



There was a time, not so long ago, when **Joshua Redman** was regarded as one of the young lions of the American jazz scene. It's hard to believe, then, that the Californian-born tenor saxophonist celebrated his 50th birthday in February. Even so, slim, shaven-headed and possessing a youthful visage, he doesn't look his age. There's also a youthful vigour to his playing, which remains as vibrant and exploratory as it was twenty-five years ago when he first took the jazz world by storm. The last time Redman appeared at Cheltenham was in 2005 when he brought his Elastic Band to the festival. At that time, the saxophonist was experimenting with a type of edgy fusion sound (as heard on the 'Momentum' album) but these days he's more of a traditionalist and at Cheltenham Town Hall, he opted to showcase a saxophone-bass-drums trio, an instrumental configuration that was first pioneered by Sonny Rollins in the 1950s. Rollins favoured a trio without a chordal instrument because it allowed him greater melodic and harmonic freedom as a soloist, and it's my guess, listening to his foraging, free-flying saxophone in Cheltenham, that Redman was attracted to the format for similar reasons.

Taking the stage with Redman were two of America's finest rhythm section players - bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer, Gregory Hutchinson. They provided simpatico accompaniment throughout, supporting Redman's improvisations with anchoring bass lines and fluid polyrhythms. The trio began with a sprightly version of the jazz standard 'Mack The Knife' - which allowed Redman to demonstrate his gift for melodic ornamentation - following it with one of the saxophonist's original tunes, 'Back From Burma,' which was initially more meditative in character, though it eventually blossomed into an impassioned tone poem packed with sonic drama before subsiding mournfully. The music ranged from the gentle and elegant - exemplified by an original composition called 'Second Date' - to more driving, propulsive numbers like the funkified 'Tail Chase,' which allowed Gregory Hutchinson to demonstrate his dynamic drumming skills.

"We're just up here making it up as we go along," quipped Redman at one point in between songs. The audience laughed, but he wasn't being flippant and was making a serious point. In

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Monday, 06 May 2019 11:16 - Last Updated Monday, 06 May 2019 22:38

fact, he felt compelled to qualify his earlier statement, just in case his words were misinterpreted. "We've studied hard and know this music and practiced and immersed ourselves in the vocabulary and when we're up here improvising, it's just playing what we feel like playing," he said, capturing the essence of what it is to play jazz at the highest level.

The show closed with Redman inviting onto the stage, British saxophonist, Soweto Kinch, who armed with an alto saxophone contributed to a rollicking high tempo blues in the spirit of Charlie Parker's bebop staple, 'Now's The Time,' which closed the show on a euphoric high. It prompted the vociferous audience to call back Redman for a much-deserved encore, who - after much deliberation over what to play - obliged with a simmering groove seasoned with funk inflections.

If you wanted to witness a masterclass of tenor saxophone improvisation, then this was the concert to see at Cheltenham and it didn't disappoint. Let's hope it's not another fourteen years before Redman's next appearance at the festival.

(Charles Waring)