

Live Review: Arcade Fire in London

Contributed by
Wednesday, 31 January 2007

A masterpiece of Baroque architecture, London's St. John's Church sits cradled in Smith Square, a stone's throw from Westminster Abbey and Parliament. Its interior – usually reserved for orchestras and symphonies – holds about 600 people. Both grand and intimate, the space was an ideal venue for one of the first shows previewing new material from the Arcade Fire's much-hyped, oft-leaked sophomore release, *Neon Bible*.

Inside the church last night, pamphlets reading "Desire or Fear?" lay neatly on the empty chairs – a fitting question for a band whose followers have simultaneously coveted new material and worried nothing would top the group's debut album, 2005's *Funeral*. Judging by the frenzied applause that followed each new number, desire won. Controlled desire. The crowd was pin drop quiet between songs. "Jesus fucking Christ," frontman Win Butler gasped. "We're in a church. I should have expected this here."

Undeterred by the silence, the band – outfitted like a troupe of crazed Dickensian runaways – opened the set with "Black Mirror," which emerged under a dark cloud of rumbling guitars and terrifying strings as Butler wailed, "Mirror mirror, on the wall/Tell me where the bombs will fall."

Orchestral strings, majestic howls and soaring harmonies flavored the new songs, but there was no question the tracks were hewn as pure rock & roll confections, and epic ones at that: thundering drums, pounded keys and thrumming bass-lines throbbed beneath lyrics about Jesus, automobiles and deadbeat dads.

Joining the ranks of the Killers, the Hold Steady and other young bands who've recently caught the Bruce Springsteen bug, Arcade Fire offered up "Antichrist Television Blues" – a piece of 1950s-style boogie-rock the Boss copped from the Sun Studio vaults – and the stellar UK single "Keep the Car Running," which sounded like a *Born to Run* outtake. Cloaked in a pipe organ, "Intervention" aimed for a similarly anthemic drama. Working for the church while your family dies/You take what they give you and you keep it inside, Butler yelled, his voice approaching Springsteen's trademark growl.

When the band wasn't layering strings over fuzzy rock melodies, it kept the music lean and restrained. "My Body Is A Cage" evoked one of Tom Waits' clangorous spirituals, with Regine Chassagne's sonorous bass drum accompanying Butler's mournful wail. They also tore through inspired takes on "Tunnels," "Haiti," and "Rebellion (Lies)." "No Cars Go," a *Neon Bible* track that had previously appeared on the group's EP, received a dramatic new arrangement and a galloping instrumental coda.

Thanks for listening to all these new songs, Butler told the audience. "But I know there's nothing worse than a band that just won't play the hits."

With that, Arcade Fire launched into an encore of "Power Out," marching through the crowd and outside onto the church's steps. Surrounded closely by its audience and observed from the windows of brownstones that line the square, the band played an acoustic sing-along version of "Wake Up" to a city on the verge of slumber.

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