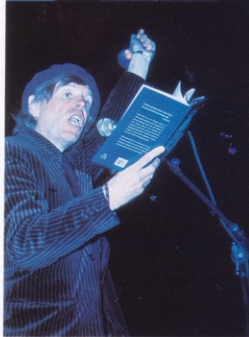


On Location

Live and kicking: festivals, concerts, clubs in the flesh



84 THE WIRE
JUNE 01 1992
CARL ANDERSON + THE JOHNSONS, PROTESTANTION + BURNING LIVE

CURRENT 93 + ANTONY & THE JOHNSONS + PANTALEIMON + BACKWORLD
LONDON BLOOMSBURY
THEATRE

UK

BY DAVID KEENAN

It has been four years since Current 93 last played live in the UK, and a great deal has changed in the meantime. That show, at North London's Union Chapel in Islington, featured an augmented rock line-up of almost orchestral proportions. Current's 1996 album *All The Pretty Little Horses* represented the pinnacle of the dense, apocalyptic folk sound that David Tibet had spent the previous decade developing, in relative isolation from more visible alternative rock movements. Subsequent Current releases, especially their two longform meditations on memory and time, *Soft Black Stars* and *Sleep Has His House*, have been stripped back to minimal instrumentation and forlorn, distant drones. How their new, more introspective material would work live was anybody's guess.

So, four years on from the previous live outing, Current 93 came out of the shadows for two performances over consecutive nights, a Friday and Saturday in early April, accompanied this time by many more of the eccentric musicians, poets and exhibitionists who have come to join Tibet around his Durtro label. Joe Budenholzer's group Backworld opened the

festivities on the Friday night, coming on stage to the sickly poptones of Shirley Temple. Budenholzer was largely responsible for the alien cabaret arrangements on Lydia Lunch's *Matrikamantra LP*; but his own material here forsakes electronics altogether, his darkhearted acoustic ballads owing more to Love's Arthur Lee or even, surprisingly, Glasgow's Belle And Sebastian. He has an intuitive grasp of big, iconoclastic 1960s-style chord changes which, when coupled with his deep, chocolatey vocals, make for a seductive mix. Despite the absence of drummer Laura Cromwell (a member of The Vivian Sisters, but probably "best known" for her duets with NYC saxophonist Dorgon), her last minute stand-in did just fine. Drawing mostly from their latest album, *Of Silver Sleep*, Backworld produced their strongest set to date, combining ecstatic religious imagery with complex, weaving guitar shapes and Phil Spector-like martial rhythms. However, the highlight of the show was Budenholzer's duet with Rose McDowall on "The Devil's Plaything", both singers swooning into each other like a malevolent Nancy and Lee.

The Saturday night opened with a rare performance by Andria Degens's Pantaleimon, who exist in a weird twilight world somewhere between the devotional drones of La Monte Young and the lonesome, blasted territory first mapped out by folk vocalist Anne Briggs. Over bowed dulcimer and singing bowls, Degens's plaintive vocal sparkled with dark magic as the cavernous acoustics of the Bloomsbury Theatre echoed with overtones.

It's all a world away from the theatrical splash

of New York's Antony & The Johnsons, who made their UK debut with entirely different sets across both nights. At Friday's show, they mostly drew material from their self-titled debut on Durtro, and although live the songs lacked the muscular dynamics of their studio recordings, an aura of frailty transformed "Twilight" and "River Of Sorrow" into soft little prayers. Saturday night was even better, kicking off with performance artist Julia Yasuda, in nothing but stars and stripes bodypaint, sending lonesome SOS calls on her Morse code generator. Antony's set consisted of mostly new material, featuring more ornate yet delicately balanced arrangements. Their heartbreaking reading of "I Fell In Love With A Dead Boy" hushed everyone in the hall, as Antony held a silent break in mid-song for what felt like an eternity.

Still, these were ultimately Current 93's nights, and Saturday's in particular was gloriously elemental. Poet Jeremy Reed gave a sonorous reading of his poem "Palace Gate (In Memory Of Martyr Sinnott)" before the group was ushered onstage by a small child enthusiastically proclaiming, "God is Love!"

Opening with "Good Morning, Great Moloch" from *Sleep Has His House*, vocalist Tibet was visibly quaking with enthusiasm as, barefoot and bathed in light, he bent into the audience while the rest of the group, now streamlined to guitarists Michael Cashmore and Gary Ramon (of UK psych unit Sun Dial), and Joolie Wood on keyboard and violin, stood like shadows around him. With such minimal backing, the onus was on Tibet to contour the set's dynamics; rising to the challenge, his vocal

seemed to accumulate force as the night drew on. "Niemandswasser" became a mantric evocation, pushing upwards with every line; the momentum of the performance burst forth with a bloodied assault on "In The Heart Of The Wood (And What I Found There)", with Ramon's otherworldly slide guitar going up against Cashmore's cutting acoustic. When Tibet finally dedicated a track to his mother (in the audience) and his late father ("also present, in Christ's Thunder Perfect Mind"), the moment was profoundly affecting for audience and performers alike. Later, the rest of the group left Tibet and pianist Maja Elliott illuminated in little lunar pools of light for a series of slow reworkings of material from *Soft Black Stars*.

When they finally reconvened for an encore of "Coal Black Smith", joined by Rose McDowall and Karl Blake (of Shock-Headed Peters), the Current of old was momentarily resurrected, with Tibet dancing in a pixie blur with his hand above his head like horns. However, the closing rendition of "A Gothic Love Song" best caught the spirit of the weekend. With Antony ghosting on backing vocals, Tibet seemed lost in reveries as the piano chords slowly traced his rapturous ascent. A fitting end to an emotionally exhausting but spiritually invigorating weekend.

Current 93 shows are starting to seem less like 'entertainment' and more like eavesdropping on one man's intensely personal quest for salvation, and as such I can't think of anyone else attempting anything even remotely as ambitious. So where will they be five years from now? On this weekend's evidence, that's reassuringly impossible to predict. □

Clockwise from top left: Current 93's David Tibet, Antony & The Johnsons, performance artist Julia Yasuda, and poet Jeremy Reed