

Hackney Colliery Band

Collaborations

Start time: 7.30pm

Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes, including interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Thomas Rees speaks to Hackney Colliery Band's Steve Pretty about reinventing brass band tradition, embracing eclecticism and their plans for a collaborative tenth anniversary celebration.

Once upon a time in the UK brass bands played stirring, vibrato-heavy renditions of 'Jerusalem' at village fetes, but in the past decade the music has had a serious shot in the arm thanks to groups like Hackney Colliery Band, who drew from jazz, soul, electronica and beyond to create a bold new sound. Ten years on, they're still innovating and defying convention.

'When we're at our best, we surprise people,' says bandleader Steve Pretty, who chose the band's name, with its old world echoes, to pay homage to the great British brass tradition where many of the players in Hackney Colliery Band got their start – although Pretty concedes it's slightly tongue in cheek. Not many colliery bands know their way around sophisticated jazz harmonies, after all, and still fewer can whip up a festival mosh pit with a fire-starting Prodigy medley.

When they were starting out, it was also important to Pretty to ground the group firmly in the UK and to set them apart from American outfits, such as Youngblood Brass Band. 'We wanted to make sure we had our own sound,' he says. 'We're a band from London not New Orleans. We've always been at least as influenced by rock and by European jazz, electronica and UK drum and bass.'

Eclecticism is one of the band's greatest strengths. 'From day one we said, within reason, nothing is off limits,' Pretty says. 'We were putting out a Balkan-influenced tune on the same record as a hip hop-influenced tune or a jazz-influenced tune... We could probably have been more commercially successful if we'd picked one route, which is what various agents and managers wanted us to do,' he laughs. 'We've definitely made life more difficult for ourselves, but I think it's made things much more interesting as well... There's all this possibility out there, why would we constrain ourselves to just one or two little genres?'

Even in the early days, when they were one of the hardest-gigging festival bands on the scene, they sought to avoid the most obvious covers, which is where that Prodigy medley comes in. 'It's really trying to expand what is possible with the lineup that we've got and changing people's minds about what those instruments can do,' says Pretty. 'Bringing those instruments to the fore and presenting it like a rock band has been an ongoing mission.'

Highlights from the past decade include a set at the closing ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics and a tour of the Balkans, particularly significant given how much Balkan brass music has influenced the band's sound. Then there was the time Amy Winehouse joined them on stage at an early gig. 'She was just there because she liked the band and then she jumped up to sing with us,' remembers Pretty. 'That was pretty special.'

It very nearly didn't happen. According to the story, Winehouse was hanging out in the band's dressing room before the show. Their sousaphone player wasn't too up on popular culture and, having no idea who she was, booted her out. When the band came on, Pretty told the crowd what had happened and Winehouse got up. 'I thought: "I'm either going to get punched here or it's going to be really good",' he laughs. 'Luckily it was really good!'

Tonight's tenth anniversary celebration draws from the group's new album, Collaborations: Volume One. It's their most ambitious record to date and sees them team up with more friends and musical heroes, including The Roundhouse Choir, vocalists Angélique Kidjo and YVA, British jazz heavyweights Pete Wareham and Dennis Rollins, Tom Rogerson of the experimental rock trio Three Trapped Tigers, and Ethiopian vibraphone great Mulatu Astatke – another hugely important influence on the band's sound. Many of those guests will be appearing tonight, among them spoken word artist Rob Auton, whose work is equal parts whimsical and eccentric, touching and profound. There will also be a few sneak previews. As the album's title implies, the band have more, exciting collaborations in the works as they head into their second decade.

'It's been an amazing ten years and it should be an amazing ten years to come,' says Pretty. 'I feel so lucky that we've been able to do it on our terms and I'm really proud we're now doing a big show at the Barbican, working with all these amazing people. We've always just wanted to do interesting music with interesting people and this is a real celebration of that.'

barbican

Performers

Hackney Colliery Band

Steve Pretty trumpet, electronics, composition, visuals

Olly Blackman drums, composition

Luke Christie drums, composition

Jonathan Sweeney trombone

Ed Rieband trombone

James Arben tenor saxophone, flute

Roland Parsons trumpet

Ed Ashby tuba, sousaphone

Jeff Miller sousaphone

Guests

Mulatu Astatke vibraphone, Wurlitzer, percussion

Pete Wareham saxophones

Dennis 'funkybone' Rollins trombone

YVA vocals

DJ Yoda turntables, visuals

Rob Auton vocals

Tom Rogerson keyboards

Seb Lee-Delisle laser artist

Gina Southgate painter

Angélique Kidjo vocals (via video)

Roundhouse Choir

Osnat Schmool musical director

Rathi Kumar assistant musical director

David Cumming choir assistant

Roxanne Cavaye choir assistant

Alex Cunningham

Alex Sewell

Azyba Ellis

Elise Boileau

Ellie Ferrand-Brooke

Ellie Roberts

Eve McQuaid

Hannah Coombes

Indira Lemouchi

Issac Kolapo

Jemima Marie Borges

John Medley-Hallam

Karyma Ellis

Lara Kester

Lauren Dyer

Laurence Morgan

Lily Sellars

Louisa Healey

Lucie Hiron

Luice Wolfman

Mia Chaudhuri-Julyan

Miguel Rivera

Molly Neylan

Molly Shiller

Nicholas Wong

Omar Peracha

Ryan O'Riordan

Solomon Thomas-Lea

Stefania Okereke

Victoria Vickers

Will Young

Produced by the Barbican



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