

EFG London Jazz Festival

in association with Serious

Festival dates: Fri 11—Sun 20 Nov 2022, centre wide

Kevin Le Gendre speaks to the CHICAGOxLONDON's avant-garde jazz musicians Ben LaMar Gay and Alabaster DePlume about their unique collaboration, set to open this year's opening show at the Barbican.

Every November, the EFG London Jazz Festival gives audiences a grand adventure in sound through some 300 concerts by established and emerging artists from all over the world. Over ten thrilling days improvised music from Africa, Europe, Britain and, of course, America brings heat to the onset of a cold winter. Furthermore, the programme has specially curated nights that may open new worlds for listeners. They will be able to enjoy must-hear music from must-know scenes.

This year no session is more hotly anticipated than International Anthem presents CHICAGOxLONDON, opening the festival at the Barbican on Saturday 12th November. The night continues a cherished tradition of bringing together the musical and spiritual connections of Chicago and London's jazz scenes under the CHICAGOxLONDON umbrella, on the fifth anniversary of its first iteration in the Total Refreshment Centre.

This concert celebrates the informal unions and exchanges of energy that have taken place between these two creative hotbeds in the past few years, placing a number of dynamic young artists in the international spotlight as a result. The line-up is mouthwatering. From 'over there' come Ben LaMar Gay, Angel Bat Dawid and Jeff Parker, while from 'over here' is Alabaster DePlume, and several other surprise guests who will drop in on the night.

For LaMar Gay, a trumpeter and producer with a wealth of ideas to match the breadth of his technique, the event reflects first and foremost the desire to build networks across borders of any kind. 'It's been a steady rise of folks searching for communities of listeners who believe in the magic of sound and the multi-generational sharing of it. Since the first moment, one realizes that the love of music, a connectedness between you and the beyond, starts to grow. You begin to search for more songs, stories, vibrations that possess the unifying qualities that help your dreams be a little more approachable.'

As is the case of all the aforementioned artists, LaMar Gay records for International Anthem, the Chicago label that has boldly championed creative music that engages with the full artistic possibilities and political complexities of the Digital Age. It's a label in which composers have the chance to manipulate sound by way of wireless devices as well as unplugged instruments while commenting on anything from climate change to fake news to Black Lives Matter. But another primary component of this motherboard of musicians is the east London venue, Total Refreshment Centre, which in the late 2010s became a vital space for players to perform and bond with kindred spirits from elsewhere.

Somewhat inevitably, the Chicagoans gravitated towards it, understanding that there was a strong 'common denominator' that bound improvisers based in 'the windy city' and the 'big smoke.'

And as saxophonist-poet Alabaster DePlume explains there was a spirit of independence that flowed through the fast-growing assembly. 'One of the things that we at Total Refreshment Centre share with International Anthem is a community of care through devotion to the creative endeavour,' he explains. 'When we found each other, it validated these ideas. Ideas that each of us had, in the past, championed in isolation – before any validation from the 'industry' or supposed 'success'. The ongoing rise of International Anthem reflects the universal rise of creative work devoted to humanity and support.'

barbican

A cursory glance at the label's catalogue, which counts the likes of Makaya McCraven, Junius Paul, the late, great Jaimie Branch and Irreversible Entanglements among many others, makes that clear, but, perhaps more importantly, consolidates the place of Chicago as one of the major cultural centres of the world. The city's infinitely rich musical history includes innovative figures in a wide variety of genres, from classical composer Florence Price to cosmic bandleader Sun Ra to soul stars Earth, Wind & Fire. Ben LaMar Gay revels in this heritage.

'It is considered a Black Mecca by many African-Americans, including myself,' he states emphatically. 'When you have a significant number of people who possess a thing that influences the entire world in one space, that space becomes a natural resonator of such richness.' British musicians who have travelled to Chicago, such as Alabaster DePlume, heartily attest to its vitality. 'When I visited on tour earlier this year, the teeming potential and explosive energy just under the surface of everything seemed somehow familiar to me. Historically speaking, Howlin' Wolf was on heavy rotation early on, Muddy Waters & Sam Cooke – long before I imagined playing a saxophone, back when I was making angular math punk on a Gibson guitar. But this city continues to transform music for everyone, around the world.'

CHICAGOxLONDON is a chance to see that promise materialise before your very eyes as the artists on stage, from Gay and DePlume to Jeff Parker and Angel Bat Dawid, are all known for their ability to challenge themselves and listeners. The combination of mesmerising spoken word, declamatory horn themes, startling guitar textures and otherworldly operatic vocals, complete with an accompanying rhythm section full of transatlantic talent, moots the possibility of something happening in the moment that just cannot be conceived in advance.

'It's a shared thing,' says DePlume. 'It's humbling, for me, and frightening yet natural that we are creating this together, yourself, myself, the artists and the audience indeed – perhaps those who are reading this now, who will make this what it will be, on the night.'

Performers

Alabaster DePlume saxophone, vocals, guitar

Angel Bat Dawid clarinet, piano, vocals

Ben LaMar Gay cornet, synth, vocals

Conrad Singh guitar

Dan Nicholls synths

Donna Thompson drums, vocals

Edinho Gerber guitar

Jeff Parker guitar

Matt Davis sousaphone, vocals

Mikey Kenny fiddle

Momoko Gill drums

Rosetta Carr bass

Theon Cross tuba

Tommaso Moretti drums

Asher Gamedze – drums

John Ellis – piano

Produced by Barbican in association with Serious



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