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Lonnie Holley, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London — review

Mike Hobart

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Roger Thomas

“I’m in London” might not sound like a promising opening line, but when half-chanted in a blues-inflected moan by Lonnie Holley, it felt laden with significance. And it was. Holley was soon conjuring the ghosts of his Alabama past, a future free of want and the spirit of mother earth with snippets of lyric, hollers, shouts and the occasional jaunty whistle.

Holley might sound like an itinerant bluesman, albeit one with shamanistic intent, but his music tells a different tale. His keyboards combine jangly textures and stark arpeggios, splayed chords and one-note riffs to reach back into the past but, like Sun Ra’s, they have a futuristic bent. One piece started by noting that Pluto was “a place in space that once was a planet, but now isn’t a planet at all”. It went on to conjure illicit stills and earthquakes, whales and the Great Spirit.

The masterstroke at this Meltdown festival gig, though, was the cello and drum accompaniment that amplified and embellished each dot and detail of Holley's stream-of-consciousness aesthetic. Dave Eggar's bowed cello delivered bittersweet lament or soared singing to a climax, while pensive pluckings and the scampering scratches of free jazz added sonic range. Steven Nistor's sparse drum accompaniment was equally impressive with gently patted hand drums, the throb of mallets and the drive of a full-blown kit equally varying texture and pulse.

Holley played synthesised electric piano for the most part, but switched to grand piano for a rumination on his past and Sun Ra-like organ and electronica for deliberations on human action, the future and freedom. The third number began with abstract cello flutters and evolved into pulsating riffs. It started in the present with "Stones and bricks all around me", referenced his 1950s childhood — "we used to play with stones and bricks" — and throbbed with mysticism and fluctuating energy.

He introduced the final number with an off-the-cuff "We're all human". Somehow, he made the obvious sound profound. As with the rest of the set, he balanced a sense that the world is out of kilter with a feeling of spiritual renewal. The song began, "I'm just a new boy — singing the blues". Maybe, but here he magicked distant times and faraway places, and connected the audience with its own humanity.



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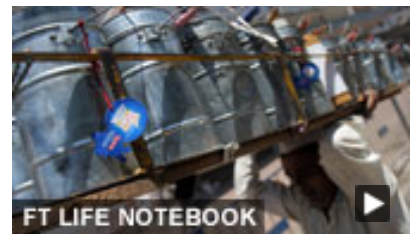
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