

Richard Bona + Hindi Zahra, The Barbican - 2nd November 2009
Review by Daniel Paton

Richard Bona's return to London is received with warmth and gratitude. It's not hard to see why, given that Bona is a performer of immense charm and delicate charisma. His hybrid music draws from a diverse array of influences, from the jazz through which he first built his reputation, to traditional African music via Weather Report-era fusion. In concert, the result is, thrillingly, both passionate and precise - undeniably entertaining if not always completely challenging. Bona knows his audience well, and understands what they expect from him.

We are first graced with the presence of Hindi Zahra, a Moroccan singer based in Paris building a deserved reputation for sophistication. To describe her as the 'warm-up' act would be somewhat misleading as her unconventional band (two guitars and drums) mostly create languid and dreamy atmospheres, dealing as much in space as they do in sound. Occasionally it breaks into a driving groove, but even then a palpable restraint remains. The overall effect is pleasant but hazy - musically tasteful but sometimes a little tentative. Her melancholy calm provides a considered contrast for Bona's expressions of joy.

Ten years into a successful international career, Bona is back in London with a brand new album 'Ten Shades of Blues'. Writing it took him all around the world, and the album incorporates American folk music as well as his more familiar African and Latin rhythms. His selections from the album in this show come from a recent trip to India ('Shiva Mama') and exhibit his more reflective side ('M'Bemba Mama').

The new tracks are thoughtful and played with a quiet ebullience that seems characteristic of Bona. It is however the more familiar material that truly engages the crowd. The funky groove of 'Please Don't Stop', Bona's collaboration with John Legend for the 2005 'Tiki' album, gets the earliest cheers, whilst 'O Sen Sen Sen' really makes the Barbican erupt.

The band demonstrate both vitality and control throughout, the punchy arrangements executed with meticulous clarity. Bona introduces each band member by explaining where they come from. 'This man comes from one of the most dangerous places in the world', says Bona of his Haitian drummer, 'but then again I only hire dangerous people'. Impressive solos suggest these players all have stories to tell.

Bona is both craftsman and showman, a musician of both depth and playfulness. When unleashing his set of quirky bass tricks on the obligatory Jaco Pastorius medley, he's setting out to raise a smile but it also shows us his effortless mastery of his instrument. Here is someone who really makes the bass guitar sonically versatile, and is able to make it sound sweetly melodic or aggressively rhythmic.

This approach seems reflected in his stage persona too. His hilarious rant incorporating a warning not to take the swine flu vaccine, the bombing of the moon and communications with aliens, also has some serious points underlying it. Human beings can be both controlling and arrogant and it's important for individuals to see beneath these carefully constructed disguises.

His voice is pure and communicates clearly and directly, regardless of the choice of language (he is self-deprecating about his attempt to sing in Portuguese). When he loops his own voice to create a choir of multi-tracked Bonas, the effect is beguiling.

Bona's music, in spite of its pick and mix hybrid of world styles, is not especially radical. It's engaging enough, but never likely to cause upset or spark controversy. Sometimes, though, a dose of the party spirit is exactly what is needed. When it's dispensed with this much enthusiasm and belief, it works wonders. Bona may be thinking of ten shades of blues, but the effect is more like ten shades of joy.