

Black Cloud's silver lining

Music

Davina and the Vagabonds, at Arlington Arts, Snelsmore, on Friday, May 18

DAVINA Sowers and her suavely dressed Vagabonds took to a packed house at Arlington Arts. With influences spanning the spectrum of blues through to jazz and ragtime, we were treated to songs from the newly-released *Black Cloud*, as well as covers of some of the bands favourite performers, including Billie Holiday and Louis Jordan.

The Minnesota-based outfit stylishly performed their set, making their opening invitation to dance if we wanted to pretty unnecessary. Tight rhythms, a wild brass section and Davina's convincing vocals made foot-tapping, head swaying and for the more adventurous spectators, some out-and-out swing dancing abound.

Comparisons of Davina's voice to that of Amy Winehouse and Etta James were quickly justified. With something like a second soul summoned from a deep fire in her belly, the band powered through the opening few numbers. Equally as entertaining were the New Orleans-style songs that the bands performed with trumpeter Daniel Eikmeier and upright-bassist Michael Carvale taking the vocals and giving the venue a flavour of the atmosphere of Mardi-Gras.

Aside from the vocal performances, the musicianship was also superb. Davina, who is classically trained as a pianist, showed outstanding versatility; owning the instrument – even if at one point she attempted to go for a high A, only to find that the touring piano was slightly smaller than the 88 key one she was used to at home. The rhythm section were tight and disciplined allowing the brass players to shine, blaring out wild impromptu solos, making full use of their instruments' ranges.

The songs from *Black Cloud* went down incredibly well. The sassy rhythm combined with the melancholy lyrics brought a wry smile to the face of everyone in the audience, the rock and roll style of *Lipstick and Chrome* will be a surefire dancefloor filler wherever it is played and the sweet *Sugar Moon*, the 'girly song' of the album, was magically written and captivating.

The band ended the set with the crowd-pleasing *St Michael vs the Devil*. If the cool minor seventh chord progression and catchy chorus weren't enough, then the 'solo-off' towards the end, with Davina oohing and aahing a tune and the brass players trying to mimic it for a thoroughly entertaining 10 minutes, made this easily the stand-out of the live set and made the demands for an encore more than justified. Something that the band, continuing their European tour until the end of the year, will have to get used to.

DAN MORTON



Davina and the Vagabonds



Performing at the Corn Exchange

Young folk take over town

Music project kicks off series of summer events

GAEL Music, the organisers of Saturday's large-scale event with support from West Berkshire Council enjoyed an excellent turn out from around 60 families whose children are involved with this exciting new music project that is being delivered through schools.

Shoppers were treated to street performances including an impromptu jam session with a local busker on Northbrook Street. Instrument try-out sessions in the market place were then taken up en masse by the general public and there seems to be a groundswell of public interest in the work that Gael Music, the Berkshire based music charity, is doing in local schools.

The project's Culture Together Ensemble then performed to a full house at the Corn Exchange, with members of the Southern Sinfonia and Berkshire Maestros. Sally Westman, a New York-based session musician who was in Newbury for the day and saw the concert said afterwards: "The standard of musicianship was incredibly high among children of all ages some of whom only started with Gael Music in September."

Gael Music's chief executive Luke Daniels said "It's been a marvellous day for children and music in West Berkshire, we now have active involvement from around 60 families in the events we have planned for 2012 and their children's music-making. It will be wonderful to watch and hear this growing ensemble of brilliant young musicians develop over the coming year through the public performances we have planned."

The group also performed at Burghfield's May Fayre on Sunday and provided free music workshops via their trademark tipi. West Berkshire councillor Carol Jackson-Doerge is the local authority lead on West Berkshire's '2012 Enjoy' schedule of events. She said: "I am delighted that children from across West

Music

Culture Together, in Newbury town centre, on Saturday, May 12

Berkshire have the opportunity to perform at a range of events this summer, including Burghfield's May Fayre. It was a real family event and an opportunity for everyone in Burghfield to enjoy a fantastic day in the sunshine."

Gael Music is a key partner in a creation of a new music education hub for Berkshire alongside Berkshire Maestros, Readipop and Culture Mix at a time when government funding for music in schools is being cut by 40 per cent over the next three years and individual schools' music offer will become a more important part of ofsted reports. A range of schools, venues and providers are working as hub partners as a means of limiting the impact of these cuts upon children and young musicians in the region. For more information visit www.gael.org.uk



Playing in the street



Upcoming Culture Together events

Corn Exchange

Saturday

Free music sessions

Victoria Park, Newbury

Sunday, June 3

Picnic in the Park

Corn Exchange

Saturday, June 9

Free music sessions

Aldworth

Sunday, June 17

Berkshire Giants Fest

Shaw House

Saturday, June 30

Garden Party

Newbury Racecourse

Saturday, June 30

Culture Fest

Mortimer

Saturday, July 7

Fun Day

Newbury town centre

Wednesday, July 11

Olympic Torch Relay

Pure class

Newbury Spring Festival

Escher String Quartet, at St Michael and All Angels Church, Lambourn, on Tuesday, May 15

THE programme notes state that 'The Escher String Quartet takes its name from the Dutch graphic artist MC Escher, inspired by his 'method of interplay between individual components working together to form a whole'.

Aptly named, this quartet played as one instrument conveying the music but this was not to the exclusion of individual tonal resonances being clearly audible. This was helped by placing the viola to the front opposite the 1st violin with the 2nd violin and cello in the arch of the circle.

Mendelssohn's *Quartet No.6 Op.80 in F Minor* was written after the death of his sister, which profoundly affected him. The Escher Quartet played with a richness of tone, and full-bodied energy, portraying the different elements of grief to the extreme – anger, sadness, darkness, despair. The first movement was driven with vital energy and cohesiveness, whereas the second movement was performed with intensity of sadness with the odd chink of light overcome by the darkness of tragedy. Intense building up of phrases added to the depth of feeling. The third movement with its falling sixth motif was sad, even when in the major key showing little relief from grief. The sonorous viola was prominent in the fourth movement, which plays itself out exhausted after more emotional outpouring.

Eclipse by Brett Dean was written in response to the Tampa nautical crisis of 2001 and the political chaos which ensued. As a piece of abstract music it explores a wealth of string effects – glissandi, deliberate mistuning, tremoli, harmonics and unusual bow techniques as well as musical devices such as constant metre changes, dynamic contrasts and so on. As a piece of programme music, it depicts feelings of anger, grief and disbelief and frustration. Chaos and the terrified screaming of people could be heard along with the ship's horn, the waves and the rocking of the boat. On whatever level the listener perceives the composition this is a strong, harrowing work which leaves the listener drained and questioning.

Not everyone would agree with the interpretation of Elgar's *Quartet in E minor Op.83*. This was driven forward with an energetic force that did not allow the breadth of Elgar's 'Englishness' to breathe. The texture was densely played rather than allowing the first violin to sing and there was little time to 'stand and stare'. But again, this was played with real security and conviction.

The encore, truly deserved, was the final movement of Haydn's *Quartet Op.75 No.5*. This was played with terrific verve, spirit, brilliance and fun.

The concert was summed up in a fellow audience member's comment – "this was classy playing".

JULIA ROWNTREE

Goring gap gig for NZ's Got Jazz winners

I DON'T often get invited to review and take part in jazz festivals thousands of miles away but this year is a very welcome exception.

A mighty long way away from Newbury and the UK, just about as far away as you can get in fact, the Manawatu Jazz & Blues Festival takes place this year from Wednesday, May 30, until Sunday June 3, to coincide with the Queen's diamond jubilee celebrations in Palmerston North, a town near the end of the peninsula in the south of the New Zealand North Island, 80 miles from Wellington.

Featured at the festival will be the The Kings Of Swing, a concert featuring resident big band Rodger Fox's Wellington Jazz with music by past masters Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Artie Shaw.

There will be a Manawatu Guitar Day which will star American jazz guitarist Mike Stern, local bands and orchestras from the region playing in hotels and bars around town, much as you would see at our more local Marlborough Jazz Festival in England and educational workshops, open to musicians of all ages with instruction from major US musicians Tom Warrington, bass, Joe LaBarbera, drums, Alan Broadbent, piano and New Zealand trombonist Rodger Fox.

On Saturday, June 2 at the Regent Theatre in town the band will be led by American saxophonist Bob Mintzer a veteran of the great Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra and will feature guitarist Stern. Blues with a solid beat will be represented by vocalist Julie Lamb and her musicians, known, not surprisingly as The Lambhunters.

There will also be a down and dirty blues band, Darren Watson and his Real Deal Blues Band. From Italy, violinist Luca Ciarla and his quartet, the intriguing Steve Erquiaga Quartet featuring the leader's guitar, Paul Hanson on bassoon and Tom Warrington, bass with Lauren Ellis at the drums.

New this year, and one reason why I have flown out to cover the festival in late May, is the 'NZ's Got Jazz' contest which is a competition open to solo musicians under the age of 26. The finalists will perform at the Regent Theatre on June 2, as part of the International Jazz Festival Gala Night and I will be one of the judges, along with British singer/pianist Theo Jackson and New Zealand musician and teacher David Lisik.

The winner will be given the prize of coming to the UK to appear as part of the programmes presented at the 606 Jazz Club in Chelsea, possibly the Pizza Express in London and Goring Jazz Club here in our region.

Theo will have solo concerts of his own at the festival where his performance style as a composer, singer and pianist are not unlike those of Jamie Cullum although Jackson is more in the straight ahead jazz bracket.

With musicians from US, Italy, New Zealand and this year, the UK represented, this annual festival which has been going for more than 30 years, takes on a truly International flavour. I will report on the proceedings on my return to the UK in June – watch this space.

DEREK ANSELL