

# Damon Albarn

## The Nearer The Fountain, More Pure The Stream Flows

**Start time:** 8pm

**Approximate running time:** 80 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

### Martin Aston looks at the influence of Iceland on Damon Albarn's latest record.

When Blur were at the epicentre of the UK music scene in the late 90s, their singer Damon Albarn sought respite by visiting Iceland.

He was instantly smitten by this remote island with a small population (currently less than 350,000) relative to its geographical size and a startling, raw landscape sculpted by glacial ice and volcanic fire. 'It was just fresh on every level,' he said. Albarn would return many times over the years, investing in a bar in the capital of Reykjavík and buying a house just outside the city, a bond enshrined in 2021 by being granted Icelandic citizenship.

Albarn's kinship with Iceland is the key to his latest album, *The Nearer The Fountain, More Pure The Stream Flows*, which he brings to the Barbican for two very special shows, before heading to Europe, culminating in a performance in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavík, where the album was first conceived.

Towards the end of 2019, Albarn had been given carte blanche by French music producer Marc Cardonnel to create a new work. Deciding on an orchestral piece, he invited an ensemble of string players, trombones, horns, percussion and keyboards to his house on Iceland's southern coast, to respond to the view through the floor-to-ceiling windows of his living room. 'We literally started playing what we saw: the landscape, the line of the mountain, the weather coming in,' he told *Uncut*. 'The extremes of light and temperature and wind velocity.'

That was before Covid intervened. As Albarn recalled, 'We had a tour planned with shows in Reykjavík and all over Europe when the pandemic hit, that's when I went back to the music, then during a lengthy spell during lockdown at my farm in Devon the songs fully emerged and an album took shape.'

*The Nearer The Fountain...* threads orchestral with electric and acoustic guitar, electric piano and organ, harmonium and saxophone, electronics and field recordings. 'I felt like I had completed stuff in Iceland, but the world was different and I was in a totally different environment,' Albarn explained. 'I wanted to express my feelings, my interior world, at that moment.'

Ever since he first visited Iceland in 1997, Albarn has had the travel bug, and in musical form too. In 2006, he launched Africa Express, the floating cross-continental collective he co-founded after he accompanied Oxfam to Mali and recorded an album with local musicians Afel Bocoum and Toumani Diabaté. In 2007, he co-created *Monkey: Journey to the West* with Chinese director Chen Shi-Zheng, a stage adaption of the 16th century novel *Journey To The West*. If the pandemic literally grounded Albarn, *The Nearer The Fountain...* still gave him license to roam. 'Sometimes it took me down to Uruguay and Montevideo,' he said, referencing 'Tower Of Montevideo'. 'Other times I went to Iran, Iceland or Devon. With travel being curtailed, it was kind of nice to be able to make a record that strangely put me in those places for a moment or two.'

Guitarist Simon Tong and saxophonist/classical composer Mike Smith (a long-standing touring member of The Good, The Bad & The Queen, and Albarn and Jamie Hewlett's virtual band Gorillaz) were his main companions for the trip, whilst the title track is co-written by German conductor André de Ridder. Describing the recording to *NME*, he said, 'It's like we were a house band on a cruise ship that's anchored somewhere and there's nobody on the boat besides the band. That's the kind of mood I wanted to set.'

barbican

The album title is taken from a poem by the 19th century English poet John Clare, the son of a farm labourer whose celebrations of the English countryside were tempered by his laments for its disruption. According to Albarn, 'I have been on my own dark journey while making this record and it led me to believe that a pure source might still exist.'

That dark journey is reflected in the album's overriding mood. Moments of levity like the woozy calypso of 'The Tower Of Montevideo' and the jazzy blasts of 'Combustion' are outnumbered by a sombre spirit reminiscent of Albarn's 2012 album *Everyday Robots* (which travelled back in time, to his 1970s youth in Leytonstone and Colchester) and other works, such as his 'Elizabethan' opera *Dr Dee* and the Brexit-inspired album *Merrie Land* recorded by The Good, The Bad & The Queen, Albarn's collaboration with Paul Simonon, Simon Tong and the late Tony Allen.

For all its sombre undercurrents, *The Nearer The Fountain...* has its moments of balance, such as swimming amongst seals in 'The Cormorant' and the aurora borealis (Northern Lights) that partially inspired the album's finale 'Particles'. The track, Albarn says, was born from an 'intense metaphysical,' conversation with a rabbi on a plane to Reykjavik, which reminded him of that natural phenomenon, 'a direct result of particles sent on solar winds from the sun. They die when they hit the Earth's protective skin but, in their death, they cause a chemical reaction that gives us a magical light show.'

However, safety issues around Covid means that Albarn's touring ensemble will be smaller than originally planned. But these shows promise to be special, highlighting this new Icelandic citizen's love for his second home as well as its bittersweet origins, set in some of the greatest songs of Albarn's multi-faceted and brilliant career.

## Performers

**Damon Albarn** vocals, piano

**Mike Smith** keys, sax

**Seye Adelekan** bass

**Simon Tong** guitars

**Seb Rochford** drums, percussion

### Demon Strings

**Sarah Tuke** violin

**Katono Sato**

**Ciara Ismail** viola

**Isabelle Dunn** cello

Produced by the Barbican in association with Rain dog productions

With support of Icelandair and Islandshótel

Damon Albarn is managed by Eleven Management



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