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ROTHERHAM OPEN ARTS FESTIVAL - Sunday, September 23, 2007

John Doe · A Story of The Blues : King Rollo and The Band of Brothers



King Rollo

The final night of this years' Rotherham Open Arts Festival went out on something of a blue note. John Doe: A Story of the Blues, is a fascinating stage show incorporating song, dance and poetry, which celebrates the story of the blues and most importantly how it was influenced by African music.

King Rollo first performed a similar show in 2001, which was especially commissioned for the Humber Mouth Literature Festival of that year, and tonight he presented an updated version with his 'Band of Brothers', a tight full blown blues band with a rhythm section that includes Nick Evans on bass, Ian Croft on drums and regular 'Two Old Gits' partner Dr A on keyboards. Rollo was joined tonight by Best Blues Harmonica Player of 2005, according to 'Blues Matters' magazine, Laurent Moulrier and two African djembe players Godfrey Pambalipe and Limukani Nyoni, or to his friends 'Limsa' both from Zimbabwe.

I managed to speak to King Rollo immediately before the show and he handed me a full script of the proceedings, which I was able to



Limukani Nyoni (Limsa) and Godfrey Pambalipe

follow throughout the two part performance at The Spiegel tent in Rotherham Town Centre. The show is an uncompromising 'tell it how it is' documentary in words and music commemorating the roots of slavery and how we have come to understand the power of freedom. The inclusion of this production in the 2007 Rotherham Open Arts Festival is significant as it falls in the bicentenary year of Wilberforce's abolition of the slave trade and the show's main purpose is to highlight the ongoing struggle against all forms of modern slavery.

The show could easily have been a blues jam with any number of blues standards thrown in, but King Rollo and his Band of Brothers, with the help of a couple of delightfully exotic 'sisters', brought to life the story of the Blues from its beginnings in the early 1900's, through years of change and its connections to the Swing era of the Twenties and Thirties and the R&B period of the Sixties, almost right up to the present day, with an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of blues styles and settings. Interspersed throughout the performance were oratories by Rollo and other members of the band, taken from the writings of prominent figures in African-American literature (Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar), statesman and abolitionist (Frederick Douglass) and first-hand accounts from African slaves including Olaudah Equiano, William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs.

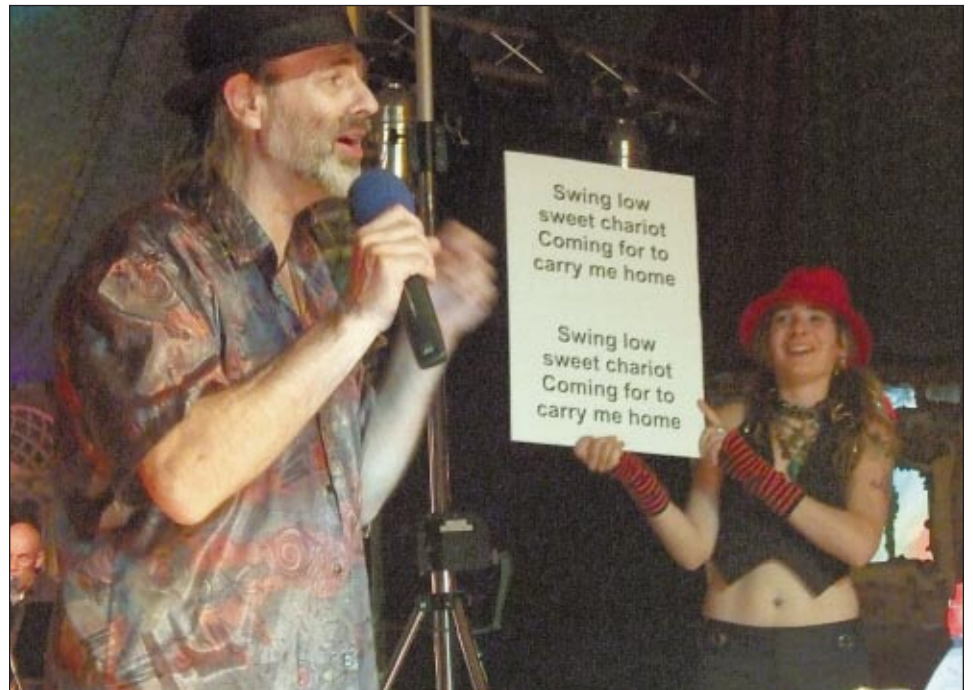
From the early days of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith with songs such as "Basin Street Blues" and "St Louis Blues", King Rollo and the band circumnavigated their way through the history of the Blues with relative ease, changing styles and periods with seamless precision. One minute we have a relatively faithful version of Bessie Smith's "St Louis Blues", with the memorable 'rock in the sea' theme, the next we are tackling the ragtime and country blues period of Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller on, respectively "Diddy Wa Diddy" and the brilliant "Trucking Those Blues Away" featuring an incredible harp solo by Moufflier.



Laurent Moufflier

"Toady Toady", a King Rollo original, was to all intents and purposes a nod to the New Orleans lineage of bluesmen from Professor Longhair to Dr John and anything inbetween. King Rollo's songs are essentially what holds this entire piece together, and because the styles and narrative changes so much along the

way, they are a remarkable achievement in themselves. Fun nights just wouldn't be fun if there wasn't at least a tiny bit of audience participation and King Rollo wasn't going to let such an opportunity slip by tonight. With band members holding up cue cards, the audience was divided into three groups and they were encouraged to sing three spirituals "Swing Low Sweet Chariot", "When The Saints Go Marching In" and "I Wanna Sing", in unison!



King Rollo with Caz

Lest we forget, blues music is for dancing to as well and Caz and Sophia provided some visual treats to remind us of the juke joints of the Deep South and the big city clubs of Chicago and New York in the North. It is probably asking too much to bring The Cotton Club to The Spiegel tent in Rotherham, but there is no arguing with the fact that we were given a flavour of it tonight.



Caz performing some poi

King Rollo knows his stuff. He reminds me a little of John Mayall, if that's not being too obvious, both in his handling of the material and in his band leader qualities. He is obviously a fountain of blues knowledge and has educated himself far beyond the odd Paul Oliver book and a subscription to Blues Unlimited Magazine. Putting a show together like this, with so much scope and having such a big story to tell is certainly no mean feat. The thing that works best for me though and I dare say for everyone else who came along to witness this extraordinary spectacle, is that King Rollo and his Band of Brothers (and Sisters), manage to tell such an appallingly shameful story, highlighting man's continuing inhumanity towards his own brother, yet making it uplifting and fun at the same time. That's the real essence of The Blues I guess.



King Rollo

John Doe · A Story Of The Blues
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LiveArt is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1997 to encourage creative artists in the sphere of live performance, as a focus for education and a platform for cultural diversity projects.

