

Reviews

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An African triumph for Glastonbury's best-kept secret

World music

Africa Express

Park Stage, Glastonbury

★★★★★

This, surely, was the bravest event at Glastonbury this year. It took place away from the crowds and television cameras, and involved a who's who of African stars and an array of western celebrities. Few festival-goers even realised that it was happening, but that, it seems, was the intention. Damon Albarn said he favoured the low-key approach, "because I love that word-of-mouth thing".

Africa Express is that musical rarity: a genuine experiment. Started by a group including Albarn as an angry reaction to the lack of African artists at Bob Geldof's Live 8, it turned into a forum where African and western musicians could work together – though its events have been so secretive that it appeared to have become an exclusive musicians' club. Now, at last, it had gone public, with a little-publicised, five-hour show that could have been a disaster. The aim was spontaneity: no one knew in advance exactly who was going to turn up, or who they would decide to perform with.

Amazingly, it worked. It started with the stirring Malian duo of Amadou and Mariam, now backed both by the rousing



Newcomer ... Somalia's hip-hop star K'Naan Photograph: Live

brass of the Kick Horns and by Billy Bragg, who then segued cleverly into the Leon Rosselson song *The World Turned Upside Down*. This 17th-century English history lesson was suddenly transformed by a sturdy Malian improvisation. "Who was that?" asked Bragg, coming off stage. It turned out to be Soumaila Kanouté, a singer from Toumani Diabaté's *Symmetric Orchestra*. Toumani, the world's greatest kora exponent, was joined for a glorious collaboration with the Senegalese star Baaba Maal, while the new Somali hip-hop celebrity K'Naan later shared the stage with Algerian punk rocker Rachid Taha. K'Naan and Amadou reappeared during the rousing set from desert-blues exponents Tinariwen. And so it went on.

The Africans clearly found it easier to collaborate than some western musicians, but there were exceptions. Norman Cook, aka Fatboy Slim, played one of his shortest ever DJ sets, wisely choosing the Fela Kuti song *Zombie*, so that Kuti's one-time drummer Tony Allen, could join in while Damon Albarn and Baaba Maal now added vocals. Indie rockers the Magic Numbers also did well, attracting Bragg and Taha for *People Get Ready*, while the finale included Rachid Taha's furious treatment of the Clash classic, *Rock El Casbah*, helped by the full cast.

It was an extraordinary, historic set, and my sympathies to all at Glastonbury who never knew what they were missing.

Robin Denselow