

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Blondie*

Thebarton Theatre

Video may have killed some radio stars but it was the absolute making of Blondie. From their first appearance in 1977 at the height of the Punk and New Wave incursions, this New York pop band not only made their mark but set their own agenda for success. Hopping genres from arthouse pop to disco, reggae and even rap, Blondie not only ruled the airwaves but the cathode rays as well

With *Countdown* and *Rock Arena* the main sources of pop music on Australian television, the release of Blondie film clips was an event. Surely there is no greater classic than 1978's *Heart of Glass* from *Parallel Lines*. The opening bars of rippling disco bass, the robotic movements of Chris Stein, Jimmy Destri and Clem Burke with their faux Mod haircuts and then, backlit and ravishing, the insinuating vocals of Debbie Harry.

Already in her early thirties, with several bands in her CV, as well as a stint as a Playboy Bunny, Harry, with her shag-cut platinum hair, her peachy skin and delectably lidded eyes re-defined pop beauty. There had been plenty of fetching women singers before, and plenty who challenged the girlie stereotype altogether. But Debbie Harry had glamour. She was up there with Harlow and Marilyn Monroe and, when we heard her cooing, unformed voice on the radio we also summoned up after-images of those look-away eyes and the corona of light that transformed her into something close to an encounter of the third kind.

More than twenty five years on, Debbie is now Deborah, and a mature fifty eight years old. After the split-ups and the lawsuits, Blondie has been reconstituted for a world tour and are heralding a new CD, *The Curse of Blondie*, due, after some delays, for release in a month or two. The line-up, for the first tour of Australia since *In the Flesh* jumped into the charts in 1978, includes Blondie originals - keyboard player Jimmy Destri and drummer Clem Burke.

Conspicuously missing is Chris Stein who is claiming family commitments. Interestingly, it is only when Stein is absent that we can

recognise how necessary he is in the band's semiotic. Like Pete Townshend, what he lacks in looks he makes up for with a sort of charisma of indifference. Stein, of course, carried the title of World's Most Fortunate. As The Boyfriend, he and Debbie Harry were the Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe of pop.

Now the focus is very much on Harry herself - and with a more ample figure and a relaxed outfit in orange accents, she is telling us that life is good without the need for high glamour. The trademark platinum hair remains, as do those legendary cheekbones and cupid's bow lips but now Deborah Harry is straight into the music. The set opens with two new songs, sounding true to Blondie but with the heavy bass and beats of current dance culture. The crowd is hyped, crouched and waiting for a gold plated hit. Harry smiles like a cat and tosses out *Dreaming*. Clem Burke does the fluttery drumming, Destri the synth fanfares and Deborah Harry trills those witty rhymes and repetitions - meet, meet, dream, dream. This is the essence of Blondie. The spirit of the Chiffons and the Shirelles, now in New York quotation marks, the artless sound of art pop.

The band is riding a thudding wave now, and the hits unfold. *Hanging on the Telephone*, *Call Me* and then, all cascading disco bass and chiming guitars, the anthem to instant gratification ... tonight, tonight - *Atomic!* Abba harmonies, yes, but something more ... sardonic. The band stretches out and displays some of the new talent in bassist Leigh Foxx and one of the Stein stand-ins, Paul Carbonara - introduced at the end of the set only as 'Delicious'. The other ring-in, Jimmy Bones, is a skinny kid with a Guns 'n' Roses headband and a great deal more guitar licence than he deserves. Blondie have always had a whiff of satire but this joker is mainline Spinal Tap.

The new single, *Good Boys*, gets a solid workout and Harry and the band may get to chart in their fourth decade yet. The torchy *Maria* is the cue for composer Destri to lay out some keyboards, assisted by Kevin Topping. But it is the dance numbers - *Accidents Never Happen.*, *The Tide is High* and the intriguing *X Offender* - that have the fans swooning. *Union City Blues*, one of Harry's more substantial songs, features Clem Burke to good effect and the set closes, only to be immediately re-ignited, with the first encore - *Rapture*, a remarkable work of pop cannibalism, with its syncopated rap interlude ten years before its time. The surreal video clip comes to mind, Harry dancing in front of graffiti walls with a loping partner in top hat and tails. She is in terrific voice with those sassy lines of urban desire.

There is still a feeling that something has been missed - is it *One Way or Another* ? Well, yes. But, no. *Heart of Glass* is, of course, the finale - fluting vocal, unabashed disco beat, Destri, under-used on synths, brought to centre stage. Forget the guitar hero just concentrate on the Old Firm - Harry, Burke and Destri. No look-away glances this time, not quite as ravishing , tempus has been somewhat fugit. But there is something fabulously unrepentant here - all in their fifties, playing shameless, coquettish postmodern confections that would bury any other band under its own pastiche. That's Blondie - too good for Dagwood , and still too good to be quite true.