

Ottawa Citizen

The Impossible Gentlemen (Basho) The Impossible Gentlemen



Who are the Impossible Gentlemen, you ask?

Two Brits (guitarist Mike Walker and pianist Gwilym Simcock) and two Americans (bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Adam Nussbaum), that's who.

While we haven't seen or heard much of their group on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, the band, since its inception in early 2010, has become a darling of the British jazz scene, toured in Europe, and even won the best jazz ensemble prize at the most recent Parliamentary Jazz Awards.

Its debut disc reflects the somewhat larger input of the Brits — Walker, who was the band's prime mover, contributes four tunes while Simcock wrote three. Closing the disc is Nussbaum's slow, gritty blues *Sure Would Baby*. But the impact of the music is very much the result of a cohesive, democratic band in which every member is pulling his weight and watching everyone else's back.

After hearing the opening moments of the disc's first track, *Laugh Lines*, I thought, "Ah — it's going to be this kind of album." Walker's opener begins fast and tense and a long, dizzying melody for guitar and piano unison follows. Very convincing high-energy playing ensues.

But the other tunes reveal other facets of the group's musical personality. Walker's mostly waltzing *Clockmaker* and *Gwil's Song*, by Simcock, are unabashedly lyrical, rolling songs. Not coincidentally, they feature nice turns by master melodist and band elder Swallow on electric bass.

The disc's longest track luxuriates in a similar mood. Walker's *When You Hold Her* begins with a lovely, self-contained piano introduction before Walker on acoustic guitar and Swallow state its theme together. The tune swells into something grand over time, without getting too big. Its 11 minutes go by too quickly, as you might find in this illustrated YouTube version:

Wallenda's Last Stand is a loping Latin tune with Simcock adding some melodica. It's a good change of pace.

The remaining tunes — Simcock's *You Won't Be Able To See It* and *Play The Game*, and *Sure Would Baby* — are power plays, at times dense and note-y but always justified by a strong sense of purpose. On Nussbaum's greasy, stretched out minor blues, Walker uncorks some Scofield-like howling and scratching. It might not be that gentlemanly, but it's just right for the tune. Here's a live version of that tune:

One surprise for me with the disc: there are no pieces by Swallow, a tunesmith of the highest order. I see, however, that the group has played his songs in concert: