

The Impossible Gentlemen, at Pizza Express, W1

David Sinclair

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The upper echelon of the jazz world is a place of constantly shifting alliances. But even by those standards, the Impossible Gentlemen is a rare and fabulous group of talents. The Anglo-American quartet comprising the veteran electric bass player Steve Swallow, the classically trained young pianist Gwilym Simcock, the fusion guitarist Mike Walker and the drummer Adam Nussbaum, has forged an unlikely but distinctive musical chemistry that has lasted well beyond the honeymoon period of their first, self-titled album, released to acclaim last year.

On the opening night of a Pizza Express residency, Walker explained that they were there to showcase — and indeed learn — material for a second album, which they will be recording next week. There was a palpable sense of adventure as they embarked on *Modern Day Heroes*, the first of several new tunes that deftly balanced carefully scripted melodic arrangements with free-flowing passages of improvisation.

Simcock's rolling piano figures entranced on the 16-bar blues *Barber Blues* and Nussbaum maintained constantly inventive ways of embellishing the drum parts while sitting perfectly in the groove. With Swallow, hunched intently over his music stand, playing his melodic bass parts with a plectrum, it was Walker's guitar solos that supplied a welcome touch of fire. With a tone which varied from light and airy to molten, he applied himself with unremitting intensity to the job in hand, losing himself in the music and shaking his head so spectacularly during one explosive sequence, that his glasses flew off. When he had calmed down, Walker also introduced the numbers, explaining the unlikely inspiration for the various titles with an engaging sense of Lancashire humour.

There were plenty of older numbers, too. These included a wonderfully atmospheric swing through *Wallenda's Last Stand* a delicately balanced Latin-tinged piece written by Walker, inspired by the tightrope walker Karl Wallenda, who made a fatal high-wire walk aged 73. Piano and guitar locked into a garrulous conversation during Simcock's composition, *You Won't Be Around to See It*, while the bass and drums hit an indiosyncratic funk groove. And they closed the night with a high-spirited return to *Laugh Lines* the irrepressible opening track of the debut album.

Tonight, tomorrow, Pizza Express; Sat, Wedgewood Rooms, Portsmouth

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