John Lees’ Barclay James Harvest/Gordon Giltrap and Oliver Wakeman - London, Islington Assembly Hall - 8th November 2013

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The first thing you can’t help noticing about Gordon Giltrap (a legend of acoustic guitar to rival Renbourn and Williams, if ever there was one) and Oliver Wakeman (son of Rick, and like his father an ex-Yes-man and Strawb) is their sense of humour. For two men associated with musicianship, dexterity and a form of progressive rock some may misinterpret as ‘po faced’, they certainly enjoy a laugh, and bring a warmth to the proceedings as a result, interspersing each song with wry anecdotes about their careers, their non-prog-appreciating wives and the music of lesser-talented, French MOR pianists (I think you know who I mean...) that serve by way of fine contrast.

Sometimes, the perfection and technicality of Wakeman’s playing can both overshadow and sonically drown out Giltrap’s looser, more organic approach, but they still complement each other perfectly, and the addition of vocalist Paul Manzi (currently fronting the Heavy Metal Kids) on a couple of numbers brings yet another unexpected dimension. Rounding things up with what Giltrap calls a “medley of his hit”- ‘Heartsong’, they gave the fans enough entertainment to make them wish for more in future, which is, I imagine, what we’ll be seeing of them in 2014, especially now Esoteric Records (also home of JLBJH) are reissuing Giltrap’s back catalogue.

Which brings us neatly, of course, to John Lees’ Barclay James Harvest themselves. Upon entering the Assembly Hall tonight, there’s a muted air of expectation coupled with a deep feeling of emotional connection - not that it’s unusual for prog fans to connect in any way with their favourite bands, or vice versa- but even by those standards, 2013, and this tour have marked a watershed of sorts for John Lees and his compadres. For these aren’t just any old shows, but the first shows since the release of ‘North’, the first album of new material by this line up, and the first Lees has had a hand in the creation of since ‘Nexus’ in 1999.

In the ensuing years, we’ve seen the return of original keyboardist and co-vocalist Woolly Wolstenholme, the Man With The Mellotron (a return tragically curtailed in 2010 by his clinical depression and eventual suicide): legal cases involving former orchestral arrangers that have dragged the band’s name through the courts, and every possible setback that an established rock act could suffer. In short, Lees and band, Craig Fletcher on bass and vocals, Jez Smith on keyboards and Kev Whitehead on drums, have been through it all and more, and still come out the other side. True survivors, then, and if any band deserved their fans’ undying respect and support, it’s this one. Luckily that support has been amply repaid: not only is the album maybe the finest of any BJH line up since ‘XII’in 1978, but tonight proved they are still very much a force to be reckoned with in concert. Not that I thought for one minute it would be any other way, but it’s still nice to be proved right occasionally.

Considering Lees’ position as leader of the band (in fact, without him there would be no band) he’s remarkably happy to let Fletcher (now in the band some 15 years himself) handle a fair selection of lead vocals: then again, that proves how much of a genuine band this line up is, as opposed to a solo project bearing the former band’s name. The first two numbers, ‘Ball And Chain’ and ‘If You Were Here Now’ both feature Fletch singing lead, the guitarist himself not stepping to the mic until ‘Ancient Waves’, a moody, floating number very reminiscent in places of ‘Stupid Dream’ era Porcupine Tree which, of the new material, some audience members may be the most familiar with, as it was debuted live some three or four years ago. Swiftly following this with the stone classic ‘Child Of The Universe’ shows exactly how well the new material meets with the old: both a treat and a surprise follows next in the shape of ‘Crazy City’, a vintage Les Holroyd number again voiced by Fletcher, with biting riff and CSNY-style harmonies still intact.

To Fletch’s credit, he makes no attempt to sing in the airy, high register of his bass-playing predecessor : nor, on the Love-inspired ‘Poor Wages’ or the extended prog-out reworking of ‘Song For Dying’ does he attempt to emulate the sonorous, choirmaster-like tones of the deceased Wolstenholme. If anything, his is a throatier, more soulful croon (something which matches his 1973 layered hairdo perfectly) perfectly in centre-range, which, by enabling him to handle heavier material like newie ‘The Real Deal’ and the vintage ‘Taking Some Time On’ (although the latter sadly lacked the percussive lunacy of the studio original) has partially rejuvenated the band into the kind of rock ’n’ roll territory people often forget they’re more than capable of. Likewise, Jez Smith’s keyboards may lack the eerie Mellotronic sound Woolly was so renowned for, but he too has brought his own preferred concoction (of Hammond, synth and piano) to the mix, added a touch more archetypal prog widdly than before, and even showing himself as a dab hand at harmonies- not bad for a chap who works in a bank when not on tour. And whereas Whitehead is in no way the thunderous powerhouse Mel Pritchard was, Lees couldn’t hope for a more driving yet gentle, intuitive and solid drummer, almost seemingly perfectly in sync with what the song requires.

But what of Lees himself? Almost 50 years into his career, does the man once described as the “grumpy old git of prog rock” (although many could jostle for that title) still seem to be enjoying himself? Yes, and in fact, he’s having a better time than I’ve seen in years, with droll, deadpan humour evident (“I went to a pub on’t’ moon t’other day”, he quips, “but I had to leave, there were no atmosphere”) and the knowledge of a new, exciting chapter in the band’s history firmly in mind. At 66, still in his best smart casuals (with the horrid snoods and blow waves of 80-84 thankfully forgotten) and a new growth of charity fundraising-Movember beard sprouting forth, he still looks every inch the Northern gentleman and teacherly type he actually is - even slightly obscured behind a lectern - but he’s also a great British guitar hero and a unique vocalist with an instantly recognisable sound, and that sound is still in evidence tonight.

It may be slightly hesitant on ‘Hymn For The Children’ - another new addition, this time from the seminal ‘Time Honoured Ghosts’ - but that’s hardly surprising considering that he hasn’t played it for aeons and the new line up are only just starting to work it into the set. On the new songs, though, particularly the album’s epic, standout title track and even-longer ‘On Leave’, an emotional and candid tribute to his departed bandmate - it‘s so natural it’s as if he’s been wearing the songs inside out for months, and on acknowledged classics like ‘Poor Man’s Moody Blues’ and the climactic ‘For No One’ it flows like fine wine - although knowing Lees, it’s more likely to be a fine Lancastrian ale. My only complaint would be as usual, the predictability of the encore. ‘Mocking Bird’, still very much the band’s anthem, admittedly has to be played, and with John and Craig trading vocal lines left to right, it works wonderfully - but after that, once the roadie hands over three acoustic guitars (one for Jez) we know what’s coming, and we also know the show is over.

Which brings me, again, to the eternal question: “does every JLBJH show have to end with ‘Hymn’”? Anthemic, stirring and clap-worthy it may be, but it’s also becoming a little worn by now, and although Lees has often stated that the lyric should be read allegorically, its Christian stance has never sat right with me (any more than that of ‘Child Of Man’, but at least that has more oomph), almost as if it remains the one song that would put off a possible convert of a non-religious kind and drive them away from appreciating this otherwise very fine, quintessentially English and fascinating of progressive rock bands. Would it hurt to maybe end with something else, maybe ‘After The Day’ (which I’m sure I have seen them do once) or ‘One Night’? Others may disagree, but it’s at least an idea. Yet for all that, I am simply glad, that after all the trials and tribulations and tragedies, there is still a band called John Lees’ Barclay James Harvest, and they have a great new album out that can go head to head with their classics. In an alternative reality somewhere he and Les Holroyd have resolved their differences and are playing together, but in this one, this is about as fine as any band of its age could hope to be. Let’s just hope there are a few more chapters yet before this book closes.