album. Inspired by Leadbelly and a host of other great blues performers the piece was played here last year under the title

"Hey Pretty Baby". This featured a scorching blues guitar solo from Walker with Simcock providing a calming piano coda as Walker, quite justifiably, towelled himself down.

Also played last year, but unfortunately not yet documented by this ensemble, Steve Swallow's "Ladies In Mercedes" is arguably his best known composition. It first appeared on his duo record with vibraphonist Gary Burton "Hotel Hello" in 1974 with British singer Norma Winstone adding a set of lyrics several years later. The tune is now something of a modern standard that has entered the repertoire of many singers. But any vocal version would struggle to compete with this arrangement that moved from Swallow's virtuoso solo bass opening through feverish solos from Walker and Simcock, the latter underpinned by Swallow's playing of the tune's insistent Latin vamp.

The Swansea crowd went crazy for this giving the group a standing ovation. Inevitably they returned for an encore, this being another as yet unrecorded tune "Days Of Old", this time from the pen of Nussbaum. It transpired that the drummer had picked up on a melody being sung by his eight year old daughter. He developed it, with added harmonic advice from his partner in rhythm Mr. Swallow, and brought it to the group. Given the origins of the tune it's perhaps not surprising that compared to much of the quartet's thrillingly complex music the piece seems rather naïve. But this simplicity brought a welcome touch of contrast with the focus fixed firmly on the beauty and simplicity of the melody. Lyrical solos from Walker and Swallow embellished the piece perfectly and Simcock's reintroduction of the melodica provided a particularly nice touch. Nussbaum is becoming an increasingly important composer within the band, his simple down to earth tunes offering a good contrast to the busy writing styles of Walker and Simcock. It's likely that both he and Swallow will feature more prominently as composers on the inevitable second album