

The Arts Desk

Ian Shaw, Pizza Express Jazz Club

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Without a little help from his friends: Ian Shaw

As acts of musical funambulism go, a solo gig by a jazz singer ranks pretty high in the fearless stakes. Listening to Ian Shaw in the intimate surroundings of Pizza Express Jazz Club, without the safety net of bass or drums, you suddenly remember how thrilling it can be to hear songs that have long been absorbed into your consciousness being recast entirely anew.

Shaw has never been one to plough a narrow artistic furrow, favouring instead an inclusiveness that draws from several stylistic wells. A superbly paced first set embraced everything from Joni Mitchell's limpid "River" to "Blues in the Night" - one of the finest creations from the Arlen/Mercer songbook - to a barnstorming version of Chick Corea's "Spain".

While some jazz singers build an entire career around a default position - a breathy whisper, a bluesy drawl - Shaw is blessed with a voice that comfortably stretches from a sonorous basso profundo to a Todd Rundgren-like falsetto, often within the space of a single song. The falsetto, especially, was used to beguiling effect throughout the evening, notably on Tom Waits's "Take It with Me".

But the song which resonated most powerfully in the memory was the self-penned title track from Shaw's latest release, *Somewhere Towards Love*. Poignantly charting life's inevitable disappointments, it already sounded canonical, the singer imbuing it with just the right amount of bitter-sweetness.

Special guests were introduced in the second set, with varying degrees of success. Julie Covington (of "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" fame) presented a playful medley of "You Make Me Feel So Young" and "Twisted", while Carol Grimes seemed to forget that we were in a relatively small, confined space, delivering a performance of "Cool Fire" that was the aural equivalent of Desert Storm. Ouch.

Thankfully, order was restored with the introduction of Shaw's long-standing musical collaborator (and Ronnie Scott's house pianist) James Pearson, for a reading of "My Foolish Heart" that possessed a rare, perfectly crafted beauty. A final sugar-rush of auditory pleasure saw singer Natalie Williams and trumpeter Sue Richardson join Shaw and Pearson for "I Can't Give You Anything But Love", before Shaw wrapped things up with the simple elegance of Noël Coward's "If Love Were All" - a song which, in his hands, sounded utterly contemporary.