

Phronesis at Brecon Jazz Festival Jazzwise 2011

Yet the wildcard in Brecon's pack this year was almost certainly Phronesis' 'Pitch Black' show that promised almost an entire performance in total darkness. Hardly a band that requires a novelty USP to grab headlines, seeing as they've just been blazing new trails in the US and Canada to huge acclaim and standing ovations, this 'concept' performance was an audacious and ultimately triumphant creative masterstroke.

The idea of travelling to the heart of Wales to sit in a darkened room with 250-strangers listening to a band is a hard sell on paper, but in reality as darkness descended on the second tune, entitled 'Love Song', there was a frisson of excitement, albeit one you might experience on a ghost train. Bassist/bandleader Jasper Høiby had settled both his and the audience's nerves with some jokey banter – with the band of superb pianist Ivo Neame and gregarious drummer Anton Eger both settling in on the first tune with the lights up – yet there's a serious reason for this sightless audio experiment. Drawing inspiration from witnessing his sister going blind and how she had bravely dealt with it, Høiby made his point by prefacing the music with, "we're all going to be blind for a while tonight." And so as the lights dimmed the band struck up an intricate tune, spritely bass and piano unison lines darting against Eger's boiling beats, striking the listener with the thought; not seeing is not all about a 'lack' of vision, it's more about a heightened sense of hearing and feeling.

Indeed this exciting entrée was followed by a set of breathtaking music, and yet instead of listening, or rather observing the codified ticks that accompany every jazz performance, the band's interaction took on more playful qualities. Cheeky drum breaks made one chuckle, beguiling layers of piano immersed the listener in a shower of melodic and harmonic waves, bass lines guiding us all through the inviting darkness. In a world where we increasingly need to listen more – be it to each other or to high quality music – the absence of visual stimulus was to create a unique bond between artist and audience. As the lights faded up on a burning version of 'Abraham's New Gift' the music maintained its intensity but the temptation was to keep one's eyes closed and remain submerged in this new space created by one of the most exciting bands on the planet today who had just taken jazz into uncharted conceptual territory.

Mike Flynn