

How the Light Gets In

The Impossible Gentlemen

Posted by [Gerry](#) on [November 13, 2011](#) in [Music](#)



We saw these guys [in July 2010](#) when they were undertaking their first tour and going under the unwieldy name of Simcock-Walker-Swallow-Nussbaum. Now they've adopted the cryptic, but rather more memorable title of The Impossible Gentlemen. We saw them put an excellent show last night at Pacific Road in Birkenhead.

The Impossible Gentlemen are a quartet of Anglo-American jazzmen who first got together in 2009. From Britain there's pianist Gwilym Simcock and guitarist Mike Walker, who conceived the project, and from America, drummer Adam Nussbaum and bassist Steve Swallow (seen left to right above). However, at Pacific Road Steve Rodby substituted for Steve Swallow



Steve Rodby (photo by wilcox2007)

Since the band launched at Ronnie Scott's Club in May, 2010, they have received critical acclaim for their live performances, and their excellent debut album, released in May, lives up to the expectations we had after seeing them at Manchester's RNCM. Which isn't that surprising, because these guys have musical pedigree.

At Pacific Road they opened with Simcock's composition 'Barber's Blue' which we heard first a month ago during his [Trio performance](#) at the Capstone in Liverpool. It's a great number, having, as Simcock explained in his introduction, some of the characteristics of the Samuel Barber piano music that he enjoyed when he was training as a classical pianist. The piece was inspired by his recent rediscovery of his student notes on Barber.

From there the band played nearly all of the selections that appear on their first CD (above). This event was part of the Wirral Guitar Festival, and I guess many of the audience had come specifically to see the guitar wizardry of Mike Walker. And although the Impossible Gentleman meld perfectly as a team and all of them gave outstanding performances, there was no doubt that Mike Walker is the unifying force and star of the outfit.

Imagine a cross between Pat Metheny and Jimi Hendrix and you're close to the sound and artistry of Mike Walker. It's probably fair to say that Mike isn't that well known. Yet he has played and recorded with jazz greats such as Steve Swallow, Kenny Wheeler, Dave Holland, Anthony Braxton, Bill Frisell and many others. He plays regularly in the UK, Europe and around the world, but remains resolutely based here in the north west. He was born in Salford and built up a reputation on the live jazz circuit in the 1980s and 1990s. He teaches at the Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts (LIPA) and privately from his home in Lancashire.



Mike Walker

Many of the most arresting numbers at Pacific Road were composed by Mike Walker: ‘Laugh Lines’, ‘Clockmaker’, and ‘Wallenda’s Last Stand’, dedicated to the high-wire walker Karl Wallenda, who fell to his death at the age of 74 on his last walk. This haunting number, and a couple of others, featured Simcock leaning across the piano keyboard to play the melodica with one hand whilst playing piano with the other. Also featured was Mike’s beautiful composition ‘When You Hold Her’ which begins with Simcock providing a delicate piano intro, but later evolves into a soaring, Hendrix-like guitar solo from Mike.

As well as ‘Barber’s Blue’, Gwilym Simcock contributed the exciting ‘You Won’t Be Around To See’ – in his words a Hammer-horror subversion of the standard ‘Softly As In A Morning Sunrise’ – and another as yet unrecorded number, ‘Fremantle Doctor’, written after a recent visit to Australia and honouring the cooling wind that brings welcome relief on sweltering and humid days in that town. The band segued into this tune from Nussbaum’s ‘We Three’ which shared a similarly chilled out feel. ‘Try to imagine’, Simcock said, ‘lying on a beach of silver sand beside an ocean of blue – just like Merseyside, perhaps’ .



Adam Nussbaum

Nussbaum introduced his own tune ‘Sure Would Baby’ by talking about how as a child he was mesmerized by his parents’ collection of 10-inch blues LPs, featuring strange and wonderful names like Leadbelly, Lightnin’ Hopkins and other great blues performers. The piece featured a scorching blues guitar solo from Walker which in some respects was the highlight of the evening.

It was a great evening, but sadly probably the last we’ll go to at Pacific Road. Faced with having to make substantial cuts, Wirral Council is closing the venue at Christmas to focus its cultural support on the renovated Floral Pavilion in New Brighton. Not quite the same ambience – at Pacific Road it’s cabaret seating, so you can have a drink while watching the performance.