

Review: The Scoobs at The Bull in Colchester

The Scoobs are a well oiled groove machine. I guessed that they would be, having played with two of their number in the past, both of whom I consequently knew to be very funky men, but it was pleasing to have my expectations confirmed. More pleasing still was to discover how non-generic this band is: it's not that they are self-consciously boundary pushing, or deliberately setting out to innovate, just that their collective enthusiasms cast a wide net, and they're serving up the whole rich diversity of their catch.

So just what does that include? I heard one of their number describe their music as a 'world groove fusion' which is a term that's been used to cover a multitude of sins, but in their case it means that you might hear hints of funk, calypso, reggae, high life, merengue, chimurenga, ska and probably a few more besides. I can report (thankfully) that this makes for a true fusion rather than the mess it might turn into in less capable hands.

This is a group of experienced musicians: The Scoobs are celebrating twenty years together this year (apparently they were all about ten years old when they started). Experience doesn't show in chops, which any monkey can have in spades by their late teens if they practice obsessively enough, but in knowing what to do with them. Everyone had a share of the limelight during the course of their two sets, and without exception they showed off their skills without noodling or shredding: just a few tasty licks or fills, designed to enhance the song rather than draw attention to the player. It's that taste, restraint and (dare I say it) maturity that is key to strong, deep groove playing, of the kind that leaves space for the dancers to move into, rather than spelling the rhythm out on every beat like a demented typewriter.

Their material was mainly full band grooves, and mainly original compositions, although there were some more tribal sounding feels with lots of percussion (and some didgeridoo), and some well chosen covers. The latter ranged from a well worn but effective warhorse like 'Low Rider', to the rarely revisited classic 'Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Again)', and it was nice to notice that a bit of creativity had gone into the selection.

In fact, creativity was as much in evidence as groove, in a very low-key, self-effacing manner. There was nothing outlandish, jarring, or particularly challenging (except to the most sheltered pairs of ears), but the band's huge range of stylistic touchstones were continually intermeshed in ways that were never obvious, and were always directly to the point. And the point was? To bring the party, of course, which is exactly what they did.

Their performance and presentation was consistently happy, friendly and relaxed, always focussed outward at the audience, and always moving with the music; they looked as though they were having as much fun as they'd like us to have. And that's about the size of it: no frills, no gimmicks, no outlandish performances or musical gymnastics, just deep, earthy grooves, light, catchy melodies and an unaffected pleasure in being there and sharing their music. That's a formula that's hard to top.

Oliver Arditi