

Collected here are a variety of short music reviews written for TNT Magazine, London

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Fela Kuti

Brixton Academy

By Lyn Ashby

"THE STAGE manager just told me no smoking in here," said Fela Kuti under the spotlight with a lighted cigarette stuck in his gleaming grin. "'Me!' I said to him, 'I SMOKE!'"

It's easy to imagine that if indeed he ever could transform Africa into the Africa of his dreams, that he would be its self-appointed, benign, and probably autocratic ruler. Perhaps even king. Each of his entrances and exits on stage is trumpeted by a full five minutes of wildly free-form ecstatic cacophony from his 40-strong Afro Orchestra. His dancers wait obediently on their hands and knees for their moment in the spotlight and his almost entirely black audience treat him as a demi-god of the New Africa. He struts and prances not so much like the humble spiritual and musical messenger he claims to be. But more like the proud, visionary tyrant that, in all likelihood, he would be.

His concerts are a happy marriage of political rally, spiritual meeting and musical extravaganza. His political message is still clear: Africa must unite against its corrupt and 'illegal' governments, while his musical message is mesmeric. A full evening's program presents perhaps only three or four songs that proceed endlessly and sinuously from a pleasure in the rhythms of the body. Thus entranced, we are happy to receive his propaganda.

Watching Fela and his spectacle is like watching Africa attempting to reshape itself. And this it does, under Fela's direction, with enormous energy and hope.

Anthony Braxton Trio

Royalty Theatre

By Lyn Ashby

IF YOUR music listening has been dominated by rock or pop, and you don't know what freeform, improvised jazz sounds like, then one possible description might be jazz's version of *Sonic Youth* without the vocals. Know what that sounds like? Perhaps this doesn't help much.

Evan Parker on solo saxophone gave an impressive demonstration of the possibility of squeezing just one more teeny-weeny semi-quaver into each bar already stuffed with the flashing of never-ending appoggios. Rapid Phillip Glass played on horn. Sometimes it was like watching *Koyunbashi* without the visuals. And this being so I closed my eyes, prepared to nod off if necessary and thereby discovered an access to this inaccessible music.

In what at first seems just a wall of sound, one discovers windows. Bass melodies, albeit unconventional ones, become discernable at the bottom end of this babble, while others squawk

and screech at the top, employing such masterful techniques as circular breathing for 20 minutes at a stretch. Conventional patterns of rhythm and melody seem to be strictly avoided.

The Anthony Braxton Trio, therefore, appeared as men possessed with the same frenzied passion as three men competing in a plate-smashing context. Sometimes it seemed to make as much musical sense. In fact of course, the chaos is tightly structured. They even read music sheets and turn the pages at the same time. This is carefully orchestrated cacophony. Abstract sounds move in and out of periods of relative harmony, often oscillating between the two main modes of 'full-blast' and 'almost not there,' hanging by a thread in which a mere trickle of sound, a clang or a squeak precariously rides the gaping silence to create strange and sometimes menacing moods.

While eschewing traditional rhythm and melody however, this music largely eschews traditional pleasure, and while admirable and interesting in its quest to expand the vocabulary of music, it is, alas, rarely much fun.

Gil Scot-Heron

Town & Country

By Lyn Ashby

HIS dense grey hair gives him away. Just how long he's been making this stylish, personal jazz-funk-groove with a biting edge only the devotees and the archivists can really say. His special commitment to issues of social conscience and an unashamed examination and expression of emotional states together plot the trajectory of his bumpy (some might say failed) career. As if coming from an age now long gone, when music was in the hands of musicians who were artists with something to say, (instead of today's legion of executive-produced pop puppets), Gil Scot-Heron seemed to pit himself against the establishment and as a result has spent long periods without a recording contract. The machine requires total obedience.

But surprise, surprise! The masses are not so easily fooled, for countless fans risked the lack of late night public transport to listen once more to such classic tunes as *Everybody's Got A Pistol*, and (an abridged version of) *B Movie*. Introducing his band's colourful characters as The Prince of Darkness, The King of Sunshine and The Minister of Entertainment, (in charge of the "vibe-mosphere" — "a combination of the local vibrations and the atmosphere, together which contribute to the ability to have a good time"), his delivery seems less excessive these days with fewer songs terminating in a frantic freeform white noise, and more given over to solo soul songs with a rich deep brown voice. "We must not confuse the blues with rock, or with roll," he says, "or with any of the above".

A thirty-minute version of *Angel Dust* outlining the evils of the demon powder turned into music theatre as he acted out its debilitating effects, while his bass player (The Minister of Entertainment), with a radio plug, slapped and funk'd his way around and amongst the crowd, eventually emerging on stage to play a blistering solo.

Other GSH standards got an airing, including *Is That Jazz*, *Nearly Lost Detroit*, and *No Place I Ain't Been Down*, gently shining some loving light into life's darker moments, along with newer songs about global concerns such as *Working For Peace*. But ultimately the vibe-mosphere of Gil Scot-Heron's songs is illuminated by the sunnier side of life. "Enjoy yourself!" he says. "If you enjoy Suzi, then that's a bonus. But the best and really the only thing that you can do is enjoy YOUR-self."

Natalie Cole

Hammersmith Odean

By Lyn Ashby

AS IF direct from the musical heartland of mainstream black America (wherever that is), all glitter and glitz, came Natalie Cole last week, to "make love to you — all night long." With little option then than to assume the musical missionary position (and perhaps more interested in some sort of friction with her personality than music), her devotees squealed ecstatically despite her limited range of (emotionally expressive) techniques.

Her essential message seemed to be an overblown sentimentality ("I just live for you baby"), packaged in that great American showbizz pizzazz reminiscent of 'Solid Gold' ("Have we got a great show for you tonight"). The blinding gloss of this show masks whatever real substance there may be below. But then how much substance is really required when the primary objective seems to be showmanship itself.

In her usual format of building upon a basic heavy drumbeat and generally cluttered band sound, she managed to deliver an ultimately frantic version of her father's classic hit "When I Fall in Love". A lesson perhaps in how to squeeze the soul out of an otherwise soulful song in the name of faking just one more multiple performance orgasm.

For some of us unfortunately, however, the end result was not so much the body's warm afterglow of satisfaction, but instead more like that indulgent nausea of having scoffed way too many chocolate hobnobs.