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Womad 2009 at Charlton Park, Wiltshire



Peter Gabriel padded out his set with plodding funk-rock

Stephen Dalton



Marking its third year in its idyllic home, the annual Womad festival drew 30,000 people to a leafy corner of Wiltshire. The weekend's family-friendly atmosphere felt as Utopian as ever, even if the bill leant rather too heavily towards the coffee-table end of world music, with fewer of the left-field surprises that typically enliven Womad.

Peter Gabriel, the festival's co-founder, is still the figurehead. He last played at Charlton Park two years ago, but his Saturday headline set was billed as a fundraiser for Witness, the human rights charity that the singer founded in 1992 — indeed, he dedicated his anti-apartheid classic *Biko* to Natalia Estemirova, the Chechen activist murdered two weeks ago.

Gabriel made a conscious effort not to repeat his 2007 show, a lively greatest-hits affair. This was a noble but misguided choice, as it meant denying this year's audience of several of his bigger singles — there was no *Don't Give Up* or *Sledgehammer* — while padding out his set with plodding mid-1980s funk-rock. While Gabriel's commitment to Womad and Witness is commendable, too much of this dry, flat, dirge-like performance was tedious.

Womad is one of Britain's most enjoyable festivals, but musically this was not a vintage year. Rokia Traoré and Oumou Sangaré, the Afro-soul divas who hail from Mali, both sounded mellifluous and gently hypnotic, but unerringly polite. Even the much-praised new sensation Mamer, a bluegrass guitarist from rural northern China, proved more head-noddingly pleasant than foot-stompingly great.

Dressed like a bejewelled imperial potentate, the mountainous American soul singer Solomon Burke headlined on Friday from his trademark stage throne. His bling-loaded presentation was hard to fault, even if his covers-heavy cabaret set lacked spark. Sam Cooke's *A Change is Gonna Come*, the stirring Civil Rights classic rehabilitated as President Obama's election anthem, provided the emotional peak.

Australia's Black Arm Band, making their Charlton Park debut, were introduced by the actor Pete Postlethwaite, an "honorary elder", in keeping with Aboriginal tradition. Their audio-visual show, fronted by Archie Read, was grounded in the bittersweet struggle songs of indigenous Australians, accompanied by archive film footage and damning commentary on Britain's imperial past. Naturally, most of us in the impeccably right-on eco-hippie crowd cheered heartily when confronted with our own postcolonial guilt. A very Womad moment.