

# London's burning

Albarn, Simonon and crew recast their second LP as a rousing soundtrack to the street protests outside. By **Pat Gilbert**.

## The Good, The Bad & The Queen

The Palladium, London

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT in the Kingdom of Doom, as Damon Albarn sang on *The Good, The Bad & The Queen*, and outside on Oxford Street some of the prophecies of the project's first album are coming to pass in spectacular style. The vision of a flooded future-London that Albarn imagined on that debut long-player, released in 2007, has today become a reality; but the rising Thames waters have been substituted by a torrent of environmental protestors, and rather than a stranded Northern whale, all eyes are on Extinction Rebellion's beached pink boat being manhandled away by police.

In the bowels of the Palladium theatre, a couple of hundred yards away, Albarn nurses a bruised leg, having popped out for a quick butcher's at the mayhem, only to be mobbed by fans. The splendid alignment of elements today isn't lost on the singer: here were are in the home of British variety, his band about to perform TGTBTQ's latest album, *Merrie Land* — a dark, ominous, wonky dub-music hall LP holding a mirror to a sickly and divided England — with co-frontman Paul Simonon, whose commitment to environmental issues once saw the ex-Clash man banged up in a Greenland gaol when the Greenpeace boat he was sailing on was impounded by the authorities.

"It already seems like a very special day," beams Albarn, removing a pink beanie hat to mop beads of sweat from his brow. "It's wonderful to see Oxford Street gridlocked by families sitting on rugs, with kids doing drawings and people making cups of tea for one another. Things like that reveal to us the potential of human society." Simonon — in natty pinstripe suit, cream baker-boy cap and DM boots — also marvels at the protests. Reviving the TGTBTQ for a second album has, he says, made him think again about what the project really means. "I said to Damon the other day, What are we doing? Is it folk? I thought maybe it's folk-goth. Which in some ways it is..."

"I told Andrew Keightley, our lighting designer, that I wanted the lighting to terrify people. It makes it more theatrical; that idea you're going to the theatre rather than a rock'n'roll concert."

And, 90 minutes later, the notion of rock music as performance art takes hold as soon as the safety curtain rises to reveal a stage set dominated by Simonon's moody backdrop-painting of

### SETLIST

Merrie Land / Gun To The Head / Nineteen Seventeen / The Great Fire / Lady Boston / Drifters & Trawlers / The Truce Of Twilight / Ribbons / The Last Man To Leave / The Poison Tree / History Song / '80s Life / Kingdom Of Doom / Nature Springs / A Soldier's Tale / Three Changes / Green Fields / The Good, The Bad & The Queen

Blackpool pier, and the band silhouetted by bright white arc lights. Perhaps because it's been a gloriously sunny (thus beery) Good Friday, or maybe through a process of osmosing the curious atmosphere of joy and violence in the streets outside, the audience tonight seems unusually supercharged, immediately surging to the front of the seated venue and greeting the band with rowdy cheers.

*Merrie Land* is played in strict sequence, so we should know what to expect. But what we get instead of a

studied live playback is the album being recreated in the moment, a work of art vividly re-made before our eyes. For this show, capping a short tour, the TGTBTQ core — Damon, Paul, ex-Verve guitarist Simon Tong and septuagenarian Afrobeat drum magus Tony Allen — are variously augmented by a female string section and the 40-strong Penrhyn Welsh Male Voice Choir. And it is on the wistful, hypnotic *Lady Boston* that all these ingredients, plus audience, eventually react as one, turning this 21st century echo of The Clash's *Straight To Hell* into a weird kind of modern English hymn.

From then on, everything becomes more intense and darkly celebratory. *Ribbons'* pretty melodies are juxtaposed with the menacing call-and-response of *The Truce Of Twilight*, amid which Albarn bellows House of Commons' Speaker John Bercow's cry of "Order, order!", thus laying a path for the genuinely quite bonkers anti-Brexit (well, the whole album is) music hall vamp, *The Last Man To Leave*. Meanwhile, Simonon enacts his own unique folk-dance, teetering back and forth with his old white Clash-era Fender Precision slung at the hip like a tommy gun, randomly jerking it sideways as if dodging incoming fire.

The curtain falls with Albarn at the piano, grinning manically, only to be raised a couple of minutes later for the Penrhyn choir to holler out the stirring *Molianwn*, before the group dig in to similarly remodel the first TGTBTQ album, the insidious melodies of *History Song*, *Green Fields* and *Herculean*, and strident *Kingdom Of Doom*, embracing us like old friends.

The performance finishes, as the script dictates, with the spiralling, maniacal, speeding-up-to-frenzy shimmy of *The Good, The Bad & The Queen*, and suddenly we're all done.

For such intrinsically doleful music to be so spectacularly resurrected as hymnal, rousing and unrepeatably in-the-moment is a testament to the TGTBTQ's peculiar allure and in-built genius. Then again, it is indeed "a very special day" in the Kingdom Of Doom.

"Doleful music resurrected as hymnal, rousing and unrepeatably in-the-moment."



Merchants of doom: The Good, The Bad & The Queen (from left) Simon Tong, Damon Albarn, Tony Allen, Paul Simonon; (below) the band with members of the Penrhyn Male Voice Choir; (below, left) dark times at the London Palladium.

