

Speakers Corner Quartet: Further Out Than The Edge

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 150 minutes, including interval

Arwa Haider talks to Speakers Corner Quartet about collaboration and community.

'It's all about behind the notes. Playing music together is just one iteration of our relationship and community.' – Raven Bush, Speakers Corner Quartet

There's fierce love and fearless liberty at the heart of Speakers Corner Quartet. This close-knit, creatively fluid collective first got together in 2006, as the multi-instrumentalists bringing livewire energy to Brixton spoken word and hip-hop session Speakers Corner. While that open-mic night is no longer, its original house band have gone on to forge their own musical universe, with the Speakers Corner Quartet line-up comprising Biscuit, Kwake Bass, Raven Bush and Peter Bennie on flute, drums/percussion, violin and contrabass with electronics. They've played alongside the likes of jazz/electronica icon Herbie Hancock, poet and playwright Kae Tempest, and at the request of Turner Prize-winning artist Chris Ofili at his Tate exhibition. They are individual innovators, and whole-hearted collaborators.

Tonight marks Speakers Corner Quartet's first public concert in nearly a decade, but it's expressly not a reunion or a comeback; it is a continuing evolution. The evening will feature special appearances from creative kin spanning singer-songwriters, poets, playwrights, musicians, composers, producers and film-makers, including Tempest, Sampha, Mica Levi, Joe Armon-Jones, James Massiah, Tawiah, Hinako Omori, Wu-Lu, Confucius MC, Lea Sen, Tirzah, Coby Sey, Trustfall and Lafawndah. This expansive line-up is testimony to the bonds created by Speakers Corner Quartet – notably, Kwake's role as visionary musical director for numerous contemporary talents – and the affinity within the group itself.

'It's really a family affair, because we've all been working together in different capacities for years; I first started working with Kae around 2011, doing *Brand New Ancients*,' says Raven. 'Normally, we'd be helping these artists make their records – producing, or being called in for strings or flute. We've all got – pun intended – many strings to our bow. It's really nice now that everyone's jumped on our project; it feels like a really nice, good process.' 'It's the element of trust created within that,' adds Peter, technically the newest player in Speakers Corner Quartet (he joined in 2012). 'You can do what you want, and everyone's going to accept that. It's a very singular experience between all of us. Everyone's really different as individuals – but somehow, here it is, stronger than ever.' 'It's hive mind mentality,' explains Biscuit. 'We're all one living, breathing organism when it comes to playing. This is the refined, final and definitive version of this project.'

This show also bears a characteristically evocative title; *Further Out Than The Edge* seems to meld solid legacy and unconstrained new horizons: '*Further Out...* is an extension of the concept when SCQ became its own thing, rather than a house band,' says Kwake. 'Once the Speakers Corner night was no more, *Further Back Than The Beginning* [Speakers Corner Quartet's acclaimed 2009 EP] was kind of the sentiment of what we were doing, rather than what people thought we were doing. We considered it quite punk at the time – we're trying to artistically say that we're not really into being put into this box. There's a conceptual narrative that runs through all of it, about space, time and identity. It takes a lot for the band to get where it's at as a brotherhood. We've worked on lots of different things, and everyone comes back with the fruits of the harvest. We've always been behind someone, but now we can present everyone, in a unanimous line. We've played with all the UK hip hop acts; we can capitalise on our stance within our scene,' Kwake laughs: 'Patience is a virtue!' With such far-ranging possibilities, surely it was tricky finalising the line-up for this show? 'Not really, no,' booms Kwake. 'There was a point, where I said: "We're not going to work with strangers". I didn't feel comfortable with opening the door to working with everyone because it's seen as a hot ticket. But if there's a personal connection, there's nothing stopping it at all. We're very lucky in that nearly everyone here is our nearest and dearest – it's very natural to get your mates to come and play a gig.' An exception to this long-standing friends and family rule turns out to be a pioneer who shares Speakers Corner Quartet's ethos (as well as formative

barbican

busking years); ambient music and meditation elder Laraaji's collaborative video piece should be a highlight.

Creating expressions across space and time has come naturally to Speakers Corner Quartet, as well; they've long embraced remote working, since Biscuit relocated to Cornwall in 2014, and video hangouts and file-sharing became the norm ('I've been in Lockdown for years, working this way,' deadpans Biscuit). As tonight's new material will prove, Speakers Corner Quartet's sound has extended through genres: electrifying improv jazz; alt-soul; 21st-century spirituals and movie scores (the group also recently created the original soundtrack for indie director Greg Hall's film drama *Baby Boy*). 'When the world started getting even heavier than it already was, we were like: alright, let's not muck around, let's utilise our strengths and not pander to the industry, hype or situation, and just do it how we feel it should be done.' Explains Kwake, 'what makes Speakers Corner Quartet so different to everything else that we're part of? It became our personal outlet, where we're just free.' 'That was the vibe from the get-go,' agrees Peter. 'I think people can be intimidated by that level of realness, because the love is everything encapsulated – all of the darkness and all of the light, at the same time. And actually, it's really fucking intense.' 'As I get older, I realise how important time is,' muses Raven. 'There's the fact we've been together for so long, how much life has happened between the inception and now – and we're together because we love each other and resonate on the same levels.' Biscuit nods, sagely: 'We've got this show where it's meticulously put together – but it's psychic. It's bigger than business. This is the sound of our lives.'

Performers

Speakers Corner Quartet

Biscuit flute
Kwake Bass drums
Peter Bennie bass
Raven Bush violin

Special Guests

Coby Sey
Confucius MC
Hinako Omori
James Massiah
Joe Armon-Jones
Kae Tempest
Lafawndah
Laraaji
Léa Sen
Leyla
Mica Levi
Oren Marshall
Sampha
Shabaka Hutchings
Tawiah
Tirzah
Trustfall
Wu-Lu

Ezra-Lloyd Jackson scent design

Produced by the Barbican



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