Stardust

Hejira, Cornish Bank, Falmouth, Sunday 5 May

Hejira are a 7-piece band who celebrate Joni Mitchell's late 1970s period, with a particular focus on the *Shadows & Light* live album (and film), which saw Mitchell assembling an amazing touring band which included jazz musicians Jaco Pastorius, Pat Metheny, Lyle Mays, Michael Brecker and Don Alias.

It is this jazz approach which Hejira adopt, with band leader and guitarist Peter Oxley and vocalist and guitarist Hattie Whitehead fronting an amazing bunch of musicians including both a drummer and a percussionist, a keyboardist, a fretless 5-string bass player, and an amazing saxophonist who sometimes plays a wonderful sounding bass clarinet.

Cover bands can sometimes be dull, often unable to actually exactly reproduce the music they are playing let alone reinvigorate it, so I am please to report that Hejira do not attempt to do so, instead preferring to adapt and re-present the music in the spirit of Joni Mitchell rather than any slavish copy. Some songs are stretched out, others condensed, whilst some take brief sideways trips before returning to the song itself. There were also a couple of non-Mitchell tracks included in the band's two sets: a storming cover of Metheny's 'Phase Dance' in the first, and an Oxley original in the second.

Unfortunately that second one featured the drums and percussion and kind of betrayed the jazz roots of the band, coming from a place where polite applause follows each musician's solo break, but mostly that kind of thing was avoided and the band fluently worked together as a unit, playing with texture, rhythm, sound and volume to good effect. (Although I'd have liked one of the keyboards to have sounded less bright than it did sometimes; and to not have had the PA turned up to the edge of distortion for the second set.)

These are small complaints however, as the band ripped through tracks such as 'In France They Kiss on Main Street' and 'Coyote', reinvented the long haunting narrative of 'Song for Sharon' and turned 'Blue Motel Room' into an even more languid blues than it already is. Earlier songs 'Woodstock' and 'A Case of You' –neither favourites of mine – were given a new lease of life, and one of the *Mingus* album tracks, whose title eludes me, was moved further into song territory than its jazzier recording.

A highlight of the second set was a cluster of three interwoven tracks as recorded for *Shadows & Light*: 'Amelia' and 'Hejira' with a linking version of 'Pat's solo', which allowed Oxley to shine even brighter than he already was. This grouping was probably the nearest the group got to being a covers band, but even here the music was given some subtle twists and individuality.

Musically this band are astounding. Dave Jones' fluid bass provided enough muscle and underpinning to help propel the music whilst also offering tonal shading and a third, deeper guitar sound, whilst Chris Eldred's keyboards veered from semi-abstracted jazz playing to very 70s fusion sounds via tonal vamping. I don't normally like drums and percussion but Rick Finlay and Marc Cecil were some of the best I've ever heard, making full use of cymbals, bells, rattles and shakers (etc). Cecil is also an ace conga player, whilst Ollie Weston's saxophone playing is exquisite – gliding between and around the music, as is his use of bass clarinet at times, softly honking away in the deep register of a song.

There is, however, no getting away from the fact that it is Oxley and Whitehead who make the band. They are an odd double act: Oxley in patterned flares and loose shirt, the much younger Whitehead seeming relaxed and personable, both grinning like idiots at each other during songs, talking across each other in the introductions, and seeming to genuinely enjoy the applause and cheers from the Cornwall crowd. Whitehead's voice is very much her own, but as individual, flexible and adaptable as Joni Mitchell's, and she is not afraid to add her own inflections and meanders to songs. She also plays a mean rhythm guitar, and has a stand full of guitars to select from, presumably because of the different tunings Mitchell is renowned for using.

Oxley is a virtuoso. One moment he is riffing away, the next he is spinning out kaleidoscopic shards of bright sound, then he is sustaining gentle textures or disappearing off into careful exploratory solos. This is a band who seem to genuinely enjoy playing together as they circle and dive into the best of Joni Mitchell's music, renewing and reinventing her amazing musical legacy. They are on tour until the end of July. Do go and check them out.

Rupert Loydell

(775 words)

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