

First Night: Womad Festival, Charlton Park, Malmesbury

By Nick Hasted

Soul's preacher man inspires the faithful

Solomon Burke, the last of the Southern soul giants, closed the twenty-seventh Womad festival's first night with a set casually drawing on the history of R&B and rock'n'roll he lived through and influenced.

A man of incapacitating weight as great as his voice, he appears in a throne as if by magic, in a glittering gold waistcoat.

Whether singing the song Tom Waits wrote for him, "Always Keep A Diamond In Your Mind", or Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come", the preacher-singer many always rated better than his friend Otis Redding maintains easy power and an odd dignity. Bothered by the space a festival field puts between him and the crowd he invites dozens of them up to dance. His band could be tighter and smaller, to give that voice room. But as news spreads that Prince Harry is on-site, the presence of soul royalty means much more.

Earlier there were discoveries from every global corner, as wind swirled black clouds away, to leave this Wiltshire field baking in unexpected sun. The feeling this may be a lucky festival isn't hurt by the first sound I hear: Los Desterrados, Judeo-Spanish music from north London, in the almost lost language of Ladino. It could be Yiddish the way it's sung, and as violins and Spanish guitars intertwine, it's hard to know where or when you are.

Womad crowds can be over-generous. I never again expect to hear such warm applause for a maracas solo, but the guilty party, rural Colombians Cimarron, playing their region's joropo music, justify the attention. What is really striking is the stillness on stage as each instrument solos, creating almost perverse sonic space around sudden frenetic, full-band bursts. Their female dancer, in a gorgeous dress from some 19th century ballroom, swirls in a deadly-looking courting ritual round a stamping male, and a sensual past breathes again. Black-robed Mariem Hassan is another early highlight, a spokeswoman for the rebel nomad tribes of Western Sahara, whose rapid ululations drill through the air. Dirty rhythmic lead guitar helps the job here. Nor are potent resistance songs her only talent. As we're cheerily informed "Mariem will be cooking later at the Taste the World tent." Of course...

One of the surviving stars of the Buena Vista Social Club, Eliades Ochoa, these days lets the tempo simmer, not steam. But he is a living link with layers of history. It's a measure of the riches of the day's riches that Ochoa clashes with the wonderful Dub Colossus. Transglobal Underground man Nick Page's idea to match Jamaican dub with the young inheritors of 1970s Addis Ababa's "Ethio-jazz" is a triumph. Smoky saxophones and the strong, easy voice of Tsedenia Woldesilassie sexily intertwine.

But the day's star-making performance comes from Mali's Rokia Traore. This rangy, athletic diplomat's daughter seems actorly when emulating a scat-singing chanteuse. It is when she dances, hips swinging half-way to Somerset, and straps on an electric guitar to lead her band in hard, dramatic rock, that she becomes potent with pride.

Even this is less memorable than mostly Aboriginal Australians The Black Arm Band's "cultural intervention" against their race's criminal suffering. Mark Atkins' didgeridoo becomes an instrument of deep and ominous breaths.

Veteran Archie Roach takes the place of his wife Ruby Hunter, hospitalised in Bath, and is visibly saddened and distracted. He still leads lyrical protest songs worthy of Dylan, played as honkytonk country swing, soul and jazz. Before Burke has even cleared his throat, Womad has unearthed many riches.