Lift Off!

*Live at the Royal Albert Hall*, Hawkwind (3CD, Cherry Red)

Despite what the CD booklet that accompanies this triple album clamshell CD set says ('Contrary to all the old historical anecdotes, Hawkwind is no longer a rabble-rousing vortex of discontent and mind altering chemicals.') nothing much has changed musically once these sonic cosmonauts hit the stage and launch into 'Levitation'.

There's little pause for breath before the musical riff monster continues. 'You'd Better Believe It', which later mellows into a gentler keyboard diversion before guitar re-entry. Then we travel with the 'Psychedelic Warlords' to 'Arrival in Utopia', listen to 'Rama the Prophecy' and go back to 'The Beginning'... Then there is a Tangerine Dreamlike interlude, a cosmic reset before the riff to 'Spirit of the Age', a personal favourite, emerges and dances around the hall and speakers, wavering synthesizers to the fore.

'Underwater City' slows the mood with its atmospheric evocation but then it's back to head-crushing heaviness for the rest of the first CD. Slot the second in to the stereo and 'Peace' issues forth, calming piano which is swiftly swept aside as 'Right to Decide' stomps onstage, before we get the spoken word and ambient dreaming of '10th Second of Forever'.

From then on in it's stage stomp central. 'Born to Go', a slowburning 'Star Explorer, a chaotic headrush version of 'Brainstorm', and an attempt to catch the resulting psychedelic 'Neurons'. Then it's down the echoing maze of 'Black Corridor' to meet the 'Master of the Universe', and finally, the calming start of 'Welcome' that erupts into volcanic dissonance and a spoken goodbye.

What else is their to say? Hawkwind simply seem to get better and better, and have such a great backlist of music to choose from. They may prefer rock energy to subtlety live, but the layering of sound and rhythms is cleverer and subtler than you first imagine. There's a third CD of studio rehearsals here, which has a very different and much cleaner feel, and includes a version of 'Underwater City' which at the time in 2023 was yet to be released on a studio album.

Hawkind have survived against all the odds and everybody's expectations to continue their auditory explorations away from that infamous 'vortex of discontent and mind altering chemicals', surviving – indeed thriving on – endless line-up changes, new musical inspirations and contexts, reinventions and gig after gig after gig. They have been a working band for so long it's hard to know whether they are in or out of critical favour at any given moment, hip, unhip or leftover hippies. But who cares? For me, old age has granted them an even wider world to explore, and more and more musical ability and sounds to do so.

Rupert Loydell (460 words)