We Have Lift Off

Gong & Ozric Tentacles in concert

What do you get when you mix up Van de Graaf Generator sonic interludes, pulsing lights, the ghost of Fred Frith on guitar – all tapping, stroking and blended sounds, banshee cyclical drumming, a 1970s lightshow, honking saxophones and a reincarnated Syd Barrett? Why, the current incarnation of Gong of course!

Last time I saw Gong was shortly before Gilli Smyth died, and a longer while before Daevid Allen took flight. My friend and I had expected a ramshackle bunch of hippies but were amazed how tight the band was: more like Soft Machine than stoners sharing their teapot mythology. Some of that tightness has remained – bass player Dave Sturt and drummer Cheb Nettles are astonishing players, as is Ian East, the sax & clarinet player – but Kavus Torabi's somewhat hit-or-miss singing, not to mention his childish enthusiasm and collection of effects pedals for his guitar and voice have reintroduced a certain strangeness back into the music, as has Fabio Golfetti's exploratory guitar playing.

The hall is full of smoke and an audience of a certain age, whose grandad and grandma dancing is a joy to behold as the evening wears on. Torabi smiles at everyone who catches his eye and excitedly reports how the music has called out and gathered us all together, and what a good time he is having. The set is a strange mix of meandering hippy workouts, complete with lightshow full of pyramids, magic signs and symbols and much chanting, and tighter pieces more reminiscent of songs. Mostly they rely on rhythmic pulsation, repetition and variation overlaid with strange combinations of samples, instruments and off-kilter jazz. There's even an embarrassing couple of appearances by a 'dancer' (who clearly can't dance): firstly as a school play angel or spirit, dressed in white sheets and makeshift wings; secondly, a little later, to make an attempt at some sort of Eastern dance that mostly relied on her skipping around and fluttering her eyelashes.

Despite these embarrassing moments and my cynicism, I found myself enjoying the gig as wave after wave of sound built to relentless crescendos that even off key singing and the overdone strobe lights couldn't destroy. Somehow Gong manage to combine the psychedelic with space rock and jazz and ambient soundscapes to produce a heady mix of stuff that mostly just sounds like themselves reinvented. Having swum 'Through Restless Seas', reset the clocks, and been urged to 'Rejoice!' you can see why the band claims their 'Guitar Is A Spaceship', with room for all of us aboard. Anyway, we all safely crash landed into the bar and awaited the second band.

I haven't heard Ozric Tentacles for decades. The stuff I heard back in the 1980s was dubby, trippy dance music, born out of the festival circuit. Now, their music seems like an endless series of guitar solos in search of a tune. Like Gong they have a superb drummer to underpin and propel everything, with a rock solid bass player working with him; but the non-rhythmic music comes from a keyboard player stage on the audience's right and founder member Ed Wynne on the left, playing electric guitar and occasional keyboard.

Wynne is clearly a technically proficient guitarist, but after the first 20 minutes I was longing for a change in the endless flurry of notes issuing forth. We did get a few bluesy keyboard moments, and Gong's dancer turned up as a flautist for a couple of songs, thankfully limiting her dance moves this time, but mostly this was hard rock guitar over relentless drum and sequencer patterns. I was reminded of 1970s free jazz concerts where someone would explore the sonic possibilities of bits of metal, or a single instrument: it was interesting, sure, but I wanted it *applied* to something, not to hear it as an end in itself.

The Ozric's website calls the music 'uniquely trippy soundscapes' but I'd beg to differ. This is style over substance, an adoration of guitar prowess for ability's sake, a relentless sonic assault that bulldozes you over until you give in or grow weary of the battering you are receiving. It was good to see Gong again though, busy 'Forever Reoccurring' as the band always tend to do.

Rupert Loydell

(716 words)