

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Adelaide Review

Cream

Royal Albert Hall, London
5 May

When it was first announced in the English press that the 1960s cult group Cream was reforming for four nights at the Royal Albert Hall there was an outpouring, you might say, of dairy metaphors. Would they be as fresh as they were thirty seven years ago? Would the old enmities between members sour the occasion? Would they blend, or remain somehow colloidal? Would they prove to be long life, or go to powder?

Word of the reunion first came from the guitarist, Eric Clapton, when he blurted the news on Radio 2 back in December last year, and, when tickets went on sale in March, all four concerts sold out in a matter of hours. Since then, rumours have been rife of tickets on e-Bay going for upwards of two thousand quid. On the night I attended there were dozens of scalpers briskly pacing the circumference of the Albert Hall looking to buy, sell and trade the hottest ticket in London.

There are many reasons why a Cream reunion should be such an event. Hailed as the first supergroup - meaning, the players came from already successful bands - Cream, modestly named by Clapton to indicate their calibre, were, in 1966, something completely different. Their first album, *Fresh Cream*, with a cover depicting the band in aviator leathers while the title graphics formed a white psychedelic droplet in the right hand corner, suggested a new hybrid - musicians with peerless blues credentials (Alexis Korner, John Mayall, Graham Bond's Organisation) were also picking up signals from the acid rock scene in the American West.

Songs like *Sleepy Time Time* and *I Feel Free* - high harmony pop, with weird gear changes written by bassist Jack Bruce, rubbed up against incendiary readings of the greatest of the Delta Blues - Skip James, Muddy Waters and the legendary Robert Johnson. By the second album, *Disraeli Gears*, the mix was even more apparent, with a blazing cover by ex-pat Australian Martin Sharp, rivalled only by Peter Blake's art-work for *Sergeant Pepper* as the finest of the sixties lysergic Renaissance.

Cream lasted barely two years, with four albums, including the double masterpiece *Wheels of Fire*. They sold 35 million records for Polydor and

Review by Murray Bramwell

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

PREPRINT ONLY

Robert Stigwood's RSO label, and rated highly with audiences and critics on both sides of the Atlantic - even in the face of competition from the new genius, Jimi Hendrix. In 1968 Cream separated with more speed than atomic particles - the heavy touring, creative rivalries, drugs and other excess, sent the fresh young aviators into a tailspin, everyone had had enough. Except the audience of course. And the Farewell Concert in the Albert Hall on November 26, 1968 only fuelled the longing that *Goodbye* (their "posthumous" album) might just be au revoir.

Interestingly, the 1968 Albert Hall concerts were filmed by Tony Palmer for the BBC. Famous later for a series of idiosyncratic music docs, Palmer's film of Cream's last hurrah - at a time when very little music was documented beyond appearances on Top of the Pops - offered a serious (sometimes too earnestly serious) analysis of the band's music. The concert footage, featuring long frenetic jams and intricate solos, was interspersed with interviews with the players. Bruce talked about his formal training as a cellist in Edinburgh, Clapton, just twenty three at the time, demonstrated signature riffs which would serve him for nearly forty years and Ginger Baker produced polyrhythms, counterpoints, and cymbal and bass drum dialectics which made you want to double-check the number of his arms and legs. Palmer's film, shown widely on television provided an enduring record of the band and further perpetuated the kudos of the trio by depicting them as virtuosi, like chamber or jazz musicians. In its nerdy way the program was signalling - in the same way that the Beatles were being reviewed in the Guardian - that popular music was becoming very interesting.

So when Cream stepped out for four nights in May this year, their return was not like any other. For a start, because of the mutual ill-feeling, it had been deemed so unlikely - although they had played briefly at the Hall of Fame induction in 1991. Even when things were finalised, Clapton very recently confined the number of gigs to four, vetoing an extension when other Albert Hall cancellations made a longer residency possible. For another reason - there is no other band from the sixties of Cream's stature that is still standing. The reaper has claimed fifty percent of the Beatles and the Who, the Doors are down to three, and Hendrix died in 1970. There's Pink Floyd - but even with the acrimony between Roger Waters and David Gilmour, their bands still regularly tour the material.

Onstage in that eccentric, ornate cake tin, that Quangle Wangle's hat, the Albert Hall, Cream are not the messengers of liquid psychedelia they once were. But unlike the Stones did at last week's press conference, they don't

Review by Murray Bramwell

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

PREPRINT ONLY

look ludicrous either. Clapton, the youngest at sixty, is relaxed in a blue short sleeved shirt, Jack Bruce, although frail after serious health problems resulting in a liver transplant two years ago, is looking intent and alert, while Ginger, sixty six and sporting the official event T-shirt, looks as droll as ever. The audience, well lit throughout the show (for the purpose of the DVD filming, of course) is the demographic you'd expect. Portly persons of a certain age, just like me, except with German, French, American and Geordie accents. All come to see one of the half dozen great bands of rock's most creative decade and buying up every speck of merchandise to remember the occasion by : the shirt, the mug, the poster, the book, everything but the zimmer-frame.

Opening with *I'm So Glad*, Cream are well rehearsed and note perfect. Clapton, the most match-fit, is at his fluid best , Bruce's vocals are less emphatic but he gathers impressive strength as the night proceeds. Ginger, rumours of osteoarthritis aside, is back in the seat, the most inventive of his peers - a big- sound drummer but with more texture than Moon or Bonham - and a capacity to flow with the brilliant, high stepping bass-lines of the exemplary Jack Bruce.

The blues repertoire is favoured first - *Spoonful*, with great dollops of Eric best Fender work, and *Outside Woman Blues*, Eric on lead vocal and then for the solo, going for that slowhand glide, head thrown back, face in a frown of concentration, his right leg flapping to the beat in absent-minded rapture. Ginger, a crowd favourite from the first, takes the mic for *Pressed Rat and Warthog*, which like *Anyone for Tennis*, I always thought sat uneasily in the Cream repertoire and belonged instead with the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band. The crowd loves it, but I am more into Jack Bruce's lead on *Sleepy Time Time* and then the unleashing energy of his duets with Clapton for *NSU*.

There are many high points. When Clapton pauses for that seeming eternity before he leans forward and Hits the Pedal for the wahwah solo in *Badge*, when Jack Bruce snarls Pete Brown's mordant lyrics to *Politician* (on election night for Tony Blair's not so New Labour) and when they sing that marvellous line from *Born Under a Bad Sign* - if it wasn't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all. Bruce plays ghostly harmonica on *Rolling and Tumbling* and sings with full operatic pathos on *We're Going Wrong*. He is one of the great pop vocalists. Clapton is the God of guitarists, but Jack Bruce was the brains in this band. Perhaps that's why Eric, a very successful bandleader for all these years now, finds himself ambivalent about a Cream reunion.

Review by Murray Bramwell

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

PREPRINT ONLY

Clapton reprises *Crossroads*, but more in the style of his recent Johnson tribute than the blazing fuzzbox guitar of *Wheels of Fire*, everyone does *White Room* proud and Eric has another crowd-gasping Pedal Moment. Then Ginger rolls up his sleeves and settles into *Toad*. Drum solos have been lampooned since well before Spinal Tap, but Ginger, at sixty six is inspirationally adept. This is up there with Jack deJohnette or Tony Williams or any of the jazz fusion guys. Nick Mason, from Pink Floyd says he would never have taken up the drums if not for Ginger. Meanwhile Jack and Eric are sitting to the side of the stage quietly chatting as Ginger proves once again that a Toad can make a prince.

The audience goes wild. No coronaries are reported but in some cases it must have been close. Perhaps the single encore, *Sunshine of Your Love*, the Bruce/Brown/Clapton classic is enough to rejuvenate us all. With its erotic lyricism, its strange brew of harmonies and its sunburst guitar it completely captures the spirit of the late sixties - especially combined with the melting solar collage of Martin Sharp's imagery. In this performance Cream has lived up to its name, and its legend. We may, or may not, see them pass this way again. If not, we can say: we were there - then, in 1967, and now, in our weird, baby boomer dotage. We can say - we were the cats that got the cream.