Songs in the Key of London

Curated by Chris Difford & Nihal Arthanayake

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 150 minutes, including interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Arwa Haider talks to Chris Difford and Nihal Arthanayake about curating a celebration of London through song.

A decade ago, the Barbican premiered Songs in the Key of London: a lively, multi-artist musical tribute to the capital city, curated by musician and legendary co-founder of Squeeze, Chris Difford. The show was a memorable array of famous landmarks, poignant notes, multi-genre talent and excitingly unexpected twists – not unlike the city itself – Songs in the Key of London also sparked further concerts, including one in Difford’s birthplace of Greenwich. Tonight’s edition transports Songs in the Key of London back into the City of London, as part of the Barbican’s 40th anniversary celebrations, with a brilliantly spirited line-up co-curated by Difford and DJ and broadcaster Nihal Arthanayake.

‘It’s very much a group effort, and I think that's really important because London is a very diverse city,’ says Difford. ‘And although a lot of the songs from past history might represent a kind of very white London, when you think about contemporary artists like Dave and Stormzy and Kae Tempest, that's a New London; that's a new youth that is telling the story of a great city. For this, I think I've investigated at least 180 songs about London, from all different points of view.’

Arthanayake adds: ‘I didn’t want to delve too deeply into what had gone before and try to think about the many different cultures that come to call London their home. London is as much about struggle as it is being an artist. To try and make it as an artist here is a triumph of creativity over calamity.

‘I wanted to find artists who personified the energy of London and the imagination that comes from being in a city where so many artistic possibilities become realities. London sounds to me like the harsh beats and darkness of the stained concrete, the uplifting chords of the green spaces and the lyrical wordplay that comes from being in a city where 250 languages are spoken.’

London has seemed to feature as a character in Difford’s own song lyrics, not least Squeeze’s celebrated 1979 hit ‘Up The Junction’(which itself nods to Nell Dunn’s story collection, and the subsequent film adaptations); the music is instantly recognizable, and immediately redolent of specific neighbourhoods, even many decades after its release.

‘If you’re living in London, as a songwriter you’ve got so much to work with; you can look outside the front door, and the inspiration’s there,’ says Difford. ‘And tracks like [The Kinks’ 1967 classic] ‘Waterloo Sunset’, still strike a very emotional chord I think, regardless of where you're from, because it's such a diverse city that these songs feel like they belong to all of us.’

At different points of his career, Difford has lived variously in New York and East Sussex; how has his relationship with London evolved as a songwriter? ‘When I think about London, I think of it in a reflective way,’ he replies. ‘At the moment, for instance, I'm thinking about the gasworks where the 02 Arena is now, because that's where my dad worked for his entire life. So I'm writing about the environment that has completely changed from being a marshy boggy working place with a social club to what it is now.’

Tonight’s line up spans a thrilling array of artists and musical storytellers, spanning indie visionaries and urban folklore to exhilarating soul and pop poetry, including Brett Anderson, Marc Almond, Ruby Turner, Nadine Shah, 10CC co-founder Graham Gouldman, Zara McFarlane, Emmy the Great, KathrynWilliams, Ayanna Witter-Johnson, Saint Etienne’s Sarah Cracknell and Debsey Wykes, Boo Hewerdine, Louise Marshall and her choir, Matt Deighton, and talented newcomer singer-songwriter Komal.

‘I think it’s good to have the balance between the famous names and the people that are on the stepladder coming up,’ says Difford. ‘I’m completely blown away that Marc Almond is doing it because he's an artist that gives 100% of himself whatever he does, and he's really great at singing the songs he's going to sing. So I'm really excited about that from a theatrical point of view. And then there’s Komal, who’s written a brilliant song about what her view of London is.

Tonight’s concert takes in timeless expressions and constantly shifting vantage points; the music embraces the richest sense of familiarity, the pulse of tension, and the tantalizing promise of new horizons. It collectively sings to this source of constant fascination, frustration, inspiration and love: the place that we call home.

Performers

Chris Difford creator, co-curator

Nihal Arthanayakeco-curator, MC

Kate St John musical directors

Neill MacColl

Band

Kate St John alto saxophone, oboe, cor Anglais

Neill MacColl guitar

Leo Abraham guitar

Ben Nichols bass

Chris Vatalero drums

Anthony Kerr marimba, percussion

Jack Pinter saxophone, flute, clarinet

Sheila Maurice-Grey trumpet

Nikki Yeoh piano

Special Guests

Marc Almond

Brett Anderson

Sarah Cracknell

Matt Deighton

Harry Enfield

Graham Gouldman

Emmy the Great

Boo Hewerdine

Komal

Zara McFarlane

Louise Marshall and choir

Nadine Shah

Ruby Turner

Kathryn Williams

Ayanna Witter-Johnson

Debsey Wykes

Barbican Young Poets

Kerrica Kendall

Simran Uppal

Produced by the Barbican



